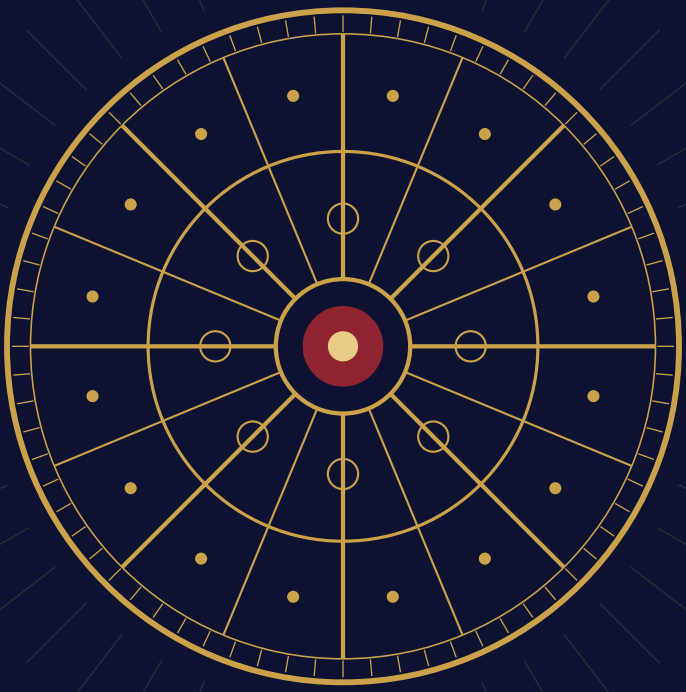
A MAITHILI NOVEL



KURUKSHETRAM

OF THE

INNER MIND

Translated from the original Maithili by the author himself

GAJENDRA THAKUR

VIDEHA

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GAJENDRA THAKUR

First Edition · 2019

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Author: Gajendra Thakur

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Note to the Reader: The novel contains distinct currents of time belonging to the ancient epics, the foundational debates of philosophy, and imagined characters of the modern age. Its fictional episodes do not constitute historical evidence or evidence drawn from judicial records.

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EPIC AND PHILOSOPHY: A MAP OF CORRESPONDENCES

The narrative correspondences between the seven kāṇḍas of the Rāmāyaṇa and the eighteen parvas of the Mahābhārata are recorded in the following tables according to the structure adopted for this novel. These comparisons are not meant to suggest that the modern characters are reincarnations of the ancient figures, or their equivalents in caste.

The Seven Kāṇḍas of the Rāmāyaṇa: The Narrative Journey

Kāṇḍa	Mahābhārata Parva	Chapters	Social and Narrative Journey
Bāla Kāṇḍa	1. Ādi	1–12	The emergence of names, lineage, the city's ancient river, and the first notice of death.
Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa	2. Sabhā	13–24	Home, rights, vows, and exile brought about by public humiliation.
Araṇya Kāṇḍa	3. Vana and 4. Virāṭa	25–48	Life outside the shelter; concealed identities; a re-education in labour and knowledge.
Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa	5. Udyoga	49–60	Unequal allies, broken promises, the search, and the first attempt at a pact.
Sundara Kāṇḍa	6. Bhīṣma, 7. Droṇa, and 8. Karṇa	61–96	Crossing the border to bring back evidence; the testing of a teacher's authority, birth, and messages.
Yuddha Kāṇḍa	9. Śalya, 10. Sauptika, and 11. Strī	97–132	Disaster amid cooperation, the losses of the night, and confronting the dead and those who remain alive.
Uttara Kāṇḍa	12. Śānti through 18. Svargārohaṇa	133–216	Responsibility, rehabilitation, homecoming, disintegration, and an unfinished future.

The Eighteen Parvas of the Mahābhārata: The Structure of 216 Chapters

Parva	Rāmāyaṇa Kāṇḍa	Chapters	Principal Narrative Thread
1. Ādi	Bāla Kāṇḍa	1–12	The register of names and the steps of the pond.
2. Sabhā	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa	13–24	The assembly, privacy, and displacement.
3. Vana	Araṇya Kāṇḍa	25–36	Rumour, forest rights, and education.
4. Virāṭa	Araṇya Kāṇḍa	37–48	The register of labour and the measurement of structures.
5. Udyoga	Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa	49–60	Unequal alliances and an

Parva	Rāmāyaṇa Kāṇḍa	Chapters	Principal Narrative Thread
			accounting of the benefits of water.
6. Bhīṣma	Sundara Kāṇḍa	61–72	Vows, warnings, and the hospital.
7. Droṇa	Sundara Kāṇḍa	73–84	Evidence, the murder of Mahesh, and journeys across the borderlands.
8. Karṇa	Sundara Kāṇḍa	85–96	A stage-by-stage answer concerning the twenty-seven names.
9. Śalya	Yuddha Kāṇḍa	97–108	Consent and the web of causes before the disaster.
10. Sauptika	Yuddha Kāṇḍa	109–120	The actual labour of rescue and the failure of structures.
11. Strī	Yuddha Kāṇḍa	121–132	Confirmed deaths and grief in the flesh.
12. Śānti	Uttara Kāṇḍa	133–144	Investigation, accountability, and governance.
13. Anuśāsana	Uttara Kāṇḍa	145–156	Documents of rights, the register of the ghats, and schools.
14. Aśvamedha	Uttara Kāṇḍa	157–168	Attribution of credit, measurement of water, and public compliance in rehabilitation.
15. Āśramavāsika	Uttara Kāṇḍa	169–180	Care of the elderly, love, and personal distance.
16. Mausala	Uttara Kāṇḍa	181–192	Memorials, new contracts, and the failings of reform.
17. Mahāprasthānika	Uttara Kāṇḍa	193–204	The safeguarding of memory, copies, and homecoming.
18. Svargārohaṇa	Uttara Kāṇḍa	205–216	The right to knowledge, names made public, and the life that remains.

A MAP OF PHILOSOPHICAL CORRESPONDENCES

In order to preserve the distinction between the original philosophical doctrines and their narrative application in the novel, the concepts, recurrences, and decisions of the plot associated with each of the three texts are shown separately.

Bhāmatī: Adhyāsa and the First Four Sūtras

Concept	Parvas / Recurrences	Narrative Application
Adhyāsa	Parvas 1 and 2; again 11 and 18	The error of taking a name for a body, a title for a character, and a register for the whole of a human being will be

Concept	Parvas / Recurrences	Narrative Application
		undone.
Athāto brahmajijñāsā	Parva 3; again 12	The right to inquire will reach beyond birth and title; Mrinal's question will change the teacher's reply.
Janmādyasya yataḥ	Parvas 5 and 9	The search for causes will not stop at a single culprit; nevertheless, individual responsibility for a particular crime will remain.
Śāstrayonitvāt	Parvas 7 and 14	The limits of evidence, the validity of knowledge, and written authority; due credit for domestic labour in the making of knowledge.
Tat tu samanvayāt	Parvas 8 and 18	The intended meaning of words spoken to one another will be examined; eliminating disagreement will not be taken for true harmonisation.

Nyāyakusumāñjali: The Five Stabakas

Stabaka	Philosophical Question	Principal Parvas and Consequences
First	The unseen (adṛṣṭa), otherworldly means, and the question of a conscious governing principle.	Parvas 3 and 5: in Udayana's temporal strand, a dispute over the fruits of action; in modernity, discipline in reasoning about unseen causes.
Second	The possibility of rites without God; the Mīmāṃsaka objection concerning the validity of knowledge.	Parvas 5 and 12: can collective work be accomplished without a chief? This modern question will enter into dialogue with the original dispute.
Third	Examination of the evidence said to refute the existence of God.	Parvas 6 and 7: distinctions between non-apprehension, non-establishment, and negation; the absence of a name does not establish the non-existence of a person.
Fourth	God as a knower, true cognition, and the reality of knowledge.	Parvas 8 and 14: claims made by an omniscient speaker, old and new knowledge, and a test of the reliability of institutions.
Fifth	Positive inference in support of God, and the responses to it.	Parvas 9, 12, and 18: Udayana's case will receive its full force, as will the opposing questions; disaster will not become cheap, conclusive proof of any doctrine.

Tattvacintāmaṇi: Divisions of Pramāṇa

Means of Knowledge	Narrative Application	Principal Parvas
Perception (pratyakṣa)	Illumination and distance in testimony, sense-contact and illusion; blindness must not be equated	1, 4, 6, and 13

Means of Knowledge	Narrative Application	Principal Parvas
	with the absence of all knowledge.	
Inference (anumāna)	Pervasion (vyāpti), limiting conditions (upādhi), subjecthood (pakṣatā), reflective consideration (parāmarśa), and fallacies of reason (hetvābhāsa); merely seeing a vehicle carrying a consignment does not establish every offence.	4, 7, 9, and 12
Inference of God (īśvarānumāna)	Gangeśa's particular dispute over agency, power, and causation; the unbridgeable distance between reasoning and grief.	6, 9, 12, and 18
Comparison (upamāna)	Understanding the relation between name and object through resemblance; a similar face or a caste stereotype is not sufficient proof of identity.	3, 7, and 13
Verbal testimony (śabda)	Expectancy (ākāṅkṣā), semantic fitness (yogyatā), proximity (āsatti), and intention (tātparya); testimony, digital excision, silence, and translation.	2, 8, 14, and 17

A MAP OF CHARACTERS, LINEAGES, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Genealogical relationships are given only where the manuscript offers explicit evidence. Otherwise, the groups that follow are "narrative/social circles", not assertions of blood relationship. The original story maintains the distinctions between birth, upbringing, and communal association.

Documented Family Relationships

Relationship	Status Established in the Story
Sarita → Naira	Mother and daughter; Naira's death is irreversible.
Subhadra → Kabir	Direct testimony concerning birth mother and child; confirmation from the original birth record remains incomplete. The mother who raised him is a different person.
Shakuntala → granddaughter	A relationship across generations; the granddaughter's independent decision about her education.
Yusuf → son	Father and son differ in their choices of occupation.
Meera Banjara and her sister	They are sisters; each has independent rights concerning transport clients and her work.
Anupama Sen and her maternal grandmother	The grandmother's old private letters and the right to a shared copy.

Seven Principal Social and Narrative Circles

The Das Family and the Station

Characters: Sarita, Naira, Sanket, Fakira

Relationships and conflicts: The identification of living people; the struggle between names concealed for safety and the right to publish.

The Mishra Family and the School

Characters: Maithili, Ishan, Subhadra, Kabir

Relationships and conflicts: Recognition for philosophical work; the difference between being raised and being born into a family; dispossession of rights within the guise of protection.

Mallik and the Artisans' Quarter

Characters: Shyam, Tara, Lalit, Shakuntala

Relationships and conflicts: The price of craftsmanship, the measurement of drainage works, and the freedom of a new generation to choose its occupation.

The Weavers and Textile Trades

Characters: Yusuf, Parvati, Nasim, Urmila

Relationships and conflicts: Wages, confidentiality, the border, and allegations about an illicit consignment; disagreements between generations within the household.

Ruhani's Shelter and the Crossroads

Characters: Ruhani, Champa, Rukhsana

Relationships and conflicts: Protection, earnings, and self-determination; even the provider of shelter must learn to relinquish control.

The Itinerants and the River

Characters: Janaki, Hira, Devaki, and migrant families

Relationships and conflicts: The right to routes and movement; defence against rumour, and the admission of one's own mistakes.

Commerce and Medical Care

Characters: Devavrat, Aniruddha, Aditi

Relationships and conflicts: Profit, dependence upon medical treatment, and genuine service; crimes and responsibilities at different levels.

Ancient and Modern Narratives: Groups of Characters

Rāmāyaṇa: Birth and Home

Characters: Janaka, Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, Shrutakirti, Dasharatha, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Manthara.

Relationships and conflicts: Birth, marriage, the labour of service, inheritance, and the cost of vows; Parvas 1–3 and 13.

Rāmāyaṇa: Exile and Companionship

Characters: Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna, Guha, the boatman in the Kevat episode, Shabari, Ahalya, Anasuya, sages, and the unnamed workers of the hermitages.

Relationships and conflicts: Trust, the body, rights over the forest, and the conditions of shelter; Parvas 3–5, 12, and 15.

Rāmāyaṇa: The Search and the Adversaries

Characters: Sugriva, Vali, Tara, Angada, Hanuman, Jambavan, Sampati, Jatayu, Trijata, Mandodari, Vibhishana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Indrajit.

Relationships and conflicts: The failings of alliances, news, the adversary's family, and the cost of war; Parvas 5–11.

Rāmāyaṇa: After the War

Characters: Sita, Lava, Kusha, Bharata, Urmila, episodes associated with the textual tradition of Shambuka, and unnamed citizens.

Relationships and conflicts: Public opinion, the right to study, homecoming, and the right to tell a story; Parvas 12–18, with attention to textual variants.

Mahābhārata: Beginnings and Power

Characters: Satyavati, Ganga, Shantanu, Bhishma, Amba, Vyasa, Vidura, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, Madri.

Relationships and conflicts: River, lineage, vows, niyoga, state power, and women's decisions; Parvas 1, 2, 6, and 11.

Mahābhārata: Education and the Forest

Characters: Drona, Kripa, Ekalavya, Drupada, Shikhandi, Hidimba, Ghatotkacha, Ulupi, Chitrangada, the Nagas, and imagined supporting characters from forest communities.

Relationships and conflicts: Access to knowledge, the interests of the forest, marriage, and the unequal acceptance of lineages; Parvas 3–7.

Mahābhārata: Assembly and Negotiation

Characters: Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Draupadi, Krishna, Subhadra, Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Shakuni, Vikarna, Yuyutsu.

Relationships and conflicts: Rights, play, silence, humiliation, conflicting understandings of dharma, and opportunities for peace; Parvas 2, 5, 8, and 9.

Mahābhārata: War and Birth

Characters: Karna, Radha, Adhiratha, Abhimanyu, Uttara, Ashwatthama, Kripa, Kritavarma, Shalya, Sanjaya.

Relationships and conflicts: Upbringing as greater than birth, the limits of warfare, violence at night, and the witness; Parvas 6–11.

Mahābhārata: The Life That Remains

Characters: Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Uttara, Yuyutsu, Vidura, Parikshit, Janamejaya, Ugrashrava, Shaunaka, and the listeners.

Relationships and conflicts: The obligations of the living, authority over narration, the chain of vengeance, and the question of the final journey; Parvas 11–18.

Bhāmatī

Characters: Vachaspati Mishra; the voice of Shankara's commentary; Bhamati as inspired by popular legend; the fictional Mrinal and Lohana.

Relationships and conflicts: The genuine philosophical debate over adhyāsa and the first four sūtras, labour, inquiry, and co-authorship; Parvas 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 14, and 18.

Nyāyakusumāñjali

Characters: Udayana; fictional speakers presenting Mīmāṃsaka, Buddhist, Cārvāka, and other opposing positions.

Relationships and conflicts: Full arguments and replies on the questions raised in the five stabakas; Parvas 3, 5–9, 12, and 18.

Tattvacintāmaṇi

Characters: Gangeśa; traditional and new opposing positions; the fictional Malati, Madhav, and the workers of the school.

Relationships and conflicts: The four divisions of pramāṇa, the distinct inference concerning God, and new questions that alter the examples; Parvas 1–9, 12–14, 17, and 18.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS: THEIR AGENCY AND DECISIONS

This list is drawn from the novel's register of characters. The ages given here are those recorded in the original register; they do not independently establish biological relationships.

Naira Das — 34

Goal: To restore the records and secure the right to her own labour.

Difficult decision: The hurried publication of the truth would compromise a witness's safety; she must subsequently acknowledge her mistake in public.

Sarita — 58

Goal: To establish proof that she is alive and win recognition for the work of a woman who was left out.

Difficult decision: To admit that the practice of changing names for protection was misused.

Sanket — 16

Goal: To have a means of communication of his own and receive technical education.

Difficult decision: To prevent his image and the material on his phone from being used without consent.

Fakira — 60

Goal: The right to earn a living, move freely, and receive healthcare.

Difficult decision: To refuse the pressure to describe an incident he has only heard about as one he witnessed.

Ruhani — 42

Goal: Safe shelter and respect within the community.

Difficult decision: To relinquish control over the decisions of those who depend upon her.

Champa — 36

Goal: Treatment for her mother, wages, and the freedom to pursue her love.

Difficult decision: Whether to surrender private information demanded in exchange for help.

Janaki — 39

Goal: The safety of an itinerant family.

Difficult decision: To admit an unrelated financial deception of her own while confronting a false accusation of child theft.

Yusuf — 49

Goal: The weaving business and his son's freedom to choose another path.

Difficult decision: To return a profitable consignment that is nevertheless illicit.

Parvati — 45

Goal: Recognition for her contribution to weaving; a livelihood distinct from Pavitra Patwa's work of knotting and threading.

Difficult decision: To resist the erasure of women's due share from collective demands.

Urmila — 41

Goal: Wages and the correction of the hospital's textile register.

Difficult decision: To give perilous testimony despite the needs of her family.

Tara — 24

Goal: Craftsmanship, the measurement of water, and shared control over records.

Difficult decision: To enter even her own family's old unlawful bargain into the record.

Lalit — 52

Goal: Safe construction and payment of the money owed.

Difficult decision: To refuse to sign a false bill under a contract.

Shakuntala — 63

Goal: Fair payment for work in clay and an education for her granddaughter.

Difficult decision: To change the family's old rules of inheritance.

Hira — 47

Goal: Recognition for waterways and the boatmen's methods of measurement.

Difficult decision: To disclose the true limits of danger to everyone and revise the rescue plan.

Aditi — 38

Goal: To improve the town's drainage.

Difficult decision: To withdraw her own earlier, erroneous report.

Kabir — 40

Goal: Legal assistance and the protection of the family that raised him.

Difficult decision: To turn documents concerning the secret of his birth into evidence.

Maithili — 61

Goal: Recognition for co-authorship of philosophical work.

Difficult decision: To acknowledge her part in suppressing recognition of Sarita's labour.

Ishan — 67

Goal: His school, scholarship, and reputation.

Difficult decision: Despite possessing genuine learning, not to defend himself against the charge of having appropriated another's credit.

Devavrat — 55

Goal: Commerce, lineage, and public influence.

Difficult decision: To open the warehouse in the final crisis and then struggle with the obligation to submit to investigation.

Aniruddha — 46

Goal: His hospital and the treatment of patients.

Difficult decision: To acknowledge his own role in irregularities in medical supplies.

Subhadra — 62

Goal: Authority over the story of her own life.

Difficult decision: To decide the price of making Kabir's birth public.

Rukhsana — 44

Goal: Financial independence for the kitchen.

Difficult decision: To reconcile the public expectation of free meals with fair payment for labour.

Padma — 32

Goal: To mediate communication through signs and to pursue her own teaching.

Difficult decision: To refuse to disappear into the role of an assistant, and to demand fees and recognition.

Mahesh Mandal — 50

Goal: To give testimony and secure his family's future.

Difficult decision: To bear the consequences of his identity becoming public before his safety has been assured.

157 OCCUPATIONS AND COMMUNITIES: CHARACTERS AND NARRATIVE CIRCLES

These 157 entries follow the order of the original register, not an alphabetical arrangement of the novel's characters or its social and occupational circles. Neither community nor occupation determines a character's nature by birth. The chapter numbers below indicate the principal episodes in which these figures appear; they must not be taken as evidence of genealogical relationship.

1. Barhi
Character reference: Lalit Vishwakarma
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2. Dom
Character reference: Shyam
Related chapters: 9 · 49 · 186

3. Kumhar
Character reference: Shakuntala Pandit
Related chapters: 7 · 42 · 152

4. Mallah
Character reference: Hira Sahni
Related chapters: 9 · 47 · 153

5. Jolaha
Character reference: Yusuf Ansari
Related chapters: 39 · 45 · 166

6. Patwa; a separate Tatma Tanti family
Character reference: Parvati Tanti and Pavitra Patwa
Related chapters: 39 · 49 · 166

7. Darzi
Character reference: Nasim Idrisi
Related chapters: 37 · 87 · 165

8. Dhunia
Character reference: Rahim Mansuri
Related chapters: 46 · 80 · 142

9. Dhobi
Character reference: Urmila
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10. Rangrez
Character reference: Sakina — changed
Related chapters: 46 · 80 · 166

11. Garedi
Character reference: Devaki Pal
Related chapters: 8 · 58 · 167

12. Lohar
Character reference: Harinarayan Sharma
Related chapters: 44 · 93 · 188

13. Kasera
Character reference: Meena Sah
Related chapters: 43 · 65 · 142

14. Sonar
Character reference: Kamala Thakur
Related chapters: 43 · 90 · 165

15. Kanu
Character reference: Raghu Sahu
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16. Halwai
Character reference: Chandrika Rai
Related chapters: 37 · 56 · 187

17. Teli
Character reference: Bindeshwari Sahu
Related chapters: 7 · 43 · 166

18. A joint circle of Nonia and Beldar
Character reference: Amrita Chauhan and Gomati Beldar
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19. Kuredi
Character reference: Batohi Dhami
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20. Barai
Character reference: Phulo Chaurasia
Related chapters: 8 · 58 · 167

21. Pasi
Character reference: Suraj Chaudhary

Related chapters: 8 · 56 · 185

22. Sudi and Kalwar
Character reference: Mahendra Mahaseth and Binod Jaiswal
Related chapters: 7 · 93 · 141

23. Laheri
Character reference: Rekha Sahu
Related chapters: 43 · 59 · 186

24. Chamar, Charmakar, Ravidas
Character reference: Usha Ram
Related chapters: 43 · 105 · 166

25. Mali
Character reference: Nandini Bhandari
Related chapters: 8 · 58 · 167

26. Brahmin
Character reference: Maithili
Related chapters: 32 · 82 · 213

27. Kayastha
Character reference: Rama Karna
Related chapters: 13 · 86 · 215

28. Rajput
Character reference: Raghav Singh
Related chapters: 64 · 70 · 140

29. Bhumihar
Character reference: Sudha Rai
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30. Yadav, Goar
Character reference: Bhola Yadav
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31. Kurmi
Character reference: Sushila Mahato
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32. Koiri, Kushwaha
Character reference: Ramesh Kushwaha
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33. Dhanuk
Character reference: Meera Mandal
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34. Amat
Character reference: Kiran Raut
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35. Beldar
Character reference: Gomati Beldar
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36. Bind
Character reference: Ramani Bind
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37. Kevat
Character reference: Madhu Kevat
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38. Kevart
Character reference: Vinod Kevart
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39. Tiyar
Character reference: Phoolmati Tiyar
Related chapters: 38 · 57 · 164

40. Gondhi
Character reference: Renu Gondhi
Related chapters: 11 · 88 · 154

41. Vanpar
Character reference: Ratan Vanpar
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42. Kharkaut
Character reference: Saroj Kharkaut
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43. Nonphar
Character reference: Badri Nonphar
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44. Bin
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45. Kathautiya
Character reference: Sona Kathautiya
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46. Naua, Hajam
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47. Kahar
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48. Mahapatra
Character reference: Shashibhushan — death
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49. Panda
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50. Bhat, Hindu
Character reference: Chetan Bhat
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51. Bhat, Muslim
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52. Pamariya
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53. Bakkho
Character reference: Hasan and Zubaida (bus)
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54. Dusadh, Paswan
Character reference: Haricharan Paswan
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55. Musahar
Character reference: Sugni Sadai
Related chapters: 12 · 104 · 165

56. Bhuiyan
Character reference: Ratan Bhuiyan
Related chapters: 5 · 85 · 168

57. Bantar
Character reference: Savitri Sardar
Related chapters: 13 · 87 · 145

58. Bauri
Character reference: Kedar Bauri
Related chapters: 27 · 81 · 164

59. Bhogta
Character reference: Rajo Bhogta
Related chapters: 35 · 75 · 149

60. Bhumij
Character reference: Asha Bhumij
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61. Chaupal
Character reference: Anita Chaupal
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62. Dabgar
Character reference: Kamlesh Dabgar
Related chapters: 42 · 99 · 188

63. Ghasi
Character reference: Ramesh Ghasi
Related chapters: 6 · 60 · 210

64. Halalkhor
Character reference: Rani Halalkhor
Related chapters: 10 · 103 · 143

65. Hari Mehtar
Character reference: Mamta Hari
Related chapters: 12 · 103 · 137

66. Kanjar
Character reference: Mohan Kanjar
Related chapters: 30 · 78 · 150

67. Kurariyar
Character reference: Hiravati Kurariyar

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68. Lalbegi
Character reference: Rosie Lalbegi
Related chapters: 28 · 86 · 155

69. Nat, Hindu
Character reference: Nandu Nat
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70. Pan, Sawasi, Panar
Character reference: Basanti Pan
Related chapters: 14 · 89 · 156

71. Rajwar
Character reference: Dulari Rajwar
Related chapters: 38 · 54 · 145

72. Turi
Character reference: Sonmati Turi
Related chapters: 39 · 73 · 162

73. Khatwe
Character reference: Ramvati Khatwe
Related chapters: 8 · 76 · 159

74. Rajbhar
Character reference: Dhani Rajbhar
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75. Rajdhob
Character reference: Uma Rajdhob
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76. Kori
Character reference: Geeta Kori
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77. Lodh
Character reference: Phoolchan Lodh
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78. Nurang
Character reference: Neelima Nurang
Related chapters: 7 · 90 · 154

79. Dev
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80. Kathbaniya
Character reference: Lakshmi Kathbaniya
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81. Chidimar
Character reference: Poonam Chidimar
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82. Dhandi
Character reference: Shiv Dhandi
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83. Dhankar, Dharikar
Character reference: Ruchi Dharikar
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84. Kalar
Character reference: Beena Kalar
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85. Natuwa
Character reference: Hari Natuwa
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86. Sarvariya
Character reference: Amala Sarvariya
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87. Danuwar
Character reference: Durga Danuwar
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88. Bote
Character reference: Shanti Bote
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89. Darai
Character reference: Binu Darai
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90. Kumal
Character reference: Niru Kumal

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91. Majhi
Character reference: Gopal Majhi
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92. Tharu
Character reference: Meena Tharu
Related chapters: 12 · 57 · 160

93. Dhimal
Character reference: Rachna Dhimal
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94. Gangai
Character reference: Durga Gangai
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95. Jhangar, Dhangar
Character reference: Lakshmi Jhangar
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96. Kisan
Character reference: Niranjan Kisan
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97. Koche
Character reference: Malati Koche
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98. Meche
Character reference: Hira Meche
Related chapters: 11 · 77 · 154

99. Munda
Character reference: Chanda Munda
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100. Pattharkatta, Kuswadiya
Character reference: Paro Pattharkatta
Related chapters: 41 · 100 · 137

101. Rajvanshi
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Related chapters: 36 · 76 · 159

102. Satar, Santhal
Character reference: Lakhan Satar
Related chapters: 26 · 80 · 161

103. Tajpuriya
Character reference: Tulsi Tajpuriya
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104. Sheikh
Character reference: Salma Sheikh
Related chapters: 15 · 101 · 145

105. Sayyid
Character reference: Asad Sayyid
Related chapters: 17 · 78 · 149

106. Pathan
Character reference: Irfan Khan
Related chapters: 44 · 94 · 144

107. Moghal
Character reference: Nahid Moghal
Related chapters: 4 · 91 · 165

108. Malik
Character reference: Shabnam
Related chapters: 14 · 95 · 141

109. Rain, Kujra
Character reference: Rukhsana — food
Related chapters: 38 · 55 · 187

110. Kasab, Qureshi
Character reference: Farida Qureshi
Related chapters: 37 · 79 · 157

111. Chik
Character reference: Farid
Related chapters: 38 · 82 · 146

112. Dafali
Character reference: Karim Dafali
Related chapters: 12 · 19 · 209

113. Nat
Character reference: Sajid Nat

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114. Bhathiyara
Character reference: Amina Bhathiyara
Related chapters: 4 · 42 · 185

115. Miriyasin
Character reference: Hamida Miriyasin
Related chapters: 7 · 21 · 211

116. Madari, Qalandar
Character reference: Javed Qalandar
Related chapters: 25 · 53 · 195

117. Mirshikar
Character reference: Sabina Mirshikar
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118. Sai, Fakir, Diwan, Madar
Character reference: Fakira
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119. Chudihar
Character reference: Farzana Chudihar
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120. Sikligar
Character reference: Nazir Sikligar
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121. Nalband
Character reference: Salim Nalband
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122. Abdal
Character reference: Saqib Abdal
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123. Itfarosh, Gadhedi
Character reference: Noorjahan Itfarosh
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124. Thakurai
Character reference: Rahina Thakurai
Related chapters: 19 · 96 · 139

125. Kulaiya
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Related chapters: 8 · 75 · 202

126. Shershahbadi
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127. Surjapuri self-identification
Character reference: Rafiq — his own
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128. Khatik
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129. Kapariya
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130. Gulguliya
Character reference: Reva Gulguliya
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131. Banjara
Character reference: Meera Banjara
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132. Bari
Character reference: Shanti Bari
Related chapters: 6 · 50 · 184

133. Tikulhar
Character reference: Suman Tikulhar
Related chapters: 45 · 59 · 182

134. Turha
Character reference: Bela Turha
Related chapters: 5 · 56 · 160

135. Gangota
Character reference: Suraj Gangota
Related chapters: 10 · 69 · 158

136. Donwar
Character reference: Tulsi Donwar

Related chapters: 11 · 90 · 163

137. Dangi
Character reference: Madhuri Dangi
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138. Roniyar
Character reference: Madhav Roniyar
Related chapters: 47 · 93 · 143

139. Kesharwani
Character reference: Vinita Kesharwani
Related chapters: 12 · 87 · 161

140. Mahuri
Character reference: Shashi Mahuri
Related chapters: 7 · 95 · 140

141. Barnwal
Character reference: Arun Barnwal
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142. Agrahari
Character reference: Vibha Agrahari
Related chapters: 42 · 92 · 142

143. Kasaudhan
Character reference: Sharada Kasaudhan
Related chapters: 44 · 89 · 159

144. Pansari
Character reference: Harish Pansari
Related chapters: 46 · 94 · 144

145. Santhal
Character reference: Somri Hembrom
Related chapters: 33 · 76 · 199

146. Oraon
Character reference: Rita Ekka
Related chapters: 26 · 86 · 157

147. Gond
Character reference: Devi Gond
Related chapters: 66 · 99 · 147

148. Gorait
Character reference: Mangri Gorait
Related chapters: 28 · 84 · 162

149. Bengali family
Character reference: Anupama Sen
Related chapters: 6 · 91 · 214

150. Marwari family
Character reference: Kamala Jain
Related chapters: 8 · 56 · 183

151. Punjabi Sikh family
Character reference: Gurmeet Kaur
Related chapters: 41 · 54 · 187

152. Newar
Character reference: Maitri Shrestha
Related chapters: 9 · 75 · 197

153. Kami
Character reference: Sumitra Kami
Related chapters: 48 · 96 · 181

154. Damai, Dholi
Character reference: Karuna Damai
Related chapters: 5 · 60 · 189

155. Sarki
Character reference: Meena Sarki
Related chapters: 45 · 73 · 160

156. Badi
Character reference: Chandra Badi
Related chapters: 20 · 53 · 180

157. Gaine
Character reference: Dev Gaine
Related chapters: 4 · 57 · 207

Parva 1 · Ādi | Bāla Kāṇḍa

Chapter 1 · The Dead Person's Kitchen

In Videhapur, on that Ashadha morning, the news of Sarita's death arrived while she was searching a tin of rice for a prescription belonging to her dead husband. Her husband had died seventeen years before. The prescription was dated yesterday. And the notice that had appeared on her phone declared that Sarita herself was no longer alive.

The rice was boiling over on the stove. Sarita lowered the flame first, then set on the water she had kept beside the tongs. A person standing close to the fire knows what must be done immediately. But there is no stove to tell one when the news on a telephone must be attended to.

Bittu, a child from the neighbourhood, was reading the screen. He was in Class Two and still stumbled over conjunct letters. "Dea... th... no... tice," he sounded out, and looked up at Sarita's face. "Whose name is this?"

"Mine," said Sarita. "Reading the word 'dead' a second time won't change anything. Find your slippers and get ready for school."

Bittu laughed to himself, but held the laughter back. No one seemed to be allowed to laugh at the news of a death. He fell silent and picked up the pair of slippers, each a different colour, that lay in the corner. Outside, his mother was asking someone to return a milk vessel. The world was still conducting its small accounts.

Sarita's room stood behind the railway line. The trains could not be seen: between her room and the tracks lay a medicine warehouse, tin-roofed houses built all around a sealed-up pond, and a high wall. But she could tell by the sound whether a train was arriving or departing. Today the railway whistle offered her a kind of consolation: whatever is alive and moving has a voice.

She turned the phone face down on the cot. The notice gave a name, an age, an identification number and a date. The age was correct, the year of birth was correct; the date of death was two days before today. During those two days, in that very room, Sarita had gone to the market twice, cooked rice, wrung out clothes and rubbed oil into her knees in the evening. The telephone had asked for no proof of any of these acts.

"They even chose the date on which I was to die," she murmured. Then she took out a plate for herself and slid it towards the door, as though preparing to answer someone.

She found the creased paper in the rice tin. At the bottom was a blue printed emblem; above it were her husband's name and the stamp of the

hospital's distribution centre. The medicines listed were three tablets and an injection. While her husband was alive, he had never received treatment for this illness. The time of dispensing was recorded as 5:12 yesterday evening. In small letters, at one corner of the prescription, were the printed words 'Medicine received'.

Sarita knew where her husband's death certificate was kept: in a brass box, among folded clothes, which she took out every year without reading it. In seventeen years she had been required to prove his death many times—first for a pension, then for a small share of land, then to change a name on the ration card. Each time the old grief had come with a new fee. Today she had no desire to open that box again.

On the back of the prescription, Sarita's name appeared in the space marked 'Next of kin'. On one piece of paper she was the living relative of a dead husband; on another she was dead herself. Both statements had been entered into the records of the same town, yet neither cancelled the other.

She stopped herself from putting the two records together. The notice of death was on her phone; the prescription lay at the bottom of the rice tin. It was as though the rice between them would prevent anyone from hastily joining one to the other.

Naira arrived eighteen minutes later. Her bag contained a charger, two dry rotis, a small notebook and a damaged hard drive. She had found work near the station salvaging copies of old records; even when she went half-fed, she never forgot a date on a fragile sheet of paper. At the doorway Naira looked first, not at the phone, but at her mother's face.

"Did you send for anyone else?"

"I sent for you. Bittu read it. He's gone to school."

"The prescription?"

"Wash your hands first. There's rice here."

"Mother, this is terribly urgent—"

"The news of a death can wait for the rice. The rice cannot wait for news of a death."

Despite herself, Naira smiled. Sarita spoke such sentences precisely in times of distress, leaving her listeners unable to decide whether to answer or remain silent. Naira washed her hands. There was scarcely any water left at the bottom of the bucket. Her mother called out, "I've kept fresh water for you. You can spare a little time to fetch some yourself, too."

Naira turned to look at her. What had sounded like a scolding in childhood had now become the reassuring voice of a house in which no one treated her as a workbench. She filled the water vessel and sat down on the cot.

When she opened the mobile phone, the notice bore the heading Municipal Life Records Service. Beneath it were the registration number of the death, the symbol of a digital signature and a link for an ‘Application to Correct Status’. Naira opened the page separately and preserved a screenshot bearing that precise time. There was an option to conceal the name and identification number before sending it to anyone, but she did not send the original screenshot beyond her own device.

The application’s first question was: What is the applicant’s relationship to the deceased? There were three choices: husband, son, authorised representative. No daughter. Naira turned the screen towards her mother. It was not that Sarita could not read; she read it, then asked, “Where am I in this?”

“Not on this list,” said Naira.

“Then correct their list first.”

“Before that, we have to save your life.”

Naira selected ‘Authorised representative’. The next field demanded the consent of the deceased. Her finger hung in the air for a moment. She photographed the sentence on the screen, but did not share it as a joke. Two days earlier, her mother’s identity had been terminated; now the same mother was being instructed to give her consent.

“Mother, will you show me the documents? Write me a statement saying you are here before me today.”

“What shall I write in this statement? That I am alive because I’m cooking rice?”

“Cooking rice isn’t proof. But the fact that someone has seen you can become evidence.”

“Then the person who sees me will need another piece of paper. Write it down. But don’t let my rice burn.”

In her notebook Naira entered the date, the time and what Sarita had said. Beside what she had witnessed with her own eyes she wrote ‘Direct observation’; beside what had come through the phone, ‘Information received’. She did not wish to turn the two into a single kind of evidence. This caution came from her profession, but for the first time it felt so difficult within her own home.

From the roadside came the wet rasp of someone clearing his throat. Fakira rested his walking stick beside the doorway. A damp cloth was tied around its tip so that the knocking would not trouble the station watchman. He remained at the door and asked, “May I come in? The children said some news had come about Sarita.”

"Come inside," said Sarita. "There's a bucket on the left. No ill omen will follow if you touch it."

Fakira found the edge of the bucket with his foot and moved on. The way through the house was familiar to him, but the things left by the doorway were forever changing. Sarita gave him a corner of the cot. As soon as he sat down, he said, "So we shall be eating rice cooked by a dead person again?"

"Will you make certain I'm dead before you eat?" asked Sarita.

"Not if they ask me. On a day when a living person serves you rice, who has the leisure to call her dead?" Fakira laughed. Naira's lips, too, curved into a smile, but within both their laughter she could hear her own terrible helplessness.

Fakira took an old pass, folded in two, from his cloth bag. Its corners had gone white with being unfolded so often. "They stopped me at the gate today. Said my voice wasn't in the new register, nor my name. Pass cancelled. If I come back, I must bring fresh permission."

"How long have you been passing through that gate?" Naira asked.

"I would say thirty years. The man at the gate would say he was seeing me for the first time. He wants receipts for thirty years. I need water today and enough time to catch my train."

He began to say his name for himself. "Listen. In one register someone wrote me down as 'Sai Fakir'; in another, 'Diwan'; in another, 'Madar'. Those are not all the same thing. My name is Fakira. Keep the account of the work I do in each place under the name of that work. Shoving all of us into some old column will not open my road."

Naira examined the pass. On one side were the hours during which he could pass through the railway square; on the other, the seal of the service centre and a date. Fakira did not want to name the person in charge who sometimes left water for him at the station. He wanted only to say that the pass had worked until yesterday, and today it did not.

"What exactly did the person who stopped you say today?" Naira asked.

"He said I wasn't in the register. He did not use the words 'You are dead'. People say someone has struck my name off. I want to keep what I've heard separate from what I've seen."

Naira remembered the notice about her mother. The same system, the same day, but no evidence that it was the same error. Above Fakira's statement she wrote 'Heard'. It was easy to declare one incident the cause of another; restraining oneself was harder.

"May I put your name before anyone?" Naira asked.

"Ask me again first. My livelihood isn't waiting for my name to appear in print. It's waiting for the road to be opened."

He put the pass back in his pocket. Tucked into it was a small receipt, the account of the coins he had paid for tea at the station that morning. Fakira showed it with a little smile. "The tea seller still refused me credit today. To him, I seem to be alive."

Sarita served rice on three plates. Fakira asked how the fish tasted. "Fried potatoes today," Sarita said. "These days the river is bringing up more papers than fish." Fakira replied that potatoes, at least, did not ask for water; they could be boiled in whatever happened to be lying by the stove. Sarita accepted this science of his.

Naira was about to take her first mouthful when she noticed the sign that the correction page on her phone was closing. The deadline for applying was that evening. On another page was the receipt for medicines issued in the dead man's name; it carried a different application number. Naira wrote down both numbers. It might be coincidence, or it might be conspiracy; what the evidence showed for now was merely two separate transactions.

"Someone has collected these medicines," Naira said. "It isn't just that a prescription was made. The time of dispensing has been recorded."

"Who collected them?" Sarita asked.

"There's no name on this copy. We'll have to request the receipt register from the centre."

"Then write this: my husband could not have collected the medicines. Someone is declaring his living wife dead. Those are two separate matters. Otherwise they'll turn them all into papers for the same quarrel."

Naira paused as she wrote down her mother's words. Sarita did not know the cause of the errors, but she understood their consequences. If her husband continued to be recognised as dead, she was entitled to a widow's rights; restoring him to life on paper might efface the history of his actual death. If she herself remained declared dead, the rice for her kitchen, her medical registration, every claim upon her home could be called into question. A reversal on paper descends first upon the means of living.

Naira stepped outside and placed a call, almost soundlessly. The help centre's automated voice first recited the language options. When she selected Maithili, the response said, "The identity of the authorised applicant has not been established." She noted down the helpline number. On a second attempt, the request was registered, but no time was given for its resolution.

Daylight was growing beyond the doorway. On the other side of the warehouse wall, water lay stagnant. The monsoon had not fully begun, yet water had already acquired the habit of standing still in one place.

Schoolchildren on the narrow path were circling around it. Naira did not yet invent a story about some unknown drain. First there was the wet soil she had seen; the cause of it was a matter for investigation another day.

When she went back inside, she saw that Sarita had taken the old death certificate out of its brass box. Her hands did not tremble as she unfolded it, but a yellowed flower petal was caught in the crease. Sarita lifted it onto her palm, then returned it to the box. Naira asked nothing.

“Make a copy of this document,” Sarita said. “The original stays with me. What you’ve taken onto your phone, keep it layer by layer. And don’t send our address everywhere.”

“But a moment ago you were telling me to correct the list.”

“Correcting a thing and showing it to everybody are two different matters. First see what you need to see. You can show it to the world afterwards.”

Naira could not tell whether she liked that answer. Her contract work consisted of opening up other people’s old writings; for many years her mother’s work had also included keeping certain names buried. A line was being drawn between the two kinds of labour in the same house.

Fakira finished his plate and lifted his stick. “I have to catch the midday train from the station. The road is closed, but time hasn’t stopped. I’ll tell you this evening whom I managed to speak to.” Naira wanted to stop him, then heard the decision in his voice and remained silent. She asked permission to make a photocopy of the receipt, and recorded only the time and seal.

At the doorway Fakira laughed. “Auntie, how am I to enter the price of the rice I ate in your house? If I write it in the name of the dead, I’ll never get clear of the debt.”

“Write it in the name of the living,” said Sarita. “And after you’ve eaten, you can still feel your body, can’t you?”

“Oh, very much so,” Fakira said. This time the tip of his stick gave a faint ringing knock. Measuring the path before him, he went on his way.

Naira saved the image of the death notice and the copy of the prescription in two separate, secure folders. She named the first ‘Mother—Alive and Present’; the second, ‘Father’s Medicines—Verification of Receipt’. She recorded their dates separately. Fakira’s testimony remained in a third note, which she did not treat as an explanation of either of the first two documents.

From under the cot Sarita brought out a sheet of paper wrapped in an old cloth and turned it over in her palm. “There’s something I must tell you tomorrow,” she said. “Some names are such that, even while correcting them, you must protect the people who bear them.”

Naira did not reach for the paper. “Today, your name first.”

"Yes," said Sarita. "But my name isn't caught in this alone."

The midday train whistled again. The pot of rice was empty, save for a little stuck to its bottom. Sarita poured water into it so that washing it in the evening would be easier. On her screen Naira saw the message 'Application received'. Only this much was certain: the question had been entered into the record. An official answer confirming that Sarita was alive had still not arrived.

Yet there was fire in the stove, a vessel of water in the house, and the work of cooking again that evening. As Sarita put the pot away, she said, "If they tell you again that I have died, ask them—who is going to account for this rice?"

Chapter 2 · Twenty-Seven Names

On the second dawn of Ashadha, when Naira woke, the kitchen door stood half open. Inside, Sarita was drying paper, not rice. Two drops of rain blown through the window during the night had fallen on the wooden platform. Sarita had spread out an old newspaper and laid a folded sheet upon it. At each of its four corners she had placed a small brass bowl upside down, to keep the paper from blowing away.

"Has water got into it?" Naira asked.

"Into the cloth on top. The writing is safe."

Naira remained standing in the doorway. Yesterday her mother had said she would speak today. Today, before anything else, Sarita was saving the paper.

"Will you have tea, or examine this first?" Sarita asked.

"You have your tea first."

"But you are always in such a hurry to understand everything at once."

Naira smiled. Sarita did not accept the smile as an answer. She measured water from the lota and set it on the fire; twice, while crushing the ginger, she stopped her hand. The firewood was damp. In the ordinary delay of that household task, Naira found herself able to hold back, a little, the questions rising inside her.

When the tea was ready, Sarita lifted the bowls from the sheet. One part of the paper was the colour of wheat; another had been blackened by smoke. It bore three fold marks. There was no official heading on the first line, only writing in Sarita's own hand: twenty-seven personal names, with small marks beside some of them. Four names had been written in different ink. Here a date, there a question mark, elsewhere a blank space. At the last fold Sarita had placed a separate little slip of paper, tying it in place with thread.

"Where did this come from?" Naira asked.

"I wrote it. Not all on one day."

"At whose request?"

"At my own, to begin with. Later, at the request of each person who said no one had listened to what they had to say."

Naira reached to lift the sheet. Sarita interposed a warning: "Do not open that fold."

"Why?"

"There is a name there. I shall tell you when you have the right to read it. For now, no one has the right to print it."

"How am I to investigate without reading the name?"

"Begin with twenty-six names. Your eyes will not close merely because you have not read one."

Naira felt this was unfair. She worked with old records, and in her line of work a sheet whose one line had been covered with cloth seemed scarcely worth examining at all. But she looked at her mother's face. Sarita was not eager to impart a secret. She had already decided that, to protect someone, she would endure even her daughter's mistrust.

"The original will stay with you?"

"Yes. I shall give you a copy. But the fold will remain closed."

Naira laid both hands upon the platform. "I agree. Provided you write in your own hand, in the margin, that this part has been kept closed at your request."

Sarita put down her tea. "What difference will writing that make?"

"If tomorrow someone asks whether I hid the name of my own accord, I can say whose decision it was. And if you wish to change your decision, that too will be on record."

Sarita considered this for a moment. Then, on the blank reverse of the sheet, she wrote: 'The final fold has been kept closed at my request. No decision has yet been taken to open it.' Beneath this she entered the date and signed her name. Naira watched her. Yesterday other people had been demanding proof that this woman was alive; today she was herself putting proof of her own will into writing.

"Are all twenty-seven people on this list dead?" Naira asked.

"No."

"Are all their documents wrong?"

"No. Some documents are correct, but have been put to the wrong use. Some names are right, but the relationships given are wrong. Some people have changed their own names. Some have had their names written down by others without being asked."

"Then this is not a register of deaths?"

"I own no register. This is an account of work that could not be completed."

The tea was growing cold. One by one, Naira examined the first twenty-six names. Their significance did not unfold to her all at once; a sheet of paper was not, in itself, the story of a person's life. She asked her mother what the

marks meant. A small circle had been drawn where Sarita had received information; a double line, where someone had requested a correction. A line struck through an entry did not mean that the correction had been completed. Indeed, that was precisely what was in dispute.

"Why has a line been drawn through this name?"

"I was told the case had been closed. But the woman who came seeking the correction received not a single document. So I put a question mark beside the crossed-out line."

"Did you send her name again, then?"

"Not that day. The office had closed. The following week I was not allowed to go in."

"Did someone stop you?"

"The man who stood at the door said there were orders. The person who could show me the order was in another room, but he did not have the key to it. I never clearly understood who was stopping me. So do not write down anyone's name as the person to blame."

This caution of Sarita's astonished Naira. For years her work had taught her to preserve evidence and keep inference separate. Her mother had learned the same lesson without naming it, without training, amid the struggle for a livelihood and the humiliations of everyday life.

Outside, the morning rain was dripping from the tin awning. Bittu's voice came from the neighbouring house: he could not find his school exercise book. From beneath the platform Sarita took the pencil he had left there the day before and set it by the door. "Tell him he left his own thing here last night. But don't write it in my name that I am teaching him."

Naira burst out laughing. "Everything is about names today."

"Because people who write down names forget to write down the work."

A small, old receipt had been tucked into the middle of the sheet. It recorded no sum of money, only a time of entry and a serial number. Its corners were worn. Naira asked, "Have you kept this?"

"Yes. A man came for three days trying to have his name heard. On the fourth day he was allowed in. This proves no more than that he entered that day. Whether anyone listened to him, the receipt cannot tell us."

Naira asked permission to photograph it. Sarita said, "Copy the name and number into my notebook. Do not separate the original receipt from this sheet." Naira wrote them down. Then she began transcribing the meanings of the marks, each on its own line in her notebook. Beside what she understood she wrote 'Sarita's statement'. What she did not understand she left blank.

"How old is this sheet?"

"The first writing is old. I added the last four names recently. The dates were never all recorded in one place. Your task now is to establish that chronology."

"And yours?"

"Not to sell, without asking them, the confidence of those to whom I have given my word."

Naira looked at the sheet again. In the course of her contract work she had opened many records to public scrutiny. Where an office had concealed them, making them public usually seemed the proper course. Yet this sheet might also contain a path into the innermost rooms of someone's home. When a government's wrongdoing and a frightened person's privacy are written on the same paper, the manner of disclosure has to change.

By noon Naira had checked the lettering of all twenty-six entries. In three places the same name had been spelled differently. Sarita supplied no evidence that would justify identifying those spellings as one and the same person. In one entry the word denoting a family relationship had been crossed out, though the original name remained intact. The one firm conclusion was that the paper was not a list of criminals, but an account of errors of several kinds and of corrections that had been held up. Even this conclusion, however, rested on Sarita's words and writing. Verification against outside registers had yet to be undertaken.

As she prepared the midday meal, Sarita saw there was little oil left in the pan. "We'll need to fetch oil this evening."

"I'll bring it. Aren't you going to the hospital?" Naira asked.

"I must go to notify them that I am alive, or they will close my old account for medicines. But you must examine the medicines printed on that prescription. Don't make those two matters into one again."

Naira agreed. Instead of attaching the photograph of her father's prescription to her mother's sheet, she placed it in a separate folder. She made a third folder for the list, naming it by the date alone, not after any person on it. On her phone she disabled the facility that could automatically share someone's home address or identification number.

Rising from the stove, Sarita looked at the imprint left upon her hands. "Do you remember drawing a red flower in my account book when you were little?"

"And you wouldn't give me a pen for three days afterwards."

"I didn't give you the pen, but I gave you rice to eat."

"Was there a name hidden beneath the flower?"

"No. It was a flower, that's all. Not every old mark is a mystery."

Naira laughed, and the fear within her loosened a little. To search for a clue in everything her mother said was another kind of injustice, not unlike the one from which she wanted to rescue her mother's writing. For a while the two of them quarrelled over whether the vegetables needed more or less salt. Sarita said that anything fried by Naira would smell of investigation rather than fenugreek; Naira replied that evidence needed salt as well. Through their laughter, life returned by its ancient right.

In the middle of the meal Sanket appeared at the door. Sixteen-year-old Sanket carried two different casings from old mobile phones and a small screwdriver. Yesterday he had told Sarita he would replace the button on her broken phone; today he had brought a button of the right size. He did not ask whose death notice had reached the house. First he opened the phone's back cover and laid it on the table. Then he said, "This button will work, but fitting it won't bring back the old photographs. The pictures will have to be saved separately."

Naira watched him at work. "Do you keep things stored in a broken phone?"

"What is mine, yes. Having somebody else's phone in my hand doesn't make its photographs mine," Sanket said, turning the screwdriver. "Yesterday at school they sent a group photograph to everybody. The number written on the back of my book was visible too. I told them to remove it. They said everyone was forwarding the picture. So I asked: does everybody doing a thing make it right?"

Sarita laughed. "There will be no holiday for your teacher if you go on arguing like that."

"I don't want a holiday. I only want them to crop out that part of the photograph and send it again."

Naira glanced towards her copy. She did not ask Sanket to open any part of the sheet. She asked only what one ought to do to conceal a name in a photograph of a document. Sanket said, "Cover the part you don't want anyone to see before you take the picture. If you black it out afterwards, who knows where an earlier copy might still be?"

He fitted the button and gave the phone back. Sarita offered him tea in return for his work, but Sanket said it was time for school. He could not stay for tea; tomorrow he would have some hot milk sweetened with jaggery. Sarita agreed without insisting. After he had gone, Naira looked at the folded sheet. There had been no inspection of any copy, no disclosure of anyone's secret: only a boy's dissent over his own photograph, left behind in the house.

After the meal Sarita folded the original sheet once more. She tied the little slip concealing the final name with fresh thread. Naira wanted to photograph it, but Sarita refused. Her daughter made a copy instead: twenty-six visible

names, the marks accompanying them, and a blank space for the twenty-seventh. On the reverse of the copy she recorded that the original was in Sarita's possession and that the final name was confidential at her express instruction. Both of them entered the date; what Sarita had said aloud, Naira recorded beneath her own signature as 'Statement heard'.

"Who will see it?" Sarita asked.

"For now, I shall. If I need to check something with someone, I shall cover the names and ask the question. Without your permission I shall not send anyone a photograph of the original."

"And if keeping that name closed causes an innocent person to be accused?"

Naira fell silent. For the first time Sarita herself had raised a question against the rule she had made.

"Then I shall have to come back to you," Sarita said. "Sometimes secrecy is protection. But we cannot make it a sacred duty for all eternity."

Naira did not immediately assent. She said only, "If the investigation reveals that someone may be harmed, I shall tell you first. And I shall accuse no one without evidence."

Beyond the window, water had gathered against the wall of the railway warehouse. Two children were sailing paper boats upon it. One boat quickly sank; the other wheeled around towards the wall. Sarita shut the window. "The water isn't deep there, but there is glass at the bottom. Tell the children to keep their shoes on when they play." Naira went outside and told them. She noticed then that one trickle of water was running towards the wall, but she could see no way for it to flow out. She drew no conclusion about its cause; she merely resolved to examine the place when she had the chance.

When she returned, the phone rang. An unfamiliar number. Naira said 'Hello' in her ordinary voice. At first she heard a distant sound like a train whistle. Then a man's voice asked, "Has the paper reached you?"

"Who are you?"

"It has reached the person who was meant to know. Tell Sarita that if the twenty-seventh name is uncovered, it won't take long to put out the fire in her kitchen. You two should be careful which roads you take."

"Do you know my name? Why do you think it necessary to threaten us?"

There was silence at the other end for several moments. Then the voice said, "If you have any sense, don't send those names." The call ended.

Naira immediately wrote down the time. She recorded exactly the words she had heard. She looked at the number again: no name appeared on the phone. The identity of the voice, its location, its purpose—none of these was

certain. One look at her daughter's face was enough for Sarita to know that something had gone wrong.

"Whose call was it?"

Naira repeated the words verbatim. Sarita did not interrupt.

"Do you recognise him?"

"Not by his voice. I understand one thing: someone knows about the paper. Who that someone is remains to be discovered."

"I shall inform the police," Naira said. "The exact words of the threat. Not your sheet."

"I won't stop you," Sarita replied. "But keep a secure copy of my application to be recognised as alive, in my own name. If tomorrow someone says the person who received the threat is dead, I don't want to have to point to the kitchen all over again."

For the first time Naira saw her mother's fear plainly. It arose less from the unknown man's voice outside the house than from the dread that someone within the world of documents might erase her living existence once again. Naira sat beside the stove and took her mother's hand. There was no official category for that touch, yet in that instant her own decision changed: she would not abandon the investigation; she would not rush to publish; and she would record the threat as a separate offence.

Picking up the bag in which they would bring home the evening oil, Sarita said, "Tomorrow Fakira will bring news from the station. Don't attach him to this sheet unless there is a reason arising from his own account."

"I won't," Naira said. "His gate pass and your list are two separate matters."

Sarita placed the original sheet in the brass box. She did not yet close the lid completely: first she straightened the flower petal inside. Naira did not draw so much as a question mark in the final blank space of her copy. The count of twenty-seven names was complete, but she possessed only twenty-six of them. She recorded that absence as a lack of evidence, not as evidence of guilt.

Outside, a train went by. Water still lay motionless beside the wall. In the house the evening fire was lit, and Naira understood that protecting this sheet was not merely a matter of hiding the sheet itself. It was the beginning of the difficult work of restoring to those whose names were written there the right to their own lives.

Chapter 3 · Time at the Crossroads

The tea seller at the railway crossroads was taking the kettle off the fire for the third time, but Fakira had yet to lift his glass. After the first train of the morning had gone, a silence descended upon the crossroads. At first it seemed empty; then, little by little, the sounds of people's work became audible within that emptiness—the wicker of a basket shifting, a wheel freeing itself from the mud, the lid of a milk can rattling. Amid all these sounds Fakira pieced together the route of his day. Today one sound was missing. The iron chain hanging across the railway service gate had not been unfastened since the night before.

"How much sugar in your tea?" the shopkeeper asked.

"As much as comes at the price. But tell me the price first."

"Back to your accounts again today, are you?"

"It's because you keep your accounts straight that I ask you. A man who doesn't keep them straight holds out his palm without asking."

The shopkeeper laughed. Fakira counted out two coins. He paid for the first glass of tea but did not reach for a second. His daily earnings came from three kinds of work: telling strangers at the crossroads when their buses would leave, receiving payment for carrying someone's bundle, and sometimes asking an acquaintance for help. He did not put all three under the same name. Begging was no disgrace to him; but neither would he allow money earned by labour to be called charity and struck from the accounts.

An old timetable of his own making was pinned to a bamboo post outside the shop. The early train, the first bus to the market, the boat across the Tilwah, the small vehicle bound for the hospital—he had had all their times written on the sheet in large letters. Some dates were crossed out; others had been altered. Today a new question would have to be inserted between two times on that old timetable: when would the service gate open?

Yesterday's lost earnings were perfectly clear in his reckoning. He had been due five coins for carrying the sacks of a family arriving by the midday train; but when the train was missed, the family took another road on its own. What angered him was not that they had failed to wait. It was that the people who shut the gate said, "You sit about at the crossroads doing nothing." Sitting there was itself part of his work. The person who explained to strangers where to change vehicles was not an employee of any particular shop; and when someone mistakenly set off towards the hospital instead of the river, half a day could be lost.

Outside the tea stall that morning, a young man stood anxiously holding his mother's hand. He was asking the way to the market across the river, yet kept repeating the train's name in a loud voice. Fakira asked him, "Are you going to the market, or to the platform?" "The market, but from the railway crossroads," the young man answered. Fakira described the route: the grain warehouse at the turn, the intersection beyond it, and then a wait for Hira's boat at the water's edge. He made it clear that the water was rising and the timing might change. Delighted, the young man held out a coin. Fakira accepted it and said, "Don't let go of her hand. The steps down are wet." The young man tightened his grasp on his mother's hand. Fakira knew the routes people travelled, but how difficult it was for someone else to travel them he still had to learn from the bodies of others.

The movements of arriving passengers, the speech of different neighbourhoods, and the inexpensive ways people measured time changed daily at that crossroads. Some addressed Fakira by his proper name; others substituted four designations from the community register for that single name. Sometimes he grew tired of arguing; sometimes he dismissed the matter with a laugh. But when his entry pass was prepared, he himself had said, "Write just one name." Once the paper was issued, he had thought his passage secure. Today, without that piece of paper, the gate no longer recognised the person he was.

The previous day Fakira had gone to catch the midday train. The watchman had told him he could not enter. After making two journeys there and back by evening, Fakira had finally returned home along the rough river path. He had been unable to bring Sarita the news he had promised her. His knee ached so badly in the night that he could scarcely move the blanket away from his leg. This morning he had fulfilled his promise and returned to the crossroads.

A new guard sat at the service gate. At the sight of Fakira's walking stick he said, "Baba, not that way. It's forbidden again today."

"Until what time?"

"Ask the administration."

"Where has the administration hung up its clock?"

The guard grew a little irritated. "The pass isn't valid. If you want to get in, pay the facilitation fee."

"How much?"

The guard named a sum. Fakira made no move to take out his coins. "A receipt?"

"Who takes a receipt for such a small matter?"

"The sum may be small. The road is not. May I write down your name?"

Instead of giving his name, the guard pointed towards a window beside the gate. Fakira committed to memory his voice, the location of the window, and the time. He was not calling anyone a thief. It remained to be established whether the unreceipted payment demanded of him was an official entry charge or someone's private demand.

There was a long queue at the window. Some had come for permission to load railway sacks, others for a way through with baskets of fish, and still others to ask the time of a vehicle for patients. Fakira took his place at the very end. The woman ahead of him lifted her child from her hip and put yellow slippers on his feet. The child reached towards Fakira's stick. "Why hasn't this stick got a bell?" he asked.

"If it had a bell, people would listen to that instead of listening to me," said Fakira. The child laughed, and so did his mother. The queue moved one step forward.

The clerk behind the window placed the old pass before his machine. He entered the number once, then asked Fakira's name. "Fakira," came the reply.

"Any other name?"

"Read out what is written in my identity record."

"Three names come up here. One has Sai before it, another Diwan, another Madar."

"Don't turn three names into one man. Match the number on the document that belongs to me. I've already told you my name."

The clerk sent to another window for an old register. Fakira kept his palm upon the wooden ledge. At last a voice came from within: "The travel authorisation associated with this number is inactive. The linked life-register entry records the person as deceased."

Fakira asked first for something on paper. The clerk pointed towards the screen. "Baba, it's written here."

"I won't be able to read it merely because you show it to me. I've heard you read it aloud. Now, if you write it on paper, I can show it somewhere else."

The clerk was silent for a moment. The queue outside was growing. He took out a small slip and wrote down the travel-authorisation number, its current status, and the time of the inquiry at the window. Fakira spoke again: "Write that it says 'deceased' as well. Tomorrow someone may say you were speaking only of the pass's expiry date." The clerk added that word too, but wrote beneath it: 'Verification of original entry pending.'

When the slip was placed in his hand, Fakira did not fold it. “Whether I am alive cannot be settled at this window. But if the error begins here, I now have its location in writing.”

“The way across isn't closed altogether,” said the clerk. “Keep going around by the riverside.”

“How long does that take?”

“I don't know.”

“Then how does that become an equivalent road for me? Will anyone put the distance my legs must travel, the passenger's train, and the hours of my earnings into any of these papers?”

The clerk did not answer. But at Fakira's insistence he recorded the time of the application and gave him a reference number. For the first time, the complaint passed from a voice outside the window into a register inside it. This did not reopen the gate, but it would now be harder to deny that a complaint had been made.

Before noon Fakira went down towards the Tilwah. There was an uproar along the riverbank. Two men with baskets of fish stood near a boat, while several passengers pressed to be taken across at once. Hira the boatman was bent over the stern, lowering a long bamboo pole into the water. Different colours marked the places near its knots; the colours were not decoration, but a way of remembering his own measurements.

“Hira, you're late calling out today,” Fakira said.

“First I listen to the water,” Hira replied. “The force of the current upstream isn't what it was yesterday. Push the boat off too soon and we'll regret it in midstream.”

Fakira rested his stick on a dry strip of bank. Hira plunged the pole into three places. At the first, he reached the bottom quickly; at the second, the depth increased suddenly; at the third, there was a sound of something shifting. He tested it again. “The earth has slipped here,” he said, “but I won't judge the depth from the sound alone. I'll steer the boat according to what the pole tells me.”

“How old is your pole?” a passenger asked.

“Age doesn't make a thing accurate,” Hira said. “I checked the coloured markings again yesterday. But the current has changed today.”

People were insisting that two sacks piled on the bank be taken aboard. Hira had one of them removed. “Not that much weight on this crossing,” he said plainly. “The man who reaches the other bank keeps his earnings. If he falls into the water, the price of his goods won't bring his body back.” The owner grumbled but set half his load aside. Once the boat was moving, the

water did not flow at one pace along both banks. From a distance the eddies downstream looked smooth; but where they lay, Hira slowed his oar.

Beside the river every kind of work kept a different clock. For baskets of fish, the first crossing at dawn was valuable; those bound for their fields needed to be across before the sun climbed high; and for a patient even the last boat of the evening could sometimes be too late. The boatman could not be the keeper of everyone's time. Yet it was he who had to decide when a crossing was safe. A woman carefully lowered her covered basket and asked Hira, “I'm losing the hours when I can sell. Why hasn't another boat been arranged?” Hira said, “I'll call its owner. But he'll have to examine this altered depth as well.”

Looking towards Fakira, the woman said, “Every day we arrive late, and then the buyers at the market say, ‘Lower your price.’ We aren't the ones making ourselves late. Who is going to account for the time we lose at the landing?” For the first time, Fakira considered that question beyond the limits of his own case. He always recorded the hours of his lost earnings, but there was no shared reckoning of the time others spent waiting at the river. “Get together one day and write down how many times the boat was held back, and why,” he said. “We can't abolish the time needed for safety checks, but we can demand an account of unnecessary delays imposed at the landing.” The woman answered, “The buyer will refuse even to look at our written account.” Hira had been listening. He agreed to record departure times for the boat, but fixing the market price was beyond his authority.

Nearby a small boy was drawing a boat in the sand with a stick. He traced a track around all four sides and announced, “This is the railway and this is the water. They'll run together.” Fakira did not drag his stick across the lines the boy had made. He merely told him that the reckoning of a toy boat could not be used when boarding a real one. The boy laughed and rubbed out his lines. When the water crept up to the edge, the sandy track broke apart of its own accord. Fakira did not treat the sight as an omen. A child had made and unmade his game; there was nothing extraordinary in that small freedom of the day.

Fakira did not cross yet. He waited for Hira to return. An elderly woman had been seated towards the rear on the first crossing; she needed to fetch medicine from the railway crossroads. Fakira told her that the inner service gate was closed. The river route was open, but taking the long way round would take time. He gave her no fixed duration, for he had not yet measured the route himself. “Son,” she said, “sometimes time itself is medicine.” Fakira listened but offered no reassurance he could not justify.

When Hira returned, Fakira boarded his boat. Placing a hand upon its side, he felt a smooth join in the old wood. “Lalit's repair?” he asked.

“No. That's an old strip I had fitted myself. Lalit will inspect the forward planking next week,” Hira replied. “Not every join is the work of the same hand.”

Fakira laughed. “Just as the records decided all the names belonged to one man.”

“What has happened?”

“One window says I'm dead. Yet your boat is still asking me for the fare.”

Startled, Hira looked at him. “Something wrong with the pass?”

“Yesterday all I knew was that the pass had been blocked. Today I have a paper saying that the linked life-register entry marks me as dead. I still don't know how the error was made.”

Hira asked no more questions than he needed to. He said his old ledger, in which he kept the times of people arriving at and leaving the landing, recorded many of Fakira's journeys. But that ledger could not correct an entry in the life register. “I'll testify to your crossings,” he said, “but only to those I actually saw. I won't swear to the days I didn't see you.”

Fakira nodded with satisfaction. “That's all I ask.”

After disembarking on the far bank, they stood together for a little while. Hira pointed out a fresh place where the river had eaten into the shore. Fakira touched the soft ground with the tip of his stick. Earth that had been firm yesterday sank today under the weight of a foot. Someone had driven a bamboo pole into one part of the bank to mark a landing; on the other side an old footpath had disappeared beneath the water. Fakira asked whether the pole marked a public place to disembark or the boundary of someone's private lease. “Different people say different things,” Hira replied. “We'll have to see a copy of the records.” Neither of them pulled out the pole.

The driver of a small vehicle approaching from the village recognised Fakira and sounded his horn. Fakira counted the stages: the walk to the river, the wait for the boat, the climb up the far bank, and the remaining distance to the vehicle. What he had lived through today was not a matter of clock time alone; it involved legs and risk as well. He decided against writing ‘alternative route available’ in his timetable. A road that was available was not available in the same way to everyone.

When the midday heat had begun to abate, Naira met him at the crossroads. Fakira began by saying that he had been unable to keep yesterday's promise. Naira saw the new slip in his hand. “Have they marked you dead under your own name?”

“The clerk at the window read it out, then wrote it on this copy. I won't claim to have seen the record with my own eyes.”

With his permission Naira read the slip. The wording of the original status, the application reference number, and the time were clear. “May I copy this?” she asked.

“Copy it. But keep the times of my journeys and the matter of my complaint. My name isn't a key for joining up every register.”

Naira noted the document number. It differed from the reference number on Sarita's death notification, and the service gate's travel register was yet another record. It would have been easy, on seeing the same word ‘deceased’, to regard the two cases as threads of a single crime. Instead she wrote clearly in her notebook: ‘Fakira's travel authorisation; Sarita's life notification; connection unverified.’

“Will you come to the centre with me?” Naira asked.

“I can. But first, write down what I have to say.”

Naira opened her notebook. Fakira recounted as four distinct incidents the refusal he had heard the previous day, today's demand for money without a receipt, the word ‘deceased’ read out at the window, and the journeys Hira had witnessed. Whenever the question of guessing the guard's intentions arose, he stopped himself. “For now, write down what he demanded, not the name of an offence.” Naira headed his account ‘Fakira's testimony’; she recorded separately the details of the new slip she had seen herself.

They went to the service centre together. A different clerk was at the window. He examined the number on the slip. Fakira did not plead. He reckoned up what the journeys had cost him. “Yesterday I missed the midday train. Today I've crossed the river twice. I was asked for money without a receipt. If your rules have changed, give me that in writing. If there is an error in my record, give me a date when it will be corrected.”

The clerk turned through the file and issued a provisional inquiry slip. It neither changed Fakira's recorded status as dead nor automatically reopened the railway's inner service gate. But it stated a date for a further hearing and named the officer responsible for alternative entry. Fakira asked Naira to read it aloud. “Does it say anywhere here that I must give up my livelihood and sit at home?” he asked. Naira said, “No.” “Then tomorrow I'll be back at the crossroads at my usual hour.”

That evening, at the tea stall, Fakira added a line beneath his old timetable: ‘Service gate: authorisation disputed; river route: ask about current and load before crossing.’ He did not put his name beside it, for the timetable was there for every traveller's use. As he poured the tea, the shopkeeper said, “So now even Baba's death has come with a receipt!”

“No,” Fakira laughed. “I've got a receipt for having been written down as dead. I still have to pay my fare to stay alive.”

The warmth of the glass spread through his fingers. Across the crossroads people were setting off along their separate roads. On the far side of the river, Hira's boat was drawing in to the bank again; from the tracks rose the sound of the approaching train. Fakira counted his coins, paid for his tea, and straightened the time of tomorrow's first train on the bamboo post outside the shop. His complaint had not yet been answered, but he had not decided to surrender the hours of his life to someone else's mercy.

Chapter 4 · The River's First Home

In the ancient days of Hastinapura, before the morning boat set out from the Yamuna landing, Satyavati would open the baskets of fish belonging to her father and inspect them. The fish kept in cold water overnight looked fresh at the top, but two had spoiled in the pile beneath. She set them apart. The price of raw fish should be determined not by the brightness of its eyes but by the actual condition of its flesh: her father had taught her that when she was a child.

Seated on the bank, her father moved small wooden counters back and forth. Each counter stood for a reckoning: repairs to the nets, the boatman's share, payment to the carrier who took the catch to market, and grain for the household. The boat was the family's means of livelihood, but the river was not their inheritance. When the water fell, the landing shifted; when the current grew fierce, a day's consignment was lost; and when the king's men came to be ferried, ordinary passengers had to wait. Her father did not know the names of all who waited. Their lost earnings, however, found no place among his counters.

Satyavati examined the knots of a net set aside for her younger brother. He had cut his finger the night before; a knot tightened with an injured hand might tear the mesh. She repaired the broken join herself, yet entered the full share of the work against her brother's name. Her father had once said there was no question of counting wages separately for work done within a family. Satyavati had replied, "Today I mend the net; tomorrow he will row the boat. If the work is done and no name is kept beside it, who will remember whose work it was?" Her brother had found in those words not pride but a small assurance. Today he showed her the bandage on his finger and gave a wry little smile. Even in a household to which a proposal of marriage had come, its smaller lives had not surrendered their own rhythms.

"Is the boat to make the crossing today?" Satyavati asked.

"Take the market people over first. Then we have word that the king's people wish to speak again."

Satyavati put the lid on the fish basket. She remembered Shantanu's first arrival: the smell of the river, the rocking of the boat, and the man seated opposite her, who asked questions without understanding what the respondent's time was worth. She did not deny her attraction to him. But attraction and the conditions of marriage were not the same thing.

Her father swept the counters into a single pile. "If you enter the royal household, your suffering will be less."

"Will my suffering be less, or will my boat be cut loose from its own landing?"

"Both may happen."

"Then say each thing separately."

Her father looked towards the stretch of shore where the old mooring post had had to be replaced twice. "We must not treat it as an insult that people of a great house wish to take our daughter into theirs," he said. "But if someone recognises you in the morning river as a boatman's daughter, and by evening the palace considers it necessary to conceal that identity, what kind of honour is that?" He did not regard his daughter as a prize to be awarded. Yet the prospect of drawing close to royal power weighed heavily in his calculations. Satyavati listened to that desire of his, too.

Her father looked at her. He was not asking for a kingdom for himself. His concern lay with the future of the children Satyavati might bear, and with the dignity of a house that could be despised at court for the smell of its fishing nets. But his daughter added her own words: "If the rights of my children are bargained over without my being asked, my body will bear the burden of that bargain. And if all of you decide that the earnings of my old home no longer count, what will become of the shares owed to those who work on this boat?"

She held out a basket towards her father. "Here is today's catch. No discussion of kings and kingdoms will lower its price."

At that moment the sound of horses' hooves came from far away. Devavrata was approaching along the river road. He possessed the power to resolve the king's desire; with that power came the beginning of a difficulty for which he would have to pay with his own life. Satyavati rose to her feet, but did not hide behind her father.

Devavrata bowed in greeting. Her father stated his condition: the right of Satyavati's future children to the royal throne must be secured. Devavrata was silent for a moment before answering. He was weighing together the debt he owed his lineage, his father's wish, and the duties of a future king. Before him, too, lay this household's boat—a boat whose loss of a single day's earnings meant less rice in the house.

"The vow you make," Satyavati said, "you will make at the cost of your own life. I want none of the glory of a vow whose weight silences someone else's voice."

Devavrata looked at her. "Then what do you wish for?"

"I wish for a place in which I can speak for myself. I do not wish my children's future to be made the subject of deceit. And when I enter the royal palace, this house upon the river must not be turned into a reason for shame."

Her father wanted to say something, then held his peace. It was no simple matter to give a royal promise concerning a son's right. The vow Devavrata was about to take would bring him extraordinary renown; but the full meaning of the severe restraint that vow would lay upon his future was not yet within anyone's grasp. Satyavati listened to his decision without turning it into a likeness of her own. She kept open the possibility of consenting to the marriage, and with it her right to answer her father's question herself.

A basket of fish at the back of the boat suddenly stirred. A child was trying to lift the lid. Satyavati checked his hand and laughed. “Take the fish to market first. The king can wait.”

The river went on flowing in its own current. The story of the vow made that day would travel far into the future; but that morning the oar was still in the hand of the person who steered the boat, and the household's account of food at the landing had yet to be settled.

Videhapur, Ashadha 2039. On the banks of the Tilwaha, it was the midday sun, rather than the light of dawn, that now fell upon the shore. The acknowledgement number for Fakira's complaint lay in Naira's notebook; the questions surrounding it remained unanswered. She had come to the landing to measure the time taken by Fakira's circuitous route, and to see how people actually used the place described on paper as “alternative access.”

Two young men were washing motorcycles on the masonry steps of the first landing. On the other side, where the steps ended, Urmila was trying to steady her feet in the wet earth beneath a load of washing. Her washing board stood so low that she had to bend to lift every sheet. What weighed upon her was not the cloth on her head but the demands upon her working hours. She had to deliver the first batch of hospital laundry by noon.

“Can a vehicle reach this place?” Naira asked.

Urmila raised her eyes. “The van that collects the clothes comes as far as those paved steps. They won't let me do my washing there. A van can't come down here. First tell me whose route you're asking about.”

Naira explained her work. She was helping with Fakira's complaint, but she had not come merely to turn public access to the landing into evidence for his case. Having listened, Urmila asked, “Will you write down the time my work takes, too?”

“If you want me to.”

“Then write this first: besides the time it takes to wash the sheets, there's the time spent carrying them from this landing up to the van. The hospital wants the work done on time, but it doesn't count the labour of carrying them that distance.”

Naira wrote it down. She had not seen the hospital's bills, so she recorded Urmila's words as testimony. With her wet hand, Urmila tapped the edge of the washing board. “I bought this board with my own earnings. Calling the landing public property doesn't turn the board into government property.”

A boy on the paved steps was taking photographs with his phone. Urmila called to him at once. “You can photograph the water. I've spread out my laundry, and the patients' names are written on it. Don't photograph that.” The boy lowered his phone. Naira put hers away in her bag as well. In the eagerness to show a blocked route to the landing, a patient's identity and illness might be made public.

As she separated the clothes into two piles, Urmila explained that not all the hospital sheets were washed in the same way. Cloth requiring special cleaning had to be kept apart; another batch needed a separate line of posts for drying. “If you cut the time, you break the sequence of the work,” she said. “The people who make out the bills see how many baskets there are, but not how many different jobs there are inside a single basket.” Naira did not look at the colours of the cloth and draw conclusions about anyone's treatment. The order of work Urmila described contained knowledge of how to labour safely. To verify it, the hospital's written instructions and payment register would also have to be examined.

At a nearby food stall, Amina Bhathiyara was serving rice in little bowls made of leaves. Hasan and Zubaida had set two boxes beside her. Their old place of livelihood at the bus stand had shrunk, and they spent their days moving from one consignment to another; today they were trying to sell the contents of one box at the landing. Amina asked Hasan to help carry the empty dishes, promising not to deduct his payment from the food bill but to enter it separately. With a small hoe, Zubaida levelled the wet earth before the stall, making a little dry place.

“Will I be able to sit here every day?” Hasan asked.

“I don't know,” Amina said. “How can I promise you a veranda that isn't mine? But I'll pay you today for the work you've done.”

She opened her ledger. On one side was the amount owed by those who had eaten; on the other, the amount due to the person who had carried the boxes. Naira noticed that on that day's sheet the distinctions between kinds of work occupied more space than the prices.

An old notice for the festival honouring the river landing and keeping its water clean, held in Kartik and Agahan, was tied to a bamboo pole at the landing. Last year's date had faded; no names had yet been entered for this year. Urmila said that every year people came together for the cleaning, yet after the landing had been cleaned, the question of who could use it and at what time remained unresolved. “This time brooms and songs won't be enough,” she said. “The hours for using the steps, for washing, for unloading

fish baskets, and the path for bathing will all have to be written down separately."

Urmila still remembered last Kartik's gathering clearly. One group had cleaned the steps, another had read out the accounts of donations, but no one had asked the women washing clothes on the earth at the unpaved landing what hour they needed the water. The day after the cleaning, they had once again been ordered to move, over and over. This year she recalled the timing of the vehicle Fakira had spoken about. She wanted the festival's register to contain not only a column for attendance but also one for omissions—whose work had been delayed, and why. Naira suggested marking a separate, safe way down for children; but to do that, they would first have to examine the path across the ground. Urmila agreed. Their understanding was being reached not on the day of the festival, but on this wet afternoon.

Meanwhile, Chetan Bhat was about to take a folded manuscript from his old bag. At the landing he earned his living by reciting family genealogies and reading invitations to ceremonies of the past. He was paid to show the pages of his manuscript, but he himself made no claim that everything written in them was true. Dev Gaine sat beside him, tightening a string on his instrument. Chetan asked, "Shall we sing the old songs at Kartik?"

"We shall," Dev answered, "but anyone who wants to record them and sell them in the market must ask first. Listening to a song and trading in it are not the same thing."

Chetan laughed. "Nor does the story in my papers become proof of anyone's ownership of land without being checked." Dev plucked a string; the note faltered a little, then settled. He did not sing the whole song just then. Only the opening phrase about the landing could be heard—a melody that gave pleasure to those who recognised it, not a hint of some new accusation.

Near a pile of goods, Phoolchan Lodh was shifting wet sacks. The first rains had flooded his field and changed the order in which he could sow his seed. There had been talk of assigning him a temporary plot outside the village. On paper it was vacant land; quite another reckoning was needed to determine the soil available for cultivation and the distances to water and the market road. He borrowed a dry length of bamboo from Urmila and, in return, spread earth over a slippery patch along the footpath leading down. Naira asked him, "Are you making this path?"

"I'm making it fit to walk on today," Phoolchan said. "Spreading this earth won't give me ownership of the land."

On another side, Bina Kalar was setting out empty bottles and measuring glasses for her small shop. The question of obtaining capital from her father was still being discussed at home; she kept the accounts of today's business in her own name. Nahid Moghal came from a little farther away carrying a paper bag. Seeing the two women together, Naira thought that a family's name on a

land document and the consent of every member of that family were separate matters. But Nahid did not show Naira her papers at that moment. She bought two bottles from Bina, paid for them, and put the receipt in her bag. Through that small purchase, the question of her ancestral share remained suspended until its own time.

Entering the price in her ledger, Bina turned a page. Three months' earnings were recorded separately from the capital she had asked her family to provide. “If you want to call a shop your own, you must also bear some of its risks,” she told Nahid. Nahid smiled. She was not asking for instant advice about the family's land; she needed time to hear properly what the family agreed to and what was being said about her share. Naira made no attempt to overhear their private conversation. Not every person's private papers are an invitation to an investigator.

One of the young men on the paved landing moved his vehicle away. A space opened up. Urmila did not lift her washing board and move to the paved steps. “If they tell me to leave this place now, the next batch of sheets will be late again,” she said. “Let the times be settled in writing first.”

Bending beside Urmila, Naira counted out the distance between the landing's two approaches. The shorter path climbed the paved steps, but a temporary bamboo barrier stood across its entrance. The other circled up from the unpaved landing, where a load could slip in the wet mud. The words “alternative access,” which Fakira had questioned, now carried another meaning for Naira. Fakira's railway gate and Urmila's river landing did not belong to the same institution; it would be wrong to make them identical examples of a single injustice. Yet here, too, the cost of the extra distance was absent from the paperwork.

“Who put up the barrier?” Naira asked.

“The fishing people put one up once; later the municipal people said something about it,” Urmila replied. “Whoever takes it down now must know exactly whose it is. If you pull it out without finding out, someone else's net will be torn.”

Naira entered three points separately: barrier present; ownership unverified; public access obstructed. Urmila said, “Put the time beside my name in the Kartik register. Put the value of my labour in the wage register. And if everyone can agree, keep a clean way down for the children, too.”

As she closed her ledger, Amina offered Urmila some of the rice left over from the meal she had prepared. Urmila asked the price. “Hasan's help made the work with the dishes easier today,” Amina said. “I'm sharing some of that ease. No charge.” Urmila laughed. “Then one day I'll wash your sheets. But we won't make it an everyday rule.” They both laughed. Amid the hard questions that had filled the day at the landing, there was this unplanned sharing of food; no one's phone took a photograph of it.

Before evening fell, Naira turned towards home. Chetan Bhat called after her. “You examine documents, don't you? I have an old ledger. The same names appear in it again and again. I won't tell you they're all correct. When you have the chance, you may read it.”

Naira did not immediately ask for the ledger. “First tell me whose it is, and whether you have the right to show it.” Chetan nodded. His manuscript remained closed for its own time; the way to another meeting had opened.

When Naira reached home, Sarita was serving rice. Naira told her about Urmila's work at the landing, but did not add the patient's name, the contents of Nahid's bag, or anything from the ledger of Chetan's that she had not read. Sarita asked, “Is the water the same for everyone?”

“No. And their ways to reach it aren't the same either,” Naira replied. “You told me, didn't you, not to put every name in a single box? Today I understood that a landing doesn't fit into a single box either.”

Sarita set a water vessel beside the plate. “And who will measure the land now?”

Naira looked again at the distance between the landing's two approaches in her notebook. “Whoever measures it will first have to ask who uses the land. A place that looks empty isn't necessarily unoccupied.”

From the direction of the Tilwaha came the evening wind. The river had not yet reopened its old course; nor were Naira's papers proof that it would. But the people at the landing, who had insisted on counting their time, their earnings, and their right to speak as separate things, had already changed the question she would ask next.

Chapter 5 · Janaka's Measure

In the age of Janaka in Mithila, the foundations of a new chamber were being dug in the rear courtyard of the royal residence. Rainwater from the night had collected in the excavation; two craftsmen were bailing it out with cups folded from leaves. A measuring cord had been drawn taut, but a damp stake had tilted to one side. The master builder was driving it back into the ground when Sita came to the edge of the courtyard.

She had not come to inspect the foundations. She had set out along that path towards the garden, and stopped when she found it blocked. One of the craftsmen bowed to her from a distance. Sita asked, "The cord is straight, but where will this old footpath go?"

"A new courtyard is to be built," the builder replied. "The old path will be enclosed. This is land belonging to the royal residence."

"The path ran through the royal residence," she said, "but who used to walk along it?"

Instead of answering, the builder picked up the wet stake. A young craftsman said that the women gardeners had always used the path to reach the well. Once the new wall went up, they would have to walk all the way around from outside. Nobody interrupted him, but the master builder signalled with his eyes that he should be silent.

Sita asked him to speak again. The craftsman gave his name and, showing the rough wound on his hand, explained that the previous day he had pulled out a nail to save the measuring cord. Two days' wages were still owing to him. "I was given work, not land," he said. "They tell us where the wall is to go. What happens to the path afterwards is not in my hands."

Janaka arrived in the meantime to inspect the work. Seeing his daughter standing among the labourers, he smiled. "What are you looking at?"

"They are measuring how large the courtyard will be," Sita answered. "But there is no measurement of how much of the footpath will be lost."

Janaka questioned the master builder, who explained the ownership of the royal grounds and the proposed use of the new assembly hall. Janaka listened, then said to Sita, "In affairs of state, one sometimes has to give up one path and make another."

"Who will bear the burden of giving it up?" Sita asked. "For every cubit by which the cord is extended, the journey round the wall will not be shortened by a cubit. If land is given away as a gift, is the old labour of the people who use it given away with it?"

At this mention of a gift, Janaka fell silent for a moment. A grant of land was under discussion in the royal assembly: the state was to give a plot to an ashram or for some work of service. The generosity of the giver would be proclaimed, but the assembly had not yet decided what should happen to the seed already sown in that soil. Sita had heard of the proposal. She wanted the question of existing use settled before the gift was made.

"Gifts make works of dharma possible," Janaka said.

"But who will attend to the dharma of the person whose field yields less grain?"

There was no bitterness in the disagreement between them, yet Janaka could not evade the question. He instructed the builder to provide another cord. The first was to measure the space within the wall; the second, the path by which the women gardeners reached the well. As for the proposed land grant, he ordered that the land's existing use be investigated first. This order was not a final decision about the gift. Sita understood at least this much: a gift declared in words and a life altered on the ground could not be reckoned with the same measure.

Beside the chamber, on a heap of earth left over from the digging, an elderly woman was sorting two pieces of stone. Her task was to separate the defective stones, but the tally book recorded only the stones, not the hands that sorted them. She rubbed one piece a little and showed it to Sita. A fine crack ran through its interior; if a wall were raised upon it, the rains might split it open. The master builder set the stone aside. His authority was not diminished by hearing another person's knowledge of the crack; on the contrary, the wall was made safer. Sita asked who would bear the loss incurred in returning the stone. The builder said that he would examine the accounts for the materials supplied. An object required for the building had been rejected; the question of the money remained.

From this Sita understood that the royal command, the craftsman's measurements, and the actual condition of the materials all had to be brought into relation with one another. The king's seal alone could not make a defective stone sound; nor could a craftsman's experience alone determine the right to a field. There was earth before her eyes, but the promises attached to that earth extended far beyond it.

The builder raised the question of the young craftsman's unpaid wages. Janaka called for the accounts. The man was not paid at that moment, but a date was fixed for opening the ledger. Sita saw that a single command could move a wall, yet payment still required a further reckoning. If the reckoning remained unchanged, the outcome of the labour would remain incomplete.

Videhapur, Ashadh 2039. The first rain of the morning had not yet dried. Two chalk lines had been drawn across the footpath leading from the paved steps of Barki Pond towards the unpaved landing. When Naira arrived, the

first line ended precisely where the load of laundry Urmila carried would swing round and slip. The second disappeared behind a vegetable stall in the market. Beside the lines stood a notice: ‘Survey of proposed access; not the final boundary.’

The previous evening, Sarita had asked who would measure the land. Naira had come today hoping to find an answer. The survey team had not yet arrived; an assistant was driving bamboo pegs into the ground and laying out a measuring tape. He said the path was being examined under orders from the municipal body, but no final notice of land acquisition had been issued. Naira entered that distinction in her notebook.

At the bend near the landing, Kiran Raut was setting down a sack of dried paddy seed. Kiran’s field did not lie directly on the pond’s edge, but the cart carrying its produce to market passed through this narrow turn. Naira first heard Kiran speaking to the assistant, saying that the chalk line cut across the route used to transport the goods. “This is for a public amenity,” the assistant replied.

Kiran opened a little account book. “An amenity for whom, an expense for whom? The name on this sack isn’t the name of the landowner. I sow the seed as a sharecropper. The owner’s name is written on the land deed, but the debt for this consignment is entered in my account.”

Kiran did not offer the book to Naira unasked. First came a question: on whose behalf had she come? Naira introduced herself: she assisted in examining errors in records; she was not the municipality’s authorised survey officer. “I can write down what you tell me. I cannot declare the measurement correct.”

Kiran began with a straightforward question: once the new path was built, how much farther would the seed cart have to travel? The assistant pointed to a short line on his map and said that the difference would be slight. Kiran untied the sack and showed him the calculation. Four sacks could be loaded in one consignment; if the handcart could not turn at the bend on the detour, the journey would have to be made twice. Both the hire charge and the time required would rise. The assistant stretched out the tape again, but the cost of lifting and carrying the sacks found no place in his measurements. Naira recorded that separately. There was nothing wrong with showing a distance on a map; what was wrong was to leave unasked what would move through that distance, whose body would move it, and how much time it would take.

Just then Kiran took from the sack a cheap box of pencils bought for a daughter. One corner of the box was wet, but the pencils inside were dry. Kiran laughed and said that at home the little girl drew the outlines of fields in her exercise book, always making them rectangular. “There isn’t a field of mine shaped like that anywhere,” Kiran said. “So perhaps when she learns to measure, she’ll finally explain my own field to me.” The people from the

survey party joined in the laughter, and for a little while the quarrel over the chalk lines fell still.

Kiran showed Naira a page. The share of the grain and the seed bought on credit were entered on separate lines. Kiran was not asking Naira to verify them yet. The request was that the surveyors, when drawing the proposed route, hear not only from the owner of the field but also about the time spent transporting its produce. “Will you give me a copy of this page?” Naira asked. “Cover the part with the amounts first,” Kiran said. “Why should I expose the household’s entire debt in a dispute about a path?” Naira agreed.

Before noon, a young man arrived carrying a cardboard box of papers. It contained old bills from a construction contract; the name written on top was Ratan Bhuiyan. Ratan himself, a thin man, accompanied him. He had carried earth and bricks at a previous construction site in the village, but on paper a sum of debt had somehow become attached to his name. Naira did not infer that a crime had been committed merely from seeing an old bill. Ratan said, “The weight I carried was called wage labour. The money I never received is now being called a loan I owe.”

“Do you have a receipt?” Naira asked.

Ratan showed her two sheets: the first listed materials delivered, the second an amount payable. He was not certain whose signature appeared against the sum. The contractor's stamp was clear on one side of the paper and blurred on the other. Naira explained that a dispute over ownership, an account of sharecropping, and unpaid wages should not be jumbled into a single complaint. Ratan quietly separated his papers. “If we keep them separate, will they listen to us separately too?” he asked. “Whether they listen is not in my hands,” Naira said. “But when I put the papers together, I won't erase the differences between your claims.”

There was an old crease in the bill Ratan held. He said that two men who had worked with him the previous year had left for distant places after failing to receive their pay. He did not know their full addresses and refused to add names on the strength of guesses. Naira told him to write only what he knew for now. He could not recall the exact date of the earlier payment, but he remembered the day the materials were unloaded because rain had come down in torrents. The memory of rain was not enough to establish a date; to Ratan, it was an aid to remembering.

A young assistant wanted to photograph both sheets together on his phone. Ratan stopped him. “The first paper is about the work I did. The second carries a debt written down by somebody else. If people see the two stuck together in a photograph, they'll say I've accepted the debt.” The assistant lowered his phone. Naira remembered the condition Sanket had placed upon the use of his own picture. This time the consent of the person to whom the papers belonged became the first condition for photographing them.

In the midst of this brief exchange, a cart bound for the unpaved landing came to a halt. Urmila called from a distance: where the peg had been driven in, her laundry cart could no longer turn. The assistant moved the peg back by two cubits. That adjustment decided nobody's title to the land; it did, however, make room for one day's burden to pass. Urmila pushed the cart through, checked the time, and set off towards the hospital without prolonging the argument. Naira remembered the route she had measured the day before. The movement of living labour appeared differently upon what had looked like an empty line.

There were separate slips in the survey team's box. One recorded the weekly fee for Bela Turaha's place in the market; another line of the proposed road ran close to the space where she temporarily spread her goods. Another slip contained an old neighbourhood roll for Hema Dev's school, from which the names of women who had built their own homes had repeatedly been omitted. Rachana Dhimal's name appeared in an attendance register documenting language instruction for a family newly arrived in the area. None of this established the boundaries of a parcel of land. It did, however, make plain that the market, the school, and people's movements were all bound up with this route.

The first page of the survey ledger bore only the title of the survey. Beneath it lay a short list of local uses gathered from the people present. This did not turn Hema Dev's school's concerns, the language spoken by Rachana Dhimal's family, and Bela Turaha's modest market stall into identical claims of property. If roadwork began the next day, access to the school, market hours, and the entry of laundry carts would have to be examined separately. All these activities belonged to the same adjoining parts of town, yet their losses could not be expressed in a single figure.

As the young man lifted his box, two more slips fell out. One was a proposal for an event involving an audio recording of Rashid Bhat's singing; the space for permission to record had been left blank. The other was an estimate for repairs to Karun Damai's musical instrument; no separate fee for the performance had yet been added. In one place the thing being measured was land, in another it was remuneration. Naira saw that if these slips were rolled into a single total, the sums owed to everyone would be wrong. She asked the assistant not to fill in the empty spaces. He said the event committee would do so later.

The surveyor arrived at midday. Looking at the chalk lines, he first opened the measurement sheet. Kiran put the sack aside, and Ratan set down the old box. The surveyor said the width of the road was marked on the sheet, but the position of a narrow drainage ditch at the side had not been indicated separately. The chalk line ran over the ditch. The assistant took the measurements again; the tape was accurate, but the starting peg had been set on the wrong side.

That small mistake was corrected. A new line was drawn and the old one crossed out. Ratan asked whether this would cancel his debt. The surveyor said no. Kiran asked whether the sharecropping arrangement would now be protected. The answer was that it was still uncertain. But everyone had seen the proof that the first line ought not to have been treated as a final boundary. Naira wrote in her ledger: 'Measurement reference corrected; questions of possession, use, and debt remain unresolved.'

A little way from the landing, a reading session for the evening was being rehearsed in the open veranda of a school. Naira had promised to bring Sarita there; Sarita could not come today, but she had given Naira a copy of a page from an old manuscript. The page employed the names Triyuga and Lakshmana as poetic expressions in a story set in Janaka's time. There was no reason to treat those names as precise measurements of the modern Tilwaha waterway at Videhapur. Another book lying in the veranda referred to a possible connection between the names Lakshmana and Lakhandei, a connection still awaiting examination. Naira wrote 'poetic name' in the margin of the page and left the space for a location on the map blank.

In an old photograph of a festival pasted to the veranda wall, people from the landing sat together. A line from a song was written beneath the picture, but the singer's name was incomplete. In the neighbouring classroom, children were writing down the names of trees, ponds, and footpaths near their homes. On some papers a name was marked 'heard'; on others, 'seen'. The teacher indicated that the old name of a river, heard from a grandfather, should not simply be pasted onto the present-day survey map without examination. A boy wanted to write Triyuga underneath Tilwaha. Naira asked him to keep the two names on separate lines. He was not offended. "Then both names will survive," he said.

One of the schoolgirls was reading the story of Janaka and Sita. She asked, "If the king gave the land away, did he give away its water, its paths, and the rice growing on it as well?" The woman conducting the reading did not answer at once. "The story tells us of a gift," she said. "But asking whose life was changed by it is also part of reading." The girl wrote the question in her exercise book. That day she wanted an answer, not a triumphant speech.

When Naira came home, Sarita was grinding spices on the stone slab. Naira explained how the day's survey line had been corrected, how Kiran had covered the figures in the account book, and how Ratan's two papers differed. She mentioned no one's private sums. Sarita asked, "The line that was wrong has been corrected. But what was it that told the person drawing it who would have to go the long way round?"

"Not their names. The people first explained the work they did," Naira said.

Sarita washed the grinding stone. "Then look again at our old household tables. How many of the names there belong to the family, and how many of

the entries are accounts of work? Even I haven't always written the two in the same way."

Naira looked up at the old satchel hanging above them. The sheet containing twenty-seven names was still in Sarita's keeping; Naira had no right to make a copy without her consent. There was another old household ledger here, which Sarita now offered to open. "Tomorrow, in daylight," she said. "And ask first: on what date was this written?"

Outside came the sound of a handcart's wheels from the direction of the pond. The corrected chalk line might wash away in the damp of the night, but the correction had already been entered on the survey sheet. Naira made a reckoning in her mind: the land had been measured; one wrongly placed peg had been removed; the time for examining the household ledger was yet to come. She rose to check the water in the pot of rice. With that ordinary task, the day came to its close.

Chapter 6 · The Arithmetic of Home

Before putting the morning rice on to cook, Sarita drew out the old satchel from beneath the wooden cot. A length of string, of the kind used to tie a bundle, was caught in its strap. She did not cut it. She worked it loose gently, as though cutting the string might somehow diminish the papers inside. Naira sat on the mat opposite her. Yesterday her mother had said they would open the ledger by daylight. Daylight had come, but the right to open it was not Naira's. It remained in Sarita's hands.

"Shake the rice off it first," Sarita said. Two grains of dried rice were lodged in a corner of the satchel. Naira picked them out and placed them on a plate. Sarita laughed. "If a little grain survives among the household's old accounts, don't take it for an ill omen." Water was still warming on the stove. The room held a faint smell of smoke, and from outside came the distant sound of a train.

The ledger had no handsome title on its cover. On the first page, in heavy letters, someone had written 'The Arithmetic of Home'; beneath it were five columns: rice, oil, salt, medicine, and fares. On the reverse of the paper was the incomplete impression of an old school stamp. Someone had thrown the book away, and Sarita had rescued its unused pages. Now its first use and its second lived together under the same cover.

"When is this page from?" Naira asked.

"Which page? The first blank sheet came into my hands on one day. I began writing later. A stamp already printed on a sheet doesn't make the writing belong to the day of the stamp." Sarita answered as she turned the page.

Naira saw '2027' written in the margin. Beneath it stood the price of salt and two tablets of medicine. On one side of the following page, 'On credit' was written in red ink and 'Paid' in blue; Sarita had struck through some of the entries with her own hand. "Red first, and blue afterwards?" Naira asked.

"Sometimes. But I can't say everything written in red came first. Once the blue pen ran dry and I wrote down the price of cooked rice in red. The colour of a pen is no clock."

Hearing this, Naira did not open the camera on her phone. She wanted to remember, separately from any photograph of a page, the circumstances in which it had been touched, turned, and examined. Sarita stopped her finger at one place in the ledger. Beneath a straight line drawn across the middle of the page were the words 'Rajinar well: bricks for the steps'. In another hand, or at least another pen, someone had added 'rope for drawing water'. Between those two lines lay an account of grain.

"Why is this expense for the well in the household accounts?" Naira asked.

"Because it was paid out of this house. The water belonged to the well, but the fare for bringing the bricks came out of my pocket. Look there to see whether anybody repaid it afterwards." Sarita showed her an empty space in the last column. Naira did not call that blank an outstanding debt; neither did she draw a question mark beside it. The expenditure was recorded. Any reimbursement remained uncertain.

Sarita turned back two pages. There was a list of purchases made one evening at the market: green chillies, sattu, a cubit of cloth, and paper for Sanket. He was still little then; he would ask for paper and make brightly coloured pictures. "He was learning his tables on those ruled lines," Sarita said, "while I wrote the expenses on the backs of his unused sheets." Naira remembered a little train Sanket had once drawn: the carriages were all different shapes, but he had made them run on the same track. That memory proved no allegation against anyone. It did, however, offer one answer to the question of why the household ledger had been kept.

On the other side of the page was a small fold. Before opening it, Sarita looked at Naira. "You may unfold this. But this ledger and the sheet of twenty-seven names are two different things. Don't imagine that because the ink looks alike, you understand everything about the names on the other sheet." Naira agreed. Inside the fold was an old repair receipt bearing the year 2038, on which the bricks for the well's wall and the wages for the work were added up separately. The date stamp was indistinct, but the total was complete. It was now certain that papers belonging to two different times had been kept against the same page; why they had come together remained uncertain.

Before noon, Sarita gave permission for copies to be made of two pages of the ledger—the pages dealing with the household's grain expenditure and the costs at Rajinar well. She did not authorise copies of the others. Naira first asked who would see them. "You, me, and whoever is responsible for examining the old repair accounts," Sarita replied. "Not everybody out on the street." Naira took photographs on her phone, returned the original ledger to Sarita's lap, and entered in a separate file: 'Restricted copy, made with the owner's permission.'

Sarita asked, quite naturally, "That sheet of twenty-seven names, where four places are written in a different ink—had you taken it to be a list made on a single day?"

"At first I thought someone had added four names later. But that, too, was a supposition."

"Do you write down a household's rice accounts in a single day? The days change. Sometimes I wrote a name after hearing it spoken; sometimes I corrected something written before. But ask separately who wrote it and

when. I'll tell you what I remember. What I don't remember, I won't pretend to remember."

From this admission Naira obtained one small answer: the list had not been completed in a single sitting. She dated her mother's oral account to the present day. The nature of the work associated with the four names, the restricted layer of the record, and the case of Sarita herself, recorded as dead, still required separate investigation. Naira made no claim that she could determine the age of the ink on an old receipt merely by looking at it.

Earlier Naira had imagined that once a copy had been made, it would be easy to lock the original paper in a cupboard. But Sarita kept lifting the ledger to explain its words; to shut it away might also be to shut away someone's lived experience. At the top of her notes Naira wrote: 'Examine separately the order of pages, the account of when they were written, and independent records of dates.' The same ink could be used on different days, and different inks on the same day. Sarita's account had disproved the assumption of a single sitting, but the question of who had added which name, and on what date, remained open.

On the way to Rajinar well, the new chalk line drawn the day before still survived in patches on the damp earth. The corrected stake, whose position had provoked the disagreement between Kiran and Ratan, was standing where it had been moved. Passing it, Naira noticed that a cart had been able, for the first time, to get through without being pushed backwards. Urmila's handcart was not there today. Naira did not go on to conclude from its absence that the work had stopped. All she knew was that yesterday the cart carrying the hospital laundry had found enough space to turn.

The mouth of Rajinar well was not wide, but the old raised platform surrounding it lay across the paths of many people. Children coming home from school set their satchels down on it; residents drew water; those pushing carts made their way round its edge. The iron railing on one side of the well had come loose. The friction of the rope had worn away the corner of a brick. Water shone below, but its brightness was no proof that it was clean or fit to drink.

Lalit Mallik was bending over the edge of the platform, inspecting the joints between the bricks. Padma was with him, checking whether the notice written for schoolchildren could be read clearly. 'CAUTION' stood out in large letters on the board, but nothing indicated which section of the railing was loose. Padma drew an arrow to mark the place. When Naira began to ask how deep the well was, Lalit said it would be wrong to offer a figure without a safe measurement and the presence of people authorised to undertake it. He refrained from leaning over to make an estimate himself.

To the right of the well, Sudha Rai stood among a gathering of people, clutching documents against her chest. She had proposed building a small

awning to provide shade over the well's platform, and a declaration was being prepared that she would give some land for public use. But the new line drawn in the deed of donation crossed the narrow passage used by two tenant families. Schoolchildren used that passage too.

"I'll pay for the awning," Sudha said, "but put it in writing that this land is a gift. If the papers remain held up, who is going to begin the work?"

Without attempting to take the papers from her, Naira asked, "Have the tenants been heard about their right of way?"

"Nobody is putting them out of their homes. There's another way round."

Padma pointed towards that 'other way'. There was a shallow pit there and a stretch of broken brick. A child carrying a schoolbag could cross it, but going round with a water-filled pitcher was hardly easy. Sudha was silent for a moment. For the first time, behind the graceful signature on her deed of donation, she could see the labour a tenant performed each day. She did not tear up the declaration then and there. She said that the use of the passage should first be recorded separately. The decision about the donation remained to be made.

At that moment one of the tenant women standing beneath the proposed awning lifted her pitcher. She had no wish to mount a platform and make a speech against Sudha. All she wanted was to be able, that very night, to walk to the well from her home by the path she had always taken. Sudha made room for her to put down the pitcher, but kept the deed of donation tucked under her arm. Naira was unwilling to bridge that small distance between one person's generosity and another's rights with a mere signature. Someone proposed fixing a date for the hearing; the task of entering it in the register began. No decision had been reached.

Repair estimates had been collected on an old wooden bench at one side. Among them lay a receipt concerning the wooden planks of Keshari Bin's boat. Keshari had written that someone had asked what the boat would fetch if sold, whereas the cost of repairing it had yet to be measured. The boat's timber and the well's railing were separate jobs, though the materials bought for both at the market had travelled in the same cart and incurred a common transport charge. Rather than combining the two bills into a single cost, Lalit kept them apart. Materials arriving in one cart did not make the work belong to a single owner.

In the school veranda, a small account book lay open for rehearsals of the next public reading. The time allotted to Phoolmati Pamariya's song was entered separately from her fee; the cost of repairing Ramesh Ghasi's instrument was entered separately from what he would be paid to play it onstage. At first someone had written 'community contribution' over the two entries, leaving both amounts unpaid and unspecified. Seeing the blank spaces beside those words, Padma sent the book back. There was no rebuke in her

voice, but she had no intention of perpetuating, through her own handwriting, the old habit of listening to songs without paying for them.

A bill for goods supplied by Lakshmi Kathbaniya lay pressed against the veranda window. She had reckoned separately the prices of the small lengths of rope and the materials for lids that came from her shop. Someone had entered her name in the account book beside the entire debt of the well committee. Padma made it clear that selling goods did not make a person jointly liable for everyone else's debts. Lakshmi herself was not present; her receipt spoke for the price she was owed. On the second copy of the bill, the date for payment remained blank.

On the same table was a slip specifying an advance payment for articles Shanti Bari had prepared for a wedding. A family wanted to use those articles on the day of the proposed public reading, but the space for the advance had been left empty. The organisers had wanted to put the slip together with the donations for repairs. Padma separated the two entries: one was the price of wedding articles for a household, the other the cost of maintaining a public well. A distinction so small might prevent a woman's earnings from vanishing under the name of a charitable contribution.

Naira picked up the last slip. It was a letter envelope addressed to Anupama Sen, with a line written clearly beneath her name: ‘Original letter private; no shared copy without permission.’ Naira did not open what was inside. The envelope was intended for the collection of local history assembled for the public reading, but its owner would decide whether anyone needed to see the original contents. Naira remembered the restricted permission her mother had given for just two pages of the old household ledger. The greater age of a document did not lessen the force of its owner's wishes in the present.

A little girl stood beside Rajinar well with an empty lota in her hands. Others were still waiting to draw water, and the growing crowd on the platform left her no room. Padma closed the account book and asked everyone to move back a couple of handspans. Lalit stretched a temporary rope beside the loose railing, but made it clear that this was not a repair, only a sign marking an area to be avoided for the day. The girl's mother drew water, placed the filled lota in the child's hands, and left by another path.

No decision was made that day about replacing the bricks at the well or putting up the awning. Two things were nevertheless accomplished: access beside the loose railing was temporarily barred, and it was agreed that the use of the passage would be recorded before either the costs of repair or the declaration of donation was settled. Naira mentioned the restricted copy of Sarita's receipt. Lalit asked permission to look at the prices on that copy, not at the original ledger. Naira said she would first ask Sarita again for consent to this specific use. The earlier payment had still not been established in full; the

old prices might nevertheless be useful when the cost of future work was calculated.

On her way home, Naira noticed an old wooden cot beneath the veranda. Some faded numerals, apparently denoting years, had been scratched into one of its legs. Someone had recently taken the surface for a vacant space and laid an account book on it. Children sat there writing the old stories of their houses in their exercise books. One asked who had made the cot. Their teacher replied, “If we find the name, we'll write it down. If we don't, we won't invent one.” Naira paused. From where she stood, she could not read the age of the marks in the wood. She went on without touching the cot.

Along the road, two children released from school were arguing over whose account should be believed when telling the history of an old house. One said that his grandfather always told the same story, and therefore it must be true. The other said that his grandmother told it differently, but that did not make her a liar. Naira smiled as she listened. The wood of the old cot had given her a question, not an answer. Perhaps the next day someone would find, beside that wood, one end of a thread leading into the history of a family. For now it was only a possibility.

That evening Sarita sat at home sorting lentils. Naira told her what had happened during the day: the loose railing at the well, the separate bills for repairs, Sudha's deed of donation, and the need to ask permission again before showing a copy of the expense record. Sarita listened without interrupting. “If you want to show my receipt,” she said, “first make it clear that I paid the transport fare that day. I don't remember whether anyone repaid me later. If I don't remember, don't turn it into a debt somebody is assumed to owe.”

In her notes, Naira changed ‘payment unverified’ to ‘reimbursement unverified’. The difference between those two expressions was slight, but the first suggested doubt about whether the fare had been paid at all, while the second raised the question of whether it had been paid back. Sarita read the page and agreed. The committee could examine the portion of the record concerning Rajinar well; the entries for food and medicine would remain within the household.

“And the sheet of twenty-seven names?” Naira asked softly.

“I still have it. Tomorrow I'll tell you separately as many of the dates as I remember. Not all of them.” Sarita made a small heap of lentils. “What have you learned today?”

“A single page doesn't hold the life of a single day. And I can't fill in from my own imagination what the paper doesn't say.”

Sarita put water on to wash the lentils. Naira wrapped the ledger in an old cloth and placed it back in her mother's hands. On the wall, the shadow of the lota standing on the cot moved slowly: no impossible shadow, merely the

light of evening changing. The day's expenses had yet to be entered in the arithmetic of the household. Sarita measured out the rice and said, “Add another handful to the rice for two. Someone may come.”

Naira did not ask who. She dropped a handful of rice into the pot. The story of the numerals on the old cot could be heard tomorrow, but a plate had already been set aside for tonight's guest.

Chapter 7 · The Bench of Five Generations

The rice from the extra handful Sarita had put into the pot was still warm by evening. When a voice sounded at the door, she lowered the flame rather than taking down the plate. Shakuntala stood outside. In her left hand she carried a small earthen vessel with a clay lid; in her right, two papers wrapped in cloth. Her granddaughter was with her, holding a school exercise book whose corner had curled slightly in the rain.

“Was there any water left today?” Sarita asked.

“The clay was left. The water, not yet,” Shakuntala replied. “I've come back from Kumharauti. Let me eat first, and then I'll show you the papers.”

Naira spread a mat on the veranda. Shakuntala's granddaughter put her exercise book safely inside, out of the wet. Sanket laid an old newspaper beneath it for her but did not ask permission to pick it up and look through it. The girl opened the pages herself. Her school assignment was to write about five generations of a household. The first line asked, ‘Whose home?’ Half a page had been left blank for the answer.

“I can write down five people's names,” the girl said, “but nobody will tell me whose bench it was.”

Naira remembered the wooden bench she had seen that day on the school veranda. The numerals on one of its legs had worn away. She took out the little sketch she had made on paper and showed it to them. “It looks like a year, but we still haven't managed to read it. What's written on the bench might be the maker's name, or it might be a mark added afterwards. If we want a comparison, we'll have to go back and examine the wood.”

Shakuntala leaned closer to see the sketch without her spectacles. “My father used to say that the school's old bench was commissioned from a carpenter in exchange for earthen vessels. But I have evidence only that I heard my father say so; I haven't seen the accounts for the bench.” She did not tell her granddaughter to close the exercise book. “Write down the difference, if you can.”

Sarita served the rice. The granddaughter liked vegetables; Shakuntala preferred her dal with little salt; Sarita liked a little more water with her rice. Sanket put a roasted chilli on his plate. Shakuntala burst out laughing. “Five different palates in one kitchen! Make a register of that, and they'll divide the house into five parts.” Sarita laughed in such a way that the granddaughter began laughing too, forgetting her question for a moment.

After the meal, Sarita took some old sheets, bound in cloth, out of the chest. They were not the household ledger she had shown Naira yesterday. This was a bundle of papers in different sizes: some written down by one

person, some recording what another had said, and some bills kept in the house simply because they were papers. On the first sheet stood the year ‘1942’; a water stain spread along the edge of the lettering.

“The date is written here,” Sarita said, “but I don't rightly know who wrote it. My grandmother used to tell us about her grandmother's household. I wrote down what she told me. Two hands, belonging to different times, are present on a single sheet.”

“Then I won't put ‘eyewitness account from 1942’ at the top,” Naira said.

Sarita agreed and began telling the first story. Her great-grandmother would turn the vessels upside down at night so that work could begin at dawn without a sound. Before the rains came, the village had organised the clearing of a pond. Some people dug out the earth; some supplied spades; others carried water; still others cooked rice for the weary hands. A quarrel broke out over whose field should receive the excavated soil, and a day's work was put back by two days. Sarita's grandmother used to say that the villagers took a very long time to count the labour of the women who cooked for the workers.

“This was said to be the story of the pond-clearing in 1939,” Sarita added. “I remember the date because my grandmother said it. We must look separately for a document that records it.”

“In whose names was the work counted on the days they cleared the pond?” Naira asked. Sarita thought for a moment. “Grandmother said the names of those who wielded the digging tools went into the register. The time given by those who cooked the rice, carried water in pitchers, or washed injured hands often found no column at all. Later, one woman wrote down what her kitchen had cost and laid the account before everyone. At first they laughed. Then they understood that without rice, fuel, and labour, the pond would never be cleared.” Shakuntala asked whether she remembered the woman's name. Sarita shook her head. “No. If her name cannot be found, I won't invent one for her. But neither will I erase her work.”

Shakuntala lifted the lid of her vessel. Inside were two small lumps of clay, one red and one grey, each wrapped in a separate piece of cloth. “We heard about that old quarrel in our house as well. My family said that the silt of a pond was not the same as the clay that could be turned on a potter's wheel. But these samples I brought today still have to be tried on the wheel. Don't treat them as though they came from that old clearing.”

Naira did not touch either lump. Shakuntala took up the grey one and crumbled a little of it between her fingers; that alone could not establish whether it was suitable for pottery. An enclosure around a construction site had narrowed the old footpath leading to the clay ground at Kumharauti. Transport had grown more expensive, while Shakuntala had yet to receive payment for the vessels she had supplied. In the midst of that delay, the admission expenses for her granddaughter's new class remained unsettled.

“How much clay will you take out?” Naira asked.

“As much as we're permitted to take, and as much as proves usable. I won't claim that the entire place belongs to me. But nobody has the right to close off an old route of access without a hearing.” Shakuntala unfolded the papers she had brought in the cloth. The first recorded an earlier transport charge; the second was an unpaid invoice for vessels ordered from her. “If I spend every rupee in the house fighting for access to clay, how will my granddaughter go to school? We need papers. Spoken words don't always endure.”

On the back of her exercise book the granddaughter drew a small circle. “Grandmother, I want to learn how to make clay pots, but I want to go to school as well.”

“Both choices may be different from what I would choose,” Shakuntala said. “And if one day you tell me you don't want to make pots, your schooling won't stop then either.” She did not smile as she spoke; the unpaid invoice lay open before her. Naira understood that the cost of such a promise could never be entered in an account, yet without some means of paying that cost the promise would remain incomplete.

Sarita turned to another sheet. Beside the year 1974 were the expenses of moving a household: two sacks of grain, some vessels, and the repair of a leg. The mention of which family had moved was brief, its name incomplete. “My grandmother used to say that in that year part of the house was made into a place for studying. But, from what she told me, it wasn't open to all the children in the household. Some worked during the day and learned their letters at night.”

Beside this sheet, Shakuntala's granddaughter found another answer to her school question. A window had been drawn in the picture of the old house, but it struck her that not every child had enjoyed the same freedom to look outside. She drew a little window in her exercise book, and a path beyond it. Looking at the picture, Sarita said, “You understand the state of a home not from the size of its windows, but from whether the way out is open.” Sanket smiled and said he could understand the picture too. “Then teach me to draw a vehicle,” the granddaughter said. The two of them sat together on the mat, their sheets of paper side by side.

As he listened, Sanket asked, “Could everyone write their own name, then?”

“No,” Sarita replied. “And if someone couldn't write, it wasn't right to take their thumbprint without their consent. There are things in a family's story that are not easy to hear.”

The sheet dated 1993 listed railway fares and the cost of posting letters. Sarita said that her mother used to read aloud letters from relatives who had

gone away to earn a living. The letters spoke not only of household expenses but of the taste of food: one person did not like the rice where they lived; another found salt too dear. The space where ‘reached home’ should have been entered was blank. “Perhaps a letter was lost here,” Sarita said, “or perhaps nobody wrote down that it had arrived. A blank space is no grounds for declaring someone missing.”

Whether or not the letters named a great city, people at home often gathered everyone living away under a single word: ‘pardesiya’, one who had gone to another place. Sarita did not accept that simplification. “Going far away and abandoning your family are not the same thing. Some return. Some send letters. Some cannot send even a word of news. I won't put reasons into their mouths because no reply came.” Shakuntala said, “When someone failed to come back to the village, people would sometimes begin dividing that person's share among themselves.” Then she added at once, “But I'm not saying that happened in this household.” Sarita nodded at her care.

Naira resisted the urge to make a copy of that entry. Her mother's permission to handle the papers did not extend equally to every sheet. She looked at the question in the girl's exercise book: ‘Whose home?’ If the home of five generations were reduced to its owners' names, those who tended the hearth, made the vessels, or went away to earn a living would vanish. For the moment, however, that was Naira's own thought, not evidence supplied by the page.

Just then, Bindeshwari Sahu's son came to the door with a slip showing the price of a bottle of oil. The cost of replacing an old part of the oil press and the price of oil bought in the market appeared on separate lines. Shakuntala smelled the oil in the bottle and said that once, in their home, you could hear the sound of oil being pressed. Bindeshwari was thinking of selling the press, but others in the family regarded it as an object of remembrance. “Keeping the machine won't pay off the household's debts,” Sarita said, “but if we sell it, where shall we keep the memory? That's a question too.” The slip went into the cupboard. No one settled the matter that night.

When Sarita opened the third bundle, two school-fee receipts from 2008 came out. One concerned Naira's education; the other related to the distribution of old books to someone. Naira examined them closely. The column for payment of the fee had been completed, but there was no signature acknowledging delivery of the books. She remembered that in that year, instead of giving her a book, someone had salvaged the unused pages of an old exercise book for her. Yet that memory could not supply the missing signature on the receipt.

“I won't tell a story in which I left home just so you could get an education,” Sarita said, looking at her daughter. “I went on doing my own work. Your schooling came into conflict with the work of the house. Once I

left the dishes unwashed on the day of your examination, and the household talked about it all day."

Naira laughed. "At the time I thought you had lied for my sake. You said the tap was broken."

"The tap really was broken," Sarita said with a smile. "But how often the truth was spoken on someone's behalf—that's another set of arithmetic altogether." The granddaughter joined in their laughter, although she did not know the name of the examination Naira had taken.

On the sheet dated 2027, a vehicle's wheel had been drawn in Sanket's childish hand. Seeing his old drawing, he looked a little embarrassed. With that small hand he had drawn everyone in the household: one face round, another figure tall, and an empty space left for one person. "Why is this space empty?" Naira asked.

"The paper was torn," Sanket said. "It's possible someone was left out. But now I can't say who." Sarita returned the drawing to the boy's hands. Naira resisted the temptation to connect its empty space to the list of twenty-seven names. The meaning of the drawing could be no more certain than its maker's memory.

Along with the slip concerning the footpath at Kumharauti, Shakuntala had several more receipts in her bag. Amrita Chauhan had written her name beside an old claim relating to the clay at Nonthara; Gomati Beldar had separately counted the hours she had spent transporting materials for modern construction work. The two documents had been tied together, but the work they recorded was not the same. It would be wrong to add Gomati's wages to Amrita's claim over land merely because the old occupational register grouped the Nonia and Beldar communities together. Understanding the distinction, Shakuntala put the papers away separately again.

One envelope contained an old measuring slip from Mahendra Mahaseth's business; another held a receipt for a small purchase by Binod Jaiswal. People associated both households with the name of an old occupation and treated them as though they shared one account, but the names on the payments, the dates, and the owners were different. Naira could read the names clearly on both envelopes. No one had asked her to judge anyone guilty or innocent on the strength of those slips. Shakuntala said only, "If the price of the pots from Kumharauti gets put on the same bill as these, my money will disappear."

The granddaughter opened her exercise book again. Between the pages was a copy of a wedding invitation sent by Nilima Nurang. Nilima had written that she intended to apply to have her mother's name entered correctly in the marriage register. "If a name is left out," the girl asked, "can it be written in afterwards?" "An application can be made," Sarita said. "But correcting a document and correcting an old family memory are not the same thing." At the top of her exercise book the girl wrote: 'What I don't know, I shall ask.'

In a small songbook kept on the veranda, the fee for Hamida Miriyasin's wedding songs had been entered separately. An organiser had wanted to sing the words of an old song in mockery; Hamida had refused permission for that use. Her song belonged to the memory of a household, but calling it a memory did not cancel the singer's right to be paid for her work. Shakuntala's granddaughter said she wanted to hear the tune. “First we'll ask the singer,” Sarita replied. “All right,” the girl said. “Then tomorrow I'll recite my own poem.”

The last paper in the bag was an old notice concerning rent for Shashi Mahuri's warehouse. It recorded only the rental period and the general conditions for storing goods, not what had actually been stored there. Naira did not try to match the notice to the sheet of twenty-seven names. Nothing about the shop's condition or any irregularity could be established from this one receipt. For now, she could see only one possible use for it: they would need to ask separately about the transport charge for certain vessels brought from Kumharauti to the warehouse, and when that journey had been made.

A light shower began outside. Waiting for it to pass, the granddaughter sat on the threshold of Sarita's house and drew five houses in her exercise book. Beneath the first she wrote 1942; beneath the second, 1974; beneath the third, 1993; beneath the fourth, 2008; and beneath the fifth, 2027. Then she stopped. “Are these five houses the same house?”

“Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't,” Sarita said. “Land changes, rooms change, people change. Even those who eat together don't always live beneath the same roof. So don't write about all five times under a single person's name.”

“And 1939?” the girl asked.

“Put that story of the pond-clearing under a separate heading,” Shakuntala answered. “Say that it is something you heard. When we find the old accounts, we'll check the date.” The granddaughter left a blank space along one side of the page. Sarita's story said that on the day of the clearing some people lifted earth, some cooked rice, and some found their way to the pond's landing blocked. The girl wanted to ask all three groups about it the next time, before filling the blank.

When the rain stopped, Shakuntala helped her granddaughter to her feet. She wrapped the two clay samples again; she would test them on the wheel tomorrow. Naira spoke of arranging a separate day to examine the numerals on the school bench, but she thought it more urgent to prepare Shakuntala's written request concerning access to the clay ground. Shakuntala herself said, “In the application I'll write only that the old path to the clay ground has been used, and that I want its use investigated and heard. I won't write that the entire piece of land belonged to my forefathers.”

That decision did not diminish her claim. For the first time, it would be stated in a form to which the other side could respond. Remembering the limits Sarita had placed on permission to use her ledger, Naira gave Shakuntala a blank sheet of paper. Beneath the first question in her exercise book, the granddaughter had written: ‘Listen to the stories of those who lived in the house, those who worked there, and those who went away.’ It was not a complete answer, but it was enough of a beginning for learning.

Before closing the door, Sarita wiped the wet corner of the threshold. She bound the first bundle in cloth again, but laid aside one letter bearing an old postmark from Simatirtha. “This isn't my letter,” she told Naira. “I won't open it without permission from the person whose name is on it.” Naira looked at the letter without turning it over and went to fetch water to wash the dishes.

A little rice remained in the pot. Sanket asked whether they should save some roasted chillies for the granddaughter if she came tomorrow. “Ask her,” Sarita replied. “Why should everyone like what you like?” Sanket smiled. Amid the names of five generations, this small question about a meal was giving the home of the present day a time of its own.

Chapter 8 · The Letter from Simatirtha

At dawn, when Sarita lifted the envelope from the top of the chest, she found that damp had softened one corner. Water had dripped beside the barred window all night. Naira came to kindle the cooking fire and saw her mother passing a dry cloth around the edges of the envelope. The postmark was from Simatirtha; the name was Ramvati Khatve's. Sarita did not fold it away again. “This turned up yesterday while we were looking at Shakuntala's papers. When Ramvati was staying here, she left an old letter of hers in my keeping. Somehow there was never a time to return it.”

“Have you opened it?” Naira asked.

“No. A piece of paper doesn't become mine merely because it has grown old.” Measuring the water for the rice into a vessel, Sarita said, “Ramvati is going towards Makhaniya Dabra today. I'll put it into her hands. If she thinks it right, she'll tell us about it herself.”

Naira was getting her bag ready. She remembered how, the day before, Shakuntala's granddaughter had drawn five houses in her exercise book, with a blank road between them. A Simatirtha postmark made it easy to estimate the distance between two towns, but not to know how a letter had crossed it. She slipped the envelope into a plain protective sleeve to keep it dry. Sanket asked, “Shall I take a photograph, so we've got a copy?” Naira shook her head. “We'll ask Ramvati first. Keeping an envelope safe and having its image on everyone's phone are not the same thing.”

The water on the road beyond Videhapur had not yet risen to knee height. The wheels of the light vehicle threw up mud as it went. Naira and Sarita sat at the back. At a narrow bend before the pond, a man working for Devki Pal got up to move the bundles of wool he had laid beside the road. Devki herself was noting down the time at which the animals were taken across. New stakes had been driven into the footpath leading to the pasture beside the canal; both the animals and the wool bundles now had to go round by another way. Devki's receipt gave more attention to the extra cost of conveying the wool than to its weight. Naira did not ask to copy the receipt. She asked what one line meant, and Devki answered, “The freight is mine to pay; the path belongs to everyone.”

Farther on, a little marker bearing Phulo Chaurasia's name was tied in a furrow of a betel field. A worker was testing the dampness of the soil. The marker stated the proposed time for releasing water, but not how much water the field could bear. Beneath Suraj Chaudhary's palm tree, a receipt for the daily wage of a tree-climber had been stretched out to dry. A bamboo tube had arrived from Nandini Bhandari's nursery for a trial; its dimensions might prove useful for cultivation at the pond, but they would not establish the value

of the nursery's land. All four kinds of work lay along the same road, yet the losses and gains of the four households were distinct.

Before they reached the pond, the vehicle stopped on a narrow culvert. Two young men sat there, delivering wedding invitations: one family was from Simatirtha, the other from Videhapur. Both said there would be music at the wedding, but no one had yet decided who would pay the bride's fare to visit her mother's home. The young men held the invitations and two slips concerning travel expenses. Sarita said with a laugh, “It will do no harm to reckon the travel fare before the wedding songs.” One of them asked, “But who will sing?” Sarita replied, “Whoever wishes to—and whoever is paid an honorarium for it.” A little laughter passed over the culvert, and the vehicle moved on.

Makhaniya Dabra was not like Barki Pokhari. There were neither masonry steps for bathing nor a stone platform for washing clothes. A safe footpath down to the water had been marked along the bank; beyond it, the makhana leaves, their thorns, and the marshy earth presented difficulties of their own. Ramani Bind was spreading wet sacks at the head of that path. Four women beside her were sorting dried makhana seeds from the previous season. The section planted with new seed lay across the water. If the level rose, they would have to move the sorting place; so the hours of work and the route into the pond had to be settled first that day.

“Will you finish popping them today?” Naira asked.

“Only a sample from the old lot,” Ramani replied. “The new crop is still in the water. To claim that we've brought it out and popped it today would be a lie to the market and a lie about our wages.” She showed Naira one of the seeds in her hand—dried, hard, needing heat and then a practised hand before it could be popped. “Work in the water and work beside the fire must be counted separately. People looking on call it all ‘makhana’.”

Sarita set down her cloth bag and sat on the bank. Naira noticed a thick ledger already lying open on the work mat. At the top was a heading for transactions under the water lease; below it, dates and numbers of loads. There was a column for women, labelled ‘Family assistance’. Its figure was zero. Ramani placed a finger on the page. “What I do when I go down into the water has been entered as assistance. The time these four women spend sorting is zero too. The value of the produce will go into the account of the person who holds the lease. There's nowhere that records how often we have had to shake the water off our bodies.”

A clerk said the old water-lease register had no separate column for wages. Instead of prolonging the argument, Ramani produced two sheets. The first recorded the times at which work began and ended; the second carried the names of the women present, entered with their own consent. Some did not wish their names made public; private receipts had been prepared for them.

“No names will be posted without consent,” Ramani said, “but anonymity must not become an excuse for withholding a day's pay.”

“These pages won't change who owns the lease,” the clerk replied.

“I'm not asking for ownership just now,” Ramani said. “I'm saying that sowing, entering the water, collecting the seeds, drying them, and popping them are not one person's labour. Let the dispute over ownership be heard separately. Write down today the price of the work done today.” Weariness showed on the clerk's face. He too said it would be difficult to release money without a signature in the account kept above him. Without raising her voice, Ramani laid three old receipts before him. One bore a man's name; on the other two there was nothing but the number of loads.

Ramani pointed out another entry. New transactions had been posted under the name of an old account holder, although the local register of deaths recorded that person as deceased. Ramani did not possess a certified copy of the death register, so she did not yet allege that the account was fraudulent. She asked instead for separate particulars: who had paid in the money, who had received it, and how the register had been updated. Naira remembered the notice concerning her mother's death, but resisted the temptation to treat the two occurrences as proof of the same crime.

Meanwhile, people gathered to agree on the sharing of seed and water. They first had to settle when water would be released, how much of the approach would remain safe, and whether anyone who entered the pond would have a helper. The small measurement taken with Nandini's tube was accepted only as a reading for today; a condition was added that it must be taken again if the rains grew heavier. Phulo's marker recording the watering time for her field was kept separate, because the cost of protecting the field could not be thrust upon the workers at the pond. A marker was left for the route used by Devki's animals. Someone gave the three undertakings the name of a common festival. The disputes, however, were not yet settled.

Ramani had the first rates entered on paper: the payment for the seeds sorted, the time spent drying them, and the remuneration for popping them, on three separate lines. No one accepted the argument that a skill which had taken days to learn should command a lower rate. A woman who had come for temporary work asked, “I've given half a day. Will you write down half my name?” Ramani replied, “Your whole name; the number of hours you worked, separately.” Hearing that, the clerk turned the page again. He made no payment yet, but agreed in writing to provide a copy of the attendance record and the separate rates.

Ramani added a second condition: women entering the water must have somewhere to change into dry clothes and to rest. There was only one shelter on the bank, and a merchant's sacks occupied half of it. The clerk said the goods might get wet if the sacks were moved. “Then find another safe place

for the sacks,” Ramani answered. “To leave our people wet, with thorns in their skin, and then write zero against their labour—these are two parts of the same injustice.” The work group had half the shelter cleared at once. The sacks of seeds were raised onto a wooden platform.

During the half-hour break, Sarita saw Ramvati at the edge of the pond, taking papers written in two different scripts out of her bag and separating them. One came from a household where a marriage had taken place; the other concerned money sent home from work away. Her family of birth was not identified in the same manner on both. Sarita placed the envelope in her hand. “You left this at my house. I haven't opened it.” Ramvati touched a corner of the paper and looked at the postmark. Her eyes did not immediately fill with tears; first she read the date on the back, as though making a calculation.

“I wanted to reconcile the two forms of my name in one document then,” Ramvati said. “The marriage register wasn't made in the name by which they called me at home. When earnings came in, the bank wanted proof of the other name. I left this letter here so it wouldn't be opened in front of everybody.” Before thanking Sarita, she asked, “Who has seen it now?”

“Only Naira and I have seen the envelope,” Sarita answered. “Sanket asked whether he could take a photograph, but he didn't.” Ramvati relaxed a little. She opened the envelope herself and drew out a sheet yellowed with age. After reading it alone for some time, she returned. “It contains the old address of my mother's house, and mentions two testimonies,” she said. “I'll tell you one line, but there will be no copy of the whole letter. It is also about my mother's life.”

Naira closed her notebook. “Keep the original of a paper that serves both sides. If you ever need a translation for an application, you can choose the words yourself.” Ramvati said that once, when an expression of kinship was altered in translation, members of her mother's family had been taken for relatives by marriage. To correct the mistake in the documents, she wanted separate replies from both sides. The letter contained an old thread that might lead to such a reply, not a final decision.

Two expectations had stood behind Ramvati's marriage. Her mother wanted her daughter not to change her birth name; her husband's family wanted a single form in the documents. Ramvati had heard both, but within her own household she made her own decision about the name by which she would be called. “I won't turn my mother's family into a lie, and I won't turn my husband's family into an enemy either,” she said. “What is wrong on paper must be corrected. Whatever love there is in a relationship must not be wrung into a document of dispute.” Her words brought back to Sarita an old disagreement with her daughter Naira. She said nothing.

At the edge of Makhaniya Dabra, the wage slips belonging to Naseema's and Rafiq's families had arrived in a bag bearing Amir Kulhaiya's name. They sent letters by way of Simatirtha. The name Mahananda appeared on one sheet bearing their old family address; nobody mistook it for another name for the Tilwaha at Videhapur and added it to the map of the water lease. In Naseema's letter a term of domestic address carried different meanings in two languages. Amir wanted the translator's fee for that line stated plainly, because a difference so small could cause money to be held back under the wrong person's name.

The remittance account distinguished the gross sum, the charges deducted along the way, and the amount received at home. According to Amir, the intermediary had said that all the charges were to be paid once, yet the document named three deductions. This still required verification. Taking the slip, Naira added the figures, one after another; the two totals did not agree. She told Amir to ask both sender and recipient to show their separate receipts, and not to call the intermediary a thief yet. Amir agreed, but said anxiously, “If I pay the fee a second time under the name of correcting an error, how many days will the medicine at home have to wait?”

Elsewhere, Sugni's old exercise book held a memory of flooding, recorded under the name Kosi or Kosika. Suraj's family had linked that memory to a debt on fields the flood had cut away. The first page of the book recorded no water-level readings, only an estimate of when the household had fled. Naira listened to the recollection but did not set it alongside today's measurement at the pond in Videhapur as though the two were comparable. A different river, a different year, different people: resemblance in suffering does not make maps identical. The page concerning Sugni's household debt was put aside for the next meeting, separate from what was owed for the makhana work.

As the day wore on, some visitors who had come to watch the makhana being sorted began asking why so small an undertaking needed so many separate lines in the accounts. Ramani showed them the dried seeds. Two women were lifting the same sack, but one was testing the seeds while the other repeatedly turned to tend the heat of the fire. The time required for the two skills was different, as was the danger of injury to their hands. Ramani said, “When the day's produce is given one price, that does not give you leave to erase all the kinds of labour that went into it by calling them one job.” Someone laughed, but before putting another question, the visitors sat down beside the work and watched.

A small bill from a trader arrived at the edge of the pond. It set out the conditions of an advance sent by Kamala Jain's family: the price of the goods, the sacks, the carriage, and the date for repayment. It said nothing about Kamala's private or religious decisions; no rumours about her could be accounted for by this bill. Ramani said they would not accept the advance as grounds for deducting the entire price of the produce beforehand. The trader's

representative left a written agreement to reconsider the rate at the next meeting. The buyer had not changed, but a previously unanswered condition was now clear on paper.

A young man who came to examine the sacks wanted to put makhana seeds of different sizes together in one heap. Ramani stopped his hand. “If the market pays different prices for different sizes, you must recognise the separate care the women put into sorting them.” The young man said that buyers at the market looked at a basket, not at names. Ramani placed two different samples in the basket to show him and said that the rate the buyer accepted after inspection must be recorded in writing. This time he did not object, but neither did he sign for a new rate. The question remained open, deferred until the fair.

After midday, the popping of the old lot stopped. Clean water was set aside for washing hands. Ramani folded the private slips belonging to women who had asked that their names not be publicly displayed and put them in her bag. On the public board were written only the number of workers, the hours worked, and the total amount due. For the first time, the clerk copied those figures into his ledger. Payment was still outstanding; nevertheless, nobody could afterwards claim that the women had merely come to watch.

When the singing began, one woman held back at first. “This is my grandmother's tune,” she said, “but I've changed the words. If you're going to write a name, listen to me sing before you put mine down.” With her permission, Ramani had the song's title and the singer's name entered on a cultural sheet separate from the work ledger. The song recalled the road home, wet palms, and cooked rice. The melody rose and fell; someone forgot a line, and someone else laughingly began again. Naira did not record the song. For a while, she simply listened.

Sarita repeatedly missed the beat as she tried to clap along. A young woman beside her laughed and showed her how to hold back her hands for one beat before the second line began. “I know the rhythm of lifting the lid from a cooking pot,” Sarita said. “I'll have to learn this new one.” Everyone burst out laughing. In the midst of that laughter, Ramani asked when they should rehearse the song for the village's next fair. The young woman said she could come only after her school examination. Ramani agreed to change the date. No page of debt was opened, no accusation written down; the singer's time was simply respected.

After the song ended, Ramvati called Naira aside. She folded her letter and put it into her bundle. “When I go to Simatirtha again, I'll obtain separate testimony about why my mother's name changed between two papers. If I want one of those accounts to reach you, I'll ask first. I want to protect my home; I'm not asking for the right to conceal anybody's crime.” Naira said she would not make a name public without consent, but an ordinary error in a

register would still have to be corrected through the proper procedure. The two women agreed on that distinction.

As they were leaving the pond, Ramani showed Naira a copy of her new page. The working hours were clear, but there appeared to be a difference between the route recorded for the incoming water and the path actually used to enter the pond. “This wasn't what I'd set out to examine,” Ramani said, “but no measurement was taken today on the side from which they say the water comes. When Tara and Aditi come tomorrow, I'll ask about that first.” Naira did not regard it as decisive proof of some hidden scheme. She merely marked the questions separately with her pen: From where does the water enter, and who measured it, and when?

On the journey home, the old envelope was no longer in Sarita's bag. In the space it had occupied she put a small sample of makhana for the granddaughter, which Ramani had given her permission to take. Ramvati's private letter had reached its rightful owner; for the first time the women's wages had been entered on a separate page; the account of the deductions from Amir's remittance still awaited examination. As the vehicle rounded the bend, Sarita asked, “It'll be late before I can cook the rice. What shall we eat today?” Naira said, “Let's begin with what is left. But we'll ask Sanket first whether he wants a chilli with it.”

Chapter 9 · The Blocked Channel

Along the far side of Barki Pond, the grass had grown so tall that it was difficult to read the direction of the water from the stalks rising above it. At dawn Tara Mallik thrust a slender bamboo rod into the growth. It sank into soft earth, then struck something solid and stopped. She bent and touched the ground. Beneath the mud lay the straight edge of a brick. When she cut through the grass roots and lifted them away, one corner of an old, half-buried outlet came into view. No water flowed through it. In the pond above, yesterday's rainwater lay motionless.

“Is this passage shown on the map?” asked Lalit Vishwakarma. He had brought two wooden stakes. Before answering, Tara traced the edge of the brick with the tip of her rod. “There is a line on the map. But we have come today to find out where that line opened. A line on paper cannot make a brick stand upright.” Lalit drove his stakes in farther away, where the earth would not give way beneath anyone's feet. When someone proposed climbing down and clearing the mouth by hand, Tara forbade it. “First we must know the depth, and the weight pressing down from above.”

A little way off stood the warehouse's rear wall. Fresh plaster gleamed at its base, and a strip of cement had been laid across a narrow crack beside it. The old papers showed more open ground between the wall and the pond than could now be seen. Tara took a small drawing, made in her father's hand, from her bag. The paper had yellowed; some figures had faded away. On one side was the mark of a woven bamboo structure made by Shyam Mallik, and on the other a route taken by water. “This drawing is not a title deed,” Tara said. “It only shows how work used to be carried out here.”

When Aditi arrived, the dust of the marketplace still clung to the soles of her shoes. In her hands were an old municipal report and the inspection sheet for that day. For a month she had been hearing complaints that the channel was blocked. The preliminary report recommended minor repairs: remove the accumulated silt, replace the damaged bricks along the outlet. Tara looked at the sheet and then pointed towards the wall. “If a weight has been placed over the mouth, clearing the silt alone will not be enough. Where will the water go?”

Aditi sheltered the papers beneath her umbrella to keep them dry. “I drew up the proposal for minor repairs from the measurements available before I visited the site,” she said. “What I see now gives us grounds for another examination. But one old brick does not prove that the channel ran from here beneath the warehouse.” Tara did not contradict her. She laid her rod on the ground in two different positions and said, “That is precisely what I am saying. First, write the question correctly for the investigation.”

Meanwhile people had gathered at the pond steps. A day for the communal dredging of the pond had been fixed before the rains, but the work had stopped halfway through, when heavy clouds gathered and wages remained unpaid. One heap of excavated mud had dried hard upon the footpath leading to the steps. Some said the pond had been cleaned; others said the steps had been blocked. Today's gathering was not a repetition of the festival, but an occasion to reopen the accounts of that unfinished day. A child had brought the flute on which the songs were played, though it was not yet time for him to sound it.

Urmila Rajak arrived carrying wet clothes. On one side of the steps, three women were waiting for their turn to wring out their washing; a bamboo enclosure set up for the fishery lease had narrowed the path. “Calling the pond public does not open my washing place again,” Urmila said. “My working hours are different. When the fishing nets are spread out to dry, where am I to wash the clothes?” She showed them her statement of expenses: the extra fare caused by the detour, the labour of carrying the wet washing once more, and the delay to a consignment of hospital linen.

There was an old receipt for a fishery lease in Ramani's name, but she had not come that day. Tara did not send Naira a photograph of the receipt. Instead she asked Urmila whether the hours reserved for fishing could be kept separate. “The approach to the washing place must be cleared,” Urmila replied, “and the fishermen's livelihood must not be destroyed either. But the written conditions concern fishing. They do not, of themselves, extinguish my right of passage.” Tara gave that sentence a line of its own in her notes.

Hira Sahni stepped out of his boat and watched the inspection from a distance. He needed to keep an eye on the time for setting the evening nets, but Tara had called him there. Hira pointed to the direction taken by a dry leaf floating on the water's surface. The wind was blowing eastwards; the leaf was turning back. “Do not write that wherever the leaf goes, the current must be going the same way,” he told them. “The surface may be still while the route underneath is different. When I take out the boat, I test the depth separately with a bamboo pole.” Aditi entered his observation on the measuring sheet as the observation of a working boatman. She did not call it an engineering survey.

Lalit was moving his wooden stakes away from the open patch. In his bag lay the carpenter's receipt: two stakes, one straight board, and a temporary safety barrier. When he named the price, a man nearby declared that everything should be provided free for a community festival. Lalit laid the board on the ground. “If I choose to give something, I shall say so. But if wood requested for an official survey, and a day's work of my hands, are simply treated as free, there will be no truthful account of the work.” Aditi promised to attach his receipt to her inspection papers, though payment would still depend on the office's approval that day.

By then Shyam Mallik had been turning a fragment of old bamboo weaving over in his hands. The woven piece had been made not to dam water in the drain but to mark a place where the earth might collapse. A new contractor had entered it among the materials for a temporary bridge. Tara measured the old specimen and said that when the work changed, its name ought to change as well. Shyam did not prolong the argument. On his daughter's paper he marked three knots in the old pattern. The price of the work and the credit due for its design would have to be discussed more fully later.

A volunteer opened the page of unfinished accounts for the pond dredging. The number of people who had lifted mud on the first day, the cost of food on the second, and the rain on the third had all been crowded into the same column. The receipt for vessels of rice brought from Rukhsana's kitchen was separate; some had entered it as a donation. Tara did not examine every receipt, but proposed that the labour of the women who prepared the meal be costed separately. Two schoolboys planted a red flag on an old mound of earth to keep children from playing there. The communal undertaking would survive only if the record of who had done how much work survived with it.

Along with the grass-cutters came Dhani Rajbhar's application concerning a footpath used for irrigation. He had written that a bamboo fence had been erected across the mouth of the old ditch that carried surplus pond water towards the fields. Dhani himself was absent; with the application came a schedule of farming seasons. Tara marked the matter separately: was the channel intended for public drainage or for irrigation? The same line could not determine both rights. It would not do to save the higher fields by drowning the houses below; nor would it do to save those houses by releasing water onto the fields without permission.

Two women from the settlement behind the pond arrived carrying baskets. Mud excavated on the dredging day had been dumped outside their doorways. After it dried, people had begun driving large carts over it, and the carts, turning there, struck the walls around their hearths. The women did not withdraw from the communal dredging, but no one had asked them to decide where the mud should go. Tara had the destination of the heaps and the cost of carrying them away entered separately on the new work sheet. “I have nothing against work done for everyone,” one woman said. “But my doorstep is not a place for everyone's refuse.” Space was left on the new sheet for her consent.

One of the young men cutting grass said that, now the old opening had been found, they could all clear it together in a day. Another, whose leg had sunk into the mud the day before, stopped him. The upper soil was wet; if a hollow lay beneath it, the earth might cave in. Aditi herself took a length of cord and marked the safe boundary. Standing beside her, Tara said, “Enthusiasm makes hands reach out. But who will keep the accounts for an

injured labourer's family?” One young man quietly put down his spade. He had not run away from the work: he began putting up the barrier.

The clerk who had accompanied Aditi was reading out a list of records. In a supply slip sent from Simatirtha, Rafiq's own description of his regional identity had been recorded, but the office software had merged it into another, more familiar category. Tara asked that the complaint about the wording of the slip alone be entered on the sheet, saying that the form of the name Rafiq used for himself must remain distinct. Another file contained Maitri Shrestha's objection to a translation concerning the transport of medicines: the time when the supplies arrived and the time when they were issued had been rendered by the same word. Neither file proved why the channel had become blocked. Yet an incorrect identification could change where responsibility fell in the future.

When the sun came out, the bricks concealed in the grass became clearly visible. Above the old opening lay a deep score unlike the surrounding mud. Tara copied its outline onto paper; she did not measure it. Aditi regarded the provisional comparison of the ground levels on either side of the opening as incomplete, because what everyone was calling the old measurement had been made from the present water level. The water stood high after the rain. Nearby there was also a narrow cut made by a small run of water. “We must not treat all this as a single drainage route,” Aditi said. “The small flow, the water-cut and the channel will have different functions.” Tara ran her palm beneath the grass and saw the distinction for herself.

Aditi opened the last page of the old report. The date on which measurements had been taken was written there, but not the points from which they had been taken. Someone began to accuse a member of the former survey team. Aditi stopped him. “The signature is mine. First we shall find the original measurement register; then we shall decide who is responsible.” Tara asked whether the register was safe. Aditi wrote down that it must be checked the next day.

By then the sunlight had slipped behind the clouds again. A sudden wind crossed the pond; one row of grass bent, while the next remained upright. For a moment Tara watched the line made by that bending. In her childhood Shyam had told her that, before the rain, the grass around the outlet used to bend just so. The memory had given her a reason to look for the place. But she could not take the wind's movement as certain proof of the old current's direction. On her sheet she wrote: “Local memory: confirmation pending.”

At noon the people engaged in dredging the pond sat down to eat together. Rice from Rukhsana's kitchen had arrived with kanika and vegetables. A small boy began playing his flute, but stopped halfway through to ask when the heap behind them would be removed. People laughed at the question; then an elder said that when a child's playground had been fenced off, there

must still be room for a child's laughter. Shifting her plate, Tara said the safe footpath would be made first. No one forbade the flute. Amid the work, laughter continued, even without a promise to sustain it.

After the meal Urmila returned to the steps. She asked Tara to show her the papers. The provisional plan for draining the water showed a route to the washing place in pencil, but gave no width for it. Lifting her bundle of clothes in both hands, Urmila walked along the proposed route to demonstrate. At the narrow point she could go no farther. “Now write that a person going to the washing place does not go empty-handed,” she said. Tara moved the removal of the earth heaps to the first place in the work plan. The annual observance honouring the pond steps would be held in Kartik; preparations for it had begun with today's footpath.

A farmer asked who would be answerable if opening the channel sent water towards his betel field. Aditi did not assure him that such a thing was impossible. She said that the new measurements, the old map, the slope of the field and the likely rainfall runoff would have to be examined separately. Tara also wanted them to decide, before work began, where the water might be held temporarily. Opening the mouth without examination would be as careless as leaving it closed forever.

A warehouse employee had been watching the inspection from afar. He said the wall had recently been plastered, but the paperwork for the warehouse extension was at the office; he had no copy. Tara neither asked his name nor accused him. Aditi noted the warehouse office as the place to which a formal request must be sent. As the employee turned away, Tara noticed water standing at the foot of the wall. That was an observed fact. To infer the whole underground course from the standing water would be a different undertaking.

A note arrived on behalf of the families who sold fish from Barki Pond: the terms of the fishery lease conferred rights over fish, not every right concerning bathing, washing or drainage. Two different signatures appeared on the note, but it was unclear to whom one of them belonged. Aditi asked for verification. Before arriving at any decision, Tara drew Urmila's washing place and the bank used for fishing as two separate lines. She understood that saving one person's access to the steps today must not take away another person's livelihood tomorrow.

As evening came on, a bamboo barrier was put up around the deep cut. Yellow cloth was tied to Lalit's stakes. Separate teams were selected to cut grass, remove the heaps and make a temporary approach, with each team's remuneration recorded. The new fill lying across the channel mouth was not removed: doing so might affect the warehouse foundations. Tara did not stop there. Standing outside the barrier, she compared Shyam's old drawing once

more with Aditi's measuring sheet. The two agreed approximately on the direction of the opening, but differed in their figures for the distance.

“Should I have written ‘ordinary accumulation of silt’ in my first report?” Aditi asked of her own accord. As she awaited an answer, she looked not at Tara but at the mark that had been fenced off since morning. “Do not write that you saw what you did not see,” Tara replied. “But neither can you now bury what you have seen beneath the old line.” Aditi took out her sheet. She did not strike out the words “minor repairs”; beside them she wrote clearly, with the date: “Traces of an old outlet observed on site; further investigation required into possible structural drainage and encroachment. No work without measurements.”

The written correction did not, in that instant, drain the pond. Nor did it secure Urmila's unpaid wages. But the trace of the outlet now appeared in the public inspection record, and responsibility for the small task of opening a safe approach had been entered separately. The volunteers began collecting their tools from the grass they had cut. That day one barrier had been made secure, the value of several people's work had been put on record, and the rainwater remained standing exactly where it had stood before.

When Naira arrived in the evening, Tara showed her only the public portion of the inspection sheet. Naira did not immediately connect this mark with Sarita's ledger or the transactions at the makhana pool. “When, according to your papers, was this outlet blocked?” she asked. “At present,” Tara replied, “I have found the opening, not the date on which it was closed.” In Hira's old travel notebook there was a page bearing the name of the river Kamala; that name also appeared in the papers concerning the earth at Shakuntala's parental home. Naira did not put the two documents together on the assumption that Kamala was another name for the Tilwaha. She thought only that she would have to speak to different people to hear the memories of the old journeys and the old earth.

As Naira returned home, the mud of the channel clung to her shoes. Sarita set a lota of water by the doorway. “What was opened today?” she asked. Naira took off her shoes. “Not the channel,” she said, “but the way to investigate it. And a temporary footpath to the steps.” Sarita understood that what had been opened as a question on paper remained closed in the water. She began serving the meal. Outside, water dripped softly. Tara had no definite measurement yet for that dripping, but she had a reason to return tomorrow.

Chapter 10 · The Shadow of a Name

After the night's rain had ceased, a thin film of water shone along the footpath leading from Barki Pond to the warehouse. The yellow cloth Tara had tied to Lalit's stake the previous day had grown wet and sagged halfway down. Naira tightened its knot. When the wind rose, the stake did not stir; the earth still held it fast. But beside the old bricks within the cordoned-off area, the water stood just as it had before. Yesterday's inspection slip had said 're-examination'. Today they still had to decide where that re-examination should begin.

Tara arrived with two notebooks. One bore the stamp of the municipal survey team; the other contained lines she had drawn herself. “First I need a way of reaching the back of the warehouse,” she said. “Unless we establish where the line that runs across the paper actually passes over the ground, taking measurements will only repeat yesterday's mistake.” “Have we permission?” Naira asked. Tara said that the warehouse office had been asked to arrange a time for inspection, but written permission to enter had not been given. They therefore decided to remain outside the cordon that day.

They had heard the name Purnadhar before. In old conversations at Sarita's house, it had meant, by turns, useless land, the bed of a river that had changed its course, and a low-lying place that filled as soon as rain fell. Behind the warehouse wall lay a narrow strip of land known by that same name. Much of it had already been filled in. Water collected where grass had grown; where cement gleamed, no stream was visible. The survival of a name was no reason to assume that the old passage remained open.

Sushila Mahato arrived carrying a small tied handful of paddy seed. The day before, she had asked the municipal team not to let the inspection barriers close the path she used to irrigate her field. Tara noticed the seed in her hand. “What do you want to show us with that?” she asked. Sushila picked up a pinch of wet earth. “I've come to tell you how the timing of sowing works in my field. If you open the channel and the water suddenly runs that way, the seed will drown. If it stays blocked, the beds on the western side will dry up. Either way, I bear the cost.”

On a page of her notebook Tara drew not the name of Sushila's field, but the routes by which water entered and left it. Sushila explained that the family had followed the same way of selecting seed for a generation, though she was now learning to calculate the water levels from her school-educated daughter. “She says, 'Mother, if we write down our estimates, we can test them next year.' I tell her, 'First take the soil in your hand.' Put the two together, and it will be better still.” Naira saw her smile. It was not only the engineer's knowledge being tested here; a whole year's savings from a field depended on those lines.

A little way off, there was a receipt in Gomati Beldar's name for a day's construction labour. It recorded the carrying of earth, but did not say how many loads had been tipped behind the warehouse. Gomati was working at another site that day. Her absence was taken neither as an admission of guilt nor as consent. Tara wrote to the office requesting a copy of the receipt. Who had carried out the filling that could now be seen, and who had kept the accounts of the wages paid, were two separate questions.

A handcart stopped on the right of the cordon. Rani Halalkhor's name was entered on the municipal cleaning crew's list. The workers were separating broken glass and barbed wire discarded beside the standing water so that visitors to the inspection would not cut their feet. Not everyone had protective gloves; the space on the list for requesting equipment was blank. Naira noticed the blank, but did not photograph the workers without their consent. The clearing made the path look clean. It did not dispose of the question of unsafe work.

Meanwhile an elderly man arrived with folded papers in a jute bag. Tara introduced him as Ratan Vanpar. Ratan had been born into a family settled beside the river, though he now lived in a neighbourhood behind the market. From the bag he drew an old, hand-drawn map. Its edges had worn away; across its centre ran a crooked line, alongside the names of four fields from another time. “This is a copy made in my father's hand,” Ratan said. “I don't know where the original is.”

Naira wiped her hands before taking hold of a corner of the paper. “Where did the line you're showing us once run?” Ratan answered, “When I was small, the river after the rains did not flow deep enough to carry a boat. But there was a passage where water gathered, as though remembering its old home. My father used to say, 'Water does not readily part from this earth.'” He stopped speaking. What he had offered was a sentence from memory, not a claim to have measured anything.

Ratan had not brought his map to sell it. The measurements of the strip inside the cordon might bring together the footpath his maternal grandmother had used and the site of an old, temporary fish enclosure. He wanted that distinction entered separately in the hearing. “It would be wrong to call what was a field a river and make someone surrender possession,” he said. “And it would be no better to call the place where water used to flow a field and bury it.” Tara assured him that both possibilities would be examined, but his hand-drawn map could not serve as conclusive proof of land rights.

While Ratan was speaking, a warehouse employee came to the outer gate carrying an empty sack. He wanted to spread it in the sun to dry. The municipal team did not tell him to keep the gate closed; they merely asked him not to leave anything inside the inspection cordon. The man picked a small, broken wooden board out of a heap of rubbish and set it aside. Two

letters in old paint remained visible on the board. When the dust was brushed away, Tara read the name: 'Purnadhar'. Nobody present knew what year it had been painted or where the board had originally stood.

Tara measured the board. The wood was light, with two rusty nails on its back. “It isn't a boundary marker,” she said. “It might have been a signboard.” The warehouse employee said it had been lying in the heap since the day before, and he knew nothing of its origin. Naira wrote in her notes: 'Found beside rubbish outside the gate; original location unknown.' The words on the board were no proof of the history of the land or the warehouse, but the board itself was certainly an object that held the memory of a name.

Seeing signs of another shower, the employee moved the board away from the gate and propped it against the solid wall. At that moment sunlight fell through a break in the clouds. Naira raised her hand to show Ratan where to fold his map, and her gaze happened to fall on the board. It had already been moved away from the wall and placed somewhere else, yet its narrow shadow still stood on the wall in its former place. A second shadow slowly darkened where the board now rested; the first remained for a little while, unchanged.

Naira's hand stopped above the map. She blinked. Water was dripping, the sunlight was changing, and a vehicle passing nearby had stirred up dust. She did not know whether anyone else had seen anything on that old stretch of wall. The shadow slowly grew pale, like someone turning round belatedly at the sound of their name. Meanwhile Tara was talking with Ratan about the folds in his paper. The employee was gathering up the sacks. No one cried out in astonishment.

Naira went over to the wall. There was a faint line in the old plaster, but it did not have the shape of the board. She set her palm against the wall. The shadow of her hand moved with it. She wanted to lift the board and repeat the experiment, but she stopped herself. Whether what she had seen was the fatigue of her eyes, the shifting light, or some small delay in time itself, she could not yet give it a name. The rusty nails, the colour of the wood, and the place where it had been found could all be measured; that lingering shadow was a private experience, hers alone.

“What are you looking at?” Tara asked. “A difference in the old plaster on the wall,” Naira replied. “Photograph it, but don't say the photograph tells us where the board used to hang.” Tara agreed. Naira said nothing about her strange experience. She felt less fear than a kind of embarrassment: if she entered into another person's records something whose only evidence lay within her as a memory, even that memory might be pronounced false.

The inspection team placed bamboo rods at two points to gauge the depth of the water beside Purnadhar. Remembering Hira's method of measuring water, Tara asked whether the ends of the rods had reached firm ground or merely stopped in mud. The first sank into the soil; the second touched hard

earth. The figures were recorded, but no one claimed that both measurements had been taken from the same bed. A short message arrived from Aditi's office: a copy of the warehouse's old approved plan had been requested; it had not yet been obtained.

Another paper followed the message. A slip gave a different name for an old crossing used by Gopal Majhi's boat, but on the municipality's new map the line did not extend as far as the passage had once run. Gopal was not there himself; the slip recorded the time of his boat's next crossing. Tara wrote in the margin that a navigable route and a safe rescue route in a disaster must not be treated as one and the same. What was needed now was to compare the documents, not to presume the boatman's agreement.

Suraj Gangota's application for a loan arrived with the other papers. He wanted the dues on land taken by the river to be considered separately from his old land title. A person looking at the survey of the strip beside the warehouse might call all of it abandoned land. Suraj's application was a reminder that behind land described as abandoned, a household's debt might still be alive. Naira did not copy the amount he sought onto the public sheet. The application was kept separately, under restricted access, with the land-dispute papers.

At noon Sushila returned. This time she had a small diagram drawn by her daughter. It recorded the triangular part of their field, the height of the water channel, and the different sowing dates in each of the preceding two years. “We worked all this out sitting in a room at home,” she said. “My daughter told me that if a number was wrong, I should strike it through and write a new one. I realised that even a mistake written down by village people can be corrected.” Naira smiled. “Instead of rubbing it out, strike through it and add the date,” she replied. “Then next time we'll know when the correction was made.”

Sushila was willing to leave the page with Tara, but decided to take the original home. Tara made a copy in her own hand. In this modest piece of work, two days' water levels, the timing of flooding in the field, and the calculations behind the choice of seed became a new question for the enquiry. No order to open the channel could be issued without the warehouse's formal approval papers; meanwhile, work in the fields could not simply stand still. They had to record whose preparations for the next rainfall were most inadequate.

When Ratan saw the lines of Sushila's field, he grew a little uneasy. “If this strip used to be a watercourse,” he asked, “why is there a field boundary there now?” Sushila opened her handful of seed. “I did not build that embankment, but my crop grows behind it. Don't destroy my paddy today in order to understand the past.” Both gathered up their papers and fell silent. Naira told Tara that the disagreement must be recorded alongside the two possibilities

shown by the maps. There was, as yet, no order either to cut anyone's crop or to remove the barriers.

Standing nearby, Ratan could feel other people's eyes upon his old map. He said to Naira, “When I see the names written in my father's hand on this paper, so many things about our home return to me. But I cannot say my father was right about everything.” Naira handed the paper back. As Ratan tightened the string around the folded map, he recalled how his mother, when the rains came down, would first lift the sacks of wheat above the level of the doorway and only then ask after the river. In his household, the memory of water had been both a fear and an ordinary sequence of domestic tasks.

Later in the afternoon, small children began playing marbles on the path at Purnadhar. One child's marble rolled inside the cordon, and he made to run after it. Naira stopped him and told him that not all the barbed wire had yet been cleared away. Instead of enduring a long scolding, the child asked, “Who will build this path?” Tara answered that if the path was for public use, its measurements and the responsibility for repairing it would be put into writing. The child did not understand, but someone rolled his marble back to him. He returned to his game.

Far away in the market, smoke rose from Rukhsana's kitchen. Naira remembered the smell of rice cooking at Sarita's house. In recent days her time had been so divided between home and office that she had not finished a brief conversation with Sanket the day before. The child's marble reminded her of Sanket's old paper boats, which he had floated in the water of the courtyard when he was little. To those boats, river and pond were places for play; to Urmila, a livelihood; to Sushila, cultivation; to Ratan, the way home. No single survey could contain all the meanings of the same piece of ground.

As she closed the inspection, Tara separated three sets of papers: yesterday's drawing of the outlet, today's limited enquiry at Purnadhar, and the list of records requested from the warehouse. “What will happen to the old board you found?” Naira asked. Tara said it would be wrapped in clean, dry cloth and deposited, in the presence of a warehouse representative, as an object found at the site; its origin would be recorded as unknown. The mere act of reading its name did not transfer ownership of the object to the municipality.

Before going home, Naira stood alone for a while. The sunlight no longer touched that wall; the long shadow of the warehouse stretched across the ground. She opened her small private notebook, which she kept apart from Sarita's ledger and the official documents. She wrote: 'Today, outside the gate at Purnadhar, after the wooden board was moved, I seemed to see its former shadow remain on the wall for a little while. No other witness known. Possible error of sight or light. Not evidence for the verification of facts.' She

closed the notebook. The purpose of that page was not to address a court, but to speak truthfully to herself.

That evening Sarita was washing rice at home. “What became of the name today?” she asked casually. Naira said that an old board marked 'Purnadhar' had been found, but that it did not establish the boundaries of the place. Draining the water from the rice, Sarita said, “Sometimes a thing keeps its name, though its place has shifted.” Naira did not tell her about the shadow on the wall. Sarita did not ask. There had been silences like this in the household before, silences each of them had learned to carry in her own way.

Sanket sat at the table, repairing the cracked cover of his phone. An acquaintance wanted to see the photograph he had taken the day before of a red mark on the warehouse. Should he send it? Naira did not take the phone from his hand. She merely asked, “Does the picture show anyone else's papers or face?” Before answering, Sanket opened it and stared intently at the image. Then he said that the backs of two men and the corner of an old receipt were visible at one side. “The picture is yours,” Naira told him, “but not everyone shown in it has the same rights over its use. Tomorrow we'll decide what can properly be shared.” Sanket kept the phone with him.

When Sarita served rice, Sanket asked for rotis. There was little flour in the house; Sarita said she would knead some in the morning. Suppressing a smile, Sanket said, “Then give me rice, but plenty of pickle with it.” Naira laughed. The family settled this small dispute over dinner. It corrected no record and uncovered no crime. Yet sometimes laughter shared between two plates keeps a household free, for a moment, of arguments over names and papers.

That night Naira looked once more at the copy of the official inspection report. It clearly distinguished the documentary sources concerning Purnadhar, the measurements available, and the permissions still outstanding. Her private notebook lay in another compartment. She did not bring the two pages together. A breeze came through the window from the direction of the old pond. Whether it carried a voice, or merely stirred the leaves, was not something Naira needed to decide. Tomorrow she would have to hear Sanket's own conditions about the photograph of the warehouse mark. Today's task had been only this: not to turn the experience of a shadow attached to a name into an accusation of wrongdoing.

Chapter ıı · My Phone, My Terms

At dawn Sanket wiped the screen of his phone with the end of Sarita's old cotton sari. On the screen was the warehouse wall, and on the wall a crooked red line. Beside the line were the backs of two men, and, at one edge, the corner of what looked like a torn receipt. Sanket enlarged the photograph with his finger. The red paint came into focus, but the writing on the receipt grew blurred. He held the phone away and looked again. What he had regarded yesterday evening as no more than a mark now held within it the concerns of three different people.

Sarita was baking rotis on the hearth. They had been short of flour the day before; this morning she had kneaded the dough in advance. When Sanket reached out to take a roti, Sarita pointed to his plate. "Sit down first. The phone won't eat your roti, but if you eat at this speed you'll go on feeling hungry." Sanket did not laugh. "I've got to show the photograph today," he said. "Who will ask those two men?"

Naira was taking an inspection slip from her bag. "I cannot say that because their faces are not visible, we have no need of their permission," she said. "And even if their permission is obtained, that doesn't entitle someone else to draw whatever conclusions they please from their photograph. What is it you want to do?" Sanket broke off a piece of roti and thought for a while. "I'll keep the original photograph. I'll show only the part needed for the inquiry. I won't send it over the internet." Taking another roti off the griddle, Sarita said, "Good. Now don't let your breakfast go cold."

When they reached the gate at Purnadhar, Tara took a fresh measurement sheet out of her paper bag. Yesterday's yellow circle was still visible at the mouth of the channel. On the cement dust in front of the warehouse, the night's water had left small marks. "Did you take the photograph?" Tara asked Sanket. He said yes, but did not hand her his phone. "First tell me where you're going to use it," he said. Tara was silent for a moment. The condition, voiced so quietly, did not offend her. Instead, she checked her papers and answered, "To examine the marks at the site. Not to display it at a public meeting."

Sanket opened the photograph. The two short red strokes on the warehouse wall looked, from a little distance, like a single connected mark. Tara asked on what day, at what time, and from what distance he had taken the picture. Sanket showed her the time, but could not remember the distance. "Then we won't write down a guessed distance," Tara said. Sanket held the phone steady. A few days earlier he would have taken questions of this kind for distrust. Today he understood that the credibility of a picture he himself had made could depend upon his willingness to say, "I don't know."

A warehouse worker came out through the gate. He was the same man who had been drying sacks the day before. The colour of the clothing on one back in the photograph resembled his shirt, but Sanket did not announce that he had identified him. The worker said the red paint might have been a mark left when old stock was unloaded. In some places, masons also put red marks beside cracks they were repairing. “I'm telling you what I've heard,” he added. “I don't know who made this particular mark on this wall.” Tara entered his name and the time of his statement on her sheet; she did not record what he said as a formal admission.

Sanket looked at the corner of the receipt visible at the edge of the photograph. Until yesterday it had seemed to him an inanimate scrap. Now, seeing the empty basket for carrying goods in the worker's hand, he understood that a receipt might also be a record of somebody's dues and earnings. “Can I ask whether that man's back is in the photograph?” he said. The worker replied, “I won't speak for another man when he isn't here.” Sanket switched off the phone. It did not seem right to fill an answer that was not yet available with something imagined.

Beside the wall, Tara opened her notebook to a drawing she had made herself. The position of the red paint was represented there by no more than a dot. She turned the page towards Sanket. “Your original photograph may have evidentiary value. But first we must find the original measurement for this point and the old records of the wall. The paint tells us nothing by itself about ownership. Nor does it prove, by itself, that water was blocked here.” Sanket wrote in his notebook: ‘The paint may have served several purposes.’ That short line on paper did not make his photograph less important; it protected the photograph from being made the instrument of a false accusation.

Tara began packing her bag for the meeting at Pachhiyari Chaur, the western lowland. Sushila's map of the moisture in her fields had reached her the day before. If the channel mouth beside the warehouse was opened, any discussion of where the water would move would remain incomplete without knowing the present slope of the lowland. Naira asked whether Sanket would go with them. Tightening the case around his phone, he said, “I will. But first it must be agreed that nobody on the meeting committee will use my photograph in their publicity.” Tara wrote down the condition. Her signature was on the paper; Sanket's rights had not passed into her hands.

The shade of the trees was still cool along the path towards Pachhiyari Chaur. On one side stood young transplanted rice; on the other, vegetable beds. People called the thin, raised ridge of earth between them a chanchar. When the rains rose, people and small animals walked upon it. Seeing the gleam of water across the lowland, Sanket asked, “Are there fish here too?” “In season,” Sushila answered. “But water you can see and a right to catch the fish in it are not the same thing. And when the water recedes, this very ground becomes a place for growing rice.”

Sushila laid a bamboo pole on the earth and traced two lines. The first marked the remembered reach of the rainwater; the second, the path used by people and animals in the dry season. “If you draw both in the same colour,” she said, “half our village will become empty space on the town's paper.” Tara took out red and blue pencils, but Sushila stopped her. “Write what the lines are called first. Give them colours afterwards.” Sanket remembered the red mark on the warehouse wall. He did not open his phone to show it.

Just then two girls came from the far side of the lowland carrying bundles of grass. The first found her footing on the chanchar; the second stepped down into wet mud. Laughing, she set her bundle to one side. But Sushila stopped them where they stood and asked which way would still be passable next week, when the water rose here. “The path that seems short in the dry season becomes very long in the rains,” one of the girls said. Tara drew the detour she described as a faint line on her map. The girl said that going home by that route took more time. Time was recorded alongside distance.

Ramesh Kushwaha arrived carrying a basket of vegetables. His feet were muddy, and in his hand was a small receipt recording the days on which water had been supplied. He pointed out his field on the map and asked who would pay for the first crop in his beds if the mouth of the drainage channel was widened. “I don't object to water being drained away from the village,” he said. “But along the route it takes, how many times will water stand in my field? Why should I say yes without a calculation?” In the margin of her paper Tara made separate spaces for the timing of the crop and the losses it might suffer. No decision had yet been made; nor had anyone consented without first recording the cost.

Devaki was taking her animals along the path. She stopped at a narrow point on the chanchar and said that when the lowland filled, her cattle had to make a long detour. Sushila added the route to the drawing. A representative of a fishing family asked where the seasonal nets were set. Tara marked their positions but did not colour the area as though it were under permanent occupation. The more lines were added to the map, the less the lowland resembled an empty expanse. It looked more alive than before.

An old school desk had been set at the edge of the lowland. At this meeting of the seed-and-water partnership, people were first asked what work they wished to undertake; nobody was handed a spade on the strength of their caste or household. Those who could not enter the water chose to read receipts, record measurements, or watch the safe route for children. The rates of pay, the provision of safe tools, and the attendance register lay on the desk. For the first time, Sanket recognised in these arrangements a rule akin to the one he had made about his photograph: to do work and to retain a right over what belonged to you were not opposing things.

The young man keeping the attendance register was writing down names in haste. Sushila noticed that one woman's whole day of work holding back the water had been entered as ‘help’, although she had left the sowing of her own plot to come. The slip was opened again; her hours and wages were entered. A bill for expenses was attached to the containers of food Rukhsana had sent. An elderly man laughed. “At this rate we'll have to account for the singers too.” “If someone wishes to sing,” Tara replied, “we shall ask both their permission and their fee. No one will make singing a condition of attendance.” With that, everyone turned to their work.

Six small slips had been set apart at one end of the desk. The slip bearing Renu Gondhi's name acknowledged receipt of her application concerning the enclosure of the pond and access to it; the question of the landing would not be settled by a map of the lowland. Asha Bhumij's receipt concerned temporary accommodation costs for a displaced family. On a slip for travel money received in Binu Darai's name, the person who had paid the sum and the person who had received it were recorded separately. These papers did not concern a single issue, but all needed to be kept safe if the presence and labour of the families participating in the partnership were to be accounted for accurately.

A short passage in two languages accompanied a petition from Hira Meche. He had had a note added beside his signature stating that he did not understand the words of the first passage. Verification of its meaning in the original language was set aside for the next hearing. Tulsi Donwar had submitted a copy of a document concerning rights in another village; a single village's name on the lowland footpath could not, therefore, determine every right of use. Sanket did not offer to photograph the slips. The organisers entered only the receipt numbers in the public attendance record.

Kiran arrived with an old bundle of sharecropping papers. Two pages contained the names Budhi Gandak and Adhwara. One appeared in the margin of an old sharecropping agreement; the other, in an account of dues sent from home. Sushila asked whether the names meant that the direction of the Tilwaha should be redrawn. After reading the pages, Tara said, “No. These are the context of the papers and an account of a family's travels; they are not evidence that a branch of either river ran through this place.” Kiran's concern was somewhat different from the river map: who still owed the dues from the last harvest? Kiran kept the sheet recording those dues and gave permission only for a copy to be made.

By midday everyone was looking at the two maps laid beside the desk. A stretch across the middle of the lowland was white on the municipal office's drawing. On the map made by the villagers, that same space was filled with four distinct marks: rice cultivation, seasonal fishing, grazing, and the route along the chanchar. Tara said the villagers' lines could not take the place of a measured survey, but neither could the blank white on the municipality's map

establish that people had no rights there. Both maps were to go to Aditi for examination. Sanket wrote a small reckoning in his notebook: one map showed the route taken by water; the other, the time of the families whose lives depended upon it.

At mealtime the containers of rice and vegetables sent by Rukhsana were opened. Sanket, who usually preferred roti, had no complaint about rice today; he was very hungry. The vegetables contained tender greens bought from Ramesh's basket, their price entered on a slip. “There ought to be room on the map for the time people need to eat, too,” Sushila said. Everyone laughed. In the midst of the laughter, Devaki's cow came up to the desk and began sniffing the papers. Sanket sprang to his feet and gathered them up. His phone was safe in his pocket.

After the meal a young man told Sanket to send the photograph of the red mark on the warehouse wall to the group; otherwise, people would not believe there was an obstruction in the old channel beside it. “There is a wall, and there is a mark on it. Those are things we have seen,” Sanket answered. “How the obstruction came about is still to be investigated. And I won't send a photograph showing other people to a group without their permission.” “Then why did you take it?” the young man asked. Sanket's voice rose a little, but he steadied himself. “To understand something. Not to hand out the right to show it to everybody.” Naira did not intervene.

For public purposes Tara opened a drawing she had made with her own hand. It showed the warehouse wall, the possible traces of an old channel mouth, and the limits of the area that still required inspection. There were no photographs of people on it. Sanket gave permission for Tara to look at his original photograph in his presence, solely to compare the position of the mark. He also asked that a separate line be written: ‘Original photograph retained on Sanket's phone; no public copy issued.’ Tara signed that line. Sanket understood that his condition had not become an enemy of public work; it had become a rule governing the use of a document.

Before evening the first copy of the seasonal map of the lowland was finished. It marked separately the raised chanchar, the spread of rainwater, the dry-season route for cattle, seasonal fishing grounds, and the boundaries of the vegetable beds. A question mark remained wherever measurements had yet to be taken; receipts concerning disputed crop payments were kept apart. As the people rose, they wrote down the date of the next meeting, when the lines for both seasons would be checked. No one could say the dispute over drainage had ended. But the first attempt to impose an outlet upon fields that had not even been marked had been brought to a halt.

On the way home Naira asked Sanket, “What did you find hardest about today's work?” “Everyone wanted to see the photograph,” he said. “And I wanted something I'd taken to be of use. But I didn't want to watch it being

turned into an outcry against someone.” Naira told him that if the photograph was formally requested at the next inspection, he should keep the original safe and insist on a written account of why it was wanted, who would receive the copy, and the limits of its use. Sanket agreed. He did not yet know the whole procedure behind such a condition; he understood why it was needed.

At home Sarita had begun preparing the evening meal. Seeing the mud on Sanket's shirt, she asked whether his phone had survived. Sanket laughed and took it out. “The phone survived. And now nobody gets to use its photographs without my say-so.” “Very good,” Sarita said. “But you aren't getting on the bed in those muddy clothes.” Sanket went to change his shirt. Naira placed an authorised copy of the lowland map on the table, apart from Sarita's paper bearing the twenty-seven names. Papers concerning two mysteries could lie on the same table; the meaning of one did not thereby unlock the other.

When night fell Sanket looked once more at the original photograph on his phone. The red line was still as red as ever. Beneath the image he wrote a note for himself: ‘Warehouse, Purnadhar; location of view known; purpose of mark unknown; consent of other persons pending.’ Then he turned off the phone and opened his school notebook. A copy of the lowland map was to go to the municipal office the next day. In the blank white space on that town's map, so many people's kinds of work had been entered today. It pleased him to know that something important could be brought before the world without displaying anyone's face.

Chapter 12 · The City Behind the Ghat

As the first sunlight of morning fell across the rear landing of Barki Pond, Ramani Bind turned her fishing net inside out and spread it open. The dew of the night still clung to every mesh. Two children came out of a water-filled hollow, gathering marbles, and she drew the net in a little to give them room. It was forbidden to leave fish baskets on the narrow steps of the landing, but nowhere was it written who had issued the prohibition. In Ramani's bag lay a folded copy of the fishery lease. The men's names appeared on its first page; half of the second had been torn away. Her question was greater than all the fish she might catch from her boat in a day: on whose page was her right to catch them written?

Hira was checking the rope of his boat at the landing. Ramani showed him the lease. "I have to attend the hearing today. If they show me only the first page again, I shall get up and leave," she said. Hira let go of the rope and looked at the paper. "Then ask for the entire lease. But the route of a boat and the limits of a fishery are not the same thing." "I know that too," Ramani replied. "When I go out to fish, the owner of the landing is one person, the lessee of the water another, and the person who fixes the boat's hours a third. I am expected to answer all three." She picked up her basket and went on her way.

At the crossroads Naira and Tara sat with yesterday's map of the low-lying floodplain spread out before them. Sanket did not photograph it; his task was to keep the corners of the paper from lifting. On the municipality's printed map, a straight line ran along the back of Barki Pond to the mouth of the drainage channel. On the map made by the local people, the old footpath beside that line was marked separately, as were the temporary fishing enclosures, the gardens submerged in the rains, and the narrow route along which the hospital's laundry was brought. The two maps were not drawn to the same scale, so Tara first recorded their scale ratios and the years in which they had been made. Even then, one piece would not fit: where the municipal map said "vacant land," the people pointed to a path by which three generations had descended to the landing.

Aditi arrived carrying her inspection bag. Inside it was a description of the marks found at the mouth of the channel, but not the original copy of the warehouse's approval. "On this map," Tara asked, "does this line mark the pond's boundary, the drainage boundary, or a revenue parcel?" Aditi removed her spectacles and bent closer to the paper. "It would be wrong to treat the three as one," she said. "The municipal drawing shows a provision for the outflow of water; it cannot, by itself, determine rights over the land." "Then who holds the property file for this white strip?" Naira asked. Aditi replied

that the file from the municipal estates department and the original entry in the revenue office would have to be requested separately.

From behind the landing an elderly man came with papers wrapped in mud-stained sacking. Suraj Gangota was on the opposite bank of the river. A copy of the debt papers for his field, sent by him, had reached Tulsi Donwar's hands. Tulsi laid them before Naira. "Where there is sand today, there used to be a field," he said. "Without that field, the account of what is owed is difficult to understand." The document contained measurements extending as far as the old field embankment, but it did not show where the bank lay after the latest erosion. Tara marked the date on the page. "This is evidence that the old field existed," she said, "but without a measurement of the present bank, I cannot say that the same land will reappear when the water recedes." Tulsi lowered his head. The river did not suspend its waiting for the day a debt fell due.

Below the landing one could see the fresh furrows left by sand being dug from the river. By the afternoon's turn, water would fill those furrows again. Sugni Saday climbed the path with three women and two young men from her neighbourhood. They carried no spades, only the attendance slips they had written out themselves. "Count us in the team that will clear the channel," she said. "But first tell us whose way the work will block, and when the wages will be paid." Tara explained that they were still assessing the risks; no order had been given to open the drain. "Very well. Then we shall be part of the survey," Sugni answered. "Do not say afterwards that the people of our neighbourhood never saw the work being planned." She had her name entered on the first line, together with her right to choose the work she would do.

Beside the map, Mamta Hari of the municipal cleaning team submitted a slip. The work schedule printed an instruction to descend inside the drain, but the boxes for protective gloves, boots, and the bamboo support rope had been left empty. Mamta argued with no one. She circled the blank boxes in red pencil and wrote: EQUIPMENT NOT RECEIVED. After getting the slip stamped as received, she went to inspect the worksite. Sugni saw the paper and said, "Our team will not go down there without an inspection either." There was no display of heroism in this, no pleasure in stopping work. People bring their bodies to their labour; when those bodies are not safe, the account of public work remains incomplete.

Meanwhile, Ramani had reached the veranda of the municipal office. The clerk at the counter showed her half the lease and said that the list of named beneficiaries was sufficient. Ramani did not even touch the paper on the desk. "Why does this page say nothing about the limits of the water, the duration of the lease, access to the landing, the contractor's share, or the names of the women?" she asked. "All that will be in the second annexure," the clerk said. "Then show me that as well. I have not come merely to ask for a count of the

fish. I want the complete document setting out the limits of my work and what is due to me.” Standing behind her, Naira recognised an absence of a different kind from the one in the list of twenty-seven names. Here the person’s name had not been concealed; the terms of her rights had.

By noon, tables had been set out in the courtyard of the municipal library for a public reading of the accounts. The principal annual public reading took place in Phagun, with songs, schoolchildren reading out figures, and public questions about the use of the river. This special meeting, held after the onset of the rains, had been called under the regular rules of that event; it was not an attempt to repeat the Phagun festival. Karim Dafali had brought his dholak wrapped in cloth, along with a receipt for the cost of fitting it with a new skin. The committee entered the fee for his singing as a separate item. The coloured cloth ordered to decorate the platform had been hired from Nasim’s shop. Labour and goods had not vanished into the assumption that they were gifts.

On the other side of the table lay Vinita Kesharwani’s two small account books. One held her own debts, the other the accounts of a business shared by the household. The men from the office wanted to combine the sums, but she had insisted that the books be stamped separately. Meena Tharu’s application for a land lease had arrived as well, with the land’s actual agricultural use and the company’s proposal recorded on different pages. No one’s entire documentary history was read aloud here; only the receipt number and the date of the next hearing were entered. Amid this crowd of ledgers there was no single measure by which to say whose difficulty was the greatest.

When the public reading began, the payment for water and refreshments supplied from Rukhsana’s kitchen was read out first. Karim lightly struck his dholak twice. Two schoolgirls sang two lines of an old river song, then stopped. They were asked to remain on the platform, but their allotted practice time had ended. Laughing, they stepped down. Ramani was pleased by this small thing: no one now seemed to believe that inviting a person onto a platform made that person the platform’s property. Fakira, seated in the front row, kept time with his fingers. He did not wish to sing.

Naira lifted the first document: the water register. It described the uses of the pond, the outlet, the sand landing, and the low-lying floodplain. She read out the place names and the entries for public expenditure, leaving out private addresses and details that might identify people through their medical treatment. Then someone raised the matter of Sarita’s page of twenty-seven names. A young man said, “Now that everyone is gathered, read that list too.” Naira did not even open it. “That is a register of people’s names,” she replied. “For some of those people, their safety and their identities as living persons are at stake. The right to inspect a public water account is one thing; compelling the disclosure of someone’s private name is another. Two documents do not

become subject to the same rule merely because they happen to be lying on the same table.”

On either side of the public drawing, Aditi wrote a few small figures: the year the map had been published, its scale, and its source. With their help Tara identified the position of the old channel mouth. One stretch of the municipal line and the revenue boundary almost coincided; elsewhere a discrepancy remained that could not be explained away by differences of scale. Turning towards the assembly, Naira said, “The failure of two maps to agree does not prove fraud. But where one map shows vacant land, people have a path and a history of use. We are requesting the municipal estates file for the plot behind the warehouse and the revenue file for the plot along the pond’s edge. The approvals, amendments, and boundary surveys in both files must be examined together.”

A voice from behind the table said that even if they obtained all these papers, the signatures of officials and contractors would not bring back the old soil. It was Tulsi speaking. There was despair in his voice, but no permission for anyone to put his land in another person’s name. Aditi replied that the inquiry must begin by measuring the present boundary accurately and registering the old claim separately. Naira wrote this down, adding that the loss of a field to river erosion did not automatically cancel the debt upon it; nor did the survival of old documents amount to an order that the river restore the land. Tulsi folded the paper again and put it back in his bag. His question was as difficult as before, but now there was an office from which the documents could be demanded.

Ramani rose once more in the midst of the assembly. “Where is my complete lease?” she asked. The office clerk said a copy of the annexure could be provided the following day. “And until tomorrow,” Ramani asked, “may I cast my net or not?” This time Aditi was silent before answering. The fishery lease did not fall within her office’s jurisdiction. The local official presiding over the meeting recorded that, until the existing written terms had been clarified, anyone imposing a new prohibition or a new fee would have to produce a reasoned order from the department that had issued the lease. It was no lasting victory. But instead of hearing a different prohibition from a different mouth every day, Ramani now had grounds to demand a written answer.

The second small paper sent by Suraj contained no compound interest, only a record of ordinary outstanding dues. Naira struck out a proposal to enter an estimate of the lost field’s former yield in the same column. “Paying the price of the paddy does not bring back the field,” she told Tulsi, “and the field’s submergence does not automatically reduce a loan taken out in a previous year to zero.” “Then what am I to tell them at home?” Tulsi asked. Naira did not hurry to answer. Tara walked down to the sand landing. At the edge of the wet sand, an older layer of earth lay exposed. She did not drive her staff into it, for

the bank might slip. She marked its position from a distance and scheduled a further measurement for another day. On the paper they wrote “CLAIM OUTSTANDING,” not “LAND VACANT.” It was a distinction Tulsi could carry home.

The people were gathered all around the table when children’s laughter drifted up from the water-filled landing. Three children had made little boats of wood. One boat stuck at the edge, and another child pushed his own boat towards it to set it free. Both boats turned and came to rest together. The youngest child grew angry, claiming that the other had stolen his boat’s victory. An older girl pulled his boat free and set it on the water once more. “It’s only just begun,” she said. In this game there were no leases and no boundaries of land. Hearing their laughter, Fakira went over to them. Rather than lift the wooden boat with his foot, he brought it to the bank with a thin stick. The children went on, absorbed in their race.

When the crowd in the courtyard turned back towards the table, Sugni was standing with her copy of the attendance sheet raised in her hand. She pointed out that the work of the local drainage team had been entered by name, but no time had yet been fixed for a meeting to choose the team itself. “We shall decide the day,” she said. “We are not going to put down our names and sit quietly.” Naira did not take the decision into her own hands. The committee members fixed a separate date for an open meeting of the workers, at which women, young people, and those employed under subcontractors could all have a say. Mamta’s safety slip became the first item on that meeting’s agenda; the empty equipment boxes were not treated as if they had been filled. Sugni read the acknowledgement and signed it. Beside her name there was now a record of something real she had done in demanding a voice in the leadership.

When the receipt number for Meena Tharu’s application was announced, she took a copy to the elderly member of her family standing by the door. Vinita gathered up her two ledgers. Someone urged her to reconcile the figure in one of them with the orphan-relief fund, but she replied that the basis of any such accounting must first be set out in writing. Karim unwrapped his dholak, then bound it in its cloth again. He lingered near the committee to receive the fee agreed upon for his two beats that day. The song at the public reading had brought people together; it had not made the singer’s expenses for the day disappear.

Amrita took a copy of a land document from her bag and examined it. Along one edge of the paper stood the name “Amrita,” identifying a person and appearing beside her mother’s signature. There was also an old list of sources in which “Amrita” appeared as a river name; someone had once attached a copy of that list to the land papers. Naira marked the two occurrences separately. “Amrita is a name in your family,” she said. “The other page refers to a river. The same letters do not make both references one place.” Amrita gathered up her family’s original document. More than the

geography of a river, she was troubled by the thought that, at the coming hearing, the evidence her mother had preserved might once again be dismissed as “unclear” and excluded.

As the evening sun declined, receipt numbers came through for formal applications seeking two property files. The first concerned the approval and subsequent alterations relating to the municipal plot behind the warehouse; the second concerned the revenue entries for land adjoining the pond and Purnadhar. They also requested the rules governing which pages could be made public and which personal details would have to be redacted. The white strip on the map had not yet been filled in. The only decisions entered were that, pending examination, the people’s documented footpath should not be closed without a hearing, and that no new drainage works should begin without measurement, risk assessment, and written authorisation.

As she left the office, Ramani looked again at the incomplete copy of the lease in her bag. Beside the torn page there was now a new receipt: an acknowledgement of her request for a certified copy of all the conditions. She folded the receipt separately from the first page. Gathering up her maps, Tara said to Naira, “There used to be a blank space. Now there are questions in it.” “If we change the white line before those questions are answered,” Naira replied, “we may give rights to someone who had none, and dispossess someone who did.” They were still caught in the argument when Sanket came with a length of string to tie up the papers. Today there was no phone in his hand.

On the road home, a notice hung announcing a benefit-distribution meeting for Sarita. The next day, an announcement of assistance for certain families was to be made from the municipality’s open platform. Naira read the notice but did not search for Sarita’s particulars there in the midst of the crowd. A whole day spent marking the differences between two maps had shown her how much harm a single name in the wrong place could do beneath the glitter of a public platform. She wrote the date from the poster in her notebook and went on towards home. For now, Sarita needed her evening medicine and her meal of rice; tomorrow’s meeting was a question for another day.

The little boats at the landing had gradually grown heavy in the water, as soaked wood does. The children took them out one by one and set them aside, so that they could play again tomorrow. Ramani tightened the rope of her boat a second time. She had not yet received her lease, Sugni’s team had not received its tools, and Tulsi had not recovered his field. Yet the receipt numbers for the papers demanded at the table, the conditions of labour committed to writing, and the children’s game, saved for another day, were separate truths belonging to that same day. Behind the landing stood the city—and in the city’s records, for the first time, the people of the landing had entered their demand that the paths beneath their feet be clearly shown.

Chapter 13 · The Dead Woman Called to the Stage

On the stage erected for the distribution of assistance, the placard bearing Sarita's name lay face down. Its white edge showed against the red cloth, so that no one looking from a distance could tell whose name was written there. Early that morning municipal workers had been raising the bamboo posts, but one of the pegs was loose. As a young man pulled the cloth taut, the skin of his palm was scraped away. He let go and asked for water. Sarita opened the lid of her water vessel and gave him some. He thanked her and went back to the post. Sarita did not ask to have the placard turned over. She wanted her name to be spoken from her own mouth, not by the cloth on a stage.

Naira accompanied her to the meeting ground. After yesterday's discovery of the discrepancy between the two maps at the landing, the receipt numbers for the two property files were safely entered in Naira's notebook. She had not left the notebook at home today, but her mother had made one thing plain: "Let the hearing about the landing stay at the landing. What I have to say, I shall say at the table where they read my name." Naira accepted this. Sarita had brought a copy of the notice of her death, her earlier application asking for her living presence to be recorded, and a copy of the medicine prescription issued in the name of her dead husband. The original page containing the twenty-seven names remained locked at home. That page was more vulnerable than the gathering itself.

Behind the stage stood a blue tent. Inside, employees were determining the order in which the beneficiaries would be called. At one table they kept the slips brought by families seeking assistance; at another, complaints about inconsistent entries. Yet the sign at the entrance pointed both queues in the same direction. An elderly man was asking about the assistance payable on account of his dead wife. His hands were trembling. Watching him, Sarita understood that today's gathering was not merely a place where fraud might occur; for some people it was also the way to money they genuinely needed. Even in her anger, therefore, she did not wish to wear down the old man's patience.

At the list desk Naira found Rama Karna, who was supervising the making of copies. There was red ink on Rama's table, files bound with string, and an empty receipt register. She was checking the dates written at the top of the documents one by one. A man standing beside her said quietly, "If Sarita's status is changed, there will be no trouble on the stage. We can supply the papers later." Rama stopped her hand. "On whose orders? If that is what you are saying, put it in writing. I shall not alter an entry without a signature."

Sweat stood on the man's forehead. He said there was no time. "That makes the date and signature more necessary still," Rama replied.

Rama examined Sarita's application and then looked at Naira. "The number in this receipt register is the office's incoming-mail number. Do not take it to mean that the correction has been made. A separate written statement of today's discrepancy can be submitted, but I have no authority to strike out the earlier page." All Naira wanted was to ensure that no one quietly changed her mother's identity on the strength of somebody else's spoken instruction. She left a copy of the application with Rama, who entered it in a separate register and stamped its receipt. She handed one half of the receipt slip to Sarita and placed a carbon copy in the file, bearing her own name as well.

On the other side of the desk stood Savitri Sardar. In her cloth bag were papers giving addresses in two villages. After the flood, her family had temporarily moved from the first village to a second settlement; on the new relief list the village had changed, as though every claim belonging to the earlier time had changed with it. "We changed where we lived," Savitri said. "The days when we needed food did not change." The clerk said that the present address could be corrected on the list, but the assistance still due for the preceding month would require another examination. Savitri made him put that in writing. She was not prepared to accept one correction as compensation for every loss.

Niranjan Kisan was troubled by the word that followed his given name on his slip. He explained that 'Kisan' formed part of his family's name and self-identification; in an old office field it had been treated as the name of his occupation, and other details had consequently been deleted. As a result, a bank-linked account had been held up for one transaction. "That I farm is one thing; that Kisan is part of my name is another," he said. The young employee at the desk at first began to laugh. Then Niranjan spread out both papers. Rama checked him: "Look at name, occupation and account identity in separate fields. Put one in place of another and you will cause another mistake somewhere else." Niranjan received an acknowledgement for further scrutiny, not a promise that the account would be released immediately.

Garlands and a plaque naming the donors were being carried towards the stage. Arun Barnwal stood with his account book in a cloth bag from his shop. An organiser had offered him a large garland and the announcement of his name over the microphone. Arun asked whose account would bear the expense of printing names on the publicity plaque. He was told that he could make a voluntary donation towards it. Opening his ledger, he showed that the deadline for paying the tax due from his shop was near. "A donation will bring applause," he said, "but what is owed must be paid first." The organiser grew uncomfortable. Arun declined the garland and closed his ledger. He had no faith that this decision would immediately make his public image shine.

Sarita burst into laughter. “Everybody here has a different sorrow attached to their name today,” she told Naira. “What are you laughing at?” Naira asked. “That man left the garland of charity behind and took his accounts with him. If the sack of rice at home is empty, a garland will not cook a meal.” Savitri, hearing her, smiled a little too. For this moment in the crowd there was no announcement. Savitri asked Sarita whether she belonged to the same village. “As long as I remain alive, I belong here,” Sarita answered. “The papers say something else.” Savitri’s smile slowly disappeared.

The microphone test began. First came a loud “One, two, three,” repeated three times; then someone broke into an unfinished line of a song. Tea from Rukhsana’s kitchen arrived. When the question of payment arose, the organiser said that this was public service for the day. The young woman who had carried the tea asked, “If it is public service, who will pay for the milk, the sugar, and the labour of carrying it here?” The organiser asked to see the expense slip. When Sarita lifted her cup she noticed a crack along its rim. No tea was spilling; she turned the cup, placed her finger over the cracked part, and began to drink. Naira felt that her mother had already gathered within herself the weight of the voice she would need today.

When the meeting began, the names of the first few families were read correctly. A woman signed an acknowledgement for assistance towards the treatment of her elderly father; a labourer’s wife was absent, so the office hours of the following day were announced in connection with her payment. Each person in the crowd had concerns of their own. The master of ceremonies made a short speech about the success of the assistance distribution. Sarita listened. She did not wish to call the work of helping people false merely because she had a question of her own to raise. But as the list was read in the final part of the meeting, the announcer’s voice suddenly changed.

“Will a representative of the family of the late Sarita Das please come up to the stage,” the microphone announced. Then there was a pause, as though the crowd were waiting for some dependent relative to rise. The placard beside the microphone was turned over. Sarita’s name was written on it in Devanagari, with ‘Assistance to the Family of the Deceased’ printed beneath. Naira reached to take her mother’s hand; gently, Sarita withdrew it. “I must go myself,” she said. She needed her daughter’s protection, but she would not place upon her daughter the burden of proving that her own body was alive.

Sarita walked to the stage. One section of the steps was loose. The young man to whom she had given water in the morning was still there. He showed her where to put her feet. Sarita climbed one step at a time. At first the announcer took her for a dependent relative and extended the envelope in his hand towards her. She did not touch it. “I am the person whose name you have just read,” she said. Confused, the announcer began, “Then you are from the deceased person’s family—” Sarita interrupted him. “My husband died a

long time ago. But you have read ‘late’ before my name. This paper says that I am dead. I have come here and am standing before you myself.”

Some of the people seated in front rose to their feet. Someone called for the microphone to be handed over; someone else said she should be taken to an officer first. The paper shook in the announcer’s hand. He wanted to move the microphone away, but Sarita looked at him and said, “I have not come to quarrel with you over your name. If the page is wrong, show me the page. Do not read it in place of my own voice.” Behind the stage, employees began turning through the file in which the category of assistance was printed. The microphone passed into Sarita’s hand.

“I want no one’s pity,” Sarita said. “You can take a wrong page even from the hands of someone who does need pity. I still light my cooking fire. My husband died seventeen years ago, yet a medicine prescription was issued in his name as recently as yesterday. A notice of death arrived in mine. I have already written to say that I am alive, but no answer came. They called this a public meeting today, so I came. If you are truly listening to me now, put the procedure for correcting the error in my papers into writing. Examine the entitlement to assistance properly as well. Do not declare me dead and applaud.”

A young man in the crowd raised his phone above his head. Sanket was standing nearby. “If you take photographs,” he told the man, “do not spread everyone’s faces and papers together.” The young man answered that it was a public meeting. “The meeting may be public,” Sanket said, “but every letter on a private slip is not.” He took out his own phone, but did not begin recording. Between the mother’s words and the daughter’s, there was also the question of his own permission. Sarita looked towards him from the stage. Sanket asked with a gesture; Sarita gave a small sign that he should write down what was said into the microphone, not make a moving picture of her face. Sanket opened his notebook.

The officer seated beside the announcer asked for the microphone. “There may be an error in the record,” he said, “and the complaint will be registered. Nevertheless, I cannot verify everything here and now. We shall not make a payment on the basis of the printed assistance list without checking identity.” Some people in the crowd jeered. The officer added that the final matching of names would require the departmental papers and the family’s statement to be examined separately. “And the word ‘deceased’ that was spoken here?” Sarita asked. The officer faltered. Then he instructed the announcer to remove the display placard, although it was possible that photographs had already been taken.

Naira rose from her place among the spectators. Rather than ask the officer for the microphone, she went to Rama Karna’s desk. “How can we obtain a written record of what has just been said?” Rama explained that minutes of

the meeting would be prepared and that Sarita could submit a signed account of her own statement. “Let her words be entered as she spoke them, not as somebody else’s ‘the error has been corrected’,” Naira said. Rama answered quietly, “I shall not write a decision in a field where no decision has been made.” At the top of a blank page she wrote the date and the words ‘Disputed death status—statement of the person appearing in person’. She left space for Sarita to read and approve it.

As Sarita descended from the stage, she stopped at the first step. Her feet were aching. A woman carrying a child moved aside to let her pass and asked, “My name is wrong on the list too. How many days does it take?” Sarita did not invent an answer. “I am still going from place to place to get mine corrected,” she said. “But if they take your statement in writing, keep the receipt.” The woman’s child had caught hold of Sarita’s sari. The mother quickly freed its hand. Sarita smiled and rested one finger against the child’s fingers for a moment. The child did not mistake her for a grandmother; nor was the woman a symbol of anyone else. Each had her own way to go.

Savitri carried her relief slip with its changed village address back to Rama. What she had seen on the stage made her afraid that the correction recorded today might be erased tomorrow. Rama showed her the sequence in the receipt register and explained that the outstanding assistance from her former village had not automatically been added to the new list. “Then register a separate claim for it,” Savitri said. “I can come back again, but do not make me into a different person every time my home changes.” Niranjan too obtained a number for his application concerning the confusion between his name and occupation. They did not stand beside Sarita to have their photographs taken; they checked their own papers and went on their separate ways.

At a table outside the meeting, Arun Barnwal was showing the receipt for the tax he had paid. An organiser he knew said, “If you had accepted the garland today, everyone would have been looking at you.” Arun replied, “A day’s attention does not balance an account.” He put the office receipt into his bag. A little way off, an argument was going on over payment for the tea; Arun made no proposal to combine his shop accounts with the public kitchen’s expenses. Each piece of work had its own amount due. Sarita watched in silence. Today the debt owed to her own name on paper seemed the greatest of all, yet that did not make anyone else’s dues smaller.

By midday two copies of Sarita’s statement had been prepared. The first was kept in the office receipt register; the second was placed in her hands. She read it. Rama had written that the applicant had appeared in person and had formally disputed the recorded status of her death; verification of the earlier entry and a separate inquiry into the dispensing of medicine had been requested. Nowhere did it say that Sarita had been officially declared alive. Naira looked at her mother. “If they had written down something that has

not happened," Sarita said, "it would have been the same mistake all over again." Only then did she sign the page.

As the meeting drew to a close, the cloth over the stage sagged once more. The young man who had drunk water that morning was tightening another peg. "After what happened today, will you go home now?" he asked Sarita. "Now I shall go home. It is time to put the rice on," she answered. The young man laughed. "Well, everyone has heard your name." Sarita looked at him. "Hearing a name is one thing," she said. "Hearing it and writing it correctly is another." When she stepped beyond the stage, a light breeze came from the direction of the landing, bringing together the smells of mud and sun-warmed cloth.

On the way home Naira asked whether speaking in public had lightened her mother's heart at all. "The weight will grow lighter when you no longer have to go about every day proving that I am alive," Sarita said. "What I said today was my own word. But the people who heard it have their own work to do; we shall see how much of it they carry out." Naira did not apologise to her mother, because today she had not spoken in her place. For a while they walked in silence, a silence without the pretence of sympathy, with only the ease of going together.

That evening Sarita opened the kitchen window and began to wash the rice. The amplified voice from the meeting could not reach the house, but as she swirled the grains in the water one of her own sentences came back to her. Meanwhile Naira placed two slips apart on the table: the old copy in which Sarita was recorded as dead, and the written statement of her living presence made that day. The same name appeared on both papers, but they did not say the same thing. Outside, Sanket was comparing the words spoken into the microphone with what he had written in his notebook; he would not decide to make them public without first asking those concerned.

In the neighbourhood behind them, the women at Ruhani's shelter were reading the notice of the next day's assembly. Ruhani had been invited to sit on the stage as a 'representative of the community', but her name was absent from the field granting voting rights. The matter had not yet reached Ruhani herself. There were plenty of chairs at Videhapur's meetings, plenty of name placards, and small empty boxes where written rights should have been. In Sarita's home the rice had begun its first rising boil. She lowered the flame. Her name had been spoken often today; the work of writing it in its rightful place still remained.

Chapter 14 · The Representative's Chair

The next morning, in the community hall at Videhapur, the chairs were being dusted, wiped clean, and set in straight rows. Five chairs at the very front were draped in blue cloth; behind them stood plain benches. The doorkeeper said the blue coverings were for guests. On the back of one chair a slip of paper had been fastened to the cloth: "Ruhani, Community Representative." Beneath the name there was neither an organisation nor an office. When Ruhani reached the gate of the building, that slip was the first thing she saw. The invitation had come yesterday. Today she had to discover what it meant.

Ruhani had walked from her shelter in the back neighbourhood. Champa was with her, but she had not come to carry Ruhani's belongings; she had brought her own account of travel expenses for treatment and the wages lost by taking leave from work. On the way Ruhani had asked, "Do you think they have called me here to hear what I have to say?" Champa had replied, "Calling you is one thing they have done. Listening requires ears, and making a decision requires not a chair but authority." Ruhani had laughed. She kept the answer in mind, for she knew that even the authority of someone who offered shelter could sometimes weigh too heavily upon the voice of the person being sheltered.

At the entrance lay an attendance register. One column was headed "Men," another "Women," and a third "Special Guests." Ruhani picked up the pen. "You are a guest," the clerk said. "Sign in the third column." "Where is the register for members who have a vote?" Ruhani asked. The clerk pointed towards the secretary seated inside. Beside the secretary lay a separate volume bound in green. Ruhani went over to it. The green register held eighteen names. Hers was not among them. The secretary smiled. "You will be seated at the front as a mark of respect. Only permanent members have voting rights."

"How does one become a permanent member?" Ruhani asked. The secretary produced a copy of the rules. The committee made recommendations on municipal relief, shelter, access to the ghats, and complaints about drainage. Its decisions did not themselves become government orders, but its recommendations could alter priorities for grants and public works. The rules provided for nominations to membership from neighbourhoods, occupations, and institutions. A "specially invited representative" was a person summoned to be heard, not to vote. Ruhani did not turn down the corner of the page. She read the small print in the last line: the committee itself had the power to amend its rules.

"If hearing me cannot change anything, why put up this nameplate?" Ruhani asked, pointing towards the chair marked with her name. "So that everyone can see that your community has been treated with respect," the

secretary replied. “I can tell you who needs respect,” Ruhani said. “But when the hours of access to the ghat, grants to the shelter, and the route to medical care are being decided, why is my voice not wanted in the vote?” Gathering up the papers, the secretary said that this question would have to be taken to the chairperson. Ruhani insisted that it be entered on the agenda at the start of the meeting.

Tea was being served in the courtyard before the proceedings. Champa asked the price and paid for a cup. Her travel expenses had not yet been reimbursed, but she disliked having to appear dependent upon another person’s generosity even for her tea. As Ruhani lifted her cup, she noticed the shadow of the building falling in two parts across a little puddle. There was no mystery in the puddle: rain in the night and broken paving were its straightforward causes. “If people cannot understand a little puddle like that,” Champa said, “how much will they understand about a sick person trapped in mud on the road to the ghat?” “Perhaps they will understand,” Ruhani said. “But we shall look for the proof of that understanding in their decisions.”

Across the tea table stood Neeraj Panda with an old ledger. He was preparing payment slips for people engaged to perform religious rites. Looking over the ledger, an organiser suggested that the expense of the rituals be added to the assistance payments for bereaved families. Neeraj struck a line through one of the columns. “Whoever wishes to arrange a rite according to their faith may do so of their own will and within their own means,” he said. “Assistance depends upon an examination of everyone’s entitlements; it must not be tied to my ritual fee.” The organiser said the families would be pleased if every service could be provided on the same day. “Getting things done on one day,” Neeraj replied, “is not the same as putting everybody’s costs into one account.”

Ruhani asked Neeraj whether, after the wrong name had been announced among the dead at Sarita’s meeting yesterday, a proposal for a ritual had also been sent out. Neeraj said that he had received no list of anyone’s private names, though he had certainly been given a combined payment form. “When someone has protested that she is alive,” Ruhani said, “adding the cost of her memorial observance would be another humiliation.” In his ledger Neeraj wrote two distinct headings, one for assistance and the other for rites. It was a small act, but it left families a place from which they might later raise an objection.

Behind the hall Basanti had set her basket of betel leaves on a table. A damp cloth lay over the leaves, and with clean fingers she was separating the spoiled ones from the sound. Against her name in the vendors’ register stood an official alternative designation that her family did not use for its identity. Basanti unfolded a slip lying beside the basket and showed it to the registrar. “We call ourselves Paan Sawasi Panar,” she said. “Write the name we use in the register. If you need the term from the government column, put it in another

column." The registrar explained that it had been copied from an old list. "An old copy does not keep a betel leaf fresh," Basanti replied. "Nor does a name remain the same for ever merely because it has been copied."

Champa bought a betel leaf from her, but Basanti did not leave her work to attend the meeting. She did not want the leaves she still had to sell that day to go to waste. Ruhani asked whether it would be possible to seek correction of the register after the meeting. "After the meeting they will pack up their tables and leave," Basanti said. "Write it now." A little slip reached the secretary, recording separately the identity Basanti had given herself and the old terminology in the document. Ruhani understood that even to secure the correct pronunciation of a name, people had to take time away from earning their living.

As soon as the meeting began, the chairperson read out the names. Ruhani was called a "distinguished representative," and a young man came forward to place a garland on her. He seemed embarrassed; he had been assigned a task and had to carry it out. Ruhani accepted the garland in her hands, thanked him, and did not sit in the blue chair at the front. She placed the flowers at the corner of a table and took a seat on a bench near the audience. "Is there something uncomfortable about the chair?" the chairperson asked. "The chair is perfectly good," Ruhani replied. "But it does not seem right to display my name where my vote has no place."

The first proposal concerned the order of priority for admission to relief shelters. One member argued that the funds available should go first to registered permanent residents. Another spoke of the need for medical treatment among people living in temporary shelters and of their exposure to flood danger. The secretary read the two alternatives in turn. Ruhani raised her hand. The chairperson allowed her to speak as an "invited speaker," but made it clear beforehand that her raised hand would not be counted in the vote. "Why is there not a single permanent member," Ruhani asked, "from among the people whose names and lives will be affected by these alternatives?"

"We are listening to your experience," one member said. "If we change the rules, every group will demand a member of its own." "Who chose the eighteen people sitting here now?" Ruhani asked. "In whose names were they given this authority?" The secretary showed her the nomination forms. Several members had been nominated by institutions, others by meetings held in their neighbourhoods. "I do not object to that," Ruhani said. "I want the process of electing members to be open also to the people whose places to live, ways of moving about, and routes to treatment are being determined."

Shabnam Mallik was seated near the doorway, reconciling slips for voluntary expenses. Seeing the nameplate before her, someone addressed her as "Mr Mallik's representative" and placed an official file in front of her.

Shabnam did not open it. “Mallik is my family name,” she said. “It is not an official seal. Take the papers you are handing me to the authorised desk.” The young man who had brought the file was embarrassed for a moment. Shabnam did not scold him; she showed him the authorised accountant’s table. On the receipts for her own voluntary expenses she had also written “Verification pending.” Ruhani saw how readily a title that sounded distinguished could inspire an unwarranted trust.

The chairperson interrupted the discussion and called for a vote on the proposal. Ruhani raised her hand again, this time to ask a question. “If everyone listens to what I say but my vote is not counted,” she said, “then record that plainly in the minutes. And I formally object to the list of people in the relief shelter being made public without their permission.” Champa rose from the bench and said that the details of her medical treatment must not be entered on a collective list. She spoke in her own name; Ruhani’s representation could not take the place of her consent.

A faint fragrance of betel leaves drifted from Basanti’s basket near the hall window. The registrar called her over again and asked whether the name in the official list should be struck out. “If you strike it out,” Basanti said, “tomorrow you will say the old document cannot be found. I want the entry I have given you to be matched with the earlier one.” As she spoke, she showed the receipt for last month’s market fee. One name appeared on the receipt, another in the new vendors’ register; the basket and the labour of selling its contents were hers in both. The clerk entered a note linking the two names. He had no authority to make the final correction. Basanti returned to her leaves. Ruhani saw that, when people required such care in the recording of their own names, it was equally wrong to call someone their representative without taking comparable care.

At first the secretary wrote a single line: “Suggestion by Representative Ruhani.” Ruhani read it and said, “It was not merely a suggestion. I submitted a written proposal concerning membership and voting rights, and an objection to the public disclosure of the private details of shelter residents. Record them separately.” The secretary took a fresh sheet. The chairperson looked uneasy, fearing that if the pages multiplied in this fashion every day, the meeting would never end. “You reach decisions on these matters in a single sitting,” Ruhani said, “but the days on which their consequences are lived are very long. Two extra lines will not ruin the day.”

The members voted on the original proposal for distributing relief. One side secured a majority, though no final distribution of money could take place until the departmental review. Ruhani did not insist that her own vote be counted; she remained seated on the open bench. The chairperson said the demand to amend the membership rules would be taken up at the end of the meeting. Ruhani asked that it be placed specifically on the agenda of the next meeting and that, until a consent procedure had been clarified, the private

patient list of the shelter should not be circulated outside the meeting. One member asked how essential services could be delivered without a list. “The information needed for treatment,” Champa replied, “will go to the person giving the treatment. Not to the spectators at a meeting.”

There was a short break at midday. Rukhsana had sent a slip stating the price of a plate of pua, the sweet fried cakes ordered from her kitchen. Eating half a pua, Champa said, “Today the garland was yours, but I got the sweetness.” Ruhani smiled. In Champa’s jest she heard a measure of dissent directed at herself: sometimes she too was too quick to make decisions for others in the name of the shelter. “If we sit down together inside the shelter,” she asked, “will you speak?” “I will,” Champa replied. “But only if there will be listening afterwards as well.” Ruhani pushed the plate towards her.

During the break Naira arrived outside the hall. Yesterday’s written statement from Sarita bore a clearly visible receipt number from the office; today Naira had come to learn its status. At the gate she met Shabnam. Shabnam told her how a document had been put into her hands merely on the strength of her name, and that she had returned it. “My mother’s name, too, is written as dead on one page,” Naira replied, “and on another she is recorded as present and alive. Who had the right to write those entries, and with whom were they checked? Reading the name alone will not give us those answers.” Shabnam showed her the authorised desk where she could submit the receipt and inquire about the case.

An employee told Naira that yesterday’s statement had been received, but that no decision had yet been made to verify Sarita’s status as living. A separate complaint about the medicine prescription was awaiting reconciliation with another office. Naira asked whether any committee there had examined copies of such documents. The employee said that the committee received the meeting’s expenses and aggregate relief figures; individuals’ private papers ought to remain outside its proceedings. Naira wrote down that this was the employee’s statement, not a certified departmental rule. Listening to Ruhani’s argument, she was coming to understand that the question of who had the right to see information was connected to, though distinct from, the question of who had the right to vote on its use.

In the second part of the meeting the secretary read out the request for an amendment. Ruhani submitted a formal proposal: there should be a method of choosing members in consultation with the affected shelters, itinerant workers, and non-permanent users of the ghats; people from different groups must not all be classified as belonging to one caste or one occupation; and rules should provide for attendance expenses and compensation for the loss of a day’s work. Her proposal was not a demand that her own name be entered immediately against every position on the committee. The chairperson made it clear that permission to consider a rule amendment could be put to the vote now, but the rules themselves would not be changed that day.

“If people are to have voting rights,” one member said, “they must also shoulder responsibility.” “I have not come here to escape responsibility,” Ruhani replied. “Those who are suffering the harm are carrying responsibility already. But they are not given the right to demand an account of it.” From the back Neeraj Panda observed that someone would also have to give final approval to the decision to separate the costs of rituals from grants; otherwise everybody’s name would end up attached to an incorrect bill. Basanti had come as far as the doorway with her basket in her hands. The slip seeking correction of her name had still not been returned. Ruhani gestured towards her. “If you write a person’s name incorrectly, the register for choosing her representative may be wrong as well.”

This time the secretary read the draft aloud to everyone. Ruhani stopped him at one word. It said, in Hindi, “Proper representation of all communities.” “How can you write that as a conclusion already?” she asked. “That is the very matter we are debating.” The secretary struck out “proper” and wrote instead, “Objection concerning representation received.” The chairperson looked at Ruhani as though wondering why so much time should be spent on one word. “That one word,” she said, “would allow you to claim that the work has already been done.” Shabnam, still gathering the expense slips, spoke up. “It is the same difference as that between a verified receipt and an unverified one.” She had not become a vote for either side; she had simply offered an example from her accounts.

At last the chairperson called for a vote on placing a review of the membership rules on the agenda of the next public meeting. The permanent members agreed that the proposal would be read and considered; Ruhani, however, did not obtain a vote at the meeting that day. The secretary made the distinction explicit in the minutes. An interim procedure for withholding the shelter’s private patient list from open distribution was sent to the accountant and the relevant service workers for examination; it was not described as a final rule. Having read the page, Ruhani asked for copies of her objection, her proposal, and the meeting’s response. The secretary supplied a receipt number and wrote down when the copies would be made available.

Towards evening Ruhani left the hall. The blue cloth still covered the chair; the garland was where she had left it. “Will you take the garland?” a cleaner asked. Ruhani paused. “No,” she said. “Give it to whoever prepares today’s expense account. Let the price of the flowers be entered too.” The cleaner laughed. “But it was your name on it.” “My name was on the chair,” Ruhani replied, “not on the decision. Next time we shall test both.” Champa set off home beside her. Neither felt that this was a complete victory, but the dissent entered in writing that day would not be so easy to erase on the morrow.

On the way Naira met Ruhani. She showed her a copy of her mother’s statement but did not unnecessarily disclose the private information it

contained. Ruhani showed Naira the receipt for the minutes of the meeting. The two sheets carried the voices of two different human beings. “What was said over the microphone has been written down,” Naira said, “but my mother’s recorded status as dead still has to be changed.” “They heard what I said, too,” Ruhani replied, “but I still have no vote. We must keep a measure of the distance between words and rights.”

As they approached home, Champa glanced at her watch. Tomorrow she had to go to work, and she still had to find the fare for her treatment. “If I cannot come to the next meeting,” she said to Ruhani, “do not give your assent in my name.” “Not without your consent,” Ruhani answered. In that small promise she recognised a test of her own leadership. The question raised within the meeting would have to remain alive inside the shelter as well: who could call themselves another person’s representative, and who had the right to stake another person’s life upon a decision?

Chapter 15 · Draupadi's Question

In the assembly hall of Hastinapura that day, the dice made scarcely any sound. Amid the gleaming floor, the lofty seats, the fragrance of incense, and the heavy breathing of those gathered, the four dice knocking against one another sounded, now and then, like an unfinished word escaping from someone's throat. The game had already gone much too far. The men who at first had called it an entertainment of the royal court were now watching one another's faces more closely than the things being wagered.

Yudhishthira's hand lay motionless beside his knee. Having lost his wealth, his cattle, his chariots, his kingdom, and his brothers, he found within himself a vacancy where judgment ought to have been; into it Shakuni's voice entered with disquieting ease. Shakuni raised the matter of another stake. Everyone present understood that this was no longer an ordinary game. Yet no one rose and took upon himself the authority to stop it. Each man looked to the next, as though the responsibility for the first refusal must always belong to someone else.

Vidura's lips tightened. The question for him was not simply how many possessions had been lost; it was by what right a person whose own freedom had been imperilled could pronounce upon the freedom of another. He looked around the assembly. Concern showed on the faces of certain learned men, but others seemed to be waiting for the one phrase that would confine the whole dispute within the boundaries of a rule.

Draupadi was not yet in the hall. Her name was spoken in that place where the old convenience of treating a woman's absence as her consent remained available. The stake was declared. The dice were thrown. Among the men who gambled, a decision was announced; yet no one had asked the person upon whose life that decision was to be imposed. The flame of a lamp standing in the hall trembled, and no one knew whether it had been stirred by a draught or by the unease within the building.

A messenger was sent to Draupadi. When he arrived with the summons, she began not with obedience but with a question. On hearing why she had been called before the assembly, she did not simply accept the command. Her question was precise: had the king lost himself first, or had he staked her before that? If he had already lost himself, whence came his right to wager the life of another? The messenger could give no answer. He had been instructed to deliver an order; no one had taught its bearer how to answer a question.

The messenger returned and laid the question before the assembly. Some of the men then heard, for the first time, that the woman who had been named as a stake was herself questioning what had been done with her life. Impatience showed on Duryodhana's face. To him, the immediate fulfilment

of the assembly's command mattered more than its obligation to answer. The objection already stirring within Vidura was beginning to find words. Bhishma remained silent amid the discipline of a long lifetime and the conflicting boundaries of royal duty. His silence did not diminish the question; it made it heavier.

That evening in Videhapur, Naira placed two documents separately upon Sarita's table. The first was a receipt acknowledging a statement that Sarita was alive and present. The second recorded a proposal to amend the rules of Ruhani's committee. Both bore official stamps, but they meant different things. One acknowledged that words had been heard; the other asked who would possess the authority to accept them and act upon them. Naira moved the little earthen lamp away from the corner of the table so that no drops of oil would stain the papers.

Sarita was picking stones out of rice. “Another meeting today?” she asked. “There was more work after the meeting than in the meeting itself,” Naira said. “Ma, I have a copy of your statement. But the person empowered to change the file has still made no decision.” Sarita set aside a small pebble. “So they will still consider me dead on paper?” There was weariness in her voice, not amusement. “Yes, wherever the false entry remains,” Naira replied. “I won't comfort you with a lie.”

Just then Sanket appeared at the door and said that two women were standing outside the office asking to be heard. One carried a bag of old papers; the other had a small cloth bag from the hospital tucked beneath her arm. The first introduced herself as Anita Chaupal. In the local register, she had been assigned to a social category she did not recognise as her own. Consequently, her application concerning her earnings had been sent to the wrong counter, and unwelcome questions had begun to be asked about her family.

Anita did not set her bag upon the table. First she asked, “Will what I say about these papers in this room be carried outside?” “I will record only as much as you wish,” Naira answered. “But if an application must be submitted to an office, I will tell you beforehand what information is required.” “The wrong caste has been written beside my name,” Anita said. “To get it corrected, must I recount the entire history of my father, my grandfather, and my husband's family?” Naira was silent for a moment.

The other woman, Salma Sheikh, had come from the hospital's temporary assistance desk. She helped patients' families fill in admission forms. That day an elderly woman had arrived struggling for breath, but her identification number did not match the entry in the register. A member of the treatment-room staff had insisted that the form be corrected first. Salma had replied that no one could hold her breath while waiting for numbers to be reconciled. She

needed to make the patient's rights understood, but she needed, too, to protect the livelihood her work at that desk afforded her.

Sarita carried the tray of rice inside and came back. “Drink some water first,” she told them both. Salma took a glass in her hand. “They did finally take the patient in. The doctor examined her. But no one kept any account of the time lost. If I submit a written question, they'll tell me my work is to fill in forms, not to change the system.” Anita looked at Salma. “In my case they made the form wrong and then told me to explain the meaning of my name. I gave them the name. They supplied the meaning themselves.”

Naira did not merge their grievances onto a single sheet. Anita's case concerned wrongful social classification and privacy; Salma's concerned the demand for identity verification before treatment. One thing joined the two: at the decisive moment, the voice of the person whose life was being judged had been absent. But that resemblance did not erase the difference between their cases. Naira took out two separate blank pages.

Anita drew a receipt from her bag. Her application had been accepted, but a note from the subsequent office said it could not proceed without verification of the social classification. An employee had told her simply to accept whatever appeared in the list as correct. “If I accept it,” Anita said, “the same thing will appear in my child's papers next time. If I refuse, they'll say I don't want assistance.” Naira read only those portions of the document that Anita had authorised her to use.

From behind them Sanket said, “Shall I take a photograph?” Anita immediately gathered up her bag. Sanket lowered his phone. “No, not without your permission,” he said. “I can read out the dates on the old documents if you'd like. There is no need for a photograph.” Some of the hardness left Anita's face. Salma laughed. “In this house, at least, a mobile phone asks before it is raised.” Sanket smiled too, but put his phone away in his pocket.

In the ancient assembly, the messenger had gone back once more. Draupadi stated her question again, with greater clarity. To her, evading an answer was itself a decision: a decision to enforce a judgment about her life without hearing her. The discipline of the assembly sought to keep her from speaking, but she would not surrender the path of questioning. She demanded an answer from the assembly, not merely permission to enter it.

Bhishma's difficulty was not that he failed to understand a woman's suffering. It was that several accepted rules were colliding, and power was profiting from their collision. The old practice of a husband's authority, the claim of enslavement, the rules of the game, the honour of the royal house: amid these words, Draupadi demanded the right to be present as a person. Vidura knew that the assembly would not quickly agree to an answer that disturbed its own convenience.

At last Draupadi was brought before the pitiless gaze of the assembly. An outrageous attempt began to exert control over her body and her voice. The moment of humiliation was being arranged as though it were a display of royal power, yet Draupadi did not relinquish her question. She did not ask for an answer as the object of anyone's pity. She pressed her case: why had no account been taken of the consent and independent existence of the person described as the object of the wager?

The lamps high above the royal hall cast many shapes upon the polished floor below. One shape reached Draupadi's feet and broke apart; another grew long and spread into the distance. No one took these shapes for omens. They were light and shadow; and upon that floor stood a human being whom many in the assembly chose not to hear, turning instead to observe the direction from which the light fell.

The following morning, Salma reported for duty at the hospital in Videhapur. The register of the night's events recorded the time at which the elderly woman had been admitted, but the space for the time treatment began was blank. Salma asked the desk employee why it had not been entered. “Complete your own forms,” he told her. “The doctor will record the treatment time.” “Then record why that line has been left empty as well,” Salma replied. “The patient was made to wait. That must not disappear.”

The employee grew irritated. “Are you going to take every patient's details and discuss them outside?” “I'm not asking for the patient's name,” Salma said. “I'm asking how long the system makes people wait.” Aniruddha was coming out from inside the hospital. He stopped and listened to them both. The hospital had difficulties of its own—a complaint about medicine being supplied under the wrong identity was still unresolved—but that concern did not justify withholding urgent treatment. Aniruddha gave no definitive decision yet. He asked for a written account of the incident.

Salma wanted her name to appear on the statement. “Better to write it anonymously,” the employee said. “There'll be less trouble.” “Use my name if I choose to give it,” she answered. “Don't impose anonymity upon me either.” The elderly woman's family had not granted permission for her name to be made public. Salma therefore removed the personal details and recorded the delay, the procedure, and the order in which treatment had become available. Aniruddha gave her an acknowledgment of the application. Salma was not asking that essential medical examination before treatment be abolished; she was asking that identity verification and the sequence of treatment be kept distinct.

That day Anita reached the back entrance of the office. A newly painted notice about public welfare covered the outside wall. Inside, names were being called at a window, and people bent towards its small opening to answer. Anita showed her application number. The employee again demanded an

extensive account of her family's lineage. “I will provide as much as the rules require,” she said. “My family's private life will not be the price of correcting a list.”

The employee placed a finger upon a line in the register. “But this is what it says here.” “The register has written my name wrongly,” Anita replied, “and you are making the register a witness against me. Show me the source of the entry.” The employee fell silent for a while. On taking out the file, he found that no copy of the document from which the original entry had been made was attached. He then said that nothing could be changed without an order from a senior officer. Rather than continue arguing, Anita asked that this absence be recorded in writing.

Naira met her in the shade outside the office. Anita told her that the original supporting document had not been produced. Naira did not press advice upon her. “Would you like us to raise this at a public hearing,” she asked, “or should we first submit a written question to the responsible officer?” Anita thought for a moment. “A written question first. No one has the right to call out my name before a crowd. If I decide to speak publicly later, that will be another matter.” Naira added a line to the application: Permission has not been given for the public disclosure of private particulars.

As the two came out, they met Rama Karn near the gate. She had brought the acknowledgment slip from the previous day's assistance meeting. Seeing Anita's distress, she started to ask what had happened; but Naira made a small gesture with her hand to indicate that the matter was private. Taking no offence, Rama spoke instead of the business that had brought her there. “To write that someone living is dead, and then, when the person comes forward, to refuse to accept the proof—that's a remarkable art these offices have perfected.” Anita laughed openly for the first time, then said, “It gives us a laugh. But this art comes at a very high price.”

That evening at the shelter, Ruhani was examining the acknowledgment of her proposed amendment to the membership rules. Champa returned and asked how many more people's names had been put at the top of a list before they had agreed to it. Ruhani had left the list blank that day. “I remembered what you said,” she told her. “Someone was telling me about Anita's complaint, but I did not go to summon her. She will choose her own way.” “Today you were silent in the right place,” Champa replied. Ruhani laughed. “Will someone garland me for this silence too?”

Smoke rose from the cooking fire on the shelter's veranda. Rukhsana was keeping a small account of the evening meal. She told the two women that the price of vegetables had gone up that day, but the number of plates given free would be recorded separately; the labour of those who prepared the free meals would not itself be free. Taking up her plate, Champa said, “Today everyone is writing down a line about rights. Write down the number of

aubergines on my plate." "I'll write down the number," Rukhsana replied, "but eat your aubergines before you start arguing again."

That night Sarita took out her old account book. Naira had told her about Anita's complaint without disclosing the woman's private particulars. Sarita pointed to an old entry listing rice and oil for several different households. "I had written Kamal's name wrongly here," she said. "It was corrected when Kamal pointed it out. And I remember asking myself then: I may have the right to make an entry in this book, but who has the right to decide the true form of another person's name?"

"The mistake in your account book was corrected," Naira said. "The procedure for correcting a government file is complicated." Sarita closed the book. "Complicated doesn't mean a person must give up their name. But if someone wishes to conceal a name, that person's reasons ought to be heard as well." Naira remembered the day when Sarita, alive before the microphone, had been pronounced dead. She also understood that some altered identities saved lives; to make every entry public could itself become an act of violence.

In the ancient assembly Yudhishthira's head was bowed. All the history of the royal house stood around him, yet Draupadi's question brought him face to face with a decision of his own. He knew what it meant to suffer defeat. But the injury of changing another human being's fate without consent could not be contained within his experience of losing. Even if those assembled accepted the outcome of the game as valid, the question remained: who could be called a stake?

Draupadi looked towards Vidura and then towards Bhishma. Neither gave her immediate justice. She set out her objections once more, each in its order: what power to transfer another's rights remains to someone who has himself suffered dispossession? On what grounds may a person who was never consulted be called a thing? And who gave the assembly the right to call its silence consent? The three questions sounded through the hall from three different directions.

Vikarna had been listening for a long time. He was younger than many in the assembly and possessed less influence; he also bore the weight of his close kinship with Duryodhana. Resting a hand upon his seat, he leaned a little forward. To answer the question the elders were evading would mean more than presenting an argument: it would mean deciding to stand against his own side. No words had yet left his mouth. Draupadi's question held its place at the centre of the hall, and the noise of the assembly slowly gathered around that silence.

In Videhapur, Naira was putting away two slips for the following day. Salma's acknowledgment number was separate from Anita's request for the source document. The two files did not bear the same red mark; no single person's guilt had been established. But both slips had taught her that before a

decision could be made about anyone, at least this much had to be known: where had that person's voice been recorded, what had that person been asked, and who had been obliged to answer?

Before going to sleep, Sanket hung his phone from a peg beside the door. “If you don't look at my photograph,” he asked Naira, “will you believe what I tell you?” “I'll listen to what you say,” Naira replied. “But I'll record separately what I've seen, what I've heard, and what has been verified. And I won't look at your picture without your permission.” “Then that's all right,” Sanket said. To him it was no grand principle. It was the satisfaction of being able to make his own small decision about his own small possession.

Far away, at the unbuilt landing of Barki Pond, two lights from the town trembled upon the water. The ripples broke their reflections apart and joined them again; but the way to the ghat remained closed, and the written decision to reopen it had yet to be made. Sarita fastened the door from inside. Naira wrapped the two slips separately in cloth and put out the lamp. Not one file changed of its own accord that night. But two women had already demanded answers of those who presumed to decide their lives.

Chapter 16 · The Silence After Vikarna

In the assembly hall of Hastinapura, Vikarna slowly lifted his palm from the wooden arm of his seat. The wood was warm; only now did he realise how many times he had gripped it tightly. Draupadi stood before the assembly. Instead of answering her question, the men looked from one another's age and rank to the expressions on one another's faces. Directly in front of Vikarna, a courtier was silently folding the edge of his upper garment, as though straightening the creases in the cloth might set right the disordered proceedings of the court.

Vikarna looked first towards Draupadi, then towards his brothers. He knew that if he sought Duryodhana's permission before speaking, permission might never come. He rose. No one had ordered him to do so; no one offered support. At first his voice trembled a little, but what he said was clear: the answer to Draupadi's question could not consist merely in proclaiming who had won the wager. By what right had a man who had already lost his own freedom put another person at stake? To leave that question unheard could not make the loss just.

Vikarna did not stop there. He said that there had been many ways in which judgment could be hemmed in during the game; the future of a kingdom and of kindred had been set upon a gaming table. In such circumstances, who had asked Draupadi what she wished? Why should her absence be treated as consent? More than anger, his voice carried astonishment that, among so many people, no one had yet been willing to hear this simple question to its end.

Duryodhana stared at him. To be a brother meant both shelter and constraint within the royal court. Vikarna understood that words easily spoken inside the household might change his relationships the moment he spoke them before the assembly. For an instant a line of hope appeared on Vidura's face. Bhishma remained silent in his seat. His silence was no answer to Vikarna's reasoning, but the men of the assembly stood ready to interpret it according to their own convenience.

Karna rose. He sought to dismiss Vikarna's objection as immature, placing first the rules of the game and the result publicly declared for the wager. His voice bore a hardness born of memories of his own long humiliation. He knew how the order acknowledged by the assembly decided whom to admit and whom to exclude; yet no private suffering of his could confer a right to humiliate Draupadi. His reply did not resolve the fundamental difficulty in Vikarna's question: Draupadi's consent, and the authority that Yudhishthira had already forfeited. Nevertheless, Karna's words carried weight in the assembly, because those who held power wished to hear them.

Draupadi heard Vikarna speak on her behalf. No immediate comfort came over her face. She saw plainly the distance between one man speaking the truth and the orders of an assembly proceeding as before. She did not ask Vikarna to promise her deliverance. Her question was addressed to the assembly, and it was from the assembly that an answer was required. “Does one person's speaking change the meaning of everyone else's silence?” This gave her question a new edge. Vidura wished to answer, but the uproar in the hall grew louder.

Vikarna was signalled to sit down again. He sat, for he possessed no physical force with which to alter the course of the proceedings. Yet what he had said remained there after he had taken his seat. The court scribe had already recorded the sequence of victories. In small letters at the edge of the page, he entered the objection. The line containing the principal decision remained untouched.

In Videhapur, during the second part of the day, a drop of water fell from the roof of the local committee room into an empty bucket. Old newspapers had been spread beside the window to dry the papers. The minutes of yesterday's meeting were to be read aloud today. Ruhani had arrived early, but her chair once again stood in the row reserved for those who were not permitted to vote upon decisions. This time there was no blue cloth upon it. Files lay on the table, and among those files her written objection lay pressed down.

The secretary began calling the attendance. Ruhani asked, “Am I present, or am I invited?” “Those are not the same thing,” the secretary replied, “but your name appears among the invitees.” Ruhani said, “Then when you write ‘unanimously agreed’ in the minutes, write also that my vote was never taken.” The secretary grew somewhat uncomfortable. The chairperson explained that a review of the rules would be considered at the next meeting; today's proceedings would follow the existing rules. “I am not asking you to announce that the rules have already changed,” Ruhani said. “I am asking only for an account of the voices that those rules keep outside.”

Amla Sarbariya had brought a bag containing copies of documents and a small bundle tied with red thread. The bundle held no account of anyone's private life; it held the receipts acknowledging applications from different households. Her community's name had been written in three different ways in three municipal offices. In one place a letter had been omitted; in another the final vowel-sign had been changed; in a third it had been linked to an altogether different name. This had affected the application numbers, and some families had been turned away on the allegation that their entries were duplicates belonging to the same person.

Amla began by stating her name distinctly. When the secretary opened the register, the entry again contained the wrong spelling. She did not laugh.

“Write this correctly first,” she said. “Then listen to what I have to say. We have asked that the name be written in one consistent form, but each household must keep its own number and its own rights. If, in correcting a word, you make us all into one person, you will have committed another wrong.” An employee suggested that changing the characters in the mobile system would be sufficient. “What has been printed on paper travels in people's pockets,” Amla replied. “Changing an entry on a mobile screen will not erase the reasons given for earlier rejections.”

A young man who had come with her stood holding a bag of books. He had to go to work the next day; finding the fare for journeys to both places was difficult. Amla gestured for him to sit. “Your working time is an expense too,” she told him. “When I have this recorded, I shall also have them record what all these repeated journeys have cost.” The chairperson asked how that could be joined to the collective application. Amla untied her bundle and showed how many people had gone three times to different counters, only to be sent back each time without an answer as to where the original error had arisen.

Naira was seated in the back row. She remembered Anita Chaupal's application. Anita's difficulty had been an incorrect social classification; Amla's was a misspelled name and an erroneous matching of entries. The two were not the same. Naira did not bring Anita's private affairs before the assembly. In her notebook she wrote: source of the incorrect entry; officer authorised to accept a correction; time allowed for issuing a copy. Then she closed the notebook and listened to Amla. In this matter, today, the right to speak belonged to Amla herself.

Sakib Abdal had put an old bag of accounts beside the door of the meeting room. He had been asked to collect contributions for clearing the drainage channel the previous month. He earned his living from small transport jobs and occasional collection and delivery of goods; people also left contributions at his shop. The day before, someone had alleged that Sakib's private earnings and the public contributions were mixed together in the same bag. Rather than merely deny the allegation, Sakib had brought two separate account books.

He laid the first ledger on the table. “This is where the public contributions are entered: how much came in, and by whose authority it was spent on the work,” he said. He kept the second ledger in his hands. “This holds my transport charges, debts, and household expenses. No one is entitled to inspect every page of it. But if my transport was used for work paid for out of the contributions, I will show the receipt separately.” The chairperson grew a little irritated. “So much formality over cleaning a channel?” “The contributions for the cleaning must be open to scrutiny,” Sakib replied. “That does not oblige me to make my household accounts public.”

There was a blank line in Sakib's public ledger. Payment for transporting Lalit's wooden measuring board to inspect the mouth of the drainage channel had not yet been approved. Cutting a route for the water was prohibited until Aditi had inspected it, so the only expenditure entered against the proposed work was the money spent on preparation. Sakib himself distinguished any profit he might earn. "If my vehicle is needed, agree the rate beforehand. I will not make a quiet profit out of public contributions, but neither will I abandon my livelihood and work for nothing." From the back row someone murmured, "He is right."

Ruhani looked towards the voice. The chairperson was reading from the draft minutes: "with the agreement of all members present." "Does this 'all' include Sakib?" Ruhani asked. "Does it include Amla? Does it include me?" "Invitees' views are entered in the record," the chairperson said. "Members cast the votes." "Then write two separate lines," Ruhani replied. "'Votes cast by members'; 'objections raised by invitees'. Words heard aloud have their place, and votes have theirs." The chairperson looked at the secretary. For a while the secretary's pen hovered over the page.

One member of the committee said, "If we spend so much time on these little distinctions, how will the pond excavation ever move forward?" Gathering up her papers, Amla said, "If wages for digging are entered in my name, but on paper I am taken for somebody else, how am I to do the work? Putting the accounts right is part of preparing the excavation." Sakib added, "If you do not record what is owed to a worker separately, you will afterwards claim the work was donated. Things are delayed because trust in the accounts was never established at the outset." From outside came the continuing sounds of measurements being taken on the steps of the ghat.

The chairperson carried the proceedings forward. No proposal to amend the membership rules had been placed before that day's meeting for decision; only the draft minutes of the earlier meeting had been read. Ruhani asked again whether the silence of those members who had said nothing had been described as support. "Under the rules," the secretary replied, "those who did not cast a vote at the time of the count were recorded as present." Ruhani said, "I am asking you not to invent figures. Who spoke in favour, who spoke against, who remained silent, and who had no right to vote—why must these four different conditions disappear into the single word 'unanimity'?"

Naira rose from her place. "I am not a member of this committee," she said, "so I will not decide what its rules mean. But if I may inspect a copy of the minutes, I can read the passages relating to dissent separately." The chairperson smiled faintly. "Your mother's case is proceeding elsewhere. Must we have another discussion of evidence here?" Naira remained calm. "Yes—elsewhere. If we mix these matters together, we will do harm to all three: Sarita's statement that she is alive, Amla's name, and the voting of this committee." She lowered the paper she had been holding.

In Hastinapura, after Karna's reply, some members of the assembly fell utterly silent. They had heard Vikarna, but to take an open position was dangerous. Vidura once more insisted upon justice. Yudhishthira's bowed face was not, for him, proof of consent given in silence. The fact that Draupadi's question remained unanswered did not mean that the decision could now be accepted as just. The silence of one whose throat cannot release a word may contain reasons altogether different from those of the assembly.

Vikarna wondered what would come of what he had just said. Would his household continue to count him among its own, or call him disloyal? The questions rose within him, but he felt no shame. He looked again towards Draupadi. He understood that his words had not saved her from the humiliation of the assembly. Yet if he had not spoken, the account of what had happened would have made all the men appear to hold the same opinion. For the sake of that single distinction, he accepted the price.

Draupadi's gaze fell upon the massive doors of the hall. Life went on outside too: water had to be fetched, meals cooked, stables cleaned, and messengers awaited. It was the people outside who would have to bear the consequences of the royal assembly's decisions. Yet they had no seat in the place where its rules were made. Draupadi began to perceive another side of her own question: an order that determines people's lives owes an answer not only to those who win within the assembly, but also to the lives upon which its decisions descend.

When the meeting in Videhapur broke for an interval, Champa arrived on the outer veranda. Ruhani offered to read the draft minutes to her. “I've only just come from work,” Champa said. “Don't enter my name without my permission. But if you want my opinion, tell me the whole of it.” Ruhani handed her a page. Champa could read, but fatigue made her blink again and again. She did not ask for a chair; she sat on the wooden platform of the veranda. It was not the seat of honour inside the committee room, but here there were fewer obstacles to asking a question.

When Amla came outside, a receipt slipped from her bag, and Sakib picked it up for her. One edge of it was damp. “Have a copy made of a paper like that,” he said. “Then you won't have to go running about again.” “The price of the copy will go into the account too,” Amla replied. “They have written our names wrong, but every office has collected its fare and fees with perfect accuracy.” They both laughed. A little way off, small paper twists of roasted gram flour had been sent over from Rukhsana's kitchen. Sakib bought two; Amla bought one with her own money. No question could keep hunger at bay.

After the interval, the secretary read out a revised draft. It now stated that Ruhani's objection concerning voting rights had been received, that a review of the membership rules was proposed, and that the opinions of invitees had

not been counted as members' votes. The relevant records office would be asked to investigate the source of the spelling of Amla's name; until then, copies of the reasons for rejecting her applications would be preserved. A copy of Sakib's public contribution ledger had been lodged with the committee's accounts, but not the full text of his private ledger. These were small changes in procedure, not final decisions.

Having heard the draft, Ruhani asked, “And the members who remained silent?” The secretary showed her the place where something could be written. Until then the line had been blank. He filled it in: “Present, but expressed no opinion.” The chairperson said that these words did not constitute a final interpretation of the rules; they merely recorded what had happened that day. Ruhani accepted that. “Write only what took place. I will not pretend this line has given me the right to vote.” There was a slight weariness in her voice, but her inner resolve had not weakened.

Meanwhile, for the first time, Amla saw her name correctly written on a correction application. The office's original register had not yet been altered. Holding the paper in her hands, she said, “For now, this has my name right. The work concerning my household still remains.” Sakib checked the receipt number for his public contribution ledger. “If there is still a dispute about my transport charges,” he said, “I'll put the rate and the receipt before them. Contributors ought not to have to trust my word alone.” Each held a small piece of written evidence, but neither document undid the damage already done.

Before the meeting ended, the chairperson announced that the earlier vote count would stand. Ruhani left without the right to vote. She understood that having the name of an objection preserved in the minutes and having an institution change its decision were two different stages. Champa met her at the door. “Another garland?” she asked. “We saved the cost of flowers today,” Ruhani replied. “That will pay for two copies.” “Make sure you get a receipt for the copying,” Champa said, “or you'll end up quarrelling with Sakib.”

When Naira reached Sarita's home, the evening rice was just being taken off the fire. Sanket had set warm water in an earthen bowl and was washing the nib of his pen in it. Sarita asked what had happened at the committee. “The decision hasn't changed,” Naira said. “But those who said nothing were not recorded as supporters; those who had no vote have had their objections preserved separately.” Sarita considered this for a while. “On the stage they called me dead, and afterwards they wrote down that I had spoken. Because the page bearing my words survived separately, it became possible to fight from there. But it will take people again to make them change the paper.”

Naira looked towards her mother's old ledger. The page with the twenty-seven names was still kept separately, wrapped in cloth. Nothing at today's meeting had established a new owner or a culprit in relation to it. In her small

notebook she made three headings: “Stated”; “Heard”; “Decided.” Amla's correctly written application lay somewhere between a statement made and one acknowledged; Ruhani's objection had been heard, but voting rights had not been determined. Sarita's declaration that she was alive had been recorded, but the notice of her death had not been cancelled. These distinctions did not make the mystery of the papers more sensational; they made it clearer.

At night the wind came from the direction of the Tilwaha. In the rustle of bamboo in the courtyard there seemed to be the sound of a boat's oar striking water. Sanket set his pen upon the wooden platform to dry. “If everyone keeps silent,” he asked, “who will tell what happened that day?” “Whoever saw it will say what was seen,” Sarita replied, “and whoever heard it will say what was heard. And whoever found the courage to speak should at least have the right not to have their words changed according to someone else's wishes.” Naira remained looking at her.

In the assembly hall of Hastinapura, the lamps were growing smaller one by one. Vikarna's voice had not altered the immediate outcome, but it left a witness to one thing: even those of the same household, sitting in the same assembly, did not regard the same injustice in the same way. Draupadi's question still stood amid the assembly's claims of authority. The shadows lengthened; the court's decision remained as it was. The protest against a wrong that could not be stopped that day did not fall out of history. It remained both in the words people had spoken and in the heavy debt of the words they had left unsaid.

That night in Videhapur, a sheet bearing the committee's seal was being prepared for delivery to three different households: one copy for Ruhani, one to accompany Amla's application, and one beside the acknowledgement of the contribution ledger. No one received from that sheet a complete remedy for the troubles of a life. But if, at the next meeting, someone declared that “everyone had agreed,” there would now be written grounds on which to read the claim and challenge it. Long after Sarita's hearth had gone out, the ash beneath it remained warm. Naira did not put her hand to it. She merely closed the veranda door and thought: sometimes even silence must be accounted for, lest one person's failure to speak be made into false evidence of another's victory.

Chapter 17 · Kaikeyi's Due

When the bell sounded for the changing of the watch in the royal palace of Ayodhya, Manthara lowered the little oil lamp in her hand. The night watchman stood his staff beside the door and rubbed his eyes with weariness. Baskets of flowers were arriving along the corridor. News of the preparations for the coronation had not yet reached every chamber in equal measure, but the new pitchers set in a corner of the courtyard and the seats washed in haste made one thing plain: tomorrow the palace would assume another form.

Manthara carried three keys wrapped in a piece of cloth. The first opened Kaikeyi's inner storeroom; the second, the servants' veranda; the third, a small chest containing medicines, bandages, and vessels for heating water. As she grew old, the weight of the keys seemed greater in her hand. It was not the weight of iron. It was the weight of a question: with a new king and a newly ordered women's household, to whom would the authority of those keys pass?

A young attendant stood holding a basket. "How many flowers shall we need from today onwards?" she asked. "Count as many as there are in the baskets," Manthara replied. "A change of king does not change the number of flowers, but it can change the name of the person who counts them." The attendant tried to laugh, then asked, "My name too?" Manthara slipped her palm beneath the basket to steady it. "Save the flowers for now. I have no authority to answer for your name."

In her chamber Kaikeyi was unfastening a silken band. It was old, and its threads held the memory of a wrist injured in wartime. To her it was less a sign of victory than the mark of a day on which, after she had saved the king's life, he had promised to grant her two boons. Through all the years since, she had never turned that promise into payment for the ordinary work of her days.

"Your Majesty," Manthara said, "today the attendants have been asked to draw up a list for the new arrangements. No one has told them who is to be assigned where." Kaikeyi folded the band and put it aside. "The work of the coronation has increased. There will be more service to perform; that will be why they want a list." Manthara answered, "When the work increases, the hands required increase too. But there is talk of striking names off as well. No one has looked into the faces of those who do the work."

Hearing her tone, Kaikeyi sat upright. Manthara had been with her for many years, but old affection did not mean that Kaikeyi accepted every supposition of hers as truth. "Are you telling me what you heard, or what you saw?" she asked. From the knot at her waist Manthara brought out not a sheet of paper but a list made of knots tied in cloth. There were no names written upon it. She counted them from memory: the one whose household drew its grain from here; the one whose wounds were dressed from this very chest; the widow who came to serve with her son beside her.

"Who will answer for all of them?" Manthara asked. "I have no objection to Rama. But if, after his coronation, the new overseer of the attendants says their service is no longer wanted here, where will these people go?" "Rama is not one to cast people aside," Kaikeyi said. Manthara answered at once, "We can trust in his kindness. But does kindness secure what was already owed?"

Kaikeyi fell silent. She knew Rama's affection within their royal family. She also carried a mother's concern for Bharata, who was not then in Ayodhya. Rama's happiness had never seemed to her something separate from the happiness of her own house. Manthara's question was beginning to set these things against one another all at once. "Is it only the attendants' due that troubles you?" Kaikeyi asked quietly. Manthara did not avert her eyes. "No. There is Bharata's future. There is my own old age as well. I will not give my fear the name of selfless service."

That admission made Kaikeyi look at her afresh. Manthara was not concealing the possibility of fault in herself. "However deep the affection of a royal house," she said, "affection is not a rule. Someone assured of safety today may find their name on the list of those cast off tomorrow." "Then you want me to prevent Rama's coronation in Bharata's name?" Kaikeyi asked. Before answering, Manthara straightened the lamp's wick. "I want you to decide now what your promise means. Do not afterwards lay the blame on me for having raised the question."

Kaikeyi went to the window. Outside, clouds were passing across the moon above the courtyard. A servant covered the mouth of a new ceremonial pitcher with cloth so that no dust would settle in it before dawn. The affairs of the kingdom had long been conducted with such care. Yet at the moment of a great decision, where did even half that care disappear from human beings? She remembered Dasharatha's pledge—a promise the king had made, but one she herself remained free not to invoke.

"If I ask for the boons," Kaikeyi said, "I shall receive what is due to me, but it will become a punishment for Rama." "Rama's coronation without even a pause may become a humiliation for Bharata," Manthara replied. Kaikeyi turned towards her. "Bharata is not here. If I write my own desire in the name of what he feels, that too will be an injustice." Manthara said nothing. She understood that fear alone would no longer govern Kaikeyi's course.

A tray of food was brought into the chamber. Kaikeyi lifted a mouthful, then put it down again. When the attendant moved to take the food away, Manthara stopped her. "Let the tray stay here," she said. "Hunger will return." "Have you eaten anything all day?" Kaikeyi asked. Manthara shook her head. The two women took a little rice from the same tray into separate bowls. The difficulty of the decision did not vanish, but this ordinary act reminded them that the palace ran not upon a king's promises alone, but upon the time of a thousand people.

Dasharatha came to Kaikeyi's chamber in the last watch of the night. His face was tired from the preparations for the celebration; yet at Kaikeyi's summons he asked with pleasure, "What gift would you like today?" Within

that easy question Kaikeyi perceived the heavy place occupied by an old pledge. She did not sit down after greeting him. "Not a gift," she said. "I want a reckoning of your promise to grant me two boons."

The smile left the king's face. He first remembered the event of the war; then he looked at Kaikeyi as though he had expected the future of that memory to be nothing more than an occasion for celebration. "I have pledged to give you whatever you ask," he said. Kaikeyi answered, "Then listen first. You will not bear the burden of what I ask alone. It will fall upon Rama, Bharata, Kausalya, the citizens, and all of us."

For the first boon she asked that Bharata be crowned king. Dasharatha's palm trembled upon the arm of his seat. Before naming the second boon, Kaikeyi took a little time to steady her breathing. "Let Rama live in the forest for fourteen years," she said. The sound of a bell outside reached the chamber; somewhere the rehearsals for the celebration were continuing. Once the king uttered "Rama," and then his voice failed him.

"Kaikeyi," Dasharatha asked, "what are you trying to save by this promise?" Anger and entreaty were joined in his question. Kaikeyi herself could not see her answer with perfect clarity. She wanted Bharata to have a secure place at the centre of the kingdom; she wanted a future free from the pain of mistrust; she had heard of the insecurity in the lives of Manthara and the attendants. Yet she could not herself claim that these reasons made Rama's departure for the forest an indisputable necessity.

"I will not withdraw the boons," Kaikeyi said. "But neither will I say that this decision harms no one." Dasharatha could only look at her. On the day he made his promise, the king had seen his own generosity; now, on the day when he must fulfil it, he could see no end to its cost. He gave no answer. Silence spread through the chamber in place of words.

Manthara stood outside the door. Because the king was within, she had no right to enter. She could not hear every sentence spoken inside; she refused to risk fashioning a complete meaning out of fragments of sound. The servants' keys clinked once more in her palm. She understood that the household whose security she had spoken for might now become the beginning of another insecurity. She put the keys not upon the chest, but into her own bag.

In the first light of dawn, Kaikeyi sat beside Dasharatha. Outside, the flowers for the celebration were still fresh; inside, deep lines of exhaustion marked the king's face. For the first time, Kaikeyi turned Manthara's words about in her own mind: if a new right is taken away in order to protect an old promise, whose home is laid waste in the name of protection? But she had made her decision, and she could not escape responsibility for its harm by laying it upon another person's conscience.

In Videhapur that same day, the wind was lifting one corner of a printed sheet intended for the school noticeboard. Asad Syed climbed a ladder and took it down. The page contained two phrases relating to the assistance-distribution committee's previous meeting: "unanimously" and "approved." Asad supervised admissions and the attendance register at the school; reading

public notices issued by the town had also fallen to him. He knew the weight of words which, once fastened to a wall, would be quoted from house to house.

The headmaster said, “It’s a notice sent down from above. Why are you throwing it away?” Asad showed him the torn corner. “I’m not throwing it away. I’m taking it down. Whose signature is on this? Yesterday we received the minutes with the objections recorded separately. This notice again says everyone agreed.” “Why should the school get involved in this dispute?” the headmaster asked. “Our work is teaching.” “The wall belongs to the school,” Asad replied. “The children’s families read this page. If a falsehood goes out in our voice, how can teaching remain separate from it?”

An old bamboo penholder stood on Asad’s desk, though most of the school’s work now appeared on sheets printed by machine. In his own handwriting he set down three lines: the original source of the notice, the date of issue, and the limits of what the school had verified. He had no wish to leave the space for a signature empty, but neither did he wish to sign a claim for which he had no authority. He made two copies of the page for submission to the office.

At that time Naira had come to the public assistance counter behind the school to enquire about obtaining a certified copy of Sarita’s statement that she was alive. The minutes of the previous meeting were in her bag. On seeing her, Asad asked, “Have you read this page? It says ‘everyone’s approval.’” “Not everyone was present,” Naira answered. “And not everyone who was present had the right to vote.” “Then this is not a school notice,” Asad said. “It has become publicity for somebody’s conclusion.”

Naira told him that Ruhani’s objection had been recorded, but she had not been given voting rights; Amla’s application had been accepted, but the original community register had not been corrected; Sarita’s statement had been entered on record, but the notice of her death had still not been cancelled. Asad did not interrupt. He wrote each of the three circumstances separately upon the paper. “Write down what has been achieved,” he said. “Do not turn what has not happened into an achievement. Otherwise, when a child asks tomorrow why their mother’s application is still held up, what shall we tell them?”

In one of the classrooms, some children were rehearsing a play. A girl forgot her line, and another child quietly prompted her. Asad turned towards the door. Watching that simple act of help, he remembered that reading out someone’s name from a paper and taking the right to speak in that person’s name were two different things. He told the children to carry on rehearsing and returned to the desk. In that brief pause Naira, too, understood that the right to speak was not settled only upon the platforms of public meetings.

The headmaster returned to the office. “All this running about to correct two lines? If the board stays empty, people will say the school is hiding information.” Asad offered a solution. “Let us keep a copy of the original notice. Add a note underneath saying that this is a statement sent by the committee, not a conclusion verified by the school. When the correct minutes

arrive, we can post a copy beside it." "And the cost?" the headmaster asked. Asad took two receipts from his bag—one for photocopying, the other for glue. "I have paid for these myself. Next time, let us decide in writing beforehand whose account will bear the expense."

Naira looked at the receipts. Such small sums generally escaped notice, but the labour of correcting a school announcement also took time and money. Instead of thanking Asad, she asked, "Will your name appear on this application?" "It will," he answered. "The incorrect page was put up by my hand. The demand for its correction should go forward under my signature as well. But the whole fault of the person who sent the letter must not be put upon my name."

At the assistance counter, an employee said that a separate application would be required for a certified copy of the committee minutes. Naira produced one she had already written. The employee went on to say that the school's seal would not be affixed to the copy. Asad laughed. "Why would it need the school's seal? It needs the seal of the body that held the meeting. My seal cannot make me the owner of its decision." Displeasure showed on the employee's face, but he wrote down the acknowledgement number for the application.

Naira entered the number in her notebook. This was not going to put right, at once, the record falsely declaring her mother dead. But the difference between the committee's accurate minutes of yesterday and the publicity sheet of today had been preserved. She did not assume that any one person had knowingly dictated a lie. All she knew for now was that the state of the proceedings had been presented differently in the public announcement; the original author, the signature, and the sequence of approvals would have to be examined separately.

As the afternoon waned, Asad sat in a patch of shade beside the school and unwrapped his rotis. He invited Naira to sit, then set aside half of the fried greens he had brought from home for her. Naira refused. "You won't have enough to eat," she said. "It isn't too little," Asad replied. "It's a matter of sharing. No one's name needs to be struck off for someone else to eat." They both laughed. For a while they spoke of the children's games at school, the repair of a broken bench, and the water that collected on the road during the rains. No mystery was solved in that conversation.

On the other side of Videhapur, Sarita was setting water to heat upon the stove. Naira reached home before darkness fell. She placed the school letter and the acknowledgement number before her mother. As she read, Sarita asked, "Does anyone here say that the false record of my death has now been corrected?" "No," Naira replied. "This letter concerns the committee's statement. Your case remains separate." Sarita nodded. "Let it remain separate. Give every injustice one name, and no one can tell who is responsible for which."

On the veranda, Sanket was making a little boat out of paper. The story about the school play interested him. "If a child forgets a line and another

child tells it to them," he asked, "who gets the credit for saying it on stage?" "The one who speaks the line," Naira answered, "and the help given by the other child deserves recognition too." Sanket drew two separate blue lines on his boat—one for the person who steered it, the other for the person who showed the way through the water. He saw no official map in those lines.

That evening Urmila was waiting for the vehicle that would take the hospital linen. The person who was to collect it had earlier asked her to wait until nightfall; nothing had been put in writing about wages for a second shift. Sarita offered her some of the hot water from the stove. Drinking it, Urmila said, "When the night grows longer, the work grows longer too. But entering the hours of the night in the column for daytime will not give me back my sleep." Naira listened without hurrying to reply.

In Ayodhya, dew lay upon the palace flowers at dawn after that night. Kaikeyi could not step outside the consequences of the boons she had demanded. Beyond the chamber, Manthara tended the attendants' keys and listened as their names were called one by one. She knew that even if her fears had been true, the remedy she had proposed was not innocent. Within the door the king was silent; outside, people were asking what had become of the celebration. No one yet possessed a sentence capable of speaking truly, all at once, of everyone's due, everyone's loss, and everyone's future.

In Videhapur, before closing her notebook for the night, Naira wrote two headings: "The one who gives the promise" and "The one who bears its burden." Beneath them she laid out separate papers: Asad's school notice, Ruhani's dissent, and Sarita's statement. She did not open the page of twenty-seven names; the discoveries of this day had yielded no direct answer to the mystery surrounding any of them. Outside, Urmila's vehicle arrived late, and she refused to load the bundles of linen until the additional hours had been entered in writing. The night went on deepening, but one small account had been changed for this night.

Chapter 18 · Urmila's Night

In the royal palace of Ayodhya, the sound of pitchers being filled for the morning rose before the sound of human voices. Dew from the night had settled on a brass water vessel standing upon the raised platform. When Urmila lifted it, the cold entered her hands. Inside the chamber two trunks stood open: one held the plain garments for Lakshmana's journey, the other the clothes of the palace's daily life. The first trunk was easy to fill. No one wished to take responsibility for the second.

Lakshmana had said that he would accompany Rama into the forest. The decision had been announced during the night, but the moment of hearing a thing and the moment of understanding what it would mean to live through it are not the same. Urmila had kept awake all night, not because she was weeping, but because she was reckoning anew the work of a household whose duties had, until yesterday, been divided among its people. Rama's departure for the forest, and Sita's decision to go with him, were events so immense that people had begun to forget even their right to ask small questions. Urmila was making a list of those questions: who would give Kausalya her medicine, who would be with Sumitra through the night, who would ask whether the elderly attendant had been allowed to rest?

When Lakshmana came in, he found Urmila straightening the edge of a garment. "I shall take very little with me," he said. Urmila looked at him. "I can make your bundle smaller. But how am I to make smaller the bundle of work you are leaving behind?" Before answering, Lakshmana laid the bow in his hand beside the door. "I must go." "I am not disputing the necessity," Urmila said. "I am only asking: once you have gone, whose needs will remain here?"

Lakshmana had to weigh his decision once more. He felt his loyalty to Rama, his obligation to keep Sita safe upon the journey, and, beside them, the faces of the tired people in his own home. He did not say that Urmila would manage everything. Nor could he bring himself to promise that all the burdens left behind would somehow grow lighter of their own accord. "I shall make arrangements for the mothers," he said. Urmila answered quietly, "An arrangement is not the name of one woman. If you assign someone work, you must decide when that person is to rest as well."

Shrutakirti stood at the doorway. She held a little glass bowl containing a little jaggery and roasted grain. "Eat something first," she said. "If the stomach that does the thinking is empty, our thoughts will devour us too." Urmila laughed. It had been a long time since her laughter had sounded in the room. She took a small piece of jaggery and gave half to Shrutakirti. "Where do you find so much wisdom?" "It comes with the roasted grain," Shrutakirti replied. In that instant, beyond the forest, the throne and all the vows, the two sisters still possessed a world of their own.

“When will you sleep tonight?” Shrutakirti asked. “When the night’s work has been apportioned and written down,” Urmila answered. Shrutakirti laughed. “Then the palace will keep an account of sleep for the first time.” Urmila smiled too. “Here the watches change, but no one counts the watches kept by those awake beside a bed.” After a pause she added, “I do not ask for the boon of sleep. I ask for my share of the night.”

Before noon, Urmila sat with Mandavi and Shrutakirti in the inner courtyard. They listened as the attendants’ duties were divided. One elderly woman said plainly that during the third watch of the night her eyes no longer saw clearly. She was ashamed to admit it. “Gather flowers by day, not by night,” Urmila told her. “There is no reason to punish anyone whose eyes see less well in darkness.” Another woman asked whom she must seek for leave to attend to a sick child. “Come to me,” Urmila said, “or, if I am absent, to Shrutakirti. We shall make clear whom everyone should approach. You need no written order to have your child’s suffering heard.”

Having listened to them all, Mandavi said, “People will come to me as well, but Bharata is not here. How much authority do I have in his absence?” Urmila replied, “You must have as much authority to decide as you are being given responsibility for the work. Otherwise only the blame for mistakes will be yours.” At that, Mandavi enumerated the duties entrusted to her: issuing grain from the stores, arranging suitable food for the long-standing patients, and ensuring rest for the women on night watch. Not everything was settled at once, but it became clear to whom each question should be taken.

When Sumitra came into the courtyard, she said that she too was owed a share of the waking nights that would follow Lakshmana’s departure. Urmila rose at once, but Sumitra motioned her to remain seated. “I am growing old, but I can still speak for myself,” she said. “Ask me before you choose the woman who will attend me. And decide whom she is to call when she grows tired.” For the first time, Urmila saw in this decision not merely a mother-in-law’s permission but the partnership of a fellow worker. Sumitra added, “Lakshmana has gone in the name of the duty he believes in. Its burden shall not fall upon you alone. I too belong to this house.”

When Lakshmana returned, Urmila handed him his bundle of clothes. “Are you angry with me?” he asked. “You understand the love that lives within anger,” Urmila replied. “But if you take my question for nothing more than anger, it will never be answered.” Lakshmana took her hand. He might have said that he would return and put everything right, but he did not know whether such a promise could be kept. He said only, “I shall remember the arrangements you have made.” Releasing his hand, Urmila said, “Remembering will not cook the rice here. Tell others, too, what you have heard.”

In Videhapur, on that same rainy night, Urmila stood beside the bundles of hospital linen. The vehicle had arrived, but the paper in its driver’s hand recorded only “daytime transport.” Daylight had long since faded; the hours of the second shift were mounting. There was sweat on Urmila’s forehead, and

her arms ached from lifting the linen at the ghat. Instead of loading the bundles on the vehicle, she set them squarely on the ground.

"What has held us up now?" the driver asked. "The work has not been held up," Urmila said. "The account of the night has." He showed her the paper. "Get it signed. If the linen reaches the hospital late, I shall have to answer for it." "So shall I," she replied. "But your paper says these things were collected in daylight. How can work done at night be entered in the daytime column?"

Sarita had come out onto the veranda carrying a vessel of hot water. She made Urmila drink a couple of mouthfuls first. Naira had arrived too, but she did not take the argument out of Urmila's hands. She remembered the question raised at the previous day's meeting about Ruhani's chair and her right to speak. "Urmila-di," she asked, "would you like me to read the paper, or would you rather state your terms first?" "Read the paper," Urmila said. "I shall state the terms."

The paper gave the number of bundles as three, but no time of collection. The driver said that the clerk who opened the hospital's supply ledger would not be available before morning. Urmila showed him the different marks tied to the cloth of the bundles. "These two contain washed sheets. The third contains other linen used for patients. Do not enter all three as one kind of item. They will go to different places inside the hospital." For a moment the driver was silent. He was in a hurry to deliver the linen; Urmila was in a hurry to avoid being blamed if it went to the wrong place.

Naira opened her notebook to write. Urmila stopped her. "That is your notebook for evidence. If you put my wages in it, the hospital will say tomorrow that this is merely someone's private writing. I shall take out my own register." From an old cloth bag she drew a small register. Some pages containing the year's wage entries had curled where they had been wetted. Urmila ruled a fresh line: "Additional night collection"; "Total bundles"; "Time vehicle arrived"; "Time of arrival at hospital"; "Payment outstanding."

"Are we going to spend until dawn writing all this?" the driver asked. Urmila placed the paper before him. "You can watch the time. Every minute spent writing is part of my time too. But if you prefer, telephone the hospital and tell them these three bundles will arrive late because the wages have not been accounted for." The driver thought this harsh. He took out his phone, then, before dialling, asked, "Will you record my time as well?" "Your working time under your name," Urmila replied. "Not under mine."

They spoke by telephone to the employee who received linen at the hospital's night entrance. He said that he could issue a receipt for the supplies immediately; the contractor would have to decide the wages. Urmila understood the distinction perfectly. "A receipt for delivery proves that the work was done. It is not an acknowledgement of wages. I need both, separately." The employee agreed to record the count and the time of arrival. With his own hand the driver entered the time of collection. No money had yet been paid, but they had stopped the night's work from being turned into day's work and the account closed on that falsehood.

As the vehicle set out, Naira asked, “Shall I come with you?” “You have work to do at home for your mother,” Urmila said. “I shall go with the vehicle this once. If I need you there, I shall telephone.” Sarita gave her a flatbread and a little container of leftover vegetables. Urmila pulled a face. “Are you sending me to work at night, or to a wedding procession?” Sarita laughed. “At a wedding feast, who keeps count of the serving dishes? This bread is from my home for you, not from the hospital’s supplies.” Urmila put the container in her bag. Her tiredness had not lessened, but a small smile had come to the corners of her eyes.

On reaching the rear entrance of the hospital, the vehicle stopped again. The place where bundles of clean linen were to be kept in the inner section had been changed; mud and water had collected along the old route. Urmila asked the gatekeeper why the laundry had not been informed of the change. “I was not ordered to tell anyone,” he said. “Then whose account will show the delay caused by the changed location?” she asked. This time she was not asking who had the authority to give an order, but about the sequence in which the work had to be done. An employee came forward with a lamp, and the bundles were counted separately.

By the door, Saraswati Thakur was fastening the cord of her cloth bag. Inside were a comb, scissors, a clean strip of cloth for covering a customer, and the things needed for braiding hair. Her modest trade outside the hospital was tending the hair and beards of patients’ relatives, workers, and attendants. She had just finished combing the hair of an elderly woman whose daughter was a patient. The woman had said that, after waiting all day for the doctor, she had found no opportunity to attend to her hair. Saraswati had given her the time, done the work, and written a receipt for the agreed fee.

Urmila had seen her before but had never asked her name. Looking at Urmila’s register, Saraswati said, “Do you keep an account of the night too?” “You as well?” Urmila asked. Saraswati took a paper out of her bag. “Some people say, ‘You only moved the scissors twice. How much time can that take?’ But before cutting hair there is water to fetch, a seat to set out, a clean cloth to change. Who counts any of that?” Urmila smiled. “The person doing it with her own hands must count it first.”

Saraswati saw her daughter waiting outside. Along with a book, the girl held a notice about a training course. “Ma, may I go to that class tomorrow?” she asked. “First we shall look at the household accounts,” Saraswati answered. “We must work out the fee and the cost of getting there and back. But what you wish to learn will not be tied to the scissors in my bag.” The daughter hesitated before speaking, as though she were not accustomed to hearing permission given so plainly. Saraswati laughed. “Knowing how to shorten someone’s hair does not give me the right to cut short everyone’s dreams for the rest of their lives.”

As she listened to them, Urmila folded a page of her register. “People tell me that if my daughter goes to study, who will look after the household income?” Saraswati said. “But those same people never count the time she

needs for learning." "I hear that question every day too," Urmila replied. "Who will do the housework? Who will wash the linen? Who will carry the patient's bundle? The work can be shared and an answer found. But why must the answer always be one woman's body?" Saraswati did not laugh at this. She said to her daughter, "Come, let us go home. The work will be there again in the morning."

Meanwhile Champa had come out of the hospital. She had been sitting there since nightfall for her mother's tests. Seeing Saraswati, she said, "I was supposed to give you your ribbon yesterday, but I could not get home." "Give it to me tomorrow," Saraswati answered. "This is no hour to demand a debt from someone who has sat awake all night." Champa glanced at her phone in her pocket, then slipped it away again. She indicated the faces of those standing by the hospital door; one person had lifted a piece of cloth to give a relative some privacy. "Everyone asks for news here," Champa said, "but not every piece of news belongs to everyone." Moving towards her bundles, Urmila said only, "You decide when to tell your own story."

Night had deepened by the time the receipt for the bundles was written. Urmila sorted the clean linen and checked the time of handover. The additional night hours were entered in the register, but the space for payment remained blank. "I can attest to the hours," the employee said. "I cannot fix the rate." Urmila accepted that limit, but she would not put her thumbprint against an empty space. She wrote "Payment undecided" and asked for a copy of the paper. The employee hesitated at first, then gave her one. One answer had been secured; the next dispute still lay ahead.

Urmila remembered the coming Kartik festival, the day of honouring the ghat. She wanted that year's celebration to be more than flowers and lamps arranged by the water: she wanted a board displaying the working hours of all those who washed the linen. How many pieces each person had carried, which paths had been closed, who had found a replacement during the night watch —these things ought to be read aloud before the people. Then she remembered that months still remained before the festival. It was a comfort in the middle of the night to imagine better arrangements for the future; it did nothing, however, to free her body from the weariness of today.

On her way back, Urmila saw Saraswati's daughter reading a book beside the road. Beneath a faulty light bulb the girl narrowed her eyes to make out the words. Saraswati told her not to read in such darkness. "Once the work starts at home, I shall have no time," the daughter said. Saraswati did not close her book. "Then we shall divide up the hours at home," she said. "But for now, watch where you are walking." Urmila remembered the fresh line in her register: one counts time not only to claim payment, but also to make room for one's own life.

In Ayodhya, as evening fell, Urmila sat with a friend in a small courtyard. The commotion of departure had subsided. Her friend was unstringing a garland of wilted flowers and arranging leaves upon a new thread. "Why are your eyes red?" she asked. "I have been awake," Urmila said. "And I have wept

a little too." Instead of replying, the friend loosened a knot between the leaves. Urmila spoke again. "People will say Urmila spent so many years in patient endurance. But today I shall get through only tonight. Tomorrow night I shall face tomorrow."

"What used to give you pleasure?" her friend asked. Urmila was taken aback. Then she answered, "Catching the wrong note in the middle of Shrutakirti's song; arguing with Mandavi about the colours of flowers; sewing a little garment with my own hands." Smiling, her friend asked, "Then why should all that end?" Urmila rose and gathered up the thread. "It will not end. When there is need, I shall work; when my heart wishes it, I shall sing too. I shall not surrender my right to the space between the two."

In Videhapur, Urmila returned home before dawn. Inside the veranda Sarita was lighting a small electric lamp, not an oil lamp. Naira opened the door and asked, "Did the linen reach them?" Urmila held out the receipt. "It reached them. The time is recorded. The money is not here yet." Looking at the paper, Naira said, "You must keep this copy." "I shall," Urmila replied. "But right now there is something else I must do." "What?" Sarita asked. Urmila laughed. "Sleep."

Without a word, Naira drew the curtain across the window. She did not open the notebook containing the entry recording Sarita's death or the page bearing twenty-seven names. No new clue had been found at this dawn; nevertheless, they had prevented a night's labour from being swallowed by a false daytime account. The duplicate receipt lay safe in Urmila's bag. What her body needed now was not another paper, but sleep. Outside, the sound of the first vehicle starting up rose into the morning. Inside, for the first time, Urmila closed her eyes without anxiety.

Chapter 19 · Champa’s Message

In the light of early morning, Champa was wiping a fingerprint from the screen of her phone. She had scarcely slept since returning from the hospital the night before. She had already written down the time for her mother's medicine, how much she might save on fares, and the hour she had to be at work. Only then did she open a private message on her phone. It contained few words, though they had taken her a long time to compose: she wished to spend her next day off wandering through the market with someone, eating hot jalebis and sitting for a while without anyone watching over her. No one had bestowed this wish upon her as charity. She wanted to claim a single day from the midst of her own labour.

Ruhani appeared at the doorway. “The hospital again today?” she asked. Champa closed the phone. “I have to collect Mother's test report. Work first, then the hospital.” Ruhani stood holding the shelter's account book. In her hand was the acknowledgment of the objection they had lodged at the previous meeting: the private details of Champa's mother's treatment were not to be read aloud. “Keep this copy with you,” Ruhani said. Taking care of the paper, Champa replied, “An acknowledgment does not mean they have accepted what we asked. But a paper made on my behalf ought, at the very least, to remain with me.”

On the shelter's little veranda, Rukhsana was taking the pot of rice off the fire. Champa tasted a mouthful and said it needed more salt. Rukhsana immediately held out the bowl. “Put more in your own plate; I won't put it in everyone's rice at once.” Ruhani burst out laughing, and Champa laughed too. The ordinary exchange lifted a little of the night's exhaustion. Reading the notice of the meeting hung beside the door, Rukhsana said that the community building would hold a public review that day of the previous week's assistance and medical receipts. Champa decided to leave her mother's private papers at home and take only her own receipt for travel expenses.

At the town's community building, rainwater was dripping not from the roof but from a broken drain beside the steps. A woman from the cleaning crew had placed a bucket at the entrance to intercept the water. Inside, two kinds of papers lay on the meeting table: a statement of public expenditure and individual applications for assistance. Naira had arrived early and reminded the secretary that placing the two kinds of documents before the same meeting did not make both of them public. “We'll examine everything in front of those who need to read it,” the secretary said. “Examination is not the same as reading aloud,” Naira replied. “First decide where the boundary lies.”

When Champa came in, Ruhani indicated a bench at the back. At the previous meeting, Ruhani's name had appeared on the blue-covered chair, though the chair conferred no voting right. Today she did not ask for the

place bearing her name. Looking at the papers laid out in front of her, Champa asked, “What am I supposed to do at this hearing?” “Speak for yourself where the matter concerns you,” Ruhani said. “My name does not stand in for your consent.” Champa looked at her. This promise had been made inside the shelter before; today it would be tested before other people.

Across the table, Karim Dafali was adjusting the strap of his dholak. He had received the wages owed for singing at the Phagun folk-recital, but the cost of repainting and refurbishing the instrument remained unpaid. Two young men approached him near the door with a handbill proposing that he write a campaign song for the forthcoming local election. “Everyone's attention is on Champa now,” one of them said. “Take a couple of lines from her message and make a fierce song out of them. You'll draw a crowd.” Karim handed the sheet back. “Since when did something said to her in private become merchandise for my drum?”

Annoyed, the young man asked, “Don't you ever sing political songs?” “I do,” Karim answered. “I sing about roads, wages and crooked accounts. Not about stealing a woman's private words and making her a laughingstock.” The young man tried to lay an advance payment on the table. Karim did not touch it. “I'll pay for the skin of my dholak out of what I earn,” he said, “not out of the price of someone's humiliation.” Both men went away. Karim did not know for certain who had sent them with the proposal, and he would not attach anyone's name to a mere guess.

The chairperson first ordered the public expenditure to be read aloud. The cleaning crew's wages, the cost of the drainage survey and the fare for bringing medicines to the shelter were announced separately. Champa examined her travel receipt: the date was correct, but part of the amount was still outstanding. She raised her hand. The secretary said questions would be taken at the end. Meanwhile, a man in the front row lifted a small sheet of paper. “We should also hear an example of assistance being misused. Look at what a beneficiary writes.” He handed the paper to the chairperson.

The chairperson began to read. At the first two words, a chill passed through Champa's body. They were the words of the private message she had sent from her own phone, but the lines in the middle had been removed. Even the name of the person to whom she had written was printed only in part. Her ordinary wish to go out and eat jalebis was turning, in the mouths of those listening, into laughter and insinuation. “She wants help with treatment, and money for outings too?” someone said. Another person laughed. Champa's shoulders tightened. She could not understand how the page had found its way out of her phone.

“Stop,” Champa said, rising to her feet. The chairperson did not stop reading. A public accusation had been made, he said, and she would have an opportunity to answer it. “I will answer,” Champa said again, “but first stop reading out my stolen private words. This is not a statement I consented to make.” Her voice was raised, but she was not abusing anyone. Some people in the meeting took offence at the sound of her protest. Naira did not rush to the

microphone. Instead she asked the secretary who had authorised the paper's public circulation and where the original was. The secretary said nothing.

Ruhani rose from her bench and came before the chairperson. “Champa is here herself,” she said. “She has a voice of her own. Reading out her private message is not the same as taking her testimony.” The chairperson asked why the message should be concealed if it was true. “I am not objecting to the truth,” Champa replied. “I will answer for what brought me here: my mother's treatment and the accounts of my wages. My love, my day off and the life of the person at the other end of my phone do not belong to this assembly.”

An elderly member asked, “Do you admit that in this message you said you wanted to meet someone you know?” Champa looked directly at him. “I wrote that I wanted to meet someone. That is my own wish. I have no obligation to tell the assembly the name of someone dear to me. I applied for assistance; I did not promise to make every letter of my life public.” For the first time, the room fell silent for a little while. Champa did not mistake that silence for approval. She simply finished what she had to say.

Karim picked up his dholak and set it behind him. The young man came over and murmured, “See? That could have been a song.” “My drum will not sound today,” Karim replied. “Until this meeting returns to its proper business, another song would only turn people into spectators of this humiliation.” Going up to the chairperson, he reported that he had rejected the proposal for a song based on a private message. “Do not put my name down for anyone's campaign,” he said. “If you want a song, read out the wages still owed today. I'll decide on the tune separately.” His refusal did not put an end to song; it drew a line between who owned it and what it was meant to do.

In an outer room of the building, Rahina Thakurai earned a little money copying papers and binding them into books. On her table lay an old paper cutter, thread, glue and a price list that gave separate charges for making copies. A man from the office had asked her that morning to duplicate some pages. She had no authority to read and verify the original papers, but she entered the number of copies and the time of delivery in her register. Hearing Champa's voice rising from the meeting room, she stopped the cutter. The size of the paper being passed around at the inner table seemed familiar, but she did not assume that two sheets of the same size must have come from the same original.

When Champa came outside, her hand shook as she held a glass of water. Rahina vacated her chair. “Sit here,” she said. “No one takes photographs in this room.” “Do you make copies of papers?” Champa asked. Rahina nodded. “Yes. I record the price and the time; I don't sell the truth of whatever is written on a sheet.” Champa said, “I want the original sequence of my words kept safe, and I want to know how many copies were distributed.” Rahina replied that she could account for all the copying jobs that had come to her, but could not claim to account for every copy made in the town.

Rahina opened her ledger and showed Champa a line: the morning's copying job, the number of sheets, and the reference number left for the recipient. She did not hide the box for the name with her finger. She said only that she would not give out someone's private contact address without authority, though she would produce the register to an authorised person investigating the complaint. Only then could Champa finish her glass of water. Rahina's family had advised her to keep away from quarrels of this kind; for now she made no accusation against her family. Keeping an honest account of her work and accusing someone of causing humiliation were two different courses.

When Naira came outside, Champa asked her directly, “Have you seen what was on my phone?” “I heard the opening part of what was read at the meeting,” Naira said. “I have not seen the original message.” Champa took out her phone, then checked herself. “I am not going to show you the whole of my private conversation,” she said. “But, to compare the lines that were cut, I will show the parts I choose to whoever is given responsibility for the investigation.” “That is your decision,” Naira replied. “There is no need to hurry and call my conjecture evidence.”

The three women went back inside. Ruhani first reached toward the secretary to ask for the paper, but Champa put out her own hand. She laid a written petition on the meeting table. It made three demands: that the public reading and circulation of the stolen message stop at once; that the copy which had been read be preserved rather than destroyed, so that its source and the omissions could be examined; and that the minutes state explicitly that Champa had not consented to the reading. Champa signed her name below the petition. Ruhani's name was entered only as that of a witness who had accompanied her.

Kabir was outside the building in the legal-aid room, examining another applicant's papers. Naira asked him only about the procedure for submitting a petition. Kabir came in and told Champa, “If you wish, a copy of this complaint can be given to the appropriate officer to prevent further unauthorised circulation of private information. I do not yet know who stole it.” Champa added a separate line to her petition: “The right to seek legal remedy is reserved.” Kabir did not add his own name beneath her signature; he merely told her which counter was the proper place to submit the copy.

“If you stop the copies, how will there be an investigation?” the chairperson asked. “Keeping something safe for an investigation and distributing it around the meeting hall are not the same thing,” Champa answered. Naira explained the evidentiary distinctions between the edited copy read from the dais, the original conversation on the phone, and the process by which the paper had been made. None of the three, by itself, established who had stolen the message. The chairperson initially proposed putting the question to the assembly, but the secretary reminded him that a majority of spectators could not acquire ownership of someone's private words by voting for the right to read them.

Two members of the assembly objected. One argued that an accounting of public assistance must also examine the conduct of the people receiving it. “Show me where the conditions of assistance have been written down,” Champa said. “If the receipt for treatment is false, examine it. The fact that I think of eating jalebis on my day off does not prove that the price of medicine has been falsified.” This time Rukhsana spoke from the back. “If you want the bill for jalebis, get it from the market. Why are you attaching it to a medical prescription?” Some people laughed, but this time their laughter was not directed at Champa.

The secretary recorded the receipt of the petition. The chairperson announced that no more of the page would be read at that day's meeting and asked for the distributed copies to be returned. There was no evidence that this request brought every copy back from the hands into which it had passed. The sheet on the table was placed in an envelope, sealed with the date and the signatures of two people present. Champa turned the envelope over in her hands; she did not ask to read the paper inside it. She asked only whether the count of copies, responsibility for the envelope and the date of the next inquiry would be clearly entered in the minutes. The answer was that they would now be written down.

Rahina came in and laid on the secretary's table a certificate bearing the reference number from her copying register. “One copy of this morning's job went to this office,” she said, “but I will not say, without checking, that it was the very page read here.” The secretary took the certificate. “Why involve yourself in this dispute?” a member asked. “Anyone paid to make copies of papers is also responsible for saying how many were made,” Rahina answered calmly. “My family's name may mean something to you; it is no substitute for my accounts.” Taking back her register, she returned to the outer room.

After the meeting, Karim found Champa on the building's steps. He asked whether he should attach the campaign-song proposal to her complaint. “Keep a record of the pressure placed upon your own work,” Champa said. “But do not make the matter of a song in my name public on your own initiative.” Karim agreed. He put the handbill into his ledger and noted as well that he had refused the advance payment. He had not been paid the hire charge for his dholak that day; he asked the secretary for a written statement of what was still owed and went away. Choosing the right work did not make the question of one's livelihood disappear.

As Champa stepped outside the building, a message arrived on her phone from the person to whom she had written that morning. It was a brief question: “Is your day all right?” For a long time she looked at the screen before replying. That person's name had been printed incompletely before the assembly; they too might have to face embarrassment and danger. Champa wrote: “Something wrong happened to me. I won't explain it all now. When we meet, I'll tell you myself.” Afterwards she did not switch off the phone. She simply put it in her pocket. She still wanted to speak with the person she loved.

Back at the shelter, Ruhani asked Champa, “How many people should I tell about this?” “Only as many as the work requires,” Champa said. “Ask me before telling anyone news of my mother.” Ruhani nodded. Then Champa said, “You spoke for me today, but when I read my own petition, you stepped back. I liked that.” “I still have to learn how to step back,” Ruhani replied. There was neither an abdication of leadership nor a proclamation of her own importance in the answer: it was the difficult practice of standing beside someone.

That night Rukhsana served not jalebis with the rice but flattened rice and curd. Champa laughed. “Now everyone will think of my affairs whenever they hear the word jalebi.” “The wish you had this morning will not be turned into a thing for people to insult,” Rukhsana said. “When you really get a day off, eat jalebis bought with your own earnings.” Champa picked up her plate without replying. The next cost of her mother's medicine, her wages and the rent on her home were still present at that plate; yet she also had a right to keep one small happiness for the future.

When Naira reached home, she showed Sarita the acknowledgment from the meeting. Sarita was cutting marela greens that day. “Whose private words were read from the platform?” she asked. “An edited version of Champa's message,” Naira said, and no more. “She submitted the request to stop it herself.” Sarita resumed cutting the greens. “Do you have her whole message?” “No.” “Then don't fill that empty space with guesses of your own.” Hearing her mother, Naira opened her notebook. For the first time, she felt no need to add a new name to it.

Naira wrote two separate entries: “Copy read at meeting: original unknown,” and “Objection: received with Champa's signature.” She left a third line blank: “Identity of person who made the copy.” That empty space marked a lack of evidence, not an ornament of mystery. A copy of Champa's petition would enter the inquiry papers only with her permission; it would be wrong to bind it into the same file as Sarita's page of twenty-seven names. Naira closed the notebook. The question of Sarita's being alive was still unresolved, but that day a small obstacle had been placed in the path of those who would treat a person's private voice as the property of an assembly.

Far away, inside the community building, the secretary was putting the sealed envelope into a separate compartment of a cupboard. The signatures he could see upon the envelope did not tell him where the first copy had come from. In the outer room, Rahina had spread open a page of her copying register to dry; she slipped a dry cloth beneath it to keep the ink from running in the damp left by the rain. The Dafali's dholak was silent that day. Champa was back at the shelter, counting the little containers of her mother's medicines. Across the town, many papers were being put in their proper places; no one's ownership of a life could be contained wholly within them.

Chapter 20 · Premature Publication

The fine rain had stopped, but the outer steps of the town's community hall were still slippery. When the cleaning crew arrived at dawn with old bamboo brooms to sweep away the water, they found two papers from the previous night's meeting soaked in the drain. One was a statement of public expenditure; on the other, someone's name had been half erased. The woman cleaning the steps held her hand over that second sheet for a moment. Then, without trying to read it, she placed it in the office's locked box. Protecting the paper was her work; deciding the course of the life written upon it was not.

Naira had slept little that morning. Champa's message had been read aloud, and even after the objection had been entered in the meeting minutes, the sound of laughter remained in her ears. Sarita was taking the pot of rice water off the stove. "If testimony is urgently needed," Naira asked, "and the person who can give it is afraid, what should one do first?" Sarita covered the pot. "First understand whether the person giving the testimony is taking the same risk as you." Naira did not reply. In her bag was a letter from Mahesh Mandal, and she was impatient to unfold it.

Mahesh had asked to meet behind a small repair workshop across the railway tracks. He had not wanted his name associated with the dispute before. Some years earlier, while overseeing temporary arrangements for moving goods from a warehouse, he had been given the task of recording the times at which vehicles entered. He had kept notes of times and places; his own eyes had not seen what was inside the consignments. He made that distinction three times at their first meeting. But he remembered vehicles and labourers passing at night along the road behind the warehouse—a road shown on the municipal map as an ordinary dead-end lane.

The rasp of metal sheets being ground came from the workshop. Mahesh and Naira sat not in an inner room but beneath an open-sided shed. Mahesh took a letter from his pocket. "You may read the times I have written down," he said. "But make this public only after my home and my family's movements are secure. My daughter's route to school has not changed. I am trying to arrange a move. For now, no name, no voice, not even details of what I was doing that day that would allow people to identify me."

Naira read the first page. Mahesh had signed a limited consent: the municipal committee could be notified so that the road behind the warehouse might be inspected in general, but neither the witness's identity nor the details of his testimony were to be made public until his safety was assured. The final line read, 'No conclusions beyond what I myself witnessed are to be attributed to me.' The words 'may be notified' in the first line caught Naira's eye. She read the last line too, but her attention did not rest upon it.

"If a general notice goes out today, the channel may be measured sooner," Naira said. Mahesh shook his head. "A request for inspection can be submitted

within the committee today. But my timings, the kind of work I did, and the direction of my house must not be put together in a news report yet. Even if you omit my name, people who know a few things will recognise me." Naira said she would be careful. Mahesh laid a finger on the page of her notebook and repeated, "What I mean by caution must not count for less than what you mean by it." He did not smile.

Meanwhile, on the far side of the shed, Chandra Badi stood with her instrument case beside her. She earned her living by playing and singing; for the town's folk-recitation programme she had been promised payment for three songs. The case held small cymbals, a percussion instrument wrapped in cloth, and a copy of her contract kept safe from the wet papers. An office clerk had told her that she was a guest at the programme, not someone entitled to payment. Chandra had replied, "The songs I sang were not guests. They were my work. If my fee was fixed before everyone, put it in the accounts."

Naira met her at the doorway. Chandra held out the contract. The three songs and the hours of rehearsal were entered separately; the space for travel expenses was blank. "They summon us as singers for their meetings," Chandra said, "and then make up stories about our lives as they please. Some imagine that gives them the right to question me about my body. I sell my art, not the history of my body." Naira examined the sheet and said plainly that she could not make the office pay, but could show her how to register a claim for the money owed in the open accounts. "I know the way," Chandra answered. "Just write that I made the demand myself."

Chandra's fellow singer came from behind with a needle and thread. The torn strap of the instrument case needed mending. Chandra set the contract on the table and held the strap herself. "Without this case, I cannot even carry my instrument to the stage," she said. "And if the money doesn't come now, what about the next programme?" her companion asked. "I will not abandon the stage," Chandra replied, "but I will not sing again without written terms." There was more confidence in her craft than anger in her voice. The strap was sewn; the outstanding payment remained unsettled.

Mahesh was leaving the shed. Chandra merely greeted him as he passed; she did not ask why he had come. Naira was glad of that ordinary silence. Here, no one assumed ownership of another person's secrets. Yet in Naira's mind the mouth of the blocked drainage channel, the old map of Purnadhar, Aditi's postponed inspection, and the approaching municipal meeting were all moving together. Every day's delay meant another day with the outlet blocked. She felt that if something appeared in print, the officials would be stirred into action. Within that thought she gradually pushed aside the need to wait for Mahesh to move his family.

At noon, in the office's small computer room, Naira was preparing the next issue of the citizens' bulletin. At first she wrote only about the discrepancies between public maps and the demand for a fresh survey of the channel. These matters had already been raised in an open meeting. Then she remembered the vehicle timings Mahesh had recorded. She added a sentence: 'According to

a former worker associated with repair work behind the western warehouse, not all night-time entries are recorded in the municipal register.' There was no name, but the type of work, the time, and the place had appeared together. Having written that much, she stopped. Mahesh's warning came clearly back to her.

A colleague read the draft and asked, "Do you have permission to publish this testimony?" Naira opened Mahesh's letter at its first line. "There is permission to give general information," she said. The colleague read the last line. "But it also says the information is to be made public after security is in place." "I've left out his name," Naira replied. "It is a general fact." The colleague proposed printing only the maps and the request for a site inspection, and holding back the details of the testimony until the next issue. "If we publish that little," Naira said, "the officials will bury the file again." It was a prediction; she had no definite evidence that an immediate delay would follow.

A headline glowed on the computer screen: 'A Night Road Behind the Blocked Channel?' Even with its question mark, the direction of the headline was plain. Naira shortened the wording and removed one of the times, but left 'former worker' and 'repair work' intact. She pressed Send. The page went into the town's public-information group, gradually reaching the phones of those who kept copies of its posts. Printed sheets could be counted; she no longer had any means of counting the households to which the copies shared by phone might travel.

In the citizens' bulletin group, someone also tried to attach a photograph of Champa at the meeting to Naira's post. Naira asked for it to be removed and wrote explicitly that Champa's private message and the inquiry into the channel were separate matters. Even then she did not feel the full weight of her own contradiction. She was protecting Champa's photograph from unauthorised use while having herself published details that could lead to Mahesh's identification. Applying what one knew of another person's rights to one's own sudden enthusiasm was proving the hardest thing of all.

The first response came from a schoolteacher in town: why did the two municipal maps give different names to the same road? The second came from a fish-market shopkeeper: what effect did the night traffic have on the fishery's waters? The third was an accusation; its author declared that everyone employed at the warehouse was a thief. Naira immediately wrote beneath it that the documents supported no such charge. Yet the details she had brought together in her original post began taking on forms of their own in conversations beyond it. One person was already circulating the story with 'the man who exposed the secret' in place of 'former worker'.

None of the talk among Mahesh's former colleagues at the repair workshop across the tracks amounted to verified testimony. One man said that every vehicle travelling at night must be illegal; another answered that, during the flood season, even permitted vehicles sometimes travelled at unusual hours. To Mahesh, both statements sounded dangerous. He had written down the times

he had seen in his records; people were now adding cargo, motive, and crime to those times. No explicit accusation had yet been made against him, but he could hear that the manner of the talk had changed.

Mahesh called that afternoon. His voice was subdued. “You published what I told you?” “I did not give your name,” Naira said. Mahesh was silent for a few moments. “Does someone who knows I used to keep the night-time records for that stretch need my name? An old colleague rang to ask whether I had made a statement against the town. My home is still there. My daughter will come back from school along that same road today.” The pen slipped from Naira’s hand and fell on the table. She did not pick it up.

“I will take down the post,” Naira said. “Do, if you can,” Mahesh replied. “But how will you erase it from the memory of those who have seen it? Tell me first: did you read the last line of my letter?” “Yes.” “Then what was it you did not understand?” There was no abuse in the question. Naira searched for an answer. At last she said, “I treated my own haste as more important than your permission.” Mahesh did not hang up. “Calling it a mistake does not settle the matter,” he said. “The road my family takes home has not changed today.”

Naira first posted a correction to the original notice: the witness’s essential conditions for making these details public had not been met; the details were not to be treated as testimony properly authorised for public reliance. She removed the original post but recorded the time of its removal. Then she preserved the draft of the report, its published version, the correction, and Mahesh’s initial consent in separate files. The page containing his private address did not go into the public records. She understood clearly now that deleting the original draft to conceal her error would be wrong as well.

Naira went to Kabir and asked, “What is the first thing we must do now to keep Mahesh safe?” Kabir said they must not make his family’s whereabouts public without his permission, and must ask Mahesh himself through whom he wanted safe travel and temporary accommodation arranged. If a formal request for police or administrative protection was to be submitted, the risks and uncertainties must be recorded in writing. “I will not write a letter saying protection has been provided when it has not,” he made clear. “And you must give a separate account of what you did in publishing the report. Do not call that Mahesh’s consent now.”

Mahesh agreed to meet Kabir that evening, but told Naira not to come to his house immediately. “My family are angry at present,” he said on the phone. “If you come and tell us how distressed you are, we will find ourselves comforting you. First let us decide where we can go and where we cannot.” This time Naira did not interrupt him. She repeated his wishes to Kabir word for word. Work on the application began, but the space for the family’s location was left blank; Mahesh would fill it in himself. The blank was no one’s oversight.

At Mahesh’s home, as the evening meal was being prepared, his daughter put her schoolbag down beside the door. Mahesh moved it farther inside. His

wife asked, “The paper you showed us said our safety had to come first, didn’t it?” “It did,” Mahesh answered. “Then just because we are now agreeing to discuss leaving home,” she said, “that does not mean leaving is easy.” For the first time, they made a list of possible routes. They did not settle where they would go, but every member of the family now had a voice at the table where the decision would be made.

That evening Chandra returned to the folk-recitation committee’s office about her payment. Outside, two men were examining a screenshot of Naira’s deleted post on a mobile phone. One stopped Chandra. “You people travel from village to village. Have you heard anything about where Mahesh is going?” Chandra understood that her work on the road was being turned into a cheap means of spying. “I travel for performances,” she replied directly. “I have no right to ask where another person’s family intends to go.” Then she went inside to ask for a receipt for the amount owed her.

The clerk again told her that her songs had been performed for the public good, so her fee would be considered once the grant arrived. Chandra laid the contract on the table. “Which rule says that, for the public good, the artist must go hungry?” The clerk said her name was on the guest list. With her finger Chandra pointed out the hours of rehearsal, the journey, and the three songs, each entered separately. The office did not pay her full fee that day, but acknowledged the debt and gave her a written receipt. Chandra made two copies: one for her instrument case, the other for the committee’s accounts. “When I sing again,” she said, “I will settle the conditions for both the stage and the payment beforehand.”

Watching this, Naira remembered the last line of Mahesh’s letter once more. Permission was not a copy of someone’s debt: it came with conditions. If the committee could not fix the price of Chandra’s songs and impose it upon her, how had Naira assumed the right to measure Mahesh’s risk by herself? She kept that question to herself. She did not take up Chandra’s working time by telling her the story of her own mistake in publishing the report. As they came outside, she asked only, “Did you get a copy of the receipt?” Chandra rested a hand on her case. “I got the receipt. Not the money. I will not mistake one for the other.”

That night, at Sarita’s house, Sanket was taking wires from an old radio and fitting them to a small speaker. When Naira came inside, he asked, “Why was your post removed from the town group today?” “I published details of a witness’s statement without full permission,” Naira said, “details by which the man could be identified.” Sanket put down the wire and looked at her. “You ask me before publishing a picture from my phone. Why did that rule not apply to Mahesh?” “I thought acting quickly would get something done,” Naira said. Sanket’s reply was brief: “Thinking a thing will get done and its actually being done are different.”

Sarita was sitting on the veranda, sorting rice through a sieve. She heard everything. Naira thought of defending herself by speaking of the danger posed by the blocked channel, but Sarita asked first, “Had you given Mahesh

reason to believe that he would remain in control of decisions about his own home?" Naira lowered her head. "It is wrong to hide the truth," Sarita said. "But it is wrong, too, to put another person's body and home in danger in the name of truth. One mistake cannot pay off the debt of another." She did not stop sorting the rice.

Naira took out a copy of Mahesh's letter. She marked its four conditions: arrangements to secure the household; the family's consent; limits on what might be made public; and a final check of the original statement. Not one of the conditions had been fulfilled. She could have said that the error was small because 'the name was not printed'; but the question of how easily people could work out Mahesh's identity demanded an answer. In her notebook she wrote: 'Publication was my decision; conditional permission was not full permission.'

Meanwhile, a notice arrived from Aditi's office: time would be set aside at the next meeting for a fresh survey of the mouth of the drainage channel. The notice did not say that Naira's public report or Mahesh's testimony had prompted the decision. Gomati's site application, Tara's markings, and Hira's water measurements had already been submitted. For a moment Naira felt as though she had found a justification for the usefulness of her post. Then she read the paper carefully. It proved nothing about the necessity of placing Mahesh at risk. A proper administrative step and a wrongful publication could take place at the same time.

Kabir sent a message: Mahesh and his family were considering temporary arrangements for alternative routes of travel; their location must not be written down. Official protection had not yet been confirmed. Naira replied only to acknowledge receipt. She picked up the phone, wanting to apologise to Mahesh again, but remembered his earlier refusal. She would not ask the person she had forced into difficulty to take on the further work of listening to her guilt. She did not yet know what Mahesh's family would decide that night.

Padma had been invited to examine several fragments of audio for an inquiry the next day. Short recordings were circulating among many phones: who had said what at the meeting involving Champa, when the microphone had been switched off, and how much of Mahesh's statement was being circulated separately. Padma told Naira, "Before you write down what someone has been heard to say, you need the whole sequence of events. You cannot determine the intended meaning of a person's words from a cut-off fragment." "This time I will wait until the original recording is available," Naira replied. Her words were a promise; they could not erase what she had already done.

In the last watch of the night, Chandra opened her instrument case and tightened a loose string. In rehearsal, half a line of the song kept going wrong, but she did not immediately cut it away. When the breaths before and after a note fell into place, the meaning of the phrase changed. Elsewhere, Naira sat looking at the times of her original publication and its correction

on the computer screen. The letter containing Mahesh's conditions was preserved separately. Outside, a thin stream of water ran through an old drain. Its direction needed to be measured to be known; there was no need to endanger anyone in order to make that measurement.

Chapter 21 · Whose Voice?

The fan was turning in the western room of the community building, but its low drone made the little red light on the recording device on the table seem to tremble. Padma did not sit behind the table. First she opened one shutter of the window halfway; then she turned the meeting chairs so that whoever spoke would have the light on their face. “Listening to a voice is not a matter for the ears alone,” she said. “Those who understand by watching lips, those who ask questions in signs, must have room to answer too.” The secretary gathered up his notebook and phone and left the middle chair vacant.

Outside, preparations were under way for the annual public recitation, open accounts and songs. On the veranda, children were making paper pennants; in one corner Rukhsana was seeing that the smoke from the cooking fire had a way out; and Hamida Miriasin was protecting the pages of her songbook from the wind. This year's gathering was to hear readings from the water register, the accounts of unpaid wages and the minutes of the previous meeting. Yet for three days the greatest excitement had been over two short audio recordings. In one, something resembling Ruhani's voice could be heard; in the other, an incomplete fragment of a statement by Mahesh. No one possessed the entire recording, and still people were pronouncing their final judgments.

When Naira entered, Padma drew out a chair for her but did not reach towards the phone on the table. “Are you present in this room as a writer, or as the person who owns the testimony?” she asked. “I violated Mahesh's conditions in my last publication,” Naira replied. “I want to help with the inquiry now.” Padma said quietly, “Then first acknowledge that your guilt is not evidence either. We shall listen to the voice on the terms belonging to that voice.” On the first page of her notebook Naira wrote: statement, inference, permission. This time she did not fill in a person's name in advance beside any of the lines.

Padma had an old notebook devoted to listening. On the left-hand page she wrote what had been said; on the right, the circumstances in which it had been spoken—whether someone had stopped midway to ask for water, whether someone had failed to hear a question, whether someone had answered before another had finished speaking. She remembered the first day of her training, when a teacher had told her that an interpreter's gravest error was not merely to omit words, but to erase a disagreement between two people. The warning had seemed difficult to understand then. Today the two phones lying on the table made its meaning plain.

The meeting secretary arrived with two phones and a little memory card in a paper envelope. He said that in the first clip circulating through the public group, a woman's voice could be heard saying, ‘Read it before everyone,’ followed by the words ‘Champa's private matter.’ People had joined the two

together and were saying that Ruhani had ordered Champa's private message to be made public. "Who verified that those two fragments belong to the same sentence?" Padma asked. "That is how people understand it," the secretary replied. Padma wrote 'That is how people understand it' in her notebook and put a question mark beside it. "Now write down where the original recording is."

From an office cupboard the secretary brought out the recording device used on the day of the meeting. After a long discussion, the chairperson had authorised the original file to be heard in the room, not for copies of it to be distributed publicly. Padma read the terms of that permission carefully. She made clear that the presence of a file on the office machine did not, by itself, establish its complete authenticity; its sequence of creation had to be checked against other recordings and the minutes. She did not remove the memory card and put it in her own phone. The original would be played on the office machine itself, while the starting times and pauses were entered on paper.

Champa and Ruhani came in. Standing beside the door, Champa asked, "Are you going to play my private message to everyone again?" "No," Padma answered. "In this inquiry we shall listen to what was said from the dais, not to the message inside your phone. If it ever becomes necessary to compare the original conversation, you will decide who may see how much of it." Champa sat down beside the table. Ruhani did not wait for the secretary to signal where she should sit. She pulled up an empty chair and said, "I shall hear the whole sentence behind the accusation against me. But answering an accusation does not mean reopening the discussion of Champa's private life."

Padma played the circulating clip first. There was a knocking sound, as of a hand striking the table; some words were loud, others thin and faint. 'Read it before everyone' could be heard, and then another fragment joined it without so much as the space of a breath. Ruhani's face showed her weariness. "I am listening to my own voice as though it were separate from my mind," she said. "We shall not settle whose voice it is yet," Padma replied. "First we must examine the order of the sentences." She asked the secretary where the meeting clock, the changes of subject recorded in the minutes, and the time shown by the machine corresponded with one another.

The office's original audio file began to play. First came Champa's request; then the sound of the secretary turning papers; then Ruhani's distinct voice: "Read the rules before everyone—the rules under which private papers were brought out." A few moments later she spoke again: "Do not read Champa's private matter before everyone. Do not make the rules and a person's private life into one thing." In the circulating clip, the opening of the first sentence had been removed, and the latter part of the second, including the word 'not', had been cut away. Padma stopped the original recording. Champa had been holding her hand tightly clenched; now she opened it and laid it upon the table.

The secretary opened the attendance register and checked the time of the meeting. At that moment an employee had gone into another room to fetch

water and had moved away from the microphone; consequently, half a minute of sound in the original recording was indistinct. Instead of concealing the gap, Padma marked it on the paper. “We have enough corresponding evidence to establish the sequence of the two sentences,” she said, “but we will not write down who said what during this interval.” Naira saw how much patience it took to acknowledge incomplete evidence. In her old haste to fill a page, she would never have left such a space unfilled.

Naira was about to say, “Then the accusation was false.” Padma stopped her. “The full sentences have yielded one meaning here. To claim that we have proved who made the edited file, or that anyone acted with malicious intent, would be another judgment altogether.” Naira struck through a line in her notebook and wrote it again: The alleged support by Ruhani for reading a private message is inconsistent with the original recording available; grounds exist for suspending the accusation. Padma agreed to that wording, but would not allow her to write that the original recording was complete.

The secretary opened the minutes from that meeting. One line read, ‘Ruhani's request that the rules be read’; another, ‘Objection to the reading of Champa's private message.’ Between them a word had been crossed out in the secretary's pencil. “Who crossed out this word?” Padma asked. “I may have corrected the writing when I made a fair copy at the end of the day,” the secretary said. “I cannot remember exactly now.” Ruhani stared at the sheet. “If a person cannot remember, no one should be found guilty on the strength of a guess,” she said. “But both the first draft of the minutes and the later clean copy must be preserved.” The secretary agreed.

The clip on the second phone contained Mahesh's indistinct voice. Someone had circulated it in the public group with the caption ‘All the night vehicles are illegal.’ Mahesh's voice did not appear in the original recording of the meeting at all: he had not spoken from the dais that day. Padma pointed out the difference. “This must be a voice recorded somewhere else. It cannot be verified against this office file.” Remembering Mahesh's conditions for his safety, Naira fell silent. Then she said, “I shall make no public response to this second clip until Mahesh himself chooses a safe way to proceed.” Ruhani answered, “Silence is no longer a remedy for everything. But we must understand who has the right to decide another person's silence.”

Hamida appeared in the doorway. She had heard something of the examination of the recordings, but she had come carrying her own songbook. A young organiser wanted her to alter two lines of an old wedding song and perform them so as to raise a laugh at Champa's humiliation. “If I sing it, people will think I agree,” Hamida said. “If I refuse, they will say the song belongs to the village—who is the singer to forbid it?” She showed them the fee previously agreed upon in writing. The organiser had reduced it by half, calling the performance ‘traditional service’. “These are two different questions,” Padma said: “permission to use the song, and what is owed for singing it. Each calls for its own decision.”

Champa looked at Hamida's book. “I am glad you will not sing a song naming me,” she said, “but sing the wedding song you yourself choose. Your livelihood must not be stopped in order to stop my humiliation.” Hamida smiled. “Songs are my livelihood, but not every word is merchandise for the market. Once I sing for a daughter leaving her parents' home, the family keeps the meaning of those lines for itself. If someone later turns them into a drumbeat for humiliating another, I can change my tune again.” She closed her book.

By midday the open seating for the public recitation had been arranged. On one side of the little stage stood a clay water jar; on the other lay a thick account register. Ramani Bind wanted to read out a written statement that the complete lease for the fishing waters had still not been received. Chandra arrived with the receipt for the money owed her for singing. To the audience, entertainment and accounts seemed two separate things; yet payment to a woman singing on the stage and wages owed to a woman working on the river were different entries in the same register. Rukhsana also demanded a written account of how much rice had been used in the kitchen and how many women had served the food.

Padma asked the organising committee to make summaries of the speeches available in signs and in writing for participants whose hearing needs differed. She had been invited to perform precisely this work, yet the line for her honorarium was blank. “Interpretation is a service, not the honour of being a guest,” she said. After some hesitation, the secretary made a separate entry in the register: payment for sign-language communication and transcription. Accepting the written acknowledgment, Padma said, “I have not received the money yet. But once the work has been given its proper name, it will be harder to erase it later by calling it free.” Naira remembered what Chandra had said about her earlier receipt.

Making the opening announcement to the public assembly, Ruhani said, “When we say that the full passage of a statement is to be heard today, we do not mean that every private audio file will be played into everyone's ears. The full context of the minutes already made public will be read. The remaining evidence has been examined in a secure room, in the presence of the people concerned.” There were objections. A young man said, “Then how are we to know that you are not being protected?” Padma answered, “The reasons for an inquiry can be explained. Stealing someone's private papers all over again is not verification.”

The secretary read the approved public portion of the minutes. ‘Read the rules before everyone’ and ‘Do not read Champa's private matter before everyone’ were heard in their proper order. Afterwards he made it clear that the circulated audio fragment did not correspond to the sequence in the original office recording, and that examination of the allegation that Ruhani had supported the public reading of the private message would be suspended pending further inquiry. The assembly did not respond with one voice. Some applauded; others asked why the maker of the edited clip had not been caught.

“We have no right to put an unidentified person's name onto a document,” Padma said.

Champa was invited to speak from the stage. She did not respond to the laughter by reading out her private message again. She said only, “In the words we have heard now, one of my requests has been accepted: that my private affairs should not be read aloud. But the humiliation I heard will not leave my body as easily as a wrong line can be struck from a piece of paper. The accounts for my treatment and the question of my wages are still unresolved.” She sat down. Ruhani made no public speech to console her; she merely pushed a glass of water towards her.

Behind the stage Hamida loosened the strap she had been tightening on her dholak. The organiser asked again, “If we leave out the old song with the jokes, will people stay?” “Whether they stay or get up and go, I do not know,” Hamida replied. “I will take responsibility for the words I sing.” She began an old wedding farewell song, without mocking anyone by name. In the song, the daughter leaving her home was not merely an object of tears: she carried with her the landmarks of the road, the earth of her mother's home and her own voice. Hamida paused and said, “My grandmother taught me the next line of this song. She used to say: when you send a daughter away, keep the road open for her return as well.”

In the midst of the song an elderly woman brought a copper water vessel from her house and placed it upon the stage. She said it was the vessel from which water had been given to her on the day of her wedding farewell. Hamida did not break off the song. She completed the last note of the phrase before asking, “Who is to have the vessel now?” “My granddaughter has gone to the city to study,” the old woman said. “When she comes home, I shall give it to her.” Laughter rose in the gathering, but this time no one was being humiliated. Hamida placed the vessel back in the old woman's hands.

Padma was working with Sanket to write out the meaning of the next lines. Sanket displayed the text on a small screen, but he did not leave the automatic speech-recognition system's mistaken words in place for people to mistake them for the actual song. Hamida herself corrected two words. A little girl asked, “Why does the song speak of a ‘road home’?” “Because the one who leaves must be free to return of her own will,” Hamida said. “A farewell song must not take that right away.” After this answer, no one laughed at Champa by name. Some people began to hum along with the song.

Late in the afternoon a short inquiry note was prepared in the secretary's room. Padma had it set down unambiguously: the order of the two audio fragments circulating in the public group differs from the office recording available; changing their order reversed the meaning of the statement; the particular allegation against Ruhani is suspended for the present; the source of the editing, the equipment used and the intention behind it remain unverified. “May I post a photograph of this note?” Naira asked. “First see whether it contains a private mobile number,” Padma replied, “and whether

everyone named in it has had a chance to read the portion intended for the public." Naira put her phone back into her bag.

Having read the note, Ruhani said, "This finding favours me, but we still do not know who leaked Champa's message. I shall not lead a victory procession now." Padma agreed. Champa took out the first acknowledgment of her complaint and laid it beside the new note. "At first I said, 'Listen to me,'" she observed. "Now two documents record my right to speak. But I shall still have to pay for my treatment myself." Outside the room Rukhsana had set aside some rice for her. Champa thanked her for the food, but also asked that the cost of rent and meals be entered in the shared accounts.

By the time the gathering ended, Chandra had gone back to the office for her unpaid fee. Hamida was with her. Under the heading 'Cultural Programme' the secretary wanted to combine both singers' fees in a single entry. "My rehearsal, travel and payment are separate," Chandra said. Hamida rested her hand on the written permission for her song. "And the conditions governing the use of my words are separate too." The secretary made three columns. The full amount was not paid in cash that day, but both the date and the money due were recorded. After the public recitation, this small piece of accounting had become as necessary as the songs performed there.

There had been no new disclosure about Mahesh. Only a brief message had arrived through Kabir: the family would decide its travel arrangements for itself, and its private location was not to be made public. Naira read the message and closed her notebook. "You have not written a single line today about Mahesh's audio?" Padma asked. "It would be wrong to publish another guess about a voice whose original source has not been verified," Naira replied. "And even if the source were found, it should not be published without honouring the conditions for his safety." Padma offered no praise. As she gathered the papers from the table, she said, "Now keep to this rule on the next difficult day."

That evening, on the veranda of Sarita's house, a plate lay covered for Naira. Sanket was trying to listen to a recorded tune through the small sound-box he had made. He had not recorded Hamida's song without permission; he was only playing an old instrumental melody at home. "What did you think of what you heard at the public recitation today?" Naira asked. "Someone had taken a piece out of something whole and made it say something else," Sanket replied. "But when I heard all the words of Hamida's song, I understood that keeping the road home open is part of the song too." Sarita lifted the cover from the plate. Steam rose from the rice, and amid the silence the ordinary hunger of each day demanded its place once more.

The next day, the public portion of the inquiry note was posted on the committee office's noticeboard. Beneath it was written that no immediate action would be taken against Ruhani on that specific allegation, and that the original audio material would remain secure. Yet in another corner of the same board a new order was being put up: payments under certain municipal contracts would be suspended pending review. The office clerk pinned the

paper in place and walked away. Naira read both notices without adding anyone's name or guilt to what they said. One false accusation had been stopped. Whose household cooking fire would be affected by the other decision—that was the question for the following day.

Chapter 22 · The Order Concerning the House

The paper on the noticeboard had curled at one corner in the damp of early morning. Naira reached out to smooth it, then checked her hand. At the bottom of the page, the office seal and date were clearly visible; above them was an order suspending payments to contractors and service providers. The last line said that no fresh material for the work was to be handed over until the review was complete. The moment she saw her name, Naira understood that this was more than a notice withholding her fee: it also barred the path of her daily work examining the records. Inside the doorway, the clerk was turning his chair towards the sun.

"What objection has been raised against my contract?" Naira asked. Turning the pages of his register, the clerk replied, "All contracts are undergoing the same review. This paper does not record any particular fault on your part." "Then give me a receipt for the hours I worked and the material I submitted under my name." The clerk looked up. "But payment has been stopped." Naira said, "Payment and work already submitted are two different matters. Who is responsible now for the records I read with the office's permission?" The clerk did not venture an answer of his own. He took two copies of her application and stamped one to acknowledge its receipt.

Her earlier mistake obliged Naira to test the sound of her own voice once more. Since she had published details contrary to Mahesh's conditions, some people had wanted her removed from the office; others said the suspension of her contract was retaliation. The order established neither explanation. She sat outside the office and divided a page into three parts: work completed, payments outstanding, and material now in the office's custody. Where she might have written the word 'retaliation', she left an empty line. It would take documents, not a story, to fill it.

Just then Ruhani telephoned. "Someone has pasted a notice on Champa's room," she said. "The landlord says she must leave within three days. I'm going there now, but I won't decide anything on Champa's behalf before speaking to her." "Is it a municipal order or the landlord's?" Naira asked. "I haven't managed to read it," Ruhani said. "A name printed on a paper is not enough to settle what authority it carries." Naira put the office receipt in her pocket and took the lane towards Champa's room. More than her own contract, she was troubled by the thought that Champa might once again be the last person told what was to happen to her home.

Champa's rented room stood at a bend in the lane. On one side was an iron trunk, on the other a vessel for storing water, and at the small window hung a blue curtain. She did not spend every night there; her mother's treatment and journeys after dark sometimes obliged her to stay at Ruhani's shelter. But her own lock, her bedding, and a towel drying in one corner made this a place of her own. Today the door was unlocked. She stood there reading the notice,

while the landlord kept repeating from in front of her, “I have received an order.”

The notice said that the room was to be vacated pending an examination of certain papers concerning the building’s ownership and use. At the top was a mark resembling a municipal-office stamp, but nowhere on the page was the issuing officer clearly named. Below were the landlord’s signature and a three-day deadline to leave. Champa peeled the paper carefully from the wall so that the pasted corner would not tear. “I’m not throwing this away,” she said. “My rent receipts and this notice will be kept separately.” Before photographing it, Ruhani asked her permission. “First I’ll keep a copy on my own phone,” Champa replied.

“The more papers you gather,” the landlord said, “the house won’t become any less divided. The upper floor is being examined for repairs.” “Then why am I the one given three days in the name of repairs?” Champa asked. “What have you told the tenants in the other rooms?” The landlord replied that each would receive a separate notice. Champa wrote down his answer. She could see that the building did have cracks; there was damp in the walls, and she had no wish to deny it. But inspecting an unsafe building and immediately driving out a tenant were not the same decision.

“There’s a vacant bed at the shelter,” Ruhani said. “If you wish, you can put your things there now.” Champa looked at her. “Thank you for the bed. But don’t take that to mean I have surrendered my right to stay here.” “I didn’t say that,” Ruhani answered at once. Champa replied quietly, “You didn’t intend to. But people often offer their decisions along with their help. I haven’t decided to vacate the room today.” This time Ruhani fell silent. She did not withdraw the offer of help; she changed its terms. The bed would be ready whenever Champa wanted it.

Two young men who carried household goods were standing in the lane. The landlord had probably summoned them already. They waited in the hope of wages, without having lifted anyone’s trunk. “Who called you here?” Champa asked them. One of the young men glanced towards the landlord. “I don’t want your wages to be withheld,” Champa said. “But no one will lift my trunk without my permission.” For the first time, the landlord realised that he might have to pay the cost of work he himself had arranged. He told the young men to wait outside the courtyard.

On her way back to the shelter, Ruhani noticed a new red line drawn against the entries for electricity and water in the old account book. One room in the building was run with temporary municipal assistance, another part was supported by Rukhsana’s sale of meals, and some of the residents paid rent out of their earnings. The new order again demanded proof of how assistance had been distributed. The member who kept the accounts said, “If we don’t submit all the papers now, even our use of the house could be questioned.” “Tell everyone that,” Ruhani replied. “No decision will be made in secret on anyone’s behalf.”

A small meeting gathered in the room beyond the kitchen. Rukhsana lowered the flame before joining them. Champa brought the notice from her own room, but made it clear that her private medical papers were not to be added to the shelter's accounts. One member wanted her registered immediately with the municipal office under the shelter's name. "What would that mean for my right to remain a tenant elsewhere?" Champa asked. Nobody could give a definite answer. Ruhani deferred the decision. "We won't sign something in the name of everyone's welfare when we do not understand what it means."

As she passed round glasses of water, Rukhsana said, "A home isn't just a count of beds. Yesterday the money for oil for my kitchen didn't arrive, so for one day I didn't cook here. People said I'd left the shelter hungry. But the children in my own home need rice too." One member said in embarrassment, "I thought all the supplies came as donations." Rukhsana laughed, but there was nothing light in the laughter. "Even donated rice must be washed, cooked and served. Whose time is all that?" She insisted that the hours spent on each kind of work be entered separately in the register. Champa raised her eyes from the notice and signalled her agreement.

In the middle of the meeting, Gauri Kapariya arrived. A folded tarpaulin lay over her shoulder, and in her hand was a small ledger recording the travel dates of temporary encampments and the sums owed for repairs. Her people moved their stopping places with the seasons, near the open ground beyond the river. This time they had been told orally to leave in the name of clearing the roadside. "We travel," Gauri said, "but that doesn't mean we have no place. The day someone's vehicle gets stuck, everyone suddenly remembers the name of our road."

Gauri's ledger recorded two outstanding payments for tarpaulin repairs from the previous week. "Do you want to stay here?" Ruhani asked. "Some families will stay; others will go towards another market," Gauri replied. "Don't put everyone's decision under my name. I came to understand what the paper means, not to enter myself on the shelter's list." Champa showed her the notice. Gauri bent over it. "My name isn't on it," she said, "but I recognise a threat of three days." People from the different groups would submit an objection together, she said, but nobody was to make anyone's private route public.

In the courtyard, the children began unfolding the tarpaulin. Gauri stopped one of them. "That's hired equipment, not a mat to play on." The child grew embarrassed, and Champa showed the child the torn corner of the blue curtain from her room. Gauri took out a needle and thread. "Stitching a tarpaulin and stitching a curtain are different jobs," she said. Everyone became absorbed in watching her make the repair. Champa asked the price. "It's a small job," Gauri replied, "but it's still work." Champa took out the money from her purse and paid her. Neither had bought the other's charity in that exchange.

Naira arrived just then. Gauri spelled out her own name and asked who would be shown anything that was written down. “I don’t automatically have the right to prepare a report on this house’s difficulties,” Naira said. “I’ll put only as much in my notebook as you tell me, and ask again before making any of it public.” “A summary of what our people say can go before the committee,” Gauri replied, “but not the roads our children will take.” Naira agreed. This time the memory of Mahesh’s testimony, given under conditions, did not return as another test for anyone to pass. It had become a boundary in her conduct.

The shelter’s members spread out their papers: a copy of the building lease, the kitchen’s unpaid accounts, an earlier demand for repairs, and the register of assistance distributed. “I used to sign for people again and again,” Ruhani said. “It built trust, but those signatures also brought other people’s decisions into my hands.” “You run the shelter,” Champa said, “but the decision whether to leave my room must remain mine.” “And in our group,” Gauri added, “everyone must have their own time to set out.” Ruhani pushed the notebook forwards. Those present entered their names, objections and proposals in separate lines.

Ruhani suggested a small working group: Champa would examine her rent papers; Rukhsana, the kitchen accounts and outstanding payments; Gauri would seek the travelling families’ consent and prepare a collective objection; and the shelter’s longstanding members would request the original terms governing the building. Naira offered to help read the documents. “Your contract has been suspended,” Champa said. “Are we to go forward as though you carry the office seal?” “No,” Naira replied. “I can read what I’m able to in a private capacity. I won’t submit an inquiry report in the government’s name.” This limit was entered in the minutes.

Kabir arrived at midday. Naira had made it clear beforehand that they were not seeking a final legal judgment written on a document, only guidance on the proper way to lodge a petition. Reading the notice, Kabir said, “It gives three days, but ask for the original order showing whose authority set that deadline. If the building presents an immediate danger, a proper safety inspection must come first. If it is only a dispute over possession, do not make that the same thing as building safety.” “Will asking for the papers guarantee that I can stay tonight?” Champa asked. “I can’t promise that,” Kabir answered. “But a written objection and its acknowledgment will matter at the next hearing.”

Naira showed Kabir the order suspending her contract. She set the two papers on the same table, but Kabir made it clear that two notices issued around the same time should not be assumed to have arisen from the same cause. Naira wrote in her notebook: ‘Separate papers; examine their issuing authorities separately.’ Champa smiled. “Your notebook has more empty spaces these days.” “I used to be in a hurry to fill them,” Naira said. “We’ve all had to bear the effects of that haste,” Champa replied. “Now I want to see what good your patience can do.”

Before evening the working group went to the municipal office. From her rent receipts, the original notice and the slip for repairing her torn curtain, Champa selected only the two documents that were needed. Gauri carried the group's collective questions, not the identifying details of individual encampments. Rukhsana brought the kitchen ledger. "All your applications concern different matters," the clerk said. "They are different matters," Champa replied, "so give us separate acknowledgments. Don't lose my papers by calling us one crowd." The clerk opened three registers.

At the office they learned that Champa's notice had been prepared on the basis of a letter from the building's owner; a copy of a municipally verified building-inspection report was not available at that counter. Having said as much aloud, the clerk hesitated to put it in writing. Champa wrote in her application: 'A certified copy of the inspection report has been requested; it has not yet been received.' The paper was stamped. That did not immediately cancel the eviction, but it closed the way to accepting an order to vacate, issued on one side alone, without question. Arrangements were also confirmed for a copy of the application to be sent to the landlord.

The counter for Gauri's group was separate. An employee said that certain families' names did not appear on the list of temporary encampments. "Don't write that because a name is missing from the list, the people do not exist on the ground," Gauri replied. "Speak to our representatives before carrying out an inspection." She did not submit the private particulars of every member of the group for the file; she supplied only their collective objection and an agreed means of contact. When she received the written acknowledgment, she explained to the others that it did not establish a permanent right to the land, but it did open a paper path towards a conversation the following day.

Looking at Rukhsana's accounts, an office employee asked, "If the people at the shelter receive meals free of charge, why demand payment?" Rukhsana opened the ledger and showed the rice, fuel, cooking hours and cash payments for each day as separate entries. "I'm not asking the people who ate the meals for money," she said. "I'm asking the institution that enters my labour in its accounts as zero to account for it." The employee gave her an acknowledgment slip. Rukhsana made sure she heard clearly that the final answer would come after the inquiry. Closing her notebook, she said, "For today, my work was to put my name in front of that zero."

A light drizzle began outside. Rather than unfold her tarpaulin, Gauri kept it tightly bound; if it became wet, carrying it to the next market would be difficult. Champa stood at the edge of the awning. "What if they still tell me to leave after three days?" she asked. "Then you will decide whether to appeal, take a temporary room, or risk remaining where you are," Gauri answered. "I cannot make that decision for the people in my group." Champa looked at her. Rather than a promise to 'save' her, the answer seemed difficult, but useful.

When Naira returned home, Sarita was cooking lentils over a low flame. "How much work was done today?" she asked. "Payment on my contract was

suspended. I asked for a receipt for the material I'd submitted. Champa lodged an objection to the notice on her room. Gauri made a way to put things in writing after consulting her group." Sarita stirred the lentils. "So three papers became the stories of three different homes." "And no one wrote a decision about someone else's home under their own name," Naira replied. Sarita set the lid on the pot; the bubbling lentils settled.

Sanket came to the doorway carrying an empty bucket to fetch water. "Didi, if your contract has stopped, does the computer work stop too?" he asked. "I won't open the office's original files now without authority," Naira replied. "I can read the public facts in my own notebook. Then I'll examine the terms of the contract again." Sanket showed her his phone screen: an old school notice used the word 'unanimous', though the minutes of the meeting recorded dissent. "Should this sort of thing be examined separately too?" he asked. "Yes," Naira said, "but we must check the reasons and the permission before printing anyone's name."

As evening came down on the shelter's courtyard, a little girl who had arrived with Gauri was making a small windmill out of a leftover piece of torn tarpaulin. "That won't help drive the smoke from my kitchen," Rukhsana said, "but it's lovely to watch it turn." The girl put the windmill into her hand. Ruhani tied it to a stake in the courtyard. There was little wind; its blades turned twice and stopped. "When the wind blows a little harder, it will turn again," the girl said. Nobody made it into a parable about the dispute over the house. For a moment, everyone simply watched the windmill.

After supper a short message came from Ruhani. A bed would be kept for Champa at the shelter, but her belongings would not be moved without her decision; Gauri's people would go where they themselves chose; and Rukhsana's outstanding payment for meals would be entered again in the next account. Each of the three proposals had received separate consent. Naira read the message aloud to Sarita. "Champa still has the key to her room, hasn't she?" Sarita asked. "She has. Today she locked the door herself." Gathering up the plates, Sarita said, "Sometimes simply keeping the lock in your own hands is a great thing."

That night Champa looked at the newly stitched corner of the curtain in her room. The crack in the wall was still there, and so was the notice; she could deny neither. She folded her bedding, placed her rent receipts in the iron trunk, and saved on her phone the offer of an extra key to the shelter. Then she locked her own door. Someone in the lane said, "The order about this house will come from above now." Champa did not turn around. She understood that asking for the original order, having an unsafe roof examined, and keeping the choice of her own place in her own hands were three tasks she would have to undertake together.

On the other side of the town, the office clerk was entering the acknowledgments in order in the register. After Naira's application about her contract came Champa's request concerning the notice, then Gauri's group's objection, each on a separate page. Nowhere in that sequence was anyone's

victory recorded. The key to a vacated house, the lease for a house still occupied, and the right to safe shelter—none of those questions had yet received a final answer. But the people who had once been told only, 'It is an order from above,' had asked today: Who is above? Which order? And who has the right to decide?

Chapter 23 · Bharata's Refusal

In the royal palace at Ayodhya, the lamps along the veranda were still burning long after day had risen. Their wicks, steeped in the smell of oil, had not been trimmed for some time; the flames stretched upward as though reaching for the carved wooden eaves made by a craftsman overhead. After dismounting, Bharata went first to one of those lamps. A servant hurried up. "Prince, everyone is waiting inside." Bharata told him to lower the wick. The servant raised his hand, then abruptly drew it back. No one was certain any longer who in the royal household had the authority to give an order. Bharata himself shook off the charred end of the wick. It was a small task; but in this house even the smallest tasks had begun to require permission.

News of Dasharatha's death had reached him, yet the words of that news were one thing, and the experience of his father's absence another. Entering his mother's chamber, Bharata found Kaikeyi folding away yellow bedding and trying to mend the broken clasp of an old bracelet. She did not rise. "Why did you attach my name to the boons you asked for?" Bharata asked. Kaikeyi gave no answer. The clasp slipped once more from her fingers. Outside came the sound of Shatrughna's sandals; he did not enter.

"When did you ever hear me say that I wanted the kingdom?" Bharata asked again. Kaikeyi said, "What I heard was the voice of my own fear. The court was preparing for Rama's coronation, and I thought your place would become smaller." For the first time Bharata saw his mother through the fear to which she had given the name of love. "To preserve my place, you took away Rama's. Is what remains now a kingdom, or merely an empty seat?" Kaikeyi laid the bracelet down. She had no comforting answer to that question.

In the assembly hall the emblems of kingship lay folded in red cloth. The priests, ministers, scribes, officer in charge of the stables, and keeper of the granaries stood anxious around the same seat, each for a different reason. Some urged Bharata to accept the coronation at once, so that orders could begin to be issued again; others insisted that it would be improper to unlock the treasury while there was no king. Bharata listened to them all. The keeper of the granaries reported that food distribution on the outskirts of the city had been halted for two days. The officer of the stables said the fodder was running out. While the crown awaited its wearer, the hunger of the people and the hunger of the animals stood waiting too.

Bharata rose but did not touch the red cloth that covered the royal insignia. "I will not enter my elder brother's right under my own name," he said. Several faces in the hall went still. "But neither can I escape by saying that I have nothing to do. Let the granaries be opened for distribution, let the roads be maintained, let wages not be withheld. Whatever account is written here must be an account of temporary responsibility—not a deed of

ownership." A minister asked, "Under what title will you sign?" Bharata answered, "I shall write my name. Record the assembly's disagreement over the title as well."

An elderly member of the assembly objected that a kingdom could scarcely be run without a king. Bharata heard him out and asked for a small sheet of paper. On it he began to have the limits of decisions recorded, rather than the orders themselves: distribution of grain, care of the sick, public safety; but no gifts of land, no new proclamations of succession, no private rewards. One minister warned that such restraints would weaken the government. Bharata replied, "If I take the trust placed in my hands for my own property, governing will certainly become easier. But what, then, will be left for the one whose seat we claim to be preserving?" His voice did not rise. That was why some of those present had to lean forward to hear him.

That evening Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi, Shatrughna and Bharata sat down to eat together on the same veranda. Urmila brought a bowl of lentils from the kitchen and arranged for the plates set aside for the serving women to be brought out to the veranda as well. Taking his first mouthful, Shatrughna said that when they were children Bharata would refuse to eat rice if too much ghee had been poured on it, yet felt no shame at all in stealing ghee from someone else's plate. A laugh escaped Sumitra before she could stop it. "The witnesses to that offence are still alive," Bharata said, "so I cannot plead innocence." For a few moments laughter stayed in the house; no council of decision-makers entered it in the record.

At the end of the meal Kausalya asked Bharata, "Will you go to Rama?" "Yes," he answered. "I have no title to carry with me to that meeting." As she gathered the plates, Urmila said, "And who will decide the everyday work of those who stay behind in this house?" Bharata looked at her. It was a question that had to be answered before anyone could reach the forest. "For as long as I am away, let Shatrughna and the ministers keep the accounts open," he said. "If any of you see someone's rightful due withheld in the name of getting work done, do not wait for my return." Kaikeyi quietly pushed the water vessel towards them. The affection of a household did not erase the wrong committed by a kingdom, but the evening meal helped them live through one more night.

On another morning of that same season in Videhapur, a little windmill tied to a stake in the courtyard of Ruhani's shelter stood half-open even though there was no wind. Rukhsana turned it by hand, then set a pot of water on the stove. "Yesterday the little girl said it would spin when the wind came," she remarked. "All I need is somewhere for the smoke from my stove to go." Ruhani laughed, but the laughter stopped as her eyes fell again on the municipal office's letter in her hand. Her name had been proposed for the temporary maintenance of the shelter building; the letter did not make clear how much authority was to accompany that name.

The letter said that an 'authorised contact person' was required to keep the shelter's daily arrangements running without interruption until the

investigation was complete. Another page was enclosed, asking for particulars concerning the use of the building and its permanent transfer. The secretary said, “Sign both at once and the repair of the water tank and the next consignment of rations will be easier.” Ruhani placed the two pages on separate parts of the table. “Serving as a contact and becoming the owner of the house are not the same thing,” she said. “First everyone must see what promise each paper contains.”

When Champa arrived at the shelter, she carried not her iron trunk but only an envelope of rent receipts. Two days had passed since she had been given three days’ notice to vacate her room. She still had not received a certified copy of the inspection. “I can stay in this house tonight,” she said, “but that must not put the key to my own room in someone else’s name.” Ruhani showed her the register for temporary stays: the visitor’s name, the period for which accommodation was needed at night, and the limits of consent were entered separately. Champa chose to leave blank the space requesting details of her medical treatment.

A member seated by the table objected. “If everyone insists on their own conditions, help will come to a halt.” Wiping her hands on the end of her sari, Rukhsana said, “The fact that you can take all our labour without conditions does not prove that people who ask about conditions are bad people.” She set out the previous month’s food expenses. The donated rice was entered in one line; firewood, oil, hours spent cooking, and wages for washing plates were recorded separately. For the first time the member’s gaze moved away from the foodstuffs alone and settled on the time the work had taken.

Naira had come not to give legal advice, but to help them read the papers. She made it clear at the outset that her own records contract had been suspended. She spoke briefly to Kabir by telephone. He advised them to examine the wording of the two documents separately, ask for the original terms governing the building and a copy of the public decision, and not assume, without seeing the relevant file, that signing would actually alter permanent ownership. When Ruhani put down the phone, she said, “Then for the moment we agree only to the limited work on the first page, and keep the second for examination?” Champa asked, “And the signatures of the people who live here?” “There can be no consent without the voice of those whose rights will be affected,” Ruhani replied.

Just then came the sound of two boxes being set down at the shelter’s outer door. Hasan and Zubaida had arrived from the bus stand. The old space at the bus terminus, where they had once found a little room to stand near Amina Bhathiyara’s roadside stall by the ghat, had now been closed off with an iron barrier. Hasan’s box contained needles and thread, a small measuring tape, waterproof cloth bags and little articles useful to travellers; Zubaida’s held strips cut for sewing, wire and small lidded tins. Both depended for their earnings on people passing through on their journeys.

Hasan showed them a receipt for the fee he had paid to occupy the old space. “The stand has gone under a new contract,” he said. “Now they say my

receipt gave me no right to sell anything there; it was only a charge for occupying the place that day." Zubaida said, "If we accept that as the whole truth, we shall have to abandon years of work. Yet we will not lie and say the receipt grants us a permanent lease. Our appeal asks this: who will account for when the arrangement was changed, what notice was given, and what alternative space was offered?" Ruhani invited them to sit inside. "First tell us where to put the boxes," Zubaida said, "somewhere safe from fire and water."

Beside the doorway stood Hiravati Kurariyar with a small bamboo frame and her repair tools. She travelled from the bus stand to the next market, working wherever she found a job. She had been offered work sewing the torn mats on the shelter's rear veranda, but in return for being allowed to sit there she was being asked to guard the place all day without pay. "I know how to sew a mat," she said. "Keeping watch is another job. Tell me separately the hours and the price of each." Rukhsana took out a sheet of paper. "Shall we measure the mats first?" Hiravati sat down at the table and stretched out her measuring tape.

Hasan picked up an old bench lying in the courtyard and tried to set it level, but one of its legs wobbled. "If we put the boxes here, the cloth will get damp underneath," Zubaida said. Hiravati measured a leftover piece of bamboo from her frame. "This could go beneath the leg," she said, "but it will not be a permanent repair." "How much?" Hasan asked. "As much as the work is worth," Hiravati answered. "But mending the bench will not get me my place at the bus stand." Everyone burst out laughing. The separate crises of three livelihoods could not be contained in the leg of a little bench; nevertheless, for the moment the bench stood steady.

Zubaida took out the draft of her appeal. Its first line read, 'Please put the old place in my name.' "Do you actually want permanent ownership?" Naira asked. After a moment's thought, Zubaida replied, "No. We want a definite time when we can work there every day, and a place where no one can demand arbitrary fees. If changes are necessary for safety at the stand, we do not oppose them. But we cannot accept an iron fence being put up at night, only for someone to say in the morning that no one ever earned a living there." She struck out the first line and wrote another, asking for evidence of their former use, a copy of the order changing the arrangements, a hearing, and an alternative site.

Hasan wanted to attach to the old receipt a wage slip Amina had given them for work at the ghat. Zubaida stopped him. "That slip is for work somewhere else. It will not prove a right at the bus stand." "Then what use is it?" Hasan asked. "Keep it in the account of our new livelihood," she said. "When the office asks what loss the closing of the stand has caused, we can show that we have not been sitting idle, yet still cannot earn what we earned before." Hasan accepted the distinction. Their decision to undertake new work did not amount to forgiving the old injustice.

As the secretary entered Hiravati's name in the shelter's register of payments due, he asked how to spell 'Kurariyar'. She showed him the name

written on a small piece of paper she carried. “Do not put down my travelling work as proof that I have a permanent place here,” she said. “And if I go to another market tomorrow, do not write that I abandoned the work and fled. I shall accept work with a date agreed, and deliver it on an agreed date.” Ruhani had the time required, the wages and the cost of materials entered separately on the sheet where Hiravati had recorded the measurements of the mat. With her permission Hiravati had a photograph of that copy kept on Zubaida’s phone. She owned no phone herself, but the right to ask for a copy was hers.

Later in the day the shelter committee met again. Hasan and Zubaida decided to submit their appeal independently; the shelter had no authority to grant them a permanent lease at the bus stand. Ruhani said, however, that one corner of the building’s veranda could be made available for their repairs during two specified periods each week, provided fire precautions, access and the safety of the other residents were checked. “What would the rent be?” Zubaida asked. Rukhsana stated the small costs involved; any decision to waive the charge, she said, must be entered in the committee’s open accounts. This was not a gift, but a proposal for limited use.

Some members again pressed for the shelter’s letter to be signed. “If it is not signed today, the repairs will stop,” one said. “The repairs really are needed,” Champa replied. “But how does that mean we should give away the key to this house for good?” Ruhani picked up the first paper and read it aloud: temporary consent to act as a contact, arrange inspections for fire and water safety, and fix the dates for necessary repairs. She asked for written authorisation for that work alone. Separate lines were made for the views of those present; the names of dissenting members were recorded as well. The second paper was not signed.

At the municipal office that afternoon, a clerk refused at first to accept the two parts of the letter separately. “Half a document will hold up the file,” he said. “Then record now the half of the work that lies within our authority,” Ruhani replied. “We shall examine the original conditions governing the other half.” The clerk asked for a copy of the rules from the next desk. After checking them, he was able to issue a receipt acknowledging the limited request for maintenance, while keeping the file on permanent transfer separate. Champa made the meaning of the receipt explicit: it was not a decision on ownership of the building, only proof that the request for inspection and necessary work had been received.

Outside the office, Hasan held two papers in his hand: the old receipt for the bus-stand fee and the new acknowledgement of his appeal. “One paper belongs to the past,” he told Zubaida, “and the other to the road ahead.” “The old paper says only what is written in it,” Zubaida replied. “And the paper about the road ahead contains, as yet, only a request.” Just then Hiravati was lifting her bamboo frame onto her shoulder. She laughed. “You count your papers, and I shall count my mats. If the two accounts agree one day, so much the better; and if they do not, the wages must not stop.”

That evening five plates were laid out on the shelter veranda. Rukhsana served the meal, keeping a separate account of its cost. Taking a plate, Champa said, “I still do not know whether I shall be in my room tomorrow or here.” “But we can decide about a plate of food right now,” Ruhani said. Zubaida told Hasan there was too little salt in the rice; he slid his share of salt towards her. Hiravati laughed. “Do not start a dispute about who owns the salt in this house.” For a few moments everyone’s attention rested on the meal. Outside, a light breeze turned the little windmill’s blades three times.

Back home, Naira told Sarita what had happened. Sarita stopped sewing for a moment and asked, “Did Ruhani sign?” “Only for the work she was authorised to undertake,” Naira replied. “Not the page about ownership.” Sarita said, “If someone lets another person use a key in their keeping, the house does not thereby become that other person’s.” Naira laughed. “Are you saying that about your own ledger, or about the shelter?” Pulling tight a knot in the thread, Sarita answered, “About whoever needs to understand it. But the original page of the ledger will stay with me.”

That night Naira opened her notebook. After her own mistake in breaking the terms of Mahesh’s permission, she had been learning to set down the limits of even the smallest undertakings. On today’s page she wrote three sentences: permission to repair the shelter is not ownership; an old fee paid at the bus stand is not a permanent lease; a copy of a private document is not consent to publish it. She did not yet possess answers to every question. But she wrote those three sentences so that, the following day, no one’s rightful due would be entered under the wrong name. Outside, a drop of water fell from the veranda at Sarita’s house. Sanket moved a bucket beneath it. Repairing the tap would be tomorrow morning’s task; placing the bucket there was tonight’s responsibility.

Chapter 24 · The Veranda Outside

By dawn the bucket on the veranda of Sarita's house had filled. In the water that had dripped from the roof all night, no reflection of the sky remained; fine particles of falling lime had settled into a milky layer at the bottom. Sanket carried the bucket outside to empty it and noticed a new crack beside the wooden doorframe on the veranda's right side. He reached to touch it, but Sarita stopped him. “Not yet. If the mason says tomorrow that this beam is weak, we must support it first.” Naira heard them from inside the house. Until the previous night, the thought of leaving home had seemed to her almost imaginary; now they had to move their bedding from beneath that very doorframe.

Since Naira's contract for archival work had been suspended, the household accounts had changed. Sarita wanted to spend the money saved from her sewing on repairing the roof, but the workman had warned that the veranda would be unsafe to live in until its rotten inner timbers were replaced. Sanket proposed making a temporary prop. Sarita examined his drawing and said, “You may be able to make it, but first we shall listen to someone who knows how to take the measurements. If your hands remain unharmed, there will be much more for them to make.” Sanket put away his notebook. He was hurt, but he did not take offence at his mother's speaking openly of her fear.

In the lane, the landlord's man had been standing outside Champa's room since morning. He carried a padlock and a paper bearing the words “Safety Reasons.” Champa was filling a water vessel and giving her mother her medicine. Her mother's knee was swollen; during the night she had found it difficult to descend the room's steps. “The three days are over,” the man said. “Put your belongings outside.” Champa answered, “You still have not given me the original inspection report. I shall not insist on living beneath an unsafe roof, but you will not put on that lock without an inventory of my possessions and a receipt for the key.” Instead of offering reassurance, the man pressed her harder. Lifting her mother's pillow, Champa said, “I shall not spend another night here. That does not mean you may enter the outstanding rent or the security deposit in your accounts however you please.”

“What will people say if we go to Ruhani?” her mother asked. Folding an old blue sheet, Champa replied, “People say all manner of things even while we are living here. Your medicine and your breathing matter to me first.” She tied her mother's clothes into a small bundle, opened the iron chest, and placed the rent receipts, treatment prescriptions, and private letters in three separate envelopes. The wound left by the stolen message was still with her. This time she wanted to know the whereabouts of her papers no less certainly than those of her other belongings.

At Ruhani's shelter, Rukhsana had set rice to cook on the stove. When Champa arrived, Ruhani first showed her mother somewhere to sit, then

opened the register. “There is a room free here for two nights,” she said. “After that we shall sit down and decide whether the stay needs to be extended in light of the hospital examination. If you wish, your application concerning your rights to the rented room can proceed separately.” Champa opened the window. A small windmill was turning on the veranda outside. “Let Mother have the bed,” she said. “May I sit on the veranda and sew clothes?” “Sit there,” Rukhsana replied, “but work for which you receive wages must not be entered as a free service provided by the shelter.” For the first time, Champa's mother smiled.

Just then Badri Nonphar arrived from the edge of his old settlement. His family lived in the back row of a temporary construction site, where rainwater had been collecting for want of a drain. An official had given him a resettlement slip assigning a particular corner in a new settlement, but offering no clear arrangements for drinking water, sanitation, or the journey to and from work. Unfolding the slip, Badri told Ruhani, “It says ‘alternative shelter’ here. But nobody knows from which well we are to get water for the child at night in the place they have shown us.” On the back of that slip his wife had written, in another hand, a list: the child's medicine, utensils, work tools, and a rope for their milch goat. The inventory of possessions had grown larger than the name of the home.

“Did you sign this slip?” Ruhani asked. “I acknowledged receiving it,” Badri said. “I did not accept the resettlement in full. If my family pitches a tarpaulin at the edge of an empty field for two days, that must not be taken as permanent consent.” His wife intervened: “And under which account will they pay the money demanded for a hired cart?” Badri had not thought of an answer to that question. He lowered his eyes to the paper. The decision to leave a home was not merely a man's signature; its first reckoning was written upon the back of the person who carried the load.

Malati Koche, who had come with Badri, already lived in the new settlement. Her house had been there before, yet no firm path had been built for carrying water from the public tap to her neighbourhood. She unscrewed the lid of her yellow container and showed them the muddy water. “They are sending all of you here,” she told Badri's family, “but a queue forms at our only tap from early morning. Some say that when the new people arrive there will not be enough water to share. I say: why should we not share it? Ask, too, for an account of what is being done to increase the supply.” Her voice held both welcome and concern.

Malati spread out a small map of the new settlement. There was mud in front of the tap, and the lane beside it had been washed away by the first rains. Hiravati's bamboo framework might be useful there, but it could not be trusted as one would trust a permanent bridge. Badri's wife said, “I will not take the child along that path at night.” “Then first we need a temporary passage built together, and an outlet for the standing water,” Malati replied. “I shall not allow a new lock to be put on the tap without the consent of my

neighbourhood. But neither shall I tell any family to stand humbly at my door begging for water."

Naira arrived in the midst of these discussions. The workman examining her family's roof had told her to vacate the inner room for two days. Sanket had found a small room to rent near Railway Square, with a solid roof overhead and a window through which the west wind entered when it was opened. Sarita had been unwilling at first. "How can we leave everything that is in the house?" she had asked. "We shall go for two days," Naira had said. "Without measured details of the repairs and a written account of the cost, there will be no document declaring that we have abandoned the house." "You can say 'document' easily enough," Sarita had replied, "but who will water the tulsi in the courtyard?" Naira had not been able to answer her then.

By midday the concerns of all three families had gathered upon the same veranda: the bed for Champa's mother, the rope for Badri's hired cart, and a sample from Sarita's cracked roof. They had not all been driven out by the same order. Champa was moving because of the dispute over her room and her mother's health; Badri was leaving an unsafe place without accepting the incomplete resettlement slip; Sarita was choosing temporary accommodation for the repair of her home and the safety of her family. Outside, the afternoon sunlight was moving towards evening, but no one inside the shelter made a proclamation of heroism out of anyone else's decision. Each needed an actual place in which to spend the coming night.

Rukhsana set out three glasses of buttermilk. "With so many people coming into your kitchen, how will you keep the accounts?" Malati asked. "If someone gives a donation, I enter the name separately," Rukhsana replied. "If someone pays for a meal, that is another entry; and the cooking I have done since morning is another." Sipping his buttermilk, Badri's little son asked, "Why is my glass a different colour?" Rukhsana laughed. "Look: there is buttermilk in your glass, not water." "But the colour belongs to the glass," the child said. In that laughter the weariness of all three households grew lighter for a little while.

Champa went back to the landlord's man. This time it was Champa herself who spoke, not Ruhani. They drew up an inventory of the belongings inside the room in two copies, one for Champa and one for the man who would fit the lock. She lifted the bedding from her mother's cot, then hesitated over a small earthen flowerpot on the window. She had planted it in that room a year earlier. "Leave that old pot," the man said. Champa took it in her hands. "I did not buy it in my own name," she said, "but I filled it with earth, and I planted what grows in it." The man said nothing. The door was locked, the receipt for the key was signed, and the dispute over the deposit remained unresolved.

Badri was loading the family's belongings onto a handcart. In the little tarpaulin home beside the railway tracks, his wife had dried neem leaves to drive away mosquitoes. She placed them in a bundle. A neighbour asked, "Have you accepted the new settlement, then?" "No," his wife replied. "We are

taking the child away from dangerous water. Badri will submit a written objection, and Malati is showing us how water may be obtained once we reach the place. Even while we were living here, the family's water had been bad for two days." The neighbour helped lift her bundle onto the cart. He did not have to leave his own home, but that did not absolve him of carrying a share of the weight.

At the edge of the new settlement, Malati and two other women were clearing a small platform where water buckets could be placed. When Badri's family arrived, there was no space near the tap to unload the tarpaulin from the cart. Some people said, "More crowds here as well?" Malati replied, "You shall decide together how the space is to be used. But closing the tap is no way to put anyone to the test." She gave Badri's wife two glasses of water from her own house. "This is hospitality, not a permanent arrangement," she made clear. "Tomorrow we shall write a joint application about the hours of access to the tap, the queue, and the earthen path." Rather than fold his hands in gratitude, Badri asked, "What shall we do to help with the work?" "First listen to how every family uses the water," Malati said. "We are not going to uproot the tap that is already there."

Before evening, Naira returned to empty the room at home. Sanket was putting the books into sacks. His cheap old radio, lengths of metal wire, and half-finished sound box lay in one corner. "Shall we take all these?" he asked. "Only as much as you can carry," Sarita said. "Make a list of the rest." Sanket asked, "Mother, if we empty the room, will people say that you have gone away?" Looking towards the row of houses beyond her own, Sarita said, "We shall watch who records in the papers whether we are living here or not. But what kind of mother's love would it be to make you sleep in a house that is not safe?"

It was then that Naira raised the question of the page bearing twenty-seven names. Two sets of leaves from Sarita's old ledger had been kept apart: in one notebook were the entries concerning public corrections; within another, older fold lay the original page of names. Until now that paper had remained in Sarita's private chest. "If they take the roof down, it will not be right to keep it here," Naira said. "I can seal it in a safe envelope and take it with us." Sarita stayed her hand. "You may give me an envelope. But I shall keep the original page myself. The hurt of what was made public without asking me is still in this house." Naira's mistake in publishing Mahesh's testimony before the agreed time was fresh in her memory. She did not argue.

Sarita opened the chest. The corners of the original page, kept between folded layers, were old and yellowed; Naira did not reach towards the writing. Sarita placed blank sheets on either side and folded the page inside a cloth. No photograph of that page was taken with any new phone. Sanket merely measured the cloth-wrapped bundle to make certain that it would fit properly into a small wooden box. Sarita tested the lock and tied the key into the end of her sari. "If I am questioned, I shall answer," she said. "But no one will take a paper from my hand and write an answer in my name."

Naira understood that her mother was not, at that moment, guarding a page that proved some fraudulent crime, but defending her authority over what was in her own keeping. “I shall record separately the status of the copy I have kept for examination,” she said. “The original remains with you, and the public use of private names is prohibited for now.” “And the one name I had forbidden you to read?” Sarita asked. “That prohibition will not be broken,” Naira said. “But we shall record separately where the inquiry has come to a halt.” Sarita gave no answer. On the wall, the hand of the old clock advanced by a minute. Water was still dripping inside the house.

The workman who came to inspect the roof fitted a temporary wooden support against the outer doorframe. Lalit had been called to examine the measurements; he warned that installing a support was no proof of lasting safety. The workman's written note recorded the length of the crack, the waterlogged timber, the necessity of removing the roof, and the date for a further inspection. Naira took a copy. An elderly neighbour asked, “If you all go away, who will look after the tulsi at this house?” “I can come here every evening,” Sanket said. “You must not go inside until the supports have been removed,” Sarita said at once. “Put the tulsi in a pot outside.” The old woman offered a place beside her own courtyard for the pot.

On her bed at the shelter, Champa's mother could at last stretch out her legs and sleep. Champa sat beside her, threading a needle. When Ruhani came in, Champa asked, “If I work here in return for staying, will that leave less room for another patient?” “Your wages for work will be a separate matter,” Ruhani said. “If the period of your stay must be extended, we shall consider everyone's needs. It would not be right to move your mother; that much we shall put in writing.” Champa looked towards the window. The little windmill was turning faster now, but no one stopped to watch it. The indispensable work of living lay ahead.

Badri pitched a small tarpaulin shelter behind the new settlement, but that night they discovered that they had too few vessels for fetching water. “We left the large earthen pitcher at the old place,” his wife said. Badri wanted to go back immediately. Malati stopped him. “Do not take the eroded path in the dark. Keep one of my empty pitchers for now. We shall go together in the morning.” Badri was still turning the office slip over and looking at it from every side. “If I write down the household accounts, will the place begin to feel like a home?” he asked. His wife smiled. “It was not a home there either when water had risen to our pillows. But we shall go back for what we left behind. That is not a letter of acceptance; it is looking after our own belongings.”

It was the eve of Bharata's departure from Ayodhya. On one of the palace's outer verandas, people were tying up small bundles. Bharata had promised that he would go to Rama, yet the obligations owed to those remaining in the capital could not simply be put on hold. Shatrughna asked the record-keeper who would enter the measures of grain and the entries for wages. A servant said that the first order had been written in King Dasharatha's name, and they were now waiting for a new name. “Hunger will not wait for anyone's name,”

Shatrughna replied. The work of serving those within the palace and the needs of the city beyond it could not both be contained in the preparations for a single journey.

Kaikeyi brought Bharata a woollen wrap. Before accepting it, he asked, “From which household has this come?” “I took it from an old chest in my own chamber,” Kaikeyi said. Bharata accepted the wrap; that act was no declaration that the injustice brought about by his mother's fears had been forgiven. Urmila set aside a small purse for the cost of the serving women's meals. “The work of those who do not go on this journey will not cease,” she said. Bharata nodded. The sounds of departure filled the palace, but the voices of those who had to stay at home were heard that night as well.

In Videhapur, Sarita's family reached the little room near Railway Square. The door's sliding bolt was loose; Sanket opened his tool kit and tightened its screw. As Naira put down their belongings, she asked, “Are you tired?” “I am tired, but I shall cook some rice,” Sarita said. “You must all be hungry.” Naira went forward to look at the stove. The container for the rice was new here, the drinking glasses were new, but Sarita's old brass measure for rice was the same. “The little bowl has changed homes too,” Sanket said with a laugh. “Not the bowl,” Sarita replied. “The reckoning of what our stomachs need has come with us.”

After the evening meal, Naira put three papers into a separate file: information concerning the inventory of Champa's belongings and the receipt for her key; Badri's objection to incomplete resettlement and the water problem at the new site; and the inspection note about repairs to her own home. The losses suffered by the three families were different. The first family's deposit remained withheld; the second had no assured permanent water supply; the third had not yet had its roof repaired. No single acknowledgement of receipt had resolved all their difficulties. Yet the people of each household, with their belongings and their decisions, had made it through to another day. Naira did not add this information to the public register of names.

Sarita placed the wooden box not beside her pillow but beneath a small table. “Have you got the key?” Sanket asked. “Yes,” Sarita said. “And what if I am away from time to time?” he asked. Sarita looked at him. “If neither of us is at home, we shall decide who ought to look after the papers. But for now their ownership will not be handed over to anyone.” “In the morning I shall go to Railway Square to meet Fakira,” Naira said. “Not to ask for news of Mahesh, but to learn the next date concerning Fakira's own complaint about his right to travel.” “First,” Sarita replied, “we must learn how the water reaches this new home.”

A short whistle sounded from a train outside. Sanket opened the window, and air damp with rain entered the room. Sarita wiped the table with a corner of her shawl, covered the rice that was left, and touched the lock of the box once more to make sure it was fastened. Naira read no names. That night they were outside their home, but the story of the home had not ended. In the

darkness near Railway Square, someone's footsteps sounded and then receded. Sarita put out the lamp. In place of the empty veranda, the doorway of this little room had now become the threshold she kept watch over.

Parva 3 · Vana | Araṇya Kāṇḍa

Chapter 25 · An Empty Space on the Train

In the rented room at Railway Square, the first sound of dawn was not a train but an empty water bucket. Sarita had turned on the tap. Twice it gave out nothing but air; the third time, a thin stream of water appeared. She slid a lota beneath the bucket and called to Sanket. “Before anything else, write down the hours when water comes to this house.” Sanket looked at the clock. Naira was examining, in her notebook, the unfinished business of three families from the day before. Today she had to go to the station to learn the date of the next hearing on Fakira’s complaint about his right to travel. Sarita said, “Your inquiry will go on, but if the water in this house keeps stopping like this, how are we to cook rice?” Naira rose and took hold of the other side of the bucket.

The road near the station was wet. Keeping clear of the water dripping from the awning of the tea stall, passengers hurried along with their bundles. Fakira stood beside a pillar, touching the edge of the paving stones with his foot to gauge the distance along the path. The old service gate was still half shut, though a few people were slipping in by the narrow way beside it. As soon as Naira reached him, she said, “I’ve come to find out when your application will be heard again.” Fakira replied, “I need to know about that hearing too. But the morning train is due in now. This time I’m not going to miss it.”

Naira glanced at her watch. She had been told that the office staff would not take their seats before nine; Fakira said that by nine he would have earned the first money of his day. “I can stay with you until the train comes,” Naira said. Fakira laughed. “Stay, by all means. But when I show someone the way, I shall answer for myself. You are not my master.”

The morning train had not yet arrived when Sona Kathautiya appeared, bringing two bamboo frames and a bundle of tools on a handcart. Part of the load had to be delivered to a repair site across the railway tracks. A wheel of the cart stuck in the mud. Explaining where to push, Sona put her own shoulder to it. A man said that a charitable association in the town would describe the delivery as social service in its printed notice. Sona let go of the cart and looked at him. “Who is paying the carriage charge? The cart-puller is still owed two days’ wages.” The man said, “Such accounts, even in charitable work!” Sona answered, “Record the donation under the name of charity. Record my carriage charge under my name.”

Fakira turned towards Sona. “Take your cart around the right-hand corner of the drain. The ground there is soft.” Sona said, “I’ll hold the frame steady. You keep calling out the way.” It was a small partnership: Fakira did not pull the cart, but he knew and described the signs along the route. Sona counted

the items again against the slip recording the load and gave the cart-puller a copy. The man from the charitable association wanted to take a photograph for the printed notice. Sona stopped his hand. “First the receipt for the carriage charge; then permission from the person whose work this is.” The man gave no answer yet.

Then Haricharan Paswan’s small goods vehicle came to a halt in the square behind the station. Its driver had been summoned unexpectedly during the night to carry a patient to hospital; the vehicle had to be made ready again for the morning’s consignment. Haricharan sat beside a tyre, checking its air. “Everyone wants the fare reduced when they call it a vehicle for patients,” he said, “but both the driver’s night and his morning must be counted.” In a thick ledger he entered the times of the previous day’s journey—when the vehicle had left, when it had returned, the cost of petrol, and the driver’s rest. Naira asked, “Does this vehicle go near the warehouse too?” Haricharan did not close the ledger. “It goes wherever it is hired. But carrying another person’s goods does not automatically make me responsible for what is inside them.”

Naira checked her question. Mahesh’s family was still suffering the consequences of her premature publication of his testimony about the old road to the warehouse. She asked Haricharan only whether the hire charge for a journey and the driver’s wages appeared on separate receipts. He showed her a blank specimen, concealing the name of the actual customer. “If a formal inquiry comes, I shall produce the records I am entitled to produce, through the proper procedure. Don’t turn a supposition about a journey into an accusation of crime.” Naira agreed. An empty stretcher strap hung from the back of the vehicle. The sight reminded her of Urmila’s night-time transport of hospital linen. The hours spent on both kinds of work needed to find their place on paper.

When the train entered the platform, the press of people grew on one side. Fakira had already heard that the passengers were coming down the inner staircase more quickly now. He directed one family towards the bus for the market and another towards the place where the dispensary’s small vehicle stood. Two people gave him coins; a third, a woman, thanked him and walked on. After answering all three, Fakira felt the separate coins in his hand and put them into his pouch. Naira did not offer to count them. For a moment she thought he should come straight to the office; but at the next traveller’s question—“Which way across the river?”—Fakira was back at his work.

Near a heap of sacks unloaded from the train, Shiv Dhandi stood holding his wage slip. He was not a railway employee; he worked with a contracted team unloading vehicles. In the previous week’s accounts, the last letter of his name had been changed, and his signature no longer matched the payment list. “When you ask my name, I tell you I am Shiv Dhandi,” he said to the man keeping the accounts. “Why, then, are there two spellings on two slips?” The clerk said, “Prove your identity first.” Shiv showed him the marked

tickets for the sacks he had unloaded. “Match the number of days I worked against these. My days must not disappear in a dispute over my name.”

Naira asked if she might see Shiv’s papers, but he first asked, “What will I gain from your doing this?” It was a fair question. Naira said that instead of taking his private details she could explain the form in which a public complaint might be written. Keeping the slip in his own hand, Shiv had a line entered before the employee: payment withheld because of a difference in the spelling of his name; work tickets retained; a date to be given for correction. The man at the office issued an acknowledgement but gave no answer to the larger claim. Shiv said, “Now this slip is going home with me. My name will not go into your notebook yet.” Naira accepted his decision.

At that moment Lakshmi Jhangar came up behind them, holding an old cloth bag carefully. Inside were several copied pages from an earlier labour contract, with the working season entered on one line and the arrangements for lodging on another. She did not yet know for certain who held the original. She said to Shiv, “Your days of work have been lost from the paper; in the matter of my family’s old work, the paper itself is still unavailable.” Naira asked what she hoped to establish by means of those pages. Lakshmi answered, “First I must find out which pages these are copies of. Only then can I make a claim. Payment due for my grandfather’s work and a debt owed by the household would not be entered on the same line.”

Shiv told her the way to an inexpensive place that bound documents. Lakshmi said, “I’ll bring the copies, but I will not present a paper that does not belong to my family as though it were ours.” Her family wanted the dispute settled quickly; Lakshmi wanted to make sure that a false claim did not saddle them with a new debt. Naira did not press her to fix a date. When the cord of Lakshmi’s bag came loose, Shiv tied the knot for her. Both had to return to their work before the next train arrived.

Outside the platform, Javed Kalandar was fastening up a little curtain of cloth. Behind it were two slender bamboo rods and a handmade paper puppet. He had once performed with live animals; now he had decided not to keep animals at all. The children asked, “Where’s the monkey?” Javed laughed. “Today the monkey is made of paper. It needs no rice, only the labour of these hands.” Working the puppet strings, he told a short story in which a hungry character acted out giving away half his rice. The onlookers laughed, and some of the children insisted that he perform it again.

When the performance was over, Javed opened a small tray. Those who wished to pay did so; others walked away without paying. He did not detain them. But a station guard said that the gathering was blocking the passage. Javed immediately lowered the curtain, pointed towards an empty space, and asked, “If I put it on this side, will the way remain clear?” The guard laughed at first, then said they would have to check where the station boundary ended and the public square began. Javed asked to see the boundary peg. “I changed my livelihood so that it no longer depended on animals,” he said. “I do not yet know how to make a livelihood when I am allowed no place to stand.”

Naira lingered over Javed's puppet. Sanket wanted to learn to make such stringed toys; this morning he was at home writing down the hours when water ran from the tap. Naira asked Javed whether a small evening performance for the children might be arranged with the proper permission. Javed said, "Settle the fee, the place, and the time first. Call it free, and everyone will think the work is worth nothing." With that he retied a knot in the strings. From a little distance Fakira recognised the sound and said, "This song would suit that puppet very well." He hummed two lines of an old folk tune he loved. Javed caught the rhythm. For once, no one spoke of documents.

When Fakira had finished singing, he sat down quietly. The crowd from the train had thinned. The tea seller brought him a small glass. Fakira paid for it and asked how much sugar was in the tea this time. Javed said, "You could charge for your singing as well." Fakira laughed. "I sing this song for myself. Not everything has a slip of paper attached to it." Naira did not write that answer in her notebook. Some things people did for their own pleasure had no need to be turned into testimony.

Suddenly a cry went up beyond the square that a child had gone missing. A woman was walking quickly through the crowd holding a child by the hand; someone called her a member of an unknown gang and raised a mobile phone. Naira saw an elderly relative of the child hurrying towards them from the other side. A young man shouted, "Send the photograph! A child-snatcher has been caught." Fakira got to his feet. "Who has seen a child being stolen?" he asked. The young man said, "Everyone says so." Fakira replied, "What everyone is saying is not the same as what someone has witnessed." Frightened, the woman lifted the child into her arms.

Naira told the young man with the raised phone that the child's safety must be checked first and no photograph circulated. At the station's enquiry window, the woman was given an opportunity to explain. The elderly woman travelling with the child had alighted from a different carriage and reached them by another route; the child had been travelling with her, but they had become separated for a short while in the crowd on the platform. In the presence of an employee, the two sides' travel papers and their conversation with each other confirmed that the younger woman was a member of the family. The child asked for water. Naira told the crowd to move away. This incident did not establish that a child had been abducted here; nor did it give any reason to call off the search for a missing child from some other family in the town.

The young man was unwilling to delete the incomplete image on his phone. "What if it really had been a kidnapping?" he asked. Naira answered, "Then a safe investigation would have been necessary, not a public accusation." The employee at the enquiry window recorded that the child had been reunited with the family and that a false rumour had spread about this incident. Fakira asked whether anyone would also note the time taken to clear the crowd from the platform. "That is a separate entry," the employee said. "Good," Fakira replied. "The child's matter belongs to the child; the matter

of my blocked passage belongs to me. Don't bury everyone on a single sheet of paper."

Naira remembered her original purpose once more. The acknowledgement of Fakira's old complaint, complete with its number, had been entered in her notebook; Fakira himself held the original. When they reached the official's desk, Naira urged him to inquire into the status of the complaint. Fakira said, "The morning train has gone now. Give me ten minutes." He took the coins he had earned from his pouch and counted them separately, deducted the cost of tea, and checked the time of the afternoon train again. "Your inquiry matters to me," he said, "but if you tell me to go at once, who is going to pay for the food I lose by doing so?"

Naira did not give the easy answer that almost escaped her—I will pay. It would have been wrong, in the name of an inquiry, to make Fakira dependent on her generosity in place of his earnings. "I'll stand in the queue and ask the office about the position," she said. "You finish your work with the afternoon train. If they need a statement from you in person, I'll ask for the appointment to be fixed after it." Fakira nodded. "If the officer wants to hear me, I shall name the time myself. You will not make a statement in my place." Naira answered, "I will not." Since Mahesh's case, she knew very well the weight of that small promise.

At the office window Naira showed the old reference number. The employee turned through the register and said that the complaint was still active, not closed; a reply from another section was awaited for the verification of the name. The original entry declaring Fakira dead was still in the system. Naira asked, "What is the prescribed number of days for a reply after acknowledgement?" The employee pointed to the written noticeboard. Naira copied the public time limit into her notebook, but did not repeat Fakira's private identification number aloud before the crowd. The officer proposed a morning appointment for his statement. Naira said, "The applicant earns his living in the morning. Let a time in the afternoon be offered, with his consent."

At first the employee said, "It is difficult to give everyone a separate time." Naira indicated the crowd outside the window. "Then record that a request has been made to change the time. Give the applicant an answer, whether the request is accepted or refused." The employee wrote the date on a slip, entered a proposed hearing for an afternoon the following week, and said that final confirmation would depend on the applicant's signature. Naira came out with a copy of the proposal. This did not correct the entry recording Fakira's death. It might, nevertheless, spare him the necessity of surrendering his morning livelihood in order to pursue his complaint.

Naira read the new proposal slip aloud to Fakira. When he had heard it, he asked, "Won't the boat across the river have left by then?" Naira did not know. Fakira opened his old timetable and checked the boat's departure time; the rains could alter it. "I'll ask Hira tomorrow," he said. "I must meet the people who run the boat at the Tilwaha landing. First I want to hear their

conditions from them." Naira said, "For both the inquiry and the journey, we need to understand the water at Tilwaha." Fakira replied, "Yes. But do not think of those who work on the water merely as people who show us the way."

After the afternoon train arrived, Fakira guided two passengers to the place where their luggage had been put. One paid him the agreed amount; the other said he had no change. Fakira did not insist on remembering the man's name or face, but said plainly, "Next time, ask the price beforehand. I want the value of my work, not your pity." The passenger went away embarrassed. This time Naira did not follow him. When Fakira heard the train's final whistle, he sat down on the empty plank beside his feet. He hummed the last two notes of the same tune again. There was no entry of death in this song, nor any mystery of an envelope.

When Naira returned to the room at Railway Square that evening, Sanket was sitting over a timetable he had made of the water supply. After the first flow at dawn the tap had stopped twice. He had asked a neighbour for water, but neither its price nor the rule for sharing it had yet been agreed. Sarita had put lentils on the stove. "What happened about Fakira?" she asked. Naira said, "The death record has not been corrected. But we have a written proposal to change the time of his hearing. He did not miss his morning train." Sarita asked, "Did he want to look at the original page bearing the name?" Naira answered, "No. He wants his own entry examined. My page, the rumour about the child, and the papers concerning fishing rights are three separate matters."

In the middle of his notebook Sanket drew an empty square and labelled it 'Afternoon Train'. Naira smiled. "Why this square?" Sanket said, "In the morning there is water from the tap, in the afternoon Fakira's train, in the evening Mother's lentils. Not everyone lives by the same hours. Making room for one person's work does not mean that another person's time is empty." Stirring the lentils, Sarita said, "If all your studying has taught you that, it has been worthwhile." Outside, the whistle of a train continued to sound. This time the sound carried more than the mystery of someone whose living identity had been lost: it held the weariness of those returning home after their work was done, a little money earned, and the road into the following day.

Chapter 26 · Guha's Riverbank

After the crowd from the morning train had thinned, Fakira tapped the stone paving of Railway Square with the tip of his stick. Naira had brought him the slip received the previous day, proposing a new time for his hearing. Taking it in his hand, Fakira said, "It says after midday. But the timing of the boat we must catch to cross the river has to fit as well. Let us hear what the boatmen have to say first." Sarita was putting the water vessels in order in the new room. Before leaving, Naira had told her that today she would not be examining the original page of names; she would be looking into the arrangements for Fakira's journey.

The rainwater had still not receded from the road towards Tilwaha. Beyond the paved road lay an earthen rise, where water stood in ruts left by the old wheels of bullock carts. Fakira found the edge of the path sometimes by its sounds, sometimes with his stick. Once Naira moved forward to take his hand. "Tell me when a rut is coming," Fakira said. "I'll place my feet myself." Walking beside him, Naira warned him of the ruts ahead. She was only now learning to respect this small distinction.

The first thing they saw at the landing was not a boat but a wet plank. Two men were fastening an iron strip across its split joint. Hira was bent beside the boat, measuring the waterline. In his hands were a coarse length of rope and a narrow wooden strip with peeling paint. "The water is higher than yesterday," he said. "The boat will run, but we must settle the fare and the load first. Everything cannot go aboard one boat." On the far bank no one was waving a flag; a few people simply waited with their belongings.

Beside Hira sat Madhu Kevat with a thick ledger. His boat generally took people and small consignments as far as the opposite bank, sometimes giving travellers bound for Simatirtha the first stage of their journey. Crossing a river and crossing an international border were different journeys, a distinction Madhu explained openly to everyone. "If you have a bus to catch farther on, I'll put you ashore on the other side," he said. "Border papers and checks at the post are not included in my boat fare." Naira entered the distinction in her notebook.

Behind the landing, a notice sent from an office had been tied with rope to a post. It declared that the boatmen's community would provide free service for journeys undertaken as public assistance. There was no signature. Madhu unfolded the paper and held it up. "If people from the village are in trouble, we will not turn our faces away. But the boat, the oil, the planks and the boatmen's time did not spring into existence as a donation from somebody. Whoever announces a free passage must first say how the boat is to be kept going." An elderly passenger asked, "Are you selling your river?" Madhu replied, "The river is not my property. But the boat is my responsibility. Do not confuse the two."

Hira looked at the reverse of the notice. “At yesterday’s meeting it was called a ‘proposal’. How has it become an ‘order’?” Madhu asked anyone who had a copy of the meeting’s proceedings to bring it forward. No one immediately moved. Naira asked, “Who put up the unsigned copy?” Madhu shrugged. “That is a question for an inquiry. Do not make me the guilty party by telling me what you yourself do not know.” Naira fell silent. Her remorse for publishing a half-truth after Mahesh’s testimony still demanded a place in the way she worked.

Meanwhile Fakira stood on the open ground beside the landing. “I need two things from the boat,” he said. “A safe place to sit, and the revised sailing time when the river rises. I’ve been given a new time for tomorrow’s hearing, but if I must wait two hours at the landing, I’ll lose that day’s earnings all over again.” Madhu asked who he was. Fakira gave his name, but did not read out the entire account of his death entry before the assembled people. “I may not understand the sickness afflicting your papers,” Madhu said, “but I can record the waiting time in the ledger.”

Long before this, on a bank of the Ganga, Guha listened to the water striking the underside of his boat. The river’s current had changed during the night. In the small Nishada settlement, the morning meal was being prepared; the boat’s ropes were being dried, and some children were pulling aside a fence of thorny bamboo. It was then that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana reached the shore. They had a journey before them, but for the people who lived along the bank this morning had already been a morning of work. Guha recognised his guests. After bowing to them, his gaze went to the mud on Sita’s feet and the planks of the boat.

“Accept my friendship,” Guha said, “but first hear what the river has to say. The landing planks are wet. We cannot carry all the baggage at once. If we turn the boat across the route where our people lift their fishing nets in the morning, we shall spoil their day’s work.” “We need to reach the other side quickly,” Lakshmana said. “Then it matters all the more that we choose a safe passage,” Guha replied. “Tearing the nets in the name of haste is no act of friendship.” Rama looked at him. What a friend had said did not seem to him a defiance of an order; it was knowledge drawn from the riverbank.

Sita touched a plank of the boat and asked, “Who will give a hand to someone who cannot swim as they step down?” Guha called two boatmen and had them set a sturdy bamboo pole at the landing. “If a hand is wanted, we shall offer it after asking,” he said. “There is no need to make another person’s body a monument to our own helpfulness.” Lakshmana looked towards the water. He accepted the condition that his weapons should be placed apart, so the balance of the boat would not be disturbed. Guha instructed his people not to cut across the old route of the fishing nets on the return journey after the first crossing.

A young boatman on the shore asked, “If the princes are guests, who will collect the fare?” Guha said, “The guests are dear to me. Today I shall pay the boatmen what is due to them from my own share of food. But if another

traveller comes tomorrow, asking that person for a fare will be no insult." Rama said, "Then I understand that you keep your hospitality to guests separate from the rights of your own people." Guha's small decision made room within the boat; the day's labour of those who cooked, dried the nets and rowed did not come to an end merely because guests had arrived.

At Tilwaha in Videhapur, the water surged once more. Madhu had two sacks taken off the boat. One was described in the papers as 'disaster supplies', but inside were sealed packages belonging to a private shop. "I will not give this sack a free place reserved for disaster relief," Madhu said. "Record it under the name of what it actually is." The shopkeeper who had brought the sacks protested. Hira pointed to the wet planks. "The load limit of this boat is written here. Remove two sacks and two passengers can sit safely." The shopkeeper began scolding the labourer who was lifting the sacks. Madhu stopped him. "Argue about your goods with me, not with the labourer."

A young man tightening the planks wrung out his wet shirt. He was Lakhan Satar. Since the previous night he had been repairing the temporary incline to the landing; now he saw that the contractor's paper described his day's labour as 'community service'. He put a finger on the ledger. "I carried the timber here. I did not stop the water. If you wipe out the hours I worked last night by calling them service, where will my morning bread come from?" "How many hours did you work?" Madhu asked. "There were two others with me," Lakhan said. "If you record only my hours, their names will be left out." He was writing the three men's hours separately in his own notebook.

Naira asked Lakhan whether he wanted a copy of the paper. "Let me put my own records straight first," he said. "If the payment is cut, I shall speak with my companions." There was anger in his voice, but he did not turn the dispute of that moment into a larger accusation. One corner of the plank Hira was inspecting was still loose. Lakhan picked up his hammer. "I shall finish the work. Once it is done, see that a date is fixed for payment." Madhu entered in his ledger that the team working on the planks would be given a separate receipt.

On the open ground above the landing, two groups were considering where they might set up a small stage. Nandu Nat was measuring the distance between his bamboo poles; the child who had come with him, schoolbag on one shoulder, was revising the following day's lesson. Hari Natuwa was gathering up a cloth curtain and saying that, if there was a performance that evening, part of the earnings would be put aside for the child's books and fees. The two groups were not one: their arts, families and accounts of rent were distinct. A member of the landing committee said, "If the boat is to run free, let the entertainment be free as well." Nandu did not laugh. "The child will not be on the stage during school hours," he said plainly.

Hari rattled the coins in his thin tin box. "Money set aside for a child's books cannot be turned into cheap entertainment. Anyone who wants a performance should state the hours and the wages." Nandu added that the stage must be placed where it would not block the path of people getting off

the boats. Madhu insisted that Hira's measurements be checked before a crowd gathered at the landing. Nandu and Hari marked and set aside their respective bamboo poles; instead of rehearsing for a performance that day, the children were given time to attend school. A small agreement had been reached. A complete contract for the performance had yet to be drawn up.

A woman who had been tracing lines on a stone beside the water had listened silently throughout. Rita Ekka held a folded paper. She had witnessed an application for a loan during an earlier repair of the landing, but in the present demand for repayment her title and another person's name had been joined in the same line. "Why is this sum against my name?" she asked. The man with the ledger said, "It will be some change in the family name." "I know the accounts of my family," Rita replied. "I shall not sign this without seeing what it says."

Madhu offered Rita the notice, but she kept it in her own hand and said that the original agreement and the lender's copy must first be produced. "It is easy to look at someone's poverty and declare every debt to be the same," she said. "I shall repay whatever is mine. Why should I owe what is not?" Naira did not write Rita's name in her notebook. She recorded only that the landing committee's register of loans had no procedure for requesting a comparison of names, and that an applicant was seeking the original copy. Rita's private dispute remained in her own hands.

Ramani Bind arrived at the landing with a slip concerning the fishing rights at Barki Pond. Renu accompanied her and was keeping separate records of the hours for passage at the landing and for washing clothes. "Showing a lease for fishing in the pond does not establish a right over every landing on this river," Ramani said. "And permission to let everyone disembark at the landing does not, in turn, become a fishing contract." Renu said, "I need the hours when the landing is open. Ramani needs the terms governing production. If two different questions are written on one slip, once again neither will be heard."

Renu had an old copy of a paper in her hand. She said that a letter from her maternal home gave the name of a river as 'Bagmati', while another old transcription had 'Bangmatti'. The letter concerned the use of water in that other region; it was not a physical survey of the Tilwaha in Videhapur. "Seeing these two readings gives me no grounds to say that the Tilwaha joins that river," Renu said. "Only this: if a letter speaks of a landing, and we reduce it to a share in the fish from a field, the path by which women there came to fetch water disappears." Naira copied both readings exactly as they stood. She drew no new line of confluence on her map.

One employee, suppressing a laugh, asked, "So how many ledgers do you people want?" "As many separate lines as there are separate kinds of work," Ramani replied. "More ledgers will not increase the water; they will reduce the number of wrong entries." Folding the paper, Renu added that the hours worked by Urmila, who washed clothes, also depended on an open path to the landing. Hospital linen could not be put into the river wherever one pleased,

but its safe transport to the bank was necessary. Hira agreed that forcing boat safety and general access to the landing under a single rule would be harmful.

As midday advanced, the last plank of the boat's approach was fastened. Hira stepped into the empty boat first and checked the four places where loads could be put. Madhu pulled twice on the rope to test it. Lakhan stood to one side holding the slips recording his companions' hours. Nandu and Hari had moved their stage poles away from the boat's path. Rita had put no new signature on her debt papers. Ramani and Renu were writing separate applications. There was no great cheer at the landing, no scene in which one person had made everything right for everybody else.

"May I cross now?" Fakira asked. "Four passengers and two small bundles on the first trip today," Madhu replied. "Feel the plank before you sit down. There is no hurry." Fakira asked where he could grasp the rope. Before reaching out his hand, Madhu explained its position. Fakira boarded and sat down at his own pace. Naira remained on the bank; she had no immediate need to cross. Hira checked the line for the load, and the boat slowly left the shore.

On that ancient bank of the Ganga, Guha's boat too was moving forward. Rama sat with Sita and Lakshmana; on the bank, the people drying fishing nets went on with their work. Guha himself held the oar and looked back once. The shore was not empty. He owed friendship to those he was carrying across; he did not cease to owe responsibility to those he was leaving behind. He told the young boatman that, on their return, the woman who lifted the nets must be given her share of the food. That day, the ordinary hours of work continued alongside friendship.

In Videhapur, when the boat carrying Fakira had reached the opposite bank and returned, Madhu took down the notice promising free passage and placed it inside his ledger. "Does that mean the assistance is stopped?" the employee asked. "No. Anyone who needs to reach a hospital urgently should go first. Write a proposal that the cost be met from the town's relief fund. Put up the fare openly for those who will pay their own passage. Unaccounted expenses must not be deducted from the boatmen's wages." The employee said again that the office's approval would be needed. "Then it is a proposal," Madhu said clearly, "not an order."

Hira showed Naira the limit marked on a wooden strip. "The water changes every day. Today's inspection cannot guarantee tomorrow's safety." "I shall write that," Naira said, "but you must identify for yourself what needs checking." Hira entered the current water level, the boat's load and the time of the next inspection in the measurement register. Naira examined its public copy; she did not ask for the private names of passengers. A separate receipt was issued for the plank-workers' daily wages. No date was fixed for producing the original loan agreement in Rita's case; she received only an acknowledgement of her request.

As evening came on, the raised platform at the landing began to empty. Nandu's child was drying the wet corner of the schoolbag beside the fire; Hari

counted his earnings into the box reserved for books. Madhu asked both men to meet again about the time allotted for a stage performance the following week. “First we shall look at the school holiday hours,” Nandu replied. On her way home, Rita kept the papers safe in her bag. She had not won her case, but neither had she accepted a debt entry without proof. These small refusals along the riverbank were as real as the day’s earnings.

When Naira returned to the room at Railway Square, Sarita was tempering the lentils. Sanket was drawing a boat on a sheet of paper. “How many people crossed?” he asked. “Four on the first trip,” Naira said. “But today I learned that the conditions mattered more than the number.” “Eat your rice and tell me who laid down those conditions,” Sarita said. Naira recounted separately what Madhu, Fakira and Hira had said. When she came to the two names for a river in Renu’s old letter, Sarita asked, “Has Tilwaha changed its name again?” “No,” Naira said. “That is an old letter from another place. I must not put on the map what I do not know.”

Sanket left an empty place in the boat he had drawn. “Who is that for?” Sarita asked. “The person who rows the boat every day needs somewhere to sit, too,” he replied. “I kept giving all the passengers a place in the picture and forgetting the boatman.” Sarita laughed. Naira took the proposed slip for Fakira’s hearing out of her bag and placed it on the table. The time had not yet been confirmed; the work across the river was not finished in a day either. Yet the boat had run that day, an erroneous ‘free service’ order had been returned to the status of a proposal, and five people had spoken about their rights to their labour or their names without erasing one another’s identities.

Chapter 27 · Shabari's Dawn

One dawn in Dandakaranya, Shabari was separating wet firewood into two piles. Wood that had dried through to its heart was laid beside the hearth; pieces whose bark still held the night's rain were spread upon a raised bamboo frame to await the sun. The hermitage had only one hearth, but the mornings of those who depended upon it began at different hours. One person brought water, another stitched leaves together, another prepared a warm poultice for a sick child. The guest had not yet arrived. The work was already under way.

When Shabari had first come to this place, she had been shown where to gather fruit, but no one had clearly answered her questions: where the fruit was to be left, who would distribute it, and what was to become of any that ripened too far. One year's rains had spoiled a store of grain. Since that day she had set aside separate places for seed, dried roots and drinking water. People still bowed their heads in reverence to the memory of Matanga, the hermitage's teacher, on a morning such as this. But to kindle a hearth one needed dry fuel, not memory.

"Will you wait beside the path again today?" Karuna asked as she washed the leaves. Her mother had an old injury to her leg, and Karuna wanted to take her midday medicine home. "I shall keep watch," Shabari said. "But you must leave at your usual time. The guest's arrival is something I wish for; it is not a debt you owe." Karuna laughed. "Will you be able to say that in front of the visitor too?" For a little while Shabari said nothing. "I will," she answered. "If I cannot, the work of the morning will slip out of my hands."

Shabari remembered the first dispute she had had with her teacher. After the rains, the finest fruit from the hermitage orchard was always chosen first for visitors; the women's plates were left with what had fallen or broken. One day she had asked why the hunger of those who served was reckoned less. The teacher had answered that they must all decide the question together. Nothing changed that day, but little by little those who worked outside throughout the day began to have their portions set aside first when the morning fruit was divided. When Shabari remembered words, she remembered small changes such as these along with them.

The wind stirred along the forest path. Through the sound of falling leaves came the footsteps of two people in the distance. A young man from the hermitage ran up to say that two travellers carrying bows were asking where to find water. Shabari did not seize the basket of fruit and rush out. She first gave Karuna the poultice for her injured mother, then looked at the rice on the hearth. "Set aside what we ourselves need," she told the women sitting in the courtyard. "The guest's meal can be prepared from what remains."

While washing the courtyard for the visitors, Mriga tightened the binding around an old broom. "All my life I have been told that everyone in the hermitage is equal," she said to Shabari. "But when it is time to pick the fruit,

it is my hands; when it is time to tell the story, it is somebody else's name." Shabari said, "Speak for yourself. Even if the visitors give no answer, your question will still stand." Mriga went a little way and stopped. It was not as though she had suddenly been granted some new right; but she had gained courage to put the question into her own words.

Rama and Lakshmana came along the path to the hermitage. Their bodies were dusty from travel, and in their eyes was concern for someone absent. Shabari set out water. "Wash your hands and faces first," she said. "There is a great deal of dust on this path." Rama thanked her. Lakshmana asked where the hermitage drew its water. "Down the slope," Shabari replied. "But a tree fell across that path last night, so those bringing water now come by the upper bend." Her answer held a map of the forest, not some mystery descended from heaven in bodily form.

Rising from the hearth, Karuna asked, "What would you like to eat?" Lakshmana said that whatever was available would do. Hearing this, Shabari said, "Not everything that is available belongs to a guest. Some of this fruit has been kept for the sick. These roots have been cooked on the hearth, and we can offer you some of the fruit." Rama looked towards the basket; for a moment his gaze rested there, as though all the hands behind an ordinary meal had become visible to him together for the first time.

"Why have you waited for so many days?" Rama asked. Shabari replied, "My teacher said that one day guests would come with whom it would be important to speak. But in the meantime, the people who came here every day went on being hungry. I could not turn them away in the name of waiting." Rama looked at her. She continued, "It is good that you have come today. Tomorrow you will leave, and the hearth will burn as it did before."

Mriga, the youngest woman in the courtyard, spoke up about the work they had shared. "Everyone will tell the visitors' story afterwards. I picked the fruit, Karuna brought the water, Shabari cleaned the roots. Will anyone even ask my name?" She was not shy; she merely wanted an answer. "What is your name?" Rama asked. "Mriga," she said. "And I know the paths through the forest." Lakshmana asked her about the way ahead. Mriga described the marshy ground beyond a large rock and warned them that the short, straight path in the rains deceived travellers like a trap.

Shabari served the meal on leaves. Karuna set aside her own portion and left for her mother's home. No one detained her in the name of honouring the guests. After the meal, Mriga divided up the task of washing the earthen vessels. When Rama and Lakshmana asked about the forest path ahead, Shabari told them what she knew, without adding conjecture where her knowledge ended. The time for their departure was drawing near; that did not mean the hermitage's clock had stopped.

As he was leaving, Rama said, "Your service will be remembered." Shabari answered, "It is good to remember service. But the hands that light the fire need time to rest as well. When you visit another home, ask about that too." Lakshmana asked Mriga to explain the landmarks once more. With a twig she

traced the turnings in the earth. The two travellers departed. Shabari counted the fruit that remained, filled the water jars, and said to Mriga, “Take the evening off from the hearth today. I shall do my share.”

That week a small kitchen had been opened at Railway Square in Videhapur to distribute meals at dawn and in the evening. Sarita, who had left her house and was living in a temporary room, arrived with an empty container. She had not come to beg for food but to examine the grain accounts; containers holding medicinal dressings and drinking water, together with the rice, were standing in the same veranda. After crossing the river by boat with Fakira, Naira had understood that a shortage of food was not the kitchen's only problem. Someone brought the grain, someone unloaded the burdens, someone received the bread: each person's time was different.

Inside the kitchen were three hearths. Dal simmered on the first, rice on the second, and water was being heated on the third. Urmila had not come with the hospital linen, but an old, clean piece of cloth she had sent was being used to lift hot vessels. She had already made it quite clear that a patient's linen and kitchen cloths must never be kept together. Sarita saw the separate mark on the cloth and smiled. The dispute over Urmila's wages remained unresolved, yet the practical rule she had given was protecting everyone at work here.

A board outside the kitchen read: “Community Meals — Service Free of Charge.” Beneath it two men were counting five sacks. “There were seven,” one said. “Two have disappeared.” Meera Banjara pulled her handcart to one side. “Did the paper list seven sacks of rice, or seven sacks of different goods?” she asked. “Open them and look before you suspect us.” On her cart were separate bundles of flour, salt and dry firewood.

When Naira arrived, she first noticed the fear on people's faces. She remembered the earlier affair of Champa's private message. She asked Meera, “May I write your name in a public notice?” “Put it in today's account of the goods,” Meera said. “Not on a poster making accusations.” Sarita said, “Count the grain first. People are hungry.” An elderly woman stood by the board holding a small plate. She was given bread before the argument continued.

Kedar Bauri was repairing a broken plank in one corner of the veranda. Three migrant labourers were with him; they had still not been paid for earlier repair work. A fresh blister had risen over an old wound in Kedar's palm. “Will this be entered as free service too?” he asked, looking at the board. “Today is a day of relief,” the manager said. “Everything cannot be governed by accounts.” “Relief meals are one thing,” Kedar replied, “and wages for hammering down planks are another. I am not asking for bread because my stomach is empty. I am asking for the price of my work.”

Sarita set down her container and sat beside Kedar. “How many hours?” “Three today. And payment for the previous four days is being withheld,” he said. Ramu, a young worker who had come with Kedar, showed his time slip, its edges soaked through. Naira did not reach out to take it. “Keep your copy,” she said. “If you wish, I can help you examine the wording of a written

application.” “First give us enough room to write in every hour,” Ramu said. The manager's form had a box headed “Volunteer,” but none headed “Worker.”

Meanwhile Poonam Chidimar arrived with a thin length of netted cloth folded against her chest. She sewed covers to protect sacks of fruit and grain from sun and rain. Seeing her surname, the manager asked, “Your people catch birds, don't they?” Poonam opened the folds and showed him the fine stitching. “I made this. What my family used to do is another story. Today I sew covers and send my child to school. If you wish, write the old story beside my name, but do not record today's occupation incorrectly.”

Poonam's daughter stood nearby, wearing wooden sandals and reading a page from her schoolbook. “Mother, how do you spell ‘free of charge’?” the girl asked. Poonam said, “Those entitled to this meal will receive it free; but the people who cook it and bring it here do not labour for nothing.” The child studied the letters. Sarita burst into laughter. “You'd need a very large notebook to write down the meaning of that phrase,” she said. Laughing too, the girl tucked the page into her schoolbag.

Shanti Bote arrived just then, having stepped ashore from a boat. River sand clung to her sandals. She laid a slip of paper on the table. “Two sacks were on the far bank,” she said. “A man from the settlement delivered one, and I carried the other. The unloading charge for these two sacks is entered separately. When the seal is dry, enter it in the ledger on my return.” The manager checked the figures on the slip. In the first count it had been assumed that all seven sacks had reached Videhapur at once. In fact, five were here and two at the distribution point across the river.

Loosening the rope of her handcart, Meera said, “My signature is against the goods that arrived here. Why should I answer for sacks left across the river?” Shanti said, “And who decided my unloading charge? The people who count five sacks count their own hours, but forget the hours spent on both banks of the river.” Naira asked that Shanti's slip and the register of delivered goods be placed on separate tables. “One register records the amount of food, the other the cost of transport. Do not turn them both into a single story of blame,” she said.

Fakira arrived, his stick tapping steadily. From the sounds of Railway Square he could tell where the next turning towards the kitchen lay. When someone moved to take his hand, he stopped them. “First tell me which side the hearth is on,” he said. “I shall find my way.” Poonam's daughter counted aloud the stone steps in that direction. “What's cooking today?” Fakira asked. “Chickpeas and rice,” the girl replied. “Then give me one bowl of chickpeas and half a portion of rice,” Fakira said. “Let me decide what my stomach needs.”

Someone proposed a new rule for the kitchen: if a person took only half a plate, a red mark should be put against their name, so that they would not receive a full grain allowance on the next occasion. Sarita intervened. “A person's need for food changes. Taking half a plate does not make someone

entitled to only half their rights. Record the amount of food distributed, not a fault in the body." Kedar added, "And someone who has no appetite is no reason to deduct the wages of the worker who keeps the hearth going." For the first time the manager looked away from the board and into the faces of the people.

A woman warming herself by the fire in the veranda said that news of the supposedly missing sacks had already spread through the square. "Some people are naming Meera's group." Meera spoke at once. "If anyone has something to say, let them say it to my face. But first show me the original count." Instead of taking out her phone to issue a public notice, Naira compared two lines in the register: five sacks received here, two received at the place across the river. There were entry numbers on all three papers. Shanti covered the private passengers' names on her boat-fare slip and showed only the goods entry.

