

It always started with a stillness.

Nisha's senses modulated the surroundings in an attempt to sharpen her focus. Her vision dampened to a narrow tunnel of curved lines and the world muted into nothing more than an indistinguishable hum. In exchange, her other senses kicked into overdrive. The unforgiving sun burned her skin. Her fingers seared against the asphalt.

*Fifty-two seconds to victory. Nothing more.*

The deafening crack of the pistol shattered the quiet. Adrenaline surged into Nisha's veins and she exploded off the starting block. She accelerated. Desperation drove her forward. And as the heat from the sun gave way to the burn in her lungs, she saw it. The end. Maybe even victory. She left nothing behind. Time slowed as she pushed herself almost beyond the capacity of her body.

Her senses returned her to a state of stillness as she crossed the line, tearing through the ribbon. The numbers flashed and for a fraction of a second, the universe held its breath.

*Fifty-three seconds.*

The universe exhaled. The crowd roared. And Nisha crashed. Her knees buckled and slammed into the track. She pressed her face into her palms to muffle a scream.

Hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her up, maneuvering her to the sideline.

"You won."

She shook her head, refusing to look at her coach. "Fifty-three seconds."

"I know. You're fine. Remember, this is not a qualifier."

She pulled away. Her eyes burned but she refused to let tears spill. It was unacceptable. Three years of training and sacrifice for the chance to qualify for the national team tryouts and she continued to fall short.

Friends and families of the other sprinters poured onto the track. Teammates patted her back and congratulated her while she stood with only her coach at her side, the defeated winner. "I just...I need to go."

"We've talked about this. You have to stay for the medals."

Nisha bit back a retort. Did she want to force a smile on her face for a track full of strangers? For an unsuccessful outcome? Definitely not. But after one too many reprimands about her lack of sportsmanship, she knew better than to argue.

"Fine." She glanced at her watch. "But I can't stay long."

"You are not headed to the gym," he said, his voice poised to reprimand her.

She had a habit of punishing herself at the gym after a failed race. And that's exactly where she wanted to disappear to now. Instead, she had to head uptown to her mother's apartment because her grandmother insisted on giving her a sari for her cousin's wedding tomorrow.

"I can't. I need to pick something up from my grandmother." As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

"That's good," he said, his annoyance falling away into a surprised smile.

In the last three years, not a single member of her family had attended a meet. She never bothered to explain their absence, not wanting to open herself to that level of vulnerability. But what felt like a sneaker rubbing against a nasty blister then was all but callused over now.

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The post race obligations took longer than she wanted. She barely had time to shower before trekking up to Morningside Heights. She wrapped damp her hair into a tight bun. Her black curls would morph into a mess of frizz as

they dried but she couldn't risk taking the time to fix it. She would rather endure her grandmother's criticism about her appearance than risk crossing paths with her mother.

She turned a corner into the familiar tree-lined street of pre-war buildings. When she reached her mother's building, she snuck in behind a resident and sprinted up the stairs to avoid small talk in the elevator. The faint sound of classical Tamil music drifted from Apartment 6B. She held down the doorbell, knowing it would take her grandmother a minute to notice it.

"You have keys," her grandmother said as a greeting when she let her into the living room. Shelves grazed the crown molding of the cream walls, overburdened with books on etymology and ancient languages and brass oil lamps. In the corner by the window was a deflated evergreen loveseat. As a child, Nisha would curl up in the sofa, tucked into her mother's side while she graded papers and quizzed Nisha on her knowledge of Sanskrit or Dravidian languages.

The sharp sweet scent of rose incense wafted through the room. Tendrils of smoke danced over the photos on the mantel by the couch. Pictures of Nisha and her baby sister at various ages. A framed photo from her high school graduation. Photos of her mother and stepfather on their wedding day. And a family photo in the center—one without her own father—the last photo Nisha took with her mother, just weeks before Nisha had walked away.

"It's in my apartment somewhere," Nisha lied. The keys to her mother's place had never left her keychain but she refused to use them. This wasn't her home anymore.

"Fine, fine, take off those dirty shoes." She swept her eyes over Nisha, tutting her tongue and shaking her head. "Look at you. Have you been running in the sun again? At this rate you'll be darker than your periyappa in Jaffna. You could have at least avoided the sun until after Meena's wedding. You might meet a suitable man there."

