The Feast of Lord Serpent

1

What?” I asked, snapping up my head from the Snakes and Ladders board. My pawn stood three steps behind the mouth of a snake.

“Feast of Lord Serpent,” Ruhi said.

“What’s that?” I picked up the dice, rolled it on my hand, squeezed my eyes shut, and whispered, “Please, lord Serpent, no three.” I dropped the white dice. It rolled thrice on the board, two, then a one, and the cube stopped with three dots on the surface.

“Damn it,” I said, slapping the floor. Ruhi and Kabir laughed.

“Gotcha,” Ruhi said, picking up my pawn and placing it back at the bottom line.

I glanced at the inside of the shrine of Lord Serpent, where we sat. I frowned.

Come on, Lord, not this.

The serpent idol sat motionless in the centre of the inner sanctum. Watching me and my friends and the village beyond.

What’s the feast of Lord Serpent?

“My father said the feast is tomorrow,” Ruhi added.

“Shame, you know nothing about it,” Kabir said. “I have known since childhood. My grandpa says he has been waiting for this festival since his teenage years.”

“Even my father says so. He says only lucky people get the chance. My mother says Lord Serpent himself will come to bless us.”

I scratched my head, my eyes brightened, looking once again at the idol. Will he come?

“And his offerings will give us power.” Ruhi grinned. “Powers? What kind of powers?” I asked. “Unlimited money.”

“That’s not a power.”

“My mother says that by drinking his holy offering, women can gain immense beauty for a lifetime,” Ruhi said.

“Sad you won’t be one of them,” I laughed. The words slipped out before I could stop them. Ruhi shot me a death stare. I pressed my lips together, trying to stop giggling, but a snort escaped anyway.

“It’s true, though,” Kabir said. We both slapped our hands together, neither of us controlling our laughter. I watched her skin. Warm beige. White patches stuck in a cloud shape.

Ruhi looked out at the pond behind the shrine. A breeze skimmed past the water, catching her hair. It was the only place in the village where the summer heat felt like a blessing.

“Okay. I’m leaving.” She said, standing up. “Oy, wait. I was kidding.”

She wiped her eyes as she stood. My stomach dropped. Was she crying? Damn.

“Wait,” I said, pulling her hand.

She tried to snatch her arm, but my grip was stronger. I looked at her face. Pale streaks glimmered in sunlight. It spread on both of her cheeks.

My mother said it happened because a snake bit Ruhi’s mother while she was pregnant. Ruhi’s father believed that the snake came to bless them. So they never had a check-up, having faith that she would survive. She did survive, but her daughter was born with pale streaks. They took it as a blessing, but my mother thought she would look more beautiful without the patches. I thought the same.

“Hey,” I whispered.

“Leave me alone!” She snapped, wrenching herself ahead. She was stronger than I thought.

“Ruhi.” Kabir got up. “We were kidding.”

“Never talk to me again.” She jolted her hand and broke free from my grip. Before I could catch her, she ran towards her home.

Kabir stood beside me, sighing. “You made her upset.” He said.

I watched her disappear, feeling my chest grow heavy with the words I should not have uttered. If someone were to say I’m fat, I would beat the shit out of them, but I never imagined how it would be for another person. Now I know.

“Say who?” I looked at him and started walking towards home. “You’re going too?” He asked.

I shrugged my shoulders without looking at him. “At least complete the game.”

“You won,” I said and left him behind.

“Slow down, big kid.” I heard his voice. But all I cared about was apologising to her, and that would take time. She would make me stand on her door for hours without responding.

There were fields on either side of the road, and a chain of uneven trees formed a border between them as I walked ahead. Sunshine glimmered on my face, cutting through its canopies. A huge arch welcomed me inside the village, where all the houses were located. Spread across four lanes.

Before apologising to Ruhi, I wanted to know more about the feast. So I turned to my lane. A line of houses stood on either side; a few had two storeys, while others consisted of only a room with a barn beside. Three cows stood under it, and the air smelled of their dung. They looked at me as I passed, telling me I was no different from them.

“Whatever,” I muttered and walked into the house next to it.

“Carry this.” My mother said, giving me a tub full of clothes. “Follow me.”

Shit, my time’s gone now. I followed her to the ropes.

“Hold it tight,” she said. “If it touches the dirt, you’re re-washing it.” “Fine,” I muttered.