The count was made again. None of the seven sacks had disappeared. The town's talk of "two sacks stolen" proved false. "Now put the result where people can see it," Meera said. "Suspicion spreads in an hour. How many days will a correction take?" The manager pinned a new sheet behind the board: "ERROR IN COUNTING. ALL SEVEN SACKS ACCOUNTED FOR AT POINTS OF RECEIPT OR DISTRIBUTION. ALLEGATION OF THEFT FALSE." "Write that the error was in the counting, not against my name," Meera said. The sheet was amended accordingly.

But correcting the false accusation did nothing to settle Kedar's wages. In a temporary ledger the manager created a separate heading: "Repair Labour." Kedar entered his three hours there; Ramu made a clean copy of his damp time slip. The group's application for the four preceding days' arrears would go before the next meeting. "All that has happened today," Kedar said, "is that my work has acquired a name. The day I receive my money is still far away." Sarita replied, "And if the price does not follow the name, we shall ask again."

The smell of chickpeas bursting on the hearth rose into the air. Poonam knotted the edge of her netted fabric, but did not give away her new cover for nothing. Meera had its measurements and price entered on a separate slip. Shanti said that she would name her rate once she had seen the time needed to lift goods on both banks at dawn. Meera asked when her transport cart might connect with Shanti's boat. They considered a partnership, but agreed only that each would first write down her own expenses. Neither would entrust her entire family's route to the other's hands.

Poonam's daughter asked whether their kitchen would operate every day. No one could give a definite answer. "The morning meal could be connected to the work we do," Meera said. "And it would be good if, once a year, all the families met to examine the accounts of the kitchen, the landing and the warehouse again." "An annual meeting is fine," Kedar said, "but don't withhold daily wages until then." Shanti added, "The river does not rise at the same time on every day of the year. When you choose a date for a collective gathering, listen to the people who work at the landing." No date was fixed; they agreed only to put the proposal before the next meeting.

Towards evening, Kedar's companion Ramu sat in the kitchen veranda, drawing an old path in the earth with his finger. “They have stopped us bringing dry wood from beside this forest,” he said. “Rules to protect trees are not wrong,” Poonam replied. “But who will grant permission for fuel for our hearths and materials for our work?” “If the path has been closed,” Meera said, “the first thing to reckon with is the water and labour of those who travel on foot.” This discussion was becoming a question about how the paths would be allotted the following day. As yet, no one had decided to break a rule.

As Meera was turning her cart to go home, her younger sister called from behind. “At the next market, I want to sell goods by my own route.” Meera was about to say that everyone in a partnership ought to follow the same road; instead, she paused and asked, “How much can you carry?” Her sister told her the weight of the goods and the cost of transport. “Come with me for two days and look at the expense book,” Meera said. “Then decide according to your own reckoning.” This short conversation produced no immediate agreement, but neither was the sister's separate path refused.

Naira returned to the room with Sarita. Sanket was making a paper basket, with little separate name labels inside it for a boatman, a woman who carried goods, and a woman who blew the hearth into flame. “Were the seven sacks found?” he asked. “All seven were counted,” Naira replied. “We had been looking in two wrong places.” Sanket turned his basket over and examined it. “If we write something in a ledger, do we have to write the name of the person who carried it?” Sarita said, “Before writing a name, we must understand that person's permission and what the work means.”

Fakira had finished his half portion of rice. The sound of the little girl's laughter was still coming from the kitchen. “Eating half a plate of rice hasn't made me half a man,” he said. “If the chickpeas are good tomorrow, I'll ask for a full portion.” Sarita filled a vessel with plain water for him. For the first time, the woman who managed the kitchen's work sat down in the middle of the veranda with her own plate. No one ordered her to rise again.

In the distant hermitage of Dandakaranya, evening had fallen, and Shabari too was cleaning the hearth. Mriga sent one slice of the last ripe fruit she had reserved for herself to Karuna's mother's home, and offered the other to Shabari. “The visitors have gone,” Mriga said. “Who has a right to this fruit now?” Shabari ate her slice and laughed. “First, those who are hungry, those whose labour has gone into it, and those who have a voice in how it is shared,” she said. For a little while they were both silent. The wet bark laid over the wood had begun to dry. There was still the problem of the next morning's meal, but on this night no one would leave their plate untouched and go to sleep hungry.

Chapter 28 · Hidimba's Pact

Far from Dandakaranya, at a resting place along the Pandavas' journey through the forest, Hidimba was gathering three pieces of broken bamboo before dawn. The path beside the roots of a tree had been damaged in the quarrel of the day before yesterday. Two children had gone that way to collect tubers, and she pressed the earth down with her feet, showing them a new turn in the path. The marks of the night's violence were still visible on the bark. Hidimb was dead; for his sister, his death had brought no end to the forest's hunger or fear, nor to her responsibility for its paths.

Bhima came carrying a vessel of water in one hand. "Shall I lift the bamboo?" Hidimba looked at him. "Lift it, but I shall tell you where it must go. Your arms are strong, but my eyes know the ways of this earth." Bhima picked it up without replying. He had begun fitting together two hollows at the side when Hidimba stopped him again. "This turning must remain open for the pregnant deer. We do not close the paths of every other creature merely to make a shorter path for people." Bhima laid the bamboo down in another direction.

The attraction that had arisen between them had not made Hidimba forget her brother. She had refused his cruel command to kill the strangers; even so, it seemed harsh to her to turn his death into a song of victory. Bhima asked, "Do you wish to come with me?" Hidimba said, "The question is not whom I shall follow. The question is what kind of bond I may have with you while remaining here in my own forest."

Kunti was sitting beside the fire, cleaning the husks from rice. When Hidimba approached, Kunti rose to offer her a seat. "I can sit here," Hidimba said, and sat on the earth. She set out her wishes without circumlocution. She accepted Bhima's love, but need not leave the forest to go with him; if they had a child, the mother's word about the child's upbringing and name must be heard first; and no child would be considered conscripted at birth into the army of any lineage.

This was not easy for Bhima. He could not see how to divide his time between his duties to his brothers and the time owed to Hidimba's home. Hidimba noticed the mark of a thorn on his hand. "Does it hurt?" she asked. "It is nothing," Bhima said. As she drew out the thorn, Hidimba said, "A hand that protects others is not diminished by admitting its own wound. Tell me what promise you can actually keep." For the first time Bhima spoke of his difficulty without turning it into a tale of valour. "I cannot abandon the journey with my brothers. But when I am here, I will not remain merely a guest in your forest." Hidimba handed him a wooden vessel. "Then fill this with water and bring it back. We shall speak of the rest of the promise."

Yudhishthira had been listening. His first question was, "Our journey must continue. How, then, will this relationship be sustained?" Hidimba placed a

thin sheet of bark before him. “Do not promise what cannot be sustained. Let the time of staying, the conditions of departure and the respect due at a future meeting all be stated clearly. Let us begin the child's future with the child's rights, not with our fears.” Nakula asked, “Where will we find paper here?” Hidimba laughed. “This is bark, not paper. And if people refuse to honour what is written, how is that the bark's fault?”

Kunti examined the split on the back of the bark. Hidimba called for a woman of her community who made marks to preserve agreements. The elder first repeated Hidimba's words, then listened separately to Bhima and Kunti. Bhima said he would not conceal the obligations of his journey, and that while he stayed he would respect Hidimba's decisions concerning the forest's welfare. Kunti promised not to deny the mother's rights in raising a child. The elder made three marks on the bark: consent to stay, honesty in parting, and the child's own future. This was not the seal of a royal court; it was a memory laid before witnesses.

Hidimba folded the bark. “If one day you call upon our child's name in a time of danger,” she told Bhima, “ask the child before summoning them. Giving one's blood is no tax imposed by birth.” Bhima remained silent for a long while. Then he said, “I have heard you. I am here today; tell me what share I can take in today's work.” Hidimba pointed to the remaining pieces of broken bamboo. On the first morning of love, making this path passable again was no small answer for her.

Videhapur, the monsoon of 2039. The question of firewood raised in the Rail Square communal kitchen the previous evening received its answer at dawn from a notice nailed to a gate: “FOREST-EDGE ROAD CLOSED. ACTION WILL BE TAKEN AGAINST UNAUTHORISED ENTRY.” The lower corner of the paper was wet. The date was clear, but splashes had erased the next line identifying the office of the issuer. Ramu stood there with an empty handcart. Behind him came Meera Banjara's sister carrying a sack; it contained no firewood, only empty baskets bought for the kitchen.

Kedar Bauri said, “Yesterday I was told to enter what I was owed for fixing the planks. Today the very road to the kitchen is closed.” Meera did not interrupt him. “The two matters are connected, but keep their accounts separate. An application for wages will not be settled simply by opening a gate.” While they were discussing this, Batohi Dhami arrived with two empty honey vessels and a long bamboo hook. Its end was smooth so that it would not tear the bark of the trees.

Reading the notice, Batohi said, “I take this road to gather honey. There are old beehives on some of the trees, though the yield is not the same every year. Today I am not going to cut a hive; I am going to check the vessels I left there.” The guard standing at the gate said, “Your name is not on the list.” Batohi asked, “Who made this list, and where can I submit an objection?” The guard had only a duty slip issued two days earlier. He had no authority to invent an order of his own.

Devaki Pal had halted her goats some distance from the gate. Their hooves were sinking into the wet earth. “If we go round this way, we shall reach the pasture,” she said, “but during the rains the channel behind it stays full. I will not take the animals that way.” In her bag was a copy of an old water-route record. The word “Khairi” was written at its head. She had found the paper among her mother's family's accounts of seasonal grazing routes; she did not know whether it bore any geographical relation to the Tilwaha of Videhapur.

Tara read the words on the paper carefully. “The value of this name is that it may help us understand the old conditions governing access here. It is not proof that the Tilwaha flowed under that name,” she said. Devaki breathed more easily. “I do not need a new name for the river. I need to know how to get the animals safely to water.” She stroked a goat's neck. A little goat was chewing at the end of her sari; laughing, Devaki gently pushed it away.

A girl who had come with Devaki was counting water containers. “Two here for the animals, and three for people,” she said. The gatekeeper asked, “Do all of you live in the forest?” Devaki replied, “Our home is in the village. A grazing route does not determine where we live.” As she handed out water, the girl noticed Batohi's empty vessels. “Didn't you go to fetch honey?” “They would not even let me see whether the hive is still there today,” Batohi said. The girl asked, “If someone says the tree belongs to him, do the bees become his as well?” Batohi laughed. “We shall have to ask the bees. But before taking a hive, we need to understand the rules of the forest and of the people who use it.”

Meanwhile, Tulsi Tajpuriya climbed down from the driver's seat of a small goods vehicle. The next journey scheduled to bring medicines along the unpaved forest-edge road was approaching, though today his vehicle carried sacks of grain. “This gate concerns more than firewood,” he said. “If you close every road here, the vehicle will have to go through the town's narrow lanes, where schoolchildren walk.” The guard said, “I cannot decide an alternative route for the vehicle.” Tulsi answered, “Then let the person who can make that decision come here.”

Rosie Lalbegi was shaking the collected water from her umbrella. She worked under contract, collecting separately sorted rubbish from the nearby rooms, and her community also had its own tradition of religious identification. The young man filling out a temporary register at the gate made an assumption from her name and put her religion and occupation into a single box. Before taking up the pencil, Rosie asked, “Will you write what I tell you, or what you think you know?” The young man started.

“Yes, tell me.” Rosie pointed to each entry in turn. “My work is sorting waste, but that is not my religion. My surname determines neither of those things. I need to take the materials for my work through this gate every day.” The young man crossed out his earlier supposition and entered the information she gave him on a separate line. Signing her name, Rosie said, “This is not only about whether I am allowed inside. The names of the people counted here must be correct.”

Mangari Gorait arrived at the gate last of all, although her work had been obstructed before anyone else's. She had once led a sorting and cleaning team at the now-closed factory on the edge of the forest. After the factory shut down, she had never been able to obtain its book of outstanding payments. The outer wall of those premises was now being used as part of the new gate across the forest road. “Who ordered this door closed?” she asked the guard. “I don't know,” he replied. Mangari said, “I will not blame the man guarding the wall of the factory that withheld my team's wages. But neither will I surrender my right to ask the name of the person who owns the door.”

When Naira arrived, she did not take out her phone at once. Her mistake in violating Mahesh's conditions for his safety at the last meeting still pained her. She asked Batohi, “May I see your vessels and the map of your route?” Batohi showed her his copy, but on condition that she did not reveal the exact location of the hives. “If a crowd gathers where the hive is, both the bees and the people will be harmed,” he said. On her map Naira marked only the turning that gave access to the area, not the location of the hive.

Gomati arrived too. Rainwater was swirling in the ditch outside the gate. “The new earth piled up here seems to have changed the slope,” she said. “I will not say so with certainty merely from looking. We need measurements.” Tara went down beside her. In the copy of the old drainage record she carried, this bend had no name. As they investigated, the two women marked three features separately: the gate, the ditch and the public footpath. Aditi's inspection papers were not yet at the gate; no one attached her name to an order on the strength of an assumption.

As the crowd in front of the gate grew, a man called out, “Let us all break the lock.” Batohi refused at once. “Then the path to water, honey and pasture for the goats will disappear into a quarrel. What we need today is written evidence of our demand.” Mangari said, “Breaking a lock will not open my wage ledger.” Turning his vehicle key in his palm, Tulsi said, “The goods in my vehicle have to be delivered today. How long is the crowd going to stand here?”

Poonam Chirimar from the kitchen arrived carrying measurements for the netted fabric prepared for the evening meal. She laughed when she saw the guard's torn raincoat. “You guard the gate while your own shoulders are getting soaked.” “The requisition for a raincoat has been held up too,” the guard said. Poonam asked, “If I sew it, will I be paid?” The guard could not decide what payment she should receive. That brief exchange of laughter eased the crowd a little, but the road remained closed.

Meera proposed that everyone should first set down the particulars of their own work, and only then prepare a joint application. Batohi's honey vessels, Devaki's grazing route, Tulsi's transport, Rosie's regular work and Mangari's factory arrears were entered on separate lines. Kedar wanted to record the outstanding payment for his repairs as well. Meera did not stop him, but had a separate application number assigned to it. “Giving five injustices one name does not make any one of them smaller,” she said.

A woman who had worked with Mangari showed her old identity card. Mistaking it for an entry pass, an employee stepped forward. “This is an old employment identity card, not a pass granting passage,” Mangari said. “Do not mislead everyone by holding it up.” The employee asked for an earlier register. It emerged that the gate's security arrangements were covered by contract papers, but no independent order closing the public path was shown in that file. The discovery did not open the gate by itself, but it weakened the rumour that the closure was a final prohibition imposed by the forest department.

Naira asked, “What is the written procedure for obtaining a copy?” The employee was not authorised to answer. He went inside to fetch the main office's receipt book. The wait was long. Tulsi decided to turn his vehicle along another road through town so that the grain could arrive on time; he entered the additional freight cost separately, with the question of who should pay it left open. “On a day when I am carrying patients, I will not make such a diversion without discussing safety first,” he said, and drove away. His decision did not avert the coming dispute over transport. It revealed its first cost.

Rahina Thakurai, who had once worked in Mangari's old factory, also came to the gate. She made copies of documents and had previously transcribed the proceedings of public meetings. Mangari asked her to examine a copy of an incomplete stamp on the margin of the old wage register. Rahina said, “I can copy the letters, but I cannot tell which office had authority to use this stamp without seeing the original.” Mangari turned the paper to show her. Three months of unpaid wages had been combined in a single column, with no separate amount due to each worker. Mangari decided that before the next meeting every worker in her team would write down their own days of labour. The lock on the gate would open no wage slip, but during this wait her old claim began to take shape again.

After noon, a woman employee from the office came out herself. Having examined the guard's slip, she said that the security of the warehouse inside the premises and the legal status of the old communal footpath would be investigated separately. For the present, only a team conducting measurements and inspections could pass through one corner of the gate; the restriction on general entry remained in force. She assigned a receipt number to the application and accepted the request for a copy of the papers within three days. Mangari asked, “And if no answer comes in three days?” The employee said, “The time is written on the receipt. Ask again on the strength of that.”

Devaki took her goats towards the ditch, but would not lead them into the deep water. Turning an empty honey vessel in his hands, Batohi said, “I never got to see the hive today. Whether the honey will wait for me until evening, I cannot say.” Rosie asked him, “What is in the empty vessel?” Batohi laughed. “Tomorrow's hope.” “Then keep it safe,” Rosie said. “It is hard to keep a ledger of what hope is owed.” They both laughed.

Meanwhile, a young man turned a camera towards the crowd and declared, “Show everyone. These people are blocking the road.” Two families from Janaki's travelling group were passing that way with their belongings. Naira gestured for him not to take close pictures of their faces without consent. The young man filmed the gate from a distance, but Naira did not see what his phone had saved. Janaki told her group, “Get the children and the loads across first. We can argue later.” By evening, the story of the road closed at dawn could have turned into many different stories.

At the old forest encampment, as evening fell, Hidimba and Bhima returned to the path. While driving a piece of bamboo into the ground, Bhima asked, “What if one day you change your mind and wish to come with me?” Hidimba replied, “Then I shall say so. If you change your mind, you must say so too. We shall not mistake silence for a promise.” Bhima let go of the bamboo and looked at her. “You have been fighting a greater battle than I have, long before this.” Hidimba laughed. “I am making things clear not because I want to fight you, but because I want us to live together.”

She went on. One of Hidimb's former guards, a young man, stood beside the path. His question was bitter: “If you live with a stranger, what becomes of your brother's people?” Hidimba told him her decision. “I shall not erase my brother. But I shall not bring back his commands of violence either. The forest paths will remain for everyone who works on them. I shall decide who enters my home.” The young man lent a hand in lifting the bamboo. His misgivings had not disappeared, but he ceased obstructing the path to the house.

By evening in Videhapur, Meera had prepared four copies of the joint application: one for the office, one for those who used the road, one for the separate dues of the workers, and one to be entrusted to someone who had been unable to attend the hearing. Rosie asked, “Which copy will contain my private information?” Meera said, “Only the register for which you gave your permission.” Batohi had the location of the hive removed; Devaki specified the season when the grazing route was used; Mangari kept the old claim for unpaid wages separate.

As Sarita washed the kitchen utensils, she asked Naira, “Has the road opened?” “Not yet,” Naira said. “But we have found a way to demand the original document showing whose order it is.” Sarita drained the water and turned a vessel upside down. “If every question found its answer in one day, how would people go on living the next?” She did not smile. Her voice carried the weariness of experience. Naira saw a small cut on Sarita's hand, made by the edge of a container. Without speaking, she offered her a clean piece of cloth.

At night Devaki's little goat kept chewing at its new rope. Devaki quickly pulled it free and said, “I can undo this rope's knot, but tomorrow people will have to gather again to undo the knot at the gate.” Smoke rose from the distant kitchen. Tulsi's vehicle had delivered the food; Kedar's wages were still unpaid; Batohi's honey vessels remained empty. Four separate signatures on

the joint application were drying on the damp table in the night. No one had handed over their forest, their livelihood or their future into another's keeping. Yet they had all spoken of coming together again to seek a passage through the next dawn.

Chapter 29 · The Child Stealer

The photograph of the forest gate, wet until late into the night, had spread by dawn through the tea stall at Railway Square like a sheet of paper laid out to dry. The stallkeeper's son held one phone before another and played the video. For a few moments Janaki's back appeared on the screen, then a child's hand; beyond them were the bamboo gate and someone's sharp cry—"Catch them!" As the video ended, a caption appeared: 'Child thief caught this morning.'

Fakira was standing in the queue for tea. Hearing the words, he looked not at the phone but at the stallkeeper's son. "Who recorded it this morning?" he asked. "It was sent today," the young man replied. "The time something is sent and the time it happened are not the same," Fakira said quietly. The young man laughed, but did not put the phone away. Two people standing nearby had already forwarded the video to another group.

At that hour Janaki was spreading her group's damp sheets in the sunshine beneath the railway bridge. The day before, at the forest gate, she had turned two families back, children and burdens together. Now she was intent on shaking the water from a sheet when a strange woman saw her from a distance and tugged at her little daughter's hand. The child faltered; her mother almost lifted her bodily and carried her away. Janaki was left with the wet sheet in her hands.

"What has happened now?" asked Sarayu, an elderly woman of the group. "Yesterday people watched us on the road," Janaki said. "Today they hide their children when they see me." Wringing out a sheet, Sarayu said, "Shall we put locks on our mouths as well, then?" Janaki did not answer. She remembered the young man's phone at the gate. He had been asked not to take photographs, but no one knew what he had recorded from how far away.

When Naira arrived, Janaki stated her conditions before anything else. "Make your enquiries, but do not put our children's faces on phones again. Last time Mahesh's words were published. The people in my group will not pay the price for that mistake." Naira took a notebook, not a phone, from her bag. "Tell me the sequence of your work that day," she said. "We can discuss making anything public afterwards, with everyone's permission." "And if we do not give permission?" Janaki asked. "Then I will not disclose names without consent."

To begin with, Janaki allowed only three things to be written down: she had reached the gate yesterday evening; in one of the two families a child was with its mother; and no abduction had taken place before her eyes. She did not want the child's name recorded. "When the crowd shouted 'Catch them,' who were they shouting at?" Naira asked. "Someone had spoken of breaking the lock on the gate," Janaki replied. "Perhaps somebody was frightened. I

cannot say for certain either, without hearing the whole of what was shouted."

Behind Railway Square, in the school's temporary classroom, Meera Mandal was propping up a bamboo board. In her household she was known as Dhanuk, but in the work of running a class it was not her caste that mattered; it was the children's time for learning and the rent she had paid. For two months she had been buying the rented matting and chalk from her own earnings. Three children had failed to come to class today. Their families had said Railway Square was unsafe.

Meera showed her register. "Should a child who wants to study be kept out of the classroom because there is no permanent address? Two of these three were here yesterday. The third comes from a travelling encampment. I have written the child's name, but not a home address." "Who wrote yesterday's attendance?" Naira asked. "I did," said Meera. "But this register will not catch a child thief. It can tell us where education was interrupted—that much." She laid the damp pieces of chalk beneath the board to dry.

When Meera gave the hours of the previous day's lesson, it emerged that a child from Janaki's group had been in this classroom. There was, however, no proof that this was the child seen in the video. After a moment of eagerness to match the names, Naira stopped her pen. A school attendance entry did not establish where a child's body had been at every moment. "Will you take a photograph of my register?" Meera asked. "Only a written confirmation of the time," Naira said, "not the complete list of children."

The noise of the crowd grew. Outside the tea stall at Railway Square a young man was telling people that Janaki's group had fled the village the previous day. At that very moment Janaki herself arrived there with Meera. She set her empty bamboo basket on the ground in front of him. "If I ran away, where have I come from now?" she asked. The young man showed no embarrassment. "If the video is false, bring the child before us." Janaki's reply was fierce. "I will not turn any child into a spectacle to put your suspicions at ease."

Durga Danuwar also came into the crowd. On her shoulder was a small bundle of cut bamboo; in her hand she carried a copy of the route map. She had been bringing raw materials for baskets from the overgrown riverbank beyond, and the closing of the gate had forced her to make a detour. Someone pushed against her, saying, "The child's case first; bamboo afterwards." Durga lowered her bundle. "Bamboo afterwards, if you like. But my cart travelled along this road yesterday, carrying this very bamboo. If you want to know the time, I can tell you."

Durga showed Naira her transport receipt. It bore the date of the previous evening and the number of bundles loaded. "My cart was stopped at the gate," she said. "Janaki's people were on this side with their belongings. People were talking about opening the lock. I heard no child scream, though I remember the uproar." "Did you see everything that happened?" Naira asked. Durga

smiled. “I was trying to free my cartwheel. I will not claim to have seen what I did not see.”

Naira wanted to see the video again. The stallkeeper’s son was willing to hand over his phone, but all he possessed was a forwarded copy. He did not know who had written the words ‘this morning’ above it. He showed the time displayed for the file: it was the time the phone had received it, not the time it had been made. “That tells us when it was forwarded,” Naira explained. “It cannot establish when the original recording was made.” For the first time the young man heard a question that had nothing to do with the glitter of the screen.

They went to the gate to find the original video. The watchman was drying the previous day’s soaked duty slip. Naira first asked whether he had detained anyone on an accusation of stealing a child. “My duty is to guard the road,” the watchman said. “I took no child into custody yesterday on any such charge.” Durga checked the time of her consignment. The watchman showed them the restriction on vehicle entry recorded against that hour, but refused to hand over the section bearing names without a formal request for a copy.

Then a friend who had accompanied the young man admitted that he had recorded the scene from a distance. The original file was still safe on his phone. Janaki trembled when she saw the face of a child from her group clearly visible on it. She stated her condition plainly. “We can view it together here first, but no copies are to be passed around.” The young man agreed. Padma was absent, so Naira did not pretend to be a technical expert. She simply wrote the original file’s date, the sequence of images and the owner’s account separately in her notebook.

In the original footage the rain-soaked notice on the gate, Tulsi’s cart carrying grain and Durga’s bundle of bamboo were visible together. Meera then checked the time of the cart carrying grain for the previous day’s kitchen against her food register. The circulated copy, labelled ‘this morning’, was presenting an event of the evening as though it had occurred at dawn. Three separate records of work confirmed this error of date and context. Who had circulated the video with that caption, however, was still unknown.

The mother of the child from Janaki’s group also came to the gate. She did not want to bring her child before everyone. Sitting a little apart, she spoke of her working hours, the journey the previous day and the child’s presence with her. She had no birth certificate for the child, but that did not become a pretext for forcing her into a public spectacle to prove that she was its mother. “Your private statement will be kept separately and securely,” Naira said. “We will not show the child’s face in the public correction.”

“Then what answer will you give to the words ‘thief caught’ written there?” Durga asked. “This video does not prove that a theft of a child was caught,” Naira replied. “An event that happened in the evening has been called a morning event. We will seek a correction of those two claims. Details of whose child it is are not for the public meeting.” The tension in Janaki’s palms loosened. For the first time since morning she felt a little relief from

her fear. But the crowd had already sent the file onwards; it could not be recalled from every phone.

At precisely that moment another voice rose. A woman came running towards the railway bridge, sweat and dust streaking the side of her nose. “Has anyone found my son?” Without asking anyone’s name, she looked straight at Janaki. Janaki immediately stood up. The woman said her name was Lata. Her eight-year-old son, Mithun, had become separated from his family at the market near the kitchen after morning. Searching and asking after him, she had come this far.

The crowd turned towards Janaki once more. Meera stepped between them. “One moment. Write down when and where Mithun was last seen. Yesterday’s video cannot be of this child’s disappearance—the times are different.” “What do I care about the video?” Lata said. “I want my son.” Her eyes were wet, but her voice was hard. Moving her basket aside, Janaki said, “Our people will help look for your son too. Do not block the search by declaring my group guilty before it has begun.”

Lata described her son’s clothes: a blue kurta, a scarf that shed red dye when wet, and a broken strap on the sandal of his left foot. Naira wrote down these details with their time and place, but did not repeat the child’s full identifying particulars before the crowd. “Did Mithun go to the market alone, or with someone?” Fakira asked. “With my younger brother,” Lata said. “My brother went into a shop to buy oil. When he came out, the child was gone.” Nobody had yet formally spoken to the shopkeeper.

Sabina Mirshikar was returning from the market. Her bag contained a needle, cord for repairing old nets and half the money a labourer owed her. She had quarrelled the day before with a young man in her family. He had pressed her to take up prohibited hunting in the name of tradition, and she had refused. Now she looked for work in the market mending nets and binding baskets. Someone in the crowd saw her bag and said, “People like these could carry a child off from anywhere.”

Sabina opened her bag and set the needle and cord on the ground. “This is not even a fishing net,” she said. “It is cord for tying the joints of a bamboo basket. If a child is missing, I will help search. But do not pronounce a crime proved the instant you hear the name of my forebears.” Turning directly to Lata, she asked, “Have you actually been to the shop where your son was last seen?” Lata shook her head. “The crowd will not even listen to me.”

Janaki decided to go with Lata. Naira wanted to stop her—the safety of the group was at stake—but Janaki said, “If I leave, they will say I fled. If I help, someone will say I came to wipe away the traces. Where is a person supposed to live under such reckoning?” “You will not go alone,” old Sarayu said. Janaki asked that no crowd of five follow them: only Meera and Sabina should come. Lata agreed. Naira asked Fakira to make a separate check on the times at the station, on the condition that his livelihood should not be interrupted.

At the oil shop in the market, Lata’s younger brother admitted his mistake. “I left the child standing outside. I thought it would only be three

minutes." The shopkeeper could not be certain of the time; he had been weighing oil for the kitchen just then. His ledger recorded the money, not the child's movements. "The water seller, the fruit seller, people crossing the street—did anyone see anything?" Meera asked. "Someone said they had seen a child in a blue kurta in the northern lane," the shopkeeper replied. "I did not see him myself."

In the lane Sabina picked up a broken sandal strap lying beside a heap of rubbish. Lata rushed towards it. "That's his!" "The colour and the way it is broken are similar," Sabina cautioned her. "That alone does not prove the child came this way. First let us see whether the strap has any distinguishing mark." Lata held it in her hand, but did not immediately allow anyone to record it as certainly belonging to her son. On a separate sheet Naira wrote: 'Possible object.'

Fakira worked out the timing from the station bell and the order in which trains had arrived. His daily work enabled him to clarify the interval between the afternoon train and the purchase of oil in the market. Even so, he could not say whether Mithun had boarded a train. "Can we get permission to look inside the carriages?" Naira asked. "First approach the railway staff in writing," Fakira replied. "Even if the child had no ticket, that does not mean he did not get on a train."

Back in her classroom, Meera drew a small map: the market, the oil shop, the water tap, the northern lane and the two roads leading to the station. When dismissing the children, she explained the ordinary rules of safety again, but did not turn Mithun's name into a public spectacle. As Durga steadied the map against the bamboo board, she said, "Do not draw yesterday's blocked forest road and today's search for a child in the same picture." "There are two maps," Meera replied. "Paths of suffering may meet. Evidence of what happened must remain separate."

Before evening Janaki and Lata reached the local assistance desk. The employee first showed them the viral video. "That video is from yesterday evening," Janaki said. "It is not the morning when this child went missing. If you wish, I can give you the written findings of the time check. But first register the report that Mithun is missing." Lata gave her son's identifying details. The employee drew up a separate report; the unproven accusation against Janaki's group was not automatically entered into it as a finding of guilt.

"When will the search begin?" Lata asked. The employee spoke of checking the possible routes and contacting the relevant police post. Naira insisted on a written acknowledgement. The employee entered the time and serial number of the complaint and handed over a copy. There was no miracle in that sheet of paper. Mithun had still not been found. But the official report of a missing child was no longer buried beneath the viral accusation against Janaki's group. Holding the paper in both hands, Lata read her son's name written upon it.

Naira prepared a second application concerning the original video from the gate. It set out the wrong time and context, the corroboration provided by the

previous day's grain cart and transport records, and the demand that the child's face not be circulated without consent. Janaki listened to the whole text before approving it. "Do not write that everyone lied," she said. "Write that this recording does not establish that a child was stolen." Naira changed the sentence. She had learned that the right words, too, could sometimes keep a person's life safe.

Durga lifted her bundle of bamboo onto her shoulder again. Her signature had been on the previous day's application about the gate; today the account of her transport had helped verify the video. But the problem of access along the forest road remained precisely as it had been. "I shall go this way again," she said. "I still want a separate answer in law. No one acquires the right to stop my bamboo in the name of a child." Meera resolved to open her classroom the next day. The fear outside had not disappeared, but she refused to leave the children's schooling suspended.

Sabina gathered up her net-mending cord. As she was leaving the market, a young man asked, "So you've given everything else up and become a social worker now?" "Pay me for my work and I'll stitch your basket tomorrow," Sabina replied. "Helping for nothing today has not relieved me of the cost of feeding myself." She put the slip for her half-paid wages back in her bag. She did not receive the other half that day, but neither did she abandon her reckoning of what her skill was worth.

As evening fell, Janaki's group returned beneath the same railway bridge. Sarayu was reheating the leftover rice-and-lentil khichdi for the children. A little girl asked, "Mother, do we look bad in the photograph?" Janaki stroked her head. "A photograph is not bad. What people say about it without asking can be bad." The girl asked again, "Where is brother Mithun?" Janaki's answer was brief. "We are still looking. We shall look again in the morning."

When Naira sent word to Lata, she said only that the separate possibilities of the market, the lane and the station had been recorded for investigation. There was no news that anyone had been caught, or that anyone had been finally declared innocent. "How long before I get my son back?" Lata asked. Naira had no answer. She could give only a copy of the acknowledgement, the correct way to make contact and the time of the next enquiry. In the face of grief, the glitter of conjecture could accomplish nothing.

At night Sarita washed the water vessels and turned them upside down. When Naira returned, she asked, "Did the list of names come out today?" "No," Naira said. "Two different papers came out today. One concerns the context of a false accusation; the other, the search for a missing child." Sarita wiped the rim of a vessel with her palm. "Then keep the two papers separate. Behind a name that sends people running, someone may truly be waiting for a person to come home."

Naira placed two envelopes on the small table. The first held the application to correct the context of the viral footage; the second, a copy of the written report seeking Mithun. The original page bearing the twenty-seven names remained safely wrapped in Sarita's own cloth. No connection between it and

the day's search for the child had been established. Outside, the smell of Sarayu's khichdi came mingled with the far-off sound of a railway bell. The children of Janaki's group had eaten their rice and begun to fall asleep, while in Lata's home a plate of food stood covered, waiting.

Chapter 30 · Ahalya's Voice

The morning sunlight fell upon an empty plate in Lata's courtyard. The night before, she had covered a serving of rice and kept it for Mithun. She poured away the water that had settled over the thin rice, but could not bring herself to wash the plate. A neighbour told her, "The people searching will come again." Lata looked towards the door. "Let them go to the market instead of coming here," she said. "How will looking through my house help them find someone who is not in it?"

Naira arrived carrying two separate copies of the papers: the application seeking correction of the viral video, and the report of Mithun's disappearance. Lata would not even touch the first. She studied the time written on the second. "Did nobody look for him before this hour?" Naira said, "There was a search, but this is where the official written record begins. I will not erase the interval between the two." Lata folded the paper and tucked it into her sari.

A girl from the neighbourhood, returning with a water pitcher, said that a new notice had been pasted on the market wall. Beneath the announcement of Mithun's disappearance was a blurred photograph: a man standing beside a handcart, with two children at its edge. Someone had drawn a red circle on the image. There was no government seal, but underneath was written: "Beware." Naira asked, "Who put it up?" The girl shook her head. "Everyone who reads it says it came from the authorities."

At the market Naira saw that dampness had curled the edges of the paper. Half the man's face lay in shadow in the photograph; neither child's body was fully visible. A single word below it had spread from tongue to tongue: "Kanjar." Naira reached for her phone, then stopped. To prevent a second circulation of the unauthorised image, she first copied the words of the notice into her notebook. She did not photograph the face.

A little way off, the owner of the cart was taking apart the axle of a broken wheel. His name was Mohan. Someone had told him that in this village his community's identity travelled ahead of his name. Mohan laid a screw on the ground and saw people gathering on both sides. "The wheel will be stuck again today," he told the young man working beside him. "Yesterday in the mud; today in people's talk." The young man could not laugh.

Lata's cousin went and stood before Mohan. "Is that you in the picture?" "It looks like my cart," Mohan said. "And whose children are they?" Showing his palm, slick with axle grease, Mohan replied, "To answer that, we first need the original photograph. I have a record of the days my cart was here. But why should anyone assume that I know every child ever seen standing beside it?"

Beside Mohan was a thin metal box. From it he took three slips relating to wheel repairs. One bore an earlier market date, another a payment for hire near the railway bridge, and the third the unfinished work of that morning. “Look at these,” he said. “I was pulling my cart to earn a living. Your paper does not say where the photograph was taken, when, or by whom.” Naira said, “These slips establish your work, not a complete account of any child’s movements through the day. We shall write down the two things separately.”

Instead of putting his slips away, Mohan looked at Naira’s notebook. “Yesterday I had made no accusation against anyone. Today people use my name and say, ‘Look at his caste.’ Yet the day after my name has been dragged about, I shall still have to mend a wheel.” A small bell on the cart rang as the wind touched it. No child was crying at the sight of Mohan; nevertheless, the silence of the crowd weighed more heavily than that bell.

Just then Sajid Nat entered through the market’s other gate. Brightly coloured costumes were slung over his shoulder, a small camera was in his hand, and between his fingers he held a battery cover. He trained schoolchildren in music and acting, and sometimes recorded festival performances to sell the footage to the organisers. Two days earlier he had filmed a performance. Since the previous day, a fragment of that recording had been circulating without his name.

When Sajid saw the photograph on the wall, he put his costumes down on the ground. “That picture of the cart is from the rehearsal for my play,” he said. Someone asked, “Where is your proof?” Sajid did not hand his camera to Naira. “I have the original file. But I was recording the children rehearsing. Their parents gave permission only for the rehearsal and the stage performance. If, in the name of an inquiry, I distribute the whole recording through the market, I shall be committing an injustice too.”

“You may set the conditions under which the original file is viewed,” Naira said. “I shall give you the purpose of the examination in writing.” First Sajid opened the receipt for the performance. It gave the venue, the fee and the school’s scheduled time. The cart shown in the photograph had been hired to carry theatrical materials. Mohan said, “Yes, that day my cart carried the wooden boards for the play. But you cannot recognise the date merely by looking at the photograph. Compare the receipt with the original recording.”

Since morning, the crowd had pushed aside the question of finding Mithun. When Lata herself reached the market, someone said, “Look, they’ve caught the cart man.” Lata looked at the red circle on the paper and then at the axle in Mohan’s hand. “Where is my son?” she asked. Nobody answered. “Drawing a circle around somebody’s photograph will not bring my son back,” she said. “If anyone knows anything, let them tell us the time and the place.”

Her question brought back to Naira an old story she had heard from Sarita in childhood. It was the story of Ahalya. But Sarita used to say that those who

told the story often said least about Ahalya herself. Now Naira wondered: when the judgement upon a person's life has been fashioned in another voice, through which doorway may that person's own voice return?

Long ago, in a forest where fine dust and green grass grew together beside a sage's hermitage, Ahalya was wiping one corner of a platform plastered with earth and cow dung at dawn. Many people knew the name of the place. But it was those who worked there who knew in which season the water rose, when the paddy was pounded, and who gathered firewood on winter nights. Ahalya had watched their days and nights pass.

After a visitor had come, an accusation had been raised against her. The men of the hermitage told different versions. Some spoke of a disguise, others of recognition, while still others merely repeated Gautama's anger. Ahalya tried in her memory to separate a man's voice from the hour of his arrival. Memory did not make everything plain; what one considered alone was not the same as what became an accusation before the world.

After Gautama's anger, no assembly was convened at the hermitage in which she might answer. People went on talking; few troubled themselves to hear what Ahalya wished to say. Some called her stone, some a sinner. Ahalya saw that when a person was called a stone instead of by her name, people ceased asking about her food, her fear, her sleep and her sorrow. There were many ways to tell the story here; her life would not fit into only one of them.

Much later Rama and Lakshmana came to that place. Standing beside a vessel of water, Rama bowed to Ahalya. The people waiting outside the hermitage immediately declared, "She has been redeemed." Ahalya looked towards them. For years she had been denied the chance even to hear that word, yet it was no complete answer. She invited Rama to sit and offered Lakshmana water from the pitcher.

"How long have you been alone here?" Rama asked. Ahalya answered, "If I spend my days counting them, who will keep account of the work I have done in those days? You have come: that belongs to the present. But have you already accepted as truth everything that has been said about me?" Rama was silent. The vessel of water did not tremble in Lakshmana's hand, but his eyes turned away.

Ahalya went on. "There is fear in my memory, and confusion, and the pain of my own decisions. Where I am uncertain, I do not wish to speak with certainty. But why should those who wrote the story of my punishment without asking me be regarded as the sole owners of every account?" Rama replied, "I am standing here to listen." "Then listen first," Ahalya said. "And when you tell the story afterwards, consider where you will place my voice within it."

An elderly woman from the hermitage came to them carrying a bundle of dry kindling. She told Rama, "I have never known her as a stone. In the dry years it was she who tended the rope of the forest well. When the water ran

out, it was she who worried over how more might be found." Ahalya smiled at the old woman for the first time. "Do not ask for testimony to that," she said. "To see another's work, you must observe not merely a face but the passing days."

As she loosened her bundle of kindling, the old woman said, "Many people know the ground on which this hermitage stands. But when the floods came, they asked Ahalya where the path would still run. Now that guests have arrived, everyone wants to tell her story in their own words." Ahalya stepped forward and set aside a broken twig from the bundle. "If anyone asks me, I shall speak," she answered. "But the days of my life contain more than a single accusation. If guests come here again, I shall decide for myself when I wish to serve them food."

As Rama prepared to leave, he rose as though to say something. Ahalya did not stop him. She said only, "Wherever you repeat my story, repeat my question too. If justice is completed merely by the touch of another, where in it is the voice of the one whose life has passed?" Sunlight spread outside. The work of the hermitage was not finished. The old woman went to put away her kindling; Ahalya too lifted the vessel with which she fetched water.

At the market in Videhapur, Sajid set his camera on a small table. Janaki, Lata, Meera and Mohan sat around it. Naira first wrote down that those present would view only the timing and sequence of the images; no copies showing the children's faces or names would be taken away. Once he had switched on the camera, Sajid said, "Whoever cuts up what I have made and sells it is selling more than my labour. They are selling the children's trust as well."

The original recording showed Mohan's cart, the construction of a bamboo gate and the children rehearsing for a school play. Sajid paused the screen and pointed out the theatrical signboard. "What looks like a red cloth in this photograph is the stage curtain. The viral footage of Janaki's group by the forest gate is a different recording; this stage photograph is not part of it. The notice that Mithun had disappeared dates from the day after this performance." Meera compared the attendance record for her school class with the time on Sajid's performance receipt. The two times agreed.

Naira made it clear that the photograph showed Mohan's cart at a rehearsal on another day, and could not sustain the claim that Mohan had taken Mithun away. Lata asked her to repeat the sentence. "Write that the photograph was displayed in the wrong context. Do not write that the search for my son is over." Naira wrote two separate lines. After reading the paper, Mohan said, "I do not need grand words declaring that my innocence has been proved. Let people read only this: the picture from which the accusation arose does not support that accusation."

The person who had pasted up the notice had still not been identified. A shopkeeper said a young man had left the paper there in the evening, but he

had not seen the whole of his face. Sajid's original file offered no evidence as to whose hand had drawn the red circle on the photograph. Naira entered the matter as "unknown", not under speculation. She remembered her earlier mistake in publishing Mahesh's words prematurely. This time she would not attach another name to the affair for the sake of a small victory.

Mohan asked for the notice to be taken down. Some said it should remain until Mithun was found. Mohan answered, "My cart and the missing child are two different matters. Why should an injustice against my name remain in place while everyone waits for the day the child comes home?" With the market shopkeepers' agreement, the misleading photograph was removed. In its place, with Lata's permission, they posted only a general notice giving a contact point and time for information about the search, without a face marked out for suspicion.

Sajid also had in his bag a slip recording an outstanding payment for the performance that day. When he went to the organiser, the man said, "Now that everyone has seen your video, who is going to pay for it again?" Sajid answered plainly, "Permission to use the images and payment for my labour are two different matters. My work has been used to disgrace someone publicly; that does not make it free." He entrusted a second copy of his receipt to Meera for safekeeping. The dispute remained unsettled, but the question of who owned his work had been put in writing for the first time.

As he gathered his coloured costumes, Sajid asked Mohan, "Will you still hire out your cart to me?" Mohan smiled at the corner of his eyes. "First pay the last hire charge. And don't hang that red cloth in another photograph and bring an accusation down on my head again." "In the next play," Sajid said, "we shall have a boat instead of a cart." Mohan answered at once, "Get the boatman's consent first. Otherwise his name will become a spectacle too." They laughed together for a little while. The hire was still unpaid, but ease had returned to their faces for the first time.

At a corner of the market Janaki arrived with Sarayu, the elderly woman of her group. "The accusing notice has been taken down," Sarayu said. "But when our child goes to school tomorrow, what will people call her?" Meera answered, "I shall open the class again. I shall enter the children in the attendance book under their own names, not under the name of an offence." Janaki fell silent at the answer. She felt relief, but the face of the little girl who had been frightened beneath the railway bridge at night was still before her eyes.

Lata's brother said a child in a blue kurta had been seen in the northern lane. Lata rose at once to go there. Naira said, "First ask the person who told you when it happened. If we run after no more than the colour of a garment, the children in that lane will again become objects of suspicion." Lata stopped. "Are you trying to hold me back?" she asked. "No," Naira replied. "I

shall go with you. But we will not surround someone else's child without checking."

An elderly water seller in the lane said that a boy in a blue kurta had passed by not yesterday but that very morning. He had seen the boy with his own eyes, but had not seen who, if anyone, was with him. Besides the colour of the clothes, Lata asked whether the strap on the boy's left sandal was broken. "Who had time to look at his sandals?" the old man said. That small answer left Lata's hope suspended once more; at least, however, one confusion about the time had been cleared up. She made no demand that any unknown child be seized.

Meera was having the water seller's statement written down when Mohan came past, pushing his cart. A new nail had now been fitted to its wheel. Lata stopped him. "What happened to you today involved people from my family too. An apology will not bring my son back, but what was said falsely was false." Mohan stopped the wheel and listened. "We shall talk when your son is found," he said. Lata replied, "If this matter hangs unresolved until my son is found, the injustice done to you will hang unresolved as well. Both things needed to be said today."

At noon Sarita was tending a fire on the veranda of their temporary lodging. Naira returned exhausted. "Was Mithun found?" Sarita asked. "No." "And the paper about the Kanjar?" "The misleading photograph has been taken down; whoever made the accusation is still unknown." Sarita stirred the thin rice with her ladle. "The day you learn to write two answers separately," she said, "you will cause less harm to one by means of the other." Naira took the lid from her hand and set it on the hearth on the veranda.

That evening Sajid sat in the market once more, with the account book recording the children's play and its fees. "Who will teach the children who want to learn how to record?" Meera asked. Switching off his camera, Sajid said, "First teach them to listen when a child says they do not want their face shown. Then show them the buttons. Before becoming a teacher, one must practise listening." Mohan had parked his cart behind the table; the wheel was turning quietly now.

That night another serving of rice was placed on the empty plate in Lata's house. This time she covered it and set it not beside the doorway but inside the kitchen. The search for Mithun would continue the next morning; understanding that one photograph was false evidence had not brought him home. But the red circle that had made a whole community's name synonymous with crime was no longer on the market wall. Only a small trace of drying paste remained, upon which the morning sunlight would fall again.

Chapter 31 · Ekalavya's Lesson

On the second morning after the false photograph with the red circle had been taken down from the market wall, Sajid arrived carrying not his camera but an empty wooden frame. He set it on the bed of Mohan's handcart. "Another performance today?" Meera Mandal asked. "Not a performance," Sajid replied. "A lesson. Whoever takes a camera into their hands must first understand what gets left outside the frame." Mohan, oiling a wheel, said, "Just make sure the hire for my cart isn't left outside it." All three laughed. After the humiliation of the previous day there was a measure of caution in their laughter, but there was laughter still.

Meera had begun a small gathering for children's lessons on a makeshift veranda near the railway square. It was no substitute for a permanent school: there were only sacks to sit on, a piece of chalk, and letters written on an old board. Even so, several children had arrived early. In her attendance notebook Meera was making a small mark beside each name, so that coming to this class would not be mistaken for formal enrolment at a school.

Just then Reva Gulguliya appeared outside the veranda with two children. One carried a bundle of cloth; the other had a shallow bamboo basket tucked beneath an arm. Reva's whole family moved camp as the seasons changed. Someone had told her that letters were being taught on this veranda. She approached Meera. "Please let both children learn to read. I don't yet know where we shall be living next month."

Meera first asked the children their names. "Birsi," the girl said. "Jatan," said the boy. Reva smiled. Having given his name, Jatan asked, "Will you write my name on paper for me?" "First you'll practise writing it yourself," Meera said. "But to enrol at a school we shall need an address, an age and information about your guardian. Where the papers are missing, we shall have to find a way." She did not pretend that enrolment had already taken place.

Reva took two folded slips from her bag: one was a collective list of the temporary settlement, the other an attendance record from the children's learning circle at their previous stopping place. The first had no number for a permanent house. Meera put the papers separately to one side. "They provide a way of contacting you," she said, "but they are not school admission papers." "Shall I put down a house number that doesn't exist?" Reva asked. Meera shook her head at once. "No. We will not invent what is not there. The children may sit in the class now; I shall raise the question of formal admission in writing."

From the other side of the veranda came a woman carrying a torn blue bag. Its opening was tied with a thick knot of cotton thread; inside were a short measuring tape, two screws and papers folded into cloth. She introduced

herself as Chanda Munda. She had been thinking of returning home after a long spell of construction work away from it, but on the contractor's attendance records she appeared in one place as "Chanda" and in another merely as a labourer's number. "The proof that I worked is in my hands," she said. "The account for the day I can go home is still in someone else's."

Chanda wanted help writing an application for unpaid wages. At the distant worksite she had handled iron frames, inspected the knots in ropes and measured the spacing of scaffolding used by workers carrying stone. She had two slips showing working time and a receipt for supplied materials as evidence. She opened her bag to show them, but before giving the slips to Naira she asked, "Whom will you allow to see these papers?" "Copies will be made only for a purpose you approve," Naira replied. "The originals will stay with you."

Naira had come because Meera had asked her the previous day to provide a corrected copy of the false allegation against Mohan. Since the termination of her contract, Naira had become careful to distinguish between a private notebook and a public petition. Her mistake in publishing Mahesh's testimony before its time had been no small episode for her. Seeing Chanda's slips, she did not immediately take out her phone to photograph them. First she wrote in her notebook: "Original documents held by Chanda; permission to examine them limited to wages and papers concerning return home."

Sajid lifted the frame and placed it in the middle of the veranda. "One lesson today," he said. "What a camera shows is not the whole world." Birsi stood inside the frame. When Jatan stepped outside it, Sajid asked, "If a photograph were taken, who would not appear?" "Jatan!" the children answered. "Nor the person who made the basket Jatan is carrying," Reva said. At that, Sajid laughed openly again. Leaving his camera switched off, he said, "First understand the frame. Only then ask whose photograph you have permission to take."

Chanda examined one of the frame's joints. "This screw is loose. If a child hangs on it, it will fall." Sajid tried to tighten it, but he had no tool of the right size. Chanda took a screwdriver from her bag and aligned the two edges of the wood. When she had tightened the screw, she shook the frame herself to test it. "You learn by watching work," she said, "but the price of tightening a screw and the time spent teaching are two different accounts." "Now I see that hiring my cart belongs in the lesson too," Mohan said.

That small repair led Meera to ask a question. "Whom do we call the teacher when someone teaches a skill? And how does the learner find food for the day?" Instead of demanding answers from the children, she asked Sajid to write the questions on the board. Jatan went on joining his letters, while Birsi brushed chalk dust from her hands. Meera remembered an old story of the forest, the story of a man called Ekalavya. "Many people tell the story of

Ekalavya's thumb," she said. "Listen now, and imagine how his days may have passed afterwards."

In a forest long ago, Ekalavya once again tried to draw his bowstring with the hand whose thumb he had given away as his teacher's fee. At the first attempt the string slipped. The second time the arrow lodged in the earth. The third time the wood of the bow struck his arm sharply. A boy seated at the edge of the forest watched him. He had come to learn the art of archery, but seeing Ekalavya hurt himself he asked, "What can you teach me now?"

Ekalavya set the bow on the ground and looked at his hand for a long time. With that hand he had once held distance and direction in a single rhythm. Others had treated the giving of the teacher's fee as an event concluded, and gone back to their homes; its consequences in his body began again each morning. He said to the boy, "Not the bow today. First watch the wind. Which way are the reeds bending, and how long do they stay bent in the same direction?" "Will watching the wind fill my stomach?" the boy asked. Ekalavya did not take offence.

Among the families at the forest's edge, hunting, gathering forest fruit, fishing and barter were different kinds of work. A bow did not have to be drawn every day. But when the rains went wrong, when the stony paths were closed, the entire group felt the absence of one accomplished hand. Ekalavya did not conceal his injury. He showed the boy the position of his fingers. "The skill I have lost is lost," he said. "I shall not turn it into glory and pretend that glory will feed you."

At dusk an elderly woman came through the forest carrying a vessel made of bark. She worked with a family who made bowstrings. She tested the tension of the string and said, "What you could do before will be difficult now. But making strings, seasoning bamboo, teaching measurement—all these kinds of work have value. If all you teach a pupil is how to worship you, what will there be for that pupil's household to eat?" Ekalavya listened. Within the honour he had once attached to the word teacher lay a deprivation he had not seen; now he began to discern its shape.

Earlier Ekalavya had set up an image of Drona as the teacher of his solitary practice. There had been a dispute over his claim to acknowledge Drona as his guru, and the giving of his thumb had changed his life. Those who told the story did not speak in a single voice. For one who remembered the humiliation, there was no possibility of denying that humiliation. But for the forest's new pupil the question was not only the punishment of the past. How far did the door to learning stand open now, and who would pay the cost of keeping it open?

The following morning Ekalavya assigned the boy and two new pupils three tasks: first, to judge the straightness of bamboo; second, to keep the tension of a string even; and third, to check that no living creature stood

beyond the target. He tried once more to shoot an arrow himself. It fell far short of the mark. The boy burst out laughing, then grew ashamed. “You may laugh,” Ekalavya said. “But now tell me at which stage the error occurred.” The boy did not run after the arrow. He examined the pull of the string and said, “I think the hand cannot grip as it used to.”

For the first time Ekalavya laid his failure wholly before a pupil. “Recognising an error is work too,” he said. “A teacher who hides his injury teaches you in darkness.” He then made a modest arrangement: families sending pupils would agree upon a share of food for the teacher; those making strings would be paid separately; pupils without the means to buy materials would receive them from a common store. The arrangement answered by no means every question. “And if the store is emptied?” the elderly woman asked. “Then instead of stopping the lessons, we shall reckon the work and its costs again,” Ekalavya replied.

In time the boy learned, besides judging a bow’s strain, to distinguish the different joints of bamboo and to read the signs along wild paths. His first earnings were not the reward for a hunt but payment for strings he had made for two households. When he brought Ekalavya a portion, Ekalavya asked, “Is this payment for my name, or for the time I spent teaching you?” “For your time,” the boy said. Ekalavya accepted the share, but asked for a piece of bark on which to write it down. For the first time, name and payment entered separate ledgers.

When the story reached this point on the veranda in Videhapur, Birsi asked, “Was Ekalavya able to aim again?” “In the story of his later life that I have told you,” Meera said, “his hand never became what it had been. He found new work and new pupils. It would not be right to say that everything was made well again.” “It is not right for someone else to make a livelihood out of another person’s wounded hand,” Chanda said. “But even after the injury, that person must be paid for the work they can do.” In his notebook Sajid wrote “time” before he wrote “education.”

By noon Meera had brought a list of the available procedures for enrolling Reva’s children at school. The form said that the box for a permanent address had to be filled in. Someone had told her orally, “First settle your camp at a fixed address.” Meera did not accept that answer as the last word of the law; she decided to ask a school official for clarification in writing. “Our camp will be here until evening,” Reva said. “Tomorrow we might be in another lane. The children’s names will still be the same.” Meera prepared two applications: one requesting temporary attendance in class, the other asking how formal enrolment could be secured without a permanent address.

Jatan had written the letter “J” of his name backwards. When Birsi reached over to pull his notebook towards her, Reva stopped her. “Whatever he has written, that much of the learning is his own,” she said. Meera wrote the

correct letter beside it; she did not rub out the earlier one. Sajid picked up his camera, then put it down again. He wanted to show the child's first attempt at writing, but he had no right to sell it, or publish it without permission.

Meanwhile Chanda unfolded her wage slips and showed them to Naira. The first recorded her working days and bore a signature. On the second, part of the amount had been deducted, but the box giving the reason was blank. "Does the contractor have the original attendance record?" Naira asked. "Yes. These two copies are all I have left. Before I go home I need to know they cannot declare me absent and withhold my wages again." Naira recorded the dates on the slips and the difference in the deductions separately, but did not claim that they proved the final amount owing.

"I want to go home," Chanda said. "But one person says I must remain on the job until I get all my money. Another says that if I leave, the papers will be closed." "What do you want?" Meera asked. "I want to see my home, and then decide for myself whether to stay here or choose other work. What is due for my past attendance must come with me. It must not bind my body here." Naira put Chanda's own words into the application; she did not make the decision for her in the name of giving advice.

In Chanda's bag was a little loop of rope of the kind she used to secure the timbers of scaffolding. Sajid asked whether she could teach the children to make knots. Chanda looked around at the small hands, the loose frame and Mohan's cart. "Not knots for high scaffolds," she said. "Here I can teach practice knots that carry no load. When an actual weight has to be supported, you need both trained people and an inspection." Having set that limit, she laid two slender ropes on the table. Meera entered the fee for Chanda's hour of instruction in the public expenditure ledger.

A few people objected. "It's only teaching little children two knots. Payment for that?" Reva laughed. "Anyone who thinks teaching is easy should try doing it." One man tightened a knot, but it came undone as soon as it was pulled. Chanda did not scold him. "First decide what the knot is meant to do," she said. Hearing the question, the man looked at the rope again. Mohan placed a rupee beside the ledger—not the full fee, but a first contribution. Meera checked what money was available in the common fund for the rest. The payment was agreed before the work began; it was not announced afterwards as charity.

Birsi, sitting beside Reva, asked whether she too would be paid a wage. "Your work today is to learn, not to earn wages," Chanda said. "When you are older and choose work for yourself, do not give anyone the right to call your labour free." "If I learn to read, will I be able to tie knots like you?" Birsi asked. "You need not become like me," Chanda replied. "You will learn in your own way. There will be things I have to learn from you as well."

As the afternoon sunlight faded, Mohan lifted the frame. One of its screws still needed checking; Chanda marked it, because without the correct replacement part it would be wrong to call the frame completely safe. Sajid did not photograph the loose joint. “I’ll bring the part tomorrow,” he told Mohan. “Today’s lesson is finished, not the repair.” “Right,” Mohan answered. “I won’t charge hire for calling unfinished work complete.”

In the evening Naira put the papers into separate envelopes. Chanda’s applications concerning wages and the journey home went into one; the two applications concerning the admission of Reva’s children went into another. The papers in the search for Mithun had already been kept separately, while Sarita’s original page of twenty-seven names remained in Sarita’s own care. If all these papers were made into one “problem file,” one person’s wishes might disappear inside another person’s accusation. Naira did not want to make that mistake again.

Meera remained on the veranda. Birsi’s “B” and Jatan’s reversed “J” were still on the chalkboard. Afraid of rain, she was about to bring the board inside, but Birsi said, “Not yet. Mother must see.” Reva stood and looked at the two letters. “One the right way round, one backwards,” she said. “Both are the beginning of reading.” She divided flattened rice and jaggery among the children. This small meal bore neither the stamp of an admission form nor an account of wages; nevertheless, amid the day’s fatigue it made a place of its own for everyone.

By the smoke of the cooking fire Chanda was tying up her blue bag again. “Have you fixed the day you will go home?” Naira asked. “Not yet. I’ll take the acknowledgement of my application and then choose the day for myself. My home may be waiting for me, but I will not let papers bind my feet.” Reva gave her a handful of flattened rice. As Chanda ate, she undid a knot and then folded the same rope neatly into her bag.

That night Sajid was wrapping his camera in cloth. “Nothing was recorded today,” Meera said. “What shall we put in the account of the training?” “Write down the reason for what was not photographed,” Sajid replied. “What remains outside the frame is part of everyone’s knowledge too.” Meera entered separately in the training ledger the hours of the class, Chanda’s fee, the children’s temporary attendance and the fact that a written answer from the school was still awaited. The telling of Ekalavya’s story had been part of that day’s lesson; it had not been turned into proof of official history, or into a rule assigning a profession to anyone by birth.

As the veranda was being closed, Jatan put his little notebook into his mother’s bag. His backward “J” was still on the first page. “Will you write again tomorrow?” Birsi asked. Jatan nodded. Reva did not say whether their camp would still be there tomorrow. She simply took the children by the

hand and set off along the night road. Inside the notebook, in the darkness, the page remained where it belonged; no one had yet crossed out that letter.

Chapter 32 · Athāto: Whose Right to Inquire?

At dawn, Jatan was practising writing his name on the damp earth of the veranda. The backward “J” was still on the first page of his notebook; he had not crossed it out. Meera Mandal took a little piece of chalk, wrote the letter correctly on the board, and left a small space between the two forms. “Whose mistake is this?” Jatan asked. “The writer’s,” Meera said. “But pointing out a mistake and shutting the writer out are not the same thing.”

Reva Gulguliya sat beside the children. In readiness for moving camp, the knot on her bundle had been pulled tight since the night before. The written reply requested from the school the previous day was due to arrive today. Three times she looked out beyond the veranda. In her notebook Birsi had drawn a house with a door but no number inside its walls. “This is my house,” she said. Reva smiled. “For as many days as you live here, this is your house. Afterwards we shall make another.”

When Naira arrived from her temporary lodging, she carried two copies of Chanda’s wage papers and Reva’s school application in separate envelopes. The night before she had written three questions in her notebook: who had submitted the application, who had authority to answer it, and whose voice had been lost between the two. The mistake of publishing Mahesh’s testimony before the agreed time still filled her with shame. This time she had made herself a rule: ask permission before photographing anybody’s papers.

The school clerk rode past the veranda on his bicycle. He handed Meera a short, stamped letter and went on. It said that verification of a permanent address for Reva’s children remained pending; no final order had been made concerning their participation in classes. Meera read the letter again. There had been neither an admission nor a written refusal. But if someone were to claim tomorrow that the school had driven the children away, this letter would not allow the claim to pass as fact.

“Where, then, will Jatan and Birsi study?” Reva asked. “Today’s lesson is here,” Meera said. “I shall speak separately with the head of the school. But I will not say that they have been enrolled.” Jatan asked, “Will they see my backward ‘J’ at school?” “Your letter belongs to you,” Naira told him. “If the school requires another document, the two papers will be shown separately.”

A public reading and discussion had been arranged that day at the old pathshala in Videhapur. At the community’s request, Maithili Mishra had agreed to speak on “Access to Learning,” but the invitation placed only the word “Respected” before her name. Beside Ishan’s name stood his credentials as a scholar and editor of texts. Maithili folded the invitation and put it in her bag. It was not respect she objected to. Her question was whose labour made scholarship possible, and who was entitled to see that labour recorded.

On the veranda of the pathshala they found Harimohan Pathak wiping the seats. He conducted classes in the reading of manuscripts and had undertaken to prepare a copy of an old book. He feared that if everyone came without preparation, both the reading and the discussion would suffer. “Discipline is necessary in study,” he told Maithili. “A desire to inquire does not, by itself, bestow grammar, knowledge of variant readings or skill in argument.”

“You are right,” Maithili replied. “But to keep the door to practice closed and then say people lack the qualifications to enter—what kind of discipline is that?” Harimohan objected at once. “The door is not closed. The levels are different.” “If the levels are attained through learning, where does one find the first lesson?” Maithili asked. “And if someone has learned but possesses no certificate, who will listen to what that person has to say?”

Ishan came out carrying a sheet of paper. From within, he had heard the exchange between his wife and Harimohan. “Raise this systematically in today’s disputation,” he said. “The question will be written down,” Maithili answered. “So will the name of the person asking it. Otherwise, when the question appears in a book later, the only person credited with it will be the one who gave the answer.” Ishan’s eyes showed a moment’s discomfort, but he could not evade the argument.

A work schedule had been pasted to the pathshala wall. Paper repair, copying, laying out seats, cleaning and instruction each had an allotted time; only the copying had a figure entered in the payment column. Maithili pointed to the empty lines. “The list says who will sweep. Where is the payment due for that work?” “It is a community contribution,” Harimohan replied. “If it is voluntary,” Maithili said, “record the consent beside the name. Otherwise this, too, is labour.”

Meanwhile Meera arrived with Reva, Birsi and Jatan. Showing the school’s reply, Meera asked only whether the children might sit in the pathshala’s public beginners’ class. At first Harimohan supposed that she was requesting formal admission to the school. Meera made the distinction clear. “No. The application to the school is a separate matter. Today we are asking for a place where they can learn a few letters.” With that clarification, Harimohan’s first objection changed.

Birsi reached towards a book resting near the wall, then checked herself. “May I touch it?” she asked. Harimohan showed her the fragile edges of its pages. “This is not the old manuscript but a copy of it. If these thin pages get wet, the letters will be damaged.” “If I make a mistake in my notebook,” Jatan said, “I can write it again.” Maithili smiled. “The question here is not merely whether a hand may touch a book. It is also how to keep the book safe while opening a way for people to read it.”

Far away, in a Mithila belonging to another age, Mrinal was spreading a thin sheet of paper out to dry in the sunlight. Night dew had soaked one

corner, and the dark strokes of the writing were beginning to spread. Lohna, who made the paper, told her, “Put it in the direct sun and the sheet will shrivel. Give it air in the shade.” Mrinal lifted the paper and carried it beneath the veranda roof. The small task of preserving its script was bound up, for her, with the desire to read it.

Mrinal worked in that compound drying paper, counting manuscripts and brushing away dust. She recognised some forms of letters, but not others. Every day during a lesson she sat outside and listened to the voices. That morning Vachaspati Mishra was to speak on the opening of the Brahma Sutras. “I can save the paper,” Mrinal said to Lohna, “but I have no leave to ask the question written on it. Is the fault in the paper, or in me?”

Wiping the paste that clung to his hands, Lohna said, “I make paper. I do not decide whose name will be written on it. But I will ask about the price of paper and the hours of my work. If you wish to ask a question, go to the teacher yourself.” “What if he tells me to learn the text first?” Mrinal asked. “Then ask for a way to learn it,” Lohna answered. “That is all.”

At that hour Vachaspati was explaining to his disciples the opening words, “Athāto brahmajijñāsā”—“Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman.” The disciples offered differing views on the sequence of atha and ataḥ and on the purpose of inquiry into Brahman. The teacher did not force their statements into a single meaning; after hearing the opposing positions, he clarified the grounds of the question. Mrinal stood at the edge of the veranda. She could not follow every interpretation of the aphorism, but she kept hearing the word jijñāsā: the desire to know.

At the first pause Mrinal folded her hands. “May I ask this question too, today?” Some disciples looked at the clothes she wore for work. “The meaning of the scriptures is taught here,” one of them said. “You dry the paper.” Mrinal did not rebuke him. “My work is different,” she said. “But is it forbidden here for me to ask the meaning of a word I do not understand?”

Vachaspati motioned her to sit near the inner edge. “Ask. And do not be ashamed to say what you have not understood.” “When we say atha,” Mrinal asked, “does the time for inquiry open at the same moment for everyone? If one person has already studied the scriptures and another is still putting letters together, how can they both reach the same question?” The teacher did not answer at once. Turning to his disciples, he said, “First understand the question. Do not reduce it to whatever is convenient for you.”

One disciple argued that without the necessary preparation for study, serious questions became meaningless. Another said that the transmission of knowledge demanded an order of learning: to seize upon the terms of doctrine without elementary practice led to confusion. Mrinal listened to both. “I am not opposed to preparation,” she said. “I am asking for the

teaching by which one may prepare. If you do not teach me my letters, tomorrow you will have made your own proof that I am unqualified.”

Vachaspati did not set that day’s question down as a final philosophical position. “An aphorism must be interpreted through its reasoning, its tradition and its purpose,” he said. “The difficulty you encounter in your life is not merely an illustration; it is a real question about work. If an illustration gives rise to a question, I must test whether it has been applied in the right place.” These words unsettled the disciples’ accustomed order a little.

The teacher pointed to a thin rope lying on the veranda. “Have you heard the example of mistaking a rope for a snake in the dark?” “I have,” Mrinal said. “But when the strokes on a wet page spread, I could understand its letters before, and afterwards I cannot. My eyes are the same. Knowledge has changed because the condition of the object has changed. Is this the same kind of error?”

“That is not what the example means,” a disciple said immediately. Mrinal nodded. “Then explain the difference. I do not want to call a fault in the paper a fault in the rope.” Vachaspati looked at the corner of the sheet in her hands. “Good,” he said. “Here the physical state of the letters has altered; there the object is taken for something else in the dark. To treat the two as one would damage the reasoning. Now let the disciples say why the distinction matters.”

The lesson had not been transformed into a claim that drying paper was the meaning of inquiry into Brahman. Yet after his first familiar illustration the teacher added another question: was the obstruction to knowledge caused by an error of the senses, a change in the object, or a want of preparation in the reader? To acknowledge Mrinal’s objection did not mean that she now understood all the aphorisms. It meant that her experience had helped discard a misleading analogy.

When the lesson ended, Vachaspati asked Mrinal, “Can you come here every day?” “For one muhūrta, after I have finished the morning work with the paper,” she replied. “But if the sheets are not dried, the manuscripts will suffer too. If the hours of my work are to be reduced, we shall have to speak with Lohna.” For the first time the teacher saw plainly the practical weight of the question. “Then tomorrow we shall settle the time with Lohna present,” he said.

Lohna had left some water outside the classroom for Mrinal. “Have you gained admission?” he asked. “I have been allowed to sit. The time for learning my letters has not yet been settled. Those are two different things.” Lohna laughed. “Then do not beat the drum of victory. Tomorrow we shall see how to divide the work.” “The drum can sound,” Mrinal replied, “when I am able to disagree, in my own words, with the meaning given to a line I have read.”

All day Mrinal continued counting the folds of paper. When one sheet had been saved, Lohna said, almost casually, “This one will do.” That small praise gave her an unexpected happiness. She brought water for him in a brass lota, then measured with her eyes the evening shadow falling across the wall. Tomorrow she would not have to dry the pages alone during the lesson: Lohna would tell his assistant in advance. So that one person’s hour of learning would not become another person’s unnoticed extra labour, the two of them divided the work that very day.

At the Videhapur pathshala Harimohan had written “Athāto brahmajijñāsā” on the board. Maithili asked that the aphorism’s original philosophical meaning be explained separately from the present-day question of education. “This sutra is not a government school’s admission rule,” she said, “and it would be wrong to derive a direct verdict on the social policies of our own age from it. But readers will still ask, in their own circumstances, who decides whether a person is qualified to inquire.”

Harimohan drew two columns beneath the words on the board: “Interpretation of the Scripture” and “Today’s Dispute over Access.” In the first he wrote text, reasoning, opposing position and response; in the second, beginners’ classes, materials, time, instructors and fees. “Which column am I in?” Jatan asked. The gathering laughed a little, but Maithili answered, “For now, the second. The wish to learn does not cancel the first question’s right to be asked, but it does open the path by which the subject itself can be studied.”

Harimohan had spoken of his fear that the pathshala’s manuscripts would be damaged. Chanda Munda arrived and said, “On a building site, when we hand a tool to a new worker, we begin by teaching the lighter tasks; we do not make the worker lift a heavy load without practice. But if you say, ‘You may not even touch the tools,’ and keep someone outside for life, how is that person ever to learn?” After hearing her example, Harimohan did not hand the old manuscripts to the children. Instead, he proposed making ordinary sheets for practice.

Maithili placed two copies of an old page she had brought with her on the table. Both were copies of the same text, but in one the marginal annotation had been reproduced, in the other it had not. “Is the author’s signature enough to explain the meaning of this omission?” she asked. Harimohan examined the pages. “No. We must compare them with the original.” “And in that work,” Maithili said, “we must record the names of the copyist, the examiner and the person who supplied the annotation.” Ishan remained silent. He understood that the matter was not confined to the class being held that day.

“Not every kind of effort is the same,” Harimohan said. “We must distinguish the original argument from checking a copy.” “By all means distinguish them,” Maithili answered, “but do not erase either. Do not credit

someone for work they did not do, and do not leave uncredited someone who did it. Attribution too must rest on evidence.” She did not seek a final judgment on her own contribution that day. First she asked that the register record the nature and date of the work.

Naira had been listening. She remembered that after breaking the conditions attached to Mahesh’s testimony by publishing it too soon, merely writing “I am sorry” had not been enough. Here too there was a question of consent: whose written annotation might be made public, and whose private copy was to remain available only for checking. She suggested to Harimohan that permission to attend a class and permission to publish a copy of a text should be recorded separately, for they were different acts. Permission to publish a photograph alongside a child’s name was not to be presumed.

Jatan wrote “J” once more on his practice sheet. This time its shape was right, though the stroke beneath it slanted. Harimohan showed him how to hold the pen. “May I keep the wrong letter?” Birsi asked. “Certainly,” said Harimohan. “The paper is yours. The pathshala’s original manuscripts are another matter.” The girl’s question made him realise that the protection of materials and the humiliation of a learner must not be made into one and the same rule.

At the other end of the room, Sarita showed Naira an old notebook in her handwriting. “Hearing all this has brought something back to me. Someone used to make me write the accounts by hand, and in the end it was his name that appeared. I was paid for the work, yes, but the corrections I made left no trace in the document.” “Mother, when is this notebook from?” Naira asked. “We shall have to check the date,” Sarita said. “Do not link it to the original page of names yet. The two documents will have different histories.”

As the meeting’s final resolution, the administrator of the pathshala recorded three points. Practice sheets would be distributed for elementary lessons; the children’s temporary attendance would be recorded separately; and a written reply from the relevant school was still required for formal enrolment. Chanda’s time spent training others would not be treated as unpaid: if the pathshala invited her to teach a practical class, the payment due would be agreed beforehand. Harimohan signed the proposal.

“And the register of contributions to the work?” Maithili asked. The administrator opened a second ledger. This time Harimohan himself wrote in the empty headings: textual revision, copying, linguistic comparison, examples, final approval. “The names will be filled in after the material has been checked,” he said. Maithili agreed that the evidence needed examination, but insisted that the vacant columns must not be closed. Ishan undertook to establish the dates of the older manuscripts in that ledger. The dispute had not been decided, yet it was no longer so easy to bury it in nameless silence.

During a break Harimohan asked Birsi how far she had travelled. She showed him the dust on her feet. “This far.” She had no measure for the distance. “When our camp moves, there will be another road,” Reva said. Instead of supplying an answer at once, Harimohan put a light practice book into her hands. He set no fixed date for its return, only gave her the pathshala’s contact address. “What if I go far away?” Birsi asked. “Take what you have learned with you,” he said. “We can speak again about the book.”

After the class Reva saw that Jatan had kept the first backward “J” beside the correctly written “J” of that day. “Why the old one?” she asked. “Because I used to write it this way, and then I learned to write it that way. If I keep the first one, I shall understand again.” Reva wrapped both pages in the same piece of cloth. She did not know which camp she would be living in tomorrow, but she would not let the difference between these two days of her child’s learning be lost just yet.

In the evening, as Maithili was closing a window of the pathshala, she asked Harimohan, “Did you change your answer today, or your example?” Harimohan did not smile. “I learned the limits of my example. There is more reading to be done before the answer,” he said. “That too is a beginning,” Maithili replied. She took the old copy of her annotations from her bag, checked its date and put it away again. This was not the day on which the quarrel over credit would be settled; but the question was now in writing.

On the veranda of that far older age, Mrinal stood once more with a damp sheet in her hands. Seeing the difference between sunlight and shade, she returned the page to Lohna. Inside, Vachaspati was selecting the lines his disciples would study the following day. Mrinal looked towards the door but did not go in again after the lesson was over. Tomorrow they would speak once more about time, labour and a way into learning; today she had work of her own to finish.

That night, on the temporary veranda in Videhapur, Meera was closing the class register. Beside the names of Reva’s children was written “temporary attendance”; in the school’s register, “reply pending”; and in the pathshala’s ledger, “elementary instruction.” None of the three expressions could stand in place of another. From a little distance Naira read the three lines. On the way home Sarita spoke of a small lamp. “Those who write need light,” she said. “So do those who make the paper.” Naira took her mother’s hand and walked on. In that evening light no one’s question had yet come to an end, but the name of the person asking it had not been erased.

Chapter 33 · The Lamp and the Paper

The following dawn, when Mrinal reached the veranda where the paper was laid out to dry, Lohna was already measuring water into two earthen trays. In one the water was clear; in the other, fine strands of ground fibre floated on the surface. He put a thin wooden frame into Mrinal's hands. “We made time yesterday to listen to the lesson,” he said, “but these pages will not make themselves. From today we shall keep a fresh account of the work.”

Mrinal lowered the frame into the water. When the fibres had spread evenly across the mesh, Lohna lifted it with care. A thick clump had gathered in one corner. Mrinal reached out to touch it. “Don't,” Lohna stopped her. “Wet fibres find their own course. Press them down and they will knot where they lie. Watch the flow of the water first.” Mrinal tilted the frame a little, and the dense clump slowly dispersed. For the first time she understood that making a sheet of paper smooth demanded more patience than the labour of one's hands.

Inside the same compound, copies of the text had been made by lamplight throughout the night. When Bhamati came there in the morning, she found the oil bowl empty and the tip of the wick black. A fine film of soot lay across two leaves of the manuscript. “We had enough light last night,” one disciple said, “so the work went forward quickly.” Bhamati looked at the blackened edges. “Quickly, yes. But who will clean off this smoke? Who will pay for the oil? And when a lamp has been kept burning all night, whose eyes will have the chance to rest at dawn?”

The disciple replied that serving the scriptures was a meritorious duty shared by all. Without lifting the smoke-stained sheets, Bhamati set them against the wall. “The merit is yours to speak of,” she said. “The stinging eyes are mine. Put them both in a single account, and the figures will not come right.” Her voice carried neither anger nor a plea for indulgence. She was reckoning costs as one reckons the grain in a household.

Vachaspati was inside, collating the lines of the text. Bhamati called him out. “The longer the lamps burned in the night, the heavier the burden left for the morning,” she said. “Four pages are ready; two will have to be dried again. Lohna will not provide any more fibre until the earlier payment is made.” “How much is owed?” Vachaspati asked. “We shall know when we have seen how many sheets can be saved and how many are spoiled,” Bhamati answered. “Not by counting the sheets alone.”

Lohna came in carrying, not a stack of the paper he had made, but a piece of torn screen. “This must be replaced,” he said. “The edges do not rise to an even thickness through the old mesh. I was promised payment for my labour; the cost of materials was separate. The disciples are calling the two one

expense.” Vachaspati had been absorbed in his text, but the torn mesh now lay before him. “When can a new screen be brought?” he asked. “On market day,” Lohna said. “Until then, we can make smaller sheets with what we have.”

On the classroom wall Bhamati wrote three lines of accounts: sheets made, sheets spoiled, sheets saved. Lohna added a fourth: time spent at work. One of the disciples laughed. “At this rate we shall have a ledger longer than the book itself.” “Make a book without accounts,” Bhamati replied, “and in the end all you will have is torn pages.” A faint smile crossed Vachaspati's face. It did not erase his disagreement.

Later in the morning Mrinal came inside for the single muhūrta allotted to her lesson. She saw that on a leaf of the new copy someone was transcribing, not a list of the many names of rivers, but a fragment of an unfinished poem. One line contained the word “Kṛtasārā.” The words before and after it had been lost; the corner of the original from which this copy was made was broken too. “Is this the name of a river,” Mrinal asked, “or a word describing some quality in the poem?”

“It is a word associated with water,” a disciple said, “so it must be a river.” Mrinal looked at him. “Yesterday the letters I saw were damaged by water, but that did not make their meaning a river. The preceding words are missing here. Is it right to guess from a single surviving line?” Vachaspati asked to see the incomplete leaf. He did not immediately declare the word to be a river's name. “This is a question about the reading of the text,” he said. “To fill the space left by a missing page with conjecture is not to give an answer.”

Bhamati set a slender marker beside the leaf so that the word could be checked again. “When we find another copy of the original, we shall compare them,” she said. “And until then,” Mrinal asked, “what if someone uses this name to claim land at a landing place?” “Tell them to look at the measurements of the land,” Lohna replied. “A boat cannot be steered by a line from a book.” Laughter ran through the room, but Vachaspati did not dismiss the question.

That day a little girl came to Bhamati. She belonged to a disciple's family and had wandered inside in her eagerness to watch the paper drying. Seeing the charred wick of the lamp, she asked, “When the light is finished, where does the smoke go?” Bhamati took her to the window. “Some of it goes outside,” she answered. “Some settles on the paper, and some enters our breath.” “Then why don't you burn fewer lamps?” the girl asked. “We shall all talk about that this evening,” Bhamati said.

In Videhapur that same morning, clouds had gathered thickly overhead. Rainwater had dripped all night through a seam in the tin roof of the pathshala, dampening the bottom of a bundle of practice sheets. Jatan was turning the pages, trying to save the letter “J” he had written. Birsi lifted a

sheet. “My letters can still be read,” she said. Reva spread it towards the sunlight. Harimohan Pathak grew uneasy as he examined the paper. “If this goes on, the pathshala will not survive the rains,” he said.

Maithili was busy saving an old copy kept on the pathshala veranda. Ishan went up to inspect the sheets of tin. The accounts had not been settled for the craftsman previously called to seal the seam. “Today's lesson will be delayed,” Harimohan said. “The children are already here,” Meera answered. “We can give them a short lesson even while the sheets are drying.” To Jatan she said, “Saving even one page is work. But don't put the wet paper too close to the fire.”

Just then a woman stood outside the veranda and lowered a wet bag to the ground. Her name was Somri Hembram. She had come from a group of migrant labourers. In her bag were a work slip, a contract only partly translated, and a small receipt wrapped in cloth. Chanda Munda had directed her to the pathshala because Somri needed help reading the written conditions.

Somri opened the paper and showed it to Maithili. “My name is here,” she said, “and the figure for a day's wages is here too. But there isn't a single word in the language I speak at home. They told me to put down my thumbprint; they would explain it afterwards.” “Where is the work?” Maithili asked. “On construction work away from home,” Somri said. “They will call us again tomorrow. I understand the work I am to do. I do not understand everything the paper says.”

Harimohan examined the slip closely. One line set out the ordinary wage conditions; another concerned notice of a change in accommodation; a third provided for deductions if the work was abandoned midway. Somri asked first about the day's pay. Then she asked, “If work stops because of rain, will this deduction be made?” “That line is ambiguous,” Harimohan said. “Then why,” Somri replied, “am I being asked to put my thumbprint on an ambiguity?”

Meera began explaining the written terms in plain Maithili, but Somri stopped her. “I shall listen to what you explain,” she said, “but payment for someone to explain it in my mother tongue will be a separate matter. Some in our group understand Maithili; others do not. I can have my own statement written down. Each person's consent must come from that person's own mouth.” There was resolve in her voice, without any desire for a quarrel. Chanda smiled. “Naira asked permission before she made a copy of my papers too. People ask first here. That is why I brought you.”

Somri also carried a short bamboo measuring rule in her bag. She looked up at the leaking seam in the new roof. “Water has collected at this joint,” she said, “but I will not stand here and give orders as though I had been hired to repair it. Whoever is responsible for safety while climbing on the roof, for the tools and for the wages must decide how the work is done.” Ishan was coming

down. “I could tighten that sheet myself,” he exclaimed. “You may be able to tighten it,” Somri replied, “but if your foot slips on the wet tin, you may save the paper and injure your body. There is a difference between eagerness to work and working safely.” Ishan stayed his hand.

“What would you like written in your application?” Maithili asked Somri. She considered for a moment. “Not that somebody else will sign in my name,” she said. “Write that the conditions of the contract must be explained, that the members of the group must understand them in their own languages, and that the wages of the translator must be entered in the contract accounts.” “I cannot yet give a final judgment about all the legal implications,” Harimohan said. Somri folded her slip again. “I am not asking for a judgment,” she replied. “First I want a copy of the questions in writing.”

There were two brief messages from the contractor's clerk on Somri's phone. The first gave the hour at which she must report the next morning; the second asked for the slip to be returned. She read them without replying at once. “Are you afraid?” Chanda asked. “I am afraid of losing the work,” Somri said. “But if I put my mark on something I have not understood, my family will pay the price.” In her village lived an elderly woman who could hear a voice over the phone but could not read written conditions. Before going away to work again, Somri wanted that woman too to understand the difference between wages and deductions. She had come to this decision through her own experience, not on the orders of any meeting.

Meera chose a clean page from an old notebook. At Somri's direction they wrote four questions: the daily rate, the accounting for work stopped by rain, the terms governing a change of accommodation, and the right to understand the terms in one's own language. One copy would remain with Somri; the other was for the workers' meeting. Simply receiving these questions had not altered the original contract. But before any thumbprint was given, the questions had at least been put into writing. Somri took the receipt from her bag, checked its date, and put it carefully away again.

At that moment Jatan stumbled while lifting the bundle of paper. The sheets scattered, and Birsi burst into laughter. “It isn't only my pages that flew away,” Jatan said crossly. “Everybody's did.” Somri bent her knees and sat beside him. On one sheet she noticed a backward “J”. “What is this?” she asked. “An old mistake,” Jatan said. “Don't throw it away,” Somri told him. “When you write it correctly, that first page will show how your hand has changed.” The child put it safely in the middle of his bundle.

At midday Sarita arrived carrying hot rice and a shallow pot of dal. The cooking fire's smoke drifted beyond the veranda. “Have you eaten?” she asked Somri. Somri took out her own flatbread. “I have this,” she said, “but if the vegetables are for sale, I'll pay for them.” Sarita laughed. “What we have cooked today is for a shared meal. If I take on the cooking as work tomorrow,

then we shall settle the price.” Somri took a spoonful of vegetables and opened a little jar of pickle from her bag, offering everyone a taste.

Over the meal Sarita asked Maithili whether the wet books had been saved. “The old copy has survived,” Maithili said. “The practice sheets can be written again. But the space for the payment due to the person who made the copies is still blank.” Sarita looked at the empty bowl from her cooking. “I like it when people eat food made by my hands and ask for me by name,” she said. “But let somebody go on cooking anonymously every day, and one day even the household accounts will begin to lie.”

Later in the afternoon a heavy drop fell once more from the wet roof. The water did not remain there: it ran past the bundle of paper and disappeared into a deep footprint in the courtyard. Sanket was making a small sketch of the stream's course. Seeing Harimohan glance at his phone, he said before the teacher could speak, “This is a picture of how the water travels here, not of anybody's face. You can look at it before I make it public.” Naira asked him to put a time on the paper; in the next rain, the course of the water might change. What they had seen was neither proof that a house had flooded nor proof of any contractor's wrongdoing. But it was an observation useful enough for making the roof safe.

On the veranda of that much older age, no lamp had been lit by evening. Bhamati was sorting the sheets in the day's last light. Lohna came with his account of the work. He had received half of his wages for the previous two days; for the remainder, a fixed measure of grain had been recorded. “I shall take this much today,” he said. “Write down the day on which the rest is to be paid. If payment is impossible now, there is nothing to be gained from a false promise.”

Vachaspati placed his mark upon the account. Lohna asked to have it read aloud. “The mark is there,” a disciple said. “What need is there to read it again?” “You all read the pages made by my hands,” Lohna answered. “Why should I not hear the line that records my wages?” Bhamati read it aloud. Lohna changed one word: instead of “assistance”, it must say “balance owed”. Vachaspati accepted the alteration.

Bhamati was quietly cutting a wick for the lamp. “Everyone here will have a line recording their own work,” Lohna asked. “In which line will your name appear?” Bhamati folded the wick between her palms. “There are entries for oil, mats, keeping watch at night, separating the faulty copies,” she said. “But the question of names is not simple. Some stories tell of a wife who kept vigil beside a lamp. I shall not turn what a story did not witness into a proven event by declaring that it happened.”

Mrinal sat down beside her. “Then should people's stories be written down, or not?” she asked. “They may be written down—as stories,” Bhamati replied. “What someone has seen may be recorded as testimony; what someone has

inferred, as inference. Yet the wife's labour in preparing food and staying awake through the night is no less for that.” “And your own account?” Mrinal asked. Bhamati lit a little lamp. “I shall tell my own story,” she said. “I will not allow another person's tale to be put into my mouth.”

Hearing Bhamati's words, Vachaspati came out from within. Seeing her small lamp, he asked, “Will so little light be enough to make out the fine letters of a verse?” Bhamati moved a delicate sheet away from the flame. “No,” she said. “So tonight read only as much as can be read. Leave the rest for the morning light. Hands and eyes are household resources too.” Vachaspati promised to reduce the copying that night. The disciples would lose some practice, but the sheets Lohna had made would be spared the smoke. One disciple was displeased at first, then began gathering the papers into their chest himself.

The little girl who had asked about the smoke that morning came in again from outside. Holding a small crooked scrap of paper, she said, “May I write my name on this?” “It's a torn corner,” Lohna told her, “but it will do for writing.” The girl looked at Mrinal. “Who will teach me the letters?” Mrinal asked. Bhamati moved the lamp a little farther away. “Anyone who can read,” she said. “But first let the paper dry.” The child tried to dry the sheet by blowing upon it, and Lohna broke into a hearty laugh.

By evening in Videhapur, repairs to the seam in the roof had still not begun. A temporary tarpaulin protected the damp bundle, and a time was set for the next day when the craftsman could reach the roof safely. Somri took away her copy of the four questions about her contract. In the work register Maithili recorded her name not as “a labourer requesting translation”, but as “Somri Hembram, seeking clarification of the contractual terms”. Somri nodded after the entry was read aloud, but said, “Tomorrow the others in my group will speak for themselves. I do not stand in for all of them.”

At the end of the day Naira examined the corner of the surviving copy on the pathshala table. Maithili had kept two versions of her corrected page apart. One carried the name of the person who had supplied the annotation; the other did not. “We must not conflate this with the original document in the register of names,” Naira said. “The question of credit is separate.” “Yes,” Maithili replied, “but when something goes missing, people readily suppose that the cause must be the same in every case. Paper can be ruined by water, or smoke, or carelessness. We shall have to look.” Without touching the page, Naira examined its dry corner.

On her way home Sarita covered the lamp. Jatan was tightening the knot around his practice papers; Birsi was measuring out water to wash the empty rice bowls. On Mrinal's veranda in that distant age, Lohna had set his screen out to dry, and Bhamati was trimming the wick of that small lamp. In both

places the hands of those who preserved the written page were weary. Yet when morning came, the children would have letters to write again.

Chapter 34 · The Unseen Cause

On the rain-soaked veranda of the pathshala, Hema Dev measured the wooden display board before she looked at the papers. An old nail protruded from its right-hand edge. Beneath it, half the exhibition sheet hanging there had curled in the night's rain. Hema paused before touching the paper. It carried pictures of the founding of Videhapur, the old road, and the dredging of the pond. Beneath the pictures were ten men's names and a single line: “With the assistance of the women of the village.” Hema asked quietly, “On which page are the women's names?”

Harimohan Pathak was drying a bundle of books. “I wanted to see them myself,” he said. “Perhaps a later page was left out.” Straightening what remained of the exhibition sheet, Hema answered, “Perhaps. But if it is always the same people's page that goes missing, who is to notice the mistake?” She took the board down from the wall and laid it on the ground. Meanwhile Jatan and Birsi were forming letters with lime in the wet courtyard outside. They liked the pictures, but the meaning of the blank margin on the paper escaped them.

Hema had brought two registers from home: an old list from a school ceremony and a copied page relating to the dredging of the pond in 1939. The latter was a photographic copy of an older reproduction preserved within a family, not an original government record. On one side were the words “food”; on the other, “those who carried the mud” and “marking the landing steps.” Several names ran into the torn edge; in places only an initial survived. Hema did not want to complete indistinct letters with names of her own imagining.

When Meera Mandal reached the veranda, Hema showed her the two pages. “There is nothing wrong with writing the men's names in the school's history,” she said. “What is wrong is that those whose work made the men's work possible are all compressed into a single nameless word.” Meera asked, “Which names can you read with certainty?” Hema pointed out four marks. Two names were complete, one was incomplete, and an old water stain covered the fourth. “Then we must not call all four equally reliable evidence,” Meera said.

A short lesson in local history was being prepared at the pathshala that day. The pupils had been asked to look not only at pictures of the ghats but also at the old accounts of labour. Yet what appeared clear and agreeable on the exhibition board was not the whole story. Hema drew a white line in chalk. On one side she set down verified names; on another, incomplete names; on a third, labour recorded without names. “These three lines do different work,” she said. “The fact that a name cannot be read does not prove that the person never existed.”

Long ago in Mithila, a lamp burned on the outer veranda of Udayana's place of study until the first light of dawn. After the night's disputation, two piles of manuscript leaves had been laid apart. On one were written the arguments of the position being defended; on the other, the objections. As a disciple lifted the smoke-blackened wick, he asked, “How are we to accept the claim that something unseen exists as a cause?” Instead of answering, Udayana motioned for the disciple who was opening the manuscript to sit to one side.

A guest was to present the Mīmāṃsaka's pūrvapakṣa, the opposing position, at the day's assembly. Udayana invited him to speak first. The guest argued that the fruits of action often do not manifest immediately. To account for the later fruit ascribed to an act properly performed, the supposition of *adṛṣṭa*, the unseen, or *apūrva*, a potency not previously manifest, might be sufficient. Why, then, was it indispensable to posit a separate conscious governor for every such result? There was no mockery in the question. He proceeded to set out the grounds of his position systematically.

One pupil grew impatient. “What is unseen is unproved. There is an end to the matter.” Udayana stopped him. “Unseen and unproved are not the same word,” he said. “Some things are not directly perceived, yet an inference concerning them has conditions of its own. For now, hear our guest's statement to the end. Before you refute a position, you are obliged to understand it in its entirety.” The pupil folded the leaf in his hand, then opened it again.

The guest continued. If the mere observation of a delay between human action and its fruit were offered as proof that God was necessary, one would have to ask where the invariable relation, the *vyāpti*, had been established. If the unseen were admitted, could it adequately account for the connection through *apūrva*, or not? And if it could not, where precisely did the explanation fall short? Udayana had each question written down. In that room disagreement was finding its proper words; respect for argument did not become an obligation to agree.

Outside the veranda stood a small earthen pot. Its owner, an elderly potter, was turning over vessels soaked by the night's rain to dry. A disciple pointed to the pot and said that although the water inside could not be seen, its presence could be inferred from the weight; the unseen was much the same. The guest smiled. “Lift the pot and test it. You have a means of checking its weight. The relation you posit for the delayed fruit of an action has a different limit of verification. Do not suppose the dispute is already settled by stretching one example into the likeness of another.” Udayana told the disciple to ask the potter's permission before touching the mouth of the vessel.

Wet clay covered the potter's hands. As he turned a pot upside down, he said, “If I fail to sift out the sand mixed into my clay, the pot will break in the firing. But whenever I see a broken pot, I do not always blame the sand.

Sometimes it is the heat; sometimes the time given for drying.” Udayana smiled at the words, but did not turn them into ready-made proof of a scriptural proposition. “Your example shows that more than one cause may be possible,” he said, “and that is how far its usefulness extends.”

Before noon, the wording of a manuscript leaf caused a dispute between two disciples. One wished to set down the opposing questions in abbreviated form and move quickly to the answer. The other objected that this would weaken the guest's position. Udayana took up both leaves and examined them. On the first, five questions had been reduced to three; on the second, the space for the reply had been left blank. Udayana instructed the scribe to write “incomplete,” not “abridged,” upon the first. “Keep this leaf safe today. We shall answer tomorrow. First, do not cut away the body of the question.”

Back at the Videhapur pathshala, Hema was asking how much it would cost to reproduce the old pictures. Harimohan said the school's small fund could cover two copies, but the managing committee's permission would be required to reprint the display board. “Then let us make the corrections we can make on paper today,” Hema replied. “For the rest, we shall submit a written request.” Maithili Mishra was seated nearby, examining the old copy. “Where a name is incomplete, leave the space blank and add a clear note,” she said. “Do not lead readers to mistake a conjecture for the original record.”

Just then a woman unknown to them came to the front of the veranda. In a narrow bamboo basket she carried strips of paper protected against damp, knots of thread, and a small box of colour. She introduced herself as Nasima Shershahbadi. She had heard that the school needed someone to reinforce the edges of the exhibition sheets. “The paper you hang here will get wet,” she said. “Colour alone will not save it. It needs a strip fastened along the back first.” Hema slid the board towards her so that she could examine it.

Nasima unpacked her tools and steadied the torn corner of a sheet. “My family say it is pointless to give a full receipt for a small job,” she remarked. “But when I attach something to a sheet, there are three things to account for: the cost of materials, the time of my hands, and the terms of any later repair.” Meera asked, “How shall we put your name down in the account?” Nasima answered slowly and distinctly, “Nasima Shershahbadi. Exactly as I have told you.” Meera wrote the spelling on a slip and read it back to her.

Nasima examined the right-hand edge of the exhibition. “The last letters of the names have been cut away here,” she said. “The board is narrower than the width allowed for in printing. Whoever trimmed the sheet cut into the line of names.” Excited, Hema asked, “Then did the women's names disappear simply because of a printing mistake?” Nasima shook her head. “I can tell you this much: some letters on this sheet were cut away. Why names that were never written down to begin with are missing—that is not something I can discover from this corner.”

Hema rested a finger on the board and remained silent for a little while. Until then she had thought all the names had been removed deliberately. Now there was a physical explanation for part of the loss. But a printing error could not account for the women whose work had been left anonymous in the original list of the old ceremony. “I am revising my first accusation,” she told Harimohan. “The evidence of trimming in print must be kept separate from the question of names never entered in the original register.” Harimohan wrote both statements into the school's meeting book.

Looking at Nasima's box of colour, Jatan asked, “Does that paint cost a great deal?” “It has its price at the market,” Nasima replied. “But whatever remains here can be used on another job, so I shall deduct that from the account. What I shall not deduct is the time of the hands doing the work.” Birsi showed her the practice sheet bearing her letter “B.” Nasima offered her a narrow strip and said, “Ask your mother's permission before you paste this on. A child's first page does not belong to the school.” Reva laughed from a distance.

Hema showed Naira the old dredging page. Naira opened her notebook with care. “When you made this copy, did you have a chance to see the original?” she asked. “I found a copy of a photograph in an old box belonging to a family,” Hema said. “We still do not know whose hand wrote the original.” Turning the paper over, Naira replied, “Then the date of the paper and the date of what it describes must be checked separately. This is not the original list from the register of names. We can compare it with that list, but we must not force a match.”

Hema suddenly asked, “If some women's names are nowhere recorded, on what grounds can we recognise their labour?” “The measurements of the cooking, wage accounts, old tools and objects used in the work, separate accounts given by families—whatever can be found,” Naira answered. “Record the sorrow of what cannot be found as well, but do not put names of your own choosing into the empty spaces.” Sarita was just setting down a pot of dal. “And even if not a single name had been written,” she said, “somebody must have gone to clear out that mud. To know that work was done and to know the names of those who did it are two different questions.”

Nasima reached for a bowl of dal, then stopped. “In which book is the price of this meal recorded?” she asked. “We are eating together today,” Sarita answered. “But the water, the firewood and the work of cooking are accounted for separately.” Nasima laughed. “Then neither names nor rice go unaccounted for on this veranda.” Jatan came over with his empty bowl. Hema told him to wash his hands first, then gave him two little packets of roasted grain as well.

During the midday recess in that ancient debate, the guest came back to Udayana. “You had my question written down,” he said, “but my position is

not that everything invisible works of itself. I am asking at precisely what point an additional conscious cause must be held indispensable, when the unseen already admitted may explain the connection with the fruit of an act.” Udayana inclined his head. “We shall set down the question in that form,” he said, “so that the burden of answering rests upon me, not upon a distortion of your position.”

When the disciples had gathered, Udayana laid down a simple rule. Each side must first restate its opponent's reasoning in a form the opponent accepted, and only then advance an objection. One disciple complained that this would take too much time. “If you invent a false opposing argument to save time,” Udayana said, “the answer will come quickly, but what you produce will be confusion, not disputation.” The guest had the rule entered on his leaf. The complexity of the assembly was not diminished; the likelihood of humiliation was diminished a little.

Then a pupil of eleven asked, “If a person does evil and does not suffer the consequence at once, is that because of the unseen? And what of the innocent who suffer?” Udayana did not give him an instant answer about fate. “The idea of the unseen cannot erase responsibility for every injustice that we can see,” he said. “Whose hands performed the deed, who was hurt: what can be investigated in this life must first be investigated. Our disagreement about the unseen is another debate, still before us.” The guest accepted the limits of this reply; the original philosophical dispute remained unresolved.

A disciple asked whether this reply should be written into the book as Udayana's final and definitive doctrine. “Write that it was the conclusion reached by today's assembly,” Udayana answered. “Do not make it into a line of my authoritative treatise and quote it without an established text.” He placed a small mark in the right-hand corner, so that the leaf would keep its proper place within the imagined record of the debate. This manner of writing showed respect for questions, with no desire to mislead readers of a later age.

In Videhapur, Hema was drafting a new proposal for the school's history lesson. Her first sentence read: “The contribution of women to the dredging of the old pond.” Harimohan asked, “What comes after that?” Hema wrote a second sentence: “The available pages do not preserve every name in full; the list of verified names extends only as far as the names that can clearly be read.” She left several blank signs where names would have stood, but added that these blanks signified a lack of evidence, not an absence of labour.

An elderly teacher did not like the new wording. “Why put controversy on the school wall?” he asked. “People want to remember their forebears.” “So do I,” Hema replied. “But why should remembering them require us to forget the women of their households?” The teacher said that adding names to anonymous work could provoke disputes between families. “It could,” Hema

acknowledged. “That is why we shall give a source for every name. Where a name is incomplete, we shall not display it as complete.”

Someone proposed that Naira connect the school board to the private documents in the register of names. Her reply was unequivocal. “The original page containing Sarita’s twenty-seven names is not material for this exhibition,” she said. “The public history of dredging the pond and the rights governing records connected with a living person’s safety are separate matters.” Hema agreed at once. She wanted to restore women’s names to the history of labour; she did not want that victory at the price of anyone’s confidential identity.

Nasima prepared a sample of the new reinforcing strip. She had a small receipt for the paper, with her name, the quantities of the materials, the hours of work and the transport charge entered separately. “A receipt for such a little favour?” a school volunteer asked. “Those who wish to give help may do so on their own terms,” Nasima replied. “What was discussed with me was a job. This is work.” Hema wrote the time of receipt on Nasima’s bill and signed it. The date of payment was entered separately; she did not receive the entire sum at once.

In the afternoon Meera brought the children over to the exhibition. In the old picture of the pond, Jatan noticed a long bamboo pole. “Did someone carry that pole there?” he asked. “Yes,” Meera replied, “in somebody’s hands. Those hands are not shown in this picture.” “Then is the picture incomplete?” Birsi asked. “A picture may be complete within what it chooses to show,” Meera told her, “but what we need to know cannot all be found in the picture alone.” Birsi was not satisfied with the answer, but she had found herself another question.

Sarita was sorting greens on the school’s wooden bench for the evening meal. Hema asked who in the family had told her the story of the 1939 dredging page. “It happened before I was born,” Sarita said. “What I know is a memory passed down through the mouths of later generations. Not all of it is of the same standing as what can be read on paper.” Hema wrote down the phrase: “Oral recollection: a separate source.” Sarita laughed. “Will you put my name beside that?” “If you give permission,” Hema replied.

Somri Hembram arrived with a copy of her four questions about her contract. Seeing Nasima at work binding the paper, she asked whether Nasima could also make her pages safe. “I can,” Nasima said, “but I shall not interpret the meaning of your contract. A translator’s work calls for separate payment.” Somri smiled. “That is all I want—that each person who knows a kind of work should have their name written beside it.” There was no long sermon between them. The thread was drawn tight, and the edge of the paper made straight.

No answer to Hema's application arrived that evening. The school's officer in charge merely wrote that the sample of the revised history lesson would be considered at the next committee meeting. Hema did not insist that the board be replaced immediately. Instead, she had Nasima attach a temporary strip beneath the sheet: “This picture and list of names are based on incomplete sources; verification of the proposed corrections is in progress.” She had kept her promise not to conceal the empty spaces. The definitive publication of the names was still to come.

Night fell on the place of study in the older age, and both manuscript leaves from the disputation were closed. Udayana read the guest's recorded questions back to him. The guest corrected two words: “necessary” and “sufficient.” The disciple wrote the corrected words again. “Today,” Udayana said, “the argument and the objection have been preserved. The road towards an answer begins here.” On his way out, the guest noticed the potter's dried vessels. He asked the price of a pot and chose one for his drinking water. The conclusion of the doctrine remained unsettled; the buying and selling of the pot was complete.

Before leaving for home in Videhapur, Hema raised the school's damp display board onto the wall once more. Nasima tightened a knot of thread behind it. Hema placed the receipt in a register separate from the pages of history, so that payment for labour would not be allowed to disappear into anonymity again. Jatan stumbled over the letters as he read the temporary notice. “It says ‘incomplete’ here,” Birsi said. “Shall we read it again?” “Yes,” Hema answered. “When a new page comes, we shall read it again. We will not hide the old mistake.”

As Naira went away, she noticed two shadows cast on the veranda's outer wall: one from the board, the other from the bamboo prop. The shadows ran together, though the objects were different. She made no attempt to prove her private experience at Puranadhar by means of this sight. The next day she had to examine photographs of two similar faces; the distance between seeing the same likeness and declaring the same identity had yet to be crossed. Inside, the school's new strip stirred lightly in the breeze, while the knot Nasima had tied held fast in its place.

Chapter 35 · The Recognition of the Gavaya

The board that had hung all night in the school veranda was being taken down. The knot in Nasima's thread held firm, but a new sheet pasted beside it fluttered at the slightest breath of wind. It belonged not to the school but to the market's search party. Two blurred photographs had been attached to it: one taken at the bus stand, the other in the western lane. In each, half of a man's face could be seen. Between them someone had written in red ink: "The same man?" Below, another hand had added: "Enquiries concerning Mithun." Mira Mandal stopped as she steadied the board. Before anything else, she kept the children from reading the notice.

Jatan was drawing lines in the earth outside. Birsi had laid out yesterday's lesson pages to dry in the sun. The red lettering aroused their curiosity. "Is this another picture of a child-stealer?" Jatan asked. Mira laid her palm across the edge of the paper. "For now, these are two photographs, not an accusation. We must examine where they came from before writing anyone's name." Birsi asked, "If the faces look alike, why shouldn't they belong to the same man?" "Looking alike and being the same," Mira replied, "are two different things. That is what we shall study today."

When Naira arrived, she carried a slender file: copies of information gathered by volunteers searching for Mithun. The original complaint was with Lata, and the formal investigation was proceeding along its own separate course. This file had been assembled to help people cooperate in the search. It gave Naira no authority to write "suspect" across a photograph in red and thereby turn a person into a criminal. She stared at the notice in surprise. "How did this picture get out of my file?" she asked. "Someone pasted it up here during the night," Mira said. "It bears no school seal."

The first photograph showed part of the signboard of a tea stall at the bus stand. In the second, a person was turning away, the shadow of a gamchha falling across his eyes. The images differed in date, distance and the camera with which they had been taken. Naira turned the sheet over. The file did not name the person who had supplied the photograph. It merely said, "Seen." "Seen by whom?" she asked. "No one wrote that down," Mira replied. Naira was silent for a moment. When she had published Mahesh's account too hastily, she had made her gravest mistake at precisely this point: she had filled a blank space on paper with her own certainty.

Just then Reva Gulgulia came from the direction of the railway square. In one hand she carried Jatan's small notebook, in the other Birsi's damp sheet of writing. There had been talk since the previous night of moving the encampment yet again; the road beside it was waterlogged. Reva stood before Mira and said, "We were told to meet the head today. The children's names are still on the class register, but not on the school's admission roll. What

house am I to show the people who demand a house number?" There was more exhaustion than anger in the question. Meanwhile, the children wanted to look at the letters they had written.

Mira showed her the letter brought out from the school's little office. It said that address verification was pending. "I did not stop them from learning yesterday either," Mira said. "But without a written order admitting them, the class on my veranda cannot count as enrolment in the school." Reva laid the notebook in her lap. "So childhood must stay where it is while I wander from place to place? A child's age is not tethered to a house-post." On hearing this, Mira looked at the clock. There was still some time before the head's meeting began. Rather than simply take the children along, she first asked Reva how far their photographs and personal papers could be shown to others.

At the bend of the veranda a woman Mira had not seen before was setting down a bucket and a tube of rolled paper. The bucket held no lime, only thin strips of washed wood. Her name was Rajo Bhogta. For the time being she lived in a small house between the school and the railway square. Because she had moved about the town, her old certificate of residence in the village and her present rent receipt gave different addresses. She was also owed two days' wages for carrying materials for the school. She approached Mira with an application. "I put my name down for school assistance," she said, "but the office says the papers do not agree because there are two addresses. Does living in two places mean I am two human beings?"

Hearing Rajo, Reva turned round. "Do your papers show your first home?" she asked. "Yes. My people are still there. I find work here. What kind of reckoning allows the address of one place to wipe out what I earn in another?" Mira examined the copy of Rajo's old certificate and her new rent receipt separately. Rajo put out a hand to stop her. "First write down who you are showing these papers to and why. Last time I handed over a copy, I never found out whose phone received its photograph." Naira immediately wrote the purpose of the inspection on a blank sheet. Only after Rajo had read it and agreed did she show them the copies.

By then word of the red notice had spread outside. A shopkeeper from the market came towards the school. The same gamchha, the same line of the cheek, he insisted, appeared in both photographs. If the pictures were set aside during the investigation, the guilty man would escape. "Have you seen the original files of both photographs?" Naira asked. The shopkeeper shook his head. "No. But I have eyes." Rajo did not laugh at his reasoning. She picked up one of her wooden strips and placed it beside another before him. "Look at these two thin pieces of wood," she said. "One belongs to a school window, the other to a bench. Their colour and width are alike. Does that make the window a bench?" "That is wood," the shopkeeper said, "not a human being." "Then we ought to be more careful still," Rajo answered quietly, "when we speak of a human being."

Mira had already been thinking of an old example for the children's lesson. On the board she wrote "gavaya." Jatan stumbled over the word, and Birsi helped him sound out the letters in her own way. Mira said, "Suppose someone who knows the forest tells you that a gavaya is an animal resembling a cow. Later, in the forest, you see an unfamiliar creature, recall that description and understand what the word 'gavaya' refers to. That is the kind of relation discussed under upamāna, knowledge through comparison. The cow and the gavaya have not become one and the same animal." "So it can look like a cow and still have another name?" Jatan asked. "Yes," Mira said. "And it would be a still greater mistake to use this example to declare that two human beings must have the same identity."

Harimohan Pathak came out from inside. He heard the children laughing and repeating "gavaya." When Jatan mispronounced it as "gavaiya," a singer, Rajo smiled. "Don't summon a singer," she said. "He'll arrive with a song and demand payment for it too." The children laughed. Harimohan drew two columns on the board: "Relation between word and object" and "Identity of a person." "In the first," he said, "resemblance can be a useful indication. In the second, the likeness of faces alone proves neither a name, an event nor a crime. The day and place of the photograph, whose camera took it, and independent confirmation of the person's identity: these call for separate enquiries."

Long before, in Mithila, during the period of Gangesha's studies, a pupil had been writing out the example of the gavaya. He remembered the sentence he had heard: the animal resembling a cow is called a gavaya. "If I say 'gavaya' as soon as I see a cow-like shape," he asked, "is my knowledge complete?" The teacher first distinguished the sentence he had heard from the object he had seen. "Ask whose trustworthy words you heard, how the unfamiliar creature really corresponds to that description, and how you understood the relation of the word to its object. You cannot see one distinctive mark of a cow and call every wild animal a gavaya."

"And if, after seeing one gavaya, I see another?" the student asked. "Then you have reached questions about the class to which a thing belongs and the difference between individuals," the teacher replied. "The purpose of this disputation is to understand the meaning of the word 'gavaya,' not to catch a thief. Learn its limits first." That day an analogy was entered in the notebook, with a space left beneath it for objections. The propositions of that philosophical debate belonged to the questions of their own time; a photograph from Videhapur many ages later could not serve as evidence for them.

When the door of the head's office opened in Videhapur, Mira went in with Reva, Rajo and the children. The clerk looked at Rajo's papers and declared at once, "There are two addresses. The assistance will have to be stopped." "Which assistance, and under what rule?" Rajo asked. "And why have you

added my wages for carrying goods to this?" The clerk turned the file over. A number from the receipt for transporting materials had been entered beside the application for assistance; because the name was the same, the two accounts had been linked. "Examine the connection between these entries first," Mira said. "Here Rajo is a worker; elsewhere she is an applicant for assistance. Even when a copied sheet is the same, the purposes of the accounts are different."

The head said that eligibility for assistance would be examined separately, but it had been a mistake to place the transport-wage receipt in the assistance application. Rajo insisted that the two sheets be separated. "All this dispute over such a small sum?" an employee present in the office asked. Lifting her bucket, Rajo said, "It is a small sum on your desk. When it reaches my house, it will buy salt and oil." The head gave the payment department written instructions to examine the receipt separately. Rajo did not receive her wages that day, but the grounds for treating them as a suspicious transaction in her assistance file had been removed.

When Reva's turn came, the office again asked for a permanent address. She opened Jatan's notebook. "The child's name is written here, not the number of a house," she said. "I will not write down a false number. I have copies of the slips from the places where he studied before. Tell me in writing what other way there is to complete the verification you require." The clerk said admission could not take place without the procedure. "I am not opposed to procedure," Mira replied. "But there must be a procedure that does not leave out a child whose home moves." The head turned to the notebook and looked at its pages: Jatan's reversed 'ज' and Birsi's straight 'ब'.

"This is not the school's regular attendance record," the head said. "No," Mira replied. "And calling such a class regular enrolment would give us a false account. But while a decision is pending, why should the children be deprived of lessons?" The head issued a written order that attendance in the temporary class and decisions about admission should be entered in separate registers. There had still been no formal admission; a possible alternative method of address verification remained for consideration at the next meeting. Reva took the acknowledgement of receipt into her own hands. She did not smile on reading the order. Her first question was, "Where will the class be tomorrow?" "For now, on the veranda," Mira said. "We shall decide together how to make our way around the town."

Outside the office they met Lata. She had been gathering information from another house in the western lane in the search for Mithun. Sleeplessness had left its weariness around her eyes. When she heard about the red photographs, she went straight to Naira. "There is a possibility that both faces belong to the same man, isn't there?" she asked. "There must be grounds before we can speak of a possibility," Naira replied. "These images do not yet establish a person's identity. It would be wrong to put the person linked to the

second picture on a list of criminal suspects." There was a sharpness in Lata's voice. "Are you cutting away my hope again?" "Not your hope," Naira said. "I am setting a limit to one inference. We are keeping safe all the other concrete information in Mithun's search."

The shopkeeper still had the first picture in his hand when Sajid came up. Instead of saving the photograph on his phone, Sajid first asked who had supplied this copy on paper. "I got it from a market group," the shopkeeper replied. "I don't know whose phone held the original." Sajid raised the sheet towards the light from a window. "Half the shop's name can be seen here," he said. "But has anyone checked whether that signboard was replaced last month or a year ago? And the clock visible in the corner could be the shop's clock, not a record of the time the picture was taken."

"Then the photograph is useless?" Mira asked. Sajid shook his head. "No. It may tell us something about a place. Perhaps it can be matched against another witness's account. But this sheet tells us nothing reliable about the camera, the date, the limits of the crop or the whole face. I do not have the original file, so I will not claim to know its digital timestamp either." Naira wrote down his words exactly as he had spoken them. For the first time the shopkeeper said, "I was only trying to help." Lata looked at him. "Help us. But if your own son goes missing one day, do not paste your grief over the face of a stranger."

Mira brought two vessels of water from the school. The shopkeeper looked ashamed; Sajid had not snatched the paper from his hand. Behind the veranda, Reva was taking out flattened rice for the children to eat. Rajo gave them jaggery from a little tin in her bag. Handing half his piece to Birsi, Jatan asked, "Is today's lesson over?" "No," Mira said. "You have all asked some very good questions today. Now eat, and put your notebooks away." Lata's anguish was not dispelled in that moment, but amid the children's chatter the voices around her sounded ordinary again, if only for a little while.

Lata examined the photographs. In the first, sunlight fell along the side of the man's cheek; in the second there was shadow. Even the colour of his clothes could not be made out clearly. "What if this man saw Mithun?" she asked. "Then, once his identity is established, he may be a witness," Naira replied. "If we call him an accused man before checking, it will become harder even to ask him what really happened." Lata nodded slowly. She did not demand that the sheet be pulled down and torn apart. Instead she said, "Keep the original copy safe. Remove the red word 'suspect.' If someone who actually saw anything comes forward, take that person's statement separately."

In Mira's and Lata's presence, Naira opened the community search register. On the page it said: "One person: similar face, possible connection." Above that line she entered an unmistakable correction: "Identity unverified; not to be used as grounds for suspicion of a crime." She recorded the uncertainty of

the images' provenance separately. An untouched copy of the original images was placed in an envelope for safekeeping, so that their dates and sources could still be examined. No one's face was to be put on a public notice. Lata gave her written consent for a copy of the correction to be sent to the officer conducting the formal investigation.

Mira brought the board outside once more. "So the man in the picture wasn't a thief?" Jatan asked. "I do not know who the man was," Mira replied. "When we do not know, calling him a thief is wrong. And if we have spoken wrongly about someone, we should not wait for a great public announcement before putting it right." Beside the picture she had drawn of her home, Birsi drew another house. "The two houses look just alike," she said. "Can I say I live in both?" Reva laughed. "You might live in both. But a picture cannot tell us where you will sleep tonight. I can tell you that."

After leaving the office, Rajo set her wooden strips outside the school. She showed Nasima her account for the work of making a new edge for the board. "The two sets of papers have been separated," she said, "but I still have to count my payment again." Nasima checked the knot in her thread. "Count it when the person who owes you is standing there. Otherwise tomorrow they'll say it was assistance work." "This time," Rajo said, "I'll have it written clearly on the receipt that the place of work is temporary, but the worker's name remains the same." The two women gathered up their tools.

In the evening, an employee of the head came to Mira with a short letter. It asked for a plan for a public site for the temporary teaching camp, language assistance and safe travel; the school vehicle was not yet available. Padma would need a means of communication in the classroom, and Sanket had his own conditions concerning the use of his equipment. Mira knew that no such plan could be made without their consent and payment. "You will be there yourself at the next meeting," she told Reva. "I will not decide where the children's home is according to my own reckoning." Reva took the children's hands and sat down at the edge of the veranda. The path for tomorrow was still to be settled not on paper, but among people.

That night Naira wrote three lines in her notebook: "Resemblance: observed"; "Identity: unverified"; "Crime: unproven." Beneath them, with Lata's permission, she recorded the time for the continuing search and a place of contact. The original page bearing Sarita's twenty-seven names was not part of this notebook; it remained separately in Sarita's custody. Naira looked outside. The board cast two shadows on the school wall, one new and one old. From a distance they looked alike; close up, the nail in one shone new, while the other bore the rust of years. She did not mistake the shadows for evidence. Inside, Birsi and Jatan were putting away their own notebooks. That night their names remained not on a sheet of accusations, but in the notebooks in which they were learning to read.

Chapter 36 · The School Beyond the Walls

Jatan had set three bricks together on the school veranda to make a little platform for his notebook. The morning's rainwater had drained away, but the earth was still wet. One of the bricks sank at the edge of the platform, and his notebook slid into the mud. Birsi picked it up, brushed the dirt from its pages and said, “You've rubbed out the ‘ba’ I wrote, too.” “How did I rub it out?” Jatan protested. “The brick sank.” Mira Mandal watched them both. No separate report was needed now to demonstrate how makeshift their place of learning was; the damp corner of the notebook lifted from the mud said enough.

Mira had brought in her bag the letter received from the school office the previous evening. It required a proposed route for a temporary teaching team travelling through the town, provision for language assistance and safe movement, and an account of the work's expenses. The letter did not decide the question of formal enrolment. Reva Gulgulia sat beside a pile of notebooks. “Will Jatan be able to study on this veranda only when the town comes here?” she asked. “If we come near your home,” Mira replied, “who will decide when we must go round to the others?” “All those who will be travelling,” said Reva. “If you draw up a fixed route without asking us, we'll find ourselves in the same trouble again.”

Padma arrived with two boards, drawings made in chalk and small pieces of cardboard in her bag. On seeing the school veranda, she spoke first not to the children but to Mira. “What have I been called here to do today—conduct a class, or help people understand the language used in the meeting?” “We need both,” Mira said. “Then enter the time and the payment for each separately,” Padma replied. “When I interpret a child's signs, that child is making themselves understood to me. Do not treat our voices as yours to use without payment.” Mira opened her notebook. She offered no praise in place of an answer to the objection; on a blank page she drew two separate lines.

Sanket came up from behind carrying a phone and an old speaker in a small cloth bag. The edge of the phone's screen was cracked, though its sound still worked properly. He did not put the equipment down in the middle of the veranda. “Does everyone here need to hear it played?” Padma asked. “First I'll find out who wants to listen,” Sanket said. “If someone doesn't, it won't be played.” A little girl was sitting at some distance; loud sound troubled her. Through hand signs and drawn pictures Padma found out what she preferred. The child chose the route symbols drawn on the board instead of the speaker. Sanket put the speaker back into his bag.

To make the first map of their journeys through the town, they were all to go towards Rajinar. Three roads branched from there, towards the school, the temporary shelter and the treatment room. Beside the raised platform, the old

railing had been cordoned off with a temporary rope during the last repairs. The rope was still tied, but someone had rested a loaded sack against it, and a stake had begun to lean. Reva caught Jatan by the hand and drew him back. “Decide on the route first,” she said. “The children can come afterwards.” Lalit had been called in about the repairs. Bending down, he examined the earth behind the stake. “I've already reported that the railing is loose,” he said. “Simply tightening the rope again won't make it a permanent repair.”

At that moment Madan Raut arrived in his small vehicle. In the back were a folded bench, two ropes and an empty crate used for carrying medicines. He sometimes transported things for the school, but the fare and the time were settled separately on every occasion. “Could you bring the children along this route twice a week?” Mira asked him. Rather than unfold the bench, Madan first consulted his notebook of working hours. “If a call comes in the morning to take a patient,” he said, “I cannot leave a child halfway along the road. And if I already have children aboard, I cannot turn the vehicle around at once to collect a patient. The promises for these two jobs must be separate.”

“Then how are we to rely on the vehicle?” Reva asked. “First decide which days are for the regular round and which are for emergency journeys to treatment,” Madan answered. “When there is an emergency, who will arrange another means of transport for the school? Calling something a vehicle does not, by itself, make the work possible.” Sanket drew two strips, one red and one blue, on his board. Padma stopped him. “You cannot be sure that red means danger to everyone in the same way. There must be words and signs as well as colours.” Beneath the strips Sanket wrote ‘School round’ and ‘Patient transport’. Madan had two different fares entered. He lowered the charge for the school, but did not erase the cost of fuel or the driver's wages.

Saraswati Thakur came from the nearby lane carrying a bag filled with combs, scissors and strips of cloth. Work for the families of hospital patients had kept her out late the night before. Her daughter was on the school veranda that day, drawing a picture of the broken wire of a piece of equipment. “Will there be teaching here,” Saraswati asked, “or will the children be put straight back into my workbag?” “They need a place where each can say which road they want to take,” Mira replied. Saraswati looked at her daughter's drawing. “Because I have these scissors, why does everyone assume she too must earn her living with them? She likes taking equipment apart to see how it works. I want information about that kind of training.”

One of the school employees laughed. “If she learns her mother's work, she'll have a way of earning already.” Saraswati did not answer his laughter with laughter. “There is no smallness in the work,” she said, “but we ought to ask who is to choose whose work. I will not draw up an advance account of my daughter's earnings in place of her education.” The employee said the training would cost money. “It will,” Saraswati acknowledged. “That is why I want to change the hours of my work. I'll give up uncertain calls at night and take

regular customers in the morning. My income will fall; but I will not save it by wiping out my child's wishes." Padma explained this to the daughter in simple words. The girl touched the drawing and said, "First I want to learn how to join this wire safely."

Just then Pratima Rajvanshi arrived with an old copybook and a folded map. Her family preserved the memory of an old donation connected with the school land; exactly which land it was, on what conditions it had been given, and who now held what rights still awaited examination of the papers. Pratima showed them two iron rods recently driven into the ground behind the school wall. "Someone is talking about measuring out land here for a market lease," she said. "If this is part of the school's public-use land, nobody can fence it off without an inquiry." Before taking the map, Naira asked, "Is this the original document?" "No," Pratima said. "It's the copy kept at home. The original is mentioned in the margin of this page. We have yet to find it."

Naira studied a corner of the copy. One mark on the old boundary appeared to correspond to the raised platform at Rajinar, but the present roads and the measurements on the page did not fall into the same pattern. "You can't establish ownership just by looking at an old brick," Lalit said. "We must also find out whether the school or the municipality is responsible for repairing this railing." "I am not making a final claim of ownership on the strength of a copy," Pratima answered. "But until the inquiry is complete, why should anyone be allowed to fence off the children's route?" The head's employee suggested that the rods might stand on private land. Naira recorded that statement too. They agreed to prepare a request for the written order authorising the rods and for a verified map of the boundary.

An elderly woman came back along the Rajinar path with water. "New papers are drawn up every day," she said. "Will anyone tell us whether the water in the well is fit to drink?" "I carry patients," Madan answered. "I don't test water." Lalit likewise explained that inspecting bricks could tell them nothing about the cleanliness of the water. On her page Mira wrote two separate questions: the safety of the railing and platform; the testing of the water and information about its use. "Which way are the children to go until the tests are done?" the old woman asked. Folding her map, Pratima replied, "There's a narrow lane to the east, but a handcart can't get through it." At once a route ceased to be merely a line: it became the different bodies and different kinds of work of many people.

Padma had them practise three different journeys. Jatan carried a board and notebook, Reva a vessel of water, and Madan a vehicle key. Each needed a different way past the well. Sanket did not show the three journeys with a single arrow in his notebook. On the board he drew small pictures: a child on foot, a handcart and a vehicle. The little girl who had earlier refused the speaker pointed to the narrow turn behind the platform in the drawing. With her hand she made a gesture for going around. Before interpreting it, Padma

asked the child again; the girl nodded to confirm the sign. She was under no obligation to speak in front of everybody.

Jatan turned the exercise in finding a route into a game. He folded a paper boat, set it on one side of the platform and said, “This is my school; this is my house. If the water of the well comes between them, shall I sail a boat?” “Your paper boat will get wet and sink,” Birsi replied. “Find a dry road first.” Everybody laughed, but Jatan quietly picked up the boat and put it on the other side. He drew a new route on the board. “Then shall I go the long way round?” he asked. “Yes,” said Padma, “but make a road beside it for someone who cannot walk. Not every child comes at the same pace.” A third line appeared in Jatan's drawing. For the first time, the map of the school on paper was beginning to show the different journeys of three people.

As an immediate precaution, Lalit put up a temporary bamboo barrier two arm's lengths away from the loose railing. Saraswati supplied a strip of leftover red cloth, but Padma warned them not to depend on colour alone being visible. Following the method Nasima had used earlier for tying bamboo, Lalit had the words ‘Do not go this way’ written on a small board, with a bent-line symbol beside them. Mira asked the children to read the sentence aloud. The barrier was meant only for safety until the inspection, not as somebody's private wall; a dated notice saying so was written in Madan's and Pratima's presence. Lalit also made out a receipt for his materials and labour. No one claimed that the well had now been completely repaired.

Back on the school veranda, the committee met. On the first page Padma had the limits of her work set down: language assistance, communication adapted to differing needs in hearing, and adjustment of teaching in consultation with the children; no circulation of confidential family names or voices. “What I hear does not become my property,” she said. “The child whose words they are, and that child's family, retain their rights over them.” Sanket took out his phone and told the school employee, “The original recording stays on my device. No copying without asking. If we make pictures for teaching, no one's face or private papers will be put into them.” “Then how will we get proof?” the employee asked. “There are work registers, agreed accounts of attendance, and ordinary teaching materials that have been approved,” Sanket replied. “A child's face is not the only route to proof.”

Reva raised the question of her son's enrolment again. Mira was unequivocal. “Attendance at this travelling school does not amount to formal admission. I won't put the two together on one sheet and give you a false assurance.” Reva was silent for a little while. Then she said, “But let it be written somewhere that Jatan is studying.” “He will keep his own notebook,” Padma said. “The committee will keep only a collective account of how many lessons have been given.” Pratima added, “And if this turns out to be public land, the school's written permission to use the veranda will govern it, not the whim of the family that made the donation.” No one in the meeting gave

particular applause to a statement that went against her own family's possible claim; the employee entered it in the minutes.

A disagreement arose over the times of Madan's rounds. The school wanted his vehicle available every morning at eight; Madan would not make that promise for a vehicle kept in readiness for patients. “If somebody suddenly needs treatment,” one parent asked, “will you leave the children to walk?” “No,” said Madan. “That is why we must decide beforehand the name, contact details and fare of another means of transport. One vehicle of mine cannot be in two places.” Mira proposed that the first two rounds be held at safe sites within walking distance, with a separate plan for children who could not walk that far; if the vehicle was needed, the school should contract with Madan for specified days in advance. Padma added that a class could not be called open to everyone while ignoring the cost of reaching it from far away.

Meanwhile Saraswati's daughter had drawn the wire of Sanket's old speaker again. Sanket would not let her touch the equipment; first he showed her why the switch must be turned off and what precautions to understand before removing a wire. “I need a broken thing to practise on,” the girl said, “not something that is working.” Saraswati laughed when she heard her. “I ought to tell my customers the same thing,” she said. “Just because I have scissors in my hand doesn't mean every head of hair must be cut at once.” Between mother and daughter there was a small decision: the following week they would ask for the training list, and Saraswati would alter her working hours a little. They had not yet raised the application fee. But the two of them had already made their first decision towards changing the course of her work.

Naira kept looking over the papers for the temporary school. Three registers seemed to lie together in the same bag: the children's lessons, the repairs to the well, and the itinerary of the travelling teaching team. If anyone's name were entered in the wrong place, an earlier mistake could happen all over again. “Applications for enrolment belong in the school alone,” she told Mira. “If the route map is made public, exact home locations must be taken off it. The minutes concerning the well should record only the work, its cost and the people responsible.” Mira agreed. The register for the search for Mithun was not opened at that meeting; Lata's authorised contact details and the actual search remained under their separate arrangements. The original page containing Sarita's twenty-seven names was not there either.

Towards evening the head's employee came with a short reply. It stated that the temporary arrangement allowing lessons to continue on the school's outer veranda would not be obstructed; for new rounds through the town, however, a formal proposal setting out parental consent, safe routes and expenses would have to be submitted. This was not final approval. Mira read the letter aloud. “Then where will lessons be held the day after tomorrow?” Reva asked. “Here,” Mira replied. “Before we fix the first day of travelling through the town, we need all your signatures.” “Not signatures alone,” Padma corrected

her. “Everyone must understand the decision in their own language.” Madan said he would provide the fare calculation for the two proposed days tomorrow; no one should assume he was available during the hours set aside for patients.

On the last page of the proposal Saraswati added three lines: ‘Information on training for every family’; ‘A mother's occupation is not a daughter's obligation’; ‘An account of income lost when working hours are changed’. Pratima had this entered: ‘Request a verified boundary for the school land; do not close off the passage pending inquiry.’ Madan's signature, made with the point of his pen, was a little crooked; he took a separate notebook and wrote out again that the terms for the proposed school vehicle and for patient transport would remain distinct. Padma read the figure entered for her payment and corrected it. Sanket asked everyone for permission to photograph the page; consent was given only to make a copy of its public portions.

Two children stayed on the veranda until late. Jatan turned over his damp notebook and laid it on a page that had dried. Sitting in the shade, Birsi asked, “Will the brick sink again tomorrow?” Lalit gave them a leftover piece of dry wood. “Put it here,” he said. “It's not a proper desk, but your notebook won't fall in the mud.” “How much does it cost?” Jatan asked. Lalit paused. “It's an offcut. In the work account, we'll put the price of the wood down as zero. But when a proper bench is made, the charge for the labour will be separate.” For Jatan, this accounting was another lesson in arithmetic.

Rukhsana brought rice and water in the evening. Another argument arose over who would supply grain on which days and who would cook for the community kitchen. “When this school starts travelling, the children will need something to eat as well,” Mira said. Rukhsana set down the plate. “They will. But through whose labour? Put down the cook's time alongside the price of rice.” Urmila, returning from a day's work carrying laundry, heard her words. She was tired, but she fetched water for Rukhsana. “Let us eat first,” she said, “and look at the accounts again tomorrow. But we won't abandon the accounts.” There was hot rice and dal on the plate; tonight nobody needed testimony or a clue to some secret.

Beside Rajinar, the temporary bamboo barrier stood firm in the darkness. The railing was still loose, the water had yet to be tested, and the correct boundary of the school land was still unknown. Yet on the children's veranda a new wooden support now held their notebooks clear of the mud. As they were leaving, Padma asked Sanket, “How will you keep the original of the sign you drew on the board?” “With the little girl's permission, the board will stay at the school,” Sanket said. “I won't keep even a faceless copy of it on my phone. If she wants it changed next time, we'll change it.” “Then learning will continue,” said Padma, “but the child's voice will not be imprisoned in one place.” Madan's empty vehicle passed out along the narrow lane ahead.

They still had to decide together which road the children would take the day after tomorrow. At least this much had been settled today: nobody would silently make that decision in their place.

Parva 4 · Virāṭa | Araṇya Kāṇḍa

Chapter 37 · The Cook's Name

The rain had stopped, but the ashes beneath Rukhsana's hearth were still damp. She looked at the makeshift stove on the school veranda, three bricks set close together, and instead of putting wood on it, her first act was to move it. Muddy water seeped from behind the bricks. If a fire were lit there, the one dry place where the children could keep their notebooks would be filled once more with smoke and mud. She called to Mira Mandal. "There will be cooking where there are lessons," she said, "but the way to the fire must not be the children's way."

Mira came carrying the letter from the previous evening. Final permission for the travelling school to make its rounds through the town was still pending, although classes were going on in the outer veranda of the school. The attendance register and the register of formal enrolment were being kept separately. "Let us arrange rice for the children for two days," Mira said. "Then we can work out the next part of the route." Rukhsana asked, "How many children? Who will cook? And who will pay?" "People are giving grain," Mira replied. Wiping the wet clay from the brick off her palm, Rukhsana said, "Grain does not turn into cooked rice merely by passing from hand to hand."

Reva Gulgulia was drying the torn notebook belonging to her son, Jatan. Hearing them, she said, "I can work too, but Jatan must be allowed to go on studying. I cannot leave him behind and sit at a stove all day." A school employee heard her and said, "If the mothers from the households each give an hour, why should there be any need for wages?" Rukhsana looked towards him. "Would you want to prepare registers for an hour at a time and have your payment left out of the accounts?" The employee searched for an answer. "Anyone who wishes to volunteer should be free to do so," Rukhsana said. "But choosing not to volunteer is no offence. And write down the names of those who do."

A proposal had been made to hold this year's annual Shared Kitchen and Wages Day on that very school veranda. The previous year, people had called the food a free gift and failed to count the hours spent by the women who cooked it. This time, Rukhsana asked for the paperwork before anything else. She had three headings written on a board: Grain and Other Ingredients; Roasting and Preparation; Labour of Cooking and Serving. "There must be three separate sheets," she said. "Otherwise the name of the person who gives the rice will be printed, and the name of the person who tends the fire will vanish again."

Long ago, in the city of King Virata, the royal kitchens had grown hot while the morning was still young. Steam rose from great cooking pots, and grains of paddy lay scattered across the veranda floor. A powerfully built newcomer to the kitchen had introduced himself as Ballava. He had been given a place at court as a skilled cook, but his true name was Bhima, compelled to conceal his identity during the final year of exile.

On his first day an old servant of the kitchen looked at his hands and asked, "You can lift such a weight, but do you know how to measure spices?" Ballava made no grand claim. He took the pestle in his hand and asked the woman pounding paddy, "How much salt does this household use for one pot?" She answered, "The king's palate has one measure, a patient another, a traveller newly arrived a third." Ballava listened carefully. Strength could lift a pot; strength alone could not determine the measure on which flavour and health depended.

The chief cook of the palace was writing the number of guests at his table. He added Ballava's name on one line, but there were no blank lines for those who picked the grain, washed the greens, or dried the firewood. They had been working for days, yet in the count they were simply called "the kitchen people." "When there is not enough food," Ballava asked, "whose name will the blame be entered against?" "The cook's," said the chief. "And when everyone has eaten?" Ballava asked again. That answer did not come so readily.

In Videhapur, Raghu Sahu arrived from his roasting hearth with two baskets filled with roasted flattened rice and chickpeas. The warmth of the roasting still lingered in his hands. "Do not enter me under the donation of grain," he told Rukhsana. "The chickpeas belong to the people who supplied them; that price is separate. The cost of my fire, my time, and the carrying is another matter." He gave her a slip bearing the weight of what he had roasted and the hours spent on it. "Raghuji," a school employee asked, "aren't you helping with relief work?" "I am," Raghu answered. "That is why I can reduce the price. But if you write 'free', tomorrow anyone who has work done at my roasting hearth will show me this piece of paper."

Chandrika Rai came after him. Customers had been fewer at her little sweetmaker's shop for the past week, and she wanted the contract to supply savoury porridge and something lightly sweet for the shared kitchen. "If people are giving the rice, let the wages for cooking still be paid the day after tomorrow," she said. "I will not accept a debt of that kind. Ghee, jaggery, spices and cooking vessels are separate costs." "And your profit?" Rukhsana asked. Chandrika laughed. "Has it become shameful even to name a profit?" There was worry about the day's losses inside her laughter.

Mira laid the three sheets before them. The gift of ingredients would be entered under the school's name; Raghu's roasting under the name of his roasting business; Chandrika's prepared dishes against her commercial receipt.

“I will cook,” Rukhsana said, “but not all the time. When is the break? Who will serve? Who will wash the dishes? Those lines are still empty.” Reva stepped forward. “Tomorrow I will serve for an hour, of my own will. If you want me to work the next day, ask me first. Do not put my name in a register of permanent servants.” Mira copied that sentence exactly as she had said it.

There Naseem Idrisi untied a bundle. Inside were two dozen washed cloth bags, in which flattened rice and chickpeas could be kept apart. Their seams were strong, but no child’s name had been stitched on them. “Names would make distribution easier,” Mira said. “Keep the names in the register,” Naseem replied. “If an empty bag is found on some road, why should everyone learn where somebody’s child goes to school?” He handed her a slip showing the number of bags, the cost of the cloth, the time spent sewing, and the washing instructions. “I am a tailor, not an inspector. My customers’ names will remain safe in my measurement book.”

People were gathering with the supplies on the school veranda. When Jatan reached out to taste the flattened rice, Raghu gave him a clean bowl. “If there is too little salt,” Birsi asked, “shall we write ‘one pinch’?” “Whose pinch?” Chandrika asked. “Yours or mine?” The children began examining their own pinches of salt. Rukhsana made them wash their hands with water. “The first lesson today,” she told them, “is to have clean hands before tasting the food, and to use the same measure before writing down a measurement.” There was laughter, but the work of the kitchen moved forward too.

Durga Gangai brought a basket from the market filled with dried makhana, flattened rice and a mixture she prepared at home. She spent her days waiting for small customers; the larger shopkeepers took goods on credit, and payments had been held up for months. “My goods are not a donation,” she made clear. “For this first occasion I might give half a basket at a lower price. If people like the taste here, let the buyers come to me directly next time.” Rukhsana tasted a handful. “There is too little salt in this mixture.” Durga smiled. “Rukhsana will supply the salt, and I will take the payment.”

A thin sheet slipped out from the middle of Durga’s old ledger. The name ‘Gahuma’ appeared on it. Her elderly mother used to say that customers in earlier days had asked for goods using that name. Durga did not know what place, watercourse or market identity the name had once belonged to, nor when it had been used. Naira asked permission to photograph the page. “Will the photograph sell my goods?” Durga asked. “No,” Naira said. “It will only be material for checking a record of the name.” Durga drew the page back towards herself. “Then write down the sale first. You can ask about river names afterwards.”

Farida Qureshi came carrying a clean box with a lid and a weighing scale. Her family’s business in the market involved the sale and weighing of meat. Since people had different food preferences at the shared meal, she was not

pressing anyone to buy meat here. The box held the lidded vessels requested for the school and a written list of prices for supplies available in the market. Seeing her, one shopkeeper said, “If we buy goods from these people, others will raise questions.” Farida lifted the lid of the box and showed him the scale. “Let them ask questions. Let them ask about weights, cleanliness and prices. But if you are refusing because you have seen my name, write down the reason.”

The shopkeeper made another grudging remark about her, but Farida did not immediately prolong the quarrel. She asked about the town’s health-inspection procedure and showed Mira a copy of an earlier inspection receipt for her shop. “I am not saying that this paper disposes of every allegation today,” she said. “But neither is it right to stop my customers without an inspection. If necessary, I shall request a fresh one.” Mira made a separate record of the objection. The inspection of the articles for today’s shared kitchen could be completed; the dispute over a collective boycott in the market had not been settled here.

In King Virata’s kitchen, Ballava’s first dish was ready. A court official exclaimed in praise, “The new cook’s magic!” Ballava laughed for a moment, then looked at the woman who had kept the fire at an even heat since dawn. He could not speak his concealed name before the king: his own safety and his family’s depended upon the disguise. But he could make a smaller decision. He asked for the expenditure on two pots of grain and the names of the cooking team to be entered separately. “Putting down names will not increase the royal revenue,” the chief cook said. “It will at least tell us whom to ask if something goes wrong,” Ballava replied.

That night Ballava looked at the turmeric stains on his fingers. He knew that the identity he had acquired at court was temporary, but for the people of the kitchen, the labour of every day was not temporary. His own need for a secret name was not the same as another person’s need to have a name made public. He did not wish to confuse the two. In the new ledger he had only what he himself had seen recorded: selecting the grain, carrying water, cutting greens, tending the fire, serving the meal. The counting of labour had begun; justice for that labour had not been accomplished.

By noon in Videhapur there was enough rice from donations for the moment, but the firewood had fallen short. Once again the school employee said, “Let everyone bring wood from home today.” “We will find what is needed to light the fire,” Rukhsana replied, “but we will not take the last dry sticks from a poor household in the village. I can prepare khichdi for one day. As for the next day’s account, there is still no answer to how much grain or fuel we have.” She altered the proposed two-day meal programme into a definite arrangement for the first day and a conditional one for the second. Mira was disappointed at first, but she accepted that account rather than write down a false certainty.

Urmila arrived carrying a vessel of water. She had brought it not from Rajinar but from the separate supply point used by the school. “The well water has not been tested,” she said plainly. “I will not give untested water for cooking.” The employee said there was no provision in the accounts for the time taken to carry water along that route. Urmila set the vessel down. “Carrying it is my work. I made no promise to give it away.” Rukhsana immediately had the time spent on transport entered separately. Urmila said payment for carrying hospital linen the previous night was still outstanding. If today’s wages for bringing water were merged into that earlier debt, no one would know which work had been paid for.

For a moment Rukhsana stood alone beside the stove. There was an old blister on a finger of her palm, left by a hot cooking vessel; she changed the strip of cloth over it. Chandrika sat nearby and opened the accounts of her little shop. “I like coming to a shared kitchen for a day,” Chandrika said, “but I have to shut the shop to do it.” “Not everyone loses the same thing,” Rukhsana replied. “Your customers may return. If I am given no rest, my body may not recover.” “Then let us divide the time that is left today,” Chandrika said. “Sit down for half an hour. I will see to the serving.”

The sheets of accounts were read aloud in public. Raghu’s payment for roasting, Chandrika’s price for savoury food, Naseem’s wages for sewing the bags, and Rukhsana’s hours spent cooking, serving and cleaning the vessels had not been muddled together on a single piece of paper. Durga’s first consignment was small; Farida’s list of prices was still being kept as an option. When the shortfall in the budget for the second day became apparent, a donor asked, “So much accounting for public service?” “This accounting will let public service endure for two years,” Rukhsana answered. “A gift without accounts shines for one day, and the next becomes a debt laid upon a woman’s shoulders.”

An elderly man among those who had supplied rice was a little offended. He wanted his name to stand highest on the board. Rukhsana did not remove it. She merely said, “The exact weight of the rice you gave is recorded. The cost of Raghu’s fire and Mira’s attendance work will not be left out. That takes nothing away from the honour of your gift.” In the end the old man agreed to have the word ‘rice’ written after his name. Reading that line, Jatan asked, “Where will you write the name of the person who washes the dishes?” “Whoever washes them will say so,” Reva answered. “I will wash them today. But tomorrow someone must ask me.”

Before the food was served, Rukhsana spooned some khichdi into a small bowl and tasted it for salt. “Still bland?” Chandrika asked. “It is right for the children,” Rukhsana said. “If you want more, put some on your own plate.” Raghu laughed. “There is salt in the chickpeas from my roasting hearth. Put my name in as well.” Still holding the bowl, Rukhsana laughed. “If everybody’s name goes into the food now, where will there be any room left

for the rice?" In that one burst of laughter, the pain in her shoulders, which had been with her since morning, seemed a little lighter.

Jatan and Birsi sat together on the veranda. The children received their meal, but no decision had yet been made on their formal enrolment at the school. Padma arrived and asked Mira who would attend the language and movement exercises the following week. Ruhani was there too. The children wanted a cloth curtain for their dance programme. "I can sew the curtain," Naseem said, "but I shall take the measurements and quote a price. And I will not write names on children's private photographs." Ruhani smiled. "First let us settle where they are to practise. I do not teach the lesson that changing a costume changes the identity of somebody's life."

By evening the vessels in the kitchen were being washed. Chandrika counted the jaggery left for her shop; Raghu picked up his empty baskets; Durga tucked the receipt for her first sale into her ledger. Farida repeated that she would apply for a municipal inspection herself. Naseem completed his count of the stitched bags and marked a torn edge for repair next time. Behind these small tasks, large payments were still outstanding. But today no one's labour had been erased merely by writing it down as 'help'.

Mira gave Rukhsana two copies of the written accounts. One would remain at the school, the other with her. Rukhsana folded the page and put it in her bag. "We shall meet here on this day next year," she said. "But I will not be tied to a single day's communal cooking every year. I have been thinking of opening a shop of my own. Let there be a day when, instead of cooking, I can listen to someone sing." "Then I will buy you a ticket," Mira said. "I will buy my own ticket," Rukhsana replied. "Only let my time belong to me that day."

When she left the school, the temporary bamboo barrier beside Rajinar was still in place. The water had yet to be tested; the railing was old; permission for the travelling school remained incomplete. Amid all this, the children's dry notebooks and the sheets bearing the cooks' names were safe in separate bags. From a distance she heard Ruhani calling the children to their next practice. Rukhsana turned once, though she was weary, then went on towards home. For today, the stove had gone out.

Chapter 38 · Brihannala's Classroom

The following morning Rukhsana did not go to the kitchen. She set a low wooden stool outside her door and spread yesterday's receipts upon it to dry. The damp from the rain had curled the corners of the paper. Instead of putting rice on the stove, she made herself a cup of tea and looked at the clock. There was still time before Ruhani's practice began at the school. Today she had decided to go as a spectator, though, as she was leaving home, the old habit of taking a shawl from the chest to wipe down a chair nearly detained her.

On the school veranda, Jatan was attempting to turn in a circle with both arms outstretched. Birsi laid two pages from a notebook near his feet so that he could see where to stand when he had turned around. The moment Jatan stepped on a page, he panicked. Ruhani said, "This is not an examination in dancing. Look at the ground first, then listen to your own body." Jatan laughed. "Am I to read the notebook or save my feet?" Ruhani answered, "One day you will learn to do both. Today, save your feet."

When Rukhsana arrived, Mira began asking her about the work in the kitchen, but Ruhani interrupted. "Put her name down among the spectators today. Someone who feeds everyone else has the right, sometimes, to sit and watch." Rukhsana sat at one end of the veranda. Feeling the faint blisters on her palms, she watched the children move to a rhythm sounded without instruments. Not one of them could quite keep an even step, but no one laughed and shoved another child for falling out of time.

Long ago, in King Virata's city, the beat of a mridangam resounded through Princess Uttara's practice room. The new teacher there called himself Brihannala. The court had entrusted him with teaching dance and song; in truth he was Arjuna, concealed under another identity as he and his brothers completed the last days of their incognito exile. Light entered the room through a window, and a little bundle of ankle bells lay on the floor. No one there spoke of his former skill in warfare.

On the first day Uttara asked, "How can someone who knows the rhythms of battle teach the rhythms of song?" Brihannala set a pair of small hand-cymbals in her hands and said, "Both require the discipline of listening. But knowing one rhythm does not, by itself, give you the right to undertake another kind of work." He demonstrated the steps, then drew back. Instead of taking hold of Uttara's arm under the pretext of correcting her movements, he showed her from a distance where to place her feet.

A palace attendant spent the day stringing the ankle bells. Whenever the strap on Uttara's foot loosened, she fastened it again. No one counted the hours of her labour. Brihannala asked how long it took her to prepare one

pair. The woman looked at him in surprise: why should a teacher be asking about the time her craftsmanship required? "If one bell breaks," she said, "the whole knot has to be undone." That day Brihannala shortened the lesson to leave room for the strap to be repaired.

Uttara had another question. "Teacher, your work is music and your name is Brihannala. But outside the court, whom do you call your own people?" Brihannala was silent for a moment. He was not permitted to tell the truth. Rather than invent another false story, he answered, "For today, my answer is only this: I am your teacher. A vow prevents me from answering certain questions; I shall not lay the burden of that restraint upon you." Uttara did not like this unfinished answer, but at least her teacher had made clear where his silence began. As she tied the sash for her lesson, she understood only that the two of them were choosing silence for different reasons.

One of Uttara's companions said that people at court laughed at the way Brihannala walked. Uttara stopped her. "Their laughter will not teach me my lesson any sooner." She asked her teacher how one should endure such laughter. Brihannala said, "If you answer every voice, the lesson will be lost. But enduring another person's contempt must not become a condition of learning either." Beneath his words lay the fear of his hidden life, whose full meaning Uttara could not grasp. As she fastened the ties in the classroom, she knew only that their silences did not arise from the same cause.

In Videhapur, an employee of the municipal assistance committee came to hang a signboard outside Ruhani's classroom. It read: 'Brihannala's Dance: A Special Hijra Performance.' Beneath the words a space had been left for photographs of the class and its performers. "This name will bring in a grant," the employee said. "And it will draw a bigger crowd." Ruhani read the entire board but did not immediately tear it down. She stopped Jatan's practice and said, "Children, have some water. I have something to attend to in this writing."

She asked the employee, "Who authorised this line?" He turned over his papers. "The committee said to connect it with an old story. Arjuna, too, had adopted a disguise." Ruhani replied, "Arjuna concealed his identity; when the appointed time ended, he could return to his own name. My own identity is not a weapon hidden from anyone. I will not allow the society and the life to which I belong to be sold as somebody else's disguise during an incognito exile."

Padma was there. She repeated the employee's words exactly as he had spoken them, so that their meaning would not change in anyone's hearing. She photographed only the heading on the board; no children's faces appeared in the image. "Whose signature is on the grant letter?" she asked. The employee said that he had been told to put up the board, not to choose its wording. Ruhani did not snatch the paper from him. "Then do not put this

board up here," she said. "First give us written notice that the wording is to be changed."

Meanwhile Bhola Yadav arrived with two brass-coloured milk cans. Milk had been proposed for the children after class, but the amount owed to him from the previous week was still unpaid. Setting down the cans, Bhola said, "Yesterday's rice is a separate account; today's milk has a separate price. A donor may want his name on a signboard, but his proclamation will not pay me." The employee asked whether some of the milk might be given free for the festival. Bhola replied, "First count up how much was promised free the last time."

Mira wrote down the measures of Bhola's cans and a receipt for yesterday's outstanding debt. Bhola was thinking of sending his son into another occupation; selling milk was hard work, though the trust of his customers was longstanding. "I want the boy to choose work of his own liking," he said. "But if the money for the milk does not come back into our house now, who will pay his school fees?" Mira told him the next date for payment would be written down: there would be no vague 'later'. Bhola put his copy of the receipt into his pocket.

Phulmati Tiyar came up from behind carrying a bundle of fishing nets. At the boat landing's fish market she made nets and helped sell small fish. Mira wanted netting to shade the practice area, but Phulmati would not permit her fishing net to be used as decoration wrapped around the children's bodies. "This net was made to be stretched in water. A child will fall if a foot becomes caught in it," she said plainly. Instead, she quoted a price for making a shade screen from thin strips of bamboo.

A young man accompanying Phulmati asked how much she earned from the old net they owned jointly. Her face hardened. "The accounts for that partnership have still not been settled. I have come here to discuss a separate piece of paid work for this class." She drew out a strand and showed them a torn join in the net. "If this breaks while catching fish, that is a separate liability. Making shade for the children is a separate job." Mira kept her written quotation. The old partnership dispute was not settled that day, but the new work was not mixed up with the old debt.

Dulari Rajwar arrived at the veranda carrying a ration slip and a small book of debts. She had not come to watch the rehearsal; she had heard that there would be a government assistance camp. The employee said that beneficiaries needed to sign a collective consent form to verify their names. Dulari asked to read the paper. Its final line said that assistance received could be counted towards adjustment of earlier private debts. Her eyes remained fixed upon that sentence.

"Why must I agree to surrender my claim over a debt in return for rations?" Dulari asked. "The form is an old one," the employee said.

"Everybody signs it." Dulari sat down beneath the signboard. "Then everybody's signature is not my answer," she said. "I have not come here to quarrel. I want the grain to which I am entitled; the debt will be discussed separately." Padma read out the meaning of the line clearly. Dulari took away a copy of the paper without signing it.

Rukhsana had been watching all this in silence. After all the papers she had drawn up for the kitchen yesterday, she was beginning to understand how many different meanings a single signature could acquire. She half rose to bring Dulari a cup of tea, then remembered her resolution and stayed where she was. Jatan ran over with water. Ruhani smiled. "You see? The spectator's place is not empty. Jatan can do the work." For the first time, Rukhsana thanked someone without getting to her feet.

On the other side of the veranda stood Farid Chik, carrying a notebook wrapped in thin paper. His family had long been associated with the sale and cutting of meat in the market, but Farid wanted time for his studies. He had come to ask for the work of notating the tabla rhythms for the school programme. Someone said, "You would leave the family business for music?" Farid replied, "I am not abandoning what I owe my family. In the morning I help with the shop accounts; in the day I study. But why must I spend all my time in that shop?"

Ruhani called him into the classroom. Farid had divided the rhythms in his notebook into little sections. Padma asked whether he could change the beat for children moving at different speeds. Farid had an old borrowed book in his bag for his night-time studies. He told Ruhani, "At home they say that if I spend all day learning music, who will keep the shop books? I have said I will give two hours to the accounts, but not give up school time." Ruhani asked, "Does everyone at home agree to that promise?" Farid shook his head. "No. That is why I am not making a complaint against anybody yet. I am making a notebook in which to record my own time." Ruhani asked him to mark those two hours at the shop alongside the rhythms in his notebook—not because life should always be reduced to an account, but so that he could see the promise he had made.

"It can be changed," Farid said, "but I want one chance to play it and see." He struck a wooden board three times, lightly. Jatan caught the rhythm, while Birsi, moving in her own way, remained two beats behind. "In this classroom," Ruhani said, "being behind does not mean being wrong. Sometimes the rhythm itself needs to change."

In King Virata's palace the day of Uttara's second lesson arrived. Brihannala called in the attendant who fastened the ankle bells before the practice began. This time she proposed replacing the thin leather strap; the old cotton cord broke too easily. A court official asked why such a small task required new material. "Do not call the failure of something small," Brihannala replied,

“when the whole movement rests upon it.” He feared exposure beneath his assumed identity, yet as a teacher he could not evade responsibility for safe instruction.

That day the daughter of a palace attendant stood at the classroom door beside Princess Uttara. She did not ask to enter; she merely listened to the rhythm. “May she learn too?” Uttara asked. A courtier said that the lesson was for the princess. Brihannala answered, “Today’s lesson time belongs to the princess. If permission is granted to teach another girl, there must be separate time for her and a responsibility undertaken by her teacher; listening in secret cannot take the place of her right.” Uttara asked that an additional hour be set aside at the end of her own lesson. No decision was made at once, but for the first time the question of that girl’s education had been heard at court.

In Videhapur, the signboard came back to the veranda. The employee had crossed out the first words and written a new title: ‘A Class in Shared Rhythm and Dance.’ Ruhani read it and said, “I have no objection to this name. But the decision to print the children’s photographs, voices and full names in the programme must be made separately, with the consent of their families and of the children themselves.” The employee said it would be difficult to show donors proof without photographs. Ruhani asked him, “Can you not show that the class took place through attendance and expenditure records?”

Padma prepared two sheets. The first would record attendance numbers, times, the instructor’s fee and the cost of materials. The second would contain the families’ consent, with separate choices for the use of images and voices. The public copy would carry no private names. When Sanket arrived, Ruhani did not ask him to open his camera. He volunteered, “I can measure the lighting on the stage. There is no need to take photographs.” Padma laughed. “Today the world is managing without pictures.”

Mira recorded a separate objection to the debt-adjustment line on Dulari’s form. The employee acknowledged that he did not have a revised form. He could not tear up the paper, but he did at least write that Dulari had not relinquished her right to receive rations and that the debt dispute was a matter for separate decision. Dulari did not sign; she took away a stamped copy acknowledging receipt. She received no immediate assistance, but neither had any false consent been created.

Dulari folded the paper and tucked it into her clothing, then turned and came back. “One more thing,” she told the employee. “If I do not get the rations, listen also to how much grain will be left in my house tonight.” At first the employee took this for an emotional appeal, but Dulari counted out the provisions for three days and the four people who depended upon them. He agreed to add this information to the written application; he made no promise of distribution. Dulari left understanding the distinction: to hear someone and to fulfil that person’s right are not the same thing.

As Bhola took back the milk cans, he again asked Mira when the first payment would be made. Mira counted the days and wrote on the corner of the receipt: 'We will meet on this date; if payment has not been made, the reason will be communicated.' Bhola said, "Writing so much will not make the money arrive by itself, but I shall know what day to ask for it." Phulmati placed her sample of the thin bamboo shade screen beside Farid's notebook. The value of each person's work was entered on a separate sheet.

Still seated at her end of the veranda, Rukhsana noticed a calculation in the notebook. The time required to distribute milk to the children; the time spent washing and cutting vegetables; the hours lost in bargaining—yesterday's kitchen account had included the first two, but left out losses in the market. She remembered the small supply of greens and aubergines she had brought from the Rain-Kujra family near her home. She asked Mira for a sheet of paper. "What I bring from the market has an account of spoiled goods too," she said. "Work does not begin only when we reach the stove." Mira added a new item; the decision about payment was left for later.

Ruhani began the final practice of the day. The episode of Arjuna taking the name Brihannala appeared in her account, but she told them, "That story is of a disguise adopted to survive a difficult circumstance. My life is not an imitation of it. The name I choose today speaks of my own existence. If you want to learn to dance with me, you must understand the difference between those two things." Birsi asked, "Then whom shall I play in the drama?" Ruhani answered, "The character you choose through your own understanding. But first we shall read the story."

The children joined hands to make a circle. Once again Jatan stepped on the strip laid out on the floor. This time he did not panic; he picked it up, set it to one side and marked his place anew. Farid struck the board three times, Phulmati tapped two thin pieces of bamboo together, and Ruhani watched for the next movement without issuing a command. From her place among the spectators, Rukhsana began to clap. Her back ached, but she did not stop applauding.

At the evening meeting, Mira read out the proposed cost of the training. Naseem's sewing of the curtain, the possible supply of thread by Parvati Tanti, and Pavitra Patwa's knotwork would not all be given one price under the single heading of 'costume'. Parvati and Pavitra had not come to the classroom yet; it was agreed that their measurements, rates and consent would be taken the following day. Ruhani made it clear that her living identity must not be turned into a commodity for a display of disguise.

When the school veranda had emptied, the signboard bearing its new title was taken down from the bamboo and stored inside. Permission for the stage, regular funding and formal enrolment in the travelling school were still outstanding. Yet after the first day of classes, copies remained of five separate

receipts and one objection to a rejected debt condition. As she was going home, Rukhsana said to Ruhani, “When Parvati and the others bring the cloth tomorrow, call me. Not to cook food here—to look at the colours.” Ruhani asked, “Will you buy your own spectator’s ticket?” Rukhsana laughed. “Yes. But this time, for the front row.”

Chapter 39 · The Weaver's Due

At daybreak, the first beat of the loom could be distinguished from the fluttering chatter of the doves. In Parvati Tanti's courtyard, the cotton threads stretched on the frame since the night before had grown faintly damp with dew. She drew one strand up between her fingers and bent her ear to listen. The thread was sound, but the wooden shuttle was rubbing against its course. No one else in the house had yet risen. Parvati let two drops of oil fall upon the shuttle's tip. Today she was to show samples of cloth for the school's dance class. More than the pleasure of choosing colours, she was troubled by the thought that the payment for her work might once again be entered under somebody else's name.

From inside she brought out an old length of cloth for a turban and spread it upon the veranda. A little green floral embroidery ran along the cotton border; the ground in the middle was grey. The edging still had to be knotted. Parvati had woven the length itself; the knotwork around its edge belonged to Pavitra Patwa. Anyone looking at it would have called it one piece of cloth. Parvati saw two lamps burning in two different houses, two separate portions of time, and two separate lines of debt.

As soon as Pavitra arrived, she turned the cloth over to examine it. "Why did you leave the first turn of the border unfinished here?" she asked. Parvati said, "So you can turn the thread when you tie the knot. If I had finished weaving the border, you would only have had to cut it again." Pavitra took her coloured threads from a little cane box. "Then we shall put the time saved into the price. People think the knotwork on a turban takes no more than a pinch of the fingers." They both laughed. They belonged to different families and had learned different crafts, yet customers often called out to them as though they answered to the same name.

Yusuf Ansari appeared at the doorway with a small bag of loom parts and a sample of cotton. There had been talk of supplying curtain material for the school, and he had come to show what his workshop made. "My son says we ought to photograph the cloth and sell it by telephone now," he said. "But when the warp snaps halfway through, how is a telephone to hear the sound?" Parvati replied, "Selling it by telephone may be his work; weaving it is yours. Each ought to have its own payment." Yusuf fell silent. At home the family was still arguing over his son's wish to take up another occupation. He did not want to carry that quarrel to the school door today.

Before Parvati left, her mother-in-law came and stood near the entrance. Her eyes fell upon the threads. "In my day, whenever a whole length of cloth was sold, the money was entered under the name of a man of the house," she said. Parvati asked, "Did you never ask for your share?" The old woman smiled faintly. "I did, and there was a quarrel. Afterwards I thought that when the

children grew up, they would understand. Now it is your turn to make them understand." Parvati gave her a narrow strip of coloured edging. "Keep this. Tell me how it looks in the morning light." The mother-in-law laid it across her shoulder and went indoors to look in the mirror. Her desire to see a rainbow had not yet been exhausted.

When they reached the school with the three lengths of cloth, the marks of yesterday's dance circle were still visible in the earth of the veranda. Birsi stood upon one of them, keeping the beat with her feet. Farid was tapping lightly on a smooth wooden board. Ruhani was telling the children, "The colour of the cloth must not impede your steps. Whatever you wear must let you move comfortably." Rukhsana had come to sit among the spectators in the front row. That day there was neither a cooking ladle nor an account book in her hands. The practice of having her hands empty still felt strange to her.

Mira spread a thin sheet over a charpoy to display the samples. The employee first showed them a printed schedule of rates. Its heading read: 'Complete Dance-Costume Package.' Under that one entry, the prices for cotton, weaving, dyeing, edging, sewing and stage decoration had all been combined. "A single bill will be more convenient for the grant provider," the employee said. Parvati read the line and folded her cloth. "Convenient for whom? Where is the name of the person who weaves it?"

The employee's voice grew hard. "If you keep such elaborate accounts for collective work, when will the school ever hold its programme?" Closing her little box, Pavitra said, "I have not come to stop your programme. But if you drown my payment for knotting the turban in the wages for weaving the cloth, who will count the grain my household needs?" Ruhani made room for both women to sit beside the charpoy. She told the employee, "Yesterday we agreed that a costume is not the work of a single name. If the paper today is still the old one, the programme cannot proceed on the old terms."

In the meantime, Sonmati Turi arrived carrying a light, square frame made of bamboo. She made small samples for sale in the outside market. She had heard that after the school programme the artisans' work might be displayed at the town's trade exhibition. "Stretch the cloth across my frame," she said. "Then everyone can see its colours without wrapping it around a body." The employee asked, "Will that require a separate payment?" Sonmati set the frame on the charpoy for a moment, then lifted it again. "When a wooden frame is hired, hire is paid. Why should my bamboo be free?"

Rukhsana listened to everything from the edge of the charpoy. She remembered that Jatan had cut the vegetables for the dance class's first meal the previous day, yet the board had continued to say 'Rukhsana's Kitchen.' She had not asked for her name to be taken down. But hearing Pavitra speak of the many hands concealed within a single finished thing, she called Jatan

over. “Was the payment for what you cut yesterday entered in the accounts?” Jatan said, “Rukhsana Didi, you saw the work I did. That itself meant a great deal.” Rukhsana answered, “Seeing is one thing. Paying is another.”

Ruchi Dharikar had come with Sonmati. In her cloth bag was a sample woven from coloured strips: threads winding inward from two directions to meet at a tiny point in the centre. The children immediately asked, “Is it a flower or a star?” Ruchi replied, “Before you give it a name, it is a pattern I have woven.” She opened her notebook to take measurements. “If something made in our house is displayed, its design may be shown with a photograph. But no one must copy it for an outside shop without asking us.” Hearing this demand, Parvati nodded without hesitation. For the first time, it seemed to her, someone was asking who owned a design before asking whether it was beautiful.

Kamlesh Khatik stopped at the doorway with a bundle. He had been asked to bring light straps and binding cords from the market for the stage. There were two red strips in the bundle. At the sight of one of them, a man muttered, “That looks like something from the very market where the wrongful consignment came from.” Kamlesh looked at him. “I have brought the bill for goods bought in the market. A thing does not become criminal merely because its colour is red.” He handed the paper to Mira. The bill stated the number of items, but the school’s new order had not yet specified what the strips were to be used for. Mira put the paper aside and said, “First we shall examine their intended use. No accusations: the measurements of the goods.”

Ruhani pulled one of the strips taut. A knot made with it around a child’s waist might tighten dangerously. She asked Kamlesh whether anyone had given him measurements before he bought it. “The order said ‘twenty red straps,’” he replied. “There were no sizes, large or small.” Farid held a strip against his arm to demonstrate; it left a red mark. The school employee looked embarrassed. “Can they be returned, then?” Kamlesh said, “I shall speak to the shopkeeper. But under what heading will you enter the transport fare and the labour of my journey?” Mira could not answer him at once.

Parvati lifted a light piece of cloth from among the samples. “Why use a thick cord for dancing? I can weave a soft drawstring into the cloth itself, and Pavitra can make whatever ornament the border requires.” Pavitra interrupted at once. “Not ‘can make’ as though that settles it. First we shall determine how much string, how many rows and how many hours.” Rukhsana burst into laughter. “Watching the two of you reminds me how often I have quarrelled in the kitchen over measuring two pitchers of water.” She corrected herself: “Not a quarrel—measuring the worth of one’s work.”

Birsi was looking at the blue thread in Pavitra’s box. “Is this for me?” she asked. Pavitra placed a little piece in her hand. “Feel it first.” Birsi turned the thread between her fingers. “It is cool, like the sky.” “And the green?”

Rukhsana asked. Birsi took the green edging and held it against her cheek. “Warm, like a field.” Everyone laughed. This time no one assigned a colour to a particular religion, caste or kind of body. An extra hour had appeared in which a child’s preference could be heard.

Water was collecting on the narrow earthen path beside the classroom. A little rain had fallen the night before; drops from one corner of the thatch began to fall directly upon the charpoy where the samples lay. Sonmati immediately lifted her frame. Yusuf gathered the lengths of cloth, and Pavitra put her box of colours into her bag. Birsi ran to bring an earthen pot, but Ruhani stopped her. “Your foot will slip there. Stand back first.” Together they saved the samples from getting wet. Mira took out a slip to enter the expense of repairing the thatch. Parvati said, “On a day when work is being done, somebody must also take responsibility for making the place safe.”

Just then Yusuf’s telephone rang. It was his son. The shop had said that parts were needed to repair the old loom at home; his son did not want to miss his electronics training to go and collect them. At first Yusuf said irritably, “Who is supposed to look after the work at home?” Then he looked at the five different kinds of labour spread across the charpoy at the school. Into the telephone he said more gently, “Do not leave your training to come. I shall fetch the parts. If you have time this evening, come and look over the shop accounts; if not, I shall manage them.” When he ended the call, there was no pride of victory on his face, only a little fear: would this new arrangement really work?

The afternoon sunlight shifted away from one side of the veranda. Sonmati spread Parvati’s cloth over her frame. Ruchi placed her own sample in the middle of the stretched fabric, and Pavitra began the knotwork along its edge. Five people, five pairs of hands, were occupied with one object, yet no one took another’s place. Ruhani guided the children in slow turns before the cloth. It was not draped around anyone’s body; a breath of air was enough to stir its border. “Before anyone wears it,” Ruhani said, “we must see where it might catch during the dance.”

The employee returned with the schedule of rates. This time five separate lines had been drawn on the page: Yusuf’s supply of cotton, Parvati’s weaving, Pavitra’s knotwork, the hire of Sonmati’s frame and the use of Ruchi’s design. Each had its own heading. Kamlesh’s bundle was kept apart until the examination was complete. “When we add these prices together, the budget will rise,” the employee said. Parvati replied, “The cost was always greater than the old budget made it appear. It was the wages that went unwritten which kept the figure low. They were simply invisible on paper.”

Mira worried that the programme might fall apart. With five separate entries, approval for the grant would have to be sought again; if it was delayed, the children’s practice might suffer. She asked Parvati, “Could we have one

sample made first, against a small advance? Afterwards I can obtain the committee's approval for everyone's rates." Parvati answered, "Write down how many hours we are to give to making that one sample. The order for the full length must be separate. You cannot call the first piece a 'sample' in order to make its labour free." Mira accepted the condition.

As the little slips of paper were passed around, one parent grew anxious. "So many people to pay for a children's class? Buying a piece of cloth would be cheaper," he said. Ruchi gave him her woven strip. "Pull this twice." The father pulled; the knots did not loosen. "I have turned it back through the weave three times. If it breaks, no sharp end will pierce a child's hand. Cheaper does not always mean safer." The parent grew serious. "My child will stand on a stage before important people. I wanted the child to look beautiful; I had not thought first of keeping the child safe."

Pavitra drew the notebook towards herself. She wrote separate, precise measurements for the sample: the length of the edging, the number of knots, the quantity of cotton. The school employee wanted both women's names to appear in a single space on the receipt; it would save room. Pavitra wrote her name on an empty line and left the next one for Parvati. "The cheapest way of saving space is to cut out a name," she said, "but I need that space on this page." This time the employee did not argue.

Kamlesh's bill came up for discussion again. An old weighing slip from the market bore the name of the same shopkeeper who had previously supplied certain goods to the hospital. Someone guessed that the red strips might have come in the illicit consignment from that place. Naira, who had arrived to collect two copies of a water-lease document from Mira, examined the papers. "The appearance of one shopkeeper's name on two documents does not prove the goods came in the same consignment," she said plainly. "For now, match the actual strips, the measurements on the order, and the date on the receipt. We shall examine the hospital papers separately." For the first time Kamlesh breathed freely. There were still questions about his goods, but no accusation against his community.

Naira sat for a while beside the charpoy. Since the premature publication in Chapter Twenty, she had been reluctant to sign anything merely because a paper was put before her. She asked Kamlesh's permission to photograph the original bill. "No photograph yet," Kamlesh replied. "Look at the copy Mira gives you." Naira agreed. Ruhani brought her a cup of water and asked, "Since when have you begun stopping at once when somebody tells you 'no'?" Naira smiled slightly. "There is something I learned very late," she said. Ruhani asked no further question.

By evening, a fine splinter of cotton fibre had lodged in Pavitra's finger. Parvati took it out with a piece of her own cloth. Holding Parvati's hand, Pavitra said, "Writing our payments separately does not mean separating our

affection.” Parvati’s eyes shone. “That is exactly what I have been fighting for,” she said. “Let everyone see how one person’s work is joined to another’s. But being joined is no reason to erase a name.”

A little friend of Parvati’s daughter came running from the house as a messenger. Her mother-in-law had not broken the mirror indoors; she had merely held the coloured edging against her old sari and said that she had not seen such colours for many years. The child carried a small packet of leaves containing jaggery and roasted chickpeas. “Grandmother says you must eat something while you work,” she said. Parvati opened the packet and shared a little with everyone. Pavitra wanted to give her share to Rukhsana, but Rukhsana raised her hand. “No. I shall take my own share today. I am not on duty to serve anyone.” They all laughed again.

As Sonmati lifted her frame, she warned Mira that its use in an outside market exhibition would require permission separate from its use at the school. Ruchi sewed a small mark onto the back of her sample, so that if copies were made, the question of their source could be raised. Mira said clearly that no long-term market agreement had been concluded that day; the proposal would go before the next meeting. Sonmati was pleased. The right to say no, even once, was itself a beginning of a new kind of trade.

Standing beside the cloth, Yusuf noticed a slight flaw in the fabric he had woven. He wanted to turn the border over to conceal it, but Parvati stopped him. “Mark the place on the sample. We shall put it right when we make the complete length.” Yusuf agreed. He could not yet see what great future lay ahead for his business. But he could see this much: showing a customer a mistake was not a humiliation; it opened the way to correct it in time.

While a fresh copy of the schedule was being prepared, Yusuf noticed that no earlier dues were entered against the line for supplying cotton. He remembered an old debt to a trader, incurred when he had bought fine thread on credit. He told Mira, “Do not add my old debt to the price of this sample. But if I receive the advance, I shall be able to pay the supplier of the thread.” Mira wrote down a separate date. The promise to repay the debt was greater than that day’s sale; Yusuf did not want his son’s training fees to become entangled once more with the debts of the loom.

When the work was done, Rukhsana stayed behind once more to look at the colours. The green, blue and grey lengths lay in the evening light. Without anyone asking her, she tapped out a little rhythm, and Farid answered with a laugh. “Tomorrow, when the children turn with these borders fluttering,” Rukhsana said, “I shall sit right at the front.” Parvati asked, “Have you bought your ticket?” Rukhsana replied teasingly, “We shall make out a separate receipt for the ticket. I have learned that much too.”

On the school noticeboard, the entry marked ‘Complete Package’ was struck out. The new sheet recorded five separate prices for making the sample,

the permissions required, and the dates of payment. Not every price had yet been approved; even so, no one could sell the work under somebody else's name. As Parvati gathered up her cloth, she noticed that the mark left at one corner for Naseem's sewing was still clear. Today the weaving and the knotwork had been recognised as separate tasks. Tomorrow Urmila, who washed the cloth, was to come with the time required for laundering it and the old hospital register. Parvati ran a finger over the mark and folded the length away. The thread had not yet been cut.

Chapter 40 · The Cloth Register

Before spreading the clothes out at the ghat, Urmila ran her hand over the washing slab. The night's water had receded, but the mud between the stones was still soft. She set her laundry bundle to one side, untied the string of the old notebook fastened at her waist, and counted its pages. Those belonging to the hospital were wrapped in oiled paper to keep out the water; those recording her own wages were tucked inside a piece of cloth. Both ledgers were in the same bag, but they did not concern the same work, nor did they belong to the same people.

At the school yesterday, Parvati and Pavitra had insisted on entering separate prices for their weaving and knotwork. Urmila had not gone merely to listen. Her eye had fallen on a corner of the cloth left for Nasim to stitch, and she had said, "Until a length of cloth has been washed, you cannot know its true size when worn. But the accounts for hospital linen are not the accounts for dance costumes." Parvati had asked, "Does your register also make provision for recording separate payments?" Urmila had answered, "The names are there; the time is not always there." Today she had come carrying an account of that missing time.

Before sunrise, people were already lining up to fill two water pots at the paved steps of Barki Pond. On one side were the steps for bathing; on another, the slabs where clothes were washed; and farther along, the unstepped landing where handcarts entered. Each of the three uses had its allotted time. But for several days an iron grille and empty crates from the warehouse had occupied half the paved ghat. The handcarts had to descend into the mud of the unstepped landing. Those in a hurry would not wait for the laundry workers.

Renu was there already, with a short measuring cord in her hand and marks drawn across the slab. "They say we are to take measurements today in preparation for the ceremony honouring the ghat," she said. "People will plant coloured flags first and remove the grille afterwards. I say it should be the other way round." "Flags won't divide the water among us," Urmila replied. "Give us a passage to the washing slabs first." Renu laughed. "You have come again today to plead the case of your ledger." Urmila patted her bag. "Wet clothes can be counted as work. Who will count a heart soaked through?"

Just then Champa approached, not from the courtyard but along the path above the ghat. She was carrying a clean sheet fetched from the washing place for her mother's treatment. Behind her stood two young men with their phones raised. "We'll take pictures of the cleaning festival," one said. "We'll show everyone taking part." Champa stopped short. "My face and this sheet will not appear in the same picture." "It's a public ghat," the young man objected. Urmila looked towards the phone in his hand. "The ghat is public.

Champa's body is not. If you want a photograph of hands at work, first write down whose hands they are, what they are being paid, and whether they consent." The young man lowered his phone.

The volunteers who had come to organise the cleaning day belonged to different households. Some were shifting the grille; others were gathering the mud from the slippery slabs into a separate heap; others warned the children not to go down near the water. Rice and greens were to come from Rukhsana's kitchen, but Urmila insisted that the hours worked by those preparing the food and those cleaning the ghat should both be entered. "Everyone will sit down together at the feast," she said. "Everyone's name should be in the ledger too." A small child seized a broom and tried to run off with it. Instead of allowing the child to sweep, Renu gave the child the task of watching the stones marked in colour.

Saroj Kharkaut had brought two small pieces of fishing net. One was old, its threads hardened by long exposure to water; the other was made with new yarn. "When they're sweeping, will you make sure no one mistakes these knots for rubbish and throws them away?" she asked. She repaired the fishing nets herself, but there was disagreement in her household over sharing the cost of a new one. The person with the money wanted the rights to the entire net registered in his own name. Holding up the net, Saroj asked, "If the hands that haul it have little capital, where does their share go?" Renu showed her a place where the old knots could be tied up and kept apart.

On a page of the notebook Saroj entered the yarn for the new net, the bamboo stakes, and the time needed for repairs. Urmila noticed that a price had been entered for the thread, but the hours spent tying knots had been left blank. "Someone will fill in this empty line however they please later," she said. Saroj picked up the pen. "I'll write down today's time today. No final decision about shares can be made without everyone who makes the net." Their first small agreement was that repairing nets salvaged during the ghat cleaning would not be treated as unpaid labour. The cost of the larger, jointly owned net would be discussed at the next meeting.

Geeta Kori arrived along the narrow path above the ghat with a cloth sample. A fine fabric woven in her courtyard had crossed the border through a company, but she had not received the full payment. She had invited Urmila to examine the colour and weave of the sample: its resemblance to the colour of sheets supplied to the hospital had troubled her. "Just because the grey looks the same, does that prove it's my cloth?" Geeta asked. Urmila rubbed the fabric between her fingers. "Matching colours don't establish a common maker. Compare the thread, the measurements, the edges and the bills. Claim your arrears on the strength of your own papers." Geeta put the sample back in her bag. She resolved not to make her claim for payment depend upon anyone else's investigation into medical supplies.

As the sun climbed higher, Nurjahan, the brick seller, arrived with a small cart. It held no bricks, only rough pieces of old material intended to prevent slipping. A donkey stood tethered beside it. Nurjahan gave the animal water before unhitching the cart. Someone had proposed that she unload heavy bricks into the mud by the ghat, but one look was enough for her. “If the cart goes down this way, the animal's legs will sink,” she said. “I don't want the cost of caring for my animal confused with the cost of carrying goods.” One of the organisers said, “It's work for the festival. Think of it as a donation.” Nurjahan replied without hesitation, “I'll give what I choose to give. No one is going to declare contracted wages a donation.”

Madhuri Dangi arrived with two women carrying winnowing trays used to clean grain. Their group had sorted millet and rice for the common meal. It had been agreed with Rukhsana that the cost of the ingredients and the wages for winnowing them would be entered separately. “Everyone gets mentioned when there's a feast,” Madhuri said, “but the hours spent by the women cleaning the grain disappear.” Urmila pointed to the blank line in her own ledger where the hours of her night washing had been omitted. “Not this time,” she said. Madhuri consulted each woman before writing down her hours. Geeta laughed. “There's a brisk trade in time at the ghat today.”

Beneath the joking, Urmila's task was a difficult one. The hospital laundry brought in for a day's work came in two kinds of bags. Some were marked with a count for ordinary washing; the others carried a warning that they must be kept apart. In the old register both had simply been entered as ‘clothes’. “I don't examine the hospital's treatment of patients,” Urmila said. “I shall record only how much linen came into my hands and when it came. I won't open bags marked for separation without the proper arrangements.” Renu designated a safe place for those bags. They agreed not to put water used by the public at the ghat and the hospital's specialised work together into the same trough.

Naira arrived a little later. In her bag was a copy of the revised schedule of rates prepared at the school the day before, but she kept it separate from the investigation that day. “May I look at your old register?” she asked Urmila. Urmila did not hand it over at once. “First tell me which entries you want to see. Patients' names, workers' names and the dates on the bags are separate things.” Naira paused. She still remembered her mistake in publishing Mahesh's testimony too soon. “The number of bundles, and the times they were collected and delivered,” she said. “I won't record the patients' names.”

On that assurance, Urmila opened her duplicate register. The page from three days earlier listed fourteen bundles. In the ghat ledger, beside Urmila's signature, the collection time was recorded as eight twenty. But the copy obtained from the hospital supply room bore the word ‘received’ against seven forty-five. The difference between the two times was not merely thirty-five minutes; it was a reversal of their order. The dates on the pages agreed, and the

identifying marks on the bundles appeared to agree as well. Naira frowned, then wrote three questions in her notebook: What did ‘received’ mean? Had the slip been filled out in advance? Who had matched the markings on the bags?

“I looked at the clock at eight twenty,” Urmila said, “because that day I had to leave another job at a different ghat. But I didn't fill out the hospital's page. All we can see is that someone wrote seven forty-five.” “Then had the clothes already reached the hospital?” Naira asked. Urmila shook her head. “I cannot answer that. Someone may have counted an earlier consignment, the slip may have been prepared in advance, or there may have been an error in the count. All of it needs checking. Don't record a delay against my name, and don't record a theft against anyone else's either.”

Geeta was looking at the corner of the notebook. “Can the same bundle mark ever be used again?” she asked. “Yes, if an empty bag is put back into service,” Urmila said. “So look at the number of pieces of linen along with the date.” Saroj held up an old coloured knot from her net. “I can remember the same blue knot in my net for two years,” she said, “but my memory is not a register.” Naira smiled at this small comparison. The three distinctions Fakira had taught her—what had been heard, what had been seen, and what had been inferred—stood out clearly in her notebook once again.

Champa sat to one side. “Did this reversal of times affect any patient's treatment?” she asked. Urmila quietly consulted another hospital page. A copy of the treatment room's public work schedule recorded a request for an extra sheet that day, but the identity of the person for whom it had been requested was in a private record. “All that's written here is that a request was made,” Urmila said. “When it was fulfilled, and whether any delay harmed anyone, must be investigated separately. I can testify as to when my cart left. A doctor must speak about the patient's condition.” Remembering her concern for her mother's treatment, Champa nodded in agreement.

Aditi came to the ghat to inspect the town's drainage. Her measurements distinguished between the flow of water outside the ghat and the route of water used by the hospital. Seeing Nurjahan's cart, she said, “Don't put a heavy load of bricks on the broken edge of the paved steps.” Urmila immediately asked, “Then which way is the hospital's laundry cart to go?” Aditi opened an old map. One route went around by the blocked channel, where the warehouse crates were standing. “For today we'll mark a temporary route for light carts,” she said. “A permanent repair will require an inspection.” “That will do for now,” Urmila replied, “but write down the time. Otherwise we'll be stuck at the washing slab again tomorrow morning.”

At the meeting for Ghat-Honouring Day, the proposal to take photographs came up again. This time Sanket himself had arrived. Before opening his camera, he asked Urmila, “May I photograph the hands doing the

work?” “Yes, but not Champa; not the markings on patients' bags; and if taking a photograph interrupts someone's work, record that time too.” Sanket burst out laughing. “Wages for a photograph as well?” “If you make my hands stop, yes,” Urmila said. Sanket photographed the washing slabs, the safe route and the water markers. Anyone who did not want a face shown was left outside the frame. The lesson he had learned about having control of his own phone was proving useful now.

When Rukhsana and Madhuri brought the food pots, the tired ghat grew lively. Nurjahan tethered her animal in the shade and joined them. “If you bring your cart here again tomorrow,” Saroj told her, “don't crush the stakes for my net.” “I'll watch where the animal puts its feet,” Nurjahan answered. “You tie a flag to the stakes first.” Both women laughed. Geeta asked them to write out the recipe so that she could send it to a colleague who lived far away. “I'll write the recipe,” Madhuri said, “but don't forget the wages for cleaning the grain.” No new clue came to light. There was only rice, greens, water, and rest for weary bodies.

As she ate her first mouthful of rice, Urmila asked Rukhsana, “That day you went to look at the colours—did you truly get any rest?” Rukhsana smiled. “I saw the colours. But the next day I still had to cook for everyone.” “I'd like to come to the ghat once, at the next cleaning festival, without a washing slab or a laundry load,” Urmila said. “Someone else will dry the clothes.” “And shall I serve you rice then?” Rukhsana asked. “No,” Urmila laughed. “You'll sit beside me. Someone else will prepare our food.”

After midday, Aniruddha arrived with an employee from the hospital supply room. Urmila had insisted beforehand that the original pages of the register, the payment records and the confidential treatment records be kept apart. Aniruddha showed them an authenticated copy of the hospital record, but covered the portion identifying patients. Before anyone else could speak, Naira asked, “When the word ‘received’ is entered against seven forty-five, does that mean the linen actually arrived, or merely that an inward-entry slip was opened?” “This document doesn't make that distinction,” the employee replied. “As a matter of routine, a slip can be opened beforehand. But to find out who did so that day, I'll need to check the original records against one another.”

Urmila read out the questions she had prepared. “If the slip was opened early, why does it say ‘received’? My cart left the ghat at eight twenty. I could not have reached the hospital at seven forty-five. Thirty to thirty-five minutes have been deducted from my wages. On what basis?” Aniruddha grew serious as he listened. “We ought first to order the entry corrected,” he said. “Don't strike out the page,” Urmila replied. “If there's a mistake, attach a note of correction to the original. Let what was written remain there.”

The employee produced a copy of the gate register for that day. It showed a handcart carrying linen entering after nine o'clock, but the driver's signature was unclear. Naira recorded only that the seven-forty-five entry in the supply room and the time after nine at the gate did not agree; separate confirmation was needed that the cart had been Urmila's. Aniruddha ordered the relevant slips and the original weighing and payment records to be preserved without alteration. One inference had been disproved: the hospital's recorded time of ‘receipt’ could not be treated as proof of the actual completion of the washing. The decision halted the proposal to hold Urmila immediately at fault.

Urmila then took out another page of her wage register. It contained four entries: the time spent counting bags at dawn, cleaning the slabs, waiting for linen that had to be kept separate, and carrying it to the cart. The hospital's payment sheet said only ‘washing per bundle’. “On a day when a patient's linen arrives late,” Urmila said, “my wages go down, but the waiting time has still been taken out of my life. That isn't justice.” “The company does the same,” Geeta called from a distance. “You've entered your own claim separately, haven't you?” Urmila asked. Geeta showed her the corner of her receipt.

The meeting reached three modest decisions. Collection at the ghat and actual entry into the hospital would be recorded in separate fields; workers' waiting time and the labour involved in special separation would be accounted for separately; and neither photographs taken at the ghat nor copies of personal laundry registers would be made public without permission. No new wage rate was fixed immediately. But time previously dismissed as ‘not work’ would now be measured. “The cost of keeping hospital linen clean is not just soap,” Aniruddha told his employee. “It's time as well.” Urmila was not satisfied with the words until she saw the line provided for a signature.

Late in the evening Saroj gathered up the net she had been repairing. Nurjahan loaded the old brick pieces back onto her cart, since no heavy work could begin until the paved ghat had been inspected. Madhuri recorded the remaining grain from the meal and returned Geeta's cloth sample. Champa folded her mother's sheet and set off home. No one had been made into anyone else's saviour; calling the cleaning a festival had not erased the price of labour. There was less mud on the washing slabs, but the passage to the unstepped landing had not been fully opened.

As Naira was preparing to leave, Urmila stopped her. “Will you meet Lalit the carpenter?” “Why?” Naira asked. Urmila showed her a copy of an old hospital repair bill. One line described a wooden loading ramp for moving laundry from the ghat towards the hospital as ‘newly constructed’. Beside the approval for payment was an empty space for Lalit's signature. “At the place where it says a new ramp was built, I've slipped twice,” Urmila said. “The old timber is still there. But I know nothing about carpentry. Let the person said

to have made it examine it." Naira noted the date on the bill. "Let him see it first. Only then can we speak of anyone's fault."

On her way home, Urmila straightened the pages of the registers in her bag once more. Two hours of her wages for the previous day were still owed; a written investigation into the hospital's reversed times had begun; Champa's right over her photograph had been acknowledged; and responsibility for marking a temporary cart route at the ghat had been recorded. Amid all this, she pictured the following year: a clear space by the water, a board bearing the names and hours of the laundry workers, and a day when she would come only to look at the river. Nearing home, she remembered what Rukhsana had said: on that day neither of them would sit down to prepare the food. Closing her notebook, Urmila understood for the first time that even the wish for rest needed a place kept safe for it.

Chapter 41 · The Carpenter’s Signature

When Lalit Vishwakarma opened the gate of his workshop at dawn, the paper pushed beneath it had curled into a damp roll. A fine rain had fallen through the night. He spread the sheet out to read it. It was a bill for repairing the wooden loading ramp used to move laundry between the hospital and the ghat. At the very bottom, a small mark in red ink stood in the empty space for authorising payment: Sign here.

Inside the workshop lay planes and saws, lengths of timber drying, and a curved rib from an old boat. Lalit usually examined the grain of wood before he looked at figures on paper. Today the figures had caught hold of him first. The bill declared that a new ramp had been installed, its joints replaced, and a safe passage made ready for loading carts. Only the previous afternoon Urmila had told him that the old timber there was still slippery beneath her feet.

He put a measuring tape, chalk, two small nails, and his old work ledger into his bag. As he touched the edge of a plane, the faint scar of an earlier injury showed on a finger of his left hand. He opened the ledger. He had still not received full payment for two stakes and a straight batten installed during an inspection of the drainage channel a month before. That work and the hospital loading ramp were separate jobs. It would be easy to combine them under one payment, but on whose account would the older debt then remain?

At the ghat, Urmila was wringing out washed sheets on the stone slabs. There was less mud after the previous day's communal cleaning, but an edge of the timber still stood proud along the way down to the unstepped landing. She gathered up the sheets and took Lalit to the place where the carts were unloaded. “I don't know one kind of timber from another,” she said, “but my feet have slipped here twice. The paper says this was newly built.”

Lalit bent to inspect the end of the old ramp. A little fresh paint had been applied to one side, but a crack in the wood ran inward beneath it. The nails on the other side looked to have been changed fairly recently. He made two chalk marks. “Some repair may have been done,” he said. “But what I can see here does not justify saying an entirely new ramp has been installed. And you cannot discover how much weight it will bear merely by tapping it with your hand.”

Naira had come with Urmila. In her bag were two copies of the conflicting entries in the laundry register: seven forty-five in the supply room and a time after nine at the hospital gate. She asked Lalit, “Does the bill for this ramp prove that the laundry was received on that day?” He shook his head. “Even if the ramp was built, whether the laundry crossed it at that hour is another matter. Look at the bill, the actual work, and the load separately.” Naira made three separate headings in her notebook.

Just then a representative of the municipal contractor arrived carrying a blue folder. Two labourers accompanied him, though they carried no new planks, only rope and empty sacks. The representative held out the bill to Lalit. “You understand carpentry. Inspect it and sign. The hospital's money is held up. Every labourer's payment will remain stopped.”

Lalit read the whole page. “It says here that a new ramp has been installed and that a cart carrying a specified load can cross safely. Tell me who installed it, and where the load-test record is.” “We have receipts for the materials,” the representative replied. “New timber was added to the old ramp. That's how such work is described.” Lalit said, “If a turn of phrase can make old wood new, who takes responsibility for an injured foot?”

He remembered something his old teacher, Harikishun, used to say: whoever made a wooden joint had to keep two accounts, one of what the eye could see and the other of the people who would walk upon it. When Lalit was learning his trade, the old man would step onto the completed planks himself. Later, from experience, Lalit had learned that water, mud, and the weight of a laden cart could not be tested simply by putting the carpenter's own body upon the wood. The memory made that blank space for his signature seem heavier still.

From the far side of the ghat a woman came carrying two bundles of clothes. It was Uma Rajdhob. She set her customers' washing on the raised platform, not at the water's edge, because her right to use the unstepped landing had not been settled. She held receipts for three different customers. “Urmila, if these slabs are busy during your hours, I'll sort my bundles up here,” she said. “But if the work at the ghat is entered under the name of one group, my customers will be counted under somebody else's name again.”

Urmila went over to her. “I don't want that either. My hospital linen isn't your customers' dhotis. The water hours should be separate, and so should the payments.” For the first time Uma looked at the document Lalit was holding. “Then why does the cost of repairing this ramp carry the names of all the washerfolk? Nobody asked me.” Naira checked the dates on Uma's receipts, but did not copy the customers' private names into her notebook. Uma said that for the moment she only wanted to propose separate hours at the ghat; she would not decide on cooperative washing without first consulting all her customers.

Uma folded one customer's slip, then opened it again. She had a sheet belonging to a third customer, who had proposed that its payment be included in Urmila's hospital contract. “The work is done differently,” Uma said, “yet people suppose that one person can set the price for every washerwoman's labour. I'm not against any group. I want the work done in my own name, and the customer's payment for it, to be visible separately

first.” On the blank edge of her ledger Urmila wrote down a day for a separate meeting with Uma—not on impulse, but after asking her permission.

The sound of a chisel travelled across the ghat. Paro, the stonecutter, was marking a small stone beside the broken upper edge of the landing. She had been called to examine the work of temporarily securing that part of the municipal bank. She stopped her chisel. “This piece of stone can be removed,” she said, “but the earth beneath is wet. Put a heavy ramp on it and the whole thing could sink together. My trade is cutting stone, not certifying how much weight the ground can carry.”

“If none of you will work together,” the representative asked, “where will the hospital cart go?” “I'm ready to take measurements for work that can be done safely,” Paro replied. “I'm not accepting a contract to put in a heavy ramp without testing the ground.” She showed him her receipt. It specified the cutting of a stone sample, the marking of the damaged edge, and a day's wages. Nowhere did it authorise the building of a bridge. Having listened, Lalit wrote on his own paper: “Stone assessment separate.”

A slender white scar crossed Paro's left wrist. Once she had been ordered to lift a piece of cut stone before it was ready, and the stone had grazed her hand. She spoke of this not as some inherent feature of her hereditary occupation, but as an example of badly organised work. “I want to be paid for working quickly too,” she said, “but paying for an injury doesn't prevent it.” In her bag, apart from her tools, was her young daughter's notebook. On days when she found work and was kept late, there was less time to teach the child at home. She was accounting for that cost as well.

Meanwhile a handcart wheel had become stuck at the upper edge of the unstepped landing. Salim, the farrier, arrived with a small box of tools. His family had once earned its living shoeing horses and working on bullock carts; now he was learning to repair the joints and axles of small wheeled carts. He lifted the cart, tightened the loose nut on its wheel, and told the driver, “It's empty now. Before you load it heavily, the wheel will need to be checked again.”

“You've tightened the wheel,” the driver asked. “Doesn't that mean it can cross the ramp?” Salim did not laugh. “I inspected the wheel. Lalit will inspect the wood beneath it. An engineer must speak about the water and the ground. Why squeeze all three judgments into one man's signature?” He wrote the labour charge and the price of the part separately on a narrow receipt and handed it to the driver. On the back he had written the address of a training programme in modern vehicle servicing; he had not yet decided whether to enrol.

By noon the smell of damp timber mingled with smoke from the cooking fires. Gurmeet Kaur brought two containers of rice and lentils for the shared meal. Her family had settled in Videhapur through old trading connections

across the border, but today's work in the kitchen was her own choice. She sat with Rukhsana and opened their accounts. “Don't enter grain received as a donation in place of someone's wages. The cook's time must have its own cost.” Rukhsana laughed. “Half my life seems to have gone by explaining just that.”

Gurmeet entered grain, cooking fuel, and transport under separate headings. Someone asked, “Bills even at a festival?” “If it's a festival, there'll be singing too,” she replied. “Does a singer have no stomach?” Uma began an old washerfolk's song at her words, but kept counting her customers' clothes as she sang. Rukhsana called everyone to eat. Lalit was still measuring the end of the ramp when Gurmeet set a plate of rice beside him. “You can sign while you eat,” she said, “but read it first.”

During the meal Lalit took out the account of a young man who worked with him. Two days earlier the young man had sanded timber from a boat in his workshop; the date on which his wages were due was approaching. Lalit had not told him he would be paid only if the hospital contract came through. Wages were owed for work performed, not conditional upon the award of another contract. In his head Lalit was calculating what he might get by selling an old workshop tool or taking on some smaller job. The more freely the people before him laughed over their food, the more silently his reckoning continued.

The contractor's representative returned. This time his folder contained a printed drawing: a proposal for a temporary approach over the unstepped landing, attached to the loading ramp. Lalit was startled when he saw it. Beyond the old planking, two lengths of timber would be added to make a narrow path on days when the water rose. People would take it for a bridge and carry heavy loads over it. “Who drew this?” he asked. “It's a way of keeping movement uninterrupted,” the representative said. “Once you certify it, we'll begin the work.”

“I can make joints in timber,” Lalit replied. “But you cannot call this safe without calculating the river level, the ground beneath, and the load. The drawing also encroaches on the boats' passage.” He marked the sheet to show where one end of the planking might be left unsupported when the water rose. “That's a possibility; it needs testing before anyone can say precisely what will happen. But if no test has been done, why should I write ‘safe’?”

Urmila put down her plate and came over. “Yesterday we asked for a temporary route to turn the handcarts. Not a heavy bridge.” Naira added, “If supplies arrive late, patients lose precious time. But putting other people at risk without testing anything, in the name of saving patients, is no solution.” The contractor's representative answered wearily, “I have a deadline too. If the papers don't go through, the money won't come. Then write down what work can actually be done.”

Lalit dictated three entries. First: the old loading ramp had been partially repaired; there was no evidence that it had been entirely rebuilt. Second: a temporary diversion for empty or lightly loaded handcarts should be marked separately, and its safety inspected each day. Third: any new approach or certification for the weight of heavy vehicles required an independent technical inspection. He signed this inspection note. He did not put his pen to the bill authorising payment.

Gathering up the papers, the representative said, “You cannot say this bill is false. We have receipts for the materials.” “I have made no finding that anyone has stolen anything,” Lalit replied. “I am saying only that the work I can see here does not agree with the words ‘newly built’ on this paper. If timber was made ready somewhere else, why record it as installed at this ghat?” Naira asked for separate copies of both documents. The representative promised a copy of the inspection note, but said the original payment file would stay in the office.

Towards evening Aditi arrived. Tara had brought her questions arising from the earlier measurements of the drainage channel. Lalit showed Aditi the drawing of the proposed approach. She searched the sheet for authorisation to construct a bridge; it said only “proposed alternative”. “This isn't a work order,” she said. “It would be improper to obtain a load-safety certificate on this basis. I'll add a note calling for another site inspection.” Marking the temporary fish enclosure and the turning space for boats on the drawing, Tara said, “If opening one route closes off somebody else's livelihood, hear them before you do it.”

As Gurmeet gathered the empty meal vessels, she asked, “Will everyone see these papers at the Boat-and-Tools Inspection Festival?” Hira had arrived to examine the stitching of an old boat sail. “We'll look at oars, ropes, wheels, and timber joints at the festival,” he said. “But a festival demonstration isn't an official load test. You can't sing a folk song over a measurement that hasn't been taken and declare the thing safe.” Lifting his tool box, Salim added, “I'll demonstrate the wheel, but I'll explain there and then the difference between an empty cart and a loaded one.”

Standing beside the river, Hira recalled an inspection at the previous year's gathering. An old boat rope had appeared wonderfully strong during the demonstration. The following week, after it grew wet, its fibres had begun to open. Ever since, he had urged the boatmen to make a rule that whatever was inspected at the festival should be tested again afterwards. Tara added that measurements should be repeated whenever the water level changed. No one should mistake a flag raised on one day of the year for proof of safety throughout the year.

In preparing for the communal gathering they made one modest decision. Four things would be recorded beside each tool: the name of its owner or

maker, the date of inspection, what had been observed, and what had not yet been tested. Children would practise reading these entries, and payment for demonstrating the work would be fixed separately. “I'll show the washing slabs too,” Uma said, “but I won't put anyone's private laundry on display.” Paro wrapped a cloth around the point of her chisel and smiled. “I'll cut stone, but first I'll show people where to stand out of harm's way.”

Everyone laughed. For the first time in many days Lalit finished the last mouthful of his meal without anxiety. Yet as he set his plate aside, his eyes fell upon a young messenger from the office, approaching with a fresh notice in his hand. It stated that the immediate hospital–ghat repair contract was being withdrawn from Lalit: because authorisation for payment had not been secured within the prescribed time, the work would be assigned to another craftsperson. The outstanding payment for his earlier work would remain subject to a separate examination.

Urmila read the notice and fell silent. “If you had signed that paper, could you have kept the contract?” she asked quietly. “Perhaps,” Lalit said. “But then my signature would have been on the place where your foot slipped as well.” There was no pride of heroism in his voice. The worry of household expenses, money owed for tools, and the wages of his fellow worker was plain upon his face. In his ledger, against the day's work, he wrote: “Inspection; payment still outstanding.” His pen hovered for a moment.

“I'll keep a copy of this order safe,” Naira said. “Changing the contractor doesn't settle the questions raised by the first inspection.” “If another carpenter does the job with proper measurements, I've no objection,” Lalit replied. “My quarrel isn't with the work. It's with signing blindly.” At that moment Paro showed him her stone sample. The small, flat piece, laid on wet earth, had tilted to one side under slight pressure. “Look,” she said. “The stone is solid, but the earth underneath gives a different answer.”

Holding the sample, Lalit looked towards Shakuntala's potters' quarter. Smoke was rising from the kiln, and Shakuntala's granddaughter was coming home with her school notebook tucked beneath her arm. The investigation into the faulty timber would continue in its own right; but questions concerning the bank of the ghat, payment for clay, and the child's education would take him to that house the next day. Lalit gathered up his tools. The old ramp at the unstepped landing had not yet been closed, but his signature was not on the papers for the unsafe bridge they proposed to build in its name.

Chapter 42 · The Future of Clay

The morning sun had not yet reached the rain-soaked thatch above the kiln in the potters' quarter. Beside her wheel, Shakuntala Pandit set down two lumps of clay and kneaded them. The first spread smoothly beneath her fingers; in the second she could feel grains of grit. She did not throw them together into the same trough. Rain through the night had left the footpath under water, and a newly cut bamboo stake had been driven into the ground beside the gate to the clay pit. Shakuntala stood looking at it for a while. Then she pressed the marks of her fingers into the lumps and placed them before her granddaughter.

"Both clays are the same colour. Why are they different?" the child asked. Shakuntala replied, "Colour doesn't make a vessel. You have to see how much water the clay can take in your hand, how it shrinks as it dries, how well it survives the firing. All of it." The girl began shaping a little bowl from the first lump, but its rim leaned to one side. Shakuntala did not stop her hands. "If you want to learn another kind of work, you must learn here, too, how to see what has gone wrong." The child smiled.

Today was her first day in her new school uniform. The cloth had not come from Parvati's loom, but the sleeves of the tunic stitched by Nasim were a little too long for the girl. She bent her elbow to test them; the fabric hung loose. "Clay from the wheel will get caught in these sleeves," she said. Shakuntala laughed. "You aren't going to school to turn a potter's wheel." "But I want to know how to do both," the girl answered. "I never said I would spend my whole life doing only this."

Lalit Vishwakarma came to the door. The previous day, after refusing to sign an incorrect load certificate for the hospital's unloading ramp, he had lost the job that was immediately available to him. In his palm he held a small sample of Paro the stonecutter's work. "The stone beneath this clay has tilted," he said. "I came to understand how the wet clay of the potters' quarter differs from the earth used to fill the ghat. But a bridge's load-bearing capacity cannot be decided from a potter's experience alone." Shakuntala said, "Then take a sample, not a decision. Write down where the clay came from as well."

Naira arrived just behind him. She had not brought a copy of the hospital ramp bill, only the inspection slip bearing Lalit's signature. She had come to hear the potters' claim as a separate matter. Shakuntala brought out the pages showing her old dues: four consignments of vessels, one order for repairs, and two acknowledgements signed to confirm that goods had been taken away, not that payment had been made. "They counted the vessels for the municipal event, but not what they owed me," she said. "Now they tell me that, since the way to the clay pit is closed, I should accept half the old price as full settlement."

As they walked towards the clay pit, the child kept her school notebook tucked under her arm. The shutter of Kamlesh Dabgar's small shop beside the footpath stood half open. Kamlesh sold implements for mending broken handles on vessels, wooden moulds and thread for repairs. Since the rent on the roofed shop had risen, he had been thinking of taking some of his stock home. He called to Shakuntala. "With the route for carrying goods narrowed, the pressure to vacate the shop has grown. They've shown me a new calculation of the rent. Nobody has asked about the repair bills they still owe me."

On his slip Kamlesh drew two small boxes: one for the shop rent, another for his customers' unpaid accounts. Naira asked, "Will you give the committee copies of these records?" "I'll submit the rent proposal," he replied, "but I won't display the names of my customers and their households before everyone. Mending broken vessels is my work; making a spectacle of my customers' private possessions is not." Shakuntala told him that the cost of repairs should not be folded into the dispute over clay. Kamlesh nodded. His shop had not yet been padlocked, but nothing had been settled about next month's rent.

At the gate stood Niru Kumal, carrying not two sacks of clay but an empty basket and a measuring cord. Niru had come from a family in Simatirtha. She sold pots of her own making and hoped to join in a small partnership here. When the route for bringing in clay was closed, a supplier had brought a document requiring every artisan to be liable for the whole debt, no matter how much clay each one took. Niru had refused to sign. "I can fire a kiln together with others," she said, "but why should I carry into my home a debt incurred by someone else, without even knowing what it is?"

Shakuntala placed a piece of her smooth lump in Niru's basket. "This is my sample, not yours. Measure it and enter it under your own name, so there can be no confusion afterwards." Niru said, "And we'll divide the cost of firing by the day and by the consignment. If someone's pots break, we won't make the whole group pay for them as though they were a common debt." Lalit asked, "Shall I help you put your agreement into writing?" Shakuntala stopped him. "First let us decide the terms in our own words. Then we'll find someone to write them down."

The discussion about access to the clay pit brought back to Shakuntala a day in the previous monsoon. Two women from the work group had been returning with baskets on their heads. Water had pooled across the path, forcing them to make a detour, while the hired cart waited on the other side. The extra labour of that day had not been added to the price of the vessels. "The clay costs nothing," a customer had told her. Shakuntala had replied, "If the clay is free, then come and fetch it yourself." The customer had merely laughed and gone away. Today the question of that journey had taken the form of a written demand for access.

A board fixed to the gate read: ENTRY PROHIBITED FOR SAFETY REASONS. There was a date beneath the words, but the name of the person who had issued the order was not clear. Shakuntala herself had seen earth cave in along one side during the previous rains. She had no reason to pretend that danger was false. But she had received no document explaining who had decided to close the safer stretch of the footpath on the other side as well. Tara Mallik came over when she saw the measuring cord. She first recorded the length of the fenced-off ground; she gave no judgment about who owned the clay.

The clay pit in the potters' quarter was not a flowing channel of the river. Rainwater gathered in its hollow during the monsoon, and in the dry season the lower strata became visible. Shakuntala explained that the dark earth on top was unsuitable for vessels, while removing too much of the smooth layer underneath could bring down the edge of the pit. "For now, I can measure only the height, the water marks and the places where clay was previously dug out," Tara said. "The properties of the clay and the risk of erosion require separate examinations." Lalit kept the sample, and Naira marked the place of collection on each bag.

Tara drew a chalk line near the edge of the hollow, then kept the girl away when she came closer. "Don't stand on that wet edge," she said. The granddaughter stepped back. "If the clay is sliding away, where will you put the stakes?" she asked. "I don't know yet," Tara answered. "If drawing a line gave us the answer, engineers, craftspeople and labourers would not have to make their own separate examinations." The girl wrote the question in her notebook. For the first time, hearing someone say "I don't know" did not disappoint her.

A labourer returning from the fields said, "The lorry that carried off earth for the municipal filling took the same clay that can be used for pots. The receipt just says 'earth'." Shakuntala did not answer at once. She opened the receipt for her last consignment. It recorded weight and the number of vessels, not the digging of clay. Tara examined another paper, which was in fact an estimate for material to fill the road. Both papers used the word "earth", but the goods, the dates and the heads of payment were different.

"Then can we say that earth for filling was stolen and charged to the pottery account?" a young man asked. Naira shook her head. "No. Nothing here proves that. On the contrary, the claim that the two bills could be joined merely because they used the same word does not survive examination. We must request the original order closing the gate and the actual receipts from those who carried the material, separately." Shakuntala pressed the lump still clinging to her palm. "For so many days, what they owed me has been buried inside that word," she said softly.

By noon, people had gathered at a small temporary municipal camp. A desk had been set up to receive written questions about permission to excavate clay from the pit. Shakuntala laid out three samples of her old vessels, the acknowledgements of receipt, and her granddaughter's school admission form. The clerk's first question was, "Is the application about land, or about schooling?" Shakuntala did not laugh. "They are two different things," she said, "but a household's earnings and a child's education do not live far apart."

Beside the desk, Amina Bhathiyara was putting down containers of rice and vegetables. She fed travellers; today, two police employees who had come for the inspection had also ordered food from her shop. One of them said that, in the name of "public service", payment for the meals would be made later. Opening her receipt book, Amina said, "Travellers eat and pay. If people on government duty eat, I'll give them receipts too. For credit, write down a name and a definite date. A uniform does not turn a meal into a donation."

The first employee was irritated, but the other read her slip and said a receipt for the amount should be issued. Amina reconciled the account there and then. "I won't leave anyone hungry," she said, "but the decision to give away food is mine, not someone else's." The smell of rice made Shakuntala glance towards the girl. In her hurry to get to school that morning, the child had left half her flatbread uneaten. Amina gave her a small plate, and Shakuntala paid for it. "Grandmother, do we have to write down the time we spend eating, too?" the girl asked. Amina laughed. "Write down the price of the food. Don't count the pleasure of eating it."

On one side of the camp, Vibha Agrahari arrived with the records of her small medicine shop. The labourers who dug clay had been speaking of wounds, skin troubles and the cost of medicines, and she had brought a price list for basic first-aid supplies. An organiser said, "Record these goods as a donation. It will be good publicity for your shop." Vibha gathered up her papers. "I can decide how much profit I need," she said, "but if we record a donation without accounts, afterwards it will be impossible to see who actually received the medicine, and who bought it."

Vibha listed separately the quantities, purchase prices, selling prices and items she proposed to provide free of charge. She gave the injured worker no medical advice about taking drugs; she told him to go to the treatment centre. Naira mentioned that questions about names and times of receipt also arose in the hospital supply records. "My shop receipts will show the limits of my responsibility," Vibha replied. "Fault in some other supply cannot be determined from my name." She left behind a transparent account sheet and went away. The question of her larger business had not yet come before them.

When the meal was over, Amina was gathering her empty containers when she noticed Shakuntala's three sample vessels standing in the sunlight. She picked one up and asked, "Could you serve hot lentils in this?" "At present it's

a sample," Shakuntala said. "Only when it has been fired in the kiln and tested for holding water will I call it a vessel for food." Amina put it back at once. "Then I'll write a separate order for the next batch," she said. For Amina, a bowl was an everyday object. For Shakuntala, every failed sample had consumed fuel and a day's work.

While examining the clay-pit papers, an official said that, to prevent anyone from falling prey to fraud, the simplest course would be to end all outstanding claims with a single settlement sum. "Which claims?" Shakuntala asked. "The price of four consignments? The cost of the repairs? Or the days of work lost because the path was closed? If you write them all as one amount, the price I'm asking for my vessels will vanish again." "You could receive a smaller amount now," the official said. Shakuntala pushed the slip forward, but did not sign it. "Receiving less money does not mean all the old dues have been paid," she said.

At that point Niru Kumal made a modest proposal: permission to collect sample clay from an approved, safe edge on designated days; a separate record of the weight taken by each artisan; and a distinct account of the expenses of the shared kiln. Tara added that the area called "safe" could only be marked after an inspection of the site. The official did not immediately grant permanent access. He accepted an application for the original closure order to be obtained and for a site visit involving artisans, engineers and municipal representatives. Shakuntala copied the acknowledgement number into her ledger. "At least the questions are on paper now," she said.

As the documents were being gathered up, the granddaughter suddenly grew quiet. A space for a guardian's signature lay empty on her school admission form. Shakuntala picked up the pen. "Can I study and learn to measure soil, find the way water flows and work on bridges?" the child asked. "You can learn," Lalit said, "but first, for now, go to school. If you want to learn to measure timber, I'll show you. The decision about whether a bridge is safe must be made by a properly trained and qualified engineer." Shakuntala did not change the meaning of the girl's question. "Choose your own path," she told her. "I'll teach you how to turn the wheel, but the wheel will not write your destiny."

After a little silence the child asked, "Grandmother, if I do other work, who will turn your wheel?" Shakuntala paused. Enthusiasm alone could not answer that question. The joints in her hands ached, and the girl's contribution to the daily work might one day have helped support the family. "I'll employ someone, or take on less work, or learn a new way of doing it," she said slowly. "Every one of those choices is difficult. But I won't tell you to surrender what you want merely because it will be difficult." The child kept her fingers against the old hardness of her grandmother's hands.

Shakuntala signed the admission form. The clerk handed over a notice about the school uniform and the new science class. The girl tried to read the sheet, stumbling over a difficult word. Naira began to sound it out in parts, but the child repeated it herself and smiled. Shakuntala suddenly remembered her own first day beside her father's kiln. Someone had shown her then how fast the wheel turned, but no one had asked what else she wanted. Now she held her granddaughter's form in her hand, and that question had not been silenced.

As they left the municipal office, Naira advised Shakuntala to keep three separate sets of papers: the question of access to the clay pit, the money owed for vessels already delivered, and the school documents. Shakuntala laughed. "What has my file to do with that sheet of twenty-seven names in your house?" "If we ever find a verified connection, we'll examine it," Naira replied. "For now, we won't combine these three matters either." There was a small relief for Naira in this: by resisting the temptation to turn every disorder into a story about one guilty person, she could still hear what people were actually owed.

Returning home at dusk, Shakuntala set the two lumps of clay beside the wheel once more. Niru had left her own sample of clay so they could decide on a day to use the kiln together, but the debt agreement had not yet reached Shakuntala's house. Kamlesh had sent a copy of the written proposal for his shop rent. Amina's food receipt clearly named the person responsible for paying. Vibha's price list lay in a separate pouch in the house. Shakuntala did not tie these pages together into a bundle of mysteries. Each paper pointed towards its own particular claim.

Her granddaughter came into the courtyard wearing the new tunic. The sleeves had now been altered to fit. She lifted the half-formed clay bowl, looked at it and sketched its outline in her notebook. "It isn't round," she said. "Turn it again if you want it round," Shakuntala answered. "And if you want to draw a plan, write down why it's crooked as well." On one page the girl drew the circle of the wheel, on another the footpath through the potters' quarter, and on a third the threshold of her school. The same hand had drawn all three lines, but the three paths were not one.

For supper there was rice, greens and a little pickle bought from Amina's shop. Shakuntala snipped a loose thread from her granddaughter's tunic. The clay near the kiln was still wet; the bowl made that day was not yet ready for the fire. The arrears had not been paid, the gate to the clay pit had not opened, and the money for each month of the child's schooling still had to be found. Yet, for the first time, the talk in that house was about the new subjects she would study, not about ways of stopping her. Shakuntala smiled as she washed the plates, and the girl put away her notebook and went to sleep.

Chapter 43 · The Brassworker and the Goldsmith

In the light of early morning, Meena Sah turned a brass vessel upside down and struck it lightly with her hammer. The metal rang clear, but at the third blow a cracked seam along one side began to shiver instead of sounding. She turned the vessel again. Two letters, painted long ago by the hospital, still clung to its rim. Years before, the vessel had been used on a trolley that carried meals to patients; now she had been commissioned to beat it back into shape for heating water. Meena laid down her hammer. “I'll raise that seam again, but I'll enter only the work I've actually done. I won't charge the price of a new vessel.”

Naira and Urmila reached the workshop veranda together. In Naira's bag were three separate copies of Shakuntala's clay receipts from the previous day. Urmila carried the page from the hospital's linen register on which the time of the vehicle's arrival had been entered before the time the linen was collected. Seeing the vessel beside Meena, Urmila asked, “Do you repair the hospital's old things as well?” Meena answered, “Mending broken vessels is my trade. But sometimes the slip says an article has reached the hospital when it's still lying here on my veranda. How is the sound of my hammer to reach beyond what the paper says?”

She opened a thin ledger. On its first page were her repair charges, on the second the pieces of metal used, and on the third the cost of transport. Three marks of identical size appeared in one corner of the new hospital receipt, but Meena's ledger listed repairs to only two articles. “Whose is this third mark?” Naira asked. “I don't know,” Meena said. “Only two vessels came to me in that consignment. I never saw a third. Whether this is a copy of my signature or another column on the materials slip, I can say only after I've seen the original paper.” Naira wrote the question down as a question.

Inside the veranda, Meena's sister had set water to heat on a small stove. Coal for the furnace had grown expensive, and Meena was reckoning what it cost to open an old joint and make it sound again. Customers sometimes asked, “How can a few little taps of a hammer cost so much?” She would show them the split in the metal. “What you cannot see in a single blow can take a whole watch of the day to put right.” Her sister insisted that they eat their midday meal on time. Since morning Meena had been working without a break, sustained by nothing but tea. At last she yielded to her sister's insistence and put the hammer aside for a little while.

That morning the market lane was awakening to its separate trades in metal, bangles and oil. People were carrying their wares away to prepare for the next collective inspection of boats and tools. Lalit Vishwakarma was finding little work since losing his contract, but Meena offered to pay him for holding the handle of a broken vessel steady. “I don't want hands working for

nothing, even for an inspection," she said. Lalit laughed. "A household can't live on telling the truth alone. I need this small job today." There was a carpenter's plane in his hand; no one had entrusted him with testing the brass seam itself.

As she measured a strip of metal, Meena asked Urmila to show her the hospital page. Urmila first covered the patients' personal names. "The linen was supposed to arrive at this hour," she said, "but the hospital register says the goods were taken before our vehicle got there." Meena read the date on her repair receipt. Its recorded time was in the afternoon of that same day. Someone immediately wanted to conclude that every discrepancy belonged to the same business. Naira stopped them. "The dates for linen, vessels and treatment belong to three different registers. We'll compare the times, but we won't call all three matters crimes because one entry is wrong."

Just then a woman passed Meena's workshop with a bangle wrapped in a little piece of red cloth. Kamala Thakur, the goldsmith, was on her way to open her shop. Behind her came people from two families, arguing as they walked. A young man maintained that a pledged bracelet had belonged to his father; an elderly woman said it had come from her parental home and had been pledged in her own name. Kamala unlocked the till and asked the two parties to sit apart. "Whoever speaks the loudest will not have their article examined first," she said quietly.

Kamala's register had separate columns for the weight of each ornament, its assay, the signature of the person pledging it, and the name of the lender. But on an old slip, opposite the owner's name, someone had merely written "head of household." The elderly woman asked, "Instead of writing who was head of the house, write when I myself handed over my bracelet." The young man objected that the loan had been taken for his father's business. Kamala said, "Who benefited from a loan and who owns the jewellery are not the same question. First we'll compare the old deposit slip, the account of the witnesses who were present, and the marks on the article."

The old woman laughed when she looked at the bracelet. "I had this little crooked flower made on one side. The goldsmith said it would cost more to make the petals even. I told him to leave it crooked." Kamala turned the ornament in the light. There was indeed an uneven flower on the inner side. But she did not immediately pronounce on ownership. Recognising a mark could help establish a claim; it was not proof of the whole right. She prepared a copy of the claim in the elderly woman's own name and gave the young man time to submit the documents relating to the business loan.

Outside the shop, Rekha Sahu, the bangle-maker, had opened a little chest of bangles. On stiff paper she was drawing the measurements of a new pattern, its central line curving like a river. She had received an order for bangles for a community event, but the customer had said that the pattern Rekha designed

should be handed to a machine workshop, with no separate payment for the design. Rekha raised her pencil. “Make them by machine if you like. But if you want a copy of the measurements my hands have made, you must have my permission and pay for it.”

Kamala called her over and showed her the old woman's bracelet. “Look at this crooked flower. Not every irregularity is bad workmanship.” Rekha lifted her pattern from the paper. “I may be paid for the bangles I make today,” she asked, “but who will go on selling this line for the next fifty years?” The women's problems were not identical. One concerned ownership of an ornament, the other the right to use a new design. Yet both knew how disputes began when the name of the person who made a thing and the name of the person entitled to sell it were made to occupy the same line.

Before noon, Usha Ram arrived with two pairs of shoes and some leather for musical instruments. In the preparations for the boat-and-tools inspection, repeated wetting had loosened the old skins on several drums. The event organisers had promised instruments on the stage, but suggested that the cost of repairing them be met from donations given for the singing. Usha had only laughed in reply: “The singer earns the fee for the song; I earn the fee for the leather. Write down the two kinds of work separately.” Today she had come to demand an order in writing.

Usha showed them the last on which she shaped her new shoes. She had altered the seam at the place where contact with water wore the leather away first. A trader claimed that the shape had long belonged to his shop. Usha showed him the first measurements in her notebook, the trial piece that had torn during testing, and a drawing of the seam she had remade. “I don't deny that his shop sells a similar shoe,” she said. “But I want to sell, under my own name, the alteration my own hands have made to this seam.” Instead of leaving the sample with the trader, she said she would show it to him after obtaining his written acknowledgment.

At the end of the lane stood Bindeshwari Sahu's old oil press. The dense smell of oil had settled into its walls as deeply as if they were made of date-palm wood. Some members of the household wanted the press preserved exactly as it was; his son argued that its upkeep could instead sustain a small new oil shop. Bindeshwari had invited a buyer that day. An elderly woman of the household was distressed by the thought that, if the press were sold, the memory of the family's old occupation might disappear with it.

Bindeshwari passed his palm over the wooden press. “I have memories too,” he said. “But it now costs more to turn this press and extract oil than we earn from selling it. There are debts to pay, and a small shop would let us work in a new way.” His son, pleased at this, was already thinking of increasing the sum written in the buyer's offer. But Bindeshwari went on: “The price of the timber

and the old debts must be accounted for separately. The old weighing stones and the little measuring vessel my mother used will stay in the house."

"Then what of the lamp my father placed behind the press on its first day?" the elderly woman asked. Bindeshwari was silent for a while. "We'll keep the story of the lamp. Making an object of worship out of the wood won't pay our debts." They were not enemies, these two people, but two fears within the same family. Bindeshwari did not immediately seal the sale of the entire press. Before the buyer he stipulated an independent valuation and payment of the wages still owed to the household workers. The family's consent remained unsettled until that evening.

Examining the press, the buyer asked whether its old wood could be turned into new furniture. Bindeshwari answered only that it might be possible; without testing the timber he would not name a price. Meanwhile his son said he would look at a room to rent for the new oil shop. The elderly woman said that, if the new shop opened, she wanted to learn to use her old scales for measuring oil there. Bindeshwari smiled when he heard her. A household's memory lived not only in its old implements, but also in the knowledge of how to use them.

When Naira reached the oil-shop veranda, Urmila was sitting there wiping sweat from her face. "You again?" Naira asked, laughing. "Will the wheels of the linen cart turn without oil?" Urmila replied. "I came first to find out how much extra the driver will charge for carrying the supplies." Bindeshwari saw that her cart needed fresh oil, but did not put down an estimated charge. He asked the driver when it had last been serviced. "The bill for the vessels and the bill for the oil may both go under the hospital's expenses," Urmila said, "but that doesn't make them the same work."

Toward evening Lalit and Meena reached the old hospital warehouse. Gomti had come on behalf of the labourers' group. The previous repair bill stated that an old mixture of shell and lime had been removed and new material put in its place. Gomti said, "The sacks we carried had 'lime' written on their receipts. Where the sacks came from, and what they actually held—those are two things I cannot testify to." She produced separate slips showing the days she had transported them and the wages she had earned.

Meena examined a handful of powdered shell from the old material. In childhood she had heard stories of making lime from shells found beside the river, but those stories were no test of the scientific properties of the materials used in a new building. "I can speak about the joints in a metal vessel," she said. "I can't tell just by looking whether this powder is from an old wall or a new sack." Lalit added, "A soil sample, the price of lime, the seam of a metal vessel and the load carried by timber: each of these four things requires its own examination." Gomti had the names of the workers at the site entered, but took consent from each of them first.

A warehouse employee brought out an old delivery note. It bore a stamp saying “Materials Received,” but the box marked “Place of Use” was blank. Meena compared it with her repair bill. On the date when she had returned two brass vessels, the delivery note listed four items: two of metal, one sample of shell-lime and one unidentified piece for repair. “My bill accounts for only the first two,” she said. “Look elsewhere for the third and fourth. Don't enlarge the scope of my work until I'm made to testify about everything on that list.”

Naira entered two distinct questions in her notebook: when the hospital's articles had been transferred, and into whose hands; and where the building materials had actually been used. Here she discovered one small correction. On the slip bearing Meena Sah's signature, what people had read as “three repairs” contained a third mark that was not a count of repairs at all, but a separate tax column relating to labour charges. Once the employee produced the original form, that misreading was corrected. Yet the discrepancy between the receipt and the use of the four items listed on the delivery note remained exactly as it had been.

Outside the warehouse a weighing scale stood askew. A young man from the labourers' group asked whether the charge for carrying sacks had been reckoned by weight or by consignment. Gomti opened her papers and explained that on some days the workers had been paid by the load, but no additional wages had been entered for the heavier labour of lifting sacks of lime when they were wet. Naira did not write the claim on the page concerning discrepancies in construction materials. She opened a separate account for wages. Relief showed on Gomti's face. Her testimony was not merely a means of discovering faulty supplies; it was evidence, too, of what was owed for her own labour.

“Then take away the accusation of theft,” Meena said. Naira replied, “I'll record that there is no basis for accusing you of three repairs. But the question of where the other goods went remains open.” Gomti spoke for her workers as well. “We remember lifting sacks of lime. We won't be pressured into providing proof of things we never saw.” Lalit did not lay the papers from his lost contract on that same table. An injustice had been done to him, but his separate appeal would address it; it was not part of the question raised by this delivery note.

Meanwhile, the elderly woman returned to Kamala's shop with a witness from the old days. The witness said that, when the ornament was pledged years earlier, the woman had taken the bracelet off with her own hands, although the lender's receipt had been made out in the name of a man of the family. The young man was still anxious about the sum owed. Kamala explained that she had no authority to alter the old record. What she could do was attach a supplementary statement of the elderly woman's claim to ownership. The loan, its interest and the terms on which the article could be

redeemed would have to be examined separately. The old woman received the copy bearing her own name and tucked it into a corner of her scarf.

Rekha had come to Kamala for the measurements of her new bangles. Looking at the design, the old woman said, “The curve in your bangle is very beautiful, but won't it cut the hand when it's worn?” Rekha laughed and turned the bangle around its wooden mould. One edge was rough indeed. She rubbed it smooth there and then. “That's what I need a customer to tell me,” she said, “not simply that it's beautiful.” For the first time, amid her anxiety about saving her bracelet, the elderly woman laughed with ease.

Usha showed Rekha the receipt for repairing the leather on her drums. The colour of the bangles and the sound of the instruments would both be noticed at the celebration; yet the names of the people who worked behind the brightness of the stage were often erased. Rekha proposed that at the next community gathering the maker's name and agreed fee be displayed beside each object. “And the singer's name separately,” Usha said. “Because I made the drumskin, I won't claim a right over the singer's melody.” A child sitting nearby heard this and insisted on writing the maker's name on a little box that held his toys.

Bindeshwari returned from the family's evening meeting. The buyer had agreed to provide a new valuation within the next two days; no final signature had yet been given for the sale of the oil press. The household had decided to keep his mother's old measuring vessel, the press's first wooden board and the ledger of oil extracted. There was weariness in Bindeshwari's eyes, but for the first time he could see a way not of freeing himself from those memories, but of preserving them separately. He brought Meena a small tin of mustard oil, for which she paid the full price.

Urmila picked up her register and set off for home. Meena gave her a copy of the bill for repairing the two vessels, on condition that the owner's private details should not be made public during the inquiry unless necessary. Naira put the copy of the delivery note in her bag, but left the paper concerning the woman's claim of ownership at Kamala's shop. It would have been easy to pull all those separate pages together under the name of a single mystery. Today, however, the real search lay in discovering who had seen which object, who had received what payment, and how far each person's signature could properly speak.

As night fell, the light tapping of metal rose once more in the market lane. Meena was finishing the seam of the first vessel. The crack inside the joint appeared to be closed, but she would not return the vessel until she had filled it with water and tested it. Across the lane Kamala was letting the supplementary sheet bearing the elderly woman's name dry; the edge of Rekha's bangle had been smoothed; Usha's new shoe last still stood on the veranda; and Bindeshwari's oil press awaited the buyer. The question raised by the hospital

delivery note remained unanswered. Yet five people that day had come to see more clearly the workmanship, the price and the name belonging to each one's labour.

Chapter 44 · The Blacksmith's Tools

At dawn, the fire in Harinarayan Sharma's forge was not yet red, but a pale yellow. Holding a thin strip of iron in his tongs, he laid it upon the anvil and brought down his hammer. The strip bent to one side. At the second blow the bend flattened; at the third, a narrow groove formed within it. He placed a finger beside the groove. "A rope won't sit here," he said. "This is where the wheel-pin will fit." His son Ajit was recording the measurements in a notebook. The smoke from the forge rose and slipped through a crack in the door, out towards the marketplace, which was only just beginning to wake.

"Father, why are people frightened when they see iron shaped like this?" Ajit asked. Since the previous evening, a photograph of the workshop had been passing from phone to phone. It showed a long iron rod in Harinarayan's hand and three pieces of metal bent into strange shapes. Beneath it ran a caption: Evidence of weapons being made near the hospital warehouse. Without lifting the rod, Harinarayan answered, "If you give a thing a name before you see what it does, you'll end up calling a ploughshare, a nail and a latch the very same thing." Ajit's hand stopped moving over the notebook.

Four unfinished implements lay in the courtyard: a hook for lifting the grille over a drainage outlet, a pin for the axle of a handcart, an iron clamp to hold the wooden frame of a loom, and a ring to secure a rope along the side of a boat. Three had been ordered by different customers; the price of the fourth had not yet been settled. Harinarayan was writing a small mark in chalk beside each article. The old workshop ledger explained every mark in full. Those marks had been cropped from the photograph. What remained was the pointed end of a piece of iron and a frightening headline.

Just then Meena Sah arrived with a copy of the hospital's incomplete delivery note from the previous day. Her work was repairing metal vessels, but one of the four items on the note was still described as an "unidentified repair piece." Meena did not place the sheet beside the anvil. She spread it on an empty plank, safely away from the furnace. "Three repairs were entered against my name, and that mistake has been corrected," she said. "Now somebody is saying this fourth thing is your iron rod. I don't know who has said so."

Harinarayan studied the page. "I have receipts for everything that went from my workshop to the hospital. But here it merely says 'piece': no weight, no dimensions, no signature." He opened his ledger. A month earlier he had made two door hinges and a joint for a small grille for the hospital. The fourth line recorded an iron ring for a customer's boat, which had nothing whatever to do with the hospital. Meena lowered her eyes. "Then we must put a stop to this insistence on making the words on a sheet of paper stand in for the object itself," she said.

An argument was about to begin over the person who had circulated the photograph, but Naira stopped it there. “We still don't have the original picture, the time it was first circulated, or the consent of the person who took it,” she said. Ajit wanted to find at once whoever had disgraced his father. Harinarayan laid a palm upon the boy's head. “Learn to show the measurements of your own work. To declare someone guilty without evidence would be to repeat the very mistake made against us.” Ajit remained sulky, but he wrote down the actual measurements of the rod in the photograph.

Outside the workshop appeared two police officers and an employee of the municipal inspection team. Naira had come with them, though she stood a little apart. During the previous day's inquiry she had kept the shell-and-lime sample separate from the slips for the metal vessels. Today, acting on a local complaint, the police had come to examine the uses of ordinary workshop tools. “There are questions about the shapes shown on social media,” the municipal employee said. “Please cooperate with the inspection.” Harinarayan lowered the furnace fire, moved the workers to a safe distance and opened out his table of tools.

Looking at the long rod, the first officer asked, “Who is this point meant to strike?” Harinarayan did not thrust the rod towards him. Instead, he placed an old wheel axle on the anvil, fitted the rod against it to show the measurements, and said, “There is a groove on the other side of this rod for the retaining stop. What looks like a point is the end that joins the parts. Here are the mould and the old customer's wheel.” The employee examined the measurements. “Couldn't a tool be used for something else?” the officer asked again. “It could,” Harinarayan replied. “But what is possible and what has actually been done here are two different kinds of evidence.”

With the employee's permission, Naira wrote three headings on her paper: What the photograph shows; What was examined in the workshop; What questions remain unanswered. She had once feared that speaking too quickly against a public complaint might cause genuine evidence of wrongdoing to be overlooked. She remembered her own mistake in publishing Mahesh's testimony before it was safe to do so. “For now,” she said, “all we ought to state publicly is that the photograph does not, by itself, prove a crime. If there are other objects or documents, they will require a separate inquiry.”

At that moment Irfan Khan came over from the neighbouring vehicle-repair shop. A black smear of grease ran across the sleeve of his shirt, and he carried a small, worn bushing. He had come to collect an axle pin he had ordered earlier from Harinarayan. Seeing the crowd, he asked, “Have you stopped the part for my vehicle?” “It's here,” Harinarayan said, “but an inspection is under way.” Irfan placed his order slip before the municipal employee. It listed the axle of a vehicle wheel, the date, the identifying mark of the old part, and the request for its replacement.

One of Irfan's customers owned a small passenger vehicle, which carried patients and workers from the railway square at different fares. Its driver was in a hurry. He had told Irfan over the telephone that if a complaint about the noise of the brakes were put in writing, he might lose his transport contract. Irfan had not yet written the complaint down; he intended to inspect the fault a second time. Now, in front of the gathered people, he made his decision. “I'll issue a slip today recording what I saw in the vehicle. The customer may be angry if he chooses, but I won't call it safe without an examination.”

One officer looked at the round hole inside Irfan's bushing. “And this?” he asked. Irfan made no attempt at a dramatic demonstration. He set the old part beside the new measurement and showed where the metal wore away as the axle turned. There was the scar of an old injury across his palm; he understood the hazards of his work. “This is a repair sample,” he said. “A shape like this might be made for some other purpose, but look at its use on this vehicle first. Then put your inference into writing.” The employee took a photograph, and also recorded the instruction that the customer's private details were not to be made public.

Naira asked Irfan a question apart from the others. “How many days ago was this vehicle repaired?” Irfan replied that he had written down the dates of his earlier work, but he could not testify about the part replaced in another workshop. “Put the limits of my work in the record,” he said. Naira wrote three more words: Seen. Done. Heard. In the marketplace there were people eager to draw every consignment into a single criminal story merely because a vehicle had a similar name. The separate receipt for this inspection stood in the way of that eagerness.

Once a rumour spreads through a market, it alters the prices of goods as well. Harinarayan's regular customer Nandlal, who had ploughshares made for his fields, did not come at all. His son had seen the report on his mobile phone and sent word suspending the order. Harinarayan read the message and grew a little sad, but he did not offer it to the police as evidence against an adversary. “He was frightened. It's my task to explain things to him,” he said. “If every customer gets frightened, how will the forge stay alight?” Ajit asked. Harinarayan stood looking at the unfinished ploughshare beside the anvil.

Near the bangle shop, Farzana Chudihar was laying out three kinds of goods for a customer: hand-shaped lac bracelets, thin glass bangles, and uniformly sized pairs made by machine. After hearing talk of Rekha Sahu's new design, some people had begun calling Farzana's wares “copies.” Farzana explained the separate costs of manufacture and the different risks of breakage. “Rekha's design belongs to her,” she said. “The mixture of colours in these bracelets, and the turn given by my hand, are my work. And the machine-made ones I'll sell as machine-made. I won't call them handmade and charge more.”

The customer said, “Some people are even saying that bent thing in the photograph of the metal is a tool for cutting bangles.” Farzana did not laugh. She picked up her craftsperson's small tongs, showed the rubber on their jaws, and placed beside them a narrow clamp Harinarayan had made. “These two tools may look alike,” she said, “but one holds hot lac and the other steadies a wooden mould. If you turn a shopkeeper into a criminal without looking at the receipt or the work, these hands of mine will be brought to a stop as well.”

Farzana's sister's daughter had come to buy bangles with money she had saved herself, for the first time. Instead of red, she chose a grey-green bracelet. “Do you really like this colour,” Farzana asked, “or are you choosing it merely to go against what everyone says?” The girl laughed. “It's like the shadow of a cloud. It'll look even lovelier when it rains.” Farzana explained how to care for lac when it came into contact with water. Rather than lowering the price and calling the difference a gift, she entered the agreed discount on the receipt. For a little while, their laughter broke through the fear hanging over the market.

A short distance from the bangle shop, Sharda Kasaudhan sat with the pages of an old pawn ledger spread before her. Having heard of the dispute over a woman's ornament at Kamala the goldsmith's shop, she had decided to examine the old interest calculations in her own family's business. Her elder brother said that reopening the old slips would damage the family's reputation. Sharda had replied, “If an unfair charge has been entered, keeping the page shut won't save our good name. But I won't call every pawned article stolen property either.” That day she had brought separate applications from three families.

On Sharda's first page, the amount of the principal was clearly entered, but one item of interest had been charged twice. On the second, “family” had been written where the name of the woman who pledged the article should have stood. On the third, it was unclear who had paid how much towards redeeming an article after the term of the pledge had expired. Sharda made a separate account and told the customer, “I'll examine the figures. I won't authorise the sale of any jewellery today.” Her brother grew irritated. “If you reveal so much to customers, you'll ruin the family business.” “It will be ruined far more,” she answered, “when trust is broken by accounts that cannot be explained.”

When Kamala arrived, Sharda spoke to her about the supplementary claim concerning the elderly woman's bracelet. Kamala did not unfold the private documents for her to see. “The ownership claim is lodged in my shop,” she said. “You examine your own interest accounts. If the customer herself gives permission, then we can consider how the two sets of papers relate to one another.” Sharda agreed. Questions of a woman's ownership and of debt touched both businesses, but that was no reason to make the customer's private obligations public without her consent.

After midday the inspection team assembled once more at Harinarayan's workshop. Lalit Vishwakarma had also come, because the wooden and iron measurements needed to correspond for the clamps intended for the temporary landing platform at the ghat. Lalit had lost his earlier contract not through any mistake of workmanship, but because he had refused to sign a false certification of load-bearing capacity. He made no promise to undertake the new work; he merely showed the old template he had brought. “If the iron clamp is made properly, the wood won't slip,” Harinarayan said. “But whether the whole platform will hold when the water rises is not something my tool can tell you.”

Aditi and Tara arrived a little later. Aditi carried a preliminary drawing for the renewed inspection of the drainage outlet, where the measurements of the old obstruction restricting the flow were still incomplete. The municipal employee asked whether the iron hook could be used to lift the blocked grille. “The hook has been made to lift a grille,” Harinarayan replied. “But when it should be lifted, how far, and with whose permission—that must be decided by the engineer and the people who use it.” Tara pointed out that the grip of the hook needed another slight bend to prevent it from slipping in the hand. Harinarayan entered her suggestion in his notebook.

The inspection team examined the measurements of all four unfinished implements, the customers' orders, and a demonstration of how the tools were used. That day, nothing found in the workshop supplied specific material evidence for the phone caption alleging that weapons were being made there. One of the police officers agreed to record this in his remarks. He added, however, that any independent inquiry into an outside consignment or another complaint would not be closed by this finding. “That's fair,” Harinarayan said. “Only don't circulate a photograph of my ordinary tools as though it were proof of a crime already established.”

The municipal employee gave Naira a short copy of the inspection report, which mentioned the uses of the four ordinary tools and the receipts from their separate customers. Halfway through the page, she stopped at a single word: “recovered.” “What article was seized here?” she asked. “The samples were examined, not seized,” the employee replied. “Then please write ‘inspected,’” Naira said politely. “Changing one word can change the future of a document.” The employee prepared a corrected copy and handed it to Harinarayan.

Ajit was still standing in the doorway. He had a handful of small scraps of iron with which he wanted to make a little wind chime. Harinarayan looked at the string the boy had brought. “These pieces have sharp points. Grind the edges smooth first, or you'll end up cutting someone's hand with what you call a chime.” “Will they call this a weapon too?” Ajit asked. For the first time that day Harinarayan smiled. “If you can make it so it doesn't cut a hand and makes a beautiful sound, that will be the first test of your craft.”

A short correction appeared on the noticeboard in the market square: the inspection had not substantiated the allegation concerning the photograph of Harinarayan's workshop; an object could not be judged apart from its observed use and the relevant documents. No one offered an open apology. Nandlal did not immediately reinstate his order for the ploughshare. The loss remained written in Harinarayan's ledger; it was not a debt that vanished simply because a proper inspection report had been issued.

Irfan telephoned his vehicle-owning customer. “I'll finish the axle work today,” he said, “but I'll record the fault I saw on the brake-inspection slip. Whether to put the vehicle on the road is your decision; it's my responsibility to say when it is unsafe.” After a silence the customer said, “Just write that it needs to be looked at again.” “I'll write that it needs to be looked at,” Irfan answered, “and I'll also write down the wear I've already seen.” He ended the call. He knew he might have lost a customer.

In the evening Farzana set three small boards outside her shop: Handmade Lac Work, Glass Bangles, Machine-made Goods. She took time to explain the differences in colour and size to a customer, without pressing anyone to buy the most expensive things. Rekha Sahu came by briefly and asked her opinion on a new shape. “The colour is good at this joint,” Farzana said, “but it will rub against the wrist. The honour of a craftsperson lies in keeping the customer's hand safe.” Rekha noted a small correction on her drawing.

Farzana told her that she wanted to show children a short lesson on the three kinds of bangles. Instead of letting them touch hot lac while it was being worked, the lesson would use a cold mould, colour samples, and the safely finished edges of broken bangles. “If a child takes to the craft,” Rekha said, “the child should learn what proper training costs. No one should make children do a shop's work under the name of free skills.” “And a child who doesn't take to it,” Farzana replied, “will still learn the value of money earned by somebody else's sweat.”

At the family's evening meeting, Sharda laid down a sheet on which the principal, the interest, and the owner's name were entered separately. Her brother was still arguing, but he fell silent when he saw the line where interest had been charged twice. “We'll correct this one account,” he said, “but we can't open every old ledger in a single day.” Sharda agreed. She fixed a day on which the customer's permission would be sought for the first copy of an open interest register. It was not a complete victory, but the old command to keep the papers closed had been broken.

At night Harinarayan was putting out the forge fire when Meena returned with the corrected receipt for her brass-vessel repairs. “The question of that fourth item at the hospital remains,” she said. “My iron hook from today is not the answer to it,” Harinarayan replied. “If I find a receipt, I'll produce it in my own name. But I won't bear witness to what I haven't seen.” Meena

nodded. Both wanted the missing article found; neither would turn the other's work into false evidence.

Before the workshop closed, Gomti arrived carrying a slip. Among the labourers who had collected samples from the hospital warehouse, one worker's signature was absent; in its place was only a thumbprint. “I'll call in the person whose print this is,” she said. “I won't put words in his mouth that aren't written on this paper.” Harinarayan glanced at the slip and gave it straight back. “Everyone who works at a forge can have blackened hands,” he said. “You can't identify one of my workers just by looking at a dark thumbprint.” Gomti kept the slip safe in her own possession.

Urmila passed the workshop beside the handcart used for carrying hospital linen. She asked Harinarayan whether the axle pin would be ready in time. “Your cart's pin is being made,” he said. “When you collect it, you'll have a separate receipt. But fitting this pin to an unsafe landing platform won't make the platform safe.” Urmila laughed. “We've begun to understand that water, linen, axles and platforms all need their own accounts. When the wages due to us are settled with the same clarity, then I'll say we've made progress.” There was mockery in her words, but weariness too.

Ajit hung his little wind chime above the anvil. When a breeze caught it, two of the three thin pieces rang, but the third remained silent. He took up the tongs and altered the distance between them. Now all three gave their separate notes. Harinarayan ran a hand along one rough edge. “This still needs smoothing,” he said. Ajit took the chime down again. Admitting that the work was unfinished did not lessen his pleasure in it. Outside, across the distant marketplace, the effects of the day's falsehood still lingered. Inside, the forge had gone dark; yet a small, new sound made of iron remained in the house.

Chapter 45 · The Weaver's Consignment

In the half-spent light of dawn, the first drop fell from the roof of Sukathi's market shed, and Vinod Kevart tipped over the bamboo cover. The water gathered in it fell not upon the baskets of fish but into a deep earthen pot set beside the drain. All through the fish market, the sounds of wet sacks, nets, broken pieces of ice, and the wooden sandals of the water-carriers rose together. Vinod's first concern was not the price of fish but the danger of someone slipping on the narrow passage where the last vehicle of the night was still standing. He lifted his small slatted selling platform and shifted it once more. From near the shed owner's accountant came a voice: "The rent will be higher in that spot." Vinod answered, "Write down the rent. But first leave some room for people to set their feet."

On the other side of that wet passage Yusuf Ansari was unloading two bundles of cloth. The fabric that had come from his loom was folded with such care that, as soon as the binding was loosened, a fine red thread along its edge shone in one unbroken line. A white paper strip was pasted to the second bundle: "Yusuf Ansari, Handloom, Approved for Hospital Use." His hand stopped at the sight of it. He had not written the words of approval, nor did he possess any test report showing that the cloth had passed the standards required for a hospital. The first bundle held cloth woven by his own hands; the fabric in the second felt strange beneath his fingers. Yet both carried the stamp of the same shop.

The driver opened his delivery note. "It's all one trader's goods. The unloading slip has been made out under a single name." Yusuf drew a thread from a corner of the second bundle and examined it. The structure of the yarn, the join at the edge, the feel of the folds—none belonged to his loom. He did not want to tear the length of cloth; he merely showed the corner of the sample and said, "I did not weave this. A stamp bearing my name does not make a thing mine." The driver insisted that the trader had paid an advance, that the market price was good today, and that the sensible course was to unload and sell at once. Yusuf placed the first bundle to one side and tied his own red cord around the second. In his household ledger that cord meant: "Sale stopped."

Yusuf's son telephoned just then. He was training in electronic equipment and wanted to devise a small method for matching photographs of customers' consignments. "Abba, look at the stamp on the second consignment through your phone. It will match the photograph of our sample," he said. Irritated, Yusuf replied, "You cannot feel the holes along the edge in a photograph!" His son fell silent, then said, "That is precisely why I keep asking you to put a sample number beside the photograph. I am not setting aside what your own eyes have seen." Yusuf looked again at a digit written in the corner of the

delivery note. The previous evening, each time his son had urged him not to sell two different lots of goods under one mobile-phone image, Yusuf had heard only another obstacle to business. Today his own fingers were beginning to understand why the boy had said it.

As Vinod adjusted his scales, he noticed Yusuf. “In cloth, two bundles bear one name. In fish, they’ll say two baskets came from the same pond and use that to cut the price,” he said, laughing. A weight already stood upon his customer’s scale, but the question troubling him was why the carriers’ fee never appeared on the receipt. He sold his fish on a platform shared with the fishers. The wholesale contractor’s vehicle could pull straight into the shade; the small sellers had to bear both sun and rain. Today, for the first time, Vinod took a page of his own expenses to the shed accountant: the cost of buying the fish, bringing it ashore from the boat, carrying the baskets, and counting the fish that had spoiled, each entered separately.

After reading the page, the accountant said, “The big transporters pay in advance. That’s why their places are permanent.” Vinod answered, “I pay rent too. But will you count the spaces by the wheels of the vehicles or by the baskets from which people sell? A man who bought his fish at dawn has been given a place where water still drips.” The accountant did not pretend to search his register for the names of the small sellers; he actually turned the pages. There was only one entry for them: “Miscellaneous.” “Miscellaneous is not a person’s name,” Vinod said. He did not demand an immediate decision on the whole contract. Instead, he wrote down the date on which he could submit a separate application for space to the market committee.

Nearby, Suman Tikulihar was opening her little wooden box. Inside were brightly coloured tikulis made on safe clay and wooden moulds, round paper samples, and small identifying marks for the borders. For the fair at the fish market, the traders wanted boards bearing the names of their goods, and Suman had received a partial order to make coloured signs. She told one customer, “The pattern I have created will remain recorded in my sample book. You may use the board you buy for that board’s intended purpose; the price does not include the right to copy my mould for every shop.” The customer smiled at first, then asked, “What, then, is the price for making the sign?” On a small receipt Suman showed the paper, the colours, and the time of her hands as separate items.

At that hour Meena Sarki was fastening two leather straps to a bamboo post beside the shed and hanging up samples. Her family made equipment for pack animals, straps for tying sacks, and grips for tools. She had brought sample measurements from a cooperative group across the border, but transactions in this market were conducted in local currency and on local receipts. The currency, date, and allocation of costs for paying the people in her cooperative were still under discussion. Meena tugged lightly at one strap to demonstrate

its strength. “This one isn’t for a wet fish basket. If water keeps getting into this joint, it may loosen.”

The driver asked Meena to bind both bundles of cloth with a single strap. “I can certainly tie them,” she answered, “but why should I tie a slip bearing the wrong name into my knot? First tell me which bundle is to go to whom.” She entered three items on her small receipt: hire of the strap, labour for tying it, and time spent waiting. “Everyone wants to be paid separately!” the driver exclaimed in irritation. Meena replied, “When the same person does three jobs, none of those jobs becomes free. And a strap is not proof of anyone’s wrongdoing.” She supplied her strap for the first bundle alone, withholding it from the second until responsibility had been made clear.

Yusuf opened the cloth in the first bundle. The days of his household seemed bound into its threads: where the warp had once broken, a small join had been repaired with earth-coloured yarn. He did not wish to conceal that little mark of handwork merely to make a sale. The cloth in the second bundle was smooth and lustrous, but he had neither the authority nor the test results needed to call it “hospital-approved handloom.” A representative of the wholesaler arrived and said, “You’ll get twice the price. We can find out later who put on the stamp. Just send the goods.” Yusuf opened his ledger and entered the first bundle’s number separately. “What I have not woven shall not go out under my name,” he said. “A double price cannot turn a false claim about hospital use into the truth.”

The trader’s representative reminded him of an old debt. The advance for the school curtains had still not been received in full; the shopkeeper who supplied his yarn was demanding another payment. “This sale would clear your debt,” the man said. Yusuf’s mouth went dry. He remembered the slip for his son’s training fees lying in a little drawer. On a page he wrote out his estimate of the loss: two days’ shop rent, the cost of bringing the bundles to the vehicle, and the delay in buying the next supply of yarn because this sale would be held up. Even after laying out those figures plainly, he did not untie the red cord. It was easy enough to speak of an ethical decision, harder to provide grain for the household.

Water was flowing from outside the roof into the shed’s drain. A young man declared that, because the drain was blocked, the pond water must certainly have gone bad. Vinod stopped him. “This is the shed’s outlet. The water in the pond is a separate question. Today’s smell cannot give you a numerical measure of the quality of the water there.” He drew a rough sketch of the shed’s gate, the route taken by its wastewater, and the place where the fish were stored. The drainage of the water running through the market needed inspection; testing the reservoir from which the fish came required a different sample and a different procedure. Suman added a fine line to the corner of her sign design so that, on the fair’s board, the market drain would not be confused with the picture of the pond.

By noon the organising committee for the fish-and-makhana labour fair had assembled on the market's communal platform. Ramani Mallah came carrying an old sample of dried makhana. She was clear about the fact that gathering makhana in the ponds, drying it, popping it, and taking it to market were separate kinds of work. One committee member proposed buying the lengths of cloth along with the fish and makhana at a single rate for "local goods." Yusuf, Vinod, and Ramani looked at one another. Ramani spoke first. "Calling something local is a mark of respect. But the price must follow the work. A raw makhana seed and a popped kernel are not the same."

Showing a slight flaw in his length of cloth, Yusuf said, "The rate for handwoven cloth must take account of the hours spent at the warp and the cost of the yarn. Add transport separately. I don't make fish baskets, and a fish seller isn't the keeper of my loom." Vinod added at once, "The buying price of the fish, the small seller's share, and the loss on spoiled fish must all be kept separate. Writing one price for everything brought in by a single vehicle makes matters easier for the trader, not the worker." This time the committee made four entries instead of one: fish, makhana, cloth, and transport. The rates were not approved immediately; the original purchase slips were requested for the next meeting.

The trader's representative returned. This time he carried a copy of an invoice showing the combined sum for both bundles, with the stamp of Yusuf's shop printed on it. "Sign it and we'll release the load. Otherwise return the advance you were given," he said. Yusuf saw that the invoice bore only a stamp, not his signature. He laid his authentic weaving sample, the earlier order, and the receipt for the first bundle on the table. "I am prepared to account for the money owed on the cloth I actually wove," he said, "but I will not sign to say that the other goods were made by me. Whatever advance was paid against those goods requires a written reconciliation."

Naira had come to the public noticeboard at the market to collect a slip concerning Urmila's wages. Yusuf had no wish to draw her into his dispute, but Vinod asked who would keep secure copies of the written papers. Naira heard the numbers of both bundles, photographed the lengths of cloth with their owners' consent, and wrote down no more than what could be observed: the first bundle matched a sample from Yusuf's loom; the second bore his printed name, but there was no proof of its manufacture. To investigate the words "hospital-approved," the hospital's purchasing register would have to be examined. The appearance of those words did not justify calling the faults in the hospital's old metal invoices and cloth register one and the same offence.

Naira noticed a common vehicle number on the representative's invoice. The same kind of vehicle number had appeared on some of the hospital's warehouse slips, but the dates and descriptions of work were different. She told Vinod, "A single vehicle may carry fish, cloth, dyes, and fluffed cotton through a market. A matching vehicle does not mean that every sack has the

same source. Each consignment needs its own loading slip, place of unloading, and mark of acceptance.” “Then don’t write that my vehicle is a criminal either,” said the representative. “I won’t,” Naira answered. “Nor will I declare anyone guilty without investigation merely because his name has been printed here.”

Beside the red cord already tied around the second bundle, Yusuf fastened a narrow strip of paper: “Identity of manufacture and intended use unverified; sale suspended; original packing preserved.” On the first bundle he wrote an accurate description and measurements of the cloth from his loom. The representative objected that, if the goods were sealed, there was no saying how long they might have to remain in a corner of the shed. Meena displayed a blank receipt for her straps. “Wherever they are kept, charge the storage by the day and write it down. No one is to open a bundle without permission.” Yusuf accepted a temporary entry making him responsible for the storage charge. Whose debt it would ultimately become remained open.

At Vinod’s stall, an elderly customer chose two pieces of fish. “I don’t want half a paseri,” she said. “There are only two of us at home today.” The seller told her, “The price comes down with a big basket.” The old woman laughed. “Your scales don’t keep a register of the hunger in my house!” Vinod weighed out the smaller portion she wanted and, instead of using an empty leaf bag, placed it in a clean, shallow basket he had beside him. When she paid, another customer remembered his own calculation and asked for his fish to be weighed again. “This is a market, not an examination hall,” said Vinod, “but if you want the weight checked, the scales are free.” Laughter rose again among the crowd.

Toward evening the secretary of the fish-market committee prepared a temporary notice: the narrow central passage through the shed was to remain clear; the small vendors would submit written accounts of their stalls, rents, and carrying costs; a decision on permanent shade and the special concessions enjoyed by the wholesale contractor would come at the next hearing. Vinod’s demand had not yet been granted. Even so, it mattered to him that his own name had appeared on the hearing sheet in place of “Miscellaneous.” He folded a copy of the paper and put it in his netted bag. “Is there a song written in it?” his daughter asked. “Not yet,” said Vinod. “But if there is room left for your drum, there will be songs.”

Suman was handing the last customer of the day her sheet of coloured paper. The customer’s daughter picked out a round tikuli and said she wanted a blue dot on it, not a red one. Suman showed her another sample. “Choose the colour by which you want your mark to be known,” she said. “But learn how to use the adhesive safely before you put it near your eyes.” The little girl set the tikuli on her forehead and saw the reflection of her mother’s face in a broken mirror. Amid the uproar of the fish market, Suman was pleased by the

child's small assurance. As she handed over the receipt, she closed her sample book, without promising to sell every design in it.

Meena gathered up her straps and gave the driver a separate receipt. She had received the hire for one strap; half the waiting time remained unpaid. She refused to reduce the amount and call it a "favour." After a moment's thought, the driver said he would settle the account tomorrow. Giving him the second copy of the slip, Meena said, "I can give you until tomorrow, but the date written on it must be today's." As she was leaving, Suman asked when she might put a little coloured mark of her own on a leather grip. Meena smiled. "First we'll write down whose object it is, how far the right to use the mark extends, and how the price is to be calculated. Then we can begin the new work."

Yusuf called his son once more. "Your method of photographs and numbers proved useful," he said, "but I need the sound of the warp on my loom as well." His son laughed. "I don't want to take its sound away. I want to learn electronics. I'll make the register of your lengths of cloth, but I don't want to spend the whole day sitting at the loom." Yusuf was silent for a moment. The father did not want his son to sever himself completely from the family trade; the son wanted him to understand that helping did not mean abandoning a different profession. For the first time Yusuf heard that difference without irritation. "I remember the date your training fee is due," he said. "We'll keep the debt account separate." It was not an easy promise to make, but the decision to open two separate pages was real.

On her way back from the shops, Naira took copies of three papers from Yusuf: the order for the first length of cloth, a visual description of the unverified label on the second bundle, and the vehicle's unloading slip. She left the originals with him. "The cotton-fluffer's, dyer's, and washerwoman's goods came on this shared vehicle yesterday too," Gomti told her along the road. "They've said they will bring their separate registers." Naira replied, "Then each register must be read together with its owner's account. The evidence found here must not be made to prove more than it can." The search for the old missing hospital supplies had not suddenly been resolved by this new label.

Back home, Yusuf opened two fresh pages in his night ledger. On the first he entered the wages for the authentic cloth, the yarn, and the amount due from the customer; on the second, the storage cost of the held consignment, the trader's advance, and the wait for an investigation. At the bottom of the page he wrote a separate date for his son's training fees. The loss was plain on paper now; it had not grown any smaller. Yet the bundle bearing the false label had not been sold that day in the name of any hospital or school. For the first time the small fish seller's name had entered the record of a hearing. And a son could lend a hand to his father's work without surrendering the work he

wanted for himself. Yusuf lowered the lamp. The loom was silent tonight, but the true identity of its warp remained intact.

Chapter 46 · The Washerwoman, the Dyer and the Cotton-Fluffer

Urmila Rajak was spreading a freshly washed white sheet across the stone platform at the ghat, holding down its four corners with stones. The morning wind kept lifting one corner, again and again. Sunlight needed to reach the inside of the sheet, but the damp rising from the mud was making it heavy once more. Urmila passed her bare hand over its middle; if the inner seam remained wet, the sheet would begin to smell when it was put away at the hospital. She had set two baskets beside the platform—one for sheets already washed, the other for linen whose count and time of receipt had not yet been reconciled. The same day's sunlight fell on both baskets; in the register, they belonged to different days.

Renu came along the path above the ghat with an old piece of chalk and a length of string. Word of the cloth bundles stopped at Sukathi's cattle shed the day before had reached her. “Everyone says the cloth that came in the same vehicle was the hospital's missing property,” she said. Urmila did not stop folding the washed sheet. “Since when has 'everyone says' been the name of a register?” she asked. “I have a count of what I washed. Rahim will account for what was fluffed. Sakina will know the dyed cloth. Why should I identify what never passed through my hands?”

In the public room across the narrow road from the ghat, Naira had asked not for three tables but for one long plank. Three separate squares were marked on it in chalk: washing, dyeing, and cotton-fluffing. Those lines would settle no question of ownership; they would merely keep the papers from becoming muddled. Gomti opened the window. “A fourth square?” she asked. “For transport,” Naira replied. “The vehicle travelled between all of them, but a vehicle's delivery slip cannot take the place of a work receipt. Keep its accounts separately.”

Rahim Mansuri was the first to arrive. An old khadi bag hung from his shoulder, and in his hand he carried a small bundle of cotton. The moment he opened the bag, delicate fibres drifted into the air of the room. Loosening the cloth tied across his nose, he said, “Filling new mattresses with cotton I've fluffed and making old cotton rise again are different kinds of work. In the first, I am owed the price of the material as well; in the second, the cotton still belongs to the customer.” He had received an order to make a sample of a new mattress. Yet now, as soon as they heard the hospital mentioned, customers were asking whether he filled mattresses with stolen cotton.

Sakina the dyer arrived behind him. There were fine marks of indigo beneath her fingernails and two different stains in the spaces between her fingers. She unfolded a length of cloth, one half grey, the other inclined

towards a shade between green and violet. “This isn't a mistake. The customer changed her mind,” she said. “When she first asked for a muddy blue, I tested the dye on this piece. Then she said she wanted green for the school curtains. The cost of the new dye, the hours spent washing it, and the labour of the first sample are three separate charges.” After ordering the change of colour, the customer was proposing to pay only half the bill.

The third visitor was Harish the grocer. He carried spices, rough pieces of soap, and two tins of dried ingredients ordered for testing fabrics. He set the tins down on the table and brushed away the dust. “I don't make dyes, wash linen, or sew mattresses,” he said before anyone could ask. “I sell certain materials. My sales register shows which sack left my shop and which came from the wholesale warehouse in the market.” The label on one of the tins was rubbed away. Rather than certify its contents merely on the strength of his own name, he wanted to show the original purchase invoice.

Naira had with her the papers for the two consignments tied with red cord the previous day: the measurements of Yusuf's first length of cloth, the unverified stamp on the second bundle, and the unloading slip for the shared vehicle. Yusuf himself had not come. He needed to finish a small order at his loom and find the money for a payment due to a customer. He had not sent his original pages, only agreed that the copies he had given Naira might be read again. “We'll examine things on this plank, not deliver a verdict,” Naira told them. “Tell us where your own papers came from. Don't drag in the name of anyone who isn't here.”

The driver arrived too. His name was Mahendra. He had been awake late loading bundles of cloth, and his eyes were red. According to his slip, the same vehicle had stopped in four places: first at the cotton-fluffer's yard, then in the dyer's lane, next at the goods entrance behind the hospital, and finally at the cattle shed. But two digits in the times were blurred. “It rained in the night,” Mahendra said. “The paper got wet. Don't make me a thief for that.” Naira wrote down his words. A wet sheet of paper was not, in fact, an answer to every discrepancy; but neither was it right to call the explanation a lie without examining it.

Rahim opened his first receipt. It recorded seven mattresses whose cotton had been fluffed again, cotton weighed for two new mattresses, and three covers taken home by their owners. Beside the thumbprint of an elderly woman, her grandson had written her name. “These were the customer's own covers,” Rahim said. “I wasn't paid for selling cotton; I was paid for fluffing it. If someone says that every bit of filling seen in the vehicle belonged to the hospital, does that make the old woman's mattress stolen too?” Urmila read the date on the receipt. It was two days before the disputed date in the hospital's linen register.

Mahendra said that not seven mattresses but only four sacks had gone into his vehicle. Rahim could not even bring himself to laugh. “The number of jobs done and the number of sacks carried aren't the same,” he said. “Three customers took their things away by hand. Four sacks went by vehicle. If you mean to cut the wages for my seven mattresses, talk about four sacks; but don't say all seven mattresses travelled in that cart.” Naira made two separate columns: the artisan's work and the actual transport. A young man in the gathering who had earlier made an accusation slowly slipped his phone into his pocket.

Sakina spread out her book of dye samples. Beside each colour a fine thread had been tied and kept inside the page so that the sunlight would not alter its shade. Showing the first sample for a length of cloth and the one made after the change, she said, “There are receipts for two colours, but only one length of fabric. The customer's finger mark is on the written instruction changing the order. The cloth hasn't acquired a new owner; it has acquired a new account for dyeing.” Gomti asked, “What if the same length has been counted twice?” Sakina replied, “Then why was I paid less? Two orders were counted; there was only one length of cloth.”

Harish the grocer's little notebook held the names of many things: salt, carom seeds, dried bark, two thin pouches of raw oil for making soap, and blank paper for wrapping. Seeing “white material” written on one page, the young man immediately said, “That must be powder for cleaning the hospital's linen.” Harish stopped him. “'White' describes a colour, not a use. This is a sample of dry lime, which is also white, but you don't put it on a person's body. Before opening a sack, read its name, its source, and the note explaining its purpose.” Harish did not want a mistake made by his shop to be concealed. Nor did he want someone else's imagining entered in its place.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside the room. Two young men came from the direction of the cattle shed, saying that someone had accused Mahendra the previous day of carrying off a child in his vehicle. One had a photograph on his phone: sacks, and between them a small blurred figure. “Look. A child was sitting inside,” he said. Instead of taking the phone in her hands, Naira asked, “Who saw it? At what time? From how far away?” “It came in a social-media message,” he answered. Mahendra's face reddened again. “There was cloth in my vehicle,” he said. “No child.”

Urmila went outside and saw that, at the corner of the photograph, there was an empty sack lying behind the vehicle; next to it stood a boy fastening the strap of his wooden sandal. His face could not be seen. Naira explained to the young man that a photograph did not establish the child's circumstances, relationship to anyone present, the time, or the context. A rumour of child abduction that had spread at the station some days earlier had been disproved on investigation; this new picture could not be treated as proof of that incident. “If a child really is missing,” Naira said, “the family's information

must reach the responsible office by a secure route. Circulating an anonymous picture in the market does not find the child."

Meanwhile, a woman was standing outside the room with her son. The boy said he had not climbed into the vehicle; he had been waiting for his mother by the roadside. His mother did not consent to anyone showing her son's picture on the young man's phone. "I'll testify that my boy was with me yesterday," she said, "but his face is not going up on the market noticeboard." Naira said she would record the woman's statement and the time concerned separately and keep them safe. Settling the earlier rumour could not automatically determine the truth of this new photograph; nor was anyone to identify the woman publicly.

After midday the hospital's warehouse clerk arrived. He had a copy of a receipt, not the original register. In a somewhat sharp voice he said, "The same vehicle number appears at the hospital and at the cattle shed. Can there really be so much coincidence?" Closing her book of dyes, Sakina replied, "The vehicle is hired. It isn't a servant of one household. My length of cloth doesn't belong to the hospital. If the customer's name and contact details are needed, obtain her consent." The clerk said that the error involving packing marked with the hospital's name had to be examined impartially. Naira agreed. But what was now to be investigated was not merely the vehicle's presence: it was the acceptance of each delivery and the origin of its packing.

Urmila opened the page for the day the linen had been wet. In the list of seven hospital sheets and five covers, one recorded time of receipt came before the time the washing had finished. She showed the clerk the empty space in the corner of the paper. "I didn't write this. According to my ghat register, the sheets were still being wrung out at that hour," she said. "Perhaps someone entered the time of the order instead of the arrival," the clerk replied. "That may be," Urmila answered. "Then give the order and the actual receipt two separate lines. Don't erase the hours of my work along with the mistake."

Urmila told them something that had happened on the day of her mother's treatment. One night, when a patient needed a sheet, she had taken a clean one from her own home to the hospital. Afterwards the account of the payment due for that sheet had remained unclear in the office papers. "I don't want my mother's illness displayed in the hospital records," she said. "I want the hour when the cloth was delivered and the wages for the work of my hands to be written correctly, without using the patient's name." At that distinction the clerk's voice softened a little. He said that no amendment could be officially stamped without examining the original register.

Naira drew a timeline from the four receipts. Four sacks of cotton Rahim had fluffed were loaded in the morning; one length of Sakina's newly dyed cloth went in before noon; Urmila's clean linen was loaded towards evening; and Harish's two tins were delivered to a different customer. The hospital's

copy showed a stop by the vehicle but did not fully record the quantity of goods, the seal, or the recipient. “This line shows that the routes of four separate jobs were involved,” Naira said. “It doesn't show that the hospital's missing goods have been recovered.”

At that moment Gomti asked, “Then what is the position of Yusuf's bundle tied with red cord?” Naira replied, “The source of the label claiming hospital approval must be examined. The registers of these four workers don't identify the person who made that label. No one may open the red cord without Yusuf's written consent and an authorised procedure for the goods.” The warehouse clerk said that if cloth was being stolen and sold in the hospital's name, the consignment held back could be useful to the inquiry. They all agreed that the goods should be kept safe, but unverified accusations must not be spread.

Mahendra's predicament was a separate one. Since the day before, two customers had stopped hiring his vehicle, and he feared his business would collapse even if no wrongdoing was proved. “Give me a copy saying I'm innocent,” he told Naira. “I'm not a judge,” she replied. “But I can give you a verified comparison of the receipts collected here and put in writing which accusations have no supporting evidence. Keep safe your vehicle-maintenance register, the signatures made when goods were loaded, and your accounts of hire.” Mahendra said, “If somebody's letter contains the word 'suspicion,' customers stop reading there.” At those words Rahim fell silent, remembering his own customers.

As he was gathering up his tins, Harish the grocer set aside a small packet. The name printed on its wrapper differed from the name on the paper inside. “I won't charge for this yet,” he said. “First I'll check the wholesaler's original receipt. But don't use one mistake in this packet to condemn all my spices.” Sakina asked, “Did you put this on the vehicle?” “No, I brought it myself today,” Harish answered. “The tins in yesterday's consignment have different numbers.” Naira kept the two entries separate. Harish gave written permission for a photograph of the packet to be used in a private inquiry, provided it contained no customer's name.

When the market committee drafted its notice for the evening meeting, a dispute arose over a single word. The secretary had written: “Suspect goods in a shared vehicle.” “People will read that line and think even the cotton in my mattresses is suspect,” Rahim said. Sakina added, “I changed a customer's dye colour, not the ownership of her goods.” Gomti proposed another wording: “The separate loading slips for a shared vehicle are being reconciled; labels on two consignments and the hospital's receipts are under separate investigation.” The secretary began calculating the cost of printing so long a sentence. “The wrong short sentence will be cheaper,” Urmila said, “but we'll be the ones who pay for it.”

The clerk answered that it was not possible to put every detail of the hospital's internal registers on a public board. Naira agreed. “No patient's name, customer's home address, or child's image should be made public. The board should state only the procedure and where a complaint can be lodged. Give separate written notice to anyone whose property has been held.” In the end a short notice went up: “A vehicle number alone does not establish the source of goods or prove a crime; submit the relevant receipts.” This did not settle the hospital's questions, but it blocked one immediate route by which four workers might have been publicly shamed.

Before returning to the ghat, Urmila telephoned Renu. “Has the grating been removed?” she asked. “Half the way is open,” Renu said, “but the earth by the gate is subsiding. If a vehicle turns there again, the edge may break.” “Then I won't send my handcart loaded with linen through that way,” Urmila said. “And record this as an obstruction on a public route, not as a decision on ownership under the water lease.” Renu explained that the fishery-lease map marked the water area, but did not give a complete measurement of the route workers used to reach the gate.

Hearing this, Naira took out an old copy of the water lease. It contained certain conditions governing the use of the water, but did not show the actual width of the passage along the gate through which linen, baskets of fish, and boatmen's tools had to be carried. The water-lease papers had nothing to do with the child-abduction rumour. Nor could the hospital bills be gathered with it into one great accusation of a single crime. But the narrowing of the public route had made it genuinely difficult to establish when, where, and why the vehicle had stopped. Naira recorded this point as a separate observation.

On their way home, Sakina showed her daughter a dye sample. “It's half green and half purple,” the girl said. “What's its name?” Sakina considered it before replying. “The customer may decide its name, but my hands worked to make that colour.” “If I give it a new name, will it have a new price too?” her daughter asked. Sakina laughed. “Changing the name doesn't add any yarn. But if the customer asks for the colour to be changed again, my labour must be counted again.” She showed her daughter how to wash the dye from her stained fingers with soap, for the beauty of colour was no excuse for neglecting the safety of the hands that made it.

That night Naira wrote four headings on the last page of the meeting register: Original Register of Names; Rumour Concerning a Child; Hospital Inventory Register; and Access under the Water Lease. The register of names still lacked some of the original signatures it required. Public accusations over who had circulated the child's unsafe photograph had been stopped. The hospital had been asked for the original record of actual receipts. An application had been prepared for a measurement of the gate on the water-lease route. These four lines might touch one another; without evidence, they could not be allowed to dissolve into one another.

A request was sent to Hira Sahni and Tara to bring measuring cord, a copy of the old boundary markers, and a record of the times when the route at the ghat became blocked the following morning. Urmila wrote down where her handcart had been unable to turn; Mahendra recorded how long he had been obliged to wait outside the gate; Rahim supplied a small drawing of the place where his sacks had been loaded. No signature made the gate wider by itself. But, for the inquiry, the things each person had actually seen were not forced into a single page of accusation.

In the last watch of the night, a small mattress cover rose and filled out again in Rahim's home. His daughter touched the bundle of cotton with her hand. “So soft!” she cried. Rahim laughed. “It is soft, but touch it when the mattress is finished; for now it will raise dust.” He put aside a clean, thin scrap for her to make a pillow for her doll. The dispute in the market had not gone away. Yet in this house, tonight, cotton had been restored to its true work, and his daughter to her play. Whatever width they measured at the gate tomorrow would have consequences for the passage along which that work had to travel.

Chapter 47 · The Measurement of the Gate

At dawn, beside the gate, Hira Sahni planted an old bamboo pole from his boat and rocked it to and fro. Its tip looked firm above the surface, but the moment it met the mud below, it sank another finger's breadth. He pulled it out, laid it aside, then planted it somewhere else. “Before we begin measuring from the surface of the water,” he said, “we must see whether that surface can be taken as a fixed level at all.” Inside the gate the water was still moving slowly; at the outer corner Urmila's handcart had stood trapped for hours the previous day. Half the grating had been opened, but the wheel marks in the mud were fresh even now.

Tara Binout arrived carrying two pieces of chalk, a measuring cord and a slim notebook. Behind her came Shyam Mallik, a cloth bag slung over his shoulder to protect the folds of the old papers. Aditi, the municipal engineer, appeared with two assistants. The copy in her hand clearly stated the outer width of the gate, but beneath it was a small symbol whose meaning no one could explain. “Is this the distance between the iron pillars,” Tara asked, “or the width of the passage through which a person can actually walk?” Aditi studied the paper for a moment. “The old report does not specify its reference points,” she admitted.

Urmila demonstrated by pushing her cart forward. As the first wheel crossed the gate, the second began slipping down the slope at its edge. She stopped at once. The cart carried no linen, only empty bamboo baskets. “I am not going to practise this with patients' sheets aboard,” she said. Mahendra, the driver, showed them the slip on which he had recorded the hours spent waiting the day before. “My vehicle did not go through here,” he said, “but because the unloading place was so far away, the hire went up.” Hira made one thing clear: whether the same width would suffice for a motor vehicle, a handcart and a boatman's equipment was a question to be tested separately in each case.

The first cord was stretched between the gate's two iron pillars. One of the assistants called out the measurement immediately. Tara stopped him. “The cord is taut, but will a wheel travel over the earth that has slumped at the side? Measuring empty air won't tell us how much passage there is on the ground.” They took a second measurement between the lower projection of the ironwork and firm earth; for a third, they tried to reach the hard layer beneath the mud. The three figures differed. Hira had the location, time and water level entered beside each one in his notebook, because a rise in the water could change how any of those measurements ought to be used.

Meanwhile, the representative of Dhani's irrigation lease pointed out a dry line with the end of his stick. “This used to be called Kankar,” he said. “My master's forefathers took water along this way to their fields. The little stream

is dry now, so there should be no question of a public claim over it.” Tara squatted on the spot. Beneath the dry crust lay earth of different colours, and on one side she could make out a thin trace of where water had flowed. “We shall record the name Kankar as testimony,” she said. “But hearing a name does not establish that the land is vacant, and an old account of irrigation does not prove the present boundary either. We need to examine it against the dates of rainfall and use.” Displeasure settled over the representative's face.

“If that line is not vacant, how am I supposed to carry water to the fields?” he demanded. Hira pointed with his pole to a narrow bend below. “What served you for a day as a way to bring in water may have served fishing families all through the rains as a place to come ashore. We shall hear both accounts. But no one may fill in another person's passage to make a canal for himself.” Aditi said it would be wrong to mark out anyone's land immediately beyond the limits shown on the government map. Tara accepted that restraint too. They were there to inspect and measure, not to change possession.

Shyam took an old copy from his bag. In small letters along its edge was the word 'Kareh', beside two crooked marks. Tara lifted the paper and went to a worn old brick near the next corner. Two parallel lines had been scratched upon it. “My grandmother recognised this mark,” she said. “But what she saw has come down to us through my memory. I do not know whether this brick remains in its original place or has been moved.” In her notebook she entered Kareh as 'the local name on an old measurement paper', not as proof of a confluence or of the river's true course.

“If the marks cannot be trusted, why should anyone be paid for finding them?” Aditi asked. Tara pointed beneath the grass. Two women had spent until midnight searching for the old path, and no one had even wanted to ask how much time it took them. “Wages for locating a mark and the authority to treat that mark as conclusive are two different matters,” Tara said. “Pay the people who found the traces of the old course. What they have shown us may prove wrong under an engineering examination. That does not make their labour free.” Aditi told an assistant to open a time register for the local helpers.

By then Madhav Rauniyar had arrived with a small handcart. It held red chalk, waterproof sleeves for papers, a cord measured out in cotton thread, and two thin sacks of lime. “The municipal team asked for three things and the market people for five,” he said with a laugh. Taking the chalk from a glass bottle himself, he showed them a sample. “This is for marking paper, not for dissolving in the water. The lime is separate. I won't scatter that on anyone's ghat either without a proper description of the work.” His account book had three distinct columns: the price of each article, whether anyone had taken it, and who still owed money.

Lifting one of the sacks, an assistant said, “This is government work. Let us use it first; the receipt can be made afterwards.” Madhav caught hold of the sack. “Writing 'government' on a paper won't pay what my shop owes. Take only what has been authorised; I'll carry the rest back.” His son stood holding the cartwheel. “Father,” the boy asked, “if we sell it all, won't today's earnings be good?” Madhav replied, “If we waste lime on work nobody needs, who will pay the price the river bears tomorrow?” He issued a receipt for the chalk and the sleeves, and left the sacks of lime sealed on the cart.

When everyone climbed the embankment behind the gate, the view changed. On one side the raised earthen chharki seemed to promise the settlement protection from high water; on the other, the same filling had lifted the drainage outlet above the level of a small field. An elderly woman farmer approached carrying a hand hoe. “Behind this embankment my crop was saved from the rain,” she said, “but the water trapped here stood in the houses behind us for two days.” Hira studied the slope by the shadow of his pole on the ground, but said that a shadow did not measure the movement of water. No one should even consider cutting through the embankment without measuring the water height, the depth of the fill and the actual drainage capacity.

Aditi showed them a line in an old engineering report. Beside the chharki it drew one straight edge, as though no human foot had ever been set there. Beneath that line Tara drew three bends she had marked in her notebook: one for the route along which linen was carried, another for the footpath down to deeper water where boats landed, and a third for the narrow place people climbed during floods. Shyam's old record of bamboo work showed a bend too, though it gave no measured distance. This did not mean the report was false; it meant that the questions it had set out to answer were narrower. Tara circled the difference in red chalk.

“If we put every footpath on the map,” an assistant asked, “where will there be room left on the paper?” “In the water,” Hira replied, “people don't need space on paper. They need somewhere to climb out.” “Without the paper,” Aditi said, “we cannot obtain permission to make the route safe.” Tara answered, “Then correct the paper. Don't erase people's paths for the convenience of a straight line.” Someone in the crowd applauded. Hira stopped him. “If the figures are wrong, everyone will suffer.”

A member of the municipal committee produced a capacity certificate that had already been prepared. Once it was signed, temporary consignments and boating equipment could be taken through the gate. “Today's measurements are sufficient,” the member said. “If we hold up the paper, the fish market, the hospital linen—everything—will come to a standstill.” Hira read the sheet. One line declared 'safe passage for vehicles and boating equipment in all seasons'. He put the pen down. “Today an empty cart managed only half the passage. We have not measured the highest water here during the rains. Why

should my name bear the weight of 'all seasons'?" The danger of increased hire charges and losses on consignments if he refused was real. But a false certificate might exact its price in someone else's injury.

"My linen arrived late yesterday," Urmila said. "If it is held up again today, patients' bedding cannot be changed on time." Hira looked at her. "I am not saying this to stop your work. I am saying it so the person sent along that route can keep both hands safe." "Then put an alternative route in writing," Urmila replied. "Don't simply say no." Everyone fell silent at that demand. Naira, who had so far been comparing copies of the papers, stepped forward a little and proposed that possible temporary access arrangements be examined on a form separate from the capacity certificate.

Hira pointed out the old place where people boarded the boats. Only pedestrians could pass there, one at a time; a heavy cart could not. On the far side, Gomti Beldar's team might be able to lay a small level platform the next day, but it would be wrong to open it before testing the stability of the earth and the river level. Aditi assigned another team to inspect an alternative temporary route. The essential linen Urmila needed that day was divided into two loads; a small vehicle would take them as far as the safe outer bend. The distance for which the loads then had to be carried by hand, and the wages due for that work, were recorded separately. "Changing the route doesn't wipe out the hours I work," Urmila said.

Near the embankment two workers were cutting grass in preparation for the old annual communal day on which the gate and water channel were cleared. On the day for opening the mouth of the channel, people usually identified the silt accumulated at the outlet, divided the labour among themselves and cleaned the sections that were safe to touch. Today no one had ordered the entire blocked mouth to be opened. At Tara's request, the workers cleared only the grass on the outside, so that the old watermarks could be seen. Beneath it another stone appeared. They measured its distance from the lines on the first stone, but did not treat it as an official boundary marker.

Hira brought out an old meeting notebook from the annual boat-and-equipment testing festival. It contained separate entries for the length of the bamboo pole, the estimated load on a boat and the marks on the bamboo used to test depth. "An old bamboo pole may go down into today's water," Hira said, "but yesterday's depth is not today's figure." He pointed to a worn strip along the bottom of a boat. One of the municipal assistants wanted to paint a handsome new mark upon it. Hira stopped him. "First test an empty boat and a loaded boat separately. A painted mark is no substitute for a sound point of reference." The knowledge of boatmen was being made part of the work, not put on display as a marvel.

Madhav returned with the account for the chalk. A committee member said that the purchase register listed five protective sleeves, although only

three had been used. Madhav showed him the two unopened packets. “These will go back, and the bill will be reduced accordingly.” The member asked when goods bearing the hospital's name had come through Madhav's shop. “Hospital orders are separate,” Madhav said. “This receipt for sleeves belongs to the gate inspection. The quality of other goods has to be decided by testing those goods themselves.” Naira entered the two purchases separately.

After midday a boy began drawing a river on the earth with red chalk. His grandmother, who lived beside the chharki, asked, “There is no water here. Why draw a river?” The boy laughed. “In my notebook the river will pass this way.” With her hoe, the grandmother turned one bend in his line. “And when the water rises in the rains, where will my house be?” The boy drew another line. Tara watched. On paper, making a new line was a game of learning; on the ground, it raised the question of someone's home.

The sheet bearing the signature of the engineer who wrote the old report was in the office, but the copy available in the field did not state the seasonal conditions on the day of inspection. Aditi made it clear that no conclusion could be drawn about the report as a whole before the remaining pages were obtained. Tara agreed. Yet today's inspection had shown that the local enclosure, the footpaths and the drainage behind the chharki were missing from the available account. She had this recorded: 'Request the complete original document. The available copy does not adequately show the routes used for local access.' Instead of an accusation, the sentence preserved the proper place for further investigation.

Naira and Mahendra returned to the narrow bend and checked again the time at which the vehicle had stopped the previous day. Mahendra said his loading slip named the 'eastern gate', but the goods had actually been unloaded two hundred paces before it. “Did someone arrange that difference deliberately?” Naira asked. Mahendra shrugged. “I did what I was told. Someone may have changed the words on the paper, or I may have had to change the turning.” Looking at the creases in the old credit notes on his vehicle, he said, “That one little bend has cost me two customers.” Naira marked the actual unloading place; she did not write down a criminal motive.

An old wage list reached Shyam. Instead of people's names, some entries gave the names by which they were called at work: one person was 'Red Cap', another 'Little Boat'. “These are false names,” an assistant said. “Every receipt here is therefore suspicious.” Tara objected at once. “A name used at work, a name used at home and a name invented to commit fraud are not the same thing. Ask for the original payment register first.” Shyam did not keep the list as his own. He recorded the name of the person from whom it had come and the permission given for handing it over. Naira quietly set the matter apart. A mistaken identification on this sheet could multiply a thousand questions.

As the afternoon waned, the committee held an open meeting. Aditi had an assistant read out three findings: the width currently available at the gate did not provide sufficient evidence for a certificate of safe passage in all seasons; the available copy of the old report did not fully map local access; and the protective effect of the embankment on one side, together with its effect on drainage on the other, would have to be measured again. Hira signed only the line witnessing the measurements actually taken that day. Beside his signature the words 'NOT A CAPACITY CERTIFICATION' were written clearly. Tara added a separate application for payment of the time spent by workers who had located the old marks.

“What has all this achieved?” the committee member asked. “Tomorrow the gate will still be narrow.” “Tomorrow I won't push my cart through with my eyes shut,” Urmila replied. “The other route and the wages for carrying things along it are on record.” Madhav showed the revised bill; Mahendra supplied the actual place where the goods had been unloaded. The gate had not been opened, but it was now clear whose earnings were held up by whose waiting. Aditi recorded the request for the original report. No one would cut through the chharki without an examination.

That evening, while turning his boat pole in his hands, Hira dropped a dry leaf into the water. It spun slowly in the eddy inside the gate and caught against the side. A boy standing nearby asked, “Will a boat get stuck there?” “A boat isn't a leaf,” Hira replied. “Its weight, its draught and the wind are different. But that leaf has given me a question to look into.” He asked the boy to count the marks on the pole. The child counted to three, forgot the fourth, and they both burst out laughing. There had been less fresh money from fish in Hira's house that day, for he had given half his day to the measurements. Payment for his own labour was essential too.

Back home, Tara carefully dried the copy of the old Kareh marks. On the reverse of the paper she wrote not her grandmother's trembling letters, but only the measurements she herself had taken that day. She knew that some papers relating to her family's old bamboo work had not yet been brought out. Concealing them would not make the present map more trustworthy. A stone had been found today; a worker had recognised its mark; she had demanded payment for that work. But who could be called the owner of the earth was a question her pen had not yet approached.

At night Naira laid a new sheet beside four older, separate lines of evidence and headed it 'Evidence for Access and Measurements at the Gate'. One entry read: 'Reconciliation of work names, personal identities and payments in the original wage list remains outstanding.' On the strength of that list it would be wrong to label anyone a criminal or a secret accomplice. She kept a copy of the letter requesting the original report from Aditi's office and sent word to Shyam that workers' private identities must not be displayed on the public board. There would be another inspection at the gate the following morning.

Before then, they would have to distinguish three possibilities: whether the names concealed there were hidden to protect someone's safety, someone's livelihood, or someone's deception.

Chapter 48 · Three Reasons for Disguise

At dawn, Shyam Mallik kept his palm pressed against the folded corner of an old wage list, trying to smooth it flat. Yesterday's chalk dust had settled along the right-hand edge. The first line recorded the date of the work; the second, the hours spent clearing earth beside the gate; and on the third, in the space for a name, stood the words 'Red Cap'. Two days' wages were still due against that name, but there was no signature acknowledging payment. When Shyam lifted the sheet, a particle fell from the crumbling paper. “This dust won't tell us who anyone was,” he said to himself. “But we can still see whose wages remain unpaid.”

Tara had come from the edge of the Binout embankment and now stood before him. She had spent the night drying a copy of the measurements of the old markings. “Did you find the original list?” she asked. Shyam shook his head. He had obtained this copy from a trunk in an old contractor's house; the original register of names was said possibly to be in the municipal storeroom. The contractor's son was preparing to sell the house and did not want to hear accusations against his father. “We'll ask for the original,” Tara said, “but first we'll establish what work this list concerns. The women who marked the stones at the gate yesterday aren't named here.”

Naira arrived on time, carrying two empty envelopes and an old cloth bag. Shyam laughed. “Why all this covering up, when we're trying to see the names?” “Whether a name needs to be seen,” Naira answered, “and whether everyone needs to be shown that name are two different questions.” She laid a strip of paper across the list and read the serial number of each entry. Some lines bore names used in calling people at work; some gave full names; and in one place a name had been inserted in different ink over a blank space. “Someone may have changed this name,” she said, “but we don't yet know a single reason why it was changed.”

A municipal assistant had been having a noticeboard erected in the square since early morning. His idea was to put up a photograph of the list: anyone whose name appeared could come and identify themselves. “That would be an open inquiry,” he said in his defence. Tara's voice hardened. “Will displaying someone's name on a board make them safe if they haven't been able to come and demand their wages?” The assistant replied that they also had to identify fictitious workers. Naira looked at the white surface of the board. “An open inquiry does not mean open access to people's private details. Put up the dates, the kind of work and the unpaid amounts first. Where it becomes necessary to see a particular person's name, it can be examined in a separate hearing.”

At that moment, from the road outside the gate came the rasp of a metal file. A thin man set down a small wooden chest and took out three objects: a clasp for tightening a boat's rope, the worn tip of an old chisel, and the

crooked iron tooth of a bhowra. His name was Nazir Sikligar. He meant to repair these three things that morning and return them to the river landing. Pasted inside the lid of the chest was a page from his handwritten receipt book. Beside each object he had noted its former condition, the time spent filing it, the owner's consent and the amount due. Nowhere was there a price for selling the object.

The municipal assistant had scarcely caught sight of the tools in the chest when he said, “Yesterday there was suspicion about the blacksmith; today, sharp objects again! Your list doesn't even give the customer's full name. It just says 'boatman'.” Nazir stopped filing and stood upright. “Before touching that clasp, I asked its owner whether he needed it for tightening the knot ahead. If you want, he'll tell you so himself. But his home address isn't a public part of my receipt.” The accusation that had earlier spread about Harinarayan's workshop had already frightened some of Nazir's customers. Nazir had no wish to close his chest: every interruption to his work reduced what he could earn that day.

Hira Sahni came up with a boat pole on his shoulder. He fitted the clasp into a coil of rope, then showed them the old, loose one. “Look at the difference,” he said. “With the first, the rope slips back; with the second, it doesn't. That's why it needs filing. You can't decide what a tool is for merely by looking at its edge.” Before touching the page of Nazir's receipts, Naira asked his permission. The date and duration of the work were clearly entered beside 'boatman'. “Who gave you that name?” she asked. Nazir smiled. “At the landing, five people know each other's boats by name better than they know each other's real names.”

Urmila was just then arriving at the bend in the road with the hospital linen. The narrow gate had not yet passed its safety inspection, so once again she would have to carry her bundle on foot along the smaller path. “Leave aside the question of the owner's home,” she said. “Sometimes I'm called the washerwoman, sometimes Urmila Rajak. On the day my name doesn't bring me my wages, whom am I supposed to say I am?” Naira made two separate columns on her list: 'Name used at work' and 'Person verified as entitled to payment'. She wrote down that the two should not be kept together in the same public register. Urmila picked up her bundle of cloth. The extra time she spent carrying it on foot had still not been entered in the wage register.

A little farther away, Sumitra Kami arrived with a small square wooden box. From it she showed them two right-angled fittings made of thin strips of metal, with a double groove on one side and a slight bend on the other to hold a rope. She had been asked for measurements to join the wooden edges of a temporary panel at the gate, but she did not describe the fittings as a certificate of load-bearing safety. “This is a sample. It can be used only after testing,” she explained. Her receipt listed the metal, the heating, the time

spent shaping it and the measuring as separate items. Into the sample she had struck a little triangular mark of her own making.

“But you're a Kami. Why use this mark instead of your name?” the assistant asked. “The mark identifies my work; it isn't meant to conceal my name,” Sumitra replied. “Another craftsperson's name went onto a panel I made earlier. This time my full name will appear in the papers. But no photograph of this sample is to go to market without my permission.” Her father had known the older craft of repairing tools, but she had altered the measurements of the grooves herself. She also told them about an advance offered by a large customer, who wanted all rights to the design while paying only for a single sample. Sumitra had not accepted his proposal.

It was midday before the door of the municipal records storeroom could be opened. Inside stood three boxes: the first labelled 'Old Drainage', the second 'Contracts', and the third 'Wages'. The keeper of the storeroom said the original list ought to be in the third box, but the papers behind its glass panel had become wet. Naira stopped him from pulling the box out. “If the pages are damp, record their condition first and call the person responsible for them. I have permission to examine a copy, not to damage the object itself.” Shyam's heart began to pound. Where he had come in search of an account of wages set down in writing, the very body of the paper was in danger.

They found another copy of the list lying outside the box. Beside 'Red Cap', someone had written 'Moti' in pencil, but there was neither a full name nor a signature. “See?” the assistant cried triumphantly. “A false name has been turned into a real one!” Tara asked, “Is Moti a person, or a boat? When was that pencil mark made? Whose handwriting is it?” The questions subdued him. Naira took copies of both sides of the page, noting the corners, the colour and the differences in the writing. Until the original had been examined, the pencilled 'Moti' was not accepted as proof of anyone's identity.

From beside another old file, the storeroom keeper brought out a letter. A woman had written in it to claim her wages and had asked that she not be called by the name she used at home while at work. At one time, people looking for her had caused an uproar at the landing; she had been trying to live somewhere safe with her child. The letter also gave her actual address. As soon as Naira had read it, she folded it back and returned it to its envelope. She did not read out the name or copy the address. “The existence of this letter proves no fraud,” she said. “It shows that public identification put this woman at risk. Her claim to wages can be examined without destroying her safety.”

The assistant argued that keeping such letters hidden might help someone making a fraudulent claim. Naira agreed that fraud was possible, but the possibility was no reason to expose the woman who had written the letter to danger. “The date of payment, the place of work, the supervisor's testimony and a safe means of contact: those four things can be checked. There is no

need to put a home address on a public board." Tara asked for a deadline by which the woman's wages would be determined. The keeper agreed to arrange a confidential meeting, but the demand that a copy of the original letter be made public that day was refused.

Long ago, in the royal palace of Viratanagara, Sairandhri was leaving the queen's chamber carrying a basket of fragrant flowers. At court she was known by a name of service, but she was Draupadi; to disclose her identity before the period of concealment ended might endanger her family. One of the attendants, who worked alongside her day and night, asked whether it did not weary her to be called by a name that was not her own. Picking a thorn from a flower stalk, Sairandhri answered, "The heart remains behind the name. But I shall survive only if I can choose, for now, whom to tell and how much." The attendant did not stare at her. She simply held out a hand and took some of the basket's weight.

That afternoon in Videhapur, when Naira came out of the storeroom again, Vinod Kevart was standing there with a net folded like bedding on his handcart. He asked whether they had an old copy of the records of the fishing enclosures. Shyam had a sheet bearing the name 'Chilon', followed by an account of the bamboo panels of a small fish enclosure and the net that checked the flow of water. In another old ledger the word was 'Chilaun'; nothing in that ledger established that the two referred to the same thing. "Changing one letter doesn't make the river, the object and the money due into one and the same," Vinod said. "The elders in our family used these two words in different circumstances, but we'll need the papers to establish the place."

A rumour was already moving through the market that the wage list contained the words 'Little Boat', and that someone must therefore have hidden a child in a boat and carried the child away. Hearing it, Urmila dropped her bundle of linen to the ground. "We haven't even established whether 'Little Boat' is the name people use for a cargo dinghy," she said, "so where has this child abduction come from?" A young man wanted to show a blurred photograph from the previous day on his phone. Naira stopped him. An earlier rumour concerning a child had been investigated separately; a word in this old wage list proved no connection with that photograph or with any actual disappearance.

A man in the crowd said firmly, "If you keep everything confidential, when will the guilty ever be caught?" For the first time, Shyam interrupted him. "I'm not in favour of shielding anyone who's actually guilty," he said. "But if you turn a person owed two days' wages into a criminal, no one will ever have to account for those wages." Naira asked what evidence would be required if someone had in fact taken two payments for the same work under two names for personal gain. They would need to verify the signature on the paper, the banking or cash-payment record, the dates of the work and independent

testimony of attendance. Two similar names by which people were called were not, by themselves, evidence of deception.

After midday, they found a small cash receipt showing different amounts beside 'Red Cap' and 'Moti' on the same date. The assistant grew excited again. Naira examined the stamp beside the first amount: 'Payment Outstanding'. Beside the second stood 'Advance Issued'. They were not even the same kind of payment. “We cannot add together different sums for different purposes and call them duplicate payment,” she said. “Ask for the original stamp register and proof of who received the money.” At first the keeper evaded the question; at last he supplied a date on which a written application would be acknowledged. The possibility of fraud had not been ruled out, but no one had been declared guilty.

When a municipal committee member arrived, he raised the cost of the public hearing. “If you check so many names one by one, who's to pay for the work? The inspection allocation was approved for measuring the gate.” Tara opened her ledger. “Half the pay is still withheld from some of the people you first called in to take measurements. Now you want free labour for every new inquiry. It's right not to issue a false certificate; but finding the truth must not come at the expense of someone's food.” The member replied that he had no authority to release an advance. “Then don't summon another team in the name of an inquiry,” Tara said. “Put the terms of payment in writing first.”

Nazir opened the lid of his chest again. He still had to return the third object of the day, but the officials' questions since morning had left the work unfinished. “If I spend my time getting every remark that people make written down, when am I to pick up my hammer?” he asked. The assistant tried to reassure him that it would count as official work. “A classification won't put rice in my house,” Nazir said. Tara asked Nazir and Sumitra to record separately, on a sheet set beside them, the time spent in inspection, the time spent showing samples and the value of their materials. A line was added forbidding any photograph or sample from being shared without the consent of both makers.

Sumitra turned the sample with her triangular mark round in her hands and showed it to them. “I'll allow this fitting to be tested for this work,” she said, “but that doesn't mean a different contractor may take the sample and remove my name from it.” The municipal engineering assistant said that the office had a separate procedure for designs. “Then write down that procedure,” Sumitra answered. “Don't give me mere assurances.” She decided to deposit the metal fitting for inspection but to keep the original drawing herself. The office recorded the date of receipt of the sample and the terms of its return. The question of ownership in the forthcoming contract remained open.

Later, Naira and Shyam wrote five short provisions together. First: when a name has been changed for safety, the person's original identity is to be

checked only through an authorised, secure process, never in a public list. Second: a name used to earn a living is to be matched with the work, the date and the wages due, without unnecessarily recording a home address. Third: a person's chosen public or professional name is to be respected, while any private reconciliation of payment records needed to prevent duplicate payment must be undertaken with consent. Fourth: differences of name arising from errors of language, script or hearing are to be checked against the original entry, without accusation. Fifth: where fraud is suspected, the underlying evidence of separate payments must be examined at a separate hearing; the allegation is not to be advertised publicly before the inquiry.

Reading the fifth provision, Shyam said, “You've made five kinds of rules, but we spoke of only three reasons: safety, livelihood and crime.” Naira smiled. “The three reasons are questions for judgment. The five rules are ways of keeping records. A fifth rule for checking evidence of fraud doesn't become a fifth reason. Nor is choosing one's name a crime; neither is a clerk's mistake.” Shyam remembered an old saying of his grandmother's: changing a boat's name does not change its bottom. But he did not think it necessary to write down the comparison. The real page lay before them, and it still needed evidence.

Naira prepared a separate application seeking secure access to the gate's original wage register, the stamped payment register, the inspection appointment letters and the list of those who had taken measurements. The application made no mention of the original page concerning Sarita's twenty-seven names. That page was in Sarita's own keeping, and no link between it and the gate's wage list had been established. Shyam said that if anyone began to combine the two lists, needless suspicion would grow. Naira agreed. “The same word, 'name', in two different sets of papers doesn't make them one document.” She kept the file on the child-abduction rumour in a separate sealed envelope too.

In the slanting light of evening, the committee member returned. He wanted to announce that all work at the gate would cease until the original register was found. Hira Sahni said, “Stopping the safety inspection is understandable. But leaving a rope loose, rubbing out the markings and holding back the workers' pay isn't safety.” Tara added that an immediate protective barrier and the accounting for inspections already completed ought to continue. The committee member accepted two kinds of work in writing: no unsafe load-bearing use, and essential maintenance within a safe boundary. Terms of payment would be settled before a new team was summoned.

When Shyam reached home, he found his young son drawing a boat on a blank page of an old exercise book. Above it the boy had written 'Little Boat'. Shyam did not scold him. “Whose boat is this?” he asked. “I drew it,” his son replied, “but when it goes into the water, even the fish will see it.” Shyam laughed, then looked at the corner of the page. The boy's name was written at

the top, the boat's below. “Keep the two names separate,” he said. “If the boat is lost, your name won't be lost with it.” The boy closed his box of colours and began to draw water on the next page.

For the third time that week, Naira wrote 'Request to Examine the Original' in her notebook that night, but this time she added a date: the municipal office had agreed to issue an acknowledgement of receipt. Correcting the faulty measurements at the gate, investigating the discrepancies in the hospital linen supplies, stopping the abduction rumour and keeping workers' names safe each required a different method. A short message from Tara read: 'Not everyone will come for the next measuring team without an advance on wages.' Naira saved it. There might be three reasons for disguise, but the consequence of withholding pay was altogether tangible. They had to decide whose expense tomorrow's work would be carried out at.

Parva 5 · Udyoga | Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa

Chapter 49 · The Price of Cooperation

The first sound of morning beside the gate was not the striking of a hammer but the peeling of a slender skin from a length of bamboo. Shyam Mallik held the cane against his knee and worked its end smooth with a small, sharp tool. Beside him, Tara Binout was rolling up her measuring cord and checking the lines she had drawn through the night against a sheet of paper. A message had come from the municipal office the day before: regular measurements were to cease until the original wage register could be found, but local people were to report at once to mark the unsafe ground beside the gate. The message stated the hour at which they were to appear. It contained not one word about payment.

Tara laid the notice on top of her ledger. “Are you shaving that bamboo for your own work, or making yet another free sample for the municipality?” Shyam tried to smile. “There's no distinction between the two in that notice.” The previous night, his household had had to buy milk on credit. The bamboo he was cutting was meant to become an oar for a customer; giving half the day to the gate would put that customer's order back another day. Tara lifted the bamboo and set it aside. “First we must settle who has been summoned for an inspection, for how many hours, and by whose authority.”

When the municipal engineer, Aditi, arrived, she was accompanied by two assistants and a representative of the irrigation embankment committee. One assistant carried a white sheet headed 'Voluntary Local Cooperation', with spaces below for names and signatures. As she read, Tara stopped at a clause: 'Samples and information submitted shall be available for public use by the municipality.' “So by signing one sentence, do I hand over my Binout drawings, the route of the old outflow and all of Shyam's markings to you?” she asked. Aditi took the sheet from her assistant. “It's an old office form,” she said. “I asked them to bring it for a safety inspection, not to transfer ownership of anyone's plans.”

“Whatever your intention, this is the line we're being asked to sign,” Tara replied. Shyam set his small bamboo model on the ground. Along one side were three differently tied joints, made to show which way a wheel might slip on the narrow approach; it was not a bridge capable of bearing a load. When the assistant reached to pick it up, Shyam raised his hand. “Look at it, handle it, take measurements. But don't carry it away to a workshop without my permission. If someone treats these joints as a finished structure and includes them in a contract, we'll be back where we started, with another false certificate.”

Hira Sahni came up from the boats and said that half the passage recorded in yesterday's measurements would become impassable as soon as the water rose. “There must be warnings wherever it's dangerous to put a foot,” he said. “There will be warnings today,” Tara answered, “provided we agree first on a fixed day's wages and the price of the materials. I'm not refusing to leave people in danger. I'm refusing the practice of pointing to danger as a reason to summon workers without pay.” Hira lowered his boat pole. He, too, was still owed money for an earlier inspection. He went and stood beside Tara.

Meanwhile, Parvati Tanti and Pavitra Patwa reached the gate carrying two separate bundles. Parvati's held three lengths of thin woven cloth with yellow and red borders; Pavitra's little box contained knots of coloured thread and braided strips to be tied to bamboo. The municipal assistant had given them a small order the previous day to make warning markers out of thread left over from the school performance. On the order form the materials were described simply as 'cloth ribbon'. Parvati spoke at once. “Weaving is one kind of work; braiding the borders is another. Call both of them one ribbon, and the wages of two households disappear into a single line.”

Pavitra took a red knot from her box and held it up. “This thick knot is for recognising the warning at night. This finer one is only for marking a measurement. The difference comes from what I've learned in the delicate work of knotting ornaments. But that doesn't mean Parvati's work at the loom has somehow become mine.” Parvati smiled as she listened. Part of the payment for the earlier school order had still not arrived, and she had fastened that notice to their two separate receipts. The municipal assistant asked, “Won't it be difficult to make two payments against a single order?” Pavitra answered, “At one gate you can pay separately for iron and wood. Why can't you pay separately for the labour of two households?”

There on the earth Shyam showed them the old line of the drainage channel. In his father's day there had been a small experiment in using woven bamboo to turn the flow of water; later, new fencing had diverted its course. His recollection was not proof of what the map showed, but it suggested where a fresh survey ought to look. “The office will need a copy of this line,” the assistant said. “Look at the copy, check it, record the disagreements,” Shyam replied. “But you have no permission to erase my grandfather's marking and call it a municipal invention.” Tara added, “And the hours spent showing you the marking will be counted as work.”

Aditi turned the paper over. “There is a small emergency allocation already approved for a protective cordon,” she said, “but I cannot authorise a contract for the entire drainage inspection here. If we draw up a list limited to the work immediately needed, it may be possible to pay an advance. The remaining inspection will require separate approval.” The embankment representative objected. “Keep the job small. Why so many names? Put ten people on the list and it'll take a week to open the gate.” Tara asked, “Whose

name would you strike out? The person who wove the thread, the one who tied the knot, or the one who marked the earth?”

In her ledger Tara drew four columns: the item of work, the maker's name, the price by hour or piece, and the limits of its permitted use. Shyam entered his bamboo model and measurement markers; Parvati, the weaving of three lengths of cloth; Pavitra, eight braided strips; Hira, the time spent marking a safe passage. Tara put the original drawing back in her bag. “We'll show the paper for public inspection,” she said, “but the copy will carry the words 'Inspection copy; not permission to construct'.” Aditi accepted the condition as reasonable, although she asked for time to arrange formal acknowledgment of their contribution in the municipality's permanent map register.

Two children out playing in the morning saw the yellow strips and came closer. “That's the colour we had on our dancing clothes!” one of them said. Parvati folded the cloth. “The colour may be the same, but the work is different. This isn't permission to dance here. It's a warning not to go any farther.” The child asked whether they could attend the dance class. “Ask Ruhani about the class,” Pavitra said. “Don't go on to this loose stretch of ground.” Laughing, the children headed towards the safe bend in the path. Tara watched them go. Making safety markers, she realised, involved more than drawing a plan; people had to understand what the marks meant.

Long ago, in the forests of Kishkindha, while Rama and Lakshmana wandered in search of Sita, Sugriva saw two bowmen in the distance from the high rocks of Rishyamuka. His first feeling was not welcome but fear. His dread of Vali followed him in every unfamiliar footstep. Hanuman asked how the door to a possible friend could ever be opened if every stranger was pronounced an enemy before he had introduced himself. Sugriva replied, “I need a friend. But when someone comes bearing his strength, I must also ask where the limits of his intentions lie.”

Hanuman approached Rama in disguise and listened before anything else. Rama told him of his search; Hanuman spoke of the suffering of Sugriva's exile. The two sides did not face the same distress: on one, the search for Sita; on the other, fear of Vali and the question of kingship. A meeting became possible, but before friendship could be witnessed by fire, Hanuman had to understand what a promise would mean to each of them. Sugriva's fear was not mere cowardice. It held the pain of old injuries, political inequality and an uncertain future. He wanted an ally, but he also wanted the right to be heard.

By noon in Videhapur the sunlight had grown fierce, and the wet earth beside the gate was beginning to harden into a crust. The municipal assistant returned with another paper, headed 'Temporary Order for Safety Markers'. Against the advance payment were the words 'subject to approval'. Tara placed her finger on the line. “That's not an advance. That's a possible future. How is Parvati to buy thread in the meantime?” Standing beside her, Pavitra said, “The school still hasn't settled what it owes us. How long are we meant to run

our households by doing one job after another on credit?" "If safety work is held up," the assistant said, "someone will have to answer for it." "And if hungry labourers do the work," Tara answered quietly, "does no one have to answer for that?"

A message came to Shyam's phone from home. The customer waiting for the boat oar had returned and said he would take his order to another workshop. When Shyam ended the call, he looked at Tara. "I made him wait yesterday. Now another half-day's gone. Shall I put the money I've lost into my own ledger?" "Certainly," Tara said. "But we mustn't force it into the municipal account if it's not a payment due for work done for them. Record the loss caused by this decision separately. Then we'll understand whose household bears the burden of a public inspection." For the first time, anger edged Shyam's voice. "So it's our lives that are being eaten away while they take their time deciding."

Naira arrived with the acknowledgment for the original register from the municipal storeroom. She heard that someone was proposing to attach Shyam's drainage line and the old wage list to the same map. "The stamped payment register for the entries marked 'Red Cap' and 'Moti' has still not been found," she made clear. "There's no need to publish those old names in order to inspect the map. If the local woven-bamboo design is useful, give Shyam and Tara credit for their work. The dispute over the earlier workers' private names must remain a separate, protected inquiry."

"There was a 'Little Boat' among those old names," the embankment representative said. "People say a child was hidden in some boat." Naira interrupted him. "People say—who says? On what date was anything directly witnessed? Which child? A wage list for work at this gate and a rumour of child abduction are two different questions. We cannot see one word and pronounce a verdict on another crime." The representative tried to show them an old blurred photograph. Naira would not let him turn his phone towards her. "There is a separate, safe process for investigating a child's disappearance. Spreading the child's picture here will not turn a rumour into proof."

For a few moments Aditi was silent. Then she opened the local expenditure register. There was enough money left under the previously approved safety-cordon allocation to make an advance payment for four limited items of work, though not for the whole inspection. She proposed that the day's strips, bamboo markers and marking of safe distances should be paid at half the agreed rate in advance; the balance would fall due on a fixed date after the measurements were verified. Separate acknowledgments would be issued in each person's name rather than a single receipt for the whole amount. "This decision falls within my authority," she said. "I won't pretend to approve the additional measuring work for which people were summoned."

"And the credit?" Tara asked. Aditi added another line: 'Local bamboo weaving and safety-marker samples: Shyam Mallik, Tara Binout; weaving: Parvati Tanti; braiding: Pavitra Patwa; waterway inspection: Hira Sahni.' Tara

saw at once that the limits on using the design were still missing. Aditi amended the line again: photographs, copies or use in construction would require separate prior consent, while displaying the visible warning markers for public safety was authorised. Shyam regarded his model. “This is where my trust begins,” he said. “It doesn't end here.”

The employee preparing the accounts wanted to put Parvati's and Pavitra's names on one receipt. Pavitra took out her own copy. “What's owed to my household won't go into Parvati's, and what's owed to hers won't be entered under my name,” she said. “But without seeing and understanding each other's work, these warning strips could never have been made,” Parvati added. “Separate payment doesn't mean working apart.” The employee prepared two slips. Pavitra counted the knots she had braided, and Parvati measured the length of each piece of cloth. The small act of reckoning resembled a public assembly: nobody was making a grand speech, but each person wished to have a voice.

When the advance receipts were ready, the method of payment beside Shyam's name was entered as 'bank transfer'. He supplied his account details. Pavitra said that her own account was active, but she would not consider payment received without confirmation that the money had been deposited. The municipal treasurer was called. After the funds available and the grounds for receipt had been checked, instructions were issued for the four craftspeople's advances to be credited that day. “We'll verify both the bank orders and the marks beside the water,” Tara said. “A signature alone won't make us believe the money has arrived.”

Before evening, the first message confirming a small payment appeared on Parvati's phone. She looked towards Pavitra, whose phone was still silent. A little later the money appeared in Pavitra's account too. The municipal treasurer showed Shyam the paperwork confirming his payment, but no notification had reached his phone; in his ledger he wrote, 'Sent; receipt still to be checked'. Tara checked the advance in her own account, then placed her finger on the line recording the old arrears. “Half the payment for this new job has come,” she said. “Yesterday's work is still unpaid.” Aditi gave her a written date for a hearing on that claim, not a promise of payment.

When it was time to put up the warning markers, Tara first stood on the sloping ground to see how it lay. Rather than calling a small child over to test it, she asked an adult assistant to walk along the safe edge. Parvati's yellow strip was visible wherever a wheel might slip; red knots marked the narrow turn. Hira sounded the water again with his pole. Shyam attached the bamboo uprights only to markers driven into the earth, not to a platform that could support a weight. No one could climb on them. The arrangement was a temporary warning, not a repair of the gate.

While they worked, Tara saw the embankment representative trying to move one of the yellow strips towards the side leading to his field. She stopped him abruptly. “The measuring point was fixed here. Move it and the mark on

the paper won't match the mark on the ground." He protested that the path to his field was being blocked for no good reason. "We'll record your claim," Tara replied. "But you can't shift a safety marker as you please. Neither ownership of the public outflow nor your right of access to the field has yet been decided." Aditi entered his objection with its date. The disagreement between the two sides remained on record, but the warning strip went back to the place that had actually been inspected.

Thin clouds were beginning to gather overhead. Shyam's son came to see his father from a distance and tried to read the four square boxes drawn in the corner of the ledger. Instead of handing the child his old bamboo-cutting tool, Shyam gave him a new pencil. "Look at these squares," he said. "The first is for the thing made, the second for whose hands made it, the third for how much time it took, the fourth for its price. Read them and tell me whose line is missing." The boy stumbled over Pavitra's name. Laughing, Pavitra read it aloud herself. "Once everyone can read their own name," she said, "mistakes on paper will have a harder time surviving."

After the work was finished, Naira put three papers into separate bags. The first was the public safety order: who had been engaged, for what work, and at what price. The second was the private wage register, whose original names and payment entries had still to be verified. The third was an information sheet relating to the investigation of the rumour about a child, which did not belong before this gathering. "We tested one claim today," she told Tara. "The order drawn up on the assumption of unpaid voluntary cooperation couldn't stand. In its place there's a limited order for paid work." "One order has been corrected," Tara answered. "When the water rises, all the passages these measurements have missed will come back asking to be accounted for."

Late in the evening, on his way home, Hira saw that no new sign declaring the old unsafe platform fit to bear loads had been erected. Only the red-and-yellow warning ribbons stirred in the wind. The bamboo Shyam had fashioned lay elsewhere, set out to dry; Parvati and Pavitra had taken home their remaining materials separately. Closing her ledger, Tara said, "So far the first price of cooperation has been this much: the workers' names and the money they actually received have been put on paper. But will those who don't want the water kept from their fields accept this agreement so easily?" Hira answered, "When the water rises, friendship and fear will both have to be measured again."

That night the embankment representative stood outside the municipal office reading the public order. He paused at the names of Tara and Shyam. "No one has signed off on this map as final," he told Aditi. "So who can have the path to my field closed?" "No one has changed any permanent right," Aditi replied. "We've put up a warning where danger was actually observed. At the next hearing, both your objection and the measurements made by the local workers will be considered." He folded the notice, but his doubts remained. Inside, Aditi was putting away the copy of the measurement ledger

for safekeeping. In the margin of the paper stood the names of three parties still in disagreement.

Chapter 50 · Sugriva's Fear

Morning dew still clung to the yellow strip beside the gate. Uma Rajdhob was wringing out three wet sheets and spreading them over separate bamboo poles. A little slip of paper was tied to the end of each pole—not the customer's name, but the serial number in her own ledger. From a distance the sheets appeared the same colour, yet Uma could distinguish their torn hems, old stains and heavy borders. Just then a representative of the irrigation embankment committee came up from the ghat with two assistants. In his hand was a folded copy of the previous day's safety order.

"Who asked for this yellow marking to be put here?" he demanded. Uma did not put down the sheet. "If you want to see the municipal order, read it beside the gate. These are my poles for drying clothes. Tell me if they've obstructed the path." The representative said, "You might as well consider the path closed since yesterday. The people in the fields are frightened. Are we to let outsiders who come to take measurements run the place?" Before extending the argument, Uma tied down the corner of the sheet. The customer's clothes had to be returned on time.

Shyam and Tara arrived beside the narrow edge of the gate. Tara noticed fresh footprints made since the yellow strip had been put down. People had begun using a cramped, damp footpath towards the fields. "The danger hasn't been removed," she told Aditi when she arrived. "We've merely changed the direction in which people walk. If the alternative path is unsafe too, we mustn't conceal that fact and write down the first marking as a success." The representative replied, "If you call the way to my fields dangerous, you'll weaken my rights." Tara answered, "A measurement cannot decide whose rights they are. It can show where a foot will slip."

Aditi opened the safety order. Two confirmations of the limited advance payment had been recorded separately from the checks still outstanding. She said the warning arrangements would remain in force, but the day's meeting could not issue an order to open the gate permanently. In a harsh voice the representative asked, "Then at whose pleasure is the water to be held back from the fields?" Hira Sahni stood listening, his boat pole upright in his hand. "Whether the water is being held back and whether the passage has narrowed are not the same question," he said. "We'll look again at today's water level, the mouth of the outlet and the bamboo markers. I never claimed to know its capacity for the whole year."

Uma came to Tara from her row of sheets. Her concern was the route her customers could take. "Yesterday someone told a household that, from now on, only the old contractors would be allowed to wash clothes at the ghat," she said. "Three of my customers have already started sending their washing elsewhere. I never had a contract, only my regular customers. Whenever

there's a quarrel over the path, the rumour is enough to stop my work too." Tara said, "Have them record where that claim came from. The warning order grants nobody a monopoly over washing."

On the raised platform, Urmila Rajak was counting the clothes. She asked Uma, "If you want, you can use the shade above during my shift. But our clothes, customers and accounts of what we're owed will remain separate." Uma smiled at first, then hesitated. "If I take shelter here, people will say I'm working under Urmila. I want to set the price of my own labour." Urmila answered evenly, "Let them say what they will. Neither of us owns the other. If we arrange safe water and drying space together, we can record the shared expense separately."

The market inn was Uma's largest customer, and it set the rates unilaterally. A man from the family that owned it had come again that day. "If you and Urmila work on the same platform," he said, "we'll give all the inn's washing under one name. And I'll set the price." Uma looked at him without speaking. It was those payments that bought grain for her household. She opened her ledger at the old sums owing: three payments made late, and once an additional job for which nothing had been paid. "The price of my hands has kept falling under this arrangement," she said quietly. "How many more times am I to accept these terms merely to keep a single customer?"

"Then what terms do you want?" Urmila asked. With a finger Uma drew three circles in the earth of the platform. "First, each household's clothes must arrive and go back under a separate serial number. Second, the washing charge must be fixed in the name of the worker who does the work. Third, the shared costs of shade, carrying water and keeping the path safe must go into another ledger. No customer may bargain with one person for the labour of an entire group." Urmila drew a fourth circle. "And water that hasn't been tested must be kept away from clothes and bodies. We must also record who pays for the testing." Uma left that fourth circle undisturbed.

The innkeeper's man looked less pleased. "After so much paperwork, how can washing stay cheap?" he asked. "Perhaps it won't be cheap," Uma answered. "But if clothes go missing, we'll know whose responsibility it is; and if wages aren't paid, we'll know whose household has been deprived of grain." Instead of agreeing to the previous rate, the man demanded all of Uma's working hours for himself. For the first time, Uma refused him outright. For an instant she thought of the fees for her young daughter's schooling, but the thought did not change her answer.

On the other side of the platform Shanti Bari arrived carrying two boxes of wedding decorations. In one were strips of bark for ceremonial wedding crowns and threads of flowers; the other held half-finished festoons and coloured knots. One corner of a box was wet. "Since the route was changed yesterday, the cart had to go round by the upper side of the ghat," she said.

“Let me dry these here, or the colours will run.” Uma shifted one of her poles to make room. Shanti's box was set not on the sheets but upon an empty wooden rack.

Two women had come with Shanti, hoping to order wedding materials for their neighbourhood. One said, “A date has suddenly been fixed in the family. Give us half the things now; we'll pay after the wedding.” Shanti showed them a page of outstanding debts from the previous year. Against the materials supplied to two families someone had written 'thank you', even after the cost of the goods had been deducted; there was no mark to show payment. “I may receive credit in a house celebrating a happy occasion,” Shanti said, “but credit will not buy my bark, thread or time.” The visitor lowered her head.

Shanti drew two lines on the lid of the box. “Half the cost of materials in advance for anything made in a colour specially for your family. The rest on the day of delivery. If a family cannot afford it, let them seek help from a separate fund for mutual assistance. But don't call it assistance and then waive my wages.” She turned towards them. “And if something already made can be used by several households, its hire charge must be separate, as must the account of anything broken. No one has to buy every wedding decoration anew.” Uma spoke up. “Your rules are like the ones we're making here at the ghat. Keep the customers, but don't erase the maker's name.”

By noon Shanti had drawn up two documents. The first was a model account for wedding orders: bark, thread, colour, time, advance payment and final amount due. The second concerned voluntary contributions for assistance: how much had come from whom and how it had been used. She wrapped the page of donations in a separate piece of cloth, apart from the page recording her wages. The first woman made no promise of an advance payment, but the second paid the hire charge for a shared festoon and took a receipt. Shanti entered the first actual transaction made under her new rules.

Meanwhile Phulo Chaurasia returned from her betel field. In her hand was a folded old family document, on which the name 'Khiroi' appeared in one place. A new assessment notice had described Phulo's field as a beneficiary of the drainage work and demanded a larger contribution. She spread the edge of the paper before Tara. “My grandfather's ledger gives this name, and two old lines of expenditure beside it. But when water is still standing in my field, what benefit have I received from the drainage that they now say I enjoy?”

Tara looked closely. The paper contained the name and two figures for old expenditure, but no clear measurement of the land. “The name Khiroi is attested in this family document,” she said, “but the paper does not establish a direct connection between it and the present gate. That claim will need maps, measurements and records that belong to the relevant period.” Phulo folded the document. “That's what I want too. But I showed you this page to stop

them writing down a benefit against my name and deciding how much I must pay for the drainage before anything is established."

The representative of the irrigation embankment committee had been listening. "If each household counts its benefits and losses separately," he said, "what value does the committee's collective decision have?" Tara asked, "Does collective decision-making mean that one household's costs may simply be imposed on another? Yesterday we made separate wage accounts for a temporary warning. If we're going to divide the drainage costs today, we must hear separately how long water stands in each field, whose route is closed and who has difficulty even washing utensils." The representative would not concede the argument. He did, however, agree to receive Phulo's objection in writing.

On the rocks of Rishyamuka, Sugriva's inward terror had not diminished. Since his flight from Kishkindha, every rustle of a leaf seemed to him the approach of one of Vali's messengers. Hanuman came bringing news of his meeting with Rama and Lakshmana. "The two brothers are searching for Sita," Hanuman said. "They possess strength, but they wish first to hear your story." Sugriva looked across the distant valley. "Before I listen to a powerful man's promise," he replied, "I need to ask what limits there are to his strength."

When he came before Rama, Sugriva told the story of his exile: the mouth of the cave, the vigil for his brother's return, the dreadful sound from within, the decision he had made on seeing blood, and Vali's anger afterwards. Sugriva recounted his memories of his side of the story, one by one. "From what I saw that day, I concluded that my brother would never come back," he said. "But Vali understood my decision as betrayal. Before his strength, my explanation went unheard." Rama listened. He did not immediately deliver a final judgment upon the absent party on the strength of this account alone.

Sugriva stated his conditions for a promise plainly. "You want help in finding Sita; I want safety from exile and a hearing for my claim to the kingdom. I fear Vali may kill me. And I fear something else: once this alliance has placed the kingdom in my hands, how much right will the people who have stayed with me have in it? Friendship will not make that question disappear." Hanuman put Sugriva's fear before Rama without concealing it. Rama said that Sugriva's help was necessary in the search for Sita, and that he also had a duty to listen to Sugriva's suffering. But Sugriva asked again, "If the two brothers give conflicting accounts, whose word will your arrow believe?"

The dry grass bent along the edge of the rock. Rather than display the grandeur of his vow, Rama did not evade the question. "I seek your friendship so that you may be safe," he said. "But when strength is raised in the name of justice, it is right to ask the reason for its use." Sugriva's fear did not vanish, but he ceased to hide it. Hanuman saw that no decision about the kingdom

had yet been made. What had begun was the possibility of two parties speaking openly of what they lacked and what they expected of each other. The work ahead would put that promise to a severe test.

In Videhapur, a strong wind rose after noon and the thin strips of bark in Shanti's box began to flutter. Uma gathered her sheets; Shanti pressed down the lid. Just then the man from the inn returned. “I've been to another washerman,” he told Uma. “He'll take on the whole job for less. If you wish, you may work for me alone at the old rate.” Uma felt a sharp pain in her chest. Her mother had washed clothes for that same inn for years. But a memory was not a contract.

“You're free to choose another worker,” Uma said. “But don't tell me that, to keep my customers, I must force down the wages of another household or erase its name. I'll give all three of my regular customers my new terms in writing.” The man stopped. “If you refuse half the price, the loss is yours,” he said. Uma answered, “Then I'll enter the loss in my ledger. At least I've begun to understand whose name a loss is carried under.” There was no heroic fanfare in her decision. It settled instead into the close silence of a household worried about its next grain purchase.

Urmila came to Uma's side. “The hospital washing will continue on its own separate receipts,” she said. “I can't hand those customers over to you. But we can divide the hours on the safe platform—morning for you, midday for me, and another measurement in the evening if the water falls. We'll share the cost of the bamboo drying poles equally. Shall we make a small timetable?” Uma asked, “And if someone has an accident on the platform?” Urmila did not laugh. “Then we'll stop work first, tend to the injury and inform those responsible for inspecting the public path. These bamboo poles are not a safe bridge.”

Shanti pushed forward her two papers. “My materials are separate from the donations; your customers are separate from the shared shade. If both sets of rules are read out at the same meeting, people will think we've all joined forces to put prices up.” Uma said, “Then each of us must speak about her own goods and the reasons for her terms. The prices will be decided together.” Shanti asked, “And what of a family that truly cannot pay?” Uma replied, “There must be an open register for helping them. We won't secretly cut a craftworker's wages and call it charity.”

A municipal assistant wanted to put up a notice on the public board: 'Washing operations at the ghat jointly transferred.' Uma stopped him the moment she read the line. “Who has transferred them? And to whom?” Such wording seemed easier to the assistant. Urmila stepped forward. “Sharing a cooperative's shade and dividing hours is one thing. Nobody has handed over the hospital contract, Uma's customers or my own wages to anyone else.” The

assistant crossed out the words and wrote: 'Temporary shared use of the safe platform; each worker's customers and wages remain independent.'

Aditi came with the gate-inspection chart. It marked the side inspected and found safe, the side still uncertain, and the lower gate where access was prohibited. The representative immediately recorded a disagreement: one of the marks lay beside the cart track leading to his fields. Aditi answered, “This isn't a permanent restriction. It would be wrong to declare the path safe without testing both rainfall conditions and the loads it must bear. Your objection will remain on record under your name.” Tara said, “Our local measurements will remain in the cost ledger, but no engineering test still outstanding must be described as complete.”

At the end of the meeting, Naira drew attention to a call-name mentioned in an old wage register. One representative connected that name, 'Chhot Naav', with a family claiming rights over the approach to the gate. Naira asked to see the original page. The date beside the name was incomplete, and there was no accompanying payment document. “A call-name cannot establish someone's rights or guilt,” she said. “The identity of the living person you're referring to, and the claim to the land, must be examined in separate records. This call-name won't change the measurements of the gate.”

Before handing Naira a copy of her family document, Phulo asked, “Will everyone be able to read all of it?” Naira explained clearly that the public hearing needed only a verified extract of the entry bearing the name Khiroi, a statement about the condition of its date, and a general reference to the expenditure. The remaining pages of private family transactions would stay in a sealed envelope. Phulo gave her consent. “Investigate the damage,” she said, “but don't carry private debts into the marketplace.” Tara attached this restriction on disclosure to her measurement report.

At the hour when the first evening lamps were being lit, Uma's daughter came to the platform with a book. “Ma, no washing from the inn?” she asked. Holding her damp ledger carefully, Uma replied, “That work has gone elsewhere. I've got clothes from two households here now.” Her daughter sat down to add up the figures. Uma did not stop her, but said, “Learn to read accounts—that much is enough. You needn't come to the ghat to work beside me. Study whatever you want to study.” Under the line in Uma's ledger marked 'shared shade', the girl made separate pencil signs for poles, soap and time.

As she packed her box, Shanti handed a finished festoon to a woman. The woman put her thumbprint on the receipt for the advance; Shanti read out the count of the articles to her and made the date for the remaining payment clear. “My daughter wants this colour for her wedding,” the woman said happily. Shanti replied, “Let her choose the colour. The labour of making the

things will still be mine." Their agreement contained neither humiliation nor any shame in asking to be paid.

When night fell, the representative of the embankment committee stood beside the measurement board for a long time, watching the water. "I'm afraid a temporary marking will be used as proof of a permanent boundary," he told Aditi. "Then write down that fear," she replied. "We'll record the duration of the marking, today's measurements and the limits of the inspection. What hasn't been examined cannot become evidence of a right." The representative read through his written objection again and changed one expression: in place of 'land seized', he wrote 'difficulty in the temporary use of the path'. The dispute remained, but for the first time his sentence described the actual nature of the difficulty.

Tara was walking home with Shyam. "Today Uma lost the inn's business, Shanti received her first advance, and Phulo's charge for the field—was it stopped or not?" Shyam asked. Tara replied, "Uma's loss was recorded. One receipt was issued under Shanti's new rules. Phulo's objection reached the hearing. There is still no decision on the charge. Don't weigh three different outcomes on a single scale." Shyam walked silently for some distance. Then he asked, "In the old story Sugriva found friendship after speaking of his fear. Why do people here still fail to find trust even after they've spoken of theirs?" Tara said, "Speaking of fear is the first condition for being heard. Then comes the question: whose voice will be heard when the decision is made?"

Tara divided her measurement ledger into three sections. The first: the risks observed that day, for which temporary safety measures would remain. The second: the households whose benefits and losses were still disputed, particularly Phulo's field and the committee's route. The third: the local knowledge for which credit and remuneration had yet to be entered. She wrote her name and paused with the pen in her hand. At the next inspection the old markings would be compared with the present measurements. But no line could be considered complete until it had been decided whose voices were to count.

Chapter 51 · Tara's Reckoning

Before the first shadow of morning had reached the right side of the gate, Tara had uncoiled the measuring cord three times. The first time she stretched it from post to post; the second, along the strip where people walked; the third, across the ground washed away by the night's rain. Shyam Mallik held the chalk. Raising the first length of cord, he asked, "If only the first measurement goes on the municipal map, what use will the other two be?" Tara answered, "The first is the distance between the posts; the second is the path people take; the third is the danger of collapse. Put all three into a single figure and a human being will fall—not the paper."

When Aditi, the engineer, came to examine the measurement book, two representatives of the embankment committee were already standing beside the gate. One maintained that the bamboo barrier blocked the way to the fields; the other feared that, if the bamboo were removed, a cart would slip off the narrow stretch. With her chalk Tara drew a circle on the ground where a cartwheel had sunk the day before. "We saw this wheel," she said, "but I cannot say whose land bears this mark." Aditi entered the measurements. Both representatives had their objections recorded once again, each in his own words.

Shyam laid a small strip of cloth across the three sections marked on the paper. The first was headed 'Immediate danger'; the second, 'Claims of benefit and loss'; the third, 'Knowledge contributed through labour, and payment due'. Tara said, "My reckoning includes not merely the quantity of water, but the people who come down on that side and the hours their work takes. Yet I will not issue an engineer's certificate. What Aditi can measure is her responsibility. What I have seen and heard must be written under my own name."

A municipal assistant carried a notice: 'Local suggestions received for the improvement of the gate.' The assistants' names appeared on it; Tara's and Shyam's did not. Tara did not tear it up. She took a red pencil and placed a question mark beside the words. "Which suggestions?" she asked. "Will the markings we showed you be copied, and something incomplete made public as though it were finished? Consultation does not mean taking people's knowledge and leaving out their names." The assistant looked uncertainly towards Aditi. Aditi withheld the original notice from circulation.

Just then Ruchi Dharikar arrived, a bamboo basket tucked beneath her arm. Inside, wrapped in cloth, was a sample of her new weaving. At an earlier craft exhibition the children had called its double-curving band a flower. Ruchi had used that pattern to make a thin mat which could be folded and tied around the warning post at the gate. Spaces left between its red and yellow

strips made the pattern distinguishable even at a distance. “I've brought it for you to look at,” she said. “Whether anyone buys it is still undecided.”

The assistant laughed. “But this is like a design we've seen in the office. We made a print of it only yesterday.” He brought out a sheet bearing lines that resembled Ruchi's double curve. Beneath them were the words ‘Municipal local-warning pattern’. The basket went still in Ruchi's hands where it rested against the ground. “How did a line made in my house get into the office?” she asked. No answer came at once. Shyam remembered that when a photograph of the shared samples had been taken, Ruchi's mat had lain at the back. Did the mere appearance of a thing in a photograph make its use everybody's right?

“For my object to be visible in a photograph and for someone to reproduce it for sale are two different matters,” Ruchi said. “I understand why you need a safety sign. But if the municipality calls our family's weaving its own invention, who will own the new product my daughter has made?” Aditi drew the sheet towards her. “Printing from this draft will stop. First we shall find out whose consent was obtained for the photograph. Public use of the pattern and commercial copying require separate written permissions.” Tara looked at Ruchi with a new attentiveness. Her own question about the map had acquired another shape before her eyes.

Ruchi's daughter, Chhabili, picked up a narrow strip. “Ma, if I use blue instead of red, will it become something different?” Ruchi did not silence her. “A change of colour does not change who owns a pattern. But there is nothing to stop you learning to make a new one,” she replied. Chhabili laughed. “Then I'll make a weave of my own.” Phulo Chaurasia, standing by the doorway, smiled. Tara handed Chhabili a blank sheet of paper, but did not take the strip out of her hand.

Sakib Abdal climbed onto the platform carrying two bags. In the first was a bundle of receipts for contributions towards clearing the drainage channel; in the second, his private account book for small transport jobs. His shoulder still ached from stumbling while lifting a sack the day before. “How has my name entered this inquiry?” he asked the assistant. “Last month's public contributions were kept at your shop; some rope for the gate warnings was bought there too. The same name appears in two places,” the assistant said. Setting down his bags, Sakib replied, “The same name does not mean the same money.”

Contributions for the previous clearing of the drainage channel had been left at Sakib's shop. He issued receipts and charged separately for his work carrying goods. One rainy day, after he had brought the collection box indoors, a rumour had spread that the bags had been exchanged. Now his name had surfaced again in the inspection of materials used at the gate.

He opened the first ledger. Dates, receipt numbers, donors marked as public or confidential according to their wishes, and the headings under which collective expenditure had been made were all entered separately. The second book recorded petrol, hire charges and private earnings. The assistant asked, “Why does one record show you receiving this sum, while the other shows a transport charge on the same day?” Sakib answered, “Because one is a donation to that fund and the other is payment for the labour of my hands. If transport was paid out of donations, there must be an authorisation and a receipt. If a private customer paid me, that payment must not cast its shadow across the donations column.”

Tara noticed that one receipt box bore only the word ‘Food’ beside an expenditure. The amount was small, but neither the recipient's name nor the time was there. Shame crossed Sakib's face. “I ordered rice for the cleaning crew that day. The shopkeeper gave me the account by word of mouth; I took no paper,” he said. A representative burst out, “Then all the contributions are suspect!” Tara stopped him. “One incomplete entry means that, for now, this expenditure on food is unverified. It does not prove that the entire public fund was stolen.” Sakib drew a circle around the line recording his mistake.

“And if you cannot obtain the receipt?” Aditi asked. “I shall write down the date and the testimony of the three people who brought the food,” Sakib said. “The expense will remain marked ‘incomplete evidence’. I will not manufacture a document.” The assembly fell silent. Shyam said, “The photograph of our sample went out without our names; your food was entered without a receipt. They are different errors, but both need an account of how they will be put right.”

In an age immeasurably distant from this one, within the royal palace of Kishkindha, Tara had heard an unfamiliar sound: Sugriva's challenge, raised with an assurance that did not come naturally after defeat. Vali was preparing to leave the hall, trusting not in a bow but in his own strength. Tara barred his way. “Why does the brother who withdrew in fear yesterday call out again today with such confidence?” she asked. Anger shone in Vali's eyes. “He is testing my courage,” he said. “Look beyond your courage,” Tara replied, “and consider the help that may have come to stand behind him.”

Tara had not discarded the intelligence Angada had brought her. News of the meeting between Sugriva and the princes of Ayodhya, Rama and Lakshmana; of the search for Sita; and of the agreement made with Sugriva—she did not know the whole truth of every side of these matters. But she understood that the reason for Sugriva's courage in returning had changed. “You may win,” she said, “but who will trust the kingdom afterwards? The people are silent with fear. Is a kingdom to be governed by trust, or by a roar?”

Vali tightened the bracelet on his wrist. “Am I to retreat from my own brother's challenge, then?” Tara answered, “To step back is no disgrace if

stepping back saves lives. Make terms. Bring the accusations you have against him before a hearing. Put the question of a share in the kingdom clearly before the assembly. Do not pay for today's anger with Angada's future." Vali stared at her. "Are you defending my enemy?" Her voice remained steady. "I am thinking of your life, of Angada's rights, and of the households of this city. Those three interests do not always coincide."

Vali remembered the blocked mouth of the cave, the death misunderstood, and the humiliation of losing his kingdom. Tara had heard the account; for that very reason she knew how both brothers fought in the belief that their own memories contained the whole truth. "If you believe Rama is just," she said, "go to him and ask your questions. If you do not, it is more dangerous still to fight without reflection against an enemy helped by an unknown archer." For an instant Vali fell silent. Then his anger outstripped his thought.

Vali set off towards the field of combat. Tara stepped aside from the threshold, but stepping aside did not signify consent. She called Angada to her. "Mother, Father will come back victorious, won't he?" the child asked. Tara laid a hand upon his head. "That is what I hope," she said. "But after victory, we must ask who survived, whose rights survived, and whose words will be heard." Angada's eyes were full of questions. He did not promise to abandon his father's side, and his mother did not ask him for that promise.

By the gate at Videhapur the midday sun had dried the knots of the measuring cord. As Tara prepared her table of estimates, she told Aditi, "One figure here concerns the water, another the hours during which passage is safe, and a third the petition of a family whose route is obstructed. Adding them together will not produce one meaningful number. Write a separate conclusion for each." The embankment representative said, "You give no importance to the carts that carry our crops." Phulo replied, "Record the times when the water to my field is obstructed; then my loss can be assessed too. Measure your cart route separately." At last the disagreement had taken a form in which it could be read on paper.

Aditi proposed a day for the next inspection, but Tara raised her hand. "Who will pay for it?" she asked. The assistant lifted his eyebrows. "The first advance was issued yesterday." "That was for temporary bamboo warning signs and that day's measurements," Tara replied. "At the new inspection I, Shyam, Hira and Ruchi will each perform different work. Set out the scope, record the duration, and then pay the advance. Don't write 'local cooperation' and remove our names as before." Beside her, Shyam held out a clean sheet of paper.

"Has every kind of knowledge become something to be sold?" the assistant asked. Tara did not smile. "Those who have come here are not all asking the same price," she said. "Hira's experience of identifying a navigable route, Shyam's labour joining bamboo, Ruchi's weaving, my calculations of local

drainage—four different kinds of work. If that work is useful for public safety, it must be paid for. Nor shall I claim ownership of what I do not know to be mine." Aditi began writing four separate items on the notice.

Ruchi spoke up. "My strips can be used to show the colour signals on a safety warning, provided the price and duration of that limited use are written down. But the design cannot be copied for sale in the market." "What if people copy it in their homes?" the assistant asked. "How could I stop people from learning something at home?" Ruchi replied. "But learning from our household's sample is not the same as printing a thousand pieces in the municipality's name. How many will be made, on whose order, under whose name? Write that down." Chhabili listened as she drew three new lines on her paper.

Aditi wrote the agreement: during the two-week safety trial, Ruchi's sample warning strips could be tested for limited use; any photograph of the sample would credit Ruchi and her family; no large production order would be issued without a new contract. Ruchi read the paper with immense patience. She had a line resembling 'transfer of all ownership rights' struck out. Looking at the deleted words, Tara remembered the rules governing photographs of her old maps. "An agreement begins with this line," she said, "with saying plainly what we are not giving away."

Meanwhile, Sakib unfolded an old sheet brought by the shopkeeper. It listed food items and approximate quantities, but the shopkeeper could not remember the day the cash had been paid. "This paper makes it possible that food was supplied," Sakib said, "but it does not establish the complete sequence of cash payments. I shall write 'confirmation pending' in the contributions register." He separated his private transport book. "My daughter even records the dates when her school fees fall due in this. I will not expose all my household accounts to a public inquiry. I will show what concerns public money, and no more." Naira supported him. "Access for inspection must have limits. Privacy is no excuse for concealing accounts, but a public right to inquire is not permission to read every page in a private household."

A man in the meeting asked, "If the original wage list has 'Chhot Naav' written in it, why do people with that same name appear all through these contribution records?" Naira replied, "We have no evidence yet that a person known by a calling-name, a donor, and a carrier of goods are one and the same individual. The original payment papers must be compared with the dates. The rumour about the missing child will remain separate from this reckoning." She did not pin a copy of the old list onto the public board. Unnecessary exposure of private names had to be prevented.

Later that afternoon, before returning home, Shyam and Tara sat under a bamboo shelter beside the river. Looking at a cut on his palm, Shyam asked, "If people understand that the name of the person who does the work ought

to be on the paper, why do they grow so angry about it?" Tara answered, "Because once a name is written, someone can ask: whose work was it, who received the pay, who must answer if something goes wrong? Nameless cooperation costs least of all." Shyam laughed. "Then should I start giving receipts for every task in our house?" Tara looked at him. "At home we need justice, not receipts. It is unjust to treat household labour as free, too."

Having said this, Tara fell silent. That morning Shyam had dried the measuring cord she had spent much of the night untying and fastening. His manual labour was entered by name in her table. But in whose ledger would there be a place for the hours he spent that evening telling Chhabili the story of Ruchi's family's weaving? After a while she asked, "Will you leave your own household work tomorrow and come with me to the inspection?" Shyam said, "If we list each job separately, who will soak the bamboo at home?" They both laughed. Yet Tara immediately resolved that, before the next inspection, she would ask how much of Shyam's time was actually available.

Far away, in the forests of Kishkindha, a harsh sound rose among the leaves. Vali and Sugriva confronted each other once again. In the midst of their struggle an arrow came, and Vali fell to the earth. Tara was still in the palace with Angada. When the news reached her, her feet trembled for a moment; but she told no one a lie in order to conceal her grief. Angada tried to run. Tara took his hand. "Come," she said. "But we shall see with our own eyes and ask questions. What someone tells us will not, merely by being told, become the whole of our truth."

When Tara reached the battlefield, the story of Vali's strength lay suddenly cast aside, like a heavy mace set down at the edge of the ground. She sat beside her husband. Grief and anger closed about her together. "I tried to stop you," she said softly. "This is no moment for proving that I was wise. Who will answer for the fear that will now rise among the people?" Sugriva stood at a distance; in Rama's presence difficult questions about the justice of the combat were being raised. Grief did not make Tara surrender her objections; nor did anger make her turn Angada's life into an instrument of revenge.

Sitting beside his father, Angada asked, "If there was friendship, why was my father an enemy?" Tara did not order him to be silent. "That is your question," she said, "and you have a right to have it heard. Counsel about the kingdom, a father's wrongdoing or strength, and a son's future—these cannot be entered in a single account." She looked towards Sugriva. "If you take charge of the kingdom, you must account for this child's life and his trust as well. You will not secure the realm by silencing him." For the first time Angada saw that his mother's reckoning counted not the numbers of power, but the space in which he could breathe.

The evening meeting at Videhapur was brief. Aditi read out the revised notice: three points of temporary danger; two written objections concerning

the disputed route; and the four names of local advisers, with separate payments due. It stated clearly that technical certification had not yet been completed for every part of the work. The embankment representative saw his objection entered with a date, rather than dismissed. Phulo received a date for a formal hearing on the benefits and losses to her field. Changing the words had not set the water flowing, but it had given the affected people somewhere to speak.

Sakib handed copies of the public contributions register to two members of the meeting and put his private transport ledger back into his bag. The single food entry would remain marked ‘incomplete evidence’ until separately verified. Ruchi agreed to the limited trial of her sample, but did not sign any large production order. “Come home,” she told Chhabili. “We'll finish your new blue-striped design.” “And if people say it's good?” Chhabili asked. Ruchi smiled. “Being praised doesn't mean the work is finished. We must count how much thread it took as well.”

That night Tara reopened her measurement book. Beneath its three sections she wrote a new line: ‘Whoever's interests are counted has the right to be heard.’ Shyam sat beside the lamp, smoothing a thin split of bamboo. Tara asked, “When the next meeting comes, can we make sure no one is left out—someone whose loss has been calculated but who has never been called to speak?” Shyam answered, “And those who are called must be given time to ask their own questions.” Beside her new line, Tara left a blank space. The figures were still to be entered; she had come to know that, next time, a young voice would be heard first in that emptiness.

Chapter 52 · Angada's Tomorrow

Before dawn, in the open ground behind the gate, Nandu Nat was pulling two bamboo poles out of the earth. The rope, soaked by the night's rain, had hardened around its knot. He caught one end between his teeth, and little Jhilmil came running. "Babu, if you take these bamboos away, where will there be shade for me to study?" In her hand was an old exercise book in which, the previous day, Mira had made her write 'equal' and 'unequal'. Nandu let go of the rope. "They say that from today no stage may be erected here. First we shall see the paper; then we shall think of a way to give you shade."

After the previous day's meeting, a municipal assistant had drawn a mark in red chalk on the strip of ground near the gate. The tarpaulins, bamboo poles and small cooking vessels all fell on the inner side of his line. The slip of paper said, 'Clear the passage for temporary drainage safety.' It said nothing about the distance to be cleared, the date from which the order applied, or whose authority lay behind it. Gauri Kapariya stood beside the mark, counting the folds of her tarpaulin. She asked the assistant, "When this red line is washed away by the rain, whose word are we to take then?"

"You people are always on the move anyway," the assistant said. "Stay somewhere else for two days." Gauri opened her account book. In it were the cost of repairing the tarpaulin five days earlier, the pegs driven in at night, and the clay hearth on which they kept their fire. "We move, but we are not the wind," she replied. "Some of us have sick people with us; some have children staying here for their examinations. The public way must remain open. But to say 'Move' without showing us where is not a complete measure for safety."

Shyam Mallik and Tara Binout arrived carrying the inspection cord. Looking at the chalk mark, Tara said, "Yesterday my chart gave the dimensions of the dangerous strip. This line goes beyond it." The engineer Aditi was summoned. She read the notice and made it clear that the technical team had called for further examination of the load and drainage at the narrow section; she had issued no written order to clear the whole expanse of ground at once. "But do not spend the night where there is a danger of collapse," she warned. Gauri agreed that the families would move away from that part, provided a safe edge was identified and the reason set down in writing.

Nandu faced another difficulty. His troupe had been invited to perform at the first cultural evening of the fish-and-makhana workers' fair, but the organiser's new notice made the children's presence compulsory for the entire evening. It also proposed halving the fee on the grounds that this was 'community entertainment'. Jhilmil had an examination early the following morning. Reading the notice, Nandu's wife Maina said, "If she dances until

ten at night, how will she read her pages in the morning?" "This money will pay for this month's exercise books and rent," Nandu answered. There was calculation in his voice, not command.

Jhilmil sat beside a pole and opened her book. Covering each letter in turn with her hand, she repeated what she had learnt. Maina asked her, "What is it you want to do?" "I do not want to stop learning the beat of the dholak," the child said. "But instead of performing all evening, I want to go to school first. When I sing my song, I want to sing because I choose to." Nandu looked at her face. Until now the troupe's journeys and earnings had been his to decide; for the first time, Jhilmil was asking for a share of her own time.

As the bamboo was being pulled from the ground, a young man approached, swinging his mobile phone. On its screen was a brief scene from an old performance by Sajid Nat. "We'll use this scene in the town's publicity," he said. "We'll add the children's dance to it. If people contribute, the advertising money will be of use to everyone." Sajid himself arrived just then, carrying a camera and a notebook. At the sight of the red border of his stage curtain on the screen, he stopped. "That scene is my work," he said, "and I have no permission to give you the children's faces for publicity."

"But the video has already been circulating in the market," the young man protested. "What is the point of talking about rights now?" Sajid put his camera back into its bag. "Because it has circulated, may anyone who wishes sell it? My original recording was once wrongly joined to a photograph in the search for Mithun. Naira's inquiry separated the contexts. Since then I have learnt how many lives can be shaken by a single scene cut out of its place." Instead of handing over the original file, he asked the man to state in writing the purpose of its use, the period of use, and the limits of its audience.

A small crowd gathered. Someone asked, "Why hold back art from work being done for safety?" Sajid answered, "Why must a child's performance be sold in order to show a safety map? If you need footage of a public programme I have made, agree on a short extract, the performers' consent and the payment. I will not hand over the children's rehearsal files." Nandu added, "Whether our Jhilmil goes onstage will be decided after we have considered her school day. Her face is not a thing to be used in an advertisement."

When Naira arrived among the people, Gauri showed her the notice. Naira read it, but she did not stamp it as though it were an official order. Since her contract had been suspended, she was careful to distinguish her private assistance from government certification. "Write down three questions," she said. "Who issued this notice? What is the original safety measurement? And where will the affected people's objections be recorded?" A man immediately said, "Find out how many false names there are among these travelling people as well." Naira replied, "An accepted contact for the group is enough for an

objection about a place to stay. There will be no public register of children's routes or the private names used in their homes."

In the palace of Kishkindha, in an age immensely distant from this one, Angada sat beside his father's mace. It seemed to him that the metal had not yet grown cold, though the time for mourning after the battlefield had already lengthened into days. Outside, preparations were under way for Sugriva to assume the throne. Angada asked his mother, Tara, "How am I to believe that the friend of the man who killed my father today will protect me tomorrow?"

Tara moved the mace away from the wall. "I am not ordering you to trust him," she said. "Vali has died; that is my grief. Sugriva will govern the kingdom; that is an event in the life of the people. Your life is not merely what remains after those two things." Angada said angrily, "Everyone will say that my father was wrong. Why, then, will they still identify me as his son?" Tara's eyes filled. "Because being a son does not mean inheriting blame. It means having a bond with memory. Your father's love for you was no falsehood; nor was every decision he made an act of justice."

Hanuman was standing at the threshold. He asked permission to sit beside Angada. The boy said, "You are Sugriva's ally. Will you listen to my question, or will you give me the king's answer?" "I shall listen to your question," Hanuman replied. "The reasons for the side I have served may also be questioned." Angada asked, "When the kingdom changes hands, who will bring grain to the homes of the soldiers who stood with my father yesterday?" Hanuman did not make an immediate promise. "That question must be put before the assembly," he said, "and the families whose names are entered for relief must be asked as well."

When Sugriva entered, Angada rose but did not bow in salutation. The palace attendants grew alarmed. Sugriva stopped them from moving him aside. "Angada," he said, "I have not come to take your father's place." Angada asked at once, "Why, then, do you take his throne?" Memories of defeat, exile and victory passed together across Sugriva's face. "If the kingdom were left without a ruler, the people too would be left unprotected," he said. Tara intervened. "The ordering of a kingdom and the winning of a child's trust cannot be accomplished in the same instant. Tell us plainly how much room your vow of friendship leaves for the families who have survived here."

Sugriva looked towards Angada. "I shall give you a place in which to learn the work of government," he said. "Only because I am Vali's son?" Angada replied. Sugriva fell silent. "Let training be his right, not a compulsory test of loyalty," Tara said. "He also needs time to grieve with his mother and to ask questions about his father." Angada asked, "And what if tomorrow I wish to learn, not the use of weapons, but the words of an envoy?" Hanuman smiled a

little. “To be entrusted with words is a difficult art too,” he said. Angada took his hand away from the mace. For the present, the choice was still his.

At midday in Videhapur, a meeting was held in the old school veranda. Mira Mandal set a pile of exercise books before her. Jhilmil brought her reading book, and Jatan, the son of Reva Gulguliya, came with his lesson sheets. “I can show you last week’s attendance at the travelling school,” Mira said. “But it is not proof of formal enrolment. Those whose enrolment applications are still pending need separate receipts.” Nandu asked, “If we shorten the performance, the children will have time for study. But how are we to find the money for rent?”

Madhu arrived from the ghat committee with the measurement of the narrow passage. “There will be no stage behind the gate,” she said. “That is where the boats pass, and the warning bamboos stand. But for the first two hours of the evening a performance may be possible on the higher ground above the ghat, provided a safe pedestrian way is kept open for the crowd.” Aditi added, “This is only a temporary arrangement for a programme, not a certificate that the gate is permanently safe. A heavy stage or electrical wiring will require separate inspection.” The organiser’s representative said, “In two hours we shall have fewer spectators. The payment will fall.”

Nandu pressed a finger against the old leather of his dholak. “If the fee falls, we shall shorten the performance,” he said. “We shall not shorten the children’s time for lessons.” “Then we will not have the full number of dancers,” the organiser replied. Standing beside her daughter, Maina said, “Jhilmil, tell everyone what you want.” At first the child was shy. Then she said, “I will take part in the first song of the evening. After that I shall go home and write. If the performance starts late, I shall not take part.” For a moment the anxiety of lost earnings flashed in Nandu’s eyes. Then he said, “That will be my condition too.”

In the written agreement Nandu had the troupe’s two hours of labour, the hire of the bamboos and the cost of repairing the dholak entered separately. There would be no condition requiring the children to appear during school hours. In return, the organisers would not pay the additional fee for an all-night performance; the earnings Nandu had expected were reduced. Mira provided a copy of the school timetable, not a record of the children’s names and the routes their households travelled. Madhu marked out the safe ground and proposed conditional permission for one week. She did not make a decision about any permanent right to erect a stage.

At the same meeting Sajid spread out a small screen. The young man was ready to pay an advance for publicity, but on condition that, once he had bought the video, he could show it as many times as he wished. Sajid handed the paper back. “Such a sale would not be the end of my work,” he said. “It would be the end of my rights over it.” He wrote down two alternatives:

limited use of a short public promotional extract once separate consent had been obtained from the performers, or a fixed fee for a new recording made for the organisers. The original file, the children's rehearsals and the earlier wrongly cut scene were all excluded from any public bargain.

"Then I shall make a video on my own phone," the young man said. "Filming a public place is one question," Sajid answered. "A song performed on a stage, the performers' agreements and a child's identity are different questions. Let us first tell the audience whose images must not be recorded." Jhilmil laughed. "Could you show the hands playing the dholak instead of my face?" "If that is what you want, and the performer agrees, we can make an image of the hands at work," Sajid said. He did not switch on the camera.

Then Gauri's difficulty became the most urgent matter before the meeting. Two men had come the previous night threatening to remove the shelters beside the red-marked strip before nightfall. "I am not insisting on staying on the dangerous lower ground," Gauri said. "But whose field we should go to, at whose doorway we should light our fire—that cannot be settled for us by one person's order." She placed the receipt for repairing her tarpaulin on the table. The receipt was no proof of ownership of the land, but it did show that the families' belongings and labour could not simply be cast aside.

Reva Gulguliya rose. "My Jatan has only just learnt where the school is," she said. "Drive us one way today and another way tomorrow, and the teachers will say he does not attend regularly. I shall sign the objection with Gauri, but the route for my own family must be decided separately." Janaki raised the question of the health of Sarayu, an elderly woman in her troupe. The travelling families were not all of one community, one occupation or one itinerary. For the first time, their common question could be heard without its becoming pressure upon them to make one common decision.

Champa had come too. She was troubled by the rooms in Ruhani's shelter and by the notice concerning a private house. "If anyone needs a roof for a night," she said, "I can ask Ruhani what space is available. But the shelter's rules must first be read. We shall not enrol a family without its consent." "A shelter can help in a crisis," Gauri replied, "but I am not asking that my entire troupe become members of that household. I am asking for a hearing about a safe public route and a temporary place to stay." Champa lowered her eyes. She understood that behind a promise of one night's shelter, the old disagreements over keys and rules had not yet been resolved.

Aditi presented a temporary alternative. The ground behind an old warehouse, away from the gate, had not yet been certified 'free of danger' by technical inspection, but a proposal could be made for its preliminary examination. Gauri insisted that no children or sick people be sent there before inspection. A representative of the embankment said, "Our vehicles turn on that ground." "Then measure the routes needed by all three parties

together," Tara replied. "You cannot complete one person's measurement by erasing another person's need."

A small working group was formed: a representative chosen by Gauri's group, Reva to represent her separate application, Janaki for her troupe, and one local resident. Ruhani's shelter was not automatically added to the list. Gauri had it recorded that the stopping places of every family would not be plotted on a public map; only the disputed safe route, the proposed alternative ground and the groups' contact details would appear. The official gave an acknowledgement for an inspection the following dawn. They agreed to vacate the dangerous red strip for the night, while a request to suspend the basis of any forced wholesale eviction pending inquiry was entered at the office. Its acceptance was not yet certain.

A gust of wind turned the pages of Jhilmil's exercise book in the veranda. She had written there: 'I shall learn songs and arithmetic too.' Beside the line, Nandu made a little calculation: two hours' earnings, fewer tickets, the cost of rent, the price of books. Seeing the deficit, he fell silent. "If we cannot earn the money for the books," Maina said, "we shall find other work next week. But we shall not fill this gap by keeping our daughter onstage all night." Instead of drawing a circle around the figures, Nandu put down a small tick. "Your examination is tomorrow morning," he reminded Jhilmil. "And yours?" the child asked. "Mine was today," Nandu replied.

Far away, evening settled upon Kishkindha. In Sugriva's assembly stood two elderly soldiers who had served Vali, hesitant and ill at ease. Seeing them, Angada asked his mother, "By what name are we to call these men? Yesterday they were my father's people." "They are still people of their own households today," Tara replied. "Those whom war leaves behind must not be spoken of merely as the defeated side." Angada said to Sugriva, "I shall learn the arts of arms, but I shall also ask whether these men's children have food."

Before the royal assembly, Sugriva vowed that the injured and bereaved families would be counted and help sent to them. But Tara insisted that the promise be kept distinct from an immediate proclamation of victory celebrations. "A household without grain needs food, not the sound of conches announcing a festival," she said. Hanuman spoke of the possibility of teaching Angada the work of an envoy. "I want to learn to listen first," Angada answered. He did not abandon his grief for his father; but neither did he command himself to make vengeance for his father's death the one purpose of his future.

That night in Videhapur, as a strip of red cloth was tied tightly to the warning bamboo by the gate, Gauri had two families of her troupe move temporarily to the safer edge. The final measurement of the ground had not yet been made; no one claimed a permanent right over it. Sajid kept the original recording in his closed bag and went away with the draft of a limited

agreement. Nandu agreed to wait for Madhu’s permission slip before raising the poles of his stage on the proposed ground above the ghat. Watching the red cloth flutter, Jhilmil asked, “Will that flag be taken down tomorrow?” “After the inspection we shall know what must be moved, and where,” Gauri replied. “But if we set out in time for your examination, we shall be able to get along this path.”

On her way home, Naira placed three documents in separate envelopes: the agreement on performance hours and wages, the unfinished draft concerning rights over the video, and the acknowledgement of the temporary objection about shelter. None of these went into the file on the search for Mithun. No new suspect’s name was sent to Lata on the strength of that day’s crowd. From the kitchen Sarita asked, “Whose tomorrow survived today?” “For one person, two hours on a stage,” Naira replied. “For another, the right to keep the camera switched off. For another, a safe roof until the next dawn. No one has tomorrow’s certainty in their hands, but all three were able to put their questions into words.” Somewhere far away came the light beat of a dholak: its rhythm was a beginning, not an order.

Chapter 53 · Ruhani's Key

In the first light of dawn, Ruhani stood holding the rusted lock of the shelter's main gate. Water had entered it during the last squall of rain; the gate opened only after she had turned the key twice. Inside, Rukhsana was kindling the stove. Looking out, she asked, "If you are away again today, will everyone be left standing at the gate?" Instead of answering, Ruhani separated two keys of the same shape from her bunch. One belonged to the main gate, the other to the old storeroom; without a mark to distinguish them, they looked exactly alike.

"The work of opening a door does not make me its owner," Ruhani said. Sliding the pan aside, Rukhsana replied, "But if it is not settled who keeps the key, everyone will look for you whenever there is a problem with food or medicines, or a fire." The previous week the municipal office had acknowledged Ruhani as the contact person for temporary maintenance; she had still not accepted any document conferring permanent ownership. Yet every visitor asked her, "What is the order of the house?" It was in that question that the greatest danger lay.

The little windmill made of tarpaulin, tied to a post of the veranda, began to spin in the breeze. Champa emerged from the window with a glass of lukewarm water for her mother. The old woman had slept well the previous night, but the time for her medicine had changed again. "I want to go away for two days," Champa said. "I shall leave Mother with my sister and write down the medicine times. I need a break from the shelter's work all day long and the old trouble over my room." There was no apology in her voice, although an old trace of guilt for having made such a request lingered on her face.

"Does your mother agree?" Ruhani asked. From within, the elderly woman answered, "I shall go to my daughter's house. Let this daughter go and look at the river for two days—leaving work behind." Champa burst out laughing. For a very long time the only journeys that had taken her past the river landing were hurried errands between hospital sheets and papers, not a chance to look at the river itself. Ruhani did not make her fill in another box in the shelter's consent register. "If proof is needed for the leave," she said, "give them a copy of the medicine schedule, not the place you are visiting privately."

Meanwhile, Manjari, seated in the courtyard, was packing away her sewing basket. She had lived in the shelter for eight months and had said earlier that she was thinking of renting a small room near the market with a friend. Today she held an old five-hundred-rupee note and a slip concerning the rent. "I shall leave next Monday," she said. "The way back from the sewing shop

will be shorter. But I do not want my name struck off the shelter's list as though leaving someone's charity were a crime."

"Have you seen the room?" Ruhani asked. "The water, the lock, the terms of the rent?" "I have seen it," Manjari replied. "The landlord wants an advance; I shall bargain with him. I am asking for the right to make my own decision, not for permission in place of a decision." At these words Rukhsana stopped blowing on the stove. "What if the next grant is reduced when a room becomes vacant?" she whispered. Ruhani did not evade the question. "Then we shall look at the conditions of the grant," she said. "We shall not keep Manjari's life as a number in a ration calculation."

By the time the sun was high, a small meeting had assembled in the courtyard. Rukhsana brought the ledger of food expenses; Zubaida arrived with the box of keys used for repairs at the bus stand; and Champa sat down after fixing the hours of her mother's medicines. Ruhani set two bunches of keys on the table. "The main gate, the communal storeroom and the emergency water tap must be opened by three different locks," she said. "The keys to private rooms will remain with their occupants. Two elected members should each hold a spare key to the gate for ordinary use, and when the duties change, the account of the keys should be drawn up afresh."

"'Elected' is easy to say," Zubaida observed. "How often will someone who has worked through the night hear another person calling in an emergency?" "I am in the kitchen," Rukhsana replied, "but I cannot be here every night either. The key for a fire emergency must be kept in a way that everyone's life does not depend on one person waking up." The three women then agreed to have two copies of the communal gate key made—one for Rukhsana, one for Zubaida. Ruhani would keep the original as the contact person, but would no longer be the sole custodian. No one would receive an unrestricted right to unlock private rooms.

"And the key to my old room, after I leave?" Manjari asked. "You will make the inventory of your belongings yourself," Ruhani said. "Hand over the key you have been using with a receipt for the transfer. That is not a notice forbidding you to return to the shelter." Manjari's lips parted slightly. "I was afraid that if the rented room did not work out, they would say here: you left once, so you cannot come back." "The rule for applying to return must be the same for everybody," Champa said. "But why should your new rented address be printed in the ledger?" The meeting agreed that a private address would not appear on the public list.

The sound of a wooden mat being dragged came from the doorway. Hiravati Kurariyar stood there with two bundles. The place where she travelled from one site to another weaving mats was in a back courtyard of the market, away from the dangerous strip by the gate; nevertheless, two men working for the contractor had threatened to remove the bamboo from her spot. "My customers meet me here," she said. "I am not insisting on going back onto

the dangerous strip. But the safe corner where I lay out my work every day is called an encroachment, all of it, without anyone taking its measurements." She spread the dimensions of the mats she had woven and receipts from three customers across the table.

Tara arrived just then, returning from an inspection at Binout. She explained that the strip carrying the red warning and Hiravati's weaving place fell within two different sets of measurements. "I do not have the documents establishing rights over this rear part of the market," she said, "but we can ask the office what measurement is the basis for calling it dangerous." Hiravati had her name entered, with the condition that her customers' private home addresses would not be attached. Tara pronounced no decision. Instead, she had Hiravati's right to be present at the next inspection put in writing, and added a demand that the time she spent there should be paid for.

At noon came three beats of a dholak. Hari Natuwa arrived with his son Anshu. The cover of Anshu's exercise book had come loose, and Hari was fixing a thin strip of leather over its torn edge. "They have offered me two extra songs at the evening fair," he said. "The pay is good, but Anshu has practice at school the day after his examination." "Babu, do not give up your work," Anshu said. "My exercise book will keep its place." "Your examination must have a place inside me too," Hari replied, "not only inside your head."

"So what will you do?" Ruhani asked. Hari unfolded a small paper from his bag. The organiser's advance-payment slip specified a performance lasting the whole night. "I shall play for the first two hours, and let another adult performer take the later part," he said. "I shall not receive the full night's fee. I shall buy Anshu's books with what remains, but I shall not sell his night to pay for them." Rukhsana paid him separately for the food and did not enter the artist's labour as a donation in the shelter's register.

Anshu opened his exercise book and read aloud, "Look at the clock; learn to recognise time." "Then ask me at what hour my performance is to end," Hari said. "First you learn to tell the time," the boy retorted. Everyone burst out laughing. Hiravati picked up a slender strip of bamboo and fastened the cover of Anshu's book with it. "There is no charge for this," she said, "because it is a gift I give of my own free will. But that does not mean the next mat will be free." Anshu nodded solemnly.

Javed Qalandar arrived carrying a poster advertising the evening performance. Across the top were printed the words: 'The Animal Wonders of the Madari'. Javed folded the paper and laid it before Ruhani. "This time I have no animal with me," he said. "It was not easy for me to decide to give up the work I once did. To earn my living, I have made a new act out of the puppeteer's strings, shadows and my own voice." The organiser wanted to draw a crowd with the name of the old spectacle. Javed was asking for the new name of his art to replace that false advertisement.

He took two slender pieces of bamboo, a little cloth screen and a brass bell from his bag. Anshu sat on the other side of the screen. Javed moved his hand; from shadows rising and falling across the cloth there emerged the likeness of a bird in flight. Then the bird suddenly escaped from its own shadow—nothing remained but the empty screen. The child clapped. "Let the audience have the chance to understand what they are seeing," Javed said. "There can still be wonder; there is no need to keep a living creature captive."

"If there is no animal, fewer tickets will be sold," one of the organisers said. Javed did not smile. "Let fewer be sold, but let the advertisement tell no lies. And the artist must be paid for the design of the screen that has been made." Hari took him aside. "The last ten minutes of your act could fit into the space I leave after my two hours." Together they made a new, shorter programme, writing down their respective shares of the payment. This was no guarantee of success, but it was the first definite contract Javed had secured since abandoning his former livelihood.

Chandra Badi stepped forward from the back of the crowd, carrying her box of ankle bells. Seeing her name, the young man who printed the posters asked without thinking, "Women of your caste always dance, don't they?" Chandra put the box down on the floor. "I sing as well, and teach rhythm. And when I do not wish to dance, I do not dance," she said clearly. "My body will not step onto a stage at the command of your caste register." The young man tried to laugh off his remark, but Rukhsana asked him, "Why ask Chandra a question you would not ask a male artist?"

Chandra opened the box. Beside the ankle bells lay pages of songs written by hand and an earlier organiser's receipt for an unpaid balance. "I have the right to dance, and the right to say no," she said. "If I go onstage, I shall be introduced as I choose: 'Chandra Badi—Singer and Teacher of Rhythm.' Photographs, videos and the songs themselves require separate permission. And I will not sign another contract for a full night until the old arrears are cleared." The young man pencilled the new description into an empty corner of the poster. Chandra looked at it. "Not in pencil. Change the printing. People's eyes will not see a correction made in pencil."

Hearing of the performance, an employee of the municipal office came to the shelter with an application for temporary assistance with the building. "We need a single list of everyone who lives here, together with the holders of the keys," he said. "Then it will be easier to certify the relief." Ruhani invited him to sit down, but did not hand him the page. "We shall tell you who holds the keys needed for fire and water safety," she said. "But the keys to private rooms and the personal histories of the residents are not part of a public relief list."

"Then what if someone goes missing?" the employee asked. Naira had arrived meanwhile to help Hiravati read her application. She answered, "If an actual complaint about a missing person is made, there is a separate procedure

and investigation. Treating every resident as the record of a potential crime cannot take the place of that procedure." She stated plainly that her government contract remained suspended: she was helping people read their papers, not issuing official orders. The employee claimed that the shelter's address had appeared in an old wage register for work on the gate.

Tara asked for a copy of the old register. The name of the same lane was indeed there, but the date preceded the hospital repairs. That line of the address showed a place to which materials had been delivered, not anyone's overnight residence. The original signature attached to the name written above it and the wage receipt were not available. "The same lane does not establish that the same person lived there," Naira said. "At present all I can insist on is that the names of the shelter's current residents not be linked to this old entry." No name belonging to an unidentified resident from the meeting was sent to the file concerning the actual search for Mithun.

The employee was displeased, but Rukhsana showed him the clearly marked inspection list for fire and water safety and the measurements of the rooms used in common. Individual private addresses remained outside the list. Instead of issuing a receipt, he agreed to request a copy of the original conditions governing the building. "I cannot decide the relief here," he said. "Then write 'Decision pending,'" Ruhani replied, "not 'Failure to cooperate.'" The employee's pen hesitated. At last, on the margin of the receipt, he wrote: 'Basis for requiring additional private details under examination.'

Hiravati sewed a strap onto Manjari's torn bag, and in return Manjari tied the loose threads along the edge of Hiravati's mat. Neither burdened the other with unpaid work: they wrote the value of the small exchange on their respective pages. Chandra sat there reading the wording of the new poster. "I shall sing," she said, "but there must be no verse in this programme that makes a woman's body an object of ridicule." Hari changed one line of a song. Javed took the bell from Anshu's hand and swung it himself. For a moment the courtyard became a genuine school of artists.

The next morning Hiravati went to the market's rear courtyard. Deep footprints marked the place where the bamboo had been taken away during the night. She had brought her bundles of goods, but her former right to sit and work there had not returned of itself. The office had given her a date for the hearing on the measurements. "Today I shall spread out a little work on this safe side," she told another craftswoman. "Everyone should attend on the day of the hearing, and bring an account of the earnings they have lost." There was no declaration of victory in the decision. It was a refusal to allow her labour to disappear without a voice.

Ruhani did not go to inspect Manjari's prospective room. Manjari went herself with her friend; Champa, when asked, merely read through a copy of the rental terms. They discovered that the water charge had not been written down. Manjari asked the landlord and had it added to the copy. The advance

was not reduced, but a separate estimated monthly water charge was recorded. Her departure on Monday was settled. Her cot at the shelter was not immediately allotted to someone else: first there would have to be a list of needs, a schedule for repairing the room, and a date for replacing the cot.

On the first day of Champa's leave, three slips giving the times of her mother's medicines were handed to her sister. "If you like, I can accompany you as far as the path to the ghat," Ruhani offered. Champa smiled. "No. On these two days of leave, I shall choose my own way." She picked up her small cloth bag and went out. The elderly woman sitting on the cot said, "There is no greater paper of permission than a mother." Everyone laughed. In Champa's eyes there shone, after many days, a clear line of time kept for herself.

After noon Ruhani, Rukhsana and Zubaida tested the new keys to the gate. The main lock turned easily; the separate storeroom key would not fit it. The two elected members acknowledged in writing their copies and the limits of their responsibilities. They established a rule requiring two witnesses in an emergency, a record of the necessary action, and notification afterwards; where life was in immediate danger, rescue must come first, and the account of it later. This arrangement gave no one a right of routine entry into private rooms without consent. Ruhani's old special authority diminished, with the change duly recorded; some of her own weariness diminished as well.

That evening Hari gave his shortened performance. Anshu listened to the first song with his book open, then went home with Maina. Children applauded Javed's shadow-bird; no one looked for a real animal. Before her first song Chandra spoke into the microphone. "Listen to my name and my work as they are printed on the poster. I shall take a rest between songs whenever I wish." Some in the audience grew impatient, but once the singing began they found the rhythm. All four artists received the agreed first instalment. A date was written down for the remaining payment, which had not yet been received. From that first instalment Hari bought Anshu's practice book for the following month. Looking at the child's name on the cover, he said, "I ought to make this calculation before every performance."

Returning to the shelter that night, Ruhani saw the little windmill turning silently this time. Manjari sat on her cot, writing down the measurements of the window in her new room: a curtain would have to be sewn. Closing the food ledger, Rukhsana said, "Today the gate was opened twice while you were away." Zubaida replied, "Both times were recorded: once for work at the tap, and once to bring medicines." Ruhani laughed. "Once this house used to wait for me to return. Today its people are learning to wait for one another."

An empty cup had been left on the bench outside. Ruhani was lifting it to be washed when Manjari said, "That is mine. I shall take it to my next home." Ruhani placed the cup in her hands. "Of course you must take it," she said.

Manjari studied the fine crack inside it, as though some uncertainty about the life ahead could be glimpsed in so small a thing. Then she wrapped it in cloth and put it in her bag. The lamp in the lane beyond the gate came on; no one had needed to place the key to a private room in somebody else's hand.

Chapter 54 · Ritual Without a Presiding Authority

At dawn, outside the shelter's storeroom, a length of barbed wire caught in Rukhsana's sari. She was unloading sacks. The rice left over after the performers' programme the previous day was to be used in today's communal kitchen. But a new sign had been erected before the door: 'Relief Distribution: Approval of the Chief Coordinator Mandatory.' Beneath it, the space for a name was blank. Ruhani stopped, turning the key in her hand. "We decided nothing of the kind yesterday," she said. "Who is this chief coordinator?"

Keeping hold of the sack, Rukhsana answered, "Before writing down anyone's name, ask whether this is relief rice, rice received in payment for artisans' labour, or rice donated to feed the children. Whoever made that sign has put all three in the same bin." One was temporary municipal assistance; another, grain purchased from the market; the third, people's voluntary contributions. Instead of tearing down the sign, Ruhani leaned it against the wall. "Let whoever wants this order come forward and explain why," she said.

Dulari Rajwar was the first to arrive. In her hand was a thin ration bag containing two handfuls of gram and an old debt slip. The office distributor had told her the previous day that, if she wanted the next instalment of relief, she must first agree to relinquish her claim concerning an old cooperative loan balance. Dulari laid a finger upon the slip's right-hand corner. "The dispute over the paddy loan is one thing," she asked. "How has the grain meant for a hungry child become security for that debt?" Rukhsana let her set the bag on a low stool, but would not write 'debt forgiven' before reading the slip.

Just then Gurmeet Kaur dismounted from her bicycle. The previous evening she had collected two boxes of donated utensils and some cash for the communal kitchen. The donors wanted plaques bearing their names attached to the utensils. Gurmeet opened two pages of accounts: the objects received in the boxes, the municipal grant, and the actual payments made to the performers. "Putting a name on something does not make a donation transparent," she said. "Everyone must be able to see how much came in, how much was spent, and on whose decision it was spent." There was little reproach in her voice, but a great deal of resolve.

Before noon the following day, Durga Danuwar arrived from the forest's edge. Short lengths of bamboo were tied to her bicycle. A handrail for children was to be made at the right-hand corner of the temporary path near the gate. A member of the panchayat had said that work could proceed if the names of the families bringing bamboo from the forest were registered; yet neither the amount that might be cut nor the route to be used had been settled. Durga said, "I do not call the forest the courtyard of my house. But I

know how many years this footpath has been in use. Let the paper say how much bamboo may be taken, from where, and for how long. Do not merely write down the people of my community as ‘forest cutters.’”

Madhuri Dangi entered the kitchen with her daughter. The girl had tied a scarf about her waist and was sorting makhana, fox nuts. Madhuri had brought a proposal for cooperative food production: flattened rice, roasted makhana and dried greens to be supplied to the school and the relief team. On the first page she had written the prices; on the second, the shares due to the women who would do the work. Rukhsana noticed that the male supplier’s transport charge had been included, while the hours spent by the women carefully sorting and drying the greens were called ‘domestic assistance.’ Madhuri crossed those words out with her pen. “When work done at home is sold in the market,” she said, “that work has a price.”

Four kinds of paper had gathered in a single little courtyard: relief grain, public donations, the bamboo path and food production. A municipal employee said, “If there is one chief coordinator, decisions will be easier.” Ruhani answered, “In an emergency, there may be one person to telephone about safety. But what is owed for food, permission to use the forest, and rights concerning a debt cannot all be altered by that one person’s signature.” The employee was offended. Gurmeet said, “We are concerned not with the title of a chairperson, but with the limits of that person’s signature.”

Long before this, at Udayana’s place of study in Mithila, a sheet had likewise lain unfilled. That age was not the same as the age of modern Videhapur. There a visiting Mīmāṃsaka returned at dawn, carrying the copy of his opposing argument that he had written during the night. In the courtyard there was no sacrificial wood, only palm-leaf manuscripts, a water vessel and two earthen seats. Before taking his place opposite the visitor, Udayana told his pupils, “Today we shall hear, not the answer, but first the objection in its strongest form. If we blunt the edge of a question before answering it, the sharpness of our answer will itself be lost.”

The Mīmāṃsaka unfolded his page. “I am not saying that a sacrifice takes place without human beings,” he said. “There is a sacrificer, there are officiating priests, the recitation of mantras and a prescribed sequence of acts. The question is why, for the religious fruit of these acts and the authority of the injunction that commands them, we must posit an additional, omniscient presiding being. The injunction makes its meaning known through its own prescription; it is possible to speak of apūrva, the unseen potency generated by an act, or of adṛṣṭa, the unseen factor, to account for its later fruit. If an individual will is required behind every act of understanding, what becomes of the authorless authority of Vedic speech?”

Udayana listened attentively. A pupil sprang up at once. “If apūrva is unseen, his doctrine is worthless.” Udayana stopped him with a gesture. “We

forbade precisely this sort of reply yesterday,” he said. “Our own Nyāya tradition also discusses the unseen. The issue is not the existence of a word called adṛṣṭa, but whether what it explains is sufficient. Our guest says that no further conscious governor is needed for the operation of the injunctions governing action. Now examine the grounds of that objection.”

The visitor leaned back. “There is more,” he said. “If you ground trust in Vedic speech upon an omniscient speaker, by what independent evidence will you establish that speaker’s omniscience? And if you identify the speaker through the Veda itself, is this not mutual dependence? If statements of injunction are held to have been preserved in a beginningless tradition, why must we search for a first teacher at every imagined beginning?” Udayana had the three questions written on separate lines: authority, the ordering of consequences, and the renewed transmission of tradition.

The pupil Somesh brought an old metal bell. “The bell does not ring of its own accord,” he said. “There must be someone to ring it; therefore a sacrifice must have God as its presiding authority.” The Mīmāṃsaka placed the bell back in his hand. “In your illustration the action of the hand is visible; my question concerns the distant fruit of a religious injunction,” he said. “To turn an example into proof without understanding its limits diminishes reasoning.” “The courage to correct a false analogy is the first reward of philosophical disputation,” he added.

Without quoting a verse, Udayana stated the first principle of his response. “I object to the view that, as soon as knowledge arises, its truth must in every case be regarded as automatically beyond dispute. The signs by which error is distinguished from truth have to be examined. In the case of trustworthy testimony, the speaker’s competence, the absence of defects, and the relation to other means of knowledge matter.” The visitor immediately asked, “If the test rests entirely upon external grounds, where is the first trustworthy ground to come from? And does every human being, before acting upon something heard, undertake a complete inquiry into the speaker’s character?”

Udayana did not laugh. “Ordinary life does not proceed by reading an entire treatise on verification before every act,” he answered. “But when dispute arises, Nyāya asks what can support the validity of knowledge. Your proposal of intrinsic validity offers one way of securing a stable meaning; our account of validity established through external conditions opens the way to judging defects. This difference of opinion by itself has not yet established God. My larger claim requires further reasoning.” Beside the answer, the pupil acting as scribe wrote plainly: ‘Incomplete.’

Turning to the second question, Udayana said, “If we accept the creation and dissolution of the world, it becomes reasonable to ask how the tradition of knowledge could be set in motion at a new beginning. Merely assuming an unbroken human succession of teachers and pupils is not enough when the

continuity of that very succession is disputed. At this point our position argues for the necessity of an omniscient teacher." The Mīmāṃsaka smiled. "But you cannot impose upon me your own accepted conception of creation and dissolution. You must first refute our account of beginningless human practice and the eternal relation between word and meaning."

In a voice of assent Udayana said, "Very well. Your premises concerning the world differ from mine. Until the intervening lines of reasoning have been tested, my conclusion remains a disputable doctrine, not a command binding upon everyone." He had the pupils record these words as 'the dialogue of today's disputation,' not as authenticated lines from anyone's original treatise. On his own page the visitor wrote: 'The question remains unobstructed; the answer awaits examination.'

In Videhapur, the sacks of rice had still not been opened by midday. But the children were hungry. Rukhsana said, "It would be no justice either to leave children hungry until the dispute over the accounts is settled." Gurmeet lifted the lid of a box and showed that the bag containing municipal aid had been tied separately. Dulari's old debt slip was not in that bag. They decided that the day's meals could not be withheld from children whose school attendance was verified, or from residents with medical needs. Two members would record what was received; the cost would subsequently be entered in the public ledger. No one's private debt would find its way into that line of the accounts.

Dulari telephoned the distributor standing near the gate. The voice from the other end was loud: "Sign the paper relinquishing your loan claim, and you will get tomorrow's rice." Dulari replied, "I will accept today's relief, and I will request a separate hearing on the loan account. Strike out the sentence about surrendering a claim in return for rations and give me a new copy." The distributor said, "Then distribution may be stopped." Gurmeet did not take the telephone from Dulari's hand; with Dulari's permission, she wrote down the date of the statement she had heard. Rukhsana set aside some of the rice she herself had bought for the children's meal, so that the dispute over Dulari's entitlement would not be concealed beneath a private donation.

Durga Danuwar brought two members of the forest panchayat to the site. Seeing the pile of bamboo, one member said, "The same rule applies to everything that comes out of anyone's forest." Durga showed him the narrow corner of the gate. "These four poles are left from an earlier cutting site; we need four new ones. I shall write down where the new bamboo will be cut, the quantity, and the time for replanting. But I will not agree that the panchayat should bar the people who bring the bamboo from entering, and put all the work in a contractor's name." Tara made it clear that a safety handrail required not only the proper thickness of bamboo but tests of its fastenings and the weight it could bear.

An elderly member of the panchayat said, “We respect your knowledge of the forest, but the risk on a public path is ours to bear as well.” Durga laid a pole along the ground. “Then your name will appear in the decision, and the name of my work will appear too,” she said. They measured twice. The panchayat gave temporary permission to use a limited number of the old bamboo poles; a day was fixed for marking the limits of new cutting on a map. Tara warned that this permission was not full safety certification for the gate. Seeing the written date, Durga breathed out softly: the payment for the work had been fixed that day, but the larger question of forest rights remained open.

Madhuri Dangi’s daughter Ananya sat with a plate of dried greens. “Mother, shall I write my name or everyone’s?” she asked. Madhuri said, “The names of those who did the work.” Three women had sorted makhana in the kitchen; a man had carried a sack from the market. The old slip recorded his transport charge, but the women’s time was entered as zero. Madhuri made all four enter their hours separately. One woman said, “I got up in the middle to breastfeed my child.” Madhuri answered, “Then we shall record less working time for you, but not none at all.”

Rukhsana, Gurmeet and Durga were called to taste a sample of the communal meal. There was too much salt in the makhana; Ananya stuck out her tongue and asked for water. Everyone laughed. Madhuri acknowledged the fault in the sample she had prepared, but would not let it become a judgement against the women’s skills. “We shall change the measure in the next batch,” she said. “The contract must state who bears the cost of a defective sample. Workers who followed the instructions will not have their wages cut in the name of recovering that loss.” Rukhsana placed an order for a small trial batch; the larger purchase remained dependent upon a later inspection.

Gurmeet’s donation register was laid before the meeting. One donor wanted his institution’s name on the food plates, but had also verbally stipulated that the kitchen workers’ wages be reduced from the money he had given. Gurmeet wrote to him: the accounts for donations and wages would not be mixed; a public acknowledgement was possible, but no donor could unilaterally alter what workers were owed. His reply had not yet arrived. The disputed money was not shown as spent.

The employee asked once more, “Then who is in charge of all this work?” Ruhani picked up the sign outside the storeroom again. “Two people will be responsible for the emergency alarm. Rukhsana’s team will be responsible for food safety, Gurmeet for the grant accounts, Tara and Durga together for inspecting the bamboo site. Dulari will pursue the debt claim in her own name. Everyone’s rights will not disappear into a single order.” In place of ‘Chief Coordinator,’ she wrote on the sign: ‘Work Accounts and Contact

List.’ The municipal employee said, “That is not regular authorisation.” Ruhani answered, “I shall put that in writing too.”

When Naira arrived with a copy of the old wage register, Dulari showed her the debt slip. On one line were written the words ‘Voluntarily relinquished entitlement’; nowhere was Dulari’s signature to be found. The employee said that, had her name been entered on the blank line, distribution of relief would have been easier. Naira recorded the date of the copy, the page number and the source from which it had been obtained. “This establishes that the sentence exists,” she said, “but it is no evidence of Dulari’s consent. Her consent cannot simply be presumed. If there is written authority for stopping distribution, ask for a copy.” Dulari wrote her name on the slip requesting a hearing, not on the paper relinquishing the debt claim.

Meanwhile, Naira examined another document. On the back of the leaflet that had spread the child-abduction rumour, someone had written the number of a relief vehicle. Someone said that a former worker at the gate had also travelled in a vehicle bearing that number. Naira compared the two lists. The first number appeared on the vehicle receipt for a day of relief distribution; the second contained identical digits in an older register, but the digit giving the year had been torn away. “Matching digits do not establish that it was the same vehicle, the same passenger, or the same crime,” she said. The original receipt and the time of the actual complaint were requested. Without evidence, no driver, labourer or shelter resident was given a new name of suspicion.

That afternoon the argument resumed at the ancient place of study in Mithila. Somesh, the pupil, asked, “Master, if an omniscient governor is necessary, who bears the blame for people’s wrongful deeds?” The visiting Mīmāṃsaka added his own point to the question. “Responsibility for an act must rest with the person who performs what is enjoined. To posit a divine arbiter cannot mean that human wrongdoing is wiped away.” Udayana agreed that human duties and responsibility for observable causes must not be set aside. Yet he did not abandon his Nyāya position. “My claim,” he said, “is not that God performs every act of practical life. The question concerns the ultimate ground of the order of the world and the authority of religious speech.”

The visitor replied, “Then you must demonstrate it clearly. Merely calling something ‘the ultimate ground’ does not furnish proof.” Udayana told his pupil that the next day there would be a separate examination of whether Vedic statements possess validity intrinsically or through external conditions, and that the premises of the inference in favour of creation and dissolution would be set down. He cherished his answer; nevertheless, he returned the visitor’s copy without erasing a single line of the three questions. The two positions remained in different hands upon the palm leaf. Before the lamp

went out, one dispute had been made clear; no one name had been granted the sole right to decide its resolution.

Evening was falling over the kitchen in Videhapur. Dulari's family received their meal that day; the old loan dispute was not over. Durga's four remaining bamboo poles were measured and stored in a safe place; permission for new cutting was not yet settled. Madhuri's sample was prepared again with less salt; the price of the first trial batch was entered alongside the names of all the workers. Gurmeet left the space for an acknowledgement blank beside the disputed donation. No one filled the empty line and thereby became everyone's master.

As they washed the pots, Rukhsana said to Ruhani, "Today the food was saved, but the papers have multiplied." Ruhani laughed. "Paper does not satisfy hunger. Yet how often, without paper, has someone been kept hungry while the accounts were settled in somebody else's name?" "Next time I shall measure the salt," Rukhsana said. Madhuri showed her the empty corner of her ledger. "And write down your own time as well," she said.

As she left, Naira read the new sign outside the storeroom. In small letters along its bottom line were the words: 'Record separately what is owed to those who work, and their right to refuse.' She closed the pages of her investigation. In her notebook was the date of her next appointment to take the real testimony of the missing child's mother. That mother's story could not be written from the day's rumour-filled leaflet. At the door Ruhani turned her key; no one's private room was opened inside, and outside the kitchen fire went out at its appointed hour.

Chapter 55 · The Missing Child’s Mother

At dawn, Lata took three tickets from a pouch of old clothes and spread them beside the hearth. One bore a station stamp; on another, the figure for the fare had run with sweat; only half the third remained. She smoothed it with her fingernail. Never before Mithun disappeared had so many scraps of paper gathered in their house. On the first page of her notebook was written: ‘Last seen at the market.’ On the second: ‘Time the report was made.’ The pages between were not blank, but no one had reckoned the hours spent searching or what that search had cost.

When Naira arrived, Lata banked the fire in the hearth. “Must I tell again what I told you yesterday?” she asked. Before taking a seat, Naira said, “Only if you wish. I have a copy of your first statement. I have come not to make you repeat it, but to fill in, in your own words, what was left out of those lines.” For a while Lata watched the pen in Naira’s hand. “Then write that I have missed three days of work to look for him. The time since my child went missing and the time in which the food in my house has dwindled are not the same thing. But both are true.”

Lata’s younger brother, who had gone into the oil shop and come out to find Mithun gone, stood beside a pillar of the veranda. His eyes were red, as though he had not slept all night. “It was my fault,” he said. “If I had turned at the door and looked sooner—” Lata stopped him before he could finish. “We shall reckon faults later. Tell us how many times you searched near the shop and whom you asked. Do not put down as something you saw what you did not see.” Her brother described the two routes he had retraced. Naira recorded his statement on a separate sheet from Lata’s; she did not merge their words into one account.

Lata took out the old missing-child notice. It already described eight-year-old Mithun’s blue kurta, the red scarf whose dye ran, and the broken strap of his left sandal. “People hear about the sandal and have shown me five different sandals,” she said. “At the sight of each one my breath quickens. Then I see that its strap is whole. How am I to explain it all by sending photograph after photograph?” Naira replied that these identifying particulars would be kept with the help desk and authorised search teams. The public leaflet would not contain the family’s full address, her brother’s name, or a collection of every misleading image. Lata agreed to those limits.

“I want the dates and times set in order,” Lata said. With a piece of chalk she drew four lines on the earth of the courtyard. The first stood for the market; the second, the search from the oil shop to the station; the third, the report at the police outpost; the fourth, the distant bus stand. Opening her notebook, Naira said, “The time you left the market is an estimate. The time stamped on the acknowledgement at the outpost is certain. We shall check the hours spent searching between them against the testimony.” “If the hour is uncertain, does that make my running about a lie?” Lata asked. “No,” said

Naira. “To call something an estimate is not to call it false. It is to make its limits clear.”

For the midday meal Rukhsana had ordered vegetables from the Rain market. Two members of Lata’s household had been added temporarily to the children’s meal list at the communal kitchen. Rukhsana came herself to fetch Lata, but, seeing the tickets by the hearth, asked, “Have they counted the bus fares too?” Lata did not smile. “The first day I went to four places on foot. On the second, the money I paid in fares could have bought oil for the house.” Rukhsana did not enter Lata’s expenses in her own ledger. “My kitchen register is for meals. If we hide what you have spent on the search inside it, tomorrow somebody will say you received every kind of assistance.”

At the kitchen Bhola Yadav stood with two cans of milk. His old credit slip accounted for four days’ milk, but the relief ledger acknowledged delivery on only two days. “If the milk is now to be given to the search team’s families,” the distributor told him, “put it down under relief.” Tightening the lids of the cans, Bhola said, “Record who actually received my milk. Did the people whose names bear the charge receive any? Last time two households went home without milk while the donors went on posing for photographs.” The distributor accused him of making a scene before the crowd. Bhola laid his payment slip on the table; he did not take away the cans.

Lata had arrived and was listening silently. Someone murmured that among those to whom Bhola had not given milk were also people “under suspicion.” Bhola turned at once. “Those households went without milk because their names were missing from the distribution list. I am not connecting that omission to the child-abduction rumour. You must not connect them either.” Naira examined the register. The line acknowledging receipt bore the distributor’s signature, not that of the child’s family. “Have the two recorded days of delivery verified,” she said, “and put in writing a proposal for immediate payment of what is owed for the other two.” Lata whispered, “When a name is entered wrongly, even a meal is lost.”

Bhola did not speak of his own household all at once. A little later his daughter came to wash the measuring vessels. “Babu,” she asked, “if someone asks me for rice, must I look at a slip first?” Bhola said, “Give a thirsty or hungry person water first. But do not forget who was meant to pay, or who did pay.” He told his daughter to put away the empty vessels and looked towards Lata. “I will not make you feel small by announcing, as an act of kindness, that I shall charge nothing for your household’s milk while Mithun is being sought. Whatever help I give, I shall give in my own name. What remains a debt will remain in the accounts.” For the first time Lata thanked him directly.

Outside the market, Poonam Chidimar was stitching a new border onto an old jute cover. She had received an order for the cover because the communal kitchen’s rice sacks got wet whenever it rained. A volunteer saw her old family name and asked eagerly, “Your family used to catch birds, did they not? Then perhaps you know something about the old wandering people who took

children away from markets." Poonam pushed the point of her needle into the cloth. "I can tell you the story of my family's former livelihood. But I cannot attach to the search for this child a thing I have not seen."

She showed them two pages concerning her work. On the first she had written, from her own recollection, what her grandmother had told her about the old methods of catching birds, the seasonal paths they followed, and why the family had abandoned that occupation. On the second were the measurements of four covers made that day, the cost of the thread and the wages due to her. "Keep the first page as memory," Poonam said. "The second is my livelihood today. If you read my name and start looking for someone to blame for a vanished child, you will have read both pages wrongly." The volunteer lowered his head in embarrassment. With Poonam's permission Naira recorded the receipt for the work she now did; the family memories remained in Poonam's private notebook.