Perfectly on cue. If it wasn't unkept hair, it was her complexion or her status as a single woman. At least her grandmother avoided criticizing her about her career aspirations. She left that to her daughter, Nisha's mother.

"Ammahma! You can't say things like that," her sister said from behind her grandmother. "Nisha is beautiful."

Of course, her eleven year-old sister with her light brown skin and naturally straight hair came to her aid. She didn't need defending. She wasn't going to dodge the sun for some archaic standard of beauty. With or without the sun, her skin was a deep brown color and Nisha wouldn't have it any other way.

Her sister flung herself at her. "Did you have a race? Did you win?"

"Hi Abi," Nisha said, wrapping her arms around her. "I did."

She beamed. "Come! I want to show you my new pavadai."

She followed Abi into the bedroom that she had once been hers. A two-piece skirt and blouse in green and fuchsia lay neatly on the twin bed. Gold borders embellished the pavadai, the standard wedding outfit for little Tamil girls.

"You'll look perfect in it," Nisha said.

"I helped mom pick out your sari. You have to see it! Mom said it's special because it's your first one."

Nisha shifted and pressed the pads of her fingers against her thighs to mask her discomfort. She had thought her grandmother was lending her one from her own collection.

Her grandmother hushed her youngest granddaughter and ushered them into her room. "Come now, let me show you how to drape the sari. I'll pin the pleats to make it easier."

The powder pink sari was dotted in delicate gold foil print with a thin embroidered scallop border. The accompanying blouse had a sweetheart neckline and wide straps that tapered in. Nisha ran her fingers over the yards of organza. She bit the inside of her cheek, staunching tears from welling. Her mother had perfectly honored her preferences and Nisha couldn't even honor her with her presence.

Nisha hadn't spoken to her mom in any substantive way in three years. Not since the accident with Abi. Hurtful words were exchanged. Whether it was due to Nisha's anger at her mother or her own shame for her actions, Nisha couldn't bring herself to reconcile with her mother.

Abi chattered away about school and her friends while her grandmother maneuvered Nisha in and then out of the sari, rattling off instructions that Nisha would never remember. She would resort to finding a video online tomorrow.

"Before you leave, I have one more thing for you," her grandmother said as Nisha packed the delicate sari into her duffle bag.

She picked up a small jewelry box from her dresser, caressing the red velvet. "These have belonged to the eldest woman of every generation of our family. Passed down when she wears her first sari."

She held it out. Abi peered up on her toes. Nisha froze, eyes locked on the box. The sari was already too much.

"I can't." Her words struggled to escape her parched throat. She spun on her heels, desperate to swallow her regret down with some ice water. With the duffle bag slung over her shoulder, she stumbled out of the room and into the kitchen. She grabbed a glass and shoved it under the water dispenser.

"Kanna," her grandmother said. She flinched at the undeserved term of endearment. "Come, sit down." Hands guided her to the kitchen table. It was perhaps the softest her grandmother had ever acted. Abi slid into a chair beside her.

"Why are you upset?" Abi asked.

Nisha's lips twitched but she failed to hold a smile. "I'm not."

Her grandmother pushed the box to her. "Open it. *Please.*"

"I don't want it." She didn't *deserve* it. Her tightened her grip on the glass of water.

"It is yours." Her grandmother peeled the glass from her fingers and placed the box in her hand.

Any further protests fell away. The box now demanded her full attention. As if under a spell, a profound stillness settled over her. The hum of the refrigerator, the ever-present aroma of tamrind and chili powder, the chill of the air conditioner on her skin faded into the background. Her thumb pressed into the velvet.

Nestled inside were a pair of antique jimikki earrings, their tarnished gold alloy radiating an ethereal reddish-gold sheen. The domes, adorned with rows of gems and intricate motifs of lotuses and conch shells, hung gracefully from teardrop-shaped sapphire studs framed in diamond encrusted metal. Her fingers drew them out of their cushion. With each movement, tiny pearls suspended from the rims of the domes tinkled, like the soft, rhythmic pitter-patter of rain against tin.

"They're so pretty. They belonged to mom? I've never seen her wear them?" Abi said.

The enchantment broke. The sounds and smells of the kitchen rushed back, assaulting her senses. Nisha gasped. "What happened?"