She started hanging my pants in it. The sunshine fell straight into my eyes. It was hot here. I hate summer, but at the same time, I love it. Vacations were the best part of it. Hanging out beside the pond was the other. But burning myself here? I doubted whether schools should shift to winter vacations. But if that happens, I would have to attend school in this heat. Hell no.

“We have a festival tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her voice lifted. “Yes. First time in centuries.” “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t know?” She asked. “Are kids not talking about that?” “No. Ruhi and Kabir told me.”

“Son, you’ll see wonders happening tomorrow.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. Fire crackers? Stars on the earth? Was Lord Serpent coming to see us?

“It means blessings. The holy book says every five hundred years, Lord Serpent comes to our village. Blesses his people with all their wishes.”

“Is it real?” My mind had already started searching for my inner wishes. I want to be thin. Handsome too. And powerful in math.

“Aye. Yes. Yes.”

“What’s your wish?” I asked.

“Mine?” She thought for a while. “I want to be happy.” She said with a huge smile. “Aren’t you already?” I asked.

My mother glanced toward the dark interior of the house. Inside, my grandmother lay in her wheelchair, coughing weakly. My mother lowered her eyes. She spent her days wheeling my grandmother from room to room. I helped her, too, sometimes.

My mother rubbed my head.

“Of course I’m.” She grinned. “Your happiness, son. And hers.” “Oh.”

She said nothing. Only the sound of the breeze and clothes hanging on the rope, as well as the cow’s mooing from the neighbour.

I thought about what my father would have wanted. His life?

I hoped he was alive to be part of the feast; it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. When he died, my mother told me he went to Lord Serpent’s home. Well, he had already taken his blessings, then.

2

I was going to Ruhi’s. The sun was sinking, painting clouds orange before dying.

Uncle Keshav was heading towards the shrine. Accompanied by two men, including his elder son, Ravi.

“Hello, uncle,” I said, passing by him, nodding to Ravi.

“Nivan.” Keshav stopped. “How are you, son?” He put his hands on my shoulder, with a huge grin on his face.

“I’m good,” I said, stretching my lips.

“Good, I met you here. Will you help me carry these bottles inside the shrine?” One of those two men held a bag full of tiny plastic bottles.

“Go with Ravi, son.” Keshav rubbed my hair. “Good lad. Lord Serpent will give you extra blessings tomorrow.”

A grin passed on my face. Extra blessings. I took the bag “Follow me,” Ravi said.

My chest felt shackled. What about Ruhi? I still owed her an apology. I didn’t want to see her straight away at the feast. We were reaching towards the shrine. A few more minutes and I’ll see her.

I glanced across, looking at Kabir’s farm. Kabir was there, standing beside his father. His father’s finger hung mid-air, pointed at him. A harsh voice echoed in the air. I could not make out the words, but it sounded like a warning. Kabir’s eyes dropped to the ground, and his hands clutched the hem of his t-shirt.

When his father turned towards the other side of the field, he looked around, spotting me. I waved. His hands raised a little but dropped as his father commanded him to bring something.

My mind raced once again, thinking about how to begin my conversation with Ruhi. I walked up the stairs. Ravi halted, turning to me.

“Give it to me.” He raised his hand towards the bag. I passed it to him.

“Thanks,” Ravi said. “You may go now.”

He did not wait for my response and headed towards the small door beside the idol of Lord Serpent. I looked at the idol, bowing my head and whispered a silent prayer. His yellow eyes stared at me. Empty and soulless.

I turned to go, but halted, wondering what was inside that small door. I never noticed it until now. I took my steps ahead. Strolling. Tilting my head to see inside. The door was closed. But I did not hear it clicking.

I pushed the door. To my surprise, the door was not heavy, a light, thin layer of iron. Inside was complete darkness. A white light flickered across the room. Ravi’s flashlight.

I sat on my knees and pushed my head inside the darkness, and a second later, I was standing inside. The room was tiny. I could see Ravi’s silhouette. He was on the other side of the room, unaware of my presence.

Hissing echoed from every corner of that room. I wondered where exactly it was coming from. It didn’t take long for me to sense something slithering across my feet.