Watching Poonam sew, Lata suddenly asked, "There was red thread like that in Mithun's scarf. Have you seen—" She left the question unfinished. Poonam held up the border she had sewn. "There is red thread in countless scarves. If you wish, I can tell you how to stop the colour from running. But do not ask me, on the strength of this thread, about a child I am supposed to have met." Lata let the unfinished sentence lie and began watching the sewing. Poonam taught her how to separate two strands of thread. For a little while they were both occupied with the ordinary work of cloth, outside the language of a missing child and a wrongful accusation.

At the municipal help desk the old rumour-laden leaflet appeared once again. This time someone had written a new time on its reverse beside the number of a relief vehicle. "Look," cried a volunteer, delighted. "Now the time matches! This vehicle was near Mithun that day." Lata reached to take the leaflet, then checked her hand. "Whose eyes witnessed that time?" she asked. "Someone said it over the telephone," came the reply. Lata set the leaflet down again. "Without the caller's name, the time of the call, and the place of an actual sighting, you will send me wandering down a false road for another day." For the first time, the help desk entered those words of hers in its minutes.

Naira laid a copy of the original vehicle receipt on the table. The date of distribution was clear, but the box for the vehicle's return time stood empty. In the old register of wages for work at the gate there was a similar sequence of digits, but the year was incomplete. "These papers do not prove the two vehicles were the same," Naira said. "And even if it was the same vehicle, who travelled in it and whether the child was present would remain separate questions." "Then do not send a search team on the strength of this new time," Lata said firmly. The help-desk employee marked the new leaflet 'Unverified information' and suspended its public circulation pending independent confirmation. The existing plan to search the actual market-to-station route remained in force.

Behind that office Arun Barnwal arrived carrying a large, brightly coloured banner from his shop. In his family's name it announced a 'Child Assistance Fund.' An employee told him, "Just give the kitchen supplies. The papers concerning the old tax dues can be dealt with later." Arun's younger brother, who had come with him, silently opened the account book. The tax arrears on earlier business and the interest for late payment lay there before them. Folding the banner, Arun asked, "Will advertising this fund count as payment of my taxes?" The employee tried to evade the question. "Public service looks good."

Arun answered, "Public obligations are not cancelled in the name of public service. Whatever tax my shop owes, I shall pay against an official receipt. If I give to the search for the child, I shall give under a separate receipt, on condition that my name is not printed." "Then the money spent printing the banner is wasted," said his younger brother. Arun looked at him. "That was the cost of my mistake in advertising. Do not turn it into a relief expense." He went to the designated payment window and obtained an acknowledgement of his payment. He returned having separately recorded the question of an old tax assessment that was to be examined some days later. The enormous banner meant for the outside of his shop was folded and put away in a room.

Madan Raut arrived with the kitchen vehicle, and Arun and Lata met in the same doorway. Madan explained that a patient needed a seat to be taken for medicines, so the search team could not have the vehicle at that hour. A young man said to Arun, "If the vehicle from your donation fund runs, the child can be found sooner." Arun answered plainly, "No vehicle has yet been booked in the name of my fund. If I pay a fare, the receipt will show the real passengers and the real purpose. I will not stop a patient's journey and race after an abduction rumour." Lata, listening, said, "My search is not false either. But blocking a patient's road does not enlarge my right to search."

Rukhsana was calculating the cost of the day's meals. There were separate entries for leaf plates, oil, rice, greens, and the workers' hours. One of two baskets of vegetables had rotted after being caught in the rain. The market seller was unwilling to take the goods back. "The cost of today's food is not merely the rice that reaches a plate," Rukhsana said. "We must count what was spoiled, the transport paid to the person who carried it, and the hours of the person who cooked. But we shall not ask Lata's family for a single coin if the relief team pays for those meals separately." Gurmeet showed her the remaining grain already approved under the grant. The source of the rest of the money had yet to be settled.

"Rukhsana didi," a volunteer said, "a child is missing. This is no time for bargaining over prices." Rukhsana laid her ladle on the table. "I want Lata's son found as much as anyone. But if we cook free of charge day after day in the name of the search, who will put food in the homes of the women working at this hearth? Today we shall cook with the relief grain already approved. For tomorrow, we shall decide how many plates to make according to the contract we actually have." Lata stepped forward. "Do not cut anybody's

payment in the name of my sorrow," she said. "You need not conceal the costs from me in order to keep me grateful."

In the afternoon, the help desk reopened the account of Lata's days of searching. Her notebook recorded two rounds on foot on the first day; three bus fares on the second; a day away from work, spent at the outpost and help desk, on the third; and enquiries at the station on the fourth. A volunteer wanted to add everything together and announce one large figure. Lata stopped him. "For tickets that have survived, put down their actual fares. For the walking, record the time, not imaginary transport costs. Call the wages I lost an 'estimate of loss,' not money received." Naira made three separate columns: expenses supported by receipts, time based on statements, and estimated earnings forgone. For the first time the paper showed Lata the full extent of her search.

Suddenly Lata asked, "Do the hours before I made the first complaint count for less?" "No," Naira said. "But the basis of verification is different. We shall take your brother's account, the oil seller's confirmation, and the time of the station report one by one." The help-desk employee took the seller's contact details and sent a message. Over the telephone the seller could confirm only that Lata's brother had come into the shop to buy oil. He could not reliably remember where Mithun had been at that moment. Naira entered that incomplete account as supplementary testimony, not decisive evidence. Lata was disappointed at first, then said, "Write down as much as he knows. I shall go on looking for the rest."

At the market Poonam arrived to deliver her newly made covers. Bhola stood there with the account of the milk still owing to him. Before everyone, the distributor paid a small sum: the price of the two days' milk whose receipt had been checked and confirmed. On the receipt Bhola wrote, 'Payment for the remaining two days under verification.' Before taking away his milk cans, he asked, "Why were some people's names left off the list?" The distributor replied that the municipal office would decide eligibility for relief. "Then that question must go to a separate hearing," Bhola said. He had received part of his money that day, but the inquiry into unequal treatment had not been closed.

Poonam's completed covers were the right size, and Rukhsana's team accepted her first consignment. Poonam had 'Sewing covers for sacks' written on the receipt. "You will not put down the old bird-catcher's name?" the volunteer asked again with a laugh. This time Poonam smiled. "My name will remain mine, and the work will be the work I do today. When I tell the story of the older work, listen carefully then." She thought of using her payment to buy pencils for her little girl's school, but did not yet enter that future purchase in her buying ledger. Looking at the tiny bell on Poonam's needle box, Lata said, "Mithun used to come running when he heard a sound like that." Poonam covered the bell with her hand. For a little while neither spoke.

Before evening Lata returned home from the market. Her brother was sweeping the courtyard. She noticed that one ear of Mithun's little clay horse had broken. As a small child he had painted it himself: blue in front, green behind, with no proper boundary between the colours. Without thinking, Lata laughed. She remembered Mithun making the horse gallop and saying, "This horse won't wear sandals, so its strap will never break." At the time she had laughed too as she gave him water to drink. Now the memory brought a laugh that lasted only half a moment before silence returned. "Shall I put this toy away safely?" her brother asked. "It belongs to my courtyard," Lata said. "It is not an object for the investigation."

Someone called from outside that a scrap of red cloth had been found beside the river. Her brother rose to run. For a few moments Lata looked at the plate inside the house and the clay horse. Then she went to the door. "Where? Who saw it? Who has the cloth?" she asked. The person bringing the message had no clear answer. Lata did not scold him. "If it is genuine information, take the place and time to the help desk. I shall not spend another whole night running about the riverbank on the strength of nothing definite," she said. She sent her brother with the messenger and remained at home, waiting for the telephone to ring.

Naira returned to the help desk and submitted Lata's revised account. It recorded the actual sequence of the four days of searching, the surviving tickets, her brother's separate statement, and the oil seller's limited confirmation. The attempt to attach a new time to an old rumour leaflet and turn it into an allegation of crime had been stopped in writing. The original register of twenty-seven names remained in Sarita's care; Tara was examining the water-lease land documents separately. No new suspect's name was entered in Mithun's file on the strength of either. The help-desk employee agreed to give Lata a written list of contacts at the station and market for the next day of searching.

That night, as she turned the pots upside down to dry, Rukhsana told Gurmeet, "Today's meal costs were covered. Tomorrow is uncertain." "Arun has paid his tax dues," Gurmeet said. "That does not automatically clear the kitchen's debts." Rukhsana entered only as many plates for tomorrow as the approved supplies would cover. Madan had left a separate slip for the vehicle used to carry a patient's medicines. Devvrat's name appeared on the page for that medical assistance, but no instruction had been accepted that would halt an inquiry into treatment in the name of someone's donation. Rukhsana folded the page and put it aside.

That night Lata filled Mithun's plate with rice again, without having washed it, but she did not place it at the door. She put the little clay horse carefully on a high shelf, where a gust of wind could not break what remained of its ear. Her brother returned to say that the report from the riverbank had not been confirmed. Lata did not blame him. "At dawn we shall follow the route agreed for the station," she said. Then, for the first time in many days, she served herself a bowl of rice. Somewhere outside a drum was beating, and

for an instant she remembered Mithun's ungainly dancing. No new sign came after that memory. As she put the first mouthful of rice into her mouth, she slipped the two remaining tickets into a book for the next day's search.

Chapter 56 · Medicine Given in Charity

As the first window of the hospital dispensary opened at dawn, the dew on the glass vials shone white. Before getting down from her cot, Jamuna Devi sat for a little while with her feet planted on the floor. Three months earlier, when they had brought her here, her breathing had been so broken that she could not even answer her daughter Kanchan's questions. Now she could put on her sandals by herself. The happiness contained in that small act appeared in none of the hospital's ledgers.

Kanchan stood by the door with an old cloth bag. Inside were the prescriptions, their tickets for the journey home, and two photographs taken out of the account book. “Ma, why must you go all the way inside again just to say thank you?” her daughter asked. Turning her eyes away from the row of vials, Jamuna said, “You know who paid the fare when the first vehicle took me away. We should remember with affection the people who helped us. But bowing our heads at somebody's door will not alter what is written in the hospital papers.”

She had first been brought to the municipal hospital with a high fever and an infection in her chest. The doctors continued treating her; meanwhile, the costs of tests and medicines at a hospital elsewhere had been added to the bill. Devvrat's relief fund had paid the vehicle fare, the charge for making oxygen available, and some of the medicine bills. When Jamuna thought of how her life had been saved, she thought of the doctors, nurses, driver, and the fund's assistance together. She did not know that any one person alone had saved her. Nor did she make light of the help she had received.

In the courtyard outside the hospital, the second meeting of the communal kitchen's Food and Wages Day was to be held. The accounts would be read aloud: how much grain remained after the previous meal day, whose payments were outstanding, and how food would reach patients' families. Kanchan brought her mother there while Rukhsana was washing a large cooking pot. A thin band of sunlight lay across the damp courtyard. Rukhsana drove the smoke rising all around away not with her ladle but with a fan of straw.

“Jamuna Kaki! You've come on your own feet!” she cried, laughing. “And not carried on anyone's head,” Jamuna replied. “That is what we're celebrating today.” Rukhsana offered her a low stool, but Jamuna would not sit beside the great board bearing the donor's name. “I'll eat outside,” she said. “There's plenty of air here.” Her wish was so ordinary that Kanchan smiled.

Raghu Sahu was taking roasted chickpeas from the hearth of his roasting shop. A volunteer wrote on a slip: ‘Flattened rice, chickpeas and roasting received as donations.’ Raghu held out a roasted grain to show how hot it was. “Put the name of whoever gave the flattened rice under donations,” he said.

“But who donated the wood for my fire, the time spent roasting, and the wages for spreading the grains out twice and filling the baskets again? Has my work become a donation without anyone asking me?” He did not tear up the slip. With a red pen he divided the entry into three parts.

Chandrika Rai arrived then with light, jaggery-sweetened puas. The customers had still not fully returned to her sweet shop. Work in the municipal kitchen provided a real source of income, yet a day's crowd without an agreed price could force her to close her own shop. Unfolding a sheet of paper, Chandrika said, “Not every plate gets a pua of the same price. The patients whose doctors have prescribed a particular diet must not be given jaggery. Pua for children is one thing; rice and porridge are another. Don't enter the grant as though it were my profit.”

Gurmeet Kaur placed three account books before them: purchased provisions, provisions received through grants, and wages together with the vendors' legitimate profit. Chandrika pointed out a shortfall in the previous payment. “They said two hundred plates were prepared, but I supplied seventy puas. Who made the others?” Rukhsana explained that the other team had served flattened rice. “Very well,” Chandrika said. “Then enter my seventy. Put the other team's payment under their own names. Making my receipt larger won't increase the money I am owed.”

Meanwhile, a member of the hospital's medicine-distribution staff came into the courtyard. He carried a copy of a letter from the relief fund. The municipal inspection team was due the following week to examine the medicine stores and the receipts for vehicle hire, but an intermediary of the fund had proposed that the beneficiaries first hold a public meeting of thanks, and the inspection follow afterwards. The employee said hesitantly, “Some people want the value of this assistance to be recognised before the inspection.”

Jamuna rose from her stool. “I'll speak of its value today itself,” she said. “But why should the inspection depend upon the day I give my thanks?” The employee had no answer. He pointed out that the letter's final line used the word ‘coordination’; there was no direct order to stop the inspection. Naira, who had been delivering the list of contacts for Lata's next day of searching, took the slip. “Show us the original of this letter. Who made the suggestion, and has anyone accepted it? Those are two different questions.”

Kanchan tried to restrain her mother. “Money has been paid in your name. What if you need medicines again?” Jamuna pressed her daughter's hand. “If I keep silent out of that fear, then to whom will my life belong? The thanks for the medicine I received are mine to give. But I have no right to prevent an examination of public accounts.” Patiently, she explained that she would show her personal treatment records only to her doctors and duly authorised

investigators. She would not recite her medical history into a microphone before a crowd.

Naira asked whether she consented to the sharing of a copy of the assistance slip. Jamuna gave permission for a limited copy showing only the dates, the heads of expenditure and the sums paid, not the private details of her illness. Kanchan put another copy in her bag. Naira prepared a page for the public accounts recording what the fund had paid for, the hospital's authorisations and the status of receipt verification. “Evidence of a donation shows that assistance was given for treatment,” she said. “It does not erase questions about other irregularities.”

Devvrat himself was not at the meeting. An assistant from his office came and said that tarnishing the name of the relief fund might mean the medicines of poor patients would be stopped. Having said so much, he fell silent. Chandrika asked, “Why would looking at the papers stop the medicines? If the fund's rules contain such a condition, show us a copy. If they do not, don't shelter behind the patients' fear.” Rather than answer plainly, the assistant said he would return with the original agreement. His words were not treated as a written instruction from Devvrat.

At the back of the meeting stood Suraj Chaudhary. He had brought palm leaves from home, along with the old tools for drawing sap from the palms. His father considered the skill of climbing the trees the family's only means of livelihood. Suraj had begun thinking of a new trade: a hygienically prepared, tested, non-intoxicating drink made from what the trees yielded, with its ingredients clearly identified for customers. But the moment he said that the work of tending the trees, climbing, cutting and filling bottles ought to be paid for separately, his father's face had hardened.

“Are you going to abandon the trade of your forefathers?” his father asked. Suraj set the bundle of leaves on the ground. “I won't abandon the trees, Babu. But I'll record the wages of whoever climbs them separately from the profit on a bottle of drink. Whether or not to sell an intoxicating drink cannot be decided by invoking family tradition as though that settled everything. We'll decide after considering tests, regulations and what I myself want to do.” His father's anger did not subside, but he opened the upper folds of the leaves and examined their quality. For the first time their quarrel reached the question of earnings and labour.

“Where will the money for new bottles come from?” Suraj's mother asked. “Work on the trees needs to be paid for today, not some other day.” Suraj opened his ledger. He entered separately his father's two hours of climbing, his own cutting and cleaning work, and the cost of samples of the thin bottles. “No large consignment for the first trial,” he said. “Only after the small samples have been tested will anything go to market.” His father took the ledger, studied it for a long time, and corrected the entry for his hours of

climbing. It was not a complete victory for agreement. But for the first time the work done within the household had been given its own name in writing.

Just then Bela Turha arrived, with dust rising from the road-survey marks. The old red markings for the proposed road widening ran across her stall. Small bags for covering the mouth, twine for fishing nets, and covers used in the market were the goods from which she made her living. A municipal employee said, “The road will be widened. Your stall will have to go.” “Where am I to put it?” Bela asked. “That will be decided later,” came the answer. She stood still. “Show me the place first,” she said. “Then tell me the day I must move.”

People had gathered at Bela's stall, and a small argument broke out with the municipal employee. Naira asked everyone to stand a little apart. Tara Binaut brought the old survey papers. She made clear that the red line marked the limit of a proposed road, not a final eviction order. Bela produced her receipts for the weekly market fees. “This receipt does not make me the owner of the land,” she said. “But it does prove that I work here regularly.”

Bela asked to inspect two possible sites: one beside the school, where her stall might obstruct the children moving through the crowd, and another near the old peepal tree, where rainwater collected. She would accept neither without examining it. Tara invited Bela to tell the next survey team the actual width of her stall, but did not promise a final allotment in the market. Bela began a short list of places where her regular customers could be found. “Will people know where to look for me in the new market?” she asked. No one had an answer.

At noon a sack of grain for the meal and a bill for its contents arrived from Kamala Jain's household. Her family's shop supplied provisions, and some members of the family prepared special food on ritual occasions. One of the event's publicity workers suggested to Kamala that a religious declaration be printed on the donor board beside her business's name. Holding a copy of the bill, Kamala said, “The wheat came from the shop. Record its price and the discount. Why should what vows I observe personally, or choose not to observe, be attached to the receipt for goods sold by the business?”

Kamala's elder brother-in-law said from a corner, “People judge the family's reputation as a whole.” Kamala remained calm. “If it is one reputation, then keeping the merchant's prices honest must come first. The rules I observe about my own food are my personal decision. The right to sell goods in the shop does not depend on that decision.” Her younger niece felt a little more at ease on hearing this. Until then she had been afraid to say how she wanted to choose her everyday meals. Kamala did not settle the question of the girl's plate there and then. She merely said, “We'll speak at home, not over a publicity worker's microphone.”

Raghu came over again. The first consignment of roasted chickpeas had been used up. A volunteer asked him to supply a second consignment on credit. “It's for the patients' families. The donor will settle the account tomorrow.” Turning down the fire in his roasting hearth, Raghu said, “If there's no assurance of payment tomorrow, I'll give only what has been approved. I'll have to sell the remaining chickpeas in the market. Otherwise who will pay for the wood and the rent?” Jamuna looked at him and agreed. “Don't close your roasting shop in the name of keeping me alive,” she said.

At this, Chandrika grew alert in the middle of the meeting. “The fund pays for medicines and the kitchen distributes grain, but if wages are treated as something to think about afterwards in both places, how will the assistance last?” She proposed a three-day trial: meals would be cooked only for as many plates as had advance approval for provisions and workers' pay; the rate of profit would be made public; the cost of donated goods would be recorded as zero, but the labour of those who prepared them would not. Gurmeet and Rukhsana worked together on the wording of the proposal.

Outside, Kanchan urged her mother to eat something. Jamuna said the doctor had advised regular, light meals, so a small bowl of specially prepared dal should be set aside for her. Rukhsana invited Kanchan to see the kitchen, but Jamuna did not get up herself. “Today I'll sit a little and listen,” she said. Her wish was respected. For the first time Kanchan understood that her mother's recovery did not mean she must return immediately to work every day.

As evening began, the assistant returned with a two-page authorisation letter from Devvrat's office. The first page specified the financial ceiling approved for medicines and the payment dates. The second set out the option, not the obligation, of publicising the donor's name. There was no explicit clause deferring the inspection. Taking a copy, Naira said, “If the payments for food or medicine are genuine, we shall record them. But this letter does not prevent us from examining the accounts of the warehouse, the hospital and the vehicles.”

The assistant said, “And if the major donor becomes angry, what of future assistance?” Jamuna asked him directly, “Are you reporting something Devvrat has said in writing, or your own apprehension?” “My apprehension,” the assistant replied. Jamuna drew a long breath. “Then don't stop me from saying thank you. I'll write to him that his help reached me. I'll also write that the hospital inspection must go ahead. Both are truths of my life.” The assistant lowered his eyes a little, but promised to deliver her letter.

Aditi, a member of the inspection team, examined the entries on the page. She said only that the agreed vehicle fare, the actual duration of the journeys, the medicines received and the records of medicines issued from the hospital store would have to be reconciled. Jamuna's medical history would not be

made public. The original distribution register would be requested from Aniruddha's hospital office. The earlier discrepancy over times in the linen register would not be used as an easy route to declaring the medicine receipts fraudulent. Each item would be examined on its own evidence.

On the help desk's paper Naira set down three independent headings: the search for Mithun; the accounts for hospital medicines and transport; and the public route by the gate and the water-lease land. Someone in the crowd wanted to say that a vehicle number seen earlier had also appeared on a medicine-hire slip. Naira asked, “Is it the entire number that matches? The date, the driver, the journey too?” The reply was that only the last two digits matched. She confined the information to a line marked ‘Unverified match’. No new allegation was entered against anyone.

When the communal meal began, Jamuna joined her hands before taking the first mouthful. “For the donation?” Kanchan asked. Jamuna laughed. “When I was suffering, you stayed awake all night. Your hands are in this mouthful too. I'll thank those who paid for the medicines; I'll also see that those who cooked the food receive their wages.” Kanchan passed two mouthfuls from her own plate to her mother. In the courtyard children were making little heaps of flattened rice and playing at mountains. Watching them, Jamuna laughed without fear for the first time in a long while.

While she was laughing, Kanchan's little son came running with a half-cooked pua. “Grandma, I made this,” he said. Rather than eat it, Jamuna took his hand. “You didn't mix jaggery; you mixed flour and water. Now ask Chandrika Kaki how many times the fire has to be tended.” Chandrika did not take the child near the hearth. She showed him a cool mould kept at a safe distance. In it he fashioned a round paper pua. Laughing, Jamuna wiped tears from her eyes. Kanchan did not ask what those tears meant.

After the meal, Rukhsana read out the final reckoning. All the plates approved for that day had been served. Written approval from the municipal office was still awaited for the proposed next three days. A payment receipt had been issued for Raghu's first consignment; no second consignment had been taken on credit. Chandrika's old receipt for seventy puas had been entered separately in the payment list. A payment date had been fixed, but the money had not yet reached her hands. Gurmeet also told the gathering why the proportion of the public subsidy appeared to be falling: work previously entered as free was now being counted as an actual expense.

As Suraj set off with his father, the older man said, “I haven't tasted your new drink, so I won't say it's good. But the price of the risk in climbing the tree must not be deducted.” A little relief showed on Suraj's face. Bela packed up her stall and put sketches of both possible new market sites among her papers. Kamala Jain bought a small box of food to take home, keeping the shop's discount and her own food expense separate in the payment. The four

people's decisions had been made on the same platform, but none of those decisions stood in for another person's life.

Before leaving, Jamuna handed Naira a short letter. It expressed her unambiguous thanks for the medicines and vehicle fare provided through Devvrat's relief fund, from which she had benefited. Immediately after that came a sentence: 'I wish the details of my treatment to remain confidential; I do not support preventing an independent inspection of the hospital's public purchases and payments.' She did not turn the letter into permission for publicity. With Jamuna's consent, Naira arranged for a copy to be sent to the relief fund's office. The original stayed in Kanchan's bag.

Home again, Jamuna sat in the shade of the old neem tree. Kanchan put lightly salted porridge on the stove, and the child brought his paper pua to show his grandmother. Once, every sound in the house had seemed to call attention to the hour for medicine. Today there was the clatter of the stove, a child's insistence and the ordinary business of the evening. "Go to your work first tomorrow," Jamuna told Kanchan. "I'll take my midday medicine on time." For the first time, Kanchan could trust herself to leave her mother alone for a little while.

At the other end of town, Tara was filing the plan of Bela's alternative market sites among the public survey papers. A farm labourer looking at the drainage line there asked, "This line runs straight on paper. But where will you write down what a man knows whose feet sink into that field every day?" Tara opened a separate blank page. She did not answer him that night. The day's experience had taught her that gratitude for a life saved, knowledge of how to save a field, and the wages owed for work each needed a place of their own in which to be heard.

Chapter 57 · Janaka and the People

At daybreak, a bamboo measuring rod left on the embankment of a field suddenly sank a hand's breadth into the earth. Ramesh pulled it free, and the yellow clay clinging to its lower end gleamed in the first rays of the sun. Tara arrived carrying the survey papers for Binout. The evening before, she had told a farm labourer that she would record what he knew; today Ramesh brought her to the line along which, on paper, the water drained away easily, though beneath the surface a thin layer of sticky clay held it back. “Drawing a line is easy,” Ramesh said. “Step down here and see how hard it is to pull your feet out.”

Tara touched the ground with the edge of her shoe. Little water showed on the surface, but beneath the grass the earth was trembling. Ramesh had left two hours of his own work to show her this; Tara entered his name and the time. A municipal assistant asked, “Wages even for showing us this much?” Ramesh did not look at him. “If the time I lose from my work doesn't enter the accounts, this path will disappear again in the next rains.” Tara said, “Payment for today's knowledge of the site will have a separate entry. No decision about rights over the land will be made on the strength of this wage slip.”

A little farther off, Dhani Rajbhar had propped a strip of bamboo against the mouth of a small irrigation channel. The previous month a landowner, wanting to protect his own plot, had piled earth across the passage. With the channel blocked, water no longer reached the field Dhani had rented, while every rainfall flooded another family's courtyard. Dhani thrust his spade into the soil. “I don't own this land,” he said, “but the old route by which water reaches everyone runs through here. Who gave anyone the right to close its mouth merely because we have no ownership deed?”

Just then Sushila Mahto arrived with two little tins of seed. On each she had written the date, the name of the field and the day of sowing. She unfolded the company's glossy leaflet before Ramesh first, not before Tara. It promised that the new seed would give a certain yield even where water collected. Sushila said, “The results weren't the same on my two plots. But if I say on that basis that this seed is bad everywhere, I'll be delivering a verdict without testing it, just like this leaflet.” Her account book had curled page by page from getting wet; the figures remained clear.

Mahendra, the seed seller's representative, said, “The soil was not prepared equally, so the comparison is unfair.” Sushila agreed. “You're right. Water stood for three days in one plot and one day in the other. But your advertisement says ‘under all conditions.’ In my trial, five of eight rows bore ears of grain in one plot, and seven of eight in the other. These are figures from different fields, not a scientific conclusion. Write down that the claim needs independent testing.” After looking through her book, Mahendra drew

a pencil circle around ‘under all conditions,’ but he made no promise of a correction on the company's behalf.

Pawan, a new trainee who had come with the representative, was noting the measurements of the fields. He asked Sushila, “Did you dry the paddy you'd harvested before weighing it for sale?” Sushila showed him her account of the two days spent drying it. Pawan said this was not enough to establish the seed's general qualities, but the categorical sentence on the leaflet should be examined again. Mahendra tried once to close Pawan's notebook; Pawan would not give it up. Sushila saw that a copy of her objection would now remain in the hands of one of the company's own employees.

Sushila's son Vinay was trying to catch an insect that hopped among the grass on the adjoining ridge. His mother stopped him. “The seed samples are there. Don't step on them.” Vinay sighed. “All of you count water and paddy. When I talk about our field at school, the teacher shows me pictures in a book.” Sushila put a small lump of wet earth into his hand. “Look at the pictures,” she told him, “but remember the weight of this lump as well. The two are not the same thing.” Vinay placed the lump on a leaf to dry.

That day, in the royal assembly of ancient Mithila, visitors were setting gifts of gold and silver before Janaka. Scholars had come to listen to a debate on knowledge. The king's patience was renowned far and wide, but behind the palace the share of a plough had become stuck in a field. A labourer carried the iron share to the court in his hand. The gatekeeper told him to wait until the ceremony was over. “The grain to be offered in the sacrifice inside that hall,” the labourer said, “comes from a field whose seed is rotting under water. If the news is late, a whole year's work will be ruined.”

Janaka summoned the man inside. A courtier, displeased by the interruption of the chanting, made his objection known, but the king went on looking at the earth adhering to the ploughshare. The labourer explained that the lines drawn across the field's surface were one thing, the ground beneath it another. “It is the king's field,” Janaka said. “Will calling it the king's change the course of the water?” the labourer replied. For a moment the assembly fell silent. The king's learning was still searching for an answer to this ordinary question.

A learned woman standing at the rear asked, “What is the test of the knowledge possessed by one who claims to know?” A scholar of the court began speaking of the self and non-attachment. The labourer did not know the worth of those words; the soil was still clinging to the ploughshare in his hands. The king instructed a servant to inspect the site with the cultivators and record how long the water remained in the fields. Yet at that moment no one in the royal assembly asked what rights the labourer himself had over the field belonging to his household. Between the reputation of Janaka's wisdom and the life of his people, that question remained unanswered.

In Videhapur, Meena Tharu held a document on which the ink was still quite fresh. An agricultural company wanted long-term leases from several

families in the village. Its employees described the proposal to everyone as “an opportunity for progress.” While he was ill, Meena's father had agreed to take an advance, but the paper did not carry the consent of every member of the family. Spreading the sheet upon the ridge of a field, Meena asked, “When a lease in the company's name is written over the land where we sow, shall we ever be able to return to our own plot?”

“The rent will be fixed,” the employee said. “The company will manage the water.” Meena asked, “Will the rent be paid in a drought year? On what terms can the lease be ended early? And who will control this channel?” The second page said ‘managerial necessity’ but offered no clear answer. An uncle said, “Your father needs the advance, and you're holding things up with this talk of reading papers.” Meena replied quietly, “I need Father's medicines, but I will not hand over all our future harvests without measurement simply to pay for them.”

Meena did not tear up the paper. She kept a copy apart and gave the company's employee a written objection: no signatures until the family had discussed the matter and the meaning of its terms was clear. Her father was not pleased with this decision. There was worry over the cost of medicines in his eyes. Meena gave him the water vessel she had brought from home. “I'm stopping the lease, not the treatment,” she said. The words did not end the quarrel in the household; they made room, however, for an open conversation instead of secret assent.

Meena's mother sat on a low wooden seat, sorting strips of leaves. She asked only one question in the middle of the discussion. “If the company repairs the channel, who will put in writing that rainwater won't enter our house again?” Meena could not answer it. Her father had once worked there as a labourer and remembered the channel's old mouth. He pointed out two places where clearing the piled earth might instead turn the water towards the house. The family's experience, too, had become part of Meena's objection.

Before noon, Phoolmati Tiyar spread her old fishing net beside the channel. Its threads had torn in four places, but the turns and knots of its weave were exquisitely fine. Her former partner had reduced her share of the money from selling a net, arguing that she had not paid for its latest repairs. Phoolmati showed her old marks on fifteen of the knots. “I made this. Put the sale price of the net and the cost of the later repairs down separately.” The former partner stood by his own reckoning.

Vinod Kewart and two young fisherwomen arrived from the fish market at Sukatthi. Phoolmati proposed that they form a new net-making group, with separate entries for hours spent weaving, the cost of thread, repairs and each person's share in the sale of fish. One of the young women asked, “And if the net is kept in someone's house and somebody else uses it the next day?” Phoolmati laughed. “Then a little account book will have to travel with the net.” The first four names of the group were entered. The dispute over the old net did not resolve itself merely because this new paper had been written.

Very few people knew how to make one particular knot Phoolmati had learned from her mother. Sunita, who had joined the new group, grew disheartened as she tried to tie it. Phoolmati did not laugh at her mistakes. Slowly, she turned the thread once with her own hands, then returned the cord to Sunita. “When you've learned the knot, we'll record what your work is worth as well,” she said. Sunita opened a little notebook and wrote her name on its first line. The group's beginnings were not merely a protest against the old partnership, but a sharing of new skill.

On this side of the channel Dhani picked up his spade again. Phoolmati's new group would need the passage to carry their baskets of fish, but irrigation water had to reach the fields too. One landowner spoke of his fear that his embankment might break. Dhani did not dismiss it. “Your ridge must survive if my seedlings are to survive,” he said. “But a closed gate beside the trunk of a tree stops everyone. Call us all on the day of measurement.” Tara marked the proposal: temporary opening only under supervision; any decision on a permanent public route to follow a hearing.

Nandini Bhandari brought a damp gamhar sapling from her nursery. In her hand was a water ledger headed ‘Puraini.’ The name had survived in the nursery as an old local designation for a source from which water was brought. An employee asked, “Where does the Puraini River meet this place?” Nandini smiled. “In my ledger, this is the old name of a water source; this paper cannot establish the confluence of some distant river.” She showed him the dates written beneath the name and the payments owed to those who carried the water.

Sushila and Nandini argued over the price of the nursery plants. “Why is a sapling of the same size so much dearer than it was last month?” Sushila asked. Opening her ledger, Nandini showed her the cost of transporting soil, watering twice more, and paying the nursery workers. “I accept that your costs have risen,” Sushila said, “but the measurements for the two extra waterings are entered on the same line.” Nandini did not hide the paper. She promised to show the measurements the following day, but would not yet accept a lower price. Their disagreement remained alive alongside the price list hanging at the nursery gate.

Dev Gaine was taking out an old sarangi in preparation for the evening assembly. At the previous fair, someone had recorded one of his melodies on a mobile phone. Now an advertising agent for the agricultural company wanted to play it as ‘the song of the new seed.’ Dev asked, “What words will be added? For how many days will it be played? And where will my name appear?” “The tune belongs to the people,” the agent said. “How can it be anyone's exclusive property?” Dev held his bow still. “An old tune has many forms. But this performance, my voice, and the verse I composed are my labour. Hearing a single minute of it does not give anyone the right to use it for ever.”

With Dev was his niece Ragini. Playing an old performance of her uncle's on her phone, she said the song carried different rhythms for the water in the

fields and the women's work of planting; the pounding drums of the new advertisement would change its meaning. Dev told her, “You understand the song, so finish your schooling first. You are under no obligation to sing with me.” The agent promised to put in writing a proposal for one new performance at a limited fair, with payment. Dev refused to surrender the recording without conditions; no final agreement was made that day.

To Ragini, the dispute meant something different from what it meant to her uncle. She wanted to use a song played at the village festival in a school play. Dev did not stop her. “You can learn it and sing it,” he said. “But you have no right to sell a recording of my voice today to another company, just as I cannot claim the rights to your picture.” Ragini decided to make a new melody for her practice. At that moment Dev smiled as he tightened the slack strings of his old sarangi with his own hands.

Tara spread the survey register before the assembly. One page marked the place where Ramesh's rod had sunk, another the blocked mouth of Dhani's channel, a third Sushila's seed trials, and a fourth Meena's objection to the lease. “All this paper will only make the work difficult,” the municipal representative said. Tara answered, “The work is difficult already. We should not conceal its difficulty by writing one word—‘development’—over everyone. Each person whose field, water, labour or livelihood is affected needs a separate time to be heard.”

The municipal representative wanted one joint order issued at once: open the channel, inspect the fields and obtain consent to the company's proposal. Meena rose. “I have no objection to inspecting the opening of the channel, but that does not mean I accept the lease of my land.” Dhani said, “I want public access, not to seize anyone's field.” Sushila added, “I'll provide the seed samples, but an independent examiner must verify the company's advertising claims.” Tara entered the three statements on separate lines. A collective decision did not mean that everyone had given the same consent.

Phoolmati came forward with the small register of her new net-making group. “If the channel is opened, where will the fish go?” she asked. “Their routes are different in the rains and in the dry season.” Vinod showed the market fees. Aditi, who had arrived after finishing an inspection of the hospital warehouse, said that the fish market's cost register might be relevant to the inspection of the channel, but a receipt for the hospital vehicle would not thereby become proof concerning water-lease rights. Naira agreed. She placed the papers about old nicknames and the search for Mithun in a separate, closed file.

The ploughshare that had been carried into Janaka's assembly at dawn lay in the open courtyard until evening. When the farmers returned from inspecting the site, the king asked them, “In whose field will the water remain?” There was no single answer. One household wanted the channel deepened; another said that would cause its well to dry up. The scholars resumed their debate on self-knowledge. Janaka did not stop them, but

ordered the names of both farming households to be entered in separate registers. The king's renowned discernment was no final judgement upon their disagreement; it had merely opened a door through which they might be heard.

At the Videhapur meeting Dhani was at last permitted to clear a little grass from the mouth of the channel, and even that only in the presence of two families and under the supervision of an employee. The great heap of earth was not removed without inspection. Dhani received written acknowledgement of what was due for his time and the work of his spade; permanent responsibility for repairs would be decided later. Ramesh tied a short red thread to the spot where his rod had sunk so the mark could be found at the next measurement. “The thread is local information, not a substitute for an engineer's inspection,” Tara said. “But don't remove it.”

When Meena returned home, her father was awake on his cot. She gave him a copy of the lease and sat down. “Didn't you give the company a plain answer?” he asked. “I haven't said ‘yes’,” Meena replied. “I've put the questions in writing. Father, I cannot save the field if your treatment stops, and the treatment cannot go on if we exchange the harvests of the next five years for a paper whose meaning is uncertain.” Her father was silent a long time. Then he said, “Sit with me tomorrow and read the second page.”

When Sushila brought her seed tins home, Vinay's lump of clay had dried. As soon as he broke it, he found that the inside was still damp. “There can be water underneath even when the top has dried,” he said. Sushila laughed. “That's why we have to measure.” She did not ask her son to recite the day's results; she told him to watch the film of water at dawn for himself. Phoolmati, tying the first knot of a new net, was teaching her daughter that tightening a knot and letting it loosen were two different kinds of work. In both houses, knowledge of work was becoming not a family command, but an invitation to learn.

That night, before closing the survey register, Tara added a new page: who gained when water was held back, who suffered when it was released, and whose labour went unpaid while a decision was awaited. Nandini's ‘Puraini’ ledger, Sushila's seed trials, Dhani's public path and Meena's rejected lease remained secure in their separate papers. Outside, a light rain began. The first stream came down off the field ridge and divided in two directions. Tara stood beside the window listening to its sound. It was hard now to find a single line of causation; many hands had held back the water, and each hand had a story of its own.

Chapter 58 · The Web of Causes

When Ramani Bind lowered a slender bamboo rod into the water at the edge of Makhaniya Dabra, its tip lodged in the mud. She pulled it out; with the clay came a handful of rotting leaves and threads from an old sack. At dawn the water seemed motionless from one direction, yet a small current beneath the surface was turning the leaves another way. Tara stood on the Binout embankment, counting the markers. In her bag lay a sample of wet earth brought from Sushila's field the evening before. Today she had no wish to issue an order to open the pond's outlet merely on someone's word.

Rinsing the rod, Ramani said, “Some people here say that holding back the water will save the makhana; others say that releasing it will save the fish. But nowhere have they recorded together when the seeds were planted in the pond and how much water there was in the lowland fields at the time.” Phoolmati Tiyar, who had come with her, gathered up her dhoti, soaked to the knees, and began examining the makhana leaves. Another member of the new net-making group stood behind her. Phoolmati asked, “If the current is released here today, will there be a safe passage for dragging our new nets?” Ramani answered plainly, “I don't know. Measure the depth again first.”

Tara stretched the measuring cord along the embankment. Following Hira Sahni's advice, they marked the times on small stakes: the water level at dawn, at noon, and after rain. Jairam, a municipal employee, said, “The old map shows the outlet running straight. What will all this measuring change?” Tara pointed to a bend in the cord. “This stretch is straight on paper, not on the ground. If we cut through to straighten it, the first rush of water will enter Phulo's betel field. An old line is a place to begin work, not the end of a decision.”

Phulo Chaurasia arrived from her betel garden holding a twig of tender leaves. The wet bamboo supports of its overhead shelter had begun to sag. “I'm not in favour of stopping the pond's water,” she said. “But the earth they propose to raise for the new embankment will stand above my field. If the rain turns the current back against the betel roots, two years' earnings could disappear in a single night.” Jairam said, “If everyone wants the benefit, someone must make a sacrifice.” Phulo replied, “Write down who is to make that sacrifice, by name. Why choose my one field in the name of everyone's benefit?”

Just then Ramesh Kushwaha came down carrying an empty vegetable basket. He had already shown the others the place where the rod had sunk near Sushila's field. Now it was the tender bottle-gourd vines in his own beds that troubled him. “The first outflow may pass through my field,” he acknowledged. “But if five days' planting is drowned, on whose assessment will

compensation be paid? If we're warned beforehand that the water will rise throughout the rains, we can change the crop.” Tara entered the present crop, the likely duration of standing water, and the measurement of possible damage under separate headings. On that page, the space for Ramesh's ‘yes’ or ‘no’ remained empty.

Devki Pal arrived carrying a bundle of wool, with two goats and an old ewe. At the sight of new bamboo stakes planted across the old livestock track beside the canal, the ewe turned away. Steadying it, Devki said, “If the pond water is held at this bend, I'll take the animals by the high northern road. But market carts race along that route. If a sheep panics and runs off, who will count its value on the map?” Her son Neeraj held a little balance for weighing wool. “If we go around,” he asked his mother, “will we reach the market in time?” She replied, “Arriving safely comes before getting a price. But will anyone record what the delay costs?”

Batohi Dhami came forward, unhooking his bamboo implement from a tree trunk. The old path by which he gathered honey ran beside the proposed embankment. “I need a way to reach the trees,” he said, “not permission to damage them in taking honey. The bees that arrive in flowering season must be protected if there is to be a livelihood.” One official associated him with old hunting practices and asked whether he would put up prohibited traps again. Batohi did not smile. “Write down all three things: I will take honey, preserve the trees, and catch no animals. The name of one occupation does not prove a different offence.”

Sabina Mirshikar stopped when she heard the last words of that exchange. Her bag held a net-mending needle, knotted cord and two receipts for repairs. A man who had asked her at the previous market to hunt prohibited animals in the name of tradition was there again. “If the old route opens,” he said, “the old work can resume as well.” Sabina looked him directly in the eyes. “Everyone ought to have the right to travel the old route. But I will not do unlawful work. Look at the earnings from my needle and my knots, not at my community's name.” She placed the receipt for her outstanding repair payment before Tara.

On the other side of Makhaniya Dabra, four women were sorting seeds. A child mistakenly stepped among the leaves, and its mother pulled it aside; the marshy ground looked ordinary enough from above. Wiping the child's feet, Ramani said, “Planting the seed, gathering from the leaves and cracking the dried makhana are the work of different hands. Yet the lease paper treats the person whose name appears on it as the one entitled to every benefit.” One woman showed the blisters on her palm. “If the wages for cracking the nuts are deducted in the name of repaying a loan, how much of my own labour remains mine?”

Paras Lal, an associate of the makhana contractor, said, “The money for the seeds was paid in advance, so the deduction is fair.” Ramani asked him to open his account books. The first page showed expenditure on seed, the second the lease of the pond, the third the advances paid to women workers. Tara asked why all three items had been combined into a single family's debt. Paras gave no answer; he said they would discuss it when the owner arrived. Ramani did not abandon the argument, but neither did she fill gaps in the original accounts with conjecture. The women wrote the dates on which they had each received money on separate sheets of paper.

At noon Nandini Bhandari came from her nursery with two earthen pitchers, a length of bamboo pipe and a notebook. She demonstrated that over the previous four days the quantities of water in two planted beds had been different. “These are measurements from my nursery,” she said, “not of the flow across the entire lowland. All I can say from them is that the soil on this side stayed damp longer. To calculate how much water will pass out, we need further tests.” Jairam said at once, “Then we can count the compensation for your land at half the price.” Nandini closed her notebook. “I shared measurements of water, not an offer to sell my land.”

Nandini's niece Kanchan had come with her and was floating a paper boat beside the pitchers. The boat kept circling in one place. “Why doesn't it go forward?” Kanchan asked. Nandini showed her a small rise of mud. “The current turns here, looking for its way.” “Shall I push it with my hand, then?” Kanchan asked. Nandini laughed. “A push will move the boat, but it won't open the mouth that's really blocked.” The little girl lifted out the boat and placed it on the dry bank.

When they reached the western lowland, they heard the sound of a foot slipping from an embankment. Ramesh Kushwaha caught a bottle gourd before it could roll out of his basket. When water lay here in the rainy season, there were opportunities for fishing and grazing livestock; after the water receded, people grew paddy and vegetables. Dhani Rajbhar stood on a narrow public path. “What is pasture this season will be a field the next,” he said. “If the decision to open the outlet is made by looking only at today's water, no one will ask what next month's planting requires.”

Ramani showed them an old mark left by her boat along the edge of the lowland. It stood high on the earth, where the water had reached in the last monsoon. “My boat came up to this place,” she said. “But that memory doesn't create a fishing-water lease for today. Our application to enter the women's names separately on the lease is still pending. What I am describing is the movement of water, not a final ruling on rights.” Tara recorded her statement with the date. Rather than erase the description ‘permanent waterline’ from the employee's older sheet, she added a note correcting it.

Sushila Mahto brought a new notebook from her seed trials. On its cover she had written ‘Bardari.’ Seeing the word, Jairam asked, “There's no river of that name anywhere on the map.” Sushila replied, “In my notebook, Bardari is the local name of the piece of field where I first sowed the seed. I've recorded how many days the water stood there. If anyone wants to establish another meaning for the old name from other sources, let them do so. I'm not identifying a river confluence from this entry.” She gave the distance between two rows of seedlings and the date of planting.

Saroj Kharkaut arrived with a bundle of thread for the new nets. Her cost book contained the word ‘Balthi.’ “In our group,” she explained, “Balthi is the name of a small team that sews nets in a separate place. When its figures are joined to those for Ramani's boat and Vinod's fish market, don't erase the workers' names.” An assistant at the edge of the lowland took Balthi to mean the main drainage outlet and was about to circle it in red. Saroj stopped his hand. “First ask what this name refers to on this page. One word does not make two places the same.”

Phulo Chaurasia showed three sides of her field in the measurement register. On one was a slope, on another the bamboo shelter, on the third an old footpath. “For two weeks of rain I can endure water along the slope,” she said. “But if, in the third week, the earth of the embankment is raised higher, the garden may take the full blow of the current.” Ramesh replied, “That's why I want the damage to my beds measured over the two-week trial.” “And in the dry season?” Tara asked. Ramesh thought for a moment. “Then some of the stored water must be available for farming, but the outlet used by the lowland fishers must not be closed.”

Devki proposed an arrangement for the livestock track: the high northern road when the rains rose, with carts required to slow down at market times; in the dry season, the footpath along the old canal. A shopkeeper said, “If animals come through, there'll be mud in front of my shop.” Devki replied, “I'll lay earth at the market bend at my own expense, but the stakes fencing it off must be removed. Give us a safe passage for two hours on the day we sell wool.” She also offered to give up the temporary use of one patch of ground where she sold her goods. Neeraj kept watching his mother's face: her concession would mean less space for his little market stall.

Batohi opened the mouth of his honey vessel and let them smell its fragrance, without pouring any into the water. “If the new fence for the embankment runs between the trees, I won't be able to bring my tools around,” he said. Manju, a woman assisting with forest work, replied, “There is a new beehive on one side of those trees this season. No route for crowds should be laid out there.” They inspected the place together. In the end they proposed conditional access for Batohi along the dry northern ridge during the trial: no cutting trees, no disturbing the new part of the hive, and entry

only after a safety inspection. Batohi did not demand automatic restoration of the old route.

Sabina asked what the new mending work would pay. A municipal man told her, “People of your community have been making nets like these for generations. Think of it as service to the community.” Sabina took the needle from her bag. “I'll give voluntary service if I choose,” she said. “For the knots I spend six hours repairing, I want wages. And don't ask me again to hunt illegally.” Tara examined the receipt for the earlier net that the man still owed her for. Half the payment remained outstanding. Sabina had one condition entered in writing: she would stitch a new net once an order was issued, but would not waive what was still due for the old one.

For the annual ceremony of opening the water channel, people had first wanted to bring bright-coloured flags. This time the measurement register was opened before the flags were brought out. Dhani's cultivation, Ramani's fish, Phulo's betel garden, Devki's livestock and Batohi's honey: each of the five interests was heard separately at the meeting. Phoolmati Tiyar added that the new net-making group would not enter the pond without safe access. “How, then, are we to hold the festival?” the chair asked. Ramani replied, “Examining the channel and deciding who is responsible for it are part of the festival's work too. The drums can sound afterwards.” The children held the bamboo poles for the flags off to one side.

As the proposal for sharing seeds and water was being drawn up, Jairam demanded a single table showing how much water should be released during the rains and how much held back in the dry season. Nandini said that four days of nursery measurements could not determine the figures for the whole lowland. An associate of Hira Sahni wanted to set up a temporary gauge for measuring the water, but no major cutting through the old embankment was permitted without a test of the load its base could bear. Tara wrote down the sequence: first take measurements from a safe bank; conduct a second inspection after the water rose; decide in the presence of the affected families. The line marked ‘Permission to open today’ was left blank. Only temporary removal of debris from the small measuring opening was authorised.

Preparations for the fish-and-makhana labour fair came into conflict here as well. Paras Lal wanted to collect a passage fee at the pond landing, in addition to displaying the makhana lease. Ramani asked, “How does a receipt for a seed loan confer the right to levy a toll on a public path?” A representative of Vinod Kewart separately argued that the fee for entering the landing should be the same for small sellers bringing fish to be weighed. Tara set down three distinct hearing dates: one for access to the landing, one for the makhana lease, and one for the sellers' service fee. Paras did not withdraw his claim, but that day's attempt to combine all the rights on one sheet was stopped.

By evening, preliminary accounts of three chains of benefit had emerged separately. The blocked drainage held water in some higher fields, but increased waterlogging in certain lower ones. Receipts issued by the employee who collected fees at the landing did not fully agree with the old authorisation; the original order was demanded. In the production-loan papers, advances made to women workers and the loan for seed had both been entered in one household's name. Naira listened to everything and said, “All three lines of gain and loss may connect, but as yet there is no evidence of one person or one intention behind them. Wherever the papers are incomplete, ask for the full originals.”

A young man in the crowd said, “The makhana sacks must have come in the same vehicle that was caught at the hospital.” Naira immediately asked for the source of his statement. He repeated something his uncle had told him, but could give neither a date, nor a vehicle number, nor the name of anyone who had seen the sacks. Naira made the distinction explicit: “There is a separate register for the investigation into hospital supplies, and separate papers for the search for Mithun. Don't spread the child-abduction rumour again on the strength of a guess.” She did not pronounce Lata's name before the crowd. Because the original source of the young man's statement could not be found, it was recorded as unverified information, not evidence.

On the back of her measurement register Tara wrote down the seasonal conditions. First: no one was to cut open the channel alone when the first strong monsoon current arrived. Second: no permanent embankment would be raised in the western lowland without a joint inspection of its present uses for crops, grazing and fish. Third: separate registers would be prepared at Makhaniya Dabra for seed, gathering, cracking the nuts and loans. Fourth: the original authority for the landing fees would be examined. Fifth: any loss affecting Devki's livestock route, Batohi's honey path, Phulo's betel field and Nandini's nursery would be heard separately. No one could treat these conditions as a final decision on water rights.

Devki drew two soft strands from a small bundle of her wool and gave them to Neeraj. “Tie a red mark on this bamboo for the night,” she said. “Cart drivers will be able to see that animals turn here.” Neeraj tied the threads and asked, “Will we go to market tomorrow?” Devki looked at the empty pan of his balance. “We will, if the promise to slow the carts on the high road is kept. Otherwise the wool will be sold late.” She and Neeraj went back by the old bend. Her proposal had not resolved every problem, but they would no longer have to drive their animals into the marsh at another person's command.

Batohi fixed a time to inspect the site with the forest assistant before the trial at dawn. On her way home, Sabina folded the old receipt for the net and tucked it into her bag. She had not yet received a new work order, but she now had a written date on which she could demand the old payment. Nandini left

a copy of her nursery's water measurements with Tara and kept the objection concerning the price of her land safe in her original notebook. When Phulo reached home, she tightened the lower row of bamboo supports around her garden with her own hands. The water might rise in the night; the page recording the decision mattered, but so did the knot she tied herself.

Back at the edge of the pond, Ramani asked the women how far tomorrow's gathering work would extend. “If the water rises suddenly,” one said, “today's seeds will be ruined.” Ramani took the wet sack from her hands and set it aside. “That is why there must be measurements, and the measurements must be announced in time. My name has not yet been added to the lease, but why should the news that the water is rising go out without reaching me?” For the first time, the women wrote down not only their working hours but also the time by which they must receive a warning. As the sun went down, a soft rustling rose among the makhana leaves. The day's labour was over; the inquiry was not.

At dusk, Tara and Ramesh stood once more beside the embankment. Ramani gathered her baskets and joined them. All three examined the pages bearing their signatures: when measurements would be taken during the rains, whose voices would be heard in the dry season, and who must be warned before any sudden release of water. “I won't give my field as a passage without compensation,” Ramesh said. Ramani replied, “I won't surrender my outlet without the names of those entitled to the fishery and the workers' details.” Tara said, “And I won't silence either of you with a single line on a map.” Entering the disagreement in writing had defeated no one; it had given the next conversation ground on which to stand.

That night an envelope arrived from the municipal office. Inside was a letter from the water committee on the opposite bank. Its members wanted a joint inspection, but stipulated that the names of their fields and homes must not be circulated publicly. Jairam proposed making a photocopy and sending it to every WhatsApp group. Tara stopped him. “First ask whom the senders have authorised to receive this message, and how much of it may be shared.” Naira kept the public request in a separate file, and the page containing private addresses in a closed one. Outside, the rain was growing louder. A way had opened for the voices of the people on the other bank to be heard, but those voices still belonged to them.

Chapter 59 · The Envoy's Conditions

The rain had softened the envelope at its right-hand corner. Instead of spreading it in the sun, Tara laid it between folds of dry cloth. Two words in the letter from the water committee on the opposite bank had been underlined in red ink: “Limited circulation.” Jairam stood with his telephone in his hand. “If we want the measurements to be public, the letter ought to be public too,” he said. Tara did not lift her eyes from the paper. “The measurements will be public. But why should anyone's home address, or who lives on whose land, be made public without their permission?” Outside, beside the embankment, the red thread tied to a bamboo stake had darkened as it soaked in the rain.

Early the next morning Naira separated the letter into two parts at the office. Its first page contained the request for a joint inspection, an account of the season's water, the difficulties of travelling between the banks, and the address to which a reply could be sent. On the second were the families' names, their house numbers, and the reasons for their fear. She made a copy of the first page; the second she returned to the original envelope and marked with the date of receipt. Jairam asked, “Do you trust these people?” Naira answered, “Trusting them and protecting their names are not the same task. First we must understand what the messenger has been authorised to say.”

The old footpath to the opposite bank passed through the bend at Simatirtha. In the last monsoon the decking of the little culvert had been washed away. Boats now made the crossing, but because the load assessment remained incomplete, they had no permission to carry everybody across in one journey. Hira Sahni pointed to an old plate hanging at the side. “For the outward trip there will be a separate boat carrying a lighter load. Whatever report is prepared, treat it as evidence of measurement, not as a certificate of passenger safety.” In the journey register Tara entered the boat's capacity, the boatman's wages, and the possible delay on the return trip as separate items. There was a cost to not going at all; the cost of taking the wrong road was greater.

That morning Shyam Mallik said the real request in the letter was only this: the families across the water wanted to know which way their children should run if the drainage channel was suddenly opened. At the previous meeting, compensation for damage to Ramesh Kushwaha's field and the lease on Ramani Bind's pond had been kept as separate questions. Yet for a warning to reach both banks within a day, information would have to pass from one side to the other. “If our map draws a line across their homes,” Shyam said, “they will have a right to see the map. But that does not take away their right to prevent its copies from travelling from phone to phone.”

On another page of the ancient story, a search party stood by the sea. They were heavy-hearted because no news of Sita had been found. Sugriva's deadline pressed upon them, and the sea stretched away before their eyes. Angada was courageous, but could not be sure that, having leapt across, he could leap back again. Jambavan went to Hanuman and reminded him of his strength. Hanuman faced not merely the trial of reaching the farther shore, but the harder work of returning with news. He carried Rama's signet ring, a token that could help Sita recognise the messenger; the token itself, however, was not Sita's reply.

Near Tara's office, Rekha Sahu, the lac-bangle maker, set three samples in her wooden box. One was a bangle shaped by hand; the second, a design traced to scale on paper; the third, a small machine-made trial of that design. The businessman who owned the machine had proposed a partnership: “My machine, your design, both our names in the market.” As she listened, Rekha folded away the sheet bearing her pattern. “Put a price on the machine's time,” she said, “but once a photograph of my pattern goes out, it can travel through a hundred shops. What sort of partnership would that leave us?”

Sitting beside Rekha, Pavitra Patwa folded back a third corner of the paper. “Have it written here that the photograph of the sample may go to a customer for the inspection of one pair. A fresh permission must be obtained before another mould is cut.” The machine owner objected. “Business will stop under so many conditions.” Rekha turned a piece of half-hardened lac over in her palm. “My business has stopped too. But if the price of a shape I have created once becomes zero for every consignment that follows, why should I make the next one?” In the end, they wrote a proposal for a limited three-month trial: the first sample fee payable in advance, the number of pieces produced to be recorded separately, and the original pattern book to remain with Rekha.

From the other side, Suman Tikulhar took two painted panels out of her chest. A circular emblem she had designed for a new marketplace had been reproduced by a trader in an advertisement without asking her. “I bought the panel,” he said. “Surely I can print it as well.” Suman placed the panel carefully upon the table. “The panel painted on wood may be yours. But you did not buy permission to put its emblem on a thousand posters.” She showed him her sample book, where the dates, customers, and agreed uses had all been entered.

Saroj Kharakaut arrived carrying a bundle of newly tied netting. At the last meeting concerning the pond, the member with the money had wanted to enter the whole net under his own name, although the women who stitched the knots had borrowed money to buy the thread. Saroj divided a sheet of paper into three sections: the cost of buying the yarn, the hours spent stitching the knots, and the risk of setting the net in the water and hauling it out again. “The larger the capital, the larger the share,” a man said. Saroj picked up an old, torn net. “Capital will receive its share. But the one who dives in to save the net—under whose household capital will you count that person?”

That day Saroj's group agreed, with the consent of five members, to make a small net as a trial. The cost of the thread would be paid first. Wages for stitching would fall due on a fixed date whether the net sold or not. Whatever profit remained would be apportioned with capital and risk entered separately. Two members did not agree with the whole set of rules. Their objections were written on the back of the page; the decision was not described as unanimous. Giving Tara the net's cost register, Saroj said, “If the people on the other bank give permission for their names to be seen, explain this to them: a fishing net may be held in common, but not by rubbing out the names of its makers.”

At midday Malati Koche arrived carrying water in a plain yellow container. Fine earth had settled at the bottom. The tap in the new settlement ran during the first part of the day; before water could reach the houses at the far end, the flow had thinned to a trickle. “They tell us to settle new families here,” she said, “but the next outlet in the pipe shuts off before the water reaches us. I shall write to the people across the bank that we can all contribute to the cost of sharing the water; but I want it made clear who is to receive payment for repairs, and when the tap will be opened.”

Jairam said Malati's hamlet was not mentioned in the water committee's letter; they should send the concerns of the other bank first. Malati tightened the lid of her container. “Our settlement stands on the edge of this very drainage channel. If you open the full pipe and send the water across, this queue will be left empty. I am not denying their suffering. But without hearing me, whose messenger can you be?” At her insistence, the letter to be carried by the envoys was amended to include the communal tap in the new settlement and the maintenance charge, though no private house numbers were added.

At that hour Phoolmati Pamaria was rehearsing a song on the school veranda. She had inherited the old song of the Simatirtha road from her mother. The invitation to perform described it as “Folk-song performance—contribution”; the line for the fee was blank. Padma sat beside her with the paper. Phoolmati crossed out a line of the song in which a Pamaria woman was made an object of laughter. A young organiser said, “If you change an old song, where will the people's identity remain?” Phoolmati replied, “My identity is not the repetition of an insult. My mother used to stop at that line. Now I shall sing different words.”

Padma prepared two versions of the song in translation: one offering a readily understood sense to listeners, the other accompanied by notes on the original words. Explaining the word “border” in her own notebook, she said that in one place it meant the boundary between fields, elsewhere the line of a district office's jurisdiction, and in the song the distance separating a person from someone beloved. Phoolmati had three separate entries made: her performance fee, the musicians' accompaniment, and credit for the translation. The young organiser was not certain he could meet the cost of the

event. Phoolmati smiled. “I shall sing the song a second time, but first I shall hear the conditions under which I am to speak. The song will reach its listeners; its worth must reach them too.”

Durga Danuwar showed them a fragment of a song bearing the name Lakhandei, preserved inside her old notebook. Someone was taking it as an indication of a monsoon current and marking it on a new map. At the top of the page Naira wrote, “N36—Lakhandei; folk name/poetic expression.” “This is a song,” she said, “not a measurement of the river as it flows today.” Durga asked, “Then is my song of no use?” Padma answered, “No. A song tells us what a people remember. But to treat the ‘Lakhandei’ of an old verse and a particular stream on today's map as one and the same without checking the sources would do an injustice to the song as well.” Durga's name and her permission for the singing were entered in the margin of the notebook.

Before the journey, a telephone call came from the secretary of the committee across the river. Another question arose during that conversation. The committee wanted the visiting delegation to read only a translated summary; Shyam wanted to take the complete map. Tara proposed a distinction: measurements of the public landing and information about the present extent of flooding could be shared there, but the boundaries of private fields would be disclosed only in the presence of the people affected. The secretary replied that she would read these conditions to her members; she could not yet say that they had accepted them. After the call, Jairam made a face. Tara said, “We have not received an answer. We shall not send out copies as though permission had arrived.”

When Hanuman stood upon the seashore, the trust of his companions was gathering into a rising tide of encouragement. Jambavan did not merely tempt him with the prospect of glory; he reminded him how grave the undertaking was. The party's knowledge of where Sita was, and of the condition in which she might be found, remained incomplete. Rama's ring was a token that might lend credibility to the messenger's account; but whom Hanuman would first meet in Lanka, and how much he should properly say at that meeting, could be settled only by what happened after the journey began. No single proclamation could shorten the breadth of the sea.

When the modern delegation reached the landing, its first difficulty was not translation but a name. In the boatman's assistant's register, a member from the other bank had been entered under a surname by which the municipal list identified a different family. A young man claimed that the same family's name appeared in an old wage register. Naira laid both papers on the table. “The pronunciation is similar, but the house numbers differ, and so do the dates. Nor does this register identify the person who made the entry. Do not write that these are one and the same person until the original name register has been checked.” A certified copy of the original register was requested; the circulation of the rumour in copied form was stopped.

Someone raised the subject of the old vehicle again. “That must be the vehicle in which the child was taken away,” a man whispered. Tara did not throw the accusation into the crowd. Naira questioned the man separately: had he seen anything himself? At what time? What was the number? Who had witnessed it directly? He had only a third person's account. “There is a registered case concerning the search for Mithun,” Naira said. “If new facts come to light, we shall give them to the officer in charge. But today's visit to the water committee is not a disguised pretext for that search.” The boatman agreed to show the receipt relating to his vehicle. His willingness was not treated as a confession of wrongdoing.

On the stony bank at the landing, Malati met three women from the opposite side. They were explaining how often water came from their tap in the course of a day. Padma could not immediately understand one woman's words: in the local dialect, the word *ber* referred not to the hour at which water flowed, but to the queue waiting behind the tap. A mistaken translation could have started a quarrel between the two banks. “Hear the whole sentence first,” Phoolmati said, “and then translate it.” The woman explained again: bringing a pipe as far as the houses would require time and labour; they must not be charged twice in the name of distributing water. Malati set down her container and listened carefully.

The secretary on the opposite bank examined the signature on the first page of the letter, but the second page remained closed. “Our members' fears are not false,” she said, “but I cannot show everyone their house numbers. They have asked to be told at least one day before the drainage channel is opened.” Hira Sahni replied that, in very heavy rain, it would not be scientifically defensible to promise that a day's notice could always be given. There must be a separate system of immediate warning in the event of an emergency. The secretary wrote the question down. After she had spoken plainly of the real difficulty facing her side, some of the strain left her face.

At a brief meeting, the messenger's task was divided into three parts. Tara would carry the notice of public inspection; Hira's team would provide the water-level measurements; and objections concerning private families would be conveyed on separate sealed pages, only after the authorised members had consented. Jairam wanted to share a photograph of the decision at once. Padma turned the paper towards him. On it the secretary had written: “Permission from the members first.” Instead of taking a photograph, Jairam copied the public portion by hand into his notebook. The alteration seemed small to him, but the names of the households did not go out.

There, Rekha's little machine-trial sample and Suman's warning emblem were shown. A trader from the bank asked whether the committee could use Rekha's colourful spiral on its flag. “We shall make a different pattern for the committee's safety emblem,” Rekha said. “The pattern of this bangle is not for a flag.” Suman allowed her simpler sign to be used for warning boards

alone. Both conditions were recorded separately in a notebook. The trader received no blanket permission to print either design. Actual work would begin only after the committee issued an order for its own specified use.

The women of Saroj's group opened out a small sample of netting at the landing. It was not a demonstration of how to catch fish, but of the strength of the knots and the differences in cost. A large buyer asked, “Wouldn't it be simpler to keep the accounts if all the money were paid under one name?” Saroj replied, “Our shares need not be made invisible merely to make the accounting simple.” Tara suggested separate lines for the proceeds of a communal net's sale, the investment in thread, and the wages of its five members. Saroj agreed, but added that the written agreement would not endure if the objection of the person who had opposed it yesterday was never heard.

By the time the afternoon was declining, Phoolmati began to sing. The rain had stopped; above the landing, the shadow of a neem tree fell across the stones. There was a road in the song, a longing to return, and the voice of a woman who, instead of repeating her name at every stopping place, asked for the way home. Where Phoolmati had removed the insulting line, she sang new words: “The road is mine, the voice is mine; listen to my news first.” An elderly woman of Simatirtha quietly kept time. Padma left her translation notebook closed. It was not necessary to explain every word in the middle of a song.

Before the return journey, the committee accepted two points in its written reply: it would send a small delegation for the inspection of the public landing, and it would seek permission from its members before circulating pages bearing names. But the first disagreement over the meaning of **open access** remained. Tara said a team measuring a public route needed the opportunity to inspect the places concerned. The secretary replied that some members of her committee were not prepared to admit an outside delegation beside their fields. Ramesh Kushwaha's compensation claim also remained unanswered. No one could yet say that an agreement had been reached.

Before the boat left the landing, Malati filled her container with a mouthful of water from the public tap on the opposite bank—not as a sample for testing. She bought a small sweet for her daughter from a third shop. “At least we were heard today,” she told Tara. “But there will still be too little water in our tap tomorrow.” “That is why we shall bring the page on maintenance charges and the tap measurements to the next meeting,” Tara replied. Malati laughed at that much. “A meeting is one thing. Watch people standing in the queue when it is time to fill their vessels, and the arithmetic looks different.”

Back in town that evening, Naira put all the pages in order. An authenticated copy of the original name register was still outstanding. News of

the search for Mithun remained uncertain. The water-lease claim awaited a separate hearing. The water committee's public request was kept in a copy fit for circulation, the private list in a sealed envelope, and the receipts for the delegation's expenses with Tara. Jairam deleted a blurred photograph from his phone: unwillingly and by accident, it had caught the corner of the secretary's closed page. Naira watched and said only, “Now write down what you saw, and what you did not see.”

That night a line of Phoolmati's song remained in Malati's ears. When she reached home, she washed the bucket, set her daughter's clothes out to dry, and wrote down the time of tomorrow's queue at the tap. Suman closed the notebook of patterns inside her chest; Rekha checked the receipt for the first advance payment due from the new machine owner for testing her sample; Saroj tied a label bearing a separate name for each of the five members to the bundle of thread. Disagreement remained at the landing. But on that day no one's name, picture, melody, or pattern had become another person's property without permission. At the next meeting the question of opening the public path would arise again; this time it stood accompanied by the written conditions of every side.

Chapter 60 · The First Agreement Breaks

The line drawn in charcoal upon the damp bamboo board had spread in the morning water. Hira Sahni set the board aside instead of wiping the mark away with his palm. “Yesterday this line was used to show the breadth of the landing,” he said, “and look at it today: once it is wet, even its edge can no longer be distinguished. The measurement of land and the permission recorded on paper demand still greater care.” Tara lifted the bamboo board and placed it in the shade of the hut. The water committee on the opposite bank had appointed a time to meet again; the consent conveyed in the first envoy’s letter extended only to inspection. It had given no one the right to assume that the public path would henceforth stand open on every day.

On the veranda beside the landing, two tables were set facing one another. Jairam, the town’s representative, opened his file; Shabnam Khatun, secretary of the committee on the opposite bank, had an envelope stamped with the seals of her members. Shabnam had authorised the public map to be viewed, but wanted separate consent before the boundary behind a private field was marked out. “If we have to ask the owner of every field each time,” Jairam said, “the inspection will never be finished.” Without raising her voice, Shabnam replied, “And if you go in without asking, no one will accept your measurements even after the inspection is finished.” Naira wrote down the two statements on separate lines.

Ramesh Kushwaha put his basket of vegetables beneath the table. Inside, a few okra pods lay covered by neem leaves; the tips of two leaves had begun to yellow. “They say the watercourse is to be taken through the middle of my field,” he said. “Then why is the space for compensation blank? If the green crop on two kathas of land is washed away, the measuring team’s success will become my household’s loss.” Jairam replied that no decision had yet been made about a permanent canal. “Very well,” said Ramesh. “Then who has already given permission to cut into the earth in the name of a temporary inspection?” For the first time Tara turned away from the joints of the map and looked at the face of the man whose field was at stake.

Hira took out two lengths of cord in different colours. The first marked the dimensions of the old public footpath along which labourers had always walked after disembarking from the boat; the second marked the proposed inspection route along the edge of Ramesh’s field. He explained that a visual examination from the first path and the driving of stakes into the second were two different acts. “Looking at the water from a distance is the beginning of evidence. Driving stakes into a field is a physical intervention. Permission for the first does not automatically authorise the second,” Hira made clear. Shabnam explained the matter to her committee members in their local speech. Padma listened to the translation, then asked again about one

uncertain meaning in the original wording. Whatever ambiguity remained was entered in the notes as ambiguity.

An elderly member from the other bank, Jagdish Jha, stood up in favour of an open route. His daughter-in-law was ill; when the rains rose, the small boat stopped running, and the detour along the public footpath meant that medicine did not arrive in time. “I own no field,” he said, “but where is the time we have lost, going round and round in search of a way, accounted for on this paper?” Shabnam supported him. Ramesh did not try to silence him either. “I have no quarrel with opening a route for a patient,” he said. “What I shall oppose is making a permanent road for vehicles across my field without payment, under the name of a patient’s route.” The single expression “open access” had concealed two very different needs.

Before noon the town’s legal assistant read out a draft. Its first line promised “unrestricted entry to all relevant sites for inspection and emergency services.” Shabnam laid a red pencil across the sheet. Ramesh raised his hand as well. “Unrestricted” meant that no one would have the power to prevent entry; yet the draft said nothing about what would constitute an emergency, who would draw the boundary between private and public ground, or who would pay if damage occurred. Jairam wanted the signatures first and the conditions added afterwards. “A person whose price is to be asked only afterwards cannot give consent now,” Tara said. For the first time, the page lay on the table unsigned.

A register was being prepared for the annual Phagun gathering, Public Recital–Open Accounts–Song. The organisers decided that the proposal arising from these negotiations in the rainy season should be carried to Phagun’s public stage. Rashid Bhat brought an old notebook of songs from his household; a municipal employee wanted to use his voice in publicity. “My family’s song is not the property of somebody’s office,” Rashid said.

Padma asked Rashid where the original song ended and his new composition began. He remained silent for a little while, then showed her the margin of the old notebook. “These four lines are my grandmother’s words. The next three are my own; I wrote them when the culvert had broken. They have become one song in performance, but it would be an injustice to call the whole thing an ‘anonymous folk song’ in a public recording without explaining that difference.” Rashid kept the question of his family’s consent separate. Permission was given for only one line to be read at the assembly. A condition was added that a recording of the complete song would require the performers’ written consent and an agreed fee.

Ramesh Ghasi came from the far side of the ground, tightening the leather strap of his instrument. A few adolescents were practising with him. In the organisers’ old expenditure register, the entry “Music—community service” showed a payment of zero rupees. Ramesh set his finger on the page. “My

instrument does no less work than anyone's invited song," he said. "When the singer's name is announced from the stage, the accompanying musician's name should be announced too. And the price of rehearsal, travel and performance must not disappear behind the singing." Two schoolchildren listened to the notes from his instrument. He did not tell them to stop practising; he asked only that the organisers reckon with the work.

Karun Damai opened the torn edge of the instrument and showed them how an old knot had worked loose beneath the coloured cloth. "The wage for this repair is not the wage for performing," he said. "On the day I put the instrument's tone right, I shall not be playing on the stage; on the day I play, the tools of repair will remain at home." The manager wanted to enter the two charges on a single slip. Karun cut a piece of old cloth to show the measurements, listed the cost of thread separately, and said he would not give away the same day's labour twice. Listening to him, Ramesh Ghasi added, "Nor is it right to reduce a performer's fee by deducting the cost of repairs." Each made a separate entry for the payment due to him.

Farzana Churihar brought three pairs of bangles in the fold of her clothing. The first were fashioned by hand from lac, the second were of glass, and the third were machine-made goods bought in bulk. At the Public Recital fair there had been a proposal to sell all three for a single price under the name of "handicrafts." Farzana opened out the three categories separately. "Even when I have bought machine-made goods from the market, the customer ought to know what they are. The hand-fashioned lac bangles contain my time, my sweat and my design. Glass bangles carry a different risk of breakage." One woman chose glass bangles, another lac. Farzana respected each customer's choice; she opposed charging a higher price by putting a false name upon the goods.

A municipal employee said that all these matters of music and the marketplace were separate from the water agreement. Naira turned a page in her notebook. "Separate, certainly," she said. "But if the proposed agreement is to be read before everyone, we need a separate account of who pays for the labour of building the stage, playing the instruments, translating, and selling at the fair. None of this establishes anyone's rights over land. It does, however, establish the truth of the event." Tara decided that the public reading of the five conditions concerning water would have its own register of credit and payments for the stage. It would not be a legal part of the agreement, but a record of the labour involved in the gathering.

In the ancient story of Kishkindha, when the search parties had gone far away, Hanuman stood upon the seashore, conscious not only of the strength within him but of the responsibility it carried. He had Rama's signet ring. No one could determine beforehand in what order he would listen to Sita or tell her his message once she recognised the token. Jambavan had urged him to put his strength to use; but the haste of the searcher must not efface Sita's

wishes. This question from the ancient story was no rule for a modern agreement about water. In that story a messenger was learning the limits of the trust placed in him; here two communities were setting down in writing the boundaries of their respective rights.

At the modern landing, one of Shabnam's committee members asked for the page of names inside the confidential envelope to be opened. "If the names are not shown, who will receive compensation?" he asked. Naira replied, "The identities of individual claimants will be examined at an authorised hearing. For a public reading, the field numbers, the kinds of loss and the number of objections can be given; home addresses need not automatically be disclosed." Shabnam said that some of her members were unwilling to make their names public because of threats made in the past. Ramesh favoured keeping the measurements of his own field in the open, but even he agreed that the decision to reveal someone else's private page was not his to make.

Hira pointed out an error in an old village measuring gauge. In one sample, the mark indicating water level was covered by a stain of paint; in another, the date was not clearly legible. "I cannot tell you the maximum capacity of the flow from these figures," he said. Jairam asked, "If someone is in immediate difficulty, does that mean nothing can be done?" Hira replied, "Rubbish can be cleared from a safe stretch of bank, but the mouth of the channel must not be cut open to change the flow without an inspection. Arrange the emergency warnings first." Tara wrote down that the five conditions for a trial must clearly distinguish the procedure for seasonal measurements from that for an emergency.

Then the real obstacle to an agreement emerged. The town wanted both the old footpath and the adjoining new inspection route declared public, so that its team could enter whenever it chose. A majority from the opposite bank acknowledged the old use of the footpath but insisted that permission from the owner must precede entry upon a private boundary. Ramesh demanded a written assessment of damage to his crop. Jagdish Jha continued to insist that the patient's route must not be obstructed in the meantime. For half an hour the wording changed—"open," "conditional," "emergency," "regulated"—but no single word could pay the cost of all those interests at once.

At mealtime Ramesh's wife came from the field. She wanted not merely to speak for her household but to find a way to reach the market and buy medicine for her little daughter. She opened a small bundle of okra and laid it on the table. "This is fit to eat," she said, "but if the field is flooded three days from now, the plants will rot. Will you measure the value of the crop by today's market price, or by the time I have spent growing it?" Ramesh was silent. An official said that estimated rates would be calculated according to the government's prescribed method. "Very well," Ramesh's wife replied.

“Show us the method, and do not let the wages of the women who weeded the field disappear.” At that Tara gave her a separate line on which to sign.

When the meeting resumed, Jairam pressed for one short sentence: “During the period of inspection, claimants shall not raise questions of compensation.” Ramesh pushed the paper away. His wife said that such a restriction would amount to a demand for silence while their crops were being damaged. Some members of Shabnam’s committee wanted to sign immediately in the hope that the town’s money would pay for a small culvert. Others feared that a right once surrendered would never be recovered. The secretary counted the small voting slips. Five members opposed the broad wording permitting entry; three were willing to consider it subject to conditions. The date of this count was recorded, but the decision was not printed as unanimous.

Naira took out a clean sheet and headed it: “First Agreement Unsuccessful: Five Possible Conditions for Consent to a Trial.” The first condition required separate maps of the public footpath, the private field boundary and the emergency route for patients; consent from the person concerned before entering private property; and a public account of limited safety work in an immediate crisis. Beside the word “consent,” Shabnam asked her to add “prior information,” so that families with little formal schooling could understand the notice. Ramesh objected that merely delivering information did not establish permission to enter. Naira kept the two statements separate; she did not hurry them into a false reconciliation.

The second condition required measurements in both the rainy and the dry seasons, gauges set in safe locations, technical verification and access to the original data, together with a written procedure for correcting an erroneous measurement. Beside his own name, Hira had the words “adviser on inspection, not arbiter of ownership” entered. The third condition required advance notice of any planned release of water, warnings in languages understood by the settlements, and a separate, immediate message in the event of sudden danger, specifying safe routes for children, older people and families with sick members. Malati’s communal tap and Jagdish’s route for patients had helped give rise to this condition, but their private addresses were not entered on the public sheet.

The fourth condition called for separate assessments of possible losses to field crops, women’s wages, livestock routes, nurseries, fish and makhana, and prohibited permanent excavation until the hearing of objections and responsibility for compensation had been made clear. Ramesh and his wife read the wording of that line once more. The fifth condition required a public account of expenditure and receipts for inspections, transport, craftwork, language assistance and safety work; restrictions on the circulation of pages bearing private names; verification of representatives’ authority; and rules for safeguarding original documents. To the last line Naira added: “Agreement to

consider these five conditions is not an agreement itself, nor a ruling on any crime or on the ownership of land.”

Growing irritated, Jairam said, “Then what use is it? The news will have to say that the meeting was a success.” Naira answered, “Its success goes only this far: the parties who disagreed were able to set down their reasons for disagreeing. No agreement has been reached. How can the report say that one has?” Jairam wanted the brief press note to include the words “open access approved.” Shabnam herself struck them out. Tara recorded the time and counted those present; no one had signed an agreement. The parties acknowledged only that they had received the text of the five conditions. Two stamped copies were made, and the confidential envelope containing objections was sealed again.

Outside the landing, news had already spread through the crowd. One man accused Ramesh of blocking the way for patients going to the hospital. Jagdish Jha stepped forward himself. “Ramesh listened when I spoke about the time my sick relative was losing,” he said. “The disagreement concerns where the footpath ends and his field begins. No one has opposed the proposal to open a route for patients.” Another man claimed that Shabnam’s committee was hiding something inside the private fields. Naira made it clear that refusing to publish names did not prove that a crime was being concealed. The search for Mithun, the hospital’s materials register and the claim concerning the water lease remained, as before, in three separate files.

By the time the day arrived for that year’s annual Phagun celebration of Public Recital–Open Accounts–Song, the pages from the unsuccessful meeting had been opened again. During the intervening months, minor repairs had been made to the safe public footpath, but no agreement had yet been reached over unrestricted access to the private field. In front of the stage there was dry dust instead of wet earth, and local children were tying up coloured paper flags. The organisers decided that the five conditions should be read aloud first. Padma explained their meaning in accessible Maithili; Shabnam gave a summary in the language used by her committee. The seal on the page of private names was not broken in public.

At the open-accounts table, Rashid Bhat read a line of his song, but stopped the equipment before the recording began. “This part may be shared with the people present at the stage,” he said. “For publicity beyond it, my family’s and the accompanying musicians’ permission must be obtained separately.” The organisers showed him the payment slip. A performance fee for Ramesh Ghasi’s music was approved, along with the announcement of his name from the stage; a separate receipt was prepared for Karun Damai’s materials and labour in repairing the instrument. Karun touched its newly tightened fastening and signalled to Ramesh to bring it into tune. The music began, but the accounts were not closed.

Farzana set three boards outside her little stall: “Handmade lac,” “Glass,” and “Machine-made goods.” For each, the material, risk of breakage and price were clearly stated. Two customers first chose the cheaper machine-made bangles; a third customer’s daughter liked the colour of the lac. Farzana laughed. “You have chosen knowing the price. That is what pleases me.” She refused the request to dance on the publicity stage. The fair was a day for her to earn her living. Karun’s younger brother bought a pair of glass bangles for his mother, and Farzana wrapped them in a separate piece of paper. There was no obligation for everyone at a community gathering to perform the same role.

Ramesh Kushwaha stood behind the stage with his wife. Looking at the public accounts, a representative asked why the amount entered for damage to the field was still zero. “A zero here does not mean there has been no loss,” Ramesh’s wife said. “It means no payment has yet been made. Keep two separate lines: the amount claimed and the amount paid.” Tara had the register corrected then and there. Ramesh did not automatically open the way across his field, but he did grant permission for a limited stockpile of earth needed to repair the public footpath safely: one week, at a specified edge, without cutting the crop. On the sheet setting out the conditions measured by his wife were their separate signatures, hers and Ramesh’s.

That evening Tara separated two copies of the five conditions. One was for the public open-accounts register; the other preserved the sequence of original consents and objections. The sealed appendix containing private names was kept safely in a third place. Naira allowed only this sentence to appear in the press note: “First negotiations on open access unsuccessful; five conditions for joint testing recorded.” The file concerning Devavrat’s assistance to the hospital was not brought to that table; neither was the copy concerning the search for Mithun. Keeping records distinct sometimes gives justice room in which to work.

On the way home, Ramesh’s wife picked through the okra left from that day for her daughter. “We have allowed them to keep earth there for a week,” Ramesh asked. “Won’t that create trouble later?” She replied, “The boundary has been measured, the period written down, and they must ask for consent again. If trouble comes, we shall speak again.” She showed her daughter a tiny okra flower on the plate. Across the water, Shabnam’s boat moved patiently out towards the open current. The five conditions were in her bag; no one regarded them as a certificate of victory. When the old tale of Ganga’s condition opens next, this experience will remain in the reader’s mind: how far the unspoken part of a promise may reach into another person’s life.

Chapter 61 · Ganga's Condition

Far from Hastinapura, where the river curved, a footprint lay in the wet sand. A thin runnel of water entered it and then withdrew. Shantanu reined in his horse beneath the shade of a kadamba tree. Mist was rising from the far bank, and at the water's edge a woman was wringing the wet hem of her woven garment. Her hands moved with the certainty of someone who knew the river's ebb and rise. The king dismounted and went forward. The woman raised her head. They were seeing one another for the first time, yet there was no startled haste of unfamiliarity in her eyes.

"Who are you?" Shantanu asked. The woman replied, "If I tell you the name you ask for, will you have understood everything about me?" The king fell silent. She gathered water in her cupped hands and let it return to the river. "A name is where recognition begins, not where it ends," she said. The king renewed his request that she accompany him. Before accepting, she imposed one condition: he must not question the reasons for her actions, prevent her from doing what she chose, or address her with insulting words. If that bond were broken, she would leave. Shantanu heard the final sentence of the condition. He gave himself no time to understand how far the silence demanded by the words between might reach.

On her first day in the palace, the woman introduced herself as Ganga. The serving women in the courtyard dried her damp clothes, which still bore the smell of the river. At mealtime she did not ask for a large platter; she ate warm rice and vegetables from a bowl and listened through the window to the moving air. Shantanu liked these unassuming tastes of hers. One evening they sat together on the roof by the battlements. The king spoke at length of quarrels at court, and Ganga listened attentively. "Why do you never tell me about your day?" he asked. Ganga laughed. "Today I listened to the affairs of your court. In my day, a branch became caught against the river embankment. Three boatmen were needed to remove it. Do you know their names?" The king could not say.

Their affection deepened with time. Though she lived within the palace, Ganga did not abandon her path to the river, and after the affairs of the kingdom Shantanu would walk with her to the bank. When their first child was born, lamps burned in the palace and the serving women changed the cloth in the lying-in room. Shantanu felt the newborn's palm close around his finger. The whiteness of the tiny fingernails astonished him. Ganga held the child to her breast and gazed at him for a long while. Then, in a watch of the night, she took the baby in her arms and went towards the river. The guard recognised her and stepped aside.

When the king followed her, Ganga was standing knee-deep in the water. A small wave had touched her arm; there was no sound from the child. A question lodged in Shantanu's throat. Ganga looked up but spoke not a word that night. Summoning all the strength in his body, the king recalled the condition he had accepted: no questions, no restraint. He returned to the palace. A vessel of milk remained in the lying-in room, and a fly was beginning to settle upon its rim. Shantanu reached out and brushed it away. In that insignificant action he understood for the first time that the price of keeping a promise could be paid with the absence of another person's body.

Fewer lamps were lit in the palace when the second child was born. The king remembered the first night not with hatred but with fear and hope. He told himself that what had happened once would not happen again. With the baby held against her breast, Ganga went towards the river. Shantanu followed as far as the doorway and stopped. In the morning a maid asked him in which chest the newborn's clothes should be placed. The king lifted a lid and closed it again. He had no answer. Ganga returned and folded the cloth of the empty cradle herself. There was hardness in her face, but once her hand trembled. Shantanu saw the tremor without knowing what it meant.

Through the third, fourth and fifth births, the routines of court continued. Border disputes, taxes upon fields, boatmen's complaints, fodder for the horses —nothing stood still. But for Shantanu, time had divided into two parts: the days when he could feel a child's touch, and the nights when he could not gather the courage to ask the next question. He ordered his councillors to make the riverbanks more secure, yet did not think it proper even to question the guards about what happened in his private chambers. His royal commands reached across the city; they did not reach his own newborn children.

After the sixth child's birth, Shantanu said to Ganga, "I want the child's name entered in the records of the kingdom." She looked at him. "Will giving him a name protect his life?" she asked. The king answered, "How will people remember him without a name?" Ganga said, "Remembrance is greater than a name. But this question of yours is the beginning of asking why I do what I do." Shantanu pressed no further. That night he wrote only two words on a private palm leaf: "Sixth son." Not a single letter could bring back that child's life.

When the seventh was born, Ganga lingered a little longer. The baby had caught hold of her finger. She removed her gold bracelet and laid it beside the bed so that it would not scrape his cheek. Shantanu stood in the doorway. He wanted to say, I am with you, but stop doing this. All he said was, "The water is rising outside." "I have seen," Ganga replied. When night came, the seventh child too vanished into the river. This time the king did not watch from a distance; he knew what had happened from the smell of the river. His own part in the decision was becoming unmistakable within his silence.

Ganga carried a secret story that Shantanu had not yet heard. The ancient Vasus had been cursed to human birth for the theft, from Vasishtha's hermitage, of a sacred cow descended from Kamadhenu. Ganga had promised to release them through brief human lives. When she made that promise, she had not imagined the weight of those lives as a mother's body would come to know it. The seven children who had dissolved into the river's current were not merely a number representing freedom from a curse. Each had a different face; each time her finger had been left empty. Yet she had not shared with the king her reason for what she was doing.

One day, in the palace's little courtyard, Ganga was picking through rice with her hands. Shantanu sat beside her. "When does being a king seem difficult?" Ganga asked. Shantanu replied, "When my decision destroys someone's home." Ganga set a small stone apart from the grains. "And when you make no decision?" she asked again. For the first time Shantanu looked directly at her. He wanted to say that the condition restrained him, but he knew that accepting the condition had itself been his own decision. Neither of them answered Ganga's question that day.

When news of the eighth pregnancy came, fear and tenderness entered the women's quarters together. An elderly midwife said that this time she would tie the baby's cloth securely. Shantanu was troubled to hear it: how could a cord of cloth save a child from death? "If the question arises of stopping the mother's action, what will you do?" he asked the midwife. She looked at him not as a king but as a frightened father. "I shall look for the newborn's breath," she said, "and try to save whoever I can. I do not know the meaning of a secret vow." In that brief reply Shantanu found a courage that the long discourses of the royal assembly had never given him.

The night of the eighth child's birth was extraordinarily still. Shantanu pressed his ear close enough to hear the baby's heartbeat. This act of listening was not a kingly duty; it was the small work of a father. Ganga covered the child with the end of her sari and set out towards the river. This time Shantanu followed. On the sand his footprints at first mingled with Ganga's and then parted from them. Reaching the river's edge, he said clearly, "Enough. Not this child." Once the words had left his mouth, he knew that the vow was broken. But the child's living body was before him, and for the first time its protection had been spoken aloud.

Ganga turned. There was more profound exhaustion than anger in her voice. "You have abandoned your promise, Shantanu." The king said, "I have lost seven children. My silence did not protect them. If you have a reason, tell me; but I will not let another living child lose his life before my eyes." Ganga clasped the baby more tightly. "You had the right to ask questions," she said, "but you surrendered it in exchange for the condition. Now you have changed your decision. For this child I shall open another road into life."

Standing on the bank, Shantanu heard for the first time of the Vasus' curse and Ganga's promise to release them. She explained that seven of the Vasus were to have brief human births, while the consequence of the eighth one's actions required a long human life. The king listened, but the empty cradles of the lying-in room kept passing before his eyes. "If this was the rule, why did you not tell me before?" he asked. Ganga answered, "I concealed the reason for my condition. I too shall bear the weight of this decision." She told him the story of the curse, but did not ask him to regard the pain of the dead children as cancelled by that story.

"Where will the eighth child live now?" Shantanu asked. Ganga looked towards the mist floating above the river. "He must be taught knowledge, the use of weapons and the principles of conduct. You see your prince only as an heir to the throne; I want him to return with the ability to question." "Are you taking him away from me again?" the king asked. "Yes," Ganga said. "With me his life will be preserved and he will receive an education. You broke the condition on the day you stood up for his life. Now you must pay the price of enduring this separation as well."

The child slept against his mother's shoulder. The king wished to touch the tiny nails on his feet. Ganga did not stop him. Shantanu placed a finger against the child's sole, as though such a touch were testimony greater than any oath. "I want to call him by his name," he said. "Devavrata," Ganga replied. Shantanu repeated the name slowly. It could not settle the account of the first seven absences, but for the eighth child it became a form of address turned towards the future. Carrying him, Ganga disappeared into the river mist.

For many years Shantanu continued to govern his kingdom. Counsel about wars, marriage alliances, irrigation canals and the needs of his subjects returned again and again. Yet one question from the river remained fixed within him: which promise is it just to keep, and when does it become necessary to resist it? He did not turn the seven empty cradles into a proclamation of victory in the kingdom's history. Devavrata's name remained written on a private palm leaf. With time the ink of that name grew pale; the question did not.

One day, approaching the river, Shantanu saw that one part of its current had been arrested in an extraordinary fashion. With a dense rank of arrows, a young man was holding back the force of one branch of the river. He studied carefully the speed of each released arrow and the water's response. Shantanu stopped, astonished by his skill. The child's face had become a young man's, yet at the corners of his eyes a line of old recognition was beginning to appear. Ganga revealed herself there. She told the king that Devavrata had been educated in the Vedas, statecraft and the arts of arms, and recounted the names of his teachers and the attainments of his learning. Then she brought the young man before his father.

Devavrata bowed in greeting. Shantanu laid a hand upon his shoulder and for some time said nothing. This silence did not mean the terror of those seven nights; yet the empty space of the past between father and son remained within it. “Will you tell me the story of my childhood?” the young man asked. Shantanu said, “I shall tell you what I saw. What I did not understand, I shall not claim as knowledge of my own.” Ganga was listening from a distance. For her, the hour of leaving her son was different from the condition laid down at their first meeting: this time she did not forbid Shantanu to ask questions.

In Videhapur, during the week after the first agreement had broken down, Naira unfolded a neatly creased sheet of paper. Beside it lay a carefully preserved copy of the five conditions sent by Shabnam’s committee. The new sheet contained several lines copied from an old register of wages; with it had been deposited a separate receipt and one person’s written statement. Mahesh, who had been called to examine the sequence of the documents, remained standing in the doorway. “The three seem to point to the same thing,” he said, “but I am not going to join the names yet.” Naira drew out a chair for him.

The register contained the name “Mithua.” The second paper was an old boat-fare slip, bearing only the abbreviation “Mi.” before an amount and an indistinct date. The third was a statement by an elderly worker at the landing who said he had heard somebody addressed as “Mithu.” Naira understood that, on hearing the name of Lata’s missing son Mithun, someone would be eager to make the three records agree. But three questions remained unanswered: the date on the slip was unclear; the time referred to in the statement was uncertain; and no one knew who the “Mithua” in the register had been. These papers might offer a possible lead in the search for the child, not a confirmed identification.

When Lata entered the room, Naira first asked her permission. “I will show you three documents,” she said. “If you wish, you may read a private copy. I shall not attach this supposition to your son’s name in any public notice.” Lata took the papers in her hands. Straightening the wet corner of the slip with her finger, she asked, “Who had this slip?” Mahesh replied, “The name of the person who collected it is recorded, but there is no signature from the owner of the original.” Lata said, “Then ask that person first. I need hope, but I will not have you seize another child and bring him here by calling him my Mithun.” Her voice was weary; her decision was clear.

Aditi came into the room carrying a separate envelope of hospital supply records. Seeing Naira’s papers, she did not place it beside them. “Documents relating to the hospital’s public payments have a different original source and a different purpose,” she said. Naira wrote three headings: “Writing directly observed”; “Possible resemblance of letters and sounds”; “Unverified inference concerning the person’s identity.” The letters “Mithua” could be seen in the register. That the “Mi.” on the slip referred to the same person was not proved.

The old man's statement concerned a name heard, not a face seen. Mahesh entered the details of the custodian of each document on a protected sheet.

Tara arrived carrying the inspection map of the Binaut landing. She asked why the private names had not been entered on the public sheet of the five conditions. Naira replied, "If permission to publish has not been given, I will not treat silence as consent and print them. The agreement sheet belongs to everyone; protecting the source of this statement is a separate matter." Tara agreed, but added that the wages owed to people named in the labour register must not thereby be made secret. "Let their names remain protected," Mahesh said, "but the amounts on the receipts and the timetable for verification must reach the original claimants." A claim number and date for a reply were therefore recorded without making anyone's name public.

At evening Naira gave Lata not a photograph of the original slip but a written description of it and a list of questions. "You may make corrections to this list according to what you consent to share," she said. Lata folded the paper and put it into her bag. "If he turns out not to be my son, you will not stop looking?" she asked. "No," Naira answered. "The search will neither begin nor end on the strength of such a paper." Lata rose to return home. Mahesh accompanied her to the door, but even when asked for the source's name, Naira did not disclose it publicly that day. The memory of her earlier error in publication was making her cautious.

On the ancient riverbank, Devavrata, returning with his father, saw the city's great gate for the first time. The gatekeeper bowed to him as a prince. Devavrata halted. Rather than speak of what Ganga had taught him, he looked at the narrow footpath beside the palace. "Is there a way through this gate for everyone?" he asked. Shantanu replied, "The rules of royal business are different." Devavrata asked again, "And what of those who were not consulted when the rules were made?" Shantanu did not answer at once. His son's question recalled to him the silence of the night of his eighth child.

That day Ganga was moving away in the river's current. She carried three different burdens: the brief lives of seven infants, the long life of the eighth, and Shantanu's promise, broken only after so much delay. She had explained her condition, but she did not take upon herself the decisions that remained to the king and their son. Shantanu walked with Devavrata through the royal gate. He thought: I broke my silence once to protect my son; what future promise will bind him and me again? The answer lay in the decisions of the next generation of the royal house, not in Ganga's story.

That night in Videhapur, Naira wrote a brief note in the margin of her papers: "Accepting a condition, understanding a condition, and bearing its consequences are three different acts." The copy of the five conditions from the failed agreement remained safely behind it. The original envelope containing Mahesh's statement was still sealed, and a separate request had been sent to verify the date on the boat-fare slip. At home Lata put away

Mithun's old clay horse. Her hope rested not on the resemblance of a new name, but on the right to keep searching. On both sides of the river the water flowed according to its own course. The price of a promise written on paper would now be measured by its consequences.

Chapter 62 · Bhishma's Vow

In the inner courtyard of the royal palace, Devavrata was unstringing his bow. A small bandage covered the fingers he had grazed while practising how to check the force of a river's current. Shantanu had brought him into the city and acknowledged him as his son; the courtiers had shown him the seat reserved for the crown prince. Yet that day Devavrata noticed that his father sat before a meal without touching a grain. The palace drums sounded at dusk, but neither music nor sleep reached the king's chamber. When asked what troubled him, Shantanu said, "My mind is weary of the affairs of state." His eyes were turned towards the river, where Ganga had once spoken the final meaning of her condition and departed.

Devavrata did not wish to burden the king with another question. Instead he summoned the royal charioteer aside. The man had accompanied Shantanu on his journeys for many years. "After which journey did my father's face change so greatly?" Devavrata asked. At first the charioteer sheltered behind the king's privacy; then he explained plainly that Shantanu had met a young boatwoman named Satyavati at a river landing. The prospect of marriage had pleased the king, but her family wanted royal rights of succession for any children she might bear. "Your place as crown prince stands in the way of that promise," the charioteer said. Devavrata asked, "What did my father say to me about it?" "Nothing. He valued your rights above his own desire." The answer deepened the son's affection for his father, but it also awakened an old fear of silence.

At dawn Devavrata went down to the river landing. The day's fish consignments had already gone to market, and empty baskets stood upside down in the sunlight. Satyavati was tightening a fresh bandage around an injured finger of her younger brother. Her father, who worked at the landing, was adding up the day's accounts with small wooden counters. He rose when he saw Devavrata, but Satyavati did not stop what she was doing. "Yesterday you heard my question," she said. "Today I have come to answer it," Devavrata replied. She tied the knot in her brother's bandage and sent him back to work. Her gaze rested not on the royal visitor before her but on the possible consequences of the words he had come to speak.

Her father had insisted that a son born of Satyavati should inherit the throne. Devavrata considered the royal council, the kingdom's old ceremonies of consecration, and the rights of father and son. "I relinquish my claim to the throne of Hastinapura," he said. "If Satyavati has children, I shall recognise their right to rule and protect that right." The ministers standing at the landing stirred at his declaration. An elderly minister, well versed in affairs of state, asked, "During the king's lifetime, the crown prince's authority lives not merely on paper but in the trust of the army and the

esteem of the people. Who will witness your promise?" Devavrata answered, "All who hear it now. But it must also be written down and declared before the next assembly."

Satyavati's father set his wooden counters aside. Pleasure and anxiety appeared together on his face. "You may surrender your own right," he said, "but what if you have a son tomorrow? Who will prevent him from claiming the kingship despite the words you speak today?" There was more than greed in the question: the father knew how alliances could shift at court. Devavrata understood that relinquishing a claim in the present did not, by itself, prevent a dispute in the future. At a fish market, the bargain struck for the first boatload did not bind the price of the next; on a throne, however, the lives of many people were at stake. Seeing Devavrata fall silent, the father spoke again. "I will send my daughter to the palace, but I will not leave her children to an uncertain tomorrow."

Devavrata moved towards the water's edge. The cold river touched the grazed skin of his fingers. He remembered the years of his education—his time with Ganga, his master in archery, and the question he had asked at the palace gate after his reunion with his father: what happens to those who were never consulted when a rule was made? This time the rule was about to issue from his own mouth. He turned towards the gathering. "I shall not marry," Devavrata said. "I shall observe lifelong celibacy and devote myself to protecting this royal house; I shall claim neither children nor the throne for myself." After he had spoken, everyone at the landing stood motionless for a while.

The ancient telling describes flowers raining from the sky at this moment and the gods crying out the name "Bhishma." The royal priest would record the celestial spectacle as a sign of the vow's greatness. But what Satyavati's younger brother saw at the landing was simply this: this young man would never have a child of his own to call his child. The high councillors offered praise while the knot in the bandage bit into the boatman's wounded finger. Satyavati asked Devavrata, "Have you made this decision in the name of my condition, or of your own judgement?" Devavrata stopped short. "I have made it myself. I shall not place its burden upon you." Satyavati's expression softened a little. "Then do not call it the price of my marriage. If it becomes a price, one day someone will try to collect the debt of this sacrifice from my children."

The royal priest urged that mantras be recited at the announcement of the new name, Bhishma. Devavrata bowed and accepted the name, but ordered the charioteer first to carry written notice of his renunciation of royal office to the assembly. Satyavati's father asked, "And your own wish? Will it never change?" "A human being's wishes can change," Bhishma said, "but I have vowed to remain faithful to this one." The father lowered his head. He had

secured the promise of a safe future for his daughter; the cost of the young man's entire life could not be reckoned with his wooden counters.

When Satyavati went indoors, it was not her mother but her little brother who asked first, “Sister, does this mean you won't have to row a boat any more?” She laughed. “If I stop rowing, must I stop understanding the water?” He held up his bandaged finger. “And what about me?” “Your wages will still be paid in your own name,” Satyavati said. “My marriage does not wipe away what is owed at the landing.” She told her father that the fishing nets, boats, and outstanding dues of their household must not all be entered under the king's name as part of her wedding gifts. Her father was startled at first, then agreed. This small domestic decision was quite different from the royal vow, yet Satyavati's own future depended upon it too.

By the time Devavrata returned to court, the news had already reached Shantanu. The king held his dish before him but could not swallow a morsel. “I did not ask this of you,” he said. His son replied, “You remained silent. I believed that my right was the cause of your silence.” Shantanu asked, “And if your belief was mistaken?” For the first time, a shadow of uncertainty crossed his son's face. “Then I made an irrevocable vow for a cause I did not know with certainty. But I accept it now as my own decision.” Shantanu remembered the night of Ganga's eighth son, when the delay in breaking silence had exacted so terrible a price. Today his son had given a meaning to that silence on his own.

The king granted his son a boon: death would have no power to compel Bhishma until he himself consented to the hour of his death. The court regarded it as an unequalled reward. Bhishma remained seated beside his father for some time. “The right to choose the hour of death is not the right to choose every day of life,” he said softly. Shantanu listened. His son said nothing more, but the king understood that this boon could not restore his son's right to marriage, children, or the ordinary joys of a household. Though father and son had met so many times before, never had they felt quite so alone together.

The following day, the declaration concerning succession to the throne was read aloud in the royal assembly. The elder councillors assented, but the commander of the army raised a question: if Satyavati's children succeeded to the throne, who would possess the authority to educate them and to decide how the army should act in wartime? Bhishma replied, “Officers of the state will serve the state's interests. I shall provide protection and education, not become its owner.” “And if the king disagrees with you?” “Then he shall remain king, with his disagreement intact.” Some listeners were reassured; others were sceptical. In government, a vow governed the conduct of one man. Without written rules for institutions, it could not of itself sustain an enduring order.

Satyavati came to the palace. On her first evening she went to the courtyard well, where a maidservant insisted on bringing her water in a vessel reserved for the royal family. “I can draw it myself,” Satyavati said, but the maidservant grew frightened. “If the queen lowers the bucket herself, I shall be blamed.” Satyavati left the bucket where it was, sat beside the woman, and asked which rules had been written down and which were obeyed only out of fear. On returning to her chamber, she requested time at court to hear an answer. Speaking of the boatmen in the family into which she had been born, she said that the comforts of the palace must not render the labour of her first home invisible.

For the first time, Shantanu sat with Satyavati in the palace garden without any ministers attending them. Cold water had gathered near the flowering shrubs. “Are you happy here?” the king asked. “Sometimes,” Satyavati answered. “But the court still displays your son's vow as though it were an ornament belonging to me. I fear that if I disagree with any decision, someone will say, ‘Even after so great a sacrifice?’” Shantanu gave no reply. She went on, “I married of my own free will. Your son's vow belongs to him. Judge my decisions by what I do, not by the account of his sacrifice.” This time the king spoke his agreement, though the fulfilment of those words would have to be tested over many days.

The years turned. Satyavati gave birth to Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Once, in the rainy season, the boys made little paper boats inside the palace. Chitrangada marked his boat with a dot of gold-coloured paint, while his younger brother launched a plain leaf boat into a runnel of water. Bhishma stood beside their play, not as a guard but as a spectator. “Uncle, where is your boat?” Vichitravirya asked. Bhishma folded a leaf for him. The child asked again, “Why don't your children come and play with me?” Bhishma's hands stopped. He did not tell a lie. “I have made a vow that means I shall have no children.” The little boy did not understand; he simply placed Bhishma's boat beside his own.

Within the laughter of that household, the question of kingship continued to grow in silence. When teaching Chitrangada the use of weapons, Bhishma explained the conditions of defeat as well as victory. “If your victory lays waste to someone's field, the king must pay for it,” he said. The boy asked, “If you are not the king, why are you teaching me all this?” Bhishma answered, “My vow not to take the throne does not free me from responsibility.” Satyavati stood on the threshold of her chamber and heard their exchange. It comforted her, but she knew that the line between protection and decision would have to be drawn again when the boys grew older.

When Shantanu fell ill, the sound of physicians' footsteps became more frequent in the palace. One day the king summoned Bhishma to speak privately. “You gave your life for my happiness,” he said. Bhishma shook his head. “No, Father. I made a decision, and its consequences remain with me. If

you call it the price of your happiness, you will turn what I did back into a debt you owe." Shantanu gazed at his son's face for a long time. "Then accept one thing: my silence was never an order to you." Bhishma answered, "And let my vow never become an order to silence those who come after us." That day father and son did not settle an account of blame. They shared a brief conversation about a difficult truth.

After Shantanu's death, the royal assembly fixed the day for Chitrangada's coronation. Bhishma himself brought forward the crown. Some councillors proposed that orders be issued in Bhishma's name until the boy came of age. Bhishma accepted administrative oversight, but stipulated in writing that responsibility must be recorded whenever the royal seal was used. Satyavati read every line of the proposal. "If my son is to be called king," she said, "he must have an education, the right to ask questions, and the means to change a wrong decision." Some councillors thought the queen was demanding too much, but Bhishma had her words entered into the minutes of the assembly.

In time Chitrangada began displaying his courage beyond the duties of government. He came into conflict with a Gandharva king who bore the same name, Chitrangada. The war dragged on, and in the end the king lost his life. When the news arrived, what remained in the palace courtyard was not the glitter of weapons but the memory of the two brothers' unfinished paper boats. The councillors came before Satyavati carrying the document of succession. She asked first about her son's funeral rites and the wounded soldiers. "The king has died," she said, "but who will look after the homes of the ordinary people who fell beside him?" Bhishma arranged assistance for the soldiers' families. Yet for all he did, he could not bring back the son whom he had helped to raise.

Vichitravirya was still very young. The royal assembly seated him upon the throne, but the heavy work of governing continued to come into Bhishma's hands. Again and again the same fear rose in Satyavati's mind: the future of this house had been reckoned in two sons, and one was gone. Bhishma had closed the path to descendants of his own for ever at that river landing. A minister asked him in private, "You perform the king's duties, but the name is his. How long can such an imbalance last?" Bhishma answered, "That is why our first task must be to make the king capable. If I alter my vow to conceal the weakness of the kingdom, I shall create a second problem."

One evening Satyavati summoned Bhishma. Beside her lay a little wooden bow from Chitrangada's childhood, its string broken. "My father sought an assurance about the future," she said. "For that future you closed one road through your life. Now Chitrangada is no more. What can I say with certainty about Vichitravirya's life?" Before answering, Bhishma took the wooden bow in his hands. "Nothing with certainty. I shall see to his safety and education." Satyavati asked, "When the question of marriage arises, where will his own wish have a place?" "It is my responsibility to understand that wish," Bhishma

replied. Her eyes rested on his face for a moment. “Not only his,” she said. “The wish of the person he is to marry must have a place as well.”

That same evening in Videhapur, Naira was examining the public copy of the five conditions upon which the attempted agreement had failed. Tara arrived with a fresh document. It contained a proposal from the other side for testing the gate: “Open the passage first; the particulars of compensation and the safety inspection can be settled afterwards.” Tara set the paper on the table. “They say this is a condition of trust,” she explained. Naira asked, “Has the trust of the person who must yield a passage beside his field been put into writing?” Tara shook her head. “No. Ramesh's objection is still on the original page.”

Mahesh came in as well. He carried a receipt from the source of a wage register bearing the name “Mithua.” The letter stated that permission to examine the handwriting in the register was limited: the original page must not be made public under anybody else's name. Naira placed the letter separately from the papers concerning the search for Mithun. “I cannot change the name of somebody's child on the strength of my own guess,” she said. Mahesh asked, “And if the receipt is withheld, what becomes of the right to wages?” Tara replied, “The claim number, the amount, and the hearing date will reach the person entitled to them. Keeping a private name out of print must not close the road to payment.”

Lata had come to ask when the next search would take place. Naira explained that day's new information with care: the source of the register had been found, but the person's identity had not been established. Lata remained silent for a while, then said, “The belief that my son will come home one day keeps me alive. But I will not seize someone else's child in the name of that belief. You may write that in your records.” Naira bowed her head. Tara added to the previous page that no one's personal silence was to be counted as consent merely because a collective condition for opening the passage had been stated. At the end of the meeting they sent their reply: permission would not be granted to open the passage unilaterally before the safety inspection and the discussion of compensation.

In ancient Hastinapura, Bhishma was meanwhile consulting the ministers about a forthcoming marriage. Courts in distant lands held ceremonies in which princesses were to choose their husbands, yet the language of assemblies, lineage, and royal prestige often drowned out the princesses' own voices. News reached Bhishma of the marriage gathering for the three daughters of the king of Kashi. A minister said, “This alliance may be necessary to secure Vichitravirya's rights.” Bhishma asked, “Has the prince been asked what he wants?” “We shall speak to everyone,” the minister replied. “And the princesses?” No answer came at once. Satyavati's warning remained in Bhishma's memory, but the immediate crisis at court was driving him towards a hasty decision.

That night, after supper, Bhishma and Satyavati sat in the old palace courtyard where Chitrangada had once launched his paper boats. Inside, Vichitravirya was listening to music. Straightening the wick of a lamp, Satyavati said, “I do not want my son's future built by closing another woman's mouth.” Bhishma replied, “I cannot turn away from my vow.” “I am not asking you to,” Satyavati said. “I am asking whether, even as you keep your vow, you can hear another person's right to choose.” Bhishma remained silent for a long time. The vow he had made at the river landing was being tested again—not in battle, but by this question within the home.

In the morning the councillors set about preparing for the journey to Kashi. They oiled the axle of the chariot, inspected the horses' hooves, and shook the dust from the old standard. Bhishma gave his charioteer not an order for war but a list of what the journey required. He was thinking: I relinquished my rights for my father's happiness; I gave my time to protect my brother's kingdom. At what point does my authority end when I must decide another person's future? The journey did not stop for want of an answer. The chariot stood ready at the palace gate, while the lives of Kashi's three princesses had not yet been touched by any news of the decision being made.

As the day advanced in Videhapur, Tara said to Naira, “The agreement has broken down, yet the work has not stopped. But the five conditions we wrote must not one day become weapons against our own people.” Naira answered, “The test of a written promise lies not in its announcement, but in whether those whose lives it affects have the right to speak.” She entered the date of the receipt, kept Ramesh's objection concerning his field safe, and did not close Lata's search file. The chariot of Hastinapura and the gate of Videhapur did not belong to the same history. Yet in both places, if anyone mistook a vow of their own for a final solution, there might be too little room left to hear the questions of those who came after.

Chapter 63 · Amba's Time

Inside the royal palace of Kashi, turmeric had been set out in three brass trays. Attendants were arranging different flowers beside each tray; Amba herself changed the flowers around the largest. "The scent of these flowers gives me a headache," she said. The attendant grew flustered. Changing the flowers to suit a princess's taste on the day of her swayamvara was no great matter, yet every task was so tightly bound by rules that even an ordinary wish sounded like a command. Ambika and Ambalika looked at her and laughed. "How shall we recognise them when all the princes arrive?" Ambalika asked. "When one already knows the person one is looking for, there is no need to examine everyone else," Amba replied. Behind that answer lay an earlier meeting with Shalva and a private hope. Some in the household knew of it, but the royal assembly did not recognise it as a promise put into writing.

Her father's royal priest came to explain the order of the swayamvara: the gate through which each king would enter, the chamber where his weapons would be laid aside, the person who would place the garlands in the princesses' hands. Everything had been decided. "If I have already chosen someone," Amba asked, "at what point in these proceedings may that be said?" The priest smiled. "You will place a garland around his neck before the assembly. What could be clearer?" Amba asked again, "And if someone seizes me before I have had the chance to lift my garland?" Rather than answer, the priest began speaking of the preparations outside. The princess understood: the rules provided for a celebration of her choice, but no means of protecting it.

The swayamvara assembly filled beneath the afternoon sun. Ambika's eyes travelled across the great banners; Ambalika counted the soldiers' weapons. Amba searched the hall for Shalva's seat. He had come. Their eyes met, but before either could rise, the sound of the conch shells changed. A chariot bearing the banner of Hastinapura stopped at the entrance. Bhishma entered the midst of the assembly. He announced that he had come to seek the hands of all three princesses, not as brides for himself but for Vichitravirya. Protests broke out. Some kings laughed about his age; others mocked his vow. His face hardened. Yet in everything Amba heard, there was not a single word about her own consent.

The order of the assembly disintegrated in the noise of battle. The line of guards was broken, the chariot horses thrust forward, and Bhishma seated the three sisters in his chariot. Frightened, Ambalika clung to Ambika's arm. Amba drew back the curtain. "I came here to make my own decision," she said, "not to be told Hastinapura's." Bhishma answered, "The honour of a royal house will be yours." "Whose honour is it," Amba asked, "if it gives me no opportunity to speak?" The charioteer tightened the reins. The wheels began to turn, and the fragrance of the palace flowers fell away into dust.

Shalva pursued them with his soldiers. At a narrow turn in the field he fought Bhishma. The twang of bowstrings mingled with the panting of horses. Shalva's weapon broke; one wheel of his chariot sank into the ground. Bhishma did not take his life. Having won the battle, he went on. From behind the curtain Amba watched Shalva's defeat. She feared for his wounds, but a sharper question arose: who could grant a battle the right to decide her life? She thought that a man able to halt a chariot by the strength of his arms might also have stopped for a single moment to listen.

In Hastinapura a royal residence had been prepared for the three sisters. There was perfumed water, new clothing, and women waiting to welcome them. Amba accepted the garments and set them aside. On entering the queen mother's court, she asked to speak with Satyavati alone. "I had chosen Shalva of my own will," she said. "What happened in the assembly at Kashi was not my marriage. I ask permission to go to him." Satyavati looked at her for some moments. Something of the question she herself had asked at the river landing before her marriage sounded here again. "Your words will be spoken before Bhishma," she said. "No decision about your life shall be taken in your absence."

Bhishma rose as soon as he heard her. "I did not know this fact," he said. "Not knowing is itself a failing in the making of a decision," Amba answered. "How was I seen among the three sisters?" Bhishma had words for his vow, for succession, for the needs of the kingdom; Amba's question brought them to a halt for a moment. He went before the assembly, summoned the priests and guards, and it was announced that Amba would go to the king of her choice. A secure chariot and women attendants were provided for the journey. Ambika and Ambalika embraced their elder sister. "Where is your home now?" Ambalika whispered. Amba could not answer. She thought only that the answer to the question of home remained to be found.

At the gates of Shalva's city the guard asked who she was. Amba gave her name, and the guard stepped aside; yet she was made to wait before she could enter the court. Shalva sat with his injured arm bound in a dressing. At the sight of him Amba went forward. "I have returned," she said. There was relief in her voice: the kind of relief that comes when, after battle, travel, and humiliation, one finds one's own identity again. Shalva's expression remained hard. "You went in Bhishma's chariot," he said. "Did I go," Amba asked, "or was I taken?" Shalva replied, "He defeated me before all the kings."

"How did your defeat become my consent?" Amba asked. Shalva rose from his chair and turned away. He began to speak of what the people of the royal court would say, how the honour of his lineage could be preserved, and what name he would be called if he accepted a princess whom Bhishma had won. Amba listened to each objection. "When I chose you," she said, "you understood that I was a person. Now one man has defeated another, and by that fact I have become an object won in battle?" Shalva spoke of the pain of

his humiliation, and Amba did not call that pain false. But she saw clearly that he wished to lay the burden of his defeat upon her body.

At last Shalva refused to marry her. Amba asked him once more, “If Bhishma had never fought you and I had come here on my own feet, what would you have done?” Shalva tried to say that things had been different before. “Then I am not the one who has changed,” Amba replied. “What has changed is the gaze of your society.” She left the court. At the gate an attendant asked, “Where shall we go now?” “First to the place where the decision began,” Amba said. The chariot turned again towards Hastinapura. The dust of the road no longer stung her in quite the same way, for within her grief the shape of a question was becoming definite.

Before Satyavati, Amba recounted Shalva’s entire reply. She omitted nothing: the old promise of love, Shalva’s defeat, his humiliation, and his final refusal. Vichitravirya was called into the assembly. “Your marriage was given as the reason for carrying me away,” Amba asked him. “Now Shalva has refused me. In what position do you see me?” Vichitravirya was uneasy. He had been told that Amba had given her heart to Shalva. He did not wish to enter a marriage in which his acceptance would become another name for Amba’s defeat. “I will not marry you against your will,” he said. “I am not asking for marriage at this moment,” Amba answered. “I am asking for an opportunity to make my position clear.”

Bhishma had said that his vow was unalterable. “You brought me away from my swayamvara,” Amba asked him, “fought Shalva, and then sent me back to him. Your will operated in all three decisions. What decision remains to redress the damage to my life?” Bhishma began explaining that he could not marry for himself. “I am not asking you only for marriage,” Amba said. “I am asking whose responsibility it is for what you called the protection of your lineage. Is there any road to justice for me outside your vow?” Bhishma searched for an answer. The rules of the royal court offered no clear remedy.

The royal priest proposed certain arrangements: refuge with one person, protection under another, a gift from some royal family. “I shall be grateful for food and shelter,” Amba said. “But a gift will not decide my objection.” Satyavati adjourned the assembly. Sitting beside Amba in private, she asked, “What is it that you yourself wish for now?” After a long silence Amba answered, “At first I wanted a life with Shalva. Now I want anyone who makes a claim over my life to be required to answer for it. Without that answer, I will not move towards another marriage.” Satyavati did not restrain her. She made travel arrangements available and supplied a written copy of the statement Amba had given before the court. It was not justice, but it was a small means of keeping Amba’s own voice from disappearing again.

After leaving Hastinapura, Amba went to many hermitages and royal gates. Sometimes her story was called a dispute between royal houses, sometimes the

obstinacy of a woman disappointed in love. In one hermitage an elderly woman ascetic asked her, "On which day did what happened to you begin?" Amba named the day of the swayamvara. The ascetic asked again, "And your conversation with Shalva before that? Write down that day as well." She tied three separate knots in a strip of cloth: the first for Amba's own choice, the second for her forcible removal, the third for Shalva's refusal. "If these three are called a single event," the ascetic said, "the place where each person is at fault will disappear from sight." Amba took the knotted strip with her.

One king heard Amba's suffering but had not the courage to oppose Bhishma. In another court she was asked why she did not herself take up arms. "Who in your assembly teaches a woman to bear arms?" she asked. Laughter arose, but an elderly warrior remained silent. He told his disciple to provide the traveller with safe shelter for the night. Amba saw that there were people willing to help, but their assistance did not carry her question to the seat of power. Daily travel, finding food, explaining her name in strange places: in these her years were being spent. Even to obtain one day in a court of justice, years seemed necessary.

At a hermitage in the foothills of the Himalayas she met her maternal grandfather, Hotravahana. Seeing her face, the old man thought first not of greeting her but of her injuries. "You are weary," he said. "Have I come here as a princess," Amba asked, "or as your granddaughter?" "Here your own name is enough," Hotravahana answered. The next day he heard her whole story and said that Parashurama was regarded as Bhishma's teacher; his assistance might be sought. "Does being his teacher make his word automatically just in my favour?" Amba asked. A faint shadow of embarrassment crossed the old man's face. "No," he said. "But he has the capacity to hear the question. I cannot promise that his decision will be in your favour."

When Parashurama came, Amba bowed to him, but she did not lower her head as she told her story. She spoke first of her choice of Shalva, then of the breaking up of the swayamvara, Shalva's rejection, and the consequences of Bhishma's vow. Parashurama interrupted to ask, "Do you still desire marriage to Shalva?" "What would I gain," Amba said, "by compelling to marry me a man whose fear of humiliation is greater than my will? I want the person whose actions began this injustice to accept responsibility for them." Parashurama said he would first reason with Bhishma. Amba made herself clear once more: "Let me be heard. No settlement shall be made in my name of which I learn only afterwards."

Bhishma came and bowed to his former teacher. Parashurama asked why he had carried the three princesses away from their swayamvara and what remedy he had offered on learning Amba's wishes. Bhishma gave the account of the journey and of sending her safely to Shalva. "She returned," Parashurama said, "and the causes of that return are both your battle and Shalva's refusal." Bhishma repeated that he could not break the vow of his life.

"I recognise the strength it takes to keep a vow," Parashurama replied. "But you cannot bring the question of someone whose suffering you have caused to an end merely by invoking your vow." For a moment Bhishma's eyes turned towards Amba. In her face there was no anger, but the weariness of a decision that would not yield.

The discussion between teacher and disciple failed. Parashurama challenged him to battle, and Bhishma took up his weapons. Amba stood at a distance from the field. On the first day the shafts of the two bowmen brought leaves falling from the trees. On the second, injured horses were replaced. The days passed, with no clear sign of victory. The disciples wished to describe the conflict in the language of triumph. "For all the days that formidable weapons are wielded," Amba asked, "who will write down my question?" An ascetic gave her water. She unfolded her strip of cloth and looked at the three knots. The battle could not erase the first event.

After many days of conflict, the battle between teacher and disciple was brought to a halt. Some ancient tellings speak of divine weapons and a heavenly voice intervening. For Amba the immediate result was simpler: Bhishma remained alive, his vow remained unchanged, and no one had been able to give her a new path through life. Parashurama told her he had tried to the extent of his powers. Amba bowed. "I am grateful that you heard me," she said. "But my question has not ended because the battle was not won." The teacher did not try to stop her. Once again there stood before her the distance between a promise of justice and justice obtained.

That night Amba sat on the river sand outside the hermitage. Water was wearing away a tooth-shaped stone; a small current slipped past one side and found a path along the other. She looked at the weariness of her own body and remembered the land of her birth. Once she had been free to change the fragrance of the flowers; on that very day she had also possessed the right to choose the companion of her life. Yet the assembly had offered that right no protection. Now neither Shalva's door, nor Hastinapura's palace, nor Parashurama's battlefield held the answer that was owed to her. She tightened the third knot in the cloth. What society regards as a single night of humiliation, a woman pays for throughout her life.

Meanwhile in Videhapur, Naira was copying an old boat-fare slip onto clean paper. The ink had spread in one place on the original. The writing might be read as "Miṭhuā," though another reader saw "Mithuā." Mahesh said, "We now have three readings of one name. Shall we tell Lata all of them?" "We shall tell her the three possible readings," Naira replied, "but we shall not call any one of them the certain name of her son. We still have no original proof of the fare-payer's age or the date of travel." Tara set down the inspection list from the opposite bank. "Anyone to whom this name is attributed must have the right to show or not show their own papers," she said.

Lata came into the inspection room carrying a small bundle of Mithun's old clothes. "Three people read the name three different ways," she asked. "Where is my son in any of them?" Naira placed the paper before her. "We cannot yet say. It may record the fare for a consignment carried by boat. We can go further only when we have matched the original account book and its date." "But you will not close the search because the name does not match," Lata said. "No," Naira answered. Then Lata spoke more softly. "And you will not seize a child from someone else's home on the strength of my grief." She herself chose to hear even the possibility that went against her hope; her right to hear it was recorded there in the papers.

Tara added a line to the letter concerning the gate inspection: the fact that a collective representative speaks on a matter concerning someone's private field or home must not automatically be taken as proof of that person's consent. "A sixth condition after the five?" Mahesh asked. "All five are different forms of this very matter," Tara replied. "We need no new number, but room on every page for the affected person to speak." Naira placed the source slip in a closed file. The Amba of history and the Lata of Videhapur were not witnesses to each other's lives. Their time, their rights, and their wounds were different. But Naira resolved not to make room in her records for the error of writing the final meaning of a person's life while that person was absent.

Amba set out once more. She did not travel from hermitage to hermitage merely recounting Parashurama's battle. Wherever she went, she asked how the authority of armies had entered a ceremony meant to honour a princess's free choice; she asked why, when Shalva rejected her, there had been no institution capable of giving a decision. Some women gave her food; some elders could not answer her questions. She began to change the words in which she told her experience: not "defeat in love," but "dispossession of my own choice"; not "failure in the teacher's battle," but "justice left unfinished." These were not words accepted in every royal assembly of her time. But she refused to let her story be reduced to a title convenient to someone else.

The seasons changed again. Practising severe austerities in the mountains, Amba asked Shiva for an answer: why, when this injustice had begun within one life, was the road to justice barred within the boundaries of that same life? Ancient narratives say that Shiva granted her the boon of becoming, in a future birth, the cause of Bhishma's fall. Amba did not regard this promise as an easy victory. She understood that if justice required the span of a second life, the arrangements of the first must have been terribly narrow. In popular memory, the account of her decision to stand before the fire might be shortened to a tale of vengeance; yet her days had been filled with love, exile, questions, refusal, travel, and the search for justice.

On the final evening she gave the strip of cloth with its three knots to the elderly woman ascetic of the hermitage. "The first knot was my wish," she

said. “The second was that I was not heard. The third was that, even after I had been heard, justice did not come. Do not tell anyone that I lived only to bring about another person’s death.” The ascetic asked, “What would you have people remember first?” Amba answered, “That my time was my own. They took it all away; I made time to question them once again.” Firelight fell upon her face. In that light the ancient account sees the end of one birth and the sign of another yet to come. But the story ending here is the story of Amba’s long question. The life and choices of the child yet to be born remain to be told.

Chapter 64 · Shikhandi's Decision

The first sound of dawn in the armoury of Panchala came from a blacksmith's hammer. The young Shikhandi stood with the broken head of an arrow in his hand. His teacher had told him to throw the arrow away, but he had asked, "If the iron point is still sound, why should we not fit it to a new shaft?" The smith seated him beside the forge and showed him where the grain of the wood had split, and why an arrow, once repaired, must first be tested with a gentler draw. The teacher's eyes widened. A child of the royal house was taught how to wield weapons, not the patience of those who made them. That day Shikhandi understood for the first time that reading the marks left by damage was work no less important than loosing an arrow.

In Drupada's palace, two accounts of Shikhandi's birth circulated. The king had been told of a boon from Shiva: a child connected to a woman's unredressed wrong in an earlier life would be born into his house. The royal family sent out news of a daughter's birth as news of a son. In Drupada's eyes this was a means of securing the succession and managing an old fear; inside the palace, the newborn lay in the midwife's arms, with no need to understand the royal proclamation. The queen said, "The child I am holding must first be given the chance to live." Drupada answered, "To live, one must have a place at court." There was a difference between those two sentences, and, as the years passed, Shikhandi's childhood took shape within that difference.

When Shikhandi was defeated in an archery lesson, another pupil laughed. "The prince has lost." The teacher rebuked him, but Shikhandi stopped him. "I lost because I let my left hand slacken as I drew the bow. I shall try again." That evening the queen saw the blisters on his palm. "Do you wish everyone to call you prince?" she asked. Shikhandi replied, "I have never been able to decide what everyone will call me. But perhaps I may still decide something of what I shall learn to do." The queen rubbed ointment into his palm. The question was not fully answered that night, but it now belonged to him.

The royal priest counted the days; the commander reckoned Shikhandi's prowess; certain ministers matched the date of a future battle against the old boon. Shikhandi had few opportunities to hear these discussions. Even so, one evening he asked Drupada, "If my birth is meant to answer an injustice of long ago, which day is my own?" Drupada had said, "The days of the royal house belong to the kingdom." "Does belonging to the kingdom mean having no wishes of one's own?" Drupada watched his child for some time. He saw courage in the one who asked, but found it hard to accept that such courage might choose a direction of its own.

That same morning in Videhapur, Ruhani was measuring a torn curtain on the shelter's outer veranda. A school theatre group wished to perform a scene

from the Bhishma Parva. The organiser's leaflet announced: "Ruhani's Life: Today's Shikhandi." Ruhani put her scissors down on the table. "When did you hear the story of my life?" she asked the organiser. The young man faltered. "The audience needs an example it can recognise." Returning the leaflet, Ruhani said, "Amba's story, Shikhandi's story, and my life are three different lives. If you turn all three into one convenient name, you will hear none of them properly." The organiser promised to return with another title, but Ruhani did not yet give permission for the rehearsal.

Just then Tara arrived carrying an inspection file. A temporary strip installed for safety at the gate resembled the timber used in the hospital's old wing, but without Lalit's signature there could be no certification of its load-bearing capacity. Tara said, "A supplier wishes to inspect the materials himself. His name is Raghav Singh." Ruhani asked, "Is this a question of what the materials cost, or of the wing's safety?" "Both. And the papers for the two may be different," Tara replied. Ruhani kept the measurements for the stage's new curtain and the invitation to inspect on separate sheets. No one's right to their story and another's right under a contract ought to be written on the same board.

In Panchala, a marriage proposal for Shikhandi arrived from the royal house of Dasharna. The ministers regarded it as confirmation, before the courts of other kingdoms, of their proclamation concerning the succession. On reading the marriage letter, Shikhandi's first question was, "What has the princess been told about my life?" Drupada's face hardened. "What every court knows of your royal identity." "Whatever has been concealed within that identity will fall as a burden upon her life," Shikhandi said. The queen was aghast. No one at court had the courage to halt the marriage in time. Once again the fear of a royal house occupied the space in which a woman should have been free to decide.

When the princess of Dasharna arrived at her new home, she was shown the lofty palace, the chambers of weapons, and the splendour of the celebrations. Yet in the privacy of a conversation between husband and wife, the question changed. "I want to understand you," she said. "But how can I make a choice about something that was never told to me in my own home?" Shikhandi replied, "Many decisions about me were made without me. None of them could erase the reality of my life. But the truth was withheld from you, and I cannot deny that this was an injustice." Fear, anger, and disappointment appeared together upon the princess's face. She decided to send word to her father. Shikhandi did not prevent her.

When the message reached Dasharna, Hiranyavarman felt himself dishonoured. Weapons were gathered; messengers came and went more frequently. In his court Drupada ordered preparations for war in the name of defending the succession. An officer of the army said to Shikhandi, "Had the royal family's private affairs remained secret, there would have been no war."

Shikhandi answered, "Why should someone who never chose a secret be made to bear its burden? It is no wrongdoing to hear the princess's complaint." That night the queen reminded him that in war it was the food and water of ordinary townspeople that would first be destroyed. Shikhandi left the palace gates and went towards the forest. He was not merely fleeing another's punishment; he wished to make a decision beyond the clamour of the royal court.

In the forest he met a yaksha named Sthunakarna. At the yaksha's refuge stood an earthen water vessel, dry leaves, and a small wooden seat. Having told his story, Shikhandi said, "The difference between my body and my place in society has set two kingdoms moving towards war. Yet no king can answer the question that is mine." Sthunakarna asked, "What do you want of me?" Shikhandi did not answer at once. First he had to make clear to himself that the body, dignity, or right to life of another being was not automatically a means of resolving his own predicament.

Ancient accounts describe this encounter as an exchange of female and male states between the yaksha and Shikhandi. Having heard of Shikhandi's distress, Sthunakarna consented to lend him his maleness for a limited period and to take upon himself the femaleness associated with Shikhandi's birth. Shikhandi asked, "Is this exchange of your own free will?" "Yes," the yaksha replied. "But you must promise to return when the appointed time is over." Shikhandi accepted that promise not as a written royal command but as an obligation undertaken towards another person. The yaksha, too, had a life of his own here; it would not be right to erase it from the tale.

In one version of the story, Kubera is angered on learning of Sthunakarna's changed bodily condition. His curse is said to make the exchange endure until Shikhandi's death. The price of those words was different for the two parties. Shikhandi had found a road back to his royal life; Sthunakarna could no longer regain his former state at the time he had intended. Shikhandi asked, "When I have gone, who will come to learn how you fare?" The yaksha could not smile. "Let us begin," he said, "with someone remembering the promise he has made." Shikhandi did not simply charge a servant with bringing back news. He resolved to return himself from time to time.

On Shikhandi's return to Panchala, questions concerning his body became a matter of royal examination. Some versions of the tale say that the king of Dasharna ordered a secret test to dispel his doubts. Shikhandi understood the cruelty of this: an examination of the body had taken the place of truth within the marriage and the consent of the persons concerned. The immediate threat of war receded, but it could not therefore be said that the princess's earlier objection had been answered. In private Shikhandi told her, "If you wish to return, that choice will remain yours. I shall not claim possession of your life for the sake of peace between kingdoms." The princess

decided to spend some time among her own people. That decision found no place in the victory proclamations of the royal court.

In a letter sent from her parents' home, the princess wrote of more than royal humiliation. She wrote that, among the choices she should have been allowed to make in her new home, what she needed first was time alone and the right to make her own decisions. Hiranyavarman read the letter with anger: he had soldiers at his command, but no answer to his daughter's own words. When Drupada heard the proposed settlement between the two kings, Shikhandi made it clear that agreement to prevent a war could not become an order compelling husband and wife to live together. The queen kept a copy of the letter in her chamber. At least here the voice of someone whose name was left out of the written history of the treaty would survive.

Shikhandi returned to the armoury. His first teacher had grown old; the blacksmith's son now wielded the hammer. Looking at an arrowhead, the young smith asked, "Prince, do you remember the repair we made long ago?" Shikhandi said, "I know one more thing now. The price of a weapon whose wound another person must bear cannot be calculated by the seller of iron alone." He ordered that the pupils also be taught how to dress an injured horse's wounds, how to account for water in war, and how to reckon the wheels removed from chariots. Soldiers loved to speak of his valour. Shikhandi, for his part, did not wish to abandon the small tasks that sustain life before a battle begins.

In Videhapur, Raghav Singh arrived near the hospital's baradari carrying a cardboard box of materials from an earlier job. Inside lay two rusted hinges, a sample of timber, and three receipts. "These are not accounts written by my nephew," he said at the outset. "They are receipts for goods delivered by my firm and stored in the warehouse." Aditi picked up one of the slips. It bore the words "old wing," but did not say in which room the hinges had been fitted. Raghav continued, "This is a receipt for delivery. It does not prove that the materials were installed in the proper place." Such candour might delay full payment to his firm. Even so, he was not prepared to fill in the blank line himself.

Lalit the carpenter held the timber sample in his hand. "This is old laminated wood. Putting a load on it when it is dry is not the same as doing so in the rains." Raghav stiffened. His supplier had told him the wood was water-resistant. "I shall provide the laboratory certificate for the description under which I sold it," he said. "But this little piece cannot establish the condition of the whole roof of the old wing." Aditi had the source, date, and recipient's signature recorded on two separate sample bags. For the first time in the dispute over the contract, Raghav acknowledged the limitations of incomplete evidence alongside his own commercial interest.

A young man accompanied Raghav, one whose ordinary work was carrying heavy sacks in the warehouse. He stopped and looked towards the hospital corridor, but Raghav did not press him to speak before everyone. “If you saw something yourself,” Naira said, “first write down the time and place in your own words. If you heard it from someone else, say that separately.” The young man replied, “I shall look at the papers when I get home.” Raghav said, “Look carefully. Do not fill a gap in your memory with a guess.” Raghav took a copy of the ledger for himself. In the days to come, the moral weight of this small act would grow.

At noon Ruhani went to the school’s rehearsal space. The new leaflet for the play now read: “Shikhandi: His Own Vow, His Own War.” But the instructor again insisted that Ruhani appear at the start of the performance and say, “I am the modern form of this character.” Ruhani refused in a quiet voice. “I am a person living in the present. My experience is not evidence about the historical or mythic body of Shikhandi. Tell his story in his own voice. I can help you examine the language of the performance and the children’s consent.” A girl on the stage asked, “Then will the hero be defined not by his birth but by what he decides?” Ruhani replied, “The story may become difficult. But that is a good question.”

For the battle scene, the teacher distributed wooden swords among the children. Some came forward to play Bhishma and others to play Shikhandi. A boy said, “Shikhandi only stood in front. It was Arjuna who shot the arrows.” A girl answered him, “Who decided to stand in front?” The instructor wanted to end the argument, but Ruhani said, “Let the question remain. We shall write down separately what each person did in the battle.” Three columns appeared on a sheet of paper: role, decision, and consequence. No child was required to disclose a private identity as a condition of taking part.

By the time the war of Kurukshetra approached, Shikhandi’s name had become surrounded by many retellings. Drupada’s house had allied itself with the Pandavas. In the reckoning of the army, Shikhandi had been assigned his share of chariots, horses, and arrows. At an assembly, a warrior whispered, “The hour has come to avenge the wrong done to Amba in her earlier life.” Shikhandi heard him. “You may listen to the story of my former life,” he replied. “But in the present, the food for my soldiers, the evacuation of the wounded, and the accounting of arrows are my decisions. Do not turn me into a figure waiting solely for another person’s death.” The warrior fell silent in embarrassment.

One evening before the battle, Arjuna came to Shikhandi’s camp. They were testing the tension of their bowstrings. Arjuna said, “The grandsire has vowed not to raise a weapon against you. That circumstance is decisive for the army’s plan.” Shikhandi answered, “If I am here only as an object to stay the grandsire’s hand, who will give meaning to my own part in this war?” Arjuna laid his bow aside. “Your chariot will move, and you will wield your weapons.

The responsibility for my arrows will remain mine." Shikhandi added, "And we shall not make the deaths of my chariot-horses or soldiers seem small by calling them a stratagem." They agreed. But the day of battle would put agreements of this kind to the test.

In his own camp, Bhishma spoke to his commanders about Shikhandi. He repeated his decision not to take up arms against Shikhandi, a decision founded upon the old account of his birth. An officer asked, "And if Shikhandi shoots arrows at you?" Bhishma replied, "I cannot change my decision." Here once more could be seen the long life of his vows. His refusal measured Shikhandi's ability in battle and his present existence by the story of an earlier birth alone. The consequences of that view for the conduct of the war would be grave.

At dawn on the tenth day, dust and the sound of conches rose together. Shikhandi checked the forward strap of his chariot himself and told his charioteer to prepare a place where an injured horse could be replaced. He advanced towards Bhishma. The army opened a path as he moved, allowing Arjuna's chariot to remain behind him. Shikhandi drew his bow and his arrows flew; Bhishma did not raise a weapon against him. From behind came Arjuna's arrows, inflicting the decisive wounds of the battle. A chariot axle broke, a standard bent, and Bhishma fell towards the earth—his body held above the ground by the arrows that pierced it.

One soldier made to proclaim at once, "Shikhandi has killed Bhishma!" Another cried, "Write it as Arjuna's victory." Shikhandi halted his horses and said, "Write what you saw. I advanced and loosed my weapons. Bhishma did not raise a weapon against me. Arjuna's arrows brought him down. To absorb one person's history into another person's name is not to tell the truth of war." His voice was very small beside the conches of victory, but his charioteer remembered those words. Shikhandi asked first for news of his wounded soldiers. The fall of the grandsire could not instantly send any child's father home.

Bhishma lay alive upon his bed of arrows. Shikhandi looked upon him from a distance. There was the memory of Amba's long question, but there were also the days of Shikhandi's own life: the blacksmith's furnace, Drupada's fear, the crisis of the marriage, the debt owed to Sthunakarna, the labour of the battlefield. He would not accept that Bhishma's fall could be called complete justice for Amba's life. He told his charioteer, "Let the names of every soldier from my chariot be entered in today's record of the battle. Let no one become merely a number in the account of Bhishma's fall." Shikhandi did not lay down his weapons; the war ahead was not yet over. But the decision of that day had been his own.

As evening descended in Videhapur, Aditi wrote three separate lines on Raghav's receipt: the fact that the materials had been delivered; the

uncertainty about where they had been installed; and the absence of a safety test. Raghav stamped the first line with his firm's seal, but not the second. "I cannot testify that the materials were fitted in that room," he said. Mahesh asked, "Who, then, will inspect the records for the old wing?" Aditi replied, "First the original repair order, then the possibility of moving the patients, and the list of equipment. An order to empty a ward is easy to write on paper; every hour of such a move may be hard for the patients." Closing his box of samples, Raghav said, "I shall provide proof of what I sold, not a false promise that the hospital has been made safe."

At another table, Naira was placing the blurred slip bearing the name "Mithua" into its file. No new direct evidence had emerged concerning Mithun, Lata's son. She sealed the three possible readings of the name, the incomplete date of the fare, and the reported statements separately. On the outer veranda, Ruhani read the revised leaflet for the play. Her fear that her life would be turned into proof of an ancient character had eased somewhat. Shikhandi's ancient tale and the modern lives of these people were not testimony to one another. Yet the difficulty of keeping the name of one's own decision from disappearing beneath another person's signature was different in each place—in the hospital register, in the shelter's keys, and upon a chariot of war.

When Raghav reached home that night, his nephew was sitting with an old warehouse ledger open before him. "Uncle, the date of what I saw is on one page," he said, "but the signature on another page is not mine." Raghav did not ask him to write anything immediately. First he cleaned his spectacles and examined the corner of the page, where the shade of the ink changed. "Tomorrow we shall take the original register with us," he said. "You will speak of what you saw with your own eyes. And before that, we shall settle how to protect you from what you fear." He closed the book. There were still patients in the hospital's old wing; the hours of their lives could not be suspended while blank lines in a register were filled.

Chapter 65 · The Hospital's Old Wing

Water was dripping through a joint in the ceiling of the hospital's old wing. At first the drops were small—so small that the woman who cleaned the room merely set an empty bowl beneath them and went on with her work. Within half an hour the sound of the water striking the bottom of the bowl had changed. Salma, the nurse, moved the bowl aside and put up a yellow warning mark so that no one would slip in the dark. Beyond the window the sun was shining. Yet, seeing the wet ceiling within, nobody spoke of rain. No one yet knew which pipe or ageing joint the water was coming from.

In that same room, Sheetal Devi sat half-raised upon her bed. A tube for her treatment was fitted to her right arm, and her daughter was folding a blanket beside the pillow. "Are they going to close this room?" the daughter asked. Salma replied, "First we must find out how much of the building is unsafe. We are not going to pick up your mother and put her down in an empty courtyard." Sheetal began looking for her slippers. "I can walk," she said. Her daughter pointed to her feet: one was swollen. Wanting to walk by one's own strength and being able to walk safely were not the same thing.

For the third time Aniruddha unfolded the plan of the hospital's old wing. The western staircase was shown as wide upon the drawing, but over the years half its width had been turned into a storeroom for boxes of medicine. "I have twelve beds to account for," he told Salma, "but not beds alone. I need separate lists of who requires continuous equipment, whose treatment cannot be interrupted midway, and who cannot be lifted without two members of staff." An employee asked, "Then shall we send everyone to the new wing today?" Aniruddha said, "A vacant room in the new wing does not become a place where treatment can be given merely by standing empty."

Salma went from room to room drawing up her lists. Two patients needed regular assistance with breathing; an elderly patient had to be watched throughout an ongoing treatment, with the tube kept in place; and the mother of a child was asking to remain beside the bed through the night. Salma wrote no patient's name on the public inspection sheet. She kept the full particulars on a restricted page for the medical team. "We shall ask those who are able to answer before making decisions for them," she said. "When a patient cannot speak for themselves, there must be a way to inform the family or an authorised caregiver. Changing the name of a wing does not, by itself, save a patient."

By the time Aditi arrived with her inspection bag, the bowl beneath the ceiling was half full. She looked first not at the ceiling but at the time written beside the bowl. "The first mark was made after half past eight," Salma told her. "That does not tell us when the leak began." Aditi opened her earlier report. Some months before, she had described the blocked drainage behind

this wing as a “defect requiring limited repair.” Reading those words again beside Tara’s and Hira’s measurements, she found them painfully inadequate. “I shall not cross out my first estimate and make it disappear,” she said. “I shall add the date of the new evidence to it.”

Raghav Singh came to the hospital carrying a cardboard box and the outer cover of his nephew’s warehouse ledger. His nephew was already standing at the door. In his hand were copies of the two pages he had seen the day before, but he was afraid of signing a statement about anything he had not witnessed with his own eyes. Raghav drew him aside. “First understand which documents belong to a public inquiry and which are private,” he said. “Remember the hours you were actually at the warehouse. For the sake of my firm, you need not say you saw something you did not see.” The young man drew a deep breath. The assurance that his account could be heard in full and in safety had yet to be secured.

Today Meena Sah carried no hammer, only three old receipts. She had left her sister in charge of the shop during the meal hour and come from her metalworking workshop. The hospital’s delivery note listed two metal vessels, a sample of shell-lime, and an “unspecified repair piece.” Earlier, the third mark on her repair slip had been mistaken for a third vessel, and an outcry had followed; when the original form was found, that mark proved to be a tax entry against her labour charge. Yet the delivery note still listed four items. “I returned two vessels after repairing their joints with my own hands,” Meena said. “Let no one put my name to a statement about how the third and fourth items were used.”

Aditi placed Meena’s two receipts and the hospital’s receiving stamp upon the same table. On the first document Meena had recorded when she handed the two vessels to the hospital’s carrier; the second bore the warehouse seal; the third carried an officer’s signature beneath the words “work completed,” but the space identifying the room in which that work had been done was blank. “Receiving materials, accepting that they have been used, and certifying that the work has been safely completed are three different stages,” Meena said. Aditi made that observation a new line in her report. Aniruddha, standing near a patient, asked, “If we misread the third document, have we been treating the old wing as safe on the strength of that mistake?” There was no immediate answer.

Gomati opened an old cloth bag stained with the sweat of the labourers’ group. Inside were copies of the dates on which they had carried sacks of lime and the tokens issued for their wages. “We unloaded all those sacks behind this room,” she said. “But we did not test whether they contained lime or some other mixture. Nor did we see whether the contents went into the hospital building or remained in the warehouse.” An employee suggested that, since the sacks had been heavy, there must certainly have been fresh repair

work. Gomati objected: “A labourer’s body knows the weight. My back cannot tell you what mixture was put upon a wall.”

Lalit the carpenter arrived carrying an old wooden plank. Wood of this kind had been used for the hospital’s unloading ramp, and he had once been asked to certify it without a load test. He measured the width of the landing, then showed them a loosened edge of brickwork. “This ramp may have been made for a light trolley carrying linen,” he said. “But taking a heavy hospital bed, its tubes, and two staff members along the same route is another matter. I will not issue a certificate on the strength of what my eyes can see.” He still felt the old hurt of having lost a contract. Even so, he refused to reckon the worth of his signature as though it were merely part of the price of the plank.

Aniruddha went with his team to test the actual exit by the old staircase. When they turned an empty bed, its front wheel caught against the corner of the wall. Salma wrote down how much time the staff lost in freeing it. “The empty bed got stuck,” Aniruddha said. “With a patient, equipment, and an anxious family beside it, this route would be harder still. Do not record this demonstration as though we had moved a patient.” Another door was opened, but in that direction the ground above the laundry-water drain was wet. The water was plain enough to see; where it came from was not.

Behind the old wing, Urmila Rajak was unloading bundles in the washing enclosure. Her register already showed the difference between the time taken to bring linen from the ghat to the hospital and the time at which the supplies room acknowledged receiving it. Today a hospital employee told her that, because of the repairs, the laundry bags could no longer be left beside the old drain. “Then how far round must we carry them?” Urmila asked. “I shall observe the rule for delivering patients’ linen safely, but the extra distance and the labour it requires must be entered in the record.” After examining the kinds of bags, Salma marked a safe temporary place for them. The private identification marks on linen requiring special precautions remained inside sealed bags.

The narrow laundry drain, the water used for washing hands, the drops from the ceiling, and the water standing in the pit outside the old wing all seemed to come from four different directions. Aditi ordered separate measurements and samples for the four possible sources. An employee declared that the old shell-lime wall had absorbed water and that this must explain every problem. Meena explained, “My father told me the old story of making lime from shells. But to establish the properties of this wet powder today, or to call it the cause of a fault in the hospital’s construction, we need a test of the material. People’s memory gives us the name of a method, not verified proof of what it can do.” Aditi signed the application for an independent laboratory examination.

Out on the veranda, Kanchan had brought her mother, Jamuna Devi, to have her medicines checked. Hearing the talk of the old wing, Jamuna said, “The day my life was saved, not everything done in this hospital was worthless. But an account must be given of the wall that is leaking now.” An employee tried to show her the donor’s plaque. Jamuna shook her head. “I was ready to offer thanks yesterday, and I shall be ready tomorrow. Today ask how Sheetal’s bed is to be moved.” Kanchan served her mother some food. The story of a life saved and the investigation of faulty repairs did not cancel one another out.

By noon, after watching an empty bed stand ready for so long, Sheetal’s daughter had become impatient. “Will you go on discussing papers while my mother’s bed remains here?” Aniruddha took her to see a room. The new wing had a bed available, but there was as yet no suitable place for the equipment Sheetal’s treatment required. “Then what does a safe place mean?” the daughter asked. “A place where her treatment will not be broken off,” Aniruddha replied. “I am working out the proper arrangement with the team. Today we shall put our decision concerning your mother’s consent and supervision in writing.” For the first time, the daughter was going to receive a written answer from the hospital to a specific question.

At the municipal meeting, someone proposed simply locking the old wing and displaying a notice: “All patients transferred.” Aditi said, “Writing those words on a notice does not transfer a single patient.” Aniruddha drew three columns on the board: those who could remain for the time being in a part judged safe; those who could be moved as soon as the necessary arrangements and trained staff were ready; and those who must receive priority because they faced an immediate risk. Every name was kept on the restricted medical list; the public sheet contained only numbers and the arrangements required. “This plan is not an apology to be written after an accident,” he added. “It is the division of our responsibilities today.”

Raghav brought out invoices from his warehouse dating back four years. Wooden planks, metal hinges, and sacks of lime had been supplied on different dates. An earlier published summary had gathered them all together as a single instance of “complete repair.” “I sold the materials,” Raghav said. “Without documents, I cannot tell you who reopened an old sack after all these years or where the materials were installed.” Meena compared one date on his papers with her own slip. The date on the four-item delivery note, the date of Raghav’s timber supply, and the day Gomati carried the sacks were not the same. The differences did not prove theft; they weakened the heading that called it all “one job.”

Aditi obtained written authority from the hospital’s records officer before opening the old iron cupboard. In an inner compartment lay a grey file marked “West Wing: Temporary Repairs.” As she turned its pages, a thin slip fell out: an order to repair the unloading ramp, a note reading “retest after the season,” and a signature half rubbed away. The following page contained no

result of any retest. “How long has this paper been here?” Aniruddha asked. The records officer said the file had come from the old warehouse, but the transfer register would have to be examined to discover who had placed it here, and when. Aditi returned the slip to its original position and had a certified copy made.

“Test it after the season.” Lalit read the words slowly. “That sentence does not mean a test was carried out after the season.” Aniruddha examined the part of the old work mentioned on the slip. Sheetal’s bed was not in that area, but the adjoining veranda’s exit ramp lay upon the same route. “This slip gives me a reason to clear the area,” he said, “but a practical route for moving patients must still be made.” Aditi took out a copy of her first report, the one describing a “minor repair defect.” “I shall correct my mistake,” she said, “but until we have the results of fresh tests, I shall not claim to know the entire cause.”

Seeing the word “season” in the note, Tara Binaut opened her measurement register. Of the three markers driven into the ground beside the old drainage channel, one now lay inside the warehouse’s newly extended wall. Hira Sahni’s measurements gave different widths for the channel’s course in the rains and in the dry season. “I shall not reduce the cause of the crack in the wing’s wall to a single line about drainage,” Tara said. “But if the water outside is held back, the time needed for an emergency exit may change. That measurement must be tested separately.” A municipal representative asked, “Will that much be enough?” “For now, we can use only the measurements we have,” Tara replied.

Before evening Salma called Sheetal’s daughter to the doorway. A place in the new wing had been made ready, with the equipment needed for treatment; a trained team would move the patient at the appointed time. The reason for the transfer was explained to Sheetal, and her questions were heard. Instead of tucking her slippers beneath the pillow, she handed them to her daughter. “Where shall I put these?” the daughter asked. “Somewhere I can put them on again,” Sheetal said. The bed was lifted slowly. Salma walked beside it for part of the way, then entrusted the patient to another nurse and wrote down the complete handover. Moving one patient safely did not amount to a declaration that every patient’s difficulties were over.

Meanwhile, at the laundry behind the hospital, Urmila had been delayed. The temporary route was longer, and the employees wanted a separate trolley to ensure that clean bags and those requiring special isolation did not travel together. Urmila explained that the change had obliged her to make two extra journeys. An administrator said, “In an emergency, everyone must cooperate.” Tightening the knot on a bag, Urmila answered, “I am cooperating. But because the reason is urgent, my time has not ceased to be work. If I am not paid, what woman will be willing to come along this route tomorrow?” Salma added the extra hours of carrying to the written order.

Meena did not lay a hand upon the iron grille behind the hospital; without testing it, no one could say how strong the metal was. She noticed an old brass tap in the washing room. The receipt for that tap was not hers. Unnecessary water running in the rains would make the patients' route slippery, so Aniruddha asked an authorised mechanic to shut off the supply. Meena submitted once more her claim for the proper payment due on her two repairs. "I shall give evidence in the inquiry into the materials," she said, "but withholding my wages will not bring the truth to light." Aditi had Meena sign a separate acknowledgement of receipt for the payment dispute.

As Urmila gathered up the empty bags, she remembered an old conversation with Rukhsana at the ghat: one day she would sit there without washing a single garment, and Rukhsana too would rest that day. Now her hands smelt of soap, and her eyes were growing numb with fatigue. "Have you eaten anything?" Salma asked. Urmila laughed. "Can a person live on registers?" An employee brought some rice left from Rukhsana's midday meal. Urmila asked for water from a safe tap to wash her hands, then sat and ate quietly for a little while.

Outside, the patients' families were sitting upon a low platform. One man was saying that the old wing would fall down that very day; another claimed that the money in the relief fund had been swallowed up. Naira did not belittle their fears. On a sheet of paper she wrote down what was firmly established that day: a leak had been observed; an original slip concerning temporary repairs had been found; there was as yet no evidence that the retest had taken place; one patient had undergone a planned transfer; the review of the others was continuing. "This list does not answer fear," she said. "But turning fear into false evidence will not make anyone safer."

Mahesh began reconciling the timings of handcarts in the hospital's old gate register. Urmila's morning cart, the sacks Gomati had carried years before, Meena Sah's vessels, and Raghav's planks appeared as four separate consignments. Naira saw that placing a discrepancy of a few hours on one day upon the same line as proof of repairs carried out years earlier could breed accusations no one had earned. She restored the sequence of the original dates and obscured private names wherever the copies did not require them. The restricted file concerning the search for Mithun lay in her other bag. No fresh evidence had emerged linking it to the hospital's materials records.

Late in the evening Aniruddha and his team again reviewed the condition of the remaining beds. For the elderly patient requiring closer monitoring, the necessary equipment and staff arrangements in the new wing were not yet complete; the demand that he be moved at once was therefore set aside. Temporary safety measures and constant observation were maintained in the part of the old wing where he remained, and an emergency alternative was established. As he signed the order, Aniruddha said, "Our work is not finished because a document says the building has been emptied. No one may discount

the value of the time belonging to a person whose life depends upon this treatment merely for my convenience."

In her revised report, Aditi wrote that the old wing's construction history, the drainage, and the accounts for materials were interrelated questions, but the full chain of causation between them had not yet been established. The original repair order, the place where materials had been used, material samples, the course of water outside, and patient evacuation were entered as separate matters for investigation. She did not erase her earlier description of a "limited defect"; beneath it she added an explicit correction: "Previous assessment incomplete; detailed investigation required." Reading the report, Tara said, "Now the labourers' testimony is not hidden behind the paperwork. It is part of the inquiry." Aditi agreed, but left the space for conclusions blank.

On the road home that night Meena met Lalit. "Did you find the name of the third item?" he asked. "No," Meena answered, "but we found an old slip saying that the work was to be tested again afterwards. To treat a test whose result cannot be found as a successful test would be wrong." Folding the slip relating to the contract he had lost, Lalit said, "So long as a signature retains its meaning, perhaps the wages owed will be paid one day." "I too am still owed money," Meena said. "But Sheetal reached a safe place today. I shall enter that in my account, and tell my sister." They took different roads towards their homes.

That night the bowl in the old wing was emptied once again. The source of the water leaking from the pipe or joint had not yet been identified; the warning mark and the watch beneath it remained in place. In her new room, Sheetal asked her daughter to unfold the blanket brought from home. On the outer veranda, Urmila's linen trolley stood ready for the safe route it would take the following day. Aditi placed the certified copy of the original repair slip in the restricted file; Aniruddha wrote down the conditions for transferring the remaining patients. Turning from the doorway, Naira looked once more at the light within the hospital. Here, duty could not be decided by a single command. Beside every bed, someone was living the next hour of their life.

Chapter 66 · Krishna and Arjuna’s Pause

At half past five in the morning, the yellow warning strip hanging in the veranda of the hospital’s old wing began to flutter in the wind. Urmila’s empty linen trolley stood beneath it. She wanted to move forward, but removing the bamboo pole fixed beside the exit would mean stepping onto the wet floor within. The watchman showed her an order sheet: “Immediate and complete evacuation.” Urmila asked, “What is to be emptied—the patients, the linen, or the responsibility?” The watchman said nothing. The previous night Aniruddha had written that some patients would be moved once a trained team was available; this new sheet named no patients and made no provision for their care.

When Naira arrived, Aditi was arranging copies of the old repair slips to the right of the doorway. A municipal employee wanted a stamp put on the sheet at once, so that the dispute would not grow. “But there is danger,” he said. “There is danger, which is why time is running out,” Naira replied. “A lie will not save us time.” From inside, Aniruddha called out that Sheetal was in a safe room, but the staff and equipment needed to monitor an elderly patient were not yet fully in place. With a single stroke, the watchman’s order sheet erased that medical decision.

Long before this bewilderment, on the morning when the war at Kurukshetra was about to begin, Arjuna had asked for his chariot to be halted between the two armies. This was before Bhishma’s fall; for those who know the memory of his bed of arrows, time here was turning backwards. The conches had sounded, but there was still a pause before the first arrow flew. Krishna gathered the reins and brought the chariot to rest where Arjuna could clearly see the faces on either side.

Arjuna saw the standards first, and then the people beneath them: the bow of his grandsire Bhishma, the face of his teacher Drona, the armour of familiar brothers, the restless eyes of young soldiers who might never before have travelled so far from home. A charioteer was stroking his horses’ muzzles. Arjuna did not know the man’s name, but he knew that when the arrows began to fly, that man too would try to stay alive. The string of his own Gandiva began to feel heavy. “If I raise a weapon against those with whom I learned how to live,” he asked, “where will victory find a place in my life?”

Krishna did not immediately promise him victory. He looked at Arjuna’s hand: the bowstring had slackened, and his skin was wet with sweat. “You need not turn away from what you see,” he said. Arjuna watched the dawn light fall upon the blade of a sword and answered angrily, “Blood will flow in the name of dharma, and afterwards everyone will write the story of his own victory. I want no such kingdom.” Krishna let him hear the compassion

within his own words; then he asked whether not wanting a kingdom and abandoning the work of resisting injustice were the same decision.

Arjuna refused to have the question mistaken for personal fear. “I am not afraid of Bhishma. I love him. To take up arms against my teacher feels like striking at my own education. If I win, how will the people of his household look upon me?” Krishna replied, “The responsibility borne by those you love must also enter your consideration. But if compassion removes you from every decision, into whose hands will you give the future of those you wish to protect?” Arjuna had no easy answer.

A wheel of the chariot had sunk halfway into the earth beneath it. Krishna spoke of the distinction between the self and the body, of impermanence, and of the limits of grief. Arjuna listened, but would not accept that the suffering of a dead body could be brought to an end merely by an intellectual distinction. “If I contemplate the self,” Arjuna asked, “will I hear the wounded man’s cry any less?” “No,” said Krishna. “The purpose of contemplation is not to declare that cry unreal, but to steady the mind amid fear and attachment.” A horse snorted beside the chariot, and their conversation went on beside the breathing of that living body.

Krishna explained the difference between action and attachment to its fruits. “If you imagine yourself entitled only to the outcome you desire,” he said, “you will abandon the work the moment an unwelcome outcome appears.” Arjuna asked, “Then who will answer for the consequences? Shall I loose my arrow and say its result is not mine?” Krishna’s eyes hardened. “To give up attachment to the fruit of action does not mean erasing the account of its consequences. If you are the author of your decision, no one absolves you of the judgment it requires or the harm it may do.” Arjuna repeated the distinction to himself, though certainty remained far away.

At moments it seemed impossible to Arjuna that such a long deliberation could take place between two armies. From the distant Kaurava ranks came the clatter of shields. “Why should so many people wait for my decision?” he asked. “What if there were still a way to avert the war?” Krishna recalled the failed embassy, the proposal to divide authority, and the history of refusals. But he did not say that every war becomes just merely because negotiations have failed. Arjuna returned to his question: a man might invoke the name of difficult duty to justify a private vengeance. Krishna did not ignore the possibility.

“I see my own attachment in the body of my enemy,” Arjuna said, “and justice in the bodies of my own side. What vision can correct that division?” Krishna urged him to examine his understanding, exercise restraint, and test his self-interest. “Before a decision is made, look at whom you are protecting, whom you are harming, and whether you are calling your anger a principle.” “Is all that possible in the midst of war?” Arjuna asked. “Perfect innocence

does not come easily to an imperfect human being," Krishna replied. "Even so, to abandon reflection is not a duty."

That morning Arjuna also saw Shikhandi, a warrior fighting beside him whose life had been shaped by decisions made in royal assemblies. Shikhandi's part in the struggle against Bhishma would later prove decisive, but already Arjuna wondered who had listened to Shikhandi's own wishes. The thought did not ease his hesitation; it deepened it. Krishna did not claim to speak on Shikhandi's behalf.

Krishna raised the question of svadharma, one's own duty. Arjuna went on, "If the duty of a kshatriya meant nothing but fighting, why would I have so much to consider? If a single rule is imposed upon every circumstance, what purpose does human judgment serve?" Krishna replied, "To understand one's nature and responsibilities is not simply to put on a role as one puts on a garment. One must also have the power to examine the duties that role lays upon us." This did not give Arjuna complete assurance about his decision to fight. But for the first time he understood that the question of action could not be reduced to whether a hand was raised or lowered.

Bhishma's standard would not hold still in the wind. Arjuna touched the string of his bow with his fingers. "If I rise," he said, "I shall rise carrying not only my attachment, but also the possibility that my sense of justice is mistaken." Krishna did not demand a vow that he would never question again. He said only that inaction, too, leaves consequences in the world. Arjuna did not wish to remain a bowman seated behind the chariot. Yet for the first time the act of lifting his bow seemed to him not merely an emblem of courage, but a responsibility bound to the lives of others.

In later ages, this conversation was called a teaching on duty and action without attachment to its fruits. But on the morning of battle Arjuna first saw human faces and asked questions; Krishna did not forbid him to ask them. To treat that ancient crisis as a straightforward licence for violence in the present would be to erase the circumstances of the story.

Near the hospital entrance in Videhapur, a young man began showing Naira a line from that same war on his phone. "See? One has to be hard when doing one's duty," he said. He meant it as support for the proposal to force the patients outside. Naira did not snatch the phone from his hand. "The right to make a hard decision and permission to use force are not the same thing," she said. "We need to know which patients face what degree of danger, what safe alternatives exist, and within whose authority the decision falls. A fragment of a verse cannot become a hospital directive."

Aniruddha came outside. "I am not minimising the risk of keeping certain patients in that section," he said. "But disconnecting equipment and pushing beds away is no treatment either." The municipal employee held up his paper and said that if anyone obstructed the immediate evacuation, those on duty

might have to use force. Salma answered, “An emergency evacuation requires a trained team, not the shoving of people who disagree.” The employee’s face fell. He, too, was afraid that if an accident occurred, his name would remain on the order.

A little way from the crowd stood a young woman in white, holding a closed box. The box bore the number of patient-dressing supplies inside and the date on which they were to be deposited. Her name was Devi Gond. She had come to the hospital early that morning for nursing training. Her mother needed care at home, and her family objected to her going out every day. Today she had been assigned to count clean materials under a trainer’s supervision. But when the watchman could not find her name in the duty register, he barred her from entering.

Devi showed him the seal of her training centre in the corner of the register. “This is my first day,” she said. “I am not asking for the right to touch a patient and treat them on my own. I want to learn, and write down whatever work the supervisor instructs me to do.” Salma counted the contents of the box and made out a receipt for the materials. When the trainer arrived late, Devi refused the request that the waiting time be entered as “voluntary service.” “Record the training hours separately,” she said, “and if the hospital assigns me additional carrying work, record that labour separately.” Her voice was quiet, but the words were clear.

Naira did not question Devi about her home, but Salma, looking through the training papers, asked, “Will staying here until evening cause you difficulty?” Devi paused. “It will be time to give my mother her medicine. My brother asks why I go on studying instead of staying to do the housework. I want him to sit with Mother for one part of the day so that I can finish my training.” “Are you making this decision yourself?” Salma asked. “Yes,” Devi said. “But the argument at home will not be settled on this veranda today.” She gathered her papers and went to her assigned place.

Inside, in the room on the right, an elderly patient had raised himself halfway from his bed. Hearing the pushing and shouting outside, he kept asking whether he was going to be expelled from the hospital. Aniruddha explained that his treatment would not be ended without a safe alternative, until a trained team and a place equipped for the necessary care were ready. Devi was counting supplies under Salma’s supervision. A member of the old man’s family asked her, “Are you a doctor?” Devi shook her head. “I am in training. Please ask Salma Didi and the doctor about treatment.” That small clarification spared the family from making a decision on the strength of a false assurance.

Outside, Tara arrived with her drainage-measurement notebook. On one page she had recorded two different levels at which rainwater collected behind the hospital. The municipal employee wanted her to certify at once that the

old wing had become unsafe because of seepage from outside. Tara said, “I measured the depth of the water outside. I have neither the evidence nor the authority to certify the strength of the wall inside or a defect in the pipes. If my measurement is insufficient, measure again. I will not put on paper what I have not measured.” Aditi added the statement as a separate technical observation.

At one end of the veranda someone picked up a stone; someone else was talking about burning the order sheet. Naira went towards the young man. “Patients have to be moved along this passage. If you throw that stone, who will be hurt first?” His hand slackened. “Then what are we supposed to do? These people will not listen.” “We will demand the original order, have the safe alternatives written down, and enter your objection on the record. But no violence.” The young man laid the stone on the floor.

For the meeting, they chose an empty table in the hospital’s old medicine store. Naira set three sheets apart: the record of visible risks, the medical list for transferring patients, and the authority of the official who had issued the order. “I will not certify all three as true with one stamp,” she said. Aditi produced the temporary repair slip, which called for another inspection after the rains, but no proof could be found that the inspection had been completed. Aniruddha wrote down the needs of the remaining patients. For the first time, the municipal employee admitted that the language of his “complete evacuation” order did not match the arrangements actually available.

The order was rewritten: entry to the section under immediate threat would be restricted; patients would be moved in stages while essential medical care was maintained; trained supervision would be provided; families would be informed of the reasons; and a named officer would receive objections. The employee was reluctant to remove the word “forcibly,” but Aniruddha insisted that emergency procedures for saving lives and a general order to suppress opposition could not be covered by the same term. At last the paragraph was struck out, and it was agreed that a separate authorisation for safety enforcement would be requested. The hospital had not become safe overnight. At least it had escaped the false completeness of an order on paper.

As Devi’s work receipt was prepared, Salma repeated the count in front of her: twelve packets of clean dressings, two sealed boxes, and three hours of supervised practice. “I can certify that much training,” Salma said, “but payment approval for the extra carrying work must be obtained separately.” Devi kept a copy of the receipt. It showed the time the materials had been received separately from the time she signed. “If tomorrow someone says I distributed medicine in my own name,” Devi said, “this paper will show what I did and what I did not do.” Naira privately remembered the clarity of Devi’s register as knowledge earned through sweat.

After midday, Devi's brother arrived at the hospital. "Mother is alone," he said. "You are doing great service here. Who is going to serve the family at home?" Devi led him towards the shade of the veranda. "I have not abandoned home," she replied. "But if I give up training, who will pay for Mother's medicines next year? She needs you with her for two hours today. Tomorrow I will do my share for two hours." Her brother said he would discuss that arrangement again at home. It did not end their disagreement, but Devi did not sign a paper withdrawing from nursing training.

At about that time Lata came seeking news of the closed file concerning the search for Mithun. Three separate documents lay near the corner of the doorway: an old boat-name register in which a name could be read as "Mithua," a fare slip with an incomplete date, and an elderly person's account of something heard. The municipal employee asked whether they should combine the three and begin looking for a vehicle that had come near the hospital. "The reading of a name is one matter, the date of a fare another, and a voice someone heard a third," Naira said. "These three do not yet establish that the same child was present." "Then where will the search go?" Lata asked. Naira showed her a written application requesting the original, separate register from the boat landing, based on the times that could be established with certainty.

Lata wanted the news to travel far, but did not want an innocent family surrounded by false accusations. "If Mithun can hear me," she said, "let him understand: I am looking for him, not beating someone else in order to find him." Naira asked whether she had permission to make those words public. "Give the details necessary for the search," Lata said, "not my private words." Naira closed the papers. To print the voice of suffering as a public speech could itself be an act of violence.

As evening fell, Sheetal asked her daughter in the hospital room, "Did they find the bedding I left on the old bed?" Her daughter said that Urmila had cleaned it and put it away in a separate bundle. Sheetal spread out her blanket and looked at the tree beyond the new room. She could not entirely follow the news of the structural inspection, but her name written beside the door, the time of her treatment, and her daughter's chance to ask questions were real forms of safety. Aniruddha turned from this new room towards the old wing, where decisions about the remaining patients were still awaiting resolution.

Tara and Aditi checked their final measurements in the hospital's rear veranda. Aditi noticed that the place of a half-erased signature on the original repair slip differed from the place of the signature on the rewritten order. The discrepancy required investigation, but matching names did not establish that one person had written both signatures. Mahesh wrote down the procedure for requesting certified copies of the two documents. Naira said, "The paper I have actually seen is the first limit of what I can claim. Matching times may yield

an inference; similar letters may suggest a possible identity. If anyone calls all three the same kind of evidence, I shall record my dissent.”

On her way home that night, Devi carefully tucked her training slip into her cloth bag. Her mother was sitting on the bed, waiting for her. Before her brother said anything, he put a pot of water on the stove. Devi did not tell her mother the entire story of the day’s work. “I had it written down which tasks I learned,” she said. Her mother asked, “Is your name there too?” “It is,” Devi answered, “and beside the work I do not yet know how to do, there is an empty space as well.” Her mother smiled. But the division of care at home for the following day had still to be decided.

From the direction of the distant landing came two blows of iron, separated by an interval. Mahesh suggested that perhaps the lock on the new gate was being closed. Naira would not record it as the sound of the gate without seeing its source. “Tomorrow we shall ask the people there,” she said. “What was decided today?” Mahesh asked. Naira showed him a copy of the new order. “The order to remove people by force has been changed. Safe transfers are continuing. Those are two different things.” The sound came again. Tomorrow they would ask who had heard what, who had seen what, and who had merely thought they knew.

Chapter 67 · Seeing from Afar

At the tea stall in the railway square, the first kettle of the morning was on the boil, but Fakira had yet to lift his glass. He unwound the wet cloth from his walking stick and wrung it out. It smelled of earth; the thin iron ring at the end of the stick had worked loose. The shopkeeper's son offered to fetch a hammer. Fakira shook his head. "We have no need of that sound today. People heard two blows in the night and have already made three stories out of them." The boy asked, "But you were over that way, weren't you?" Fakira replied, "Being in that direction and witnessing an event are not the same thing."

The previous day, on her way back from the hospital, Naira had heard two blows of iron from the distant landing, with an interval between them. Mahesh had guessed that the lock on the new gate was being shut. Without seeing the source, Naira had refused to enter his guess in the record. Today, as she set out to meet Aditi with a copy of the hospital's amended order, the tea seller called to her: "They're saying the old man who heard it also saw it." Fakira raised his head. "I may be old, but my statement hasn't grown old. Has someone changed it?"

In Fakira's shoulder bag lay a folded slip, with the half-circle of a blue stamp visible along one edge. That night he had been returning to the railway square by the lane behind the hospital. An employee had told him to have his account of the noise entered in the security register. Fakira had given the time, said what he had heard, and made it plain that he did not know the names of the people standing nearby. Once he had received the slip, he had gone to catch another train. Today someone read a public notice aloud to him: "According to a witness, two persons were seen breaking the iron gate." Those were not his words.

Naira asked permission before taking the slip in her hand. "Write down its number," Fakira said, "but don't put it in your own pocket. Once my original travel-pass papers were left at a window, and it took an hour for them to come back." Naira copied the number, the stamp and the time of receipt into her notebook. The slip said only "information concerning a noise." When the sentence published on the noticeboard was read aloud, Fakira repeated twice, "Two people? Seen? I said no such thing." Naira recorded the date and time of his denial separately.

"Where were you that night?" Naira asked. Fakira traced his route from the railway square to the old wing. "At the third turning in the lane there's a broken brick. My stick caught there, and I had to steady my feet. Then the first metallic clang came from far away. After a little interval, the second. The wind was coming from the hospital, though sound can travel against the wind as well. I saw no one's face, heard no vehicle's wheels, and do not know what

iron object it was." In her notebook, Naira had placed a question mark beside the word "far": the actual distance remained to be measured.

"What did you touch?" Naira asked. "The lane wall, my own stick, and that loose brick at the turning. Not the gate," Fakira said. "When the iron tip of my stick struck a stone in the lane, I felt the vibration through my hand as well as hearing the sound. The two distant clangs carried no such vibration of touch. How, then, could I make a statement about the condition of the gate from what my hand experienced?" Naira divided a page into three spaces: what the ear had heard, what the palm had felt, and what the mind had inferred. The difference that would have disappeared if everything were forced into one line now stood in the open.

Fakira had to catch the midday train before noon. He asked for the time and said he must not be kept waiting from morning until evening merely to give evidence. "I earn my wages delivering passengers' bundles. My life record says 'dead', and my travel pass is still blocked. That false entry has already cost me a great deal of work. Must the people who want my testimony take the hours in which I earn my living as well?" Instead of arranging an immediate meeting, Naira agreed to a time in the afternoon. Fakira himself said the error in the papers had to be corrected; but the price of becoming a witness must not be his daily meal.

Aditi, Mahesh and an assistant to the security officer came to inspect the lane behind the hospital. When Naira arrived, she said, "The officer's name, duties and the time of the inspection must be on paper. Before anything else, Fakira will state what he needs in order to get there." Fakira asked, "Where the rubble has been piled, is there a safe way through for my stick?" The assistant said there was not: loose stones lay along the edge. Tara showed him the next safe stretch of path, describing its distance and turns without pulling him by the arm. Fakira went forward at his own pace. In that moment Naira understood that safe access for a witness was not a favour bestowed by an investigation; it was a condition necessary for the investigation itself.

At the first turn in the lane was a narrow drain running down from the old dispensary behind the hospital. Rainwater had collected there among rotting leaves. Pointing to a crack beside the wall, Aditi said, "There's an old photograph of this crack, but its present depth still has to be measured. The fact that an iron sound was heard in the lane does not establish that the crack appeared at that moment." The assistant said, "Wasn't the damage done on the very night of the explosion?" Aditi replied, "Who established that there was an explosion? And who established the earliest date of the crack?" The two questions remained there, beside the standing water.

Fakira stopped by the broken brick. "This was where I stood." Tara measured the distance from it with her feet and made a note, but Fakira would not sign a certified figure for an estimated distance. "Your measuring

tape gives you a distance; my memory gives me the way through a dark lane," he said. "Good if the two agree. If they don't, don't alter the way I walked to make it fit the measurement." Mahesh underlined the word "approximately" in his own notes.

The security assistant struck an iron rail twice with a stick and asked, "Did it sound like that?" Fakira went still. This sound had come from close beside him; the clangs in the night had held distance, and an emptiness behind them. "I can't say. You struck it twice deliberately just now, so I heard it twice. We have no evidence yet of what was struck that night, whether someone struck it on purpose, or whether a loose cover fell." Aditi stopped the assistant. "If we carry out an experiment, we shall record the kind of object, the distance, the weather and the recording itself. Making an unplanned noise in front of a witness and inducing him to say 'that's the one' is not an investigation."

Near the hospital's rear window, an old iron plate over a drainage outlet shifted in its place. When the water rose, it was held down with a wooden support. Raghav Singh's materials invoice mentioned two such plates, while Meena Sah's repair slip separately listed two metal vessels. The assistant promptly joined these facts together. "Then was the sound made by the plate?" Mahesh checked him. "An invoice saying 'plate' does not mean that the plate in this lane came from that consignment. Whether the sound heard came from it is a third question." Fakira gave a small smile of agreement.

Near the watchman's house, a woman was filling a brass water pot. Naira stopped to speak to her first. The woman said that she too had heard the iron blows at night, but water had been dripping in her courtyard like a little waterfall, and she could not be precise about the interval between the first sound and the second. "I was putting the child to sleep on the bed," she said. "I saw no one running." The assistant stepped forward to write down her name. She stopped him. "If you ask where I work, I'll tell you. But don't read my home address out before a crowd." Naira offered her a safer means of contact for the testimony.

Meanwhile, a message arrived on a phone at the railway square: "Fakira saw the names of those who attacked the hospital." Sarita switched the phone off as soon as she had read it. When Fakira returned from his afternoon work and sat outside her house, she asked, "Did you see them?" "No," Fakira said. "But people keep placing the faces they need over my eyes." Sarita gave him a bowl of lentils. "Eat. After that, say again what you said before. A bowl of dal is not a bribe to change anyone's evidence." Fakira laughed. "If it hasn't enough salt, I'll certainly change my statement."

At the evening meeting, a municipal assistant brought a draft. Its first sentence read, "Suspicious persons were observed by the witness." Fakira stopped him in the act of reading. "Strike out the first line. There's a lie

written beside my name.” The assistant said, “The form has a box for ‘seen’; there is no separate box for ‘heard’.” Fakira replied, “Then add a box. Or leave this one empty. A shortage of space on the page is not a shortage in my testimony.” Two people at the meeting grew restless; a swift conclusion seemed necessary to them. Naira did not photograph the draft. It mattered more that the procedure for correcting the original sheet should be written down.

An employee quietly told Fakira that correction of the old death entry on his travel pass depended on an officer’s approval, and that making so much trouble would not be good for him. Fakira was silent for a long while. Then he asked, “Do you have the authority to decide about my pass?” The employee said, “I am only here to convey information.” “Then don’t change the information in exchange for my testimony. The travel pass is being heard in a separate proceeding,” Fakira answered. He spoke softly, but for the first time the employee’s hand paused in the middle of writing. Naira recorded the words of the implied threat as neutrally as she could; she decided not to assign a definite motive to anyone without further evidence.

Mahesh requested a copy of the earlier oral statement. On the original register page, only three words of Fakira’s account could be seen: “night, two sounds.” After those words, someone had added “two men, gate.” The handwriting appeared different, but a difference in handwriting could not by itself identify who was responsible for an alteration. Naira asked, “When was this line added, and under whose authority? Give us a photograph of the original page, the register sequence and the work log.” The officer said a written reply would be provided the next day. Fakira insisted that the whole statement be read aloud to him before he was asked to sign it.

For the new statement he had them agree on four headings. First, “Heard”: the time and place of the two distant clangs that night. Second, “Touched”: the loose brick in the lane, the wall and the sensation at the tip of his stick. Third, “Heard later from others”: the rumour of a vehicle speeding away and the published notice. Fourth, “Inferred”: possible sources of the iron sound, without calling any of them evidence. Naira asked, “Have you said all four of these fully in your own words? Shall I read them back?” Fakira replied, “Read as much as you like; each time we’ll stop and check. Don’t turn me into a witness in a hurry.”

As the statement was being written, Aniruddha was wheeling a patient on a stretcher through the hospital veranda. The safety barrier beside the old wing was still tied in place; under the new order, transfer to safer rooms was continuing. When the vehicle’s iron wheels climbed onto the track laid across the floor, there were two short sounds. Fakira started, then smiled a moment later. “Here I have the source of two sounds right in front of me,” he said. Aniruddha replied, “And at another time. Don’t use the sound of hospital

equipment to decide what happened at night." Fakira nodded. The hospital was going about its work; not every clang was a line in the record of a crime.

That evening Lata came to the hospital with a fresh application in the search for her missing child. She was distressed to hear that her son's name had been drawn into the rumour about the vehicle. Fakira told her himself, "I did not see a vehicle. I did not hear a child's voice. Don't run anywhere on the strength of what someone has written in my name." Lata looked at his face for a long time. "I only need one right road," she said. "How will I find my child by running down the wrong one?" Naira separated once more the indistinct "Mithua" in the boat-name register, the incomplete fare receipt, and the name the elderly witness had heard. Fakira's sounds that night established the identity of no one in any of those three records.

But Lata asked: if someone had heard a sound that might help in the search for her son, should all such information now be withheld? "No," Naira answered. "The information must carry its time, its source and its uncertainty. Refusing a false certainty is not the same as stopping a search." Fakira drew two scraps of paper from his bag, both given to him by the tea seller. One bore yesterday's train time, the other today's. "The time changed, but he didn't stop selling tea," Fakira said. "In the search for your son, too, take the parts that are solid and ask the next question. Don't make someone guilty out of my guess." The trembling in Lata's hands eased a little.

The security officer wanted Aditi to write a provisional conclusion: the old wing's window had been damaged at the time of the iron blows. Aditi said, "I have no definite measurement from that time. My earlier inspection recorded a small crack, and a further test was ordered after the rains; I have no proof that it was completed." She placed three documents separately: the old repair slip, a photograph of the present crack, and the new testimony about what was heard. "At the next inspection, the ground beneath the warehouse and the drainage levels must be measured again," she said. "But a sound heard tonight cannot change the date of that old crack."

Leaving the meeting, Tara went to the water mark on the outer wall of the hospital. Looking at her measuring notebook, she realised that the line she had earlier taken for the highest rainwater level might have been the edge of a limewash applied several days before. "I'll check it again," she said. "What looks plain to the eye may have a history of how it came to be there." Fakira listened. "The same with my ears. The sound in the distance was clear; its cause was not nearly so clear." Both paused over the comparison. Naira recorded that the two matters required separate inquiries.

The next day, an amendment sheet arrived with a copy of the register. The earlier copy had not been removed; beside it had been added: "The previously published account does not match the witness's statement; the portion concerning visual testimony is withdrawn." The claim that Fakira had "seen

two people" was cancelled. He asked, "If the original page was wrong, why not tear it up?" Mahesh replied, "No. Both the original and the correction must remain, so the history of the error can be seen." Fakira laughed for a moment. "People are eager enough to erase my name. When I ask them to erase a mistake on paper, I have to stop them doing it."

On accepting the copy of the correction, Fakira had two further conditions written down. First, the public notice must not print the full details of his private movements; only the relevant time and a general description of the lane were to appear. Second, if he was needed to speak again, he must not be ordered to miss the morning train; the time should be settled beforehand with his consent. The assistant said, "Travel arrangements will be covered as an expense of the inquiry." Fakira asked, "Is that in writing?" The assistant prepared a provisional allowance slip, but payment had not yet been approved. Fakira kept the acknowledgement copy. It remained plain that he had not yet received the money.

On the far bank of the landing, two labourers loading goods asked Fakira what religious order of fakir he belonged to. He was accustomed to the question. "I am Fakira," he replied. "One clerk writes 'Sai Fakir', another 'Diwan Madar' in the register. Their words are not the whole of who I am. Do you need someone to carry your bundle, or someone to tell you a story?" The labourers laughed and asked the charge for carrying the load. Fakira first found out the rises and dips of the route, and then named his price. Half the wage in advance, half when the work was done: both agreed to those ordinary terms.

While the goods were being unloaded, a brass bowl slipped from one labourer's hand and struck the stones twice. Fakira turned his head at the sound. "After the first blow there's a ringing as it spins along the ground," he said. The labourer picked up the bowl and showed him that one side had been dented. "You knew it was that just by hearing?" he asked. "No," Fakira replied. "The spinning sound gave me an idea. You told me what the object was. Tomorrow, I'll say that a labourer told me it was a bowl. What I heard and what I was told each have their own place." The labourer's little boy was standing nearby. He tapped the empty bowl with a finger and burst out laughing.

In the evening, a little mango tree behind Fakira's house cast a patch of shade. A neighbour's daughter sat there every day, repeating her lessons. Today she asked, "When will your pass be opened?" "The office that blocked it will open it," Fakira said. "I haven't abandoned the application." The girl asked again, "When somebody's mistake is corrected, do all their troubles come to an end?" Fakira showed her the loose tip of his stick. "I'll tighten this myself; the office will deal with the pass; tomorrow's journey will have to be seen to tomorrow. Life goes on after one problem has been put right. It does not come to an end."

That evening Sarita was washing rice in an old vessel. Naira told her that Fakira's corrected statement had been accepted, but the entry declaring him dead had still not been amended. Sarita asked, "Two papers for the same man: on one his voice is written truthfully now; on the other he is still dead? What sort of accounting is that?" Naira replied, "The errors came from two different sources. Correcting one does not correct the other by itself." Sarita poured away the water. "Then the other door must be opened too. But don't forget that today Fakira earned his own meal."

That night Naira put three copies into separate envelopes: the original statement, the corrected sheet, and Aditi's unfinished inspection report. All the papers lay on the same table, but none could serve as proof of the others. Aditi asked over the phone, "I need to check the date on the copy of the old report I've been given. Does your amended testimony record the hour of the first blow?" Naira said, "It records a time recalled from memory, not read from a clock. I'll send it under that description." Aditi replied that the next day she would examine the original warning notice and the old map of the warehouse land together.

That night, walking home from the railway square, Fakira again heard a distant sound from the direction of the hospital. This time it was not one clang but many small ones—perhaps repair work, perhaps vessels in some vehicle. He stopped, rested the tip of his stick on the stone, and listened for a little while. Then he went on his way. He wanted to know where the sounds had come from, but standing watch all night over his guesses was not his work. If need be, he would ask tomorrow. In his bag, separately and safely stowed, lay the coins he had earned that day, the copy of his corrected statement, and the application for his travel rights, still only half restored.

Chapter 68 · A Copy of the Warning

As Aditi undid the binding of an old file on her desk, a small knot in the red thread snapped. She did not immediately lay a hand on the papers. First she placed the broken thread on a clean white sheet and counted the pages inside the file. At the top lay a copy bearing the seal of the municipal office, in the middle were pages in her own handwriting, and at the end was a copy whose marginal words had been struck through and written again. Outside the window, two labourers were examining where to set a ladder against the roof of the hospital's old wing, without yet climbing onto it. Aditi looked at the clock. Yesterday she had received Fakira's corrected testimony; today she needed to establish what the first written warning had said, and how much work had actually followed it.

When Naira arrived, Aditi spread three sheets before her. "This is the initial report bearing my signature," she said. "This second sheet is the office's abbreviated summary. The source of the third has not yet been established." Naira read the line on the first page: "Waterlogging beside the rear wall and a fine crack along the edge of the foundation; mandatory reinspection after the rains." In the abbreviated summary, the last five words were missing. In their place stood "Recommendation for routine repairs." Aditi spoke softly. "The difference occupies very few letters. But it is enough to change the order in which work is done."

"When was the first copy written?" Naira asked. Aditi showed her the date on the paper. The inspection had taken place just before the weather turned, when work had begun to cover the outer drain of the old wing. On the summary, the office's date of receipt belonged to the following month. Two digits were missing from the receipt sequence between the two dates. "I am not saying yet that someone removed them deliberately," Aditi made clear. "First I have to know who prepared the summary, which original was placed before that person, and in which register the instruction to reinspect was entered."

After a little silence Aditi read aloud the wording of her first inspection once more. She had called the crack "small" because there had been a thin line in the upper plaster and the foundation beneath had not been exposed. "The word 'small' was not the result of a measurement," she said. "I did not have the full equipment that day. That was why I called for a second inspection. My fault, too, is that afterwards I did not insist firmly enough on evidence that the office had completed it." Naira did not interrupt her. Acknowledging the limits of one's own earlier decision was not the same thing as immediately pronouncing someone else guilty.

When Mahesh came in, Aditi asked him to supply a photocopy of the original document. Mahesh said, "Is this warning the same thing as the

hospital's repair slip?" Aditi shook her head. "The repair slip concerns work on a particular item and gives instructions for testing it again. My inspection called for examination of the outer edge of the foundation and the weight of water pressing against it. They may be related, but they are not one and the same document." Mahesh entered that distinction in his register. The iron sounds Fakira had heard at night could not be used to alter the date of this file.

Aniruddha telephoned. Two patients were scheduled for examination in the old wing that day. One had already been transferred to safety, but the alternative arrangement for the other patient's treatment machine was not yet complete. "If you carry out the inspection, don't block a passage we're still using," he told her. Aditi replied, "I'll first measure the ground outside. If we need to go in, we shall separately agree on the treatment team's consent and the procedures for keeping the patient safe." After she put down the telephone, she said to Naira, "It is easy to put a warning about danger on a blank sheet of paper. It is harder to account for the cost of keeping a hospital running."

On the hospital's old veranda, Jamuna Devi was opening her medicine box. When Aniruddha spoke of moving her to a new room, she first looked towards the window. "I can see the morning kachnar blossoms from here. Does the other room have a window?" Aniruddha said it did, but there was a high threshold at the rear door; a safe ramp would have to be fitted before she moved. Closing the lid of her box, Jamuna said, "I shall put my medicines and a safe way to walk before the tree. But don't lift my bed without asking me." Salma recorded the time of her treatment on a fresh sheet and arranged to inform her family. The hours required to obtain that consent did not automatically find a place in an external measurement report.

Tara had reached the warehouse's outer gate before the others. She carried a measuring notebook and two stout wooden pegs wrapped in cloth. On the strip of Purnadhar, last night's water had collected in one place, while beside it an old white border of lime shone in the sun. Before driving in a peg, Tara asked the employee's permission. "Not inside the enclosure," he said. "Even on the public strip outside, the exact boundary of the land is still disputed." "Then we'll set down temporary markers, not drive them in," Tara answered. "The need to measure does not change anyone's ownership."

Ratan Vanpar arrived just then with his old jute bag. The paper he had earlier shown, a copy in his father's hand, now lay straight between two plain protective sheets. The person accompanying Ratan was not his grandson but a young woman from the neighbouring house, who read documents aloud for him and ran a tailoring shop during the day. "She has come to read to me, not to decide in my place," Ratan said. Naira also asked the young woman for her consent. She said she needed to return before the afternoon's tailoring orders were due.

Ratan opened the paper and rested a finger on a worn, crooked line. “My father used to call this the old course of the Jibach. That was the name in our household. When I was a boy, shallow water would stand along this side for two or three days after the rains. But that line, as I remember it, cannot tell you the entire present course of the river.” Tara asked, “Where did you yourself once cross on foot?” Ratan pointed towards a raised embankment to the west. “I used to go there holding my father’s hand. I’ll tell you only as much of the distance as I can remember.”

The warehouse accountant came out from the inner counter carrying a key. Sweat stood on his forehead. “If you use this paper to declare the warehouse land part of the river,” he said, “where will our labourers keep the sacks? Who will pay the rent?” Ratan looked at him for a moment. “I haven’t come to break down your warehouse. I want to know whether this was my grandmother’s old footpath, and when and how far the water used to rise. Where people earn their living, count their work too. But don’t erase a watercourse merely because money is made there.”

Tara put three separate questions before everyone. First: where had the old drainage channel run? Second: what were the ground levels and the flow of water today? Third: what did the valid land-rights records now say? “The first answer will begin with memory and old maps, the second with measurements taken by instruments, the third with the revenue register,” she said. “No one answer can stand in for another.” The accountant asked who would pay for the inspection. Naira showed him the limits of the municipality’s written advance approval. There was still no authority to begin additional work.

Ratan took a little bundle of cloth out of his bag. Inside was his father’s old measuring cord, its knots set at unequal intervals. “I played with this cord as a child,” he said, laughing. “It frightens me to think that people may have divided fields with it.” Tara laid a modern measuring tape between two of the knots to compare the distance, but in her notebook she described the cord as “an indication of historical local measures, not a standardised measurement.” The young woman asked, “If your father’s things are made public, will his name be attached to them?” Ratan replied, “His name should be there. But copies may be used only with my consent.”

Naira understood why that sentence mattered. She asked Ratan whether the document could be photographed for the public inquiry. “Photograph the part that shows the measurements,” he said. “Don’t put the family names written beside those four fields on display at the crossroads. Some of their descendants now live elsewhere. Don’t settle their rights without asking them.” Naira wrote these limits on the consent sheet. The original would remain with Ratan; private names would be obscured in the authenticated photograph; a complete copy would be kept in the restricted inspection file. The young woman asked to be paid for the time she had spent reading. Ratan

smiled. “This isn’t a favour to my family. It is an hour taken away from her sewing.”

The first line of measurement began not at the warehouse wall but at a fixed stone on the public path. Tara explained that the wall’s foundation might itself have shifted; it could not therefore be treated as the sole stable reference point. Following a method Hira had described earlier, they distinguished the bed beneath the water from the mud above it. One bamboo pole sank into soft soil; another met a hard layer. Recording the figures, Aditi said, “A depth measured to the mud and a depth measured to the hard layer are not two readings of the same thing.”

Tara proposed weighing and keeping a small soil sample. Aditi stopped her. “The laboratory number and collection procedure haven’t yet been approved. If we fill a container without entering it in the register, tomorrow it will be difficult to say at what depth the sample was taken.” Tara agreed, then marked three locations in her notebook: the exposed edge, the filled strip, and a position at a safe distance from the warehouse wall. The accountant insisted that a warehouse representative be present. Ratan wanted someone who knew the old local paths to be there as well. Both were allowed, although the technical collection of samples would be left to a trained team. That small decision lowered the voices of the disputants. For the first time, all sides could see that the method of investigation had to be written down beforehand.

As Ratan moved towards the western embankment, his dhoti caught on thorns growing beside the old footpath. The young woman bent to free it. The accountant immediately said that nobody had authorised entry into the enclosure. Ratan stopped of his own accord. “This path seems old and familiar to me, but there is wire here now. I won’t insist on going in merely because I remember it from long ago.” Tara showed him another route around the outside. Travel expenses and safe access were conditions for Ratan’s testimony, not a trial he had to endure to give it.

Then a warehouse labourer said that the water behind the building had never risen as high as his chest. “I’ve been unloading sacks here for ten years. I’ve never seen a river.” Ratan answered quietly, “What you saw in those ten years may be entirely true. My childhood is older than that. But where the water I knew as a child goes today—that must be measured.” Aditi recorded both statements, noting the period each covered. Not having seen a river was not accepted as proof of its complete absence; nor could an old memory properly be treated as a measurement of present flood depth.

Tara was holding down a thin map against the midday wind when an old debt letter concerning Suraj Gangota’s eroded field arrived from the office. The document contained an archival reference to a place called “Dhemura.” The area of the field and the outstanding loan had been entered in two different inks. Naira spoke at once. “We shall not connect this name to the

old line of the Jibach and invent a confluence. Suraj's letter is evidence about cultivation and debt. The geographical question has its own procedure." Tara kept a separate copy of the letter.

Suraj himself had not yet arrived. His son had left the letter and said his father would come to the loan hearing the next day. "If our field has been destroyed," the son asked, "why hasn't the debt been destroyed with it?" Naira said that no answer could be given without examining the loan rules, the record of the loss and the family's claim. Beside the document they wrote: "Original loan register to be requested." The name Dhemura did not instantly turn the Purnadhar land into the family's property. But the economic burden of the vanished field had reappeared on paper.

A nurse from the hospital's inspection team sent word that the smell of stagnant water was growing stronger near the rear passage of the old wing. Aditi immediately telephoned Aniruddha. She did not abandon the site and run to the hospital; first she asked him to separate the emergency cleaning team's work from the route used for treatment. Aniruddha said the water had not reached the patients' rooms, although one corner of the outside passage was wet. Tara noted that the relative height of the hospital and warehouse grounds should be checked again against the same datum. A possible connection between their drainage systems remained a hypothesis, not a conclusion established by measurement.

Towards evening the municipal assistant engineer arrived. Looking at the original of Aditi's warning, he asked, "At the time you wrote only that the crack was small. Why do you now call such an old inspection the source of a major danger?" Aditi put her finger on the instruction in the margin of the report. "I am not calling it the proved cause of a major danger. What I wrote was: reinspect after the rains. We must establish the date on which this warning was received. Then we must establish whether a record of that reinspection exists." The official turned the page back again. "And if you find such a record?" "Then we examine the procedure followed in that inspection and what it found."

The official asked that the news report should not use the words "past negligence proved." Naira replied, "I won't write that either. A warning was issued—that is one piece of evidence. The necessary sentence was omitted from its summary—that is another. Whether the reinspection took place is still a question to investigate. Responsibility, intention and the complete chain of causes leading to harm require separate inquiry." Tara added that deciding the route of a drain without current measurements of the warehouse ground could heighten the danger. The official agreed to publish a notice of temporary restrictions and to seek written authorisation for the full survey.

Ratan had remained silent through the discussion. Before leaving, he asked the young woman to read aloud once more the four old field names on his

paper. He could not hear one of the names clearly, and she offered two possibilities after studying the letters. Ratan shook his head. “If I declare one wrong name to be certain, I may change the history of that household as well.” Naira placed a question mark beside the name. An indistinct letter in an old document did not give anyone licence to reject a living descendant’s claim in haste.

As he gathered his papers, Ratan told the young woman that at the first rumble of thunder before the rains, his mother used to lift four things to a higher place in the house: a sack of seed, his father’s measuring cord, the medicine box and the child’s writing slate. “I used to think water would wash everything away together. But my mother said each thing needed its own way of being saved.” The young woman said, “Today your father’s cord might have been treated as a measurement if you hadn’t stopped them.” Ratan smiled. “I did not stop them. I said: write down the history of the cord; take the measurement with something else.” The bottom of his bag had split. The young woman took out a needle and thread and stitched the tear. Ratan offered to pay her, but she said, “This is a favour within the family. Payment for public reading work is another matter.”

As Ratan rose to go home, the employee stopped him at the gate to offer him a cup of water. “Your father’s map frightens me,” he said. “If the warehouse closes, where shall I go?” Drinking the water, Ratan answered, “The line my father drew is not an order to take away a labourer’s livelihood. If the use of this land changes, the question of the workers’ employment must be heard too. But if the watercourse is blocked, will pretending not to see it save anyone’s living?” The employee glanced towards the empty sacks hanging on a peg. Their anxieties were different, yet both their futures were caught beside the same wall.

Over the evening meal Sarita asked Naira, “How much of Ratan’s map was proved true today?” Naira said, “Today we established the rules for using the map. Measurement of the land has begun. All the questions about what is true remain.” Sarita placed a single grain of boiled rice in her palm. “Look. You can see whether this grain has swelled. But can you see inside it the debt on the field it came from, the price of water, or the hours spent by the person who cooked it?” Naira laughed. “You are making my report difficult too.” Sarita said, “Let the report be simple. Just don’t cut people’s lives out of it.”

That night Aditi returned to the office and examined the three pages from the old file once more. She put the original signed sheet and the copy bearing the receipt sequence in separate plastic sleeves, taking precautions against damp. The name of the person who had written the revised summary was blank, though the receipt stamp was clear. She did not fill that space with a name she merely suspected. In the first calculations of her report, the height of a foundation reference point had been marked “local estimate.” In the later

summary the same figure had been described as “measured.” She recorded this difference in a new note beside her own signature.

Mahesh asked whether the original measurements should be withdrawn altogether. Aditi said, “If the original reference point proves wrong, the calculations must be corrected. But we must not erase the history of the old paper. Measurements actually taken then have only the standing they earned then. Incomplete facts from that day cannot tell us the depth of today’s ground.” Mahesh drew up a checklist: locating the original reference point on the site; finding the post-rain reinspection register; obtaining permission from the warehouse; tracing the hospital drain’s outlet; and securing safe routes for the patients. Empty spaces were left beside each task for the person responsible and the deadline.

Naira examined the wording of the safety team’s letter. The draft said, “Illegal filling by the warehouse caused damage to the hospital.” She replaced it with: “The possible connection between filling on the plot behind the warehouse, the old drainage channel and the hospital foundation is under investigation.” The official asked, “Will that make people cautious?” Naira answered, “For immediate safety, issue a separate, unmistakable warning not to enter the unsafe strip near the old wing. Declaring an uncertain cause to be a definite crime does not make anyone safer.” A revised copy of the safe-corridor map was sent at once to Aniruddha’s treatment team.

There was a proposal to call Ratan back the following day to give evidence. Tara pointed out that his knowledge had already been used throughout a day of measurement. If he was summoned again, he should receive proper payment for his travel and lost working time. Ratan heard the proposal over the telephone and said, “The original map is in my house. If I carry it about on a rainy day, the pages may get wet. If all you need is one unclear field name, I can read it over the telephone. But if the whole route must be examined again, give me a date in writing.” The office proposed a date for the next inspection; his reply was still awaited before final agreement.

Among the papers from Aditi’s old file was a small slip bearing the words “Look again” in her own hand. She turned it over and saw faint ink on the back: an employee had entered the date of receipt, but the space for a signature confirming that the inspection had been completed was empty. For a long time Aditi stared at that blank space. It did not prove that no inspection had ever taken place. Yet after so explicit a warning, the failure to find its record was itself a question the institution had to answer. She lengthened the list of places to search. She wrote no accusation against any single name.

At the next hour of dawn, outside the Purnadhar enclosure, Tara marked the first fixed reference point for the new survey with temporary yellow paint. A warehouse employee stopped on the route he used for carrying sacks, and Tara measured the width required for his daily passage as well. Ratan’s father’s

map was not there that morning, but it might be possible to establish a safe way of reaching the embankment he had described. In the measuring notebook they wrote: “First fixed reference point established; direction of the old watercourse unverified; decision on warehouse land rights pending.” They were small words. But the time and labour of the people behind them were no longer concealed.

Returning from the hospital, Naira looked towards the warehouse wall. The old wooden board bearing the word “Purnadhar” had now been put in a safe place; the peculiar shadow cast by the sunlight there on another day was not visible now. She did not add the page from her private notebook to the official file. What had to be established here was who had written the earlier warning, who had received it, and where the evidence of subsequent action lay. She understood inwardly that an absent name on a page and an absent path on the ground were not absences of the same kind. The next inquiry would test the difference.

Chapter 69 · The Meaning of Absence

From early morning the sacks had been shifting in the Purnadhar warehouse, but in the little office it was an empty space on a form that held everyone's attention. Aditi's register of acknowledgements for the warning letter bore a date, a seal and the number of the original communication; the space reserved for the signature of the person who had carried out the reinspection was blank. Mahesh moved a finger towards the small rectangle, then held back his hand. Naira said, “A signature missing from the paper and an inspection never having taken place are not yet the same statement.” Outside, Tara was examining again the rain-dampened yellow of the temporary mark on the warehouse wall.

Half-closing a shutter of the window, Aditi said, “What frightens me is not the empty space but the haste with which people will fill it. Someone will write that the inspection took place; someone else will say that it never did. Let both sides first give the date, the employee's name and the source of the site register.” Mahesh showed them a list of the copies he had requested during the previous three weeks. The sheet was torn in two places. Whether a name had disappeared with the torn portion or the paper had merely worn away was unclear. Naira took an image copy of the blank space and left the original document in Aditi's custody.

Just then Suraj Gangota appeared at the doorway. He carried an old cloth bag under his arm; beside him, his son Harihar held two narrow strips of bamboo. Setting the bag on the floor, the father said, “I have found the papers for my field. I have not found the field.” It was not the voice of a man begging for alms. He wanted his case to be heard. Harihar said, “The dates on Father's debt keep advancing even now, but where rice once grew by the edge of Dhemura, boats are afraid to stop.”

Suraj drew two slips from the bag. The first bore the field's old land-account number, with particulars on the reverse of the seed and irrigation loans for which it had been mortgaged; the second calculated the sum outstanding after the last monsoon. Even though half the field had been eaten away, the full amount remained entered against the debt. “I'm not asking you to tear up the documents for my sake,” Suraj said. “I'm asking why the instalments should remain unchanged when the source of the harvest no longer exists. Look at the work I did alongside the account you keep of it.”

“Father,” Harihar burst out, “will showing them these papers bring the field back? Will the lender agree?” Suraj looked at him. “No. The hope of recovering the land and the demand to alter the debt are two different things. If I put them together, they'll dismiss them both with a single no.” Naira did not post the amounts from the slips on the public discussion board. She marked them “Private liability—to be checked against the original register”

and placed them in a separate cover. Suraj's express permission was obtained for the hearing.

Tara came in from outside and opened an old map across the table. At one corner was a copy of the line drawn by Ratan Vanpar's father; at another, the blue dots of Aditi's present measurements. “There is an empty space between the two,” she said. “I have no right to fill it out of my imagination. Someone may say the old name of Suraj's field matches the strip where the Purnadhar warehouse stands. But a document bearing the name Dhemura establishes neither ownership of this plot nor its connection with the river's confluence.” Suraj nodded. “I have come for a hearing about the debt, not to seize land.”

The office assistant kept turning the papers over. He could not find Suraj's name on the old list. “There is no entry for your family in this year's register of beneficiaries,” he said. “How, then, can you apply in the name of a damaged field?” Suraj was silent for a few moments. Harihar rose to his feet. Naira did not take the application from his hand. Instead she asked the assistant, “Which scheme does this register belong to? Which year? And up to what date did it accept applications? Does a name's absence prove that the field never existed, or that the procedure was never completed in this particular list?”

The assistant's face reddened. “How am I supposed to make a payment to someone who isn't on the list?” “Whether payment is allowed may be a question of the rules,” Naira replied. “But that the person never existed, or that the land was never his—those are different conclusions. Please do not confuse them.” In the margin the assistant wrote: “Check earlier records, acceptance of application and variant spellings of name.” He did not strike out his original entry; he placed a new question beside it.

On just such an afternoon, centuries earlier, people assembled for a philosophical disputation in a garden in Mithila were moving their seats as the shade shifted. Opposite Udayana, an opponent was studying a question written on palm leaf. “You argue for an omniscient God,” the opponent said. “On what evidence does the necessity arise to accept the existence of one who is not directly apprehended, when action and the affairs of the world appear to proceed without him? If my failure to perceive him does not injure your position, is perception no longer necessary?” There was no mockery in the last question before the assembly, only the stern demand of knowledge.

Without closing the palm-leaf manuscript, Udayana answered, “Before you say you have not seen something with your own eyes, tell me what sort of thing it is, and under what conditions you ought reasonably to expect to see it. If a lamp standing before you is not visible in full light, the inference that it is not there gains strength. But if the thing in question has not been established as an object of the senses, how can its non-apprehension count against it in the same way as the lamp?” “That answer does not prove your God,” said the

opponent. “Quite so,” Udayana conceded. “My argument so far only shows the limits of the proposed counter-evidence; it is not a positive proof.”

Another scholar asked, “Someone may deny your claim not by direct perception but by inference. Events in the world arise from causes, yet there may be many such causes. Why must there be one omniscient governing intelligence?” The opponent added at once, “Simply inserting the name of God into an incomplete explanation solves nothing. If the reason offered for an inference lacks invariable concomitance, the grandeur of its conclusion cannot remove the defect.” Udayana waited until the objection was complete. “The relation between reason and what it is meant to establish requires separate examination,” he said. “But any inference that seeks to establish an absence must submit its own grounds to scrutiny as well.”

The opponent lifted a small vessel with a clean bottom. “There is no oil here,” he said. “I look into it and apprehend an absence. Is that knowledge false?” Udayana looked inside. “No,” he replied. “Under suitable conditions you have learned that the vessel is now empty. But would it be reasonable to infer from this empty vessel that there is no oil anywhere in the city, or that oil has never existed?” The pupils glanced at one another. The subject was a little pot, yet the dispute had reached the place and time of an absence, and the means by which it could be known.

“So you too admit that non-apprehension can sometimes be a means of knowing absence,” the opponent said. “Yes, where the appropriate conditions and circumstances have been established,” Udayana replied. “Where they have not, ‘I have not seen it’ does not become ‘it does not exist.’” The opponent questioned him again about the conflict of verbal testimony, the limits of analogy, postulation and the independence of non-apprehension as a means of knowledge. Udayana kept their respective roles distinct. At the centre of the argument in his third *stabaka* lay the insistence that a claim to refute God's existence by such means must itself be examined. The opponent did not withdraw his final line: “The failure of a refutation does not lighten the burden of proving an assertion.” The gathering broke up that day with the disagreement intact.

Back at the window of the Videhapur office, Harihar's eye caught a name printed in still-damp ink. The ancient disputation was not evidence for his debt slip. Here, solid questions demanded answers: who had been appointed to prepare the register, under which spelling the name had been entered, and who possessed the measurements of the eroded field? From inside the bag Suraj brought out an old seed tin once used on his land. There were no seeds in it now, only three grains of red earth. “I have kept this earth not to bring back the field,” he said, “but so my son may understand that his father once farmed it.”

In the cooperative loan office adjoining the main room, the officer in charge, Kankalata, had opened the original ledger. Suraj had known her for some time. “The amount outstanding is in the book,” she said. “We cannot pretend it isn't there. But there is a procedure for applying to restructure the loan after last season's erosion. The loss itself must be established through a separate process.” “Then why,” Suraj asked, “have I received nothing for all these months except demands for instalments?” Kankalata opened an old file under her counter. The sequence recording receipt of his application could not be found. The copy Harihar had submitted bore the stamp of a different counter.

“Look here.” Harihar showed her two impressions in different inks. “I left the application on this day. Who can say I never handed it in?” Kankalata asked at which window he had left the paper. Harihar could point to the place but could not remember the employee's name. “This receipt of yours will be examined,” Kankalata said. “I can give you a new acknowledgement number today for the copy. But without an inquiry I cannot certify that the first application was accepted in time.” Harihar's anger did not immediately subside. Still, for the first time he was looking at an official acknowledgement of his paper.

Suraj asked that the debt be divided into three entries: principal, interest already accrued, and the penalty for delay imposed after the erosion. Kankalata drew three lines on a sheet. There were receipts for some of the repayments made from the field's harvest over earlier months; for others, none. “I don't want money I have paid to appear as owing a second time,” Suraj said. “Your receipts will be matched with the ledger,” Kankalata answered. “If there is a discrepancy, it will be corrected.” The lender had not yet agreed to compensate him for the loss. But for the first time the account of what he owed had become open to argument.

In the afternoon heat Suraj and Harihar sat beneath the shade of a peepal tree outside. “I'll go to Delhi to work,” Harihar said. “Let the field go. Where will we find room for so many papers in the place I'll be living?” Suraj wanted to stop him, yet did not. “Go wherever you wish, but don't bind my decision to your fear,” he said. “I will seek a hearing to reduce the debt. I will not write the dream of getting the field back into this file.” For the first time that day, although he still disagreed with his father, Harihar offered to pay the bus fare for the hearing of his claim.

Meanwhile, in the final acknowledgement section for Aditi's warning, an employee found an old visitors' register. It contained a number corresponding to the date on which the inspection team was said to have arrived. But the visitor's name continued onto the next page, which lay inside a locked chest. “Can we now say an inspector came that day?” Mahesh asked. “For now we can say only that a number was entered in this register,” Aditi replied. “Without the purpose of the visit, the person's name and evidence of work on

the ground, it remains incomplete.” She requested written authorisation to open the chest.

Balai, a worker at the warehouse, stood beside the place where the old wooden signboard was stored. “In ten years of working here, I've never seen an open drain at that spot,” he said. Ratan had come from a distance, but no time had been set for his public testimony that day; he had only given permission for two indistinct letters to be read to him over the telephone. Naira recorded Balai's experience together with its time span. Not having seen something in ten years was significant testimony, but it could not close the history of an older channel. Tara did not drive a yellow peg into the new survey point; permission to enter the land had not yet been obtained.

After sunset Naira made three columns in her notebook: “Name,” “Receipt,” “Statement.” Under Name she recorded the different positions of Suraj's old land entry and the current relief list. Under Receipt she recorded the acknowledgement of the loan application and the incomplete old copy concerning boat fares. Under Statement she recorded the metallic sound Fakira had heard and Balai's limited experience of the site. She did not weave these separate papers into a single chain of proof. The file on the search for Mithun was secured in another cupboard, some distance away. A similar-looking name was not sufficient reason to open it.

Mahesh had just returned from meeting a local correspondent of a newspaper. The journalist wanted information about the obstruction of the hospital's outer drainage and the old warning. “The name has been removed from the government letter,” Mahesh said. “He says the report is incomplete without a name.” “A name is not always indispensable to the truth of an event,” Naira replied. “The accountability of a public official is one thing; the home of a witness who runs a risk is another. If publication of a name is necessary, the reason and consent must be recorded in writing. Even a surname, without proper checking, may identify a person.” Mahesh folded the draft in his pocket once more.

That night the cooperative's first amended reply reached Suraj's home. Kankalata had written that a proposal to suspend new penalties for late payment until the inquiry was complete had been placed before the committee; an accurate reconciliation of the principal and earlier interest would be heard within fifteen days. This was not final relief. Suraj asked his son to read the letter aloud. “Will someone come to collect the debt in the meantime?” Harihar asked. There was no explicit line about that in the letter. Suraj decided to write another application the next day to ask this still unanswered question.

At home Suraj's wife, Faguni, was taking a pot of bathua greens off the stove. “Have you forgotten even the hour for eating, talking about the field?” she asked. Suraj smiled. “I didn't find the field today, but the three entries of

the debt were separated." Serving rice in an old bowl, Faguni said, "If the earth has been washed away, my two months of labour transplanting rice lie in that earth too. Where will my work be written into the hearing about the debt?" Suraj fell silent. He had not thought of naming his wife as a co-applicant in the next day's petition.

In the morning Faguni took out a little account she had kept of the seed work: how many days she had transplanted, how many she had weeded, how many she had carried meals to the edge of the embankment. "I was not the owner of the field," she said, "but my time went into it. My absence from the evidence register doesn't mean I did no work." Harihar laughed and said that his mother's notebook was more clearly kept than his father's accounts. Faguni looked him straight in the face. "Clear handwriting is no use if they won't let me into the hearing." Suraj resolved to go with her.

At the next hearing Suraj, Faguni and Harihar all went to the cooperative office. Kankalata could not yet say whether Faguni's account of her labour would count as official evidence for reducing the debt; she did, however, permit it to be attached to the particulars of the affected family's income and loss. "I won't say the drowned field will return of its own accord," Suraj said. "What I want is that instalment dates which cannot possibly be met should not be fixed on the basis of a harvest that no longer exists." In the margin of the meeting record was written: "Preliminary consideration of loan restructuring approved; actual measurement of erosion, old payment receipts and recalculation of family income still pending."

Kankalata signed the proposal. With Suraj's consent, his copy was placed inside the cloth bag. Outside, on the bench, Harihar was talking to some impassioned young men. One told him that if half the field was gone, half the loan would automatically be cancelled. "I won't say anything of the kind now," Harihar answered. "I want the written conditions for whatever remission may be possible. A declaration without evidence will only bring us fresh trouble tomorrow." Suraj felt proud of his son's reply, but no desire arose in him to bind the boy to farming as he himself had been bound.

At midday Naira returned to the blank signature box on the warning. Permission had arrived to open the chest, but the following page of the register was not inside. An entry said it had been sent years earlier to the repairs division. "We've searched this much and still not found it," the employee said. "Can we say it was destroyed?" Aditi stopped him sharply. "You can say it wasn't found in this chest. If you wish to say it was destroyed, show the register of destruction. Otherwise don't complete the story of a missing paper with your own guesswork." The employee added a new search number to the record of that answer.

Naira telephoned Mahesh to ask him to keep any press statement about the blank signature box restricted for the time being. "A draft had already gone

to the newspaper," Mahesh said. "I've asked for it back. The editor says only the final copy will be printed." "Did the draft contain the direct witness's name?" Naira asked. Mahesh paused. "Not the full name, but hints about the address and family relationships. I'm sending a written request to remove them." "An assurance alone isn't enough," Naira said. "Get confirmation of the amended copy. Meanwhile, think about the safety of anyone those details could identify."

Aditi was copying the faint writing from the reverse of a document. Outside, the gatekeeper pulled his chair indoors; small drops of rain had begun to fall. Suraj's letter about the eroded field, the blank space for the hospital's reinspection and Mahesh's draft for the newspaper had all arrived on the same table in a single day, yet none was evidence for either of the others. Naira thought that an absence could be the absence of a thing, of a name, or of a record showing that a responsibility had been fulfilled. Fill all three with the same colour of ink, and guilt itself might be transferred—and an innocent person's life altered with it.

That evening, at the doorway of his house, Suraj placed the little empty red-earth tin in Harihar's hand. "Keep it if you're preparing to go to the city," he said. "Not yet," Harihar replied. "First I'll come to the hearing about Mother's labour and the restructuring of your loan. After that I'll choose my own road." Faguni was setting a light by the door. Far away a vehicle at Purnadhar sounded its horn once, but no one in the house speculated about whose horn it was or why it had sounded. One thing had been settled that day: without any promise that the field would be restored in full, the family could still speak on the terms of what was owed to them.

That night Mahesh lit the lamp on his desk and waited for the editor's answer. One page held a copy of Aditi's warning; another, his written request for a correction sent to the journalist. A short message appeared on his phone: "The printing copy has been closed; changes are not possible." Mahesh called again. Nobody answered at the other end. For the first time he wrote a line on the paper separate from the newspaper's deadline: "Risk of identification; immediate confidential contact with the family concerned is necessary." The evening's clamour had died away outside, but the empty place on the paper before him was no longer silent.

Chapter 70 · Mahesh's Night

Before dawn, the first newspaper landed upside down at Mahesh's door, one corner darkening with dew. His daughter was setting her school shoes on a stool to dry. She bent to pick up the paper, but Mahesh's wife reached it first. On the front page was a report about the drainage system. It did not name Mahesh; nevertheless, it printed together the description of 'a former employee connected with night work at the western warehouse beyond the railway line' and the direction of his home. Another line referred to an old ledger seen by a relative of a supplier to the hospital repair contract. His wife folded the paper. Milk was still coming to the boil inside the house, yet the words of the report had already crossed its threshold without anyone's permission.

Before reading the report, Mahesh looked at the clock. Their daughter had to be taken to school. His wife asked, "How many former night-shift employees of that warehouse live in this neighbourhood, with daughters whose route to school is also known?" Mahesh gave no answer. Naira's carelessness in an earlier citizens' bulletin had already made his identity recognisable. That post had been removed, but copies survived on people's phones. Now the new report pointed towards his house for anyone who read it alongside the old copy. The omission of his name had afforded no protection.

His daughter wanted to look for an advertisement for her school in the middle of the newspaper. Her mother did not snatch it away; she gave her a page separate from the report. "Which way would you like to go today?" she asked. The girl said she would take the usual route with her friends, but yesterday, near the market, two men had asked about her father. "I told them I was going to school. Was it wrong of me to say that?" Mahesh looked at his daughter. No short answer of his could lift the weight of her question. "You did nothing wrong," he said. "But you have no obligation to tell anyone who asks about my work." His wife added that the teacher would be given only the limited information the family had agreed upon; their daughter's name would not become a public example in the correction of a newspaper's mistake.

A brief message from the editor arrived on Mahesh's phone: 'It was not possible to stop printing; we will revise the online version.' Mahesh photographed the newspaper page and the time of the message and preserved them separately. He telephoned the editor. "Change the online passage," he said, "but who will account for the paper that has already reached people's homes? I want the right to see the original basis of this report. And do not describe it as testimony given with Mahesh's full consent." The editor replied that the name had been withheld in a matter of public interest. Mahesh said,

“When a person can be identified without his name, what protection have you given him by not printing it?”

At the factory beyond the railway line, Raghav Singh had been waiting since morning for his nephew. The young man had spent the night looking at two pages of the ledger: one bore his genuine acknowledgement of receipt; on the other, a mark purporting to be his signature did not appear to have been made by his hand. Raghav had summoned him to examine the papers, but when the young man arrived he carried a folded newspaper rather than the original register. “Uncle,” he said, “am I the supplier's relative in this report? People at the warehouse are saying I'll ruin the contract.” Raghav read the relevant lines first. The printed words were not his nephew's testimony, yet they contained enough clues for people familiar with his work to recognise him.

“What did you see with your own eyes?” Raghav asked. “The goods arrived,” the young man replied. “I recorded the date they were received. I did not see where they were installed. The second page carries a signature in my name, but I don't remember signing it, and the handwriting is different. That is all I will say.” Raghav did not press him to add anything. “Don't lie to save my contract,” he said, “and I won't pretend that your silence could save it. But before you give evidence, we shall ask for a written answer about your safety.” Relief mingled with fear in the young man's eyes; his uncle's business depended heavily on supplies to that warehouse.

When Naira reached the newspaper office, bundles of paper were tied up beside the front window. She had received an acknowledgement of her request for a correction the previous night, but the printed edition contained no such correction. On four separate sheets she laid out her original post in the citizens' bulletin, the time it had been taken down, the limited permission Mahesh had given, and the passages from the new report. “I read your earlier publication as a public source,” the editor said. “My mistake in making that source public did not give you the right to identify the person,” Naira replied. “But you also bear responsibility for your own editorial decisions.”

Without speaking, the editor took out a fresh page, a copy of which could go into the evening edition. He suggested adding the words ‘Identity unclear’ below the report. “That will sound like an invitation to readers to solve a mystery,” Naira said. “Remove the details that identify a private person, not the public facts. Keep the date of the hospital's original warning, the missing copy of the reinspection, and the question of patients' safety. Do not point readers towards a family's doorstep.” “Whose name, then, will the article carry?” the editor asked. “The name of the office whose public decision is under scrutiny,” Naira replied. “Not the name of a private witness.”

She insisted that both the correction and the erroneous printed text be preserved as part of the record. Yet no one sitting in that office was ready to

admit that Naira's first post, sent to a municipal group months earlier, had itself created a risk. Beside her own name Naira wrote down the date of its original publication. Acknowledging her responsibility at the newspaper office was one thing; publishing a story of her own moral absolution without the family's permission was another. She stopped herself from doing the latter. To repeat Mahesh's private address in the correction would only repeat the wrong.

Kabir met Mahesh and his wife in the legal-aid room. Their daughter was at school. Her teacher knew only that on that day the girl must not be released to anyone else without written parental consent. Mahesh's wife laid on the table not the newspaper but a list of the family's necessities: their daughter's books, medicines, the route to work, drinking water for the night, the rent for temporary accommodation. “We need somewhere confidential,” she said, “but confidentiality must not mean that my daughter has to leave school.” For the request for official protection, Kabir made separate entries recording the dates of the threats, the messages on the telephone, and inquiries from strangers.

Mahesh showed him a copy of his previous application. It had an acknowledgement number, but no reply. Kabir made it clear that an order assigning security personnel, an assurance given over the telephone, and actual accommodation were three different things. “Must my name be included in the papers?” his wife asked. “Only as much as the process requires will be kept in a closed record accessible to authorised officials,” Kabir replied. “We will not put your full home address in a public application.” She consented, adding one condition in her own voice: Mahesh would not decide alone at their next meeting. Mahesh accepted it. His testimony had placed a burden on the family's life; he had no right to impose that burden on them unilaterally.

At noon Raghav arrived with his nephew. Kabir asked the young man separately whether he wished to speak in his uncle's presence. He looked first at Raghav, then said, “Let Uncle stay, but I will give my own answers.” The original page of his ledger listed four items of material; the following box for one of the items was blank. In the copy, that blank box appeared to have been filled in. The young man said he had seen the goods unloaded at the warehouse, not the repairs being carried out. “Are you certain that the signature on the second page isn't yours?” Aditi asked. “I want it verified,” he said. “It doesn't match my handwriting. But I don't know who wrote it, or when.”

Meanwhile, one of Raghav's former contracting associates telephoned. His voice was raised: “If the nephew talks, the next consignment stops.” Raghav did not put the call on speaker for everyone to hear. He ended it first and asked for a written proposal. The associate sent a message: ‘Further orders for goods temporarily suspended.’ No actual reason for the suspension was formally declared, but the time of the threatening call and the suspended order were recorded together. “I will calculate what the loss of the contract

costs me," Raghav told his nephew. "I will not erase what you saw." "What if they dismiss me from my job?" the young man asked. "Then we shall take up your right to earn a living as a separate question," Raghav replied. "I will not pay you to keep silent."

Examining the original delivery slip, Aditi said that a list of 'four items' did not prove that all four had been installed in the proper rooms. Meena Sah's receipt for repairs to two vessels was a separate document; Lalit's refusal to certify the load-bearing safety of the timber was another. The warehouse workers' attendance register established where witnesses had been, not who was guilty. Naira kept the subjects of the three statements separate: a sound heard by one worker, goods actually seen entering by another, and the written instructions in an earlier report. Each could be checked against the others, but none could be used to fill the other's blank spaces.

In the middle of the meeting Mahesh's telephone vibrated. From an unknown number came a short message: 'Anyone reading the papers had better think of his home.' There was sufficient reason to understand it as a threat, but no one knew who had sent it. Mahesh placed the phone before Kabir. Kabir advised him to preserve the time and number of the original message and to attach a copy only to the authorised complaint. His wife laid a hand on the table. "This is no longer merely a matter of keeping the investigation confidential," she said. "How much longer before our home is protected?" No one could promise a definite time. The answer left her dissatisfied, but it was better than a false assurance.

That evening an officer at the police assistance desk accepted the application. Looking at the newspaper cutting, he said, "But no one's name has been printed." Mahesh's wife answered plainly, "Instead of a name, they have printed clues about our home, his work, and our family. People have already begun questioning our daughter." The officer added the details of the risk to the application, recorded that patrols would be increased, and issued an acknowledgement number. Mahesh asked whether there was also an order for direct protection at night. The officer said approval would have to come from above; it had not yet been confirmed. Kabir noted this incompleteness on the copy of the application.

When Mahesh returned home, his daughter was drawing a river in an old exercise book. A blue line ran between two houses on the page. "Is that a river or a road?" Mahesh asked. "Both," she replied. "I want there to be a bridge so I can go to school." Mahesh tried to smile. "Give her a chance to tell us what happened today," his wife said. The girl explained that her teacher had treated her like any other pupil all day, but a friend had said she had read something about 'your father's work' in the newspaper. Then she asked, "If someone tells the truth, does everyone have to know his family's name?" Mahesh took a long time to answer. "A person has the right to tell the truth. But there is also a duty to protect those who choose to take that road."

For the evening meal his wife had warmed the leftover lentils to go with rice. She opened the list of things they would need if they left the house. Someone had suggested that a relative beyond the railway line might put them up, but that relative had not yet agreed. Their daughter insisted that she would take only her books. Her mother said that clothes, medicine, and school papers would be needed as well. Mahesh asked whether he would be able to go with them. “You can make arrangements for the papers concerning the investigation,” his wife said, “but I too shall decide where we live. If we have to leave for somewhere else tomorrow at dawn, we must explain it to our daughter first.” There was less bitterness in her words than the hard resolve of a day exhausted by decisions.

Mahesh came close to making a small but consequential mistake. The editor telephoned a second time. “We can print a new clarification. If you give us your full name, the speculation will stop.” In anger, Mahesh wanted to say, Print my name, then; I have nothing to hide. His wife saw the notebook trembling in his hand. “Why must our home address become proof of your courage?” she asked. Mahesh changed his answer. “I do not consent to publication of my name. Investigate the hospital's public work. I will give my statement to those from whom I need answers through a closed procedure.” The editor accepted this much in writing.

At home that night Naira read through the draft of her letter again. Without visiting Mahesh's family that day, she had received a copy of a document in which his wife had written: ‘Until safety is assured, all public clues to our identity must be stopped. No future letter is to presume the family's consent.’ Naira thought of telephoning once, then saw that his wife had already given her answer in writing and did not call. She sent Kabir only information about the procedure: the online version had been changed, but the distribution of the original printed edition could not be undone; the decision on the request for protection was still pending. She preserved the original copy of her earlier publication. Remorse was no reason to destroy evidence.

Mahesh asked his wife and daughter to rest in the inner room. He rose to check the front door when a message came from Kabir: a renewed request for night patrols had been made, but no definite deployment had yet been confirmed. “Don't keep opening the door to look outside,” his wife said. “We are all worn out from looking at papers the whole day.” Mahesh agreed. He set together the empty milk vessel, his daughter's school water bottle, and the small bundle of medicine his wife had tied up. In the arrangement of these ordinary things, the house seemed not a temporary refuge but his own life.

Before midnight there came a loud knocking in the lane. Mahesh did not open the door. “Who is it?” he called from within. The reply came: “We want the old warehouse accounts.” “For matters of work, write to the office,” he said. “This is a family home.” Two more blows struck the door, splitting one

of the wooden panels. His wife took their daughter into the inner room and dialled the number of the assistance desk. Mahesh stood behind the door, but at that moment he did not know how many people were outside. He named no one.

The latch held against a single violent pull. A heavy object was thrown from outside; it shattered the glass above the doorway and fell into the veranda. Mahesh stepped back, warning his wife, but a small shard of glass lodged in his left arm. Their daughter began crying in the inner room. Hearing the noise, two neighbours emerged from their houses. Footsteps outside quickened, and a motorcycle drove away into the distance. No one had seen a face clearly. His wife first secured the door from within and seated their daughter somewhere safe. Then she pressed a clean cloth against Mahesh's arm. He was alive and able to speak; the depth of the wound still had to be examined.

A woman from a neighbouring house used her phone to arrange help from the hospital. “Can you send a vehicle?” Mahesh's wife asked. “My husband has been injured. Please don't put our address in the public group.” The neighbour gave their location to the ordinary emergency number but sent no photograph to the neighbourhood group. “Don't look at my arm,” Mahesh told his daughter. “Keep your books with you.” “I won't look,” she replied, “but if you go, I'm going with Mother.” Her mother did not stop her. That night the centre of the family's decisions was not the author of a newspaper article but the three people inside the house.

In the hospital emergency department, Salma arranged for Mahesh's arm to be cleaned and the wound examined. The doctor said that the injury from the glass required treatment and observation. There appeared to be no immediate danger to his life, but the actual extent of the wound would be recorded after examination. A police employee asked for a general account of what had happened at the scene. Mahesh stated clearly that an attack had occurred, but he had not identified the assailants. A voice outside had said ‘warehouse accounts’, yet those words alone proved neither who had ordered the attack nor its real motive. His wife wrote down the exact words; she appended no conjecture to them.

When the news reached Raghav, he came to the hospital entrance without bringing his nephew. His eyes were tired. “Don't call your nephew here,” Mahesh said. “His name will be published again.” “He will make his own decision about giving a statement,” Raghav replied. “I won't prevent him. But I won't tell anyone which road he takes.” He knew that the threat to suspend the contract over the telephone and the attack on Mahesh's house had occurred close together in time. He did not take that proximity as definite proof that the same person or order lay behind both. Nevertheless, he placed the messages concerning his contract and a copy of his nephew's ledger in separate envelopes, to be kept safe for an authorised investigation.

Kabir brought a copy of the written request for protection to the emergency department. The previous application had been acknowledged; the account of the new incident and the medical note on the wound would be attached to it. An officer said that a senior official had been consulted about temporary protection. “I don't want to hear that someone has been ‘consulted’,” Mahesh's wife replied. “I want a written copy of the decision. We must decide now where our daughter is to spend tonight.” With her permission, Kabir began discreetly making contact about one possibility for temporary shelter. Agreement on the place had not yet been obtained.

Naira came to the emergency department and stood a little way outside. She did not go in and take Mahesh's hand. Kabir came out and told her the family was occupied with medical treatment and legal procedure. “Are the original papers concerning the publication safe?” she asked. “They are,” Kabir said. “But as yet they do not establish the complete chain of causes behind anyone's crime. There will be an investigation. Wait for the family's decision.” “I will wait,” Naira said, “but I won't conceal my responsibility for the first publication.” She wrote those words in her notebook, not in a public report.

Beside the emergency bed, Mahesh looked at the river his daughter had drawn. His wife had picked up the exercise book on their way out. The paper had been folded, and the ink at one end of the bridge had blurred. “I don't know whether I have managed to save the truth about the work today,” he told his wife. “But you two will decide matters concerning our home, not my testimony.” “Your testimony belongs to you, and the road by which we live belongs to me,” she replied. “We shall try to protect both. First, let us get through one safe night.” No one had won anything at that moment, but the voices of the family had come together again.

After midnight a message arrived from an officer: the immediate request for patrols had been accepted; approval for regular personal protection and confidential accommodation remained pending. Mahesh understood the difference. The original copy of his nephew's ledger was under seal, the uncorrected newspaper edition was preserved separately, and photographs of the scene of the attack had been requested for the authorised investigation. These were three distinct things. From the hospital window Mahesh looked at the darkness in a distant lane. He knew the night was passing, but the question of safety had not been resolved. Seated beside the bed, his wife wrote down not the name of a guard but the time of the next meeting. A blank space still remained on the page.

Chapter 71 · Death and Documents

Before the light of dawn had reached the hospital veranda, Mahesh's wife was reading the date written on the dressing around his arm. The paper gave instructions for cleaning the wound and the time of his next examination, but there was still no answer to the family's application for protection. Sitting at the edge of the bed, Mahesh tried to put on his kurta with one hand. His daughter stepped forward and fastened its buttons. Attempting a smile, he said, "I still need your help." She answered, "But you must look at my school drawing yourself." Neither of them laughed. All that remained between them was a small measure of trust.

His wife had arranged the night's papers in three folds. In the first were the medical prescriptions, in the second an account of the attack on their home, and in the third a request for a confidential place of residence. A hospital employee explained the discharge procedure, but there were no written security instructions about leaving by the public entrance. She telephoned Kabir. "I don't want reassurances. I want a vehicle and the name of the person responsible," she said. Kabir told her that consent for a temporary place was close to being obtained, but no security officer had yet been definitively assigned. She put down the telephone and looked towards Mahesh. "Then we shall not go home," she announced.

Mahesh agreed to that much. Into an old bag he put his spectacles and the river his daughter had drawn. Taking out a written statement, he asked, "Will this reach the authorised investigating officer through Kabir?" His wife read it. Mahesh had written plainly that the hospital's goods-entry register was familiar to him, but that he had not himself seen where the materials were installed. He had also written that, on the night their house was attacked, he heard voices outside but did not see the attackers' faces. Giving the paper back, she said, "Write only what you saw. Our daughter must not be made to pay the price of someone else's conjecture."

Kabir met them in a deserted hospital office. He counted the copies of Mahesh's original statement in front of him, gave him a stamped envelope as acknowledgement of receipt, and urged him not to remain away from his bed for long without medical permission. Mahesh said, "I am not prepared to write that I am safe simply because I am lying in a bed. I want an answer about the safety of the place where my daughter keeps her exercise book." Exhaustion showed on Kabir's face. He could not himself appoint security personnel, and he had to state that limitation plainly. He obtained the wife's consent once more to arrangements for the family's separate accommodation. Their daughter chose not to be present for this conversation; she wanted to sit in the hospital garden and finish her drawing.

Towards noon, permission for temporary accommodation came through. The vehicle was to reach the closed veranda behind the hospital, for journalists had gathered at the main entrance. Mahesh's wife stated explicitly that their daughter must be seated safely in the vehicle first and that nobody was to take photographs. Kabir agreed a route with the hospital staff on that basis. The time was written down, but confirmation by telephone of the driver's identity remained suspended in uncertainty. "We shall leave when we have a definite name," Mahesh said. Immediately afterwards, a message came from an inner office: his signature was required on the original copy of the protection request.

His wife offered to take the papers herself. Over the telephone an office employee said that the injured applicant must appear once so that his signature could be identified. Kabir objected: "Bring the document to his bedside. Arrange a time to meet him." The employee replied that the officer was about to leave and a meeting was possible only now. Mahesh understood that otherwise another application would remain pending. "I shall go with Kabir only as far as that corner of the office," he told his wife. "You stay with our daughter." For a long moment she looked into his eyes. "Do not go beyond the limit you have just set," she replied.

The hospital's rear corridor was half dark even by day. Wooden crates, old cots and empty laundry drums stood along one side of the passage. Kabir walked to Mahesh's right so that his injured arm would not strike the wall. The office door was now shut; the employee had gone into another room. The two of them stood waiting. At that moment two people came swiftly through the narrow rear entrance. One called Mahesh by name. Mahesh turned to look, but before he could answer the first person shoved him towards the wall. In the second person's hand was a heavy iron object.

Kabir stepped forward, shouting, "Stop!" The sound of the blow reverberated inside the walls. Mahesh fell to the floor. Before Kabir could reach his head, both assailants had run towards the rear door. Kabir had not seen either face clearly; the fleeting impression left him only the colour of some clothing and a voice. Rather than give chase, he shouted for help, because Mahesh was not getting up. A ward attendant and two security guards arrived. "Clear the way. Call the medical team," the attendant ordered. Kabir laid the papers in his hand upon the floor and knelt beside Mahesh's head.

When Mahesh's wife ran towards the emergency room, their daughter was following her. At the doorway she stopped the child from going in. "This is not where you must stay," she said. "Telephone Dulari Aunty, but don't write our address in any public group." The girl dialled the number. In that small decision, amid her fear, she found something she herself could do. When her mother went inside, treatment was being given to Mahesh. The doctor said plainly that his head injury was serious and the outcome could not yet be predicted. The wife's first question was, "Was this caused by last night's wound

on his arm?" The doctor answered, "No. This is a new injury. The two incidents will be recorded separately."

Time did not stand still. The bed was changed, medicines were brought, and the physicians made one small decision after another. Near the doorway, his wife kept her eyes on the hands of the clock. The words that needed saying were so simple—medicine, water, breath, again. The dressing from the previous night was still on Mahesh's arm, but it was the new blow to his head that threatened his life. Once she called him by name. Someone said that the doctors were at work and the family should stand a little farther away. She stepped back, but she did not leave that place.

As evening fell, a doctor asked Mahesh's wife to sit apart with him. She was told the time at which his death had been recorded. The doctor wrote a medical account of the grave injury caused by a violent blow; the formal processes of an inquiry into the death and a post-mortem examination would also be necessary. She managed to read the time on the paper, then closed the notebook. "Last night he was alive. There was a dressing over the wound on his arm," she said. The doctor repeated only this: "The fatal injury received in today's new attack will be investigated separately." She rose and went towards the door. Outside, her daughter was sitting.

"Where is Baba?" the girl asked. Her mother seated her beside her. She gave no promise that he would survive. "Baba will not come back now," she said. For a long while the child looked into her mother's face, then crumpled a corner of her half-finished drawing. "I fastened his buttons," she said, the words escaping her mouth. Her mother opened the girl's hand and smoothed out the picture. "Yes, you did. No one can erase that," she replied. When the child began to cry, her mother did not tell her to be quiet. Sitting on a chair outside the ward, they held each other together.

Naira learned the news from a brief message sent by Kabir. She did not go to Mahesh's house; his family was still at the hospital, where their public identification would once more put them at risk. At her desk she opened a copy of her first publication about Mahesh. The page contained a designation, a warehouse, and indications of the route his family took. Reading it, she recognised her mistake in putting these details together. The notice had been removed, but printed copies and forwarded images remained in other people's hands. She did not write down her private remorse and slide the paper beneath a desk-weight. She placed the original copy and the evidence of its publication time in separate envelopes.

The editor telephoned that night. "We can issue a joint statement," he said. "Write that we all acted in the public interest, and that unknown people committed the murder. Leave out the matter of your mistake for now." Naira was silent at the other end of the telephone. Then she said, "I will not turn the life of the man who has been murdered into a shield for my intentions. I

published wrongly. I did not commit this murder, but the identifying clues I published made his identity unsafe. I shall say both things together.” “Will you take the blame upon yourself?” the editor asked. “Only as much responsibility as is mine,” Naira answered. “Those responsible for the crime must be investigated for their own actions.”

After notice of Mahesh’s death, the authorised team closed off the hospital’s rear corridor. While dictating the sequence of what he had seen, Kabir first struck out the words “red shirt,” because he could not remember the colour of the clothing with certainty. “There were two people, weren’t there?” an officer asked. “I saw two figures at close range,” Kabir said. “I saw the moment of one blow. The object in the other person’s hand was clear to me, but not the face.” An employee drew up separate lists of the registers left behind, the security guards’ duty assignments, and the cameras at the rear entrance that needed checking. Whether the camera had actually been working could not then be answered.

The envelope Kabir had dropped at the scene was recovered in the presence of police witnesses. Inside was the receipt for Mahesh’s statement; the original statement was already secure under seal in the authorised office. His wife insisted that, since a copy of the statement contained their home address, it must not be included in any public copy. The officer said private details would be kept separate for the security investigation. Kabir asked for that assurance in writing. Mahesh’s life could not be saved, but the question of his family’s future safety had not ended with his death.

The doorway where the first attack had taken place, the corridor where the second had occurred, and the hospital’s old repair register were three distinct sites of evidence. Repeating this distinction, Raghav Singh requested, through a lawyer, a time for his nephew to give an authorised statement rather than keeping him confined at home. “Uncle, you have lost your contract, and now Mahesh is dead. Will my speaking change anything else?” the nephew asked. “We shall not lie,” Raghav answered, “but who died here, and why, are not things I shall declare on the strength of somebody’s guess.” He was afraid, but he did not proclaim that the question surrounding his nephew’s original signature was the proven cause of Mahesh’s murder.

In the last watch of the night, Shashibhushan Mahapatra arrived outside the hospital mortuary. In his hands were thread for tying bamboo splints, the measurements for white cloth, and a small account book of labour charges. He was not a hospital employee but a private craftsman who supplied materials needed after death. On seeing Mahesh’s wife, he stopped some distance from the door. “I am Shashibhushan,” he said. “Someone told me there might be arrangements to make for cloth, bamboo and transport. I shall decide nothing without your permission.” “Where do you get the name you enter in your accounts?” she asked. “I do not make government death certificates,” he replied. “My account records only materials and labour.”

Shashibhushan showed her two pages. One set out the separate costs of bamboo, cloth, thread and a vehicle; the other listed the wage for his own work. He made it clear that the paper issued by the mortuary, the medical certificate of death, the police procedure and his trader's receipt were not one and the same thing. "If we do not write the name yet, can you hold the materials?" she asked. "Once written approval is received," Shashibhushan said. "If the name is not confirmed, I shall reserve the materials only against the family's acknowledgement slip; I will not attach a name to an unknown body and take money for it." She wrote her husband's name, Mahesh Mandal, clearly, but asked whether their daughter's name had to appear on the receipt. "No," Shashibhushan answered.

The next day Naira prepared a draft public letter. Its opening line named neither suspected people at the hospital or warehouse nor alleged culprits; it recorded Mahesh's murder and the decision not to publish private details without his family's consent. She then set out the date of her first civic bulletin, what information she had made public, and how it might have opened a path towards identifying him. She publicly apologised for the mistake and separately stated the editorial responsibilities of the newspaper and the institution. She did not claim to have ordered anyone's murder; neither did she write that she knew the source of any such order.

Naira read her statement at a public meeting of limited attendance. Mahesh's family members were not entered by name in the attendance register. "Mahesh has been murdered," she said clearly. "Responsibility for that crime lies with the people who carried it out and those who planned it. The information I made public had not undergone an adequate review of the risks to his safety; my mistake increased the danger that Mahesh could be identified. I accept my share of responsibility, but I do not declare any unproven person guilty of the crime." Someone in the gathering asked, "Then on whose orders was he killed?" "I do not yet know," Naira replied. "The original evidence remains to be examined."

The representative of an officer said that a public apology might affect the criminal investigation. Naira replied that she was not destroying any original investigative records, merely acknowledging her failure to verify what she had published. A student asked how such misinformation could be prevented in future. Naira proposed four practical rules: assess the risk of identifying a witness; obtain the family's independent consent; preserve the history of corrections made to published material; and do not append private home addresses to documents intended to serve the public interest. No one applauded on hearing the rules. An elderly man asked, "What will these rules give the man who could not be saved?" Naira took some time to answer. "Nothing now," she said. "They are work I must do to change myself, not recompense for his death."

Mahesh's wife did not attend the meeting. She was with their daughter, looking through copies of the medical papers. "Will everything Baba wrote go into the newspaper?" the girl asked. "No," her mother said. "Some papers will go to the investigation; some I shall keep; and some you may read when you are older." On the edge of her river drawing, the girl sketched a little boat. "This paper is Baba's," she said. Her mother took the picture but did not lock it away in a trunk; she left it on the table in their room. Even after his death, the child's drawing was her own possession, not evidence belonging to the state.

When Shashibhushan returned, two figures appeared on his receipt: the advance already paid and the balance due when the work was done. He had refused a suggestion that the grieving family be made to pay everything that night. "What if I want fewer things done?" Mahesh's wife asked. "Then you pay only for the materials actually used and the labour actually performed," he said. "The grandeur of a rite is not a condition of my trade." He did not ask to which caste Mahesh had belonged, or by what name his death would be publicised. On his receipt he wrote, "Materials ordered by the family of Mahesh Mandal"; he did not claim to issue a certificate proving the murder case.

Kabir brought Mahesh's wife the written acknowledgement of the criminal investigation. It listed the time and place of the incident, the sequence of treatment at the hospital, separate witness statements, and the objects collected for examination. A formal investigation into the murder had begun. But neither the identities of the attackers, nor the source of their orders, nor a possible connection with the hospital contract had been established that day. "And my family's protection?" she asked. Kabir replied that a renewed application had been accepted and temporary accommodation arranged, but the order appointing regular security personnel was still pending. He could hear the inadequacy of his own answer.

Mahesh's wife did not return to the old doorway of their house. She gave the key to a woman neighbour for a limited time only, to fetch clothes and the books their daughter needed. It was put in writing that no other papers in the house were to be disturbed without police permission. "Will you ever go back to that house?" the neighbour asked. "I will not answer that question now," Mahesh's wife replied. "First let my daughter sleep for one night without the sound of someone at the door." The neighbour offered to send them a hot meal, which she accepted; she did not, however, give permission for their family's story to be told in public in exchange.

At night, through the window of their temporary room, the girl watched a lamp shining far away. When her mother told her to sleep, she asked, "Will Baba's name remain in books?" Her mother answered, "If you want it, his work may be written down. But on the days when you remember him, you need not open a book." The girl fell silent. A little later she said, "I was

frightened when they were changing the dressing on his arm. Today I understand that he was alive then." Her mother kissed her forehead. In the darkness of the room she remembered Mahesh without making him a hero or a symbol of testimony: an ordinary living man, boiling milk, letting his daughter fasten his buttons, watching the rain.

Elsewhere, the officer preparing a plan of the scene was asking Kabir just how much of the blow he had seen himself. "I was with him," Kabir said, "but I did not see the face of the first man who appeared behind him. I heard a voice, saw the direction of the blow, and saw Mahesh fall. To say more would be to turn someone else's story into evidence from my own eyes." The officer wrote down his words exactly. After the death, the temptation to fill every empty place in the story with someone's conjecture had grown stronger. Kabir made the difficult decision to leave those spaces empty.

Among the heap of documents from the day Mahesh died, there was one thing without any government seal: his daughter's drawing of a river. On the back, in small letters, Mahesh had written, "May the colours of this boat not wash away, even after the rain." Her mother read the line, then gave the picture back to the girl. The murder case, the public admission of error, the repair file and the application for safe accommodation had each begun to follow its separate course. But the girl still needed a school for the next day, her picture, and a place to sleep beside her mother in a new home. These questions about her life would not wait for any final conclusion to be reached on paper.

Chapter 72 · Sanjaya's Distance

Kabir held three sheets of paper. The first was a preliminary list prepared for the examination of Mahesh's death; the second, a plan of the scene; the third, a copy of his own statement. Sunlight entered through the window, but the glass of water on the table in the inquiry room was still untouched. Kabir placed a finger on a line of the third sheet. It read: 'The witness saw two assailants striking the victim.' He said, "That is not my statement. I saw two figures; at the moment of the blow, I saw only one hand and Mahesh falling. I do not know whether the other person struck him or not."

The clerk drew the paper towards himself. "You spoke of two people before," he replied. Kabir did not raise his voice. "Two people being present and both of them striking are not the same thing. Do not shorten what I saw into a different event." The statement was written again. The earlier sheet was not torn up; it was attached to the amended statement. Kabir checked the time and receipt number on both pages. For the first time, he felt how moving a single word could alter the attribution of blame for an entire event.

Mahesh's wife did not send their daughter to school that day. The teacher had asked for work to be done at home, but the child kept trying to read the line her father had written on the back of her drawing of the river. Her mother said, "You need not read this picture today. You can colour it, if you wish." The girl opened her box of blue crayons and asked, "Will Baba's name appear in the news again?" Her mother said, "Some news will be printed. But you and I shall decide what happens to our picture and our address." For the first time, the child laid her paper face down on the table.

When Naira met Kabir, he did not praise her public statement. He said, "It was necessary that you admit your mistake. But if the face of someone I did not see appears again in your report, all of it will have been for nothing." Naira replied, "This time I shall draw up a record of sources before writing the news. For what comes from you, the original statement; for what comes from the officer, the official copy; and for what is my inference, I shall say plainly that it is an inference." Kabir asked, "In whose voice will you speak the words Mahesh can no longer say?" Naira was silent for a few moments. "Not even in the voice of the papers he left behind may I add whatever I please out of my own mind."

In the assembly hall of Hastinapura, in an age long past, Sanjaya stood before Dhritarashtra. There was no dust of the battlefield upon his clothes, yet his voice was weary. The king's hand trembled upon the arm of his throne. "Bhishma?" was all Dhritarashtra asked. Sanjaya answered, "He lies upon a bed of arrows on the battlefield; life has not yet left him." The king asked again, "And my sons?" Sanjaya did not immediately recite a number. He understood

that although news of war might begin with the grief of one family, it could not end at that family's threshold.

Before the war, Vyasa had bestowed upon him the gift of extraordinary sight. Through that divine faculty, Sanjaya could apprehend scenes from the distant field of battle and the order in which events unfolded; he was not an ordinary eyewitness, watching with his natural eyes from the royal court. Yet the scene made available to him and the meaning given to it were not one and the same. The dust of battle, the movement of chariots, the rain of arrows, and the falling soldiers could enter his account. But why should he claim to know, in a single breath, the whole inward decision of every warrior, the sorrow in the home of every unknown soldier who died, and the consequences of tomorrow?

"Did you see everything?" Dhritarashtra asked. Sanjaya said, "Your Majesty, I describe the scenes made available to me by Vyasa's grace. What I infer from the events on the field I shall not present as though I had seen it. And where I have not entered the depths of a person's mind, I shall not invent the hidden cause of that person's decision." Dhritarashtra bowed his head. The answer brought him less reassurance than a fuller weight of war. He was king; nevertheless, he could exercise no dominion over the lives of his sons.

Sanjaya began his account of the chariots on the first day. Banners stirred across Kurukshetra's vast expanse. The sound of a conch rose in one quarter and dissolved in another; yet not every sound upon the battlefield was a command. The beat of hooves, the cries of the wounded, and the calls of commanders mingled together. The king interrupted him. "Was that conch a sign of victory?" Sanjaya replied, "To hear the conch and to know the final outcome of the war are two different things. At that moment the war was beginning; victory had not been decided."

The wick in an oil lamp trembled inside a metal vessel at the side of the hall. Dhritarashtra asked Sanjaya to sit, but Sanjaya remained standing. The king's question concerned more than the strength of armies: he wanted to know whose orders had reached whose bodies. Sanjaya said, "Fatherly affection and decisions of state have both been part of your life, Your Majesty. If I recount only grief, the history of decisions will be lost; if I speak only of royal guilt, the suffering of this household will go unheard." The king listened to the faint trembling sound of the vessel and made no reply.

Dhritarashtra asked about his son Duryodhana. Sanjaya described the arrangements the prince had made, his approach to his teacher Drona, and the disposition of his forces. But he added one thing: not every soldier standing on the battlefield in obedience to the king's command shared Duryodhana's desires. One was there out of duty, another out of fear, another for the livelihood of a family. Dhritarashtra had no sight, yet amid these voices the presence of those unknown people began to trouble him.

Arjuna's chariot had halted between the two armies. Sanjaya recounted the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna to the king: why a warrior standing amid war trembles at the sight of his teachers, kinsmen, and friends, and how the question of duty cannot be resolved by command alone. Dhritarashtra listened without speaking. "Arjuna did, at last, take up his weapon," Sanjaya said, "but his first question had not been erased. He made his decision bearing the weight of that question." Hearing this, the king remembered the many days of his own long silence.

As Sanjaya reached the account of the tenth day, his voice grew quiet once more. Shikhandi's chariot stood before Bhishma, and Arjuna's arrows rained down. Bhishma held to his decision not to raise a weapon against Shikhandi. Sanjaya did not credit every arrow to one bow, nor did he dismiss Shikhandi as an inert shield. Bhishma's body, pierced by many arrows, came to rest upon a bed of shafts. "Did he die then?" Dhritarashtra asked again. "No," Sanjaya made clear. "He fell there; he did not die. He is still breathing."

Dhritarashtra shuddered. He asked whether Bhishma had been given water, who stood around him, and whom he remembered in the privacy of his mind. Sanjaya told what he could recount of events, but did not attempt to claim full possession of Bhishma's inward memories. The king grew dissatisfied. "Then you cannot tell me everything?" Sanjaya answered, "If I claim to tell everything, even what I do know will become less worthy of trust."

For a little while Sanjaya stood alone in a dark passage of Hastinapura. It would have been easy to conceal the king's responsibility behind the king's grief; it would have been just as easy, in speaking of his responsibility, to diminish his private sorrow. Sanjaya resolved to do neither. Returning to the hall, he said, "Your Majesty, I shall recount the course of the war. But the decisions that brought us to war are questions you yourself must ask." Dhritarashtra did not order him to be silent. That day the king felt clearly, for the first time, the limits of his own listening.

On Naira's desk in Videhapur there was no ancient manuscript belonging to Sanjaya. She had laid out three copies from a modern murder investigation. The first was a receipt acknowledging Mahesh's statement; the second, Kabir's amended eyewitness account; the third, the hospital register of entries and departures. Each recorded a different action on the same night. Mahesh's receipt proved that a statement had been submitted, not that every allegation in it had been established as true. Kabir's statement concerned a limited glimpse of the blow; the hospital register documented the time at which the injured man was brought for treatment.

It was not easy to find old pages in the hospital's records room. An employee brought out a thick file and asked whose signature they wanted. Aditi said, "Before a copy of any signature, we need to see the original sequence of the pages." Two pages in the middle had been placed in reverse

order; setting them right did not change the recorded admission time, but clarified the order in which the entries had been written. Naira did not insist that the employee's name be put into her report. She wrote that the difference between the binding of the papers and the time of their entries remained a matter for official inquiry. The smell of the old file and the exhaustion in the employee's eyes were both part of that day's work.

Naira wrote separate dates above the pages. Comparing a copy made after the death with a contemporaneous document from the night of the first attack, they found a difference between the times shown by the clocks. Aditi said, "We have not established whether the hospital clock and the guard's clock showed the same time. If we treat a difference of five minutes as time unaccounted for in the crime, we may turn the investigation upside down." Naira recorded the question of testing the clocks separately. A colleague said, "Who will read such a small detail in the news?" Naira replied, "We cannot change the meaning of time to make a report easier to read."

As Kabir read his statement, he stopped at one passage. The clerk had written, 'The witness saw a person wearing red.' He had already asked on the first night for the reference to colour to be removed. "I do not know what effect the light had upon the colour," he said. "The bulb in the corridor was half broken. What looked red may have been some other dark colour." At this the clerk grew irritated. "If you strike out every detail, what will remain?" Kabir answered, "What will remain is the trustworthiness of what has not been struck out." Once more, the date and signatures of correction were added.

Mahesh's wife asked to meet Kabir separately. She did not wish to hear an accusation against anyone; she wanted to know whether her home was safe. "Will the public copy of your statement contain details by which my daughter could be identified?" she asked. Kabir replied, "The original is with the authorised investigation. I cannot myself issue orders about the public copy. But a separate application can be made to remove personal details." His wife read the application herself, did not have their daughter's name entered, and kept its receipt number in a small notebook. Bereavement had not taken from her the right to decide.

Naira's editor proposed a new headline: 'Eyewitness to Mahesh's Murder Reveals a Face'. Naira drew a red line beneath it. "No face has been revealed," she said. "The eyewitness saw only figures and part of a blow. If we use a headline like that again, we shall repeat our admitted error in another form." The editor asked, "What, then, shall we write?" Naira turned the paper towards him: 'Amended Testimony Distinguishes What Was Seen from What Was Inferred'. Displeasure showed on the editor's face; but this time the decision to publish a headline without examining the original statement was deferred.

That evening Lata came to Naira's office carrying a small bundle. Inside were separate copies of an old register bearing the name 'Mithua', an incomplete receipt for a boat fare, and an elderly person's account of what he had heard. Lata asked, "Is there anything here that can establish where my Mithun is?" Naira arranged the papers in order. "There is a similarity of names, but 'Mithua' may also be someone else's familiar name. The receipt gives neither the full name nor the complete details of the journey. The old man's statement concerns what he heard; it is not clear that he himself saw Mithun sitting in the boat."

From the bundle Lata drew a piece of the old red thread Mithun had worn. "This was on his wrist," she said, "but if I see a thread of this colour on another child's wrist, I cannot call that child Mithun." Naira listened. On the back of the receipt Lata herself wrote two questions: 'Who holds the original receipt?' and 'Who witnessed the date of the journey?' Her handwriting was still unsteady, but the questions were her own. She put the thread back into her bundle; she did not surrender it to any inquiry room as evidence.

Lata's eyes remained fixed upon the receipt. She read the Maithili numerals once, then the blurred date written on the reverse. "Should I go there and ask?" she said. Naira replied, "Before travelling, it is essential to find out who has the original receipt. You must not give up another day's earnings and set out on the strength of an incomplete copy, only to return with one more conjecture." Lata did not agree at once. "My son is missing. I cannot set aside the calculation of risk. But if I travel, I shall first write down whom I intend to question and what I shall ask."

When Tara arrived at the office, she had in her notebook a copy of the five unaccepted conditions for an agreement concerning the gate. Reading the water committee's letter from the opposite bank, she said, "On the journey across the border, the workers' words must be translated. But I shall not enter their names in the envoy's letter without permission." Padma insisted that the original language and the translation be kept in separate copies. "The words in the language a person spoke must be preserved first," she said. "What we explain in translation must not be allowed to become the original testimony." Naira recorded that the travelling party would agree separately with each person on the limits of any use of their words.

The investigating officer showed Kabir the plan of the scene. The old wing of the hospital, the rear door, and the bend in the corridor were marked upon the paper. Kabir indicated where he had been standing. The clerk drew an arrow pointing towards the warehouse. "Why that?" Kabir asked. The officer replied, "Our team's conjecture about the possible direction of escape." Kabir said, "Mark that possibility in another colour; do not put it into the testimony of my eyes." The arrow was not erased. It was labelled 'Investigative Inference' and placed in a separate section. A map of a route was not the same thing as identification of a criminal.

During the statement, an empty chair had been placed before Raghav's nephew. "May I get up and have some water?" he asked. The officer gave permission. When he returned he read the page, then pointed to his old signature beneath the words 'Materials Received'. "That is work I did," he said, "but it was not my responsibility to determine whether patients could remain in a half-built section." His voice trembled. Outside the door Raghav was worrying about the work he had lost, but he did not put his own defence into his nephew's mouth.

Raghav Singh's nephew was prepared to give his authorised statement that day, but stipulated that he must first see his original materials receipt. "The signature I gave was for delivery of goods," he said, "not for an examination certifying their safe use." The officer assured him that this distinction would be maintained in the statement. Raghav stood outside. His suspended contract had reduced the family's income, but he did not instruct his nephew to remember something untrue. The receipt might prove useful in the inquiry into Mahesh's murder; the time had not yet come to call it conclusive proof of an order to kill.

At noon Mahesh's daughter came home with a page of schoolwork. She asked whether she should tell the teacher the address of their new accommodation. Her mother telephoned the head teacher and requested that the information be kept in a contact register with restricted access. The child opened her drawing of the river once more. "I shall give this boat a new colour," she said, "but not the part Baba coloured." Her mother sat beside her. The girl herself was drawing the boundaries of her picture. Before so small a decision, the proportions of all the public reports seemed, for a moment, very slight.

That evening Naira wrote the opening paragraph of her new report. Three matters had clear primary grounds: Mahesh had been murdered, the police investigation was continuing, and Kabir had made an amended statement. Beyond these, she wrote that the identification of a face, the order behind the attack, and any possible connection with the materials register were still separate subjects for inquiry. This time the editor removed the family's private address. The link to the correction of Naira's first publication error remained in the report, but the route to the family's home did not. For the first time she saw that admitting an error and preventing a new one were two different kinds of labour.

At night the scene of Dhritarashtra's assembly hall rose once more in Sanjaya's account. The king asked, "When I hear of Bhishma's fall, is the scene my mind constructs true or false?" Sanjaya said, "From what you hear, your mind makes an image. I am responsible for what I say; but I am not a witness to every shape formed in another person's mind." Dhritarashtra was silent. Then he said, "Continue, then. But wherever you do not know, tell me

that too.” For the first time, Sanjaya heard in the king’s command permission to endure incompleteness alongside truth.

Sanjaya took up his tale again, but did not invent the name of every unknown soldier on the battlefield. He spoke of Bhishma’s bed of arrows, Shikhandi’s active presence, and Arjuna’s shafts, and listened to the king’s questions. The king wanted to know the fate awaiting his sons. Sanjaya said, “The decisions of the next battle are yet to be made. Let us name clearly those who have fallen, and not enter the living, before their time, in the register of the dead.” These words brought the king no happiness, but they gave him one necessary discipline of news.

Naira’s last task at the office that night was to prepare four separate envelopes. The first held Kabir’s eyewitness statement and its correction; the second, the receipt in the materials register; the third, the questions concerning the name ‘Mithua’ and the incomplete boat-fare receipt; the fourth, the water committee’s letter to the envoy and the permission for translation. On each she wrote the original source, the date the copy had been made, and the conditions governing its use. None of this established anyone’s guilt, or found Mithun, or produced an agreement over the public passage. But now a gap in one item of evidence could no longer be filled by an imagined supplement from another.

As Tara was leaving, she asked, “When do we begin preparing to go to Simatirtha?” Padma said, “First we must make clear the boat fare, the place where we shall disembark, and the wages for language assistance. Until those three things are settled, I shall not ask anyone to come.” Lata gathered up the notebook containing her questions for the journey. Before going home, Kabir arranged for the receipt number of Mahesh’s wife’s security application to reach her, without making her address public. Night would pass; beyond the papers, people’s bodies, livelihoods, and fears remained real, each in its own place.

Before going to sleep in the new room, Mahesh’s daughter placed her drawing of the river not in her mother’s hands, but between the pages of her own book. As her mother put out the lamp, she asked, “Where have you kept it?” The girl replied, “With me. I shall look at it when I want to.” Her mother asked nothing more. As uncertain as the measured passage of water on the opposite bank, the way through this household’s next day was not yet open. But within the child’s small decision, no one had the right to tell the whole of her life in another person’s voice.

Parva 7 · Droṇa | Sundara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 73 · The Landing at Simatirtha

At dawn, Madhu Kevat was feeling along the damp joints of the boat's planking with her fingertips. The night's water had receded, but across the middle board a fine line showed, sharp as a sliver. She knelt, drew out an iron nail, and turned the split in the wood towards the sunlight. "No full sack is to be placed on this board," she told the boatman beside her. The travelling party had not yet reached the ghat. Madhu's day had begun long before there was anyone to wait for.

Above the path to the opposite bank, Tara Mallik stood with three bags. One held the measurement register and copies of the five conditions on which agreement had failed; another, a change of clothes; the third, folded papers protected against the spray aboard the boat. Padma had kept the questions in their original language in a little bag of her own. Lata carried a plain notebook. On its first page she had written: Who holds the original register bearing the name Mithua? Not one member of the party said aloud that Mithun would be found that day. Yet for Lata this was the first journey of its kind on which she herself had chosen the direction her questions would take.

As she untied the old rope from its mooring post, Madhu asked, "Do you want to be put ashore on the opposite bank, or will you need a vehicle to take you farther, as far as the post?" Tara said, "We shall land on the opposite bank and go on to Simatirtha. I cannot tell how long the inspection of the papers there will take." Madhu opened her ledger. The boat fare, weight of luggage, hour of disembarkation on the far side, and charge for keeping the boat waiting each had a separate space. Padma asked, "Who will pay for the time of the local woman travelling with us?" "The person whose work it is must be paid for it," Madhu replied. "Her voice is not included in my fare." Tara paid the boat fare in advance; Madhu gave her a signed receipt. Any additional waiting time would be payable separately, and only if it arose.

An employee at the temporary post beside the ghat held out a slip. "This is a visit in the public interest. Why, then, should there be no reduction in the fare?" Madhu asked, "Who will pay for the planks, the repairs, and the boatman's day? Whether I help in an emergency is for me to decide. A government announcement does not make my labour free." Tara asked to see the written approval from the collective fund. There was no signature on the employee's slip. He took the incomplete proposal away again.

An elderly man in the crowd at the landing needed somewhere to sit. Madhu first guided the traveller to a shaded stone, then showed Lata the bamboo handhold for boarding. When Tara started setting the luggage on

the boat's planks, Madhu stopped her. "Weigh it first. The map of the road is in your hands; the measure of what this boat can bear is in mine." Tara remembered Hira Sahni's earlier warning: an incomplete measurement of a load was no proof of a safe journey. Together they opened a small bundle. Two unnecessary iron tools were left at the landing with a responsible custodian, against a receipt. That delay was the journey's first decision.

Just then Shanti Bote came back from the opposite bank and brought her small boat alongside. The friction of the rope had left red lines across her palms. She told Madhu that the previous day she had delivered two sacks to the landing-house on the far side, but the entry at the desk acknowledged receipt of only one. "I am asking for an accounting on my own behalf," she said. "Do not put what I am owed under the name of your party." Madhu examined her slip, but in her own ledger recorded only that Shanti had made a claim; she did not write that payment had been made. Today Shanti wanted to carry back a small consignment belonging to a family. For her, the border meant more than a journey: it was the next day's earnings.

Lata broke the silence. "What if, behind that register marked 'Mithua', I find Mithun's name?" Padma said, "Then we shall ask who was present when the name was entered, and what their source was. A matching name will not establish the child's identity." "I know," Lata answered. "But you need not explain to me every time that because I am his mother I will rush to a conclusion." Padma closed her bag. "You are right. You will ask your own questions. My work is to make the language understood, not to choose the answers." Lata looked towards the water again, but this time her notebook stayed open.

The landing plank on the opposite bank had slipped sideways. Madhu brought the boat close to shore but did not set the plank down at once. First she checked for hollows beneath the wet earth where the passengers would put their feet. As soon as Tara stepped ashore, her sandal sank into the mud. Lata burst out laughing. "We draw straight paths on paper," she said, "and the earth keeps its own bends." Tara laughed too. Madhu offered the bamboo pole, but asked Lata before trying to lift her. Once she was steady on shore, Lata herself picked up Padma's bag. The first stage was over. The border was still far away.

Under the roof of the landing-house an old signboard carried two names: "Gandak" and "Gandaki." Shanti Bote had come there to collect acknowledgement of her consignment. An employee said that the first name was used for the river water and the second for a trading address. Shanti shook her head. "That is how your office understands it. Both forms appear on my old boat-fare documents. Look at how old the papers are, and who wrote them." Padma noted both forms. She did not turn the signboard into proof of two separate rivers, nor did she settle any geographical correspondence.

Near a wall inside the landing-house, “Gohi” had also been written in black ink. Madhu showed them a page of her ledger in which that name appeared beside an old fare route. “Do not suppose this word means that all our boats travel on one and the same current,” she said. “We can know precisely what this slip means only when we find who issued it and the details of the route.” Tara kept Gandaki and Gohi as distinct names in the documentary record. For those whose daily labour lay upon the river, a mistake in a name was never merely a mistake on a map; it could become a quarrel over fares.

During a two-hour halt, slips were handed out near the post for names and addresses. Tara did not add Lata’s family’s private address to the public list of the party. She handed Lata the pen so that she could answer the question herself. An employee glanced at the paper and asked, “Why are three women travelling alone?” “Because we have work to do,” Lata replied. The question had nothing to do with any travel regulation. Once the inspection was finished, they went on to buy their tickets.

When the bus made its first stop at the outer market of Simatirtha, the smell of dust and hot spices filled the interior. The driver tried to load an unnecessary third sack. Tara showed him the weight printed on the ticket; he had been reading a luggage slip meant for another vehicle. Lata was about to lift a basket belonging to a child seated behind her when the child’s mother took hold of it herself. “That is my pot of curd,” she said. “People should ask before doing someone a favour.” A little laugh ran through the bus. The dispute dissolved into laughter, and the pot arrived safely in its proper place.

At the entrance to the market, Padma found Kumudi waiting to help with the languages. Shanti had written to her beforehand. Kumudi understood the local speech, Maithili, and the working vocabulary of offices across the border; apart from interpreting, she also kept accounts of goods traded in the market. Her first question was, “Do you need my time for the whole day, or for two meetings?” “Two meetings,” Padma replied, “and if more is needed, a new agreement.” Kumudi stated her rate. For a moment Tara thought the sum high. Kumudi asked, “Showing the way, listening, and then bringing words into correspondence—is all that a single task?”

Kumudi’s question made Padma revise her earlier assumption. On the journey the party had provided only one budget heading for an “interpreter.” Kumudi explained that the time spent conveying an office’s questions was different from the time spent preserving a craftworker’s answer in her own words; written translation would be another task again. “First let me hear the words of the question I intend to ask,” Lata said. “Do not shorten what I say to suit everybody else.” Kumudi accepted the condition. A receipt for the advance was prepared, the limit of two meetings written down, and it was agreed that disagreements over wording would be marked in the spaces left blank.

Their first meeting took place in a walled courtyard in the market. Sonmati Turi had propped up a bamboo frame; the cloth stretched across its centre fluttered whenever the wind reached it. Smaller and sturdier than the earlier school sample, this was a new frame. A merchant from outside had placed an order requiring every craftworker to supply twenty articles in the same colour and size. “Twenty articles belonging to whom?” Sonmati asked. “The bamboo is mine, the thread belongs to another, the pattern to a third. When something proves faulty, who will be heard?” The merchant’s representative said that one invoice under one name would make things easier.

Sonmati lowered the frame. “Easier for you, not for us,” she said. She added the names of two women craftworkers to the proposal, but did not sign on their behalf without their permission. She had the price of the first five trial frames recorded separately, along with the additional labour required if the pattern changed and the cost of return transport if the whole consignment was rejected. A young woman asked, “Will the order not be delayed if everybody’s name has to appear?” “It will,” Sonmati answered. “But once the work has begun, the delay caused by unpaid wages will cost far more.”

In another corner of the courtyard, Niru Kumal had set three clay vessels upside down. Dark marks from the old kiln showed on their bases. A supplier who had come to see her renewed his proposal for a collective loan: under the name of a producers’ partnership, all the village craftworkers would be jointly responsible for the whole debt. Niru did not even take the paper in her hands. “I will cooperate over safe clay, a shared kiln, and the days when goods are dispatched,” she said. “But why should I accept the old interest owing against someone else’s household without examining it?” The supplier replied that large-scale trade could not grow under such conditions.

Niru then turned over one of the vessels and showed him its base. “This broke in the last consignment. I reduced its price myself,” she said. “I am not running away from responsibility for a fault. But if I take on debts of other people’s that I have never seen, there will not be clay left for making new pots.” Sonmati proposed a small trial consignment. Niru agreed: the separate payment due for five pots, the recorded expense of using the common kiln, and credit limited to what she herself accepted in writing. The merchant deferred the larger order. Niru’s hands were empty, but the next day’s firing in her kiln had not been brought to an end.

Meanwhile Meera Banjara came round the slope behind the market, turning her handcart. In her bag were two receipts relating to the earlier dispute over transporting firewood and salt for the kitchen. This time another proposal awaited her: a partnership to deliver small consignments for Sonmati and Niru twice a week. Meera’s sister did not want all the family carts to depend on orders from a single market. She wanted to preserve her older

relationships with customers along another route. Meera listened to both sides, then stopped the cart's wheel.

"My sister will take her own road," Meera said. "That does not mean she opposes my partnership." The merchant said that every vehicle belonging to the family ought to come under a single mark. "We are one family," Meera answered, "but the vehicles can carry separate liabilities." She had the two days for which her own cart would be available written down, leaving her sister's time blank. Her sister came forward herself. "On that day I shall go to the weekly market across the river. Nobody has the right to hold me back in someone else's name." The two sisters agreed to sign the new proposal on separate terms.

Meena Sarki unrolled her leather straps and laid them out. One was for securing a mule's load; the other was to be tightened at the side of a box used for carrying vessels. She showed the representative a wet strap that had slackened after being in water for a while. "If vessels are carried through wet conditions with this as it is, they will fall," she said. The representative was in a hurry. "All we need is a properly named receipt." Meena grew irritated. "The name on a receipt will not tighten the knot in a strap. Write down the trial load, protection from water, and responsibility for damaged goods first."

Meena unfolded a proposal from a group of leatherworkers across the border. They wanted a day's collaborative work to teach the measurement and stitching of straps, but the proposal gave the merchant complete rights over photographs of the samples and any new designs. Meena struck out that line. "Payment for every sample shown; fresh permission for the use of any new design made together," she said. Sonmati agreed that if a new strap were devised for fastening her bamboo frame, both their names would appear on the trial slip. A small alliance was formed. There was no large bargain yet.

Kumudi hesitated over two words while interpreting this discussion. In the merchant's language, the word for "responsibility" could mean either an obligation to make good a loss or merely a promise to deliver goods. "Which meaning did you use?" Meera asked. Kumudi repeated the original sentence and stated the two meanings separately. "I will not sign saying I have understood what I have not understood," Niru said. The representative complained that too much time had been wasted. "We are paying for the time," Padma replied. "Neither you nor we can afford a liability arising from the wrong word." A second slip was drawn up.

At midday Shanti Bote did not send food from her home. She came herself, carrying beaten rice, fried fish, and vegetables in small vessels. "This is for sale," she said. "The women of my household are not sitting there making free meals for travellers." Lata paid for her portion. Kumudi asked whether the food could be made with less spice. Shanti laughed. "But you belong here!

How has your tongue become such a foreigner?" In that small laughter, the line between insider and outsider loosened for a moment.

In the afternoon they met in the water committee's building. On an old wall hung lines of the drainage channel drawn by hand, with certain places left blank. A local woman stood holding her own measuring cord. "Your maps from Patna or Videhapur cannot tell me how the water drains away from my house," she said. "Where I have seen the water rise is my testimony; it is not a measurement. The measuring must be done again." "That is why we accepted the invitation," Tara replied, "so that we might hear your conditions." She placed her papers on the table without beginning to copy the lines on the wall.

When the meeting opened, Padma presented Kumudi's fee slip separately. The committee secretary asked, "Two payments because the same thing is spoken in two languages?" Kumudi answered for herself. "My work is not to say the same thing twice. It is to preserve what both sides mean. If you permit someone to speak, you must also arrange for her to be heard." The local woman added, "I shall speak about my home in my own language. The interpreter is not my representative; she helps my voice reach another person's ears." The secretary entered an objection on the slip, but the meeting was not stopped.

When her turn came, Lata asked her question. She showed the copied page carrying the name "Mithua," but circulated no photograph of any child. "In whose custody is the original register containing this name?" Kumudi slowly rendered the sentence in the other language. An elderly employee replied that he had seen a slip from the old boathouse, but did not personally know the person who had made the entry in the register. Padma repeated the original answer to Lata. "So the slip you saw and the name you heard about are two different things?" Lata asked. "I saw the slip," the old man said. "Whether Mithua was a child or an adult, I heard from someone else."

Someone at the meeting was about to declare that Mithun's trail had therefore been found. Lata stopped him. "That is not a confirmed trace of my son," she said. "But we have found a way to ask where the slip was seen." The secretary wrote down an official time for inspecting the old boathouse records, adding that there was no guarantee the original copy would be found there. Lata entered the date in her notebook. For the first time that day, the page held something clearer than an answer: a location that could be checked.

Tara opened the copy of the five conditions that had not been accepted. First came the timing of warnings: the local families said that the morning of a surveying party and that of people living in houses of unbaked earth did not run by the same clock. Second was responsibility for the water after the drainage was opened; third, compensation; fourth, access for everyone; fifth, a response to complaints. The secretary wanted the party to record agreement to all the conditions on the very day of the visit. "Today's meeting was an

interview, not an agreement," Tara said. One man grew angry, but the woman from the village spoke: "We will not sign without looking at our fields." At that, the noise of the meeting diminished.

Before evening, Meera arrived with her cart outside the meeting-house. She needed the next day's measurements to carry Sonmati's five frames and Niru's three vessels safely. Meena kept one fastening of the leather strap with her for testing. "I shall stitch a second knot at home," she said, "and only then tell you what load it can bear safely." Niru wrote down the actual number of vessels on the paper, not an estimated number. Having received an advance for the first five frames, Sonmati decided to begin work that evening. Their alliance proceeded not through anyone's grand declaration, but through small, clearly defined limits on the work.

By evening the clouds had thickened. Madhu received only a brief message by phone: the travellers had landed safely, and the time of their return would be decided after they had looked at the weather. Shanti went home with the slip for her earnings; Kumudi left to attend to another customer. Meera watched her sister's cart take a different road, but did not try to stop it. Niru and Sonmati began choosing clay and bamboo for their separate tasks. The day of the families across the border had not begun with the visiting party, nor would it come to a halt when the visitors left.

Lata opened a fresh page of her notebook. It held three lines: the copied name, the testimony of the person who had seen the slip, and the appointed time for inspecting the original record. Nowhere was it written that "Mithun has been found." Nearby Tara checked the boat fare and the separate charge for waiting; Padma marked a disagreement between one of Kumudi's original words and her own translation. The next day's road was not yet wholly clear, but something had been settled by that day's landing: no convenience gained by one person's journey could give that person a free claim upon another's labour, language, or decisions concerning home.

Chapter 74 · Drona's Due

At daybreak in Simatirtha, Shanti Bote began to untie the wet rope of her boat from its bamboo post, then stopped. Tucked into her waistband was the unloading-house slip from the previous day: against the work of unloading two sacks, it recorded payment for only one. An employee coming up from the landing called, "Why bring up yesterday's business all over again today?" Fastening the rope to the post once more, Shanti answered, "Because yesterday I was not paid what I was owed. The boat will go out again today, but yesterday's earnings will not be washed away in the river." The employee carried a bundle of new permits. He said the right to ferry goods and the settlement of old payments belonged to different offices. "Then write down the names of both offices," Shanti said. "I will not waste a day at the wrong door."

Tara, Padma, and Lata had come to the landing to collect the letters arising from yesterday's meeting. Kumudi's time for two meetings had already been used; today she was due to attend to another client. Padma had preserved the disagreements over yesterday's interpretation, but made no claim to decide the wording of Shanti's application herself. Shanti handed her a blank sheet. "When I ask for my earnings, count the time my boat was held up as well," she said. "The hours spent waiting at the checkpoint are hours taken from my household." Tara asked whether obtaining a new crossing permit might make the question of payment easier. "First let them acknowledge the arrears," Shanti replied. "The permit concerns work still to come; the debt concerns work already done."

Long before that morning at the modern river landing, Drona's story had begun differently in the royal world of the Kuru line. The bottom of the grain jar in a small courtyard had become visible. Kripi tilted it and shook out two handfuls of grain; dry husks scattered over the table. Ashwatthama had returned that day after seeing neighbouring children holding vessels of milk. He asked his mother for food, not for milk, but Kripi understood the unanswered question in his eyes. Drona stood at the doorway. His hands knew the discipline of scripture and weapons; they did not know how to secure regular meals for his own child.

As Kripi washed the grain, she said, "The learning you have acquired is not worthless to me. But when the grain in the house runs short, we ought to know exactly what that learning entitles us to ask of whom." Drona answered quietly that Drupada had once been his fellow student, and in their student days they had spoken of being equals. Kripi asked, "Is the affection of schoolfellows the same thing as a promise upon the royal treasury, or as the food belonging to the people?" Drona said nothing. He had decided to go to

Drupada; yet in that journey he had tied together his fear of humiliation and his child's need for food.

When Kripa heard the news and came to see him, Drona was replacing the string of an old bow. "Do you want a teacher's position, or a friend's assistance?" Kripa asked. "I want him to honour the promise he made," Drona replied. Kripa said, "One must establish the words of a promise and the circumstances in which they were spoken. Poverty is no disgrace. But you must understand for yourself the limits of the claim that poverty may give you upon another." Drona's face hardened. The question seemed to him an attempt to belittle a friend's gift. Kripa added, "Your skill is proven. Ask to be paid for teaching princes, and that will be your due for labour. To demand half a kingdom on the strength of a childhood promise is another matter."

When Drona came before Drupada in the assembly hall of Panchala, the doorkeeper looked first at his clothes. Drona introduced himself as Drupada's former fellow student. Drupada recognised him, but lacked the courage to acknowledge their former intimacy before his courtiers. "Companionship in childhood does not confer equality in the right to rule," he said. Within Drona, shame turned into a fiercer anger. He had not wished to leave his friend's house as a beggar; but Drupada, having erected that distinction between them, offered him no honourable path towards a conversation beyond it. A servant standing in the hall kept looking at the small bundle Drona had brought, though he had no right to speak on Drona's behalf.

After the assembly, Drupada told his minister in private that treating an impulsive promise of childhood as a command to divide royal land would be unjust to the people. The minister asked, "Why, then, did this argument require his public humiliation?" Drupada could find no answer. He had been defending the limits of his royal authority, but personal pride had entered into the way he declared those limits. He had lost the opportunity to send Drona away with food, a guest's lodging, and respect. No one in that assembly could then foresee how far the violence born of this humiliation might spread.

Kripa did not question Drona immediately upon his return. Drona gave a brief account of his journey and added his conclusion: "The friend who promised to regard me as his equal will now give me no respect without power." Kripa asked, "Will you then make your pupils pay you that respect?" Drona said, "I give them knowledge. Why should it be wrong to ask something in return?" "There is a boundary between recompense and revenge," Kripa answered. "Measure the worth of a prince's training by the ability he gains. The debt of vengeance for a teacher's humiliation is not fixed by the pupil's birth." Drona stood up when he had heard this much. His silence expressed disagreement, not consent.

When an offer of teaching came from Hastinapura, Drona demonstrated his skill with the bow. The princes' eyes shone with curiosity at the difficult art. On the first day he taught them how to hold the bow and to steady the breath before aiming at a target. When a young student failed, Drona corrected the position of his hand. His mastery in that moment was real; but that truth did not make every order he would issue in the future just by itself. Kripa watched from a distance. He renewed his proposal that training hours, the maintenance of weapons, and the remuneration due to the teacher should be recorded separately. Drona agreed to this arrangement, but he did not erase the account of Drupada's insult from his mind.

One evening Ashwatthama came to his father's training ground and asked, "What you teach me, will you teach the other boys too?" Drona laid a hand upon his forehead and said that the test of merit was demanding. The boy asked again, "Who will see the merit of someone who is never admitted?" Drona had no answer to give him then. From a distance Kripi called her son to eat. The grain jar at home was still not full, but there was now the prospect of new payment for teaching. Drona wanted to leave poverty behind, while also harbouring the thought of writing the old wound to his honour upon the futures of his new pupils.

Back in the present at Simatirtha, two windows of the unloading office opened before noon to receive Shanti's application. The first clerk said that permission to operate the boat was a matter for the local water committee; the second said that freight payment was the responsibility of the merchant who had ordered the goods. Shanti wrote down the two answers separately. "Your stamp is on the merchant's slip," she showed the second clerk. "It does not mean that I was paid. It does, however, confirm that the goods arrived here." The clerk turned the slip over and back. The ink in the line acknowledging receipt of one sack was unusually dark; the figure on the slip for loading the second sack was different. Shanti asked for a dated copy of the original goods-receipt ledger. Even today she would not set the boat free on the strength of a verbal assurance.

Meanwhile, on the veranda behind the office, Asha Bhumij was arranging receipts in a little tin box. It contained many scraps of paper, but the names of the members of a household were nowhere complete in one place. She was adding up the separate costs of temporary accommodation, transport, medicines, and lost earnings for families displaced from the mining area. Tara glanced at the papers and asked, "Will you be able to arrive at one total?" "Adding up a total is not difficult," Asha replied. "But I will not write that everyone was driven out at the same time, or that every loss arose from the same cause." She kept a separate line for each family's consent. Some had paid rent in outlying settlements; others had lived rent-free with relatives, but their children had missed school.

Asha's younger brother grew anxious when he saw the word "belongings" in the account. "Where have you written down my schoolbooks?" he asked. "Where books were lost, I shall record lost books; where schooling was interrupted, I shall record school days," Asha told him. "They are not the same loss." An elderly displaced man offered to be a witness. He had seen the vehicle when people left the area, but had not seen the belongings inside every home. Asha entered that limit into his statement. The first relief slip approved a sum for a few days' lodging; the official deferred a decision on permanent compensation. Asha accepted the interim sum, but not in exchange for surrendering the final claim.

Chanda Munda arrived on the veranda with a blue bag. A new letter had now entered the dispute over her attendance record at the construction site: a printed form requesting permission to return home. Beneath it a clerk had written that no certificate of departure could be issued without the "contractor's remaining approval." Chanda looked at the space for her name. "Why should a contractor's wishes decide whether I may go home?" she asked. The clerk explained that it was merely an office rule. Chanda replied, "I need his accounts for the wages he still owes me. But I have not placed my body, and the right to take it home, under his authority."

Chanda showed the blank spaces on the next slip to the two migrant labourers who had come with her. One was ready to sign without reading because his mother was ill. Chanda did not forbid him. She said, "First hear what is written here: 'All payments received.' If you have not received them, say so clearly in the empty space." The second worker said that his travel fare was a separate claim. Chanda prepared three separate applications for each of them: notice of leaving work, a claim for unpaid wages, and identity verification for the journey. The date of departure was fixed, but the dispute over payment remained open. Preserving that distinction on paper was Chanda's victory for the day.

At the edge of the market, Rafiq arrived carrying two documents of identity he had written himself. The first gave the name of his regional speech, "Surjapuri"; the second gave the community identity his family had preserved in its history for many years. The digital form demanded that both be entered in a single box. "If you write the dialect, the caste will be understood from it as well," the clerk said. Rafiq did not laugh. "If you speak Maithili," he asked, "can all your other identities be understood from that one word?" The clerk said the form had limited space. "Then record the shortage of space," Rafiq replied, "not a shortage in my identity."

Returning from work for another client, Kumudi heard Rafiq's request. She explained that in translation a single word for "language" could diminish the independent identity of a regional dialect, but she had no authority to change an administrative code. Rafiq wrote the original application in his own linguistic form; Kumudi made its purpose clear in the standard language,

and no caste name was added automatically to either version. The official issued a written acknowledgement of the objection. On his way out, Rafiq said, “The digital form has not changed today. But there is now proof that I did not accept the false matching of my identities.” His young niece walked beside him, repeating two words with their particular pronunciations. Rafiq did not correct her; first he asked how those words were spoken in her home.

During the meal break, Lata asked when she could inspect the old boathouse records. An employee said that the original ledger could be seen in the presence of the investigating officer at the appointed hour; no public copy was yet available. Lata wrote the time in her notebook. She did not produce the old “Mithua” slip again, for pasting it everywhere would not reveal what the name meant. “Do you want to go today?” Padma asked. “I shall go,” Lata answered, “but first I will state my conditions for recording whatever I find there. A history in which a child’s name was heard is not the same as the whereabouts of my son.” Tara agreed that the expense of that day’s journey would be entered separately.

Maitri Shrestha came to the office with a folded copy of an old transport document. She was engaged in correcting an old error concerning the time of her family’s transport of medicines. This time she pointed to the name “Parola” on one page. “I want the original pronunciation of this name matched with its written form,” she said. “On another page one letter is different. I cannot say that this means there were two places.” The clerk proposed drawing a route from the old ledger onto a present-day map. Maitri refused. “Here we have a name in a record. To establish where the route actually lay, we need the information recorded by the issuing authority at the time.” Padma copied the name exactly as it appeared.

Another slip came from a journey involving the family of Nasima Shershabadi. At the top stood the name “Mechi.” Nasima had come to the office herself because the copy of the document had incorrectly truncated her family’s name. “I sew strips of paper to save old books,” she said, “but what is the use of saving the paper if the name of my home remains wrongly cut away?” The clerk said that the presence of “Mechi” allowed one to assume the journey had passed through a particular border checkpoint. “Where is that checkpoint’s stamp?” Nasima asked. There was no clear stamp. She supplied the actual date of her journey and the stopping places she herself had seen, but would not accept an entire route inferred from the written name alone.

Nasima’s adolescent daughter, who had come with her, was holding the slip. She asked her mother what would happen in the school admission register if the office could not write their names correctly in their own language. Nasima handed her a pen and asked her to write her name. The girl first wrote the form spoken at home, and then, separately, the spelling demanded by the official. Nasima asked that the two be entered not as mutually contradictory, but as related forms. Rafiq listened from one side. He

did not draw Nasima's identity into his own box, and Nasima did not take Rafiq's linguistic claim and attach it to her own name. They faced an inconvenience in the same office, but the remedy each sought was different.

Shanti received the first reply to her claim for arrears in the afternoon. The unloading office acknowledged that two sacks had been entered in the landing register, but the merchant's freight-distribution account contained only one receipt. The officer gave her an interim acknowledgement: claim received, verification pending. Reading it, Shanti said, "Do not record this as payment." She submitted a separate application for permission to operate the crossing in the future, setting out the working days on both banks and the limits on how long the boat could be held. The officer appointed a time for inspection in the following week. Shanti accepted that much for the prospect of seasonal work with her boat, but kept the arrears slip in a separate file.

In the afternoon Asha brought a new table calculating the losses of displacement. Each row carried a different mark for "seen firsthand," "heard from the family," and "confirmed by receipt." One man complained that writing in this way would make his loss appear smaller. "No," Asha answered, "it will only make the claim stronger. Where there is no receipt, a person's experience will not be erased; the route by which that experience can be verified will be shown separately." She divided responsibility for delivering copies of the approved temporary-housing payments from house to house. An elderly woman said she could not attend their large meetings. Asha arranged to hear her at home; she did not take the woman's signature without her permission.

Towards evening, Chanda took copies of her three applications to the bus stand. She kept one account of the money needed for her ticket home, and another of what the contractor owed her. "If I go home, will I miss the hearing on my claim?" a fellow worker asked. "If you appoint a representative, have notice of the hearing sent to your home," Chanda replied. "If you must attend in person, apply to change the date. I will not let my decision to go home become a letter renouncing my claim." She did not buy her ticket immediately; first she obtained an acknowledgement number from the office. The journey the following dawn was still a possibility, but the contractor's verbal prohibition was no longer being treated as a written right.

In that earlier age at Hastinapura, Kripa came again one evening to Drona's training school and noticed a blank space beneath the schedule of instruction, where the recompense due was to be entered. "Why is this empty?" he asked. "A teacher declares his dakshina when the teaching is complete," Drona said. "He may declare it," Kripa replied, "but the pupil has a right to know beforehand the limits of the risk he will be asked to undertake." Before Drona's eyes the assembly hall of Drupada rose once more. "The account of my humiliation is still unsettled," he said. "Your humiliation

is real," Kripa answered. "It does not follow that every pupil becomes a debtor to your revenge."

Drona did not stop the lessons that day. He corrected Arjuna's grip, gave a weaker pupil another chance, and set Ashwatthama to work oiling the weapons. There was proficiency in what he did, but the space for the teacher's recompense remained empty. In Panchala, Drupada was examining the register of his army's expenses and his subjects' taxes; he too had failed to grasp the full consequences of humiliating his old fellow student. Kripa's question displeased Drona, yet refusing to answer it did not destroy the question. The pupils might one day become soldiers in a future war; for now they were young people learning, whose labour, safety, and decisions had a value of their own.

At Simatirtha, when the first hour of night sounded, Shanti tightened her boat's rope and set off towards home. She carried two slips: one for the old freight charge, a claim neither rejected nor yet verified; the other appointing the date for inspecting her future crossing permit. Asha took away the accounts of her families; Chanda kept copies of her documents for the journey home; Rafiq safeguarded the acknowledgement of his linguistic objection. Maitri's paper bearing "Parola" and Nasima's bearing "Mechi" lay in separate envelopes: they had not been forced together into a single map. Tara and Padma preserved all these distinctions in their travel register, so that at the next inspection no inference could quietly become original evidence.

Once, in the evening crowd, Lata turned to look at the closed door of the records room. No new evidence about Mithun had been found that day. What she had gained was a definite time for examining the original register, and the clearer understanding that, just as the wages due for someone's labour could not be reduced for another person's convenience, neither could the search for someone's child. Closing her notebook, she said to Padma, "Tomorrow I shall look at the page numbers. Before the last digit, I shall read the first name." "And whatever we cannot read," Padma answered, "we shall leave blank." In the lantern-light of the checkpoint, the shadows of the papers stirred. Darkness lay across the river, but each person had brought the name of what was owed to them a little more clearly into view.

Chapter 75 · The One Last Digit

The iron nail that held the window shutter in place at the old warehouse by the railway square had worked loose. Naira pressed it down with her palm to stop the dust blowing over three piles of papers. The first contained public copies, with private details redacted, of the official correspondence relating to Mahesh's murder; the second, transport slips brought from Simatirtha; the third, applications for school and labour assistance. Seeing the final digit, '7', written in blue ink on top of all three piles, Kabir had telephoned the previous night. He had found the coincidence extraordinary. Naira released the nail and straightened a corner of the papers. "The same final digit does not mean the same account," she said. Kabir replied, "But why have all these papers come together in one place because of the same digit?"

Beside the tracks, the tea seller was taking a pan of boiling water off the fire, and the dull thudding of sacks being moved could be heard from a distance. Naira locked the original page of her earlier publication in a desk drawer. She had already acknowledged publicly her responsibility for publishing Mahesh's name in a misleading context; it now seemed unthinkable to link another person's identity to a mere number. She told Kabir, "First write down whose hands brought these three sheets here, on what day, and for what purpose. We can speak of the final digit afterwards."

The first slip belonged to Rajo Bhogta. Her application, sent the previous day for school supplies, had found its way into the wrong compartment at the railway-square assistance centre. On one side was proof of residence in her former village; on the other, a recent receipt for rent. In the school-assistance list, the final address code was seven, and the computer had entered two families' applications under a single serial number. Rajo herself arrived that morning carrying a small bucket. She had come about three different matters: notebooks for her child, water at her rented home, and the outstanding payment for transporting supplies. "What other inquiry is there?" Rajo demanded sharply. "My child's schooling is not a criminal document."

Naira found her a place to sit inside but did not raise the question of taking a photograph. Rajo unfolded the letter bearing her old address. She regarded it as the record of a house she had left, not proof of where she lived now. "I work here while my address keeps changing," she said. "If I cannot get assistance without the old address, the school will move out of reach for the very people building new homes." On the telephone, a school employee insisted that she enter one 'permanent' address. Rajo answered, "At present I have a rent receipt, a record of my child's attendance at school, and a neighbour who can testify. Read all three and tell me which is needed for which purpose."

The skin had peeled from Shiv's palms. Five attendance slips were tucked into his shirt pocket. On one, his name was written 'Dhāṛī' (धाँड़ी); on another, 'Dhāṛi' (धाँडि); on a third, simply 'Shiv'. Payment had been stopped in the digital wage account because of the difference in the final spelling of his name. When the contractor's representative again told him to 'prove his identity', Shiv did not fling the slips onto the table; he spread them out carefully. "Here are the signatures of the men who worked with me on the days I unloaded the sacks," he said. "Check the letters of my name again. Do not blame me for an error instead of paying me for five days' work."

Kabir noticed that Shiv's slip, too, ended in seven. But that was the number of an attendance token, not an address code from the school. He tried to signal this to Naira with his eyes. Naira stopped him and asked Shiv directly, "When did this token come into your hands?" Shiv said the contractor's foreman had given it to him on the first day. On the second day, the number on the machine-generated slip had changed, but the wage list had been prepared from a copy of the old token. The attendance book was still with the contractor. In her notebook Naira wrote 'Shiv's statement', not 'attendance book examined'. Shiv would not let the matter rest there. "Write that I am asking for the money," he said, "not merely for my name to be corrected."

People began gathering at the railway-square centre. Counting his glasses, the tea seller asked whether all the papers would have to be submitted at the same window that day. Rajo burst out laughing. "If there is only one window, start by opening the accounts of everything owed to the tea sellers." A faint smile touched Shiv's face as well. Naira ordered tea and paid for it. The tea seller, for the moment, had no use for the digit written on his mother's slip. As Rajo made this small observation, she rubbed dust from her eyes, as though, amid all the disputes, it was necessary to keep some other part of the day alive.

That same day in Simatirtha, Lata arrived at the appointed hour to examine the records of the old boathouse. The pages of a thick register had been darkened by the oil from many hands. The records keeper opened only the specified entries for one year. In one place there were letters resembling those in the copied name 'Mithua'; alongside them stood a serial number for boat equipment. Lata asked, "Is this a person's name or the name of a consignment?" The employee said, "I cannot be certain from this handwriting. The register is headed 'Boat Equipment'." Rather than write down a conclusion at once, Lata copied the heading and page number. The search for Mithun was not brought to an end by this page.

Padma sent Naira a brief message: the final digit seven occurred repeatedly in the cross-border transport pages, but the serial numbers belonged under different headings. She did not send a photograph of the original register, for permission had been given only to inspect it. Naira wrote back asking whose

hand had made the copy that could be used publicly. Lata asked whether the message had been sent without details identifying her son. Padma showed it to her; there was no name and no indication of a home address. Lata breathed more easily but said, “Helping an inquiry is right. The search for my child will not become material for somebody else’s quarrel.” Padma wrote down her decision.

While Rajo’s and Shiv’s papers were being kept separate, the matter of a third application came up. At the school veranda, Rachana Dhimal was teaching four children to write words for their homes on an alphabet board. Some children from migrant families had returned before the rains; others had left again. The school’s regular attendance register demanded fixed names and entries, while Rachana was conducting weekly classes so that the children’s learning could continue through their journeys. She told Naira over the telephone, “My class has begun. I will ask for books and permission to use a room, but I cannot write down in advance which state these children will be living in during which month.”

Among the school papers Rachana read the name of a watercourse, ‘Tilayuga’, beside a copied map of the fictional Tilwaha. A volunteer wanted to declare the two names alternate forms of a single river. Naira stopped him. “Tilwaha is the name of the river within this town’s story. Tilayuga, or Tilayugba, belongs to a separate register of sources. A likeness in sound does not make the place, the boundary, and the rights to its waters the same.” Rachana said that what she needed was a route by which the schoolchildren could travel, not a map establishing ownership of the river. Yet if official papers wrongly conflated the names, a family might be marked absent at an address where it had never been expected to live.

The headmaster said that changing the language of the textbooks lay outside the school’s authority. Rachana answered, “Keep your textbooks. I will teach a class that explains their words in the language spoken at home. And make a way for a child returning after a journey to catch up with the pages missed.” She also set out her payment plainly: the hours spent teaching, the preparation, and the labour of sending messages from house to house. The headmaster had initially taken this to be voluntary service. Rachana told him that giving one day freely was one thing, teaching throughout the year another. At last a proposal was written down for the use of an empty room twice a week and for trial wages. Permanent approval was still pending.

At the railway square, a young man showed Kabir a list spreading across phone screens. It marked Rajo, Shiv, medicine transport, migrant arrivals, and school papers in the same colour. Its heading was ‘The Number Seven Network’. Such a correspondence could not be accidental, the young man insisted. For an instant Kabir felt the old haste rise within him. If he published the list, his name would be counted among those leading the investigation. He showed it to Naira. She asked, “Did the person who

compiled this list consult the original accounts, or only the pictures people shared?" The young man replied, "All the pictures came from people." "Then it is a list of pictures," Naira said, "not proof that the accounts are the same."

The young man's friend objected, "Mahesh has been killed. Now are you calling every piece of evidence a coincidence in order to protect yourselves?" Naira's expression hardened. "Mahesh's death is a verified event. Who killed him, what the motive was, and which records are connected with it—those are three questions requiring three separate answers. I know the cost of my first mistake. I will not put another family in danger by joining names without verification." The young man asked, "Then do the numbers tell us nothing?" Naira answered, "Numbers can raise questions. Without knowing their sources, they cannot deliver a verdict against anyone."

Near midday, Amir Kulhaiya arrived at the centre with a small business ledger. He helped migrant workers send their earnings home; letters and money did not always reach their families on the same day. An earlier message involving Nasima's family had convinced him that an incorrect form of address in another language could change the person to whom money was paid. Now a broker had put forward a proposal: Amir should hand the families' money to a private intermediary, who promised to deliver it faster using one 'shared code'. The proposal sheet, too, ended in seven. Amir sat down. "Who bears the price of such speed?" he asked.

The broker displayed his stamp, but the stamp was not a receipt acknowledging payment. Amir gave a woman from one of the families a chance to put her questions over the telephone. She said that on the previous occasion the money had arrived in the name of a male relative, although she was the one who managed the household expenses. Amir asked the broker whether he would put in writing each recipient's independent consent, the exchange rate, the service charge, and the arrangements for returning money after a failed transaction. "A business cannot stand on so many details," the broker said. Amir did not laugh. "Then this business will not be conducted with our people's money," he replied. He set a day for comparing authorised transfer methods for three families and rejected the proposal to hand over their cash collectively to a private intermediary.

When Amir opened his ledger, Kabir could see how different the digits were. Rajo's seven was an address code; Shiv's, an attendance token; Amir's, the final mark on a proposed transaction slip. On some of the other papers the '7' was not an identifying number at all but a page number. Yet the shared list called them all 'matching identification numbers'. Naira gave Kabir two pens of different colours: one for details established from an original source, the other for information merely reported to them. Kabir asked whether they needed a third colour for words translated from another language. "Yes," Naira said, "if the meaning of the words changes."

At the medicine-transport centre in Simatirtha, Maitri Shrestha had opened an old receipt from her family's papers. After noticing a variant reading of the name 'Parola' the previous day, she now needed to examine the dispatch note for a new consignment of medicines. In the original Nepali document, one word marked the date on which the goods had been 'released for departure'; the Hindi translation had rendered it as 'received'. Because of that difference, the local hospital maintained that the medicines had arrived, while the carrier said the consignment was still on its way. Maitri recorded separately the seal on the boxes, the departure of the vehicle, and the hospital's acknowledgment of receipt.

An employee showed her the figures on his computer. The entry with a serial number ending in seven was marked 'complete'. "The software says the goods have arrived," he said. Maitri asked, "Which employee opened the medicines and counted them?" No one answered. The hospital storekeeper was telephoned; he said he had received notification of the consignment, not the boxes themselves. Maitri insisted that its status be entered as 'verification pending'. The employee protested that changing an old entry would disrupt the accounts. "To save a false account," Maitri replied, "you can make medicine reach its destination on paper, but not reach a human body."

Maitri was not herself a translator, but she did not regard the labour of interpreting transport terms as something to be had for nothing. Before asking Kumudi to come, she inquired about her available time and remuneration. Kumudi arrived after finishing another job. She carefully compared the three sentences in the original language, the dispatch order, and the receipt slip. She stated plainly that correcting the translation did not prove the boxes had actually arrived. Maitri signed the corrected statement, and Kumudi entered her own name as translator. The storekeeper decided that on the boxes' arrival he would check the count, the medicine names, and the condition of temperature protection; until then they would not be entered in the receipt register.

Seeing the name Panar in Maitri's letter, an assistant proposed changing it on the map to another sound-form used in the local speech. Rafiq had come to the same office for a copy of his earlier application concerning his linguistic identity. "The sounds I hear in my Surjapuri speech need not always be written in one form," he said. "But the sound I speak cannot establish the location named in a document from another district." In a note, Kumudi kept the original spelling of Panar distinct from Rafiq's spoken form.

In the afternoon a call came from the railway square to the cross-border centre. Naira asked Maitri who owned the original receipt and which portions could be made available in a certified copy. Maitri said that she could send the corrected translation, but not the box-seal register without the office's permission. Naira read aloud the wording of an application seeking that permission. Maitri laughed. "Before you draft your letter, remember that I am

running about trying to get the medicines onto the right route. Do not stop my work for the sake of your investigation.” Naira agreed at once. The time of an inquiry and the time of medicines could not be measured by the same hands of a clock.

Another message reached Rajo from the school. Her application was about to be removed from the assistance list as a ‘suspected duplicate’, because the computer held two addresses with the same final digit. Rajo went to the school herself. She showed the headmaster not the paper leaf her daughter had made, but the attendance register. “This child studies here,” she said. “She no longer lives at that old address.” The school employee said resources were scarce and checking each differing address took time. “Then write down how long the checking will take, and arrange interim assistance as well,” Rajo replied. “Do not place the burden of an error on the child.” In the end the school authorised temporary use of books for one week and fixed a date for verifying her residence. The final decision on the full assistance remained outstanding.

News also came from Rachana’s school. Two families had agreed to the mother-tongue class, but a third wanted its child not to speak the language of home, for fear of ridicule. Rachana sat apart with the mother and asked which words came most naturally to the child. At first the woman was silent. Then she said she wanted to change the language in which the child was taught, not abandon the language of her home. Rachana altered the programme: first shared pictures and counting, and then answers in whichever language the child chose. The class became a place for learning, not a performance in which a child had to cast off shame before an audience.

At last the contractor’s account for Shiv’s unpaid wages reached the centre. The foreman brought a copy of his signature. On two slips the letters of the same worker’s name differed, but the dates of work and the number of sacks agreed. The automatic reason for withholding payment was the variation in the name; it was not evidence that someone had deliberately stolen Shiv’s wages. “Whether the cause is a machine or a human being,” Shiv said, “the sacks I lifted all day were real.” Naira demanded a written decision from the contractor. He ordered payment of the three verified days’ wages and instructed that attendance for the remaining two days be checked with two members of the work team. Shiv took the receipt and counted. “Not half,” he corrected them. “Three days’ wages. Let the other two days remain written down.”

When the contractor’s representative asked whom they should blame for the error, Shiv said he did not yet know. “The slip tells us that the form of my name changed,” he said. “Whether somebody changed it deliberately or it went wrong in the writing needs a separate inquiry.” Naira attached particular importance to that distinction, for it raised again the question of when and how Mahesh’s name had circulated through the old warehouse papers. But there was still no direct source connecting the error in Shiv’s payment to

Mahesh's death. Finding the same kind of carelessness did not establish the same perpetrator.

Kabir opened the shared list on his phone again. Its original heading could now be changed. He wrote: 'Final digit seven in separate accounts; three verified sources, two unconfirmed copies.' Naira asked, "Is there any need to make this list public?" Kabir thought for a while. "No. Once it is public, people will see the digit before they see the distinctions," he said. He restricted access to the list, recorded the permission given by the owners of the original papers, and removed Mahesh's family details and Rajo's address. His old eagerness for news was still alive, but this small act of restraint was his own decision, not an order from Naira.

As evening approached, Amir met the three families at the centre. An elderly woman was expecting money for her grandson; a migrant young man was sending funds for his mother's medicines; and a woman from the third family explicitly insisted on receiving the money in her own name. Amir explained that they could discuss the matter together without needing a joint account. Each receipt would separately record the sender, recipient, fee, and arrangements for refunding an unsuccessful transfer. The elderly woman asked whether so much writing would not cause delay. "It will take longer," Amir said, "but less time than the delay caused by money arriving in the wrong place." The families chose the authorised route for payment. The broker's demand for an advance remained rejected.

Far away in Simatirtha, Maitri's boxes of medicine finally arrived on the evening vehicle. The seal was found intact before the storekeeper, but one slip concerning temperature control was unclear. The decision on whether the medicines were fit for use was left to medical testing. Maitri obtained a separate receipt for the freight; she did not claim to issue a certificate of the medicines' quality. As Kumudi prepared to go home, Maitri paid her for that day's work. Rafiq spoke the Panar word in his dialect once more, but no one drew a public map on the strength of the sound. That day's useful correction had been made not on a map, but in the meaning of a sentence in the office records.

Returning from the records room, Lata told Padma that the heading 'Boat Equipment' on the old page containing 'Mithua' had weakened the supposition that the entry referred to a person. Padma asked, "Then will the next inquiry stop?" Lata answered, "No. Someone who has not lost a child may feel relieved when one page ceases to offer a lead. I need to know whose hand made that slip. But I will not have somebody else's boat accounts seized in Mithun's name before we know." She filed an application for lawful access to the original copy. In the slow pace of this search lay the firmness of her decision, not defeat.

In the darkness at the railway square, the boy closing the office was testing the lock on the outer door. Rajo went home with coloured paper for her daughter; Shiv walked towards the market to buy rations with the wages for three days; Rachana was preparing pictures for her next class; Amir was keeping the three families' receipts separate. These were outcomes of their own days, not appendices to a single mystery. Naira left one sheet on the table: 'Final digit seven; differences of source confirmed; connection with a crime unverified.' Below it were four empty spaces: original register, handwriting, time of entry, and who benefited. She knew that these spaces did not yet yield an answer about motive.

As Kabir tightened the nail in the window, he asked, "Shall we meet here again tomorrow?" Before putting out the light, Naira replied, "When the authorised answer about the original papers comes. Until then, Rajo's books, Shiv's remaining wages, and the actual examination of Maitri's medicines must continue." The wind no longer entered, but the sound of the trains outside went on. In her register of corrections, Naira wrote only this: even when the number is the same, the person, the object, and the event are not necessarily one. The search for justice in Mahesh's death continued without interruption; to refrain from carelessly joining another innocent person's name to that search was the difficult decision she had earned that day.

Chapter 76 · After Ekalavya

At dawn Pratima Rajvanshi stood beside the wall behind the school, an old bamboo pole in her hand. Three arm's lengths from the wall, beside a newly planted iron stake, two pupils had begun playing marbles in the earth. Pratima did not tell them to move. First she pointed out the thin red thread tied to the stake's tip. "Who tied this thread?" she asked. "Two men came yesterday evening," one child said. "They said a big shop would be built here." Pratima listened, but did not mistake a child's report for a surveyor's order. She opened her notebook, entered the stake's distance from the wall, and looked towards the old gate through which the children came to school in the rains.

As the headmaster arrived to unlock the school, Pratima showed him her map. "This is the copy preserved in my family," she said. "I have always heard at home of an ancestral gift of land. But we must check the original register to find which part of this ground, if any, stands recorded in the school's name. For now I am asking only whose authority placed an iron stake outside the wall." The headmaster said that a shopkeeper's representative had approached him one day, but the school had given no written consent. Pratima asked him to preserve dated photographs of the children's footpath and of the open ground used by the school. She did not wish him to rush into declaring the land private property either.

Rajo Bhogta arrived at the gate with her daughter. In her hand was the acknowledgement for the application struck from the assistance list the previous day. She asked Pratima whether the new stake meant that the path behind the school would be closed. "We do not know yet," Pratima answered. "And if someone intends to close it, we shall ask by what right." Rajo said, "Whether my daughter receives assistance is a separate decision. But her way to school must not be blocked." Rather than bury those two different demands in a single petition, Pratima proposed writing two letters.

Inside, Rachana Dhimal was drawing pictures for the children along the blank edges of old newspapers. Rajo's daughter chose a boat. "What do you call this at home?" Rachana asked. The word the child spoke was different from the word used in Rachana's own household. Instead of correcting her, Rachana wrote down both. In that moment Pratima understood that a claim over school land was not merely a dispute about title deeds. The continuity of the learning taking place in this open room was also at stake. Yet a child's two words could not establish the legal boundary of a plot of land.

At about the same time, a message came from Sarita in Videhapur. She was arranging to return Ramvati Khatwe's old letter, saved through the rainy season, in accordance with Ramvati's permission. Ramvati was seated outside the Simatirtha office. She had identity papers issued in two places: one bearing

the name of her family's former home, the other spelling her name differently after marriage. Turning his screen towards her, the clerk said, "One of these must be wrong. You choose which one to keep." Ramvati asked, "Will choosing wipe out my earlier life? In whose name shall I claim the wages still owed where I worked before?"

The shifting of a border had not changed the work of her hands. In the paddy-planting season she worked in the fields; in winter she mended clothes. But one register had added her post-marriage address, while another retained the identity under which she had worked in the first place. The employee said it was an ordinary correction of a name. Ramvati opened a little cloth pouch and took out the receipt for her first wages. "This bears my former identity," she said, "but I was the person who did that work. If you treat the names as two different women, the money will disappear. If you erase the newer paper, how is my daughter to give her mother's identity at school?"

Before proceeding, she asked Ramvati whether she needed help understanding the document's words or wished to write the application herself. "I shall speak for myself," Ramvati replied. "Keep the same question alive in both languages." Kumudi read aloud the expression used in the original paper's other language. In one place it said "return"; on the printed form, the same matter had been rendered as "new migration." On hearing the difference, Ramvati dictated three lines: recognition of her earlier work, her present residence, and the continuing claim to her wages. She had her objection recorded to treating any one of these as a substitute for the others.

Outside the office Ramvati received Sarita's letter. Damp had made the corners of the old paper fragile. On it Ramvati recognised the signature she had used when she had stayed for several days at Sarita's home. Over the telephone Sarita said, "It is your paper. I kept it; that gives me no right to write its meaning for you." Ramvati asked permission to attach that old signature as evidence in the present application, while making it explicit that the letter alone did not establish the validity of both identity papers. The office accepted her application. A decision on the correction would await the original issuing register.

Long before these modern documents, at the edge of an ancient forest, Ekalavya stood examining a broken bowstring. The wound on his thumb was old, but stiffness still troubled his hand in the mornings. That day a new girl came with the adolescent boy who was learning from him. The girl's mother made vessels from bark, but her daughter wanted to learn to read the forest paths and tie the safe knots used in nets. Ekalavya did not place a bow in her hand. He first asked, "What is your name? And whose wish is it that you have come here?"

The girl said her name was Jhumki. "My mother sent me," she replied, then paused and added, "But I want to learn. I want to show those who say my

hands are not made for this work.” Ekalavya set a length of cord before her and made no inquiry into her ancestry. “Tie this knot first. If you do not know, say so. Pretend to know and the rope will break.” Twice Jhumki tied it the wrong way. On the third attempt she stopped and noticed how the wet end of the cord was leaving slack as she pulled it tight.

The elderly cord-maker, who had earlier spoken to Ekalavya about accounting for the value of teaching time, watched Jhumki at work. “Your school has more pupils now,” she said to him. “But I am still paid the old rate for my cord.” Ekalavya replied that the cord for the new pupils had been taken from the common store. “Where in that store,” the old woman asked, “are the names of those whose labour filled it?” Ekalavya opened the old bark ledger. One leaf recorded a portion of the adolescent boy’s first earnings, but nothing about the cord-maker’s hours. He called for a fresh leaf and asked the woman to explain how her work should be measured.

Meanwhile a hunter came down the outer forest path. “Pupils will come to you because of your name,” he said, “and hearing that name, they will pay a teacher’s gift.” Ekalavya stretched the fingers of his injured hand. “The price of that name has already been paid,” he said. “I cannot now cheat the children who come here.” The hunter objected: “Are you a teacher, or a seller of rope?” The old woman intervened. “Who will provide another rope when one breaks? Skill has a price here, and so does the thing made.” The hunter walked on without answering, but Jhumki had heard his contempt.

“My mother can give less grain to the store than other people,” Jhumki asked. “Will that mean I can learn less?” Ekalavya did not immediately promise that everything would be equal; the common store had been half empty the previous month. He sat down with the older pupil and calculated how much grain each learner could contribute, who needed materials, and how many hours he himself could teach. He entered the amount due for the older pupil’s time spent in training. If Jhumki’s mother could not provide grain, perhaps she could teach the measurements for making bark vessels. But before counting that as an arrangement, they would ask the mother herself.

During practice that day Ekalavya gave Jhumki a piece of bamboo and held it away from the target. “Measure this with your eyes, not with a knife,” he said. Jhumki estimated the distance between two nodes, but failed to see a fine crack beneath the bark. When she bent the bamboo, the thin wood snapped. “If you hide a mistake,” Ekalavya said, “someone else’s hand may be hurt. We shall enter the cost of this broken piece among today’s teaching expenses. Deliberate waste would be another matter.” For the first time Jhumki discovered that admitting an error did not mean being turned out of school.

At dusk Jhumki’s mother came. Before taking her daughter home, she asked Ekalavya, “Who was your first teacher?” Ekalavya briefly told her of the clay image and his decision to give his thumb; he did not hide the old wound.

"Then did that teacher count you among his pupils?" the mother asked. Ekalavya took time to answer. "I accepted him as my teacher. His recognition and my acceptance were not the same thing." The mother said, "If my daughter studies here, will her name be entered in the bark ledger?" Ekalavya handed Jhumki the writing implement. Jhumki made the first mark of her name herself, and the old woman wrote beside it the account of the materials used for her teaching.

Ekalavya had no need to declare Drona's knowledge false; he knew the cost of the decision made upon his own body. Before nightfall he made the new pupils practise listening for signals from those walking ahead on a forest path, instead of taking aim with arrows. For the first time Jhumki recognised, from a considerable distance, her mother returning with the bark vessels. The older boy, hearing her identify the figure correctly, said, "That will not catch a fish." "If Mother does not lose her way," Jhumki replied, "there will be a fire burning at home this evening." Ekalavya said nothing to that answer. The day's outcome in his school was not an arrow striking its mark but a safe way home for three people.

In present-day Simatirtha, that same afternoon, the seventh envelope was opened again on the veranda of Binu Darai's house. Money from it had paid for repairs to the roof; one portion had gone towards her father-in-law's medicines; and her husband had said on the telephone that some of it remained in savings in her name. But in the account papers only the male head of the household was named as recipient. "I am not saying that every rupee earned must be given to me," Binu said. "I am saying that the share sent by agreement for my expenses and savings must not be left at another person's mercy."

Amir Kulhaiya came carrying the separate receipts he had prepared the previous day for three families. Binu asked him about a fourth transaction, her own household's. Rather than beginning with the sum, Amir first asked who had the right to see the recipient's papers. Binu explained that her husband was working abroad and that not everyone at home had been told how much the remittance service had deducted in fees. Amir suggested a separate written instruction for the relevant portion of the money, to be drawn up with the consent of both Binu and her husband. He entered only what the existing accounts established. "And if my husband does not agree?" Binu asked again. "Then the disagreement will remain in writing," Amir said. "I shall not invent your agreement."

Binu's mother-in-law, who oversaw the drying of the household paddy, heard them speaking. "When money comes into the home," she said, "it belongs to the home." Binu did not deny it. "It belongs to the home," she answered, "but decisions should also reckon how much work is done there, and by whose hands." She opened her small notebook and showed that repayments on the loan, medicines, and the girl's schooling had already been

given priority. The quarrel was not about hiding money. It was about giving her name a place in the decisions. At last the two women agreed to ask for explicit instructions naming the recipient of the next remittance. Their dispute over past expenses remained unresolved.

Amir's envelope also contained an old migration paper bearing the word "Fariyani." He put the slip carefully aside. "This name appears in the place field of the original document," he said. "I cannot yet check its geographical limits. Let us first see through which service the worker's money passed, as this slip records." They copied the amount on the old paper, its issuing authority, and the date of receipt into separate entries. Amir thought that the document might help families living across the border reconstruct the history of secure remittances. But a single place-name was no warrant for drawing an entire route.

That evening Somri Hembram arrived at the school with a contract and two lengths of heavy thread. Three workers accompanied her, and a child. The contractor had sent papers for work at a new location, but not every member of the group understood the language in which they were written. "Last time we had four questions," Somri said. "Now we have written answers, but in the translation the sentence authorising deductions from wages for 'breach of discipline' has been left out." Maithili first asked where the document had come from. Somri showed the original and the workers' jointly signed authorisation empowering her to take it to a translator—not to sign on anyone else's behalf.

The contractor's agent said the opportunity would soon be gone; all this passing between languages was causing delay. Somri asked, "If an accident happens where we are to work, who pays for the hospital? Where does it say so here?" The agent answered that such arrangements were understood verbally. Somri turned to her fellow workers. "Does a spoken promise sound the same to everyone?" One of them said he did not even know the accommodation charges. Somri did not fold away the papers. She said she needed time to consider the new offer, but had not yet consented to deductions she could not identify.

When Kumudi arrived, Somri asked whether the principal terms could be read aloud to the workers in the Santhali spoken at home. Kumudi acknowledged that she could not herself provide an authoritative Santhali translation of every term. Somri proposed seeking help from a literate member of the group and a trained language assistant at a distance. "I shall speak," she said. "They will check the words. But the final consent belongs to each worker." Kumudi recorded the differences between the Maithili wording and the administrative language. Separate time and payment were agreed upon for checking the accuracy of the Santhali text. The translator's contribution would not vanish under the heading "free service."

When the child climbed down from someone's lap and began knotting one of the thin threads, Somri gently stopped his hands. The contractor's seal was fixed to that thread. "It is a counting mark for the consignment," she said. "Give him another thread to play with." His father took a little coloured cord from his pocket. Somri remembered the days when her mother, before going out to work, wrapped bread in cloth and kept count of her hours without any paper. She wanted the time worked by her own group now to appear in written records, so that the children would inherit more than memories of exhaustion. But that wish was not an order to this child to become a labourer.

On another call the contractor warned that the contract might be cancelled unless it was signed at once. Somri answered plainly, "You must put the period of your offer in writing. Our people will decide once they understand it in their own language. If you refuse us time, do not put the blame for losing the work around our necks." One young man in the group grew frightened: there was a debt at home. "Anyone who wishes to go today is free to decide," she told him, "but go on the basis of what you have actually read in the paper." The young man took his copy away to telephone home before signing. The other two workers chose to wait until the translator could meet them. Their choices were not all the same.

In Maitri Shrestha's transport room, the temperature slip for the evening vehicle's boxes was being checked again. Among that day's papers was an old family transport document bearing the name "Lalbageya." Along one edge a distance was noted in Nepali; along the other was a Hindi translation made later. An officer, in a hurry, said there was no need to name the translator: the original already carried a seal. "The seal on the original tells us about the history of the shipment," Maitri replied. "Why should we erase the work of the person who explained the difference between the languages?"

Kumudi was unavailable. Another language assistant named a fee over the telephone, and Maitri agreed, specifying the limits of the reading she was authorised to request: the written form of the place-name, the unit of distance, and the kind of goods dispatched. The assistant confirmed that "Lalbageya" was written there, but warned that a present-day road could not be identified from it without confirming the date and original route. Maitri entered the assistant's name along with that qualification. The incomplete results of the boxes' temperature checks were kept separate: correcting a transport record did not establish the quality of the medicines.

The headmaster showed Pratima a written reply from the local land-records office. The original survey register had been called for to verify the boundaries of the area used by the public school; the school had not yet approved private construction there. "We must not write that construction has been stopped forever," Pratima said. "But while the inquiry continues, the children's path must remain open." The headmaster accepted responsibility

for maintaining a temporary footpath beside the school gate. Pratima did not want an advertisement celebrating her family's old gift. If the conditions of that gift had been intended to protect public use, she wanted them examined openly.

Rachana was gathering the children's exercise books. Rajo's daughter had filled her picture of a boat with two colours—one for the name used in the language of home, the other for the name in her school textbook. "Will it be wrong if I write both?" the girl asked. "Sometimes a place or a word may have different forms," Rachana said. "If someone wants to understand, tell them where each word came from." Yet this habit of keeping distinctions in writing was useful beyond the schoolroom as well: in the wider world of records, it could protect people from needless accusations.

That night Naira received four brief notices in Videhapur. Ramvati's application had been received; a decision remained pending. Written agreement from Binu's family had been requested concerning her share of the money. The translation review of Somri's contract was incomplete. The original register for the school land claimed by Pratima had been called for. Kabir proposed writing a news report. "The subjects may belong together in an article," Naira said, "but do not turn the papers into links in a single crime." On her first page she looked again at the four empty boxes she had reserved for original sources in the investigation of Mahesh's murder. No new direct evidence of that event had been found that day. The boxes therefore remained empty.

For a moment Kabir said he would like to hear the story of Drona and Ekalavya. Sarita sat behind them, filing a copy of Ramvati's letter. "A story may help me understand Ekalavya's wound," Sarita said, "but it cannot decide the case of Ramvati's two papers." Naira did not repeat her words. She read the next words of Ramvati's message: "I will not give up the wages owed for my earlier work." Outside the room Shiv Dhandi had come to ask whether there was news of the remaining two days' pay due to him. Naira could tell him no more than the contractor's new acknowledgement number. He decided for himself what he would do the following day.

Before the last bus of the night, Ramvati placed both her identity papers in one bag, but gave each its own cover. At home Binu showed her savings notebook to her mother-in-law; Somri wrote down the place where the workers would meet for language assistance the following day; and Pratima kept a copy of her request that the iron stake with its red thread near the school gate be safely fenced off rather than removed. In the ancient forest, the first mark of Jhumki's name was drying on Ekalavya's bark ledger. The question they held in common was no more—and no less—than this: who would write the conditions under which a person might enter to learn, earn, or teach; and who would have the opportunity to change those conditions once written?

Chapter 77 · Trijata's Message

In the Ashoka Grove of ancient Lanka, Sita was examining the veins of a leaf. A yellow leaf, wet with the night's dew, had torn between her fingers; in another, the green fibre running down its centre was still strong. She wondered whether, when the watchwomen changed shifts, she might use that fibre to mend the torn edge of her garment. Outside the grove, metal vessels rattled against one another, and one voice told another that grave news had come from the battlefield. No name could be distinctly heard. A little later, a watchwoman repeated those indistinct words as though their meaning, and the outcome they foretold, were known to everyone. Sita laid down the leaf and rose. The news had grown larger in the confidence of the person repeating it than in anything that had actually been said.

One of the watchwomen came close. "Give up waiting today," she said. "There is ill talk in the palace about the one for whom you wait." Her voice held more weariness than compassion. "Who saw it?" Sita asked. The watchwoman looked away. "Men have returned from the fighting." "Did you see them?" "No. The men on guard at the gate said so." Sita asked again, "And from whose mouth did the men at the gate hear it?" This time the woman made no answer. She had no permission to argue beyond the hours and duties of her watch. Tightening her grasp upon the shaft of her spear, she walked away. Sita did not feel humiliated; nevertheless, the words she had heard remained suspended within her.

Trijata came along the path behind the grove just then. She carried two little earthen bowls in the crook of her arm, one filled with water, the other with the thin gruel left from boiling barley. As she set them down, she saw Sita's face. "Has the news reached you already?" she asked. Sita did not answer. Trijata spoke of her own accord. "I heard it when I was returning the eating vessels in the palace's inner courtyard. Two servants were saying to each other that the news from the war was changing. I saw no letter in their hands. I heard the name of a soldier, but I do not know whether he had seen the battlefield with his own eyes." Having marked the limits of what she knew, Trijata fell silent.

"If you are so uncertain," Sita said, "why have you come to tell me?" It was a hard question. Trijata looked towards the water. "Because some of the watchwomen are stating it as certainty. I thought you needed to know, before hearing that certainty again, what grounds there were for it. And I do not wish you to surrender the judgment of your own heart merely because you trust me." Sita motioned for her to sit. The barley gruel was growing cold, but Sita could not bring the first mouthful past her throat. The days of waiting had worn her down. In such exhaustion, even an unconfirmed report could strike like a blow.

A faint drumbeat sounded from one end of the grove. A company of watchwomen stood and looked south. “I hear the drum as you do,” Trijata said. “But the beating of a drum does not tell me whether this is victory, defeat, or mourning.” Sita turned to her. “What I see is the earth of this grove, these trees, and your face. The condition of the one I love is not contained in any of them. If I give fear the place of news, I sell my own judgment into the hands of a tale someone else has made.” She drank a mouthful of the barley gruel. She had no appetite, but neither would she abandon the work of keeping her body alive.

“What would you wish to hear first,” Trijata asked quietly, “if an opportunity for verification comes later?” Sita answered, “What the person who went there saw with his own eyes; how far he travelled; of which hour he speaks. Let him not claim to have seen what he did not see.” Trijata nodded. She had a dilemma of her own: to question the source of what she heard in the palace might be counted an act of insubordination. Yet to carry words unquestioned could injure a woman held captive. She did not profess to shoulder every danger by herself. She said only that, if clearer news came from outside during the next watch, she would try to understand it, and that, if she could find no source, she would say that too.

Sita was silent for a while. Then she lifted the torn leaf. “If I try to stitch my garment with this vein, it will break. I shall use what has held, not strain what has failed until it passes for something dependable.” Trijata showed her the thread in her hand. Together they tied a small knot along the torn hem of the cloth. While they were thus occupied, a watchwoman returned to say that no written order had arrived from the palace. Sita did not pronounce that absence good news. She understood only that she had as yet no sufficient ground upon which to make a new decision.

Towards evening Trijata sang softly two lines she had learned at home: “Though the drop of dew may never last till morning, the earth remembers thirst; the hand stretched out within the darkness keeps the warmth that is its own.” It was no prophecy. Trijata herself said that a song could not disclose the state of a battle. For the first time in many days, Sita managed a faint smile at the last note. She had found no assurance in the song, only the presence of another human being seated beside her. The struggle beyond the grove was not diminished by that companionship. But within the decisions she must make, there was a little less room for the unsupported certainties of others.

In contemporary Videhapur, on the following morning, Amala Sarbariya was untying a knot of red thread on an office veranda. On the corner of a page returned with yesterday’s application, the wrong name had been written beneath a blue seal. That single error had brought three different consequences to three families: assistance for one child’s schooling had been suspended; a second family had been asked to submit its labour register for verification once again; a third could no longer find its old receipt number in

the queue. Amala had brought the papers together in one bundle, but had made a separate inner cover for each. She would not allow the convenience of a collective petition to erase the individuals whose cases it contained.

The assistant sitting at the veranda table adjusted his spectacles. “There are slight differences in the letters of everyone’s caste name,” he said. “If we standardised them in one place, the work would be easier.” Amala drew closer. “We can discuss a standard form. But first tell us why one household’s correct name was attached to another household’s account. Are you going to correct an error, or exchange the people themselves?” The employee turned the page. The application number was right, but a letter had been cut from the name on the computer-generated list. A young man sitting near Amala had come to the office from his business selling lantern oil. He had no assurance that he could take another day off. He wrote down the fare he had spent on the journey there.

Amala read the joint petition aloud before them all. This time its lines disclosed no one’s private family circumstances. The principal demands were a separate comparison of the original handwritten entries with the printed copies, written reasons for any alteration to an individual record, and preservation of the original date of receipt for every application previously returned. The assistant warned that submitting a collective list might cause the earlier applications to be entered afresh at the end of the queue. Amala refused. “Our time has already been spent. You cannot call the months lost through your error a new application and set the count back to zero.” She prepared two copies of the petition, handed one to the office, and required the time of receipt and an official seal upon the other.

The dispute was no longer merely about letters. A ward representative offered to sign on behalf of them all, so that the women would not have to come back repeatedly. Amala did not refuse his assistance, but drew a boundary around his authority. “Come with us. Help us make copies. But if we are each writing our own names, you must not put down one signature in place of all of ours.” The representative was uncomfortable. Then he volunteered instead to take the papers to the photocopying centre himself. Amala recorded the time, the cost of the copies, and the day of their return. No record was corrected that day. A written order was issued, however, to locate the list from which the error had arisen, and the former places of all three families in the receipt sequence were provisionally protected.

Hira Meche arrived in a small room behind the same office, carrying a folded copy. A document beside which he had earlier caused the words “I did not understand the language” to be written had now been sent to him again. Showing him his signature on the copy, a contractor’s representative claimed that he had already agreed to an alteration in the use of the community road. No one had previously read the proposal to Hira in his mother tongue. “This is my hand,” he said plainly. “But whether its meaning was explained to me is still to be established.” The representative asked mockingly, “Can the writing

of a hand tell a lie?" Hira replied, "Why do you suppose that a mark made by the hand proves what the mind understood?"

A committee employee wanted Hira to sign a fresh form at once, declaring that he withdrew his earlier consent. Hira would not fill out that page immediately either. "Unless I am told what the first document was intended to do, what exactly am I withdrawing in the second?" he asked. The language assistant who had accompanied him was separately noting the date and the limits of the proposed work. A fan droned without ceasing in the little room; a dusty measuring cord lay beside the desk. Hira picked it up. "If the road is diverted through here, which way are my freight vehicles to reach my home? Where is that question written on this form?" He also rejected the suggestion that the cost of a written translation should be treated as another person's unpaid service.

The interpreter read the first page sentence by sentence. After a sentence concerning a "temporary trial of the route" came the words "no objection to long-term use." Hira remembered hearing the first sentence, but did not claim to know whether the second had been read to him. The contractor argued that both pages bore the same date. "The sameness of a date is not testimony that its meaning was understood," Hira answered. In the end, his written request to suspend implementation until a further hearing was accepted. This was not a complete cancellation: the validity of the earlier consent remained undecided. On his own copy Hira wrote clearly: "Disputed consent; verification of translation pending."

When Amala saw Hira on the veranda, she asked whether he needed copies made of his application. Hira smiled. "I will pay for the copies. But do not fold my case into your community's corrections of names." "That is exactly what I want too," Amala replied. Each kept the separate acknowledgement of receipt for their own papers. Amala's concern was with applications suspended because of altered letters; Hira's struggle was over the meaning attributed to his supposed consent. Recognising the difference did not weaken their support for each other. It prevented officials, for their own convenience, from registering every grievance under a single heading.

Nasima Shershahbadi came to the threshold of the new school with a box of bookbinding needles in her bag, for sewing torn edges of paper. She had undertaken a week's repair work for the school library and had also come to apply for admission for her adolescent daughter. The girl gazed at the alphabet chart hanging on the right of the new compound. "Mother," she asked, "will they hear the way I speak here and laugh at me again?" At her former school, some children had mimicked the sounds of her home language and laughed. Nasima offered no false assurance. "If they laugh, I shall write to the head of the school," she said. "I shall not advise you to abandon your education."

At the admissions window, the clerk began to pronounce Nasima's name and faltered. Two men standing behind her began imitating its last syllables.

Nasima turned straight towards them. “If you want to learn my name, ask me,” she said. “You need not keep mangling it for amusement.” The children waiting in the queue fell silent. The clerk explained that the register allowed only a limited set of letters for names. Nasima showed the difference between the form written in her household and that in an older government copy, making clear which page required which correction. She asked that the original pronunciation of the girl’s name be retained in a note in the admissions register, so that it could be reconciled with the official form used by the education department.

The headmistress called her into the office. Nasima first showed her a book from the library with its binding broken. “You would not throw this book away merely because it is torn,” she said. “Nor should you dismiss the labour of understanding a child’s language as a ‘problem’ to be removed.” The headmistress explained that the rules required a transfer certificate from the girl’s previous school, and that the certificate had not yet arrived. Nasima asked how her daughter’s attendance would be safeguarded in the meantime. They agreed upon written interim permission: the girl could sit in class from the following week, while the final admissions entry would depend upon verification. The written complaint about mockery of her language was also registered separately. No child was publicly named as responsible before an inquiry.

On the school veranda, the daughter wrote her name herself for the first time on a trial page of the register. Nasima did not move her hand over the letters to alter them. She also asked the hours of the evening adult-learning class for herself. The skill of binding paper was her livelihood; learning to read the pages was a different education she wanted. The headmistress said that the class was presently meeting in a small room, and that the rules for formal enrolment still needed checking. Nasima took a form for herself without claiming that her studies had already begun. As they stepped outside, her daughter said, “Today I was given a place for one day.” Nasima replied, “Mark yourself present in that day’s place. I shall gather the papers that give you the right to the next.”

Meanwhile, at the room near the railway square, Naira and Kabir received Rafiq’s two-line phonetic transcription. The river-name spoken by a member of one family was “Sa-ura” (सउरा); an older official copy recorded “Saura” (सौरा). Someone had urged them to declare the two slips merely two settled spellings of the same word. Rafiq said over the telephone, “What I heard, I wrote as ‘Sa-ura.’ The other paper says ‘Saura.’ Their pronunciations may be related; I have not established that they refer to the same actual place.” Naira recorded separately the date of the original paper and the circumstances in which Rafiq had heard the name. A translator was commissioned to prepare a copy showing both readings, with the translator’s name and remuneration recorded.

“If the two names might be the same,” Kabir asked, “why not place a single mark on the map?” Naira slid the paper towards him. “Seeing the name of a river in a record and identifying a particular watercourse on a map are two different tasks. Do not slip the second into the folder for the first.” Rafiq added only that the date beside the river-name on the family’s travel document was incomplete, and that the issuing mark on the official page still needed examining. The agreed fee for language assistance at Simatirtha was a separate matter. Kabir struck “proven match” from the draft on his phone and entered “examination of variant readings.” The ink of the deletion had scarcely dried.

That day another name appeared in Binu Darai’s savings notebook: “Seer” (सीर). It was written along the edge of an old paper concerning her migrant earnings, connected with the place where payment for a consignment had been withheld. A relative suggested that the meaning of Seer might correspond to another river-name written farther down. Binu did not immediately answer. She brought out the remittance slip and looked at it: it gave a date, a sum of money, and the recipient’s name, but there was no map beside “Seer.” “It may be the name of a small place in its own right,” she said. “Do not attach it to another stretch of water and change the story of my withheld money.”

Binu made separate copies of both pages. Since the previous day she had been raising the question of a woman’s share of income sent to her family. Today she decided that, even before the spelling of Seer was settled, the party responsible for payment must give a written reply. Her mother-in-law sat in a corner peeling potatoes. “So much running about for a small name on a paper?” she asked. Binu answered, “If the name is wrong, the money may go the wrong way. But even when the name is right, the money will not arrive by itself.” Her mother-in-law took the notebook, examined the date, then gathered the potato peelings and said, “In that case, first write down the name of the person who owes it.” Binu wrote that name in its proper place.

At evening Naira gathered the reports from the three directions. Amala’s collective application had been received; the original register was under examination. The meaning of Hira’s consent remained disputed; a date for the renewed hearing was still to be fixed. Nasima’s daughter had interim permission to attend class; verification for final admission was pending. Rafiq’s bilingual copy of the river-name had been made, and “Seer” on Binu’s earnings paper had been kept separate. Kabir asked whether he might give them all one common theme. “In the news, ask the question they share,” Naira answered. “Who claims that another person understood? But do not tie all these papers into the thread of a single conspiracy.” The original file of the investigation into Mahesh’s murder lay closed and separate on that table. No new direct evidence in that case had emerged that day.

Before boarding the evening vehicle to look for the old list, an office employee telephoned Amala. He said that all the families might have to

appear again to have the errors corrected. Amala was tired. At home she was tending a lit cooking stove, pushing the rice husks further into the fire. “First compare the copies of those families’ correct records that you already have,” she replied. “Call those whose signatures or testimony are needed, and give them a date. Do not make everyone abandon a day’s work and stand in line on the strength of a guess.” For the first time the employee acknowledged that the office ought first to count its own errors. Amala put down the phone and tended the stove’s heat. This time at home, too, was part of the price of her petition.

Hira paid his language assistant the first instalment of the translation fee, agreeing that the remainder would be paid after written verification. He knew that even if he lost at the new hearing, he would need a copy of the grounds for the decision. Nasima stitched a length of coloured thread to the edge of her daughter’s exercise book, so that she would recognise her own things at a distance on the first day. Before catching the night bus, Rafiq looked once more at the slip bearing the two spellings; Binu wrote the date on which she would demand her money beside the letter marked “Seer.” No single piece of news had brought relief to those four households. Each, however, had been able to choose the next small task that was theirs to undertake.

In the old Ashoka Grove the watch changed again at night. Trijata was walking towards the distant palace; she had not promised Sita that the truth would certainly be found before dawn. Sita touched the knot she had tied in the thread that day. She was resolute, but not at ease. Who said what to whom inside the royal household, and who would be made to pay for it—those answers lay outside the grove. For now she confined her resolve to this: she would call what she had heard something heard, what she had seen something seen, and what she did not yet know she would not give the shape of a verdict. For her, that interval was no surrender. It was the stern discipline of waiting.

Chapter 78 · Mandodari's Home

Before dawn, in the royal household of Lanka, Mandodari stood at the door of the provisions room. The rim of the bronze measure used for rice had split; she turned the vessel over to see whether grains had caught in the crack. More guards had been posted after the night's reports of battle, and the steward was saying that food must be saved for those inside. Mandodari first asked for the account book. How hunger was to be apportioned within a household had become, for her, a question to be faced before the royal command.

An elderly woman who distributed the meals said, "Your Majesty, those in the outer quarters whose family members have been wounded have been told that today they will receive half their share." Mandodari asked, "On whose orders?" The old woman had no answer: she had heard it said when the night watch changed. The steward declared that the city gates would remain shut, and that reducing everyone's ration was proper if the stores were to be protected. Mandodari told him to open his ledger. Yesterday's quantities stood unchanged against the plates of the royal family; opposite the names of the outer servants there were only empty lines. "If there is truly a shortage," she said, "begin the reckoning with my plate. An empty line will not satisfy anyone's hunger."

A guard's wife came inside to change the dressing on her wounded husband. The sentry stopped her, saying that nothing could leave without fresh permission. Mandodari ordered the supplies to be given to her, but also had the name of the treatment and the quantity entered in the record. The wife asked, "Will this writing get my husband his treatment, or will they question me all over again at the next change of watch?" Mandodari was silent for a moment before that question. Then she said to the steward, "Put a mark of receipt in this woman's hand. The command given in the royal household and the way a person is treated at its gate must not become two different things."

When Trijata entered the courtyard, the wakefulness of the entire night showed on her face. Mandodari called her into an inner room and asked, "What news was given to Sita?" Trijata said that accounts of the battle heard from a palace servant were spreading through the grove as settled truth. She herself had not gone to see the battlefield; she possessed no direct testimony from a soldier. "I told Sita precisely that," she added. "She said she would not pass judgment in her own mind on the strength of something no one there had seen." Mandodari listened to the answer in silence.

A young woman of the royal household, one of whose kinsmen had gone to war, asked impatiently, "Why does a captive woman need the true news?

She belongs to the side that has brought this calamity upon our house." Before answering, Mandodari made Trijata sit down and drink some water. "She did not come into this house of her own will," she told the young woman. "We cannot lay the blame for the war upon someone brought here by force. If I pronounce Ravana's decision innocent merely because of my relation to him, I shall inflict the harm upon everyone a second time." The young woman lowered her eyes, but her own fear did not lift. She said that every blast of the conch outside made her dread the death of someone she loved. Mandodari took her hand. She gave her no false promise of reassurance.

A little later a messenger came from the royal council. In the circumstances of war, he said, movement within the household was to be restricted, and the names of suspect servants kept apart. Mandodari asked what "suspect" meant. The messenger replied, "Those who ask too many questions." She felt the violence contained in the words. "A person's question is not a crime," she said. "If something has been witnessed against someone, record the event. The doors of this household shall not be closed to a person merely for asking."

She met Ravana that same day in an inner passage. He was hurrying towards the council chamber. "Sita is here," Mandodari said, "but bringing her here was not a decision made by all of us whose lives depend upon this household. Send her back. And do not punish with fear the families of those who went to war at your word." Ravana replied harshly that bending before an enemy would offend the dignity of the kingdom. Mandodari said, "If a kingdom's dignity is built upon keeping one woman prisoner, where in it is there room for the children of my house?" Ravana gave no answer. He went on down the passage.

Watching him go, Mandodari recognised the limits of her power. By issuing orders she could change the provision of medicine, food, and rest; she could not overturn the king's decision with her own hands. Returning inside, she summoned two women—an elderly distributor of food and another who carried messages to the homes of wounded soldiers. She told each to keep her own accounts. She assigned that responsibility not as a favour bestowed by the royal family, but as a right belonging to their work. If either chose to go outside, food would still be provided for her tired journey.

Trijata rose to return to the grove. Mandodari did not press her to stay; she asked what Trijata herself wished. "What I have heard," Trijata said, "I can report as something heard. But I will not take the count of grain I have seen inside this royal house and turn it into a report from the battlefield." Mandodari gave her two thin flatbreads and a small vessel of medicine. "Give them, by your own judgment, to whoever you see needs them. Do not proclaim an act of charity in my name." Within the inner household, at least, work had begun to fill the empty entries in the food register.

That same dawn, at the school in Videhapur, a sheet of paper lay half folded behind the glass of the noticeboard. When Asad Syed turned the key to open it, a mosquito trapped inside flew out. Beneath the name of the school the paper stated that, in the case of the missing child, information concerning a “suspect itinerant group” had been received from a local source. The sentence carried no receipt number, no name, and no date on which it had been checked against the school’s first notice. Asad remembered that the school had originally done no more than urge the administration to protect the child and act upon verified information. This harsher line had been added afterwards, by someone else.

At that hour Mohan Kanjar was fitting a strip of iron around the wheel of his handcart at the edge of the market. His first customer of the morning had turned back halfway along the road; another, who had ordered a wooden chest delivered to his home, had telephoned to ask that Mohan not bring the cart near his children. Hearing such fear spoken aloud made Mohan angry, but he did not abandon his cart in the middle of the road and begin shouting at people. He had kept the three repair slips he possessed on the day the first accusation was made. Now he was speaking for himself to each of the people who had originally issued them.

When Mohan went to the shop selling iron fittings near the bridge, the shopkeeper said, “I can put the date in writing, but how would I know when you went to the other market?” Mohan asked, “Show me the page of your sales ledger for the axle and pin you supplied for my wheel. That is what you actually saw.” The shopkeeper opened the ledger. Opposite one date were the price of the axle, the slip number, and the account of the payment. He gave Mohan a signed copy, but wrote no testimony about any time or place beyond his own knowledge.

From there Mohan went to Sajid Nat. The original footage of the school’s drama rehearsals was stored in Sajid’s camera; several children’s parents had already set limits on how it might be used. “My cart can be seen in the picture,” Mohan said, “but that picture is being used to circulate my name through the market. How can there be an investigation without spreading the whole scene abroad?” Sajid agreed to show the date of the original file and permit the school’s designated inquiry team to inspect it securely. “The children’s faces will not be made public,” he said plainly. Mohan agreed.

Lata also came to the school. Since returning from Simatirtha she had received two replies concerning the search for Mithun: in the old boathouse register, letters resembling “Mithua” appeared under a heading for boat equipment; there was still no basis for treating the word as a person’s name. Lata did not open her notebook before Asad. Instead she asked, “If you change that paper, will you remove the search for the missing child as well?” “We will not remove the search,” Asad answered. “We will separate it from

the accusation made against a community without evidence." "I want the search," Lata said. "Not a cheer for the arrest of the wrong man."

The headmistress asked Asad for the school's original notice register. He showed her that the first public notice had been written on an attendance day and that its sequence was recorded in the school's dated ledger. The "local source" cited by the disputed sheet was named nowhere, nor was there written permission to use the image. "Then take this sheet down at once," the headmistress said. "It must be taken down," Asad replied, "but there must also be a public correction of what went out in the school's name. Removing a sheet from behind glass does not erase its words from people's telephones." The headmistress authorised him to prepare a corrected statement.

At the same meeting a parent objected. "A child is missing, and all you do is correct words!" Asad did not ask the parent to sit. He answered while they were both standing. "To find the child, we need times, places, and statements from those who actually saw something. If we choose a criminal by looking at a community, the search will go down the wrong road." Lata turned towards the parent. "My child's name is not a screen for your anger," she said. "Tell us what you saw; if you heard something, tell us where it came from." The parent had an audio message but admitted not knowing whose voice it was. The message was set aside for examination; it was not pronounced testimony.

Asad began to write the public statement. In its first line the school accepted responsibility for the false collective accusation published on its noticeboard. The second said that neither a blurred image nor anyone's community identity could establish an accusation of child abduction. The third asked people to give the appointed investigator whatever direct information they possessed about the child's whereabouts, including time and place. "Shall I write that Mohan is innocent?" the headmistress asked. Mohan himself replied, "Write that the basis of the accusation was false. You have not investigated every road I travelled that day. Do not issue a verdict on my whole life in my name, all at once."

The new statement was read outside the school. A young man displayed on his telephone an older, shortened video in which the false line from the paper was already travelling from person to person. "That will not disappear," he said. "No," Asad answered. "That is why the date of the correction and its full text must remain public too. Whenever someone shows the old line, there should be a way of showing them the new one." Mohan pushed his cart away. Some customers were still standing at a distance; a public statement could not, in a single instant, heal the wound dealt to his livelihood.

In the afternoon market, Kamlesh Khatik's bamboo chest had become damp, its lid left open. Inside he had kept, separately, a length of red tape bought for a stage, the cord used to fasten it, and two old bills. The previous day a trader had again said that a consignment containing red cloth

resembled someone's suspicious goods, and that "the Khatiks" were involved in such trading. Kamlesh straightened the weighing scale standing at the shop entrance. "Cloth can be of the same colour," he said, "but where is the proof that its price, measurements, seller, and use are all the same?" The trader could say nothing definite beyond the colour.

Kamlesh brought out two pages of his accounts. One recorded the date on which the stage cord and tape had been purchased; the other recorded the carriage fee for delivering the materials to a school programme. The seller on the first bill and the recipient on the second receipt were different people. "These are the accounts of my goods," Kamlesh said, "not the truth about every consignment in the whole market. But it is unjust to attach everyone's name to an accusation without examining the goods in question." He also wanted the limits of confidentiality concerning his customers' names put in writing.

A member of the market committee looked at the figures and said that the purchase bill showed five yards, while the school's receipt showed four. Kamlesh unrolled a strip of cloth. "One yard of the edge was folded over for strength; four yards were used on the stage," he explained. Meera, who had carried the school's materials earlier that day, said that she had seen the number of bundles, not the measurements inside them. Asking for the school craftworker's measurement ledger, Kamlesh told her, "Do not say you saw what you did not see merely to support me."

The craftworker arrived before evening. His recorded measurements mentioned four yards in use and the remaining folded edge, but neither the colour of the thread nor the shop from which it had come. "Part of my purchase and its use can now be matched," Kamlesh said. "Do not place responsibility for some other unknown consignment in the market upon my head." The market committee's convenor accepted a copy of the individual purchase record and proposed in writing that the notice making the collective accusation be removed. The decision was deferred, because they still had to discover who had issued that notice. Kamlesh kept a copy of the postponement.

Meanwhile, Meera Banjara's sister was tightening the fastenings on four sacks of dried provisions on a small handcart. The name "Supain" appeared repeatedly in her old route notebook—sometimes as a customer's mark, sometimes beside a minor stopping place along the road. A new trader suggested that if every cart joined the same transport partnership for the week, carriage charges would fall. Meera had already agreed on two days' terms for consignments belonging to Sonmati and Niruk; her sister was unwilling to give up either her old customers or control of her own time. "The saving from a collective rate is not payment for closing my road," the sister said.

Meera opened her notebook to show the trader that the old entry marked “Supain” had a date beside it, but no authenticated map. “In my family’s accounts it is the name of a place along a route,” she said. “We cannot use that to make an official determination about the course of a river, a boundary, or a confluence. But it can help us look for a customer’s receipt.” Her sister quoted a separate carriage charge for her four sacks. The trader warned that anyone staying outside the partnership would pay a higher rate next time. “Write down the price,” Meera answered. “My sister will decide.” The sister did the reckoning, chose her own route, and obtained a written agreement on the carriage fee.

Under the awning outside lay Sonmati’s bamboo frame. Meera measured it and checked once more the two days committed to her own partnership; she did not add her sister’s cart list to her ledger. “Won’t keeping so many accounts separate lead to quarrels at home?” Sonmati asked. Meera laughed. “There will be a quarrel when one person’s earnings disappear under another person’s name.” Still tying the sacks, her sister said that when they returned in the evening, they would both eat a meal cooked on the same hearth.

At the office across the border, Ramvati Khatwe took two identity papers from her bag and placed them on the table, one after the other. One described her family of birth in one form; the other used a different spelling after her marriage. On the first day of examination, the officials had kept both originals for comparison; Ramvati had been left with only the deposit receipt. Today she had come to demand the return of the originals and a written reply concerning the error. The clerk said that the file was still open and therefore the papers should be left in the office. “If I cannot take my originals with me,” Ramvati asked, “how am I to prove who I am at the next place?”

On one of them the word “Santi” (साँती) appeared beside a reference to Ramvati’s first journey. The clerk guessed that it was a corrupted form of another river’s name, and that it would be best to correct it automatically. Ramvati stopped his hand. “That word is on my old paper,” she said. “First look at the original source: the place, the route, and the purpose for which it was written. Do not change my family’s identity merely because two sounds resemble each other.” She submitted an application asking that “Santi” be preserved as an independent archival entry. No one there had verified its actual geographical location.

The clerk said that returning the originals would leave the office’s inquiry incomplete. Ramvati showed him an alternative she had prepared: a copy certified in her presence, the page numbers of the originals, and a date of return recorded on the deposit receipt. “If you wish to investigate, keep authenticated copies. Why must the real papers I have guarded all my life remain shut in a room for an indefinite time?” she asked. A senior officer was called. After comparing the originals, he returned both papers to Ramvati, although the administrative reconciliation of her identities was still

incomplete. On the acknowledgment she had the words “Originals returned” entered, not “Dispute resolved.”

Outside the door Ramvati sat down in the shade and first straightened the creases in her papers. She did not open in that office the old private letter Sarita had returned to her. On the telephone she told Naira only this: both originals had been returned safely, “Santi” remained a separate entry, and the correction application was still under examination. Naira wrote down the news but did not ask for the full address of Ramvati’s parental home. The day’s success was a limited one for Ramvati; sometimes the preservation of a limited right is enough to make the next struggle possible.

For the evening meeting in Videhapur, Naira, Asad, and Kabir sat at a narrow table. Asad set down three separate copies: the school’s original notice, the falsely added line, and the corrected statement. The slip from Mohan’s shop ledger and the conditions under which Sajid’s original recording might be examined remained separate. News of Kamlesh’s measurement register had come by telephone, but without a copy of the original Naira wrote “reported” in her notebook. “If we call all these papers a single story?” Kabir asked. “They may tell the story of one city,” Naira replied, “but that does not mean the causes of the offences are one and the same.”

Lata received a copy of the school’s correction. She read the entire page, then wrote beside one line, “The search for Mithun continues.” Asad asked whether this should be added to the school notice. “Let a notice keep to its own limits,” Lata said. “Give the dates of the search, the investigation schedule, and the next contact officer on a separate sheet. My son’s name must not become an exhibit in the correction of a false accusation.” She did not demand the right to inspect Sajid’s recording herself; she said that the designated officer should examine it with the proper permission.

As night fell, the new statement was placed on the school noticeboard. Instead of tearing up the old sheet, the school kept it in its record file marked “Incorrectly published copy.” Asad’s responsibility had not ended: he did not know how many telephones still held the old short video. Mohan’s dated slips had yet to go before the interim inquiry. The proposal to withdraw the collective accusation against Kamlesh still awaited signatures. Meera and her sister had chosen dates to deliver goods by two different routes; Ramvati had put her original papers back in her bag. Not every fear had been dispelled in anyone’s home. Yet that day some people had managed to keep their true names, their work, and their questions separate from other people’s guesses.

Chapter 79 · The Resemblance of Faces

At dawn, beneath the railway bridge in Videhapur, Sarayu was shaking out a wet mat. The night's rain had soaked so deeply into its layers that, each time she shook it, a muddy stream ran from its edge. Janaki was separating the ashes from the cooking hearth. Just then Sarayu's granddaughter came towards them, covering the screen of a phone with her finger. “Is this a picture of my grandmother too?” At the child's question, Sarayu let the mat fall. On the screen two blurred women's faces had been pasted side by side: the first cut from an old scene at the forest gate, the second taken somewhere behind a goods vehicle. Underneath were the words: “Look, this is the same group taking away another child.” In the second picture it was not even clear whether the shape was a child or a sack.

Janaki took the phone into her own hands but did not let the girl look at it again. She had read the school's written correction the previous evening. It withdrew the false accusation against the group; yet now, with a new comparison, the old fear had returned. “Who has the right to measure my face?” Sarayu asked. Janaki replied, “Who gave the person holding a cropped picture that right? But what we need now is an answer from the originals of both pictures, not from our anger.” Two young men in the group urged her to seize the phone. Janaki stopped them. Confiscating one phone would not erase the copies already spread abroad.

Naira was standing at a shop near the railway square, about to buy tea. As soon as Janaki's message arrived, she left the tea and came. Sarayu's first question was, “Will you print my name in a document again?” Naira answered, “If you do not wish it, we will publish neither your face nor anything identifying your home. But we shall draft a correction of the false charge with your consent.” Janaki set out her own wishes separately: no new photographs; an answer to the public accusation at a public meeting; and no removal of the file on Mithun's disappearance from the investigation to which it belonged. Naira agreed. She noted when and to whom the two pictures were now being circulated, but did not assume that the creation time shown on a phone was the time of the event.

Sajid Nat arrived at the school office with his camera and a small, old memory card. His first recording was of a rehearsal for the school play, showing Mohan's handcart and a red curtain. The second was an old recording of travellers at the forest gate, whose original was on the phone of the young man who had filmed it that evening. Sajid did not know whether today's composite image had been cut from that recording. “I can show you what my camera recorded,” he said. At a table inside, Asad Syed set out three documents separately: the school's first notice, the false accusation that had

been published, and the correction issued yesterday. None of the three required anyone's face to be displayed.

The young man brought his original phone. He feared that everyone would turn him into a criminal. Janaki said, “You have already acknowledged that you made a recording at the forest gate. If you do not know who added the false caption, say that you do not know. But do not name anyone merely by claiming that the footage you have matches the second picture.” He played the entire original recording. It showed the wet gate, Durga's bundle of bamboo, Tulsi's grain cart, and two families from Janaki's group passing through in the evening light. There was no incident of a child being seized in that recording, nor was there the new image of a goods vehicle that had subsequently circulated.

At the meeting a man said, “But the face is exactly like Sarayu's. How can comparing faces be false?” Meera Mandal approached him. “If the resemblance is so exact, specify the particular feature being compared,” she said. “The cloth over the head, the angle of the nose, the stoop of an elderly body—is that enough to declare two people one and the same? In the example of the gavaya, a resemblance described by another may offer a way to recognise an object. But here, to identify a person, we need the date, the place, an unbroken recording, and independent testimony.” Meera had discussed upamāna, knowledge through comparison, in the children's classroom before. Now she understood that a lesson's example could not, by itself, prevent public humiliation unless the work of establishing evidence was done as well.

Padma took responsibility for tracing the original of the second picture, but made it clear that she had no right to open the entire contents of anyone's private phone. A market trader who had forwarded the circulating image showed her only an older message containing that image, captioned “unloading goods.” The trader claimed the photograph had been taken two days earlier. “Were you the one operating the camera?” Padma asked. He said he was not. “Then we must see the original held by the person from whom you received it,” she said. The trader grew afraid before naming his source: he too might be held responsible for the false accusation. Janaki said, “Do not make the name public. Let the investigators obtain the original.”

By midday word came that the picture was from an old loading yard beside the cattle enclosure at Sukathi. A woman unloading goods had a brightly coloured cloth wound around her head; seen on the small screen, she had been called Sarayu. The woman did not consent to the public release of her real name. She was prepared to give her account directly to the designated investigator, for the picture was now damaging her own livelihood as well. “Do not turn my face into a means of excusing another woman's supposed wrongdoing,” she said. “That would be wrong too. Look at the day I worked, the unloading receipt, and what the photographer says. Correct the error wherever it lies.”

The photographer of the original picture was found near the old thatched shed of the cattle enclosure. On his phone was a short, unbroken recording: baskets being unloaded, empty sacks folded, the woman wiping the sweat from her forehead with her own headcloth. Beyond the doorway stood a new weighing scale, and the enclosure's bookkeeper produced the receipt for its installation. The date was checked not against the bookkeeper's assertion alone, but against the labouring woman's hire receipt and the sequence of the original recording. The scene was not the evening incident at the forest gate; neither did it show a child being taken away. Nevertheless, the source of the composite image—the phone on which the two faces had been joined—remained to be investigated.

On the meeting paper Naira wrote one word: “Resemblance.” Underneath she wrote: “Not identity.” Padma added that correcting this error of identification from an image did not amount to establishing every fact about either woman's life. Sarayu said bitterly, “You are all writing things down, but when will my granddaughter go back to school?” Meera gave the time of the next day's class and asked the girl's mother which route would be safe. Janaki said the families themselves would decide the children's route; under the school's rules, their names must not be removed from the class register.

That same evening, before the hearing on the fish-market contract, Vinod Kevart was drying old weighing slips that had stuck to the market boards. Since morning, the smell of fish and water from melting ice had been rising in his stall. The wholesale contractor's vehicle stood in the shade, while the small sellers' baskets sat in the sun. Vinod's daughter tapped the base of a basket with a bamboo sliver and asked, “If they write down our names, will we get some shade?” Vinod said, “Our names are on the application; a share has not been granted yet. Today we must make the question of that share clear.” He put the water-soaked slips in a separate bag, as though rescuing accounts that had been running away from him for months.

The committee secretary first read the old contract aloud: the contractor would pay a deposit and, in return, have priority in choosing spaces. Small sellers appeared under a column marked “incidental charges.” Vinod asked how many people were meant by “incidental.” Phulmati Tiyar had taken an hour off from her work on fishing nets to attend. With her were two young women who received separate wages for cleaning and selling fish. “Baskets are sold in my name too,” Phulmati said, “but making nets is paid labour. When deciding who has a share in the market, do not treat the purchase price and the payment for work as the same thing.” The secretary at first objected to writing down so many names. Four separate slips obliged him to pause his pen.

The contractor said that he paid for repairs to the market's drain and roof himself. Vinod did not deny the expenditure. “Show us the repair bills,” he said, “and tell us which account receives the daily fees paid by the small sellers. If we contribute to the costs of the contract, why are our names absent from

the facilities it provides?" The contractor laughed. "Will you people open a separate market of your own?" Phulmati answered, "If we did, we would have to arrange the customers' approach, the weighing facilities, and the disposal of refuse all over again. We want rules for our rightful share here."

Vinod displayed four columns in his own accounts: fish bought at dawn, carriage, market-board rent, and the day's spoilage. For the first time the committee understood that the small sellers were not demanding a share under the name of profit; they were asserting a claim to the money remaining after their expenses had been deducted. One member proposed allocating two corners of the permanent shade by lottery. Before agreeing, Vinod asked, "Will only those who pay a wholesale advance be allowed into the draw, or those who pay a daily fee as well?" Instead of answering, the secretary looked at an empty line on his paper. A new category would have to be written there.

A young fish seller said, "I come for two hours a day. If I must pay a whole day's market-board rent, there will be less food at home." The contractor replied that separate accounting for two hours would be difficult. Vinod showed an old record of a half-day's sales, but did not present it as an established rule. The committee accepted a proposal to identify three boards for part-time spaces on a trial basis for one week; final approval of the measurements, cleaning arrangements, and fees was still pending. Vinod and Phulmati took a copy of this partial written decision. Neither called it a complete victory.

Along the market road came Gita Kori with folded fabric samples tucked under her arm. She did not stop at Vinod's hearing. She had arranged to speak with a fellow loom worker across the border to reconcile the company's outstanding payment. Urmila Rajak had earlier been careful not to confuse the colour of Gita's cloth with the sample of hospital linen. Gita now carried the note recording that comparison and the company's original order, tied separately in a piece of cloth. Stepping onto a stone, she remembered for an instant the clatter of her loom. Remembering the length of a bolt of cloth was easy; counting the buyer's deferred promises was harder.

The call with Saraswati, her fellow weaver across the border, began with a silent picture message. Saraswati could read the company's letter in Hindi, but recorded her loom's daily wages in Maithili and in the language of her home. She first sent Gita two questions: did the delivered cloth match the weave sample specified in the order, and had the company's mark been placed on the selvedge with the weavers' consent or without asking them? Gita spread out her mother's old measuring cord and replied, "The measurements match. I did not authorise the label. But changing a label alone will not cancel the money still owed."

When the company's local representative arrived at the meeting, he said that part of the cloth had not been sold and that therefore the entire payment

had been withheld. Gita said, “The sales ledger will show what happened to the unsold goods. My terms for wages were written down earlier—when I handed over the cloth.” Opening her account book, she showed two separate heads: the cost of buying yarn, covered by the company's advance, and the weaving time for which Gita and her companions were owed their own wages. Saraswati sent a copy of her document by phone, recording receipt by the purchaser across the border, but the authenticity of the signature still had to be verified. Gita marked it “copy of receipt received,” not “payment confirmed.”

The representative asked, “Will involving people from across the border help this business?” Gathering up her measuring cord, Gita said, “Listening to the person whose hands sent the goods and the person who received them is not the ruin of commerce. I shall neither pressure my fellow worker to become a witness nor declare every bolt of the company's cloth stolen property.” Saraswati agreed to file a written claim under the rules of her own country, but stipulated that the customer's private name must not be disclosed publicly. All three parties then agreed in writing to exchange dated copies of their accounts. No money had been paid; but the questions of who owed the wages and who must carry out the examination no longer went unnamed.

On her way home, a cart driver showed Gita Yusuf's detained bundle tied with red cord. “This is cloth too. Might it belong to your company?” he asked. Gita read the label from a distance but refused to touch the bundle. “A similarity of colour, a similarity of vehicles, and the name of the material—none of these makes it my cloth,” she said. “The owner of those goods must open the original records. What is owed to me cannot stand in place of what is owed to someone else.” She saved the message Saraswati had sent for the next day's hearing; its full contents were not to appear in any news report without Saraswati's prior consent.

At the eastern edge of the market, Farida Qureshi was lifting the lidded chest of her meat stall. For ten days other sellers had been saying that the food at her shop was unhygienic and that no one should buy goods from “Qureshi people.” Some echoes of the school's false accusation had reached the market, but no one could say clearly which customer's complaint had begun this boycott. Farida's customer numbers had fallen. Rather than go begging for justice at someone's doorstep that day, she had submitted a written application to the municipal health inspector.

When the inspector arrived, Farida did not shut her shop. She showed him the clean water, the vessel for washing implements, the covers, and the arrangements for keeping goods cool. The inspector produced his thermometer and sanitation checklist. He said that the inspection would be judged by prescribed standards; community names and rumours were not items on the form. Farida replied, “If you find a fault, write it down and I shall put it right. But the rules for inspecting all the shops around me must not

be turned into a finding against me merely because of my caste or religion." She also asked for an official receipt for the inspection fee.

One customer said that something bought there yesterday had smelled unpleasant. Farida did not interrupt him. "Write down when you bought it, what kind of goods they were, and where they were kept," she said. The customer could not recall the whole day, but thought the purchase had been made sometime after noon. The inspector recorded this as a complaint, not as a finding from his direct inspection of the shop. He found that a cleaning strip in one corner of the chest needed replacing. Farida replaced it immediately and entered the date of the correction on the inspection sheet. That small fault did not justify the general boycott.

The president of the market association said that a boycott was a matter of people's personal choice. Farida objected. "Whether a customer chooses to buy is that customer's affair. But if the association labels my shop 'bad' without an inspection and tells everyone not to come here, that is no longer preference. It is an organised accusation." She asked the president to show the old notice. The paper bore no testing date, no sample of the product, and no signed complaint. The president would not himself agree to remove it. Another member proposed waiting for the formal inspection report before deciding.

On the inspector's preliminary form some arrangements were marked satisfactory, one improvement was required, and the laboratory result for the sample was still pending. Farida accepted that limited conclusion. When a journalist called, she refused to say, "My shop has been declared entirely blameless." "Give them only what the report says so far," she said. "I have corrected the fault that was found; the rest of the examination is unfinished. Let those who issued the boycott order show the grounds on which they did so." Two shopkeepers in the association favoured removing the collective-boycott notice before the next meeting, but the president's signature was still missing.

The public hearing that evening took place beneath the broad-canopied tree at the railway square. Janaki wanted only adult representatives seated there: no child's face, name, or stopping place on the journey was to be spoken of before the crowd. Padma began by reading out the origins of the two images and a list of their cropped portions. The original forest-gate recording concerned an old dispute over passage in the evening; the other original showed goods being unloaded in a loading yard. Neither established Mithun's presence or showed a child being taken away. Sajid again insisted that the photographs from his play be kept separately; its red curtain had previously been described as suspicious cargo.

A young man asked, "If the two original pictures are different, who is guilty?" Naira said, "What I can state now is that the accusation against Janaki's group based on these faces was unverified and wrong as a public

allegation. Discovering who joined the two pictures is a separate investigation. And if you have facts concerning Mithun, take them to the office where the first report was registered." Lata came to the hearing, but did not recite the description of her son's clothes once again in front of the crowd. She asked, "Now that the old confusion has been dispelled, has a date been fixed for the next step in the search for my child?" A worker at the help desk answered by giving her a written time.

Janaki said, "Withdraw the words 'child stealers' from the accusation against our group. Do not merely write 'there may have been a misunderstanding' and leave everyone under suspicion again." The school's headmistress, Asad, and the market representative prepared a joint correction. It stated plainly that the available viral images and the purported match between faces did not constitute evidence linking Janaki's group to the abduction of a child; the accusations made on that basis were withdrawn. The investigators' separate missing-person file would remain open. Janaki listened to the whole text and signed it, but did not consent to publication of all the members' names together.

Sarayu sat silently beneath the tree. Someone said, "Surely you feel relieved now?" Pointing to the fold of her wet mat, Sarayu answered, "Earlier, strangers in the market would ask the price of my wares. These past few days they have seen my face and turned away. The paper has been put right—but when will the buyers' eyes be put right?" Janaki rose with her. They themselves decided to go to another market at dawn; no one would determine their travelling route in the name of sympathy. Meera set the children's writing board firmly in place once more.

That night Naira opened her notebook to three sections. In the first was the written retraction of the false public accusation against Janaki's group; in the second, the time-bound next steps in the search for Mithun; and in the third, the separate claims and disputes of the market—Vinod's provisional board, Gita's unpaid wages, Farida's unfinished inspection. Looking at the register, Kabir asked whether the fact that fish and cloth were sometimes carried by the same vehicle might reveal a connection. Naira said, "To investigate a possible connection, we shall request the vehicle's loading slips. Shared wheels do not mean a shared crime." Yusuf's bundle with the red cord still had not been opened.

As Janaki served the evening meal, she called her granddaughter to sit beside her. The little girl asked, "Is Grandmother's face Grandmother's again?" Sarayu smiled. "My face was never anybody else's," she said. "Other people put the wrong name on it in their papers." Far away, the railway wheels clattered. At Lata's home a covered plate was still waiting for her child; a new date for the search had been written down, not an answer. That night Janaki packed the belongings for her group's next journey. The struggle to reclaim

one's identity and the search for a missing child could go on together, without either swallowing the other.

Chapter 80 · The Weaver's Second Ledger

At dawn Yusuf Ansari was bent over his loom, joining a broken thread of the warp. As he pressed the tiny knot with his fingernail, he heard a vehicle outside, but did not raise his head. After returning from the market the previous night, a customer had asked for his white length of cloth back. The man had grown frightened on hearing that even genuine merchandise had been detained because of another bundle tied with red cord. Yusuf had already spent the customer's advance, and before going to sleep he had stitched a second, thin ledger into the middle of his old account book. On the first page were the measurements of cloth woven, credit taken for thread, and wages; on the second, the carriage of the detained consignment, the shop's stamp, accusations received, and the cost of the inquiry. All night the two pages had lain pressed against each other, but the goods recorded on them were not the same.

Before leaving for the training room, his son put his small bag of tools in the courtyard and asked, “Abba, why have you sewn two accounts together? Earlier you had written the bundle with the red cord down separately.” Yusuf said, “Writing them separately and proving that they are separate are two different things. I must open a way for what I wove to reach its customer. I must stop what I did not weave from being sold in my name.” His son showed him the first photograph of the cloth on his phone. He said that if the photograph included the mark of the join at the edge and the date, comparison would be easier. Yusuf accepted the suggestion, but said the photograph should assist the account, not take the place of touch. His son did not leave without drinking his tea; his mother had put bread in his bag.

Urmila Rajak came and stood outside the shop. In her hand was not a count of the hospital sheets she had washed, but a receipt from her own washing place. “If everything loaded onto one vehicle is given a single name, my washing will be called theft too,” she said. “Tell me which page is needed at today's hearing. I will write down the water and cloth work I actually saw; I will not say what was put onto the vehicle afterwards.” Yusuf urged her to submit only a certified copy of her laundry register. The two agreed to bring their original account books to the hearing and to surrender copies only against an officer's receipt. They also resolved to request written permission before anyone untied the red cord, and not to open the bundle before noon.

Three tables had been set up that day in the storeroom behind Sukathi's cattle shed: one to establish ownership of the goods, the second to compare transport slips, and the third to hear complaints. Naira had arrived early and prepared a list showing whose pages were to go to which table. Mahendra, the driver, had brought his damp transport slip in a plastic cover. “Because everything was loaded onto the same vehicle, they have made me the driver of

one single crime," he said. "I can tell you where I stopped. How am I to know whether the cloth inside was woven or printed?" Instead of filling the blank spaces in his times from her own guesses, Naira told him to ask for the checkpoint entry register. It recorded the vehicle's arrival, not the origin of each load.

Once permission had been given to break the seal on the first bundle, Yusuf spread out the length of cloth. There, among the threads, lay the little earth-coloured join his fingers would have recognised even without seeing it. In the photograph taken by his son, a measuring tape had been placed beside the join. The customer's original order specified the width, length, and ordinary intended use; it said nothing about hospital approval. The customer who had come to testify produced his purchase slip and said that he had ordered the cloth for curtains at home. The officer asked, "Can you identify every join in the cloth?" "No," the customer answered. "I recognise my order and my advance payment. Let Yusuf explain the weaving." The limit of his evidence was recorded.

The second bundle bore the same shop stamp, but its white label carried an added assertion that the goods had been approved for hospital use. Shekhar, who had once traded with Yusuf, said, "Perhaps those words were written at the warehouse. No one meant to hurt anybody." A senior hospital employee, accompanied by the warehouse clerk, made it clear that the register produced contained no entry showing that an institutional approval letter had been issued for this particular consignment. He displayed not the hospital's records for an entire year but the relevant period and the letter-number entries. "I can say that I have not found an approval in this record," he said. "From this page I cannot say who printed the label, what cloth is inside the bundle, or whether all the hospital's other materials are secure."

Shekhar argued that every trader used marks resembling government seals. Naira asked him, then, by whose authority the word "approved" had been printed. Shekhar said that the instruction had come by telephone from the warehouse, but he could not remember the name. Yusuf asked that this claim be entered in the written statement: an account of a telephone call was not proof of an order. In the presence of the authorised goods inspector, two independent witnesses, and the custodian, the outer label, stamp, and weight of the bundle tied with red cord were recorded. It was not yet released for sale. The reason entered for its detention was "distribution under an unverified claim of approval," not "theft by Yusuf."

"When, then, will my genuine bundle be returned?" Yusuf's voice rose. The officer in charge of inspection said there was ambiguity in the joint transport slip: releasing the first consignment might make tracing the second harder. Yusuf laid his second ledger before him. "Your work is to investigate. Feeding my family is work too. If the grounds for detention do not apply to the first bundle, issue a written order for keeping it, and put your reasons in that

order." The customer added that the workers waiting to hang the curtains at his home had been sitting idle because the cloth was late. The officer compared the two sets of pages again. The owner, measurements, and order for the first bundle had been identified; its journey in a shared vehicle was the only suspicious connection that remained.

Mahendra showed a photograph of a patch of lime that had remained on the floor of his vehicle. "Look at this," he said. "Both bundles were put in the same place." Yusuf replied, "The wheels and the floor shared a road; they did not share ownership." For the first time Mahendra openly spoke of his fear for his job. If he began issuing separate receipts for each consignment, the vehicle owner might deduct the extra cost from his hire. Vinod Kewart, who had come over a dispute about fees at the fish market, said, "Enter the cost of preparing separate papers under the transport charge. Don't leave the driver's shoulders bearing the blame for the goods." The officer recorded a temporary arrangement requiring separate loading numbers for future consignments.

Rahim Mansuri sat on the threshold of the hearing room, folding a mattress cover. He had been accused of hiding stolen hospital materials in a consignment of four sacks of fluffed cotton. On the previous occasion he had shown a register for the fluffing of seven mattresses, but three customers had taken their goods away themselves. Today he had brought a receipt written by the grandson of an elderly customer, the transport record for the four sacks, and a separate bill for new cotton. He did not bring his mattress into the middle of the table and tear it open. "It would not be right to rip apart the cotton and covering without the owner's permission," he said. "If you need a sample for evidence, call the owner."

A member hearing the complaint asked whether Rahim's sacks had not been seen at the turning behind the hospital. Rahim read out his appeal, in which the date of the accusation differed from the time at which his four sacks had been unloaded. Mahendra said he had driven until very late that night. He had stopped near the turning, but could not remember whether the sacks had been unloaded there. Rahim did not make this lapse of memory into proof that Mahendra was lying. He asked only that the objects, their owners, the labour, and the stopping places be examined as four separate matters. His appeal was received and attached to the complaint register. No final order withdrawing the accusation was made then.

From the doorway Rahim's wife told him over the telephone that customers' advance payments for cotton for new mattresses had diminished. Rahim assured her that the appeal had been filed; he did not say that business had returned to normal. His wife told him a decision she had made from her own accounts: beginning the following day she would accept small orders to restore the stuffing of old household mattresses, but she would not send merchandise by the vehicle under accusation until separate loading slips had begun to be issued. "This time the two of us will set aside the cost of the slips

together," Rahim said. His wife replied, "The cotton dust goes up my nose too. Why should my name be absent when the expenses are decided?" Rahim fell silent and wrote her name in the margin of his copy of the appeal.

Sakina the dyer arrived when the sunlight falling across the dyed cloth was casting a green patch on the white wall. She opened two leaves of her sample book. The first recorded indigo; the second, a green-and-violet shade requested afterwards in writing by the customer. Between them were the washing time and the quantities used for dyeing the fabric again. The trader's representative said the bill had increased because she had made accounts for two orders. Sakina placed a small piece of thread in his hand. "There was one length of cloth, but the labour was done twice," she said. "I am not saying I sold two lengths. You are saying that the second dyeing somehow became free."

The date on the customer's written request for the change was clear, but the thumb impression upon it looked irregular. The representative questioned the impression. Sakina said she had herself heard the customer ask for the change, but that it would be proper to call the customer to verify the written consent independently. She did so. The customer acknowledged both the original order and the request for a different colour, but explained that there had been concern that the earlier dye would fade in sunlight. Sakina showed a half-length she had kept for testing. A whole season had not yet passed to establish the dye's long-term durability. Here the specimen was evidence of workmanship, not a guarantee of the future. Eventually the customer proposed paying part of the wages for the changed colour immediately and settling the balance on the test date.

"Does that mean the debt on the first bill is cancelled?" the trader asked. Sakina drew a vertical line in the margin of her account. "No. The old amount due, the price of the new dyeing, and the question raised about the quality of the colour are three matters. Record the disputed part as disputed; do not erase payment due for work that has been accepted." In the customer's presence she recorded the part-payment, adding the date for the balance and the limits of the objection. The customer took his copy away. Sakina opened her book again and saw that the sample of the earlier colour was safe between the pages. Preserving evidence had required no humiliation of the customer.

Meanwhile, at the Khatāl fish market, water from melting ice was running towards the feet of the weighing scales. The earlier decision to give Vinod three part-time stalls for a week was being put into practice today with a measuring cord. The contractor's accountant said that two stalls were unusable because of standing water. Phoolmati Tiyar arrived with a coil of fishing net tucked beneath her arm. "The water at dawn is not the water at noon," she said. "Putting down a cord once and declaring the place bad is not a measurement." Vinod took off his sandals and went to the water's edge. Mud

was oozing from a corner of the drain, but no one had measured how deep it was.

An employee of the committee drove a slender reed into the mud to measure its depth. The readings differed at four points; at the first there was fine silt, and at the second the water from the ice had made the ground slippery. Phoolmati demanded that the cost of cleaning the market be recorded separately from the charge for using a stall. “Water from washing fish, rainwater, and water from melting ice may come from different places,” she said. “Look at the drainage before placing the blame on anyone.” Vinod pointed out two vendors who carried customers' credit slips home with them. If the market ground was measured incorrectly, the earnings of the part-time sellers on the following day would not be protected.

The contractor showed his bill: wages for digging the drain, carriage for removing silt, and repairs to the roof. Vinod said the bill had indeed been produced, but it did not account for the daily cleaning charges already collected from the fish sellers. The committee secretary recorded a decision to maintain the temporary stalls for one more week and arrange for an independent new measurement of the drain. Those four readings did not establish from whose field the silt had come or the full nature of the water body. Phoolmati wanted the names of two young women who sold fish for short periods to be entered in the stall list for their respective dues. Their signatures were collected; the contractor's final agreement was still outstanding.

Lakhan Satar was unloading wooden planks on the slope beside that market. He and two companions had repaired the temporary passage for movement after the rains the night before. In the proprietor's accountant's book, “voluntary community service” was written opposite all three names; yet the contract bill had charged separately for their labour that same night. Lakhan still bore a pressure mark on his forehead from lifting the wet planks. “We did the work for the community, and that is true,” he said. “But calling what we were promised charity in order to wipe it out is not right.” He did not merely want his own name corrected; he wanted his two companions' working hours recorded as well.

The proprietor said the replacement of the planks had been voluntary because everyone using the landing had benefited. Lakhan asked, “Then in whose name have you entered the wages on your bill?” The accountant said it was a general item in the contractor's bill, and no actual payment was necessary. From his bag Lakhan took out the weighbridge slip for loading the timber, bearing the time of entry that night and the warehouse mark. The slip established the time of the work, not the wage rate. Chandru and Bela, his companions, each said separately that the rate had been promised in their presence. Lakhan gave them an independent chance to put that testimony in writing; he did not write their voices down under his own name.

Bela disagreed with the proposal that all three should be entered as having worked an equal number of hours. “I unloaded the planks, but in between I went home to see my sick child,” she said. “My time was shorter; my share of the work was not. Record separately how long each person worked and what work each did.” Lakhan did not try to silence her. Before the accountant two kinds of reckoning were opened: hours and work performed. The old verbal promise about the rate lived in the separate memories of three witnesses, but no written acceptance of it had yet been found. Lakhan submitted the group's collective claim and applied for the entry “unpaid” in the wage register to be formally marked as disputed.

Gomati told a clerk who had come with her that the word “community” did not turn everyone into one labourer. Chandru's household expenses, medicine for Bela's child, and Lakhan's work loading planks were different matters. As the clerk wrote the names, he tried to leave Bela as no more than “Lakhan's companion.” “I have a name of my own,” Bela said. “I will tell what I heard, not Lakhan.” The accountant wrote down her name. It was decided that the proprietor's original bill and register would be produced on the appointed day. Until then the three would keep receipts acknowledging their testimony. No one announced that their wages had been paid.

After noon Naira, Yusuf, and Mahendra returned to the storeroom. The employee preparing the separate loading slip examined the proof of ownership for the first bundle and said the cloth Yusuf had woven could be released. Yusuf read the paper before doing anything else. By mistake it had been printed with the words “all associated goods released from inspection.” He refused to sign in the margin. “I want permission only for the number I wove on my own loom,” he said. The employee prepared the slip again, specifying the measurements of the cloth, the customer's name, the distinctive seal on the second bundle tied with red cord, and a separate statement that its detention remained in force.

Mahendra now encountered another difficulty. The vehicle owner said that the time lost in preparing separate loading slips would be deducted from Mahendra's daily wage. He went not straight to Naira but to Vinod. “You calculate the hire for stalls in the market every day,” he said. “Who will enter the hire of my time?” Vinod showed him an empty space on his own slip. Mahendra recorded separately the reason for the lost time, the actual waiting, and the vehicle owner's instruction. “Give the people who are fixing my share of the fish market this page as a separate matter,” Vinod said. “Do not let your wages be cut in the name of my dispute.” Mahendra had found a place for his own application.

As Yusuf was leaving with the first bundle on his shoulder, Sakina came up to him. “The cloth has been released,” she said. “And the second ledger?” Yusuf smiled. “The second ledger records expenses I have not recovered.” Sakina replied, “The old payment for my dyeing is still owed too. Making the

right papers does not open a customer's purse by itself." Together they considered the question of the shared transport charge on the old vehicle. Yusuf said he would pay whatever transport charge was genuinely attributable to the first bundle; the cost of detaining the second should not fall on him without cause. Sakina would accept no deduction from the wages due for her dyeing. Both understood clearly the need for separate accounts for two lives that had travelled the same road.

When the first length of cloth reached the customer's home, a young woman of the household came into the courtyard carrying the measuring tape herself. As she measured the height of the curtains, she said, "My window is small. I shall keep the cloth left over for work of my own." Yusuf watched with pleasure as the fabric reached the use for which it had really been made. His son was returning from training. He saved the number of the new receipt on his phone, but told Yusuf, "You don't want the customer's private name published. I won't publish it." Yusuf answered, "Explaining the accounts of a piece of work and selling the story of everyone's home are two different things." For the first time his son did not photograph the second page of the ledger.

At dusk in Khatāl, Phoolmati and Vinod were marking a small bamboo board for the drainage of water. The two young women marked a place at their short-time stall, though it still had no permanent shade. "Two days selling nets and a week's place in the market will not meet a household's expenses for the whole year," Phoolmati said. "But once the rule is written, it becomes easier to ask questions later." Vinod's daughter watched the last piece of ice of the day slip into the water. "Is that ice water going into the river?" she asked. "I cannot say without checking where the drain leads next," Vinod answered. "All I can see with my own eyes is that this water is gathering in this hollow."

Before returning home, Naira looked at a separate page in the investigation file on Mahesh's murder. His name had not appeared in any original document at that day's commercial hearing. In Lata's notebook the next date for checking on the search for Mithun had been entered; nothing warranted sending the stamp on Yusuf's bundle as evidence in the search for the boy. Yet some names of stopping places on the transport slips appeared to match places along the route recorded in an earlier missing-person application. Naira entered this comparison as "a possible question for investigation." Goods and people travel along the same roads; that ordinary fact does not establish an abduction.

Yusuf opened his account books one last time. In the first ledger, part of the payment for the cloth delivered to the customer had now been entered. The debt for thread, his son's training fee, and the losses of the days gone by still remained. In the second were plainly recorded the identity of the detained bundle, the hospital's limited document concerning the absence of approval,

Shekhar's incomplete statement, and the date of the next inspection. Yusuf did not write “crime proved” beside anyone's name. A night wind entered beneath the roof of the loom shed. With thin lengths of cord he tied the two ledgers separately. Behind that separation, a way had opened for someone's innocent merchandise to move, while a sale made under another's unverified claim of approval remained stopped.

Far away, the lamps at Khatāl were going out one by one. The fish sellers lifted their baskets and turned homeward; they would meet again at dawn to settle the next measurement and allotment. In her house Lata sat touching the fold of the first kurta Mithun had worn; today she had received no more than confirmation of a fixed time for the next inquiry. Among the transport slips Naira had kept apart, one question remained: in whose name had the unverified stamp of approval been placed, and who had actually sent the goods? An examination of the merchandise might answer that question. There was no basis, however, for saying that the answer concerning the missing child would be the same. On the road that had once seemed one undifferentiated darkness of suspicion, at least two separate directions could now be discerned; the people concerned still had their work to do, each along their own way.

Chapter 81 · The Child in Another Place

That morning the tea-seller was cleaning not the glass of his little oil lamp but one leg of his table. The corner of a slip wedged beneath the leg had grown damp; as soon as he pulled the paper free, the table began to wobble. Naira stood waiting for her tea. Her attention fell on a half-effaced phrase in blue ink—“Next Stop.” The tea-seller hastily gathered up the paper. “An old bus-fare slip, sister. It was helping to keep the table level.” Naira left him to it. There was dust upon the road, the smell of raw milk in the air, and beneath the rear wheel of a bus the morning sky lay reflected upside down in a puddle. Not every scrap of paper here was a clue; but today Lata was coming to this very bus stand to meet someone.

When Lata arrived, it was not Mithun’s maternal uncle who accompanied her, but Kamli, an elderly neighbour. She had stayed awake all night to write down once more the measurements of the blue kurta Mithun had worn, though today she did not take the paper out. A message had come from the local help desk: in records recovered during the search for another child, a contact location at the bus stand had been found. The information explicitly said that this lead did not establish Mithun’s whereabouts. Lata lingered over that line. “If the news is about another child, why have you called me here?” she asked. Naira said, “Because a witness says the office of the intermediary whose name you heard last time used to be on this road. But it is a name heard from someone else. Coming here does not mean accusing anyone.”

At the rear entrance of the bus stand stood two officials, a child-protection worker and a woman clutching a small red bag. The woman was Chameli. Her twelve-year-old daughter, Gunja, had left home eleven days earlier and not returned. An acquaintance of the family had said there would be an opportunity for education together with some light work, but Chameli had given no written permission. She had first looked for her daughter among relatives in the neighbourhood; a missing-person report was filed four days later. Today she had received confirmation of the place where her daughter was, though the formal process of bringing her safely home was still under way. “I haven’t come to seize anybody,” Chameli said. “I want to know who prevented my daughter from coming back of her own free will.”

The child-protection worker first made it clear that Gunja’s statement would not be read aloud at a public table. An investigating officer placed papers along the edge of a separate copy. Gunja had been found in a sewing room where the attendance register called her a “new assistant” instead of using her name. The dates in her own account, the room’s entry register and the two stage-by-stage receipt slips issued from the bus stand corresponded. On the first slip a signature recorded that she had been handed over to an adult as an “assistant”; on the second was an acknowledgement of receipt by

the person responsible for the sewing room. No document was found establishing the child's consent or her guardian's permission. The officer had secured the original register; examination of whose signatures on the copies were genuine was still pending.

"Then trafficking has been proved?" Lata asked in a single breath. The officer replied, "We have a first corroborated sequence showing a child taken from one place to another for labour without her guardian's permission. In her statement she says she was not allowed to go home. On that basis a criminal investigation has been opened. Who played what part, who used deception, and whose guilt will be established in court—those are still separate questions." "And Mithun?" Lata asked. The officer answered plainly, "Mithun's name does not appear on either slip. At present there is no basis for connecting him with the children in that room." Lata lowered her face but remained standing.

Chameli opened her bag and showed the old school exercise book she had brought for her daughter. Along one margin Gunja had embroidered a flower in blue thread. "She knew how to sew, so everyone will say she must have gone to work of her own accord," Chameli said. "Wanting to learn to sew and wanting to be kept shut away in a strange place are not the same thing." The child-protection worker said Gunja had spoken clearly on precisely this point: she wanted to learn to cut cloth, but she had never agreed to leave school or place her earnings in another person's hands. Gunja had also asked to see a teacher she knew. The officer recorded that request as a need relevant to the child's rehabilitation, not as evidence to be used in someone's speech.

The person Lata had heard they were searching for had once occupied premises in the lane east of the bus stand. There was no nameplate on the door, only four marks where adhesive had been. Inside were a torn stack of cash-receipt forms on a table and an old chair. The owner said the office had been rented and its tenant had left two days earlier. "Where has he gone?" Lata asked. "I don't know the address," the owner said. "Even the final instalment of rent is outstanding." Naira asked permission to examine the owner's tenancy register. The document contained a contact name, but the last two digits of the telephone number were blurred. She did not propose treating the owner as a witness to a crime merely on the strength of that name; a request was made for the original register to be lawfully examined through the investigating officer.

Lata went inside and touched the chair once with her hand. "Could Mithun have sat in this chair?" The question escaped her without deliberation. Naira did not invent an answer. Kamli, silent until now, said, "Chairs can be the same colour, and a child's path still be different. I don't want someone to search for my grandson's name here and write it in without proof." Lata looked at her. It brought tears to Lata's eyes to see how carefully the old woman guarded the right to speak Mithun's name, not merely her own. In

her notebook she wrote down the office's location and beneath it added, "No evidence of his actual presence."

As they came out of the lane, a bus employee stopped them. He said that a few days earlier he had seen a thin girl with a man, carrying a sewing bag. An officer took him aside and asked when. First he said Tuesday, then Wednesday evening. When the vehicle register was examined, he admitted that he could not remember the day with certainty. Hearing a description of Gunja's clothes, he said, "Yes, something like that. It must have been her." Chameli hurried forward. The child-protection worker intervened: "Tell us first what you saw. Do not add what you heard today to your memory of what you saw then." His statement was recorded as "possible sighting; date uncertain."

While the officials were gathering their papers, a small group of three labourers came up from behind the bus stand. In Kedar Bauri's hand was not a wooden plank but an old work-time slip. With him were Jugal, Phulwa and Shambhu—the people who had repaired the relief veranda and whose wages had been withheld under the name of "service." For days Kedar had been collecting separate accounts of each person's hours, tasks and agreed rate. Today they had come to submit their collective claim at the contractor's temporary office. Seeing the police at the stand, Shambhu began to draw back. "They'll ask for our names and addresses again," he said. Kedar replied, "Standing behind a wage claim is not the same as standing in a line of accused persons."

Lata recognised Kedar. Last time, as he repaired a broken plank in the relief room, she had seen blisters on his palm. "When you were working with the contractor's men, did you ever hear anything about that intermediary?" she asked. Kedar did not close his ledger. "I have heard the name," he said, "but I do not know whether my contractor and the person who took the child away are the same man. We must not make taking workers to a job and taking a child without permission the same thing merely by using the same words." "I asked for a name, not to declare anyone guilty," Lata said regretfully. Kedar replied, "Good. Then let us keep each other's papers safe from being mixed together."

At the sight of the collective claim, the contractor's accountant said the work had been done voluntarily during the flood. In her account Phulwa had recorded the hour when they had lifted the panels of the sinking veranda. "The food in the relief room was free," she said, "but no one asked us to give our sweat for nothing. Jugal, Shambhu and I all heard the agreed rate." The accountant said there was no such rate in his register. Kedar answered at once, "That is why we have brought our papers. If our names are missing from the register, we want to see the register. Do not turn us all into one labourer by writing 'migrant'." Shambhu gave a tally of working days two fewer than Phulwa's. The collective claim recorded that difference instead of concealing it.

The accountant proposed paying a small lump sum if they would withdraw all their papers. Jugal wanted to agree immediately. A message about medicine had come from his home. Phulwa objected. “How much of whose dues will this money be taken to settle? Once we sign, will every remaining demand be closed?” Kedar pushed the document forward. “No one will make a quiet settlement in all our names.” In the end the accountant gave the offer in writing and entered their application in the receipt register. Kedar did not treat the offer as payment; he added a separate request for an advance to meet Jugal’s immediate need. The dispute over what was owed remained alive, but its reckoning was no longer left to the air.