"Your ammah wore them on the most special of occasions," her grandmother said to Abi before turning to Nisha. "Are you okay?"

Nisha's fingers twitched and she blinked at her grandmother and Abi, dragging herself from the haze, where only the earrings mattered. She dropped them back into the cushioned box before they entranced her again. She had seen them before. "She wore them when when she married your dad."

"She wore them when she married your father too, Nisha."

Abi leaned forward. "Can I touch see them?"

Their grandmother nodded. Abi beamed and gently placed the earrings in her palms, bringing them close to her nose. Nisha tensed, ready to snap Abi out of it if she got lost in the earrings. Abi held them up to her eyes, bouncing on her seat as she usually did when she was excited. "Wow, they're so pretty."

Nisha relaxed and took a sip of water. She must of imagined it. They were nothing more than a family antique. She turned to her grandmother and switched to Tamil. "I can't accept them."

"You are not going to break with a tradition that has been in the family for *centuries* for this petty grudge of yours," her grandmother responded in Tamil. Her voice had lost its placating tone.

"Aren't we already breaking with tradition? Isn't this passed down from mother to daughter?"

"And who's fault is it that?"

Her chest tightened. "She rejected me."

"But she didn't. She said things in anger. You cannot hold her to it forever."

"Please, Nisha," Abi said. Both women looked down at her. Abi's eyes glistened. "Don't make mom sad."

Nisha flinched. She wished she had never come for the sari. She could have borrowed something from a classmate or worn a dress. But instead, here she was, hurting her sister...again.

"Abi..." she started. "Wait, did you understand what we were saying?" She had purposely switched to Tamil to spare her sister the details.

"Of course."

"When did you start learning Tamil?" Nisha said.

"I mean, I know a little. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"We were speaking in Tamil," their grandmother said.

Abi scrunched her nose and sniffed. "No you weren't."

"Abi," their grandmother started, warningly.

"Don't change the subject!" Abi placed the earring back in the case and snapped it shut. She held it out to Nisha. "Just take them. *Please*."

Nisha couldn't deny her sister. She nodded. Gingerly, she grazed the box, bracing herself. Nothing happened. The refrigerator hummed. The tamarind and chili powder filled her nostrils and the cold air of the AC stung her skin. She tucked the box into the front pocket of her duffle bag. "I should go."

"I'm sorry I got mad," Abi whispered. She hung her head and traced her toe along the tiled floor.

Nisha smiled ruefully and pulled Abi into a hug. "Don't be." Whenever she questioned her choices, Nisha needed to remind herself that her mother had Abi. She was the superior daughter. Abi would have their mother and she would have her earrings.

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That night, Nisha laid out the sari on the back of her chair but left the earrings tucked away in the duffle bag. It wasn't rational, perhaps, but it felt safest. But as the night ticked away, sleep alluded her. In the next room, her roommate argued with her boyfriend over the phone in French. But it wasn't the French profanity that kept her up.

She huffed and flung back the sheets. She was being ridiculous. She rummaged for the red velvet box. Nothing would happen by holding a pair of earrings. She hadn't had the chance to really examine them at her mother's. She crawled back into bed and snapped open the box, laying it beside the glass of water on her bedside table.

She ran her fingers over a sapphire. Her roommate had switched to English as she continued to yell at her boyfriend. She took a sip of water, the liquid crisp against her tongue. The pearls glistened under the light of the lamp. Her senses had not dulled. She laughed. She was in total control of her surroundings.

But when she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of a boy she never met. A boy sitting by a window, stretching his arm out into the rain, reaching for the earrings.

It always started with a stillness. Her senses modulated the surroundings in an attempt to protect her. Dampened her vision to a narrow tunnel of curved lines and muted the world into nothing more than an indistinguishable hum. In exchange, the other sense kicked into overdrive. The unforgiving sun burned against her skin. Perspiration gathered on the curve of her upper lip. She licked it away, the salinity clinging to her tongue. She uncurled her toes and lifted her heels. The pads of her fingers seared against the asphalt. Each draw of air laced with the scent of rubber tempered the pounding of her heart. It grounded her, to focus on the heat and salt and rubber. And not the tension coiling in every synapse. 52 seconds. That's what she needed. Nothing more.

