

The village didn't use a calendar; we used the Great Ash.

When its bark bled, we fasted. When its leaves fell like gentle rain, we danced. This year, the Elders said that the tree demanded a "unification". They chose me because I walked the line. Neither the blacksmith's son nor the weaver's daughter could claim me, so the Elders claimed I belonged to the earth itself.

They buried me waist deep in the ancient soil, my body a bridge between the world of mortal men and the silently weeping dead. As the roots began to wind around my thighs, drawing blood and sucking it up, I realised I wasn't just feeding the tree.

The tree was knitting the village into a single, screaming mind. And I was the yarn.

The blacksmith's son was standing ten feet away, his face a mask of sombre reverence. But inside the Great Ash, he was a frenetic mess of colour and rot.

I didn't see his face; I felt the callouses on his palms as if they were my own. I felt the sharp, metallic tang of the forge in the back of my throat and the secret, jagged hunger he had for the weaver's daughter.

But it wasn't just him.

The "unification" hit like a tidal wave of hot, molten rock. The roots tightened, pulsating in sync with the village's collective blood. I was the needle threading through a hundred chests, dragging their lives behind me.

I felt the Elder's knees ache with the pains of age. I felt the midwife's grief for the child she couldn't save three winters ago. I felt the baker's petty theft, the cobbler's hidden bottle, the systemic, low-frequency hum of a thousand tiny lies now stripped naked and shivering inside my skull.

They weren't individuals anymore. They were a single, bloated organism, and I was the nervous system.

Then, the tree pushed deeper.

It forced my consciousness down, away from the surface, away from the land of the living, and into the underworld. The roots in my thighs drank my blood and used it to bridge the gap between the two.

Below the village, beneath the cellars and the wells, lay the previous "yarns." I felt them as a tangle of calcified thoughts and fossilized screams, their minds preserved in thick sap.

They weren't entirely dead. They were just the deeper layers of the root system.

Then the realisation dawned upon me. The Great Ash wanted to remember the village. Every birth, every betrayal, every breath ever taken in the shadow of its branches was being archived inside of it.

"Stop," I tried to scream, but my mouth was filled with the village's collective breath. A hundred pairs of lungs exhaled, and I felt the carbon dioxide burn.

The blacksmith's son leaned forward, his eyes glazing over as he finally slipped into the frequency. He smiled, a slow, terrifyingly vacant expression.

"We see you," a hundred voices whispered, but not through the air. They whispered it from inside my own chest.

The tree began to pull. My skin stretched and hardened, turning to bark, to fibre, to something that could withstand the weight of a village that no longer knew how to be alone.

The sky began to pale, but for me, the sun was a dying concept. Light was just a vibration felt through the photosensitive skin of the leaves high above.

I was no longer just the yarn; I was the loom.

Through the collective "we," I felt the village Elders turn away from the burial site. They walked with a synchronised gait, their footsteps thumping against the earth like a single heavy heart. They weren't going home to their separate beds. They were going to the Great Hall to sit in the dark, staring at nothing, sharing a single dream of a harvest that tasted of iron and salt.

But deeper down, in the dark marrow of the Ash, I found the others.

The "yarns" of a century ago. One woman—I knew her name was Rāga, though the memory was slick with sap—was tasked with holding the village's collective anger. For eighty years, she had felt every fist clenched in a dark kitchen, every hissed insult between neighbours. It had turned her consciousness into something jagged and sharp.

"Your turn," Rāga's thought-echo brushed against me. It felt like a dry leaf scratching against stone. "You are the new Anchor. You take the secrets they cannot carry. You take the shame."

Suddenly, a flood of filth poured into me.

I felt the butcher's secret joy in the kill. I felt the Elder's cold calculation when he chose me—the relief that it wasn't his own kin, followed by the terrifying realisation that he would soon feel my death as if it were his own.

The physical world began to blur. My legs were lengthening. They branched and split like the distributaries of the Ganges opening into the Sundarbans. My larynx, having hardened into heartwood, no longer screamed to express the agonizing pain. I could feel the water table miles below, tainted by the minerals of ancient bone. I could feel the wind moving across the mountains, and it felt like a cold hand stroking the hair I no longer had.

Then, I felt a new pulse.

Someone was approaching the tree. They weren't part of the "we", not yet. Their mind was a bright, solitary spark in the suffocating fog of the village's hive-mind.

It was the weaver's daughter. She was holding a hatchet, and her thoughts were a frantic, beautiful chaos of 'No, no, no.'

For a second, I felt a flicker of my old self, the girl who once walked the line. I tried to reach out—to warn her that if she struck the bark, she wouldn't just be cutting a tree. She would be lobotomizing her own father, her neighbours, and the boy she loved.

The tree felt her, too. And the tree was hungry for a new thread.

Notes:

Rāga is the Marathi word for anger.