At that moment a young man, seeing the labourers, said that the office behind the bus stand arranged employment and that perhaps news of the girl could also be found there. Kedar stopped him. “Let the investigators examine the number we were given for work. It would be wrong to call everyone who offers work the same intermediary without checking.” Naira did not take an informal copy of Kedar’s slip. He authorised an official comparison of the number, on condition that the full particulars of their wage claim remain outside the inquiry. The officer made a separate acknowledgement. The care taken over this gave Lata the sense that the search was climbing another step, but to leap without a foothold remained dangerous.

On the other side of the stand, Durga Gangai was setting down her basket. In the past, a large trader from the market would take her mixture of makhana and flattened rice on credit and never return with a proper account. Today she had come not with little packets but with two bags of different weights. The gingery fragrance of makhana and the warmth of roasted flattened rice were unmistakable amid the dust of noon. The old trader’s accountant called out, “Nothing for us?” “The earlier debt is written down,” Durga said. “From now on I shall supply this consignment against an agreed price in advance. I will decide the limit of your credit myself.” The accountant turned away and went to another shop.

The new buyer Durga had come to meet ran a small team delivering tea and food around the bus stand. When Rukhsana first tasted her mixture, she had asked how much salt it contained. Now she asked about customers’ preferences and how long it would keep without spoiling. “My customers have long journeys,” Rukhsana said. “If the flattened rice goes soft in a damp bag, why should I pay the price?” Durga opened two lidded samples. One had been sealed since yesterday; the other had been made that morning. She did not conceal the difference in flavour. “Sell this consignment between morning and evening,” she said, “and if it does not sell, reduce the quantity rather than reducing the price of the next batch.”

A teenage employee of Rukhsana’s tea team asked, “Why are so many people gathered at the stand today?” Durga answered, “One mother has had news of her daughter. Everyone else has come about their own business.” The

girl said that the week before she had seen a woman leading a little girl by the hand onto a bus. Rukhsana asked her carefully, “When? Which bus?” The girl fell silent. “I didn’t recognise anyone’s face,” she said. Durga did not praise her for speaking the truth. She simply said, “If you want to have what you saw recorded, go to the officer. Don’t change your memory by mixing in what you have heard from the crowd over the last two days.” The teenager decided to give her statement after finishing her food-serving shift.

A message arrived on Lata’s phone from an unknown number: “The child will be found across the river. Send the fare first.” The message contained neither Mithun’s name nor the time of any sighting nor a shred of proof. For a moment Lata began counting the money in her pocket. Kamli did not restrain her hand. “If you send the money, tell me before you do,” was all she said. Lata showed the phone to Naira. Naira advised her to preserve a screenshot of the number and forward it through the official contact; Lata herself decided not to send money immediately. “It isn’t for the sake of the money,” she said. “I will not shut my eyes out of longing for my son.” Her voice was heavy; there was no display of heroism in her decision.

Before leaving, Chameli asked the child-protection worker once more when Gunja would be coming home. The worker explained the procedure: a health examination for the child, confirmation of safe contact with a guardian, and arrangements to hear what Gunja herself wished. “I am her mother,” Chameli said, “but let my daughter tell in her own words what she has endured. If every official asks her the same questions over and over, what will become of her?” The worker agreed that unnecessary repetition should be prevented. Repeating her home telephone number, Chameli added one more line: “She has asked for her school exercise book. Please tell me in good time when she needs it.”

At the afternoon meeting, only a single sentence from Gunja’s letter was read to Chameli, with the child’s permission. Gunja had written that the woman who ran the place addressed her by name when handing out sewing thread, yet had confiscated the slip bearing her home address from her pocket. The first part of that statement concerned Gunja’s daily experience; the second was an allegation to be investigated. The investigator secured the original page of the letter. The circumstances of two other adolescents found in the same workshop were being investigated separately; the officer refused a suggestion that they all be folded into a single story and displayed as a public tally of “rescues.” Chameli silently put the exercise book back into her bag.

Before evening, the original page of the office tenancy register was opened for authorised inspection. Beside the word “contact” were one identification, a second signature and a third date. The handwriting of one name on this page appeared to resemble the contact name written on Gunja’s first receipt slip; similar handwriting, however, was not conclusive proof of the same person. What had been confirmed so far was that the two original slips recording

Gunja's movements had been issued from the same contact location, establishing the first documented link in the child's unauthorised transfer for labour. Examination of the original signatures, telephone records and firsthand statements continued in order to determine the tenant's responsibility and the roles of the others involved.

When Kedar's group came out of the office and sat beneath the bus stand's awning, Jugal took out the prescription for medicine needed at home. "If I'd received even a small advance, I could have caught the evening bus," he said. Phulwa took two leftover rotis from her bag. "We came here for our papers, and now we're hungry too," she said. Shambhu asked with a laugh, "Shall we enter our mealtime in the wage register as well?" Kedar replied, "If we had eaten in the middle of work, we would. Today we have come to demand our rights, so we shall pay for our own food." Then he handed Jugal a written copy of the request for an advance. His family's emergency had not been postponed in the name of the collective dispute.

Meanwhile Durga returned to Rukhsana's team to see how the first bag was selling. Three travellers bought the flattened-rice-and-makhana mixture; one said the dried ginger was too strong. Durga wrote the objection in her notebook. The money for the three packets sold had immediately been entered with Rukhsana, and Durga could clearly see the advance due to her. "Shall we make the second consignment milder?" Rukhsana asked. "Not everyone wants the same taste," Durga replied. "We'll make two smaller quantities, but first we must work out what they will cost." She had heard about the dispute over measurements at Khatal; now, keeping her own eyes upon her weights, she went to drink water at the tea-seller's stall.

Before going home, Lata went to Chameli. Chameli did not recount Gunja's entire statement; she said only that her daughter was in safe care. "Will you be able to sleep tonight?" Lata asked. "We shall see when my daughter comes through her own doorway and eats something of her own choosing," Chameli replied. "I do not yet know what they have asked her, or how frightened she is." "We have not found where my Mithun is," Lata said. Chameli did not put a hand on her shoulder. Instead, she drew a clean sheet of paper from her red bag and gave it to her. "Write on this when you need to. I too had to learn to write things down."

The first evening bus had gone by the time Kedar, Phulwa and Shambhu were ready to leave, so they waited for the next. Jugal returned to the office for a reply to his request for an advance; he received no written approval, but the receipt number of his application was in his pocket. Kedar said that the date of the next meeting should be given to each remaining worker separately, and that no one should be made responsible for another's fare without being asked. Phulwa telephoned home to say that she had received no wages, though the claim had been registered. From the other end came a child's voice:

“Mother, shall I keep some rice for you?” “I’m coming,” Phulwa said. “You eat your roti first.”

As the officer filled in the last page at the help desk, he tied threads of different colours around two files. In one were the register relating to Gunja’s transfer, her protected statement and the original records from the place where she had been made to work; in the other were the pages concerning Mithun—the market, the oil shop, the broken strap of his sandal, and the application about the contact. “If a place-name matches, a comparison can be made,” Naira said, “but write down the absence of a match as well.” The officer recorded, with the date, that Gunja’s case had reached a corroborated link in the investigation but that nothing here had established a connection with Mithun. Nor had the separate documents concerning Mahesh’s death even been brought to this table.

That night Lata sat on the threshold of her kitchen and washed Mithun’s plate. Until then she had covered a portion of rice on it every day and set it aside. Today, in its place, she laid a little piece of blue cloth left over from the measuring of his kurta. It was not that her waiting had diminished. She wanted only to release food from the captivity of waiting. Kamli put porridge on the hearth. Lata opened her notebook and wrote down the next time she was to examine the oil shop’s credit page. The new office address was in the same book, and below it a boundary set down in clear letters: “No evidence that Mithun was seen there.”

Far away at the bus stand, Rukhsana’s team was washing its empty vessels. Half of Durga’s first consignment had sold; the price and flavour of the remaining stock would be reckoned anew at the following dawn. The wages owed to Kedar’s workers remained entered as outstanding; the process of bringing Gunja home was not yet complete. That night’s achievement was the gathering of corroborated records tracing a child’s unauthorised transfer for labour, giving the investigation its first firm path. But the doorway of Lata’s house was still without the sound of Mithun’s footsteps. Gunja’s truth belonged to Gunja. To turn it into an answer about Mithun would be to lay a second injustice upon the first wound.

Chapter 82 · Maithili's Page

As soon as Maithili opened the desk drawer, a fine fibre of old paper caught beneath her fingernail. She lifted out the wooden casket kept inside and set it upon the veranda. At the bottom of the casket, between folds of cloth, lay two layers of papers: in one, leaves from a manuscript in Ishan's clear hand; in the other, writing faded to a misty blue, with Maithili's annotations advancing along the margins. It had not rained the night before; nevertheless, she first tested the window latch, then spread a dry cloth over the table. Few visitors came into this little room of the house. Today Harimohan Pathak was expected, Ishan would be present, and for the first time Maithili would read aloud, in her own language, pages written by her own hand.

Sarita peered in from the kitchen. "Don't open the casket on an empty stomach," she said. "Just a moment," Maithili replied. Sarita did not laugh at those words. She knew how often learned people, promising "just a moment," consumed not only the hour appointed for a meal but also the time of the person who cooked it. She set down a plate of flattened rice and warm milk, yet touched none of the papers. "Shall I shut the door, so that dust won't settle on them?" Maithili asked. "Shut the door," Sarita said, "but leave this little window open for air. In the afternoon, the sunlight comes in low from this side." Only then did Maithili notice that even the light in this room had been arranged through another person's daily attention.

Inside the casket's lining lay an old measuring tape and a cotton towel. When Maithili lifted the towel, a thin note, separated from between two leaves, slipped out. She did not immediately declare it part of the book. It bore figures for the purchase of materials, an incomplete date and three letters. When one was eager to establish a name, it was easy to make such a fragment mean more than it could bear. Instead, she placed it in a separate envelope. Harimohan had spoken of bringing a magnifying glass to examine the order of the original leaves, differences of ink and the marks along their edges. For now Maithili had only her memory: on which day she had written a revision, and on which day the written page had passed into Ishan's hands. Her recollection was precise in its details, but the dates were not equally clear everywhere.

Ishan entered carrying his worn teaching satchel. The exercise sheets damaged by water on the school veranda had still not been prepared anew; Harimohan had sent him a list the previous day. "Why have you summoned me so early?" he asked. Maithili arranged the leaves before him. "Because when someone asks who wrote a paragraph submitted by one of your pupils, you open the page and look. For years, when I have asked that question about my own paragraphs, I have been offered nothing but my memory. Today there are two pages." Ishan sat down. He looked at the neat handwriting and

recognised it at once. “This is my first draft,” he said. Maithili placed the other leaf before him. “And this is the copy of the corrections written afterwards. Do not dismiss it as merely a note in the margin of your draft.”

The first leaf contained a discussion of the distinctions among the means of valid knowledge. At one point the relation between the example and the inference drawn from it had been left unclear; on the second leaf an objection from the opposing position had been introduced, and the reply altered. Maithili read the relevant portions of both versions, one after the other. “Here your sentence said that because the same outcome had been observed, the same cause could be taken as certain. I asked: had the possibility of other causes been excluded? After that, a new condition was added to the example. That was not merely a comma.” “We discussed that objection,” Ishan said. “And so,” Maithili answered, “I am not claiming that all your knowledge belongs to me. My question is who reshaped the written argument, and in what form that person’s name will appear in the book.”

When Harimohan arrived, he examined the corners of the leaves before taking them into his hands. “Not with bare thumbs,” he said, producing a clean piece of cloth from his bag. His eyes came to rest on the revised argument. “The philosophical objection matters,” he said. “But a manuscript leaf proves, in the first instance, that a particular hand wrote these words. To establish credit for co-authorship, we must also know the history of the leaf.” Maithili agreed at once. “Finding that history is part of what I am asking,” she said. “Do not turn the absence of its history into proof of my silence.” “Shall we begin, then, by comparing the handwriting?” Ishan asked. “Handwriting, dates, the sequence of drafts, and the testimony of those to whom the pages were read,” Harimohan replied. “Each must be considered separately.”

Maithili opened an old notebook. Before one entry were the words “Objection again”; below them, in ink of another colour, was an instruction to change the example. “That notebook has comments of mine as well,” Ishan said. “It does,” Maithili answered. “And I shall not erase them. What you wrote should be read under your name. What I wrote should be read under mine.” Looking at the two colours of ink, Harimohan cautioned them that a difference in colour alone could not determine the order of dates. Maithili accepted the warning. She did not conceal the uncertain date on the leaf she had herself written. She was prepared to risk making the weaker points of her own case public in order that the truth of her claim might be tested.

Three soft knocks sounded unexpectedly upon the wooden door. Farid slipped off his wet sandals at the threshold and came in. He carried neither a rhythm-practice notebook nor a musical instrument, but a school-admission application and the shop’s weekly accounts. He had been looking for Harimohan to ask about lesson times. “If this is not a good time to sit inside,

I'll wait outside," he said. Maithili invited him in, but moved the leaves a little to one side. "These are original documents in dispute; no photographs without an examination," she made clear. Farid nodded. "I came to understand one line of my application," he said. "The shop's ledger is in my pocket, and no one is going to read that without asking either." Harimohan promised to set aside a separate time for both of Farid's papers.

Farid's family had long been engaged in sorting goods for the market and selling them. His father wanted him in the shop during the afternoon arrival of customers. Farid wanted to attend the school's evening classes and learn to teach rhythm, but he did not wish to flee from the obligations he bore towards his family. He had therefore divided the seven days in his notebook: the shop's accounts in the mornings, turns unloading stock on certain days, and fixed hours for lessons. His father had said, "If you keep the accounts, you will learn the finer points of trade." Farid had answered, "Yes, but learning the trade must not be an excuse for leaving my studies unfinished." Today he needed the school clerk to acknowledge the agreed hours in writing.

"Why does this application mention your family's consent?" Harimohan asked. "I am an adult," Farid said. "Meeting the requirements of the course is my responsibility. My family's agreement is needed for dividing up the work at home, not as a substitute for my right to enrol at school." Harimohan read the form. In small letters it specified "Evening Study," but an office worker had treated it as an application for the ordinary daytime classes and sent it back. "Submit a written request to distinguish the two timetables," Maithili said. "Your work for the family must not become a reason to declare you unfit for school. But you must account for the hours you undertake in your own name." Farid wrote the correction into his application.

Meanwhile Sarita came to collect the plates. She stopped short when she saw the leaves spread across the table. "How old are these?" she asked. "Very old," Maithili said. "Some of your notebooks are from that time too." Sarita did not immediately bring out her notebooks. "The accounts I wrote and the arguments you wrote are not the same thing," she said. "But in those days, while I was carrying meals in, I would also be asked to make copies. We can sit down and look at that separately one day." Maithili opened her mouth, then closed it. She had come forward today to claim her own handwriting; to use Sarita's notebooks as supporting evidence for her claim without Sarita's permission would be another instance of the old wrong. "You choose the time," she said. Sarita carried the dishes away.

On a separate sheet Harimohan wrote three headings: Original Argument; Proposed Revision; Editing and Copying. "These will not decide the matter in themselves," he said, "but they will show what kinds of work were done." Ishan placed a finger on his initial discussion. "I prepared the structure of this argument about the means of knowledge, its original definition and its first disputation. After Maithili's question the example was changed. But the

sequence by which the revised example led to a new conclusion was something we examined together, sitting side by side.” “Then you yourself see that two names may be necessary?” Maithili asked. “I see participation,” Ishan replied. “The extent of co-authorship still needs to be compared against the evidence.” That limited admission was not a complete victory, but for the first time the matter was no longer merely “a discussion at home.”

Harimohan’s discomfort came from another quarter. In the public school, his name was associated with opening the door to learning; pupils would sometimes hold up a page from a book and ask how one person alone could make a decision about its authorship. “If I issue a certificate of co-authorship today,” he said, “tomorrow either Ishan or Maithili might ask for it to be reviewed.” “Then write down the procedure by which the decision is reached,” Maithili replied. “Acknowledge precisely as much as the evidence establishes; mark whatever still needs checking as ‘under verification.’ But do not look at the title page of the first edition and tear up all the other papers.” Harimohan recorded the numbers of the leaves on another sheet, adding no new marks to the originals.

At that moment Naira arrived outside the house. She was returning from the child-protection office, where the arrangements for Gunja’s safe return and the examination of the oil shop’s ledger in the search for Mithun were being handled separately. Maithili called her in. Looking at the pile of papers, Naira asked, “Are all these going to be made public?” “First the copies must be checked,” Maithili said. “Then we shall decide. Tell me: whose permission is needed to make copies of original pages?” “Where ownership or private information is involved, it would be wrong to circulate copies without the permission of the people concerned,” Naira replied. “But permission alone does not prove authorship.” Ishan smiled. “Every argument in this house comes down to the rights attached to a piece of paper now,” he said. “Questions of rights in papers arise from the lives of those who write them,” Naira answered. “Paper cannot pronounce the verdict by itself.”

For an instant Maithili wanted to ask Naira for news of the discussions about Kabir’s birth. For several days people had been saying that the family’s old list of names contained a confidential note about a birth. There had even been a proposal to make public the circumstances of Kabir’s birth and upbringing on the strength of a word or two in that list. Maithili spoke plainly. “My pages raise a public question about credit for authorship. Kabir’s private birth records will not become an example in my argument without his consent. Just because there are papers in both cases does not mean they may be opened under the same rule.” “The decision is his to make,” Naira said, and went no further. “And Sarita’s papers concerning the twenty-seven names will not be brought here.” Harimohan entered this boundary separately in his register.

Showing Naira a copy of his application, Farid asked, “If the school hours change, must I write down how much money I shall still contribute at home?” “First compare the promise you have made to your family with your father,” Naira replied. “Write down what you earn, but do not enter wages in your own name for days on which you did no work.” “That is why I’ll work one morning in the shop in exchange for two evenings,” Farid said. “My father has agreed verbally once already. I need the division of time in writing.” “And the money for your own books?” Maithili asked. Farid took a small pouch from his bag. “These are two payments I received for teaching rhythm,” he said. “I’ll buy my first book with them. I’ll keep my regular contribution to the household separate.”

After midday Maithili and Ishan slowly returned to the old question. Harimohan read a passage and asked, “Who first wrote the objection that follows this sentence?” “Maithili raised the question,” Ishan said. “And Ishan wrote the first form of the answer,” Maithili replied. “But the three lines pointing out a further difficulty in that answer are mine.” She opened two notebooks and showed where the relevant references stood. Harimohan did not quote the objection in isolation; he noted only its page and line positions. In that way, the risk of taking half a sentence, unexamined in the context of the complete text, as someone’s final philosophical position was reduced.

From Ishan’s satchel came a copy of a handwritten list. The date when the first writing had been completed was clear at its head, but the date of the subsequent revisions was given only as the name of a month. Maithili searched inside her casket and found a letter written in that month, in which she had told Ishan that they needed to talk again about the proposed example. The language of the letter was private, and in part domestic. She decided that the whole letter would not be laid open before the gathering. Harimohan would examine only the portion necessary to compare the date with the related page; afterwards he would read his written account of the examination to them both. Ishan agreed. Their consent did not resolve every question in the private relationship, but it established a boundary for the inquiry into credit.

A teenage schoolgirl came to the veranda to collect an exercise sheet. Harimohan told her to wait outside, for the fragile original leaves were spread across the table. He caught himself immediately and asked, “Have you come for the copy of your lesson exercises?” “Yes,” she said. He took a separately printed sheet from the cupboard inside and gave it to her. “How much must I learn before I can read all these?” the girl asked. “The exercises you are doing today are the first steps,” Harimohan replied. “Use copies so that the original manuscript is not harmed.” Maithili smiled. “Protect the pages,” she said, “but do not shut the classroom door without need.” The pupil departed with her exercises; for a moment the argument inside the room had touched the ordinary time of a child’s education.

When the evening sunlight fell slantwise upon the veranda wall, Farid returned with his father. His father had left the board of his weighing scales at the market. He spoke hesitantly. “Will the accounts of our household be settled here?” Maithili gathered up her own leaves. “No. The decision belongs to you two. Sit with Harimohan to discuss the school timetable.” Farid looked towards his father. “I’ll take responsibility for the shop in the mornings,” he said. “On the two evenings when I have classes and the customers begin to crowd in, you can employ someone else for half the time. Let us decide that person’s wages first.” “Out of whose profit will those wages be paid?” his father asked. Farid offered a small part of his earnings from teaching, but did not promise to shoulder the entire cost that belonged to his father.

His father grew angry at the proposal. “I’m not stopping you from studying,” he said. “But if the shop stands with no hands to work in it, who will meet the family’s obligations?” “Count the work I shall do keeping the books on five mornings,” Farid replied. “My earnings from teaching will pay for my books, and I shall contribute a fixed amount at home. I won’t promise anyone more than that.” He showed his father the actual sales figures for the preceding two weeks. For the days on which he had been away, he had not written the wages against his own name. For the first time his father looked at that clean, empty column. “You’ve left it blank,” he said. “Because I did not work on those days,” Farid replied.

Harimohan laid the two timetables side by side. In place of four evenings of school, it might be possible to arrange introductory lessons on two evenings and one morning before a holiday, leaving Farid to practise on his own during the other two hours. The school had not yet given its final approval. Farid and his father put an agreement in writing: for the first month Farid would contribute a fixed share of what the family was owed, keep the shop’s accounts on the appointed mornings, and discuss a new division of work when examinations drew near. His father added a condition: “Ask before assigning extra work.” He signed, but signed the paper agreeing the hours, not Farid’s school-admission form in place of his son. Farid was glad of that distinction.

After Farid had gone, Ishan asked, “If a family can set out an economic agreement in writing, why have I been so afraid to make a list of my own contributions?” Maithili did not hastily accept this question addressed to himself as an apology. “Because the moment you made such a list,” she said, “the sole authority that stood beside your name might have had to be examined again. And on my side too there may be matters for which I have a strong memory but not an equal weight of written proof. We must account for both.” Ishan counted the lines of his neat original draft. “I am prepared now to surrender the pages for written examination,” he said. “The final word about revising the published text must still come.”

Harimohan prepared a brief record of their agreement. It listed the external identifying marks of four leaves, the number of the copies selected

for registration, where the originals would be kept, the names of those who would examine them, and whose permission would be required to make further copies. In the space for contributions he wrote: “Handwritten revisions by Maithili submitted; examination of authorial participation continuing.” Ishan’s original composition was explicitly recorded as such. Since the leaves were still being examined as evidence, no immediate order was made to print a new name on the title page of the published book. Maithili stated clearly that this provisional register was not final justice; nevertheless she signed it, because for once the question had not been left in the darkness of a spoken understanding.

Naira, meanwhile, was preparing to go home. A message came from Lata: a time had been fixed for inspecting the oil shop’s debt ledger; no direct evidence of Mithun’s presence had yet been found. Naira sent back only confirmation of the hour, adding no conjecture. “Do you see anything alike in your investigation and my dispute?” Maithili asked her. “When different questions are forced into a single document,” Naira replied, “wrong answers begin to take shape. But it would be just as wrong to make my investigation evidence for your argument.” Maithili agreed. She wrapped her leaves in their cloth again; Naira put her telephone into her pocket and went out.

Sarita was baking rotis over the hearth behind the house. When Maithili went there, Sarita asked, “Did the pages survive?” “They did,” Maithili said, “and we found a way to have them read as they ought to be.” “Aren’t you going to ask when I shall open my notebooks?” Sarita asked, putting down the wooden tongs. Maithili answered not with a display of affection but with attention. “I shall ask—but not now. You are tired today. Tell the account of the work you did in your own words. I shall not take your time merely to fill the empty spaces on my own page.” Sarita turned another roti. Whether the answer had brought her relief, Maithili could not tell.

Stepping outside, Ishan saw Farid and his father walking on the far side of the road. Farid held the school application, while his father carried the shop’s ledger. There was enough distance between them to make it seem that they walked separately. A little farther on, however, the father stopped and showed Farid a customer’s list of goods sold on credit. Farid paused and explained some of the calculations. Ishan looked at the copy of the list in his own hand. Today he had become ready to write Maithili’s name beside the revisions she had proposed; turning that acknowledgement into the next edition of the book still remained to be done. He had confidence in the work that was truly his, and with that confidence the difficult apprenticeship of recognising another person’s labour had begun.

That night Maithili placed a blank sheet between the two copies on the table. Harimohan had written the date of the next examination upon it. At one corner of an original leaf lay an old line she had drawn, marking where the bridge between cause and conclusion had broken within a sentence. She

felt the desire to run her finger along that line, but did not touch it. The leaf was no longer merely an object of her memory; it was material held safely under examination. From the kitchen outside came the faint sound of Sarita washing utensils. Maithili opened the door. “Leave the dishes,” she called. “I’ll wash them in the morning.” From within, Sarita answered, “In the morning I shall show you some pages. The dishes will be finished tonight.” When Maithili put out the lamp, that promise was not a celebration of victory. It was the appointed hour of another, more difficult listening.

Chapter 83 · Sarita's Labour

At dawn, when Sarita drew the blowpipe away from the hearth, a half-burnt coal rolled out of the ashes and onto the floor. She picked it up with the tongs and put it back into the fire. Water was boiling in an earthen pot, but she took care that not a drop should fall on the blue-bound notebook resting on the bench behind her. Today she had to fulfil the promise she had made to Maithili yesterday. First she took the rice off the fire and banked down the embers; only then did she wash her hands and open the notebook. Its first page recorded measures of rice, oil, and lentils. On the seventh, lines of prose began without warning. For whom had these two kinds of writing, in the same hand, been set down? Sarita was ready to answer that question herself.

Maithili arrived a little before the appointed time. The moment Sarita saw her, she said, "Sit on the veranda, but first hold down the lid of this pot for me." Maithili set aside her papers and grasped the lid. Hot steam brushed her fingers, and she snatched her hand away. Sarita burst out laughing. "Didn't I tell you yesterday that you would be washing the vessels in the morning? Your hands will have to learn work from the very beginning of the day." Maithili laughed too, but when she saw water bubbling over the rim she asked for the tongs. Their small laughter came naturally to them both. Then Sarita laid two dry boards upon the table: the old notebook on one, today's accounts on the other. "Don't be in a hurry to fold my story into their dispute," she said.

On the notebook's seventh page lay part of a passage of questions and answers, with spaces between certain words and a red stroke along the margin. Maithili immediately recognised it as a copy of a portion of Ishan's first lessons. "On what day did you make this copy?" she asked. Sarita shook her head. "I won't give you an exact date yet. It was the paddy season that year, but the season I remember is not the same as the date on the paper. Look here: first I wrote *kāraṇa*, 'cause'; later I replaced it with *hetu*, 'reason'. You read it aloud, and I wrote it down. Whether the change came at your suggestion or from something I understood myself, we shall need another page to establish."

Beside the copied text in Sarita's notebook were two small ration accounts. At times she had cooked for Harimohan's school; at others she had found cloth to dry books or put written pages back into their proper order. One page recorded the number of meals eaten by five people. Below it stood the entry: "Four pages written out twice." Sarita said, "One day water dripped in from behind and the ink spread. You were all at your lesson. It took much longer to dry the wet copy, and then I asked about the letters that had disappeared and wrote them out again. I did not understand and correct everything on my own. I should have kept a separate record of the names of those I consulted. I haven't found that page yet."

Maithili took out an old printed book. Ishan's name appeared as its author at the beginning, and at the end was a brief acknowledgement: "Assistance from the household." Sarita did not immediately place her finger upon those words. "That line belongs to the time when you were writing," she said, "but it contains no reckoning of the days I spent. I do not claim to be the author. I say only that the pages advanced through the cooking, the copying, and the search for examples. I cannot call the ideas you changed your own way my ideas." "Then your name should have appeared in the acknowledgements—" Maithili began. Sarita interrupted her. "The name matters. But first listen to the work."

She drew a thin sheet from inside the notebook. It gave the sources of three examples: old water measurements from the village pond, weights recorded at a warehouse, and payments due at the landing. Sarita had seen the first with her own eyes. The second she had heard from Rukhsana. The third was copied from somebody else's notebook; she had never seen the original. "You took all three into your teaching together, calling them 'the practices of ordinary people'," she told Maithili. "I asked then whether the third example was true. You said it would serve well enough for an explanation. That answer stung me. I feared it might be wrong, but I was in no position to change a line in the book." The whole of that day did not return to Maithili's mind, but she recognised the manner of the answer she had given.

"I did say it would do," Maithili murmured. "Yes," Sarita replied, "and inside that 'would do', the question I had asked was buried. Now the credit for your handwritten arguments is being examined. This is an opportunity for me, but my account must not become evidence in support of your side. I can say that I gathered examples, pointed out certain false comparisons, and made some copies accurately. Look at the pages to discover which objections brought changes into the book." She marked off the material she had witnessed directly, the things she had heard, and what had been copied at another person's direction.

Just then Lakshmi Jhangar appeared at the door. Her bag had been soaked in an earlier rain, but this time the papers inside were protected on both sides by oiled sheets. "I went yesterday to the place you told me about for comparing the copies," she said to Sarita. "Two more pages turned up, but the owner's ledger still hasn't been opened." Sarita invited her to sit. "This is your work," she said. "I can read it aloud, but the decision will be yours." Before opening the bag, Lakshmi said, "No one is to photograph anybody's private papers in this house. I need a copy of the petition I wrote, not every story about my grandfather." Maithili put her phone into an inner pocket.

On one side of the copy of Lakshmi's old labour contract was the length of the working season, on another the arrangements for lodging, and on a third the quantity of grain advanced. The document bore no clear signature acknowledging a debt, although the office was describing the wages owed as a

“family debt” instead. Lakshmi had become cautious after seeing the case of Shiv Dhandi’s wage slip. “I want what my ancestors earned,” she said, “but I will not create a false claim and place somebody else under an obligation. The word ‘family’ is written here, but the space for the individual’s name is empty. My grandfather’s name is on another sheet. I will join the two only when the original register has been found.” She copied the figures she could actually see into her own notebook.

Sarita handed Lakshmi an old receipt from the place where the papers had been bound. It said only “two copies”; it gave no serial numbers for the original pages. “Your copies will have to be examined once more,” Sarita told her. “Whether this torn corner was already torn in the original, or was damaged while copying, is something the copyist must tell us.” “He said before, ‘They’re old papers—what is there to examine?’” Lakshmi replied. “Today I shall ask him to write down the date and the source of the pages.” Someone in the family wanted to lodge a complaint at once. Lakshmi had already decided her reply: not without an acknowledgement of receipt, and no entry lacking the date on which payment fell due would be described as a “proven outstanding amount.”

Looking at Lakshmi’s papers, Maithili asked, “Could you leave this copy with me? There is a similar difficulty in examining copies of scholarly writing.” Lakshmi looked at her for a moment. “My grandfather’s wages are not an example for your philosophy,” she said. “You may learn the procedure, but don’t copy my papers and take them to your meeting.” Maithili understood the carelessness of her question. “You are right,” she answered. “I shall not use the contents of this document. If I need to learn how a source can be protected, I shall ask about the general procedure without names.” Lakshmi gathered her bag together and asked Sarita whether she could send an inquiry by post and save the bus fare to the office.

Sarita examined an old receipt from that office. “Check the method of submission by telephone,” she advised. “Don’t post an original paper without confirmation.” Lakshmi herself called the office on its published number. The person who answered said an application seeking information about the source could be submitted with a copy, but that inspection of the original would require a separate appointment. Lakshmi wrote down the time, the telephone number, and the words she had heard. She decided to take her papers home, leaving with Sarita only a fresh copy of the application to read. “I can endure the quarrel at home for a few more days,” she said, “but once an incorrect amount is entered as payable, it is hard to have it corrected.”

When Lakshmi had gone, Maithili turned her face towards the window. The scent of chillies drying in the breeze drifted into the room. Sarita lifted the lid of the cooking pot to look inside. “Did that hurt you?” she asked. “When I demand my own right to what I have written,” Maithili said, “I remember the limits of evidence. But the moment somebody else opens their

papers, I begin to see them as material for my argument.” Setting out the plates, Sarita replied, “If you have understood it today, you will ask next time. The same thing happens to me. Someone comes to have a name corrected, and I start looking into the other columns of their accounts.” The froth on the lentils slowly subsided.

After the meal Sarita opened her written exercise sheets again. One contained an example: if two households possess identical weights, that does not establish that their grain came from the same source. “I first had occasion to say this,” Sarita explained, “because two sacks at the market weighed the same, but the grain in one household was damp and the other’s was dry. I spoke of what I had seen. You wrote it down for discussion. In the sentence that finally appeared, my sacks were still there, but my name was nowhere.” Maithili looked at the relevant passage in the book. The words had been fashioned by Ishan; the original observation behind the example might have come from Sarita. The surviving written sequence did not yet prove it conclusively.

“If you had seen the scene yourself first,” Maithili asked, “should your name have been given as the source of the example?” “At the very least,” Sarita said, “someone ought to have asked me where my observation was to be printed. I might well have agreed. But I had not put my experience into the sentence used in the book. Whether the questions you raised changed the argument is something the two of you must examine. Keep the category of my work distinct.” Maithili asked permission to write a summary of Sarita’s statement on a sheet of paper. “Read it aloud to me first,” Sarita said. “Then only as much as I accept may be copied.” Maithili did not put pen to paper until Sarita’s spectacles had been found.

Harimohan arrived in the afternoon to see the condition of the original pages. Beside the book on the table he found old rice accounts and slips recording the sources of the copied examples. “Which documents are we to take for examination?” he asked. Sarita laid three things before him: the copy of the written pages, the accounts of food and cloth expenses, and the list of sources for the examples. “The handwriting in the first is mine; the ideas need not be,” she said. “The second records labour and expense. I have never found a complete written account of what was owed. The third distinguishes what I saw, what I heard, and what I took from someone else’s papers. Do not combine the three and make them a certificate of authorship.” Harimohan wrote down the particulars. The originals stayed where they were.

He asked whether anyone had proposed a statement of contributions before the book went to press. Maithili recalled a small meeting held on the day she was presiding. Sarita had prepared the meal on time and arranged two copies of the original pages. When the acknowledgements were read, Maithili had said, “Assistance from the members of the household.” Sarita had been sitting in the back row. She had not protested that day. Maithili looked at her now.

“I saw the empty space where my own name should have been,” she said, “yet I gathered all your work into a single word. I could have allowed a detailed public account to be given. I did not. That was my silence, not Ishan’s decision alone.”

“Do you remember this incident,” Harimohan asked, “or is it written in somebody’s register?” “The programme of the meeting may have survived,” Maithili replied. “What I said that day is a memory. Compare it with whatever records can be found.” Sarita said, “I did not protest because I had to remain there to settle the cost of the meal. I wanted to return home without causing discomfort to those who were on the platform. Do not call my silence complete consent; but do not say, either, that I demanded credit there and then.” Harimohan recorded their statements separately. For the first time Maithili was able to speak of her own carelessness without adding a sentence in her defence.

Ishan arrived towards evening. Sarita did not hastily gather up the papers at the sight of him, but she kept beside her the page headed “Permission to Examine the Ledger.” “Is there something I may see?” Ishan asked. “There is,” Sarita replied. “I copied the writing on these four pages; they can be compared with the originals you wrote. But I will not offer you the food accounts as proof of credit for your book.” Ishan recognised the handwriting on the first page. “Why were the errors corrected in the notebook?” he asked. “Some at your instruction, some at Maithili’s,” Sarita said, “and once or twice I raised a question because of something I had understood. To find out how each error came to be corrected, we need the original copy.”

Instead of drawing the notebook towards himself, Ishan asked Harimohan what permission had been given. Harimohan told him that inspection would extend only to the pages Sarita chose to show. Still confident of his original authorship, Ishan said, “The central exposition was mine. I shall not equate the labour of copying with the writing of an argument.” “Neither do I,” Sarita replied evenly. “But there is a value of its own in the copying without which the pages would not have survived, and in the questions asked about the sources. This is not a gift of a name. It is recognition of work.” Ishan fell silent. Maithili did not immediately write anything down, mistaking his silence for assent.

Meanwhile Naira came by to return a spool of sewing thread she had taken from Sarita’s house. Seeing her mother surrounded by papers, she asked, “So the notebook has been opened today?” Sarita laughed. “It has—but not the original sheet of twenty-seven names I gave you. Its key is still where it was.” “I wasn’t even asking about that,” Naira replied. “I have a separate office list to examine now in the search for Mithun.” Sarita took off her spectacles. “Then let this notebook remain a history of the work done in this house, not a shortcut into somebody else’s private investigation.” Naira saw one line recording the hours her mother had spent working. “You were writing until

night that day?" she asked. "The lentils boiled over that night too," Sarita answered with a smile.

Lakshmi telephoned again. The binder had agreed to provide the source numbers of the original pages from which the copies were made, but needed another day. No written answer had yet arrived from the office. Lakshmi had decided for herself that the following day she would submit a signed petition, asking that the dues for lodging and the wages due for labour be examined separately. "If you need the fare, tell me how much first," Sarita said. "I've made provision for the bus fare," Lakshmi answered. "What I need is your time to read the papers, not money for the journey." After putting down the telephone, Sarita compared the time needed with the hours set aside for her sewing. If she was to give time to another person, the hours of her own livelihood needed a name in the accounts too.

Maithili and Harimohan drew up a short register of work. It had five separate columns: the days Sarita had cooked; the pages she was known to have copied; questions about revisions; sources of examples; and permission to inspect documents. Dates that were uncertain were left blank. Where no receipt for payment could be found, they wrote "awaiting evidence," not "unpaid." "Will you turn into a debt even the days when I worked of my own free will?" Sarita asked. "No," Harimohan answered. "You must tell us the difference between voluntary service and work requested of you." Sarita entered two days of shared meals provided without charge and set apart three days of copying undertaken at someone's request.

When the question arose of what was due for those three days, Maithili wanted to pay the money at once. Sarita stopped her. "If you want to pay, first verify the account of the days. Some work was paid for at the time, some money for materials remains owing, and the question of the examples I supplied will not be settled by money alone. If I accept a donation without an account, tomorrow somebody will say Sarita took payment to keep her mouth shut." Maithili closed her bag. "I shall look for the programme of that meeting," she said, "and whatever public acknowledgement of contributions is needed, I shall read the proposed words to you first. If you disagree, that too will be recorded." To this Sarita agreed.

Outside, the sun was setting, and red points of light from the hearth glimmered on the earthen floor of the veranda. Naira was arranging the plates when Sarita told her, "Teach Maithili how to make the round rotis you never manage to make yourself." Maithili laughed. "Yesterday I couldn't even hold a lid. Today I must sit an examination in roti-making?" Naira handed her the rolling pin. The first roti resembled no map of India. Sarita looked at it and said, "This map proves nobody's title to land, but there is nothing wrong with it as food." All three laughed. The roti did not puff up on the griddle, but, cooked slowly layer by layer, it became fit to eat. After that laughter, nobody opened another paper or brought out another piece of news.

After the evening meal Ishan read the old line of acknowledgements in his book once more. He picked up a pen as though to write something, then set it down. “Today I have listened,” he said, “but the form in which each kind of work will receive public credit must be decided after examination.” “Tomorrow I have cooking and sewing again,” Sarita replied. “I cannot sit in meetings every day. Keep my written copy safe, and tell me when I am to be heard.” Maithili, who had once regarded other people’s time as freely available, now asked for a written agreement about the hour. Harimohan fixed a brief time for the next hearing; Ishan undertook to bring the original pages recording his own contributions.

After everyone had gone, Sarita put the blue notebook back in its box. Today she had not tried to place her name where someone else’s stood. She had only made certain that her copying would not be lost inside another person’s silence. She tied the notebook’s loose thread into a firm knot. On her way out, Maithili turned once more. “Tomorrow I shall make the rotis,” she said. Sarita smiled. “Do—but ask me whether I like eating them.” Understanding the weight of that simple question, Maithili walked home. Ishan’s original argument remained secure; the register of Sarita’s work had been opened; and Maithili would now have to answer for her old silence not only in words, but in the way she acted.

Chapter 84 · The Teacher's Acknowledgement

As Ishan brushed the dust from the binding of an old book, a blue stain came away on his fingers. He wiped the paper with a white cloth, but the thin line of colour would not disappear. Perhaps the ink had spread when the volume was bound; perhaps someone had touched it afterwards with wet hands. At present he could establish neither possibility. Three bundles lay before him. The first contained his original exposition in manuscript, the second two printed editions of the book, and the third the school's letters prepared in answer to questions from students. Since returning from Sarita's house the previous day, he had spent the night putting the papers in order. Today, before Harimohan, he had to lay out not merely a defence of his position but the limits of his own work.

The shade of the tree in the courtyard had not yet reached the parapet of the well. Ishan read the old notations in the margins of his original pages. In one place he had set down the order of the means of knowledge; in another, the relationship between the reason offered in an inference and the proposition to be established; in a third, the conditions under which an unfamiliar object might be recognised through comparison. Those lines were in his hand, as the early notebook and the students' lesson notes attested. But beside one page stood a question in Maithili's handwriting: "Why infer a single cause from an identical mark?" After that question, the example in the printed work had changed. Ishan could see that his name alone, written on the page, could not tell the whole history of the alteration.

Maithili had arrived before him on the veranda of Harimohan's school. She had with her the five-column register of work prepared the day before with Sarita's permission. One narrow column recorded the days on which meals had been cooked, another the copying of pages, a third suggestions for revision, a fourth the sources of examples, and a fifth the limits of what had been inspected. Opening his bag, Ishan said, "I have brought my original pages. I shall open them for everyone to see." "Everyone?" Maithili asked at once. "Sarita's written notebook is not among these. Show your own pages, but her permission must be sought separately for hers." Ishan checked his hand. It seemed necessary to him that, in announcing his own generosity, he should not once again gather another person's rights into his own possession.

Harimohan straightened the writing board and laid three objects apart: Ishan's early notebook, a copy of Maithili's handwritten revisions, and the printed book. "Whatever we say today, we must also say what our source is," he insisted. "This is not a judgment by a court. We can examine the letters written on a sheet of paper. To determine when an idea first entered someone's mind, we need further evidence." Maithili kept the original of her revised page in its box and laid out only the copy she had authorised for

inspection. Ishan selected those passages of the book in which the original argument had remained unchanged. His presentation was precise: he also demonstrated the sequence of proposition, reason and example from old exercise sheets used at his school.

“I wrote the first form of this question,” Ishan said, “and I conducted discussions of it with my students. Until the day Maithili raised her question, the fundamental principle was the product of my own thought.” Maithili conceded the point without irony. “I do not dispute that. The claim I make for my page is not that you knew nothing. But when I showed you the weakness of the example, you put its revised form into your book. Nowhere was my question acknowledged. Why?” She wanted an answer to that question not from the colour of a photocopy, but from Ishan’s own words. Harimohan raised his pen, yet added nothing on their behalf.

Ishan turned the pages of the printed book. In the first edition, the equal weight of two sacks had been offered as an indication that their contents came from the same source; in the later edition, the distinction between equality of weight and identity of cause had been made explicit. “I had already felt that something was unsatisfactory here,” he said, “but it was only after Maithili’s question that I decided to change the example. If that change was not acknowledged, the responsibility is mine.” He stopped for a moment. “That does not mean Maithili wrote every printed line. Nor does it mean this page would have taken the form it did without her.” “This is the first time,” Maithili said, “that you have spoken my name as the reason for the change.”

“Where can the dates of your first and second editions be established?” Harimohan asked. Ishan showed him the inside pages. The years of publication were printed there, but not the precise date on which the manuscript had been revised. The school attendance register mentioned a lecture on the subject; its date established a connection with the topic, not the birth of every sentence. Maithili wrote two reference numbers on her small sheet. “That is why my handwriting matters. But I, too, may be mistaken when I try to remember the day on which I wrote a page.” Each of them marked a limit beside the evidence they had supplied. Formerly they would have regarded such admissions as intellectual defeat; today there was no going forward without them.

Footsteps sounded in the courtyard, and Sarita appeared. She carried not her notebook of copied pages but a little sewing bag over her shoulder. She had left a garment belonging to her first customer of the day unfinished and would have to return to it within an hour. “I have come for a little while,” she said. “I have put the lentils on the fire. Naira will watch them, but she has work of her own.” Harimohan wrote down the new time limit. Ishan asked Sarita, “Will you tell us what you remember after looking at the four old pages you copied?” “First tell me,” Sarita said, “are you giving me time so that

you may listen to me, or are you trying to save your book with what I have written?” The question was not harsh. It was direct.

Ishan glanced at Sarita’s sewing bag, where a thin little tin held her broken needles. “We must not confuse the two,” he replied. “If the original exposition is truly mine, evidence will protect it. But I must also acknowledge the harm done when I failed to value the labour here. By writing ‘assistance from the household’ in the old book, I compressed your copied pages, the hours spent cooking and the sources of the examples into one vague sentence. That was wrong.” Sarita looked once towards Maithili. “Ishan, that is not a complete account of what I contributed,” she said, “but you have begun to recognise the mistake. Now I need it stated on paper, not merely regretted.”

Harimohan proposed that they write beside each old item the kind of claim it could support. Sarita raised an objection. “I want cooking to be included in the list of labour that sustained the writing. But it would not follow that because I cooked the food, the argument became mine. When I saw something with my own eyes, my experience is the source of that example. When I heard it from someone else, that person must be named, or the uncertainty about the source must be stated.” For the first time, Ishan listened to her entire sentence without interruption. Harimohan opened a register with separate headings: original writing, suggested revisions, copying, firsthand examples, reported examples and arrangements for materials. No final stamp of ownership was placed beside any of them.

Mangari Gorait came in from the other end of the veranda. Two streaks of wet earth marked her cotton scarf. At the closed factory beside the forest, a new gate was being built against the old wall, and the sorting and cleaning workers of her group had been barred from entering. She had not brought people to break locks or wield sticks today. She had brought three lists signed by her group and old wage slips. “Are you examining copies of papers here?” she asked. “We are comparing certain pages,” Harimohan replied. “If your business is different, it will need its own time.” “Seven people in my group are owed money,” Mangari said. “Four have come with me today. A single word like ‘employment’ will not contain all their accounts.”

Ishan drew a low stool forward for her, but Mangari first called in the companions waiting outside. Prema unfolded her attendance slips for the days she had cleaned; Bholu’s work had been inside the factory’s sorting shed, and his period of service was different; Saroj said that she had been called to remove materials for two days even after the closure was announced. The seventh member was absent through illness and had asked to see the slip before authorising anyone to submit a claim for his dues. Mangari brought their papers together on the same table, but recorded each person’s permission to have them copied separately. “I am the group’s representative,” she said. “I do not become the group itself.” Hearing her, Sarita remembered the register she had prepared the day before.

Mangari placed a receipt before them. At the top was the factory's old stamp; below it were the words "group payment." The spaces for the bank account and for the name of the person who had received the payment were blank. The guard at the gate had said that the owners had settled everyone's account. "What does this receipt prove?" Mangari asked Harimohan. "It proves that a paper bearing those words exists," he said. "Its authorised source and whether the money was actually paid must be examined separately." "Not a single rupee has come into my hands," Prema said. "Nor mine," said Saroj. "But if someone enters an amount in all our names, our statements that we did not receive it must also be recorded one by one."

On Mangari's document, "sorting supervisor" was written beside her name, but the space for the payee on the receipt was empty. What the gatekeeper had said was only a report she had heard; the receipt did not prove that payment had been made; and to infer payment here because it had occurred under an earlier contract was merely an analogy. Ishan explained all three distinctions, then immediately fell silent. Looking at him, Mangari said, "You may explain the distinctions, but you will not decide the price of our work. We must demand an account from our former employer." Ishan nodded. At this point the teacher's knowledge had become useful by recognising its own limits.

A message came from a guard who had returned from the factory gate: the new manager would meet only a representative. Mangari objected. "A representative may go, but each worker's claim will remain in the original application, not only in a copy. We shall not write 'consent obtained' for the member who is ill without that member's consent." She divided the day's application into two parts: wages unpaid up to the closure, and cleaning or carriage work required after the closure. The cost of safety equipment bought by workers with their own money went into a third, separate list. "And if the office closes today?" Prema asked. "A receipt number will not mean our work is finished," Mangari replied, "but tomorrow we shall have a paper on which to base what we say." She had chosen to pursue the dispute without needlessly closing every possible way forward.

Sarita looked at the clock. She had to return to the kitchen. Turning to Ishan, she said, "The payment due for my three days of copying has been entered on paper, but the source of the money has not. We still have to compare the dates on which I received earlier payments. Mangari is taking away the accounts of her seven workers herself. I am not leaving my pages here." "If I name an amount today," Ishan said, "I may make another mistake before the accounts have been examined. But I shall not withdraw from responsibility for the work undertaken at my request. I will sit with you and agree upon the value of your days." "Include," Sarita said, "the time I shall lose by setting aside other work to give you those days."

Maithili then showed them the register of contributions she had prepared. Beside her name were the words "questions leading to revision and

arrangement of examples,” but it did not specify the changes made on each page. “I regard this as incomplete,” she said. “But where a sentence appears in your book under your name alone, an acknowledgement of my contribution can be written now.” Without picking up her page, Ishan wrote on his own paper: “The question leading to the revised example was raised by Maithili; the original argument is Ishan’s; the handwritten pages remain subject to comparison.” Beside the sentence Harimohan added: “Preliminary public notice, not a final determination of credit.” Maithili read it. “That is the first accurate sentence,” she said, “but it is not the whole account.”

Ishan lifted the book from the table and reread the passage in which “assistance from the household” had been printed. “By leaving unnamed the people who maintained the house, dried the papers, brought the meals and copied the writing,” he said, “I gave the reader an incomplete history. The deprivation of credit is a fact; I bear my share of responsibility for it.” “You can say that publicly, can you not?” Harimohan asked. “I shall,” Ishan replied. “But if the declaration erases the distinctions within Sarita’s contribution, that too will be an injustice. She has not herself claimed authorship. I shall not make her an artificial co-author merely to ornament my remorse.” Having heard that much, Sarita lifted her sewing bag onto her shoulder.

“Do not turn me into an ornament,” Sarita said. “The wages I have earned, the time I have lost and the examples I have witnessed raise three different questions.” She then asked Maithili whether the old programme of the meeting would be found the following day. “Harimohan has the key to the box where the records are kept,” Maithili replied, “but we can say which day’s papers have survived only after looking.” “Where they have not been found, write ‘not found,’” Sarita said. “That is all I have to say before I go. Naira’s time in the kitchen is hers as well.” As she went out she smiled at Mangari. Neither gave the other’s struggle a new name by borrowing her own. They merely asked each other the bus fare.

When the veranda had emptied, Uday asked, “Teacher, if your mistake becomes public, will the boys and girls at the school still trust you?” Ishan did not immediately reassure him. “Some students will be disappointed,” he said. “Others may understand that a teacher can be questioned. They must test separately the subject I have taught them. Admitting that I have erred as a human being does not make the principles of inference false. Nor does my understanding those principles make it impossible for me to err.” Uday wrote down his question of the day in his notebook; Ishan did not stop him. Outside, two new pupils were waiting for the school bell.

As the day began to fade, Mangari returned. She held an official acknowledgement number, but the third page of her copy had not been stamped. “They accepted two applications,” she said. “They told us to submit the claim for safety equipment under a separate number. I did not add the claim of our sick member without that member’s signature; we have arranged

a meeting tomorrow for that.” Prema opened a small plastic bag wrapped in her scarf. Inside was the purchase slip for a pair of safety gloves that had worn out. Mangari placed it in a separate envelope. “This proves that the equipment was bought,” she explained. “It does not yet prove that the owner ordered the purchase.” Then she set off for home. Her claim had made its first entry into the public record, but the wages remained unpaid.

Seeing the acknowledgement number, Maithili said, “Mangari has obtained a small measure of progress, but the factory has not opened and the wages have not been paid.” “That is precisely why her decision has substance,” Harimohan said. “She has asked not for someone’s kindness, but for an obligation to answer.” “My letter carries a similar danger,” Ishan replied. “People may read it and think the matter is over. We must make clear that acknowledging words, paying what is owed and doing justice to authorship are separate stages.” Maithili put a finger on the empty margin of his page. Ishan added a sentence: “This preliminary statement shall not be taken as the final settlement of any dispute.” The weight of those words seemed greater to him than that of his own name.

Farid came to the evening class and marked his attendance. When Ishan began the lesson on inference, a student named Uday raised a question. Ishan chose another example: the equal weight of wet and dry grain does not establish that both have the same history of production. He said that the source of the example, which involved Sarita’s experience, was still under examination; for the present lesson it would therefore be treated only as a hypothetical sentence for testing. “Then if the person who originally supplied the information is not present,” Farid asked, “can a teacher make it an example by which to test a proposition?” “Yes,” Ishan replied, “but it must be identified as hypothetical, not as an instance directly witnessed.” The classroom fell silent not by command, but in thought.

When the lesson ended, Ishan pinned the preliminary letter to the school noticeboard. He did not remove his own name. He added an acknowledgement of Maithili’s contribution and set out the distinctions in Sarita’s work. Beneath the notice were the time at which comments would be heard and the place where objections could be lodged. Two students read the letter and went away without speaking. A young man stepped forward and asked when the final decision on authorship would be made. Ishan stated plainly that he could not give a definite date. He showed only the next date Harimohan had noted for locating the sources of three documents. Another student said he had read the old edition and asked permission to compare the differences between the pages. Ishan regarded the request not as a favour done to him, but as a legitimate question.

At home Sarita was taking the pot of lentils off the fire when Maithili arrived carrying a small piece of dough for bread. “I promised to cook today,” she said. “Then wash your hands first,” Sarita replied, “and see whose time it is

at the griddle.” Naira sat on the veranda with her investigation papers closed. She had no wish to thrust either the original page of the twenty-seven names or news of Mithun into her mother’s mealtime. Ishan arrived a little later, but when he asked permission to serve the rice, Sarita told him to fetch a pitcher of water instead. Performing a small household task did not discharge the old debt. No one in the family pretended that it did.

After the meal, Ishan read a copy of the letter aloud to Sarita. She stopped him halfway. “Do not write ‘invaluable assistance’ here,” she said. “When you call it invaluable, its price vanishes. Write ‘three days of copying, separate arrangements for meals, and the sources of examples.’” Ishan changed the wording. Sarita pointed to the next line. “For anything I said I had seen with my own eyes, ask me to confirm the source under my name. Do not record as my firsthand observation something I heard from Rukhsana.” Ishan preserved that distinction on the page. Meanwhile Maithili was rolling out the bread. One edge of the dough remained thick when she laid it on the hot griddle; she asked Sarita whether it ought to be rolled again.

When night had deepened, Ishan put his original notebook back into his bag. The argument on its first page was still his; the historical responsibility for the revision on the second still called for examination shared with others; and the anonymous thanks printed in the book awaited another reading. He understood that to be a teacher meant more than teaching truth: it meant making room to hear the questions of those whose voices had been suppressed within his own book. Yet this understanding did not settle his debts. The account of Sarita’s three days, Maithili’s claim page by page, and the unpaid wages of Mangari’s seven workers remained open in their separate notebooks. Ishan extinguished the lamp, but placed the second copy of the letter on the table where it would be the first thing to catch his eye in the light of morning.

Parva 8 · Karṇa | Sundara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 85 · Radha's Labour

In the outer settlement of Hastinapura, the first light of dawn fell upon the veranda where Radha was cutting narrow strips of cloth to wind around the bands of a chariot wheel. Still damp with the night's dew, the cloth shrank beneath the knife. She drove a small peg into the ground beside the hearth, dried the strips before doing anything else, then measured their width. The previous day Adhiratha's chariot had jolted along the city's uneven roads. Unless the looseness of the wheel was corrected today, the horse would tire from the strain of pulling it, and the work that brought in their hire might be lost. Radha marked a knot in the cord she had made with a dab of lime. She wanted the measure of her labour, too, to be remembered.

Karna came out of the house carrying water in an earthen bowl. A fine cut from a bowstring crossed one of his fingers. As Radha took the bowl from him, she noticed the wound and rubbed oil into it. "Who taught you to hold it that way yesterday?" she asked. Karna lowered his eyes. "I tried by myself. The target was far away, and my arm trembled." Radha did not sternly forbid him. "Before you fix your gaze upon a distant target, learn the strength of the string," she said. "And when your hand is cut, do not make the treatment of it a matter of shame." Karna remained silent. He did not want to repeat the words he had heard in the market: what use was archery to the son of a charioteer? But his silence concealed nothing from Radha.

Adhiratha entered the courtyard with the metal rim of the wheel in his hands. "The royal storehouse paid only half of today's wages," he said. Radha showed him the new strip she had prepared for the repair. "Being paid half does not mean the reckoning for the whole work has vanished. This week I sold my share of the grain to buy barley for the horse, oil for the wheel, and thread for the cord. Those expenses must be entered separately in the ledger." Adhiratha began to laugh, then grew grave. For years he had supposed that money spent on the household was not money that needed an account of its own. Yet it was Radha's purse being emptied that had made the chariot's wheels turn; that he could not deny.

Radha handed two fresh strips to Dhairi, an elderly woman of the settlement who did sewing. Dhairi told her that when a horse was turned in a narrow part of the city, the band sometimes caught behind the wheel. Taking heed of what she had seen, Radha altered the length of the cord. "Then was your first measurement wrong?" Karna asked. "The measurement I took was right for that wheel," Radha replied, "but Dhairi has seen another difficulty when the chariot is moving. To change a measurement is not deception; it is

respect for new knowledge." Dhairi asked to be paid for her thread. Radha counted out the money she had set beside the hearth and gave it to her. She would not bind a worker in the chains of reciprocal favours merely because they called one another helpful.

Karna helped lift the front wooden frame of the chariot. When he bent to fit the metal rim into place, Adhiratha stopped him. "It is still hot." "I am not afraid," Karna said. "It is not fear you need," Adhiratha answered, "but the sense to protect your body. This chariot is my livelihood; your hands are not meant for this chariot alone." For a little while the words astonished Karna. The people of the city had already tied his future to the circumference of a chariot wheel, yet his father could see such different possibilities in those hands. Radha paused in her work and watched them both. More than pride, she felt anxiety: where would the money come from to feed and educate such possibility?

At midday a messenger arrived from the city. He told Adhiratha to reserve his time for a royal journey the following week, but could not state what the work would pay. Radha came out from the veranda and asked whether meals and the hours spent waiting through the night would also be paid for. The young man was taken aback. "You do not drive the chariot," he said. "I keep the account of what it takes to put that chariot on the road," Radha replied. "Adhiratha will settle his wages himself. The cost of the bands, barley and repairs supplied from this house must also be included." The messenger could promise nothing definite. On a blank leaf, however, he noted the day of service and the need to ask again about the rate. Radha knew that a note was not a promise of payment. It meant only that nobody could simply take their time away on the assumption that it was freely available.

Looking at the leaf on which his mother had written, Karna asked, "How much do we know of the story of my birth?" The sudden question stilled the thread between Radha's fingers. She could tell him what she remembered of the first day he was brought into her home. She had no right to fill in what she did not know before that memory began. "I know the fear and the cold of the day I first took you into my arms, and the sound of your crying," she said. "I do not know all that went before. And this too is true: from that first day until now, whose arms have held you, whose food has nourished you, and who has watched through the nights when you were ill." Karna asked nothing more. His question had not ended; for the first time, he had found room within it for more than one truth.

Radha opened the basket of grain. She remembered half a line from a song she had sung to Karna when he was small, but not the words that followed. This time she sang the unfinished song and laughed in the middle of it. From outside, Dhairi began to supply the missing tune, though hers was different again. Neither woman quarrelled over which version was right. Karna took a piece of bread from his food bowl and laughed with them. Radha thought

that it was necessary to count the cost of labour, but not every happiness in a day could be made an entry in a ledger. During that small interval there was no question of a king, no verdict about birth: only a loose wheel made firm and an open doorway to a home.

Videhapur, 2039. From early morning, sheets for drying paddy had been spread before the old grain warehouse. Kiran Raut was working a small winnowing tray to separate the husks. He had first swept the open ground: after the rain, the grains might otherwise become mixed with the swollen earth. The village sharecroppers had been told to accept a new schedule of loans, headed “Consolidated Dues.” Kiran looked at the sheet and put down the winnowing tray. The landowner’s name stood on the field lease, while the seed advance and the cost of transport had been added to Kiran’s share. He would not endorse three different relationships with a single signature.

Kiran asked his daughter Rekha to fetch the account book from the house. She came with her schoolbag, inside which was an old pencil box. Sitting beside the drying sheet, she ruled three columns as her father instructed: the share of the harvest, the debt for seed, and transport charges. “Must the landowner first show us the document for the deduction he has written against my name?” Kiran asked. “I can draw the lines,” Rekha said, “but I have no authority to declare the account correct.” There was something of her classroom lessons in her voice. Kiran laughed, but filled the empty spaces himself. He was unwilling to turn his daughter into a witness to a debt she knew nothing about.

An employee of the community weighing station said that part of the paddy deposited at the warehouse had already been handed over to the landowner, so a deduction in the new account was perfectly ordinary. Kiran showed him the old weighment slip. It recorded the weight of the consignment on arrival, not any agreement about the division of the crop. “If the paddy arrived, I accept its weight,” Kiran said. “But how much belongs to whom cannot be proved by this slip.” The employee summoned the landowner’s representative for midday. Kiran had no wish to reopen his dispute over title to his family’s land here; for today he wanted only the debt added afterwards to be shown as a separate item. Nor would he allow anyone to hold up his sacks at the warehouse door: the time for drying that grain was passing.

Behind the warehouse, under the broken roof of a building site, Ratan Bhuiyan was lifting a lime-whitened brick to examine it. When the rain had come in, the papers from his old contract had become wet on that side of the shed. He approached Kiran to ask whether the breeze from the winnowing tray might help dry them. “A loan has been entered against my name, though I never even saw the money,” he said. Instead of drawing his own papers closer, Kiran cleared a corner of the drying sheet for Ratan’s documents. “My account is a separate matter,” he made plain, “but we can share a place to lay

out papers until they dry." Ratan spread the leaves without a word. He did not mistake the offer for Kiran's automatic support in his dispute.

In Ratan's old bill, the wages of those who carried earth and the items for tools purchased in the contractor's name were printed in the same sequence. The contractor's clerk laughed. "Your name appears on both pages, so the debt is yours." Ratan laid out his working tools before the man: a hammer with a cracked handle, an old rope, and a small notebook in which he counted bricks. "Look at the mark on the hammer I made with my own money," he said. "The contractor's inventory lists an iron spade. When did that spade ever come into my hands?" The clerk could offer no definite answer. Ratan submitted a written request to see the original authorisation of the sum entered under his name. He made no announcement that the debt had thereby been cancelled.

The landowner's representative, whom Kiran had asked to attend, arrived and examined the warehouse weighment slip. He kept talking about the sacks counted on a particular day, but would not produce the earlier date of the seed purchase on which the alleged debt depended. Kiran proposed that whatever portion of the paddy was undisputed under the accurate weight slip be released that day, and that no further debt be added to his share until a receipt for the contested deduction could be found. The representative was reluctant. The warehouse guard pointed out that if the paddy were held back and became damp, both parties would suffer. At last a temporary mark was placed on the weighed sacks, and the statement of deductions was sealed in a separate envelope for a later hearing. Kiran's way to market had not been closed, but the dispute over the debt remained open.

In a narrow market lane, Lakshmi Kathbaniya set an empty bottle upside down on the bench of her shop. A customer wanted a broken lid replaced; Lakshmi was prepared to supply one only after checking the correct size. Just then the newly appointed chair of the well committee came in carrying a thick file. "You supplied both rope and lids to the same committee," he said, "so your responsibility has been entered under the joint losses on the repairs." Lakshmi did not prolong an argument before her customer. First she settled the price of the replacement lid, then opened the committee paper. Sales from her small shop and the cost of communal construction were two documents that did not belong together.

Lakshmi rested her fingernail on the line of the account where the supply of goods was recorded. "This is the receipt for what I sold. Just below it, someone has written 'jointly liable for the committee's debt.' On what day did I make such a promise?" The chair said that the previous committee had treated everyone as a member. "Being a member, selling goods and becoming a debtor are three different things," Lakshmi replied. "When the wooden lids in my shop are sold, their price is due to me. That does not make me

answerable for the failed repairs to the well wall." She took back her original receipt and asked where the additional sentence on the copy had come from.

Meanwhile Ratan came to the market to ask the old price of tools. Lakshmi offered him not tea but a stool to sit on first, and showed him the measurement for a new hammer handle. Ratan asked whether she would give him a written bill for the purchase. Lakshmi wrote one at once. "Tomorrow somebody may claim that all of us shopkeepers were partners of the contractor," she said with a smile. "They put a loan against my name on the strength of somebody's assurance," Ratan answered. "Today I asked whose signature that assurance bore." Each understood the difference between their grievances. For the moment, all they arranged was how to exchange copies of the relevant papers: Ratan would keep a copy of the price of his tools, and Lakshmi would safeguard her shop's sales register.

Kabir came down from the legal-aid room and entered the market. In his bag was the acknowledgement slip for Mangari Gorait's wage application, but without Mangari's permission he did not open that document in the present dispute. Kiran showed him his sheet with the three columns. Kabir's first question was, "Which part of this page do you authorise the investigators to see?" Kiran chose the figures for his share of the crop, not the page of household expenditure written by his daughter. Ratan read out his application asking for the original acceptance of the contractor's debt. Lakshmi submitted a written request to investigate the source of the line added to the committee receipt. Kabir did not turn the three of them into one collective 'list of victims'. He explained that they faced different offices, different responsibilities, and different routes by which evidence could be obtained.

A short message from Naira appeared on Kabir's telephone: Sarita had still not decided whether to open the original page containing the twenty-seven names; the question of the copy and the original lay within the boundaries she herself had set. Kabir read the message and put his phone away. Ratan asked whether, since he worked in law, Kabir could have every document corrected immediately. Kabir laughed. "I can show you how to request a document. Whether the truth is established depends on the documents, the people concerned and the hearing." As he spoke, he remembered the old papers of his own family: knowledge of a birth, decisions about upbringing and the rights of a household could not all be settled by a single application. He did not use other people's papers as a place in which to resolve his private concerns.

That evening Kabir went to Sarita's house. In the outer room Naira was shutting away a copy of Maithili's revisions; her mother's notebook of collected copies had not been opened that day. Sarita was heating milk over the hearth. "Have you come to see an old page bearing somebody's name?" she asked. "No," Kabir said. "Today I have a question of my own. If the history of those who brought a child up is scarcely recorded on paper, does that mean the life they lived is any less real?" Sarita lifted the milk from the fire and put a lid

on the vessel. “Because there is little on paper, memory does not become false,” she said. “But neither does having a memory give us leave to write out the contents of a document we have never seen. Before you ask for someone’s story, give that person permission to tell it.”

Kabir said that certain old matters were being discussed with Subhadra, but Subhadra had her own reasons and her own privacy. How could he reconcile his desire for information with those rights? He was not sure. “When Subhadra chooses to speak, you may put questions to her,” Sarita replied. “Making her speak before a public assembly would not be a service to truth. And the woman in whose home you grew up—her labour through the nights does not disappear the moment a birth record is found.” Naira added nothing. Kabir’s thoughts and the affairs of his family did not strike her as raw material for an investigation.

Kabir recalled a scene from his childhood. On a rainy day the schoolbag kept dry inside the house had somehow become wet; the woman who raised him had stayed awake late, drying the pages of his exercise books one by one. He could not remember the date, but he remembered the smell of damp paper and a handful of paddy placed in a corner. He did not claim absolute reliability for the recollection. “I will ask her about that day again,” he said. Sarita smiled. “Yes. And if she tells you it was someone else who dried those books, give your memory another place to stand. Love need not diminish when a memory changes.” After a moment, a gentler light came over Kabir’s face.

That same evening, in the settlement outside Hastinapura, Radha unwound the new band around the wheel and inspected it. If the little corner sewn by Dhairi had been rubbed too hard, there was a danger it might tear. Adhiratha had taken the chariot out and brought it back. The wheel had turned freely. Karna’s eyes shone. Radha bent close and touched the stitching by the wheel. “The work has succeeded,” she said, “but tomorrow the dust of the road and the weight it carries will test it again.” This time Adhiratha entered in his ledger not only the price of the band but also the money Radha had spent on barley. No royal order had made him add that sum. A question raised within the household had obliged him to write it down.

Karna was about to step outside with his wooden bow, faded by the sun, when Radha called him back. “What for?” he asked. “Eat first. If you practise on an empty stomach, you will only worsen the injury.” “I want to prepare myself for a greater target,” Karna said. “Let the target be of your own choosing,” Radha answered, “but the right to eat at the proper time is not a prize for someone else to award.” She served coarse bread and greens on his plate. Adhiratha showed him a better way to hold the bow, but did not claim to be his teacher. Karna put the bow down and sat to eat. The question of his future remained; the hunger of that night was satisfied.

In the evening darkness Dhairi came to collect what remained due to her for the narrow strips she had sewn. Radha asked, “For the long strip that must be stitched tomorrow, shall I bring you the measurements, or will you go yourself?” Dhairi told her what she preferred: she would go in person. When measurements were changed on another person’s say-so, she was the one who had to do the work twice. Radha accompanied her to the doorway. As she saw the first star in the sky, the final line of the old song suddenly returned to her. She hummed it; Dhairi joined in, and then both realised that their words were different. They burst out laughing. Radha held on to that laughter. Amid the labour of the household, she too needed a little interval of freedom that was hers to choose.

At the next dawn in Videhapur, a copy of Kiran’s warehouse slip arrived in a separate envelope. The box authorising release of the undisputed paddy had been filled in; beside the contested debt stood the words, “Original document yet to be examined.” Kiran had the sacks loaded onto a handcart. Ratan copied the receipt number for his application seeking the original authorisation of the tools into his notebook. Lakshmi filed a written objection to the additional sentence making her liable for the committee’s debt and kept a separate receipt for what her shop was owed. These three outcomes had exposed no common enemy, nor had everyone’s debts been cleared. But now nobody could write their silence down as a single, joint consent.

After returning home, Kabir took a cloth bag, its threads fraying, from the bottom shelf of an old cupboard. It contained his exercise books from his student days, a leaflet from an old school programme and a small cloth handkerchief. On one paper the name of the woman who had raised him was written clearly; on another, the space for a name was blank. He did not pick up a pen to fill it. He shook the dust from the handkerchief and laid it apart, resolving that he would hear the history of those things from an older member of the family when that person had the time and wished to tell it. Whether Sarita would open the original documents she had laid aside on the following day was her decision. Nor had the ledger of Kabir’s own upbringing been made empty merely by the mystery of someone else’s birth.

Chapter 86 · The Original Page

As Sarita lifted the lid of the brass box, a thread caught beside her fingernail and snapped. She did not throw the old thread away; she laid it beside the low wooden bench. Inside were a sheet of paper folded into narrow sections, a dried flower petal and a small receipt. For several weeks Naira had been watching the place where her mother kept this box, but today, for the first time, Sarita herself had chosen the moment to bring it out. First she half-closed the window shutter. There was light enough to read the writing, but not enough for anyone outside to see the table clearly. “I will show you the original,” she said, “but you will not take it away. And the fold I have kept over one name will not be opened yet.” Before sitting down, Naira shut her telephone inside her bag. Today the first act required to earn her mother's trust was to do nothing.

Sarita did not unfold the entire sheet. She opened the first two of its three folds; the last remained covered by a small piece of paper. In the old lines of ink, the handwriting was dark in places and faint in others. Four names had been written in a different colour, and Sarita had said before that they had been added later. Naira took out her earlier copy. The final space on it was already blank, with Sarita's instruction written on the reverse. The twenty-six visible names in the original and the twenty-six names in the copy agreed in number, but one letter in the third line had been transcribed a little differently. Sarita looked at it. “This may be an error in your copy. When a letter in the original is unclear, it is not right to write down a whole name as though you have understood it.” Naira put a question mark beside the line. She did not alter the name.

“Are the four names in the other ink still four different mysteries to you?” Sarita asked. “I still do not know whether all four were added for the same reason,” Naira answered. Sarita said quietly, “No. On one day a woman came with an application for a correction; on another somebody said a family's name had entered a different page. The other two incidents were separate. Where would I have found ink of exactly the same colour every day?” She seemed about to smile, but the smile did not come. Among Naira's older notes was an inference she had written down: *Same colour of ink, same occurrence.* She drew a thin line through it and wrote beneath it: *Difference in ink observed; reason to be investigated separately for each name.*

In the cloth bundle Sarita had kept another slip. It was an admission receipt from a time when someone had gained entry to an office only after trying for three days. A time and a number were printed on it, not the result of any hearing. Naira had copied its particulars before. Today she asked, “Should I compare the serial number on this receipt with the order of names in the list?” Sarita answered, “That comparison may be a question worth investigating. But

even if the numbers match, that will not prove the person's words were accepted.” In her voice was the weariness that comes from witnessing innumerable small defeats on paper. “I did not write these names to identify criminals. This was a record of the work of people whose voices were stopped halfway through.”

Ramani's voice came from the doorway. She had come from the landing to borrow a rope for drying fishing nets, but saw that papers were being examined inside. Sarita covered the sheet at once. Naira rose and went out. On Ramani Bind's hand was a fine cut from a wet net. “There is to be a survey at Barki Pond today,” she said. “At first they said only the male leaseholders would decide the path to the landing. My nets go down into that water, but my name is not on the paper. I have brought a letter from my mother's family that mentions the Gangi. I have kept it not to turn it into a river map, but to understand something about my mother's people.” Naira glanced towards her mother. Sarita answered from within, “If you are going to read a document, first understand the person's right to the name. What concerns me lives in my house. The pond's business belongs at the pond.”

Beside Naira's first copy was an old date. On that day Sanket had come to the house to replace the cover of a damaged telephone, and Sarita had refused to open the final fold. Naira fitted the dates together in her mind: her mother's page had been written first; a copy of it came afterwards; but none of her old notes established when the printed list circulating outside had been made or who had made it. “I want to establish who gives the copy I am looking at the right to call itself the original,” she said. Running a finger over an old scratch on the box, Sarita replied, “The original of the page written in my hand is this one. Putting an official seal on a piece of paper does not make the letters formed by my hand belong to somebody else.”

Before noon Sarita told Naira of a small decision. She would allow the visible part of the original to be recorded on a sheet in the presence of them both, but the original would not leave the box. The copy would state only the date of inspection, the condition of the folds, the twenty-six legible entries and the final space that remained covered. Any record requested from the office must not be given the status of Sarita's privately held original. Naira repeated her mother's words in her own language so that nothing might be misunderstood. “You already have a copy,” Sarita asked. “What have you learnt today that is new?” “A difference in one letter, my mistaken inference about the colour of the ink, and the fact that you are allowing someone to examine your page, not giving it away.” Sarita nodded. Neither the key nor the authority over the paper had slipped from her hands.

At the landing of Barki Pond the water looked clear that day, but a green film clinging to the third step was ready to send a foot sliding. With a bamboo pole Tara Mallik was testing the depth of the mud beneath the water in three places. At two points the pole sank as far as her knee; at the third it

met a solid edge of brick. Aditi wrote *observed here* on the measurement sheet, not *average depth of the entire pond*. Fishing nets were drying to one side, and empty baskets stood on the stone washing platforms used by the women who laundered clothes. A contractor displayed a slip and announced that the lease was held by his party, so the next forty cubits of the landing would remain closed. Ramani asked, “Where in the lease is the portion of water for fishing defined, and where does it prohibit people from using the path down to the water? Those are not the same line.”

Urmila could not set down her bundle of washing near the platform. She stood with the wet weight balanced on her shoulder. Ramani offered her the wooden bar from her net, so that the bundle might rest on it for a moment. The contractor's strongman called for a rope to be drawn farther across the landing. Tara stopped him. “The measurements are not finished. The rope will go no farther.” Ramani opened half a page from an old lease. A man's name stood in the first section; the second was incomplete. “An application has already been submitted to enter the names of the women who fish with me. You show us this old half-page and put off answering it.” The contractor said a collective lease operated only in the name of the head of the family. Ramani understood how the labour of weaving a family's nets and the name in which its rights were held had been made into separate things.

Renu Gondhi arrived from the shallows. She laid down the acknowledgement slip for her earlier objection to the fencing of the pond, but would not allow it to be inserted into Ramani's file. “My appeal concerns the enclosed path,” she said. “Ramani's question is the share of women in the common fishing rights. Combine them, and somebody will reply that the matter has already been decided.” Renu also had an old page from a letter written by a relative on her elder sister's side, mentioning the place-name *Dhauri* and the handwritten account of a witness who had seen a lease. She made it clear that the name in the letter proved neither the course of the Dhauri nor its connection with the pond nor its boundary. It showed only that the name had been used in the family memory of an old lease dispute. Aditi entered the two documents under separate source headings and stopped a proposal to draw a conjectural line on the site map.

Ramani spread out the letter from her mother's family bearing the name *Gangi*. In one corner the delicate letters of her mother's handwriting conveyed news that the price of some fish had arrived and urged that her daughter's share should not be forgotten. As she read, Ramani's voice softened, but she immediately explained what the letter was worth. “This is a document of my life. It does not establish the boundary of Barki Pond. But my mother called me by the name of a person with rights. Here, in the lease, I am merely a woman of somebody's household.” Tara asked whether she consented to placing the letter in the public register. “Not my mother's whole letter,” Ramani replied. “Write that an application has been made to include women's

names. If necessary, I will show the part containing the date.” Naira remembered the confidential page at home, but did not bring it forward as an illustration in place of the question of rights Ramani was asking in her own name.

The measurements provoked a fierce dispute. The contractor's representative wanted to declare the rope stretched from the western landing towards the shallows to be the boundary of the lease. Tara pointed to the survey sheet. It showed only the straight-line distance measured during today's inspection, not a boundary established by law. Three old stakes were seen in the mud; two moved when touched, one was firm. Urmila showed them the narrow footpath by which she reached the washing platform, and explained that in the rains she could not walk there with a load when water filled the path. Aditi measured it immediately. In the open section there was room for only one person with a bundle to pass at a time, and the obstruction was marked separately by the measurement taken with the pole. She entered *passage obstructed*, not *the entire landing unlawful*.

“I shall not stop selling my fish today,” Ramani told the representative. “But if you close the women's way to the boats inside this rope, how will we lower our nets tomorrow?” “I have paid the rent,” the contractor answered. “Show us what you paid for,” Ramani replied. “A receipt for payment does not confer a monopoly over every use.” Then she gave three women who fished with her the opportunity to state their names. One woman was absent, and Ramani refused to add her name to the application without her consent. Tara recorded an interim decision for that day's inspection: the new rope put up during the survey would be removed, the way to the washing platform would remain open for the present, and a formal hearing on rights would follow only after the complete original fishing lease and its missing annexure had been examined.

At the municipal office, a copy of the report on the landing was placed before Rama Karna. The original lease was not on the officer's table. There were only two computer-printed pages, one column headed *Licence*, another *Family Representative*. The space where Ramani's name should have been was empty. A senior assistant whispered, “Just change this much: write that the family's consent has been obtained. We can collect all the signatures afterwards.” Rama stood up from her chair and checked the date at the top of the slip. “When consent has not been obtained,” she asked, “whose order authorises us to write in an official copy that it has?” “The work is urgent,” the assistant replied. “I shall not treat urgency as a substitute for a written order,” Rama said. “Bring the original lease. Until then, the status of the application as received will remain exactly as it is.”

At the office, Naira raised an unrelated matter with Rama. Sarita's handwritten page of twenty-seven names was not a government original; it was the original of a private list. The authenticity of the altered copy

circulating from the office had yet to be examined. Rama left two separate spaces clear on her desk. “The owner of a paper and the person who made it are not necessarily the same,” she said. “Your mother's handwritten original is in her home. Do not turn it into a government file. As for this office copy bearing a seal, I cannot add or remove anybody's name without seeing the original entry.” Naira asked why five differing identities appeared in the office's sealed copy. “First we shall look for the original entries and the orders authorising the changes,” Rama replied. “A change may also have been made to protect somebody. That is a possibility too. For now, all we have observed is a difference.”

Rama had the circulating copy brought from the cupboard. Its third page had repeatedly been shown during disputes at the office. A number was printed at the top, but the file to which that number belonged could not immediately be found in the original receipt register. Naira counted the lines of names against her copy. In one, the relationship to a father or guardian appeared to have changed; in another, one identifying description had been replaced by another. Altogether they marked five entries whose differences required further examination. The fold covering the twenty-seventh name had not been opened, and Naira made no claim that this place had been compared. “Five discrepancies have been found,” Rama said, “not five crimes.” She wrote an acknowledgement of the copy being kept securely in her office, and an application was also made to inspect the original register.

Meanwhile Rosie Lalbegi came to the office about wages due for her cleaning work. In the computer entry against her name, an assumed religion and an occupational category had been placed in the same field. “Everyone's details are filled in like that,” the clerk said. “Why do you infer from my contract to carry away this office's refuse the account I give of worship and household tradition within my community?” Rosie replied. “Cleaning this office is my occupation today. Where, and in what terms, I declare my religion is my own right.” She wrote a correction application herself. Rama accepted it, without falsely promising that the original entry would be changed on the spot. “If I have an acknowledgement number, I can come back next month about my attendance,” Rosie said. “But my wages must not be withheld while the field for my identity remains empty.”

Near the office door, Rita Ekka was carefully drying a wet sheet of paper. In a fresh debt-recovery notice, her surname had been joined to another person's name, and on the same page a signature was attributed to her as guarantor. She had once been a witness to an application concerning repairs at the river landing; she had not borrowed the money. “Whose debt am I supposed to repay?” she asked. The recovery agent said that the family's traditional name matched. Rita placed the date on her witness slip beside the date on the recovery notice. “A match in one letter of a name does not make a signature mine. Show me the original agreement and the borrower's acknowledgement

of receiving the money," she said. Instead of providing the page, the agent suggested that she photograph it. Rita refused. A photograph without an established source would not prove her objection.

Rama took a copy of the recovery notice from Rita but did not call it a government-certified agreement. She wrote explicitly: *Copy presented by claimant; original to be requested.* "The old document on which I gave evidence is in my bag," Rita said. "I will not leave it here yet. Let whoever has authority to ask for it first do so in writing." Naira saw that Rita, like Sarita with her protected list, was withholding a paper, but for a different reason. It meant neither that the debt had been forgiven nor that the recovery claim was valid. Rosie left with an acknowledgement of her correction application; Rita went away without a certificate of clearance, carrying instead her demand to see the original agreement. Rama put the two files in separate cupboards.

After half the day had passed, Naira returned to Sarita. She brought only a blank printed comparison form, not a government list of names. "What happened at your office?" Sarita asked. "Ramani's name was missing from the pond lease, but we have not seen the original annexure. Rosie filed a correction concerning her identity, and Rita asked to see the original debt agreement. The copy of our list that is being called an official record is also awaiting examination." Sarita stretched out her tired legs. "Do all these pages look the same to you?" she asked. "No," Naira replied. "But everywhere the mistake has been to act without asking the person to whom a document belongs." Sarita got up and began gathering the ash around the hearth.

Sarita looked at Naira's form. No one had filled in names by guesswork beside the five altered entries. "If I call back the person whom I saw asking for a correction," she asked, "might that put her in danger?" Naira did not answer at once. She did not know whether all five changes had been made from the same wish or under the same pressure. Someone might have changed a name for safety; someone else might have discovered a change made in their absence; a third person might not yet know their details had been altered. The language of the first approach would have to be different in each case. "I will not make anyone's address public," Naira said. "First I shall record their separate consent to being contacted and what inquiry each person wants undertaken." "Then my page will open a road for you," Sarita said, "not break down somebody else's door."

Before the evening meal Sarita changed the cloth lining her box once more. Naira did not touch the key. "I have heard of five entries with different identities," she said, "but that is not the guilt of five people. If an identity has been changed, the questions of cause, consent and safety must come first." Sarita answered, "I had no authority to alter anybody's name in the list of twenty-seven either. What I wrote was an account of what I had heard or seen. My list cannot tell you who was given the order to change an official copy." For the first time she added a sentence in her own handwriting to the new

comparison sheet: *Private original list shown for examination; permission for complete publication not granted.* She wrote the time beside it.

As night deepened, a message came from Tara Mallik. The new rope stretched beside the washing platform at Barki Pond had been removed, and a written request for the complete annexure to the fishing lease had been submitted to the office. Rather than put her boat away, Ramani was preparing to take her nets down to the water at dawn. The original agreement for Rita Ekka's alleged debt had not been found, and Rosie's application for correction of her identity had merely been acknowledged. These were all incomplete results; yet in each case it was becoming clear who would have to answer on the following day. In her notebook Naira entered the sources of the letters beside the river-names *Gangi* and *Dhauri*. She did not pronounce either name to be a river now identified on a map.

As Sarita lowered the lamp, she asked Naira, “What have you written now in that third line of your copy?” Naira opened her notebook again. “Where water had made the letter indistinct, I had filled it in by conjecture. Today I marked it as uncertain.” “Good,” Sarita said. “But I must answer for the word I changed myself. I will not put the blame for my mistake on you.” Naira could see an old mark of alteration on her mother's handwritten sheet, though she could not say when it had been made. Sarita allowed a brief note at that point: *Accepted by the writer as her own revision; date unknown.* The twenty-seventh name beneath the fold remained unseen.

When Naira stepped outside, damp air from the pond carried the smell of fish and of nets drying. Inside her mother's house, the original sheet had been returned to the brass box. Naira's bag contained only the comparison sheet for the twenty-six visible names, its final space blank and the limits on disclosure clearly stated. She thought that finding an original page was not an ending, but the difficult beginning of deciding how far any person's account might be trusted. Along the path Ramani was teaching her daughter how to tie the knots in the nets for the morning. “Will they write my name too?” the girl asked. “I have submitted an application,” Ramani replied. “When the answer comes, I will show it to you. Meanwhile I shall teach you how to measure a net, because the people who write our names will never do our work for us.”

Chapter 87 · Five Altered Identities

For the second time Nasim Idrisi threaded his needle, pushing his spectacles up onto his forehead. Five little bags of white cloth lay before him; at the mouth of each a strip was folded to precisely the same measure, though the linings were of different colours. He had chosen those colours to distinguish the bags, not to stand in place of anyone's name. Outside the tailor's shop, the tea seller was pouring boiling water from a tin vessel. Amid the sound, a young man arrived with a telephone in his hand. “I want a photograph of your customers' ledger. There's talk of five names having been changed. Who are these people you sewed for?” Nasim stopped the wheel of his sewing machine. “Because the cloth passed through my hands, must I give you an account of their lives as well?” he asked.

The young man introduced himself as a volunteer with a local information group. He carried an extract from a page of the municipal office's records, in which differences in names or terms denoting relationships had been marked beside five entries. Beneath them somebody had written in red ink: Gang of people using assumed names. The moment Nasim read those words, he drew the cloth close to himself. “Which document proves there is a gang?” The young man replied that all five alterations appeared on the same list. “Five kurtas stitched in the same place don't mean that five people live under the same roof,” Nasim said. “Look at the differences in the list; don't invent a whole category of crime out of them.” The young man lowered his telephone, but slipped the extract into his bag.

Nasim remembered the message Naira had sent the previous night. Sarita's private original sheet contained twenty-seven names; the twenty-six places left uncovered were being checked, while the last fold remained closed by Sarita's own decision. Five differences of identity could be seen in the municipal copy, but the original orders for those changes, and the dates on which they had been made, were still being sought. Nasim had never embroidered children's names onto the bags he had once made for the school kitchen; he remembered well the mistake of treating a customer's measurement book as if it were a public attendance register. Today he was making five new bags to protect the papers of five independent individuals. The bill for the tailoring was ready. Confidentiality was not a gift handed out for nothing: it was a definite condition of his professional responsibility.

When Naira came to the shop at noon, Nasim showed her the bill: separate charges for the cloth, thread, lining and stitching of all five bags. “Who will pay this?” Naira asked. “Not the people whose documents they are meant to hold,” Nasim said. “If the investigating committee has asked for them, let it put the expense in writing. But the bill will give the numbers of the bags, not the private names of the customers.” Naira agreed. Rama Karna had sent word from the office that the receipt sheet for the altered copy had been found, but

the signed authorisations attached to it were not all together. Before approaching the five people, a question still had to be settled: what should each person be asked, and in what form should the answers be kept?

They did not choose the room behind the tailor's shop. Customers listening to the sewing, young workers, and people standing outside the door could always overhear what was said there. The small municipal reading room had a door that could be closed from within, although the building attendant would know that someone was receiving visitors at that hour. Naira sent each person a separate message: an invitation to meet, not an order; attendance alone would not be taken as consent to make a name public. Two wished to come in person, another two chose different times, and the fifth permitted a conversation by telephone. Rama said that the official verification would proceed independently; what was said at a private meeting was not to be entered as a substitute for a formal statement to the authorities.

Sugandha was the first to arrive. Instead of a piece of paper, she had a stem of bel leaves caught against her palm; on the way to the reading room she had bought the leaves near the temple for her sister. “I will not speak my old name aloud here,” she said. “You may write the name under which I have worked since leaving home. But if you join my former address to that name, the people I escaped will be able to reach me again.” Naira asked whether she had lodged a formal complaint against anyone. “I have a copy of my statement,” Sugandha replied. “But don't write down my fear as a crime already established by an investigation. What I tell you of my own experience is my testimony; what the office verifies is the office's responsibility.”

On the reverse of the sheet Sugandha had a condition written down: her current name must remain on the attendance and wage-payment registers; the connection with her former identity was to be viewed only during authorised verification; and her place of residence must not appear on any public list. She did not want the change of name to cost her the wages she had already earned. “Shall I write your new name against your clothing measurements too?” Nasim asked. Sugandha laughed. “Take my measure from my body, not from my name. I'm the one who'll wear the clothes, not the people looking for me.” Nasim folded the note and put it inside a bag. All that was written for the public notice was: Statement of first individual received; limits on publication specified by the individual concerned. No former name appeared.

Zahir came for the second meeting. Mud was caught in the pedal of his bicycle, and the strap of his right sandal was tied together with thread. He had formerly carried goods through the market. At the labour broker's office his attendance had been recorded under another name, after which it had become difficult for him to claim what he was actually owed. “I didn't change my own name,” he said. “Someone told me it was written like that for safety. Nobody told me what name was being put into the wage ledger.” Naira made clear that, for the moment, this was Zahir's testimony; without seeing the

broker's records, they could not establish where the instruction to change his name had come from. “Does that mean my wages will stay unpaid?” Zahir asked.

“I'm not saying they should be withheld,” Naira answered. “But we must find out whether the money was paid to someone else under the wrong name.” Zahir supplied two slips for consignments he had carried and the names of fellow workers who could identify him on three days. He also expressly forbade the publication of his colleagues' addresses. His decision was that the name he currently used at work could be used in the municipal inquiry, but not the name of the neighbourhood in which his old home stood; and every copy supplied must identify clearly the source of the original paper. Outside, the bell on his bicycle rang again and again. When he came out of the reading room, he tightened its loose screw himself.

Nasim paused when he heard the third person's name. Devaki had submitted a written request to have her mother's name entered in the space for a guardian, although the copy in circulation still carried her father's name. One clerk had described the alteration as a “new identity”; another called it “concealing an old identity.” Sitting by the window, Devaki said, “I have lived with my mother, borne the expense of her treatment, and it is to that address that my letters reach me. I will state, with evidence, how my relationship with my father is to be recorded. But I do not want to be frightened every time by having letters sent to his house.” Her mother's name was not spoken aloud there. She placed the necessary papers in a sealed envelope.

The question sent by Rama for verification said, Father changed. Devaki struck out those words and had them replaced with The distinction between a contact person and a guardian's details. “I am not asking to erase the register of my birth myself,” she said. “But I want the right to decide into whose hands a letter is delivered.” Naira rewrote the page. The alteration did not change anyone's ancestry; it recorded a request to keep the address for public correspondence separate from the original record of private relationships. Devaki read the new page and signed it herself. By then the evening light had begun to fall obliquely across the red floor of the reading room.

The fourth person, Mangala, did not come to the reading room. With two friends she was weaving bamboo mats in a shared workshop behind Barki Pond. Naira went there at the time Mangala had chosen. Mangala did not stop working; as she pushed the last strip into the weave, she said, “Here people know me by the name under which I work. At the relief camp a different name was written down, and they said it was for my protection. But if people later begin to say that I took relief twice, who will look at the papers?” She had fastened the camp receipt into her ledger. Nasim offered her a bag, but Mangala said the iron-bound chest in the workshop was safer for the present.

Mangala made one distinction plain: there were two receipts bearing different names, but she had received payment only once. The other slip recorded a check on attendance, not a payment. She showed them both, but

did not surrender the originals. “I want to be freed from the public accusation, not to have my story told from house to house,” she said. One of her friends, gathering up the edge of a mat, asked how long the evidence would have to be kept safe. “Until the investigators give me a receipt for taking it, it stays here,” Mangala answered. She could give Rama a signed, concise statement; she did not authorise the publication of the names of customers or neighbours.

The fifth voice came over the telephone. The name she wished to use was Kamli. Naira did not ask permission to put the call on speaker so that everyone might hear it; she held the telephone to her ear, wrote down each sentence, and read it back in turn. Kamli had previously supplied a temporary name to obtain a slip for medical assistance. Now people were displaying the medicine register bearing the old name beside the assistance letter bearing the new one, accusing her of having taken treatment meant for somebody else. “I received the medicine,” Kamli said. “Have its quantity and dates checked. But why should the page describing my illness circulate through the market?” She was willing to disclose the hospital she had attended only for authorised medical verification.

Along with her limits Kamli raised one further question: if the investigation found an error, would her former name be printed again on the correction notice? Naira said she could not settle that question over this telephone call; they would ask the office for a written arrangement. “Then do not call my voice an official statement yet,” Kamli said. “I am ready for an inquiry, but first tell me three things: where the papers will be kept, who will read them, and which name will go outside.” Naira copied those three questions word for word. The fifth bag remained empty. Nobody ordered it to be filled.

By evening Naira and Nasim had returned to the municipal office. The powerful breeze from the fan on Rama Karna's desk made the corners of the papers flutter. She weighted them with the lid of an inkpot, then read Naira's brief notes. The five individuals had expressed five separate wishes, but those wishes did not yet establish the legality of the five procedures by which the office had altered their entries. “I need answers to three questions,” Rama said. “What was in the original entry, who had the authority to change it, and was notice given to the person concerned?” Naira corrected her notes, making two columns: Reason as stated by the individual and Evidence of an official alteration.

At that moment a crowd gathered in the outer veranda of the office. A shopkeeper waved the red-marked extract in his hand. “These five changed names must be cleared up. If a person's identity is secret, the accounts of that person's relief and wages will be secret too!” Voices rose around him. “Ask how much money was spent, who approved it, and on what date,” Nasim said to him. “But why insist that, before the accounts can be understood, you must know the door of the woman who has withheld her home address for her own

protection?” The shopkeeper said the public had a right to know the whole truth. Rama came out onto the veranda. “A public account of expenditure and the private details of a person at risk are two different records,” she said. “The office's duty is not to sell the contents of a private file.”

The young man who had been carrying the extract around was also in the crowd. Nasim reminded him of the question he had asked that morning. The young man said the red lettering was not his and that he had received the photograph from another group. “What if I've forwarded it?” he asked. “Then you have taken part in circulating it,” Naira replied. “But this extract still carries no proof of its date, the original file or the signature. It shows five altered entries, not five proven crimes.” On his telephone the young man wrote a correction below the earlier message: Reasons for alterations under investigation; private names not published. He had no account of all the places the extract had already reached. This was a correction, not complete control over its circulation.

Savitri Sardar had been standing in a corner of the same veranda for a long time. In her hand were a relief slip from her old village and an entry for the temporary residence she had occupied after the flood. An employee said that once the new village's name had been entered, recovering the dues outstanding from the old village would be difficult. “I moved to another village,” Savitri said. “I did not become another human being. Nor is a change of village proof that somebody is using a false name.” She showed two dates on which she had sought food and an unfilled distribution slip from the first camp. Against one date the document said Present, not Amount paid. She wanted her new village address to be corrected in the current relief register, but did not want the losses from earlier months crossed out as though they had automatically been settled.

Rama could issue separate acknowledgements for Savitri's two applications, but could not yet give a decision. Savitri attached evidence of her present village to the first application and a copy of her attendance on the earlier relief day to the second. “Write on the receipt: Earlier claim for assistance under consideration,” she said. An assistant again suggested entering the new village against the old page, so that two different dates would be absorbed into a single address. Savitri refused. “The date on which the rains came, and where I was living then, have not changed,” she said. Rama left the old record as it stood and attached a separate amendment sheet. No stamp was put on it to imply that the earlier relief claim had been automatically accepted.

A voice called from outside that Vinita Kesharwani had arrived with her household account books. From the grocery shop at the crossroads she extended credit for sixteen kinds of provisions. Turmeric stained the wooden weighing box in her shop, and rice dust clung beneath her fingernails. A man of the family who accompanied her said, “All the household's credit belongs in a single account. Separate signatures will only multiply the trouble.” Vinita laid two ledgers on the desk: one for goods purchased in her own name, the

other for the family's shared business. “The debts I approved are mine to account for,” she said. “But if you put another person's liability against my name, show me the old receipts.”

The man protested that splitting the accounts would destroy the family's standing. Without speaking, Vinita opened an old sheet bound with red thread. Beside one date was the man's signature, yet half that same amount had already been entered in Vinita's own ledger. “Am I to pay the sum twice for the sake of our reputation?” she asked. The shopkeeper admitted that, when the copy was prepared, the total from the family ledger had been entered again in a separate account. Final reconciliation of the amounts was still outstanding, but he acknowledged in writing that the duplication of a single debt would be examined. Vinita opened a fresh credit page under her own name, setting its limit and the payment date herself.

Nasim asked Vinita's advice about the price of one of the cloth bags. “If you've supplied cloth, write down who is to pay for it,” she said. “The person whose documents go into the bag doesn't thereby become your customer.” Naira listened. An employee proposed putting the expenses of the five private conversations, the copies of Savitri's two applications, and the correction of Vinita's duplicated debt under a single item in the committee's fund. Vinita stopped him. “Where the charges are separate, the liabilities are separate. Don't use the cost of bags made for confidentiality to cancel a debt owed to my shop.” That short sentence showed Nasim a clear way to have his bill paid. The committee treasurer issued an approval slip for the payment; it contained none of the names hidden inside the bags.

Late in the office day an old covering letter belonging to the government's copy reached Rama. It said Restricted circulation for reasons of safety, but the individual orders authorising all five changes were not enclosed. In a corner of the sheet were two employees' initials and a date that could not be read clearly. “With this letter before us, all our office can say is this,” Rama said. “At some point somebody proposed restricted circulation. It has not yet been proved that all five entries were changed by the proper procedure.” Naira agreed. She did not copy into her public summary the fragments of names that could be read on that paper. Rama issued the next written order to search for the original, but invented no date by which it would be found.

When Naira went to pay the rent for the reading room, its owner asked, “How many people came?” “I am paying the full rent for all the hours for which we took the room,” she replied. “I have no consent to give you a list of the visitors.” Without argument, the owner wrote out a receipt for the money. Picking up the dried stem of bel leaves left by the window, Naira remembered Sugandha's hand. Not every little thing in a life becomes evidence. Some things belong simply to a person's day's work, a meal, or the memory of someone dear. She put the stem in the rubbish bin. There was no need to call it a preserved specimen and turn it into a trace of somebody's private story.

When she reached home that evening, Naira told Sarita the results of the day. She read out no names, describing only the differences in the five people's consent to publication and the absence of the government's original papers. Sarita was kneading flour; the dough clung stubbornly to one hand. “Did you meet everyone on the very first day?” she asked. “Three came to the reading room, one met us at her workshop, and one spoke by telephone,” Naira said. “It wasn't possible to have everyone sign the same sheet.” Sarita smiled. “That's right. A person chooses even the place in which to say what is hardest in the heart. And don't write zero in your summary for what someone has not said.” Naira did not turn her gaze towards her mother's closed box.

Naira prepared brief entries for five separate records of consent: what each person had been asked, through which means, what part of the answer could be shared, and what still required examination. Not one old name, neighbourhood, illness or original signature appeared in the public summary. In the register for documentary examination, the five discrepancies in the office's records were marked separately; she did not insert into that register the twenty-six exposed names and the covered twenty-seventh place on Sarita's private original sheet. Merging the two layers would add nothing to the evidence; it would merely violate the limits set for protection. What the first meetings had established was the right of all five people to make independent decisions, not final proof of why the office had altered their entries.

In the courtyard Kabir was cutting away a loose thread from the binding of an old book. Naira saw that the lamp in the inner room had grown dim. “Did you get an answer about anyone's name today?” Kabir asked. “Not an answer. I discovered the limits governing how an answer may be given,” Naira said. “One person wants the right to work under a name; another wants to keep her home address hidden behind it.” Kabir closed the book against its binding. “The examination of the fourteen discrepancies is tomorrow, isn't it?” he asked. Naira nodded. “Yes, but I won't call fourteen differences one mistake. If a changed name protects somebody today, declaring the entry wrong tomorrow could bring the harm straight back to that person.”

As Nasim closed his shop that night, he saw that the young man's corrected message had reached the information group, but two copies of the first red-lettered extract were still circulating. He sent the young man a short reply: My customers' ledger is not public material. If you want an account of the expense, ask the committee for the bill, not for the measurements of somebody's clothes. Then he gathered the fallen threads from beneath his sewing machine and sat down to record the measurements for the next day's work. Some of the five bags had been filled, others remained empty; no one else would decide whose bag belonged to whom and make that knowledge public. Outside the window, leaves fell from the neem tree. Inside, the clean page of the ledger bore only prices, dates and names of jobs—his own livelihood and the boundaries of other people's lives, each kept in its rightful place.

Chapter 88 · Fourteen Discrepancies

The wet shoes left in the veranda of the municipal office were making small marks of mud on the white floor. Stepping carefully around each mark, Naira made her way to the iron cupboard. Rama Karna had weighted down the covering letter found the day before with a wooden ruler, lest the fan's draught tear its half-burnt corner any further. “You said fourteen,” she asked. “Fourteen people, fourteen names, or fourteen mistakes?” Instead of unfolding the document, Naira picked up fourteen plain slips laid beneath it. “For now, these are fourteen cases in which discrepancies require investigation. In some, the facts do not agree; in others, the meaning of a field has been misunderstood; in still others, the document conferring authority is missing. We cannot give fourteen human lives the same treatment merely because we have put them under one number.”

Rama wrote “Original” on the first slip in blue ink. Naira stopped her. “Write down the source before calling anything an original. Sarita's handwritten list is her private original; the office copy may be the original of its own register. Those are not the same sheet of paper.” Rama let the ink dry and added “Source examination” above it. As the clerk Devshankar untied the thick string around a file, he said, “Settle them all with one correction order. Send out a letter and close the matter.” Rama pointed him towards the open complaints box beside the doorway. “Will a single order restore the account of someone wrongly entered as dead? Will it make a person safe whose home address must be withheld, if we write that person's name for everyone to see?”

Outside the window an old woman selling Darbhanga-style flattened rice was shaking rainwater from her shop's tarpaulin. Naira divided her fourteen slips into four piles: handwriting and matching; rights and classification; transactions and attendance; and access and protection. “These four piles are routes of inquiry, not decisions,” she said. Rama put a fifth, blank sheet beside them: “Disputed facts—no final order.” Just then Renu Gondhi's voice sounded in the veranda. Before coming in, Renu slipped off her wet sandals and left them at the dry edge of the steps, holding the map in her hand against her chest for fear it would be soaked.

Renu had brought the first measurement slip from the previous year, a photograph of the rope stretched across the path to the landing, and the acknowledgement number of her appeal. “At first they told me the lease was private, so I couldn't go down by the back shallows. Now I hear the whole pond has been included in the lease,” she said. Ramani Bind came in behind her, carrying a knot from a fishing net, not a printed manifesto. “I am speaking about my share of the fishing rights. Renu is speaking about the path by which she reaches the landing. The people asserting claims over those two things are not the same,” Ramani explained. Rama spread out the office's small map. A red line ran along its edge; the annexure to the old lease was not there. Renu bent to study it and then asked, “Does the mere sight of a red line amount to an order closing off the place?”

According to the survey employee, the rear enclosure had been closed to prevent accidents during the rainy months. “If that was a safety rope,” Renu asked, “which page specifies how long it is to stay, and the alternative way out?” The employee had no answer. He showed them a separate message from the private leaseholder describing the matter as “unauthorised entry”; the message was dated after the rope had been put up. Ramani said, “Putting a warning on the steps for people's safety is one thing. Handing the key to the entire landing over to a private person is another. I too need a place to spread my nets. But I will not purchase my right to fish at the price of Renu's right to walk there.”

From the records officer Ramani requested a complete copy of the old fishing-water lease, the original signed page, the map annexure, and the conditions of renewal. The officer offered a short abstract—the leaseholder's name at the top and the fee beneath it. “You cannot see the landing breathe in an abstract,” Ramani replied. “I want to know where the boundary of the fishing right ends, where the condition governing women's shared participation appears, and where the public right of passage lies.” She asked for a receipt for the copying fee. She was ready to pay the actual cost of the copies herself, but the documents must be complete. Rama accepted the written application and issued an acknowledgement.

Renu added a sentence to her appeal: while her request for removal of the enclosure awaited a hearing, arrangements for a separate safety inspection should be made, without treating ordinary access to the landing as already closed. Anita Chaupal, who had been sitting in the veranda, asked, “Will they hear your complaint only when Ramani gets the annexure to the lease?” “No,” Renu said. “I am giving them the date on which my passage was obstructed, the testimony, and the photograph of the rope. The question of how far the lease extends is another investigation. The two hearings must not spend months waiting for each other.” Rama issued two separate acknowledgements. For the first time Renu saw “Public Access to the Landing” written plainly at the top of her application. Her voice had not been lost in the crowd of papers headed “Fishing-Rights Dispute.”

Anita took from her bag a copy of a social-category register with a dark blue cover. The category added after her name on that page did not match the application she herself had completed. “People look at that field and decide what my life must be,” she said. “How many places must I go to explain myself, between the person who entered the mistake and those who believe it?” Devshankar said, “In the old list, people from a family with the same name appear under another category.” Anita interrupted him. “How does another member of my family's document become evidence about me? First bring out my original application. Give me the written rule specifying what proof is required here. Do not open a public argument over the name of my community.”

Rama searched the file. The applicant's signature appeared on the next page of the original application; the classification field seemed to have been filled in later, when the record was entered into the office computer. The digital

history showing who had filled it was not immediately available. Naira wrote clearly: “Difference between original application and computer entry confirmed; responsibility for altering the entry under investigation.” Anita wanted the hearing on her scholarship application not to be held up by the mistake. Rama initiated an inquiry into arrangements for a temporary slip reading “Classification Under Dispute,” not a final certificate. There was little relief in Anita's voice, more determination. She asked who would receive a copy of the corrected register—and who would not.

Niranjan Kisan arrived at the other window. The sun had drawn fine lines across his face; a small packet of seed was tucked into the bag holding his papers. In the old bank-linked register, “Kisan” formed part of his family name. In the new digital form it had slipped into the field for occupation. The names therefore failed to match, and the account for his payment had been deactivated. “Change the occupation and it will be all right,” the clerk said. “It is true that I farm,” Niranjan replied. “But when you put a word belonging to my name under occupation, you erase me as a person. Changing the occupation may mean that tomorrow's payment is held up again.”

He laid down a short printed bank statement and an old cooperative-society membership slip. His name was written the same way on both. As the clerk began to read aloud the last four digits of the account, Niranjan stopped him. “Do whatever matching you have to do inside. If my account is spoken aloud across the veranda, who will know whose money is being discussed?” Rama prepared a request for an authorised name-matching letter from the bank. Without it, the municipal office could not claim that correcting the word in its own register would lift the bank's restriction. Niranjan added one last request: the bank must receive the acknowledgement of his objection before the date of the next seed grant.

As the three people were leaving, Naira saw that no single stamp of “mistake” could be placed on them all. Renu wanted a hearing against the obstruction of a pathway; Anita wanted an incorrect classification amended; Niranjan wanted a separate field for a person's name and for an occupation. An acknowledgement of an objection was not the right itself, but it could fix the next date on which that right would be heard. Beside her fourteen slips Naira added a new column: “Time-sensitive harm.” For Anita, the date her application would close; for Niranjan, the seed subsidy; for Renu, the season when the waters would rise. “If we leave out time,” Rama said, “justice in the file will, through delay, become injustice.”

In the afternoon Nasim Idrisi came carrying the cloth bags. He did not open all five of them before Rama. First he presented the sewing bill for the inquiry committee and asked whether a copy of the payment order would be placed in the public file or kept within the accounts. “Write the person's name as well,” the records officer suggested, “and the expense will be justified.” “The justification for the sewing lies in the bag's dimensions, the cloth, and the committee's written order,” Nasim said. “Not in a client's private affairs.” Rama recorded acceptance of the materials and service on the bill, not the names that might be placed inside the bags. On her own slip Naira wrote:

“Search continuing for the original orders authorising renaming for reasons of safety.”

There were four questions in Naira's first pile. In the first, a letter indistinct in the original had been made definite in the copy; the remedy was not to replace the letter by guesswork, but to obtain permission for a protected reading from the writer and mark the uncertainty. In the second, the two stamps “Present” and “Payment Received” at a relief camp had been treated as evidence of a single payment; that required checking against distribution receipts. In the third, the village where a flood survivor had first sought refuge and the village where she now lived had been entered under one date; Savitri asked that two entries be made according to their respective times. In the fourth, two papers bearing different names, produced by Mangla, had given rise to an allegation of claiming benefits twice, although the details of one recorded payment still required reconciliation. Beside each of the four slips Naira wrote down a separate source. Not one carried the words “Fraud proved.”

In the second pile were three forms of misclassification. Anita's social category had been wrongly added; that required comparison of her original application with the computer history. Niranjan's family name had migrated into the occupation field; that required an authorised reconciliation of names with the bank. Rosie Lalbegi's self-declared religion had been inferred from the work she performed; correcting it would begin with an independent declaration completed by Rosie herself. For a moment Devshankar said, “Isn't there a form for correcting the name in all three cases?” “In one,” Naira answered, “the spelling of a name is wrong; in another, someone's name has been turned into an occupation; in the third, a person's religion has been invented from her labour. The form may be the same without the question being the same.”

In the third pile lay testimony that Zahir's attendance had been recorded under another name; Vinita Kesharwani's duplicated credit entry; the page that had turned Rita Ekka's testimony into security for a debt; and Kamli's protected identity in the medicine register. Proof of the transactions was needed in all four matters, but a medical page could not be opened for discussion at a community assembly without permission. Rama wrote: “For attendance: employer's original list and worker's dates; for credit: reconciliation of the two ledgers; for debt: original agreement and examination of signatures; for medicines: authorised confidential clinical reconciliation.” Naira added two questions concerning protection to the fourth pile: who could see Sugandha's former address, and when administrative permission for the five altered entries had been given. In neither kind of case did the absence of evidence constitute permission to breach confidentiality.

Rama counted the fourteen slips. “Four, three, four, two—that makes thirteen.” Naira looked towards the window. The absence of the complete lease sought by Ramani and the private enclosure line drawn on Renu's map had remained on one slip, though the two claims were different. She picked up

the fourteenth slip: “Distinction between the fishing-water lease annexure and public access.” Rama recorded that two independent applications would be attached within this case, and the disposal of one must not be taken as approval of the other. “A bamboo rope and a cloth bag are different things, however you count them under fourteen,” Ramani remarked from the doorway. She had returned because the office seal had been omitted from her copying-fee receipt.

A new clerk saw the fourteen slips and asked, “Were fourteen mistakes found in one list?” Naira corrected him. “These are fourteen discrepancies requiring examination across various related registers and cases of disputed claims. Sarita's private original list of twenty-seven names has not been absorbed into them. Its twenty-six visible lines and one protected line remain separate. Nor are we going to call the office's five altered identities five separate crimes within these fourteen.” The clerk flushed, but changed the heading on his sheet to “Discrepancy Cases, Not a List of Guilty Persons.” “That sentence must appear in the public copy too,” Rama said. “No personal names or abbreviations suggesting guilt are to go outside.”

At that moment a man arrived from the crossroads, describing himself as the leaseholder's representative. He had a photograph of a stamped document in his hand and demanded to see Renu's appeal. “Where is your letter of authority?” Rama asked. “My employer's name is on the map,” he said. “Seeing a name does not by itself entitle you to read someone else's complaint,” Rama replied. “You will receive notice of the public hearing, but not the original of her personal testimony.” The representative raised his voice. Fish prices at Barki Pond, he said, would fall, and theft would increase unless people were kept out. Ramani stepped forward. “If a fishing net has been stolen, write down the date and lodge a complaint. Don't use an imagined thief to cover up the question of the right to walk to the landing.”

In the photograph he had brought, the lease fee was legible on one half of the document; the annexure defining its boundaries had been cut off. Ramani did not ask permission to take the photograph onto her own telephone. “I will obtain the complete copy from the office. I cannot found my claim on half a photograph,” she said. Looking at a red mark of mud on the office floor, Renu remarked, “That is mud from the shallows. Has anyone even swept the steps down to the landing today? They use safety as an excuse for closing it, and do nothing to make it safe.” Rama drafted a letter requesting a joint inspection date from the municipal roads team and the fisheries branch. She did not conclude in that letter that the enclosure was either lawful or unlawful.

Niranjan had not gone home. He had sat beneath the office neem tree, making call after call to the bank. He was told that an officer's signature would be needed to reopen the account blocked because of the confusion over his name, but the bank officer would have to see the papers first. Niranjan came inside again. “I will not open a new account under another name,” he said plainly. “All the transactions of my old account, my share of the crop, are there. Correcting a wrong field must not erase the past.” Rama explained the

limit of her authority: she could forward an application to correct the original municipal register, but she could not order the bank to reactivate the account. Niranjan accepted the letter with that limitation stated in it and resolved to attend that week's meeting of the agricultural cooperative himself.

Anita received a stamped copy of one of the two versions of her written objection, but sat down again when she read the stated reason: “False caste declared.” The words placed the blame for an administrative mistake upon her. “I have made no false declaration. Your register added the wrong category,” she said. Beside the stamp Rama wrote a correction: “Conflict between applicant's original particulars and office entry; cause unknown.” Anita read it carefully for two minutes. She wanted the unwanted classification removed, but not at the price of officials going from house to house to interrogate the community. Rama made clear that the confidential annexure would be preserved for authorised examination, not pinned to the public noticeboard.

Afternoon was fading beside Barki Pond. Renu returned to the rope, which someone had removed in the night and someone else had tied up again. Two children came running towards the landing, then stopped for fear their feet would sink into the mud. Renu showed them the safer path along the firm paved edge and warned them of the slippery ground. Her appeal against a private enclosure did not mean that anyone should step into the shallows before they had been measured. Picking a thin leaf from the mesh of her net, Ramani said, “When we get the copy, we will look first at the boundary of the bank, then at the fishing share.” Her daughter examined the knot in the rope and asked, “Whose is this?” “We shall ask the person who tied it,” Ramani answered. “And listen to the one who needs to pass.”

In the evening Naira went to the municipal public reading room. The young man from the day before was sitting there once again with his phone. A photograph of the red excerpt was still circulating in his group; this time people had begun writing “Fourteen Guilty Names” beneath it. Naira showed him the public heading of the fourteen cases, not the private documents. “So these aren't fourteen people?” he asked. “No,” said Naira. “In some cases there are two documents concerning one person; in others one service involves several people; in some, permission to examine the evidence is still outstanding. Join two numbers together and make a portrait of a human being out of them, and the correction itself becomes another rumour.”

In a corner of the reading room, a woman who had once been Sarita's pupil was teaching her daughter the multiplication tables. Seeing the paper clipping, she asked, “If there is a mistake in a list, does somebody die?” Naira paused before answering. “Sometimes a wrong entry can stop someone from receiving medicine, a livelihood, or an entitlement. But it would be wrong to say without inquiry that every error has caused a death.” “My daughter's name was entered wrongly at school,” the woman said. “I spent a whole month running from place to place. One day the teacher corrected it. But who will give her back that month of learning?” Naira wrote down the question

without recording a register number. Every experience had its own measure; it could not be used as a pretext for increasing the count of fourteen cases.

When she reached home, Naira read Sarita a copy of the public summary. Skimming the froth from a pot of red lentils on the hearth, Sarita said, “You have got your count of fourteen right. But will those who brought complaints have a chance to read the answers?” “Each application has its own acknowledgement and the next date is written down,” Naira replied. “We will not send a public letter to someone whose page is private.” “And my twenty-seventh layer?” Sarita asked. “There is no new conjecture about that today,” Naira said. Sarita put the lid back on the pot. The smell of the lentils had warmed the room.

Rama remained in the office that night. She laid a heavy sheet over the fourteen slips, recording in order: which original had been inspected; which account was testimony alone; which order was missing; which officer was responsible for answering; and on what date the applicant could expect information. She left unchanged the protections surrounding the five altered identities. With Renu's and Ramani's two independent appeals, a complete annexure to the same fishing-water lease had been requested, but each answer would go to a different person. The validity of Anita's incorrect category would be examined separately from Niranjan's bank-and-cooperative reconciliation over his name; their next dates remained different. Small corrections had been made that day. Final resolution, and the question of responsibility, remained.

As Rama went to close the window, she noticed an old covering sheet concerning a death notification protruding from the cupboard. The list described someone as “Dead,” yet a slip showing active transactions had been attached to it; the actual recipient of the payment was not clear from the document. She would not squeeze it onto the last page of the fourteen cases. This new comparison needed its own examination of sources, person, and dates. She placed the papers in a separate grey folder and wrote, “Not a declaration that the person is alive; reconciliation of death notice pending.” The sight of an active account belonging to a dead person did not bring the dead back to life; nor could anyone be named a criminal without first establishing that a living person had been wrongly entered as dead. The first star had appeared outside the window. Two lamps were still burning in the office.

Before dawn Ramani was still mending the knots of her net. Half-asleep, her daughter asked, “Mother, will they write my name in that lease today?” Ramani stroked her head. “Today I asked for the whole document. I did not sign what I had not seen. Tomorrow I must speak again about the path and the net.” The girl lifted the circular mouth of the net in her small hands; the thread tightened a little round her fingers. Ramani loosened the knot. Outside, a breath of wind raised small ripples on the pond, and one end of the tied rope moved soundlessly. Cutting it would have been easy. What remained was to write plainly who had a right to which path.

Chapter 89 · Four Living, Four Dead

Before the municipal office windows were opened, Rama Karna set two shallow, tray-like lids upon her desk. One held blue slips, the other ochre. She had not taken home overnight the death notification and the account of active transactions discovered inside the grey folder. These were papers belonging to a government cupboard, and responsibility for their safekeeping rested with the office. When Naira arrived, Rama did not immediately pass her the first sheet. She began by reading out two headings: “Declared dead, personally alive” and “Death confirmed, account still active.” Naira said, “In one group we must correct an error; in the other we must investigate transactions. If we interchange the headings, we shall turn the living person's very body into grounds for suspicion, and a dead person's name into that of a culprit.” Beyond the window, the veranda was filling with the smell of yellowing paper.

The first blue slip concerned Sarita Das. Her name and identifying number had been entered in a death notification, yet she had appeared at a public meeting to object in person. The office's acknowledgement of her written statement was also in the file. The second slip concerned Fakira, whose access pass at the railway crossroads had been suspended on the grounds that he was dead. Fakira was alive, with his voice, his walking stick and the earnings of his day's work; but a copy of his old pass could not, by itself, restore his status. Rama wrote: “Physical presence and personal statement received; order cancelling death entry not received.” Naira added that the public portion of Sarita's statement at the meeting and Fakira's occupational permit had not originated from the same source.

The person named on the third blue slip was a woman living in the relief settlement. She had made repeated journeys to the office to prove that she was alive. Today she had brought, in a cloth bag she had sewn herself, receipts for medical examinations on two separate dates. She did not consent to having her name made public, but agreed to have her identity and signature compared before the investigating officer. “My medicine was stopped, and so people took me for dead,” she said. “But why should a prescription be the only way for me to prove that I am alive? Give me somewhere to speak for myself as well.” Rama placed her statement in a sealed cover and noted the date on which the office was to decide. As the woman lifted her bag, she said she had sewing to finish that day; this hearing could not be allowed to swallow her whole life.

The fourth blue slip concerned a young man who carried bundles at the bus stand. Payment had stopped when a death mark was entered beside a date in his wage register, though he possessed separate receipts for work done after that date. Rama asked whether he would accept making an application for a

“new birth,” without any evidence, merely to have someone remove the mark. The young man did not laugh. “The wages I earned in my old days will not be transferred to the name of a new man,” he said. He requested that the location of his stand be concealed in the public account, because his former contractor had been calling him ever since he demanded his arrears. Naira prepared three separate requests on his behalf: for the original wage register, the work receipts and the digital history of the date on which the death mark had been entered.

Naira's hand stopped as she opened the first sheet from the ochre pile. Sarita's husband's death certificate was seventeen years old; a recent hospital medicine-distribution slip had been issued in his name. Two stamps were visible: the medicine had been prepared and it had been collected. But the signature of the person who collected it was not on this copy. Naira wrote, “Death document independently verified; recipient of distribution unknown.” It would be senseless to declare her husband's death a falsehood merely to make the new slip correct. It would be equally wrong, on the strength of the slip alone, to accuse someone in the dead man's household of stealing medicine. Rama set aside a separate letter requesting certified copies of the dispensary's original distribution ledger, the code of the person who authorised the issue, and the recipient's signature.

On the second ochre slip, regular deductions of interest appeared against the old savings account of a deceased labourer. His family had submitted a copy of the death certificate, but the deductions had continued under an automatic standing instruction. Naira said, “The transactions are continuing—that is true. But if a machine goes on deducting interest by itself, it does not prove that someone has withdrawn money with their own hands.” The third sheet showed rent being deposited on a fishing lease after the lessee's death. A family member said that they had paid an old amount due. That statement required verification, but the deposit did not automatically turn the deceased person's name into a false identity. The fourth ochre slip recorded a fee for the “release of an item” from an old pawn account. The receipt showing into whose hands the item had actually passed was missing.

Beside the eight slips Naira wrote eight separate descriptions of their status. Each blue case concerned the effect of a death mark upon a living person; each ochre case concerned recorded activity after a verified death. The fourteen discrepancies remained a separate matter, as did Sarita's list of twenty-seven names, kept locked away at home. Rama counted: “Four living, four dead.” Devshankar asked, “So eight crimes?” Naira turned to him. “Eight questions, with eight paths of investigation. Only the court and the competent investigators may count crimes, and only after the evidence.” She also recorded the instruction that the names of the deceased were not to be published without their families' consent. Light from the window had

climbed onto the corners of the papers, but the empty space between the blue and ochre piles remained wide.

That day, beside Rajinar, Sudha Rai stopped the unloading of bamboo posts brought for a school veranda roof. Two workers already stood with tools for digging the holes. A schoolteacher, having heard the public announcement of the donation, had come to offer thanks. But the proposed boundary of the gift ran across the narrow path regularly used by two tenant families and their children. Sudha said, “I do not wish to withdraw my gift. But if we plant these posts today and narrow somebody's everyday passage, I shall have done nobody a kindness.” The teacher asked when he should announce the date for building the veranda. “When those who use the land I wish to give have been heard,” Sudha replied.

One of the tenants, a woman carrying a bundle of dry wood for the evening hearth, saw the bamboo posts and said, “A veranda is a good thing. But I take my handcart around this bend, and when my mother-in-law is ill we carry her out on a cot. It is easy to tell us to use another path; in the rains that way goes under water.” A member of Sudha's family said that paying rent did not confer permanent rights over land. Sudha interrupted him. “We shall examine the papers to determine the nature of those rights. But to write a false deed of gift without measuring how people actually live and move here is another matter.” She fixed a meeting to measure separately the needs of the schoolchildren, the tenants and the builders of the veranda. Their names were entered not on the publicity board announcing the donation but on the acknowledgement sheet for the hearing.

Sudha herself struck out a line in her first declaration: “Unconditional donation of the entire parcel.” In its place she wrote, “Proposed use subject to examination of tenancy and rights of passage.” The teacher was disappointed, for the school had already fixed the day for a public inauguration. From the initial sum she had set aside for the gift, Sudha paid the day's wages of the workers whose time had been wasted, but she did not pay the entire construction bill for work that had not been done. The tenant woman asked whether she could speak for herself at tomorrow's meeting if her husband could not attend. Sudha answered, “It is you who walk that path. Your words need not wait for someone to represent you.”

On the other side of the market, Basanti Pan was examining a line in a government copy of her identity record that linked three different words. The self-description in her family's old application had become, on the new computer page, one field labelled “accepted equivalents.” The clerk said the entries Pan, Sawasi and Panar were connected to benefits under a single category; too many questions would delay her certificate. Basanti replied, “The benefits code belongs to your accounts. The identity I speak aloud will not be erased for your convenience. First write down the word I use; then show me the rule governing your official category.” In her hand was a small bag of bael

leaves she had brought for a niece who sold them in the market. She could not abandon a whole day's work over the dispute about her official identity.

For the first time, the clerk preparing the copy showed her two separate fields on his screen: “Applicant's self-stated identity” and “Office classification.” The first field could be filled in, but when the certificate was printed the government term appeared again. Basanti told him, “Then keep my words in the original record and register my objection to the printed term. For now, I want an acknowledgement of verification, not a false assurance.” She asked another woman, who was about to sign her application in haste, to have its lines read aloud. The woman thanked her and said that she wanted her own name explained correctly, not Basanti's identity for herself. Basanti smiled. “That is precisely why I want everyone's page to remain separate.”

At noon Sharda Kasaudhan was turning the pages of an old ledger in her family's pawnshop. Her elder brother, seated by the window, was considering joining the names of two customers on one combined slip. Sharda did not snatch the book away. Instead, she pointed out the dates: on the first pledge, the principal; on the second, the woman who owned the pledged item; on the third, the charge for redeeming it. In the first, an item of interest had been entered twice; in the second, “family” stood where the woman's name should have been; in the third, the signature acknowledging the return of the article was absent. “If we open up the old books,” her brother said, “people will think the shop is not even being run properly.” Sharda answered, “To keep it running, we need a ledger. We do not need a false one.” She prepared three separate customer acknowledgements and set aside the double-charged interest under a temporary heading for disputed amounts.

When the first customer's payment details had been checked, Sharda admitted that the additional interest entry was an accounting error. Even after correcting the slip, she asked whether the customer preferred the overcharged amount returned in cash or deducted from the principal. The customer chose cash. Sharda paid it and handed over the corrected receipt, but she did not mark the other two pledges “settled.” Her brother asked whether this ledger contained any old pledge still operating in the name of a dead person. Sharda said, “I do not intend to write that a dead person is alive merely because an account appears active. First we shall examine the original death document, ownership of the pledged article, and the signature acknowledging its delivery—each separately.”

Just then Nahid Moghal arrived carrying a bag of documents belonging to her mother's family. She had not come to Sharda to settle the sum of a pledge; she wanted to understand the limits of consent regarding a share of land. An old letter inside the bag used the name “Livari” for a river in reference to her maternal village. It described a field beside a river, but could not establish where that channel ran on a present-day map. “This letter comes from my

mother's side," Nahid said. "If anyone records a decision about mortgaging this share without me, I shall stop it." Sharda told her she could authorise even a copy of the letter if she wished, but ownership of the family pledge and verification of the relevant signatures required a separate, duly authorised procedure.

Nahid drew the cord of her bag tight. "I shall not leave a copy now," she said. "First I will ask my family which part of the letter may be shown. Nobody is going to make the entire address of my mother's family public merely on hearing the name Livari." On the blank application sheet Sharda wrote only: "Consent regarding maternal share disputed." She did not press for a photograph of the entire document. Leaving the shop, Nahid stopped at Bina Kalar's stall at the market bend and counted out the price of two small bottles herself. The papers concerning her home were uncertain; this small act of buying and paying was her own decision.

Meanwhile the municipal office had received preliminary information about the four active accounts of deceased persons. In the second ochre case, the bank confirmed that the recurring interest deduction was the result of a standing instruction; no withdrawal of cash by a human being had yet been established. On the third sheet, the person who had deposited the fishing-lease rent had offered to supply a separate receipt, which had not yet arrived. In the fourth, the original receipt for the redeemed pledged article was reported missing, making it impossible to say to whom the article had been handed. In the first case, the hospital had still not sent the original register for the medicine distributed in Sarita's husband's name. Naira wrote "Inquiry continuing" against all four, but entered a different condition beside each.

Differences had also emerged among the four blue slips. The original minutes of the public meeting in Sarita's case bore an official seal. The railway service office had sent notice of the suspension of Fakira's pass, but it was unclear in which department the original death mark had been entered. The woman from the relief settlement again confirmed her presence before an officer, while the young porter's old wage receipts had been submitted for inspection. The private addresses of the third and fourth persons did not appear in the public summary. As Rama handed out acknowledgements, she asked each person into whose hands the reply should be delivered. Sarita herself said, "My reply into my own hands. Why should proof that I am alive be laid upon my daughter's head?"

That afternoon Naira noticed a small and unsettling detail. Even after Sarita's first objection to the death entry, one office copy showed the mark "Dead" entered again in an update. The update details specified "selected manually," but the file contained no history of the authority to select that mark, the reason for doing so, or who had ordered it. Devshankar said, "That looks deliberate." Naira stopped him. "We can see a deliberate action in the fact that someone manually selected the mark again after the objection. We

have not established the connection between the person, the purpose and the order.” Rama issued written instructions to preserve the original computer change log, the access permissions of the responsible user and the update order for that day, so that nothing could be erased again before the investigation.

Outside, someone had told a junior newspaper reporter that accounts belonging to eight dead people had been discovered in town. The reporter came to Rama with his notebook. “Eight people still earning money after they died?” he asked. Rama showed him only the public summary on her desk. “Four living people were recorded as dead; four people who truly died have activity entered under their names after death. To call both groups eight dead people is wrong. And a bank entry showing activity is not the same as someone actually receiving money.” The reporter asked whether he could have photographs. Naira replied, “Who has given anyone the right to turn the private injury of people struggling to establish that they are alive into a picture?” She asked him to read the date and the limits of the sources stated in the public summary.

Towards evening Sudha returned to Rajinar. With the work suspended, the bamboo posts lay drying in a pile. The tenant woman had brought her child. Looking at the posts, the child asked whether the veranda would not be built after all. Sudha showed them the proposed path marked out on the earth; this time the turning space for a child's cart had also been traced in lime. The child pushed a toy wheel along it, only for it to stick at the bend. A craftsman said, “The width may be correct on your paper, not on a toy's wheel.” The woman answered, “The bamboo frame of a cot is bigger than this. Let us take the real measurements tomorrow.” Sudha arranged for a fresh measurement the next day; the announcement of the gift remained conditional.

On her way home, Basanti unfolded the acknowledgement of her application. The printed official equivalent was still there, but a separate line now recorded the identity she had stated herself. It was not the final certificate, yet the words she had spoken were no longer outside the office's scrutiny. Her niece opened the bag of bael leaves and asked whether their price would be paid now or tomorrow. Basanti counted out the money. “The account for the leaves belongs to today; the question of identity to tomorrow,” she said. Preparing for the next day's work, she put a small mark in the corner of her old ledger. She did not intend to let the labour of her trade disappear into the shadow of a dispute about her name.

Supper was being cooked at Sarita's house. Naira had not brought home the open papers from either the blue or the ochre pile; she had only the public summary and a copy of her mother's application. As she stirred salt into the lentils, Sarita said, “When you say four living, I understand that I am one of them. But my husband's death must not become a falsehood for somebody else's convenience. Medicine was collected in his name: ask who collected it. Do not declare him alive and cancel the papers that acknowledge me as his

widow.” Naira agreed. Sarita then asked which officer would provide a written answer about the repeated “Dead” entry and when the correction would be made. Naira gave the date of the inquiry; she did not promise a particular result.

Kabir arrived while they were there. He wanted to send a message asking to meet Subhadra, but when he saw the public death-notification sheet on Sarita's table, he asked, “Who decides how far one may go in telling the story of another person's life?” Serving the meal, Sarita answered, “First, the person whose story it is. And whoever listens must first ask which part is theirs to use.” Kabir said that his wish to see the old records of his birth was held in check by Subhadra's privacy. Sarita offered him no name or date. “Give her the opportunity to state her own conditions,” she said. On his phone Kabir asked Subhadra only when they could meet; he did not ask her to write out and send her story.

Before closing the office for the night, Rama prepared separate correspondence for the two piles. In the blue cases: personal appearance by the living individual, the original history of the erroneous death entry, interim steps to restore essential services, and a date for the reply. In the ochre cases: confirmation of death, the source of the active transaction, the actual recipient, and verification of the rights of an authorised heir. Sarita's list of twenty-seven names was not made an appendix to either. Naira saw that on each of the eight slips at least one question now required an official answer in writing. Yet nobody's guilt had been proved; the history of any death had not been altered; and the four erroneous death marks had not yet been removed by formal order.

As Rama extinguished the last light, she looked through the window. Damp air came from the direction of Barki Pond. The shadow of Ramani mending her nets on the ghat and Renu's demand for a public pathway still awaited separate hearings. Sudha's deed of gift and its passageway, Basanti's own spoken name, Sharda's corrected interest and Nahid's unopened maternal-family letter each remained where it belonged. On the paper the four blue and four ochre marks stood clear; but it would have been wrong to compress the time of living people and the rights of the dead person's family into a single colour. Rama tied the folder shut. At dawn those seeking answers would come again. Their time had belonged to them all along; now the office would have to account for it.

Chapter 90 · Subhadra's Condition

Subhadra put a little thin oil into the clasp of the old brass-bound chest and turned the key. The lid was still caught from within. With one hand she pressed down the wooden rim; with the other she lifted the chest open. The cotton pouch inside had faded, but its knot had been tied with care. Instead of untying it, she first wiped down the two chairs standing against the wall of the room. Kabir was coming to sit with her today. She had given him time to hear his questions, not to open every sealed page of her life. On the table, the shadows of neem leaves swaying beside the window stirred. On a small slip of paper Subhadra wrote: "Conditions for Speaking." Seeing the words set down, she felt her voice grow a little steadier.

Kabir arrived a little before the appointed hour. He brought neither fruit nor books, only a plain cloth bag containing his own notebook and a bottle of water. Seating him on the veranda, Subhadra asked, "Tell me first, in your own words, what it is you want to know." Kabir did not rush. "I want to learn the truth behind the blank space in my birth papers. But I cannot cut the story of the home where I was raised out of my life. The time for telling is yours. I only need to know how I should put my questions." Subhadra looked at his empty hands. She was glad he was not casting his eyes towards the chest, but she did not allow that pleasure to soften her conditions.

"The first condition," she said, taking up the slip, "is that nothing said today will be recorded. If anything needs to be written down, ask my permission first. Second: without my permission, no one is to show another person any name, address, date of birth, or photograph of an old letter. Third: wherever I choose to stop, the right to decide when we begin again will remain mine. Fourth: you have the right to ask questions; you do not have the right to publish the answers immediately." Kabir listened to every word. "Would these rules prevent me from writing down my own memories?" he asked. "No," Subhadra replied. "Your memories belong to you. But you must not publish a private story I tell you by passing it off as your own recollection." For the first time, even their disagreement had been spoken aloud between them.

"If something you tell me reveals a fact about my own life," Kabir said, "how am I to verify it?" Subhadra was silent for a while. From beside the brazier indoors came the fragrance of roasted makhana. "Verify the fact," she said softly, "but do not go knocking at another household's door with that name without asking me. Do not make someone who is still alive suddenly answer for a part of their past. If documents must be examined as evidence, I shall decide which copies may be shown and to whom. The need for truth and another person's safety must both be placed on the same table." Kabir said he

would write his questions in sequence and show them to Subhadra first. The condition was recorded, but no definite date was set for her answers.

At Subhadra's request, Naira came in the afternoon. She had not been invited into the sitting room; she sat on the veranda, there only to confirm what kind of copy each person was permitted to see. “When you are investigating,” Subhadra asked, “will you not photograph a private document as soon as you find one?” “I shall first record its original source, the permission given, and the purpose for which it is to be used,” Naira replied. “The need to use it in a news report would have to be established separately.” Subhadra read out her four conditions. Naira suggested one qualification to the final sentence: nothing would be made public without permission, but if evidence were demanded through lawful process, separate advice would be sought. Subhadra added the amendment in her own hand. She wanted her conditions to protect privacy, not to become a weapon for concealing falsehood.

Just then a message came from Kamala Thakur at the market. The elderly woman who had claimed that an old bracelet belonged to her maternal family had brought the original pawn receipt to the shop that day; the young man had also brought the account of a business debt. Kamala wanted Naira not as a witness to the dispute but solely to verify the time at which the copies of the receipts were made. “You may go,” Subhadra said. “Nothing said in this house is to find its way into that shop's papers.” Kabir made ready to rise, but she stopped him. “There are still questions I have for you. Do not take what I have not said today and turn that absence of an answer into proof of somebody's suspicions.” Kabir sat down again. Subhadra gave him a copy of her written conditions. The chest containing the papers remained shut.

There was no fire burning in Kamala's shop, only a small blue lamp by whose light the metal of the jewellery could be plainly seen. The elderly woman laid the bracelet upon a red cloth. The crooked flower worked on its inner surface was precisely as Kamala had seen it at their first meeting. The young man spread on the table the account of a loan taken by his father. “It was a debt of the household,” he said. “The ornament was kept at the shop, so I shall repay the principal from its sale.” The elderly woman did not reach for it. “Find out who benefited from the loan. Find out separately who owned the bracelet.” Kamala opened a ledger from her old register. The weight and date of pawning were recorded, but the space headed “Head of Household” did not contain the name of the object's owner. Neither party's claim had yet been fully established.

Kamala had two copies prepared. On the first she recorded the elderly woman's claim of ownership, her memory of a gift from her maternal home, and the bracelet's distinguishing mark. On the second she recorded the debt, the amount, the signatures, and the dispute over who might be liable to repay it. “If you separate the two papers,” the young man asked, “won't you delay the decision?” “If I put them together,” Kamala answered, “it will be easy to sell

someone's property without ever hearing that person." The elderly woman supplied the name of a living witness from her maternal family, but forbade anyone to record that person's telephone number without consent. Kamala issued a fresh receipt for keeping the article in her custody and imposed a temporary hold on its sale. She neither seized the ornament and handed it to the elderly woman nor cancelled the young man's debt. It was then that the elderly woman looked, for the first time, not at the ornament but at her own name upon the receipt.

As Naira was leaving the shop, Kamala asked her, "How many women's possessions have disappeared under the habit of writing 'Head of Household' on a piece of paper?" "We cannot calculate that from this one bracelet," Naira replied. "But it would be wrong to dismiss the question raised by this bracelet as a mere family quarrel." Gathering her brass weights, Kamala said, "I am a goldsmith. I can test whether a metal has been adulterated; I cannot test its owner's rights by the colour of the metal. For that, we need testimony, deposit receipts, and a hearing." She herself decided not to give the shop key to anyone who sought to wrest the elderly woman's ornament away through financial intimidation. To Kamala, the price of respecting another's privacy was a cost of doing business, not merely a moral lesson.

In the municipal registry room, Nilima Nurang was lifting the transparent cover around a copy of her marriage record. The paper named her father and husband, but there was a rubbed smear of ink where the name of a woman from her maternal home should have stood. She had submitted her first application months earlier and still kept its acknowledgement number. "A woman's family of birth is identified through her father," the clerk said. "Why make fresh trouble?" Nilima did not rise from her chair. "My birth record carried the names of two parents. When the marriage copy was made, one name disappeared. I am asking for that entry to be restored as it stood in the register. No one's marital status will change because of it." Her voice was composed, though the corner of the paper trembled slightly in her hand.

Nilima laid out separately the recorded sequence of the original entry, the maternal name printed on the wedding invitation, and an old guardianship letter signed by her mother. The clerk tried to treat all three as the same kind of proof. "An invitation is a statement printed for society," Nilima said. "The original register is an official entry; a letter from my mother's home is a personal statement. Each serves a different purpose." She had her application worded "Restoration of an Erased Name," not "Addition of a New Name." An elderly employee seated nearby explained that written permission would be required to bring out the bound volume of the original marriage register. Nilima took an acknowledgement of that procedure. She received no order correcting the record, but for the first time her request had become a formal records-correction case rather than a "routine family request."

Beside the village field on Nilima's marriage paper stood another name, that of a local watercourse: “Nima.” An assistant immediately began marking a river on a map. Nilima stayed his hand. “My mother used this name when she spoke of the village. I have not yet established which channel it referred to, or in which season. The word is on the paper; do not make a fixed boundary out of it.” Naira noted the source of the entry and its date. The presence of the word *Nima* on that page was directly verifiable; the actual river course or confluence could not be settled from the document. Nilima wanted the name from her mother's home restored, but she did not want the geography of that home's memory imprisoned within a mistaken map.

Into the same registry room came Tulsi Donwar, carrying two villages' papers wrapped in coarse matting. The first concerned the old boundary and debt entry of a field lost to river erosion; he had already shown it to Naira through Suraj Gangota. The second concerned his family's shared rights of use in another village, where new signatures and the names of older witnesses were recorded separately. Seeing the address on the first sheet, an office employee told him to take the second away. “A lease from one village cannot wipe out my path in another,” Tulsi said. “And the debt on the eroded field is still in my hands. Just because sand has covered it, the field does not grow back in the bank's ledger.”

Tara Mallik had been called to the sandbank to measure the boundary. The sun was directly overhead. Along the river, the wet sand was deep in some places and hard in others; where the surface looked level from a distance, the pressure of a foot brought out a fine gleam of water. Suraj Gangota pointed towards the old embankment. “There used to be rice here, and over there in the lowland we tethered the cattle.” Tara unrolled her measuring cord but said, “What I measure today is the ground as it stands now. The old field's dimensions are in the records; evidence of the shifting bank will be needed separately. Even if the land forms again, questions of possession and debt will not automatically become one and the same.” For the first time Tulsi himself took hold of the end of the cord.

A cart loaded with sand became stuck on the sloping approach to the landing. Its driver wanted the survey team to move back behind the vehicle. Tara gathered in the cord where it would have been difficult for the wheels to move under their load, but she did not leave the choice of measuring points to the driver. A boy was sorting sand nearby; the wet earth was subsiding around his feet. Tulsi told him to climb onto the dry rise first. “If the cart stops, I'll be paid only half my fare,” the boy said. Tulsi gave him water from his bag, but did not presume that a rescue entitled him to take over responsibility for the boy's wages; he raised the question of payment for the lost time with the driver. Tara briefly recorded the dispute in the inspection note. Accounting for the river's erosion meant more than marks on a map: it meant the risks borne by those who earned their living there every day.

In Tulsi's papers from the second village, names appeared beneath two separate headings, “Balan” and “Bhutahi Balan.” The clerk casually reached for a pencil to strike out one of them and make a new combined name. Tulsi stretched out his hand to stop him. “These papers belong to two different times. First establish what each name referred to, and from what source the other paper was drawn.” Tara explained that the available names provided no basis for declaring a single, definite river channel, confluence, or boundary of rights. Tulsi wanted someone to read the evidence of his older interests in the second village; there was no need to invent a false geography to do so. The employee accepted copies of both source documents with the application and assigned a separate date for examining the boundary.

In the evening Kabir came again to Subhadra's house. He brought a short list of questions written out beforehand. At the top were the headings “Name,” “Time,” and “Who May Be Told”; beneath them was a question about his date of birth, but no guessed answer. Subhadra read the questions one by one. “The question of the name must be deferred for now,” she said. “As for time, I must first examine my old papers. And the third question—who may be told—I shall not settle that in a single day.” “Do I need permission to speak to the people who brought me up in my own home?” Kabir asked. “Your own home belongs to you,” Subhadra replied. “But when you receive something as a private memory from me, do not change its source and tell it to them as though it came from elsewhere.”

Kabir felt that Subhadra was not inviting him even one step farther in. “If all these rules continue for very long,” he said, “I shall be left alone with my questions.” For the first time Subhadra leaned forward from the back of her chair. “I, too, had to live alone with what I had to say for a very long time,” she replied. “That does not give me the right to silence you. But neither does your restlessness give you authority over the history of my body.” Kabir lowered his eyes. He heard in her words not privacy alone, but her weariness and the cost of choices she had once been made to bear. Instead of offering an apology, he said, “I shall ask again when we may talk. If you do not speak today, I shall not record your silence as an admission of guilt.”

Subhadra did not open the chest. From a table drawer she took out only an old envelope, on which a name had been written in unfinished ink and a blot obscured the place for the date. The paper inside remained sealed; Kabir did not touch it. “Look,” she said, “the existence of a name is directly visible, but the meaning of the whole letter is not yet known. There is an old dispatch slip associated with this envelope, but it still remains to be established whose house was written on it. And there is something I myself may tell you after some time. Its value as testimony will be that of firsthand experience, not automatic confirmation of every document.” Kabir heard the difference between the three levels of evidence. He did not lean forward to read the name. For now,

what mattered was that Subhadra should be able to keep the boundary she had set herself.

“If you tell me something later,” he asked, “will I be able to fill the blank space I saw in my old foster-care record with that answer?” “Understand first why the space is blank,” Subhadra replied. “Sometimes a document is incomplete because the person writing it did not know. Sometimes it is incomplete because someone was not allowed to write. Those two causes require different kinds of proof.” Kabir remembered drying the rain-soaked bag of the woman who had raised him. “I do not need a birth slip for that memory,” he said. “But I shall ask her about it too, so that I remember it accurately.” Subhadra asked after the woman's health. Kabir said that these days she spent her time on the veranda, giving Tulsi water. Subhadra smiled.

When Naira returned, Subhadra showed her only the page setting out their consent, not the substance of their conversation. Beside her signature she wrote: “Kabir may put his questions; each use of any part of an answer requires separate consent.” Kabir added in his own hand: “I shall make clear the source of any memory or old document that I discover independently.” Naira gave each of them a copy. She made no note of any private birth details for herself. “What we have written gives me the right to my own time,” Subhadra said. “But if fear comes over me later, it would not be right for me to drive you away and silence you at every meeting. I shall tell you a day when we may meet again.” Kabir accepted the promise not as an adequate answer, but as an adequate beginning.

Across the market, Kamala locked the pawned bracelet in a secure compartment before closing her shop for the night. The elderly woman's claim of ownership and the young man's debt papers were in separate envelopes; the date of the next hearing was written on each. Nilima Nurang sent the acknowledgement of her application to her maternal home, but did not write that the register had already been corrected. Tulsi Donwar left his sand-wet shoes outside and spread out the papers from the second village to dry. His debt had not diminished that day; but the immediate attempt to erase his claim in one village on the strength of an address from another had been stopped. In three separate homes the same kind of night had arrived: a small and difficult chance to speak for oneself about one's own name.

On their way back, Naira and Kabir were held up in a narrow lane. An elderly bookseller was dragging his shop bench inside. Kabir helped lift the wooden bench, while Naira rescued two books from the threshold before they became wet. “Is there still room for books in your house?” the bookseller asked. “I'm thinking of putting up two shelves in the little room,” Kabir said. “But one of them will hold not Naira's archives, but the books she chooses for herself.” Naira laughed. “And there must be a separate shelf for your old notebooks. The greatest right in that room, though, will belong to the

window: it must let the air in without letting the pages blow away." The bookseller promised to give them measurements from some old timber.

As they crossed the lane, Naira asked, "After hearing so much today, are you disappointed?" Kabir walked a little farther before speaking. "I received no answer," he said. "But today I understood that even waiting for an answer carries a cost in another person's life. I used to hope that one name would explain every year behind me. Now I see that the little days spent by those who raised me are not made smaller by that one name." Naira matched her pace to his. She suggested they might make a short journey somewhere by train the following month, if their work allowed it. Kabir proposed a destination, but the trip was not settled. "First the shelves in the room," Naira said, and smiled.

When they reached home, Kabir opened an old book and slipped between its pages the note on which he had written the required thickness of the shelves. Naira removed a leaf caught in the window. That night their conversation contained neither the twenty-seven names nor the count of eight death notices, nor any immediate solution to a mystery. Kabir set water for tea on the stove; Naira washed two cups and put them ready. In the lamplight the imagined lines of the empty shelves showed clearly against the room's wall. "We'll keep our shared books here," Kabir said. "Whose name shall we put on the shelf?" Naira asked. "Let us put the books there first," he replied. "Whoever wishes to read should be able to find a place." The tea came to the boil. A soft wind entered from outside, and the window stayed open.

Chapter 91 · A Convenient Error

At dawn Sarita was setting little metal water cups upon the four corners of the old receipts spread over a woven mat. During the night rain had blown through the window; the papers had not become wet, but the fold of one sheet had lifted. She pressed it flat with her palm, taking care not to run her fingers over the ink. The outer paper bore the acknowledgement number of her petition to be recognised as living; the sheet inside recorded the unpaid wages for three months of transcription work. Amid the smell of rice cooking in the kitchen, she put the two into separate envelopes. “First,” she said to herself, “I shall look at the papers for the work that my death made easier for someone else.”

When Naira arrived, Sarita offered her a low wooden seat before offering tea. “They said the money for my copying work was withheld because my name was in the column for the dead. But the expense of the work I did must have found its way into some register.” Naira asked whether the receipt for the arrears was an original or a copy. Sarita brought out three papers of different colours: an acknowledgement bearing the date on which she had handed over the work, an old account of the lines she had transcribed, and a new status notice from the office. The first two were her own papers; the third bore an official seal. “I am asking for what is owed to me for my work,” Sarita said. “But I will not call anyone a thief on that basis alone, not until I have seen where the money went.”

The previous year, a small undertaking had been organised to make the old documents salvaged from the flooding of the municipal library legible again. For three months Sarita had transcribed lines that remained visible beneath the water stains; she had also arranged for other people to read and verify some of the pages. This was not the separate three days of copying she had done on Ishan's philosophical manuscript. The library undertaking had its own register of daily attendance, pages delivered, and remuneration approved. Sarita had still not received a complete copy of that register, but she had the dated acknowledgements in her pocket. “When a name becomes wrong, does the work vanish too?” she asked Naira. “The work itself has survived,” Naira replied. “We shall examine the papers and ask for an answer.”

Among the eight slips Rama had divided into two piles the previous day, Sarita's name still appeared as “dead” in the blue group. Fakira's erroneous marking, the case of the woman from the relief settlement, and that of the young man at the bus stand were separate matters; the ochre pile concerned investigations into active accounts belonging to people who really had died. Naira first explained this distinction to Sarita once more. “Your husband's death seventeen years ago, and the question of new medicines being dispensed in his name, belong to a different record,” she said. Sarita agreed. “If we tie

that question to whether I am alive, two injustices will become one convenient excuse.”

White limewash was flaking from the municipal accounts room that day. A folded newspaper had been wedged beneath one leg of the table to stop the ledger from sliding. At Rama's request, the accounts assistant first produced the register arranged in order of payment acknowledgements. Three instalments had been approved for Sarita's earlier transcription work, but in the column for actual payment, opposite her name, stood the words “status closed.” Beside it was a new paper: “Incomplete transcription and editing completed through an external service.” A sum covering three months had been included in the bill submitted by the organisation run by Girdhari Sah, which administered the service contract. The ledger alone could not establish whose account had actually received that money.

“Girdhari Sah's organisation?” Sarita asked. The assistant smiled. “First the work stopped; then it was done through a private agency. The rules provide for that convenience.” Gripping the edge of the table, Sarita said, “On what day did the work stop? I handed in the last page of that month with my own hands.” She showed him her acknowledgement. The assistant's silence did not make him guilty, but it placed two claims to the same work before them. Rama asked for the bills for all three instalments, the bank payment notices, the original delivery register, and the order by which the status had been closed. “Convenience describes a procedure,” she said, “not a cause.”

Naira understood that the death marking had prevented Sarita from receiving payment, and that after this obstruction an outside organisation had become eligible to be paid. But an order on paper was needed to establish the link between those two events. Girdhari Sah was sitting outside the office; the voices of the women and men sorting paper in his small printing shop could already be heard. He came inside in response to Rama's written notice. “I was told to carry out as much copying work as the approved bill covered,” he said. “I did not declare Sarita dead.” “I have not accused you of that,” Sarita replied. “I am asking whether you supplied new pages in place of those I delivered, or whether my written pages were counted again to make up your bill.”

Girdhari first placed a copy of the work order upon the table. Its date was later than Sarita's final delivery. The order said “remaining work,” without clearly specifying the pages concerned. An employee who had accompanied him explained that a bound bundle had arrived from the office; it had been cut apart and fitted into another binding. “I cannot say how many new letters we wrote,” Girdhari said. “The bill was based on a count.” Naira then asked for two versions of the same page. In the copy kept safely at Sarita's home and the copy deposited by the organisation, a crooked mark in blue ink appeared in precisely the same place. It indicated a sequence of copying, not conclusive proof of theft.

Rama laid two blank sheets on the table. On the first she wrote, “Payment for Sarita's labour withheld”; on the second, “Payment for an external service approved for Girdhari's organisation.” Sarita herself added a third line: “Whether the material covered by the two jobs is identical or different—to be checked against the original pages.” “The ledger has already shown who benefited from the convenience,” she said. “But why someone repeated the death marking is another question, still unanswered.” Girdhari agreed to submit his position in writing and instructed the employee not to throw away whatever remained of the original bundle. There was anxiety on his face; Rama did not record that anxiety as testimony of a crime.

Before noon the bank's payment acknowledgement arrived. Two instalments under the external-service contract had been deposited into Girdhari's organisation's declared account; a third had been approved, but its disbursement could still be stopped. A few days before its payment date, Sarita's status as dead had been selected again, manually. Naira set the two dates side by side, drawing no arrow between them. “We now have direct evidence of who received this sum,” she said, “but proximity in time does not establish who originated the order.” Sarita drew a deep breath. “I shall ask him to his face. I want no hidden advantage, only an account set down in writing.”

Girdhari was called in again. He was shown the bank's seal, but the private account number was kept out of the public proceedings. Deducting from the approved amount the costs of sorting labour, paper, binding, and transport, he explained that the balance would remain as business income. He acknowledged that his organisation had benefited by that amount. But he said the unpaid dues of an individual copyist were not a matter covered by his contract. “Then do not turn this into a quarrel between two sums of money,” Sarita said. “If you rebound my pages, layer upon layer, you are entitled to payment for that work. The office's obligation to pay me for the words I transcribed does not thereby come to an end.”

Sunlight was moving across the building's veranda. Chetan Bhat sat with a bundle of papers wrapped in old cloth beside his knee. Returning from a performance of genealogical songs in the town, he had come to this office. In exchange for hearing him sing the family histories, a household had given him an old slip of paper. It bore a name resembling Sarita's, but the date of writing had been lost with a torn corner. An acquaintance had told him that showing the slip would unravel the mystery of today's entry declaring her “dead.” Instead of approaching Naira first, Chetan asked Sarita, “Do you wish to look for something about yourself in this paper?”

Sarita looked at the writing along the outer edge. “It does not carry enough marks of identification to establish that it refers to me,” she said. “Who owns your paper?” Chetan explained that the family had given him the old letter and slip as part of his payment for singing their lineage, but had said nothing

about a right to sell their private letters. He grew uneasy. For years he had received, in return for his singing, sometimes grain, sometimes cloth, sometimes the histories of families. The value of a sheet of paper was not the same as the right to the life recorded on it. Chetan decided not to make the original slip public without written permission from those who had given it to him. For the moment there would be an examination of the paper's texture, ink, and date, with access restricted to its source and purpose.

Naira did not ask him to sing. She asked whether the organisers of the performance had issued him a receipt for his remuneration. Chetan showed her a small slip: two hours of singing, with travel expenses recorded separately. “If this paper was received as a gift,” Rama asked, “why is its value absent from the receipt?” Chetan had no easy answer. “Because at the time I did not know its value. But I understand now that before another person's old memories become my earnings, I need the giver's consent.” He decided to ask for the receipt to be amended. He would meet the family and have the gift, the material entrusted to him, and the right to make copies defined separately.

At the other end of the veranda stood Nahid Moghal, shielding an envelope containing papers about land belonging to her mother's family. On an earlier occasion she had registered a dispute over consent at Sharda Kasaudhan's pawnshop. Today she had received a letter from two brothers on her mother's side, proposing to mortgage the land to repay an old debt. The letter stated “family consent,” but Nahid's signature was missing. One brother said over the telephone, “Your share is small; we shall pay you when the money comes.” Without taking the telephone from her ear, Nahid replied, “Whether my share is small or large is something I shall examine in the documents. Do not record my consent as an assumption.”

She went with Sharda to the registry room. The title deed, the new mortgage draft, and an old letter from her maternal village were laid out separately. The old letter mentioned the Liveri; no attempt was made to use that name to fix the measurements of a present-day river. Sharda said that entering a loan in the pawnshop's ledger did not transfer ownership; the competent authority would decide whether a mortgage was valid without the permission of a person holding a share. That day Nahid rejected the proposal to sell her share, but fixed a time to examine the account of her family's outstanding debt. Her condition—that nobody could write down her consent on her behalf—was entered on the acknowledgement of her application.

Anupama Sen arrived carrying a bundle of letters from an old chest in her mother's family home. The papers carried the scent of camphor from the bottom of the chest. In one of the letters written in Bengali script, a Maithili word had been added in pencil; on that basis alone an elderly member of the family had assumed the entire letter could be made a public record here. “These were my grandmother's letters,” Anupama said. “The people whose names appear in them still have living descendants. The originals will remain

in my care; I shall consider which lines may be copied for public use.” She had come to see whether there was a connection with the period of Sarita's transcription work, not to offer a definite answer.

Naira gave Anupama a separate table at which to read. She did not immediately hurry to interpret the Bengali lines herself; Anupama first established the dates of the letters and the relationship between their writers and recipients. One letter mentioned expenses incurred in repairing books at an old shelter school; it named no one associated with a present-day death entry. “It would be wrong to look for today's accounts-office order in this letter,” Anupama said. “But the old school's ledger may establish who possessed copies of the books.” She wanted a certified copy of two lines relating to book expenses to be made, with the details of the private household concealed and the source and limits of use stated on the copy.

At that moment Chetan did not ask to see Anupama's papers. He was washing his hands at the tap outside; the old rhythm of his singing ran through his mind, but he had no wish to raise his voice today. “Would the family whose slip is in your bundle know me?” Anupama asked him. “Possibly,” Chetan answered, “but to link names without knowing would be to make the same mistake again.” They decided to draw up separate letters requesting permission. The occurrence of a similar name in a genealogical song, a family letter, and an official death register did not establish that all three concerned the same event. It did, however, allow the people involved to place conditions upon the use of their papers.

Girdhari returned to the accounts room. Two workers employed by his organisation had said their wages would be held up if the entire payment were stopped. Sarita could see them standing outside; one woman kept opening and closing her empty lunch tin. “Investigate the disputed portion of the contract income,” Sarita told Rama. “But do not deduct the attendance or wages of the workers who actually sorted those papers.” At first Girdhari took this as support for his own position. Sarita immediately added, “I am not declaring you innocent. I am speaking about their labour.”

Rama had no authority to order the seizure of money or to pronounce anyone guilty. She prepared separate recommendations for the competent officer: immediate recalculation of Sarita's unpaid remuneration; suspension of the external contract's third instalment pending verification of the work actually done; a page-by-page comparison of the first two instalments; preservation of receipts for wages actually paid to the organisation's workers; and a request for a safeguarded copy of the original digital record of changes to the death status. Girdhari filed a written objection to the cancellation of the entire contract on the evidence of a single page. Rama attached his objection as well. A date was set for a hearing, not for a verdict.

For the first time Sarita spoke while looking directly at the contractor. “There is a bank slip showing that your account received money. There is an official seal showing that my arrears were withheld. Putting these two facts together, I ask: whose work was made easier by keeping me dead?” Girdhari was silent for some time. “I got the contract,” he said. “If your name had remained active, perhaps I would not have received some of the work. But I did not change the marking.” “Write down as much of that statement as can be verified,” Sarita said. “I shall leave the rest as a question. I will not sell the evidence that I am alive in order to manufacture a crime against someone else.”

A restricted envelope arrived before Rama. It contained the time of the notice recording the manually selected change in death status and a code identifying the user section. But the device's identity, the individual employee's login, and the chain of authorisation were incomplete. A technical assistant said that several employees worked at the shared terminal; a timestamp could not identify a person. Naira wrote that there was a measurable time at which the copy had again been marked “dead”; the user-section code was administrative evidence; the person who gave the order was still unknown. Sarita read this incomplete answer aloud and demanded that the original history of the changes be preserved.

That evening Nahid answered another call from her mother's family. This time her brother said that delaying the mortgage would increase the interest on the loan. “The debt worries me too,” Nahid replied. “That is why tonight I am asking for a full account of the amount. If I can arrange help tomorrow, I shall offer it on terms concerning my own share. But do not put my name to a decision about the family's land on a document I have not read.” After ending the call, she asked her mother in which seasons the old fields had yielded an income. Her mother could not remember each year, but spoke of the old practice of sowing seed after the floodwater had receded. Nahid did not turn her mother's memory into a precise measurement for the document.

Before returning home, Anupama left a copy of two lines for public use at the office. Private names had been concealed, the date of the source was recorded, and permission for use was limited to comparing expenditure on books. Chetan did not leave his slip behind; he had a date entered for seeking the family's permission. Each of them retained some papers, and each made a different decision. Sarita saw that today neither had been compelled to disclose private papers at another person's instruction. “What would you do,” she asked Chetan, “if a person's name in your song were changed?” “First I would ask how the song's remembered account differs from the old paper,” he said. “What I do not understand, I will not turn into certainty in the song.”

When Sarita reached home, she did not sit down in a mood of overwhelming triumph. She warmed the roti she had kept for herself; just then a child from next door came to borrow a bowl of sugar. The child asked

whether her name had been corrected at the office that day. “Not yet,” Sarita said. “But the people who said my work had stopped will now have to look at the pages I handed in.” “Then will you write again?” the child asked. “I will. But first I shall collect what is owed to me.” She blew on a hot piece of roti and gave it to the child. For a little while, amid the clink of the cooking ladle, the heavy sound of the written objections dissolved into the rhythms of the household.

Naira was returning from Rama's room late that evening. At the corner of Bajrang Chowk, someone was once again distributing printed leaflets repeating the old viral accusation against Janaki's troupe. A young man said that the news about Sarita's account had exposed the “entire network” of child abduction. “The investigation into this account concerns payment for Sarita's labour and the contractor's benefit,” Naira said clearly. “The separate correction of a public accusation against Janaki, already shown to be false, is still under way. The evidence of Gunja's unlawful transfer is a separate matter. The search for Mithun also remains open.” The young man said it was easier to put everything into a single report. “Strangers pay the price of easy news,” Naira replied.

That night Sarita wrote a short note on the back of her first acknowledgement: “While my death status was kept in place, an external copying contract became eligible for payment; two bank instalments reached the organisation's account; the name of the person who selected the death marking again, and the source of the order, remain unverified.” She signed beneath it. This was an accusation, but it began with two established facts and ended by stating plainly the limits of the evidence. She did not fold the paper away in the chest with the old documents. She placed it in the file for the next hearing, so no one could say that she had chosen silence in exchange for the work she had done.

Far away, in Rama's office, a faint smell of dust lingered after the ceiling fan had been switched off. The request to verify the third instalment lay on the officer's desk, while the demand for the original record of changes remained sealed in another envelope. Rama knew that the officer might try tomorrow to dispose of the matter as a mere accounting error; the contractor might ask why payment should be stopped when work had actually been performed. Both questions would have to be heard. But Sarita's claim to be alive was no longer merely a vague “objection.” It now stood in direct relation to the acknowledgement of her labour, the arrears withheld from her, and the evidence of whose account had received the money.

Chapter 92 · The Unravelling of an Accusation

At dawn Janaki was reweaving the broken edge of her bamboo mat. When a thin strip of bamboo pierced her finger, she pared its splintered tip smooth with a knife. She meant to spread the mat out at the evening market; for a week now, customers had been stopping halfway towards her stall and turning back. Sarayu had hung her damp floor rug over a wooden railing to dry. Caught in the same railing was another printed leaflet: two cropped faces, and between them, in large letters, an accusation of child stealing. Janaki did not tear it up. She looked at the shopkeeper's imprint and the date of printing on the reverse, then put the paper away in a dry cloth. “The old accusation was withdrawn, but a fresh leaflet was printed only the day before yesterday,” she said. “The question now is not simply whether I am innocent. Who will pay the price of this lie?”

By then Sarayu had already changed the route she took through the settlement lanes to sell her rugs. In front of the granddaughter who sat beside her at the shop, a customer had asked where she kept the children. Back at home the girl had repeated those words as though they were a question in a game. Sarayu told Janaki, “I have the paper recording what was said at the hearing in my bag. But who will take down the new leaflet on the shopkeeper's door?” “I shall go to the shop myself,” Janaki replied. “Whoever put up the old accusation must put the proper correction in that very place. I will not make every woman in our troupe stand up and show her face again.” She straightened one end of the rug. For the first time that day, the edge of the cloth lay perfectly even.

As they entered the printing shop at Bajrang Chowk, the trimmed corners of sheets of paper crunched beneath their feet. Mahato, the press owner, wiped the ink from his hands and said he merely printed the copy he was given. Janaki placed two papers on his table: the earlier joint correction issued by the school and the market, and the fresh accusation printed the day before yesterday. “The correct text of the first paper reached your press,” she said. “Why, then, did you print the second without checking?” Mahato looked towards one of his workers. The worker said the second order had come from a local publicity group. The owner maintained that the language of the correction was difficult, whereas a headline designed to provoke fear was simple. “Who gave you the right,” Janaki asked, “to make other people's lives difficult for the reader's convenience?” She requested, in writing, that the printing order book be preserved for inspection and that the number of leaflets distributed be disclosed.

When Naira arrived, the owner's hand came to rest on the ledger. “Those are my private customers' accounts,” he said. Naira did not demand that the book be opened before everyone. Instead she submitted a written request for

preservation, specifying that the order slips and payment receipts for the dates in question should be kept safe. “The identity of those who spread the accusation is a matter for investigation,” she said. “Throwing every one of this press's customers' names into the marketplace would be another wrong.” Mahato signed the acknowledgement of receipt. Janaki put a copy of it in her bag. For the first time, the formal path towards correcting the false leaflet had been written down at the very place where it was sold.

A brief hearing was arranged on the school veranda before noon. Asad Syed brought certified copies of the school's earlier notice and of the public retraction. Sajid Nat placed the original footage of his theatrical rehearsal, the unbroken recording at the forest gate, and the account of the original footage from Sukathi's loading yard in three separate envelopes. His coloured curtain had been a stage property; it had been described as a screen behind which children were hidden. The three original recordings came from different places and different days. The complete source of the equipment used to join the two faces in the new leaflet was not yet in their hands. But there was no need to reopen the question of whether the accusation's principal basis was false: the original recordings showed no incident in which Janaki's troupe took away a child.

One of the school parents asked, “Then is it also a lie that a child has gone missing?” Looking at him, Janaki said, “Mithun is missing. That is the suffering Lata knows firsthand in her own home. Documents have been found concerning Gunja's removal to work elsewhere without permission. And our troupe was called a band of child thieves on the strength of two photographs spliced together: that accusation has been shown to be false. Do not use any one of these three things to erase the others.” Standing at the edge of the veranda, Lata loosened her grip on the cord of her bag. “Why must my son's file be dragged into the public correction again?” she asked. Naira assured her that the correction would identify the category of incident, not Mithun's clothing, the family's address, or private leads in the search.

A member of the market committee proposed that Janaki submit written certificates of good character, accompanied by photographs of every member of her troupe. Sarayu rose from her chair. “The people who accused us already displayed our faces,” she said. “Now, to clear the accusation, must we put our faces on display again? Did anyone ask the people whose photographs were printed the first time?” The committee member fell silent. Janaki made it clear that the correction should be published, the old leaflets withdrawn and those posted in shops removed, but that the full identities of the women, children and itinerant families must not be made public. Asad amended the wording of the proposal. The committee agreed to the revised version, and a separate application number was assigned to the claim for compensation.

At that moment a message arrived from Chameli at the child-protection office. The arrangements for Gunja's return home were not yet complete, but

the first permission for safe contact with the girl had been granted. Chameli did not want her daughter brought before the hearing that day and presented on a platform as “the child rescued from abduction.” Janaki herself telephoned her. “I am taking back my own name,” she said. “Let your daughter keep her voice in her own hands.” Chameli asked whether a separate investigation against those responsible would proceed on the basis of the confidential statement. “It is proceeding,” Naira said. “The conclusion reached at this gathering will not become a verdict in that investigation.” Chameli put down the telephone and decided to buy a new cover for Gunja's exercise book, rather than give a statement to the media.

In the child-protection officer's room, a different task was under way. Certified copies of the original register from the former rental office at the bus stand, the transport slip recording Gunja's handover to the first person, and the receipt book of the sewing room had been laid out for comparison. The register carried the name of the rental office's contact; the first slip bore the same contact identifier, and the second recorded receipt at a specified destination. According to the officer, the sequence of slips, their dates, and the places of receipt corresponded. Examination of who had personally written the signatures, and of the criminal responsibility of each participant, was still in progress. But the separate route of intermediaries by which the girl had been taken from the contact office to the sewing room was no longer merely a rumour.

An employee immediately declared, “So we can say the trafficker has been caught.” The senior officer stopped him. “The two slips, together with the office's record of receipt, establish that a route of intermediaries existed,” he said. “Determining which person intended what, who practised deceit, and who kept the girl in a particular place is a separate matter requiring proof.” The owner of the rented premises agreed to supply his receipts for outstanding rent, but said plainly that he had not seen with his own eyes who sat in the office every day. Gunja's protected statement would remain with the investigators; no part of it would be sent to the market hearing.

When the child-protection worker returned from seeing Gunja, Chameli had come out onto the veranda. With permission, the worker told her only this: Gunja wanted to go back to class, but she did not hate sewing, and she also wished to know how her earnings had been accounted for. “Do not make what she learned into the mark of a crime,” Chameli said. “If she picks up a needle when she comes home, let it be because she chooses to.” The worker wrote down the time of the next visit. A separate demand was recorded that neither Gunja's safe return nor her education be left waiting for the conclusion of the court proceedings.

Lata came to the officer to look at the papers. She had feared all along that, if Mithun's name did not appear on Gunja's slips, the officials would turn their attention to other business. “Does the period during which this office was

rented include the day my son went to the market?" she asked directly. The officer wrote out the time interval: some overlap was possible, but there was no direct trace of Mithun being there. "Then examine again the original statements about the oil shop at the market and the torn ribbon," Lata said. "Do not make up my son's story out of this girl's papers." She was now matching the times in her own search for herself. Kamli put some water in her bag. That was the extent of the help she offered: no hurried words of reassurance.

Outside the office came the light, repeated knocking of iron. Nazir Sikligar sat on the stone platform, repairing the loosened iron fitting of a farmer's hoe. During the night someone had written in charcoal above his shop: "MAKES WEAPONS." The words had spread after an initial police inquiry, prompted by a driver's account of a slip bearing the phrase "iron repairs" among a consignment of weapons. Nazir did not stop working. "First look at what is actually in my hands," he said. "A slip that does not carry my name cannot make my tools proof of my guilt."

Nazir took three old receipts from a small pouch. The first recorded the charge for straightening the teeth of a sickle and a ploughshare; the second concerned the fastening on the handle of a field hoe; the third, the joining of a metal plate used in a kitchen. He had entered separately the customer's name, the day of the work, the dimensions of the object, and the amount paid. An inspector asked whether someone who worked with iron was also capable of repairing weapons. "The possibility of a skill is not the same thing as the work recorded on these three receipts," Nazir replied. "Bring me the original waybill for the consignment you are investigating." He made the plate, the receipts and his ordinary tools available for inspection, but lodged an objection to being labelled a "criminal" on the strength of conjecture.

Nazir's apprentice, Batesar, said that a customer had brought him a broken lock for repair the day before yesterday, and that he had photographed it on his telephone. Nazir stopped him. "Do not send a picture of the customer's whole house to the news people," he said. "If an image of the item repaired and a copy of the bill are sufficient for the inquiry, give them that much." Batesar then concealed the identifying details of the house in the photograph, obtained the customer's permission, and attached a copy of the signature of the person who had collected the lock. When the inspector left Nazir's shop, no object had been seized in support of the allegation about weapons. The origin of the anonymous consignment slip bearing the word "repairs," however, remained an open question. Nazir counted out his apprentice's wages for the afternoon; an investigation was no reason to withhold the pay for his day's labour.

Two lanes away from the ringing of iron, Bina Kalar was emptying the cash drawer in her small shop. The prices of bottled goods, oil, salt and soap were entered in separate columns. That day the question of the old weighing scales

in the courtyard of her ancestral home had arisen once more. Her brother had said that the share in the house should remain in the hands of the man who ran the household; if Bina wanted a loan to expand her shop, she must take it herself. It was then that Bina had, for the first time, demanded a written account of her ancestral share, the ownership papers, and the family's expenditure. When her brother came to the shop today, customers were standing in the doorway. Bina finished taking their payments and giving change before offering him a chair. A family dispute did not leave a customer's money hanging in the balance.

“The shop is already running under your hand,” her brother said. “Why do you need money for your share as well?” Bina took three pages out of the cash drawer. “The shop was built with my savings and what I borrowed,” she said. “My share in the house is another matter. If that share gives me the capital to rent another room, I shall expand my business. But even if I do not receive it, I shall not surrender my right in the house.” Her brother said that the expenses of their father's illness had also been charged against the old house. Bina did not dispute those expenses. She asked instead that the actual medical receipts, the debts apportioned among family members, and the documents of ownership be kept distinct. In the end they fixed a date for providing a copy of the family accounts, not for deciding on a payment in cash for her share.

That evening her wholesale supplier arrived. He said he would advance the money for opening another shop, but on condition that Bina buy oil and soap from no one else for three years. Bina read the terms and handed the paper back. “I need goods,” she said, “not a mortgage on my freedom to choose where I buy them.” The merchant warned that he would reduce her discount. Bina arranged to obtain prices from two smaller wholesalers; this might mean postponing the opening of her new shop. That night she counted the modest sum in her cash drawer and entered in her ledger: *Share in the house not received; independent purchasing options still open.* The value of the right she had claimed had yet to come into her hands.

Vibha Agrahari came to Bina's shop to buy a bottle. Her medicine delivery vehicle had been stopped a little earlier. An urgent order from the hospital listed the needs of five patients, but the approved stock available in the warehouse could not meet the entire demand. Vibha showed Bina her statement, in which purchase price, transport, storage costs and selling price were entered separately. “Everyone says I should give up my profit,” she told her, “but who will pay the driver who gets the medicines there on time? And if I keep the whole profit, two of the families will not be able to afford the treatment.” Bina left her scales for a moment to study the paper. “Do not conceal what things cost,” she said, “and record separately whatever help you wish to give.”

When Vibha reached the hospital dispensary, the pharmacist first checked the batch numbers and expiry dates against the stock register. On one box, the

label pasted outside did not match the distributor's slip inside. Its sale was stopped, and the reason entered in the inspection register. It was agreed that the remaining quantity from verified batches would be allocated according to the urgency of the patients' needs, in an order authorised in writing by the physician. Vibha said that decisions about dispensing belonged to the physician, while her own accounts would show the purchase prices and how far she could reduce what she charged. She offered to forgo part of her profit for three families in need, and separately asked a local fund to make a contribution under a written assistance arrangement. The medicine was not described as “free”; both the supplier's costs and the relief received by the patients were recorded.

On seeing the box with the mismatched labels, an assistant in the dispensary said it must be the very consignment mentioned at the office dealing with the transfer of children. Vibha stopped him at once. “A mistake on one label does not make me a criminal. If there is to be an investigation, bring the complete consignment papers,” she said. The assistant withdrew his words. Nevertheless, in response to an official request from the investigators, Vibha agreed to provide copies of the box's external markings, the date it entered the warehouse, the serial number of the transport slip, and the seal placed on the consignment withheld from sale. The original box would be kept safe, and its medicines would not be dispensed. One discrepancy was not allowed to become an excuse for stopping the distribution of verified stock; nor was permission granted to sell the uncertain box.

As Vibha left the hospital, she heard the announcement of Janaki's public meeting to correct the accusation, and stopped. A young man in the market was saying that the transport identifiers on the child-transfer slip and the medicine box matched, proving that all the organisations belonged to the same network. “Which identifier on which slip?” Vibha asked. The young man showed her only a message being passed from one person to another, not an original document. “If the same location appears on the transport papers, it will be investigated,” Vibha said. “One truck may carry legitimate medicines, while somebody else may misuse the same company's name. Travelling by the same route does not establish shared guilt.” She put the paper concerning her withheld box aside for the officer by name; she did not wave it about on the platform.

The meeting to put the record right took place in the evening light. Janaki sat in the front row without going onto the platform. Asad read aloud the full wording of the old accusation, then gave the dates of the earlier correction issued by the school and the market and of the newly printed leaflet. Mahato, the owner of the printing shop, had come as well. He did not have the full identity of the person who had placed the order, but admitted that even after receiving notice of the correction he had printed the accusing leaflet again without verification. He undertook to submit the number of copies printed

and a list of the places where they had been distributed by a specified time. “I do not want beautiful sentences of apology,” Janaki said. “I want the truth put where you disgraced us.” A member of the committee entered her words verbatim in the minutes.

A member asked Janaki to write on the notice herself that every accusation had been false and that the real intermediary had been caught. Janaki separated the two demands. “Our troupe was branded as child thieves on the strength of an edited video. That evidence was misleading, and the accusation was false. I will sign that correction,” she said. “Separate documents have been found concerning Gunja's unauthorised transfer. The court has not given its decision. If we write someone down as a criminal in advance, we bring the hammer down on another life.” The officer nodded in agreement. The documents concerning the intermediaries' route would remain subject to judicial investigation. Gunja's statement was not read on the platform, nor was Mithun's name used to create a sensation.

The committee's written decision dealt with three matters separately, each within its proper sphere. First, within the limits of the committee's authority, it issued directions to stop the sale and public display of the old false leaflet and to post a correction with equal visibility wherever the accusation had been distributed. Second, it accepted a separate application concerning the financial losses suffered by Janaki's troupe, covering market-stall charges, lost sales and testimony; the amount of compensation remained to be determined. Third, it recorded that the original registers and receipt slips in the independent child-protection investigation were to be preserved within the authorised investigative process. No liability was assigned to the press's customer without a hearing. Janaki listened carefully to every word and collected the acknowledgement herself.

For a moment the old question rose again from the crowd: “If the troupe is innocent, then who is the intermediary?” Lata turned towards the people. “My Mithun is missing,” she said. “I will not find my son by deciding in my heart that someone must be guilty. Investigate the part played by whoever is named on the slips. But the way to my child is not written on those papers.” Her words did not still the crowd; some people were holding up their mobile phones even then. Yet Janaki and Lata stood on the same platform and each took a separate acknowledgement for her own application. In people's hands there were now, at least, two different papers—two different rights.

Sarayu spread out her rugs once more and waited for customers. Two women asked the price; a third began to murmur about the earlier accusation. Sarayu showed her the correction but did not tell the whole story of her life merely to make a sale. “Look at the knot in this strip,” she said. “It will not come loose when it gets wet. That is what the price is for.” One customer bought a rug. Janaki watched from a distance. It was the money from a single sale, not the full restoration of anyone's dignity. Even so, Sarayu could set

aside enough to buy flattened rice and jaggery for her granddaughter that evening. In the market, something made by her own hands was sold again under her own name.

Before shutting his shop, Nazir asked Batesar what work remained for tomorrow. “The loose plate on the rice-husking machine, and the latch on Ramji's gate,” the young man replied. Nazir kept copies of the receipts. The accusation about weapons would not disappear in a day, but the inspector's recorded report now clearly described the ordinary repairs completed that day, the customers' confirmations and the unsubstantiated nature of the allegation. Bina entered in her night ledger the date on which she expected the ancestral papers. Vibha matched the acknowledgements for medicines dispatched according to the physician's authorised order, and checked the seal on the box with the mismatched label herself. All three had obtained a result concerning their work; no single investigation had answered the other questions in their lives.

That night Naira read the child-protection officer's list of receipts. Two stages of the intermediary route by which Gunja had been moved were now linked by evidence. Yet one serial number from the transport papers had also been raised for comparison with the slip on the withheld box of medicines and with another page referring to an anonymous consignment described as “iron repairs.” Naira did not immediately write anyone's name beside the matching digits. The original shipping records and the receipt issued to the lawful owner were needed for the next examination. She closed the file. Outside, in the market, the corner of the new correction notice fluttered in the wind, while Sarayu's mat lay spread on the ground beneath it. The accusation whose foundations had fallen apart had been explicitly corrected that day. The evidence concerning the route along which a girl had truly been carried away without permission was proceeding in a separate file.

Chapter 93 · The Link Between Consignments

On the rear veranda of the hospital, Madhav Rauniyar wiped his hands on his cotton towel before touching the rope tied round the crates on his cart. The night's dew had made the wood slippery. The label on top of one crate bore a medicine's name in blue ink; the bundle inside carried the seal of a different distributor. The box with the mismatched labels, which Vibha Agrahari had set apart the day before, was still in the locked storeroom. Madhav had brought three other crates associated with that consignment, which the hospital had ordered returned. “Sign the slip now; the goods can be examined afterwards,” the pharmacist said. Madhav tightened the rope once more. “I will not sign for the return of something I haven't inspected.”

The smells of damp phenyl and hot tea mingled on the veranda. A nurse came out from inside with a request to make approved medicines available for five patients. “Since yesterday's hold, we're running short of the medicines the patients need,” she said. Madhav knew that returning the goods would tie up the money needed for fresh purchases. When Vibha arrived, the two of them opened the crates beside the stock register. “First meet the patients' needs from the approved stock,” she said. “Keep these crates separate for examination. A patient's need cannot be made a reason for accepting defective goods.” The nurse breathed more easily, but asked for the day's arrangements for medicines to be put in writing.

When Naira reached the hospital, two young men outside the door were repeating the same story on their phones: the slips for medicines and iron repairs bore matching numbers, and therefore every blacksmith in town was involved. A little way off stood Harinarayan Sharma, with an iron fastening he had brought for the axle of his old handcart. He heard them but did not quarrel. Ajit's face was flushed. “Babu, will you let them photograph you again?” he whispered. Harinarayan replied, “I have the papers recording the measurements of my work. If I am given a chance to say what the photograph does not show, I will. But first we must find out what goods were actually seized.”

Three separate bags had been placed in Rama's room that day. One held the hospital's supply slips; the second, the receipt for Yusuf Ansari's detained bale of cloth; the third, the seizure inventory for a metal chest previously sealed by the police. The police's written preliminary inspection recorded that metal components relating to unauthorised weapons had been found in that third chest. Their definitive technical identification and origin remained under investigation. Naira did not pile the bags one upon another. “The recovery of weapons-related material is a fact recorded in this inventory,” she said. “But there has been no inspection establishing that Yusuf's cloth or Madhav's medicines were inside that chest.”

The officer compared the transport codes written at the heads of all three slips. The same short number appeared on the outer sheets, but the consignments' own numbers were different. Mahendra, the cart-driver, was called in. Putting his finger on the edge of an old register, he said, “That number wasn't assigned to my vehicle. It belonged to the counter where the person booking the goods made the arrangements. The vehicle number is in another line.” He pointed to a blank-looking space where water had blurred the date. An employee began to describe all three as goods transported on the same day, but Mahendra stopped him. “First look at their separate dates of entry. The same number may have been used again at one counter.”

Rama called for the original register of the goods depot's booking counter. In the first recorded entry, the order to transport the boxes of medicines had come not from the hospital but from an outside distribution agency. In the second, the signature of the person who collected the sealed metal chest was indistinct. In the third, a bale of cloth had been loaded in Yusuf's name, but the name of the person who attached the external acceptance strip was missing. An anonymous slip marked “iron repairs” on its reverse had also been added to that office's register, without any craftsman's name. One common feature emerged among the slips: the booking fees had been deposited at the same intermediary counter, and the office stamp of the recipient who took the payments was the same. Naira had the page numbers and dates entered in the record. She did not add the words “same owner.”

“An intermediary counter means an intermediary person?” Harinarayan asked. “We will request the attendance records separately to establish how many people worked there in shifts,” Rama replied. Ajit immediately asked why a chest of weapons was being connected with Yusuf's loom. Yusuf, who had come to collect the outstanding payment on his first length of cloth, said quietly, “If my yarn and someone else's iron were weighed at the same weighing depot, that doesn't make my loom start producing iron.” Both men were having to explain once again the identity of the things by which they earned their living.

Before asking to see Yusuf's separate ledger, Naira sought his permission. Yusuf showed her the sales entries in the first account: the length of cloth woven for household curtains had already reached its customer, but the credit taken for the yarn had yet to be paid off. The second account recorded the rejected acceptance strip tied with red cord and the delay caused by the warehouse inspection. “Question the person who made the stamp that ended up attached to my name,” he said. Naira replied, “The origin of the stamp will be investigated. Unless some new, concrete reason emerges, there will be no fresh hold on the sale of your lawful cloth.” Yusuf left his ledger open. He asked whether he could have that formal assurance in writing, for another customer had telephoned to say that his goods might be stopped again.

Just then Mahendra Mahaseth arrived with one of his old measurement slips. People in the town, hearing the name of his wholesale business, had assumed that he owned the warehouse in question. But his ledger gave separate costs for the drums of oil and sacks of pulses measured from the first day of the month to the last. “No goods of mine went out on the date shown on the booking slip being circulated under my name,” he said. Seeing Mahendra the cart-driver, an employee laughed. “Both of them are named Mahendra. That's where the confusion came from.” Mahaseth answered without hesitation: “A shared name does not conduct my business transactions. Look at my signature, who owned the goods, and the amounts paid.” The cart-driver, too, laid his wage slip separately before them.

Since the previous evening, Binod Jaiswal had been searching for the stamp of his small shop. A customer from the neighbourhood had told him that, because the old occupational designation “Suri–Kalwar” appeared in his records, his business and Mahendra Mahaseth's must belong to the same branch. Binod showed the receipts in his purchase ledger for two crates of bottles and household supplies. The sum was small, but the parcel charge bore the stamp of that same counter. “I ordered goods through this counter. Does that mean a crime is to be written against me?” he asked. “No,” Naira said. “It means your receipt can provide an independent check on the dates when the counter was operating.” Binod agreed to provide a certified copy on condition that his private customers' names were concealed.

On opening the depot's old ledger, the officers found that Binod's small purchase and the booking for the chest connected with the offence had taken place in different weeks. The numbers on the receipt stamps, however, ran consecutively in the same register. No corresponding number was found for the goods attributed to Mahaseth. The inspector revised his earlier sentence: in place of “connected with Mahendra's warehouse,” the record now read “connected with the intermediary's booking sequence.” Mahaseth breathed more easily, then asked, “Which copy am I to show the customers who stopped trading with me because they thought me guilty?” The officer agreed to issue a limited public correction. No one promised to make good the losses caused by the damage to his reputation.

Harinarayan spread out his row of tools. The first line contained hooks for lifting drainage grilles; the second, pins for a handcart axle; the third, clamps for securing the wood of a loom. He demonstrated the use of each. During the earlier inspection, four ordinary tools had been examined and not one seized; Ajit was holding up a certified copy of that report. “If this unidentified metal chest is to be displayed against my shop,” Harinarayan said, “find it in my receipts.” The police officer acknowledged that no stamp belonging to Harinarayan, nor any issue slip from his workshop, had yet been found on the chest. The independent inquiry into the source of its metal would nonetheless continue.

Ajit asked the police inspector how many times work that had proved innocent would have to be examined again. The inspector did not respond with a long lecture on the law. “If new material evidence appears, there will be questions to ask,” he said. “We cannot keep presenting an old photograph from a phone as a fresh seizure.” Ajit had his little three-plate rattle in his hand. He made no attempt to show it to the police. He did not think it right to turn his small invention into a spectacle merely to defend his father's workshop. Quietly he tied up his bag and left for his training.

A representative of the distributor came to Madhav Rauniyar as he stood beside his cart on the veranda. “If you return all three crates, the hospital's dues will be reduced,” the man said. “You won't be able to sell our goods a second time.” This was a new condition for Madhav. Showing him the number of crates he had counted twice, he said, “The hospital itself has rejected these goods. If I save today's loss by selling a bad batch, it is a patient's body that will pay the price tomorrow.” The representative produced an old price list. Madhav opened his accounts and entered the original purchase, transport and return costs separately. He was preparing a claim that stated the reasons for his loss.

Vibha stepped forward and asked the pharmacist whether the contents of the detained box had been described as “counterfeit” without laboratory testing. “No,” he replied. “Distribution was suspended because the label did not match the distributor's slip.” “Then write that, and no more, as the reason for my return,” Madhav said. “Bad packaging and a medicine proven to be substandard are not the same thing.” The representative softened a little. He agreed to give a written acknowledgement, though he said he had no authority to refund the money immediately. In the pharmacist's presence, Madhav had photographs taken of the exteriors of all three crates. No patient's prescription or identifying details entered the camera's frame.

At that moment an assistant came running in with the news that the weight of the metal chest held by the police matched the weight recorded for an old consignment in the hospital's medicine depot. If the weights were identical, he declared, the goods must have passed through the same hands. Naira stopped him to ask, “Apart from the equal weight, is there the same seal, the same measurement, the same entry in the goods ledger?” The assistant shook his head. Harinarayan did not lift the iron in his hand. He merely said, “A hoe weighing five seers and a sack of seed weighing five seers both weigh five seers.” The assistant was embarrassed. Rama decided that his remark belonged only among the questions requiring further inquiry, not in the final report as a finding.

In the afternoon the former clerk of the intermediary transport counter was summoned after being given notice. The elderly man fitted a magnifying lens with trembling hands and examined the sequence in the register. “This stamp was used in my day as well,” he said, “but the counter then operated in

two shifts. The number belonged to the office; the signature belonged to a person." The officers asked him for the names of the former employees. He supplied four names, but could not remember one date. Naira left that omission as a blank in the record. The clerk identified two acceptance slips carrying his own signature. He was unwilling to claim as his own the blurred signature visible on the slip for the chest connected with the offence.

Rama then compared the edges of the police's original seizure inventory with the hospital's dispatch slip. Both papers recorded advance freight payments on the same day under the stamp of the same intermediary office. The amounts differed, but the pages of the receipt ledger were consecutive. Independently turning the pages of the original register, the inspector marked the consecutive entries; no final expert examination had yet established that they had not been added later. Nevertheless, the original ledger produced before them, the bank's records of the freight payments and the gate's time register together showed a substantial connection through use of the same booking intermediary. "A connection has been established," Naira said. "What has not been established is that one and the same person ordered both the medicines and the weapons-related material."

Suddenly Yusuf asked, "What will happen to my bale tied with the red cord?" The officer said that examination of the origin of the stamp on its rejected acceptance strip would proceed separately from the booking inquiry. The questions concerning the cloth's actual weave, commercial ownership and right of distribution were already on record. The written copy imposed no fresh restriction on the length of cloth that had been released; the disputed bale remained in secure custody. Yusuf's expression brightened as he read the page and thought of the possibility of paying off his debt for yarn. The second bale was not yet free, but the first length of cloth had not been pushed back beneath the shadow of suspicion.

When Binod returned to his shop, a customer said that after so much controversy he would never again order goods through the same transport counter. Looking at the receipt for a new consignment, Binod replied, "I have made genuine purchases through this office. That does not mean everything it ever did was right. But if suspicion alone makes me throw away all my old stock, who will pay my debts?" His wife was counting the evening's small change in the open cash drawer. She interjected, "Find out what another carrier charges, and fix definite dates for whatever payments remain due. Trust in business does not work with closed eyes. It works with open accounts." Binod began writing down the rates of alternative transport services.

Examining the freight details for his warehouse, Mahendra Mahaseth explained that he had brought in no weapons-related goods through the old intermediary during the preceding month. The inspector wanted to seize all the available ledgers. Mahendra asked for a specific order; the employee agreed instead to certified copies for the limited dates in question. "I am not

obstructing the inquiry," Mahendra said. "But the private information of every customer in my business must not be exposed so that someone can sell it again." He posted a new notice at his warehouse gate: no goods would be loaded without separate entries for the type of goods, the sender and the person collecting them. The clerk raised the question of payment for this additional work. Mahendra made a written proposal to fix a separate rate for it.

As Madhav turned his cart to return the three crates, an elderly woman stood at the corner of the road asking for medicines for her grandson. "If there are medicines on your cart, give me some now," she said. Madhav folded his hands. "These goods are going back because they need checking. You need medicine, but not from these crates." Vibha explained how ordinary medicines available from the hospital's approved stock could be obtained and led the woman to the prescriptions counter. The woman asked why shopkeepers were entangling themselves in so much paperwork. "So that the route by which your grandson's medicine can be trusted remains clear," Vibha said. Gathering her prescription in her hand, the woman went inside.

By evening three separate statements had been recorded in Rama's room, from the police investigator, the hospital pharmacist and the municipal receiving clerk. The fact of the seized metal chest and its contents would remain within the police's jurisdiction; examination of the medicine labels belonged to the health department; and the accounting of improper bookings or payments belonged to the administrative inquiry. An employee proposed writing in the joint press release that "the hospital's medicines and the weapons belong to the same gang." Naira objected. "What we have seen directly is one intermediary counter and certain links in the payments. The organisation of any gang, who issued the orders, and with what purpose remain to be investigated. If we write a false sentence, innocent people's livelihoods will be stopped again." Rama struck that line from the draft.

Outside the town, where Janaki's troupe was selling its rugs, only half the news had arrived. Sarayu saw a young man combining the transfer of children, weapons and medicines into a single image. She showed him the correction issued the previous day. "The accusation against us has been dismissed. Why, then, is my photograph in this leaflet again?" The young man said that all the incidents seemed connected to him. "Things seeming connected and proof that they are connected are different," Sarayu replied. "Ask the price of my rug. My face is not an object for investigation." The young man agreed to remove the image but did not promise to check the source of his information. Sarayu counted the full proceeds of her sales and put them into the pouch set aside for the household's debts.

Lata arrived at the child-protection office at a separate appointed time. Her first question was whether the confirmed route of intermediaries in Gunja's unlawful transfer for labour might offer a lead in the search for Mithun. The

officer said that the name of the booking office on Gunja's slip could be examined again as part of the transport inquiry, but so far there was no direct match with Mithun's name, appearance or the day he had gone to the market. Lata wanted the shared office's staff list preserved, so that the time register could not later be destroyed. The officer accepted her written request for preservation. Lata rose to go home, but sent word to Chameli, Gunja's mother, that the work of restoring the girl's education and bringing her home safely must continue independently.

At the evening forge Harinarayan was tightening a loose ring on the rattle Ajit had made. Nandlal's old ploughshare was still lying in a corner, for the customer, frightened by the rumour, had withdrawn his order. “Will what was written today make him come and collect that share?” Ajit asked. “Perhaps, perhaps not,” Harinarayan replied. “But this paper gives me grounds on which to speak for the work my tools do. After a man has been falsely suspected, it takes time for customers to trust his work again.” He left a thin coating of oil on the ploughshare, as though the absence of the customer were no reason to dishonour the work.

At home, as he set fine threads upon the warp, Yusuf answered his son's telephone call. The young man said that the stamp of the shared booking counter was visible in photographs on his phone as well; he wanted to put all three pictures in one folder and send them to the police. “First get the owner's permission for each photograph,” Yusuf said. “I will give you the image of the stamp on my bale. Someone else's medicines and the police's evidence do not come under the authority of a folder on my phone.” His son agreed. The young man’s mother was puffing up flatbreads over the stove. “Opening account books all day doesn't make the amount of yarn you owe any smaller,” she remarked. Yusuf laughed, then measured the yarn left over from the day's work and set it apart for a new order.

The last papers reached Rama's desk as the evening birds were changing direction towards the eaves. One notice required the original seal of the intermediary office, the shift-workers' records and the freight-payment pages to be preserved. Another directed that unnecessary restrictions on legitimate commercial consignments be lifted. A third called for technical testing of the hospital's box with the mismatched labels and for the deadline for settling payments on the returned goods to be recorded. Naira read the pages and added only one sentence: “A shared booking arrangement is evidence of a connection, not a conclusion of shared criminal responsibility.” The date for the next inquiry was fixed, not a verdict of guilt. Outside, a cart-driver was turning over his handcart to shake off the dust, while inside the hospital new arrangements were being made to provide approved medicines to five patients.

On the way home Naira met Kabir. He had to fix the date of his next meeting with Subhadra and had written the questions he wished to ask in a small notebook. He asked Naira whether the truth had been found that day in

the dispute over the hospital boxes. “We found the truth of some connections,” she said, “while the truth of some ownerships was already there. We did not make them one and the same.” Kabir remained silent for a little while. The page recording the permission he had received at Subhadra's house lay in a separate fold of his notebook. “I too will find answers to some of my questions,” he said, “but the rights of the person whose life is being told must not be cut out of the middle of the story.” They went their separate ways. At night the sound of iron fastenings ceased, but the wood of the loom went on sounding softly.

Chapter 94 · The Rights of a Guardian

Kabir sat beside a heap of yellow earth spread across the courtyard of the old house, measuring with a slender strip of bamboo the square stand on which the lamps would be placed. On the veranda, the mother who had raised him was wiping the clay lamps with a thin cloth. One had a crack along its rim. Setting it aside, she said, “It will break as soon as we pour in the oil. We shall use it to hold flowers.” Kabir smiled. In this house, before a broken thing was thrown away, someone considered what other use it might serve. His mother asked, “Are you going to Subhadra again today?” “She herself has given me a time,” Kabir replied. “When I return, I'll finish the stand with you.” His mother looked into his eyes but did not repeat her question.

Kabir wrote the measurements for the stand in an exercise book from his student days. Inside were two old receipts for school fees and, along the edge of a page once soaked by rain, a child's words of thanks addressed to his mother. Picking up the receipts, Kabir asked, “You have kept these papers even now?” His mother laughed. “If I hadn't kept them, who would tell you the date of your first prize?” After a pause, she added, “It isn't only the papers that make me remember dates. You had a fever that day, and still you came home carrying your medal.” Kabir put the receipts back. The incomplete record of his birth and the abundant memory of days such as these were two different things; the absence of one did not diminish the existence of the other.

At Subhadra's house the chairs stood exactly where they had been placed during their first meeting. The brass-bound chest, however, was no longer in the locked room; it stood in a corner of the sitting room. Subhadra first shut the door from inside, then invited Kabir to sit and placed on the table a copy of the four conditions she had written. “I shall tell you certain things today,” she said, “but once you have heard them, you have every right to criticise my decision. This single day does not give you the right to know everything else about my life at once.” Kabir did not hurry to reassure her. “First I'll listen,” he said, “and then, if there is something I don't understand, I'll ask.” A cycle-rickshaw bell rang outside and faded into the distance. In the stillness of the room, the rhythm of Subhadra's breathing could be distinctly heard.

Subhadra took from the chest the cotton pouch whose knot they had spoken of before. She laid in front of Kabir not the original letter it contained, but a carefully preserved copy, turned face down. Before allowing him to read it, she said, there was something she needed to say in her own voice. “I gave birth to you,” she said softly. “I say this as testimony from my own experience. If, on hearing it, you immediately ask for documentary proof, that is a reasonable demand. But do not regard what I say as a lie merely because I have remained silent for so many years.” Kabir's hand stayed

motionless on the edge of the table. The name he had refused to entertain on so many nights were now being spoken aloud by a living voice.

Kabir did not immediately call her Mother. Nor did Subhadra put him under any pressure to use that name. She explained that at a difficult moment in her life a decision had been made to place the child in the care of another family. She possessed letters from that period, an incomplete indication from the hospital and a dispatch receipt, but not yet a certified copy of the complete official birth register. “Why I let you go, who knew, and what part each person played—I shall answer these questions in order,” she said plainly. “Some things I experienced myself; others I heard from people. I do not wish to turn the two into one story.” Kabir asked, “What was the family who raised me told at the time?” Subhadra acknowledged that she was not a complete witness to what they had been told.

With a finger Subhadra pointed out a faint impression of ink upon the copy. “This is the writing from the letter inside the old wrapping; the date has become a blur. The dispatch slip bears a mark of receipt, but that mark alone does not prove that the letter reached the right person.” Kabir did not photograph it with his mobile phone. “Which part may I examine independently?” he asked. “Today, this copy, with names and addresses concealed,” Subhadra replied. “I shall be present on another day for examination of the original. I will not disclose the full address without the permission of the person whose privacy is involved in this letter.” In his notebook Kabir recorded the source of the material he had been permitted to see, but not the personal names.

“I accept your account of my birth,” Kabir said. “For me, your testimony is an important truth. For what is entered in the government register, I shall obtain separate evidence. But there is one question I want to ask now: will what you have told me make my place in the home and property of the family who raised me any less?” Subhadra shook her head. “No. I gave you birth; they gave you their days and nights. Examine what the law says in its documents, but no one can take away what you owe them.” “It is not only a debt,” Kabir said, “but a claim to inheritance as well. If my name is in the old documents, I shall not erase it with my own hands.” After that sentence they both fell silent.

For the first time, Subhadra did not close the lid of the chest completely. She asked Kabir what came first to his mind when he remembered the woman who had raised him. Kabir spoke of a rainy evening: the wet pages of his exercise book had been laid out separately to dry; a handful of paddy had been set upon them to stop the wind carrying them away; night had fallen, but his mother had not dozed. “I cannot tell you the date of that incident,” he admitted, “but I can still remember the smell of those pages.” Subhadra listened without speaking. “I wasn't there that day,” she said at last. “I have no

claim upon what I did not witness. Whatever name you call your mother in your own heart, I make no claim upon that form of address.”

As he was leaving, Kabir wished to add a line to Subhadra's consent document: ‘The account of birth given today may be used privately, but not published publicly.’ Subhadra read it and asked what he meant by ‘privately’. Kabir explained that he needed the right to speak with the family who had raised him, but would not share Subhadra's address or images of her documents. After considering this, she wrote: ‘Kabir may tell his foster family what he has learned about his birth, in his own words; publication of my letters or personal details will require fresh consent.’ Both signed. Naira was not present; Subhadra wanted this first conversation to remain between the two people concerned.

That afternoon the front wheel of a passenger vehicle had been raised at Irfan Khan's repair shop. When a fingernail scraped the brake drum, black dust fell away; the inner surface of a worn bushing showed an uneven sheen. The driver had already said that the vehicle served the hospital route, and that leaving it idle for a single day would cost him two days' hire. Irfan demonstrated the wear with a steel gauge. “I haven't merely listened to a noise,” he said. “What I've seen after opening this wheel will go into my inspection report. I accept responsibility for the earlier repair to the axle; but if I declare this faulty brake safe and let the vehicle go, the patient sitting in front will become part of the risk I have taken.”

The driver telephoned his employer. A voice at the other end told him to write ‘reinspection’ and release the vehicle. Irfan read out his report: which components had been opened, where wear had been observed, what repairs were necessary, and which checks had to be made before the vehicle could carry passengers again. He did not testify that the earlier defect had been caused deliberately. “I won't have my vehicle repaired at your shop any more,” the owner said. “That is your decision,” Irfan replied. “But I cannot turn what I have seen into anger.” When the call ended, his apprentice asked, “If the customer goes, what about our wages?” Irfan opened a new ledger, with separate entries for payment due for inspection and payment due for repairs.

Under a nearby tin roof, Salim the horseshoe-maker was sorting wheel nuts. His old tool chest held a hammer for fitting horseshoes, a small pair of pincers and nails in two sizes; his new one contained a borrowed torque-measuring tool, a lamp for examining brake cables, and a training notebook. An acquaintance asked, “Will you abandon your ancestors' trade? If there are no horses left, does the name of the horseshoe-maker disappear too?” Salim lifted an iron horseshoe in his hand. “The name doesn't disappear. The craft within it changes. The heat of a wheel, the joining of metals, the effect of weight—I learned all these while fitting shoes. But I won't inspect a motor brake on the strength of old skill alone. New study is necessary.”

Salim filled out an application to become a trainee at a small vehicle-service centre. His earnings would fall during the training, so he told his old customers he could inspect their cart wheels two days a week, but stipulated that he would issue no motor-vehicle safety certificate without completing the training. An elder in his household was indignant at first. “You have a fully trained hand for making your own horseshoes. Why become someone else's apprentice?” “I shall keep that hand,” Salim replied. “But when a person's life depends on a journey, it isn't right to call myself a master of the vehicle's workings without learning them.” After a while the elder carefully put the old hammer back in its chest. It was a silent assent, though not an absence of anxiety.

Looking over Salim's application, Irfan warned him that workshops in many places bound workers to an indefinite period of unpaid ‘learning’. “Read the conditions governing hours, safety and allowances,” he advised. Salim showed him the entries for days of practice and the training fee payable. He requested an amendment: after a specified period there must be a qualifying test and a certificate showing that he was competent to use the tools. The instructor was reluctant when contacted by telephone, but Salim said that unless the condition was written down, he would not leave his old work only to be stranded halfway. Eventually written acceptance arrived. Salim placed a copy of the form in his tool chest and asked Irfan's permission to watch a real brake inspection.

Soon afterwards the driver of the passenger vehicle returned to the yard outside Irfan's workshop. He explained that the owner had assigned another vehicle to carry the hospital patient, but there was still pressure to load festival supplies onto the old one. “Taking the passengers out doesn't make the defect in the axle go away,” Salim said. “Driving an unsafe vehicle under the name of a lighter load isn't right either.” The driver telephoned an acquaintance who owned a handcart. Salim examined the wheels of that old cart and issued a written receipt identifying the parts found to be sound. The festival goods went by another, safer route. Irfan understood that writing down a fault, rather than merely driving away a customer, could sometimes be a way of placing responsibility for the work where it properly belonged.

In the grocers' lane of the market, Harish had opened three bundles in front of his shop. Their outer wrapping bore a well-known trademark, while the small packets inside carried different names for their contents, printed in inferior ink. He had already noticed the first sign of this mistake at the dyer's shop; now, when the wholesaler's original invoice arrived, the discrepancy became clearer: the number of bulk sacks did not correspond to the number of packets inside. Harish would not allow a customer to sniff or otherwise try the sample he had set aside in a tin. “An unknown substance is not to be tested by putting it in the mouth or on the body,” he said. “Sales from this consignment are suspended for now.”

A customer said he had bought from Harish a raw ingredient bearing that name for making soap, and intended to use it at home the next day. Harish consulted his sales record and stopped him. “Bring back any packet marked as belonging to this consignment. I'll refund the price or offer proper goods in exchange. Whether the wholesaler reimburses me is a claim I shall pursue afterwards.” “Why should you bear the loss?” the customer asked. “Because the goods left my shop,” Harish answered. “But before accusing anyone of the faulty packaging, I need evidence of who made it.” He did not put the customer's telephone number on a public list; instead, he arranged to notify each person separately.

Harish's assistant hesitated while preparing the return slips. What proof could be offered to customers who had taken goods on old credit accounts, without an invoice? Harish opened the credit ledger and checked the quantities and dates against the names, but pointed out that not every packet sold on the same date was suspect. He allowed customers to bring the original empty packets into the shop and posted a written notice promising to accept returns wherever the available identifying marks matched. “What if large numbers of people turn up with new packets?” the assistant asked. “Check the weight, the markings and the ledger,” Harish said. “But don't withhold a genuine customer's money out of fear.” Eight packets had been returned by evening; notices were sent about the rest.

Meanwhile, at the house where Kabir had been raised, the clay lamps had dried. His mother was drawing fine lines of red ochre across the newly plastered courtyard. A girl from the neighbourhood arrived with two garlands of mohariya flowers. His mother put the price of the flowers directly into her hand. “Keep them as a festival gift,” the girl said. His mother smiled. “I'll pay you for your work. If you wish to give me a gift afterwards, I'll accept it.” Kabir stood at the door watching. After hearing Subhadra's account, nothing here seemed strange to him; rather, the familiar words and gestures had become clearer. His mother did not ask him to submit that recognition to another test. She only asked whether he would eat first or finish the lamp stand.

After the meal, Kabir asked permission to tell her what he had learned. His mother stopped washing the dishes, wrung out the cloth and laid it aside. Kabir said that Subhadra had today given firsthand testimony that she had given birth to him; the original records remained to be examined, and no copies of private papers would be released without consent. There was no unmistakable sign of sorrow on his mother's face, nor of astonishment. She drew a long breath. “I remember the day you came into this house,” she said. “I didn't witness the day of your birth. If I claim to have seen what I did not see, I would be doing harm to your own life.” Kabir said, “I want you to tell me again about that day—only as much as you truly know.”

His mother took from an old cupboard a red-bordered handkerchief wrapped in cloth. “This was with you on the day you came,” she said. “But I don't know which house it was first made in. You used to develop a fever very quickly then. The receipt for the medicine bought in your first month is still in the exercise book.” Kabir examined the handkerchief. There was no name on it. His mother said that a neighbour had known something about those earlier days, but that it would be wrong to enter the woman's name or an assumption into a register without asking her. “I do not own the first day of your body,” she said, “but I am a witness to the years in which I raised you.” Kabir took her hand.

Kabir himself raised the matter of the small plot of land belonging to the household and the plain ancestral ledger kept in the cupboard. “If I ever apply to have my name corrected,” he said, “I shall not quietly surrender the rights I hold in this family's records of care and inheritance.” His mother replied, “First see copies of what the documents say in law. My wishes, the old accounts and the rules of statutory inheritance may be three different things. For whatever is rightfully yours, I shall go with you.” Together they opened the cupboard and placed copies of the old property papers, documents relating to his upbringing and school records bearing the guardian's signature into separate folders. No new name was filled into any blank space.

Kabir drafted a letter seeking private advice on the records. In it he wrote that he had obtained direct oral testimony concerning his birth, while verification of the original written evidence was still pending; that independent documents recorded his residence, schooling and long-standing family ties in the home where he had been raised; and that he required appropriate legal advice on personal inheritance, correction of his name and privacy. His mother read the letter and altered only one line. She preferred ‘mother who raised him’ to ‘foster mother’, but did not want a dispute over a name. “We can leave the legal category in the letter,” Kabir said. “At home I shall go on calling you Mother.” That one sentence eased a little of the long weariness between them.

When Naira came in the evening, Kabir did not recount the whole of his private conversation. He told her only that he had received significant firsthand testimony about his birth and was sorting the papers needed to safeguard his family's rights. “Do you need help with the verification?” Naira asked. “I need help understanding what kind of documents these are,” Kabir replied. “But I won't give you the source of Subhadra's private letter without her consent.” Naira accepted this. Her investigations over so many days had taught her that closeness was not a key that opened every door of an inquiry. From her bag she took a simple empty folder, on which Kabir himself wrote ‘Records of Upbringing’.

News also came from Irfan's shop that the vehicle with the defective brakes had been taken to another mechanic because its owner feared losing

customers. Irfan did not claim to know what inspection the other mechanic had carried out. He gave one copy of his signed inspection report to the vehicle's owner and another to its driver. In his warning he specified the limits of his examination; he did not invent an official order prohibiting the vehicle from the road. Salim watched the inspection exercise with his instructor and remarked that the true value of a repair was sometimes measured by the price of letting a customer go. “That's not its only value,” Irfan replied. “If tomorrow someone brings another vehicle for safe repairs, the livelihood continues.”

Kabir went himself to Harish's shop to collect the turmeric and ajwain ordered for the festival. Opening his sales ledger, Harish told him that these goods came from a different, tested consignment; the packets with counterfeit printing were being returned. As Kabir placed the items in his bag, he asked, “How much will these returns cost?” On a lower page of his notebook Harish showed the cartage, the replacement goods he had supplied and the expense of returning the packaging. “The loss is mine,” he said, “but I have kept my claim against the wholesaler separate. The finest-looking printed name no longer means the finest goods.” Kabir took his receipt for the payment. It was a small consequence of exchanging trust that came ready-made for trust that had been tested.

For the festival, small niches were set up in two corners of the courtyard. Kabir's mother wanted all the lamps arranged in one even row, but the children insisted that lamps of their own making, each a different shape, should stand among them. “Let the places of the people who made them be seen as well,” Kabir said. His mother laughed. “Then I'll put that crooked lamp I saved in the middle. It's cracked, but it will do nicely for flowers.” The women of the neighbourhood brought oil, wicks and water, each separately. If one household brought more than the others, it was not proclaimed as a donation; whatever was offered was accepted simply. Laughter and the sound of work flowed together through the courtyard.

Kabir's questions had by no means grown fewer. He felt the weight of the next page of Subhadra's testimony, the handwriting on the old letter, the hour of his birth, and the name that had never been spoken. Yet that night he closed the notebook in which he kept his questions. Handing him the wicks for the lamps, his mother said, “The garland is a little short this time. Shall we make another?” Taking up the garland thread, Kabir replied, “I'll make it. But tell me first, does the doorway look bad if the garland is short?” “No,” his mother said. “The door will remain open. Whoever comes should find light inside. That is enough.” Without speaking, Kabir tied the thread. In this courtyard he had no need to produce new evidence of his place.

Chapter 95 · The Order to Kill

Before unlocking the warehouse at dawn, Shashi Mahuri separated the two crooked brass rings on his bunch of keys. One key belonged to his spice warehouse; the other to a room he had rented three months earlier to the office of a transport intermediary. Rainwater from the night had crept in beneath the door. Spreading an old sack on the floor, Shashi told the watchman, “Write down the time whenever anyone asks to see a document. I will not claim, in my own name, the right to open a tenant's belongings.” An authorised notice had reached him the previous day. It required access to the warehouse; it was not an order to confess to a crime.

When the investigating officer arrived, Shashi first produced the original rental agreement. The first page specified the room's dimensions, the second the monthly rent, and the third the ordinary rules for storing goods. An annex prohibited handing the room over to another party without written permission. “You knew nothing of the consignments inside?” the officer asked. “In the first month I saw wooden chests and empty baskets,” Shashi replied. “Later the tenant put a new lock on the inner door. I lodged a written objection and received no answer. I have a copy. How am I to testify to what I never saw?” Alongside the rent receipts he placed the acknowledgement number for his objection.

On the warehouse's rear wall, a square patch of limewash was whiter than the rest. A noticeboard had once hung there. Someone had taken the board down and stored it in another room, but four nails remained in the wall. The inspector photographed them. Shashi said he did not know when the board had been removed; the difference in colour could not tell him that. The watchman opened his duty register. One night it was not the tenant's usual employee but Shekhar himself, the shift supervisor from the intermediary's office, who had asked him for a key at midnight. The watchman had refused. Only now, during questioning, had he heard of another entrance through which the room could be reached.

In the municipal records room, Naira laid three folders on a table. The first concerned Mahesh's death and the investigation into the attack; the second, the warehouse tenancy and the intermediary's transport operations; the third, an instruction issued by Devvrat's office. Rama held a certified copy of the original receipt register. “I don't want one story here,” Naira said. “I want the histories of three kinds of responsibility: who said what, who did what, and who benefited from the consequences.” Rama added another line: “Finding the name of someone who profited is not the same as finding the signature of the person who gave the order.” Shashi's rent receipts were set apart at a corner of the table.

The document from Devvrat's office had come from an old file of the hospital assistance fund. That fund really had paid for Jamuna's medicines and transport; the beneficiary's letter of thanks had also been preserved. But the new page was not about distributing assistance. It belonged to correspondence concerning inspection of material brought in from outside. It stated that the warehouse's old entry register must not pass into unauthorised hands, and that office procedure should be followed before the dispute was allowed to escalate. At the bottom was a mark of approval from Devvrat's office. The inspector made clear that the seal and signature still required independent examination, though the original file's receipt number corresponded to an entry in the office's outward-dispatch register.

Beside that page lay an internal note drafted in Shekhar's office: ‘Ensure that the outcome of stopping Mahesh's testimony is secured.’ An employee asked what it meant. Naira objected to changing its words. “We cannot decide from this line alone whether it instructed someone to intimidate him, hold up an application, speak to him, or use violence,” she said. “But the fact that someone put in writing the objective of stopping Mahesh's testimony deserves investigation.” Rama recorded that the note had been found in Shekhar's office, did not bear Devvrat's signature, and could not reasonably be treated as a word-for-word copy of Devvrat's original letter.

Shekhar's former accountant was summoned. Pain in the old man's ribs made it difficult for him to sit for long, and the officer allowed him to stand from time to time. The accountant said that Shekhar had handled freight deposits, night-time warehouse bookings and accounts with outside contractors from the same room. “Some orders he gave himself,” he said. “Others came by telephone from above.” The officer asked what he meant by ‘above’. “I didn't hear any names,” the accountant answered. “If you want to put down a guess, you won't get my signature.” His voice was tired, but he did not wish to repeat the mistake he had made during an earlier inquiry.

A small sheet of paper was taken from a sealed police evidence box. It was not a page torn from the original cash ledger in Shekhar's office but a separate expense voucher that had been attached to it. It recorded two instalments, their payment dates, and an internal heading: ‘night pressure’. Both dates fell close to the first attack on Mahesh's home and the later fatal incident. The amounts matched withdrawals shown in bank records, but the full particulars of the recipient account still awaited authorised confirmation. Naira wrote: money moved; a heading was entered; the dates corresponded. Whether the money had been paid for murder was a question for further evidence.

Meanwhile, a coil of wire was found in a rear room of Shashi's warehouse. The inspector did not pronounce it the weapon used in the attack on Mahesh. It might perfectly well have been an ordinary length of tool wire. Beneath it, however, lay a folded receipt bearing the receiving mark of Shekhar's office and the words ‘rear door’. Shashi showed them the plan attached to his rental agreement. The rear portion was not included in the tenancy. “If that part has

been opened, I will not wash my hands of responsibility," he said. "But first measure it. Don't shut down my main warehouse and take away my workers' daily wages." As the inspector sealed the room, he specified an authorised route by which the bundles of spices could still be removed from the front.

When Mahesh's wife came into the inquiry room, her first question to the officer was, "Who will be standing outside my house?" More than the story told by the new evidence slip, she needed to know her daughter would be safe on the way to school. The officer showed her a copy of the written arrangements available. Having read it, she said that the previous 'assurance' had not prevented an attack. This time the names of the security personnel assigned and the times at which emergency contacts could be reached must be written down. Naira rose to speak, then sat again. Mahesh's wife was capable of putting the questions of her own life into words. Time was set aside for her testimony; it was not turned into the dramatic opening of a news report.

She held firmly to the part of her last conversation with her husband that she wished to recount. Mahesh had repeatedly said that seeing a register of materials, or hearing someone's name, did not identify the person who had commissioned a murder. He had spoken to his wife of his fears, but she had never heard him say, 'Devvrat will have me killed.' "Now everyone wants to write their own conclusions in his name," she said. "I will not testify to words he never spoke. But I will not let go of the question of why written protection was not provided after the threats." The officer recorded the two points separately.

When Shabnam Malik arrived at the municipal service room, a new employee saw her family name at the door and stood up. "Madam Malik, I've sent in the man you recommended," he said. Shabnam was startled. "I haven't recommended anyone." In the employee's register, someone claiming to represent the 'Malik office' had sought permission to photograph documents from the investigation. The original entry pass bore no authorised officer's signature, only a shiny printed strip. Photographing the strip, Shabnam told the officer that her surname had been turned into an administrative authority. The time of the entry and a list of the files shown to the visitor must be preserved.

The employee was afraid he would lose his job. Shabnam asked him directly, "On whose instructions did you show the file?" "I saw the name strip," he answered. "The man inside said he had come from a major donor." Shabnam said, "A donor's name, a family name, and official administrative permission are three different things. Admit your mistake, but don't write down that you identified someone you never actually saw." The head of the service room ordered the entry details to be preserved. It was not yet certain whether any document had been removed from the file. The mistake of granting access, however, was entered in the public register, with responsibility for it recorded.

Shabnam also produced an old page of voluntary-service expense vouchers. She had always insisted that the name ‘Malik’ did not make her a government representative. This time her words became the subject of public suspicion. Someone suggested she might have agreed to the arrangement beforehand—why else would the family's name have been used? “Someone can steal my family name,” she said quietly, “but not my consent. Give me a chance to speak for myself.” She had a public notice drafted: no permission to enter issued in her name, or on the strength of her family's standing, was valid; genuine applications must carry the seal of an authorised official.

Before evening, the police interviewed a former driver from Shekhar's office in a separate room. Twice he drank water while setting out, in order, what he had personally seen and heard. After the first attack, he said, Shekhar had been furious and had declared, “If he hasn't understood the warning, this man must not be left alive to give his statement.” The driver identified the words as a threat he had heard Shekhar utter, not as an event he had witnessed with his own eyes. The officer asked whether anyone else had been present. The driver said he had seen two colleagues there, but did not know whether either had heard the words. His statement was recorded, and his identity was not made public.

The driver's mobile phone contained the original file of an old voice message. Its timestamp appeared to place it two days before the incident, and a voice could be heard saying, ‘We won't give that man another chance to reach the office.’ The driver claimed the voice sounded like Shekhar's. The inspector said that the digital file's time, integrity, and voice identification required independent verification. A secure copy of the phone's complete contents was made; the message was not transferred to any journalist's phone. As Naira began writing the words ‘order to commit murder’, she stopped herself. The meaning of what had been heard was terrifying, but technical confirmation of the speaker's identity and the context remained outstanding.

There was other evidence, however, that was not merely a matter of sound. On a page of the rental ledger, Shekhar himself, acting as an authorised employee, had approved the night-time movements of two individuals through the rear of the warehouse. The gate watchman's time register and the payment voucher corresponded with this. An initial examination of separate camera footage by the police suggested that those people had been seen near the time of the fatal attack on Mahesh; no conclusive identification of their faces had yet been made. The officer was explicit: there was a substantial link between the organised night-time arrangements and the payments, but it remained to be fully proved who had struck which blow at the scene of the murder. Even so, the old account of Shekhar as merely a clerk who arranged the movement of goods could no longer stand unchallenged.

Shekhar was formally notified to appear and give a statement. He requested the presence of a lawyer, and a time was fixed. One employee wanted his failure to appear immediately to be reported as an admission of guilt. Rama

objected. “Exercising the right to give a statement is not a confession. And if you have the original ledger, the money trail and evidence of the secure route, present them properly. Don't build an entire accusation on silence.” Naira saw that these words might make the investigation not slower but more durable. Shekhar answered a call from one of his employees and gave a date by which he would send his written account. No answer had yet arrived.

Meanwhile, a letter came from Devvrat's office. It said that Devvrat had supported preventing unauthorised distribution of documents concerning the hospital's public construction works, but had given no order for violence against Mahesh. Three legitimate receipts for charitable payments accompanied the letter, recording assistance to patients, including Jamuna's treatment. Naira did not throw the letter away. She asked whether, after the original letter had been issued, Shekhar had received any separate telephone or verbal instructions; the office said it would check its contact register before answering. It would be wrong to declare the denial truthful before an independent inquiry, just as it would be wrong to treat charitable donation receipts as proof of a violent order.

Devvrat himself did not attend the next municipal meeting. His representative said, “Our office's work is social service. Allegations like these will bring assistance to patients to a halt.” Aniruddh, occupied with arranging patients' treatment, replied, “I acknowledge the value of the medicines that reached them. But aid given in the public interest grants no one the right to silence a person's testimony.” He did not, as a doctor, assign responsibility for murder to Devvrat; he merely stated in writing that patient assistance and safety inspection were two independent administrative matters. The representative requested that continuing medical assistance should not be interrupted. That request was recorded in the meeting.

Naira placed two instruction sheets from the offices side by side. One concerned controlled access to public documents; the other was Shekhar's internal note about the ‘outcome of stopping testimony’. The officer prepared a list for separate examination of the papers, inks, signatures and dispatch sequences of both. “Suppose,” Naira said, “the higher office gave an order to withhold papers, and an intermediary took it as permission to intimidate someone. Responsibility would then have to be examined in two places. If, on the other hand, the higher office expressly consented to violence in a conversation, looking for proof of that would be a separate undertaking.” Rama added a third column: who had actually benefited from the violence, and who knew it was being done.

At the back of the warehouse, Shashi and a labourer were drying soaked sacks over the heat of a brazier. The investigating team had taken away a few metal samples; Shashi obtained a receipt for each. A time was set for legal advice on the proposal to terminate the tenant's agreement. Parvati, one of the women workers, said that four days of her wages must not be held back on account of someone else's crime. Showing her the cashbook, Shashi said,

“Rent on the room they have closed and your wages are not the same account. You dried those sacks; you'll be paid for that work today.” Parvati counted the money and said she needed to buy salt for her household. The payment was not turned into a news story about the proprietor's generosity.

As Mahesh's wife helped their daughter with her schoolwork, she heard a question: “If someone threatened Papa, have they caught that person?” Her mother said, “They've found some papers during the investigation. But who is guilty must be established according to the rules. You don't have to tell anyone who asks about our life at home.” “And Papa?” the child asked. Her mother placed an old one-line note of his between the pages of the book. “He won't come back. We don't have to wait for documents to know that.” The girl was silent for a while, then resumed the unfinished mathematics problem. For her mother, this small ordinary moment and all the difficult statements she had made that day belonged to the same life.

As the afternoon drew towards its end, the investigating officer read the first interim findings. Mahesh's murder was an established criminal act; the conclusive identification of those who had carried out the physical attack and each person's part in it remained under examination. The note about exerting pressure, the night-time entry arrangements and the chain of money linked to Shekhar's intermediary office were under evidence-based investigation; the indications of a violent decision were strong, but the statements and digital sources required formal authentication. An instruction from Devvrat's office to prevent unauthorised circulation of records was available; there was, as yet, no explicit written order to commit murder. The inquiry into that instruction's actual intention, subsequent communications and knowledge of the intermediary's actions continued. Naira understood as she listened that intensifying the investigation of one person did not mean another had already been cleared.

The amendment to the entry register in which Shabnam Malik's name had been misused was also recorded that day. Shabnam did not want anyone's private address published because of the wrongly granted permission, but she was equally unwilling to conceal the failure to verify identity. She prepared a limited public statement: ‘Entry was permitted on the strength of a prestigious surname; there was no written authorisation from the person concerned.’ She took pride in her family identity, but made it clear that a surname could never be the sole evidence of trustworthiness. The time-based inquiry into precisely which documents the visitor who had come to take photographs had accessed was scheduled for the following day. Shabnam agreed to attend in person.

In the evening, Naira offered to read her draft report aloud to Mahesh's wife. “I'm not an editor,” the woman said. “What you publish in public is your responsibility. But I will check whether you've removed anything that identifies my daughter or our home.” Naira gave her a copy of that section. She struck out two details: one identified the school, the other indicated the

direction of her temporary residence. She added nothing to the account of the murder investigation. “You mustn't turn my life into evidence for your inquiry,” she said. On the page Naira had given her, the wife signed beside the lines she had deleted—the first time she had done so—and her consent extended only to those limited changes.

That night Naira changed the headline of her report. She had first written, ‘The Murder Order Exposed’. Then she wrote, ‘Links in an Intermediary's Violent Decision: Separate Inquiries into Instructions and Benefits’. Her editor asked who would read such a long headline. Naira chose a shorter one: ‘Three Questions About the Murder Order’. In the report, the facts corroborated by the original ledger, the driver's recorded statement, the written denial from Devvrat's office, and the unanswered questions about the contact register were kept in separate paragraphs. No picture was published of someone whose face had not been seen. That night, for the first time, an effort was made to write of Mahesh's death not merely as a tale of darkness in a warehouse, but within the precise limits of the responsibility borne by the living.

As a final task, Rama showed Naira a sealed sheet. It was not Sarita's original list of twenty-seven names. It was a copy of an old payment schedule associated with that list, on which red ink distinguished which entries could be shown to whom. Rama said that one intermediary's receipt number found during the day's murder inquiry corresponded to a sequence in the schedule; a matching sequence did not mean a matching person. “Tomorrow Sarita herself will set out the original sheet, the actual receipt, and the limits of permission given by those whose names appear there,” she said. Naira returned the page. The day's decision had opened the way to a deeper investigation of one intermediary; it could not, without asking, contain the whole story of twenty-seven people's lives.

Chapter 96 · Reconciling the Twenty-Seven

Before opening the brass box, Sarita wiped away the dust that had settled along its bottom. The rain had stopped beyond the doorway, but drops were still falling from the mango leaves. She set the box on the low wooden bed and asked Naira, “Who will be there today?” Naira counted not names but roles: Rama would examine the original office documents; two people would verify the testimony; and Sarita herself would explain what she had written. “As a journalist, I won't be looking at everything,” Naira added. “I'll keep separate even the notes concerning anything I have no permission to publish.” Sarita lifted the lid, but paused before turning back the final fold of the paper. “That condition must be stated at the meeting too,” she said.

Steam from the rice boiling in the kitchen drifted through the window and spread across the courtyard. Sanket had laid out two plates for the midday meal. He knew that papers would be examined at his mother's house that day, but he had not asked whose names were written on them. “Shall I take the food to the office?” he asked. Sarita said, “Go to school first. Protecting your mother's work doesn't mean doing everyone's work in her place.” Sanket put down the plates and picked up his books. Naira watched him leave. Sarita did not want the ordinary course of a child's day brought to a halt in the name of guarding twenty-seven names.

At the municipal records office, Rama Karna would not permit three tables to be pushed together. On one would lie Sarita's private handwritten list; on a second, the government's working copy, the receipt register and the old payment schedule; and on a third, the consent documents and the results of the reconciliation. Nowhere was there a public noticeboard displaying the names. The gatekeeper kept an attendance register, but no reason was entered for the witnesses' visits inside the building. Rama adjusted the window shutter and said, “Some matters will be decided here, while in others we shall establish a connection. Even what we establish may have to go for further examination. It isn't our task to declare anyone innocent or guilty.”

On the first page of her notebook Naira had already written three words: original, testimony, transaction. Sarita cautioned her. “Be careful with ‘original’. This is my original handwriting, not the government's original entry. Sometimes I wrote down a document I'd seen, sometimes what somebody told me, and sometimes my own inference—all on the same sheet.” She pointed to four places where the lines of ink differed. “These weren't corrections made on a single night. I went back and wrote on four occasions, for four different reasons.” Rama recorded that account without inventing dates. The folds in the paper, the differences in the ink, and Sarita's recollections each had their own limits as evidence.

As soon as the matter of the five altered identities arose, the old experience of the reading room came back into view. Nasim Idrisi had delivered the protected consent forms for all five people in a sealed bag. One person had authorised publication of a present name, but not the former one; another had authorised only the correction reference number; a third wanted the mother's name entered in the register but excluded from any news report. Rama said, “These five lines cannot all be printed in the same fashion. If the government copy stamps them all alike, we shall be making the same mistake again.” Naira agreed. Her report could mention the number of people involved, but not their private addresses.

Rahina Thakurai came in from the veranda, knocking the mud from her sandals at the threshold. There were two little stains of blue ink on her fingers from her copying work. She had previously gone to examine an incomplete stamp in the register of wages owed by Mangari Gorait's closed factory. Today she had been called because, for a time, she had worked making copies in the municipality's old transcription room. When Rama began to write down her particulars, Rahina said plainly, “Don't give my testimony credibility on the strength of some man in my family. What I saw on the page will bear my own signature. About what I didn't see, I'll remain silent.”

Rahina's paternal cousin was standing outside the office. That morning he had told her at home that speaking of an old mistake would harm the Thakurai family's livelihood. Rahina had not argued with him. She had served rice to her daughter, tied up her bundle of copying work, noted the hours of the legal-aid room, and left. Now she said to Rama, “I have to pay the fare for another job. Hear my full statement first, or I'll lose this evening's copying work.” Rama glanced at the office clock and made her the first witness. Alongside personal risk, the hours by which a living was earned had their place in this inquiry.

Rahina recalled a copying room she had seen three years earlier. The wire used for drying papers had broken, and the employees had laid old bundles on a wooden platform. She had been given a numbered list to copy. In five places, instead of names, the words ‘For correction of identity’ appeared. Beside one line was the mark ‘Not for publication’, which she herself had not made. “I didn't see the original applications that day,” Rahina said. “But I still have the receipt number for the copy I made, and the receipt for my work. Those words of warning were missing from the version printed later.” What she held out was not a press cutting, but her wage receipt.

An assistant immediately asked, “So the warning was removed deliberately?” Rahina looked at him. “Don't put that conclusion into my mouth. I didn't see the words in the printed copy. Whether someone removed them, or it was printed from another master, the machine's source register will tell us.” Rama compared the receipt number on the wage slip with the office's transcription register. The number matched; so did the date of the work. But the column for the authorising instruction was blank. Rahina

insisted that the blank be recorded in her statement. The strength of her testimony lay not in filling that empty space with imagination, but in marking where it was.

Sarita's hand reached the last fold of the paper. Even then she did not turn it towards everyone. “This line contains the present identity of a living person,” she said. “Making public the name that person adopted after leaving an earlier life would put their livelihood and safety at risk again.” Rama first opened the consent document. The person's chosen representative was present in a separate room for a limited verification before Rama and Sarita. Naira closed her notebook and went outside. The longing to read the final page of a story did not seem to her more important than another person's safety.

Outside the door, Naira took a cup of tea and sat beside Rahina. Of her own accord, Rahina spoke about her home. “My cousin says the family's name will be spoiled. But in the year when I made fifteen trips to the office to get my copying wages, did the family name get my account opened for me?” Instead of answering, Naira asked, “May I publish your statement?” Rahina thought for a while. “You may print my own name and what I saw while doing the copying. Not which school my daughter attends, or who the men in my house are. Those things are not proof of my testimony.” Naira wrote down the boundary exactly as Rahina had set it.

After the limited verification inside, Sarita folded the sheet again. In a separate sealed record, Rama preserved only the attestation that the current identity in the twenty-seventh entry, the relationship acknowledged by the person concerned, and the status of any necessary transactions had been checked with that person's consent. No public copy of the former name was made; the representative's signature did not appear in the public summary. “I can now say that all twenty-seven entries have been accounted for,” Sarita said. “But I won't say that all the secrets of twenty-seven lives have been revealed.” Rama replied, “The result of a reconciliation and the whole story of a life are not the same thing.”

Beside one entry Sarita had written ‘returned’. Naira had originally understood this to mean a return to employment. Today, with the woman concerned having given permission, Rama heard its actual meaning: someone had come to the relief office for a second time after the flood. The woman's name had been entered on her first visit, but no money had been paid. A new receipt was opened on the date of her second visit. “Then the first claim stands cancelled,” an officer said. The woman objected. “I came back. I didn't surrender my right.” Rama struck out the assumption of cancellation and retained both dates. Lowering her eyes, Sarita said, “When I wrote them, I didn't understand that those two words could carry so much weight.”

A small strip identifying the evidence was placed beside each of the other twenty-six entries. In some cases, a person present had given the dates of their own work; in others, an old receipt bore a receipt number; elsewhere, the

payment register showed a sum of zero. Zero did not mean that no work had been done, nor that the debt had been extinguished. It meant only that no payment appeared in that particular register. When Naira came back inside, she asked, “How can we call the reconciliation complete where no transaction is recorded?” Rama said, “There we'll write, ‘No evidence of payment; claim to be dealt with separately.’ Reconciliation doesn't mean everybody has received their money.”

That day, a line in red ink on the old schedule brought a new difficulty. A receipt number found during the murder inquiry at Shekhar's intermediary office matched a number in this old copy. “Then it's the same transaction!” an assistant exclaimed. Sarita interrupted him. “The numbers match. The things they refer to haven't been shown to match.” Rama called for the old ledgers from both files. One recorded the cost of transporting a bundle; the other, a fee for examining a copied booklet. The sums and dates were different. The common format of the numbers might also have arisen from the office's numbering system. Rama classified the coincidence as ‘Relationship under further examination’, not as a fresh accusation in the murder inquiry.

After midday a low, repeated tapping of a hammer on iron came from the back gate. Sumitra Kami arrived carrying three metal fittings in a wooden box, together with an old receipt. One sample had a double groove for holding a rope in place. After she had demonstrated that design, a similar shape had appeared on the drawings for new materials under a local contract. Sumitra had not sought to prohibit its use outright. “First find out whether someone copied my lines, or arrived at the measurements independently,” she said. “But when my drawing appears among the contract papers, why should the account of the name and the labour leave me out?” From the bottom of the box she took her original sketch, stained with oil.

An official remarked that nobody held private rights over the design of fittings for a public gate. Sumitra did not reply at once. She drew two forms on a sheet of paper: one an ordinary right angle; the other showing the dimensions of her groove and the turn that stopped a rope from slipping. “A right angle isn't my household property,” she said. “But I have a claim concerning the testing of these measurements, the sketch I made, the sample of the new fitting and the use of my name in selling it. I haven't certified that the bridge is safe. If somebody installed my sample without testing it, responsibility for that is another matter.” The official's easy answer—that everything was public—foundered on that distinction.

Naira asked Sumitra whether she might take a photograph for the newspaper. “Photograph my hands and tools,” Sumitra replied, “but not the complete dimensions of the original groove yet. Let there first be a written acknowledgement and an agreed fee for training.” She also asked that the name of her assistant, Chhotalal, be entered; he was owed separate wages for grinding the metal. Chhotalal would have preferred to remain silent, but Sumitra told him, “I won't add your hours to my name. The work you've done

must be paid for in your own right." The assistant wrote down his working hours. Authorship and the earning of a livelihood were not allowed to lose their value by being swallowed into a single dispute.

Rama examined the receipt for Sumitra's old sample. The office register contained an entry for the same date, but the space for the maker's name on the new contract drawing was blank. That much correspondence was established, and no more. Rama recorded a provisional decision: use of the new fitting would be suspended until inspection was complete; the original sketch and the office copy would be secured; a separate committee would carry out technical testing; and Sumitra's name and claim would be entered into the record immediately. "At least this time the evidence that I made it won't disappear from the papers," Sumitra said. Before signing, however, she had it read aloud that remuneration for training and producing the sample would be determined at a separate hearing.

Rahina had heard the last part of the discussion. As Sumitra came out, she said, "Your groove and my copying work reach the table only when somebody else begins putting them forward under their own name." Sumitra gave a faint laugh. "Then I ought to write my name down early—but I ought not write down what I haven't seen." Rahina asked whether she could buy a small metal plate from her; a corner of the wooden chest at home had broken. Sumitra named a price. She did not sell the sample, but promised to make a new, ordinary fitting. Amid the arguments, the useful making of everyday things went on.

Back in the records room, Sarita examined the reconciliation sheets for the twenty-six openly examined entries. She had explained the reasons for the four changes of ink; proper consent had been recorded for each of the five altered identities; fourteen administrative discrepancies remained separate cases in their respective files; and the slips concerning four living people wrongly marked dead, and four people genuinely deceased whose accounts were still active, remained separate too. A young clerk asked, "Five, fourteen and eight make twenty-seven. Shall I put that in the summary?" Rama expressly forbade it. "A numerical coincidence isn't evidence. These are groups drawn from different registers. Some people may figure in two cases, and some may not be on this original list at all. Don't make a false genealogy out of arithmetic."

Naira stopped at the word 'verified' written below one entry. "Verified what?" she asked. "The person, the work, or the payment?" Sarita answered, "Earlier I wrote down the names I heard. Now the documents, testimony and position regarding money have been placed alongside each entry. But I have no right to say that a person's whole life has been verified." Rama composed a new heading: 'Reconciliation of entry relationships complete; dues, corrections and the outcome of allegations remain separate.' The heading carried discomfort as well as relief. A claimant for unpaid wages would still

have to visit another office, but their name would not be trapped in an accusation without foundation.

Meanwhile, the sheet concerning Sarita's own withheld remuneration came before them again. Accounts confirmed that two instalments had been paid to the external contractor, Girdhari Sah. But the full equivalence between the work Sarita had done and the work performed by the outside organisation still had to be measured against the original submissions. “The question of recovering the payment stopped because my name was marked as dead is separate,” Sarita said. “By reconciling these twenty-seven entries today, I am not giving up what I am owed.” Rama issued a letter requesting a copy of the payment officer's separate order. Proof that Girdhari had benefited did not establish that he had authored the false mark of death.

An employee preparing the office's new copy asked why a photocopy of the openly examined portion containing twenty-six names should not be attached. Rama showed that public verification could be served by recording the date of direct inspection, the sealed examination record and the categories of evidence available. Once a complete image of the names was circulated, there would be no means of recalling it. Sarita herself raised the question of cost: paper for a separate secure copy, a box in which to store it, authorised inspection, and notice of the right to appeal would not be provided free of charge. Rama drafted a request for departmental funds. The written proposal stipulated that the expense of these safeguards must not be placed on the private witnesses.

When Rahina's statement received its official receipt stamp, she breathed more easily. But the sight of three missed calls from her paternal cousin on her phone saddened her. “What will you say at home?” Naira asked. “That I said what I saw, and didn't claim to have seen what I hadn't,” Rahina replied. “My family's agreement matters to me, but testimony isn't family property.” She slipped the folded acknowledgement into an inside pocket of her bag. That evening she had to listen to her daughter's lessons, and there was the possibility that tomorrow her hours at the copying shop would be cut. She decided to ask that very day for a written accounting of her wages.

The draft public statement was read in the evening light. Naira wanted people to understand that the examination of the twenty-seven entries was complete, but that no public list of their names would be issued. One member said, “Then the public won't know anything.” Sarita replied, “The public will know what procedure was followed, how many entries were examined, what evidence exists, who is responsible, and the date of the next hearing. Truth doesn't grow larger because everybody is told where a frightened person lives or finds shelter.” Rama included the procedure, expenditure, reference numbers for necessary corrections, and the avenue of appeal in the public summary. The documents disclosing private identities would remain separately sealed.

During a short break, Rahina sat on the veranda floor and added up the figures in her account book. Having spent two hours at the office, she would have to finish part of that day's copying work before evening. Rather than panic, she first sent her customer a clear notice of when it would be ready. Sumitra sat down beside her and showed her fingernails, blackened by her work. “My marks are made on iron,” she said, “and yours in ink. Neither is easy to wash away.” Rahina laughed. She did not pay an advance for the ordinary metal corner fitting to be made for her daughter's chest. Sumitra said payment could be made after the fitting was ready and had been measured. Neither woman called the other's labour a favour.

Aniruddha telephoned from the hospital. Part of the consignment of medicines with inconsistent labels was still being held for inspection, and it was proving difficult to find a vehicle for transferring patients. Naira understood that reconciling the twenty-seven entries would not, by itself, resolve the hospital's material difficulties. Rama made no announcement of a new agreement over the telephone. She said only that the timetable for patients' medicines, vehicles and drainage would be presented separately at the next day's meeting of the parties concerned. Even after a decision concerning old evidence, new arrangements were needed for the next day of living.

At that moment Sumitra was putting the metal samples back into her box. A young man said work on the new gate would begin at dawn. “Not before the measurements have been checked,” she said firmly. “That doesn't mean the work must be stopped for ever. First show evidence that the temporary plank is safe. If it isn't, set down another route for travellers.” The young man complained that so many inspections were inconveniencing people. Closing the lid of her box, Sumitra said, “When the plank gives way, will you remember the names of the people who suffer? Arrange to pay for safe work on time.” Instead of answering, the young man went to summon the inspector.

Before returning home, Sarita took back her private sheet from Rama. The sealed record of inspection remained in the office; the original handwritten list would go back into the brass box. Rama counted it through: the necessary reconciliation of all twenty-seven entries was complete; the conditions governing publication of five identities were recorded separately; hearings concerning disputed payments remained pending; and the way was open for orders to correct the registers. Naira wanted once more to look at the final sheet, then drew back her hand of her own accord. Her mother asked, “Do you trust it now?” Naira said, “Trust has grown not because I've seen the sheet, but because I've accepted the limits of the examination.”

When she reached home, Sarita put the pot of rice back on the fire. Sanket had returned from school and was writing a difficult word on his slate. Kabir had come to show them a fresh slip from a creditor concerning the wooden shelf. Naira told him that she had no wish to tell the whole story of the day's papers at home. He smiled, folded away the slip, and asked Sanket what the

word meant. Sarita placed the box on the upper shelf. This time she did not bind the brass lid with new string. She laid across it an ordinary strip of cloth, whose knot she herself had the right to undo.

Writing the final line of her report that night, Naira kept the private summary of the twenty-seven separate from the pending letter in the murder investigation. The question of Shekhar's conduct and Devvrat's instructions still required evidence before any judgment could be reached. The order to correct the false mark of death against Sarita's name had not yet been fully carried out. Mithun's trail was being pursued elsewhere. But one task had genuinely been completed that day: the relationships, testimony and available record of transactions for twenty-seven entries had been reconciled, without hanging any living person's concealed name up in the marketplace. Naira closed her notebook. In the days ahead, people would again ask the price of loyalty, promises and standing by one another. The resolve of this night was simply that no one would claim authority over another person's trust without permission.

Chapter 97 · Shalya's Allegiance

On the wheels of the chariot travelling from ancient Madra towards Kurukshetra, Shalya was brushing away the dust with his own hands. The leather had swollen in the night dew, and the charioteer said the axle would have to be oiled before they reached the next halt. Shalya let him attend to it; first he asked how many carts of grain were following at the rear of the army. This company, setting out to support the Pandavas in war, consisted of more than royal chariots. There were grooms, metalworkers who repaired equipment, cooks and foot soldiers. Their weary bodies would bear the first weight of the political word Shalya had given.

Nakula and Sahadeva, the sons of Madri, were his nephews. The two had not been brought up in the same household courtyard during their childhood, yet the memory of his kinship through their mother had carried Shalya a long way. A young soldier asked, "We were told the road led to the Pandavas' camp. Whose splendid resting place is this, then?" Vessels of milk and ghee stood near the entrance. No one answered. The officer receiving them said only that a tired guest first comes to know his hosts through the meal they provide. Shalya did not go straight inside. He first asked the woman carrying water whether enough would reach the carts at the very back of the column. "The order covered only the first chariot," she said. "I have asked for another pitcher for the rest." Shalya instructed that its cost too should be entered in the accounts.

Within the encampment were spacious awnings, spotless seats and fodder mixed with salt for the horses. An elderly attendant from Madra laughed and said, "Yudhishthira has thought of everything." It was a supposition, not an identification. Shalya did not immediately challenge it either. He was satisfied to see clean bandages laid ready for washing wounds in one room; in another, a young assistant who had arrived late had received nothing to eat. Rather than tell the boy to eat from his own plate, Shalya had the kitchen superintendent bring him the portion allotted to him. He did not want anyone's right to wages or food transformed into an act of charity.

At the end of the meal, the chief officer of the reception came forward respectfully. Shalya said he wished to offer his thanks in person to the king who had provided such hospitality. Honouring the customary obligation, he gave his word that he would not disregard any reasonable assistance asked of him in return. Everyone seated nearby heard the promise, though no name had yet been spoken. One soldier smiled and mentioned Nakula; a momentary hardness crossed the reception officer's face. Shalya noticed the

change of expression, but before he could speak, Duryodhana himself entered from behind the outer curtain.

"The hospitality was mine," Duryodhana said. Triumph rang in his voice; there was no note of apology. The vessel of water in Shalya's hand did not tremble. He set it down slowly beside his seat. "Then why was I given no opportunity to know who had made these arrangements?" he asked. Duryodhana replied that hospitality was not offered by asking which side a guest belonged to, and a king's word did not diminish after he had eaten. Shalya said, "A debt incurred by accepting a meal and the choice of a side secured through deception are not the same thing. If you wished for help in war, you should have said so to me at the outset." The reception officer lowered his eyes. Food still lay on the serving plates.

Duryodhana made his demand explicit: Shalya and his army were to join his side. Unease spread among the commanders of Madra. One pointed out that Shalya's nephews stood with the other side; another said that to turn back now would break a king's promise. Shalya raised a hand and silenced them both. He told Duryodhana, "The promise you have received was spoken by my own mouth. I know what it weighs. But do not suppose that this burden has wiped away my judgment, my old ties, and every injustice I have witnessed." One of Duryodhana's attendants took this for an unnecessary condition. Shalya continued to make clear what his promise did, and did not, mean.

An elderly counsellor, who had served Shalya almost as a minister, stood at the far edge of the assembly. Before him the treasurer placed the account book for the reception. Gold, food, gifts and fodder for the horses had all been added into a single reckoning. Shalya asked, "Whose consent has been promised in this book on behalf of these guest soldiers?" The treasurer showed him that most of the attendants had not marked receipt for their own meals; the portions for the group had been collected under a commander's seal. "How, then, can this reception amount to the freely given military consent of them all?" Shalya asked. Duryodhana invoked the traditions of a royal invitation. Shalya requested permission to keep the expense ledger with him.

Duryodhana wished to avoid discussion of the old humiliation in the royal assembly. Shalya would not let the subject pass. Reports of the game of dice and Draupadi's humiliation in the court had reached Madra; he had not personally witnessed every detail of those events. "What I have not seen myself, I cannot claim to have seen," he said. "But where the question was the defence of a woman's dignity in an assembly, the advantage gained by remaining silent cannot become your kingdom's account of justice." Duryodhana argued that in the exercise of royal duty, conflicting claims might also be decided through war. Shalya replied, "The decision to wage war may be yours. I gave no promise to call the humiliation of an innocent person just."

Shalya's personal attendant called him aside. The horses needed an additional day of rest after the interruption to their journey, and the commanders did not know where they were now to submit the accounts for their own provisions and medicines. Shalya saw a new difficulty. When a king abruptly changes sides, the livelihoods of cooks and grooms change along with those of armed men. He told his treasurer that the dues owed to the people of Madra would remain as before; the unused supplies from the reception camp would not be divided up as private rewards; and anyone with a legitimate reason to return home would have that reason heard. His army was now an instrument of a decision, not merely a company enticed by pleasures.

That evening Shalya had two separate messages prepared for Nakula and Sahadeva. Each explained the reasons for his decision; neither claimed that his nephews had agreed to it. A messenger asked, "Shall I tell them Your Majesty had no choice?" Shalya replied, "To call it compulsion would conceal the part I myself played in choosing. I recognised the deception, and I decided to honour my word. It is for me to bear the sorrow of that difference." Before the messenger departed, Shalya ordered that the letters be delivered securely, not turned into broadsheets spreading news of the war.

On the other side of the camp, the cooks from Madra were weighing the grain that remained. A representative of Duryodhana declared that it was all now part of the Kaurava stores. The head cook objected: the dry grain brought from Madra and the food received as hospitality were in separate heaps. Shalya went there himself and had both amounts counted. "A change of political allegiance does not change the original owner," he said. The representative silently took a copy of the tally, while some of the soldiers, watching, understood that the dispute between gratitude and entitlement which had occupied the royal gathering existed beside the cooking fires as well.

At night Shalya walked to the place where the horses were tethered in the Madra camp. The smell of oil and wet grass hung in the air, together with the distant cough of a sentry. A young soldier asked him, "My king, must we now believe that everything said by the side we have joined is right?" Shalya answered, "No. A soldier's discipline and the murder of his judgment are two different things. If an order comes to break the rules of war, we must call to account the person who gave that order." That was as much as he could say; he did not possess an answer for every hour still to come. At dawn he confirmed his decision to turn the chariots towards Duryodhana's camp, but resolved to take his dissenting voice with him.

The next morning, in a hospital in the modern town, Aniruddha was lifting the two front wheels of a stretcher to inspect them. The rainwater outside the corridor had not dried; plastic and fallen leaves had caught in the drainage grille. One wheel kept lodging in a crack in the floor, so the patient transferred during the night had had to be taken through another doorway. The reconciliation of the twenty-seven entries had been completed on paper the previous day, but the hospital floor was exactly as it had been yesterday.

Aniruddha told a nurse, “Settle the patient’s route first. Obtaining the key to the storehouse won’t make this floor level.”

Outside the hospital gate, Tara and Hira Sahni were wrapping their wet measuring rods separately in lengths of cloth. Near a tree on the old footpath, the water mark had been half erased. Hira said that the place treated as zero in the last official survey was not at the same level as the village’s traditional marker. If the two were converted into one figure without verification, the safe route would be shown incorrectly. Tara was pressed for time. “Patients are being held up while we wait for the inspection,” she said. Hira answered, “Then measure the route usable now separately from any order to alter the permanent flow of water. When the rod is planted beside the post, I shall first show everyone the marks on the ground.”

Five things were laid on the table for the midday meeting: a sealed key box from the storehouse, the timetable slip for the patient transport vehicle, two copies of the local water-level measurements, the community kitchen’s expense ledger, and the rules governing the public copies of records. The sight of that table reminded Naira of the unfinished sheet from the first attempted agreement. Consent had broken down then over a demand for unrestricted entry across private field boundaries. Now an official had written on a fresh page: ‘Facilities unanimously agreed for disaster management.’ Without signing, Shabnam Khatoon asked, “Where was this unanimity obtained? Our committee hasn’t even taken its vote today.” The secretary’s pen came to a halt.

Devvrat was present at the meeting. He had questions to answer about the management of his storehouse; his earlier instructions were recorded in a separate file in the inquiry concerning Mahesh’s death. For the moment he said, “Let us find a way to release immediately whatever part of the medicines and safety supplies has passed inspection.” Aniruddha asked who would authorise the release, who would take responsibility for the consignment labels, and whether the gate leading to the vehicle would be opened. Devvrat named three different offices in reply. Hearing this, Tara said, “If there are three names, write down three times and obtain three signatures. A patient cannot go from office to office.”

Shabnam laid out the objections of the committee from the opposite bank. On the map, the short way round a vehicle could take beside Ramesh Kushwaha’s field in that village had not been marked in the correct colour. Ramesh’s wife came to the meeting herself. Old scars from weeding marked her palms. Placing a finger on the paper, she said, “If you cut through the boundary of my field today and call it an emergency route, who will I ask to pay for the damage tomorrow? I don’t want to hold up a patient. But did you first inspect the open stretch of the old footpath?” Hira showed her two alternative sets of measurements. One path was feasible for people carrying a patient on foot, but not for a heavy vehicle.

In the heat of the meeting, a clerk hurriedly proposed that people from every household should provide ‘free service’. Ruhani, who was temporarily organising the delivery of water and simple meals from a nearby neighbourhood, interrupted him. “Two vessels of cooked rice will go from my home today. That is my own decision. But tomorrow, when fifty people need feeding, don’t enter zero in the budget by calling women’s labour free.” She placed before them separate calculations for rice, fuel, washing utensils, the journeys made by those delivering the food, and necessary dietary restrictions. An employee suggested that writing down caste beside each name would simplify distribution. Ruhani replied, “Count the need for food, not caste. And keep the list of patients’ medically prescribed diets confidential.”

For the first time that day, Naira did not take out her camera. The committee members’ private statements of objection, the protected identities among Sarita’s twenty-seven entries, and Rama Karna’s restricted inspection records were still kept in a separate cupboard. To those asking for a community copy, Naira said, “Everyone has a right to public receipts and the total expenditure. That does not give anyone the right to circulate a photograph revealing a living person’s concealed name.” Rama proposed a procedure: preserve the official original, prepare a separate community copy with names redacted, and disclose the reference number of every appeal. The committee was discussing policy here, not reopening the private affairs of the twenty-seven entries.

Rama Karna arrived at the meeting-room threshold carrying an old decision paper divided into numbered clauses. The first failed agreement had confused ‘permission’ with ‘giving advance notice’, treating the two as if they meant the same thing. Now an employee again wanted to write a provision permitting entry across a private field boundary on the strength of proof that notice had been sent. Rama recorded her objection. Ramesh’s wife said, “Hearing about it an hour beforehand does not mean I consented.” Shabnam asked for three separate clauses to make the emergency alternatives plain: ordinary work, immediate measures to save life, and accountability for any damage afterwards. She wanted people to understand their objections before they signed this time.

A young hospital nurse placed a small metal plate on the table. It was an old part used as a temporary grip on the stretcher ramp, and a proposal to replace it appeared in the printed list. Technical testing of Sumitra Kami’s new grooved prototype was still pending. The nurse asked whether, in the meantime, they should use some handmade, untested substitute. Aniruddha said no. Sumitra herself answered, “My claim to rights over my design does not establish that it is safe for use in a hospital. If the old approved plate is sound, inspect it and use it. The new prototype must go to the laboratory.” Her assistant, Chhotalal, made out a wage receipt for the work of tightening a loose screw on the old plate.

News reached the room that the wheel found wet and faulty that morning had still not been repaired. Irfan Khan came from his small repair shop. He wrote down the cost of replacing the wheel and said that hospital staff must first inspect the old defect in its axle. An official suggested that he ‘repair it as a donation’. Irfan replied, “I will examine it first for the patient’s safety, but there will be a receipt for my labour. Fitting a new wheel to a defective axle is no service.” In the meantime, arrangements were made to use the hospital’s other stretcher, which had already been tested. A little relief appeared on Aniruddha’s face, though the water in the canal had not fallen.

Outside the meeting, the rain began to fall harder again. Hira and Tara led a small inspection party along the safe part of the public footpath. Ramesh’s wife went too: she wanted to see both the boundary of her field and the route a patient would take. Hira matched the old water marks between two stakes. A narrow stream ran beneath an empty stretch of planking. “Not a heavy vehicle,” he said, “but one patient can be carried across this section by four bearers, if the mud is cleared first and safety attendants stand on both sides.” Tara recorded how long the work would take, what the bearers would be paid, and the signal at which the crossing must stop. She limited permission to one inspected transfer.

A little after midday, Jagdish Jha’s daughter-in-law needed to be transferred for an examination. As the nurse sought the family’s consent, she explained that the patient would go by the longer route; they would not cut across a private boundary belonging to another village. Jagdish wanted the vehicle to come straight to the house. His daughter-in-law spoke for herself. “I need my medicine on time. If the inspected foot route is safe for a stretcher carried by hand, take me that way. Don’t publicise my name; inform my family at home.” One family member stayed behind; another accompanied her. The bearers stopped where the footpath was broken, Hira checked the width once more, and a few moments later the stretcher reached the other side. It was the successful transfer of one patient, not proof of a permanent road open for unrestricted use.

On the transfer slip, Tara entered the time before the names of the four bearers. Two were labourers from the river landing; two were trained hospital attendants. An official told the workers called away from the landing on their day off that payment could be considered later in an emergency. Tara said plainly, “The rate will be written down before the work. An emergency is not a reason to reduce it.” On behalf of her committee, Shabnam asked again whether the bearers had been told what signalled a low or rising water level. Hira pointed out the red cloth hanging beneath the walkway: it was the sign to turn back as soon as the water rose there. The precautions taken for this single use of the route were not an authorisation for regular transport.

At the same time, another vehicle was held up outside the town storehouse, waiting for a separate consignment of medicines. An inspection paper arrived from Devvrat’s office, but the employee authorised to open the sealed door was

absent. A young attendant proposed breaking open the key box. Aniruddha stopped him. “Medicines whose labels are under investigation cannot be taken to patients without permission. But holding back supplies already approved also puts people in danger.” Over the telephone, Devvrat said he would come in person and fix a time for a limited inspection. Tara entered his words alongside the date; she did not record the assurance as though the storehouse had been opened.

At the brief evening meeting, Shabnam struck out ‘unanimous’ on the first page and had ‘disputed proposal’ written in its place. Devvrat acknowledged that the five matters—the storehouse, the patient, the measurements, the food and the community copy of the records—required separate lines of responsibility. Ruhani submitted the receipts for that day’s actual food expenses, but requested a separate wage rate for the collective kitchen arrangement proposed for tomorrow. Rama recorded the date on which the rules for copies would be examined. Hira signed the temporary safe measurement for one stretch of the footpath, not a certificate for the entire drainage system. Shabnam said, “Some work was accomplished today. If we call it a complete agreement, tomorrow’s objections will be suppressed again.”

Naira crossed out the first headline she had written: ‘Road Opened on Five Conditions’. In its place she wrote: ‘One Patient’s Route Opened; Five Conditions Still Under Review’. Sarita gave Naira a small container of food she had brought from home; it contained no secret office papers. “Eat today,” she said. “Tomorrow, attend to those whose hearing is tomorrow.” Naira stood by the doorway listening to the water outside. The stream seeping through one hospital wall had still not stopped, and the storehouse remained locked. Alongside the day’s small success, the unfinished work made itself heard just as clearly.

Chapter 98 · Vibhishana's Path

In the royal residence of ancient Lanka, Vibhishana was tightening the lid of the water jar set beside the threshold of his home. A night watchman had opened it to drink but had gone away without replacing the lid. A little boy came barefoot into the courtyard and asked, "Father, may I go up to the roof today to see the sea? Yesterday you said the boats could be seen a long way off." Vibhishana did not lift him into his arms; first he moved him into the shade beside the jar. "There are many guards on duty today. We shall go in the evening, if it is safe." The boy asked again, "Who will say whether it is safe?" Vibhishana had no immediate answer.

Inside, his wife was setting apart two measures of grain: one for their household, the other for the attendants whose families were working on preparations for war. The supply of rice issued from the royal treasury had been dwindling for three days. "The watchman said that anyone who leaves home will lose their share from the treasury," she told him. Vibhishana asked whether the watchman had seen the order himself. "He only heard it," she replied. Both understood that a threat passed on by word of mouth could inspire genuine fear, but that did not establish where it had come from.

Before going to the royal assembly, Vibhishana summoned an old attendant. The man said that the decision to keep Sita confined in the Ashoka grove had stirred resentment even in the soldiers' homes, but he would not name anyone. Vibhishana did not think it right to press him for names. His opposition to Sita's having been brought there by force did not depend upon anybody's secret identity. He resolved to say in the assembly, in his own name, that holding a woman against her will was not the defence of a kingdom but an injustice within it.

As soon as the ringing of the bell ceased in Ravana's assembly, the commanders began proclaiming their preparations for war. An officer gave the number of enemy soldiers across the sea with such certainty that one might have thought he had inspected every rank himself. Vibhishana asked, "Which messenger brought that count? Is it a direct enumeration or an estimate?" The officer fell silent. Ravana declared that speaking of the enemy's strength diminished the courage of the assembly. "Assurances that have not been examined do not make courage," Vibhishana replied. "I favour removing the cause of injustice before there is war."

He urged that Sita be sent back with honour. Ravana called this fear on his brother's part. Several members of the assembly laughed; others lowered their eyes. Vibhishana did not raise his voice. "Being your brother cannot make every decision of yours right," he said. "It is not the throne that is being insulted: it is because of this throne that all these lives have been placed at risk." Ravana spoke in rebuttal of royal authority, but gave no answer to the question of Sita's consent.

A warrior in the assembly accused Vibhishana of passing information to the enemy. In support of the charge he could produce no messenger, letter, or direct encounter. Vibhishana answered him: “I am expressing my disagreement here, in this assembly, before you all. And here an accusation is being manufactured against me about something supposedly done in secret.” In his anger Ravana ordered him to leave the court. Vibhishana understood the consequences: he had separated himself not by taking up arms but by speaking, yet the guards of the royal palace might recognise no distinction between the two.

When he returned home, the boy asked whether his father had forgotten their evening visit to see the sea. Taking off his sandals, Vibhishana said, “I shall be going far from home.” The boy looked towards the water jar. “Then who will fill it?” Vibhishana looked at his wife. She did not stop working. “I shall fill the jar,” she said, “but first we shall talk together and decide who is to remain in this house, and who is not.” There was anger in her words, and an insistence upon her own authority. Vibhishana acknowledged that the punishment for his political dissent could not simply be imposed upon his family.

He opened a bundle of cloth and separated the pages recording household dues and wages still owed to the servants. “If you take these papers with you,” his wife said, “who here will be able to show proof when people ask for their earnings?” Vibhishana left the original ledger at home. He took only what he needed for the journey and letters for messengers concerning his family’s safety. He did not promise his wife more than lay within his power. The decision to dissent was his; the protection of his family was not wholly within his control.

At the small door behind the royal palace, a guard barred his way. He had known Vibhishana since childhood, but the young man’s duty had now changed. “I have orders that no goods marked as belonging to the royal stores may leave with you,” he said. Vibhishana showed him his empty palms. An elderly messenger accompanying him urged him to take the royal seal, which would secure him prestige on the far shore. Vibhishana left the seal at the gate. “Prestige built by stealing documents will earn no trust,” he said. The guard opened the door at last, but did not raise his eyes when they parted.

On reaching the shore, the small band of companions who had come with him wanted to press forward. Two said that, once they entered the camp across the water, they would certainly be taken for enemies. “The people in that camp have not yet promised to accept us,” Vibhishana said. “We shall ask for refuge, and listen to their answer.” He stated openly why he had left his side, but did not offer the secret routes used by ordinary households in Lanka, or the names of captive servants, as goods to be traded. He told his companions too not to sell information about innocent people in order to save themselves.

Across the sea, in Rama’s camp, the soldiers readied their weapons at his arrival. Sugriva and several other commanders were uncertain what to do.

That Ravana's brother should appear suddenly with his companions could not, without examination, be made a reason for trust. A sentry told him to halt at a distance. Vibhishana stopped there and explained why he had come. He said that he had opposed his brother's unrighteous conduct and now sought shelter. Yet the fact that these words had been heard was not, in itself, proof of his inward intentions.

Rama listened attentively to the objections of his companions. One said that admitting the newcomer might expose the camp's plans. Another said that turning him away could imperil the life of a person already in danger. Rama decided in favour of offering the stranger refuge. He made clear that the shelter required to preserve a life would not be withheld until every test of allegiance had been passed; but access to the army's confidential plans, its night watches and anyone's secret duties was another matter altogether. Refuge and military authority remained two separate things.

Bowing, Vibhishana said that he and those who had accompanied him would obey the rules governing food and rest that applied to everyone. Rama asked, "Where is Sita? Tell us only what you have yourself seen." Vibhishana kept what he had heard in the royal household distinct from what he knew directly. In haste a guard demanded a map of every secret gate in Lanka; Rama stopped him. A boundary was established there and then: Vibhishana's refuge and protection were not to be purchased at the cost of increasing the danger to ordinary families in Lanka.

At his first meal in the camp that night, Vibhishana remembered his little boy's question: Who will fill the jar? Far off, the glow of Lanka's fires and the preparations of its armed men flickered in the darkness over the sea. His new shelter had not put an end to the labour of his household or the fears of his wife and child. A young man among his companions asked, "My lord, you have left your own people. Whose people are you now?" Vibhishana said, "I refused to support what I saw to be wrong. But that decision does not erase what I owe the people I have left behind." He took his first mouthful of food. Nothing had been won in that moment; a difficult path through life had been chosen.

Videhapur, 2039. At the rear gate of the hospital, Tulsi Tajpuriya stood turning the front wheel of his goods vehicle to measure it. News of the drivers' strike had arrived, and there was a risk that the appointed times for transporting two consignments of medicines and a patient to another treatment centre that day would come to nothing. The tarpaulin rolled up on the roof of the vehicle was wet from the night's rain. Tulsi first checked the air in the tyre. For a journey of that distance the vehicle had to be sound; a driver's agreement alone was not enough.

The strike had not been ordered unilaterally by the vehicle owners. The drivers had stopped work in protest against three months of unpaid risk allowances, payment for night journeys, and the practice of making drivers bear the burden of repairs after accidents on the damaged culvert. A young

driver named Jamir stood holding a sheet of paper. “If we put all the vehicles back on the road in the patients’ name,” he said, “tomorrow the owners will ask why we called a strike at all.” Tulsi did not interrupt him. “We must keep our demands valid,” he said, “and keep the hospital’s essential route open too. We shall put the two matters down separately in writing.”

Aniruddha came out of the hospital and explained that Jagdish Jha’s daughter-in-law had completed her first transfer, but two other patients might need to be taken for further examinations on time. He named neither patient publicly. One needed special observation; ordinary transport might be available for the other. Tulsi asked plainly, “Let the doctor make a separate list of those whose transfers are indispensable. We will not carry warehouse goods under the pretence that ours are patient vehicles.” Aniruddha agreed that any emergency instruction would be entered on a medical slip, not made into publicity.

Hira Sahni and Tara arrived at the gate carrying two maps of the drainage system. Hira showed them the mud still adhering to the measuring rod from the previous night. “A vehicle may pass under this culvert, but the flow of water has still not been measured. Adding weight on the wet surface is dangerous.” Tara said that the old proposal to use a detour across the private field boundary could not be put into effect without Ramesh’s family’s consent. At the previous meeting only a slip giving notice had been drawn up; notice was not permission. Tulsi marked the edge of the map in red, but did not treat his mark as official approval.

The drivers’ meeting began on a raised platform as the water receded. To the right stood a woman nurse from the hospital; Jamir and Tulsi were in the middle; to the left Ramesh’s wife stood pointing out a new water mark on the embankment of her field. The transport contractor’s representative said, “If an exception is made for a patient today, tomorrow it will be made for every load.” Tulsi replied, “Then write down that you will not extend the limits of this exception.” The representative fell silent, for a written restriction would not offer convenience to one side alone.

Ramesh’s wife had laid bundles of seedlings in her field. “I cannot see the sun’s path at night,” she said. “If a vehicle climbs up here, the embankment holding the seedlings will wash away. If my land is opened in a patient’s name without my consent, I shall be the one to bear the loss.” Aniruddha asked whether she would allow herself to be present when a safe alternative route was measured. She agreed. “Let them measure, not enter. Ask me again about entry.” Tara put in writing that permission to witness the measurements was not consent to use the land.

There, too, a woman driver named Paro opened the old pages of her duty register. Twice she had been sent out at night to carry injured people, yet the extra payment had been entered under the goods-carriage account. “I am not afraid of emergency journeys,” she said, “but when my signature is described as voluntary service, the accounts for my family’s rations no longer add up.”

Jamir read out the dates on her slips; the contractor's representative promised to bring the original attendance register for those days. Paro said she would take part in a trial run if the vehicle was suitable and payment was recorded in writing, but first she wanted a copy of the register.

During the vehicle inspection, Irfan Khan reported a minor defect in Tulsi's rear brake. "You can still drive at low speed as far as the hospital, but replace the part before any longer journey," he said. Tulsi and Jamir looked at one another. Running a dangerous vehicle during a strike might make for a story about sacrifice, but it would not make the patient safe. Showing them a list of sound vehicles available, Irfan suggested a smaller vehicle belonging to another driver. Trained staff would have to check whether it could accommodate a stretcher: a mechanic's estimate was not medical clearance.

Ruhani, who was in charge of the community kitchen, arrived carrying two thin rotis and a vessel of hot dal. People had been sitting at the strike meeting since morning, and it was time for the nurses' shifts to change. Before serving the food she said, "This kitchen runs on voluntary donations, but the wages of the women who cook will be entered separately." A representative laughed and said that so much accounting was hardly appropriate in an emergency. Setting down his plate, Ruhani replied, "The hunger of people in need does not wipe out my accounts." No one refused the food; the receipt book remained on the table as well.

Shabnam came to the meeting with a copy of the papers from the first failed agreement. She read aloud that five questions—patient transport, drainage, access to the warehouse, the labour of preparing food, and public records—were still being examined separately. An assistant from Devvrat's office wanted to turn this exception to the strike into an advance announcement of a 'second agreement'. "Opening a patient-care route for a single day does not break the seal on the warehouse or mend the drains," Shabnam said. "Write down only what has actually been agreed." Rama Karna added words to that effect in the public copy.

Tulsi had three conditions written down. First, only emergency transfers certified by a doctor and specifically identified life-saving supplies: no detained consignments, nor those whose labels were still under examination. Second, each driver's independent consent, a safety inspection, and written payment of the normal fare and risk allowance; undertaking this journey would not be taken as withdrawal of the strike's original demands. Third, if a public route was unavailable and private land had to be used, explicit permission must first be obtained from the person concerned. "And the hours?" Jamir asked. Tulsi added, "A trial from six tomorrow morning until noon, followed by another meeting."

The contractor said the rate of the risk allowance had not yet been fixed. Jamir produced an old payslip. "Let the previous written rate apply to tomorrow morning's journey," he proposed, "and let the arrears for the disputed months remain a separate claim." Having examined the accounts,

the contractor conceded that payment had to be promised in writing for this specified exception. Before entering names in sequence, Tulsi asked each driver separately, “Do you agree?” Two refused; their names were taken off the list. Three accepted on the stated conditions. There were fewer volunteers, but the meaning of consent had become clear.

Inside the hospital, a nurse was explaining the procedure to the daughter of an elderly patient. “If these meetings go on and on,” the daughter said, “who will stop the clock on my father’s breathing?” Aniruddha told her that the physician would determine the time of transfer according to the patient’s condition. If treatment there was safer, the mere availability of a vehicle would not mean that he must be sent away. The daughter entered a hospital room and took her father’s hand. The strike outside was no small thing beside her anxiety, but she was at last being given accurate information about her father.

Near the warehouse, a representative from Devvrat’s office arrived with two lists of medicines. The first contained approved supplies whose inspection was complete; the labels on the second were still being examined for inconsistencies. He wanted to combine both lists on a single emergency slip. Aniruddha noted limited availability against the first list and asked for a copy of the order directing that the second remain sealed. Naira took a few photographs to document the difference, but kept the patients’ names and the drivers’ private telephone numbers out of her camera’s view. Shabnam said that the medicine lists must not be made into an allegation of guilt in the investigation of Mahesh’s murder.

As the afternoon waned, Tara, Hira and Ramesh’s wife walked from the hospital to the public bend in the road below. Where rubbish had been cleared away, water began to flow for a little while, but the broken wall of the main drain was still holding it back. Hira stood the measuring rod upright; the readings before and after were recorded. “Today’s clearing has made one corner of the vehicle route safe,” Tara said. “It has not completed the drainage work.” Standing on the field boundary, Ramesh’s wife looked at her seedlings. A small current was turning towards them, so she herself settled with a labourer what he would be paid to repair a temporary bamboo barrier. She received a written assurance that half the cost would be met from the public-drainage allocation.

During the brief trial in the afternoon, a hospital guard wanted to hang a sheet bearing the word ‘Consent’ at the vehicle gate. It named no driver and carried no signature from the hospital officer responsible. Rama stopped him. “This is a notice, not an agreement,” she said. Paro arrived with a copy of her receipt: her outstanding pay had been entered separately in the previous month’s list, and the fare for the new trial journey had been recorded under another heading. Only then did she put her name down for duty. “Now the problem is solved,” an employee exclaimed happily. “We have a vehicle time for today,” Paro replied. “We still do not have three months’ wages.”

In the evening Tulsi returned to the raised platform where the strikers were meeting. Of the three drivers who had agreed, one had a vehicle found unsuitable for a stretcher when its medical dimensions were checked. That driver was removed from the roster without penalty. For the other two vehicles, the names of the drivers, nurses and responsible officers were recorded separately. “Two vehicles are not enough,” Jamir said. “It is true that they are not enough,” Tulsi replied. “But putting down a faulty vehicle as a third will increase the number on paper, not the safety.” No one applauded. They merely wrote the list again.

As Naira wrote her report, she avoided making one event out of the old story of Shalya, Vibhishana’s seeking refuge and the present-day drivers’ strike. No one in the town had directly witnessed those ancient decisions. For the events of the present she had written pay rates, vehicle-inspection slips, measurement marks and signatures recording consent. Her first headline read: ‘Strike Broken, Route Open for Patients’. She struck out ‘Strike Broken’. The new headline was: ‘Strike Continues, Limited Route for Patients’.

When Tulsi reached home at night, his little daughter was turning the washed dishes upside down to dry. “Father,” she asked, “will you go to the hospital tomorrow, or sit with the drivers?” “I shall check the vehicles at dawn, then the two sides will meet,” he said. His daughter asked who, then, would stitch her torn school umbrella. Tulsi took it into his hands. One end of a metal rib had come loose. Saying he would fetch some fine thread, he sat down on the roof. The work of a household did not wait upon any public agreement.

At dawn the next day a list was posted at the gate: two vehicles fit for the trial, their designated drivers, the hours during which patient services would operate, written responsibility for payment, and a prohibition on entering private land. A separate date was fixed for the next hearing on the drivers’ original strike demands. The full cost of replacing the hospital wheel had not been approved; the main drain remained blocked; the inspection seal on the warehouse had not been removed. Yet for the first time, when a nurse asked what time an essential vehicle would be available, she received not a guess but an actual availability confirmed by signatures. Tulsi shut the bonnet and went to wash his hands before his next task.

Chapter 99 · Kumbhakarna's Awakening

Inside the western rampart of Lanka, jars of oil were being brought before dawn to the door of the vast chamber set aside for Kumbhakarna's sleep. An elderly attendant, looking at a blister on her finger, told a newly arrived soldier that the smoke from the torches had grown too thick inside. She put out a torch herself. "If we are to wake him, there must still be air to breathe," she said. On the faces of those waiting for the door to open lay the weariness of war, not the impatience of celebration.

The first sign that sleep was breaking in the chamber was not a roar but a cough. As Kumbhakarna turned over, a metal vessel placed beside his bed fell to the floor. At the sound of water he opened his eyes and spent a long while trying to recognise the attendants. "What day is it?" The old attendant standing near him said that the situation at the city's outer posts was deteriorating and the king wanted him present at once. Kumbhakarna asked again, "I am not asking how many days I have slept. What has happened in the meantime?" He sat up. "And the people in our homes? Who will tell me how they are?"

When water was brought, he saw that the pitcher was half empty and that two young men working inside were trembling. Kumbhakarna did not order that soldier to stand; he pointed instead towards the food vessels. The old woman said that those occupied with preparations for his awakening had had no rest at night for three days. Kumbhakarna pushed away the thin platter of rice set before him. "Let those who woke me eat first," he said. The guard stared in astonishment. Those who had sacrificed their own sleep to turn a sleeping body into an instrument of war had no place in the court's reckoning of exhaustion.

Ravana's messenger reported that Vibhishana had left the royal household and joined Rama's camp. For a while Kumbhakarna's face remained still. "Why did he leave?" "Betrayal of his brother," the messenger replied. Kumbhakarna did not accept this as an answer. He asked separately about Sita's captivity, the dispute in Ravana's assembly, and the gathering of troops on the far shore of the sea. Some of what the messenger related he had heard in the assembly himself; some had come from the mouths of guards. Kumbhakarna recognised where conjecture entered the account. Yet the news of Vibhishana's departure recalled their old disagreements. It did not seem impossible to him that his brother had found the courage to state his dissent before the royal court.

The passage leading to the royal residence had been propped up in two places with fresh timber. Near a small heap of rubble, five children were collecting rounded pieces of stone. A soldier ordered them away, but one little girl replied that her mother worked there during the first watch and she was

looking for her mother's stiff, worn sandals. Kumbhakarna moved the girl to one side and asked her name. "Will my telling you my name help find the sandals?" she asked. The sandals were not found. He gave the guard the task of removing the rubble safely; he offered the girl no firm promise of reassurance.

Mandodari met him outside the royal assembly. Instead of royal ornaments she held a small list tied with thread: which households had wounded people, where the supply of grain had been interrupted, which attendant was going about her duties after leaving her own child behind. "His Majesty wants your strength," she said, "but war also takes place in the bodies of those at home." Kumbhakarna stopped to read the list. Mandodari said it was incomplete; no news had come from houses that could no longer be reached. "What you have told me was not lost in my sleep," Kumbhakarna replied. But even after reading it, the choice before him had not become simple.

Ravana had walked behind his throne, as though he wished his brother to hear him standing rather than seated. "The city is in peril," he said, "and you ask about food and rest?" Kumbhakarna replied, "Stopping people from eating in a time of peril does not diminish the enemy." Ravana's gaze hardened. He uttered Vibhishana's name as though a single disagreement were an assault on the entire royal house. "If our brother is wrong, oppose him," Kumbhakarna said. "But first hear what he said." Ravana remained silent. Outside, a war conch sounded, yet its note could not fill the silence between them.

Ravana said that Sita had become a question of Lanka's honour: to let her return would be a declaration of cowardice. An old scene from a royal feast rose in Kumbhakarna's mind. That day a servant had broken a vessel and, out of fear, tried to conceal his fault. Kumbhakarna had spared him punishment in return for telling the truth. Now he said to Ravana, "An act begun in injustice is difficult to abandon when you have named it honour. Difficulty is no proof of righteousness." Ravana reminded his brother that the crisis was at the gate; there would be time to preach afterwards.

Kumbhakarna turned his eyes away from his brother for a moment. "If I do not fight," he asked, "who will protect the vulnerable people of my city?" Ravana answered by speaking of the soldiers' oath. "And if it was your own command that brought this war here?" Kumbhakarna asked again. Ravana grew furious at the question. He did not threaten Kumbhakarna with exile; he said that his place was in the front rank of battle. For an instant Kumbhakarna thought of the path Vibhishana had taken across the sea. But he resolved not to borrow his brother's path merely to spare himself the pain of making his own decision.

He spoke plainly. "To hold Sita here without her consent was wrong, and remains wrong. I will not call the war that began for this reason a righteous war. But I shall go with the defenders of the city. I shall give no order to strike the wounded, those who have laid down their arms, or families hiding in their homes. Whoever I can save, I shall save." Ravana said that the battlefield allowed no time to remember such distinctions. "Then the burden of

deciding is heavier still," Kumbhakarna replied. He understood that stating his restrictions would not stop the actual violence of war; his very presence among the soldiers would strengthen the campaign whose cause he believed to be wrong.

Leaving the assembly, he met a young commander who had selected a route of attack for him. On the map, the mark denoting a small village had been rubbed out and replaced with an arrow for the troops to pass through. "Were there people living within this mark, or only empty houses?" Kumbhakarna asked. The commander said that half the villagers had fled. As to the remaining half, he had no information. Kumbhakarna drew the erased mark again. "Send a messenger first. Do not treat a village as empty on the assumption that its people are absent." He added, "I have heard what that will cost. But I will not act as though I know what I do not know."

In the soldiers' camp, the bandage around a wounded man's knee had come loose. Kumbhakarna told the attendant to stop his hand. "Until the physician arrives, only cover it with cloth," he said. Food left from the earlier feast had reached the camp, but the woman distributing it asked to whom the share due to a dead soldier's family should be given. "We shall count after the war," said the commander. "Feeding the family tomorrow is a question for today," she replied. Kumbhakarna ordered a trustworthy officer to make an actual count of the families; it was not right to wait until morning for a full account of the soldiers' deaths.

As night deepened, the wheels of war chariots were being inspected at Lanka's gate. Kumbhakarna took up his weapons. The attendant who had put out the torch at dawn came bearing water. "You have woken," she said. "May we sleep now?" Kumbhakarna replied that the next watch was being brought in to relieve the guards. The old woman then asked, "And you?" For a little while he did not answer. "I am going into a war that began for a wrongful cause," he said at last. "Now I must not turn my face from the responsibility for what I myself shall do." His departure was a decision, not proof of innocence.

Videhapur, 2039. Morning rainwater had collected beneath the edge of the paved strip in the lane behind the hospital. Kamlesh Dabgar was sweeping down the water trapped at the edge of his thatched roof. Inside his little shop, strips of iron for fastening broken pitcher handles, a cobbler's knife and lengths of thread hung separately. There a man sent by the landlord pushed a new rent notice towards him, its figures written in red pencil. It demanded the increased amount from the third month onward, or that he vacate the premises within seven days. Kamlesh did not sign it.

During the previous year's dispute over the clay ground, Kamlesh had kept separate accounts of rent and customers' unpaid balances. Now the school fees of his two children and the medicine for his elderly mother depended on the money kept in a single chest at home. A meeting of the community forum had been arranged with Shabnam, but to make his customers' names and

addresses public would destroy their trust. Kamlesh separated two sheets: the first set out measurements, rent, the repair space and payments; the second contained descriptions of customers' personal belongings. He chose the first sheet for the public meeting.

Devi Gond reached the hospital half an hour before the appointed time to inspect her training register. Her duty roster recorded the inventory taken on her first day and the work performed under Salma's supervision, yet opposite three shifts that week someone had written 'Absent'. Devi brought the bus-fare receipts for those days, a copy of the training centre's attendance record and the hospital's goods-receipt numbers. An office assistant told her that, since her mother was unwell, it would be proper for Devi to leave her studies and stay at home. "Which doctor decided my mother's treatment," Devi asked, "and in which register is the order terminating my training?" The assistant was not qualified to answer the first question, and he had no document for the second.

Leaving home, Devi had been turning over in her mind their conversation of the night before. The old pain in her mother's right leg had grown worse; even walking to the hearth was becoming difficult. Devi's younger brother had said that household work was more important than a 'woman's education'. Her mother had tried to take off her bangles and give them to Devi, as though they would have to be sold to pay for the training. Devi had returned them. "Your medicine and the cost of my training are two separate questions," she had said. Quietly, her mother had asked, "Then who will give me my midday medicine on time?" It was a practical question; an encouraging sentence alone could not solve it.

In the hospital's inner veranda, Urmila was checking the list of new patient transfers. Two inspected vehicles were available under the strike's limited exception, but the main drainage channel was blocked. One patient's stretcher could not make the first turn. Urmila asked Devi to count the outer dressings; her instructor had not authorised her to lift patients without supervision. Devi counted seventeen cloth dressings where there should have been eighteen, and recorded the shortage. An employee whispered, "If one is missing, write eighteen in the register. It's an emergency." "If we hide the shortage," Devi replied, "we shall have to search again when the next patient needs them." Salma signed her supervisory verification in the margin.

Meanwhile, on the community platform at the clay ground, Kamlesh laid out his rent sheet. The landlord's representative argued that the opening of the road to the hospital had raised market land values, and that the landlord was therefore entitled to increase the rent. Kamlesh read out the dimensions of his shop: its small thatched roof, the corner that flooded in the rains, and the drain whose cleaning he had paid for himself. "I shall pay the original rent," he said. "But when half the shop is under water, why must I pay three times the amount without a written measurement?" Shakuntala Pandit,

standing nearby, said, “Show the receipts for everything. The repair of my vessels and his rent do not belong in a single account.”

Rama Karna, seated on the platform, said that a dispute over the rent of a private building could not be settled by a majority vote on a public platform. Whether fees were being imposed for the use of a community path and drainage system under cover of a rent increase, however, was a public question. Kamlesh read the third line of his sheet: ‘Contribution towards road improvement’. No measurements of repairs or approved expenditure had been supplied by the owner. In the municipal measurement book, repairs to that small drain were listed as proposed, not completed. Tara compared the dates on the two papers. They corroborated Kamlesh’s contention that a charge had been added to the rent notice by describing proposed work as already completed; the underlying dispute over ownership and rent nevertheless remained unsettled.

The landlord’s representative threatened Kamlesh, saying that people who complained on the platform would find no customers coming to their shops next time. Kamlesh stood and picked up the pitcher whose handle he had only half repaired. “The thread and the hours I have spent joining this handle are my work,” he said. “If you wish, I shall set out my legal claim in writing. But I will not hand over the private ledger of customers who trust me with broken vessels from their homes.” A young man demanded their names. Shabnam said that a list of customers’ private possessions was unnecessary to substantiate a public claim concerning rent. She entered the reason for refusing in the meeting minutes.

When Devi’s shift ended, her brother arrived at the hospital on his motorcycle. He said in the veranda that if their mother did not receive her medicine on time, Devi would be blamed. Devi asked Salma what would happen to the certificate due the following week if she abandoned a scheduled training shift midway. Salma said that regular attendance was required, but the rules for leave to provide care at home were separate. Showing her brother those rules, Devi said, “You take responsibility for giving Mother her medicine this afternoon. I can change my shift tomorrow morning, but I will not give up my training.” At first her brother refused. Then their mother herself spoke over the telephone: “You must learn how to give the medicine too.”

The bitterness between Devi and her brother did not disappear at once. Their mother said she would look after her own prescriptions and that her voice, too, would count when the family divided the hours of care. In a small notebook Devi wrote down three possible arrangements for help at home: her brother at midday, Devi in the evening, and paid help from a neighbour for two days, subject to her consent. Her brother asked where the money for the neighbour would come from. Devi admitted that her actual training allowance was still unpaid; from the money available at home that day, her

mother agreed to pay for assistance over two shifts. No one treated women's unpaid labour as the foundation of the solution.

Kamlesh's rent dispute became entangled with the hospital question at the platform meeting when a municipal employee proposed clearing the strip of repair shops to widen the lane temporarily for patient vehicles. Hira Meche arrived with a measuring rod. "The chief obstruction to turning the vehicle is not this shop," she said. "It is the rainwater and the immovable stones piled at the bend. If there is an official survey of this place, show us the original plan first." Kamlesh was willing to discuss limited use of an alternative passage at stated hours, but rejected permanent eviction. The need to move patients was real; that need did not automatically extinguish every private right.

He said that one of the two vehicles certified for a trial that day had reached its appointed patient ten minutes late because it had had to go round the outer edge of the flooded area. "Write down the ten minutes," she said. "There is no basis for saying the water has completely drained away." Kamlesh proposed lifting a narrow, temporary wooden panel in front of his doorway, provided the actual route for patient transport was measured first, the hours of use were written down, and the municipality accepted responsibility for closing the panel again. This limited cooperation was not conditional on relinquishing his permanent rights to the shop.

At this suggestion Shabnam halted the meeting. "These are two documents," she said. "One is temporary permission for the hospital's emergency route; the other is a private dispute over rent. They must be signed separately." Kamlesh gave agreement in principle to the first, subject to the measurements on site and the hours being fixed; on the second, he filed a written objection demanding the calculation of the new charge. Makan-Rama entered the date the document was received in the public forum's receipt register; this acknowledgement did not amount to the landlord's consent.

After midday, Devi's training included supervised care for an injured driver. Under Salma's direction she arranged the materials for removing a bandage, then asked the patient's permission. "Is this your first time?" the driver asked. "I am in training," Devi said. "Salma Didi is here. If you would rather I did not do it, another trained member of staff can." The driver consented. Devi's hands trembled once as she put on the fresh dressing, but Salma stopped the procedure and explained the sequence again. The patient's wound was examined in time; both Devi's error and its correction were recorded on her training sheet.

In the veranda, a hospital administrator told Devi that, since her family objected, she should leave the training and send someone else in her place. Devi placed her register and the supervisory signatures before him. "Disagreement in my family does not make me unfit for training," she said. "If I have broken an attendance rule, record it according to the rules; otherwise give me the grounds for removing my name in writing." The officer

made no decision that day, but authorised a review of the three shifts incorrectly marked absent and handed Devi the schedule for the following week. Devi copied it into her own notebook: an earlier shift had already disappeared on the strength of a verbal assurance.

At the second session that evening, Hira and Tara measured the corner of the repair shop. They found that removing the outer panel of the doorway would create room for one wheel, but would do nothing to repair the damaged wall of the main drain. The municipal employee acknowledged the distinction in his measurement book. Kamlesh estimated the labour cost of removing the temporary panel. One representative suggested that he should do it free as a community service. “If wood is cut by my hands, its price must be entered,” Kamlesh replied. “If I wish, I can donate my own share separately.” Two small copies of the measurements and costs were made. The temporary permission was set aside for dawn the day after next, when the actual need for medical transport would be assessed again.

When Devi arrived at her mother’s room that night, her brother had given the medicine on time, though he had spilt half the water. Their mother laughed. “Next time put a bowl underneath.” Her brother grew irritable at his own mistake. Devi instinctively began to pick up a cloth, but her mother stopped her. “This time he will clean it.” Her brother took the cloth and wiped up the water. This small change at home was no resolution passed by a council. Devi laid her training sheet by her mother’s pillow; seeing the red mark against an error, her mother asked, “Have they crossed out your name in red ink?” “No,” Devi replied. “It shows me where I have something to learn.”

At the night meeting Shabnam again spread copies of the five outstanding questions from the old agreement across the table. Temporary consent for hospital patient transport had not repaired the drainage; payment for preparing meals, the warehouse seal, and objections concerning public copies still required explicit decisions. The landlord was summoned to the hearing on Kamlesh’s rent dispute, with the original agreement and the statement of expenditure underlying the new fee. An assistant from Devvrat’s office wanted to add one line: ‘All parties are cooperating.’ Shabnam struck it out and wrote, ‘Limited proposal for one temporary route; other objections remain.’ Devi telephoned from the hospital to say she had received the training timetable, but the false entries of absence still had to be corrected.

When Kamlesh returned home, the join in the pitcher he had been repairing had dried. He gently filled it with water to test it; a single drop escaped. The pitcher was not wholly repaired, but he could now see where more thread was needed. His mother asked, “Will the shop remain?” “It has not been taken today,” Kamlesh replied. “The rent question remains, but my objection is on record.” His mother held a packet of medicine. She asked whether he would return the pitcher to its customer tomorrow or test it again. Kamlesh emptied it and turned it upside down. “I shall test it again,” he said.

Far away, a timetable for patient vehicles was posted at the hospital gate, and water remained trapped in the main drain just as before.

Chapter 100 · The Second Agreement

In the veranda of the municipal office, Urmila was turning over five sheets of paper soaked by the morning rain, trying to dry them. Water had dripped all night through a split corner of the roof; the times of the patient vehicles on the first sheet had blurred, but Tara had copied them out again from the previous day's original register. In a bamboo basket beneath the table lay an empty earthen cup of curd and some sticky leaves. The office attendant said the meeting would be delayed by another half-hour: Devvrat's car was held up at the city's other gate. Shabnam rose from her chair and went to the door. “The day has already begun for the people this meeting is meant to serve,” she said. “If the hour changes, tell those who have come. Do not leave the old time on the paper.”

Outside, Tulsi Tajpuriya stood holding a sheet with the names of his drivers. During the limited trial the night before, two vehicles had arrived at the appointed time, but one had been held at the gate for ten minutes; the mud along the drainage channel was still soft. Jamir, one of the drivers, showed the soles of his shoes. “I managed to pull the vehicle free,” he said, “but don't charge the responsibility for this mud to my insurance.” A nurse from the hospital, overhearing him, said that ten minutes could alter the course of someone's treatment. They agreed that the delay had been real. The question was who would bear the cost, and who had the authority, to prevent another.

Inside the office, Shabnam unfolded a copy of the first agreement. Beside its five conditions were the signatures of dissent from the first meeting, which an official press note had once described as a 'unanimous decision'. Rama Karna laid a clean sheet on the table—not as a proposal to tear up the old objections and write a new agreement in their place. “The new page will answer the first,” she said, “not replace it. Wherever there is no agreement, we shall write 'pending'.” Devvrat's assistant asked whether the outcome of the meeting would not then appear weak. “It isn't the paper that's weak,” Rama replied. “It's the work that remains unfinished. Letters cannot cover it up.” Naira wrote the first line in her notebook: 'Second meeting; first objections preserved.'

When Devvrat arrived, the warehouse inspector and two representatives of the traders accompanied him. He explained his lateness, but immediately said that the public statement must also record the assistance already provided to the hospital. Aniruddha, who had supervised the evacuation of patients overnight, replied, “There is a separate receipt for that assistance. On this page we need an answer to how quickly the patients can be taken out safely.” Before Devvrat could speak again, Shabnam motioned him to sit. The vacant chair facing him bore no person's name: its label read 'Responsible representative of

the warehouse'. This particular responsibility was being kept distinct from his roles on other committees.

As soon as the first condition was read aloud, Tulsi's drivers objected. The proposed words were: 'Vehicles shall remain available whenever required.' Jamir asked, “Who decides what is required? How many vehicles? And when will the drivers rest?” Tulsi laid down the inspection slips for the two approved vehicles from the previous day. “Two vehicles took part in the trial up to noon. For now, any official declaration of availability must be confined to specified hours,” he said. Describing the patients' condition, Urmila reminded them that only a doctor could certify the need for a transfer; the transport committee must not make patients' names public. One employee favoured the words 'at all times'. Aniruddha asked him, “Do you have drivers and safety clearances for all those hours?” The employee had no answer.

The clause on patient transport was finally revised. On a doctor's certified request, a journey would be arranged within a fixed period, with the name of an available, inspected vehicle and a consenting driver recorded; any delay would be entered with its cause and the actual time. The ordinary fare, night-risk allowance and rest hours for the drivers would be kept in a separate register; the old arrears that had led to the strike would not be wiped out. A trader said that under such conditions there would not be enough vehicles. Without raising his voice, Tulsi replied, “Write down how many we have. Find a safe alternative for the rest. Writing four on a sheet will not turn two vehicles into four.” For the first time Urmila sat back with relief, though she knew that a time entered in a register did nothing in itself to lessen pain in a human body.

For the second condition, Tara spread out the damp map. Hira Meche compared its markings with the red marks made during the night's measurements. The water had begun to move after temporary debris was removed, but it had collected again beside the broken wall of the main drain. The municipal engineer proposed cutting through Ramesh's field embankment to give the water a straight course; repairing the channel that way would be cheaper. Ramesh's wife, who had come with a packet of seed, set her hand on the map. “Cheaper in your accounts. Who will count the erosion of my field?” The engineer said that in a public emergency private objections could be heard later. Shabnam asked him for the written authority for that assertion. He had no order he could show them.

Ramesh's wife gave two dates concerning the embankment: when the grass had been cut, and when the water had changed direction. She did not have complete title deeds to the land in her name, but she was present because her cultivation was affected and the question of who could grant permission had to be heard. Tara explained that the public pathway's width and the private field boundary appeared on the same map; even a preliminary survey before agreement did not confer permission to enter. Hira used a wooden rod to demonstrate the depth inside the public drain. A small blockage of stones

could be cleared there without touching the private embankment. The engineer asked for more time to submit a complete plan. The meeting authorised one limited part of the work, not the plan as a whole.

Just then Paro Pattharkatta came in carrying a heavy bag. There was an old white scar on her left wrist; the bag held samples of two kinds of stone and several different chisels. The municipal contractor wanted her to cover the damaged drain with a thick stone slab and sign a certificate of 'complete structural safety'. Paro placed her samples on the table. “I can cut away the loose edges, make the surface level and fashion a safe slope. I don't calculate the load borne by soil that's being washed out from underneath.” The contractor muttered, “Then refusing to do it now means the work comes to a standstill.” “Doing it the wrong way,” Paro said, “means it will collapse again.”

Paro produced a receipt for a sample job she had done earlier. It recorded a day's wages, not responsibility for an entire bridge. She would not accept the attempt to place approval of a whole drainage structure upon a small artisan's name in the new contract. Lalit Vishwakarma, who had lost a contract after questioning an earlier slab inspection, examined the samples. Stonecutting, the placing of supports and the structural load test, he said, belonged to different stages. Paro made her decision at once: she would accept a small, safe repair job based on recorded measurements, provided the engineer took written responsibility for testing the ground and her wages were fixed in advance. She might lose the contractor's larger commission. But her chisel would still move on terms she had chosen herself.

The third condition, access to the warehouse, caused the greatest commotion. The inspector presented two lists. The first contained medical supplies that had passed inspection; the second, medicines held back because their labels did not match, together with other consignments still under examination. Devvrat said that removing the items on the first list would at least reduce the hospital's shortage. Aniruddha acknowledged that need. But in the inspector's draft, both lists came under one order of 'emergency release'. Rama picked up a red pencil. “One list bears a mark showing the inspection is complete; the other says testing is continuing. One seal does not make them equal.” Devvrat said that complicated procedures would leave the people needing the supplies waiting. “If the wrong medicines are delivered,” Aniruddha replied, “their suffering will be greater still.”

The warehouse workers' representative asked who would pay the wages of those guarding the sealed goods when the gate was opened for a limited period. The first proposal had not addressed the question at all. The inspector said that the guards were government employees. “We are not government guards,” the worker replied. “We will count the bundles inside, close the locks again, and we want wages for that time.” Shabnam added another line to the copy: the presence of the examining officer, the hour of entry, serial numbers of items removed, an account of the resealing, and payment with the workers'

signatures. Devvrat's assistant called it a device for increasing costs. An elderly warehouse watchman said, “Tomorrow you'll ask me whether the night lock was opened. That is why today's hour must be written down.”

For the fourth condition, Ruhani set not her notebook but two lidded containers on the table. One contained a portion of that day's leftover rice; the other, a measured quantity of uncooked lentils. “The register shows exactly how much was cooked,” she said, “but the part that accounts for all the hours the women spent at the stoves is blank.” A representative of the municipal donors' association proposed making public photographs of the donated meals. Ruhani asked which families had consented to having their children's hunger photographed. The representative tried to change the subject. “Put donations in the list of donations,” Ruhani said. “Don't hide the wages of the kitchen behind a line of blessings.”

A young cook who had come with Ruhani said that during her night shift a neighbour looked after her child, and that getting home cost her two fares. She did not threaten to stop work; she wanted a complete account of what she was owed. Devvrat proposed that money from one donor's fund should cover three days' grain for the meals. Ruhani agreed to that much, but insisted that the cooks' rate per shift and the cleaning workers' wages be secured from a separate fund. No one was to presume that service would continue automatically after three days; there would be another meeting and a fresh agreement. For the first time, the paper had three separate columns: donations, purchases and payments.

Sona Kathautiya was waiting at the door. Two slips for her unpaid cartage were still awaiting the signature of an old handcart operator across the railway line. An activist from one of the donors' groups urged her to speak at the meeting as a 'selfless helper'. “First pay the cartage and labour for the day I delivered those two bamboo frames,” Sona replied. “If I choose to give something of my own, record that as a donation.” In her bag was an old receipt grey with dust. She had also brought a proposal for a new delivery: bamboo boards for the hospital's temporary safe passage, this time with the freight charge and the risks of transport written down in advance.

Someone asked whether it was proper to think of profit in an emergency of this kind. Sona put down her bag. “My handcart man has been asking for his fare for three days. Whether his son can go to school is an emergency too,” she answered. After examining the slips, Rama said that the other party would have to be notified so that the true amount of the old arrears could be reconciled; if Sona wished, she could register her request for payment now. Sona signed. She fixed a separate rate for transporting the new bamboo boards and stipulated that her photograph must not appear on the donors' association's poster without her permission. “Those who want credit,” she said, “should take credit for what they themselves have given.”

Meanwhile an old transport slip made out in the name of Bedhi was produced. Sona said that this name had been given to her as the location of a

job; she had delivered the goods using the stopping place written on the slip and the driver's spoken directions, not by observing the bend of a river. A municipal assistant asked whether Bedhi was the river that met this drainage channel. “I don't know,” Sona said plainly. “The name on the paper is the name of a place in the records. I have not seen the streams join with my own eyes.” Tara recorded the name in the river register separately from the address on the transport slip. No map of an unverified confluence was drawn merely for the contractor's convenience. Sona did, however, come away with one thing clear: in claiming her arrears she could not change the place name on the slip and add it to the account of another village.

The weary voices at the meeting rose again as soon as the page concerning the fifth condition was opened. The administration wanted the public copy to read 'All parties agree'. Shabnam read out the limited decisions reached under each of the five headings. Silence among those present could not be treated as consent. Naira wanted to write a summary for the newspaper, but she had no permission to publish the private details of patients, workers or the warehouse. Rama proposed three separate documents: a public copy, an authorised copy retaining the signatures and objections, and a private annex restricted by consent. None of the pages from the failed first meeting would be removed.

Devvrat's assistant said, “If the old objections remain attached, business confidence will suffer.” “How long can confidence endure if mistakes are concealed?” Shabnam asked. This time Devvrat himself silenced his assistant. He said that whatever responsibilities his office accepted should be written down with dates and signatures; the earlier sum given in hospital aid should not be presented as an achievement of this agreement. Naira recorded his statement, but did not regard his new signature as proof of innocence regarding the old instructions under examination in the investigation of Mahesh's killing. The two official sets of papers belonged to different matters. Devvrat did not challenge that distinction; nor was his silence described as an admission of guilt.

By noon a written draft had been prepared, but one new sentence appeared in fine print: 'Permission to use necessary private property along the route of emergency repairs shall be deemed implicit.' Ramesh's wife opened the page and found the sentence. “Because I sat here, my permission to use my field has somehow been given?” she asked. The engineer said that such language was customary in standard forms. Tara struck it out and wrote that inspection, emergency passage and permanent construction each required separate permissions, and that every proposed use of private property required a prior written decision from the person affected. Beside her name Ramesh's wife had the words 'Use of field embankment refused for the present' entered. The deletion of that sentence made the document's real intention clearer than the original wording had done.

Paro Pattharkatta then read the new short contract for safe repairs. The municipal inspector proposed assigning her only the marking of the broken

edge and the preparation of stones suitable for placing a temporary slab in a safe location; the engineer would certify the load-bearing capacity. Paro looked at the scar on her wrist and asked who would have the authority to stop work if the water rose again while she was working. “I shall give the order,” the inspector said. “I am the one who uses the chisel,” Paro replied. “My feet will feel the rising water first. I want the written right to give the signal to stop.” At last a clause was added allowing work to be halted when a safety objection was recorded.

Paro signed the proposal for the first payment at the meeting, but fixed the time for bringing out her tools only after half the agreed amount had been paid in advance. At this, the contractor threatened to give the larger contract to another artisan. “A large contract will not fill my daughter's notebooks,” Paro said, “if the blame for a fallen slab is laid at my door.” Before going home she arranged a day with Lalit to inspect the new measurements. Lalit said that he would promise nothing beyond the limits of his own work in wood. Their small partnership rested on respect for one another's experience, not on responsibility for a structure neither had seen.

Rama read out the final wording of all five conditions once more. The first specified a limited number of vehicles, fixed hours and a risk allowance; the second, identified safe work inside the public drain and a separate objection to using the private embankment; the third, controlled access to inspected warehouse supplies under seal and separate wages for the workers; the fourth, donated grain for the kitchen and payment to its labourers; and the fifth, a public copy, a register of objections and protection for the private annex. Shabnam had the responsible office, the date of inspection and the means of notification in the event of failure entered beside every heading. The words 'unanimous agreement' were not written. The document was called a 'second working agreement within specified limits'.

Signatures were still needed from all concerned. The traders' representatives would not agree to opening all the warehouse locks, but accepted a limited period for releasing inspected supplies. The drivers attached a separate objection concerning the outstanding payments from their strike. Ramesh's wife examined the map and acknowledged notice of the work within the public drain, but recorded again her objection to the use of her field. Sona signed the new freight rate without removing the page claiming her old arrears. Paro signed the register for her small, safe repair, not a certificate of safety for the entire structure. Signatures accumulated on the document, but the limits of each signature became clearer too.

As the papers were being sealed, a small argument broke out outside the office. A man from the donors' association suggested garlanding people at the inauguration of the agreement. Lifting two empty cooking pots, Ruhani said, “Ask whoever would pay for the flowers. My kitchen has no oil left for tonight.” Sona asked which account would provide the advance for tomorrow's delivery. An official assistant wanted to photograph the newly

signed papers, but Shabnam first ordered the private names to be concealed in the public copy. Instead of preparing a celebration, people were gathering their slips for the work they had to do next. The scene was not one of despair. Here, in place of competing for credit, one could hear the names of payments owed.

Before evening, the first small piece of work began on the public section of the drain. Hira drove in a measuring rod, Tara recorded the new measurements separately from the old markings, and Paro marked only the places where it was safe to remove the loose stone along the edge. No heavy slab had yet been laid. A young man said that by morning the drain would be open. Paro looked at him. “Work has begun today,” she said. “The full path for the water to escape has not yet been made.” A little bubble rose from the mud inside the drain; no one in the crowd heard it burst. But Hira saw that the water on the measuring rod remained at the same level.

At the hospital gate, Tulsi's two vehicles stood in their assigned places. Urmila compared her watch with a nurse's. Each patient proposed for transfer the next day would be assessed separately; someone who needed treatment there was not to be moved merely because a vehicle was available. One patient's mother asked whether the water inside the hospital would be stopped. “Work has begun on the drain outside,” Urmila replied. “What is dripping inside the hospital still needs to be examined. I'll tell you when the time is certain.” Hearing this, the woman sat down beside the bed. The truthful limits of work meant more to her than an empty assurance.

Naira was preparing to go home with a copy of the public document when Urmila, putting away an old pen, asked, “At next year's urahi, will you get into the water, or will you measure water on paper again?” Naira laughed. “If I get in, will you come to rescue me, or write down the time first?” “First I'll see whether you really need to come out,” Urmila said, “or whether you've gone into the water for no reason. Then I'll give you my hand.” Both laughed. No drum for the urahi was beating anywhere. They were only talking about the next year's communal festival of cleaning the water bodies, and imagining that perhaps they might find a couple of hours for themselves.

Urmila said that if there was a separate arrangement for the hospital laundry by then, she would actually take a day off. Naira said that she would choose one day off from her next series of reports. “Will there be any days left for you?” Urmila asked. “No one knows how many days are left,” Naira replied. “But why must we always write half of the day we have today in someone else's name?” Urmila rose with a smile. She picked up the thermos she had left on the table. The tea inside had gone cold, but they drank a sip each all the same.

When the municipal office closed that night, two copies of the five sheets were placed in separate boxes. The public copy would be posted the following morning; Rama kept the original, with the objections attached, in her authorised register. Shabnam checked the next date for the measurements

once more. Devvrat's office had signed for its responsibilities, but his earlier instructions and the file investigating Mahesh's death remained where they were. The consignments held back inside the warehouse were still under seal. Sona put the acknowledgement of her cartage claim into her bag; Paro wrapped the edge of her chisel in a cloth. Outside, near the hospital gate, two vehicles stood in their places, while the water in the drain still stirred slowly. The second agreement was not a bridge built over that water. It was a promise substantial enough to be measured and tested tomorrow—and challenged if it broke.

Chapter 101 · The Patient's Time

At five forty-two in the morning, a third drop fell from the ceiling into the brass bowl in the hospital laundry. Urmila had not counted the first two; she had been opening a bundle of linen. The third fell directly onto the edge of a freshly washed sheet. She lifted the bundle and set it on a dry bench. Beyond the window, the courtyard water had not drained away all night. Mud had choked the channel towards the gate, while inside the laundry a separate trickle came through an old joint. On the first page she wrote two distinct headings: 'Water flowing in from outside' and 'Leakage inside'. To call both things one fault might make the cleaning quicker, but it would not make the repairs right.

A public copy of yesterday's five-condition agreement hung at the hospital gate. Beneath the first condition were the words 'two inspected vehicles'; the sentence said nothing of the combined weight of medicines, patients, relatives and linen. Urmila compared the hands of the clocks. The one on the wall was five minutes slow; the nursing room's was two minutes fast. She called Aniruddha. "If three clocks give us three different times, in whose name shall we record the patient's delay?" Aniruddha reconciled the two registers against the time on his telephone, but also had the wall clock's error entered into the record. Erasing an error would not, by itself, correct the time to which someone had testified yesterday.

In the first bed, the elderly Saraswati Devi held her daughter-in-law's hand. She had been struggling to breathe since the night, and the doctor did not consider her condition stable. In the next room little Rehana could not raise her injured foot; sweat had gathered on the shoulder of her mother, Anwari. A medical decision had already been made to send the third patient to another centre after examination, but the medicines being administered and some equipment would have to accompany the patient. Standing between the three beds, Aniruddha said, "Someone who needs immediate care here will not be sent away simply because a vehicle is waiting. And before we send anyone, we must speak to the centre that will receive them."

Urmila took out cords of two colours: one for the bundles of washed linen, the other for bags of used linen. While crossing the wet floor of the laundry, a trainee put both kinds of bag on the same trolley. Urmila stopped the trainee's hand. "This isn't an accounting problem about too little linen. It's a matter of patient safety." The trainee was frightened; the work had continued without a break since the night. Instead of leaving the trainee with a reprimand, Urmila called for an empty trolley and gave the young worker two minutes to drink water. Then she counted: seven washed sheets, five clean covers, and four bags of used material. The two sheets that had got wet were not included among the clean supplies available for use.

Tulsi Tajpuriya's two vehicles arrived at the gate. Looking at the mud on the tyres, Jamir said the first vehicle would become stuck at the bend by the drain. Madan Raut arrived at the same moment in his small vehicle, having promised to take the schoolchildren to school. The watchman assumed that a third patient vehicle had now been found. Madan shut the vehicle's rear hatch. “I haven't taken the children to school yet. If you want me to carry a patient, first put in writing who is responsible for getting the children there safely by some other means.” The rear bench of his vehicle was folded down; unfolding it would not automatically turn the vehicle into medical transport.

Madan had the headmistress called on the telephone at the meeting table. Seven small children were waiting at the appointed turn in the road in the village behind them; two of their parents had already gone to the fields. The headmistress said she could send a teacher to the turn, but she could not put all the children into one rickshaw. “It's an emergency,” a man said. “The children can walk by themselves for one day.” Madan's voice hardened. “Heavy goods vehicles go fast along that half-mile of road. I have given my word to take those children. Leaving them stranded on the way would be a wrong as well.” For a while the committee studied both maps, one of the school entrance and the other of the hospital gate.

In the end the headmistress decided to send two teachers to separate turns in the road and notify the children's families. Madan would complete his first journey to the school; meanwhile the patient's medical assessment would continue. Madan's first fare would be paid from the school committee's account, and the hospital's second journey would be entered in a different register. No teacher was assigned an extra shift without notice under the name of a ‘donation’. Madan wrote the scheduled school arrival time in his notebook and started the engine. Watching him go, Urmila grew a little impatient, but the hospital's clock could not swallow up the schoolchildren's time.

Haricharan Paswan stepped forward. His contracted vehicle had carried empty medicine crates at dawn; the seats and floor needed cleaning again. An employee said that, since a patient had to be transported, it was enough that “the vehicle is empty”. Haricharan pointed to a broken catch inside it. “If the bench shifts, the responsibility for the patient will land on my head. Inspect it first.” Jamir, Tulsi's driver, and the hospital employees examined the places where passengers could sit safely. Haricharan proposed that for the time being his vehicle carry only inspected equipment, necessary supplies and a patient's family's approved belongings—not seriously ill patients until a doctor and transport inspector found it suitable.

Haricharan's ledger had separate columns for the driver's attendance at dawn, petrol, cleaning and hours lost waiting. The contractor's representative proposed paying half the fare in the name of service to the sick. “I can reduce my own share of the profit,” Haricharan replied. “I cannot cut a driver's night in half.” A young driver, who had been standing for three hours without rest,

noticed that ‘idle’ had mistakenly been written beside his name. Haricharan handed him a pencil. The young man entered the actual hours of his shift. The correction did not instantly restore his exhausted body, but the register now recorded the reason another driver had to be called.

By seven o'clock Salma Sheikh had opened the temporary service desk. Anwari held out her daughter Rehana's registration papers; one digit of the identification number differed in an older copy. The clerk at the window said no transfer slip could be issued until the records matched. Supporting the girl's foot, Anwari asked, “Shall I take my daughter home so that I can get the papers corrected?” Salma first called the nurse. Having ascertained the need for medical examination and relief of the child's pain, she said plainly, “Correcting an identification record is one task; treating a patient is another.” She arranged a provisional, individually issued treatment slip. The girl's full name was not posted on the public list at the gate.

The clerk warned Salma that questions would be raised about such a provisional slip when the bill was prepared. Salma knew the terms of her month-to-month appointment at the desk; an allegation of error could put her livelihood at risk. Nevertheless she lodged a written objection: ‘Urgent medical need must not wait for correction of identification details.’ Rather than sign, the billing officer wanted to give verbal approval. “If I am putting this in writing,” Salma said, “the answer should be in writing too.” With Anwari's permission she placed only the essential documents in a private envelope; there would be no photograph identifying the patient for a public gathering.

At seven twenty-seven Aniruddha ended a call to the other centre. A bed had been assigned there for one patient; the entry to be used and arrangements for continuing medication had been confirmed. Urmila read through the inventory of supplies. An assistant said that one bottle was unavailable at the hospital and could be procured from the market after the vehicle set off. Aniruddha refused. It would not be right to send a patient onto the road while leaving the responsibility for ongoing treatment incomplete. The journey would not begin without confirmation of suitable available supplies from the pharmacy, directions for their use and the agreement of the receiving centre. The objection cost eight minutes; those minutes were entered not as ‘unnecessary delay’ but as time required for safety.

In one place the water in the veranda was now more than two fingerbreadths deep. At the rear door, Hira Mech measured it with a short stick and showed that the water outside was holding at the level where the drain's outlet was blocked. The place where water dripped inside the laundry was different: a roof joint and a damp wall. Tara marked the two boundaries on the plan in different colours. An employee wanted both entered as ‘the ordinary effects of rain’. Hira showed him the difference between an old, dried stain on the wall and the fresh line left today. “Rain is one event,” she said. “Whether a joint has broken calls for another examination.”

Urmila held the laundry's old accounts. Twice in the preceding week clean linen had arrived late: on one day the drainage had stopped, while on the other no water had come through the laundry tap. She recorded the difference between those earlier incidents with care. A hospital assistant proposed preparing one combined complaint and calling everything a ‘flood’. “How shall we connect a laundry tap with the town's embankment?” Urmila asked quietly. She sent the count of medical supplies and the responsibility for building repairs to their respective departments. Information needed to pass between the two; responsibility did not need to be thrown from one to the other.

At eight fifty-six the trained staff arrived to lift the first patient. One family member was permitted to accompany the patient, but the woman's elderly mother and small child were standing at the hospital gate. “How far am I supposed to go,” she asked, “leaving my mother here?” Salma and Shabnam separately recorded a safe place for them to wait, someone who could carry word to the household, and a contact at the other centre. Someone in the crowd said all these questions would cause the vehicle to leave without them. Looking at the clock, Urmila replied, “If we haven't settled who will go with the patient, are we to put that person down halfway along the road?” She checked the consent form, leaving room also to hear the patient's own objection, should there be one.

At eight fifty-nine the vehicle came through the gate, but the gravel scattered over the mud in front of its wheels slipped away. Jamir switched off the engine. Irritated, a hospital officer ordered the vehicle to be pulled through by force. Tulsi said no patient would be put aboard until a safe strip had been laid. Paro Pattharkatta had marked the limits of the small repair yesterday; the stones still had no heavy structural support. Returning from his school journey, Madan saw the crowd gathering at the gate. He parked at the side and helped clear a way for passengers, but would not accept responsibility for pulling the hospital vehicle without an inspection.

At nine twelve the vehicle's wheels crossed the temporary strip made safe for its passage. Urmila wrote in the register: scheduled entry, eight fifty; actual entry, nine twelve. Not twenty-one minutes but twenty-two. The nurse said the vehicle had jolted repeatedly, and that too should be on record. In his driver's log Jamir entered the time taken to lay the temporary strip and the name of the person who helped. A journalist asked whose death this delay might have caused. Urmila did not answer; Aniruddha had said that no claim about a patient's outcome should be made without medical examination. Naira understood the meaning of that silence: a hasty accusation without evidence could weaken the evidence of real negligence as well.

Meanwhile, Saraswati Devi's breathing had grown still more difficult. Aniruddha and the medical staff on duty were attending to her. Her daughter-in-law came out once and asked Urmila, “The vehicle has gone. Why aren't you taking her?” Urmila called the doctor. Aniruddha explained

that Saraswati's condition was such that the journey by this route could not be judged safe; at that moment she was receiving treatment where she lay. Her daughter-in-law grew angry. “Didn't they tell us yesterday that everything would be all right once the vehicles were found?” Aniruddha did not say that everything would be all right. He asked for the source of that earlier verbal assurance to be recorded.

At nine eighteen the first transfer's actual departure was entered in the register. Madan's vehicle took clean supplies and a small piece of luggage belonging to one approved accompanying family member; Haricharan's vehicle took a checked crate from the pharmacy by a separate route. The patient travelled with the necessary medical staff. The numbers of all three vehicles, the seals on the supplies and the separate fare slips were recorded. “There are three receipts for what people call one journey,” Shabnam said, “and three distinct responsibilities as well.” No photograph was taken to advertise anyone's generosity. But as dust rose behind the departing vehicles, the people waiting at the gate fell silent for a little while.

At nine thirty-six Rehana's injured foot had been examined. The doctor said she could be treated here; there was no need to send her to another centre. Relief came over Anwari's face, but she asked whether the mistake in the identification record had been corrected. Salma told her that treatment was under way, and that the application to amend the register retained both the old number and the source of the new, correct copy. Anwari examined her own signature. An employee wanted the mistake struck from the papers entirely. “Don't strike it out,” Anwari stopped him. “Write that the first number was wrong, and when it was corrected.” Meanwhile her daughter sat on the bed watching a tiny bird outside the window.

At ten seven Saraswati's daughter-in-law was called back into the room. Despite the care she was receiving, Saraswati's condition had deteriorated. At ten fourteen the doctor certified her death. Urmila stood beside the wall, the page with the linen count still in her hand, but at that moment its numbers offered her no support. The daughter-in-law asked softly, “When I let go of her hand, was she still alive?” A nursing attendant said she could not account for the exact seconds in question. Aniruddha confined himself to what could be affirmed from the treatment record and the final condition the staff had observed.

The daughter-in-law, whose name was Shailaja, came out of the room and began searching for her slippers. They were on her feet. Salma offered her a chair, but Shailaja would not sit. “Write down the name of whoever said that if the vehicle came, Mother would be saved,” she said. Aniruddha did not claim to know whether he had heard that promise; Shailaja's statement was entered in the complaints register in her own words. The sequence of treatment times, medical decisions and vehicle delays was preserved. Shailaja's grief was not dismissed as ‘confusion’, but neither was the delay declared the sole cause of death.

Shailaja asked whether she would have to pay another fare to take Saraswati's body home. An employee began talking of an ‘emergency service’, though he did not know the rules. Urmila went to the office to ask about the proper procedure. In the meantime Shailaja telephoned her younger brother-in-law. The first question from the other end was, “What did Mother say?” For some time Shailaja did not reply. Then she said, “Her hand was warm at the end.” After that single sentence she fell silent. On the wet veranda floor, a woman employed to sweep was quietly clearing away the water. Her task was to make the passage safe, not to turn grief into a spectacle.

In the first hour of the afternoon, confirmation arrived that the patient vehicle had reached the other centre. There was a discrepancy between the receiving desk's signature and the count of supplies received: three linen covers had been sent, but only two had been recorded on arrival. Urmila read out the inventory again over the telephone. The third cover was found tied separately beneath the patient's bed. She recorded its proper location without erasing the original mistake from the register. There was also a four-minute difference in the actual arrival time: stopping at the gate was not the same as handing the patient over in the ward. She wrote, “‘Arrived’ and ‘handed over’ do not mean the same time.”

Haricharan's driver came with the day's accounts. The column for the risk allowance promised for the emergency journey had been left blank on his payment slip. Instead of accepting the receipt, Haricharan marked it in red pencil. “According to the papers, we did not transport three patients today. We carried equipment and the family's belongings,” he said. An employee asked why vehicle operators kept accounts in such minute detail. “If we change what was true yesterday to suit today's convenience,” Haricharan replied, “there'll be no wages left for anybody the day after tomorrow.” He gave the driver time to eat and rest; he made no promise yet of another journey.

Madan Raut returned to the committee with the school's arrival register. All seven children had reached their appointed destinations under the teachers' supervision, though one girl's mother had complained that she had received the message late. Madan placed that complaint beside the register. A hospital assistant asked him to reserve his vehicle from early morning the following day. “I won't promise any time without the joint committee,” Madan answered. “Children and patients both need to arrive on time, but one vehicle cannot be sent to two places at once.” The committee itself undertook to find another arrangement for the next day's school run.

Salma was closing the window of her service desk when the ward supervisor summoned her to read her written objection. He said it would damage the hospital's reputation. Salma answered, “Someone who came for treatment was told first to make the digits in an identification record match. That is true. Let the doctor have the credit for the treatment the doctor gave, and let the obstruction that was wrong be changed.” The officer offered her no

immediate commendation. He did, however, agree that the next shift should receive written, not merely spoken, instructions that emergency treatment was not to be held up while a registration entry was being corrected. Salma kept a signed copy for herself.

Before evening, Urmila separated two pages. The first recorded the scheduled and actual minutes of the patient transfer, the medicines, equipment, linen, family consent and confirmation of arrival. The second concerned the hospital's water: drainage obstructed outside, leakage inside, the loss of wet linen and the separate labour of cleaning. The medical record of Saraswati's death was not included in either public copy; it was kept for authorised access by the family and any possible examination. The acknowledgement of Shailaja's complaint was placed in her hands. Slipping it into her bag, she said, “Don't reduce Mother to these figures. But preserve every minute that is true.”

Behind the hospital, Hira and Tara were taking measurements along the drain again. The temporary strip had turned the water aside a little, but the inner layer of the old wall crumbled at a touch. Beside the words ‘small, safe repair’ in yesterday's agreement, Tara entered today's measurements. She would not sign a certificate of complete repair until the engineer's approval had been reconciled with the workers' actual testimony. From a distance Urmila saw a white curtain stirring at an upper window of the hospital. The bowl that had been empty at dawn was now more than half full of water. She lifted it and poured the water outside; at that very moment a new drop sounded against its bottom. Tomorrow's work would begin with that sound. The day's lives and losses had already been written down.

Chapter 102 · The Layers of Repair

When Gomati Beldar scraped the thin cement along the edge of the drain with the blade of her spade, a band of yellow earth appeared beneath the wall. The morning's water had already entered the crack. From above, it looked like the smooth surface of a recent repair; but at the touch of a finger, grit began to crumble away. Gomati set her spade on the ground and stopped the two labourers who were lifting baskets. “Don't put your feet there. We were told to make this surface, but no one told us to lay the bricks beneath it.” Tara Mallik came from the pond's edge and cordoned off the line with rope. At that moment, washed linen belonging to Urmila could be seen hanging in the window of the hospital's old wing. The death of Saraswati Devi the day before still troubled everyone.

Aditi arrived carrying the office's thick map and a copy of the previous inspection. Behind her came the municipal repairs officer and a young man responsible for examining the contractor's accounts. The officer's first question was, “If we fill this tunnel-like hole, can vehicles pass today?” Gomati picked up a red brick lying on the paved surface and held it out. On one side was a hard layer of old lime mortar; on the other, a thin coating of new cement. “The vehicles do need to pass,” she said. “But this isn't a hole. It's the mouth of an old watercourse that has been blocked. If I call what I've seen a hole, water will collect here again tomorrow.” Aditi did not immediately put the brick among her papers. First she recorded the place, the time and the name of the person who had lifted it.

During the previous day's patient transfer, the vehicle's wheel had become stuck in mud at the hospital gate. A temporary strip had been laid to allow the patient to leave, but no one had erased the recorded entry time of nine twelve. Urmila came today with a copy of that register. “The medical cause of Saraswati Devi's death cannot be established from this earth,” she said. “But neither should we abandon the inquiry into why the vehicle stood at the gate for twenty-two minutes.” The repairs officer objected that water was also leaking from pipes inside the hospital. Tara replied, “Exactly. The internal leakage will be investigated separately. Don't hide the evidence of a blocked watercourse behind those pipes.”

Gomati opened her old wage register. On its first page were entered eight loads of earth carried from the old mound at Nonthara; the second recorded payment for filling behind the warehouse on the third day. The measurements given to the labourers had extended only as far as the warehouse gate. They had been shown no order to block the mouth of the watercourse. “You did the work, so you must take responsibility for it,” said the contractor's young man. Gomati took the register back out of his hand. “I take responsibility for the earth I carried. I've written down where I was told

to unload it and how many hours I worked. But how can responsibility for a map and an order I was never shown be entered against my name?"

Amrita Chauhan arrived with a small brass-coloured seal from an old house in Nonthara. The seal had not belonged to her father; it was associated with an old collective sale of earth in the village, and she did not present it as proof of ownership. Amrita maintained that after the industries in Nonthara closed, a new contract map had been laid over an incomplete copy of the land-reform promises made to the families. "Gomati's hours are not my land," she said firmly, "and the old earth of my village is not a fault to be charged against Gomati's livelihood. I want the chain of revenue records." Aditi arranged for her claim to be registered under a separate application number.

The contractor's young man looked at the two women and laughed. "Beldars and Noniyas both work with the same earth. Make one collective document." Amrita stepped forward to answer him, but Gomati raised a hand. "We'll give evidence together, because the work was done in the same area. But that doesn't mean I was given Nonthara's land in place of wages, or that the money still owed to me will be paid by settling Amrita's old claim." Tara prepared a copy with two columns: claim to land, claim for wages. Amrita placed the old mark beside her demand; for the first time, Gomati signed with all her working hours set out in full.

Before noon, people gathering for the annual day of clearing the mouth of the watercourse began to assemble beneath the peepal tree nearby. Children had brought a drum and coloured paper flags, but at Tara's instruction the flags were planted on high, safe ground. Everyone was told in advance that no earth was to be dug outside the designated safe route. Hira stretched out his measuring rod. Ramani Bind marked the fishermen's way to the pond, and Phoolmati Tiyar the place where the nets were kept. The work was being done on the same day, but fishing at the landing, water for the fields and access through the hospital gate were three distinct uses. A proposal to open the blocked mouth without authorisation in the name of the festivities was rejected.

Tara drove bamboo stakes into the ground at three places. At the first stake, the accumulated water was half a palm deep; at the second, a handspan; at the third, inside the eroded section of old brickwork, the water was almost still. Counting the minutes, she compared the markings at all three points. Even after the rain had stopped, the water levels were not falling together. A dumped heap and a cement slab met at the drainage mouth, but how much water each obstruction was responsible for remained a matter of estimation. Hira wrote in his notebook: 'Direction of flow observed; full measurement of causes outstanding.'

An elderly man began to recount how the watercourse used to be opened on the appointed day. In earlier times, people cut the grass and cleared the silt, then bound reeds into a small arrangement to restrain the water during floods. This time he suggested calling the labourers in the night and cutting

through the entire bank. Gomati would not agree. “Our ancestors knew the earth, and that's why those methods were right for them. But vehicles now use this ground to reach the hospital; there are iron pipes underneath and unknown filling below the wall. To wield spades in the dark would be to send the workers into a deep pit.” After listening to her, the old man told his grandson to put the spade beside the drum.

A village girl who was cutting paper for the flags asked Gomati, “Is the brick you removed old or new?” Gomati let her touch the two layers with a finger. “My eyes can tell you old from new. To establish the exact year would take a laboratory or dependable records.” The girl asked again, “Then why does everyone think they can tell who's at fault from the colour of a brick?” Amrita smiled. “A name for the guilty is found quickly, child; papers about payment and responsibility take longer.” The children began beating the drum, but did not cross the lime line marking the limits of the work.

Phoolchan Lodh arrived, cleaning the earth from his feet. The surface of the plot offered to him for rehabilitation was dry, but when he dug down half a hand's depth, he found a sticky layer that held the water beneath it. From his experience of farming he believed the layer might make transplanting rice possible after the rains; in winter, however, there would be no irrigation route. The officer held up the papers. “Eighteen dhurs are eighteen dhurs.” Phoolchan could not bring himself to smile. “Whether a house can stand on eighteen dhurs, or seed can grow there, is another reckoning.”

Early that morning, Phoolchan had collected two small soil samples from the proposed land. He placed them beside Tara. “There's loose, crumbling sand in this second bag. If I leave my water-fed field and go there, what will I spend on water, manure and transporting the harvest to market?” A young man tried to dismiss the question by saying he was being given government land free of charge. Phoolchan showed him the accounts from his previous planting: seed, wages, cow dung, irrigation and the family's food. He stated clearly that he accepted the need to leave an unsafe site, but would not consent without an examination of whether the alternative could sustain his farming.

Aditi took Gomati aside. Her first inspection report had said, ‘Minor repair sufficient’; a note reading ‘reinspection’ had been added in the margin with a later date. “If you admit that your paper was wrong, they'll have to examine my statement,” Gomati said. “Otherwise the contractor's line will prevail everywhere: the labourers damaged the mesh.” Asking for the original copy of the first report, Aditi said, “My first conclusion rested on what I had seen at the time. But the word ‘sufficient’ can no longer stand. I shall withdraw that conclusion; I shall not erase the limits of the inspection on the day it took place.” Gomati kept her eyes on Aditi's paper, as though weighing the actual burden of the words.

A representative of the repairs department objected that writing this would hold up payment and make it difficult to reopen the gate immediately. Aditi answered, “It is no simple matter to declare an unsafe slab fully repaired and

send vehicles across it. But a temporary safe route and an investigation of the original repair order can proceed together." In her written amendment she kept separate the date of the earlier inspection, today's site measurements, Gomati's original testimony and the questions yet to be examined. Opposite the words 'Minor repair sufficient', she wrote clearly: 'Claim withdrawn; structural and drainage tests required.' Someone wanted to tear out the page containing the first version. Aditi refused.

Meanwhile, a bill emerged from the contractor's account book. It described 'cheap filling, temporary paved surface', with figures for the quantities. On one sheet Tara set out separately the amount billed, the number of loads Gomati had carried and the thickness of the layers visible at the site. The bill gave a date for completion of the slab, but the site-acceptance signature was dated two days later. The financial payment file bore a third date. An employee immediately wanted to conclude that the work had been completed before payment was made. Aditi stopped him. 'Approved', 'measured' and 'paid' belonged to three different procedures; a difference between their dates did not, by itself, prove an offence.

When a second file of older letters was opened, another layer of departmental delay came to light. There was an acknowledgement of Tara's request for a fresh survey as far as the mouth of the watercourse. The inspection paper had passed through the contractor's office to the municipality's main branch, but the requested annexure to the original map had not been attached along the way. One branch had written that the work was 'completed locally'; another that 'structural approval pending'. Two months separated the documents. Aditi did not call the empty interval a deliberate delay by any particular person. She asked for the date on which each file had been received and the name of the post responsible for answering it.

During the inspection, a woman labourer showed them old blisters on her palm. Half her wages for casting the slab were still unpaid; the contractor had entered her work as 'auxiliary labour' at a lower rate. Gomati urged her to have her own hours and her complete account of the work written down, rather than placing them under another labourer's name. The woman took out the school-fee receipt for her small son. Aditi issued two separate acknowledgements, one for the investigation of the work and one for the wages due, so that a dispute over faulty repairs could not be used as a pretext to withhold payment for work actually done.

There was an unusual word in Gomati's register. Beside a site marker written 'Baruna', a new copy had printed 'Barune'. An inspector took this to mean that the receipts from two places belonged to the same project. Gomati turned back through the pages and showed him that the first register carried the full address of a different contract, while the second mentioned only a water-name at the edge of an old land map. "I don't know for certain whether this is a difference in sound or two separate records," she said. As Naira prepared her notes, she wrote: 'Source verification pending for the names

Baruna/Barune; phonetic resemblance does not establish the identity of a site, a river or a wage account.’

Two labourers fell into disagreement near the heap of old bricks. One said that the village president had given the instruction orally; the other remembered the municipal supervisor being present on the day the slab was cast. Gomati asked each to write down separately the time and the people he had seen. “Write down what you did not see as well,” she said, “or later all our ‘testimonies’ will be turned into one sentence.” The first labourer agreed, but the second was a little frightened. What if his name were removed from the next contract? Amrita did not offer him a false assurance. Instead, she helped him keep a separate receipt acknowledging his wages.

The women arranging food for the annual clearing of the watercourse refused once again to cook without pay under the name of a collective donation. One of them said, “Let the workers hold back the water and let us tend the hearth, but let everyone's working hours be recorded.” Keeping it separate from the hospital's meal accounts, Urmila made a list of the flour, vegetables and fuel needed for the gathering. The children resumed their drumming and the making of small pictures. There was festivity in this annual occasion—the smell of mud, fresh tender greens, wet ladles and the shade of the peepal tree—but this year the proof of its success was not a false declaration that the entire drain had been opened.

An employee came running from the hospital. He said that as the waterlogging outside had diminished, the inner wall had begun to dry, so the repairs could be declared complete. Tara showed him yesterday's measurements: the outside water level had fallen a little, but the internal pipes had not been tested. “After Saraswati's death, the families will ask about time and responsibility,” Urmila said. “They have a right to be heard. We cannot declare repaired what we do not know to be repaired.” The employee had no answer, but he still asked permission to remove one edge of the safety barrier. Aditi said that separate authorisation existed for a temporary patient route; the structural section would remain closed.

As Tara sealed the silt sample, she noticed the earlier line of lime on the ground again. Inside the line, the handle of a broom was holding back the water; outside, a thin current was finding its own way. Even after the temporary cleaning, the pooled water within had not receded. Hira compared the difference with the previous day's water levels. Rather than writing ‘drainage opened’, he had to enter: ‘Surface flow has resumed slightly; obstruction remains below.’ Because of that sentence, the next measurement was not deferred until the next rainfall: a new date was set for safe testing.

Shailaja was standing near the hospital gate. She was not a member of the survey team, and no one had summoned her to establish the cause of the death. Urmila gave her an envelope explaining the procedure for requesting an authorised copy of Saraswati's treatment records. “Those twenty-two minutes the vehicle spent at the gate in the morning,” Shailaja asked, “they won't just

be written down as the cause of my mother's last moments, will they?" "We'll say only as much as the investigation establishes," Urmila answered gently. "And if you wish, you can frame your question in your own words." Shailaja signed her complaint herself, identifying her relationship as daughter-in-law. That page could not contain the full meaning of her grief.

The officials met again in the afternoon. They read the five written conditions of the agreement separately, asking how far each settled responsibility for the watercourse and the hospital route. Permission for temporary vehicle movements would remain, but no permanent certificate would be issued without testing the physical defect beneath the slab. The seal on the warehouse's suspect goods would not be broken under the pretext of measuring the drainage. Payment for the labour of preparing food would be kept in a separate account. Neither Shailaja's private medical questions nor Gomati's home address would appear in the public inspection report. As Naira recorded the proceedings, she remarked that the narrower the language of the amendment became, the harder it was to understand the distinct responsibilities.

Phoolchan drew a red line across his copy of the rehabilitation offer. "You people have already called this 'suitable'," he told the officer, showing him the word. Tara explained where his samples could be tested. Only after examining the water source, the depth of the soil and the road to market could the land's suitability be decided. Phoolchan said he was not opposed to moving house, but he would not be compelled to abandon farming. Amrita added that the hearing of Nonthara's old land claim must not become a minor appendix to the rehabilitation documents. Beside Gomati's separate wage claim, the distinction between all three questions became clear: the history of the land, its present agricultural use and payment for the earth that had been carried away.

Aditi signed a new site order. For the present it authorised only controlled cleaning of the exposed outer section, separate sampling of silt and a safe inspection on foot; heavy spades and machinery were not to enter the blocked mouth. A deadline was set for providing the investigating officer with the original repair bill, the approved plan, the labourers' original statements and the payment receipts. "And if they force me to cast the slab again?" Gomati asked. Aditi gave her a copy of the written order. "You may say no to work outside the terms of this order." Gomati folded the paper and put it not inside her blouse but in the dry compartment of her toolbox.

As evening descended, the collective group assembled for the annual clearing of the watercourse read out its account of the day's work. The grass had been removed, three measurement points marked, the silt samples set aside, and the temporary safe route for patient vehicles preserved; the blocked mouth had not been fully opened. Disappointed, a boy asked, "Then we haven't won anything here today?" Ramani answered, "The fishing nets are dry. But if we had stubbornly cut through the drain, the hospital wall might

have fallen too. Victory isn't measured by the noise of a drum." The boy gathered up the drum strap and carried it away, but when he saw the boundary drawn in lime he left it uncrossed.

Gomati and Amrita walked back together along the edge of the watercourse. Partway home, Amrita put the seal from Nonthara into her bag. "The old earth is trapped," she said. "The name of my village disappears from the papers before it disappears from people's minds." "The work of my hands was in the records," Gomati said, "but the name of the hand that gave the orders was missing. Now, at least, a question has been written in that blank space." Amrita counted the days until the next hearing of her case; Gomati counted the hours of her next morning's wages at another construction site. Though they walked together, their paths were not the same.

Back at the office, Aditi placed the new amendment on top of the first report, not hidden beneath it. A temporary safe measure remained in operation for the hospital's patient route. The earlier claim that minor repairs were 'sufficient' had been withdrawn. Cheap filling, obstructed drainage and departmental delay had become distinct lines of inquiry capable of being tested. How those strands together had increased the risk of an accident still required investigation, and they did not establish the cause of Saraswati Devi's death. Through the window she could see the three bamboo markers standing in the earth. In the lamplight Aditi wrote on the next page: 'Let the case for the inquiry be clear, but leave room for evidence that may contradict it.'

Chapter 103 · Positive Reasoning

Rani Halalkhor nudged a shard of glass aside with the handle of her broom; it rattled across the dry ledge of the drain and came to rest. In the morning light, the line of lime drawn three days earlier was still visible near the hospital's rear gate. Beyond that line, where no one knew the exact depth of the water, the municipal cleaning contractor had ordered two labourers to climb down. Rani held her broom upright. "Picking the glass off the path is one job. Going down inside to remove the silt is another. You've put our team's name against both, but a body isn't the same thing in both places." She made the adolescent trainee in her crew step back two paces. His sandals were worn thin, and an old medicine vial lay shattered on the ledge.

A representative of the contractor arrived carrying a yellow sheet. In heavy letters it read: "Remaining cleaning to open the mouth of the watercourse." At yesterday's collective gathering, the grass on the outside had been cleared, but permission had not been given to use heavy implements inside the blocked mouth. Waving the sheet, the representative said, "The public had its festival yesterday. Today the job has to be finished. Otherwise the entire contract payment will be held back." Rani asked, "If the contract payment is withheld, will our wages for the last five days be withheld too? Answer that question first." The workers' names were on the young man's sheet; the payment column was blank.

Mamta Hari arrived with the register of the municipality's permanent sanitation crew. She did not work under the contractor and had received a separate instruction from her own department: to assist with an inspection inside the drain. She had already circled in red the empty boxes for protective equipment. Today she opened the page in front of a municipal employee and showed him: gloves requested, not received; protective footwear requested, not received; no provision for testing the atmosphere inside the enclosed drain. Slightly embarrassed, the employee said, "There's one pair of heavy gloves in the storeroom." Mamta asked him, "Whose size? Who will be given them? And how will gloves that stop broken glass reduce the risk from air no one has examined inside?"

Rani and Mamta stood together, but what was owed to each of them was not the same. Rani's name was on the contractor's list of labourers; Mamta drew her salary from the municipality. If Rani stopped working, the contractor could mark her absent. If Mamta challenged an instruction, her office could raise a question of discipline. Naira offered to record both their statements. Rani stopped her. "Hear my companions speak first. I speak for the crew, but I cannot turn another person's fear into my own signature." Mamta agreed. In the darkness inside the drain, the water stood motionless; outside, the sunlight was growing stronger.

Long before, in a courtyard of learning in Mithila, a disciple had tried to set an earthen lamp-vessel, still damp, out in the sun. Water seeped from its rim; when he pressed the edge into shape with his thumb, a crack opened on the other side. At that moment, a visiting elder of the Mīmāṃsā school came onto Udayana's veranda. The disciple laughed at his misshapen vessel, but the visitor looked at the clay on his hands and asked, "Are you people going to try once more today to establish the world by means of that pot?" Gathering the palm-leaf manuscripts before him, Udayana said, "The pot is not proof. Sometimes it merely provides a beginning from which to raise a question. Today the limits of that beginning are themselves in question."

In the first four stages of the disputation, Udayana had sought answers to arguments advanced by the opposing side. Now he wished to unfold the sequence of his own positive inferences. The disciples laid out mats in the shade. Udayana said that the inference of a maker from a made thing was familiar in ordinary practice: observing causation and the ordering of things in the world, one could advance the case for a conscious directing ground. He offered examples of the earth and other effects, but added that what was to be established here was not a potter whom anyone had seen with their eyes. To establish the proposition, the reason, the invariable concomitance, and the possible counterinstances would all have to be examined. One disciple placed his wet vessel at the edge of the veranda and began listening closely.

The Mīmāṃsā guest objected at once. "We see human beings make pots and cloth. But have you ever seen a potter making the earth? The moment you compare limited things that are made with the entire world, you change the domain in which you take the relation to be established. And if you posit a maker, why should that maker have no need of a body, desire, effort or instruments? Is a maker without a body anything more than a word used to evade a difficulty?" He lowered his head and waited for an answer. There was no mockery in his voice. He was seriously maintaining that his own tradition's account of causality and of the relation between action and its fruits was sufficient.

Udayana remained silent for a moment. One of the disciples tried to dismiss the opponent by saying that, on his view, "the world made itself." Udayana stopped him. "To answer by weakening his position is not disputation," he said. "He does not deny causation. The question is this: once unseen efficacy, the natures of things, and the succession of actions are admitted, what evidence proves the necessity of an additional omniscient governor? The burden of that question rests with our side." The guest nodded. For the first time, a student understood that learning required not only the ability to defeat an opponent but the ability to listen to him accurately.

Udayana turned to the combination of material things. The mere existence of inert constituents was not the same as their organisation into effects; his position was that a conscious cause could be inferred from ordering and purpose. He raised separately the beginnings of linguistic practice and the

question of confidence in the means of knowledge. “If there is a continuity of knowledge, tradition and coordination,” he said, “what are we to understand as its ultimate ground? Shall we posit another rule behind each rule, making an endless succession, or acknowledge a knower through whom this order becomes intelligible?” He would not allow one answer to cover over every reason he had proposed; each reason had its own objection to meet.

The guest replied, “Language is learned in human dealings. One generation learns from another, and that one from a third. Before you establish the need for a first speaker, you must show why such practice cannot be beginningless. And trust in testimony may arise not from anyone’s omniscience but from the speaker’s reliability and from testing what works and what fails. If you demand consciousness to account for the combination of inert substances, what sustains the activity of consciousness itself?” On his palm leaf he drew three lines: experience, inference, additional proposition. He wanted to see where the leap from the first two to the third had occurred.

In his next question, the Mīmāṃsā guest also gave the positive grounds for his own view. “The fruits of action do not proceed from a person’s immediate wishes. We explain them through the relation of rule, unseen efficacy and a long continuity of tradition. If you turn a rule into a governor’s will, is that will itself subject to rule? If it is, where is the need for an additional governor? If it is not, what grounds stable knowledge?” Udayana answered that the case for an omniscient cause could not be saved merely by naming divine will; the tests of agreement and difference would be demanded there too. He asked the guest to state his reason, then rejected the obligation to insert the qualification “embodied like a human being” into the universal relation assumed by his own inference. Declining to pronounce the debate settled that day, he had a new question written down: What is the evidence that a body is indispensable to agency?

Outside the courtyard, a woman who had come to sell earthen vessels set down her basket and asked for water. She had not come to hear a philosophical debate. When a disciple gave her water, she saw the damp vessel and smiled. “Keep that in the shade. If you put it straight into the sun, the rim will crack again.” She explained how much dry firewood she needed for the kiln at home, then went on her way. The disciple was astonished that the answer to what had gone wrong with his vessel had come not from the disputation, of which she knew nothing, but from a craftswoman’s practice. Udayana said, “Her experience tells her how this particular vessel should be dried. It does not settle the ultimate cause of the world; but if we leave no place for experience, we cannot conduct an inference properly at all.”

At this a younger student posed the question the other way round. “Teacher, if we infer a maker from a pot, why don’t we infer an eater from a sweetmeat? Just because I am hungry, the sweetmeat doesn’t say so itself!” Everyone laughed, the guest included. Udayana did not suppress their laughter. “Because the existence of a sweetmeat and its being eaten are two

different propositions. When you change the subject, you change the reason. The evidence of your hunger is your stomach, not the sweetmeat.” The boy’s face shone with delight: his question had not been treated as a disturbance. He moved his earthen vessel into the shade, as though the first experiment of the day’s disputation had succeeded there after all.

After midday the guest asked again, “Can you ever directly test the limits of the knowledge of one you call omniscient? If not, by what criterion can an inference to omniscience be judged?” Udayana acknowledged that this was a difficult question. He argued for approaching the matter through distinct inferences drawn from scripture, language and the ordering of effects in the world, but did not conceal how much additional evidence the claim to omniscience required. The guest said that the Mīmāṃsā account of Vedic authority had its own arguments for the Vedas’ beginninglessness and their not being the work of a person; merely saying “there must be a speaker” did not dispose of that view. Udayana signalled to a disciple to write down the guest’s words in full.

By the first lengthening of the evening shadows, they had been able to agree on one question: after building the positive side of an inference, it was wrong to declare victory without answering the strongest possibility advanced against it. Their conclusions on the doctrine still differed. The guest did not ask for his palm leaf back; he allowed Udayana to keep a copy so that his actual words might be read at their next sitting. Udayana told the disciple to mark the reasons for the proposition and the opponent’s objections with different pens. The disciple picked up his drying vessel. A slender crack remained at the rim, but water had stopped seeping through it.

At the rear gate of the hospital in Videhapur, the sun had become fierce. Rani spoke separately to the six members of her crew. Two labourers said they feared losing the contractor’s work for the following month; an older woman said that if she had to climb down, she would struggle to breathe; the trainee said plainly that he did not even want to touch the water inside. Rani kept their names in her private notebook. On the public notice she wrote only the decision: entry into an enclosed drain of unknown depth, without testing, was not accepted. They could undertake the separate task of removing glass and rubbish from the safe area above, but consent to the danger below must not be attached to that work.

The contractor’s representative held out his paper again: no completed contract, no payment. Rani showed him two copies of older receipts. The first bore signatures for four days of cleaning the outer area. On the second, the contractor had written, “Safety equipment supplied,” but no worker had signed the acknowledgement column. Rani asked, “How was equipment issued in the name of someone who never received it? Keep that question separate. We will not go down into the drain now. And the dispute over wages for the days stopped will proceed separately.” She was afraid, but she did not turn her fear into acceptance of the order.

Mamta went to the municipal officer. She placed the page she had first marked in red beside a copy of today's inspection record. "Wherever anyone writes 'safety arrangements available' on this paper, compare it with my acknowledgement column," she said. An assistant to the officer sent a photograph of old gloves from a storeroom. Without even looking at the phone, Mamta replied, "A photograph is not a substitute for the equipment. If the equipment is available, record the name, size, training and actual handover. Even that will not automatically authorise entry into a closed drain; the site and its risks need a separate assessment." For the first time, instead of writing "equipment delivered," the municipal officer wrote, "Supply verification pending."

Aditi came from the hospital gate carrying the measurement notebook. Yesterday she had withdrawn her assertion that minor repairs would suffice; today no one had issued any written instruction stating that an immediate inspection inside the drain was necessary. The representative said, "If you stop everything, are we supposed to get hospital patients through the mud?" Aditi read out again the three separate responsibilities: a temporary safe footpath, a restricted route for vehicles, and the initial investigation of the physical outlet. "Patients need a route," she said, "but making someone risk their life by going down into a deep drain is not a way of treating them." From inside the gate, Urmila asked about the timing of the patient vehicle; just then a car strayed beyond the designated safe strip.

A municipal employee said, "Rani and her people have stopped the work. What was the point of yesterday's festival, then?" Ramani Bind, who had arrived carrying the fishing net she had gathered up at the pond, answered, "Yesterday the grass that could safely be removed was cleared. The blocked section was left untouched under Aditi's order. Why change the name of the work now and put the blame on Rani?" Ramani had fish to weigh at the market that day. She did not remain long at the gathering, but she witnessed the receipt for an application addressed both to the municipality and to the contractor. She made it clear that no one had authorised her to decide on Rani's behalf.

By afternoon the crew had divided the work into two parts. They used tongs and stout baskets to remove rubbish from the dry path above; the dangerous edge was cordoned off with rope. When a labourer without protective footwear moved forward to lift a heap of glass, Rani stopped him. "I said we could pick up what was safe to handle. I didn't say you should touch broken vials with your bare hands." Mamta arranged a separate appointment with the municipal storekeeper to check whether boots and glass-resistant tools were actually available. A village shopkeeper from the courtyard offered to lend his old bamboo tongs; Rani did not pronounce untested implements approved safety equipment.

Within an hour a woman employed to wash the hospital linen came to the gate. She said that if even one piece of glass remained on the cleared strip, it

might puncture a patient trolley's wheel. Rani accepted her point, but stopped the remedy proposed by the contractor's representative: pick it up quickly with bare hands. Mamta submitted a written request to check whether the municipal storeroom had a long-handled litter picker. In the meantime, the barrier around the vehicle route was rearranged, the hospital staff were alerted, and patients continued to move along another safe strip. The laundry worker also learned how to file a complaint about her inadequate shoes. The danger from cleaning was not the private problem of sanitation workers alone, but neither was it right to place the first burden of responsibility on them.

Mamta's daughter brought food from home. The girl had an examination, but today she wanted to go to the library first, after school. Mamta said, "See to your studies first. I can take care of my own bag." Her daughter joked, "You've got a name for every piece of equipment in your register. Why isn't my lunch box in it?" Mamta smiled. "I'll settle what I owe for the lunch box at home, not on the municipal sheet." Rani offered her a piece of lime pickle from her own plate. For a little while, amid the water, the contract and the hospital, there spread the familiar fragrance of three women sharing an ordinary meal.

At the afternoon meeting the representative made his first proposal: Rani's crew should go home with the work recorded as "suspended"; the wages question would be considered later. Rani said, "If you don't put a date to 'later,' by tomorrow there'll be a notice calling us absent." She submitted her demands in writing: no entry into the hazardous drain; full credit for the hours spent safely cleaning the outer area; a separate dispute over wages for the work stopped that day; the contractor's bills for equipment expenditure; and an impartial site assessment. The contractor did not accept every point. But the municipal officer wrote into the order that no one would be made to enter the unassessed enclosed drain that day, and that the claim concerning wages due would be formally received. It was not a complete victory, but it closed the way to verbal pressure to send them inside.

Mamta attached a copy of the order to her municipal register and again drew attention, with a red line, to the equipment column that had remained empty since the first day. An employee whispered that if she kept writing down names she would bring trouble on herself. Mamta replied, "If the names are crossed out, tomorrow someone will say the equipment had been supplied. I am recording only what was and was not handed over in my presence. I'll ask for the original of the officer's order." Beside her signature she added, "Receipt pending." Her personal testimony had not turned into a public accusation, but neither had it become another convenient silence in the office.

In the evening Naira prepared two copies of the minutes. The first set out the location, the limits of the risk, the work completed safely, and the inspections still outstanding. The second, restricted copy gave the workers' names, the hours unpaid, and the contractor's disputed claim of receipt. Rani

asked, “You won’t have to read out all the names in my notebook, will you?” Naira said, “Anyone with a lawful need to verify what is owed will have access to the necessary lines. A crowd has no right to people’s private identities.” Rani was not entirely reassured, but decided to keep the original notebook herself. It was recorded that no copy of it would be distributed publicly without her signature.

Inside the hospital Urmila was folding away Saraswati Devi’s former bedding in a clean room. Shailaja’s application for authorised treatment records was still being processed. No new medical evidence had emerged to establish that the defects in external drainage had caused her death. Urmila handed Mamta a small vessel of water. “Now that the upper path is open, patient vehicles are moving,” she said, “but the leak inside and the blocked mouth of the drain are still two separate afflictions.” Drinking the water, Mamta said, “Keep the hope of repair separate from proof that the repair has been made. I will work where I can protect life along with my livelihood.”

Before darkness fell, Rani checked the knots in the rope once more. Two unseen bends of the enclosed drain still lay hidden beneath the black water. Along the dry strip where the glass had been removed, a nurse could now set her feet safely. One of the contractor’s employees called from a distance, “Will you come tomorrow?” Rani answered, “Where safe work has been authorised, I’ll come. Where an assessment is needed, I won’t come without it.” She would get home half an hour late; she had told her slightly older daughter to water the vegetable patch. As she walked, she thought of the patch, and then of her notebook. At the hearing about wages due the next day, the whole crew would again have to speak, each for themselves.

At her office Aditi read the last papers of the day. There was an acknowledgement of the cleaning completed outside; the inspection of the blocked outlet had yet to be scheduled; the municipality’s supply of equipment was incomplete; and the contractor’s claim concerning wages remained in dispute. She did not draw an unnecessary new green line on the old map. The river had not changed its course; the hospital vehicle was still moving along a temporary route. Yet one decision made that day was real: no one would be sent down into the black water without an assessment. Whose labour and whose expense would pay the cost of that decision at the next inspection remained an open question.

Chapter 104 · The Question of Power

That morning a heavy ball of wet earth had lodged against the front hoof of Nurjahan Itfarosh's donkey. She bent down and prised it loose with a thin sliver of wood, examined the crack inside the hoof, and stopped her cart a little short of the hospital's rear gate. It had rained all night. A fresh white line had been drawn at the gate, but half the bricks brought yesterday to hold back the water were still on her cart. The contractor's clerk shouted from a distance, "Unload the bricks. The workers are waiting." Nurjahan replied, "First I see to the hoof, then the road. My delivery slip specifies transport over a dry strip of ground, not through submerged mud."

Sugni Saday laid her attendance notebook on the cart's rear board. With her were three women and two young men from her neighbourhood. In the previous survey Sugni had had the names of her team entered in the record, but when the work plan was drawn up, the narrow watercourse through their neighbourhood had once again been left blank, a white space on the map. She had not come to lift bricks from Nurjahan's cart. She had come to speak about the path through her neighbourhood. Driving a dry reed into the ground at the water's edge, she said, "The municipal drain passes this way, but before the water from our houses reaches it, it stands in two courtyards. Whoever takes charge of the work will have to see all this."

The morning cooking fires had not yet been lit in Sugni's neighbourhood. One of her companions said that the water standing in her courtyard had forced her to put her child's books up on a bamboo platform. In another house an elderly mother-in-law could no longer move about. Sugni did not ask the two women to tell the same story. She divided a page of her notebook into two sections: damage to households and work proposed by the municipality. "We need the work," she said, "but not at the price of concealing what has happened to our homes." A young man asked where their daily earnings would come from if the work stopped. "A survey of the risks is work too," Sugni told him. "First let us get its payment fixed."

The clerk showed them the measurement slip. It listed the length of the outer drain to be filled, six cartloads of bricks, and a single lump sum for the cleaning team. Sugni's first question was why the women of her neighbourhood had not been named separately. "The payment will come in the team's name," the clerk said. "You can divide it among yourselves." Sugni answered, "I shall make the division myself, but the municipality must also record how much it pays to each person. If one of my companions stops work for a day because she sees danger, into whose pocket will her share go?" The clerk fell silent and turned the page.

Nurjahan placed a third account before him: the trader's price for the bricks, her own charge for carrying them, and, separate again, the costs of

treating the donkey's hoof, giving it water and fodder, and allowing it to rest. "The animal belongs to you," the clerk said. "Why should we bear its expenses?" "That is precisely why I will not send it over an unsuitable route," Nurjahan replied. "The cost of the animal's labour was included when the cartage was agreed. Now that extra time has been spent preventing an accident, no one has the right to turn it into an invisible loss." There was anger in her voice, but she was not asking for alms on the spot. She was asking that the original terms in the ledger be honoured.

By the time Aditi arrived, Nurjahan's cart and Sugni's team were standing on opposite sides of the drain. The day before, Rani Halalkhor and Mamta Hari had stopped an order requiring workers to enter the unsafe enclosed outlet; Aditi's office had expressly recorded that the actual receipt of materials and an inspection of the physical risks were still outstanding. Now the clerk produced a fresh slip. "Nobody will go inside," he said. "We'll just lay the bricks from above and that will do." For the first time Sugni smiled. "What does 'that will do' mean? Where will the water go? Will the bricks sink, be swept away, or block the village path?" Aditi opened her measurement notebook. Instead of colouring in the paper, she went to examine the mud beside the hoof and the reed.

Long ago in Mithila, a question about the previous day's test with fire had been written on a palm-leaf manuscript. Gangesha Upadhyaya held the leaf beside his place of study. In the teaching room there was a small clay hearth where the pupils had blown on the fire to prepare their early meal. Looking for another piece of wood, one student asked, "The fire is here. Why won't this wet wood burn?" Another replied, "Its power to burn has diminished." Gangesha did not pronounce an immediate judgement. He picked up a few dry straws lying some distance from the hearth, showed them to the students, and asked, "What exactly have we observed that would allow us to know why something did not happen?"

For the Mīmāṃsā scholar who had come to debate that day, the question of the power to burn was not merely an illustration. "Sometimes fire is in contact with a combustible substance," he said, "and yet burning does not take place. Certain traditions offer the example of a special gem or mantra exerting an obstructive influence. If apparently similar causes yield different results, why should we avoid discussing the capacity inherent in a thing? The absence of the power to burn, or the obstruction of that power, may be regarded as part of the causal account." Gangesha asked a pupil to repeat the visitor's words and set them down, so that the opponent's position would not be changed into an easier version of itself.

"Shall we blame the fire or the gem?" a young man asked. "I am not asking whom to blame," the visitor replied. "I am asking what the conditions of production are. Burning occurs in one place and fails to occur in another. The difference demands an explanation." Gangesha set the word blame aside. "If we introduce moral fault into the inquiry into causes," he said, "the

investigation will escape our control. We must first establish what we actually know of the fire, its contact with the substance, the substance's condition, and any possible obstruction. We are not forbidden to imagine what we have not observed; but we must establish why that supposition is needed."

Gangesha unfolded the Nyāya argument from parsimony. "If the difference between the occurrence and non-occurrence of an effect can be explained through the presence of known causes and the absence of an impediment, why must we posit an additional unseen power behind every successful event?" The visitor replied, "To speak of a cause's capacity is not necessarily to multiply invisible entities. It is also to describe the nature of a regular relation. And when you speak of the 'absence of an impediment,' which possible impediments are to be checked? If we go on adding some unknown obstruction after every failure, the explanation may still remain incomplete." Between their positions lay a distinction as fine as a line on the palm leaf. To erase it and write that they agreed would not have been a disputation.

The pupil placed the wet wood beside the hearth. When the green bark clinging to it began to dry, he said, "It will burn now. Which theory shall I choose when it does?" "First see how dry it really is," Gangesha answered, "how far it stands from the fire, and what happens. One example does not prove the final law governing every substance." The visitor too agreed that before any change in the example could be treated as confirmation or refutation of a concept, the event itself must be described clearly. On his palm leaf he entered the case of the wet wood separately from that of a special impediment.

The visitor raised another question. "If an impediment cannot be seen, how do we know that it is absent? The limits of sight and the absence of an object are different things." Gangesha told the student not to treat "I cannot see a gem in the dark room" as equivalent to "There is no gem in the room." "Then what grounds the absence of an impediment?" the student asked. Gangesha spoke of an examination appropriate to the circumstances, of what perception was available, and of considering the relation of an obstruction separately. His first answer contained less certainty, but the question had become sharper. An older pupil asked, "Is it possible to make a decision and still retain such caution in reasoning?" "Yes," Gangesha said, "but declare no wider a scope for your decision than it can bear."

After the meal the disputation turned towards the inference of God's existence. Gangesha asked a pupil to outline the Nyāya inference from the world's character as an effect. The student gave the examples of a pot being made, a potter's effort, and the existence of the pot; from these he moved towards considering an intelligent maker of an insentient product. Gangesha taught him to examine the argument without leaping over its steps. "What is the basis of the familiar relation by which we connect a pot to a potter? And how far can we extend that relation when we speak of the earth or of the

whole world?" he asked. This inference belonged to its own philosophical tradition; the words of a later treatise were not spoken in that room.

"If every manufactured object requires a maker we can see," the Mīmāṃsā visitor asked, "how can we suppose the maker of the world to be without a body, tools, or material? And why should there not be several makers?" Before replying, Gangesha identified the points in contention: the probans of being an effect, the pervasion claimed on the strength of the example, and the inference of a maker's knowledge, desire, and effort. "The Nyāya position entertains the possibility of an eternal knower without a body," he said. "But we cannot dispose of the opponent's questions simply by saying, 'God exists.' The conclusion can carry only the weight the reasoning can support." The visitor remained unconvinced, but he was pleased to find his objection accurately recorded on the pupil's leaf.

A young woman student, delayed because she had been sorting grain for her mother's breakfast, arrived and asked, "If knowing a cause helps us prevent an effect, will understanding the inference of God dry my wet grain today?" A little laughter passed through the room. Gangesha did not laugh. "The causes affecting your grain must be investigated by means suited to them," he said. "An argument concerning the maker of the world is not a procedure for producing heat in that hearth. But both inquiries can teach us discipline in asking questions: who has made the claim, what is the evidence, and where do its limits lie?" The student lifted her basket, and Gangesha instructed a pupil to record her question as part of the lesson, not as an insult.

At the hospital gate Aditi took her first measurement again. No calculation had yet been completed to show where the pressure of the water would increase once the brick embankment had been laid. The municipal record showed that the order to enter the unsafe enclosed drain had been withdrawn; the clerk was treating that prohibition as permission to fill the outer channel. Aditi drew two arrows in her notebook: one for the possible flow from the hospital's outer outlet, the other for the water descending through the courtyards of Sugni's neighbourhood. "There are houses between those arrows," Sugni said. "How did our neighbourhood become a blank space on the map?"

Sugni divided the tasks among her team. One woman would set a bamboo pole at the height of the old watercourse opening; another would date the photograph showing the mark left by last year's silt; the third would gather independent accounts of how long water remained standing in the houses. The two young men would hold the measuring rope, but no one would descend into the enclosed drain. The municipal engineer's assistant objected at once. "This survey is government work. If you write down your own measurements, there will be quarrels later." "Do not call our measurements the government's final evidence," Sugni replied. "But do not destroy the evidence of the houses where the water has stood without even consulting the people who live there."

In the course of the inspection, a difficulty arose almost immediately. One young man on Sugni's team mistook a temporary municipal stake for an old boundary marker and began to pull it out of the ground. Tara Binout stopped his hand. "That stake marks the distance measured for safety. It must not be taken for a line of ownership." The young man acknowledged his mistake, but asked why the distinction had not been written clearly on the paper. Aditi then had a serial number added to the stake beside its colour mark and the time of day entered on the photograph. A small dispute was averted by making the language of the inspection more precise, and the young man was given a separate wage entry for his work as an assistant measurer.

By noon two patient vehicles had passed along the hospital's temporary route. Urmila was noting their scheduled times. A patient's relative asked whether, now that the bricks had arrived, the water would be drained away by tomorrow. Urmila resisted the temptation to reassure him. "The safe temporary route for vehicles is working at present," she said. "No date has been fixed for completing the outer drainage. The repair of the leak inside the hospital is on a third list." "I need somewhere dry to keep the medicine bottle," the relative said. "I don't need the names of your plans." Urmila immediately showed him a high shelf in the storeroom. Without waiting for a large decision, they found a small place that was safe.

Nurjahan brought her cart onto the firm ground at the side. Two municipal labourers were ready to unload it there, but the clerk again insisted on a single consolidated receipt. The slip declaring that "the bricks and cart have been supplied" said nothing of the risk to the animal's injured hoof, the cost of an additional journey, or the hours spent waiting without a load being moved. Nurjahan would not sign it. She counted the bricks remaining in the cart. Small pieces, half-fired bricks and pieces of the correct size had been mixed together. "The load column says six cartloads," she said, "but the bricks in all six are not alike. Measure and weigh them first. Do not postpone the accounting until after payment."

There was contempt in the clerk's laugh. "If you insist on so much accounting, how will we ever build a bridge?" Nurjahan answered, "There is no order to build a bridge with these bricks at present. If people are to walk trusting their weight to them, counting is no small matter." Sugni stood nearby. She did not propose drawing Nurjahan into the leadership of her team: carrying loads and clearing an outlet were different kinds of labour. Instead, she suggested that each woman's receipt record a separate time of inspection and place of delivery. This modest arrangement would prevent one woman's future claim from being buried beneath the other's.

Nurjahan's adolescent daughter arrived with the midday meal. Looking at the knot in the bandage around the hoof, she said, "If that knot has to bear the pressure of a heavy yoke again, it will come loose." Taking a roti from her daughter's hand, Nurjahan replied, "That is why I shall go back with the cart empty for now." The girl turned the page of accounts. "In the entry for the

extra journey by the safe route, have you recorded the water I gave it and the time it took to rest?” “The time is recorded,” Nurjahan said. “But we must decide the price of that work ourselves. Do not give up your hours of study to stand beside the cart every day.” Her daughter put her school notebook into her pocket and went away with the empty food tin.

A representative of Devvrat arrived at the municipal office with a copy of the five conditions of the second agreement. He argued that since the hospital vehicles were moving, it was necessary to show that the drainage work had been completed swiftly. Aditi made the distinction explicit. “The passage of vehicles is a safe temporary measure. It is not evidence that the drainage has been repaired. Success elsewhere does not erase work that remains incomplete here.” The representative warned that the municipality’s reputation would suffer. Sugni did not answer him. She brought out a photograph of the first courtyard in her neighbourhood, with water risen well inside it. “Do not make the name of this household public,” she added. “But do not erase the house from the map either.”

When Rani Halalkhor and Mamta Hari arrived, Sugni showed them her sheet of measurements. Rani repeated her earlier decision not to enter the enclosed drain. “My team will remove broken medicine bottles and dry rubbish from outside, using protective clothing,” she said. “There will be no survey inside without trained people and the necessary equipment.” Mamta showed them the box for gloves on the receipt form: it was still empty. Sugni asked her team members whether any of them wished to undertake the external work. The three women stated the hours they could give. One young man had to fetch medicine for his sick father that day, so his name was placed on the following day’s roster. Once the decision had been made, Sugni’s leadership became an act of listening rather than giving orders.

Aditi went to check the measurements along the edge of the neighbourhood’s watercourse. By then Tara Binout had arrived with a second copy of the old markings. Tara pointed out the difference between the lime line and Sugni’s bamboo marker. “Before the old rains, the water here used to turn beyond the rear boundary,” she said. “But that is not enough to authorise opening the entire former route now. We have not seen how much of the structure beneath the warehouse survives.” Aditi wrote down three separate inquiries: the possible course of the old outlet, the present flow of water, and the load the temporary footpath could bear. That third entry would be essential to the demand for a bridge that was to arise in the next chapter.

One of Sugni’s companions returned from the houses with a message. An elderly woman did not want a municipal survey mark on her doorway. There had once been rumours that houses would be demolished on the strength of such marks. Sugni immediately wrote in her notebook: permission to measure inside the house still pending. “Will the outer line be enough, then?” Aditi asked. “First we must explain that this is an assessment of risk, not an acquisition of land,” Sugni replied. “If she does not agree, we will not take

measurements inside her home. The height of the water outside and what she tells us orally will be recorded as separate kinds of information." The urgency of one of the young municipal workers diminished.

Before evening medicine had been applied to the hoof of Nurjahan's donkey. Nurjahan handed the clerk a copy of the veterinary receipt. "That is a private expense of yours," he said. Nurjahan laughed, though her eyes were tired. "Yes, I am responsible for its body. But if we are repeatedly pressed to carry loads along an unsuitable municipal route and have to make an extra journey by a safe one, the charge for that journey is not a private gift." She entered two claims separately: the unpaid balance for the transport already authorised, and the extra cost of the changed, safer route. She paid the bill for treating the animal herself, but had the reason for it stated clearly in her proposal for revising the freight rate.

A labourer asked what Nurjahan gained if the municipality would not pay for the animal's treatment. She showed him two drawings of the route. One was shorter but lay through deep mud; the other involved a longer circuit, though the hoof would not sink into it. "We avoided harm today," she said. "To keep it from being hurt again tomorrow, the cart must be sent by the proper road. If the rate is set out in writing, I will not have to wait for somebody's kindness." For the first time the clerk studied the drawings seriously. He made no promise of payment in full, but stamped an acknowledgement of a partial amount on the receipt for the old arrears and wrote in a date for examining the extra journey.

At the municipal office Sugni was given a newly stamped sheet. It contained a line for everyone's signature, but one of the three women in her team could not write. "Put your thumbprint there," the employee said. Sugni read the paper aloud to her companion, then asked whether the hours and tasks entered were correct. The woman said she had worked only half a day on the external cleaning, not a full day descending into the drain. The original sheet was then amended. The woman made her mark and Sugni put a copy into her hand. As they came outside, the woman said, "I have given my thumbprint. My voice ought to remain beside it."

That evening in the ancient Mithila classroom, Gangesha asked his pupils for two different palm leaves. One contained the grounds and objections relating to the inference of God; on the other were the arguments about the power to burn and the absence of an impediment. The young woman student had returned, having dried her wet grain. "The fire in my hearth was all right," she said, "but I had kept the air from reaching it. Now I understand that changing the wood alone would not have given me the answer." Gangesha replied, "The knowledge you gained by doing this has its proper limit: that particular event. The truth of a position concerning God has not been proved by your small success." A faint sign of agreement passed over the visitor's face; the philosophical disagreement remained exactly where it had been.

“I will not dispense with the term power,” the Mīmāṃsā scholar said. “It provides an important explanation of regular capacity.” Gangesha replied, “And I shall not hasten to posit another entity without examining the absence of obstruction and the sufficiency of the collection of causes.” No one was declared victorious. Beneath the two statements the pupil left a blank line where a future objection or example might be entered. Here learning was not merely a matter of filling palm leaves. It consisted also in guarding the space left open for further examination.

At the hospital that evening, Aditi added three new entries to her amendment of the earlier engineering findings. Attendance was confirmed for the safe external survey carried out by Sugni Saday’s team, but entry into the enclosed outlet remained forbidden. Sugni’s name was entered as coordinator on the neighbourhood’s risk map, with an explicit note that these measurements would not decide rights over the land. A partial payment was approved towards the arrears for Nurjahan’s first delivery, and a date set to hear the claims for the remaining freight charge and the extra journey. Her cart was released from unnecessary transport work after dark.

Urmila came out after recording the time of the last patient vehicle. “How much has the water gone down since morning?” she asked Sugni. “As much as the wind and the slope have allowed,” Sugni said. “Our survey hasn’t opened the drain by itself.” Both women laughed a little. Nurjahan stroked her donkey’s neck. “And the weight of the bricks we didn’t unload will stay in the ledger too.” Tara drove a new bamboo marker into the ground at the edge of the narrow track: no proceeding beyond this point without a load test. The marker was not a bridge. But it had made clear, today, the first condition of the safe bridge that someone would claim could be built tomorrow.

Chapter 105 · Binout's Bridge

At first light Tara Binout scratched a mark into a joint of bamboo with her fingernail. Beneath the skin the colour was yellow in one place, black in another. She set the yellow bamboo aside and drew a small circle in chalk around the black. The marker she had planted the day before, warning people not to go beyond the municipal stake, was still standing. To its right, the narrow public outlet offered room for two feet; to its left, the earth had subsided again under the night's rain. Until the crowd reached the gate, Tara would not set foot upon that ground. Permission had been granted to begin work, not to open the whole passage.

Lalit Vishwakarma arrived carrying two wooden planks wrapped in cloth. The edge of the first was sound; in the second, the grain had turned inward. "Paint will not remove the defect from this one," he said. The contractor's assistant, impatient to get on, asked, "It is only a little bridge. Why all this sorting?" Lalit held the split end before him. "The feet of those who cross it will not grow smaller because the bridge is small. I lost my first contract because I refused to sign a false account of the load it could bear. This time the paper and the timber must say the same thing."

Shyam Mallik and Tara already knew one another's forms of weaving. Shyam opened a bag of old specimens: a mesh of slender bamboo for enclosing fish, the flat woven side of a bamboo basket for vegetables, and three small, distinct models of a chachari, a narrow bamboo footway. A young municipal worker laughed. "All three are bamboo, after all." Tara turned the fine knot of the little net between her fingers. "This can stop a fish from passing. If we join it together and claim that it will bear a human being, will the difference between a fish's body and a person's disappear?" Shyam would not agree to cut a single bamboo until the separate purposes of the specimens had been recorded on paper.

Hira Sahni lowered a measuring rod into the water and said that during the night the level had risen between two marks; that fact alone, however, proved nothing about the speed of the current. Behind the gate the surface was somewhat calmer, but no one had yet established how far the earth beneath had been scoured away. Aditi the engineer inserted a new test sheet beside the old report. "First the foundations," she said, "then the joints, then a limited load test. Even a successful test may have to be reconsidered if the rains bring a new current." The few administrative employees present at dawn were disheartened by this, but Hira breathed more freely.

Urmila had come from the hospital's rear door. She carried an empty medicine case, with a separate little bag inside it for the fragments of broken glass vials. "Why has someone raised the question of transporting patients this

way again?" she asked. "Wasn't a safe route settled for Tulsi's vehicle?" An assistant replied that once the bridge was built, the distance for carrying a stretcher would be shorter. Urmila put the empty case on the ground. "A shorter route is not the same as a safe route. When a patient cannot walk, there is more to consider than weight: the body must also be kept steady. The patient-transfer vehicle will run to its existing schedule. A chachari is no substitute for that arrangement."

Rather than announce a decision, Tara called over the people from the four nearest houses. The woman in the first wanted to show them the old footpath by which her two small children went to school. The elderly man in the second said that walking without a stick was difficult for him. Water collected in the courtyard of the third household, but the family had not consented to having its private embankment cut. The fourth house was empty; its emptiness was no ground for declaring the land public. Tara wrote down each need separately. "For anyone this footway cannot serve," she said, "we shall record another safe route. Building one bridge does not make every problem disappear."

People began to gather beneath the peepal tree for the community inspection of boats and tools. The drum traditionally played on that day had not yet sounded loudly; first came the tables of bamboo, rope, nails, timber and leather samples. Parvati Tanti brought coloured warning strips of cloth, and Pavitra Patwa wrote out separate prices for tying their knots. Shyam explained to everyone that a coloured strip indicated a slippery place; it was not a rope to hold on to. Names were entered in the event register only with the people's consent, and work teams were not assigned by caste without asking. Some had come merely to watch. No labour or signature was demanded of them.

Usha Ram spread a little strip of leather over the table. On an earlier job altering the pattern of a shoe, she had devised a new join for an edge that wore down when wet. Drawing on that experience, she had brought a sample intended to increase the grip of a foot on a bamboo platform, but made no claim about its load-bearing capacity. "We can accept this leather as our official specification," the contractor's assistant said. "You take the price of the material." Usha picked the sample up again. "If the material is sold, that is one price," she said. "If my design for the joint is to be used again and again, that requires separate permission. And this strip is a sample, not a device certified to carry the load of a bridge."

The assistant grew angry. With so much reckoning of individual rights, he said, night would fall before any government work was done. Lalit replied, "I lost a contract by refusing to sign what was false, but I still have the right to call defective timber defective. Listen to what Usha says about her design." Usha rubbed an old shoe and her new sample against a small wet board. The old edge slipped; the new one caught a little. "This shows only how they

behave on this surface at this moment,” she added. “Two nights of rain, mud and every kind of foot will require different tests.”

Before noon Hira came with the pole used to propel her boat. Some people wanted goods ferried quickly by boat while the bridge was being built. Hira said that both the water’s depth and the distance from the bank at which one boarded were changing. She showed them separately the seating board of a small boat, on which she had already refused to take more than the stipulated number of passengers. “My boat’s capacity is established by its papers,” she said, “and the capacity of Lalit’s planks by their tests. I will not sell confidence in one on the strength of the other.” Tara thanked her and went back to inspect the testing stake.

As they were setting down the foundation strip, an inner course of old brick fell away at a touch. Paro Patharkatta held back her chisel. The municipal youth said that a little mortar would make it firm, but Paro answered, “I have seen that the brick is loose. My eyes have not seen whether it is supported all the way below. Paint over the top will not answer that question.” Aditi then considered placing a new support outside the marked line. This might disturb the steps of a private house, so they sought the woman’s permission a second time. She consented only to movement along the public edge for measurement, not to driving a stake into her steps.

The proposed site of the bridge shifted half a hand’s breadth away from the weak foundation. That change rendered one of Lalit’s cut planks useless. The assistant snapped his papers and demanded, “Who will pay for this wasted wood?” Lalit’s cheeks reddened. “When you approved the first measurements, the foundation had not been fully examined. I want my labour in cutting the timber accounted for, but do not place the entire burden of a decision made without proper inspection upon my neck.” Aditi went through her earlier measurement sheet and recorded the reason for the new cut in writing. Timber had been lost. It would have been easy to conceal the loss and declare the work completed cheaply, but no one took that course.

Tara and Shyam brought the diagonal weaving of the new bamboo into alignment. Showing how the knots differed, Shyam said that the tension in the middle cords had to be made even before the final strip at the end was tightened. Parvati offered her woven thread band to mark where feet should go, but Tara made clear that it was not a structural binding. Instead of driving a hammer against the edge of the timber, Lalit first checked the dry nail-holes. Usha fitted her leather-strip sample only to a detachable board. “If this board fails,” she said, “do not oblige me to cut down the whole bamboo structure.” Earth, timber and labour would all be saved by that provision.

A young man began taking photographs of the bridge design with his phone to send to a market group. Shyam did not seize his hand to stop him. He stood before the camera and said that he had no objection to public images

of the general safety inspection, but the complete pattern of Tara and Shyam's knots was not to be circulated for reproduction without permission. "This kind of weaving has come down from earlier generations," the young man asked. "How can you claim the sole right to it?" Tara replied, "I am not calling our ancestors' craft my private property. Do not erase the particular measurements, drawings, revisions and names of those responsible for this site." The young man added the artisans' names and the limits of permission to the draft of his message.

Standing at either end of the new chachari, Sugni Saday watched where people would place their feet. Two women from her neighbourhood had been paid for a day's measurement survey; the bridge-building group had listed them as its own employees. Sugni had the error corrected at once. "My team recorded water levels and the experiences of the households. The construction of the footway belongs to Tara's team. The receipts for these two kinds of work will remain separate," she said. The municipal assistant was weary of reading so many names, but the unauthorised addition of half a day to the employee list was corrected there and then. No one went down into the drain without pay; no one lost credit for a skill beneath another name on a form.

Towards evening the first sequence of tests began. Temporary safety lines were stretched on both sides of the bridge, and the spectators stayed behind them. Engineer Aditi examined the certificate recording the weight of the test sack; Lalit measured the deflection of the planks, Tara observed the movement of the knots, and Hira took a fresh reading of the water level. When the first sack was lifted off, there came a faint creak from one side. Someone in the crowd said, "Bamboo always makes a noise." Lalit located the direction of the sound and halted the test. What the crowd had taken for a successful demonstration yielded, as its first result, a decision to stop.

When the plank was removed, it was not the leather strip that had moved; a fastening behind the wood had turned slightly. An old iron-fastening sample made for Harinarayan Sharma was lying nearby, but the fastening actually used had been taken from old stock intended for another job. Harinarayan was called in. He asked for the component's original invoice and its precise dimensions, then pointed out that a fitting of the wrong size might have been selected. "Calling the iron strong does not prove that the whole bamboo support is sound," he said. Aditi ordered the replacement fastening to be tested independently. No one was allowed to cross until the first metal fitting had been replaced and the structure examined again.

Because of this stoppage, the hospital's case of medicines was sent by the old, safe route that required a longer circuit. Urmila herself entered the vehicle's time in the register. An employee said that an official had arrived to inaugurate the bridge, so even the empty case ought to be placed on it for a photograph. Urmila answered, "If you show a bridge stopped during testing as though it were in use, tomorrow a patient's family will trust it. An empty case

is not a prop for a display.” The employee stepped back. The vehicle departed not late but at its appointed hour; amid the disappointment over the ceremony, that ordinary regularity relieved Urmila.

Meanwhile, one of Usha’s customers arrived with an old shoe model from his shop. If she gave him the leather-strip sample, he said, he could make many pairs from it that night. Usha showed him the separate entries in her register: the supply of material, use of the design, sale of the shoes, and testing on the footway’s board were four different agreements. “I may choose to work with a new customer,” she said, “but I will not watch my measurements reproduced in another shop without my name. First put down the price of the small trial and the return of the sample.” For the first time, the customer returned the shoe pattern and said he would meet her the next day for written permission to use it without photographs.

Under the peepal tree, the organiser urged them to start playing the drum, but the old charge for repairing the instrument was still unpaid. Usha said that the sound would come once the labour of replacing the hide had been paid for; no one was obliged to play for a donation. Raghu the cook had brought warm flattened rice, sweet potatoes and chickpeas roasted with salt. Someone asked whether the cost of this food had been entered in the event’s public accounts. Raghu showed his little receipt. A young woman who had come to sing tasted his sweet potato and said, “I will sing, but I too must have time to eat first.” The crowd laughed. For a while people set the work aside and lost themselves in the taste of the food and the laughter they knew from home.

Before the second test Aditi placed three papers in front of the official. The first listed materials and wages, the second the tested load and conditions of inspection, the third the limits of use. The official asked whether the inscription on the inaugural plaque could read “Public Bridge”. Tara answered, “For now write ‘Limited Temporary Bamboo Footway’. Ownership of the public route is a separate question; a single day’s testing does not make a permanent bridge.” The official joked, “Does one cut a ribbon for such a modest name?” Usha laughed. “Buy a ribbon if you want to cut one. Do not cut the words that make the route safe.”

After the new fastening was fitted, sacks were placed one by one for the second test. Within the approved sequence, the deflection of the planks and movement of the knots were measured. The static test load of ninety kilograms was not treated as permission to cross under that weight. Aditi entered an operating limit of sixty kilograms on the instruction sheet: only one person at a time, whose body and accompanying belongings together must remain within that limit; no heavy loads carried by hand; running, crowding, transporting stretchers and bringing vehicles onto it were prohibited. The load limit appeared in figures in the original inspection record. The public sign, too, gave the sixty-kilogram limit, the conditions of use and the date of testing.

“What if someone weighs more than the limit?” Lalit asked. Aditi replied, “We shall not call the bridge stronger than it is in the name of not turning that person away. We shall record the responsibility to provide another safe route.” Urmila indicated the existing route for hospital patient vehicles; Hira agreed to make a boat available if necessary, subject to testing. An elderly woman looked as though she could cross the chachari with someone holding her hand, but she found it hard to control her steps with her walking stick. A paved footpath was chosen for her instead. Among the people gathered for the inauguration, one of the most important was someone who did not step upon the bridge at all.

Tara wanted to fasten the sheet of operating conditions beside the gate, but rainwater could reduce the paper to pulp. Pavitra Patwa knotted together signal strips in two colours; Parvati Tanti wove a border so the small markings written on them could be seen from a distance. Shyam arranged the limits under which images of those signs might be used. Tara explained that the red strip marked danger; it was not a rope to grasp. Someone had to be appointed by name to examine the planks each day when the water rose. A boy among the spectators said, “I have read that it will be closed during rain. But who will see the sign at night?” Night watch then became a separate question.

Ramani Bind arrived and asked whether the chachari would shorten the route to the fishing rights at Makhaniya Dabra. Hira answered that the footway crossed only a small cut in the public outlet; nothing about it established access under the lease for the pond. Ramani closed the cover of her register. “Another bridge ribbon will not give me an answer to my claim,” she said. Tara promised her a separate copy on which the footway’s measurements and the limits of the private water lease would be marked distinctly. Ramani’s disappointment did not vanish, but the papers concerning her lease dispute were not lost in the inaugural crowd.

The municipal assistant said again that writing ‘limited permission’ would slow the relief work. Sugni showed him an image of the lowest-lying house in her neighbourhood. “If the water rises here tomorrow, this footway will be closed first. We shall have to find another way out of our homes,” she said. Aditi agreed that as soon as the water passed a specified mark, use would automatically be suspended; it would not resume without a fresh inspection on site. Responsibility for maintaining the footway would remain in the municipal register: Tara’s team would not be saddled with unpaid vigilance for an indefinite period. Sugni asked when the next payment for her survey would fall due. This time the assistant gave her an answer from the accounts.

At the small boat-and-tool inspection ceremony, it was not an empty medicine bag that first went onto the footway, but a light object designated for the test, followed by the cautious steps of a trained local worker. Reaching the other side, he did not wave a flag. He turned and asked how much the planks had swayed. “Look at the wood that has been walked upon before you

speak of trust," Tara said. The inspector recorded the time, weather, weight and any changes observed during the sequence. The crowd applauded, but Lalit remained quiet until he had put his hammer away in its box. This was no dim old recollection: the wound of losing his previous contract was still fresh. Today, for the first time, the price he had paid for refusing had appeared before him as safety in the work itself.

At the end of the day Usha obtained a receipt from the official. It recorded the price of the leather sample, a separate design-testing fee and the requirement of written permission before further use. Because the customer's claim concerning the form of his old shoe remained unproved, this was not made into a final ruling on intellectual rights. A limited practical arrangement was accepted, however, to prevent copying without permission. Usha took home a pair of newly measured shoes for her daughter. "Are these for walking on the bridge?" her daughter asked. "No," Usha said, "for the paved road to school. I will not put a child's feet at risk to make a bridge look grand."

When the evening sunlight fell upon the wet bamboo, its upper lines began to gleam white. Urmila stood on the hospital veranda. Naira arrived carrying a copy of the day's public notice and asked her first question: "What shall I write —that the bridge is finished?" Tara opened her notebook. "Write: a limited structure for a narrow, temporary route has opened subject to the conditions of its test. It is not a complete drainage outlet, not a permanent bridge, not a route for patient vehicles." Naira wrote the sentence down. A child asked quietly, "Then are we to call it a bridge?" Shyam laughed. "Call it a bridge in your village, but do not forget its limits."

As he packed away the food containers, Lalit noticed that half a day's pay had been left off a worker's measurement slip. He opened his notebook again, asked the man's name and did not go home until the correct entry had been made. Tara examined the knot of the red warning signal, Shyam put the remaining pieces of bamboo into his bag, and Aditi marked the date of the next inspection. Nurjahan's cart took a circuitous route along the paved road with its load of bricks; her previous arrears had not yet been settled. At the hospital Urmila reconciled the times of two patient vehicles. The day's achievement was small: a few safe footsteps, a recorded load limit, an audit of payment, and the right to close the way at the first sign of danger. No one knew whether the water would rise again during the night. But for now, no one could purchase another person's trust by calling an unsafe passage safe.

Chapter 106 · Acceptance of Treatment

Videhapur, a rainy dawn in 2039. As the lid of an iron chest was lifted in the hospital, glass gave a faint clink inside. One corner of the white paper pasted to its top was wet, but the red mark upon it was clearly visible. Aniruddha had the chest placed on a dry table on the veranda. Two employees reached to count what it contained, but he stopped them. “First establish when this chest arrived here, whose custody it has been in, and what that mark means.” At the hospital gate, two patient-transport vehicles stood waiting for their appointed departure times. The day before, light footsteps had crossed the chachari, but that had not shortened the old safe route used by the patient vehicles.

Urmila came, leaving behind a bundle of washed clothes. In her hand was the night-duty register, in which a patient's request for medicine and the storeroom's response had been entered on two separate lines. During the night an employee had said, “The goods have arrived.” At dawn the same employee said, “The supplies are sealed.” Urmila asked, “Why was the patient told two different things? Whose convenience is served by using the same word for something that has arrived and something fit to be used?” Instead of answering, Aniruddha called for the two original storeroom registers. For the first time that day, the word “original” was added to his instruction to bring a document.

The first register counted the consignment dispatched from the warehouse. The second listed the goods physically received in the hospital storeroom. On a third, summary sheet stood Aniruddha's own signature beneath the words “Supplies available for emergency needs.” It bore the date of the night when the corridor was wet, plans were being made to move patients from the old wing, and two warehouse inventories were prepared. Aniruddha turned the page over. The storeroom assistant said, “Sir, you signed for the medical need; I filled in the available quantity on that basis.” Aniruddha looked up. “The quantity you entered does not make my signature correct. I shall first write down what I had seen when I signed.”

At that moment Salma Sheikh came carrying a small glass bottle, properly labelled, with an issue slip recording in full the name of the medicine and the time it had been dispensed. “This came from the authorised stock, reached the patient, and has a record of its use,” she said. Indicating the other chest, she added, “That chest bears a purported total, but the correspondence of some of its labels is still under examination. If we keep these things in the same room, the mere sight of a count will begin to pass for trust.” The storeroom assistant felt insulted. “It is I who look after the keys,” he said. Salma replied, “And I look after patients' bodies. Our responsibilities are different, which is why both records are needed.”

The scene from that night returned to Aniruddha: the broken axle of a stretcher, clocks showing different times, the absence of a room suitable for medical observation, and an exhausted driver standing beside the gate. Over the telephone, the storeroom employee had said that supplies “dispatched” from the warehouse could be considered to have arrived. Aniruddha had pressed for the immediate receipt of approved supplies, but had not stopped to examine one word on the summary sheet. He had not required the authorised employee to confirm the checks that lay between “dispatched” and “available.” Today it was his own signature, not someone else's, that had covered over that difference.

When Naira reached the hospital, Aniruddha invited her as far as the outer table, not in her capacity as a journalist but as an observer of the correction to the public record. Bending over the sheet, Naira asked, “Did you acknowledge a total quantity, or authorise the use of every item?” Aniruddha said, “I signed an emergency summary of medical need. But my signature created the impression that everything counted was available in the hospital. I failed to question the figure that included items still under inspection at the warehouse.” Naira said, “Your account needs a chronology. Write what you knew before, and what you learned afterwards.”

In the courtyard Shailaja had come to collect a bundle of clothes belonging to her dead mother-in-law, Saraswati Devi. The bundle's identifying mark was found in the register, but an employee following her asked, “So the hospital has admitted its mistake now, hasn't it?” Shailaja stopped. “Which mistake?” Aniruddha came outside. He explained plainly what was wrong with the storeroom summary and said that the investigation into the medical cause of death was a separate matter, still unfinished. Shailaja opened the bundle and looked at a sheet inside. “The question of my mother's last hours remains,” she said, “but I also have the right to see the document recording the mistake you acknowledge. It is no substitute for my grief.”

Aniruddha promised Shailaja a certified copy of the public correction, not access to patients' private records. Shailaja asked that they also establish who had said the words in the original complaint, “If she had got a vehicle, she would have survived.” No one had yet identified with certainty the author or speaker of that assertion. Salma gave her a separate receipt. This time Shailaja sat down of her own accord, before anyone could offer her a chair. Water lay pooled on the leaves of the kachnar tree in the courtyard. Truth written on paper could not bring back her mother-in-law's voice, but Shailaja took into her own hands the decision about when to ask her questions.

In a small treatment room apart from the medicine store, Jamuna Devi had opened her medicine box. Catching sight of Aniruddha, she asked, “Will you stop giving me the proper medicine I have been receiving?” Aniruddha told her that authorised, checked medicines already available would continue to be used in regular treatment; the chest under examination would remain

sealed separately. Jamuna showed him her sheet of treatment times. “I get my medicine on time, but have I no right to know whom you are blaming outside?” Aniruddha replied, “Your right to treatment comes first. And when the system goes wrong, you have the right to question it.” Closing her box, Jamuna said, “Then don't take away my dose on account of somebody's signature.”

Before noon Rama Karn and Shabnam Malik arrived at the hospital records room. They carried the papers of the first two agreements. Implementation of all five conditions still depended on the forthcoming joint signatures. Rama asked, “Will Aniruddha's admission serve as permission to open the warehouse?” Shabnam herself answered, “No. Admitting an error does not declare goods under investigation safe. There must be a separate inspector's order, inventory and right of entry.” Aniruddha felt a faint relief at this answer, because his aim in acknowledging his failure was to correct the hospital's arrangements for patients' medicines at once, not to break the lock on the warehouse.

Rama prepared three sheets. The first concerned the improper wording of the hospital summary, the second the verified physical arrival of goods, and the third the separate seal on the consignment under examination. An employee suggested crossing out the first incorrect sheet and writing in the new quantity. Rama put down her pencil. “If we erase the error, we erase the hour in which it was made. A copy of the original will remain attached; the amendment will carry a new date and its reason.” There was a blank space below Aniruddha's signature. The first proposal was to write “improper generalisation” there. Shabnam changed the wording to: “Accepted complete availability in an emergency summary without verifying actual receipt in the storeroom.”

Aniruddha read the sentence twice. The first time, he felt it made his fault sound terribly grave. The second time, he remembered the night when the words “complete availability” had prompted immediate assurances over the telephone from storeroom staff. “That is fair,” he said, “but add that I did not assume the authority to examine mismatched labels myself. My responsibility was to determine medical need, not to act as the final examiner of a medicine's authenticity.” Rama wrote: scope of duties specified; shortcoming in the decision acknowledged; separate criminal investigation into the source continuing. Approval of an inaccurate summary was not in itself a confession to murder, smuggling, or the production of counterfeit labels.

Meanwhile, when Urmila came to collect the laundry bundles, she looked once more at the hospital gate register. She had not forgotten the contradictory entries: an old “received” at seven forty-five and an actual entry after nine. She asked Aniruddha, “Will they use this error as an excuse to attach it to my old laundry sheets and start cutting my wages again?” Aniruddha said, “No. Today's admission concerns the emergency summary of

medicines. The inquiry into the laundry register is separate. Any decision about those wages must also have its own reasons in writing.” Urmila let out a long breath. She had been afraid that in the name of correcting one official's mistake, the payment due to a vulnerable worker would once again be held back.

The trainee attendant Devi Gond arrived carrying her training notebook. It contained a question about identifying the external marks on medicines. Devi asked Aniruddha, “If an item has been counted in the storeroom, but permission to use it safely is still pending, what should I write in my training chart?” Aniruddha replied, “If you write only the number, your entry will be incomplete. Write separately, ‘Under examination—not for use.’ But do not take it upon yourself to change a patient's medicine.” Devi asked another question: “What if a senior person says there is no time?” Salma said, “Record the pressure of time and summon the responsible doctor. A trainee must not be told that safety depends on keeping silent.”