I glanced at the floor. At first, my eyes saw nothing but darkness. Then a faint yellow pinprick moved across. I realised it wasn't just one yellow pinprick skimming across the room, but dozens of them. Hissing. Slithering. Darkness had given way to too many shadows. I was mistaken in counting a dozen when there were hundreds of them.

One of them slid across my feet. Sending tremors inside my body. It was cold. Smooth. My leg jerked, and I kicked that snake with all my force to the other side. It landed among others and started hissing once again.

Another snake was slithering near me. I took a step backwards, throwing my hands behind me in the hope of finding the door. It was steps behind. The snake was an inch away as I raised my leg to kick it just like the previous one.

"Don't move." Ravi's words echoed inside that small room.

My eyes froze, looking at him. I scanned that long, living rope, yellow eyes of it staring at mine.

A tear welled in my lids. Blurring the image of that wild animal. I squeezed shut my eyes. If I don't look at it, it won't come near me. But it's hissing ringed in my ears.

I opened my eyes, looking at Ravi, who was carefully walking towards me. "Save me," I begged with quivering jaws. "Save me, please."

My legs were quaking now. The snake pulled its neck into an S-shaped coil, ready to strike. Two long fangs extended from its mouth.

My entire life ran through my eyes within that moment. My breath caught in my throat. It will bite. I shut my eyes. Lord Serpent. Save me. Lord Serpent. Please. Save me.

If Today Lord Serpent doesn't save me, then he does not exist. If he saves me, then he exists. I decided.

Ravi was facing me as I opened my eyes. His hands held the neck of that snake. Both of its jaws open in midair, struggling to keep it shut.

"I told ya to go," Ravi studied me.

Life rushed inside my body while energy drained. "T-Thank you," I muttered.

He nodded and threw that snake away.

"Go now." He said dead serious and walked back to where he had stood before.

My legs shuddered as I walked towards the stairs. Heart racing. Hands unsteady. I collapsed on the platform beside the stairs, almost crying, pulling the hem of my pants, scanning for any bite marks.

Did it bite me? Did it bite me?

I threw away my slippers, looking for a bite mark on my sole. Thankfully, nothing. I kicked my legs, still feeling the sensation of crawling across them.

I glanced back at the room. The door was closed. I kept staring, expecting a snake to slither out after me. Every shadow seemed to be carrying one of them, waiting for a perfect time to attack. I hope not.

Even the Lord Serpent's idol seemed alive, and at any moment it would jump from its place to attack me.

I tried to get on my feet, only to fall on my butt again.

I had no energy left to go to Ruhi's place. I stumbled towards my home. I looked at the sky. Almost dark. Thanks, Lord Serpent, for saving.

When I walked into the lane of my house, I saw all the women walking towards me, wearing a gleaming saree. Carrying instruments like tabla, harmonium and some more that I could not name. My mother was among them.

"Where are you going?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "At the shrine." She replied.

My feet felt no land beneath. Shrine?

"It's not safe," I said. "What?"

"It's not safe to go there." "And why's that?"

"Hurry up." One of the women called my mother.

"Coming." My mother said, swiping her hand on my hair and face, wiping sweat away. "I'll be fine, sweetheart. Lord Serpent will keep me safe." She smiled and joined the crowd.

I watched her go. Fist clenched. I should have said.

All the men trailed behind the women, wearing kurtas of different colours. They carried other instruments with them. A smile on their faces. It was an identical smile, one that I had never seen before among all of them in my village.

3

I went to the shrine, joining others. Kabir was one of them. Both of us sat on the corner, hearing the divine songs dedicated to Lord Serpent. Keshav's voice dominated among them. The sound of instruments drifted up from the floor, vibrating through floorboards.

My eyes locked onto the door beside the idol. None of them knew what was inside. What if one of them crawls outside? My spine chilled with the thought. I swallowed down my fear, looking at the idol. Please keep your army on leash. I prayed.

"You know what's inside that door?" I asked Kabir. His eyes followed my finger, and he noticed the door. "What?"

Should I say? He would not believe me. Or worse. He would laugh.

I glanced at Ruhi entering the shrine, ignoring us at first and walked beside her mother. But for a moment, she locked her eyes on mine. I smiled. Her lips spread a little. Was it my imagination? As she darted her eyes away at once, sitting with her mother, joining the divine prayer.

"Still upset?" I asked Kabir, who was also looking at her. "It seems so." He said.