The deafening crack of a pistol shattered the stillness. Adrenaline surged into Nisha's veins and she exploded away from the sound. Fear and desperation drove her forward. Her limbs did not require her consent to accelerate to the point of weightless between footfalls. She pulsed with energy, matched only by the blood pumping through her. Just as the heat from the sun gave way to the burn in her lungs and muscles, she saw it. The end. Safety. Maybe even victory. She left nothing behind. Time slowed as she surged almost beyond the capacity of her body.

Her senses returned her to a state of stillness. She crossed the line, tearing through the ribbon. The numbers flashed and for a fraction of a second, the universe held its breath.

53 seconds.

The universe exhaled. The crowd roared. The sun glared. Nisha crashed. Her knees buckled and slammed into the track. She bent over. Her face pressed into her palms so she could muffle her scream. She hadn't made it.

Hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her up. Nisha allowed herself to be maneuvered to the sideline.

"Nisha, you won."

She shook her head, refusing to look at her coach. "53 seconds." Her voice was hoarse as if her vocals had run a race and not her legs.

"I know. You're fine. This race doesn't mean anything."

She pulled away. Her eyes burning. She refused to let the tears spill. Friends and families of the other sprinters had poured into the track. She was surrounded by cheers, high fives and warm embraces. Strangers patted her back and congratulated her while she stood with only her coach at her side, the defeated winner. "I just...I should go."

"We've talked about this. You need to stay for the medal."

The pitter-patter of water brought comfort to the residents of Navapur. Chander perched on the window seat on the second floor of the inn. The people in the streets below moved slower than usual, stopping to chat with neighbors. Chander pushed the window open and stretched out an arm. Droplets slid down his fingernails, disappearing into the canal below.

The bed behind him creaked. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the smell that accompanied the rain. A hand slid over the raised ridges of his scarred shoulder. Chander pressed his lips together into a line as the fingers trailed down his bare back. With a thud and the clink of coins, Chander forced his eyes open. He drew his arm inside and closed his fingers around the pouch, massaging the coins inside.

He turned around and smiled thinly at the woman. Avni was the same age as Chander's father when he died but she looked younger, no doubt a privilege of her Virajati caste. Unlike his father, Avni did not need to toil away in the unforgiving shipyard sun. Instead, she conducted business from the shade of a canopy.

"I'm traveling to Rajyapur with the shipment tomorrow but I would love to see you when I return." She lifted her hand from where it had settled at his waist and ran it through Chander's dark curls, sweeping them away from his forehead. "If you'll have me, of course."

Chander managed to muster up another smile. He had no intention of continuing with their arrangement after they paid the kara and patronage picked up at the inn but truthfully, he never knew when he would need her coin again.

"Perfect." Avni grasped his chin and pressed her delicate lips against his before she reached for the door.

"Before you go," Chander said. "Have you seen Tammer? Do you know if he will return before the shipment goes out?"

"Darling, I cannot keep track of everyone at the shipyard."

Chander slumped against the wall. While Avni could afford the watercab to return to town each night, Tammer could not.

"I'm sorry, Chander. The schedule of jobs does not always line up with the kara cycle. If I see your brother, I will let him know you are worried."

Chander released a ragged sigh after Avni left. Yes, he was worried. It was a simple fact. If his brother could not return tomorrow, they would not have enough to make kara.

He turned back to the window and leaned his head out. Rain sank into his hair. In the canal running alongside the street, a watercab approached the inn. The oarsmen glided the distinctive yellow and blue, flat bottomed boat to a stop in front of the inn. The oarsman's passenger—a tall woman with drenched pin-straight black hair stepped onto the street.

He shoved the bag of vitta into his churidar pocket, grabbed his shirt and tried to quell the flutter in his belly as he rushed downstairs. The receiving room was long and narrow with battered, wooden tables and colorful, mismatched chairs scattered throughout. A frayed burgundy rug and cushions rimmed with ash rested in front of a large fireplace. On the other end, a tall counter sheltered barrels of majja underneath.

The lack of travelers within the current kara cycle forced his brother to find work at the shipyard while Chander served majja to the locals and entertained the occasional night with a Virajati. With no sign of Tammer's timely return, the potential vitta brought in from an actual lodger filled Chander with hope.

The bell over the door chimed. Chander settled behind the bar and arranged his face with a pleasant smile.

"What a lovely day," Chander said.

"Yes. A perfect day for travel."