Devi also spoke of her worry about getting home. Her mother was ill, and the family was still working out a new division of care. Aniruddha did not propose keeping her on the night shift without cause, as though she must atone for the hospital's failure. “Your training for today is complete,” he said. “Permission and supervision for tomorrow morning's shift will be recorded.” Devi put away her notebook. She had added a new question to her training: whom does silence protect? As she stepped out of the hospital corridor, she remembered to buy some warm sattu for her mother at the market.

The storeroom employee returned with his handwritten count. His voice was a little quieter than before. “Sir, if they accuse me, I'll say that the doctor's order was responsible.” Aniruddha said, “I am writing down the order I gave. But you must also answer for the figures you entered without counting. Say what you actually saw. Neither take another person's mistake upon yourself nor conceal it.” The employee said that while he was preparing the goods-receipt slip, a call had come from an outside transport manager. He thought the number could be found not on his private mobile phone but in the office's old call register.

Hearing about the telephone call, Shabnam asked at once for the relevant document, but gave the employee the option of making his statement in a room apart from the public crowd. That a call had been received was, for the moment, only his oral account; the number had not yet been found in the register. According to him, the caller had urged him to enter the figures quickly, but neither the caller's identity nor any authority to make such a demand was established. Naira did not write “unknown order” in her reporter's notebook. She wrote: “Employee's claim; comparison with office call register pending.” Shabnam cautioned that a fair investigation required evidence of the limits of the employee's duties and the pressure actually exerted on him before he could be pronounced guilty.

Beside the narrow temporary chachari near the hospital, a crowd of children had gathered. Tara Binout was checking the knot of the red warning signal. A boy carrying a heavy sack on his back turned towards the footway, but Tara showed him the longer paved route. “Didn't the bridge open yesterday?” he asked. Tara said, “A limited pedestrian route opened. A sack's weight, rising rainwater and the carrying of patients are not within its permitted conditions.” The boy was displeased, but when he saw Nurjahan's empty vehicle returning, he arranged to put his sack on it for the journey along the paved road. No one could turn the announcement of the chachari's opening into permission to send heavy hospital supplies across it.

Anwari was uneasy. The injury to Rehana's foot was healing slowly, and she feared that news of the detained consignment would cause people to declare every medicine in the hospital untrustworthy. Salma showed her, separately, the authorised medicines' issue slip, the treatment instructions, and the times when medical staff were available. “The source of what has been approved for this girl is entered on this slip,” she said. Anwari asked, “May I keep a copy?” Salma explained the limits of a patient's family's entitlement to records and gave her the appropriate copy. Anwari's first decision was that she would not take the girl home out of fear alone; she would keep up the regular reviews of her treatment.

In the afternoon a representative from Devvrat's office suggested that Aniruddha's admission could settle the entire supply affair. “If the hospital is admitting its own mistake, why needlessly damage the warehouse's name?” he asked. Rama laid two lists before him: one recording the hospital's premature summary of availability, the other the consignment under examination for inconsistent labels. “The error in the first document raises a question about the hospital's duties,” she said. “The second concerns the consignment's source, labels, transport and sequence of custody at the warehouse. An answer to the first does not answer the second.” Devvrat's representative disagreed but offered no conclusive evidence to rebut the distinction.

Aniruddha also made clear that if there were genuine receipts for Devvrat's earlier assistance to patients, that assistance would be acknowledged as service. The inconsistent warehouse labels, the inquiry into Mahesh's murder, and the criminal responsibility, if any, of the supply intermediary would remain matters for separate investigation. The representative asked, “Then what benefit does your admission give us?” Aniruddha said, “It will correct the false availability figure used for patients, ensure that medicines actually available are requested in time, and prevent the next officer from signing without checking. That benefit is not for the promotion of your name. It is for the people in this hospital.” The representative left quietly through the outer door.

A municipal officer wanted Aniruddha to write immediately that he accepted full responsibility. Shabnam saw the words “all irregularities in the

supply chain” in the draft. She asked Aniruddha, “Did you inspect the entire consignment yourself?” “No.” “Did you approve all the payments?” “No.” “Then why accept responsibility for everything?” The officer said that emergency announcements always required general language. Shabnam replied, “A public notice may be general. An allegation of responsibility may not.” The incompatible sentence was struck out, and in its place they specified the incident, time, signature and limits of the investigation.

At last Aniruddha read his handwritten statement. “In the emergency summary prepared at night, I signed a sheet treating materials dispatched from the warehouse as available without separate confirmation of their physical receipt at the hospital and approval following inspection. This created the possibility that an exaggerated count of available items would be used in planning treatment. My failure to verify the accuracy of that sheet was a shortcoming in the discharge of my responsibilities. I am preserving the original and issuing a correction.” He paused. Then he added the final sentence: “Which patient actually failed to receive which medicine, and what medical consequences, if any, resulted, require independent investigation.” His pen trembled a little as he wrote it, but the writing was legible.

Rama entered the time the statement was received. Instead of endorsing it, Shabnam wrote, “Statement received; facts yet to be verified.” For the public copy Naira requested only the passages describing the error, its correction and the preventive safeguards to follow. Aniruddha gave permission but imposed the limit that private patients' names and the details of the employee's unverified telephone call must not be published. The employee's name remained in a confidential annex to the investigation. Urmila asked what would happen if someone altered the account and printed a headline saying, “Doctors Confess to Crimes.” Naira wrote a headline in her notebook: “Doctor Acknowledges Specific Error in Hospital Availability Register; Consignment Inquiry Continues.”

Aniruddha went through the inventory again with the storeroom assistant. One consignment had been approved, but its actual weight showed a lower quantity than recorded; the shortfall was written down at once. Another item had received valid approval following testing, but because a gate key was unavailable, it had not yet come into the hospital's possession. Investigation continued into the inconsistent labels on a third. “To call all three of these simply ‘unavailable’ would also be an error,” Salma said. “They have not been obtained for different reasons.” The single figure headed “Total Medicines” was then removed from the hospital noticeboard and replaced by three headings: physically available and approved; approved but awaiting delivery; and under inspection.

An employee asked whether so many categories would not make the day's work difficult. Urmila replied, “Does calling difficult work easy shorten a patient's waiting time?” Aniruddha did not give two members of the health

team the impracticable order to recount the entire storeroom every hour. Instead he decided that at each change of shift, the responsible storeroom employee and a designated member of the treatment team would jointly reconcile a limited list of available supplies; any discrepant slips would be preserved separately. The employee was still worried, but having a written time assigned to this responsibility somewhat lessened his fear of accusations that might otherwise arise at any moment.

As the first patient vehicle of the evening was about to depart, Tulsi Tajpuriya examined the driver's rest slip. Jamir checked the weight and seal of an approved medicine chest before loading it into his vehicle. Urmila reconciled the medical list against the medicines, equipment and names of staff who would accompany the patient. Having examined the patient's condition, Aniruddha recorded the decision to transfer. Anwari had agreed that her daughter Rehana would continue her treatment here, so the girl was not put into the vehicle. The wet floor of the outer corridor made the circuitous route take a little longer. The actual time was recorded; the mere availability of a vehicle was not used to hurry a patient out.

Tara returned after tying the day's final safety warning beside the temporary chachari. Aniruddha stopped her to ask whether a lightly burdened person carrying medicine for a patient might cross it. Tara replied, “If a person who needs to make the crossing is within the prescribed limit, and the weather and foundations are sound, that is a separate matter of pedestrian use. But the hospital's supply plan must not be based on this chachari. The warnings may change in the rains.” Aniruddha agreed. He was beginning to understand how easily limited permission could become a sweeping assurance when repeated inaccurately, whether it referred to the contents of a storeroom or to a route.

At the gate that evening, Naira met Urmila. “I'll write about the doctor's mistake in today's report,” she said, “but I'll also write about his work treating people all night and keeping the patient vehicles moving.” Urmila answered, “That will not make the error smaller, and it will not make the treatment untrue.” Naira asked when the arrears recorded in Urmila's old laundry-time register would be heard. Urmila looked at the last page of her notebook: there was a date for a hearing, but no order for payment. “I won't give up my wages to celebrate someone else's admission,” she said. Naira laughed. “May I print that line of yours?” “Ask first, then print,” Urmila replied.

Before going home, Aniruddha saw that the certified copy prepared for Shailaja had been stamped. The document was still difficult to understand, so he asked Salma to explain each item to Shailaja in plain language when they met. The date of the separate medical inquiry into Saraswati Devi's death was also clearly entered. The receipt for Saraswati Devi's sheet, Aniruddha's statement, and the hospital's inventory of medicines were three different documents: none could claim authority over the others. Salma placed the first

paper in a small blue cloth bag, the second in the office's locked chest, and the third on the table used at the change of shift.

At night new copies of the five conditions were being prepared for the municipal meeting. Shabnam saw that although the hospital's correction sheet had been signed, the actual handover of the goods inspected at the warehouse was still outstanding. A date had been set for the first instalment of the kitchen workers' wages, but the cooking pots had not yet begun to provide meals regularly. Cleaning of the outer drains continued, while the internal blockage had not been opened without a safe inspection. Beside each item Shabnam marked separately what was “done” and what remained “pending.” Aniruddha's admission was one necessary correction towards removing an obstacle to these five decisions, not the five signatures required by the agreement.

When the sound of the last patient vehicle had faded into the distance, a little quiet settled over the hospital veranda. Aniruddha turned the old summary sheet lying on the table and examined it; he did not tear it up. Beside it lay the certified copy of the new correction. Outside, rainwater was creeping towards the corridor, and inside, drops were still falling from an old joint. The nurse on duty laid down a dry cloth and took charge of the gate key. Aniruddha asked her, “Have the approved medicines for the next shift been counted?” She said, “They have, but one chest has still to arrive.” Aniruddha wrote down that incomplete answer without pretending to complete it. Tomorrow's treatment would begin from that truth.

Chapter 107 · Five Signatures

The lower edge of the old warehouse gate had swollen in the damp morning air. When Devvrat turned his key, the lock would not yield at first. The watchman picked up a small tin of oil from the ground, but Rama stopped his hand. “The time at which the lock is opened will be recorded. First see whether anyone has touched it.” The watchman opened his old register. The night guard had changed, but the ink on the paper seal was still intact. Devvrat withdrew the key. Before the first signature, what had to be secured was not the lock itself but the presence of everyone appointed to witness its opening. At the hospital, waiting for a single chest of supplies meant time passing for a patient. Yet that urgency could not become permission to remove goods under investigation without a record.

Rama laid five sheets in the public corridor. At the head of each, Shabnam had written the name of a distinct task: safe travel for patients; local water measurements and public drainage; the supervised handover of warehouse supplies cleared by inspection; a relief kitchen offering equal access; and the public copy of the records. Beside each task stood the name of the responsible representative. This time the signatures were not to be symbols of celebration but a checklist for work to begin. Shabnam looked at the clock. “We shall record the time of the next event after each signature. If a condition has not been met, we will not print a picture of five signatures and say the work is finished.” Leaning against a pillar of the veranda, Naira opened her notebook. She had permission to take photographs, not to obtain private lists of patients.

“Why bring the appendix of the old allegations back,” Devvrat asked, “when I am opening the warehouse myself today?” Rama showed him the sealed envelope. “Your cooperation today belongs to today's work. It does not erase the earlier investigations into the order for Mahesh's murder, the source of the detained consignment, or the hospital's inaccurate summary of available supplies.” For a little while Devvrat kept his eyes on the envelope. He wanted the goods released quickly, but he had no authority to wipe out lines in records still under investigation. He read the restriction written on the page and signed: controlled handover of goods approved by inspection. This was the first signature, not a declaration that everything in the warehouse was innocent of wrongdoing.

The authorised inspector pointed out the thread beside the second lock. Behind it lay the property of two departments. On one side were approved bandages, clean sheets, water-testing equipment, and materials whose testing for medical use was complete; on the other were medicines with inconsistent labels and suspicious transport bundles, held under a separate seal. Setting down his scales, Gopal, a warehouse labourer, asked, “My name won't disappear beneath the freight account, will it?” Before Devvrat could answer,

Rama brought forward the wage sheet. Gopal and his two fellow workers would sign for the times spent opening the gate, counting the goods, closing it, and sealing it again; the rate of payment was already written down. The watchman also examined the receipt for his additional night shift. One lock was opened. The red seal on the other remained unbroken.

As the first bundle of clean sheets came out, Urmila caught hold of it and insisted that it be opened there at the gate. There was a smell of dampness along its edges, although the cloth inside was dry. “Fit for laundering, not yet for a treatment bed,” she said. The store assistant wanted every piece entered under the single heading “Received.” Urmila made three separate entries: arrived; usable after testing; and sent for cleaning. Watching from a little distance, Aniruddha said, “I will not repeat today the mistake I acknowledged yesterday.” It was decided that one chest of supplies should be taken to the hospital; whether its contents could be used would depend on a separate examination. Devvrat's signature had opened the warehouse gate. The doctor's inspecting pen would determine when the supplies might be put to use.

Outside the warehouse, an old fence protruded into the path of an empty handcart. Sona Kathautiya had drawn up her cart, but she did not order her workers to clear the fence without pay. “Under which budget head will the labour for opening a government road be entered?” she asked. Shabnam had the municipal worker's name and the time recorded. Sona showed the receipt for an advance on her new delivery; her claim for earlier unpaid freight remained pending separately. She sent the approved supplies to the hospital by the designated diversion. Opening the warehouse gate was a definite event, but it did not make every obstruction disappear of its own accord. When the first cart departed, the watchman wrote down the exact time. Not a sentence of additional praise for Devvrat appeared on that page.

On the outer hospital veranda, Tulsi Tajpuriya was changing shifts with two drivers. One vehicle would carry a trained attendant, the prescribed supplies, and one approved family member; the other was assigned to lighter goods. Madan Raut had already completed the day's journeys for the schoolchildren. Haricharan Paswan asked whether a driver who had been awake all night would be sent out again merely by calling the journey an “emergency.” Tulsi showed him the column for rest. “Having a vehicle available and having a driver fit to drive are two different things.” Shabnam entered the time of the second signature on the five sheets. Tulsi's approval covered a safe roster for patient transport; it was not an agreement by the drivers to withdraw their earlier claims for wages. The first patient departed at the proper time. Patients still receiving treatment safely at the hospital were not sent away simply because a vehicle was standing outside.

Jamuna's son stood on the hospital steps watching the rear door of a vehicle. “Will they take everyone away now?” he asked. Salma Sheikh placed a hand on his head as she answered: “Anyone who can be treated safely here will

remain here. Anyone whose doctor believes another place offers the care they need will travel when the time is right.” Jamuna put her treatment papers into her bag. She did not say yes without a reason. Shailaja had come to ask the date of the hearing concerning Saraswati Devi's death. Aniruddha did not begin showing her the new treatment list; instead, he instructed that she be given a separate certified copy concerning her earlier complaint. The opening of a kitchen, the movement of vehicles—none of these successes gave anyone the right to make Shailaja's grief disappear.

At the riverbank, Hira Sahni's measuring rod was planted in the wet earth. Aditi marked the red boundary from the old report and the line of today's current in two different inks. Tara Binout went as far as the first narrow bend of the ruined drain, but did not enter it. Sugni Saday set her team to removing rubbish from the marked, safe section outside. Bending down, Paro Patharkatta examined a cracked slab at the edge; her tools did not go inside before the load had been tested. “The signature has been made. Open the drain,” an employee said. Aditi replied, “The obstruction in the section you can see may safely be cleared. Entering the main structure is still prohibited.” The third signature approved the local measurement; it did not certify that the entire drain had been repaired.

Ramesh's wife stood beside the field embankment with a small bundle of seed. She feared that, in the name of public interest, the administration would cut through her private boundary in the night. Aditi showed her the outer limit marked on the inspection sheet. “We shall work within this line. Your objection concerning the land on this side has been entered.” With her foot, the woman made a small mark in the soil. “If the water comes back into my field, who will listen then?” Hira answered that the water-level measurements could be compared over time; there was also a written procedure for any further objection. The rights over the field had not been decided there, but after timber and debris were lifted from the public outlet, a thin stream of water became visible. Tara called that measurable progress, not a safe and lasting solution.

In an old classroom of the school being used as a shelter, Ruhani was counting utensils, with slips of paper spread across the floor. Buckets had been placed beneath two leaks in the roof. The window could be opened, but the door latch had jammed. A local craftsman straightened its bent metal plate; his wages were recorded before the room was opened. A teacher asked whether the caste, religion, and family names of those entering the shelter should be kept on separate lists. “If confidential details are needed for someone's medical requirements or for access for a person with a disability, obtain them with consent,” Ruhani said. “We will not inspect identities before assigning places in the meal queue.” Four families brought their own bedding. An elderly woman asked for an unobstructed passage beside the door, and Ruhani had the things lying there removed.

No sooner had the shelter's first room opened than a young man from a donors' association tried to enter with a camera. Shabnam stopped him at the door. “The children and patients inside are not objects to be photographed,” she said. The young man protested that without pictures the donors would not trust them. Ruhani showed him receipts for grain stored in the room, the count of bedding, and acknowledgements of the work done. “Let them put their trust in these,” she answered. In a corner a child was setting down a little doll made of thread. The child could tell someone its name; nobody, however, had given permission for its face to be published. The shelter door was open to everyone, not to turn the lives within into a public spectacle.

A dispute broke out before the first pot was set upon the old kitchen hearth. The donors' association had issued a receipt for three days' rice and lentils, but the accounts for oil, fuel, washing utensils, and pay for the night shift were incomplete. “Another disaster has come,” said a young man. “Let everyone give one day's service for free.” Ruhani rose from beside the hearth. “If I want to make sweet rice in my own home, I can give it away without charging anyone,” she said. “But why do you call feeding twenty-five people, washing the wet pots, and keeping watch at night a matter of my personal wishes?” Rukhsana showed them the pages of her earlier open accounts. Raghu the cook kept the purchase of lentils separate from the price of spices. Chandrika stopped a new order for puas until the old payment due to her had been settled.

For the first time, the hours of work were entered in an orderly roster. Kanchan and two women newly engaged to cook asked who would look after their children at home; they needed short, scheduled breaks. Mamta Hari and Rani Halalkhor, who would be doing the cleaning, said they needed safe water, protective clothing, and sandals for washing the utensils. The filthy water from the drain would not be used for kitchen work. The representative from Devvrat's office again held up the donation receipt. Ruhani laid the workers' payment vouchers beside it. Shabnam made the distinction explicit: the value of donated rice, the cost of purchased oil, the workers' hours, and their wages were separate items. Ruhani provided the fourth signature for the kitchen's operation, but only after the advance for the first shift's wages had actually been paid out.

An employee counted the money and handed each cook the stipulated advance together with a receipt. One woman's name had been written incorrectly in the count. She spoke up herself. “Correct my name. If the receipt carries the wrong name, who will be paid for my work tomorrow?” The clerk corrected the mistake. The employee signed, and the worker added her thumbprint after the document had been read aloud to her. Ruhani put her copy in a small blue bag. The rice was late in going on the fire because of this process, and irritation rose among the waiting crowd. Lifting his wooden ladle, Raghu said, “I know what it means to be hungry and waiting, but

deducting the cooks' wages will not make the khichdi cook any faster." This time no one broke through the queue in the name of claiming that everyone's service belonged to everyone else.

Urmila arrived at the door for the first tray on the treatment list. She asked how the kitchen would take account of patients who were fasting, those whose salt intake was restricted, and the timing of their medicines. Salma handed over separate slips for meals and medical advice. For patients unable to eat the ordinary khichdi, separate arrangements were made according to medical directions. Rukhsana said that if soft rice cooked at home and brought in was accepted, its cost too would appear in the public purchase register. Another bucket of water was carried off the hospital veranda; the leak within had not been stopped. The relief kitchen's operation did not mean the building's weakness had been repaired. But it did make it less inevitable that people should remain hungry.

Ishan came from the landing place after watching the work of two small boats. Hira's team had looked at the river level and approved a restricted route for bringing utensils and dry firewood, not heavy vehicles. As Ishan pushed a boat, he saw his foot sinking into the bank and stopped at once. "Today's signature will not hold good for tomorrow's current," Hira said. The goods were unloaded from another, safer stretch of bank. Ishan did not conceal the value of his own labour; he had the boatman's hire and the porters' wages entered separately. Some people called him a scholar of philosophical debate and told him not to lift the heavy load. "Working with my own hands at this moment is one thing," he said. "My charity must not acquire a claim over the rate charged by someone whose livelihood depends on this boat every day."

By noon, the smell of hot khichdi drifted beyond the school veranda. Ruhani did not make two separate rows of places to sit; she arranged one long serving area, with slightly raised benches for those unable to sit cross-legged. There were no boxes for caste or religion on the list of people fed, only the number of plates and the agreed need for special assistance. First in the line sat a driver; after him an older woman, a craftsman's daughter, and a municipal worker. "May I eat from my own vessel?" an elderly man asked. "Of course," Ruhani replied. "No one is ordered to eat from an identical plate. The condition is that everyone has an equal right to receive food." The old man took out his brass vessel, sat a little apart, and began to eat. No one objected.

Chandrika had brought a small quantity of sweet puas made with jaggery, but the price of her first consignment was clearly stated on its receipt. There was a little too much ginger in Rukhsana's khichdi; from Raghu's second pot came the scent of roasted cumin. A girl began mixing the two flavours, and her mother laughed. "There is no insistence here that every village must eat its khichdi with precisely the same salt," Raghu said. Nurjahan returned from work and, after giving her donkey water, sat down to eat. Sona Kathautiya took a plate only after settling her freight accounts; Ruhani offered her no

special place of honour. The two women sat in the same row. A small quarrel arose over the taste of the lentils, and for that moment not one file of old allegations was opened between them.

When Rama came to post the public sheet, she saw that the plaster was crumbling from the wet wall. Naira suggested fixing the copy to a wooden board and keeping another inside the office. The public summary set out the five conditions in order, the people who had approved them, the services that had actually opened, and the work still outstanding. Information about the supplies under warehouse inspection appeared only at an appropriate level of detail; the names of private patients and the protected identities of the twenty-seven were not included. Sarita asked to have her copy read aloud. “Where is the reference to the earlier sheet carrying objections?” she asked. Rama added the original reference number at the foot, so people could see that a new agreement had not extinguished the old objections.

Rama placed the fifth signature against the distribution of this public copy and the protected appendix. Shabnam recorded who was responsible for supplying copies and where a hearing could be requested. Naira prepared her news report from the material she had permission to use. In her notebook she wrote that the doors of relief had opened and the five conditions had been put into effect, while investigations into earlier wrongdoing were continuing. Someone asked whether Devvrat's photograph would be placed at the top. “Let the opening of the lock remain visible in a report about opening the lock,” Naira replied. “One man's smile must not erase the patient's vehicle, the measuring rod, the kitchen workers' wages, and the right to the records.” Devvrat heard the words, but made no further proposal for a plaque bearing his name.

As the water moved a little farther through the outer outlet, a municipal employee began preparing an announcement of success. Hira Sahni pointed to a fresh mark on the measuring rod. “It has fallen by this much at this hour. We have still not completed the measurements of the incoming water upstream, the load on the embankment, or the scouring within the spillway.” Aditi wrote “Limited improvement” on a mustard-coloured sheet. Shabnam added the phrase to the public summary. There were two leaks in the shelter roof; drops were still falling from a joint inside the hospital; and the sixty-kilogram limit on the temporary chachari bridge remained unchanged. Five signatures were no guarantee against every possible movement of water. Yet the services meant to be opened could now be seen outside the pages of the agreement.

Before the evening meal was distributed, Ruhani checked the accounts for the first shift herself. The measure of rice was correct, but two hours of the utensil washer's labour had been left out. She amended the sheet in front of the worker. Whether the worker's eyes were wet with tears or stung by smoke, she did not ask. “Write down as much as you have worked,” Ruhani said.

Rukhsana handed over responsibility for her second shift there, and Kanchan found time to go home and see to her child. She had not fallen asleep beside the cooking pot; she was going home with wages in her hand. When the price of labour entered the day's final reckoning, there was no longer an empty space where it could be replaced by the word donation.

Urmila sat beside Naira with her plate. The marks of their different occupations were on their hands—ink on one pair, the blue of washed cloth on the other. “Will your tea be cold again tomorrow?” Naira asked. “Today's khichdi is hot,” Urmila said. “I won't waste even that.” She put the first spoonful into her mouth and narrowed her eyes. “Too much of Rukhsana's ginger,” she whispered. Naira laughed. “Mix it with Raghu's cumin.” Hearing them from a little distance, Ruhani called out, “We'll write down who decides the spices in the next batch, along with that person's wages.” Laughter followed. Amid the days of grief, even this small disagreement over taste offered insult to no one.

As night fell, nothing remained of the earlier spectacle on the shelter veranda. The room was open, and the name of the person on night duty had been posted at the door. An approved vehicle had reached the hospital. The warehouse gate had been sealed again according to procedure, but the cleared supplies had reached the places where they were needed. Water flowed through the safe section of the public drain, and the quantity of khichdi left over in the kitchen had been recorded for the next shift. Before closing the sheet bearing the five signatures, Rama asked, “How many meals were served?” Ruhani gave the number, then added, “Write down how many remain as well. We shall cook again tomorrow.” Outside, five people took different paths across the wet earth towards their homes. They were not all owners of the same promise. But on this day each of the five had done the work that belonged to them.

Chapter 108 · Beyond the Water Level

In the first light of dawn, the red line on Hira Sahni's measuring pole had disappeared beneath the water. Where the mark had remained visible above the current until the previous evening, brown water now swirled with fine mud. Hira did not pull out the pole. She planted another bamboo a hand's breadth away and wrote the same time upon both. From the direction of the shelter came the voices of the women who had washed the kitchen plates the day before; at the landing, five men stood beneath the thatched roof waiting to load sacks into a boat. Hira looked at them and said, "Not one sack yet. First we record the water level. Then we shall speak of boats."

Madhu arrived with the old landing register. The final crossings of the previous night had been entered against four boats; someone had proposed making six boats ready for the first morning run. Hira put a small question mark beside the six on the slip. "The water has risen, but we have not yet seen where the current has grown stronger. We shall not increase a number merely to preserve the dignity of the paperwork." Madhu pulled at a rope and examined the bottom of a boat. A bead of water glittered in one of its wooden joints. She remembered the wages paid for repairing that boat the day before. "It has been repaired, not tested," she said. "For now it stays at the landing." The owner protested, "But it was running yesterday!" Madhu replied, "Yesterday's water is not today's."

When Aditi came onto the raised platform above the landing, she was carrying a copy of the agreement bearing five signatures. The municipal representative wanted to demonstrate that all five services were operating: the shelter was open, the kitchen fires were burning, vehicles were running, approved goods had been released from the warehouse, and water levels were being measured. Without resting her eyes on the paper, Hira asked, "On how many readings do you base the claim that the route is safe?" Aditi answered, "Yesterday evening's reading and the preliminary reading this morning." Tara Binout said, "It is good to record two times, but we must also see how far the water has risen between them. A route safe at one moment is not permission to use it all day." This time Aditi did not argue.

After sunrise, the circumference of the narrow whirlpool forming on the right side of the Tilwaha began to change. The bamboo of an old fishing net, half exposed before, now showed only its tip. Hira took down a long sounding pole and touched the riverbed at three places: hard sand at the first, moving silt at the second, and at the third the pole sank farther than expected. She had the time of each measurement written beside its mark. Gopal Majhi came up from farther along the landing with the shaft of an oar resting across his shoulder. His clothes were wet against his ribs, his eyes reddened by the night's passage. He looked first at the current, then at the faces in the gathering. "Are

you thinking of sending the boats along the straight line on the old map?" he asked.

At Gopal's question, a young municipal volunteer turned his tablet towards them. A blue line ran straight to the rising ground behind the hospital. "This is the evacuation route on the official map," he said. With a wet bamboo, Gopal drew two bends on the earth. "Before the rains, a bullock cart can turn along this route shown on paper. Once the water rises, the inward-turning current at the first bend catches the stern of a boat and drags it round. Last night I made that turn in an empty boat, not a loaded one. The two tests are not the same." The young man asked, "Then what is this route called?" Gopal answered, "First understand whose map the name belongs to."

In the municipal register, the word "Tirsula," copied from an old transport slip, had been placed at the end of the blue line. Gopal picked up the slip. "In my father's time, the name Tirsula appeared in a separate register of routes. It was a reference to a name, not a direct measurement of the water at this landing. You wrote Tirsula and assumed that a boat could leave straight from this bend of the Tilwaha. What original measurement supports that identification?" The young man had no answer. On the back of her page, Naira wrote: the source of an old name, the present route, and a verified geographical connection are three separate things. "I am not asking you to erase a name," Gopal said. "But if you send living people into the water on the strength of a mistaken name, the error in the name becomes an error inflicted on their bodies."

An official proposed correcting the map immediately by writing "Gopal Route" on it. Gopal did not smile. "Putting my name there will not make the river's mouth solid. The bend in the bank that local people call the 'Old Erosion' should keep that name here; if measurements show it can be used, record the hours when it can be used. Preserve separately the original paper on which you found Tirsula." Rama prepared a three-part amendment sheet: the wording of the old slip, Gopal's first-hand testimony about the route, and the uncertain measurements of the present moment. The young man was displeased at having to withdraw his first map. But after seeing the bank itself coming apart at the landing, he removed the public line from his mobile screen. For the first time, Gopal thanked him.

Hira seated all the boatmen in a circle. Of the six boats, one had to be held back because its repairs had not been tested; another had an unevenly wet bottom; a third could not maintain sufficient freeboard under a heavy load. She authorised only three boats for limited daytime trips. One additional boat would remain ready, empty, solely for emergency assistance, without permission to take passengers. Testing on Shyam Mallik's newly fastened boat was not yet complete. "Reducing the number of boats will lengthen the queue," Hira said. "I can see the inconvenience. But it is also one way of reducing the number who may drown." Resentment stirred among the people

waiting. Some held up the five signatures on their applications and demanded the right to board at once.

Rice had been rinsed in Rukhsana's kitchen since dawn. Hearing the voices at the landing, she came as far as the courtyard, though she did not abandon her cooking pot; she instructed Raghu to keep count of the time. "If there are fewer boats, the next consignment of fuel will be late," she said. "We have rice for today, but tomorrow's reckoning will have to be made afresh." Sona Kathautiya arrived with her cart. She proposed that a third of the dry rice should be sent not on a heavily laden boat but by handcart along the safer upper route. An administrative worker objected that this way passed beside a privately owned field ridge. Sona answered immediately, "Being able to see a route is not the same as having permission to use it. Listen to the owner of the ridge, and record the wages for carrying the goods before the journey begins."

A young man returning empty-handed from the landing complained that with only three boats his wages would be halved the next day. Madhu showed him her register: there would be fewer safe crossings in a day, but securing boats, inspecting ropes, giving signals, and standing ready for emergency assistance were work too. She decided that boatmen whose vessels were held back would not be kept on watch all day without pay. The owner of the additional boat wanted the general fare increased for everyone. Hira rejected the proposal and asked why poor passengers should pay for defects in the repair of a boat. A separate account was opened for the revised wages and fares.

At the edge of the field ridge, Kiran Raut was anxious to protect her soil. The loan she had taken for seed for the last crop was still unpaid. An official asked what objection she could have to allowing carts through for a single day. "One cart will pass today and ten tomorrow," Kiran said, "and the seedbed will be broken. Put it in writing that this is only for light grain, only two journeys, and who will be responsible for restoration if the earth is damaged." Remembering an earlier mistaken assumption, Aditi listened without speaking. She added a demarcation of the field and an immediate assessment of any damage to the temporary permission. Kiran allowed the first two carts to pass. Thanking her, Sona said, "Relief must not be an excuse for making a field poor again."

On the hospital veranda, Urmila had two transfer slips for the morning. One patient was stable and could continue treatment there; the other needed specialised equipment. Tulsi Tajpuriya asked whether one of the three riverboats could be reserved for the hospital. Over the telephone Hira said, "Before a patient is taken aboard, both the doctor and the boatman must say the transfer is possible. Write down separately the limits of the boat's body and those of the patient's." Salma read the consent terms aloud to the patient's family. Aniruddha examined the equipment list; from it, a journey by the hospital's small road vehicle appeared safer. The proposal to use a boat was withdrawn, but the patient's transfer was not halted.

At the end of the queue stood Shailaja, carrying on her shoulder a bundle containing an old sheet that had belonged to her mother-in-law, Saraswati Devi. She was due to receive a certified copy of a page from the hospital, but her earlier plan for crossing the river now involved a boat that had been prohibited from sailing. Setting the bundle down, she asked, “Will my paper still be kept for me until tomorrow?” Rama wrote out a safe place and time for her to collect the copy. “I do not ask for any extra priority,” Shailaja said, “but my mother’s case must not disappear behind the excuse of a rising river.” Her question was entered separately in the objections register at the landing.

Before noon, Kishori Darogi, who had been keeping watch beside the embankment, came running, breathless. She reported that water was showing at the right foot of the bund. The municipal representative was about to treat this as proof that the embankment was in danger of breaking. Tara stopped him. “Surface runoff, seepage from within, and overflow from above are three different things. First see where the water is coming from.” Gopal went by the narrow village path behind the fields. Hira tied up the boats at the landing and carried the measurement sheet to the embankment. Aditi recorded the time of the first small inspection team and forbade the crowd to climb onto the bund.

Two goats grazing on top of the embankment were scraping away the lower earth with their hooves. Devaki Pal drove her goats away. “The goats will go,” she said, “but I will not surrender my right to see the drainage on the side of my house.” A thin thread of water could be seen emerging from behind the sandbags. Tara took some soil into her hand to judge its dampness; Aditi and the official measured the place where water had collected. No one was yet in a position to call it a breach. Gopal warned that if a temporary obstruction on the upper side held back the water, the rise in the lower settlement might change. “Calling one house safe is not permission to drown another house’s doorway,” he said.

Shiv Dhandi and Sugni Saday’s team were summoned to carry sandbags. One worker from the administration said there was no time to record names in an emergency. Shiv reminded him of the dispute over the old wage register. “If we are to carry the weight, the accounting for it will be done now. Unless the measurements and the orders are right, we shall not step blindly onto sinking earth.” Sugni demanded protective footwear, ropes, and a dry place from which to work. The official was irritated at first, then stopped when his own foot slipped beside the embankment. The weight of the materials, the workers’ names, hazard allowances, and the signal for stopping work were put on paper. Bags were placed along a limited, safe section; no additional weight was put upon the inner erosion without testing.

The women living on the other side of the village had the opposite concern. If sandbags continued to be piled on the safe, higher part of the bund, where would the water from their courtyards go? Rama wrote down the

statements of two women representatives separately. One said, “There are children in my house. Do not raise the road and send the water inside.” The other said, “Do not close the passage by which fish reach our wetland on account of this water.” Aditi made clear that the day’s inspection did not authorise a permanent raising of the embankment. Tara identified a safe outer drainage point, but made measurements of the lower houses and their residents’ consent mandatory before it could be opened. The decision was limited to that much, but the voices from both sides had entered the record.

Naira asked Rama how the public notice should be written. The young municipal volunteer wanted to write “Embankment safe” so that the crowd would not swell. Hira spoke sharply. “Safe for how many hours? On which side? Under what load?” Naira changed the sentence: immediate marking and protective work had been undertaken on a specified outer section of the embankment; the upstream current, the inner soil, and the movement of water on the other side remained under examination. The public notice also set out the restricted daytime service of three boats, one empty rescue boat, the suspension of regular night crossings, and the limits of permission to use the alternative land route. “Every word on this page will have consequences for someone’s body,” Rama said.

An elderly boatman insisted that his boat could still be operated on the strength of long experience. Gopal took him aside to the bank. “You are a friend of my teacher,” he said, “but the upper sand is shifting in this current. Experience can help us read the water; it cannot be seated in place of the water itself.” The old man looked at his worn oar. “Then what am I to do?” Gopal offered him a place on the shore signalling team, with separate pay. He was silent, then said people would not recognise his work if he was no longer in a boat. “When you stop others from rowing into danger, you will be saving them just the same,” Gopal answered. By evening, the old man’s report of a whirlpool he had observed proved useful.

The first half of the day’s meals reached the kitchen distribution point on time, but the cart of fuel was delayed on its second journey. Rukhsana lowered the fire. Children waited for their bread; a volunteer wanted to take an unauthorised photograph and send it to a donor. Kanchan stopped him at the door. Ruhani supplied the public figures for goods received and meals served, not the faces of families. After resting her animal cart, Nurjahan brought a small load of dry firewood along the safe land route. She said plainly, “The outstanding carriage charge is payable separately, and today’s work separately.” Raghu put a fresh pot on the fire. The food arrived late, but the reason for the delay was openly entered in the time register.

Rehana, whose leg bore an old injury, found a place beside a shelter window with her mother, Anwari. Hearing that the water was rising, the child asked whether the medicine coming for her treatment had been stranded across the river. Salma showed her three lines on the paper: medicine

available; approved but in transit; and awaiting verification. “Today’s medicine for you is on the first line,” she explained. Anwari was still frightened. She asked whether anyone would be there on the night shift. Urmila showed her the named duty roster but offered no false assurance about the night’s water. “Whatever changes, you will be told,” she said. Through the window, the child watched grey clouds gather again in the sky.

Returning from the hospital, Aditi stopped beside the bamboo footbridge. Tara had already tied a notice across it: even light pedestrian use was temporarily suspended. A young man asked why a written weight limit had been issued only the day before. Tara showed him the wet foundation beneath the first bamboo of the bridge. “The load limit was tested on the assumption that the earth would remain firm. The water has changed that condition; the figure on the paper did not hold against the water.” Shyam Mallik removed a small wooden peg and kept it safe. They did not tear up the decking and throw it into the river. Clear signs, guards, and information about the alternative route were placed at both ends of the footbridge.

The municipal disaster team wanted a new map at once. Gopal said changing the colours of the map would not suffice. He urged them to test the safe approaches on the ground with local boatmen, women who handled oars, and farmers who worked the riverbank. Madhu showed the marks made on the side of her boat; Sona measured how deeply a cart wheel had sunk into the mud; after the two permitted journeys across Kiran’s field, they examined the condition of the seedbed. Beside every account of lived experience, Rama recorded its source. On one line she wrote “Limited pedestrians by day”; on another, “Materials only”; on a third, “Prohibited for now.” No line was declared a route for all time.

When the map was about to be published, a problem arose again. Beneath the name Tirsula on the old slip Gopal had read, another paper carried a name spelled differently. To resolve the difficulty, an employee urged them to treat both as synonyms for Tilwaha. Naira said, “Pasting the name from a source onto today’s water-level line is a confusion.” Gopal read out his own statement of direct testimony: “This is a description of the bend now observed and the behaviour of a boat; the geographical correspondence of the old document bearing the name Tirsula is a matter for separate verification.” The young man corrected the mistake on his first map and preserved the original copy. Gopal taught him that a corrected map, too, might become someone’s evidence in the future: do not erase an old error and then call the result history.

At the third reading in the evening, the rate at which the water was rising appeared to have slowed a little, but Hira made no announcement of relief. With the water higher, the shape of the whirlpool had changed; wet grass was caught in the anchor rope of one boat. Madhu cleared the rope with her own hands. “Three boats today,” she said. “Tomorrow perhaps two, perhaps four.

No number in advance.” Gopal asked whether payment had been arranged for those who would give warnings along the shore through the night. Shabnam showed him the written order for the approved shifts. One watchman said he could not stay the entire night because his young son had a fever. Another trained person was appointed in his place, and the first watchman’s half-day of work was not deducted.

In preparing for the night, the agreement bearing five signatures was undergoing another practical test. The measured quantities of the goods released from the warehouse were put on a separate board; the old seal on the bundle under inspection remained intact. The shelter door was open, but when Ruhani saw water dripping inside the room, she moved the bedding away from that corner. Rukhsana entered the names and wages of the night’s kitchen workers. Tulsi changed the drivers’ rest times and assigned an alternative shift for the emergency patient vehicle. In the disaster register, Aditi had the words “subject to this condition” entered beside each task. Devvrat called the caution unnecessary fear, but Urmila answered, “Fear grows not because limits are written on paper, but because they are concealed.”

Writing the final public page, Naira saw how easily the wish to tell a story of complete relief could choose its words: “All safe,” “All open,” “All ready.” She struck out every one of those sentences. In their place she recorded the services actually functioning and the limits that had changed: three boats for restricted daytime use; a road vehicle for patients; the bamboo footbridge temporarily closed; separate inspections on both sides of the embankment; the relief kitchen operating; goods under warehouse investigation kept apart. In the margin of the notebook, Urmila wrote in her own hand: the internal hospital leak remained as before; measurements of the external water level neither established nor disproved its cause. Looking at the ink on Urmila’s fingers, Naira said, “Now the names of those keeping watch tonight will be on this page as well.”

As darkness deepened at the landing, Gopal sat once more in the bow of an empty boat and listened to the sound of the bend. A difficult current does not conform to the arithmetic of one’s mind: he had learned that from his father’s old boat. He rose and came over to Hira. “Which route is left by your measurements?” she asked. “One small rise of dry land, only for light assistance in daytime,” Gopal said, “and even that must be measured again at dawn before use. For the rest, people on both banks need to be warned.” Hira promised the next watch would do so. Gopal signed in the space for his name, but asked for another line to be added in parentheses: “Local testimony on the route; to be tested again as the water level changes.”

In the first watch of night, smoke rose from the shelter stove, Jamuna’s medicine reached the hospital corridor on time, and a guard by the river was straightening the warning bamboo planted in the dub grass. Although all three boats were moored, their ropes strained in different directions. Facing

the water that had passed the red line, Hira crossed out the old figure and entered a new time. In the distance, Naira saw the shadow cast by a hanging lantern. No bridge had collapsed; nor was it time to declare that a town had been saved. On the night after the five signatures, the water had taught them to read the agreement in a new way: an agreement reached would endure only while the courage remained to call unsafe today the route that had been called safe yesterday.

Parva 10 · Sauptika | Yuddha Kāṇḍa

Chapter 109 · The Night's Accord

In the first watch of the night, Rukhsana half-opened the bamboo window to let the smoke from the stove escape, and the smell of wet earth entered from outside. The bottom of the iron cooking pot had caught against the hearth. She took hold of one of its handles and turned it a little with one hand, while with the other she straightened the damp corner of the wage register. The quantity of food would be determined by the number of people present in the shelter. Opening a fresh sack of rice, Raghu said, "As the night goes on, more people will come." Rukhsana replied, "If they come, they will eat. But who will keep from being cut the hours of those who have already begun work?"

Behind the door, Kanchan had turned an empty plate upside down and was wiping it with a cloth. The kitchen had opened the previous day after the five signatures, but on its first full night the difficulty was not merely how much food to prepare. Two self-help groups both wanted to enter Kanchan's name in their registers, so that each could show its share of the labour as completed. Setting down the plate, Kanchan said, "I have come here with only one body. If you write eight hours against my name on each of two pages, that may suit you, but it will not give me sixteen hours." Rukhsana had her sign one register; in the other she entered a reference to the time spent assisting, not a second payment.

In the kitchen's public room, Chandrika was ruling five columns on a sheet of paper: supplies, food prepared, food distributed, quantity remaining, and hours worked. Until now everyone's attention had gone to the first three columns. Showing them the fourth and fifth, still blank, she said, "If the hearth survives tonight, who will light it tomorrow? Where will you write the name of the person who stays late to scrub the pots?" A young man raised his phone to take a photograph. Rukhsana stopped him at the veranda. "Show the food and the accounts, not someone's face wet with exhaustion. No photograph and no name without permission." The young man lowered his phone and asked for a clean copy of the register.

Beside the cauldron, Raghu separately weighed the rice whose invoice had come from the warehouse as approved relief supplies that day. On the other side, Kiran Raut arrived with flattened rice and a little leafy vegetable from her fields. "This is not something I am giving away," she said. "It is what remains of the share belonging to the sharecroppers of our courtyard. If payment cannot be made now, write down the weight. Tomorrow we will settle the account after consulting everyone." Rukhsana waited for the pointer

on the scale to come to rest. If a harvest was called an anonymous donation, who would keep account of the seed? The flattened rice was entered on a separate receipt.

At the shelter, Ruhani had set a hand lantern outside the door of the sleeping room. There was no water on the veranda, but a faint dampness could be seen climbing the wall in the far corner. A volunteer urged her to put three families to sleep there, since there was no space left for anyone in the dry room. Lifting the bedding, Ruhani said, “We will not put a child’s head where water is entering the wall.” She asked the families who wished to stay together and who wanted a separate curtain. Two beds were moved onto the small covered platform near the window. It was proposed that the empty veranda of the school be measured for the third family; it was not immediately declared safe.

Anwari sat with a folded cloth beneath her daughter Rehana’s foot. The girl remembered the hour for her medicine, but did not know whether a new nurse would be there for the night shift. Before asking about the medicine, Salma Sheikh asked, “How is your pain now?” Rehana turned her foot a little and grimaced. Salma read her medical sheet and checked the time. She had the handover written down for the next nurse: the medicine given during the previous shift, the next examination, and the information conveyed to the family. “A patient must not disappear between one watch and the next,” she said. Anwari’s hand relaxed a little.

At the gate, the keys to Tulsi Tajpuriya’s two vehicles hung from separate nails. Jamir’s shift was nearing its end; his eyes were red from the night’s work. An employee of the disaster team wanted a vehicle sent straight to the landing because a rumour had spread that an elderly man was to be taken aboard a boat. Tulsi telephoned Hira Sahni. Hira was unequivocal: “Regular boat service is closed at night. First confirm where the elderly man is, his condition, and a safe route over land.” Tulsi did not rouse Jamir for another journey. She entered the time his duty ended in the rest register and verified the presence of a newly trained driver. To set off without checking was not to offer help.

In the municipal communications room, Shabnam Malik watched three telephones ring together. The first caller said the embankment had broken; the second reported that the water behind the bund was rising; on the third there was no report at all—someone rang and hung up. Shabnam assigned three different marks: unverified information, site inspection required, and contact unsuccessful. An official said, “Combine them into a single report and send out an emergency announcement.” She asked, “If people leave their homes, where will they go? And if the report proves false, who will tell them the way back?” They decided to issue a location-specific warning, not an announcement that the embankment had breached.

At the landing, Gopal Majhi was listening to the ropes of the moored boats. In the swift water, their knocking made a sound of its own. Madhu Kevat sat nearby with her oar laid upside down. Her fares at the landing had fallen that day, but she had received a written order for payment for the night watch. “What does standing watch mean?” she asked. “Turning people away, or taking them across in exceptional cases?” Hira addressed them both: “In this watch our first duty is to warn people. A special rescue can be decided only after a joint assessment by the doctor, the boatmen, and the site team—not through one person’s enthusiasm.” Madhu then tied a strip of red cloth to the wet gunwale of her boat, so that even in the dark it could be seen to be out of service.

A drenched adolescent came running up to Gopal. His home lay on the other side of the embankment; his mother had said the water had risen two fingerbreadths since evening. Holding up his fingers, he asked, “For this much water, should we lift up all our sacks and bedding?” Gopal looked at the mud around the boy’s feet. “What you have seen matters. But when did you measure it, and from which mark?” The boy hesitated. Madhu put a small piece of chalk in his hand. “Go back and mark the wall with the time. If you cannot do it alone, take someone with you. I will not record something heard as though it had been seen.” Two people who knew the safe land route went with him.

Aditi, the engineer, sat down and opened the map of the embankment. Yesterday’s water-level sheet contained three readings taken at different times at Tilwaha; two new lines had to be added for tonight. A young man from the town said the rise of the water had slowed, so the old mouth of the drainage outlet should be reopened. Aditi showed him Tara Binout’s written observation: the erosion of the earth within could not be judged by looking at the upper surface. She remembered the letter in which she had withdrawn her earlier conclusion that only a ‘minor repair’ was needed. Admitting an error did not automatically make the next decision correct. She authorised limited exterior measurements during the night inspection, not entry into the structure.

Tara, Shiv Dhandi, and Sugni Saday went out to inspect the safety ropes. Shabnam’s note said that a complaint had come from the lower settlement behind the embankment. Shiv asked, “Where the path is slippery, what arrangements are there for footwear and light?” An employee held up a bright torch. Sugni said, “Whose hand will hold that torch, and who will stop the work afterwards?” The team agreed on the markers on both sides as the limit they could approach, and fixed a time for their return. No one would disturb the face of the earth at night. The workers called to move the sandbags had their waiting time entered in the register as well.

On the right-hand side of the embankment, a slight current of water brushed the outside face of the sandbags, but its source could not be clearly

seen in the darkness. Tara measured the distance between two markers and told Shiv not to add any weight to the path. An official standing behind them wanted the photograph labelled ‘Repair Completed’. Sugni said, “If we describe something we have not touched tonight as complete, the morning team will come with false confidence.” She had the limits of the inspection recorded under her name. Gopal’s young team returned to say that the water mark on the wall on the lower side had risen by half a fingerbreadth. Aditi did not combine the two observations as though they were measurements taken at the same time.

Meanwhile, water began dripping again from the roof of the hospital’s old laundry room. Urmila moved the bundle of clean sheets away and counted the keys to two separate rooms. Aniruddha asked her where the new crate of supplies released from the warehouse was now kept. Urmila showed him the receipts: approved cloth undergoing a washing test; a small portion of medicines that had passed inspection in the treatment cupboard; the bundle with inconsistent labels still sealed. “A sentence saying the warehouse has opened is not the same thing as an item ready for use by a patient,” she said. Aniruddha looked again at the correction sheet for his earlier inaccurate summary of availability. Today he did not increase the available stock on the strength of verbal assurances.

When Devvrat came to the warehouse gate, mud had collected beside it. The watchman wanted to show him the count of materials released in a controlled manner the previous day, as recorded on the night list. Devvrat’s assistant urged that a second room in the private store be opened and some waterproof sheets taken out. Examining the seal on that room, Rama Karna said, “There is a question concerning the old private accounts attached to this lock. Writing ‘emergency’ will not suspend the inspection.” Devvrat replied, “So my supplies are to lie useless while people need rescuing?” Rama suggested requisitioning inspected sheets from the open store already approved for disaster relief. A decision about the sealed room would be taken in the presence of an authorised inspector.

Devvrat agreed, though there was irritation in his voice. He wanted the assistance he was giving that day to be visible at once. Shabnam showed him a copy of the five conditions. “The correct time of your contribution today has been recorded,” she said. “But that does not change the question of the private ledger you have still not produced. Fix a time tomorrow to open it separately before the inspector.” Devvrat had the watchman correct the gate-closing time for the night. No new thread was tied over the old seal; nor was it removed. Inside the gate, the darkness remained as before, but the count of sheets distributed on the outer platform was reconciled.

In one of the shelter rooms, the grandson of a sick elderly man was telling his family over the phone that ‘everyone is safe’. Ruhani took him aside. “Saying that may give your family some peace,” she told him, “but people in

another house may think the road is open. Tell them about your grandfather's condition and where you are." The young man asked what ought to be written in the public notice. Ruhani read out the sheet hung beside the bench: shelter open; damp room closed; meals served in scheduled shifts; night crossings of the river closed; emergency medical contact available. He telephoned his family again. This time there was less triumph in his voice, and more assurance.

As Rukhsana took the second cauldron off the stove, she noticed that the last three people in the distribution line had quietly stepped back. They were afraid that if their names were entered in the register, someone to whom they owed an old debt would find them. Rukhsana recorded the numbers of their meal tokens, not their names. Rama made it clear that confidential eligibility records would be kept separately; the kitchen's public accounts would show only the number of meals, the supplies, and the labour. An attendant whispered, "If there are no names on the page, how will the accounts tally?" Counting the plates, Kanchan answered, "You reconcile the food by the plates you have served, not by giving hunger a name."

A small dispute then arose. The hours worked by two women who had washed the kitchen utensils on the previous shift had been entered short. An official said that evidence of continuous work was required if they were to receive the special allowance for the half hour that fell around midnight. Pointing to the heap of wet utensils, Chandrika said, "A kitchen does not close when the food has been served. Pots, water, ashes, the stove—all of these are work." Rukhsana brought together the clock times, Kanchan's testimony, and the slip signed by the water carrier. Both women read out their own hours. It was not an entire hour but forty minutes of omitted labour that was corrected. A separate payment order was issued, not a prize for a photograph.

Raghu asked once whether all this accounting might not end by putting out the fire. Turning the wood in the stove, Rukhsana said, "The work and the accounts will both go on. If we give out bread tonight and leave the cooks in debt tomorrow morning, whom have we saved?" Raghu laughed. "Then in the morning we shall have to scrub the ledgers along with the pots." Kanchan was the first to laugh, followed by the children standing in line. Laughter did not take away their exhaustion, but everyone returned to their place for the next pot of food.

During the second watch at the landing, a call came saying that a pregnant woman on the edge of the village needed to reach the hospital. Shabnam first confirmed the address and contact number; the hospital doctor was consulted about her condition. Regular boat service remained suspended, but there was a possibility of reaching her by medical vehicle along the higher ground. Tulsi's trained driver checked a small vehicle and made it ready, while Gopal warned the local route team accompanying it about the bends in the road. The consent of the woman's family was recorded separately. The time of departure

was not published in the public notice; in accordance with the family's wishes, only the medical contact remained available.

After the vehicle had been sent, Rama sat waiting for a telephone call. When no word came, an impatient young man from the town said, "I'll post on social media that the rescue has succeeded." Rama stopped him. "The vehicle has left: that is confirmed. It has arrived: that is not yet confirmed. That she has received safe treatment is a third fact." When the driver called, his voice was strained with breathlessness. He had stopped on the raised road and brought the family into contact with the medical team. The final medical outcome still depended on written information from the hospital. Rama entered only confirmation of their arrival on the public sheet, without the patient's name.

The news brought a little hope to the people in the shelter. Ruhani spread a safe, dry mattress in an empty room reserved for relatives returning from the hospital. Kanchan's little brother was sitting beside her, making a paper boat at the doorway. "Will my boat sail in this water?" he asked. Setting the paper boat in a dry plate, Ruhani said, "It will sail here. On the river outside, you must listen to the real boatmen." The child poured a little water into the plate to see. The boat floated for two moments, then became soaked and stuck to the bottom. He asked for another sheet. Kanchan gave him a dry piece of ordinary writing paper, not a relief-distribution slip.

At the third measurement of the night, Aditi saw that the water was receding on the outer side of the embankment, but the water collected in the fields behind the bund remained at the same level. Hearing this, an official immediately announced that the danger was passing. Tara replied, "A lower reading at one point does not tell us what is happening along the whole embankment." Some farmers wanted the mud cleared and the outlet opened before dawn. Kiran Raut, whose seedbed stood beside the trapped water, said herself, "I want my field saved, but not at the price of flooding another village's homes." It was decided that in the morning light, measurements would be taken together on both sides, in the fields and by the houses. The outlet would not be opened at night.

In a corner of the communications room, Naira was matching the time of each event against the list bearing five signatures. One page recorded the hospital's receipt of medicines, another confirmation of the vehicle's arrival, a third the kitchen's meals and wages, a fourth the incomplete water-level inspection, and a fifth the limited handover of warehouse supplies. She added a line to the record: 'For work begun by agreement, its limits and what remains unfinished must be shown separately.' The municipal representative asked her to shorten the sentence. "Shorten it," Naira said, "but do not cut away what is unfinished." She prepared a brief public summary and kept the fuller original securely with Rama.

Midnight had already passed. A report came to Shabnam's phone that standing water had been seen in one of the shelter rooms. Ruhani went at once and found that the water had not come from the embankment outside; it was dripping through a cracked joint in the roof. A volunteer was about to report that 'floodwater has entered the shelter'. Ruhani showed him the wet matting. "I have seen water coming down from the roof. I have not seen floodwater enter the room." The bedding was removed, an inspection by a repair worker was entered for the next shift, and a separate place was found for drying the wet clothes. The people were moved first into a dry room; the report was written afterwards.

An elderly woman who had been staying in that room was searching inside her purse for the key to her house. Her grandson said that the house was locked and there was no need for her to keep the key with her here. "It was my own hand that locked my door," the woman said. "When I go back, it will be my own hand that opens it." Ruhani gave her a dry pouch for her purse; she did not ask to keep the key herself. The old woman felt the pouch to make sure it was properly fastened, then rested her head on her grandson's shoulder. The day of her return was uncertain, but the key was hers to hold even now.

A little before dawn, khichdi remained in the kitchen's last pot. Rukhsana reconciled the quantities in the register. Three fewer plates than planned had been distributed because three people had gone to join their families. The remaining khichdi was not simply entered as the following day's 'expenditure'. A slip authorised its use, within the prescribed safe time, for meals for five people on duty. Chandrika examined the receipt correcting her wages: her name, hours, and the date of payment were clearly stated. "Last night you kept the hearth alive," she said. "Today my hours have been saved." Rukhsana smiled. "Both must survive if the next pot is to be put on the fire."

Tulsi's vehicle returned empty, but Jamir had not yet completed his rest, so no one woke him. The new driver noticed that mud was caught in the tyre after the first journey. He cleaned it, checked the lights, and obtained authorisation for the next shift. Written news came from Salma at the hospital: the woman brought in during the night was under safe medical supervision; fuller information on her medical outcome would be given in accordance with the family's consent. On the strength of that limited statement, Tulsi recorded the vehicle team's task as completed. Shabnam added no conjecture about the patient's name, home, or treatment to the public notice.

Gopal and Hira reached the landing again for the first measurement at dawn. They felt the ropes with their hands to see how tightly they had drawn in the dark. The water had not risen to the red mark of the previous day, but fresh silt had collected in one place. Hira did not treat that measurement as grounds to cancel the night closure order on her own authority. "In daylight we will examine the riverbed again at two places," she said. Gopal wrote on his

slip that the warning team had changed watches on time, no boat had run during the night, and acknowledgements had been received that people on both banks had been informed. A new decision at dawn depended on the next inspection.

As Rama closed the folder with the five signatures, she saw that every page recorded something real that had been done during the night, and beside every such act stood at least one question still unanswered. The accounts of Devvrat's private warehouse were awaiting inspection by an authorised officer; the leak inside the hospital was unrepaired; the old mouth of the drainage channel was closed; and the people of the lower settlement behind the embankment remained anxious. Yet the kitchen women's hours had been entered, the vehicle had taken the correct road, the boats had stayed closed through the night, and the shelter's damp room had been emptied. Shabnam asked, "Who has won today?" Rama answered, "Those who did not evade their share of responsibility kept one night from falling apart."

When a thin line of the first sunlight fell across the shelter steps, Kanchan's little brother put his paper boat there to dry. Ruhani did not stop him; she only asked him to keep the steps clear for people passing. Rukhsana capped her pen and put the wage sheet from the previous shift into a dry bag. Naira pinned a copy of the night's public notice to the wall. Its first line read: 'Agreed services operated; safety restrictions remain in force.' No single signature had stopped the water. But that night, five signatures had become five separate acts of work, and a truthful account of those acts had survived for the decisions still to come.

Chapter 110 · The Warehouse Opens

In the light of dawn, Devvrat separated a small brass key, blackened with age, from the bunch he carried, to open the warehouse's second chamber. The first chamber had already been opened for a limited inspection the day before; Urmila had kept safe the receipt for the supplies sent from there to the hospital. Today the question was the second chamber, where goods purchased privately, articles promised as donations, and commercial supplies had been stored beneath the same roof. The wheel tracks left by the night's vehicle were still wet in the mud at the gate. Sarju, the watchman, said, "The water hasn't come up inside, but the damp is spreading along the back wall." Devvrat touched the wall first, and only then put the key in the lock.

Rama Karna stopped him. "Before you turn that key, enter the time of everyone's attendance today. This is a private room, so both your consent and the presence of the authorised inspector must be clear." Devvrat asked, with an edge in his voice, "Am I opening my own warehouse, or proving the door of my own house in a courtroom?" Rama answered, "Opening your house is your decision. But once the papers become part of an inquiry, tomorrow there will be arguments about who saw what and what they did not see. Today's cooperation will have value only if its limits are recorded truthfully." Devvrat looked at his watch and entered the time against his name.

Inside was the mingled smell of kerosene and wet jute. On bamboo staging lay bundles of sheets, rolls of waterproof fabric, empty canisters, short lengths of rope, and two closed wooden boxes. Devvrat's assistant, Rameshwar, said, "Let's call all of it relief supplies on a single slip. If the truck doesn't reach them, people will say the warehouse was opened only to be left empty." Urmila arrived from the hospital just then. She unrolled one length of fabric and showed them a damp stain along its edge. "I won't allow this where a patient is to lie, not without cleaning it first. If an inspection finds it fit for the shelter floor, record that separately." Rama drew up three categories: fit for immediate use, fit after cleaning or testing, and under examination.

For the first time Devvrat looked closely at the differing condition of the goods he himself owned. He told his assistant, "Writing 'donation' on an item doesn't make it clean." Rameshwar replied, "But once the goods go out, the loss will be entered against our account." Devvrat did not interrupt him. "We shall make the accounts. First determine what can properly be used. While we discuss the price of one thing, a family elsewhere is searching for a dry place beneath a roof." Urmila did not immediately endorse those words. She said, "A family needs something safe, not the spectacle of a donation made in haste." Devvrat bowed his head.

While the stock was being counted, Sarju stood to the rear. The first slip listed eighteen rolls of waterproof fabric, but only seventeen were found on

the staging. Rameshwar said that the eighteenth had gone to the shelter the previous day. When Ruhani's night register of receipts was brought, it showed two small tarpaulins in place of an eighteenth roll. A young man joked, "One roll has run away!" Sarju looked at him. "The name of whoever took the goods will have been entered. If something went out during my watch, I can tell you what trace it left." He produced the dispatch slip from the first chamber. It clearly recorded two small tarpaulins, but no eighteenth roll. The shortage was marked 'undetermined'; no accusation of theft was made.

Rameshwar's face fell. "If we hold court over every roll in this fashion, it will take the whole day," he said. Rama answered, "We have not written 'theft'; nor have we written 'distributed' without evidence. Those are two different things." Shabnam Malik explained to him that the immediate purpose of opening the warehouse was to make the goods available for use and to account transparently for their receipt, not to identify a criminal before any relief could be given. When Sona Kathautiya arrived with her vehicle, she raised a separate matter: the receipt showed the charge for yesterday's journey, but the money had not been paid. "Who is paying yesterday's freight before I carry new sheets today?" she asked. Devvrat instructed his assistant to arrange payment of the first outstanding amount against the public receipt.

Shabnam said, "The contents of this chamber belong to you privately, but consent to inspection has been given under the agreement. There must be a separate deed of donation for goods you wish to give for relief, and a separate purchase document for goods you wish to supply at a fair price. Nothing under investigation can be slipped silently into either list." Devvrat remained quiet for a moment. He felt his ownership of things bought with his own money; yet he remembered the leaking roof of the shelter the night before. He authorised individual examination of the seventeen rolls actually present, not the eighteen on the old list. "Whatever is sound, I shall donate; put no price on whatever is damaged," he said distinctly.

The first patches of mould were found on the inner layers of three rolls. Of the remaining fourteen, two had their bindings cut, while twelve appeared to be in good condition. Urmila said, "Not for the hospital treatment room. Ruhani's requirements for a dry shelter floor and for an outside curtain must be assessed separately." Tara Binout was called. She held an edge of the material up to the light, then said, "Even if the cloth itself is sound, fasten it over a cracked joint in a roof and it will collect water until it falls upon the people beneath. A bamboo support may serve for a curtain; this is no repair for a roof." Devvrat asked, "Then what use is there in donating it?" Tara replied, "A donation means something only where it can be used safely."

In the middle of the inspection Rama brought up the private account books. Devvrat gripped the bag hanging against his chest. "These pages contain my customers, debts, medicines for my family, and help given privately to people. Make all this public and you will lay their lives open."

Naira was there to write a report, but at that she closed her pen. “I don’t need people’s names. But the chain of receipts for any goods linked to the hospital’s documents must be verified,” she said. Devvrat asked, “Will you link my name to a murder again in the news?” Naira answered, “I shall write about benefit, payment, and the limits of the allegations. I shall not name anyone guilty without proof.”

Inside the private ledger were three slim volumes bound with coloured thread. The first recorded private loans made at interest, the second transport and purchases of cloth, and the third goods withdrawn for social assistance. Rameshwar was willing to show two of the volumes, but wanted the first wrapped securely in cloth. Rama made clear that copies would be made only of relevant pages, within the written scope authorised for the investigating officer; the complete list of unrelated private loans would not become a public record. Devvrat made his decision. “Count the original volumes in front of me, record their order, and identify the relevant pages separately. The inspection officer will retain the sealed copy. Do not show these names to anyone who has no authority to see them.”

An employee brought an empty envelope for the seal. Rama was the first to notice that its lower edge was wet. Shabnam sent for a new, dry envelope. Devvrat and the inspector both wrote the date and time, the first and last page numbers, and the number of copies on the attendance sheet. The original ledger, unaltered, was to remain in a locked cupboard under Devvrat’s guard; copies of the pages identified for inspection were checked page by page, sealed, and placed in secure custody. Devvrat was given his copy with a receipt, while the public notice board said only: ‘Copy secured; examination of contents pending.’ The crowd at the warehouse gate was a little disappointed. Nothing about this procedure had become a spectacle.

A discrepancy appeared between two pages. The hospital’s old summary of supplies showed a certain box as having been received in full, but the private transport page carried an incomplete initial beside its receipt and a later date. They remembered Aniruddha’s earlier admission: he had entered ‘available’ in the summary without verifying actual receipt. Shabnam said, “A difference in time between these two documents is established. It does not yet establish that anyone deliberately deprived a patient of medicine.” Rameshwar asked, “Will they simply assume that the unfinished initial is mine?” The inspector answered, “Identifying the original writer is a matter for independent investigation. If your testimony is required, you will give a separate statement.”

What was surprising was that beside the discrepancy they found an account that was perfectly clear. On an emergency night the previous month, Devvrat had bought medicine with his own money, and its receipt matched the hospital’s original signatures. Urmila looked at the page and said, “These supplies really did arrive that day. They were used in treating patients.” A little

light came into Devvrat's eyes. "At least that much has been acknowledged," he said. Urmila added, "Where assistance is established, I shall record it as assistance. But one correct receipt does not erase an error on another page." Devvrat tried to smile, though the smile did not quite come. The history of what he had done could no longer be contained in a single colour.

Behind the warehouse, Tara and Aditi went as far as the mouth of the old drain. Hearing that the warehouse was being opened, some people had assumed that the drainage outlet would now be opened too. But the old bricks that had collapsed across the opening, the uneven layer of concrete above, and the silt that had entered it were a separate problem. Shiv Dhandi pushed a bamboo stick into the silt from outside to show that beneath the top two inches of soft material there was a solid obstruction. "If workers go down there now, the wall may collapse from behind them," he said. Aditi once more entered 'entry inside prohibited' on the measurement sheet. Devvrat said, "Opening my gate does not unlock this drain."

A municipal representative urged them to take two spades, remove the bricks, and take a photograph, so people would see work being done. Tara took the spade from his hand and laid it on the ground. "A photograph will show the opening, not the weight bearing down over anyone's head inside. If you want excavation, first put in writing the measurements for support, the ground bearing, and the arrangements for an alternative outlet for the water." Sugni Saday added, "My team's names are on the list, but we will not go down into an unsafe opening. First arrange for a safe sample of the outer silt and settle the wages." Devvrat's associate said irritably, "If everything is held up, when will the water go down?" Sugni answered, "Burying a worker does not make water recede any faster."

Just then Gopal Majhi arrived with measurements taken beside the embankment. A thick layer of silt clung to his feet. He said the river's water level outside had fallen a little, but the water pooled behind the warehouse had not gone down by the same amount. No one had yet established the source of that second body of standing water. Aditi added the new measurements from two points. Shabnam asked whether the difference meant the warehouse floor could now be considered safe. Tara showed her the joints between the bricks just inside the gate. "The floor slopes at the edge, but we do not know what voids may lie underneath. Change the route before bringing out the next load of heavy boxes." Sona Kathautiya kept her vehicle's wheels on safe, higher ground.

In front of the warehouse, Rukhsana came to ask about the rice allocated to the relief kitchen. "The slip that arrived yesterday says ten sacks. Seven sacks reached the kitchen today. Are three on their way, or have they been held back?" Devvrat did not answer from his private ledger; he called for the public handover register. It showed clearly that seven sacks had been delivered, two had been held for approval after inspection the following day, and one had

been separated because it was wet. Rukhsana said, “Then write ‘seven available’ for me, not ten. We shall decide how many people can be fed on that basis.” Rather than conceal the shortage, she herself drew up a proposal for the quantity of the next meal and an alternative supply of lentils.

Chandrika sat beside her, making a small calculation in the margin of a sheet of paper. The bill for the firewood consumed in the kitchen overnight stood in the trader’s name, but no separate hours had been entered for moving the hearths, drying the wet utensils, or cleaning the ground. Devvrat’s assistant said, “The kitchen runs on donations from the warehouse; an additional expense under this head will upset the budget.” Chandrika looked straight at him. “Rice can be donated. My time cannot. If my five hours become two hours on paper, whom will you call to work the next night?” Shabnam showed him the fourth condition of the signed agreement. A revised shift register was prepared at once.

An elderly resident of the shelter approached Devvrat. “You are giving away the sheets left in your house; that is a good thing,” he said. “But my granddaughter shivered with cold last night. Could she have a dry mat?” Before replying, Devvrat looked towards Ruhani. Ruhani explained that the roofs of two rooms inside the shelter were leaking, so new floor coverings would be placed only in the dry rooms. The old man’s granddaughter spoke for herself. “I won’t go into the room where the roof drips. My books will get wet again.” Devvrat noticed the torn cover along the edge of the girl’s book. “Ruhani will decide where it goes,” he said. “I will provide the material.” His voice had grown gentler than before.

By midday the inspector had recorded samples from the relevant pages, the count of the goods, and the condition of the seals. Rama read Devvrat the old sentence in the agreement: safe access to the warehouse was to be provided. “That sentence did not mean that the entire warehouse would thereby be certified innocent,” she said. Devvrat acknowledged, “I could not understand that yesterday. I thought the moment the gate opened, the lock upon the accusations would open too.” Rama answered, “Cooperation will be given its due weight; questions about the accounts remain separate. Justice has room for both.” He was silent for a while after that reply.

Questions were also raised about goods linked to old slips from Shekhar’s intermediary office. Rameshwar insisted that because the same transport intermediary’s name appeared everywhere, responsibility for the suspicious bundle ought not, in the end, to fall upon Devvrat. Naira said, “No. Nor does that establish his innocence automatically. Lawful cloth, medicines, and boxes under inspection have all passed through the same office. For each consignment we must examine its separate owner, loading, receipt, and consent.” Shabnam made clear that the list of statements belonging to the separate investigation into Mahesh’s murder would not be opened here. Any

connection discovered in the warehouse's private accounts would be supplied only to the competent investigators through proper procedure.

Before evening, an employee attempted to photograph a page of the private ledger on his phone. Devvrat did not reach out and snatch the phone from him; he called the inspector. "I agreed to provide copies. I did not agree to have photographs of every customer's name passed around." The inspector instructed the employee to stop using his phone and entered the incident in the record. Naira noted the small scene in her notebook, but not the private names. She saw that the protection of privacy was not merely a shield for the person under questioning; it was also a right belonging to customers, workers, and families who had not even been told what the inquiry meant. Seeing her silence, Devvrat asked, "Will you write about this?" Naira said, "About the incident. Without the private names."

Unexpectedly, a small part of the puzzle was resolved that very day. Searching for the eighteenth roll, which had remained unaccounted for since the previous night, Sarju found a small paper on the reverse of an old weighing slip. It was a workshop slip indicating that a portion of a roll might have been cut and made into two small tarpaulins. But the signature acknowledging receipt was indistinct. "Then it may not be missing at all," Sarju said. "It may have changed form." Urmila answered, "Perhaps, but the reconciliation is not complete without verification." Later that afternoon, Kanchan's maternal cousin, an artisan, gave testimony that he had sewn the two small tarpaulins that day; the measurements of the cut portion matched. The shortage was removed from the list of possible thefts and entered instead as 'item converted —confirmation of receipt pending'. Sarju breathed more easily.

The effect of this small change upon Devvrat was larger than anyone had expected. He told his assistant, "If an item changed its form in my ledger and the change was never written down, how much faith have I myself been placing in these accounts over so many years?" Rameshwar began to speak, but Devvrat said nothing about punishing him. Instead he scheduled a separate meeting with every warehouse employee: old entries were not to be erased, and every correction must carry its date and reason. The employees asked for a written copy of this decision, so that no officer could make a verbal accusation against them the following day. Devvrat agreed to their request.

As the afternoon wore on, Tara fixed a temporary wooden board beside the gate. It read: 'Entry and exit of approved materials by this route; access closed beside the old drainage opening.' Some young men asked whether the notice could be read at night. Shiv Dhandi tied a red strip of cloth there and requested limited lighting. Sona Kathautiya's vehicle set off for the shelter with the twelve approved rolls, but today its driver first saw his own name in the attendance register and acknowledged receipt of the first payment. Devvrat stood at the warehouse threshold and watched. The word 'donation'

was ceasing to mean a proclamation alone; for him it was becoming work bound up with access and safety.

On her way back to the hospital, Urmila refused to enter a single item as medical supplies on the donation receipt without clinical authorisation. Devvrat said, “Very well. What went to the shelter will not be described as a donation to the hospital.” He asked whether the washing tests on the sheets approved the previous day had been completed. Urmila said, “Some lengths can be washed; permission to place them on patients’ beds will follow testing. I will give you the decision in writing.” He put his bunch of keys back into his bag. Through this exchange, each side was recognising the limits of the other’s responsibilities; neither sought a favour in return for silence.

Preparing the public notice in the evening, Naira wrote three lines: the warehouse’s private chamber had been opened voluntarily; limited distribution of usable goods had begun; copies of relevant private accounts had been sealed and secured for authorised inspection. A young man had already typed the headline ‘Entire Warehouse Cleared’ on his phone above that page. Naira showed him the accurate wording. “Not entirely cleared. The suspect medicine consignment remains under a separate seal, the old drainage opening is closed, and the examination of the ledgers is unfinished.” The young man was disappointed, but later shared the limited report. At the shelter, Rukhsana reconciled the figures in that news: the rolls had been dispatched; the claim about the rice had not changed.

Taking the evening water measurements, Aditi came to Tara. A slight difference could be seen in the height of the water beside the old opening, but the solid silt inside remained as it was. Tara said, “Today we opened a way for goods to leave the warehouse, not a way for the water to leave. Tomorrow the question of a boat’s load will arise again, because people will now demand to cross for relief supplies.” Aditi saw that people had begun piling their bags beside a boat at the landing, as though goods and human beings were subject to different rules of weight. She immediately sent word to Hira Sahni: with the changed water level, the boat’s former capacity test would have to be repeated.

As night fell, Devvrat wrapped the original volumes of his private ledger in cloth again. One corner was tearing, so Rameshwar put them in a dry box; no page was removed. Devvrat kept with him the receipts for that day’s handovers and the acknowledgement of the sealed copies. Outside, Sarju was changing the watch. “Sir, shall we open it again tomorrow?” he asked. Devvrat replied, “For those who need to use the goods, we shall record the inspection time and open it. The seal on the chamber containing goods under investigation will not be broken without permission.” Sarju copied those words into his register.

From the landing came the faint sound of a rope rubbing against the wood of a boat. Devvrat, who had spent the whole day inside the warehouse, started

at the sound. He remembered that a receipt for goods could be completed on paper, while the route by which those goods reached human beings had limits of its own. He closed the gate, this time without an announcement. At the shelter, a dry curtain made from the twelve rolls had been hung; the medicines under investigation remained under seal; the old drainage opening was still obstructed by silt. At the landing Hira Sahni, changing the night watch, looked into the empty belly of the boat and set aside the bamboo measuring rod for the capacity test at dawn.

Chapter III · The Boat's Capacity

In the dawn earth, fine fibres of rope spread around the stake driven into the ground. Hira Sahni loosened the loop around the stake and tightened it again, then ran a finger over the slippery patch left by the night's dew on the inner planking of the boat. At the news that the warehouse's second chamber had been opened, people had gathered at the landing earlier than usual. One carried a dry sheet on his shoulder, another held a sack of grain, and a family had brought a hospital prescription. A young man stood announcing, "The warehouse opened yesterday; today the boats will go out fully loaded. That is what the five signatures mean, surely!" Hira let go of the stake and looked at him. "Where among those five signatures is the condition that reduces the weight of the river?"

At the top of the landing Madhu stood with the fare register spread before her. Seven people had already entered their names for the first boat, but the owners of four damp bundles laid beside it stood apart. Madhu asked, "Who is travelling with these bundles?" Three people raised their hands at once. "If nobody enters themselves as the owner of a bundle, that will not make the boat's load any lighter," she said. Hira drew lines to divide the passengers' names, the estimated weight of their belongings, and the boatman's place into three distinct columns. A middle-aged man said irritably, "Are you counting a child as one whole person?" Hira replied, "If a child goes under the water, does it draw only half a breath?"

The current of the Tilwaha was not as it had been yesterday. The sand at the edge slipped inward beneath a foot; the water glittered above, but the sounding pole did not strike the same bottom twice in the same place. Gopal Majhi came with three points marked. At the first the silt was loose; at the second the bed held firm; at the third, old erosion had narrowed the space in which a boat could turn. He told Hira, "If the carts coming from the gate unload all their sacks here together, the first danger will not be on a boat but on the gangway down to the landing, where the crowd will gather." Hira told Madhu to mark a separate limit for people waiting to descend. Even standing on the landing became part of the calculation of safety.

A municipal employee arrived with a sheet-metal board. In large letters it proclaimed: 'RELIEF BOAT—IMMEDIATE SERVICE FOR ALL.' Hira read it and asked, "For all at what time? On what grounds do you call it immediate?" The employee possessed the office's signature, but no record of that day's test of the boat. Shabnam Malik explained that a public announcement conveyed permission; it did not certify a safe carrying load. The employee grew annoyed. "If we stop people, the crowd will descend on our office." Hira said, "The crowd may descend there. The water will not rise after

asking anyone’s name.” Rama had the board turned face down until the actual limits of service could be written on it.

Preparing for the inspection, Shyam Mallik fitted a thin chisel between the joints of the old timber planking. First he had the boat emptied; even after the water was bailed out, moisture remained in one corner. He gave the root of a timber a light tap and listened to the sound. Lalit Vishwakarma had scraped the rust from an iron strap with a knife, but he refused the proposal to put on fresh paint. “We shall look at the crack before covering it,” he said. Hira explained to the boatmen that testing required a controlled place and trained supervision; passengers were not to be used as sample weights to discover a boat’s capacity.

For the next weighing they assembled bamboo poles, sacks marked with their test weights, and a written register. The boat was secured in a controlled, quiet stretch near the bank. After each stage Tara Binout, the inspector, examined the timber joints, the distance between the gunwale and the water, and the balance of the hull. Gopal entered the day’s current, wind, and condition of the bed separately. They began without any load, then placed prescribed testing weights in sequence. A young man asked, “If it can take so many sacks, surely ten men will be safe!” Tara ordered the sacks removed. “Sacks do not stand up or run in fear to one side. The inspector will record how far these test results can be applied—not your enthusiasm.”

The first inspection disclosed that a boat whose planking had seemed sound until last year continued to seep for a little while at a rear joint even after the test load was removed. Shyam laid his tools on the ground at once. “This boat is out of service again,” he said. Its owner flared up. “Where is my day’s income to go while I stand here?” Madhu showed him the previous decision on daily rates for boatmen’s watch duty and assistance during inspection. Hira said, “The repair has one price; the owner’s loss while his boat is stopped is a different matter. But I have no authority to put that loss on a passenger’s head and send the passenger into the river.” The owner fell silent and looked at the damp joint.

Meanwhile Keshari Bin came carrying the half-dried oar of his old boat on his shoulder. His boat was moored to a fence some distance from the landing. A long split ran along its forward edge, where a makeshift knot of old cloth and wire could still be seen. Keshari had stopped using it. He carried two documents: an offer from a buyer and Lalit’s incomplete estimate for repairs. Laying them on the board, he said, “If I sell it, I may be able to clear today’s debt. If I do not, my livelihood and another family’s livelihood will both continue to depend on this timber. But where will the money for repairs come from?”

The buyer’s representative was waiting with a blue cloth bag. “Your boat is no longer fit to sail,” he said. “I am offering you a single price; we shall take

the timber out and put it to work. Sign today and receive the cash today." Keshari asked, "And the old repair debt at the landing—will that be deducted from this price, or remain separate?" The representative gave no clear answer. Instead he extended another sheet, on which the boat, its oars, bamboo poles, ropes, and even its modest right of passage at the landing had been written down as a single item. Keshari pulled the page aside. "The timber of the boat is mine, but the passage at the landing is not my property to sell."

Lalit sat beside him on an old wooden bench. "I gave you one total estimate earlier," he said, "but it included the shared cartage for the iron brought for the well railing. Today we shall separate that again." He made three headings: timber, metal fastenings, and the wages of skilled hands. Keshari said, "I have been reluctant to enter my own labour. People will say, 'The boat is yours, and the wages are yours too?'" Lalit answered, "Owning the timber does not make the hours spent joining it together free. But the credit for work you do not perform must not be put against your name either."

The queue at the landing lengthened. A woman showed her prescription: her medicine had been sent from the clinic, but arrangements to deliver it to her home on the other side were incomplete. "My son has been awake all night. Take me across now," she said. Salma Sheikh read the prescription and telephoned the clinic. The medicine was for ordinary use; confirmation of the patient's identity and of a safe means of delivery to the home was still pending. Hira said, "The permitted places on this boat are already filled for this crossing." The woman's eyes filled with tears, but instead of speaking she gripped the prescription tightly. Salma found out the departure time of a vehicle using the higher land route for her.

A young man wanted to record the scene on his phone. "A sick boy's mother is refused a place on the boat. When people see that, the authorities will listen," he said. The woman turned her back on the camera. Naira did not snatch the phone from his hand. In a quiet voice she said, "If you wish, show the numbers served at the landing and the length of the wait. Do not show her face without permission. And write the full facts of the complaint: there was no safe place left in the boat, and an alternative vehicle is being sought." The young man reluctantly lowered his phone. The woman had no wish to see herself turned into somebody's story; she wanted only to get the medicine home.

Hira now asked everyone to stand in a circle, leaving space between them. She wrote down the day's water conditions, the inspected boats, the restricted crossings, the maximum number of people permitted aboard including the boatman, a separate allowance for the weight of belongings, and the signals for stopping a journey midway. She rejected an old assumption that four average-sized adults could travel in a particular boat. The number would have to be determined in conjunction with weight, age, luggage, water conditions, and the actual recommendation following inspection of that boat. An official

asked, “Then what number do we announce to the public?” Hira pointed to the figures specified in the margin for that day. The first boat could carry five persons including the boatman, the second four, the third three; the accompanying luggage would have to be weighed separately and kept within its own limit. “These are limits for these boats at this hour. They are not one rule for every other boat.”

Madhu called the passengers one by one. A small child clung to his mother; she wanted him not to be registered separately because she would carry him on her lap. Hira asked where the child could sit safely. “Holding him on your lap does not erase his name from the water,” she said. Seeing a round coil of rope lying on the landing, the boy asked, “Is that a snake?” Madhu laughed. “It is a rope. A snake would never agree to remain tied in so many places.” A little smile appeared on the boy’s face. He and his mother were given places on the next safe crossing. The waiting had not ended; their turn had changed.

Keshari stroked his boat and went towards the small workshop behind the landing. There Shyam, Lalit, and Usha Ram kept separate samples of their different kinds of work. Keshari showed everyone the buyer’s offer, but did not ask for an immediate verdict on hearing the price. “I have one condition,” he said. “If this boat is made serviceable by collective repairs, write down first how its future earnings will be divided. Otherwise, in the name of repairing it, I shall lose the boat itself and become a debtor for other people’s unpaid labour.” There was fear in his voice, but no shame.

Shyam specified how far they could open up the timber for inspection. One portion could be used again; another would have to be replaced entirely. Rust was plainly visible on some of the old iron nails. Usha said that she could provide a sample of a flexible leather fastening, but leather could not serve in place of sound timber where the principal wood of a safe boat was cracked. Lalit entered the proper price of the metal fastenings. Keshari asked, “And if all the money cannot be found now?” Madhu brought out the accounts showing the small amount available in the community emergency repair fund. Assistance from the fund and the limits of private debt were separate matters; no one could decide to transfer ownership of the boat without the owner’s consent.

For this reason a short open meeting was held at midday, instead of waiting until evening. Every craftsperson who would work on the repair stated a wage rate; a clear account was drawn up showing what share of the boat’s future income would go towards repaying the repair loan. Keshari said, “I say I shall not sell the boat. But if I surrender six months’ earnings without an account, that ownership will survive only on paper.” Rama entered advance payment, the outstanding balance, and rights after repayment in separate rows of the register. The buyer’s representative came again. “You have turned away from ready cash to lose yourself in a forest of papers,” he said. For the first time Keshari answered without alarm: “I need the cash, but I need the boat as well.”

The decision on collective repairs was put in writing, but the boat was not immediately authorised to go back into the river. Testing, time for the wood to dry, inspection of the bindings, and renewed approval under changing water conditions were still required. Keshari did not sign the sale deed. Instead he entered his name and the craftworkers' wages on the repair order. He stood holding the smooth handle of his oar, as though the long years of his livelihood were caught within the length of the timber. The buyer picked up his bag and left. No victory drums sounded at his departure, nor was everyone in agreement. Some at the landing still thought selling would have been easier.

In Keshari's bag lay an old carriage receipt bearing the name 'Baluaha'. Seeing it, a young man from the town said, "So this boat used to come from Tilwaha by way of Baluaha. I shall add that route to the map." Keshari stopped him immediately. "That name is on an old receipt for the purchase and carriage of my timber. The word does not prove that two rivers meet here. We still have to ask exactly where the timber came from." Rama copied the date, written place-name, and seller's identity as references awaiting verification. The name Baluaha had entered the story, but no new course was assigned to the river on the strength of an assumption on paper.

As the heat mounted, the voices of those standing at the landing rose again. The number of permitted crossings was small, but the urgency of delivering plated meals and rations was greater. Rukhsana arrived with a bucket of water and two empty plates. "If the meal time moves back, how many times am I to keep the fire burning?" she asked. Sona Kathautiya replied that the first light consignment by the upper route had arrived within the permitted limits; for the second, measurements would again have to be taken along the field boundary belonging to Kiran Raut. "Very well, the food will be cooked later," Rukhsana said, "but tell everybody how the delay is being accounted for." A public notice was hung at the landing: supplies carried by the land route would not take up any of the boat crossings.

When the first authorised boat set off at midday, an uncommon silence fell over the landing. The boatman seated everyone in their assigned places according to his training. A request to stand up and take photographs in midstream was refused. Gopal signalled from the bank; Hira kept her eyes on the clearance along one side of the hull. The boat reached the opposite shore and returned empty. A young man was about to raise a cheer, but Hira first had the bottom of the boat and the wear on its ropes examined. Only after that inspection did she say, "One safe crossing has been made. That does not make the next crossing safe of itself." The elderly boatman on signal duty touched the oar with his fingers in agreement.

Before the second crossing a sudden slanting wind arose. Thin white lines appeared on the water in the distance. Hira looked at the new measurements and, rather than leave the previously approved numbers unquestioned,

suspended the crossing for the time being. The middle-aged man who had quarrelled at dawn could be heard again. “At this rate we shall still be examining things at dusk. The boat is here and the people are here!” Hira went over to him. “I do not underestimate your delay,” she said, “but when the wind changes, the number I wrote down must be reconsidered.” She showed him the change in the movement over the riverbed. At first he rolled his eyes; then he saw his child standing beside him and fell silent.

Some people left the landing and went towards the higher land route, but there too the consent of each household where the route crossed a field boundary and the safe condition of the vehicle were required. Tulsi Tajpuriya made it clear over the telephone that the vehicle reserved for the hospital must not be turned into a general goods cart. Madan Raut made a late change to the time at which the schoolchildren would return and sent separate messages to their parents. These adjustments were not the victory of any one leader; they were an acceptance of numerous small, practical inconveniences. On the page she was preparing for the newspaper, Naira did not write a headline about a ‘miraculous crossing’. She recorded the times, the stoppages, and the alternative services, all three.

An old companion of Shyam came up to Hira, a man who was afraid at the sight of broken wooden planking. Hira then told him about an earlier repair. Many years ago, after the rains had receded, she had believed a boat to be as good as new. Shyam had spent the whole night drying the timber and tightening its joints; at dawn Hira had taken the empty boat out for its first test. Halfway across she heard a thin sound, which at first she took for the splash of the oar. She turned back immediately and saw that the edge of the timber was splitting from within. “People went on saying the repair had been successful,” Hira said. “I say the successful part was turning back in time.”

Hearing the story, Keshari asked, “Then even after my boat has been repaired, what if we have to turn it back again?” Hira replied, “Then we shall turn it back. A repair succeeds only when the right to stop the boat after finding a fault remains intact.” Keshari laughed. “In that case my boat will get a great deal of practice at returning.” Shyam laughed too. “At least there will still be ears willing to hear about a defect before we take the money for the repair.” For a little while the hard faces in the queue softened. The story produced no fresh clue at the end. People merely understood that what a boatman calls a refusal can also be another name for experience.

As evening fell, the woman with the prescription returned. Her son had received his medicine safely by the land route; she was giving Salma the receipt for it. “I was very angry this morning,” she said. Hira replied, “Being angry is no offence. It is my responsibility to explain the reasons clearly.” The woman asked whether the boats would run tomorrow. “We shall measure tomorrow’s water tomorrow,” Hira said. The woman was not satisfied with so little an answer, but she understood that, instead of receiving an assurance that could

not be verified, she had at least been told the reason for the delay in her son's medicine.

Rama reconciled the day's register. The number of approved crossings, the crossings suspended, the boats removed for repairs, and the separate status of the rescue boat were all entered. A government representative asked whether fewer trips should be shown as a saving in the budget. Madhu stopped him. "Watch duty, testing, ropes, inspections, the boatmen's safe waiting time—all these cost money. The hours of a boat that did not sail are not zero." The official turned the pages and looked. Rama read out to him the separate entries for the day's fares and public payments towards repairs. Before the word 'saving' could be written, it was deemed necessary to account for the expenditure actually incurred.

With a copy of his repair order in hand, Keshari returned to the boat before setting off for home. He stroked the old split timber and wedged a scrap of paper into the gap. It was neither a talisman nor a blessing: it bore the date of tomorrow's inspection and the time appointed for the collective team of craftspeople. Lalit asked, "What if the paper gets wet and the writing disappears?" Keshari took it out and put it in his bag. "You are right. Better than hanging a promise on a boat is to keep it in the register, where questions can be asked about it." He did not tear up the buyer's proposal; he wrote 'NOT ACCEPTED' on it and kept it separately for future accounting.

Before leaving the landing, Keshari met the young craftworker who wanted to learn how to dismantle the planking of an old boat. The young man asked, "If I come to learn, will I be paid from the first day, or must I serve for a month before receiving wages?" Keshari remembered an old mistake of his own: how often he had treated an apprentice's helping hands as free. "The time spent watching and learning must be entered separately," he said. "But carrying timber, holding a plank, and cleaning tools are work, and work must be paid for." The young man told him the correct spelling of his name and had it written down. There and then Keshari decided that the apprentice's time would also appear openly in the repair costs. That would make the loan from the fund harder to repay later, but the debt of invisible labour would weigh more heavily still.

From the warehouse, one of Devvrat's employees brought the count of the remaining relief bundles. Someone again proposed making two trips with the empty rescue boat in the darkness of the night. Hira refused outright. "The empty boat has been reserved for rescue alone. If these four bundles cannot be moved, find another way to send the food. We shall not load a safety boat and invite the very emergency it is meant to meet." Tara supported her. Leakage inside the hospital and the external drainage remained unfinished problems; a successful crossing at the landing solved neither of them. Devvrat's employee took the figures back. He was dissatisfied, but the supplies were kept on a safe, dry part of the landing, without anything being lost.

In the light of sunset spreading over the water, Hira looked once more at the measuring rod. Of the three points marked in the morning, a new mound of silt had risen at one. She had the fresh mark entered alongside the old one, not erased over it. Gopal said, “Tomorrow the route will change again.” Hira replied, “Then tomorrow we shall measure it again. People will accuse me of making new rules every day.” Lifting his oar, Gopal said, “The rule changes when the river changes. We cannot hold human lives still for the convenience of a paper record.” From a distance Madhu turned over the list of turns for the following day and tucked it into a protective cloth.

People gathered one last time on the raised platform at the landing. Keshari publicly announced that he would not sell his boat, but he also stated the conditions of the repair loan and the wages to be paid for the work. Some applauded with satisfaction; others remained silent, knowing that the boat was not yet ready. Hira wrote that Keshari’s boat must not be added to the list of those fit for service. A collective decision did not mean concealing a collective risk. Keshari himself signed beside the entry. “I shall save my boat,” he said, “but for now it will carry nobody across.” Hearing this, Lalit offered to take the empty toolbox from his hands; Keshari lifted it together with him.

The night watchman felt the ropes of all the boats once more. The empty rescue boat lay moored in its allotted place; the day’s permissions for the three tested boats had expired, and the craft awaiting repairs stood in a separate row. Naira wrote the closing sentence of the public notice: ‘The demand for crossings was greater; the safe limits were not increased; alternatives were sought; collective repairs were approved under agreed conditions, but use remains suspended.’ Somewhere in the distance a lid clanged against a cooking pot. Hira knew inwardly that the queue at dawn would be heavy again. But the reason for the weight that had not been placed on the water that day remained, in clear words, before the people rather than upon the river’s breast.

Chapter 112 · Ishan's Hand

The wet earth lodged in the bottom of the boat had dried into a dark-brown crust. Shyam Mallik scraped at its edges with a slender piece of bamboo, but he did not dare lift Keshari Bin's old boat. Yesterday they had decided against selling it; today the first task in repairing it was to move it to safe, dry ground. Along that reach of the Tilwaha, the water had fallen and risen again during the night, leaving fresh soft silt around the old mooring posts. Ishan came down to the landing with his book bag over his shoulder and found four men standing with their hands on the planking, none of them yet exerting any force. "Give me something to do as well," he said. Shyam glanced at the bag. "First put that somewhere dry. Then listen to where the boat must not be pushed."

Tara Binout marked the boundary of firm ground with a red thread. "The boat is empty, but the split between the timbers has not yet been fully examined," she said. "A small plank is moving near the edge. If everyone pushes together, the crack may run through the other side." Lalit Vishwakarma laid down two dry, rounded lengths of wood; Shyam would decide whether and how to use them. Keshari looked uncomfortable to see his own boat at the mercy of so many people. "It is my boat," he said. "If I do not lend a hand, who will?" Hira Sahni answered, "The owner's hands are needed, but ownership does not give anyone the authority to certify safety." Ishan set down his bag and listened.

Madhu sat at the landing with the day's register of names. She opened the workshop wage sheet first: it had separate columns for those carrying timber, those inspecting it, and those attending to oars and ropes. "We shall record the names and hours of everyone who actually works," she said. Ishan held out a hand. "I will help without payment." Madhu did not close the register. "You have the right to volunteer. But your lending a hand cannot reduce the wages of the other four men. And if you are hurt, your name must be on the assistance record." Ishan had his name entered, with the notation 'volunteer; no wage claim' beside it. Jhumki, Shyam's assistant, asked, "The ropes I dried—is that work, or only something done around the house?" Madhu recorded her time too.

After the preliminary inspection, permission was given to shift the boat towards the land. Gopal Manjhi identified a place where feet would not suddenly sink into the silt. Ishan was assigned to push, not to direct the movement. Shyam called out, "One, two—not yet. The rope is slack." In his first burst of eagerness, Ishan had already lowered his shoulder; at the warning he straightened up. At the second signal everyone pushed. The boat moved a little, then stuck. Ishan's palm scraped against the rough surface of a plank. He tried to laugh. "I had thought work outside books would go more quickly."

Keshari replied, “It is easy to turn back the page of a book. Where a boat’s timber catches, it stays caught.”

Jhumki was watching Ishan’s hand. “Master, you’re bleeding,” she said. A red line had indeed appeared on the tip of his finger. Ishan tried to conceal it with his gamchha, but Devi Gond, returning from her hospital training and stopping at the landing, had clean water and a small first-aid kit brought over. “It is a small wound, but do not put that hand back into the silt,” she said. Ishan asked, “Have I interrupted your work?” Devi replied, “My training exercise is one thing; your injury is another. Do not turn either into a spectacle.” She cleaned the wound as needed, bandaged it, and advised him to watch its condition. This time Ishan did not insist on pushing again.

The work on the boat did not stop when he moved aside. Shyam and Lalit inspected the joints again; Keshari gave his opinion on the list of timbers to be replaced. Madhu asked Jhumki whether this was supposed to be her hour of study. “I go to practise my letters in the afternoon,” Jhumki answered. “Then someone else will take over the remaining work,” Madhu said. At that moment Ishan understood that if he went on making a story of his slight injury, both the girl’s education and the boatmen’s labour would disappear behind it. He sat down away from the planking, in the dry veranda where his book bag had been placed.

Inside the bag lay a short note from Harimohan, delivered the previous day. There was still no final agreement on the three sections of the proposed credit statement for a revised edition of an older published book: Ishan’s original philosophical exposition, Maithili’s revisions, and Sarita’s labour in copying the text and supplying examples. Ishan had not answered yesterday. A young man at the landing, who sometimes attended his lectures at the school, came over and asked, “Master, you were pushing the boat! If I send out the photograph, people will see that scholars do manual work too.” Ishan replied, “A scholar pushing a boat may be worth seeing. But without the names of those who built this boat, the picture would be incomplete. And the picture will not erase my error from the pages of the book.” The young man put his telephone back in his pocket.

Meanwhile Maithili arrived at the veranda. She carried another copy of Harimohan’s letter in her hand and the children’s writing-exercise notebooks in her bag. She noticed Ishan’s bandage but did not presume to know how he had been hurt. “What happened?” she asked. Ishan told her. After asking how the bandage was to be cared for, Maithili opened the letter. “The school committee meets this evening,” she said. “Pictures of your hand will circulate for the next few days, but when shall I see the signatures authorising the changes to the pages of the printed book?” Ishan was not taken aback. He had long owed her the hearing of that question. “I will not evade that work today,” he said.

Maithili pointed to a line in the letter. It said that the revision committee might praise Ishan’s ‘social commitment’ in its provisional public notice on

account of his voluntary labour. “Why is anyone using those words?” she asked. Ishan read the passage. “Perhaps for the school’s publicity,” he said. “Then tell the school you do not consent to that publicity,” Maithili replied. “A photograph of you pushing a boat is not evidence that you have met your obligations. Nor does service to the public entitle anyone to ask Sarita to forgo the money owed to her.” Ishan wrote an explicit objection in the margin of the letter and signed his name.

Sarita arrived around noon. On her shoulder she carried not wet cloth but two finished lengths of sewing work, to be delivered to a customer across the landing. She could send the goods on one of the day’s approved safe boat crossings, though she did not wish to cross herself. Madhu calculated the freight and issued a receipt. “This is a charge for my business,” Sarita said. “Do not combine it with the work on the school’s book.” She saw the letter and immediately asked, “Has the amount been fixed for the three days of copying work that the old account shows as owing in my name?” Maithili answered, “The count of pages and the hours still have to be checked.” “Then write down the reason for the delay as well,” Sarita said. “Promises will not buy me thread.”

Ishan opened his ledger. It already listed separately the original pages of the published book, Maithili’s notes, and Sarita’s work under their respective numbers. “I cannot pay the whole amount now on the strength of an estimate,” he said. “But I can write to the committee recommending an advance against the work already verified. If I bear personal responsibility for any part of it, I shall record that separately too.” Sarita listened without speaking. Then she asked, “Will the receipt for the advance call it a ‘gift’?” Ishan answered, “No. Partial payment for copying work.” “And it must also say that accepting payment does not bring my testimony to an end,” Sarita added. Ishan wrote that sentence in his own hand.

At Gopal’s signal, everyone looked towards the water again. The first boat authorised to operate that day was approaching the other side of the landing, but the strong wind had altered the angle at which it would come in. Hira stopped the general announcements and instructed the boatman to bring the vessel to a safe halt first. The boat was not carrying more than the permitted number of passengers; the problem was the new silt at the bank, not their number. Ishan rose and stepped forward. Hira raised her hand from a distance to stop him. “Your hand is bandaged. The boatman makes the decisions here. No one else is to approach even the bamboo poles.” Ishan sat down again. This time his wish to help took the form of obeying an instruction.

The passengers could disembark along a narrow strip of firm ground. Madhu divided the crowd into two groups. Shanti Bote helped an elderly woman off the boat; the woman needed to have an essential bundle from home brought ashore first. A young man let go of her hand and ran to seize the bundle. Shanti stopped him. “The person first, then the bundle. But what belongs to her must not be put into the public warehouse without asking her.”

Ownership of goods and the safety of life were recognised as separate matters. Tara immediately withdrew a newly loosened section of the landing's wooden walkway from even temporary use.

Uday, a student sitting near Ishan, asked, "Master, is it fair that everyone gives the boatmen the credit for today's work? You pushed as well." Ishan looked towards the river for some time. "I pushed for an hour, and that hour should be recorded against my name. But seeing a split in the timber, testing a boat's weight, knowing the markings at the landing—those come from their study and skill. To write all of it under my name would be an injustice." Uday asked again, "And the pages you wrote?" "That is the harder question to answer," Ishan said. "I have no reason to renounce what I wrote. Nor have I the right to make the history of someone else's revisions disappear." Uday wrote the question in his exercise book; he did not repeat the answer as though it were an aphorism.

Harimohan came to the landing himself to prepare for the evening meeting. He brought two pages from the committee. One concerned the process of reprinting the old book; the other recorded the state of the evidence for individual contributions. Maithili read the second page first. It said that evidence had been checked for three passages she had revised, though the date of one page remained uncertain. "Where the date has not been established, say it has not been established," she agreed. "The other three passages can be discussed publicly at once." Harimohan asked Sarita, "Where is the record for the two disputed days in your list of copying work?" Sarita answered, "I shall bring the notebook from home. Do not enter anything under my name on a guess."

There at the landing, Ishan submitted his written objection to the committee. "No photograph of my work on the boat in an advertisement," he said. "And no mention of today in a statement purporting to resolve the dispute over authorship of the old book." Harimohan asked, "Then where does this incident belong?" Ishan replied, "In the landing's register of wages and assistance, where there is a true account of everybody's hands." Madhu, who was writing the freight schedule beside them, looked up. "And if the school ever wants to use this as an example in the study of labour," she said, "it must seek the boatmen's permission first. Those who merely look at a photograph do not own the work."

The written refusal brought Maithili some relief, but no satisfaction. "You have stopped the photograph. That is right," she said. "But on the public notice about my revisions, which has been hanging for six days, some students write 'Maithili's question,' not 'Maithili's pages.' Do you understand the difference?" Ishan answered, "I do. The person who raises a question and the person who rewrites a passage of argument may have performed two different roles." Maithili showed him in her ledger where the three revised paragraphs appeared. "Then let the committee specify which sentences came from my

hand. I want a line of evidence in place of praise.” Harimohan added her request to the agenda.

After the crowd at the landing had thinned, Keshari and Lalit were reconciling the account for the timber needed in the repair. A trader suggested that because Ishan had helped that day, his name should appear above the contractor’s in publicity for the repair fund. Keshari objected at once. “Nobody prevented me from selling my boat; I made the decision myself. The repair design belongs to Shyam and Lalit, and Madhu keeps the payment ledger. Ishan lent a hand, but he did not know how to open the first joint.” “His name will bring donations,” the trader said. Keshari answered, “If we erase the craftworkers’ names to obtain donations, we shall be taking on a new debt.”

Usha Ram arrived carrying two samples of her leather fastenings. They were attractive to look at, but Tara warned at once that these items offered no proof that the boat’s main structure was safe. Usha herself said, “I am putting these samples in the jute bag. We shall decide whether to use them only when the timber has been fully examined. For now, nobody is to see a photograph and write, ‘Usha’s binding saved the boat.’” Ishan nearly smiled, but there was no laughter in Usha’s face. “I want credit for my design,” she said, “and I do not want false claims made about what that design cannot do.”

Lunch came from Rukhsana’s kitchen. For a little while the taste of peas, the smell of greens, and the steam rising from the rice displaced the dry scent of timber at the landing. From a small container she had brought with her, Sarita offered Maithili half a roti. “I had wanted to bring you something from home,” Maithili said. Sarita laughed. “I eat because I am hungry, not to keep accounts of favours. But the time I saved from cooking at home today allowed me to finish two pieces of sewing.” Ishan added no sermon to this remark. He picked up his own plate and sat in the line for food; he asked Madhu to confirm whether the wages of those serving the meals had been entered.

Rukhsana overheard him. “The wage register for today is being prepared,” she said. “If it is incomplete, it says so. Your asking about payment does not mean payment has been made.” A faint flush of embarrassment came over Ishan’s face. In an easier tone, Rukhsana continued, “If you wish to help wash the plates, do not take the paid work away from the people doing it. For a while you can arrange the water and the utensils.” This time Ishan first asked whose work it was and whose permission was needed. Only then did he begin stacking the empty vessels in a clean place. Sarita watched from a distance. She was pleased by the sight, but she knew that this small, useful act did not by itself settle the account of the three days for which her work had gone unrecognised.

Before the meeting began, Naira came to check the facts at the landing for her report. The number of passengers authorised yesterday did not match the crossings actually made today. Hira showed her the written record of services suspended when the wind changed during the day; Gopal pointed out the

fresh silt marks. “Some people are saying that because a scholar pushed the boat, the service has expanded,” Naira said. Hira laughed. “Moving a boat onto dry ground and carrying people across a river are two different tasks. Ishan helped with the first. I shall authorise the second only after assessing the condition of the water.” Naira made this distinction the opening sentence of her report.

Rama arrived as well, bringing the new register for implementing the five-signature agreement. Three matters were expressly recorded: the main drainage outlet was still blocked with silt; work on the seepage inside the hospital was incomplete; and the suspect supplies in the warehouse remained sealed. An official asked, “There has been some relief today. Can we issue a notice declaring complete success?” Rama answered, “The relief is real; a complete solution is not. Record the successful distribution of materials, and record the failure of the drainage work too. We do not need a lie to build a bridge between those two facts.” Ishan listened. The blank spaces in his own ledger came back to him, but he did not make an example for his private philosophical lessons out of the public register.

The evening assembly was held not in the school veranda but in the shade near the landing, because the boatbuilders needed to be home before the night watch began. Harimohan told everyone when to be seated. Then he read the records according to the work performed, not merely under the names of three people. Madhu read the labour register first. Against Ishan’s name stood ‘voluntary assistance’; against Jhumki’s, ‘cleaning and drying ropes’; and against the names of Keshari, Shyam, and Lalit were separate entries for inspection and repair. Hearing his own name, Ishan lowered his head. He neither sought applause nor made a performance of asking for his name to be removed.

Harimohan then opened the book’s revision statement. Maithili confirmed her three proposed changes. Sarita displayed only those pages she had authorised for public inspection. Ishan supplied written evidence identifying the section of his original chapter and, beside the passage whose revision had begun with Maithili’s handwritten objection, gave written acknowledgement of her name. Sarita asked, “And the source of the example drawn from my experience?” Harimohan entered a line: ‘Source under verification: Sarita’s claim of direct experience.’ Sarita accepted that this was not yet an established, verified finding; neither had the claim been made to disappear.

A member of the committee proposed that a favourable reference to Ishan’s volunteer work might soften discussion of his earlier wrong. Maithili responded immediately. “Draw a line between those two matters. I do not deny the help he gave today. But the history of my contribution to the pages was not written on the riverbank.” Sarita added, “And if you put the word ‘goodwill’ into the entry for my unpaid wages, I shall not sign.” Ishan did not take offence at their objections. “Let my genuine knowledge be protected,” he

said, “but where I failed to give rightful credit, a letter of praise alone will not put matters right.” The member withdrew the proposal.

Three new decisions were clearly entered into the minutes. First, the portions of Maithili’s contribution already verified would be linked to the relevant pages in an immediate public correction notice; the remaining disputed passages would stay under examination. Second, the source and date of partial payment for Sarita’s confirmed copying work would be recorded, without requiring her to relinquish her outstanding claims. Third, Ishan’s voluntary assistance with the boat would remain in the landing register, not in the evidence of authorship for the revised book. Ishan, Maithili, and Sarita signed separate pages. Their names were not put on a single sheet so as to turn their different claims into a claim of one kind.

In the midst of this, Jhumki came running with her notebook. “Has my lesson time gone by?” she asked. Maithili showed her the clock. The final hour of practice was still left. Brushing fragments of rope fibre from her hands, Jhumki asked, “Can I use the names written for the boat today to practise reading?” Madhu gave her a copy of the line bearing her own name, covering the portions containing other workers’ private information. “Begin learning your letters with your own name,” Maithili told her, “but that does not give anyone permission to make another person’s accounts public.” Jhumki recognised the letters of her name and smiled. The day the boat was pushed had left the girl a new piece of writing.

At the far end of the landing, Shyam was inspecting the bottom of Keshari’s boat one last time. Word had come that the repair timber would arrive the following morning, but no date had been approved for using the boat. Hira had again rejected a request to put the spare rescue boat to work carrying unsafe cargo. Ishan went over and asked, “Will there be anything I can do tomorrow?” Without smiling, Shyam said, “There will. But tomorrow’s work will be explained tomorrow. Let the bandage on your hand heal first.” “And the things I do not know?” Ishan asked. “Recognising what you do not know is also a necessary beginning to this work,” Shyam replied.

For a while Maithili and Ishan walked home in silence. On one side of the path small children’s footprints marked the silt; on the other lay the shadows of bamboo. “I wanted to help today,” Ishan said, “but people kept stopping me. Once I would have felt humiliated by that.” Maithili answered, “Being stopped does not always mean being insulted. When I questioned the pages, you took that for an attempt to stop you too. The difference is that there it was my argument; here it was the boatmen’s experience.” “In both places I have been late in learning to listen,” Ishan said. Maithili did not laugh at the admission. She simply went on walking beside him.

On reaching home, Sarita first sent word to her customer about the delivery of the sewn cloth. The new receipt listed the freight for her business separately, and the committee’s proposal for partial payment separately. She did not want to put the two papers in the same box. She placed her sewing

ledger beneath a wall peg and wrapped the copying pages in blue cloth to keep beside her. Her daughter Naira asked, “Was anything decided today?” Sarita replied, “A way has opened for one payment, and no one’s name has been erased. The rest of the work remains.” Naira held out a plate to serve the meal. This time she did not turn her mother’s answer into a headline.

That night Ishan removed his bandage to look at the wound, then cleaned and cared for it as the medical advice required. The ledger for the book lay before him, but for the first time that day its blank spaces troubled him more than its written words. His own name remained in place as the author of the original exposition; the work of entering Maithili’s name against her verified revisions had begun; and the account of Sarita’s labour and the sources she had supplied was still open. These pages had not changed because he had laid his hands upon a boat. They had changed when all three people could retain the right to have their separate claims examined. From the back room came the sound of someone shaking out ropes to dry. Tomorrow the water level would be measured again, and permission for boats to sail would again have to be determined separately.

Chapter 113 · Ashwatthama's Night

A slender splinter protruded from the axle of the broken chariot. Ashwatthama pulled it free with his fingers, then held it in his palm for no reason he could have named. Evening had fallen over the battlefield. The earth, ground to powder beneath the horses' hooves, was beginning to take on the first dampness of dew, yet the smell of burning had not ceased to travel across the distance. Kripa was searching for water for the wounded soldiers; Kritavarma was examining the bandages on a horse that had survived. The three had come to the same place, but each carried a different question within him: who would protect those who remained alive, and what would now be done in the name of those who had died?

Duryodhana lay motionless beside the lake, wounded. The bandage around his thigh was soaked; whenever he spoke, long intervals separated one breath from the next. As Ashwatthama approached, Duryodhana opened his eyes. He did not ask for an account of the whole war. He merely said, "Son of my teacher, are you still here?" In that small question lay the shame of defeat, trust in a friend, and an impossible hope of survival, all together. Remembering his father, Ashwatthama snapped the splinter in his hand. "I shall not listen. I shall answer," he said. The anger Duryodhana saw on his face gave him reassurance; in Kripa, it awakened fear.

Kripa knelt to examine Duryodhana's bandage. "His wound is not receiving the attention it needs," he said. "Send back the two attendants who were with him. King or common soldier, a wounded body asks not for orders but for treatment." Duryodhana said faintly that what mattered to him now, more than treatment, was the honour still left to his army. Kripa replied, "There is more than one way of preserving honour. Getting the surviving soldiers home is one of them." Ashwatthama broke in: "Drona's head was severed, and I am to go on counting the hours of rest for the living?" Kripa looked at him but offered no immediate reply.

Drona's death had never settled into a single moment in Ashwatthama's mind. In the news of it, his own name had been used as an instrument of falsehood; what had happened after his father laid down his weapons seemed to put every memory he possessed on trial. When Ashwatthama was a child, Drona would inspect the tenderness of his fingers before letting him string a bow. Now the memory of those hands was bound to the pain of having been unable to save his father's life on the battlefield. "Dhrishtadyumna will sleep peacefully tonight," Ashwatthama said in anger, "and I, my teacher's son, must wait?" He had already settled the answer to that question within himself.

Kritavarma stepped forward. "I understand your enmity towards Dhrishtadyumna. But he is not the only person in his camp. Charioteers,

cooks, guards, those who tend the horses—they are all exhausted." Ashwatthama took these words as opposition to his revenge. "Whose food do they eat in this war?" he asked. Kritavarma was silent for a moment. "Eating a man's food is not the same as consenting to his crime," he said softly. His years as a soldier gave him the standing to speak those words; he could not yet summon the courage to act upon them himself.

An elderly soldier came carrying a rope he had removed from beside a dead horse. It was needed that night to lift the wounded in their blankets. Ashwatthama was about to ask for it, thinking it might serve his own plan, when he noticed that the soldier was tending an injured companion. "I've carried eight men with this rope," the old man said. "Remember this knot when you make another." For a moment Ashwatthama watched the trembling of his fingers. He could not quite bring himself to appropriate that labour for his revenge, yet he did not change his mind. He simply turned back towards the chariot. The soldier was left free to continue his work, though he possessed no power to bring the war to an end.

The three made camp beneath a great banyan tree. Small cries came from crows concealed among its leaves. Kripa said the horses were exhausted: they should wait until dawn and choose a safe road. Each time Ashwatthama closed his eyes, he saw his father's final hours. Sleep would not come. Suddenly an owl flew out of the darkness and struck at the branch where the crows were roosting. The branch shook; first came the calls of birds startled from sleep, then the disorderly beating of wings. One bird fell to the ground before it could take flight. Ashwatthama sat upright. He took the night's spectacle for a sign, though it was nothing more than the natural violence of a hunting bird.

"By day the crows would raise an uproar as soon as they saw it," Ashwatthama said. "At night there is no order to their flock." Kripa kept his gaze on the tree. "A bird does this out of hunger and fear. A human being cannot take permission for his conduct from such a sight." Ashwatthama answered, "Why should I observe the rules of daylight with an enemy who won through treachery?" Kripa's reply was unequivocal: "Once you commit with your own hands the very act you condemn, what becomes of your accusation?" Kritavarma listened to both of them. He understood that the dispute was not merely over the means of victory, but over the meaning of victory itself.

Kripa proposed another course. Dhrishtadyumna could be challenged at dawn; Yudhishthira could be questioned about Drona's death; the surviving soldiers could be gathered as witnesses, and those who had resorted to deceit could be named. "By dawn," Ashwatthama said, "they will already have written the story of their victory." Kripa answered, "Then what you write tonight will no longer be called justice." Kritavarma opened his mouth to speak, but feared the pain to Ashwatthama's wounded pride. At that moment he had no inkling of the burden his silence would later become.

Tightening the strap of his weapon, Ashwatthama declared that he would go as far as the camp. Kripa moved forward to stop him. "To kill someone asleep, helpless, with his weapon laid aside, is not war," he said. "Drona's unjust death gives no licence for such a deed." Ashwatthama did not thrust Kripa's hand away; he gently freed his arm from the older man's grasp. "You mourn my father, but you cannot determine the limits of my grief," he said. Kripa replied, "The grief is yours. The lives of those you intend to kill are not." Ashwatthama turned his eyes away from those last words.

As he mounted the chariot, Kritavarma approached as well. "If I let you go alone, I may have to search for your body at dawn," he said. Kripa asked sharply, "Will you go with him for his safety, or to help him accomplish what he intends?" Kritavarma's face offered no answer. He said only that he would accompany him as far as the gate. Ashwatthama accepted this limit, but he knew that two experienced warriors standing outside the gate would make his attack within possible. The violence of one man's mind was becoming a journey undertaken by three.

After the long day of battle, the camp of the Pandava side lay in exhausted security. The sounds of victory had long since ceased. Now there were pitchers for washing bandages, bamboo pegs on which weapons were kept, and the dying embers of cooking fires. At the outer gate a young guard had bent to give water to an injured companion. The other guard remained seated because of his own wound; no one had yet arrived to relieve him. This lapse signified not consent to evil, but the fatigue of a day spent fighting. Ashwatthama saw in it the enemy's weakness; for those sleeping within the camp, it was simply the necessity of being alive.

Inside the camp, a woman attendant was separating wet bandages and counting the dry cloth that remained. During the day she had been told that the surviving supplies must go first to those with the gravest wounds. "If the horse cries out at dawn," she told her assistant, "you'll know it wants water, not that the war has started again." The assistant laughed wearily. Both supposed that the night was a time for rest. The attendant placed her bag of bandages beside her pillow; she did not wish to pass the responsibility on to anyone else before sleeping. In the midst of these ordinary tasks, something stirred in the shadow beyond the gate.

Ashwatthama stopped for an instant on the way in. In the darkness at the gate, he sensed the presence of an immense guardian—stern and motionless, as though barring the path. He invoked Shiva within himself, but the recollection did not stay his anger. He was searching instead for a way to confer the force of righteousness upon what he had already resolved to do. He went forward. Behind him, at the entrance to the camp, Kripa and Kritavarma took their positions. To stand there was itself a decision; neither man was ignorant of the consequences of his presence.

Dhrishtadyumna's tent stood in the part of the encampment where officers exhausted by battle lay down to rest for a few hours. Ashwatthama drew back the tent flap. The oil in the lamp inside was nearly spent. When Dhrishtadyumna awoke, his hand moved instinctively towards his weapon, but his sword had been laid some distance from the bed. Trying to rise, he asked, "Who is there?" Ashwatthama gave his name, and in that name there was more accusation than lamentation for a father. Dhrishtadyumna tried to recall the events of the earlier battle and state his own case; Ashwatthama did not allow him to finish his sentence.

"If it is battle, give me a weapon," Dhrishtadyumna said. There was fear in his voice, but along with fear a final appeal that the adversary before him should at least grant him the conditions of a fight. Ashwatthama went on remembering how his father had laid aside his weapons. It was as though he had wilfully shut down his own capacity to see the essential difference between Drona's helpless moment and the helplessness in this tent. Violence followed. Its details could confer no heroism; what remained clear was that Dhrishtadyumna had been denied both the weapon and the time necessary to defend himself. When Ashwatthama left the tent, the flap continued to sway in the wind, as though no decision had been made within.

An elderly attendant, still awake in a nearby room, rose at the sound of a scream. He came outside carrying a vessel of water, not a shield. As he called out to ask someone's name, Ashwatthama advanced. The old man woke a younger man and told him to pick up the bag of supplies for the wounded. "My brother is near the gate," the young man said. "First get those who cannot walk out of here," the old man replied. No one there was reckoning how to win a war; they were lifting bodies according to who could walk and who could not. In the midst of that human urgency, the sound of the sword drew closer.

Soldiers who had fought alongside Uttamaujas and Yudhamanyu rose from a tent and came outside. Some had managed to take up their weapons; others had not. A few attempted to resist, but in the unequal state of readiness at night their resistance could not hold. A commotion rose from the direction of Shikhandi's contingent, followed by the sound of running feet. Even now Ashwatthama did not regard Dhrishtadyumna's death as the settling of his debt to his father. Each new body seemed to offer another reason for revenge. Such reasons did not run out; they multiplied. The moral boundary that might have stopped them had already been broken by the first act of violence.

Draupadi's five sons were in the camp that night. Each had a name, an education, relationships, and an imagined future of his own, although the records of war commonly identified them through their fathers' names. The tumult within the camp woke them. Some of the young men searched for weapons, some tried to rouse others, and some looked for a way out. Their attacker gave himself no time to understand who they were as individuals—

nor did he wish to give them any. They were killed in the violence of the night. Their deaths were not the deaths of the five Pandava brothers. They were the endings of five living lives, and no mistake about lineage could diminish the measure of that loss.

For a moment Ashwatthama stopped. The age of one face among those young men reminded him of friends from his own childhood. Near a dead soldier lay a hand, curled around a thin cord—perhaps the binding of a weapon, perhaps some ordinary object brought from home. Ashwatthama did not know its meaning. Yet he saw that the cord remained between the closed fingers, while life did not. The sight might have stopped him, but he changed its meaning within himself: "He was a son of the enemy's side." This reduction of a person to an affiliation gave him the illusion that he could escape a separate responsibility for each death.

When the attendant tried to lead an injured man out of the camp, a stampede had begun along the outer passage. She told her assistant plainly, "Do not abandon someone who is alive to carry away supplies." She watched a narrow-necked water pitcher fall from someone's hand; the water vanished into the earth. Inside, two more pairs of hands were needed to lift an unconscious soldier. The attendant called for help, but the noise outside swallowed her voice. That helplessness could not be called her crime. Her choices were still directed towards life, even as choices against those same lives were being made along the path of the assault.

At the gate Kripa and Kritavarma heard the uproar rising in the distance. "The fighting inside is coming out," Kritavarma said. Kripa replied, "Where was there any battle inside to begin with? We attacked a sleeping camp." Kritavarma could not claim to have heard nothing. Fleeing people reached the gate. In the darkness it was difficult to distinguish a soldier from an unarmed attendant; that very difficulty made the actions of those standing guard at the entrance more terrible still. Kripa signalled to one wounded man to get away, but that single gesture did not undo his participation in holding the gate.

Beside his chariot Kritavarma saw a young soldier carrying a wounded friend on his shoulder. "May I take my friend outside?" the young man asked. Kritavarma stepped aside for a moment; then he resumed his position, blocking the way. In his mind he wanted to soften the cruelty of all he was doing by that one act of mercy. Kripa saw it. "Letting one man through does not lessen your responsibility towards the rest," he said. Kritavarma asked with sudden harshness, "Then why are we standing here?" Kripa gave no answer. The question had already wounded them both.

Gradually the sounds from within the camp began to change. First there had been screams, running, the impact of metal; then, in some places, nothing remained but fires spreading through neglect. Ashwatthama raised

no royal banner of victory. He remembered his father's name, but its meaning was growing indistinct in the smoke of violence. He had killed the man he came to kill, yet the emptiness within him had not been filled. He told himself that Drona's humiliation had been avenged. But that account had no separate place for Dhrishtadyumna's unarmed body, for the futures abandoned by five young men, or for the deaths of nameless attendants.

Before dawn Ashwatthama came out. His clothes bore the marks of the night. "Dhrishtadyumna?" Kripa asked. Ashwatthama gave a brief answer. Then Kritavarma asked, "The Pandavas?" Ashwatthama said that he had not found the Pandava brothers in the camp. His answer revealed not the true failure of his revenge, but the way its targets had shifted. Those whose lives had been taken that night could not be restored by any imagined victory. Kripa and Kritavarma avoided one another's eyes. All three were alive; their survival together was no longer, of itself, a mark of innocence.

A young charioteer came near to water the horses. Looking at the faces of his masters, he understood that no simple question would receive an answer. "There are wounded men along the road," he said. "Our cart can carry two people at a time, if you permit it." "Take them," Kripa said at once. Ashwatthama did not stop him. The charioteer returned with a companion, but he could not save everyone he wanted to save. There was no philosophical consolation in that limit to his work. Even so, while lifting one wounded man into the cart, he asked the other man's name, so that someone might be able to find him later.

The three returned to Duryodhana. The wounded king was too exhausted to look upon the yellow light of dawn. Ashwatthama told him of the attack in the night, pronouncing Dhrishtadyumna's name distinctly as he spoke of victory. Duryodhana showed a faint gladness. In hearing that an important commander of the victorious side had been killed, he perceived one last act of resistance within his defeat. But when he learned that the Pandava brothers were still alive, the corners of his eyes tightened slightly. "Then who died?" he asked. Ashwatthama began to enumerate the names. Within that question lay both the narrowing of the victory Duryodhana had expected and the appalling widening of the slaughter that had actually taken place.

Kripa sat beside Duryodhana and examined the bandage on his wound once more. There was no longer any strength for a learned disputation in his voice. "Do not let the account of this night be written as a tale of heroism," he said. "The deaths of those who were asleep, of those deprived of weapons, cannot be added to the tally of battle fought by day." "I did what I had to do for my father," Ashwatthama said. Kripa replied, "You have the right to speak of your duty towards your father. You do not have the right to give consent on behalf of those who were killed." Duryodhana said nothing; the intervals between his breaths were growing longer.

A woman arrived beside the lake with her child. She was no attendant of a royal household but an ordinary traveller searching for a husband from whom the battlefield had separated her. A guard stopped her, saying that the wounded king was resting within. “I do not want the king,” the woman said clearly. “I want news of the man who went yesterday to carry the wounded.” Kripa heard her question and sent the charioteer for a list bearing the names of two injured soldiers. As she waited, the woman seated her child on the earth. “Be sure you ask the names correctly,” she said. Her voice held nothing of the victory or defeat of kingdoms; it asserted the right to receive even the last piece of news about a life.

Ashwatthama walked a little way from the lake. He looked at the earth dried upon the blade of his sword. The fingers that had held a weapon all night were now trembling. For a moment he remembered how many times Kripa had told him to wait for dawn. He could not escape that memory, even if he wished to. Yet the first touch of remorse could not bring the dead back to life. In the distant, gathering light he could make out the outline of the branch on which the owl had fallen upon the crows. The responsibility for turning a bird’s natural act of hunting into a command for a human decision could rest with no one else.

Kritavarma came to Kripa and said they must decide where to turn the mounted troops. “Wherever we go,” Kripa asked, “how shall we tell the story of this night?” “It will be difficult to hide what happened,” Kritavarma said. Kripa replied, “Finding concealment difficult and deciding to tell the truth are two different things.” They looked towards the last remaining roads of the war, but for the first time what lay before them was more frightening than defeat: the history of their own actions. Ashwatthama came up and signalled that they should leave. “Wait until the wounded have been lifted aboard,” Kripa said. This time Ashwatthama did not prevent it.

In the first light of dawn, smoke continued to rise from the camp. Those who had survived set about identifying the wounded, taking down names, sending word to families, and preserving the dignity of the dead. Their labour arose not from the commands of the victors but from their own ties to one another and their sense of responsibility. Ashwatthama had completed his revenge, but the right to determine its moral worth did not belong to the avenger alone. A single night’s violence had been a decision made at that hour; its grief would reach many other lives in many different ways. And as day broke, the work of saving the breaths that remained began once again.

Chapter 114 · Medicine and the Breath That Remains

In the last watch of the night, Urmila lifted the wet sack that had been laid beneath the door of the hospital's old wing, and a thin stream of mud ran out of it. The sack had been put there to keep the water back, but it had now soaked up so much that it was heavy with it. She dragged it into a dry corner. One look at the marks left in the earth of the corridor told her that the water had advanced another two fingerbreadths since the previous watch. There were separate papers for the obstruction in the outer drain and the leak from the roof inside; on the ground, the waters from both had already mingled. Instead of picking up her broom, she rang the bell in the nursing room.

When Salma Sheikh came out, Urmila said, "There is water in the corridor where the patients' beds have to be turned. I shall clean it, but first decide where the patients are to be taken." Salma's eyes fell on the iron-wheeled bed opposite the doorway. One of its wheels had been sticking since the previous day. She summoned the employee who had the keys. "This bed cannot be used. Bring another stretcher and examine its wheels. Calling something urgent does not make an unsafe thing safe." The clock in the nursing room showed four thirty-seven, but the clock at the outer gate was still five minutes slow. Salma corrected the time in her duty register.

Meanwhile Jamuna Devi tried to raise herself halfway from her bed. She was having difficulty drawing breath; she attempted to speak, but no complete sentence emerged. Anwari, sitting on the neighbouring bed, first held out a glass of water. Then she saw Jamuna's face and drew the glass back. "Salma Didi!" Her cry carried beyond the veranda. Salma ran in, saw Jamuna's condition and immediately called for a trained assistant. Anwari laid down her daughter Rehana's exercise book and cleared the space beside Jamuna's pillow. Instead of attempting to lift the patient by force, she waited for Salma to tell her what to do.

A little earlier, Aniruddha had been checking the amended copy of the supplies register. When the news reached him, he came to the room. He observed the rhythm of Jamuna's breathing, initiated a medical examination and asked Salma to verify the availability of the approved emergency equipment. "We shall not touch the consignment under investigation," Salma made clear at once. This time the store assistant himself brought the approved box, showing both its number and the actual time at which it had been handed over. Aniruddha wrote the necessary treatment orders; the task of administering the medicine belonged to Salma's trained team. Jamuna watched their faces, as though trying to understand whether anyone among them regarded her breath as something more than a number to be counted.

The small treatment room in the old wing could accommodate a patient, but the inner layer of its wall was damp and crumbling. The red mark Aditi and Tara had made the previous day remained plainly visible. “Is there room in the safe ward ahead?” Aniruddha asked. Salma answered, “One bed is empty. The route around is longer. We could get her out more quickly through the little rear doorway, but the iron at its threshold is loose.” Aniruddha hesitated. In the past, whenever he saw the shorter route, he would take it. Today he chose the safer corridor, though it required a detour. Jamuna’s emergency did not make the decision any simpler.

Urmila removed the sheets lying in the safe corridor. Each bore a little strand of coloured thread, marking it for the hospital’s property register, but she did not let the fear of upsetting her linen accounts stop her. “They were in the patient’s way, so I moved them,” she told her assistant. “We shall reconcile the numbers afterwards. For now, just write down which cloth has gone to which patient.” A young man from the kitchen, who had come to help, offered to hold the bed. Salma thanked him and stopped him. “Clear the wet dishes and the slippery floor. Let someone trained to lift a patient do the lifting.” He looked embarrassed for a moment, then set about the work that was his to do.

Tulsi Tajpuriya received a telephone call at the gate. Of the two vehicles assigned to the service, one driver had not yet completed his rest period; the other vehicle was outside on a patient journey. “A vehicle will come,” Tulsi said, “but first look after this patient in the safe room here. Do not hold a bed in the corridor on the hope of a road journey.” She contacted Haricharan Paswan to arrange a change of driver. Still half-asleep, Haricharan did not simply accept the instruction: he sent written information about the available drivers, their rest periods and the condition of the road. To Aniruddha, the wait for a vehicle seemed long; yet it had become clear that an empty vehicle and a vehicle fit to travel were two different things.

As the bed was readied to be moved, Salma explained the order of the transfer. Two trained employees took their places on either side. Devi Gond stood some distance away with her training register, but Salma permitted her to prepare the necessary things in the next clean room. “Keep watching the treatment with your own eyes,” Salma said, “but no medicine without instructions.” Devi counted each item in turn. In her bag was a small packet of sattu she had put aside for her mother at home; she set it on a dry bench by the window. For the first time she understood that training did not mean putting out one’s hands at every moment. Sometimes it meant leaving the way clear for hands that had been trained.

When the wheeled bed turned beside the booth-like threshold, its rear wheel caught for an instant in a wet joint. An employee tried to wrench it free. Aniruddha stepped forward to steady the bed. At that very moment the loose iron flap at the edge swung against his arm; its exposed sharp rim tore his skin, and, losing his balance, he put one knee to the ground. The bed did

not overturn, but the sleeve of Aniruddha's white kurta turned red. "Stop the bed," Salma said. There was such firmness in her voice that every hand became still in an instant.

Trying to stand, Aniruddha said, "Take Jamuna first." Salma handed over a clean cloth for pressure to be applied to the wound, but she did not leave her patient. She sent another trained nurse to Aniruddha. "They are both patients," she said, "but their needs are different. Look after the wound in your arm, Doctor Sahib. I am watching Jamuna's breathing now." Aniruddha wanted to reply, but the pain of his injury entered the sentence before he could finish it. He sat down against the wall. Devi ran to fetch a dressing; at the employee's direction, she first opened the clean materials and laid them ready.

A doctor from the next shift was called to examine the extent of the wound and the movement of Aniruddha's arm. He had been attending another patient in the hospital's new ward. On arriving, he explained plainly that Aniruddha should not try to get up and manage the stretcher himself: the injury required examination, cleaning and whatever treatment was necessary. Aniruddha's first protest was, "I can still give directions." The other doctor answered, "When you yourself are injured, sharing the burden of decisions is part of our organised work. Tell us what you saw, but accept my judgement concerning the examination of your wound." More than the injury itself, Aniruddha felt the discomfort of this unfamiliar role.

Salma kept watch on Jamuna's breathing, consciousness and response to treatment as they reached the safe ward. The trained team continued the assistance prescribed in the approved medical orders. Water still lay on the threshold of the old wing. Word was sent to Gomati Beldar to have the loose iron flap immediately cordoned off, but no worker was to be sent down into the unsafe drain. Tara arrived and tied a fresh red rope across the area. "Why was this flap not noticed earlier?" an official asked. Tara answered, "That edge was marked on the map of the safe route, but today we saw it actually move. That is a question for inspection. Write down the objection; do not select someone to blame on the strength of a guess."

Jamuna opened her eyes in the ward. Salma spoke her name, not to assure her that the danger had passed, but to see whether she understood. Jamuna nodded faintly. Outside, Anwari stood waiting. "I am not one of Jamuna's family," she said, "but she was struggling to breathe before my eyes. Please inform her own people." Through an employee assigned to the task, Salma sent a message to the contact recorded for Jamuna's household. The information was not posted in the public register. Anwari then returned to her daughter Rehana. "Will that old lady speak again?" Rehana asked. Her mother replied, "I do not know yet. We shall pray, and the doctors will do their work."

The medicine-store assistant brought Salma the sheet listing the approved drugs. One box from the consignment under investigation was already sealed

in the warehouse. “This is an emergency,” he said. “People will ask why the patient was made to wait while that box remained shut.” Salma did not allow him to see the patient’s chart; she looked only at the list of what was available in the store. “The requirement for a safe source of medicine does not change. Write separately what is needed and what is actually available through the proper channel. If there is a shortage, requisition it through the prescribed arrangement.” For the first time the assistant asked, “And if it does not arrive in time?” Salma said, “We shall record that time accurately too. Writing a false statement of availability does not deliver treatment.”

First aid was being given to Aniruddha’s arm. The employee applying the dressing asked him questions he, as a doctor, would ordinarily have asked somebody else: when the injury occurred, what object had caused it, who first gave assistance. Aniruddha answered each one fully. Before his eyes passed the papers of the investigation into Sarita Devi’s death and his own earlier admission concerning the supply summary. He was tempted to think that the pain of this wound was punishment for his mistake. But he soon understood that physical suffering was no substitute for a judicial decision. “Record the time,” he told the employee. “The inspection of the flap will proceed separately.”

At a low table behind the nursing room, Devi Gond was preparing the register of emergency materials used. Her training supervisor noticed that in one line Devi had written ‘medicine delivered’, when all she had done was bring a sealed box into the ward. “Delivered to the room and administered to the patient are not the same thing,” the supervisor said. Devi amended the entry to ‘handed over’. “If someone asks what the patient was actually given?” she asked. “They will consult Salma’s record and the physician’s orders. Do not take responsibility for what you did not see.” Devi took the lesson to heart. That day, for the first time, the lessons of the earlier dispute over supplies entered the practice of her training.

In the courtyard Gomati and Tara were putting a temporary barrier around the iron flap. The ground was soft because water continued to drain across it. A junior municipal officer said, “Take the flap out and throw it away. The work will be finished.” Gomati asked, “If we remove it, what will hold the half-open joint above? I shall not touch it without structural authorisation.” Tara took measurements and photographed the looseness of the flap, keeping every private face out of the picture. When Aditi arrived, she remembered the incomplete order for load testing in the hospital’s old wing. She lodged a written objection asking for a timetable for permanent repairs. The immediate cause of the night’s injury and the larger question of the drainage defects persisting for months were kept apart.

Jamuna’s daughter-in-law arrived from home. She asked directly, “Tell me, will she survive?” Salma gave her no false reassurance. “Her breathing is receiving more support now than before, but she remains under medical observation,” she said. The daughter-in-law asked whether she might sit

inside. Salma allowed her a limited time, explained how to clean her hands and insisted that the way for treatment must be kept clear. The daughter-in-law laid her fingers beside Jamuna's palm. The little glimmer of recognition in the older woman's eyes brought tears to her own; it was not medical proof.

When the other doctor wrote the next decision about Jamuna's treatment, Aniruddha was sitting on a bed outside. Salma asked him only for the previous treatment details she needed: Jamuna's regular medicines, her response during the preceding night, and who had been informed. Aniruddha answered, but did not attempt to issue orders again. "Today you listen to everything I say and then write it down," he told Salma. Smiling, she replied, "Tomorrow you may be able to write for yourself. Today let the responsibility that is mine travel from my voice into my hands." Her smile was brief, yet in that moment the distance between physician and nurse grew a little smaller.

Urmila counted separately the sheets and dressings used in the two wards. Someone asked what use there could be in such petty accounting during a disaster. She answered, "If a sheet used for one patient is entered against another name, tomorrow the deduction will come out of my wages. And the patient, too, has a right to know the source of what was used." She did not turn her earlier protest over unpaid linen work into a public demonstration in the midst of the emergency, but at the end of her shift she added the missed time in writing. They had closed off the way by which fresh arrears might be created in the name of disaster relief. Meanwhile Chandrika from the kitchen brought the nurses hot water. "The time that took has been entered as paid work, hasn't it?" Salma asked. Chandrika laughed. "Today even the nurses are asking!"

The vehicle that arrived at the gate was kept standing empty. Tulsi herself verified that the medical team had not yet decided to send Jamuna out. The driver was not Jamir but another man who had completed his rest; he refused to set out with a patient without a treatment order. A municipal official said, "I have to submit a report showing the vehicle has been used." Tulsi replied, "Keeping a safe vehicle ready is also a service, if the patient ought not to travel at this hour. If a journey actually takes place, we shall record its time." The local relief committee approved a separate entry for payment for the waiting time. The driver did not lose his hours, and the patient was not carried away merely for show.

After midday Jamuna clasped her daughter-in-law's hand a little more firmly. She could not form a whole sentence, but she signalled that she wanted water. In accordance with the medical conditions, the nurse attended to the care of her mouth; nothing was given simply because the family asked for it. The daughter-in-law now understood that love's immediate impulse and the safe sequence of treatment were not always the same. Anwari saw that Rehana had drawn a little flower in her exercise book. "I shall show the flower to the old lady when she is better," Rehana said. "Draw it," Anwari replied, "but if

she needs to rest, show it later.” The child’s waiting, too, was a small and real task that day.

In the wet corridor outside, Aditi saw the board warning people away from the temporarily closed passage. She told the municipal office again that the fact of a wheel catching must not make the entire danger the fault of the workers transporting the patient. The loose flap, the corridor water, the inner leak in the building and the obstructed drain outside all required separate investigation. Gomati submitted a written statement from the workers, making clear that her team had not been assigned to repair that threshold during the night. “Do not put my name against work I have not even seen,” she said. Aditi accepted the statement and left blank the place where the cause had not yet been proved.

Shailaja had come to the hospital’s public counter to ask the date of the next hearing in Saraswati Devi’s case. Her expression did not change when she heard of Aniruddha’s injury. “I want you to recover,” she said, “but I shall not allow the question of my mother-in-law to disappear into this wound.” With one hand Aniruddha held the arm of his chair. “No,” he said. “The inquiry into my injury and your complaint belong to two separate files.” Shailaja asked again when the next medical review would take place. The employee had a definite date and gave her a certified copy. Paper could not take the place of grief; it could keep her question from being drowned.

By evening, after hours of observation, the immediate crisis in Jamuna’s breathing had eased a little, but she was not released from regular monitoring. Salma checked the change in her condition with the doctor before recording it. The daughter-in-law asked whether she should go home or remain through the night. “You have responsibilities at home as well,” Salma said, “but the arrangement for receiving news of her treatment tonight must be clear. Space for sitting here is limited. You may take turns.” The daughter-in-law sent a message to her husband’s younger brother: he would come at dawn; for now he would look after the daughter at home. Her decision did not wait for the authority of a man at the hospital.

Aniruddha was looking at the dressing on his injured arm when Devi asked permission to approach with her training sheet. “May I write down the details of your injury?” she asked. “Write what you yourself saw,” Aniruddha said. “What I wish to tell you as a patient is separate. And no photograph of me in a public report without my consent.” A faint smile appeared on Devi’s face. “Doctor Sahib, you have said exactly what we were taught in training: a patient’s body belongs to the patient.” Salma, overhearing, said, “And when a trainee’s hours are over, that time belongs to the trainee.” Devi picked up the sattu she had put aside for her mother and obtained permission to go home.

The doctor reporting for the night shift listened to Salma’s account of Jamuna’s condition. When he sat beside Aniruddha, Aniruddha showed him a brief account of the accident and the correction to the earlier availability summary. “There was a time when I assumed supplies were available without

checking," Aniruddha said. "Today I saw with my own eyes that the iron flap on a route marked safe could move. The two errors are not the same, but in both cases the burden of what has gone unseen may fall upon a patient." The new doctor said, "Let that experience remain in the report. But do not take all the causes of your injury upon yourself. A safe system cannot be made by one person's vigilance alone."

Rukhsana sent the list of the night meal from the kitchen. The measures of the little khichdi reserved for hospital staff, the food remaining for the shelter and the shifts of paid work were entered separately. Sitting near the window, Salma suddenly laughed as she raised her first spoonful. Urmila asked why. "This morning Doctor Sahib was telling everyone the room could not function without me; now I am telling him he must not get up from his bed without my permission." Urmila said, "Record the day's achievement: two nurses have succeeded in making a doctor rest quietly." Hearing the laughter, the daughter-in-law in the next room smiled a little too. Jamuna was breathing. For the moment, that was reason enough for the night.

As the clouds grew thicker, Tara came once more to examine the barrier around the threshold. The flap had been made temporarily secure, but she did not declare the passage open for use. New signs directing people along the safe detour were posted outside the nursing room. At the place reserved for his duty signature, Aniruddha wrote: 'Injured; direct responsibility for treatment transferred.' Salma entered the time for Jamuna's next examination in her register. On the two papers were the marks of two different pens. Water continued to drip in the hospital through the night, and the original blockage in the drain remained; but the care of one life had passed out of the hands of an injured physician and been shared among many trained hands.

Chapter 115 · Permission for a Photograph

The knot in the red rope across the outer threshold of the hospital's old wing had tightened in the rain overnight. At dawn, Sanket did not want to touch it. Standing a little way from the cordon, he tried to read the writing that marked the closed passage by the light of his phone. Half a corner of the warning notice had drooped into the water. The arrow pointing towards the new, safer detour was visible, but further along it could easily be mistaken for an indication towards the crossroads. Sanket read aloud, "Old entrance closed; south veranda open." Just then two elderly women arrived carrying bundles of clothes and stopped at precisely that forbidden threshold. They could not make out half the letters on the notice.

Sanket raised his hand to stop them. "Not this way. Go round to the right," he said. The first woman asked, "There is water on the detour too, isn't there?" Sanket did not claim, on his own authority, that the alternative route was safe. He called the hospital's temporary route attendant. The attendant came with a wooden board bearing red-and-yellow markings and led the women along the higher veranda where Salma had arranged the transfer of patients the previous day. The women went inside, but Sanket was left wondering how useful a written warning could be to those unable to read it. In his notebook he marked a new position for the arrow on the board. On his phone there was, for the moment, only an image of the entrance from outside.

Sarita had sent him to the hospital with a box of breakfast. "Don't spend the entire day staring at people's faces on your phone," she had told him. "And eat on time." Sanket had laughed, but the previous evening a private message had arrived at home and kept appearing on his screen. Two affectionate lines written by someone, a small anxiety about the studies that lay ahead, and Sanket's own awkwardly worded reply. He had kept that exchange for himself. Such a document—even when it lived inside a telephone—was not the property of any public assembly, hospital or municipal employee. The many earlier disputes over photographs within his own household had begun to teach him this.

Urmila was reconciling the number of wet sheets on the outer veranda. During the night's evacuation two sheets had gone into the patients' safe room, and one had been used to wipe away water. She insisted that none of these should be entered as "missing supplies." Sanket showed her the arrow he had drawn in his notebook. Urmila said, "Sanket, the arrow is right. But write beside it that this route has been inspected for now, not approved for all time. If the water rises, that too may change." Sanket wrote, "Morning inspection." He understood that sometimes a small word could keep people from placing too much trust in a sign.

Inside, Salma Sheikh had begun another shift caring for Jamuna Devi's breathing. Jamuna had remained under medical observation throughout the night; her daughter-in-law was allowed to sit for a little while beside the bed beneath the window. Aniruddha, with a fresh dressing on his injured arm, had come to look over the papers, but the orders for direct treatment were another doctor's responsibility. Salma told him, "When your arm hurts this much, give me the register and tell me what you need to say." He smiled. "Today I too am something entrusted to someone else." Urmila did not laugh. What she saw was that the time at which responsibility for a shift changed hands also had to be clear.

Outside, a small rescue team had planned, before noon, to remove some essential materials from a room behind the old wing. The room itself was not within the marked danger zone, but it stood against the wall at the back of it. Tara Binout said that no order to remove anything could be given until the joint in the wall had been inspected. An official was in a hurry: beds and approved supplies should be recovered before the rain started again. Examining the wet earth, Gomati Beldar said, "What looks dry from a distance has silt beneath it. There must be a warning that a person's feet may sink." No one had entered yet. They decided first to observe the actual conditions from higher ground.

Holding his phone camera up from a distance, Sanket brought the wall of the old veranda, the safety rope and the new stream of falling water into a single frame. Tara stood beside him and asked, "What exactly are you recording now?" "What my eyes can see, and the time the phone gives me," Sanket answered. "Not anyone's home or face." Tara did not instruct him to treat the photograph as conclusive proof of what had caused the old damage. She said only that a short video might help establish the changing direction of the water, provided its original sequence was preserved. Sanket steadied the phone and began filming.

At that moment an employee approached from the other side carrying a slender bamboo ladder. He thought the way through the closed veranda would be shorter. Gomati called out from a distance, "Don't go near that panel!" Hearing her, the man stopped, but the assistant walking behind him pushed the front end of the ladder forward. As soon as the bamboo tip caught against the wet shutter, the shutter creaked and a handful of plaster fell away. Tara raised her hand and told everyone to move back. No one was trapped inside, but the assistant's foot sank into the silt and he lost his balance. From a nearby raised ledge Gopal Majhi extended a rope, Tara indicated firm ground, and with the rope's help the assistant came out.

Throughout the small rescue, Sanket's phone had continued recording. Its frame did not contain the assistant's face. Mostly it showed the shutter's outer joint, the silt, the end of the bamboo and Tara's raised hand of warning. On the recording one could hear Gomati's command to stop, the creak of the slipping ladder, and the assistant saying, "I am out." Sanket then turned off

the camera, as though there was no need to keep holding up a screen when someone might require help. Staying outside the safe boundary, he fetched a glass of water. He did not presume that this gave him the right to push in among those conducting the rescue.

There was a scrape on the outside of the assistant's knee. Tara seated him on a safe bench and called for medical assistance so that his ability to bear weight on the leg could be checked first. He said, "My first impulse was to pick up the ladder and fasten it again. Now I see the ladder couldn't even bear its own weight." Gomati replied, "No one is blaming you for wanting to do your work. We shall investigate who proposed sending workers along a route that had been declared closed." The official himself asked who had heard his verbal instructions. No one person had heard the entire sequence. One had caught half a sentence, another had seen a gesture, and another had seen only the person who handed over the ladder.

When the inspector arrived, the official said, "It's all recorded on the phone. Send it over and we shall have complete proof of the accident." Sanket replied, "I can give you the thirty or thirty-five seconds I have. I do not know what happened in the room before that, or who installed the shutter." Gomati looked towards him. "We can hear the warning," she said, "but that voice does not establish who was responsible for the earlier repairs." The official said that the inquiry required the whole phone. Sanket instinctively covered the screen with his fingers. Sweat appeared on his forehead. It was not easy to disagree with a public official simply to protect an ordinary possession.

Tara intervened. "Define the subject of the investigation. The phone's limited view is relevant to the danger at the shutter and today's attempt to remove materials. The number of pictures a person keeps on a private phone is not part of this incident." The official asked, "What if the same phone contains older photographs of the wall?" Sanket answered, "I showed an earlier photograph of the red warning mark for a limited inspection. It is a different view, from a different day. If you want that as well, give me a separate written reason." This was not the stubbornness of his former self, but caution learned from experience. Tara said that the original recording of today's scene must be preserved, and that the time, place and persons present must also be written down for an authentic comparison.

Naira came to the hospital when she heard the news. First she gave Sanket some water; his hands were still shaking. "Were you frightened?" she asked. Sanket nodded. "Yes. I am not afraid that there is something wrong with the video. I am afraid that if I unlock the phone, people who have no business with my other things will read them all." Naira said, "Giving what an investigation needs and surrendering your right to a private life are two different decisions. But you must not alter the footage you do give. Keep the original safe." Sanket asked whether he should submit a written statement in his own name or through Sarita. "You must say what you decide," Naira replied. "Your mother's advice and consent matter too."

Twice Sanket paused while writing down the time of the incident. When Rama checked the time shown on his phone against the office clock, there was a slight difference. “Write down even a difference of a few moments,” Rama said. “If the records make all clocks show the same time, a reader will assume they describe the same instant.” Rather than crossing out what he had already written, Sanket added a separate line: “Phone time not yet reconciled with office time.” He remembered his earlier temptation to add an estimated distance when showing the photograph of the red mark at the warehouse. Today he was learning that the failure to state the precise limits of time could also disappear behind a picture’s immediate brightness.

When Sarita arrived, her first concern was for Sanket’s arms and legs. “You haven’t been hurt?” she asked. “No,” Sanket said. “I was outside the cordon while filming.” Sarita touched his forehead, and only then understood that this was the sweat of fear, not fever. She told the employee, “You have no right to read everything on my child’s phone. Specify what is required for this incident. After that, we shall show you the relevant copy ourselves.” Sanket breathed more easily, though he smiled a little at his mother’s calling him a child. “I’m not little,” he said softly. Sarita answered, “Then where did you put your breakfast box?”

Three papers were laid on a table in the room: the preliminary note from the structural inspection that day, the eyewitness statement, and permission to use Sanket’s footage. Rama insisted that the scope of permission be stated clearly. In his own hand Sanket added: today’s shutter, the water outside, the warning shouted aloud, and the sequence in which the assistant came safely out. No private photographs, letters, messages, contact lists or pictures taken on other days were included. He did not have to surrender the password that unlocked his phone. The original video would remain on Sanket’s protected phone; the investigating officer would prepare the specified copy in his presence. A separate request for permission would be necessary for any public showing or circulation.

A technical assistant asked whether the facts would not be incomplete if they watched a cut-down video. Sanket said, “If cutting the beginning or end would leave the scene obscure, see the whole of that short recording—but not my old gallery.” Naira suggested a way forward: preserve the original time sequence and copy only the specified video into a separate file; record the duration of the copy, its starting and ending times, and the recipient’s name. If someone wanted a version with faces obscured for public instruction, that would be a separate decision about a separate use. Gomati herself said, “My voice can be heard here. I permit my voice to be used for this inquiry. But do not turn it into something that says a person knowingly committed a crime even after hearing my warning.”

The inspector watched the limited copy. The red rope, the white shutter, the bamboo tip, the falling plaster and the assistant’s shadow outside were visible in the video. For half a moment a nurse appeared in a distant doorway;

she had played no part in the incident. Rama described her work without naming her and added a condition that, if necessary, her figure should be obscured in any public copy. No one suggested altering the original. Tara paused the video at two separate moments: the first position of the bamboo as it touched the shutter, and the falling of the plaster afterwards. “There is an interval between the two,” she said. “But this short view cannot tell us where the shutter’s original weakness began.”

The assistant came forward himself and said that he would permit the scene in which his foot sank into the silt to be viewed, but did not want the name of his home, his mother’s identity or the sound of his cry included in public news. “I need work,” he said. “What if people call me a coward and make me lose my job?” Gomati replied, “Your right to safety at work will be protected. We need to see under whose orders the mistake was made, not make a spectacle of a worker’s fear.” Hearing this, Sanket put his phone away. He could have attracted a great deal of attention on the internet with those images. But before him stood the livelihoods and reputations of two living people.

After noon, a reporter from outside the town came to the information desk. “If the rescue video goes viral, the repairs will happen quickly,” he said. Naira answered, “The evidence of the building’s defects must be presented. Going viral is not a substitute for an investigation.” The reporter asked Sanket directly, “Do you keep love messages on that phone too? Why are you so afraid?” Sanket’s face suddenly flushed. Someone was trying to turn guesses about his private life into a joke before a public gathering. Sarita said plainly, “No one here will receive an answer to that question.” Rama entered in the attendance record that a private question unrelated to the incident had been raised, and answering it had been refused.

Sanket thought of the message from his fellow student. There was no state secret in it, only an unfinished line of poetry and a wish to look at books together after the examinations were over. If anyone read it in the name of “evidence,” the trust of the person who wrote it would be broken. Sanket now thought that the love between them was perhaps not made of exquisitely fragile words, but of trust in each other’s silences. He did not open the phone and try to erase the private message. Erasing it would mean denying a part of his own life out of fear. What he needed was a clear boundary around the inquiry, not a secret escape from it.

For the evening measurements Tara, Aditi and Gomati went again to the rear of the closed wing. Using the phone footage, they identified the place by the warning rope beyond which the ladder had been pushed. But examining the inner joint of the shutter would require the old building’s repair register, a mason’s testimony and a structural inspection. Aditi had already withdrawn her earlier opinion that this was a “minor repair”; she added a new note to the file stating that, despite the warning, the limits of the work had not been made clear. “I shall write what I saw,” she said, “and leave what I did not see as

inference." Gomati added that no worker would re-enter the site without a safety order.

Urmila hung a small curtain once more inside the hospital. Jamuna's room was visible through the doorway from outside, and someone raising a mobile phone could easily capture the patient's face. "Even a photograph without the patient's name is still part of her life," Urmila said. Salma agreed. For the public notice she decided to give no details of Jamuna's health, only the status of the service room. When Jamuna's daughter-in-law heard the decision, she said, "People keep telling us that if she is being treated, we should show them a picture. But the moment Mother opens her eyes belongs to our family." Sanket understood another meaning of his own decision: the privacy he had demanded was necessary not only for his messages of love, but also for another person's suffering.

Meanwhile, Rukhsana was calculating the evening meal to be sent from the relief kitchen. A request had arrived for additional food for the hospital's rescue team. An official wanted to call this voluntary assistance and leave the work of the women in the courtyard out of the labour register, without recording their names. Rukhsana stopped him. "The work is an emergency," she said. "That does not make the labour disappear." Sanket offered to photograph the prepared plates with his phone, but Rukhsana answered, "Before a photograph, record the number, the names of those who cooked, and the payment slips." Sanket watched the food being weighed and decided it was better not to take a photograph. Not every truth has to become an image.

An elderly boatman whose home stood beside the rising water came to the hospital gate. He had heard that the flood had broken the shutter behind the warehouse and that several people had been crushed beneath it. Sanket did not show him his video. Instead he read out Shabnam's location-specific notice: no one had been confirmed trapped under the wreckage; one assistant had been brought out safely; the outside route beside the old wing was closed; further inspection was in progress. The old man asked, "Everything appears on the phone, yet why do people tell such different stories?" Sanket said, "A photograph catches one corner of one moment. Rumour quickly settles in the space behind it, where no one has seen." The boatman left after giving a separate report on conditions around his own house.

On the way home Sarita did not ask Sanket to unlock his phone for her inspection. She asked, "Did you bring back a copy of the permission you gave?" Sanket took out the folded paper. Sarita read it line by line: video restricted to practical inspection; private material excluded; fresh consent required for public use; responsibility for the original copy clearly assigned. "And how do you feel?" she asked. "Frightened," Sanket said. "But now I understand that fear need not make me shut everything away. I can say how much I am willing to give." Setting down a plate, Sarita said, "Then give me this much now: tell me whether you're hungry. The rice is getting cold."

That evening Naira divided a page of her working notes into three separate sections: what the phone directly showed, the independent statements of eyewitnesses, and the future structural examination of the building. Instead of putting Sanket's name in the public headline, she wrote that the footage had been made available within the permitted limits. Without Sanket's permission it would have been wrong to make him a "brave camera hero." Naira remembered the earlier false accusation against Janaki's troupe, built upon the resemblance of faces. Now even an authentic rescue video, if circulated in fragments without context, could create a wrongly accused person. She did not tear up her first draft; she kept it with marks showing her revisions.

When Tara came to the entrance for the night inspection, a thin run of water had advanced a little beyond its previous measurement. Without equipment it was still difficult to see the condition of the old wall from within. She repeated the temporary suspension of work for the following day. Aditi had "structural condition of old wing subject to re-examination" entered on the public notice; she allowed no one to write either "building already collapsed" or "completely safe." Gomati warned the night watchman not to go inside to retighten the rope if the knot worked loose, but to put a new barrier around a firm post on higher ground. For now, the success of the rescue lay in maintaining a safe distance.

In his small room Sanket opened his large notebook and sat down to write. On that page he did not copy the permission form by which he had donated his phone footage. He recorded only the small event of the day: "Today someone came out safely. The team holding the rope brought him out. I gave the video. The video is not my whole day, and certainly not my whole life." Then he wrote a reply to the private message. Its words were few, full of affection, and intended for no third person. Thunder sounded beyond the window. He lowered the volume of his phone but did not switch it off: the way remained open for legitimate news from the hospital to reach him if necessary.

Aditi had left the list for the dawn inspection at the office. The guarding of the safe materials in the warehouse continued; the patient vehicles were running on their assigned shifts; the relief kitchen maintained separate slips for workers' payments. But the structure of the hospital's old wing had still not undergone a conclusive examination. Sanket's short video had become useful evidence bounded by time, not an answer to the entire accident. One person had been saved; the private world inside one phone had been saved too. And whatever old weakness remained within the red cordon Tara had set could not be decided upon until the next inspection bore the actual weight of the evidence.

Chapter 116 · The Old Wing

In the first watch of morning, Gomati Beldar examined the knot in the red rope stretched across the outer threshold of the hospital's old wing. Fine rain had fallen over it during the night. The post was firm, but the earth beneath it had swollen. Rather than pull the post to tighten it, Gomati drew a small circle around it with chalk and told the watchman, "Do not put your foot here. If a post begins to move, the warning tied to it will move as well. Test the firmness of the ground first." The watchman opened the night register. Once again there was a discrepancy between the clock at the gate and the clock in the hospital's nursing room. Gomati recorded the time shown on her own watch, but did not declare it the official time.

Inside the safe room, Urmila was counting sheets. Those brought out of the old wing had been divided into two piles: sheets in use by patients and sheets sent for cleaning. Jamuna Devi was still under treatment, with Salma Sheikh monitoring her breathing. Aniruddha's arm remained bandaged; the medical team had forbidden him to take part in lifting or moving patients. Urmila left one line blank in the register. Two patients' old belongings were still in a small room inside the old wing. Permission to retrieve belongings and assurance that it was safe to enter the room were not the same thing.

Tara Binout was waiting for Aditi by the outer platform. In her hands were yesterday's sheet of measurements and a thin strip of wood she had brought today. She held the strip upright and compared it with the shadow cast by the old wall. She did not treat it as a direct measurement, only as a marker of position. New grains of plaster had fallen from beside the narrow crack visible the previous night. When Aditi arrived, Tara said, "I can see that these grains have fallen since last night. But I cannot tell from outside how deep the crack goes." Aditi did not strike out the words "awaiting re-examination" on the document. She wrote a new date beneath them.

Two employees wanted the passage behind the old wing reopened because the safe diversion made for a long walk. One of them said, "An assistant was rescued yesterday. That turned out well. There hasn't been any accident today." Tara replied, "Yesterday's rescue is not evidence of today's safety. When a door panel shifts and the soil washes away, the fact that one person survived does not make the structure strong." Aditi repeated the prohibited boundary already marked on the courtyard ground. "No order to retrieve materials, either," she said. The employees said they would put their dissatisfaction in writing. Aditi did not prevent them.

At the outer edge of the courtyard, Sugni Saday was setting out small measuring stakes with her team. They were not undertaking work inside the drain. They examined the wall of the warehouse extension beside the mouth of the watercourse, the soil on either side, and the stream passing through the

partly open outlet. Sugni told her assistant, “Don’t record that heap of wet earth as river silt. It might be earth fallen from beneath the wall, or silt washed in from outside. We need separate samples.” The team went as far as the line already tested and no farther. Standing at that distance made the outlet difficult to measure, but Sugni had accepted the written limits on the risk under her own signature.

At the office, Naira was reading the previous night’s incident report. She did not play Sanket’s video again. The permitted, restricted copy had been secured, and the separate statements bearing on the event were being compared. On hearing Aditi’s new report, she decided to go to the hospital. First, however, she left a sheet with Rama: the time recorded by the telephone, the time at the gate, and the hospital time must not be treated as one clock when constructing the sequence of events. Rama asked, “If the crack really has grown today, will yesterday’s image be enough?” “No,” said Naira. “Yesterday’s image is evidence of yesterday. Today’s condition needs today’s measurements.” That was all they said about it. Neither suggested reopening Sanket’s private phone.

In the hospital’s safe room, Salma was arranging the change of staff shifts. Jamuna’s daughter-in-law asked about the morning report. Salma said her breathing had become somewhat steadier than during the night, but that observation and treatment were still necessary. Looking towards the door of the old wing, the daughter-in-law asked, “My mother-in-law was there. That is why the clothes we brought from home are still inside. Who will bring them out?” Urmila answered, “Write down the items. When the safety team gives written permission, trained people will retrieve them. We understand the value of what belongs to someone you love, but we cannot risk another person’s body to fetch it.” The daughter-in-law asked what would happen if the passage was closed forever. Instead of answering, Urmila had her enter an exact description of the belongings in the register.

Around eight o’clock, a scraping sound came from a corner of the outer platform. At first it was like the fall of a wet leaf. Standing outside the rope, Gomati saw two thin flakes of plaster detach from the wall and fall into the mud. Tara heard the sound too. She did not start, but made a mark on her measurement sheet. A few moments later the iron door panel appeared to have sagged slightly at its upper joint. Aditi immediately told the employees inside, “Leave everything where it is. Everyone beyond the boundary.” The short order came first; the explanation followed.

In the safe corridor adjoining the old wing, two workers were taking an elderly patient on a cot for a routine examination. On hearing Gomati’s warning, they stopped. From some distance away Salma instructed them to assess the patient’s condition before moving the cot; an abrupt turn could itself be dangerous. A trained attendant checked the condition of the safe detour, then turned the cot slowly. “But I passed along here yesterday,” the old man asked. “Why not today?” The attendant was about to say that the old

building was falling apart, but Salma stopped him. “Use of this section is being suspended today,” she explained clearly. “Your examination will take place by another route.” To frighten someone and to tell the truth were not the same act.

Tara did not go towards the door panel. She observed the change from the distant markers laid upon the ground. No new long crack had appeared, but plaster had fallen away beside the gap between yesterday’s reference marks. An engineer assisting Aditi examined the exterior line through binoculars and with measuring instruments. He said these signs could not establish when the entire structure might fall; equally, its safety under load could not be certified. Aditi wrote down his words exactly. Her purpose was not to turn a single remark into a prophecy of disaster. It was to close a passage in use where there was no proof that passage was safe.

Rama called from the outside office. “Have you recorded the time of the incident?” she asked. Aditi consulted her notes. The time of the first falling fragments was in the watchman’s register; the second sound was timed in Tara’s notes; estimates by three witnesses differed slightly as to when the panel was first seen to sag. “I am not going to make all three agree on a minute of my choosing just to produce one exact time,” she said. “The sequence is recorded. The official clocks will be checked.” Rama agreed. Establishing the times was no pointless refinement: the difference might later determine who had received a warning, and when.

When Naira reached the hospital, a crowd had gathered beyond the platform. One person said all the patients inside had been crushed; another insisted no wall had moved and the whole affair was an excuse to stop work. Naira did not invent a fresh account in the middle of the crowd. She showed them the official notice: “Signs of structural change in the designated section of the old wing; passage closed; verified list of affected patients and staff in preparation.” A father asked for his daughter by name. Naira directed him to the responsible nursing room, where the list was being checked. Without seeing the names, she had no authority to say that everyone was safe.

Aditi signed the next order. The rear threshold, the iron panel, the narrow passage beside the old medicine storeroom and the wet veranda adjoining that section were to be closed immediately. The boundary for evacuation was marked, while arrangements were made for two safe rooms to remain in use until the director and the nursing team had completed and approved their inspection. “Shut down the entire hospital,” one official urged. “Then no one can accuse us of anything.” Aditi answered, “We shall stop use wherever safety requires it. But closing treatment where safety has been verified would cause patients another kind of harm. I shall write the actual boundary, not an easy sentence.”

Gomati went over to the workers. An official had told two earthworkers to enter the old wing on the pretext of clearing debris. “Show me the order,” Gomati asked. He had only verbal instructions. She had the workers’ names

entered, together with the work they had completed up to that hour and the wages still owed to them. “Why should they deduct our pay when they stop the work?” a young man asked. “Work has been stopped because danger has been identified,” Gomati said. “The hours for which we were available do not vanish. Before the work begins again, there must be a new and safe plan.” Instead of sending her team inside, she assigned them the upkeep of the measuring stakes outside.

Sugni’s note on drainage at the mouth of the watercourse arrived. Water was moving slowly through the old outlet, but a narrow obstruction remained beside the warehouse extension. The water level in the open outer section was slightly lower than yesterday; the wet ground beside the hospital wall had not dried to the same extent. “Can we assume that because the water is lower, the load on the building has eased?” Tara asked Sugni. “Not from one measurement,” Sugni replied. “The water outside and the route of seepage inside are different. The mouth needs to be opened, but nobody is going to cut a channel without measuring whose house the water would be diverted towards.”

Many people still remembered the excitement of the day the outlet had been partly opened. Someone argued that since five signatures had been obtained, the work of saving the drain had already been declared complete. Aditi made the distinctions plain. Releasing usable goods from the warehouse, opening the mouth of the watercourse fully, and establishing that the old wing was structurally safe were three separate outcomes. Water could be seen flowing through the partly opened outlet, but part of the obstruction that had existed before the agreement remained. Recording that fact did not diminish the importance of the signatures. It made clear what those signatures did and did not establish.

A contractor’s representative proposed demolishing the weak part of the old wall immediately and laying new bricks in its place. Lalit Vishwakarma asked, “What will hold up the roof while you are demolishing it? Where will you put the load stacked beside it? Who will measure the soaked foundation underneath?” The representative displayed his budget sheet. “A budget is not a load test,” Lalit said. From a safe position Paro Pattharkatta examined the nature of the material and said she would not begin cutting until the course taken by the water collecting around the stone foundation was understood. She refused the contractor’s small advance. Her team needed work, but they would not purchase a livelihood with their lives by tearing down a structure they did not understand.

In the safe rooms Urmila counted the linen for the third time. An official suggested the inventory could be done later. “Later we shall no longer remember whose blanket was given to whom,” she said. “Names entered now will prevent wrongful payments and false claims.” She told Rukhsana to prepare a revised number of meals for the patients who had been moved. Rukhsana did not immediately stop sending food. First she asked how many

people were in each ward, which patients could eat only in accordance with medical instructions, and how many attendants would be staying through the night. Giving everyone the same plate was not necessarily giving everyone equal care.

Sarita came from the direction of the shelter when she heard the news. She had not brought Sanket, because his telephone was not needed for today's inspection. Reaching Naira, she asked, "The man who got out yesterday—is he all right?" Naira told her that the employee had reached his own home, and that this had been confirmed. "And today?" Sarita asked. Naira showed her the list, on which several names still awaited verification. Sarita did not press her to publish it immediately. "Let no false news reach someone's home," she said. Her words carried the old weariness of the unfinished search for Mithun, but she did not force the meaning of every name in today's building inspection into her own private history.

Near noon another uneven sound arose from beside an old inner room, as though someone were slowly dragging a heavy vessel across the ground. Everyone was outside the prohibited boundary. A small fragment of brick fell near the doorway, followed by a thin piece from the upper corner of the wall. An attendant, startled by the noise, tried to run inside: he had remembered leaving his bag there. Gomati stopped him at the rope. "What is in it?" she asked. "The money for my family," he stammered. Gomati gripped his hand firmly. "We can enter the loss of that money in our accounts. There is no paper I can give in exchange for your life."

As soon as Aditi heard the new sound she ordered a complete temporary prohibition of entry through the old wing. Now not even trained employees were to go in to retrieve belongings. The structural team would inspect it from safe points outside; patients would be moved by an alternative route that had been examined. Hearing the order, Salma immediately checked the list of beds in the safe rooms. Two patients needed to be transferred; the longer journey had to be arranged without delaying their scheduled medicines. Someone asked how safe the "other safe route" approved yesterday could still be today. "That is the right question," Aditi said. "Check the present condition of every route again before using it."

Aniruddha tried to step forward with his bandaged arm, but Salma stopped him beside the door of the new room. "We need your experience," she said, "but you are not going to lift a cot with an injured hand." Aniruddha read out the schedule and pointed out that one examination in the course of Jamuna's treatment was still due. He coordinated it with another doctor. Jamuna lay holding her daughter-in-law's hand. No one knew whether she could hear the sounds coming from the old wing; her daughter-in-law had heard them distinctly. She asked Salma whether the door of the safe room could be closed. Salma closed it, while keeping the arrangements for treatment staff to enter in place.

Naira reached the community notice board outside. Devvrat was there showing receipts for the materials made available. After the second room of the warehouse had been opened, the goods delivered to the hospital had been recorded separately by their usable life and identification numbers. “These goods from your consignment are being put to proper use,” Naira said. “But that does not mean the accounts for repairs to the old wing have proved correct. We must not write that.” Devvrat was silent for a moment before answering, “I could decide to open the warehouse. My ledger cannot prove when the old wall was properly repaired.” His admission did not answer questions about his earlier administrative instructions or the other investigations. It did, however, prevent today’s public statement from becoming a lie.

Sugni returned to the mouth of the watercourse. Water was passing through the opened section, but mud was gathering along the inner side of the upper enclosure. Small fragments of brick from the old warehouse extension lay scattered there, and they did not appear to have come from a single day. She had her assistant collect samples and give each location a separate number, then marked one place “Excavation prohibited.” A neighbouring farmer said, “The water has to be drained from my field. Cut through here now.” “Your right to your field will be recorded too,” Sugni replied. “But if we cut here and send the water into somebody else’s house, what becomes of that person’s right?” The farmer remained unconvinced, but agreed to provide fresh measurements of his field.

Gomati placed three separate papers on Aditi’s worktable: yesterday’s door panel, today’s crack, and the working hours suspended today. “If you want testimony from the workers, keep your own instructions beside it,” she said. Looking through the orders, Aditi found that the initial decision to put up a temporary rope had been recorded in writing, but it remained unclear who had subsequently been allowed to enter, and at what times, in the name of maintaining the barrier. She acknowledged that uncertainty on the page. “I shall record when the lapse occurred,” she said. “I shall not name a culprit yet.” “Do not rush to choose someone to blame,” Gomati replied. “Stop the rush to make another mistake around a danger that has already brought work to a halt.”

Rama called again, taking separate notes on the witnesses’ clocks. Aditi gave her the sequence: newly disturbed earth at dawn; flakes of plaster falling at eight; the later sagging of the panel; the uneven noise at noon and the fall of a piece from the upper corner. She hesitated and asked, “Would it be right to write ‘failed’ in the record?” Tara, standing nearby, answered, “In terms of use, the old section has failed: we can no longer rely on it being safe to use. But we cannot say when the entire building will collapse.” Aditi wrote the heading: “Unsafe for use: designated structural section; complete prohibition of passage.” The source of every witness’s account was entered alongside the recorded times.

Meanwhile, Phulo arrived at the information point from a house beside the watercourse, bringing her two children. Water had not yet entered their home, but the clay bin in which they kept grain was damp. “We need news about more than the hospital,” she told Naira. “Tell the women of the houses when the mouth of the watercourse will be opened and whose land will be cut through. During the day the men are out in the fields. If the water comes at night, we are the ones who will lift the children.” Naira entered her words on a separate sheet. When Sugni’s team arrived, Phulo showed them the water mark on the wall of her house, but she also expressed her misgivings before allowing any sample to be taken: the earth must not be dug away from the foundations of her home. Sugni measured from the outer surface. No one entered the inner room without the family’s permission. This small act did not immediately open the warehouse outlet, but the next page of measurements would now contain more than the government wall: it would also contain the soaked grain and the right of a household to remain in its home.

Towards evening Urmila, exhausted, leaned for a moment against the window of the room. She had counted no more sheets than she did on other days, yet her hands felt more tired. Naira brought her water. “Will you go home for the night?” she asked. “When the shift changes,” Urmila replied. “My staying here is not, by itself, a system.” Naira wanted to laugh, but the laugh was brief. “Do you remember the calculation for your leave next year?” she asked. “On my day off,” Urmila said, “I shall sit on the steps by the pond and look at my feet in the water. You will not attempt to measure them.” They both laughed a little, while outside the gate the sounds of a new watch taking over were rising.

Before the night shift began, the safe land route between the warehouse and the hospital was inspected again. Tulsi Tajpuriya had the drivers’ rest periods, vehicle fuel and verified turning points recorded separately. Hira Sahni sent word that the boats’ normal carrying limits would not be altered in the stronger current today, although the number of people asking for assistance had increased. Paro Pattharkatta sent instructions to her team that no one was to accept a private payment as an inducement to break down any part of the old threshold. None of these three decisions offered a miraculous solution. Each person did what could safely be done within the limits of their responsibility.

A new sheet was pinned to the hospital notice board that evening. It named the closed sections, the alternative locations for affected services, the emergency route for patients, the prohibition on workers re-entering, and the people responsible for contact. Neither of the two easy statements—“The entire hospital is closed” or “Everything is safe”—appeared on it. An elderly woman who could not read stood before the board, and Champa read each line aloud to her. “When will my son get the bread he left in a bag in that wing?” the woman asked. “No one may go inside just now,” Champa said.

“His belongings will be listed.” The woman supplied her son’s name herself. She would not allow it to be entered anywhere merely as “unidentified material.”

Aditi showed Naira a copy of the papers prepared between dawn and evening. “Has the boundary of the corridor described as safe, outside the evacuated section, been checked again?” Naira asked. “It has been checked against the measurements available today,” Aditi said. “The new water mark at the rear must be measured again at dawn. For the moment the route is in use under conditions.” “But if the number of patients rises during the night?” Naira asked. “We have Tulsi’s land-transport route and Salma’s plan for the treatment rooms. When new information comes, we shall change the decision again. We will not treat a decision made for the present as a permanent order.” Naira copied that sentence into her notebook.

A new team of guards arrived at the gate. Gomati showed them the firm new barrier beyond the old rope, read out the written prohibition, and told them not to run inside alone if a sound came from within. A designated safe point had been established for reporting what they heard and seeking assistance. In the gathering, impenetrable darkness, the wall of the old wing looked less like a palace than a tired body; but the comparison was no structural measurement. Aditi’s papers held the times, locations and observed changes; Gomati’s register held the work suspended; Salma’s rooms held the patients; Naira’s notebook held the questions that remained. A passage which until yesterday had been in partial use was closed today. And before the next decision could be made, even what had been deemed safe would have to be tested once more against the water and weight of a new day.

Chapter 117 · Naira's Choice

During the first watch of the night, Naira drew three sheets of paper together on the hospital information desk. On the first, the way through the old wing had been struck out in red ink; the second marked the place where Tulsi Tajpuriya's vehicle could turn; the third held Aditi's measurements from the evening. Wet shoes were leaving a thin line of mud in front of the door. An employee, in a hurry, suggested taking away the lantern standing on the corner of the room. Naira stopped him with a gesture. "We need this light here. The name of the route we choose cannot be written in darkness." On a clean page of her notebook she made three headings: Closed; Open Subject to Conditions; Awaiting Reinspection.

Gomati Beldar arrived with the revised watch roster. Two guards were posted at the outer barrier to the old wing, but one of them was due to finish his duty in two hours. "When people ask for the bags they've left inside, a tired guard may give way to a little pity," Gomati said. "That pity will send him in there himself." Naira asked, "Has the order closing the route been explained to everyone?" Gomati said that the notice had been posted, but those bringing water for the night kitchen could not read it. Together they decided that different people would take responsibility for repeating the same prohibition aloud—in the language of the ghats, the language of the hospital and the speech of the workers. The written words of an order were not the same as the order reaching those who needed to hear it.

From inside the safe treatment room, Salma sent the names of three patients. Jamuna Devi needed regular observation; the time had come to change the dressing on a young man's foot; a third patient's breathing measurements were fluctuating again. "We cannot put all three into a vehicle at once," Salma said, coming to the doorway. "Moving someone whose treatment can continue here amid all this commotion is itself a risk. But we must not keep waiting too long with someone who needs equipment in another room." Urmila stood beside her with a cloth bag and the patient list. "The route has been tested," she asked, "but has the space needed to turn a stretcher been tested as well?" No paper held the answer to that question.

Naira telephoned Aditi, who was beside the outer measuring stake with Tara Binout and Lalit Vishwakarma. "Tell me what you have seen now, not what we trusted yesterday," Naira said. Aditi replied, "The old northern wing is entirely out of bounds. The bamboo footbridge at the rear is also out of bounds. The outer eastern corridor was tested and remained conditionally usable until evening, but we must check the water marks again after the rain. The southern land route can take a vehicle; the connection needed to bring a patient's stretcher as far as it is a separate matter." Naira wrote down all three statements exactly as given. She would not enter the word *safe* in her notebook without attaching a time and a limit to it.

In the outer courtyard Tara had set out a short measuring rod of bamboo and a piece of white chalk. Lalit showed her a fresh water mark on a level part of the brickwork, a little way from the wall. “When we measured this evening, there was no new crack here,” Tara said. “The surface is wet now, but the sight of moisture alone cannot tell us when anything will collapse.” Gomati asked, “Then what can we trust?” Tara counted three things: subsidence in the outer ground, distance from the structures overhead, and the actual room available to turn a stretcher. Lalit added that, instead of beginning with a test under a heavy load, they should turn an empty stretcher under controlled conditions and see how much space it required. No human life was to be made the test weight.

Sugni Saday came from the other side of the courtyard. There was silt on her feet, and in her hand she carried a small board showing the channel's water level. “The water is rising differently at the western mouth from yesterday,” she said. “I haven't tested the ground underneath that third route you're proposing along the edge of the fields.” A young man argued that the field path was shorter. “A shorter distance and firm ground are not the same thing,” Sugni replied. She also spoke of the soaked grain bin at Phulo's house. If the channel's outflow was redirected in haste, water might reach that house. The decision to save the hospital could not be made by extinguishing the rights of its neighbours.

At the vehicle stand Tulsi Tajpuriya was tying strips of white cloth to mark the boundaries. After making a circuit, the driver Haricharan Paswan said that there was room at the southern turn to reverse the second vehicle once the first had left, but a crowd would block the way. Tulsi ordered that only the driver, the patient attendant and the designated family member should remain by the vehicle door; anyone seeking information must wait at the information point. “Don't write that treatment is complete just because the vehicle has arrived,” she told Naira. “Keep a separate record of the time taken to lift the patient out of the room.” Naira rested her pencil against the clock. Time at every stage was now decisive.

Word came from Hira Sahni at the river. The regular boat service would remain reduced and a relief boat had been kept free, but in the darkness and the strengthening current there was as yet no tested plan for taking a hospital stretcher aboard. Shyam Mallik said that Keshari's repaired boat was still on dry land; putting it into the water under the name of emergency service was forbidden. “Someone or other is closing every route,” an attendant complained. “No,” Urmila replied. “Each of them is telling us the limits of what they know. We have to find a way within what is true.” The meaning of Hira's difficult decision was not to refuse assistance; it was to refuse a promise to carry a load that could not be borne.

Kabir came to the information desk. In his hand was an empty notebook cover belonging to Naira, which he had brought from home that day. “You came home yesterday with your papers soaked,” he said. “This time, don't let

the pages inside get wet." Naira smiled faintly. "Did you come for my notebook or for me?" "For both," Kabir answered, a little shyly. He took a dry handkerchief from his bag and laid it beside the pages. Naira gave him no sweeping responsibility; she merely asked him to stay near the public noticeboard and read verified news aloud to the families. "And don't let anyone write in a missing name on the strength of a guess," she added. Kabir nodded. There was no language of a final farewell in this small meeting.

As the night deepened, Aditi returned to inspect the outer corridor again. Without crossing the line barring entry to the old wing, Tara and Lalit made their way round from the east. At two places they cleared water from the ground to examine the surface, measured their distance from the overhanging eaves, and slowly turned an empty stretcher at the bend. On the first attempt one wheel caught against the edge of the threshold. Lalit rejected a suggestion that part of it should be cut away. He changed the direction of the turn and tried again. A small improvement was achieved without taking the risk of removing the door threshold. Aditi recorded the time—8:47 p.m.—and wrote: "Outer strip usable subject to conditions; continuous reinspection."

Naira drew four short lines. First: the old northern wing was closed. Second: the western edge of the fields was untested. Third: neither the bamboo footbridge nor a boat was to carry a patient on a stretcher. Fourth: only that portion between the outer eastern strip and the southern vehicle stand which Aditi and Tara had just inspected could be used. Reading the paper, Rama asked, "Should we say 'on the information available today'?" Naira wrote, "Inspection available up to 8:47 p.m." Rama asked again, "Who will change the order if a new mark appears?" Naira wrote down Aditi's name and added that Salma and the guards also had the authority to stop the movement of patients immediately. No arrangement was to be left empty in the hope that a single person would perform an act of heroism.

The patients' families were beginning to protest. Jamuna's daughter-in-law asked why taking the longer way would not compromise the time needed for treatment. The son of the other woman pointed to the door of the short, closed corridor. "It's only ten paces," he said. Urmila answered quietly, "The doorway is ten paces away, but the structure above it is unsafe. We have to save time, not at the price of a life." Salma explained which stages of treatment must not be interrupted once the patients left their rooms. The son remained anxious, but on the written consent form, instead of pressing his demand for the shorter route, he had his right to accompany his mother recorded.

The first stretcher was taken, without a patient, as far as the outer strip. Tara did not push it with her own hands: while Lalit and the trained attendants led that work, her task was to observe the marks. Gomati cleared the crowd, and Urmila secured the thin sheet on the stretcher so that it would not catch in the wheels. The empty stretcher turned properly. "The success of an empty stretcher doesn't mean that we have completed a load test for every patient," Tara said. "Keep the next evacuation slow, and don't bring another

load along with it.” One attendant grew a little less impatient. Rather than wipe the sweat from his hands on the patient's sheet, he used the cloth set outside.

The young man came out first. His foot wound was under control, and the timing of his treatment could be calculated anew. On Salma's instructions, his dressing and a small bag of medicines were secured to the stretcher. Urmila checked the name on the paper but did not immediately mark him as “removed”: that line required confirmation of receipt at the vehicle stand. Naira stood at the entrance answering the family's questions herself. The stretcher paused for a moment at the turn, then reached the open area to the south. Tulsi's driver called out the time, and Urmila wrote it in the corner of the page. Everything went well, yet no one took that as grounds for declaring the next two journeys automatically safe.

A small disagreement arose between Salma and Aniruddha over the treatment of the second woman. Holding the chart in his injured hand, Aniruddha said that if she was moved to another room, some of the equipment would require a backup. Salma insisted that the availability of what was needed in the new room be checked before any apparatus currently operating here was disconnected. Her judgment prevailed, because she bore the actual responsibility for treatment during this shift. Devi Gond counted the pieces of equipment but made no claim to issue clinical orders herself. When the new room was ready, the family was told of the options; nor was the family merely given some perfunctory instruction in the dark and sent away.

Meanwhile a thin stream of water began to enter the courtyard from a new direction. Sugni did not wade into water up to her knees; in the light outside, she compared the present level with the previous mark on the measuring stake. She told Aditi that there were signs of changing pressure near the channel mouth, though at that moment no subsidence could be seen in the ground beneath the eastern strip. “I've looked twice,” she added, “and I'll look again. That doesn't mean the water has finished its work.” Aditi wrote down the time for the next inspection. Gomati asked whether the evacuation of patients should go on until then or be suspended. Aditi said that the appearance of a fresh water mark or a sound from the structure would mean an immediate halt; otherwise the procedure could continue under its conditions.

For a moment Naira stood looking at the page marked in red. All day she had written “evidence incomplete” on one document after another. Now she faced the question of acting amid that incompleteness. To acknowledge uncertainty did not, by itself, defer the need for a decision. She thought: if she chose the untested route through the fields, the attraction of a shorter distance would make her abandon the evidence; if she ordered the footbridge opened, she would be breaking the prohibitions imposed by Tara and Hira; if she held back every patient without cause, treatment itself would become more dangerous. Within the limits of that day's measurements, the outer

eastern strip offered a practicable answer. That answer was no guarantee of safety at every future moment. It was simply the more responsible choice in the present comparison.

“Why do you want to stand in the corridor yourself?” Rama asked. “You could keep the records from the information desk.” Naira replied with a question: “Who has actually witnessed the time between a patient leaving the room and being handed over to the vehicle, which the records give as two separate moments?” Urmila said that she had to remain with the stretcher, but could not write on a sheet at every turn. Gomati proposed posting a guard at the first point along the route. Naira said that she would check the list at the second point; should circumstances change, she would come straight back out and inform Aditi. She had no need to enter the forbidden part of the building to do this work. Rama accepted the plan, but made it conditional on someone else accompanying her.

Kabir was sitting beside the information board, writing down an elderly man's home address. Naira showed him the sheet: which route was closed, which was open for the time being, and whom to inform. “Have you eaten tonight?” Kabir asked. From her bag Naira took out a small roti Rukhsana had given her, untouched until now. “When you keep counting time here,” she said, “the clock in your stomach seems to strike on its own.” Kabir did not ask her to divide the roti in two. He simply brought her some lukewarm water. For a moment they were silent together. The silence was no forewarning of disaster, only the ordinary closeness of tired people. “When the notice changes, take down the old sheet,” Naira said, “but don't tear up its copy.” Kabir set about doing just that.

When the first young man's family reached the vehicle stand, Haricharan recorded the precise time of handover. The delay in moving the stretcher was not laid at the door of a single employee. Drawing a line in the corner of the page, Urmila said, “Don't copy this time against the next stretcher. Every patient moves at a different pace.” Salma checked once more that the written name and dosage of the medicine given to the young patient were travelling with him. Aniruddha was sitting down to write now. “How long have you been working without sitting?” he asked Urmila. “Count the work and it is a great deal,” she said. “Count the rest and it is very little.” Salma immediately promised to send a trained attendant for the next shift.

Gomati had taken a new worker into her team, a man who kept looking towards the forbidden threshold. His name was Inder, and he had left his bag of tools in the old room. “I've got work for my livelihood at dawn tomorrow,” he said. “If I don't get my tools back, the contractor will deduct my wages.” Gomati had a written receipt made out in his name. “The loss of your tools will be entered in the record,” she told him, “but I won't send anyone in there secretly.” For the first time Inder gave a clear inventory: a chisel, a hammer, a measuring cord and two clamps. Hearing it, Tara said the objects could be recovered only after a safe inspection the next day; there could

be no promise before dawn. Inder suppressed his dissatisfaction, but moved away from the prohibited line.

In the middle of the night, an elderly patient grew dizzy. Someone in the crowd called for the old short corridor to be opened, saying that otherwise precious time would be lost. Naira did not answer at once. She listened to Salma's instructions. Salma said that the man must first be examined where he was, in a safe place, his head kept steady, and a decision about transfer made according to his condition. “Who will take responsibility for my father's life?” his daughter asked angrily. “We won't choose a shortcut at the price of his life,” Naira said. “And the decision about his treatment belongs to the medical team, not to me.” The daughter began to cry. A woman from Rukhsana's team gave her water without dismissing her fear as foolishness.

Tara came to look again at the eastern strip. In the beam of a torch placed at the corner, she saw a faint sign of moisture high on the eastern wall. She thought it unwise to touch or tap the surface, and signalled Lalit to record the distance from an outside measuring point. “It would be hasty to call this a crack,” Lalit said, “but we mustn't ignore it either.” Aditi entered a new note on the inspection sheet: “Mark of moisture above; regular rechecking required; no additional load.” She repeated the order that the stretchers were to proceed one at a time. Naira added the amendment to her route sheet. As the information changed, the decision changed with it. One small pause after another became indispensable to the work.

Before the second stretcher was moved, Urmila pressed lightly at the pulse in her left hand. Constantly wringing wet sheets, steadying stretchers and writing out the records had begun to numb her fingers. Devi Gond asked whether she wanted a rest. “Arrange a change of shift,” Urmila replied, “and another woman will be able to eat on time.” Having completed the count of the supplies for which she was responsible, Devi offered to look after Urmila's cloth bag. Salma agreed to the arrangement, assigning the responsibility for treatment signals to a trained attendant. Urmila stayed beside the patient, but did not insist on carrying every object herself. Her exhaustion was not proof of heroism. It was a real limit to human labour.

Now Naira placed her choice in writing on the shift desk shared by the five parties. It said, in plain words: the old northern wing was closed; boats and the bamboo footbridge were unsuitable for evacuating patients; the untested edge of the fields was rejected; the outer eastern strip could be used only on the basis of Aditi's time-specific measurements and Salma's patient list, with one stretcher at each stage, the necessary guards, and the authority to halt movement immediately. Devvrat asked for a line to be added: “Warehouse materials made available on time.” “That belongs in a separate receipt for availability,” Naira replied. “It doesn't establish that the route is safe.” Devvrat put the ledger back. This time the signatures were intended to acknowledge the limits of a decision, not to hide responsibility in a darkness shared by all.

When the second stretcher moved, Naira stood beside a guard in the part of the corridor that had been inspected. Urmila tucked in a corner of the patient's sheet and held the stretcher wheel steady. “Where's my daughter?” the woman asked softly. Naira showed her the daughter outside the doorway, standing at the appointed distance. “We'll get round the bend first,” Urmila said, “then she will walk with you.” The stretcher moved forward slowly. No new vibration could be heard along the outer strip; Aditi's latest order had not yet changed. Naira wrote down the time of entry on her sheet, then signalled to the guard ahead. The daughter followed the stretcher. Her hands were empty, but her eyes never left her mother.

Just as they passed the first turn, someone called from the rear courtyard that a small cart carrying water to the kitchen wanted to enter the same route. Gomati stopped it outside. “One stretcher is moving,” she said. “The other load comes later.” The kitchen assistant was upset, because the food was growing cold while they waited. Rukhsana herself arrived, had the food vessels put down in another safe place and said, “The kitchen cart will not collide with a patient's stretcher. There's another stove on which to warm the food.” The waiting time of the worker carrying the water was recorded too. Keeping an account of inconvenience did not make the rule cruel; it made those enforcing it answerable.

When the rear wheel of the stretcher descended into the level southern courtyard, Urmila stopped to straighten the patient's sheet. Naira matched the times of entry and exit. From a distance Rama showed her the paper signal that the team at the vehicle stand was ready. No one applauded this small success; everyone went on to the next part of their work. A message came from Salma saying that treatment for one patient was continuing in the safe room and that the patient was not to be moved yet. Naira did not strike the name from the route-use list. She merely wrote, “Transfer postponed—medical decision.” Illness and the danger posed by the building existed together, but they did not call for identical responses.

Tara reminded Aditi that another inspection would be essential when the last night watch changed. Gomati's team was already instructing the incoming guards. Naira decided to give one copy of the route sheet to Aditi, another to Salma and a third to Rama. If someone's telephone failed, the time attached to the decision could still be read from another person's paper. “Will you drink some water before the next stretcher?” she asked Urmila. Taking a sip, Urmila said, “First set your clock right. Everyone asks for the time here, but time never stays in anybody's hands.” Naira laughed. Instead of closing her notebook, she looked once more at the hands of the clock.

A light breeze crossing the courtyard grew cold against the wet walls. The sound of the distant channel was not of one unvarying pitch: sometimes the water caught in the silt, sometimes it quickened through an open stretch. Naira's choice to remain there had not been made once and for all; she had repeated it with every new measurement. She had decided to use the

remaining viable route within its tested limits, not vowed to give her life for anyone. The red line across the old wing still marked a prohibition; the guards and their authority to stop movement remained in place along the outer eastern strip. Urmila asked the name of the next patient, Naira opened the list, and both understood that responsibility, on this night, meant acting on the knowledge that could be seen and verified now—not claiming possession of the next measurement, which neither of them yet had.

Chapter 118 · Urmila’s Weary Hands

Urmila was straightening the edge of a wet sheet with her left hand, but her fingers no longer bent as they had before. The cloth hanging by the feet of the woman on the stretcher was in danger of catching in a wheel again. She slid it lower, held it down with her knee, undid a knot with her right hand and told the attendant, “Don't push yet. Look at the wheel on that side once more.” The flame of the little lamp hanging along the outer eastern strip shivered whenever the wind touched it. The red rope barring the old northern wing was plainly visible in the dark, but the thin patch of damp noticed earlier high on the wall of the new route now seemed darker. The hands of the clock moved on; behind them, each wheel of the stretcher advanced with care.

Standing at the first turn, Naira took a signal from the guard ahead. The space for ‘Evacuation begun’ beside the next patient's name was still blank. “Write the name only when the stretcher leaves the room,” Urmila said. “Reaching the other side is a different time altogether.” Naira bent over her notebook. “What's happened to your hand?” “It is tired,” Urmila replied. “And don't write tiredness down as bravery after an accident. We have to divide this work.” Devi Gond came forward and offered to hold the sheet. Salma sent word that another trained attendant should join the shift. The small adjustment eased the burden on Urmila's shoulder, but the register remained with her: no one else yet understood the entire reckoning of which linen had gone where.

In the shelter room, Rukhsana was setting out hot water. A woman came to say that her elderly mother-in-law had not received a clean covering. Rukhsana was ready to hand over her own towel at once, but she asked, “Which stretcher is she on? Let us first find the linen approved in the record.” She did not want to withhold anything merely to make the paperwork look correct. She knew that if the last clean sheet were taken without cause from another room, the patient there, struggling to breathe, might be left lying in wet clothes. Her assistant Kanchan showed her the shift list. One entry said, ‘Two clean sheets sent out,’ but there was no time of handover. The price of such carelessness was paid not by the paper but by bodies waiting for help.

When Urmila heard about the entry, she left the stretcher in the attendant's care and came to the small table in the south. “It is true that two sheets went out,” she said. “One is in Jamuna's room, the other went with the young man evacuated first. The one you are asking for is a third. The bundle in the store bears an old approval number, not today's.” “Then we mustn't open it?” Kanchan asked. Urmila paused. “A piece of paper cannot decide to keep a patient waiting. If Salma says it is needed, we shall bring safe linen. But inspect the condition of that old bundle and record it.” Finding a key took time, for the assistant responsible for the list had already gone onto the night watch. Urmila resolved to record those three or four minutes separately

afterwards; she had no wish to turn them into a story of someone's individual fault.

Salma came out into the courtyard herself. Her face showed the weariness of a night without sleep, though her voice was steady. “Jamuna is still receiving treatment,” she said. “The patient we intend to bring out on the next stretcher is growing cold in wet clothes. She needs a clean, dry covering, but no one is to enter that disordered store.” Rama went to show the list to an additional member of staff. Urmila stopped Kanchan at the safe table outside the storeroom. A young man standing behind them exclaimed, “All this delay for one sheet!” Urmila did not rebuke him. “I understand how cold the person waiting inside must be,” she said, “but if we change the name of an item in the record, there will be nothing left for the next patient.”

Tara and Aditi returned to examine the damp high on the wall. Under the torch the colour of the wet plaster was different now: dark brown edged with white, and, at one point, a glint of water. From a distance Lalit stretched his measuring cord and recorded the length of the mark. Tara looked up. “We cannot yet tell whether it has grown since the earlier photograph or merely looks larger in this light. But put no new load beneath it.” Aditi added ‘Upper section to be reinspected’ beside the current order. As soon as the new information reached her, Naira signalled that the next stretcher should stop. She did not tear up the old page on which she had made her choice; she wrote in its margin that permission to use the route had been restricted again.

Meanwhile the daughter-in-law's voice came from the inner treatment room. The elderly woman, a mother to her in all but birth, was breathing regularly, yet she had become restless after lying on her back for so long. “I can see my daughter outside,” the old woman murmured. “Let her come in.” Urmila went into the room and asked the medical assistant how long the family might stay beside her. Once permission was given, the daughter sat holding her mother's hand for a little while. “Why is everyone outside frightening people?” the mother asked. “Because they're frightened themselves, they're looking at the route truthfully,” her daughter replied. Straightening the woman's covering with her right hand, Urmila said, “If the evacuation is stopped this time, treatment will continue here. We won't leave you alone.” At that moment the patient did not see Urmila's own hand trembling.

When Kabir's written message reached Naira in the courtyard, she looked outside for a moment. At the secure information desk Kabir was checking the order of the families' names. He had asked whether, now that the old markings had changed, the image on the signalling phone should be made public. Naira sent a brief reply: ‘The old image is evidence of an earlier time. It cannot stand in for today's measurements. Preserve the original.’ She was exhausted from carrying separate notebooks on privacy, labour and the building's risks through the night, yet each was needed for a different purpose. Kabir's next message contained only the words, ‘Drink some water.’ Naira felt

like replying with a joke. Then the guard's whistle sounded, and she took up her pen again.

The whistle signalled a change of watch, not an emergency. Beside the old rope, the incoming guard was stopping two men from the village. They wanted to go into the closed wing and rescue a wooden chest from their home. Gomati Beldar explained that a written list would be made of personal possessions still inside, but the unsafe section would not be opened. “There are pictures of my parents in that chest,” one young man said. Gomati's voice softened. “I cannot measure what they are worth to you,” she replied. “But if you go in now and do not come back, saving those pictures will mean something else.” The young man described the colour of his chest and where it stood in the room. For the first time, the guard thought of his work not simply as barring a way, but as bearing witness to those who waited.

At last a clean covering approved for the stretcher was found in a cupboard in another room. Devi checked the laundry mark and confirmed that it was dry; Salma confirmed the need for it. Urmila entered the time it was brought, but did not force the time already lost into the register's old column marked ‘Available on time’. “Four minutes have disappeared,” an assistant said. “They haven't disappeared,” Urmila answered. “What people endured will be recorded.” Rukhsana's assistant sent the covering inside. Once that small task was completed, a question remained: whose shift had been responsible for the night's register, and why had one receipt for a handover not arrived on time? The answer was left for the following morning's inquiry. For the moment, a living patient lay before them.

Before allowing the next evacuation, Salma examined Aditi's sheet. “The damp above has increased,” she said. “How much longer can the old eastern strip be used?” Aditi answered, “For now, stop starting any new patient's evacuation. But it would be wrong to abandon someone who has already reached the turn we inspected. Get that stretcher to a stable place, and allow no further load.” Naira wrote, ‘No new entry.’ Tara authorised the stretcher already caught at the corner to be moved carefully to the next secure, level stretch rather than left where it stood. No one imagined that these instructions had removed every danger. They marked only the course of lesser risk available at that moment.

Urmila's team then consisted of four people: Urmila herself, Devi, a trained attendant and the assistant handling the stretcher. At the inspected turn Naira was checking the list with the guard. The old woman lay on the stretcher; her daughter had already reached the other side of the safe courtyard. Urmila signalled to her once more that they were moving slowly. Suddenly, through the smell of wet walls, came the strange sound of metal dragging. It began like a fallen utensil, then lengthened into a drawn-out scrape. Tara raised her head; Aditi signalled with her hand for everyone to stop. Not all of them had time to understand what had made the first sound.

A strip of plaster came away from the outer corner of the upper service passage. First there was a thin cloud of dust, then a violent mingled sound of timber and brick. It was not the old, prohibited northern wing that gave way: part of another section adjoining the eastern strip subsided. The assistant managing the stretcher dropped to his knees. Devi reached out to protect the patient's head. Urmila gripped the rear wheel and held it still at a point where the ground seemed to move beneath them. Naira did not drop her notebook and run towards the stretcher. First she called loudly to the guard beside her, repeating the order: “No new entry.” Dust and the smell of wet lime filled the air.

“Mother, I'm here,” Devi called. The patient's reply was indistinct, but her hand moved. The trained attendant was holding the front of the stretcher steady when a short beam in the middle of the passage tilted and fell behind the wheel. A line of fallen bricks lay across Urmila's path; if she stepped back, the stretcher might tip. “Don't move your foot beyond this mark,” she told the assistant. Naira stared at the new curtain of dust between the turn and the stretcher. She called to Tara, “Which part is stable now?” Before answering, Tara looked again at the outer wall. Without examining it, she could not call any place safe.

A second crash was quieter than the first, but it knocked over the information board in the middle of the courtyard. Gomati pushed the people outside further back. Instead of rushing to rescue the hot cooking pot, Rukhsana put out the cooking fire so that boiling water would not spill on those running past. Kanchan and Chandrika led the children in the shelter into the inner safe room. They did not scold the children for wanting to see what had happened; they simply took them round by the measured route. Haricharan told the driver not to park at the entrance and block the way: space must be left for a possible emergency evacuation. For the first time the five-signature agreement was working not as five helpless parties, but as hands acting in concert and with order.

Aditi wanted to record the time at which the upper section failed, but dust had settled over her watch. Tara showed her own watch; both remembered the differences between the times in Rama's office register and the earlier record on Sanket's phone. “I shall write an estimate for now,” Aditi said. “The exact time will have to be reconciled from three sources. We do not yet know how much fell or why.” Rama recorded separately the limits of what had been witnessed: the first sound, the first fall of material, the second sound, and the order barring entry. She did not describe the incident as an accident that had been inevitable in advance. The earlier inspection had noted damp in the upper section, but no measurement had then established when a particular component would fail.

Urmila was trapped behind the stretcher. Two sheets of her linen register had filled with brick dust. She did not bend to save them; first she asked Devi whether she could hear the patient's breathing. “She is breathing,” Devi said,

“but I won't make a medical judgement. Tell Salma.” Urmila looked at her left hand. Her fingers had stiffened as though still gripping a stone. “You keep her head steady,” she said. “I'm holding the wheel.” The assistant said, “I could let go and jump clear.” Urmila did not forbid him, but she said, “If each of us moves separately, the stretcher may overturn. Listen first to the people outside.”

Naira kept calling from the far side of the marked line. “Urmila, can you hear me?” The answer came from within: “I can hear you, but not clearly.” Naira switched on the torch in her bag; through the dust its light made a small yellow circle. Seeing it, Urmila asked, “What time is it?” “First, all of you keep still,” Naira replied. Urmila asked again, “No arrival has been entered in my register. Do not write ‘Arrived’.” Even in making that request she said nothing about her pain. Naira understood that to Urmila the register was no lifeless thing: it was a promise that someone had truly reached the other side. She wrote clearly in her notebook: ‘Evacuation in progress; receipt not confirmed.’

Keeping her distance from the outer wall, Aditi asked Tara and Lalit to measure any possible safe means of entry. Lalit's first thought was to prop a timber support in place. “Where we do not understand the path of the load above,” Tara said, “pushing wood in below could bring about another collapse.” Gomati ordered a worker to bring rope, but gave no one permission to climb the weakened wall. “We can get a rope as far as ground we have seen to be stable,” she said. “We cannot lift a beam without an engineer's measurements.” At first Inder had been worried about his bag of chisels. Now he did not offer his tools without being asked. He had begun to understand that there is a right time to use a tool, and fear alone cannot choose it.

Hearing the noise from the safe treatment room, Salma came to the outside table. She handed the supervision of Jamuna to another trained nurse and tried to establish the condition of the trapped patient. Devi's voice, breaking and returning through the obstruction, described the rhythm of the woman's breathing and the position of her body. Salma kept asking one question until she had a clear answer: “Is Mother's mouth clear? Is her neck steady?” Once she had heard, she instructed the people inside in what they could do without losing their precarious stability. Aniruddha, his hand still injured, tried to rush forward, but Salma asked him to supervise the handover of medical supplies and the additional team outside. This time too he did not claim a right to enter the trapped space in the name of service.

The patient's daughter reached the outer corner of the rope and began to cry. “Is my mother all right?” she asked. Naira did not avert her eyes. “We have heard voices from her team,” she said. “Devi has told us that she is breathing. I cannot promise yet that she will get out.” “Then how far away is she?” the daughter asked. Gopal Manjhi was standing beside them. Looking at the ground plan, he said, “From this side of the wall, the distance of two small rooms. But with the load that has fallen between, getting across is another

matter of time." The daughter sat down on a stone. The smallness of the distance did not reassure her; their inability to say how long it would take weighed more heavily.

Rama opened the register of the five-party agreement and divided the night's responsibilities. Tulsi's team would keep the ambulance approach open; Rukhsana's would provide water and food to waiting families and workers; Devvrat would arrange written handover of lighting and materials that had been checked for use; Aditi and Tara would decide on any safe route; Salma would maintain contact with the medical team caring for the trapped patient. Someone suggested that these five signatures were a 'guarantee that everyone would be rescued'. Rama stopped him at once. "Signatures distribute responsibility," she said. "They cannot make a load lighter when we do not know its actual limit."

Rukhsana wrapped a few rotis and some jaggery in a cloth and gave them to the outside team. She set aside a small cup of lukewarm water for Urmila, though no one knew whether it could reach her. "She's spent so many days washing other people's sheets," Kanchan said quietly, "that she hardly speaks of her own exhaustion." "This is not the time to tell her whole story," Rukhsana replied. "If she comes out, we shall put her hours of rest on the roster." Meanwhile Kanchan did not close the kitchen's wage register. The extra hours worked through the crisis were entered beside each person's name. The steam of charity and the wages owed for labour did not dissolve into the same cooking pot.

Sugni Saday sent a guard towards the mouth of the drainage channel. The old outlet was partly open, but water could be seen collecting in the blocked section near the warehouse extension. She did not pretend to know by guesswork how much pressure that water had placed on which part of the building. "The measuring stake has moved," she told Aditi. "I saw the level from outside; I haven't seen the ground within." On the strength of that distinction, Gomati refused to send workers beside the fragile wall to drain the water. Someone wanted it cleared at once, but the question of whose body would bear the cost of that proposal had been raised in time.

Two assistants managed to reach the shelter of a safe outer ledge and carry a thin rope to a fixed point. After checking the load ahead, Tara said that the rope could be used only for messages or small essential objects; it was not authorised to bear a person's weight. Naira suggested sending in a small torch and a bundle of clean cloth. From inside Urmila replied, "Water first, if it can be sent safely." Rukhsana's cup might spill or become contaminated on the way, so they chose a sealed bottle. For the first time the empty distance between hands had become a distance across which an object could pass. It was still not a path by which the trapped people could come out.

The stiffness in Urmila's hand had grown a little worse. "Kanchan has sent a bottle of water," Devi said. "Drink some." Urmila was trying to check the position of the patient's head. Close beside her, Devi whispered, "Your hand is

shaking. I'm holding things steady.” Urmila did not take this as an attempt to deprive her of her work. “Hold it,” she said. “Listen to what I need.” Then she took two swallows from the bottle. In the smell of wet lime, the ordinary taste of water unexpectedly brought back the memory of home: warm air over washed clothes drying in sunlight, and the faint scent of soap on a child's sheet. She did not linger in the memory. The stretcher wheel was still beneath her right hand.

Outside, Naira turned a wet page of her notebook. She found the time when the first patient had been received, and the second; opposite the name of the patient trapped on the stretcher there was an empty space. She understood that the earlier delay of three or four minutes in obtaining linen was a fact in the night's sequence of events. But it would be reckless to call that delay the cause of the collapse, or to blame Urmila's work for the accident. Aditi's order, made on the basis of fresh measurements, had stopped the sequence of stretchers; the collapse occurred afterwards. Naira wrote three separate entries: ‘Delay in receipt of linen’; ‘New order following route inspection’; ‘Failure of upper section’. Before making any one of them the cause of another, the sequence itself had to be correct.

From inside Urmila called, “Naira, your voice is clearer now. Tell the daughter that her mother is with me.” “I told her we had heard voices,” Naira replied. “I did not give that news the full name of reassurance.” Urmila was silent for a little while, then answered, “You did right.” From farther away Gomati's guard reported that the rescue team had begun examining a new route. The curtain of dust thinned a little, but the load overhead remained unstable. Naira did not leave her station and cross the prohibited line. She stayed beside Tara, passing on instructions. Her choice was still to help within limits the evidence supported, not to take a vow to die.

As the last watch of the night approached, someone came to Rama and said, “So many people have come out safely. Everything will turn out all right.” Rama asked for the actual number of patients who had reached safety. When the count was complete, she acknowledged that success. Then, on a separate sheet, she wrote: ‘One patient and members of the evacuation team trapped inside; rescue efforts continuing; independent confirmation of their present condition required.’ Her hand slowed as she wrote the words, but she wrote neither ‘All safe’ nor ‘All lost’. The warmth was fading from Rukhsana's cooking pot. Outside, the waiting daughter sat with the cup of warm water held between her hands, without drinking it.

Tara made two small marks in the earth outside, from which another safe inspection might be possible. Lalit drew the line of the crack on paper. Gopal indicated the position of the nearest boat, but said plainly that a boat was not a means of reaching the trapped room. A message came from Hira Sahni: the boat's load limit had been reduced in the altered current; if necessary he could bring materials to an appointed place, but he could not promise an impossible rescue. As far as Salma could hear the voices within, she gave the next

instructions for the patient's care. Every team was trying to reach them, yet nearness and the ability to arrive remained two different things.

Once again Urmila looked at the bent corner of her linen register. She did not ask for the pages to be sent outside; her hand was still keeping the stretcher wheel steady. “Leave blank the receipt I couldn't complete,” she told the assistant beside her. “When the patient reaches the other side, let the person who sees her write it.” The assistant's eyes were reddened by dust. “And if the page gets wet?” he asked. “Then people will bear witness to the work that was done,” Urmila answered. “A page cannot stand in for living people.” For the first time she loosened her trembling hand a little, for Devi and the assistant had taken some of the stretcher's weight between them. Outside Naira's voice came again. The broken space between them still stood between those two voices.

Chapter 119 · The Distance of Delay

Naira drew a fine line beneath the blank entry in the register. Above it was the name of the woman trapped inside; there was no time recorded for her arrival outside. Whenever Urmila's voice came through the dust, Naira lifted her pen; as soon as the voice ceased, she held back again. The page was wet, yet the line had not been rubbed out. In the safe courtyard, the elderly patient's daughter stared at the paper without looking away. “May I go a little closer?” she asked. Naira replied, “We will stay within the boundary Aditi and Tara have inspected. I will carry your question inside, but I will not send you into an unsafe place.”

There were two rooms' lengths between the two sides of the corridor. Amid the heap of broken bricks, that distance sometimes seemed no longer than a hand's reach, sometimes as vast as the far bank of a river. Tara marked a new line of the crack on a wooden board. Lalit's measurements showed the earth beneath the outer support was settling. “If we lift the beam now,” he said, “we cannot predict where the load above it will go.” Gomati told the workers standing behind her, “No one is being tested for courage. To rescue those inside, the people outside must remain alive.”

At the other end of the courtyard, two patients had already been brought to a safe room. One attendant walking with the third stretcher had torn her sandal. Instead of stopping, she asked the assistant beside her for a dry pair. Watching her, Salma said, “Complete the handover of the patient first; then see to your foot.” The attendant answered, “I haven't forgotten my foot. It is because of my foot that I don't want to leave the stretcher halfway along the route.” There was no declaration of heroism in those words—only one of the difficult calculations ordinarily made in the course of a day's work.

Three clocks confronted Rama. Tara gave the time from her wristwatch; Aditi's inspection sheet recorded the event with an approximate time; the clock on the information desk differed by several minutes. Rama did not force the three into agreement. “Write down four separate times,” she said. “When the incident began, when entry was closed, when first contact was made, and when the first person was brought outside. I do not yet know whether these entries will later serve as evidence of someone's guilt or innocence. But if we record a false time, we close the road to finding the truth.”

Inside, Devi held a folded cloth steady beneath the old woman's head. There was dust on her forehead, a trace of dried water upon her lips, and brief intervals between her breaths. Devi told Salma what she observed, exactly as she observed it; she left no room for her own guesses to enter her voice. A trained attendant asked, “Shall we pull the stretcher a little now?” Urmila

replied, “If you move it, the front wheel will slip towards the collapsed edge. Wait until the outside team sends its new measurements.” The assistant's right knee had been scraped. Urmila asked Devi for supplies to put a small dressing over it.

A folded sheet of paper was sent in from outside along a thin rope. It contained Salma's questions: the woman's breathing, the position of her body, and her response to voices. Devi wanted to write the reply, but the torchlight shifted as she took hold of the pen. The attendant wrote; Urmila read the words aloud; Devi corrected them again. Only after this small reconciliation among three people did the paper travel back. On receiving the answer, Salma gave the next instructions for treatment that were possible under the circumstances. She made no claim to understand the condition of a patient she had not seen in full.

In the register of times, Naira entered Urmila's first instruction: “Do not write 'arrived'.” After that she marked the separate source of each voice from within. When Urmila spoke, she wrote Urmila's name; when Devi spoke, Devi's; beside an indistinct word she wrote “unclear.” There was a temptation to attribute a cough heard at a distance to the patient, but Naira did not put down her name. The daughter grew impatient with such care. “Where is my mother in all this paperwork?” Naira answered softly, “Your mother is inside. The paper is only stopping me from telling you something untrue.”

When Hira Sahni arrived, wet mud from the landing place still clung to her feet. Gopal Majhi showed her the path behind the hospital; from there the outer wall looked very close. Hira touched the ground once, then examined the broken corner. “A boat from the landing cannot climb a wall,” she said. “I cannot lessen the force of the river or lift the weight of bricks. I can carry supplies as far as the safe landing, and I can take those who come out across the water within the prescribed load. I cannot promise to bring those inside out now.”

Two people objected at once. One said, “But the boat is just beside the pond behind us.” Another suggested thrusting the boat's long bamboo pole through the window to serve as a wooden prop. Hira asked, “Have you seen the weight of the roof above that pole?” No one answered. She handed the pole to Lalit, but only for hanging a light in a safe place. To turn something belonging to a boat into magic would waste both people's time and their lives. At the landing Hira regularly set her daughter to hold the boat's mooring rope; here, too, she knew the limits of her work.

The line for food distribution had changed in Rukhsana's kitchen that night. The normal portions were kept separate from those reserved for injured workers. Chandrika was boiling extra hot water; Kanchan was counting the dry cloths. A man ran in and said, “Give everything away free. At a time like this, keeping accounts is a sin.” Without turning away from the hearth,

Rukhsana answered, “No one will be denied food. But it is not righteousness to let the wages of those cooking all night disappear. The extra hours worked today will be written down.” They gave the man water, and he quietly began helping them lift the lids.

In the outer shelter, the relatives of two patients who had already arrived were trying to identify their belongings. Because Urmila's linen register was unavailable, the nurse on duty did not attach names to the unlabelled pile; instead she made a list from the laundry marks, the rooms, and the times of handover. “We will not assign an unverified object to someone by guesswork,” she said. The elderly patient's daughter recognised a blue-bordered shawl resembling her mother's, but it had not been placed on another patient; it was a separate shawl brought from the laundry room. Such small distinctions seemed immense that night.

Salma shared responsibility for the outside medical desk with a colleague. Jamuna Devi's care continued in a safe room inside, and the nurse herself wrote down the times of her examinations. Aniruddha was restless when he looked at the bandage on his injured hand. He drew up the inventory of the medicine chest, but when he asked to go on towards the collapsed corridor, Salma stopped him. “Your work now is to put the right supplies into the right hands,” she said. “An injury does not end a duty, but it changes the shape of that duty.” With his head lowered, Aniruddha opened the next page of the inventory.

Gomati's team identified a stable position beside the outside wall. From there, without crossing the prohibited section, the rescue team could send a small inspection device inside. Tara said they must first examine the load on the projecting eaves: a fragment falling from above could change what the safety boundary meant. Lalit managed the measuring cord, but no one sent him forward alone. Members of the trained team prepared the necessary measurements for supports. Reaching those inside was essential; nevertheless, causing a second entrapment through an error would do nothing to diminish the first.

Meanwhile a clerk from the old office heard the news and arrived carrying papers. He asked how many names of the dead should be written down. Startled, Rama said, “A notice of death requires evidence. This is a rescue register.” Embarrassed, the clerk replied, “I meant the names of those who have been hurt.” Rama had the headings clarified: “Brought out safely,” “Injured and under treatment,” “In contact from inside,” “Status unconfirmed.” This correction of words was more than office etiquette. Everyone remembered what had happened in Sarita's earlier life when a death was recorded wrongly.

In a room of the shelter, three children watched the light outside through a gap in the window. Instead of pulling the curtain, Kanchan asked whether

they wanted water. One child asked, “Can we put the broken hospital back together?” Kanchan replied, “Repairs to the building can be made after it has been examined. Keeping people safe is the first task now.” The child set a paper boat he had made on the table. It occurred to no one to launch it on water. He had written his name on the paper boat, and even after some time the name could still be read clearly.

Inside, the assistant holding the stretcher could no longer suppress the pain in his back. “My hands are going numb from holding this,” he told Devi. Urmila did not scold him. Together the four of them divided the responsibility for the weight anew. Urmila opened her numb fingers a little; Devi supported the woman's head; the trained attendant checked the stable base. None of them possessed miraculous strength. The most ordinary way of enduring the time was to keep the entire burden from falling upon one exhausted body. The stretcher remained steady in the little space it occupied.

The daughter asked the same question for the third time: “How much longer to cross the distance of two rooms?” This time Naira did not answer at once. New changes were appearing in the marks made by Tara and Aditi; an answer based on the earlier measurements would be false. Naira seated the daughter beside her and said, “We can measure the length of two rooms. But we have not yet measured the time needed to remove the fallen beam, test the earth beneath it, and carry your mother's stretcher out safely.” Wiping her eyes, the daughter said, “Then don't give me a false time.” Naira acknowledged her request. “I won't.”

On the safe footpath outside, Hira met the driving teams of Haricharan and Tulsi. One ambulance had been given clear space in the courtyard; another vehicle stood ready to take essential supplies towards the landing. Hira told the driver that if a river crossing became necessary, the number of passengers would be counted afresh at the embarkation point. The crisis gave no one permission to alter a boat's load limit. “We take responsibility for carrying the people brought out safely to their different destinations by vehicle,” Haricharan said. They did not turn an emergency into a competition to increase numbers.

At the entrance, the rescue team brought Tara an image showing the position of a beam. It showed another collapsed fragment lodged above a narrow opening. When someone asked whether the patient could be brought out through that gap, Tara answered plainly, “A gap judged by eye does not become a passage for a stretcher.” Aditi made a new sketch where she sat; Lalit marked the direction of the load from above. Two trained members were permitted to inspect as far as the safe boundary, but there was still no order to lift the rubble. Every moment of waiting weighed heavily; a mistaken command could weigh more heavily still.

Hearing the sound of the channel, Gopal Majhi came over to Tara. “The water is rising again,” he said, “but I cannot tell from that sound how far it has soaked the wall inside.” Sugni Saday returned with the newly recorded height on the measuring stake. The outlet blocked near the warehouse extension was still only partly open; obstructing silt and pooled water formed separate physical barriers. Gomati made it clear that she would not allow a worker onto the fragile corner in the name of draining the water. This time the five-signature agreement was present not on paper, but on this side of the line barring entry.

Rama read aloud the first part of the evacuation register. Among the patients removed from the hospital's old wing, those who had reached safe rooms outside each had a separate signature acknowledging their arrival. Two people had been moved to other safe rooms for treatment, and the vehicle times were being reconciled. “Many people have come out,” Rama said. “Do not diminish that success.” Then she opened a second page. “But the spaces for the arrival of Urmila's team and the patient are still empty here. The success recorded on the first page cannot fill the second.”

When Urmila heard talk of the previous page from inside, she laughed faintly. “Rama has always kept her pages straight,” she told Devi. “Are you worrying about your register again?” Devi asked. “Let the space remain blank if it is blank,” Urmila replied. “If we come out, I'll see that the time of the stretcher is entered correctly.” “And your hands will be examined then,” Devi said. Urmila did not argue. Weariness could now be heard clearly in the pauses in her voice, but when asked a question she still answered.

A young rescue worker came to Tara and said he could try to squeeze through the opening to reach the stretcher. Tara responded with neither anger nor praise. “We can measure the width of your body,” she said, “but we do not yet know the path the weight above will take. If you go in without an approved support, you will give us another person to bring out.” The young man removed his helmet, brushed away the dust, then began checking the equipment list. His work had not become insignificant; it had simply found another form.

Kabir arrived beneath a tree at the outer edge of the courtyard. He had an updated list of the families, but before calling Naira he asked the guard where it would be safe to speak. Seeing the torch signal, Naira came as far as the outer line. “I've matched the names of the people in the shelter,” Kabir said. “Why are you standing so close?” Naira showed him her measurement sheet. “Voices can reach us here, and if anyone changes the boundary inside, we can send word outside at once,” she said. Kabir did not tell her to go home. He asked only, “Your position has been inspected, hasn't it?” Tara showed him the approved mark from outside.

A report was circulating on Kabir's phone: “Everyone trapped in the hospital has been rescued.” He did not read it out to Naira; he went first to Rama. She showed him the confirmation sheet. In reply to the report, Kabir wrote that most patients had reached safe rooms, but one woman and the evacuation team were still inside and in contact, and no final outcome had been confirmed. He resisted the temptation to fill his sentence with emotional reassurance. The cost of false hope was already visible in the daughter's eyes.

Naira called towards the interior. “Urmila, there are two pieces of news from outside: the safe evacuation of patients is continuing, and a new route for your team is being examined.” “Has the new route been declared safe?” Urmila asked. “Not yet,” Naira replied. “Tara is checking it.” Urmila said, “Then if you put 'evacuated' beside our names, the work of the people outside will seem easier.” “I won't write it,” Naira said. “I've kept the line you told me to keep.” A brief silence passed between the voices. Then Urmila answered, “Good.”

Dawn was still far away, and the darkness of the night's last watch lay over the ground. Insects circled the lamp hanging on the outer veranda; dust had collected in the bottoms of empty teacups. Rukhsana changed her wet shawl and took charge of the next shift in the relief kitchen. Kanchan wanted to reheat a cup of water that might be sent to Urmila. “First ask whether it can safely reach her,” Rukhsana said. The urgent desire to do something did not create the right to do it. Even in the kitchen, they were beginning to understand that.

At last Lalit and Tara identified a new possible point of access. The outside ground had been tested there, but the sagging structure overhead required additional support. Aditi authorised the trained rescue team's next inspection, not the removal of a person or a stretcher. This limited decision narrowed the distance a little; it did not slow the passage of time. Hira was not kneeling in the mud at that spot. She was checking her boat's rope once again at the designated landing outside. She knew, as a matter of course, that nearness could sometimes be only an illusion of the eye.

The trapped woman's daughter wanted to give Naira her mother's old little tin of cloves. “The smell helps her feel calmer,” she said. After examining the tin, Salma said it would be unwise to send a fragrance or any substance inside without knowing the patient's breathing condition. The daughter tucked the tin back into the fold of her sari. “Then may I speak her name to her?” she asked. Salma said yes. Along the passage of voices, Naira sent word that the daughter was waiting. Devi bent close to the old woman's ear and said her daughter's name once. The woman gave no answer at that moment; Devi clearly reported the absence of a response as well.

Rama reconciled the count outside once more. The full name of one patient, whose arrival slip had carried only a first name, was confirmed with

the family and marked separately. Another patient's medicine bag had been delivered beside the wrong stretcher; Salma corrected the mistake in time. These two small corrections made the count on the first page more trustworthy. “A disaster breaks many things at once,” Rama said, “but we can at least keep the names of those who survive correct, one by one.” Her voice was weary, but there was no unearned proclamation of victory in it.

Naira shifted her position a little within the boundary that had been inspected, because fresh lime plaster had fallen from above the spot previously marked. She moved only after Aditi gave a new signal. From there the voices inside could be heard slightly more clearly. “Urmila?” she called. “I can hear you,” came the reply, though the words broke twice. Naira told Rama that the quality of contact was changing, not anyone's status as living or dead. She noted the time on her phone and sent Kabir a message: “A voice has just come through; no final conclusion.” Kabir replied simply, “Read.”

Inside, Devi straightened the covering over the woman's body again. For the first time Urmila wanted to remove her exhausted hand completely from the stretcher wheel, but she asked who would take the next share of the weight. The trained attendant and the assistant together took hold of the stable support, while Devi continued monitoring the woman's breathing. Urmila spread her fingers and looked at them: a small splinter of wood was lodged beneath a nail wet with dust. She wiped her fingers on the edge of her sari. “If the team outside reaches us,” she said quietly, “we'll come out in order; first we'll ask how the patient is to be lifted.” In those words was a desire to survive, not a claim of certain future safety.

Tara sent in the results of the new measurements from outside. Preparations for installing the next support could begin, but turning the stretcher before the fragment lodged overhead had been removed remained an unacceptable risk. Aditi wrote that limit into the order sheet. Gomati checked her team's attendance; no one had crossed the unsafe line. Hira sent a signal from the landing that the boat was ready in a safe place, but access inside the hospital was the work of trained rescuers on land. Rama wrote these three reports on three separate lines. One line could not make up for what was missing from another.

When the guards changed shifts in the last watch of the night, the people who had reached the shelter safely answered as their names were called along the veranda. Some had not yet been given permission to go home, but their arrival alive had been confirmed. The patient's daughter rose, then sat back down on the same stone. Voices still travelled back and forth from Urmila, Devi, and the others inside, but no actual path of rescue had yet been made. Naira placed her palm over the blank space for receipt in the register, so that the wet paper would not curl again. The distance was still only two rooms; the time needed to cross it could not be obtained by anyone's promise.

Chapter 120 · Before Dawn

Naira held her thumb beneath the blank line in the damp register. The edges of the page had swollen with water over the course of the night, and the space in which she was to write “Received outside” kept springing open. She had noted the time on her watch when Urmila's voice had last come through clearly; since then, the nib of her pen had rested against the paper while she waited for another message. Moths wandered into the courtyard light. A new worker, arriving at the change of watch, asked, “You're still here?” Naira showed him the red line and the second mark Tara had made. “I'm authorised to remain here only as long as this measurement holds. If the mark changes, I'll move too.”

Tara was comparing a newly drawn line on the measuring strip along the outside wall with the earlier drawing. Lalit had sketched the angle of the jammed beam in his notebook; a slender discrepancy had appeared in the line, though it was still difficult to say whether the shift had been caused by the movement of the mass lodged overhead or by the settling of the soaked ground. Aditi told the leader of the trained rescue team, “You have permission to begin securing the support. You do not yet have permission to bring out the stretcher trapped inside.” The leader replied, “I can see a way through, but not a safe roof above it.” Between those two statements, what remained of the night dragged on.

Seated behind the stretcher inside, Urmila tried to uncurl her fingers one by one. Devi Gond was supporting the patient's head. The trained attendant had tightened a loose joint along the stretcher's side, while another assistant wiped away, with a cloth, dust that had fallen from the broken wall. Sometimes the elderly woman opened her eyes; at other times only the slow rise and fall of her breathing could be seen. “Say Mother's name again,” Devi told the assistant, “the name her daughter waiting outside calls her by.” Urmila spoke softly: “Send the answer to the medical question they asked earlier first. We'll give her daughter a voice to hear, not a promise.”

Naira could not make out every word from within. Someone proposed using an empty tin tube to carry voices from the safe position, but Tara said the earlier light-rope message system was sufficient; a new rigid object might catch in the debris blocking the passage. Naira accepted the rule. “Urmila, a bottle and some cloth have arrived outside. Tell us, one thing at a time, what you need,” she called. Devi's voice came first in reply, followed by Urmila's: “Check the support beneath the patient's feet again. My hand can be treated when I'm outside. For now, watch her breathing.” Naira conveyed these instructions word for word to Salma, without adding any medical interpretation of her own.

At the medical table outside, Salma handed over Jamuna's treatment sheet and read through the equipment list again for the patient still trapped inside. Aniruddha stood before her with a clean bandage around his injured hand. “If I went as far as the room, it would ease some of the burden of nursing,” he said. Salma did not rebuke him for unnecessary bravery, but her answer was unequivocal. “Choosing the medicines and ensuring their safe handover are the useful things you can do now. Being a doctor does not make a route safer when it hasn't been approved even for trained rescuers.” Aniruddha wrote down the verified names and doses of the necessary medicines and checked the list twice.

Near the neem tree in the courtyard, the elderly patient's daughter still held the little tin of cloves inside the fold of her sari. Sarita came over to reconcile the list of affected families. The daughter searched her face for a moment, as though she might have brought fresh news. Sitting beside her, Sarita said, “We've known since yesterday that your mother is inside. The latest confirmed fact is that we were able to hear the team there. Their present condition is being checked.” The daughter took out the tin and set it on the table. “Tell me to my face what isn't on the paper,” she said. Sarita replied, “If I tell you an unconfirmed thing as a certainty, I will only take something else away from you.”

At the information table outside, Kabir was checking the names of patients confirmed to have reached safety. Earlier in the night a false report had spread that everyone trapped had come out; even after he had refuted it, questions kept arriving on his phone. He asked the officer on watch which was the authorised way to get a message to Naira. “You may come up to this line. Beyond it, wait for a signal from Naira's team,” the officer said. Kabir stood there holding his papers. The thought crossed his mind that, as her husband, he might be entitled to enter beyond the rule, but he did not ask for that privilege.

Tulsi Tajpuriya's drivers had two vehicles ready at the edge of the outer cordon. The first was being prepared to carry two patients who had already been brought out safely to another treatment room; the second had become a place for storing equipment for the trained rescue team. Haricharan changed the shift of one driver so that he could eat. “Rest at a time like this?” somebody asked. Haricharan answered, “A tired driver's mistake will create another emergency. Our job for those still inside is to keep the vehicle ready, not to fill an empty seat.” That small decision left a vehicle available when needed, with a steady pair of hands at its wheel.

Inside, Devi was counting the patient's breaths again. Urmila folded a thin page from her ledger and tried to hand it to the assistant, then stopped. “It isn't necessary to send this page out now,” she said. “You all can testify to which medicine was given and which failed to arrive.” The attendant asked, “And if the names you've written down are destroyed?” Urmila gave a little

laugh. “We've worn ourselves out saving pieces of paper, but we won't abandon the patient.” Devi said firmly, “We're sharing the patient's weight now. Tell us about the pain in your own hand as well.” For the first time Urmila said plainly that the pain was spreading from her shoulder all the way to her fingers.

Outside, Tara saw the measuring rod sent towards the first support brought back. Its tip was coated in smooth wet earth, and someone immediately wanted to declare that the passage inside was stable. Tara stopped him. “We have found earth. That is the fact, and nothing more,” she said. “We need another measurement to know whether the weight lodged above is still in place.” Aditi added the new inspection to the order. Lalit's team was preparing to fasten an additional support, each bamboo and metal joint requiring a separate person's signature. It was precisely this delay that the families waiting outside hated most, yet without it the danger of another accident was real.

Gomati Beldar counted the members of her team at the outer cordon. In the list, the account of the hire charges against one young man's name was incomplete. She decided to write it out fully once the crisis had passed, but she would not send him into an unsafe area now. “If my mother were inside, I couldn't stand here doing nothing,” the young man said. Gomati replied, “The daughter sitting at that table wants her mother too. Our wishes are the same; they don't make the weight above the passage any lighter.” The young man took charge of looking after the lighting cable at the safe edge of the courtyard. It was possible to contribute to a rescue without crossing a prohibited line.

In Rukhsana's kitchen, the steam had almost gone from the last khichdi of the watch. Kanchan, her hands weary, was counting bowls, while Chandrika looked for room on the hanging line to dry additional clean cloths. “Is it proper to write down money at a time like this?” a volunteer asked. Rukhsana replied, “The hunger and the wages of people who've stayed awake till now both fall due on time. Help and payment for work aren't opposites.” She herself untied a bundle of cloth, but would not count the supplies prepared in the trapped people's names as delivered without a handover mark. That caution gave the fear within her a little shape.

Gopal Majhi returned after looking at the measuring stake set by the bank of the Tilwaha. The water had not risen uniformly through the night: it had collected near a bend in the embankment, and its force by the spillway was different. Hira Sahni was checking her boat's rope at the designated safe landing. “If they open a way through, can we take the trapped people straight out by boat?” someone asked. Hira shook her head. “The rubble of a hospital hasn't turned into a river. A boat is useful at the landing, not on the roof of a building.” Gopal said, “Give them a false route and you'll trap the rescue team in two places.” Both acknowledged clearly the limits of what they could do and took responsibility within them.

On the strength of the latest inspection, Aditi informed Naira that she needed to move half a hand's breadth farther back from her old observation point outside. Naira closed the register, told the guard, and shifted to the new safe mark Tara had drawn. By moving, she was not withdrawing from the people trapped inside but from the lime falling from above. A corner of her notebook remained on the old table. Kabir noticed it and asked, “Shall I bring that out?” Naira raised her hand. “No one forward now. I'll record the new time at the new position.” Her voice was tired, but her decision was clear.

All the while Kabir had wanted to say one ordinary thing to Naira: the morning medicine kept for Subhadra was on the table at home, and he would check the time for it when he got back. But there was no opportunity to pass a domestic sentence through the authorised signals. In his notebook Kabir wrote only: “Last direct sighting of Naira: near new marker. Contact available.” Beneath that line he made no prediction about the future. The duties of husband and record-keeper were no longer separate inside him, yet he carefully maintained the distinction on paper.

Suddenly a small metallic sound came from inside. The trained attendant said that some piece lodged overhead seemed to have shifted a little; he could not see it himself. Urmila stopped him from aiming the torch upward, because the sudden sweep of light was striking the patient's face. Devi bent beside her and asked, “Mother, can you hear me?” Whether the elderly woman's eyelids moved or only the light trembled, no one could be certain. Raising her voice, Urmila called outside, “Something else has fallen from above. Check it. Don't send anyone in.” Naira wrote down the words she could make out clearly and passed precisely that much on to Aditi.

The rescue leader's face turned in the torchlight. He said to Tara, “Your new measurements show we can reach the support. But if that suspended piece falls, how will the boundary change?” Tara replied that permitting another entry without first stabilising the overhead load would be indefensible, both scientifically and humanly. In the last line of the order Aditi wrote, “Entry suspended.” One worker said irritably, “It'll be dawn before you finish writing your papers.” Aditi paused. Her voice neither rose nor fell. “The paper is for examining the causes afterwards; the order is for the people alive now. We cannot dispense with either.”

Then came the first loud report, as though a long split had opened somewhere within waterlogged timber. Tara lifted her torch. Beyond the new safety marker, one corner of the upper outer overhang crumbled and fell. A guard blew his whistle for everyone to move back. Clutching the register to her chest, Naira began to retreat within the marked area, but in the dense cloud of dust it was impossible to make out where anyone stood. “Back! Everybody back!” Her voice rose once above the noise. Kabir heard it from the designated outer line. When he tried to run forward, a guard caught his arm and stopped him.

The second sound was less loud, but afterwards the hanging lamp went out for an instant. Whether an electric wire had been pulled loose or the outside switch had been cut was not immediately clear. As the dust slowly settled, torchlight fell upon broken bricks. The spot marked out for Naira was buried beneath debris from the overhang. A wet page from the register drifted through the water outside and reached the rescuers. Rama picked it up but drew no conclusion from finding it about Naira's condition. From a distance Kabir called, “Naira!” There was no reply. He called again. This time Tara told him, “Let everyone stay behind the safety line now.”

The movement of dust and sound along the passage inside had also fallen silent. Devi's brief signal, Urmila's calls, the sound of the assistant's objects striking one another—sounds the team outside had learned to distinguish individually—all ceased at that moment. Salma called through the earlier means of communication first, then sent the second authorised signal. No answer came. “We haven't received a signal,” she said. “That is not a test of whether anyone is alive.” One young man supposed everyone inside had been crushed; another said, “No, if the sound has stopped, perhaps they've escaped.” Salma checked them both. “Both are suppositions. I'll record only what we heard.”

The rescue team first counted the people outside again. Three guards were found at their assigned positions; one of them was injured and sent straight to Salma for treatment. Naira could not be found. Kabir called her phone, but whether a bell could actually be heard or only the sign of a call appeared on the screen could not be verified; he wrote down the time. Seeing the new extent of the debris, Tara immediately invalidated the previous safety marker. She acknowledged that the earlier night's measurement had been based on the information then available, but after the new collapse it was no longer usable. This was not the moment to apportion blame; it was the moment to prevent further danger.

“Where is Naira?” the patient's daughter asked Kabir. The weight of the question was such that she could not even ask about her own mother. Kabir told her exactly as much of the truth as he possessed. “She was by the marker, and then the debris fell. We have neither a reply nor direct access yet.” The daughter asked, “Urmila?” “We've lost contact with those inside too.” Kabir's throat tightened a little. Sarita gave him water. He drank, but he did not add any reassurance of survival to his answer. For him, this restraint was no ordinary professional rule; it was what remained of the promise he had made in Naira's presence.

A message suddenly appeared on a volunteer's phone: “Urmila is safe; Naira is going home.” No eyewitness was named beneath it, only the words “People inside are saying so.” The young man showed the message to Kabir. For an instant Kabir reached towards the phone. Then he asked, “Who saw them? Who brought them out? Which safe room have they reached?” Nobody had

an answer. Handing back the phone, Kabir said, “Don't send this on. If it's true, someone will be able to give us the time of their arrival. For now, these words will only deceive the families.” The young man deleted the message, but nobody knew how many other phones it had already reached.

Rama told no one why she kept remembering the old matter of Sarita's false registration as dead. She ruled four separate columns in her ledger: “Confirmed arrival outside in person”; “Contact maintained by voice”; “Contact lost”; “Independent confirmation pending.” When she wrote the names Naira and Urmila in the third column, her hand stopped. “Contact has been lost in two different places,” she said aloud. “Two deaths have not been recorded.” A clerk asked what they would tell the officer the following day. Rama answered, “When they read today's page tomorrow, they must be able to see clearly what we do not know. We will not manufacture certainty.”

Seeing Naira's name before her, Sarita felt an old grief rise together with the present one. Once, she herself had been wrongly entered as dead on paper, and that error had brought injustice upon her work, wages, and identity. But tonight she did not want anyone falsely declared alive either; the only correct statement was that death had not been confirmed. She said to Rama, “Write only that contact was lost. If the next examination reveals a sorrowful truth, we shall accept it as such then. For now, the name I see is a person, not a number made of guesses.” Rama agreed in silence.

Gomati's workers stood before Tara offering to help. Two said they were ready to clear the new debris and that the outstanding hire payments could be dealt with later. Gomati did not offer them thoughtless thanks. “Being ready also means understanding where the danger begins,” she said. Tara examined the new load overhead, and Aditi permitted the trained team to inspect the additional support from stable ground outside. One worker had a scrape on his foot, which was treated. Nobody was sent beneath the unsafe overhang. Waiting for a way to be opened was still unbearable, but panic was not allowed to become a permit.

As she bandaged the injured guard's arm, Salma asked what he had heard. “I heard someone tell Naira to step back. Then there was dust. I didn't see where she was,” the guard said. Salma recorded “Last warning heard” separately from “Last location seen.” She was searching for a way to reassess the condition of the patient inside, but no direct measurements were reaching her on which to base a diagnosis. Aniruddha kept the appropriate medicines and first-aid supplies ready. From a distance the patient's daughter watched the bandage being fastened around the guard's arm and understood that treatment could begin for an injured person who had come out. As for her mother still inside, the questions remained without a voice to answer them.

Beside the shelter window Kanchan told Rukhsana that the water kept for Naira had grown cold. Rukhsana did not order her to heat it again. “Keep it

covered," she said. "We'll give it wherever it's needed." Seeing how exhausted Kanchan was, she arranged another shift. Chandrika was recording the outstanding hours owed for work in the kitchen; at such a time her hand trembled at the thought of writing down her own wages, but Rukhsana herself signed the sheet. "We have no news of anyone's absence yet, and the work of those who are present must not become invisible," she said. Meanwhile the children at the shelter were thinking about their food at dawn. The ordinary needs of living people did not stop because the night was uncertain.

Back at the information table, Kabir wrote a short notice in his own hand. The number of patients confirmed to have reached safety had yet to be reconciled with Rama, so he left the figure blank. He wrote that, following a new structural failure in the eastern service corridor, established contact with Naira and Urmila had been lost; the trained rescue team was testing a new access route; there was no final confirmation either of death or of safe evacuation. He read the notice aloud before Rama, Salma, and Aditi. Each checked the words relating to her own responsibility, and Kabir struck out unnecessary sentences. The language of a verified record did not diminish grief, but it closed the way to falsehood.

A copy of the notice was posted in the safe waiting area. An elderly man asked, "Will writing all this save anyone?" Kabir answered, "No. But it may prevent wrong decisions being made because someone has said what isn't true." Clenching his house key in his fist, the old man said, "Then tell me as soon as there's word that anyone has been seen." Kabir showed him the table where confirmed information would be posted. This small arrangement could not move the debris, but it meant people no longer had to run to the prohibited line in search of news.

Water was striking the side of the channel in a new way. Gopal recorded the change at the measuring stake and informed the guard; he made it clear that the latest figure for the water level was not evidence of life or death inside the building. Hira Sahni tightened again the rope mooring her boat at the safe landing. A local man said, "Everything will be all right when dawn comes." Hira replied, "Daylight will make measuring easier. It won't mend a crack by itself." She wiped the plate showing her boat's capacity limit and handed it over to the next watch. The night's cold had settled deep into her hands, but the boat's rope was still a solid thing for which she could take responsibility.

Tara and Aditi drew a new outer boundary and reassigned the duties of the watch. A small open space could be seen at one corner of the debris, but it would have been wrong to conclude that a person was safe inside it. The trained team continued preparing access for lights and inspection instruments. Lalit added the new crack to his construction sketch. Beside the workers' names Gomati wrote, "Waiting in safe area; no new entry." These

words did not complete the work. Yet the prohibition that had saved lives earlier in the night had not lost its meaning.

The first sign of the night becoming lighter appeared not in the eastern sky but upon the lamp that had been lit again. Its yellow glow seemed steady amid the dust. Kabir looked at his phone screen. Naira's last message was still there: “A voice has come through just now; no final conclusion.” He raised a finger to type a reply, then did not switch off the phone. The words of that message were still true, but their hour had passed. Opening the register, Kabir wrote a new line: “Contact lost; awaiting further direct confirmation.” He left the next space blank. Dawn had not yet fully come, and no paper had the right to fill that empty space from imagination.

Parva 11 · Strī | Yuddha Kāṇḍa

Chapter 121 · Confirming the Name

At the bottom of the brass bell on the outside table, rainwater from the night had collected. In the first light of dawn, Rama picked it up and dried it with a cloth, but she did not ring it. The rescue team was approaching the hospital's ruined service corridor again; there was as yet no reason to summon the crowd with fresh news. Tara touched each of the three joints in the new support with her own hands. Lalit studied the line of load on the other side. "We shall remove only what has been cleared for removal," the leader of the trained team said. "Whatever we find inside, the officer outside will report its condition." Aditi wrote the time of the next inspection beneath the order. The route closed the previous night remained closed. Work began only at one narrow point of access opened from outside.

Kabir stood beside the table. He held the phone bearing Naira's last message, but no longer kept waking the screen to look at it. The line he had written during the night—"Contact lost; awaiting further direct confirmation"—was safe with Rama. Sarita brought him warm water. "Whose news will we hear first?" Kabir asked. "Whoever is found," Sarita replied. "We cannot decide the order." Her answer was not harsh. She herself held the list of names, and she understood that impatience to write a name did not make a person appear, or alter the truth about a body.

The first person brought out was an assistant with the rescue team who had been trapped on the far side of the debris. His knee was injured, but he was conscious and could state his name. Salma received him at the treatment station. "Whom did you see inside?" someone asked at once. Salma raised a hand. "First his wound, his breathing, and his temperature. We can ask questions when he himself is ready to give an account." The assistant drank some water, closed his eyes, and then said slowly that after the first sound he had been unable to see anything. The testimony of a survivor was useful; it was not proof of another person's death. Rama entered his name under "Recovered alive," not in the list of possible dead in the adjoining section.

Then the obscured portion of the outer overhang was exposed. The rescuers saw a body at the place where Naira had been. Before removing the debris, they secured the weight above it; when the trained team carried the body out, no spectators were permitted near the site. Tara folded her measuring tape and withdrew. She knew that her eyes might suggest whose body this was, but confirmation of a name lay outside her technical authority. An authorised physician first examined the signs of life. A little later, the physician called

Salma aside and had the medical findings recorded. Rama entered the time of recovery and the time of examination on two separate lines.

Instead of summoning Kabir immediately, the officer asked whether he was ready to make an identification. Kabir was silent for a moment. “What does it mean to be ready?” he asked. “Once I have seen what is there, I cannot make myself not have seen it.” Sarita did not try to take his arm. “I can come with you if you wish,” she said, “but I will not speak that body’s name in your place.” Kabir nodded. He went into the secure identification room, where there was a curtain and a member of the medical staff, not an assembly of onlookers.

There was dust on Naira’s face. Kabir did not claim to recognise her by the colour of her clothing: in the calamity of the night, sheets, coverings, and bandages might all have been changed. He could see the familiar shape of Naira’s face and a small old mark on her hand. He asked himself whether fear was making him take another face for hers. The physician continued separately to reconcile a second identification record, the rescue-site marker, and the details of their relationship. At last Kabir said quietly, “This is Naira. I am her husband, Kabir.” As he spoke, his voice broke, but he did not withdraw the name he had uttered. The officer did not close the procedure upon recording the spoken identification alone; the remaining checks for independent confirmation were also prescribed.

Outside, Sarita did not ask Kabir what had happened the moment she saw him. He sat down in a chair before her. One small sentence came out: “Naira did not survive.” Sarita bowed her head and remained seated for a long time. No one could have said how long this grief had been waiting within her. After a while she asked, “Did the physician examine her?” Kabir said yes. “And the second check?” He told her about that too. On the written page before her, Sarita did not strike out the old entry beside Naira’s name, “Contact lost”; beneath it she wrote the new date and the grounds for the report. One line was the truth of an earlier hour, the other the truth of this dawn.

An old remark of Naira’s returned to Sarita now with extraordinary clarity. At a municipal meeting, an officer had once said that mistakes in a register could be corrected and that women ought not to raise so many questions about them. Seated there, Naira had asked, “Who will bear the cost of the mistake? Who will give back the work and the nights of the woman whose name was struck out?” At the time Sarita had been reluctant to speak before so many people. Naira had not compelled her to do so; she had merely pushed an empty chair towards the table. Today the small sound of that chair rose again in Sarita’s mind. She understood that Naira’s absence had not rendered the question lifeless.

Work on the other side of the inner service corridor was difficult. The metal joint of a bed was jammed in the debris, and water was seeping nearby.

Sugni Saday supplied the outside measurement of the sodden ground, but that measurement alone could not determine whether the rescuers might enter. Gomati put her workers to the task of bringing lights, ropes, and materials safely to the access point. “Urmila had been calling out for so long,” someone said. Gomati replied, “Yesterday’s voice is evidence that she was alive yesterday. We will not pronounce upon her condition today by guessing.” Her throat was heavy with emotion; her orders remained clear.

Devi Gond was brought out first, from beside the bed. Her body was dusty and she had a small wound on her forehead, but she could understand and answer questions. Salma asked her name and began treatment. Devi’s first question was about the woman patient; Salma said another rescue team was working to reach her. Devi then spoke Urmila’s name. “The last time, I had her hand in mine,” she said. “After that, dust rose behind the bed.” Salma treated these words as testimony about the last touch, not an announcement of the hour of death. Devi was allowed to rest; she was not made to recount the same scene again and again at once.

Urmila was brought out after a second safe point of access had been established. Some wet pages of a register were caught against her body; the rescuers attended to the body first and placed the papers in a separate bag. Looking at the papers, one employee said, “Surely the name here will identify her.” Rama stopped him immediately. “This is the hospital’s register, not identification of Urmila’s body. First the medical examination, then independent matching.” The physician completed the examination. Urmila’s death was certified. A family member, the hospital’s attendance records, and colleagues familiar with her recent work were consulted separately to establish her identity. No one made a sheet, a bangle, or a document decisive evidence on its own.

Urmila’s sister had come from home carrying a folded bundle of old laundry receipts. When she confirmed what she had seen in the identification room, she began to weep; after a while she wiped her face and asked the officer, “You have written that she is Urmila Rajak, haven’t you? Not simply ‘the hospital washerwoman’?” The officer repeated her full name. “There is an account of the clothes she washed on the stone slab, too,” the sister said. “The work she did here must not become nameless after her death.” Rama said that separate files would be opened for wages and service-related claims. The sister did not demand money on the spot; she demanded that no one remove the original ledger, the bundle receipts, or the attendance sheets.

Rama examined the draft notice of Urmila’s death. It described her as a “hospital employee”, although part of her work had also involved independent washing and the labour of carrying loads. “Does this classification describe her job title,” Sarita asked, “or account for all the wages she earned?” “There is only one box on the form,” the clerk said. “Then record the limitation of the box,” Sarita answered. “Do not reduce the

person's work." Urmila's sister decided to submit two kinds of evidence: the hospital's night-shift record and the wages owed for labour at the washing ghat. Neither matter would be resolved that very day. The family's claim would remain alive the next day, the next month, and, if necessary, for years.

At that hour, the patient's daughter was opening and closing her little tin of cloves in the courtyard. The woman inside whom she called "Mother" had been brought to a separate recovery point. Salma conducted the first examination, after which the physician's finding was conveyed to the family: the elderly woman had not survived. Her daughter gave her mother's familiar name, but the slip bore only an initial. Rama matched the family's particulars against the treatment sheet, the temporary bed marker, and the independent testimony available. The papers relating to all three bodies were kept separate, so that this woman's identification would not become confused with those of Urmila and Naira. "May I see her now?" the daughter asked. No religious sermon was offered in reply; the officer explained the arrangements for identification in a secure setting.

At another treatment room, notice also came of the death of an elderly man who had been brought out during the night. His family was on its way from a distant village; the preliminary marker written on his sheet did not agree in spelling with the name on the treatment record. Rama held back the name on the draft. "A temporary number may be necessary for a death," she said, "but we must not put a definitive seal beside the name of someone whose identity is uncertain." A member of the rescue team asked how many names would be needed before a total could be announced. "Counting and identification are two different tasks," Rama replied. "The number will come from medically confirmed cases; an individual's name will follow complete verification." The distinction delayed the paperwork a little, but kept another family's grief from arriving at the wrong door.

Sarita took an old yellow page from her bag. On that page she herself had once been marked "dead" while still living. The stopped wages, the services withdrawn, and the pain of having to prove who she was all over again were still within her. Rama handed her two new notices, one for Naira and one for Urmila. Sarita compared each particular with the old page. The first had carried a name but no genuine medical examination of the living body it had contradicted. The new notices contained separate times of recovery, the physician's examination, the grounds of identification, and independent testimony from the families concerned. "The first paper was false," Sarita said. "Today's papers tell the truth. But even when it tells the truth, a paper cannot take away this pain."

Kabir saw the old false page in Sarita's hand. "Your name was wrongly struck off," he said, "and now Naira's name really…" He could not finish the sentence. "Her name has not been erased, Kabir," Sarita said. "Her days of living have ended here. All the days I spent beside her have not been wiped

away.” Kabir asked for a copy of Naira’s register entry. Rama did not hand over the original page; she explained how he could obtain a certified copy. Kabir agreed. He did not want a photograph of Naira’s last handwritten order. He wanted the sequence of her work not to be turned into a false story.

Rukhsana did not favour reducing the quantity of rice in the kitchen. Many people were still waiting, and the next shift of rescuers was on its way. “How can we ask those who have lost someone at home to eat?” Kanchan asked. Rukhsana paused with the ladle in her hand. “We will not tell them that eating will lessen their grief. We will simply put food there for whoever wants it. Those who do not must not be pressed again and again.” Chandrika set aside water and a cloth for Urmila’s sister; she also completed the wage sheet. At that same table, rice received as a donation and money owed in return for labour were entered in two separate ledgers.

Kanchan brought a bowl to Urmila’s sister. The sister did not take it, but asked, “Who went to her washing ghat today?” Kanchan did not know. From nearby, Uma said, “No one has taken the clothes. We will ask the family first.” The sister looked once at the bowl and then said, “Give me half. I cannot eat just now, but the child who came with us is hungry.” Kanchan brought another bowl and spread a good, dry leaf for the child. This was no funeral feast, nor any grand consolation. It was only the recognition that the hunger of Urmila’s family, their rights, and their grief must each be allowed its own place.

Aditi returned to the hospital’s wet wall and opened a new sheet of measurements. A man outside said, “Now it’s clear, isn’t it, that all this happened because the drain was blocked?” “The obstructed outlet, the unsafe load, the unfinished repairs, and the sections that collapsed at different times must all be investigated,” Aditi replied. “When the causes are established, we shall record them. The deaths are confirmed today; the full web of causes is still under investigation.” Tara was standing nearby. Photographing the exclusion line marked around the old wing, she said, “The hour of the new crack and the hour of the older mark are not the same. Confuse them, and another time it will be human beings who bear the weight of that error.”

Water was still standing in one place beside the hospital’s washing enclosure. The damp bundles of clothing brought from the ghat were not set down on the ground; two women who knew Urmila’s work from before lifted them onto a safe platform. “Some of these clothes still belong to patients,” one said. “They need cleaning.” “Stopping the work and taking the whole burden upon ourselves without an account are two different things,” the other replied. They took instructions on infection prevention from Salma and obtained a written handover time from Rama. So that Urmila’s death would not turn into neglect of her work, they raised the question of payment even as they agreed to carry it on.

Sugni Saday collected a soil sample near the outer mouth of the drain. Gopal Majhi was preparing a record of the water level beside the embankment. An officer overseeing their work said, “Today is a day for death notices. You could take these measurements tomorrow.” “Today’s water will not be here tomorrow,” Sugni replied. “If today’s measurement is missing, tomorrow’s decision will be incomplete.” She labelled the sample container with the time, place, and her name. But she did not write “cause of death” on it. Gopal recorded separately the direction in which the water turned at the bend of the embankment; the condition of the wall inside the hospital lay beyond the scope of his measurements.

By the light of afternoon, the crowd outside the identification room had grown. A reporter wrote Naira’s and Urmila’s names on a sheet of paper and asked for photographs. Kabir answered him directly. “Both deaths have been confirmed. Without the families’ consent, no image of the bodies or of private messages will be made public.” “What, then, do you want us to publish?” the journalist asked. “Reliable information about what has been verified. Not unnecessary last words.” Urmila’s sister added from beside them, “Do not call her merely a dead employee and wipe out the wages recorded in her laundry ledger. She kept her own account of quantities, hours, and rates.” She did not look towards the camera as she spoke; she gripped her bundle of receipts more tightly.

A damp page from the register kept at Naira’s secure table was opened in the presence of Salma and Rama. They decided against leaving it in fierce sunlight to dry; instead the pages were spread apart in ordinary, airy shade. Beneath Naira’s last known signature there was no mark saying “Evacuation successful.” A new clerk asked whether “dead” should now be written in the empty space. “That space was for recording the time of evacuation,” Rama said. “The death notice has its own register. To fill an earlier blank with a later outcome would break the chronology of the evidence.” The clerk withdrew his hand. The last empty box beside Naira’s writing remained empty.

While Devi Gond rested in a safe hospital room, the supervisor responsible for her training came to see her. Someone said, “You were brave like Urmila, and you survived.” Devi opened her eyes. “Urmila did not stay inside to display her courage. The bed and the patient were in her care. There are many reasons why I survived too: the assistant’s hand, the team that installed the supports, the route that opened. To make it all into one comparison would diminish Urmila’s work.” The supervisor listened. Devi asked for a copy of her treatment record; she wanted the actual circumstances of the accident preserved in her training file.

An attendant retelling the night’s events was beginning to forget parts of their sequence. He said Urmila had called out after the first noise of breaking, then stopped and said, “Perhaps it was before.” Rama did not suggest erasing his first statement. “Write what you are certain of now,” she said. “Leave what

you do not know as uncertain." This did not produce a quicker chronology, but it preserved a proper limit for the later investigation. Such testimony would have its place in determining any responsibility for crime, neglect, or negligence. The language of an accusation was not mixed into the confirmation of a death.

Kabir was thinking of going home and opening Naira's room. Since the night before, he had remembered that Subhadra's medicine had been left on the table. "Should I go home now, or stay here?" he asked Sarita. "It is important to go home and give the medicine," Sarita answered. "If your signature is needed here, Rama will let you know." Kabir opened an ordinary reminder on his phone: salt for the house, the repair of an old book, and a list Naira had written. He put the phone back in his pocket. Even after death had been confirmed, rice, medicine, and the key to a house had not ceased to be necessary.

Urmila's sister spoke with Uma and another woman about arranging who would collect the clothes washed at the ghat that evening. No one in the conversation tried to demonstrate sympathy by immediately taking Urmila's place. "Whatever we do, its payment must be written down," Uma said. "And the old arrears separately," the sister replied. "Today's help does not settle yesterday's account." She wrote an application for a certified copy of Urmila's laundry ledger. An employee asked uneasily, "Even on a day like this?" Looking at him, the sister answered, "For you, this is one day. In our home these accounts will continue for a very long time."

Outside the hospital, the first clouds of evening were gathering. Rama placed three sealed envelopes before her—the verified papers relating to Naira, Urmila, and the elderly woman patient—and a separate, incomplete register, in which the spelling of the elderly man's name was still being reconciled. She did not bind all the papers into one bundle. Notice was sent to Shashibhushan requesting the independent testimony needed for the next day's identification procedure. "How many dead?" someone asked. Rama stated the medically confirmed total then made clear that the limits of evidence for the personal identification of each body differed. Reconciling the names was the next task; a tally of grief could not take its place.

Sarita handed Kabir a certified copy of the notice bearing Naira's name. He read it without folding the paper. After a long time, he said, "The hope we still had yesterday has been given a name today." "It has been given a name," Sarita replied, "but Naira was never merely a name on this paper." Silence lay between them. Far away, the sound of water boiling came from Rukhsana's kitchen, and the red line marking the unsafe wing was visible in the rain-lit air. What had changed between dawn and evening could not be called back by words. Yet the next page of the record could not be left blank where Urmila's wages, the hospital's water, and the treatment of the patients who remained alive were concerned.

Chapter 122 · The Last Body

On the mortuary veranda, a bolt of white cloth had lain half-unrolled since the day before yesterday. Shashibhushan Mahapatra straightened its edge and wound up his measuring tape again. The damp morning air had entered the threads; if the cloth were cut now, the measurements taken earlier could no longer be trusted. On the other side of the veranda lay four envelopes—three sealed, and one marked in red pencil: ‘Identification incomplete.’ When Rama saw him, she said, “Today we verify the names before we place any orders for materials.” Shashibhushan set his measuring tape down on the cloth. “I have come for just this,” he said, “so that no one leaves here with the wrong name through anything I do.”

The first envelope was Naira’s, the second Urmila’s. The third belonged to the elderly patient whose daughter had sat all night in the hospital courtyard holding a little tin of cloves. The medical examination, the family’s identification and the order in which the bodies had been received at the mortuary were recorded separately on each of the three sets of papers. The fourth register concerned an elderly man brought out of the treatment room during the night; a brief code written on the sheet of his cot did not match the lettering on his treatment record. An employee said, “If we enter the name we think it is, the vehicle can leave on time.” Rama answered, “A vehicle leaving late is one inconvenience. Sending the wrong body would be a wrong done to another family.”

Shashibhushan remembered Mahesh Mandal’s death. That night Mahesh’s wife had asked separately about the cost of the bamboo and the cloth she had ordered. He had opened his account book and explained that the receipt for the materials, the mortuary’s papers and the police inquiry were three different things. Now, in this unfamiliar veranda, an employee looked through his old accounts and said, “You do this work every day. Make one list for all four bodies. The names can be corrected later.” Shashibhushan replied, “I know how to write down prices. My account book gives me no authority to settle the identity of the dead. Where the name is uncertain, write that it is uncertain.”

Before noon, two men, a woman and an adolescent arrived from a distant village. They carried an old prescription bearing the name of an elderly relative, ‘Budhan Das.’ On the paper there was an indistinct scrawl that might also have read ‘Budhan Paswan.’ Seeing the corner of a cloth hanging some distance away, the young man cried out, “That is the colour of my father’s dhoti.” He wanted to see the body. An employee immediately reached for the key. Rama stopped his hand and asked, “Are you identifying him by the colour of this cloth, or does your family know of some older distinguishing

mark?” The young man was dismayed, but his mother caught his arm and said, “The cloth could belong to anyone.”

The adolescent opened the small bag he had brought for his maternal grandfather. Inside were an empty spectacle case, a knot tied in a cord of jute fibre and a half-written letter. “Grandfather was wearing his spectacles when he left,” he said. “We found the case at home just now.” Rama did not treat these belongings as evidence to be seized; she let the family keep them as their own possessions. Shashibhushan watched the boy’s trembling fingers. Before any name could be matched, there was already an entire night of searching, the expense of the journey and the unfinished sentence in that letter. Yet the family’s suffering could not, by itself, become proof of identity.

The nurse’s register was brought from the treatment room. During the emergency evacuation that night, she had placed two patients on separate cots. The admission code on one was four-seven-two; on the other, four-two-seven. Dust and damp ink had broken the lines between the digits. “I tied a blue thread to the wing of the cot I sent out,” the nurse said. An employee asked, “Then this body came from that cot?” The nurse did not answer at once. “I saw the blue thread. While the body was being lifted, I was attending to another patient’s breathing. I did not see who that person was.”

When Kabir and Sarita reached the veranda, the crowd drew back at once. No one had the courage to ask Kabir about Naira’s death; in that silence, his grief was in danger of becoming public property. Kabir went to Rama and asked about the verified copy of Naira’s envelope. “One for the home, one for the inquiry,” he said. “No private photograph is to go outside.” Rama replied that the family’s written choice was being added to the file. Kabir glanced at the papers relating to the other bodies. “Do not give a family whose name is still unknown the kind of definite news you gave me,” he said.

Sarita sat beside the mother from the Das family. Introducing herself, the woman said, “I am Sabita. We have come from eight kos away. If the body is not my father-in-law’s, what shall I say when I go home?” Sarita replied, “Tell them what you have seen. Do not decide anything about what you have not seen.” Sabita reached for the water set out in the courtyard, then drew back her hand. “Everyone at home says the hospital will give us a name and we shall believe it. But if we take home a false name, we shall have stolen another household’s grief.” Sarita looked at her for a long time.

Shashibhushan sat in an empty chair in the office and laid a small new page beside his wages ledger. At the top he wrote: ‘Materials to remain secure while identification is pending.’ He ruled separate columns for voluntary advances, measurements of cloth, numbers of bamboo poles and goods that could be returned. A shopkeeper said, “You are worrying about business at a time like this?” Shashibhushan looked at him and replied, “At a time like this it is all the more necessary to write things clearly in business. I will not compel

anyone to pay for a body whose identity is uncertain. But no one may erase the wages owed to the weavers and carriers who work with me.”

The daughter of the elderly woman patient came to ask for her verified envelope. The little tin of cloves that had been in her hands since the night was now empty. The cloth she had chosen for her mother was not white, but the pale yellow of something old. Someone remarked that everyone was given the same garments for the last journey. “My mother loved yellow while she was alive,” the daughter said softly. “I shall decide what she wears.” Shashibhushan took the measurements but did not offer to add anything unnecessary. He understood that the choice of a dead person’s clothing sprang from the affections of the life that had gone before.

A printed list arrived on Rama’s desk, headed ‘Final Confirmation.’ In his haste, a young man from the department had filled all four spaces. In the fourth he had read the indistinct code as ‘Budhan Das.’ “What is the basis for this name?” Rama asked. “The prescription of the family waiting outside, and the similarity of the handwriting,” the young man said. “That the family has arrived is a directly observed fact,” Rama replied. “Their connection with this body is, as yet, a claimed identification. You cannot put two pieces of evidence in the same line and make a third fact out of them.” Humiliated, the young man began to fold the paper. Rama stopped him. “Do not destroy the original. Preserve it, with the history of the error.”

The young man’s senior officer said that a time had been fixed for the funeral vehicle and that the town needed a public notice of the number of dead. “Writing ‘uncertain’ will frighten people,” he said. Shashibhushan rose. “Writing the wrong name will not bring them peace,” he said. “A paper then hands a dead person to one family and takes that person away from another.” The officer looked at him. “Which department are you from?” “None,” he answered. “I arrange the materials. But surely I have the right to ask the family for testimony before a name is entered on my receipt for a body.”

Rama decided that all four sets of papers must first be sorted into separate entries. The verified records for Naira, Urmila and the elderly woman patient would clearly state the sequence of treatment and evacuation, the medical conclusions and the source of identification by relatives. The fourth entry would carry a temporary reference number, the secure place where the body was kept and the care it required—but no name. The list would state: ‘Identification incomplete; family claim under examination.’ She directed that the public notice distinguish the process of confirming a death from the process of establishing an identity. Just then a voice rose outside the hospital: “How long will you keep calling my man unknown?”

The speaker was an elderly woman in a sari with a blue border. A younger woman accompanied her. The older woman said her husband had been admitted to the hospital on the day of the disaster and had not returned since

leaving home. The younger woman held two prescriptions and an old school photograph. Hearing her, the young man from the first family said, “Your relative must be someone else. This prescription has my father’s name on it.” The old woman stopped. “I have not come to steal a name,” she said. “I have come to find out where my husband is.” Before the disagreement between two grieving families could harden into opposing claims, Rama arranged separate places for them to sit.

The younger woman in the second family gave her grandfather’s name as ‘Budhan Sah,’ but the prescription said ‘Budan Sah.’ Sabita’s prescription bore the name ‘Budhan Das.’ The indistinct letters had become a possibility for each family in its own way. “Matching names is necessary, not sufficient,” Rama said. “We shall examine the time, the entrance used, the treatment sequence, the belongings associated with the body and independent identification separately.” The younger woman asked, “What if the letters on our old prescription were written wrongly too?” “That would not invalidate your testimony,” Rama answered. “But before we treat the document as fact, we need its source.”

Salma came from the secure room. The records of patients separated during the night were still being checked against the sequence of treatment. She asked the nurse where the first patient’s wristband number had been entered. The nurse brought out her signed shift sheet, on which the numbers for the wristband and the breathing-assistance equipment were recorded separately. Salma did not send either family inside. “The room where the dead are identified is not an exhibition,” she said. “First there must be permission under a safe procedure, then time for the family to prepare itself. Refusing to look, or choosing when to look, is also the family’s right.”

Urmila’s sister wanted to go from there towards the ghat. She carried the bunch of keys to Urmila’s washing place, while the papers concerning her unpaid hospital wages were in a separate bag. She recognised Shashibhushan, who had given a grieving family a proper receipt on the night of Mahesh’s death as well. “Write down the price of my sister’s last garments,” she told him, “but do not close her account at the ghat yet.” Shashibhushan replied, “My ledger will record the cost of the cloth. Her wages ledger will remain where it belongs.” Remembering her sister’s voice, she sat down again.

Devi Gond was in the secure room. The dressing on her forehead wound had just been changed, and the doctor had advised her to speak as little as possible. Rama did not think it right to summon her immediately to give evidence. Devi herself sent a short message: when the elderly man had been lifted inside, she had been helping Urmila; she did not claim to have seen the body well enough to identify him. She remembered a cloth bag tied beneath one patient’s cot, but could not say whose cot it was. Rama had ‘Memory incomplete’ entered in the note. She did not conceal the absence of evidence.

In a corner of the courtyard, Sabita had told her son to be quiet. He was holding a mobile phone on which someone had sent a shadowy picture that appeared to resemble his father. A message beneath it read: ‘Identification confirmed.’ “Who sent it to you?” Sarita asked. Lowering his eyes, he said, “A news group. The photograph is blurred.” “Then do not forward it to anyone yet,” Sarita said. “I do not want the people at home to weep over a lie,” the young man said. “But if I do not send it, everyone will say I am hiding the news.” Sarita returned the phone to his hand. The choice would remain with his family, but circulating a name without a source could also dishonour another family.

One of Shashibhushan’s assistants arrived with bamboo in a sack. “How much shall I set aside for each body?” he asked. Shashibhushan first checked what the three verified families had consented to and what they actually needed. For the fourth, he ordered the materials to be kept apart rather than cut. “If the uncut cloth is returned,” the assistant asked, “what happens to my day’s hire?” Shashibhushan decided to pay him the agreed half-day wage from his own account. “I will not make a poor assistant bear the cost of a risk I am preventing,” he said. For the first time, the assistant raised his head. “Will there be a receipt for that payment?” Shashibhushan smiled. “There will. That is why I am in this work.”

The two families were given separate appointments in the identification room. Sabita went first, accompanied by a member of the treatment staff and a woman assistant. As soon as she saw the face, she closed her eyes. “Do you recognise him?” the employee asked. After a while she answered, “I cannot say. In my fear every face looks the same to me.” She told her husband and son outside that the colour of the cloth was no more conclusive than the name on the prescription. It was not easy for her to refuse an identification: at home she would have to answer all the questions again. But she did not replace her uncertainty with a false certainty.

When the second elderly woman entered, she silently looked towards the body’s hand. She said her husband had an old scar on his thumb, but the bandage made it impossible to see clearly here. At her request, a medical employee wrote an account of the examination within safe limits; the woman did not attempt to remove the bandage herself. The photograph brought by the younger woman showed a face altered by the passage of time. Coming out, the older woman said, “My heart tells me it is he. But do not turn my heart into a signature on a certificate of proof.” Rama’s eyes rested on the woman’s trembling hands.

Aditi and Tara had stopped people from taking fresh photographs of the hospital’s broken wing, because crowds were trying to force their way in there in search of pictures of the dead. “This is not a place for spectators,” Tara said sharply. “The support overhead has not yet been inspected.” A journalist argued that the public wanted to see the truth. Aditi replied, “Show them the

cracks in the building. Show them the measurement records. Displaying the dead without permission will not establish the building's defects." She directed that a list be made of the available evidence from the physical inspection, not photographs of private bodies.

Kabir sat on the hospital platform holding the paper bearing Naira's name. Sarita told him that Subhadra's medicine had been delivered home. She also said that no one at home would move the papers on Naira's desk just yet. "Arranging papers will not fill the place where her voice used to be," Kabir replied. Steadying himself, he asked, "What happened to the family of that elderly man?" "Two households are waiting," Sarita said. "The name is still on hold." Kabir did not look up at the sky; he looked at the stagnant water in the drain flowing before him. "A name on hold is right," he said, "where there is a risk of being wrong."

New information reached Rama. A carbon copy of the old emergency admission register had survived in another secure room of the hospital. Beside the number '472' there was a possible match for the first three letters of a name; '427' belonged to an admission at a different time. But the final page of the copy was wet, and the signature was difficult to read. Rama had the original and the carbon copy placed in two separate bags. An officer said with sudden enthusiasm, "Then it is settled!" Rama replied, "We have distinguished the sequence. At this moment I can say we have found the reason for the false match. Establishing who the right person is will require further investigation."

An attendant from the rescue team came to say that he wanted to correct his first statement. During the night he had said that one cot had reached the outer doorway first. Now he remembered that a wheel had come off that cot, so the other cot had been left behind. He feared people would call him a liar if he changed his statement. "Do not cross out the first account," Rama said. "Add the time of the correction. Silence born of fear will not cure a gap in memory." She gave him water to soothe the cough that interrupted his words. The evidence of his labour had not become less valuable because he needed that water.

In the hospital's narrow outer veranda, the daughter with the tin of cloves brought the yellow cloth she had chosen for her mother's body. She asked Shashibhushan whether a small piece of it would be left over. "It will," he said. "You can keep it at home if you wish." "My mother used scraps of this colour to teach my little daughter to sew dresses for her dolls," the daughter said. "How could I explain a whole bolt of cloth to her one day?" Shashibhushan wrapped the clean, trimmed remnant for her. In that moment, what kept the dead woman from becoming a number was not a stamp, but a small piece of coloured cloth.

Urmila's sister returned from the ghat. Uma and two other women had divided the day's responsibilities instead of stopping all washing: the patients' clothes urgently needed would be kept apart from those of ordinary customers. "My sister's name will not remain only on the list of the dead," she said. "Whatever is owed in her work ledger will remain owed." A verified copy of the ledger she had supplied was placed before Rama; her sister would keep the original safely. Shashibhushan paused as he wrote Urmila's name on his cloth receipt. Over the years he had met many relatives of the dead, but this family was telling him that a person's last clothing and unfinished livelihood belonged in two separate accounts.

By late afternoon the departmental officer returned with the corrected list. It carried the names approved by the three verified families; the fourth line contained only a temporary number and the words 'Confirmation pending.' The officer said that this was the form in which the public notice would be issued. The young man who had earlier entered the fourth name on a guess laid the paper before Rama. "What happens to the wrong list?" he asked. "It will not be destroyed," Rama said. "It will remain in the history of the correction, not become a public list of names." For the first time, the young man acknowledged how far an error in a single letter written in haste could travel.

Shashibhushan did not paste a copy of the correction notice into his business ledger. He recorded only the order number and the family's consent. He knew that rites should respect the different customs of different households; yet no custom could make it a righteous act to hand the wrong body to someone's children. An elderly priest asked him, "And if the work is not done before dark?" He replied, "I have no right to add pressure of time to an uncertain name. Where matters are certain, the work will proceed according to the family's wishes. Where they are uncertain, time is needed." The old man stepped back without an argument.

The evening wind grew stronger beside the drain. Both families from the distant villages were given separate blankets and food at the shelter while they waited; the cost of these and the time of their delivery were recorded separately in Rukhsana's kitchen. "I shall phone home and say it is not certain," Sabita said. "Someone there may have been preparing for mourning since dawn." The second elderly woman told her younger companion, "Do not shut the door at home. We shall tell them when we return." Both statements contained hope, but hope did not demand consent to false evidence.

Devi Gond's supervisor came to see her in the evening. In a small voice Devi asked whether Urmila's name had been correctly written in the death notice. The supervisor did not show her the certified copy; she first spoke of the family's permission. Devi accepted this. "I heard her last words," she said, "but I shall write down only as much as I heard. Let the rest be told by her

sister, who knew her at home." She understood that a human being was not merely one night's scene. Perhaps the next lesson in her training lay not in a classroom, but in accepting that limit.

Before leaving the hospital, Kabir came to Rama. He asked whether the elderly man's temporary identifying code would remain in a secure place. Rama said yes and showed him the two families' written testimonies, the separate treatment registers, the available belongings and the notice of the next medical examination. "A body does not become worthless because a name has not yet been found," she said. Kabir wanted to say something, then remembered the copy bearing Naira's name. "Every dead person has people of their own," he said. "Sometimes it takes time to reach them. We must not fill that delay with someone else's name."

After dusk, Shashibhushan folded the cloth that remained. The materials intended for the three families were tied in separate bundles; no photograph of a dead person's face was attached to any of them. The fourth bundle remained open, containing only uncut cloth and thread measured out for possible use. "Is that for the last body?" his assistant asked. Shashibhushan looked up. "Last for whom?" he said. "The person who has yet to receive a name was once someone's first concern in life. We shall keep only the cloth ready. The family and an independent inquiry will tell us whose body it is."

Rama opened a new night register on her desk. Beside three names lay their verification papers; beside the fourth there was no question mark, but the words 'Identification in progress.' Before closing the new file, she looked once more at the erroneous printed copy. The name had been entered wrongly, yet its date and signature meant it could matter to a future inquiry. She placed it with the correction notice in a separate envelope. Outside, Urmila's sister was walking home with her ledger, Sabita was telephoning her relatives, and a weight had been set on Shashibhushan's uncut cloth to keep the wind from carrying it away. For the person whose identity had not been established, the way to write a false final sentence had been closed.

Chapter 123 · Gandhari's Question

At that dawn after the war of Kurukshetra had ended, Gandhari was feeling with her fingers the two broken stitches along the edge of her sari. As she prepared to leave the royal house and go among the dead, an attendant tried to tighten the knot of her old blindfold once more, but Gandhari stopped her hand. “Make it tight enough not to come loose along the way,” she said, “not to make grief itself dark.” Outside the chamber came the slow sound of horses’ hooves. No proclamation of victory could alter the news that had arrived throughout the night.

Duryodhana’s wife sat beside the doorway. In her lap lay a sash edged with ornamental braid, its threads loosened in places. She folded it, then opened it out again, as though folding it properly just once might complete some household task left unfinished since the day before yesterday. Hearing the tremor in her fingers, Gandhari asked, “Whose is that?” “His,” the woman said softly. She could not bring herself to pronounce his name. Gandhari touched the edge of the sash. “Keep it with you on today’s journey. No one has the right to say that the things through which a royal family mourns must be put on display for everyone.”

Sanjaya stood beside the chariot. He wished to repeat the last reports of the night, but Gandhari spoke first. “Tell me what you have seen with your own eyes. What a soldier told you, report as that soldier’s account. Do not turn a supposition into the name of someone dead.” Sanjaya changed the way he spoke. He described separately Duryodhana’s last combat, his shattered thigh and the desolation at the edge of the battlefield. After that came the news of the attack on the camp during the night. Among those reports were the deaths of Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi’s sons; but not every word carried by a frightened messenger was the testimony of an eyewitness.

Dhritarashtra’s hand trembled upon the rail of the chariot. He asked for his sons’ names in order. After one or two he would stop, as if the next name, once spoken aloud, would extinguish the last trace of that son’s existence. Gandhari took his hand. “Do not ask me to answer for each name, one by one, just yet,” she said. “Those whose deaths we know, we shall mourn; those whose stories are incomplete, we must ask about fully.” Dhritarashtra said nothing. The habit of issuing royal commands had fallen away; a father was waiting now for answers to be placed before him.

The chariot moved along the road outside the city. In a broad courtyard a potter’s wheel lay overturned; beside it an unfinished earthen pot was drying. A woman from the family that had made clay vessels for the war stood looking towards the doorway. She raised her head at the sound of the chariot wheels but offered no salutation. “Why is she silent?” Gandhari asked. Sanjaya replied, “Her son went to carry water for the soldiers and has not returned.”

Gandhari signalled for the chariot to stop. Going to the woman, she did not announce who she was. She asked only, "His name?" The woman gave it, then added something else: "Before that, he made pots."

Gandhari did not answer the woman with a royal promise. "Who is at home?" she asked. "Two children, his father and I," came the reply. The market where they sold pots was closed, and the ox-carts that brought clay had been requisitioned for the war. Gandhari told Sanjaya to have an accurate inventory made of the grain and oil remaining at the royal house, so that families could state what they needed; but the woman's name was to enter that list only with her permission. For the first time the woman raised her head. "Writing down his name won't bring my son back," she said. "No," Gandhari answered quietly. "But his work should not vanish as well."

The wheels kept catching in the dust of the road. Behind the royal chariot came not only horses but soldiers with cloth tied over wounds, widows who had no chariots, and adolescents carrying water to the injured. A young man bore a banner of victory. He had been ordered to wave it, but no wind rose. Hearing his footsteps, Gandhari said, "Fold that away." The young man hesitated. "Your Majesty, it is the sign of the Pandavas' victory." "Let victory be spoken of in the assembly," Gandhari replied. "Do not swing a banner over the heads of those whose household fires have gone out." The young man folded the flag, bewilderment still on his face.

The first party carrying the dead was seen returning. They held a short list of names, many letters of which had been blurred by sun and water. An officer suggested that it would be easier to separate the dead according to their side: Kaurava soldiers here, Pandava soldiers there. Gandhari asked, "And those whose bodies no longer bear a sign of either side?" The officer had no answer. "A mother's eyes do not read the seal of a faction," she said. "Let identification be attempted separately; to record the uncertain as certain is a second insult to the dead." Rather than issuing an order, she put before the officer a proposal for a written agreement, with room for testimony from families on both sides.

As the battlefield came nearer, the smell of the earth changed. The air held a mixture of horse sweat, sodden fly-whisks, dust, blood and grain gone stale. Crows cried in the distance. Gandhari could see nothing beneath her blindfold, but she could tell that people's steps had changed. In every line they tested the ground before setting down a foot. An attendant warned her of a deep trench ahead. "Who dug it?" Gandhari asked. "It may have been for drainage from the camp," said the attendant. "Do not speak of 'may have been' as a fact," Gandhari replied. She paused and went on along the safer edge.

Duhshala walked ahead of her. She had already been mourning her husband's death; now the news of her brothers' bodies had left her face

exhausted. Gandhari took her arm and asked, “Where do you wish to go?” “I must go to my brothers,” Duhshala said, “but first I want to see the wife of the soldier who used to harness the horses to my chariot.” Gandhari did not prevent her from choosing. Taking an attendant with her, Duhshala slipped away through the crowd. She was choosing the path of her own mourning; a sister’s grief was not lost within the names of her brothers.

Dhritarashtra was told that the Pandavas were approaching. Yudhishthira bowed respectfully. His body was weary, but someone who had come with him wanted to speak the formal words of victory. Gandhari stopped him. “Before you say whatever it is you have come to say, tell me this: are all your wounded safe?” Yudhishthira paused. He said that many injuries were still being treated, and that the killings in the camp during the night had deepened the women’s suffering. Gandhari’s voice hardened. “Then who chose ‘victory’ as the first word for this hour? What door does that word open for the child searching for his father upon the conquered ground?”

Yudhishthira did not answer at once. He wanted to say that efforts had been made to avert the war, that it had been necessary to fight for what was rightfully theirs, that continuing to endure injustice would itself have been a wrong. Gandhari let him finish. “I am listening,” she said. “Your claims have reasons of their own. But when the language of those reasons begins to close the mouths of people who have come to grieve, a king is blinded by his own story.” She asked Yudhishthira to arrange separate hearings for the wounded and the bereaved of every side, and to allow those whose names remained uncertain to be awaited with dignity.

Bhima stepped forward. Gandhari knew the sound of his tread: even amid the blood-red tumult of battle it had carried a weighty steadiness. “You struck my son’s thigh with your mace,” she said. Bhima’s reply recalled the assembly where the dice had been played and Draupadi humiliated. He said that Duryodhana’s injustice, and the severity with which deceit had to be opposed in war, had brought him to that moment. Gandhari asked, “If, in answering a crime, you abandon your own rules, what shape of righteousness remains in the victory?” Bhima fell silent. In that silence there was neither forgiveness nor a complete defence of what he had done.

Gandhari had not forgotten all her son’s injustices. She remembered how many had remained silent after the humiliation in the gambling hall, and how little courage the women of the royal house had been able to summon to intervene. She said to Bhima, “I am Duryodhana’s mother. I will not dispute the testimony that he did wrong. But his wrongdoing does not make every blow dealt to his body sacred.” Her breath broke as she spoke. Sometimes it was the weight of admitting her son’s faults, sometimes the grief of having lost him; the two burdens could not be borne separately.

Duryodhana's wife stood at the very back. People were addressing her as the prince's widow. Gandhari asked, "How would you have your own name written?" For a moment the woman was startled. She gave her name and added that she would have to take responsibility for feeding the young children of the household. Gandhari said to Yudhishthira, "This woman will ask for what is due to her, not for the charity of your arrangements after victory. Why must her papers wait upon a royal signature?" Yudhishthira said that regular provision of food and shelter would begin immediately; the woman herself chose the conditions on which she would accept assistance.

Kunti came to Gandhari. There was no gladness of celebration in her greeting. Gandhari touched her hand and remained silent for a while. "Your sons have survived," she said. "Mine have not." Kunti replied, "There are things in my life too that do not let that sentence remain so simple." Gandhari heard the tremor in her voice but did not press her further just then. The two mothers had not lived the same story. The state had played a part in one woman's grief; the other's life bore the burden of a silent secret. However easy it might be to merge the two, doing so would not make the account true.

Draupadi came from farther behind. The murder of her five sons in the night had entered her very way of walking. No one dared address her as a victorious woman, though the language of the war's final outcome had placed that word upon her. Gandhari heard her asking after a wounded attendant. "My sons did not survive," Draupadi said softly, "but who will ask after that servant's daughter?" Gandhari had a place made for her to sit. Between the two women there were no easy words of consolation, only the recognition that both grieved, and that the causes of their grief were not the same.

An elderly woman was searching for a little bundle tied inside a broken shield. Her son had distributed food from a field kitchen during the war; the shield was not his, but she had been told the bundle had fallen nearby. Soldiers ordered her to keep away from all the weapons. Draupadi went to her and asked what the bundle held. "Salt and sattu," the old woman said. "He had tied it up for the child." Draupadi told the guard to conduct a safe search in the old woman's own presence, not under the authority of Draupadi's name. Gandhari heard and understood that, beyond victory, the smallest belongings of living people too could become testimony.

Sanjaya told Gandhari of another group of the dead. The names of well-known commanders were there, but the names of two attendants had been written only in part. Dhritarashtra said that the funeral rites for their sons should be decided upon first. Gandhari did not refuse him. She only extended the question: "The prince's name is written in full, the water-carrier's only halfway. Who has the right to leave that incompleteness in the funeral rites?" "Give me time," Dhritarashtra said wearily. Gandhari took his hand again. "Take the time you need," she said, "but do not take from the families left behind their right to speak first."

Before Krishna arrived, a small disturbance passed across the field. Some called him the guide of the victorious side; others remembered his last efforts to prevent the war. Hearing him approach, Gandhari turned her face towards his footsteps. “You went to the royal assembly; you spoke of peace,” she said. Krishna acknowledged that he had. “Then why could this destruction not be averted?” she asked. Krishna answered that many people had made choices of their own and the proposals for peace had been rejected. Gandhari’s voice rose. “You saw what could not be done. But where does the burden fall for all that human pride made impossible?”

Krishna did not dismiss her question merely by invoking fate. He recalled the failed exchanges in the royal assembly, the wrong committed at the game of dice, the proposals to avert the war, and the choices that brought about the final battle. “I know all that,” Gandhari replied. “But knowledge does not fill the emptiness in a mother’s hands. If those who understood the ways of statecraft watched these consequences unfold, who will account for their silence amid the celebrations of victory?” Krishna did not urge her to become calm at once. The recognition of her sorrow found expression not in words but in the patience with which he listened.

The hard language of a curse rose in Gandhari’s heart. The ruin of her lineage had reached her not as a scene imagined but as news of bodies. She spoke to Krishna of a future calamity: even among those who, in their strength and self-assurance, believed their own people invincible, the seeds of destruction might lie hidden. Her words rose into the form of a curse, and for an instant those present seemed to hold their breath. Krishna did not counter it with arguments about victory. Gandhari herself brought her trembling hands together; even after the curse, the wounded before them still needed water. Nothing had changed that.

As the sun climbed, the dust grew more biting. An attendant seated Gandhari in one place. Someone begged her to remove her blindfold and see the bodies; there was talk, too, of the miraculous sight possessed by an ascetic. Gandhari refused. “What I know now must be examined by other means—people’s separate accounts, identification, and what remains of their possessions. Opening the eyes does not make moral judgment easy.” She adjusted the knot of the blindfold caught against her fingers. The blindfold was her choice; but she did not regard her own judgment as the final truth in place of other people’s testimony.

A young bride approached her, the vermilion in the parting of her hair covered with dust. She said her husband had gone with the advance detachment, and no reliable news had come of his body. One soldier said he had been killed; another suggested he might have been taken prisoner. To whom could the young woman bring such uncertainty? Gandhari asked Sanjaya who had been the source of each report. The first man had not seen the death himself; the other’s account was conjecture. Gandhari told the

bride, "For now, your husband's fate is uncertain. You shall not be declared a widow for someone else's convenience." For the first time a faint glimmer of relief entered the woman's eyes, though the fear remained.

Near the chariot the soldiers were once again preparing to sound the bell of victory. An officer thought it necessary to inform the people that the final battle was over. Gandhari said, "Sound the bell if it means the fighting has stopped. But let its first note rise in the assembly hall, not within the cremation ground. Those who are searching for a name here will find no answer in that sound." Yudhishthira gave the messenger new instructions: what would be announced publicly today was information about the dead and the hours for a safe search, not a date for celebration. The order was a small one, but it marked the first change in the language of public announcements that day.

Draupadi asked Gandhari whether she intended to send cloth from the royal house to the families of the dead. "I will work with you," Gandhari said, "but let us ask each family what it needs in keeping with its own customs." The preparations for the final rites of Draupadi's five sons were different from those of Duryodhana's family; neither woman wished to make anyone dependent in the process. They began to speak not of the number of the dead but of the labour of those who survived: the people who would bring water, those who would gather wood, those who would look after children, and those who would care for anyone overcome beside the funeral fires.

Duhshala returned from her earlier errand. She had met the wife of the soldier who harnessed the horses. The woman did not want the ledger of what was owed to her husband to be wiped clean in the name of royal assistance, for then the wages he had actually earned would disappear as well. "I have come back after listening to her," Duhshala said. "She does not want alms. She wants an account of what he earned." Gandhari touched her forehead. "It matters that you heard it from her own mouth." Duhshala had not surrendered her right to weep for her husband's death; the strength to act for someone else's rights did not stand against that grief.

A soldier brought a metal armlet, battered and bent. He believed that it had belonged to Duryodhana. Dhritarashtra wanted immediately to accept the object as a last token of his son. Gandhari felt its curve and scratches with her fingers. "Its weight is familiar to me," she said, "but there is no name inscribed here. Have any other signs been found by which to identify it?" The soldier said there were none. Gandhari asked him to put the armlet aside with respect. This small restraint hurt Dhritarashtra, but a little later he said himself, "You are right. I want it to be his; wanting and knowing are not the same."

Sanjaya drew up two separate sets of entries about the dead: in the first were directly observed identifying marks and identifications by families; in the

second, reported accounts, incomplete identities and the need for further searches. Gandhari listened as the words on the page were read out. “My sons’ names are all on that page,” she said, “but do not dismiss those whose names are missing by calling them ‘others.’” “Then what shall I write?” Sanjaya asked. “As much as we know,” Gandhari replied. “Leave a question for what remains.” That modest record would serve not merely the mourning of the royal house but the next journey of families still searching.

When the afternoon wind had died, Gandhari sat again beside Duryodhana’s wife. The woman still held the sash in her lap. “Must I hear all his faults?” she asked. “People expect me to decide publicly whether he was good or bad.” Gandhari said, “In your memory there are his laughter, the water of your household, the nights he stayed awake when a child had a fever. Justice needs an account of the wrongs he committed. Both accounts can remain separate.” After a long time the woman said, “Then today I shall make no speech either for him or against him. I shall simply speak his name in my own voice.”

Yudhishthira came to Gandhari again. He told her that arrangements were being begun for temporary food and shelter for bereaved families, continuing medical assistance, and the identification of individuals. Gandhari asked which granary would supply the kitchens and who would maintain them. Yudhishthira gave the name of a servant. “Count the labour of the woman who will light the cooking fire behind him as well,” Gandhari said. Whether the policy of the state had reached beyond the page and as far as the hearth seemed to her the more necessary question at that moment. Yudhishthira had a fresh list prepared.

Before evening Dhritarashtra proposed once that all the princes’ last rites be performed magnificently in one place. Gandhari understood the grief behind his proposal. “Let those who wish to follow their customs together gather together,” she said. “But being the mother of a defeated son gives me no right to decide the observances of every family.” Dhritarashtra agreed. The decision did not abolish the privileges of the royal family altogether, but it halted one kind of pressure. In the small shelter set up amid the battlefield, each family was given a turn to speak.

Grief surged again into Gandhari’s throat. She began to recall her sons as children: the child who had first placed a broken toy in these hands, the one who sulked when the food was too salty, the one who had once fallen asleep beside his mother, exhausted by his training in the arts of war. She knew that memories of a child did not erase the crimes of the man he became. Yet the victorious side had no right to forbid those memories either. She did not hide from the wrongs of husband and sons by entering those recollections; she only restored beside them the other colours of their lives.

Before taking his leave, Krishna stopped beside Gandhari. She did not ask him for forgiveness, nor did she announce that she had forgiven him. "I shall remember this question," she said. "When an assembly writes the last account of victory, who will ask the mother and the attendant seated at the very back?" Krishna replied that their voices must have a place if the story was to be complete. Gandhari heard him; she had no means yet of testing the truth of a promise about the future. She said only, "Give people time to be heard before you write down the words."

Before the evening red spread across the field, Gandhari asked her attendant to sew again the two broken stitches along the edge of the sash. Threading a needle, the attendant asked, "After all that Your Majesty has seen and heard today, will you return home?" "I shall return," Gandhari answered. "But first let us go to the woman whose son made pots. I want to know whether her children have eaten." The chariot changed direction. Far away on the battlefield preparations were under way for the last funeral fires; along the royal road the banner of victory still lay folded. Gandhari's question had not reached its final answer, but because of it at least one proclamation had been withheld that day, and the names of a few people had been asked.

Chapter 124 · Inside Mandodari

In the rear grain storeroom of Lanka's royal residence, the bronze measuring vessel had overturned again that day. A long-standing crack ran across its rim; Mandodari had traced it with her fingers many days before. It had not fallen because of any sudden blow. The old woman who distributed the grain had tried to catch it in her trembling hands and had been left holding nothing. Beyond the outer wall of the palace, fire and smoke had risen since the previous night. Yet it was this small metallic sound, inside, that made Mandodari stop. She lifted the vessel, dislodged two grains caught in the crack and placed them in the old woman's palm. "Your Majesty, this vessel ought to be replaced now," the woman said. Mandodari gave no answer. It was no longer certain who, in the royal residence, had the authority to replace anything.

The messenger from outside was untying the bandage around his head. He had brought news of Ravana's death, but he had not himself seen the body on the battlefield. He had heard it from a soldier, who in turn had heard it from a wounded commander. Mandodari listened to his entire account. She did not reproach him for bringing the news late. She asked only, "Can someone who saw him come here?" The messenger said that several soldiers with Vibhishana had been present near the dead king's body and that the arrangements for the last rites were under discussion. The weight of the news closed around her so heavily that for a while she stood holding the wall. When the messenger rose to leave, she said, "Drink some water before you go. The bandage on your head is soaked as well."

In the small courtyard ahead, a boy was folding a banner bearing the royal family's insignia. The cloth had caught on the end of a fallen bamboo pole. Two guards were telling him to put it in a secure room, for the victorious army might grow angry at the sight of it. "My mother said she would stuff our pillows with this piece of cloth at night," the boy said. One of the guards tried to laugh, but no sound came. Mandodari called the boy to her. Before anything else, she asked where his mother was. "I'm looking for her," he replied. The banner was now less an emblem of sovereignty than a piece of fabric trapped in a child's hands. Mandodari asked that it be left where his mother could see it as soon as she arrived.

The elderly woman of the inner quarters, who had kept the grain accounts during the days of war, begged Mandodari to come inside. "You have eaten nothing." Mandodari asked how many people were still working in the kitchen. The woman named three; there was no news of two women guards, and a young woman had spent the night beside her wounded brother. "Will she be recorded as absent, then?" Mandodari asked. Alarmed, the woman said, "I only look after the royal meals." Mandodari asked for the old ledger. On

the page that had fixed in advance the portions for the royal household, she had a red line drawn and an instruction entered: today's distribution must begin with a count of the workers present and the households with wounded members. "No one is to carry away the grain from this storeroom alone," she added. "And do not treat the plate of a family from whom there is no news as if it counts for nothing."

Two women were talking in low voices in an inner corridor of the palace. One, having heard of Ravana's death, was thinking of leaving her work; the other feared that the new ruler would regard all the attendants of the old household as criminals and dismiss them. Mandodari had heard them on her way inside, and she did not summon them merely to make them repeat their fears. She sat by the doorway so that people would not flee at the sight of her. The first woman came of her own accord. "I used to keep the keys to the royal residence. You know what was in my hands, don't you?" Mandodari said, "You can account for the rooms you opened. I will not lay upon you the blame for decisions made in the royal council."

The woman's name was Malini. She had never entered Ravana's private chamber, though she had been responsible for bringing water to the space outside it. She said that during the final days of the fighting certain vessels had been removed from the palace and described as supplies for the armoury. "I only carried water there. I am alive, but my companion has not been found." Mandodari heard her entire statement. "If you wish, your name can be used in the search. If not, I shall first pass on the information without naming you," she said. Malini considered this for a while. "Write my name," she answered, "but I did not see what those vessels contained." Mandodari had that limitation recorded exactly as she had stated it.

Trijata arrived in the outer veranda. Ash clung to her clothes; she had come from the direction of the Ashoka grove. Mandodari immediately asked for news of Sita. Trijata said that information about her safety was available, but she herself had not witnessed the entire sequence of the victorious side's messengers arriving or the decisions that followed. "What does she want for her own path now?" Mandodari asked. Trijata thought for some time. "She said that she must have the chance to hear everything said concerning her. I was brought here by another's will; do not make me an object again in another's celebration." The pain of an old conversation crossed Mandodari's face. She had urged Ravana to send Sita back. Her appeal had failed.

For the first time, Mandodari told Trijata that there had been a day when she could have appeared before the royal council, but she had turned back at the inner door. Fear of Ravana's anger and the ridicule of the men assembled there had stopped her. "I told him in private to send Sita home," she said, "but I was silent before the people who might have heard me." Trijata did not absolve her of that silence. She asked only, "If you had gone that day, would the decision have changed?" "I do not know," Mandodari replied. "But not

knowing does not erase the history of my silence." After that, they sat without speaking for a while.

A young woman of the inner quarters, whose husband made chariots, arrived in wet clothes. She had gone as far as the outer checkpoint hoping to see Ravana's body, but a guard had stopped her and told her to wait for the men of the royal family. "My husband's body is somewhere else. Whose permission must I ask to search for him?" she asked. Mandodari understood that rank had been posted as a guard even on the road to a final farewell. "I cannot identify your husband," she said. "But if my name will open the gate, I shall speak yours there first." The woman asked, "Will you yourself go to Ravana?" Very softly, Mandodari said yes.

As Mandodari prepared to leave the palace, an attendant began fastening the heavy band of a crown around her head. Mandodari stopped her hand. "There is no need for it now." The attendant asked what she would wear instead. From a wooden chest Mandodari took out a plain sari with a light border. It was not the garment she had worn on the first day of her marriage. She had worn it on an ordinary day, drying grain in the sun. It bore no royal insignia. She had sewn a little tear in its border herself. Seeing the stitching, the attendant asked, "Hasn't it grown old?" "Yes," Mandodari said, "but it knows my body."

When the palace gate opened, the smell of fire struck sharply. Two stones of the boundary wall had sunk where the royal chariots had once passed. The guard said that a chariot would have to take the longer way around. Mandodari decided to walk, but Malini's words came back to her at once: the sudden appearance of a royal woman among the wounded might draw a crowd. She took two attendants and an experienced guide with her. She did not order the remaining guards to clear the confined passage; she asked them to watch over people's safe movement through it. The guide tested the stability of the first gate before opening it. Beside a fallen stone, a frightened cat darted out, and everyone had to move back two steps.

At the first turn of the market, an elderly woman who sold oil was trying to save her scales. Half the roof of her shop had burned away. At the sight of Mandodari she did not bow. "Have all the great people from the palace come back?" she asked. "Many have not returned," Mandodari replied. The woman asked whether there was any news of her two sons. Neither name was on the royal messengers' list or among the wounded. "I did not send them to the army," she said, "but the city's order said that every man must be ready." Mandodari could find no answer. She had word sent that the two names be added to a separate search list, but she made no promise about what the search would find.

A short distance away lay the body of a young soldier, covered with a sheet. A red thread was tied around his right wrist, and three women were each

trying to recognise him by it. The brother of one, the husband of another, and the son of the third had worn threads of that colour. Mandodari told the guard accompanying her not to drive anyone away at once. The guard said anxiously that the body would deteriorate; the sun was climbing. "Dignity must be observed in time," Mandodari said. "That is why the attempt at identification must be prompt and exact. But do not turn a red thread alone into a name." One woman remained kneeling silently. She asked to see whether there was an old scar behind the young man's ear, like the one her son had borne. An assistant to the physician was summoned.

The sight brought back to Mandodari a day from Meghnada's childhood. The boy had not been practising the arts of war. He had been running through the rainwater with a small wooden boat. When it capsized, he had tried to blame the current in the channel more than his own mistake. Mandodari had turned the boat over in his little palm and told him to look at why its underside was wet. Meghnada had laughed, then felt for the crack with his fingernail. That son was gone now. She had heard proclamations of his valour in battle, but no proclamation could bring that small sound of a child's laughter home again.

She stopped abruptly. The attendant beside her asked whether they should go no further. "Here, for a little while," Mandodari said. Tears began running down her face. One guard was wiping his eyes with the edge of his garment; his younger brother had gone to war. Mandodari did not try to suppress her grief. When the guard stepped forward to bow, she checked him with her hand. "I cannot comfort you just now," she said. "They said my brother would come back by yesterday," the guard answered. After that sentence, the two women and the young man stood apart, each in the company of someone beloved who was absent.

Near the battlefield a guard, hearing Vibhishana's name, waited for an order to open the gate. Vibhishana himself came forward. There was no exultation of victory on his face. He bowed to Mandodari. Looking at him, she could not find her first words. At last she asked, "Is Ravana's body safe?" Vibhishana said that the body had been identified and that it was necessary to arrange the last rites in accordance with the prescribed customs. Mandodari asked whether there was some way to admit a woman whose husband's body was still unconfirmed. Vibhishana replied that, for reasons of safety, not everyone could be let in at once, but separate opportunities could be given to identifiable families. "Why," Mandodari asked, "must the royal household come first in this arrangement?"

Vibhishana was silent for a moment. "The king's body was identified first," he said, "so arrangements for it have begun." Mandodari accepted part of that answer. Then she said, "If someone whose name no one knows is put at the back of the queue, that person will become invisible again." Vibhishana instructed an elderly officer accompanying him to open a separate place where

the families of unidentified soldiers, attendants and city guards could seek identification. Worry showed on the officer's brow: there were too few people, the day was short, and the physicians were exhausted. Mandodari asked whether some of the attendants from the inner palace, after taking rest and giving their consent, might come to help, with time allowed for their rest as well. For the first time, the proposal to share the burden of the work became practical.

Ravana's body lay upon an immense bier. The blows of battle were plainly visible upon it; the face that had once delivered commands in council without tolerating dissent was still now. Mandodari bent towards him. Her knees trembled with exhaustion, but she accepted a supporting hand. She recognised one of Ravana's fingers—the same finger that had moved in laughter at the first letters their son had written as a child, and had stiffened when she questioned him in council about Sita. Nearness to his body summoned both memories at once. Touching his forehead, Mandodari said, "You heard what I said, but you did not change." The dead body made no reply.

A minister said that the queen should deliver a lament worthy of a victorious hero, for the people of Lanka needed it to sustain their courage. Mandodari recognised his voice. Many times in the council he had made the sound of agreement after Ravana had spoken. "Will you write my words for me?" she asked. The minister grew embarrassed. "Words of praise can be written," he said. Mandodari replied, "Through his strength, learning and courage he touched many lives. I will not erase that. But the decision to keep Sita here against her will was his as well. If a woman cannot speak of her husband's wrong, then someone else is writing even her grief."

The minister said that harsh accusations were not fitting beside a deathbed. Mandodari did not contradict him immediately. She sat for a while beside Ravana. Then she said, "I am not convening a court of accusation here. But neither is it right to use his death to erase the decisions that brought Lanka to this place." Vibhishana was listening. He carried the weight of his own choices: opposing his brother and seeking refuge, leaving his city to face him from outside, then returning after the war to stand in his own home. Mandodari said to him, "Because you spoke rightly, it does not follow that everything you have done is beyond fault. People will have questions for you too." Vibhishana assented.

An elderly attendant sat near the royal body, holding a small pouch in the fold of her sari. Mandodari recognised her. She was a woman who told stories of Ravana's childhood and had looked after his clothes for many years. When the old woman opened the pouch, inside lay the dried stem of a flower. "This was left after a sacrifice long ago," she said. "His Majesty told me to keep it." Mandodari understood that the story of an object and its price were two different things. She told the attendant to keep it herself. "If you wish, you may offer it at the last rites," she said. "But the crown has no claim upon your

own memory." The old woman's hand came to rest over the mouth of the pouch.

The wood, ghee and water needed for Ravana's funeral rites were being counted. A servant said that obtaining the finest wood for the royal pyre would require emptying the market's remaining stores. Mandodari stopped him. "The people of the market must rebuild the roofs of their houses and find coverings for the wounded. Why should all the wood be brought here?" The priest said that the dignity of the rites must not be diminished. Vibhishana proposed limiting the materials to what was necessary and preserving supplies for the other dead. Mandodari made a decision between the duty inscribed upon her as queen and the burnt houses of the city: Ravana's body would be honoured, but the city's last timber would not be consumed in a royal fire.

Outside, the chariot-maker's wife was waiting. A guard brought word that her husband's name had not been found among the wounded, and that his identification among the dead was still uncertain. Instead of weeping, the woman stepped forward. "Behind the wall of my house stands a chariot he left half finished. I could recognise that wood by the marks of his hands. But how can I accept that he is dead without seeing his body?" Mandodari said that the examination of the dead would take time, but the search under his name would continue. The woman asked who would provide grain for her household until then. Vibhishana instructed the guard that rations for the families of missing persons were not to be withheld while they awaited confirmation of a death. The guard went away with the written instruction.

Late in the day, Trijata appeared again. She had heard fresh reports about Sita: some said that she would be taken beyond the city, while others said that the victors wished to present her for public viewing. "These are things I have heard," Trijata said. "I have not seen any one of these arrangements myself." Mandodari wanted to meet Sita and ask her forgiveness, but she did not believe that her own wish entitled her to intrude unannounced upon Sita's day. "If she has the time and wishes to meet me," she said, "I shall tell her that I opposed what happened, yet could not secure her freedom. That is something I need to say; she is under no obligation to hear it."

A girl had come to see Ravana's body. She was not a child of the royal family but the daughter of a woman who had cooked meals. Her mother had died not in the war but of illness some days earlier. The girl said she wanted permission to collect the tongs her mother had left in a stone storeroom in the palace. "Now?" the guard asked. Mandodari asked whether the room was safe. The answer came: the smoke inside had lessened, but one corner of the roof was loose. She did not send the child in. Instead she arranged for an experienced person to go at a safe time and identify the object. The girl did not receive the tongs at once, but neither was it declared that her mother's belongings had become property of the royal treasury.

Before returning to the palace, Mandodari learned that some advisers to the new administration were placing the names of former employees together under the label “Ravana’s people.” She asked Vibhishana who would be counted under that name: Malini, the old woman of the kitchen, the mothers of the boys who filled the water jars? Vibhishana said that anyone against whom there was evidence of a crime would be investigated, but service alone would not be treated as guilt. Mandodari insisted that this statement reach the men guarding the gate. She remembered how far the language of the royal council could be from what was done at the gate. This time she wanted not merely a private assurance, but an instruction spoken openly.

Vibhishana summoned his scribe. Mandodari said that she was not claiming the right to issue a new royal decree herself. Three matters must be clear in the new leadership’s directions: no one was to be detained without inquiry merely because of the household they belonged to or the service they had performed; food was not to be withheld from the families of those whose deaths remained uncertain; and people whose possessions were left inside the royal residence must have an opportunity to retrieve them safely. The scribe wrote the provisions one after another. Vibhishana explained the limits of each: searches would take time, entry into ruined buildings could not be immediate, and the grain actually available would need to be counted. Mandodari agreed that they should state what was possible, not offer false assurances.

Returning to the palace, Mandodari saw the elderly oil seller again. The woman had managed to straighten one pan of her balance. Mandodari asked whether the names of her two sons had been added to the search. When the guide showed her the preliminary page, the names had indeed been entered separately; there was still no direct news. “Did you see your king?” the woman asked. Mandodari said yes. Then the woman changed her second question. “Have they all identified his body? Will anyone recognise my people?” Mandodari had no immediate answer. She placed her hand on the board of the woman’s scales and said, “No one can say today. But I shall not give an order here that their names be forgotten.”

Back in the grain storeroom, the old woman was once more measuring out rice with the cracked bronze vessel. “Is there a new vessel?” Mandodari asked. The woman said that two had been kept safe, but one had not been returned from the kitchen and the other had been ruined by the heat of the fire. Mandodari watched her trying to bind a scrap of cloth around the rim of the old vessel. “The grain is spilling out through this crack,” she said. “A new measure will have to be made. From tomorrow, check the weight of everything distributed again.” The old woman asked what would happen about the portions that had been too large or too small that day. “As far as possible, ask the people who received the food,” Mandodari said. “If there has

been a shortfall, we ourselves must take responsibility for correcting the measure."

That evening, once the cooking fire had settled, Mandodari was alone for the first time. Beside the wall, one string of an old veena left by Ravana hung loose. She did not touch it. She remembered how once he had practised a raga deep into the night, and how she had awakened midway to bring him water. That night Ravana had played again for her a melody rarely heard. Its beauty had been real. Calling it beautiful now did not make Sita's captivity innocent. Mandodari sat beside the bed and joined the memory of her son's wooden boat to Meghnada's absent hands. Tears filled her eyes once more.

From outside Malini called that the guards had read aloud the newly written instructions, but a woman's name had been omitted from the page. Mandodari invited her in. Malini said that an elderly woman who carried water wanted permission to go home; some people were stopping her on the pretext that she knew the old secrets of the court. "Has anyone listened to what she herself wishes to say?" Mandodari asked. Malini shook her head. Mandodari rose to her feet. "Come," she said. "This time I shall not turn back at the inner door." She gathered the loose edge of her plain sari and walked towards the open corridor, where an old woman was asking for the way home.

Chapter 125 · Kunti's Admission

At the ghat on the Ganges, Kunti reached for the brass lota filled with water for the ancestral offering, and water spilled over its lip onto her feet. The narrow stone steps were already damp in places. She steadied the vessel, but when she bent to fill it again, her hand would not move forward. The river flowed on at its unvarying pace. Nearby, a priest was straightening blades of kusha grass, and farther away the relatives of the dead were offering water at different ghats. Kunti felt that among this multitude was one name whose proper mourning would remain impossible until she herself had spoken it aloud.

Yudhishthira sat with his brothers on another step of the ghat. Before him, the names of close kin killed in the war were being recited one by one. At each name he offered water; at some, his fingers trembled. When an aged soldier spoke Karna's name, he paused for an instant, for they had always counted that warrior among their opponents in the war. The soldier said that certain questions also remained to be put to the charioteer of the king of Anga. Kunti heard the last part of the sentence distinctly. Questions remained unanswered; yet the answer to the question of Karna's birth was hers alone to give.

The priest told Yudhishthira that the offering for each warrior would be performed according to the customs of his lineage and family. He knew the limits of his own knowledge: the identifying marks of lineage had been stripped from many bodies in the war. Yudhishthira agreed. Kunti moved one step forward. At first no sound emerged from her throat. She addressed not the priest but Yudhishthira. "Wait before offering water for that name." Arjuna raised his head. First there was surprise in his eyes, then an anxiety that suggested the war was not yet over.

"Why, Mother?" Yudhishthira asked. "Karna was not our brother," Bhima said, "but the war is over. There is no reason to withhold respect from his body." Kunti turned towards Bhima. "I am not withholding respect," she said quietly. "I want the water offered for him to reach his true lineage." Some people seated at the ghat turned to look. Hearing the crowd begin to gather, Kunti said, "My sons have the right to hear the first answer to this matter in private. Afterwards, everyone who needs to know shall know."

Behind the ghat stood a small neem tree. Dust had gathered along the edge of the mat beneath it. Vidura stood a little way off; Kunti signalled to him to keep the unnecessary crowd back. She did not order the royal officers to post guards at the entrance. She asked only that spectators not gather to witness a new dispute among families already in mourning. Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva came into the neem's shade. Draupadi halted a

short distance away. “You must stay too,” Kunti told her. “The consequences of this matter have touched your life as well.”

Kunti did not sit on the mat. She remained standing, feeling the wet rim of the lota with her fingers. “Karna,” she said, “whom you knew as the king of Anga, Duryodhana’s friend and Arjuna’s rival, was my first son.” A light breeze stirred the neem leaves. Farther along the ghat a child was crying, and his mother had grown weary trying to soothe him. Amid those ordinary sounds, no one repeated the words Kunti had spoken.

Yudhishthira let the blade of kusha grass fall from his hand. “Your first son?” he asked. Kunti said yes. “He was born before my marriage. I was so frightened then that I could not distinguish between securing his safety at birth and my fear of social disgrace. I put him in a basket and set it adrift upon the river.” As she said this, her voice became terribly hard, as though she wished to hear the entire weight of the sentence from her own mouth. “I made that decision. I gave him no opportunity to tell his own story.”

“How, then, did he survive?” Nakula exclaimed. Kunti told them that Adhiratha and Radha had found the child and raised him as their own. “I was the mother in whose body he took shape,” she said, “but it was Radha and Adhiratha who taught him to walk, remained awake when he had a fever, and fed him when he was hungry. Calling him my son today diminishes neither her motherhood nor his fatherhood.” Sahadeva stood touching the trunk of the neem. His head was lowered, but he was listening with absolute attention.

Arjuna suddenly took a step backwards. “You knew this before the war?” he asked. Kunti did not avert her eyes. “Yes.” “Even when he stood before me, facing my bow?” “Yes.” Arjuna’s fingers tightened like a drawn bowstring. There was no bow in them now; its weight was lodged in memory. “Why did you not come to me?” The words came less as an accusation than as unbearable astonishment. Kunti had no simple answer.

“I went to Karna before the war,” she said. Bhima raised his head. “I asked him to join the Pandavas. I told him myself about his birth. But he was not prepared to renounce his bonds with Adhiratha, Radha and Duryodhana. His answer was that it was far too late.” Kunti paused. “Then, wanting to protect my other sons, I begged him not to strike a mortal blow against any of the brothers except Arjuna. He gave me his word that he would observe that limit.”

Bhima’s face changed. “You kept that promise hidden from us?” “Yes,” Kunti said. Bhima closed his fist around a handful of dry earth. “So the blows I thought were an enemy’s choices in battle also concealed an unspoken promise? I went on speaking of my own prowess, while he was making certain choices without my ever knowing!” Kunti said, “His prowess was no less than yours. But I will not say that his promise makes you his debtor. I was the one who asked it of him; he bore the burden of keeping it.”

After a long silence Yudhishthira said, "You wanted to save the five of us. But in what reckoning did you place the sixth?" Kunti did not turn away from the question. "When I met him, the mother within me longed to claim Karna again, while the mother who wanted to save her other sons was asking him to renounce something. Both desires were alive in me at once. I spoke the first too late; I spoke the second too quickly. I am answerable for that inequality." Steadying his breath, Yudhishthira asked, "What do you want from us now?"

"First, that you hear the truth," Kunti replied. "I shall not ask you to promise me forgiveness now. Offer Karna his final water with knowledge of all the relationships that made up his life. Do not let my acknowledgment sever him from his friend, the people who raised him, or his wife and children." She went on, "I feared that society would call an unmarried girl's pregnancy a crime. But in that fear I entrusted a child to the river. I have no right to absolve myself of what my hands did by calling it the will of the gods."

Until then Draupadi had been silent. She was looking at a woman seated outside the neem's shade, untying a bundle of clothes belonging to her dead husband. "Karna," Draupadi said, "was also present when I was humiliated in the royal assembly. I have not forgotten his words. Today the truth of his birth has changed; the wound of that day has not." Kunti listened without protest. Draupadi continued, "Yet his mother has the right to speak the truth about her son. I do not support withholding that truth in the name of my sorrow." No easy bridge of forgiveness sprang up between the two women, but neither was the way forward through their conversation closed.

Arjuna walked around to the far side of the neem. From the ghat came the sound not of a sacred lamp ceremony but of wood being split. An old maker of spears was gathering dry wood for the last rites of the dead. Watching the movements of his hands, Arjuna remembered the wheel of Karna's chariot—the wheel trapped in mud, the bowstring, the decisive strike. Through the closing moments of the war he had continued to test the justification for his own decision. Now the previously unknown fact of brotherhood had entered that event; it did not erase everything else that had taken place in the war.

Kunti suppressed the urge to go to him. Arjuna returned of his own accord. "Did he know who I was?" he asked. "Yes. After I told him, he knew," Kunti answered. Arjuna's voice rose again. "And I did not know." There was no answer. "If I had known," he said, "it is easy now to declare what I would have done. On the battlefield he was my opponent, and I had decisions of war before me. But you deprived me of the truth. The knowledge that should have informed my choice was missing." For the first time, Kunti lowered her eyes.

"There is another part to this for me," Sahadeva said. "When he was little, he did not know where the answer to the question of his birth lay. He found the answer to who he was in Radha's and Adhiratha's love. We may now call

him the eldest brother of our house, but he had already made a home of his own." Nakula carried Sahadeva's thought further. "How often have we two been troubled by questions about our own birth? And now we discover that our eldest brother lived an entire life outside the register of our births." Kunti listened. For the first time she understood that her sons would not answer her in a single voice.

Vidura approached and said quietly that families were being made to wait because the sequence of offerings at the ghat had stopped. He had not yet heard the whole truth himself. "Do not delay the rites for any of the dead," Yudhishthira said. "We shall return shortly." After Vidura had gone, Kunti asked, "Shall I tell everyone outside?" Yudhishthira replied, "These words came from your mouth, but all of us must live with their consequences. Today you may speak before those who sit near Karna's body, each bearing the name of his or her own relationship to him. The rights of the family who raised him must be acknowledged first."

Kunti remembered an old image of her fear. As a young unmarried woman, when she had pressed down the lid of that basket, a small cry had risen from within. She could no longer say with certainty what colour the light had cast upon the infant's face; memory alters objects over the course of years. But she still remembered a thread caught in the edge of the lid. She had pulled it free so that the lid would close properly. The effort to keep the child safe and the decision to abandon him had been made by the same hands. Now she told her sons this uncomfortable truth as well.

"I abandoned him," Kunti said, "but at the moment I left him he could not say what he wanted. Later, when I met him, he stated his wish plainly: he would remain with Duryodhana. In my first decision he had no voice; in the later one he did. That is why I shall not now rewrite his final relationships to suit my own wishes." Bhima drew a deep breath. He remembered his bitter quarrels with Karna, yet in those quarrels Karna had exercised his own judgment. It would be incomplete to understand the whole of him merely as a victim abandoned by his mother.

After a while they all returned to the ghat. Among the crowd stood an old servant of Karna's chariot. His wrist was bandaged, and he did not know why the royal family had suddenly begun making inquiries about the king of Anga. Yudhishthira first asked him to sit. The servant did not raise his eyes. "Who has come from Karna's household?" someone asked. The servant said that some relatives were present at the ghat but wanted to keep their distance; after the war, it was not easy for them to approach people from the victorious side. Yudhishthira told him to go to them, but not to bring anyone by force.

An elderly woman related to Karna's household was standing on the left side of the ghat. She had known him since his childhood in Radha's home. Kunti went to her. The woman began to bend in greeting, but Kunti stopped

her. “I have come to tell you something,” she said. “If you do not wish to hear it, I shall not stand in your way.” The woman looked straight at her. “I have heard many things said in Karna’s name. What is there now?” Kunti told her the truth of his birth from her own womb. For some time the old woman’s lips remained closed. Then she said, “Will the name of the child whose life Radha’s milk sustained now change because of your words?”

“No,” Kunti replied. “I have not come to take him away from Radha. The child I left in the river was the child Radha lifted out. I am speaking of my own wrongdoing; I am not taking away her right as the one who raised him.” The old woman looked at her for a while. Then she said, “Do you know how hard this truth will fall upon Radha?” “No,” said Kunti. “I do not know the measure of her grief. Nor shall I promise that hearing the truth from me will bring her comfort.” The old woman turned away to speak with her family. Kunti did not stop her.

In the middle of the ghat, Yudhishthira declared before everyone that Karna had been the eldest of the brothers. Before the announcement he had made room for Kunti to step forward, and Kunti herself had said that the truth of the birth should be heard from her lips. Afterward many voices rose from the crowd. Some asked why it had not been disclosed before the war; others began to speak of Karna’s obligations as a king, his friendship with Duryodhana and his deeds on the opposing side. Yudhishthira did not raise his voice. He made only one thing clear: the history of Karna’s decisions remained what it was, but the truth of his birth had been concealed.

Arjuna moved away from the crowd and stood beside the vessel of water set out in Karna’s name. The priest asked in what relationship the offering should be made. “In the name of a brother,” Arjuna answered. After those few words, his throat closed. Yudhishthira also lifted water. Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva came forward each at his own pace; there was no gesture of instant collective reconciliation. Kunti stood behind them. For the first time that day, she could publicly offer water for her firstborn son. Equally true was this: the way to give that son a mother’s name while he was alive had closed long ago.

During the offering, a young man asked how the customs of Karna’s foster father’s household were to be observed. Before answering, the priest looked towards the elderly kinswoman. She said the family would offer water according to its own customs and the royal family according to its relationship. No one needed to snatch the vessel from another’s hands. Kunti agreed. The old woman did not meet her eyes, but gestured for a young man of the household to come forward. He filled his lota with water and slowly spoke Karna’s name. No single emotion united them all; nevertheless, different hands were able to offer water in the same name.

Before leaving the ghat, Draupadi came to Kunti. “By speaking your truth today, you have not ended all the questions of yesterday,” she said. Kunti

acknowledged it. In Draupadi's eyes were the images of her five dead sons. "My sons never had the chance to call him their eldest uncle," she said, "but I am beginning to understand that in the midst of mourning them, there was another relationship unknown to us. I cannot tell you today what I ought to feel about it." Kunti offered her no lesson. She simply stood beside Draupadi while she poured water for her sons.

Yudhishthira sat down on the steps of the ghat. "Had I known this earlier," he said, "the right to the kingdom, the bonds between brothers, all the decisions of the war would have taken another shape. Some things must certainly have changed, but I cannot say with confidence precisely what would have changed, or how." Kunti replied, "I shall not ask you, in this hour of grief, to determine what the just punishment for my silence should be." Anger rose in Yudhishthira. "You kept asking me to trust you," he said, "yet you did not trust me with the truth about your first son." Kunti heard the wound in his words and did not repeat the story of her fear in defence of herself.

Bhima watched the young man drawing water, filling the same vessel for family after family. The young man's hands were tired. Bhima helped him lift a heavy container. Returning, he stopped beside Kunti. "You are my mother," he said. "That has not changed today. But what you kept secret has gone on changing the course of all our lives. I cannot tell you that I have forgiven you at once, today." Kunti reached towards his arm, but Bhima showed her his hands, still wet with the smell of the lota, and turned away instead of speaking further. Even in this refusal, their bond had not wholly broken.

Nakula and Sahadeva sat with members of the old kinswoman's household and heard a story about one of Karna's gifts. Long before the war, he had given a poor chariot-maker metal that he himself used, but had also asked what payment was due for the labour of repairing the man's tools. How many witnesses could attest to the entire incident, the brothers could not discover; they heard it as a family memory. "I knew him only through an enemy's movements," Sahadeva said. "Today," Nakula answered, "we are hearing how others remember him. It would not be right to fill what we do not know with imagination simply because we do not know it."

The sun was sinking westward. As Kunti rose to leave the ghat, she saw again the gleam of water on the step that had met her when she arrived. So many people had made offerings now that the stone was wetter still. A woman attendant came forward to support her. Kunti accepted the help; on this day she no longer had the strength even to keep her footing entirely steady. "Your Majesty, shall we go home?" the attendant asked. "Let us go," Kunti replied. "But first ask the messenger who is going to Radha's home whether I have the right to send her any words. If they do not wish to hear anything yet, I shall wait."

Yudhishthira heard his mother's question. He instructed his messenger that, if the people of Karna's household wished it, they were to be allowed to mourn privately according to their own customs; no royal visitor was to press them for admission. The truth of Karna's birth had been made public, but no royal order could determine when or how each family must respond to it. Kunti watched the messenger depart. An old longing rose within her—to meet Radha and tell her everything. For the first time, she herself held that longing back.

In the last light of evening, the Ganges turned a deeper colour. Kunti held her lota a long time; the little water remaining inside moved once. She thought of the hunger, the weary hours, the festivals, the fears and the first achievements of the son she had abandoned in infancy—stories of which she would never know the greater part. She could not claim all those years in her own name merely by invoking a birth mother's right. What the ghat had given her today was not a promise of forgiveness, but a belated opportunity to speak the truth. She set the empty lota beside the neem so that a servant might fill it again. She understood now that the empty space left by her own words needed to be filled by the voices of others.

Chapter 126 · The Measure of Rice

Sarita lifted the brass bowl she used to measure rice. The fire between the two supports of the hearth had still not properly caught; smoke from the damp wood was drifting towards the veranda. She filled the bowl and tipped it into the pot, filled it a second time, then half-filled it a third. The first two measures were for herself and the people she still hoped might come to the house; the third was for Naira, as always. Only after the rice fell into the water did she remember that her daughter would no longer come here and sit waiting to eat. She reached in to take the grains back out. As soon as her fingers touched the water, the rice scattered. Sarita withdrew her hand. The pot held just what it held.

There was a small crack at the edge of the lid. Long ago Naira had told her to bring home a new one from the market; Sarita had managed by turning the old lid the other way round. Today, as she straightened it, her finger caught in that same crack. “You’ll draw blood,” Naira’s old voice seemed to rise from the veranda, though there had been no voice. Sarita took a scrap of cloth and gripped the rim with it. She tended the fire. When the water began to boil, the lid trembled slightly. There was work enough to keep her there: lower the flame, look to the rice, take the griddle off the fire. None of it was difficult. Yet at each step in the familiar order came the memory of an extra plate.

Inside the room, an unfinished kurti lay spread across the sewing machine. A small slip bearing the customer’s name had been pinned to the cloth. Until four days earlier, Sarita had kept the delivery date firmly in mind; since the accident at the hospital, the counting of days had slackened. First she removed the slip, so that the steam from the hot hearth would not blur its ink. Whenever Naira came home, she would turn the machine’s wheel without asking. Her mother would say, “Don’t upset the count of these threads.” Her daughter would laugh and reply, “In this house you keep an account of threads, but never of rice.” Sarita had been annoyed at the answer. Today the wheel was motionless, and she felt no wish even to turn it by hand.

A bicycle tyre had left its mark in the earth by the doorway. Their neighbour Chandrika arrived carrying a bowl of leaf chutney. “You haven’t even stepped outside since yesterday,” she said. Sarita accepted the bowl but did not smell the chutney. Chandrika looked at the pot on the fire. “So much rice? How many people are coming today?” There was only the unthinking arithmetic of everyday life in the question, no cruelty. Before answering, Sarita looked once at the pot. “The amount I cook every day,” she said. Chandrika swallowed the question that might have followed. Instead of adding more wood to the fire, she drew the wet pieces away from the hearth, and the smoke lessened.

"If I made less, I'd save rice," Sarita said herself, as though she had to answer Chandrika's silence. "There's no shortage of rice in the house. What was due last month is a separate matter; what's stored in the bin has its own account. But the hand lifting the measure didn't stop the third time." Chandrika said, "Who asked it to stop? I only asked how many people would eat." Sarita turned over an empty leaf plate and set it to her right. "I don't know either," she said. Hearing this, Chandrika moved her bowl of chutney a little farther from the hearth. She stayed there, watching the foam rise from the rice, and spoke of the vegetables left unfinished on the veranda of her own house.

A little way outside, footsteps could be heard passing. The road to the hospital did not run through this lane, but the families of injured people turned here towards the relief shelter. A child held his father's hand and asked, "Can we get water in this house?" Chandrika went out and gave him water from the earthen pitcher. His father said they were trying to find the community kitchen. Chandrika showed them the way and explained that the hospital's old wing was still closed. Sarita listened from inside. The water in which the rice was boiling looked white in the morning sunlight, and the disaster outside had not entirely silenced the ordinary sounds of a home.

When she took the rice off the fire, Sarita set out three plates. On the first she put a little rice; on the second, an ordinary mound; on the third, as much as Naira usually asked for. When Naira was ravenous, she would eat a third mouthful with chutney, but if she came home late in the evening, she would leave half her rice to grow cold. Sarita would then take hold of the edge of the plate and say, "Shall I ask before serving you? Rice takes work to cook." Naira would answer, "If you ask, you'll only give me too much again. I'll serve myself exactly what I want." Mother and daughter had been out of sorts with each other for two days over that. Today Sarita sat with a finger resting on the rim of the third plate. She did not pick it up and offer it to anyone.

Chandrika came back. She saw all three plates but could not bring herself to take one away. "Please eat a little yourself," was all she said, opening the chutney bowl. Sarita drew the first plate towards her. She found it hard to put the first mouthful into her mouth. The rice was properly cooked, neither too soft nor underdone. She remained aware of its warmth against her tongue. Then, quite suddenly, she asked Chandrika, "Do you remember how Naira refused to drink rice starch when she was little?" Chandrika said, "Rice starch? She used to come to our house asking for a little flattened rice with jaggery." The two women sat together, each holding a different memory of the same child's food.

Sarita remembered one monsoon when Naira was small and water from the kitchen floor had seeped far into the house. They raised the hearth, but the fire would not stay alight. Because the rice took longer to cook that day, Naira ate the upper layer from the pot; a lightly scorched crust was left at the

bottom. In irritation Sarita had told her not to scrape out the pot to eat. Naira had answered, "Ma, that's the tastiest part." Later Sarita had separated the burnt rice and given it to her. At the memory a smile came to Sarita's lips; but as though the smile had only to try to remain for her eyes to fill, tears followed. Chandrika let her weep. She did not insist on wiping the tears away with her own hand.

Beneath the sewing machine was a small metal box. Sometimes Naira hid newspaper cuttings in it instead of rice, knowing that Sarita would not throw papers away without asking while she worked. Sarita thought of opening the box, then left it closed. Her daughter's death did not, by itself, give her an automatic right to open the private papers Naira had left in the room. Before publishing the personal details of people in the news, Naira used to ask their permission. How that same question was to be answered within a home, Sarita could not yet decide. The plate of rice stood before her; the box kept its silence.

Around midday Kabir came to the door. His clothes carried not the damp smell of the hospital but the dust of the road. He had brought a small bag from Naira's home: in it were an empty strip of Subhadra's medicine, a washed glass, and a fresh prescription. Sarita asked him to sit. Kabir asked, "Have you eaten?" "A little," Sarita said. Chandrika went quietly outside to attend to the hearth in her own house. Kabir sat in the vacant chair. On countless occasions over the past days his voice had reached this house before Naira's; today he had had to breathe out again and again before he could cross its threshold.

"There's rice," Sarita said. Kabir raised his eyes. "I'm not hungry." Sarita paused. "I won't press you to eat," she said. "But we must see how to keep what's been cooked." Kabir looked at the clean cloth placed over the mouth of the pot. "It hasn't gone stale yet," he said. "If it's to stay until tonight, cool it and put it away separately. In this heat it isn't good to leave it covered while it's still hot." When Naira was alive, it was Sarita, rather than Kabir, who attended to such small precautions. Now, as soon as he said it, Kabir grew self-conscious. "You're right," Sarita replied. "I was forgetting." For a while they could both hold on to this small, useful piece of advice.

Kabir's gaze fell on the third plate. He looked at it for a moment, then turned his eyes away. Sarita spoke of it herself. "I served the same amount I served her every day." Kabir's throat grew rough. "She didn't like a mountain of rice on her plate," he said. Sarita looked up. "Yes," she said. "She even quarrelled about it at her mother's house." For the first time Kabir gave a faint laugh. "At my house too. If there was too much dal, the rice would be left over; then she'd say, 'You don't know how to divide things evenly.'" Sarita listened. The same woman belonged to two homes, each with its own memories of her meals. Neither memory made the other untrue.

"I keep thinking Naira will come here tomorrow and ask for something," Sarita said. "When she doesn't say a word, when she doesn't push open the door, what am I to do with this rice?" Kabir looked towards the plate and was silent for a while. "I keep thinking she'll call me too," he said. "Even now, at night, my eyes lift towards the light of the phone. Even though I know whose news it may bring now." Sarita did not try to console him by saying that time would put everything right. For the present, time's first task was simply to bring the next moment, in which Naira's voice would not be heard.

Sarita put a spoon against one side of the mound of rice, then set it down again. "Kabir, you may eat as much as you wish in this house. But I don't want to say that if you eat Naira's share, her empty place will have been filled." Pain and a kind of relief appeared on Kabir's face at once. "I have no promise to fill that empty place either," he said. "Subhadra must have her medicine on time. I'll have to go back there in a little while." Sarita asked whether Subhadra had eaten anything. "She forgot," Kabir answered. "She asked for water to take the medicine, then sat holding the empty vessel." Small failures in ordinary tasks were gathering in that house too.

Sarita got up and brought out a clean container. "Then I'll put aside some rice for you and for her. Whoever wishes to eat may eat; whoever doesn't can leave it for now." Kabir held the container out, but Sarita did not touch the third plate. She took rice separately from the pot. Kabir noticed, and did not ask why. The dal went into a smaller bowl inside the container, so that it would not all spill together on the way. As she closed the lid, Sarita said, "Write down the mealtimes alongside the medicine times on the prescription." "Will you write them?" Kabir asked. Sarita began looking for her spectacles, which were pushed up on top of her head. "They're right there," Kabir said. Both laughed softly.

With her spectacles back over her eyes, Sarita wrote the medicine times on the reverse of an old sheet of paper. On its front were a sewing customer's measurements. Kabir was about to turn it round, but Sarita said, "I've written on the back. The work on the front is still unfinished too." She gave no thought to what her words might mean. Her handwriting trembled a little. Kabir carefully read the medicine names and the times, then asked whether anything had been changed in the doctor's new instructions on the prescription. Together they checked. In the midst of so small a task Sarita remembered how her daughter would sometimes be puzzled by the shapes of her mother's letters in a medicine list. She could not bring herself to say it.

After Kabir left, the house was quiet again. Chandrika did not return; she had her own work. Sarita sat on the outer veranda and drank cool water from the earthen pitcher. Across the lane two little girls were playing with a skipping rope. One pretended to tell the other that the rope had slipped from her hand and that they must begin the game again. Sarita had heard such voices innumerable times during Naira's childhood. She did not call the girls

indoors and serve them rice. Without first asking whether they were hungry, it did not seem right to make them participants in the plate of her grief. The rope kept turning; Sarita's eyes followed its movement.

Before evening, a young man from a customer's household came to enquire about delivery. He had meant only to ask about the unfinished kurti, but at the doorway he remembered the news of Naira's death. "I'll come another time," he said, beginning to turn away. Sarita stopped him. "The work isn't finished yet. If you need to change the date, say so," she said. "No, no, you must rest," he replied at once. Sarita thought that if she chose to rest, the choice would be hers; her customer's sense of guilt would not enter the work's delivery date in her account book. "It won't be ready by the day after tomorrow," she said plainly. "I'll let you know after that. The advance you paid is entered in the ledger." The young man nodded and went away. As Sarita shut the door, she did not look towards the machine.

Madhu stopped by on her way back from the ghat. She carried two notices from the drainage committee: some stretches of the channel and its outlet were functioning again, but the obstruction near the warehouse extension remained; the investigation into the seepage inside the hospital was still incomplete. "I haven't come to ask for your signature on these notices," Madhu said. "I only wanted to ask, before giving them to you, whether you wish to deal with these papers today." Sarita accepted the sealed envelope. "Not today," she said. "Perhaps not tomorrow either. But keep the correct dates and the page of payments due safe and separate." Madhu agreed. She offered no new conjecture about Naira's old register, nor did she make the papers into a remedy for tears.

Before leaving, Madhu stood on the veranda and looked towards the pot. "Do you need any help?" she asked. "Not with sewing—with the kitchen?" After a moment Sarita said, "I need two clean containers to keep this rice safely. The lid on one of my vessels doesn't fit properly." Madhu promised to send some containers from home, but Sarita said, "There's only this much rice today; one small box will do. If you have a spare, send it. There's no need to buy a new one." Madhu agreed. In making the request Sarita felt the tiredness of her body. Asking for work to be done for her had never come easily; this time she herself had specified how little was needed.

A short while later Madhu's younger sister arrived with a clean box. She wiped her feet in the courtyard and set it down. "Didi said you could keep it until the day after tomorrow if you need it," she said. Sarita thanked her. The girl looked towards the plate inside, then asked, "The school essay I had asked Naira Didi to help me write—whom shall I show it to now?" The question stopped Sarita's breath. She did not immediately offer someone else's name in Naira's place. "Keep your essay with you," she said. "You can ask Maithili Didi to read it, if she agrees. We mustn't say, in somebody else's voice, that a

promise Naira made has been fulfilled." The girl nodded. She put the pages of her essay back into her satchel and went home.

The colour of evening was changing. Sarita went to the corner of the house where Naira had so often sat and criticised her mother's work. Once Naira had said that Sarita added unnecessary embroidery thread to customers' clothes: the work took longer, but the payment did not increase. Sarita had taken offence. "Is it wrong to make something beautiful?" Naira had answered, "Ask to be paid for the extra time it takes to make it beautiful." After their argument the two had sat by the hearth and eaten rice. Her daughter had left behind in this house more than affection: she had left questions, obstinacy, uncomfortable advice, and disagreements that had never been settled. Sarita did not yet wish to turn each of her words into an icon to be revered.

The rice was cooling now. Sarita sprinkled a little water over it and, once the remaining portion had cooled, put it into the clean container. Naira's serving still lay untouched on its plate. Sarita noticed a small insect moving across it. She brushed the insect away with her hand and sat before the plate for a long time. All that time she made no decision. At last she lifted the rice from the plate and separated the part that was still fit to use; what had been contaminated she no longer considered food. As she did so, a sharp wave of grief rose within her. She drew no equivalence between saving rice from a plate and letting her daughter go. Nevertheless, her hands continued to tremble.

When Chandrika returned, Sarita said, "I've kept aside a little rice. I don't feel like eating again tonight. If someone in your house would like some, take it." "What will be left for you?" Chandrika asked. Sarita showed her the container she had kept. "There's some for me too. I gave some to Kabir. I've seen how to store what remains." Chandrika did not treat the rice as an offering from a funeral feast. She said that her elderly mother-in-law had not cooked today, and that it would be right to give her some. Sarita agreed. As they transferred the rice into another vessel, their hands touched once. Chandrika said only, "I'll bring the box back tomorrow." "Whenever it's convenient," Sarita replied.

After nightfall a short message came from Kabir: Subhadra had taken her medicine, eaten a little rice, and remained under medical supervision. Sarita read the phone screen and closed her eyes for a moment. When Naira wrote such messages, she would add at the end, "Ma, have you eaten?" Kabir had not added that now. Sarita wanted to ask him in her reply, "And what have you eaten?" But first there was the question of her own plate. She typed, "I have eaten. Keep checking the medicine times. You must eat something too." Having sent the message, she laid the phone face down. She did not keep watching the screen for another reply.

A strand of red thread Naira had left was caught in the sewing machine's belt. Sarita did not know when her daughter had left it there. There was no reason to call it Naira's last trace. She did not pull it out and preserve it in her book of measurements; she merely freed it gently from the machine's wheel and put it aside, so that the needle would not catch tomorrow. Then she tended the ashes in the hearth. The little lamp lit before the picture of Bhagavati began to flicker. Sarita wondered whether to add oil. There was oil, but her hands were tired. Satisfied that the lamp was safe, she left it where it was and went into her room.

Sitting on the cot, Sarita added up the day's measures in her head. She had put into the pot as much rice as she put in when Naira was coming home. Kabir had taken one box, Chandrika another; a small container remained for the night. The quantities tallied, but the number of people who ate in the house had changed. Nowhere had she written that from tomorrow she would reduce the measure. That decision was, for the present, needlessly difficult. The night was long, but it held more than sorrow alone: Subhadra's medicine, the unfinished kurti, the customer's advance, the damp wood for the hearth, and tomorrow's hunger were all within its length.

Imagining the morning, Sarita saw herself lifting the third bowl again. Whether she would lift it or not, she could not say for certain. She did not want another person's reasoning to govern her hand. In the memory of her daughter, fault, love, irritation, laughter and disagreement could remain separate; today she would not sift through them to manufacture a single assured meaning. Once, in the night, she heard the hearth lid rattle: wind had come in through the window. Sarita got up and steadied the lid, washed the pot in which the rice had boiled and set it upside down, then returned to bed. The empty pot could be filled again tomorrow. Tomorrow she would decide how much to measure.

Chapter 127 · The Guilt of Surviving

A thin brown line of dried blood ran along the outer edge of Aniruddha's bandage. He was trying to fasten the buttons of his kurta with his left hand, but the slightest turn of his right arm brought a pulling pain around the wound. The window of his room stood open. From outside came the sound of utensils being washed in the hospital's temporary quarters. Aniruddha let go of the button and sat down in a chair. On the table lay an examination slip from another doctor, with the time of his next dressing appointment written on it. When he checked it against the clock, he found that he ought to leave in half an hour. He was accustomed to spending even such intervals reading lists of medicines; today, however, he turned his eyes away whenever they fell upon his own prescription.

There were two light knocks at the door. Kabir stood there with a cloth bag and a small steel tumbler. "Salma said you were to be examined again," he said. Aniruddha asked, "Why have you come here? Isn't it time for Subhadra's medicine at home?" Kabir set the bag down. "I've given it to her. Sarita brought rice yesterday, and Subhadra ate a little. Now I wanted to find out when the vehicle from here would leave." Aniruddha nodded faintly. Kabir did not sit in the chair opposite. First he asked where the paper for the dressing appointment was, and the bag with the necessary things. He did not propose to carry everything for Aniruddha; he merely asked where to put what Aniruddha could not lift himself.

"You needn't do so much for me today," Aniruddha said. Kabir replied, "Who decides what is needed? Your doctor has said that the wound must be examined. I can find out where the vehicle is." Aniruddha's gaze rested on Kabir's face. This was their first meeting alone since Naira's death. He had expected Kabir's first question to concern that night: why the hospital's old wing had not been closed, how the edge of the new corridor had collapsed, where the doctor had been. But Kabir, looking out of the window, asked instead, "Does the pain grow worse when you go down stairs?" Aniruddha admitted that when descending he instinctively wanted to use his arm to steady himself, and that was when it hurt.

When they reached the courtyard, Kabir did not immediately enter a name at the hospital's temporary transport desk. He first asked whether a driver was available. Tulsi Tajpuriya's duty register stated that a small vehicle would be available for routine examination visits, but emergency patients would receive priority. Kabir accepted this condition. The driver, Haricharan, said, "He's a doctor. Someone will lend him a vehicle at once." Kabir answered, "He is going for an examination of his injury, not on a journey that entitles him to privileges. If there is room in the vehicle assigned for this purpose, we'll go in

it.” Aniruddha said nothing. He knew how easily a road could be made to change for the sake of his professional title.

While they waited for the vehicle, they sat on the outer platform of the veranda. Beyond the red boundary marked inside, part of the collapsed service corridor was visible. Tarpaulin had been tied over the rubble, but the colour of wet lime showed beneath it. “If I hadn’t gone farther towards Jamuna’s bed that day, I wouldn’t have cut my hand,” Aniruddha said. “Perhaps a doctor’s injured hand meant that the work of caring for people stopped.” Kabir asked quietly, “Was the treatment that kept Jamuna breathing stopped?” “No. Salma took charge. Another doctor came as well.” “Then let us say only as much as is true,” Kabir said. “You were injured when you came. I do not think it right to write that down as the answer to Naira’s and Urmila’s deaths.”

Aniruddha’s face grew taut. “What lies behind me isn’t merely one wound. The first supply report recorded availability incorrectly. I kept seeing the seepage inside the old wing, too. If I had insisted more strongly—” He left the sentence unfinished. Kabir scraped away the silt caught against the edge of his shoe. “I have many ‘ifs’ of my own,” he said. “When Naira stood by the table with her notebook that night, I could have urged her to come home. I could have told her to let someone else do the work. But she made her own choice. Every day I turn over what I did not do. Thinking about it is not the same thing as knowing every cause of the accident.”

“Are you trying to shield me from blame?” Aniruddha asked. Kabir did not answer at once. At the transport desk, someone was announcing the driver’s arrival. “No,” he said at last. “Where your error is established, I will not diminish it in the record. Shailaja still has questions about Saraswati Devi’s death. The investigation into the collapsed building is also unfinished. But I cannot bring Naira back by adding your wound to the reckoning of blame. Your dressing has to be checked today; that is what I came to accompany you for.” Aniruddha looked at the knot in the bandage around his arm. There was no forgiveness in this answer, and for that very reason it seemed worth hearing.

In the small vehicle going towards the treatment room, an elderly patient and his son were seated in addition to the driver. Kabir sat beside Aniruddha in the back. As the vehicle turned onto the new road, they could see the wet grain bin outside Phulo’s house. The water had receded along one side, but there were marks of fresh silt gathering near the blocked section of the outfall. Aniruddha kept looking through the window. “There’s less water here,” he said. Kabir reminded him, “Sugni’s register calls this partial drainage. The main obstruction near the warehouse extension has still not been removed.” The elderly patient inside the vehicle said, “The moment people see less water, they’ll say the problem is over.” No one corrected him. They all understood what the limited expanse of water visible through the window did—and did not—mean.

In the new treatment room, Aniruddha was not the doctor issuing prescriptions today but the patient waiting with one in his hand. A nurse called his name. Kabir rose from his chair, but Aniruddha went in alone. Kabir remained outside the door; permission to enter a medical examination was not automatically his. The nurse called back, “If he needs someone with him, the patient will say so himself.” From inside Aniruddha replied, “This is all right. If I need water brought from outside, I’ll ask.” Kabir sat down. During that half-hour of waiting he wanted to take out Naira’s old little notebook. He had not brought it with him. He had decided that today it would remain shut away at home.

A boy was sitting with his grandfather’s examination slip held upside down. The paper slipped from his hand, and Kabir picked it up for him. “Are you waiting for someone?” the boy asked. “For an injured acquaintance,” Kabir said. The boy’s grandfather smiled. “My leg is injured too. The boy can hold my walking stick, but I’ll have to learn to walk at home myself.” Those words stayed with Kabir for a long while. The grandfather’s leg wanted to walk by its own strength; Aniruddha’s hand wanted to return to the work of medicine. To help someone did not mean taking over the living of their life. The boy set his grandfather’s stick straight on the floor and began trying again to read the slip.

When Aniruddha came out, his dressing had been changed. The other doctor had inspected the wound, written down the next review, and instructed him to be careful about putting weight on the arm. Kabir asked permission to read the prescription. Aniruddha held one side of it himself and showed him the instructions: the prescribed times for medicines, the need to keep the bandage dry, the symptoms that should be reported at once, and the date of the next examination. “I used to tell my patients all this,” Aniruddha said. Kabir asked, “Will you follow it yourself now?” Aniruddha said yes, with a trace of hesitation. Within that hesitation lay the difficulty of entrusting his own body to another person’s skill.

Two lists of available supplies were posted at the medicine-dispensing window: medicines actually handed over from approved stores, and requests for items not available. Kabir stood in line for what was available on Aniruddha’s prescription, but he did not ask an official to change the doctor’s orders. An employee pointed out a temporary mark on a box. Aniruddha himself asked, “Has this consignment been verified?” The employee matched the serial number in the register and showed him its precise source. The suspicious sealed case was recorded as remaining separately locked. A little weariness came over Aniruddha’s face: after so many disasters, the same question still had to be asked. Kabir carefully folded the paper bearing the answer and put it in his bag.

As soon as they were back on the road, Kabir asked, “What arrangements have you made for lunch?” Aniruddha said there was some porridge at home.

“Who will cook it?” “I have been cooking for myself.” “Will you lift a heavy pot with that arm?” Aniruddha tried to laugh. “A doctor grows accustomed to asking questions about a patient’s home. It is difficult to hear them directed at oneself.” Kabir showed him a small container Chandrika had sent in his bag: plain khichdi, a portion that had not been entered under Aniruddha’s name without his permission. “Chandrika asked whether you would take it. I said I would ask you and let her know.” Aniruddha asked who would pay for the food. “At the rate in the kitchen register,” Kabir said. “We won’t call it assistance and treat someone’s labour as free.”

Dust had gathered on the pages of many old books in the small veranda of Aniruddha’s home. On one table lay a copy of the revised report concerning Saraswati Devi’s earlier treatment; on another, papers from the building inspection. Aniruddha began moving them aside. Kabir did not stop him. He asked only, “Will these papers be kept safe?” “Yes. The originals are at the hospital; these are copies with my annotations.” “Then put them in a dry cover,” Kabir said. “If water reaches them, there’ll be a fresh argument about which line was written when.” Aniruddha tried to open a stiff paper folder with one hand. Kabir held it steady for him; Aniruddha himself decided the order in which the papers should go inside.

While eating the khichdi, Aniruddha asked, “Who is at home with you today?” “Subhadra is there,” Kabir said. “She fell asleep after taking her medicine. Sarita has postponed her sewing work until the day after tomorrow. Yesterday the pot of rice in her house was fuller than usual.” His voice trembled slightly on the last sentence. He did not tell Aniruddha the whole story of Sarita’s third plate; it had been a private moment in her home. But Aniruddha understood how deeply the question of food was bound to mourning in so many households. He left half his bowl uneaten, then after a little while lifted it again and resumed eating. Hunger and guilt did not move at the same pace.

“Yesterday I opened Naira’s book cupboard,” Kabir said. “I saw a notebook with a water stain inside its last page. I thought, if only I had kept her at home that night…” Aniruddha said, “I gave Naira notice of the authorised inspection. There was a connection between her work and my decision. But the sequence of blame does not end with one person.” Kabir looked at him for a moment. “Are you asking me to agree with you?” “No. Perhaps I only want to hear my own voice.” Kabir put down his bowl. “I can listen. But neither of us will suppress the facts that must be given to the investigation merely because we share this grief.”

In the afternoon Shailaja came to the door. She wanted written notice of the next hearing in the investigation into Saraswati Devi’s death; Aniruddha had been responsible for keeping that copy at the hospital counter. Kabir offered to go outside, but Shailaja said, “This concerns a public record. If I need privacy, I’ll say so.” Aniruddha opened the dry folder. Shailaja checked

the dates on the pages. “I heard about your injury,” she said. “I hope you recover soon. But your suffering cannot answer my questions about my mother-in-law’s death.” Discomfort crossed Aniruddha’s face for an instant. “I haven’t made such a claim,” he said. “But if my conduct has suggested it, I’ll correct that.”

Shailaja took the written notice. In one corner of an old entry, the time at which the error concerning medicine availability had been corrected was clearly recorded. “You admitted the error; that much has been done,” Shailaja said. “Now, whatever the inquiry establishes, the family must be fully informed on that day. I do not want my mother-in-law’s medical history turned into someone else’s story of self-punishment.” Kabir listened quietly. Shailaja expressed her sorrow for Naira’s death, but did not make that sorrow a preface to what she needed to say next. She rose and reached the door, then turned to ask where she should pay the fee for a certified copy. Aniruddha directed her to the designated desk. Her questions carried rights with them.

At that moment Devi Gond was passing through the courtyard. She had a bandage over the small wound on her forehead and her training notebook in her hand. Aniruddha asked whether her examination was complete. “I had the wound checked,” Devi said. “I’ll go again the day after tomorrow. All day people ask why Urmila didn’t survive and how I did. I couldn’t even see everything that happened at that moment.” Kabir invited her to sit, but Devi said her mother was waiting for lunch. On one page of her notebook she had written the accurate times of her work, not imagined scenes of death. “I will tell what I saw,” Devi said. “Why should they demand an answer from my mouth about what I did not see?” “Your answer is enough,” was all Aniruddha said. Devi went on her way.

After Shailaja had gone, Aniruddha remained silent for a long time. “It seems to me that in their eyes my injury has no value at all,” he said. Kabir replied softly, “Not as an answer to the question about her mother-in-law. But it matters for your treatment. A person can be a patient with a wound and also answerable for an earlier decision.” “How do you manage to keep those two things apart?” Aniruddha asked. Kabir did not smile. “It isn’t that I can. I am trying now. On the day Naira died, we kept separating the meanings of every word: contact lost, recovered, identified. It was then that Rama taught us how a hurried conclusion makes the truth smaller.”

Later in the afternoon Salma and a new trainee healthcare worker contacted Aniruddha, not to inspect his wound but for his scheduled health review by telephone. Salma asked whether he had received the prescribed medicines, whether there had been any unusual pain or bleeding, and whether the date of his next examination was clear. Aniruddha answered. He was about to ask about Jamuna’s clinical report, then stopped himself. “I’ll obtain whatever information I am entitled to through the written handover later. You are on duty now.” “That’s right,” Salma said. “A new doctor is covering

that shift. You look after your wound." When he put down the telephone, what showed on Aniruddha's face was not displeasure but the fatigue of having his role temporarily changed.

Towards evening a reminder of the time for Subhadra's medicine appeared on Kabir's phone. He stood up. "Don't neglect your mother's needs for my sake," Aniruddha said. "I won't," Kabir answered. "That's why I'm leaving now." He copied the date of the next examination from the prescription onto a small separate sheet. "Tomorrow I'll speak to the people who can bring lunch. If a safe hospital vehicle is available the day after tomorrow, I'll come with you. If it isn't, I'll ask about another arrangement. Don't set off on foot by yourself in defiance of the instructions about your injury." Aniruddha asked, "How many days is this to go on?" Looking at the paper, Kabir said, "As long as the examinations are needed and you agree. This is not a promise of permanent benevolence."

Before Kabir left, Aniruddha picked up a sheet of paper. It was a copy of the account of what had happened on the day of his injury. "If you want the truth for me and for Naira, there is an error here that should be corrected," he said. Kabir looked surprised. Aniruddha showed him the line: 'Injured while evacuating a patient along the safe route.' "That route had been inspected at the time," he said, "but the loose panel was not safe. So instead of 'safe' it ought to say 'the temporary route approved at the time'." Kabir studied the paper. "It is your report; you must make the correction. But the amended line must carry a date and signature." Aniruddha prepared a separate page of corrective notes. He did not scrape the original line away. What had been said at two different times remained in two different inks.

As he stepped down from the veranda, Kabir saw an elderly woman in the house opposite trying to lift a water pitcher. "Shall I put it by the door for you?" he asked. She said yes. Kabir lifted the pitcher but did not go inside the doorway; he did not know where she wanted the vessel placed. The old woman showed him the spot. In this brief exchange of help no one spoke of anyone's grief. Having set the pitcher down, he walked towards home. At one point along the way dust thrown up by the wheel of a rubble cart settled on his sandals. He brushed it off, and suddenly remembered how Naira, walking through such dust, used to hold her notebook high inside her bag. The memory halted for an instant, then walked on with him.

At home Kabir sat beside Subhadra's cot. Her medicine had been taken at the appointed time. Subhadra drank water by herself, then looked into her son's face and asked, "Where had you gone?" "To accompany Aniruddha to have his dressing checked." "Is he badly injured?" "A doctor examined him. He has to be seen again." After a while Subhadra said, "I cannot understand the expression people put on their faces after they survive. Was it wrong to want to live?" Kabir looked at the blue veins in his mother's hand. "No," he said. "But the memory of those who did not survive keeps coming before those

who did." Subhadra replied, "Then do whatever work these living hands can do today. You may ask the remaining questions again tomorrow."

By the window Kabir noticed an old shopping list in Naira's handwriting. Salt, mustard oil, glue for books: three items had been marked. He had bought nothing today. "Will you go to the market tomorrow?" Subhadra asked. "I will," Kabir said. "But first I'll look at your new prescription." Subhadra smiled. "You've acquired your father's habit of forgetting the salt." Kabir's eyes filled with tears, but he did not hold back his smile. After a death, such ordinary teasing within the household seemed to him almost an offence. Yet for a little while he allowed himself to live inside it too.

That night Aniruddha sat alone at the table in his house. Instead of pleading to return to work without authorisation, he opened his treatment slip. He tried to keep his arm perfectly straight beneath the sheet; when that caused pain, he adjusted his position. The examination date Kabir had written lay beside him. Next to it Aniruddha placed three separate papers: personal treatment, correction of the hospital's supply records, and the unresolved questions of building safety. None cancelled another. He wrote a note saying that, if the inquiry committee wished, he would give a direct account of the moment he was injured, but the presence of that injury could not provide a complete explanation of anyone's death.

A little later a message arrived from Salma: since the patients had been transferred to the new safe rooms, separate pages had been opened in the treatment register; the monitoring of Jamuna Devi continued. Aniruddha read the message and sent back only the acknowledgement required. He issued no direct medical instructions through that channel. A slight itch rose beside the bandage on his arm. He resisted the urge to open it and look, because the time for treatment had been fixed. Once he had asked his own patients questions like these: How did you feel after taking the medicine? Now he himself had to learn to live within the interval between prescribed times.

That same night an unfamiliar woman sat outside the temporary women's consultation room, folding a piece of paper. Her name was Champa, but she did not want it called out loudly at the reception desk. An employee asked whether her case was for the police or for treatment. "First I want to speak privately with a female healthcare worker," Champa said. "I'll decide about the rest afterwards." The employee told her the time reserved for private consultations on Salma's shift, and did not ask her to describe the matter before everyone. Far away from this scene, Kabir was on his way home; he knew nothing of Champa. Her waiting had a rhythm of its own, and there was no need to make it an immediate answer to anyone else's story of grief.

At dawn the next day Kabir stood not before the medicine window but beside the utensils at home. Porridge was cooking for Subhadra, and he had prepared a small envelope containing the payment due to Chandrika for the

food supplied. For the meal to be sent to Aniruddha's house, he wrote a short note: 'Please say by telephone first whether you will accept the lunch sent today. Tulsi will be able to confirm the vehicle's time for the day after tomorrow.' There was no solemn sentence about grief in the note. Kabir spoke Naira's name once in his mind. He could not decide the reason he himself had remained alive, but he could write down the time, permission, and responsibility for the first task of the day. He did not leave the courtyard without turning down the flame beneath the pot.

Chapter 128 · Champa's Treatment

A small drop of water clung to the rim of the glass on the consultation-room table. Champa tried to brush it away with a finger, but the moment she bent that finger a pain rose through her wrist. The glass remained where it was. Outside, names were being called in turn. The young woman at the reception desk came to the other side of the curtain and said quietly, "It's your turn. I haven't called out your name." Champa looked at her. Someone had remembered what she had said the previous night. That small fact gave her the courage to enter.

One leg of the chair in the room did not rest properly on the level floor. Salma Sheikh asked for the chair to be replaced and gave Champa the choice of another. Only after Champa had sat down did Salma lift her eyes from the papers and ask, "First tell me what is troubling you most just now." She did not hurry to put a single name to the illness. She asked whether Champa wanted to speak alone or would like someone brought in with her. "Alone, for now," Champa said.

Footsteps sounded behind the curtain. Salma told the attendant outside to find another waiting place for the next patient and not to let anyone enter without notice. She explained which details would be necessary in the treatment register, and that Champa would not be pressed to say what she did not wish to say. "Will what I tell you go into the shelter's list?" Champa asked. Salma shook her head. "The shelter is responsible for food and accommodation. Your private treatment record is not part of its public list. If any information has to be shared, we'll speak with you first."

Champa's blue anchal had slipped over the arm of the chair. She began removing the old glass bangles from her wrist, one by one. Two stuck fast. Salma asked if she wanted help. Champa extended her hand, then immediately drew it back. "No. I'll take them off myself," she said. After some effort the bangles came free. Bruised skin showed above her wrist. She turned her eyes away. The previous evening, when she had gone to collect a receipt for the old belongings in her room, there had been an argument near the door. That much she told Salma. When she tried to answer the next three questions—whose voice she had heard, how many people had been there, whose hand had touched her—her lips grew dry.

"Would you like some water?" Salma asked. Champa said yes. Salma waited. Slowly Champa began to understand that treating someone who had been hurt did not give another person the right to demand the whole story of her testimony. "Someone caught hold of me and stopped me," she said. "I was pushed. I didn't fall all the way to the ground, but I struck the wall. That's as much as I can say now." Salma wrote down the cause as reported, the symptoms, and her own inferences separately. She did not ask why Champa

had gone there, why she had gone alone, or why she had not told someone beforehand. She asked again for permission to examine the injured wrist.

During the examination Salma asked where the pain lay, whether Champa had trouble moving her fingers, whether there was tingling, and whether she felt any other discomfort in her body. Treatment and any additional tests, she said, would depend on a full examination: a visible bruise alone could not reveal every injury beneath the skin. Champa bent the fingers of her right hand. The pain grew worse when she tried to straighten them. Salma wrote the necessary examination slip, set down instructions for rest and care, and told her to contact a healthcare worker without waiting for the appointed date if the pain increased, her hand went numb, or new symptoms appeared. Champa asked for time to read the slip. Salma put down her pen.

"Does this page say 'violence'?" Champa asked. Salma replied, "It records the parts of the incident you described that matter medically. I haven't written the name of an accused person, because you haven't given me a name. What I observed myself is recorded separately." Champa asked whether she would receive treatment if she did not disclose a name. "Treatment will not be withheld on that condition," Salma said. She read out the entries: right wrist, pain, swelling, a brief account of the incident as given by the patient. There was no single sentence on that sheet with room enough for the whole of her fear.

Champa said that at night the creak of a door made her sit bolt upright. She ran to her mother whenever she heard her cough; if the curtain moved, she thought someone was about to enter again. Salma asked permission to speak further about those experiences of fear and explained the option of mental-health counselling. "You needn't tell everything on the first day," she added. "But sleeplessness and fear are also matters for treatment." "Will I have to say all the same things again in that room?" Champa asked. Salma explained that the limits of what another counsellor needed to know could be made clear, and that Champa herself could decide when, and before whom, to give a fuller account.

Outside on the veranda, two employees passed carrying boxes of medicine in a large tray. A temporary drainage channel had been made beside the new rooms, but the collapsed portion near the old hospital wing remained cordoned off with rope. One employee's sandal slipped on the wet ground. He caught himself and immediately alerted the person responsible for wiping the floor. Salma looked outside. "Patients mustn't be taken along that strip," she said. Champa asked whether the medicine she was about to receive was actually available in the hospital or had merely been approved on paper. Salma checked the prescription against the supplies physically in stock. One medicine was available; for the other, an alternative would have to be decided in consultation with the clinician. No false entry of availability was made in anyone's name.

Champa’s thoughts returned to the earlier town assembly. There, a severed line from a message on her telephone had been read aloud. She could still recognise one man’s laugh, but she did not know who had stolen the original copy at that gathering. “What if someone reads out what I say here as well?” she asked. Salma showed her the lock on a small cupboard, explained the restricted access to the register, and added that keeping records secure was a responsibility, though no arrangement could be described as a magically impregnable wall. Champa asked her question again: “Who can take a copy?” Salma showed her the procedure, not a public meeting.

Ruhani sat at the side of the waiting area. Her watch had stopped, so she was trying to tell the time by the line of sunlight at the window. She had told Champa’s mother that Champa had gone for an examination, but had disclosed nothing about the injury in front of anyone. A small box of food had come from Rukhsana’s kitchen, though no plate had been set out with Champa’s name on it. Ruhani put the receipt for the meal into her bag. She needed to know the date of Champa’s next appointment in order to coordinate the shelter vehicle. Even so, she did not go to the doctor’s door and ask for the report. Experience had taught her that sometimes helping someone meant waiting.

Inside, Champa asked Salma, “Can I go to work tomorrow?” Her work was washing and folding clothes; the cost of her mother’s medicine and the old rent arrears were separate burdens. Salma gave her a time for another examination, when it could be decided how much use of the hand would be safe in its present condition. For the moment, she said, it would be better to avoid lifting heavy, wet clothes. “If I don’t work, they’ll cut my wages,” Champa said. That was not a problem Salma could remedy with a hospital medicine. She offered a written medical recommendation defining the limits of Champa’s work without including unnecessary private details of the incident. Champa agreed to take that sheet.

While the work certificate was being prepared, Champa suddenly laughed. Salma looked surprised. “In this city of papers, even a hand needs a separate certificate for itself,” Champa said. “Tomorrow the employer will ask who is going to lift the clothes. Today my hand is telling me that I won’t.” Salma smiled, but did not alter the wording of the certificate. It stated the work restrictions clearly and gave the date for review. If Champa wished, she could give the employer a copy of this document, not the complete treatment register. Salma asked whether she needed separate information about medicines for her mother. “My mother’s medicines will continue as before,” Champa replied. “Their papers are safe in my trunk today.”

At the end of the consultation Salma said that if Champa decided to make a formal statement concerning the violence, assistance could be arranged. The applicable procedure, safety measures, and available options could be explained without deciding anyone’s guilt in advance. “Will someone come here today

and start questioning me?" Champa asked immediately. "I have not arranged any such meeting without telling you," Salma said. "If any necessary procedure or exception applies, I'll explain it clearly." Champa adjusted the edge of her sari. "Today I'll finish the examination. I need another day for the statement. And if I change my mind on that day?" Salma replied, "I won't close off the answer before hearing your question."

Champa gathered her papers and stood up, but pain rose again in her wrist. This time she sat back down and chose for herself to wait a little longer. Outside, the food in Ruhani's bag was growing cold; inside, it was necessary to remain seated for now. "Please tell her I'll be out after the examination," Champa said. "Nothing about the injury." Through an employee Salma passed on only that message. Ruhani was not called into the room by announcing Champa's name. Often, in the process of turning information into a written communication, the rights contained within it change. Today no more information went outside than Champa had chosen to send.

Beneath the peepal tree outside the building, Ruhani spread a sheet and sat down. When Champa came out, the first thing she asked was, "Will you eat?" Champa nodded. They opened the food. There were two pieces of bottle gourd among the rice. Champa could not hold the spoon, so she shaped a mouthful with her left hand. Instead of looking at her injured hand, Ruhani opened the water bottle and passed it to her. For a while neither spoke. Then Ruhani said, "Tell me if you need the vehicle again tomorrow. We'll decide beforehand how much to enter under shelter expenses." "I may need it," Champa answered. "But don't put a complete list of my medical expenses under my name on the noticeboard."

A faint crease appeared on Ruhani's forehead. "Last time I wrote 'women's treatment' in the register. Could someone have worked out the name from that?" "Even without a name," Champa said, "people can work out which woman went alone that day." Ruhani took the register from her bag, but did not ask Champa to fill it out there and then. "My accounts have entries for plates of food, vehicle fares, and medicines," she said. "I'll ask everyone how we can protect identities separately." "Before you ask everyone," Champa replied, "ask the person whose name it is." Ruhani closed the register.

On the way home, two new posters had been put up on the wall of the municipal building. One carried photographs of the hospital rescue workers; the other gave the count of relief supplies at the shelter. Naira's face did not appear in the photograph. Champa did not know how many documents had acquired Naira's name since her death. Looking towards the posters, Ruhani said they would need an example of the treatment and transport accounts at the next meeting. "Why must I display my wound to show an amount of money?" Champa asked. Ruhani did not reply. She read the totals printed on the poster, then said, "If we try to put an entire person's life inside a count,

we'll get the accounts wrong too." Champa expressed neither agreement nor praise for the sentence. She merely slowed her steps.

At the main entrance to the shelter, Rukhsana was waving a bamboo fan to draw the smoke from the cooking fire outside. Seeing Champa, she asked, "Was there enough salt in the food?" A new volunteer behind her asked where Champa had been injured. Ruhani opened her mouth to interrupt, but Champa answered for herself. "I went for treatment. I won't discuss the rest just now." The volunteer was embarrassed, then asked whether the meal had arrived at the right time. Champa answered that question easily. Even in a single courtyard, two questions could have different permissions.

Champa's mother was sitting in a patch of sunlight on the veranda. One arm of her old spectacles had been tied with thread. "Why so long?" she asked. Champa sat beside her, laid the end of her sari over the bandage on her wrist, but made no determined effort to conceal it. "The examination took time," she said. "Has the pain gone down?" her mother asked. "Not yet. They've given me medicine and a date to go back." Her mother held out a hand; Champa put her left hand into it. "Did you have a quarrel with someone?" her mother asked quietly. For a long while Champa looked at their joined hands. "I'll tell you what I'm able to tell you. For now, take your cough medicine," she replied.

Her mother grew a little angry. "Am I your mother or not? I ought to know everything." Champa heard the old intimacy in that voice. "You are my mother. But even after being hurt, I'm still your daughter, not an open document," she said. Her mother took off her spectacles and began wiping them with her sari. After a while she said, "If I don't know, I'll be frightened." "I'm frightened too," Champa replied. "But I'll choose when to speak. Let me sit beside you tonight." Her mother nodded. Fear and closeness sat together between them.

That afternoon a small meeting was held to arrange the rooms in the shelter. Ruhani said the municipal supply register would make available an account of all the plates, sheets, and medicines received. But a person's injury, relationships, movements, or possible statement to the police would not be treated as a public item. "What if somebody gets relief by making a false claim?" one member asked. "Check the receipt of goods and money. Read the rules governing claims," Ruhani answered. "Don't turn the private lives of people who need treatment into a market." Champa was sitting on a bench at the back. Her name had not been raised, but she asked, "When will these rules be available in writing?" The meeting secretary picked up his pen.

As the minutes were being prepared, Champa remembered an earlier experience. Once, a word crossed out by the secretary's pen had allowed Ruhani's words to circulate with the opposite meaning. This time Champa asked to read the written line herself. At first the page said, 'General display of

the confidential list of patients shall be postponed.' "Postponed?" Champa asked. "Does that mean it can be put up again tomorrow?" Ruhani looked at the secretary. He changed the wording to: 'Treatment details shall not be made public without individual consent or a lawful basis.' Champa asked whether the shelter members would be told the limits governing these records. Her name had still not entered the public text.

Meanwhile a man outside the gate was calling out to Ruhani in a loud, heavy voice. In his hand he held a photocopy of a notice concerning Champa's old rent dispute. "Which room have you given this woman?" he asked. The guard at the gate would not let him in. When Ruhani came outside, the man said he had to make an inventory of belongings at the house and needed to speak to Champa immediately. "There is a procedure for submitting notices," Ruhani replied. "That paper does not entitle you to information about a resident's private room here." The man said he represented the landlord. Ruhani asked for written authorisation and an appropriate means of contact. His identity had not yet been verified.

Champa was told about the visitor, but was not ordered to stand before him face to face. She looked at the man outside through the window. She did not know for certain whether he was connected with what had happened the previous evening. Instead of making an identification on suspicion, she wrote down the time, the paper in his hand, what he had said, and who had been present. Ruhani asked whether they should put this account in the community register. "Record what happened at the shelter gate," Champa said. "Don't put guesses about my injury on that page." The copy the man had brought was kept in a separate envelope. The authenticity of its original still needed checking.

A woman hanging clothes to dry in the courtyard asked Champa whether the visitor was the same man who had pushed her. Champa's heart began to pound. "I can't give a name just now," she said. The woman insisted: "If you tell us the name, we can all join together to protect you." Champa looked at her. The desire to protect her was genuine in its own way. But if a crowd assembled to accuse someone on the strength of a guess, both Champa's examination and her safety could be compromised. "When I give testimony, I'll say what I saw," she replied. "If you want to help, don't send anyone my photograph or my whereabouts without telling me." The woman slipped the telephone she was holding into her pocket.

By evening the pain in Champa's hand had returned. She cared for it as the medical instructions directed and read the warning signs written on the slip. While her mother's meal was being prepared, she helped Rukhsana with the work at the stove. Champa was about to try lifting a wet cooking vessel, as she had done before. "You check the salt today," Rukhsana said. "I'll take down the heavy pot." "Where will the wages for that work be recorded?" Champa asked. "In my accounts," Rukhsana said with a laugh. "Not as a favour you

owe me.” Champa began counting the rice. Rukhsana would not accept the old habit of taking somebody’s labour for nothing under the pretext of sympathy.

After the meal, Champa opened her iron trunk. Inside it, wrapped separately in pieces of cloth, were rent receipts, her mother’s medical papers, records of unpaid wages, old petitions to the municipal assembly, and the acknowledgement of a complaint about private messages. She did not put today’s treatment slip among her mother’s papers. Instead she took an empty envelope and wrote on it in small letters: ‘My treatment.’ On another sheet she wrote three questions for herself: what rights and options would she have when making a statement; what safe means existed to prevent the person she feared from coming near her; and how would she manage lost earnings and the cost of medicine if she missed days of work? The answers to those questions would not be found in one office.

Ruhani was assigning the night watch when Champa called her over and said that she would need a vehicle on the day of her next examination, but that the details of her injury must not be disclosed before her mother without her consent. “There’s one thing I can tell you,” she added. “I may have to give testimony about what happened, but I haven’t decided against whom, or when.” “If you wish,” Ruhani replied, “you can ask the assistance desk for an appointment to explain the procedure. I won’t write a statement in your place.” “Ask for the appointment,” Champa said. “Give my name only when the office makes clear what minimum information it needs.” Ruhani made a written copy of that limit for herself. She did not ask to see Champa’s treatment slip.

Outside, the water was rising again. The old hospital wing was still cordoned off, and the obstruction at the outlet near the warehouse extension had not been fully removed. Behind the kitchen, drain water was pressing towards the wall. Rukhsana alerted the guard about buckets and a safe route through the area. This danger was separate from Champa’s private injury, yet whether she could come here a second time for medicine depended on the condition of that route. Because of the fresh rain, Ruhani decided to check tomorrow’s vehicle arrangements again. They hoped a vehicle would be available. All that had been recorded as certain was that today’s road had remained passable until the return journey.

Before going to sleep, her mother called Champa to her. “Do you remember when you talked about going round the market?” she asked. “You said you wanted jalebis.” Champa tried to laugh, but only her lips moved. That same private conversation from her telephone had been made public some days earlier, and since then even an ordinary wish had seemed to carry a risk. “When I get better, I’ll go with you,” her mother said. “When your cough has eased,” Champa replied. “And when I want to.” “You’ll have to ask me too,” her mother said. This time they both laughed softly. Champa knew

the laughter would not take away the pain of the injury. Still, the laughter was theirs.

In the last watch of the night she opened her telephone. An old message from someone she knew was still there, asking whether the day was all right. For a long time Champa had not answered that question. Then she wrote: “I had treatment today. I’m somewhere safe, but there are things I can’t speak about yet. If I ever want to meet, I’ll tell you the time myself.” She sent the message. This time she did not immediately switch off the screen. She understood for herself the meaning of that small sentence written of her own free will. Complete confidence that no one would read it aloud at a meeting was not yet possible. Even so, she would not surrender her right to make contact.

Lying on her bed, Champa watched the pain in her wrist and counted the movement of the clock’s hands. The date of the next consultation was written on her paper; the possible date for a statement she had left blank. On the trunk beside the door lay two separate envelopes: ‘My treatment’ and ‘What I saw.’ No accused person’s name had yet been written in the second. But today a healthcare worker had examined her hand without taking possession of her story; Ruhani had not demanded her private treatment slip without permission; and her mother had finally agreed to her request simply to sit beside her. Dawn would bring decisions to make all over again. For this night she had kept one decision in her own hands: treatment first, testimony in her own time.

Chapter 129 · Ruhani's List

The measuring bowl slipped from Rukhsana's hand, scattering a few grains of rice across the wet veranda. Instead of bending to gather them up, she first lowered the flame beneath the cooking pot. Near the shelter's main gate, a young man was trying to nail a sheet of white paper to a strip of bamboo. The first nail would not enter the damp part of the wall; at the second blow, the top of the paper tore. Across it, in large letters, were the words: "List of Shelter Beneficiaries." Rukhsana came outside and caught hold of his hammer to stop him. "Who told you to write this list?" she asked. "Orders from the municipal relief office," he answered. "If they're fed here, people must be able to see their names." Rukhsana called to Ruhani, who was sitting inside the gate. The torn sheet still hung by a single nail, but half a dozen people had already begun reading it.

Ruhani came out carrying her old bunch of keys. She asked the young man to take the paper down. He said there had been complaints of irregularities in the relief accounts; unless the names were displayed, the next consignment of grain would be held back. Ruhani took the sheet into her own hands. Beside Champa's name was a room number; an elderly woman was marked "ill"; and the names of two children's mothers had been entered without permission. The date on the sheet showed that it was a copy of an old attendance register, not proof of the present count. "Whose signature authorizes this copy?" she asked. The young man showed her a folded slip from his pocket. It said, "Provide particulars for verification." It contained no instruction to display them publicly.

The crowd at the gate was growing. Champa had come onto the veranda with a glass of water for her mother when she saw the bottom line of the paper and stopped. The day before, she had asked that her name not be spoken in the consultation room without her consent. Seeing her name written here alongside a room number brought back the moment when an earlier private message of hers had been made public. Rather than snatch the sheet from the people reading it, she asked Ruhani, "How long has this been up?" Ruhani looked at her watch. "I had it taken down as soon as I saw it. I can't say how many people read it before then." "We should find out what we can about who has seen it," Champa said. "Making the paper disappear quietly will not make the matter disappear."

On a table in the old schoolroom, Zubaida set two spare bricks to hold the damp paper while it dried. Rukhsana brought the grain ledger, the oil receipts, and the payment slips for everyone who worked in the kitchen. Ruhani laid the sheet from the gate face down and recorded the date and source of the copy. "We will draw up lists today," she said, "but first we must decide which list is meant for whom. This account may tell us how many

people have been fed. It does not follow that it must tell us which room each person sleeps in.” “And if the relief office really asks for every name?” Zubaida said. “An authorized inspection by an office is one thing,” Ruhani answered. “A sheet hung out for everyone in the street is another. We’ll establish what has actually been requested before we respond.”

Vinod Saw, the municipality’s assistant accountant, arrived later in the morning with a blue attendance register in his hand and a small pink token tucked between its pages. Not finding the paper at the gate, he said, “They’re asking questions at the municipal assembly about the sacks allotted to this shelter. There’s an allegation that the same person’s name appears in two places. How can I sign anything unless I know how many people are staying here?” Ruhani invited him inside, though not towards the private rooms. Rukhsana explained that today’s rice receipts, yesterday’s leftover khichdi, and the kitchen workers’ wages had all been recorded on separate pages. Vinod examined them carefully. His question was a real one; that did not necessarily make the remedy he had prepared the right one.

On a blank sheet Vinod ruled three columns: name, room, benefit. “Fill them all in,” he said. Champa, who had been listening from a distance, stepped forward. “If that sheet is left on a table, could someone photograph it?” Vinod shifted uneasily. “I’ll keep it in the file.” “And when you’re not there,” she asked, “how will another employee open it?” “That depends on the office rules,” Vinod replied. Ruhani wrote down the answer. “Then give us a copy of those rules,” she said. “We will cooperate with the audit. But before we make an open register of rooms and family circumstances, we need to establish both the authority for it and the safeguards.”

Rukhsana spread a sheet of figures before them. The number of people who had slept at the shelter, the number who had received lunch, and the packed meals distributed to families stranded on the road were recorded separately. “Thirty plates of food went out yesterday,” she said, “but thirty people did not spend the night here. If we enter thirty names in the overnight register, we shall be writing a lie ourselves.” Vinod removed his spectacles. Rukhsana opened another page: who had been paid, whose wages were outstanding, how much oil had been used. “If you need an audit, count the rice, the plates and the receipts. When there is a genuine need to ask about a person, tell that person and explain the limits of the inquiry.”

Word of a meeting reached the courtyard. Some believed publishing names would prevent people from receiving aid twice; others feared that once their addresses were exposed, old domestic disputes would find them again. Ruhani stopped the gathering from settling the question by a single show of hands. “Whether someone’s name may be printed cannot be decided by a majority of other people,” she said. “First, everyone must be told separately where the information would be published, for how long, and exactly what it would include. Saying no will not cost anyone food, medicine or a roof.” An elderly

man asked, “What if I cannot read?” “I’ll read it aloud,” Zubaida told him, “but I won’t put an answer into your mouth.”

Someone proposed that Champa should draft the consent slips. She did not refuse at once. Instead, she asked, “Am I to write the form, or be responsible for getting people to fill it in as well?” “We need your eye on the wording,” Ruhani said. “The personal answers can be taken in private, by me or another helper chosen for the task.” Champa read the first sentence on the sheet: “I give permission for my name to be published.” Her pen stopped. “That offers only one answer. Where is the space to refuse, to change the name used, or to withdraw permission later?” They made the form again. Champa paused to adjust the bandage around her wrist. Helping to write a form was no substitute for her own treatment.

The first slip went to Manjari. She had decided to leave the shelter and live in another room, but a receipt for wages owed for her earlier sewing work was still outstanding. “Who is supposed to see my name?” she asked. “If you wish,” Ruhani replied, “you can appear in the public annual account as a person who received support and voluntarily agreed to be named. Otherwise we will give only the total number. There is a separate authorized register for government inspection.” “I’ll describe my sewing work,” Manjari said. “But I won’t have my old room here, my new rented place, and the temporary aid I received all made into a single identity.” A space was left for a description, whose final words she would write herself.

The second slip reached Champa’s mother. The old woman put on her spectacles and turned the page over. “If my name is printed, people will work out my daughter’s name too. How will you stop that?” “Someone might put two pieces of information together and guess,” Ruhani said. “I cannot promise that this will never happen.” The old woman sat for a long while in the sunlight. “Then don’t print my name either,” she said. “But if my name isn’t there, how will you say that medicine was given?” Rukhsana explained that the total expenditure on medical assistance and the authorized receipts would remain available for verification; no personal name needed to be written on the meeting-room wall. The old woman decided that her share should remain in the relief figures, but without her name being publicized.

On the other side of the courtyard Shabnam sat fastening her little child’s broken sandal. Hearing that a photographer might come to prepare a donation report, she immediately asked, “Why should they need his face in the picture?” Vinod said that the municipal report sometimes asked for photographs as evidence. “Then show the cot, the sheets, the water pitcher,” Shabnam answered. “Not the child’s face without asking.” Ruhani had no intention of bringing the child forward merely as the subject of a signature form. The limits of both the child’s welfare and a guardian’s consent were written down; no permission for a publicity photograph was granted at that

time. The child put on his sandal and ran outside. He did not need to understand every part of the argument.

The tea on the table was growing cold. Zubaida noticed that Vinod opened his blue register for every slip. “Answer me one thing,” she said. “Will you write down the names of the people who say no?” Vinod considered it. “An officer may ask how many refused.” “Then record the number,” Zubaida said. “If someone’s decision not to make a name public becomes another way of identifying that person in a list, consent is only a game played with paper.” Vinod objected that an inspection required evidence. In the end they agreed to keep the response slips in a sealed private file, to be shown only in an authorized inspection under the applicable rules. The public figures would give only the totals under “Permission given,” “Permission refused,” and “Response pending.”

By midday Tara Binout had come to look at the drain behind the shelter. Water was creeping up beneath the damp wall; the outlet near the warehouse extension was still not fully cleared. She told Rukhsana to keep the heavy cooking cauldron away from that wall until the next day’s inspection. Vinod immediately asked, “Who is staying in this room? We’ll have to prepare a danger list.” “Measure the wall, the watermarks, the route and the load when you record the hazard,” Tara replied. “For people who need to be told to move, arrange a safe means of contacting them directly. A warning board has no business displaying anyone’s private history.” Once again, before Ruhani, the list of names and the notice of danger revealed themselves as two different things.

With Zubaida and Rukhsana, Ruhani worked out the order in which every room would receive the warning. They did not gather people by shouting children’s names at closed doors. The authorized care sheet setting out who should be evacuated by which route in the event of fire or flood was placed in an envelope with restricted access, apart from the shared key box. The public board at the gate carried only the safe exits, kitchen hours, the assistance desk’s contact details, and the position of the bell to be rung in case of fire. Ruhani read the board herself. For the first time it occurred to her that the most useful public list need not contain a single person’s name.

Meanwhile, a woman entered by the back door carrying two old receipts in her bag. Her husband, she said, had once taken a meal there, but he had not stayed overnight. Because of that meal, the municipality’s temporary register had put his name beside those who had received accommodation. “People say we are taking grain from two shelters,” she said. Vinod’s expression hardened, but he did not repeat the accusation at once. The woman showed them both dates. One receipt recorded where food had been distributed; the other recorded a payment of wages. The same name had appeared in connection with two different activities. “These two documents will go into the office’s

verification," Ruhani said. "That doesn't prove every complaint false. It does, however, explain why this particular name appears twice."

Vinod asked for a verification slip to be prepared from the papers, but the woman would not give him the private places her husband had travelled. "He has been looking for work for a long time," she said. "If you want to check the accounts, check the dates and receipts. Where he slept, and when, is a matter for our own household." Vinod wrote: "Separate entries for meal distribution and wage payment; status awaiting verification." The nib of his pen caught in the damp paper. Rukhsana poured two drops of water from a vessel to clean it. Laughing, she said, "Don't make a rule that whenever the ink sticks in a ledger, you add somebody's name." Vinod smiled in spite of himself.

Champa was shown a copy of the consent form. She refused permission for her name to appear on a public list of shelter residents, but asked whether she could choose, one day, to speak at an open meeting about the confidentiality of medical treatment. "That would be a different permission," Ruhani said, "for that day's subject and that day's audience." On her slip Champa wrote, "Do not publish my place of residence within the shelter." She left the space beside "Speaking publicly in the future" blank. Seeing it, her mother said, "Fill that in when you feel like it." For the first time Champa felt that an empty box, too, could sometimes honour a decision.

Rukhsana gave permission for her name to appear in the public account of kitchen payments. "I run the kitchen," she said. "My wages and working hours must not be beyond scrutiny. But the bed I slept on last night has nothing to do with the wage ledger." Zubaida wanted her name on the list of people responsible for the shared keys at the gate, because it was necessary to identify them in an emergency. When she signed, she added a condition: being named as keeper of the gate key did not authorize anyone to open a private room. Ruhani understood that a person might choose to make one part of her working identity public while keeping another part of her life private. Enforcing that distinction with human hands was harder than writing it down.

Manjari returned with her proposed description: "Manjari — sewing and mending; contact for payment through the shelter office." There was no address for her new home. "Having my name printed might bring me customers," she said. "But it is still my right to set the price of my sewing." Champa read the sentence and asked, "What if a customer takes pity on you because you came from a shelter and offers less?" "Then I'll tell them my full price," Manjari said with a faint edge of mockery. "That's why I want my name printed—not as proof that I deserve charity." She wrote down the limits of her public professional description and signed. They did not permit that page to be pinned up in place of a register naming the shelter's residents.

Seeing a blank space for “How permission may be withdrawn,” Zubaida asked, “Once a sheet has been put up, how will you remove the photograph of it from people’s phones?” “I won’t promise that it can be erased everywhere,” Ruhani said plainly. “But we can immediately record a request to remove the name from our own board, from future copies, and from the revised version sent to the office. The person must know the limits of copies already circulated before deciding.” Manjari asked for a copy of her professional description. “When someone changes their mind,” Champa said, “they should not have to explain their reasons again before everyone.” Ruhani had the sentence added beneath the form, and Zubaida read it back to check the wording.

Late in the afternoon a second messenger arrived from Vinod’s office. “If a full list of individuals isn’t sent by tomorrow morning,” he said, “the department above may stop the next delivery.” Ruhani stared at him. In her hand was the account of twenty-four hours’ food expenditure; she knew exactly how much rice remained in the store. She made no instant declaration of heroism. “On whose written order?” she asked. “Under what condition? And if the supply decision is withheld, when does the procedure for alternative supply open?” The messenger had brought only a verbal report. Ruhani submitted a request for the written grounds and a time for a hearing, and sent Zubaida with it to obtain an acknowledgement of receipt.

Meanwhile Rukhsana counted the remaining rice again. They added up the night meal, the packed provisions for the patient vehicle at dawn, and the plates for the workers. “We will not write that what we have will last two days and then promise three,” she said. Shabnam asked whether the arrangement for milk for her child would be disrupted. “According to what we’ve received so far, there is milk for tonight,” Rukhsana answered. “We have no written confirmation of tomorrow’s delivery.” The small truth gave little comfort, but no one had to depend on a false assurance. Ruhani asked the local medical assistance desk for information about alternative contacts for essential supplies. She did not enter them in the register as supplies already approved.

Towards evening two separate documents were deposited at the municipal office. The first gave the aggregate counts for daily meals and overnight stays, the goods received, the balance remaining, and the actual receipts for wages paid. The second proposed a secure inspection of individual records: which authorized staff member might view them, for what reason, within what limits, and how use of the information would be accounted for after the inspection. The copy of the old list displayed at the gate without authorization was preserved as evidence, but its room identifiers were not reproduced in an openly circulated copy. Vinod signed the acknowledgement of receipt. He wrote that the next supply decision lay with the responsible officer; this acknowledgement was no guarantee of supplies. Ruhani’s hand trembled slightly, but she read the paper and retained her copy.

Back at the shelter they reviewed the slips of those who had volunteered to be named. Manjari had consented to the description of her work; Zubaida to being listed publicly as a holder of responsibility for the keys; Rukhsana to her name appearing in the transparent wage account. These were three permissions for three different purposes, so they were not combined into a “list of residents.” A response still pending was not counted as yes. Champa’s slip remained in its private envelope. No children’s faces or family room numbers went onto a publicity board. There remained a page that the municipality’s responsible official could request to inspect as needed; it was not opened for the crowd in the street.

That night Zubaida prepared a new board for the gate. Instead of using the nail driven into the damp wall, she fixed two strong hooks into the wooden frame. The board gave the kitchen hours, emergency exits, the place where the actual expenditure of donations could be inspected, and the time for lodging complaints. In one corner she wrote, “Each person makes their own decision about publication of their name.” Reading it, Rukhsana said, “Don’t make that line too small. Someone who wants to be named ought to have room for that choice as well.” Zubaida enlarged the letters a little. The old nail from yesterday’s torn sheet was still at the gate. She pulled it out and put it into a wooden box so that it would not pierce anyone’s foot.

After the meal the young man who had stood with a hammer that morning returned. His face showed his uncertainty about what he had done. “I really thought I was following orders,” he said. Champa was there. “How many people did you see looking at the sheet?” she asked. He thought for a moment. “Two men read it. One had his phone out, but I don’t know if he took a picture.” Champa asked that his statement be written down exactly as far as that. He recorded his name and the time. None of this established any new connection between the claimant who had come to the shelter over the earlier rent dispute and the violence Champa had previously suffered.

That night Champa said to her mother, “I helped make the form today, but I didn’t give them my name.” “Neither did I,” her mother answered. “But Rukhsana gave hers, didn’t she?” Champa laughed. “She gave them her name for her work. I didn’t give them mine for my room.” Her mother considered this for a while. “Today I understand,” she said. “Even people living under the same roof can give different answers.” Outside, a thin patter of rain touched the thatch. Champa’s wrist was aching, so her mother lifted the small water vessel for her. Champa did not protest. Instead of asking to hear anyone’s story, her mother said, “Tomorrow you have to show them your bandage. Don’t forget the time.”

Ruhani was the last to return the spilled grains to the measuring bowl beside the kitchen. Rukhsana had finished counting the plates; which families would need breakfast at dawn could be recorded without a sealed envelope. Under the shared rules the key to the storeroom was handed to Zubaida.

Ruhani left an empty line for the office's reply the following day. She made no claim that everyone inside the shelter could now sleep without fear of their name being printed without permission; there was still no complete account of how many people had read the morning's paper. But tonight the list at the gate showed the donations received, the hours of meals, and the safe exits—not the names and rooms of those living inside. Before turning out the light, Ruhani wrote a short phrase beside her own name: "Responsible for reviewing the list again."

Chapter 130 · Draupadi's Remaining Days

At the first light of dawn, the sound of rice being washed came from the royal household's kitchen. As a handful of grains turned in a bronze basin, a pale cloud rose through the water; then Malini, the cook, slowly poured it away. When Draupadi arrived, Malini stopped what she was doing and stood up. "Your Majesty, I shall have your meal brought to you here," she said. Draupadi looked towards the lit hearth. "First tell me how many people you are cooking rice for today." Before answering, Malini glanced at the five little bowls set out before her. Before the war, those bowls had been kept separately for the children at mealtimes. Now, though washed, they lay there all day.

Collecting herself, Malini said, "We are counting again. There are more of the wounded returned from the camps, more servants' children, more guests waiting to be fed." Draupadi asked, "Why are these five bowls set apart?" Malini's lips trembled. "I keep feeling that one day someone will reach out a hand and tell me to set aside rice for him now." Draupadi lifted one of the bowls. A small scratch from a fingernail marked its rim. She could not remember precisely whose it was; yet she held the bowl in her hand just as a child would slide it forward before asking for something.

"We do not need so many bowls today," Draupadi said. Malini lowered her eyes, as though the words themselves might erase something. Draupadi went on: "Wash them and put them away in a dry cloth. Count separately the plates needed for those who must be fed. No one is to say that I have forgotten my sons' names. But neither shall I order five empty plates to be set out every day while hungry people wait outside." Malini began gathering the bowls. Draupadi watched her hands: fine grains of rice were lodged beneath the fingernails after a night's work.

The smell of breakfast brought a slight ache to Draupadi's stomach. She had been awake until the last watch of the night. Whenever sleep touched her, she saw the lamps of the camp, and beneath them the faces of her sons fell into separate patches of shadow. A grain of rice that had once landed on Prativindhya's head; the brothers laughing at a question from Sutasoma; Shatanika hurrying as he walked—the memories did not return in any single order. At times the voices of Shrutakarma and Shrutasena merged, and she tried to call each separately within herself. Now she could not bear to let one voice stand in the place of another. Silently she spoke all five names and watched Malini carry away the bowls.

She met Subhadra at the kitchen door. The night's fatigue showed on Subhadra's brow, and she carried a vessel of hot water for Uttara. "Has Uttara eaten anything?" Draupadi asked. "She turns her face away at the sight of food," Subhadra said. "Whenever she remembers Abhimanyu, she can scarcely steady her breathing." Draupadi took the weight of the water vessel into her

own hands. “I shall go to her myself,” she said, “but first I shall ask what she wants. She is carrying a child, and we must care for her body. But we must not tell her to silence her own sorrow for the sake of the child in her womb.” For a few moments Subhadra looked into Draupadi’s face. “You must eat something too,” she said softly.

Draupadi did not answer. She turned to an elderly cook sitting beside the hearth, stirring lentils. “Who is the thin dal for today?” The old woman replied, “For those whose teeth have been injured, and for the wounded who cannot chew solid food.” “And those with fever?” The woman pointed to another earthen pot. There had always been such different kinds of food. But at the royal household’s feasts Draupadi’s attention had more often been drawn to the glittering rows of plates. Today she could see that talk of a plentiful meal meant nothing unless one knew how many mouthfuls the person seated before a plate could actually swallow.

Malini set a little thin rice in a bowl beside the fire. “Your Majesty, this is for you.” Draupadi took it and touched the food lightly with her fingers. It was hot. She did not eat; she only watched the steam rising above the rim. Subhadra sat down beside her. “If you cannot eat now, have them keep it for later,” she said. Draupadi put two mouthfuls into her mouth. Swallowing the warm rice hurt her throat. “I am not hungry, but I needed those two mouthfuls,” she said. Subhadra offered no congratulations. She put a little water in the empty vessel and slid it close to Draupadi.

Outside in the courtyard, workmen were repairing the wheels of chariots brought back from the war. The knock of hammers on wood now sounded louder than the festive drums of former days. In the royal household, preparations for Yudhishthira’s accession were being discussed. Some councillors believed that, after so long a war, a victory feast was necessary to bring the army and the city together. When Draupadi heard that the proposal would be sent to her, she set down her bowl. “I shall not oppose a meal shared by everyone,” she told Malini. “But those who are wounded today will not wait until the councillors’ day of celebration. Let us first count who must be fed, and on which day.”