"Damn it."

"But what's inside that door?" He asked again, his voice sparkling with curiosity.

My back stiffened. Feeling wild crawl on my neck. My hands slapped on it, wishing to kill it immediately. There was nothing there.

At my front, stood a pair of legs. I pulled my eyes up. Ruhi stood there. "Hey." I greeted.

Her hands folded, her red kurti glittering under white lights. Her eyes moved across Kabir and me.

"Aren't you guys bored?" She asked.

"Of course, we are," I said, rising to my feet. "Let's get out of here, then."

"Nivan was saying something," Kabir said, getting on his feet. "Kind of a conspiracy."

"No, it's true," I snapped. "But what's that?" Ruhi asked.

"Sorry for the morning," I said. My mind cursed me; it was not the right time to apologise. When was it then?

“Come on, man, that ain’t a conspiracy,” Kabir said. Ruhi shot a glance at him, shutting his laughing mouth.

I elbowed Kabir. “Sorry.” He said.

“Tomorrow,” She said, her finger pointed towards me and Kabir, her voice woven with pride and hope. It was her eyes that revealed how hurt she was. “Tomorrow you won’t see any patches on my face.”

“You look pretty with them,” I muttered. “Don’t hear him, he’s lying,” Kabir snickered.

“No,” I cried. Then realised we were still at the shrine. Some people stared at us.

Shit.

“No worries. Tomorrow you won’t complain about this.” Her voice was sharp.

We walked downstairs, heading towards the pond. The moon shimmered across the tiny layers of the water. The air was cool and soothing, carrying darkness all around. I glanced beside the bush. What if one of them were here? I fixed my eyes around it; there must be some yellow pinpricks staring at me like prey. Gladly, there were none.

“What will you ask for tomorrow?” I asked Kabir, I knew Ruhi’s wish.

“Me?” He thought for a while. Looking at the pond and the stars that twinkled above. “I never thought about it.” He said.

“Think then,” Ruhi said.

“What do you want?” He asked me.

“I want to be thin,” I said, looking at my belly. “And handsome and good at math.”

“If it’s like that, I want to be good at science,” Kabir said. “And…” He pressed his lips, staring towards the crowd inside the shrine. By following the direction of his gaze, I saw his father. Lost in prayer with others.

“I want him.” He muttered.

“You already have a father,” I said. My chest dropped into an unknown bottomless void, missing my Dad.

“I want him to love me. Like when I was a child. The way he used to kiss my cheeks and forehead before going to work. My mother said he’d jumped out of joy when I was born. And now that I’m 14, he forgot to love me.

“He orders me to work on his farm like I am one of his employees. He won’t even call me with love in his eyes. One mistake and he would beat the shit out of me. At night, he would come with a bottle in hand and sometimes filled with rage.

“I understand the pressure. I understand the uncertainty of climate and how it ruins all our crops. I understand his state, and sometimes I want to give up on school and work with him.” His eyes were shimmering. “Then I see you guys. Playing.

Studying. The life I cannot leave behind.”

Silence echoed for a while. I never thought of it. I glanced at Ruhi, searching for the right words, but found none. Even she wanted to say something, but ended up staring at me.

“If Lord Serpent grants this wish. I’ll ask for it.” He muttered, wiping his tears away with his finger.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Agh.” He jerked away his shoulder.

A red mark was visible beneath the collar of his t-shirt. Oh, Lord serpent.

“This is normal, guys. Chill.” He said, cheering up, a smile returned to his face, as natural and normal, hiding pain beneath it. That was Kabir I knew.

After staying silent for a few seconds,

“What were you telling?” Ruhi asked, diverting the topic. “Who?” I asked.

“You,” Ruhi said. “Kabir said you were telling him something. A conspiracy?” “Oh. Yes. Guys…”

“Hearing.” Kabir interrupted. “Behind that door.” I begin. “What door?” Ruhi asked. “The one beside the shrine.” “Oh, that.”

“There are_”

“What’s there?” Kabir asked. “Let me speak stupid.” I scolded.

“Okay.” He kept his fingers on his lips. “Snakes,” I said. “So many snakes.” “Really?”

“I was inside that door, and the small room, filled with snakes. Hundreds of them.” “Hundred?” Kabir asked, leaning against a boulder.