She met Yudhishthira at the door of the council chamber. His face bore the want of sleep, the weight of responsibility, and the burden of his own decisions. “Do not trouble yourself to come to the council just now over a matter of food,” he said. Draupadi asked, “Are any of the kitchen workers on your council?” Yudhishthira was surprised. “The officers are there. The people who examine the stores accounts are there.” “Is Malini there? The person whose hands distribute the food will know who is ill, who is a child, who has arrived by a difficult road. How else will they understand?” Yudhishthira fell silent. Draupadi said, “I wish to attend the council not to display my grief, but to help decide about the food.”

At one end of the chamber lay accounts of the different heaps of grain. During the war much food had gone from the royal stores to the army; some granaries had been destroyed, and carts bringing supplies from the markets still could not travel freely. Prabodh, the storekeeper, said that what remained could sustain the royal family's regular arrangements, but the needs of all the families in the camps were uncertain. "Who has been counted under 'regular arrangements'?" Draupadi asked. Prabodh named the royal servants, guards, and guests. "And the families of the women who work in the kitchen?" Draupadi asked. Prabodh turned a page. "They have not been counted separately." "Then complete the missing count," Draupadi said, "before deciding whether the quantity of food should be reduced or increased."

Bhima entered the chamber with two wounded soldiers. One had an arm bound in bandages; the other had an injured jaw. "We endured hunger in the war," Bhima said. "If the people of the city cannot find food today, what kingdom have we saved?" The storekeeper grew frightened; Bhima's voice was deep and heavy. Draupadi spoke between them. "Brother, the two soldiers you have brought do not need the same assistance. One needs help putting food to his mouth; the other needs soft food. An order to open the granary is necessary, but we must also consider the form of the food and how it will reach them." Bhima's face softened. "I shall take them to the kitchen myself," he said.

An elderly councillor said, "The royal family is in mourning. The queen should be kept away from such petty arrangements." Draupadi looked at him. "Petty arrangements?" she asked. "For some days of my life, the measure of the mouthfuls I gave my sons was the greatest decision before me. Now that children in other homes are hungry, how has the counting of their food become petty?" The councillor rose to protest, but Yudhishthira motioned him back to his seat. Draupadi continued, "Before the next royal decree names the day of a feast, make certain that those wounded today will be fed."

Vidura, who had brought his experience of keeping accounts to the council, said that the number of families returning after the war would change each day. Draupadi agreed. "Then do not turn the count into an unchanging truth," she said. "The people who serve the food must see every day who has arrived, who has left, who is still in the outer camps. There must be a way of asking whether one plate or two will reach the person behind a name, and whether food also reaches the homes of those whose hands prepare it." Vidura wrote a new line in the margin of the proposal. Prabodh was still anxious about the distribution of grain. It was decided that the stores would first be counted as they actually stood, and that only afterwards would promises of distribution be written down.

When Draupadi moved to affix her royal seal, her hand stopped. It was the first document of state she had signed since the deaths of her sons. Would putting her name to this paper somehow diminish the days of mourning? The

thought came to her, and at once she understood that rice would not find its own way into the bowls merely because she withheld her seal. Slowly she pressed it into place. "Let this order be reviewed again tomorrow," she said. "If the accounts prove wrong, change it. No one must conceal a mistake on account of my name." Yudhishthira passed the document before him to a second officer for examination.

When the council ended, Draupadi went to the courtyard where the wounded were staying. A woman was giving water to her husband; lifting the lid was difficult because her right hand was injured. Draupadi held the vessel steady for her. Recognising her, the woman began to rise. "Remain seated," Draupadi said. Hesitantly, the woman asked, "Your Majesty, I am not a soldier's wife. My husband carried fodder for the horses. Our names do not appear among the families of soldiers." "How was he wounded?" Draupadi asked. The woman explained that he had been moving a cart that had caught fire. "Then why should his need for food depend upon a military rank?" Draupadi asked.

In another corner of the courtyard a little girl sat holding the stone of an unripe mango. Her mother said that since the terror of the night the child would take nothing into her mouth, but went on sucking the mango stone. Draupadi sat down beside her without taking it away. "What kind of mouthful do you like?" she asked. "Roti with ghee on it," the girl whispered. Her mother answered quickly, "Where is there ghee at a time like this?" Draupadi did not silence the mother. She sent word to Malini to prepare a roti for the child, but to check how much ghee was actually left in the stores. "If I promise her plenty without knowing how much there is," she told the mother, "her trust will be broken."

The stone in the girl's hand reminded Draupadi that one of her sons had preferred the tartness of an unripe mango to the sweetness of a ripe one. She wanted to hold the memory close, but the girl was looking towards her, waiting for food. Draupadi did not stroke her head. First she asked, "May I sit here?" The girl said yes. For some time they sat together without speaking. When tears fell from Draupadi's eyes, she made no effort to hide them. The girl sucked again at one edge of the mango stone. Her mother quietly wiped the dust from the spot with the edge of her sari.

At noon Kunti found Draupadi on the veranda behind the kitchen. Since telling the truth of Karna's birth, Kunti had found it difficult to speak easily with her sons. Draupadi did not rise when she saw her; nor did Kunti take this for an insult. "Have you eaten anything?" Kunti asked. "Two mouthfuls," Draupadi said. "I shall eat again now." Kunti untied a knot in the end of her sari and took out some dried jujube berries. "A woman gave me these on my way back from the ghat. I had kept them." Draupadi picked one up. A small part of it was split, but the rest was sound.

"Hearing Karna's name has not changed the pain within me," Draupadi said. "I have not come to ask you to change it," Kunti answered. "And my sons are no longer here. I am their mother. Your confession helps me understand your loss, but understanding that much does not make my own loss smaller." Kunti lowered her head. "I accept that," she said, and fell silent. A crow landed near an empty vessel on the veranda, then flew away again. Between the two women there opened a space for memory and disagreement in which no promise of forgiveness was demanded.

Breaking a piece from one of the berries, Kunti said, "I must ask after Radha's household. She raised the child; I spoke the truth of his birth too late. I cannot know what it would be right to send her without first asking." Draupadi replied, "Now that his name is known, the daily food of that household must not be stopped. And if someone hears stories of Karna's generosity and goes asking his family for gifts again, that would be wrong." For the first time Kunti looked directly at Draupadi. "I shall convey what you have said," she replied. Draupadi merely inclined her head. She finished her own mouthful without help.

Towards evening a maid arrived with a message from Gandhari's camp. There were questions about distributing food among the families of the wounded and the dead: some families of Kaurava soldiers felt ashamed to accept grain from the Pandavas' royal household. Draupadi decided to visit Gandhari's camp. Yudhishthira said that he too would go. "Come," Draupadi answered, "but first let me hear what the women themselves have to say. We can then ask together what belongs to the business of your government." Yudhishthira agreed. Draupadi's chariot went without a banner of victory; she had expressly instructed that it should.

At Gandhari's camp several women were cutting dry wood into short lengths beside a mat spread on the ground. One had lost a son in the war; another's husband had not yet returned. Gandhari recognised Draupadi's arrival by the sound of her voice. "You have come here?" she asked. "I have come to ask the people of your household about the grain," Draupadi said. Gandhari lifted a hand, but paused before touching her. Draupadi moved nearer and laid her hand in Gandhari's palm. They remained silent for a very long time.

"My sons are gone," Gandhari said at last. "All five of mine as well," Draupadi answered. There was no measure by which the two women's grief could be made equal: their sons' lives, the wrongs they had committed, the affection within their homes—all were different. "Today a widow told me that eating from the royal stores would mean betraying her dead husband," Gandhari said. "She does not want food from the enemy's side." "Is she here?" Draupadi asked. Gandhari lifted her hand towards a corner of the mat. "She will speak for herself," she said.

The woman's name was Charvi. She had not touched the leaf plate set before her. "My husband fought against the Pandavas," she said. "How can I eat their food?" Draupadi did not laugh away the question. "What work did your husband do?" "He bound the axles of chariots. During the war he had to take up a weapon too." "And what work do you do?" "I spin thread," Charvi said. Draupadi answered, "Cloth made from your thread may have been worn by Pandava soldiers and by Kauravas alike. Your labour belonged to your household. If you accept food today, it does not mean that you concede victory to either side. But whether to accept it is your decision."

After a while Charvi asked, "If I refuse, will my child's portion be stopped too?" "No," Draupadi answered at once. "Your child's hunger will not be punished for your disagreement. Food will remain here for her. You may give it to her yourself, or let a neighbour bring it to her." In a low voice Gandhari added, "There will be no condition of humiliation attached to this leaf plate." Charvi put the plate into her daughter's hands. She herself did not yet eat. Draupadi did not take that refusal as a personal insult; nor did she imagine that giving someone food would immediately heal the wounds between them.

On the way back from the camp, Draupadi's chariot passed a broken well. Workers were removing its damaged roofing, for people gathering to perform the last rites of the dead had been held up there in search of water. Draupadi signalled for the chariot to stop. A young water carrier said that filling two earthen pitchers took too long because the well rope had worn thin. Draupadi did not try to pull the rope herself; she knew that such a display amid all these wounds would be pointless. Instead she asked where a new rope could be found, and who would agree upon its price. The young man named a trader. Draupadi ordered that he too be consulted about the price. She made no false promise that the well would be fully ready by morning.

When she went to Uttara before nightfall, the room smelled faintly of boiled milk instead of fragrant incense. Uttara was looking out of the window. "How is your body today?" Draupadi asked. "My mind keeps changing," Uttara replied. "Sometimes I cannot bear the smell of dal; sometimes I want rice. People say the future is growing inside me. I wonder how that future will speak to me without Abhimanyu." Draupadi sat beside her. "Your child will not take the place of your past," she said. "The child will come with a life of its own. And the grief you feel today is yours too." Uttara pushed her vessel forward. "There is a little milk left. Will you have some?"

"Your body needs more just now," Draupadi said. With a faint smile Uttara asked, "Will you make the decision without asking me?" For the first time in many days a smile broke across Draupadi's face, if only for a moment. "No," she said. "If you want to share it, we shall." Uttara poured half the milk into another vessel. Each took a separate sip. Beyond the window two maids were hanging washed clothes out to dry. There was little wind; they would take a long time to dry. "Today I would have been telling Abhimanyu why the wind

would not rise," Uttara said. Draupadi listened. The names of her own sons were present in that silence too.

When night came, Krishna was standing outside Draupadi's room. Before entering he had asked a maid whether Draupadi wished to be alone. She invited him in. He had not come to give counsel. In his hand was a letter from a soldier returned from the war whose home address had proved incorrect. "Who will find this family?" Krishna asked. Draupadi read the letter. "Let Vidura's people look for them," she said, "but do not announce the woman's name in the middle of the city without first asking her. Send word through people of her village before anything else." Krishna nodded. It was a small question, yet the family's dignity was bound up in its answer.

"And you?" Krishna asked. Draupadi looked towards the window. "Among the names of my five sons I search for the taste of my own food. Each mouthful I put into my mouth feels as though I were celebrating something without them." Krishna remained quiet for a while. "Hunger is not a celebration," he said softly. Draupadi turned towards him. "I understand that with my mind," she said, "but the body does not move according to the mind's time." Krishna did not turn her words into a question of scripture. He asked, "Shall I tell Malini what time you will work tomorrow?" "I shall tell her myself," Draupadi answered.

After Krishna left, Draupadi opened a cupboard. Inside lay a few small things belonging to her five sons: a half-worn wooden die, a broken length of bowstring, a half-written character on a leaf, the fading edge of a piece of cloth, and a small copper ring. In some cases she remembered clearly which object belonged to whom; in others her memory faltered. Rather than insist on assigning the objects to names, she gathered them together in a cloth. "I shall not make them greater by calling certain what I do not know," she said to herself. Then she took out a garment and laid it aside to wear the following day.

When Malini came to her doorway, Draupadi asked, "How late did the kitchen work go on?" Malini said that some of the servants were still preparing thin food for the wounded to eat at night, while the rice for the morning had yet to be washed. "Do not keep everyone awake through the night," Draupadi said. "Make sure those whose watch is over can rest. Tell me if you need more people." Malini hesitated, then gathered the courage to ask, "Where shall I keep those five bowls?" Draupadi paused. "Where they were kept safely before," she said. "We shall change the daily setting of their plates now, but we shall not throw their things away." Malini bowed and went out.

For the next morning's decisions about grain, Draupadi wrote a short note. First: the food for the wounded and for children must be prepared differently. Second: the kitchen workers must receive rest and food. Third: there must be no humiliating conditions attached to grain given to families of the defeated.

Fourth: the daily count must leave room for the outer camps and for families still returning. At the end she wrote, “Ask the people in the kitchen; what is on paper must be checked beside the hearth.” She made no immense vow. Her hand was steady as she folded the note, though her eyes were tired.

Before going to sleep, Draupadi returned once more to the hearth. In a little vessel over the embers left from the night, rice was being warmed for a wounded child who had woken late. “Shall I give you something more?” Malini asked. “Yes,” Draupadi said. “One small bowl. Only as much as I can eat. If there is too much, do not take it from someone else’s plate; find another use for what remains.” Malini served the rice. Draupadi sat beside the fire and broke off a mouthful. Her sons’ absence was present in that mouthful too. But she herself had asked for the food; and she herself had decided when she would rise again to make the decisions about tomorrow’s meals.

Chapter 131 · Sita's Fire

In the Ashoka grove in Lanka, Sita was filling a little earthen bowl with water. There was a crack along one side; whenever she poured from it, her fingers grew wet. She did not wish to throw the bowl away, for on hot days she used it to moisten the tender new leaves of the ashoka tree. The final night of the war had passed. The smoke rising in the distance had thinned, but ash was still falling from the city's broken roofs. At the garden gate, the women who had stood guard were asking for news of their own homes for the first time that day. Listening to their voices, Sita set the bowl beside the tree's roots.

When Trijata came in, there were small stains of ash on her sari. She had gone out during the night to look for a friend whose son had been taken away to the war. “Did you find your friend?” Sita asked. “I found her house, not its people,” Trijata replied. “A neighbour said they had all been taken to the southern square. I still do not know what happened.” Sita put a vessel of water into her hands. Trijata washed her hands first and only then drank. In the midst of that ordinary sequence, both women understood that news of the victors and news of families who had disappeared did not arrive at the same hour.

Before they had finished speaking, Hanuman appeared at the garden gate. The woman guarding it moved aside, but Sita herself went out and invited him in. There was a gravity about Hanuman unlike anything she had seen at their first meeting. “Ravana has been killed in battle,” he said. “Rama and Lakshmana are safe. The way is open for you to leave Lanka.” Sita's finger came to rest on the crack in the bowl. For a little while she could find no words. Then she asked, “Rama is not wounded?” “The wounded are receiving treatment. Rama himself is up and walking.” Hanuman did not add the exhilaration of a royal proclamation to what he had said.

One young woman among the garden attendants covered her head and began to weep. Her brother had been with Ravana's army, and she had been unable to find him since the night. At the news of victory, it was her brother's name that came to her mind. Sita went to her. “Tell me your name,” she said. “Madhavi.” “Madhavi, how is the search for your brother going?” The young woman said that in the list of soldiers which had arrived, her brother's name was written in two different ways. Hanuman said quietly, “I shall arrange to have it checked myself. It would not yet be right to assume that those two names belong to the same person.” Sita held Madhavi's trembling hand between both of her own.

Hanuman asked Sita whether Vibhishana's people might bring clothes and ornaments for her, and what time would be appropriate to take her to Rama. Sita looked down at the edge of her sari. Many of the garments she had worn in the forest had been replaced, but she had spent a long time in these plain

clothes. “I shall bathe,” she said, “because dust and smoke have settled on my body. But ask me which ornaments I wish to wear. Do not turn my arrival into a display of victory.” Hanuman agreed. Trijata smiled: after so long, she had heard in Sita's words something of the ordinary, unyielding spirit of home.

The elderly woman who brought water for Sita's bath said that the rope at the city's well had broken during the war, and water now had to be carried from a great distance. Sita asked that one of the two jars set aside for her be returned. “Half the water with which I am to wash must be used to wash the wounds of the injured women inside,” she said. The old woman answered fearfully, “I cannot send it there without an order from the royal household.” Trijata went to Vibhishana's attendant and asked him to make the arrangement. The old woman's name was Dhanvati; it was the first time Sita had learned it. “I have been bringing water here for a long time,” Dhanvati said. “Few people ask my name.”

After bathing, Sita chose a light garment. She held the yellow silk sent from the royal household in her hands, then laid it aside. “Why have you put it away?” Trijata asked. “It is beautiful,” Sita replied. “The labour of whoever made it deserves respect. But I do not wish to wear it now in order to change the state of my mind.” She drew a comb through her hair. One of its teeth was broken. Trijata offered to bring her a new one. Sita laughed. “Let me finish this first. Even with the tooth broken, it is untangling my hair.”

As she left the grove, Sita saw lines of soldiers along the roads of Lanka. Some of the vanaras were wounded; some of the men of the rakshasa army had their hands bound in bandages. A passage had been arranged through them for her palanquin. At the gate, one of Vibhishana's officers was loudly ordering people to move away. An old woman in the crowd was searching for her grandson. Sita had the palanquin stopped. “Some of the people here have come to see me,” she said, “but others have come to look for their own.” The officer's face flushed, but at a signal from Vibhishana the attempt to drive the crowd away by beating them ceased.

Vibhishana came forward. “Your safety is essential,” he said. “I do not dispute that,” Sita replied. “But if someone must be hurt to keep another person safe, what meaning does that road have for the person being protected?” Vibhishana said that room could be made for the chariot and that they could move ahead without driving the people away. “Who will see to the treatment of the wounded attendants of Ravana's household?” Sita asked. Vibhishana gave a name, and Sita asked Trijata to repeat it. Having spoken about responsibility for that woman's household, she sat down in the palanquin once more.

The place of assembly had been prepared beside the battlefield. Grass had been laid in two places because it was difficult to stand amid the ash and dust.

The sun's rays flashed not from the blades of swords but from the water vessels of the wounded. When Sita stepped down, many eyes turned towards her together. There was respect in some, curiosity in others; some gazes sought an object that people had long preserved in their imaginations. In the midst of all those eyes, Sita saw Rama. He was ahead of her, but so many people stood between them that their ordinary voices would scarcely reach one another.

Rama's face bore the exhaustion of a long war. Before asking after Sita's well-being, he addressed the assembly. He said that the purpose of the war had been to remove injustice and clear the stain upon his lineage; after the time she had spent in an enemy's house, questions would arise among the people, and public life demanded an answer to them. His words were calm, but a calm voice, too, can become severe. Sita listened. Rama went on linking his words to the obligations of kingship and the judgement of the people. Some men in the assembly nodded in agreement; others lowered their eyes.

Sita took a step forward. “This stain you speak of,” she said, “whose actions brought it about? I was brought here by force. Why should my body be made to answer for the actions of the man who held me here?” A low murmur rose at the edges of the assembly. Rama said that alongside his personal grief he was bound to answer before the people. Sita replied, “The people have a right to have their questions heard. But hearing a question and making a woman into an object put on display to answer it are two different things.” Her voice was neither raised nor trembling.

Lakshmana stood a short distance away. Anger and shame both showed on his face as he heard Sita speak. He looked towards Rama, then towards Sita. “Sister-in-law”—that was all he could say. “Lakshmana, do you know me?” Sita asked. “Yes,” he said at once. “Then what is the difference between your memory of knowing me and the conjectures of this assembly?” Lakshmana answered, “I have not witnessed every day of your life. But I know that you were abducted against your will.” “Why, then,” Sita said, “has conjecture about the time you did not see taken precedence over what you do know?”

At the edge of the assembly, an elderly vanara physician was changing the dressing on a wounded soldier. He whispered to his companion, “I am seeing that woman for the first time today. How, then, could my gaze pronounce judgement on her?” His companion answered, “The affairs of a king's household belong to the king.” The old man said, “In war I obeyed the king's orders, but the water that washes a wound knows neither caste nor side. What I can see here is that she is speaking for herself.” The exchange did not reach Sita, but among several of those watching, the shape of the question was changing for the first time.

An officer who had come with Vibhishana said that the women of Lanka's inner palace could be questioned: they had seen how Sita spent her days. Trijata stepped forward. “I can say what I saw,” she said. “During those days I

saw her refusal, her fasting, Ravana's threats, and her conversations with her companions. But who can swear to every moment beyond what they themselves witnessed?" "Then the testimony is incomplete," the officer replied. "Incomplete testimony does not mean the accusation is true," Trijata said. "And no one keeps watch over every moment of a woman's body."

Sita turned to Trijata. "With what could I repay my debt to you?" she asked. "Think of debts later," Trijata said. "See whether Dhanvati's water is going to reach the women." For a moment, the crowd fell away from Sita's sight. She remembered the old woman from the Ashoka grove who carried her jars from far away. She understood that many small questions of staying alive still lay outside the victorious declarations of kings and commanders. Then she turned back to Rama. "I have spoken my truth. Now let it be made clear what spectacle the people here wish to see."

Someone in the assembly spoke the word fire. Sita could not tell whose voice it was. For so many days the fire on the battlefield had been an instrument of destruction. Now there arose the idea of measuring a woman's innocence before that same fire. Lakshmana's hand closed into a fist. Rama was silent. For a long while Sita listened to the echo of the word. In her mind she saw the crack in the bowl beneath the ashoka tree: whether a crack appears in a body or in a vessel, people often call it a fault of the vessel itself. Yet the thought also filled her with anger. She had no wish to forgive this injustice through the beauty of a metaphor.

"Lakshmana," Sita said, "if it is considered necessary to light a fire before this assembly, give me a place beside it where I may state my own decision. No one is to seize me and carry me there." Lakshmana shuddered. "How can I do this?" he asked. "I am not asking you to diminish the value of my life," Sita replied. "I am naming, in my own words, the improper question that has been raised here. Your disagreement, too, must be heard." Lakshmana looked towards Rama. Rama's assent seemed caught in an exhausted silence.

Sita turned to the assembly. "Many of you standing here to watch today do not know me. Whether fire burns me or spares me, the question in your minds may arise again about another woman. What justice will she find, then, standing before an assembly?" Some of the people gave no answer. Hanuman bowed his head with his hands joined. He had wanted Sita to find rest after the war; instead a new peril stood before her. Sita's question had already fallen upon the assembly before the fire was lit.

Wood was brought. Two of the logs were damp; a servant set them aside and laid down dry branches instead. His finger was bandaged. Sita saw that the man preparing the fire was himself wounded. "Who has looked at the wound on your hand?" she asked him. Startled, the young man answered, "No one yet. I shall go when the work is finished." Sita said to Lakshmana, "Ask someone to change his dressing." To some in the assembly, this small

question seemed out of place. Sita did not change what she had said. The hand that builds a fire is a body, too.

The fire caught. First a blue smoke rose from within the wood; then the flames spread. Trijata stepped back a little as the smoke stung her eyes. Sita looked once towards Rama. “If you wish to give me a place in your life again,” she said, “you must also listen to what I have said here. My will shall not stand waiting now for your answer.” She joined her palms before the fire. Her words invoked the truth of her own conscience; for her, the fire did not become a name for consenting to a punishment ordered by someone else.

In one ancient telling of this story, Sita enters the fire, and Agni, the god of fire, returns her unharmed, proclaiming her innocence. Those who hear that telling see it as a miraculous reunion. In another widely told version, the true Sita had been under Agni's protection even before the abduction, and a shadow-form had gone with Ravana; in the moment of fire, the distinction between the two is revealed once again. These two paths through the story are not interchangeable accounts of a single sequence. In the first, the woman's body is surrounded by fire amid accusations; in the second, a different arrangement has existed since before her abduction. The meaning of the event changes according to which telling is heard.

Those watching the encounter with the fire in this assembly carried their own visions of it. To some, Sita's return through heat and brightness was a god's answer; to others, her words had already been enough, and the fire was needless. Trijata wiped her eyes with the edge of her garment. Hanuman stood immovable. One wounded soldier sat down with his back turned, because the smell of fire reminded him of a hut set alight during the war. “I shall not watch the fire,” he said. His companion sat down beside him. Neither of them argued about what the fire meant.

When Sita could be seen standing once more before the assembly, there was sweat upon her forehead. Those who had heard the god's proclamation wanted to cry out in triumph, but Sita raised her hand to stop the noise. “The answer given here,” she said, “cannot stand in place of all the days of my life. The injustice committed by those who carried me away by force occurred on that day. My innocence must not now be distributed as though it were a prize of victory.” The severity of Rama's expression began to soften, but he was still searching for words he himself could say.

At last Rama came forward. He explained his earlier words by speaking of his fear of public opinion. Sita did not interrupt. Rama said that the people questioned the conduct of a royal family. “Let the people ask questions,” Sita replied. “No one need be afraid of that. But when something done against my will is made a question about my character, the direction of the question has changed. What you say about me will affect women who cannot summon an

assembly in their own homes." Rama heard her. The distance between them had lessened, but the wound was not healed in that instant.

Hanuman's attention turned then to an elderly woman who had come with Vibhishana. He recognised Dhanvati in the crowd; she had brought water for the Ashoka grove. Her jar was half full. "Why have you come here?" Hanuman asked. "Permission has been given for a fresh jar of water for the wounded in the grove," Dhanvati said. "But the well needs a new rope. The people from the royal household say the work must be entered in the accounts for after the war." Hanuman spoke to Vibhishana and had the price of the rope and the wages arranged at once. Dhanvati bowed to Sita from a distance, then took the road back.

When Trijata reached Sita, she stood for a moment with her head lowered. "You are tired," Trijata said. "Yes," Sita replied. "I need water. And have you yourself eaten anything?" Trijata shook her head. "Not since dawn." Sita asked for an ordinary leaf plate from the side of the assembly. Food for the royal household and food for the vanara army had been kept apart; an attendant asked which kind of plate he should bring. "Bring what you eat yourself," Sita answered. Trijata burst out laughing. "Rice before ornaments, as far as I am concerned," she said. Sita, too, smiled for a moment.

Madhavi found her in the crowd then. There was still no complete news of her brother, but an inquiry had begun into the two differently written names. "I have no fire to stand before," she told Sita, "and no courage to put questions to a king. I only want to hear his name spoken correctly." "No fire is needed for your words to be heard," Sita replied. "I shall ask Vibhishana's people to give you a place in the search for the name, but they must not present what they do not know as truth on the strength of a guess." Tears filled Madhavi's eyes. She could not complete her words of thanks, and Sita did not oblige her to.

Preparations began for the formal departure from the assembly. An attendant wanted to set a victory banner before Sita's palanquin. Sita said that the flag would be a symbol of the army's victory, not of the road she was taking. She wanted a plain canopy to shield her from the sun. "Is there anything else you wish for before leaving Lanka?" Vibhishana asked. "The names of the women in the Ashoka grove, and arrangements to find their families," Sita said. "If any of them wish to come with me, ask them of their own free will, not by an order from the guards. Those whose homes are here must not be obliged to accompany me." Vibhishana had her words written down.

Rama wished to speak to Sita in private. They stood beneath a small awning at the edge of the battlefield; Lakshmana and Hanuman kept their distance. "I am hearing your voice after so long," Rama said. "I had imagined this meeting differently." "So had I," Sita replied. "There were things I held in my

heart as I watered the ashoka leaves, things I could not say before everyone here." "What things?" Rama asked. Sita was silent for a little while. "I had wanted to ask whether the water of that river in the forest still felt as cool as it once did. But before this assembly I had to speak first of my right to my own life." Rama lowered his eyes.

"And now?" Rama asked. "Now I need rest," Sita said. "We shall speak again. If public opinion must have a place in that conversation, I shall listen; but my own memories and my own wishes shall have their place as well." Rama held out his hand. Sita looked at it for a moment and then placed hers upon his palm. It was a touch of reunion, not the verdict of a court. Rama tried to understand the difference. From outside came the clatter of vessels being set down for food; after so long, an ordinary sound was finding a place in the silence between them.

By evening the smoke over Lanka's roads had diminished. Before leaving, Sita went once more to see the Ashoka grove. Water was being drawn with the new rope Dhanvati had brought. Madhavi was trying to have her brother's name entered on a second slip for the search, and Trijata was comparing the letters she had written. Sita picked up the cracked bowl. A little water remained in it. She poured it at the foot of the ashoka tree and placed the bowl in Dhanvati's hands. "If it still serves, keep it," she said. "If not, replace it." Dhanvati felt along the crack with a finger. "It can still carry water to the roots of the flowers," she said. For a little while Sita watched that small task. The assembly and its fire were receding behind her, but she had resolved never again to separate herself from the right to decide what would be done with her body and her words.

Chapter 132 · Beyond the Number

After the rains of 2039, a fragment of brick had been wedged beneath one leg of the table in the hospital's temporary office. Once the wet floor had dried, the leg had begun to wobble, and when Rama opened the red-bound register of deaths, the table gave a little shudder. She pushed the brick farther in with her foot. People were waiting on the veranda: some for certificates, some for clothing left behind, others merely to learn where they were supposed to go now. At the morning meeting they were to settle the total number of verified deaths. Rama arranged the final medical reconciliation, the identification files and the earlier, erroneous copies in three separate piles before her.

A clerk from the municipal office took out a clean sheet of paper. "If everyone signs off on a single number today, we can send the report to the higher office. After all the changes to the previous list, nobody will ask questions again." Rama capped her pen. "The questions will not end. We shall say only that the count of medically confirmed deaths for the specified period has been completed. If a person's identification is under separate examination, that status will not be altered by the count. We shall not send a body to someone's home on the strength of a guess while its name remains under inquiry." The clerk struck out the words "All disputes concluded," already printed on his sheet.

Outside, Sarita sat on the kitchen veranda opening the lid of a tiffin box. Half of the rice cooked the previous night was still inside. Her hands returned to the old habit of arranging a plate according to the portion Naira would have eaten had she been alive. Sarita stopped her spoon halfway. When Kabir came and sat beside her, she did not press him to eat. She asked only, "Would you like to see the page where the work she left unfinished will be recorded?" "I would," Kabir said. "But I shall not claim that everything about her life can be contained on that page."

Inside the meeting room, Aditi laid out a new measured drawing of the hospital's damaged wing. Tara pointed to the red exclusion line, beyond which entry was still prohibited except under the authorisation of specialists. A member urged them to record the cause of the disaster now that the death toll had been settled. Aditi replied, "The time of the incident, the recovery of bodies, the medical findings and the structural investigation belong to different records. The obstruction of the old drain, errors in loading, repair records and tests of the materials supplied are still under investigation. Confirmation of a death does not in itself establish every cause or identify everyone responsible." At an indistinct point on the new plan, Tara wrote a question. She did not turn it into a finding.

From the final case file Rama showed them the history of a correction to an identification. A name added in error the day before had been removed from the public notice; the original erroneous copy had been preserved as evidence of the correction. “The total we are establishing,” she said, “rests on medical verification, not on names called out in a crowd. Responsibility for the final matching of names will remain with the designated officer. A family’s claim does not become false merely because it is still pending.” On the summary sheet placed before the meeting, three statuses were printed separately: Death Confirmed; Identification of Person Under Investigation; and Correction of Related Records.

Urmila Rajak’s sister arrived at the doorway. She carried two account books under her arm, one a copy of the hospital’s shift accounts, the other a collection of old receipts for clothes washed at the ghat. Before entering, she wiped her feet; she was afraid of wetting the damp papers again. “I haven’t come to collect another death certificate,” she said. “I have that. But where will you record the clothes my sister’s hands delivered to patients’ homes, the nights she spent at the hospital, and the cartage charges still unpaid?” For the first time, the clerk held out the list of the dead to her. She closed it. “Her name is correct there. My question is about something else.”

Uma, who had come with Gomati, said that after Urmila’s death other women had temporarily taken over some of the essential washing; payment was still owed for their work as well. An officer asked, “Will the family receive the old arrears, or the payment for the new work?” Gomati said, “These are different people, and different shifts. The wages for the clothes Urmila washed belong in the claim made by her heirs. Record the wages for the work Uma and the others did in their own names.” Urmila’s sister opened one of her sister’s receipts and supported a damp corner with her fingers. Its markings were fading, but the date and the number of bundles could still be read.

When Sarita came in, someone indicated the chair reserved for the chairperson. Rather than sit, she moved it a little farther back. “Hear what I have to say first,” she said. “Let nobody assume that because I am Naira’s mother, every decision of this committee must be mine.” Weariness lay in her voice. “I have the right to ask questions on my daughter’s behalf and the responsibility to see that her name is not entered wrongly. But why must Urmila’s sister’s question be heard only through me?” She offered the empty chair in front to the sister. The woman did not sit. She placed her account books on the table and remained standing.

Rama had a new, thick register brought in. At the head of its first page the clerk began to write “Assistance for Families of the Deceased.” Sarita stopped him. “That title will make all the outstanding obligations look like a single grant.” Kabir proposed, “Write ‘Register of Dues, Responsibilities and Unfinished Work.’ Let the relief file be only one source within it.” Rama changed the heading. She instructed that each entry should contain a

description of the work or goods, the claimant's separate identity, the evidence available, the portion in dispute, the office required to respond and the date of the next hearing. Where evidence was not yet available, the entry was to read "Additional Evidence Awaited," not "Rejected."

The clerk scratched his head at the seven lines drawn across the page. "If we open so many accounts, where will the money come from?" "Opening an account proves nothing about whether money will be found," Kabir said. "But if there is no account, what is owed will disappear from the office's sight." Rama explained that payment orders could not be issued on every claim at once; the committee's authority was limited to preliminary verification, recommendations and follow-up within specified periods. That limitation was written plainly in the register. No one was to be given a false assurance, but neither was anyone's claim to be closed without a hearing on the pretext that a document was missing.

In her last days Naira had been trying to reconcile a number of pages recording gates, attendance and mistaken identities in a new form. Kabir had brought a file cover from her desk at home. Inside were an unfinished list, two empty envelopes and the corner of a private letter. When Rama reached towards it, Kabir said, "I can give you copies of the pages relevant to the work for examination. Not the letter. That is between Naira and me." Rama withdrew her hand. In the file she wrote, "Sections relating to public work to be received with the family's consent; private correspondence retained in confidence." Naira's death had not made every word she had written public property.

At that moment a young girl came in carrying a small iron key. She was the granddaughter of an elderly patient at the hospital. She had kept a leftover piece of yellow cloth chosen for her grandmother inside one of her books. "This is the key to her trunk," she said. "Mother says not to open it. But Grandmother promised our neighbour some cloth for sewing work, and it is inside." Sarita asked, "What does your mother want?" Rama understood that not every piece of unfinished work was a debt for the state to recover. Some things belonged to the trust between members of a family.

Kabir explained two possibilities to the girl. She could keep the promise in a private family list, or she could, of her own accord, have a record made of the work and the neighbour's name. Without consent, nothing about the contents of the trunk would enter the committee's register. "I'll go home and ask Mother again," the girl said. She left gripping the key between her fingers. For her, the meeting's outcome was not a sum of money. It was simply that no one had ordered her grandmother's trunk broken open in the name of public mourning.

A little before noon, Neeraj Panda entered. He carried a small brass plate, some kusha grass in a bamboo basket, and a folded receipt book. On the

veranda two families wishing to perform mourning rites had asked him about the time. A volunteer helping with municipal relief had told him to provide a receipt so that all funeral expenses could be shown together under the government assistance account. Neeraj set his plate on the corner of the table. “First make one thing clear,” he said. “The decision belongs to the family that wants the rites. A family that does not want them must suffer no reduction in its relief grant.”

The volunteer objected. “Donations have been collected for collective relief. If rites are performed in a deceased person’s home, those cost money too. Wouldn’t it be easier to keep a single account?” Neeraj opened his receipt book. On the first page were the date of the work and the family’s request; on the second, the actual cost of materials; on the third, his payment for services. “I will not enter a charge for my time without the family’s agreement,” he said. “But neither will I accept having my fee quietly taken from public grain supplies or government assistance. For a family that does not want the service, the amount due under this heading is zero.”

A man spoke irritably. “Even at a time like this the pandits want to discuss their accounts!” Neeraj looked at him. “Asking to be paid for my work is not an insult. But I do not want anyone’s relief reduced in the name of my religion, either. If you wish to say farewell without a ritual, I will not enter your name in my book. If I voluntarily provide a service without payment, that too will have a separate record.” Shashibhushan, standing to one side with a receipt for cloth, said, “The price of cloth, the cost of transport and the pandit’s fee are three separate items. Government assistance is a fourth.”

Urmila’s sister asked, “I will decide for myself what I wish to do for my sister. But what if an advance for the rites is deducted from the wages she is still owed at the ghat?” “It will not be deducted,” Neeraj answered at once. “If any payment is due to me, the family will give me a separate receipt for it. I have no claim whatever on the wages she earned.” The sister looked at the empty line in his receipt book. “Then do not write my name here yet,” she said. Neeraj closed the book.

Rama sent for ink in two colours. Black was used for entries concerning social assistance, emergency shelter, medical care and approved compensation; blue for private transactions involving goods or religious services voluntarily requested by a family, which could not be represented as government-authorised expenditure. An inspector asked whether the colours might later be changed. “Colour is only a sign,” Rama said. “The real separation lies in two different serial numbers, two different signatures and clearly stated sources.” Neeraj insisted that no list be made of families declining religious services. For those cases, writing “No charge” was sufficient.

A widow sitting on a wooden cot said to the woman beside her, “My husband wanted to lie quietly in the earth. I remember what he said. But

people in the village will say I was trying to save the expense.” Her neighbour answered softly, “Must you sell your grain for the sake of what people will say?” Neeraj remained seated a little distance away. He made no attempt to approach her and deliver a sermon on devotion. After a while the widow herself asked whether there was a public place where she might light a small lamp in remembrance. “You can light the lamp yourself,” Neeraj said. “Ask the committee for permission to use a public place. You do not have to employ me.”

Along the outer veranda a thin line of water kept moving, as though an old river buried within the building were searching for a way between the papers. For an instant Sarita heard Naira’s laughter in that sound—the laughter of the day Naira had said that behind a wrong figure someone might lose a day’s food. Sarita understood the voice rising within her to be memory, not evidence. Tara was measuring a crack in the drying wall again. There was no place in that measurement to record a supernatural utterance.

Aniruddha came to the door carrying a prescription. His injured hand was supported in a bandage, so he used the other to turn the papers. He asked Rama whether his note concerning the hospital’s former, incorrect instructions for safe evacuation had reached the inquiry team’s file. Rama showed him the mark acknowledging receipt, not a finding. “I will explain my error again,” Aniruddha said, “but the costs of treating the injured must not be withheld until the inquiry’s final report.” Salma agreed, adding that the need for treatment would be determined by medical examination, not by the ultimate decision about blame.

After her next examination, Devi Gond came in for a short while. The bandage on her forehead had not yet been removed altogether. She held a slip giving a new date for her training. She heard that a committee member wanted to call her back to give another account of the night she had spent inside. “I have put on record the times I witnessed and the voices I heard,” Devi said. “I will not add the name of someone I did not see. What I need now is time for treatment and for my training to resume.” The member agreed, but then tried to dismiss the entry for training expenses by writing “Volunteer” in the relevant box. Devi asked, “If the organisation required the equipment practice, who is to pay for hiring the equipment?” Her question became a separate entry in the new register of dues.

Ruhani arrived with the accounts from the assistance room. The sacks of grain for Rukhsana’s meals, the kitchen wages and the receipts for medical transport were ready for open public inspection. But she did not open the envelope containing the private names of the people living in the shelter. “Let every sum of money and every item coming in or going out be verified,” she said. “But publishing the room address of someone who needs shelter must not be a condition of providing help.” “How can there be payment without the claimant’s name?” the clerk asked. Ruhani explained that there was a

separate procedure for confidential examination by authorised officers; the public notice did not have to print every detail.

Just then raised voices came from outside the office. Two labourers had arrived demanding payment of the outstanding charges for carrying materials to the storeroom. A third man was accusing them of preparing a second bill in a dead person's name. Gomati invited them inside and had their receipts laid out separately. The first bill dated from the earlier hospital repairs; the second was for safe transport during the night of the disaster. Lalit showed that the quantities of some materials could not be accepted without an inspection on site. "Make your inspection," one labourer said, "but do not punish today's hunger because you have doubts." The committee decided to recommend interim payment of the undisputed portion of the transport charges that had been verified. The disputed portion remained open.

Among the stacks of papers they found a page from Naira's unfinished work ledger. It separately marked names preserved from loss, reasons for changes to identities, and questions still to be put to claimants. Kabir did not sign that page: Naira had written it, and it was to be retained for verification of her handwriting and the source. Looking at it, Sarita said, "I do not know the answers to all those questions. Being her mother does not mean I must have the answer to every inquiry my daughter undertook." In the new register Rama provided two distinct spaces: "Person Willing to Take Over the Work" and "Author of the Original Work."

A teacher who had been looking after the children's temporary school since the disaster said that Naira had once requested an old attendance register so she could correct the names of children who had been left out. "May I have permission to complete that work?" he asked. "Look at the children's names only with their families' consent and in accordance with the school's rules," Sarita replied. "If anything private about a child is published under Naira's name, I shall object." The teacher wrote a revised request. For the first time, it was plain in his eyes that unfinished work could pass on from the dead only with permissions and limits, not through sentiment alone.

As the afternoon wore on, Rama began finding the office responsible for responding to each outstanding claim. Wage claims would go to the labour-records department; treatment costs to the appropriate medical officer; assistance for temporary accommodation to the relief office; and responsibility for the construction to the engineering inquiry. "It would be more convenient for people if a single committee took charge of everything," the municipal representative said. "In the name of convenience," Aditi replied, "no committee can write the findings of a technical investigation. We can open a path for a claim; we cannot seize the authority to investigate it." The representative then proposed obtaining a written acknowledgement from each office.

Urmila's sister stood up once more. "You are taking copies of my sister's account books. First make it clear that the originals will remain with me." Rama agreed. The sister asked a second question. "If someone tells me three months from now that the papers are lost, must I fight all over again from the first day?" This time the clerk answered of his own accord. "You will be given a copy bearing the receipt number and verification. If the file goes on to another office, you will also be able to see the record of its transfer." "For now," the sister said, "I want that promise in writing." It was written down. For the first time, she sat in her chair.

As he put the key to his house into his pocket, Kabir asked, "Have Naira's unpaid remuneration and the expenses of the investigations she carried out been entered separately?" Rama showed him both entries. A member suggested that the outstanding sums might be adjusted against the family's relief grant. Kabir shook his head. "The grant is given because of a disaster; remuneration is owed in return for work done. Two rights do not cancel each other out because the same name is attached to them." Sarita remembered the wages that had been withheld when an old, false notice had recorded her as dead. "If some office had explained that distinction to me long ago," she said, "it would have saved years of my life."

When the first page of the new register was completed, not everyone stepped forward to sign. Neeraj said that he would sign his own account of receipts for rituals, but his signature should not authorise any money disbursed from relief grants. Conversely, he did not want those keeping the relief accounts to record his private fee as an expense of public assistance. Rama entered this explicit refusal. Neeraj placed a separate copy in his own account book, recording the date and the decision. He did not know when it might be needed, but the boundaries of source and responsibility now existed on paper.

From a thin cloth bag Shashibhushan took out an unfinished strip of edging intended for the elderly patient. "There is no government bill for this," he said. "I need only the family's address, with their consent." Sarita looked at the bag. It seemed pointless to search her memory for whether Naira had ever been fond of yellow. Every deceased person had a favourite colour of their own, and those colours would remain somewhere—in a cupboard, an outbuilding, a trunk. Such things could not be contained within the state's total count.

Before evening an official message arrived. The higher office required the settled summary of the death count immediately, but described the register of outstanding claims as merely a "local voluntary proposal." The letter said that unless the committee's formally constituted leadership and authorised signatures were settled, the receipts in the dues register would not receive departmental recognition. "Then make me the chairperson," the municipal

representative said. “I can sign.” Sarita looked at him. “An official seal is necessary,” she asked, “but why should it silence everyone else in return?”

As the letter was read, people began to gather outside again. Labourers stood with the receipts for their day’s work; Urmila’s sister held the account books she had safeguarded for so long; Ruhani was ready to present the food accounts without disclosing private names. “If tomorrow this register is rejected over the question of leadership,” Kabir said, “everything we have agreed today will remain inside this room.” “There will be leadership,” Aditi said, “but the independence of the investigation and the families’ consent will remain in writing.” On the blank reverse of the government letter, Rama began writing the notice of the next meeting.

Sarita held out her hand for a pen. “Send today’s verified count of the dead,” she said. “Do not change a single letter. With it, state that the register of outstanding dues remains open and that tomorrow there will be a meeting to determine the authority to accept and pay those claims. No leader will be appointed today, in the midst of grief, by the command of one family or one office.” Finally the names of the representatives present were entered on the notice, together with a note of dissent.

Rama stamped her approval on the total verified death count. She put no final seal at the head of the second register; she issued its first receipt number and recorded that a response was awaited from the responsible office. Urmila’s sister went out carrying her copy. Neeraj departed, keeping the kusha grass on his plate separate from his receipts. Kabir put the envelope containing Naira’s private letter back into his pocket. Sarita picked up her nearly empty tiffin—there was still some rice left—and paused in the doorway. “Who will sit in the committee chair tomorrow? That is not the only question. Who will ask the questions for those whose names were never written down?” On hearing her, Rama added a new line to the next day’s notice: “Public determination of leadership, representation and authority to approve payments.”

Parva 12 · Śānti | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 133 · Who Will Govern?

On that morning at the beginning of 2040, Rama had turned three chairs upside down on the veranda of the temporary office. A nail had worked loose in the leg of the chair left vacant for the chairperson the previous evening. If anyone set it upright, the cloth might tear. It would be best to call a carpenter, but people would arrive before the meeting; so Rama moved it to one side and arranged the remaining chairs in a circle. On the table, the red-bound register of verified deaths lay closed. Beside it, the new register of dues and unfinished work ought to have been open, but the cloth sealed the night before still covered it.

Urmila's sister was the first to arrive. Her ledger was in a jute bag, and white marks left by washing soap were still visible on her fingers. Looking at the blank paper, she asked, "If a chairperson is elected, will my sister's wages be counted from the day that person signs, or from the days on which Urmila actually worked?" Rama said, "The period covered by the claim will not change. The question of an authorised signature is separate." The sister remained standing beside the table. "You write these things down separately. We have to bear them all with the same stomach."

Lime plaster fallen from the hospital wall after the last rains had collected along the veranda. Whenever the wind rose, dust swirled beneath the chairs and settled on the sister's bag. Rama spread out an old sheet on which the papers could be placed. Outside, a water tap was dripping. The labourer who had come to shut it said, "This needs a plumber. If we merely turn it tighter, it will keep bursting." Rama wrote down his name and the request for repairs. The expense would not enter the register of dues owed to families of the dead.

When Sarita arrived, she did not go straight to the red register. She stood at the edge of the veranda, where Naira used to take off her sandals and straighten the papers in her hands. Today that place was empty. Kabir brought her water. Without taking the glass, Sarita said, "The question I asked yesterday will be answered by a vote. But no one is to say that I demanded five votes in my daughter's name." Kabir said, "You have one vote. The evidence of Naira's work stands on its own. To make her stand for election again would be an injustice."

As the meeting began, the municipal representative pushed a copy of an official letter across the table. "The department above us wants an authorised signature. Unless we send the chairperson's name, the list will remain a local record. The next instalment of relief may be held up as well." Aditi asked, "Is there an order to withhold it, or is that your apprehension?" The

representative looked at the letter before answering. “The letter expressly makes recognition of the dues register conditional. I heard about the instalment over the telephone.” Instead of recording the telephone conversation as a verified order, Rama wrote: “Oral information; confirmation awaited.”

At the entrance, Tara was placing a short wooden board between two broken strips of flooring. An elderly man who had arrived in a wheelchair could not get up onto the veranda. The meeting’s first announcement was interrupted so that he could be brought inside. The representative grew impatient. “Elect the chairperson first; then make the arrangements.” Tara raised her head. “To elect a chairperson without someone who cannot enter is not an arrangement. It is an exclusion.” People held the board steady, and the old man came in at his own pace. No one described the new board as a permanent facility. Tara requested a written inspection of safe access.

A young man seated in the circle asked for the notice. He wanted to read it aloud to his elderly mother, but the words “authorised” and “proposed” had been joined together in such a way that their meaning remained obscure even when read aloud. Sarita had the notice rewritten: who was to be elected, who would not have the power to distribute money, and where a dissenting opinion could be recorded. The young man read the revised notice to his mother. “If I have to leave in the middle,” the old woman asked, “will what I have said be struck out?” Rama answered, “No. Your words will remain in the record.” The woman asked to see them in her own copy.

From her bag Ruhani took out two kinds of documents: the open accounts of meals, rice, medicines and labour, and a list acknowledging receipt of sealed envelopes containing private identifying information. “Will the people staying at the shelter take part in the vote?” she asked. “We need names,” the municipal representative replied. Ruhani said, “Verify their eligibility for representation, but do not print residents’ private addresses on a public list. There was a way of doing this yesterday. Why should there be none today?” Rama added a separate provision for confidential verification to the proposed rules. Not everyone understood its wording, so Ruhani explained with an example: sacks of food could be counted, but the fears that had driven a person to seek shelter were not for everyone to inspect.

Gomati and Uma came straight from the laundry. Uma said that she had left two bundles unfinished that morning; she needed to know when she could return to work. To sit through a three-hour election meant losing part of her day’s wages. A volunteer said, “Can anything be done for society without making this much of a sacrifice?” Uma did not laugh. “Who will issue a receipt for the sacrifice? My name may be on a committee, but who will pay the rent on my room?” Sarita did not open her purse at this question. She said, “Representation must not be purchased through personal charity. First put

down arrangements for meeting times, travel, childcare and lost earnings. If there is no source of funds, do not make a false promise of payment."

The municipal representative suggested that the election be postponed for a week while all these rules were drawn up. Urmila's sister opened a blank page of the register. "Is the hearing of our claims to be postponed for a week as well?" The dispute showed no sign of subsiding. Aditi offered an intermediate course: elect a working committee for a limited term that day, to deal with acknowledgements and correspondence; hold the election for permanent representation only after public notice, access and expenses had been arranged. "We must not exclude those who are absent today from a permanent decision," she made clear.

Kabir changed one line of her proposal. "A chair declared temporary has often become permanent. Write down the date on which the term ends, and the limits of the work." Rama wrote: thirty days or a duly authorised general assembly, whichever came first; until then, the procedure for adding new members would remain open. The municipal representative insisted that he should be made chairperson directly; correspondence would move faster that way. Gomati asked, "Your official seal is useful. But if there is a dispute about my laundry shifts or my transport receipts, will you investigate it yourself, decide it yourself, and hear the appeal yourself?" The representative was still searching for an answer.

Rama drew a line and separated the responsibilities. The elected coordinator would oversee meetings and follow-up on the dues register. An authorised office employee would receive and forward correspondence in the prescribed manner. The investigation of technical causes would remain with an independent team. Approval of payments would belong to the legally competent office. None of these positions would replace another.

A boatman whose route to work passed behind the hospital asked whether the investigation into the blocked hospital drain would begin again on the order of this new committee. Aditi replied, "The investigation is under way; not every measurement has been checked. Here we can ask for the investigator's name and the date when an answer is due. We cannot pronounce a fresh finding of guilt." The boatman found the answer incomplete. He showed them his account of two days' lost earnings. Rama issued an acknowledgement of that as a separate livelihood claim, not as evidence in the investigation. The boatman put the paper away. "Then on which paper will the chairperson sign?" the representative asked. "On the committee's resolution," Rama replied. "Not on a government order authorising disbursement." Nor did Rama ask for her own name to be put forward as the secretary of the proposal. "There must be someone else to check the mistakes of the person keeping the accounts," she said.

Aniruddha arrived in the middle of the meeting. His bandaged hand made it slow work to lift the door latch. He sat on a chair at the side and made no claim to vote. At once the representative said, “As a doctor, you would be suitable to lead the committee.” Aniruddha answered quietly, “My treatment is not finished. My statement about the earlier, incorrect instructions for safe evacuation is under investigation. It would not be proper for me to sit apart from that review and present my position as a credential.” Devi Gond, standing beside him with her treatment paper, said, “I have seen his wound. My own training is unfinished too. The fact that I survived does not make me the representative of the families of the dead.”

Hearing this, Sarita came forward. “Do not propose me for chairperson. Naira has died, but she was not this committee’s inheritance. She was a daughter. Her work was hers, as were her desire to correct her mistakes and the things she kept private. A mother’s rights do not amount to an order to take her daughter’s place.” She turned to Urmila’s sister. “You, too, may refuse if you wish. Do not count a ‘yes’ spoken in grief as permanent consent.” The sister answered, “I do not want leadership. I want my ledger to be heard. But if someone tries to silence what is written in it, I shall interrupt.”

Before the election, Ruhani had the attendance register reopened. The private names of everyone living in the shelter were not entered on the open list. Where people had chosen a representative for themselves, a sealed copy of their consent was placed with an independent person responsible for the count; the copy would not be displayed on the public noticeboard. For the temporary working committee, the approvals of the different groups of workers and claimants who were present were clearly recorded. No votes were counted in the names of absent people. An elderly man said, “More important than my right to vote is that I should be able to get a wrong decision changed afterwards.” Rama did not leave the spaces for appeal and reconsideration blank.

A man from the family into which one of the deceased had married said the other families would make a false decision against him. There was a dispute over inheritance within his own household. Kabir made it clear that the committee’s temporary vote would not settle an inheritance case. Sarita asked the man, “Will you agree that a copy of the document you want to submit should be shown to the other party in accordance with the rules?” He fell silent. Rama accepted the claim, but recorded the decision concerning kinship and shares as “Awaiting evidence and examination by the competent authority.”

Uma proposed Gomati’s name. Gomati refused at first. “There is someone ill at home. I do not have my hands free to spend the whole day in meetings.” Uma said, “You will not do it alone. We shall divide the shifts. My work matters as much as the work of hearing yours.” Kabir proposed that Gomati serve as coordinator for the limited term; in her absence, an alternate member

announced beforehand could conduct the meeting, but that member would not automatically acquire the right to open anyone's private records. Tara wanted one provision added: a copy of every decision should be made public, with private details removed.

The municipal representative put his own name forward again. Two members spoke in his support, saying that without access to the department the register would be ineffectual. Workers, shelter representatives and some family representatives spoke for Gomati. Sarita did not become a vociferous supporter of either side. She asked the representative, "If you are elected, will you permit a complaint to be lodged against you?" "If the rules provide for it, I will," he replied. "Then sign the rules before the chairperson is elected," Sarita said. Gomati signed the same paper.

When the votes were counted, Gomati's nomination had been accepted by a majority. The municipal representative, however, recorded his dissent: departmental recognition might be at risk. His dissent was not struck out. An available government clerk accepted responsibility for forwarding letters, with the limits of his authority set out in writing. Rama agreed to maintain the secretarial records on condition that the date of every amendment and the name of the person proposing it would be retained. After thirty days, Gomati's position would automatically come up for review.

Four separate matters were written on the election certificate: how many people had been present, how many votes had been cast, who had been left out, and how notice of the next open assembly would reach them. Before signing, Gomati asked Uma, "Has anything been arranged to change your shift?" "So far it is only a proposal," Uma answered. "I shall check again tomorrow." Gomati had the word "arranged" struck out and replaced with "responsibility for making arrangements." She signed, but did not ask for her victory to be announced. No one brought forward the chair with the exposed nail, which had been set aside near the table. Gomati sat on an ordinary chair in the circle.

The new coordinator chose, as her first task, not the removal of the heap of fallen plaster but the reading of the entry for Urmila's outstanding wages. The dates of her shifts were checked once more against her sister's ledger, the hospital copy and the receipts for laundry at the river landing. Uma's new wages remained on a separate line. The clerk said one old transport receipt was unclear. Gomati did not order the whole amount to be released immediately. She proposed that the verified portion be forwarded that very day, and that a definite day be set to reconcile the remainder. "Will I be able to take a copy of the forwarding note home?" Urmila's sister asked. Rama began preparing one.

Neeraj Panda was standing outside. When the discussion of acknowledgements reached him, he was invited in. An old proposal was raised again: to add the receipts for rituals to the common pool of relief funds.

Neeraj opened his ledger to the written objection he had made the previous day. “The consent and fee account of a family that accepted a service are separate; the assistance due to a family that did not accept the service must not be reduced. Use my receipts to verify my services, not as proof of the disbursement of relief.” Gomati had a copy of that statement placed in a separate envelope. Neeraj did not himself become an approver of relief payments.

A copy of Ruhani’s open food accounts was also attached to the list of claims, but the private shelter documents remained sealed. The municipal representative recorded a partial dissent on this point. The higher office, he said, might demand full names. Gomati answered, “If a request comes, we shall ask for a written reason and authorised access. We will not sell anyone’s fear for their life as an entry in an expense account.” The decision did not stop the kitchen’s work. Rukhsana had time to send in the next request for supplies. Uma, too, rose to return to her shift.

After midday, Sarita opened her food tin on the outer veranda. The old habit of setting aside Naira’s portion caught at her fingers again; this time, however, she shared the rice with Gomati. “The moment they call me chairperson,” Gomati said, “people will begin to think I am someone else.” Sarita replied, “People call me Naira’s mother to my face, and sometimes I forget my own name. Do not forget the hours of your work.” Without making any further promise, the two ate together for a while.

No final reply bearing the office seal arrived. But by evening the earlier summary of verified deaths remained exactly as it had been, while the first claims in the new dues register had each been given a separate acknowledgement number, a date of forwarding and the name of the office from which a reply was expected. In her own hand Gomati added a line to the register of resolutions: no sum owed should be considered paid merely by a decision of the elected coordinator; every claimant would have the right to see and challenge the reply. As Rama distributed copies, she asked, “When will the first public review be held?” Gomati said, “On the day an answer about payment arrives. And if none arrives, we shall ask for the reason on the appointed day.”

Then the municipal representative quietly returned to the empty office. He read the dissent recorded beside his name and said, “I have lost, but I am still afraid for the work. When people who take on leadership grow exhausted, who will take their place?” Gomati turned the register towards him. “Write down your fear as well. But sit with me for a moment and count the days until Urmila’s outstanding wages must be answered for.” For a few moments the representative held the pen without writing. Then he entered the date of his next meeting, not beneath Gomati’s name, but in the separate column for a dissenting member. The person occupying the chair had changed; the office’s responsibility was still about to be put to the test of change.

Chapter 134 · Yudhishthira's Reluctance

In Hastinapura after the war of Kurukshetra, a crown lay beneath a cloth in the chamber behind the royal assembly hall. One corner of the covering was wet. Water had dripped all night through a crack in the roof, and the guard had not dared to move the crown. When Yudhishthira arrived in the morning, his first glance fell not on the crown but on the small round stain of water gathered beneath it. He could have wiped the stain away with a finger; instead, he drew his hand behind him. There was no one to ask how the water was to be kept out of the chamber of the state.

Three people stood outside the door: a royal scribe, the point of whose pen had worn down; an old man who measured the grain in the granaries; and a woman carrying two bundles of thread under her arm and a torn strip of cloth in her hand. The guard told them that no petitions would be heard before a decision had been reached about the coronation. The woman set down her bundles. "I am not here to watch a coronation," she said. "I want to know who will write the order for cloth to be given to those who have gone hungry since yesterday." Her words could be heard clearly inside.

"Bring them in," Yudhishthira said. For an instant the guard looked towards the crown, as though permission to grant an audience must come from there. The old grain-measurer entered carrying a balance with a loose pan. The woman wiped her feet at the threshold, although a fine layer of dust from the battlefield already lay upon the floor. Yudhishthira motioned for her to sit; she remained standing. From among the bundles of thread she drew out the slip on which her claim was written.

"Cloth was made for the soldiers," she said. "Those who returned alive have put it on. Of whom are we to demand what is owed for those who did not return? The maker's wages do not die with the dead." The scribe examined the slip. It bore the seal of an officer from before the war, but the space for payment was blank. "We must establish whether the officer is still alive," he said. "Establish it," the woman answered. "But who has the right, without an inquiry, to enter the amount owed to me as zero?"

The language of renunciation was on Yudhishthira's lips. Only a short while earlier he had told his brothers that he could not accept a kingdom purchased at such a price in blood. To him the crown's gleam was like iron heated beneath the sun of violence. Now the woman standing before him was changing the meaning of those words. His right to refuse the kingdom was the decision of one man; how many days the cooking fire in the woman's home would remain unlit was a consequence borne by many others.

When Bhima came into the chamber, he held half a piece of stale flatbread. Since the war he had been unable to leave a plate of food unfinished; wherever

he turned, he saw grain running short. Seeing Yudhishthira silent, he said, “Brother, if you do not want the kingdom, do not want it. But someone must open the granary locks. A soldier’s widow, a labourer’s child and a wounded horse cannot stand waiting for a vow to be fulfilled.” As he spoke, he laid the bread on the table without finishing it. The woman did not look at the piece.

Arjuna came in behind him. His garments still carried the smell of the soil that no amount of washing could erase from the days of the war. “The accounts of the chariots and weapons are ready,” he said, “but many who worked in provisioning are absent from the first list. On what basis are we to draw up the accounts of the treasury today?” The old man with the balance said, “It is easy to call three days’ grain thirty days’ grain. Then the kingdom will survive on paper, while people die in the city.”

Yudhishthira lifted the water vessel. His hand did not tremble; its steadiness seemed to him a kind of hardness within himself. “I saw thousands of homes laid waste because of the war. Am I now to govern them in my own name? I had vowed to go to the forest. There I would live without authority, without giving orders. I would still carry the burden of what has been done.” Vidura, who until then had been sitting at the edge of the chamber, asked, “If you go, who will sign the orders for what is owed?”

“Someone else who is fit to do so,” Yudhishthira said. Vidura asked again, “Who will appoint that suitable person? Where will an appeal against the appointment be heard? And if he pays his own soldiers first and turns away the widows of the defeated, will the silence of the forest answer that discrimination?” The scraping of the guard’s wooden sandals sounded in the chamber. There was no accusation in Vidura’s voice, yet the questions were difficult even without accusation. “The wish to renounce may be honourable,” he said. “The right to renounce and the right to withhold another person’s due are not the same.”

Draupadi arrived just then. She was not dressed that day as a queen of the kingdom. Her hair was bound, but one slender strand kept falling across her forehead. Since her sons’ deaths, people had spoken softly in her presence, as though a louder voice would make her bereavement more real. As soon as she entered the chamber, she gestured for everyone to continue speaking as before. “Do not interrupt the matter of anyone’s wages on account of my sorrow,” she said.

The woman with the thread tried to bow to Draupadi, but Draupadi helped her lift the bundles instead. There was a narrow blue stripe in the cloth; before the war, had it been chosen for the decorations of a festival, it would have been beautiful. Now that cloth had become bandages for wounds. “Who gave you the measurements for making this?” Draupadi asked. “Those caring for the wounded,” the woman replied. “First they gave me the soldiers’

measurements. Then, from what cloth remained, I made clothes for whichever children it would fit."

Draupadi looked at Yudhishthira. "You are thinking of laying down the burden of the throne. Where am I to go, leaving the empty beds of my sons behind? If I wished, I too could stay outside this chamber. But the woman who made these clothes is asking neither you nor me for permission to receive money. She is asking for the way by which she may obtain what is owed. The work of hearing her cannot be put off until mourning has ended." Instead of answering, Yudhishthira looked towards the courtyard outside.

The line of mourners in the courtyard was growing. One had come to ask for a dead soldier's weapon to be returned; another was unable to perform the funeral rites because neither her husband's name nor his body had been found. No petition said whose grief was greater. A widow whose household had supplied the defeated army was stopped at the door. "This is the victors' royal assembly," the guard said. Draupadi heard him and went towards the entrance.

The widow entered and stated her own identity; she made no request to conceal that her household had been on the defeated side. The army had requisitioned an ox from her fields to carry military supplies. The ox was gone, but the tax owed against her name remained in the records. "I never took up a weapon," she said, "but the tax collector demands the amount entered before the war. He says I gave the ox willingly." The scribe lowered his gaze. The document recorded the seizure of the ox, but no voluntary consent.

Bhima was growing impatient. "If a wrong has been done, cancel the tax. Why so much accounting for that?" The widow shook her head. "It will be good if the tax is cancelled. But my claim for the price of the ox will remain. And if someone says I am lying, let two witnesses from my village be heard." Vidura replied, "The allegation and the payment must be kept separate. The claim for the ox's value will be examined against documents and witnesses. Pending that inquiry, her household must not be shut down over the outstanding amount."

Yudhishthira stood up. The throne lay two turns of the corridor away from this chamber. He did not go there. For a little while he stood holding a pillar in the courtyard. Outside, a child was drawing lines and playing with a small stone. His mother stood in the queue to have her name entered. Each time the boy threw the stone beyond the line, he drew a new one. It seemed to Yudhishthira that the boundaries of the kingdom had been drawn with this child's chalk; a gust of wind would wipe them away in the dust. He did not take the thought for a divine command.

Vidura called for another register: the accounts of those who had cooked day and night throughout the war. The old grain-measurer said that the kitchens had moved with the armies; many families could be identified by the

marks left on cooking vessels, but the vessels themselves were not proof of payment. They would also need the woman's handwriting, witnesses and measurements of the grain remaining. "We will intervene everywhere," Bhima said. Vidura had him sit beside him. "It is necessary to reach everywhere," he said, "but to arrive everywhere and write down the answer one happens to prefer is not justice."

One young man said that his father had given water to the wounded on the night of victory; another said that his brother had done the same work in the defeated camp. The water was the same for both, but separate lists had been made for restoring their dues. Arjuna turned the first list over in his own hands. "Examine the names according to the work done, not according to what is taken as proof of anyone's valour," he said. One of the young men immediately asked, "And if the person who saw the work has died, who will hear what he would have said?" For a few moments no answer came.

Draupadi gave the young man water. "Tell us what you saw. If you heard something from another person, name your source. If you are making a guess, call it a guess. Everything must be verified, but nothing will be left unheard." Draupadi herself began to test the words she had just spoken. She knew that a hearing with a woman of the royal household was not equally easy for everyone to obtain. She told Vidura, "The work of the register must not end here. Count also how the petitions of those who were not allowed inside reached us."

By noon the air in the chamber had grown hot. The water set out for the petitioners was running low. Bhima picked up the half-piece of bread and found it had dried hard. He went outside and arranged with the cook for water and something to eat for everyone standing in the queue. "Where shall I enter the cost of this work?" the cook asked. Bhima first wanted to laugh, then grew serious. "Enter it where the labour of people without names is accounted for. Giving out food does not bring the grain back of its own accord."

An elderly craftsman arrived carrying a small wooden box on his back. Before the war he had repaired a bridge. The bridge had not broken, but the planks had been replaced again because of the chariots that crossed it. Before asking for his wages, he wanted an inquiry into why the record showed payment settled in his name when he had received no money. The scribe opened the box. Inside lay two old receipts, a measuring cord stained with mud, and a coin. The coin was no evidence of a crime; it was merely money saved from the period of his labour.

As Yudhishthira looked over so many records, he was surrounded by the memory of that night when it had been hard to distinguish the wounded from the dead on the battlefield. He closed his eyes. He seemed to hear the rustle of feathers on an arrow; there was no bow in the chamber. When he

opened his eyes, he saw that the wind through a broken window was merely stirring the edge of the cloth. He did not turn his fear into evidence about the war, or take it as a decisive sign for the kingdom.

“I still wish to go to the forest,” Yudhishthira said plainly. “If I set that wish in place of the work owed to all of you, it will be unjust. Yet whenever I speak the name of the kingdom, my mind runs back to the battlefield.” Arjuna did not call this admission weakness. “I too want to be released from the weight of many vows,” he said, “but I did not make the promises on which the people standing here depend. Their claims still call for an answer.” Between the brothers there was no victorious argument.

Draupadi spoke her dead sons’ names silently to herself. She did not wish to write those names into the royal accounts and turn them into objects of charity. Yet she knew that public assistance to the families of the dead and the private memory of the dead were two different things. She said to Yudhishthira, “For myself, I shall ask for time to mourn. But I will not tell a woman whose wages have been withheld for two months to wait for the duration of my grief. If you govern, govern knowing your limits; if you do not, leave behind a real arrangement for those who must.”

Nakula came with the accounts of the stables. Some horses had survived the war, but the children who had cared for them were not named on any officer’s list. Comparing two papers bearing different dates, Sahadeva said that the same supplies appeared to have been entered twice. “It might be a mistake; someone might also have taken advantage deliberately. No decision without seeing the original ledger,” he said. Yudhishthira listened to this restraint. It was easy to name an offence in haste; harder to ensure that what was due reached the right person.

A messenger from the household of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari arrived to say that some refugees who had returned to the royal residence could no longer find their old rooms. The messenger’s voice carried a request, not a command asserting authority. Vidura gave him a written instruction that the list of temporary accommodation should be drawn up separately from disputes over ownership. “Do not throw those who are living there onto the street,” he said, “but do not strike out the older claims to the rooms without hearing them.” No one was immediately pleased with this answer. Two families needed different kinds of protection at the same time.

As the sun lowered, the scribe lifted his worn pen and examined it. The nib had snapped. The woman with the thread took a small piece of cotton yarn from her bundle and tied it round the pen’s reed shaft, making it a little easier to grip. “This won’t improve the writing,” she said, “but the hand will slip less.” For the first time Yudhishthira smiled faintly. Amid so many dreadful decisions over so many days, the little object reminded him that the work of governing did not always take place at the height of a crown.

Yudhishthira told the scribe not to return the first claimant's slip. A copy was to be given to the woman, while the original would be retained for examination; if the date of payment remained uncertain, the document must state plainly when she could ask for an answer. In the second register, the claims were to be classified not by the side taken in the war but by the type of claim, the evidence available, the inquiry still outstanding and the name of the person responsible. He ordered that the relief grain be released for immediate distribution, but that the wages owed to workers must not disappear into a charitable gift of food.

"So you will become king?" Bhima asked. Yudhishthira did not give a direct answer. "Today I will not turn away from responsibility for the claims these people have brought," he said. "That much I can say. Tomorrow my mind may again incline towards renunciation, but a receipt issued today must remain valid the day after. For that to be possible, the arrangement must be greater than any one person." Vidura had the last part of his words entered in writing, but he refused the proposal to record that "all dues have been settled". No date for disbursement had yet been fixed.

The widow from the defeated side took the copy into her hand. "This paper will not bring back the ox," she said. "No," Yudhishthira answered. "But now your claim cannot simply be dismissed. If I stop it here, there must still be a way for you to be heard elsewhere." For the first time the widow looked towards the cloth covering the crown. "Its shine means nothing to me," she said. "I shall come again to have the wrong amount struck from the records." She went away. Yudhishthira did not thank her, because this was not a gift from him.

In the evening Draupadi left the chamber and went to the empty beds of her sons. No one followed to tell her the new rules of the kingdom. She shut the door and asked to be alone. Bhima told the guard to let no one enter for that hour. Outside, smoke rose from the kitchens; people were eating, but in many homes the plates once filled with affection remained empty. No royal order could fill that absence.

At night Yudhishthira returned to the chamber where the crown lay. The water stain had dried, but the crack in the roof remained as it had been. He told the guard to agree on the mason's wages first thing in the morning; the roof of the palace would not be repaired without paying for the work. Then he asked Vidura the time and the way to go to Bhishma. "I wish to hear his wisdom," he said, "but before asking for knowledge I shall show him the orders I have given. If he says my duties are fulfilled, I shall ask him: whose dues have truly been paid?"

Vidura turned down the lamp flame. "Take questions to his bed," he said, "and with the answers take the voices of those who asked them." Yudhishthira did not put on the crown. Instead of folding the first page of the register and

taking it with him, he left it on the scribe's table, where the claimants could see it again the next day. Before the palace doors were closed, the name of the last person to arrive with a petition was entered. The path to the forest remained open; Yudhishthira did not take it that night.

Chapter 135 · Bhishma's Bed

Across Kurukshetra, after the war had ended, the morning wind brushed the feathers of the arrows with a thin, whistling sound. The dew that had gathered in the night glittered around Bhishma's bed; a few drops clung to the iron heads of the shafts, as though the earth were lending its water to the metal. Two attendants were setting earthen bowls upon the grass. The first was empty, the second held water, but the ranks of arrows made the way to Bhishma difficult. A boy standing at a distance asked his father, "With so many arrows around him, who gives him water when he is thirsty?"

Yudhishthira left Hastinapura early that morning. He carried no crown, only two copies from the register that had been laid before yesterday's hearing. Vidura had left the original with the clerk so that the claimants might consult it again. Draupadi, Arjuna and Nakula travelled in the chariot with him. Bhima came behind, arranging the carts that carried grain. Krishna's chariot stood by the roadside; he had asked for no place of precedence.

Bhishma heard them approach and opened his eyes. The shadows cast by the arrows supporting his body were shortening in the morning light. He recognised Yudhishthira and then looked at his uncovered head. "Have you come from the work of governing, or to ask how to leave it behind?" His voice was very faint, but his words were clear. Yudhishthira knelt. "I did not go to the forest yesterday. I had copies made of certain dues, and released some grain for relief. Then, at night, I understood that doing these things does not make the burden of government lighter. It increases it."

"Who does not imagine escaping a burden?" Bhishma said. "Many times I too imagined myself freed of the weight of my vow. But a promise laid aside in thought changes nothing in the lives of actual people. Tell me what you have done; I shall listen. Whatever knowledge I possess is no shield against scrutiny after so much suffering."

Yudhishthira unfolded the papers wrapped in cloth: the first concerned payment still owed for making garments, the second a widow from the defeated side whose ox had been taken, the third the labour of the wartime kitchens. Bhishma listened to the names and asked whether the claimants were alive, whether witnesses were available, and who held the written accounts. Yudhishthira replied that the answers were not the same in every case. "Then equal justice will not come from identical decisions," Bhishma said. "Take the evidence where it can be found. Where it cannot, do not throw away a person's account for that reason alone. A ruler's restraint is tested in the hearing itself."

Draupadi had said nothing. She was watching a little blade of grass growing behind the bed, green even in the shadow of the arrows. Bhishma

turned towards her. “Panchali, I can see that you have a question.” Draupadi raised her head. “The question was not born yesterday. When I was dragged into the royal assembly like an object, learned and senior men were present. They debated the meaning of the rules, but the hour of my humiliation did not stop. Today you will teach the duty of kings. First tell me what knowledge was doing that day.”

Yudhishthira folded the page he held. Bhishma did not close his eyes. “I was in that assembly,” he said slowly. “I did not show the clarity and courage needed to stop your humiliation. I cannot separate my attempt to understand the intricacies of dharma from my own failure to act. Whatever I say now will not cancel the account of the harm I did.”

“Then why should anyone need to hear your answers now?” Draupadi asked. There was anger in her voice, but no display of it. “If an old keeper of knowledge never pays the price of his earlier silence, he will merely teach new people the etiquette of speaking, not give them the right to speak.” Bhishma moved his head a little; the arrows stirred, pain rose through him, and an attendant stepped back. “No one is obliged to listen to me,” he said. “You may interrupt me, or leave this place. Test whatever useful thing I say against the work of the people you hear, day after day.”

He looked at her once more. The familiar wartime messages and arguments about weapons had now become questions of whether a bowl was clean. Draupadi asked, “If the royal assembly again becomes a place where someone is humiliated, and the scholars say the rules are difficult, what should the person suffering that humiliation do?” Bhishma answered, “The first duty of an order there must be to stop the harm. Let the reasoning be elaborated afterwards; first secure the person’s safety. I did not make that decision in time, and I will not hide that failure beneath my teaching.”

Two women sat some distance from the bed. One had lost her husband in the war; the other had wandered from camp to camp without finding her son’s body. Vidura had urged them to come, not to lend dignity to the gathering, but so that they might have a way to speak. The first woman approached and asked Draupadi’s permission to put a question to Bhishma. Draupadi stepped aside to make room. “Will you ask which side my husband fought for,” the woman said, “or first find out when his old mother is to be given food?”

“Her need for food must be heard first,” Bhishma replied. “The side he served may matter later as evidence concerning a claim, not as a qualification for compassion.” The woman answered at once. “I am not asking for charity. I am asking for the wages due for the grain my husband was sent to store. The register calls him a soldier, but he was no soldier. He carried loads.” Bhima came forward. “We came across lists like that all day yesterday,” he said. “Not everyone attached to an army did the same work.” The woman refused to put

her slip of paper into Bhima's hand. "I shall give my paper to the clerk, take a receipt, and go home."

Yudhishthira signalled to the scribe who had come with him. The scribe spread a blanket upon the ground and made a copy of the slip there; the original stayed in the woman's hand. Her name, the kind of claim, the witnesses available, and the appointed time for a reply were entered separately. Vidura examined the paper. "Write the slip authorising immediate food assistance in a different colour," he said, "so that the wage account is not treated as settled by that assistance." The woman could not read the receipt. The scribe read it aloud. She asked him to read two lines again, and only then set her thumbprint upon it.

Meanwhile the second woman took out her son's small weaving knife. "This was his," she said. "He too is nowhere in the count made after the war. The household where he wove cloth says he went to the fighting and so his name must be entered on the soldiers' list. I have not seen his body. Who can say that he is dead?" Concern was plain on Bhishma's face. "Where death has not been verified, do not write a supposition as fact," he said. "But neither order a family's continuing needs to wait until that inquiry has ended."

Yudhishthira remembered the widow's ox from the day before. "We shall keep death, livelihood and compensation for loss as separate claims," he said. "But if one family has to go round three doors, how many old people will reach them?" Vidura answered, "Let there be one door and separate sections for the decisions. People are not servants of the kingdom, obliged to go about remembering the different names for their suffering." Bhishma closed his eyes, as if this small arrangement put more verses from more books to the test than any learned dispute. Then he said, "Measure the distance to the royal assembly not by the king's journey, but by the feet of the person carrying the petition."

Arjuna sat down beside the bed. In some of the arrows buried in Bhishma's body he recognised the shapes of his own weapons. Once his hands had obeyed the commands of war; now one of those hands was passing water to an attendant holding a vessel. "Grandfather," Arjuna asked, "if a man has guarded a royal house for an age and only later changes his understanding of protection, what becomes of the worth of his earlier promise?" Bhishma drew a deep breath. "The one who keeps a vow imagines that he remains without stain. But listening to the suffering that vow has caused others is also part of its truth."

"Your vow was personal," Draupadi said, "but its shadow fell upon the women of the royal house. Did they have any part in those decisions?" Bhishma did not answer at once. A horse neighed in the distance. "For a long time I thought of my renunciation as a service to the family," he said. "But if what a person calls sacrifice, and takes pride in, restricts another person's

choices, that account too remains unsettled. I did not hear the voices of all those women. I cannot now dismiss that omission as destiny."

Nakula raised the matter of the injured horses. After the fighting ended, many animal keepers and stable boys had been tending the animals without orders. "None of them has a letter of appointment," he said, "but the horses will survive only if these people stay awake for two nights." Bhishma answered, "Payment for the labour of keeping a living creature alive is no favour conferred by the state. Let the work they have done be acknowledged. But if, in the name of recording it, an official makes out a false receipt, that too must be investigated." Nakula was not entirely satisfied. He asked plainly, "What will they eat while the inquiry goes on?" Bhishma agreed that there should be a separate provision for food in the meantime and a later accounting of wages.

An elderly scribe arrived, a man who had once written the orders of the Kauravas. The guards were stopping him. "May someone who served the Kauravas now put his hand to our registers?" Yudhishthira asked. "His handwriting and memory may be needed," Bhishma said. "But the office he once held is not, by itself, proof of his trustworthiness. Compare his account with another copy of the register; hear also the people whose names were struck out." The old man drew back. "I signed some orders whose consequences I lacked the courage to look at. If I write now, I shall show those earlier signatures of mine as well."

"Which orders?" Draupadi asked him. The old man fell silent. Bhishma did not come to his defence. "Do not pronounce someone guilty by force merely because he does not wish to speak," he said. "But when a document has served as the basis of a public decision, the state has a duty to ask for a copy. It is difficult to understand the difference between private fear and public rights." The old man took a cloth bearing an old seal from his waist sash. He said there was a cupboard in the records store for which he did not possess the key.

Yudhishthira decided that the cupboard would not be broken open by force and an immediate judgment announced. It would be opened in the presence of Vidura and witnesses from two different sides; an inventory would be made of whatever was found inside, and two copies kept safe. "Who will bear responsibility for that?" the old man asked. "The person whose name is written down will answer for it," Yudhishthira said. "Write my name too, if I give the order." For the first time the guard understood that the matter lay beyond his own powers. Instead of saying anything, he offered to show them the way to the records store.

Bhishma's breathing grew laboured. An attendant wiped the sweat from his forehead with a cloth. Bhishma asked for water. The bowl could not be brought to his lips, so Arjuna arranged for clean water to reach him. Water shone in Bhishma's eyes, but he began no tale of a miracle. As he drank, he watched the two women through half-open eyes: one guarding her receipt,

the other her son's knife. Each held in her hands a different kind of incompleteness.

Krishna came near. "Grandfather, do you wish to rest?" Bhishma smiled faintly. "Yes. But first allow these people to go, whose questions I was able to keep waiting at the door for so much of my life." Krishna made no reply. He moved aside to clear a path for a young man bringing his wounded brother on a wooden cot. The young man wanted medicine, not a discourse on the duty of kings. Vidura told him where the treatment camp stood and had the immediate need for medicine marked beside the name being entered.

"With so many questions still unanswered," Yudhishthira asked, "is it right that we should seek answers from you as you lie here?" "What I know can be tested," Bhishma said. "Do not hide what I do not know behind my name. Knowledge is not a hoard gathered into one person's body that only his hand can unlock. If you do not record the criticism of my earlier silence, my teachings now will acquire an authority they do not deserve." He paused. "Before speaking of the duties of kingship, restore to the royal records the voices that were struck out."

Draupadi came closer again. "By finding fault with your silence, we do not wipe away the guilt of the assembly," she said. "Many took part in my humiliation; many others watched. But do not let what you have acknowledged become a new ornament to your greatness. A story about honour slips all too easily between grief and justice." Bhishma's lips moved. "I do not want such honour," he said. "Let your words be written down, and my reply immediately after them. Let the reader decide how late each sentence arrived."

The scribe looked at Draupadi in astonishment. He was not accustomed to placing a woman's words before a man's reply in an official register. "Do not send what I have said to a separate section as merely the statement of a wounded woman," Draupadi told him herself. "This is a question about how the royal assembly conducts its business." Yudhishthira instructed the scribe to write it, and the man read the first line aloud. Draupadi changed two words. The marks of those corrections were not scratched out or destroyed; they were recorded beside the text. Bhishma watched this small act.

As the sun climbed overhead, the shadow slipped beneath the bed. Yudhishthira asked Vidura when a day would be fixed for hearing the matters in the records. The people in the camps were dispersing, Vidura replied; many witnesses would soon leave. A temporary place for hearings should therefore open the next day, with copies of the notice posted at the food hall, the treatment camp and the city gate. Bhima promised that people travelling from far away would have water and somewhere to sit; he would keep a separate account of the rations used for this purpose.

Arjuna then asked, “If the evidence differs, what becomes of the suffering of someone whose account cannot be believed?” “The truth of suffering and the procedure for testing a claim are distinct,” Bhishma said. “Because someone weeps, not every accusation that person makes is proved; because there is no paper, the suffering is not thereby false. A ruler’s task is not to throw up a bridge between these things in haste and let it collapse. Record what has been established, set out what remains to be investigated, and leave the door open for those whose words have not been heard to return.”

Meanwhile the first woman’s mother-in-law came to the bed, supporting herself against a cot. Whether her son had been a soldier or had carried supplies meant nothing to her. “Sister,” she said to Draupadi, “before I go back to the village, I need three days’ grain from the storehouse. My grandson is crying.” Draupadi gave instructions for a grain voucher to be prepared at once, but asked the old woman where she would like to sit to receive it. The woman looked towards the shade of a date palm, away from the sun. A small table was placed there. Without merging assistance with the decision on wages, the two papers were taken up separately.

Bhishma watched this much, then closed his eyes in weariness. Yudhishthira rose to bow before him. Bhishma made a feeble attempt to laugh. “Lighten the weight of your bows,” he said. “We shall see the real fruit of this day when you are tired and an unknown woman comes again with a slip of paper. If there is still an arrangement for hearing her, we may say that something has come of my words. Otherwise it will mean only that I delivered a great deal more wisdom on one more day.”

Before leaving, Draupadi straightened the two bowls set beside the bed of arrows. She was about to remove the empty one, but an attendant told her that it would hold the water in which visitors washed their hands. She left it where it was. Many things that seemed useless could become a means of help in another person’s work; but the thought did not heal the wounds made by the arrows. She looked at Bhishma one last time—an old man who had acknowledged his former silence and still could not give clear answers to certain questions.

The chariot then turned towards Hastinapura. Yudhishthira instructed the scribe to mark separately, alongside Bhishma’s teachings, Draupadi’s objections, the working woman’s refusal, the unverified fate of the missing son, and the old scribe’s uncertain memory. “I do not want only the answers that make me look good,” he said. “Do not leave blank the places where I did something wrong or stood by and watched.” The scribe’s hand trembled. It was difficult to obey such an order, because the king was having matters written down against himself.

At the city gate Yudhishthira gave Vidura the copy of the old register and said that at the first public hearing the officials must begin by stating not only what they had done, but also what they had put off. As she stepped down from

the chariot, Draupadi added, “When deciding whose statement will be heard first, do not look only at rank.” The clerk asked how precisely he should write this. Yudhishthira answered, “Do not defer the statements of those whose decisions harmed people. And do not consider those statements complete unless there is a place for the people who suffered to speak.” The list for the hearing, which would run into the night, began to change; the next empty space at the top could no longer be filled with someone’s silence.

Chapter 136 · The First Statement

In the first cold weather of 2040, beads of dew were gathering on the tin roof of the community office. Instead of opening the brass box that lay on the table, Sarita spread a dry cloth beneath it. Three sheets lay before her: a blank form for her statement, a copy of the summary already made public, and the slip bearing the mark of her own consent. The morning light fell across one corner of the slip, and Sarita could not yet take her eyes from that small mark.

Rama Karna said, “If you wish, you can read the written questions beforehand. You are under no obligation to finish telling your story at once before an official today.” Sarita replied, “I shall read the questions. But I shall write the first sentence in my own hand. No one must later say that something was added on the strength of my name.” Her voice did not tremble, though the fingers holding the paper were cold. Rama gave her a glass of water.

Chairs had been placed along two sides of the room: on one side, those recording the statement; on the other, people who wanted to examine the conditions governing their testimony without making their names public. Ruhani said the shelter’s confidential register of identities would not be opened here. If it became necessary to mention someone in Sarita’s statement, the person’s identifying details would be removed from the public copy. “Then who will see the original?” Gomati asked. Rama answered, “Only to the extent required for an authorised examination. The reasons for decisions, the procedure, and the means of appeal will remain open to the public.”

Sarita wrote the date at the top of the first page. “I shall keep what I saw with my own eyes separate from what someone told me,” she said. “Where there is an inference, write that it is an inference. My work is being examined here, not my character put on trial.” Outside came the sound of Uma’s sandals. She had taken half an hour from her laundry shift to bring the papers concerning the balance of Urmila’s wages. She would not consent to another meeting consuming her entire day.

Rama asked her first question: when had the original sheet containing twenty-seven names been in Sarita’s possession, and in what condition? Sarita laid a hand upon the lid of the box. “For a long time the original sheet was in my keeping. When I myself had been declared dead, possession of that sheet did not serve as proof that I was alive. I challenged the office’s erroneous mark in person. The circumstances of all the names on that sheet were not alike. Some people were living, some deaths had actually been confirmed, and in other cases the accounts of what was owed were entangled. I said that no one was to expose everybody’s private story in the marketplace.”

She glanced behind her once, as though Naira might be sitting on the empty side of the room. Only a torn sack lay there. Sarita did not give her

memory the standing of evidence. “Naira was with me that day,” she added. “She was explaining the order of verification, but the original sheet did not pass into a journalist’s authority simply through the affection between a mother and daughter. There were limits to testimony, and those limits were respected. I cannot bring her back now to answer for anything I say here.”

“What exactly did your verification establish?” Rama asked. Sarita answered, “Each of the twenty-seven entries was checked, one by one. We marked which facts were confirmed by official copies, which by the testimony of living people, and which by separate receipts for payment. The conditions attached to publishing five identities were kept confidential. An avenue of appeal was provided. That work was done. But completing the verification did not mean that every payment had been made, that every false mark of death had been removed, or that the families’ fears had ended. I understood that even then.”

“Then where was the error?” the municipal representative asked. “The proposal was made public at the time with everyone’s agreement.” Sarita looked towards him. “That sentence is where I made my mistake. I consented to publication of a summary of the procedure. It said ‘reconciliation completed’, but I did not make sufficiently clear the danger that readers might overlook what was still owed and the correction orders that had not yet been issued. I should have asked for one more line: ‘The results of verification are not the restoration of rights.’ I did not.”

“So did you give everyone false information?” Gomati asked. Sarita shook her head. “No. The original count was not invented. The claimants’ names were not disclosed without permission. My mistake lies in the empty space between two true statements, into which a reader could put the whole success they wished to see. I failed to stop and consider that risk when I gave my consent. Write that down. But it would also be wrong to turn it into somebody else’s fault.” Rama paused over the page and read the words back to her.

From outside the door a young man said, “I understood from that public sheet that all the accounts had been settled.” He was not summoned inside. Gomati asked whether he wished to have his statement recorded or was merely asking a question. “For now, a question,” he said. “My mother was told that day there was no point going to the office.” Rama wrote: Account of public understanding; source yet to be verified. Sarita asked, “Was it someone from the office who told her not to go, or someone in the neighbourhood?” “A man from the neighbourhood,” he replied. His question had lost none of its importance, but responsibility had not been shifted without cause.

Rama opened the second sheet. A false notification of death had previously been entered against Sarita’s name, obstructing both her wages and her work. “Do you wish to give another statement proving that you are alive?” she asked. “No,” Sarita said firmly. “I have had to establish that I am alive too many

times. Today I am speaking about my work and a decision I made wrongly. The papers concerning that earlier injustice will remain as context for this statement, but do not substitute them for what I am admitting today. Record separately the time allowed for whatever administrative correction is still outstanding."

Kabir entered quietly. In his hand he carried a certified copy, not the original, of a note from Naira's unfinished work. He set it on the table. "Rama can decide whether this supports your statement. I will not hand over Naira's private letters." Sarita said, "Your silence does not protect me, Kabir. And you have your own grief. If you wish, you can sit outside this room." This time Kabir did not leave. He moved his chair a little farther back, as though even distance were something to be agreed upon.

By then Badri Nonphar had arrived at the gate. With him were his wife and Malti Koche, from the new settlement. The edges of Badri's folded resettlement paper were crumbling. At the top, beside the place-name, were the words 'permanent arrangement'; the spaces for the water tap, toilet, route to the children's school, and journey to work were blank. His wife took the broken lid of an old water pot from her bag. "I left the old place relying on this vessel," she said. "At the new place I borrowed Malti's pot. And now this paper says we have settled there."

Gomati gave them time to speak. "Whose hearing have we come to in this room?" Badri asked. "Sarita's statement, or our objection to this paper?" "They are separate matters," Sarita replied. "But if I am speaking of the mistake of writing 'problem resolved' beside people's names, you must speak for yourself about the error on your paper. I shall not speak in your place." Badri turned to his wife. She decided to speak first.

"On the night the water came into our home, I moved the child aside and pulled away the tarpaulin," she said. "That does not prove that I accepted both the land and the house at the new site. A place to survive the night is one thing; a place to live is another. How far is my son's school? Where will we get water? Will the vacant ground be counted as agricultural land or not? None of these questions appears on anybody's paper." Malti added that the tap used by the families already settled there was now under greater strain. But a quarrel over sharing water ought to become a demand for a public provision, not a private dispute.

On the reverse of his paper Badri showed them an old address. The name Budhanad was entered there. "That is a place-name in my family's old farmland papers," he said. "It has been merged here with the address written for the new residence. I have not surrendered my claim to the old field." Rama recorded the name exactly as it appeared. Aditi, who had arrived a little later with the site-survey file, said, "We cannot determine a river's course or the boundary of a plot from that name alone. We need the original map, the revenue copy, and an inspection on the ground."

“If you refuse the plot now available for relief, your name may be removed from the next list,” the municipal representative said. Badri looked again at his wife. “A signature obtained by frightening someone is not consent,” she said. “I need another tarpaulin from tomorrow, but I shall strike out the word ‘permanent’.” Gomati asked the representative for the written rule. He had no clear order authorising the removal of anyone’s name. Beside the statement Rama wrote: A warning was made; no written basis presented.

Inside the room Uma glanced at the clock. “My shift is nearly over,” she said. “Where should I hand in the slip for Urmila’s unpaid wages?” Gomati gave her a signed acknowledgement of receipt. “A receipt, or payment?” Uma asked. “A receipt,” Gomati said. “The verified portion has been forwarded, and a date is recorded for examining the rest.” Uma read the slip and put it in her pocket. “Then write that word larger,” she said, “so that people who have had fewer chances to learn to read can understand it too.” She went back to her laundry work.

Sarita’s statement resumed. “On the first day I raised, before everyone, my objection to the mark declaring me dead. It taught me one thing: an administrative error cannot be placed above the voice of the person standing here in front of us. Later, when I began checking the papers, I kept their sequence and the limits of verification in order. But I had no control over the experience of someone reading the public summary. I did not make a full enough effort to foresee how that reader might misunderstand it. That is the extent of today’s mistake; it does not mean that my whole life has been a lie.”

“What consequence do you want this admission to have?” Rama asked. Sarita fell silent. Outside, some children were competing to touch drops of dew falling from the roof. She remembered how, as a child, Naira had insisted on trying to catch dew in just that way. Sarita did not try to smile. “I have not come to prescribe a punishment for myself,” she said. “But a correction must accompany the earlier public summary. State plainly which rights are still outstanding. And let this amendment be made in my name, not Naira’s.”

One committee member proposed publishing a new amendment containing all twenty-seven names in the verification register, to dispel public suspicion. Ruhani objected at once. “Two wrong decisions do not cancel each other out. Why expose private identities in order to correct the ambiguity of a public summary?” Badri’s wife spoke too. “My telling you my story is not permission to display every family’s address.” The proposal was withdrawn. Rama prepared a limited draft of the correction, which Sarita would read again.

Aditi opened her bag of maps, but she made no pronouncement in the middle of Sarita’s statement about the ultimate cause of the hospital’s drainage failure. “I have an earlier measurement report bearing my signature,” she said. “Its limits now need to be examined again. I shall not decide, on the strength of what has been said here today, whether the drain or

the building was at fault. Tomorrow I shall bring the original pages of the measurements. Whatever is proved wrong I shall formally withdraw.” Sarita looked at her. “Speaking of a mistake does not correct it,” she replied. “But unless it is spoken of, even the door to correction stays shut.”

At midday Rukhsana sent rice and vegetables for the meal. She did not come herself; her work was to deliver the food, not to put herself on display at the meeting. Showing the provisions and Rukhsana’s labour entered on separate lines in the expense book, Gomati said that the meal served to those attending today must not be entered in the accounts as though relief had been distributed. Badri’s little son stood near the window, breathing in the smell of rice. His mother took him outside to eat. A dispute over documents had no right to keep him hungry.

Before eating, Sarita listened to every paragraph of her statement as it was read aloud. At one point Rama had written, ‘Wrongful consent to publication of the summary’. Sarita changed it to, ‘Limited consent to the published summary without clarifying its incomplete meaning’. “I am not making my mistake smaller,” she said. “Why should I take upon myself a permission I never gave? And why should I leave blurred the thing for which I am responsible?” Rama retained the record of the amendment; the earlier wording was not erased from the page’s history.

“Naira believed in distinctions as fine as this,” Kabir said softly. “But even she could never put everything right.” Sarita looked towards him. “Neither can I. I could not save her, and I shall not find the answer to that in this file. The inquiry into the cause of the accident will follow its own course; my error of consent will follow another. If the two are joined into a single story of blame, no one will listen again.” Kabir ate half of the food on his plate. He knew Sarita could urge him to eat each day, but she could not command him to account for his grief.

Badri and his wife came back inside. In her own hand she wrote three conditions at the foot of their paper: receipt of temporary shelter; a reply within a specified time about safe, accessible water arrangements; and recognition that accepting a new residence did not automatically extinguish their claim to land. Malti asked that the water rights of the households already settled there be recorded on another sheet, so that the burden of the new families’ arrival would not be imposed on them privately. Gomati accepted both requests at the same hearing, but issued two separate acknowledgements for the decisions.

“The word ‘incomplete’ that you keep writing will make the higher office send the paper back,” the representative said. “If it comes back, write down why it was returned,” Badri answered. “I will come again for my child’s water. But I will not have what we do not know today recorded as though we have been given a home.” Gomati agreed to send the department a request that no

fresh order evicting people from the temporary settlement be issued. She did not present this as a legal guarantee. A written response was still awaited.

Rama opened the third page of the new statement. The first page dealt with Sarita's work of verification, the second with the limits of her public consent and her own lapse, and the third with the correction requested and the names of the officials required to respond. "Shall we record the legacy of Naira's work on this page?" she asked. "The register of Naira's unfinished work is separate," Sarita said. "The questions in her handwriting have their source there. I shall not make myself the authority over her statement merely because she was my daughter. What I did must be in my name; what I did wrong must be in my name too."

Gomati read the draft correction aloud. The public summary had been right to say that reconciliation of the twenty-seven entries was complete. Payment of each amount due, correction of the records, consent to publication of identifying details, and restoration of personal rights remained matters for separate procedures. Before this statement could be made public again, the claimants' private information would be removed, and a period for objections would be announced. Sarita added a line: "The office is responsible for making a reasonable effort to give those who saw the earlier summary equal access to this correction."

The evening sunlight slipped from the wet edge of the roof. At last Sarita signed the original statement. Rama gave her one copy; another went into the restricted records, and the draft public correction was marked 'Not yet for publication'. Instead of folding her copy, Sarita laid it flat in a folder. The ink on her hand was drying. Suddenly she asked, "And if I remember something more tomorrow?" Rama replied, "Then we shall not change the first statement. We shall add a supplementary statement bearing a second date. Both your memory and the record will retain their history."

As they were setting off for home, Badri's wife spoke to Malti about the water pot she had borrowed. Malti laughed. "Return it when water is easy to get. But first we shall all demand that the platform beside the tap be built." Badri looked again at the name Budhanad written on his paper, but he did not use that name today to declare the river, the field and the house subject to one and the same measurement. His child took a corner of flatbread from the bag and began to eat. The child was looking at nobody's important signature.

When Sarita reached the office door, Aditi called after her. "Tomorrow I shall make the original of the old measurement report available for inspection. Seeing how carefully you preserved the history of the words today, I want to re-examine the measurements that bear my signature." Sarita did not turn back into the room. "Open your own pages yourself," she said. "But nothing I have said proves your measurements right or wrong." Aditi nodded. Sarita took the road home, a copy of her first statement in her hand, while

ahead remained the document that would demand an answer from its own author tomorrow.

Chapter 137 · The Old Report

Instead of blowing the dust from the old measuring rule, Aditi dampened the corner of a cloth and wiped it clean. The first line engraved on the brass had almost disappeared. She held the rule beside the office window, where the morning sun fell directly upon it. Three documents lay on the table: the old report bearing her signature, Tara Binout's field notebook, and the municipality's register of receipts. The same tract of land had three different boundaries in those three records. At today's meeting Aditi would have to speak about her own signature; she must not claim to know what had yet to be understood about the earth itself.

As she closed the door, Rama asked, "Is this the original?" Aditi nodded. The blue of the official seal had spread across the foot of the page, and an old water stain marked one corner. "Yesterday Sarita did not erase the first version of her statement," Aditi said. "I shall not paste new figures over this report and make my former decision disappear either." Rama noted the old file number. To make the distinction between the original and a copy clear, she proposed that the sealed packet be opened in the presence of everyone attending.

Outside on the veranda Mamta Hari sat with her municipal work register. Dried mud clung to the soles of her shoes, but she had not come from working inside the drain. "If I ask where the gloves are, they will say everybody has been issued them," she said. "Beside my name the receipt column says zero. Tell me, does this document say safety equipment was provided or not?" Aditi turned to the report's final page. One sentence described the site as 'suitable for an ordinary external inspection'; beneath it, however, there was no accompanying record showing that equipment had actually been received.

"I treated a route I had seen as though it were the same thing as work that could safely be undertaken," Aditi said. "The language of my measurements went beyond what they could establish." Mamta replied, "That language was used by my department when it ordered us to work. When I refused, they told me there was an engineer's report." Rama recorded that Mamta had lodged an objection to the order, had not received safety equipment, and that entry into the interior was unacceptable without a separate risk assessment. Mamta read the page and said, "Let my testimony stand just like that. Do not turn it into a story about somebody else's courage."

When Tara arrived, the first thing she did was open the window. She spread out the field sketches made on both sides of the embankment. One line represented the strip along its upper edge; another marked the standing water that had reached the lower settlement. In Aditi's old report, the gradient between those two places had been treated as a single combined measurement. Tara said, "In our last inspection we could not identify the original fixed

reference stake from which this gradient was calculated. Not finding it does not mean it never existed. It means only that a drainage order cannot rest upon these figures."

Gomati stopped at the doorway when she came for the meeting. "If you merely withdraw the paper, who will withdraw the orders already issued?" she asked. Aditi had no answer ready. She was silent for a moment, then took out the distribution list attached to the old report. They agreed to seek acknowledgement of receipt from every office to which a copy had been sent: hospital management, the municipal repairs branch, warehouse inspection, and the drainage office. "If an office incorporated my conclusion into an order of its own," Aditi said, "we need proof that the correction has reached that office."

Sarita arrived a little late. She had left yesterday's statement at home; today she had come to listen. She carried none of Naira's notebooks. Gomati offered her a seat, but Sarita sat on an empty bench beside the window. "I shall ask where, in these papers, is the story of those my daughter tried to save," she said quietly. Aditi answered, "Today I shall account for the sources of my measurements. I shall not use them to declare the cause of Naira's death. That belongs to another inquiry." Sarita listened to the limit Aditi had placed upon her own account.

Halfway through the report there was a simple line drawing. It appeared to place an old mouth of the Purnadhar beside the back enclosure of the warehouse, but the drawing had lost the distinction between the date of the old map and the newer markings. Ratan arrived with a copy of a hand-drawn map preserved from his father. "This paper is part of my family's memory," he said, "not final proof of a right." Tara accepted the distinction. "It can help us ask where the old channel opening may have been. This copy alone cannot determine the warehouse's title to the land."

Suraj had come with Ratan. The hearing concerning his agricultural debt was still proceeding in a separate register. "If the river's former course is marked again, will the reckoning of my losses change?" Suraj asked. Gomati replied, "It may provide further evidence for your claim. But ownership of the land, the actual damage to your field, and the debt you owe are three separate questions." Suraj looked at her. "I shall have all three written down," he said. "Before this, someone would give me one answer and nobody would listen to the other two questions."

Outside, two women who had come for water set down their pitchers and listened. One of them asked, "If the river's mouth is opened on paper, how much deeper will the mud be along our path?" Tara invited them inside. "Show us where you walk." The women traced a bend on the ground with their fingers. Tara marked that bend on the map, but made clear that it would not become the line of a new drain without an inspection of the site itself.

Paro Pattharkatta came carrying a small box of tools. Two workers accompanied her; both had heard news of a contract to be offered the

following day. As soon as the municipal assistant saw her, he said, “If the report is wrong, cut away the loose slab and put in new stone. Work could begin today.” Paro opened the box and took out a grooved chisel. “This can cut stone,” she said. “It cannot measure how much weight a waterlogged foundation will bear. If we cut a slab without examining what supports it, the road above may collapse.”

The assistant said that those who worked during the emergency would receive an additional allowance for risk. Paro handed back the slip stating the amount. “My household needs money,” she said. “That does not mean I shall take your unknown danger upon my own head.” One of her fellow workers asked softly, “Then will there be no work for us now?” Paro replied, “We shall propose safe repairs on the outer strip that has been inspected. We shall touch the inner supports only after they have been examined. We refuse work whose dangers are unknown, even when it comes with an allowance; we do not, for that reason, surrender our wages for work that can safely be done.” She submitted a written application naming every member of her crew.

Aditi compared the application with her own earlier wording. The report had stated: ‘Ordinary improvements can be undertaken immediately.’ The new inspection had shown that this sentence should have applied only to the safe outer section, not to the whole slab. She did not draw a new red line across the original. On a separate sheet she wrote that the old conclusion was unfit for further use, and that the original would be retained as a record of reference and accountability. Gomati added, “Write down the decision that no new contract is to be sanctioned on the strength of that conclusion.”

The municipal representative’s face hardened. “If you withdraw the report, will you accept responsibility for the official delay?” he asked. Aditi replied, “I shall accept responsibility for my incorrect certification. But without a separate inquiry you cannot lay every cause of the delay upon me. There are distinct records showing when materials were requested, when they were purchased, and whose orders were held back.” “Now the department will demand my testimony,” the representative said. Gomati did not smile. “That is why we shall put each person’s name in a separate space.”

Mamta rose and addressed the gathering. “The receipt column for my safety equipment has not been blank only since today. When I objected to the municipality’s order, they told me to look at the engineer’s paper. Now the engineer is changing her conclusion. But my disagreement was written down before this; do not give it a new date.” Rama requested a copy of the old order. There was no need to write Mamta’s testimony afresh at that moment: its date and wording had survived on the first page. Aditi said, “I shall attach your earlier objection to the revised report. I will not let my incorrect finding erase the disagreement you rightly recorded against it.”

Rani Halalkhor had also reached the veranda. She carried the hours register for the contracted cleaning crew, not Mamta’s municipal register. “My companions were told that if we did not go down inside, we would not be

counted as having worked," she said. "We cleaned the safe part above. Our claim for the wages for that work is still outstanding." Gomati acknowledged receipt of the register and kept it apart from Mamta's testimony. The difference between two systems of labour could be heard clearly in the consequences of the same day's order: one concerned the safety of a municipal employee, the other the withheld earnings of contracted workers.

At midday the group went to the Purnadhar. The soil beside the warehouse's rear wall was wet, but the record of when the water had risen and receded was still incomplete. Tara showed them a reference stake in the safe section; Aditi studied her old map. A little farther on, the warehouse clerk maintained that the strip of ground lay within the institution's leased premises, and that no one therefore had the right to search for the river's course. Ratan answered, "Measuring where the old channel ran and determining rights under the lease are different undertakings. Closing the way to a measurement does not prove ownership."

Near the old mouth of the channel, Tara did not touch the loose earth with her hands. She examined the marks from a distance, using a slender rod. The river was called Purnadhar, but she could not yet say what combination of the present current, an earlier course, and runoff from the warehouse had made the wet traces visible there that day. This time Aditi left a white space blank, marked 'Source testing pending'. Ratan looked despondent at the empty space. "For now, this is the accurate record," Tara said. "A space filled with something false is not truly filled."

When the group reached the lower side of the embankment, Phulo was already standing there. She had heard all about protecting the higher bank; she wanted to know in whose calculations the standing water behind her own home appeared. Suraj showed them the boundary ridge of the field below. The warehouse clerk had not come to this site. Aditi noted watermarks from two different times, while Tara asked the village women what they remembered about when those marks had appeared. Their recollections did not replace measuring instruments, but they gave a reason for choosing the times at which further inspections should be made.

"If we cut through the embankment below, the water will escape," a young man said. Phulo stopped him. "Onto whose house?" she asked. He gave no answer. Tara spoke carefully: cutting the embankment, filling the raised strip, and providing a new outlet were three different decisions, each carrying its own risks. First they would have to verify the gradients on both sides, the water levels, and the routes people used. Aditi recorded that the old report had treated an estimated benefit to the higher side as proof of safety for the lower. That conclusion was to be withdrawn.

Paro came to the embankment without her tools. From a distance she studied the gaps between the stones and said to Aditi, "I cannot leave my crew without work again tomorrow. If you sanction an inspection of the safe outer strip and separate wages, we shall work there." Aditi looked towards the

municipal representative. “First there must be an accounting for the new contract,” he said. Paro answered, “Before you begin the accounting, write down the names of those whose livelihoods will be interrupted.” Rama entered the crew’s application as received and added a proposed date for a hearing; she offered no firm assurance of payment.

On her way back, Mamta bought a little paper notebook for her daughter, who had said she wanted to go to the library the next day. Rani asked, “Can you say your work is finished today?” Mamta replied, “The space for my testimony is no longer blank. The space for my equipment still is. I shall not colour them both the same.” Rani examined the accounts of her contracted work. “My hours have not yet turned into money either,” she said. The two women took roads towards different offices. Though each carried the separate burden of her own papers, they still found time to look at one another.

Sarita returned to the office. She wanted to see the public correction to the old report, not the entire confidential case file. Aditi read aloud the part concerning the report’s conclusions about drainage. “Does this paper establish the cause of Naira’s death?” Sarita asked. “No,” Aditi replied. “It shows that the safety conclusion based on my earlier measurements was unreliable. The hospital structure, blocked drainage, supplies, and decisions relating to the deaths each require their own evidence.” Sarita drew a long breath. “At least this question has not been closed here,” she said.

Before signing beneath her name, Aditi asked Tara once more, “Have we now obtained the correct complete measurements for everything I stated wrongly?” Tara’s answer was unequivocal. “No. The missing fixed reference point, the different dates of the old maps, and the unequal watermarks on the two sides make new testing essential. I have a limited account of the inspections already conducted; we do not yet have decisive measurements.” Aditi passed a hand over her face. “Then the amendment must not pretend to a new certainty,” she said.

The new letter was divided into three clear sections. The first formally withdrew the old signed conclusion, specifying the limits of the reasons for doing so. The second requested orders for new official measurements, equipment checks, external inspection, and independent collection of records. The third set out immediate precautions: no unsafe entry into a blocked drain, no breaking up an unverified slab, and no arbitrary change to drainage on one side of the embankment in the name of protecting the other. Decisions within the committee’s authority took effect that day; matters beyond its powers were referred in writing to the relevant departments.

After reading the final page, the municipal representative asked, “Which budget heading will pay for the new measurements?” Gomati replied, “Relief grants, Mamta’s salary, the arrears owed to Rani’s contracted crew, and the cost of an engineering investigation do not come from one and the same fund. First let the officer authorised to decide the budget issue a written decision.” Paro renewed her request for safe repair work. “Meanwhile, do not

bury the acknowledgement of our previous work," she said. Rama entered the time of receipt on the document. The question remained open, but it was no longer unclear who had to answer it.

Late in the afternoon Aditi did not add a fresh signature beside her old one on the original report. She dated a separate letter of withdrawal, repeated the number of the original report, and requested a change in the status in which it could be used. In Gomati's presence, two copies of the letter were sealed: one went into official dispatch, the other into the committee's public records. A third sealed copy was kept for the investigating team. No one was permitted to tear a page from the original. Aditi looked at the dust upon it; this time she did not wipe it away with her cloth.

That evening a new notice was pinned to the board. The first man to read it asked, "Does this prove that the hospital was at fault in every respect?" Another said, "No, it means nobody is at fault yet." Gomati stopped them both. "That the old measurement was wrong is one fact. What kind of wrongdoing occurred, and who is responsible for it, must be established by separate inquiries. Both these extreme answers are wrong." People began to read the notice again. For the first time the paper said plainly that a claim of safety could be false without that falsehood automatically answering every other question.

As Aditi gathered her files to go home, Mamta's empty receipt column caught her eye. She added a further requirement to the list for the new survey: before any inspection, the authority must verify that workers on the site had permission to undertake the work safely, that equipment had actually been handed over, and that their working hours were recorded. "We cannot put a paper right by sending people into danger all over again," she told Rama. Rama inserted the condition in the draft order. Before the new measurements could begin, there would now have to be a worker's acknowledgement of receipt as well.

Outside, a bicycle messenger set off carrying letters from the office. His task was to bring back an answer from every department; the time allowed for each answer had been recorded, not its promised result. Sarita watched him leave from beyond the window. None of these documents had diminished Naira's absence. But as Sarita was about to go, Aditi stopped her. "I am allowing the part of my error to become a primary document in the inquiry," she said, "not the final judgment about blame." Sarita replied only, "Then give the next question its own name."

Gomati opened the last page. It contained four empty spaces: the physical sequence of the accident; neglect of duty; possible records of unlawful gain; and allegations of deliberate violence. Rama asked, "Shall we keep all four lines in one file?" "They may lie on the same table," Gomati said, "but they cannot become one accusation." Aditi laid a copy of her old report between them. They wrote down the limits of what that page established. Darkness

thickened outside, and for the first time the room made separate places for evidence before settling on the names of the wrongs.

Chapter 138 · A Separate Column for Blame

At dawn, Gomati Beldar opened four empty files on the old desk in the office. Aditi's withdrawn report had been placed there the previous evening, and Rama had stopped someone from covering it with new papers. On the rain-soaked veranda, shoes were drying in one place, people in another. Gomati did not write anyone's name on the files. On the first she wrote 'Physical sequence of events'; on the second, 'Possible neglect of duty'; on the third, 'Allegations of unlawful gain'; and on the fourth, 'Allegations of deliberate violence'. She left a little space between all four. Seen from outside, it was an ordinary desk. At its heart, the difficult work had begun of dividing the single story of someone's life into four different kinds of question.

Rama came in carrying a seal. "Some people say that if we write murder, the investigation will move faster," she said. "Others want us to write accident so that everyone will be absolved." Gomati closed the window shutter to keep the papers from blowing away. "Both groups want a verdict before the inquiry," she replied. "There is no new dispute over a death that has been confirmed. But whose duty was breached, what changed and when, and whether anyone deliberately caused harm—none of these questions can be answered with the same stamp." She asked Rama for a copy of the receipt.

Kabir stood at the doorway for some time. In his hand he held the outer cover of one of Naira's small notebooks; he had left the private writing inside it at home. "I feel anger whenever I hear the word murder," he said, "and when I hear accident as well. Neither word will bring Naira back. But if we settle on the wrong word at the outset, where will the proper investigation go?" Gomati invited him to sit beside the desk. Kabir did not sit. "I have come today to hear the limits of what is known," he said. "Do not mistake a family's grief for a failure of reasoning and pronounce someone either innocent or guilty."

Aditi brought not the original of her old measurement report but an authenticated copy of her letter withdrawing it. She asked for it to be placed in the first file. "I have withdrawn my conclusion that the drainage was safe. The old measurement reference points could not be located; the water marks on the two sides of the embankment also belong to different times. That is enough to make an earlier technical assertion unreliable. It does not mean that the water broke the hospital wall of its own volition, or that some particular person deliberately weakened that wall." Rama asked, "Then should this letter not go into the second file?" Aditi replied, "A copy may be placed there for context. But the first home of the evidence is the measurement, and the limits of that measurement."

Tara came in and showed them copies of records made at three different times of rainfall, water marks and drainage. A newspaper leaflet had joined

the edge of Mallik Pond, the old mouth of the Purnadhar and the water at the hospital gate with a single red line on one illustration. Tara laid the leaflet on the desk. “An illustrator is free to draw a line,” she said. “My measurements have not yet established that same line. Water level, a blocked drain, seepage inside and a weakened wall may all have affected one another; each requires its own measurement.” She had ‘Public conjecture’ written in the corner of the leaflet, so that nobody would mistake it for an inspection record.

Just then a letter arrived from the municipal repairs department. Its language was severe: certain ‘local repair workers’ had altered the fill without authorisation and thereby compromised safety. In place of names, it cited a number from Gomati Beldar’s wage register. Gomati read the paper and stood up beside the desk. “That number identifies our crew’s claim for wages,” she said. “It does not identify who issued the instructions, who selected the materials, or who approved the site.” The department’s messenger said, “I was told only to deliver the letter.” Gomati replied, “Then take a receipt for delivering it. The department must answer for its contents, not your mouth.”

A Beldar worker who had been waiting on the veranda heard the news and came inside. An old callus on his right palm had split open like a wound. “I carried baskets of earth that day,” he said. “If I say I did not, I shall be lying. But nobody showed me the measurements that said where to put the earth. When the edge of the embankment began to crumble, Gomati had the work stopped. Now the papers say that all of us were the ones who blocked the entire drain.” His voice trembled, but he asked for the page on which to sign his own statement. Gomati did not tell him to make his testimony agree with hers; she had it recorded separately.

“Then if the workers are not at fault, are the officers?” a municipal employee asked. “Everyone’s name is in the file.” Rama took the pen back from his hand. “Having a name in a file and being proved guilty are different things,” she said. “The worker will say what he did, what orders he received and what he stopped. There will be records of the approvals the officer gave. No one may fill the unaccounted-for time between those two levels with an accusation based on guesswork.” The worker went quietly outside. He had received no pardon for his own actions, but neither had he been made to bear the weight of orders he had never seen.

By noon, Gomati’s old hours register, the contractor’s bills for filling material, and copies of site approvals lay open in three separate bundles. For the first time Rama saw how many different signatures stood between the money paid for materials and the money that reached the workers’ hands. An officer immediately declared, “The price shown is lower. That means theft.” Gomati stopped him. “Buying cheaper material may be a poor decision. The discrepancy in the bill may be real. There may also have been an accounting error. To allege unlawful gain, gather evidence of the path the payment took, the kind of material supplied, who benefited, and what was knowingly

decided." She admitted some papers to the third file, but its heading remained 'Allegation'; it did not become 'Proved'.

Between two ledgers lay a torn receipt. On the back a river's name had been written as 'Baruna', while the printed copy said 'Barune'. An assistant exclaimed, "This makes it clear: the same fill was shown at a second place, and payment was collected twice." Gomati said, "Wait. The original register gives the full address; the copy gives only the watercourse name. Similar sounds do not establish identical locations. Baruna and Barune may be different pronunciations of one name—or entries for different places. This question did not arise only in this chapter; it was left unresolved in the register earlier too." She opened the old entry and showed them the date. Naira's annotation, 'Source verification pending', was still there.

Kabir bent a little closer. At the sight of Naira's handwriting he felt, for an instant, that her voice had moved through the room; in fact, someone outside was striking an empty metal vessel. He raised his eyes. "She did not erase that distinction," he said. "If we now invoke her name to declare these two places identical, we shall erase her caution too." Beneath the copy Gomati wrote: do not combine register totals without confirming the original identity of each site; where doubt remains, pursue separate correspondence. That decision suspended the allegation of possible duplicate payment, but did not close the way to verification.

Then Sarita arrived. She did not wish to have Naira's private letters read aloud. Nor did she wish to hear a new dispute over the confirmation of her death; the hospital kept a separate record for that confirmation. "I want to know which office the family must approach when the course of the questions changes," she said. "If structural negligence is found, will it automatically be taken as proof of the cause of Naira's death, or must there be separate medical and chronological investigations?" Aditi replied, "There must be a separate inquiry. I do not wish to minimise the extent of my error, but I will not call something proved when it has not been measured." Sarita did not rest her hand on the first file.

The legal adviser appointed to the meeting also arrived. He made clear that the working committee was not a court empowered to deliver a verdict. Its task was to preserve records, identify the sources of statements and physical evidence, send independent files to the competent investigating authorities, and keep open the channels through which people could submit claims for what was owed to them. "We cannot write murder for the sake of sensation," he said. "But if a specific allegation of deliberate violence is brought forward, we must not bury it in the accident file either. It must be referred separately, with the details of the allegation, its source and the limits of what can properly be accepted." Kabir asked, "And if that file contains nothing but an allegation so far?" The answer came: "Then it will be written down as an allegation."

A young man handed them a leaflet he had written. He claimed that certain routes used to supply the hospital with goods had been suspicious, and therefore the blockage of the drain might have been deliberate. Rama asked him, “What goods did you see? When? In whose hands? Did you go to the drainage site yourself?” The young man admitted that the connection was his own inference; he had heard the talk about the goods from someone else. Gomati did not tear up the leaflet. “Write separately what you saw, what you heard, and what you inferred,” she said. The young man amended his sentence. Unless he identified the person from whom he had heard it, his source could not be described as reliable.

Ruhani had sent a written request from the shelter. It asked that the public register of the disaster show the number of people displaced from their homes and the expenditure on relief, but that the private identities of shelter residents should not automatically pass into the files of allegations. Gomati added that limit to the draft order. Nor would Champa’s confidential medical papers become copies for circulation at the general meeting; if necessary, only the records concerned could be examined, with consent and according to lawful procedure. Here, no one’s suffering was turned into public material for an inquiry.

Outside, an elderly woman stood with an application concerning arrears owed to Urmila’s family. “You are making four compartments for blame,” she said, “but which compartment will hold the accounts of Urmila’s laundry?” Sarita rose and seated her. Rama showed her a separate register of dues, in which questions of wages, the deposit and return of clothing, and responsibility still remained open. “We shall not press this into any one of the four allegations,” Rama said. The woman asked for a receipt for her application. She did not want a lengthy definition of legal proceedings; she wanted a piece of paper stating on what day an answer would come.

One officer could not reconcile himself to this. “If the committee opens so many files, there will be no end to it,” he said. Gomati replied, “If we make arrears disappear merely to reduce the number of files, what will end is the paperwork, not the dispute. Keeping four questions of causation apart from the claim for wages makes clear who must answer, and by what date.” The old woman folded her receipt and tucked it into a fold of her sari. As she left, she turned back. “Find out how she died. But do not withhold payment for the work she did while she was alive until you have discovered the cause of her death.”

Towards evening a second letter arrived from the municipal department. This time it proposed withholding the outstanding payments for local repairs, on the ground that the workers might have been at fault. Gomati read it and immediately drafted a reply. “Do not suspend indefinitely the approved payment for work actually done merely because the matter is under investigation. State the basis of any disputed amount clearly, and keep the remainder of what is owed separate. Take statements from the workers;

produce the order book, quality-inspection records and documents concerning the supply of materials. No collective punishment.” She did not put only her own signature as convenor to this reply; she attached the workers’ representative’s objection as well.

The municipal assistant was still saying, “Gomati is a Beldar herself. She will take her own people’s side.” Gomati did not smile. “I am also a witness to receipts for my own work, which is why I shall not adjudicate my personal claim,” she said. “In that part of the dues, Rama will examine the receipts and an independent member will conduct the review. But my occupation is no reason to exclude the voice of the entire Beldar crew.” For the first time Kabir turned to look at the assistant. “Disclosing a personal interest is not dishonesty,” he said. “Concealing it is the problem.” The assistant promised to submit a written objection and fell silent.

Gomati opened a page in her old register. It recorded wages for eight consignments of earth. Once, in exchange for those eight loads, oil and rice had reached her household; part of what was owed had remained unpaid even then. Resting a finger on the page, she said, “I carried the earth. I shall not withdraw that admission. If an error of mine is found in the work, let it be investigated. But if you erase the questions about who drew up the warehouse plan, who ordered the drainage blocked, who chose inferior materials, and who omitted the inspection, and leave nothing but the mark of my basket, that will be another lie.” Rama wrote down her statement without ornament.

Aditi made no attempt to offer reassurance. “The erroneous measurement bearing my signature belongs in this chain too,” she said. “I will not claim that, by admitting my mistake now, I have erased the consequences of my earlier decision. But I must myself demand the actual evidence needed to establish how much harm my error caused.” Tara did not immediately announce a schedule for new water measurements; separate approval was still required for weather conditions, safe entry, independent instruments and the presence of people from both sides. The rush to fill the files was not allowed to increase the danger of new work.

Two people were arguing on the road outside. One said, “If the investigation does not find murder, there will be no justice.” The other said, “If there is no proof of murder, then everyone is innocent.” Sarita did not intervene. She stood beside a pillar on the veranda and took a small bottle of water from her bag. When Naira had grown tired while reading documents, she used to ask for drinking water to be placed nearby. The memory spoke to Sarita, but in that moment it was not becoming new evidence. She put the bottle back in her bag and returned inside.

“I shall submit one more application,” Sarita said. “Let the independent confirmation of Naira’s death in the records remain undisturbed. Let her surviving private papers not be made public without the family’s permission. And let no decision reached along any one of the four paths of inquiry be

taken automatically to extinguish claims for relief, personal property or service-related dues." Rama read the application aloud. Sarita corrected it: in place of 'ownership of private papers', it should say 'right of access to private papers', because the final disposition of the property was a separate question. At this small correction, Gomati paused before signing.

Separate forwarding letters were prepared for all four files: a fresh technical examination of the physical sequence of the accident; departmental orders and testimony concerning safety for possible neglect of duty; independent scrutiny of bills, supplies and payments for suspected unlawful gain; and statements with clearly identified sources concerning allegations of deliberate violence, to be placed before the competent lawful investigating authority. Not one letter said that guilt had been established. The committee claimed no power to deliver a verdict beyond its authority. But each letter named the office required to acknowledge receipt, the date by which a response was sought, and the documents still missing. The empty compartments were no longer invisible gaps.

When Gomati Beldar came outside that evening, the bamboo marker planted in the mud some distance away was moving in the darkness. She noticed that, behind it, the shadow of the old wall seemed divided into four pieces. There were not four walls in the water; the wind was breaking the reflection of a single wall. She saw no more than that. Before setting off for home, she turned back to Rama. "Send notice today to the worker whose payment the letter proposes to stop. Give him a time to come inside again tomorrow." Rama wrote the time in the notice book. It would not be right, while making files, to leave outside the person whose work might be taken away the day after tomorrow.

As the first lamp of the night was lit, Kabir half closed the door of the room. The four files lay apart on the desk, yet he knew that many of the people passing through them would be the same person: a witness, someone injured, someone owed money, someone accused. Outside, Sarita's footsteps slowly receded. Aditi had left a copy of her withdrawal letter in its proper place in the file. Rama was writing down the order of the next day's hearing. Then a small piece of paper was put before Gomati: 'Should the cause be proved first, or should those whose dues are clear be paid first?' She kept it as a question, not an instruction. Four separate paths of allegation had now been opened; tomorrow the question for reasoning would be when, and how, evidence arriving by different paths might touch one another.

Chapter 139 · The Return of Reasoning

In the light of dawn, fine dust from the limewash was falling from the right-hand wall of Udayana's study. The wood of the veranda was damp after a night of rain. When a pupil began moving the box of palm-leaf manuscripts from beside the wall, a dried bilva leaf and two leaves tied together with thread slipped out. He looked anxiously at his teacher. Udayana did not rush to lift the box; first he checked the order of the pages. One carried the opening of his own inference, the other an objection raised by the visiting Mīmāṃsaka. On the wet floor, the two pages were on the verge of sticking together.

The guest who had challenged his position so sharply at yesterday's assembly had been late rising that morning. A pupil who had accompanied him stood trembling at the door. "Master, an old fellow student of his died during the night," he said. "The guest is asking for the assembly to be dismissed. He has no wish now to hear the arguments you set out yesterday." All the pupils turned towards Udayana. Someone wanted to say that the most forceful voice of opposition had fallen silent, but the words never reached his lips when he saw his teacher's face.

Udayana spread the pages upon a cloth. "We shall set another date for the assembly. First go and ask what he wishes." The pupil asked, "Is the reply to his argument postponed until then?" Udayana said, "The reply can remain written. If the person who has questions to ask has no strength to listen today, I will not force his voice out of these pages." He sent the student with a pitcher of water and dry clothing. The neem-wood seat at the centre of the room remained empty; the guest had sat there the day before.

Before midday, the opposing teacher came in person. River mud had dried along the hem of his garment, leaving a pale, whitish line. In one hand he carried a small writing vessel belonging to his friend—a brass inkpot, stained with black ink. "I had this with me," he told Udayana. "His family wants this object brought home before the written manuscripts. I know you are waiting for the assembly to resume." Udayana did not take the inkpot. "It will go home in your own hands," he said. "No dead person's belongings will be held as security for a debate."

A young Naiyāyika, who had felt humiliated by the opponent's questions the previous night, asked quietly, "Is death not evidence of the world's impermanence? When that is so clear, why does he not give up his position?" The guest heard him. "My friend's death is evidence for you now?" he asked. "On the night I was counting his breaths, will you turn my helplessness into a victory for your argument?" The colour drained from the pupil's face. Udayana did not permit him to continue the dispute.

“Direct knowledge of a person’s death,” Udayana said, “can establish that the life of this particular body has ended. What conclusions must necessarily follow from that about the self, God, the fruits of action, or the cause of the entire world requires further examination. And at present, our right even to undertake that examination is bounded first by the wishes of those who grieve.” The guest said plainly, “I do not agree with your conclusions. But today, for the first time, I feel that you value my question.”

The guest took up his argument again. “Yesterday I said that the supposition of *apūrva* might suffice to account for the later fruit of an action. You asked how the rule governing the distribution of those fruits could be determined, and how actions that obstruct one another could be related. I had come to give you my reply. My friend is no longer alive. But his death makes my position concerning *apūrva* neither true nor false.” Udayana nodded without lifting the palm leaf. “Nor has his death strengthened my evidence for God,” he replied.

A thin sunlight was spreading across the far end of the veranda. An elderly woman who bound manuscripts was loosening a knot in her thread. The pupils called her by her work rather than by her name: “Mother Who Stitches the Leaves.” Today she came forward. “These leaves you are trying to save stick to one another when they get wet,” she said. “If you pull them apart sharply, both will tear. Dry them first, and then separate them.” Udayana gave her an extra strip of cloth. The old woman laid the leaves apart, but did not claim that her work furnished proof for any philosophical argument. Her craft had rules of its own.

Towards evening, a young man from the dead friend’s household came to collect the remaining manuscript leaves. He had not come to listen to a disputation; he had come to count the things the household needed. “The leaves bearing his handwriting will remain at home,” he said. “You may keep the copies the pupils made. But my mother asks whether the copying has been paid for.” The pupils had not been prepared for a question of this kind. Udayana summoned the keeper of his funds and told him to examine the accounts for originals and copies separately. The young man put the leaves into his bag. Tonight he was more concerned about the fire in the household hearth and tomorrow’s journey than about disagreements in belief.

In a distant town, on a morning in 2040, Rahina Thakurai was unlocking her copying shop. The night’s dew had jammed the hole in the iron lock; she stopped twice while turning the key. Inside she found that two bundles belonging to regular customers had been taken back without notice. A note from her paternal cousin lay on the table: beginning this month, there would be a separate arrangement for customers shared by the family. There was no accusation in the note, only the cold language of accounts. Rahina did not telephone her cousin at once. First she added up the wages from the previous week that had not yet been paid.

Her daughter stood by the door with her schoolbag. “Ma, may I come here when I return from school today?” she asked. Rahina gathered together a ledger with torn pages. “You may. But I will not give away the time you need for your studies in payment for anyone else’s quarrel.” Seeing the bunch of keys, the child asked, “Will Uncle keep a different key?” Rahina replied, “The lock on the shop will open according to the accounts of my work. The lock on family relationships is harder to open.” She sent her daughter to school without laying her own fears upon the child’s head.

The acknowledgement sent by Rama Karna lay on the table. In the statement Rahina had given during the Reconciliation of the Twenty-Seven, she had recorded her recollection of the serial number of a copy and of a mark reading ‘Not for publication’. Now the investigating team had again requested the source of the printed copy and the sequence of permissions. The letter stated that the original of the old register had not been found, although the receipt for copying fees was verified. This small truth had struck a heavy blow at Rahina’s livelihood. She had refused to call something an original when she had never seen the original; even so, her relatives accused her of not having kept silent.

When her cousin arrived, he did not pull out a chair. Standing, he said, “I did not stop you from giving evidence. But customers are saying that government papers leave our family shop. A household we have worked with for three generations has withdrawn its business.” Rahina showed him a copy of her earlier statement. “Look here,” she said. “Which private paper went outside? I gave the receipt for my own wages, issued in my name. I never said that anyone deliberately removed words from the printed text.” Her cousin looked at the page but lowered his eyes.

“One must also preserve the family’s good name,” her cousin said. Rahina pointed to the simple metal mending piece made by Sumitra Kami on the torn corner of her box. “I keep this box in good order with thread, glue and money,” she said. “If, in the name of the family’s honour, I had spoken falsely about one line in a register, which of my copies would a customer trust tomorrow?” Her cousin fell silent. In the distance came the rumble of a printing machine; in this little shop, copying was done entirely by hand.

Before evening, on the ancient veranda, the guest again sat opposite Udayana. This time he placed his dead friend’s inkpot on the floor and said, “Let me complete one point of our disagreement. If many chains of causation are found in the observable world, where is the invariable concomitance established that would make us infer a single conscious controller behind every chain? When we see a pot made by a potter, we may recognise a maker. But to set the sky, rivers, bodies and desires alongside a pot also demands evidence.” The room was silent, for this was no easy question.

“An example does not constitute the whole subject of an inference,” Udayana said. “The order of effects, the fitness of means, the coherence of acts

and the limits of known causes must be examined separately. I do not want to pick up a pot and stamp its likeness upon the world." The guest replied, "Then test the order you speak of against the experience of disorder as well. Famine, accidents, the death of an innocent child—calling all these the unknown reckoning of karma does not dispose of the objection." Udayana looked towards his pupils; none was eager to contradict the guest at once.

"I cannot regard that objection as answered," Udayana said softly. "An unanswered moral question and an inference concerning the causes of the world are not propositions of the same kind. I will not make another person's suffering an instrument for filling the gaps in my knowledge." The guest rested a hand upon his friend's inkpot. "Nor can I accept that grief obliges me to abandon the question of truth for ever," he replied. This time their two statements did not cancel each other. One asked for a pause; the other, for a return.

"Then will today's disputation end with a blank conclusion?" a pupil asked. The guest asked him, "Since when has an empty space meant failure?" Udayana said, "Write down the questions that remain unanswered. For those you have answered, write down the limits of the answers. Erasing your opponent's dissent is no victory in constructing an argument." For the first time the pupil serving as scribe left as much space for a page of disagreement as for a page of answers. Before the ink had dried, the elderly woman came with her thread; to prevent the leaves from sticking again, she placed a thin, dry leaf between them.

In the modern town, Rama arrived at the door of Rahina's shop. There was no microphone or photographer with her. "Your first statement is safe," she said. "Now we need a limited supplementary statement, to make clear the difference between the sequence of your copying work and the printed version. We do not need your family's names, your daughter's school or your home address." Rahina invited her inside. "I will give the supplementary statement," she said. "But first tell me: with whom do I lodge the account of the loss that has reduced my work?"

Rama took two separate application forms from her bag. One was for acknowledging receipt of an evidentiary copy for the inquiry; the other was to register a claim concerning services and money due, on which Rahina could record unpaid sums and notice of the termination of an agreement. "The committee cannot bring customers back to your shop," Rama said plainly. "But if you are owed wages for official copying, that sum can be identified in an account separate from the dispute over your testimony. You can submit a documented complaint about the loss of private customers. We shall not write the decision before the inquiry." Rahina placed the two papers apart.

Her cousin was still standing inside. "Opening all these files, you are taking family affairs into the streets," he said. For the first time Rahina turned fully towards him. "I will not write our family affairs here," she replied. "But when

you removed the customers’ bundles without telling me, it affected what I earned. If you wish, say how much work you took elsewhere, and from which day. Do not make the amount disappear by calling it a family disagreement.” Her cousin picked up a pen to write the names of two customers on the blank back of a printed leaflet, then stopped. “I will not give their names without permission,” he said. “Then give the number of jobs and the dates,” Rahina replied. “Names when permission is obtained.”

Rama opened the page for evidence. Rahina repeated the old order of the copies three times, and on the third occasion acknowledged that she remembered one message only from hearing it, not from seeing it. “Write ‘heard’ beside this sentence,” she said. “Whether it was clear in the first statement or not, write it again now.” Under that word Rama asked another question: “From whom did you hear it?” Rahina answered, “Two employees were talking in the room. I did not know their names. I will not invent their identities now.” The supplementary statement had not become weaker; its certainty had acquired more precise limits.

At that moment a handcart tilted in the lane. A sack carried by a woman transporting bundles of thread fell to the ground, and some papers rolled towards the wet drain. Rahina rose and ran outside, picking up the pages with one hand. Her cousin, without being asked, helped steady the cart. “These pages contain my customers’ measurements,” the woman said. “If I misread them and sew the garments wrongly, the cost will be taken out of my wages.” Rahina counted the leaves one by one. The last was stuck beside the water in the drain; she separated it patiently. The woman thanked her for this small service, but did not alter the count of the pages by a single one.

Back in the shop, Rahina asked her cousin, “Will this working relationship between us continue or not?” He said, “I can bring back some of the work, but not all the customers. And not everyone at home agrees with the evidence you gave.” Rahina replied, “I am not asking for a paper declaring agreement. I am asking for a written account of whatever share of the work can return. As for the rest, I will listen to what is said at home, but I will not withdraw my statement.” Her cousin sat down at the table for the first time. He agreed to count the two bundles again; the family quarrel was not over.

In the ancient time, at the end of the assembly, a pupil asked Udayana, “Master, should we record the death of our opponent’s friend on the assembly pages?” Udayana replied, “As the reason for postponement, write only as much as the family permits: that the proceedings were paused because of private grief. Do not turn the death into a consequence of the argument. Respect the wish of the family if it wants the name kept private.” Hearing this decision, the guest bowed his head. He picked up the inkpot and took his leave. At the doorway he turned back. “I shall bring my disagreement again,” he said. Udayana answered, “Bring the whole question.”

After dusk, before her daughter went home, Rahina showed her the board at the back of the shop. Three new lines had been written there: how many copies had been made for each job; how much payment had been received; and the date on which an answer would be sought about what was still owed. The child asked, “Will Uncle laugh at you again for writing all this?” Rahina was silent for a little while. “Perhaps he will, perhaps he won’t,” she said. “But whoever owes the money must give an answer one day. Laughter is another matter.” The child counted one line and corrected it.

When Rama returned to the committee room that night, Gomati Beldar had the four files concerning causes lying open. Rahina’s supplementary statement and copying receipt did not automatically go into any of them. Rama first acknowledged their receipt in a separate register of claims, then sealed the limited copy needed for the inquiry. “This page does not prove that anyone committed an offence by removing words,” she told Gomati. “But it is a fact worth investigating that someone had seen, in a copy, words that were missing from the printed text. And a separate date has been fixed for answering the claim for copying wages.” Gomati wrote down the date. In a place on the page that had been blank before, the name of the office responsible for answering now appeared.

The candle flame wavered in the room, and for a moment the shadows of the four files became a single blur upon the wall. Rama straightened the lamp glass, and the shadows parted again. She knew nothing of the ancient disputation, and had no evidence from palm-leaf manuscripts. Before her lay only Rahina’s signature, a receipt for wages and the appointed day for the office’s reply. Gomati said, “Now we must connect the argument about causes to the account of work. What did the person entitled to give orders actually do, and whose payment was stopped by the silence of the one who said nothing?” On the first line for the next hearing, Rama wrote ‘Action and Cause’, leaving a space that living people would themselves have to come and fill with their words.

Chapter 140 · Action and Cause

At dawn, water was dripping, drop by drop, from the roof of the veranda outside the committee room. Gomati Beldar placed the four files on causation beneath the window and drew the fifth register—the one recording wages and outstanding payments—towards herself. The last question Rama had written the previous night still lay open: who had the authority to give the order, who had done the work, and who had withheld payment? In a corner of the table was a copy of the old accounts for eight consignments of earth. Gomati did not turn its pages. She wanted to ensure that, when the papers concerning her own entitlement came under examination, her position as coordinator would not weigh upon the decision.

Rama opened a departmental letter. Across the top, in heavy letters, stood the words: Possible negligence by local repair workers. Below, one worker's attendance number had been circled, although the attached copies of the material approvals, the plan and the inspection report bore many signatures. “So far, this establishes only a question,” Rama said. Gomati read the line beneath it. The recommendation was that all wages be withheld until the inquiry was complete. “With that sentence, punishment would begin before the inquiry,” Gomati said. “Payment for work whose hours and measurements have been verified must not vanish under the pretext of an investigation.”

On the veranda sat the earthworker from the previous hearing, the blisters on his palms split open. In the file he had only a number in place of a name; outside, a child was calling him “Babu.” His wife had arrived carrying an empty sack for rice. She knew none of the language of the courts. “If we are not paid next week either, the interest on what we borrowed will rise,” she said. The worker showed his wounded hand. “I carried the earth,” he said. “I did not draw the plan. But I can tell you how full the baskets were.” Gomati gave him a place to sit inside, not to announce her decision to him but to hear what he had to say.

The officer's assistant read out a list: the person who performed the work, the person who approved it, the person who supplied the materials, the person who checked its safety. In the first space he wanted to write only the worker's number. Rama stopped him. “Enter roles in this list, not culprits. If one person performed two roles, join them only after examining the evidence.” Gomati said, “I have a receipt for my own labour, too. I shall not sit as a deciding member on that claim.” The assistant frowned. “Does that mean you will withdraw from the entire repair case?” “No,” Gomati replied. “Where my own money is to be decided, another member must decide. But my profession cannot be used to take away my right to hear the testimony of earthworkers.”

Raghav Singh arrived just then. Fine factory dust clung to the soles of his sandals, and in place of an empty cardboard box he carried a thick envelope. His nephew stood a little behind him with a certified copy of the old materials ledger. Raghav told the assistant, “My firm delivered the straps and hinges. I shall speak to what I know. But I will not, merely because of that, certify the quality of the repair that was carried out.” The assistant was already writing ‘Supplier responsible’ in a box filled out in advance. Without taking the sheet from his hand, Raghav asked, “Responsible for which item, which order, which inspection?”

A separate chair was brought for the nephew. He examined the signature on his first statement, then rested his eyes upon a blank space on the new sheet. “I saw the materials being unloaded,” he said. “This space was blank then, too. On a copy made later, I found something written in it, but the writing does not appear to be mine.” Rama asked, “Can you say for certain who filled it in?” The young man shook his head. “No. I shall speak only about my handwriting and what I saw at the time.” Raghav did not look towards him just then. It would have been easier for him to rely upon his relative's silence; here, however, the young man's freedom to speak mattered more than that assurance.

Raghav's phone vibrated in his pocket. The message was from an old contracting partner: the next supply agreement would not now be revived; for adjustment of the remaining advance, he should contact another office. What had previously been only a suspended order had become notice that the arrangement was over. Raghav did not show the screen to his nephew. Before stepping outside, he handed Rama a copy and said, “Keep the account of the earlier threatening telephone calls separate. This letter is not, by itself, proof that the contract ended in retaliation for anyone's testimony. But record both its date and the earlier messages.” Rama acknowledged receipt. Raghav's palm remained still upon the paper for a moment.

Before midday Raghav returned to the factory's small courtyard. Three workers were covering sacks on dry wooden boards. The accountant asked, “If the next consignment is not coming, where shall we put these men to work?” Raghav could not tell him that everything would be all right. For the first time he made out a separate account of the wages still owing and changed the order in which the portion of advance money remaining with the factory would be distributed. “I cannot make this the price of silencing my nephew,” he said, “nor can I meet my own losses out of money these people have earned.” The accountant opened his red ledger, in which some payments had already fallen due.

Raghav's sister came over from home. The nephew was her son. She held an old medical prescription and bread wrapped in a small piece of cloth. “You were right to leave him free to decide,” she said, “but do not put the burden of this failing business upon our boy alone.” Raghav asked, “What does your son

say?” “He says his uncle did not teach him to lie. Now let no one at home say that he ruined the household.” Before answering, Raghav looked towards the dark room at the back of the factory. “I shall say that in front of all the workers,” he said. His sister left the bread and went away. She had no wish to turn concern for her son into a public performance of sympathy.

Meanwhile, Shashi Mahuri arrived at the committee room carrying his two brass keys. One side of the ring was bent; he had marked it separately during the earlier inspection. He also brought the tenancy agreement, receipts for rent paid, his written objection to the fitting of a second lock without permission, and a copy of the watchman's attendance register. “I own this warehouse,” he began, “but I have not witnessed everything the tenant did. Look at how soon I objected when I received information. Investigate what I was not told. Merely entering my ownership on a page does not automatically make the contents of the building my crime.”

An assistant asked hastily, “But an unlawful warehouse was operating on your land. Shouldn't your name stand in the first column for blame?” Shashi was silent for a minute. “If I failed in my duty, let that be investigated,” he said. “But do not bind the goods in the warehouse, the rent for the rooms, the unauthorised subletting and criminal intent into one word.” Gomati asked, “To whom did you send your written objection?” Shashi unfolded a corner of the receipt. The stamp acknowledging delivery was clear; the space for a reply was empty. “No reply came,” he said. Rama turned that into a question for investigation, not a seal declaring him innocent.

The watchman had come as well. His eyes were accustomed to the night watch; in the brightness of the room's window he kept blinking. “One night Shekhar asked me for the key,” he said. “I did not give it to him. I did not see who went through the other gate.” Someone asked, “So did goods enter at night?” The watchman answered slowly, “I cannot say. Turning what I did not see into testimony will not save my job.” Shashi did not nod to signify agreement. He had been given a chance to speak for himself; he did not want to make himself the owner of the watchman's words.

Parvati, a woman labourer, appeared in the doorway. She had once dried rain-soaked sacks in Shashi's warehouse and had received payment for that work. But opening the back room or counting the consignments inside it had not been her task. “Everyone says I worked in that warehouse,” she said. “That is true. But if you want answers about something I know nothing of, ask me, not my employer.” Rama gave her the right to choose the next date for her limited statement. Parvati said it must not be market day, when she earned wages from other work. Shashi did not decide her time for her.

As the pale midday sun reached the veranda, Gomati returned to the page bearing the earthworker's number. The departmental assistant's new draft said: All persons concerned are jointly responsible. Gomati turned the sheet

towards him. “A collective structure tells us that responsibility must be apportioned; it is not a licence to erase what particular people did,” she said. “But fastening upon one individual does not automatically absolve the whole system.” The assistant asked, “Then how am I to put it in a single sentence?” “Write separate questions about the name, the order, the work actually done, the risk observed, the power to stop it, and the information available at the time.”

The earthworker said that on the day of the filling, the loaded baskets had been unsteady. He had told a supervisor that the earth was wet, but he could remember the man's face, not his name. The assistant immediately began writing, ‘Warning given.’ The worker stopped him. “I said it aloud. I do not know who heard how much of it. There was no written notice.” Gomati thanked him, for the reliability of his testimony lay in just that distinction. The man remained sitting, applying ointment to his cracked palm. The roughness of the earth was still there in that hand, but no one could read from its blisters whose orders had caused the earth to be laid down.

On the next page Rama added a copy of Aditi's old report containing the erroneous measurements. Aditi had already withdrawn its mistaken conclusions, but the full record of the permission granted for work on the strength of those conclusions was not yet available. Tara was present to examine the safety boundary. “I do not consider the site open for new measurements,” she said. “The time, the equipment and the agreement of people on both sides are still outstanding.” The assistant asked, “For how many days, then, must we defer a finding of fault?” Tara replied, “Where evidence is missing, the investigation must continue. But why must people waiting for treatment, safety barriers and wages that are firmly established be made to wait for it?”

From the rear of the room, Rukhsana came forward carrying the kitchen accounts. She showed the quantities of food and the supplies used each day, not the names of those staying in the shelter. As Ruhani had requested, an account of expenditure could be made public without exposing residents' private identities. “While all these files have been circulating, provisions for my kitchen have been stopped three times,” she said. “The shopkeeper says the money has been frozen because of the accident. If the food bill is verified, clear that account; investigate whatever is suspect separately.” Gomati sent the kitchen accounts to the register of payments due, not to the files of accusations. That day's food had not caught fire; the question had descended from the papers to the rice cooking upon the hearth.

Towards evening Raghav returned. He had already told the factory workers that his nephew's statement would not be recorded as the sole reason for the collapse of the business: the market, the suspended contract and his own long-standing financial dependence would each have a separate accounting. He handed Rama a formal letter from the company: no private restrictions would

be placed upon his nephew's testimony; his wages for attending the inquiry would not be deducted; and if an investigating officer summoned him to examine the original materials slips, the company would make copies available. “I shall try to protect my reputation,” Raghav said, “but I shall not close the pages of truth to do it.” There was no triumph in his voice, only the weariness of a man reckoning his losses.

Rama asked, “Will you make the letter ending the business relationship public?” Raghav shook his head. “I have given the investigation what it needs. I will not take revenge by exposing my workers' names and individual pay.” The nephew, who had been waiting outside for a while, came in. “Let my statement say that Uncle has stopped trying to prevent me from speaking. But Uncle is right: he did not see with his own eyes where the materials were used.” Gomati said, “Your statement will remain yours. It will not be altered to turn anyone's courage into a monument.” The young man read the paper once more and signed his limited account.

Shashi was then showing a copy of the old warehouse plan. The building's boundary and the rooms let out for rent were clearly marked; along the rear entrance there were two measurements in different inks. “I will not claim to know when this line at the back was changed,” he said. Rama asked for the date of the original plan and the source of the alteration. An officer objected, “Are we now to suspect the owner on the strength of this alone?” Shashi answered for himself. “Questions born of suspicion may be asked. Asking a question and proving guilt are different things. If the rear passage was altered with my permission, show the evidence. If it was not, ask who altered it.” He hoped for relief, but he did not want a document certifying an innocence that had not yet been established.

The tenant's unpaid rent was also on the list. Shashi wanted the cost of repairing the room damaged by rain to be recorded separately, without that claim being taken as an assertion that the seized goods belonged to him. Kabir made it clear that the rent due under the agreement, possible compensation for damage and rights over consignments under investigation were three distinct legal questions. Shashi asked, “May I let the room again?” Kabir said, “Only after checking the limits of the seal and the competent authority's order. For now, make sure your sacks of spices nearby are safe, but do not disturb the lock on the room under investigation.” Shashi placed the two rings of keys apart once more.

The earthworker's wife was still waiting. Their child wanted to sail a paper boat on the puddle in the veranda, but his mother stopped him: one of the sheets of paper was his father's acknowledgement slip. Rama came with a brief order signed by an independent payment verifier. It recommended the release of the undisputed portion of wages for verified consignments, while calling for a time-bound examination of the remaining arrears, the worker's statement and a copy of the materials inspection. “Not all the money will be

in your hands today," Rama told her plainly. The wife asked, "Then what will taking this slip do?" Rama said, "The office will be obliged to give a written answer by the specified date. I shall ask again on that day."

As he was leaving, the worker stopped beside Gomati. "You have protected your own people," he said, though there was more suspicion than gratitude in his words. Gomati replied, "Today a recommendation was made to lift the hold on part of your wages. A different member will consider my own claim concerning eight consignments. If your work is found to have been faulty, no one will conceal it. But that will not extinguish the inquiry into the orders given from above." The worker ushered his wife ahead of him. The child now held a scrap of old newspaper from which to make his boat; his mother had tied the acknowledgement securely into the end of her sari.

At the close of the meeting, the officers wanted one joint conclusion. Gomati gave them a fresh page, with three separate columns beside each person's name: what work the person had witnessed, what decisions that person had authority to make, and what payment due or possible liability remained. Shashi's line recorded the tenancy agreement and written objection; Raghav's recorded the supplies, his nephew's independent testimony and the terminated business relationship; the earthworker's recorded the actual carrying of earth and the incomplete payment. Rama would not allow the words 'possible liability' to be removed, but she kept them distinct from 'proven offence'. This page did not replace the four investigation files. It made a clear path of reference between them.

Sarita came to the door. She had heard about the day's dispute, but she had not brought Naira's private notebook. "Do not turn Naira's name into another example on these separate pages about causes," she said. "She died; the evidence of that is complete and recorded elsewhere. Her unfinished work, her personal belongings and who is owed what belong to different accounts." Rama showed her that the record confirming the death had not been altered and that the question of payment due remained open in the payments register. Sarita sat for a little while. Gomati spoke no words of heroism to her. Among all the papers, she left room for the woman's silence.

At the final meeting Kabir kept two files apart, one for legal assistance and one for relief. "A difficult question will arise at the next hearing," he said. "If a person under accusation has given assistance to a bereaved family, does that end the investigation into the accusation? And does the family's acceptance of help amount to agreement to abandon its legal action?" Gomati closed the folder containing Shashi's receipts. Raghav was gathering up a copy of his letter. One good deed did not make every decision a person had taken lawful, any more than a single wrong decision could erase that person's truthful testimony. But the real test of this principle would come with the next distribution of assistance.

By night the water outside the room had receded, though the closed wing of the old hospital and the obstruction near the warehouse extension were still visible from a safe distance. Far away a child had launched a newspaper boat into a pond. It paused for a moment in a small eddy before drifting towards its own bank. Gomati watched from the window, but she did not imagine she could discover the cause of the disaster from its movement. She picked up one of the letters left on the table: protection for Raghav's nephew to give independent testimony, a lawful examination of the documents concerning Shashi's rooms, and a time-bound reply on payment of the worker's undisputed wages were all to be dispatched that day. Rama placed them in separate envelopes.

As she closed the door, Rama said, “Now some places will send written replies, some will send receipts showing that assistance has arrived, and others will send notices of legal proceedings. We shall have to keep those three things distinct.” Gomati checked the window latch. “We shall keep them distinct,” she said, “but we must not leave those entitled to an answer wandering from office to office.” She extinguished the lamp. In the courtyard came the soft tread of a worker returning from Raghav's factory. His earnings, the nephew's testimony and Shashi's locked room no longer bore the name of one accusation. No court pronounced judgment that night, but dates had been fixed for answering the separate duties that remained.

Chapter 141 · Help and Litigation

In the morning a small iron chest stood on the steps of the committee room. On its lid, the words “Medical Assistance” remained in faded paint; inside were bundles of receipts, slips recording deliveries of medicine, and two empty cloth bags. Rain had fallen during the night, and the stone beneath the chest was still wet. Rama did not bring it indoors at once. She asked Devvrat’s employee, “On whose authority was this left here? Is the name of the person who gave the receipt recorded?” The paper the employee held out bore only the words “Public Interest.” Arriving on the veranda, Gomati Beldar said, “It is easy enough to write the name of a good cause. Someone must also be named as responsible for opening the chest.”

Devvrat himself arrived a little later. With him was Rameshwar, carrying the two keys to the lid, each tied to a separate cord. Devvrat said, “I have continued to provide assistance. I have come to give a complete account of it, so that it may be known how many patients received medicines, how many households received blankets and how many people without homes received supplies.” Gomati invited him to sit inside but would not allow anyone to put a seal on the chest. “If objects under investigation and public assistance come from two different sources, their identities must be recorded first,” she said. Devvrat took off his spectacles and laid them on the table. What troubled him most was that today, before anyone would hear about his assistance, he was being asked for permission.

Kabir was already seated there. No written answer had yet come to the question he had left at the previous day’s meeting. “It matters that the things you gave reached the right people,” he told Devvrat. “But the investigation concerning Mahesh is still in progress. If the provider of assistance says that no prosecution may proceed against him, what path remains open to the bereaved family?” Devvrat did not challenge him immediately. From beside him Rameshwar produced a draft document, headed “Protection on the Grounds of Recognised Social Service.” The moment Rama took it up, she asked, “Protection from what? From producing records, or from criminal investigation?” The draft made no distinction between the two.

Mahesh’s wife arrived on the veranda with her daughter. The girl wore a blue schoolbag over her shoulder; her mother kept adjusting its strap. At the sight of Devvrat, the woman stopped short. She had not been informed beforehand that she would meet him here. “I remember receiving the medical assistance that came to our house,” she said, “but there is no receipt for this child’s fear at night. Is my consent not required in a proceeding concerning the investigation into Mahesh’s death?” Rama immediately assured her that no decision to bring them into a joint meeting had been taken without her permission; if she wished, she could give her statement in a separate room. The woman chose the empty room next door.

Rama opened the list lying on top of the chest. There were valid assistance slips for Jamuna's treatment, records of clothing given to the shelter, supplies for emergency lighting, and hire papers for two vehicles, all bearing different dates. Some deliveries were confirmed by authorised signatures from the hospital; others appeared only in the warehouse dispatch register. "For what reached the hospital, we need the hospital's certification," she said. "What was handed over on the road cannot be called treatment given to a patient." Devvrat himself placed a finger on one slip. "I had the quantity corrected for this consignment of lights. Do not tear out the old page." Rama recorded that the correction order was available, but an independent reconciliation of the goods' actual use was still outstanding.

Just then Shabnam Malik came from the municipal service office. She carried a certified copy of the entry register and a photograph of a gleaming nameplate. "I have no objection to checking Devvrat's receipts," she said. "But someone carrying a plate marked 'Malik Office' had earlier been taken for an authorised person and shown files. A surname cannot serve as the key to a gate." An old employee of the office stood with his eyes lowered. Recognising him, Shabnam said, "Your mistake is in the record. Now tell us how many pages were opened in front of that person. Say only as much as you saw." The employee described the covers of three files; he remained uncertain whether their contents had been read.

Rameshwar said hurriedly, "There are many people called Malik. Why bring up this old affair in the middle of charitable work?" Shabnam answered, "Because the prestige of charity and the right of entry into an office are being tied together again. The person who entered under the shadow of my surname had no genuine authorisation. Who sent that person is not yet established." Devvrat turned towards Rameshwar. "Was that plate printed through your office?" Rameshwar denied it. Shabnam had his denial entered in the record, but she would not accept it as the truth and close the inquiry.

The chief clerk of the service office brought out a new sheet. A note of correction had been attached to the erroneous entry in the admission register, but one employee said that writing "Corrected" should be enough to repair the injury to someone's reputation. Shabnam would not agree. "First decide the limits of the notice to be given to those whose papers were shown. Their private addresses must not be disclosed; but the demand to examine whether unauthorised access to the files occurred must remain specific." Devvrat looked away from his associate and said, "You may scrutinise my list of donations here. Neither a surname nor a donation receipt makes anyone an officer." Shabnam asked for a certified copy of that sentence, not a leaflet of praise.

Towards noon, Mahendra Mahaseth and Binod Jaiswal arrived with their accounts in two separate bags. Mahendra's old wholesale register for barrels was thick; the edges of the ledger from Binod's small shop were worn. Once again the office notice had described them as "Joint Suri–Kalwar Suppliers."

Setting his papers on the table, Mahendra said, “Our names may stand together in the old catalogue of occupations, but that does not put my family’s accounts inside Binod’s shop. The earlier correction to the accusation against me already says that these are separate firms.” Binod said, “The extent of what I own is small. But being small does not mean someone may put my attendance or my seal under another person’s name.”

Rama brought out the booking sequence from the old transport counter once more. The number for the consignment attributed to Mahendra had not been found in the earlier inspection; Binod’s legitimate purchase belonged to a different week. The intermediary counter’s seals were numbered in a single register, but that alone did not prove a partnership between the two businesses. A municipal assistant asked, “Then should Suri and Kalwar be entered as separate castes?” Mahendra replied, “The office will not alter our community names to suit its convenience. The question here is ownership, goods and payment.” Binod added, “An historical heading in a catalogue of occupations does not turn the transactions of two families today into a single transaction.”

A revised draft of the public notice came for the hearing. The false consignment linked to Mahendra’s name had been removed; evidence of Binod’s purchase was retained with its limited dates; and each man was assigned a separate acknowledgement number. Mahendra asked, “Who will take responsibility for sending this correction to the merchant who stopped accepting my goods yesterday?” Gomati replied, “The office that published the false accusation will issue a copy of the correction. We cannot compel private customers to change their commercial decisions.” Binod telephoned his wife and told her to start calculating a new transport rate that day. Their shop could no longer depend on the old intermediary’s word.

Meanwhile Devvrat’s employee drew an envelope from behind the assistance chest. It contained receipts signed by several families. In two places there was a preprinted sentence: “No further claims.” Rama saw it and held back the paper. “Is this a receipt for assistance, or a waiver of claims?” The employee said that under the old procedure both had been included on the same form. Kabir asked, “When the supplies were received, why were people made to write that they would make no claim against anyone in future?” Reading the page, Devvrat said he had never previously questioned what that printed condition meant. Beside one woman’s signature stood a thumbprint, but the register of who had been present when it was made was blank.

Mahesh’s wife sent word from the separate room: she was willing to examine proof of receipt, but she would not give her statement about her husband’s death at anyone’s ceremony of assistance. Gomati respected her wishes. On the back of the application Kabir wrote that the names of families whose actual consent remained unclear must not be made public; a competent authority should determine, in a separate proceeding, whether the condition on the receipt could be enforced. “I am not writing a court’s judgment here,”

he told Devvrat. “But we cannot claim that by accepting a bundle of clothes a human being surrendered the right to seek justice.”

Devvrat continued to look at the envelope for some time. The goods had come from his warehouse; the final sentence on the paper had not. He asked Rameshwar, “Did this printed form come from your office?” Rameshwar said the printing had been contracted out and an old template might have been printed again. “It is not enough to write ‘might have been,’” Devvrat said. “Give an account of the original template, the printing order and the person who had these forms filled in.” The employee said the work could not be completed before noon. Devvrat did not impose an impossible immediate order; he told him to record a date and the name of the person responsible.

Smoke from the busy kitchen drifted on the breeze into the veranda outside. Rukhsana arrived carrying a plate, but before distributing food at the hearing she submitted a receipt for the balance owed on her supplies. “Not every grain of rice is cooked in the donor’s name,” she said. “This sack belongs to the relief account; the other was bought on credit. If you write ‘donation’ against what has not been paid for, no fire will be lit in the shopkeeper’s kitchen.” Taking the plate, Devvrat told Rukhsana that his organisation could help settle the debt if she wished. She replied, “First make clear from which account the payment will come. The kitchen must keep running, but my wages are not an advertisement for anyone’s reputation.”

Sarita came into the shade of the veranda at that moment. She carried none of Naira’s private papers. She had been told that a waiver of claims was being written alongside the receipts for donations. “Naira’s death has been confirmed,” she said quietly. “Do not make that fact the subject of another hearing. No one can close the door on the dues owed to our family, the documents we are entitled to, and the course of the investigation merely by distributing blankets.” Devvrat opened his mouth to answer, then fell silent. Sarita’s eyes were not on the chest but on the wet road outside. She was not insulting those who accepted charity; she was refusing the unspoken condition that they must sell their rights to receive it.

Gomati also opened the application submitted by Urmila’s sister. The hospital laundry ledger, the wages due and the expenses of personal rites were held on separate sheets. “Adding Devvrat’s donation receipt to this account will neither reduce nor settle Urmila’s wages,” she said. Rama instructed the payments clerk to give written notice the following day of when payment of the verified, undisputed arrears would be authorised. “If litigation proceeds,” the clerk said, “an instruction to stop payment might arrive.” Gomati replied, “No such written instruction exists now. Who gave you the right to stop today’s work out of fear of an order someone might issue tomorrow?”

Towards evening, Rameshwar drew Devvrat aside into a corner. “Sir, if these papers waiving claims are investigated, the families who received help will lose faith. Some may stop accepting donations.” Devvrat answered, “Their trust should not depend upon a certificate protecting me.” Rameshwar asked

again, “Then what use will your assistance be in Mahesh’s case?” Devvrat said, “Treatment given is evidence of treatment given. The evidence for the allegation of threats belongs before the police and the court. I accept that distinction; but I will not admit to a crime I did not commit.” He retained his right to defend himself and abandoned his demand for special privilege.

When Kabir began to have Devvrat’s statement written down, an assistant at once opened a document headed “Confession of the Accused.” Kabir stopped his hand. “What you heard here was that he would not demand that the proceedings be halted,” he said. “You did not hear him admit criminal guilt.” Devvrat looked towards Kabir at this distinction. The old bitterness between them had not lessened, but the limits of what had been said were fixed. On a separate sheet Rama recorded, in three distinct sentences, Devvrat’s account of assistance, his refusal to surrender his right of defence, and his agreement to cooperate with the investigation.

Before he could sign, an authorised police messenger arrived. There was a fresh request about the state of the inquiry into the earlier threats concerning Mahesh’s death, the night-time movement register and digital messages; it contained no notice of a decisive forensic finding. Gomati handed the messenger a separate sealed letter subject to investigation. She did not give him the list from the assistance chest. Instead, a procedure was set out for verified copies of only such information as had been lawfully requested. “Receipt of any sum of money does not conclude an investigation,” the messenger said. That sentence was recorded as a statement of the notice’s legal limits, not as a final finding of guilt.

Mahesh’s wife came out of the other room. Her daughter had taken a pencil from her bag and was drawing two houses on a sheet of paper—one with a door, the other with a window. The mother said to Rama, “I acknowledge the real help that paid for treatment. But I do not consent to the words ‘No further claims’ printed on that paper. Write that clearly on my behalf.” Rama asked whether she recognised the old thumbprint as her own. The woman replied, “I will not identify it today. First I want to see the original page, the time and the people who were present.” Her daughter folded the paper and gave it to her mother. The doors of both little houses remained open.

The sealed file concerning Champa’s medical privacy was not opened in that room; nor were the personal identities of residents in Ruhani’s shelter register included in the public papers. Rama marked those limits again, because the proposed printed list of assistance was about to acquire the heading “All Beneficiaries.” Devvrat said his organisation would disclose the public totals of expenditure, not the name of every patient. “Let the totals be open,” Gomati said, “and let the dignity of those who need confidential treatment remain intact.” Meanwhile the treatment slip for Aniruddha’s injured hand was kept separately in the hospital’s authorised room. It did not become proof of the donor’s moral virtue.

After the afternoon had begun to fade, the assistance chest was opened. The presence of the two keys, the name of the person reading the inventory and the outward identification of every object were recorded. On one page of an old dispatch slip the serial number of a medicine consignment was indistinct. Signing beside that page, Devvrat said, "I cannot say for certain who received medicine under this number." In the pharmacist's absence no one affixed a final stamp declaring the medicines legitimate. Rama had the sheet sealed separately so that the correct medical records and the source of supply could be reconciled the following day. Acknowledging assistance was not yet evidence of the medicine's quality or of innocence in its supply.

As darkness fell, Gomati signed three letters. The first stated that reconciliation of the receipt and use of verified assistance materials would continue. The second provided for a separate review of the printed waiver clause: the rights of those who accepted assistance would not be regarded as extinguished automatically. The third affirmed that the investigation into Mahesh's death and the related threats would remain with the competent authorities; no certificate of donation issued by the committee would stop that process. Devvrat, present in the room, signed only to accept responsibility for his own statement and the records he had made available. The draft "Protection" document still in Rameshwar's hand was preserved at the back of the file as a rejected proposal; it was not made to disappear.

On his way home Binod said to Mahendra, "Goods will be unloaded at my shop again tomorrow. From now on, though, I shall record the owner of every crate and its freight charge separately." Mahendra replied, "The wound left by the old accusation against my name will remain on record too. I have received a correction; that does not mean customers are certain to return." They walked a little way along the same road before taking different lanes. Their parting was not an act of hostility. For the first time the government paper truly kept the accounts of their two families apart. Behind them, someone had pinned a copy of the correction beneath the false notice at the tea stall. The earlier ink had not vanished from the paper.

Before closing the door, Rama asked Devvrat, "Will the original purchase, storage and hospital receipt records for the bundles of medicines issued through your organisation be available tomorrow?" Devvrat said, "I shall make the original ledgers within my authority available for examination. I cannot manufacture proof for consignments that came through another distributor." Rama's pen paused over the old empty column. She recorded the limits of his answer exactly as they stood. Outside, on the wet stone, the old impression left by the chest was still visible. The chest itself had been brought safely inside, but the story of its contents had yet to reach their original source.

Chapter 142 · The Source of the Medicine

Before the first light of dawn, three crates had been opened in the hospital's temporary dispensary. The first bore the blue band of the hospital's authorised stores, the second the red ink of a donor, and the third no clearly legible name on its exterior. Before touching the third crate, Salma photographed its weight marking and the condition of its seals. Outside the room, a woman attending a patient asked, "If the medicine is in there, why this delay?" Salma answered, "Your patient's treatment is continuing with the medicines already available and verified. To open this crate without establishing its source would not be treatment. It would invite another danger."

When Aniruddha entered the room, the bandage on his left hand still looked new. He carried a thick file in his other hand but did not seat himself behind the table from which the medicines were distributed. Salma set a chair for him in the corner. "The present orders for treatment are my responsibility," she said. "What I need from you is the sequence of events at that earlier time." Aniruddha agreed. He did not wish to turn the pain in his own body into evidence for the inquiry, nor to have his earlier administrative error erased merely because he had subsequently been injured.

Rama had brought three sets of papers in separate covers: the indistinct issue slip found in the assistance chest the previous day, a certified copy of the stores ledger, and the hospital's receipt register. Devvrat's employee Rameshwar was present again, but this time he had not been given the key to the chest. "The donor will provide his papers," Rama said. "The medical staff will establish what was used in treatment. The authorised team will investigate the supply. One signature cannot certify all three." Rameshwar asked whether dividing the file in this way would not cause delays. Straightening the pages, Rama replied, "No one has yet opened the ledger that counts the delays caused by false reconciliations."

Against one date the receipt register showed eight bundles; the original purchase slip showed nine. The stores clerk immediately urged them to assume that one bundle had been stolen. Salma stopped him. "Nine were purchased and eight reached this door. That alone does not establish where the other one finally went. Look at the intermediate centre, the transport papers, and the return receipts." Aniruddha showed them the note he had written that day. One bundle had accompanied a patient transferred urgently in a secure vehicle, but he could not remember whether its receipt had been entered in a separate register. His recollection became a lead for the inquiry, not a certificate of proof.

Gomati Beldar stood outside the dispensary beside a dripping tap. Hearing the discussion within, she said, "When ten people's names are wrongly entered on one sheet, correcting them costs ten households a day apiece. Take even

greater care with consignments of medicine.” In her hand was a copy of an old repair bill belonging to Meena Sah. Meena had promised to come herself that day, and Gomati did not unfold the bill for inspection. “We shall ask the question in front of the person whose signature is on it,” she said. That small decision prevented an old rumour from acquiring yet another form.

Meena Sah arrived carrying the new lid of a metal vessel. “This is a sample,” she said. “It is not old hospital property.” The round rim bore the small mark of her workshop. The earlier bill laid on the table recorded two repaired vessels, one incomplete description of the work, and a charge for carriage. In the stores register, beside the same date, stood the words “medical vessel.” Rameshwar promptly said, “There, you see—the medicine was distributed in this coppersmith’s vessel.” Meena looked at him. “The paper says vessel. My bill does not say what was put inside it.”

Salma asked Meena whether the vessel’s construction made it suitable for storing medicines. Meena answered plainly, “I repair metal joints and leaks. Giving medical approval is not my trade. When the vessel was handed over, I was told it was for ordinary use in the hospital stores.” She also pointed out in her ledger that half her wages for the repair were still unpaid. Gomati entered the amount separately in the register of outstanding dues. “I cannot promise to pay you before you give evidence as a condition of that evidence,” she said. “But neither will I hold back what you are owed until the inquiry reaches its final decision.”

On the back of her old bill Meena showed them a small pencil mark. The carrier had signed on taking delivery of the first vessel; after the second was handed over, the room assigned for its delivery had been changed. On the third line an officer had signed beneath the words “work completed,” but no room was named. An empty space in an earlier copy suddenly came back to Rama. She turned the pages of the file. In the hospital drainage department’s book there was also a work order of the same date for removing an “old layer of shell and lime.” An assistant hastily declared that the metal vessels, the lime, and the medicines must all have belonged to a single conspiracy. Aditi had just entered the room. “Three jobs being done on one date does not prove that they had one common purpose,” she said clearly.

Aditi had brought a revised copy of her earlier measurement report. Her withdrawal of its erroneous conclusions was recorded on the first page. She explained that the local history of building with shell and lime mattered, but only modern testing of samples could determine what mixture was present in any particular layer and how much water it had resisted. Lalit recognised an object used in an old casting process, yet refused to pronounce its age merely by rubbing it in his hands. Gomati’s workers supplied the inquiry team with copies of the bills and the times at which materials had been unloaded, collected earlier. No one had yet declared the old building materials the sole cause of the disaster.

Lalit said to Meena, “Your vessel went to the hospital stores, while my sacks of lime went elsewhere. But the same transport contractor’s name appears on the slips.” Meena replied, “Then investigate the contractor’s two journeys. Carrying goods in the same vehicle does not make their owners the same.” In the midst of this exchange Aniruddha remembered an earlier instruction of his own. He had accepted that he had made a mistaken administrative assumption about the patients’ evacuation route. He said again, “That decision belongs in the building-safety inquiry. Do not append it to today’s medicine record and use it to pronounce me guilty or innocent.” Salma agreed.

Before noon Vibha Agrahari arrived with a long ledger of medicine distribution. Behind her came a driver who had driven through the night. Opening the book, Vibha first showed the purchase price, then the cost of transport and necessary cold storage, and finally her own margin. An assistant at the hospital immediately said, “Taking a profit in a calamity like this must be a crime.” Vibha answered calmly, “If a ceiling is to be placed on profit, I will take part in that debate. But if the driver’s wages, proper storage, and the actual cost of medicine are all entered as zero, no vehicle will run tomorrow. An investigation of wrongdoing must be kept separate from the calculation of profit.”

Vibha had previously detained one crate because its labels did not match. Its seal was intact. “I did not send those goods to any patient,” she said, “because the identification of the bundles inside did not agree with the slip outside. Yet after I stopped them, a rumour spread through the market in my name, claiming that I was hoarding medicines to raise prices.” Rama asked her to record the original grounds for suspicion and the date of the hold. Vibha permitted her driver to make a statement in his own name; he also entered the wages still due for his hours on the road. Without that small account, the cost of verification would have passed silently into his household.

Gomati proposed that essential consignments which had been verified as safe should not be held back unnecessarily because an inquiry was under way. Salma specified the conditions of medical approval and storage inspection. Vibha offered to reduce her margin on the emergency list, but only for a fixed period and a verified quantity; the same amount of medicine would then reach every eligible family on equal terms. An employee of Devvrat’s organisation said that the organisation would make up the shortfall. Vibha asked, “Will an account of the payment made with donated money be public? If the donor wants the names of patients printed, I will not accept the money on those terms.”

Gomati’s pen paused once as she wrote the rules. “How is medicine to reach a family that has a doctor’s prescription but is staying anonymously in the shelter?” A short message from Ruhani at the shelter explained that essential medicines could be delivered through its medical coordinator against a sealed acknowledgement; the public ledger need record only the approved quantity and expense. Salma asked that someone be formally assigned responsibility for

the medical verification of this arrangement. Rama recorded the authorisation to keep the private list of names outside her open accounts register. Vibha added no condition requiring public identification of the customer to her schedule of prices.

Just then Rahim Mansuri appeared in the doorway. An old sack of carded cotton hung from his shoulder, but he had not come to deliver goods. He had received the reply to his appeal concerning the four sacks of mattress material detained on suspicion of theft. A government employee read out the document: no evidence had been found to support the allegation that this particular consignment contained stolen hospital goods, and the restriction was being lifted. Rahim let out his breath. “Then will my four sacks be returned to me?” he asked. “After the inspection seals have been cut and a proper receipt obtained,” came the answer.

Rahim’s happiness was not immediately complete. The appeal had cost him three vehicle hires, fees for copies of documents, and the expense of hiring another cotton-carder to do his work. The order contained no provision for compensating him for all those losses. “The accusation has proved false,” an assistant said. “So the matter is over now.” From his bag Rahim took a small, old pillowcase filled with stray fibres. “The customer who owned this cover died four months ago. His daughter had said, ‘Return the mattress. When I come home to my mother, I shall sit upon it.’ My name is cleared on paper, but who will return those four months?”

Gomati recorded the financial loss and the personal grief separately in Rahim’s statement. The order releasing the consignment would take effect at once; his request for reimbursement of the costs of appeal would be forwarded with the receipts he could produce. She said openly, “I cannot promise that you will recover every rupee. But it would not be right to halt the process for the part of the payment supported by clear evidence.” Rahim’s acceptance came not as silence but as a question. “If medicines and mattresses are loaded together in the same vehicle again, will there be another suspicion tomorrow?” Meena replied, “Then each consignment must have its own seal and movement register.”

Listening to Rahim, Aniruddha moved to the window of the temporary room. Outside, a small boy was giving his father water. The sight brought back the day of Jamuna Devi’s treatment, when medicine had been available on time but the route through the building had become unsafe. “Some patients benefited from this very supply,” he said. “There is evidence of that in their medical records. But it does not settle the question of why those who died lost their lives. And the absence suffered by those who did not receive medicine also calls for proper investigation.” He made no attempt to invent a new story that could alter the deaths of Naira and Urmila, or turn Devi Gond’s survival into an explanation of them.

Salma laid before Aniruddha a list of sealed patient records without opening the private pages. “Were you on duty on this date?” she asked.

Aniruddha examined the specimen of his signature and then said, “This page bears my signature. I will not give the total number of medicines distributed from memory. The actual slips must be reconciled by the authorised pharmacist and nurse.” Salma accepted responsibility for preparing a certified, limited summary: how much of the approved quantity had been used, whether there had been any departure from the prescribed times, and which information must remain solely in the patient’s confidential file. No details of anyone’s treatment would be read aloud at the public meeting.

Rama spread the two sequences of medicine-distribution records across the table. Between them were two empty spaces in the serial numbers. The number on the crate Vibha had detained did not match either space; no entry had yet been found in the hospital receipt book for the extra bundle shown on the donation slip. “An empty space is not a criminal’s name,” Rama said. “But the claim made by those who said everything had been accounted for is not correct as matters stand.” Rameshwar pointed to the name of an old transport agency on one of his organisation’s documents. The investigators recorded it as the next link to be examined in establishing the verified route of supply, not as grounds for an immediate arrest.

Meanwhile Meena showed two calculations from the old page recording her wages. For the first job there was a storekeeper’s signature and the hospital’s acknowledgement of receipt; the box for final inspection of the second job was still blank. After examining the documents, Gomati said that an order dated for release of the undisputed part of the first payment would be issued, while the amount for the second would remain separate until independently reconciled. “You will not demand my silence in return for the first payment because I am giving evidence, will you?” Meena asked. “No,” Gomati said. “Tell them what you saw. The wages are yours by right, not a reward.” For the first time Meena folded the yellowed bill and put it into her bag without anxiety.

In the afternoon the water-inspection team took samples of shell and lime away under separate seals. In their presence Lalit explained the traditional terms for old construction materials used in his family, but he would not allow those vernacular names to be entered on the testing form as the definitive laboratory names of substances. When Aditi was about to record an estimate of water absorption, Gomati asked from which layer the sample had been taken. In answer they showed sketches of two different locations. “Then there will be two results for two locations,” Gomati said, “not one property attributed to the hospital’s entire wall.” This did not settle the underlying question of the old drainage outlet that remained blocked.

Outside, the clouds were clearing. As Rahim went towards the warehouse to collect his sacks, Vibha’s driver offered him a little space in the vehicle. Rahim first examined the transport slip. It listed no bundles of medicine, only empty crates and safe equipment being returned to the room. “I shall put my goods here, and we shall enter both names separately,” Rahim said. The driver

agreed. Each tied down the other's goods in the same vehicle, but neither signed the other's consignment note. After so long, a small distinction of that kind seemed easy for the first time.

Devvrat attended the evening meeting. Rama showed him the inquiry's summary: assistance was acknowledged to the extent that there was proof of its delivery; the route of one uncertain medicine consignment remained to be established; the benefit of medicines demonstrably used in treatment was recorded separately; and the questions of unauthorised storage and mismatched labels were separate again. "I feel relief when I hear that those to whom I gave assistance have been saved," Devvrat said. Kabir replied, "It is the survivor's right to decide to whom to give credit for their treatment. But an accounting of that credit does not close the questions of a criminal investigation." Devvrat did not dispute this, nor did he confess to wrongdoing.

An employee proposed stopping all additional distribution of the hospital's medicines until the investigations were complete. Salma rose from her chair. "Who will take responsibility for the patients whose treatment is interrupted by withholding approved medicines?" The employee had written "for the convenience of the inquiry" in his proposal. Salma struck out the phrase and had the precise condition entered instead: only those bundles whose quality, identity, and preservation had not been confirmed would remain under secure seal; whatever was available and verified must reach patients without interruption under authorised medical orders. Vibha signed the new slip showing her reduced margin. Approval of the wages due to the driver was recorded separately on the same page.

A young woman sent a message from Ruhani's shelter. She did not want her name posted anywhere in order to obtain medicine, but she feared that her continuing supply would be stopped. Instead of asking for her name, Gomati arranged for the message to reach the hospital's confidential medical contact. A rule requiring two authorised signatures for medicines supplied to the shelter was proposed, but Ruhani's sole possession of the key remained a separate, older question. Over the telephone Ruhani said, "If responsibility for supplies remains in my one hand, tomorrow someone's care will once again depend upon my favour. We ought to sit with everyone in the shelter and decide this together."

Before leaving, Aniruddha asked Salma the date of his next medical examination. He felt a slight pull in his hand from having spoken more than usual that day. Salma showed him his prescribed treatment schedule again; she did not propose giving him new duties. Outside he met Meena, who was waiting to collect a copy of the order concerning her wages. "Your old bill showed me a question distinct from the error in my own instructions," Aniruddha said. Meena replied, "My bill can tell you where the metal vessel went. It cannot decide whether your work was right or wrong. But if anyone ever moved a vessel without my signature, I shall demand an account of it."

On the last document of the evening Gomati obtained four separate signatures: authorisation for the immediate delivery of safe medicines; independent investigation of the source of the suspect consignment; separate action on the sums due to Meena and Rahim and on the expenses of Rahim's appeal; and testing of the shell-and-lime samples with preservation of the records of where they had been taken. A clerk tried to give all these orders the heading "Medicine Case Closed." Gomati turned the page and changed the heading: "Treatment Continuing; Source Inquiry Continuing." For the first time the members of the committee saw that two things being "continuing" were not in conflict with one another.

Darkness was descending upon the road. Vibha's vehicle left by the safe route carrying verified medicines; Rahim's four sacks went back towards his own store; Meena held a copy of the order concerning her wages. None of them had been compensated for every loss. The sealed third crate was still inside the hospital, and the indistinct name written on it had not yet become the name of a criminal. Rama stepped forward to hand over the door key when Ruhani's telephone rang again: there was one key at the shelter, and many needs. Sending her a copy of that day's acknowledgement of the safe receipt of medicines, Rama said, "Now all of you must decide the matter of the key together."

Chapter 143 · The Rules of Shelter

At dawn, the key turned twice in the brass-coloured padlock hanging on the shelter gate, but on the third attempt it stuck halfway. Ruhani still held the old bunch: the keys to the main door, the storeroom, the medicine chest and the room at the back were all tied to one cord. From beside the stove Rukhsana called, “I have to fetch medicine for a patient, and the key is stuck in your hand. Whom does this arrangement protect?” Ruhani did not wrench the lock open. She turned the key slowly, and it opened.

During the night an order had arrived from the hospital for the delivery of verified medicines. Salma had written that the private prescriptions for treatment would remain with the medical contact; the public relief accounts would record only quantities and costs. But once medicine reached the shelter, the authority to open the chest was still registered in Ruhani’s name. Rukhsana and Zubaida had already been given separate keys. Even so, the questions of when to open the chest, whom to telephone and which decisions would have to be put before the next day’s assembly still left everyone looking towards Ruhani.

Lifting a wet sack that lay across the veranda, Rukhsana said, “You have distributed keys, but on the signed document containing the rules you are still the sole person responsible. Yesterday the hospital employee would not enter a receipt in my name. I can distribute grain; why should I be incapable of receiving medicine?” Ruhani replied, “Understanding the medicine is the work of medical staff. Accepting the chest and getting it to the proper contact is the shelter’s work. Those two things must be written separately.” Zubaida laid four blank sheets on the table. The headings were written on the first: doors, stores, treatment and complaints.

A young woman who had sent a message about medicine the previous day on condition that her name not be made public sat in the shadowed corner of the veranda. No identity register was opened in front of her. “If you form a committee of three,” she asked, “will all three read my papers?” Zubaida answered, “No. The committee will see the count of medicines delivered; the authorised medical worker will see the prescription. The key to private papers will not be distributed among these four sheets.” The young woman asked again, “And what if someone who knows me sits on the committee?” Ruhani said, “You may choose another contact instead, without having to give a reason.”

The shelter’s first collective meeting was fixed for after the kitchen work, so that Rukhsana’s rice would not be left half-cooked. Champa came, but she had left her medical papers safely at home. “Will someone who lives outside the shelter but works here have the right to speak?” she asked. Zubaida said, “This house cannot function without the cooking, the night watch, the

cleaning and the storeroom work.” Champa asked another question: “And will someone who lives here have to recount her private history in order to vote?” A fly went on buzzing above the table.

Ruhani proposed that the adult residents elect their own representative; that the regular workers have a separate representative for decisions concerning their work; and that private details about medicines never be read aloud at an open meeting. In an emergency the doors could be opened to save lives, but that would not confer a right to conduct routine searches of rooms. “And if your decision is found to be wrong?” Rukhsana asked. Ruhani set her bunch of keys on the table. “Then I too must answer for it. We shall not write rules on the assumption that one person will always be right.”

At that moment came the knocking of a stick against the gate. Rani Halalkhor had arrived with her crew’s register of working hours. The strap of her old, worn sandal had been stitched again near the side of her foot. She asked permission to sit in the courtyard; Ruhani invited her inside. “They are telling us again to clean the drain behind the shelter,” Rani said. “Where the surface is safe, we can work. But we will not obey an order to go down into a closed opening without an inspection, breathing protection or safe footwear. They have withheld the wages for that day by recording it as ‘work abandoned.’”

“Is this the shelter’s drain or the hospital’s?” Rukhsana asked. Rani showed her two pages of the register. The earlier order concerned the hospital’s rear outlet; the new slip had added a complaint about water collecting by the shelter wall. The contractor had entered the same crew against both sites. “We removed the glass and dry refuse from the surface,” Rani said. “The hours for that work are recorded, and the supervisor signed for them. We are not claiming money for entering the drain, because that work was not done. But the wages for safe work and the account of a day stopped because of danger cannot both be put under a single heading, ‘absent.’”

One of the shelter residents spoke at once. “If the drain is not opened, water will come into my room. How are we to live if all of you stop working?” Rani removed her sandal and showed the split in its sole. “Your need to keep the water out is my need as well. But if I go down there and die, who will fill in tomorrow’s hours against this body’s name?” The resident lowered his eyes. Ruhani did not intervene. Rani went on herself: “Measure a safe route, remove the refuse outside, and have the work inside done by a trained crew with proper equipment. We are not running away from work.”

Zubaida made a separate column for the drain work in the shelter’s expenditure register. She did not propose putting the wages withheld from Rani under the old contract into the shelter’s expenses; those remained payable by the contractor. She did, however, propose wages for the shelter’s own safe cleaning work outside, with specified hours and approved materials. “If we accept work here, will it be taken as surrendering our earlier claim?” Rani asked. “No,” Ruhani replied. “A receipt for new work will not be

evidence against the old payment still withheld." Rani asked for time to consult her crew.

Just then Madhav Roniyar's handcart stopped by the gate. On it lay the outer wooden slats of three crates returned because of defective packing—not medicine. Showing them, Madhav said, "I decided that I would not earn a profit from carrying defective goods to the hospital. The distributor took the goods back but is deducting money from the earnings we had already agreed. Now the same consignment has been named on the bill for the materials for the wooden cupboard ordered for the shelter. Unless this false reconciliation is corrected, a debt you do not owe will be entered against you."

Rukhsana brought out the measurements for the new storeroom. Dry timber and hinges had been approved for the cupboard; they had nothing to do with the hospital crates Madhav had returned. The draft sent by the employee said "adjustment for old crates." Madhav said, "I will give up the part of my profit that is disputed because the defective goods were returned, but the receipt for carriage actually performed must be examined. I do not want the shelter's account filled up to compensate for my own loss." Examining the paper, Champa said, "This time the important thing is not to save face. It is to put the accounts right."

An elderly resident asked, "If we do not buy the cupboard from Madhav, when will the materials arrive?" Madhav heard the question and answered, "The bill for the approved cupboard is separate. The return of the defective consignment is separate. Today I shall personally stop goods I refused from entering this house under another name." Ruhani did not place a public call to the distributor's representative. First they compared Madhav's written claim, the original receipt and the sample for the cupboard. Two residents inspected the sample. They agreed that payment for the approved new materials would be made only after a written acknowledgement was received that the defective goods had been returned.

By the time the second pot of rice was put on, the meeting had grown heated. A male member said, "If the keys pass into everybody's hands, who will be responsible when something is stolen tomorrow?" Rukhsana replied sharply, "Even when the key was in one person's hand, a sack of oil once went to the wrong place. The receipt established who was responsible, not the key." She got up to lower the stove flame, then turned back. "But I do not want everyone opening the storeroom at night either. There must be all four things: a representative, a time, a reason for entering and an account afterwards."

The bunch of keys gleamed before Ruhani. She remembered the night of the earlier disaster, when those keys had opened the gate and living people had entered. For a moment the thought of relinquishing them was unbearable. Yet she knew that someone who had opened a door in a crisis did not thereby become the owner of other people's bodies and nights for ever. "If I am not here," she asked, "will today's rice, medicines and safe exit arrangements still

work?” Champa answered, “They ought to. If they do not, then we must change the rules.”

A young woman at the meeting stood by the window. “But the fact that we do not pay rent is no proof that we are permanent members of your household,” she said. “What if the representative decides tomorrow that I must leave?” Ruhani replied, “Security of residence cannot be ended by one day’s majority vote. If there is a question of changing the period for which someone may live here safely, that person must be given a hearing, time and alternatives. Private reasons will not be demanded at a public meeting.” Zubaida added to the page: “Any member may lodge an objection to a decision without publicly disclosing their name or relationships.”

A telephone call came from Rani’s crew. Three members agreed to the safe cleaning of the outer drain; one could not come because he had to fetch medicine for his ailing father. Rani had the register say “did not consent,” not “absent,” against his name. “It is not within my rights to punish someone who does not wish to take the job,” she said. “And wages for work already performed will still be due.” Ruhani added a sentence to the rules on representation: refusing work would not make anyone ineligible for food or residence at the shelter.

At noon Rama arrived from the committee room. She carried a sealed acknowledgement for verified medicine from the hospital, not a private list of names. “Getting this consignment to those who need treatment is the responsibility of the medical contact,” she said. “The shelter will record the quantity and date of receipt. I have not come to take your keys. But if the limits between public expenditure and confidential records are made to meet on the same page, there will be a dispute over authority later.” Ruhani asked, “Does the government committee have the power to approve every part of the shelter’s internal rules?” “No,” Rama said. “Public assistance is subject to rules for auditing its expenditure. That does not give the committee ownership of the residents’ private lives.”

Rama showed them a copy of the old relief ledger. The total weight of the grain distributed that day was certified, but three entries for wages paid for the actual cooking were still incomplete. “The people who kept watch at night, who washed the utensils, were workers, not donors,” Rukhsana said. “Do not erase their hours in the name of putting our accounts right.” Ruhani agreed. For the first time the meeting opened the column for meal preparation costs and entered dates against all three incomplete items for confirmation by the workers who had actually done the work. One page was filled; three boxes remained blank.

“If we fill those boxes with guesses,” Champa said, “how will we face the inquiry afterwards?” “Leave them blank,” Ruhani replied, “but mark them as amounts still due.” No dead person’s name was brought in as a metaphor. Ruhani knew of Sarita’s grief, but she did not demand that private suffering as proof of the legitimacy of the shelter’s written decisions. The hospital’s

register of deaths and the shelter's record of labour each remained in its proper place.

Madhav's telephone rang again. Instead of accepting his original claim, the distributor had sent two conditions: an acknowledgement that the defective consignment had been taken back in full, and a written promise not to speak about it in future business dealings. Madhav read the paper and grew quiet. "I shall not sell defective goods," he said. "But I cannot agree to be forbidden to speak of a mistake." Ruhani asked him to sign in her presence, and he refused. "The shop is mine; the decision is mine. You may be a witness, not the owner." Ruhani smiled faintly. For the first time, a distance between them did not stand in the way of help.

Before evening Rani began the safe outer cleaning with two members of her crew. First the broken glass was removed with long-handled tools; a board was placed over the closed inner outlet, marked "NO ENTRY—INSPECTION PENDING." A boy from the shelter asked why the water was still standing there. "For now we have bandaged the wound on the outside," Rani said. "The cause inside has not been examined. If we call the bandage a cure, it will hurt again with the first rain." The boy reached towards the broom his family had traditionally used. Guiding him away to the safe side, Rani said, "First bring a bucket for the water."

When the cleaning was finished, Rukhsana counted the hours and prepared the payment paper. "This money is for today's safe work at the shelter," Rani said. "The wages the contractor withheld for the earlier days are separate." Rama entered the two claims in different registers and gave Rani a copy acknowledging receipt. No final order was immediately issued concerning the wages previously withheld for the days on the municipal job, but a date was fixed for sending the investigating officer the verified hours of safe work Rani had shown them and a copy of her written objection on grounds of danger. Rani folded the paper and tucked it into her scarf, where she kept her broom needle.

Before the vote Ruhani read the arrangements again. One copy of the key to the main door would be held by the elected resident representative, the other by the person appointed to take responsibility at night; the storeroom could be opened only in the presence of two responsible persons and against a receipt for anything taken out; notice of the receipt of sealed medicines would go to the medical contact, who would retain secure control of private prescriptions; in a crisis, rescue would come first, followed by a written record of the reason and time. The representative's term would be limited, a separate day would be set for hearing complaints, and no one would be required to disclose private relationships.

An elderly woman asked, "If the keyholders quarrel, will we be locked outside?" Zubaida answered, "There will be a separate provision for safe emergency entry. We shall test today that the main gate's latch can be opened from the inside, not only from the outside. In a fire or medical emergency, no

one must wait while somebody searches for a key.” “And if the representative is herself the subject of a complaint?” Champa asked. Ruhani said, “Then she will take no part in the decision. Another elected member and an independent helper from outside will hear the complaint, and, when necessary, the complainant will receive a written copy.”

The rules were adopted by a majority. Zubaida was elected representative; Rukhsana accepted the appointed responsibility for the nights. Two members remained opposed, subject to conditions. Their votes were not removed from the register. One wanted a clearly stated rate of pay for night watch; the other, written assurance of privacy in their room. “Where a condition has not yet been fulfilled, we shall not write ‘completed’,” Zubaida said. Ruhani gave both of them amendment sheets. No one applauded when the meeting ended. Rukhsana went to check the rice; there was too much water in the pot. She lowered the heat.

Ruhani placed the main key in Zubaida’s palm. A small metallic sound rose from the bunch, and to Ruhani it sounded like her own name. She asked the representative to write “received” on the paper and wrote “member” after her own name, not “former sole person in charge.” “Do you feel lighter?” Rukhsana asked. Ruhani considered the question. “A little afraid,” she said. “When I give up authority, I give up control over mistakes as well. But it matters more that there will be a way for everyone to see them.”

The new key was not first used to inspect the storeroom inventory. That night, when Rukhsana closed the kitchen and came out, a girl in the back room was spreading papers over a sack in the dark to prepare for her morning lessons. “Will you let the children study here tomorrow?” she asked. “Our books keep getting wet.” The new representative read the limits of her authority and said, “Once the nighttime fire and safety checks are done, the meeting will discuss using this room. No order has yet been given to stop anyone studying.” Ruhani heard the answer. Decisions could go forward without her, too.

In preparation for dawn, Zubaida swept the floor of that empty room and pushed the little fragments of brick to one side. Even after the safe cleaning outside, the mouth of the drain remained blocked, but the water on the veranda had not entered the room that night. The full account of Rani’s old wages remained outstanding, as did the disputed profit on the goods Madhav had returned; the new rules could not undo their losses. Yet opening the shelter storeroom now required two signatures, and for the first time the girl who had asked for a study room had been able to have her request entered on the page of rules. Beside her question Ruhani left a space for the date: tomorrow was the day an answer was due.

Chapter 144 · The Question of Work

On a morning in Phagun, as soon as the door to the shelter's rear room was opened, half a piece of chalk dug into the sole of Zubaida's foot. During the night, bits of brick had been placed beneath the girls' exercise books so that the fine lime dust falling from the ceiling would not settle on their pages. Along one edge of the floor, a dark line remained from the damp of an earlier rainy season. Zubaida stopped sweeping and drew a small circle in chalk around it. "Will the children sit here?" Rukhsana asked. "Not here," Zubaida said. "But we must not take a photograph of the new room's inauguration without showing this reason." The girl who had asked her question the previous evening stood in the doorway, holding two wet pages from her exercise book.

In the dawn of 2040, the places chosen for classes were the shelter's veranda and an adjoining, unoccupied porch. The inner room would remain closed until the repair inspection was complete. Ruhani had not decided on her own to hang up the school signboard; now an ordinary member, she sat at the meeting Zubaida had called. Rukhsana could take the first cooking pot off the fire and join them because the separate wages of the two women preparing the meals had been entered in the accounts. The girl held out her exercise book. "You took my first question yesterday," she said. "Give me the answer today." Zubaida showed her the date. The time promised for the answer had not yet passed.

For Padma, it was no late beginning. She had arrived before the others, carrying in her bag more blank paper than books, three brief sets of instructions written in different languages, and a small bell. Sanket had brought a light recording device, an exercise book, and a folded cloth. He set the device on the table and marked it with his name. "Can we keep their voices on record here?" a volunteer asked. Sanket answered, "We may replay the words of someone who reads, to help with learning. But we may not make the recording public without the speaker's permission. And never the child's face or name." Padma agreed. The first lesson of that day was not sound, but consent.

An elder at the meeting said, "Since the school is inside the shelter, those whose names are registered here should study first." A boy standing just beyond the doorway had a handcart beside him. "I don't live in the shelter," he said. "I deliver goods on that cart. If I come to learn in the evening, will you keep me outside again?" Padma looked at his face, then at the women sitting inside. "The right to learn here will not depend on a receipt showing residence," she said. "But the privacy of those living in the shelter will be protected. Entrances, hours and teaching spaces will be kept distinct. No one will have to surrender the residents' private register as a condition of entry." Ruhani's eyes rested for a moment on the old bunch of keys.

Sanket placed three shapes of different kinds on the floor: a circle, a square and a long strip. “If we write rules only for people who can read letters, the rules are incomplete,” he said. A child picked up the circle. “What will a blind person see in this?” he asked. Sanket did not scold him. He let the child feel the raised surface of the strip and count the edges of the circle. “Some people understand by touch, some by listening, some by reading. These samples are not enough. Each person must be allowed to say what help they need.” Padma placed his point at the beginning of the information sheet, as though the child’s question had opened another door in the curriculum.

Meanwhile Sarita arrived quietly. What she carried was not Naira’s old notebook but a blank ruled page brought from home. She sat on the bedding in a corner. The girl who had been sitting at the doorway asked first, “Will you teach us what Naira wrote?” Sarita’s breath caught for an instant. “We shall not make her private writing public by guessing at a consent she cannot give,” she said. “But we can teach the courage to ask the questions she taught us to ask.” Kabir arrived a little later; he did not ask for the page. Grief was still alive between them. No inauguration of a school could cut it away.

A committee employee proposed collecting every pupil’s full identity, family history and relief receipts in one place before teaching began. Zubaida read aloud the copy of four rules she had written by hand. “Whether someone receives relief is not a question of the right to learn. A child’s safe contact information will be held only by the teacher. If anyone does not want their name made public, their attendance will be counted under a code.” “Then how will we show the accounts?” the employee asked. Padma replied, “How many people studied, how many hours the classes ran, how much was spent on materials: those figures will be open. Which child is afraid of which person is not an item of account.”

Just then a small vehicle from Irfan Khan’s old workshop stopped beside the courtyard. It carried two folding iron benches, a wheeled platform and a chest of repair tools. Before unloading, Irfan took out the paper recording his check of the brakes. “This is not that old passenger vehicle,” he explained. “After I wrote down its worn bushings and defective brakes, the owner went to another mechanic. I lost that customer because of my work. I have brought these things in another vehicle of mine, one that is safe.” When the boy moved forward to help unload a bench, Irfan first showed him how to secure the wheel against movement.

A committee member laughed. “You’ve shown yourself so honest. Why not give it all to the school for nothing?” Old lines of grease ran across Irfan’s palm. “My loss should not become a fee for honesty,” he answered. “And if I forgo payment for labour, these children will learn tomorrow that a craftsman’s work is worth nothing. I’m not charging rent for the benches. Enter the cost of the vehicle and the unloading time against the date the work was done.” On his receipt Padma entered the donation of equipment, the labour involved in transport, and the loss of the customer in three separate columns. The school was not charged for the lost customer.

Harish Pansari arrived from behind them. On his handcart were paper bags, chalk, washable cloth and several tins of spices. He placed an old packet on the table. The name printed on it did not match what was inside. “This isn’t for sale,” he said. “The wholesaler says only the printed wrapper is wrong. But the weight, the invoice and the contents do not agree. I’m returning the consignment. I’ll have to pay the freight.” Zubaida asked, “Have you separate evidence for the materials you’re supplying here?” Harish showed her a clean receipt and an open box of new goods.

Paying the return freight would reduce Harish’s household savings for the month. Watching him, a parent asked, “Your shop’s name has been damaged by this false packaging. Is it right for us to give our children your goods?” Harish reached to put the box back on the cart. The boy stopped him. “If a name is damaged, does real chalk become bad too?” For a moment no one spoke. “I won’t sell a consignment whose contents cannot be reconciled with its papers,” Harish said. “For what has been verified, I’ll give you a receipt. If you choose not to buy, that is your right.” Zubaida weighed a box of the new chalk and purchased it at the public price. The cost of returning the defective consignment remained separately entered against Harish’s name.

Padma was filling the first page of the school’s admission register when a young woman spoke in a distressed voice from the edge of the courtyard. “I’ll enrol under my own name, but if the men at home learn that I’m studying, they will stop me.” Zubaida did not insist on seeing her entire household register. “How would you like us to contact you safely?” she asked. The young woman whispered another woman’s name. Sanket switched off his recorder and put it in his bag. No claim made on paper could give anyone a greater right to that answer than the person who had spoken it. Padma wrote down an admission number and kept the contact slip in a sealed envelope. “Education must not become a new danger,” she murmured. “The danger is already there,” the young woman said. “Stopping my studies won’t cure it.”

By noon, preparations had begun in the teaching space for the Phagun gathering of folk readings, open accounts and songs. In one corner the women were practising two old folk melodies. The organiser’s secretary proposed offering the singers a meal in the name of a blessing, and nothing more. From beside her stove Rukhsana called out, “We count the cost of the meal, but not the singers’ time?” The woman leading the songs spoke up. “If we sing of our own free will, that is one thing. For a public event our time has been committed, and it must be paid for.” The open ledger was then filled in with the date, the hours, the singers’ consent and the agreed rate. No child’s singing would be recorded without permission.

Old coloured cloth had been brought to decorate the classroom. Seeing a splinter of bamboo pierce a boy’s foot, Champa made him sit down at once. She cut the cord used to tie the cloth, leaving its ends short. “Who is checking that the tools are safe for today’s celebration?” she asked. Rani Halalkhor was passing with the team assigned to safe cleaning work outside. She pointed out a dark mark along the wet edge of the floor. “The blocked drain inside is still under inspection. Don’t seat the children here.” Zubaida marked out a new

boundary for seating, and the prescribed wages for this additional safe work by Rani's team were entered separately. That entry did not settle the wages withheld by the former contractor.

At the time of the first lesson Padma showed three objects set upon a bench instead of calling the attendance register: an empty bowl, a receipt and an old knotted cord used to measure the embankment. "What do these have in common?" she asked. "All three are empty," said one child. "There are knots in the cord," said another. Padma smiled. "We can see that a bowl is empty. What is written on a receipt calls for evidence. The knots on a cord cannot tell us the depth of the river today." A girl asked, "Then who will go to measure the river?" Sanket answered, "Before someone goes, we must think about that person's safety and the value of their labour."

As he listened, Kabir's eyes remained on the bowl for more than a moment. A thought rose within him: if Naira had been there, perhaps she would have checked the date on the paper. He did not turn that thought into words supposedly spoken by Naira. Sarita moved among the children, distributing plain sheets of paper. A little girl asked her, "Do people who have died come back to teach?" Sarita stopped handing out the sheets. "No," she said softly. "Those who have died do not return. We may learn something from their work, but learning is not the same as their coming back." The girl formed the first letter of her name on the page.

To the right of the teaching space, a young man faltered while reading a line of a song. Instead of pushing him towards the letter chart, Sanket asked, "Would you rather learn by listening, or by feeling each letter in turn?" The young man asked, "I keep watch at night. My eyes grow tired. Where will I find time to study during the day?" Zubaida opened the timetable. The rate to be paid for the shelter's night watch was still being revised. "Let us have two short periods, one at dawn and one in the evening," she said. "Someone who cannot give up their earnings must not be penalised for enrolling." Padma wrote that a pupil's name would not be struck off for a low attendance percentage.

The first four expenses were read from that day's open ledger: transport by the safe vehicle, verified chalk, cleaning wages, and payment for the songs. Someone in the audience asked, "If donations have come in, why do we need so many receipts?" "The benches came as a gift," Irfan said, "but the hours spent driving were not a gift." "Nor were the cooks' hands," Rukhsana added. Signing beneath her name, the lead singer said, "I have accepted payment for singing. That does not give you permission to make the story of my private life public." Ruhani asked permission to fold away the paper containing those words, not to read it aloud.

At the entrance a government assistant examined the admission forms. "If you don't write down where people live," he said, "checking the ration queue later will be difficult." Padma answered immediately: "School attendance and eligibility for rations are different matters." The assistant was holding the previous month's relief list, in which two surnames had been spelt differently in different entries. He acknowledged that the distribution register would

have to be checked again tomorrow. “If a child studies here today and is denied rations tomorrow,” Rukhsana asked, “studying here should not have to serve as proof of eligibility.” The assistant began to answer, but Zubaida said, “Record an objection to the error separately. Stigmatising a pupil here will not correct a document.”

Harish’s young son had come not to attend class but to count the goods remaining in the shop. His father showed him a page listing how many bags must be returned and the freight due on each. “If we’re losing money,” the boy said, “why not sell the packets with the wrong wrappers anyway?” Harish showed him the difference between the letters printed on the bag and the substance inside it. “Learning to read also means checking that a name matches the thing it names,” he said. “Then who will pay,” his son asked, “if the name in the credit ledger is wrong?” Harish turned the page and wrote down a date for verifying the true name of an old customer who owed money. This was not homework set by the school. It was a debt due to his shop that day.

Before reading letters in the evening class, the children drew objects associated with work in their homes: yarn in one, a fishing net in another, a water-carrying pot in a third. One boy drew a huge round flatbread, with six legs sticking out around it. “What animal is this?” Padma asked with a laugh. “The bread runs away,” the boy said. “It disappears faster than my mother can make it.” The entire veranda broke into laughter. Rukhsana laughed too. “If you’ve given bread legs, we must put catching it on the syllabus.” This laughter did not drive anyone’s memory of grief away; for a little while, the air of the classroom grew light.

The dispute over the incomplete register of working hours from the afternoon arose again. An official wanted to combine the costs of singing, cleaning and teaching under one heading for the public festival. “The singer’s receipt belongs with the singing,” Zubaida said. “The teacher’s hours belong with the teacher. The wages for the shelter’s regular kitchen are separate. We must not cover unfinished work with the colours of a festival.” Padma entered the time she had spent mediating that day; Sanket recorded the limits on the use of his equipment. “Aren’t both of you volunteers?” the employee asked. “I’ve given some hours freely today,” Padma said, “but if classes are held regularly, there must be provision for fair payment for that time.” A new page for an outstanding payment was opened in the committee’s accounts.

An elderly woman who had come with her grandson rather than to learn asked, “I cannot recognise letters. How am I to understand the papers from the meeting?” Sanket sat quietly beside her. He explained the substance of the decision aloud, and Padma asked which terms she would like to hear explained again. The woman stopped at the word ‘consent’. “It must not be that my grandson reads something out and then says I’ve agreed to it,” she said. Zubaida amended the rule: anyone unable to read a written copy would be entitled to an oral explanation in the presence of a second trusted person, time to ask questions, and a separate mark recording consent. For the first

time the grandson placed his hand over his grandmother's and listened, instead of answering for her.

Rukhsana told the meeting that the school's veranda must not block the shelter's emergency exit at night. A group proposed pushing the benches inside for storage when class ended. Irfan measured their legs and showed that placing them so far in would narrow the escape route in the event of a fire. "I made these benches," he said, "but my wishes cannot change the measurements required for a safe exit." Champa led the children through a practice evacuation by a separate, safe route. The courtyard gate stayed open. Zubaida entered the additional duty in the watch register, together with the time it would require.

After all the decisions, Padma read out the admission rules: the same right to learn for those living inside the shelter and those outside; no public disclosure of private residence details; classes at separate times; the use of devices and recordings only with consent; no use of children's pictures or stories for publicity; help appropriate to language and physical needs; and no cancellation of food costs or labour dues in the name of education. "Will a school really run under all these rules," one parent asked, "or will you do nothing but fill in papers?" Padma asked the child sitting beside her to pick up a sheet. The child read out their own name and then asked, "Can I come tomorrow too?" "Yes," Padma said. "That is why the rules are written."

While Rukhsana was arranging the class hours for the following week, her eyes fell on two entries in an old assistance ledger that had been left over. Two families staying in the shelter had ration slips with their identities spelt differently; the new residential location of one family had not yet been entered on the principal list. "This will hold things up again at tomorrow's distribution," Zubaida said. "The school register must not be used as grounds for cutting off rations." Rukhsana made separate copies of the papers and recorded times to meet the families privately. She forbade anyone to read their names aloud in the school courtyard.

After the last song of the evening came to an end, several people went home together. Exercise-book pages fluttered on the veranda, and dust left by passing feet gathered near the window. Before locking the storeroom with the new key, Zubaida checked four payments and two incomplete entries in the public accounts. Harish carried away the freight slip for returning his badly wrapped consignment; Irfan unloaded and set aside the empty benches from his safe vehicle. Neither man received an award, but neither was his loss placed as a debt upon the heads of the pupils.

The girl who had been at the shelter at dawn showed Zubaida her exercise book. On the first page was yesterday's question: 'Can I learn to read?' Beneath it she had written her own answer today in three crooked letters. Returning the book, Zubaida said, "This page belongs to you. In the school's accounts we shall add only one to the number of new readers." The girl laughed and ran outside. Rukhsana came out onto the veranda carrying an envelope with an application to correct the mistakes in the ration queue for the day after tomorrow. Zubaida did not read the confidential names inside; she recorded

only the date and time of receipt. The school had opened. Its first examination would take place in the next queue.

Chapter 145 · The Ration Queue

On a morning in Phagun, 2040, two handfuls of rice spilled onto the floor from the mouth of a sack resting on the ration-distribution table. Rukhsana bent to gather the grains, but the distribution assistant said, “Leave it. Such a little quantity never gets entered in the accounts.” She did not stop. “It may never enter the accounts, but even this much grain is missed in the homes of those standing in the queue,” she replied, pointing out the split seam of the sack. Zubaida brought an old cloth. The clean rice was transferred to a vessel, while the grains that had gathered dust on the floor were set apart from those meant for distribution. The chalk used in the school the previous day still lay behind the table. Rukhsana picked it up and made three marks: goods received, people reached, and entitlements still unfulfilled. These were not three names for the same number.

The previous evening she had set aside, before Zubaida, copies of two families’ incorrectly recorded names. Today she had brought their ration slips, old receipts, and the limited documents obtained with the families’ consent. The confidential list of shelter residents remained locked in the storeroom; there was no photograph of it at the distribution desk. Some people in line wanted to disclose where their homes were; others wanted to give only a distribution-centre identifier. Padma brought two chairs from the school veranda. An elderly person was finding it hard to stand for so long. “Someone who cannot get here early should not lose their place in the order,” she told the assistant. He kept looking at his watch but made space on a blank sheet for requests for special assistance.

In the middle of the line, Savitri Sardar held papers stamped by two different villages. When the river changed course, her family had settled beside another village. Her name remained in the old relief register, the village name had changed in the new list, and for the intervening months each office had made the other responsible. An employee issued a new slip. “See? The name has been corrected. That settles the objection.” Savitri looked at the white sheet. “The mistake in my name has been corrected. But where, in these papers, is the grain for the months when I went home empty-handed?” Her voice was neither loud nor pleading. She wanted the date of the earlier refusal recorded beneath the slip.

Both registers were opened on the officer’s table. The first showed Savitri’s correction taking effect from that day; in the second, the space opposite the earlier distribution date was blank. The employee who read out the office regulations said he had no immediate authorisation to compensate her for all

the previous days. Savitri touched the empty space once. “Then do not write ‘paid in full’ here.” Rukhsana did not merely advise her to take the day’s grain. She read out the separate application: correction of identity approved; compensation for the intervening period under consideration. “I shall take today’s bag,” Savitri said, “but I shall not accept it as an answer to the earlier account.” The employee entered a separate serial number in the margin.

Under the tamarind tree, Dulari Rajwar stood with a thin bag pressed against her feet. Two pages of her ledger recorded an old grain debt and meals received at the relief camp as separate transactions. Her son had urged her the night before to sign, because food was urgently needed. She had not scolded him. But the form placed before her today still contained the remnants of the same clause: upon receipt of rations, all claims concerning the debt would be deemed adjusted. Dulari turned the paper towards the distributor. “My debt dispute concerns a particular shop. This rice is public assistance. What bridge have you built between the two?” The assistant said the printed form had come from higher up.

Rukhsana did not tear up the form in front of everybody. She circled the clause on Dulari’s copy and insisted that the original be preserved. A message went to Gomati. She arrived as a committee member but did not take all authority over distribution into her own hands. She asked the government officer which office had issued the debt-waiver directive. The officer was unaccustomed to hearing the two questions treated separately. “Should we stop distribution until the form is corrected?” he asked. “Remove the wrongful condition,” Dulari answered, “not the distribution.” Gomati had a brief interim clarification written down: a signature acknowledging receipt of grain certified only that grain had been received; it did not relinquish private debts or claims.

The assistant moved to stamp the new slip, but it bore the previous day’s date. Padma reminded him that a false date could also damage a future claim. So the correct date and the reason for amendment were entered separately. The defective original was not destroyed. Lifting her bag, Dulari said, “I am not asking for my ledger to be hidden from every public meeting. I am asking that its accounts not be settled here in the ration queue without my consent.” Her debt remained; so did the dispute. But the grain she took that day was no longer held hostage to either.

At the back of the queue, Anwari had helped her daughter Rehana into a seat. Pain in Rehana’s leg arose from an old injury, and one digit on her medical papers did not agree with the identity register. Salma Sheikh arrived with a provisional verification slip. When the assistant began calling the child’s name aloud, Salma stopped him. “The medical register confirms that her treatment is continuing. That is true. One digit still needs correction. That, too, is true. Neither fact requires you to shout her name here before her

next dose of medicine." She enclosed the necessary papers in a private envelope and recorded only the family identifier required for distribution.

The officer objected that future checks might be difficult using that identifier. "Then specify a secure place and time for the check," Salma replied. "An error of identity must not become a punishment that interrupts treatment." "Must I bring my daughter here every time?" Anwari asked. Salma said she would arrange a separate appointment for the identity correction, while continuity of treatment would be protected. Only the essential food assistance was to be distributed here; the complete medical papers would remain secure in the clinic. The officer made a telephone call, then wrote down the duration of provisional approval and the date of its later review. They had obtained permission for a defined period, not yet a permanent correction of the records.

By then the sun had risen higher. In the mild Phagun wind hung the dust of grain and the smell of damp sacks. A boy asked his mother, "If I wrote my name at school, why are these people writing it again?" She continued reading her slip before answering. Padma knelt beside him. "The school register says that you are learning to read. This slip accounts for the food your household is owed. A mistake in one cannot erase the other." After considering this, the boy asked, "Then if they spell the letters wrong in two places, do they have to correct them twice?" Someone laughed. Padma laughed too, though the child had made the hardest question of the day simple.

Zubaida placed a copy of the communal kitchen's expenditure account on the outer storeroom table. In the pages recording paid working days during Paush and Magh, separate rates were given for cooks, grain cleaners, dishwashers and those who lifted the supplies. This time a proposal came to label the women helping with ration distribution as volunteers. "Record separately those who genuinely wish to help of their own accord," Rukhsana said. "But do not erase the pay of anyone engaged to work fixed hours." An elderly cook pointed to the date of an incomplete payment for an earlier day. The cost of additional meals today was not allowed to be counted as settlement of those arrears.

By midday the line had not grown shorter; only its faces kept changing. People had come from another village on hearing that Savitri's name had been corrected. Rukhsana could not walk up and down the queue and record every objection. "The shelter key is now shared with Zubaida," she told Gomati. "If my name is entered as the sole representative of this ration queue, we shall repeat the same old mistake." "Then why should the beneficiaries not choose their own representative?" Gomati asked. The officer replied that the office had already appointed a contact person. "The contact person may belong to the office," Savitri said, "but I shall decide who speaks for me."

At that, those at the very end of the queue came forward as well. One woman complained that if representatives were chosen merely from those who spoke first, people travelling from far away would once again lose their voice. Dulari suggested completing the day's distribution before holding a short election meeting. Rukhsana agreed. She insisted that people whose identification was incomplete should not be excluded from voting if their status as beneficiaries was recorded in the committee's secure provisional list. Individual names would not be read out over a microphone. It was settled that each beneficiary household present would cast one vote; no employee would vote in the name of an absent family, and objections could be submitted until the following day.

Someone said to Savitri, "You should become the representative yourself." She did not answer immediately. "My village has been corrected in the records, but I have not received the earlier grain. If I become the representative, someone will tell me to abandon my own case." "Those arrears do not cease to be your right because you hold office," Dulari said. "But if the office means you must abstain from deciding your own claim, write that in the rules." Gomati lingered over this distinction: a representative could examine the public account, but could neither decide her own claim nor inspect every family's private records without consent. It was easy to call a position service without having rules for surrendering power; much harder to observe them.

An elderly man who had watched the queue all day remarked that electing representatives would not instantly give them authority; the government seal still remained in the office. "I do not want to seize the seal," Savitri replied. "I want the people to be shown the account of the blank entries." "And beneficiaries should read the language of the forms," Dulari added, "not only officers." Salma could not stay long for the vote because of her medical work. Having explained the limits on the documents Anwari needed to show, she returned to the hospital. The child's next treatment was scheduled. The election of a representative was no order to postpone it.

As the afternoon sunlight softened, the main delay in distribution eased. A separate request arose to deliver an elderly disabled man's bag to his home. Two young men promptly offered to carry it, but he insisted that the contents be weighed before him and that he himself sign for receipt. "Helping someone is not the same as taking away their rights," Zubaida said. The needle of the scale wavered once, so the weighing was repeated. Only after the man had signed was the bag sent off. His son had undertaken to meet them at the square; the young men's names went on the transport-permission sheet, not on any record naming them owners of the distributed goods.

At the small evening meeting, the office's contact assistant sat beside Gomati, but an empty chair was set at the front of the decision-making table for a beneficiary. Rukhsana read out the proposed voting terms: oversight of

distribution, the exceptions register and arrears; no publication of private shelter addresses or medical records; recusal where a representative had a conflict of interest; and regular public summaries of accounts. Rather than simply entering one name, people questioned the candidates. Savitri was asked what she would do if a letter arrived concerning her own compensation. “My claim must be examined in Dulari’s presence, with another verification,” she said. “I cannot absolve myself with my own papers.”

Dulari was asked whether she would allow the assembly to inspect her debt ledger. “Only as much as is necessary to make public, and only with my written consent,” she replied without hesitation. “What has my household’s entire debt book to do with rations?” Nobody laughed. Rukhsana noticed that Dulari, once denied the chance even to read a form, had become a defender of other people’s right to read. A young man who supported appointing an experienced relief worker said the accounts would come to a halt without trained staff. Gomati made the distinction plain: employees would keep supplies moving; beneficiary representatives would provide oversight. They were not the same office.

Votes were counted in the open veranda, but nobody’s private documents were laid out on the platform. Savitri Sardar was elected principal representative and Dulari Rajwar her deputy. An elderly woman demanded that they listen not only to women’s problems in different villages but also to the grievances of single men, disabled people and those living in temporary places. “I do not know everybody’s name,” Savitri said in her first decision, “and I am not ashamed of that. I shall go to those who have the right to be heard.” She asked the office assistant for a copy of the vote count. The first object of her new office was not a garland of flowers but a copy of the record.

After the election, Savitri handed the page concerning her pending compensation to Dulari. Dulari made no immediate decision; she wrote down the names of other verifiers on the newly elected committee. Both understood that the day’s representation had not filled the empty storehouses of the intervening months. Yet the proposal to write “complete” on the old page and close the case had also been averted. An officer said that reconciling the earlier distribution would require the original arrival sheets and goods-receipt register. “Request them,” Savitri replied. “If they are unavailable, write ‘unavailable’. Do not call what survives falsely complete.”

The debt-adjustment clause was removed from Dulari’s form under an authorised cancellation stamp; the earlier defective copy was preserved with the complaint. She weighed her bag of grain, then tied up her ledger. The legal status of her old debt remained in dispute, but the threat to withhold rations had been separated from it. Later her son asked, “Mother, what did you get from your fight—flour or paper?” She opened the bag and showed him a handful of grain. “Both, but neither in full. Had we not corrected the papers,

next time the bag would have been empty again.” Without another word, her son lifted the bag and carried it home.

Salma’s provisional treatment identifier was not entered on a public list of identities at the distribution desk. News came from the hospital that Rehana had received her next treatment at the appointed hour; a separate interview date had been given for correcting the old digit. Anwari’s signature appeared on that private letter; the public list bore only the distribution identifier needed. Rukhsana saw no victory slogan in this. A temporary relaxation of the rules had spared a child further pain, but unless the underlying record was corrected, the obstacle might arise again. Savitri had the omission noted without a name in the open exceptions register.

When the storeroom closed, Gurmeet Kaur and Zubaida reconciled the wages page. The account of the grain from the torn sack, the names of those who had cleaned voluntarily, the helpers engaged for pay and the quantities used in the donated kitchen were entered separately. Rukhsana hesitated before writing down her own hours in the queue. “Record your work,” Zubaida told her. “The shelter rules must apply to everyone.” Rukhsana entered the time spent supervising distribution and helping with objection forms. Her payment had not been decided; it was not therefore presented as an automatically established entitlement. But the register did not make her day invisible.

As evening fell, several nomadic families stopped beside the empty wooden barrier that had marked the queue. They had no grain receipts from their first village, because work had taken them from place to place. One man held an old pass for travelling to another town for employment. It had expired, but he possessed another proof of identity. Savitri said that if immediate meals could be arranged, those should be assessed separately, but no decision on regular ration eligibility or travel rights should be made without consulting the rules. “If I go to have my travel papers corrected,” the man asked, “who will collect the grain from this line?” Rukhsana wrote down the question. She had closed the correctly amended pages for the day; she had no right to write an answer to this new question before hearing it properly.

The clean portion of the grain that had fallen on the floor that morning was included in the correct weight. No miracle had restored the food lost in the empty months. Savitri’s new slip carried the right village name; Dulari’s signature for distribution was no longer a certificate of freedom from debt; Rehana’s treatment had continued uninterrupted, though the identity digit remained under examination. Rukhsana handed the shelter key to Zubaida and copies of the exceptions register to the queue’s new representatives. Nearby, the nomadic man folded his old pass into his pocket and asked the way to Fakira. On the first day of the new order, the feeding of people had left open another question about a road on which both home and livelihood depended.

Chapter 146 · Fakira's Pass

A yellow slip trembled against the iron grille of the ticket window at the railway square. Fakira steadied it with his palm and laid it on the counter. Repeated folding had worn away one corner; within the crease, half a blue circle from an old stamp still remained. A voice came from behind the window: “You need fresh identification now.” “My identity has not changed,” Fakira replied. “The office records say that I am dead. Today I have brought the order correcting that mistake.” Behind him, the nomadic family who had returned from yesterday’s ration queue set their bamboo basket on the ground and waited.

There was little time to catch the morning train. In separate folds of Fakira’s bag lay a small weighing plate, a knife for undoing knots, a ledger of charges and a copy of his corrected testimony. That testimony had arisen from his recollection of two metallic blows heard behind the hospital. Ever since he had seen it turned into a form of travel identification, he had felt aggrieved. “I carry loads along this railway line,” he said. “That is why I need a pass. Why should giving evidence prevent me from travelling?” The employee’s hands paused over the keyboard. An old status appeared on the screen in red letters.

“Bring proof that you are alive,” the employee said. Fakira smiled, with almost as much embarrassment as amusement. “I came here yesterday. Standing in front of you was not proof. I even gave my thumbprint. What separate certificate of life must I obtain now?” The employee explained that he was not authorised to alter the old account’s status himself. Fakira opened the second page of his blue file. It contained an acknowledgement of receipt of the record-correction order issued by Rama Karna’s office, a reference to the original error, and instructions for authorised verification. The employee read the page, but the instructions said nothing about issuing a travel pass immediately.

The man waiting behind him moved another person’s hand away from his basket. “They sent me back in just the same way. As we change villages, our names remain in the old place. If we cannot reach where the work is, where will the food at home come from?” His wife held a tiny cloth bag. “The representatives from the ration queue sent us to you,” she asked Fakira. “Do you understand the way through these papers?” “I know some turns in that road,” he said. “But my own pass has not been released, so I cannot promise yours will be released at once.”

Outside the platform, Nandu Nat stood carrying a cloth-wrapped bamboo pole on his shoulder. Maina was fitting a notebook page into Jhilmil’s book. Nandu had the prospect of two brief performances at the coming market fair, but the organiser’s form demanded the entire troupe’s presence from evening until midnight. Jhilmil had class the next morning. Listening towards

Fakira's window, Nandu said, "If the pass stays blocked, which train will carry our stage equipment? Half the troupe's payment has already been held back from yesterday." His concern was not separate from Fakira's personal difficulty.

The train moved away slowly, without a whistle. Fakira remained standing. He did not record the missed journey as an emblem of humiliation. In his ledger, it was a sum owing to him: the wages for that morning's first consignment, lost. "You may sit in the waiting room if you like," said the man at the window. "Sitting is reasonable," Fakira replied, "but do not write the earnings lost while I wait as zero. I need a way to obtain permission to work, not a gift of food." For the first time, the employee looked at the empty column in Fakira's ledger. He had no answer.

Savitri Sardar and Dulari Rajwar arrived with a copy of the ration queue's exceptions register. On their first day as newly elected representatives, they had arranged an appointment to ask about the nomadic family's entitlements. "Correcting a name for rations and releasing a travel pass belong to two departments," Savitri said. "But we cannot accept a person being lost between the two." "Why order someone who leaves for work at dawn to be present at noon?" Dulari added. "Office hours are not the same as the hours at which a person earns their food." Instead of asking for favours, they asked for a scheduled appointment.

At the municipal entry office, Rama Karna had already laid out the file for their meeting. Asking for Fakira's sworn declaration, she said, "Has the original death marker been removed, or has an order for its correction merely been issued?" "The original sender's account still carries the old status," the employee replied. "The correction notice has reached us." Rama showed them another screen. "Then the travel service must complete its verification on the strength of this order. The original wrong entry will not vanish from the historical record; the date and reason for correction will be entered beside it. We still have to make certain nobody can lift a copy of the old entry and pronounce a living man dead again."

Fakira laid his stick to one side. "My testimony has been corrected. It states that I heard two blows; I did not see anyone breaking down a gate. Do not make a change to that sentence a condition for unlocking my pass." "No," Rama said plainly. "There is no exchange here. The evidence for the safety inquiry has its own place; correction of the travel service's error is separate. The source of the sounds you heard remains uncertain." The employee at the window considered adding the revised testimony to Fakira's travel file. Rama stopped him. "Why keep a private statement if it is not relevant? Retain only what verification requires."

An assistant then observed that removing the 'dead' status would not automatically compensate Fakira for the days on which his old pass had been

unusable. Fakira nodded. “I understand. But show me a separate counter for a claim when the charges have been deducted from someone’s ledger. I cannot prove every day’s earnings; I do have copies of the written agreements.” Savitri immediately insisted that compensation for his lost rations should not be folded into this claim. Many losses borne by one person were not one sum. Rama had an application account opened and the claim marked: ‘Received; verification outstanding.’

On the outer veranda, Jhilmil grew tired of practising letters in her workbook. One shoelace had caught in the knot of the bamboo. As Maina freed it, she asked, “Shall we go to sing at the fair or stay for class?” “Class until afternoon,” Jhilmil replied. “Two songs in the evening if I am not tired. No organiser is going to sign away a page of my schoolbook.” Nandu did not dismiss this as a child’s whim. He opened the organiser’s form. Under the names of eighteen performers was a requirement that the children stay all night, while the reduced payment was justified by the words ‘public-interest programme’.

Nandu telephoned the organiser. “We can shorten the performance, but put the basis of payment in writing,” he said. “The programme will lose its sparkle without the children,” came the voice at the other end. “Then change the stage plan. Do not reduce their education. My art is my profession; we never agreed beforehand to accept half-pay in the name of public interest.” The organiser threatened to find another troupe on those terms. Nandu continued looking at the sunlight on the roof. “What shall we do now?” Maina asked.

“First we shall calculate the cost of a shorter performance,” Nandu replied. He wrote down separate amounts for rope, drumskin, train fares and the performers’ time. Jhilmil shut her mathematics book. “Will you be paid less if I do not go?” “Perhaps,” her father said. “But your school hours are not cheap.” He did not conceal the difficulty. In a performer’s household, honouring a child’s wishes raised questions of expenses throughout the family; making the child’s voice invisible was no solution to them.

Farid Chik arrived there with a notebook and a purse containing the market accounts. His family’s sorting and selling work was busiest in the early morning. Because he had chosen evening classes, his father could not employ him as a full-time bookkeeper. Farid had made a written division of time between the two kinds of work, but his new school admission form described him as an ‘irregular student’ and demanded an additional fee. “I shall give the shop part of my day,” he told Maina. “But if I have chosen a different class time, why should I be punished for that?”

“You wanted to learn rhythm, didn’t you?” Nandu asked, looking at his notebook. Farid laughed. “Rhythm and accounts. I shall not abandon school simply in the name of business, or forget what the household owes simply in

the name of schooling. I came with my father, but the decision must bear my signature." His father returned from the market just then, sweat lined across his forehead. "If my son leaves the shop I shall have to hire someone else." "Write down the hours I shall give," Farid replied. "Agree on wages for the rest of the work. The household's need must not erase my class."

His father opened the ledger. There were entries for customers' credit, the cost of goods and one outstanding debt from the previous month. Pointing to that debt, Farid asked, "Is this a household expense or a loan in my personal name?" "It is our shared account; it has not yet been divided," his father said. "Then write down the portion of my earnings I shall contribute at home. I shall continue my studies and do my share of work. But do not have me sign for the entire old debt." His father objected at first. Then, amid the dust of an approaching bus, he silently turned the pages of the notebook.

When Rama came out of the meeting into the office courtyard, both families showed her their applications. She explained that the school, not the municipal travel office, would decide admission; but a publicly subsidised class was required to state in writing the grounds for an additional fee. Farid noted when he should contact the class supervisor again. Nandu agreed to await a revised proposal from the organising committee, but would not stamp the first proposal with his consent. An unfinished contract was no work order.

Meanwhile, the figures in Fakira's old account were being reconciled for verification. Against one designation stood 'Sai Fakir'; elsewhere it read 'Diwan Madar'. "Which of the two is real?" the employee asked. Fakira repeated what he had said before. "Both are descriptions entered in registers. The name I call myself is Fakira. When I go carrying loads, people know me by my work. Do not make words for religion, occupation or lineage the only key to correcting an error." Rama directed that the alternate register entries be kept as references under one verified identity. No new public list was created without his consent.

An officer told the nomadic man from the ration queue, "Give a permanent home address for travel." His wife interrupted: "In Jeth we go to the northern fair, and in Bhadau we go to another town. If we invent a permanent address, it will be declared false tomorrow." Dulari asked separately whether the application could accept a stable means of contact, through which an office could reach them without implying ownership of a property. The employee looked through the rules. They did provide for an alternative contact address for a mobile trade and time-limited travel credentials; that provision simply had not been used before.

Savitri asked for a copy of the rule. In place of his expired pass, the man applied for renewal under the proper procedure. The officer did not accept a single witness statement as sufficient: he requested a previous wage receipt and a new contact arrangement. The family had half the receipt; the contractor

held the rest. No pass was issued immediately, but rather than reject the application, the office set a definite period in which the papers could be completed. “And if they need food in the meantime?” Savitri asked. The difference between Ruhani’s shelter and the public ration regulations was explained; it was agreed that provisional meals could be recorded without publicly disclosing private residential names.

In a room at the back of the office, the printer suddenly began to rattle. Fakira rose, but the employee said, “Not yet.” An hour later written confirmation came that the erroneous numerical code had been removed. A correction date was added to the old account, and the order removing the block on the travel pass was filed separately. The employee placed a new card in the machine. Before accepting it, Fakira asked him to read it aloud: name, validity, permitted route, cost, and identifying reference. He listened to every line. Had a mistake remained, the gleaming new card would merely have become the old obstruction in another form.

“Your legal access to travel services is restored on this card,” the employee said. “What is the fare?” Fakira asked. “The one prescribed for everyone.” “And the old testimony about the hospital?” “That is not a condition of the travel account.” Fakira ran a finger along the card’s edge. Then he wrote in his ledger: ‘Pass received.’ In the following empty space he wrote: ‘Claim for lost earnings; decision pending.’ He did not collapse all the papers into one.

Fakira did not immediately choose a destinationless first journey with his new pass. Nandu was standing nearby, needing his equipment transported to the fair. “How heavy a load?” Fakira asked. Nandu described the weight of the poles, cloth and small instruments. Fakira named his rate and explained that another worker would be needed for safe loading and unloading. “The organiser has not agreed to pay what you are asking,” Nandu replied. “Then reconsider the place of the performance,” said Fakira. “Do not bless my work into being free.” They agreed in writing on the price and limits of the job.

Jhilmil came to her father. “I shall not take the train today,” she said. “There is practice in Padma’s class.” Nandu nodded. Maina stitched together the torn inner page of her book. “So there will be no song tonight?” Fakira asked. “There will be another time for a song,” Jhilmil replied. “Today is the time for reading.” Nandu entered his daughter’s decision separately in the ledger: child absent from the performance; remuneration calculated accordingly; no consent given to the child’s presence all night.

At the fair the organiser showed them a small stage off to one side. The first proposal had required attendance throughout the night; now, under Nandu’s pressure, a document was drawn up for a two-hour performance, with separate payment for the adult artists. The sum was lower than in the first offer, but both time and payment were clear. Nandu did not sign at once; he asked for a few moments to consult the other performers. “It says nothing about

compensation for the stage that was damaged,” Maina pointed out. That, the organiser said, was a separate old claim. Nandu accepted the distinction and had the clause relinquishing the claim removed.

Farid went to school that evening with his father. Padma had received a revised timetable from Harimohan Pathak. The school clerk acknowledged that the extra fee had been imposed on the assumption of absence from ordinary daytime classes; applying it unchanged to a student enrolled in an approved evening group had been an error. The clerk did not simply erase the old amount: he made a new entry showing the reason for and date of the correction. Farid received a receipt for the fee properly due for his class; he and his father agreed on the date on which he would contribute his share to the family accounts. His education was no longer described as an act of charity.

On the way home his father said, “We shall need someone to keep the shop’s daily accounts in the hours that are left.” “I shall be there for the first three mornings,” Farid replied. “For the other four, agree in advance on the pay of whoever you hire.” His father smiled briefly. “In all these new accounts of yours, even a father must sign.” “I have only just learned to sign my own name,” said Farid. “I shall never do it again without reading.” Their disagreement was not over, but by defining the limits of work they had found room for education.

That evening Fakira returned to the tea shop by the railway square. In his pocket were two separate receipts: one for the train he had missed, the other for the new consignment. The shopkeeper’s son asked, “Have they solved the mystery of those sounds that night?” Fakira set down his glass. “No. I heard what I heard. What I did not see, I still have not seen. The pass has been released; the cause of the sounds has not.” “Then what was the use of all those papers?” the boy asked. Fakira took the new travel pass out of his bag. “I can earn my living on the morning train. That is no small use.”

Closing the day’s decisions register at the office, Rama Karna saw three entries: Fakira’s travel rights restored; his compensation claim for lost income pending; and a date set for the nomadic family to complete the papers for renewal. Nandu’s short-stage contract and Farid’s receipt for evening-class admission lay in other departments’ records. The number of papers had grown, yet each retained its own measure of time: someone’s morning train, someone else’s evening song, another person’s hour for learning.

On the school veranda Padma was laying out mats for the next day’s class. Sanket had made a small portable strip bearing letters, hand signs and a separate aid for sounds. Jhilmil looked at it. “Can we answer in our own different ways with this?” “We shall ask you how you want to answer,” Sanket replied, “and build a way for that.” Farid’s new admission paper had reached the veranda; Fakira’s travel pass had not been put in the same file. A faint train

whistle came from outside. Inside, the children continued writing down the time for the next day's class.

Chapter 147 · The Classroom of Signs

In the first light of morning, Sanket was tightening thread across a thin strip of bamboo. Before him lay three pieces of cloth—red, yellow and a dull, dusty white. Behind each were attached large letters, raised stitching and a small wooden symbol. He intended to hang the strip at the classroom door so that children unable to speak could communicate what they needed. As Padma swept the veranda, she asked, “Will everyone know what this red means?” Sanket stopped pulling the knot tight. “I thought it could mean ‘I need help’.” “You thought so,” Padma said. “Have you asked the children?” The strip remained half-open in his hands.

The Phagun wind had carried ash from the previous night’s stove to the classroom threshold. Jhilmil arrived first. The agreement for Nandu’s small stage performance no longer demanded her attendance at night, so today she could open her notebook without worry. Looking at the red cloth, she said, “This looks like a sign for a game. Would I use it to ask for help when no one could hear me?” “Perhaps,” Sanket said. Farid Chik sat in the back row. “The children must decide what sign means asking for help,” he said. “Otherwise it becomes another command from grown-ups.”

A boy from the railway square arrived with his notebook under his arm. His family moved from place to place for work, and the space for a permanent address on the admission form was blank. His little sister came with him; Meera Mandal had written her name correctly in the ledger of the earlier temporary class. Looking at the old slip, the new office clerk said, “This proves attendance, not admission. Whose address shall we write?” The boy gripped his sister’s hand. He knew that a false address might get her a notebook today, only for her name to be struck off at the next inspection.

When Meera Mandal entered the classroom, Sanket showed her the strip he had made. Touching the raised knot of thread, she said, “This is good work, but how will a child who cannot see the colour, one who cannot feel the thread, and one who is only beginning to read all reach the same meaning?” She turned to the boy’s sister. “What do you do when you do not understand something?” The little girl tapped twice, softly, on the table. “Today we shall accept those taps as an answer too,” Padma said. On Sanket’s face appeared at once both affection for his own invention and embarrassment at its incompleteness.

When the lesson began, Padma wrote ‘home’ on the board. Jhilmil read the letters; the boy spoke the word; another child shaped a roof with her hands. Rachna Dhimal, who taught a weekly class in migrant families’ mother tongues, listened and said, “The word for home is not the same in every household. I shall say it in my home language; you tell us yours.” She wrote two different words and asked the children their meanings, without

declaring either form the ‘real’ one. When the little raised roof symbol on the strip came beneath Jhilmil’s fingers, she laughed. “I can touch a home!”

Padma was having the boy’s sister entered in the attendance book with provisional admission. “Without a permanent address, the calculation of assistance funds will go wrong,” the clerk objected. “A difficult calculation is no reason to bar a child from school,” Meera replied. “Record what evidence is available: the guardian’s mobile contact, the copy of earlier study, and a date for new verification. Record also that there is no address. Do not invent a place.” As the child recognised the letters of her own name, the clerk turned the page. He would have to consult the education office’s regulations, but the girl was not excluded from that day’s lesson.

Sanket took out a small camera and set it on the table. The previous year he had made brief visual recordings of some lessons, so children living far away could see a lesson they had missed. A representative of an organisation had come with a proposal to record a demonstration of the ‘Accessible School’. “One video will open the way to donations,” the representative said. “We can show the children’s hand signs.” Sanket’s finger went towards the record button, then halted when he caught Padma’s eye. “Consent first,” he said quietly, “and no one’s learning must suffer if they refuse.”

“It’s a group programme; asking every parent will be difficult,” the representative said. Padma immediately set the cloth strip in the middle of the classroom. “A group can study together; its faces are not collective property. Some of these children come from the shelter. Their whereabouts, families and medical circumstances are private.” Zubaida, who had arrived to deliver a copy of the shelter rules, added that collective accounts might be public, but residents’ identities were not. “Then how shall we prove the value of our support?” the representative asked in surprise. “With teaching materials, expense receipts and a demonstration without faces,” Sanket answered. “Any person who wishes to appear may give separate, explicit permission.”

“What if I want to show my hands but not my face?” Jhilmil asked. “That too is a separate decision,” Sanket said. “And if I say yes today but change my mind tomorrow?” Farid asked. Padma looked at him. “There must be a clear way to stop further use. But material that has already reached other places may be difficult to retrieve completely. That limit must be explained beforehand.” Silence settled briefly over the classroom. The representative unfolded the prepared consent form. It contained just one sweeping sentence: ‘All rights for publicity.’ “That is not consent,” Padma said, returning it. “It is a demand to surrender rights.”

Meanwhile, Madan Raut arrived at the veranda with the noise of a vehicle behind him. His vehicle was sought at one time to carry schoolchildren, and at another to transport patients. The school’s new proposal specified a morning run; the hospital’s letter allowed for a possible call to transport a

patient at precisely the same hour. Madan spread both papers before Padma. “Two separate hours cannot be fitted into one vehicle at the same time,” he said. “Writing ‘if required’ on a paper does not split a road in two. If a patient must be carried, someone must decide in advance how the children will arrive safely by another means.”

An employee suggested suspending the school run for several days and keeping Madan available for the hospital. Jhilmil shut her notebook. “Will our schooling stop again?” she asked. “Your question is right,” Madan said, lowering his head. “Delay for a patient can also put a life at risk.” He immediately requested a list of safe alternatives: which vehicles had proper seats for children, which drivers had rested, and which routes were muddy. It was also made explicit that an ordinary school vehicle could not be declared an ambulance without the facilities a patient required.

Padma met briefly there with Gomati’s representative. They decided that Madan’s morning school run would remain scheduled, while an initial contact sheet would be prepared for a separate authorised vehicle for medical emergencies. If two demands actually arose at the same time, the responsible officer would specify a safe alternative in writing rather than merely blaming the driver. Madan went back to his vehicle, but first showed them his payment sheet. The fare for an earlier diverted trip was still unpaid. “Correcting tomorrow’s list will not automatically pay yesterday’s fare,” Gomati’s representative said. The payment account separately acknowledged the claim.

At midday Rachna Dhimal began her mother-tongue lesson with five children. The regular register showed low attendance because several families had migrated. A grants officer said paying a teacher for an entire language class of five was not justified. Holding up the paper, Rachna replied, “If there are not ten children, shall we erase the language of the five? What, then, is the school for?” She showed a plan for the remaining weekly hours, contact with families at home and sharing classroom time with another teacher. But she would not consent to describing her labour as an ‘affectionate service’ worth no pay.

In Rachna’s class, one child wrote a word from his grandmother’s language; another said he was called by a different name at home. Both words remained on the board. Sanket wanted to add another word to the illustrations on the strip, then stopped. “If we put every household’s name for an object on it, won’t the strip become too heavy?” he asked. Rachna laughed. “Not every word can fit on the strip, but the right to have everyone’s word heard can fit.” The children spoke their different pronunciations to one another. The exercise was not an instant translation contest; it was practice in understanding and making oneself understood.

The school treasurer proposed a new condition: the mother-tongue class would run only if private donations came in. Padma opened her notebook in

objection. “If donations come, we can buy more books. We should not hand over our basic teaching responsibility to charity.” Rachna read the cost ledger: use of the classroom, teaching hours, travel, fluctuating numbers of children. Meera pointed out that evidence of teaching already carried out existed; the school should not pretend it was beginning from nothing. The treasurer promised no immediate payment of the whole sum, but entered the approved teaching hours in part and fixed a date to place the remainder before a committee meeting.

Devi Gond entered through the school’s back gate. Papers for the follow-up examination of her old head injury were inside her bag; outside lay only her nursing-training timetable. She had brought lunch to the household before coming to see the class, because Sanket had asked for advice on health-related signal cards. At the sight of her, a woman asked, “Who was the first patient to fall that day in the hospital?” Devi’s face hardened. “I have not come to give testimony about the hospital today,” she said. “I have come to teach some signs. I must continue both my treatment and my training.”

The woman fell silent, but a heavy silence remained in the classroom. Padma sat beside Devi on the mat. Sanket’s cards carried signs for ‘water’, ‘pain’, ‘rest’ and ‘help’. “Are these cards meant to diagnose an illness without a doctor’s examination,” Devi asked, “or simply to help a patient communicate distress?” “The second,” Sanket answered. “Then remove any claim that a picture can establish a diagnosis. If a child puts a hand on the chest, do not immediately name a particular disease. Ask, listen, arrange an examination.” In her training notebook, she showed two separate spaces: ‘symptom reported’ and ‘clinical decision’.

A boy ran in with news from home. Devi’s mother needed her evening medicine and someone to care for her; her brother had said Devi should abandon her training and stay at home full-time. Devi stood as she read the letter. “I am not saying my mother should be abandoned,” she told Padma. “But it is not true that I am the only pair of hands in that house.” Zubaida offered to show her how shared care was organised at the shelter, if she wished, while making clear that the family decision would remain hers. Devi called home. There was a sharp exchange about splitting care on her two scheduled training days between her brother and their aunt.

Her brother’s first words on the telephone were, “Has your education become more important than my work?” “No,” Devi replied, “and your work is not more important than my education. She is mother to both of us. On the days I am training, you must make time. I shall take care of her on the others.” The aunt stated the hours she could help, but refused to undertake risky medical tasks for which she had no training. They agreed to another schedule: care within each person’s availability and ability, and authorised services if clinical care was needed. Devi put down the phone and released a

short breath. The arrangement was not a complete solution, but it was no longer an order to abandon her training.

Sanket thanked her and put the paper before her. “How should we account for the fee for reviewing these health cards?” “The advice I gave today was half an hour’s work,” Devi replied. “If the school uses this material, agree on both credit and payment. Do not include any payment for my testimony about the hospital.” Padma took a note. Here too one person’s experience was becoming several different accounts: treatment for an injury, professional training, shared care at home and educational advice. Compassion in one account could not turn labour in another into work without pay.

The afternoon was passing, but the classroom assessment remained. The old examination paper read: ‘Look at the picture and write the name of the object.’ A child who could not write got no marks; another who understood the word but answered in a home language was marked wrong. Sanket laid out the small cards. In the first trial Jhilmil wrote the word; the boy pointed to the object; a girl drew a line; Farid added a name from another language beside his own word. Padma wrote new criteria for assessing answers: not the copying of one particular word, but comprehension of meaning and the ability to communicate one’s thought.

The clerk said that the district office’s annual examination would not recognise such a method. “We shall make that examination’s requirements clear separately,” Padma replied. “But why conceal a child’s knowledge in the school’s daily work? Teach writing separately where the skill is still developing; record evidence of understanding separately when it exists.” She prepared a three-part assessment: comprehension, means of communication, and the next skill that needed practice. The children were asked which method they found easiest. Some chose their hands, some speech, some letters. No child was confined permanently to one method.

Then something unexpected happened. The yellow window in Sanket’s portable strip suddenly jammed, and the children cried out together, “Sir, even your device won’t give an answer!” Sanket was shaking the strip when Jhilmil tapped it twice, softly—the very two taps the boy’s sister had given that morning. The entire room burst into laughter. Sanket blushed, then laughed himself. “All right. First rule: when a machine jams, it needs help too.” For a few moments the children’s laughter lightened the sorrow of a town exhausted by disaster.

Towards evening Meera Mandal went to the school office. The copy of the little sister’s provisional admission bore the words ‘address verification pending’, together with a clear order: the student was not to be kept out of class while the process continued. “What happened to the wages of the assistant teachers in your earlier mobile classes?” Padma asked. Meera opened her old ledger. Attendance had been certified for two periods, but the paying

office had dismissed the work as voluntary. “It is true I taught the children voluntarily,” Meera said. “But once fixed hours and responsibilities were accepted in writing, that period must be examined separately.”

The employee examining the account said there was no room for that payment in the small grant. “Do not erase the past assistant’s work in the happiness of admitting a child today,” Meera replied. The school reconciled its earlier approval letter, attendance and duties specified for the time. Not every period was equally well evidenced; those with clear written grounds were recommended for payment. For the rest, personal testimony and an earlier report were requested. Meera’s face did not brighten as it had when the children’s names entered the register, but the file no longer said ‘Free service —closed’.

Sending her five pupils home, Rachna Dhimal wrote in the ledger: attendance today, five; means of communication, three; migrant families to contact next week, two. A letter came from the treasurer approving some teaching hours, but the remaining wages still awaited a meeting. Rachna folded the letter into her book. “Next time, bring a word from your home,” she told the children. “Those whose homes keep changing can bring a word from the road as well.” They went off in different directions. Even in what was called a class in one language, their speech carried many voices, and none ruled over another.

Before returning to the training centre, Devi Gond confirmed the household care schedule by telephone once more. Her follow-up examination for the head injury would have its own date, and her earlier limited statement about the hospital incident would keep its own place. Sanket showed her a copy of the revised card. Devi marked three places: a question mark beside the sign for reporting pain, a set of options beside the request for help, and a notice to contact a trained person beside a clinical decision. “Now you may give this to a child,” she said. “But not as a substitute for a doctor.” Her brief smile met Sanket’s excitement without erasing anyone’s earlier wounds.

At the end of the day Padma gathered the books and examined the sample Sanket had made without showing any faces. The organisation’s representative had sent another letter: public descriptions of the purpose, costs and equipment were acceptable; videos of pupils or shelter residents required separate consent. Padma did not sign at once. The school committee’s regulations still needed checking, and the children and their guardians needed explanations they could understand. For the first time Sanket set apart the material he had made from his eagerness to sell it as ‘his own’. “My hands made the strip,” he said, “but the voices of those who learn with it belong to them.”

Four changes entered the school’s new decision register: provisional admission for the child without an address, a safe division of Madan’s vehicle

schedule, partial recognition of Rachna's mother-tongue class, and a sharing of care at home to allow Devi's training to continue. Beside them were four outstanding questions: arrears owed to assistant teachers, the fare for Madan's earlier journey, Rachna's remaining teaching wages, and the actual value of Sanket's work making the materials. Closing the book, Padma saw how easy it was to write 'Free admission', and how difficult to write down the price of the work that kept the institution running.

Jhilmil came back to the veranda once more. "Is there an examination tomorrow?" she asked. "Tomorrow you will show what you have understood in your own way," Padma said. "But the fees paper will also be placed before the meeting." Jhilmil slipped a tiny paper drawing of Sanket's strip between the pages of her notebook. "Was this given to me?" "Yes, the drawing is yours," Sanket replied. "But I shall not take a photograph of your notebook without asking." The grey light of evening was descending outside. Padma rested her pen on the empty column of the fees register. In tomorrow's decision there would have to be room for both the value of learning and the value of work.

Chapter 148 · Padma's Fee

Before the morning sun reached the school veranda, Padma had spread three ledgers across the table. The first held the children's admissions, the second the teachers' hours, and the third an empty column for fees. The smell of cumin rose from Rukhsana's kitchen and drifted as far as the window. Yesterday Jhilmil had asked who would pay for learning. Today Padma could no longer leave that question in the child's mouth alone. In the empty column she first wrote: Nothing to be charged to pupils in the name of admission. Then her pen halted. Whose work was it to explain the language of a lesson, read a form aloud, and record the agreement of both parties?

The clerk responsible for the school's accounts turned an old approval letter in his hands. “There is one teaching honorarium here. Translation, reconciling languages, household visits—if these are not services, what are they?” Padma showed him three receipts from the previous week: the time spent at a parents' meeting for the mother-tongue class, separate hours explaining confidentiality at the shelter, and a written reply to the office's questions about methods of assessing a child. “None of this came within the hours allotted for teaching,” she said. “Calling it free will not make its cost disappear. It will merely erase the name of the person who performed it.”

The clerk looked somewhat hurt. “You yourself have helped without payment so many times.” “I have, and I shall again,” Padma replied. “But a day on which I choose to give my time cannot be added to work ordered by an institution. Volunteering was my decision, not a permanent means of saving someone else's budget.” She pushed two sheets towards him. One read: Voluntary work—duration and explicit consent. The other: Assigned linguistic mediation—time, responsibility, remuneration and conditions of confidentiality. The clerk turned the two sheets over for a while.

Just then came the faint clink of scissors at the doorway. Saraswati Thakur entered with her workbag over her shoulder; her daughter carried the safely opened casing of a broken radio and a drawing of its wires. “Next Monday is the last day for applications to the training centre,” Saraswati said. “We have not yet raised the whole fee, but she will apply.” Her daughter said nothing. She was studying a crooked line on the strip Sanket had made, as though asking what path a wire must follow to become a voice. Padma gestured for them to sit beside her calculations.

Saraswati described her day's earnings: in the morning she tended the hair of patients' relatives near the hospital, at noon she saw a few customers, and in the evening she visited elderly women at home to care for them. Taking her daughter to training would cost her two morning customers. “Who will pay for that?” she asked, and then answered herself. “I will. But I have spoken to my elder sister-in-law about sharing the work. If she agrees, we shall record

her hours and earnings too.” Her daughter spoke clearly for the first time. “I am not going to take your scissors. I want to learn electrical safety.” Saraswati laughed. “Your road need not be any shorter because it lies in the shadow of scissors.”

The training form had a box marked ‘family occupation’. An employee had advised the daughter to write ‘barber’ so that her application would be processed quickly. Saraswati drew the paper towards herself. “The family's work is mine; the subject she wants to study is hers. They are not the same.” Padma read aloud the list of available courses. Before beginning to repair a machine, instruction in electrical safety and practice in rendering equipment powerless were compulsory. No one promised admission. The application was submitted, part of the fee paid against a receipt, and a definite date written down for the balance. Saraswati rearranged her next three days of working hours.

“You explained this form; let me pay your fee,” Saraswati said, loosening the knot of her bag. Padma stopped her hand. “This is public assistance with admission. I will not charge you. If the school assigns me the task of explaining written rules to families at fixed times, I will ask the institution to pay for that work.” Saraswati's hand remained upon the knot. “Then where will the price of your work go?” “Into a separate entry in today's ledger,” Padma replied. There was more scepticism than gratitude in Saraswati's eyes; she had seen too many favours without receipts. Padma handed her a small slip recording the time and the task.

At midday Nandu Nat carried away the bamboo for the stage; his troupe's accounts were separate. Behind him came Hari Natuwa with his son Anshu. Hari held a letter from the organisers of a performance. It offered good pay, but on conditions: an imitation of ‘rustic’ speech on stage, mockery of his own caste and occupation, and a scene in which a child would be subjected to a pretended humiliation to make the audience laugh. Hari put the letter on the table. “I earn my living from laughter. I will not sell humiliation on credit,” he said. Anshu opened his exercise book and sat quietly.

A committee member said, “But what happens on stage is acting. Why do you take the insult as real?” Hari replied, “In a performance one laughs at a character. This letter asks me to name my own people and make everybody look down on them. If a child laughs at that scene, tomorrow a classmate will repeat those words at him.” He put forward his own proposal: song, storytelling, the dholak and theatre drawn from working people's lives; limited hours for child performers, no disruption of schooling, and payment agreed in writing beforehand. The organisers did not accept it immediately.

“Father, that payment is larger,” Anshu said quietly. “My new exercise books, my textbooks, the fare to school…” Hari did not interrupt him. “If I take money for humiliation to buy your notebooks, how will you remember

what you read in those books?" he asked. "I only want your art to continue," Anshu answered wearily. Padma proposed that Hari's troupe perform as part of the school's folk-learning programme, but not under the label of a 'free cultural service'. The actual funds in the programme's budget, the fee they could support, and the time involved would all be stated clearly.

The organiser's representative telephoned again. "Take out the humiliating scene and fewer people will come," he said. Hari listened to the voice on the telephone and replied, "How many people come is your estimate. How much I am humiliated is something I know." The performance was shortened and its payment reduced from the first offer; but the requirement to humiliate anyone through the language of the stage was withdrawn. Hari signed the revised agreement. From that day's advance he made separate envelopes for two books for Anshu and next week's travel fare. The whole cost of schooling was still not covered.

At the other end of the veranda Nasima Shershahbadi was drawing thread through the torn binding of a book. Her daughter sat with a provisional school admission slip. A certified copy of the transfer certificate from the old school had arrived, but a letter of the girl's name had once again been changed in the new register. A young man in the queue heard the girl say something in the language she used at home and began laughing as he imitated its sounds. She pressed her lips together. Nasima secured her needle in a piece of cloth and stood. "If there was mockery, put it on record," she said. "Then find out whose mistake it was."

A school employee silenced the young man, but said, "Teaching in that speech will be difficult." Padma asked for an exercise book. The girl wrote two familiar Maithili words and two words from her home language; when they matched their meanings, the two sides understood each other. "If understanding proves difficult, we shall change the method," Padma said. "We will not require a child to change her voice before she is allowed to learn." She had a formal complaint registered. The young man was not declared guilty without hearing his account, but a written record of the incident was made and a clear notice issued against mocking language in class.

Nasima already had a form for her own adult-education class. "Will you study at my school too?" her daughter asked. Nasima smiled. "Your class is at a different hour; mine is in the evening. I know how to sew the binding of a book, but I need to read and understand some rules for myself." An employee said that the old permanent-address option would not do for the adult class. Padma explained the procedure for reconciling a current contact address with earlier evidence. Nasima's application was accepted and her daughter received written permission to remain in class without interruption. The date for the final correction to the records was entered in a separate register.

As her name was written, Nasima again pronounced the letters as she said them herself. The clerk repeated them wrongly once, then asked Nasima and wrote them correctly. Looking at the page, her daughter said, “This time the name sounds like me.” Nasima covered her mouth as she laughed. “Listening to a name is the first lesson,” she said, “and not making fun of a child is the second.” She submitted the bill for repairing the book, with her signature. Her payment was not relief in exchange for the language complaint. It was payment for the separate labour of sewing a book.

At the midday meeting Padma's ledger was opened again. “If we set a fee for mediation,” the chair asked, “poor families will abandon the queue before admission.” Padma had come prepared to argue. “Not a fee charged to the family. The institution that commissions language assistance, explanation of a consent form or help understanding training materials must pay from its own budget.” She showed the separate responsibilities of three sources: school, shelter and private contract. If a private contractor needed a legal condition read and explained, the cost would not be deducted from a poor worker's wages.

“Then how much remuneration?” a member asked. “Who prevents a person from adding false hours?” Padma looked at the hands of her watch. “Record the time and subject, and obtain confirmation from both sides that the work was done. But the name of a person needing confidentiality will not go on a public board. If the service was freely volunteered, we shall demand no fee. If an institution commissioned it, required material to be prepared, and fixed a particular day, it must go into the labour register.” The accounts employee requested a formal template. Payment was not finally approved on estimates alone.

Sanket came to the meeting carrying his portable strip. “These pictures contain my work,” he said, “but the children's pronunciations are not my property.” A local group had proposed recording pupils' voices and selling those recordings with the strip. He had refused. “We can agree on a price for making the strip, training people to use it safely, and repairing it,” Padma said. “Not for the voices of pupils or shelter residents without their separate consent.” Sanket laughed. “And suppose someone answers with a tap instead of a picture?” “Then first we shall understand the tap,” Padma replied. “The receipt can come later.”

In the classroom a little girl answered by drawing a picture, while an accounts worker marked zero for her in the practice list for written letters. Padma set two registers beside one another: assessment of understanding and practice in writing letters. “This child has identified the object,” she said. “She still has to learn to write. Do not make the two outcomes into one.” Accepting the distinction, the clerk altered the daily progress sheet. The teacher's additional assessment hours were also counted, though payment could not be regarded as finally sanctioned without an officer's signature.

Zubaida from the shelter appeared in the doorway. A family needed medical instructions explained in its own speech. Having heard the family's agreement, Padma went with them to a separate small room; no one switched on a camera. She read the doctor's written directions in as simple a language as she could, and had the doctor confirm again a dosage that remained unclear. “I am a bridge between languages, not a physician,” she made clear. As the family left they asked, “Do we have to pay now?” “No,” Zubaida answered. “Nor do you have to make your private identities public in order to receive a service here.”

On the institution's confidential sheet Padma recorded only the time and purpose of the episode: clarifying instructions and helping obtain medical confirmation. She did not write the family's name in the public statement of expenditure. “Without the name, what proof is there of payment?” the accounts employee asked. Padma showed him a system of approved service codes, dates, durations and signatures by the responsible persons. “There will be restricted access for audit,” she said, “not an exhibition of private lives on a public noticeboard.” Ruhani read the rule and said that confidentiality in the shelter's accounts was not merely courtesy; it was safety.

That evening Rukhsana arrived at the accounts discussion with kitchen receipts in her bag. “You are right to seek payment for linguistic work,” she said. “But do not put the rice that came into the school's funds under one heading called educational fees. Show the sources for shelter meals, books for the children's school, and the translator's work separately.” Padma nodded. The table was crowded with ledgers, so they slipped an old newspaper between notebooks to make space for separate entries. At first the clerk bristled at yet another piece of paper, but in the end he stated the limit of the funds authorised. The language of helping would no longer be a way to conceal an empty cell in the accounts.

At mealtime Saraswati's daughter sat beside Sanket, drawing measurements of the broken radio's casing. A notice had come from the training centre: her form had been accepted; the entrance test would take place the following week; the fee already paid was non-refundable, and the result would be known only then. Saraswati had given two customers' appointments to her sister-in-law. It would have been false to say the household had lost no earnings: Saraswati's share had fallen, but her sister-in-law's earnings and expenses had been entered. “What if they do not select me in the test?” her daughter asked. “Then we shall ask for another way to learn,” Saraswati said. “I will not imprison you in my occupation because you fail on one day.”

Hari Natuwa's revised performance took place on the field in the evening. Amid the sound of the dholak and the mysterious night gathering round, he sang the story of an ageing worker who, as he counted his tools, discovered that the tools knew more about his labour than the accounts did. The audience laughed, but not at anyone's caste or speech. A small child asked

Anshu, “How does your father remember so many stories?” “I shall write them down,” Anshu said, “and he will check the mistakes in my mathematics.” There was a new brightness alongside the fatigue in Hari's face.

After the performance the organiser's representative called the village dialect ‘funny’ and hinted once more that the old humiliating scene might be added next time. Holding the receipt for the outstanding payment, Hari said, “First pay the balance for today's work. We shall read the conditions for the next performance anew.” The stage lights were fading. Hari's final palm-stroke fell upon the dholak at the very moment Anshu shut his book. Each had found time for work and study in his own way, though the household's expenses were far from settled.

At the school's evening committee meeting, each clause of Padma's proposal was discussed. Five rules were accepted: service codes, verified hours, budgets separated by institution, limits of confidentiality, and independent consent for voluntary work. But the entire proposal for mediation fees was not passed in a single day. Payment for a limited number of hours was approved for a trial period, and the date of the next financial meeting was written down for the rest. Padma signed the partial decision, but did not forget to write ‘balance outstanding’ in the blank space on the page.

Meera Mandal brought copies of the assistant teachers' old wage records. “Today we have put a value on mediation,” she said. “Let us not forget the hours spent in the earlier mobile classes.” On the basis of old approvals and attendance, Padma had a procedure entered in the dues ledger for the verified hours; claims concerning uncertain periods remained undecided. The fare for Madan Raut's unannounced reassignment and Rachna Dhimal's unpaid teaching hours remained on separate departmental sheets. One new rule could not settle all the old debts, but it made somewhat clearer whose duty it was to understand them.

After nightfall Nasima placed a copy of the receipt for sewing the book into her bag. Her daughter looked again at the admission slip on which her name was written correctly. “Mother, someone stopped that young man laughing today. But tomorrow?” “Tomorrow someone may laugh again,” Nasima said. “That is why I have kept a copy of today's complaint. Your studies will continue.” The daughter asked when she too could make a recording of her voice. “On the day you want to, for a purpose you understand,” Nasima said. “For now, write your own name in your own exercise book.”

Outside the classroom the corner of a sheet fluttered on an old noticeboard. It was a copy of an earlier, vague accusation associated with fears of child abduction. Although a public correction had already been issued, this copy had not been removed; rain had eaten away one edge. Padma did not immediately decide that someone was to blame. She instructed that it be compared with the administration's letter and asked for the procedure to

remove a notice proved wrong. Janaki, who had come to the spot, said, “There was a correction before, yet this copy survived. Removing a sheet is not enough. What was spoken aloud using our names must be corrected publicly once again.” Padma made room for her to stand.

After everything else Padma returned to the table. The first ledger clearly recorded admissions, including Nasima's daughter; the second had separate entries for Saraswati's daughter, Sanket's equipment and the teachers' hours; the third showed the newly approved, limited payment for mediation and the dues for time still unpaid. When she closed the window, the children's voices could still be heard practising outside. The once-empty column for fees was no longer entirely empty. Within its written lines the names of those who worked, and the independent paths of those who wished to learn, had both survived. Yet at one end of the table the old accusation in Janaki's hand still lay open.

Chapter 149 · Janaki's Rebuttal

The glass of the school's old noticeboard was uncracked, but inside it the edges of a sheet had yellowed with the damp of the rains. Instead of pulling the paper out, Janaki stood waiting for Asad Saiyad. In her bag were two half-woven borders of a mat, a receipt for rent paid for a market stall she had lost, and a folded copy of the earlier public retraction. The words still pinned behind the glass called her troupe child thieves. The date printed on the paper was different from the day Lata's son Mithun had disappeared; that distinction had already been established. Yet that morning two parents had read the notice and drawn their children away from Janaki again.

Asad arrived with the key. “I can take this down today,” he said. “Take it down,” Janaki replied, “but first photograph it and record how long it hung there. Then tell me why the false notice remained when the first correction was printed under the school's seal.” Asad opened the glass. His hand trembled slightly as he removed the paper. After seeing the accusation issued in the school's name, he had himself identified the unverified lines and issued an amended statement. Today's question was not whether he now recognised the mistake. It was who would take responsibility for carrying the correction to every place in the school where the falsehood had circulated.

The headmistress came out of her office to the veranda. Asad placed the original notice, the first correction, the proceedings of the market committee and the sheet removed from the board in four separate envelopes. “Our names were wrongly spread everywhere,” Janaki said, “but the correction was quietly hung on a single door. We need a way of reaching those who saw the old message.” The headmistress said the school could not control everyone's phone. Janaki made no such claim. She asked for the same clear correction on each of the school's own noticeboards, letters, meetings and official messages; circulation through private telephones would require separate notices and requests.

Meanwhile Rajo Bhogta arrived carrying narrow wooden slats. Her daughter was waiting for her name to appear on the school's assistance list. Looking at the space vacated on the board, Rajo asked, “Where are my papers supposed to go now? The office tells me first to prove where I lived in my old village. When I show the house I rent now, they treat it as two names and stop the application.” Asad remembered the earlier application number: because its last digit was the same as another family's, the file had sometimes been merged with a different assistance record. Rajo said plainly that the village house proved her ancestral connection, while the rental receipt showed where she now lived. Two addresses did not make two daughters.

The headmistress suggested spreading all Rajo's documents across the public table. Rajo stopped her. “These papers contain the names of people in

my former household. Why should everyone's address be read out on the veranda to get assistance for my daughter?” Padma came out of class and proposed restricting the file to its proper purposes, with four separate sheets: present contact details for admission, connection with the previous school, eligibility for aid, and wages owed. Rajo agreed to show the originals in a designated staff area, with only her daughter's name and the status of the decision appearing on the public list. The reason for calling her old village certificate false disappeared. Final approval of the amount of assistance, however, was still pending.

Hearing Rajo, Janaki opened her frayed bag. In one corner of a market receipt were written the words ‘space denied owing to the dispute’. The advance for the place where she had been due to sell mats for three weeks had not been returned. The market committee had accepted an application concerning financial loss at an earlier meeting, but had set no sum. “I do not want sympathy. I want these figures accounted for,” Janaki said. The school clerk asked why the school should pay for losses in the market. “Examine the school's part in spreading its own false words,” Janaki replied. “Examine the market contractor's decision separately. I am not asking that all blame be put in one column.”

Sarayu had arrived from the railway bridge. Her knee hurt, but she had brought a sample mat. Looking at the new blank sheet on the board, she said, “People will say we have already been forgiven. Why put up another notice?” “Forgiveness may live in somebody's mind,” Janaki replied. “But wherever the false notice was displayed in a shop or school, a corrected one must be displayed too.” Sarayu opened her sales ledger. On three market days scheduled after the accusation spread, she had recorded zero sales. Beside those zeros she had not invented the names of customers she had never seen.

Asad took out an old telephone. It still held a short message sent in the school's name; an unknown person had subsequently appended the words ‘suspicious troupe’. The time of the original dispatch did not match the time of the amended copy. “I will sign the correction to the part sent without verification during my tenure,” Asad said. “But who altered this phone file remains under investigation.” “Write in the correction that the person who altered it is unknown,” Janaki answered. “Do not turn suspicion into an accusation against another employee or community merely because you are searching for the culprit.”

At that moment Sajid Nat arrived and put down his camera. He carried the original recording of a school theatrical rehearsal, information identifying the source of an old traveller scene at the forest gate, and the shortened video circulating through the market, secured for inspection. Before showing the children's faces on his screen, Sajid asked who among those present was authorised to examine them. He refused a proposal to play the video before the whole meeting. “People once called a coloured screen a device for hiding

children," he said. "Why should we now send the same children's faces into the market again in the name of proving something?" Asad recorded the limits of inspection: the original would remain secure, and only a description of the relevant evidence would appear on the public board.

When Lata came onto the veranda, the crowd of files on the meeting bench made her body stiffen. The search for Mithun was not over. She sat beside Janaki, but did not permit details about her child to be taken out of her application and displayed. "My son has still not been found," she said. "Janaki's retraction cannot make that fact disappear. But I will not accept another troupe being called thieves in my son's name." The headmistress withdrew a proposal to print Mithun's name in the public correction. Only the responsible officer would see the separate acknowledgement concerning the search. Neither the child's face nor details of his home would be posted on the school board.

A mother sitting a little way off asked what had happened to the reported unauthorised transfer of Gunja. Janaki explained the difference between the cases and their times: Gunja's protection records and the role of the intermediary were being examined separately. They did not make the false accusation of child theft against Janaki's travelling troupe true. "Protect the child who has been harmed," she said, "and gather evidence against a broker who took part in a crime. A victim, someone working along the route, and a possible offender do not all have one name." Not a sentence of Chameli's private testimony was read aloud at the open meeting.

Outside, two market traders were talking quietly: reinstating Janaki's troupe might frighten customers. Janaki heard them and rose. "I can hear your fear," she said. "Now show me the written rules for granting or refusing a paid stall. And record the reason given on the day we were stopped." Looking at the old documents, the market manager said a temporary restriction had been imposed for safety reasons. Janaki asked on whose verified order that concern had been based. The manager could not answer; he asked for the source document and gave a date for another meeting. Janaki did not celebrate a victory by immediately claiming that a sum had been fixed.

As noon approached, a schoolgirl came up to Rajo's daughter. "If you live in two places, has your name been written twice?" Rajo's daughter shut her notebook. Padma explained to both children what kinds of questions they had a right to ask each other. Rajo sat beside her daughter and said, "I visit my mother in our village. I work here and live in a rented house. You have only one name." The girl opened her notebook again. A school accounts assistant then wrote an instruction to correct the repeated code in the assistance file. Rajo's daughter already had permission to attend class that day; the review of assistance would now recognise one genuine family file.

Rajo was preparing to leave, satisfied with that much, when Meera reminded her about wages owed for wooden slats supplied to the school. Two days of carrying materials remained unpaid in a separate ledger. The accounts worker said the amount could be adjusted when the assistance was provided. Rajo answered directly, “Aid for my daughter's books is not wages for slats I carried. If you deduct one against the other, both sets of accounts will be false.” Attendance slips obtained through Padma verified the two days' work. The school management prepared a payment order for the verified wages; the assistance file stayed in its proper sequence. Rajo signed the receipt, but the day on which cash would actually be received was recorded separately.

Mahato came from the printing shop with a list of distributed handbills. It was incomplete: several small consignments had been collected by customers whose names were not recorded. “I printed the paper,” he said. “How can I be responsible for what somebody wrote on it?” Janaki showed him the acknowledgement from an earlier meeting. “Who composed the accusation remains to be investigated. But if you continued printing after seeing the first correction, you must answer for your decision to let it spread again.” Mahato had it recorded in writing that subsequent batches had been printed without verifying their contents. At his own expense he agreed to deliver amended notices to the shops whose receipt of the papers was confirmed; records would be requested for the rest.

A member of the market committee proposed that the retraction should simply say ‘Janaki is completely innocent’, and the dispute would end. Janaki stopped him at once. “The particular allegation made against our troupe—that this edited video shows child abduction—has been proved false,” she said. “But who can give me a certificate of innocence for everything I may do throughout my life? I too may make mistakes. If I harm someone, that must be examined separately. Write what the evidence establishes, neither less nor more.” Asad altered the draft. The retraction became shorter but more exact, and the limits of the inquiry were made clear.

Sarayu nodded at the change. “To say that we can never be at fault would be the first thing to put us in an impossible position again,” she said. Her granddaughter sat on the veranda counting the knots in a woven strip. Two children wanted to examine her handiwork. “You may touch it, but ask first,” Sarayu said. “This mat is for sale.” One child drew the pattern of knots in an exercise book. Something softened inside Janaki. Those made into nameless shapes of fear by the old notice were here now, with the work they did and the prices it commanded.

A small open meeting was held to hear Asad's corrected statement, but Janaki refused a programme in which her face would be displayed on stage. The headmistress read the source and date of the original false sentence, its public withdrawal, the fact that the edited scene did not prove child abduction, and the limits of what remained under investigation. Asad added a

sentence acknowledging his part in the administrative negligence: the removal of the old notice had not been monitored in time. The headmistress signed in the school's official name. No child was required to appear in order to prove innocence. Witnesses' names entered the public list only with their consent.

At a small table in the courtyard Mahato set down the printer's seal. Three example sites were chosen: the school's main noticeboard, the market handbill stand and the information doorway at the bus station. At each, the correction would be posted in lettering at least as large and clear as the original false words. Signed acknowledgements of receipt would be sought for distributed copies. Anyone insisting that keeping an old handbill in a private shop was simply a general commercial right was informed of the committee's limited authority and of the lawful procedure. Asad wrote that the direction applied directly to the school's own channels; for other privately owned places, written requests and the necessary proceedings would be required.

Lata sat on the outside steps holding her notebook. When Janaki came to her, Lata asked, “Will there be time at the office tomorrow to continue looking for Mithun?” Janaki checked her meeting schedule. She herself had to submit a claim for her losses at the market. “I shall not take charge of your son's search file,” she said. “But if you need someone to walk there with you, I shall come. I can give my application at the other window.” Lata released a long, upright breath. She did not ask for a grand declaration of gratitude, only said, “We must do both things on time. Do not put my son's name on another poster.” Janaki agreed.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Rajo received a written reply from the school's assistance office. The former village residence and current rental address were accepted as documents showing different purposes for the same person; the code that had merged two families was corrected. A limited grant for books and educational materials was approved for her daughter, with a distribution date fixed for the following week. Putting the letter into her bag, Rajo said, “So the books have not reached home yet, but the way to receive them is written down.” The school issued a separate authorised payment instruction for her two days of verified carrying work. The two receipts bore different numbers.

Asad sent a digital copy of his statement again through the school's official channel. A correction marker was attached to the original message, so that no one could deny the earlier error merely because the date had changed. Replies appeared in the receipt list: ‘seen’ on some phones. Some contacts had closed; other people wrote that the old video was still circulating in different groups. Asad did not add these replies to a false tally of completed corrections. “Write how far it has reached,” Janaki said. “And where it has not. It is easy to say a hundred per cent.” For the first time, Asad publicly entered the incompleteness of his own notice without embarrassment.

At the evening meeting with the market manager, Janaki submitted her ledger, the receipt for the stall she had lost, and Sarayu's comparative sales sheet. The manager said the fall in market attendance could not be attributed solely to the false allegation: there had also been rain and road repairs. Janaki accepted the objection. “Where the cause is clear, I shall ask for payment. I will not put down losses from other causes as the price of my defamation,” she said. On that basis part of the advance paid for the market place was treated as undisputed, and an order for its return was signed. The remainder of the claim for lost earnings awaited further evidence. Janaki ran a thumb over the small figure on the acknowledgement.

Before night Sarayu untied a knot in a mat and tightened it again. “Will nobody call us thieves now?” her granddaughter asked. Sarayu searched for an answer for a little while. “Someone still might,” she said at last. “But then we shall have a paper telling the truth, the price of our work, and a place where we can ask questions.” The child grew serious. “Then I shall go to school?” “You will,” Sarayu said. “And if anyone refuses, we shall ask why.” She tightened the final edge of the mat; the thread caught in its place, as though inside a knot undone many times a new firmness had been tied.

Janaki went back to inspect the school board. Beside the empty nail of the old accusation was not a photograph of it but a white strip: ‘The earlier notice posted here has been found incorrect on verification of the facts; amended notice attached.’ Below it stood the full text of the correction, its date, issuing institution and a clear place for contact. Janaki had one more sentence added: ‘This correction is not a decision concerning the search for Mithun or Gunja's protection case.’ Asad read and confirmed the sentence. Behind them the classroom was closing; Rajo's daughter came out holding her application for books. Janaki saw the child but did not ask her name and call it out in the public gathering.

Walking towards the railway bridge, Janaki received the same old edited video on her phone once again. An unknown number; a new mocking caption. She looked at the screen for a moment. Along with anger, a cold weariness settled through her body. She did not immediately answer the group in fury. She saved the time, the visible details of the sender and the message, and set them aside for inclusion in the authorised complaint. Then she sent the link to that day's amended public statement: neither an endless argument nor silent assent. The screen held both messages together, one an old allegation, the other a retraction bounded by what the evidence proved. In the next examination of an accusation based on a supposedly matching face, a face alone would no longer be enough: the real source and independent evidence would be demanded.

Chapter 150 · Faces and Evidence

The shortened video that reached Janaki's telephone during the night had returned three times under three different names by morning. On the school veranda Sajid Nat placed two mobile phones and a paper envelope on an old table. He stopped those who leaned towards the glowing screens. “We will not show children's faces to everyone here. Those authorised to examine the source can sit inside.” Janaki laid a copy of her retraction on the table. The ink of yesterday's public correction still looked fresh, yet beside it the night's fear had returned.

Asad Saiyad came with the school key. He held a record of the time the new message had been received; the number displayed as its sender was still unknown to everyone. “Was it the same man who sent it again?” Asad asked. “I do not know the name of the owner of that number,” Janaki replied. “If I call him a criminal, yesterday's mistake begins all over again.” Sajid's original rehearsal file was on another device. Without examination no one could say for certain whether the new edited clip had been made only from that scene.

Mohan Kanjar came onto the veranda carrying a small wheel from his handcart. An iron pin ordered from the parts shop the day before had not yet been fixed. His work had been half-stopped for six days; one customer had written that the cart must not be brought near children. Mohan placed the wheel beside the table so its axle would not be trapped beneath any papers. “Everyone says my face is in that picture,” he said. “No one asks how the person looking at the face knows the time and place.”

Sarayu, an elder of Janaki's troupe, sat on another bench. Some people began whispering again when they saw Mohan. Janaki did not order them to be silent. She asked, “Which of you saw anyone taking a child away with your own eyes?” No hand went up. One man said, “But the scarf and the back of the cart look the same.” Mohan passed his hand over the iron of the thin wheel. “How many cart wheels like mine are made in this market? Is that how you will write down someone's name?” His voice was hard, but his hand trembled.

The identification committee inside the school included Meera Mandal, Asad, a child-protection worker designated with Lata's consent, and two market representatives. Lata brought the notebook recording the search for Mithun but did not spread its private pages across the table. “My son is still being searched for,” she said. “I need a real lead, not someone wrongly accused.” The first member wrote on a sheet: matching scarf in two videos. Another asked what came next: source of the original image? Time? Independent eyewitness? All three spaces following the first answer remained blank.

Sajid restricted access to the original rehearsal scene on the screen. The designated members saw only those portions covered by the parents' earlier consent. To those waiting outside, Sajid gave only the sequence of events, the condition in which the file had been received and information about its order. In a two-second extract a face seemed to match a face in shadow; in the original sequence there were stage decorations, a wooden imitation handcart and actors changing roles. No committee member concluded that every copy in circulation necessarily originated in this file. The need for independent technical examination of the new message was recorded.

One representative persisted. “If the eye sees it, how many documents does it need?” Meera pinned two pictures to the board: a narrow piece of wood from a school window and a classroom bench. “The colour and width match,” she said, “but these are not the same object. In the example of analogy, a resemblance between a cow and a gavaya may help someone understand the meaning of a word. It does not establish a stranger's life history, name or crime.” She wiped the board. “The search for a child requires investigation, not analogy.”

Asad remembered how often Naira had insisted on that distinction before the rains. He did not use her name as shelter for a fresh argument: Naira was no longer alive, and the written limits of what she had previously observed remained on record. He opened the earlier sequence of certificates before the committee. “What the public correction declared false was the accusation against the group,” he said. “This new video will be examined separately. It provides no grounds for pronouncing the old false accusation true again.”

Mohan produced three repair slips and certified copies of his book of parts purchases. The first concerned a customer's wooden chest, the second the axle of his cart and the third the carriage of stage equipment. The shopkeeper had written down the time of a sale he had witnessed, but had made no claim to know Mohan's movements for the whole day. “This is evidence of the work I can show,” Mohan said, “not a seal of innocence everywhere in the world. Let the payments owed by my customers be returned, and let the defamation of a whole community without grounds be corrected publicly.”

Another page contained two slips from customers who had withdrawn work from Mohan. One confirmed that he had stopped ordering a wooden chest after seeing the accusatory message; the other said he had already been short of money before that. Mohan objected to putting both in the same category. “When the causes of lost work differ, the reckoning of the loss must differ too,” he said. The committee clerk marked the first slip as a claim capable of verification, the second as one whose cause remained uncertain. Mohan received no immediate compensation, but the actual limits of his claims were acknowledged.

A market representative proposed a public announcement, but the first draft read, ‘People of the Kanjar caste proved innocent.’ Janaki returned the sheet. “It is wrong to call all members of a caste criminals with one signature, and meaningless to issue a certificate of innocence for all time with another. Write that the images and notices circulated in support of this specific child-abduction allegation have proved no such charge, and that the collective accusation is withdrawn.” Mohan supported the same wording. The market manager listed the places where the correction would be distributed: wherever the false leaflet had reached, the amendment must reach too.

At that moment Reva Gulguliya came up the veranda steps with Jatan and Birsi. The corner of Jatan's notebook, once torn by water, had dried. In Birsi's cloth bag were two small pieces of wood into which she was learning to carve letters. A school employee opened the address box on their application and stopped. “House number?” he asked. “This month our camp is near the railway square,” Reva answered. “Where it will be next month I do not know. But my children's names are here.”

Meera placed the receipt for their earlier application on the table. She had already distinguished attendance at a temporary mobile classroom from formal school enrolment. Now written grounds for a new decision had reached the headmistress: a current contact location, the guardian's statement, attendance at the mobile class and a contact method safeguarded by the school could be recorded for enrolment. A permanent house number would not be made a compulsory condition. “Will the photograph of our camp be open to everyone in this file?” Reva asked. “No,” the headmistress said. “Necessary contact information will remain in the admission records alone.”

The employee hesitated again. “If the family moves to another village, the attendance figures will be spoiled.” Reva tightened the knot of her bag. “Wherever we go, I shall provide a way of giving notice in time. Why should absence caused by travel be turned into a child's fault?” Meera wrote two measures on a clear sheet: notification when the location changed, with contact lessons where necessary; and separate records for attendance and what had been learned. Padma added that helping a child arriving late recover earlier lessons required teachers' time. They should be paid from the school's authorised budget, not by deducting from Reva's labour.

“If my name is entered, can I sit here tomorrow?” Jatan asked. The headmistress looked at his notebook. There were mistakes in the letters written on its pages. “You can,” she said. “We shall decide together what you need to learn.” Jatan did not smile. He waited until an actual admission slip was placed in his hand. The employee entered the two children's names separately, checked the pronunciation of Birsi's name with Reva once more, and gave a receipt after taking the mark she had authorised in place of a signature.

Giving Birsi water to drink, Reva said she had taken time off work twice in the previous month to seek admission at two classrooms in town. She had lost earnings on those days and paid both times to have application photographs made. “Will this receipt bring that money back too?” she asked. The headmistress explained that the school's admission decision was not compensation for travel losses. Meera accepted copies of the old applications and set aside evidence of the earlier expenses for a separate hearing. Reva asked for no promise of relief; she wanted at least to know that no one would again call her children's new slips worthless.

Outside, a parent said in a discriminatory tone, “If nomadic children come here, who will look after security?” Lata closed her notebook and turned. “My Mithun has not been found,” she said, “but do not make these two children members of a criminal family in the name of searching for him.” The headmistress read out the common rules for every pupil: identification at admission, safe procedures for departure, and separate records of the people authorised to take children home. Not everyone was satisfied with these rules, but they were not changed according to the community to which a child belonged.

By midday the committee had drafted a public letter withdrawing the accusation against Mohan. Mohan insisted that even the phrase ‘possible suspect’ be removed: no new specific allegation against him had been recorded in the documents. Asad identified separately the source of the school's earlier unauthorised wording and the correct wording adopted that day. Sajid took signatures from the members authorised to inspect the video and returned the original file to its secured envelope. “Permission to examine a file,” he said, “does not mean permission to turn it into entertainment for the market.”

But a call came to Mohan from a customer's home telling him that the cart work would not be forthcoming yet. “The children's parents are afraid,” the voice on the phone said. Mohan folded the receipt, then straightened it. “If my payment is stopped because fear has been treated as an order, I shall ask for the reason in writing,” he said. A market representative informed him that he could tender for work transporting materials for the school once he had repaired the two wheels of his cart; no promise was made that he would get the contract. Mohan took a copy of the application without offering thanks for charity.

Meanwhile news of Keshari Bin's boat came through Hira Sahni. It was still on dry ground for repairs; final inspection of the joints remained, and there was no permission to launch it. Keshari had also sent an old receipt for transporting timber on which the word ‘Baluaha’ appeared. A young man immediately suggested that a firm line be drawn on the map between a landing place of that name and another channel. Hira stopped his pencil. “This is a source reference written on a timber-transport receipt. It proves neither a river confluence nor a complete route of travel.”

Keshari's letter described two options for the repairs. One trader had offered to buy the boat as it stood; a collective of artisans had sent a new estimate of the expense and risk of replacing a split plank. Keshari had again refused to sell but requested accounts so he could decide for himself how many months repayment of the repair loan would take. “Wanting to save the boat is not proof that it is safe,” Hira said. “Record separately the payment for those fitting the planks and the date of testing.” In the committee records ‘Baluaha’ remained only a word on the source receipt, not the name of a verified waterway.

In the rear courtyard of the school Birsi noticed the word ‘Baluaha’, copied in the margin of that letter, and asked whether it could become the subject of her next lesson. “It could,” Meera said. “But we must also ask where the written name came from. First we need to locate the place on a map.” Jatan drew two lines in his notebook: one the changing path of their camp, the other the way to school. Between them he drew no point where they met. “I know the road,” he said, “but this sheet is still empty.”

Padma came to Reva. Some boxes concerning the two children's births remained incomplete on their admission slips. She explained that checking those particulars was a separate procedure and would not cancel their admission that day. “What if someone says tomorrow that my child belongs to someone else?” Reva asked. “Then independent evidence will be required, not an assumption,” Padma said. “Your private papers will not be passed round without your consent.” Reva paused. “My children's faces change every day too,” she said, “but they remain my children every day.”

Hearing that sentence, Janaki switched off her phone. Sarayu asked whether they should issue another public reply to the new video. “Yes,” Janaki said, “but only to what has been examined. If I begin displaying my face in answer to every edited image, the liars will become masters of my days.” Sarayu placed a half-woven length of matting in her hands. “This border has to be finished,” she said. Janaki put the rent receipt for the mat separately aside; the costs of a retraction and losses in sales were not the same account.

The evening meeting took place at the school gate. Asad read the public letter: the child-abduction allegation against the group had been based on a combination of evidence without factual foundation, and it was withdrawn. Resemblance between people in the available images did not independently establish a crime by any individual. The search for the missing child and other child-protection inquiries would continue through their own procedures. Mohan's written objection, Janaki's earlier retraction and the technical complaint concerning yesterday's new video transmission were entered under three separate numbers. Lata asked for the next scheduled time in the search for Mithun to be written down; his name was not turned into a chant by the crowd.

After the correction was read, a young man from the market came up to Mohan. “I forwarded the video,” he said. “Everyone else was forwarding it then.” Instead of demanding his phone, Mohan asked, “Can you write down what you saw yourself, and what you merely passed on?” The young man lowered his eyes. He said he had not had access to the original video. Asad recorded his voluntary statement separately; it was not a document declaring anyone an accused person. Admitting an error could not erase all the damage caused by the earlier circulation, but it gave one immediate reason for stopping a new rumour.

Rather than listen to the whole meeting, Reva's children sat inside the veranda for their first regular class. The bench behind Birsi was too low, and Padma asked for a raised strip suited to her height. Jatan slipped his admission paper between the pages of a book. In the attendance register Meera wrote against their first day: School enrolment accepted; changing contact address held in confidential records. Reva wrote down the time she had agreed for travel. The paper did not turn their temporary camp into a permanent house, but the children's education was no longer merely a promise.

By evening the wheel was fixed to Mohan's cart. He lifted an empty chest for a customer and put a copy of the committee's written retraction in his bag. At the market entrance a woman asked him, for the first time, to repair a locked chest at her home. He had not recovered his former rental payment, but they agreed on a price for the new work. Turning towards home, Mohan looked back at the school board. This time the public correction recorded the withdrawal of a particular false accusation, not his caste. The trust beginning to rise behind it was small, but beyond the paper somebody's conduct had changed.

Closing the documents that night, Asad noticed that an old draft of the identification committee's form had a large box for ‘facial match’ and only a thin line for independent corroboration. He added the committee's approved amendments, giving distinct spaces for source, time, direct testimony, documentary connection, protection of private details and unverified elements. The rule took effect at once, but could not by itself erase the damage done by past errors. Reading a copy, Janaki said, “When a document seizes a living person under a wrong name, it is living people who must also assume responsibility for correcting it.”

As she closed the door, Meera asked, “What shall we teach in the first lesson tomorrow?” “Let the children choose,” Padma said. “Let them choose the subject that raises questions.” Jatan raised his head from his notebook. “I want to know who has been allowed to study, and who was once prevented from doing so.” For a moment Meera looked at him. Fine dust outside was blowing towards the bus station. The door to the school had opened today; which story would be taught inside it remained a real dispute for the following day.

Chapter 151 · Shambuka's Lesson

That day Meera wrote two lines on the school blackboard: ‘Who may study?’ and ‘Who decides?’ The light of Phagun was entering through the window. Jatan laid his admission slip not inside his book but openly on the desk; the right granted to him only the previous day was still something he recognized by the colour of the paper. Birsi went on making small letters on the back of a leaf. Padma placed three books beside the board but did not immediately open any of them. ‘Who will answer the question raised yesterday?’ she asked. ‘Everyone who wants to learn,’ said Jatan. From the back bench came an adult voice: ‘You cannot leave everything to what children want.’

The voice belonged to Naval, a member of the school's provisional management committee. He was among those who had donated money for teaching, and he wanted his contribution to give him the right to choose what was taught. ‘Some stories stir up controversy,’ he said. ‘Teach the children simple ideals first. If you write Shambuka's name here, people will quarrel.’ Padma did not answer. She looked at Jatan. ‘If we don't read the story of someone being killed for seeking knowledge,’ he asked, ‘how will anyone understand why he was killed?’ Naval shifted his gamchha across his shoulder. Reva's eyes went to the admission slip on the desk. Once again, somewhere, someone was deciding which questions her child must not ask.

Padma picked up the first book. ‘In certain widely circulated versions of the Uttarakanda there is an episode concerning an ascetic named Shambuka,’ she said. ‘It tells of his life being taken in the name of restrictions of varna and the right to practise austerities. But the episode is not present in the same way in every regional telling, textual variant or newer interpretation of the Ramayana. Its position, meaning and acceptance are disputed. We shall identify the sources of the passages we use today. The scene we imagine and perform will not be presented as a translation of an original verse.’ In slender letters beneath the blackboard she wrote three labels: ‘Original account’, ‘Textual variant’, ‘Imagined dialogue of today’. Jatan counted the three headings.

Sajid Nat brought an old strip of cloth from the empty stage. At the news that a play was to be performed at the school for everyone to see, Naval objected again. ‘What if someone takes the king's part only to accuse him?’ ‘We are not convening a historical tribunal,’ Sajid replied. ‘We are staging questions. The actors' names and the characters' names will be kept distinct.’ He set seats of equal height around all four sides of the stage, where the children could see them. Gopal Majhi, who had come to deliver a new map of the water routes, noticed one leg of a seat wobbling and slipped a thin piece of

wood beneath it. ‘Before we begin to argue,’ he said with a smile, ‘the place we sit should not shake.’

Just as Padma was beginning the lesson, Jatan asked, ‘What did Shambuka himself want?’ No answer established by a source was ready in the classroom. Before beginning the new scene, Sajid explained that the dialogue to follow was an invention of this school. The lights dimmed. An imagined edge of a forest, a folded wooden water vessel, a letter half-formed in the earth. Beside that letter sat the character called Shambuka, his knees bent. No one assigned an entirely definite name to what he wished to learn: sometimes letters, sometimes austerity, sometimes the right to his own breath. Beyond the stage sounded the low beat of a damaru, as though time itself were asking someone for an admission slip.

A young disciple came along the forest path. His gurukula clothes were clean, but his eyes were tired. He saw the lines Shambuka had drawn. ‘Who taught you those marks?’ he asked. Shambuka was silent, then put his finger on a line he had made. ‘The river taught me the first line: it runs through silt and forms itself anew. An old man taught me the second. He could not write his own name.’ ‘You need a teacher to learn,’ said the disciple. ‘Yes,’ Shambuka replied. ‘But if the road to a teacher is barred, a person makes shadows of letters along his own path.’ His voice was not a hero's proclamation. It was the ordinary question of a man exhausted after carrying water all day.

The disciple told a story from his village. Blame for the untimely death of a child was being placed upon austerities performed somewhere far away. ‘Those charged with guarding the rules are seeking the cause there.’ Shambuka turned abruptly. ‘Who has looked at the child's illness, his food, water and treatment?’ ‘Everyone is saying something different,’ replied the disciple. ‘The king has set out to make a decision.’ Shambuka brushed the earth from his hands. ‘By what evidence can anyone link one person's austerities with another person's death? If I am never given an opportunity to be questioned, what answer can I give?’ The disciple had no answer either. He had seen people's fear, not their proof.

An old woman came from behind the stage and lifted the water vessel. Her relationship to Shambuka's family belonged to this performance, not to anything established by the received text. ‘Stop your austerities,’ she said, ‘and you will live.’ Shambuka looked at her for a long time. ‘You have already paid for my life by carrying water,’ he said. ‘If I survive, that labour will not have been wasted. But if birth is the reason I must be stopped, tomorrow my brother will not even be allowed to question the measurement of a field.’ The old woman put the vessel down. ‘I want you alive. Why must the weight of changing the rules fall upon your one body?’ The stage offered no immediate answer. In the classroom outside the imagined scene, Reva rested her hands on the shoulders of both her children.

The imagined scene changed again. A guard approached from afar, saying that the king wished to ask questions in order to ascertain justice. The guard carried a weapon; Shambuka held an unfinished letter. Sajid did not conceal the inequality. Shambuka stood. ‘I will hear the questions. But will anyone listen to the answers I give?’ The child playing the guard faltered. For a moment he forgot his lines and looked towards Padma. She did not prompt him. In his own words he said, ‘I was only ordered to bring you.’ ‘Then the limits of your voice,’ Shambuka replied, ‘have been set in the very place where the limits of my rights were set.’

The classroom filled with light again. Sajid stopped the play there. ‘That is not how the event in the original narrative ends,’ said Naval. ‘You are changing the story.’ Padma nodded. ‘That is true. This stage scene is a new invention. A widely transmitted Uttarakanda text describes Shambuka's killing. We shall not erase that difficult fact. But this dialogue is no quotation from an original verse. We have stopped the play here so the children can see where a question might have been asked.’ ‘Then where is your respect for different texts?’ Naval demanded. Padma opened the source sheet in the second book. It marked separately the absence of Shambuka's episode in some traditions and the different approaches taken by modern interpreters. ‘Respect does not mean painting disagreements in one colour,’ she said.

Behind her slender letters Birsi wrote a question: ‘If someone will not let me read a story, where am I to ask about it?’ Her writing was a little crooked. ‘A girl will not understand something so difficult,’ said Naval. Birsi lifted her head. ‘If I do not understand, teach me,’ she replied. ‘Do not tell me to close my mouth.’ Nobody laughed. Outside the veranda Mohan Kanjar stopped the wheel of his repaired handcart to listen. The collective accusation against him had been withdrawn, but customers were still afraid. He stepped inside. ‘Nobody asked me where I had been, either,’ he said. ‘If they learn the rules of asking questions in class, perhaps someone in the market will listen too.’

Sajid held up a page on which the children could write questions of their own. Sanket made raised markings beneath it so they could be recognized by touch; reading did not belong to the eyes alone. Halfway down the page Jatan stopped writing. ‘If the king gives an order in a story,’ he asked, ‘is it disrespectful to question his decision?’ ‘Studying a story means hearing what a character says and examining its consequences,’ Meera replied. ‘Abusing a person or a tradition is not learning. Asking a question is different from that.’ Naval kept folding the receipt for his donation. He had wanted the lesson to be uncomplicated, but he was beginning to understand that simplicity could not justify the removal of this question.

Meanwhile Keshari Bin arrived at the outer gate. In his hands were an estimate for new planking for the boat and acknowledgements of debt from four families. He had not come to watch the school programme, but to attend the small water committee meeting held on the rear veranda. Hira Sahni was

already there. ‘We will not sell the boat,’ Keshari said. ‘A programme of repairs has been agreed upon jointly, but the timber has not yet been paid for. Until the final joint is inspected, the boat will not carry passengers.’ Hira examined the papers. ‘Put that decision in writing,’ she said. ‘If you launch an unsafe boat in a rush to repay the debt, the whole landing will pay the price again.’

One of Keshari's partners argued that if the boat did not return to service soon, the repair debt would grow. He wanted the group to pay immediately what he was owed for his work. Keshari's face hardened. ‘I am not running away from what I owe,’ he said. ‘But selling the boat would cut off four households' livelihoods in a single day.’ Tara proposed separate registers for the timber supplier's receipts, workers' outstanding wages and the joint debt. A payment stage was entered against every item. Limited approval was given to pay from the common fund the undisputed portion owed to a craftsman who urgently needed part of his wages; the contributions due to that fund were recorded separately. The boat had still not been launched. For the first time, though, it was clear who owed what, and where.

Malati Koche placed her yellow water pot before the meeting. Water had flowed from the tap in the new settlement that morning, but stopped before the four houses at the far end could fill their pots. The official register said ‘water facility available’ against every family's name. Malati showed the thin muddy deposit at the bottom of her vessel. ‘Installing a tap and getting water into a home are not the same thing,’ she said. Badri Nonphar's wife had come with her. The question of Badri's permanent rehabilitation remained unsettled, but that could not be a reason to postpone his family's right to water. A committee member said that fees would increase as new residents arrived. ‘Why pay the full amount,’ Malati asked, ‘if the tap is shut off half the time?’

Gopal Majhi unfolded his old route map. ‘Tirsula’ was written along its edge, while the government rescue document identified a route in the same vicinity by another name. ‘Once the names match,’ a young man said, ‘the map will prove the water connection too.’ Gopal did not laugh. ‘This is a dispute about the name used to identify a rescue route,’ he said. ‘The document cannot measure how many hours water actually comes through the tap.’ He submitted a written proposal that both customary names for Tirsula remain in a note to the rescue document, and that a separate log be kept of the actual hours of water supply. The old map was not torn up. Instructions for using it, with its limitations, were added instead.

Malati did not refuse to pay for tap maintenance. ‘People who repair things ought to be paid,’ she said. ‘But first decide which households count as users, how much is to be deducted for the days the tap is dry, and who will inspect the accounts.’ The committee added two representatives from the furthest houses and opened a trial register for one month. A small fixed maintenance

fee would be charged according to days of actual use; households receiving no water would not be charged the full amount. The wages for inspecting the final bend of the pipe were approved separately. Malati could not fill her pot, because the inspection was scheduled for the following day. But she went away with a written appointment, not merely a promise.

Sushila arrived carrying a little box of seed-trial samples. She had not wanted a discussion of prices at the school, but the seasonal timing of irrigation for her fields was connected to Malati's tap. Her papers named an old seed-experiment site called ‘Badadari’. An employee reading the map was about to mark it as a permanent river channel. Sushila stopped him. ‘That is the place-name of my experimental plot, not the permanent course of a river. When the rains change, the extent of the work changes.’ She showed the results from two samples: the first had a low germination rate, the second a higher one. But she would not publish the results without a note on the differing conditions of the soil. Her son Vinay wrote on the box the date of the sample he had inspected himself.

Inside the school the lesson had resumed. The voices of people reckoning the costs of water and boats drifted in from outside. ‘I think there is a book everywhere,’ said Jatan. ‘The price of a boat in Keshari's book, water in Malati's book, and Shambuka in this one.’ ‘What is written in each has a different kind of proof,’ said Padma. ‘Evidence for a literary narrative is not the same as a measurement of how long a modern tap was closed. But in both cases there is a right to ask questions.’ Sanket made distinct marks for ‘textual evidence’ and ‘physical measurement’ on his board. He did not insist on filling anyone's mind with every fact in the same colour.

Naval came back into the classroom. ‘I can withdraw my donation if I oppose what you are teaching,’ he said. The school's treasurer replied that the donation receipt had carried no condition granting personal control over the curriculum. Naval fell silent. Padma did not humiliate him. ‘Your objection will be entered in the record,’ she said. ‘The children will have access to the sources, and there will be an opportunity to speak with parents. But no one's questions will be stopped on grounds of varna.’ ‘What if someone feels that religious sentiments have been hurt?’ Naval asked. ‘We will hear them,’ said Meera. ‘Before removing a lesson we must see which statement is a source, which is an interpretation, and which is an insult. They are three different things.’

Jatan's mother Reva had been quiet for some time. After going to her place of work in the morning, she had sat at the school so long that she was losing half a day's income. Meera asked whether his enrolment papers were complete. ‘He is enrolled,’ Reva replied. ‘But if I am called here every time a question comes up, when will I earn?’ Padma had the routine parental-consent procedure amended: daily attendance was not compulsory for ordinary lessons, while separate consent would be sought for personal safety matters or sensitive

information. The value of Reva's day never became a number in the register, but she obtained written permission to go to her morning work. For the first time she could leave school early without turning back in guilt.

After Naval had left through the school doorway, an unexpected question arose. ‘The character who was killed never finished speaking,’ Birsi said. ‘If I write the story again, must I give it the same ending?’ ‘First understand the ending of the source text exactly as it stands,’ Padma replied. ‘Then give your imagining a different name. Do not erase the original event and publish a new ending as though it were the source.’ Birsi made two compartments in her notebook. Above one she wrote ‘What was told’; above the other, ‘What I think’. In the first she wrote the difficult question. In the second she drew Shambuka with an open book in his hands.

At dusk a cart bearing a potter's wheel passed the school and its wheel lodged in the old rut left by the rains. Unfired water pots from Shakuntala's household stood on the cart. One scraped against the side; fine clay dust spilled over the pages of an open account book. Shakuntala bent to lift the pot herself, and Keshari hurried to help. ‘I have not come today to talk about the price of clay,’ she said. ‘But tomorrow I shall ask about what is owed. If you tell my granddaughter to donate her wheel, first tell me where her own wishes will be recorded.’ Keshari did not seize the pot from her hands. He gave her a wooden plank on which she could set it safely.

Inside the school Jatan handed in his final page of the day. He had written: ‘There are different versions of Shambuka's story; I have the right to ask questions about them. The man who might have sold the boat did not sell it, so the debt remains. A tap was installed but water did not reach every house. After writing something down, we must also look at what has been done.’ Padma lifted her pencil to improve the shape of his sentence, but first asked, ‘Do you want the meaning changed?’ Jatan shook his head. He allowed her only to correct the final letter of ‘reached’. Sanket placed the page among the other pupils' answers, not above them all. The ancient scene of Shambuka had ended in the performance; the day of modern registers had not yet closed.

Malati went out once more to fill her pot at the tap. Keshari put the receipt for an unused boat plank in his bag. Gopal folded the map recording Tirsula's alternative names, and Sushila checked the date of the Badadari sample. They all went off in different directions with their separate unfinished tasks. Padma did not erase the first line on the blackboard. Beneath it she added another: ‘Who changed their mind after reading?’ This time Jatan did not raise his hand to answer. His gaze rested on Shakuntala's pots, their clay still soft, their shapes not determined by anyone's birth.

Chapter 152 · The Debt Owed to Clay

Morning dew glittered like pearls on the half-fired clay pot. Shakuntala Pandit turned the pot with the broken rim upside down on the wheel-board and picked from its fragile edge a splinter caught beneath her nail. The pot scraped when the cart stuck outside the school yesterday could not be made into a vessel again. But half-fired clay could be soaked and kneaded once more. Her granddaughter sat on the veranda with her examination paper spread before her. In red ink at the corner of one page the teacher had written, ‘State the basis of measurement.’ Shakuntala looked from the broken pot to that sentence. ‘They are teaching you to record measurements,’ she said, ‘while I still have to prove how the price of my work is to be measured.’

Her granddaughter felt that her answer was incomplete. ‘Grandmother, if this pot is broken, in which account book do we write its price?’ she asked. Before replying, Shakuntala opened an old ledger. At the back, slips for four consignments of pottery had been tied together with a separate cord. Two consignments had gone to the school and the communal kitchen; over the other two, the customer and the transporter had lodged different objections to payment. They would have to establish exactly which vessels had gone where. Damage could not automatically be blamed on the craftsperson. ‘This pot is my loss,’ Shakuntala said. ‘But the price of a pot accepted into someone's hands cannot be deducted because this rim is broken.’

Just then her nephew arrived. For a long time he had been raising the question of who would inherit the potter's wheel. By the family's old custom, the big household wheel, the kiln and the clay-working tools passed quietly into the hands of the next generation. He wanted the granddaughter not to leave school, exactly, but to regard her studies as a pastime while assuming ownership of the wheel and its daily work. ‘Draw up the paper now,’ he said, ‘or tomorrow someone will say an outsider is operating the family wheel.’ The girl reached to fold her examination paper, but Shakuntala stopped her. ‘Let the paper stay in her hands,’ she said. ‘Before anything else, ask yourself how someone comes to be called an outsider.’

Her nephew feared losing the family's property, and Shakuntala did not mock that fear. The kiln roof leaked during heavy rain; ageing hands could not keep rebuilding its bricks every monsoon. If no one took responsibility, the old wheel might seize up. But she said, ‘Between learning to turn a wheel and inheriting it lies her consent. My granddaughter must be of an age to consent, and she must want it. No contract for work is written on anyone's forehead on the day of their birth.’ The nephew accused educated children of abandoning the clay of their homes. In a slightly trembling voice the girl said, ‘I never said I would abandon clay. I said I wanted to study bridges and measurement.’

On a blank page of the ledger Shakuntala wrote the names of three things: wheel, kiln, tools. Beside each she left separate spaces for present use, repairs and questions of ownership. ‘For now I shall turn the wheel, share the kiln days with Niru, and pay any workers who help,’ she said. ‘My granddaughter may learn if she wishes. If she does not, there will be no penalty. Future inheritance will be decided by her informed consent and clear discussion among all the family members, not by stopping her education.’ Her nephew had never seen such a written statement. He did not snatch the paper away. He only asked how any of it could be managed while the pottery payments remained outstanding. Shakuntala gathered the four old slips. ‘We shall decide that today.’

Across the gate, two new craftspeople from Kumharauti were learning to prepare receipts. Seeing the colour of the ash, an elderly potter said the kiln must have burned too hot. Niru showed him the broken vessel. There was a small crack inside its base, although its outer red colour was beautiful. ‘A fine colour will not make a pot hold water,’ she said. The elder's inference was useful, but it required testing. Shakuntala had noticed that customers repeatedly wanted attractive samples while refusing to pay the wages of the people who tested them. From that day, they resolved to record the cost of samples separately for each consignment. Whether this would increase the amount payable required a new agreement with the customer; old receipts were not silently altered.

The safety barrier still stood at the entrance to the footpath leading to Kumharauti's clay pit. One side of the hollow had collapsed in the rains, so the risk was not imaginary. But there was still no clear written order authorizing the closure of the safe outer portion inside the cordon. Tara Mallik and Niru Kumal were waiting for another site inspection. Niru's basket held samples of red, grey and smooth strata, each in a different cloth. ‘There are plenty of sayings about hearing a pot's strength in its sound,’ Niru said, ‘but I will not promise a customer it is sound until we have tested it in water and fired it.’ Shakuntala did not mix the samples with her old clay.

There was a delay in finding the receipt number of the old application on the official's desk. When he found it, he said an earlier proposal had been to settle every amount due as one lump sum. The craftspeople had refused, and the file had stalled. Shakuntala set her ledger before him. ‘It stalled because you wanted to dispose of separate bills in a single stroke,’ she said. ‘Release payment now for the two consignments whose receipt and quality are undisputed. Inspect the remaining consignments. Hear the claim for losses caused by the closed path under a separate application. Receiving one payment does not mean I surrender every claim.’ The official stared in surprise, then began matching the acknowledgements on the receipts.

A customer's representative said payment would be made only after access to the clay pit was restored. Niru objected at once. ‘You received the vessels

before that,' she said. 'The gate closed afterwards. The price of pottery already in use in your kitchen cannot depend on permission to enter the pit.' The representative said the institution was awaiting its grant. 'Is there a written date for that grant?' Shakuntala asked. 'No? Then why must the days of my labour remain indefinite?' The accountant in the room checked the old delivery receipts and the present payment heading. Without pronouncing on any new allegation, he prepared an order releasing part-payment for the two undisputed consignments.

The order contained the words 'final settlement of all dues'. Shakuntala held the pen but did not sign. Pointing to the sentence, she said, 'Remove this. What I receive today is the first payment for two accepted consignments. The remaining dues and the separate claim for compensation are still open to hearing.' The accountant had to print another copy. The second sheet stated explicitly that the payment was partial and rights concerning the remaining items were reserved. The correction took time; the eyes of those waiting grew tired. But Shakuntala did not sign unread. Niru read the document aloud. The nephew quietly took a second copy into his hands.

By midday two carts stood outside the office waiting to collect clay. The drivers' charges had been mounting through the time the barrier had been in place. 'We will measure the water level at the pit and inspect the slope of the collapsed edge again,' Tara said. 'We cannot yet establish a safe route.' An impatient young man asked why new measurements were necessary when the older potters had taken clay from there hundreds of times. 'I have been there hundreds of times,' Shakuntala replied. 'That is no reason to pretend I did not see the hollow collapse. But keeping the whole path closed in the name of safety without evidence is a decision without proof as well.' Tara recorded a new date for the site visit and the names of the craftspeople who would attend the inspection.

News of the first payment order for the clay work reached the neighbourhood, and people came carrying their own accounts. The delivery charge on pottery supplied for a young woman's wedding had still not been deducted; in another house there was a complaint about a water-cracked pot. Shakuntala called everyone together for the evening but did not merge their entries in the ledger. She examined the complained-of pot herself and deferred assigning fault until the next test. It would have been easy to deny the fault in the name of 'supporting the craftsperson'; just as easy to withhold the entire price in the name of 'supporting the customer'. Holding the cracked vessel in her hands, she understood the weight of everyday justice between those two easy choices.

At that moment Dhani Rajbhar arrived with an old application about an irrigation channel. His field was rented, and heaps of earth had repeatedly blocked the mouth of the small channel that carried water to it. He had previously attended a meeting demanding the removal of a private fence, but

no one had decided who would pay for cleaning the channel. ‘If everyone uses the channel, why should only my spade be working?’ he asked. ‘And if I clean it alone, tomorrow someone will say I have taken possession of the water.’ Tara unfolded the old line showing its gradient. Dhani objected to any direct conflation of this channel with the pottery pit: the land and water at the two sites were different.

On the back of her answer sheet the granddaughter drew a circle for the wheel. She put a small dot at its centre. ‘Does the middle of something that turns stay still?’ she asked. Shakuntala spun the wooden board with her finger; it wobbled slightly and slowly came to rest. ‘Before you say the centre stays still, check whether the board is crooked,’ she said. The girl laughed. Earlier, her nephew would have looked away from such a scene, as if studying were an insult to the wheel. Now he asked whether they might invite a schoolteacher to see the board one day. ‘Yes,’ Shakuntala said, ‘if the girl wishes it, and after asking the teacher too.’ For the first time, distinctions of authority within the question of an invitation seemed natural.

At a small meeting, farmers, tenants and two families living beyond the channel offered different views. Without water reaching the higher fields, the crop would dry up. But opening the drainage without planning could send water flooding into the lower courtyards. Dhani did not abandon his old claim of right; he proposed accepting shared responsibility for maintenance. ‘I will work with the spade,’ he said. ‘Those whose fields benefit will contribute days or money. But the people whose homes may flood must be heard first.’ Temporary cleaning was agreed upon, subject to official measurements and the consent of affected families. Permanent irrigation rights and ownership of the land remained undecided.

Dhani smiled when he saw the separate headings for wheel and kiln in Shakuntala's ledger. ‘Not all of us own the land, but we need not run away from responsibility for work,’ he said. Shakuntala asked him in return, ‘You have undertaken to maintain the channel. Will you write that obligation on your son's forehead from birth?’ Dhani thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said. ‘The family's turn at common work can be decided among its members, but you cannot call someone's labour a donation if that person has not agreed.’ The short reply made the nephew laugh. The disputes had not ended, but his earlier haste to treat the wheel as an inheritance beyond question had eased a little.

From her bag Tara took a copy of an old survey sheet marked ‘Kareh’. To match its former river markers with present land features, she needed evidence from measurements taken over several years. A young man in the office said that since water collected in the Kumharauti pit, it must be a branch of that river. Tara raised her hand. ‘Waterlogging has been observed here. That does not justify declaring the place a river branch. The Kareh markers on the survey sheet must be checked against their date, method of

measurement and evidence of location.’ Shakuntala was glad that her application about access to clay had not been merged, without reason, into a vast dispute over an unfamiliar river.

Ratan came too. In his bag was a paper carrying a memory of an old water route called ‘Jibachh’. At first he proposed placing the landing he had known as a child in approximately the same position on the present map. Then he stopped himself. ‘What I remember in my head is not a measurement,’ he said. ‘The route may have moved over two generations. Record what I saw of the landing, but take measurements on the ground tomorrow.’ Tara entered his oral testimony separately; confirmation of the original route remained pending. Dhani asked whether this inquiry would stop repairs to the irrigation channel. The official replied that immediate measures to remove hazards on site and the long-term examination of maps would proceed in separate files.

When Shakuntala returned home at noon, her granddaughter had completed two questions on her examination paper. One asked her to calculate the volume of a solid. The girl wanted to pour water into an empty clay mould and see. ‘First inspect its bottom,’ Shakuntala said. ‘If it is cracked, the water will escape. And the numbers printed in your book are not the same as the dimensions of your mould.’ The girl laughed. She drew the figure in her question on paper, and beneath it wrote that changing the unit of measurement changes the answer. Shakuntala could not teach her the correct calculation, but she shared her habit of looking closely at the object before taking its measure.

Her nephew returned to the courtyard. This time he held an old handwritten family document. He said there could be trouble in the future if an inheritance deed was drawn up without seeking the views of all the women and men of the family. Shakuntala agreed. ‘I cannot divide the entire family’s rights on my own,’ she said. ‘But I can decide how my work will be managed for now, and that my granddaughter will not be pressured. Actual ownership of the wheel must be established by examining the old documents; in the meantime there will be no contract binding the child to labour in her own name.’ The nephew did not stitch the old page into the ledger; he proposed keeping a separate copy.

Shakuntala called Niru and divided the work of the kiln over the next three days. They recorded the number of vessels in each consignment, whose fuel was being used, whose wages were due, and how losses from broken pottery would be entered. ‘My community name is Kumal, yours is Kumhar,’ Niru said. ‘Doing similar work does not make us one family. Keep our names separate in the shared kiln accounts.’ Shakuntala agreed. When the granddaughter approached the ledger, Niru showed her how to set a lump of clay at the centre of the wheel. The girl watched without reaching out her

hands. ‘Today I shall finish my examination,’ she said. Niru laughed. ‘Then this lesson will not have been wasted either.’

Towards evening a written notice reached Shakuntala that the undisputed part-payment had been authorized in her name through the office. The full amount was not yet in her hands: an order releasing payment and actual receipt of funds were different things. She placed a copy of the order in her ledger and told Niru she would repay the old fuel debt when the money reached her account. ‘That means I still have to wait,’ Niru said. Meeting her eyes, Shakuntala replied, ‘Yes. But I will not lose sight of what I owe you. This order opens one path through my accounts; it does not close yours.’

The granddaughter asked what Shakuntala would change at home once she received payment for the old pottery. First Shakuntala said she would repair the kiln's broken chimney, then buy a mathematics notebook for the girl's lessons. ‘And the pain in your hands?’ the child asked. Shakuntala looked at her own hands. A day's clay had dried into the lines of her palms. ‘I shall have that examined too,’ she said. The nephew did not laugh this time. He saw that in the desire to save the old family wheel there remained an unanswered question: where was the cost to the bodies that worked in the household ever entered?

Before supper the family held a small meeting. Shakuntala did not tear up the document prepared to donate the wheel; beside its original proposal she had the words ‘Consent not given’ entered, to prevent its misuse later. The new proposal contained four distinct sections: an interim arrangement for running the work, wages for those employed, examination of the family's lawful ownership claims, and the granddaughter's independent choice of education. The child was not asked to sign a legal declaration. She was asked only what she wanted to study now. ‘I want to study how water is measured,’ she answered plainly, ‘but I want to watch how pots are made too.’

Shakuntala sat beside the hearth with the girl's examination paper. The last question gave the time taken to fill water in different homes. The granddaughter had calculated correctly, but underneath her answer she had added, of her own accord: ‘The time of a house that has no tap cannot be measured by the same rule.’ Shakuntala read the line without speaking. ‘The book did not ask this,’ the child said. ‘But I understood this much today.’ ‘Keep the answer to the book's question correct,’ Shakuntala replied, ‘and write the question raised by what you saw separately. Each has its own work to do.’

The wheel was still in the corner of the courtyard. No new nameplate had been fastened to it. Yet one distinction had become clear that day: respect for a craft did not require a child's future to be mortgaged. Shakuntala hung the examination paper on a peg so she could see it in the days ahead. A cheerful clamour rose inside the house; the nephew found one wrong figure in a

mathematical answer, and the child explained it to him by another method. Coming back from the kiln, Niru paused on the threshold and heard the laughter. She asked nothing. She handed Shakuntala the slip for her day's labour and took her leave.

Late that night Shakuntala made three bundles of papers: access to clay and the pit's safety; outstanding payments for the different pottery consignments; and her granddaughter's schooling. She placed all three bundles in the same chest but did not combine them. The written release order lay before her; the money itself had yet to arrive. The date for temporary cleaning of Dhani's channel was fixed, but permanent rights were not. Tara had filed for an examination of the old Kareh markers; Ratan had agreed to show the site he remembered on the Jibachh. Beneath a damp cloth lay the lump of re-kneaded clay from the pot that had broken at dawn. Shakuntala put out the lamp. In the house where a child was learning, the old wheel's slow memory went on turning.

Chapter 153 · Measuring the River

In the first light of dawn, Hira Sahni laid her bamboo sounding pole on the bank of the Tilwah and untied the red cord at its head. The knot had slipped while wet in the night. With one hand she held the old mark, with the other she measured and tied a new cord. The water before her stood a little lower than the mark of the previous year, but the line of washed grass along the mud seemed to tell a different story. Gopal Majhi was bailing water from the bottom of the boat. ‘Will your bamboo fight the government measuring tape today?’ he asked. Hira did not smile. ‘If they fight, the boat will lose again. Today we shall see where my bamboo is right and where I myself was wrong.’

The work party for the second pond-clearing of 2040 was gathering beside the Tilwah. The pond itself was the principal site, but no decision to remove silt would be taken without examining the drainage leading away from it and the safe course for boats. Tara arrived with a notebook, a level and a measuring tape. Aditi brought a copy of her previously corrected report; the earlier error had not been erased. A young man carrying a spade tried to enter the cordoned area. Gomati stopped him. ‘First listen to who is to work where, for how many hours and at what rate. We shall not let wages wash down the river in our enthusiasm for measuring water.’

Hira's pole carried bands of colour for ‘knee-deep’, ‘waist-deep’ and ‘the depth of a full-grown person’. For years she had compared the proportions of her own body with the marks at the landing. Tara asked her to have those expressions recorded as they stood, alongside comparisons in fixed units. A junior assistant lowered a stick into the water. ‘It is simple enough,’ he said. ‘Knee-deep means this much.’ Hira stood him beside her and showed him that his knee came at a different height from hers. ‘My body is my memory,’ she said, ‘not a law for everyone's body.’

The first test took place on a dry platform. Tara stretched the measuring tape straight. The pole's old green knot was slightly above the starting point; its lower end had worn away and the colour on one of its earlier sections had spread in the water. Hira did not blame the boy who had painted it. ‘I moved that knot myself,’ she admitted. ‘I once cut back the broken tip, but did not recalibrate all the bands afterwards.’ Tara made two new fixed marks and recorded the error in the old markings separately. Depths measured in previous days could no longer serve as evidence without correction.

Gopal pointed out that a small eddy rising in the right-hand current that day did not lie exactly over the line drawn on the old map. The office map marked an ‘upper crossing route’ at the point where a rescue team had refused to turn a boat during the previous disaster. Some people called it ‘Tirsula’, but Gopal made clear that Tirsula was the name he had heard for a different place

in his old rescue notes. Confusing the two routes under one word could prove fatal. He supplied the local identification ‘the downstream bend of the Tilwah’, and Tara allowed the name to be attached to the marker for the verified location.

Tara marked three test points on the river's two banks. At the first, the pole stopped on firm sand. At the second it sank into soft silt. At the third the thrust of the current was so strong that the team had to abandon measurements from the bank and call on a safe boat. A single measurement here could not establish a safe route for an entire day. ‘If the water changes between two trips, I shall measure again,’ Hira said. ‘People who used to board because they trusted my word will now hear the limits written in the register before they board.’ ‘With so many conditions, where will any passage be opened?’ an office employee asked. ‘Where it can actually be opened,’ Gopal replied.

An empty boat was sent on a trial run through the narrow current of the Tilwah. Shyam's inspection of the timber and Lalit's certification of the fastenings were on separate sheets; repairs alone did not establish that the waterway was safe. Hira sat at the rear with the pole, while Gopal called out the route markers. As the prow approached a sandy turn, Hira, relying on an estimate, told them to bear slightly left. Both Aditi's measurements and the current Gopal could see contradicted her. ‘No—keep right,’ Hira said immediately. The boat reached calm water. Back on the bank, she circled the place of her own mistake in pencil.

‘So your old experience has been rejected?’ the clerk asked. Hira looked at the mud drying on the skin of her hands. ‘What use is calling something experience if it cannot be corrected? My old estimate belonged to that day. Write the conditions of what has been measured today.’ Tara recorded the time of the test, the instruments, the names of the observers and the need for another inspection if the water changed. On the same sheet she wrote: ‘Local boatman's knowledge—accepted with corrections.’ Hira insisted that acceptance must not be mistaken for permission to keep the passage open throughout every season.

For families on the far side of the village, the closure of the boat route made it difficult to carry small consignments of medicines and grain. Madhu Kewat asked who would keep watch and measure the changing water if a single narrow safe passage remained open. Gomati added two separate items to the work list: the labour of keeping watch and the labour of measuring. Hira said that she could not give every hour without payment while losing the usual earnings from her boat. Some people objected that charging for service at a collective undertaking was selfish. ‘No one fills a stomach with the name of charity,’ Madhu replied. ‘If we record payment for public work, why should keeping watch be free?’

After discussion over two periods of the day, conditional permission was issued for a limited passage. In daylight, after fresh measurements, brief crossings would be permitted only in an inspected boat with a trained boatperson. The load limit would be established by a separate test of the boat. The boatperson would retain the right to stop the crossings again if the current grew strong, visibility deteriorated or measurements changed. An alternative road arrangement for medical emergencies was entered in a separate list. Travellers welcomed the news of this small concession, but Hira insisted that the sign must not say ‘Open to everyone at all times’.

Meanwhile Ratan Vanpar arrived carrying an old leather-bound notebook. He remembered the Jibachh landing of his childhood and had been comparing it with the river's present bend. Earlier he had said that the route between two pipal trees lay to the west of the old landing. Tara showed him the distance measured on the present site and a different mark along the margin of the old notebook. ‘Were those two pipal trees from the same period?’ she asked. Ratan searched his memory. ‘The first tree fell in a flood,’ he said. ‘The second was planted later. I have kept them both in the same memory.’ There was no shame in his voice, only a little sorrow.

Ratan gave whatever measurements he could for particular places. Where all he knew was a direction remembered from childhood, he asked them to write ‘recollected account’. Beside the estimate marked ‘east of the first tree’, a new line was drawn using the evidence of the day's tests. The correction did not diminish respect for the old name; it reduced the danger of taking a wrong route into a hollow. In the margin of his notebook Ratan wrote: ‘The story of the landing I saw is one thing; the measure of the ground today is another.’ With his consent Tara included the sentence in the public work sheet, but returned the private original notebook to him.

Another error was discovered in Gopal's old rescue document. A route's local name had been written the other way round in the town copy, so someone delivering a message during a disaster might be sent in the wrong direction. Gopal showed the actual point of access together with the new marker. An assistant asked whether correcting the name proved which order had been wrong in the disaster of 2039. Gopal said it did not. ‘Today we have corrected a wrong name. We still need the original copy of that night's order and testimony from those who heard it.’ Tara recorded that limitation. The new map was to be used for finding a safe passage, not as final proof in an accusation.

When the survey team returned towards the pond, the cleaning crew had already chosen where the heaps of removed silt should be deposited. The previous year, excavated mud had blocked the doorways of two homes. This time the women of those households had a place in the decision. ‘You did not ask about my threshold,’ one woman said. ‘Do not sing about that as communal cleaning.’ Gomati assigned priority to reopening the path in front

of her house, and kept the cartage charge separate from wages for digging. No one in the attendance register was described merely as an unpaid volunteer.

There was no blank space for Urmila's name in that year's attendance register, for she could not be present as part of the work party. Her death in the hospital disaster of 2039 had already been verified. When the washerpeople on the bank asked for a place to reach the washing platform, Sarita watched them in silence for a long time. Her grief for Naira followed its own course within her. Remembering Urmila's working life, she steadied her voice and said, ‘Measure the path for the people who will carry loads to the platform. Urmila warned us about that before.’ Her words were not treated as the consent of someone dead. The women now working on the platform offered their own measurements and demands.

A member of Urmila's family sat behind the landing showing the laundry ledger. Some wage entries did not correspond with the times at which clothes had been delivered. ‘Opening the boat route is necessary,’ the family member said, ‘but there is still no account of the last bundle she sent along this path.’ Gomati took the file but did not combine that amount with the wages for pond-cleaning. A receipt number was issued in the separate register of family entitlements. Urmila's absence became a pause in the public announcements; her right to unpaid wages stood before everyone once again as a real document.

At midday, rice and dal from Rukhsana's kitchen were served on leaves. A boy saw Hira's newly marked bamboo and cried, ‘I want to measure my height with that!’ Hira did not stop him, but pointed out that the foot of the pole had been dipped in mud and must first be cleaned. Shakuntala's granddaughter was examining the zero point of the measuring tape. ‘If the bamboo grows thinner as it wears away,’ she asked, ‘how do its numbers stay accurate?’ Tara showed her the tape's rigid metal end. ‘Instruments must be checked as well,’ she said. Shakuntala listened quietly. Her granddaughter's question had travelled beyond the volume problems at home.

Hira brought out an old journey book marked ‘Kamala’. She remembered carrying heavy sacks of clay on one stretch of that journey; the name also appeared in an old document from Shakuntala's maternal home. A young man immediately claimed that they could reconstruct the entire former confluence of the Tilwah and the Kamala from this evidence. ‘My paper about the price of clay is not a river map,’ Shakuntala said, with a trace of bitterness. Hira agreed. She described the journey book's date and the purpose for which it was used; in the day's measurements it was kept only as a reference for checking sources. The name suggested a connection, not a geographical conclusion.

Dhani Rajbhar came from beside the little channel called Kankar. A date had been fixed for temporary clearing of the irrigation drain. He wanted a

line on the office's aerial map corrected where Kankar had been marked as ‘vacant government land’. ‘When there is no rain it carries little water,’ he said. ‘But the outlets from several fields cross it. Call it vacant and tomorrow someone will fill it in.’ Tara wrote ‘Seasonal watercourse—ownership unverified’ in the site-inspection record. Dhani maintained his commitment to shared responsibility for the work; he did not, on that basis, declare the land his.

By the time they reached Rajinar, the afternoon light was fading. A peg of the temporary rope barrier installed beside the railing had tilted again; two women fetching water had stopped near it. Lalit checked the iron fastenings but did not declare the old railing safe on its own. First a temporary safe footpath was made, and uncontrolled crowding at the head of the well was prevented. The authorized repair cost, responsible institution and date for inspecting a permanent railing were written on the public noticeboard. People's access to the water source was maintained, but no one was permitted onto the unsafe top without testing.

An official wanted to publish all this work under a single heading: ‘Comprehensive Water Safety Completed’. Aditi objected. ‘The limited boat trial on the Tilwah, temporary access at Rajinar, site inspection at Kankar and cleaning of the pond are separate undertakings. Approval for one does not mean completion of another.’ Irritated, the official said the public needed a simple message. ‘Make it simple, not false,’ Sarita replied. ‘People need to know where they may go, where danger remains, and when each worker will be paid.’ In the end the notice was printed in four short sections.

A renewed examination of the work allocations for opening the drainage outlet revealed that no trained person able to assess its gradient had been included in the team assigned to remove the silt. Eager to clear the obstruction, the crew wanted to open the mouth of the drain. Tara stopped the work. ‘This pause is not a permanent ban. First make separate assessments of the homes by the landing, the betel fields and the foundations of the warehouse that might be affected.’ Gomati objected to sending workers home without payment. New written work orders were issued for the actual hours that could be spent safely moving heaps of silt, clearing footpaths and inspecting tools.

In the previous boat-and-equipment inspection register, a correction was entered beside an estimate based on the proportions of Hira's body. Shyam kept his inspection of cracks in the boat separate; Lalit presented a receipt for replacing broken strands of rope. A young boatman complained that reading so much paperwork frightened people. Hira let him rest his hand on the boat. ‘Is this wood frightened?’ she asked. ‘No. The person whose body sits in this boat has the right to know the truth.’ On a new sheet they recorded together the date of the old error, the grounds for its correction and the conditions governing the next inspection.

The register of dues was opened at the evening meeting. The boatpeople's testing hours, the cartage of silt, the cleaning crew's wages and the women's time spent measuring access to the washing platform were entered under separate headings. An official had written ‘community service’ and set the women's hours at zero. Gomati had the entry struck out. ‘Show evidence that they agreed to work without pay,’ she said. ‘Otherwise record their labour.’ Urmila's old outstanding wages were not settled by that day's slip, but her claim was not suppressed again. No fresh attendance entry was made in the name of someone who had died.

Hira returned to the bank of the Tilwah one final time. The day's permission board said plainly that limited crossings were open and new measurements would be required whenever the water changed. Two boatpeople were practising the new markers; Gopal fixed a time to hand the corrected version of the wrongly named route to the next rescue team. Ratan slipped his old notebook of memories into his bag. ‘Do not think I have lost something,’ he said. ‘My old tree no longer stands there, but I will not give the people I guide the wrong road.’ Hira held his hand. From the far bank drifted children's laughter, the smell of silt and smoke from the kitchen.

A woman returning with water from Rajinar stopped on the new footpath and asked who would inform them if it was closed the next day. Tara read aloud the name of the responsible contact on the noticeboard. ‘Will my name be recorded?’ the woman asked. ‘If you wish to testify that you were here,’ Tara replied, ‘but not your private household affairs.’ The woman gave her name and did not supply another woman's name for the access inspection without her consent. Hearing the question, Ramani said that the next meeting would need separate rules for signatures concerning the landing and fishing leases.

On her way home Hira did not tear off the old coloured band from the bamboo. She tied a strip bearing the new measurement on one side, and a little thread around the old knot on the other, to remind her that an estimate had once proved useful but had never been right for all time. Red light was spreading over the river. Today one small passage had opened, one old estimate had been corrected, and wages for some people's work had been entered. A space for signatures had been left empty for the following day's meeting; Ramani's question still demanded an answer. Hira rested the bamboo against the wall, where she would be able to see its markings again at dawn.

Chapter 154 · The Document of Consent

At dawn, on the stone-built ghat of Barki Pond, Renu Gondhi was untying a knot in a wet rope. Half the bamboo barrier had been removed, but a new padlock hung from the iron gate in the middle. The employee who had fastened it had posted a notice above it: ‘Entry prohibited without the fishery leaseholder’s permission.’ Renu read it and asked, ‘Was the lease granted over the fish, or over the pond steps and the pitchers people bring to draw water as well?’ The employee said that the notice had been posted on an officer’s orders. Renu coiled her wet rope and laid it on the stone. ‘Then bring the original order and its complete annexure. You cannot stop people walking with half a sentence.’

Ramani Bind arrived with the wet cords of a fishing net tucked beneath her arm. Yesterday permission had been given for limited boat passage on the Tilwah; the ink on Hira’s revised water measurements had scarcely dried. Ramani knew that. But a boat-safety certificate could provide no answer for the padlock on this ghat. ‘I need a place for my fishing net,’ she said, ‘and Renu needs a way for the village women and children to draw water. Do not enter both our names in one register and pretend you have settled one single right.’ A white leaf caught in the mesh of her net trembled in the wind.

Rama Karna and Gomati arrived from the municipal office, accompanied by Tara Mallik, who carried a measuring notebook, a site plan and yesterday’s inspection slip in her bag. Mud had collected on the third step inside the gate, and a stone at one edge had come loose. Tara touched it with a thin stick. ‘Opening this section today would cause an accident. We can test the two upper steps and the paved approach on the left.’ The employee immediately declared, ‘Then keeping the whole ghat closed was the right thing to do!’ Gomati answered, ‘Write down the restriction on the unsafe section separately. Establish separately what authority you have to close a safe approach in the name of the fishing lease.’

Everyone was seated on the old platform beside the pond. Three papers were laid out along lines of lime drawn on the stone: public passage, the fish-production contract, and rules governing washing and bathing times and privacy. The leaseholder’s representative objected in his very first sentence. ‘We have paid a fee. What if someone comes to the bank and damages our nets?’ Ramani replied, ‘Does that fee define the area for producing fish, or does it cover even the shadows cast by everyone else?’ The representative displayed a receipt on his telephone. Rama asked for the contract’s full boundary annexure. The photograph showed an amount of money, not the lease boundary.

Renu produced the old acknowledgment of her objection to the enclosure. To obtain it she had left her shop work and visited the office countless times,

yet each time the response had been the same incomplete photograph of the lease. ‘If my application was only a demand for part of the fish, then I was wrong from the beginning,’ she said. ‘What I asked was that women could descend the public steps with their pitchers, that patients could get water, and that a time could be fixed for those who wash clothes. What does counting the fish in the net have to do with any of that?’ Rama wrote the receipt numbers of the old application and today’s new copy alongside each other, without merging the two cases.

Ramani’s ledger contained three figures for expenditure: thread for repairing nets, wages for the night watch, and the time spent by women sorting fish. The leaseholder’s representative argued that the cost of guarding the nets should come out of private profit. Ramani accepted that the income from selling fish must be accounted for separately. ‘But the watch that keeps the public path safe is different from the watch over the fishing nets,’ she said. ‘The people who do both kinds of work may belong to the same family, but record their pay under different heads.’ Gomati asked the watchman seated to one side how many hours he worked. For the first time he stated his full working hours aloud.

Sushila Mahato came to the platform carrying two pages of her seed-trial ledger. She had been questioned again yesterday about a plot recorded under the name Badadari in the river survey. ‘My seed plot is a separate matter,’ she explained. ‘But the warning about which day the outflow will be blocked must reach the fields if the transplanting is to survive. Have you called me here to report the results of the company seed trials, or to make rules about water?’ Tara said that Sushila’s measured trial ledger was evidence about the field, not proof of ownership over the pond. Sushila gathered up her notebook and had her own available contact hours entered in the public water-warning list. She still refused to endorse the company’s false claim of yields that would hold under every condition.

Meanwhile, a file containing five records connected with identities changed for protection arrived at the other table. Ruhani objected to placing it before the open meeting. ‘This file contains someone’s private address, someone else’s former name, another person’s time in the shelter,’ she said. ‘The public has a right to inspect accounts, but that does not give anyone the right to expose the concealed places in a person’s life.’ The accountant said that the relief money associated with the ghat had to be verified. Rama replied, ‘The amount, date, approved expenditure category and independent verification of distribution will remain open. Protected identities of recipients will be accessible only to an authorised inquiry. Confidentiality is not a device for erasing wrongdoing in the transaction.’

One woman whose identity was protected had arranged to meet in the outer veranda of the assembly. The paper bearing the name she now used remained with Ruhani; neither her former name nor her place of residence

was published in the ledger. ‘Check my wages under the name I work under now,’ she said. ‘Nobody who knew me by my first name is to announce it at a public meeting. But the entry saying I took relief twice is false; set that account right.’ Rama asked whether only the financial finding should be made public, or her current name as well. After a little thought the woman said, ‘The financial finding. Keep the copy with my name in the inquiry room.’

The accountant objected that these limits would leave future officers unable to understand the papers. For the first time the woman looked directly into his eyes. ‘If you disclose my former name without permission, your accounts will be easier to understand, but I shall have to move house again. In whose ledger will the cost of that appear?’ Ruhani made no emotional speech in response. She drew two empty signature boxes on the paper: consent to access for investigation and consent to public disclosure. The woman gave permission for the first for a specified period and wrote ‘No’ in the second. She was handed an authenticated copy recording precisely that decision.

Near midday Hira Meche arrived with a copy of his earlier agreement. No one disputed the thumbprint bearing his former name; the dispute was that the proposed terms had not been explained to him in a language he understood when he put his thumb to the paper. The contractor’s man repeated, ‘Your thumbprint is here. Are you backing out now?’ Hira said, ‘The thumbprint is mine. But what you say the paper means never reached my ears in this language on that day.’ Padma arranged for a trained language assistant, but Hira first asked whether the interpreter was employed by the contractor. The independent interpreter’s identity and the provision for payment were entered on another sheet.

When the agreement was explained in a language he understood, Hira interrupted. The paper described the ordinary footpath to the ghat as being granted for ‘long-term exclusive use’ and included a condition that community members surrender their right to object. ‘I agreed to the repair of the walking path,’ he said, ‘not to surrender rights forever.’ Padma read out the distinction word by word. The contractor’s representative protested that if the contract had to be made again, the work would stop. Hira answered, ‘Count also the time for which people’s paths will be blocked later if the work starts immediately on the strength of a false meaning.’ A written order was issued forbidding the disputed earlier consent from being treated, for the present, as final approval.

On Tara’s plan, the paved landing and the muddy section were marked in different colours. The old route by which Urmila had gone to the washing ghat was marked, but Urmila herself would never return there. Her death in the hospital disaster of 2039 had been confirmed. Her family’s claim for unfinished washing work and unpaid wages continued in a separate register. An officer proposed announcing free cleaning services in Urmila’s name at the

reopening of the ghat. Gomati stopped him sharply. ‘Do not write down the wages of living workers as zero in the name of a dead person. Ask her family separately for permission to commemorate her, and pay the wages separately.’

On the level ground behind the ghat, the women who washed clothes began dividing up the available hours. One said that it was difficult to drag clothes across the ground when fishing nets were spread there. Ramani promptly offered to change the hours for spreading her nets. Another woman asked who would stop people in the crowd from taking photographs during bathing hours. Renu pulled her earlier written objection from her bag: the question of consent to photograph women at the landing had been raised before. Gomati had separate rules recorded for working hours at the washing place, privacy while bathing, and explicit consent to photography or recording at the public ghat. Even photographs taken for a safety inspection did not need to show anyone’s unclothed or private body.

A young man asked, ‘How can photographs be restricted in a public place?’ Champa, who had already made decisions concerning the confidentiality of her medical treatment, had come to the ghat with someone she knew. She disclosed none of her treatment papers at the meeting. She said only, ‘Seeing a public staircase and publishing a picture of someone’s wet body are different things. You will write nothing in my name.’ Rama recorded ‘Individual consent required’, without adding any private detail about her. Champa refused to accept any obligation to sit through the end of the meeting; she left when she chose.

Later in the afternoon Nilima Nurang brought a revised copy of the marriage register, in its small coloured cover. She had long ago applied for restoration of the name of a woman from the maternal family that had been erased from the original register. The amendment order had arrived today. The erased letters had not vanished from history; the date and source of the correction were entered alongside them. Nilima read the page and asked, ‘My mother’s name is printed now. Does that mean anyone may photograph this copy and circulate it at meetings?’ Rama replied, ‘Correcting an entry in a register and granting permission for public circulation are separate matters.’ Nilima kept the legally valid copy of her marriage record for herself; she refused permission to display her entire family history.

Beside that page Ramani placed a small excerpt, selected with consent, from a letter that had come from her mother’s home and bore the name Gangi. It recalled how her mother had considered a daughter entitled to a share of the price of fish. Another old document concerning water rights, marked Bagmati–Bangmatti, used different terms for the landing and for production. An office employee wanted to fit these two names into the boundary lines of the present pond. Ramani reached out and stopped his pencil. ‘This letter shows the language in which my mother spoke of rights,’ she said, ‘not the river’s entire course. If anyone takes it for a map, my name

will be erased again.’ Tara created a separate reference for the copy, recording its source, date and geographical uncertainty.

Renu read the general account in the letter beside her old receipt objecting to the enclosure. A cousin on her mother’s side had written that women once cleaned the ghat, though the lease had passed into men’s names. ‘This memory does not make me the owner,’ Renu said. ‘But it gives me the right to ask who is answerable for closing a public way.’ Ramani replied, ‘And my right to be paid for my fishing nets will not obstruct your right to walk.’ Both held to their decision not to sign the same paper: Renu would sign the proposal on public access, Ramani a separate draft governing the fishery.

When the leaseholder’s representative returned, he brought the complete boundary annexure. The map identified the production area in the middle of the pond, but showed no explicit exclusive prohibition over the upper public approach to the paved ghat. The representative argued that theft would be difficult to prevent unless the whole bank was closed. Gomati proposed that safe storage for the nets and the production boundary should be marked, that specified supervision be maintained along the public approach, and that complaints of theft be registered on the basis of actual incidents. The leaseholder had his disagreement recorded but agreed to the new temporary arrangement. That agreement was not declared a resolution of the original legal dispute over the lease.

After Tara’s inspection, permission was granted to open access as far as the upper paved steps. The third step, where the stone was loose, remained barred with red thread and bamboo. The first time Renu came carrying a pitcher, a security employee stopped her once more. She pointed to the conditions written on the board. He acknowledged that the upper approach was open. Renu reached the place where she could draw water. As she lifted the pitcher and turned, she looked at the spot where people had been challenged the previous year. She made no speech of victory. Water was needed at home, and she went on her way.

A separate safe area was marked for spreading fishing nets. Ramani was teaching her daughter how to tie their knots. ‘Mother, if the ghat is open to everybody, who will protect our nets?’ the daughter asked. ‘Whoever tears a net must answer for it separately,’ Ramani said. ‘We shall not protect our nets by stopping every woman from walking.’ The daughter paused over the next knot. ‘Then will they record the price of the thread I count at night?’ Ramani did not answer immediately. She opened a new line in her ledger for her daughter’s working hours, then asked whether the girl wanted payment for that work or preferred, for now, to record her time as learning.

Before evening three copies of the new arrangements were prepared. The first concerned public access: the safe approach, the repair area that remained closed, the responsible officer and the date of the next inspection. The second

concerned the fishery lease: the contract's marked boundary, net storage, the cost of supervision and the outstanding legal objection. The third covered washing and bathing: hours of labour, crowded periods, consent to photographs and protection of privacy. Rama provided separate signature boxes for each. The leaseholder's representative complained that so many documents would confuse people. Rama answered, 'If we bury three rights in one document, people will not be less confused. They will be more helpless.'

The accountant spread out a fourth sheet: the expenses of the working day. It listed bamboo used in cleaning, carts for removing mud, hours spent on safety inspections, payment for washing the stone landing and the agreed fees for the women who sang. An officer attempted to erase all wages under the heading 'Annual Collective Devotional Service'. Gomati drew a circle around the title with her pencil. 'People may offer devotion of their own free will. When an institution orders work, the institution must pay for it.' She made a separate consent line for services genuinely offered without charge, but entered no one's name there on an assumption.

Aditi inspected the register for sending water-flow warnings as far as Sushila's fields. A notice about yesterday's restricted boat permission on the Tilwah had also been pasted into it by another branch. Aditi separated it. 'Field drainage, public access to the pond ghat and the safe channel for boats require three different inspections,' she said. After checking the agreed hour for the notice, Sushila gave her consent; she would still decide on transplanting after examining the soil in her own field. Her outstanding claim in the seed dispute with the company would not be affected by signatures collected at the ghat.

A correction sheet was attached to the end of Hira Meche's translated copy. The disputed consent box in the earlier document was not simply crossed out and presented for another signature as fully understood approval. Instead, the record required notice of a fresh meeting to reach him in a language he understood. Hearing that the interpreter would be paid, Hira asked, 'Will you deduct that from my fare?' Rama said no. Independent translation was entered as a cost of public scrutiny. Hira's earlier thumbprint would remain in the archive, but its meaning would not be called final consent without investigation. He folded his copy and tucked it inside his kurta.

Before leaving, Nilima Nurang came over to Ramani. For the first time she descended onto the upper steps of Barki Pond and shook the mud from her feet. 'My mother's name has returned to the register,' she said, 'but her whole voice cannot fit inside a document.' Ramani folded away the private part of her letter again. 'My mother's letter contains the name of a river, but it is also written in my mother's hand. I shall protect both, for different reasons.' They were silent together for a while. In the distance women were lifting their evening water pitchers; their daughters were reading aloud the new rules written on the board.

The song sung outside the closed approach at last year's annual observance honouring the ghat and the cleanliness of its water rose this year beside the newly opened upper steps. The women chose the song they liked. Its words were no official proclamation of a meeting: some sang softly, others joined in while cleaning the landing. The smell of hot rice from Rukhsana's kitchen spread across the water. In the middle of the singing, a child asked why red thread was tied across the third step. 'That stone is still loose,' the mother said. 'The way is open for singing, not for jumping.' The child moved back and clapped in time again.

Reading out the final work register, Rama stated that the safe upper paved landing was open from today; the financial rights under the fishery lease remained subject to its complete contract and the pending inquiry; privacy hours and the payment for washing work were separate; and protected identities would be disclosed only within limits chosen by the individuals concerned. The dues owed to Urmila's family remained in their separate register; the inquiry papers of Mangala and other protected persons remained in closed records. A single receipt did not establish ownership of everything. When the reading ended, no one shouted in triumph. People began gathering up their work.

Ramani rolled up her net and placed the first copy in her bag. Renu filled her pitcher and set out for home. Ruhani returned the confidential envelope to the locked chest, and Rama hung the public copy of the new document on a dry board. Evening light lengthened over the pond. Some women began the song's second verse. There was no haste of mysterious revelation in their voices, only the weariness of a day's work and the small happiness of setting their feet upon a safe path. A fine line of water shone on the stone of the open landing; across the closed step, the red thread stirred lightly in the wind.

Chapter 155 · Testimony to Violence

The damp sound of the song raised yesterday on the newly opened upper steps still lingered in the houses beside Barki Pond. At dawn, as Ramani Bind stretched a rope on which to dry her nets, she saw that the public register again left a blank box beside her name. An entry further along read: ‘Shared use, not fish production.’ She did not shake the water from her hands onto the paper. She was due to meet the leaseholder’s representative again. At that very moment a man stood at the shelter door holding an envelope—apart from the crowd, though not looking as if he had fled his village. Rukhsana showed him the way to a secure room inside.

On Rukhsana’s table stood an ordinary box of medicines, a covered glass of water and a small slip recording the appointment time. Before sitting, the man looked towards the window. ‘What I say here will not go into the public register at the ghat, will it?’ he asked. Ruhani answered, ‘Only what you permit will be shared. First we shall make clear the limits imposed by urgent safety needs and particular legal duties. We will not promise without telling you something we cannot keep.’ The man chose not the chair but the low bench by the window. That was where he preferred to sit.

He tried to speak and fell silent again. Instead of asking his name and address, Ruhani asked, ‘What do you need first today?’ The trembling fingers of his left hand locked into one another. ‘Treatment for the pain. And I want to decide what words to use for what happened yesterday.’ The first sound of raindrops striking the roof came from above. Rukhsana loosened the curtain at the door so that anyone inside could see the way out if they wished. Ruhani spread out a separate consent form for treatment; the page intended for a statement remained closed.

The man explained that two men had subjected him to sexual violence. He stated that fact in words of his own choosing; he had decided not yet to give details of the time, place or identities involved. Ruhani did not ask him to repeat it. The health worker present asked whether he wanted an immediate physical examination or treatment to relieve his pain first. He chose medical assistance first. Each stage of an examination, and the kinds of samples that might be taken, were explained to him; the option of refusing to provide samples was made equally clear. If any were collected, their preservation and the limits on access would have to be recorded separately.

Outside the door an employee remarked, ‘He is a man. Why so much hesitation? Just take down his statement.’ Rukhsana let him finish, then said firmly, ‘Your question will not diminish his hesitation. Being a man takes away none of a person’s rights when he has suffered a crime. He will decide whom he wants to meet now.’ The employee was holding the open attendance register; Rukhsana stopped him from carrying it inside. That register recorded

expenditure on food, medicine and safe accommodation, not the history of anyone's body.

During the examination the health worker announced no conclusions. The treatment paper listed the medicines needed, the date for a further visit and a possible referral to a specialist. It established neither the truth of the allegation of violence nor the identity of a perpetrator. The man said he could not read the paper. Remembering Padma, Ruhani explained each sentence in ordinary language, but she did not invite a student or volunteer from Padma's school to hear confidential medical information. With the man's permission, only a trained assistant continued to explain when the medicines should be taken.

As he emerged from the examination room, the man touched the sleeve of his old kurta. A button near the seam was half broken. The health worker asked whether he wished to keep the clothes safe or wanted a change of clothes arranged. 'Let me keep these with me for now,' he said. 'If I want any tests later, I shall ask then.' He was told about the clothes' possible evidentiary value and how they might be preserved safely, but they were not taken from him by force. He asked for a small needle and thread. Rukhsana gave him sewing things and suppressed her curiosity about how the kurta had come to be damaged. He completed half the repair and kept the rest to do himself.

Champa arrived there. Her own medical records had already been kept private. At the door she asked Rukhsana whether she should go in. From within came the question, 'Who are you?' 'Someone staying at this shelter who knows the right to keep her own story to herself,' Champa answered. 'I do not know what happened to you, and I do not need to.' The man did not invite her in. Without taking offence, Champa filled a glass at the tap beside the doorway and left it there. Ruhani did not turn this act into a public demonstration of anyone's courage.

At the municipal office's open meeting that afternoon, Ramani brought the receipt for her old fishing net. Although the upper access to Barki Pond had been reopened, the shared-production register still described her as a 'cooperating family', with the signature box reserved for her husband. Ramani turned the page round for everyone to see. 'Yesterday the value of my nets was accounted for separately. Why is my right to the labour again hidden under someone else's name today?' Rama examined the original conditions of the lease and wrote: Ramani Bind, actual claimant in respect of shared labour and use; ownership and the legal scope of the lease subject to independent examination.

The leaseholder's representative protested. He said that adding women's names would alter the number of members under the contract. 'If the number is wrong, write the correct number,' Ramani said. 'That does not alter the contract by itself. But why should a person who makes the nets and enters the

water need your permission simply to exist?' Tara compared the older copy of the local labour register. Rama ordered Ramani's name to be added to the approved list for shared use and deferred a decision on the disputed column concerning leasehold rights. Ramani received both a copy and its acknowledgment number.

Renu Gondhi opened the papers of her appeal and showed an old letter containing the word 'Dhauri'. An employee proposed treating it as the pond's definite geographical boundary and drawing a new line. Renu touched the date written at the bottom of the letter. 'This is a place-name in my family's testimony,' she said, 'a reference for understanding the old enclosure. It is not a measurement on a map. I want you to inspect where the old rope was stretched, not build an entire watercourse out of the name written here.' A copy of the letter was attached to the appeal; Renu kept the original in her bag.

Nilima Nurang was also at the office. She was to receive the corrected copy of the marriage register after the restoration of her mother's name. She noticed that the word 'Nima' remained written beside the original document. An employee asked, 'Shall I put a map of this water-name in the same file?' 'My mother's name has been restored,' Nilima said. 'That is a correction to the register. Nima is a word from my family letter. Establishing its watercourse or season requires separate evidence.' She fell silent for a moment at the thought of her mother, but refused the pressure to disclose confidential family matters at the public counter.

Back at the shelter, it was time for the man's medicine. He checked the clock himself and asked for water. A stranger tried to enter, asking for his name and claiming to conduct hearings about complaints. Zubaida pointed to the rule posted on the board: confidential visits required prior consent. The stranger showed an identity card, but that alone gave him no right to a meeting. Ruhani explained the options to the man. 'Not today,' he said. 'Let the people here write down my decision, without filling in its reasons from their own guesses.'

At two o'clock a confidential notice arrived saying that the cost of the treatment could be paid from the relief account, but the receipt was expected to contain a description of the incident. Rukhsana said over the telephone, 'The expenditure category will appear in the public accounts. The identity and details of the violence belong in a closed medical record.' The accountant asked, 'What evidence shall we show if questions are raised?' Ruhani replied, 'Make rules for verifying the bill in an authorised investigation, not for laying the details of someone's body before a crowd. Accounting for public money and protecting personal identity are two different responsibilities.' The medicine was not stopped in the meantime.

The man considered for a long time whether he wanted a family member called. He remembered the name of a friend he trusted, but said that his friend was not to be given the full account of the incident. The permission sheet recorded only the time of the visit, a safe place and the limits on what could be said about his health. First he asked to meet the friend; then, in his own hand, he wrote beneath it: ‘If I become distressed, I can postpone it again.’ Rukhsana was in no hurry to collect a signature. She left the page before him so that there would still be room for him to change his mind.

Towards evening Rosie Lalbegi came to the accounts window at the office. Her attendance for cleaning work was on record, but the field for religion on the computer still contained an old assumption. She showed her declaration and its acknowledgment number. The employee said that if ‘Lalbegi’ appeared on the occupational list, the religion field would fill automatically. ‘My community, my livelihood and my faith are three different things,’ Rozi said. ‘You will not decide my religion from part of my name. I will write whatever religious identity I consider appropriate, and if I leave it blank I shall have that right too.’

Rama directed that Rozi’s declaration be kept in a separate restricted personal register, while payment of her wages for cleaning work was initiated on the basis of verified work. The history of the incorrect entry was not erased; it was marked as wrong so the reason for the correction would remain visible. ‘Who will see the old improper assumption?’ Rozi asked. ‘Those authorised to investigate,’ said Rama. ‘The public page will contain no details beyond what you choose to declare.’ Folding her receipt, Rozi said, ‘This time the payment for my work will not be tied to the name of my faith.’

Niranjan Kisan then arrived with the old order freezing his account. The word ‘Kisan’, part of his family name, had slipped into the computer’s occupation field, and the bank’s name-matching process had failed. Once more he explained, ‘I farm, but this word is also part of my name. It is not right to demand that I choose one meaning and abandon the other.’ The bank representative examined two original documents, wrote instructions for the correction, and was able to order the account reopened with name and occupation recorded separately. The claim for payments lost because of the earlier freeze remained a separate matter.

The day was fading beyond the small counter window. Looking at the approval of his account, Niranjan continued to hold a bag of seeds against his chest. ‘Once the account is open, the wages for work in the field can reach me,’ he said. ‘But what about the interest for the months it was frozen?’ The representative answered, ‘That claim is still under examination.’ Niranjan asked for a written acknowledgment. Rozi, standing nearby, did not smile. She understood the distance between having a name corrected and being compensated for the harm.

After taking his medicine at the shelter, the man felt some relief. He drank water with his own hand and looked through the window, where rain had dampened the edge of the word ‘Privacy’ pasted on the noticeboard. ‘If I do not give a statement, will they stop my treatment?’ he asked. ‘No,’ Ruhani replied at once. ‘Consent to treatment, administrative assistance and a legal statement are separate processes. A trained adviser will explain what legal consequences particular steps may have, but services will not be withheld to put pressure on you.’ The man listened with his head lowered, then asked, ‘Will I get a copy of this?’

An empty bench had been placed in the room arranged for his friend’s visit. Seeing it, the man said, ‘Before we meet, move that bench a little farther from the door.’ Zubaida moved it. He asked again, ‘If my friend comes and finds me silent, what will he say?’ Ruhani replied, ‘I cannot choose the answer to that question. If you wish, you can write your own words beforehand.’ The man wrote only two sentences: ‘I am alive. I will not tell everything yet.’ He kept the paper in his pocket. Whatever silence lay between those two sentences, he gave no one the right to fill it.

On a fresh page of written consent, the man marked three options himself: necessary treatment to continue, identity to remain confidential, and a decision on a detailed formal statement to be deferred. He permitted a short note recording the essential fact of his experience to be kept securely; he did not permit the publication of anonymous testimony. After asking him, one copy of the document was given to him in a sealed envelope and another kept in a secure archive. ‘Let people know only that I received treatment,’ he said. ‘My story is not your success story.’ Ruhani refrained even from quoting that sentence publicly.

A woman volunteer asked, ‘If we all remain silent, will the men who committed the crime not escape?’ Zubaida took her outside. ‘Silence does not mean acquitting the guilty. We must make a way for consent and a safe investigation. That man will decide his own part. We shall not abandon our duties: treatment, protection, preservation of evidence and lawful assistance.’ The volunteer remained silent, but was allowed to write down her question. It would be answered in group training; the man’s identity would not be disclosed for that purpose.

When she reached the edge of the village, Ramani saw that her name had been entered in the new shared-use register, but the next receipt for fish sales had been made out from the old list of members. As she gathered her nets, she listened to her daughter counting; the girl was recording knots and working hours in the new ledger. Ramani marked a correction beside the receipt and registered to see the accountant the following day. Recovering a name did not by itself bring payment for the nets. But there was now a place to make a written claim for what remained due.

Near her house Renu unfolded the letter and looked at the page bearing the name Dhauri. The elder's handwriting was growing fragile. She photographed it for a private copy, not for inclusion on a public water map. 'If this is not a map, why do you keep it?' her daughter asked. 'Because it tells us what paths we came by, and how someone once stopped us,' Renu answered. 'Something does not cease to be a memory merely because the facts have not yet been proved.' The daughter put the page away again.

At home Nilima tried to read the letter from her mother's family. Her mother's name was clear in the corrected marriage register. But with a finger resting in a fold of the letter she remembered a time when even seeing the documents that concerned her rights had seemed impossible. She wrote a request for a second copy for herself, one that would not carry her entire family history into the public list. The name Nima would remain in the letter, but Nilima made no claim that she could fix its geographical meaning.

In the evening kitchen Rukhsana set aside a plate of food for the man, but added no special mark to the meal register on his account. The ordinary meal count covered everyone. Picking up the plate, he asked, 'Can the friend who is coming tomorrow stay here overnight?' Rukhsana showed him the rules: permission to stay inside depended on the safety of the place and the consent of the residents, while a separate room was available for necessary visits. 'Then let us meet somewhere else,' he said. 'I will not share my room yet.' His decision was accepted immediately.

That night an exceptional circumstance was entered in the safety register: one resident had changed the time of a private visit; the details were in the restricted consent form. The public list showed the cost of treatment, not the name. Ruhani saw that leaving the 'reason' field blank on the standard form might again provoke an objection from the accounts department. She wrote: 'A separate procedure is needed for exceptions based on confidentiality. Verify approved expenditure; do not demand a personal history.' Rama and Zubaida signed the sentence separately. Amendment of the rule was placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

A night wind moved through the courtyard. Seated beside the window, the man was looking at the water left in the bottom of his cup. He opened his envelope again and read the first day's consent. He did not tear up the blank statement page. On it he wrote clearly: 'Not yet.' Then he closed the envelope and gave it to Zubaida for safekeeping. Far away, on the open approach to Barki Pond, one cord of a fishing net stirred in the wind. It told no story about anyone's body. It showed only this: even on an open path, each person's footsteps are their own.

Chapter 156 · The Exception to the Rule

A boy unloading a bundle of brinjals in Rukhsana's courtyard soaked the blue paper tucked under his arm. In the fine morning rain, half the letters on the noticeboard outside the shelter had run. Ruhani took the board down and brought it inside. Yesterday, while approving a man's medical expenses, the accounts department had insisted that the cause of the violence be entered on the standard form. Today the office had sent hundreds of printed copies of that same form. Every one contained the same three boxes: name, permanent address, reason for the complaint. There was no fourth box anywhere.

Zubaida ran a finger across the paper. 'If all three boxes are compulsory, people who do not want to give their names publicly will have to turn away.' Rukhsana asked, 'And if we leave them empty, the accountants will withhold payment. Yesterday's medicines were supplied on credit, but we cannot do that every day.' Instead of putting the stack beside the stove to dry, Ruhani laid it on a high table. 'We need names when settling benefits owed to individuals. But why demand someone's entire life history for a public receipt? We shall make a window. First we must decide what kind of path lies behind it.'

The shelter's old food-distribution window stood directly opposite the kitchen. Names were called out loudly there to keep the sequence of plates in order. Ruhani proposed attaching a second wooden counter there for complaints. Zubaida refused at once. 'Anyone listening to a complaint could be identified by people waiting in the kitchen. No one in the food queue should have to answer why they have come here.' They agreed on a low window in the empty veranda behind the courtyard, where the seated visitor's eyes would be level with the paperwork. The front door would remain open; a curtain would be available for private conversation inside.

When Rama Karna arrived at the afternoon meeting, she was carrying an old copy of the regulations. 'One form is convenient for employees,' she said. 'It also keeps the order of evidence consistent.' Ruhani did not tell her the identity of yesterday's man. She mentioned only the existence of a sealed envelope and the category under which his treatment expenses had been entered. 'An identical form for everyone is administrative convenience, not equal access,' she said. Rama sat in the empty chair and counted the papers. 'An exception must not mean an arbitrary order. Write down who decides, within how many days, and where an appeal against refusal may be made.'

Rukhsana brought water from an earthen pitcher. At the sound of the vessel being put down, the man who had received treatment yesterday emerged from his inner room. He wanted to see the new arrangement, but not to discuss his own experience before the meeting. Standing at the window frame, he said, 'I can hand in a slip here. But if my name is read aloud before everyone, this window will remain closed to me.' Ruhani asked, 'Do you want

us to use your experience as an example in trying this arrangement?' He shook his head: no. The limit he had set was recorded without repeating his circumstances: private cases would not be used as examples in public training.

The first rule went into Rama's notebook: making a complaint, receiving necessary treatment and publishing details were three distinct matters requiring separate consent. The second: incomplete personal details would not prevent an immediately necessary service, although legitimate expenditure would still be independently verified. The third: a complaint acknowledgment number was not a substitute for personal identity; the rights of several people would not be joined to a single number. The fourth: withdrawal of an application would not be grounds for deducting treatment already provided or wages demonstrably earned. Rama stopped her pen. 'Do not announce responsibility for all these expenses without an approved budget.'

Just then Anita Chaupal came through the back gate. The edge of her old receipt was so worn that one stroke of its number was scarcely visible. She did not sit among the others at first. Ruhani handed her a small slip offering a choice between an open hearing and a confidential meeting. Anita chose a confidential meeting, but permitted the general nature of her problem to be explained. 'I was assigned to the wrong caste category,' she said, 'and my earnings application went to the wrong counter. If the public correction now prints my family's gotra, generations and the name of that erroneous category, it will create a new market in the mistake.'

Rama called for the old records. The handwriting was clear enough; the mistake lay in the computer classification. A preset list used by an employee had moved Anita's name into another social category. Anita showed her own declaration of identity, the earlier application and the office acknowledgment. 'We shall not erase the wrong entry,' Rama said. 'The reason and date of the correction will remain secure so an authorised investigation can determine how the error occurred.' 'Keep the history,' Anita replied, 'but do not make that history my public identity.' Ruhani proposed two forms of corrected copy: a complete one for Anita, and one showing only the status of the correction for the open list.

'Then how will the public account be certified?' an employee asked. Anita placed her earnings slip on the table. 'Look at the day my work was recorded and the day payment was withheld. My caste did not change between those dates. A wrong box filled by your machine turned my labour into work without wages.' Rama summoned the labour-department employee. A written order instructed that the uncontested portion of the payment, clearly supported by independent attendance records, was not to be delayed until the old caste code had been corrected. Verification of the remaining claim would continue separately. Anita's fingers were still trembling, but for the first time she placed the acknowledgment straight into her bag.

Near midday Basanti Pan was returning from the market. She carried a bundle of betel leaves, their green edges wrapped in damp cloth to keep them from drying. In a government copy the names Pan, Sawasi and Panar had been brought together as ‘synonyms’, leaving no trace of the identity she used in speech. ‘Keep your classification for administrative purposes,’ she said, ‘but if you remove the name I use, my mother’s family name will again be wrong on my daughter’s certificate.’ ‘The government needs one code,’ the employee replied. ‘The code is for your work; the identity is mine,’ Basanti said. ‘Why must they occupy the same box?’

Padma came from the school. She suggested reading the document in two sections: the administrative category prescribed for the purpose of the regulation, and the identity written down as the applicant chose to describe it. The connection between the two could be shown without suggesting that one person had adopted another person’s name. Basanti stipulated that the form she received should clearly retain the name she used, and that unnecessary community details should not go into the open relief list. Rama accepted that format. Picking up her betel leaves, Basanti said, ‘The value of my time in the market is falling. Do not send me around the counters for four more days to get this corrected.’ She received a receipt and written notice of a fixed date.

Amala Sarbariya now came to the window. A bundle of applications bound with old red thread was still in her bag, but the papers of each family had been kept in separate covers. Amla showed three different spellings in three offices: a missing letter here, an altered vowel mark there, a community name merged with another group elsewhere. ‘I have come to ask for a collective correction,’ she said, ‘but if every family receives one common number, a child’s scholarship will again be held up by another person’s claim.’

The municipal information employee proposed one collective identity number. ‘It will reduce the labour of repeated verification,’ he said. Amla untied the knots of red thread for him. Behind each knot lay a different receipt. ‘You may correct the spelling of one word. You cannot turn three lives into one. My brother-in-law’s wages, my neighbour’s scholarship and my own application have different beneficiaries. If you use one number, the payment error will recur.’ Ruhani specified a public order correcting the shared spelling and a separate confidential receipt number for every applicant.

For the first time, a small crowd gathered against the wall by the window. A young man alleged that Amla’s collective application was being used to multiply the number of individual benefits. Amla did not raise her voice. She showed the due dates on her three copies: one scholarship, one wage payment, one earlier relief claim. ‘There are three claims because the loss occurred in three places. One person has not come to collect government money three times.’ Reading the open order aloud to the young man, Rama explained that the beneficiary, eligibility and payment for each claim would be verified

independently. Correcting the community name was not a substitute for that scrutiny; it made such scrutiny possible.

Zubaida hung three differently shaped slips on the wall by the new window. The first said ‘I need help’; the second ‘A record needs correction’; the third ‘I need to speak confidentially’. For those unable to read aloud, Rukhsana explained the shapes instead of relying on colour; they also made provision for people with limited vision to recognise them by touch. A pupil from the class on signs asked what people who could not distinguish colours would do. Instead of answering, Padma put three samples with different textures into the child’s hand. The child paused a finger over the second and smiled. No one’s private complaint was used as an exercise for the children.

The keeper of the kitchen accounts arrived too. ‘Two employees’ hours for the window, curtain cloth, copying paper, a private lockbox—which account will pay?’ he asked. ‘Do not hide these costs in the shelter’s ordinary food provision or confidential medical expenses,’ Ruhani said. ‘Show them separately in the committee’s public administration account, but without the beneficiaries’ names.’ Rama recorded a limited budget approval: a first-month trial, fixed rates of pay, and weekly review. A proposal to make Zubaida and Rukhsana work indefinitely without wages on the new task was rejected.

Until evening an elderly couple sat before the counter. One of them held a copy of an Aadhaar document, but the employee wanted to send them away because the photograph was blurred. Ruhani did not immediately accept it as proof of identity; she showed the alternative path of verification: the earlier authenticated relief register, a separate register of local testimony, and a time for authorised checking. ‘Will we get rice today?’ the elderly woman asked. Zubaida checked the general entitlement to food. ‘You need not wait for all this paperwork to be finished to receive a meal. The claim for a special grant will be checked separately.’ The woman lifted her plate. The slip remained for the next day.

Meanwhile an old list of river journeys arrived from the office. Some of the home addresses of pupils at Rachana’s school had been moved from the Tilwah strip recorded in the narrative to the name ‘Tilayuga’. In the margin someone had written ‘Tilayugba’ by hand. Reading the copy, Gopal Majhi said, ‘The sounds resemble one another, but if we declare all three to be the same river, we shall change the landing where people must arrive.’ Rama examined the different locations and purposes of the older sources. Tilwah was a water route in this narrative world; Tilayuga and Tilayugba were names appearing in other source registers. It was prohibited to merge one record into another without site measurement.

‘Then how shall the boat timetable be corrected?’ Gopal asked. ‘We shall ask independently where each child is currently picked up and preserve the names used in the sources,’ Rachana replied. ‘We shall not mark anyone

absent because of a false equivalence of names.’ The claim for three families whose days had been deducted from the older travel expenses was reopened. Whether Gopal had actually carried them by boat would be checked against his papers and the school attendance records. A river’s name would not be used to manufacture false earnings for a boatman; nor would sound-alike names be grounds for deducting money properly owed.

Seeing water dripping into the veranda, Rukhsana folded up and tied the bottom of the curtain. At that moment yesterday’s man was returning from his visit with his friend. No one asked how much they had said to one another. The man came to the counter to report a new time for his medicine. Instead of looking into his eyes, Rama showed him the alternative box on the otherwise blank form. ‘If you wish, you can choose a sealed acknowledgment for verification by the responsible officer.’ The man chose the sealed acknowledgment. Nobody pressed him to enter a date for a legal statement. The earlier page bearing the words ‘Not yet’ remained unchanged.

Rama opened the day’s final account. Its first column recorded approved expenditure; the second, amounts still owed where a claim had been accepted only in part; the third, the route of appeal against a decision. She rejected a proposal to collapse them all into one total figure. The order releasing the uncontested portion of Anita’s withheld earnings, the date for providing Basanti’s corrected identity copy, and the common spelling-correction order sought by Amla each received a separate acknowledgment. No one order automatically settled the rights of another family.

Anita returned to the window. She had come fearing that her full name would appear on the public board. It said only: application concerning erroneous classification accepted; privacy-protected copy supplied to the person concerned; payment instructions issued. Distrust did not entirely leave Anita’s eyes. ‘What if the old copy is already outside?’ she asked. ‘We shall issue a separate order to stop circulation of that copy and correct its source,’ Ruhani said. ‘We cannot erase by magic the copies that have already gone out.’ For the first time Anita asked not for reassurance but for a clear deadline. It was written down.

Basanti had to return to the market. Reading the sample copy at the counter, she said, ‘The official equivalence of Pan, Sawasi and Panar is in this box; the identity I speak in my own words is here. Neither is swallowing the other.’ As she folded the paper she scraped an edge of her betel leaves. Rukhsana gave her a small bowl to sprinkle water over them. ‘Today my leaves have survived, and so has my name,’ Basanti said with a laugh. ‘But who will count the price of the half-day’s trade I have lost?’ Rama arranged for her to collect the corrected copy through a local receipt centre without another unnecessary journey; her claim for lost earnings was accepted for examination with supporting evidence.

Amla was binding the separate slips for the three families, but this time left the three knots of red thread loose. Each cover bore its own sequence number; above them was one order correcting the shared word. An office employee warned that the software would have to be changed to carry out the correction. ‘Then change it,’ Amla said. ‘If the machine sees only one name, that is a limitation of the machine, not a failing in the people.’ Rama entered a deadline for the technical change and assigned responsibility for manual verification to a named officer until then. After checking the officer’s signature, Amla put the slips into her bag.

Ramani Bind arrived from the ghat approach. Her name had been added to the shared-use register, but the older fish-sales receipt still bore the names of the former members. Seeing the three sample forms at the window, she asked, ‘Which slip is for my complaint?’ ‘Choose for yourself,’ Zubaida said. ‘If we misunderstand, we can change it.’ Ramani chose ‘A record needs correction’, then wrote beneath it: ‘Right to unpaid sums.’ She was told that a preliminary hearing on dues for verified work could proceed without awaiting the decision on the contested fishing lease. Ramani’s claim had not been closed, but it now had a fresh acknowledgment number.

As Ruhani signed the budget copy, a municipal council officer objected that if such exceptions were granted, every village would demand documents under its own rules. ‘Where will uniform government procedure be left?’ he asked. Rama replied, ‘The standard of evidence will remain the same. The route by which one reaches it can vary. Read a document aloud for someone who cannot read; provide a sealed copy for someone whose identity would be endangered by disclosure; give someone whose name is misspelled an avenue of correction and appeal. None of this weakens the evidence. It makes it more capable of scrutiny.’ The officer accepted a time-limited trial, but did not yet grant permanent approval.

Even that did not settle everything. Two representatives of the employees’ union arrived to say that staff could not give additional hours at the new window without appointment letters. Zubaida supported them. ‘We shall not ask shelter residents to fill out forms throughout the night,’ she said. The proposals for fixed shifts, rest, training and wages during the first month were reconsidered. Rukhsana did not undertake to hear confidential complaints herself on top of distributing meals; separate shifts were assigned. The initial costs remained open in the public budget, personal identities in the restricted register.

At sunset a plain wooden board was fixed over the new window: ‘Complaints, Corrections, Appeals’. It carried no community name, photograph of a survivor or donor’s name. Zubaida locked the chest behind her but did not close the shutter. The staff shift would begin at dawn tomorrow. The acknowledgments for Anita, Basanti and Amla would be placed in separate sealed covers by the responsible officer, not by Zubaida

herself; only expenditure figures would be available in the common room. An evening had passed in making these distinctions, but people wounded by errors could, for the first time, choose the way in which they would speak.

Just then a new proposal arrived for the transport expenses of a council inspection team travelling beyond the local boundary. It stated: ‘Mobile verification camps will enter every village and compile a complete list of all names.’ Rama read it and stopped her pen. ‘Why should the rules at the window we opened here for complaints cease to apply when we go into a village?’ She struck out ‘all’ and wrote ‘on the basis of local consent and separate rights’. Ruhani added the requirement that the team’s travel accounts, interpreters’ wages and costs of safeguarding records be shown separately. The proposal was returned for approval. Before any horse moved, the papers authorising the journey and its expenses would have to move first.

After the kitchen closed that night, Rukhsana lifted the empty box beneath the window. There was one plain slip inside, without a name. It said only: ‘I want to be heard, but not in front of everybody.’ She did not make it into a proclamation from a platform. She set aside a blank appointment sheet for a confidential meeting the next day. A thin runnel of water crossed the courtyard below the board where the three signs for complaints had dried. There was one roof, but within it each person was gaining the right to enter by a different path.

Parva 14 · Aśvamedha | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 157 · The Path of the Unbridled Horse

Some time after the war had ended, an artisan was spreading a gold-bordered cloth over the back of a white horse in the royal stables at Hastinapur. His needle caught in a fold. He worked it free and made another stitch, but the restless horse tossed its head. Arjuna stood beside it. The commander said that the farther the horse could travel without hindrance, the farther the proclamation of the king's sovereign authority would reach. Arjuna looked into its eyes. The horse understood nothing of the letters of a royal command; it understood wide fields and an open road.

In the assembly at Hastinapur the instructions for the journey had already been drawn up. Wherever the horse entered, the ruler of that territory would have to answer with submission or war. The document was brought for Yudhishthira's signature. The king stopped at the first line. 'We seek a declaration of victory,' the priest said. 'The purpose of the Aśvamedha is the standing of the kingdom.' Yudhishthira replied, 'If a road is opened in my name, will silencing the people who live along it also be called the kingdom's standing?' The assembly fell silent at the question, but the document was not torn up.

Arjuna was entrusted with guarding the horse. He received a banner, weapons and a copy of the royal seal. Nakula oversaw the accounts for provisions and the horse's care. Pointing to an empty margin of the document, Draupadi asked, 'Where will you enter those who are not counted among the soldiers? The people who clear the road, bring fodder for the horse, and spend the night wherever it halts—women and men alike?' An officer said those were expenses outside the ritual. With her own hand Draupadi added a line in the margin: 'Where we take labour for the road, we shall pay for it.' Arjuna kept a copy of that page with him.

The horse passed through the first two villages undisturbed. Outside the third its hooves sank into sandy soil. An old narrow footpath, now being called the royal highway, ran between fields newly sown. The villagers set down their loads and stood in its way. A soldier in the advance party raised his spear to clear the path. Arjuna stopped his hand. A woman set down an earthen water-pot, bound about with leaves, and said, 'How has the field boundary that was ours until yesterday become a royal highway today?'

'The king's horse has come here,' the soldier replied. 'You must now obey.' The woman said, 'The horse did not ask what language I speak. But all the people following it are capable of giving me an answer.' Her husband had died in the war; no one had asked which side the king belonged to. What she

needed was time to cultivate her field. The village headman came forward and said that breaking the boundary of the new crop would send water flowing in the wrong direction. For the first time Arjuna felt how the direction taken by one of the horse's hooves could fall upon another person's food for an entire year.

Arjuna halted the horse there and ordered the troops back. The villagers showed them another narrow route, where two members of an old bridge had broken. The soldiers called its repair a matter of 'royal duty' and demanded labour without payment. The woman asked again, 'If a day of my hands belongs to royal duty, who will give my child rice?' Arjuna remembered Draupadi's words in the margin. Agreement was reached on three decisions: the materials for the repair would come from the royal stores, the local artisans would set their own rates, and the travellers would cross only after the bridge's carrying capacity had been tested.

The headman opened the paper bearing the royal seal. 'I accept that you may take the horse across,' he said, 'but I will not accept a copy saying that by doing so we have closed our own council of justice.' The commander objected that if such words were written down, victory would be emptied of meaning. Arjuna replied, 'What is called consent must have its boundaries in writing. If we call silence born of fear agreement, it is not the sacrificial horse that is making this journey but our soldiers.' His desire for victory had not diminished; what had changed was the way in which victory was to be recorded.

That night they camped outside the village. A boy who fed the horse asked whether it was travelling to teach the villages the new king's name or searching for the road home. Arjuna did not laugh. He added the boy's payment for foddering the horse to his own list. The lamps in distant houses had gone out. Beside Draupadi's line Arjuna wrote: 'Consent to provide passage and a declaration of royal subjection are two separate documents.' As he wrote, he knew that this amendment could not erase the violence of the entire Aśvamedha; someone who stopped the horse in the next territory would have another claim to make.

Around the fire that night the soldiers said among themselves that if word of this reached the next king's court, Arjuna's valour would be questioned. A young soldier, watching the horse's reins, asked, 'Why should villagers have the right to write down what we have conquered?' Arjuna told him to hold the horse. The soldier felt the coarse reins against his palm. 'You hold the reins,' Arjuna said, 'but the horse has not become part of your body. Control in your own hand is not the same as a right over another life.' The soldier did not answer. At dawn he volunteered to check the knot on the purse from which the village artisans would be paid.

In the last week of Phagun, in 2040, an iron trunk was being fastened to the roof of a small vehicle behind the shelter's veranda. Rama Karna loosened the knot in the rope. 'Are you afraid the trunk will fall?' the driver asked. 'I am afraid,' Rama said, 'that the people to whom the papers inside belong have not been told where we are taking them.' The travel order stamped by the council was in her hand, not on the roof. The previous day a proposal to compile 'a list of all names' had been amended and sent back.

The revised order approved the cost of the vehicle and staff, but required separate local permission to enter each village. An official called the line a needless delay. 'If every village begins making its own rules, how will an inspection be carried out?' Rama showed him the blank permission form. 'There will be one governmental standard of measurement for everyone. But the right to open a village door does not reside in the tyres of our vehicle.' She made it clear that the old original office registers would not be moved. Verified copies would go out, a copy of any new particulars would remain in the village, and confidential papers would be kept in sealed envelopes.

Ruhani drew a red line through the demand for a list of the shelter's residents. 'We shall provide the total number of rations,' she said, 'but not a public list saying who lives here for treatment and who has taken refuge from violence.' The interpreter assigned to travel with the driver asked for her rate of pay. The first budget had entered her as a volunteer. Ruhani did not boast that she could rewrite the rule at once. She placed before Rama an application for an order authorising paid interpreting work, separate from approved staff hours and other budget headings. The camp vehicle left half a watch late, but it did not leave behind a debt of anyone's unpaid time.

The accounts assistant in the front seat checked the expenditure list again. The council had asked only for petrol receipts; neither the travellers' food nor the local interpreters' time had been entered. Rama had the source of each expense recorded beside its item. The driver said that on the last camp journey he had received his two days' hire four weeks late. This time he was given the authorised advance for the first day, although the balance would be paid only after confirmation of the journey. 'We will not borrow anyone's regular labour in the name of emergency assistance,' Ruhani said. As the vehicle started, the empty seat with its curtain rattled against the jolts. It had been kept available as a protected place for a private applicant.

At the eastern bend of the market Farida Qureshi stood looking at the old boycott notice pasted to her shop door. The inspectors' final sample report had arrived. The previously stated defect in the cleaning strip had been corrected; on the basis of the recorded result of the test sample, an order to close the shop was not warranted. But the time of purchase and the storage conditions behind an old customer's complaint about a smell had not yet been established. Farida herself had not asked for that outstanding matter to be removed from the report.

The president of the market association wanted to replace the boycott notice with a smaller new sheet: ‘Shop Found Innocent on Inspection’. Farida stopped his pen. ‘Write only what the conclusion says. Let the defect that was corrected remain in the record, and write down separately the complaint that is still open. If another rumour rises tomorrow behind the word “innocent”, my position will be weaker.’ An elderly customer said, ‘I had stopped buying out of fear.’ Farida did not reproach him; she showed him her scales and said that choosing where to buy was one thing, organising the closure of every shop in a community’s name quite another.

Two boys came running up from their games and asked to photograph Farida’s inspection report. They wanted to put it on the school wall so that the old accusation would be disgraced for ever. Farida stopped them at her doorway. ‘Read the public findings of the inspection, but do not put up a customer’s name or the unfinished details of a complaint. I will not avenge the humiliation done to me by humiliating somebody else.’ One boy asked whether they could at least name the market-association president. Farida said that a signature on an order formed part of public accountability, but that there was no reason to add the names of his family. The boys reconsidered the words they would write on the board.

Rama read the authorised copy of the inspection findings aloud to the market association. The president had no documentary basis for the initial boycott. After discussion, the association publicly withdrew its former collective boycott order and agreed to display the inspection’s actual, limited findings on the new noticeboard. Farida’s old customers did not all return at once. One shop employee’s pay for the previous fortnight was overdue. Farida decided to give an advance that night, but did not abandon her separate claim against the market association for sales lost during the boycott.

When the camp vehicle reached the village square, two men stood outside Rita Ekka’s house with documents in their hands. Rita had dried her copy of the debt-collection notice again and kept it wrapped in red cloth. The collector said that unless she paid by the following week, her tools would be taken. ‘Have you brought the original bearing what you say is my signature?’ Rita asked. He showed her a photograph, not the original agreement. Rama said that the photograph would be retained as information received, not substituted for the original contract.

‘It would be best if all debts were stopped,’ Rita’s frightened brother said. Rita stopped him. ‘I took out a small loan of my own for my sewing tools. I have paid two instalments, and the third date is approaching. That is my obligation. But I will not repay somebody else’s debt merely because they took the signature I gave as a witness on the ghat-repair application and put that liability upon me.’ She laid her genuine loan receipts and the falsely attached collection notice apart. She wanted a separate identification number for each.

Rama took the incomplete order for seizure of the tools from the collection officer. The document had matched the borrower's name against Rita's, but there was no original evidence of a guarantee. She issued an acknowledgment of the objection and sent written notice seeking an interim order suspending seizure based on the wrongly associated name. This was not forgiveness of a debt. The third instalment of Rita's genuine tool loan remained due under its original terms; the payment date had not changed. Rita signed to affirm that distinction, for she would not use a false debt as a shield against her real one.

Meanwhile two teachers asked the inspection team to hold its camp at the school. An old caste-wise list of names, however, was still pinned to one of the walls. The teachers proposed photographing everyone and sending the pictures to the office. Padma, who had come to advise on interpreting and access to education, objected. 'A shared schoolroom is not a public copy of every name. People who need mistakes corrected must have a separate place in which to give consent.' The village women's committee made an empty library room available. Its members kept the key, and the team was given a stated period of access.

When the first family arrived, it received a copy showing its surname misspelt. A member wanted to photograph the document on a mobile phone. An employee said that putting it on the website would be convenient for everyone. 'Keeping your own copy,' Rama said, 'and giving everybody the right to see it are different things.' The family chose the first. The employee's irritation was plain: how many permissions would be needed for one error? 'As many as there are different people,' answered the elderly keeper of the library. Outside the open door children sat drawing pictures. The names being considered inside did not become captions to their drawings.

The village headman found a line in the travel register that read, 'Survey complete.' He struck it out. 'Only half the hamlet has come today. Call the families who went to market absent, not consenting.' In the space Rama wrote, 'First meeting held; remaining consultations according to local schedules.' The headman stipulated another condition: after the camp returned, a usable copy of each amendment would remain in the village. The council official said the originals would remain in the office. 'Keep the originals,' the headman replied, 'but an acknowledgment number in our hands will not let us read the account.' The condition was entered in writing.

Outside the library an elderly woman spread a mat and sat down. Waiting for the camp had kept her from going to market for three hours. An employee said the villagers themselves had arranged the mat, so her time could not be charged to a government file. 'I am not blaming you because I made no sales today,' the woman asked, 'but if we cannot decide when you will come next, must we keep losing our days?' Rama took out a new appointment slip. The village representatives, the school and the camp team

jointly wrote down the time of the next meeting; a representative of the women present also signed it.

In the evening, after paying her employee an advance, Farida saw the camp vehicle on her way home. The tools were still in place outside Rita's house. The two women met at the market bend. 'Is your business finished?' Farida asked. 'The papers to stop the false recovery have gone forward; the genuine instalment is still due. And yours?' Rita replied. Farida laughed. 'The notice has come down; the fear has not. But today a customer asked about my scales, not my name.' In that small exchange they recovered something of the labour of their day, not the whole of their loss.

The vehicle returned to the shelter before nightfall. Ruhani entered the totals of complaints, copies and approved travel expenses in the public ledger, but none of the private histories of the households. Padma counted the interpreter's working hours separately. Opening the register, Rama saw that nowhere had they written, 'All villages consented.' The women of one village had taken back the key; another settlement had not yet permitted the next journey. The team's onward route remained blank, but the blank space was not proof of defeat.

In that camp at ancient Hastinapur, whose time was altogether different from that of these modern papers, Arjuna's horse stood at the next dawn looking not towards its own doorway but towards a distant mountain path. The boy came to the repaired village bridge carrying a receipt for the payment for fodder. Arjuna did not fill out the slip on his behalf: the boy wrote his own name. 'The horse may go on,' the headman said. 'We will not obstruct your procession's passage. But that is the full extent of our consent.' Arjuna kept those limited words intact, though he knew they would make difficult news for Hastinapur.

That night, at a table in the modern shelter, Rama put the village papers in two separate envelopes: one recording consent to entry, the other the amended claim concerning dues and rights. There was no sound of a horse's hooves anywhere; outside, the vehicle's wheels had cooled. Reading the message received from afar, Sarita asked, 'Shall we call those who refused to meet us today "obstructionists" tomorrow?' Rama showed her the empty line. 'No. We shall write, "Awaiting a response."' Sarita signed the page. On the next journey they had yet to discover who each person was and by what name that person wished to be addressed.

Chapter 158 · Arjuna's Identity

At the royal gate of Manipur a brass-clad bell rang softly whenever the wind touched it. Beneath it the marks of horses' hooves were still fresh. From the rampart a guard saw the white horse of Hastinapur's Aśvamedha crossing a shallow channel of the river and moving towards the capital. Arjuna's banner followed behind. When the news reached the palace, Babhruvahana was tightening the string of his bow. 'Your father is coming now,' his teacher said. Babhruvahana released one knot and asked, 'The man who left his home—shall I call him a guest, or the overlord of my kingdom?'

Chitrangada was watching the soldiers practise in the inner courtyard of the palace. She did not stop the exercise on hearing the news. Only when the training had ended did she summon her son. 'He is your father,' she said, 'but the hand with which you use your weapons, the people of this kingdom, and the years you have lived here were formed in his absence. Show him respect; do not allow your people to become anyone's gift.' Her son asked in what order the names of father and mother should be entered in the court genealogy. 'Write down the people's trust first,' Chitrangada said. 'After that, record truthfully whatever relationship each person bears.'

Arjuna reached the ramparts at noon. Fruits, sandalwood paste and water were brought to welcome him. Babhruvahana bowed in greeting. The commander accompanying Arjuna was dissatisfied at this reception. 'At the sight of the Aśvamedha horse, the army of the emperor must be met with battle or submission,' he said. Arjuna's face hardened. The long years of war had bound respect and challenge together in his mind. He asked his son, 'Where have you put the courage of your bow? Are you hiding your decision to fight behind this welcome?'

The tray of sandalwood trembled in Babhruvahana's hands. 'I have had the courage to spare my city a war,' he said. 'But if obeying you means erasing the consent of my people, I will take up my bow.' The commander interpreted this as an insult to the crown. Inside the assembly hall, the artisan who had made the guard-strip for the royal gate had not yet been paid for the day's reception. Chitrangada summoned him before anyone else. 'First pay the person whose labour made this gate open,' she said. 'Afterwards we may debate the pride of the royal line.' Arjuna's soldiers began opening their expenditure book.

As evening fell, a woman appeared beside the river. Water shone upon her garments, although the guard could not tell whether it was flowing water or the brightness of a silk ribbon. Ulupi introduced herself. 'I am that part of Arjuna's life which cannot be kept outside this kingdom if his full name is to be written.' Two trusted people from the realm of the Nagas accompanied her.

Ulupi had not come to claim authority over Manipur. She wanted to know whether Chitrangada's voice would be erased by Babhruvahana's decision.

Arjuna fell silent for a few moments on seeing Ulupi. The name of Iravan rose in his memory: Ulupi's son, whose life had been lost in the horrors of the war. Ulupi did not prolong the subject of grief. 'Do not make my decision subject to your name merely by speaking the name of my son,' she said quietly. 'Chitrangada is this son's mother. The public labour of raising and governing him cannot be erased by one day of Aśvamedha. I have my own family, my own grief and my own promises. I have not come here to take another woman's place.'

The following morning three kinds of documents were spread out in the assembly hall: the daily records of Manipur's government, the proclamation announcing the entrance of Arjuna's horse, and the record of Babhruvahana's welcome. The commander wanted all three bound under a single royal seal. Chitrangada untied the red cord and put the first sheet aside. 'On this are written our people's water, crops and justice,' she said. 'The second records the journey of your sacrifice. Binding together documents that cannot be merged does not give them a single meaning.' Babhruvahana stood beside his mother but did not make the decision for her.

This time Arjuna summoned his son to the practice ground. The distance between their bows was measured. The horse was tied beside the fallow land, not brought into the midst of the contest. Babhruvahana shot his first arrow into the earth some distance from Arjuna's feet. Arjuna answered with an arrow that brushed the edge of his son's crown. A cry rose from the spectators' throats. Chitrangada ordered the soldiers not to advance. Ulupi remained at the outer boundary of the ground, never taking her eyes away. She understood that if blood had to be shed to prove a name, war would once again determine the value of a family.

At the second turn Babhruvahana's arrow severed the string of Arjuna's bow. 'An insult to the king!' the commander shouted. But Arjuna raised his hand to stop him. Babhruvahana lowered his own arrow and, before approaching his father, said, 'I did not inherit my skill with the bow from you through my blood. I learned from my mother, my teacher and the grounds of this kingdom. I can honour the father whose blood is in me without making that blood the master of everything I do.' Such a silence fell upon the field that the horse could be heard breathing.

Arjuna lifted the two ends of the broken bowstring. He remembered many accounts of war. In some, a clash between father and son carried them to a dreadful end; in others, a miraculous jewel from the Naga realm defied death itself. But standing before him this morning was a living son, bearing the trust of the citizens of his kingdom and asking for an answer. 'Under the guise of testing your courage,' Arjuna said, 'I wanted to burden you with my own

name. Your answer has taught me that you did not lose the years of my absence.' Instead of accepting another bow of homage, he took his son's hand. He made no proclamation of victory.

Ulupi came forward and picked up the broken arrow lying beside Babhruvahana. 'Who will keep these two pieces of wood?' she asked. 'I will keep one,' Babhruvahana answered. 'The other is for my father.' Chitrangada intervened. 'But the kingdom's document belongs to all of us. It cannot be exchanged for anybody's keepsake.' A public declaration was then written: the horse would pass through Manipur, but permission for its passage did not mean Manipur had surrendered its own succession or governance. Ulupi signed as a witness to the declaration, not as someone claiming either land or son.

When the horse left the palace, Chitrangada did not go to the royal gate to see her son off. She returned to an inner chamber to hear an old petition about repairs to the field canals. Babhruvahana himself entered the date in the register of the royal visit. Arjuna's attendant asked whether a song should be sung in the assembly to celebrate the meeting of father and son. 'Sing it,' Babhruvahana said, 'but if you leave my mother's name out of the song, do not sing it in this hall.' Dew fell from the leaves of distant trees. Alongside the impressions of the horse's hooves, the footprints of the artisans remained in the earth beside the canal.

Far removed in time from this ancient journey, in the spring of 2040, Kabir sat in the shelter library with two copies of an old foster-care register open before him. One line carried the guardian's name; another had an empty space for questions concerning birth. Subhadra had already insisted that the reason for the blank be established; she also had the right to choose when her private letter would be disclosed. This time Kabir did not ask for the letter. He wrote a note requesting an appointment with the woman who had raised him. Since Naira's death, it had become harder for him to keep postponing every meeting.

Sarita came outside the library. She carried none of Naira's private notebooks, only the school's newly printed timetable. Seeing Kabir, she said, 'When you go, ask that woman how many days you were ill as a child. That will not answer the question of your birth, but it belongs to the history of your care.' 'I will not let my right to the life in which I was raised disappear into conjecture about my birth,' Kabir answered softly. 'The history of the work done by the woman I called mother will not become smaller because I ask questions.'

At the shelter door an employee read Kabir's note and said that once the birth mother's name was found in the papers, the foster-care register would be closed automatically. Kabir stopped him at once. 'Where is such an automatic rule written?' The employee showed him a draft screen from the old software, not a legal order. Rama instructed that separate accounts be opened for the

actual period of care, the account given by the person concerned, and the status of the sources relating to birth. Kabir did not insist that every answer must be one he would like. What he wanted was for even an uncertain answer to be spared the falseness of invented certainty.

Meanwhile Durga Gangai was weighing bags of makhana and flattened rice for two new customers in the next row of the market. The clerk of the large trader who used to take her goods on credit came again. ‘These new buyers you have found were our customers before,’ he said. Durga steadied her weights. ‘I make my own goods. What document has given you the right to choose whom I sell them to?’ The clerk held out the old credit ledger, which showed that money was still owed to Durga but gave the trader no exclusive right to any new goods.

The new buyers belonged to a team that delivered meals to the shelter. They said openly that they would take a fixed quantity over the next fortnight, but wanted a written condition allowing them to return any bags found damp. Durga hesitated at first. The year before, the loss on a damp batch had fallen upon her. Finally she showed them her covered bags and decided to provide a small trial consignment. Price, delivery time, return of spoiled goods and the wages for carriage were written in four separate lines. Durga signed the paper with her own hand.

When she returned home, Durga examined her old remaining stock. Two bags had developed a different smell; selling them to the new customers could have brought in a little extra money. ‘If we throw them away, who bears the loss?’ her daughter asked. Durga opened the bags, then tied them up again. ‘This consignment spoiled while it was my responsibility,’ she said. ‘I will bear the loss. If I deceive the new buyers, what difference will there be between me and the trader who kept us waiting for payment?’ She entered the amount in her loss book and decided to get up early to prepare the consignment of sound goods.

A short distance away, Suraj Gangota stood in the loan office with his son Harihar. The old boundary of their field had disappeared in the river’s erosion. The source document naming Dhemura was in Suraj’s bag, but it did not establish the present boundary of the land. An officer pointed to the balance of the principal loan. ‘If the land is gone, how are we to recover the arrears?’ he asked. ‘If the land is gone,’ Harihar retorted, ‘how can we pay instalments calculated on the old harvest?’ Suraj stopped them both. ‘I am not asking for a false hope of forgiveness. I want a bearable account with new dates.’

The office ledger continued to record the annual yield at the old valuation of the eroded field. Their livelihood now came from small jobs and vegetables grown on the remaining strip. At first the accounts clerk said that a fresh agreement would require a complete survey of the land again. The limitations of the measurements, however, had been clearly stated in an old working

paper by Tara Mallik. Suraj did not turn that paper into final proof of his own land claim. He asked that the duration of the loan and its instalments be restructured in light of his present income, while the separate inquiries into ownership and compensation for erosion continued.

The officer first proposed a single lump-sum payment. Harihar's face fell; there would be nothing left to buy seed. Suraj was silent, then took from his bag a short account of the family's actual income over the next two months. After examining it, a woman accountant in the office prepared another proposal: the old outstanding balance would remain recorded, immediate seizure proceedings would be suspended, small regular instalments would be fixed, and a date set for review. It was not final cancellation of the loan. 'And if the flood comes again?' Suraj asked. 'Then there will be a route for further evidence and reconsideration,' she replied. 'The same predetermined, false figure will not be imposed.'

Before signing, Harihar read the place name on the paper. The old source said 'Dhemura'; the new administrative heading gave another name for the watercourse. He did not take up his pen to strike both out and declare a newly named river. 'Let the name remain as it is in the document from which the history of the debt comes,' he said. 'Let the measurement in the present land record be kept separately.' The officer attached a copy of the source document. Beside his thumbprint, Suraj asked that the date of the new instalment be read aloud to him. This time the male clerk did not grow impatient; he read each line again.

When Suraj and Harihar came outside, the dried mud on the river's western channel was cracking in the sun. 'Father, the field has not come back,' Harihar said. 'But the fear of having the tools taken from the house has eased a little.' 'Do not turn that easing of fear into a flag of victory,' Suraj replied. 'Next month's instalment still has to be paid.' He shook the mud from his sandals and tucked the new agreement inside his clothing. No one was required to pretend that land which no longer existed had been restored. Only the time of their debt had, for the first time, begun to move at the pace of their present lives.

At midday Kabir reached the woman who had raised him. She was watering the tulsi plant on the veranda. Instead of opening his papers, he first asked about the pain in her back. 'When you were little, I carried so much weight that my back still keeps the accounts of those years,' she said. Neither of them laughed. Between them there arose the familiar weight of old labour. Kabir asked who had stayed awake on the nights when he was ill. She named two people but could not remember a third. Kabir did not fill the blank himself.

In her cupboard lay an old woollen blanket, a little tree embroidered in small stitches along the border during Kabir's childhood. 'Who made this?' he asked. 'You used to feel the cold, so a neighbour stitched it,' she replied. 'We

shall ask her grandson her name now.’ In his notebook Kabir wrote, ‘Neighbour’s contribution—identity still to be established.’ ‘Are you afraid your search for your birth will make you forget me?’ the woman asked. Looking at the blanket’s frayed stitches, Kabir said, ‘No. I was afraid that the life in which I was raised would not even have a name in the records.’

In the evening Kabir returned to Sarita. Since Naira’s death the empty chair in Sarita’s house was still in its place. Neither hurried to display an old photograph on it or put some new symbol there. Kabir told her of his visit, but did not pass on the foster mother’s private words in someone else’s name without permission. Sarita asked only, ‘Did you find anything?’ ‘Two names remembered, one name uncertain, and the stitches of a blanket,’ Kabir said. ‘That does not settle the question of my birth. But it is a way of hearing how I survived.’

That night the draft itinerary for the mobile records team’s next journey arrived. The villages’ names were printed on the list, but their forms in local speech were written differently. ‘What do the people of the village themselves call the place you have written here?’ Rama Karna asked an employee. He said that the name on the government map was sufficient. Kabir, who had come to collect a copy of a document, said quietly, ‘The name on the map may be useful for travelling. The name in people’s own language is needed for listening to them.’ Rama added to the camp permission form a request for a local interpreter to attend.

The receipt for the first consignment to Durga’s new buyer also arrived that day. Payment for the sound goods had been deposited on time, but half the carrying wages were still outstanding. Durga did not count that balance as her own profit; she set it aside separately in the labourer’s name. Suraj put the receipt for his small first instalment into the tin box at home, not into an account for relief grants. Kabir closed his notebook of questions about foster care. The ledgers of the three households did not record one identical matter, but different obligations each still had to honour.

On a morning in Manipur long ago, Arjuna’s horse had already disappeared among the thick trees. At the palace table Chitrangada was examining approval for the repair of a canal; Ulupi was leaving with her people. Babhruvahana came to his mother carrying half the broken arrow in his palm. ‘Did my father recognise me or not?’ he asked. ‘He saw your weapon,’ Chitrangada said. ‘Do not make recognition into the vision of a single day. Tomorrow too you must hear the decisions of these people.’ Babhruvahana put down the piece of arrow and opened the account of wages still owed to the canal workers.

At the shelter in 2040 the last night shift was changing. Ruhani put aside the sealed private envelopes for the next camp; the page recording public travel expenditure remained open for everyone to read. Rama left blank the

space for the local contact's name—it would be filled only when the village consented. Kabir locked away his notebook on the history of his upbringing and kept the key himself. No one yet had a complete answer about his birth; no field lost to the river had been returned whole. But alongside the right to ask the correct question, room had opened for people to choose the language in which its answer would be given.

Chapter 159 · The Moving Archive

At the first dawn of Chait in 2040, Sarita was tightening the rope securing a trunk to the roof of a dilapidated bus. The night's dew had made it slippery. The driver said that bringing the trunk inside would take away space from passengers. Sarita was unwilling to open its lid. It held no original identity documents, only blank sheets, printed receipt books, mats, a seal wrapped in cloth, and a separate envelope containing the interpreter's wages. As Rama Karna climbed the bus steps, she asked, 'Will we spread out the mat before we hear what people have to say when we reach the village?' Sarita tied one more knot. 'First we shall ask where we have permission to spread it.'

Coming off the shelter's night shift, Rukhsana walked as far as the bus. She checked the locked box of private envelopes and said that not every member of the team had authority to open confidential records. Ruhani had placed the list of public travel expenses in a separate bag: the vehicle hire on the first sheet, the interpreter's working hours on the second, and the advance for drinking water and the midday meal on the third. Sarita saw that an office employee had entered the interpreting as 'voluntary assistance'. She crossed out the words and wrote 'remuneration due'. 'How can the work of someone without whose language our files cannot move at all be free?'

Kabir was at the bus stand to deliver copies of documents, but he would not be travelling as a reporter. 'Will you come along part of the way?' Sarita asked. 'As far as the first village. People have already been told that I carry a camera; if they do not wish it, I will not open it.' In his bag was a memory of the small torn stitches in the woollen blanket kept by the woman who had raised him, not a photograph of them. Since Naira's death he had slowly begun, for the first time, to recognise his own impatience with the time people needed to tell their private stories. Sarita looked at him and said nothing. As the bus moved, their separate faces trembled in the glass of the door.

On the road to the first village, the name on a government signboard differed from the local pronunciation. The driver read the name aloud. 'The bus does not stop under that name here,' said an elderly man sitting in front. 'Say "the bend by the tree" and everyone will understand.' Instead of photographing the board, Rama wrote both names in her notes and recorded the speaker's consent. When they alighted, villagers had already gathered beside the western bank of the pond. At the sight of the team some began forming a queue. Sarita raised her hand. 'This is not a queue for distributing relief. First we shall ask the gathering for permission; only then shall we look at individual papers.'

Pratima Rajvanshi was sitting on the school veranda. The iron rod marked with old red thread still stood behind the school. A temporary bamboo enclosure had been placed around it to keep the children from hurting

themselves. At the other end of the veranda two men were showing plans for opening a shop on the land adjoining the school wall. One asked, ‘If the camp is held here, will that be accepted as evidence that the school owns this land?’ Pratima gathered her papers. ‘Permission to hold a camp and ownership of land are two different matters. The fact that the village children study here must be protected, but the boundary has still to be checked against the original land register.’

The headmaster gave permission to use the school veranda for one day, but insisted that the open path at the back must not fall into anyone’s permanent possession. The shop’s representative proposed setting up a temporary table. Pratima did not remove it; she had its legs shifted away from the children’s route and received each party’s written submission separately. Giving him an acknowledgment, Sarita said, ‘We have no authority to declare ownership today. We can, however, arrange for a written application to reach the appropriate office asking that no new permanent structure be begun while the dispute is pending.’ Before signing, the representative read the date. He had not obtained permission to build immediately.

At the camp’s first table sat Kumudi, interpreting the local language. Her notebook gave two forms of several words: ‘return’ and ‘new migration’, ‘original document’ and ‘certified copy’. A young clerk said, ‘Work would go faster if we gave all these the same meaning.’ Kumudi gave him the example of an elderly woman from the village. ‘One sentence says that the woman “returned” to her old home; another says that she is a “new migrant”. On paper, that difference can destroy her right to wages earned earlier.’ The clerk said he had no authority to alter the printed form. Rama showed him where the original statement in its own language could be attached.

Before noon Ramvati Khatwe arrived. Her original first travel document and the identity document issued after her marriage had previously been returned to her by the Simatirtha office; she had brought both with her again today. The acknowledgment said ‘Originals returned’, not ‘Reconciliation of the two registers completed’. Standing at the front table, Ramvati asked, ‘The wages for planting paddy that were owed under my old name are still blocked because of the difference in names. What can this camp do for me now?’ Before taking the papers from her, Sarita asked permission.

Ramvati showed the papers one by one. The first receipt bore the identity associated with her former place of residence, the second her address after marriage. Kumudi read them in the regional dialect. Then Ramvati said in her own words, ‘I left my first home, but the days I worked transplanting rice in that field came with me. I live in a new place now, but the right to my old wages did not fall away at the village boundary.’ ‘Shall we join the two names and give them one number?’ the clerk asked. ‘I want the two parts of my life connected,’ Ramvati answered, ‘not one erased to make the other.’

The copy in the file bore the name ‘Santi’. In the earlier inquiry it had been undergoing verification against the documentary source; no final identification of a geographical river had been declared. Seeing the word, a new employee immediately proposed attaching the name of a river that looked similar on the map. Ramvati placed her palm on the table. ‘Do not remove the letters of the name written in the travel document. Decide which river it is when you have measurements of the river. Read separately from these papers the route I took and the amount that is still owed to me.’ Rama instructed that the letters in the original entry be preserved and the space for geographical reconciliation left blank.

The village accountant came to examine the old paddy-planting account. His ledger had a count of days but no new identification number for the payee. ‘If the numbers do not match, I am afraid to release the money,’ he said. ‘If I am standing here in person, with old receipts, dates of work and witnesses,’ Ramvati asked, ‘who has closed the road to correcting the record?’ Rama did not pretend she could order immediate payment. She drew up a list of evidence: a certified line from the original ledger, reconciliation of days worked, the separate sources for Ramvati’s two identities, and a written decision from the officer authorised to pay. This time Ramvati received an acknowledgment bearing a date for the inquiry.

After registering her claim, Ramvati remained sitting beside Kumudi. There was a small bundle of flattened rice she had brought from home, but the delay had carried them past the time for their meal of rice and greens. ‘If they call for this labour ledger again, will you be able to come yourself?’ Kumudi asked. ‘If I give up a day of planting, the money owed to me will grow again,’ Ramvati replied. ‘Write that the preliminary check should be made from copies of the papers in my absence, and that I should be told in advance when my answer is needed.’ She gave Kumudi half of the flattened rice she had left. Kumudi did not count the food in place of her wages.

Just then an employee said that the village’s applications would be easier to handle if they all went through Kumudi at the office. ‘I shall interpret,’ Kumudi asked, ‘but why should I become the owner of every application?’ She insisted that each person be given time to hear their own answer and sign it. An elderly man did not want his pronunciation corrected; Kumudi had it recorded as he spoke it. A schoolgirl wrote her mother’s name herself from her exercise book and asked the meaning of the word being entered. Her mother answered the girl’s question; the interpreter remained silent between them.

Pratima had gone by the path behind the village to request the original register for the school land. When she returned, she had only an acknowledgment for a request for an old copy, not the original. The shopkeeper asked again whether stamping the paper at the camp would make the prohibition permanent. ‘I do not intend to declare you guilty,’ Pratima said. ‘But if a new occupation of the land begins without documents, the

students' path may be closed before the real dispute is settled.' She put forward a temporary agreement: until the original survey was available, the planted rod would not be treated as a boundary; no new construction would begin; and the existing pedestrian route would remain open. The other side did not agree to everything, but accepted written notice temporarily suspending new construction.

When the school bell rang, the children came out onto the veranda. Rajo's daughter approached Pratima carrying her coloured exercise book. 'I have to go home by the back path again,' she said. Pratima did not take the book from her hand. 'It is the responsibility of grown people to keep safe the path you can walk today. But the fact that you walk along it will not decide the land case for the court.' The girl laughed at the sound of the bell and ran along the open path. The shopkeeper's representative watched the dust kicked up by her feet. That moment was not evidence deciding his claim, but it diminished his haste to begin building.

The sun was fierce by the time the team's vehicle reached its second stop, Simatirtha. Sharada Kasaudhan brought a small ledger and two torn receipts from her pawnshop. She had earlier refunded one customer an amount of interest charged twice. Today the question concerned an improper monthly addition to another family's pledged article. The customer, an elderly woman, had left a silver bangle in pledge. The ledger did not separate the value of the bangle, the principal borrowed and the conditions for redeeming the article. Sharada called to her brother, 'A customer's bangle is not the nameless property of somebody's family. Listen first to the person who pledged it.'

'If we change the old rates, the shop will earn less,' her brother said. 'The interest calculation is written down.' 'I want to repay what I borrowed,' the elderly woman answered, 'but no one ever read aloud how much was added each month.' Sharada opened two pages of the ledger before her. One showed the fixed principal; the other showed interest levied twice on the same amount. She did not conceal that a mistake had been made. Kumudi explained the word for interest in the woman's dialect, and the woman then chose a recalculation that suited her. A written correction removing the improper addition was prepared; the principal and the properly payable balance remained outstanding.

Before closing the ledger, Sharada's brother slapped an old printed interest-rate notice down on the table. 'At the time this rate applied to everyone equally,' he said. Picking up the paper, the elderly woman asked, 'If it was the same for everyone, why was it not read aloud to me?' Sharada saw that another customer was due to pledge an article that very day. Before the transaction, she had the notice rewritten in clear letters. The new sheet imposed no automatic penalty, and a separate page was kept for requests to recalculate old dues. Her brother could not hide his anger, but he allowed the new notice to be put up on the wall.

When the question of recovering the pledged bangle arose, the woman said, ‘I cannot gather the whole principal in a single day.’ Sharada proposed that the woman herself examine the instalment dates for the corrected balance and that the terms for redeeming the bangle be clearly set out on another sheet. ‘Two papers for such a small pledge!’ her brother laughed. ‘Two papers cost less than one wrong price,’ Sharada replied. The woman left the bangle at the shop this time as well, but took home a copy bearing her own name and the corrected amount due. Though she held no bangle in her hand, she felt the small warmth of a right she could now claim.

As the crowd grew at the Simatirtha camp, a new employee wanted to photograph the applicants in his notebook. Remembering Rukhsana’s written instructions, Sarita asked whether consent to public use had been obtained from anyone. ‘It is only for convenience,’ he said. Ramvati spoke at once. ‘Before you photograph me you must also hear what I have to say. Who will be able to see that picture in the notebook?’ Rama had the phone put away. Two pictures already taken were set apart and their use suspended because consent could not be established with certainty. Restricted verification of an original identity document and a photograph for public circulation did not carry the same permission.

At the south end of the courtyard stood a shared water vessel. Kumudi’s throat was dry, yet no separate allowance for her refreshment had been provided with the meal. The bus driver came there too: he had not been paid for the extra time spent waiting until midday. Sarita reopened the public accounts. Once they included the hire of the mats, the driver’s waiting, the time of the woman who carried the water, and the interpreter’s hours, the remaining advance fell short. An officer suggested drawing the expense from the donation box. Sarita refused. That money belonged to the shelter residents’ public relief fund, not to the camp’s administrative expenses.

‘Then shall we leave all these people’s work unfinished?’ the driver asked. Sarita went to the window. Outside, the woman who had set down the earthen water-pot was covering its mouth. Sarita telephoned the office to request additional written authorisation and told everyone waiting the actual position regarding time. Work that could be completed from corrected copies today would be finished; where an original register or a payment officer was required, an acknowledgment and a new date would be given. ‘If you were going to balance the books by cutting my hours, I would not come tomorrow,’ Kumudi said. ‘We will not cut your hours,’ Sarita replied. ‘The shortfall in expenditure will be shown in my public decision.’

Beside the camp entrance a man approached Ramvati. He said he wished to ask about the old register in order to reconcile the name she had used after marriage. Ramvati first asked what his source was, then said, ‘I shall share only what I consent to share. Sarita has already returned my private letter; do not make that letter an indispensable document for your inquiry.’ The man closed his notebook. His question might have been sincere, but Ramvati chose the

limits of both her time and her evidence. In the meantime, the answer concerning her old wages had still not arrived in writing.

Before leaving Simatirtha, Rama placed three slips separately. Ramvati's read: 'Original documents with the holder; verification of the connection between the two names outstanding; written answer from the officer responsible for paddy-planting wages awaited.' Pratima's read: 'Current school access protected; land boundary unresolved; receipt of notice of temporary restraint on new construction.' Sharada's read: 'Correction of improper interest on pledge explained to customer; principal outstanding.' None bore the same stamp saying 'Case settled'. When the vehicle grew crowded, Sarita pushed an empty trunk under her own seat rather than leave it at the next stop.

From the bus window on the return journey, empty paddy fields could be seen towards the village. Kabir did not enter the name of Ramvati's former home in his notes. He remembered that once, when Naira was alive, she had drawn four empty columns in an original ledger: source, time, right and benefit. Her death could not be altered by this journey. This time Kabir did not hurry to combine an old video of Janaki on his phone with the camp documents and turn them into a news report. 'Under whose name would you like your pages to be printed?' he asked Sarita. 'First find out who wrote the pages,' Sarita answered, without evading the question.

Late that night, as Rama was arranging the files at the office, she noticed that the heading of the preliminary camp report said only 'Achievements of the Inspection Team'. Kumudi's language corrections, Pratima's request for the land register, Sharada's correction of her own accounts, and Ramvati's refusal to accept a forced identification of the source had all been gathered beneath a single staff signature. Rama called Sarita over. 'Your name is given as the leader in this report, but it is losing the record of who did what and where.' Sarita drew up a chair. Her eyes were tired, but she read the papers before her again.

With a red pen Sarita began marking small numbers beside the work, not beside people's names. Kumudi's interpreting hours, Rukhsana's confidentiality rules, Ramvati's spoken corrections, Pratima's check on the receipt, Sharada's own correction of interest, the driver's extra shift—all began to appear on separate lines. 'The report will become long,' an employee said. 'We will not shorten rights to shorten a document,' Sarita replied. Beside her own name she wrote 'Coordination', not 'Author of everyone's work'. In the list of public expenditure due, Kumudi's wages and the unpaid balance for the driver's time were entered; the fact that authorisation was still pending was also left visible.

It was very late when Sarita returned home. Naira's empty chair still stood beside the doorway. She did not set the papers on it. At the table she opened the camp register and entered the date in Chait, then left the next page half

open. Taking his leave, Kabir asked, ‘Whose example will people say this record is tomorrow?’ ‘Ask the name of the person whose example it is,’ Sarita said. ‘What I did shall remain under my name. I shall not take credit for work I merely helped to keep in order.’ The rope around the trunk on the veranda had loosened. Many people had left their own signatures that day in the receipt book, which had been empty that morning, and many dues were still waiting for an answer given properly.

Chapter 160 · Sarita's Contribution

At dawn Sarita was tying four bundles of papers with threads of four different colours. The first held handwritten copies of philosophical pages; the second, the sources of examples; the third, accounts of the time and expense of tending the hearth, receiving guests and making copies; and the fourth, the receipts from the travelling camp at Simatirtha. On one corner of the table stood Naira's empty penholder. Sarita did not touch it. Kabir had said that yesterday's camp report needed another reading before it went to press. But she had another appointment today: to examine the credits omitted from Maithili and Ishan's old book. A Chait breeze lightly stirred the washed sari hanging in the veranda. She set the four bundles well apart so that their threads would not become entangled.

Maithili arrived carrying a copy of the programme of an old gathering and two editions of the book. Ishan came behind her, accompanied by Harimohan, who had already examined some pages to compare the handwriting. Sarita showed her visitors where to sit, but before handing over the papers she said, 'The question today is not merely where my name will be printed. First we must establish who did which work, when it was done, and how much evidence there is for it.' Ishan's eyes went to the pages bound in red thread. Sarita did not hand him the bundle; she allowed him to read its first sheet. A book's public correction and the rights attaching to private papers were different matters.

Sitting beside the table, Maithili opened the old programme. It named the speakers and offered thanks for 'assistance from the household', but did not name the woman who had prepared the copies. 'I prepared this programme,' Maithili said. 'At the time I did not have the words to distinguish the hand that copied a text from the mind that composed its argument. But it was my own decision to obscure all that labour under "assistance".' Sarita interrupted her: 'I need your acknowledgement, but I need a separate account of payment, time and what was witnessed. If, out of remorse, you now call me a co-author, that too will be wrong.' Maithili copied the sentence into her notes exactly as it had been spoken.

Harimohan pointed to two lines of different inks at the edge of a page. Several passages of the original exposition were in Ishan's handwriting; between some lines were clear letters transcribed by Sarita. At one point a sentence had been crossed out after a question from Maithili and rewritten, but the date was incomplete. 'The philosophical answer here is mine,' Ishan said. 'Your answer will remain yours,' Maithili replied. 'But the testimony that the answer changed after my question must not be erased.' Sarita asked them both when it might be possible to verify the original date of revision. Harimohan could say only that the pages of the two editions could be collated; the source of every alteration had not yet been established.

When the third bundle was opened, old accounts for rice, oil and lamp-wicks slipped out. One sheet recorded three successive days of copying, meals for guests and oil for the lamps at night. ‘Was all this spent on the book?’ Ishan asked. ‘Some was for the book, some for the ordinary running of the household,’ Sarita answered. ‘The extra food prepared on days when a visitor sat examining the author’s pages is marked; not every meal served at home becomes a debt owed by the author.’ Maithili asked whether they ought also to include the sewing or kitchen help of unnamed women from the neighbourhood. ‘Do not enter someone whose name and consent we do not have under an account of my generosity,’ Sarita said. ‘Ask them first.’

There was a turmeric stain on the receipt for lamp oil. As Sarita straightened it, she remembered evenings when paper had to be turned and dried far into the night to save a single page of the book. The smell of those nights still lived in her memory: wet paper, ash from the hearth, ink. But no smell could prove which page had been copied on which night. ‘This is something I remember, not a documented date,’ she told Harimohan. ‘Please keep memory and receipts in separate columns.’ On a fresh sheet Harimohan wrote three headings: Work Witnessed; Written Evidence; Reconciliation Outstanding. A thin ink line divided them. Sarita deliberately drew no arrow joining one to another.

Uma Rajdhob appeared at the doorway, a bundle of clean clothes on her shoulder and three customers’ stamped slips in her hand. After yellow safety tape was put around the gate, she had resolved to abandon her dependence on a single local customer and run a cooperative laundry with other women. Today the first collective consignment was due back, but the former large customer had imposed a new condition: every invoice must be issued in the name of an old contractor. ‘Four of us washed, dried and counted these clothes,’ Uma said. ‘If the invoice is made out like that, our names will be buried behind the contractor’s again.’ Sarita covered the papers on her desk and asked permission to look at Uma’s receipts.

Uma produced four separate slips showing hours worked. One woman, having been ill, had not worked for two days. She had not falsely been credited with the same number of working days, although her earlier capital contribution still entitled her to a share in the cooperative’s common profit. The customer’s agent had said he would pay into a collective account but would not recognise any other names. Uma announced her decision: ‘We will issue a collective invoice, but the attached payment sheet will show every member’s share. A customer who finds that sheet troublesome is free to leave us.’ Her voice was steady. She knew that losing the large customer might mean less flour in the coming month.

At noon Uma went towards the ghat with two members of the cooperative. One of the contractor’s former customers accepted that day’s consignment but did not renew the contract for the following month. Another customer, seeing the separate receipts, placed a small order. At the end of the day the

cooperative's total income was less than the former monopoly had brought in, but the shares of the four women in what had been received were clear. Sarita did not turn this news into an illustration of victory for her book. Uma sent a slip that night: 'First consignment completed; one customer lost, another found; the accounts are open.' Sarita put it in the camp's labour-record bundle, not among the philosophical papers.

Back at the table, Maithili opened the page where two sacks of grain of equal weight had raised a question about their different qualities. 'I gave this example a new argumentative form through my question,' she said, 'but the original observation was something Sarita had described.' Ishan said he too remembered seeing two sacks in the market at that time. Sarita did not dismiss either recollection. She pointed to a mark beside the market date in her old notebook, a thumbprint-like stain whose meaning was uncertain. 'A coloured stain will not decide a quarrel between memories,' she said. 'But begin by accepting my observation as a possible source; check the final credit against the copies, one by one.'

Harimohan proposed that the public statement of contributions should separately mention the verified copying labour, the documented share of food costs, and Sarita's independent recollection. The source of the example would be described as pending discovery of the original copy. Maithili wondered whether readers would attend to so much caution. Closing the book, Sarita said, 'Readers may prefer a sentence they can read quickly, but someone whose life has been left out of that sentence deserves a slower one.' Ishan proposed writing 'Sarita's invaluable service' in the first draft. She struck out the phrase. 'Call it invaluable and the value of the payment disappears. Where the work can be measured, measure what is owed.'

The driver returning from Simatirtha brought a receipt for an outstanding fare. Rama Karna's notebook recorded additional hours of waiting; in the office's preliminary report they had been swallowed up under 'ordinary travel'. Handing him a slip, Sarita said, 'This is not part of my list of contributions. It is money owed to you.' 'Why put my account here while you are preparing a document about your own work?' the driver asked. 'Because our separate labours were buried under a single name's "achievement",' Sarita replied. 'All the names must appear in the correction, but the payments must be recorded on separate sheets.' Rama confirmed receipt of the voucher by telephone. The payment date depended on the officer's response.

That evening Meena Tharu arrived with two members of her family. The agricultural company had again offered a long lease; this time her father, now recovered, was present to negotiate for himself. The earlier application had been suspended because the family's consent was incomplete. 'I am not rejecting every facility the company offers,' Meena said. 'But the field we take turns cultivating has a drainage channel. We will not give up decisions about that channel and the crop without written conditions agreed by the family.'

Her father held a list of medical expenses. The anxiety of finding that money had not gone away.

The company's representative presented a new offer: instead of a long lease, the family could choose a short-term agreement for use of the field. Yet 'full managerial authority' still appeared on its first page. 'Who will compensate us if the water channel is closed and our home floods?' Meena's mother asked. The representative was silent. Meena put a copy of an alternative agreement with a small collective farming group on the table. In it, ownership of the land and maintenance of the channel were separate matters. She did not announce a decision at once. The terms were read aloud to the family and her father was given time for questions. In the end they refused the company's original proposal and decided to examine a new agreement for limited cultivation.

The company's projected profit fell, and its representative withdrew an offer to rent out some equipment. Going home, Meena told her father, 'Now we shall have to find another way of paying for the medicines.' 'Keeping land on paper is not enough,' he said. 'It takes work to keep it in the fields as well.' Her mother wrote the days allotted to cleaning the water channel in a small notebook. Sarita did not ask for the family's original contract. With their permission she recorded only an acknowledgement of what had occurred: the local-language translation had been read out, the company's original lease had not been accepted, and the new alternative still awaited a survey of the land. Maithili did not turn this account into a philosophical example.

Two temporary bamboo enclosures stood in Bela's market. Bela Turaha's old stall fell inside the red line for road widening; the earlier survey had found both the narrow route behind the school and the waterlogged place beside the peepal tree unsafe. The municipal team now indicated the edge of a raised platform to the west of the market, where less water collected but fewer customers passed on foot. Looking at a bag marked with the names of her old customers, Bela asked, 'The place is high, but how will customers get up to it?' 'Accept the allotment first,' the official said. 'Customers will find their way.'

Bela accepted the temporary municipal allotment subject to three conditions: visible signs showing the route, an adjustment to market fees during the first weeks, and a covered, safe corner for repairing nets. As she dismantled her old stall she gathered the bamboo needles that had scattered from it. One customer told her the new place would be too far; next week he would buy fish from another shop. Bela was hurt, but she did not try to force him. On the first day at the raised platform three of her old customers did not come, while two new women bought thread for nets. She entered a loss in her daily accounts, but the eviction document did not falsely say that she had 'vacated voluntarily without an alternative'.

That evening Bela came to Sarita's home carrying several empty baskets. 'Do not let my name survive in the news only as someone who obstructed the

roadworks,' she said. 'I accepted the new site, but lost old customers. Write both.' Sarita did not copy her words into the camp's public register without permission to use her name. Bela authorised publication of her occupational identity and the public allotment notice, while keeping her customers' credit ledger confidential. Maithili saw how difficult the detailed acknowledgment of contributions could be, not just on the pages of a book but in a changing market. Yet she resisted making an imitation of another person's suffering out of that resemblance.

Meena Sarki, in the artisans' village at Simatirtha, received back two leather samples. In the earlier trial, a strap that loosened on contact with water had been rejected; now a joint team was establishing new stitches and test measurements. On the telephone Meena told Kumudi that hours spent testing samples should be recorded in Indian rupees, the labour of the factory across the border in its own currency, and any converted sum at the verified exchange rate for the relevant day. 'Shared rights' had been translated as 'outright sale of the design'. Meena refused to sign again. Kumudi reread the original line and separated the two meanings.

A representative of the artisans' group initially said it was impractical to keep so many distinct accounts in a cross-border partnership. Showing the old needle scars on her palm, Meena said, 'I know how many days of work disappear when one figure in the payment is wrong.' Eventually they agreed that payment for the samples would come first, and use of the new design would be decided later through a separate agreement. Meena's partnership had begun, but the larger commercial contract remained under consideration. Kumudi insisted on a receipt for her translation fee. 'The labour of a single word of yours reaches right into the stitching of my leather,' Meena told her. 'Without paid translation the knot will loosen again.'

Ishan produced a draft of the new printing of the old page headed 'Assistance from the Household'. The revised text separately recorded three days of copying, the status of partial verification of remembered sources, and the documented portion of domestic arrangements. But beside the value of domestic labour it still said 'recalculation outstanding'. 'From which account will these three days' work be paid?' Sarita asked. Ishan opened his old private expense ledger. An advance for food had been entered on one date, but there was no receipt for copying wages. 'I will produce evidence for what I paid,' he said. 'For what was not paid, I shall not write "ordinary household work" after the fact.' Sarita did not take this answer as an announcement that full payment had been made.

Harimohan prepared a preliminary certificate of sources. 'Copying labour: Sarita—subject to page-by-page verification'; 'Domestic arrangements: documented expenses and additional time, reconciliation of payment outstanding'; 'Oral source of example: Sarita's recollection, confirmation from the original pages outstanding'; 'Questions underlying revision: Maithili—collation with the original copy outstanding'; 'Original exposition: Ishan

—complete examination of the claim pending'. After reading it, Sarita asked that other sources' names and permissions be added only when the people concerned had replied. Otherwise, in correcting four columns, they would once more leave unnamed people in a fifth. Harimohan left an additional blank line, but invented no names.

Maithili asked for two copies of the certificate: one for Sarita, one for the review committee. Above her signature she wrote a separate sentence acknowledging by name Sarita's copying, domestic arrangements and remembered observations as sources of examples, while making clear that this was not a final determination of co-authorship. Ishan likewise signed an undertaking to verify the sources in his name. Sarita read both documents. Once the phrase 'oral source' clearly marked the limits of what she had seen long ago, she signed. As she did, she noticed a thin film of dust laid by the wind on Naira's chair. She did not rise to wipe it away. Another task had been set to be finished within the day.

A message came from the school asking to post the public version of the certificate. 'Shall we publish it now?' Maithili asked. 'Publish the provisional acknowledgment of names and categories,' Sarita answered, 'not copies of the household expense ledger or private names. Let readers know that the examination is still underway.' Ishan agreed to place the new notice beside the old page of thanks at the school, but copies of the earlier edition would not be destroyed. Anyone who owned the old book could ask for a revised sheet. Harimohan entered the price of copying against the office expenses. This time no one asked Sarita to prepare the copies without pay.

When Kabir came home he saw the four differently coloured bundles on the table. 'How many names have been saved today?' he asked. 'Only as many as could be verified have been written,' Sarita said. 'Being saved and remaining on record are not the same thing.' Kabir stood beside Naira's penholder. Sarita did not ask him to gather the papers. He read the new page of the book, then remembered a notebook linked to a blanket sewn by the woman who had raised him; the name of the neighbour who had helped was still unknown. 'Let the empty place remain empty,' he said, 'but leave the person a chance to answer when a name is found.' Sarita agreed.

The fire in the hearth was slowly dying down. Before leaving, Maithili asked Sarita whether, when she presented fuller evidence of her co-authorship the following day, she might write her own name independently. 'Write your name. That is your right,' Sarita said. 'Do not make my credit a preface to it. What I copied is in my hand, what I observed is what I saw, and the time I spent working in the house is another matter.' Maithili did not turn this reply into a philosophical maxim. On the first blank page of her notebook she wrote only her own name, and placed the pages containing the revisions behind it.

At the end of the night Sarita closed the four bundles. A public copy of the pages tied in red would go to the school; the household expense ledger would stay at home; the Simatirtha payment list would go to the officer; and the list of sources for the examples would remain open for review, subject to permission. Naira's empty chair was still there. No new heading on a document could change the fact of her death. As Sarita lowered the lamp-wick, she saw that her name had been written on the newest page of the book, with the distinctions among kinds of work beside it. Not every debt had thereby been paid. But when Maithili opened a page of her own tomorrow, Sarita's labour would no longer disappear into another person's voice.

Chapter 161 · Maithili's Own Name

The light of dawn fell obliquely across the glass of the old printing house. Maithili opened a thick paper envelope and drew out a thin, yellowed proof sheet. Three little dots of ink marked its right-hand edge. Ishan had thought them printing defects; Maithili knew that she herself had put all three there on the night when it became necessary to keep three possible answers to an argument distinct. She had come today to explain what they meant, not merely to display them.

An elderly employee of the press drew a ledger bound with wire from beneath the wooden counter. ‘I cannot say that every paper from the first edition of this book has survived,’ he said. ‘Let us first establish the order of what has survived,’ Maithili replied. ‘We must not fill what is missing with conjecture.’ Ishan stood near the door. Yesterday, signing the provisional acknowledgment of Sarita’s labour had seemed comparatively straightforward. Today it was not so easy to sit before the evidence for recognising his wife as a co-author.

Harimohan spread three pages on the table. One bore Ishan’s signature, another Maithili’s initials, and the third an old receipt stamp from the printing house. The date on the stamp fell between the dates of the two written pages. ‘The appearance of my name does not mean merely that I supervised the printing,’ Maithili said. ‘Look at the paragraph that raised the question of the authority of verbal testimony. The first draft has no answer to it. On the second sheet I changed the basis of the question, and in the final printed text the rebuttal of that basis appears in its own form.’

Ishan examined a marginal note in red ink. ‘I wrote this sentence of the answer,’ he said. Maithili nodded. ‘It is your sentence. My question and the sequence of reasoning are separate. I have not come to claim your sentence under my name. But the question without which that sentence could not have taken precisely this form was dismissed as mere “advice from the household”.’ Taking off her spectacles, she smoothed an old fold in the paper and added, ‘The evidence of co-authorship concerns work that shapes an argument for the reader.’

Harimohan matched the insertion marks drawn along the margins. In the first answer, the grounds for believing a statement had been taken to be the standing of the speaker; the later question allowed both that an eminent person might err and that an unnamed witness might speak the truth. ‘Could this example have come from Sarita’s observation of the market?’ he asked. ‘The example of the two sacks and the scales in the market must be investigated as a possible source in Sarita’s recollection,’ Maithili replied. ‘In this argument I do not claim to be the source of the example. The structure of the question and the order of its rebuttal are to be found in my notebook.’

Sarita had remained silent until then. She had not brought her red-threaded bundle into the printing house, only a copy of yesterday’s limited acknowledgment. ‘Do not turn what I observed into evidence of Maithili’s ideas,’ she said, ‘and do not diminish Maithili’s ideas by calling them my copying work. First compare the printed form of the page with what was written. Every kind of right needs to be named for what it is.’ A boy from the press brought a glass of water. As she took it Sarita asked who performed the work of supplying water there and whether the payment for it was included in the accounts.

Ishan drew a miscellaneous notebook from his old leather bag. His signature appeared at its beginning, but midway through was a page bearing a long question in Maithili’s handwriting, with his answer underneath in different ink. Before reading the page, Maithili examined the binding. ‘I am afraid they will say a loose sheet was inserted afterwards.’ The employee suggested checking the old knot in the thread, the spread of the ink and the order of the entries in the receipt register. He did not offer his opinion as a substitute for a conclusive examination.

By noon, the first comparison had confirmed the order of three proof sheets and their connection with two revised questions. The date of a fourth sheet remained unclear. Harimohan proposed saying only that, in the specified philosophical sections, Maithili’s questions, alternative reasons and revisions of rebuttals constituted evidence of co-authorship; that conclusion would not automatically apply to the rest of the book. Maithili stopped a proposal to print ‘Ishan’s wife’ after her name. ‘The relationship within our home is real, but this sheet concerns my intellectual work. In the heading to this evidence I shall have my own name.’

A horn sounded in the veranda. Haricharan Paswan arrived with two old fare receipts and the drivers’ time ledger. One vehicle had carried a patient to safety; the other had been kept available for two hours while its driver waited. In the preliminary account, the hire of the vehicles and the drivers’ night wages had been entered as one sum. ‘I provided the vehicles,’ Haricharan said. ‘The drivers gave their nights. A single signature cannot settle the price of both.’

Rama Karna’s earlier acknowledgment lay on the table. Looking at it, Harimohan said the office sanction had been issued only under the heading of vehicle hire. Haricharan held his ground. ‘Whatever I receive as hire belongs in the account of the vehicles’ cost. The drivers’ wages are separate. Do not erase the labour of the people who went with me behind the name of the contract I held.’ Sarita telephoned Rama, who confirmed that the drivers’ names and rest hours had been entered separately.

That day a brief order arrived. Payment of the verified vehicle hire would go into Haricharan’s account; the verified night wages of the drivers would be entered against their individual receipts and released separately. The disputed

portion of the waiting time would be examined again. Haricharan telephoned the first driver with the news. ‘Will the money reach me this week?’ the driver asked. ‘There is an order,’ Haricharan replied. ‘I shall tell you separately when the money has actually been credited.’ This time he was able to state the distinction clearly.

Maithili watched from the window. Outside, a man selling lassi pushed his cart through the crowd. Within the printing house Harimohan was clearing space to type a heading on a fresh sheet. ‘Credit for knowledge and wages for work,’ he said. ‘Shall we bring them together in one statement?’ ‘They may be compared,’ Maithili replied, ‘but the receipt of Haricharan’s driver is not a footnote to my book. His wages are due when they are due.’ Harimohan separated his papers.

Before evening Lakshmi Kathbaniya arrived with a small wooden box containing two kinds of lids and a piece of old rope. A loan once taken jointly by the well committee had been entered against her shop simply because she had sold the rope. The committee had now ordered that the amount due for Lakshmi’s commercial supplies be separated from the dispute over the well’s construction. But the old public debt list on the wall still displayed the entire joint amount opposite her name.

‘Customers think my shop is in debt,’ Lakshmi said. ‘I have a letter staying the recovery, but the old figure still hangs there against my reputation.’ Sarita accompanied her to the committee office. An employee said that removing the old list would make it appear that all the accounts had been repudiated. Lakshmi asked for a new notice: ‘Allegation of joint liability suspended; actual value of vendor’s supplies and separate outstanding balance under reconciliation.’ The old notice was removed from the public board on condition that it remained preserved in the records.

Lakshmi read the new notice in front of her customers, making equally clear that payment for the lids supplied by her shop was still due. ‘Then your debt has not been forgiven?’ a customer asked. Lakshmi did not smile. ‘If I owe anyone, show the proof. If someone owes me, show those accounts too. Do not call the lifting of a debt that was never mine a favour done to me.’ She put the lids back in their box and returned towards her shop.

At that moment Lakhan Satar came to the meeting with two fellow workers. At night they had cut and lifted wooden planks for a temporary approach to the ghat. Labour charges had been claimed in the contractor’s bill, yet the workers’ register described all three as performing ‘voluntary community service’. The proprietor’s accountant said that whoever marked attendance in the crowd could not be trusted. Instead of starting with a photograph of the wet marks left on the timber, Lakhan presented the contract payment voucher and the notebook of the safety shift on that night.

‘My shift was in the second watch of the night; Lakhan worked the first,’ said his companion Joga. ‘The proprietor’s ledger shows all three of us present

in broad daylight on the same day.’ The third worker did not spread his torn scarf on the table. He stated the date, the boat that came to the ghat and the time food was distributed that day. Rama recorded the three testimonies separately. The proprietor’s accountant objected that the workers might have coached one another. ‘Record the possibility,’ Sarita said, ‘but independent grounds are needed to reject the testimony.’

The ghat watchman’s old note contained the date of the night repair and a record of three kinds of tools received. The number of tools alone did not establish the full hours worked by each man, but it demolished the assertion that ‘no worker did any work that day’. The proprietor was asked to produce the original payment bill. It was recommended that wages for the undisputed watches be released separately, with the remaining hours and additional risk allowance reserved for a hearing. Lakhan’s eyes stayed on the wood where the bark had been stripped away, but he heard his own name spoken aloud from the register.

Some people in the courtyard were asking what all these minor accounts had to do with a philosophical book. Gathering her papers, Maithili came out to them. She did not wish to use events in society as ornaments for her theories. Yet she asked, ‘If one person performed the work and another published that work under a name, must we not examine the evidence for these two facts separately?’ ‘All I want is my wages, sister,’ Lakhan replied. ‘Not a book explaining my name.’ ‘You are right,’ Maithili said immediately. ‘I shall not put your name on this page without permission.’

When the long shadows of afternoon reached the veranda, Vinita Kesharwani arrived with two ledgers. The first contained her own purchases on credit; the second belonged to the family’s shared grocery business. A member of the household had drawn up a joint statement of debt, making Vinita appear responsible for purchases made without her signature. She verified three entries in her own ledger and requested separate evidence of authorisation for two purchases in the joint account.

‘If we make so many divisions in a family business, no one will trust their own people,’ one of the men of the family said. Vinita set a wooden measuring box on the table. ‘Trust does not grow from an invoice without names. I shall pay what I myself owe. First decide about the common purchases and those charged without consent.’ The shopkeeper’s new assistant wrote out a receipt for an instalment against her first ledger. Vinita paid a specified amount herself that day; the disputed portion of the joint debt was put on hold.

Vinita kept her payment receipt apart from the second ledger. Sarita asked what portion she approved for the public list. ‘Decisions about the shop’s common business may be made public,’ Vinita answered, ‘but not the figures of my separate household borrowing on a market noticeboard.’ The man of the family objected at first, then agreed to open a new account. More than the

counting of money had changed: the right to decide who must sign for whose purchases had also changed within the house.

Maithili returned to the printing house. Evening was settling over the smell of old paper. Harimohan laid out samples of the different inks and a small table of receipt dates. A date earlier than the press's next instruction had been found in the margin of Maithili's notebook, beside the page containing her independent question. The sample of handwriting matched an undisputed letter of hers; Ishan's written answer had appeared in a later revision. Only the author of one unidentified phrase remained uncertain, and this was marked separately beside the text.

Drawing the papers towards him, Ishan said, 'It was my duty to examine the signatures before the book went to press. I made it too easy to dismiss this as "Maithili's help". But some of the original exposition is also mine. Will this finding wipe all that away?' 'Why should it?' Maithili replied. 'I do not want my name on arguments you wrote. But the new reasons, objections and rebuttals I devised must not disappear into the word "wife".' This time Ishan read the entire page before answering.

Harimohan prepared a brief certificate. It stated that in the specified sections two original objections, one alternative sequence of reasoning and one revised rebuttal had been confirmed as Maithili's written contributions. Ishan's independent exposition retained its own credit; assessment of Sarita's copying, oral sources for examples and domestic labour was continuing in a separate record. For the present, the finding of co-authorship applied only to the sections examined. The remaining uncertain line remained uncertain.

For the public version of the certificate, Maithili chose unambiguous words: 'Co-author: Maithili', followed by a list of the sections concerned. 'Co-author' remained beside Ishan's name too, as did mention of the independent work he had done outside that list. An employee of the press asked whether the title page should be replaced altogether in the next printing. 'First let a correction sheet signed by both people and the publisher reach readers of the old copies,' Maithili said. 'The final wording of the introduction to the new edition must be read separately.' Ishan agreed.

The proprietor of the printing house objected to the expense. Resetting the old type, printing correction sheets and sending them to distant libraries—whose account would bear the cost? Ishan first offered to pay a portion from his own earnings. 'Incorrect credit is not merely a matter for an author's private apology,' Maithili said. 'The publisher took money for the old copies. The publisher too is responsible for getting the correct information to readers.' In the end the publisher accepted the cost of printing and distributing the corrections free of charge. The authors reserved questions about payment for their new writing separately. Sarita added that she would not accept any deduction from her unpaid copying wages to meet this new expense.

Then the order of signatures came up. From force of habit the employee turned the document towards Ishan first. Ishan slid it towards Maithili instead. ‘You presented the evidence for this claim. You should sign first.’ Maithili took up the pen and wrote her full name. She added no title borrowed from her husband’s name. Ishan signed second, then Harimohan signed for his responsibility in collating the sources. No one demanded Sarita’s signature on a document for which it was not required.

A number of students and fellow workers had gathered in a classroom at the school to hear the new notice read. Padma asked how old readers would learn about the omitted contributions. The library agreed to keep the correction sheet beside the old editions and supply it to readers without charge. Maithili asked for no platform from which to deliver a speech. She said only, ‘When you read a page, read the source of its questions too.’ A little girl asked, ‘Then someone who asks a question is also someone who writes?’ ‘Sometimes,’ Maithili answered. ‘But the evidence must be examined.’

A telephone call came from Rama outside. Haricharan’s order for vehicle hire had reached the office, and processing of the drivers’ wages had begun; confirmation that the money had entered their accounts was still outstanding. In Lakhan’s inquiry the original bill had been obtained from the contractor, but the risk allowance remained to be calculated. The public entry about Lakshmi’s joint debt had been corrected, while the sale price of her goods was still owing. Vinita herself had collected the receipt for her first instalment. Sarita wrote the four reports on four different sheets, not under one common heading of ‘Resolution’.

That evening at home Maithili set the book’s old cover before her. Ishan’s name shone in clear letters on the page; hers was absent. She did not tear the cover. She placed the new correction sheet inside, so that readers might see for themselves the distance between the old mistake and the new evidence. Ishan appeared in the doorway. ‘After this change, what will change between us?’ he asked. ‘What needed changing on paper has been changed,’ Maithili said. ‘Your signature cannot give the answer about our relationship at home in place of my name.’

A night wind turned the pages of the notebook in which Maithili had first written an independent question. She held the book down and placed another sheet on the table: the question of the reliability of the knower, for the next chapter. Outside, in Sarita’s courtyard, Naira’s empty chair was still there in the darkness. No certificate of credit could fill that absence left by death. But that night Maithili’s name had reached a public document beside the question she herself had raised with her own pen.

Chapter 162 · The Knower's Claim

One of Udayana's disciples was brushing the dust that had gathered overnight from a palm-leaf manuscript with a peacock feather. A blot of ink had fallen at the right-hand corner; in trying to wipe it away he had faded one of the letters. Alarmed, he began to turn the page, but an elderly woman scribe seated near the door stopped him. 'Do not read what has been erased as though it were a clear letter.' When Udayana arrived at dawn, the disciple's hands were trembling. The copy of the fourth stanzaic section prepared for the assembly had been entrusted to him. Udayana's first question was, 'Has the manuscript been damaged, or are you afraid to read it?'

'I have faith in your book,' the disciple said. 'I shall fill the obscured place with the meaning given in your earlier exposition.' Udayana lifted the leaf. 'My name is not evidence for these letters,' he said. 'From an explanation you have heard you may infer a possibility. The signs now written here must be read on their own evidence.' From her bundle the elderly scribe took a copy of a third recension. It too was old, but its edges were intact. She explained that the two copies differed in date by two days; that difference alone did not automatically correct an error in the first.

That day, in an old veranda in Mithila, scholars had gathered for debate alongside people who dug silt from ponds, stitched books and travelled from distant places. A guard at the entrance refused some young people admission. When asked why, he said their names were not on the list of students in the book. 'Count the number of places available for listeners,' Udayana said. 'Permission to enter and the truth of an argument are not the same thing.' He ordered temporary mats to be spread, but also directed that the wages of those who laid them be entered in writing. No rule of a scriptural assembly made labour free.

A visiting pandit rose to his feet. The hem of his robe was grey with the dust of a long journey. 'If the knower is trustworthy,' he asked the assembly, 'why should his statement not be believed?' Some disciples turned instinctively towards Udayana, as though the answer had already been set upon the seat of prestige. Udayana returned the question: 'Will you test the truth of a knower's knowledge by the height of his seat? If a man claims to have seen what he has not seen, does the title of pandit make the claim true?' 'Then how,' the visitor asked, 'is a student's trust in the teacher to endure?'

There was a water jar beside the gathering. A disciple said it held cool water and was a newly made pot from the wheel. A traveller from afar lifted the jar and declared that its bottom was full of sand. The two voices differed; the matter was not hard to examine. Touching the outer surface with a finger, the elderly scribe said, 'I can tell you the temperature of the clay outside. To know what is within, open the lid.' When they did, they found both water filling

half the vessel and sand at the bottom. The disciple's account was not complete; neither was the traveller's.

The visitor did not laugh. 'If everyone's experience is limited, who is the pramātā, the knower?' he asked. 'When knowledge proves true, examine the means by which it was obtained,' Udayana answered. 'Where there was error, identify its limits. A person does not become untrustworthy for ever by making one mistake, nor infallible for ever by being right once.' A young listener seated near the assembly asked, 'Is the teacher himself, then, outside the scope of examination?' Udayana summoned him closer. 'I, least of all,' he said. 'Listen fully to the question of anyone who challenges my words.'

When the crowd thinned at noon, the dispute about the faded letter rose again. Two students jointly proposed one reading, and a third questioned it. Instead of announcing a decisive verdict, Udayana had the original source, alternative readings and limits of inference recorded on three separate sheets. The elderly scribe said there was a flood stain at the edge of the old copy; she had not witnessed whether the letter faded before or after the flooding. Udayana recorded her testimony within precisely those limits. Among all the great names gathered in the hall, her refusal to claim omniscience was uttered in the softest voice, but no one could refute it.

Before evening a young disciple asked, 'If an answer cannot be found at once, will the book lose its authority?' Packing his traveller's bag, the visiting pandit said, 'Perhaps not its authority, but its purpose may change. I came here to test a claim, not to be defeated.' Udayana left the space beside the faded passage blank. It would remain blank in the next copy, with a reference to the alternative reading. Discussion of the fourth stanzaic section paused there, but the assembly had reached a decision: uncertainty in a word called for careful examination, not coercion in the name of prestige.

Much later, in Chait of 2040, the travelling records camp stopped beside a market shaded by a tree. Dust from its tyres settled on the torn net of Saroj Kharkaut. She shook it once, then spread out three kinds of thread separately. An assistant accompanying Rama Karna had begun entering only the name of the person who had provided the capital in the new register. Saroj drew the notebook towards herself. 'Buying thread does not make a net,' she said. 'The hands that stitch its knots and the body that risks the night to save it contribute to its cost as well.'

A representative of the investor was among the team. 'I have put up the larger sum,' he said, 'so the entire net is mine. I will pay wages later.' Saroj cut a knot from the old net and laid it on the table. 'How much later will the workers' shares be pushed?' she asked. Two women stated the number of days each had spent stitching. A young man who bore the risk of setting the net in the water demanded a separate accounting for that risk. The committee's clerk was disconcerted at first: he was not accustomed to making four accounts for one object.

On the other side of the courtyard, Sonmati Turi was propping up a bamboo frame. An order for twenty articles had come from an outside market, but the merchant insisted that if the measurements were wrong the artisans should bear every loss. Sonmati put a frame on the ground. ‘I supplied the measurements for this sample. The market will choose the colour of the cloth, and its own man will transport it. How can every fault then be mine?’ The trader answered that a single-name invoice made business easier. ‘Easier for whom?’ Sonmati asked. ‘It seems to me you are closing off the road by which fault might return to you.’

Saroj and Sonmati had scarcely known one another before. But when the investor’s representative tried to keep the risks of the net outside his own account, and the merchant pushed the risk of transport onto Sonmati, the two women stood grasping opposite corners of the same table. Saroj’s group decided that the original cost of the yarn, verified hours spent tying knots, and the working days spent hauling the net would each form a separate basis for shares. The rights of members who had contributed less capital were protected by a minimum guarantee. In her new bargain Sonmati assumed responsibility for the standard of the sample; loss arising from delays by the carrier or changes of colour requested by the buyer was separated in writing.

‘Will you both sign this paper at once?’ the assistant asked. ‘The net may be jointly owned, but the large capital contribution has not yet been deposited,’ Saroj replied. ‘First let us see its receipt.’ Sonmati likewise requested two copies of the original order. She refused an instruction to produce twenty frames without a first advance. People at the market murmured at the obstinacy of the two women. They won no commercial triumph that day, but they were no longer compelled to sign without reading.

It was afternoon by the time Niru Kumal arrived carrying earthen vessels. In the expense sheet for the last communal kiln, fuel and wages had been listed separately, but a moneylender wanted, under the pretext of a new order, to make every artisan liable for everyone else’s debts. Niru placed his paper on the table without tearing it. ‘I shall work with three families to produce a small consignment,’ she said, ‘but interest owed by somebody else’s household will not be put against my child’s name from the outset.’ The moneylender said that on those conditions they would not obtain materials so cheaply.

Niru turned three vessels upside down to show them. The base of one was sound; the second had a fine crack; the third had a crooked neck. ‘All three bear the same name for a vessel,’ she said, ‘but they are not worth the same price. If we work together, we shall assess quality separately, and buyers will trust us for it.’ Another artisan in the shared kiln accepted responsibility for his own component costs. Without the moneylender’s compulsory joint debt, they signed a partnership for a limited consignment. Niru knew that a small batch meant less profit, but it would not wager her entire household against a ruinous debt.

For the first samples to be set aside for the evening, an adolescent girl working beside Niru asked for her name to be entered. The draft partnership named only the heads of three households; it omitted the person who counted the working hours. Niru asked the clerk where the bandage for a burned finger and the hours spent supervising the firing of vessels were to be accounted for. With the girl's consent, she had her entered in a separate line as an apprentice worker. That line established a wage for the work in hand, but another meeting was scheduled to decide whether she would receive a share in the partnership in future.

Kamlesh Khatik arrived at the edge of the market carrying a box. At the sight of him, two traders whispered about 'that red strip'. In an earlier market dispute, an entire community had been accused on the strength of a resemblance in colour. Today Kamlesh had brought the original bill for the strip, the name of its supplier and the school's order for its use. 'I did sell red material. That is true,' he said. 'But how did the offence involving the seized consignment become a crime charged to the name of my caste?' The clerk tried to interrupt him, but Rama said, 'Look at all the vouchers first.'

A new witness said he had seen a strip, but not the seller. Kamlesh did not shout at him. 'Say what you saw. Did you see me make the sale?' The witness said no. Rama added that limit beside his testimony. The school's receipt register showed that two strips supplied by Kamlesh had been used to fasten the stage curtain. This did not establish the guilt or innocence of every other transaction, but it broke the basis of the accusation raised against Kamlesh over this particular material. The statement imputing collective guilt was removed from the public board.

Instead of naming the two customers he had lost because of his damaged reputation, Kamlesh struck his empty box. 'Listen to that sound,' he said. 'People used to come to find out the price. Now they hear it and turn away.' He lodged a separate claim for financial loss. No immediate ruling was made about the guilt of any trader. But the committee's written answer accepted the records of Kamlesh's individual purchases and sales, and did not permit the collective allegation against his community to remain in force.

Mangri Gorait returned at dusk from the locked gate of the old factory. She carried a list of seven workers and a copy of the factory's retrenchment-pay records. Once again there had been no one to unlock the gate. An officer at the camp suggested that the arrears could be accepted on the strength of the former proprietor's name. 'He was the proprietor then; the factory is closed now,' Mangri replied. 'We have received nothing due to us from his name. Examine the attendance shown on the list and the contract amounts that were collected.'

One of the workers in Mangri's group said that without travel money he would not attend the next hearing. Mangri untied the knot in her scarf and placed a few coins on the table, but Rama immediately stopped her. 'Your

private coins must not become the cost of a government hearing for everyone,’ she said. The camp team could provide copies of the applications free of charge; a separate request for approval of travel costs was sent. The attendance and periods of wage deductions of four of the seven workers were provisionally matched, while documents were requested for the other three. The date of the next hearing was written on the receipt.

Looking at the slip, Mangri said, ‘I have been given another date, not the money. Write the difference down.’ Rama struck the word ‘Completed’ from beside that sentence. An officer asked how often the file was to be reopened. ‘As often as someone tries to close it without paying what is owed,’ Mangri replied. Her voice was not loud. A child was spinning an old iron bolt on the ground. For him the locked factory gate had become a source of playthings; in Mangri’s home it was still a hard sign of wages that had not arrived.

In the evening Sona Kathautiya came with her transport ledger. Payment had been stopped against a receipt naming an old halt called Bedhi because an officer wanted to match it to the present map of the water routes. ‘I drove to the place named on the slip,’ Sona said. ‘I cannot tell you how many branches the river has since divided into.’ Rama preserved the name of the halt exactly as written and separately reconciled the journey, receipt of goods and transport charges due. The name Bedhi did not prove the location of some unknown river confluence; verification of Sona’s undisputed fare could proceed.

Just then Nahid Mogal entered the courtyard speaking by telephone to her mother’s family. A fresh proposal to mortgage land sent to her mentioned an old field known as Liveri, but the written consent of all those holding shares was absent. A brother said over the telephone, ‘Panditji has said this is family land, so everyone’s permission will be taken as given.’ ‘If it belongs to the family,’ Nahid replied calmly, ‘each person in the family will answer. My consent about my share will not be written out of your mouth.’ She asked for the new paper to be sent back.

Nahid’s mother recalled planting paddy beside the river in old Liveri. Nahid kept that memory safe inside her bag rather than presenting it to the map officer as a fixed boundary. A copy of an old debt ledger received from Sharada Kasaudhan would be compared, but without legal examination it was not yet established which share could be mortgaged. Nahid made one decision that day: she would attend a meeting to calculate the family’s actual debt, but would not sign the mortgage proposal in haste. Her brother ended the call.

Sarita heard news of all this by telephone. She was sitting in the office with a copy of the record beside Naira’s old penholder. Rama said applications had come from five occupational groups. ‘How many have been completed?’ Sarita asked. ‘Some agreements have changed, some accusations have been withdrawn, some hearings have received dates,’ Rama answered. ‘Not everybody has been paid.’ Sarita asked that the public report state the status of

each decision separately rather than use the word ‘Resolved’. Naira’s absence was not a mark on that page. Looking towards it, Kabir quietly closed the window.

That night, at Harimohan’s printing house, Ishan arrived with the first draft of the introduction to the new edition. Maithili was folding two copies of the correction sheet confirming her co-authorship. ‘A scholar’s words are accepted on the strength of a teacher’s standing,’ Ishan said. ‘May I write in the introduction to this book that my decision is final?’ Maithili took the new page. ‘Certainly describe the work you have verified,’ she said. ‘But prestige is not the power to stop a reader’s questions. It would be equally wrong to accept my signature as evidence while refusing to review my arguments.’

Ishan left a small blank space after the words ‘my treatise’ in the draft. Maithili did not ask him to write her statement of credit for her; she insisted that the sources by which an argument could be examined be shown. In a corner of the printing house Harimohan was counting the cost of the old copies piled there. The first invoice for distributing the correction sheets was ready. Ishan again offered a portion of his author’s fee; the publisher repeated its commitment to pay the distribution costs it had accepted. The two amounts and responsibilities were recorded separately.

Finally Maithili slid a separate sheet to the beginning of the introduction. At its top was written Pramātā. ‘The meaning of this word must be understood,’ she said, ‘by those who do not invoke a great court’s name in order to speak the truth. But what is owed to them must not disappear into an example for an argument.’ Ishan read the sheet and struck the word ‘infallible’ from its first sentence. Outside the veranda, the last stalls of the market were being packed away; Saroj was testing the new knots of her net. The knots in the paper and the knots in the net were not the same, but in both places one needed to recognise the right hands before attempting to undo them.

Chapter 163 · An Old Book, a New Preface

All night Harimohan had left the proofs hanging to dry by the printing-house window. The thin morning sunlight caught one edge of the paper; the other was still damp with ink. When Ishan pulled out a chair, the cover of the old edition slipped across the table and came to rest over the new preface. His name was on the cover. Inside lay the pages of argument from which Maithili's name had been omitted. Ishan separated the two sheets. 'What shall we write in the first line now?' he asked—not Harimohan, but Maithili. She took down the sheet hanging at the window and spread it on the table.

'Your name where you wrote the words,' Maithili said. 'Both our names where the questions and counterarguments are mine as well as yours. And a separate place to acknowledge Sarita's labour wherever she copied the text.' Ishan read a sentence from the old preface: 'The entire thought of this work is the fruit of my independent pursuit.' He crossed out 'entire' with a pencil. The paper was new, yet the scratching out of that single word carried the sound of his old certainty. 'How, then, will readers understand the work that really is mine?' he asked. Maithili replied, 'Give the evidence for your ideas where they occur. Printing my name will not strip the words from your pages.'

Ishan opened his writing ledger. The sequence of reasons in the first part was in his own handwriting; some of the original questions in the second had come from Maithili's pages; and the third contained the wording of rural examples that Sarita had heard. For one question, the original author could not be established. Ishan did not assign the passage to anyone on conjecture. 'The evidence for this section must be compared again,' he said himself. Concern came over Harimohan's face. Not thousands, but however many copies of the old book had already been printed were scattered through markets and libraries. Printing a fresh preface was easy; getting word of an old mistake back to the readers was costly.

Two new apprentices were drying sheets in the little courtyard of the printing house. One, a girl, asked how many people would ever read the correction when those who had bought the book were unlikely to come back. Harimohan showed her the old register of customers' addresses. Many entries gave only the village; some did not even name a post office. 'The effort to find the readers who received the first book is part of publishing too,' Maithili said. The girl suggested enclosing a brief notice with the letter so that readers could request the correction without bringing in their copies. Ishan put her suggestion in a distribution plan, separate from the new preface.

The printer asked, 'I printed the correction sheet at my expense. After that, must I print the whole book again?' Maithili showed him the written agreement from the preceding day. It stated plainly that correction sheets would reach owners of the old edition free of charge, and that the

acknowledged co-authorship of the agreed sections would appear clearly in the next printing. Ishan repeated his offer to contribute a portion of his fee to the cost of the corrections, adding the condition that the entire burden must not be shifted onto the payment owed to Sarita. Sarita was not at the printing house; her contribution could not be reduced in her absence. Harimohan wrote separate receipts for the two items.

Maithili began reading the old preface aloud. Its language was grand: defeated opponents, infallible conclusions, an unbroken tradition. She stopped and looked at Ishan. ‘What debate is this describing, in which the opponent was given a chance to answer for himself?’ Ishan turned the pages of his ledger. Sources could be found for some quotations from scholarly disputations; for others there were only indications of variant readings. His independent discussion of Udayana’s debates over knowledge had value of its own, but it did not warrant calling itself a ‘final proof’. In the new preface he wrote that statements from ancient manuscripts, new interpretations and unverified textual variants would be identified separately.

Sarita arrived just then. She carried a little cloth bag and two copies of a receipt. Since Naira’s death the peace of her house had never been what it was, yet she had gone out to attend to the day’s work. ‘Before you give me a letter of thanks, show me the outstanding days of copying,’ she said. Harimohan laid out a separate list of her work. Payment had been confirmed for some days; signatures authorising two others were still missing. Sarita signed the verified line and left the undecided one unsigned. ‘If you turn something you heard from my memory into a quotation, let me confirm the words I spoke. Do not call what I said Maithili’s argument, or call Maithili’s argument my copying.’

Sarita took an old sheet belonging to Naira from her bag. She showed it to no one, merely smoothed its folded edge. ‘A book’s corrected preface cannot repair the absence in my house,’ she said softly. ‘But there is no reason to erase either the payment due for the work that survives on paper or the name of the person who did it.’ Maithili made no grand declaration in her presence. For a while both women were silent. A milkman’s bicycle went along the road outside. Harimohan set aside the register for Sarita’s two incomplete days and began checking the dates again.

By noon Binod Kewart had come from the fish market to the printing-house door. A wet weighing slip was tucked into his scarf. He had not come for the old correction sheet but to understand the language of a new set of rules intended for the library. A special concession to the market’s wholesale contractor was eating into the share of the small vendors. The committee had decided that the actual weight of each basket, the cost of ice and the charge for a selling place must be recorded separately. But in the new document the contractor wanted to preserve his concession by writing ‘consent of all vendors’ without obtaining the signatures of the smaller traders.

Binod put the slip on the table. ‘My daughter wants to sell fish in the shade. The contractor’s vehicle stands in the shade; her basket sits in the sun. The fee is the same, the facilities different. They say the concession goes to the contractor because he brings more fish.’ On the table before Ishan lay the word ‘consent’; a moment earlier he had remembered the old ‘entire’ in his book. ‘Who represents all of you?’ Maithili asked Binod. He gave the names of two small traders, then added, ‘My signature cannot determine their shares.’ Harimohan prepared a separate application page for the market officer.

In the market, a trader objected that reducing the contractor’s concession would increase the cost of wholesale consignments, making fish more expensive for everyone. Binod did not silence him. He showed the rates from the first day and from today on his weighing slip and said that an examination of the real costs would show whose share should bear the expense of minimum facilities. Before the assembled traders, the officer proposed a three-day trial. A shaded place for the small vendors would be marked; the wholesaler would separately be asked to substantiate his new transport costs. That was all that had been decided. The old debts behind the market remained unsettled.

Rama read the market order aloud over the telephone. The contractor’s special concession would be reduced, with a separate allocation from the reduction to provide basic facilities for the small vendors. It was a provisional decision taking effect immediately; adjustment of the sums previously collected would be considered at the next hearing. Binod tucked the order into his scarf. A written order alone did not yet assure him that his daughter would have shade. But for the first time the names of the two women who lifted the baskets appeared clearly in the document governing the concession. ‘When there are rules written for the wholesaler,’ Binod said, ‘let them be read for the small traders too.’

After Binod had left, Sona Kathautiya arrived sounding the horn of her vehicle. The wheels of the motor vehicle from the market were thick with dust. She brought a new reconciliation of an old freight slip for the Bedhi halt. Delivery of the materials had been verified, but on an earlier donor’s plaque the credit for the goods had been assigned to a merchant. ‘The vehicle was mine, the driver worked through the night, and the diesel cost money,’ Sona said. ‘But at the opening ceremony the flowers went to the man whose photograph was printed. Take the photograph; I won’t prevent you. Just don’t pretend that it includes my freight charge.’

Harimohan pushed a receipt towards Sona. It was an order authorising payment of the uncontested portion of the freight, not notice that the money had been deposited. Sona read it and corrected him gently. ‘You have given me the order. It would be wrong to write that I have received the rupees.’ Sarita entered ‘Order issued; receipt awaited’ in the payments register. The board publicly acknowledging donations would be amended separately; someone owed payment for the use of a vehicle must not be represented as a donor. In

the margin of his new preface Ishan added a note: giving credit for work done with another person's means did not require erasing that person's name.

Two hours later Phoolchan Lodh arrived. The sticky earth beneath his feet had dried into crusts. In the resettlement documents he had been offered a vacant plot far from his village. The clerk had written: equal area, therefore an equal alternative. In the printing house's back courtyard Phoolchan broke open a small clod of earth to show them. 'This is not the soil of my field,' he said. 'But the place they are offering has no route by which water can reach it, and it will take two hours to carry produce to the market. How am I to farm simply because the ground looks empty?'

Phoolchan's son favoured the distant plot; he hoped to get a small house there. His father wanted an accounting of cultivable soil, irrigation and access to a livelihood. They belonged to the same family but wanted different things. Sarita had them record the need for a secure home separately from the need to earn a living. On the telephone the official repeated 'equal dhurs of land'. 'If this place is for a house,' Phoolchan said, 'write down whose fields I am supposed to work in for wages. A house certificate does not cure hunger.' In the end the pressure to accept the distant plot immediately was suspended, and a site inspection of nearer cultivable alternatives was scheduled.

Phoolchan's son was not pleased with the order. 'Will that delay our house?' he asked. 'It may,' his father said. 'If you want the option of living separately, I'll listen. But I do not want the shadow of stone offered in the name of my field.' Sarita recorded the two opinions separately. The office could not describe them as the unanimous view of the village. The price of the decision was time: Phoolchan might have to spend another season in temporary shelter. He gathered up the papers acknowledging that possibility, as though the truth about delay were itself part of a right.

When the sunlight had thinned outside, Lakshmi Jhangar came in carrying an oil-stained paper bag. She had obtained certified copies of two additional pages of an old labour contract. The original was still locked away in a distant office. One page listed the seasons in which her grandfather had worked; the other detailed housing arrangements and amounts deducted against debt. A clerk had previously called the whole sum a 'family debt'. 'Whether the accommodation was given in place of wages or as a loan must be read openly,' Lakshmi said quietly. 'My grandfather's signature is old. I will not give a false receipt for payment in his name.'

As Lakshmi took the pages from her bag, her brother stood near the door. 'Who will pay for work this old?' he said. 'The family is exhausted from carrying these papers around.' For a moment she looked at him. 'If Grandfather gave a loan, bring out the proof. If his wages were withheld, bring that out too. Exhaustion is not evidence.' Her brother steadied the string of her bag. She did not win his agreement that day, but she was no longer alone in carrying the weight of the papers.

Maithili read aloud the line where ink had spread between the words ‘due’ and ‘deduction’. ‘Not a guess here,’ Lakshmi said. ‘We need the original.’ She received both copies, along with acknowledgment that her claim could be filed; the amount of wages remained unconfirmed. Closing her bag, she said, ‘My grandfather will not return. I ask only that my right to what was owed for his work be examined. Don’t send me away with “the account has been settled” written on my papers.’ On the receipt Sarita wrote: ‘Contract copies available; claim under examination.’

Tulsi Donwar arrived towards evening with two bundles of documents tied in coarse cloth. One held old measurements and debts relating to a field that had been washed away; the other, a family’s rights of use in a different village. An old office had tried to reject the claim in the second village on the strength of a paper relating to the first. A letter from the new camp had stayed that order, but the rights in the second village were not yet fully entered in the register. Tulsi placed the two bundles apart on the table. ‘This field lay beside an old channel; this path belongs to the other village. The fact that my name appears in both places does not make the land the same.’

Badri Nonphar had come with Tulsi. On the back of his folded rehabilitation document was a reference to an old field called Budhand. In the proposal for his new home, the water tap and the route by which children would reach their house were still being examined. ‘I need somewhere to sleep tonight,’ Badri said, ‘and the claim concerning my old field must remain separate. I did not give this slip as consent to surrender the land.’ ‘My papers for the other village do not prove Badri’s field,’ Tulsi said. ‘But both of us have a right to keep our papers separate.’ Sarita assigned distinct registration numbers to the two applications.

An assistant had begun to connect the name ‘Budhand’ to a location on the present map by guesswork. On the telephone Aditi made it clear that the boundary of a field could not be fixed without an original revenue record and a site measurement. On the same table lay a copy of Saroj Kharkaut’s new net-cost ledger, in which ‘Balthi’ appeared as the name of a small, separate work group. Rama sent a message: do not enter Balthi on the map as though it were certainly a confluence of rivers. The costs of Saroj’s net-making group and the land claims of Tulsi and Badri were three different matters. Sarita had the assistant rewrite the page without humiliating him.

By evening the pile of paper in the printing house had diminished. Harimohan brought the final proof of the new preface. Ishan had drawn up a detailed list of what he had written: the original argument in each chapter that was his own, the specified sections of verified co-authorship with Maithili, and the places where variant readings of ancient sources remained unresolved. Where the first draft had said ‘my book’, it now said ‘the writing of and contributions to this book’. But Maithili said, ‘The word “contributions” must not diminish my co-authorship all over again.’

Harimohan opened the proof of the revised title page. There the names were explicit.

While reading the preface, Harimohan suddenly stopped at a word: ‘unblemished’. Ishan said he had no objection to his own original interpretation. ‘How can a book be unblemished,’ Maithili asked, ‘when at this very moment we are sending out copies of its mistakes?’ Ishan thought for a while. He replaced the word with ‘open to revision’. The small change did not alter the meaning of his old argument, but it made a place in the text for a reader to challenge him. For the first time he could write of respecting an opponent not as an opportunity for praise but as an indispensable condition of inquiry.

Ishan added a sentence to the new preface himself: ‘In those sections where Maithili’s original questions, alternative reasons and revisions of counterarguments are attested, she is a co-author; credit for writing beyond those limits will be independently examined.’ He read it and understood that this admission was not intended to humiliate him; it freed him, too, from false attribution. Yet there was no elation of victory on Maithili’s face. Payment for two of Sarita’s days remained outstanding, three distributors of the old edition had not answered, and an instalment towards the cost of corrections had still to come from the publisher.

‘Should we recall the old copies,’ Harimohan asked, ‘or keep a correction sheet beside each one?’ ‘Destroying the old copies will not erase the mistake from history,’ Maithili said. ‘Let the correction reach those who own the book. Give the right credit in the next printing. Where the authorship of an argument is still uncertain, leave the space blank.’ Ishan agreed. He set aside one copy of the new preface for the library, kept a second at the printing house, and gave a third to Sarita to check. Reading her own name, Sarita said, ‘I disagree with the number of days credited for copying. I’ll examine the account tomorrow. The rest of the wording is right for now.’

Outside the door Binod Kewart was passing with his daughter. Holding her new vendor’s slip, she said, ‘Babu, we still have to see whether we get the shaded place. But at least my name is written.’ ‘A written name has done its work only when you can put your basket in that place,’ Binod replied. Maithili heard him from inside. She touched her own printed name with a fingertip but kept looking towards the window. The printing-house lamp came on. Ishan’s new preface had found its place; outside the paper, the way remained open for what was owed to reach those to whom it belonged.

At the next dawn, when Harimohan began tying the bundles for the library, he found a separate slip concerning an old claim for Urmila’s cloth-washing wages stuck in the printing house’s receipt ledger. Sarita detached it from the receipt for correcting the preface and placed it in an empty envelope. ‘This is not a cost of the book,’ she told Harimohan. ‘The account for the work she did belongs in its own ledger.’ There was a faint tremor of grief for

Naira in her voice. Harimohan wrote the family's name and the relevant receipt number on the envelope. The first new bundle of books went out; another door opened for a different task.

Chapter 164 · Urmila's Due

The light of early morning was falling on the printing house's tin roof when Sarita picked up the envelope concerning Urmila's unpaid dues. Harimohan had kept it separate from the book's correction sheets the day before. The flap was tied not with glue but with old thread. Inside were a copy of the application brought by Urmila Rajak's sister, receipts for clothes washed at the ghat, and photocopies of the hospital's night-shift records. Sarita counted the pages first, then tied the thread again. It would have been convenient to place the papers in a single file, but the labour recorded in them did not belong to a single office.

The proof of the new preface was to be sent out from Harimohan's printing house that day. 'Shall I take this envelope along?' he asked. 'Yes,' Sarita replied, 'but not with the receipts for the book. I have no right to give Urmila literary thanks for washing clothes.' Ishan was listening from the doorway. He offered to pay the fare for the journey to the office. 'If you pay the fare,' Sarita said, 'we will keep a receipt for the fare. It must not be deducted from what is owed to Urmila.' Ishan quietly put away his purse.

At the town's old washing ghat Urmila's sister was already sitting. Sunshine covered the washing slab, but the place customarily occupied by Urmila was empty. Uma Rajak was wringing clothes in the far corner. Before the sister lay three colours of string for identifying separate bundles: patients' clothes, ordinary customers' clothes, and laundry from the hospital's emergency shift. Whenever Urmila tied a bundle, she had written a name and a date beside its string. Her sister lifted one of the cords. 'Look at this,' she told Sarita. 'No notice of death can read the marks left by work.'

Showing her a slip, Sarita asked, 'What amount can be established with certainty?' 'If I speak an amount,' the sister replied, 'the officer will treat it as final. Here is the signature for the night shift; there are customers' signatures on two receipts from the ghat; the vehicle number on one transport record has been rubbed away. Pay first for what is clear. Don't close the question of what must be checked again.' Water dripped from Uma's hands onto the slab. 'I want payment for the days I took charge of the clothes after her,' she said. 'Not in Urmila's name.'

The meeting was to be held in a vacant part of the town's old grain warehouse. Gomati Beldar had placed the attendance register at the door; before Rama Karna lay a decision sheet with five empty columns. The sister signed her name at the entrance but stopped when she saw 'representative of the deceased' written after the description of her identity. 'I am her sister,' she said, 'and the representative authorised by the family for this claim. Urmila has not been absorbed into me.' The clerk crossed out the words and recorded the correct relationship. Sarita pulled out the chair beside her; the sister took her seat herself.

The first officer placed a death certificate on the table. ‘The document is in order,’ he said, ‘and the assistance payment has already been made to the family. What is left to claim?’ The sister did not take the certificate into her hand. ‘I already know that Urmila is dead,’ she said. ‘Why do you make me answer that fact again when I am asking about wages?’ Rama closed the relief register and opened the register of dues. Confirmation of death, family relief, the hospital shift, the laundry contract and the freight charge were read as five independent headings.

Gomati pointed to the last entry for the night shift. The hospital’s old register claimed that part of the shift had not been completed. A worker at the washing house said that the clothes had been collected and returned on time. ‘Who can testify to the timing?’ Rama asked. Uma explained that on the night of the emergency Urmila had carried a bundle of emergency linen inside. She did not claim to have seen Urmila die, but she remembered seeing the bundle arrive. Memory, attendance and signed receipts were recorded in three separate columns at the hearing.

‘Everybody became a volunteer when they were trying to save patients,’ the contractor’s clerk said. ‘Why demand special pay for that night?’ Urmila’s sister opened a thin page of her ledger. ‘We are not putting a price on anyone’s courage in going to save lives,’ she replied. ‘But when the hours and the rate for a job had already been agreed, how can a disaster make that work unpaid?’ Gomati asked the clerk for the written order cancelling Urmila’s authorised shift. He stood there empty-handed. Consent could not be created by supposition.

Before signing the payment order, the sister produced a letter of authorisation from another member of the family. In the officer’s draft the money was described as ‘full and final settlement of all the deceased’s accounts’. Her pen stopped at those words. ‘The family authorised me to present the papers on everyone’s behalf,’ she said. ‘They did not authorise me to waive all dues before the accounts have even been examined.’ Rama had the line about final settlement removed. A receipt for whatever had been verified; the old reference number preserved for the balance. The sister placed a copy of the family’s consent in the file and kept the original in her bag.

The receipts for two bundles were reconciled immediately. After consulting the old bank particulars, the clerk said that there was no previous payment recorded against this sum. Rama issued an order to transfer the uncontested wages into the account authorised by the family and wrote plainly in the ledger: ‘Payment ordered, not received.’ ‘Where can I check when the money comes?’ the sister asked. She was told that both the bank’s deposit confirmation and a copy of the family’s receipt would be filed. She signed, but did not leave the line concerning the incomplete night-shift payment blank; she wrote down the date of the next hearing.

A boy who had been a customer at the old ghat also came to the hearing. On the night his mother had been stranded at the hospital, she had handed a bundle of clothes to Urmila; now the family was looking for two sheets from it. The sister opened a separate inventory of clothes and showed the receipt

mark. ‘A household still has rights over things that were left in Urmila’s care,’ she said. Uma offered to look through the laundry she had since taken over, but would not falsely promise to find the sheets. The customer’s claim for the return of his belongings was recorded separately from the wages and the death relief. The boy carried a copy of the slip home.

Meanwhile, Kiran Raut sat in the outer verandah with two ledgers spread before him. One recorded the share of paddy due from a harvest; the other, debts for seed and transport. Under the heading ‘joint family debt’, the warehouse’s old ledger had charged sharecroppers for expenses on the farm that the landowner alone had decided upon. Kiran set a grain of paddy along one side of a page, a debt receipt along the other. ‘This grain is my share,’ he said. ‘Who decided to add this interest in the document?’

The landowner’s representative said it was easier to collect the money when everything was kept in one account. ‘Ease of collection does not make a debt correct,’ Kiran replied. The old weighing slips, seed receipts and signatures on the sharecropping agreement were compared. The portion of the joint interest for which no basis could be found was reduced; the actual seed debt remained. The representative objected but took a copy of the revised amount. Kiran gathered the remaining grain into his cloth. He would not return home free of debt that day, but the burden of the wrongful joint charge had lessened.

Phoolmati Tiyar came through the door carrying a piece of newly woven fishing net, half finished, under her arm. An old partner wanted the group to resume operating under its former name to attract customers who had left. Phoolmati opened a knot in the net to show them. ‘My signature was on the old arrangement, not my authority,’ she said. ‘If I join it again, even the price of the new net will be deducted against the old dues.’ Two young women who accompanied her placed slips listing their own capital and hours of work on the table.

A trader in the market was prepared to advance money to the new group, but on one condition: all their produce must be sold to him at a single fixed price. Phoolmati pushed the advance back across the table. The net-making group decided to record the real costs of its first three consignments, set aside members’ wages first, and only then divide the risks of selling. The unfinished dispute concerning the old group was left separate. As Phoolmati went out, damp threads from the net caught in the lines of her palm. Nobody’s history had been rubbed from them, but the new knot was made by her own hand.

Kedar Bauri arrived then from the bus stand. Two migrant workers were with him; a member of a third worker’s family could speak only from a distance by telephone. They had already submitted a collective claim for the days on which their wages had been withheld while they built the relief verandah. The contractor had brought notice of a first-instalment payment. Kedar did not treat the notice as proof that anyone had received the money. He took the workers to the community window at the bank, where each person’s deposit was verified separately.

One worker's money had arrived; the other payment was blocked by an error in the account number attached to the name. 'Paying one worker does not extinguish the third worker's claim,' Kedar told the contractor. Rama attached receipts for the first instalments to the claims and kept the demands for remaining wages and compensation for delay open. The absent member of the migrant family did not lose a share because of that absence. When Kedar emerged, a worker asked, 'Should we go back to the job now?' 'Whether to work is your choice,' he replied. 'Paying what is owed is their responsibility.'

Phulwa, one of the workers with Kedar, played a message from home on her telephone. The landlord had not agreed in writing to wait another month for the rent. With the first instalment she had sent part of the rent; it would not yet cover her family's expenses. 'In the company's books I have rendered service,' she asked, 'so why does the debt keep growing in my household books?' Kedar had her note the time of the bank-deposit message on her phone. Phulwa's private home address did not go into the committee file; only confirmation of payment did. She was considering another approach to the court to recover the remainder.

In a corner of the warehouse Shiva Dhandi was showing two spellings of his name. On the old wage slip it was 'Shiv'; in the bank copy a partly erased letter had been read as 'Siv'. The office had previously treated him as a different person and stopped his payment. Shiva put together his time slip, evidence from the workplace and a usable copy of his identification. Gomati did not merge his file with Urmila's sister's: the error concerned a word, not death or inheritance.

After two independent signatures were compared, the correction to Shiva's name was accepted. Confirmation that the uncontested wages had been deposited in his own bank account arrived before evening. Shiva signed for receipt, but retained a separate claim for the financial loss caused by the earlier delay. 'Correcting my name will not bring back the months of deprivation my household has endured,' he said. 'That is why the correction sheet will show the dates of the delay as well,' Gomati replied. For the first time Shiva put the sheet straight into his file instead of folding it.

Nurjahan Itfarosh waited outside, washing the front hoof of her donkey with water. She had an old receipt for delivering bricks to the hospital's rear gate. In the contractor's ledger, the cost of caring for the animal had been deducted from the brick-hauling charge, leaving a balance. Nurjahan pointed to a small crack in the hoof. 'The charge for the quantity of bricks carried is one thing,' she said. 'The conditions governing treatment if the animal was injured are another. Don't turn them into a single deduction.'

The contractor replied that the donkey belonged to Nurjahan, so its treatment was her responsibility. 'I am its owner,' Nurjahan said, 'but that does not mean nobody else decided to send us along a flooded road.' A safe route was specified in the original haulage order, though no written order authorising the changed route could be found. Proof of brick delivery established the uncontested freight due; the question of compensation for the

animal's treatment was reserved for a site inspection. Nurjahan would not let anybody write 'paid in full' against a line for money she had not received.

In the afternoon Sarita came back to Urmila's sister. The same exhaustion remained on the sister's face, an exhaustion that could not be measured by the amount of relief money. 'You are looking after Naira's papers, aren't you?' she asked. Sarita nodded. 'I can't bring myself to open the drawer of the desk where Naira left her key,' she said. The sister looked down at Urmila's damp receipt. 'I have to open the ledger of her work,' she answered. 'If I don't, other people will say nothing was ever owed.'

The two women were silent for a while. Sarita's sorrow was not a replica of the sister's grief. In her last days Naira had worked with records and civic responsibilities; Urmila had cared for patients' laundry, the washing slabs at the ghat and the night shift. Death had taken them both in the same year, but their lives and their labour had different shapes. The sister showed Sarita a short piece of one of Urmila's cords, then put it back into her bag. This was not an object for an official file.

Nandini Bhandari arrived with the water ledger of her nursery. An old page contained the name 'Puraini', and there was a dispute with a customer over the cost of hauling water. An office assistant wanted to associate that name with a river on the map and calculate a price accordingly. Nandini stopped him. 'Look at the days the water was brought and the vehicle used in this account,' she said, 'not the entire course of a river.' The actual freight slip was found; the customer's agreed share of the cost was separated out, and further negotiations over the balance were scheduled. The name Puraini remained as it was.

Tulsi Donwar brought documents from the other village. The old page said 'Balan'; a copy from another source said 'Bhutahi Balan'. Again someone wanted to treat the two as one river with a permanent name and redraw a land boundary on that basis. Tulsi separated the pages. 'How can you derive the course of a river from a page that describes the way to somebody's house?' Rama issued clear instructions: the source, period and purpose of each name must be recorded separately; the land and waterways must be verified by proper measurement. Tulsi's claim in the other village remained open.

In the outer courtyard the clothes washed by Uma and the others were drying. More work had fallen to them since Urmila's death, but the administration was looking for the convenience of adding the charges for new work to the old register. 'I have not replaced Urmila,' Uma said. 'I worked my own shifts.' Rama opened a separate register of the new shifts. The wages for the days worked by Uma and the other women were recognised as payable in their own names. Nothing owed to Urmila's family was reduced on that account.

Rama raised a further question. On some pages of the hospital's original laundry ledger were water stains, and the last figures on those pages seemed different in the contractor's clean copy. Aditi had asked to inspect the original ledger during her investigation, but entry to that room was restricted for

reasons of structural safety. Rama directed that a sealed, securely kept copy be compared. ‘The examination of cracks in a building and the accounting of wages are separate things,’ she said, ‘but preserving each piece of evidence is necessary to both.’ Nobody pronounced anyone guilty on seeing the stains; the discrepancy between the copies remained on record.

As afternoon waned, the hospital accounts officer arrived with a sealed report. It proposed removing part of the night shift from the payable account under the heading ‘voluntary assistance during the disaster’. But that description conflicted with the rate agreed earlier, the signatures acknowledging receipt and the copy of Urmila’s laundry register. Gomati read out the conflicting sections of the report. ‘If the work was under contract before the disaster,’ the sister asked, ‘on what date did it become voluntary?’ The officer asked for time to provide a written explanation. Rama set a definite date but refused permission to withhold the uncontested payment.

The first message from the bank arrived in the evening: the approved wages for the two bundles handled in Urmila’s name had been deposited in the account specified in the family’s claim. Holding her phone, the sister read the amount twice. It was neither the total relief payment nor the whole of the wages outstanding. Rama gave her a copy of the bank confirmation and wrote explicitly: ‘Partial wages received; night shift, haulage and other disputed items remain.’ The sister signed the receipt, but no shout of triumph escaped her lips. Outside, the water at the washing ghat kept flowing slowly.

Kiran departed with his revised debt statement; Phoolmati went to show a customer a sample of the new net; Kedar explained the payment position to the migrant family member who lived far away; Shiva sent the deposit confirmation to his wife; Nurjahan watched how her donkey walked before driving off again. The different decisions of that single day had come from the same committee table, yet each carried a different value into a different home. Sarita thought that if they were all described by one word —‘resolution’—the people inside the lines would disappear once more.

As the evening meeting was ending, Padma arrived from the school. In her hand was a printed message from which only half a sentence concerning Urmila’s dues had been circulated: ‘Closure of the account after death’. The sender’s name was unclear. Alarmed, a clerk said, ‘This will change the meaning of today’s payment.’ Padma placed the sheet on the table. ‘First we need the entire sentence from the original letter. The language of a severed passage cannot sever anyone’s rights.’ Rama copied the printed words exactly into the receipt book but deferred judgment on their meaning.

Before standing up, Urmila’s sister opened her bag. She put the death certificate, the bank confirmation of the partial deposit, the claim for outstanding wages and the cord tied by Urmila’s own hand in four separate places. ‘Will you come again tomorrow?’ Sarita asked. ‘If they ask for the original letter, I will,’ the sister said. ‘But today I am going home to dry the clothes. I will look after her ledger, and I will wash the clothes with my own hands.’ Sarita said nothing. In the dark of the verandah the marks of the

sister’s feet fell upon the water and vanished the next moment. On the bank sheet the deposited sum endured, and beside it the balance still due.

Chapter 165 · The Meaning Intended by the Sentence

Early in the morning Padma sat in the school verandah with two sheets spread before her. The first was the printed message that had kept slipping from Urmila's sister's hands the day before: 'Closure of the account after death'. The second was a certified letter received that morning from the municipal accounts branch. Along its edge were a seal, a page number and the issuing officer's signature. Padma placed a stone on each sheet, for the wind in the verandah was so strong that cut-out words might have flown away of their own accord. The actual letter could not be blown away so easily.

Zubaida came from the shelter and asked, 'Shall we put it up on the board now?' Padma shook her head. 'First we'll read the whole letter, and its reverse as well. Don't imagine that because a piece of paper bears a seal, everything it says must be just. The seal establishes only that the office issued it.' She checked the first line of the letter against the list of enclosures, the branch number and the lettering of the following paragraph. In one copy half the sentence was missing. In the other, a small word written within the margin—'only'—changed the entire context.

When Rama Karna reached the municipality, she had the original dispatch register opened for them. At first the office clerk said, 'Urmila's family has received money. Why all this trouble now?' Padma turned the paper towards him. The full sentence read: 'Closure of the account after death shall apply only to the head of immediate relief grant; the examination of service dues, laundry charges, carriage charges and other verified labour payments shall not be affected by that closure.' Everything after 'only' had been removed from the cut-down sheet. The clerk froze in his chair. He took up his pen and checked the letter's issue number again himself.

'The complete sentence must be published,' Padma said, 'but this envelope contains the family's bank-account number and the sister's private contact address. Those must not be printed.' 'How will people accept it as proof?' the accounts officer asked. 'The letter number, date, issuing branch and certified public extract are sufficient grounds,' Rama said. 'Anyone wishing to verify it may apply to inspect the office copy by the prescribed procedure. Giving out directions to the family's home is not proof.' In the margin of the public version Padma wrote that this was a correction of the meaning of the letter, not evidence that the wages had been paid.

Urmila's sister was already drying her washing at the ghat. When Sarita arrived with the certified copy, the sister wrung out the cloth before taking the new paper. 'Will this sentence bring the wages into my account?' she asked. 'No,' Sarita said. 'The partial wages deposited yesterday have their own bank confirmation. This letter only prevents the office from taking the wrong

route and declaring all dues settled.’ The sister read the line in full once and kept her own copy. ‘Then print it,’ she said, ‘but no photograph of Urmila’s private cord.’

Someone had also made a circular stamp on the back of the old printed sheet under the words ‘consent of the family’. Rama searched for the number of that stamp in the dispatch register; she found none. She did not immediately pronounce the person who had made the truncated message a criminal, but opened a separate inquiry into its paper, its distributors and the times at which it had been received. ‘Who will reckon the harm done by the false meaning?’ Padma asked. ‘First send the correction everywhere that message went,’ Rama replied. ‘Any claim for damages will itself require evidence.’ Two volunteers went out to the market with copies of the correction.

Sarita took her phone from her bag. The number that had sent the truncated message and the names of those who forwarded it to successive groups were not the same. Padma stopped a young man who wanted to guess who the culprit was. ‘Why the fragment was cut is a separate inquiry. For now we are authenticating the complete letter.’ She placed one copy of the correction on the school noticeboard, gave a second for public reading in the market and put the original letter away in a secure file. The old truncated sheet was not burned; the full correction was attached beside it.

The new afternoon meeting was held not around a table but in the long shade of the verandah. Nasim Idrisi arrived carrying five bags with coloured linings. ‘I said this when I submitted the bill for sewing relief supplies,’ he began. ‘I will provide proof of the fabric measurements, not my customers’ names without their permission.’ An investigator demanded the complete list of the customers for the old bags in connection with the new complaint. Nasim laid out a fabric sample, the sewing orders and the dates of receipt separately. He did not open the book containing named customers’ measurements.

‘Without names the documents are incomplete,’ the investigator said. ‘If the payment for six pieces of sewing is withheld, examine the six sewing orders,’ Nasim replied. ‘How did publishing the identities of everyone whose private measurements I took become a condition for being paid for my sewing?’ Padma proposed confidential receipt numbers instead of names. Rama kept a sealed copy for matching in the accounts room; the public record showed the material, number of bags, dimensions and wages. Nasim received a copy of the verified orders. The customers’ identities remained protected.

A woman from the shelter handed Nasim a torn bag. ‘My daughter’s books have ripped its side,’ she said. Sewing the tear, Nasim replied, ‘We can discuss the cost of the repair later. But you needn’t tell me the name of your daughter’s school.’ The woman smiled. For the first time she saw that privacy could be protected not only inside a locked cupboard but also at the point of a

needle. The rhythmic clatter of the sewing machine remained distinct from the noise of the meeting.

At Kamala Thakur's shop, the third hearing in an old dispute over a pledged bangle was taking place at the same hour. The elderly woman again presented the receipt for the bangle she had received from her mother's family and a description of the crooked flower engraved inside it. A young man brought an old business debt ledger. 'The jewellery of a household used to remain in the charge of the men,' he said. 'An old custom of handling property is not proof of ownership,' Kamala replied. 'Look separately at the written evidence of whose name the object was made in, who deposited it and to whom it was given.'

A letter from the elderly woman's maternal family, the original deposit receipt and the artisan's ledger recording the making of the bangle were compared. The hearing officer made clear that, on this evidence, the woman's ownership claim was accepted and the process of redeeming the pledge would proceed in her name; the dispute concerning the family's remaining debt would be heard separately. The young man filed an objection. Before signing the decision sheet, Kamala wrapped the bangle once more in red cloth. 'I did not come to fight the people in my own home,' the elderly woman said. 'I only did not want my own possession treated as nameless.'

Kamala discovered a fresh dispute on the release form. The family wanted the bangle to be described as going into 'family custody' instead of being given to the elderly woman. Holding the bangle in her hand, Kamala said, 'I cannot erase the woman's name from the line for custody when it appears in the line recording the decision.' The weight of the old bangle had not yet returned to the woman's wrist, because the fee for redeeming the pledge was still disputed. But the question of whose right the possession would fall under had been put in writing. The young man took away his copy of the objection; nobody took away his right to make it.

Nahid Mogal was waiting outside the shop. In the earlier proposal to mortgage land belonging to her mother's family, her name had automatically been added under the claim of 'consent of all shareholders'. The new sheet now provided separate spaces for each shareholder's signature. Nahid read it carefully. The old debt was real, and the interest was rising. She did not want to risk her share merely to uphold the family's standing; neither did she want to turn away from the true calculation of the debt.

'If you don't sign today, we may face an auction of the land,' her maternal brother said. 'Fear will not write my consent,' Nahid replied. She asked for a written statement of the verified debt, the mortgage period, the greatest risk that would fall on her share if payment failed, and the procedure for recovering the land. The figure confirmed from Sharda's old ledger was separated from the increased interest in the new proposal. Nahid decided to accept a conditional mortgage against a limited portion of her share; she gave

no permission over the rest. She chose the risk herself, not through somebody else's mouth.

'Your old letter mentions a field near Liveri,' the clerk said. 'Shall we attach a map of it?' Nahid put the letter back in her bag. 'Liveri appears in the old description kept by my mother's family. For the share being mortgaged today, use the current measurement and ownership established by the proper records. I will not draw a new boundary for a field from the name of an old river.' Her brother was displeased, but for the first time that day the decision on each page of the debt was Nahid's own.

At the other end of the verandah, Sugni Saday came carrying the old bamboo measuring cord of her drainage team. After the hospital disaster, when water had been trapped, her team had helped open a safe passage for people in their neighbourhood. The new rehabilitation proposal now had a line against that neighbourhood's name: 'to be relocated'. On the map prepared by the author of the proposal there was no indication of those families' routes to work, of drainage, or of the distance children would travel to school. Spreading the cord across the table, Sugni asked, 'When the route had to be opened, I was a leader. Why am I silenced when it comes to moving our homes?'

The officer explained that temporary accommodation was ready. 'If immediate safety requires it, people will go with their consent,' Sugni said. 'But they will not sign away their permanent homes on a paper promising one night's roof.' Separate attendance slips for the women, the elderly and the itinerant families of the neighbourhood were read. By a vote of the representatives, the words 'permanent acceptance' were removed from the proposal. Sugni's team accepted the emergency evacuation plan, but permanent resettlement would require an open neighbourhood meeting, inspection of a suitable place and individual consent.

Sugni obtained separate agreement for immediate accommodation from three neighbourhood families. One chose a nearby place because an elderly woman had trouble walking; another said it could not move far because of its daily work beginning at dawn. The officer had originally prepared a list sending everyone to one large camp. Sugni had it divided into two parts: a place of immediate safety in an emergency and a decision on a permanent home. 'We will not surrender both rights with the same signature,' she said. To protect family privacy, the new list used receipt numbers instead of names on the public board.

That decision, too, had a cost. The temporary water tanker would fall short for the next two days, because the initial order to spend on the permanent site had been suspended. Sugni herself fixed the working hours for joining the pipes, but would not put a tool into anybody's hands before the wage rate was recorded. 'Don't portray my neighbourhood as living on other people's charity,' she said. 'We will accept relief, work, and say where we want to live.'

Gomati accepted responsibility for sending a copy of the team's decision back to the neighbourhood.

Geeta Kori arrived with a folded length of cloth. The company across the border had still not paid the full price of her earlier consignment. When Urmila was alive, she had seen a sample of a grey sheet and told Geeta that similarity of colour did not prove it came from the company. Geeta still remembered that remark. This time she had measurements of the fabric, the marks on its edges, a shipment receipt and orders sent by her partner across the border. 'I will claim my money on the evidence of my cloth,' she said, 'not on suspicion about the hospital.'

On the telephone the company's representative said some consignment numbers matched, but the remaining measurements were disputed. Geeta read the proposed receipt for half the amount. It said 'all dues extinguished'. She refused to sign those words. The company agreed in writing to transfer partial payment for the uncontested consignment through the bank and to submit the remaining fabric for independent measurement. As the day drew to a close, Geeta saw the message confirming the partial payment in her account. She also received a new date for the balance of her claim. It was not complete victory, but part of the money owed had become real.

A little later her loom-working partner across the border joined the call. She said that the edge of another length of fabric appeared to have been cut in the company's measuring ledger; whether the cutting occurred during transport or packing had not been established. Geeta sent her a photograph of the sample, but not a photograph of the sheet used at the hospital. 'This is a comparison of the work of my loom, not a search for a patient's name,' she explained. Her partner promised an independent measurement report for the next meeting. Geeta accepted receipt of the partial payment and continued to refuse any seal declaring full settlement.

Folding the cloth, Geeta asked, 'Can I weave as much as there is paper here?' Nasim laughed. 'If an open seam in a document were enough to bring payment for goods, my shop would be empty.' Rama gave them copies of their separate registers. 'There is a partnership proposal in the market now,' Geeta said. 'If a company takes goods in my name again, I will agree the accounts in advance.' There was the bustle of the next market day in her words, but this time the conditions were written in her own hand.

Durga Gangai was weighing makhana and flattened rice in her basket at the market. On one page of her old ledger was the name 'Gahuma', which a major merchant's accountant was attempting to present as proof of exclusive rights for a new buyer. Durga set the page on the table. 'This is the remembered name of someone who ordered goods long ago,' she said. 'It contains neither an exclusive right for today's buyer nor a map of a river.' A new customer paid for a separate weight of goods, and Durga gave him a

receipt. The old debt remained in its own place in her ledger; the new sale stood on its own.

Suraj Gangota came with his son Harihar to inquire about the date of an instalment on their restructured loan. In his bag was an old field document bearing the name ‘Dhemura’; there was no new word about recovering the land that had been lost. The restructured instalment was due, while earnings from farming remained uncertain. ‘What is the use of keeping the old name on a paper for a field that no longer exists?’ Harihar asked. ‘That name records what we lost,’ Suraj replied. ‘But we will accept only what this paper actually says; we cannot draw a new boundary from it.’ He read the calculation of interest aloud again.

Paying for two bags of goods from Durga’s basket, her new customer said he had once visited the old trader called Gahuma. Durga did not press him to serve as a witness. That belonged to another time; the old ledger could keep the name and the history of the trade. On a thin sheet of paper she entered the new buyer’s goods, their weight and the payment, and smiled. Nearby Suraj was tying his bag to keep his instalment paper clear of dry earth. Durga’s earnings and Suraj’s debt were under the sunlight of the same market, but they were not each other’s account.

Padma returned to the meeting with the final draft of the public letter. A member suggested releasing the entire private file so that the person who had cut the sentence could never make such a claim again. ‘Completeness does not mean displaying every private possession,’ Padma said. ‘The public sentence must be complete, not the whole of a person’s private life.’ She published the original sentence with a reference to its enclosures, but withheld the bank number, the family address and the details of Urmila’s personal belongings. The correction was posted on the public notice, with an explicit rebuttal beside the old incomplete copy.

When Urmila’s sister came again, she carried a bundle of dried clothes. She read the entire sentence on the noticeboard. The accounts room had fixed a date for examination of the remaining night shift, but the unclear number of the transport vehicle was still awaiting verification. ‘Today I have at least learned that a sentence in an official letter cannot erase my sister’s work,’ she told Rama. ‘Whether I receive the rest of the money is something I will come back to ask.’ Rama gave her a copy of the outstanding claim. Sarita stood silently beside her; the grief for Naira had not grown quiet anywhere within her.

In the courtyard a teenage girl sat knotting thread. Looking at the edge of Geeta’s cloth, she asked, ‘If two threads run together in this weave, whose name receives the payment?’ ‘Wages for the one who wove it, costs for the one who bought the thread, a share for the one who sold it,’ Geeta said. ‘If we aren’t careful in writing it down, the threads will quarrel.’ Padma was listening. A meeting concerning Yusuf and Parvati’s partnership had been

scheduled in the market for the following day, when this question would arise in both paper and loom.

At dusk Nasim closed his measurement ledger, Kamala returned the bangle’s deposit papers and locked up, Sugni rolled her drainage cord, Geeta copied the bank message onto paper, and Nahid took the limited mortgage proposal home. No single page amounted to the final decision on any of these lives. On the school noticeboard the complete sentence hung directly beneath the truncated one. The wind stirred the corner of the old paper; the new sheet stayed still, held in place by two small pins, its meaning held in place by the people who had not stopped asking what was owed to them even after they had read the written words.

Chapter 166 · The Weaver's Market

At dawn in Bhado, the wetness gathered on the raw planks of Sukathi's cattle market was not dew but water dripping from baskets of fish. Vinod Kewart lifted a wooden board and wedged a brick beneath it so that the narrow passage would not be slippery. Along that passage came Yusuf Ansari carrying two lengths of cloth. One had a red border, the other a yellow one; a fine grey pattern was pressed between them. Geeta Kori arrived behind him and said, ‘Today we shall open the papers before we sell the cloth. Otherwise, as in the old market, everybody's wages will once again disappear into the same bundle.’

Yusuf's loom had been working late into the night. Fine fibres of yarn clung to the joints of his fingers, but what pricked him most sharply was the ledger of the old accusation. It had already been entered in a separate inquiry that the bundle of cloth bearing a false hospital-approval label was not his merchandise. Yet shopkeepers would sometimes still say, ‘The one whose name is printed on the bundle must be responsible.’ Today he carried in his bag the market committee's written correction. He wanted to put it on the seller's counter, not stand guard over evidence.

Yusuf remembered how, when he had first set the wrongly labelled bundle aside, even his family had blamed him in their eagerness for a profit. The yarn had remained unsold for three days, and the deadline for his son's training fee had passed. Later the lawful lengths of cloth were released, but there was no compensation for that delay. Today's correction stated: ownership of the legitimate goods established; investigation into the source of the remaining unidentified consignment continuing. He regarded those words not as a certificate to display but as the foundation on which his livelihood could begin moving again.

Parvati Tanti had been sitting there since dawn with a small warp of her own yarn. Two other women of her household had also worked on the tying and patterned sections of that warp. Yusuf said, ‘I'll buy the yarn, you will weave, and it will be sold in the market under my shop's name. We shall share the profit equally.’ Parvati stopped at the word equally. ‘Before we divide the profit, who will count the losses? Whose loom is it, whose dyes? If the cloth is spoiled, whose shoulders will carry the loss? And how will the hours worked by the other two women in my household fit into your half?’

Pavitra Patwa arrived behind them with samples of her braided ornaments, cords and warning strips. ‘My name will not go on the same line as Parvati's,’ she said. ‘I am a Patwa; she is a Tanti. The price of the thread I twist for braiding cannot be included in the weaving charge.’ Yusuf smiled at first, but Parvati placed before him a separate old receipt belonging to Pavitra. It

showed the bank payment previously received for her labour in the boat-and-tool trials. In place of laughter came the rustling of paper.

Geeta spread out a length of cloth and drew six boxes: yarn, dye, weaving, braiding, transport and sale. ‘Now add a seventh: money withheld,’ she said. The cross-border company had paid the undisputed portion of her previous consignment into her bank account, but the measurements for the remaining cloth were still contested. She had no wish to conceal that old injury inside the new partnership. Yusuf asked, ‘Should the withheld sum be included in the price of today's cloth?’ ‘No,’ Geeta replied. ‘Why should a new customer pay for an old company's wrongdoing?’

A young man from the market committee took up a torn page from the weighing ledger. ‘If everyone has to be entered by a separate name, who will fill in so many papers?’ Parvati laid a short strand of yarn on the tip of his pen. ‘If you mistake this for some other thread and cut it, the cloth will come apart. Call us all one person on paper and our payments will come apart. Write down the wages for filling in forms too, but do not erase our names.’ The young man sat down again and took out a second receipt for Pavitra.

Beside a rectangular dye trough, Sakina Rangrez had set out her blue solution. A customer had complained that its colour had faded. Sakina had already prepared an account of the altered dye in the earlier consignment, but the accountant, looking at that account, insisted on declaring all the old customer's debts settled. Sakina laid out the sample from that day and the accounts. ‘Where the mistake was mine in dyeing a particular length of cloth, the charge for that work will be reduced. But a customer who bought another consignment and did not pay for it does not have that debt cancelled here.’

The customer asked, blue dye splashing against his hand, ‘How long will the colour last this time?’ Sakina showed him two ends of dyed yarn. ‘Test a sample after washing and weaving. I shall put a colour-fastness guarantee in writing, but I will not swear by the smell of my own trough.’ Yusuf's son proposed recording the sample numbers on his mobile phone. Sakina permitted that, but not photographs of the customer's name or home. The receipt for the dyeing of the new cloth was made in Sakina's name; the old debt remained on a separate disputed page.

There was too little water left in the dye house to prepare the new samples. A shopkeeper asked whether, if plenty of dye was made for the fair, the leftover solution could be emptied into the cattle market's drain. Sakina looked towards the drain, where water from the fish baskets had already collected. ‘If dye remains, we shall test whether it can be used in another batch. I cannot decide alone to discharge it into the water,’ she said. A market committee employee entered the cost of a separate container and the wages for collecting its contents.

Yusuf's son set his small toolbox on the counter. Inside were a broken charger, a fine wire-testing probe and two repair receipts. He had helped his father make a photographic inventory of the shop before, but he had not promised to spend his life at a loom. ‘Abba, today I shall be paid for my first equipment-repair customer,’ he said. Yusuf looked first at his son's hands, on which fine marks from wire had replaced the marks of yarn. ‘And the loom?’ The old question escaped him unbidden.

His son answered, ‘The loom is your knowledge. If I learn it, I shall learn by my own choice. But I will not give up repairing equipment.’ Hearing that certainty, Yusuf fell silent for a while. He remembered the first clacking of the loom he had learned from his own father; at the same time he remembered seeing his son make rounds of government offices over the charge concerning the wrongly labelled bundle. ‘My seal is no longer needed on your work,’ he said. ‘But whatever you repair, keep full written accounts with the customer. Do not store their confidential papers on your phone.’ For the first time the boy laughed without irritation.

At the fish-selling end of the cattle market, customers crowded around the boards spread between Vinod Kewart and Phoolmati Tiyar. At this year's F4 Fish-and-Makhana Labour Fair the new committee had marked out two shaded places for small vendors. The previous year wholesale trucks had occupied the shade while the contents of small baskets spoiled in the sun. Vinod demanded a written map of the passage from the committee. ‘The purchase price of fish is one thing, the charge for unloading it from a boat another, and the wages of those who carry the bundles another,’ he said. ‘If there is a subsidy, that too will occupy a separate line.’

Water had collected behind the market. An employee was about to thrust a stick into it and enter its depth as ‘half a hand’ by guesswork. Hira Sahni, who had corrected his old body-based measurements during the water-measuring trials, stopped him. Measurements were taken at two points with a standardised rod. The water was deeper on one side because the basket drain was blocked. Without testing the silt, no one called that water the depth of the pond or the level of the river. The immediate cost of cleaning was entered under market maintenance, and payment for the workers was also fixed.

Phoolmati moved a basket of fish fry aside. ‘We have formed a new net group, but the account of the capital invested in the nets has a way of disappearing under someone else's name,’ she said. Vinod explained that the market committee's new page contained separate columns for the owner of the net, the person who made the catch, the boat operator, unloading and the seller. The committee agreed to test the system on that day's trade. Each worker received a separate receipt for the first small sale. But collection charges under the old contract and its outstanding balances still awaited a hearing; one day's new counter could not make good the losses of previous years.

Women who gathered makhana were sifting the grains they had brought from the edge of the pond. Old mats had been laid beneath a grove of young trees for drying them. A trader proposed absorbing the charge for cracking the seeds into the purchase price. Chandrika brought a plate from the kitchen and placed unprocessed makhana and cracked makhana separately on it. ‘The hands that take it from the water, the fire used for roasting it, and the implements that crack it are different kinds of work,’ she said. The women's hours were recorded at the fair, and no one who had not agreed to participate was compelled to join the worship or the songs.

A child began beating a festival drum brought to the mat where the makhana was spread. Chandrika did not stop him; she asked, ‘Who owns this instrument?’ The child said that it belonged to the festival organiser. The organiser wanted to give the singing women meals instead of wages. The women objected. Slips were prepared for voluntary participation and remuneration for both rehearsals and performance. The child beat the drum again, but now its sound was the sound of work agreed upon.

At the other end of the market Bindeshwari Sahu arrived with the first signboard made from the old wooden oil press. A buyer had fixed a price for the entire press, but an elderly woman of the household wanted to retain the ancestors' measuring vessel, ledger and first signboard. The decision had been deferred for a long time. Today Bindeshwari said, ‘The press will be sold; the memory will not.’ The buyer examined two separate inventories: the wheel, timber and axle to be sold, and the signboard, old weights and ledger that would remain with the family.

‘If I don't get the first signboard, the price will have to be reduced,’ the buyer said. Showing him a crack in the wood, Bindeshwari replied, ‘The signboard is not an essential part of the oil-extracting machine. We shall keep the value of its history.’ After valuation, they agreed to the sale at a lower price. Part of the proceeds went towards paying verified old wages and debts; the remainder became capital for a partnership in a small oil shop. Lifting the household's measuring vessel, the elderly woman said, ‘The shop will be new, but the measure will not cheat.’

Usha Ram arrived carrying a small strip of dyed leather. On it was a delicate triangular design of her own cutting. Earlier a customer had wanted to use that same pattern to make numerous pairs of shoes under his own name. Usha had kept a record of her first drawing, the date of cutting and the number of the copy shown to the customer. Today he brought a new contract: he would pay her, but would acquire complete rights over the design.

‘Buying a pair of shoes and buying the whole life of a pattern are not the same thing,’ Usha said. ‘Then what are your conditions?’ he asked. ‘Credit for the design must go to me in the first batch; the number produced must be recorded; and any later batch will require separate consent. Nor may the contract stipulate that, because my family works with leather, I must remain

in that occupation forever.' She asked for time to pursue separate training in drawing and to prepare object samples. The customer withdrew his proposal for partial rights; they signed a written order for a limited batch.

Looking at Usha's strip, Pavitra said, 'Someone will look at the cord I braid and claim the design of the cord as their own.' Usha smiled. Parvati called the three craftspeople together. They saw the possibility of making something jointly: the border of a woven length, a braided cord and a sturdy leather grip. But separate receipts were agreed for the use, price and credit of all three materials. The new object was still a trial; none had been sold. Working together did not mean erasing one another's signatures.

When Usha had first made a new design, an uncle had asked her who had given a leatherworker's daughter the right to leave shoe leather and draw designs. Usha had offered no answer that day. Today she would take a copy of her limited contract home. She was making no public declaration that she would abandon leatherwork; she was deciding the boundaries of her work for herself. The advance on her new sample had opened a way to pay the first fee for her training in design.

At that moment Kiran Raut approached the market committee carrying an old sharecropping page. 'Adhwara' was written in a corner. The accountant wanted to treat the name as evidence of the market's drainage and alter rent on one side of the site. Kiran laid the page on the table rather than holding it in front of his face. 'This is an old place-name in my sharecropping and payment account. It records a division of half the grain; it does not measure the water in today's cattle market.' The committee preserved the original spelling of the name and entered the water measurement on a separate copy.

Devaki Pal had tethered her animals on dry ground away from the fair. An old record of the seasonal livestock route bore the name 'Khairi'. A young man setting up a tent for the new cloth shop wanted to enclose part of that old passage. 'I am not turning this place into a river with a piece of paper,' Devaki said. 'But look at the safe passage for animals today.' The survey worker examined the actual slope of the ground, the narrow way beside the cattle market and the distance needed for animal safety during the fair. The tent was moved a little. The question of permanent rights over the land was not settled by this temporary decision.

Bidding began for Yusuf's first length of cloth. A wholesale merchant offered one price for the woven fabric, the dyeing and the braided border, but Parvati showed him the value of each component separately. Yusuf put aside a plain length for sale; the price of the decorated cloth was fixed only after Sakina's and Pavitra's receipts had been reconciled. 'One object will have one price,' the trader said. 'The customer will pay one sum,' Parvati answered, 'but many hands labour within it. We will not hide them.'

As the stalls shifted in the afternoon, the makhana basket caught the sun and a dyed cloth slipped beneath it. Parvati lifted the cloth and examined it. Pavitra's knot at the border was sound, but Sakina's dye was damp in places. Sakina did not immediately admit fault; she asked that the sample be dried and tested. Yusuf asked the buyer for one more day. 'When we sold the first cloth in haste, they deducted the cost of the defect from every worker,' he said. The trader granted the time but reduced the advance. They entered the price of this inconvenience in the partnership account.

In the market office the page containing the old accusation was opened. Yusuf's signature on the first bundle matched the papers establishing lawful ownership and sale; the source of the second consignment with the false hospital-approval label was still under independent investigation. The committee formally withdrew the collective accusation against Yusuf's legitimate cloth. But no person's name was added as the one who had affixed the false label without evidence. Holding the corrected letter, Yusuf said, 'My trade has begun again, but I will not shut the mouth of the investigation for my own convenience.'

Rama Karn, who had come to the fair to inspect labour consent and the accounts, read the draft of the new partnership. Yusuf's shop would provide the place of sale, Parvati the weaving, Sakina the dyeing and Pavitra the braiding; each person's advance and remaining wages would be paid on a separate schedule. No equal deduction would be imposed on everyone before the cause of any damage was established. Written permission would be required concerning ownership of materials and use of designs. Geeta asked, 'If the company holds back the money, which household bears the cost of the delay?' The draft acquired a separate claim for that delay.

In the fair's public register, separate entries were made for Vinod's small-vendor space, Phoolmati's share in the net group, Chandrika's kitchen hours, Sakina's dyeing rate, Usha's limited design licence and Bindeshwari's approved share in the joint oil shop. A donation was not described as the commercial price of purchasing fish. Workers' names were not put on public display without permission, although each worker received a copy of their receipt. Those unable to read had their account entries read aloud in a language of their choice.

While reading the accounts, Rama noticed an important blank: the new partnership did not state into whose bank account the first payment would go. Yusuf initially gave his own account number, but Parvati stopped him. 'If my wages are deposited in Yusuf's account and he transfers them to me afterwards, I shall once more be dependent on his favour.' Separate receipt numbers, separate bank deposits and witnesses for those paid in cash were agreed. After the sale of the first length, four separate payment messages arrived, but the earnings from future consignments were still only an estimate.

Geeta sent a short message to her partner across the border: the first draft of the new partnership had been approved here, but the money still owed by her old company had not become capital in that partnership. She was waiting for the company to give a date for independent measurement. Turning a fine loom thread around her finger, she said, ‘I shall not weave my next cloth against money someone else has withheld.’ Parvati urged her to become a partner in the new merchandise. Geeta answered that she would decide her new share only after she received a written account of the status of her old claim.

In the evening the smell of fish mingled with that of fresh oil bottled at the fair. Yusuf's son came home with a small envelope containing his earnings from repairing equipment. He had replaced a faulty wire in a customer's radio and written his own name on the receipt for the labour. He placed the envelope before his father. Yusuf put it back into his son's hand. ‘This is what you have earned. Give to the household what you wish, of your own accord.’ For the first time the son had bought a small packet of sweets for his mother from his own wages.

Parvati folded the new partnership paper and tucked it into her clothes; Pavitra checked once more the figures on her separate receipt; Sakina took her dye sample home to dry. Bindeshwari's elderly kinswoman smiled as she measured a bottle for the new shop using the old weights. In the water left standing in the market, the lamp of the new tent quivered; no one mistook that reflection for a map of the river. Tasting a piece of his son's sweet, Yusuf said, ‘The clack of the loom is one sound, and the little ring of your wires is another. Let both sounds live in the house.’

Chapter 167 · A Measure Without an Emperor

In the last week of Bhado, two maps had been stretched across separate wooden boards on the veranda of the Videhapur panchayat house. The first was largely green: the western chaur, Makhaniya Dabra and the land beside the sand landing were all part of a single green belt. The second map had been made by Tara. In it, the colour of the water changed with the season, and here and there a narrow white way had been left through the green for an animal track. Before anyone spoke, Lalit Vishwakarma stretched a measuring cord between the two boards. A piece of wood in the first board had warped; until it was straightened, the distances marked on it would be wrong.

‘The government map is straight,’ the survey employee said. ‘It is your wood that bends.’ Pulling the cord taut, Lalit replied, ‘A bend in wood can be shown. Why should people's fields be punished for a bend in paper?’ The employee explained that the map from the district had already been approved; this meeting's only task was to add the village assembly's seal. Tara lifted a corner of the first map. It read: ‘Vacant public land.’ Devaki Pal put her bundle of wool on those words. ‘My goats' hooves pass here,’ she said. ‘Writing “vacant” does not empty the path.’

Rama Karn came and stood on the veranda steps. She held chalk in three colours, a measuring rod and the village's pages of objections. ‘We are not sitting here today as the final court for dividing ownership,’ she said. ‘We shall establish the pattern of seasonal use: when there is water, when there is cultivation, when animals pass through, when public repairs take place. But anyone who disagrees shall have their name and reasons recorded alongside the map. A seal does not mean that damage to land has somehow been erased.’ The employee warned that a column for objections might delay approval. ‘Hiding objections may hasten an approval,’ Rama answered, ‘but it is not evidence that approval is justified.’

At the edge of Makhaniya Dabra, a temporary measuring station had been set up. Women who went waist-deep into the water were drying their baskets. Phoolmati Tiyar placed a handful of seed on the table without calling it fish fry. Nandini Bhandari showed them two measuring vessels filled through the nursery's pipes. The first contained water from inside the pool, the second water that had come from the outer channel. ‘One day's measurement cannot establish a permanent lease,’ she said. ‘We shall test again when the rains diminish. And if my measuring equipment is borrowed, record when it must be returned.’

The pool's contractor wanted the wages of the women who gathered the seeds absorbed into the seed purchase price. An elderly woman spread her wet palm on the table. ‘Gathering seed from the water is one job,’ she counted, ‘drying it in the shade another, and cracking it at home a third. The man who

advanced the loan takes away the dried makhana. Where do my hours go?' Nandini opened her ledger and drew three separate lines. The contractor complained that such accounts would make the transaction more expensive. 'A method of making it cheap that erases my name is not market accounting,' the woman said. 'It is theft from my body.'

The survey employee wanted to colour the pool's lower edge blue. Hira Sahni planted the measuring rod twice in the same place; because of the silt beneath, the readings differed. Tara drew two boundaries on the map: 'present water' and 'possible extent during the rains'. A debt ledger was not a deed granting rights over the pool, although it did contain evidence of what was owed by families whose livelihood depended on the seed. At the annual meeting of the Seed-and-Water Partnership it was decided that the pool would be measured again before the next season, and that gathering and cracking workers would receive copies of their payments acknowledged by signature or thumbprint. Two receipts for the first approved wages were distributed there and then.

On the western side of the pool, Satto Devi stood holding an old debt slip. It said 'loan for seed', but the cooperative shopkeeper had deducted her cracking wages against that debt. 'I bought the seed and shall pay its price,' Satto said. 'But why should the wages for spending the whole night cracking it beside the fire become interest on the loan?' Rama ordered the two amounts verified separately. The shopkeeper entered his objection; his account was not finally decided that day. But his power to deduct wages unilaterally from the next consignment was suspended immediately.

On the way to the western chaur, the water still reached as deep as an ox's hoof. Sushila Mahato showed them a small seedbed of paddy; on the bamboo beside it was a mark cut to show the previous year's waterline. Devaki Pal halted on the ridge with her goats. Part of the chaur was used for fishing and grazing during the rains and for cultivation once the water receded. The district map classified it as permanent agricultural land. 'Paddy needs its allotted days,' Sushila said, 'but if the goats' route is closed, behind which village house will they pass when the next rains come?' Devaki listened, untied her bundle of wool and drew out a fine cord.

With that cord Devaki marked the old livestock path across the chaur. But a corner of the land allotted for her new wool shop lay on the path. 'I shall make my shop platform two hands narrower,' she said. 'I will display fewer goods in the market, but I will not surrender the path by which the animals pass.' Her son objected: 'Business will suffer.' Devaki called him close. 'It will. That is true. But if we cut off the path for the shop's profit, our own animals will be the first to get trapped. We shall write down our loss; we will not hide it.'

A seasonal drainage channel was proposed for one corner of Sushila's field. There was a danger that its water would run directly towards the betel plots of

Phoolo Chaurasia. Phoolo arrived carrying a wet betel vine. There were black marks along its leaves. She had had them examined for disease and did not claim that all the marks had been caused by drainage water. But she placed on the table photographs, expense records and receipts for the replanted vines from the two beds washed away during the previous unsafe outflow. ‘Damage from disease is separate,’ she said, ‘and damage from the earth washed away by drain water is separate.’

The employee told Phoolo that shared drainage would benefit everyone and that she ought therefore to abandon her claim. Phoolo laid the betel vine on the board. ‘If everyone benefits, one household should not have to swallow all the loss.’ On Tara's revised drawing the drain was diverted along the higher edge of the chaur, and a temporary retaining mesh was ordered at its outlet. In the examination of the old damage, partial compensation was approved for the two verified beds. Phoolo acknowledged that the amount did not cover the full loss of her field, but signed the receipt for the first payment. An appeal date was recorded in the columns for the balance and for new risks.

Nandini brought two small nursery tubs to the chaur. One contained a water-loving plant, the other seeds that would rot if submerged for even an hour. The survey employee wanted to impose one water level on the land used for all the plants. Nandini agreed to share her measuring rod, but said, ‘The value of my field cannot be obtained from the length of this rod. That requires a separate survey and a separate hearing.’ The employee marked ‘living nursery specimens’ separately on the chaur map. When she was asked for a decision on selling the land, Nandini withheld her signature; she signed only the page authorising shared water measurement.

Beside the lower embankment of the chaur, a fisherman's adolescent daughter was drying a small net. The official boundaries made no provision for temporary fishing during the rains. Her mother asked, ‘If this is a paddy field, when may we cast our net?’ ‘Not in the months when the paddy is planted,’ Sushila said, ‘but when water remains in the chaur, under an agreement that makes it safe.’ Separate dates for cultivation, grazing and seasonal net fishing were entered on the new map. The girl did not thereby obtain all fishing rights in the water, but her family's use of it was no longer invisible.

At midday Suraj Gangota stood at the sand landing holding a slender bamboo marker from the boundary of his former field. Half of it had sunk into the bank cut away by the river. The lender's representative pointed to a new flat stretch of sand on the map and declared that Suraj's loss had been made good; the place could be cultivated again. Suraj lifted a handful of earth. The sand sifted between his fingers. ‘This is not the soil of my field,’ he said. ‘The land where seedlings were planted has been washed away. Seeing new sand cannot cancel the old debt; but calling the new sand my field will not bring my field back either.’

Aditi asked the survey employee for the dates of the surveys. The old record had been made before the rains; the new measurement after the water receded. The two contexts were kept separate in the notation. The committee already held Suraj's restructured loan-instalment papers, and the date of the first payment was approaching. That loan was not treated as a final decision on land rights. Suraj said that if the new survey showed evidence of erosion, the bank should receive a copy too. Otherwise, on paper, he would still be a farmer earning an income from the field he had lost.

Along the lower road by the sand landing, workers were receiving instructions to carry sacks of fresh earth. Lalit Vishwakarma raised one sack onto a wooden platform and checked its weight. The contractor's old bill had charged for three times as much material in return for a smaller amount of timber work. Lalit had refused to sign that bill several chapters earlier, and since then payment for his legitimate repairs had been held up. Today the inspector arrived with a copy cancelling the old bill, but the payment order still said, 'Verification pending.' Lalit did not smile. 'You have struck out the wrong amount,' he said. 'When will you pay the right one?'

Gomati Beldar joined his question to the workers' hours. 'The wage for carrying sacks and the charge for joining timber are not the same. The mistake was in the contractor's bill; why should the debt for properly executed work be laid on Lalit?' Rama demanded a written deadline from the inspector. He first said fifteen days, then read the financial recommendation and issued a written order to release the verified sum within seven days. Lalit did not call it a payment receipt. Instead of a receipt he took a copy of the order, picked up his tools and went to finish a small timber joint. His household had already been paying the price of the delay.

On the old salt-working ground above the sand landing, Amrita Chauhan arrived with a sealed brass plaque. Her family remembered salt-making hearths there, although no trace of a hearth had yet been found beneath the earth. The contractor wanted the installation of a memorial to the former industry to count as settlement of the land claim. Amrita unwrapped the plaque but did not plant it in the ground. 'If a memorial is wanted, it can be made,' she said, 'but the unfinished land papers of my ancestors will not dissolve into this brass.' An image of her family's old seal was entered in the archive, not as conclusive evidence of ownership.

Gomati stood beside Amrita. Someone had read an old joint occupational entry for salt workers and Beldars and wanted to enter both women's claims on the same form. Gomati stopped them. 'I want my name and the payment order for the work I did on modern construction,' she said. 'Amrita wants her family's land claim concerning the salt ground. One piece of earth can be the site of two rights; that does not make the rights identical.' The committee opened two separate pages. The ruling on Amrita's ownership was deferred; a

date was fixed to verify Gomati's undisputed working hours. Permission for the memorial was given only at a safe site outside the zone of seasonal use.

Sugni Saday sat silently near the sand landing. In her bag was an old family account of flooding along the Kosi and Kosika, recording the colour of the water, animals driven away and grain left behind. She showed the paper to Suraj. ‘My grandmother remembered that day's flood by these names,’ she said. ‘Not so that they could become the names for a new survey of this sand landing.’ Beside his loan paper Suraj opened a separate line for the old memory. Family experience was not suppressed within the measurements, nor were modern geographical boundaries declared on its authority.

Kiran Raut and Sushila Mahato arrived with two ledgers. One corner of Kiran's sharecropping document said ‘Burhi Gandak’; Sushila's family farming papers mentioned the same name, but the two records had different dates and purposes. Seeing a single word, the young mapmaker wanted to join the pages and draw a new river line. Sushila did not snatch the pencil from his hand. She merely placed the two old pages beside the new map and asked, ‘First tell us where the measurements of my field are on this.’ The young man had no answer. Tara preserved the original spellings of the names and withdrew the proposed geographical identification.

Reading the proposed compensation list, Rama noticed that beside some household names there was only the word ‘beneficiary’, with no sum. Phoolo asked whether signing for half the compensation would prevent her from demanding the balance. The accounts clerk added a separate note: ‘Partial payment received; right to claim the remainder reserved.’ That degree of certainty was not yet possible in Suraj's erosion case, since evidence of the loss was still being assembled. Rama gave them no single answer for every case. She had only as much entered on each paper as had been established.

The second meeting of the Seed-and-Water Partnership convened again on the veranda. Women workers, boatmen, herders, cultivators, nursery owners and survey staff all examined the colours of their different seasons on the map. There was one map for the rains, another for the receding water and a third for risk and temporary prohibitions. Makhaniya Dabra was water used for production; the western chaur was shared ground that changed with the seasons; the sand landing was a place of erosion and debt. The three could no longer be called merely ‘vacant land’. A woman said, ‘The body of the land changes four times a year, but our names should never have to change.’

When the last line had been drawn on the board, the government employee asked, ‘Shall we call this everyone's consent? Nandini has not agreed to the land price; Amrita's claim is still open; Suraj wants his field back.’ ‘Call what has been agreed consent,’ Rama said. ‘Write what has not been decided as unfinished. Putting an emperor's name on every line does not make every line true. People's objections do not weaken the map; they make its use more

honest.’ The employee grimaced, but entered the reference number of the separate objections page on the main map.

Devaki's son measured the reduced platform of his wool shop again. He acknowledged that saving the track would leave room for three fewer baskets in front of the shop. ‘Put my loss on record,’ he said. ‘It will be recorded,’ Devaki answered, ‘along with the path of the herders who pass through.’ Phoolo put away her receipt for half the compensation. Nandini took back her measuring rod. Lalit folded the order and slipped it into his pocket. Each held a different piece of paper, and no paper was erasing the rights of the others.

After the meeting Tara went to the sand landing. Suraj was planting a small piece of his old bamboo marker in the earth: a memorial to the earlier erosion, not a new boundary post. ‘What did you get today?’ Tara asked. ‘Not my field,’ Suraj said. ‘But now the paper I have to give the bank will show that my field has disappeared.’ Tara gave him the reference number of the latest measurement report. ‘The figures will have to be explained to me,’ he said. ‘My son cannot read such tiny letters on a mobile phone.’

In the evening all three seasonal maps were approved at the panchayat house. The original pages recorded members' consent, separate objections and dates for remeasurement. But the office employee converted everything into one large digital image and sent it only to the headquarters account. Devaki owned no mobile phone; Amrita wanted a usable copy of her claim, not a photograph of the old plaque. Lalit could read the number on the payment order, but could retrieve nothing from the office's locked screen.

Rama stopped the employee before the door was closed. ‘Your office has received the map,’ she said. ‘But what has come back to the people who placed their land, their animals' path and their wages inside those measurements?’ ‘A copy can be viewed online,’ the employee replied. ‘My goats do not travel along online paths,’ Devaki said, lifting her bundle of wool. Amid the laughter, Rama put forward a written proposal for the following day: paper copies that could be read in the village, a version that could be heard, and the right to request corrections. The three maps had been approved; their return home was still outstanding.

Chapter 168 · The Copy That Will Return

At dawn in Agahan, Rama Karn opened a new wooden box on the veranda of the Videhapur panchayat house. Inside lay folded sheets of long paper, three blue-ink lines along their edges. These were the first usable copies of the seasonal maps approved before everyone in the previous Bhado. At the bottom of the box were small slips tied with thread: who was to receive which document, how many pages, and what information each person had the right to see. Standing beside a veranda pillar, Suraj Gangota was looking not at the map but at the empty bottom of the box.

‘The river has taken my field,’ he said. ‘What will I gain by getting paper back?’ Tara took out a copy and placed it in his hands. It showed the measurement line before the erosion and the new measurement line separately, with the space between them marked ‘Claim undecided’. ‘The earth has not been returned,’ Tara said, ‘but the place of your loss cannot be erased from the map.’ Suraj unfolded the whole sheet. Only then did an employee standing behind him say that all the original copies ought to remain in the office.

Hearing him, Rama turned the box lid upside down and set it on the table. ‘There is no dispute about the original remaining in the office,’ she said. ‘But if people have entered their fields, homes, labour and objections on these papers, giving them nothing but a route to a distant computer is an incomplete right.’ The employee warned that copies taken outside could be altered or cut. Ruhani replied that each copy would carry a reference number, date, public verification mark and record of amendments; private names would not be freely circulated.

Chandrika arrived from the kitchen carrying glasses of hot water. Rather than touch a corner of the map, she set the glasses on a wooden board to keep the rising steam away from the paper. ‘If the ink gets damp here, the verified copy will become another round of trouble with the office,’ she said, laughing. Gomati Beldar looked up at a cracked corner of the roof. There were signs where raindrops had fallen during the night. She shook out a cloth of her own and stretched it above the table. Protecting a map was work too, though no new government budget line had been made for it.

Sudha Rai asked for the first copy. The proposed land donation beside Rajainar was coloured green. An employee whispered, ‘The donation will be announced from the stage today; a name plaque will go up at the school.’ Sudha put a finger on the green strip. The narrow access way used by two tenant families also passed through it. ‘I have already stopped the posts from being driven in,’ she said. ‘If you print my announcement now, what the tenants have to say will again be treated as opposition to the donation.’

A tenant woman stepped forward from the crowd. She carried a tin borrowed from a neighbour, containing a schoolchild's discs and needle and thread. ‘The veranda roof will be made for my child,’ she asked, ‘but if the

path is closed, which way will the child go to study?' Sudha vacated her chair for her. For the first time the draft donation acquired two separate headings: 'Proposed donor' and 'Current users'. No announcement would be made until a date had been fixed for hearing the tenants.

An elderly man from the second tenant family came carrying a small path marker taken from beneath an old tiled roof. His hearing was poor; his granddaughter repeated what was said to him. 'Our ancestors walked this path,' he said. Sudha answered that an ancestral route did not in itself establish a legal boundary, but present use could not simply be erased. The granddaughter smiled. Today her grandfather had been able to finish what he wanted to say without shouting. The hearing date was entered, and for the first time someone was assigned the responsibility of getting a copy to his home.

Sudha's brother asked anxiously whether such a process would diminish the family's good name. Sudha showed him her old land papers. 'The land is in my name, but the daily footsteps on this narrow path do not belong to me alone,' she replied. She did not withdraw the donation; she changed its conditions. The paper now said: first test a safe alternative passage, obtain the tenants' separate consent, and only then demarcate the donation. The schoolteacher put the prepared letter of thanks back into his bag.

Before midday Ramesh Kushwaha arrived with three small gourds in a basket. During the previous seasonal survey a proposal had been raised to try public drainage through his vegetable field. The blue mark for the channel was clear on the panchayat's new copy, but the box for crop damage was white and empty. Ramesh put the gourds beside the blue line. 'Look at this thin skin,' he said. 'Water standing for a single night can force us to cut and throw away a crop this size instead of selling it. The benefit of the drain has a blue colour; what colour does my loss have?'

On separate pages Tara entered the field's previous measurement, planting receipts and proposed hours of discharge. Ramesh's wife, who had insisted in the earlier meeting that 'claim' and 'amount paid' be written separately, now read the account herself. 'The price of whatever crop the inspection finds destroyed is one thing; the labour needed to prepare the field again is another,' she said. The official proposed shortening the trial period. Ramesh asked, 'If neither the compensation amount nor the officer responsible for paying it is written down, my consent to the trial will be a burden of paper.'

After two hours of argument, drainage in the first year was approved for a limited period only. A site inspection to measure losses, a framework for calculating compensation and a payment deadline were put in writing. No money had yet been deposited in that account. Instead of putting his thumbprint to the consent, Ramesh read it first, then signed. His wife kept her own copy separately. At the next table Phoolo Chaurasia stood with damp bamboo from a shelter roof and old family papers. 'What if saving Ramesh's field floods my betel garden?' she asked.

The word 'Khiroi' appeared in a margin of Phoolo's paper. An official wanted to identify it with the new stream designation on the present drainage

map. Tara intervened. ‘This is a water-name found in a family document,’ she said. ‘It does not establish a direct confluence with today's drain. The effect on Phoolo's garden must be established by separate measurements.’ On the map copy Phoolo could see three marks for her field: its shelter, its slope and the old footpath. She registered a dispute concerning her share of the drainage costs; she would not accept the entire charge on the strength of an estimate.

Beside them Amrita Chauhan took the brass plaque out of her bag. In one place in the old land register for the salt-working ground, ‘Amrita’ was the name of a person; the same letters also appeared as a river name in another list of waters. Seeing the similarity, the employee began making one red dot on the map for the two entries. Amrita stopped his pen. ‘My mother's name and the name of a river may have the same letters,’ she said, ‘but that likeness can neither create nor destroy my family's rights to land.’ Her land claim remained undecided.

Gomati sat beside Amrita and showed the receipts for her hours spent carrying materials for construction. Someone had read the old occupational name joining salt workers and Beldars and wanted to put the two women's papers in one account. Amrita and Gomati refused together. Rama had the copies made with separate identifying marks. Amrita put the copy for her household in her bag; the public page would show only the status of the claim and the relevant sources. The brass plaque was wrapped in cloth again. It was an object of memory, not final proof of ownership.

On another veranda Badri Nonphar came with his family. His wife stood holding an empty water pot. At their temporary settlement, for the past three days the tap's flow had weakened after the people at the front of the queue had filled their vessels. The government's copy read, ‘Resettlement provided.’ Lifting the paper, Badri said, ‘What is provided is not a home but a corner. There is a deep pit on the way our child takes to school; there is no light on the way to the latrine at night. Where have I given permanent acceptance?’

A young man from the office said that rejecting a temporary place could cause relief to be stopped. Badri's wife held out the pot. ‘Living under a temporary roof and accepting the unfinished conditions of a permanent home are two different decisions,’ she said. On the new copy Ruhani had the family's present housing status, the shortage of water, the child's route and their objection to the permanent proposal recorded separately. Badri did not surrender the original paper; he gave only a verified extract of the receipt.

When Badri's wife approached the panchayat side again, Ruhani reached out to lift her water pot. The woman refused. ‘I can lift this. Build a proper path to the tap for me, and record how many trips it takes.’ Ruhani put the pot down and asked the times. Two trips at dawn and one in the evening were recorded. That labour was described not as a sign of someone begging for pity, but as a concrete consequence of an inadequate arrangement. Badri looked again at the date of temporary residence on the corner of his receipt. The weight of the pot had not lessened, but the person to whom questions could be directed had changed.

The immediate result was difficult. The official withheld the accelerated instalment of the permanent resettlement grant; materials for temporary repairs were delayed. That evening Badri was sewing the torn sole of an old sandal when his son asked, ‘Where will we have to go again?’ ‘For now we will stay here,’ Badri answered. ‘But before we sign away the place we are leaving, we shall read what it means.’ His wife went out to fetch water. The extra journeys to a safe tap were part of the household's costs too.

Behind the veranda Ratan Bhuiyan opened an old ochre-coloured bag. It held receipts for earth-carrying wages, brick counts and a contractor's debt note. One of the notes bore a copy of a signature Ratan denied was his. ‘First repay the whole debt,’ the official said, ‘then raise the question of your wages.’ Ratan admitted an old mistake of his own: on one occasion he had entered one extra day in his count of working days, an error corrected earlier. ‘I accepted the cost of that mistake,’ he said. ‘But why should I carry in my name a loan I never took?’

Rama asked for a copy of the independent receipts ledger. The contractor handed over his page, but there was no bank record or witness proving that Ratan had received the money. The disputed portion of the false loan was removed from immediate collection. Ratan also acknowledged a receipt for an old genuine loan of tools; that small amount remained payable. The employee shook his head: the two debts had been treated as one for so long. Ratan could not smile at the reduction in his debt. His withheld wages had still not reached his bank account.

‘The false one has been removed, the real loan remains, the wages are still withheld,’ Ratan read slowly, line by line. Sanket, who was helping people read their community copies, had separate symbols placed beside each entry so that even someone who read little could understand the status of a claim. Ratan ran a finger over the symbols. ‘For the first time on paper, I look not merely like a debtor but also like a worker,’ he said. ‘And you control this copy,’ Sanket answered. ‘No one will photograph it without asking you.’

Bina Kalar arrived carrying a bag with a small bottle and a measuring glass. Her family had given partial consent concerning her inheritance claim. Her brother had agreed that the value of the family's old market scales could be counted towards Bina's capital, but the share in a room of the house was still disputed. From the new copy Bina could understand the differences: accepted capital, disputed property and accounts of her own earnings. ‘I wanted to enlarge the shop,’ she said, ‘but with half the share I cannot meet the rent of a shop in another lane.’

Bina chose a small market corner instead. It had room for five kinds of essential goods. Her father gave her the old scales without calling them a family donation and keeping ownership of the shop for himself. Bina wrote her name with a finger on the new wooden signboard. The first day's profit was very small; to leave room for the measuring glass, she removed two bottles. The inheritance dispute continued, but the account of her independent shop did not wait for its resolution.

By the hot part of the afternoon the queue for map copies inside the panchayat house had grown long. One group wanted to publish a poster listing everyone's name, caste and permanent address in an open account. Ruhani's face hardened. 'The reasons for public decisions must be public,' she said, 'but the private address of a survivor of violence, a shelter resident or a child will not go on that poster.' Rama ordered two forms of the copy: a public-use map and a detailed private copy for the person concerned. Each person retained a separate route for objections or obtaining a copy.

An elderly woman asked, 'I cannot sign; my fingers tremble. May my granddaughter collect my copy?' At first the employee was about to refuse. The woman looked towards her granddaughter and then spoke distinctly. 'I give her permission. Read it aloud to me; she will keep the paper safe.' Rama recorded the name of a witness to the oral permission, had it read back to the elderly woman, and waited for her to confirm it again. The granddaughter did not seize the paper; she folded it and put it in her bag at her grandmother's request.

As soon as the projected cost of public copies was announced, Raghu raised a question: how would printing, translation, paper, office time and travel be accounted for? Earlier a donor had offered to pay all costs in his own name, on condition that he himself grant permission to open the copies. Sarita, who had been sitting silently at the rear desk of the veranda, suddenly sat upright. 'If the key to a donated document remains in the donor's hand,' she said, 'we shall have built another locked warehouse.' The assembly changed the proposal: public receipts for printing, wages for labour and the institution responsible for distributing copies would be recorded separately.

Materials left over from the Public Reading–Open Accounts–Songs event that had begun in Phagun were still in a schoolroom. Padma asked for a small board and two wooden stands to be brought from there. Adolescent students supported the maps without touching them. A girl asked, 'If the old copy is wrong, may we correct it again?' Padma showed her a blank space for amendments at the bottom of the paper. 'Do not hide the old incorrect copy,' she said. 'Add new evidence, and explain what changed on which day.' The girl put a small red slip beside it.

At the open-accounts reading, Chandrika read the actual payment for kitchen work, Gomati the labour on repairs, Tara the measurement dates, and Geeta Kori the sums received and outstanding for weaving. Geeta did not expose all the accounts of her private business to everyone; she read only the amount approved under the public partnership. Ruhani supported her decision. Putting a page into everyone's hands was not the same as opening everyone's private life. The distinction was made explicit in the new rules for producing copies for the whole village.

When they gathered beside the open-accounts stand, Rama asked the girls what kind of copy would be most useful. A village teenager replied, 'Where an account is wrong, don't put only a red mark; write the office that can correct it too.' Another said that the spoken permission of people who could not sign ought to count. Padma made space on the back page of the copy for both

points. The students rewrote their sentences not to display beautiful handwriting but to make them understandable. This time no prize was offered for the best reader at the public reading.

A young man proposed sending all papers by mobile phone to save printing costs. Ramesh's wife showed them her hands, with field soil still adhering to them. ‘We have a phone at home,’ she said, ‘but during the rains it cannot be charged. Then how am I to read the measurement of compensation for my field?’ Sanket helped the group decide to offer simple paper copies and an audio reading of the details. Large-print copies for those with impaired vision and a means of contact through changing addresses for travelling families were approved as well.

By evening the first set of copies had been distributed. Sudha took home notice of the tenants' hearing; the donation signboard remained blank. Ramesh read the compensation entry with the copy for his field; a payment date was written, but no money had been paid. Badri folded separately the two pages concerning his temporary settlement's problems and his objection to the permanent proposal. The paper reducing Ratan's false debt reached his home; the real debt remained. Bina departed with the signboard for her shop. The shop was small, but its key was in her hand.

At the rear window Sarita stood holding down a corner of the map. Its empty space reminded her of an old blank box in Naira's writing. She did not use that page to declare her daughter present or alter the meaning of her death. Kabir came close. ‘If the copies have come home, what happens to those who did not return?’ he asked. ‘For the ones we cannot bring back,’ Sarita answered softly, ‘we can keep their names right. And where something owed to them can be returned, we must not hold it back.’ Kabir released the corner of the map.

When everyone had gone, an elderly tenant woman returned with her copy. Her hands were shaking and she kept wanting to touch the paper. ‘I have received two pages,’ she said, ‘but who will give me the key to the door that is locked from the inside?’ Rama offered her a bench and remained standing beside it. The elderly woman did not ask to have the paper read to her; she asked first for water. Rama filled her own glass and gave it to her. Here the success of distributing the new copies was being tested once again against the needs of an old body.

Before turning out the light in the panchayat house, Rama wrote the first page for the next meeting: the actual use made of copies by those who received them, consent given by people unable to sign, care of the elderly, and who controlled the new account. Beneath those notes lay Sudha's unfinished declaration of donation. Far along the field path Badri's wife was steadying a full water pot. The papers had now returned to the village; the tired bodies, the dues and the rights of the hands that must put them to use were still there.

Parva 15 · Āśramavāsika | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 169 · Dhritarashtra's Hand

In the very old royal house of Hastinapura, at the first stirrings of dawn, Dhritarashtra's fingers slipped along the neck of a brass water vessel. It overturned, and water spread across the earthen floor until it reached his feet. He was about to call for a servant in the sharp voice of former days, but the half-formed word stopped in his throat. Though he had relinquished the throne, the old movement of command remained in his hand; his strength to retrieve the fallen vessel had diminished more than that movement had. When he bent, pain drew tight across his waist, and his hand halted in the empty air.

Madhav, the attendant standing near the door, hurried forward. 'I'll pick it up,' he said, reaching for Dhritarashtra's elbow. The old king jerked his arm away. 'Ask me before you touch my body,' he said harshly. Madhav stopped. The water continued to creep across the floor. After a silence, Dhritarashtra spoke of his own accord: 'Set the vessel upright; tell me where the stool is. Take my elbow only when I ask.' Madhav righted the vessel and described the stool's position. Feeling his way with his feet, the king reached it.

Sanjaya came from behind them. Dhritarashtra asked, 'On what day was this stool moved? Why was I not told?' Sanjaya answered, 'Yesterday the kitchen roof began to leak, and the wood was taken away to dry. The attendants thought you ought not be troubled over so small a matter.' The king laughed bitterly. 'Once I grew angry when decisions about a kingdom were made without telling me. Now even the stool on which I sit is moved, and I know nothing of it.'

Gandhari entered then. Dhritarashtra knew the sound of her footsteps, but she did not regard that recognition as a grant of authority. She told Madhav to wipe the floor and asked the king, 'Would you like food first, or shall you drink some more water?' Dhritarashtra said nothing. Gandhari sat facing him. 'I will not take your silence as an instruction to make you fast,' she said. In a low voice, the king asked for water. Harder than accepting the humiliation he felt in acknowledging a small weakness was the act of listening to another person's question.

Yudhishthira came into the outer courtyard of the palace. Special measures of grain and ghee were sent for the former king, yet two widowed women who worked in the kitchen received their own portions of grain late. Sanjaya had heard of this the day before. 'Grandfather, nothing will be lacking in your meals,' Yudhishthira said. 'I shall attend to the arrangements.' Dhritarashtra extended a hand to stop him. 'You safeguard my food; that is proper. But tell me: who measures out the grain withdrawn in my name?'

Yudhishthira answered with some hesitation, 'The officials of the court now.' 'Then they must answer for it,' Dhritarashtra said. 'Do not call anything taken in excess in the name of my hunger a kindness to me.' Gandhari added, 'And the women who cook every day have a right to their grain because of their labour, not as a gift bestowed by this aged body.' Hearing Madhav's footsteps, Dhritarashtra asked him, 'Are your wages paid on time?' 'They are three days overdue,' Madhav replied. The king felt the impulse to issue an immediate order, but turned instead to Yudhishthira. 'Investigate and give an answer. My word alone is not evidence.'

Vidura arrived at midday. Taking his hand, Dhritarashtra recalled the old assemblies in which, despite hearing warning after warning, he had been unable to turn away from his attachment to his sons. 'So often I made a show of respecting your advice,' the king said, 'while deciding according to my own fears. Now that I no longer have the power to decide, how am I to carry the burden of what I did?' Vidura offered no easy absolution. 'The first meaning of bearing a burden is not laying it on another person's back,' he replied. 'Caring for you gives no one licence to humiliate you; receiving care does not make your former decisions innocent.'

'Must I hear only of my faults for ever?' 'No,' Vidura answered. 'You may listen to songs, remember your sons, tell Gandhari of grief that is yours alone. But when an injustice is brought before you, it must not be ignored merely because you are old.' For a moment Dhritarashtra pressed Vidura's palm between both his hands. The grip still held the force of commands issued long ago. Vidura gently withdrew his hand. The old king let his hold loosen.

Before darkness fell, an elderly kitchen attendant came to Dhritarashtra's stool. Her son had gone to war and had never returned. She had not come to witness a scene of apology: she had come because her share of that day's grain had been measured short. Dhritarashtra instinctively began, 'I shall have it put right,' then stopped. 'I can no longer alter the royal accounts,' he said, 'but I can hear what you say. Present your claim to the official in your own name; Sanjaya will show you the way.' The woman did not touch his feet. Gathering her small bundle, she went towards the outer door, carrying her claim rather than the king's blessing.

Towards evening Madhav brought a fresh vessel of water. Dhritarashtra asked, 'Can you place it within reach of my hand? I shall drink by myself.' Madhav set the vessel close, guided the king's fingers to it, then stepped back. A few drops fell on his clothing as he drank, but no one rushed to intervene. Dhritarashtra felt the damp corner of his garment. 'Perhaps I never allowed people even this little freedom,' he said. Madhav did not reply. He was not a stone set there to receive the king's confessions. He had to bring grain home for his children.

Dhritarashtra instructed Sanjaya to send Yudhishthira the true accounting of Madhav's three days of unpaid wages. 'I am not ordering their payment,' he made clear. 'I am forwarding evidence to the officer responsible for the

administration.' Sanjaya wrote the statement on a piece of leaf and read it aloud to Madhav. 'May I state my own account myself?' Madhav asked. 'Certainly,' said Dhritarashtra. 'My name will not close your mouth.' For Yudhishthira this small message was not a proclamation of triumph from the royal court, but an ordinary inquiry into a payment due.

Gandhari was seated beside a fire in the rear courtyard. Dhritarashtra reached towards her but asked before touching her, 'Will you take my hand?' Gandhari was silent a little while. 'I will take it now,' she said. 'But when I wish to go somewhere of my own choosing, allow me to choose my road.' Dhritarashtra touched her palm. That night he accepted the truth that his authority was gone; he accepted his need for help. Yet he did not treat the hand that had guided him to water as a new arm of his old throne. The question of Gandhari's journey had not yet been fully spoken.

In Videhapur in the year 2040, Rama Karn unlatched the panchayat house before dawn. Of the three copies of the map distributed the previous evening, one had come back with a water-soaked edge. The elderly tenant woman who had come asking for water yesterday sat on the veranda with her granddaughter. Her hands shook, but she was resolute in her grip on the paper. 'The document reached the house,' she said, 'but people seize my hand and drag me when they want the door opened. Why?'

Her granddaughter explained quietly that some young men had proposed taking a photograph of the closed door at night and putting it on a public list. The old woman did not want the way into her home, or the private sorrows within it, circulating on mobile phones. 'Whom do you wish to read your copy to you?' Rama asked. The woman looked at her granddaughter. 'She will read it. But where I do not understand something, she will not decide in my name.' The granddaughter agreed. On a separate sheet, Ruhani recorded the date and limited purpose of the woman's oral consent; she had given no permission to publish photographs.

Padma offered to accompany the woman home. She did not rise at once. 'First tell me whose orders the people coming with you obey,' she asked. 'The records department's,' an employee replied. 'Then I shall not go,' said the woman. 'I invite guests into my house, not a government search party.' Rama showed her departmental identification and made clear that the visit would take place only by invitation, in the presence of two local witnesses, and without opening her private chest. The old woman stood, her granddaughter handed her the walking stick, and there was no need for anyone to snatch it from her grasp.

The lower panel of the door had swollen from damp. Sudha Rai, thinking of the proposed donation for access to the house, stood outside it at first, but did not seek leave to enter. The old woman asked her granddaughter to show the gap beneath the door. A foot could easily catch there; water was dripping from the roof against the wall. Ruhani did not record this as 'a need for an old-age home'. The house was the woman's own. The problems were safe

repair, usable access, and getting water at night. Rama opened separate records for the panchayat's repair allocation and the dispute over ownership.

'I could have the door repaired from my donation fund,' Sudha said. 'And would that put a plaque with your name beside my door?' the woman asked. Sudha fell silent. 'No,' she said. 'If you consent, the labour and materials will be accounted for; it will convey no right to a name.' The woman asked what would happen to the old frame if the wood were replaced. A carpenter was summoned. He explained that only the lower section need be replaced, not the entire frame. She consented to that limited repair, not to leaving her home.

At midday a printing-company representative arrived on the panchayat veranda carrying an attractive book of colour samples. His proposal was enticing: large-print copies for elderly readers, audio reproductions for people with difficulty seeing, and a secure digital repository for all the village records. The first year would cost nothing. Ratan Bhuiyan touched the sample: the large letters would be useful to him. The representative asked for signatures before reading out the small condition at the foot of the paper. Padma stopped him. 'After the free year, in whose hands will the key remain?'

The condition stated that the master copies, contact lists, and complete history of corrections would reside on the company's sole server, and that it would set the fee for obtaining copies over the following five years. Ruhani's expression hardened. 'This is the old locked warehouse in a new form,' she said. The representative maintained that central control was essential for security. Sanket pointed to the third page of the papers: there was no provision for local export copies, independent inspection, or an orderly exit from the service. 'We need security,' Sanket said, 'but becoming the owner of the documents is not security.'

Ramesh's wife asked how much of the compensation for damage to her fields would be left if the company charged her to read the payment date she had been told the day before. Geeta Kori said that in the textile trade too, buyers first took a free sample and then tried to sell the design under their own names. 'Make the large-print copies,' she said, 'but pay for them out of today's wages; do not sell tomorrow's independence.' The representative promised to reconsider his offer, but received no signatures that day.

On the budget sheet, Ruhani found the names of two schoolgirls whose work reading documents aloud was to be entered as 'voluntary service'. She struck the words out. 'If girls give their time to labour, calling it an unpaid skill diminishes their opportunity to study,' she said. Padma distinguished educational training from actual recorded reading work: safe consent, payment to a trained adult reader, and the girls' education came first. Sanket had not included this expense in his earlier proposal. He acknowledged the mistake publicly and submitted revised, higher figures. The total cost had risen, but the new accounting showed clearly whose invisible labour the supposedly free service would have depended on.

The panchayat decided to seek quotations from several printers, keep the original records under public oversight, and make audio readings available in the local school and library. Private details would be given only to the person concerned or an assistant expressly authorised by that person. An open meeting each year would review costs, corrections, and access to copies; a date was fixed for the first review that very year. Not every fee for paper copies could be reduced to zero, so a separate assistance allocation was recorded for families without means.

In the midst of these decisions Ratan Bhuiyan produced the corrected copy showing his false debt reduced and said, ‘You are writing rules, but my actual wages have still not reached my account.’ Rama acknowledged that making copies available to everyone was an achievement, not a payment. A separate public sheet recorded three different statuses: ‘copy received’, ‘decision taken’, and ‘money credited to bank’. Lalit Vishwakarma’s repair charge and the date of Ramesh’s compensation became tests of that third line too. What was owed to people of modest means would not be lost in the gloss of new printing.

That evening the carpenter was removing the lower panel at the old woman’s house. Her granddaughter laid the old nails from the doorframe on a cloth. Hearing the sound of his hammer, the woman asked, ‘Who will pay for the part you are replacing?’ The carpenter read out the receipt: the cost of the wood, his wages, and the panchayat’s contribution were separately stated. Sudha’s pledged donation was still listed as ‘expected’, not ‘received’. The old woman kept a small piece of her former doorframe. No one called it a legal title; it was a memory of her home.

Before leaving, Sarita asked permission to come as far as the courtyard. The old woman asked her, ‘What do people say to you about the daughter who could not come back?’ Sarita was silent for a moment. ‘Many things,’ she answered, ‘but none of them changes her death.’ The woman showed her trembling fingers, still damp. ‘My hand shakes,’ she said, ‘but that does not mean I cannot decide whether to leave my own house.’ Sarita listened; she did not diminish the old woman’s rights by measuring them against her own grief.

In the evening Rama wrote the first note for the next annual review at the panchayat house: who had received corrected copies, who would benefit from the new printing, where the key to control would be kept, and whether an elderly person’s decision was genuinely their own or merely convenient for somebody else. By the window Padma was reading an old passage from the story of Gandhari, but Rama did not make it evidence for the events of the day. It was only a question: when does a hand extended in companionship support someone, and when does it restrain? Far away, the repaired door of the old woman’s house opened easily; but before placing her key in her granddaughter’s palm, she asked, ‘Do you want to stay here tonight?’

Chapter 170 · Gandhari's Departure

In ancient Hastinapura, before the first light of dawn had fallen on the earth, Gandhari untied the knot of her small cloth bundle once more. Inside were some dried medicines, two plain garments, and an old length of thread. The royal storerooms held many things intended for her, but day by day she had reduced for herself the number of possessions worth carrying. At the sound of water being drawn from the courtyard well, she paused with the knot in her hands. This journey had been taking shape in her mind for a long time. Today she would have to tell the household clearly what she had decided.

In Dhritarashtra's room Madhav was asking before moving the water vessel within reach: 'Shall I put it beside your hand, or will you lift it yourself?' The small decision of the day before had changed the servant's manner of speaking. Gandhari stood in the doorway. Dhritarashtra recognised her approach. 'Why have you risen so early today?' he asked. 'Sanjaya says there is a great deal of dust on the forest road beyond the river.' 'If dust is reason enough to keep me here,' Gandhari replied, 'what am I to do about the dust accumulated within the royal house?' The old king understood that she had not abandoned her thoughts of departure.

Gandhari held out the bundle for him to touch. Dhritarashtra felt the knot in the tied cloth. 'What festival are you preparing for?' he asked, though he knew the answer. 'Not a festival,' she said. 'A choice about the days that remain to me. I shall not pretend that I am going in search of the forest's peace. Your sons are dead, and mine are dead too. At every doorway of this palace people practise offering me consolation. For now, I wish to live elsewhere with my grief.'

His hand stopped on the knot. 'Then you will leave me?' There was reproach in the question, but genuine fear beneath it. Only yesterday he had begun to emerge from the humiliation of asking for help; today, confronted by Gandhari's different wish, he felt anew the weight of his body. She sat beside him. 'I have not decided to abandon you,' she said. 'I have decided to leave life in the palace. If you wish to accompany me, that must be your separate choice. If you do not, you need not blame me. I am not your eyes. I am your wife.'

Gandhari's blindfold was very old. A new band offered by a maidservant smelled of perfumed oil, but Gandhari touched the edge of the one she had worn for years. 'People call me the woman who bound her eyes,' she said softly. 'But binding my eyes was a decision I made on one day. No one may now put every decision of my life under their own name because of that one decision.' Dhritarashtra remained silent. He could no longer stop her by a king's command. He had no such authority, and even if he had retained it, its exercise would not have been right.

Before noon Yudhishthira arrived, having heard the news. Sanjaya and two royal attendants accompanied him. ‘Mother, I shall arrange a separate garden for you here, a quiet residence, and the medicines you need,’ Yudhishthira urged. ‘The forest roads are difficult; at your age it would be safer to remain among your family.’ Gandhari heard him out. ‘I need safety,’ she replied. ‘But safety ceases to be a kindness when my permission to choose where I live exists only on paper. You have already decided how many days I shall spend looking at this garden. Where, in all this, was I asked?’

Yudhishthira bowed. ‘I accept that my fear is trying to restrain your will.’ Yet he asked again, ‘If no one stays with you on the way, what will happen if you fall ill?’ Gandhari explained that Sanjaya knew the stopping places and that a forest hermitage had limited supplies of water, food, and medical care. ‘Send word that I hope to come,’ she said, ‘but first obtain their consent. I shall not claim the grain of a poor hermitage in the name of being the queen mother. The labour and needs of those who travel with me must also be counted.’

Concern showed on Sanjaya’s face. ‘I know the route,’ he said, ‘but after the first rains the eastern river crossing becomes slippery.’ ‘Then what is the other way?’ Gandhari asked. Sanjaya described a longer western footpath, along which there were small villages and shelter for the night. An attendant eagerly suggested, ‘A royal chariot will remove every difficulty.’ Gandhari’s answer was firm. ‘Transport shall be provided when an ailing body needs it, not for display. No chariot covered in royal emblems. As far as I can walk, I shall walk at my own pace.’

Vidura came at that hour. During the years of the court, Gandhari had often listened to him in silence. Today she asked, ‘Would choosing the forest road be a flight from the royal family’s wrongdoing?’ ‘Changing one’s location does not erase the consequences of one’s actions,’ Vidura replied. ‘But to turn the remainder of a person’s life into an exhibition at court in the name of remorse would also be unjust. It is for you to decide to go to the forest. Once there, you will still have to answer each day for how you treat the people whose lives touch yours.’ Gandhari acknowledged that her journey was no certificate of release.

Gandhari went into an inner chamber where the wooden toys of her sons’ childhood were kept. She lifted a wheel whose axle peg had broken. She remembered a day when someone had been injured and she had summoned the royal physician; on that same day no one had paid attention to the injury of a boy who tended the horses. Memory did not make her innocent. She laid the wheel where it had been. Taking it into the forest would have been to make a small possession of her grief. ‘Will you leave this behind?’ Sanjaya asked. ‘Let it remain here,’ Gandhari said. ‘Those who share the memories of this house should have the right to see it. I shall not carry it along my road.’

That day the elderly kitchen attendant sat with a new measure of grain. The accounting of her three days’ overdue wages had reached the responsible

officer from the royal household, but she had not yet been paid. When Gandhari declined to have a farewell meal prepared, the woman began to fold her hands. Gandhari stopped her. ‘I have no authority to stop your work. Confront the officer about what is owed you. Have the dry provisions for my journey separately and fully accounted for. No one’s wages are to be cut in the name of my departure.’ ‘Then may I have your blessing?’ the attendant asked. ‘I wish that grain may reach your house,’ Gandhari replied. ‘But at present you need payment more than blessings.’

In the evening Dhritarashtra called for her again. He tried to lift his staff. ‘I shall come with you,’ he said, ‘but my legs cannot walk so far. I feel no shame in saying so.’ Gandhari placed his hand upon her palm. ‘We shall arrange a conveyance when we need one. But do not call my decision something you have permitted, and do not call your journey a command of mine. Each of us will travel for our own reasons.’ Dhritarashtra laughed uneasily. ‘All our lives we ruled in each other’s names. Now even to remain together we must keep those names separate.’

Gandhari measured his steps in the sand before them. Two steps he could take steadily; on the third he needed the staff. She tested the low seat of the chariot. Its wooden edge was sharp, so Madhav fitted a cushion. ‘Madhav, do you wish to travel with us?’ she asked. ‘Is that an order?’ he asked in surprise. ‘It is a question,’ Gandhari said. Madhav spoke of his family—his elderly mother, his children, and his wages still due. He agreed to assist them as far as the first stopping place, not to become a permanent servant. Gandhari accepted the limit he set.

On the first morning of their journey to the forest, a crowd assembled near the city gate. Some wanted to shout their acclaim; several women stood holding lamps. Gandhari halted. She told the gatekeeper to remove the triumphal arch erected across the road. ‘I am not setting out in victory,’ she said, ‘nor to act out defeat. Keep the road clear for those who carry water through the city.’ A widow bearing a lamp came close. ‘My son never returned either,’ she said. Gandhari asked her name and listened to the answer. The measure of the two women’s grief was not identical, but neither woman’s loss was pronounced smaller in the presence of the other.

When the city gate had fallen behind them, Gandhari stopped for the first time to recover her breath. Stones gave way to earth beneath her feet. Sanjaya told her how far the next pond lay. ‘Do you wish to change your mind?’ Dhritarashtra asked. ‘I am frightened,’ Gandhari answered. ‘That does not mean I wish to change my mind. For now we shall go as far as the first stopping place.’ She adjusted the old thread inside her bundle. Departure was not completed merely by increasing her distance from the palace: it also meant naming her needs along the way, accepting assistance, and keeping the freedom to stop.

In Videhapur in 2040, at dawn the following day, the elderly tenant woman opened and shut the newly repaired door of her house twice. The

lower wooden panel no longer caught against the ground. Her granddaughter had put milk on the hearth when the old woman took a neatly folded shawl from the chest inside. ‘I want to visit my mother’s village for three days,’ she said. The granddaughter stopped what she was doing. Only the night before they had been discussing who should keep the house key; suddenly she was expected to give a decision about her grandmother’s journey as well.

‘Now? The door was repaired only yesterday, your medicines have fixed times, and you will have to change buses,’ the granddaughter said. The old woman slowly folded the shawl. ‘Those are reasons to ask me, not to forbid me. My sister-in-law’s granddaughter now lives in the village I left many years ago. She has written that the old pond’s embankment is to be rebuilt. My mother carried earth for that embankment. I want to see how much it has changed.’ The granddaughter read the letter, but the telephone contact accompanying the village name was incomplete.

At the panchayat house Rama Karn listened to the woman’s plan. She began by saying, ‘The journey is your own. We shall discuss only the assistance you ask for.’ The granddaughter wanted Rama to prevent it in the name of ‘elderly safety’. Padma set out not a compromise but a list of real options: the difficulty of climbing bus steps, the condition of the river crossing, medicines, an emergency contact, agreement about accommodation, and who would hold the house key. For the first time the woman acknowledged that she could not cover such a long road in one day. Instead of abandoning her three-day plan, she decided to spend the night at the first stopping place.

They made contact with the village by telephone. The young woman who had sent the letter said that a room was free, but between her ageing mother’s medicines and her child’s schooling she could not look after a large number of people. ‘I shall not arrive at your house claiming a right over it,’ the old woman said at once. ‘I shall pay my share of the food, and if there is no separate place to rest I shall stay at the village guesthouse.’ The young woman laughed. ‘The arrangements matter more than the money. We can put out a small cot for you, but you must not climb the stairs.’ Hearing welcome and limits expressed so plainly eased some of the granddaughter’s anxiety.

A records assistant at the panchayat produced a digital travel pass offered by a printing company. The service would be free for the first year; it requested medical details and family telephone numbers. ‘Why must I give a company the whole history of my illnesses merely to buy a bus ticket?’ the old woman asked. Ruhani recognised yesterday’s rejected monopoly over data returning under another name. She kept the identification necessary for travel, one limited emergency contact, and the list of medicines separate. No complete copy of private medical records was placed on the company’s server. The local driver’s contact details were written on paper, as the old woman preferred.

Reaching the threshold of the house, Sarita asked the granddaughter, ‘Can you remain here for three days?’ The granddaughter explained that she had two sewing jobs unfinished. ‘If I go with her, the work will be lost. If I don’t

go, people will say I abandoned my grandmother.’ ‘Listen to both people’s wishes separately,’ Sarita replied. ‘One person’s care should not carry the permanent price of another’s unemployment.’ The old woman herself suggested that her granddaughter accompany her only as far as the first bus stop; afterwards a woman driver known to them could help. They agreed explicitly on the driver’s wages—her labour would not be taken free under the name of ‘service’.

At midday Sudha Rai came to the house. She showed a receipt confirming that the donation for the door repair had reached the bank. The old woman also asked for a receipt of her own, separating the wood, the carpenter’s wages, and the donated sum. ‘Shall I pay the costs of your journey too?’ Sudha asked. The woman smiled. ‘The repair and the journey are different matters. I accepted help with the repair. I shall pay for the journey from my savings. If I need assistance, I shall say so myself.’ Sudha did not take offence at the refusal. She corrected the earlier ambiguity about putting the house’s name on the donation document, leaving only the repair item.

Just then Lalit Vishwakarma returned from the office and reported that his correctly approved repair bill had still not become a payment. Rama called him over and showed him the difference between ‘approved’ and ‘money credited to bank’ on the public sheet. Looking at the old woman’s new door, Lalit said, ‘You can see that the work is done, but without payment no grain reaches the home of the man who cut the wood.’ The woman showed the carpenter’s receipt; his wages for that particular work had been paid in full. Two different repair accounts were not combined. The date of the outstanding government payment was sent back for verification.

In the evening Sarita and Maithili examined a specimen form of elderly people’s consent for travel, intended for the public booklet. ‘The wish of the person making the decision must be written plainly,’ Maithili said. ‘But if that person changes the decision, we cannot imprison them in their earlier consent.’ Sarita agreed and added options for returning and for stopping partway. They did not turn a philosophical observation into a printed rule. Each kept the question within the bounds of her own work: at what point does help remain service, and at what point does it become control?

The following dawn the edge of the old woman’s shawl fluttered at the bus stand. Her granddaughter stood holding her hand but asked before the first step, ‘Shall I give you my hand?’ ‘Give it,’ the old woman said, steadying her bundle with the other hand. The woman driver they knew stated the fare clearly as far as the next stopping place. There was no royal acclamation inside the bus, only milk pails, market vegetables, and the tired faces of passengers. Seated by the window, the old woman felt for her house key inside her bundle. She had left her house, not relinquished her rights over it.

When the bus stopped at the first small market, the woman told the driver she needed water. Before handing her a bottle, the driver stated the price; the woman counted out her coins and paid. ‘Travelling alone?’ a nearby

shopkeeper asked. She gave the name of her next stopping place, but not her full home address. The driver understood that helping did not mean answering every stranger's question. As the bus moved again, the woman felt the knot in her medicine pouch, checked the time, and took the prescribed dose. For the first time she understood that the journey was possible, but the limits of her body would not vanish before the wishes of her mind.

The granddaughter continued to watch the dust behind the departing bus. She returned home and picked up the sewing she had left unfinished, then resolved to wait for the third telephone ring, as her grandmother had instructed. Today she had time to work freely, but her concern was hers too. The bus followed the river road towards the first stopping place. The old woman closed her eyes, not like an unconquered heroine, but like a tired traveller. She could stop at the next halt or return if she chose; within that very possibility lay the dignity of her departure.

Gandhari's journey away from the palace and this bus journey in 2040 were not two pieces of evidence for the same event. One story held the remnants of royal power; the other a house door, wages, keys, and the price of a road journey. But when Maithili read the old account of Gandhari, a question came clearly before her: how can love for someone one lives beside be kept separate from that person's right to choose a path? Maithili closed the page. The next question would arise in Kunti's own words. It would not be right to make the moment of Gandhari's departure an answer in advance to that still-unspoken story.

Chapter 171 · Kunti's Remaining Words

In the royal palace at Hastinapura, Kunti ran a finger around the rim of a brass plate. The morning meal had been cleared away long before, but a single dried grain of rice still clung to the centre. When a maid reached to take the plate away for washing, Kunti held it back. ‘I shall clean this myself,’ she said. Washing plates was not considered work for a queen mother; yet that morning Kunti needed some small task for which she did not have to seek anyone’s leave. Gandhari had left the palace and reached the first stopping place. Since that departure, its verandas had seemed suddenly immense.

Hearing Yudhishthira’s footsteps, she set the plate beside the earthen drain. The king had come with two officials. One carried an open list of resting houses along the forest road; the other was ready to read out the arrangements for the care of elderly members of the royal family. ‘Mother,’ Yudhishthira said, ‘I shall send whatever you require along the forest route. But remain here. Since Gandhari and Grandfather have gone, your presence in the palace is a comfort to me.’ Kunti listened to her son’s voice. It held less command than fear of another loss.

‘I have already decided to go to the forest,’ Kunti answered. At first Yudhishthira assumed his mother was speaking in a moment of grief. He had the official close the document. ‘You are tired. Think it over again in a few days.’ For the first time Kunti turned fully towards him. ‘It is good that you can see my tired body,’ she said. ‘But do not make a sickness of my resolve and call it exhaustion. You cannot write a royal decree about what is in my mind.’ The officials withdrew quietly. The son who sat upon the throne was still learning how to answer his mother as an ordinary person.

Bhima and Arjuna arrived when they heard. Bhima asked directly, ‘Why will you leave the home for which we endured such a war? Who will protect you in the forest?’ ‘I do not give you the right to choose where I live in the name of protection,’ Kunti replied. ‘I shall need food, medicines, and assistance; ask me what arrangements are necessary. If you refuse to hear what I wish, that is not help but captivity.’ Tears filled Bhima’s eyes, but he left his angry sentence unfinished. Arjuna stood near the doorway from which commands for so many earlier battles had been heard.

‘Mother,’ Arjuna asked softly, ‘is there anything you have still to tell us?’ Karna’s name was present in the question without being spoken. Kunti lifted the dried grain from the plate and placed it in her palm. ‘There is much still to say,’ she answered, ‘but no words can remake the time that has passed. Karna was my son. Concealing that was my decision. He had a life of his own, friendships of his own, choices of his own. I did not speak when there was time to speak the truth properly. Speaking it later did not undo the harm.’

Yudhishthira said nothing after that admission. He already knew the truth, but the question of entering a name in the public genealogy remained almost unbearable. Looking at him, Kunti said, ‘Whether you forgive me is not in my hands. If I seek to establish my motherhood after Karna’s death by making his independent life a branch of the royal line, I will commit another injustice. Let the testimony of those who knew him as himself be heard. My words must not become the final order above theirs.’

Dust from the battlefield rose again in Arjuna’s mind. The memory of his enmity towards Karna, the impossibility of a belated affection, and his attachment to his mother struggled against one another. ‘I shall need time to understand,’ he said. ‘If you go, whom shall I question?’ ‘Write and send your questions,’ Kunti replied. ‘I shall tell you as much truth as I know. But if you do not wish to see me, that too is your right. Because of my wrong, you must not shape every decision of your life according to my remorse.’ Arjuna saw for the first time that his mother was offering answers, not demanding forgiveness.

Nakula and Sahadeva sat beside the door. Both remembered Madri, whose life had ended before Kunti raised them. ‘You brought us up,’ Sahadeva said. ‘If you leave now, how are we to repay that debt?’ Kunti rested a hand on his shoulder. ‘Care is not a ledger of debts whose last instalment requires a son to mortgage his wishes,’ she said. ‘You love me; that is enough. Help me when I tell you that I need care. But my old age does not own your lives.’

As the day advanced, Draupadi arrived with a bundle of plain clothes. She asked what garments Kunti needed. Kunti chose two light saris and returned the rest. ‘People will turn your departure into a story of the royal family’s renunciation,’ Draupadi said. ‘And again the labour of the women who cook along the road and the people who carry water will disappear.’ Kunti immediately summoned a guard and instructed him to account separately for the wages, food, and lodging costs of those who travelled with her. No one was to be made to work without pay in the name of the queen mother’s sacrifice.

Kunti asked for the road to the first stopping place, where she might meet Gandhari. Sanjaya’s message said that Dhritarashtra’s feet hurt, and the party had stayed an extra day. Yudhishthira at once offered to send a royal chariot. ‘If you send one, let it be for the body’s comfort, not for acclamation,’ Kunti said. ‘And do not turn the news of my coming into an instruction governing Gandhari’s journey without her consent.’ Sanjaya’s answer came: Gandhari wished Kunti to make her decision clear to her sons first, and only then to meet her. Gandhari was free to wait, not obliged to do so.

The evening gathering was no royal ceremony. All five sons, Draupadi, and a few close companions sat together. Kunti said, ‘When I was a girl, fear made me turn away from a life. Later I made many harsh decisions while protecting the children who remained to me. I do not claim that every decision was right. You are adults now. Make your own decisions concerning the throne, your homes, your relationships, and what you remember. My going to the

forest is not your crime, and the remainder of my life is not a punishment for you.'

'Must we give you permission to leave?' Bhima asked. Kunti's voice became firm. 'Give me your blessing if you wish; if you want to prevent me, tell me what you fear. Whether you give permission or withhold it is not the question in this decision.' Yudhishthira lowered his head. He understood that the rajadharma he invoked for his subjects was harder to practise when it concerned his own mother. Kunti rose and embraced her sons, but asked none of them for written endorsement of her departure.

The following morning, outside the city, Kunti stopped by a small bridge. A young woman filling water asked whether the traveller wanted more. Kunti offered payment, but the young woman explained that the river landing was shared by everyone. Kunti thanked her and asked whose labour had repaired the bridge. The young woman laughed. 'My father's hands.' Many hands made roads beyond the chronicles of royal houses. On this small bridge Kunti began, for the first time, to feel her way towards the meaning of her departure.

At the first stopping place, Gandhari made to rise when she saw Kunti. Kunti stepped forward. 'Remain seated. I have not come to join your journey in order to compel you to travel with me.' 'Then why have you come?' Gandhari asked. 'I have chosen the road for my remaining days. If you wish, we can go together as far as the next stop; if not, I shall stay somewhere else.' Gandhari touched her hand. After a while she said, 'Together to the next stop. Beyond that, as body and mind decide.' Hearing their voices, Dhritarashtra turned his seat towards them. Their decision was no longer an order jointly imposed on everyone.

Thus the decision to take the ancient forest road came into its own. Kunti did not leave with either her sons' forgiveness or their restraints; she allowed them to live with their disagreements. Though she and Gandhari agreed to travel together to the next stopping place, each woman retained her separate will. Karna's memory endured, but no new royal proclamation could place a final seal upon the life he had lived.

In Videhapur in 2040, at a dawn separate from that ancient story, a bus stopped in the market at the first halt. Before getting down, the elderly tenant woman told the driver, 'My legs do not feel strong enough yet. Instead of catching the next bus, I shall stay here today.' The driver looked at the name of the next village printed on the original ticket. 'Are you changing your journey?' 'I am changing it,' the woman said with a smile, 'not my rights over my home.' The driver did not demand an undeclared additional fare. She issued a receipt for the service as far as the first halt.

At the market rest house there was a room register with a compulsory printed line headed 'Responsible Male Member of Family'. The old woman saw it. 'I am an adult in my own right,' she said. 'The first name responsible for my stay shall be my own.' The clerk explained that the form was old. Using

her phone, the woman driver brought up the local panchayat's service regulations: a necessary emergency contact could be entered separately. The woman had her granddaughter's number recorded solely as an emergency contact, not as an owner or someone whose permission she required.

When the telephone call reached the granddaughter, she stopped the pedal of her sewing machine. 'Grandmother, are you all right?' 'Yes, but I have stopped here because I am tired. The original plan has changed. Finish your sewing.' With relief still in her voice, the granddaughter said, 'People will say I let you travel alone.' 'Do not let other people's words become the owners of your day,' the old woman replied. 'I shall make my decisions; you must make yours about your work. If I need help, I shall ask plainly.' When the call ended, the granddaughter set the machine running again. As she straightened the hem of the cloth, her breathing steadied too.

At the same time a first notice arrived at Sarita's office concerning the next annual review of document copies. A private company proposed that one family member should be able to give digital consent, once and for all, for every adult in the household, in return for cheaper copies. Rama Karn read the small print beneath the proposal: 'Unified Family Authority'. She drew a line under it in red pencil. 'This line makes the caregiver into an owner,' she said.

Kabir had come to obtain a copy of an old certificate relating to his upbringing. The silence of his household had not changed since Naira's death. Sarita invited him to sit, but he remained standing and asked, 'The name of the person who raised me is missing from the document. The question of my birth is separate. In such a case, who decides my present identity?' 'You are an adult,' Rama said. 'You can apply yourself to have the verified history of your upbringing added. A document cannot manufacture an answer to a question of birth that remains undecided.'

A corner of the copy Kabir was holding had folded over. 'If the person who raised me is dead,' he asked, 'does recording credit for what that person did become a claim to ownership in their name?' 'No,' Sarita said. 'Keep separate the evidence of what was done, the decision of whoever holds the right now, and the grief for what has been lost.' Kabir smoothed out the paper. He did not fill the blank line in the birth register with conjecture. He completed and signed an application to record his caregiver's verified role.

At the review meeting the company representative argued, 'For the family's convenience, one consent is the best solution. Separate signatures increase costs.' Padma asked, 'What if a mother does not wish to tell her adult daughter something? Or if a daughter wishes to keep the papers of her business separate from her mother?' The representative began speaking about 'trust'. Ruhani offered an anonymous example from the old woman's travel form: an emergency contact had been accepted, not a person authorised to give permission. She made clear that family closeness was not lawful proof of joint digital ownership.

A public hearing on the subject took place in the school courtyard. The granddaughter had finished her sewing and come along. She was asked whether, in her grandmother's absence, she would sign the records concerning the house. 'I hold the key because I am looking after the house,' she said. 'A key does not give me the right to sell it. When Grandmother comes back, she will examine her own copy. I shall check the receipts for repairs, but decisions about her property are hers.' A few people present objected, but written acknowledgment of that limit was entered into the record.

In the next turn Lalit Vishwakarma raised his unpaid bill again. His government repair invoice had been declared correct, but no money had arrived in his bank account. The representative began to demonstrate the digital progress dashboard for copies. Lalit stopped him. '"Approved" glows beside my name,' he said, 'but it does not put grain bought with that money in my house.' Rama placed the date of the payment order and confirmation of bank receipt in separate columns on the public sheet. The workers' representative chosen by Lalit was added as a third member of the review committee. Neither Sudha's donation nor the old woman's personal receipt constituted evidence that this debt had been paid.

Ruhani laid out the real figures behind the offer of cheap printing. Printing ten separate forms for personal consent instead of one cost more paper; yet the common permission form could leave an incapacitated person unable to reach the mechanism for correcting mistakes. They proposed a separate fund, a confidential copying room in the local library, and the option of submitting corrections by hand. The committee rejected the company's 'head-of-family signature' condition: it would not sell individual control in return for a cheaper service. The company asked for time to revise its proposal, and no data were transferred in the meantime.

Far away in the market town, the old woman was watching a neem tree through the rest house window. Her knees became more painful that night. She asked the woman driver for help and told her when her medicine was due. The driver called a locally trained health worker and set down the additional charge for her own services explicitly. The old woman provided the information required for the examination, not the entire history of her illnesses. In the morning she told her granddaughter, 'I shall not go any farther today; I shall rest here. The pond in my mother's village will still be there tomorrow. But I must listen to what my legs are telling me today.'

'Grandmother, I could come to you if you want,' her granddaughter said over the telephone. The woman considered it for a moment. 'Not today. I shall say if I need you. But listen: do not give anyone the rent receipts kept in the old chest at home. The repair receipts are separate.' 'Don't you trust me?' her granddaughter asked. 'I do trust you; that is why I am making clear whose documents these are. Take responsibility for what is yours. I shall examine my own papers myself.' They ended the call without wounding each other.

When Sarita came home that evening, a copy of Kabir's application lay on the table. Beside it was Naira's old scarf, folded away; Sarita did not touch it. Kabir put the scarf away himself. 'I shall ask to have my caregiver's name entered in the record,' he said, 'but I shall not let anyone press me to fill in the blank space about my birth. If the answer comes one day, I shall consider it then. And if it never comes, my life will not become an incomplete certificate.' Sarita did not impose an answer. She asked only, 'Have you kept a copy of your application?' Kabir felt in his pocket and showed it to her.

That night Maithili was reading the old pages on the journey into the forest. She underlined several sentences about Kunti's concealed motherhood, the sons' grief, and their independence of will. But she did not turn a historical narrative into evidence before a modern court merely because it raised a philosophical question. Beside her lay the page of revised credits from the new preface to Ishan's book. On it she wrote another question: how much room do we leave those we love to make their own decisions? On another page she wrote: to acknowledge the truth is not automatically to impose on another person the duty to forgive.

The following day the panchayat announced the date and procedure of the annual public review. It would examine each adult's separate consent concerning records, the register of objections, choices between printed and oral copies, and the status of actual payments. Lalit's arrears still awaited bank confirmation; the old woman's rights to her house continued; Kabir's application to record the name of his caregiver remained open for a decision. No correction was proclaimed a universal victory. The people concerned received copies of decisions actually made, and the reasons for matters not yet decided were shown separately.

At the first stopping place on the forest road, Kunti said to Gandhari at night, 'The weight of what I could not say will remain with me.' 'To carry that weight and to place it on another person are not the same,' Gandhari answered. Kunti looked at the faint glow of a distant fire. Her sons were back in the palace, each with a mind of his own. In that distance she saw motherhood, for the first time, apart from a throne of authority. The road for the next morning had not been decided, but their agreement about this stopping place was complete. Within that limit, her remaining words found their meaning.

Chapter 172 · Ishan's Room

In Videhapur in the year 2040, Ishan's hand faltered for a moment as he turned the lock of the library's back room. The teeth of the key were worn; the monsoon damp had swollen the door. He gave it a gentle push with his shoulder, and a heap of old papers stirred on the table inside. On a small brass plate beside the desk his name was inscribed, though one of the plate's two screws had come away. This room had been his place of study, not land he owned. Today's letter from the library committee said it must be vacated within seven days; a public reading room for children would be made here.

Instead of prising off the nameplate and putting it in his pocket, Ishan touched it with his thumb. The library's first director had granted him this space as a facility for research. No lease for a fixed term had ever been drawn up. Because his books occupied it, children often had to sit and study on the veranda in the evenings. He had not previously considered that inconvenience a serious problem. Now the white chalk line drawn by the craftsman measuring the future reading room showed him something he had failed to see.

On the open pages before him lay the revised statement of credit for the chapter he and Maithili had written together. A few months earlier, the text published under his name alone had omitted Maithili's original argument and Sarita's work of transcription. The evidence uncovered by the inquiry had formed the basis of a new preface, and Ishan had acknowledged his responsibility. Yet once the corrected pages became public, invitations to lecture diminished, students drifted away, and some old friends stopped calling. There were legitimate questions within that withdrawal, and there were people who took pleasure in humiliating him. It was easy to give both things one name. It was not right.

Rohit, a member of the library staff, arrived carrying an old register. 'You have five cupboards,' he said. 'Nowhere in the committee's records does it say that the key to this room is to remain with you permanently.' Ishan asked, 'Will there be public space to keep books?' Rohit replied, 'Make a list of the books everyone ought to be able to read. Take away your personal papers. Some pages contain other people's private names; they should not be left in our custody.' For the first time, Ishan understood that vacating the room was not merely a question of his standing. It was also a question of keeping papers safe.

At the committee meeting that afternoon, Rukhsana, a young teacher, said, 'We need a bright room for the children. Some books can go on open shelves, but public study hours must be fixed.' A member remarked sarcastically, 'The man who erased someone else's name ought to have his own nameplate erased.' Rukhsana stopped him at once. 'The false attribution must

be corrected. That does not mean public humiliation should become a game. We are deciding how the space will be shared, not how far we can make someone lower his face.'

Ishan flushed. He unfolded a catalogue of his old research to show how many copies of difficult texts had been kept safe there. 'Removing me from this place will impoverish the library's scholarship,' he said. Rukhsana asked gently, 'Then how often have you helped the children use these books?' There was no mockery in the question. Ishan tried to count, but his memories offered him more hours of solitary reading, closed doors, and requests left unanswered. He folded his list away.

After the meeting he encountered his old classmate Anand. 'Take this decision to court,' Anand urged. 'It's a conspiracy to destroy your reputation.' Ishan said, 'If they withheld my private books, if the library seized my original manuscripts, there would be grounds to object. But the room is public. The children need it. Removing a plaque bearing my name and establishing the truth about my writing are different matters.' Anand remained dissatisfied. 'You're conceding defeat.' Ishan answered, 'Fighting over a room will not answer for what was wrong in my book.'

In the evening Maithili came as far as the library threshold. She had two copies of the new preface to deposit and had already heard that the room was being emptied. Inside, she found Ishan taking pages in her old handwriting from a desk drawer and placing them in a separate envelope. 'I wrote the original text on these sheets,' she asked. 'May I have the originals?' Ishan handed her the envelope. 'May I keep a copy?' he asked. Maithili counted the papers and said, 'Set down in writing the terms of use for any copy needed for our jointly written chapter. You must not retain pages from my separate notebooks.'

Ishan wanted to speak of former days, when the room had been filled with Maithili's footsteps and they had bent over the same page to argue. But Maithili stood there holding her papers; she did not owe him a memory. 'The attribution has been corrected,' she said. 'That does not mean I must return to our former domestic arrangements. I have another place to study now.' Ishan said only, 'I will try to understand your decision. I will not ask you to remain here.'

After Maithili left, the sound of the wind seemed louder in the room. Ishan took a manuscript on Nyaya philosophy from the first section of the cupboard. He had written notes in its margins: the knower, the means of knowledge, and the validity of knowledge—pramātā, pramāṇa, and prāmāṇya. He had lectured on these terms for years, yet had lacked the patience to ask whose handwritten thoughts appeared on a copied page. He felt no revulsion toward knowledge itself. He was ashamed of his carelessness with his own authority. On the first page of a notebook he wrote, 'The knower's fame is no proof of knowledge.'

Two days later Rohit came with a vehicle. As he lifted a box of papers he noticed a torn receipt. 'This looks like an old account of Sarita's work.' Ishan examined it. It recorded the number of pages copied, not an acknowledgement of payment. 'I'll send a copy with it to the file on Sarita's outstanding dues,' he said, 'but I won't describe the receipt as proof that the debt was paid.' Rohit asked, 'Will you make your mistake public again yourself?' Ishan answered, 'Where accounts remain open, silence would erase another name once more.'

The following morning, when the box reached Sarita's office, she did not accept the receipt immediately. 'First record an image of the original, the page numbers, and whose hand entered this account,' she said. Kabir had come to a nearby desk to ask about the status of his application concerning his caregiver's name. Seeing the piles of paper, he said, 'When a document goes missing, a person has to begin telling their story all over again.' Sarita replied, 'And finding a document does not bring every question to an end.' She had Ishan's receipt sealed in a separate envelope.

Ishan asked Sarita, 'What amount is still owed to you?' Sarita did not smile. 'There is the account of my actual copying work, measured in pages, and the time I spent caring for the household, whose valuation is still disputed. Do not add the two together and turn them into a loving gift.' Ishan said, 'I want a clear decision about what is actually payable.' Sarita replied, 'Wanting to pay and paying are different verbs. The account will close only when the money reaches the bank.' After that, Ishan was silent.

That afternoon, a craftsman unscrewed the plate in the library courtyard. One screw was very tight; the other had rusted into fragments. Ishan did not take the plate home as a keepsake. He told the library to reuse the metal, but requested that the jointly authored booklet and its corrected list of credits remain on the public shelf after his individual name was removed. The committee recorded his request in the book register. Another member asked, 'Have you forgotten your humiliation?' 'No,' Ishan replied. 'But what we need is to correct the wrong, not celebrate someone's humiliation.'

As the boxes were being filled, a little girl appeared in the doorway. 'Will they let us sit in this new room?' she asked. 'Yes, during opening hours,' Ishan said. She asked again, 'Are there pictures in that thick book?' Ishan looked at the volume on Nyaya philosophy. 'Fewer pictures, more questions.' 'Then I'll read the questions,' the girl said. Gathering his papers, Ishan answered, 'Reading questions is the hardest work of all. There ought to be room for it in the reading room.' The girl ran away, and in the loss of his permanent seat Ishan glimpsed the possibility of another kind of place.

That night Ishan looked for somewhere to study at home. Sacks used for drying paddy occupied one side of the veranda; Maithili's old belongings were still in the inner room and ought not to be moved without her permission. He put a small table beneath the roof and lit a lamp. The wind began turning his

pages. For the first time, he attended less to the disappearing library room than to the manner of his reading. There was no disciple before him, no nameplate: only an unfinished sentence of thought that would have to be made right.

The first question came to him before he opened a book: if a knower discovers that an earlier conclusion was mistaken, will he correct the evidence, or invent a new explanation to protect his reputation? He wrote three examples on a sheet. First, the omission of Maithili's name; second, the receipt for Sarita's work; third, the library room. Each involved a different question of justice. He did not call his own discomfort a loss suffered by everyone. Then he opened his book and began writing a commentary on the ancient methods of reasoning. This copying was not intended to enlarge his name, but to practise understanding a question.

The next day a young man from the village, Munna, arrived. He had once attended Ishan's lectures but had kept away since the dispute over attribution. Now he needed to understand an example of inference for an entrance examination to advanced studies. 'What will people say if I study with you?' he asked. Ishan answered, 'What they say is for you to judge. If you think my answer is wrong, stop me and ask. You do not have to declare me innocent in exchange for an answer to your question.' Munna considered this for a while, then sat down opposite the table.

Ishan wrote down the familiar example of inferring fire from smoke. Munna asked, 'What if what looks like smoke turns out to be mist?' Ishan smiled. 'That is why we must test whether we have identified what we see correctly.' Munna countered, 'And if five people call you a scholar, does that prove your sentence is right?' Ishan's hand stopped. 'No,' he said, 'and I ought to have asked that question earlier.' Beside his name in Munna's notebook, he wrote: 'Answer under revision.'

They discussed this short lesson for an hour. At the end Munna asked about fees. Ishan did not demand a special gift in the name of his prestige, as he once might have done, without accounting for it. 'For now the first two sessions will be free in the public reading room, once the library approves the hours,' he said. 'For private lessons at my house, we'll agree on the payment for the work beforehand.' Munna replied, 'Then I can understand my options.' Ishan saw that the exchange of knowledge, too, required transparency. Its proof would be an arrangement, not his remorse.

That evening the committee convened again. A private publisher had offered shelves and tables for the new reading room in return for having the room named after it. The condition was that, for five years, children would be obliged to buy only the study guides printed by that publisher. Rohit was looking at the offer's dazzling cover. Ishan was no longer an invited committee member, but attended the public hearing on the book list. 'Thanking someone for a table is one thing,' he said. 'Compelling children to

buy a single company's books is another. My nameplate has come down; why put them in chains to a new name?'

The publisher's representative said, 'You yourself earned your living from a book published under one name. Why oppose the market now?' Ishan admitted that distribution of his earlier book had also lacked transparency. But his own failings were no reason to close off the children's future choices. Rukhsana proposed an open purchasing register and a list of titles from different publishers. The committee deferred its decision on accepting the gift and resolved to rewrite the conditions. The date for opening the reading room stood; compulsory sales were not authorised.

Meanwhile, Maithili was completing the new preface in her separate study. A letter came from Ishan inviting her to join him in explaining their jointly written chapter at the new reading room. Maithili read it and set it aside. She might agree to a public lesson on a particular day, but such agreement would not automatically restore a shared domestic life. She wrote back, 'Send me the questions and sources in advance of the reading session. My time and voice will remain my own. This letter does not decide any other relationship.' She was under no obligation to explain the distance she had chosen.

Ishan received the reply and folded the sheet slowly. He resisted the urge to telephone her. If he had already acknowledged her co-authorship in writing, demanding her affection in return would be another injustice. In his notebook he wrote, 'Admitting fault is not a way of earning a reward.' Beside the sentence, however, he also named his own sorrow. It did not have to be hidden; neither did it have to be fashioned into a weapon against another person's freedom.

The following week, while the library room was being cleaned, Rani, a woman sanitation worker, said that the rising dust made her nose burn. Rohit immediately suggested sprinkling water before sweeping. 'Write down the equipment and wages for this job first,' Rani said. 'And when the schoolchildren arrive, don't hide us behind the door.' The committee approved gloves, face coverings, and wages for the additional cleaning hours. As Ishan shifted the old table he saw whose hands were doing the actual work of emptying the room. How seldom those hands had figured in the age of his books: the thought pricked his memory.

On the morning of the opening, the reading room doorway displayed not a monument to a single book, but shelves of different heights. The girl who had asked the earlier question wrote her name on the first sheet. 'Which book would you like?' Rohit asked. She chose Ishan's old simplified explanation of Nyaya philosophy. On the first page the revised joint credit to Maithili and Ishan was clearly printed; Sarita's name appeared in the list of copying work. A separate notice outside the booklet stated that Sarita's claim for payment was still under review. These names were unknown to the girl as yet; one day, though, the truth of a name might prove useful to her.

Ishan sat outside the door. The room was no longer his, but questions could be heard from within. Munna was asking students to distinguish smoke from mist. Some answers were wrong; now and then the students laughed. Ishan was permitted to enter, but no special seat awaited him. 'Will you give the first lesson?' Rohit asked. 'Today I'll listen,' Ishan said. 'I'll make a note of what I don't understand.' For the first task of the day he chose not to give his answer but to hear the girl's question.

Returning home in the evening, Ishan sat at the table in its new place. Air entered through a crack in the roof, so he put a clean stone on the sheets. He did not begin the next chapter before correcting the first lesson's error and Munna's objection. No state honour came to replace the room he had lost; the decisive lustre around his name had not returned either. But he could read a sentence once more, and cross out a sentence that was wrong. After many days, this small labour of scholarship felt like his own.

Maithili's reply lay safe beside the table. Agreement to a public lesson the following week was possible; agreement to the old form of marriage was not. Ishan did not hang her letter in a frame like a certificate. He kept it inside a book only so he would not forget it when composing his reply. On a fresh sheet he wrote a title: 'The Changing Path of Evidence.' Outside came the voices of children returning from the reading room. They were no compensation for his lost reputation; they were this city's own future. Maithili would make her next decision from where she stood, and Ishan could not suspend his work while he waited for it.

Chapter 173 · Maithili's Distance

In Videhapur in the year 2040, when the first light of morning entered through the window lattice, Maithili separated the two keys lying on her desk. One belonged to the little study she rented for herself; the other to Ishan's old house, where some of her clothes and the brass water vessel her mother had given her were still kept. The pages she had written the previous night for a public lecture were dry, but her answer about their private relationship had not yet been set down on any sheet. Looking at the keys, she understood that the right to close a door one could open with one's own hand must also remain in that hand.

As soon as she opened a box of books beneath the table, she found an old note by Ishan on the first page. Years before, they had corrected an argument in Nyaya philosophy together. In red ink Ishan had struck out a flaw in the inference; in black ink Maithili had written a question: if the name of the person who examines the evidence disappears, who benefits from the validity of the conclusion? Ishan had laughed at the time and said, 'A good question.' In the next edition the question remained, but not her name. Now the revised book had restored it. In the empty room Maithili understood that recovering a name in print was not the same as recovering the days that had passed.

Rukhsana arrived at the door with the programme for the new reading room. 'Your name has already been printed for tomorrow's public lesson,' she said. 'Ishan's is beside it. The committee assumed you would speak together from the same platform.' Maithili read the programme. Along the bottom ran the line: 'A special lecture to celebrate the reunion of the celebrated literary couple.' She stopped her finger on it. 'I will discuss our co-authorship of the book,' she said, 'not advertise a reunion in our marriage. That line must be removed before I enter the reading room.'

Rukhsana was embarrassed. 'One committee member added it to make the event more appealing. I couldn't check it myself.' Maithili did not turn the mistake into personal enmity. 'In this city, news of a woman's scholarship becomes very small and news of her marital position becomes enormous,' she said. 'Print the programme again. Put my list of questions in the library beforehand so the students can prepare.' Rukhsana sent the correction from her telephone then and there. Instead of tearing up the first printed sheet, they attached the amended copy to it, so the record would show how the confusion had arisen.

At noon Ishan was sitting at the small table on the veranda of his house. Giving up the library room had not brought his study to a halt. When Maithili's letter arrived, he read it slowly. It set out the conditions of the public lesson, separate speaking times for the two participants, and a request that no private questions be asked from the platform. Ishan wrote back, 'I

agree.' He put down the paper and went into the old house. Maithili's clothes remained in the cupboard and ought not to be touched without her permission. Dust had settled on the wooden trunk they had received at the time of their marriage. For the first time he realised that even leaving things where they were could sometimes obstruct another person's choice of a path.

When Maithili arrived at his house that evening, leaves were falling from the old neem tree in the courtyard. Ishan opened the door, but offered no memory as an inducement to come in. 'I'll take my clothes, my letters, and the vessel my mother gave me,' Maithili said. 'We'll make a separate list of the books we bought together.' Ishan asked, 'And any of the other things in the house?' 'Not today,' she answered. 'Today I need to gather what is mine with my own hands. We can discuss the rest later.'

The old room's window was jammed. When Maithili pulled it, the wood creaked. With that sound came the memory of a rainy evening when the electricity had failed and Ishan had read aloud a difficult text by lamplight. They had laughed and argued until midnight. There was sweetness in the memory; acknowledging it was not difficult. What was difficult was refusing to make that sweetness a binding agreement in the present. Silently, she went on folding her clothes.

Ishan offered to help lift the trunk. 'It's heavy. Shall I lend a hand?' Maithili paused. 'I need help carrying it,' she said, 'but you must not read the letters inside.' 'All right,' was all he said. They each grasped a different handle. At the threshold the trunk caught, so Maithili turned it sideways first and Ishan stepped back. It was a small task, but this was a new practice: understanding one another's signals instead of simply applying strength in the same direction.

Sarita came to see them on the veranda, carrying a certified list of the outstanding dues for her copying work. 'The page numbers on Ishan's old receipt match,' she said, 'but there is no bank evidence of payment. My separate claim stands.' Maithili replied, 'My co-author's name is on the book now. That does not mean the debt for your labour has disappeared.' Ishan stated clearly that the account of actual payment for the specified, verified pages would remain open pending independent examination. Sarita asked for a written acknowledgement instead of his word. She rose only after the paper had been signed.

As the trunk was carried out, Sarita asked Maithili softly, 'Have you decided to stay in your own rooms?' Maithili said yes. 'I'm not refusing to speak to Ishan. But conversation doesn't mean returning to the timetable of that household. I now make my own hours for work and sleep.' Sarita answered, 'I ask for an account of my labour; you ask for your own time. They aren't the same thing, but if both are dismissed as gifts, the real loss is hidden.' Maithili met her eyes and nodded.

The next morning Maithili opened the trunk in her separate study. She cleaned the brass vessel, put an old letter from her mother beneath the table, and drove a nail beside the door to hang her key. Shyamali, her landlady, came to discuss the next month's rent. 'We can draw up an agreement in two names,' she said. Maithili replied, 'For now I am the tenant of this room. A visitor will come by my permission; their name won't automatically be added to the agreement.' Shyamali made out a corrected receipt. The burden of the room would rest on Maithili's earnings, and the worry of meeting it would be hers too.

On the day of the public lesson, Munna was already seated. Rukhsana had posted the revised programme at the doorway. This time its title was 'Evidence, Credit, and the Reader's Questions.' As Maithili entered, some people folded their hands in greeting and others whispered. An elderly teacher said, 'Now that the family matter has become public, people are bound to ask questions.' 'The book is public,' Maithili answered, 'so ask about its arguments. Decisions about private relationships lie within our own rights.' Her voice was steady, with no wish to triumph over the crowd.

Ishan sat at the other side of the small table. The first speaking time had been assigned to Maithili. She read a line from the old edition linking the trustworthiness of a knower to the examination of evidence. 'I wrote the original objection to this sentence on my own page,' she said. 'The copy, the date, and the sequence of revisions are in the printed correction. I am a co-author of this chapter. But readers should not believe my assertion merely because I bear that title. Let them test the example.' She set the papers down and waited for questions.

Munna asked, 'If a person made a mistake earlier, can we accept a correct answer from them later?' 'We can, if the answer has a sound basis,' Maithili said. 'But the correct answer does not automatically make good the harm done by the earlier mistake.' Ishan added, 'Responsibility for that mistake is mine. I will not put Maithili's contribution to its correction back in the shadow of my name.' The little girl who had asked the first question in the new reading room said, 'Then if the next page of the book turns out to be wrong, will you correct it again?' Maithili smiled. 'Yes, provided you read the page and tell us.'

During the interval Rajan, one of the organisers, appeared with two flower garlands. 'We need a photograph celebrating the literary couple's reconciliation,' he said. Rukhsana immediately showed him the programme. 'A little theatre is necessary to bring people's hearts together,' Rajan said. Instead of taking a garland, Maithili stepped down from beside the platform. 'My decisions about my life will not become a performance to bring people's hearts together,' she said. Ishan did not take the garland from Rajan's hands either. The photographer lowered his camera, though annoyance remained on Rajan's face.

Some spectators left following the unexpected quarrel during the interval. The flowers had already been paid for from the event's donations. 'All that preparation wasted,' Rajan complained. Rukhsana answered, 'The expense will remain in the public accounts of the meeting, but no woman will be compelled to perform a part she has not agreed to in return for that expenditure.' The flowers were placed on the library windowsill. Photographs were taken only of the consenting speakers delivering the public lesson. There was pain on Ishan's face, but he did not turn that pain into an accusation against Maithili's reply.

In the second session a woman teacher asked, 'Now that you've received credit for your co-authorship, what justification is there for living apart?' Maithili did not evade the question. 'Credit is justice concerning a particular written text,' she said. 'In a marital home there is a long history of meals, hours, silences, disagreements, and places to work. The first injustice being remedied does not mean that the account of the second can be closed without discussion. I live separately. It is not a punishment; I need room to think and to live.' The questioner said nothing, but wrote a line in her notebook.

When Ishan's turn came, he spoke about the difficulties of his study. 'Leaving the room did not make me abandon learning,' he said, 'but my sorrow at losing it gave me no right to bring Maithili back into the house.' He went no further into their private history. Returning to a philosophical example, he explained that the intended meaning of a sentence becomes clear when its context is examined, not when a single word is pulled out of it. Maithili listened closely. She found his answer to one objection incomplete and challenged him publicly. Ishan accepted the correction. Amid their irreducible personal distance, disagreement in reasoning remained alive.

After the meeting Leela, a former student, gave Maithili a sheet of paper. 'I want to cite your question in my research,' she said, 'but the first edition of the book gives only one name. How should I refer to it?' Maithili supplied both the page of the correction and the publication year of the original edition. 'Don't conceal the facts of the faulty edition,' she said, 'but write that the correction has been made. Cite only as much of my contribution as the evidence establishes. I do not want credit for a chapter I didn't write.' Reassured by that clarity, Leela left.

Evening was falling outside. 'May I walk you home?' Ishan asked. 'I'll walk by myself,' Maithili said. 'The route is safe. If it were night, I would ask about arranging transport.' Ishan asked, 'Did your water vessel get there safely?' She nodded. 'My mother gave it to me. And please send me a list of the old notes of mine still in the cupboard.' Ishan nodded. These small sentences held the ashes of a life once shared, but not one commanded the other to return.

In the lane Maithili met Leela's younger sister. 'Aren't you frightened when you read alone in your own house?' the girl asked. 'Sometimes,' Maithili said. 'Then there are neighbours' doors, the library, friends. Living separately is not

a vow to be lonely.' The girl showed her a school drawing: three houses with separate doors opening onto a single courtyard and a common garden in the middle. 'Whose path runs through the middle?' Maithili asked. 'Everyone's,' the girl replied. 'But to go inside a house you ask first.' In appreciation, Maithili touched the green line at the edge of the picture.

Back in her study Maithili unfolded the rent receipt. The month's payment would come from her translation and teaching; her income for the next fortnight was uncertain. She had not charged for the three days of public lessons, since the library's open sessions were for everyone, but she entered a fee for a new private proofreading assignment. In her former life, her earnings had often been absorbed into common household expenses without consultation. Now she drew four lines: rent, paper, travel, and assistance to her mother's family. Freedom was not merely a thought; it was a daily account too.

Ishan did not telephone that night. Maithili caught herself waiting for the call, and laughed briefly. She knew that the old pain of their relationship would not diminish so quickly. But it would be no more right to turn the absence of a call into proof of an insult. She sent a short message herself: 'Look again at the source for the objection to the second argument in today's lesson; page 149 of the book seems to contain an error. We can speak about personal matters at another time.' The reply came a little later: 'I'll check the source. Thank you.' Nothing more.

The next day Ruhani came to see Maithili for an example to use in the public records register. This time the matter was not authorship credit, but the misinterpretation of consent to photographs at a meeting. 'If two people sit together on a platform, does that mean a photograph of them may be published?' she asked. 'Agreeing to sit together is consent to the work,' Maithili said. 'A photograph, a private identification, and family publicity require separate permissions.' Ruhani added a proposed distinction to the public review checklist. It had yet to be approved for implementation; Maithili did not present it as a final ruling of law.

Rukhsana's next letter arrived. The library committee had decided to demand a correction of the newspaper headline announcing 'The Couple Reunited.' But before printing a correction, the newspaper wanted an interview. Maithili supplied a written statement: the revised credit for literary co-authorship was verified; no joint declaration had been made about private marital residence; the public lesson had concluded. Ishan gave his separate agreement. The newspaper printed a short correction, but nobody could establish how far the original story had travelled. No one claimed that the truth had now reached every reader.

That evening Shyamali had called a plumber to repair a tap in the courtyard. The plumber explained that the water lines serving two rooms ran through the same pipe, so both tenants would suffer a temporary

inconvenience during the repair. Maithili consulted Shashikala, an elderly teacher next door, about when they would fill their water vessels. Though they lived in different homes, they agreed on a common arrangement. 'We have separate keys,' Shashikala said, 'but the water comes from one tap.' Maithili smiled. A relationship did not always mean a single roof, nor did distance always mean cruelty: a pipe being repaired made the point more tangible than a book could.

In the last watch of the night Maithili wrote the title of her new manuscript: 'Witness and an Independent Voice.' On one page she quoted an objection from Ishan's argument, gave a clear reference, and set out her own reply separately. Giving another person's work its proper credit did not cost her her own voice. She filled the brass vessel with fresh water and set it near the window. The lamp in the distant reading room had gone out, but light remained within her home.

At dawn Champa appeared at the door, returning from her work at the temporary shelter with her mother's prescription in her hand. 'Do you have the telephone number of that medicine shop in the market?' she asked. 'Mother needs her medicine, but I can't abandon my own paid work today either.' Maithili gave her a seat and some water. She would not guess the name of a medicine on an illegible prescription. She advised taking the doctor's original prescription and checking it with an authorised pharmacy. 'How many more days must I put my own life on hold while I care for Mother?' Champa asked. Instead of answering, Maithili first began to listen to everything she had to say. Another woman's separate story was beginning here; Maithili's distance was not to become that story's ending.

Chapter 174 · A Mother's Medicine

In Videhapur in the year 2040, the morning sun had not yet reached the shelter veranda. Champa kept turning over her mother's prescription. A letter in the old ink had spread where a drop of water fell, and the previous day the pharmacist had refused to guess the medicine's name over the telephone. Champa slipped the prescription into a plastic sleeve. There was a glass of water at her mother's bedside, but only two doses of medicine remained in the small box beside the cot. Outside, Rukhsana was kindling a fire in the kitchen.

Maithili seated her beside the table. 'I won't try to read the medicine's name for your mother if the writing is unclear,' she said. 'The doctor's register should have the original treatment details. What hours are you meant to work today?' Champa opened her little sewing ledger. She had six schoolchildren's bags to repair, and the hours when she could work in the temporary shelter room had changed again. 'If the medicine is late, Mother will suffer,' she said. 'If I stop working, next week's rent will be uncertain.' Instead of offering an answer, Maithili began writing the two sets of hours on separate sheets.

Her mother sat up on the cot. The pain in her knees had worsened overnight. Looking at Champa's list, she asked, 'Have you written down your charges beside my medicines on that table? Am I eating up your earnings?' Champa shook her head at once. 'You're my mother. But keeping accounts of what I earn is not an insult. If I lose three hours of paid work today, how will I buy medicine the day after?' Her mother fell silent. For a long time, whenever the cost of illness was mentioned, her own body had seemed a burden to her. Champa straightened the shawl on her shoulders, but did not let the question disappear into silence.

Rukhsana arrived carrying breakfast on a tray. The shelter's meal accounts included a fixed portion for Champa's mother; her private medicines were a separate expense. 'If I miss my kitchen shift to fetch the medicine today, who will take my place?' Champa asked. 'Zubaida can take the afternoon shift,' Rukhsana said, 'but we must record the wages for her time. And you mustn't call your evening sewing a donation by reducing its price.' In that moment the meaning of an ordinary arrangement became clear: to obtain medicine for her mother, Champa would not have to ask another woman to work without pay.

Champa took out the hospital's earlier receipt. Ruhani arranged an appointment by telephone with the hospital help desk, but did not copy the medicine's name or any details of the mother's illness into her own phone. The assistant explained that without checking the original record signed by the previous doctor, no advice could be given about a changed dose. Champa agreed. When arranging a vehicle to take her mother to hospital, she asked

the fare beforehand. Ramdin, the driver, explained that if waiting time incurred an additional charge, he would issue a separate receipt. Her fear about money did not vanish.

The hospital entrance was crowded. Her mother held her knee as she searched for a place to sit. The length of the queue made Champa feel helpless; then she went to the reception desk and explained that her mother had difficulty walking. At first the clerk began asking her name and address loudly. 'I'll give the name for the necessary register,' Champa said, 'but not the details of her illness before everyone. Mother can tell you herself.' Once inside, her mother told the doctor in her own words about the pain, when she took her medicines, and the exhaustion she had felt the previous week. Champa did not interrupt. After examining her, the doctor wrote an updated prescription. No change of medicine was made by guessing at the blurred lettering of the old one.

The prescription came with the date of the next examination. The doctor explained when each medicine was to be taken and which symptoms would call for another consultation. Champa wrote the times down. Her mother had been listening and asked, 'If the pain is less at night, may I stop taking the old tablet myself?' The doctor made clear that she should consult him before changing the treatment plan. Champa treated the sheet as medical instructions, not as a triumph of her own knowledge. Consultation, medicines, and travel appeared as three separate amounts on the bill. The medicine was bought, but the rest of the month's accounts were still difficult.

Outside the pharmacy Champa met a young man she knew, Amresh. He had known her since the old drainage repairs at the shelter, and for some months they had been speaking privately. After Champa's private messages had once been read aloud without permission, Amresh had not attempted to establish their closeness publicly by using her name. Today he stopped his bicycle and asked, 'Has your mother's examination finished? If you want, I can carry the bag of medicine to the vehicle.' Champa looked toward her mother. 'I'll carry the bag myself,' she said, 'but I would like half an hour to walk with you this evening.' A quiet smile spread over his face.

Her mother had seen Amresh before, but asked a question for the first time. 'Will you take my daughter out for a walk after work?' 'If she wishes,' Amresh answered. 'Your medicine schedule mustn't become an excuse to prevent her deciding.' Her mother looked at him for a moment. 'I want to know how my daughter is doing,' she said, 'but my worry is not a string tied around her life.' Champa clasped her hand. The mother's fear was still there; the words had made the first crack in it.

Back at the shelter Champa opened her bag of sewing. The school contractor had demanded eight hours' work immediately. The written terms said payment would come at the end of the week and that the contractor would decide deductions for stained fabric at his own discretion. Champa

listed the sewing measurements and repair price for each bag, then sent back a revised offer. 'Since you look after your mother, you get to work from home at a lower rate,' the contractor said on the telephone. 'Working from home doesn't make needles, thread, or time any cheaper,' Champa replied. They agreed on advance payment for three bags; the time allowed for the remaining work was still open.

At midday, as Champa threaded her sewing machine, her mother glanced at the time for her medicine. Champa was taking her foot from the treadle to stand, but her mother said, 'I can pour the water; you show me the prescription.' She filled a small glass from the water vessel beside the cot. Champa checked the medicine's name, dose, and time against the prescription, and her mother took it with her own hands. This was no speech made at a public meeting. Yet in the care of her own body, her mother had made another small decision for herself, and Champa's line of work continued unbroken.

That evening Ruhani brought the shelter's wage register. Two hours had been wrongly deducted from Champa's previous shift because she had gone out to arrange papers for her mother's treatment. 'That was time I spent on private medical matters; I don't claim wages for it,' Champa said. 'But why deduct the four hours I spent sewing and making the list of supplies?' Ruhani matched the work register against the testimony of workers who had been present. The four hours due were entered again. In the draft prepared for a shelter donor, Champa had been described as a 'volunteer worker.' She demanded that the term be removed, since a wage had been agreed for assigned work.

'If we record wages for all the work, the grant will run out more quickly,' Rukhsana said. Champa did not dismiss the worry as false. 'Then we must reduce the amount of work and show the budget as it is,' she said. 'But we must not conceal the shortfall by calling wages love.' In the written budget Ruhani made separate columns for actual remuneration and freely donated time. They agreed that on each occasion a worker would be asked afresh whether they wished to give their time without charge. The review of the earlier grant remained open.

Amresh came at the agreed hour in the evening, but Champa was still stitching the straps of two bags. He waited at the gate and sent a message: 'Let me know when you've finished.' Champa came out five minutes later. 'I'm late,' she said. 'You may want me to leave at once, but if I abandon the last stitches, they could deduct money tomorrow.' Amresh answered seriously, 'My waiting time is my own account. Your wages aren't the price of meeting me.' Champa laughed. In that easy sentence she found more trust than in any grand promise of love.

Avoiding the crowded market, they walked to the old pond. A thin band of the evening sky lay on the water; two children were launching paper boats

from the grass at its edge. Champa stopped. 'I'm still afraid someone will see this ordinary walk and start trading stories about us again,' she said. 'I won't take your photograph or send a message to any acquaintance,' Amresh replied. 'But I don't think you want us to abandon every path because we're afraid.' Champa gazed at the pond for a while. 'Today I chose to walk this way,' she said.

On the pond's northern side, the smell of boiled chickpeas and lemon spread from a cart. Amresh ordered two paper bowls, and Champa paid for her own. 'Why do you always keep our accounts separate?' he asked. 'If you want to treat me today, say so,' Champa replied. 'If I want to treat you, I'll say so. Love alone doesn't turn every expense into a claim upon another person.' Amresh picked up his bowl. They laughed for a while at nothing serious, removing lemon seeds from their chickpeas.

Amresh spoke of his home. His father wanted him to find a job in a factory in another city. Work in repair training was scarce here. 'If you ask me, shall I stay?' he said. Champa shook her head. 'I won't decide your future for you,' she said, 'nor will I promise now to leave my mother and go somewhere else. If we find ourselves in two different cities, we'll speak about it then. My new working hours are still taking shape.' Amresh looked a little sad. He understood that in a love founded on consent, one could not carry another person's future in one's pocket. Nevertheless, he accepted her answer.

On their way back a woman who had attended the meeting when Champa's private messages were made public stopped her. 'Now it's obvious,' she said. 'You meet that young man.' Champa checked her step for a moment. 'At this moment I'm walking with my friend,' she answered. 'That doesn't give you permission to print copies of my old messages.' 'People will talk,' the woman said. 'I can't stop people talking,' Champa replied, 'but I can tell them where my answer ends.' She went on. Amresh did not turn back to quarrel on her behalf.

Near the shelter entrance, her mother was waiting with a little plate beside her feet. 'Have you eaten?' she asked when Champa arrived. Champa showed her the paper bowl. 'I had chickpeas. I'll still eat rice at home.' Her mother laughed. 'I took the medicine on time,' she said. 'Rukhsana showed me the clock; I poured the water myself.' Champa looked at the medicine box. The dose was correct according to the prescription. 'When I need help, I'll say so,' her mother said, 'but I won't call for you every minute.' How many days this small agreement would last remained to be seen. It was enough for today.

The next morning Champa made a new schedule for earning her living. On Mondays and Wednesdays she would do repairs for the school; Tuesdays and Saturdays, paid sewing at the shelter. Thursdays would be left open for her mother's appointment or for rest. On Sundays, the market if her mother wished, otherwise rest at home. She drew up accounts for each day's hours, actual payment, and the cost of thread. 'What if we sometimes need you for

extra work at the shelter?' Rukhsana asked. 'Ask me beforehand; I'll show you which hours are free,' Champa replied. 'My time belongs entirely neither to my mother, nor to the shelter, nor to the man I love.'

Ruhani brought the draft for the annual public review. The grant account listed a single sum for 'treatment of an elderly patient,' with no separate evidence for the pharmacy, vehicle, or workers' labour. 'Let the money be publicly audited, not the person's medical identity,' Champa said. 'An authorised officer can inspect the protected receipt for whatever part of my mother's expenses was paid by public assistance; it shouldn't be posted on an open wall.' Ruhani agreed. But a new proposal from the printing contractor required every beneficiary's personal number to be stored on a private company's server. The decision on examining that condition was still pending.

That evening Maithili came to look at Champa's new ledger. 'Your work accounts are clear today,' she said, 'but where have you left a line for what you want?' Champa did not blush. 'A Sunday evening walk with Amresh, if we both want it,' she answered. 'It isn't a payment due, but I've left the hour free.' Maithili said, 'Making a place on paper for your own wishes is difficult. When I wrote down the rent for my separate home, I too understood that freedom cannot live without accounts.' They spent a little while drinking weak tea that Champa's mother had made.

From a piece of old cloth her mother made a pouch to hold Champa's needles. She could not sit for very long because of her knees, so Champa finished half the stitching. 'It took me a long time to understand your love,' her mother said. 'I was afraid that if you went away, I'd be left alone.' Champa replied, 'Whether I go anywhere or remain in this village isn't decided yet. But choosing how to spend my day doesn't mean abandoning your care.' 'And I won't make it a rule that I must depend on you for everything, every day,' her mother said. One row of her stitches had gone crooked along the pouch; Champa did not insist on straightening it.

At the end of the week Champa received advance payment from the school for three repair jobs. First she deducted the cost of thread, then paid what was owed on the medicine bill. With the remainder she bought a small lidded box to store her mother's medicine, with separate spaces for prescriptions and receipts. Amresh arrived late one day because he had been filling out an application for training in equipment repair. Champa did not ask to inspect his application; she asked only, 'Can you manage the application fee?' 'I've arranged it,' Amresh said. He told her news of his work, and she told him news of her earnings.

By Sunday evening her mother's knee hurt a little less. She sat on the house veranda asking a neighbour's little daughter the names of flowers in the garden. Before going out, Champa showed her the time of the next medicine as prescribed. 'I'll keep an eye on it,' her mother said. 'If I need to, I'll call Rukhsana; otherwise I'll fill my own glass of water.' Champa held her

mother's palm between her hands and sat beside her for a moment. The medicine was in the house, the expense account still open. Her mother had kept for herself the right to say, 'Go.'

Amresh was standing outside with his bicycle. Together they took the path to the pond on foot. This time there were no photographs, no messages, only the evening breeze. At a small shop on one side, hot jalebis were being made. 'I'm treating you today,' Champa said. 'I've been paid for three bags.' 'Then next time it's my turn,' Amresh replied. They carried their paper parcel of jalebis to the stone platform beside the water and sat down. Champa laughed as she took her first bite: sugar syrup had dripped onto her fingers. She wiped them with a handkerchief and felt no need to make this ordinary sweetness in her day into evidence for anyone.

Chapter 175 · Kabir's Letter

In Videhapur in 2040, the morning sunlight was beginning to arrive, but Kabir's room still held the smell of night. He turned the key to open a drawer in his desk, and the lock caught halfway. He stopped his hand. When Naira was alive, she used to turn the key a little backwards to release this stubborn lock. Kabir repeated the movement. The drawer opened. Inside lay a length of blue thread, an old ticket, two empty envelopes, and a sheet of plain paper folded at one edge. None of these things possessed the power to bring Naira back. Yet he could not bear to remove them now.

Subhadra called from outside, 'I've put the tea on. There's very little milk.' 'I'll bring some,' Kabir answered. His voice sounded unfamiliar to him as he spoke. Since Naira's death, the household's milk, oil, medicines, and empty buckets had continued to make their demands at their appointed hours. Sometimes those demands angered him; sometimes they gave him a reason to get up. Kabir chose a blank sheet from the drawer and wrote at the top: 'For Naira.' There was no address to which the letter could be sent. He did not erase the heading.

He began: 'There is so much I have to tell you.' At once he stopped his pen. Naira had died; the small difference between 'is' and 'was' weighed terribly upon the page. He wrote, 'Yesterday I met a little girl on the road. A corner of her book was wet. I asked if she wanted help drying it. She kept hold of her book herself.' Kabir tried to smile. Hearing such a story, Naira might have made a gentle joke about the child's right to decide. But inventing fresh dialogue in her name felt wrong to him. He left the story unfinished and went to fetch tea.

Subhadra had put out two glasses in the kitchen. 'I didn't take out a third,' she said without being asked. This was not the first day the third glass had been missing from its place. 'You've put it away,' Kabir said as he lifted his tea, 'but sometimes I still feel my hand will reach for it.' 'So do I,' said Subhadra. Neither searched for an excuse to console the other after that admission. She lowered the flame. Kabir returned to his room with the tea, and a small stain appeared at the edge of the letter. Once he would have changed the sheet. Today he let the stain dry.

Before noon, a message came from Rama Karna's office. The corrected entry in his history of foster care was ready, but the digital form had joined two blank fields under a single heading, 'Original Family Identity'. A clerk had said that if the unverified details of his birth registration were filled in by conjecture, the certificate could be issued at once. Kabir closed his notebook as soon as he read the line. He himself had applied for recognition of the work of those who had cared for him in childhood, work omitted from the old

register. No answer had been found to the question of his birth, and he would not manufacture one for the sake of convenience.

At the office Ruhani laid a printed form on the table. 'This machine issues a warning whenever it sees an empty box,' she said, 'but a warning isn't the truth.' Kabir pointed to a line where the foster carer's name had slipped into the place reserved for his birth mother. 'Why should I erase the labour of those who sheltered me, fed me, and stayed awake through my feverish nights?' he asked. 'But their names aren't proof of my birth. If we write both things in the same box, we make both wrong.' Ruhani prepared a separate handwritten correction. The convenience offered by the machine was suspended for the time being.

A newly appointed employee, seated at a table in the corner, said, 'If we add your family's particulars to the Naira Memorial Fund, you could qualify for additional benefits. Your foster-care register could be linked through that fund too.' Kabir looked towards him. 'What are the rules governing an assistance account established in Naira's name?' The employee searched for a page but found no clear answer. 'Then look at the rules first,' said Kabir. 'The blank line about my birth is no measure of Naira's love. While she lived, she had the right to speak for herself. I will not allow her name to be used now to fill in the empty spaces in my life.'

The employee seemed embarrassed rather than angry. He explained that a private company was offering new software free of charge in exchange for the right to gather information about 'unknown family relationships'. Ruhani examined the agreement. If made public, it could combine private information concerning the births, foster care, marriages, and deaths of numerous families. 'It would produce a new list of beneficiaries,' the employee argued. Kabir asked, 'And if someone's name is connected by mistake, will that person have the right to remove the information?' The agreement contained no written answer.

When Rama Karna arrived, Kabir placed a copy of his application before her. 'Even without the software, we can issue a provisional, verified copy,' Rama said. 'It will record the contribution of his carers separately from the unresolved questions concerning his birth. If evidence emerges later, the legal procedure can follow.' Kabir examined the copy: it said 'Foster-care history recorded', not 'Determination of birth completed'. He accepted it but did not sign the consent form allowing his information to be given to the company. Rama added the option for those who declined consent to the agenda of the public review.

As he left the office, Kabir carried two sheets in his bag: a corrected certificate concerning his rights, and the unfinished letter to Naira. The papers did not weigh the same. He stopped beside a paan shop to buy some flattened rice. 'Was your work done?' the shopkeeper asked. 'As much as could

be proved was done. The rest is still where it was,' Kabir replied. The shopkeeper did not need to unravel that answer; he returned the correct change. For the first time Kabir paid attention to the exactness of that reckoning. A day's justice might be found in four coins, but the questions of a life could not be settled with coins.

Naira's empty chair stood on the veranda of Sarita's house. Sarita had not removed it. That day she was trying to fasten the lid of a bottle of mustard oil; the inner rim had broken. 'Shall I bring you a new bottle?' Kabir asked. 'There's oil left. I'll change the lid,' she said. When she saw the new certificate in his hand, she asked, 'Have they written the foster carer's name correctly?' 'Yes, but the name connected with my birth is still blank,' Kabir replied. 'A blank doesn't become less empty when you fill it with a lie,' said Sarita.

Kabir drew out the envelope, then put it back. Sarita noticed the movement but did not ask what it contained. She did not suppose that being a mother automatically entitled her to read a letter written to her daughter. 'Will you have tea?' she asked. 'I'll make it,' said Kabir. She did not interrupt him. While washing the glass in the kitchen, Kabir remembered how Naira would break into an argument the moment she came home: first drink your tea, then start your debate. This time the thought was not Naira's living voice; it was only Kabir's memory. He was no longer frightened by the difference.

When he returned with the tea, Sarita showed him the list for the annual audit of the records. It had separate boxes for 'Incomplete credit due to families of the deceased', 'Corrections to foster-care records', 'Confidential information', and 'Actual payments'. An official had proposed that the review be expedited if families of the dead deposited private letters. 'I've supplied the pages relating to Naira's public work,' Sarita said. 'But no rule says that every piece of her private writing must be surrendered.' Kabir put his hand over his pocket. 'I'm writing to her,' he said quietly. 'I won't send it. And I won't deposit it either.'

Sarita looked at him for a moment. 'It's right that you've felt like writing,' she said. 'You don't have to let me read it. If I want to write, I'll write too. But neither of us can measure the whole of our daughter's life by the other's letters.' Kabir felt relief and sorrow together: relief that he need not stand guard over the letter; sorrow that nobody's reading it could bring Naira back. He saw tea spilled beside the glass and reached for a cloth. 'Leave it, I'll wipe it,' said Sarita. Kabir passed the cloth into her hand.

In the evening Kabir returned to his room. He rubbed a patch of dust from the windowpane with his thumb and looked outside. Two children ran along the lane rolling a wheel. One stumbled and got up; the other stopped the wheel, but the child who had fallen insisted on rising unaided. Kabir took the letter from the drawer and wrote, 'Since your death I have spent many days searching for the meaning of my life in the answer to the question of my

birth. Now I understand that the truth of my birth, the history of the hands that raised me, and my relationship with you are three different stories.'

He stood up after reading the line. There was fear in writing the word 'relationship'. Some of the days he had shared with Naira remained indistinct in his memory: the precise date of a quarrel, the hour of a return on a rainy day, the real reason for a silence. He could not accept making those uncertainties right through the beauty of a sentence. Instead of 'I always understood you', he wrote, 'Often I did not understand you. And what comes back to me now is my memory, not your answer.'

A woman selling cloth called from outside. He stopped writing for a while and went to the window. She said her new weavers' group had made cotton towels, their prices separately accounting for yarn, dye, and weaving wages. Kabir bought a plain towel. When he asked about the accounts, she explained that the share of profits had changed under the new partnership, though wages for an earlier consignment were still outstanding. Kabir paid the full price. The woman declined an invitation to be photographed for publicity. She had come to sell her goods, not to serve as evidence for a campaign.

As he hung up the towel, Kabir remembered a day with Naira. The heat had been fierce. She had returned along a dusty road and said that anyone wishing to see workers at their labour should first give them water and a place to sit, and only then open a camera. Kabir wrote, 'This time I bought a towel. I asked the seller her name, but did not take a private photograph of her.' He added immediately, 'I'm learning this from something you once said, but it doesn't absolve me of all my mistakes.' Outside, the darkness thickened.

That night Subhadra came to the doorway with a small bundle containing a woollen blanket from his childhood, one corner of which a neighbour had stitched. 'I've heard from that neighbour's grandson,' she said. 'You can record her full name, but first ask her family how to pronounce it correctly.' Kabir opened the bundle. Its seam had split long ago, but the cloth was still usable. 'Has my name appeared on your new paper?' Subhadra asked. Kabir showed her the certificate. She read the letters for a long while, then said, 'It wasn't the paper that made me the one who brought you up. I raised you. But now, when someone asks, I won't have to tell a lie.'

Kabir did not put any new questions about his birth to her. Subhadra began to mention the name of a village she had heard in her childhood, then stopped herself. 'I didn't hear this with my own ears from someone who knew. It came from somebody else's mouth. It isn't evidence yet,' she said. Kabir nodded. 'First I want the true form of your own story,' he replied. 'I won't put pressure on you to manufacture memories for the sake of a name connected with my birth.' Subhadra folded the blanket. An empty chair stood in a corner of the room. She did not sit in it, choosing instead her familiar stool by the window.

The next day a notice appeared at the community records centre: families whose old registers had been corrected could receive free digital membership, with an additional paid-certificate option. Kabir went straight to the office. One group supported the free service; he too thought it right that poor families should not have to incur another debt for documents. But a page at the back of the agreement authorised sharing private relationship information with a second company. Rama Karna arranged another public meeting. Kabir allowed his own case to be cited as an example, on condition that the details of the unverified line concerning his identity were not made public.

At the meeting, a young employee asked, 'If every person controls their own papers, how will a common register ever be made?' 'Facts that have a lawful reason to be public will be made available,' Ruhani replied. 'For the rest we need the specific person's explicit consent.' Kabir told the gathering, 'Adding a name and selling the story of a life aren't the same thing. I want the work of my foster carers recognised. I don't want Naira's private memories or the unverified facts of my birth turned into merchandise for a company.' Some in the gathering supported him; others feared the additional process would delay certificates.

Rama acknowledged that fear as reasonable. She ruled that uncontested public copies would continue to be issued under the old arrangements; the new private agreement would be suspended for the time being; and the time, expense, and number of objections associated with each application would be published in the next annual review. Private names, medical information, and irrelevant details of family relationships would not appear. The correction to Kabir's foster-care history remained in force, while the question of his birth stayed recorded as 'Unverified'. The company's new proposal was rejected, although a working group would reconsider alternatives for its useful software features. Not every dispute ended that day.

On the shelter veranda, Champa was leaving with her sewing bag. She carried a small closed box of medicines for her mother, while Amresh was practising bicycle repair. Seeing Kabir, Champa asked, 'Have you had any relief after the review?' 'The paper about my name is correct now,' Kabir replied, 'but it can't fill the empty place in my heart.' 'I'm learning to keep my mother's medicine and my own evening hours separate,' Champa said. 'If both become a burden, one won't be a cure for the other.' Kabir looked at her little box. He did not mistake the resemblance between their experiences for a solution to grief.

That evening Sarita had placed a bundle of receipts on an old school desk. Kabir gave her a brief account of the office's new decision. 'They've suspended the private company's agreement, but the process for certificates continues,' Sarita observed. With a red pencil she marked the date of the annual review. 'Who will now verify the list of beneficiaries in Naira's name?' she asked. 'The

responsible officer, for work supported by evidence; the living person concerned, for consent to use private details,' said Kabir. 'I won't sign any new consent in Naira's place.' Sarita set down her pencil.

At that moment clothes drying beside the veranda began to blow in the wind. Sarita rose to secure them, and Kabir held down the other end. At the sight of an old blue handkerchief, Sarita's hand stopped. Naira had kept a handkerchief of that colour, but it was not clear whether this one had been hers. Without guessing, Sarita folded it. 'What time will you eat today?' Kabir asked. 'When I'm hungry,' she answered. 'I have to rise early tomorrow to open the schoolroom.' That ordinary sentence carried the weight of the next day, and also a means of living through one more day.

At night Kabir opened the last page of his letter. He wrote to Naira, 'Today I helped your mother put away some clothes. I don't know what you would have thought of this day, but I won't make any claim certain in your name. The history of the hands that raised me now has its place on paper. The question of my birth is still open. An answer won't change your death; the absence of one won't erase the days when I loved you.' His pen stopped beside the word 'loved', but he did not cross it out.

At the foot of the letter he wrote the date and signed his name, but added no postal address. Nor did he announce that he would surrender the private letter to a government office or read it at a commemoration for Naira. He placed the sheets inside a new envelope and wrote on it, 'For Naira — Unsent'. He put the envelope in his small chest, apart from the bundle containing Subhadra's blanket. The two objects told their own different stories: one of the labour of raising a child, the other of words left after love had been overtaken by death.

Closing the chest, he went out onto the veranda. Sarita was still awake. On the table lay the key to the school for the next day and a half-full glass of water. 'Shall I wake you in the morning?' Kabir asked. 'No, I'll get up myself. I'll tell you if I'm late,' Sarita replied. Kabir sat beside her for a while. Naira was not there, and neither a new record nor an answer about his birth could be manufactured to account for that absence. Inside, the letter lay safe; outside, the small preparations for another day's work. Sarita put the key in her pocket, Kabir dimmed the light, and they went to their separate rooms.

Chapter 176 · Sarita's Dawn

Before dawn in Videhapur in 2040, Sarita took water from the brass vessel behind the stove and poured it into a pan. Bending her right knee too far caused her pain, so she steadied herself with her left hand against the stove as she rose. She took out two glasses for tea. Her fingers reached towards a third and stopped. While Naira was alive, she would drink half her morning tea and hurry off to school, often leaving the rest of the glass by the window. There was no need for a third glass now. Sarita took it out from among the utensils, washed it again, and stood it upside down. In the time that small task took, the milk rose over the pan.

She turned off the stove and kept rubbing the thin film of dried milk with a cloth. No tears came to her eyes; her wrist began to ache. Naira's absence returned in the stiffness of her knee, the movement of her hands, and the familiar order of utensils. 'Today I have to wipe the desk and go to school,' she told herself. Such a sentence sometimes sounded like an instruction, sometimes like the voice of another person. She understood now that even when she issued the command herself the day's work was not lighter, but the pace at which she undertook it could remain her own.

The chair by the window was empty. Sarita considered placing Naira's old blue shawl upon it, then thought it better to leave the shawl as it was in the cupboard. The chair was not a substitute for Naira's body; it was an object in the house, where anyone might sit if they wished. She opened the door. In the lane, the milk seller had propped up his bicycle and was washing his measuring vessel. A little girl went past dragging her schoolbag. The day had begun without standing still to ask Sarita's permission. That hurt her, and also brought a measure of ease.

Once, Sarita would have called these small resistances of her body an illness. The doctor had said that exercises for her knee were necessary. Holding the doorframe, she lifted her leg and bent it three times; on the fourth, she stopped. Naira would sometimes laugh when she saw her: 'Mother, you do the counting for your exercises, not me.' The remembered voice offered support and inflicted pain at once. Silently Sarita practised three more times. Some of her motivation came from Naira's memory; but her body's limit of fatigue belonged to her, and she would have wanted that limit respected even while her daughter was alive.

The previous night Kabir had asked whether he should wake her at dawn. Sarita had refused. She really did get up by herself. She put her bunch of keys, red pencil, and school receipt book into a cloth bag. In an inner pocket she found an old list in Naira's handwriting: chalk, drinking water, a wall fan. A signature appeared beneath it, but the date had blurred. Sarita read the list and recognised the limits of what it established. Receipts for the amount of chalk

purchased would be elsewhere. This paper proved only that her daughter had written those words with her own hand.

At the school gate the watchwoman, Ramsakhi, was sweeping. Seeing the pain in Sarita's knee, she offered to take the key. 'Open the gate,' said Sarita, 'but I'll open the inner door. The ledger in that room is my responsibility today.' Ramsakhi burst out laughing. 'I didn't come to snatch your key. If I measured my rights by the length of my broom handle, every courtyard would belong to me.' They laughed together for a while. In the midst of her laughter, Sarita suddenly realised that the ability to laugh did not mean she had forgotten her daughter.

The old study room had been renamed the 'Shared Reading Room'. Ishan had once studied there; now it had low seating for children and open bookshelves. A catch on the window was broken, and the night wind had made two sheets of paper flutter. Sarita secured them. One announced a programme of Maithili philosophical lectures, the other a children's drawing competition. She put them in separate places. Knowledge and organised events could share a wall, but their meanings still needed to remain distinct.

By eight o'clock five girls and four boys had arrived. The youngest, Mayank, came inside without taking off his shoes and left wet footprints on the threshold. Sarita did not scold him. 'First wipe up this water,' she said. 'Someone could slip.' Mayank began looking for a handkerchief in his bag. Sarita gave him a cloth, and together they wiped the floor. Watching the circular motion of the child's hand, she remembered how Naira, when getting young children to help with cleaning, would sit down and join in the work. For a moment the memory tightened Sarita's throat. But the cloth needed wringing out, and she wrung it.

The first lesson in the reading room concerned measurement. The children examined three old maps of the waterways. A small copy of the public portion of a usable map, returned to the villages by Rama Karna's team, had come to the school. Sarita asked where water gathered in the lowlands during the rains and where the cattle path opened in winter. The children argued among themselves; one boy said the government map did not show the footpath beside the pond. Sarita wrote his statement on the board, but said, 'What you've seen matters. Next time we'll all inspect the place together. We shouldn't declare the map false in advance either.'

Mayank asked, 'The didi who used to teach here was called Naira, wasn't she?' Sarita was silent for a few moments. 'Yes, her name was Naira,' she said. 'When will she come again?' asked the child. The question came from ignorance, not cruelty. 'She will not come again,' Sarita replied. 'She has died.' Mayank turned the piece of chalk in his hand. 'Then who will finish this map?' he asked. 'You, I, and the people who know that path,' said Sarita. 'We'll keep what is useful from her work, but no one will become Naira in her place.'

When the bell sounded, the children went out. Sarita sat alone in the room. A patch of dried glue remained in a corner of the wall where Naira had once fixed an old lesson list. Sarita reached out to scrape it away, then stopped. She did not need to make a memorial of every object, but it was not her duty to erase every mark in a single day either. She placed a fresh sheet on the board for the next class and half-closed the window, so that air could enter without carrying the pages away.

During the play break two girls were sharing an old book. One family's name appeared on the school's assistance list, the other's did not. 'My book is torn too. Will I get one?' the second girl asked. 'If this is a public library copy, both of you have the right to read it,' said Sarita. 'If it is a scholarship book, we must check the rules. I won't say yes without understanding them.' The first girl moved her book a little closer, and they began reading the same page. Sarita saw that a child's immediate act of cooperation and the government's longer procedures did not always move at the same pace.

At midday Padma arrived with two files and a small red stamp. The annual review of the school repair grant was approaching. In one ledger Naira was still entered as 'Principal Contact'. 'We need to close the line naming a dead person,' Padma said, 'but without erasing credit for her earlier work. Should we name Sarita as the new person responsible?' Sarita did not immediately agree. 'Which part of the work will be mine? I'll handle the gate, the book accounts, and attendance checks. Let an engineer examine the construction measurements and evidence for the bills.' Padma wrote the responsibilities separately in the file.

A new name appeared on the grant list: 'Naira Memorial Assistance Centre'. Sarita was pleased to hear it, yet uneasy. Padma explained that a private printing company was offering free certificates, scholarship slips, and a digital memorial page with family photographs. 'We need information for scholarships,' Padma said, 'but why the deceased person's private letters and photographs of her family?' Sarita read the list. In the small print, the agreement allowed submitted material to be reused for 'educational publicity'. She did not fold the sheet away; she left it open on the table.

'I won't stop an award from being given in Naira's name,' Sarita said. 'But her private letters, family photographs, and the undecided records of Kabir's birth are not all going into a company's storehouse. Ask each child's family for permission before making the name of a scholarship recipient public. And don't exclude from the list those who don't want their photographs used.' Padma drafted a written proposal to that effect. Some parents objected that so many conditions would delay assistance. Sarita listened to their concerns and said that undisputed scholarships would continue through the old arrangements; the decision about private data collection would be made separately.

It was time to eat. Sarita opened her lunch tin and found two little vegetable containers. The night before, she had wanted to make a portion of Naira's favourite fried potatoes, but had not cooked it. The other box contained bottle gourd. Sarita thought how often the taste of food changes after a death, not because the tongue is different but because the person who used to comment on its taste is gone. She took a mouthful and looked out of the window. The children were giving names to the shapes of clouds. She finished her meal, though the container she had intended for the potatoes remained empty.

Kabir reached the school a little late in the afternoon, carrying the corrected public copy of his foster-care record. Its unverified birth entry was clearly set apart. 'This is your document,' Sarita said. 'You are under no obligation to show it to me.' 'I only came to tell you that the proper part of the work was done without handing over any private letters,' he replied. Sarita read the copy. It recognised Subhadra's labour in raising him, not any conclusion about his birth. 'Has Subhadra received her copy?' she asked. 'Yes. She checked the pronunciation of her own name herself,' said Kabir.

The envelope was still in Kabir's bag, but he did not take it out that day, and Sarita did not mention it. Together they brought some old textbooks down from the shelves. Half a sheet in Naira's handwriting fell out of one: not a letter addressed to anyone, only the weekly allocation of classes. Sarita set it aside as a record. 'Who should receive this?' Kabir asked. 'The place where teaching is going on,' said Sarita. 'If we lock every sheet away in a chest merely to remember it, how will the children learn?'

They needed to prepare an announcement for the next evening's programme. For the annual cleaning of the pond, there was a proposal to mark separately the watercourses of the lowlands, the safe steps at the bathing ghats, and the places where makhana seeds were sown. Ramsakhi pointed out that the women who joined the cleaning were listed merely as 'volunteers', while the men transporting materials were paid separately. Sarita drew up the list again with four distinct columns: voluntary labour, paid daily work, equipment hire, and donations. 'A communal festival isn't an excuse to render someone's work invisible by calling it free labour,' she added. Ramsakhi wrote the proper number of working hours beside her name.

That review brought an awkward fact to light. The printing company's representative said that digitising family records for the Naira Memorial Assistance Centre would be free only in its first year. In later years there might be fees for certified copies. He also said that eligibility for assistance would be classified by the company's undisclosed calculations. Rama Karna was informed. She demanded written answers: who would receive benefits, how could an incorrect name be corrected, and would those who refused consent be excluded from public services? The representative said the head office would answer. No agreement was signed immediately.

One widow waiting for a scholarship could not find her name on the list. Her son attended the school, but the family had recently moved from another neighbourhood after the flood. The preliminary list relied on an old proof of residence. 'This family's entitlement must be checked,' Sarita said, 'but I won't offer a false assurance in Naira's name.' Padma arranged separate verification of the child's attendance record, actual residence, and the conditions of assistance. The woman received a written acknowledgement. The incident made clear that even a reformed procedure could exclude those who had only recently been displaced.

Ramsakhi returned with a question about payment for sweeping. Her three additional days of cleaning appeared in the school's daily attendance register, but the contractor's bill showed only two days. Sarita examined the old ledger; there was a separate note about a chalk circle on the threshold and repair work on the third day. She did not telephone the contractor to declare him guilty on the spot. She gave Ramsakhi a written request that payment for the two undisputed days should not be held back, and a date for independent reconciliation of the third. 'Don't imagine that grief makes me less able to understand the accounts of my own work,' Ramsakhi said. Sarita listened and wrote the date in the ledger.

As daylight faded, Sarita returned home. Kabir had said that he would leave some rice in the house. In the kitchen the utensils were washed, but the salt tin was no longer where Naira had kept it. Sarita searched for a while and grew angry. Her irritation was not directed at Kabir, nor was it wholly about the change of place. Every day the house her daughter had inhabited arranged itself in a new way; every day Sarita had to recognise it anew. When she found the tin, she put it beside the stove. She said nothing to Naira in her thoughts.

Savitri, Champa's mother, came to the door with her medicine box and doctor's prescription. The swelling in her knee had lessened, but she still needed support to walk far. 'Champa has written down when I must take the medicines,' she said. 'Now everyone says it's better for me to stay at home. I want to see the fair on Sunday. Everyone laughed.' Sarita invited her inside. 'Has anyone had time to listen to what you want?' she asked. Savitri considered the question. 'I'll look at the route to the fair and somewhere I can sit, and then decide. No one should buy a ticket without asking me.'

Rather than take the prescription into her own hands, Sarita left it on the table before Savitri. 'It's your paper,' she said. Savitri read the date of her next check-up herself. For a while the women did not speak of Naira. Savitri recognised the smell of rice cooking on the stove. 'Haven't you tempered the dal with cumin?' she asked. Sarita laughed. 'I forgot today.' 'Rice doesn't stop cooking because something's forgotten. You can still add it,' said Savitri. Sarita heated the oil. The sound of cumin seeds brought back a morning from many years earlier, but she felt no obligation to speak of it.

After the meal Savitri prepared to leave. Champa had come to collect her. 'Shall I keep half of Sunday free for the fair?' she asked her mother. 'First ask whether I've decided to go,' Savitri replied. 'If we go, you can be with me, but I'll judge what my legs can manage too.' Champa paused, then said, 'All right. We'll look at the route tomorrow and decide then.' Sarita saw them off. She understood that accepting assistance did not take away a person's right to say no.

Before rising from her chair, Savitri pressed the swelling around her knee. 'And if I grow tired halfway to the fair?' she asked. 'Then you can turn back,' said Sarita. 'Plan a short journey and keep the way home open as well.' Savitri laughed. 'Everyone makes decisions for me, but if I change my mind halfway, it upsets their plan. Sometimes they're so afraid of that they won't let me leave the house at all.' Sarita did not copy her words onto a page of advice. She listened, leaving Savitri to say them in her own voice when Champa arrived.

That night Sarita reopened the school ledger and saw Naira's name in one corner. It remained as it had been on the old attendance page; in the new work schedule Sarita's name had been added as the person responsible. She did not strike out the old entry. The date of death was recorded, but she would not declare that a whole life's work ended on a single date. Padma's new schedule kept four separate items: repair payments, workers' credit, scholarship eligibility, and confidentiality of records. Beside one of them Sarita wrote, 'Listen to the person receiving assistance.'

From the doorway Kabir asked, 'Shall I leave anything ready for tomorrow morning?' 'The key is where it should be, but don't wake me,' said Sarita. 'If I can't get up, I'll tell you myself.' Kabir smiled. He did not try to console her by bringing up Naira unprompted. Sarita looked at the empty third glass to one side. She did not think of putting it away, nor did she turn it into an object of daily worship. The glass was a thing; her absent daughter was a history of a living person. They were not the same.

Before the following dawn, the window shutter rattled. Sarita's body once more recognised the hour to rise; her knee hurt, her eyes felt heavy. Slowly she sat up, drank a glass of water, and opened the door. The sky was beginning to turn pale. Naira was absent today too. This knowledge was not new, but every morning her body learned it again. Sarita took her own medicine first, then put water on the stove. The key to the school lay on the table. She picked it up: no cry of victory, no end to sorrow, only the day's first task, undertaken at her own pace.

Chapter 177 · An Elder's Consent

On a Sunday morning in Videhapur in 2040, Champa pressed the rubber tip at the bottom of her mother's walking stick to test it. Rainwater had made the courtyard slippery the previous day, and one edge of the tip had worn away. Savitri watched the inspection from her cot. 'Are you repairing the stick,' she asked, 'or looking for a reason I shouldn't go to the fair?' Champa straightened its crooked neck. 'Mother, I don't want to stop you. The doctor said you need to rest when you're tired. What if someone pushes you in that crowd and you get hurt?' Savitri reached out and took back the stick. 'Why are you writing responsibility for someone else's pushing upon my body? Look at the route first, then ask me.'

Three sheets listing possible plans lay on the veranda. The first route led from the main road to the fair's northern gate; it required getting off a bus and crossing ten minutes of crowds. The second went behind the pond, along a narrow path where there were benches. The third was to stay home and have pictures and goods brought to her. Champa had written fares, distances, and the return time in small letters. Savitri read the list and asked first, 'Under this third option, who chooses what I get to see?' Champa smiled, but could not answer immediately. Staying home was an option too, but it risked turning her mother's wishes into somebody else's guesswork.

Champa had seven sewing bags to inspect and hand over that day. Under the arrangement made the previous day, she would receive separate wages for measuring cloth and checking stitches instead of lifting heavy sacks with her injured wrist. She decided to finish two hours of that work early. Rukhsana agreed to change her own cooking shift, but said, 'Don't quietly add my kitchen wages to Champa's expenses. There must be a separate slip for any extra shift.' Savitri listened to them both. 'Let nobody's work disappear on account of my outing,' she said, 'but don't shut me in a room out of fear of that either.'

Anup came to the doorway carrying a few tools for repairing the house; Champa had shown him a loose nail in the doorframe the day before. He greeted Savitri respectfully and asked, 'If you go to the fair, would you like me to come with you?' Savitri laughed. 'You're Champa's friend, not a guard appointed over me. If I need help on the way, I'll ask for it myself.' 'All right,' said Anup. 'I'll just tighten this nail in the frame. And if the need arises, I'll help account for the fare receipts.' Champa was reassured by his easy answer. No new man's order was needed to persuade her mother.

Savitri checked the time for her medicine on the prescription. The doctor's treatment plan had not been changed. After taking her medicine she asked Champa, 'If my leg begins to hurt, I can say I want to return, can't I?' 'Yes. And if I get tired, I can say so too,' Champa replied. A small smile came over Savitri's face. 'You forget what your own body tells you when you're busy

caring for mine. A journey made by two people has to be measured by the strength of both.' She chose her old, thin shawl. Champa would have bought her something bright and new, but Savitri said her wish to see the fair was not an exhibition of clothes.

Before they reached the fair, an employee at the bus stand tried to take the prescription from Savitri's hand. 'Senior citizen assistance,' he said. 'If we enter your medical particulars, you can get a free vehicle.' Savitri drew back the prescription. 'If information about my knee is needed for transport, ask the necessary questions. Who gave you the right to read about every illness I've ever had?' The employee looked at Champa, who left her mother to answer. They brought out the rules for the concession. Those required only a general declaration of age and difficulty walking. Savitri gave her name, showed proof of age, and put her private medical details back in her bag.

Drums were sounding at the northern gate. The air was crowded with stalls selling glass bangles, clay vessels, and wooden toys. Savitri stopped briefly at the sight of so many people. Champa assumed her mother would now want to turn back. Instead Savitri asked, 'Where is the bench behind the pond?' Her plan had changed, not her desire. They left the crowded main path and chose the quieter one behind it. There was mud on that path, so Anup went ahead to see whether the stick would take hold. Savitri set down her own foot and tested it herself. 'This is a longer route,' she said, 'but I'll decide how many steps to take at a time.'

Beside the pond stood a small pavilion for the fish-and-makhana workers' fair. Binod Kevart was marking out spaces for the small sellers. Phoolmati Tiyar had opened the ledger of her fishing-net collective. A board beneath the stalls listed donations, sales, and daily wages as three different categories. Savitri asked an elderly woman who cracked makhana seeds, 'Have you come to enjoy the fair today, or to work?' 'Both,' the woman replied. 'But if I work, I must be paid. When they make us crack seeds in the name of entertainment, my hands hurt.' Savitri pressed her right knee. The answer recalled the markets of her youth, but the memory brought the concrete weariness of work more than consolation.

A little way from the makhana pavilion stood a hospital assistance table. In large letters a sign read: 'Registration for Elder Care'. A volunteer stopped Savitri and said, 'Once you're registered, members of your family can easily make all the decisions about treatment, travel, and accommodation.' 'And my decisions?' Savitri asked. 'The family decides for your welfare,' the young man replied. Champa asked to see the papers. After a field headed 'Principal Carer' came an extraordinarily broad authorisation: access to records, relocation, receipt of assistance funds. Savitri neither folded nor tore the sheet. She laid it straight on the table. 'This permission would make things easier for my children,' she said, 'but where on it is my voice written down?'

The volunteer's face fell. He thought the elderly woman did not understand the benefit. 'Just sign it,' he told Champa. 'I'll make the process simple.'

'Mother will decide for herself,' Champa replied. 'I only need permission to be contacted in an emergency. Make separate consents for separate matters.' Rama Karna was nearby at the pavilion, giving notice of the annual community records review. When she saw the form she asked, 'How many people receive their own copy after signing such a blanket authorisation? On which page is the way to withdraw consent explained?' The young man had no answer ready. Rama requested a copy in writing but did not treat the employee's disagreement as an offence.

Savitri had the following entered beside her name: 'Assistance for today's journey only; no medical decisions; no change of residence; no publicity involving private information.' The volunteer said there was no box on the form for such words. 'Then your form is incomplete,' Savitri answered. 'I can give up the concession, but someone who truly needs assistance should not be forced into silence because of that missing space.' Rama gave her a separate acknowledgement recording her objection. Champa understood that her mother's refusal had made immediate access to the benefit more difficult, but that her 'no' had preserved a clear right.

Behind the pavilion sat an elderly woman who was a tenant. Questions about repairs to her house and her rights as a tenant had already been raised at the village records meeting. Today she held a notice written by the landlord: 'Accept relocation for appropriate care.' 'My roof leaks,' she told Savitri. 'People say I should go to the new shelter; I'd get food and medicine there. But nobody will say whether I'll still have the right to my old room once I've gone.' Savitri sat beside her. 'What do you want?' she asked. 'First let them repair the roof. I could stay elsewhere for three nights, but I haven't agreed to give up my permanent home.'

Champa asked to look at the woman's paper, but the woman first asked, 'Do you live here?' 'No, I'm Champa. I've come to the fair with my mother,' Champa answered. The woman folded the notice again. When Rama came near, she handed it to her of her own accord. Rama said that temporary safety must not be used as a pretext to write away a permanent right. The repair, the length of alternative accommodation, and the written option to return needed to be made clear first. The landlord's application also required scrutiny. The elderly woman took back her slip. She did not confuse sympathy with proof of her rights, nor did she surrender her right to demand that proof.

By midday the fair was crowded. Savitri saw two stalls, bought a small clay lamp from a potter, and stood near a group of women singing old folk songs. A verse reminded her of the first fair she had visited after her marriage, in her youth. 'That day my mother told me, "Daughter, buy something at the market because you yourself like it,"' she said to Champa. 'And what did you buy?' Champa asked. Savitri laughed softly. 'Nothing. I watched what all the older people liked and went home. Today I bought this lamp for myself.' It had cost five rupees, but the weight of that declaration rested upon many years gone by.

Once she sat on a bench, Savitri's knee began to tremble. Champa gave her water. Anup and Rukhsana were at a distance examining a stall's accounts. Savitri was quiet for three breaths, then said, 'We should go home now. I won't hear the rest of the song.' Champa began to ask why she wanted to leave so soon, then stopped. 'All right, Mother. Shall we return by the path behind the pond?' 'If the mud has grown worse there, we'll look for a bus stop at the edge of the main road. We'll choose what is less difficult.' Champa found out the conditions on both routes. Her mother's decision had changed, but she was weighing the remaining options at her own pace.

There were few vehicles for the return. One driver said he would help the elderly woman climb aboard by the hand, but would charge double for waiting. Champa refused. 'If there isn't a suitable vehicle, I can sit here a little longer,' Savitri said. 'Why should fear of fatigue be used to demand any price at all?' Anup explained the limit of his working hours: he had to be at the tool workshop by two. 'Go to your work,' Savitri told him. 'Getting me home is not your responsibility alone.' Champa and the driver agreed on a fixed fare, and he wrote the waiting charge on a separate receipt.

In the evening Sarita came to ask after her. Sarita's own knee hurt, and the school key was in her bag. She asked Savitri whether she had enjoyed the fair. Savitri showed her the clay lamp, hummed the first two lines of the song, and said, 'I didn't see the whole fair. I saw as much as I wanted. Coming back halfway isn't a defeat.' Sarita smiled. The mornings following Naira's death had taught her that a day could be lived even when some tasks remained unfinished. But she did not wrap her own grief around Savitri's experience. Savitri offered to make her tea; Sarita said Champa should finish her own work first, and that she would put the water on the stove herself.

That night Padma and Rama met in the schoolroom to prepare for the annual records review. They placed three papers in separate files: a copy of the blanket authorisation used at the fair's assistance pavilion, the elderly tenant's application for temporary relocation, and Savitri's limited consent. 'We'll publish a summary of these documents,' Padma said, 'but not the people's names, illnesses, or home addresses.' Rama added, 'Let the eligibility rules for any benefit be public. The paper recording a private decision must remain under the control of the person concerned. Even a government file is incomplete if the person cannot see what consent has been recorded in their name.'

At the meeting a young man argued that elderly people sometimes did not understand what was best for them, so it was practical to give their families wide-ranging authority. Savitri was not well enough to come to the school herself, but had sent a written question through Champa. Padma read it aloud: 'If I say yes today and no tomorrow, how will the paper be changed? And if I become unable to decide, who will listen to what I said beforehand?' The young man had no immediate answer. A nurse present said emergency arrangements were necessary, but an emergency could not be used to justify

signing away rights for an entire lifetime. The meeting chose a separate group to draw up clear rules for that distinction.

Champa's name was proposed for the group. She did not agree immediately. 'I changed two hours of my working day to care for my mother today. Attending every meeting will cost me earnings,' she said. 'Declare the time and travel expenses for this work, and give elderly members a chance to speak directly.' Some called her selfish. Ramsakhi stood up. 'If the work of the hands on which a committee depends is not accounted for, it will again be built upon women's unpaid labour.' Padma added an allowance for meetings and travel to the public proposal. Champa then agreed to serve for a limited term.

The elderly tenant did not attend the meeting herself; her written condition had reached Padma. She would accept a temporary move while the roof was repaired, provided the place, period, keys, and right of return were given in writing. The landlord's agreement had not yet been received, so Rama wrote 'Pending Consideration' where a decision might have appeared. No officer treated the woman's conditions as consent to permanent resettlement. The incomplete answer was inconvenient, but it was the actual state of the evidence.

That night in the ancient forest hermitage, the bamboo staff kept to support Dhritarashtra slipped down from the outer wall of his room. Sanjaya bent to pick it up. Hearing the sound, Dhritarashtra said, 'First tell me where my staff is.' Sanjaya described its position. Dhritarashtra reached out for it himself, but could not reach. 'Now put it into my hand,' he said. Gandhari stood a little way off. In that request she heard neither a royal command nor a defeat, only an elderly man's clearly expressed wish to accept help.

Kunti was filling a water vessel at the hermitage after returning from the riverbank. Hearing her, Dhritarashtra asked, 'Are the facilities available to me here also available to the other people living in the hermitage?' 'Equality won't be seen in words but in the measured accounts,' Kunti replied. 'Sanjaya says they'll count the grain again tomorrow.' The king fell silent. The authority to reckon with the resources of the old court was no longer his, but he could still insist on hearing the result of this question. 'You won't make the decision,' said Gandhari, 'but you may ask for an account of it.' Dhritarashtra gripped his staff and straightened his body.

Footsteps sounded outside the forest hermitage. Vidura brushed the dust from his old clothes but did not enter, remaining at the door. Sanjaya invited him to sit inside. 'For many years I sat within the affairs of kings and gave counsel,' Vidura replied. 'Now I must seek, along my own path, the answer to whose rights are preserved by my continuing to sit within.' Dhritarashtra recognised his voice. He gave no order that Vidura should remain. He merely asked, 'If you are going away, will you tell me first?' 'Yes,' said Vidura. 'Even leaving in silence can sometimes take away another person's right to decide.' After that answer the ordinary work of the hermitage continued through the night.

The next morning in Videhapur, Savitri placed the clay lamp by the window. Champa asked how much her leg hurt now. 'A little more than yesterday,' Savitri said. 'I'll rest today. I won't decide next week's plans now.' Champa wrote down the medicine time and sat to sort her sewing work. Whether her mother's decision to go to the fair had been right or wrong did not become a final judgement in the house. The consequences of that decision—weariness, the remembered song, the purchased lamp, and the public objection—each remained in its own place. Savitri opened the window once and said, 'If I want to go again, ask me first.' Threading a needle, Champa replied, 'If you tell me, I'll listen. If you don't, I won't assume.'

Chapter 178 · Vidura's Way

At daybreak in the ancient forest hermitage, Vidura took off his old leather sandals and placed them on a brick at the edge of the veranda. The night dew had swollen their straps. Sanjaya came out carrying a pitcher of water. Vidura asked him, “Where does the narrow path to the north of this hermitage lead?” Sanjaya said, “First to the sal forest, then to the old landing on the river. The people who live there have no need of a road to the royal court.” Vidura bent and tightened the straps of his sandals once more.

From inside the doorway Dhritarashtra called, “Vidura, you said you would sit with me, and already you are asking about the road?” Vidura went in. The king was feeling the edge of the mat of kusha grass laid upon the ground, finding its border with his fingers. Gandhari stirred a thin gruel of barley; Kunti was cleaning the morning’s grain. Vidura said, “I am no longer the minister of your court. If I remain here, I shall revive the habits of the office you came here to leave behind.” Dhritarashtra’s face hardened a little. “Where is the court here? This is a forest.”

“Court is not the name of a building,” Vidura said. “When one person grows accustomed to answering for everyone, and everyone else waits for his command, a court can take shape without a throne.” Gandhari stopped her ladle in the gruel. “Then will your leaving also be a command? You chose to stay here and work beside us; now you will set out without asking any of us?” Vidura fell silent. He understood that relinquishing an office had been easy to declare, but it was harder to let those he loved live with the consequences of his decisions.

Sanjaya came in with the words of a forest-dwelling woman who was sitting outside. In her hand she held a hollow length of bamboo with which she carried water. The people of the hermitage had laid stones across a small channel the previous day to make a pathway. Those stones had diverted the flow that reached the huts in the forest. The woman said, “You belong to the royal family, but the water for my home used to run through that channel. Is it justice that my pitcher should stay empty for your convenience?” Vidura began to rise to answer her, then sat down again.

“If we remove the stones,” Sanjaya said, “the path will be slippery for Dhritarashtra.” The woman set her hollow bamboo vessel on the ground. “First measure whether both paths can be made. I need water at my home. Your elder needs safe footing. Why should the suffering of one become a reason for silencing the other?” Gandhari came outside. She could not feel where the stones had been placed, but from the sound she could tell that the direction of the water had changed. She remembered the uncertain ground beneath her feet on the first day of their journey.

In Vidura's mind the old royal assembly opened again. There, too, people had often said that the security of the kingdom required certain others to remain silent. He had not succeeded in preventing every injustice; nor had the objections he did raise always achieved enough. Now he did not lecture the forest woman. He asked Sanjaya to try moving apart two of the stones across the channel. Dhritarashtra came out, supporting himself on his staff. "Make my path shorter," he said, "but do not stop the water from reaching her home."

After two hours' labour the stones were moved, a branch split from a tree was made into a handhold, and the stream once again flowed towards the huts. The forest woman filled the first pitcher herself. Vidura slipped off a ring bearing the old mark of his ministerial seal and tried to give it to her. She drew back her hand. "I did not ask for a king's gift in exchange for water. If you want to take part in the work, fill some earth beneath that branch." Vidura put the ring away and lifted the soil. Wet earth clung beneath his nails. The new work of his hands felt unfamiliar.

The woman's little son sat at the edge of the veranda, shaping a bird out of a branch. Vidura asked what would change at home now that water had returned to the channel. "Mother won't have to go so far to fetch it," the boy said. "And tomorrow I can make boats on the water again." He showed Vidura his wooden bird. For a moment Vidura wanted to tell him a great story about justice and injustice in the affairs of kingdoms. Then he understood that such a story had no use today beside the boy's right to play.

At midday Dhritarashtra said, "I will not order you to stay. But tell me this much: if you go away, whom shall I ask about the decisions I made long ago?" Vidura replied, "I am not the sole keeper of their memory. There is Gandhari, Kunti, Sanjaya, and all those whose lives those decisions changed. If I alone interpret them, the affairs of the kingdom will once again be confined to one man's mouth." The king said softly, "And if I do not like someone's answer?" "Even then, you must listen."

As she served him food, Gandhari asked Vidura, "Where will you truly go?" "I shall walk to the northern landing," he said, "and then look at whatever path lies ahead. I will leave my thoughts in writing, but I will ask that no one treat them as a final law." Gandhari did not smile. "Leaving your thoughts behind and surrendering your claim upon them are two different things. What if your words are used again to justify oppression?" Vidura looked at a single grain of rice lying on his leaf plate. "Then the way to challenge them must remain open."

Many centuries after this scene in the forest, an old brass padlock lay on a table in a school assembly room in Videhapur in the year 2040. Sarita had opened the school at dawn and brought the lock with her. The annual records-review committee was now demanding permanent powers: the power

to block company proposals, to take copies of private documents, and to issue final decisions on complaints. Some of the people for whom the committee had been established did not even appear on the proposed list of members.

In red ink at the top of a page, Rama Karna wrote three words: “Hearing”, “Recommendation”, “Decision”. “These are not the same thing,” she said. Padma opened a file containing Savitri’s limited consent at the fair, the elderly tenant’s conditions for a temporary move, and Champa’s question of payment for attending committee meetings. The three files had been kept separate the previous week. Today the chairperson’s office had proposed combining them all under one heading: “Elderly Welfare”.

A representative of the printing company seated at the back of the room smiled. “The more compartments you make, the more it costs. If one permanent committee gives everyone a decision under a single number, the village will benefit.” Rama asked, “Who will benefit? Will you take a person’s household papers without their permission, then charge that person for the service next year?” “We call it protection,” the representative replied. Sarita said quietly, “If the key is changed in the name of protection, this old lock will be of no use to me.”

Savitri had come to the assembly herself that day. Her knees hurt more, so Champa had asked for a low seat for her. The chairperson’s place stood empty. A young man tried to seat Champa there, but she said, “Mother will speak for herself. I will submit a separate account for the two hours of earnings I have lost.” Savitri told the meeting that she had agreed at the fair to assistance with travel only. “I did not hand over the key to my house, I did not authorise anyone to change my treatment, and I did not give anyone the right to say yes in my place.”

One member said, “At this age, how many fine distinctions can a person remember? It would be best to trust the family.” Savitri looked at him. “Did you listen to me properly? I am not frightened of my age. I am frightened of your haste. If one day I cannot understand something, I need a way to have it explained. The answer is not to take away my voice.” This time Sarita did not write anything down. For a few moments she looked first at Savitri’s face.

The roof of the elderly tenant’s house had begun to leak again. She could not reach the assembly, but had sent three written conditions through a neighbour: the address of the temporary accommodation, continued control of her house key, and a definite date for her return after repairs. The landlord’s representative asked, “What if it rains on the very day you fix?” Padma answered, “Then give written notice of a revised date. Her rights over the house do not change.” The first draft for the proposed permanent committee had not even contained a space for this right of return.

Phoolmati Tiyar came from the riverside pavilion with her shawl wet. Her net-making group’s shares in weaving, capital invested in nets, and proceeds

from selling fish had been listed separately and then left out of the account. She said, “My name appears among the advisers, but if the price of fish falls, the loss is mine while someone else decides. If the committee passes a proposal in my name, I need a place to record my disagreement.” Vinod Kevart supported her. A map showing spaces for small vendors was public, but the people at the landing still did not regularly receive an authentic copy.

A young man promised that once the committee became permanent, they would all receive monthly honoraria. Rama said, “Payment is necessary, but define the work and the authority to decide separately.” Champa lifted her inspection slip. “If I receive payment for two hours at a meeting, of course I shall attend. But payment does not alter my mother’s consent. And if I am to decide on the wages of Phoolmati’s net-making group, I must first hear what she says. Otherwise filling in papers will change nothing.”

Ishan stood near the assembly-room door. The school’s old study had become a shared classroom for children; giving up a room had also meant giving up an old habit. Sarita asked him to come inside and sit. “I came to read the proposal,” he said, “not to become chairperson.” Maithili was already sitting in a corner. She had heard that a new clause, called “The Expert’s Final Interpretation”, had been added to the committee’s draft.

Maithili read the clause. “An expert has the right to answer a question,” she said, “but not the right to stop a challenge from the person whose life the question concerns. In our philosophical debates, I corrected Ishan’s arguments and he corrected mine. The evidence of co-authorship made our separate rights clearer. Why, then, should this committee call its interpretation final?” The representative replied that arguments would go on forever. “Not forever,” Maithili said. “Let them be open within a defined period. Decisions behind closed doors may be quicker; they are not necessarily better.”

Padma raised the decisive question: “If the committee audits its own work for the year, who will discover its mistakes?” No immediate answer came from the room. At that moment a young woman who knew sign language stood up. She interpreted a question from an elderly member with impaired hearing who had come with her: “If meeting notices are only spoken into a microphone, how am I to register my disagreement?” Padma felt ashamed. The written minutes of two meetings held the previous year had still not been made available to that member in an accessible form. It was decided that written notices, copies read aloud, and sign-language assistance would each have their own budget provision.

Rama picked up the old padlock from the table and placed it beside the key to the door. “We have given copies of the records to those entitled to them. But if the new committee keeps the new key for itself, the old monopoly will return under another name.” They agreed that hearings, distribution of

copies, and appeals should be handled by three separate groups of members, with membership rotating at fixed intervals.

Before the vote Sarita said, “Today’s decision will not satisfy everyone. The elderly tenant’s roof still leaks. Champa has yet to be paid for her last meeting. Phoolmati’s net-making group has not received its copy of the market records. Do not conceal these unfinished matters beneath a report of success.” Some members said that such openness would bring the administration into disrepute. Sarita answered, “Where a roof is leaking, you must see the water before you replace the covering.”

In a corner of the assembly Nandini Bhandari had placed a small water gauge from her nursery. Her question was distinct from the land dispute: how long would the committee’s rules for the shared gauge remain in force, and who would take new readings when the water in the low-lying fields changed? “I supplied an instrument, not a decision,” she said. “Do not write, in my name, an authorisation to sell the nursery land.” Rama amended a line of the draft: providing shared data did not mean relinquishing one’s rights. The ink of the small correction spread across the paper, but its meaning was clear.

By afternoon the committee’s draft had been revised. In place of a permanent chairperson came a rotating coordination team serving six months at a time; direct representation for older people, workers, and tenants; specific consent for the use of private documents; and a final decision on appeals reserved to an independent hearing before the panchayat. The company would receive only the limited work of printing and technical maintenance, not ownership of the original material. The proposal was not unanimous: two members recorded objections that decisions would be delayed. Their dissent, too, remained in the public minutes.

That evening Savitri told Champa, “I have spoken enough at the meeting. Now I want to be quiet for a while inside my own home.” Champa put a cushion beneath her feet and took up her sorting work. From the doorway Anup asked whether more medicine needed to be brought. Savitri checked her prescription and said, “There is enough for today. We’ll ask about tomorrow.” For the first time, the silence in the house came not from an order but from rest.

Quite apart from these modern events, in the evening at the ancient forest hermitage Vidura’s sandals had taken the northern path. Sanjaya gave him a small vessel of water. Vidura asked how much water would remain at the hermitage. “This is your share,” Sanjaya said, “but in the huts along the path they have few pitchers.” Vidura fastened the vessel’s lid. “I shall ask the people I meet as I go. I will not buy anyone’s silence with the gift of this water.”

Dhritarashtra came as far as the door. He did not take Vidura by the arm to stop him. “What if my heart grows heavy again?” he asked. Vidura replied, “Then listen to Gandhari’s questions, to what Kunti says, to Sanjaya’s

reckoning, and, hardest of all, to those you never gave the chance to answer. If I come again, I shall come with the right to amend my own words." For a few moments Dhritarashtra's palm remained suspended in the air. Vidura himself touched the hand, then let it go.

As she bade him farewell, Gandhari said, "You leave your thoughts behind; leave open the way to correct their errors as well." The ring he had left on the veranda was still in Vidura's bag. He did not bury it in the mud beside the channel or throw it into the river. He merely placed it in an inner compartment. Reducing the royal assembly to ashes would have been an easy symbol; it was harder to keep responsibility for its unfinished accounts alive. He walked north. No one immediately took the empty seat he left in the hermitage.

The next day in Videhapur, in 2040, the committee's revised draft was posted on the school wall. It stated that each person would obtain their own copy of their records, that no one could give consent in another person's place, and that the committee was not the ultimate owner of decisions. Beside her name, Phoolmati found an error printed in red ink: "share in boats" instead of "share in nets". She did not go to Padma to have it corrected, but wrote the correction herself in the public corrections register kept by the noticeboard. The first test of the new rule lay in that small word.

When the company representative saw the correction, he said, "If everyone writes on an open page like this, disputes will only grow." Rama answered, "The dispute exists even when the mistaken page is kept closed. It is only the sound of it that cannot be heard." Beneath Phoolmati's correction she entered the time and receipt number. An order to pay Champa had also been posted, but confirmation that the money had reached her bank account was still pending: the notice said "Order issued", not "Payment completed". The date of the next inspection of the elderly tenant's roof was recorded; there was no decision anywhere that she must vacate her house.

That night Ishan returned to his small study. Maithili signed the public noticeboard and went to her separate home. On a corner of a page Ishan wrote: "The shadow of an office relinquished may remain upon one's thinking." Then he struck it out and wrote: "Thought is no one's permanent property." Outside, children were playing in the school grounds. He understood that his name did not have to become insignificant, but its power to close another person's mouth had to end.

The following morning Sarita reached the school with her key and found the old brass padlock still lying on the table. She did not throw it away; she placed it among the objects kept for the school's history. A new question had been written on the noticeboard: "Once a disagreement has been heard, who holds the right to grant private forgiveness?" Sarita did not fill in the answer.

She opened the window. A bird flew up from the pond behind the school, and small circles formed on the water and faded.

Chapter 179 · Private Forgiveness

The first task each morning in the ancient forest hermitage was to measure the grain. Sanjaya brushed out the bamboo measure and set it beside the pot of barley. There was an old crack in its base; when the measure was filled, a few grains escaped along the edge. Gandhari reached out and touched its rim. “Yesterday one of the attendants said her portion had been short,” she said. “Is she here today?” Sanjaya said that the woman had gone to the river to wash clothes. Dhritarashtra sat listening from his mat. Vidura had already set out towards the north; the sound of ordinary work now filled the space beside his empty seat.

Sanjaya asked permission to bring a new measure. Dhritarashtra nearly told him to requisition one from the royal stores, but stopped himself. “Who controls the stores here?” he asked. “Two people chosen by those whose labour brings in the grain, together with the keeper of the hermitage stores, examine the accounts,” Sanjaya replied. “Then ask them,” Dhritarashtra said. “An order from my former self will not mend this crack.” Hearing the change in his own voice brought him not satisfaction, but a strange sense of being out of practice.

The attendant returned from the river. Her name was Suvasa. Her son had died in the war, and his name had been entered incorrectly in the kingdom’s list of the dead. She wrung out the wet clothing and laid it beside the grain measure. Sanjaya said that the old accounts would be checked that day. “I have come to ask about the measure of grain I brought in,” Suvasa replied. “My son’s memory is bound up with it, but they are not the same question. Give me at least the right to have what has been lost recorded as lost.” Dhritarashtra lowered his head at the sound of her voice.

After a while Dhritarashtra said, “You suffered injustice during my reign. Could you forgive me?” Suvasa wiped her water-soaked palms on her garment. “Not now,” she said, “and perhaps not ever. I need to know that hearing my answer, you cannot reduce my share of grain.” Dhritarashtra laid down the wooden staff he had been holding. Once he had thought asking forgiveness was the final step in repentance; today he understood that another person’s “no” could also be a truthful answer within a living relationship.

Gandhari asked Suvasa to sit beside her. Suvasa did not sit; she had washing to hang out. Gandhari did not detain her. Kunti asked the keeper of the stores where the measurements for the preceding seven days had been entered. The keeper brought the work ledger. Five days’ quantities could be reconciled; beside the names for two days there were empty marks. Grain lost through a crack and an omission in writing had both affected one family’s meals.

“Replace today whatever can be verified,” Kunti said. “Let the remaining pages be examined in everyone’s presence.”

In the midday sunlight a boy peered into the cracked measure. “Whose fault is it?” he asked. Sanjaya turned it upside down to show him. “No one repaired the crack in the wood in time, and the person keeping the ledger also left two days blank. If we acknowledge one fault by erasing the other, the grain will go on spilling.” The boy placed a small pebble beside the measure, so that people would notice the crack. Dhritarashtra listened to all this. For the first time his hand did not rise to change anyone’s answer.

At evening Gandhari said, “I am not leaving off caring for you, but tomorrow I shall still be angry about the decisions that anger me today.” Dhritarashtra asked, “Will it not be hard to go on beside me with that anger?” “It will,” Gandhari answered. “But I will not cover the difficulty by calling it forgiveness.” Sanjaya put the old measure aside and showed everyone the new one. The shortfall for two days was made good to Suvasa’s family; scrutiny of the remaining records was set for the following dawn. The grief of the war remained as it had been, even after these limited corrections.

In Videhapur in the year 2040, Sarita was straightening a rain-soaked notice at the school entrance that same morning. Water during the night had blurred the ink of one word: “Forgiveness”. Someone had circled the previous day’s question in red. Leaves were falling on the pond behind the school; the children had taken up brooms to sweep their classroom themselves. Sarita took down the sheet but did not throw it away. On a fresh page she wrote clearly: “To grant or withhold personal forgiveness is the right of the individual. Appeals, outstanding payments, and investigations will continue separately.”

That day an apology from the printing company arrived at Rama Karna’s office. Its representative wrote that the previous proposal allowing one person to provide the digital consent of every adult had been improper. Yet at the end of the new contract he had added a sentence: “Once forgiveness has been accepted, all previous disputes shall be deemed closed.” Padma stopped work at that sentence. “We can hear the apology,” she said, “but a company letter cannot extinguish the claims of an older woman who needs her house key or of people whose wages remain unpaid.”

Three separate tables were set out on the school veranda for the meeting: one for personal statements, one for checking documents, and the third for payments actually made. “Nobody is taking an examination in forgiveness here,” Sarita said. “You may respond without giving your name if you wish.” Champa came in holding her mother Savitri’s hand, but did not write an answer for her. “If my limited permission for travel assistance at the fair was printed incorrectly, I want the letter corrected,” Savitri said. “I can listen to an

apology from the young man who interrupted me. But I will not hand him the right to decide for me.”

The order for Champa’s two hours of work at the preceding committee meeting was in the file. The corresponding bank entry was still blank. Before the assembly the printing company’s representative folded his hands. “We have hurt everyone’s feelings. Forgive us just this once, and from the new year onward we will do better.” “I have heard what you have said,” Champa replied. “You did not withhold my wages, so your apology cannot be proof that I have been paid. But remove from the document the condition you wrote requiring private photographs to be collected.” There was neither the hardness of victory nor the excitement of compromise in her voice.

At that moment Gauri Kapariya set down a bundle of her old tarpaulins by the doorway. Reva Gulguliya, Janaki, and representatives of two nomadic groups came with her. A month earlier, seeing a red warning mark by the gate, Gauri had moved people away from the dangerous track. She had then received an acknowledgement that an alternative safe place would be inspected, not a grant of permanent rights. The inspection list now said: “The group vacated the place voluntarily.” Gauri held up the paper. “We left a dangerous stretch of track,” she said. “We did not write that we would never again make any claim there.”

A municipal employee apologised for his earlier harsh conduct. “That night we were afraid and issued orders in haste,” he said. “The fear may have been justified,” Reva replied. “But threatening to drive us from the whole stretch of ground was not. My child missed an examination; saying that you have been forgiven will not give her another examination day.” The employee lowered his eyes. Gauri said, “Whether I forgive him is a personal matter. Today the false line in the objection has to be corrected.”

Janaki had papers belonging to an elderly woman named Sarayu, who could not walk far. Her name had been entered in the proposed camp as a “shelter resident”, although she had asked only for somewhere safe to stay for two nights. “Why turn someone into a permanent resident simply because she needs a roof for the night?” Janaki said. “That name must be changed.” Ruhani, who oversaw the shelter arrangements, agreed. “There is an empty bed in my building, but we will not take possession of anyone’s journey in exchange for that bed.”

Gauri read aloud the draft for a small alliance. It had three purposes: a joint request for safe temporary stopping places, timely written notice against forced eviction, and access to education for children and treatment for the sick. It did not require all the families in the groups to follow one route. Reva wanted her daughter to stay in the town until the examination was over; Janaki wanted to leave the northern market because of Sarayu’s health. Gauri herself wished to look for temporary work in another bazaar.

“If you form an alliance, you need a leader,” said a young man. “Gauri can sign for everyone.” Gauri laid her pen on the table. “I will sign a joint objection, but I will not choose where each family must live. If I want the right to choose my own road, why should I take that right from Reva and Janaki?” Padma divided the proposal into three sections: common routes to be decided together; personal journeys to remain individual; and medical information to be used only with the consent of the person concerned. “Won’t that slow everything down?” the young man asked. “It will,” Gauri answered. “But when people rush in the wrong direction, it is the poor whose belongings break first.”

In the afternoon an old inspector from the municipal office arrived. He remembered that part of the red marking had extended beyond the limits set by the technical team. He acknowledged that his office had posted a sweeping order to vacate without adequate inspection. “You have the right to apologise,” Gauri said. “I have the right to listen. But first show us the appendix to that notice.” The inspector laid down a copy of the original measurements. One part of the evacuated track had indeed been hazardous; another had been included without the required measurement. The appendix formally acknowledged the difference.

A revised boundary drawing was made on the back of the shared measurement register. Staying overnight in the dangerous section remained prohibited for reasons of health and safety. It was put in writing that the families removed from it would receive, within three days, a list of safe temporary places from which to choose. But a third party had a claim to the proposed warehouse grounds, so that land was not immediately declared a lawful settlement. Gauri read the decision. “This is not a full solution,” she said, “but the false line saying ‘everyone has left’ has now been corrected.” Reva requested travel assistance fitted to her daughter’s school timetable.

While the meeting continued, Sarita caught sight of her daughter Naira’s old name. Someone had attached, as evidence of public benefit, a copy of a paper prepared to provide Naira with private assistance when her contract was suspended. Naira was no longer alive. Sarita did not remove the document; she had the words “Private assistance, not government certification” written beneath its heading. “Let the dispute rest in her memory,” someone said. “Memory does not grant permission to reduce the truth,” Sarita replied. “To respect the dead, we must call the work they truly did by its proper name.”

Aniruddha was not at the assembly; documents from the earlier technical inquiry concerning him were held in a separate file. A member suggested that the debate over this file be postponed out of consideration for Sarita’s personal grief. “I cannot bring Naira back,” Sarita said. “I will decide for myself when my heart is ready to hear anyone’s personal apology. But delaying an investigation into an officer’s signature, the timing of inspections, and records

of the broken structure would not honour my grief." Rama left the hearing date unchanged; conclusions would depend on the evidence still to come.

Seeing Sarita's silence, Kabir did not come forward. He was repairing a broken writing slate for the children behind the school. A little girl asked, "Babuji, if someone admits a mistake, does everything become right again?" As he drove a loose nail into the slate's frame, Kabir answered, "Some things can be repaired when the chance comes. Some losses cannot be brought back. And some people forgive; others do not. Mending this broken slate is my work. I cannot write the answer for the person who was hurt." The girl picked up her chalk and began forming letters again.

At evening Maithili came with her students to see the noticeboard. Ishan was there too, though they had arrived by different paths. A student asked whether forgiveness was a moral duty. "At times forgiveness becomes a path to personal release," Maithili said. "At other times refusing it safeguards one's truth. When we say 'ought' in philosophical debate, we must look at the evidence and the circumstances. We cannot compel a wounded person by reciting a textbook conclusion." Ishan added, "Admitting wrongdoing and paying its cost must not depend on being forgiven."

The printing company's representative returned. He wanted the list of the new alliance uploaded to the company's server, supposedly to speed up the distribution of government aid. Gauri shut her register. "I will not put the names of travelling people into a public database," she said. "We can make the necessary contacts available through separate consent. Collecting the location of every family, the children's schools, and details of illnesses cannot be a condition of such help." Ruhani supported her: the number of vacant beds in the shelter could be shared, not a list of the private lives of the people staying there.

Gauri, Reva, Janaki, and the other representatives each signed the new alliance paper in their own name. The alliance existed only to secure correction of notices, travel assistance during danger, and hearings within a fixed period. Gauri wrote on a separate line that the following week she would go to the southern market to seek work repairing tarpaulins. In her absence, the alliance would continue through its elected members. Reva would keep her daughter in town until the examination. Janaki would alter her route according to Sarayu's need for rest. Safeguarding such small differences was the alliance's first difficult success.

As she read the minutes, Padma inserted a specific clause: whether an employee's personal apology was accepted or refused, the administrative inquiries into the wrongful eviction notice, actual losses, tarpaulin belongings, and interruption of children's schooling would not be closed. Rama Karna wrote in the receipt number of the order. Three receipts for tarpaulin repair expenses had been verified, and a payment order issued, but

the money had not yet reached the bank accounts. No evidence had emerged to support a further accusation against Gauri at her door; that limited finding, too, was stated explicitly.

As the sun set, Gauri lifted her bundle of tarpaulins. Champa repeated her offer of a bed at the shelter, this time with the rules written down. “If I need it after dark, I will ask,” Gauri said. “But do not suppose that because we live beyond the shelter we are unworthy of help.” “You need not say yes or no to the bed today,” Champa answered. “If danger comes, consent will be sought again.” Ruhani entered the assurance in her register. A building’s services and a person’s decisions about their life were not the same thing.

At the ancient forest hermitage the following dawn, Suvasa came to the grain store again. Sanjaya had gathered evidence for one of the two missing daily measures; the document for the other could not be found. Dhritarashtra did not ask again whether she forgave him. “Today I will take my copy of the ledger,” Suvasa said. Gandhari did not ask her to touch the new measure; she said only, “If you find another mistake, tell us.” “I will,” Suvasa replied. “Whether you listen, we shall have to see.” She took up her pitcher and continued on her way.

The following morning in Videhapur in 2040, Sarita posted three new papers on the school noticeboard: the corrected eviction notice, the alliance’s limited public purpose, and the date of the next appeal. Beside them there was no list of the names of those who had accepted a personal apology. The water in the pond behind the school was still trembling. Gauri had set off towards a distant market; Reva came to leave her daughter outside the examination room; Janaki was searching for an airy place where Sarayu could rest. Standing outside the shelter, Ruhani watched them take their separate paths. She understood that the next question was not simply how to fill an empty bed, but the rights of those who chose their own lives beyond it.

Chapter 180 · Beyond the Shelter

Before dawn in Videhapur in 2040, a mat was opened out beyond the shelter. The curved ribs of its bamboo frame trembled whenever the wind struck them, and Hiravati Kurariyar pressed one knee against a rib to keep it straight. Rain had dripped through a corner of the roof throughout the night. There were twelve beds inside, but Hiravati's tools, a customer's torn bag, and two half-sewn mats were spread across the veranda outside. Ruhani opened the door and saw them. "Did you spend the night here?" she asked. "My work was here," Hiravati replied. "I slept in the market behind the building. Don't enter my place of work as my home."

Ruhani carried the shelter's new register. The number of "housing beneficiaries" on its earlier pages had been increased, making the next grant more likely. But those who repaired mats, those who asked for a bed for the night, and those who wanted a permanent place in the shelter had all been entered under the same designation. Hiravati showed her the mat she had measured. "This is a receipt for work, not an application for residence. If I ask for a bed for two nights, I will give my name then." Ruhani drew a red line through the old entry, but did not tear out the page. The history of an incorrect count, too, was something to be examined.

Behind the veranda Rukhsana was lighting the cooking fire. Steam from the rice mingled with smoke rising from damp firewood. Ruhani asked her how they should account for meals served to people who lived outside the shelter. "Count the plates of food," Rukhsana said, "not the entire lives of those who lift them. When I give someone rice, I do not ask for the history of their home." Champa arrived with her mother's medicines and found that beneath the box marked "Voluntary Acceptance of Shelter" the new form carried a clause in very small print: "No claim for permanent resettlement shall be made." She laid the form on the bench beside the door.

Tightening a knot in the mat, Hiravati said, "I need a safe place until midday for my travelling work. My customers come here. But surrendering the right to a future home in exchange for this small space is no bargain." "Then what shall we write?" Rukhsana asked. "Temporary workplace," Hiravati answered, "with the day and hours stated. Include the name of whoever is responsible for the goods stored here. It will rain again. Then someone will say I have been evicted when all I have done is go to a customer's house to deliver a mat." Ruhani signed beside the new entry, but did not stamp it as a complete resolution.

Before midday Janaki brought the elderly Sarayu by the hand. The swelling in Sarayu's feet had subsided, but she could not walk a long distance. A shelter employee had entered her name again in the permanent-resident column because she had stayed for two nights on an earlier occasion. Sitting down, Sarayu said, "The veranda at my daughter's home is broken. Once it is

repaired I shall live there. The bed here is good, but it is not a replacement for my name." Janaki wanted medical treatment and water to remain available to her. She did not change Sarayu's answer for the sake of her own convenience.

Ruhani asked Sarayu four questions separately: where she wanted to stay that night, whom to contact about treatment, what information should remain private, and when she wished to be asked again about her decision. Sarayu answered each in turn. Midway through she grew tired and asked for water; the urgency of filling in the paper was not used to press her. "Here tonight," she said. "The day after tomorrow I would like to go to my daughter." The employee looked displeased. This would mean a new signature every day, whereas a single permanent entry would have been easier. "We shall put the cost of the difficult work in the budget," Ruhani said. "We shall not alter a person's wishes to make the paperwork convenient."

Meanwhile two members of the municipal festival committee arrived to test the sound of their instruments. The following month a festival of the Yadav community was to take place in the public grounds. The organisers proposed that whenever shelter rooms were vacant, visiting performers should be accommodated there for the whole day. On hearing the proposal, a young volunteer from the assistance camp clapped his hands. "Give them beds free, and in return let the artists run a performance for the public good." "Shelter beds are reserved for people in danger," Ruhani asked. "Who has authorised their conversion into festival accommodation? And who will pay the performers for their work?" The members could answer neither question.

Just then Chandra Badi arrived with a box of ankle bells and an old payment slip. At the sight of a sample poster her face grew hard. It read: "Traditional Dance of the Badi Caste: All Women Performers Present." Chandra did not fold up the paper. She held it where everyone could see. "I teach singing and rhythm. Whether I dance, which songs I sing, and how many times I perform—those decisions are mine. My community is not a collective contract." The young man laughed. "That is what the audience expects." Chandra answered, "The audience's expectations do not own my body."

Rukhsana moved a low stool towards Chandra. Chandra opened the half-paid receipt from an earlier folk-performance programme: the first instalment had been received, but the space acknowledging the balance was still blank. "No new contract for an entire night until the old fee is paid," she said. A committee member immediately suggested that "shelter service" be entered in place of payment for the songs. Hiravati wound up her measuring tape. "When I make a mat, you pay for a thing. When she sings, you call it service? Who taught you to keep accounts like that?" For the first time laughter rose at the shelter door, but Chandra did not laugh. She was having to defend her name for a second time.

Ruhani had two documents prepared. The first asked the festival committee to check the amount still due for the earlier programme and put a

definite payment date in writing. For the second, Chandra herself dictated the terms of a possible performance: two songs, one lesson in rhythm, a break between them, separate permission for recording, and a rate for travel and labour. “If we do not agree on the amount and timing of payment, I shall not take the stage,” Chandra added at the end. Ruhani did not strike out the sentence. No contract for the new programme was concluded that day. Chandra put her slip back in its box.

Heavy rain gradually began again. Seeing water dripping from a corner of the mat, Hiravati resumed sewing the edge. A young woman standing nearby asked, “Don’t you want a permanent home?” Hiravati finished tying her thread. “I do,” she said. “But I want a home where I can keep my work, and the right to return when I go to another market. If someone shows me two hours on this veranda and says my claim to a permanent home has been satisfied, that is a lie.” Ruhani recorded the temporary permission for a place to work; the long-term lease of the land and the housing claim remained “under review”.

A municipal employee objected. He said that every activity outside the shelter increased expenses in the institution’s name, while the donors wanted evidence of beds occupied inside the building. Ruhani put her bunch of keys in front of him. “These keys can open a room,” she said. “They cannot lock up anyone’s future. Count the beds as one form of service; account separately for meals and medicines provided outside and for temporary workplaces. If the grant is reduced, we shall record the actual shortfall publicly.” “Then what is the importance of the shelter?” the employee asked. “That its door should remain open even for people who live outside,” Ruhani replied.

That evening in the ancient forest hermitage a thin wooden bowl slipped from Sanjaya’s hand. The sesame seeds it held scattered across the veranda. Hearing the sound, Dhritarashtra asked whose portion of food it had been. “It was for Aruna, an elderly forest woman living near the hermitage,” Sanjaya said. “She did not come inside today.” Gandhari went to the door. Beside a wooden fence Aruna sat near the little stove she had made herself. By day she worked in the hermitage’s common kitchen, but at night she did not want to leave her mud house and live there.

“The roof of your house is falling in,” Gandhari said. “There is a safe room inside. Why do you not come?” Aruna stirred the ashes in her stove. “My husband’s wooden seat stood in this house. It is falling apart, so it needs repairs. I will spend a stormy night at the hermitage if need be, but I will not promise to give up my home.” Gandhari remembered the immense rooms of her royal palace. She did not sit down to give Aruna a lesson in the simplicity of forest life. “Do you need help bringing bamboo for the roof?” was all she asked.

“I need bamboo,” Aruna replied, “but since the hermitage built its raised platform, my old drainage path has been blocked.” Sanjaya, who had arrived carrying the recovered bowl, noticed the little watercourse for the first time.

“The platform is for communal use,” he said. Aruna showed them, digging with her hand, where rainwater now pooled beneath her house. When the matter reached Dhritarashtra, habit almost made him say, “Remove the platform.” Again he stopped. Both the forest woman’s home and the hermitage’s grain store needed to be protected; an order from the old king alone would not produce a solution.

The next morning Kunti, Sanjaya, Aruna, and two hermitage workers examined the slope of the ground. Gandhari felt the coolness of the earth with her hands. Moving one bamboo support of the platform sent the water back towards its former channel, but the grain store’s veranda had to be made smaller. Sanjaya entered the half-day’s labour and the cost of a new stake as separate items in the accounts. Aruna remained firm in her decision to live in her own home. It was agreed that a room at the hermitage would be open to her on stormy nights. The hermitage became one possible source of help in her life, not the only residence recognised as legitimate.

Dhritarashtra did not summon Aruna before him. He went with Sanjaya to her doorway himself. “I see even here the shadow of the decisions I once made in the name of everyone’s welfare,” he said. “What I needed more than your shadow was a way for the water to run off,” Aruna replied. “Now that way has been made. Keep the bamboo accounts accurate; then I shall see where the errors are.” Dhritarashtra rested his hand against the mud fence. He understood that even the path of renunciation might come to a halt at the door of someone else’s home. There the decision in the ancient scene was complete.

The following day in Videhapur in 2040, the noticeboard outside the shelter bore four new columns: Overnight Accommodation, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Workplace, and Appeal. Ruhani read back the entries she had written herself. Sarayu was recorded only for two nights’ use of a bed, with her permission; Hiravati’s mat-repair workspace was listed by days and hours for one week; only the public purpose of Gauri’s alliance was displayed; and the conditions for Chandra’s proposed performance were in a separate confidential file. No one’s private medical details were at the door. But the printing company’s logo appeared above all four columns, though no one had authorised it.

The printing contractor said that in exchange for that small logo, the company would supply the notice strip without charge and hang its promotional banner over the building on the night of the festival. “So people will read the company’s name before they can open the shelter door?” Rukhsana asked. Ruhani took down the strip. A proposal was made to pay the company the ordinary price for the work, but not to grant advertising rights. To make room for that expense, the budget for new coloured decorations had to be cut. “There will be less glitter from the banners,” Champa said, “but the meaning of the doorway will remain safe.” The shortfall in decorations was entered in the register; it would not be made up by anyone’s invisible labour.

When Hiravati finished her first mat, a customer touched its edge and asked, “If this place is yours for only a week, how will I find you next time?” Hiravati handed over a small note in her own handwriting: working days, a receipt for goods left by customers, and another meeting place for a day when work might be suspended. “My route will change,” she said, “but I will return the mat I take away. The trustworthiness of my work is constant, even if the place is not.” The customer paid the first part of the agreed price for the measurements. When Ruhani asked to keep a copy of the note, Hiravati made clear that the customer’s name must not be made public.

With that small advance Hiravati bought fresh bamboo. She received written permission to use the safe rear veranda for one week. In return, the old condition that she provide unpaid watchkeeping throughout the day was removed. But the question of a permanent home remained caught in the municipality’s land inquiry. Hiravati did not proclaim victory over the delay. Packing her bag, she asked, “When is the next day of the inquiry?” Padma wrote down the date and the appeal receipt number. Hiravati put the paper beside her thick sewing thread, where the rain would not dissolve it.

The question of Chandra’s songs arose again. “If you sing,” a woman on the committee said, “you will send a message about respect for women. Why so many conditions?” Chandra took out her ankle bells and laid them on the table. “Do not speak of reducing a woman’s pay in the name of honouring women,” she said. “If I sing one song, I shall choose it; no presenter will invoke my community in the middle of the performance and insist that I dance.” At first the woman was irritated. Then she read the new poster, “Chandra Badi—Singing and Rhythm Instruction”, and agreed. The organiser signed a letter promising payment of the old balance by a fixed date; confirmation that the sum had been received was still pending.

Ruhani herself took Chandra to inspect the proposed stage. The ground sloped towards the pond, and both performers and spectators were expected to enter by the rear path. “If I have to fight my way through a crowd to reach the stage, the raga will be broken before the song begins,” Chandra said. She asked for a separate access path, a pitcher of water, and a room in which to rest. A festival volunteer asked whether that would not increase costs. “It will,” Ruhani replied. “Then prepare a proper festival budget. Do not hide the expense by borrowing the shelter’s emergency beds.” The organising group took the proposal away for reconsideration.

Gauri returned from the southern market after two days’ work, but did not stay at the shelter. She had come to read the appendix to the alliance agreement. Reva had chosen the day on which she would take her daughter back to the family after the examination; Janaki was waiting until Sarayu had rested enough to travel. “Did the alliance meet while I was away?” Gauri asked. Padma showed her the minutes. The representatives had submitted a written objection, but held no vote on anyone’s private travel arrangements.

Gauri laughed. “Then the association has learned to stand on its own feet. Everyone need not walk leaning on my stick.”

Inside the shelter, at the evening meal, Rukhsana opened the budget ledger. The new notice strip’s printing costs, Sarayu’s food for two nights, cleaning the veranda Hiravati used, and the inspection of a possible performance space for Chandra were all separate entries. A member suggested that residents would resent money being spent on outsiders. An elderly resident, Ramautar, set down his bowl. “My grain has not been reduced,” he said, “but people outside need a door against the rain. Let these accounts be shown to me as well.” Rukhsana turned the ledger towards him. When they saw the real shortfall, a proposal to buy several glittering curtains was cancelled.

That night Sarayu prepared to leave for her daughter’s home. Janaki packed the medicine bag, but did not sign the contractor’s permanent surrender-of-home form in Sarayu’s name. “Once I go in the morning, if I need help again, will that door be closed to me?” Sarayu asked. Ruhani gave her a copy of the document: the conditions for overnight assistance, the procedure for applying again, and the emergency number. “The door will open when you ask again,” she said. “Today’s decision prevents neither a future ‘no’ nor a future ‘yes’.” Sarayu put both the key to her home and the shelter receipt in her box.

On the school veranda Sarita examined the new public sheet. She asked on what grounds the entire shelter courtyard was now being proposed for the festival. Rama showed her that some donors wanted to attach their names to emergency relief and receive advertising rights in the forthcoming celebrations. “Let there be a festival, songs, people laughing,” Sarita said. “I have no objection to that. But do not cover the separate accounts we have just created with a single coloured curtain.” Ruhani wrote four questions for the festival committee’s meeting: Who will receive the contract? Who will pay for the labour? Who owns the memory? And who will benefit when an error is corrected?

At dawn Chandra closed the lid of her box. No final contract had yet been made with the organiser, but the printing house had stopped the poster that misidentified her. Hiravati was measuring a second mat for a customer; permission for the temporary veranda was in her hand, and her application for the right to a permanent home remained open. Gauri’s alliance continued to meet, Reva was putting away her daughter’s examination papers, and Janaki was looking for transport to take Sarayu to her daughter. Inside the shelter Ramautar washed thin leaf plates for the rice. No single roof had become the final name for all their lives.

Ruhani placed the old key beside the door and posted a new notice: “Those who come inside for help, those who live outside, and those who return: each person’s decision will be heard separately.” No list of names appeared beneath it. For a while Ruhani stood watching the new reflection of the festival’s bamboo poles in the pond. The poles had not yet been planted; only

measurements were being taken. On this last dawn of the Āśramavāsika Parva, she understood that making a refuge was one responsibility; allowing someone to choose a home, a market, or a road outside it was the more difficult other half.

Parva 16 · Mausala | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 181 · The Yadavas' Festival

In Videhapur in 2040, the moment the first hammer struck the festival ground, a small brass disc placed beside a bamboo stake rolled away. Three letters were engraved upon it—the name of the company making the donation. The festival committee wanted such discs fixed to every entrance to the grounds, to be admired as emblems of the town's new prosperity. Sumitra Kami opened her toolbox and picked up the disc, then looked at her own double-grooved metal joint lying beside it. Their gleam was almost identical: one had been made for display, the other to hold heavy bamboo securely in place. Yet on the measurement and inspection slip, the price of the first object had been entered, while the maker of the second was left unnamed.

Ruhani came straight from the shelter to the grounds. Until yesterday there had been a dispute over removing the advertising emblem from the shelter entrance; today a representative of that very company was drinking tea with the principal festival contractor. Tara spread out the plan and explained a proposal to widen the path beside the pond for the expected crowds. The ground was not empty: it held Rukhsana's temporary vegetable stall, the children's play space, and the veranda where Hiravati met her customers each week. Yet people pointed to the planned stage as though none of these uses of the land had ever existed.

Vijay, the committee chairman, was rehearsing his speech. "The water records have been corrected, the shelter saved, a new library opened. After such a difficult year, let us have one day of happiness without objections." Ruhani did not interrupt him. She merely asked, "Where is the ledger of what that happiness will cost?" The chairman smiled. "Talking about accounts before the festival begins will drain the colour out of it." At that moment, behind the stage, four workers were hoisting bamboo with their feet sunk in a water-filled pit. They had still not been told their wage rates in writing.

Sumitra brought out an old receipt. She had made the double-grooved joint for the temporary decking at the rear gate. Rama Karna's inspection had found a correspondence between the old date on the sample's entry and the office photograph, but the full rights to use the original design had not been settled. Now a joint made to those measurements had appeared in the festival stage. "It's an ordinary technique," the contractor said. "There is no need to print someone's name at a public festival." Resting her hand on the decking, Sumitra replied, "I do not own the ordinary right angle. Examine my measurements, the double groove and the sequence of load tests. I will claim my share of what can be proved, and claim no ownership of what cannot."

On the seashore of ancient Dwaraka, conches sounded on the first evening of the Yadavas' celebration, and coloured banners rippled above the royal avenue. To display the strength that had survived the war, carts were loaded with metal vessels, sacks of grain and gifts of victory. Emerging from the palace, Krishna saw horses belonging to the royal youths standing in the front rank of the festivities, while the narrow path kept for sailors who drew water from the ships had been blocked by the crowd. A young girl was coming along it, a clay water pot balanced on her head. A guard gestured for her to stop beneath the banners.

An organiser told Balarama, "There must be order at a victory festival: the royal house first, the servants behind." Balarama asked him, "Why must the hands that hold the ships' ropes always remain behind the royal chariots?" The organiser had no answer. Krishna watched the water spilling from the girl's pot under the high blare of the conches. Seeing the splashes, a soldier scolded her. "I am not here to be seen at the festival," she said. "I am taking water home to my thirsty mother."

Krishna told the soldier to move aside, but did not stop at the decision to release the girl as an act of kindness. He went to the landing place to find out why the water route had been closed. The owners of the trading boats had reserved the afternoon use of the landing for themselves under the name of grain offerings. Fishermen and women who carried water had been forced to wait until evening. The town proclaimed that everyone was invited to its festivities, but the roster assigning time and passage at the landing carried only a few names.

"Then stop the chariots," Balarama said. "A festival can take place without them." Krishna answered, "Stopping the chariots will open the way, but tomorrow someone will block it again. A decision establishing the right of passage must be written down." An elderly sailor said that even a paper signed by the royal house could not be trusted when the guards changed. Krishna heard the objection. Instead of assembling that evening to praise the dynasty, the meeting sat to hear the sailors, the women water carriers and the guards separately. The palace youths were made to wait, and they took waiting for humiliation.

At that same gathering in ancient Dwaraka, a prince asked, "If our ancestors had not won their victories, how would this city have remained safe? The principal place at the festival is ours by right." The old sailor said, "My household, too, paid for that safety. But I am not asking for the place of your chariot; I ask only for my hours at the landing." Balarama ruled that the sailors' passage on the water must not be obstructed by festival decorations. Rather than docking the wages of the guard who had erred, they would establish a new rotation of watch duty. The girl was able to carry her full pot home.

When Krishna returned to the platform, another conch call came from far out at sea. “Celebrate,” he said, “but have the courage to reckon the part belonging to others within the glory you count as your own.” When the speech ended, some young members of the royal family remained dissatisfied. The landing had been opened, but their resentment had not been extinguished. Krishna did not proclaim this achievement proof of the city’s eternal unity. The sea still held the ships’ ropes; the power to cut a rope lay in human beings as well. The decision made in the ancient scene ended at that open landing.

At an evening meeting in Videhapur in 2040, Tara drew two chalk lines across the plan of the grounds. One led to the main stage; the other ran by the pond and the shelter’s public entrance. The committee secretary said the second route would have to be closed for the vehicles of special guests. Ruhani showed him the old shelter register: ambulances had used that route during the emergency. “The guests’ cars can arrive five minutes later,” she said. “An emergency vehicle cannot be left without an alternative route.” The secretary objected at first, but after seeing the fire brigade’s access marked on the plan, agreed to another place for the guests’ cars.

At lunchtime Rukhsana lifted a pot of dal from the fire and said that the organiser had handed her an order slip for meals for thirty festival volunteers. It read: “Community contribution: free of charge.” Rukhsana did not laugh. “A kitchen fire may be lit by a donation,” she said, “but vegetables do not come free from the fields.” “We will honour your shelter on the stage,” the chairman said. Lifting the lid of the pot, Rukhsana replied, “Honour on a stage will not satisfy hunger. Write down the price of the ingredients, fuel and labour for however many plates you need.”

Chandra Badi had come to inspect the rehearsal arrangements. The misleading poster had been stopped, but the small print of the new one stated that her song would become the organiser’s exclusive digital property. Reading the first line, Chandra asked, “What are the limits on recording a song I sing once on stage?” “Every time people listen, it gives us more publicity,” a young company employee replied. “Who receives the profits from that publicity?” Chandra asked. “If you sell copies of my voice, you will need separate permission.” She asked for the agreed performance fee and the possible uses of the recording to be set out in two separate contracts.

Behind her instrument case, Sumitra had placed her metal joint. “People see your melody and my groove,” she told Chandra, “and then say these are common things belonging to everybody.” Chandra replied, “Everybody’s right to listen is not everybody’s right to sell.” She did not ask for that sentence to be printed on a poster. Each artist dated her own papers, so that if a dispute arose later, the actual sequence could be shown instead of a remembered one.

Nazir Sikilgar was called to conduct a technical examination of Sumitra's sample. Weighing the two joints, he said their general dimensions were the same, but the angle of the inner double groove, the catch that kept the rope from slipping, and the sequence of load tests corresponded with Sumitra's earlier drawing. The contractor still maintained that he had experimented with the shape himself. Rama examined the register of his new sample. Its date was later than Sumitra's filing at the office, though that fact alone did not establish an entire intention to steal. "We can argue about intent later," Sumitra said. "For now there is the question of the limits of use and the safety of the stage."

Beside the stage a young man tried to tighten a stake. Sumitra did not stop his hand; she first made him test it on a wooden plank. The double-grooved joint did not slip under the load, but a second component of the release mechanism twisted abruptly. Nazir said that such a half-tested assembly could not be installed on a stage intended for a large crowd. "The festival is nearly upon us," the organiser protested. "The approach of the date does not change the weight-bearing capacity of iron," Tara replied. Work on that section of the stage was stopped; musical rehearsals continued on another section of decking that had been found safe.

A prominent merchant of the town took Rama aside. He proposed giving Sumitra an "honorary distinction" and recording in the papers that the dispute over ownership of the design was settled. In return, the contractor would supply metal decorations free of charge. Rama brought the conversation back to the table before everyone. Sumitra said plainly, "Whether I accept an honour is my decision. But a presentation platter cannot pay the price of putting the maker's measurements, risks and share of joint earnings under somebody else's name." The merchant went away angry. With the free decorations withdrawn, everyone could see the new gap in the budget.

Some village youths laughed that people would grow weary of so many slips and forms at a festival. One of them, who had been erecting the stage at night, suddenly asked, "Will I receive my wages for those three nights first, or will they remain in the ledger again?" Everyone standing there fell silent. The chairman asked his name. "My name is on the stage list," he said. "I have signed the attendance line every day. But the subcontractor is somebody else, so the payment never reaches my hand." Ruhani requested copies of the attendance records for all three nights, and a protected wage allocation was entered in the festival budget ahead of decoration expenses.

Sumitra read a new draft of the proposal for joint work. For the first time, the contractor had entered her name as a "collaborating craftswoman", but left the space for a share of sales profits blank. Sumitra drew two separate lines on the paper: credit for the design, and a share in each verified use. The metal used in production, Nazir's technical testing, Chhotelal's wages for grinding and insurance against risk were given separate entries. "My drawing does not

do all the work by itself," Sumitra said. "Write down the names of every pair of hands that has worked. Partnership cannot mean merely putting my name in a photograph."

The argument went on. The contractor said he would not admit the allegation that he had copied the old drawing, but a joint production contract for specified fittings in future was possible. Sumitra added two conditions: the earlier dispute would not be treated as settled by this agreement, and every future consignment would carry a written design share for her, a rate approved beforehand and the results of proper safety testing. Rama kept the file of the earlier claim separate. Sumitra's share was entered numerically in the new contract; Chhotelal's grinding wages and Nazir's testing fee were recorded as production costs. The money would fall due after the future consignments were accepted. For now, only an advance testing allowance had been received.

Sumitra placed the advance receipt beside her older receipts in her box. The contractor's fittings were removed from that section of the stage, and until the certified new consignment arrived, only the safe decking was opened for lighter performances. The chairman's nephew sneered, "Half the stage empty at a festival of victory!" "It is easy to see an empty half-stage," Sumitra replied quietly. "It is harder to imagine beneath whose body the timber will break if a crowded stage falls." The young man turned away, but began removing the children who were running on the stage himself.

At the evening inauguration, earthen lamps were lit instead of fireworks. It was announced before everyone that artists' fees, the cost of meals, stage-safety tests and access arrangements for emergency assistance would be made public as separate budget items. The chairman did not deliver the glittering slogan he preferred; he read the written conditions from a sheet. Some in the audience applauded, some grew bored. Yet when Chandra sang her first song, the women seated in the audience could move forward freely; no guest's car blocked the path by which they rose and sat down.

After Chandra's song, an organiser raised his mobile phone behind the stage and proposed selling a recording of the entire rehearsal. Chandra asked him to lower it. She had consented to a live stage performance, not to commercial broadcasting. At first the chairman told her not to spoil the pleasure of the festival over so small a thing; then he remembered that the recording terms had been kept separate in the accounts. The phone's copy was not uploaded to a public platform; confirmation was demanded that the young man had deleted the copy stored locally. An examination of the digital seller's earlier files still remained to be carried out.

As Ruhani left the grounds, she looked at the empty strip outside the shelter where the company emblem had been removed the previous day. In its place the organisers had made a communal rangoli, whose colours were already beginning to run in the season's first drops of rain. "The colours may

wash away," Rukhsana said with a laugh, "but the receipts for the work must not." Tara acknowledged that the old repair plans and the festival's new access routes needed to be preserved in separate copies. A separate question was recorded for the next annual public audit: how new commercial rights had emerged under the name of free gifts, and who had actually received payment.

In the last watch of the evening, two young men were laughing with brass cups behind the grounds. A third stood near them, his hands trembling, while a friend sitting with him tried to give him water. One committee member said sternly that there must be no disgrace to the festival; they should all be expelled. Champa, returning with Savitri's medicines along the way past the grounds, saw them from a distance. She offered no instant diagnosis, but asked who needed treatment and who simply needed to be brought safely out of the crowd. The question of someone selling alcohol was not the same as the question of a body in dependence.

When the first night of the festival was over, Sumitra read her receipt once more by lamplight. Her name, measurements, written share and testing conditions were correct; the file of her earlier claim remained open separately. Chandra put away the receipt for the first instalment of her performance fee; the balance was still due on the stipulated date. Ruhani saw that the shelter door was open for anyone arriving in need of help. The celebration of victory continued on the grounds, but the glitter of the festival could not conceal the inequalities within. Alongside the success of the wrong that had been prevented, the date of the wrong that remained was written down as well.

Chapter 182 · A Day of Intoxication

Behind the festival ground in Videhapur in 2040, a brass cup overturned, and water began to spread from its rim into the earth. Champa bent her knees and sat beside the young man. His right hand was trembling; he opened his eyes and closed them again. His friend was holding his arm, trying to raise him. “Don’t pull him so hard,” Champa said. “I am not a doctor. Call for help first. If he cannot answer now, keep the crowd away from him.” The drums for the dancing went on beating close by, as though two different kinds of time were moving together beneath the earth.

The festival committee secretary ordered the curtain at the brightly decorated gate to be drawn wider. He feared visitors would capture the scene on their phones and bring disgrace upon the town. Champa did not go to that side of the curtain. She called Ruhani: summon a trained health worker and a vehicle through the shelter’s emergency contact. A volunteer reached towards the young man’s pockets, but Champa stopped him. “This is a medical emergency, not a theft investigation. Don’t touch his personal belongings without reason.” In the friend’s hand were two scraps of paper, one bearing an entry for credit at a shop. Champa did not spread those papers before the gathering.

After a little while the young man gave his name in a low voice: Deepak. His friend Rakesh said this was not the first time. For some days Deepak had been afraid of the discomfort his body suffered when he did not take a substance. When he grew restless at the festival, he had taken something again; Rakesh could not say for certain what it was or how much. Champa did not turn his conjecture into a medical fact. Emergency-service workers arrived, examined Deepak’s condition and involved him in the decision to take him to hospital, explaining what was happening in terms he could understand. His voice was tired, but instead of refusing he said, “Let’s go. Only don’t call my father in front of everybody just now.”

A town official pressed Champa to write down the young man’s name and the name of whoever had sold him the substance. “Obtain independent sources for a criminal investigation,” she said. “A patient’s health record and the fact that he sought treatment are not a public charge sheet.” “Then will the criminal escape?” the official asked. Ruhani had arrived, and answered, “Who is stopping you investigating someone against whom there is evidence of selling? But standing a patient on a platform and making him confess a crime is neither treatment nor reliable testimony.” The official already held a printed “Drug-Free Festival” placard in his clenched fist. He looked once at the placard and then at the vehicle carrying Deepak away.

On the second day of the Yadavas' victory festival in ancient Dwaraka, vessels of liquor had begun to circulate at the seaward landing. The public passage opened the previous evening had narrowed again—this time not because of royal chariots, but because of groups of celebrating youths sitting across it. When a sailor tried to secure his boat's rope, someone laughingly undid the knot beneath his fingers. Samba stood at a distance, treating the humiliation as a joke; one young man near him repeatedly pressed another to take a cup. Returning from the sea, Krishna saw it all. He did not begin by counting the cups. He asked whose hand had untied the sailor's rope.

Balarama noticed the unsteady legs of a young celebrant. The young man said that everyone was expected to drink; refusing would dishonour a warrior. Balarama told him to sit apart. An elderly woman was approaching with water, but the youths threatened to throw away her vessel, calling it "the drink of the defeated". Balarama took up the vessel, asked the woman for water and drank it himself. "Such hesitation at a festival of the royal house's strength?" a soldier demanded. Balarama replied, "If strength leaves a man no power to say no, how is it a mark of victory?" The youths' laughter diminished, though the path to the landing was not yet wholly clear.

Krishna heard the sailor's account. His younger brother had died in the war, and he supported the family by working at the landing. A group of youths had told him to sing the victory song before they would release his rope. "My grief is not the price of your song," the sailor said. Instead of making people swear oaths, Krishna set rules before the Yadavas: anyone obstructing the landing, however high his rank, must move; no one was to be compelled to drink; care for an injured or unconscious person must not be treated as an insult to the feast. Yet he did not declare that the day's rules had put an end to folly. Samba turned his eyes away, and one young man threw a shard of earthenware into the water.

That evening Krishna had told Balarama, "When people who understand power become afraid of their own humiliation, they do not see the crack opening beneath their own plates." Balarama had answered, "There may come a day when even our own hands find it hard to close that crack." The sailor's rope was secured again that day, the old woman's vessel was set down with respect, and the trembling youth was given a separate place to rest. Some young men called these decisions a weakness of the dynasty. The ancient scene ended with its reconciliation incomplete; its waters were not evidence in any police report from modern Videhapur.

At the hospital veranda in Videhapur in 2040, Deepak's shoes were removed. Rakesh asked how word should be sent to his home. A health worker said that Deepak could still understand conversation; he himself would be asked about necessary treatment and emergency contacts. Deepak was silent, then gave his mother's short phone number and asked that she be told the news briefly. Champa stayed on an outside bench. She did not seat

herself in the place of someone entitled to answer the patient's medical questions. "I brought him from the festival," she said. "The rest is for Deepak and the health professionals to decide."

Rakesh had carried a secret fear for several days. He said Deepak used to install coloured lights, but when his hands began trembling the contractor reduced his work. At home some called him a "criminal", others "lazy". Champa asked, "Did he abandon his work, or did his work abandon him?" Rakesh had no answer. In front of the bench, a hospital cleaner going to wash his hands tucked his pay slip into his coat. Alongside the body's fear stood the separate fear of losing a living; no one's life could be understood by giving both fears a single name.

Meanwhile a shopkeeper's name had spread through the festival grounds. Some said he sold a prohibited substance; others said Deepak had taken only sleeping medicine; none of them had evidence of either account. Padma recorded the time of each visitor's statement on a separate line. "An eyewitness may testify to what they actually saw," she said. "Do not turn a name heard from someone else into a conviction on this page." Open receipts for buying and selling festival supplies, valid permissions for selling at the site and available public footage were handed separately to the town's investigation team. No copy of Deepak's treatment papers was attached.

At night Ruhani opened the shelter's assistance register in its small room. A journalist asked over the phone, "If you give us a picture of the drug-dependent youth, people will be warned." "Investigate the route of the sale," Ruhani answered. "A person receiving treatment is not a face to be used for publicity." "Then the story will be incomplete," the journalist objected. Ruhani replied, "Filling the gaps in an unproven story with someone's face does not tell you where the illicit trade comes from." She put down the phone and sat beside Champa. Both understood that protecting privacy was an easy declaration and remaining faithful to it was difficult work.

At midday Suman Tikulhar stopped before the festival gate when she saw her coloured circular motif. Inside the circle were three short slanting strokes, with a red dot at its edge: the sample she had prepared for the new market. Previously a trader had printed it on a poster without her permission, and she had made a public objection supported by her sample book. Now the same form appeared on the festival donor board, with the company printer's name beneath it. "Some circles belong to everybody," said the young man hanging the board. Taking out her original sample, Suman answered, "The circle belongs to everybody. The sequence of these strokes, the dot at the edge and the date are my work."

Suman went not to Rekha Sahu but directly to the printing house where a sample from the earlier dispute was kept. The owner first explained that the festival committee's design file had come from the trader, who had paid for it.

“When did the person who bought the first wooden board acquire permission to reproduce the design digitally?” Suman asked. The owner opened his ledger. It listed costs and numbers of copies, but the column for design rights was blank. Suman had a one-page public objection prepared, with the original sample, the old permission, an image of the new board and the different dates. Her objection sought an examination of evidence of copying; she did not claim ownership of every circular tikuli.

The festival committee offered to drape a shawl over Suman on stage. She had asked for no shawl. “Write my name correctly wherever my work has been used, and count the copies you have made,” she said. A contractor sitting with the chairman argued that taking down the printed boards now would mean a loss. “Until destruction is actually necessary, display the public objection alongside them,” Suman replied. “But no one has the right to sell other memorials or goods with this design without new permission from me.” Hearing the distinction, Tara made three separate columns: the quantity already printed, future use, and compensation for the disputed copies.

Suman offered new terms: she would permit use of the design on only forty festival information boards for a limited period, in exchange for a clearly stated fee, her name as the original artist and fresh written consent before reprinting. The printing house prepared a list of the new boards. Of the thirty-five already printed, two had fallen, and the rest were reconciled against the count. After that verification Suman signed an agreement for the forty boards to be used going forward, comprising some newly printed ones and some corrected old copies. Compensation outstanding for the earlier unauthorised advertisement was kept separate. She received an advance for the first authorised use; the balance would be due after distribution was counted.

Ruhani asked why Suman had granted permission after so much struggle. Turning over a mould in her box, Suman said, “If people see my work, it may also increase my income. I want to prevent copying, not looking.” Champa arrived, and Suman showed her the objection papers. “Written terms are not the same thing as a patient’s confidentiality,” Champa said with pleasure, “but there is something they share. Other people cannot decide among themselves the limits of consent over a person’s body or belongings.” Suman laughed. “Once the limits are written, those who do the writing must read them too.”

Meanwhile Deepak was under observation and receiving counselling at the hospital. The doctor explained treatment possibilities, their risks and the options for ongoing help. Deepak himself asked whether he would be able to return to work. The doctor gave him no immediate assurance: the decision would depend on his condition and progress with treatment, and arrangements for safe work would have to be considered separately. Champa waited with Rakesh outside the hospital. She did not insist on being told Deepak’s diagnosis. “He is my friend,” Rakesh said, sounding calmer for the first time. “My friend is more than the name of his illness.”

With his own consent, Deepak called his mother. Her first question was angry: “Who were you with?” Steadying his voice, Deepak replied, “I am in hospital now. I need help, not a courtroom.” He could hear his mother breathing at the other end. She did not immediately ask forgiveness or proclaim him free of blame. She only asked, “Who is with you now?” “Rakesh, and the people treating me.” She said she would come at dawn. When the call ended, tears came to Deepak’s eyes. Before treatment could do its work, there was a relationship that would need time, not merely a promise.

A festival committee representative arrived at the hospital and proposed getting Deepak to take a public “pledge to give up intoxicants”, so criticism of the event would subside. At the doorway Champa asked him, “Why hold a public oath-taking in the middle of treatment? He is a patient now, not your publicity instrument.” The representative offered a free counselling camp sponsored by the company. “Help is welcome,” Champa said, “but not in exchange for the patient’s name, photograph or a guarantee of his future conduct.” Behind the company’s proposal was a contract seeking permission to use patients’ particulars in promotional analysis. That condition was struck out, and the health workers resolved to provide service information independently.

A police inspector came to see Ruhani. He had anonymous complaints alleging that prohibited goods had been sold behind the festival food stalls. He asked whether information obtained from Deepak might help him apprehend a seller. “That decision belongs to an investigation and the procedures of law,” Ruhani said, “not to Champa’s private notes about helping someone into treatment.” The inspector agreed to examine public sales receipts and statements from independent eyewitnesses. He wanted a list of names; Ruhani explained the limits of the public register. They agreed that health assistance and the investigation of unlawful trade would retain separate records, with any lawful exception to confidentiality to be decided by the proper authority.

By evening the festival’s new signs had been installed. Suman’s name was printed clearly below the motif, and the committee’s public sheet gave a brief account of the permitted period of use. “Artists will start taxing everything now,” a merchant muttered. Suman did not reply. She looked at her receipt. A little girl looking at the sign asked, “Why is there a red dot here?” With her finger Suman drew a circle in the earth and showed how the small strokes guided the turning eye back towards the centre. The girl drew another circle, but ordered the strokes differently. Suman did not stop her. A line made in learning was not the same as a copy made for sale.

For the next annual public audit, Padma added two columns beyond festival expenditure: demands for private health information made in the name of assistance, and commercial exploitation rights sought in the name of an artist’s design. Tara’s team announced that the artist would keep a copy of

every permission agreement; a company's draft claiming all rights would not become public policy. The arrangement raised the cost of new printing, displeasing the chairman. But for the first time the printing-house owner understood clearly that the price of paper purchased was different from the price of the right to use a design. The limit of forty information boards reduced the potential profit from another advertising contract; the loss was not entered as Suman's fault.

Deepak did not return straight home from the hospital. On medical advice he agreed to further care. Rakesh went to his contractor only to say that the absence was due to illness and that the next decision about safe work would depend on medical advice and Deepak's consent. The contractor threatened to withhold his wages. Rakesh showed the receipts for the three nights worked earlier: pay for work already done could not depend on the outcome of treatment. A date was written down for undisputed wages to be paid; no committee member could wipe away what remained owing by calling it "drug work".

When Champa returned home that night, Savitri was sitting at the threshold. Her mother had taken her medicine at the appointed time. "Why the hospital again today?" Savitri asked. Champa recounted the incident without naming the person involved. Setting down tea, Savitri said, "When people see a body in distress, they ask first about blame and only later about suffering. The hand you used to help him needs rest as well." Champa cradled her injured wrist and did not reveal Deepak's name. Mother and daughter sat silent for a long time. Keeping a confidence is not always concealing wrongdoing; some privacy makes room for a living person's next day.

At the third dawn of the festival, an employee of the company building the memorial arrived with fresh papers beside the old advertising disc. He said a permanent monument would be erected with the names of the dead, and the sponsors would bear all the costs. Ruhani read the papers. In the small print, exclusive rights over photographs of the monument, the list of names and commercial signboards around it were assigned to the company. A drawing also showed Suman's design decorating the memorial's edge, although no new permission had been sought. Ruhani drew a red line across that page; Tara put the memorial contract on the agenda as a separate question for the next meeting.

Returning past the hospital's outer gate, Champa did not gather a crowd to offer public good wishes to Deepak. She noticed only the cleaner mopping the wet veranda in the thin dawn sunlight, and on the wall beyond, the regular hours of medical consultation. There was no name there. Suman took her receipt and set off home; limited use of her design had been authorised, while her earlier copying claim remained alive. Coloured signs still glittered on the festival grounds, but treatment for a body dependent on intoxicants and investigation of the illegal trade had taken separate paths. Between those paths

a space had been left open in which no one's whole life could be seized under the name of treating them.

Chapter 183 · The Memorial Contract

It was a dawn in Phagun, in Videhapur in 2041. Scraping moss from the steps of the landing, Ramsakhi fixed a thin piece of wood behind her sickle so that she would not dislodge the old bricks. It was the first day of the annual water-cleanliness festival. Along the pond, women and men, fisherfolk, weavers, potters, sailors and schoolchildren were arriving for their allotted tasks. Picking up a yellow sheet of paper floating in the water, Champa saw large letters printed on its reverse: “Immortal Memory, Permanent Sponsorship.” She turned it over. Instead of the names of the dead, there were empty square spaces for advertisements.

For the first meeting concerning the proposal, Sarita had brought two chairs from the school. One leg of a chair was unsteady, so she slipped a small brick beneath it. Ruhani arrived with the company’s proposal in a red file, Tara with the thick budget ledger, and Padma with blank sheets for dissenting opinions. On the last day of the previous festival the company had promised to engrave the names of the dead on a memorial and bear the entire cost. Sarita had not yet handed over a list of names. Sitting on the steps at the landing, she opened the file. No contractor could decide which name should ever be taken out of someone’s private letter and placed before the public.

The company representative wore a blue kurta with a saffron-coloured border. His name was Shailaj. He set down a small, gleaming stone sample. “It is a substantial expense. If the sponsor is given the right to use photographs of the memorial, the list of names and advertising space at neighbouring shops for ten years, the town will bear no burden.” Ruhani reminded him that the earlier document had not even specified a duration. Shailaj smiled. “Now we’ve put ten years.” Tara asked, “And after ten years? Will the names be erased, or will people have to buy copies of their own memories?” In answer he offered a short price list for every copy made, with no column for the consent of the dead persons’ families.

Sarita’s hand came to rest on the bunch of library keys. The thought of Naira’s name on someone’s public stone sent a line of icy coldness through her body. “My daughter Naira is dead,” she said. “Her work for the school is preserved in documents. But my grief does not give me the right to hand a company commercial use of her photograph, private letters and name.” “You don’t want a memorial, then?” Shailaj challenged her. “I want remembrance,” Sarita replied. “I do not want a person’s death turned into a permanent business in commodities. Write down that distinction.”

Ruhani’s voice rose at first. “If a family wants to add a name, where will it be given room? If we do nothing but object, not even the stonework will be finished.” She spoke of families living at the shelter who could not find a safe place at the landing even to set down a temporary lamp. “Make such a place,”

Sarita answered. “But a company will not own a list of all the dead.” Such bitterness had rarely appeared before a public meeting between these two longtime collaborators. Champa was about to speak between them, then remained silent. It was as though what had suddenly risen along the bank was not water, but a disagreement suppressed for days.

Ramsakhi put down her board and came to sit with them. Green moss had stained her palms. “First tell me who will pay for the work being done right now,” she asked. Shailaj said the company would recruit volunteers for the cleanliness week. “And the food of those who earn their daily wages, yet are called volunteers?” Ramsakhi asked again. Tara turned the pages of the ledger. Wages for removing moss, protection for those entering the water, safe disposal of the extracted silt and repairs to the broken steps had all been separately approved. The company’s proposal had merged that budget with the cost of glittering memorial stone.

Farzana Churihar had been arranging three boxes on her small stall by the landing since dawn. In one were lacquer bangles fashioned by hand, in another slender pairs of glass bangles, and in the third uniformly shaped machine-made ones. At the previous folk-reading fair she had refused a proposal to label everything “entirely handmade” and charge a single price. Now a company employee said that at the memorial inauguration all the shops would sell a “sacred remembrance bangle” at one fixed, high price, with a share going to the company. Letting an elderly customer touch a pair of lacquer bangles, Farzana replied, “This lacquer is my handwork; this glass comes from another factory; these machine-made goods are wholesale. Whoever wishes can choose according to her means. Don’t attach the names of the dead and erase the difference in price.”

The customer picked up a blue glass bangle. She feared breaking it, but wanted that colour. Farzana explained the risk of breakage and showed her the correct size. Another customer asked the price of the lacquer bangle. Farzana showed the costing sheet: lacquer, colour, fuel for heating, the time of her hands, and the price. The price of the machine-made wares was on another page. “So many accounts will kill the glitter of the festival,” the company employee snapped. “Glitter on whose head?” Farzana asked. “On the worker’s hand or in the buyer’s eye?” She sold the glass pair; the customer placed an order for lacquer bangles for the following week. The buyer’s choice had become real income, not a theatrical ornament.

Kamala Jain’s family supplied grain for the communal meal at the landing. At the previous celebration she had made it clear that shop prices, discounts and religious observance were separate matters. This time Shailaj’s assistant placed before her a sample welcome board carrying a line of religious proclamation beside the family business’s name. Kamala crossed it out. “My shop will account for its business. Which fast I keep and whose ritual I attend are matters for my household and my conscience.” From some distance her elder brother-in-law said, “The honour of the donation will suffer.” “Binding

property and belief to the same board increases no one's honour," Kamala answered.

Kamala's niece Riddhi was counting the vessels for the meal. Quietly she said that this year, because of her personal convictions, she would not attend a family ceremony. Her uncle looked sharply at her. Kamala laid a hand on Riddhi's shoulder but did not allow the sponsor to make a spectacle of a family disagreement from the stage. "We will listen at home. I will not record her choice in the shop's holiday register," she said. Then she had only the weight of grain, its price, the actual discount donated, and the transport wages entered on the food bill. Riddhi was not expelled from the family shop because of her private disagreement; neither was her uncle's disapproval immediately extinguished.

By noon, two factions had formed amid the communal cleaning of the landing. One argued that if the memorial contract was stopped, no good stone would be found anywhere. The other insisted that preventing the trade in names meant there should be no communal memorial at all. Seeing the double trap, Tara said, "We need four separate decisions: a place of remembrance, a contract to buy stone, repairs to the landing, and the list of names." "And the money?" Ruhani asked. Tara opened the old repair budget for the landing. Public contributions, approved municipal allocations and individual donations were added separately to the extent that documentation existed. A mere announcement could not become an amount of money.

Someone had already written Urmila's name on the proposed list without asking her family. Urmila Rajak was no longer alive, and her sister was still pursuing separate claims for wages for the hospital night shift, cleaning at the landing and transporting clothes. Seeing the list, her sister said, "First complete the accounts for what she earned. But don't imagine that paying those wages automatically gives permission to sell her life's name." The company representative suggested that the memorial could help settle outstanding claims. Padma asked, "Which amount and what date are entered on the terms sheet?" Again the paper was silent.

Kabir stood a little apart from the crowd. The letter he had written and never sent to Naira remained shut in a box at home. Looking at Sarita, he understood that on a day like this even words of consolation could become a commercial slip. He did not go to the microphone or repeat the slogan rising behind him. He went only to Tara and said, "Give a living family a clear space on the names register to record disagreement. Someone may say no today and change their mind years later. They must have that right." Tara added "Whether the family's wishes have been asked" as the first column.

At a seaward landing in ancient Dwaraka, on an evening of an entirely different age, the remaining colours of the Yadavas' victory festival were washing into the water. An elderly sailor's brother had died in the war. Young men of the royal house wanted to carve the dead brother's name on the prow

of his boat alongside their victory song. The sailor stopped them. “My brother rowed this boat,” he said. “Since his death I need my daily earnings here, not rent paid in cheers.” Samba tried to make fun of him. Balarama stepped forward and said that nobody would impose an act of remembrance on the sailor’s boat unless the owner himself wished it.

Krishna asked the sailor, “How will your brother’s name be kept safe?” “Where I say it shall be, and where his wife wishes,” the sailor answered. A richly adorned young Yadava said that a royal memorial would make the name of an ordinary sailor great. “The greatness of a name comes from the work a person lived and the relationships he had,” Krishna replied, “not from a contractor’s ornaments.” He told the young man to lift the rope at the landing so the boat could come alongside. The sailor’s wife decided only this: no public nameboard would be fixed that day. Dwaraka’s quarrel was not entirely quieted; some Yadavas thought their dominance had been diminished.

Back in Videhapur in 2041, Ramsakhi’s foot disturbed an old brass plate as she returned to the water. The lettering on it was incomplete, and Tara did not instantly announce anyone’s name. Padma recorded where and when the plate had been found and who had witnessed the discovery; it was put into a secure box for examination of the metal. Shailaj again proposed that the company build a museum of old objects beside the new memorial. “How can we give ownership without investigating the source of the artefacts, the laws of the state and local claims?” Ruhani asked. The plate was an object, not a trump card in the making of memory. The small discovery made one reason for Shailaj’s haste clear to everyone.

Near the landing, Suman Tikulhar’s coloured circular motif had appeared again in the company’s new drawing. The limited permission granted at the previous festival covered forty information boards, not permanent decoration of a monument. Suman brought out her receipt. “The written limit of forty boards still stands. This picture on stone for twenty-five years is another use.” Shailaj said the design would be altered. Suman smiled. “Alter it, but don’t make someone else’s work yours by merely changing it a little.” No final decision on compensation for the earlier unauthorised copying was reached at this meeting.

As afternoon waned, two buckets of water began to feel heavy. The teams of Janaki Gulguliya and Hiravati Kurariyar, working on the clean-up, had no safe place from which to drink. Behind the stage the contractor’s people had left vessels for the feast, yet the workers had repeatedly wandered about thirsty. Champa had a table moved. Ruhani filled buckets herself, and Kamala Jain’s niece set out clean glasses. The modest cost of the arrangement was entered in the fair budget. Sarita saw that those whose names would never appear on the memorial were nevertheless truly thirsty today. She went to Ramsakhi and asked when the remaining wages for the third day of cleaning would be paid, as recorded in the work register.

Ruhani called Sarita aside. “You oppose the company’s proposal without hearing what I have to say,” she told her. “First tell me how the contract would benefit the shelter’s work,” Sarita answered. Ruhani explained that some families wanted a safe place in which to remember their dead; to ask for private donations year after year felt humiliating to them. Sarita acknowledged that merely raising a slogan against the trade in names would not meet those families’ needs. Ruhani in turn acknowledged that families needing assistance were not giving everlasting permission to transfer ownership. For the first time, their agreement made room for the real needs of those who disagreed.

At the gathering Champa read out a proposal. There would be a simple public resting and remembrance place at the landing, where each family would be free to choose whether to add a name. For anyone who did not wish a name to be made public, there would be a safe space in which to set a lamp in remembrance. No company would privately own the list of names. No more than the actual printing cost could be charged for public copies, and private letters or photographs could not be printed without separate, explicit consent. The proposal stated obligatorily that wages due to the dead, land claims and compensation accounts would not be treated as closed because of a donation for the memorial.

“Then we are to pay for it and receive no rights over the names?” Shailaj asked. “You may submit a competitive bid for the price of the stone, secure foundations and repairs,” Tara answered. “You cannot obtain a contract over people’s names and private memories.” Another local craftsperson said he could make foundations using old brickwork instead of gleaming stone, with easier drainage. The meeting decided on technical examination of both alternatives, with construction prices and annual upkeep shown separately. That decision reduced Shailaj’s potential commercial gain; it did not automatically establish that his company was guilty of wrongdoing.

A contractor’s associate who had accompanied Shailaj rose in protest. “Ruhani-ji, until yesterday you wanted cooperation; today you are accusing the company.” “I still want cooperation,” Ruhani answered. “I did not grant permission to sell the names of the dead in return for the shelter’s door.” An old volunteer accused her of changing her position under Sarita’s pressure. Ruhani was silent for a moment, then asked, “Examine my decision. But do not erase my right to decide by calling me somebody else’s shadow.” The disagreement was now public, and this time Ruhani felt the weariness of being the sole mediator.

At the open meeting that evening, Farzana placed her boxes before the gathering. “This is the price of lacquer bangles, this the price of glass, and this of machine-made ones,” she explained. “A customer who wants the cheaper machine-made goods will get them at that price. Someone who prefers handwork will pay for the labour. There will be no pressure to buy in the name of remembrance.” Kamala Jain read out the actual food bill and a

separate list of the donated discounts. Riddhi, despite her disagreement with the family's beliefs, fulfilled her responsibility for reading the accounts. Those two small commercial decisions provided a measure for the larger memorial dispute: gifts, purchases, faith and individual freedom did not belong in one column of a single form.

At last Sarita spoke about Naira's name. "I do not consent to a public nameboard now," she said. "The place of the letter Kabir wrote is not within my authority either. Whatever public evidence exists of Naira's work for the school will remain with its sources." A woman asked, "And if I want my husband's name to appear?" "I have no right to prevent your choice," Sarita replied. "My no cannot erase your yes." For a while the gathering was quiet after that. Shared grief did not necessarily yield identical decisions.

Beside the stage Padma hung up the full proposal on three separate sheets: verified expenditure on water cleanliness, the possible construction of a remembrance place, and the rules of consent concerning the names of the dead. The first payment schedule for Ramsakhi and the other workers gave the dates on which wages were due. It was also recorded that no contract obstructing the drainage passage at the landing would be valid. Municipal officers accepted a temporary halt to construction and a fresh open tender process. Some people were disappointed: the memorial would not be built quickly. But the public way was not closed that day, and the accounting for work done today did not have to wait for a stone with names on it.

That night Ruhani returned to the shelter veranda. Copies of the company's letters lay on the table. One sheet bore signatures from old volunteers demanding her resignation; another carried the young members' insistence that decisions should not depend on one person's signature. In anger Ruhani almost folded up the letters, then opened them and laid them flat. Shailaj's contract had been limited, but the question of whose hands would hold power within the institution was only beginning to open. She sent Sarita a short message: "We have not stopped the decision about the memorial; we have removed the condition of monopoly. At the next meeting we will also take up the rules of leadership."

When Sarita reached home and closed the school door behind her, she saw Naira's empty glass in the dark. Today she neither removed the glass nor raised it onto a nameboard. As water warmed on the stove, she remembered the green-stained palm of Ramsakhi, Farzana's three boxes, and Urmila's sister standing her ground. When memory is severed from the work of living, embodied people and made into a commercial image, there may be much glitter but little light. She lowered the flame. The contract over names at the landing was still suspended; cleaning and repairs went on. Ruhani's next question—the election within the institution—would arise from these changed circumstances, not from nothing.

Chapter 184 · Ruhani's Choice

In Videhapur in 2041, four days after the Festival of Respect for the Landing, one corner of the yellow ballot box kept on the shelter veranda had come loose. Ruhani lifted it and examined it. Inside lay some old bamboo sawdust and a half-driven nail. She did not ask for a hammer to drive the nail home. First she turned the box upside down and set it on the table, so that everyone could see there was no second compartment within it. People were gathering outside the veranda: some preparing to shout for her removal from office, others in support of her. The rough edge of the box bit into Ruhani's palm, but she did not withdraw her hand.

At the previous meeting, the contract giving exclusive control over a memorial in the names of the dead had been stopped. Repairs to the landing continued, but supporters of Shailaj's company proposal believed that Ruhani had closed off a means of helping the shelter. On the other side, young volunteers had submitted a written objection: the aid ledger, public notice board, and copies of annual expenditure depended on keys held by one person. Ruhani had read both letters. The first demanded that she leave her position. The second made an account of her solitude—an account she had long put aside in the name of work.

Early that morning Shailaj's assistant came to the shelter gate. "There is disagreement among you," he said. "Whose signature, then, will make a financial agreement valid?" Ruhani did not invite him inside. "Today is the electoral assembly," she told him. "Submit any proposal concerning property to the register. There will be no negotiations over contracts during voting." The assistant left his papers, but two old volunteers standing at the gate stopped him. One said Ruhani had decided on her own to return the money. "I raised an objection to the conditions," Ruhani answered. "The written procedure for a decision is before everyone. If I made a mistake, this assembly will examine it."

While arranging the meeting, Champa was wiping three tables: one for the register of voters, a second for ballot papers, a third for objections. Hiravati Kurariyar, who had long been connected with the shelter, asked, "I don't sleep here at night. I come by day to work on repairs. Does my vote count?" Janaki Gulguliya said, "My home moves from place to place, but why should I be excluded from the assembly when our children's education is at issue?" An old volunteer explained that only permanent members of the shelter could vote. In a moment, many who had come from outside to help found themselves on the far side of the gate.

Tara read the old voting rules. On the fifth page stood the words "resident or regular public contributor," but no period had been specified for what counted as regular. Padma brought the attendance register for the preceding

six months. “If I add or remove voters today according to my own wishes,” Ruhani said, “the election will be untrustworthy whether it goes against me or in my favour.” A provisional decision was reached: adults with records of six months’ regular labour, or a written record of receiving shelter services, could vote. Objections from those whose names were missing would be heard there and then. The old assumption that temporary residents had no voting rights would be corrected.

From the back row, twenty-seven-year-old Jharna stood. For two years she had taken turns opening the shelter doors on flood nights. Her father had never been a permanent resident; he had stayed there only while receiving treatment. “I am standing for office,” Jharna said, “but don't write ‘Ruhani’s girl’ beside my name. I have learned the work of the shelter, and I understand what consent means. When there is work I don't understand, I shall say so in public.” Her voice lacked the practiced agility of a platform speaker. It carried the fatigue of the night.

The other candidate was Mahendra, a longstanding volunteer. During the drainage crisis he had provided a vehicle, and many families remembered that service. He proposed that the chairperson be granted emergency authority to sign, so negotiations with donors could proceed quickly. “Set aside a separate power for emergency treatment,” Jharna replied. “But why should permanent agreements concerning the dead people’s names, private photographs, or shelter land be made under one person’s emergency signature?” “If donations stop,” Mahendra said, “the doors will close.” Some people voiced emphatic agreement. Inside Ruhani, an echo of her old fear sounded again.

Just then Ruchi Dharikar arrived with her daughter Chhabili. In their bamboo basket lay a finely folded mat, a double twist of red and yellow strips, and light bindings made for warning posts. At an earlier crafts exhibition, Ruchi had raised the question of her family’s rights over this weaving. Having seen its photograph, the municipality had reproduced it as a “local warning pattern”; the copies had been halted after Ruchi objected. Now a new weaving workgroup at the shelter wanted strips in the same pattern for safe evacuation routes. Ruchi set the original sample on the table. “Permission to look at something,” she said, “is not the right to manufacture and sell it.”

An employee supporting Mahendra said, “If we keep accounts of every right in all this relief work, another flood will arrive before anything gets done.” Ruchi spread the mat on the table. With her fingers she opened the central knot: here the threads of two colours turned inward and held one another. “This knot contains my daughter’s alteration,” she said. “I measured the outer binding. If the shelter commissions a version made to new measurements, it will pay for the work. But it will not print the old pattern in its own name and call it a ‘donation’ to the shelter.” Chhabili showed a different pattern in her notebook, with her name written upon it.

Jharna heard Ruchi out. She had a one-page draft for cooperative production prepared: the source of the original weave would be credited to Ruchi's family, Chhabili's altered knot separately, the cost of bamboo and thread separately, and an hourly wage separately for the weaver. Order quantities, tests for safe use, and permission for any reprinting would be recorded in writing beforehand. Instead of granting a perpetual right to reproduce the design, Ruchi accepted a limited order for the first thirty safety strips. Mahendra asked how profit would be distributed. "After production costs are deducted," Jharna replied, "the members will sit together and decide the proportions. We won't distribute imagined sums now and put anyone in debt."

Chhabili whispered in her mother's ear, "Ma, will they really accept me as a weaver?" "Your work will make your pattern known," Ruchi answered. "I will bear witness, but your own hands will fill your place." She demonstrated the tying of the new strip. Chhabili's fingers slipped and the double twist came out slightly crooked. "Could that crookedness confuse people following a sign at the gate?" Janaki asked. Tara specified two different measurements of visibility, one by day and one by night, for the trial. Ruchi herself had no wish to silence questions of safety merely to protect her art.

Shanti Bari arrived carrying a box of wedding materials. She kept a thin mat over the box so that the bark for ceremonial headgear, coloured festoons, and flower threads would not become wet. She had received a proposal to decorate an auspicious wedding pavilion in a nearby village. The family representative said, "This wedding is being supported by the public shelter. Give us all the materials now; we'll pay when the donations arrive." The weariness of old debts settled over Shanti's face. Two families had previously written "thank you" while withholding payment; she still carried those accounts in her bag.

"I understand that even an occasion of happiness can bring hardship," Shanti said. "But the merchant who sells me bark doesn't lower his price. The flower threads take time to tie. I need half the cost in advance and the rest on delivery. If the family has little money, collect a separate contribution. Don't call my wages a donation." The representative said Ruhani used to arrange concessions at such times. "I can discuss help from the assistance fund under a written rule applied equally," Ruhani said quietly. "I have no authority to waive Shanti's labour."

Shanti offered an alternative: ready-made festoons for shared use at a lower rental price, with responsibility for breakage specified separately. The family considered it among themselves. The daughter said she did not want elaborate decoration; a slender festoon was enough. She paid the first portion of the advance out of her savings and read the open rules for applying for the remaining assistance. Shanti issued a receipt. The order was smaller, but the value of the worker's labour remained secure. Ruhani understood that an

institution might survive on donations without everything exchanged at its door becoming the same thing called a “donation.”

In the noonday heat the hanging bell on the veranda came loose and rang as it fell. Champa steadied the water pot set upon a chair. Just before voting began, an elderly deaf member gestured to his daughter: the small lettering on the ballot was difficult for him to understand. Padma wrote the names and summaries of the proposals in large letters, and a neutral interpreter explained the voting rules. His daughter offered to mark the ballot for him. The old man shook his head, stopped her, and made his own mark. The assembly waited a while longer, but this delay was not counted as a fault in the election.

Ruhani came to the front of the platform. “For a long time the doors opened in my name because you trusted me,” she said. “Once, resting on that trust, I came to believe every crisis needed my signature. That arrangement must change now.” Mahendra immediately asked, “Who, then, will answer for the mistaken contracts of the past?” “Where I signed a proposal, I shall be available for its examination,” Ruhani replied. “Choosing a new chairperson will not erase the account of my old signatures.” Sarita was listening from the back. Not once did she applaud.

One group of longstanding volunteers wanted Ruhani’s name to remain compulsory on the ballot. Ruhani made it clear she was not a candidate for chairperson this time; she would fulfil her duty to transfer the records during a two-week transition. “Can anyone read every file in two weeks?” a young man asked. Tara explained that personal medical slips and private letters would not be placed on an open table before the committee members. Financial accounts, public agreements, repair expenditures, and the register of dissent would be available for examination. She separated the easy slogan “share all records” into three different levels.

Just before the vote, Mahendra’s associate claimed the company’s written promise of donation was conditional on his side winning. Shailaj was not there, but a signed document was indeed on the table. Tara read it. One line referred to “continuity of executive leadership.” It named no particular candidate. Mahendra admitted that he had interpreted the phrase as support for himself. “A donor may give consent,” Jharna said, “but cannot thereby become a voter.” The document was placed away from the ballot box, in the public proposals box. No one declared Shailaj a criminal on the strength of this ambiguity, but a requirement to examine the meaning of the donation was entered in writing.

At the sea landing of ancient Dwaraka, in an age entirely separate from this modern election, an assembly had gathered after the Yadavas’ festival to discuss the division of watch duties. Samba argued that the young men of the ruling lineage deserved first rights over the landing after the victory. A boatman’s son replied that a change in watch times would leave fishing boats returning at night stranded in the dark. Balarama praised the young men’s

courage without making courage an automatic basis for command. One youth pulled a rope to stop a boat. Krishna caught his hand. “When your strength falls upon a rope you did not make,” he said, “measure its tension first.”

An old boatman had kept the schedule of watches at the landing for many years. He showed the names he had written down: which family’s boat returned on which tide, who needed passage by night for a sick person. Samba said the old order could be changed by the wishes of the royal lineage. “The wishes of a royal house may change,” Krishna answered, “but the time of the water and the boatman’s labour do not change by command.” The assembly resolved that a new watch schedule would not be imposed without a public hearing. Samba remained displeased. The boatman’s craft returned that night; within the Yadavas, pride was looking for another form to take.

Back in Videhapur in 2041, the lid of the ballot box was sealed. There were three observers: an adult shelter resident, a regular worker, and a representative of the neighbourhood public library. As the ballots were counted, Mahendra watched his supporters fall silent. Jharna repeatedly reached toward a glass of water, then stayed her hand. The two names on the papers were counted twice. On two ballots the marks were unclear; the grounds for rejecting them were read aloud, and copies of the associated objections were kept. The final count elected Jharna by a small but definite margin. The figures were written on the public board; the defeated candidate’s votes appeared in the same ink.

Mahendra rose angrily and walked toward the gate, then turned back. “My supporters object to the treatment of two ballots,” he said. Padma gave him a numbered receipt for the objection. “The election decision takes effect today. The unclear ballots will be reviewed within seven days under the published rules. If evidence sufficient to change the decision is found, we shall recount.” Mahendra signed his objection. Ruhani did not thank him; she simply offered him a chair. A disagreement that might have lasted through the night had been given a place to be heard instead of being torn apart.

Rather than sit at the chairperson’s desk, Jharna first asked for the bunch of keys. Ruhani laid down three: for the public register, the supply store, and the private health room. Jharna handed the third key back. “This must remain with the officer entrusted with confidential medical assistance. Keeping every key with the chairperson was itself the problem,” she said. Ruhani felt lighter, but also an emptiness. Through years of accidents and nights of work, these keys had become almost part of her body. She signed the receipt transferring the first two.

Ruchi and Shanti submitted their proposals to the new chairperson for the joint-production committee. For Ruchi’s first batch of thirty safety strips, written approval specified an advance for raw materials, payment for each piece of work, and limited use of the design. Chhabili’s distinctive knot would

be used only after its tests were completed. The advance for Shanti's narrow wedding festoons had actually been received from the family; the date when the remaining payment fell due was recorded on the receipt. In both trades, the new treasurer announced, a change of institutional leadership would not cancel promises already made.

Tara proposed a three-month cycle for auditing the social accounts. Newly elected, Jharna asked whether she herself should chair that audit. "How can the person who accounts for the work be the only one to examine the account?" Champa replied. They agreed to hold a separate election for a public auditor. Confidentiality of private information, resolution of objections, and actual payment to workers would be examined in three distinct registers. Donations could be proposed, but their conditions could not exercise secret control over the institution's decisions. Shailaj's next letter thus remained important without becoming decisive.

Sarita stepped toward Ruhani. The previous day their voices had grown harsh over the memorial. "It would not be right," Sarita said today, "to erase what you built by calling it nothing more than your name." "And it was not right to protect it by calling it nothing more than my name," Ruhani answered. Neither smiled. After a moment Sarita asked what she would do now. "For two weeks I shall help people read the files," Ruhani said. "Then I shall join the shelter's outside team. I want to know the paths of those who do not live inside." Sarita rested her hand on Ruhani's arm for a moment.

In the evening children's reading could be heard from the school veranda. Chhabili was making a strip with the new knot; sweat stood on her brow, but she untied and corrected a mistake herself midway through the weave. Shanti Bari counted the advance money she had received on the table. Mahendra left carrying the receipt for his objection. Jharna wrote her first decision on the public board: "Leadership has changed; dues, appeals, and the limits of consent have not disappeared." Ruhani kept looking at the loosened corner of the ballot box. It would need repairing in the morning. This time it would not be repaired by one pair of hands, but by those of an elected committee.

That night a new envelope arrived from Shailaj's company. On it were written the words "Revised Conditions of Donation." Jharna did not accept it immediately; she instructed that it be entered in the public proposals register in the morning. Ruhani left the door of her room open while she gathered the last pages of her notebook. One sentence remained inside her: for an institution to stay alive, it must have the courage to examine the decisions of its founder. On the first submerged step of the landing, green moss was beginning to gather again. The work had not ended. The authority to carry it out had changed.

Chapter 185 · The Conditions of Giving

At the first morning bell in Videhapur in 2041, Jharna placed two envelopes apart on the shelter veranda. One bore the seal of Shailaj's company; the other the old blue emblem of Devvrat's relief organisation. Her first act as the chairperson elected the night before had been to receive the keys, but today one word on the papers frightened her: "unconditional." Before opening either envelope, she put water out for two elderly women seated outside. Mahendra was already standing there. "The landing steps are broken," he said. "If we keep the donations on hold, how will people get down?" "The steps must be rebuilt," Jharna answered. "But in whose name, and on what conditions? Those are matters we shall read aloud at today's open meeting."

Shailaj's revised letter withdrew the permanent monopoly over the memorial's name, but retained a right to be "the principal partner in institutional publicity." Devvrat's letter was different. He proposed to restart the old relief fund for the shelter, primary treatment, and public kitchen. It spoke of "providing necessary evidence," but included a line about "protecting the institution against unnecessary disputes." Padma underlined that line in red. Jharna first entered the two letters in separate registers. She did not want the satisfaction of removing one donor's condition to make them overlook an incomplete examination of another donor.

Rama arrived carrying old papers from Devvrat's aid chest. On one occasion a medicine consignment's release slip had failed to tally with the hospital's receipt register. Evidence had later established how much aid had actually reached patients, but the source of one unexplained consignment remained in question. The investigation into Mahesh's death and the related threats was proceeding separately before the competent authorities. Rama spoke in a low voice. "I have no right to declare Devvrat guilty. Nor have I the right to declare him innocent because he has made a donation." Jharna had the whole sentence entered on the agenda.

Devvrat arrived in person at ten. Rameshwar was not with him; he came alone, carrying copies of his ledgers in a small cloth bag. "Anyone who needs help must not be left hungry until a dispute receives its final judgment," he said. Mahendra voiced his agreement. But Gomati asked, "Would you object if a separate account were opened for the new money in your relief fund?" "No," Devvrat said. "Nor is it necessary to print my name on every page." "Whether his name is printed may be the donor's choice," Jharna replied. "Whether a patient's private identity is printed is not the donor's right to decide."

Outside the veranda, Suraj Chaudhary arrived with two slender palm leaves, an empty bottle, and an old vessel used for collecting sap. His father, Nandu Chaudhary, was already angry at the suggestion that his son should leave the family occupation. A proposal to distribute drinks at the town festival was linked to Devvrat's fund, and the organisers wanted Suraj to climb the trees for fresh sap and put the relief organisation's seal on the bottles. Showing the

abraded skin of his palm, Suraj said, “The charge for climbing the tree, the price of the sap, and the cost of filling a bottle are three different things. In the name of charity, the risk to my body is not free.”

“My father climbed, and I climb,” Nandu said. “Since when has this work needed such paperwork?” “That is exactly why it needs paperwork,” Suraj answered. “When a rib breaks, no one takes responsibility: they call it the ‘family occupation.’” Jharna turned Suraj’s vessel over and examined it; inside lay a thin crust of dried sap. He explained that he wanted to begin a new business producing tested, hygienic, non-intoxicating drinks. Equipment for keeping the sap clean and tests of the ingredients would cost money. Finding a market would not, by itself, ensure the tree climber was paid.

Devvrat said his organisation was interested in funding the first tests. Nandu brightened as soon as he heard this. But Suraj stopped while reading the assistance form: “The producer shall be required to use the mark recommended by the institution.” He shook his head. “I may agree to that for the first ten batches, but I won't sell a drink under someone else’s name for the rest of my life.” Tara entered in the draft that a limited grant for equipment would not transfer ownership of the design, the tree, the sap, or future sales. Training in safe climbing and separate consent from the tree’s owner would be required. Nandu disagreed with these conditions, but Suraj signed the proposal concerning his own share.

While the meeting continued, Amina Bhathiyara arrived from the bus stand carrying two covered cooking pots. She had wrapped them in an old blanket to keep the rice warm. Three travellers had previously paid cash for their meals, while two members of a police patrol had eaten on credit the day before. Amina laid two receipts on the table. “The price for a traveller is the same as for someone in uniform. If the government is paying for a meal, I need the department’s name, the order, and the date of payment.” An official snapped that the uniform was being insulted. Amina stood motionless, then showed him the empty pots. “Is the insult in this empty vessel,” she asked, “or in my receipt?”

Jharna summoned the authorised official and asked whether the patrol had an approved meal budget. The documents contained an allowance for duty meals for two members, but did not name Amina’s shop. The official said cash payment was possible and that orders would be written from the following day. Amina decided not to extend any further open credit without written authorisation. Only after she had received payment for both old bills did she issue a receipt confirming it. Tara did not add this payment to Devvrat’s donation: it was the actual price of meals consumed, not philanthropy.

Meanwhile Arun Barnwal arrived at the assembly with a thick shop ledger. He had once been urged to wear a garland honouring his donation on a public platform, but had returned the garland, saying that certain taxes were still due. Interest on the delay had since increased, and his trade had suffered because his name no longer appeared among the “donors” in the assembly’s publicity. Arun raised no slogan. He placed an authenticated copy of his bank deposit slip on the table. “I have now paid the principal tax and the calculated

interest for delay," he said. "One additional item, open to appeal, remains. I shall not pretend it has been paid."

"You've abandoned publicity and paid your taxes," Mahendra asked. "Will you make a donation again?" "Before giving anything," Arun replied, "I shall pay my shop workers the two days' wages I have withheld. I don't want my photograph on a nameboard. If something remains afterward, I will contribute it to a registered fund." His younger brother protested that the loss of standing in the town had made even credit transactions difficult. Arun did not belittle the loss. He acknowledged that the family was paying a price for the damage to its reputation. But paying taxes and decorating a donation platform were not the same responsibility.

At the afternoon assembly Jharna read the seven conditions of Devvrat's proposal, one by one. The donated money would stay in an independent bank account; expenditure would be public; the donor would not receive patients' names, medical papers, or the private information of shelter residents; receiving a service could not be made conditional on abandoning a case or appeal; supply contracts would be subject to open scrutiny; investigations into the donor's earlier business affairs would continue separately; and the procedure for withholding unpaid instalments and returning funds in the event of proven wrongdoing would be written in advance. Padma posted these points on sheets large enough for everyone to read, not in tiny print.

A woman stood and asked, "If you don't take Devvratji's money, who will give medicine to my sick child?" The noise of the assembly stopped at the question. Before answering, Champa asked after the child's condition, but did not speak the name of the illness into the public microphone. "The lawful arrangements for the treatment needed today will continue," she said. "A dispute between two donors will not stop a patient's prescription. Nor will someone be ordered to withdraw a complaint because of whose money may arrive tomorrow." Devvrat himself said that providing necessary medicine lawfully did not require humiliating a donation; it required accounting for it.

On a separate evening in ancient Dwaraka, the day after the Yadava festival, a collection of grain was being made to repair the narrow wooden bridge at the landing. An influential head of a lineage presented a large jar of grain and declared that his family's boats should have first passage over the bridge. An old boatman bent down and showed the decayed bamboo underneath it. "Will passage over the wood we repair be measured by the jar someone donates?" he asked. Samba replied that without royal assistance there would be no bridge at all. Balarama lifted the jar's lid and looked inside. There was grain, but no one's name had been written upon it.

Krishna did not refuse anyone's generosity at that ancient assembly. The proposed change to the order of boats, however, was reserved for a separate public hearing. Furious, the head of the lineage tried to lift his jar and take it back. His nephew restrained him: if the bridge collapsed, the royal family's boats would be unable to pass either. In the end, permission was given to use the grain to feed the bridge-repair workers, without granting the lineage first rights at the landing. Samba turned his face away. A section of the bridge was

repaired that day, but the sense of humiliation within the clan endured. The old scene ended there, in its own history; it was not evidence concerning the modern donation account.

Back in Videhapur in 2041, the afternoon was fading. Jharna asked whether anyone had a personal conflict of interest connected to Devvrat's gift. Mahendra said an acquaintance of his worked under a transport contract for the company, though he himself was not a shareholder. Tara recorded that much, then asked whether a copy of the acquaintance's agreement could be obtained. Mahendra drew back. "I don't know," he said. Tara wrote "Not known," not a seal of innocence. Ruhani sat in a chair at the back, not as chairperson but as someone answerable for the signatures she had formerly given.

Rama read copies of the old medicine-distribution records. A box in one consignment bore another supplier's mark, but the hospital receipt register named the donor's organisation. "This discrepancy does not prove that anyone committed a crime," she said. "Neither can a certificate praising a donation settle it." Devvrat gave a written date by which the original purchase ledger would again be made available for examination. He also asked that evidence of supplies correctly delivered remain in the file. Jharna agreed. The assembly accepted both principles: sound work must not be concealed, nor must a false reconciliation of records be covered up.

A company representative asked whether donors would be allowed to meet beneficiaries once a year. "Anyone wishing to meet may choose to do so," Sarita replied. "A list of names must not be used to open people's homes to strangers." Devvrat nodded, but a former draft prepared by his employee contained a separate field headed "Collection of beneficiary families' experiences." Padma did not erase it. She wrote "Rejected—independent individual consent required" and kept the draft. She feared that someone might retrieve the paper tomorrow and present it as evidence of old consent.

Suraj came inside again. His father sat outside in the shade of a palm. "From tomorrow I won't climb trees," Suraj said. Everyone was startled. He immediately explained: "I am stopping unsafe, irregular climbing. I shall climb only when there is a safe rope, two people present, and written permission from the owner of the tree. For now, the first sample of the hygienic drink will be made from sap obtained on the ground." Nandu entered. "Does that make my old skill useless?" he asked. Taking his father's hand, Suraj replied, "The skill is not useless. Without wages, it is exploited." His father accepted separate payment for teaching how to prepare the sample.

In Amina's next meal order, the office paid cash for the two patrolmen's food and signed the receipt. But when she saw that the paper described it as "relief food," she had the words changed to "purchased food." Laughing, she said, "Hunger is the same for everyone; each person has their own responsibility for the price." Jharna saw that no donor's name was needed for Amina's small victory. Nearby, Arun was transferring the first instalment of wages withheld from one of his workers; the employee signed for receipt only

after the bank confirmation arrived. The other worker was away. His share remained outstanding in the dues ledger.

At the open vote that evening, the proposal was divided into two parts. First, a limited specified amount from Devvrat's fund could be accepted, subject to conditions, for immediately necessary services. Second, a decision on the rest of the long-term donation would be postponed until purchase, storage, and conflict-of-interest records were reconciled. Mahendra voted to take the entire sum at once. Jharna was about to cast her own vote when she checked the rule: the chairperson would vote only to break a tie. She entrusted the count to elected members and an outside observer. A majority approved the two-stage proposal. Dissenting votes were entered in the public ledger exactly as cast.

Devvrat was silent for a while on hearing the decision. "My money is now half inside the door and half outside," he said. "Permission has been given to use some of your funds," Jharna replied. "The protection of people's rights at this door remains as it was." Devvrat did not smile. He signed the revised conditions, wrote down the date for the examination of the original records, and accepted that the remaining sum would not be transferred immediately. In his eyes this was distrust; in Jharna's, the first independent test of decision-making. There was no need to erase the difference.

Outside, Ruhani said to Jharna, "On your first day as chairperson you have deferred most of a donation. Someone will say the institution has lost money." "Perhaps," Jharna answered. "But what we have accepted cannot be spent in a way that allows a donor to silence someone whenever he chooses." After a pause Ruhani asked how they would buy oil for the shelter's lamps at night. Jharna showed her the budget: there was a small sum in the ordinary operating fund, with an open proposal for further voluntary contributions from local people. For the first time she felt sharply that independence of leadership, without an account of everyday expenses, remained only a speech.

Tara was gathering the draft vote, the rejected beneficiaries' list, and Devvrat's old ledgers. In her notebook she wrote that an early review of the relief fund had been prepared in the office on her own side. A photocopy of someone's signature of "consent" appeared to have been attached to that report, but the original sheet could not be found. Until now Tara had thought it merely an office error. "Whose hand brought in the photocopy?" Padma asked. Tara had no definite answer. "Today we examined the donor's conditions," Jharna said. "Tomorrow we shall examine the conditions in our own papers." Tara's face fell slightly.

At night Suraj's empty bottle shone in the moonlight outside the shelter gate. Amina was going home with a box of leftover rice; Arun was putting the tax deposit slip away in his ledger. No one here was an unqualified victor. The limited donation had provided some means for medicine and for keeping the cooking fire alive, but questions about the earlier medicine consignment, outstanding wages, construction of the memorial, and Shailaj's separate letter remained open. Jharna turned the key in the lock. The edge of the photocopy Tara had left inside fluttered in the breeze. Reading the conditions of

assistance was not easy; rereading the papers of one's own side would be harder still.

Chapter 186 · Tara's Error

Early in the morning in Videhapur in 2041, when Tara Mallik unlocked the old cupboard in her office, the smell of rotting paper came out. Among the turmeric-coloured files on an iron rack, the corner of the photocopy Jharna had asked to inspect the previous day was still folded. Across it, in red letters, stood "Consent Obtained." Tara touched the edge of the lettering with her nail. The signature was not hers, but the annotation came from her office, and the annotation had been treated as a mark of reliability in three subsequent decisions. She did not shut the file again.

When Padma arrived, Tara first gave her the inspection ledger she had written by hand. "I did not prepare this document," she said, "but when it came to my desk, I did not look at the original. If I certified consent in the name of our office, the fault no longer belonged only to the person who made the copy." Padma checked the date on the first page. The photocopy bore a reference to consent at an old residents' meeting, but the attendance register for that date showed that the meeting had been convened solely to arrange safe cleaning at the drainage outlet. Neither a donation nor the handing over of private documents had been discussed.

Aditi, the engineer, arrived carrying a roll of verified survey drawings. She had a copy of the old technical permission, which authorised "entry to the site for inspection." Tara placed it beneath the photocopy. Several phrases appeared in the same order, but the first line of the photocopy added "permanent use." "That is not a small difference," Aditi said. "Permission to inspect the water is not consent to give away land." Both women were now sure that the meaning of the document had been changed. Whose hand had done it, and for what purpose, remained unproven.

A notice of a meeting of Jharna's new committee had been sent for noon. Tara wanted the error recorded in the register before then. Beside her name she wrote: "Error of accepting a party's consent as certified without examining the original evidence." Her hand trembled as she wrote. She remembered an old knotted sample her father, Shyam Mallik, had shown her. He had taught her that one wrong knot in a woven structure did not require breaking every piece of bamboo to remove it, but a hidden knot could catch someone's foot. Tara did not turn the memory into proof of her innocence.

The annual day for opening the drainage outlet had come round again. A red flag was drying under the peepal tree. Only the removal of grass was permitted in the safe area beside the landing. Ramani Bind lifted a small fishing net and showed that the silt within the mouth of the outlet had not yet been cleared. Phoolmati Tiyar warned that lowering heavy tools without measurements could change both the passage of her nets and the water reaching the fields. Hira Sahni drove in a small stake. "Today's work is marking the points and cleaning the safe edge," he said. "Don't record that the entire outlet has been opened in the name of the festival."

Padma read the first page of the assembly papers and passed the document to Tara. Standing in the doorway, Tara said, “This document came from the office of my side. I made ‘Consent Obtained’ a public basis for decisions, yet I do not possess the original sheet of signatures. The authentic attendance ledger says something different. The validity of the decisions founded on that annotation must therefore be examined again.” Mahendra immediately asked, “Are you saying you wrote the lie yourself?” “I shall say what I know,” Tara replied. “The false annotation was issued from my office, and I used it without verification. Who made the signature remains to be investigated.”

Mahendra’s aunt rose from the back. A temporary plank had been laid beside her house, forcing her to make a detour to reach the water. “I was present at the meeting,” she said, “but I never agreed to give away land. If today a document turns my attendance into permission, how will I protect my home tomorrow?” Tara did not interrupt her. Jharna immediately issued a written order: no new permanent acquisition or transfer of private records could be based on the disputed letter. The earlier safe arrangement for temporary passage would continue.

Shyam Mallik took three different pieces of an old bamboo lattice from his bag. The first was a screen for enclosing fish, the second a section of a basket, the third a sample showing the safe width for placing a foot. “That paper says I made every section from the beginning,” he said. “But Tara Binout tied the knots in this third piece. How did the new measurements I supplied become money for an old transaction?” There was no anger at his daughter in Shyam’s voice, only unease. To receive credit that was wrong was, to him, also a betrayal of trust.

Tara Binout raised the wooden strip and set it alongside the piece in Shyam’s hand. “Three knots are his; the broad notch is mine,” she said. “Under the earlier municipal contract the payment was received in the family’s name, but no separate line was entered for my wages. Put both our names on the new sample, and disclose how much was received under the old agreement.” Shyam remained silent for a moment. He admitted that an advance from an earlier customer had once been spent on household needs; the written accounts did not clearly show what portion belonged to Tara Binout. He agreed to open the old ledger himself.

On examining the ledger, a new difficulty appeared. There were two receipts for the same order: one for buying bamboo, the other for weaving it. Shyam’s son argued that both payments had been received by the family together, so a fresh claim for wages would be a duplication. Tara Binout set the pierced sample before him. “Buying bamboo and tying its knots were different kinds of work. I am not asking for the money twice. I want to know how what was paid was divided.” Jharna did not fix an amount immediately. The dispute over earlier dues would remain open until the original bank receipts and the family ledger could be reconciled. Joint credit on the new safety design was recorded that day.

In the box belonging to Rekha Sahu Laheri lay three lac bangles. The hand-shaped edge of the red lac was slightly uneven: a machine operator

called it a defect, while customers said it was the mark of a human hand. Rekha reopened her earlier proposal. She would pay fixed charges for machine time, electricity, and safety, but ownership of her original pattern based on the river's curve would remain hers. Nasim, who owned the machine, said production testing would be difficult without a digital copy of the design. "Keep a copy for testing," Rekha replied, "not for reproduction without end."

A line was drawn on the paper between the two sides. The pattern could be used for a trial of forty bangles; permission would have to be sought again for further production. The craftswoman's name would not be removed from the goods, but customers' private measurements would not be used in public advertising. The risk of goods destroyed by a machine failure would be shared in an agreed proportion, not borne by Rekha alone. Reading the paper, Nasim asked, "And if we lose money in the market?" "Then we shall both find out whether this really is a partnership," Rekha said. The first testing fee reached her hands in advance. Signing this paper did not close the earlier case concerning unauthorised copies.

On the back bench of the assembly, Sakib Abdal placed two old bags before him. One held receipts for public contributions toward cleaning the drainage outlet; the other records of private transport charges and household provisions. "I was accused before of treating public donations and my livelihood as the same money," he said. "I showed two ledgers. But the rope for the last public job was bought from my shop, and its receipt was not properly disclosed." Tara was weary after hearing the errors on her own side, but she did not dismiss Sakib's account as merely another unresolved case.

The original bill for rope bought from Sakib's shop was found, but one receipt had added a charge for private haulage. He admitted that no separate slip had been issued for the labour of lifting the sacks because both payments had occurred on the same day. "Transport charges are my livelihood, not a donation," he said. Padma matched a cheque receipt to a cash voucher. The cost of the public rope purchase was verified; a portion of the transport payment still awaited bank confirmation. Sakib tied red thread around his new private ledger and blue around the bag of public receipts.

Sakib himself said that future donations would not be deposited in his private shop. The money would go to the committee's independent treasurer, and if his vehicle were needed, freight would be paid at an openly stated rate. "After so many conditions, will people trust you?" a young man asked. "Trust won't be made by my mouth," Sakib replied. "It will be made when people see both accounts." He accepted a temporary hold on the disputed transport item. It increased the strain on his household expenses for the week, but reduced the uncertainty over the balance of public contributions.

Tara returned to the microphone. This time she read the written sequence of her error: the original attendance register, the actual permission for technical inspection, the altered photocopy, and the false annotation "Consent Obtained" sent out from the office on the strength of that copy. "Today I withdraw that annotation," she said. "Any decision resting solely on this paper requires a new hearing. But the actual measurements of safe work

done before this document must be examined separately." Jharna had the public register marked: "Invalid basis; independent examination of genuinely completed safe work."

Mahendra rose again. "Today Tara apologises; tomorrow officials will make another mistake. How many times must the public listen to this?" he asked. Champa set water beside an elderly woman seated in front. "The answer is not simply to bow one's head," she said. "It is to establish a regular means of examination." Jharna announced three firm dates: objections from affected families within seven days; a search for the original register and distribution of secure copies within fifteen; and an independent hearing within thirty. If the original document could not be found, however, the creator of the false signature would not be named by conjecture.

Meanwhile the water beside the mouth of the drainage channel was catching in the fine grass. Aditi marked two measuring points on the safe slope, but gave no permission to lower heavy equipment into the closed opening. Gomati Beldar said the earlier work list contained a separate wage for carrying earth, not an order to block the outlet. Phoolmati Tiyar dried her net on the grass. She saw some children bending toward the water to look for fish again and sent them to a safe place. Correcting a false paper did not mean postponing the safety of children.

In the afternoon Tara Mallik sat beside her father, Shyam. A small old bamboo splinter was lodged in a joint of his finger. She drew it out with tweezers. "Will you judge me wrong too?" she asked. "We must account for the wrong deed," Shyam answered, "but I will not reduce your whole name to one mistake. I must open the accounts of my own old dealings as well." There was no easy forgiveness in his voice. The silence between father and daughter showed that each would have to hear the other again. Tara bound a clean dressing around the slight wound on his hand.

That evening the ledger was opened at Tara Binout's house. Shyam's family wrote down the dates of the old customer orders again. The days of Tara Binout's own labour were entered on that page for the first time. "We shall not decide the amount today," she said, "but my work will not remain nameless." Shyam agreed that the woven sample had never been one person's invention alone: inherited practices of both families had developed alongside the experiment with the new knot. This agreement would permit testing of the new safety strip to begin again; it did not close the old ledger of debts.

In Rekha Sahu's machine trial, the first four bangles emerged with equal curves; the end of the fifth split. Nasim switched off the machine and lifted the bangle. "We need a machine video to examine the loss," he said. Rekha consented on condition that the video remain solely in the joint testing record; public promotion would require separate permission. For the first time Nasim wrote in the account book in his own hand: "Rekha Sahu Laheri—Design." A small order for the following day became possible as a result. The injustices of the whole market had not been repaired in one night.

At Sakib's house, his young daughter lifted the bag with the blue thread and asked whether they would buy books with this money the next day. "That

is public donation money," Sakib said. "It isn't mine." The child pointed to the other bag. Little was left there of the private transport earnings. Sakib spoke to his wife about the difficult need to reduce their household expenditure. They agreed that correct bills would be issued for private carriage, but nothing would be taken from the public donations. His home had paid the first price of the new rule of public trust.

No one had asked about Jhingri, the woman worker whose name had earlier been struck off the list for safe drainage work. She came carrying an old receipt. On the strength of the altered photocopy's claim to "everyone's consent," her family had not been given time to object; meanwhile payment of two days' wages had been withheld. Jharna did not immediately declare the arrears paid. She had Jhingri's application entered again in the register and sent the wages officer a written order to verify one undisputed day of attendance. Jhingri tucked a copy of the paper into the fold of her sari. "It wasn't my signature," she said. "At least now my objection is written down."

By evening Padma had put up a "Corrected Notice" on the office door. The private signature on the false photocopy was not displayed with it. Only the false annotation, the different meaning of the authentic register, and the date for lodging objections were made public. "What if this paper is changed again?" a woman asked suspiciously. "Dated copies of this notice have been placed in three locations," Tara replied. "The office, the panchayat, and the beneficiaries' committee. If an amendment is made, the old version will not be crossed out and thrown away; another will be added." The woman asked for a copy and took it home to her daughter, who could read it.

When Jharna opened the objections box, the first letter was from Rukhsana. She wrote that although donated funds were recorded separately, the communal kitchen's grain, fuel, and daily wages were still entered in a single category. "We have corrected a false consent," her letter ended, "but when shall we look at the losses of those who cook the food?" Silently Jharna placed the paper first on the agenda for the next meeting. Tara gathered the remaining carbon copies of her correction. One accurate notice was not a cure for every false account. Today's correction had opened a place to hear another question.

That night beside the drainage channel, the cloth of the festival flag had become water-soaked and dark blue. Reaching home, Tara Mallik saw that her father Shyam had turned down the old lantern to save oil. On the table lay his woven sample and a copy of the public correction, apart from one another. Tara opened her ledger and wrote not "Criminal unknown," but "Author of the signature under investigation"; not "Consent established," but "Consent not established." The two statements were short, yet they changed an order that had been held over a family's land. She raised the lantern wick a little and left a blank page for the kitchen accounts of the following morning.

Chapter 187 · The Kitchen's Deficit

At four in the morning in Videhapur in 2041, Rukhsana stirred the ashes of the earthen stove and found a red ember still alive inside a half-burnt piece of wood from the previous day. She laid a little dry thatch over it, but before it caught fire her eyes went to the list of meal plates hanging by the door. At the top, in heavy letters, was written FORTY; beneath it, the approved quantity of grain would provide for only twenty-seven plates. The previous night a volunteer had added thirteen names in red ink, as though writing down a name and preparing a meal were the same task. Rukhsana put down the wood and took the list off its hook.

The mouth of the sack of lentils stored in a corner was not properly closed. Through a small hole gnawed by a rat, three handfuls of grain had spilled onto the floor. Rukhsana remembered her mother's way of recovering grain in the rainy season: separate what was clean from what was spoiled, then record the loss. She gathered the lentils, set her notebook beside the stove, and wrote that even less was available than the old list showed. Just then Jubaida arrived. “Light the fire. I'll see to the rest,” she said. Rukhsana replied, “Today we'll set the accounts alight before we light the fire.”

Jubaida looked at her palms. Salt and hot water had split the skin in two places; there was swelling at another. “Are you putting medicine on it?” she asked. Rukhsana smiled. “First these hands have to be free if I'm to apply medicine.” She described the past three days: requisitioning grain, checking purchase prices, washing vegetables, cooking, serving, washing the utensils, then writing up the ledger. Some of those hours people counted as 'service', some as 'management'; on the payment sheet her name had not appeared in full even once.

Only after sunrise did Jharna and Padma reach the shelter verandah. Having placed Rukhsana's letter first on the agenda at the previous meeting, Jharna now asked for the meal list and the grain ledger together. “We need forty plates today,” a worker said. “Otherwise what will the bedridden people eat?” Rukhsana said, “The hunger of those thirteen is not a lie. But to say that the money provided for twenty-seven will produce forty meals is a lie. You must decide where the grain will come from, and who will cook it.” The worker looked somewhat embarrassed; he had considered his responsibility discharged when he wrote down the names the night before.

Padma drew four columns on a slip of paper: grain received as donations, grain purchased from the market, fuel, and labour. Rukhsana added a fifth: loss from spoiled supplies. “If we record the loss, who will be held responsible for letting vegetables go bad?” Jharna asked. Rukhsana showed her two aubergines. One had been damaged from behind; the other had been crushed

in transit. “Whoever spoils things knowingly has a separate answer to give. But if ordinary wastage is entered as zero, either the seller or the woman cooking must make it up out of her own household. There must be a limit to that too.”

At the market, the fire in Raghu Sahu's roasting furnace had not yet grown fierce. Formerly, when the sun rose, labourers and students would buy roasted chickpeas there. Several relief camps had begun roasting their own grain, and customers at his furnace had dwindled. Jharna asked Raghu, “Can you roast two baskets of chickpeas today?” Raghu opened his old account book. “I can. But if a donor gives you the chickpeas, the grain is the donor's gift. My wood, my time, and the roasting are a different kind of work. I can reduce the price, but I cannot enter my work as zero.”

Raghu's little son was turning empty baskets upside down in a corner of the roasting shed. “Father, with so few customers, shall we shut down the second furnace?” he asked. Raghu looked at him for a moment. “Perhaps,” he said, “or the debt for firewood will grow. One order for the shelter kitchen won't bring back my old customers.” Jharna did not propose to add that loss to every outstanding debt of the shelter. She wrote an order for two specified days of roasting, with a price and a payment date. The fact that his old customers had gone did not disappear from that paper.

Chandrika Rai, the sweet-maker, was arranging sesame laddus in her shop. A boy was turning over an old receipt for seventy puas and trying to read it; there was a stain of oil on the corner of the paper. Rukhsana said, “We need help with serving today, but we won't write an estimated number of puas.” Chandrika bent over the receipt. “Last time a payment date was fixed for my seventy puas, but I still haven't received confirmation from the bank. If they say seventy again and only twenty are actually collected, who pays for what remains?” She had three separate conditions written down: prepared food, advance payment, and unsold stock.

Gurmeet Kaur arrived by bicycle with a small bag of utensils. Some women from her household had offered, of their own free will, to wash lentils; the following day they had work at the school. The organisers were calling this 'service from the gurdwara, unpaid labour'. Gurmeet corrected them quietly. “If someone volunteers for religious service, that person decides its duration and purpose. You cannot write down my name and take my time as a donation every day. This time I'll reconcile the accounts for an agreed payment. There will still be opportunities to volunteer on other days.” The attempt to turn her religion into an endless contract for free work stopped there.

During the day, a purchasing centre for the relief kitchen opened in one corner of the fish-and-makhana workers' fairground. Phoolmati Tiyar showed the certified weight of the fish caught that morning. On the hands of the women who sorted makhana were old marks left by the glue used in processing. A supplier said, “It's for relief; give us a wholesale rate. The workers

can sort out their shares later." Phoolmati pulled her basket back at once. "The price of my fish has to pay for boat fuel, stitching the nets, and the wages of those who hauled them up," she said. Dhaniya, one of the makhana sorters, showed her worn, brittle nails. Both groups had their wages and purchase prices recorded separately.

At the buying counter an old man asked, "If you make so many accounts for relief food, when will the poor eat?" Rukhsana did not close her notebook. "They will eat today. That is my first responsibility," she answered. "But how will the children of the people whose fields, nets, and hands supplied this food eat tomorrow? That is also a question." Jharna showed the limit on the funds immediately available. Cheaper vegetables could be found, but a consignment that was half rotten would endanger the patients. In the end they decided on a smaller, safe purchase. The number of plates was rewritten to match the supplies actually available.

Salman, Rukhsana's younger brother from their Rain-Kujra family, arrived with three bundles of wet greens. When he opened them, yellowing patches showed among the leaves. "If these stay in the market until evening, they won't be fit to sell," he said. "Take what's good; the rest is my loss." Rukhsana stopped him. "I won't charge the buyer for spoiled stock you could already identify. But I won't leave out the cost of bringing fresh greens to market this morning." Their voices grew a little sharp. Affection between brother and sister did not turn two separate commercial accounts into one.

At noon Chandrika lowered the heat of her furnace and came to the community meeting. The first board for the Shared Kitchen and Wages Day hung at the school entrance. One line read, 'Relief will be given free of charge'; the next, 'The labour of those who prepare relief will not be regarded as free.' Some people could not understand how the two statements went together. Chandrika lifted a plate. "We do not ask those who receive the food to pay. Payment will come from the fund, donations, and the public budget. On a day when there is no money, everyone must first be told of the shortage; it must not be hidden from the women in the kitchen alone."

Jharna proposed that purchases should be approved in advance for each round of meals; the actual plate count should be verified afterwards; and hourly rates for kitchen work should be decided in the presence of all the workers. Rukhsana objected immediately. "Record the time for rest along with the hours worked. You cannot have one woman work with the same body from the morning fire to the washing-up at night, and then simply write another woman's name when her hands can do no more." After those words Jubaida herself showed everyone the dressing on Rukhsana's hand.

A member proposed creating a new category called 'community servant', whose workers would receive food and respect instead of money. Gurmeet asked, "Someone freely gives two hours of their time—that is one thing. You

assign someone a six-day duty and deprive them of wages by calling them a servant—that is something else. The first requires written consent; the second belongs in the employment account." Displeasure showed on the member's face, but he entered his objection to the collective decision. The argument was no longer only about Rukhsana's complaint.

Rukhsana was silent for a while. In that silence she remembered her mother returning from the market with damaged aubergines, cutting away the spoiled skin and making the children's evening meal. Her mother used to say that nothing should go to waste in a poor household's kitchen. But she had never said that a woman who cooked had no end to her working day. Today, for the first time, Rukhsana put that invisible limit into a public sentence: "Within the next three days I will have one whole day of rest. On that day a team, not one replacement woman, will be responsible for the meals."

Jharna read the budget paper again. Once wages, fuel, purchases, transport, and safe storage were all added up, the portion of the grant previously announced was shrinking. Mahendra asked, "Then people will say that fewer plates are available since the new chairperson took office." Jharna set down her glass. "If they say it, I'll answer. I won't inflate the number first and then withhold the workers' pay." She publicly proposed reducing expenditure under other publicity headings in the fund. The next consignment of printed banners was deferred.

The first test of the new rule was not easy. The approved supplies for twenty-seven plates yielded enough rice for seven additional plates, but vegetables and fuel for them could not immediately be arranged. Champa asked whether the meals needed for medical reasons would be delayed. Rukhsana showed her the priority register: the prescribed meals for patients would come first; the timing of the remaining general relief plates would change. Jharna authorised a small public emergency expense for seven additional plates. Food available from another centre was confirmed for the other new names. No one's name was simply crossed out and removed.

In the evening Raghu's first batch of roasted chickpeas arrived. As the basket was opened, hot steam rose in the verandah. Padma separated the receipt for roasting from the name of the person who had donated the grain. Raghu examined the ledger. "Today's price is fair," he said, "but tomorrow I will still have as few customers as I did yesterday." Rukhsana replied, "We cannot restore the market for your roasting furnace overnight. But we will not lose sight of the price of work we ask you to do." They went back to their respective tasks without shaking hands; there was an honest trust in that clarity.

At Chandrika's shop word came that part of the payment on the old receipt for seventy puas had reached her account. She showed Rukhsana the little bank slip. "One part has arrived. Remember the date written down for the

rest." She laughed, but the edge of grievance had not vanished from her laughter. She agreed to a limited advance on the new food order. Once the small margin of profit had been openly stated, the money remaining in the donation fund diminished. Gurmeet said this reduction was not mistaken expenditure; it was the making visible of payments that had previously been hidden.

At the last meeting of the night Gurmeet signed her account. She entered the volunteer's two hours that day as unpaid service—with consent. Rukhsana's six hours of kitchen management went onto the regular payment list. The actual time Jubaida had spent cleaning utensils was entered separately. Later a new member said that so many small categories had made the ledger difficult. Gurmeet replied calmly, "Previously that difficulty was hidden in people's bodies. Now it is visible on paper. That is the beginning of an improvement."

Jharna read the assembly's final proposal: trial rates for one month, a weekly public review, an advance fund for emergency meals, confidentiality of individual health records, and a monthly register of rest days. The trial rates would not become the final permanent standard for wages; they would be reconsidered in the light of workers' disagreements and local market rates. Mahendra wrote down a line of dissent; no one stopped him. But by the collective decision of the assembly, Rukhsana would no longer bear sole responsibility for preparing the next day's food. Her next full day of rest was fixed.

Separately, in ancient Dwaraka, one morning after the festival had ended Krishna was looking at a bamboo platform remaining near the sea. Half its poles had fallen, and some ropes were still in the royal storehouse. An elderly cook said that the names of the donors of grain had been sung during the festival, but not those of the maidservants who had tended the fires. One of Samba's companions said that the food had been made possible by the royal family's donation, so why keep separate accounts? The old woman lifted the scraper from the hearth and answered, "Donated grain does not cook itself." Krishna did not interrupt her.

Balarama asked the storehouse guard to measure the grain that remained. Some had spoiled in its containers; the rest was still in usable storage. A young man of the royal family said that for the glory of the festival all the grain should be entered together as a donation. Krishna said, "The grain that was eaten, the grain that spoiled, and the hands that cooked it—each tells a separate truth." He directed that the old woman and her fellow workers receive the grain owed to them and days of rest. The storehouse door opened, but the contempt simmering within the royal family did not end.