“Snakes?” Ruhi’s lips parted in shock.

“So many of them, slithering on my feet. Hissing from every corner of the room.” A shiver ran through me as I imagined myself back in that room. “I thought I was dead.”

“But why did you go there?” Kabir narrowed his eyes.

“I was carrying a bag full of plastic bottles, following Ravi. He told me to go home after taking those bottles inside, but my curiosity kicked in, and I walked in. A nightmare. Indeed”

“Did any of them bite you?” Ruhi asked, her face twisted into concern, scanning my arms and legs.

“One of them was about to,” I said. “Until Ravi saved me.” “What was Ravi doing there?” Kabir asked.

“I dunno,” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Shall we go?” Kabir asked, his face brightening, looking towards the shrine. “Where?” Ruhi asked.

“Inside there.” Kabir pointed at the shrine. “NO.” I snapped. “Not at all.”

“Why?” Kabir said, taking my words more lightly than they actually were. “Lord Serpent is our god. Snakes can’t do us any harm.”

“Aren’t you guys joining?” I heard a voice that belonged to none of us. I turned to look. Ravi stood there, carrying an empty pot in his hand.

I held my breath. Not knowing what to say. “We came for fresh air,” Ruhi said.

“Brother Ravi.” Kabir began. “Nivan was saying that there are so many snakes inside that room, is that right?”

Didn’t he believe me?

“Yes,” Ravi answered, narrowing his eyes towards me.

“Why are there dangerous snakes in our shrine?” Ruhi asked, her voice carried fear and worry.

“Oh, don’t worry. They aren’t dangerous.” Ravi smiled. “But they were about to bite me…” I complained.

“They are here to bless along with Lord Serpent.” He said.

Oh. My lips parted as I gazed at him.

“In the feast, they stay behind the door and protect the villagers.” “Where did they come from?”

“My father says they came on their own and will leave on their own, after every villager has received Lord Serpent’s offering.” Ravi grinned, turning towards me. “That’s why none of it harmed me.” He reassured.

My mind walked back to that room. Ravi was untouched amongst them. Damn, did I unplease Lord Serpent’s Army?

Ravi walked towards the pond and dipped his pot; water gurgled inside steadily. After filling the water, he turned towards us.

“Come and join us, kiddos. There’s nothing to worry about them; they will stay inside, protecting us.” Ravi said, ruffling my head and walked towards the shrine, passing the pot to his father, who placed it next to the idol of Lord Serpent.

We joined the others and sat through the prayers. We whispered and laughed occasionally. My palms held my chin, holding my eyes back from sleep. What might all those snakes be doing? Hearing the prayers? Were these prayers meant for them as well? The door stood still. All silent, yet their hissings ringed inside my ears like one of them was around me. I swallowed my lump, turning my gaze towards the lord.

The divine prayers continued till midnight, until everyone’s throat was tired. There wasn’t a sign of weariness in their voices, though.

“Hail, Lord Serpent.” Keshav stood up.

“Hail, Lord Serpent.” All their voices merged into one.

“Tomorrow’s a big day.” Keshav’s voice echoed. “A prestigious day we are alive to witness. Imagine how many people lived and died in the same place where we stand now. How many people desired the festival as we did? But Lord Serpent chose us. He chose us and sent us into this world at exactly the right time to witness his feast, so we all can take his blessings. We must have done really good things in our past lives to have this chance. To see Lord Serpent tomorrow.”

His words heaved my chest with pride. Tiny hair on my arms stood on end. A huge grin remained on my face for a long time after his speech.

“Sleep well, people, you must not see our Lord with weary eyes,” Keshav announced, before all went to their homes.

***

At night, while trying to sleep, I wondered what would have happened if I had let Kabir go inside that room. How would Kabir have handled it? Or how would Ruhi react?

I jerked when something fell on my head. Snakes? My whole body tickled. Until I heard a familiar voice.

“Are you awake?” My mother asked. It was her hand.

“Yes,” I muttered, taking a deep breath. The ceiling was as dark as that room. “Waiting for tomorrow, aren’t you?” She said,

“Aye, yes, mother.”

“Tomorrow when the Lord comes, first ask for your well-being for your entire life.” She said, looking at my coughing grandma. “Neither of us wants to end up like that, do we?”