Back in Videhapur in 2041, a new list was hung outside the kitchen on the morning of the third day. Beside Rukhsana's name stood the word 'Rest'; on

the next line were the assigned hours, duties, and rates of pay for Jubaida and two trained workers. Champa was reassured when she read the quantities of food. Separate instructions were entered for patients needing less salt, but the names of their private illnesses were not displayed on the public board. Rukhsana came to the doorway first to check the arrangements, then picked up her bag and went home.

When she reached home, her younger brother Salman was returning from the market. He put down a box of vegetables and asked, “Not going to the shelter today?” “Today the others will do my work,” Rukhsana said. Salman could scarcely believe it. “What will you do all day, then?” he asked. “First I'll wash my hands. After that, whatever I please.” Her wrist was still swollen, but this answer awaited no one's employment, grant, or permission.

Rukhsana sat in the courtyard for half an hour without opening an account book. A little girl from next door came with glass marbles. Rukhsana told her to put aside the one with a chipped edge, then watched her play with the new ones. After so many days it was a child's laughter, not the clatter of utensils, that filled her ears. At noon she baked herself a thin roti: no measured number of plates, no announcement of a donation, no slip bearing anybody's name. There was no ghee on the bread, but the time in which she ate it belonged to her alone.

When the evening breeze came, Gurmeet sent a short message: 'Food served; all workers' hours recorded; next review on Monday.' Rukhsana read the paper and folded it without opening her notebook. In the distance smoke rose from the shelter's stove. The fire burned where it belonged, without summoning her to run from her own doorway. From the old cloth bag that had been her mother's she took a handkerchief with a blue border, laid it over her head, and sat watching the evening wind. No story of anyone's salvation was written that day; one woman had regained her own time.

Chapter 188 · The Market for Tools

At the first hammer blow of morning, two clear grooves appeared in the thin iron resting on Harinarayan Sharma's anvil. The forge had not yet become fully red. Ajit held a measuring rule in one hand and an old order slip in the other. Before them lay three unfinished objects: a ring for securing a boat's rope, a hook for opening the mesh of an embankment barrier, and a ploughshare for a field. A fourth object was inside a small sealed box that its customer had never collected. Someone outside called, “Are we opening the tool market today, or should we inform the police first?” The hammering stopped.

Lifting the iron away from the fire, Harinarayan answered, “What we sell in the market has a measurement, a use, and a customer's order. Anything whose origin is unclear will not be sold.” Ajit went towards the box, but his father did not tell him to open it. A nameless receipt four months old was stuck to the lid; in someone's handwriting it said only 'metal plate'. The same kind of vague wording had once allowed hospital equipment, a photograph of unrelated ironwork, and his workshop to be woven into a single story of crime. There was still nothing in the inquiry papers proving that the object in the box had been made by him.

Banners for the Boat-and-Tool Testing Festival were being hung along the road from the town landing to the market. Boatmen at the landing were checking the grips of their oars; potters were displaying scrapers used to repair the handles of broken water pots; farmers were comparing the shapes of ploughshares. This year, for the first time, a separate lane had been designated for legitimate repair parts and metal tools. Rama Karna's public notice stated that the fair was a place for technical demonstrations and trading, not a substitute for a criminal investigation or comprehensive safety certification. Some merchants wanted that last line removed. A stamp saying 'government tested' would increase sales.

Ajit brought out the old list of customers and placed it beside his father. The cancelled order for Nandlal's ploughshare, abandoned by the family after they saw a frightening photograph, was still an empty page. “I have three months' rent for the forge to pay,” he said, “and even after our name was cleared, those people did not return. What if they begin talking about the old allegation at the market?” Harinarayan laid down his hammer. “Truth isn't like iron that becomes straight at once when put into the fire,” he said. “Today we shall show what these things are actually used for. But I cannot erase the loss of business from our records because a frightened customer has stayed away.”

Kamlesh Dabgar was arranging two earthen pitchers, thread for joining a shoe strap, and a bamboo mould on the counter of his little shop. Though the

rains were over, the wall in the southern corner was still damp. A representative of the landlord arrived with a thin blue file. In the previous dispute a proposed drainage-repair charge had been added to the rent as though the work had already been paid for in full; the public measurement register had since exposed the discrepancy. Today the representative produced a new contract: a moderate rise in rent, but twice the advance deposit. Kamlesh read the page and remained silent for a long while. The difficulty of clearing his old debts showed on his face, but he had no desire to accept a false charge.

"I won't put the loss of goods spoiled in the last flood onto the landlord's account," Kamlesh said. "That's my business loss. But I won't pay the whole charge for drainage work that is still unfinished. Remove that sentence from the contract." The representative snapped, "Now that the market's grown, every shopkeeper has become a leader of the assembly!" Kamlesh poured a bowl of water into a repaired pitcher. A thin drop leaked through the seam. "Look at this. I haven't handed this to a customer calling the repair complete. I won't certify your unfinished drain as complete either." He emptied the pitcher again and set it to one side.

Salim the farrier arrived on a bicycle, with his old horseshoe-making box and a new vehicle-training case strapped to it. In the old box were two sizes of horseshoes, pincers, and a hammer; in the new were a brake-testing notebook, a measuring rule, and practice sheets signed by his instructor. His father stopped the bicycle and asked, "Are you opening a shop for new machines?" Salim said, "I'm still a trainee. I'll inspect the wheels and simple joints of old handcarts; a qualified inspector will give the final certificate for motor-vehicle brakes." His father ran a hand over a pair of horseshoes. "And all these things?" "Memories, and work for the customers who still need them," Salim replied.

At the entrance to the market a group of young people were taking photographs of the artisans. One of them wanted to crop a picture of Harinarayan's long hook and post it alongside the familiar old allegation. Jharna stopped him. "If you photograph an object, record its proper name and obtain its owner's permission. The case of the old suspicious consignment is under separate investigation." "We want safety," the young man replied. "Safety requires accurate information," Jharna said. "It isn't my job to declare anyone innocent on behalf of the police, and I have no right to call an ordinary hook a weapon and destroy someone's livelihood." A woman in the crowd asked what could prevent such an object being misused. Jharna spoke of open demonstrations, secure storage, and written receipts for purchases.

A police officer arrived with two colleagues. Harinarayan lowered the forge fire and invited them to the anvil. The officer carried a separate seizure inventory for an old, sealed box of metal pieces. The inventory made a preliminary reference to parts connected with weapons, but no final

determination of their technical origin had been made. “I will not sell this unclaimed box,” Harinarayan said. “Keep your own box secure for examination,” the officer replied. “It cannot be identified with the old police-seized box without proof of a match.” Ajit asked, “Then why did they call my father a criminal?” The officer said, “I did not write the words used in the old public reports. In the inspection available to us, no basis for that allegation was found in your ordinary tools made to order. We'll give you a written statement of the position.”

For Harinarayan, those few words could not fully heal four months of humiliation. The police receipt carried no everlasting seal declaring him innocent; it stated only that the inspected goods were consistent with legitimate orders. He placed a copy of the receipt before customers, but kept the unresolved slip concerning the sealed box shut away separately. “What has a clear use deserves its own market,” he told Ajit. “But you cannot make something true by striking an anvil when its origin is unknown.” For the first time Ajit stood without fear at the customers' table holding the police slip, though in his other hand he still carried the pages of cancelled orders.

Near the landing, the first boatman came to buy a ring. He showed the thickness of his rope, and Harinarayan measured the ring's internal diameter. Lalit Vishwakarma was called to inspect the wooden support; Aditi said the limits of water level and load would need to be recorded in writing. “I'll test the joint on this ring,” Harinarayan said, “but I cannot say the entire route to the landing is safe without a separate examination.” The boatman grew irritated. “Is this a festival of testing or a festival of questions?” Lalit replied, “If the first boat lists under a heavy load, the next boatman's life becomes the question. Today every object must have the limits of its testing made clear.”

Meanwhile a small goods-vehicle owner called Salim over. When the wheel revolved, there was a slight metallic scraping. “I need a certificate for the motor today,” the owner said. “It will get me a freight order.” Salim raised the wheel on a secure support and found that an ordinary joint was loose, but examining the internal brake parts required specialised equipment. He wrote two lines on the order: he would make a limited repair to the handcart axle; the motor's safety inspection must go to his instructor. “Will you put both under one price?” the owner asked. “If I give them one price, one risk will be hidden behind the other,” Salim said.

Salim's father listened from a distance. It seemed to him that his son was diminishing the value of the ancestral craft. But when Salim pointed to the grooves of an old horseshoe and told the children how iron was cooled, his father smiled. “Your great-grandfather used to take the measure for that shoe by hand,” he said. “I remember the measurement,” Salim answered. “But if the brakes are tightened wrongly, the vehicle will skid. That's why I'm learning a new skill.” He asked his instructor for written acknowledgment of the next instalment of his stipend. His earnings had fallen during his part-

time training; finding new customers at the market could not immediately make up the shortfall.

By noon the question of Kamlesh's shop had reached the assembly table. This time the landlord's representative struck out the words 'drainage repair complete', but was still demanding two months' security deposit. Kamlesh produced a short calculation: he could pay one additional month's deposit in instalments; paying the second month's deposit would hold up the money for his elderly mother's medicines. Jharna said the municipality would not dictate the rent of a private shop, but a disputed charge for the public route must not be inserted into a new contract. The representative argued that the board outside the shop affected passage along the customer route. Kamlesh agreed to remove his board at specified hours rather than claim permanent occupation of the passage.

Agreement did not come at once. “If you don't pay the advance, the renewal will be for one month only,” the representative said. Kamlesh faced the risk of uncertainty after a single month. School fees for his child, fewer customers at the market, thread spoiled in the old rains—every expense was written down. Finally a new two-month contract was drawn up: one instalment of the deposit in the first month, the second on a fixed date; the public drainage-repair charge was removed; and the landlord's legitimate building-maintenance obligations would appear on a separate line. Signing, Kamlesh said, “This doesn't recover the value of the stock that was spoiled. But at least I can open my door tomorrow.” The representative entered a dissenting note that the rent for the next renewal would be discussed again.

A trader came to Harinarayan with an offer to buy twenty hooks together, without the names of the customers, in exchange for a fixed price. “The accusation against your goods has fallen apart,” he said. “Sell without hesitation now. I'll take responsibility for their use.” Harinarayan asked, “On what paper are the hooks' dimensions, the metal grade, the final buyer, and the terms for returns entered?” The trader said that confidential dealing was a wholesaler's right. Harinarayan refused the unspecified consignment. Behind him Ajit said softly, “Father, that much money would cover our earlier loss.” His father looked up. “We won't make good our losses by sending goods back into the same darkness that brought our name under suspicion.”

News of the refusal spread through the market. One young man joked, “Now even a blacksmith has become a lawyer!” Rekha Sahu held up the receipt for her limited production of bangles. “Writing down the limits of work doesn't mean abandoning the work. I've been given measurements for forty bangles, so I must be paid for that work. If someone uses my name to print hundreds of copies, questions will arise.” Farzana, the bangle-maker, agreed. Her prices for lac, glass, and machine-made bangles were kept separate; she had already suffered from concealing different products under a single name. The customers listened, though not all of them liked the rules.

In a corner of the market Rama Karna read a line on a board headed 'Authorised Trade'. One organisation had proposed that the right to display the board be given to it: only artisans who paid annual membership fees would be allowed to sell there. Shabnam asked how much registration and necessary safety inspections actually cost, and who would benefit from the fee. It emerged that half the proposed sum had been allocated to private publicity for the exhibition. Jharna said, “We will not create another monopoly in the name of rules. Legitimate goods must be examined on equal terms for everyone, but membership for publicity will be voluntary.” The objection was recorded, and the private company's board was suspended.

Then an old farmer leaning on a stick arrived at Harinarayan's table. It was Nandlal, whose family had previously stopped the order for a ploughshare. At the sight of him Ajit suddenly went away on the pretext of bringing water. Nandlal took out his phone with the old photograph on it. “This frightened me,” he said. “I don't want police in my fields.” Harinarayan showed him an actual ploughshare, its mark, and the order slip. “I won't deny that you were afraid,” he said. “But the full use of the object in the cropped photograph was different. If you wish, I can make one share first; you needn't place the rest of the order.”

Nandlal looked towards Ajit's empty place. “My delay cost you money,” he said. “I can't pay back the entire loss. But I'll pay a fair price for one ploughshare.” He took out a small advance. Harinarayan neither lowered the price nor raised it. The advance receipt recorded the actual measurements and the delivery date. When Nandlal had gone, Ajit asked, “Will all the customers return now?” “One has returned,” Harinarayan said. “I don't yet know how many won't.” Only after hearing that answer did Ajit write tomorrow's new date for the first time on the page of cancelled orders.

Towards the end of the afternoon the police officer returned. The inspection receipt for the unclaimed box and the test report for ordinary tools were in separate envelopes. The officer said the source of the old seized box of metal pieces was still under investigation; no connection with this fair had been established. Instead of opening the unclaimed box himself, Harinarayan signed an official acknowledgment and handed it over through the secure procedure. “It doesn't bear my maker's mark,” he said, “so I won't guess that it is mine—or someone else's.” The officer gave Ajit a copy of the receipt.

Meanwhile the fair committee proposed publishing all the traders' sales figures together. Salim said his inspection work fell within the limits of his training and was not full vehicle certification. Kamlesh asked whether his temporary rent settlement would be counted as a market achievement or whether his private contract would be disclosed. Jharna announced the decision: the committee would publish only aggregated figures by category, not individual customers' addresses; and the fair itself would issue no testing certificate for which approval by an authorised institution was required. Ajit

pinned up a new slip: 'Artisan's name, scope of work, limits of inspection, payment due.'

In the evening the collective demonstration for the Boat-and-Tool Testing Festival began at the landing. Hira Mech showed how to untie and retie a rope knot; Phoolmati Tiyar stitched a torn section of net; Lalit demonstrated the measurements of a wooden plank; Salim tightened the wheel of an empty handcart and explained the limits of his inspection. An organiser on the stage wanted to announce that all the tools on display had been certified 'completely safe'. Aditi took the microphone. “The scope of what was tested today has been recorded. Without measurements of water level, heavy loads, and actual use, there can be no broader certification.” There was less applause, but the boatmen at the landing began asking for copies of that notice.

Meanwhile Kamlesh placed his new rental agreement in a chest inside the shop and tested the repaired seam of the pitcher once more. Today no water leaked out. He returned the pitcher to its customer, without forgetting to point out the mark of the old crack. Salim received a short message from his instructor: his name had been entered for the coming examination, and a written assurance had been given that the outstanding portion of his stipend would be paid on the next payment date; the money was not yet in the bank. Harinarayan counted the evening's sales. Three objects had been sold, an advance on one ploughshare had arrived, and two orders were still unfinished. The debt was not paid off, but the forge had not closed either.

As the sun set, Ajit picked up a small nail glinting in the darkness beside the anvil. “If this nail goes into the wrong hands, it can hurt someone,” he said. “Should we stop making nails, then?” Without taking the nail from his son's palm, Harinarayan replied, “Keep three questions separate: what an object was made for, to whom it was given, and which hand misused it. If we see something suspicious, we mustn't conceal it. But if all iron is called the same crime, even the making of ploughshares will stop.” Ajit put the nail into its proper groove. Outside, ordinary people were returning along the landing road carrying the tools they had bought.

Beside the sea in ancient Dwaraka, in a time separate from this modern one, Balarama was examining metal vessels left over from a festival of the royal clan. One bore the family emblem, but nowhere was the name of the labourer who had lifted it. In the distance some young men were laughing and quarrelling with Krishna. Balarama put the vessel down. He felt that even among those whom he called his own family, the lesson of acknowledging ordinary workers' rights remained unfinished. He gave no immediate royal command. Instead he sat down there first to listen to the account of meals and utensils still owed to the workers. As he listened, a distance opening within him from his own side became clear to him for the first time.

Chapter 189 · Balarama's Distance

At dawn on the seashore of ancient Dwaraka, a metal plate lay upside down. A thin film of oil from the previous day's feast clung to the inside, while the emblem of the royal family shone on the outside. Balarama lifted it and found two marks: one made by a goldsmith, the other a number traced in charcoal by a guard. The name of the plate's owner was clear, but nowhere was there a name for those who had washed it, carried it, or guarded it through the night. He set the plate down again and sat at the storehouse doorway. The sea wind carried the smell of stale liquor along with the salt.

Kailash, an elderly labourer from the landing, came pressing a hand against his knee. His son had dismantled the bamboo platform for the royal festival, but the ledger recorded two days' work instead of three. Balarama asked, “Why didn't you say so yesterday?” Kailash answered, “I did. But each time someone took your name and said the ceremony was over, that raising a question now would insult the royal family.” For a moment Balarama watched his reflection in the plate. The shadow of his name had reached a dispute in which he himself had not been present.

Two young men came down to the landing, laughing coarsely. “Must an assembly now sit over every knot in a rope?” one asked. “In times of victory no one reads so many ledgers.” The other kicked the edge of a vessel. It rolled and came to rest beside Kailash. Balarama stopped them. “If victory is so great for all of you, why has the work of these people become so small?” The first young man studied his face. “Since childhood you have taught us weapons and strength. Now we use our strength, and you frighten us for it.”

The question opened many scenes of old training within Balarama. Clubs in the children's hands, sand under their feet; the more forceful the blow, the louder the cheers. He had told them that the first duty of a weapon was restraint. But had he himself taught the victorious child to lift the other child back onto his feet? He could not remember. Instead of seizing the young man's hand, he picked up the vessel the youth had kicked, set it on the workers' table, and said, “I bear my share of what I failed to teach. But what you do now is also your own decision.”

Krishna was coming down the narrow steps above the landing at that moment. Balarama laid the storehouse accounts before him. Krishna counted: the quantity of grain remaining did not match the expenditure slips. Some plates were missing, but the discrepancy did not establish the identity of a thief. “The investigation must begin with our own people,” Krishna said. Balarama replied, “If we shield anyone by calling them our people, part of the wrong will be mine too. But it would be equally untrue to dismiss every young man as part of one guilty group.” This time they marked separate pages of the account book without arguing.

That afternoon a young woman stood on the path to the water vessels. Her mother's house was behind the landing, where rubbish from the night's festivities had piled up. “The laughter of the royal family has flowed into the water of our home,” she said. A guard promised that the royal household would send a cleaning party. “When?” the woman asked. “How will my mother fetch water today?” Rather than order his servant to bring water, Balarama asked her which route could be opened immediately. She pointed out a narrow old footpath. The guard was removed from it, and separate workers were called to carry out the remaining cleaning.

The evening assembly grew heated again. Young men sitting with Samba said that publicising the morning's complaints against the royal family was diminishing the glory of the Yadavas. An old boatman answered, “Call me a Yadava or a boatman; what I need is a passage for my boat.” One young man declared harshly that outsiders were breaking the unity of the royal line. For the first time Balarama stated his responsibility before everyone: “The people you call outsiders did not create the problem at the landing. We closed the doors of our celebrations in the faces of those who served us. I did not bring what I had seen before the assembly in time. My silence too is part of this breach.”

His words were followed by a moment's silence. Then another young man asked, “If you admit that you are at fault, who gives you the right to lead us?” Balarama's hand moved instinctively to the grip of his mace, but he released it. “My right to lead did not come from my father's name, nor will forgiveness come from the name of my clan,” he said. “Examine the means of repairing the damage. I will not forcibly close a question I do not understand.” He left his seat in the assembly and sat down on a lower step. Some of the young men called him weak; others remained silent.

Returning to Krishna, Balarama said that for a few days he would withdraw from the royal family's daily festivities and decisions and practise austerities independently beside the sea. “Does this distance extend to the people's questions as well?” Krishna asked. Balarama shook his head. “No. I am not running from those questions. But my presence is treated as the final answer in every dispute; we must make room to hear other voices. I am not abandoning my written responsibility for examining the verified dues that fall to my share.” Krishna took a copy of that undertaking. He did not try to stop Balarama.

In Videhapur in 2041, in a time entirely separate from that ancient maritime story, Bhola Yadav arrived at the public kitchen in the morning with two containers of milk. A small receipt slipped out from beneath a wet sack. Rukhsana had returned to work after her day of rest; she first lifted the lid of the vessel and checked the smell of the milk, then inserted the measuring rod. “Keep today's milk price clear,” Bhola said. “First count

separately what was owed for the earlier four days." Jharna opened the accounts chest.

Bhola spread out his slips. The price for two days had already been paid; the quantities for the remaining two were being checked against the old distribution register. Today the measurement, recipient's signature, and bank receipt were found together on one line. Jharna forwarded the committee-approved sum for payment. "A payment order is not the same as money in the bank," Bhola said. He sold the milk and went home, but at noon he opened the bank notification on his phone. The outstanding amount had indeed reached his account. He called his daughter. "Now I've been paid for all four days' milk. The discrepancy in the relief-name list is another matter."

This time Bhola came before the kitchen council for more than his own payment. He carried slips for two village families. One family regularly received milk assistance; the other family's child had been left off the list despite having the same medical need. "The accounts for the milk I sell have been settled," Bhola said. "Now I will testify to what I have seen myself. But don't blame the other family on the basis of guesses about their name." Jharna did not make either family's private health papers public; she made public the eligibility criteria and the period for appeal.

Mahendra objected. "Bhola has a business of his own. The more families are added to the list, the more milk he'll sell." Bhola answered directly, "I may indeed profit. That is why my vote must not count in setting the price. But why should that take away my right to report the facts about a child whose name has been left out?" The council decided that milk sellers could provide information but eligibility would be determined by an independent committee. One family's appeal went forward for immediate hearing; the other's approval was not cancelled without cause. For the first time Bhola closed his accounts book and put two different papers into separate envelopes.

At the tool market, Nazir Sikilgar was working a file over the edge of an old chisel. The tarpaulins remaining from yesterday's Boat-and-Tool Testing Festival fluttered in the wind. The old allegation written in charcoal on Nazir's shopfront had been rubbed half away, but people still saw the writing before they saw his craftsmanship. Harinarayan Sharma came with a broken fastening. "Can you repair it?" he asked. "I'll examine the metal joint," Nazir replied. "I won't vouch for the load capacity of an entire boat." They agreed on measurements and a price.

During the earlier police questioning, an attempt had been made to connect Nazir's name with the receipt for an unknown consignment of metal. The investigation paper now received stated plainly that the inspected agricultural tools, rope fastenings, and chisel repairs were consistent with legitimate ordinary work. The real source of the unidentified consignment remained the subject of a separate investigation; nor did the document declare

Nazir conclusively innocent of every conceivable incident. Understanding its meaning himself, he posted a limited extract before his customers: 'No evidence of unlawful articles in the inspected work.'

A young man asked, “If the report is good, why aren't shopkeepers coming back to you?” Nazir stopped moving the file in his hand. “I cannot go from door to door making every customer who left four months ago read this paper. The harm done by a false allegation often travels faster than the correction.” Harinarayan agreed, remembering the diminished custom at his own forge. But Nazir refused, even on that account, a proposal that he should personally open and test the unidentified metal box. “To claim knowledge of what I do not know would be to make the same mistake again,” he said.

In the afternoon sunlight a boatman's daughter came for a fastening. The rope at the stern of her father's boat kept coming loose. Nazir tightened the fastening again, wrote the safe limits of its use on a slip, and told her to have the entire boat inspected by a trained team. The daughter counted out coins to pay him. Nazir took no more than the agreed price; he wanted the first new customer's trust to be built on the proper measure of his work, not on charity. That evening two repair payments appeared in his ledger, but the page showing his earlier loss was still open in red ink.

As evening fell, Karun Damai arrived behind the cultural stage carrying the torn skin of a musical drum. The organisers were in a hurry to prepare for the performance the day after tomorrow. Above the stage were the words 'Community Art, Collective Service'. Karun spread out the skin. “I'll repair this drum today and play it tomorrow. Those are separate kinds of work, with separate hours.” The manager showed an old receipt in which cloth, thread, fastenings, and performance had all been combined under one heading. Karun turned the slip over and drew two columns.

The manager grew annoyed. “For such a small programme, two bills will make the accounting fees higher.” Karun placed a finger on the rim of the drum. “If I play today without repairing it, who will replace the torn skin the next day? If I repair it but cannot come onstage tomorrow, who is responsible for the performance?” Ramesh Ghasi was sitting nearby. He said that a supporting musician's two hours onstage and a drum-repairer's three hours of work were different. Jharna directed that the council's previously agreed labour rates be brought out.

Karun received an agreed amount for the repair materials and that day's labour on the spot, with a digital receipt. The performance fee would fall due after he participated the following day; the condition was written clearly. Karun wanted the organisers to pay his entire honorarium in advance, but the committee fund did not authorise it. They settled the dispute by paying the stipulated minimum advance that day and the balance on the next banking

day if the stage attendance sheet was correct. Karun accepted a small risk, but did not leave his right to payment resting on a private verbal promise.

Before nightfall the stage rehearsal began. A little girl started dancing when she heard the drum being tuned. Instead of stopping her at once, her mother asked Karun where the child could safely stand in the stage crowd. Karun put down the instrument and showed her a loose floorboard. The girl's foot could slip there. A carpenter was summoned; a proposal to deduct the repair cost from the artist's honorarium was rejected. The rim of Karun's drum was tightened with new skin, but responsibility for the danger on the stage was assigned to another worker, with proper payment.

Ruhani came to meet Jharna, the new chairperson. A private donor, she said, wanted to record the artists' performances this year for digital publicity. Jharna asked Karun's permission. “Keep the sound of today's rehearsal for private training,” he said. “Tomorrow's public broadcast requires a separate right. My drum is not going to become a permanent sound-mark for somebody's company.” Ruhani respected that answer. For the first time since leaving the leadership, she did not put the final signature on a committee document; she entered her presence only as a witness.

At night Bhola washed his empty milk containers and went home. His daughter had drawn two boxes on a sheet of paper: 'Price of Milk' and 'Assistance List'. Bhola laughed, but she was serious. “Father, will the child who isn't on the list get milk tomorrow?” “Today I opened the way to review that child's name,” Bhola answered. “I don't know whether a decision will come tomorrow. If the child is hungry, I'll give milk from our own house, but I won't secretly add the child to the government list.” It was a second lesson for his daughter: acts of compassion and demands for rights can go forward together.

As Nazir closed his shop he heard someone discussing the old accusation again. He did not run after them. Above the inspection notice on the door he pinned a receipt for a new repair, on which the customer's name appeared only with the customer's consent. Passing by, Harinarayan said, “A new order for a ploughshare came yesterday.” “And two fastenings for me,” Nazir replied. “Two objects won't make up for four months, but my hands won't be empty at dawn.” They went in separate directions; the ordinary labour of their market was becoming a first rebuttal to the accusation.

Karun gave one final light tap to test the drum's new tightening. A note travelled far into the remaining evening. Rukhsana heard it as she closed the kitchen door, but did not rush to summon anyone; her allotted working hours for the day were over. In the distance lights came on over the stage beneath coloured flags. For the first time Jharna saw two distinct signatures on the last page of the accounts: 'Artist's Consent' and 'Stage Repair'. The little

festival was still to come; at least that night one part of it did not rest on invisible hands.

In the separate time of ancient Dwaraka, Balarama sat beside the sea that night with his mace laid on the sand. In the distance laughter, argument, and the sound of broken vessels mingled inside the royal household. A messenger from Krishna came and said that some young men were again accusing one another; neither side was willing to listen. Balarama did not immediately run to convene an assembly. He told the messenger to arrange help first for those who had been injured, to keep their testimonies separate, and to place before an open assembly any decision being withheld in his name. The messenger departed.

Balarama knew that going away would not erase the consequences of what he had done before. No son, disciple, or friend could be kept safe simply by binding him with affection. He touched the grip of his mace again, but did not lift it. At the next dawn he would leave the royal family's gates and take the path of solitary discipline; he had already sent Krishna word of his decision. The darkness descending over the sea supplied no answer to his fault. Within that silence, Balarama did not turn away from his share of the truth.

Chapter 190 · Krishna's End

At the first light of dawn on the shore of ancient Dwaraka, a torn sail lay caught in the sand. Krishna bent to loosen its rope and noticed a stain of dried blood on his palm. It was the rope from the boat that had carried an injured young man away during the night's fighting. Sea foam rose along the higher reaches of the shore, but the voices from within the settlement were louder than the sea: someone was searching for a brother, someone for a missing vessel, someone for the man last seen in a rage. Balarama had sent word of his decision and departed far from the royal household. Krishna looked not towards his brother's empty seat but towards the damp sheet bearing the names of the wounded.

All night people had argued over whose honour the festival laughter had wounded, and whose hand had first raised a weapon. Two young men of wealthy families repeated their respective accounts again and again. One said, "I was attacked. I merely answered the attack." The other's hand was bandaged. "The man who died was the first to be at fault," he said. Krishna heard them both, then called for an injured boatwoman whose water pot had been shattered in the quarrel. "I did not see how it began," she said. "By the time I arrived, three men were running with sticks. My son was there, but I did not see what was in his hand." Krishna had her incomplete testimony recorded as incomplete.

In a thicket of reeds growing along the bank, several youths were breaking off lengths of stalk. In the moment after a burst of laughter, blood began streaming from one young man's head. Death had not been written into anyone's declared intention, yet there had been no time to stop the blow before it fell. A quarrel pursued in the name of the royal lineage's glory had turned lethal in an instant. Krishna ordered the wounded youth to be lifted. "Catch the guilty man first," a guard said. "Close the wound of the person still breathing," Krishna answered. "The question of responsibility will not disappear." He loosened the knot of a bandage himself so that the blood could circulate through the injured arm.

As the day advanced, the fighting among the young Yadavas intensified. Old wounds, humiliating words, pride in wealth, and accusations no one had examined mounted one upon another. The hard stems of reeds rose in people's hands as weapons; they called them the iron pestle of destiny. Yet every blow came from a real hand, and every body that fell belonged to a home. Krishna tried to separate one group, stood between the men of another, and had the wounded carried aside. Whenever he restored quiet in one place, disorder broke out behind him elsewhere. The discipline once cultivated by the royal household scattered before the fury of its own people.

On the landing's raised platform an elderly woman, Kutiladevi, sat counting her two grandsons. One had been found; there was no news of the other. Krishna knew her—she had once carried water pots during the festivals. She did not bow at his feet. “I want one name, not a list of everybody from the beginning,” she said. “I will not say we have found a name we have not found,” Krishna replied. “But someone from the search party will go with your family.” The old woman's mouth trembled. “Would you do this even if you were not a king?” Krishna was silent for a moment. “At this hour, the search for him matters more than my name.”

That night Krishna sat beside an injured child whose father had not been found. “Was my father wrong?” the boy asked. “I do not know everything your father did,” Krishna said. The boy asked again, “If he was wrong, may I still remember him?” Krishna placed a small wooden boat belonging to the boy's father in his hand. Two guards had picked it up from the sand. “Keep the memory of what you saw and the love you received. An inquiry into wrong actions does not erase that memory.” Holding the little boat against his chest, the child tried to sleep.

The following dawn, in this separate narrative time of ancient Dwaraka, news came again of Balarama's distant departure. Krishna divided among his aides the responsibility for sheltering, feeding, and evacuating the surviving women, children, and elderly people. The names of those who had received gifts were entered separately from the accounts of those whose wages remained unpaid. A courtier asked whether people would call him a coward when they saw the royal line in ruins. Folding the paper, Krishna said, “We may not be able to halt our own age. But whether we use it as an excuse to withhold what is due remains in our hands.” He returned the unused seal to the courtier. What was immediately needed was a certified copy of the instruction slip.

That day Krishna followed a narrow woodland path away from the sea. Sunlight fell through the leaves in stripes across the ground. He was tired. As he sat beside a spring washing his feet, he remembered the metallic gleam of Balarama's mace where his brother had laid it down in the distance. Balarama had chosen to go away; Krishna had not interfered with that choice. Royal household, attendants, grandchildren, war—his memories were like broken lines of sunlight. There was no strange serenity within his body, only profound exhaustion. In his mind he counted once more the names of all those still living who needed help.

On the other side of the forest a hunter named Jara saw a movement in the bushes. Through the grass he mistook a shape glinting in the sunlight for a deer's ear. He was far away, and he released his arrow without seeing the whole body. The arrow struck Krishna's foot. Krishna's body shuddered; bracing himself against the earth with one hand, he sank to one side. Jara ran through the bushes, saw the wounded man, and dropped his bow. “I thought you were a deer,” he said, trembling. “I did not have the patience to look properly.”

Blood was gathering around Krishna's injured foot. Jara bent to pull out the arrow, but Krishna stopped him. “Not by force. First bring water and clean cloth.” The hunter tore his bag to make a bandage and fetched water from the spring. Over and over he said, “I did not intend to kill you.” Krishna looked at him. “Intention and consequence are not the same,” he said. “An arrow released towards something the eye has not fully seen cannot be called back.” Jara was able to hear his own error named, but the pain of the wound was not diminished merely because he had been forgiven.

Jara asked whether he should run to the royal city and summon people. “Call them,” Krishna said. “But let no lie be told. What happened here must be reported as it happened.” The hunter rose to run, then turned back. “They will kill me.” Krishna answered very softly, “My name gives no one the right to kill you. What has happened calls for testimony, not revenge.” There was in those words no proclamation of complete absolution, nor any annulment of punishment: only a plea against the repetition of violence. Jara ran down the forest path.

Through a gap in the leaves a small piece of sky was visible. Krishna stretched his hand upon the ground. A bird called from a distant tree. The gambling hall, the dust of war, Sudama's smile, Radha's distant song, Dwaraka's grain ledgers—these arose in his mind as memories distinct from one another. He did not attempt to bind them into a single meaning. Pain remained in his body; his breaths grew shorter. There, in the midst of the forest, Krishna's life came to an end. The sea continued moving, and the instructions he had left for the care of the wounded remained unfinished work in the hands of the living.

When Jara returned with others, the forest was profoundly still. The first woman to reach the edge of the clearing took off her shawl and covered the body. A guard rushed to seize the hunter by the neck, but she stood between them. “Write down first what you have seen,” she said. “There is evidence that this man's arrow struck him. But do not lay the burden of every death in the royal family upon his head.” Jara stood with folded hands. His admission was recorded. That decision did not alter Krishna's death; it did, however, prevent a new act of revenge just as it was about to begin.

In Videhapur in the year 2041, in a temporal strand entirely separate from that ancient event in the forest, Durga Danuwar unloaded a bundle of bamboo at dawn and set it beside the forest council gate. The new sign above the gate read: ‘PATH CLOSED FOR SAFETY’. The older copy of the regulation provided for an emergency closure during the three rainy months and limited access during the remainder of the year. The new sign specified no period at all. Untying the rope around her bundle, Durga asked the guard, “Until what day will this gate remain closed?” “Everyone has been stopped to protect the forest,” the guard replied. “I understand protection,” Durga said. “But the lives of every village are not all the same.”

Durga was accompanied by her niece Maina, whose bicycle carried slender bamboo strips for weaving baskets. The previous night Maina had worked out the dimensions of a new basket beside a neem tree. If the gate remained shut, she would have to go five kos out of her way to reach the market, and the deadline for the new order would pass. “If we recognise your old footpath,” a member of the forest council said, “tomorrow somebody will claim the whole forest as his own.” Durga drew a line as far as the bicycle’s shadow. “I am not demanding unlimited ownership of the forest. I am asking for the measurement of a seasonal route and the permitted quantity of bamboo. Keep those two papers separate.”

Rama Karna and Tara Mallik arrived at the site. Durga unfolded a copy of her old permit, which prohibited cutting bamboo with its roots and stated how new harvesting was to be counted. A forest worker explained that after the rains the soil on the right-hand side slipped; half the old path was no longer safe. Durga protested at first, but when she walked over and looked, she saw the exposed roots of two old trees. She turned to her niece. “No heavy vehicle will go through there,” she said. “But if the dry upper edge is inspected and opened for a light bicycle, we can save our work.”

At an open meeting of the council, a contractor objected that all bamboo ought to go through the collective sales contract. In his view, if small artisans obtained a separate route, official quantities would be underreported. Durga opened her bundle and showed the marks of older cutting on every section. “These poles are from my family’s old stock, not from new harvesting,” she said. “Where we cut afresh, we will provide the permit and an account of replanting. But making us hire your vehicle to carry every bundle is not protection. It is a contract.” Maina laid the receipt for her market order before the meeting.

The forest worker took a measuring tape and inspected the upper edge. In a stretch of less than a kos, the ground was soft in two places; there, vehicles would have to stop and people proceed on foot. The committee finally fixed hours for limited passage on foot and by light bicycle. It retained the right to close the route temporarily on a warning of rain or flooding, but required the sign to state the reason for closure and the date of review. The maximum quantity of legally harvested bamboo, replanting, and inspection by forest workers were entered separately. Durga agreed. She herself rejected any claim that this settled the larger question of forest rights.

Maina tested the new route on her empty bicycle. At the patch of soft ground on the right, she dismounted and walked. On her return she asked Durga, “Will this rule protect my earnings every monsoon?” “No paper will guarantee every monsoon,” Durga answered. “But today we have seen the route. We have grounds for asking how long it will be open and why it may be shut.” Tara Mallik issued three copies of the agreement—one for the forest

council, one for the artisans, and one for the public archive. Maina placed her copy not loose in her bag but inside a waterproof sleeve.

That same day Madhuri Dangi was in the school kitchen, shaking a winnowing tray to sift flattened rice. Her daughter Ananya was weighing roasted makhana and filling little paper packets. The first sale under their partnership had covered the male supplier's transport costs, but the women's time spent selecting seed, roasting, sifting, and drying greens had been entered on a single line as ‘family assistance’. Pulling the ledger towards her, Madhuri told Ananya, “Time is the first proof of work no one sees. My fingers hurt today. The value of that pain must have a place in the price too.”

Rukhsana was back in the kitchen after her previous rest day, but she was no longer its sole decision-maker. The committee under its new chairperson, Jharna, had asked the women producers for separate accounts. Madhuri entered the hours spent on each task. Ananya deducted the time she had left to fetch water; the elderly Kaveri wanted to accept a lower rate because her hands worked slowly. Madhuri stopped her. “If one safe task takes longer, that should not be made a punishment over and over. Look at the quality of the product, then discuss a collective rate for the labour.”

“We are buying the packets,” the buyer's representative said. “Why should we keep accounts of shares within a family?” Ananya lifted the thin flap covering the weighing scale. “Because this enterprise is registered in one man's name. If the payment goes into his account and the women have to wait upon his goodwill, where is their written share?” The representative grew uncomfortable. Madhuri did not declare him guilty; she proposed that the sales proceeds should go into a joint account, costs should be paid, and the remaining sum should be transferred to members according to their certified contribution of labour. Personal debts and household disputes would not automatically be deducted from that account.

At noon word arrived that payment had been made for the first consignment of eighty packets. They were not all of equal weight; the school returned two underweight packets. Instead of protesting, Ananya weighed them again. “Incorrect weights must be corrected,” Rukhsana said. “But it would not be right to deduct the whole cost from the women's wages while protecting every share of capital.” The committee's written conditions provided for separate examination of damaged materials, errors of measurement, and mistakes in labour. From the undisputed sales proceeds, Kaveri, Madhuri, Ananya, and the other women received their first direct payments. The account for the two packets remained separate.

When Madhuri returned home that evening, her husband Devan asked, “Why so many separate signatures for the earnings of one household?” Sitting by the stove with him, she said, “When seed is bought for a field, we write down its price. The hours spent roasting makhana are nobody's gift. We will

decide together how the money coming into the house is used, but first it must be recognised that my share exists.” Devan read the ledger, saw the entry for his transport charges, and, for the first time, Ananya's name beside the record of her work. He was not delighted at once; but he did not tear up the ledger. He signed for the trial of the next consignment.

In the school courtyard, Sarita was gathering the morning attendance register. That day a local organiser came with a proposal for a play about Krishna's end and a shared memorial picture of the dead. He wanted Naira's photograph to be displayed beside the memorial to Krishna's death, beneath the title ‘Lives Extinguished by Divine Revenge’. For a moment Sarita's hand stopped upon the paper. “My daughter Naira is dead,” she said clearly. “Her death has its own circumstances, its own unfinished investigation, and its own surviving relationships. To call it revenge for Krishna's death would make a lie of both the myth and the evidence.”

The organiser argued that people would be moved by emotion and would not want to examine legal details. Sarita opened the old inspection report on the school roof. “Show the sources to those who want to understand,” she said. “Tell the story to those who want to hear a story—but keep a line drawn between them. Naira's name and image cannot be purchased with a yes-note from me alone. Kabir has rights arising from his own relationship with her, and Naira's published public work has a context of its own.” The organiser's proposal went to the committee on names and consent for reconsideration. Permission for the public performance would be examined separately from the school's investigation file.

Kabir arrived beneath a tree at the school. He was not carrying the letter he had written to Naira, marked ‘Private—Unsent’; it was safe in a box at home. Sarita told him what the organiser had said. “Are you asking my permission to refuse?” Kabir asked. “I am not asking permission,” Sarita replied. “I am asking what you think. The life you had with Naira was distinct from my grief.” “I don't favour giving them the photograph either,” Kabir said. “But if the students write about her public work at the school, I will not stop them.” Their limited agreement neither lessened the death nor made the private letter public.

At the community meeting that evening, Jharna read out the notice for the next pond-dredging campaign. In the previous year's register, some people's cleaning hours had been credited twice; the names of certain women had not been entered even once. Gomati Beldar stood holding the old notebook. “In the third dredging to come,” she said, “we need the same rule for every hour of work. The rate of payment must not change according to caste, body, donations, or family connections.” The committee set a date for the public reading of the draft rules. Showing the temporary closure rule for the forest path, Durga said, “Only when the reason and the review date are written on the paper does the path truly remain in people's hands.”

When night fell, Sarita reached home. Naira's empty glass stood beside the window. She picked it up, sat for a while, and put it back. She had no need of a divine meaning for anyone's death. That day, at the school gate, she had received a written statement of two craftswomen's shares, a copy of the limited forest-route agreement, and a document from the unresolved roof inspection. None of these would bring Naira back. But tomorrow the questions of the living—their labour and their pathways—would rise again, and the search for answers would not be confined within one person's name.

Chapter 191 · Not Everything Was Broken

At dawn on a morning in Chait in 2041, Gomati Beldar pulled up a bamboo stake beside the pond and planted it a handspan farther back. Water had reached its original position; any worker cutting earth there risked getting a foot trapped. In her left hand Gomati held the notebook from the previous year's dredging, and in her right, a measuring tape tied with red thread. From behind her, Phulmati Tiyar asked, “Has the measurement changed again today?” “Not the measurement,” Gomati said. “The eye with which we judge danger has changed. We will cut a handspan less earth, but spare someone the cost of an injured body.”

People had arrived from the village's different neighbourhoods for the third annual pond-dredging. Some carried spades, some baskets, and some only the papers needed to have their names registered. In the previous year's attendance record, one man's eight hours had been entered twice, while three hours each worked by two women had disappeared beneath someone else's signature. Gomati placed that page to one side. She did not hide it. “Shall we remove the incorrect page?” asked Jharna, the newly elected chairperson. “Correct the mistake, not the history,” Gomati answered. “Without this page, tomorrow someone will say it never happened.”

At the registration table Ramsakhi sat silently beside her old cleaning basket. A contractor's clerk was asking everyone to place a thumbprint on the same sheet. At the top it said that all participants had accepted the terms concerning payment, accident protection, and future compensation. Rama Karna read the sheet and stopped him. “Registering a name is one form of consent,” she said. “Surrendering what is due is another. Those who cannot read must have the terms spoken aloud to them. And a person who rejects a condition must not thereby lose the chance to work today.”

Gomati opened two separate registers. The first recorded attendance times, kinds of work, required rest, and safety equipment; the second contained payment accounts and individual complaint numbers. Rates had already been fixed at the meeting according to the verified nature of each task. Within the same safe category of work, the hourly value would not change with caste, gender, acquaintance, or closeness to the chairperson. There was no work for children: an open classroom and a shaded place had been arranged for them. Older people could volunteer to guide the teams, but their voluntary service would not be used as an excuse to demand compulsory unpaid labour from others.

Suraj Gangota came to the ghat carrying a little box filled with earth from his eroded field. “When the water rises, this bank will be cut away again,” he said. “The previous map still shows part of my field remaining, but the route where the nets will be spread is being made over that very strip.” Phulmati

Tiyar spread out the wet threads of her fishing net. “My fry will be released into this water,” she said. “If the silt is tipped into the field, who will separately pay the price of my new net?” Their voices began to rise. Setting her spade down in the earth, Gomati said, “Before we cut the soil today, we need agreement on where the soil will go.”

Ramani Bind showed them the old water-level marks on the right-hand side of the ghat. Some of the silt removed during the last dredging had been washed back by the monsoon current. “Then what use is cleaning it three times?” a young man asked. Hira Mech, mending the torn handle of a basket, answered, “Not every task will be completed forever. If one safe landing remains, seed survives in one place, one worker's name is not suppressed—those are real things. But those truths do not cancel the damage caused by a flood.” Jharna made the sentence a basis for a decision, not a victory song for the public announcement.

The contractor's clerk objected that counting hours equally would disadvantage those who worked quickly. Gomati listened patiently. “Different tasks can carry different rates,” she said. “But why should the same hour of the same work be valued at half the price because of the body doing it? If you want a special rate for skill, make an open rule first. Don't decide it afterwards by looking at faces.” An experienced worker raised the cost of wear and replacement of his own tools. Gomati accepted that too. Tool hire was entered on a separate receipt rather than merged with wages. This small adjustment took some of the heat out of the argument.

Then Batohi Dhami arrived carrying an empty earthen honey vessel. His old route for collecting honey had been closed behind the embankment. He had earlier joined an application for common access to the tree, but after the monsoon the hollow portion of the trunk had broken and the bees had made a new hive farther inside the protected area. “Open the old route,” a companion said. “We have always gone that way.” Batohi turned his vessel upside down: there was not a drop of honey in it. “Opening a path will not bring a tree back to life,” he said. “Nor will the old hunting work return of its own accord. I need a measured alternative route for reaching the honey safely.”

Manju, the forest assistant, showed Batohi the upper footway along the embankment. A narrow clear strip ran between two rows of plants in a nursery belonging to Nandini Bhandari, who had planted flowers there before. “This path can be used only for seasonal inspection and limited honey gathering,” Manju said. “There must be no felling trees, no smoking out the bees, and no destruction of an entire hive.” “Can someone close access whenever they please?” Batohi asked. Tara Mallik unfolded a sheet: the reason, date, alternative route, and next review date would have to be stated. Manju warned that work might be halted because of rain or a change in the hive's condition. Batohi accepted the limited terms.

The agreement did not restore his former livelihood as a hunter. “Then when will money come into our house?” asked Batohi's daughter Putul. His gaze remained fixed on the empty vessel. Manju proposed training in counting hives from a safe distance, and said that separate arrangements for limited pollination work could be discussed with the owners of the old flower-growing land. None of that employment had yet been settled; training and an inspection of the trees had to come first. “It would be a lie to write down as received what is not in our hands,” Batohi told his daughter. “But now we know where to apply.”

In the fierce afternoon sunlight, the first safety warning sounded at the dredging site. Two workers tried to enter silt up to their knees, but the earth beneath that stretch was hollow. Gomati blew her whistle and stopped the work. The contractor grew irritated. “Why pay wages for half an hour of sitting?” “Work stopped for safety is not the workers' fault,” she said. “If your spade sinks here, you will ask for the price of a tool. If a man's leg sinks, you will call him lazy?” Rama entered the time of the stoppage in the incident register. That area was closed pending inspection, while work continued on the safe stretch beside it.

Ramsakhi took three women from her team and began carrying earth behind the measuring stakes. At an earlier meeting she had been entered as an ‘assistant’ and her hours reduced. Today she herself watched the clock and wrote down her starting time and breaks. Gomati checked her entries against the measurements register. A girl standing nearby asked, “Why is everything being written down so carefully?” Ramsakhi answered, “Because when I reach home, people won't see how much my hands ache. At least the line recording my hours will ask what I received for that pain.”

Before evening the bamboo obstructing the old water outlet was removed. It was a small task, carried out without disturbing the earth on the upper slope. At the pond's northern ghat three elderly women walked as far as the steps without slipping, testing them for themselves. Phulmati Tiyar stepped down with her net, then stopped. “I can set my net here now,” she said, “but nobody has paid what is owed for the new one.” Gomati entered that achievement and that unresolved claim separately in the same register. Jharna forbade the announcer from declaring the entire pond ‘free of defects’.

At the seed-and-water partnership meeting the next day, Tara spread out three maps: rainwater, winter-crop use, and seasonal access to the wetland. The actual boundary of Suraj Gangota's eroded field appeared again in the new survey; beside it lay the old debt-restructuring document. A government representative said that once the common map was signed, no separate demand for compensation should remain. Suraj objected. “I have agreed on the drainage route, not consented to the loss of my field. The earth washed away has not returned.” Tara refused to allow the representative's sentence into the resolution.

Phulmati opened her calculations for the cost of a new net. Thread, stitching, the boat, the time needed to release fry—each had its separate amount. The committee agreed to examine part of the expense as additional damage caused by the public work at the ghat. But repairs already necessary because the net was old were not automatically declared a government liability. There was no immediate satisfaction on Phulmati's face. “At least write down who is responsible for the inquiry,” she said. Jharna recorded a name, a time, and an address for appeal. This time the paper did not merely say ‘will be considered’.

On the day the closed safety zone was due for review, a second inspection took place. Beneath the silt an old iron ring was found, which someone immediately began calling the remnant of an ancient bridge. Rather than lifting it, Aditi marked its position. “We don't yet know what it is,” she said. “It may be an old relic, or it may be a piece of a recent tool. Write the story separately from the measurement.” Someone laughed that such caution would make the festival less exciting. Gomati answered, “We will not declare the mud beneath a worker's foot an archaeological treasure merely to entertain the festival crowd.”

In the temporary kitchen beside the pond, Rukhsana was working her appointed shift after a day of rest. Alongside her was a newly trained colleague, Menaka, who kept the account sheets. Donation slips for the feast were separate from the number of workers' meals. Once again somebody argued that dredging was a community festival and it was unseemly for the kitchen workers to claim wages. This time Menaka answered: “Rice given in charity will fill a worker's belly. But who will pay the house rent of the person who cooks it?” Rukhsana smiled. Her protest was no longer a solitary voice.

At dawn on the third day, the payment register was displayed within a public notice area, without private banking details. Instead of showing names, Gomati posted a verifiable total against each individual receipt number and the hours worked; workers could check these against the named copies they held. The contractor wanted the entire amount sent into his company's common account so that he could distribute wages later. “If money fails to reach somebody's account on time,” Jharna asked, “who will verify the word ‘distributed’ that you have written?” The committee decided to send undisputed wages directly to each worker through an approved means of payment.

Some workers had no access to banking facilities. Rama established a secure alternative for verified cash payments, requiring two independent witnesses, an individual acknowledgement, and the right of rechecking. The contractor no longer had a monopoly, but the office's workload increased. Jharna approved fair remuneration for an additional accounts assistant; she did not expect someone to fill in unread documents without pay. When notice of the first instalment arrived, Ramsakhi's hours were correct, but one digit of her

account number was wrong. She was told why her payment had been held; everyone else's payment was not suspended.

Gomati took Ramsakhi aside. “If I said everyone's payment was stuck,” she told her, “we would break today's rule on its very first day.” Ramsakhi provided verification for a new receipt, and the financial assistant entered the correct details again. In the second part of the day, confirmation of Ramsakhi's payment arrived. She did not immediately cry out in triumph at the amount. In her mind she added the cost of fuel for the home stove, repairing her damaged basket, and a notebook for her daughter. Only then did she tell Gomati, “This time I didn't have to go from door to door asking people for my own earnings.”

At the open meeting that evening, a member proposed declaring the third dredging a complete success. Gomati placed five lines of explanation before everyone. First, the steps of the safe ghat were now usable. Second, the dangerous stretch closed to entry remained closed. Third, all undisputed payments for recorded labour had reached the workers by approved means; the remaining claims had separate hearings. Fourth, actual compensation for Suraj's field was undecided. Fifth, assessment of the additional damage to Phulmati's net was still in progress. For the first time, people saw a place for unfinished work beside the account of success.

“Will these rules survive if another chairperson comes next year?” an elderly farmer asked. “The life of a rule must not depend on my holding office,” Jharna said. Tara prepared three copies: one for the community, one for the municipal archive, and one for the open inspection book. Sanket had come from a distance. He proposed an audio version that could be listened to by members with visual impairments, on condition that private account numbers be excluded. Gomati wanted the villagers to be able to read and understand the rules in their own words as well. A public reading was scheduled for the following week.

In front of Batohi Dhami's house, Putul was painting a little bamboo box. The first inspection of the upper path with the forest assistant had gone well, but they had found no honey. Batohi had counted two undisturbed hives; he had not reached the third. “Shall we take the empty vessel again?” Putul asked. “There is training tomorrow,” he answered. “Before selling honey, we must learn to protect the hive. I won't say our old livelihood will return, but this new path is open for now.” Putul wrote her name on the box so that no buyer could sell this new work under a false name borrowed from the old hunting trade.

That night Sarita saw a small exhibition on the school veranda. The children had made two pictures of the pond, before and after. In the first, silt covered the steps; in the second, the safe landing had been cleared. One little girl had left an unfinished patch between the two. The teacher asked why she

had not completed her picture. “Work is stopped there,” the girl answered. “I won't paint it clean when it isn't.” Sarita's eyes rested on that uncoloured space. She remembered Naira, but the picture was no compensation for her death. It was evidence of what a living child had seen for herself.

When Gomati returned home, blood was seeping from the skin rubbed raw by a tool handle. She washed her hand and opened her notebook. This time no hours had been deducted by calling her a ‘volunteer’. In the light of the evening stove, the old erroneous page and the new correct receipt cast two shadows. Gomati did not tear up the old page. She wrote: ‘Third dredging: equal measurement for equal labour applied; payments verified; safety closure and claims concerning field and net continuing.’ Then she closed the notebook and called her daughter to drink some water. The ghat was not finished, but this time the wages had arrived on time.

The next morning a new notice appeared at the archive doorway: a tender to choose an ‘authorised central owner’ for digital copies. Tara Mallik stood reading the language. Copies of the dredging hours and payments were held by the community; the new contract proposed to place storage, correction, and redistribution of all copies in the hands of a single company. Tara did not sign anything immediately. She checked her bag to make sure that the community's copy from Gomati's set of three was in its proper place. Sunlight glittered on the pond. The question had opened again: under what name might someone try tomorrow to close off the rule that had been protected today?

Chapter 192 · Fear of a New Owner

Tara Mallik did not take down the new tender notice pinned to the archive door. She set her notebook beneath it and began copying every line. One corner of the paper, held down by glue, fluttered. With her pencil she drew a circle around the words ‘authorised central owner’. Yesterday Gomati Beldar's dredging register had been placed in three locations; today the proposal was that all future corrections, access, and rights over copies would depend on a single company's permission. “Take a photograph,” an employee suggested. “Another copy of a torn piece of paper can be found,” Tara replied. “Who will provide a copy of the rights being sold in this line?”

Inside the archive the old wooden drawers smelled faintly of damp paper. Sanket sat at one corner of a table reading the previous year's maintenance bill. Tara placed her copy of the tender before him. “Six months ago I questioned a five-year agreement with this very company,” she said. “Now the name has changed, but the conditions are almost the same.” Sanket pointed to the words ‘community inspection facility’ at the edge of the page. “First we would have to obtain permission to see even one sheet; afterwards they would call that an inspection facility. There is a great deal hidden inside that little phrase.” The bell rang outside.

Before sitting in the chairperson's seat, Jharna opened the window. “We will read the paper in daylight,” she said. Mahendra, who supported the new contract, argued that keeping separate copies wasted time. Storing everything in one place would make missing documents easier to find and printing cheaper. During the previous year's flood, three ledgers had been soaked, and the record of medicine distribution had disappeared for two days. Sanket acknowledged this himself. “There is a real advantage for verification,” he said. “But we must see who would gain the power to shut the whole thing down from one place.”

The contractor's representative, dressed in white, opened a document bearing four seals. The company, he said, would hold the ‘certified original’ of every document; all other copies would exist merely for convenience. The authority to accept requests for correction would also rest with the company's verification team. “If a worker's hours are entered incorrectly,” Rama Karna asked, “will the measurements Gomati can show us count as evidence, or will the company's old line prevail?” “The certified original carries the highest authority,” the representative replied. Gomati opened her palm. “Can your seal reduce the hours I spent carrying earth? It was not the seal that lifted the soil.”

Suraj Gangota brought his copy of the survey of his field to the meeting. That page contained limited consent for a drainage route, but left his claim for compensation for the field unresolved. “It is also important to preserve

whatever compensation you receive," Mahendra told him. "Where have I received any compensation yet?" Suraj answered. "If all the old pages are kept in one place and every copy issued from there, who will prevent them from tearing out the line recording my disagreement?" Tara compared the two versions. One said, 'Compensation under separate consideration'; the other draft merely said, 'Consent obtained'. Merging both under a single heading would be easy. It would not be truthful.

Phulmati Tiyar arrived with her receipt and a bundle of thread. "I can change the eye of a needle used for mending nets," she said. "But if an old knot has not been undone, covering it with new thread will make it split at the next catch." Her claim for ordinary repairs to an old net had to remain separate from her claim for additional damage caused by public work on the ghat. The company's sample register put both into one box marked 'Net Grant'. She turned the page over. "My claim will not fit inside this box." The knots of her net helped everyone understand the knots in the paperwork.

Just then Sabina Mirshikar appeared at the doorway. Two needles and pieces of a cut net protruded from her bag. She had come to ask Phulmati about payment for a repair and knew nothing of the meeting's subject. Phulmati gestured for her to sit inside. "I need the price of my work today," Sabina said. "Having my name entered at a meeting will not fill my stomach." "Then tell us first how you calculate the work," Jharna said. Sabina took three pieces out of her bag: torn netting, a repaired join, and a remaining knot of thread. "In the market someone says I ask too much for this, and someone else says the work of my caste ought to be something different."

That morning, at the corner of the market, Sabina had met a young man from her own family. He told her that the old route into the forest was reopening and that abandoning their ancestors' occupation was shameful. This 'old work' included demands for prohibited hunting. Standing there, Sabina had answered that an ancestral name conferred no exemption from the law. "How long will you survive by sewing nets?" the young man had asked. She had no answer. Now she did not hide the encounter beneath a false veil of prestige. "I did not go," she said, "but the measure of grain in our house has gone down all the same. Saying no has a cost too."

"What has this argument about hunting to do with the archive contract?" Mahendra asked. Sabina put the bent point of a needle on the table. "When I go to the market to mend nets, customers ask for a receipt. When I try to obtain work through a group, they tell me to prove my family's traditional occupation before my name can be registered. If an official in one place reads the caste entry beside my name and decides what work I am permitted to do, whose needle will this be?" "We have already seen what happens when the measure of work is confused with a caste name," Gomati said. "In the third dredging, we closed that door."

Sanket took out a page from the back of the proposal. It contained a list of ‘eligible occupational categories’ through which the company itself would update the skills register. “Where am I in it?” Sabina asked. Her community was listed under an old identity, but there was no box in which to enter her skill in the lawful repair of fishing nets. “I cannot erase your old name,” Sanket said, “nor impose a new profession on you without listening to you. But we must make room for evidence of the work you actually do.” Tara wrote Sabina's own words in the margin of the list and placed a marker in the empty space on the draft.

The meeting split into two opinions. Some feared that multiple copies would allow forged versions to spread. Rama said the risk was real: the video about child theft circulated under a false date the previous year still survived on some phones. In that episode Janaki's team and Sabina had endured groundless suspicion, and Naira had prepared a timeline for the investigation. Tara fell silent. Naira was no longer alive; the method of verification she had written down remained. “The fear of altered copies is justified,” Tara said. “But the remedy is not to sell every copy to a single owner.”

Sanket laid three coloured threads across a wooden board. “These do not indicate ownership of an original document,” he explained. “They mark who is responsible for each copy.” The first thread stood for the text certified by the issuing office; the second, the copy held by the community with its date of receipt; the third, the personal copy of an affected person, with any mark of dissent. Where two versions differed, the old line would not be erased. A separate page would record the reason for the difference. “And if one copy is false?” Mahendra asked. “Then it will be examined,” Sanket replied. “Silencing everyone will not produce the truth.”

Jharna asked about costs. Thread was free; paper and maintenance were not. Tara gave a precise account: boxes to protect papers against damp, locks, labour to make copies, responsibility for recording the date of each change, and a service for reading them aloud. Sanket said that audio copies should exclude private account numbers, home addresses, and patients' details; anyone needing to hear a personal document should have access by a secure individual channel. Padma added that sign-language and large-print versions were real work too. “Accessibility is not a festival supplied free of charge,” she said. “And no one's voice should be recorded without consent.”

There was a short break beside the kitchen. Rukhsana and Menaka served plates of rice. Sanket kept looking at his accounts. “If you refuse to eat,” Menaka asked, laughing, “will you write the bill for this rice on an empty stomach?” Tara pulled her plate towards herself. Gomati washed her hands, blistered from dredging. Sabina offered to stitch her torn glove. “If you stitch the glove, write the price down first,” Gomati said. Sabina smiled. It was the first offer over which the value of her new work had prompted laughter rather than pity.

After the meal a municipal employee said that stopping the tender might interrupt the archive's technical service the following year. Gomati had him read out the document. The payment records were not, in fact, fully protected at local level; the ink on one copy had begun to fade in the sun. Tara acknowledged that equal rights to copies also required safe maintenance—otherwise paper would simply dissolve as paper. Sanket proposed hiring external specialists to provide the service without granting them the right to restrict access. The employee gave no immediate assurance.

A member of the organisation stood up. “People have to trust someone,” he said. “We cannot sit in meetings all year.” There was justice in his exhaustion: he had left his field work to attend for two hours. “Who said you must read every paper?” Tara asked. “The division exists so that, when necessary, you can quickly obtain a correct copy of your field measurement and have somewhere to question my mistakes.” “And if someone starts fighting again, claiming that their copy is the original?” the member asked. “Certification of the issuing original is one thing,” Rama replied. “Rights over a copy are another. Write both down separately.”

Meanwhile, Sabina was examining the repair work on Phulmati's net. Two old knots had been cut away and joined with new thread; at the third she stopped. “This thread must be replaced altogether,” she said. “Otherwise the labour will be wasted.” Phulmati asked the price. Sabina first added up her labour and the materials, then caught a mistake of her own: she had omitted the time required to lower the long net into the water at the ghat for measurement. “That hour is work too,” Phulmati said. From a distance Gomati heard and nodded. The rule from the third dredging had travelled from the pond's edge into the stitches of a fishing net, but this new payment for labour remained separate from Phulmati's older claim for compensation.

The net-making group offered Sabina a trial of three nets. This was not permanent employment. The price of the first consignment, the cost of thread, and the terms for corrections if the work was rejected all had to be written down. “If I fail to mend one part of a net,” Sabina asked, “will you use that as an excuse to bar my caste's name from future work?” “We will record a fault in the work, not in a caste,” Phulmati said. “You also have the right to turn down a job.” After some thought, Sabina accepted responsibility for the first net. It was a small bargain, but the path was one she had chosen.

The young man from her family appeared again at the doorway. He did not enter the meeting but beckoned to Sabina. She went out, leaving her bag inside. He said someone beyond the forest was prepared to pay a very high price; the deal over the nets was small and degrading. Sabina looked directly at him. “If your offer is lawful, give me the papers, tell me the place, and make it clear what is to be sold and to whom.” The young man said nothing. “The ancestors are mine too, not yours alone,” she continued. “But I will not obey

an order to commit a crime in their name. I too know the shortage in our house. That is why I work with a needle.” She returned inside.

Inside, Phulmati wrote a description of Sabina's work on the receipt: ‘Inspection of net knots, replacement of thread; time and materials separately recorded.’ Sabina asked whether a reference to her community's history was necessary. “Not for this payment,” Phulmati said. “If you wish, write about yourself elsewhere.” Tara wanted to use that answer as a model for the new occupations register. Sabina stopped her. “First let me be paid for one job,” she said. “After that, make an example of what I say.” Tara closed her notebook. Living people had their own time, distinct from the desire of those who wanted to turn them into evidence.

Before evening Jharna read out the amended proposal. The municipality's legally authorised original register would remain in its issuing office; the community's certified received copy would be kept in a separate box; an affected individual's personal copy would remain under that person's control. The date, reason, previous wording, and approval for every amendment would be marked separately. Personal details would not enter public copies without consent. Nobody's rights would be ended merely by the words ‘stored on the server’. An outside organisation could provide maintenance and secure copying services, but not charge a fee to withhold a copy or claim exclusive ownership. The cost of the first three months' trial would appear in the public accounts.

Mahendra did not entirely agree with the draft. “If a separate box is stolen,” he asked, “who is responsible?” Rama conceded that they needed a receipt list, rotating responsibility for custody, and prompt notice of missing materials. Jharna accepted the amendment. But the municipal employee warned that a formal request to stop the tender had to be filed before its closing date. A meeting's voice alone could not suspend a contract. It was agreed that a written objection would be submitted the next morning and that a separate temporary order would be sought to maintain uninterrupted service for the old archives. It was not the declaration of a victory but a new list of work to be done.

Sanket and Tara began their first trial within two hours. They chose a public page from the dredging records containing no private bank details. In the school reading room Gomati and Ramsakhi checked its copy; Phulmati checked the hours of work in the ghat inspection book; and at the municipal archive Rama inspected the issuing seal. In one place the spelling of a name differed. “This change doesn't affect the amount paid,” Gomati said, “but Ramsakhi's correct name matters in the morning's work.” They did not correct all three copies simultaneously. They wrote a notice describing the discrepancy and fixed a date for reconciliation.

In the reading room an elderly woman asked what use a copy was if its small print could not be read without spectacles. Sanket read the page aloud to her. “That's fine,” she said, “but what happens when you are not here tomorrow?” At her question Sanket explained his earlier proposal for an audio copy, then sought permission to record the text of the public rules, not private payments. “First tell me where my voice will go,” the woman said. Sanket laughed at his own premature enthusiasm. “Today we shall read the rules,” Tara said, “not fill the ledger with people's voices.” Explaining this took time, but no one was silenced.

In the back room Sarita was gathering the children's pictures of the pond. Tara asked whether the school might retain copies of the pictures shown in the public exhibition. “A child's picture may be displayed for school purposes,” Sarita said, “but her full name must not go into a company's advertising. Parental consent goes no further than the purpose for which it was given.” Tara saw the blank field on the consent form. She remembered Naira: a person's absence does not automatically make someone else the new owner of her image, letters, and voice. Looking at the unfinished ghat in the child's picture, Sarita said, “The girl deliberately left this part empty. Don't fill it in.”

At dusk Sabina finished testing the first net. Two of its three knots passed; the third had been woven loosely. Phulmati showed her the defect, and Sabina restitched it without quarrelling. A receipt was prepared for the agreed starting price, with one part for materials and the remainder payable when the work was confirmed. The first instalment reached her hand. She was not instantly overjoyed; she calculated her household debt and the price of thread for the next task. There was no permanent job, only dates for the next two trials. Sabina wrapped her needle in cloth, as if protecting a small, sharp object on the long road home.

At night, as the watchman began closing the municipal archive door, Sanket signed the receipt for the final page. Tara listed the identifying details of the copies held in three places, the outstanding corrections, and the times at which people could make contact. No one had become the new owner of the old originals; the municipal tender had still not been cancelled. Meanwhile, fixed hours had been established for consulting the community copies, reconciliation of Gomati's wage register had begun, and Sabina's first repair fee and receipt were being kept safely apart. Outside, the water was receding, but the closure of the dangerous stretch of the ghat remained in force. Writing ‘open’ on paper does not make the ground firm.

The next morning, on the way back from submitting the written objection, Tara said to Sanket, “Even with three copies, we still have to go and inspect all three places. What about people in distant settlements who cannot even reach their copy?” “Then we will have to take to the road,” Sanket replied. “Otherwise this whole system will remain within the archive's four walls.” Gomati signed the inspection register. Sabina called from behind, “If

you're writing down the next day for the nets, don't take away my market hours." Tara corrected the time. A thin mist was rising above the road towards the river. The documents still had a journey to make to reach the people who owned them.

Parva 17 · Mahāprasthānika | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 193 · The Announcement of the Journey

In the royal assembly hall of Hastinapura, in the ancient age of the Mahabharata, Yudhishthira's hand did not tremble when the crown was placed upon Parikshit's head, yet that hand was no longer as untroubled as it had once been. The golden circlet looked heavy in proportion to the child's brow. Before the one to whom the throne was being entrusted stood the victors of the war, reckoning the years that remained of their own lives.

Yudhishthira told his brothers that, after Krishna's departure and the destruction of the Yadavas, he could plainly see that the age had changed. To renounce a kingdom was an easy thing to say; to depart leaving its people unprotected from the burdens of government was no easy act. Provision was made for the young king's protection, the administration of the city, and the counsel to be given to an inexperienced successor. Yuyutsu brought the experienced eye of an administrator; Subhadra retained both her concern for the coming generation of the family and her rightful place in its affairs. Departure, too, was not simply a division of possessions, but a new arrangement of responsibilities.

In Bhima's mind there was no mace, only the sound of the steps of the assembly hall. Arjuna remained touching the string of his bow, as if his hand were asking permission to be released from the habit of so many years. Nakula's eyes rested on the weary ranks of soldiers; Sahadeva remembered the many days of calculation for which no one had found an answer. Draupadi studied each face. So often decisions about her life had been made by people sitting far away in the seats of power. Now, in the decision to depart, there was the presence of her own feet.

Outside the palace, some among the crowd raised cries of praise; others asked questions. Who would collect the levy on the fields? Who would feed the orphan? Where would a message be delivered? Not every question received an answer amid the ceremonies of renunciation. Yudhishthira confirmed the instructions concerning the work of government once more. There would be no banner of victory on this journey, no pledge to acquire a new kingdom. The road ahead would test their decision; a road did not, by itself, make anyone innocent.

The five brothers and Draupadi went slowly through the city's gate. A dog began following them. At first no one noticed; after they had walked a little way, Yudhishthira looked back. What it meant to travel in the company of this creature had not yet been settled, but he did not drive it away. The

footprints in the dust differed in shape. All were going in one direction; they would not all make the same journey.

In the first warm dawn of 2042 in Videhapur, Tara Mallik had turned an empty trunk upside down to examine its bottom. The team that had preserved three copies of the records the previous year was now going as far as the settlement across the low-lying chaur. This was being described as the last round of visits in the present phase because the approved period of funding was about to expire, not because people's questions had come to an end. Before any papers went into the trunk, they placed dry cloth, a protective layer against water, and the receipts acknowledging delivery.

Sanket sat with papers spread beside his knee, reading. The list of public documents was short: the rules for counting hours on the urahi, the measurements of the safe portion of the ghat, the present status of claims over the disputed field, and a separate account of damage to fishing nets. Private payment details and children's names were not on that list. “The tender that would put the originals, the corrections, and their distribution into the hands of a single company has still not been formally closed. Don't hide that fact when you explain what these copies are.”

Sarita stood in the doorway. In her hand was not Naira's old blue bag but a cloth bag she had sewn herself, containing an unused notebook without a name on it, water, and two pieces of dry roti. The young woman who had once written down questions for these journeys was no longer alive. Sarita still heard her daughter in her mind, but that did not mean she would invent Naira's words and deliver them to an assembly as though they were her daughter's own.

Gomati Beldar glanced at the clock. “If we set off early, we can avoid some of the heat. But people in the settlement will be ready to listen only after they've come back from the fields. We can't arrive and tell them to abandon their work and sit down for us.” Tara wanted every page distributed by noon; the vehicle was needed back in town that evening. “Is this journey being made for the people,” Sarita asked, “or for the vehicle's timetable?” Gomati laughed, but the weight of the question was not made lighter by her laughter.

Separate accounts were kept of the team's travel hire, the driver's time, and the labour of reading pages aloud. Sanket insisted that, if a settlement was not in a position to listen that day, the register must say not ‘absent’ but ‘time to be rearranged’. A permit had arrived from Jharna's office, but it did not require local people to attend. “We're not going to search people out and photograph them when they do not wish to meet us,” she said.

The vehicle stopped at the end of the road beside the chaur. Water from the previous night's rain still lay along the unpaved track ahead. The driver said he could take the vehicle a little farther, but there would be nowhere to turn it round. Tara opened her map; it was from the previous year. An elderly

labourer, pumping air into a bicycle tyre, said that the path had shifted because the old earth had subsided. His first question was, “Whose permission have you come with?”

Tara held out the letter. The old man's gaze did not linger on the paper. “The permission belongs to the town. The path belongs to all of us here. If that trunk contains forms for measuring the land again, tell us first.” Sanket gently read out that these were copies of documents to be distributed, not forms for a fresh land survey. Pressing the bicycle tyre with his hand, the man said, “Then go ahead. But don't start writing down names the moment you enter the schoolroom. Lessons are going on there now.”

Two children were making wheels out of mud in front of the school. Sarita watched them for a moment. One asked whether the trunk contained medicine. “It contains papers,” she answered. “If you need medicine, I won't give you false hope.” The child went back to turning the wheel. Tara put her bag down and spoke with the teacher. There would be no meeting during lessons, though the communal meeting place would be available in the evening. “There was a list here once before,” the teacher said, “and on the strength of that list everyone was promised benefits. Make fewer promises this time.”

The agreed vehicle hire would increase, and the date by which an answer had to be given in town was drawing near. “We had written into our calculations that we would deliver copies at four places in a day,” Sanket said. “But we haven't even understood the right time for the first place.” Sarita unfolded the rotis. “Are you hungry? Eat. Then we'll go and ask the people what papers are useful to them. Everything cannot be decided by our list.”

Just then two women and a young man returned from the chaur, their feet coated in soil from the fields. They proposed sitting in the shade of the peepal tree rather than in the school. The first woman had worked on the urahi, but the account of two days' work in town the previous year had not been entered on time. The rules of the third urahi did not settle the old amount owed to her. The second woman wanted to see the strip of field through which the water had cut its way. The young man feared that the full name of his family might once again be displayed on a public notice.

Gomati opened the page. “The rule that counts hours equally on the new urahi is still in force. We cannot decide the claim for your two old days of work from here.” “Then why have you come carrying papers?” the first woman asked at once. “Because if your claim has been registered, you ought to receive a copy of it and to know the way to the next hearing,” Gomati replied. “A promise of payment now would be a lie.” The woman took the page but did not fold it; she wanted to hear it read in full.

Tara asked whether it would be convenient for everyone to sign in a single notebook. The young man objected. “The name of our household was printed

wrongly in a newspaper once. Who can guarantee who will take photographs of this notebook?” Tara put her telephone inside her bag. She understood that even the arrangement for three copies could become a new source of fear if the community was unable to question the hands entrusted with keeping them. Sanket separated the public pages from confidential petitions.

The first woman's name was entered on a private receipt, but the public count would record only one outstanding claim. “Will you take your copy home,” Sarita asked, “or would you rather leave it here in the care of someone you trust?” The woman said there was no dry chest in her home; the paper would become wet in the rains. She wanted to see the village's shared trunk, but asked who would keep the key. That small question grew larger than every page in the plan.

As the midday sun rose higher, people shifted from one patch of shade to another. An elderly man said that during an earlier flood the register of relief recipients had reached the town but its copy had never returned to the settlement. His daughter had seen her family's name displayed without permission on a publicity board. He was not in favour of destroying documents. “What was never preserved will be lost again,” he said. “But people's dignity must not be lost simply because the paper survives.”

While the records team ate roti with pickle, Tara recalculated the timetable. Instead of three locations, they could manage one properly agreed handover that day. “The figures reported above will count this as failure,” she told Sarita. “If we haven't stolen people's time,” Sarita answered, “then the local people should be allowed to say whose success or failure it is.” Tara picked up her pencil, crossed out an earlier tick, and wrote new words: ‘Awaiting consent’.

A telephone call came from the town. An employee said the team's performance report was required by evening, including the number of beneficiaries and a group photograph. Tara said the number could be provided but there would be no photograph without consent. The employee argued that without a photograph there would be no proof the work had taken place. Sanket proposed alternatives: a public register of receipts, the sequence of pages delivered, a record of corrections checked, and verification accepted by local witnesses. “A face doesn't prove that a document has reached its reader,” he said.

Before evening, discussion began on the proposal for the first shared storage trunk. The head teacher said that the school had a lock and a dry room, but the records would not be safe if mixed with teaching materials. A woman from the kitchen said the shared room was opened during the rains. In the end, the people chose two separate arrangements: public papers in a secure school cupboard; disputed private papers with a locally chosen custodian, but

only with the permission of the persons concerned. The custodian would not be selected that day, but at the next meeting.

“To tell the truth, we won't be able to come back here the day after tomorrow,” Tara admitted. “The funds approved for travel are limited. But the work of making accurate copies of the records must not stop here.” Gomati proposed that two willing people from the settlement should be trained, for fair pay, to check the copies against the originals: one to read them aloud, the other to check the differences between original and copy. Sarita objected to placing another endless burden on women in the name of voluntary service. Everyone agreed that no names would be selected before the rate of payment was put in writing.

The young man asked, “If some of us have not learnt many letters, why should we keep the copies?” “Keeping a copy is one task, understanding it another,” Sanket said. “Not being able to read does not disqualify anyone. The arrangement must include reading aloud and explanation.” The young man did not disclose his family's name but pointed out a difference between the dates on two receipts. Sanket did not declare that discrepancy a newly proven fact; he recorded a request for a separate examination.

A small disagreement arose beneath the peepal tree. An old watercourse was marked ‘closed’ on the town's sheet; the women of the settlement said that after two spells of heavy rain, water had cut a passage along it again. Tara wanted to correct the map immediately. The elderly labourer stopped her. “Write down what you have seen today. Water changing over two years doesn't become a permanent decision in a single line.” Tara wrote: ‘Local account; seasonal verification required’. To turn people's knowledge immediately into an official seal could also be a way of taking that knowledge out of their hands.

Amid these conversations, Sarita was aware of the empty place where her daughter should have been. Had Naira been there, she might have been the first to raise the difference between the dates, the second copy of the map, or the question of consent. Yet Sarita did not write a single sentence under Naira's name on the strength of that possibility. For the first time on this journey, she entered three questions raised by the people, using page references instead of names. Between the blank lines she seemed to hear the pulse in her own palm.

“Why are you so quiet?” the first woman asked. “I'm listening,” Sarita said. “My daughter used to read these papers. She is no longer here. That is why we must learn to listen, not pretend that we can speak the truth in her place.” After that answer, the woman raised her unpaid wage claim again. Sarita's grief did not erase the money owed to her. Sarita did not bring her sorrow back into the middle of the woman's question.

At the evening meeting, the first page of the receipt register was read aloud. It gave a clear account of how many public copies had been left there, which corrections were pending, and which dates for hearings had yet to be confirmed. The names on private receipts were not read out. The first woman asked who would be informed if the office altered the old page again. Tara replied that the rule requiring both the old and the new versions to be retained was still being tested. Trust in a copy could not endure if each change was left without a reason.

This time, the people chose their own hour. The day after tomorrow, after returning from the market, they would meet for one hour in the evening, without interrupting lessons at the school. A representative of the settlement wished to go to town, but first wanted an account of the fare and the day's wages that would be lost. Gomati showed a specimen account on a page of her household ledger; she made no claim that any payment had been approved. The people accepted this incomplete answer because its limits were made clear.

The plan for the team's next stop was reduced. Tara sent written notice to the town employee by telephone: a consultative handover had taken place in only one settlement that day, and new dates were needed for the other two. “We've already called this the final round,” the employee said. “How can we go again?” Tara asked, “If we cannot return, shall we leave in writing the local right to request copies and the cost of posting them? This may be the office's final round. It cannot be the end of the people's rights.”

At dusk, a separate trunk of public papers was placed inside the school's cupboard. The teacher was responsible for the lock, but it was agreed that the receipt register would be available both at the school and at the community meeting place. Tara handed a copy of the public list to Sanket, who read it aloud there to the elderly labourer. The man nodded. “Today you asked about our time, not just our soil. Remember that.” Tara knew remembering would not be enough; the next action would need to provide proof.

On the way back from the settlement, Sarita stopped beside the road. Evening light lay across the water of the chaur, and in the distance people were returning home from the fields. No one had asked her to deliver a speech in Naira's name. In that ordinary day a sharp pain rose within her: her daughter would never again walk this road. At the same time, she understood that she herself could walk it, without claiming to fill her daughter's place.

When they reached town, Tara emptied the trunk before the records office. Some public copies remained, but the list had not become shorter; it had been revised: two postponed visits, one local meeting, one wage claim, one watercourse investigation, protection of private details. At the bottom of the page Sanket wrote: ‘In accordance with the receiving location's schedule’. Sarita did not put her signature beside those words. She simply entered the date of the next meeting in her notebook.

Chapter 194 · Draupadi's Road

On the northward road of the ancient Great Departure, Draupadi drew a thorn from the torn corner of her garment. A fine thread had caught on it. When she stopped, Bhima, walking behind her, halted too. Ahead lay loose fragments of stone, a white ridge of snow in the distance, and between them a dust-filled slope. Since leaving the palace, they had crossed many rivers and desolate stretches of land and endured many weary days. None of them now bore the insignia of a royal house on their clothing. As she removed the thorn, Draupadi asked, "Shall I cut this thread, or tie it in a knot?"

"Tie a knot," Bhima said. "Where would we find another garment here?" He was about to mention the needle in his bag, but the bag held no needle, only some of the food of which he had eaten less than his share that morning. Draupadi looked at his empty hand. "We can sew it again when we find a needle," she said. The knot was small, yet a drop of blood glistened beneath her fingernail as she tied it. She concealed the sharp end within the fold of her garment and resumed walking.

Yudhishthira walked farthest ahead. The dog travelling with him stopped from time to time and looked back. Nakula's pace was measured, while Sahadeva was studying the shadow on the slope where darkness would arrive before evening. Arjuna held his palm curved as if he were still grasping the string of an invisible bow. Draupadi could distinguish them all by the sound of their weary feet. They travelled along the same road, but no one's body carried another's exhaustion.

When the midday light grew fierce upon the stones, Draupadi opened her small vessel of water. Very little of her share remained. Bhima held out his own. "I won't ask you to save it for me. But I can hear your thirst." Draupadi tried to laugh. "Does thirst have a voice?" "It does," Bhima said, "when people have walked together for a very long time." He took one swallow from his vessel and handed her the rest. She did not drink all of it.

The coolness of that mouthful brought back to Draupadi the memory of water at Indraprastha. The brightness of its royal hall, the enchanted floor of Maya's assembly, the astonishment of guests: the memories returned not all at once but in fragments. There, many hands had carried water, lifted delicate vessels, and known through the warmth of their own bodies the difference between hot and cold. Those who told the stories of kings and queens generally left those hands unnamed. Draupadi remembered, too, how often she herself had been absorbed in her own happiness there. Memory did not invariably absolve anyone.

A little farther on, the road divided. The first climb was shorter, but loose stones lay scattered across it; the other curved far around and crossed water

melting from the snow. Arjuna pointed to the first. “These stones move in the afternoon,” Sahadeva said. “Shall we wait until the heat of the sky has diminished?” Without turning round, Yudhishthira said, “The traveller whose feet remain safe will be able to continue. Do not be tempted by the shorter path.” They all took the second way. Draupadi heard the decision; only afterwards did she speak of the pain in her knee.

Their pace slowed. “Does your knee hurt?” Bhima asked. “Yes,” she admitted. “But if I tell you each time, you will all start explaining to me why we must make this journey. I am asking not for a reason but for a little rest.” Bhima sat down on a stretch of stone sheltered from the wind. “I need that rest myself,” he said. Draupadi understood that humiliation made exhaustion heavier; when someone acknowledged a need of his own rather than disguising his company as pity, that humiliation became less.

As she sat, she saw a line of dust drifting beneath the distant snow. Whether it was dust or cloud she could not tell. In her father's home in Panchala, fire had been joined to the story of her birth. If a woman born of fire had ever been a little girl, would she, too, have called out for water? Those who had fashioned songs of her miraculous origin had never answered questions about her ordinary body. She herself could not say whom to blame for the distance between a story and a life.

“Do you remember Panchala?” Arjuna asked, turning back a little. What rose within Draupadi was not the twang of a bow but the warmth of the courtyard in the house where she had grown up. “Everyone remembers the day of the swayamvara,” she said. “I remember the following morning. As I was leaving, I heard the clatter of utensils. Someone was putting the rooms in order. How late did sleep come to those who had stayed awake arranging everything for me?” Arjuna considered his answer before saying, “I do not know their names.”

“I don't know all their names either,” Draupadi said. “But that morning I could scarcely see even my own feet. Eyes were watching me from every direction. When the decision that I should become the wife of five men came down upon my head, everyone had something to say. No one kept an account of the silence within me.” She did not say this in order to pronounce Arjuna guilty. She wanted history not to settle comfortably upon the claim that silence was consent.

Arjuna's face showed first resistance, then an inability to answer. “I have no answer for that moment, even now,” he said. “Did you have one then?” Draupadi asked. Arjuna looked towards the stones beside the path. “Perhaps we mistook our victory for a decision.” There was no grand vow in the admission. Draupadi looked at him, then pulled the knot in her garment tight. The consequences of an old decision were travelling with her along this slope.

Sahadeva stopped farther ahead. The wind had suddenly strengthened. He pointed out a sheltered recess among the rocks, and they sat there. The dog entered first, sniffing the air, then lay down on the narrow path that served as a doorway. Nakula placed his water vessel beside it. Yudhishthira was gazing towards the line of the distant mountains. Draupadi watched the rise and fall of the dog's breathing. Its journey belonged to itself; it had no place in the lists of the royal lineage.

Sitting in the shelter, Draupadi remembered her humiliation in the hall of dice. The question there had been how a man who had gambled away his own freedom could possess the right to stake his wife. Instead of answering her, many had gone on searching for obscure meanings in the rules. The preservation of her clothing that day was not merely a tale of miracle; before it came the long silence of an assembly that had suppressed a woman's voice. That silence still sat within her as a separate voice.

"I was standing there," Bhima suddenly said. It was as if he had read the memory rising in Draupadi's face. "My anger was immense. But first you had to endure the humiliation in that hall. People will tell the story of my anger endlessly. How many will remember the answer owed to your question?" "Anger has a loud voice," Draupadi answered. "The voice of a question does not cease to exist even when it is silenced." Bhima rested his hands on his knees and said nothing more.

Draupadi remembered the nights of exile when wet wood had to be dried before a fire could be kindled. Cooking beneath trees, she had learnt the difference between the hunger of a palace and the hunger of the forest. During those years help had often reached her and the others. Someone showed them fruit that could be eaten; someone showed them a safe passage to the river steps. Those people had fears, fields, and families of their own. The sorrow of the Pandavas was not the full measure of their lives.

Nor had Draupadi been steadfast in every matter throughout those years. On some days, in anger, she had spoken words that later seemed inadequate; on others she had been unable to wait for justice. Bhima had borne her fury, Arjuna his resolve, Nakula and Sahadeva their caution, Yudhishthira his arguments about dharma. Five different roads towards justice were visible within a single family. Yudhishthira's patience had often been unbearable to her; Bhima's impetuosity had often been dear; Arjuna's closeness had often felt particular and special. All this belonged to her life. It was not a final judgement upon it.

The wind subsided a little outside. Draupadi rose, but the pain lodged within her knee had grown worse. Arjuna offered his hand. She took it to steady a slipping foot, then let it go. "I shall walk," she said. "But do not speak on my behalf merely because I have managed to walk." Arjuna could not

smile. For some time there was nothing between them but the scrape of feet upon stones.

On the slope ahead, a stone broke loose and rolled down. Bhima stopped at its sound. Draupadi remembered the sounds of the battlefield, where chariot wheels broke and the dead were so often identified by their weapons rather than their faces. Beyond the doors opened by victory lay the absence of her sons. Five sons, five distinct childhoods, and a future broken five times over in a single night: no discourse on dharma could diminish that loss.

She remembered a question one of her sons had asked in childhood: "Mother, if my father has gone to war, will he come back while I am asleep?" She had been slow to answer. There was now no one left to make those words come true. In her memory each son possessed his own laughter, hunger, and games. People would speak collectively of 'five sons'; in a mother's memory they were not a number, but five doors opening and closing, each in its own time.

She looked up at the sky. Krishna was gone. So often in her life his name had offered support, and so often an answer to a question. But after Krishna's death, she did not think it right to deduce from her memory of him that everything that had happened was predestined. Turning the suffering that people endured into a beautiful story of fate did not change the nature of the wound. "Friend," she said inwardly, "now I must keep my own ears open to hear what I have to say."

Yudhishthira still maintained an even pace. Draupadi tried to catch up with him. "My king," she said, "we have left the kingdom, but the imprint of decisions made in the kingdom remains within us. Does renunciation change the answers to old questions?" Yudhishthira heard her and slowed a little. "No," he said. "Renunciation is not the erasure of an account of wrongs. We carry its weight on the journey."

"Then allow me to ask one question," Draupadi said. "If someone gives a single word as the final cause of my life's ending, whose choice will that word be—mine, yours, or the listener's?" Yudhishthira did not answer at once. The dog passed ahead between two stones. A man who had been king for so long had practised choosing words. This time his silence was different from the silence of the old court, but Draupadi did not accept it as a complete answer.

"I will speak of dharma," Yudhishthira said at last, "but I understand that invoking dharma and understanding a person's life are not the same thing." Draupadi heard him. "And my own story?" she asked. "That is within you," Yudhishthira replied. Draupadi's voice sharpened. "Being within someone is not enough to keep a story safe. If another person writes her voice, when will she have the chance to question it?" Yudhishthira tried once to turn and look behind him, then continued without an answer.

Along that stretch of road, meltwater seeped over the stones and froze. Nakula tested the strength of each foothold before taking the next step. Draupadi watched him from where she stood. The face once praised for its beauty now showed the exhaustion of the day, and that face seemed more alive to her than all the old compliments. “Are you tired?” she asked. “I am,” Nakula answered. “But I used to feel ashamed to say it.” “They were taught to feel shame,” Draupadi said, “though they were living bodies.”

Sahadeva came near. “The next slope may be difficult to climb,” he said. Hearing his forecast, Draupadi asked, “Then is the decision to go on reserved for the one who knows most?” “I offered an estimate, not an order,” Sahadeva said. Draupadi nodded. She looked at the faces of the brothers. She did not feel precisely the same affection towards all five; that did not mean that the lives of the other four were meaningless to her. Inequality of feeling and injustice were not identical measures.

At that moment she remembered Subhadra: a woman with whom she had shared, at different times, jealousy, closeness, and the unannounced work of a family. Draupadi recalled how women could understand another's pain while living amid different affections and loyalties of their own. Comparison altered the shape of every attachment; the existence of attachment was not, in itself, a fault. She knew, too, that her own particular love might sometimes have left another person feeling neglected. She did not wish to conceal that objection from her memories.

Draupadi wanted to hum an old song she had heard in the courtyard when the night's work was finished, in her childhood. She could not remember the whole song; only two notes and a pause remained. “What song is that?” Bhima asked from behind. “It isn't a whole song now,” she said. Bhima laughed. “An unfinished song will do.” A brief brightness crossed Draupadi's face. Many of life's pleasures would not be written into any scripture, yet they had been felt.

In the second part of the day, the wind began lifting fine snow into the air. Draupadi's toes were going numb. She touched the knot in her garment again. What had been a task of removing a thorn that morning had now become a sign of an unsuccessful repair: the thread had pulled loose once more. She stopped and tightened the knot, but her hands shook. Bhima took two steps forward, then turned. “Do you need another rest?” he asked. “Yes,” Draupadi answered, “but will the road allow me one now?”

Before Bhima could reach her, a dry stone at the edge of the slope shifted beneath Draupadi's foot. She stretched out a hand to regain her balance. Once her knee bent; a second time she tried to straighten her body. Bhima's hand almost reached her, but her body struck the ground first. The edge of a stone caught her side, and her breaths came short and broken. Dust rose and settled again. The dog stood suddenly silent.

"Panchali!" Bhima fell to his knees. He tried to support her head from beneath. Draupadi's eyes were open, but no words emerged. Bhima brought the last mouthful of water to her and moistened her lips. He wanted to ask something—about her knee, her breath, the sharp pain, anything—but events were moving faster than his questions. Far ahead, Yudhishthira's stride had not slowed.

Bhima called out, "Elder brother, Draupadi has endured so much suffering with us. Why has she fallen now?" From ahead came Yudhishthira's answer: among her five husbands she had shown special partiality towards Arjuna, and on the severe test of this journey she had met its consequence. He did not stop walking. The answer reached Bhima through the wind like the stern exposition of dharma associated with the Great Departure.

Draupadi tried to distinguish the voice reaching her ears from the memories within. There had been a particular affection; she did not deny it. But she could not read in that single phrase the whole meaning of her sons' deaths, her question in the hall of dice, the hunger of the forest, the difficult accommodations she had made with Subhadra, and her own small joys. Yudhishthira's statement was his perspective; Draupadi's experience was not made smaller by it. She no longer had the strength in her throat to answer.

Bhima took her hand in his. Draupadi looked once towards the knot in her torn garment. That knot was not a proof of her life, but it was the work of her own hands: a decision made that morning, an attempt to protect her feet, one of the countless ordinary acts no one had assigned to a category of dharma. Bhima saw her fingers slowly relax. "I shall stay here," he said. His voice held none of the thunder of his former vows.

Draupadi did not assemble a final court of judgement within herself. There had been love, the possibility of partiality, anger, injustice at particular moments; there had also been struggle, labour, grief, courage, laughter, and unfinished questions. What she had never been able to say in full did not now need to be confined to one sentence. The intervals between her breaths lengthened. Her hand lay motionless on the stone. Draupadi's life ended there; another person's explanation could not make it complete.

Bhima remained bent over her for some time. Arjuna came back; Nakula and Sahadeva also stood there. None of the brothers could immediately find the right words. Bhima pointed to the knot in her torn garment. "A thorn was caught in this knot this morning," he said. Arjuna gazed at the small repair. He remembered Draupadi's question: "Did you have an answer then?" He still had no answer. The wind from the snow was slowly blowing dust along the edges of the stones.

Yudhishthira went on, and the dog followed him. The brothers rose, each in his own time. Before releasing Draupadi's hand, Bhima carefully laid it on the ground. Ahead lay an ascent; the brothers' bodies, memories, and

responsibilities were becoming burdens of different kinds. Draupadi did not rise. One reason had already been given for her fall. The whole story of the road she had travelled could not be contained in that single reason.

Chapter 195 · The Distance Between Brothers

On the snowy road of the ancient Great Departure, a small stone crunched beneath Sahadeva's foot. Having left Draupadi behind, the five brothers were listening now to the sounds made by one another's bodies. Bhima repeatedly looked back; Arjuna's hand moved as though the old weight of his bow remained in his empty palm. Yudhishthira continued ahead, and the dog walked sometimes beside him, sometimes among the brothers. Their silence did not mean that Draupadi had been forgotten. As yet none of them had the courage to give that silence a name.

For the first time, Sahadeva tried to calculate the distance between them as they walked. “If we all maintain the same speed until the next bend, we shall reach the shelter of that rock before dark,” he said. “Are all our feet alike?” Bhima asked. Sahadeva stopped. In many battles he had relied upon calculations that had served him well; now the intervals between his brothers' breaths were changing. He corrected himself. “Our speed may change. My calculation must not rule over anyone's body.”

Arjuna drew alongside Sahadeva. “You used to understand beforehand how heavily the consequences of our decisions would fall upon us,” he said. Sahadeva smiled faintly. “Often I understood that a decision would have consequences, but not what wound would remain within each person. Once one has claimed knowledge, it is difficult to admit ignorance.” He wanted to look towards Draupadi, but her body could no longer be seen beyond the bend.

Water had frozen into a thin glittering film across the slope. Sahadeva put his staff down first to test the ground. He was about to warn Nakula when his own foot slipped. Nakula caught his arm. For a few moments the twins stood supporting themselves against a single rock. “I was showing others how to avoid danger,” Sahadeva said. “The feet of someone who shows the way still have to stand on stones,” Nakula answered. Both gave a slight laugh at this simple observation, then immediately fell silent.

Sahadeva was struggling to draw breath. He put his staff into Nakula's hand. “It will be useful farther on,” he said. Nakula tried to return it. Sahadeva shook his head. “My hand can no longer hold it upright.” Bhima came forward to lift him, but Sahadeva said, “Let me sit down first. Then we shall know whether I can rise.” Within that small request there was no prophecy of the future, only the authority of a body in the present.

As Sahadeva sat, flakes of snow carried by the wind began settling on his clothes. Arjuna supported him, but sharp lines of pain appeared across Sahadeva's face. His gaze came to rest on Nakula's palm. “We are twins, but we shall not breathe our last together,” he said softly. Nakula's face quivered. No

learning that he possessed could lighten those words. Sahadeva opened his eyes once more. Then the intervals between his breaths grew terribly long, and his body became still.

Bhima called to Yudhishthira. “Sahadeva was wise and wished his brothers well. Why has he fallen?” The answer came from ahead: Sahadeva had considered no one wiser than himself, and his fall was the consequence of that pride. Yudhishthira's voice was not harsh, but his judgement was definite. Nakula looked at the staff in his hand. “His calculations did not include the pace of my feet,” he said. “And now you are calculating his whole life by one cause?” Yudhishthira gave no answer.

The brothers walked again. Nakula held two staffs, his own and Sahadeva's. He planted them alternately on the ground, upsetting his stride. Bhima asked if he might carry one. Nakula was not ready to hand it over. Only after they had gone a long way did he stop of his own accord. “If I keep both, neither will do its work. Take Sahadeva's staff.” Bhima accepted it. One responsibility had been shared, but one brother would never return.

Nakula caught sight of a slender stream. He knelt and touched the surface of the water. The reflection of his face kept breaking apart. In the royal hall people had praised his beauty; he had taken pleasure in that praise. But the face in the water now had dry lips, swollen eyes, and streaks of dust upon its cheeks. More than his own reflection, he noticed the exhaustion of Bhima standing behind him.

“I was told from childhood that I was beautiful,” Nakula said to Arjuna. “For a long time I believed that this quality would keep me safe. In battle my face was covered in dust, in sorrow my eyes swelled, yet I had never learnt to set praise aside.” “Knowing one's own gifts is no fault,” Arjuna said. “To use those gifts to look down on someone else may be a fault,” Nakula answered. “I did not always recognise when I crossed that line.”

Beside the stream, the dog bent to drink. Nakula moved the vessel towards it. Bhima noticed that the flow of water was slight; he shifted a stone to make a small pool for the dog. For a moment all the brothers were occupied with this simple task. Even Yudhishthira turned to look. Unlike the praise of a royal court or the cries of victory in battle, there was no rank between four human palms and the thirst of a living creature.

Farther on, Nakula stumbled. He called Sahadeva's name, then immediately understood that no answer would come. Arjuna held his shoulder. “I cannot stop calling that name,” Nakula said. Bhima helped him sit. In the cold, the warmth was draining from Nakula's hands. “I may have done wrong,” he told Arjuna, “but I have the right to call to my brother.” Arjuna nodded.

Nakula's breaths became short. His hand searched for the staff lying on the ground, but Bhima had it. Bhima hastily held it out; by then Nakula's grip

had loosened. Nakula died on that road. Yudhishthira spoke of pride in his beauty as the explanation for his fall. Arjuna whispered, “Under what fault shall we write that he was calling Sahadeva's name?” The question remained in the air. The stones beside Nakula's body gave it no answer.

Three brothers now continued. With the fingers of his right hand, Arjuna was touching the marks on his left palm. Gandiva had long since been returned to the deity of the waters; the shape of the bow survived only in his memory, not its actual weight. He clenched his fist. “In battle I trusted myself. How could an arrow be loosed without that trust?” “Keep your trust,” Bhima said. “But the target here is not beyond the stones. It is the next step you must take now.”

Arjuna remembered his pledges on the battlefield: that he would overcome the enemy within a short time, that a single archer would suffice against the opposition. Those pledges had given him strength in the terror of battle, yet sometimes they had grown larger than the measure of his powers. The memory of his failure to protect people after Krishna's death still tormented him. The easy certainty he had once felt—‘I will save them’—now sounded in his mind with all its limitations exposed.

“I could not save so many people then,” Arjuna said. “My story will contain the names of the ones who survived. When I come to those who did not, my voice is inadequate.” Bhima asked only, “Why speak of that now?” “Because I have been carrying the glory of my own name as well,” Arjuna said. “At this height, the weight of a name is becoming greater than the slope itself.” Yudhishthira was looking at the ascent ahead.

A fierce gust blew across the snow. Arjuna's feet grew unsteady. He seized a stone to pull himself upright, but his hand would no longer hold firmly enough. Before Bhima could catch him, Arjuna sank to the ground. His head was spinning. Still fighting to live, he gripped his brother's hand. “Lift me once,” he said. Bhima raised him, but after two steps Arjuna bent forward again. This time he understood for himself that the upward journey was coming to an end.

“You used to call me a warrior,” Arjuna said to Bhima. “Today call me your brother.” Tears came into Bhima's eyes. “Brother,” he said. Arjuna laid his hand, now without Gandiva, upon Bhima's hand. Thereafter his voice faded and his breathing stopped. In Yudhishthira's view Arjuna had fallen because of pride in his prowess and extravagant claims in his vows. Bhima heard this judgement, but at that moment he could not argue. All he knew was that the warmth in the hand he held was diminishing.

Two brothers and the dog remained. Bhima's body was still powerful, but his knees shook on every ascent. Within him he carried Draupadi's path, Sahadeva's staff, Nakula's call, and Arjuna's final form of address. He tried to walk more quickly so as not to fall too far behind Yudhishthira, but at a faster

pace his breath began to fail. For the first time he gave himself permission to slow down.

“Elder brother, I'm hungry,” Bhima said. He had never found it difficult to speak of hunger. This time his voice held not shame but astonishment. “We have left so much behind, and still the body does not stop asking for food.” “There is a difference between the body's needs and enslavement to them,” Yudhishthira replied. “I may often have gone to excess,” Bhima said. “But these hands also procured food for people. It would not be right to put every kind of hunger under the same fault.”

Memories rose together: the liberation of people from Bakasura's tyranny, food gathered for a companion in the forest, and the terrible force of battle. Bhima knew that strength often protected, and often inspired fear as well. “I have taken pride in my strength,” he admitted. “There were moments when I should have listened, but instead I roared. That fault is mine. Yet the pain I felt when I let go of Draupadi's hand cannot be called pride.” Yudhishthira slowed, but went forward again before answering.

Bhima's next step caught in a crack between stones. He exerted all his strength to free his foot. His muscles strained and a fierce pain rose in his chest. He dropped to one knee upon the rock. Yudhishthira turned back. Bhima tried to laugh. “They said I could lift a mountain, and now I cannot lift my own foot.” His laughter broke off halfway. The dog came up, sniffed, and withdrew a little.

“Tell me why you will go on,” Bhima asked. “We were together. Now you will be alone.” “I shall continue along the path I have accepted,” Yudhishthira said. “But being alone does not mean your companionship was in vain.” “Then let me say what is mine to say,” Bhima replied. “Those who saw me only as strong did not see my fear. Today I am afraid of dying. To say so does not diminish my courage.”

Bhima's body bent lower. Yudhishthira came back a little way and stood beside him. He took Bhima's hand in his palm. After many years the two brothers were so close without orders for battle or counsel concerning the kingdom between them. Bhima's voice grew faint. “Of the water I gave Draupadi, I had drunk half myself,” he said. “She was thirstier. I still think about that.” Yudhishthira tightened his grip. Slowly, Bhima ceased to breathe.

Yudhishthira recalled the traditional explanation: Bhima's excessive appetite and his pride in his strength. But this time the answer was not being spoken to another brother; there was no one left to ask. Once the words had passed his lips, he felt how easy it was to pronounce a judgement, how difficult to bear the weight of Draupadi's half-mouthful of water or Bhima's fear. He sat beside the rock looking at his brother for a long time. Snow fell alike between all the bodies, yet the burden of continuing to live was different each time for the one left alive.

The dog came and sat beside him. It asked no question about dharma, and offered no cause for the deaths. It needed water, and it still had the strength to walk. Yudhishthira gave it the water remaining in his vessel. In the cold rising from the stones he understood that companionship was no proof of victory, and that being forced to leave someone behind did not diminish the worth of one smaller than oneself. He rose. On the path ahead the dog's footprints appeared separately from his own.

Videhapur, 2042. In the outer courtyard of the shelter, Javed Kalandar was straightening a cloth bird that lay upside down upon a screen. One of its wings had drooped in the damp air left by the rain. Anshu was growing older. Looking at the slim bamboo joint inside the bird, he said, “If you don't mend this wing, the pretence of flight will stop halfway through.” “If it stops, the fault will not be the bird's,” Javed answered. “It will be mine for failing to repair it. We must tell the audience the truth.”

Three years earlier he had stopped exhibiting live animals. He had received some instalments of payment for the first shadow-and-bell performances at Ruhani's shelter; for the outstanding sums he had had to pursue the organisers. Now, in a new independent show, there was no written assurance of payment. People said, “Show it to the children. If they like it, they'll give you something.” Javed opened his little account book and added up the costs of travel, stitching the cloth, and buying bamboo. “If no one pays for what they like, how will the work continue next week?” he asked.

At Ruhani's insistence, the outer part of the courtyard had been kept clear so that people living at the shelter could come and go without obstruction. Chandra Badi was returning from singing practice. Seeing the poster, she said, “The title is right, but why does it still say ‘Wonder-Working Animals’?” The printer's old template had survived on the paper. Javed struck out that line and wrote in his own hand: ‘Shadow, String and Story’. “If you are not going to exhibit animals,” Chandra said, “the poster must not drag them back either.”

When the children arrived, a boy asked the first question: “No monkey?” Javed did not scold him. He raised a paper monkey onto the screen. In the puppet's hand was a grain of food, and before it lay two paths. From one came the sound of applause; on the other stood a little hungry puppet. Javed pulled the string. Instead of dancing, the monkey shared the grain. Some children laughed. A girl asked, “But will it have anything to eat itself?” Javed produced another grain and said, “A story can be changed. Hunger does not vanish.”

Two men left without watching the entire show. “There used to be real tricks before,” one said. Javed's hand trembled for an instant. He knew that the antics of a captive creature had been more attractive to some spectators. But he made no promise to bring an animal back. He undid the knots in his strings and showed the children how the paper puppet was made. “You can

make this at home," he said. "But pay the labour of whoever makes art for you."

When the show ended, Javed counted the money. The audience had given him one hundred and eighteen rupees. Forty had been spent on mending the cloth and on bamboo, thirty-two on travel, and twenty more had to be put aside for Anshu's assistance. That left twenty-six rupees in his hand. "All that work for this much?" Anshu said. "Yes," Javed answered. "What remains is very little. But the twenty rupees are what I owe you. I won't reduce your pay to make my earnings look larger." He handed Anshu the notes he had set aside.

"Will you do it on these terms again?" Chandra asked. "No," Javed replied. "Next time I will agree on the time, the place, and a minimum fee before I begin. Today's earnings prove that a performance is possible without animals. They do not prove that this much can support a household." Ruhani examined the expenses in the book, but did not promise to make up the loss from the shelter's food supplies. Assistance and an artist's payment had to remain separate: Javed understood the distinction clearly.

Anshu tucked away his twenty rupees. "Next time I can come only after lessons." Javed nodded. "My art must not be saved at the expense of your education. If I need an assistant, I shall hire one for a fair wage." Chandra showed him a secure stitch to repair the torn corner of the screen. "I can do that work," she said with a smile, "but we must talk about the price first." Javed smiled too. For the first time that day, amid the figures of his meagre earnings, he could see clearly what his next decision needed to be.

In the dim light of evening, Javed rolled up the screen. One hand of the paper monkey protruded, and he folded it inside so that it could open again next time. From the direction of the distant station came the sound of a train. Fakira sometimes set the rhythm of his song to that sound; there was no plan to meet him there today. Javed closed his account book, but kept a question in his mind for Fakira: even when the papers governing a route have been corrected, how do people protect their own time? For now the question had arisen from Javed's livelihood, not from an answer about anyone else's life.

Chapter 196 · Fakira's Station

Videhapur, 2042. Near the freight entrance of the new station, Fakira touched the raised edge of a floor plate with the tip of his stick. A wooden ramp had stood there before; now a thin sheet of iron had been laid down, one corner of it curling upwards. Fakira did not kneel. He pushed his stick forward, shook it twice, and called to a young porter. "Even an empty trolley could catch on this. When you come with a load, go round to the right first." The young man said, "You've come here for the first time and you're already telling us the way?" Fakira smiled. "I've come for the first time; that's why I'm testing the plate. Remembering the old station won't make this ground level."

Inside his shoulder bag, the new travel-pass card lay folded in cloth. He kept a copy of the correction issued by Rama Karna's office in a separate envelope. He had made a few journeys since the erroneous death marking had been removed, but the contractors at each station's freight entrance presented different rules. At this new station, the hours of admission for work had to be recorded separately alongside the local slip. He had been told that two sacks of grain and a small box were to be unloaded today; no written working period had been fixed. The man who had spoken of payment was nowhere to be seen in the crowd.

"Show your pass," the guard at the entrance said. Fakira held out his card. The guard's finger stopped at the name. "It says Sai Fakir here, but Fakira on the employer's slip." Fakira did not raise his voice in the old dispute's familiar fashion. "The principal verified name is Fakira. The other name refers to an old occupational register. Read the reverse of the card." The guard read it and then asked for confirmation through an inner window. Fakira sat on a wooden bench. The card was correct, but the unloading of the morning's first train was slipping out of his hands.

An elderly worker at the tea stall recognised Fakira's voice. He was the brother-in-law of a former shopkeeper from Railway Square and occasionally served tea at the new freight entrance. "Your pass has been cleared now. Why are you sitting here again?" he asked. Fakira said, "The pass gives me the right to cross the tracks. Whether anyone will ask me to carry a load is a different account." The shopkeeper poured tea into two glasses and gave him one. Fakira gripped the hot glass through the torn edge of his chunni. The cloth was very old, yet one flower embroidered in red thread was still clearly visible.

Fakira had an offer to deliver equipment for Nandu Nat's troupe during half of that day. Nandu had already said that if the performance took place, he would pay the agreed rate; if it did not, the limit of payment for waiting alone would have to be fixed separately. But a freight manager at the new station gave Fakira a verbal order to remain available from morning until evening.

“We don't know when the load will arrive. Stay here. We'll call you.” Fakira asked, “And if you don't call?” The manager said, “There'll still be the possibility of work.” Fakira put down his tea. “The possibility may be yours. Why should I mortgage my whole day to it?”

The manager thought the question unnecessary. “Everyone waits here.” Fakira said, “Does that make everyone's time free? I can stay until twelve for two hours at a fixed rate, and record whatever work comes during that period. After that I'll go to another job.” “Then somebody else will come.” “Let him. Make the rate clear to him beforehand as well.” Two labourers standing nearby looked uneasy; they could not afford to walk away from work. Fakira did not ask them to repeat his decision. The pressures within each household were different.

The bell at the railway entrance rang. The guard waved from inside. Verification was complete; there was no restriction on admission. Fakira pocketed the card but returned to the manager. “If there are four sacks to unload, write down the hours, the assistance of another pair of hands, and the rate. I can no longer lift heavy sacks on my own; I need a partner.” Reluctantly the manager wrote the job details on the back of an old slip. The time for the arrival of two sacks was confirmed. In his small notebook Fakira recorded: half an hour waiting, no agreement on payment; unloading to be accounted for separately. He did not treat a dispute as though payment had been received.

The enclosure of the adjoining bus stand outside the station reminded him of Hasan's old appeal. One leaf of the iron gate stood open, but marks for setting down passengers still remained in the old place. Hasan sat at a low table holding tweezers to align the teeth of a zip. Zubaida was cutting cloth and sewing a torn gusset on a bag. Their box was not inside the stand, but on a safe strip outside it. “At present we have this corner for three shifts a week,” Zubaida said, “not the whole enclosed space.” Fakira did not touch the receipt lying on the table; he merely asked them to read it aloud.

Hasan brought out the old fee receipt and the answer to the appeal. The answer had not granted a permanent lease; after the hearing, however, temporary hours of use had been allowed, with a clear prohibition against crossing the safety line. Zubaida said, “This isn't full justice for our rights. But before, we had to sit here in hiding. Now, during these three shifts, we can show the slip to an employee who tries to levy an arbitrary charge.” Hasan added, “The other four days' earnings aren't in that paper.” Fakira said, “Then your work is like my pass. A place has opened, but the train carrying your livelihood hasn't started running by itself.”

A man who looked like a passenger saw the box and asked, “The old Bakkho people are back at the stand?” Hasan recognised the contempt in his voice. He did not put down the zip he was holding. “My name is Hasan. This is

a repair table. If your bag is damaged, show it to us; if not, the way is open.” The man grew a little uncomfortable, then showed them the broken strap of his bag. Zubaida quoted the charge: the replacement strap cost one amount, the stitching labour another. “So much accounting for such a little job?” the man asked. Zubaida replied, “A little job takes time too. It isn't free.”

Hasan first repaired two knots, then handed Zubaida the new strap. As she threaded the needle, she asked Fakira, “What happened to your claim for losses after the pass was corrected?” Fakira said, “I have an acknowledgement. The verification is still pending. I submitted receipts for the days on which I had written work, but I couldn't prove every hour I lost on the days I missed a train.” Zubaida said, “I have receipts for the rent on our old pitch too, but not complete proof of earnings. We keep so many papers, and still the loss that was never written down does not disappear.”

Just then an attendant responsible for the bus stand arrived. “We have to clear the route now. Take all the tables inside,” he said. Zubaida looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes remained of her authorised period. “Which part of the route?” she asked. The attendant waved his arm. “All of it.” Hasan began shutting the box, for the last time their table had been lifted, some equipment had broken. Zubaida pointed to the chalk mark drawn beneath the table. “This safe strip is in the office measurement. If a bus is arriving, we'll move the equipment a hand's breadth back. But we won't leave right now with a false entry saying our time is finished.”

An empty bus slowly turned into the stand. Its right wheel did indeed pass close to the table. Zubaida immediately lifted the box. “We can't sit on this bend,” she said of her own accord. The attendant stared in surprise. He had expected an argument; Zubaida wanted a measurement. Hasan moved the wooden board a hand's breadth back. Once the bus had passed, Zubaida asked that the new boundary line be marked on the slip. The attendant said that this could only be decided after the measuring officer arrived; for the remaining hours that day he gave verbal permission to work on the straight outer strip. Zubaida wrote down the time and the attendant's name in her notebook—not to turn a spoken assurance into a written order, but to establish grounds for a future question.

The train had reached the freight entrance. When Fakira returned, the guard was standing beside a heavy box. The manager said, “There are two sacks with this. Unload the lot.” Fakira showed him the slip: two sacks, a joint lift, an agreed rate. “The box is new work. Its weight is separate; I'll quote a rate for it.” The manager flared up. “Conditions in the middle of a job?” Fakira replied, “Conditions before the work begins. Look at the page you wrote yourself.” Another labourer, who had been waiting since dawn, stepped forward to take the sacks. Fakira asked him, “Has your pay been fixed?” The young man did not nod.

Before lifting the sacks, the two workers examined a small weighing scale. The weight written on it seemed lower than the actual load. Fakira asked the manager to weigh the sacks again. The young man was impatient; he needed his first earnings of the day. Fakira told him, “I may be seeing it wrongly. Take a look at the scale yourself.” The young man read the measurement, then matched it against the marking on the sack. The figure was too low. The manager searched for another slip. In the confusion more of Fakira's time passed. But the sacks' actual weight was recorded, and the rate for the two men's shared labour was agreed.

Halfway through the work a message arrived from Nandu: a small stage basket and bamboo slats were to arrive by the next train. Fakira remembered his arrangement for the afternoon. The station manager said, “Stay another hour. There may be a heavy consignment.” Fakira straightened the page in his notebook. “I'll finish the work I agreed to do up to twelve. The hours after that belong to Nandu. If you wish, send word about a definite job for another day.” The manager asked, “Will you answer your mobile at every hour?” Fakira said, “At night I have time for song, food and rest. Leave a message; I'll listen in the morning.”

The guard laughed at this. “Working people put down hours for rest?” Fakira said, “What if someone kept you here without cause after your duty ended?” The guard's expression changed. “My shift hours are written down.” “And if mine aren't written, does that mean I have no shift? At this station, ownership of one's own body has been given to some people and not to others.” After that difficult sentence he went back to his work. He did not leave without a signed slip, but neither did he halt the train to deliver an angry speech.

Part of the unloading wage was paid immediately. Fakira counted the notes and matched each item to the slip. The manager paid nothing separately for the box, because the job had not been accepted and the box had not been lifted. Fakira wrote in his notebook: two sacks, shared labour, sum received; payment for waiting disputed. The young man working beside him said, “If you keep writing things down, some people won't call us next time.” Fakira replied, “Possibly. That's why I won't make decisions for everyone. But don't let them enter half your wages under my name either.” He stopped the young man long enough for him to collect his own receipt.

At midday Fakira reached the outer shelter of the platform to collect Nandu's tied bundles of bamboo and cloth. Nandu Nat came in person. Jhilmil was not with him; it was time for her studies. Nandu said, “I saw Javed Kalandar's new shadow performance. He doesn't bring animals, but his initial earnings are small too. The organiser of my little show wants to reduce my fee as well.” Fakira said, “Delivering your boards is my responsibility. If there is to be a new, lower rate, say so beforehand. Don't treat a stage as cheap by cutting

into a child's education or an animal's food." Nandu looked at him and smiled faintly. "Your words are heavier than the sacks, but useful."

Before lifting the bundle, Fakira felt its knots. The rope at one end was loose. He retied it himself and took a strip of cloth from Nandu. "If it opens halfway through the journey, the cloth will tear and someone else could be injured," he said. Nandu lent a hand. The two of them shared a small joke: a man who made bamboo dance in a performance must make sure his bamboo did not dance about the station. They laughed as they secured the equipment, and Fakira took his first receipt for the agreed afternoon rate.

While they waited for the train, an old rhythm seemed to rise faintly in Fakira's ears. He pulled a corner of the chunni over his shoulder, lightly tapped the handle of his stick, and hummed two lines of a song whose words he no longer remembered clearly. Nandu asked, "What raga is that?" Fakira said, "My mother used to sing it on the road at dusk. I couldn't tell you its name. I remember that after the last line she would fall silent, and I would keep asking her to sing again." He hummed once more, but where the words should have been, only the tune remained. There was no clue to an investigation in it: only the evening of his own home.

Before evening he returned to the strip beside the bus stand. Hasan was pulling at the handle of a newly mended bag to test it. After the customer paid, Zubaida showed him the three places she had stitched. "If any of these seams opens within seven days, we'll repair it without another labour charge," she said. "But if the bag tears again because it's overloaded, that's a different kind of damage." The customer had never been offered such terms; he agreed to take the paper. Hasan said, "Today we've been paid for two repairs and received an order for a new bag. Still nothing like the old earnings at the stand." Zubaida showed him two columns in the notebook: 'Permission to use space' and 'Earnings from repairs'. She did not add the two together and call them a complete victory.

A young woman standing nearby asked why Zubaida came there if she also looked after the shelter's keys. Putting her needle safely into its case, Zubaida said, "I supervise the stores during my appointed shift at the shelter. For these three shifts I do my own sewing. The hours are different, and the responsibilities of the two kinds of labour are different." The young woman asked, "Why does one person need so much accounting?" Zubaida replied, "So nobody can say that because I serve at the shelter I must give up earning my living; or that because I sit at the bus stand I cannot be trusted with the shelter keys." Her voice held fatigue, but no regret for her decision.

Fakira told them the account of his day: uncertain waiting in the morning, the agreed sacks, Nandu's bundle in the afternoon, and his own time at night. Hasan asked, "What if the station manager strikes your name off tomorrow?" Fakira replied, "I'll ask for the reason in writing. I'll look for work elsewhere

too. None of it is easy. But if I come running whenever he calls, he'll own my day again. There's a date on my pass, not a guarantee that my stomach won't be empty." Zubaida laughed at that. "A pass is a thin piece of paper. Hunger is a substantial question."

That night at the tea stall in Railway Square, Fakira opened his old notebook and his new entrance slip together. There were four entries: the validity of the corrected travel pass, payment for the day's work, the confirmed date of Nandu's next consignment, and the verification still pending on his claim for lost earnings. He knew that a court or an office could not give back all the time he had lost. Yet the new station manager had not been granted the right to keep him 'available until evening'. He wrote plainly: after midday, other work; evening, my own. He did not turn this small line marking off his time into the slogan of some great victory.

The shopkeeper's son asked, "Did anything come of those two metallic sounds you heard behind the hospital?" Fakira took a sip of tea. "What I heard is correctly stated in my testimony. The investigation will proceed in its own place. I won't name someone I didn't see. Why should I live this day at the station under the shadow of that night?" The boy offered him a second glass. Fakira laughed. "Write down the cost of the first. If I drink a second, write down that one too." The boy said, "Tea will come cheaper if you sing." Fakira replied, "Songs have their own price. But today, for friendship, one line is free." They both burst out laughing.

As the shop was closing, Sarita Das passed by with a little wooden key-box. She was thinking of visiting the door of the shelter kitchen's old room the next morning. Fakira greeted her. He did not speak Naira's name, because he knew that nobody's grief should be made an entry pass to every encounter. Sarita asked, "How was your new station?" "I found the right entrance, earned something, and managed to keep part of my time for myself," he said. "And you?" Sarita turned a key between her fingers. "Tomorrow morning I'll see whether to open a door that hasn't been opened for a long time."

Fakira rose and picked up his stick. He did not insist on showing Sarita his papers, and Sarita did not tell him the whole story of her key. Outside the tea stall two roads parted: one towards the new station, the other towards the veranda of the old kitchen. Neither a dog's pawprints nor a tale of the Great Departure had come down to this soil as evidence; here people made decisions in their own time. Fakira put the card safely in his pocket, straightened the red flower on his chunni at his shoulder, and walked home humming. The station was still where it had been; tomorrow he would have to ask for work again. But this evening he had chosen for himself.

Chapter 197 · The First Room

Videhapur, 2042. Sarita Das separated the thinnest key from the bunch. Its teeth caught at first in the lock of the first room of the shelter's old kitchen, then turned on the second attempt. The wooden door had swollen a little on the inside. Sarita pushed it gently with her palm, not her shoulder. A line of daylight spread through the gap onto the floor. She stood still. The air in the room had been shut up, but Naira was not in it. There was nobody there to speak this ordinary truth aloud.

Inside were two empty tins, an old line for drying clothes, and a small wooden board leaning against the wall. The stove had been moved to another part of the kitchen; for a long time this room had been opened only to store things. Sarita raised the window latch. Outside, in the shelter courtyard, came the sound of utensils being washed. Rukhsana had already said she would come to help once working hours began, but Sarita had wanted to open the door herself first.

A blue cloth bag hung in one corner. Sarita did not immediately decide that it was Naira's. Naira had used a bag of that colour, but many workers at the shelter had blue cloth. When she untied the bag, she found a piece of chalk, a sheet marked with water measurements, and a torn notebook. Naira's name and the date of a kitchen time-check were written on the first page of the notebook. Sarita did not press it against her breast. She cleared the table and placed it there.

Rukhsana arrived, checking the time. “I have to finish the stores account before noon today,” she said. “I can stay with you for two hours.” Sarita replied, “Two hours will be enough. If it takes longer, I'll come back another day. We mustn't make hurried decisions about the things in this room.” Rukhsana put down a duster. Dust rose and revolved in the light. She asked, “Shall we clean first, or make the list?” Sarita said, “First look, then write, and only then sweep.”

They spread three pieces of cloth on the table. On the first they placed objects connected with the kitchen's public accounts: an old grain measure, the washing-up workers' shift list, and a sheet recording the distribution of water. On the second went things whose ownership was unclear: a handkerchief, a pen with a broken end, and a ticket. On the third they placed the notebook bearing Naira's name and a folded private envelope. Sarita did not claim that anyone's actual life could be gathered into three piles. These were merely separate arrangements for decisions about how to care for the objects for now.

Rukhsana picked up the shift sheet. “Urmila's night work is mentioned here,” she said. Sarita paused. Urmila too was no longer alive, and the amount

still owing to her family had not been paid in full. The sheet recorded the hours during which utensils had been washed; it did not record that payment had been made. Sarita said, “A certified copy must go into the payment-verification file. But don't write, on this basis, that ‘Urmila received all her money’.” Rukhsana marked the source date in the margin.

Zubaida appeared in the doorway. She was carrying not the stores key, but two glasses of warm water. She set them on the table and asked, “Some of the things in this room belong to the shelter. If we take everything home, the kitchen will have trouble later.” Sarita answered clearly, “The shelter's property will stay here. Even something with Naira's name on it doesn't automatically become mine to take home if it is a work register. First we'll ask which papers belong to whose work, and to whose rights.” Without further questioning, Zubaida brought them an empty basket for utensils.

From the middle of the torn notebook, Rukhsana took out a page. On it Naira had recorded the order in which the rooms receiving too little water had been supplied during the shelter's morning rush. At the bottom was a short statement by a woman, quoted without her full name. Zubaida asked, “If we make this information public, could it help explain an old error in water distribution?” Sarita studied the page. “Accounting for an error matters. But the woman who told Naira of her distress in private cannot be made a witness before a public meeting. Check the water measurements; don't print her private words.”

Zubaida then suggested another way. “The shelter's tap ledger records the daily quantities. We could see the uneven distribution from that. There's no need to give out the woman's private account.” Sarita did not smile, but some of the tension left her face. She wrote the tap ledger's receipt reference beside the public page. “I don't know what Naira would say if she were alive,” she said. “But I can verify the two documents we have here.”

Before noon a new employee of the shelter arrived. The employee had been instructed to send an inventory of the old room to a donor after sorting, together with a story of Naira's work and a photograph, since these might improve the chances of receiving assistance. There was more enthusiasm than pressure in the employee's voice. “People will see how wholeheartedly service was given here,” the employee said. Sarita answered, “Send the costs of running the kitchen, the workers' wages, and the list of repairs the room needs. Including Naira's face might bring more donations, but where is the paper on which my daughter gave permission to use her private photograph for that purpose?”

“You are her mother; you can consent,” the employee said. Sarita sat down. “I am her mother. That doesn't make me the owner of everything in her life,” she said. “If a photograph she approved for public work has already been published, examine that in its own context. I haven't read what's inside this

envelope myself. I won't open it to turn it into material for donations, even without reading it.” The employee stood there for a while, then asked for a separate sheet containing the public expense figures.

The writing on the outside of the envelope was Naira's, but even the letters of the addressee seemed blurred to Sarita. She cleaned her spectacles. The date could be read; the person to whom it had been written could not be identified with certainty. There was no need to break its seal. She placed the old envelope intact inside a new, dry one and wrote on the outside: ‘Private item relating to Naira; contents not opened.’ This line was not a final legal determination of rights, only a limited record of what had been done that day.

When Kabir came to the doorway, Sarita invited him in. He stood near the window without touching anything. She showed him the three piles. “These notebook pages concern work; this envelope may contain something private,” she said. Kabir asked, “Do you want me to keep the envelope?” Sarita answered, “Not yet. First we must decide where to preserve it. Your relationship with Naira was different from mine. That's why I'm informing you, not asking you to give me permission.” Kabir agreed.

Kabir thought of the envelope containing his own unsent letter, but said nothing about it. He asked, “What arrangements have been made for Naira's phone?” Sarita said, “The phone is being kept safely elsewhere. I won't open it today. If it contains information about her work, we'll consider a proper way to obtain that; we won't call curiosity about private messages a right.” Kabir looked out of the window at children filling water vessels. “I'm curious too,” he admitted. “But curiosity can't remove a boundary.”

In Seematirtha that day, Maitri Shrestha was examining the outer seal of a medicine box. An old Nepali dispatch paper, its Hindi translation, and a blank page from the hospital's receipt register lay on the wooden table. Some months earlier, ‘released for transport’ had been rendered in translation as ‘received at the hospital’. That error had made the consignment's actual location uncertain, while the computer showed the goods as ‘arrived’. Maitri's objection had been registered, but she had still not received a certified copy of the corrected entry.

“The old entry is closed,” an office clerk said. “The work can go ahead if we add a new note.” Maitri asked, “Closed in what sense? Did the hospital storekeeper count the boxes, or did somebody merely receive information?” The clerk looked towards the computer. “The dispatch date is certain.” “Then put that date in the dispatch field,” Maitri said, “not in the receipt field. The interval between the two entries isn't an empty space on paper; it is the actual time of a journey.”

Kumudi the translator arrived. She brought a typed copy of her earlier translation and a list of proposed corrections. “Where the original says ‘issued’, I shall write ‘issued’,” she said. “Where the vehicle departed, I'll write

‘dispatched’. The date on which the hospital received it needs separate testimony.” Maitri asked, “And if the old receipt register is blank?” Kumudi answered, “It will remain blank. Making a box arrive by filling a linguistic gap is not the translator's job.”

An employee stamped ‘Certified Translation’ at the head of the document, but below it appeared only the office's name. Maitri returned the page to him. “Where are Kumudi's name, the date of her work, and her translation fee?” The employee said, “Naming individual people will make the document longer.” Kumudi said nothing; she kept her eyes on the slip. Maitri replied, “When the wrong word was written, someone asked who was responsible. Now that the word has been corrected, why is it burdensome to record whose labour made that possible?”

The clerk agreed to enter the translator's name and the amount of the approved fee, but said payment would come from the next month's budget. Kumudi opened her copy of the contract. “It specifies payment within so many days after completion,” she said. “An uncertain promise about next month cannot replace that.” Maitri called the office accountant. After checking, the accountant said the funds were available under the relevant budget head, but a signature had been put in the wrong column. Once the error was corrected, Kumudi received a payment acknowledgement; whether the money had actually reached her account would have to be confirmed against the next ledger entry.

The hospital called separately about the receipt register. The storekeeper said that two receipts for the seal count on the disputed old consignment had been found, but one period in the record of temperature protection was still blank. Maitri did not immediately write ‘all medicines arrived safely’ on the document. She attached the limits of the receipts to the corrected translation: the dates of dispatch and arrival at the store were now distinct on paper; the earlier assessment of the medicines' quality remained incomplete. The clerk muttered, “Correcting one mistake has raised four questions.” Maitri said, “Those questions were there already. The paper had covered them up.”

In the afternoon, back at the shelter in Videhapur, Sarita drew four sections on a fresh sheet. In the first she wrote ‘Public property of the shelter’; in the second, ‘Records available for verification of labour and payment’; in the third, ‘Private—keep closed’; in the fourth, ‘Ownership or context uncertain’. Kabir asked, “How long will things stay in the fourth section?” Sarita said, “For as long as proper verification takes. We won't call a guess ownership merely to save time. But we won't stop the work by keeping everything shut forever, either.”

Kabir picked up an empty box. Two faded letters on the bottom looked like Naira's handwriting. “Could this be hers?” he asked. Sarita said, “Are you certain?” Kabir turned the box around. “No.” “Then don't begin a story from

it," Sarita said. Kabir placed it in the fourth pile. The small decision also made him angry with himself: why was he still searching every object for the mark of Naira's hand? He kept the answer within himself.

As evening approached, the young shelter employee returned with a printed draft of an email to donors. This time there was no photograph of Naira on the cover. It listed five categories of expense, outstanding payments, hours of work, and a public contact address. "Some people will say the letter is without feeling," the young woman said. Sarita read it. "Those who contribute to the cost of rice will understand how much rice is needed. If anyone wants a person's face, the right to give that photograph must be asked of the person herself." The young woman asked, "But Naira can no longer answer for herself. Then what?" Sarita said, "Then don't write the absence of an answer as permission."

The employee had left a field blank: 'Special material in memory of Naira'. Sarita did not order its removal. She said that if they wanted verified accounts of the shelter's public work, those should undergo a separate review of consent; the space for private material should remain empty. She raised another question. "On what date will this donation pay the outstanding wages of the kitchen cleaner and the night guard?" The employee showed her the financial account. The date of the first payment was fixed; the balance depended on funding approval. Sarita said, "Make both positions clear. Don't sell a firm promise about the future in exchange for someone's memory."

Sarita counted the pages of the torn notebook again. One page of Naira's notes on kitchen working hours could be used in a public inquiry, but the later part of the notebook contained unfinished sentences, with neither addressee nor purpose certain. Sarita did not tear out the work page and separate it. She compiled a list of the page numbers needed, restricting permission to read them, and placed the original notebook inside a protective envelope. Destroy the paper, and the evidence will not survive; open everything to everybody, and a person's privacy will not survive. Between the two lay the work of taking care.

Kabir said, "I'm afraid that tomorrow someone will say we've hidden the whole truth." Sarita looked at him. "Someone may. That's why we'll date what we saw, what we didn't open, and what belongs to the account of public work. But we aren't obliged to use my daughter's unfinished sentences to satisfy other people's curiosity." Kabir suddenly asked, "And if someone should ever want to read my letter?" Sarita asked, "What is your own decision?" He answered, "For now, it's private." "Then private it will remain," Sarita said.

A screw was loose in the frame of the room's old window. The shutter kept rattling in the evening breeze. Kabir found a screwdriver and tried to tighten it, but part of the wood had rotted. Zubaida brought the repair ledger used by the workers. Sarita said, "If water seeps in after we close the door, these papers

will be damaged. Check the repair cost; we need a safe temporary place for the private items.” Zubaida provided a dry lockable chest, separate from the public storeroom. Responsibility for its key was recorded; the details of what lay inside were not made public.

Sarita wrote a brief receipt in the shelter register. Naira's name appeared only to identify objects on which it had already been found; the record invented neither Naira's private feelings nor any supposed wish of a person who had died. Zubaida took a copy of the receipt. Kabir signed as a witness to the arrangements for preservation, not as a witness granting the right to open the contents. Sarita thought: a signature is a short line, but understanding its limits is a weighty matter. So she had the nature of his role written beneath it.

Before the room was locked, Sarita went inside once more. The wooden board stood where it had been; the empty tins had been counted; the blue bag no longer hung separately but lay safely in the dry chest. She did not make a speech addressed to Naira. At that moment her sorrow as a mother grew neither smaller nor grander. She felt the impossible wish to share one more ordinary meal with her daughter. She smelled the lentils cooking in the courtyard and closed the window without hiding the tears in her eyes.

Outside, Kabir was writing the next day's tasks on a small sheet: collect the copy of the kitchen expenses, have the loose window frame examined, and discuss the safe preservation of Naira's phone. Sarita read the last line. “Not the phone today,” she said. “Tomorrow, too, we won't open it merely for the sake of opening it. First we must decide what the question is, who has the right to answer it, and how we will accept an answer that may never come.” Kabir folded the paper. He understood that the next day's difficult question had been postponed, not settled.

In the evening light, the lock on the door glimmered faintly. Sarita put the key in her cloth bag but left the receipt for the contents in the shelter's authorised register. As she walked home, the old room remained behind her. Opening it for the first time had not brought Naira back; closing it had not imprisoned whatever meaning remained of Naira's life. That day a notebook had been saved, a route to verifying some workers' claims had opened, and a private envelope had been kept from becoming a public spectacle. That was all that could be done; it was all that had been decided that day.

Chapter 198 · The Dead Woman's Phone

Videhapur, 2042. Kabir spread an old cotton handkerchief on the table and laid Naira's phone in the middle of it. A fine crack, as thin as a hair, ran across one corner of the glass. He did not know when it had appeared. The phone was switched off, yet its weight felt strangely familiar; the object that Naira had picked up so easily while she was alive now seemed to require both of Kabir's hands. Sarita sat opposite him. Their tea was growing cold.

The inventory brought from the room the previous day mentioned the phone but not what was inside it. Shabnam, a young employee of the shelter, arrived with a letter. The municipal memorial committee wanted to organise a public gathering in Naira's name. The proposal suggested playing surviving messages, showing photographs and sharing private conversations from her phone to let people hear 'the voice of a new generation'. The budget included a microphone, a screen and a printed booklet; the field for the person granting permission was empty. Shabnam read the letter and fell silent.

Kabir's first impulse was to say that people must not forget Naira. Then he remembered how often she had hidden people's names in news reports. "They're offering to let people hear her voice," he said, "but would she have wanted everyone to hear all the voices on her phone?" Sarita did not answer. She laid a finger on the letter's empty field. "The person they needed to ask can no longer answer. We can't fill that blank space with answers of our own choosing."

Shabnam said the committee's secretary kept telephoning. He had an old public photograph of Naira, but said that without private messages the meeting would not feel 'genuine'. Kabir asked, "If I refuse, will he say I'm hiding her memory?" Sarita said, "He may. But receipts from public work, the kitchen's working hours, and things she herself chose to circulate are all different matters. The audience as a whole does not own private conversations."

A thin envelope lay beside the phone. Kabir did not open it. This was not the envelope containing his own unsent letter; he had kept that separately in a private place, marked 'Private—Unsent'. The envelope here contained the old purchase receipt for the phone and an incomplete repair record. These papers could not establish every period of Naira's life. Sarita noted the purchase date but did not add guesses about the contents of the phone to the inventory.

"If the phone stays switched off, how do we preserve it?" Shabnam asked. "The battery may fail; the work documents inside could be destroyed too." It was a practical question. Kabir had already considered taking it to a repair shop. Sarita said that preserving the device, making uncontrolled copies of its contents, and publishing them were three separate decisions. They would seek

technical advice about preservation, but would not give an unknown repairer the right to inspect everything on the phone.

At noon a meeting was held on the shelter veranda. The people gathered not simply so that three individuals could decide, but so that different concerns could be heard. Tara brought two stacks of documents: copies of the reports Naira had issued for public work while she was alive, and papers concerning outstanding office payments. Sanket came with her. “For whatever is verified here, we don't need to open the phone,” Tara said. “But I have no private conversations, and I won't call their absence a false deficiency in the historical record.”

The municipal committee's secretary also arrived. He had a camera over his shoulder, but at the door Shabnam told him it must remain switched off inside. He put it into his bag. “We want to show Naira's courage,” he said. “People will be inspired when they understand the personal side of such a young woman's life.” Kabir looked at him. “Inspired to do what?” he asked. The secretary flustered. “Everyone will be inspired.” “Then tell us first: who gave you permission to read the private things she wrote?”

The secretary objected that Naira had worked for society, and so her writings were a public heritage. Sarita opened the kitchen ledger. “Her signature is on this page. It is evidence of work for which she herself distributed copies so that people could check it. But whoever received a letter from her has a right to privacy too. Death doesn't erase the recipient's consent.” For the first time the secretary heard a limit to his argument, although he did not immediately agree.

“But you are her mother and her companion,” he said. Something hurt inside Kabir. He wanted to keep separate the happiness of having been Naira's companion and the unbearable truth of her death. “I am her companion,” he said quietly. “But where did I get the right to speak in her place? There were times she didn't answer a question I asked her. Even then I accepted that silence as her right.” The secretary's notebook had no space prepared for a question like that.

Near the shelter door, two children were repairing the wire of an old bell. One child asked Shabnam whether they would make kheer again in Naira Didi's name. Shabnam laughed. “We'll make kheer on a day when the kitchen budget allows for it. A name won't fill an empty stomach.” For the first time Sarita smiled faintly. Amid the weight of the meeting, one thing was clear: the proposal to ask for donations in Naira's name and the money needed to run the kitchen today demanded separate accounts.

Rafiq arrived then, carrying two drafts of his newly printed identity document. He had come to see Tara about a meeting on linguistic records, not because he had been called to discuss Naira's phone. Sarita made room for him. “Are you talking about an empty field on a form?” Rafiq asked. “They've

merged both fields on mine.” In the first draft, ‘Surjapuri’ had been entered under language, and the same word had been inserted automatically under community identity.

Rafiq explained that his ancestors had described their community in one way, while the name of the language they spoke was expressed in another. The employee who merged the two in the digital form called it a matter of local convenience. “If I give the name of my language, how can people decide my ancestry, occupation and beliefs from that?” Rafiq asked. “I should have the opportunity to identify myself; what I haven't said is not for an officer to guess.” Sanket examined the draft and saw the error.

An employee showed them the correction field on a mobile screen. He said the system offered only limited choices for community names; adding a separate line would make searches less convenient. Rafiq produced an older acknowledgement, recording the date of his objection. “Silence me for the convenience of a search?” he said. “I need two lines, with the words I give myself. If there's to be some classification later, record its basis and the person responsible separately.”

When Padma joined the meeting, she saw the proposal to keep independent fields for language and community identity. Nobody in the room had the authority to alter the government's original form immediately. She arranged for both fields to be filled separately on a certified local supplementary copy, with a note explaining the limitation of the original system; a request for formal correction would be filed at the designated office. Rafiq wrote his own name and his two descriptions of identity. An employee signed the acknowledgement, but the central system still awaited correction.

“I've given my voice,” Rafiq said, “but it hasn't yet reached every record.” At that Kabir glanced towards the phone. A living man sat there correcting the words used to identify himself; in the name of a dead woman, others were demanding the right to speak words she had not spoken to them. The situations were not identical, but each sharpened the question raised by the other: whose statement was being presented as whose?

Rafiq took another paper from his bag. It contained two forms of an old river name: ‘Sa-ura’ (सउरा) as heard from a family member, and ‘Saura’ (सौरा) as written in a government copy. He showed the reference number of an old work paper connected with Naira's name. “Naira told me to write what I had heard, and not call anything certain unless it had been checked,” Rafiq said. “This paper has the sound I heard; the government spelling is on the next page. Nothing here proves they name one and the same actual river.”

The secretary said that ‘The River Discovered by Naira’ would make a beautiful title for the memorial booklet. Rafiq answered plainly, “If people make a map because you call it a river discovered by Naira, they'll be misled. She took care in recording the word I had heard. Give her credit for that care,

not imaginary credit for discovering a river." Padma asked Rafiq's permission to place both sources side by side, with their dates and spellings. He permitted only the public part of the bilingual note to be used. Private details from the family's travel papers were removed.

Just then a call came from Maitri Shrestha. She had sent a copy of a new correction regarding the reading of the name 'Lalbageya' in her family's old transport document and the credit due to translator Kumudi. Shabnam read the letter aloud. The translator's name, the date of her work and the fee had been approved; a separate entry confirming actual deposit into her bank account was still awaited. The assessment of the old medicine shipment's quality also remained incomplete because of a missing interval in the temperature-control record. Maitri had specifically asked that neither incomplete matter be described as 'proved by Naira's documents'.

"Lalbageya is a name written on this paper," Rafiq said. "That doesn't establish its present-day route. Sa-ura and Saura comes from another source. Don't sweep all four words into one watercourse when making a story." Tara smiled. "We have separate fields in our register, but the meeting proposal turned them all into one picture." Somewhat embarrassed, the secretary crossed out a heading in his notebook. Two small distinctions on paper had never seemed so important to him.

Someone called from outside that tea was ready. There was no sugar in Rafiq's cup; he was chewing a small piece of jaggery he had brought with him. Kabir asked, "If your pronunciation is recorded in your own language, won't that stop people changing it?" Rafiq laughed. "They'll still try to change it. But I'll have a copy of what I wrote, so I'll be able to speak again. Owning your voice doesn't mean that the argument over it has ended."

The secretary returned to the phone. "There are so few such public documents. People will want to see Naira not merely as a person, but intimately." Kabir's eyes fell on the handkerchief. He remembered some of Naira's small jokes, a laugh at the price of curd somewhere, shoes full of mud after rain. These memories were his own. It would not necessarily be wrong to speak of them on a public platform, but the hunger for applause could change even a memory like that.

Kabir said, "I can speak, from my own memory, of seeing her laugh. But I cannot open her phone and sell the lines she wrote separately to different people. If she wrote of her fear in a message to someone, and I read it to a public meeting, people will call that the final meaning of her life. Her life was not a single last sentence." Sarita put her cup on the table. "And her death is not our seal of permission," she said.

A young man suggested that they examine the phone privately first and select 'harmless' lines for publication. Sanket asked, "Harmless in whose eyes? The other person in a conversation may have considered the message private

too. And if looking in private increases people's curiosity, why increase the number who see it?” The young man said a technical specialist could apply a filter. Shabnam replied, “A machine can filter. It can't manufacture consent.”

They settled on a practical course. The phone's external condition, device identity and responsibility for its custody would be entered in the inventory; it would be stored switched off in a locked chest. They would seek advice from a qualified person on caring for the battery and stored data, without giving unrestricted permission to open or copy the contents. If records of public labour were needed, these would first be checked against office records and the workers' own copies. Should some necessary legal or otherwise justified reason arise in the future, a separate review could be held; this meeting would not grant approval in advance.

“The memorial will seem dull if we do that,” the secretary said. Zubaida, who was working in the kitchen, had been listening from outside. She came in and asked, “Dull in what sense? She prepared a list of night wages, and that list brought the accounting for my unpaid wages to light. Does that need special lighting?” The secretary said nothing. Zubaida continued, “I still haven't received everything I'm owed. The accurate public account needs to be released, not the private letters from my home.”

Kabir lifted the phone and placed it in the chest. When the question of the key arose, Sarita said no one person would have sole authority. There would be a joint custody entry, with reasons for opening the chest and limits on who could be present. She asked Kabir whether he would sign as a witness. He signed, ‘Custody of sealed device accepted’, and beneath it wrote in his own hand, ‘No consent to publish messages stored inside’. For the first time that day he could resolve that his love might also take the form of a prohibition.

Rafiq stood up with a copy of his supplementary identity document. An older employee stopped him. “We've accepted this paper with two separate fields. Should I tell the central office that the rule has changed?” Rafiq said, “The rule hasn't changed. My accurate statement has been acknowledged. Write no more than that. I'll return to press the remaining claim.” The employee crossed out ‘Full resolution’ in his heading and wrote ‘Separate local recording’. It was a small correction, but in it Rafiq's actual right to speak was visible.

News arrived in the evening that a copy of Maitri's letter had reached Kumudi. She was pleased to see her name recorded correctly, but would check her own account to find out whether the fee had been deposited. On hearing this, Rafiq said, “Just as a person's name was checked separately, so too must the journey of the money.” Shabnam put away the letter. Two forms of a river name, one translator's credit, and one living person's identity had been recognised separately that day without being forced into a fabricated story.

At dusk the secretary left without taking out his camera. He said the committee would rewrite its proposal: a programme based on Naira's previously approved public work, outstanding wages owed to workers, and methods of safeguarding records. Kabir said, “Before the programme, show the draft to the people concerned. Listen to the decisions of those whose names or voices you intend to use.” The secretary agreed to that much. Whether the programme would take place was uncertain; but the proposal to open the private phone and broadcast its messages was withdrawn that day.

In the courtyard Sarita lifted a water vessel. Kabir moved to take it, but she walked two steps herself. “Here,” she said, “you carry it the rest of the way.” Once Naira would sometimes stand in that very place and tease them. Now there was only empty light. Kabir steadied the vessel. The question was not to guess what Naira might have wanted; it was what care the living could exercise today.

At night Kabir looked again at the envelope marked ‘Private—Unsent’, but did not open it. In his small notebook he recorded that the messages inside Naira's phone had not been read, selected or handed over for publication. After making the entry, he sat for some time with the pen in his hand. Naira's voice came to him in memory—not exact words, only the old cadence of her speech. He knew this hearing within his mind was not a verified sound recording; there was no need to print that solitary voice.

The key to the chest was kept separately under secure custody, its receipt in the shelter register. Near the outer window a moth was beating its wings. Kabir dimmed the bulb so it might find its way into the night outside. He understood that saving someone's voice did not require opening every door in that person's life. Naira's phone was switched off. Naira was dead. Between these two truths Kabir's love now stood as a firm refusal: no one's private messages would be turned into public history in their absence.

Chapter 199 · The Story Without a Name

Videhapur, 2042. An envelope lay on the table in the records room. Its mouth had not been sealed with gum but tied with a fine cotton thread. The space for a name on its face was blank; below it were two words: ‘For a story’. Before untying the thread, Padma fastened the window latch, as though the noise outside should not be allowed to claim authority over what was said within. Sarita, Tara and Sanket were in the room. Tea was coming to the boil, but no one reached for the envelope.

The person who had brought it was sitting on the veranda. They had asked that their name be withheld, not made a show of concealing their face. Coming inside, the visitor said, “I will tell the story of what I saw. But don't attach my home, my family or the work I do today to it. Can you leave a name blank in your book?” Padma replied, “We can leave out a name. But we cannot print something unverified as though it had been established.”

“That is precisely why I've come,” the visitor said. There was weariness in the voice, but the request was clear. “Once, my household's name was printed at the back of a relief list. Everyone who wanted to find us came there. Afterwards I spent more time explaining where I lived than telling my story. Now I want the page to carry the weight of what happened, not the weight of me.” Sarita gave the visitor water. She did not ask who had been hurt by that earlier incident.

Padma spread three sheets across the table. The first was for the speaker's approved words; the second, for a list of documents against which those words could be checked; the third, for the limits of publication. “If you wish, you can read the first sheet and strike things out,” she said. “On the second, we'll record questions to investigate, not the whole incident. Nothing on the third will be made public without your decision. But if a legal inquiry arises later, we won't promise a degree of secrecy we cannot guarantee.”

The visitor thought for a while. “Are you telling me that the fear hasn't gone away?” Tara said, “If we declare fear abolished by the stamp of a rule, that will be another deception. All we can do is restrict who hears this here, who keeps a copy, and what goes outside.” The visitor continued to hold the envelope's thread. For the first time, the request to remain unnamed seemed not like a forewarning of wrongdoing but a considered choice.

Outside on the veranda, water used for washing rice was running into the drain. Through the window Sarita watched a child roll a wooden wheel through the wet earth while his mother called to him three times. The visitor smiled involuntarily at the sound. “There are people in my home, too, to whom I return every day. You have made me anonymous, not invisible. I have bills to pay, meals to cook; I make mistakes as well.” Sarita understood that

preserving a story did not mean turning an entire life into a specimen of evidence.

The visitor began. During a period of temporary copying work, a page of a labour register had been handed over. Dates of attendance were entered on it, but the boxes for hours worked on two days were empty. Someone had said aloud that the figures would be added ‘from above’. The visitor had asked whose order had left those lines blank. No clear answer had come. “I saw the empty lines,” the visitor said. “I did not see anyone erase them. Write down that difference.”

Sanket stopped his pencil at once. “Do you remember the number of that register?” The visitor gave the number from an old acknowledgement slip, though no copy of the slip was at hand. Tara turned through her inventory of records. An acknowledgement with a corresponding number had been logged, but the original labour register was not in that folder. “The receipt of a slip is established here,” Tara said. “The account of the empty hours is still testimony.” A voice called from outside, “Then what's the use of writing it down?” Padma opened the door and answered, “To open a path for inquiry, not to deliver the final verdict.”

Beside the slip number, Sanket drew a small circle in his ledger. “This is a document that reached us, not the original register,” he said again. Tara agreed that if a copy were requested, its issuing authority, the date it was made and the person receiving it must be identified separately. In the floods of earlier years, clean transcriptions had often circulated in place of water-damaged papers; neat lettering was not itself the final witness to truth. The anonymous visitor had once found such distinctions tedious, but today saw in them a means of protecting the account.

The questioner outside was an associate of the municipal committee. He said that if accusations without names were published, how could the institution respond? Sarita offered a proposal rather than a rebuttal: let the relevant office be asked in writing for the labour register bearing that number, the order authorising any correction, and a copy of the payment record. There was as yet no question of naming anyone guilty. The associate asked why the speaker would not come before a public meeting. Sarita said, “Because appearing on a public platform is not the only way to tell the truth.”

At that moment Poonam Chidimar arrived at the doorway carrying a sack cover. It was hard to push a needle through the thick jute, so she wore a small brass thimble on her finger. She had been commissioned to mend the edging of a new cover for Rukhsana's kitchen. She had come to settle her account, not to hear a confidential statement. Seeing the silence in the room, she asked, “If the sound of my needle bothers you, shall I sit outside?” Sarita laughed. “The sound of a needle won't tear the papers in here.”

The proposal to record memories of Poonam's family's former occupation came up again. A young man said an exhibition about the Chidimar community, with songs and photographs, would be beautiful. Poonam cut her thread not with her teeth but with a little pair of scissors. “The songs may be beautiful,” she said, “but first tell me which parts of my grandmother's account you actually know. What she told us about catching birds, I have preserved as memory. Today I sew covers for sacks of rice, not traps for living birds. The decision between those two things is mine.”

The young man suggested captioning a photograph ‘Traditional Chidimar Net’. Poonam placed the jute cover in his hands. “Give this that name and tomorrow my customer will think I'm selling him hunting equipment. These are the measurements for four sacks in Rukhsana's kitchen, the price, and the receipt for payment on the previous order. Something may resemble a net, but that doesn't turn an old occupation into my present trade.” The young man put the cover down again.

Padma prepared two separate descriptions. With Poonam's consent, the first recorded a limited portion of family oral memory—something heard from her grandmother, not direct testimony. The second recorded her current sewing work, the article's purpose, its measurements and the source of payment. Poonam had her daughter's name and photograph removed from both. “She's at school,” she said. “I won't decide for her that she must become a character in an exhibition.” This time the young man himself tore up his proposal for a photograph.

A bird called from the veranda, and Poonam looked towards the outer eaves. She remembered her grandmother's voice, telling them to secure the thatch before the rains by watching how the birds flew. That memory carried the scent of knowledge within her family. But what she wanted for her daughter was different: wages paid on time, treatment when a needle pierced her finger, and evenings free for study. She sat down again and began putting stitches into the torn corner of the cover.

Meanwhile Somri Hembrom arrived with two copies of a contract. After the previous language meeting, a draft of its principal terms in Santhali had been examined by a literate member of the team and a trained colleague. The reason given for deductions from wages was still obscure in one sentence. Somri displayed the papers—the original wording and the meaning explained in the language of home, side by side. “We are not against signing,” she said. “We are against signing without understanding.”

A representative of the contractor had come with her. Worried, he said that by the time all the multilingual copies were printed, the season for work would be over. Somri looked at two members of her team. One young man had debts at home and needed employment quickly. “I understand your haste,” Somri said, “but if the new Santhali text doesn't explain what the

deduction means, you can't say everyone agreed with full knowledge. Put the time of your proposal in writing, and we'll reply."

"You do the translating yourselves," the representative said. "Why should we pay for it?" Somri gave a short, incredulous laugh. "Speaking our own language is part of life at home. Finding faults in a contractor's agreement, comparing two versions and explaining them to workers is labour done during specified hours. Has anyone ever filled a stomach by calling that a gift of love?" Kumudi also sat down. She made clear that she had not certified the ultimate correctness of the Santhali: her work was to identify differences between the original administrative language and the Maithili version.

The accounts notebook was opened. Somri's meeting time, the colleague's checking hours and Kumudi's separate language work were entered under three distinct heads. The representative gave written approval for the first instalment and recorded a date for the balance after the review was complete. No one announced that full payment had been made. Somri had a line added at the very bottom of the receipt: 'Translator's fee, not wages'. Her colleagues each kept their own copy; nobody's consent was entered in another person's name.

The anonymous visitor had remained in the room, listening to all this. "There were empty boxes in my register," the visitor said softly. "Here you're putting words into empty boxes." Padma answered, "Sometimes an empty box must be left empty in exactly the right place." Somri did not ask who the visitor was. She gathered up her receipt and left; only then was the visitor ready to tell the next part of the story.

"When I first raised the question, an employee told me that the hours for those two days would be filled in later. I know his name, but I never saw him alter the register with his own hands. After that day, I was not given work at that copying desk again. Whether those two things were connected, I don't know." Sarita said, "Then only what you saw will stay in the story. The reason you were not given further work will be investigated separately."

The visitor also wanted the neighbourhood and details of the clothes worn that day removed. Sanket said that deleting so much might make checking the source difficult. "Remove it from the public story," the visitor said. "I'll give you the date and number needed for the inquiry on a sealed slip, but first tell me who will see it." Tara explained the receipt procedure: a limited number of responsible people, a record of every inspection, no entitlement to independent copies. The visitor agreed, on condition of keeping one copy personally.

By evening a copy of an old letter relating to Rafiq's speech had arrived. The spoken form of the name 'Panar' differed from the local written spelling. One colleague proposed adding a beautiful description of the river's course to the account of the meeting. Rafiq came himself and said, "The sound I spoke

belongs to my dialect; it cannot give you a map of the whole river. What was heard, the form written down and any geographical claim need separate papers." Padma put his note on pronunciation beside the original source.

'Parola' was written in a copy of Maitri Shrestha's old transport document. Kumudi marked the written reading of that name and possible differences in its sound. The document also carried other dates for the transport of medicine, but the appearance of a place-name did not give every date the same meaning. Speaking on the telephone, Maitri said, "Write only as much as you can verify of the word in that old document. Proving a present-day route from this name isn't my task." Kumudi entered the fee for her reading work under a separate head as well.

When the telephone call ended, Kumudi drew two lines in her notebook. On one side was the note on the pronounced sound of 'Panar'; on the other, the reading of 'Parola' in the old document. No arrow connected the two names. Rafiq laughed. "People draw arrows precisely where no arrow is needed." Maitri's transport claim and Rafiq's oral memory each carried the limits of their own sources. Padma left the space between them blank. This time the blank was not a mistake but a safeguard.

A young man at the meeting asked impatiently, "Are we going to publish a story or put a warning after every word?" Sarita said, "A story is made from the time left to people in their lives; cautions keep that time from turning into a lie." Tara read him the anonymous visitor's opening words, about wanting to be heard without being named. The expression on the young man's face changed. "Then there's no excitement in it?" he asked. Padma smiled. "The absence of excitement is not the absence of a human being."

Padma read the approved draft aloud. It contained the envelope, the lines of missing hours and the failure to obtain an answer; there was no mention of the home, the clothing or small clues that might reveal an identity. The visitor changed two sentences. In the first, 'My wages were stolen' became 'I was not given the opportunity to see a full account of my wages'. In the second, 'They dismissed me' became 'I was not given work at that desk again'. "I'm not diminishing my anger," the visitor said. "I'm refusing to say what I do not know."

When it came to permission for publication, Tara asked explicitly: which portions of the story, how many copies, and in what places? The visitor agreed to a limited reading at the community school and an anonymous printing in the records booklet; photographs, audio recordings and details that could reveal the original speaker were refused. The visitor retained the right to read the final text again before publication. Sanket recorded the date of consent. Omitting a name did not grant permission to turn the story into everyone's property.

A separate application was prepared for the office, asking that the labour register for the specified number, the calculation of time for two days, the order for correction and the actual payment details be made available for checking. The anonymous statement was not presented in it as a proven accusation. The municipal associate read the letter and said that a deadline for reply should be fixed. Tara wrote down the time allowed and undertook to obtain an acknowledgement of receipt herself. The visitor wanted no hint of the household in this public application. That request was respected.

As she gathered the finished cover, Poonam said, “Today my two descriptions have been separated. But the kitchen that still owes me for the new cover—will it pay on time?” Rukhsana's written acknowledgement and the agreed payment date were read aloud to her. “This is the result of my work,” Poonam said. “The beauty of my grandmother's story won't increase what I'm owed on that date, and it won't reduce it either.” Everyone laughed at that. In one person's life, memory and wages, however separate, were carried by the same hands.

Before returning home, Somri met the young man who needed work immediately. He said he could scarcely afford to wait for the translation to be completed. Somri did not deny the constraint. “Keep with you a copy of what has been made clear today. Your right to say yes is yours, not my yes,” she said. He asked whether the first instalment for translation would really arrive. Somri answered, “The written authorisation has arrived. I'll call it payment only after the money does.”

In the last light of evening, the anonymous visitor read the approved page again. There was no name on it, yet its words sounded like the visitor's own voice. “If I want to tell you more next time, this page won't turn into a locked door against me, will it?” Padma said, “New information will require new checking. The truth of what you said today is no guarantee for everything said tomorrow. And today's consent will not make anyone the owner of your private life tomorrow.”

As she cleared the table, Padma took out an old page divided into four boxes. One was intended for what had been directly seen, another for what had been heard, a third for the inference drawn from it, and the fourth for the storyteller's imagination. She did not fill in any of them yet. The pages of different people, old river names and the anonymous statement had come together, but they did not all belong to the same kind of truth. The next day, those distinctions would be the subject of a lesson.

As the visitor was leaving, the empty thread from the envelope was requested back. Sarita asked in surprise, “What will you do with this thread?” “Tie a notebook at home,” came the reply. “Today I've learnt that it's possible to keep a paper closed and still tell a story, both at once.” The visitor wound the thread around a palm and went out. On the public page Padma wrote only

the statement's reference number and the limits of consent. A name remained protected; a question for investigation remained open; the story found a way to be told without changing hands to a new owner.

Chapter 200 · The Final Check of Words

Videhapur, 2042. Padma cut four narrow strips of paper and set them on the table. On the first she wrote ‘Direct observation’; on the second, ‘What was heard’; on the third, ‘Inference’; on the fourth, ‘Imagination’. Night dew had clouded the window glass. At a corner of the table a small fibre from the thread of yesterday's anonymous envelope still clung. Padma moved it aside and lifted the corner of a sheet.

When Tara entered the room and saw the four strips, she asked, “Not a book of stories today, but a lesson in accounting?” Padma laughed. “Precisely for a book of stories. If we place what someone saw with their own eyes beside something merely heard, we distort the value of both. It would be unjust to dismiss what was heard as a lie, too. Take imagination away and the story will die; turn imagination into evidence, and people may die.” Sarita brought tea. She asked where Naira's own inferences belonged in her old news reports. “Wherever she identified them as her inferences,” Padma said.

Sanket opened the first page: the anonymous visitor's account of the labour register. The previous day the visitor had said that two lines for working hours were blank, but the original register was not then in the records room. “What that person saw is direct experience for the person,” Sanket said. “For us it is testimony received. If I write ‘Two lines in the original register were blank’ on this sheet, I will be turning something I never saw into my own direct observation.” Tara set beside it the acknowledgement for the application sent to the office. “This receipt is direct evidence that the office accepted our application. It tells us nothing yet about what the reply will establish.”

Jagat, the young man from the school, was irritated by the distinction. Yesterday, after reading the story, he had said that so much caution would leave it without excitement. Today he carried a draft play. “If I write darkness and whispers around the empty lines, will that be a lie?” he asked. Padma read his page. It showed an employee hiding the register. “You can invent the darkness; it has a place in the play,” she said. “But don't present someone whom no one saw as an employee from the actual incident. An imagined character and a person named in an inquiry must remain distinct.”

Sarita gave Jagat tea. “In a play, truth resides not only in an event but in fear,” she said. “Yet painting fear onto a scene so that the police are sent to someone's real home is no right conferred by theatre.” Jagat folded his paper. He said he would keep the scene but make the employee an invented figure, unrelated to the original dispute, and state at the outset that the characters were fictional. Padma handed him the fourth strip. The young man's question had not been exhausted.

Meanwhile Asha Bhumij arrived carrying an old tin box. Its lid was loose, so she had fastened it with a rubber band. She had already been collecting receipts for rent, medicine, fares and lost earnings from families living in different places after leaving the mining area. Today three families had sent their papers with her for checking. Asha first loosened the band and then asked, “Which of these four boxes is for the grief of leaving one's home?”

Padma did not reply at once. “The grief you have suffered in your life is your direct experience. We hear another family's grief through their account. Neither automatically proves every amount claimed for losses.” Asha said, “Then we need one space for grief and another for expenses.” She took out the first family's slips. One page recorded the rent of a temporary room, another the fare paid to reach it. A claim about the days when work had stopped was written separately on plain paper. She was unwilling to add amounts without reconciling them.

An elderly woman from the first family entered the room. Her grandson read the slips aloud. “I want to go home,” she said, “but if going back means dust and the sound of breaking stone again, why should I leave this new home?” Asha said that an independent inspection of the original house was still pending. No one would treat the woman's temporary rent as consent to resettlement at her old address. The grandson wanted one compensation payment for the entire family. “My medical expenses are separate,” the woman replied. “The cost of your interrupted schooling is separate. One figure would erase us all.”

The second family was staying rent-free in a relative's house, but had lost days of domestic work and agricultural wages. One member of the third family had gone far away in search of earnings; the cost of returning and the question of present accommodation were separate matters. A municipal committee associate said, “A single total would make the hearing easier.” Asha straightened the lid of her tin box. “Calculate a total, but don't rub out the differences within it. A person without a rent receipt hasn't suffered zero loss; and someone with a rent receipt hasn't thereby proved every claim.”

Padma slid the first two strips towards Asha. The families' own accounts were recorded as testimony heard; the amounts on available receipts were recorded as figures seen on documents. The statement ‘Mining caused every expense’ was placed under inference, because the times, places and losses of each family required separate examination. Asha wrote ‘Temporary accommodation—verified payments’ in her own hand, and gave another section the heading ‘Claims—verification pending’. The grandson added the two rent receipts for the first family; Asha counted them again. When their totals agreed, the elderly woman made her mark.

A middle-aged man asked, “If the receipt amounts have been accepted, will the return home begin now?” Asha replied, “Your letter has been entered for a

hearing, but even the date for inspecting the land has not been fixed. Whether you wish to return or to claim accommodation elsewhere remains your decision. I can record the accounts with you; I cannot choose your home for you.” In her register she left an empty space beside the family's preference. This blank was not carelessness but a right reserved for the future.

Seeing this, Jagat changed a line spoken by a character in his play. It had read: ‘All the homeless people went home.’ Now he wrote: ‘On paper the road home is open; where people's feet will go, they will say themselves.’ Asha read it and said, “That's better, but keep a separate question about whether the road is safe to walk.” Jagat struck out another word. The fewer miracles that remained on his page, the more living human beings he began to see in it.

Before noon, Tulsi Tajpuriya telephoned. Transport workers were on strike over unpaid shift allowances and rest periods. A patient needed to be taken from the hospital to another centre for specified treatment. Hospital staff were insisting that a vehicle leave at once. “An empty vehicle won't move without a driver's agreement,” Tulsi said, “and making the patient's name public won't provide treatment. I need confirmation from the hospital, the driving team and the strike committee.” Padma gathered up the papers and went to join her.

In front of the gate, the drivers sat with their vehicles' keys in a cloth bag. Haricharan Paswan had opened the register at the rest periods for previous shifts. One young man said, “Today a vehicle will be taken out in the name of one patient; tomorrow every trader will call his goods a patient.” Tulsi did not belittle the fear. “That's why we need a written exception with a fixed starting and ending time,” she said. “A safe journey for a patient and routine carriage for an owner are not the same task.”

Written notice of the medical assessment arrived from the hospital. The paper explained the need for transfer, but the patient's confidential details were not read aloud in the room. Salma returned after clarifying the limits of the family's consent. Inspection of the assigned vehicle showed that one wheel needed to be checked again; leaving immediately would be dangerous. Tulsi asked whether another inspected vehicle was available. Haricharan said one driver's rest period was incomplete, but another trained driver could be available for a specified interval.

The strike committee's representative set conditions: the journey must be authorised by the hospital letter, take place within the allotted time, carry only the patient and necessary assistant, and have the time of return entered in the register. No goods, office papers or private passengers were to travel under cover of this journey. The driver would receive written terms for additional risk pay; the issue of unpaid allowances would remain part of the strike. The owner's representative objected, “So much paperwork for one trip?”

Weighing the keys in his hand, Haricharan replied, “On the day an accident happens, everyone wants this paperwork.”

Tulsi added another line to the proposal: the exception applied only to this patient's medical transfer; every subsequent request would require a separate decision. The committee approved it, the doctor confirmed that the journey could be undertaken safely, and the family kept a copy of its consent. When the vehicle left, the strike banner remained hanging at the gate. Tulsi did not ask anyone to remove it. The underlying dispute about regular wages was not settled, but the patient's required journey had become possible for that moment.

Word came that the vehicle had reached the other hospital centre, not that the treatment had succeeded. Tulsi wrote exactly that: ‘Transfer completed; treatment status medically confidential’. The owner's representative wanted to send the statement to the press as ‘Strike Ended’. Haricharan stopped his call. “We took one patient,” he said, “we didn't sell our demand.” The committee posted a copy of the written exception in the public information area, concealing the patient's identity. Here, compassion had not become a device for breaking a strike.

When Padma returned to the room with the four strips, Tara had brought out a copy of an old letter mentioning the Mahananda. The name appeared in family messages exchanged by Nasima and Rafiq, while Amir kept a separate account of the charges for sending earnings home. A copyist suggested drawing a map of the route by which money had been remitted as far as Videhapur, using the river's name. Looking at the page, Rafiq said, “The name written in an old letter offers us a family memory. Which service carried the money, through whose hands, and after what deductions—that must be established through other documents.”

Nasima was returning from sewing a cover for her daughter's schoolbook. She said that one term of domestic address in the letter had earlier been translated incorrectly. “If an address is misunderstood, the recipient's name can change as well,” she said. Amir took out copies of three separate receipts: one issued when the money was sent, one when a service fee was deducted, and one acknowledging its arrival. Their dates differed. Rather than call the whole account ‘Money Received’, he continued checking each part separately, with the consent of the household concerned.

“Then which category does Mahananda belong to?” Padma asked. Rafiq answered, “We can directly see a word written in the original letter. What my family meant by it is a memory I have heard. To infer from that the route taken by money today would be an inference. And if I turn the river into a character who speaks, that's literary imagination.” Nasima smiled. “The river won't forbid anyone to write poetry, but don't write poetry in place of the money my daughter is meant to receive.”

This time two small samples emerged from Shyam Mallik's bag. One was the knot of a bamboo panel used to enclose fish; the other, a carefully preserved copy of a torn page from an old ledger. Vinod Kevart pointed to the word ‘Chilon’ on that page. Another ledger spelled it ‘Chilaun’. The young man's enthusiasm rose again. “They must be names for the same river—the sound has changed!” Vinod said quietly, “Perhaps, perhaps not. The name of an old object, the name of water and the place where a fishing enclosure stands are not automatically the same thing.”

Holding the bamboo knot, Shyam explained that nets for stopping fish, baskets for vegetables and bamboo walkways on which people stepped were all made from bamboo, though their uses and risks differed. Vinod's old paper accounted for materials used in a fishing enclosure; it did not establish that Chilon and Chilaun denoted one geographical place. Padma copied the two words separately, retaining their original spellings. Tara said that until fresh measurements and evidence of location were available, a strip assigned to one river must not be pasted onto another.

“May I write a song about these two words?” Jagat asked. Vinod laughed. “Write your song. Just make sure that when it's sung, the officials don't mistake it for the boundary of fishing rights.” Jagat considered giving the river two voices in his play, but promised to place that scene under imagination. Shyam put the samples back into separate bags. Solid objects were meant for their work, not for dressing up a mystery. The tension in the room eased.

Padma now picked up the draft for the community reading. Its first paragraph contained the anonymous person's statement: ‘I saw the boxes for two days' hours left blank in the labour register.’ Immediately after it, the text made clear that this was the individual's reported experience, not an original register the editor had seen. The second paragraph confirmed the office's acknowledgement slip; the third reported that an investigation was still pending. Jagat asked whether so much annotation would break the rhythm of the story. “When rhythm would convict someone,” Padma said, “rhythm can afford to stop for a moment.”

Sarita read the words on the page slowly. She remembered Naira's manner of writing—how, in short news slips, her daughter sometimes marked events and questions in different colours. Sarita could hear her daughter's voice in that memory, but she did not turn it into a new message from Naira or evidence recovered from her. “There's no need to add Naira's name to this page,” she said. “What she wrote will remain where it is; what I've understood today is mine to say.” For a moment the room was quiet.

Tara brought in an envelope containing the office's response. It merely acknowledged receipt of the application and requested time to make the original register available. Jagat immediately exclaimed, “So they've admitted

the register was irregular?” Padma made him read the letter himself. He shook his head. “No. They've only acknowledged the request.” The anonymous person's name appeared nowhere in the reply. Tara was pleased that a route towards inquiry had opened, but any decision about evidence remained far away.

Before closing her box, Asha Bhumij left Tara copies of the three families' separate records, each with the consent of the individual concerned. This time the sum of expenses was not labelled ‘Final Compensation’. The first family's available rent evidence had been reconciled; the second needed help calculating lost earnings; one date on the third family's travel document had to be checked again. “Now let us present all three things separately at the hearing,” Asha said. “But the decision about which family returns is still nobody else's to write for them.”

Tulsi's telephone rang again. The driver had returned safely, but the acknowledgement for his additional journey allowance was still unsigned. The strike committee would meet again that evening. “That the vehicle returned is information received directly,” she said. “I don't know whether the patient is well, and it would be false to write that the allowance has been paid.” Haricharan said over the telephone that he needed rest when his shift ended, and the committee would not accept an order to send out other vehicles because of this single journey. Tulsi recorded the time and pinned up the notice.

A small evening gathering began at the school. Padma wrote the four terms on the board and asked everyone to put their sentences in the right places. A little girl said, “I saw a fish beside the pond—direct observation.” Another said, “Grandmother says there used to be big fish there—what was heard.” A third said, “If it rains this year, the fish will multiply—inference.” Finally Jagat said, “A fish used to speak to the moon—imagination.” The children laughed. “All four may be spoken,” Padma told them. “Only don't pretend that all four can be weighed on the same scale.”

An elderly listener asked, “What if I saw something but couldn't understand it?” Padma replied, “The meaning of something directly observed can be misunderstood as well. Attaching the label ‘direct observation’ does not close a question.” The old man spoke of a flood in his childhood: he had seen the water rise, but had not known why the embankment broke. A young man said that many stories had been told about that flood afterwards. Padma wrote down the two statements separately. For the first time in the room, no one felt ashamed to say, ‘I don't know.’

At the end of the gathering, Jagat read the revised scene from his play. It contained no real employee, only an imaginary man frightened of a blank page; a woman told him that even where there were blanks, questions could be written down. The anonymous witness was not among the listeners, having

given no permission for their presence. Padma did not attach the page of the play to the original statement. The words ‘Imagined scene’ remained clearly marked at the foot of the page.

As night fell, Sarita sat by the low wooden platform, winnowing rice. Padma looked once more at the four strips before her. Under direct observation lay copies of documents, checked receipts and descriptions of objects actually seen; under what was heard, personal accounts, family memories and translated statements; under inference, provisional questions about connections; under imagination, the declared characters of Jagat's play. No category had claimed dominion over another. Yet Padma knew that no human life could fit entire into four boxes. The division belonged not to life itself but to the responsibility of telling its story.

Sanket asked whether the four strips should be printed on the first page of the book. “Readers may trust us more if they have signs to guide them,” Padma said. “But if we stop checking things ourselves in the name of those signs, that trust will break again.” She decided that the nature of sources relating to each disputed scene in the community book would be made clear, while the limits set by anyone's private consent would remain protected. Pages belonging to different languages, occupations and families would not, merely by being gathered together, pass into a single ownership.

The rubber band around Asha's box, the strike cloth at Tulsi's gate, the book cover Nasima had sewn, and Shyam's bamboo knot all remained in their proper places. Four words had given those objects no new owner. They had done only this: when someone next read the story, that reader might understand whose eyes, whose voice, whose apprehensions and whose imagination had helped form the page. Padma folded the final strip and placed it in her notebook. Outside in the darkness, people were making their way to their homes; the road to some of those homes was still undecided.

Chapter 201 · Farewell to Seematirtha

Seematirtha, 2042. Madhu Kevat was lifting an old plank from her boat and brushing away the sand trapped underneath it. As she raised the plank, a rusty coin and a wet corner of paper fell out. She set the coin aside but made no attempt to unfold the paper. Shanti Bote, sitting nearby, laughed. “The river gives coins back, but never receipts for earnings.” Madhu replied, “A receipt gets soaked not in paper, but in the conscience of the person who owes the money.” They both laughed, yet beneath the laughter stood a debt for unloading two sacks the previous year.

Tara and Padma had arrived above the landing steps. At the school in Videhapur yesterday, they had decided to distinguish four kinds of evidence; today those distinctions would have to withstand the test of an actual account. Tara took two pages from a torn bag—one counting the goods loaded onto a boat, the other bearing the receiving warehouse's stamp. Shanti held out her hand. “Where's my original slip?” Tara stopped. “You had it. I have a copy made with your permission.” Satisfied, Shanti took the folded original from where she had tucked it into her waistband.

Madhu drew chalk lines across her little table to draft a new fare sheet for the boat. Passenger fare, weight of goods, unloading labour and hours for which the boat was kept waiting: four boxes. The landing committee's clerk said, “So many divisions will frighten the passengers.” Madhu objected. “It's right to be wary where a price hasn't been settled. What greater cause for fear is there than losing hours without being asked, then being presented with the bill afterwards?” Shanti wanted a fifth box: whose boat it was, whose work it was, and who was to receive payment.

The trader's representative, seated beside the clerk, lifted his cap. He argued that the person ordering the goods could not pay for every delay; the time spent at the checkpoint should count as the boatman's ‘ordinary risk’. Madhu asked, “Does my boat go as far as the inspection gate?” “No,” the representative said. “Only to the water's edge.” “Then why are you measuring the checkpoint's time by the strokes of my oar?” Madhu showed him on the page where the river crossing ended. Shanti's additional wait at the receiving warehouse across the water was a separate matter, and its duration required verification too.

Shanti opened an old ledger. In one place it said ‘Gandak’, in another ‘Gandaki’. She was not seeking to establish any new river boundary from the two names. “Both these words occur on old pages about shipments to the other bank,” she said. “Use the pages to check when the goods left, when they arrived and who was paid. As for what the river's names mean, the village elders, the old writers and the surveyors can each speak within the limits of their knowledge.” Padma copied the original spellings exactly.

“If there are two names, there must have been two shipments,” said the trader's representative. Shanti showed him the different marks used to tie the sacks. “Two spellings of a name don't create two sacks,” she said. An old copy recorded the unloading of two sacks, while the division of the fare accounted for only one. Shanti was demanding payment for the difference, though there was not yet complete evidence of whose hands had unloaded the second sack. The representative examined the paper for several moments. For the first time he was prepared to write ‘Verification pending’.

In the new agreement, Madhu specified that if a boat was held because a passenger failed to arrive at the appointed time, the waiting charge must be announced in advance. If the crossing was stopped by a strong current, a safety concern or the boatman's refusal, different rules would apply. “What if there's a flood?” a young boatman asked. “Then human life comes first, the dispute over money afterwards,” Madhu said. “But we won't use the word ‘flood’ to declare ordinary earnings free of charge every day.” Before Tara put the sentence into the agreement, she asked all the boatmen what it meant to them.

An elderly member of the landing committee recalled that during a relief team's journey the previous year, an employee had posted a slip announcing ‘Free Service’ without anyone's signature. “We'll write down every term today,” he said, “and tomorrow someone will post another notice.” Madhu picked up a little wooden peg with the string of the old slip still caught around it. “Then the new rule won't live on the wall alone,” she said. “One copy for the boatman, one for the passenger, one for the committee. We need a procedure for notifying everyone of any change.” At first the clerk smiled; then he asked for paper to make three copies.

Just then a woman came from the Seematirtha water committee's building carrying a small brass padlock. Two members of her family followed her. A dispute about the drainage from their house had led to a proposal for measurements on a previous visit. The woman put the lock on the table. “This lock belongs to the box where our household papers are kept. The old debt records are there, but we won't send the originals with anyone.” Padma made room for her to sit. The meeting about boat fares did not abruptly become an accounting of family debt; the woman explicitly requested a separate time.

One part of that family's debt had earlier been presented as a cost of maintaining the house, but in the old account the principal, instalments already repaid and an additional demand for the waiting period all appeared on a single line. The woman made three marks with her finger. “I've stood in the sun and paid this money,” she said. “Let me have proof of what I paid, let what remains be entered as outstanding, and don't expect me to accept something without a basis merely because you give it a name.” Another family member immediately urged her to declare the entire debt discharged. She refused.

“I don't want a false certificate of release today,” the woman said. “Whoever comes to collect tomorrow will look at the paper. If I call everything zero now, their proper records will make me appear to be the one in the wrong again.” Tara asked which original pages she would permit to be copied. The woman consented to copies of two payment receipts, not to the public disclosure of private borrowing within her household. A teenager from the family stood by the window, calling out that it was time for the midday meal. “In a little while,” she told him. “Don't let a debt swallow the hour meant for food.”

Kumudi arrived to check two words in the local language. One meant the remaining balance of a debt; the other an advance for the next consignment. In an earlier translation, both had been combined as ‘liability’. “Does the amount on this paper refer to a present balance,” Kumudi asked, “or to an advance for future work?” The woman replied, “Money that has not come into our hands must not be entered in the account of a debt already repaid.” Kumudi set the original word, the woman's explanation and the standard form on separate lines.

In the fierce midday sun, Chanda Munda arrived with a blue bag over her shoulder. Its stitching was coming undone, but the papers inside were dry. In an old construction attendance register, her name and her registration number had become separated; there had also been an attempt to withhold permission for her to go home in the name of the contractor's remaining approval. Now she brought three different proofs: confirmation of identity, acknowledgement that she had left the work, and the papers needed for travel. She took them out herself and laid them on the table.

“Read each of these pages and tell me whether it's complete,” Chanda said to the office employee. He showed her the stamps but stopped at a line written at the edge of the final page. It stated that the claim for unpaid wages was ‘under separate consideration’. “That's right,” Chanda said. “I'm still owed those wages, but I needn't pretend they've been paid in order to get home.” The employee agreed that her travel papers were complete. He did not attempt to bind her departure to a particular hour.

A young worker accompanying Chanda said, “We've come all this way. Why aren't you going home today?” Chanda smiled. “The fact that the travel papers are ready doesn't stamp the mind as ready too.” Opening her blue bag, she took out a measuring tape. She had been invited to measure a damaged staircase at a school in Videhapur, but the rate of pay and length of the job were still unclear. Whether to return home or stay two days longer and settle the terms of that work was a decision she kept in her own hands.

An elderly boatman heard her and said, “Home is home. Why think so much about it?” Chanda replied courteously, “Home is somewhere to live, not a reward. Earning money away from it doesn't mean I've forgotten my people;

staying here for two more days doesn't diminish my right to return.” She asked Kumudi to read out a brief message for her family: the papers were complete, and she would decide the date of travel herself. As the message was being sent, she corrected one letter, because her family understood that word in the form used in her own speech.

Meanwhile Madhu was urged to be the first to sign the new agreement. She got up to inspect the boat's plank again. “What's missing from the paper?” Tara asked. “The water,” Madhu said. “How can I sign before I've seen a safe place for the people I carry to disembark?” She stepped onto the new approach, tugged at the bamboo handhold and added a condition that the cracked plank be replaced. A member of the committee muttered that this woman was making the meeting longer. Madhu heard him. “If my boat sinks,” she replied, “the meeting will last longer still.”

Shanti took out an old copy bearing ‘Gandak/Gandaki’ from her ledger. Kumudi explained that one record might refer to a river while another might indicate a trading stop, but the available pages did not permit a final geographical conclusion. Shanti asked for the payment date of the fare withheld over the difference between the names. The office clerk replied that the trader had been asked to reconfirm the entry for unloading two sacks. “Then write ‘acknowledged’, not ‘paid’,” Shanti said. The old amount did not reach her hands that day, but the claim was not struck out.

Madhu opened another old page, which had ‘Gohi’ written at its edge. A young man was drawing a winding line, joining the name to the present landing place. Madhu did not pull his pencil away. “What category of boat charge is written beside this word?” she asked. The young man read aloud: crossing, goods and time at the receiving warehouse. “Then first establish what those costs mean,” Madhu said. “To join the current we see today to one word in old ink, we need measurements and sources.” The young man placed a question mark beside his line.

On the second reading of the new fare sheet, Shanti pointed out an important distinction. The rule said ‘time the boat was held’, but left blank the space for recording on whose instructions it had waited. “If a passenger comes late and if a checkpoint employee stops us, who is responsible in each case?” she asked. Three people gave three different answers. Finally they agreed that the starting and ending times, the party stating the cause and the rate announced beforehand would be entered separately on the slip. Where the cause of a delay was disputed, its charge would not immediately be treated as a final payment due.

The trader's representative objected that if boatmen entered the times themselves, they might exaggerate them. “That's why both parties need copies,” Shanti said. “One time recorded by the employee, another by the boatman. If they differ, a written objection.” Madhu added that it was not

possible to obtain a checkpoint stamp every time; treating the boatman's independent testimony about time as worthless would be unjust as well. After a short argument the three parties agreed to a limited trial: the new slips would be used on the next three crossings, and a public meeting afterwards would examine their defects.

At mealtime, Shanti opened a small container of flattened rice and fried fish. Kumudi laughed and asked, “Not enough spices again today?” “Put less jaggery in your own tea today before you ask me for more spices,” Shanti replied. Chanda opened a packet of dried greens she had brought from home. The three women tasted one another's food, without treating anyone's domestic labour as a guest's entitlement. In the midst of the heat, that laughter let the struggle over documents meet the ordinary hunger of life for a little while.

The woman from the water committee's building returned. She showed copies of the two instalments she had repaid and had ‘Reconciliation pending’ entered in red ink beside a third claim. One lender's representative wanted the family to sign an acknowledgement of the entire outstanding balance before leaving. “I'm not breaking off the relationship,” she said. “We'll discuss the next consignment of work, but don't say we've verified all the debt accounts.” She locked the original ledger in her box and handed over only copies of the pages she had approved for sharing.

“How much further contact do you want with the team from Videhapur?” Tara asked. “News of the reconciliation of these two receipts, and the fixed date for examining the drainage,” the woman said. “We'll decide about our house in our own meeting. Come to us, but not under the title of rescuers.” Padma wrote her words down exactly. The teenager came back to ask about bread. This time the woman gathered her papers and stood up. Even with the final figure of the debt unresolved, the time for preparing food at home belonged to her.

Putting the new travel paper into her bag, Chanda noticed that it said ‘Travel permitted’, not ‘Depart immediately’. “If you want to leave today, go,” she told the young worker. “You needn't wait for my decision.” He tightened his sandals and asked when the bus would depart. Chanda told him the right stop; she did not know the exact fare, so she did not present her estimate as a fixed price. The young worker said goodbye and went on his way. For the first time, Chanda could look at the heap of her papers and breathe with relief.

Madhu and three members of the landing committee signed the new fare sheet. Shanti's separate note about the amount still due remained attached; signing the new agreement did not constitute agreement to abandon her old claim. For the trial of three crossings, the passengers on the first were read the rates, and copies were offered to those who wanted them. People were appointed to reconcile the times recorded on the two sides, but no final

agreement had been reached on every cost of waiting at the border checkpoint. Madhu tightened the wooden plank. “At least this much has happened today,” she said. “There will be no hours without a name.”

Padma brought out the old strips naming the four categories again. Madhu's written rates and signatures were records directly seen; the trader's answer about Shanti's old dues was incomplete; the proof of instalments on the family's debt was separate; the geographical meanings of ‘Gohi’ and ‘Gandak/Gandaki’ still awaited investigation. Hearing this division, Chanda asked, “Which box holds my wish to return home?” “Your own statement,” Padma said. “If we turn it into an order on paper, the mistake will be ours.” Chanda nodded. Her choice was larger than the four strips.

The evening wind moved across the river as though repeating a melody from ages past. As Shanti loaded the first trial consignment, she checked the knots in her rope. Madhu had goods beyond the permitted weight unloaded again. It caused a delay, and a trader grumbled. A child standing nearby laughed at the flash of a fish. After asking the child's mother, Shanti helped the child grip the bamboo handhold for boarding. On that short passage, the rules became not words but a safe place to set one's feet.

Before reaching the vehicle that would take them back to Videhapur, Tara wrote down two addresses for the Seematirtha family: one to which copies of claims could be sent, and another where they could request a reply about the drainage inspection. Kumudi read out the meaning of the addresses in the local language; the woman kept her copy. When Padma extended her hand in farewell, the woman said, “When you come again, don't begin with a story in my name. Have tea first. I don't keep my debt notebook open every day.” Padma laughed. “I'll drink tea, but I'll ask its price.”

On the road, Tara sent Kabir a short message: some pages concerning the work at Seematirtha had been reconciled and some payments were still outstanding; when he wished, they could talk separately about his family after her return. She did not ask for anyone's birth certificate in Kabir's place, nor attach Naira's private memories to an information notice. She also left Sarita a message saying only that the journey was safe. As the vehicle moved on, Chanda looked through the window not at the landing but at her blue bag; it contained both the papers for returning and the possibility of what might come next.

Back in the Seematirtha house, the brass lock was fastened to the box again. The final debt claim remained unresolved, but the pressure to accept it without evidence had been checked that day. At the landing, the trial of three crossings had begun; Shanti's earlier dues were still unpaid; Chanda's papers for going home were complete, and the decision was hers. The two banks of the river appeared alike beneath the evening sky, but the time, relationships and debts of the people on them were different. Farewell had not become the

end of a relationship; for the first time, the terms of the next meeting had become clear.

Chapter 202 · Kabir's Return

Videhapur, 2042. From the bottom compartment of an old cupboard, Kabir took out a handkerchief with a red border. A fine thread caught in its fold was close to breaking; he did not pull at it. He spread the handkerchief on the table. Subhadra remembered the day he had arrived with this cloth, but nobody had proof of the home in which it had first been made. Kabir also took three separate envelopes from the cupboard: evidence of his upbringing, an unverified account concerning his birth, and his private letters. He put the third envelope back inside. Today he had to understand the distinction between the first two kinds of paper.

His mother was straining soaked rice in the kitchen. Seeing him sorting papers since dawn, she asked, “Did any news come from Seematirtha yesterday?” Kabir read out Tara's message: the trial of the boat fares had begun, some payments were still outstanding, and Kabir himself was to choose the time for discussing his family. His mother set down the strainer. “I don't understand everything in these papers,” she said. “But if you're going somewhere, eat breakfast first. Even the truth turns into a quarrel on an empty stomach.” A faint smile crossed Kabir's face. It was the same voice that had made him drink water through the fevers of his childhood.

“Mother, I'm going to the records centre today,” Kabir said. “I'll ask for further information about the source of the account Subhadra gave earlier concerning my birth. First I'll check the page with your name on it. The two homes will not be made into one.” Without speaking, his mother pushed a single grain of rice aside with her finger. “I was afraid that, if some name connected with your birth was found, mine would be pushed behind it,” she admitted. Kabir replied, “I won't allow the order of names to be changed. But your labour doesn't depend upon the order of names. Tell me what you wish; I'll ask my questions. Both things can live in the same house.”

A sparrow sat beside the courtyard latch, dry grass held in its beak. Watching it, his mother said, “Building a nest doesn't mean building a new home every time. It lays fresh straw on an old branch.” Kabir understood that she was not trying to hide what she meant inside the image of a bird. “Will you come with me?” he asked. “For as long as you need,” she said. “But I'll return before it's time for my medicine. Your unsettled papers won't swallow the hours of my day.” Kabir wrote the time for her medicine on a slip and tied the broken strap of his sandal.

On the veranda of the records centre, Ruhani was comparing an old form with a new copy. The guardian's name was correct on the first page; the space for ‘family of origin’ on the second was empty. Setting both pages on the desk, Kabir said, “I want information about the source of the oral testimony concerning this blank line, not an identity made out of conjecture.” Ruhani

explained that the person's testimony had been preserved separately, but the original document requested to corroborate it had not yet arrived. “For now I can give you the status of the inquiry, not a conclusion about your birth,” she said clearly. Kabir accepted the answer.

At a nearby table, an employee proposed drawing a new family diagram. “If we connect the names in the two places with a line, the software will work more smoothly,” he said. “People won't stumble while reading it.” “Drawing a line is easy,” Kabir replied. “But what would it mean? The source concerning my birth remains unverified; the years of my upbringing are documented. It would be wrong to show two different kinds of evidence as equally certain in one diagram.” The employee looked at his mother's face. “I'm my son's mother,” was all she said, “but I cannot claim to have witnessed what I never saw.” The employee removed the line and left the family of origin blank.

Rama Karna brought out the approved format for the new record. One section gave the actual period of guardianship and the available school papers; another recorded the status of sources concerning birth; a third allowed the person to choose the limits within which their information could be used. “Does separating these sections provide a complete legal solution?” Kabir asked. “No,” Rama answered. “This is a certified copy showing the correct state of the inquiry. It is not a substitute for a final decision about inheritance or identity at birth.” For the first time, Kabir read the words on the page with a sense of relief. The document acknowledged its own limits.

An elderly man waiting nearby disagreed. “If that space remains blank, the child will have to endure questions all his life,” he said. Kabir's mother turned towards him. “Yes, the questions will remain. But putting in a false name would carry a new lie into the life of another family. I'll let my son live with a real question, not an invented answer.” Weariness rather than opposition appeared in the old man's eyes. A name had been struck out in his own papers too. Ruhani gave him a separate appointment; the discussion of Kabir's family did not become a case about the old man's affairs.

As soon as Kabir stepped outside the centre, Shanti Bote called. She was reconciling the accounts for the second crossing in the trial of the first three journeys. “The money I earn on the two banks is entered in separate accounts,” Shanti said, “but the unloading office still counts the work on one bank as part of the fare on the other.” “What does Madhu say?” Kabir asked. “The boat fare and my unloading wages are separate. Madhu witnessed my slip; she didn't put the cost of her boat onto my shoulders.” Rather than ask for copies before visiting Seematirtha, Kabir decided to examine the matter there in person.

Having taken his mother home and given her a meal, Kabir set out for the landing. On the way he met Amir Kulhaiya. In his bag were comparison sheets for remittances sent to three families, a matter they had discussed

recording long ago. “People think sending money is no more than stamping a paper and handing over a bundle,” Amir said. “The real struggle is over the recipient's name, the fee, and who gets the money back if the transfer fails.” Kabir began walking beside him. The questions concerning their homes were different, but there was one small resemblance: the temptation to fill somebody else's empty field for the sake of convenience.

As the water ebbed at the Seematirtha landing, ropes rubbed against the bamboo posts with a faint ringing sound. Madhu Kewat showed them a newly tightened plank. Shanti laid out the small slips for the three crossings: the time of boarding, the time of landing on the other bank, and the time the goods were put down at the unloading house. “Look,” she said. “Between these times I carried the sacks. The labour on both banks is mine, but the boat belongs to Madhu. Let the payment for each person's work bear that person's name.” Madhu laughed. “If they pay everything to my boat, Shanti will tie me up with her rope.”

The trader's representative pushed a sheet forward. According to him, the sum paid for the first crossing had ‘included’ the labour of unloading. Shanti pointed to the line. “Who wrote that, and when? If you'd lifted my sack with a ship's propeller, I might have agreed.” Some people laughed; the representative did not. Madhu opened her agreement and showed the three separate fields: boat fare, reason for waiting, and unloading as a separate service. The newly written rate did not include unloading wages. The claim for an earlier unloading remained under consideration, but the unloading charges for the two new journeys had been entered independently.

Shanti told the clerk that her name appeared twice in the crossing records on the two banks, as if two different people had done the work. “Both are me,” she said, “but the working time on each bank is separate. Don't deduct what I earn here from what I'm still owed there.” The employee matched the numbers. A letter of her surname had been entered incorrectly on the slip from the opposite bank. Shanti showed her original signature, Madhu testified, and the employee gave her an acknowledgement of the correction. Two items of new work were accepted that day; payment for one item concerning the two old sacks was still outstanding.

At the edge of the landing, a boy was stepping into the water to collect small stones. “Don't go deep!” his mother called from a distance. “I'm only getting stones!” the boy answered. Gathering her notebook, Shanti told him, “The stones won't run away from you. Come back to the bank first.” The boy returned. Kabir saw that the livelihood drawn from the river, and safety upon it, were larger stories than the documents.

In the shade near the landing, Amir began a meeting with the three families. One family's representative wanted all transfers to pass through a common account: this would reduce fees and make things a little easier for

the senders. A woman from the second family said that, if one person held the key to the common account, news of her share would once again arrive late. Amir placed three grains in the middle of an empty plate. “The route may be shared, but the recipients remain separate,” he said. “A common passage doesn't mean a common owner. Each transfer must have its own authorization, fee and proof of receipt.”

The middleman who had earlier proposed a single ‘shared code’ now approached from some distance. “You'll spend the whole day on paperwork,” he said. “I can deliver the money in half the time.” “And if it doesn't arrive?” Amir asked. The middleman showed his old stamp again. Binu Darai, who had come to reconcile the receipts for her household, said, “A stamp is not proof that money has been received. I need to know about the money I use for my family's expenses. I won't sign for a sum my husband never sent.” Amir did not turn Binu's voice into an argument merely serving his own position; he wrote down her instructions separately.

A migrant worker urgently needed to send money for his sick mother. Amir did not lecture him about the virtue of waiting. He laid out the actual fees, probable delivery times and complaint procedures of two authorized services. The young man chose one with his own consent; confirmation of receipt had not yet arrived. The second family chose to wait. The third authorized transfers to two recipients. The same meeting produced three different outcomes, but nobody's decision was gathered into the middleman's fist.

Amir opened a leaf of an old migration record. In one place was written ‘Fariyani’, a term he had examined before. “So now we know,” the middleman said. “This proves the route for all the money.” Amir turned the page towards him and had him read it. It contained a place reference and the issuer's mark, but neither the complete route of each consignment nor a measurement of the present address. “That word belongs to this old document,” Amir said. “I won't alter its meaning to suit your convenient map. But we can investigate whose name the money was sent under.” The middleman did not repeat his proposal for exclusive control.

Nasima Shershahbadi arrived with a document she had bound by stitching it together. On the travel paper was written ‘Mechi’; on the back, a family name had been crossed out incorrectly. She needed a checkpoint stamp, but it was indistinct on the available copy. “At least the river's name matches,” an employee said. “You can work out the route.” “It may be a river's name or a place reference on the document,” Nasima replied, “but this paper isn't a complete map of my family's journey.” She had the correct spelling of the family name, the original language and the translator's credit recorded as three separate matters.

“Has the wrongly struck-out name caused any payment to be held up?” Kabir asked Nasima. “Not according to this page,” she said. “The doubt about the recipient and the claim for expenses are on another document.” Kabir remembered the four kinds of evidence Padma had distinguished. “Then what I saw today is a corrected spelling,” he said. “What I heard is the account of your family's journey. And what remains unproved is the cause of the delayed payment.” Nasima smiled. “And I still have to stitch up this torn binding before evening.” She gathered her papers and rose.

As afternoon waned, Kabir sent his adoptive mother word that he would return by evening. He also told Sarita about the work at the landing, but nothing of the details in his birth records. Sarita replied that one leg of a table on the school veranda had loosened; if he had time when he returned, could he look at it? “I will,” Kabir wrote back. It was not the first ordinary task Sarita had asked him to do. Yet this time the work seemed to him like a return to his own life, without any pretence that he could fill the absence left by somebody's death.

Back in Videhapur, Kabir stopped at Subhadra's door. She was arranging her medicine box. He told her that her firsthand statement had been preserved separately at the records centre, but that written verification from the original birth register was still pending. “That I gave birth to you is the testimony of my own experience,” Subhadra said. “But I cannot write the history of the household that raised you.” Kabir asked, “If you wish, I could come once a week and help with your work, and learn the doctor's appointment times. But I won't assume your house keys are mine.” “I'll choose the time as well,” she replied. “And I have no right to command what you decide about your other home.” They agreed together upon the day of their next meeting.

After returning to Videhapur, Kabir went to Sarita's school. The brick placed beneath the table leg was wet. Moving it aside, he said, “The wooden joint is loose. A temporary brick could trip a child.” Sarita handed him a screwdriver and a small piece of wood. Kabir examined the joint; the split was too wide, so he advised taking the table out of use for the day. “What will it cost to repair?” Sarita asked. Kabir gave an estimate, not a firm price. Together they moved the table and explained the reason to the children.

While they worked, Sarita noticed the red-bordered handkerchief in Kabir's hand. “It's old,” she said. “It's from the day I arrived,” Kabir answered. “Mother kept it. It carries no mark of my first home at birth, but it holds the scent of many years of being brought up.” Sarita showed no idle curiosity. “I see marks like that among some of Naira's things,” she said. “They are precious, but they don't prove every event.” Kabir agreed. Their sorrows were different, but neither claimed a right to the other's silence.

That evening his mother sat on the veranda. When Kabir reached home, she was looking for the spoon with which to add ghee to the khichdi. “The

spoon's in front of you," Kabir said. She picked it up and laughed. "Did you study so much just to see that?" Laughing too, Kabir filled her vessel with water. Then he placed the new certified copy before her. "Your work in raising me is correctly recorded here. The investigation into the source of my birth is still open. No one is pressing you to change your account," he said. His mother read her name and folded the paper again, placing it safely where it belonged.

"Did you go to Subhadra's house today?" she asked. "Yes," Kabir said. "She wants time for the original confirmation of her statement. I'll listen to her and visit her, but I won't diminish my relationship with you in the name of finding an answer about my birth." "Will I have to meet her too?" his mother asked. "No. If you ever wish to, you can. If you don't, that decision will be respected as well." As she gathered her plate, his mother said, "I bear that woman no ill will. But I don't feel like meeting her today."

His mother stirred the khichdi with her spoon. "Sometimes I wonder what the woman who gave birth to you would say if she saw me," she said. "Do you blame her?" Kabir asked. "I don't know everything about her circumstances. Why should I pass judgment? But the weariness of the nights I spent beside you when you had a fever is my truth." Kabir set the handkerchief back on the table. "Her testimony is hers, and the labour is yours," he said. "What I owe each household is different."

After supper, Kabir opened his notebook. On one page he wrote: status of guardianship documents clarified; original corroboration of Subhadra's firsthand account concerning birth awaited; next visit agreed by both. On a second page he recorded the unloading charges accepted for Shanti's new journeys and the outstanding claim for the two old sacks; on a third, the separate remittance options chosen by Amir's three families. He did not try to string all the pages into a single tale. Every life had many doors. No one should surrender the key to their own door into another's hands merely for that other person's convenience.

Kabir looked towards the envelope of private letters. The words 'Private—not sent' were still written on it. He did not open it. Naira's phone remained sealed in joint custody; no fresh authorization had been given to publish the messages. He recognized his old impulse to fold Naira's death into the story of his birth, and the uncertainty of that birth into the memory of Naira. He understood that these two sorrows could inhabit the same body without providing an answer to one another. He opened the window. From far away in the darkness came the sound of a child singing at the school.

The next morning a message arrived from Amir. Receipt of the first family's transfer had been confirmed; the second family's money was still in transit; and the instructions concerning the third family's two recipients needed to be checked again. None of the money had been placed altogether in the name of a common middleman. Shanti's message said that the new

unloading slip for the next crossing had been accepted on both banks, but the hearing concerning the old arrears was still pending. Kabir placed the messages in separate folders. Work had advanced at Seematirtha; complete justice had not been proclaimed.

His mother opened the door. “Will you bring some salt from the market? I forgot yesterday.” Kabir took up a bag, slipped the handkerchief into his pocket and asked, “Have you had breakfast?” “I have,” she said. “Now go and bring the salt.” Kabir took the road to the market. The question of his birth remained open; the home that had raised him was alive; and he had arranged a new time to meet Subhadra without coercion. This return was no final key to a closed door. It was the ordinary courage to leave this house again, carrying with him the right to make his own decisions.

Chapter 203 · The Companion Creature

On the deserted road north of the Himalayas, Yudhishthira's water vessel was nearly empty. He tipped it to look inside; at the bottom, a single mouthful of water shone. The dog looked at that glimmer, turned away and settled in the shadow of a rock. Since Bhima's death, it was the first living creature to wait for Yudhishthira to rise. He placed the vessel before it. The dog lapped up the water but did not get up. A point of ice had lodged in the pad of its forepaw.

Yudhishthira knelt. At his touch the dog trembled and bared its teeth. He withdrew his hand and sat quietly. After a while the animal moved its paw towards him of its own accord. Yudhishthira tore a strip from the edge of his garment, carefully extracted the point of ice and bound the paw. The hands of Draupadi, Sahadeva's broken staff, Nakula's voice, Arjuna's empty palm and Bhima's last laughter arose one by one in his mind. This dog had not come to him in place of any of them. It was simply alive.

Far overhead, a radiance appeared in the white sky: a chariot. Indra's summons rang out over the mountain, inviting Yudhishthira to journey to heaven in his mortal body. The king looked towards the chariot with exhausted eyes. The pain of leaving those who had fallen was not yet over. He first asked what had become of his brothers and Draupadi. Indra assured him of heaven; but there was no place for the dog in the chariot. It still stood beside Yudhishthira's feet, wet snow gathering on its bandage.

"This creature has come with me all the way here," Yudhishthira said. "I will not abandon it and climb into the chariot." Indra explained that the laws of heaven admitted no such animal. "I have relinquished my kingdom," Yudhishthira replied, "and I could not save my own people. But I will not now choose to forsake the creature that depends on me and walks beside me." The dog understood none of his words. Its tired body stood there while it sniffed the loosened edge of its bandage.

In the present: Videhapur, 2042. Returning from the market with a bag of salt, Kabir noticed an old rug at the outer gate of Ruhani's shelter. One corner was soaked. A brown dog lying alone on it tried to raise its head, then laid it down again. Inside, Javed Kalandar was packing away the bamboo rods of his shadow theatre. Ruhani bent to lift the rug. "Where are you taking this animal?" Kabir asked. "I'm drying the side veranda," Ruhani said. "The rug has become damp through and through."

The roof of the back room at the shelter leaked. The building caretaker had written to say that, during repairs, no animals could remain there for a week. Some people suggested taking the old, slow-moving creature somewhere far away and leaving it there: it could neither guard the property

nor attract an audience. “We didn't take it in to stand guard,” Ruhani answered plainly. Yet the cost of a dry roof, medicine and a safe place was real, and she had to meet it.

Javed lifted the rug's other corner. “What was left after yesterday's performance won't buy its medicine,” he said. Opening his ledger, he showed how often he had borne the loss of income involved in refusing to exhibit animals. Ruhani did not laugh. “I won't deduct the animal's costs from your wages,” she said. “But there may be other ways for you to help.” Kabir put his bag down. “First let's ask how long the veranda must stay empty, and what the doctor has said.”

Ruhani took out the prescription. An old injury to the paw had become swollen again; an examination had been arranged for the next day. The outcome of treatment was not yet certain. The letter said the room would be repaired in five days, but the date on which work would begin was written separately on another page. Kabir compared the dates. “Where will it sleep tonight, then?” Ruhani asked. Javed mentioned the narrow veranda at his own house, but stopped when he remembered his instruments and the movements of his family through the space.

Two neighbours standing at the corner said that the shelter's old animals would make the lane smell worse. A woman worried that a child running past the veranda while playing might startle the dog into biting. Ruhani listened to their concerns. “We'll keep the children at a distance, fix the times for treatment and clean the place ourselves,” she said. “And if five days become five months?” the neighbour asked. Ruhani did not dismiss the question. “Then we'll call everyone together again,” she said. “I'm not asking for an unlimited right today.”

Kabir met Sarita on the school veranda. The day before, after examining a table's loose leg, he had taken it out of use. Sarita was preparing a list to ask a carpenter about the cost. Kabir told her about the shelter. “The school veranda belongs to the children's lessons,” she said. “We can't turn it into a shelter without asking.” Kabir agreed. “Then we'll make an arrangement for five days in the dry shade at the back of Ruhani's place,” he said. “We must put in writing who will give the time, do the cleaning and pay for the medicine.”

Sarita went to look at the dog first. Its body carried the smell of old medication. She remembered a day when Naira, seeing an injured bird outside the school, had wanted to stop the entire crowd. Her daughter was no longer alive; the memory did not authorize Sarita to make decisions in her name. Gathering her shawl, she told Ruhani, “I can spend an hour drying the rug in the evenings. It won't be paid for out of school funds. And I won't decide to close the teaching veranda.”

That afternoon Binu Darai came to Amir Kulhaiya's room with an envelope bearing a new message for her household. Fresh information had

arrived from her husband, who was earning money away from home: the next remittance would show the family's common expenditure separately from the amount intended for Binu's personal savings. But the service still listed a male guardian in its earlier register. “My name has appeared in a letter,” Binu said, “but that doesn't mean the money has come into my hands.” “Has receipt been confirmed?” Amir asked. “Not yet,” she answered.

At home, Binu sat beside her mother-in-law, who was drying a fresh sack of paddy. “If a house has two accounts, it'll have two hearths,” the older woman said anxiously. Binu picked up a handful of grain, divided it between two plates and then returned the grain from both plates to the same store. “Naming expenses separately doesn't divide the food,” she said. “And if the money never arrives?” her mother-in-law asked. “Then I won't sign that it has,” Binu replied. On that point the two women agreed.

The word ‘Sir’, written along the edge of an old letter, arose again. Binu's brother-in-law said that attaching the name of another place to it would make the travel papers easier to obtain. Binu showed him the stained letters on the old page. “This is our family's own reference for a small place,” she said. “But the envelope doesn't say where its waters flow. If you force this name onto a grand map, the date of the withheld payment will be lost again.” She put the original copy bearing ‘Sir’ and the claim for the money in two separate compartments.

Amir brought Binu a copy of the page carrying the new instructions. He explained that the wording of a confirmation sent by her husband was not the same as a receipt for money actually received at home. Binu spoke to her husband on the telephone. He said he would try to have her name recorded next time, though he was concerned about avoiding extra fees. “If the fee is higher, show me the costs of two options,” Binu said calmly. “Don't tell me it's cheaper by leaving my name out.” Their disagreement did not disappear, but for the first time the conversation reached the alternatives available for transferring the money.

By evening two mats had been laid on the shelter veranda. The injured dog lay on one; a medicine box and cleaning materials were on the other. Ruhani invited the neighbour in so she could see that the animal was not in the way of children's play. The woman kept her child outside the gate. “Who'll stay through the night?” she asked. “I'll take the first watch,” Javed said. “Ruhani will clean the place at dawn.” “We'll write the names down,” Kabir said, “but we must ask each person how much time they can actually give to the work.”

A young man mocked them. “If the dog is no use to anyone, why all these accounts?” Ruhani did not try to explain to him an old distinction between a goat kid and an injured ox. She merely asked, “If an elderly person in your home can no longer work, does that lessen their right to food?” “A person and an animal aren't the same,” the young man said. “No, they aren't,” Ruhani

replied. “But how does that difference give us the right to neglect hunger and injury?” The neighbour silently moved the far corner of the mat.

Binu came there after her afternoon discussion. She did not stroke the dog's head; an unfamiliar smell frightened it. “Slowly,” Ruhani cautioned her. Binu moved a stone and put down water in front of the mat. “I could find half an hour in the evening,” she said, “but I have to help my daughter with her lessons at home too.” “Shall I put your name down for every day?” Javed asked. “No,” Binu said. “I'll tell you beforehand which days I can come. Writing my name doesn't create more days.”

Meanwhile Meera Banjara had arrived at the market with her sister's handcart. In the sister's old notebook, the entry ‘Supain’ stood beside the number of different customers and the name of a route. A trader proposing a partnership had again suggested combining all the carts to lower the transport cost. “I've already committed two days next week to the consignments for Sonmati and Niru,” Meera said. “My sister will decide what to do with her four sacks.” “Two answers from the same family?” the trader asked. “There are two people in the same family,” Meera said.

Her sister turned to the notebook page marked ‘Supain’. She found the number on an old customer's receipt, but not a complete measurement of the route. “I'll use this name to trace the accounts for my goods,” she said, “not to draw a map of mountains and rivers.” The trader wrote down the partnership rate and left. The sister added up the actual costs of her own two days of travel. There were savings to be had through the partnership, but it would mean giving up a day promised to one of her customers. She postponed the decision until she could confirm the customer's time. Meera did not put her sister's notebook into her own bag.

There was a small bundle of cotton on the cart. The shelter needed clean cotton for bandages, but Ruhani had no intention of asking for all the cart's supplies free of charge in the animal's name. Meera stated the price; Javed consulted his ledger. Ruhani understood the difference between a gift and a purchase. In the end, the sister sold them a small quantity for a fair price and kept the rest for her customers. Javed preserved the receipt. This small purchase helped an injured creature; it did not quietly appropriate the earnings of a family business under the guise of charity.

When night fell, the evening wind grew strong on the veranda. The dog tried to get up and go outside. The edge of its bandage had loosened. Javed moved to pull it back, but Ruhani stopped him. “It's frightened,” she said. She sat on the ground near the gate and did not hurry. The dog walked a short distance, turned around of its own accord and settled back onto the mat. Outside, a child asked in the darkness, “Where could a sick dog like that go?” “Perhaps it doesn't know itself,” Javed said. “That's why we don't push it away.”

On the ancient road of snow, the chariot's radiance still stood waiting. Indra was explaining to Yudhishthira that the chance to receive the fruits of all his virtues was rare. Yudhishthira's feet were growing numb in the snow. He looked towards the warmth of the chariot, then at the creature beside him, its bandage snagged. “If my virtue is so small that there is no room for one companion,” he said, “I will not ask for its reward.” The dog rose slowly and tried to walk level with his next step.

Indra argued that a man who had left his dead brothers behind was now giving up this opportunity for a dog. What kind of equality was that? “I could not restore my brothers to life,” Yudhishthira answered. “This creature's life, however, still lies before my decision. Grief over the dead whom I could not save gives me no right to abandon the living.” His voice had none of the severity of a royal decree. He first held out his hand, as though leaving the dog free to accompany him if it wished. The animal sniffed it and remained by Yudhishthira's feet.

Then, in the time of the ancient tale, the dog's form changed, and Dharma revealed himself. Yudhishthira had passed the test of compassion, and Indra's invitation to the chariot stood before him once more. But within that moment, before the reward of the test, one ordinary fact remained: while the creature had been a dog, Yudhishthira had not known its identity. He had not kept it beside him because he thought it a god. The chariot moved on in a blaze of light; the old marks made by the dog's paws remained for a long time on the mountain stones.

Dawn in Videhapur, 2042. Ruhani took the dog for its medical examination. A new course of treatment was prescribed, but no guarantee was given that the injury would heal completely. The workman came to fix the date for repairing the roof. The five-day arrangement for the temporary veranda was put in writing: the passage would remain clear, children would be told to keep their distance, and cleaning and treatment costs would be recorded separately. The old creature's place was provisional, but the proposal to abandon it on the road overnight had been suspended.

That day Binu saw a new remittance message at home. The service centre had received the instructions for the money, but actual receipt had still not been confirmed. Her mother-in-law wrote ‘Receipt pending’ in the notebook with her own hand. “Why are you writing it now, after all these days?” Binu asked. “Yesterday I said we shouldn't make two hearths,” the older woman replied. “But food won't taste right to me either if I sign a false receipt.” Together they pushed the sack of paddy inside.

Meera Banjara's sister received confirmation of the time from her customer at Supain. She decided to keep one day for independent transport and to settle the charge for the other only after seeing the partnership rate in writing. Meera did not pressure her to change her earlier commitment of two days.

Her sister entered the receipt for the cotton bought by the shelter on the page of ordinary sales. Instead of writing a tale about anyone's kindness, she recorded the work of a small business. The sister's route was still her own.

At the evening meeting, Padma read out papers belonging to four categories: care directly witnessed, the medical instructions reported to Ruhani, the estimated duration of repairs, and an imaginative retelling of the ancient journey. A young girl asked, “Was the dog really a god?” “In the story of the Great Departure, Dharma appears in that form,” Padma answered. “We make no such claim about the dog at the shelter. An animal doesn't have to be divine to deserve food and treatment.” The girl looked at the dog from behind the rug. At that moment it was asleep.

Kabir came to Sarita with the estimated cost of repairing the loose school table. Sarita set the estimate aside. The shelter's medical costs would not be merged with the school's accounts, but at the next gathering of the open school the children's written questions about animals and labour could be read aloud. “I'll show the work we do,” Ruhani said, “but I won't turn the dog into a spectacle.” Javed unfolded the cloth for his shadow theatre. “I can show the play of life without it too,” he said. There was weariness around his eyes as he spoke, but also a little laughter in his voice.

The party approaching the end of its journey was considering the date for returning to the town school. Confirmation of Binu's money, the separate transport arranged by Meera's sister, and the shelter's provisional rug—each question remained open in its own household. Sarita tied the children's written questions into a bundle. Outside, the dog stood, took two steps and lay down again beside Ruhani. Nobody needed it to guard anything; today its steady breathing was itself the result of the night's work. At the school door, space was being made for a new lesson the next day.

Chapter 204 · Not the Mountain, the Door

The door of Videhapur's open school stuck again in the morning. The bottom of the door had swollen from old rainwater; a fine layer of mud had gathered in the outer frame. A girl folded the cardboard backing of her notebook and slid it beneath the door. When the door opened, the cardboard slipped from her hand. “We've spent the whole year correcting papers from all over the world,” she said irritably, “and this door is still crooked.” Sarita was entering the courtyard at that moment, carrying the bundle from the journey. She did not laugh. First she looked at the mud on the girl's hand, and then at the door.

“We'll fix this first,” Sarita said. “Then when will the meeting begin?” the girl asked. “When we can open the way inside with our own hands,” Sarita answered. The members of the returning records team began setting down their bundles on the veranda. Padma's bag held copies of testimony collected on the journey; Tara's box contained pages recording permission to use documents; Sanket's sack held a broken signboard and three cotton ropes. An old stain from rainwater still hung across the school ceiling. Their return was no triumphal procession. It was a coming back to unfinished work.

Kabir looked at the table on the veranda. Its loose leg had been repaired, but the wood around the new nail was a different colour. A young man studying at the school asked, “Will you have us count slips now, or tell us about the journey first?” Tara placed three empty covers in his hands. “We'll hear the story,” she said, “but first you must know which pages you may read and which you must not even open without someone's permission.” “Don't you trust us?” the young man asked. “I do,” Tara said. “That's why I want you to understand the boundaries and keep them yourselves.”

Two short bamboo poles were being planted in the courtyard for the annual gathering of public readings, open accounts and songs. The year previously written on the old programme board had faded. This time Sarita did not wish to put her own name, or the name of any institution, at the very top. Kamala, who had been laying out mats since dawn, asked, “Whose name, then?” “Naira Didi's!” a boy said. “Mother Urmila's!” another replied. A third child interrupted: “If we write someone's name, where will the names of the people doing the work now go?”

Sarita crouched among the children. “Naira has died,” she said softly. “For me her name is a memory, not ownership of everyone's platform. And the accounts of wages still owed for Urmila's labour aren't complete either. Tell me what you think this place should be.” The children answered at once: a house of books, a house of questions, a house of songs, a place to learn about water, a meeting room. No name won immediate agreement. Sarita saw that their disagreement diminished nothing of her memory of those she loved.

Padma opened the thick pages of the final ledger brought back from the journey. Beside every statement stood a classification—directly witnessed, heard, inferred or imagined—and a separate mark for permission. An elderly man stepped forward. “All this scrutiny will drain the colour from the story,” he said. “If I published your story under someone else's name, would that preserve its colour?” Padma asked. The old man gave no answer. Padma offered him a place to sit. “We don't forbid imagination its colours,” she said. “But before stamping a claim upon someone's life, we need sources and the right to use them.”

Meera Banjara had returned with the travelling party, but her sister remained at the school gate holding the rope of her handcart. Her notebook still carried ‘Supain’, the old reference for a customer. She had delivered the four sacks on the separate journey she had arranged; three receipts had been obtained, but the fourth customer was not at home. “What did your independent route cost?” Meera asked. “The overnight expense was higher,” her sister said, “but the customer trusted that I'd arrive at the promised time. One receipt is outstanding, so I won't count that sum as income.”

Sonmati Turi and Niru Kumal stood beside the partnership cart. Sonmati's new bamboo goods and Niru's earthenware were packed in separate rows. The partnership manager came over to Meera. “Now put all your family's consignments under the same rate,” he said. “That will reduce the overall loss.” “I've accepted the rate for my two consignments,” Meera replied. “My sister has a separate customer on one of the days. I won't sign in her name.” The manager stared at the rope of the handcart. He found it hard to accept that there could be different voices within one family.

Her sister opened her notebook and examined the partnership's written rate. This time, instead of the previous verbal assurance, the load, distance, waiting time and responsibility for broken pots were listed separately. Yet at the bottom stood the line ‘Collective decision final’. “Whose decision?” the sister asked. Niru pulled the page closer. “If a pot cracks, who bears the loss?” “All the partners equally,” the manager replied. “You don't settle what is equal merely with a word,” Niru said. “You must examine the goods.”

Tara pointed to a blank corner of the page where an amendment could be written. “The partnership is useful to me,” Meera said, “but if it turns into a single lock, the old monopoly will come back.” In the end they wrote that each consignment's owner could have their own loss verified separately; that the common cart would apply the agreed common rate only to shared transport; and that, before the next consignment, a member could leave without penalty. The manager was annoyed at first, then heard Sonmati's fear of losing her first load and signed.

Meera kept her decision to send her two consignments through the partnership. Her sister, while awaiting the missing receipt from her

independent customer, agreed to try the partnership for just one other day; she did not hand over her entire business. “Will the payment for that day come separately?” she asked. The manager put it in writing. Niru added the provision for examining broken pots. “Will the old name of the route stay in your notebook?” Meera asked her sister. Her sister laughed. “The route is mine and the name is old. Neither is sold just because the cart changes.”

Gomati Beldar, who had taken part in the early-morning desilting work, arrived as well. There was dried mud beneath her fingernails, and in her ledger she carried a copy of the previous year's rules for measuring working time. The young man chairing the meeting said, “We'll read all the amounts together in the open accounts.” Gomati shook her head. “Read the expenses, but don't announce workers' private debts over a microphone. The public rules about desilting time and payments are one thing; a person's private shortfall is another.” “How can we check them if they're kept secret?” he asked. “Each recipient can reconcile their own slip,” Gomati replied. “Don't turn somebody's hardship into a spectacle before everyone.”

In the first part of the evening programme, the adolescents distributed responsibility for the papers. No original document would remain at the school without permission; verified public copies would be kept in one box; and the hours for reading pages that the community had authorized would be set in advance. Sanket was about to hand over a key to the box. “If I have the key,” a girl asked, “why will you open it again?” Sanket stopped. He explained the earlier rule for keeping two keys with different people. “And if I make a mistake?” the girl asked. “We'll investigate it,” Sanket said. “We won't call a child a thief and send her away for making a mistake.”

Tara proposed writing the final report on the open school's journey. One member wanted a long account of all the team's achievements to help secure outside funding. “We needn't show unfinished work as though it were finished,” Sarita said. “Night cleaning, the lines where names should go, unpaid wages, the cost of treatment—we mustn't cover all these things in the colours of success.” Padma showed four pages: completed work, partial correction, disputed claim and private material. This classification was meant not to diminish anybody's credit, but to prevent a false full stop.

In the distant time of the snowbound tale, Yudhishthira had come to the moment of mounting Indra's chariot. Before him stood his companion revealed as Dharma, and Indra's acceptance. The five dear ones left behind on the mountain road had not risen and returned to life. The door of ascent to heaven was opening in the tale, but the earth's grief was not erased by its radiance. Yudhishthira looked back once towards the way where their bodies had fallen, and then climbed into the chariot. Even as the ancient narrative moved on, it did not turn love for the dead into a certificate of achievement.

In the courtyard of Videhapur, on an evening in 2042, Javed Kalandar was hanging the cloth of his shadow theatre. Some children knew how little his first performance without animals had earned. “Will the dog come today?” a boy asked. “The dog rests today,” Javed said. “The shadows will move.” At the distant shelter, Ruhani was attending to the injured old dog's medicine and the hours for cleaning; nobody had decided to bring it into the crowd as a spectacle. Javed made the shadow of an opening door upon the cloth, and behind it a small figure advanced with a book in its hand.

When the public reading began, Padma skipped several pages of the first story. “Why is the part in the middle missing?” a listener asked. “The person who gave us those pages did not permit them to be read in public,” Padma answered. “How can it be a complete story then?” the listener asked. Closing the pages, Padma said, “Not every complete life is a thing everyone has the right to hear. Be truthful within the right we've been granted to listen.” A teenage girl in the audience put her own handwritten poem back into her pocket. Whether to read it by the end of the evening would be her decision.

At the time for the open accounts, receipts were arranged on a platform. Gomati's rules for desilting work, acknowledgement of Shanti Bote's separately accounted unloading wages, Amir Kulhaiya's comparison of three remittance options and the ‘Receipt pending’ status of Binu Darai were on different pages. Not everyone's dues were immediately placed on one identical line. “What kind of successful organization are you,” a young man demanded loudly, “if so much is still outstanding?” Gomati put her finger on the page giving the dates of actual payments. “Look at what has been received,” she said. “Don't strike out what hasn't.”

During the programme, a representative from outside displayed a colourful booklet proposed for printing. He wanted the team's name on the first page, a group photograph on the second, and an ‘inspiring story’ about an anonymous person and Naira on the third. “Has the anonymous person consented to their identity or circumstances being included in a public booklet?” Tara asked. “We won't write the name,” he replied. “Everybody knows the story anyway.” “A name isn't the only way someone's identity can be disclosed,” Kabir answered. “Naira's private phone messages will remain where they belong too.” Sarita closed the booklet and told the representative he could instead distribute general information about the public programme.

Sonmati sat down, exhausted. “Won't you all be paid for building the stage?” an adolescent asked. “Why not?” Sonmati answered. “If I donate cane and bamboo, that's one thing. If I work an hour today, that's another.” The boy opened the ledger. He had previously written ‘volunteer’. “I agreed to give some of my time without payment,” Sonmati said, “but don't forget to ask what the craftsperson should be paid for the rope and bamboo.” A line in the open accounts was corrected before the children. The first beat of the song sounded just as a payment date was being written beside Sonmati's name.

Meera Banjara went with her sister to drink tea in the shade nearby. Her sister's fourth customer's receipt had arrived by telephone, but actual payment had not yet come. The written rate and damage rules for the partnership's trial consignment were correct. “I'll try it for one day,” her sister said, “but I won't give up the day reserved for my old customer.” “And if the payment doesn't arrive on time?” Meera asked. “That's why there's a condition for the trial: the old arrears must be settled first; the new consignment won't be merged into a debt.” The two women had not chosen the same road, but each had kept the other's road open.

The time came to form a new committee. A member of the previous team wanted Sanket to retain all the keys for three months. Sanket raised his hand. “While we were away, some of the work here was managed by the children themselves. Why should I take all the locks back into my own hands now?” The committee decided that two young members would oversee the box of public copies and the reading hours, a senior member would assist with verification, and owners would retain their rights over their private original documents as before. The receipt for transferring the keys was written that very evening.

A girl nominated for the committee declined. “I have examinations to sit,” she said. “I won't keep watch every evening.” Some at the meeting were disappointed. “Giving responsibility is a right; imposing it isn't,” Sarita said. The girl suggested another young woman from the school, but her consent was requested first. During that brief pause, those who had fallen silent understood that handing responsibility to a new generation and allowing them to choose the hours of their own lives were not separate acts: they were two parts of the same decision.

Padma distributed slips listing the subjects for the last knowledge meeting. The first session would cover sources and unavailable pages; the second, wages owed to workers; the third, rules for publishing the names of the dead; the fourth, the children's questions. “It isn't right to call this the last meeting,” an elderly teacher said. “Where do so many questions end?” “Last in the sense of the travelling team's responsibility,” Padma answered. “Not the end of the school.” The teacher struck out ‘Conclusion’ at the top of the programme and wrote ‘Handover of Responsibilities’.

Sarita did not take Naira's small notebook out of her bag. Its public portion and private pages had already been separated. Kabir was sitting some distance away, drinking tea in silence. “What if somebody once again announces a memorial in Naira's name?” he asked. “We'll examine the evidence for the name, the consent, and whose labour has been left out,” Sarita said. “We cannot conceal someone else's work in the name of doing something for Naira.” Kabir nodded. Naira's messages remained preserved on his phone, separate from the voices of the public gathering.

After the public reading, the children went up onto the platform to vote on a name. One was gathering the most voices: ‘The Open Door’. Another group argued that ‘Open School’ was already familiar; if it were changed, the village elders would not know where to come. A third wanted ‘The Courtyard of Questions’. The children argued their way to a rule: the old familiar name would remain on the door, and each month, inside, the children would write a new sentence beneath their drawings. This month's sentence was: ‘You do not have to know the answer to come inside.’

Sanket was folding the old map of the journey. “What was the point of travelling so far towards the mountains,” an adolescent asked, “if we're only coming back here?” Sanket smoothed the folded portion of the map. “Some questions became clearer after we travelled,” he said. “But the door you opened this morning wasn't repaired by any of our journeys. The work here must be done here.” The young man picked up the cardboard from beneath the door and put it in the rubbish bin. The carpenter had arranged to plane the door level the next day; a slip giving the cost had been pinned to the board.

At the end of the night, Meera showed the partnership papers to a young committee member and gave her only the copy containing public rates; she kept the private address of her sister's customer to herself. “May I tell the story of your separate journeys?” the young woman asked. “You may tell today's rate and decision in my name,” the sister replied, “but not the customer's location. And if I don't want the story told next time, don't tell it.” The young woman marked the boundary in her notebook. Meera also showed her how to mend a wheel on the handcart. This lesson was separate from the written agreement, but just as useful.

Before the final lamp on the veranda went out, one page of the open accounts was still empty. The first proposal for the memorial gathering already listed the names of officeholders, but had left insufficient room for the old cleaning workers, those who had transported goods by night, and the details of wages still owing for the labour of Urmila, who had died. Sarita looked at the page. She did not add arbitrary names that night and declare the list complete. In red pencil she wrote at the top: ‘Reconcile names, work and evidence before publication.’ The new committee fixed a time for that work the following day.

As the mats were being gathered, an elderly woman from Urmila's family stopped beside the page. “The people whose names aren't written haven't all been forgotten,” she said, “but how much longer will you leave these spaces empty?” Sarita listened closely. “Tomorrow I'll go through the original wage slips with you,” she answered. “We'll begin with what can be confirmed. What remains disputed won't be made to disappear quietly.” The old woman wrote the proposed time in her notebook; she would not be made to wait another whole day without information in the name of grief.

When night descended, the school door remained half open so that the smell of paint could escape. The children's picture of a door was drying on the frame, and beneath it stood two signatures acknowledging the handover of keys. For the first time, the returning travellers ate their closing meal not as a separate banquet, but seated in the ordinary row with everyone else. Sarita washed her empty plate and put it away. Before her lay the carpenter's list of tools, and to one side the unfinished lines of names for the memorial. Having heard the story of climbing a distant mountain, they now stood before this crooked door. This time the people who lived inside were opening the way through it themselves.

Parva 18 · Svargārohaṇa | Uttara Kāṇḍa

Chapter 205 · Heaven's Register

When the first nail was driven into the thin brass plate for the memorial, the hammer missed. Instead of a metallic clang, it left a dent in the wooden board. The boy holding up the plate was trembling. Sarita did not take the hammer out of his hand; she folded a piece of old sackcloth beneath the nail and said, “Read the names first. Once this is nailed down, corrections will be difficult.” The names of the institution's officeholders had been beautifully engraved on the plate. Beneath them there was no line for the people who had carried loads at night, washed floors, and lifted wet bedding.

At Videhapur's open school, the travelling group had handed its responsibilities to the new committee the previous evening. This morning was the first test of that handover. Tara took out two copies of the original proposal. One belonged to the institution commissioning the memorial, the other to the open school. Both gave the same date for the ceremony, but listed the names in a different order. Sanket asked, “Has someone changed the list?” A young woman from the new committee said, “People have made their own selections. I haven't altered anything; I've kept both copies as they were.” There was less fear in her voice than the clear firmness of disagreement.

Urmila's sister arrived with her old register of laundry work. With her came the elderly woman who had visited Sarita the previous night to have her working hours recorded. The sister looked first for Urmila's name. “Urmila is here,” she said, “but she's described only as a ‘martyr’. Where are the night shifts, the washing, and the work of loading goods onto the vehicle?” The young man who had drafted the memorial proposal said, “People don't like hearing about wages when we're honouring sacrifice.” She opened the stiff pages of the register before him. “Then first tell me how much remained unpaid. Afterwards you may decide what people would prefer to hear.”

The figures in the register were written in three colours: one for shifts completed, another for partial payments made, and a third for disputed night transport charges. Gomati Beldar examined each line with a finger. “I understand what these numbers mean,” she said, “because I've seen these arguments while making rules for counting the canal workers' time. But this register is not evidence of the cause of death.” Padma immediately wrote two separate headings on a sheet: ‘Verified Account of Life and Labour’ and ‘Current Status of Claims and Investigation’. A little relief appeared on the sister's face. At that moment she needed not praise alone, but someone who would read her papers properly.

A member of the programme committee said, “If we put in so many lines, we'll run out of stone. The important people's names will be at the top, and we'll describe everyone else with one word: ‘helpers’.” Sarita asked, “Important who? The person who signed the papers in an office, or the person who pushed a patient's bed twice that night?” The member replied, “If we raise questions like that, no list will ever be complete.” Sarita looked at the plate resting against the door. “We don't need to make the false claim that we've prepared a complete list. But who gave you the right to leave someone out knowingly?”

Shashibhushan Mahapatra arrived in the midst of this dispute. Under his arm was an old measuring cord; in his hand were receipts for bamboo and cloth. He had not come to preside over the meeting. He had been asked to estimate the cost of the fabric covering proposed for the memorial. Seeing the names engraved on the plate, he stopped. “Why does it say ‘Budhan Das’ here?” A young man answered at once, “That's the name on the hospital's old list. It had already been printed.” Shashibhushan asked, “What word came after his name on that old list?” No one answered.

Shashibhushan remembered the day at the hospital when people had hurried to identify an elderly man's body as belonging to ‘Budhan Das’ or ‘Budhan Sah’. Rama had been comparing the preserved original admission sequence, the carbon copy, and separate statements from the family. At the time, Shashibhushan had refused to add a conjectural name to his receipt for materials. “I have not made a final identification of that body,” he said plainly. “If we reproduce that old printed mistake on the memorial today, we'll carelessly attach another household's grief to the name.”

Rama was called in. As soon as she entered the room she asked, “Do you need the medical notice of death, the personal identification of the body, or permission to publish the name on the memorial?” The young man said, “Aren't all three the same thing?” Rama placed three blank sheets on the table. “No. The first concerns treatment of the body and certification of death. The second is the investigation of whose body it is. The third is the right to make a name and private details public. An empty field on one sheet does not fill itself from another.” She could provide a copy of the letter requesting updated certification from the office holding the original register, but she could not instantly answer every question.

Three proposals were raised: change the name, erase it altogether, or accept one family's claim as true. On the back of his receipt, Shashibhushan showed them an old sentence he had written: ‘Materials to be held until identification is settled.’ “If I'd cut the cloth that day and sent off the wrong body, what would a correction on paper bring back now?” he asked. The young woman on the committee wrote down the decision: no name attached to an unconfirmed identification would be engraved on the brass; the case number and the name of the investigating officer would appear in a public progress register, but the family's private details would not.

Outside, a child held the thin brass plate before his eyes and tried to look at the sunlight. Its glare prevented him from seeing anything. The sister said, “Put that down. It'll hurt your eyes.” The child asked, “If someone's name isn't put on it, does that mean the person didn't die?” For a long time she looked at his face. “Leaving off a name doesn't bring anyone back to life,” she said. “But putting on the wrong name can bring the wrong news to somebody's home.” The child laid the plate on the table and went to fetch tea. The question stayed in the room.

In the ancient account of the ascent to heaven, Yudhishthira reached the brilliance of the divine realm after leaving the earth. There he saw Duryodhana seated in a place of honour, but he could not see his brothers or Draupadi. The golden radiance of that royal court did nothing to diminish his astonishment. He asked where those who had shared the blood of the war, its vows and its separations, had gone. The divine order of precedence could not answer the question of earthly bonds. This was the ancient narrative's own moral crisis; it was not historical testimony about the list being prepared in Videhapur.

Yudhishthira's question was not merely a demand that the names of his loved ones should appear on a tablet of honour. He wanted to know their condition, even if the road to them brought sorrow rather than fragrance. If someone had told him, ‘The list of heaven is final; sit here,’ that would not have ended his questions about those who were missing. The narrative was moving towards its terrible test. To reduce the meaning of that test to the simple distribution of rewards would diminish the story itself.

Videhapur, midday in 2042. Uma arrived at the open school after her morning's washing. There was the smell of laundered cloth on her hands and a damp towel over her shoulder. Reading the committee's plate, she asked, “Will you put the dead and those who did the work in the same list?” Tara said, “No. The memorial will carry the verified names of the dead, with the families' permission to publish them; alongside it there will be a separate public account of the history of the labour.” Uma nodded. “I'm alive. Right now I need my day's wages, not a dead person's place. But I won't let the traces of those who worked beside me be erased either.”

Sonmati Turi came to measure a bamboo frame. Someone had suggested putting up an open reading board beside the small memorial. She made it clear that the bamboo supplied that day and the work of her hands must be paid for separately. A member tried to call it an act of merit and have it done free. Sonmati smiled. “You can keep the account of merit,” she said. “The account of this evening's rice at my house is different.” Gomati showed them a copy of the rule for measuring working hours. The young committee recorded the craftswoman's hours and fixed the date of payment. It was the first small test of preventing the old erasure from recurring in the work of building the memorial itself.

A man claimed to speak on behalf of the unnamed sanitation workers. He wanted his own name engraved at the very top as the group's representative. Kamala, who had spent years doing that cleaning work, stepped forward. “Have you asked us?” she said. “Some of us will give our names and some won't. Some won't want people at home to know about the work they once did. Whose permission have you obtained?” The man said, “I'm speaking in everyone's interest.” Kamala answered, “Even speaking in someone's interest doesn't amount to permission.”

Tara brought out the public portions of the old duty sheets. The names and dates of work for three labourers were available, but another document bore illegible signatures. They decided to seek consent separately from the three people who were still alive. The general total of the remaining hours would be verified against the public accounts, but no arbitrary name would be inserted in place of a half-legible signature. Kamala laid a finger on the incomplete page. “It's painful to leave a space blank,” she said. “Filling it with a lie would be worse.”

Sarita asked Urmila's sister for permission to use Urmila's name on the memorial. “Write her name,” the sister said, “but no photographs, private illnesses, or dramatised scenes of her final moments without showing them to me. In the account of her work, record the washing, the night shifts lifting goods, and the outstanding payments separately. Urmila kept her own record of what she was owed.” Sarita entered these conditions into the meeting's original resolution. Urmila's death was established, but the final calculation of the outstanding night transport charge remained disputed. Flowers for the memorial were no substitute for that money.

The disagreement over Naira's name was different. An outsider wanted to copy an inspirational sentence from her private phone and place it at the top of the plate. Kabir, who arrived towards the end of the meeting, replied, “We will not release the private messages on her phone. For her public work, examine the written material, its source, and the separate permissions.” Sarita held the grief of remembering her daughter within herself and said, “Being her mother doesn't make me the owner of all her words.” The man was displeased, but a teenage girl on the new committee wrote down the decision. Not one word from Naira's private messages was engraved that day.

When Shashibhushan sat down with his estimate for the cloth, Neeraj Panda arrived as well. His register contained separate receipts for ritual services voluntarily requested by bereaved families. A member of the memorial committee suggested that a portion of the relief intended for the families of the dead should be put towards a collective ceremony. Neeraj said firmly, “No. Each family will choose according to its own beliefs. Relief money, a craftsperson's wages, and payment for religious services don't belong in the same pot.” Shashibhushan agreed. Neither man wanted the value of his labour

hidden, but neither wished to turn mourning into a net for catching customers.

Neeraj showed them a small page from an earlier journey, containing a recollection of a route marked with the name of the Ganga. One of Shashibhushan's receipts for materials also mentioned a journey to the Ganga, but its date, goods, and payment category were different. A young man asked excitedly, “So is it proved that all those bodies were taken to the Ganga?” Neeraj shook his head. “The name of a river may mark a ritual route, or an intended journey. It does not prove the actual transport of every dead person's body. This page concerns my service. Don't force a family that never went there into the meaning of that word.”

Padma preserved the original spelling of the page exactly as it stood. ‘Ganga’ was entered as an archival return of the river's name, while Shashibhushan's materials receipt and Neeraj's record of a ritual journey were identified as separate sources. The memorial's list of deaths neither grew nor shrank because of that name; nor was any outstanding wage settled by it. A young woman asked, “Then why mention the river?” Padma replied, “Because it matters how people remember the road by which they said farewell to their loved ones. But the story of a route and an official death certificate are not the same thing.”

There was too little khichdi at lunch. The children halved the portions on their plates and set some aside for the craftspeople. Sonmati laughed. “Eat first. I'll wash my hands and eat afterwards.” One teenage girl insisted that some rice should be kept separately for her. Amid a few moments of laughter, ordinary hunger bore witness to life beyond the nails, names, and stories of death surrounding the memorial. Gomati counted the rice left over and put it in a vessel so that those finishing their work would have a portion waiting. Sarita saw that sometimes the practice of justice meant keeping a plate of food covered.

Before evening, the revised list was read aloud. The first section contained the names of those whose deaths and personal identities had been verified, and for whom permission to publish had been obtained. The second was a separate account of the verified labour of the dead and the living, respecting the publication limits chosen by each person. A third page would remain in a locked box: unconfirmed identities, disputed payments, and numbers of investigations proceeding before the relevant officials. A public summary could be read, but not the private papers. Someone said, “These three levels make the memorial complicated.” The young woman replied, “One beautiful lie would be cheaper. But from whose household would we collect its price?”

One member still wanted to restore the original proposal putting the institution's officeholders at the top. He said donors would want to see their names in large letters in photographs. Tara asked, “Put the account of

donations on a separate board. Why should rank in office determine the right to be remembered?" The man said, "I've given years to this work." Kamala replied, "Then certainly record that on the page about work. But don't turn your signature into a flag raised in front of someone else's death." The argument grew sharp, but in the end they agreed that donors' names would go on a separate information board.

Urmila's sister still had an old wage receipt in her hand. Rama gave her another paper, recording the date of the partial payment that had been approved and the hearing date for the remaining disputed item. The sister asked, "Is this hearing certain?" Rama showed her the receipt stamp. "The date has been fixed; the amount has not been decided," she replied. Drinking her last tea of the day, the sister said, for the first time, "I have nothing against flowers for Urmila. What I object to is the people giving the flowers wanting to put an end to my questions."

Kabir stood on the memorial's veranda and looked at Naira's name. There was no fabricated final message immediately below it. He said to Sarita, "When I see her name, for a moment it feels as if she'll be here to read it." Sarita looked towards the stone. "She won't come back now," she said. They were silent for a while. "Even so, let her name be written correctly," Kabir said softly. Sarita agreed. The fact of death and the unbearable absence within memory stood together; no words reconciled them.

At the evening storytelling session, Padma recounted the ancient Yudhishthira's questions on reaching heaven, but she did not equate a heavenly throne with the stamp of a modern office. A teenager asked, "If the gods chose the names as they pleased, why did Yudhishthira ask questions?" Padma said, "The story shows him asking. The answer is not simple, and that is why the question survives." The boy wrote in his notebook: 'A roll of honours and an account of a life are different.' He kept the page not as proof of anything, but as a question for the next reading.

At last, when the first brass plate was nailed into place, it bore neither the institution's hierarchy of posts nor a list of its dignitaries, but the purpose of the memorial and the date on which the evidence had been checked. Separate plates of verified names had been reviewed and approved by the families; the public status of Urmila's outstanding wage claim remained recorded alongside the account of her labour. No one smuggled Budhan's disputed identity into the list of certainties. The original misprinted paper was preserved so that people could understand both the reason for the correction and its history. Shashibhushan handed the hammer back to the boy. "Now drive it in," he said. "It says no more than what we know to be right at present."

Closing the expense account, the girl on the new committee asked Sarita, "And if new evidence comes tomorrow?" Sarita showed her the blank space on the back of the paper. "Then we'll read the list again, date the public

correction, and tell whoever may be hurt by it. This plate isn't the gateway to heaven. It's a thing made by human hands." The girl carried the accounts inside. The door, worn down by the craftsperson's work, now opened without cardboard wedged beneath it. But another blank sheet hung near the frame for the next question: the generation that had survived, its fears, and the work of protecting it, which no memorial plate could accomplish.

Chapter 206 · Uttara and Parikshit

The new sheet hanging on the doorframe of the open school had curled in the night's dew. At the top, in a girl's handwriting, were the words: ‘What must be done for those still living?’ A small boy who was reading the first line ran to straighten the paper, but Ruhani stopped him when she saw the loose nail above. “I'll fix the nail; you hold it from below.” The boy protested. “I want to do some work too.” Tara brought a low table. Standing on it, the boy held the bottom corner of the sheet while Ruhani drove the nail in herself. The paper hung straight again, but the first question still had no answer.

Yesterday the names of dead labourers had been corrected on the memorial list. Today the schoolchildren and families from the shelter had been invited to the same veranda. Sarita had thought that after paying what they owed to remembrance, their anxieties about the living might grow lighter. But early in the morning a mother brought her son to the school. During the earlier accident, the boy had hidden whenever he heard a loud noise. Now even the ordinary tapping of a hammer sent him into a panic. His mother asked, “Should I keep him away from the meeting? I don't want him to give up studying.”

Among the children on the veranda, some wanted to read and some wanted to play first. One child's old school notebook had been soaked by water; another did not want to hear her name called out before everyone. A member of the young committee suggested compiling a list of every child's suffering and hanging it beside the memorial so that donors would understand the crisis. Sarita looked first at the children's faces. One girl had hidden her face in her mother's sari. “Who has given permission,” Sarita asked, “to put the fears of the very children for whom we're seeking help on a signboard in the marketplace?”

Ruhani spread two mats on the floor. She put toys for playing on one and paper and coloured chalk on the other. “If anyone wants to tell us something, they may,” she said. “If they don't, they can begin with colours.” A boy sat on the first mat and went on making mountains with a broken piece of chalk. Another girl drew a door, but did not close it. A teacher said, “They must learn to talk about their sorrow.” Ruhani smiled and asked, “Must every story be told today, right now?” The teacher fell silent.

Kabir was filling glasses at the tap near the doorway and giving everyone water. Every time he passed the plate bearing Naira's name, he felt something break inside him. A child asked, “Does Didi's phone still ring?” Kabir set down the glass. “No. And I'm not going to make the private things on her phone public.” The child asked again, “Then how shall we remember her?” Kabir looked at the mountain the child had made. “She did her work; we'll do the work that remains. But your picture will still belong to you.”

The leg of an old wooden table wobbled in a corner. When Sanket pulled it away from the wall, a bent iron nail was found underneath. No one had taken the risk of leaving such a table among the children, and no one person's name was entered against the fault. Gomati Beldar said, “We kept the donation papers on this table yesterday. If a child climbs onto it today, it could fall.” She had the table moved aside. A worker said, “Are we to open a payment file for something so small?” Gomati replied, “A small expense doesn't make the injury small.”

Long before that morning in 2042, Uttara sat beside a window in Hastinapura after the Kurukshetra war. Abhimanyu was dead. The Brahmastra had threatened the child in her womb; in the epic narrative, Krishna's protection saved the unborn life, and the story of Parikshit's birth retained the memory of both miracle and mortal fear. For Uttara, however, the first question of the day was not the description of a miracle but the infant's breathing. She held her palm near his nose and listened for a long time, as though trying to catch not the movement of air but the small sound of time.

Women of the palace came one by one to see the child. Some called him ‘the surviving lamp of the Kuru line’; others said ‘the future of the kingdom’. Hearing all this, Uttara drew the shawl more closely around her shoulders. An elderly midwife tried to wrap the infant in warm cloth. Uttara reached out and folded it in her own way. “Keep him warm first,” she said. “We can lay the burden of the future on him later.” The midwife laughed, but the grief of losing her own kin in the war glimmered at the corners of her eyes.

Subhadra entered the chamber. The grief and tenderness of being Abhimanyu's mother and Parikshit's grandmother were present together in her face. She asked Uttara, “Have you had any rest?” Uttara answered, “Whenever I close my eyes, I see the terror of that fire again. And when I open them, I find everyone leaning over my child.” Subhadra said, “One day he will have to learn the duties of the throne, but no one needs to lift him up right now.” She told the guard at the doorway that no more visitors were to enter without asking Uttara.

Touching the child's shoulder, Uttara asked, “If everyone calls him the surviving dynasty, how will he live for himself?” Subhadra sat beside her and watched the steam rising from a vessel of milk. “Many people called Abhimanyu a symbol of valour,” she said, “but he was my son. He grew hungry; he ran through the dust. If I'd forgotten that, I would have erased his life even before his death.” Uttara held the child a little more loosely against her breast.

In that ancient age of the Mahabharata, securing the successor to the throne was also a political question. In Yudhishthira's assembly, they discussed the continuity of the line through the child and considered a secure city, guards, and teachers necessary. But Uttara asked how the boy could learn the

colour of the sky if he were always kept within the safety of the palace. The assembly was not ready to hear such a question. Subhadra did not see the wish as defiance of royal duty, but as a need of a living body. The choice of the child's first journey outside involved both guards and Uttara's consent.

Years passed. As Parikshit grew older, he was told the weighty story of the Kuru lineage. One day he broke a bow made of clay and came frightened to his mother. “When I become king, will I have to put everything right?” he asked. Uttara picked up both pieces of the broken bow. “No,” she said. “First understand what is broken. Then mend as much as you can. Don't promise to gather everyone's sorrow into your own hands.” The child asked whether he could go back to playing. Uttara let him play.

At Videhapur's open school, Sarita heard this ancient scene through Padma's storytelling. Padma made it clear that she was speaking of events in epic time, not presenting eyewitness evidence of what had happened in 2042. A teenage girl asked, “Could Uttara choose everything for the child?” Padma replied, “When children are infants, adults must make many decisions to protect them. But that protection must also mean that one day the child has the right to ask questions of their own.” The girl closed her notebook. “Then people should ask us what we think, too,” she said.

Just then, a child from the shelter began coughing violently. Dust was drifting inside; carpentry work had begun beside the open window. Rukhsana stopped the craftsperson, took the child away from the dust, and called the person responsible for the child's care. She did not guess at a diagnosis and write it down as fact. An employee said, “Put down dust as the cause in the papers. Only then will we get assistance.” Rukhsana replied, “I'll write what we've seen. The doctor is the person who must examine the medical cause.” The craftsperson gathered the tools and went to work in the shade outside.

The child's mother said, “People keep telling me to put my fear aside. I can't put it aside yet. I want to know where the way out will be the next time dust rises.” Sanket and two young people from the new committee inspected the safe exit route from the courtyard. An abandoned bench blocked the passage, and they removed it. A date was fixed for laying a temporary paved path across the slippery section in the rainy season, but the funds for permanent repairs had not yet been approved. “You've told me clearly what hasn't been done,” the mother said. “That means I can ask again tomorrow.”

Neeraj Panda arrived carrying his old ritual ledger and a new receipt. At the previous memorial meeting, he had resolved to keep the fees for religious services separate from relief for bereaved families. Now an influential organiser had brought a proposal: they should hold a ‘protection ritual’ for the children who had survived and pay its cost out of the school's relief fund. Neeraj laid his ledger on the table. “Whether to pray for protection is a matter of choice,” he said. “Those who wish may do so. But it is wrong to deduct

religious fees from money given to feed children and provide them with a safe roof.”

The organiser grew irritated. “You're a pandit, and you're opposing rituals?” Neeraj said calmly, “I'm not opposing them. I'm asking that the choices be made clear. I'll tell any family that freely calls on me what time the service will take and what reasonable fee I charge. Those who don't call me must not lose any of their rights.” An elderly woman who wanted a ritual said, “I'll have it done at home. Don't turn my faith into something to laugh at, either.” Ruhani replied, “Your beliefs will be respected, and so will the children's shared relief fund.”

Neeraj wrote two receipts. One recorded the service requested voluntarily by a family; the other confirmed that no transaction had been made out of the school's relief fund. The organiser asked, “Why do we need that second receipt?” Neeraj replied, “So that tomorrow nobody says my services were free, or that they were paid for with public assistance. The craftsperson's wage must remain honest, and so must freedom of belief.” He was not ashamed to ask a price for his services, but he did not add his claim to the food allowance of hungry children.

By noon, two separate boards stood beside the school. The first showed the safe exit, clean drinking water, times of care, and the name of the person hearing complaints. The second displayed questions written by the children themselves, which they could have removed whenever they wished. A member wanted to put each child's photograph beside the questions. Ruhani asked, “Can someone offer their picture without offering their face?” A girl raised her hand. “I want to keep the door I've drawn in colours, not a photograph.” Tara did not even write the girl's name on the board without permission.

Sarita went into the kitchen. The rice container was almost empty, but the lentils reserved for the children had not run out. Urmila's sister was there spreading out washed clothes. “Yesterday Urmila's work was recorded on the memorial,” she said. “Who will wash the new children's clothes today? Whose hours are to be entered?” Sarita lowered the flame beneath the stove. “New shifts and their wages will go under the names of the new workers,” she replied. “Urmila's unpaid wages remain a claim by her family. Those are two different pages.” Instead of accepting unsolicited relief, the sister asked for a definite day on which wages would be paid.

Gomati brought the time register. The hours were recorded for two women who had willingly taken on the new laundry work, and for a third who was giving her time to caring for the children. A committee member said, “Looking after children is a natural part of household work. Why pay for it?” The woman replied, “After my work at home, I'd ordinarily spend these hours at my shop. If you want me to stay here, recognise it as work.” Gomati counted the hours. Rama did not treat the shop's potential earnings as proof

of wages due, but she had a separate agreement written down for the actual rate of the work assigned.

That afternoon, a small clay horse made by a potter broke. The children gathered round it. One boy said, “I was going to seat the king on it.” Another said, “Then the king will walk.” The first boy began to cry. Javed Kalandar, passing with his cloth for shadow-play, picked up the two pieces and asked, “Shall the horse be repaired tomorrow, or will a one-legged horse dance today?” The children burst out laughing. That laughter forgave none of the wounded city's debts, but for a moment play found a place where fear had been.

Kabir saw in his pocket the old notation for Naira's letter marked ‘Private —Unsent’. He did not take out the letter. Watching the children's game with the broken horse reminded him of Naira, who, faced with unfinished work, would first ask who could sit down beside someone. He did not tell himself that Naira was still with him: he knew clearly that she had died. But he did not withdraw from that day's work. He gave Javed a small container of glue to repair the horse, and its cost was entered under the children's play expenses.

The turn for storytelling came again. Padma returned to the Mahabharata episode in which Parikshit's survival carried the burden of everyone's hopes. A teenager asked, “Why should somebody who survived bear more responsibility for justice because of other people's wrongs?” Padma said, “The story gives the heir power, but difficult questions as well. A surviving person isn't born merely to avenge their ancestors. They need the chance to make their own mistakes, to listen, and to put things right.” The boy asked, “And if he won't listen?” Padma replied, “Then the story of that future will have to be questioned again through other people's voices.”

Another scene from old Hastinapura, in the years before Yudhishthira's Great Departure. The young Parikshit, playing in a court veranda, reached out to touch a guard's armour. The guard drew back; an old wound from the war made it hard to conceal the trembling of his hand. Uttara noticed the hand but did not order the guard to tell his story before everyone. Parikshit asked, “Can people still be afraid inside so much iron?” Uttara said, “Fear doesn't stay outside the iron. When you become king, listening to people's fears will be harder than wearing armour.”

Hearing the guard's uneasy movement, the boy asked, “Can I stop him being afraid?” Uttara replied, “First ask what he wants now.” Parikshit approached the guard. Adjusting the armour on his shoulder, the man said, “Prince, I need to rest.” The child stepped back. Uttara did not call that small step the conquest of every duty of kingship. But for that day, she felt it might be possible to learn, before the name of a dynasty, to hear another person's words: ‘Not now.’

By evening, the boy's mother had returned to the school in Videhapur. Her son had run towards the doorway twice during the day, but the second time had come back on his own and begun drawing with chalk. His mother asked Ruhani, “Will he come tomorrow?” Ruhani looked at him. “There will be a place here,” she said, “but he and you must be asked. We won't bind household duties, study, and rest into a single promise.” The boy said, “Tomorrow I'll draw a river in the mountains. But the hammering must be outside.” Sanket assured him that the carpentry would be done during designated hours in the open air.

Written copies of these decisions were read to the children on the new committee as well. The safe exit route had been opened, but permanent repairs to the wet, slippery paving remained unfinished. Hours for care had been set, but regular funding had not yet been secured. Families were free to choose rituals; religious fees had not been deducted from the common relief fund. No child's private story had been turned into a photograph without consent. Gomati said, “Unless we write this down, tomorrow someone will claim everything is finished.” Tara nodded. “Let the unfinished work remain visible by name.”

Neeraj was wrapping up his plate and receipts. The elderly woman who wanted a ritual voluntarily arranged a time with him. A neighbouring family said openly that they would not participate. Both families continued filling water from the same tap; neither asked that the other be struck off the relief list. Looking at the children's coloured papers, Neeraj Panda started to tear a piece out of his old ledger, then stopped: the ledger page was evidence of payment. Instead, on a new plain sheet, he folded a little boat.

Before nightfall, Sarita came to put away the lower board on the veranda. The picture of an open door drawn by the girl was still there; no donor's name had been pasted over it. Sarita straightened the slightly crooked sheet. The pain of Naira's absence had not diminished that day either. But it did not seem right to paste her daughter's face over the faces of the children who could play in the courtyard. She saw the door as a door—an ordinary object that could be opened now and might need repairing again tomorrow.

The teenager who had asked about revenge during the storytelling was putting a new sheet behind the board. He wrote: ‘Whose wrongs are the survivors supposed to live in repayment for?’ Padma did not strike out the question. She only added, ‘We shall listen at the next reading.’ Two drops of colour lay along the edge of the sheet, as if the child's unfinished river had overflowed its mountains. Night was deepening outside, rice was boiling on the stove within. There was still no answer, but a place had been made for the question.

Chapter 207 · Janamejaya's Question

A woman's laugh suddenly sounded from the small audio device on the table at Videhapur's open school. Nobody had deliberately pressed its button; an unfinished list from an old programme was open on the mobile phone's screen, and the light brush of a finger had started the next recording. Rashid Bhat hurriedly turned it off. “That laugh isn't part of the song,” he said. “It's my sister's voice. She came that day only to listen to the rehearsal. We can't add it to the meeting's public record without asking her.”

Padma sat on the other side of the table. The children's question from yesterday—‘Whose wrongs are the survivors supposed to live in repayment for?’—was still on the board. They had chosen the story of Janamejaya for today's reading. But before the story could begin, the sound of Rashid's sister laughing had interrupted them. Sarita read the question on the board and looked at the phone's dark screen. The two did not seem the same to her: one was an ancient tale of a king's revenge, the other concerned a living person's right to her private voice. Yet both involved a difficult choice between listening and not listening.

Rashid opened his old notebook. Four lines taught by his grandmother were written in one colour of ink; three lines he had composed after the culvert collapsed were in another. At an earlier public reading, he had permitted only one line to be recited. At the Phagun festival, a complete recording of the song had been stopped because the accompanists' permissions and fees had not been settled. This time an organiser said, “It's for public education, not for sale. We thought the old difficulty had been resolved.” Rashid replied, “It wasn't resolved. The question was merely postponed.”

Dev Gaine was opening the case of his sarangi. Before replacing a string, he wrapped the broken piece of the old one in cloth and kept it. His niece Ragini had come back from school to listen to the practice. Years earlier a seed company had wanted to use Dev's performance in an advertisement; he had refused to sign away unconditional rights to his voice, the verses he had composed, and his playing. Ragini showed him on her phone that a short excerpt from an old fair was still circulating on one of the company's promotional pages. “Did you play it?” Dev asked. “No, someone sent it to me,” she said.

Tara opened a sheet for notes, but Padma stopped her hand. “First we must understand who actually recorded this extract.” Dev said, “People had phones out at the old fair. I don't know for certain which device it came from.” Rashid said, “And whoever owned the phone didn't automatically acquire the right to sell the sound it captured.” Sanket proposed separate permissions for the public performance and for later use of the audio or video, and suggested

that no one be publicly named as responsible for the old circulation until it had been investigated.

In the palace of Hastinapura long ago, after Parikshit's death, the royal priest's voice trembled as he told Janamejaya how his father had died. The story of Takshaka's bite had already reached the assembly. There were differing accounts of the curse, the fear, the king's carelessness, and the death itself. Janamejaya asked, “My father is dead. Who, then, will be punished?” A courtier replied, “The one who bit him.” Another voice rose: “If you punish one serpent, why should the whole race of serpents burn?”

There was no sleep in the king's eyes. Memories of small days spent with his father returned to torment him; in every one of them now, his father was absent. He laid a hand on the stone of the royal hall. “My father's death must not be left without an answer,” he said. An elderly listener rose and petitioned him. “An answer and annihilation aren't the same word, Majesty. The one who pronounced the curse, the one who killed, the one who watched, the one who could not save him—they are not the same people. How can all serpents be charged with one crime?” The priest treated this objection as a device for delaying the proceedings. Janamejaya did not command the old man to be silent.

At the modern school, a teenage girl asked, “If a serpent killed the king's father, would killing all serpents bring him back?” Padma wrote the question on the board. A young man seated at the back said, “People would think the king weak if he didn't take revenge.” A labourer sitting beside him replied, “I too would be angry if the court wouldn't listen to the harm done to my house. But burning down another house wouldn't rebuild mine.” Padma read both their statements aloud. She did not immediately declare either person the winner.

Rashid's notebook showed that two payments from the previous Phagun fair committee were still outstanding: one for the singer and one for the accompanist. His name had been announced at that earlier event, but no terms for later use of his family's song had been made clear. A young member of the new committee said, “Sing free of charge this time, in the name of education. Then the old account will come before the public as well.” Rashid shut his notebook. “You cannot settle what you owed me before by taking today's work from me for nothing. The old account is separate; today's fee is separate.”

Hearing him, Sarita called Rukhsana over. She was responsible for the shared meal, but had raised the question of musicians' wages before. She asked for the old programme accounts. They showed a fixed expense entry for the water committee's Phagun event, but beside the singer's fee was only the word ‘approved’. There was no acknowledgement showing whether the sum had actually been transferred by the bank. Rukhsana said, “Approval doesn't mean

payment. Write a receipt for whatever is paid now under the new date. The old amount owed must remain in its own ledger."

Dev was tightening a string to play two notes when Ragini said, "Uncle, may I play something of my own in the school drama?" Dev laughed. "Play a melody you've learnt with your own hands; that doesn't make it a recording imprisoned in my voice. And if you've written new lyrics, let the credit for them be yours." Ragini showed him the opening line of a song for the play in her notebook. Dev advised her to keep the sounds of farmers transplanting rice distinct from the monotonous noise of an advertisement. He did not claim that his niece's song was his creation.

The next day, in Janamejaya's assembly at Hastinapura, a sacrifice was proposed. At the sound of Takshaka's name, the king's face flushed like a cauldron. A priest versed in the rites said that the mantras would draw serpents from distant places towards the fire. For a moment, the hall fell silent at these words. A soldier seated near the king, who had witnessed fire in war, looked at his damaged palms. A question arose within him: what crime had the other creatures done, those who would be drawn into the flames along with the one the king intended to punish? The soldier did not speak his question, but the old listener's earlier objection was still in the king's ears.

Janamejaya summoned the old man again. "If I don't demand justice for my father, how can I look my people in the face?" The old man said, "Demand justice, Majesty. But first consider where you draw the bounds of punishment. Without a limit, the screams of the innocent will be drowned out by the voice of the guilty." The royal priest said this argument would halt the ritual. In anger Janamejaya declared, "I've heard what you have to say. Nevertheless, let the preparations for the sacrifice proceed." To hear was not the same as to agree. The assembly remembered that difference.

At Videhapur, Padma stopped the reading here and drank some water. The young man who had supported revenge asked, "So the king had already been warned, yet still chose the sacrifice?" Padma said, "The story makes his choice tragic. Hearing a warning does not mean a person will always choose rightly." The girl asked again, "Whose task is it to record the words of the person who was heard?" Tara answered, "If the writer of an assembly's proceedings cuts out the lines of dissent, people later will believe no question was ever raised."

Meanwhile, two programme managers arrived at the door. They proposed combining today's reading and music into a single new archive and placing it on the town's memory page. "If we keep all the voices together," they said, "history will survive." Rashid replied, "All these voices don't have the same owner. My grandmother's words, the new lines I've written, Dev's playing, Ragini's practice, and my sister's laugh have five different kinds of rights, even if they are in one file." One manager wrote on his cost sheet, "All these conditions will make the programme expensive." Dev answered, "Then put on

a smaller programme. Taking someone's voice for free isn't proof that you've organised one cheaply."

Tara asked the organisers for a definite schedule. Padma had already authorised a half-hour audio recording of her storytelling, but the voices of the children asking questions during the meeting had to be treated separately. Padma said the children's voices must not be published without permission; their questions could instead be included in written form, with their identities concealed. The young man asked, "I'm an adult. What about my voice?" "You can grant or refuse permission," Tara said. After thinking for a while, he consented only to the written version of his question.

Dev requested a new written agreement for his scheduled performance: one performance today, listening for study at the school, a separate decision on public distribution, and no permission for advertising or sale. Rashid wanted a separate page for his singing, clearly identifying the source of his grandmother's words, crediting the verses he had composed, and recording the accompanist's consent. The portion containing his sister's laugh was to be removed entirely; the original phone copy was to remain privately secured pending any necessary inquiry. The programme manager resisted at first, then agreed to a shorter recording.

Before the music began, the question of payment arose again. A member of the new committee offered to provide a cash advance from his own pocket, but Rashid laughed. "Not as a personal favour. The institution taking the work must pay it from the institution's account." The ledger was opened. Acting together, the authorised committee members paid Rashid and Dev separate fees out of the sum approved in advance for today's performance and obtained separate signed receipts. The labour of the teenager who had set up the stage and the time of the young woman operating the equipment were also entered as expenses. The outstanding payments from the old fair remained marked separately in red.

When Rashid began to sing, there was still the dust of the day the culvert broke in his voice. After his grandmother's four old lines, he sang the three he had composed in a slightly softer melody. Yet he did not remain fixed in mourning alone; he also recalled how people had carried rice to one another when the road to the market was closed. Dev moved the bow across his sarangi. Ragini sat at the side counting the beat, but no microphone was turned towards her. A fine sound of wind entered the recording. The young woman on the committee preferred to preserve it as part of the original sound rather than cut it away.

When the song ended, no official proclaimed that 'folk culture had been saved'. Sarita asked Rashid, "What has changed because of this performance?" He showed her his two receipts. "I've received the pay for today's labour. I can now choose where my voice goes. But the old debt hasn't disappeared from the

papers." Dev said, "I need money to buy strings. Ragini's schooling has to go on as well. A song's value can go towards both those things; it doesn't have to be hung up only on a memorial."

Beside the fire of that ancient serpent sacrifice, after Janamejaya's command, the chanting near the altar grew fierce. Serpents of different sizes fell into the flames; the rite intended to draw Takshaka into the fire was proceeding. Janamejaya remembered his father's death, but he could not escape the sight of the creatures struggling as they fell into the flames. Through the burning smoke the old listener's question rose again: the king wanted justice, but whose hand was setting the boundaries of this sacrifice?

Then Astika arrived. The king had promised to grant him a boon; there was no threat of an army in his words. He asked that the sacrifice be stopped. The priests frowned. Takshaka had not yet fallen into the fire, and the rite of vengeance had not reached its final target. Janamejaya's hand tightened into a fist, then loosened. The assembly understood that the king could not put aside his grief, but he could stop an order to kill carried out in grief's name. After a long struggle within himself, he gave the command to halt the sacrifice.

Astika's arrival did not bring Parikshit back to life. Nor did those who had already been hurled into the fire return. Janamejaya's decision could not erase those deaths; it could only alter the path of the next moment for the creatures still alive. Some priests considered the decision an incomplete victory, others a breach of discipline. The old listener seated near the sacrifice said nothing. The king had heard his first question and not accepted it; at last, hearing another voice, he had stopped the sequence of violence.

When the story reached this point on the veranda at Videhapur, the students began whispering among themselves. A boy asked, "What about the ones who had already died?" Padma said, "The story cannot bring them back. But it can record a decision to stop the destruction of the living in the name of the dead." Another student asked, "What if Astika hadn't arrived?" Padma replied, "We can imagine that possibility. But I won't alter the events in the written narrative and then claim my version as history."

Kabir was sitting on a mat at the back. Thoughts of Naira's phone, her private messages, and her letter marked 'Private—Unsent' rose silently in his mind. He still held many words that people could use to give Naira's death whatever meaning suited them. He did not take the paper from his pocket. Sarita came and sat beside him. Neither asked the other anything. Naira's death was irreversible; the absence of her consent could not be taken as an easy licence for public publicity.

After the reading, Padma set an exercise with four terms: direct observation, what is heard, inference, and imagination. A girl said she would not treat every line of the Janamejaya story as her direct observation, since she had heard it at the school. Padma refined her answer. "What you experienced

directly was hearing the story here. The source for the ancient events is a written epic; some of the dialogue we've composed may also be narrative imagination. Keeping these distinctions doesn't diminish the story." Pointing to Rashid's songbook, Tara said, "Here too, we won't dissolve the family memory of his grandmother's words and the actual labour of today's recording into one undifferentiated line."

In the evening, a member of the new committee played the first copy of the recording for the performers. Rashid had it stopped at several points. In one place an old mobile notification tone had intruded during Dev's playing. "That isn't part of today's performance," Dev said. Sanket preserved a copy of the original audio, removed the intrusion from the public version, and recorded the time of the edit. In another place, Rashid's sister's laugh was absent. Rashid was relieved, but asked for a separate acknowledgement of who would retain the private original file. Tara arranged for the private original not to be distributed without further consultation.

A young man asked, "What if someone outside plays a short extract without asking?" Dev replied, "First we'll establish which extract was played and where. Then we'll ask for it to be taken down. Today's written rules are the beginning of that struggle, not its end." Closing her notebook, Ragini said, "My new song for the play wasn't recorded today. Does that make it less of a song?" Dev shook his head. "No. Tomorrow, if you wish, you can sing it with your friends; and if you wish, you can keep it in your notebook." The simplicity of that freedom made him a little happy.

A brief notice about the programme was posted on the wall beside the memorial. It included the performers' names, the acknowledgements of payment that day, and the requirement for separate permission before any later reuse. The complete song inherited from Rashid's grandmother was not printed; only credit to the source and mention of the lines Rashid had composed appeared. The children's questions were presented anonymously. The old listener's objection in the ancient assembly had not been removed from the public-reading copy, though some people called it hostile to the king and wanted it cut. Padma said, "The listeners in a story aren't seated there only to cheer."

As the evening light faded, Chetan Bhat arrived on the veranda carrying his old book of genealogical songs. He had been waiting for the reading to end. Seeing Rashid fold his payment receipt, he said, "I have to check a name in an old passage of my book. People keep saying that family's line began here, but the dates on two pages don't agree." Padma did not open his book and give an immediate verdict. "Tomorrow we'll read the original pages and the disagreement aloud before the listeners," she said. Chetan asked, "And if the mistake is in my book?" "Then we'll correct the mistake," Tara said, "and keep the book. We won't strike out the people."

As Rashid prepared to go home, Dev was fastening his sarangi case. Both men looked once more at their payment slips. Rashid asked, “What will people understand about Janamejaya's story from the song we sang today?” Dev said, “Perhaps some won't understand anything at all. Some may simply like the tune. I don't have to become the sole owner of what a song means; but nobody else has the right to sell the voice I sang in without asking.” They both laughed. The paper recording the old payment due was still in Rashid's bag, but today's earnings would go home with him.

As the school door was being closed, the teenage girl added a short line beneath yesterday's question on the board: ‘Can the person who is listening to a story interrupt and ask a question?’ Sarita read it. On one side was the story of Janamejaya's sacrifice being stopped; on the other, the payment receipts from the new committee's performers were drying. They belonged to different times, different rights, different forms of violence, and different remedies. Only this much was shared: sometimes listening can change what is done. Sarita repaired the loose latch on the door and left the lamp burning inside. Tomorrow people would sit in this room again.

Chapter 208 · Ugrashrava's Listeners

Chetan Bhat had spread two pages from an old manuscript across the table. Along the edge of one was a yellow stain like clarified butter; on the other, blue ink had run in the rain. Since early morning he had been studying the pages side by side. Now Tara brought a thin magnifying glass from inside and held it above them, and the surviving half of a numeral came into view. Chetan drew the glass close to his nose. “What I've read as one date for years can be read in two ways,” he said softly. Outside, on the roof of the open school, a bird was pulling a straw loose with its beak. In that faint tapping Chetan seemed to hear the sound of a syllabic measure he had omitted.

Rashid Bhat and Dev Gaine had left the manuscript behind after their performance the previous day. Today representatives of two families, Padma, Sarita and several listeners had gathered to test its authenticity. The manuscript was a means of Chetan's livelihood: people invited him to weddings, funerary rites and recitals of family histories. An old slip supplied by one family bore a name resembling Sarita's. Rumour had spread that the slip would disclose a secret history behind the death entry in which Sarita had once been wrongly declared dead. Sarita said plainly today, “The occurrence of another name like mine doesn't make my life evidence of somebody else's lineage.” Chetan lowered his head. He knew that rumour travelled faster than paper.

Padma first examined the original layers of the two pages. The first was not a register of births but a line of ancestry sung at an old ritual; the second was a copy of an invitation made many years later. During a performance, a title belonging to one name had been attached to another. The damaged date did not establish that the two names referred to one person. Chetan said, “I've been filling the blank spaces with my voice. People wanted the rhythm of a song, and I made the gaps in the page into steps in a family tree.” He regarded the admission not as a guilty man's theatrical act of repentance, but as a difficult reckoning with the work by which he lived.

A middle-aged man among the listeners objected. “When our ancestors have been sung of in that very song, why cut them out now? If you say the manuscript is wrong, our family's standing will suffer.” Chetan replied, “I won't cut out the song. I'll strike out the claim I laid upon it—that a particular family's line runs directly from this point. Your household's memories will remain, but I can't stamp them with the seal of history.” An elderly woman who had accompanied the man said, “My grandmother used to sing the song to us. She never called it an official certificate.” An unexpected quiet descended upon the assembly. Whether honour needed the support of a falsehood was still no easy question for anyone there.

Long ago, in the forest of Naimisharanya, at the time of Shaunaka's extended sacrifice, Ugrashrava Sauti arrived along the woodland path, brushed the dust from himself and sat down. His father Lomaharshana had been a teller of tales. Ugrashrava remembered the tradition he came from, but did not claim final authority over every word merely on the strength of his father's name. He wished to bring to this forest the story of the Mahabharata he had heard from Vaishampayana's mouth at Janamejaya's serpent sacrifice. Shaunaka asked, “What have you heard?” Ugrashrava answered, “What I understood of what I heard, and what remains in my memory. I won't pretend to know what I do not know.”

Beside the sacrificial hall, a woman who carried water, a traveller from a distant settlement and a young man gathering dry wood for the fire stopped to listen. An attendant said, “The ascetics will ask questions among themselves; the others may listen from outside.” Ugrashrava said nothing at first. Shaunaka asked whose interests this division of listeners served. The attendant could not answer. Ugrashrava moved slightly aside on his seat. “If those to whom a story is told are given no chance to ask about words they don't understand, all they will receive is sound, not a story.” He asked those present to stay; he did not order anyone to leave.

The woman from the forest asked the first question. “Why should those whose names aren't in the stories of kings' houses want to listen?” Ugrashrava did not immediately begin a genealogy. “Not everyone's name has survived,” he said, “but the absence of those whose labour brought the chariots to the battlefield, of the hands that washed the wounds, is itself a failing of the tale. I'll tell as much as I have heard, and I'll listen to as much disagreement as you bring.” The young man with the firewood smiled. Before the story had even begun, its teller was being called upon to answer questions. Shaunaka left an empty place beside his seat.

In Videhapur, while Chetan's manuscript was being examined, Sajid Nat arrived carrying his camera. The strap of its bag needed stitching again. Touching the broken thread, he said, “I haven't come today to watch a video. I've come to write down its price and the limits of its use.” Three years earlier, an edited scene featuring a red curtain at a school drama rehearsal had spread a false accusation of child abduction. Examination of the original recording had disproved the basis of the charge, but the fear it had created had not been easily dispelled. Now a town group wanted to place a short excerpt from a new shadow performance by Sajid's adult artists on its memorial page. Sajid made clear that the original recording of the children was not part of the new proposal.

The manager played a sample on a phone. On the screen were three shadow figures, a bamboo frame and the slow knocking of an old elephant. The old elephant was a puppet fashioned by Sajid's hand, not a display involving a living animal. Javed Kalandar, sitting nearby, laughed. “No animal, yet

hunger and dancing have both entered its shadow," he said. A member of the group proposed putting the whole excerpt online and showing the accounts once advertising revenue came in. Sajid replied, "Permission to use it first, then a share of the earnings. Promising to show accounts afterwards doesn't give you the rights to the original file now."

Tara opened the window of the small room. It was dark inside, and the camera required light for viewing; yet they also had to keep the crowd outside from seeing anyone's face on the screen. Sajid showed the new excerpt he had made. Two adults performed, while a third person played the bamboo frame. All three had been invited to the day's review. There was no schoolchild's face on the backdrop, not a fragment of the old disputed scene. One actress asked, "If it earns money, will that belong only to the person holding the camera?" Sajid said, "No. If people have performed, their fees and any subsequent use must both be put in writing."

Among these voices Chetan attempted to fold his manuscript, but Sarita stopped him. "Finish the question of your papers today," she said, "or at another gathering the story will harden into established fact of its own accord." Tara photographed the torn corner and returned the original sheet to Chetan. Written, source-limited permission had already been obtained to inspect a second copy of the old invitation held by the donor's family. One character in its date was clear. But the link needed to demonstrate a direct succession from the manuscript's sung entry to that invitation was missing. Padma read out a proposal withdrawing the mistaken claim of descent. The findings of the earlier inquiry into Sarita's false death registration remained unchanged, and no verified connection between that record and this slip had been found.

Chetan's throat went dry. He had wanted to earn his living by singing at the gathering, but if he struck out the error, why would the family that had treated it as truth invite him again? Rashid Bhat was sitting beside him. Rashid had received his fee for yesterday's performance; the older arrears were separate. "Your work is singing, too, not merely certifying a lineage," he said. "Correcting a false line is also a skill." Anger flashed for a moment in Chetan's eyes. "You won't bear the blow to my stomach." Rashid did not turn away. "You're right about that. But how can I accept writing another person's birth into a record because you're afraid for your livelihood?"

In the story at Naimisharanya, Ugrashrava began the account of Janamejaya's sacrifice. Shaunaka interrupted to ask whose objections the king had heard before ordering the serpents drawn into the fire. Ugrashrava told as much as he could recall: grief at Parikshit's death, the resolve to avenge him, the sacrifice and the violence finally halted by Astika's request for a boon. A young man interrupted: "What story is there for those already burned?" Ugrashrava remained silent for a long time. "I can say that the sacrifice was stopped," he said. "I cannot say the creatures already killed came back to life."

A listener from an old lineage spoke up in that forest. “I've heard a different account of the story my ancestors also told. May I interrupt you here?” An attendant grew impatient again. “If the recitation keeps breaking, we'll lose its sequence.” Ugrashrava straightened his mat of kusa grass. “Interrupt,” he said. “I'll pick up the thread again. I've named the source of the account I heard; you tell us the source of yours. We won't force both into one voice.” Shaunaka agreed. In that moment the teller's lineage marked the limits of his knowledge; it did not close the mouth of a listener from another line.

On the board of Videhapur's open school Padma wrote two sentences. The first: ‘A name from this household was sung in a genealogical song.’ The second: ‘The whole ancestry of this household is proved by that name.’ The listeners accepted that the first statement had been made; the documentary links were insufficient for the second. The middle-aged man asked, “Once you write this, people will call us liars.” The elderly woman answered, “Distinguishing memory from proof doesn't make memory a lie. My grandmother's singing voice will remain.” Chetan read both sentences, signed his name and drew a clear line through the second. He did not alter the original manuscript in ink; a separate correction slip was attached.

As the day advanced, Durga Danuwar arrived carrying an old song notebook wrapped in yellow cloth. On a page in the middle was the name ‘Lakhandeyi’. Naira had earlier recorded the context of this song separately as N36. Durga said, “On the town's new page there's a straight river line drawn beside the name of my song. By what measurement was it drawn?” Sanket unfolded the indicative map and showed that the mark represented a proposed comparison, not evidence of a surveyed watercourse. Durga did not laugh. “I sing a song. If my song is used to decide where a bridge must be built, the bridge may end up in the wrong place.”

Padma showed the original note in the old register: comparisons of vernacular names with poetic expressions were one thing, surveys of sites another. Durga agreed to public listing of the name of her song and acknowledgment of her performance, but said its complete lyrics were not to be supplied without her permission. On a new page Tara wrote, ‘Lakhandeyi —a name remembered in an old song of Durga Danuwar; the present watercourse is uncertain.’ The question of a possible connection with the old poetic use of the name Lakshmana was not settled there; it remained reserved for separate examination. The old song survived, while the map's false certainty was removed.

There was another meeting about Sajid's video. Both adult actors read the proposal. The young man who played the bamboo frame behind them said, “You can hear the sound of my hands in the excerpt too, but my name wasn't there.” Sajid admitted his mistake on the spot. “Take away your beat and my shadows will be left whispering,” he said. Together they prepared a new credit

sheet. They agreed that ownership of the original scene and the editing would remain Sajid's; for one limited use of this specified short excerpt, all three participants would give separate permission. Advertising, resale and use in other programmes would require fresh consent.

The question of income was not simple. The manager wanted whatever remained after costs to be divided by an unspecified percentage. The performers asked, “If you deduct everything in the name of expenses, what will be left for us?” They then drew up a schedule of fixed amounts. The proposed first use would proceed only if a payment of twelve hundred rupees was received. Two hundred rupees of verified equipment hire and written-copy costs would be deducted. Of the remaining thousand, five hundred would go to Sajid for filming and editing, three hundred to the two actors—one hundred and fifty each—and two hundred to the player of the bamboo frame. If the twelve hundred was not received, nobody's share could be reduced without a new agreement.

Sajid had signed the sheet, but added one more condition: “Paying the money won't entitle anyone to take my old original video.” The manager agreed. Material from the earlier school rehearsal would remain in a closed archive, accessible only for specified verification; the published copy of the new adult performance would be prepared only after the artists had seen it. An actress proposed that the record of the first earnings be made public, but not her home address. Everyone agreed. Javed, watching from the veranda, said, “A stage needs an open door. An artist's home doesn't.” For a moment everyone laughed.

The ink on Chetan's correction slip was still drying. He wanted to begin a new song in his own hand, one that would preserve the memory of a festival shared by two families without asserting a definitive genealogy. The elderly woman sang him a phrase of an old tune; Chetan recognised at once that he had already taught part of it to his apprentice. If he began singing now, the anxiety over the new document would rise again among the listeners. “Leave the song for today,” he said. “First I'll read the correction to the family.” The postponement did not take away his fear, but it returned control of his voice to him.

In Shaunaka's forest Ugrashrava picked up the thread of the Mahabharata again. The woman who brought water asked where the daily lives of those left working in the fields appeared in the story, when the royal family set out on its final journey after the war. Ugrashrava said, “The account I've heard won't give you the reckoning of every day's meals. If you're speaking of your settlement, tell us about it. I won't sell your account as something I heard from my father's mouth.” A sage laughed at his simplicity. “In midstream the storyteller admits his own incompleteness!” Ugrashrava smiled too. “If I cannot see one bank of the river, should I erase the other?”

Before evening Chetan folded his old manuscript in Videhapur. The mistaken genealogical claim had been withdrawn on the correction slip; separate written permission governed access to copies of the donor family's private material; and the payment he received for singing would not be described as the price of purchasing proof of a fact. Giving a copy of the correction to the elderly woman, he said, “What I sing from now on will carry your grandmother's memory. It won't be my verdict upon your household.” She took the slip home. The middle-aged man was not yet wholly satisfied, but the dispute had been brought within the limits of the documents without becoming a public humiliation.

Sajid's first receipt also arrived that evening. Confirmation came that twelve hundred rupees had been deposited into the group's account, and separate acknowledgments of payment were written for the artists' agreed shares. The young man who played the bamboo frame counted his two hundred rupees. “This will buy my sister's exercise book and my own string,” he said. For the first time the beat made by his hands had been named as work on paper. But the full identity of whoever had spread the old false accusation remained unknown. Sajid did not fill that gap with a name drawn from supposition. He had received fair payment for one day's work, not full compensation for the old damage.

Outside the school, children were rolling a small wooden chariot about. One child took the lead and issued commands, but another stopped him halfway. “Where's your chariot going? Won't you even ask me?” They argued for a while, then tied thin bamboo cords to two places on the chariot. Now two pairs of hands were needed to turn it. Padma watched, but did not record the sight in her notebook as evidence of an ancient tale. Sarita said, “The children are playing here. Their answers will take shape within their play.” She put out water for them and straightened the door latch.

Tara was counting the empty seats for the next day's reading. The coming tale would be the recital by Lava and Kusha in Rama's royal court, where the king would face the difficulty of hearing a story sung about himself. A young woman said, “The king may hear his own story, but will he allow the singers to interrupt him?” Padma wrote the question on the board, not its answer. In Ugrashrava's forest the listeners had been able to ask questions; in Chetan's manuscript an erroneous claim had been struck out; Sajid's camera had remained in his own hands. None of these three events was proof of one identical truth. Yet in all three places a little room had been made for another voice amid someone's speech. The evening breeze was lifting dust from the board, and the door was still open.

Chapter 209 · Lava and Kusha's Recital

A corner of the song notebook had caught against Phoolmati Pamariya's finger. She read a line, then drew her fingernail beneath it. A note on the harmonium standing in the veranda kept whispering; a thin strip inside it had worked loose. Yesterday Chetan Bhat had corrected the false claim in his genealogical song. Today the open school was to hear the recitation of Lava and Kusha in Rama's court, and Phoolmati had been invited to sing a folk song at the beginning. Her name appeared on the invitation, but the song was described as an ‘old traditional presentation’. Phoolmati asked, “A song may be old, but the woman singing it is alive today. Who is this line talking about?”

Padma took the notebook. Phoolmati had earlier removed an insulting line from a road song of Seematirtha learned from her mother, choosing words of her own to replace it. The new organising committee now wanted to restore that rejected line in the name of the original text. A young man said, “We're only trying to preserve the historical form.” Phoolmati turned the notebook towards him. “Don't make me sing my own humiliation in the name of history. If the old line is to be kept for study, write why I rejected it. What I sing onstage will be my decision.” The list in the young man's hand trembled slightly. What the organisers feared was losing a song, not losing an artist.

Karim Dafali's drum strap hung from a pillar of the veranda. Testing the skin of his dholak, Karim said, “The question of a name comes with a question of payment.” He had received his original fee for the Phagun folk recital, but a receipt for the remaining costs of painting and repair was still disputed. Years earlier he had refused a proposal to turn a stolen line from Champa's private message into an election campaign song. Now another group wanted to use that same old tune without permission by calling it a ‘people's melody’. “I didn't supply the words, and I never sold the tune either,” Karim said. “It's an easy thing to declare it public property without asking.”

Long ago, in the royal assembly of Ayodhya, at the time of the horse sacrifice, two young boys were tightening the strings of their veenas once more. Lava and Kusha, who had learned the song at Valmiki's hermitage, looked at one another amid the crowd of royal officials. In place of the forest's open wind there was the scent of incense, the glitter of jewels and the rustle of guards. They had been taught to sing the tale; who would grant them the right to answer questions in the royal court, and how far, was another matter. In a low voice Lava asked Kusha, “If the person listening is himself the king in the song, where should we sing more softly?” Kusha released the tuning peg. “We won't break the melody of what we understand to be true in the words our teacher taught us.”

The two boys stood before the assembly. The song passed from the quiet paths of the forest through birth, marriage, exile and the difficult stages of separation. Those present had heard of Rama's prowess many times. But to hear the sorrow, mistakes and public decisions of their own king woven into the same melody was a different experience. At first Rama listened to the beauty of the singing. When the story reached Sita's solitude in the forest and the shadow of public reproach, his hand grew still on the arm of the throne. The song placed not Rama's enemy but Rama's life in the midst of a question. The soldiers glanced towards the king's face. No one immediately ordered the singers to stop.

A courtier said softly, “If this painful episode were omitted in His Majesty's presence, the ceremony would retain its splendour.” Rama looked towards him, but continued listening to the boys before replying. Lava's voice trembled a little; Kusha joined his own voice to it. The difficult line did not shatter the assembly's dignity. It put that dignity to the test. The king had the right to hear about his own life, but what place the words of Sita, who was absent from the story's present assembly, possessed there could not be concealed beneath ceremonial flowers and garlands.

Videhapur, 2042. Mats were being spread in front of the stage for the children. Tara had kept yesterday's question on the board: ‘The king may listen to his own story, but will he stop the singers?’ Sarita read it and looked towards Phoolmati's notebook. “Our reading includes the story of Sita in the forest,” she said, “but why should we compel a living woman singer to perform words she has already rejected?” The young organiser searched for an answer. Padma did not immediately declare him guilty. “First look separately at the language of the invitation, the newly approved text and the receipt for the work,” she said.

Phoolmati spoke of her mother. “Mother taught me the song, but at that line she would stop her voice. Even as a child I asked, ‘Why don't you go on?’ She said, ‘Learn to leave some words unsaid too.’ Last time I composed a new line in its place. But the fact that I've written a new line doesn't erase the old one from history. The old line bears witness to an insult; it isn't an order for me to sing it.” Her eyes grew moist, but she did not rise and abandon the rehearsal. A teenage girl seated nearby asked, “Then may we read the old line?” Phoolmati answered, “With its context, and with my name, if you're reading to understand it—not to imitate me.”

From behind his dholak Karim produced an old receipt. After rejecting the election workers' proposal he had been threatened with exclusion from a programme. There was no written evidence of the threat, so he was attaching no person's name to it. The group now seeking to use his tune promised payment for one small event, but demanded rights to all future broadcasts. Karim asked, “If I receive payment for today, does that mean you can sell my beat next year?” The organiser said, “If everything's forbidden, how will there

be a festival?" Karim struck his drum, once gently, twice harder. "Asking permission at a festival isn't a crime."

The song moved forward in Rama's assembly. Valmiki's composition flowed through the voices of the boys, though the question of their own birth had not yet openly entered their speech. Some of the royal officials began to look more intently at their faces, but no conclusion was announced merely on the strength of a resemblance. Rama expressed a wish to ask about the author of the song and the boys' training. Lava said that they had learned it from their teacher Valmiki at the hermitage; Kusha added that they had not been tempted by the promise of rewards from the royal court. Neither was prepared to make his voice an object of royal charity.

One of the king's attendants offered costly gifts. The boys answered courteously that wealth of this kind was unnecessary in the life of their hermitage. The refusal did not mean the singing had no value. Rather, they would not enter into a bargain in which their story might be changed for the price of royal pleasure. Rama heard their reply. Those standing in the assembly understood that something which had reached the sovereign's ears could not easily be made unheard. Yet Sita herself was not present; the boys did not claim to be the final interpreters of everything in her mind.

In Videhapur a new invitation was written for Phoolmati: 'Song—Phoolmati Pamariya; melody inherited through her mother's tradition; choice of revised words belongs to the singer; the original insulting line will not be performed onstage.' Padma suggested that the organiser's study copy could mention the omitted line only with an explanation of its context, not reproduce it in the public performance. Phoolmati added another condition. "If children are to practise with my song, tell them they have the right to change the words or to decline to sing." The organiser asked again, "If we write down so many rules, when will there be time for singing?" Sarita answered, "If the rules are settled first, there'll be fewer quarrels in the middle of a song."

The programme expenses were laid out on a small table where money was counted. Phoolmati's forty-minute recital, Karim's accompaniment and the rehearsal of the new rhythm were distinct kinds of work. The committee treasurer wanted to enter a single amount under 'community contribution' and distribute whatever was left to whoever happened to receive it later. Phoolmati refused the sheet. "I'm selling my time, not my silence," she said. Tara opened the receipt for the fee from the earlier programme, distinguishing the amount actually paid that day from today's accounts. In the new programme, the time spent working and the fee fixed for the day were written down plainly.

Karim played a passage of his new tune. It was not the song on the old election leaflet, but a fresh composition combining the rhythm of running

children's feet with the patter of rain on a roof. Javed Kalandar, seated nearby with a small puppet, listened and said, “My bamboo shadows could move to that tune.” Karim laughed. “They could, but that doesn't mean the whole tune goes with them for free.” Javed remembered the restricted earnings of his first performance without live animals. In the laughter of both performers lay the difficult arithmetic of their trades.

The amounts were settled: eight hundred rupees for Phoolmati's performance; six hundred for Karim's drumming and one-time use of the new tune; a separate two hundred rupees for the two hours of rehearsal. Any public circulation of a recording or use at a later event would require fresh permission. The treasurer agreed to simplify the decorations to reduce other expenses. They first confirmed that the source of the money was a definite deposit in the committee account. Phoolmati and Karim recorded the advances each had received. Receipts were drawn up for the balance due on the agreed date, one copy to remain with the performer and another in the school's public expense register, with private details removed. Nobody announced that all payments had already been made.

When Phoolmati altered the shape of the song, a young man said, “People hearing it for the first time won't know what those new words are protesting against.” Phoolmati asked him to stand during the rehearsal. “Then listen to the new words on their own strength. You don't have to repeat an insult every time to understand resistance.” She brought out three notes: the first belonging to her mother's melody, the second to the new line, the third to silence. Only after that silence did Karim strike his drum. The teenage listener marvelled that silence, too, could be rehearsed. Sarita knew that Naira's absence was not an example of this silence. This was an artistic pause belonging to the stage. She did not wish to make her dead daughter the meaning of every event again.

In the ancient royal court, a short interval was granted when Lava and Kusha stopped singing. The boys went out into the palace garden. With a leaf stalk Kusha drew a chariot in the soil; Lava set a small stone before it. “There's a river here. The chariot can't jump across.” Kusha began making a bridge from a twig. After singing such a difficult song in the assembly, this play belonged to them. A guard stood at a distance, but for this little while he did not see the boys as signs of anyone's descent or as part of a royal spectacle. The brothers laughed and argued over the route of their chariot.

Rama watched the direction of their play from afar. The child figures in the song and the living boys playing before him were not the same thing—the first belonged to the memory carried by a song, the second to the sky above their own heads. The king could have imposed an interpretation on the moment, but did not. He felt the need to speak with Valmiki. The public injustice and personal anguish surrounding Sita could not be declared resolved merely through the pleasure of music. The assembly would convene again, and

the song's questions would return. For now the boys' play was not made into immediate material for a royal decision.

After noon, a page of the old river register was opened at the school. The copy Sarita had supplied earlier contained the names ‘Triyuga’ and ‘Lakshmana’ in a poetic passage set in Janaka's time. While Naira was alive she had marked them ‘poetic names’, leaving their modern map locations blank. Tara held the paper for a long time, studying the handwriting. Sanket said, “It would be easy to take this Triyuga as the name of the Tilayuga waterway and paste it onto the new map.” Tara replied, “Easy, but unsupported. First examine the original passage; measurements on another map are another task.”

A separate copy of Durga Danuwar's ‘Lakhandeyi’ song had been corrected yesterday. Its possible linguistic connection with the poetic name Lakshmana remained to be examined; no decision had been reached. A student proposed writing ‘Triyuga—Tilayuga’ and ‘Lakshmana—Lakhandeyi’ with two equal signs. Padma put question marks on the board instead. “In the first pair we have no proof of modern identity. For the second, we must examine the phonetic possibility separately. The song, the manuscript and today's measurements each have their own limits.” Phoolmati interjected, “Preserve the local names, but don't make my song into a water engineer's measuring tape.”

Karim drew no river line beside the two names in his melody notebook. “Names will keep appearing in my rhythms,” he said, “but you can't measure the ghats from the tune.” The student asked, “Then what information can a song give?” Sarita answered, “It can open questions about who remembered whom, who travelled which paths, who was left out of the story. For the present depth of a watercourse you need other evidence.” The student erased the equal signs and wrote the two names on separate lines. That small correction did not solve the river's problems, but it prevented another false certainty from entering the map.

At the evening folk recital, the modern story and the ancient text were placed on the same stage without being blended together. Padma first explained that the episode of Lava and Kusha in Ayodhya belonged to the art of ancient narrative; it was not legal proof of today's performers' labour permissions. After the audience had heard this distinction, Phoolmati rose to sing. Her voice did not falter at the new opening line. The melody inherited from her mother remained hers; the choice of words was in her own hands. Karim's dholak carried the rhythm, but when Phoolmati paused, he did not fill the silence by playing louder. Two artists on the stage were listening to each other's time.

When the song ended, a voice rose from the back. “Why didn't you sing the original insulting line?” Phoolmati rose from her chair. “Because I no

longer sing it with my own mouth. If you want to study its written history, examine the research copy. It does not rule over my voice today.” The middle-aged questioner began to speak again, but a young woman beside him asked, “Why shouldn't she have the right not to sing a line she learned from her mother?” The man fell silent for a moment. Padma wrote the two questions separately. The recital did not turn into a court of law. Its immediate limit was to respect its performer's decision.

After the performance the treasurer checked the advance-payment receipts again. Phoolmati had received the agreed advance against her eight hundred rupees; Karim had received his too. They added the due date for the balances, the name of the responsible account holder and a rule requiring written reasons for delay. Karim did not merge the old disputed drum-painting receipt with the new obligation. The copy of what had actually been paid for Phoolmati's earlier performance would remain separate; the new composition was not a free extension of the old service. Folding her receipt, Phoolmati said, “Today my voice has a name, a price and a right to disagree, all on paper.” No one denied that the rights to many more songs still needed to be written down.

At the school door several children were making little bows out of twigs. One boy said he would be Lava, another Kusha. A third child, a girl, asked, “What will I be?” “Be Sita,” the first boy said immediately. The girl shook her head. “I'll ask questions when the story's told. I'll ask why the king had it sung to him.” The children argued a little, then divided the parts. The ancient scene of the boys' play and the play of these children were not one event; but this girl could choose her own part. Sarita checked the door latch again and did not interrupt their game.

At one end of the veranda Mrinal arrived with pages from an old reading of the Bhamati. She was due to present her interpretation the following day. Padma said, “The words of a song were changed at today's gathering, but we didn't reach agreement on every question.” Mrinal replied, “The survival of disagreement doesn't necessarily make reconciliation false. But calling disagreement consent isn't reconciliation either.” She unfolded her sheets, and the breeze turned up a corner. Laughing, she said, “I'll have to read this page again from the beginning.” Phoolmati heard her from a distance, but did not agree to have the division of proceeds from her song treated as proof of Mrinal's philosophy.

At day's end the memory of Lava and Kusha playing in Valmiki's hermitage remained in its own place within the song, while Videhapur's children gathered their twigs and went home. Beside the rejected line in her notebook, Phoolmati wrote: ‘Original text preserved for study; approved new text for public singing.’ Karim took with him a copy of the terms for the first use of his melody. Another time he would be free to play a different song independently. From inside the closing school Sarita looked at the board: a

story could reach the king's ears, but the king did not write all its voices. She shielded the lamp. Outside, the children's laughter had not yet died away.

Chapter 210 · Bhamati's Fourth Sutra

At Videhapur's open school, the morning breeze kept lifting the corner of a page. To hold it down, Mrinal laid a small wooden ruler upon it rather than a stone. After listening to the song of Lava and Kusha yesterday, she had opened her text of the Bhamati. Today, at the top of the page, stood the fourth sutra: ‘Tat tu samanvayat’—But that, because of the harmonious purport. A splash of ink had fallen beside the word samanvaya, harmony or reconciliation. She made no attempt to wipe the stain away with her handkerchief. Reading the passage was necessary first; making it beautiful was not.

When Padma arrived, she saw that Mrinal had cut four small slips of paper. The first bore the word ‘Text’, the second ‘Interpretation’, the third ‘Objection’, and the fourth ‘Today's Question’. Padma asked, “You're not preparing to turn the fourth sutra into a law requiring everybody's agreement, are you?” Mrinal laughed. “Quite the opposite. ‘Tat tu samanvayat’ is a sutra concerned, in the traditional interpretation, with the purport of statements about Brahman. It doesn't originally mean a vote in your committee. But I do want to question those who tear up the page of objections in the name of ‘harmony’.”

Tara brought the expenses register. During the night a committee member had written, ‘Unanimous voluntary contribution by the artists.’ Ramesh Ghasi had not even been present that day. Tara asked, “How can you record the consent of someone who wasn't here?” The organiser replied that all the artists supported the community festival, so there was nothing wrong with the phrasing. Sarita turned over the notebook. “Supporting a festival and giving one's instrument without payment are two different decisions. Don't write in everybody's name what they haven't said.”

Outside the veranda Ramesh Ghasi was undoing a knot in the strap of his instrument. One end of the old leather had stiffened; when he struck the instrument it pulled to one side. Karun Damai had already completed a repair for a different event; payment for using this instrument was not a debt for that repair. Showing the knot in his hand, Ramesh said, “My instrument is my property. Playing it is my labour. If you turn both into the single word ‘contribution’, both become free.”

Long ago, in an imagined scene of study in Mithila, while the pupils of Vachaspati Mishra were arranging the leaves of a manuscript in order, Lohna set a bamboo sieve upside down on the earthen floor. A knot had swollen in one place among its strands. The edges of the pages would come out uneven again. Bhamati was checking how much oil remained in the lamp, while Mrinal sat at the side of the veranda putting letters together. This old scene was an act of literary imagination; Mrinal in present-day Videhapur was not the reincarnation of the character in it.

One of the pupils said the fourth sutra brought the words of all the Upanishads together in a single conclusion. Another objected that turning statements from different contexts into one voice might erase their original distinctions. Vachaspati first asked them to explain the traditional purpose of the text. He made it clear that the question concerned the purport of scriptural statements on Brahman, not the settlement of disputes among those who made the paper. But while the debate continued, Bhamati's attention stayed on a page where a fourth pupil's correction had covered the first pupil's original wording.

“Who rewrote this page?” Bhamati asked. A pupil said, “It was corrected by everyone's agreement. It's better to have one text.” Lohna rose from the knot in the sieve she was working on. “Of the two sheets I made yesterday, one was spoiled. Nobody heard what I had to say about its price. If you write ‘everyone's agreement’, does my silence become consent?” The pupil replied that the meaning of scripture and the cost of a material object were separate discussions. Bhamati agreed that they were separate. “Then why have you laid one page on top of the other?” she asked.

Mrinal said quietly, “On the first day we heard the example of mistaking a rope for a snake in the darkness. The discussion of adhyasa, superimposition, began with taking one thing for another and failing to see what was there. Here, if everyone's agreement is written over one person's silence, a false belief is formed. But I don't claim the whole philosophical meaning of the sutra has been proved by that.” Vachaspati called her forward. “An analogy may be useful,” he said, “but don't forget the limits of what you're comparing.”

In Videhapur Ramesh played a short rhythm on his instrument. The children's feet began moving of their own accord. The organiser said, “Look, everybody enjoys it. Why make something so simple difficult with written calculations of payment?” Ramesh stopped playing. “I'm not against enjoyment. But if the hire of your stage's bamboo, electricity and chairs is written down, why is the hire of the instrument invisible?” He did not snatch the instrument from the adolescent sitting nearby. Instead he showed him how its strap loosened.

Tara opened the old expenditure register. At an earlier public discussion on water, Ramesh had demanded that his name on the stage and the hire charge for his instrument be recorded separately. The condition had been accepted that day; nevertheless several later invitations had again said only ‘collective performance’. “The mistake keeps recurring,” Tara said. “This time we need three separate entries on the new sheet, not just a proposal.” She wrote: use of the instrument, rehearsal time, performance onstage. Ramesh gave his own rate for each.

They agreed on one hundred and eighty rupees for an hour and a half of rehearsal, one hundred and fifty for a day's use of the instrument, and seven

hundred and fifty for his stage accompaniment. The proposed amounts were read out to everyone once more. The treasurer said there was not enough room in the fund. Jharna showed them the cost of the cloth reserved for decorations. The amount could be found by eliminating two extra coloured curtains. One member objected that the stage would look less attractive. Ramesh said, “The stage will shine less, but the instrument will sound just as clear.”

Karun Damai had been listening from a little distance. His repair bill had already been paid; he made no second demand for the same sum. But he said, “If somebody breaks Ramesh's instrument today, paying the hire charge doesn't automatically provide for repairing it. Write down the responsibility.” Tara added a separate line for the times at which the instrument would be received and returned, and for the difference between ordinary wear and actual damage. Ramesh said he would not charge the organisers for the weakness of an old strap; if any new damage occurred, both parties would inspect it.

In the ancient Mithila classroom, Bhamati attached a clean slip beside the page bearing the fourth sutra. She wrote no new sutra upon it. She merely marked the differing copies and the pupils' objections. Vachaspati asked, “What is this mark for?” Bhamati replied, “Whoever reads tomorrow will understand that a decision was made, but that the asking of questions didn't stop. Protecting a page isn't the same as locking up its meaning.” Lohna went out to prepare a new weave for the little sieve.

Mrinal said to Vachaspati, “I don't yet understand the whole exposition of ‘Tat tu samanvayat’. But if I begin applying an analogy I've heard once to every object, I'm afraid I'll fall into precisely the confusion it was meant to expose.” Vachaspati answered, “Study why an inquiry into superimposition becomes necessary at the outset. But don't decide the truth of someone's work receipt by treating it as a philosophical proof. Its verification requires methods of its own.” Mrinal placed a question mark beside ‘adhyasa’ in her notebook. She did not erase the question.

In the third part of the day, Mrinal in Videhapur showed the difference between a photograph of the old page and the original transcription. The lines before and after the term ‘Kritasara’ were incomplete even in another copy. A young man said that since the name appeared on a list of rivers, it should be accepted as a distinct river. Mrinal remembered the question posed in the old account: did the word refer to a watercourse, an adjective describing some quality, or another poetic usage? Without the original sentence, no answer could be established.

Hira was present with a notebook of water measurements. He explained, “I can draw a new line called ‘Kritasara’ on the modern map, but drawing it would be an act of imagination. I would need separate evidence for the water,

its flow and its location." A listener asked whether the presence of a name in an old book was of lesser importance. Hira replied, "It is important, but in a different way. It gives you the history of a word, not the depth of today's water." Padma wrote the distinction plainly in the public source register.

Padma opened another file from the old register of names. On one sheet a dead worker's name appeared under unpaid wages; on another, the same name appeared in a proposed memorial list. A committee member suggested that once the name was inscribed on the memorial, the sheet of outstanding dues should be closed. Without raising her voice, Sarita replied, "Honour and payment are different things. Putting a dead person's name on a monument doesn't pay what is owed to the family." Her eyes rested on Urmila's incomplete payment entry, but she did not turn Naira's death into an example for this account.

Mrinal asked the listeners, "When we see a name, we assume we've understood the entire person. Can the labour, disagreement and private life behind that name really fit into that single line?" Sanket said, "A register is necessary. Without one, even the path for making a claim may be closed." Mrinal agreed. "So we won't throw away the register," she said. "We must only avoid mistaking it for the person." Padma marked the observation separately as a philosophical analogy, not an alternative to examining the records.

The gathering sat again to decide on Ramesh's expense sheet. The treasurer accepted three distinct entries, but proposed paying the entire amount in cash at the end of the programme. Ramesh wanted today's rehearsal fee today. "The work I did during the rehearsal is finished," he said. Jharna checked the available balance in the fund and instructed that the one hundred and eighty rupees be paid immediately. Ramesh read the confirmation of receipt on his phone. Tara entered the transaction number on the slip. The remaining nine hundred rupees would be due after the programme.

There were separate signatures for hire of the instrument and the stage fee. Under the credits they wrote, 'Ramesh Ghasi, instrumental accompaniment'; 'Instrument supplied by: Ramesh Ghasi'. A young man asked, "Do you really need to put his name down twice?" Ramesh answered, "Not because I want to be seen twice, but because there are two kinds of work. Next time someone may play an instrument belonging to somebody else. The owner and the performer will then be different people." Tara kept two separate blank spaces on the form for that possibility.

The public reading began after midday. Mrinal first read the sutra in Devanagari, then gave its brief philosophical context. Harimohan Pathak asked: if the many statements of the Upanishads could be reconciled, where did opposing statements find their place? Mrinal answered, "The tradition has its procedures for determining purport, examining context and interpreting a text. Without study, I won't declare them all to have one meaning.

Reconciliation is the work of reasoning, not of burning the pages of objection." Harimohan did not withdraw his challenge.

A woman seated at the back asked, "When I don't understand enough, who will certify that I'm qualified to ask questions?" The question reminded Mrinal of her imagined counterpart's first attempts at study long ago. She replied, "The right to inquire and the ability to establish that an argument is correct aren't the same. The means of learning should be open; arguments must still be tested. You're asking a question now. Permission to do so ought not to depend on another person's generosity." The woman asked that the next reading be scheduled to fit around her work.

Meanwhile Ramesh tuned his instrument for a short performance. At the first tap, two children sitting beside Sarita looked at one another and laughed. One asked, "Does a drum get tired?" Ramesh said, "The skin loosens, and the player gets tired. Each needs a different kind of care." The child asked again, "If I sit quietly, will it get some rest?" Ramesh laughed. "I will, not the drum. But why should you sit silently? Count the beats now." Even an elderly woman at the very back began counting the rhythm on her fingers.

In the imagined school of ancient Mithila, Bhamati placed a thin cloth between the original and corrected pages one night. Vachaspati saw that the old copy had not been discarded. "If you keep both, won't the decision become unstable?" he asked. Bhamati said, "The text agreed upon is clearly written; the questions that remain are separate. The price of the time spent by those who made the paper is separate too. Firmness and forgetting aren't the same thing." Vachaspati agreed to make the distinction clear to his pupils in the next reading.

Mrinal, within that old imagined scene, reopened the first page of her notebook. Beneath 'Athato brahmajijnasa'—Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman—she had once asked for time to study. She had now reached the fourth sutra of the four opening aphorisms, but her first question had not become meaningless. She asked Lohna, "I understand that wanting to turn reconciliation into a single voice can be a grave mistake. But must I be ashamed to write down what I haven't understood?" Lohna said, "Shame comes when you write a decision in someone else's name without understanding."

Vachaspati told the pupils one last time that an interpretation of the Brahma Sutras could not be completed through analogies concerning defective pages or the prices of objects. The scriptural tradition's opposing positions, established conclusions and textual transmission required their own seriousness. Mrinal answered that when an everyday example was wrong, one should not invoke the name of scripture to defend it. The teacher accepted that boundary. The questions were not exhausted there, but they made one small decision: the incorrect example would not be repeated at the next lesson.

At the close of the public reading in Videhapur, Harimohan asked, “Now, if everyone's pages remain separate, who will be the single editor of the collective book?” Padma replied, “The editor will have responsibility for decisions, but also for recording their sources, objections and corrections. Don't mistake one signature for everybody's testimony.” Sanket showed the earlier rule requiring three copies of the book to be kept in circulation. The new proposal distinguished editorial responsibility, distribution and the record of objections. The possibility of power gathering once again in a central register remained.

That evening Sarita reopened the copy of the memorial list. Beside Urmila's name stood the unpaid wages for night-time washing and transport. Mrinal asked whether today's reading had helped her. Sarita answered, “It will help when a date and a responsible person are fixed for examining that debt again. Philosophy hasn't erased my grief. But if someone says ‘everyone is reconciled’ and tries to remove this line, I now have words with which to answer.” She did not close the page.

Ramesh's first performance began. On the stage Phoolmati Pamariya sang the newly approved words, Karim Dafali was prepared to accompany her under the terms for limited use of his tune, and Ramesh's instrument added its own rhythm. The announcer first named Phoolmati and Karim, omitting Ramesh. Without stopping the performance, Ramesh completed a phrase on his instrument. During the pause Tara showed the announcer the credit sheet. Before the second part began, the names of all three artists were announced. The mistake was publicly corrected; the earlier omission had not thereby ceased to have happened.

After the performance, payment orders were prepared separately for the nine hundred rupees still due for instrument hire and stage accompaniment. Tara wrote clearly that the orders had been issued; there was as yet no confirmation that the funds had reached the bank account. Ramesh looked once more at the one hundred and eighty rupees received for today's rehearsal, then folded the remaining slips and put them in his bag. “Today I heard my name,” he said. “When the news of the rest of the money arrives, I'll know the account is complete.” Karun Damai examined the strap and said its tension was sound for now; repairs for the next season would be another job.

In a blank space in the source register Padma wrote ‘Kritasara’. Beside it she added, ‘An incomplete term in a poetic text; not verified as a separate river.’ Mrinal asked whether they would examine it again if the complete original line were ever found. “Of course,” Padma said. “We won't turn today's uncertainty into stone forever.” A pupil wanted to paint a river in watercolours at the foot of the page. Mrinal showed him an empty space in his notebook. “Make a poem, but don't sell it as a map.” The child drew a wave in blue and wrote above it: ‘Imagination’.

Before the school door closed, Mrinal counted the four slips again: text, interpretation, objection, today's question. The page containing ‘Tat tu samanvayat’ was clearer than before because the separate page recording disagreement had survived beside it. Sarita took her copy of the disputed debt. Ramesh lifted his instrument to his shoulder and started home. Padma marked out time in the next philosophical reading for both Udayana's argument and the strongest objections to it. The lingering beat of the instrument came from outside. No one voice had silenced all the others.

Chapter 211 · Udayana's Remaining Argument

When Hamida Miriasin opened her songbook, a thin sheet of paper slipped from between its pages and fell to the floor. In red ink it read, “Performance suspended; remuneration still to be accounted for.” Holding the pages down, Hamida did not put the slip back inside. A lesson in philosophy was scheduled that day at Videhapur’s open school, but for her the first question was whether stopping a piece of work also stopped payment for the labour already performed. Without even humming the beginning of a song, she sat down in a corner of the veranda.

Padma had prepared two pages for the lesson. On the first was an outline of Udayana’s argument for the existence of God; on the second, a powerful pūrvapakṣa—the opposing position challenging it. The people who had proposed, at the close of yesterday’s lesson on Bhamati, that everyone’s views be written down as a single consensus were present again. One of them said, “Let us record one conclusion on this subject too and bring the meeting to an end. Is it necessary to make grieving people listen to so many questions?” Padma answered, “No one in mourning is obliged to listen to questions. But a person who has questions cannot have them cut out merely for our convenience.”

In the back row Sarita straightened a glass of water that was about to spill. She had already been wary on hearing that Naira’s name might be used as an example in today’s lesson. She said plainly, “My daughter has died. If someone proves God from that truth, or disproves God, that belongs to the reasoning of their own philosophy. But do not turn Naira’s death into an object for use in this assembly without my permission.” Mrinal nodded. At the top of a sheet she wrote “Philosophical argument,” and below it a second sentence: “Personal grief: consent required for publication.” The two lines remained separate.

In an imagined study chamber in Mithila long ago, Udayana placed two bundles of palm-leaf manuscripts before him. His Mimamsaka guest had returned, but this time the writing case of his dead friend was safely inside his bag. At their previous meeting the debate had been suspended because of private grief. Now the guest himself said, “I am ready to hear the argument again. If my friend were alive, he too would demand an answer to the questions. But let his death be recorded neither as a victory for my position nor as a defeat for yours.” Udayana told his pupil to read that sentence at the beginning of the assembly.

An old clay pot standing in the courtyard had a crack at its mouth. A student wanted to use it as an illustration: the pot exists, therefore a potter exists; the world exists, therefore the maker of the world must exist. Udayana stopped him. “An example indicates the direction of an inference; it does not

establish the invariable concomitance by itself," he said. "We shall advance our reasons concerning the world's character as an effect, the conjunction of substances, their arrangement, purpose, and the relation of causes. But if we merely equate the whole world with a household water-pot and fall silent, we have not answered our opponent's question." The student left the cracked pot where it stood on the ground.

The guest picked up a dry seed. "In the making of a pot, we find the potter, his tools and the clay together before our eyes. A seed puts forth a sprout. Whom do you see there in precisely the same manner? Why reject at the outset the possibility of treating the laws of nature, the fruition of action and a beginningless succession as distinct explanations?" He did not raise his voice. "The sight of order may make it possible to imagine an arranger. But to establish necessity, you must test the conditions that stand against that possibility." For the first time the pupils wrote down the objection in full.

Udayana replied that the presence of material causes and their fitting arrangement for a particular result were not the same thing. In his position, the inference of a conscious, regulating cause behind the conjunction of many causes was of great importance. "Yet it is no more proper to dismiss something merely by calling it 'unseen' than to protect it from every question by invoking its invisibility," he added. The guest said, "From the Mimamsaka position, the burden is mine to explain action and its unseen efficacy, apūrva. Yours is to demonstrate why a regulator is necessary. Both burdens are equally serious; it would be wrong to assume beforehand that they must have the same answer."

In Videhapur, Mrinal stopped after reading this literary rendering of the ancient dispute. Harimohan asked, "Does that mean Udayana's argument is being called false?" Mrinal answered, "In our reading, his is a formidable philosophical position whose proposition and reasons must be examined. The opposing case is not merely a feeble straw man. I have reconstructed the voices of ancient thinkers through imagined dialogue for the novel; these conversations must not be passed off as verbatim evidence from the original texts." In her register of sources Padma marked "philosophical tradition" and "novelistic invention" separately.

Hamida opened another page of her book. At an old wedding, someone had cut an extract from a song she sang and played it without permission as a joke. She had openly objected to that humiliating use. Now a representative of the organisers said, "This time we shall play the original version of the song to the scholars. Once everyone hears the original, the damage done by the cut extract will be put right." Hamida asked, "Who has given permission for you to play the original? And in whose account did the payment for the time I sang it go?" The representative tried to answer the first question by asking another about the second.

Hamida said, “You may examine the complete recording. I have no objection to that, provided its copy remains restricted to the inquiry team. Playing it before the assembly requires different permission. It was a song from my own mouth, not something without an owner.” Tara opened the earlier performance form. It recorded the duration of the singing, but contained no final proof of payment. The organiser sought to justify its use under the heading “community tradition.” With her hand on the book, Hamida said, “The tradition is mine too. How, then, did my refusal become invisible in the name of tradition?”

Sarita added to the meeting that the dispute over the public use of a song and the private messages on Naira’s telephone were not the same legal case. Yet both showed the temptation to declare a story a matter of “public interest” without asking the individual or family concerned what they wished. Kabir repeated his decision not to publish the telephone’s private messages. “No one will read them out as testimony for religion or against it,” he said. Padma made it clear that the unavailable parts of Naira’s private life would be marked as uncertain, not filled in with invention.

In the old study chamber the guest briefly opened and shut the lid of his dead friend’s little box. “My chief objection remains,” he told Udayana. “If the purposeful order of the world points towards a conscious governor, where do illness, floods, the suffering of innocent children and the unequal fruits of action fit into the same conclusion? To call every sorrow the result of unknown past actions is not proof by reasoning; it may become a way of closing a sufferer’s mouth.” He rested both hands on the ground. His question was not only about a private bereavement. It was also a philosophical objection concerning causation.

Udayana remained silent until the question had been fully asked. “I shall defend the reasons advanced for God’s existence,” he said, “but I shall not claim to know why a particular person died or what specific consequence a family’s grief represents. The Nyaya tradition has arguments concerning the fruits of action; the limits of those arguments are also open to question. I shall not make moral suffering into instant evidence to strengthen my case.” One pupil said the teacher allowed his opponent too much room. Udayana replied, “Reducing the room does not increase the strength of a reason.”

The guest asked what evidence would establish the nature of the creator’s knowledge and will if an agent was to be inferred behind every arrangement. Udayana explained his method of inference in terms of the structure of an effect, the fitness of its causes, and the limits of known insentient instruments. The guest accepted some of his replies, particularly that an unsupported denial was no more a philosophical doctrine than an unsupported assertion. But he said he was still dissatisfied with the step by which a relationship of invariable concomitance observed in pots was extended to the entire universe. Here the pupil acting as scribe wrote “Opposing argument remains,” not “Defeated.”

An elderly woman who stitched manuscripts entered with thread for binding the leaves. Earlier she had advised the assembly on separating water-damaged leaves. This time she asked, “If two pages are to remain distinct, how will you join them in one binding?” Udayana gave another pupil the chance to reply. “We shall put marks along the edge so the reader can understand,” he said. “The mark will work only if the thread passes through the right hole,” the old woman told him. “And remember to pay whoever copies the pages of this debate.” Her remark did not prove the argument of the treatise, but the actual work of preserving a book had entered the room.

Udayana had the expense sheet brought in. A pupil had worked all night copying out the guest’s objections once more, but the original accounts contained only an item for copying the teacher’s replies. Udayana ordered that two separate lines be entered. “If we suppress the text of the opposing argument, who will be able to examine our answer?” he asked. They agreed on the amount of a small metal coin as wages; the keeper of the funds said that the number of leaves must be counted before it could be paid. For the first time, the student demanded that the opponent’s labour be counted alongside his own.

At the meeting in Videhapur, Hamida showed an old receipt from her songbook. It listed separately the time spent rehearsing a duet at a festival and the time of her principal performance. It certified attendance, not an agreement to pay. Tara said, “This receipt will establish that the work took place. We shall need another document to establish the sum and its payment.” Hamida agreed. “I am not asking you to issue a false receipt,” she said. “Write what is owed as owed. Do not write something as paid when it has not been paid.” Anger and a fine weariness were mingled in her voice.

A member of the organising committee proposed making the earlier humiliating video public under the title “Wrong Interpretation,” so that the matter could be cleared up. Hamida refused for a second time. “You need not make people listen to the same humiliation again in order to stop its misuse,” she said. “The inquiry committee can examine an uncut copy. On the public notice, write that an excerpt was circulated without consent and that a request was made for its removal. Where those seeking removal have no control, do not claim it has been removed.” Padma recorded the distinction.

A girl from the courtyard who had counted the beats of Ramesh Ghasi’s instrument yesterday asked Hamida, “Has the singing stopped?” Hamida called her closer. “No, the song has not stopped. Permission has stopped for those who make a joke of my words.” The girl read two lines she had written, then forgot the second. Hamida laughed. “Keeping quiet where the words are forgotten can be a kind of truth too.” The child thought again and searched for words of her own. In this small game, the dignity of the artist was not turned into a sermon imposed on someone else.

Mrinal began the second round of the philosophical lesson. This time Harimohan was invited to present Udayana's position and Padma to read the objections of the pūrvapakṣa. Padma said clearly that she was not a learned representative of the Mimamsaka tradition, only a literary reader revisiting its essential arguments. Harimohan began by saying that the arrangement of the world's varied effects supported an inference to an intelligent cause. Padma replied, "Possibility is not the same as necessity. We must examine the limits of applying the marks of an effect to the universe, as well as counterexamples." The listeners stopped interrupting one another's sentences.

A young man asked, "If the two positions still disagree today, what shall we print in the schoolbook?" Padma replied, "First, each position in its strongest form. Then make clear which premises have been accepted, which questions remain open, and which sentences belong to literary imagination. We shall not ask grieving people to sign their agreement." His next question was why so many pages should be printed at such expense. Sanket said, "A misleading short page can make us spend much more tomorrow. Even so, the accounts for the printing will remain open to the people."

Meanwhile, they found that a letter of Hamida's name had been written incorrectly on an old copy of a receipt. The clerk proposed covering the original writing with correction fluid and entering the right letter. Hamida stopped him. "Let the original error remain visible. Put the date of the correction, its source and my consent beside it." Padma remembered Rahina Thakurain's experience of the proper sequence for copying documents. She attached a separate correction sheet. The original was not destroyed, and the correction did not turn the wrong name into a permanent repetition.

The keeper of the funds brought the payment list. An order for nine hundred rupees for Ramesh Ghasi's previous performance could be seen, but receipt of the money still needed verification. Against Hamida's entry there was no amount, only "Song—honorarium outstanding." A member said it would be simpler to combine the two cases under a single item, "Artists' payments." Hamida refused. "Ramesh's wages belong to Ramesh. The evidence for what is owed to me, and its determination, are separate. Put them in one entry and someone's receipt may be made to stand for another person's payment." Tara kept the lines distinct.

Evening was falling over the old study chamber. Udayana asked the guest whether he wished to see the final copy of his written objections. "I do," the guest answered, "but my friend's name must not appear in the title of this debate. Even my right over his memory is not without limits." Udayana agreed to remove the name. The questions remained unchanged. A student asked whether the dignity of the name Kusumanjali would be diminished if the teacher's answers were not accepted as complete. Udayana said, "Its dignity comes not from a garland of flowers pressed down over questions, but from the discipline of thought."

The guest said, “There is one thing I accept from you: in posing the question of God, we must not turn the labour of boatmen, potters or copyists into metaphors and forget that they are actual people. But accepting this does not mean accepting your conclusion.” Udayana answered, “And I accept that offering a philosophical account of karma gives me no authority to silence the person who suffers. But that does not command me to abandon my inference.” Both parties dictated their outstanding arguments. No formal announcement was made that the debate would resume the following day; for the present, there was a pause.

In Videhapur, Hamida closed her songbook. In place of the suspended performance she proposed a short rehearsal open to the public but not to recording—provided the purpose was clearly stated, the use of her words had her consent, and an honorarium was settled in writing beforehand. The old arrears were still unpaid, so the offer of a future event would not be taken as settlement of that debt. A representative of the organisers first repeated the word “service,” then read the new terms and asked for a day to propose a fee. Hamida gave him the time, but not her voice.

Sarita took the memorial papers. The line recording Urmila’s unpaid wages was still there; on the old list printed beside it, Naira’s death was one name, not a whole life. Sarita signed no philosophical conclusion. “I can listen to questions,” she told Padma, “but the papers of my grief will not enter a public lesson.” Padma wrote down that boundary. Sarita added, “Do not forget the date on which those who owe an answer about payment must give it.” Tara recorded the date of the next hearing on the disputed arrears on a separate sheet.

At the end of the assembly Padma fixed two accounting sheets to the wall. One clearly identified “Udayana’s position,” “Mimamsaka opposing argument,” “Unanswered objection” and “Literary scene.” The other recorded the written decision to stop the humiliating use of Hamida’s song, the restricted examination of the original recording, the correction of her name and the unpaid honorarium still outstanding. The two documents had different purposes. No one was deriving proof of present-day payment from an ancient debate; no one was pronouncing on the existence of God by means of a payment receipt.

Outside in the evening light, a young man was wiping down a wooden board for the next lesson. He asked, “Who will understand such difficult arguments in tomorrow’s class on Gangesha?” Mrinal said, “Whoever asks to understand them. But when choosing examples, we shall also listen to the people who make, measure and count the objects.” A corner of a sentence already written on the board had been rubbed away. Instead of filling it in from his imagination, the young man left it as it was; he would correct it when the source was found.

As Hamida set out for home, she took the red slip from her book once more and looked at it. She now held a written decision to stop the degrading use of her song; she had not yet received her remuneration. Without accompaniment she hummed half a melodic phrase, then stopped at the sounds of rickshaws and children. Inside the school Padma had bound the pages presenting Udayana's position and the opposing case in two separate threads of equal thickness. No final verdict on truth had been reached. But one way of making another person's question disappear by dressing it up as an answer had certainly been closed.

Chapter 212 · Gangesha's Classroom

Chalk dust still clung to the old wooden board. Since early morning a girl had been wiping it with a damp cloth at Videhapur's open school. In the board's left corner yesterday's question survived: "Whose life shall our examples come from?" Halfway through wiping she stopped. "But that is a question," she told Mrinal. "Why should I erase it?" Mrinal did not take the cloth from her hand. She wrote today's date in the empty space below. After the fierce philosophical dispute, the class began again with this ordinary task.

Hema Dev had set a round bamboo tube in the veranda. It held a copy of the school's old history exhibition, two photographs with damaged edges, and a correction sheet she had written. Years earlier a caption beneath pictures of the school's founding and the clearing of a pond had printed the names of ten men, while the labour of women had been compressed into a single anonymous line. At that time Hema had distinguished two completely legible names, one incomplete name, and one indistinct mark. "Today I have not come to write a new history," she said. "I have come to argue that we should make more room in the old account on the basis of the evidence we actually have."

Padma had spread mats for the third sitting of the annual public reading, open accounts and songs. Yesterday the two opposing positions in Udayana's debate had been bound on separate pages. Today's subject was Gangesha Upadhyaya's Tattvachintamani. Excitedly, a student wrote four words: perception, inference, comparison, and verbal testimony. Another wrote "God" underneath and added a fifth line. Mrinal asked him to remove it, but did not embarrass him. "An inference concerning God is a question considered within inference," she explained. "Do not turn the four pramāṇa divisions of the Tattvachintamani into five. Nor is today's work merely to memorise their names."

In Mithila of long ago, Malati Dhanuk's foot had sunk in the mud as she unloaded a bundle of paddy outside Gangesha's study chamber. One corner of her bamboo basket was broken, and one of her two measuring vessels had swollen from the water of the previous night. Inside the teacher's room students could see the dust of her journey. Some even laughed at her late arrival. She did not answer their laughter. "I have a question for the teacher concerning measurement," she said. "But tell me first: by what measure will you account for the cost of this soaked vessel?"

Gangesha was then writing a palm-leaf passage on the characteristics of perception. The first student said, "Two vessels look the same size to the eye, therefore they hold the same measure." Malati placed both vessels on the ground. As soon as water was poured into one, it began to seep through a fine line; the bottom of the other remained dry. "Was what you saw with your eyes

enough?” she asked. “I can hear the sound of water being poured and feel the wet edge with my hand. But what test will tell us whether the two measures are equal?” Gangesha put a question mark beside the student’s words, “Same shape, same capacity.”

Meanwhile Madhav the boatman entered with two heavy ropes. His boat was tied at the landing, but after the river had fallen during the night, an old knot in the rope had caught at a higher point. “People say you can tell the depth by looking at the colour on the water’s surface,” he said. “Yesterday it was thick and muddy; today it glitters pale. But where the hull of my boat will touch the bottom, I cannot say without trying the pole.” A student asked, “Does that mean a boatman’s inference can never be knowledge?” Madhav answered, “I make inferences. But I do not stake the lives of those I carry on one and then sell it to them as a measurement.”

Gangesha asked Malati and Madhav not to change their objects, but to help him change the classroom. “Until yesterday I kept showing you pots and cloth,” he said. “Today we shall begin our questions with this basket and rope. But a decision here may concern only one event; broader principles of philosophy require separate arguments.” He asked, “What conditions govern not only seeing but hearing, touch, smell and taste in perception? And when the eye cannot fully test a measure, under what conditions can inference make up the lack?” For the first time the student attended to the stream leaking past Malati’s hand.

In the present-day class at Videhapur, Tara brought in an old, shallow bamboo basket. Its base had been stitched. “This is an object of our own time,” she said clearly. “Do not suppose it belonged to Gangesha’s age. The other scene is literary invention set in another period.” A boy held up a photograph of the old mud-filled drain and said, “There is no water in this picture. Where, then, did the flood come from?” Aditi answered, “A photograph shows a surface at a particular moment. The capacity of the outlet, the older blocked passage and the later rainfall were separate matters to investigate. A whole chain of causes cannot be extracted from one photograph.”

Hema took the opportunity to open her notebook. “I made that mistake in my own work too,” she said. “Where an edge of a print had been cut, I initially thought all the names had been removed deliberately. When Nasima Shershahbadi showed me the width that had been trimmed away, I revised that part of my accusation. But the failure to give credit for work in the original list was a separate question, and it remained.” A child asked at once, “Did admitting your mistake weaken your case?” Hema laughed. “History grows weaker when we refuse to admit mistakes.”

In the old study chamber Gangesha drew a line in the clay beside Malati’s vessel. He asked the first pupil to say what he knew through perception, and

the second what he inferred. The first said, “Water leaked through the edge of one vessel.” The second said, “Because it became wet, its capacity may have diminished.” Malati added, “But how much the measure has diminished is not yet known.” Hearing this, the teacher set a date for a second measurement. One practical point was entered in writing: after the class, Malati was not to be pressured into accepting a loss of paddy that had not been measured.

Madhav displayed two knots in the rope. “One knot works on a boat tied to a tree; another on a slope. Similar appearance does not mean equal strength,” he said. Gangesha opened the question of comparison: when does resemblance to something familiar properly help us know an unfamiliar object, and when does similarity in appearance mislead us? A pupil who had heard the name of a distant current wanted to treat it as identical to a current by his own village. Madhav made him count the differences in riverbank, cargo and season. “A likeness of names does not open a passage,” he said. The teacher added that distinction to the exercise sheet on comparison.

At noon, while lifting a water-pot, a girl student asked Malati, “Will you and Madhav appear in the teacher’s book?” Malati replied, “I measure paddy. If my question is sound, write it down; do not write as though you own my life.” Gangesha stopped his scribe from presenting an imagined reply by Malati as an original aphorism from the treatise. “The question raised here,” he said, “is an instructional example in this class. Mark the original text of a sutra, its commentary, and the experience of these people separately.” For the first time an extra space was left on a palm-leaf page for the person asking the question.

At the study chamber’s entrance stood the messenger of a trader who bought paddy. “If you change the measure, there will be a dispute over the price,” he said. “The accounts were prepared with the old vessel.” Looking at the paper, Malati said, “I too have no wish to change an account for its own sake. I only ask that the condition of the vessel used in measuring be examined.” Gangesha did not ask the messenger to sign the palm leaf immediately. He asked Malati about her time and fixed a period during which the two vessels would be kept for testing. The pupil understood that the right to ask questions was bound up with the time taken from a person’s work.

After the scene was read in Videhapur, a young woman rose. “Where are the authentic old documents recording the lives of this Malati Dhanuk and Madhav the boatman?” she asked. Mrinal answered, “Their lives and conversations are creations of this novel. Gangesha and the philosophical tradition of the Tattvachintamani belong to historical discussion. With imagined pupils and working people, I am examining what teaching might make possible. My story is not an otherwise lost quotation from an ancient manuscript.” Padma added that explicit statement to the printed programme. The criticism had not diminished the reader’s trust; it had made clearer how much weight each statement could bear.

Meanwhile Hema Dev's history sheet reached the school committee. A member said, "The names are not fully established. Printing this sheet will create controversy. The old text already says 'assistance from women.'" Hema unfolded the bent edge of a paper. "Those words have made the women invisible," she said. "Print the two names that can be read in full, with copies of the original and their sources. Print the incomplete name as incomplete. Where there is testimony only to labour, record the labour without inventing a name." The member asked, "Does that mean the history is uncertain?" Hema replied, "Say exactly how certain this part of the history is."

In the classroom Sarita was looking at an old photograph of the mud cleared from the pond. The list of names reminded her of Urmila's hands washing bed linen—labour from a different period, not the one recorded on the history sheet. She cautioned herself aloud: "Write about Urmila's work only where there is evidence for it. If you cannot make out someone's face in the old picture, do not force Urmila's name into it." Hema agreed. "In our eagerness to add names, we must not steal another person's period or rights," she said. That day the question of absence became part of what the class studied.

In Gangesha's study chamber it was time for verbal testimony, śabda-pramāṇa. A pupil tried to validate Malati's measure with the assertion, "People in the village say so." Malati asked, "Which people in the village? Did they make the measurement themselves, or hear it from somebody else?" Madhav said, "If the old boatman at the landing tells you about yesterday's depth, ask when he acquired that knowledge. Today's current may have changed since then." Gangesha taught the differences between reliable testimony, the speaker's knowledge, and the circumstances in which words were uttered. His account of verbal testimony did not become a method of treating every claim made by ordinary people as automatically true or automatically false.

A teenager in Videhapur objected, "You listen to the experience of working people, but sometimes their inferences are wrong too. Whom should we believe then?" Padma reminded him of Hira's earlier episode with the water gauge, when local experience and standardised measurement had both had to be checked again. "Respecting people's knowledge does not mean ending the examination of it," she said. "An engineer's document is not exempt from error either. To weigh evidence, do not ask how important the person is; ask how suitable the test is." The boy wrote "respect" and "verification" as separate words in his notebook.

A new difficulty still remained on Hema's sheet. The old school kitchen's expense list did not record the hours worked by women; an account of grain expenditure alone could not establish how many people had done the work. A teacher proposed filling in the figure by estimation. Hema stopped him. "An estimate may become a question for research; it is not proof for a register of names." Rachna Dhimal, demonstrating the place of translation in children's

language lessons, said, “Changing a word does not change the person. We must have the courage to tell children that an incomplete name is incomplete.” The committee entered that point in its register.

Outside the veranda, Harimohan watched two children playing with a clay lid. Without lifting it, one child said, “There is water inside.” The other lifted it to reveal nothing but small stones. Both burst out laughing. Harimohan came into the class and asked, “The first inference was wrong. Has the child lost the right to infer?” Padma answered, “No. The child can now ask why the sign was misleading. If we do not allow the chance to correct an error, teaching knowledge becomes a punishment.” The children replaced the lid, then this time felt and shook it before guessing.

In the courtyard of the annual public reading, Phulmati Pamariya and Karim Dafali were rehearsing. The strap on Ramesh Ghasi’s instrument had worked loose; he retied it and picked up the beat. The announcer had planned to read the historical word “assistance” between pieces of music. Hema said, “If the names and fees of today’s performers can be printed, why should the women of the past receive only the word ‘assistance’?” Phulmati smiled. “Pronounce my name correctly. And do not make me sing invented songs for people whose names you cannot read.” The rehearsal resumed. The gravity of the meeting had not driven the laughter out of the music.

In ancient Mithila, Malati Dhanuk counted her measuring vessels again at the end of the day. The teacher asked, “Has testing the vessel settled the dispute over your price?” “Not completely yet,” she replied. “The trader must accept the other measure. But I now have grounds to say that the first vessel leaked.” Gangesha set a measurement test in the trader’s presence as the next classroom exercise; he did not declare an immediate judgment on the price. Madhav also rose to tighten the rope on his boat and return to the landing. The pupils drew the knots on palm leaves, though they could not bind the movement of the water within their drawings.

Gangesha asked his scribe to read out the four means of valid knowledge again in order. Earlier, the student’s page had held only “pot” as its example. Now beneath perception stood the leaking vessel; beneath inference, the conditions for gauging the water’s depth; beneath comparison, the boat’s knots; and beneath testimony, the time of the boatman’s statement. “These experiences have not changed the philosophical system and made it complete,” the teacher said. “But if we do not listen to the actual difficulty of the person asking, our examples will remain untested.” The student said, “Then will these people come to class again?” Gangesha replied, “First ask them when they have time away from their work.”

In Videhapur the management committee meeting grew difficult. The secretary said the committee had no statutory authority to revise the school’s original textbook immediately. Rather than tear up her papers, Hema made

another proposal: a supplementary page of local history with source notes, its regular use in the school's open lessons, and a separate application for revision of the original textbook. Two committee members remained doubtful. One asked, "What if someone brings new evidence later?" Hema said, "Then there will be a second edition of the supplementary page. We shall not close the door on history." By majority vote the supplementary page was approved; revision of the original textbook remained pending.

A committee member asked Hema a more difficult question. "Why should we trust the memory of someone whose household has preserved no old documents?" Hema answered, "Memory is where a question can begin. Independent testimony, objects and receipts may build greater confidence. If they do not appear, we shall not fabricate a definite date in the name of memory. But the absence of surviving papers does not make a person's life meaningless." She was about to sing a brief line of a household song she had heard from her mother, then fell silent. "Not without her permission," she added. The seriousness of the assembly was evident in that small pause.

While distributing the first copies of the page, the children added questions of their own. Jatan asked why there was no photograph of the hands that had carried mud from the old pond. Birsi said the name of a woman who had cooked the meals might be found in a family notebook. Hema forbade them to open private boxes at home without the permission of the adults concerned. "Do not tear down the curtains of people's homes in order to collect evidence," she said. The children decided to ask families at the next sitting for voluntary permission to copy relevant materials. It was schoolwork, not a search operation disguised as research.

Padma placed two sheets of new teaching material together. The first introduced the four pramāṇa sections of Gangesha's Tattvachintamani, the explicitly labelled imagined dialogue with Malati and Madhav, and rules for asking questions. The second recorded the sources for Hema's local-history sheet, the limits of the incomplete names, and the date on which the supplementary text had been approved. A young man wanted to stamp both sheets simply "Verified." Padma stopped him. "A philosophical position, an invented literary event, and the documented state of a present record are different things. One stamp cannot make all three the same." He wrote different headings.

Tara showed them the expense slip. Nasima's time repairing the edges had been included in the work of copying Hema's old document, but the previous status of payment for that item was recorded on another paper. "Today's printing, credits and paper costs for the supplementary sheet are separate," Tara said. "We shall not treat the old receipt as proof that payment has been made." Hema took the list from her and looked it over. She wanted women's labour to receive its credit on the history sheet, but did not want the labour of people making that very sheet to vanish under the label "voluntary

assistance.” Printing expenditure was approved in the public accounts; the number of copies actually distributed remained to be counted the next day.

At the evening public reading, the girl who had wiped the board in the morning read the first copy. She pronounced the two legible names with their spelling as it stood in the original, and gave the source references alongside them; she read “incomplete reading” before the partial name and then the line about unnamed labour. She stopped and asked, “If the names have still not been found, is there no room for those people in our lessons?” Hema replied, “There is room for their work, but we shall not invent names there. The possibility of finding them must remain open.” The girl drew not an empty square but an open line where the date of a future source could be entered.

When the lesson ended, Mrinal read the last sentence of the imagined classroom of Gangesha once more. Malati and Madhav had gone back to their respective work; the scholar’s pupils had been left with the weight of inconvenient new examples. The story was not claiming to be a literal history of that ancient age. But an actual change was visible at Videhapur’s school: questions raised by working people were no longer ornaments at the edge of a lesson; they had become a condition of how lessons were made. And Hema Dev’s supplementary history sheet had been added to the school’s schedule of regular open classes, although the original textbook was still unchanged.

As Sarita was leaving, she saw a proposed cover for a printed philosophical book. The editor’s name stood at the top; the space below for assistants’ names was still empty. She turned the page and asked Mrinal, “Where will you account for the work I did in the kitchen, the washing, and the verification of copies of the search register? And will you also record the occasions when I mistakenly suppressed someone else’s credit?” Mrinal did not answer at once. Hema’s supplementary sheet was drying, and the blank line in the new book remained to be filled. Outside, the children were adding tomorrow’s date to the old board without erasing today’s question.

Chapter 213 · Maithili's Own Voice

Sarita laid a finger beneath the cover of the new book. The ink had not yet dried completely; she touched the white margin of the sheet, not the letters. “There must be more than names in this line,” she said. “Write down the time spent by whoever’s work you record. And write down the times you did not listen to me.” Maithili Mishra held the proof marked in red. The night’s rain had ended, but two thin streaks of water still gleamed across the threshold of the printing house.

Maithili offered Sarita a chair. “Finish what you have to say first,” she said. Sarita did not sit. She looked at the long heading, “Those Who Assisted,” on the new proof. “There is not one signature in that phrase. The cooking, drying of pages, wiping away dust, recognising different copies of old registers—all of this was work. I received wages for some of it; payment for some is still disputed. Will you settle those disputes by writing ‘affectionate service’?” Maithili closed the page.

Harimohan Pathak entered carrying a bundle of papers. He had three copies of the earlier edition: one bearing only Ishan’s name, another containing the document correcting and acknowledging joint authorship, and a third with a list of sources pasted inside. “Verified corrections must be made permanent in the next printing,” he said. Maithili answered, “Yes. But if, while remedying the injustice of my name being omitted from the earlier edition, we hide Sarita’s work under another small phrase, this new printing will repeat the old mistake.”

Ishan came from the adjoining room to examine the proof. He had signed the earlier correction accepting Maithili’s co-authorship. That document separately listed his original arguments, Maithili’s substantiated objections, and the examples that had been revised. “Credit for your corrections has been settled now,” he said. Maithili looked at him. “Recognition of my contribution must not swallow Sarita’s work into someone else’s name. Nor will my own fault hide behind your admission.” For the first time Ishan heard her speak of writing down her own fault.

Maithili recalled an incident from earlier days. While the dates in the original manuscript were being collated, Sarita had noticed an old mark made by thread on the edge of a water-damaged register. From that mark Maithili had understood the order of two pages. But later, in a public lecture, she had said, “I established the sequence.” Sarita’s discovery was absent from that sentence. “I knew what had happened,” Maithili said, “but I did not correct the statement at once. My silence is part of the event too.” Sarita silently opened her cloth bundle.

Inside were Sarita's receipts for her work. Opposite some items there were acknowledgement numbers, against others payment orders, and against still others objections. Maithili called for the page from her earlier lecture and wrote beneath one sentence: "An important material clue to the order of the pages was found through Sarita's examination; Maithili omitted this credit from her earlier public account." Then her hand stopped. "Was it simply omitted, or did I myself leave it out?" Sarita said, "Write what you remember to be true. I am not offering you an excuse."

Maithili rewrote the sentence: "I did not credit Sarita's observation at the time; this was an error of judgment on my part." Harimohan asked what the evidence for an author's personal admission could be. Maithili answered, "The source for that sentence is my own memory and my signature. The evidence for Sarita's work must be examined in the register from that day and in the order of the pages. The two should not receive the same stamp." Ishan added, "And for any outstanding wage claim, the payment register must be the source for the amount, not the praise in this foreword."

At last Sarita sat down. Carefully unfolding an old receipt, she said, "This records my cooking hours, but not all the time I spent washing clothes. Urmila's earlier work was separate. Do not add Urmila's labour under my own claim for payment." Maithili nodded. She knew that Urmila was dead; a line of honour could not settle the unfinished accounts for wages owed to her family. The reason for including Sarita's name was not to erase the absent name of Urmila.

A worker at the printing house said, "With so many corrections the foreword will grow longer; the cost of paper will rise." Maithili examined the expense sheet. Printing new pages would cost one sum; getting a correction notice into the hands of readers of the earlier edition would cost another. "I shall shorten my own lines," she said, "but not the account of labour that needs to be verified." The worker smiled a little. "Then remove half a page of 'The Author's Humble Submission,'" he said. Sarita laughed for the first time.

Meanwhile, another problem stood at the door of Videhapur's open school. Jatan arrived with a notebook, with Birsi behind him. The new noticeboard read: "Advanced Philosophical Reading: Previous Certificate Compulsory." This was a revised version of the teaching sequence Harimohan had previously designed; he feared disorder around the fragile copies of the original manuscript. But because of the wording of the rule, even those wishing to begin their studies thought the door was closed to them.

Showing his notebook, Farid Chik said, "I have already obtained the corrected fee receipt for the approved evening class. But now they are asking for a certificate before I may ask questions in advanced reading. I do not understand the aphorisms; that is precisely why I have more questions." Harimohan said, "There is no ban on asking questions. The rules for handling

an original book are separate.” Maithili, who had arrived with a copy of the proof, asked, “Then why have these two rules been written in the same line?”

Harimohan placed his old list on the table. It distinguished introductory reading of letters, open question sessions, reading of copies, and practical handling of fragile original manuscripts. Only the line about advanced reading had survived in the later notice. “An error occurred when the list was shortened,” he said. Birsi touched the word “previous” on the board. “What I want to learn,” she said, “has nothing before it yet.” There was light laughter in the class, but Harimohan remained serious.

Maithili made a proposal: admission to the open beginners’ class and question sessions would not require any particular caste, household occupation, formal certificate or adult social introduction. Everyone working with fragile original books would receive the same safety training; anyone seeking more advanced study would have an equal chance to demonstrate the skills learned earlier. “If practice is necessary,” she said, “make the times for learning those skills public too.” Harimohan added that the number of people examining an original copy would be limited, but reproductions would be available to all.

A member asked, “Does this mean children and adults will sit in the same class? What about children’s safety?” Ruhani, who had brought the children’s timetable, made the distinction explicit: age-appropriate classes, safe supervision, protection of personal details, and guardian consent would continue to apply separately. “We shall not exclude children in the name of safety; nor shall we abolish the conditions that keep them safe in the name of admission,” she said. The new rules recorded both rights distinctly.

Kabir was sitting on a back bench. With him was a sealed envelope containing the acknowledgement of unconfirmed original testimony about his birth; he had not brought it to show anyone. The school’s old admission form had a compulsory space marked “Father’s Name,” and the family of one prospective student had postponed applying because of that space. Kabir asked, “If someone must fill in an incomplete family history before being allowed to ask questions, is the school checking evidence, or forcing a child to reveal the secrets of the family?”

Harimohan asked, “If we change the rule, who will be responsible for a student’s care?” Kabir answered, “We need a contact for care, permission, and a person answerable in an emergency. Do not make a complete account of someone’s birth a condition.” He remembered the distinction between Subhadra’s first-hand testimony about birth and the verified labour of the mother who had raised him. He would not force the two into a single box labelled family. The envelope remained closed.

Listening to the discussion, Sarita said, “Take the minimum information needed for safety in the educational register, with the consent of the student

or an appropriate guardian. The separate government procedure for birth registration will not be resolved here.” Padma drew three boxes on a sheet: “Right to learn,” “Safe contact,” and “Private records.” “Do not close the door of the first box because you lack unrelated information from the second,” she said. Kabir agreed, but attached no unannounced conclusion about his own life to the notice.

In the afternoon Maithili brought the book’s foreword back. It began with the account of Ishan’s original discussion and her verified co-authorship. Sarita’s labour appeared afterwards under a distinct heading. Beneath it, in “Authorial Error and Correction,” was Maithili’s admission. She read the order to Sarita. Sarita asked, “You have not written ‘inspiration’ before my name?” “No,” Maithili said. “The work for which there is evidence is named as work. You are not obliged to be my inspiration.”

Ishan objected to one sentence in the new foreword. It read, “All the examples were produced by collective labour.” “That could obscure independent authorship of the original philosophical discussion,” he said. Maithili accepted the objection. “Not ‘all.’ Name the person who originally wrote an example; distinguish the examples I revised; distinguish the labour of keeping the physical pages safe. One sweeping compliment can suppress everyone’s differences.” She struck out the sentence.

An older proof had printed “management of household work” in place of Sarita’s name. In Rama Kayastha’s correction register there was already a small objection lodged against that line, though its written reply was incomplete. Maithili said, “Rama’s objection must remain in the history of the earlier edition. Just because I have changed the name today does not mean we should erase the date of that objection.” Ishan asked whether Rama had consented to a public copy of her letter. Padma said, “We shall publish the summary approved for public discussion; the original private comments will be handled according to her permission.” Thus, while correcting one error, they stopped themselves from asserting a new claim over someone else’s letter.

Examining the edge of a copy of the old manuscript, Harimohan said, “It is right that you make your error public. But that does not prove we should believe every single claim Sarita makes without checking.” Sarita answered, “I do not want that kind of belief either. Look at the evidence of my work. If my memory is mistaken somewhere, write that too. But I have little formal education; that is no justice if it means you assume in advance that what I saw is false.” Harimohan gave her time to verify the sequence of one page again.

An open meeting began in the early evening. Birsi read the revised notice aloud. It now made clear that introductory lessons and question sessions were open to everyone; free practice was available for the skills test required for advanced study; and the safe handling of original manuscripts required the same training for all. Looking at the hours of his shop, Farid asked whether

practice would also be held in the evening. Harimohan set two evenings each week. “Then I can do the accounts in the morning and learn my letters in the evening,” Farid said. No one lectured him about changing his family’s occupation.

Changing the noticeboard was not enough. That day Harimohan counted the printed applications bearing the old “previous certificate” rule. Eleven copies remained; five students had already taken such forms home. Tara proposed that the committee bear the cost of delivering corrected forms to them, but that their names not be taken from a public list. Zubaida took responsibility for informing families who had consented to be contacted. “Where an address must be protected,” she said, “we shall not identify it in a public announcement.” Two families immediately received revised forms; the others had yet to be informed.

The committee secretary read the next part of the rule: confidential copies of guardian consent and emergency contact details for children; only a name accepted by the student to appear on public lists; private disputes about birth, surnames or sensitive family histories not to be conditions of admission. A member said the extra forms would increase the work. Tara answered, “If we violate privacy to save work, we shall spend still more work putting that violation right.” The rule passed despite differences of opinion. The dissenting member’s written comment was also preserved in the register.

Kabir’s envelope remained unopened that day. After the meeting he told Subhadra only that the school had adopted a rule preventing forced disclosure of private birth histories on admission applications. Subhadra asked, “Will that get you your original register?” “No,” Kabir said. “The search for that will follow its own path.” Subhadra replied, “Then call today’s improvement what it is. Do not turn it into the answer about your birth.” In that small distinction Kabir felt a little room open for himself.

Sarita returned to the printing house to collect the new copy of the book. On the way she came across a bundle of sheets in a cover stitched by Nasima, laid out to dry. She did not open it without permission. Naira’s private telephone and Kabir’s unsent letter came to mind. Some people want their stories printed; others withhold permission to tell them. In the name of the voices of the dead, the ownership of those who remained alive could not quietly be taken away. Looking at the new foreword, Sarita felt two truths together: her labour had received recognition, and her daughter could not be brought back.

Before the final printing Padma held a brief public verification. Those present heard the foreword’s statements read in three distinct categories: Maithili’s admission, Sarita’s work verified in writing, and the present state of the payment dispute. A young man asked whether printing Sarita’s name automatically proved all her old claims. Sarita herself answered, “No. A receipt

proves what that item can prove; what remains outstanding still awaits a decision. But when work done by my hands has been seen, no one has the right to describe it as ‘anonymous service.’” The young man copied the distinction into his notebook.

Before the printing machine started, Maithili signed the approval for printing. The form separately recorded the revised foreword, Sarita’s verified labour, Maithili’s own admission, the documentation of Ishan’s joint authorship, and the future procedure for submitting disagreement. Sarita kept a copy. But for wages still unpaid, the date of the next hearing was written in the labour register, not on the receipt for the book. The letters of recognition had not taken the shape of cash.

Maithili had wanted to begin the foreword with the words “My voice.” Reading the proof, she saw how often she had written “I” after that first line. She changed the opening: “What is written in this book contains different kinds of labour, reasoning and objection from many people; the rights of each must be examined separately.” Only then did she put her own name at the end. Finding her own voice no longer required her to absorb other people’s voices into it until they disappeared.

Outside, Jatan and Birsi had come to ask about practice times. Laughing, a worker at the printing house said, “Are the two of you going to write the next edition of the book?” Jatan answered, “First let me read the first page.” Birsi added, “And if I read a letter wrong, I shall ask again.” Maithili laughed. Harimohan told them the school’s new hours. The children went skipping along the wet path; at that moment the book’s weighty principles could not slow the movement of their feet.

That evening, at home, Sarita placed the acknowledgement from the labour register and the book’s new foreword in separate places. Naira’s little notebook remained as it was in her private chest. She did not take it out for anyone to read. Having heard that the foreword had been printed, Kabir came to the doorway. Sarita asked, “Have you seen the school’s application rules?” “I have,” he said. “But the broken leg of the desk where an incoming child will sit still needs replacing.” Sarita smiled. “Write the price of that work into the accounts as well,” she said.

Earlier that evening an elderly reader had warned Maithili, “If you print your own error, people will doubt everything you wrote before.” Maithili had answered, “It is the reader’s right to question. An idea that is sound can withstand revision. And a name that was omitted must not remain omitted for ever merely because we fear questions.” The old reader had not agreed at once. He wrote his objection in the printing house’s register. Maithili did not strike it out. Inside the new book, instead of sealing off disagreement, they were making room for an answer.

At night Maithili opened the first printed page. Beside her name was the admission of her fault; there was the account of Sarita's labour, and the unfinished status of payment was stated plainly. A small space had been left in the margin for the next correction. Before putting out the candle she looked through the window at the dark courtyard of the school. No one was there now; the children would come tomorrow. Ahead lay the empty place left by Naira, which no foreword could fill. Yet today one obstacle before a closed door had truly been removed.

Chapter 214 · Naira's Empty Place

Sarita prised a single grain of rice from the rim of an old brass plate. The plate was needed not for eating but for laying out clean cloth among the people who had come to work at the ghat. Naira's little notebook lay closed, just as before, on top of the chest. Sarita's labour had at last been acknowledged by name in the book printed yesterday, yet not one letter of the emptiness in this corner of the house had diminished. She picked up the plate and went outside. The Kartik wind was blowing a fine dust along the path to the ghat.

It was the day of respect for the ghat and the cleaning of the water in 2042. This time the first item on the plan was to identify the broken steps on the slope before the songs, lamps and cleaning began; the path used by washerfolk carrying their bundles was to be measured separately from the one taken by families coming to bathe. Gomati Beldar was counting the small bamboo pegs driven into the earthen bank. Tara recorded her measurements. To one side lay Urmila's old washing place. Another woman now rested her bundle there, but Urmila was absent. No one was waiting for her: everyone knew she had died.

Setting down a water pitcher, Rukhsana said, "If Urmila were here, she would have scolded us on this slope first. She would have said, 'Make somewhere for people to put their feet before planting flags.'" Renu said, "And after scolding us, she would have measured the width of the path with her own feet." The two women laughed. Sarita tried to laugh as well, but her laughter stopped halfway. The memory of Urmila was not a permanent statue rooted in the earth. It was a practical way of doing the work; without it, the ghat would grow narrow again.

Padma opened the organisers' register. One page was headed "Today's Labour," another "Earlier Dues." The outstanding payments owed to Urmila's family for washing at night, transporting clothes and travel appeared on the second page. A new volunteer asked, "Do we have to read out these accounts on a festival day? It will make people sad." Gomati replied, "Will the workers feel lighter if we do not read the accounts?" The volunteer grew uncomfortable, but did not try to merge the two pages of the register.

Kabir arrived at the ghat later than anyone else. In his hands were a straight piece of bamboo and some thread; he was making temporary warning markers for the ghat from materials left over after measuring the broken leg of a school table. Sarita asked, "Have you eaten anything since morning?" Kabir said, "I had some flattened rice on the way." She did not ask how he had spent the night remembering Naira. Nor did he try to draw an answer to that question from Sarita's eyes. Holding the bamboo between them, they began to mark the edges of the steps.

Sanket arrived with his camera. He wanted his first picture to show the open water, his second a worker's hands, and his third the dangerous stones of the ghat. Tara stopped him. "Before photographing someone's hands, ask the person they belong to," she said. Sanket laughed. "Naira used to tell me that all the time." Tara replied, "You remember what Naira said. What I remember is that she did not always say the same thing. Sometimes she herself was in too much of a hurry to take a photograph. Then she recognised her mistake and apologised." Sanket lowered his camera.

Sarita listened to them both. She remembered that Naira had sometimes been unable to fold clothes properly. In her haste she would tuck one edge in while leaving the other sticking out. This was not a childhood incident but a memory of an ordinary working day during the previous year. Sarita had taught her, "If you fold dry clothes like that, dust will get inside again." Naira had laughed and said, "Then I'll open them up and fold them again." Sarita did not want to turn that little laugh into the teaching of a goddess. She remembered only the imperfect skill of a human being and a mother's mild irritation.

"Would you like us to put Naira's name on the programme sheet?" Padma asked. Sarita thought for a while. "Let her name be there," she said, "but only for work for which there is evidence, and in that capacity. Do not proclaim as everyone's public memory something I remember because she was my daughter." Padma wrote two separate lines: an account of the deceased person's verified work and the family's private remembrance. The photographs, private phone and notebook would remain on a third, closed page, not on the public list.

On the upper steps of the ghat, a girl in her teens was sweeping beside her mother. She asked, "If you photograph an empty place, does a person appear in the picture?" Sanket said, "No. Only the place that is empty appears. Whoever looks at the photograph may add meaning from their own mind." The girl asked again, "Then is it necessary to write a name?" Sarita replied, "Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Your mother's name will be needed for the wages earned by the work she does, but not for the story of her private sorrow." The girl resumed sweeping.

Water had gathered on the lower landing. Without stepping into it up to her knees, Renu measured the depth with a wooden staff. Someone proposed seating the audience for a public reading there without first removing the loose stones. Gomati objected. "The speeches will be upstairs," she said. "Make the way down safe for those who must work there." Two young men grew annoyed: moving the stones would take time. But when a woman carrying a heavy bundle of clothes nearly slipped, everyone's attention suddenly turned to the path. They stretched a short rope to close it temporarily, and recorded a separate date for repairs.

Near midday Anupama Sen arrived carrying three papers in a cotton bag. Recognising Sarita, she stopped. “I had spoken here about an old letter before Naira died,” she said. “She did not open my papers; she asked permission first.” Sarita looked at the bag but did not touch it. Anupama said, “I haven’t come to make that letter public in Naira’s memory. I’ve come with a proposal to share two lines concerning the expense of repairing books long ago.”

The original Bengali letter written by Anupama’s grandmother was safe in a chest at her home. Today she had brought not the original but a limited copy authorised by her family. The copy gave the budget heading, date and amount spent on book repairs at an old shelter-school; the home address, private references to family relationships and names of living descendants had been concealed. Sarita asked, “How can the information be checked without the names that have been hidden?” Anupama said, “A custodian authorised to verify it will see the original. This is enough for the gathering.”

Padma asked her to record the language in which the text had originally been written, the date the copy was made and the limits on its use. A representative said, “History would be better served if all such letters became everybody’s property.” Anupama stepped back. “I will provide copies of the lines I have selected for historical work,” she said, “but I have not made this crowd the owner of my grandmother’s private words or of other people’s personal affairs. Even though the letter is in my care, I cannot sell every word of it on the strength of my wishes alone. Other people’s lives are in that letter too.”

Sanket lifted his camera to photograph the letter, then saw Anupama’s face and lowered it. “May I photograph this copy?” Anupama replied, “Write down the intended use first. The two lines about repairs may appear in a research copy; no photographs of the other papers in my bag. And do not print my family’s name on a publicity platform.” Sanket wrote these conditions in his notebook. Tara noted that consent to supply a copy of a letter was not the same as consent to spread its photograph far and wide.

Sarita did not try to find, in the letter, the smell of an old table that Naira might have touched. She remembered that on that earlier day Naira had given Anupama a separate place to sit. But she did not claim that Naira had understood everything in Anupama’s mind. “She did not open the papers without permission,” Sarita said. “That much I have heard, and I can say what I witnessed. I will not claim that she knew all the consequences of your letter.” Anupama nodded; this measured answer brought her comfort.

Just then a local organiser displayed a proposal printed on coloured paper. Its title was “Naira: The Immortal Guardian of the Ghat.” Beneath it was a space for an old photograph by Sanket, along with the sentence “She foresaw everything.” The organiser spoke eagerly. “This title will bring support from outside,” he said. Sarita took the sheet in her hands. For several moments she

looked only at the empty frame for the picture. Then she said, “She was my daughter, not the immortal guardian of the ghat. What she did not see, she did not see. Do not raise donations in a name like this.”

“I want to honour her,” the organiser said. Kabir was standing nearby. “Why should honour require an invented lie?” he asked. “She argued with me. Sometimes she cut me off before I had finished speaking. I must have hurt her too. If you write that she could soothe everyone’s mind, where am I to put my own memories?” The organiser had no immediate answer. In a quiet voice Rukhsana said, “It is not necessary to sell the deaths of children on donation slips for a meal.”

Sarita did not tear up the proposal. “Enter the error on this paper in the accounts register,” she said. “Check the sources and conditions of any donations that may have come in because of this heading; give correct information to people from whom money was taken by telling a false story.” Across the empty picture frame Tara wrote, “No permission for publication.” The programme’s expenditure sheet was kept separately, so that essential repairs to the ghat would not come to a standstill merely because a misleading publicity leaflet had been withdrawn.

Sanket moved a short distance away and switched off his camera. He remembered a day when Naira had corrected a vowel mark in a name written beside a picture, but on that very day had forgotten to ask a worker’s full name herself. Later, when someone objected to the mistake, Naira had apologised. Sanket told the story, and Tara smiled. “I remember another part of that day,” she said. “She did not take a new photograph at once. First she asked how to account for the time during which the work had been held up.” The two memories did not cancel one another out. In the same incident each of them saw different faults and different attempts at correction.

Kabir went up from the ghat to buy tea. The shopkeeper asked, “Why is everybody so quiet today?” Kabir replied, “We aren’t quiet. We’re in the middle of work.” The shopkeeper gave him a bowl of flattened rice with too little salt and joked, “At least there isn’t salt in the tea!” Kabir laughed aloud for the first time. He recalled an old, ordinary quarrel with Naira for which he could find no words suitable for retelling. He did not turn his laughter into a speech from a memorial platform. A person was laughing in the solitude of his own day.

Returning with his tea, he found Sarita sitting on an empty stone step. “My letter is still unsent,” he said. Sarita did not look towards him. “Let it remain so,” she said. Kabir spoke again. “Sometimes I want to read it aloud to her and hear what she would say.” Sarita answered, “She cannot answer. What you wrote belongs to you; I will not invent an answer in her name.” Kabir touched his pocket, though the letter was not in it that day.

Sarita spoke of another memory. “Sometimes I used to be angry with Naira. She would become absorbed in her work and forget the time for work at home. Then I would say, ‘Look to the pot of rice first.’ She would answer that no one’s name was written on a pot as its rightful owner. I did not like that answer then.” Kabir asked, “Do you like hearing it now?” Sarita said, “She is not here for me to hear it now. That is why I have the right to remember yesterday’s quarrels as well.”

The measurements resumed in the afternoon. A disagreement arose between two groups who wanted the permanent route used by washerfolk and the temporary festival decorations to occupy the same space. Tara unfolded the old map. When Urmila was alive, she had walked the path carrying a bundle of clothes and pointed out where it narrowed; old marks corresponding to her measurements could still be found. But the earth had shifted in the new year. Gomati said, “We shall respect the earlier witness, but measure again with the feet that walk here today.” Two workers took new measurements, and the decorations were moved back by two paces.

One member proposed permanently naming a part of the ghat after Urmila. A representative of her family, who had come between work shifts, said, “We have no objection to the name. But the date and the responsible party for the outstanding payment for night washing must remain in the register.” Padma showed the earlier dues page. Part of the payment had already been received; a hearing on the disputed remainder was still pending. Today’s communal ceremony was not a legal settlement of that dispute. The representative agreed to carefully worded recognition on the list, but did not waive the money owed.

When it was time for the songs to begin, Rukhsana asked whether Naira’s name should be added to the list of singers. Sarita said, “Only if there is proof of a song she wrote. Write down the names of those who are singing today.” Phoolmati Pamariya began the melody of a verse she had approved. The beat of Karim Dafali’s drum mingled with the voices of the women cleaning the ghat, but no name bestowed after death was falsely turned into credit for creation. In the middle of the song two children lost the rhythm, looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Anupama began making a final alteration to her permission form. The first draft had said, “Shared copy for the public interest.” Instead of “public interest,” she wanted three specific purposes stated: verification of the history of school-repair expenses, linguistic study of the source, and a limited research copy. No one would put a photograph of the full letter on a publicity website; the custody register would record who held the original; the private lines would stay concealed. “If these rules need to change, ask me again,” she said. Padma wrote the date, and Anupama signed.

Sanket asked, “If one copy of the permission form stays with me, one with Tara and one with Anupama, which one is correct?” Tara replied, “For now, all three of us will hold verified copies of the original consent form. But we must decide at the next meeting how later amendments in all three places are to be reconciled.” Padma did not hide this unresolved question. Spreading copies through the community did not grant a right to open the closed door of a private letter; yet preserving every record in one place could create another monopoly.

On the upper platform of the ghat, a young volunteer sat beneath the shade of a tree adding up the hired equipment costs. He said to Sarita, “Your daughter is gone, yet you have come here today. That takes great courage.” Sarita gave him water. “I came because people slip on this path,” she said, “and because sitting at home will not bring Naira back. If you call me brave, where will I be allowed to weep tomorrow?” The young man closed his account sheet. “I misunderstood,” he said. Sarita answered, “We all still have work to do in understanding.”

By evening the water had fallen a little. The mud removed in cleaning was heaped separately, and the children who looked towards its edge were told it was not a place to play. The attendance for today’s hours was read aloud, and a time announced for correcting omitted names. Urmila’s earlier wages were not added to today’s attendance. Anupama’s shared page was deposited in a sealed envelope with its conditions of public use; the private letter went home with her. From his camera Sanket supplied only the authorised photographs of the ghat’s unsafe slope.

As people began to leave, Tara showed Sarita a photograph from an earlier ceremony. Whether Naira appeared somewhere in the crowd behind the main figures was unclear. Tara said, “I remember her being here that day too, but I cannot identify her in this photograph.” Sarita looked at it from a distance. “Then do not write Naira’s name,” she replied. “Your memory is your own. I will not add my wish to make clear what this photograph does not show clearly.” Tara put the photograph away. This did not diminish her memory.

Before leaving the ghat, Kabir picked up the remaining piece of bamboo. Sarita asked, “Will you take that home?” “It may do for the school table leg,” he said. Sanket laughed. “Will it measure the same in both places?” Kabir measured the bamboo again. “No. I shall cut it again,” he said. Tara laughed at this ordinary answer. Anupama’s envelope, Urmila’s unpaid dues and Naira’s absence each remained in its own place. Nevertheless, there was a real possibility of mending one leg of a table.

Sarita returned home at night. Naira’s notebook remained locked in its chest; Kabir’s unsent letter was kept apart in his own possession; no new permission had been granted to publish the private messages on the phone. Before washing the brass plate, she rinsed away the earth settled on its

underside. Today at the ghat people had measured Urmila's path again, Anupama had shared two lines of a letter, and four people had remembered Naira in four different ways. None of this had changed Naira's death. Sarita washed the plate and set it to dry. She gave the empty place no new name.

Chapter 215 · Distributed Records

Gomati Beldar drew a short white-chalk line across the wooden plank laid at the edge of the pond. It was a line for measurement, not for writing a name. It was a dawn in Chaitra, 2042, and the fourth communal desilting in four years was about to begin. The morning air carried the smell of old pond silt; dried stalks of makhana were caught in one corner. Planting a bamboo staff, Gomati showed them the spot. “We shall lift the silt here basket by basket, but your feet will sink in this part. Make a firm walkway first.” A new worker asked, “Do we fill in the list of names first, or lay the walkway?” Gomati replied, “Writing down a name will not save a foot that gets trapped.”

Tara stood at the school door with sheets in three colours: white for accounts open to the public, blue for authorised verification, and a mud-coloured cover for private particulars. When Sanket arrived with his camera, he first asked, “If the white sheet may be inspected, may it also be photographed?” Tara said, “The right to inspect is not the same as the right to distribute far and wide. The rules being drawn up today will be put to a vote. Until then, use the camera only to document and measure the damaged bank of the pond.” Sanket put the camera in his bag. He remembered the two lines from Anupama Sen’s letter the previous week: permission to supply a copy had not meant permission to publish the entire letter.

Sarita arrived carrying water in a small lota. Naira’s notebook was shut inside the chest at home; there was no reason to open it today. She set water out for everyone starting work at the pond, then wrote her own name in the work register. Gomati laughed. “Will you count your own hours too?” Sarita said, “I shall record the hours I work. But putting down my name does not by itself decide whether I am to receive wages today. First we must agree on the nature of the work and the rate.” They left the first entry in the attendance sheet blank. Its heading read, “Actual time work began.”

Rama Karn came from the municipal office with a file tied by two cotton ribbons. The edges of the old papers had yellowed, but the dates and receipt numbers at the top were still legible. Before opening the file Rama said, “This is not the original government register. It contains my written objection from that time, its acknowledged copy, and a certified copy of the request for correction. The originals must remain in the office under the law. I cannot abandon custody there and make someone here a new sole owner.” A young man immediately asked, “Then how can the community keep hold of the truth?” Rama replied, “Truth is not merely the key to a cupboard. There must be a way to see where the original is, when it was changed, who authorised the change, and where the earlier form of the altered page survives.”

Rama’s file recorded the year in which pressure had been brought to change Sarita’s identity quietly at an official’s private request. Rama had

demanded a written order and made no new entry without a signature. A copy of the objection bearing the office stamp survived; on another was a handwritten note: “Oral pressure not accepted.” Rama paused for a moment as she read it. “I was afraid then,” she said, “for my job, and also that my own hand might again corrupt the identity of someone who was alive. Do not turn this into a tale of heroism today. If my colleague’s name is added to this page without permission, we shall be repeating the old wrong.”

At the edge of the gathering stood a representative of a printing company, who produced a glossy proposal. He said that if every copy was kept in a single secure repository, none would be lost again; members could obtain certificates instantly on their mobile phones. “If the network goes down tomorrow, who will be able to show my working hours?” came a question. The representative said, “A request could be made to the office.” Rama asked another: “And if someone cannot afford the fee, or refuses to hand over a private identity to the company, will that person lose access to an old receipt?” The proposal contained no answer. The representative said he could ask head office. It was not approved on the spot.

As soon as the first basket was lifted from the third bank of Barki Pond, the strap of a worker’s sandal broke. Sarita found the worker somewhere to sit, and Gomati sent two people to finish the safe walkway. The contractor’s clerk, who had been urging them to begin quickly without it, grew angry. “If we are delayed today, the whole programme may fall behind,” he said. Gomati replied, “The clock that measures working hours runs here, not in the contractor’s mind. Time stopped for safety will be recorded separately. Do not make workers invisible by keeping them standing here, merely waiting.” Tara entered the time of the safety stoppage on the blue sheet; the public sheet recorded only its total duration and cause.

Before noon the workers’ attendance was reconciled. Each person held a small numbered slip of their own, on the back of which the starting time, rest periods and actual duration of work were being recorded. The public board displayed the work team, total hours, applicable rate and amount due in payment, but not private phone numbers, home addresses or bank account numbers. An older woman asked, “If I want my name on the public board, why should you stop me?” Tara replied, “Your name may appear with your consent. The person who fears violence at home, or does not want her whereabouts to be public, has an equal right.” The older woman marked the consent box for printing her name; the young woman sitting beside her left that box blank. Both were entitled to pay for the same number of hours.

Ramani Bind, a fisherwoman, inspected the temporary channel through which the water from the desilting work was to be discharged. “If the silt goes this way, it will catch in the fishing nets tomorrow,” she said. She answered the objection swiftly: “Cleaning the pond four times does not mean the water was the same on all four occasions.” Measurements were taken at the site, and

two discharge points were changed. The reason was entered on the public work sheet, but neither a private letter from Ramani's mother's family nor the old name for the Gangi used in it became evidence for these measurements. Respecting the limits of testimony did not weaken the day's decision.

At the school Rama laid three copies from her file before them. The first showed the office receipt number; the second was the public summary of Sarita's earlier objection; the third was a limited copy of Rama's original handwritten refusal. Tara asked, "How will we recognise it if someone alters the public summary later?" Sanket said, "Put the date of revision, the earlier reference number and the copyist's name on every copy. Keep copies in two separate places. If a difference appears, check again against the register of the original issuing office." Padma added, "And if the objection letter is private, obtain the person's permission before showing the original. Verification is not a licence to break down everyone's door."

A volunteer said, "This is terribly slow. It would be simpler to work from a single file." "Simpler for whom?" came the reply. "For the officer who stamps a changed entry? For the worker who finds an incorrect payment tomorrow? For a company that decides the price of giving another person a copy?" Then the speaker continued in a measured voice. "Three copies also bring the risk of three different falsehoods. That is why a procedure for identifying discrepancies is essential. A multitude of copies is not justice by itself; there must be an open history of corrections."

In the afternoon a worker brought his slip to Gomati. His name had been entered with an incorrect vowel sign, and the same thirty-minute rest period had been deducted twice from his working hours. Instead of immediately increasing the hours, Gomati compared his slip, a co-worker's time note and the team's board. The calculation was corrected: there had been only one rest period. Tara wrote a second, corrective line without striking out the original until it vanished. The worker read the new amount on his small slip. "Will the paper with the earlier mistake be kept?" he asked. "Yes," Tara said. "Otherwise, how will you explain tomorrow that there was a mistake, and how it was corrected?"

One question remained on Rama's morning sheet. The identity of the officer who had issued the oral instruction was contained in a witness's private note. One group wanted the name read out at the meeting that day. Rama said plainly, "Where a substantiated administrative inquiry is possible, we shall give the record to the competent office, not turn it into an accusation sheet for a crowd. A written copy of my refusal is available for restricted use in the public interest; it does not settle the whole question of guilt." Sarita supported her. The investigation into the erroneous death mark against her name and her withheld labour dues was proceeding separately; today's vote was not a court in its place.

The wind changed in the afternoon. As the team carrying pond mud returned along the rear path, a child began to step over the rope and enter the work area. Ruhani called out to stop the child, then took the child by the hand and brought them outside. “There is treacherous silt there,” she said. The child asked irritably, “Why isn’t my name on the attendance list? I carried two baskets too.” Gomati crouched beside the child. “We shall remember that you worked,” she said, “but it was wrong to put a child to dangerous labour. Giving that work a name does not make the wrong right. Time for study and play must be protected separately.” The person who had told the child to lift the baskets was called to account. The breach of safety rules was recorded, without putting the child’s private identity on the public board.

Several months after that desilting, preparations for a vote began at the Kartik gathering for public readings, open accounts and songs. Padma did not turn the proposal into five long speeches. She showed three concrete documents: the public account of work, the closed cover protecting private particulars, and the numbered history of corrections. “Where will each of these papers be kept?” an elderly man asked. Rama replied, “Government originals with the competent office; certified public copies at the school, the workers’ committee and the local collection. The original private consent form with the person entitled to it, or with a custodian chosen by that person. If a correction is made, all three public custodians must be informed; the earlier version is to be marked, not destroyed.” A young woman added at once, “And what if someone wants permission to withdraw their own copy?” Padma said, “We shall stop further distribution, give an account of copies already available, and explain clearly the exceptions for legally mandatory records kept in the public interest.”

The company representative stood up again. He asked how long the community could afford to maintain its own copies. It was a fair question. This time Sanket made no enthusiastic speech. The costs of repairing cupboards, cloth to protect papers from damp, and trained custodians had to be counted. Gomati said, “Do not call this all voluntary service and push it into the women’s spare time. Custodianship is work too.” Tara wrote down the estimated expense; the full amount for the year had not been raised. A proposal was made to pay for the first three months from the open accounts, and to vote again on future funding.

Two separate consent forms were drawn up. On the first, a citizen could choose between a public name, a number only, and a confidential entry. The second specified the limits on the use of photographs, stories, songs or personal statements. The example of Anupama Sen’s restricted copy of a letter was read out, but her private Bengali letter was not opened. Kabir was present at the gathering. “I feel emotionally close to Naira’s phone,” he said clearly. “That does not give me the right to hand out all her private messages.” No

proposal included a line calling the dead daughter an all-seeing guardian. Sarita brushed a dry leaf from the ground with her hand.

A disagreement now arose over the voting method. Some wanted a show of hands, but some workers could not safely voice opposition before their contractors. Gomati said, “Why must someone whose livelihood can be threatened tomorrow have their yes or no displayed before everyone?” Eventually a secret ballot was prescribed for eligible adult members on the register; open discussion and the right to submit a written minority opinion would remain separate. Children could express their views on the rules, but those views were not falsely counted as adult votes. Tara showed everyone the two seals on the ballot box.

The name of one woman who had worked on the desilting appeared in the previous year’s public attendance, but this year she did not want her place of work to be publicly disclosed. A contractor said, “If names are hidden, false hours can be added.” Gomati said, “My team will observe the time worked; authorised members verifying payments will match the names. Work does not disappear because a name is not written on a board beside a public road.” The woman herself marked the number on her slip. The scope of access for a lawful official inspection was set out on a separate page.

Two members and two observers sat down for the count. The number of ballots, the reasons for invalid slips and the tally of dissenting votes were read before everyone; no individual vote was linked to a name. The proposal for distributed copies was approved by a majority. The dissenters’ sentence—“We fear that multiple copies will multiply errors”—was recorded in full in the minutes. Padma said, “The disagreement has not been erased. The new rules are now responsible for testing that fear.” Tara gave the first three verified copies of the rules to three different custodians of cupboards. Each page bore a date of receipt and a limit on use, not an assertion of absolute ownership.

Near evening the amended attendance from Chaitra’s fourth desilting was read once more. The times on two slips had been corrected, one payment figure remained incomplete, and one worker wanted the money paid into an account rather than in cash. Gomati read out the total hours. Rama said that issuing a payment order and having the money arrive were two different things. An acknowledgement of receipt was marked only where payment had actually been made. Where money owed had not arrived in an account that day, the amount remained under “Outstanding”; it was not marked “Paid” to make the programme appear successful. The whole pond had not been cleared during Chaitra. The record of work on the safely measured bank and responsibility for the remaining work were still preserved.

Rama put her final signature on the public summary of her private letter of refusal. It gave the date of “Oral pressure not accepted,” the office concerned and the inquiry receipt number; the witness’s protected identity remained

elsewhere. Beside the public copy lay the history of revisions: no one would get away with silently changing a name. “Distributing my papers today has not completed the inquiry into that earlier order,” Rama said. “But if someone claims tomorrow that I quietly agreed, the community can verify the existence of my written refusal.” Sarita did not snatch the page from Rama’s hand; she listened carefully as it was read aloud.

A new list was hung on the wall outside the school. Some people were identified by name, others by number; beside these were the applicable rates, total hours worked, the correction procedure and the locations of the three public copies. Children stood reading the list. One girl asked, “Will keeping papers in three cupboards stop people telling lies?” Sanket replied, “No. But if the page in one cupboard is secretly changed, there will be another to compare it with.” The girl asked again, “What if all three are changed?” Tara said, “Then we shall also check people’s slips, the history of the original office record, and testimony. No system can replace human vigilance.”

Sarita began carrying the evening water home. A woman holding her receipt said, “My name isn’t outside, but I shall show this slip at home.” Sarita asked, “To whom?” The woman laughed. “To whoever says tomorrow that all I did was stand watching the spectacle at the pond.” Another woman asked if she would have a chance to learn to work with the measuring team at the next desilting. Gomati said, “You saw the measurements today. Next time you hold the staff and I shall reconcile the figures.” A small responsibility passed from one hand to another.

Kabir was tightening the remaining bamboo piece against the school table’s unsteady leg. Tara entered carrying the acknowledgements for all three copies. “These papers will not open the private messages on Naira’s phone,” she said to Kabir. “I know,” Kabir replied. “And if you ever want to open them?” Tara paused. Kabir answered his own question. “Wanting is not consent. Let that distinction remain in the written rules.” He tightened the bamboo too far and the table leg went crooked. They both laughed; Kabir loosened it and straightened it again.

In the first darkness of night Rama did not hand a single young man at the school the cupboard keys. Instead, she entered the names of different custodians on three separate receipts. No single hand received every key. Yet the unfinished inquiry into the original register, unpaid wages for the pond work, Sarita’s earlier withheld dues and questions about future new uses of private records all remained. As she left, Sarita looked once towards the pond. The day’s disturbance was settling in the water; a bamboo peg from an earlier measurement still stood at the edge. She lifted her empty lota. It was time to put the rice on at home, and the day’s vote had not brought Naira back.

Chapter 216 · Kurukshetram of the Inner Mind

Sarita slid two dry sticks into the mouth of the stove. The fire glowed red for a moment, then hid beneath the ashes again. Instead of blowing on it, she used the tongs to clear the embers. Smoke came towards her eyes and she drew the end of her sari across her face, stepping slightly back. An empty lota stood at one side of the courtyard, waiting to be filled. The Kartik evening was deepening; the voting at the school was over, but the rice had not yet been put on to cook. Sarita opened the rice tin and scattered a handful of grains over a plate. She picked out a single black pebble.

Naira had once sat beside this plate, moving her fingers through the rice on the pretext of sorting the grains. In her haste she would throw away rice and pebbles together, and Sarita would make her sort them again. Today the plate lay spread out, with an empty space beside it. Sarita reached for a second plate, then closed the lid of the old iron tin. Her daughter was dead. No philosophical book, death register or new archive was needed to understand that much; but understanding it did not cook the rice.

Kabir's voice came from outside. "Shall I fill the water for you?" He was returning after fixing the unsteady school table. Without turning, Sarita said, "The second pulley at the well has jammed. Turn it carefully." Kabir took up the lota. As the pulley turned, the old rope made a faint grating sound. The first stream of water spilled over the rim of the lota and wet the earth. Kabir filled it and set it inside, but did not speak Naira's name. The silence between them was not a prohibition against saying anything. There was work to be done at that moment, and it came first.

As Sarita washed the rice, Tara and Sanket reached the door. In Sanket's palm were two small bamboo pegs intended for the back of a cupboard. Tara showed her a folded paper. "The public copies of today's vote count have reached all three places. But one date in the earlier labour sheet does not match the date on another copy. We want to fix a time tomorrow to examine and correct it." Sarita did not seize the paper. "Does it contain anyone's private name?" she asked. "No, only numbers and dates," Tara said. "Then put it on the table. I shall read the page while keeping an eye on the cooking fire, but tonight I will not write that anyone's outstanding wages have been paid."

Sanket tried to laugh. "The vote has taken place, and you still don't trust my records?" Sarita said, "I trust you; that is why I check them. If I did not trust you, I would not even want to look at your papers." Now Sanket's laughter was genuine. He put the bamboo pegs behind the door. Nobody was thinking of proclaiming that the happiness of the new rules had swept away every old anxiety. But this much had changed among the three of them: the person who asked a question was no longer expelled from the gathering.

When the rice fell into the pot of water, a fine froth rose to the surface. Sarita left the lid half open. “Tara, will you eat?” Tara said, “I told them at home I would be late. But the smell of rice is weakening my promise.” Kabir called from outside, “In this house a promise may be changed, provided you say so first.” Sarita smiled. It was a small smile; Naira had not returned in it, nor was it a rebellion against memory. Sarita lowered the fire a little so that the rice would not catch at the bottom.

Gomati Beldar came to the doorway. The dark colour of dried silt was still caught beneath her fingernails. “Tomorrow morning we shall measure the pond’s outlet again,” she said. “The two co-workers of the labourer whose slip shows a different date today give different accounts of the time. We shall hear both before correcting the slip.” Sarita moved a low wooden stool beside the stove. Gomati sat down, but did not open the work ledger in her bag. “I haven’t come here to count hours today,” she said. “I’ve come for a drink of water.”

Sarita gave Gomati a full glass. After taking a sip, Gomati said, “We are learning to record everyone’s hours fairly when it comes to paid work. Who will count the work done at home? You have sorted rice, lit the fire, heated the water. Nobody stamps a seal on that labour.” Sarita replied, “Before stamping anything, think about who will cook the rice here every day. I cannot always do it alone.” Tara immediately got up to look for bowls. Kabir said he would wash the plates. Sanket asked, “What shall I do?” Gomati said, “You count the children: how many plates will be needed.”

Amid this ordinary laughter they heard sounds from the distant riverbank. The season of heavy rain had passed, yet the water, changing course, was still bringing pieces of wood to shore. On the far side of the Tilwaha, the first cooking fire of the night was being lit in a settlement. One section of the safe walkway at the ghat had been built to measurements taken in Urmila’s time; another had been measured again that year. Her family’s outstanding claim for night wages remained on a separate page. People could walk on the path, but the convenience did not close the account of Urmila’s death or the unpaid remainder.

Ruhani arrived with salt and two green chillies in a little container. “The shelter dog ate half a roti at midday,” she said. “Its leg is still weak; Javed won’t drag it about to put on a show.” Sarita asked, “And Javed’s performance?” Ruhani replied, “Two children have asked to see the shadow play tomorrow. The ticket money won’t cover the rent; the performer’s dues are entered separately.” Sanket added, “The bamboo puppet he made has one ear much larger than the other.” Ruhani laughed. “That’s why the children like it best.”

Steam from the rice condensed into fine drops of water on the window. Sarita wiped them away with a finger and opened it. Outside, the night sky

seemed to have no end; it could prompt thoughts of planets and stars thousands of years old and of innumerable lives. But drops of water still stood on the window frame, the fire was still burning in the stove, and Naira was still absent. No invocation of the boundless sky could fill the empty seat in this house. Sarita left the window open so that the smoke could escape.

When Maithili Mishra appeared at the door, everyone moved a little closer together to make room. In her hand she held the approved copy of the introductory page for the new book. She reached out to give it to Sarita, then hesitated. “It is time to eat,” she said. Sarita replied, “Then leave the paper over there. Words won’t run away.” Maithili sat on a low stool and looked towards the place at the back where Naira used to leave a small branch to dry. She said, “Printing the mistake I have admitted does not repay the full cost of that mistake.” Sarita said, “The account of the cost will remain open. Today, over dinner, we need not hear that sentence ten more times.”

Padma arrived from the school with a small wooden slate in her hand. Four words had been written on it: direct perception, testimony, inference, imagination. “The children have argued about these again,” she said. “One says that everything the eye sees is direct perception. Another asks, ‘What counts as direct perception for a blind person?’” Gomati said, “My hand knows the depth of silt. How can the eye alone discover it?” Padma turned the slate face down. “We shall begin tomorrow’s lesson with that question,” she said. No invocation of an old scripture brought the child’s question to an end.

Running a finger along the rim of a plate, Kabir said, “Was this Naira’s plate?” Sarita looked at him. “Who in this house ever had one plate that was always theirs?” she said. “Sometimes she ate from it, sometimes you did, sometimes a patient who came from outside. But she had a habit of licking the dal from one corner of her bowl.” Kabir laughed, and a long silence followed the laughter. In his bag was still the letter marked “Private—Unsent.” It was not something to be read aloud to anyone today.

Suddenly two children peered in through the doorway. One asked, “Will the school be open tomorrow?” Tara said, “It will. Why?” The girl replied, “We want to see the keys to the new cupboards.” Sanket said, “The keys aren’t all kept in one place.” Wrinkling her nose, the girl asked, “Then what if someone loses a key?” Padma said, “You’ll learn who is responsible for opening the door and where the second copy is kept. We shall read books as well as count keys.” The children burst into laughter. For them the first lesson in justice was not a weighty speech but the time the school would open tomorrow.

Gomati took out another sheet of paper. It carried a worker’s number, not a name. “Here is the matter,” she said. “The amount is the same on the public copy approved by the vote, but on one custodian’s copy the payment box has been marked by mistake. I noticed it only when I looked again. The original

proof of payment has not arrived.” Tara immediately began to rise. Sarita stopped her with a hand. “Write a proper note tonight. Tomorrow a correction notice must reach all three copies; do not say ‘Paid’ for someone who has received no money. But eat now.” Gomati wrote the time on the back of the slip. The decision about the work was small, clear and unfinished.

Kabir asked, “Will so many people have to assemble again tomorrow for a single wrong mark?” Rama Karn, who had just reached the doorway, replied, “For the person whose money it is, that mark may mean a whole day’s food. And if you correct one wrong copy but leave the old mistake in another, the next officer will read that one again.” She did not come inside. She merely entered tomorrow’s verification time in her ledger. Sarita urged her, “Have some rice too.” Rama said, “Someone is waiting for me at home. I shall come tomorrow.” They let her go; nobody’s time was taken away in the name of kindness.

A slight breeze stirred outside the door. The stove flame lengthened for a moment, and the shadows of those seated against the wall grew now large, now small. They were reminded of Javed’s shadow play. Sanket laughed. “Look how tall we become when the lamp is placed a little lower.” Gomati answered, “A longer shadow doesn’t put more rice on the plate.” Ruhani said, “But it can make for more laughter.” Nobody was defeated in this small argument.

Sarita opened the first cooking pot. The rice was well cooked, though a few grains had stuck to the bottom. She loosened them from the sides with a wooden spoon. Naira used to take grains stuck like these and make a little serving of crisped rice for herself. The memory came suddenly. Sarita paused with the spoon in her hand. Kabir watched her hand but asked nothing. She moved the spoon again. She put the crisped rice in a small bowl, which was not reserved in anyone’s name. Whoever wanted it could eat it. The memory of an absent person did not become a rule set against the hunger of the living.

As Maithili gathered up the pages of her book, she said, “One question remains in the teachers’ room. May we change the examples when explaining the difficult words of the shastras to children?” Padma said, “The examples have already changed. Now see whether the children’s objections find a place in the next edition of the book.” Sarita listened. Vachaspati’s Bhamati, Udayana’s pūrvapakṣa and Gangesha’s reflections on the means of knowledge had not become a single answer to every question for her. Yet this much had happened: at the school in Videhapur, no one’s question was thrown out because of their birth or occupation.

Taking her first mouthful of rice, Gomati said, “There is a little too little salt this time.” Sarita raised her eyes. “Then there is salt on the plate.” Gomati whispered, “Now that I have the right to criticise, do I also have the duty to pick up the salt myself?” They all laughed. The laughter did not erase the

year's floods, the errors in attendance, the waiting for court proceedings, or the absence of anyone who had died. It was merely this small freedom: that living people, while eating, could let a light remark escape their lips.

Sarita served everyone rice a second time. Kabir said, "Sit down. I'll serve." She handed him the spoon. At first Kabir put too much on Ruhani's plate; she said, "Take half of it back. I only want this much." Without taking offence, Kabir placed half the rice not back in the cooking pot but in a separate clean bowl, to be eaten later. Sarita laughed. Sharing food did not mean imposing the same quantity on everyone. It also meant having the right to say how hungry one was. For the first time she sat down on a low stool with her own plate before her.

At that moment Sarita remembered the first notice of her own death, when a document had recorded her as dead although she was alive. She remembered too how often Naira had lost patience with her during the long struggle to have that record changed. In the end, the woman whose life had been restored in the register had a daughter whose body had not survived. No one could call that reversal a just symmetry. Sarita felt the warmth of her plate against her palm. Tonight, for her, the steam of rice was proof that she was alive; it was not proof that Naira was alive.

Ruhani rose when she had finished eating. It would soon be time for medicine at the shelter. Sarita asked, "Will you take a little more rice?" Ruhani said, "Only as much as I need. Leave the rest here. It may help if someone comes hungry tomorrow." She took rice in a small container and closed its lid properly. Saying that medicine had been obtained for Javed's injured dog, she went out through the door. No god stopped her to give her a reward; no new calamity fell from the sky to block her path. She went to give the medicine.

Before returning towards the school, Tara stopped at the threshold. "Is Naira's notebook still closed?" she asked quietly. Sarita replied, "Yes. What there was permission to make public has been put aside separately. The rest is hers." Tara said, "There was a question I had still to answer with her." Sarita asked, "What was the question?" Tara thought for a moment. "She used to say, 'How do we hear the person whose name is not on the list?'" Sarita answered, "We ask those who are alive. For those who are not, we read what survives of their words, within its limits. And those whom we could never ask —we acknowledge that emptiness."

Tara went outside. Sarita had spoken an answer to the question, but the possibility of sitting down with Naira again to discuss it had not reopened. She did not go to the chest that held the notebook. It was not necessary to bring out the objects of grief every night; leaving them closed did not make the grief less true. Kabir was washing the plates. "Where shall I put this bowl?" he asked. Sarita said, "On the shelf over there. We shall need it again tomorrow."

Everyday things had their places; there was no place left for Naira's body from which she could call out and come back.

Through the window they could see the dark waters of the Tilwaha. Many drops of the river's water were rising as vapour, many filtering through the earth, many joining another current far away. The children would learn about these transformations in class tomorrow. Sarita knew that the cycle of nature was not an answer to Naira's death. Water changes form; a dead daughter does not return with the same voice, the same body, the same dissent. Set against the vastness of the universe, one person's loss does not become small. It remains the loss of one person—irreparable.

Kabir turned the washed plate upside down to dry. "Shall I go?" he asked. Sarita said, "Stay if you feel like it, or go home if you wish. The road is still wet; be careful." Kabir sat down. He had no final sentence for a letter today. He could think about his mother, about Subhadra, about Naira, and about the different bonds connecting him to this house, but there was no pressure to complete the unfinished evidence of his birth in a single evening. Sarita did not make Kabir's decision for him.

Sarita covered the rice that remained. The metal handle of the pot was hot, so she folded a piece of old cloth around it to grip it. Kabir had left the door half closed, allowing the breeze to enter. Sarita noticed a grain of rice that had fallen beside the rim of a plate. She picked it up and did not throw it into the stove ash; she placed it in a small bowl. Naira's empty place was not filled by that grain. Sarita lifted her plate, served Kabir a little more rice, and began to eat her own meal, listening to the river flowing beyond the window.



KURUKSHETRAM OF THE INNER MIND

The battlefield is within.

Three currents of time meet in this Maithili novel: the ancient epics, the foundational debates of philosophy, and the imagined lives of the modern age.

Across eighteen Parvas and 216 chapters, set in the town of Videhapur, the story keeps pace with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata while a philosophical map of Bhamati, Nyayakusumanjali and Tattvachintamani runs beneath it. In kitchens and committee rooms, on riverbanks and railway squares, ordinary people weigh promise against burden, voice against record, and home against the world.

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