I shook my head. She cradled my head in her lap. I wondered what Lord Serpent would actually look like. In my mind, I pictured someone with a human body and a snake’s head, walking among us while we ate, blessing us one by one.

Lost in thought, I slept.

4

“How will I look without these?” Ruhi asked, sliding her fingers on the patches, looking at herself in the mirror. Her long hair was tied in a bun. She wore a golden yellow salwar kameez.

“I don’t know,” Kabir said. He was ready, wearing a yellow shirt and pants. “You will look beautiful, dear. As always.” My mother walked inside, looking at

her in the mirror with a smile. She wore a yellow saree. Outshining everyone in the room.

“Nivan. Get ready, son.” My mother said, “And lock the door when you guys leave.”

She walked to my grandma, who was also ready, wearing golden yellow. She was ready in her wheelchair. My mother fixed her shawl and drew her outside the home, with a final glance at me, she smiled. A smile that reassures better days ahead.

“Idiot,” Ruhi said about Kabir’s comment, which I failed to hear. Kabir chortling. Ruhi slapped him on his back.

“Nivan, save me, bro,” Kabir begged before getting a punch from her. I giggled.

“Brother, help me.”

“Join only if you want one of these.” She raised her fist towards me. “Sorry, brother,” I said and walked inside the other room to change.

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“Hey, you guys,” Kabir said. “You know what.” “What?” I asked, as we were walking towards the shrine.

“I’m gonna ask for wealth. So much wealth. My father won’t have tension then. Then I can study and play with you.” He said, grinning. “That’s it, and from today, I’ll be free.”

“Everyone will ask for money,” Ruhi said. I smiled.

“Guys, I added one thing to my wishlist, and it’s not wealth.” I finally said. They should know this.

“What?” Both of them asked together.

“I’ll ask our Lord never to separate us.” I grinned.

Both of them paused and looked at me. Did I say something wrong?

“Idiot. We’re already together.” Kabir broke the silence.

“We are now, but who knows about the future?” I shrugged my shoulders.

Ruhi reached towards me, her arms wrapped around my back as she embraced me. “Nobody could separate us.” She muttered.

Kabir joined her, embracing both of us.

“If Lord himself grants this, nobody will dare to.” I smiled.

“Alright then, guys. Let’s change our lives.” Kabir said, heading straight towards the shrine.

A sea of yellow moved across the floor. Hundreds of us. Some carrying dishes. Others were serving the food. All the women sat at a separate table. All children together, and likewise for all the men. All wearing a grin on their face. Uncles were talking around. Ladies gossiping and

children, as usual, were creating chaos. Some slapped the table while an annoying kid was scratching his nails on it.

“Oy,” Kabir said, tapping that kid’s forehead. “If you do that again…” Kabir raised his palm mid-air, and the kid knew better to be quiet.

My mother looked at me and nodded with a smile. My grandmother sat beside her. I was with Kabir and Ruhi. Our plates were already on the table.

“Everyone.” Keshav clapped, standing in the centre, covering the idol of Lord Serpent behind him. My eyes couldn’t stop looking at that tiny door beside. Shut as it was.

“Ravi. Pass bottles. Offering of Lord Serpent.” Keshav continued.

Ravi carried the same bag I helped him with yesterday. The only difference was, bottles were empty last evening. Now it was half-filled with colourless liquid.

“Five hundred years ago, when Lord Serpent last visited the village, our ancestors drank this same offering. It’s believed to be the highest form of offering. And served only on prestigious days like today,” Keshav’s voice echoed in the shrine.

Everyone nodded. Excitement curled in their eyes.

“Keshav, brother, now come and join us.” Kabir’s father called.

“Of course, we all must eat together for blessings.” He said, heading towards the empty chair beside Kabir’s father.

Ravi placed a bottle next to every plate. One after another. He nodded with a smile when he put the bottle next to my plate.

“Such a hard-working boy.” Someone commented.

“After that, take your place, Ravi,” Keshav said. “Everyone must drink immediately after eating the last bite of their food.

I took the bottle in my hands. The liquid trickled inside. Ruhi tapped on my hand. “After eating.” She commanded.

“I’ll beg Lord Serpent to keep you fat.” Kabir giggled.

“I’ll be the most handsome boy, you keep watching,” I said with pride. Slapping on his back while imagining what I would look like without this fat.

“Eat now,” Ruhi ordered. Taking a bite.

“Children, no more talking,” Keshav ordered. “Lord Serpent loves peace.”

I stopped talking and chewed down a bite. The place wore a silence, replaced only by the sound of eating and table moving. I looked at the pond, glimmering in the sun’s yellow rays. Breeze passing by, entering inside the shrine, not to miss the blessings of Lord Serpent.

A familiar pressure built inside my bladder.

I took a deep breath, already at my last second bite. Kabir’s father opened the bottle and swallowed the liquid inside. My mother helped my grandmother, opening her bottle and placing it near her lips. Then my mother drank her own.

“Here, I drink mine,” Keshav announced, opening his bottle and gulping the drink. “I would wish the development of this village.”

“Hail, Lord Serpent,” Keshav cheered. “Hail, Lord Serpent.” Everyone said at once. Ravi drank next.

Both my friends were about to complete their eating. I took the last bite of my food when the urge hit me. It was a strong one, and if I did not stand up and go, I would pee straight on my pants. Having my pants wet in front of the whole village was not a great idea.

I got up, feeling the gaze of my mother and my friends. “What happened?” Keshav asked, coughing.

“What’s wrong, son?” My mother asked, her voice cracked.

I lifted my little finger and turned immediately towards the stairs. “Hurry up, or you’ll miss it,” Keshav said.

“I won’t ask your wishes.” Kabir’s voice rang in my ears as I ran straight to my home. Not knowing where else to go.

I DON’T WANT TO MISS IT. My mind screamed as I got out of my bathroom, pushing up my pants zip. I ran straight towards the shrine. What if Lord Serpent departed already? I pushed away those thoughts and rushed on my way.

The top of the shrine was getting closer. A harsh caw echoed through the clouds. Three dark ravens, taking a flight across the sky, with their wings open.

I stopped as I reached the stairs. My gaze fixed on the yellow gaze of the Lord Serpent’s idol. The lord was in his place. Sitting still. Glaring at me and the silent hall.

The plates were still on the table. A few empty bottles rolled across the floor. The sound of Raven was clear, like a scream inside my ears. The heavy breeze howled, passing past me, attacking my eyes with soil dust.

I glanced at the door beside the idol. Locked. As it was. Only my chair stayed empty.

“Mother,” I whispered. My voice, hollow as the life inside me. I climbed the stairs. Blinking. Unable to swallow what I was seeing.

My mother’s head lay on the table beside her plate. I touched her face. Cold and pale. There was no reassuring smile. Her eyes were open. Looking nowhere. Not even meeting my gaze.

“Mother.” My voice broke. I shook her nonstop. “Mother, wake up,” I said with tightened jaws. My breaths halted when she made no response.

White foam floated on her lips. The moment I rested her head on the chair, it slid down and thudded on the table again.

I turned to my grandma. Hoping she would respond. Her head rested on the top of her wheelchair, looking at the sky with her dead eyes.

“Grandma.” I shook her thin, wrinkled body. “Hey.”

“Grandma. Hey, wake up. Grandma.” I cried. Her body slumped with the force of my hands.

Strength drained from my arms and legs.

Ruhi. Kabir. I ran towards them. Ruhi’s hands hung down the table. Her face was the same as yesterday.

I pulled her face. A few moments ago, she was shining in her yellow salwar. Now only her clothes shone under bright sunlight.

“H-Hey. Hey.” I slapped her cheeks.

“Oy. Ru-Ruhi.” My hands trembled, her face as cold as my mother’s.

“Ka-Kabir.” I looked at him. His head was lying on the table, facing his father. I pulled up his head.

“Oy. Kabir. Kabir. Wake. Wake up, man. You. You. Can’t. Go. Can’t go.” His head bounced on the table the moment I let go.

The bottle with liquid stood beside my plate. Untouched.

My legs felt no land below. I collapsed on the floor. Grasping my head in my hands. My jaws clenched. My lips pressing against each other.

“Can. Anybody. Hear. Me.” I cried with all the energy left inside me. I heard my own voice echoing.

I turned to the idol.

“Where are you?” I asked in a trembling voice.

A hiss echoed in the shrine. The hiss that came from that small door. I gazed towards it. A snake slithered out. Its yellow gaze fixed on mine, as it stood in an S-shaped coil.