Chander nodded. *Perfect* because the Rajni Guard could not conceal themselves from the citizens of Navapur in the rain. "How can I help you?"

"I need two days of board."

"Of course. That will be a hundred vitta a night."

Chander watched, almost greedily as the woman reached into her satchel and pulled out 20 large coins. He suppressed a sigh of relief. He had saved every vitta but it still wasn't enough. He fingered the cold copper metal and swiped them into his pocket. Now, he had enough.

"Travel papers," Chander asked next. He opened a lockbox to secure the papers during her stay. The woman unfurled a piece of paper and smoothed it over the table.

Chander held it close to his eyes and squinted to inspect it. His heart sank. Chander had seen enough travel papers to spot a counterfeit. The Rajni's seal was not embossed as deeply nor did it shimmer in the light.

"Quilla, yes?" Chander read the name on the paper. "From Vatgrama?"

She nodded and smiled. The saccharine smile highlighted the sharpness of her features. She adjusted the red sash clinging to her skin. "Is there a problem?"

Chander grazed his fingers over the coins in his pocket. Tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead. The joy of those coins evaporated. Accepting the papers broke Rajni's Law. If the Guard caught him, he would be dragged to the laborhouse and away from his brother.



His hand curled into a fist, nails cutting into his palm. But if he didn't make kara, he would meet the same fate.

"Not at all," he said, his voice tight and hoarse. He placed the travel paper in the lockbox and tucked it away. "This way, please."

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When he returned downstairs, Chander was not alone. At the bar, sat the nagarika. His uniform, a stiff, deep blue sherwani with gleaming silver buttons and a high collar, stood in contrast with Chander's threadbare shirt and gray churidar torn at the knees. Chander forced his muscles to relax and prayed that Quilla would not make an appearance while the head of Navapur's Rajni Guard undoubtedly stayed for breakfast and an unwanted chat.

"Good morning, Nagarika," Chander said, using the man's title instead of his name. He slipped behind the counter and curled his hand over the smooth wood to hide the tremor. The sound of his racing heart pounded in his ears.

"Why so formal?" His lips curled up. "What would your mother have said?"

Chander was too familiar with this routine for the jab to elicit the reaction the Nagarika enjoyed. "Rikhal Jie, how can I serve you?"

"I've had such a long night."

"Sweet rice, then?"

"Only your great matama's would do."

He made sure to shove his hand in his pockets to still the coins as he turned to the open kitchen behind him. Although his taunts no longer phased Chander, the threat of Rikhal discovering the false papers certainly did.

Vibrant spices, browning fruit and pots of all different shapes lined shelves over an electric icebox and a low clay stove. Chander crouched down and turned a knob to light a fire. Once the tips of the flames flickered through the center hole, Chander reached above for the most prized possession in the inn.

Rikhal smacked his lips together. "You are so blessed that your mother did not take that pot with her."

Chander cradled his great grandmother's pot in his hands, ignoring Rikhal's words. This was the little dance they played.

The cold, smooth metal hummed in his palms, as if it could sense the presence of the magic radiating from the fire. It was perhaps not far from the truth, considering the *agni* enchantment his great grandmother had bestowed on it. He ran his finger along the rolled

rim of the pot before placing it over the crackling flame. Chander gathered the ingredients of his great matama's revered sweet rice and threw them into the pot.

With his hands back in his pockets, he traced the edge of a coin with clammy fingers. He tried to focus on the aroma of cinnamon, cardamom and jaggery, but Rikhal would not have it.

"Chander," he said.

Reluctantly, Chander left the bowl to work its magic. "Yes, Jie?"

"Tammer has not returned from the shipyard?"

"Not yet."

"Are you concerned about making kara?"

The words were nothing more than a thinly veiled threat. Rikhal would only find delight in dragging one of them to the laborhouse if they did not make kara. He had done it before. The first month after their mother had left, they did not have enough vitta for the taxes. Chander could still hear his own cries as they dragged his brother away.

"We will be fine."

"I know you haven't had any boarders. The Rajni added new restrictions. There is even chatter of a temporary moratorium."

Chander tried not to let the shock register on his face. The restrictions explained the lack of guests that drove Tammer to the shipyard in the first place and his new boarder's false papers. "A moratorium?"

"Ah, I have already said too much. Come now, I know the sweet rice is done. Your mother made it enough times for me."

Despite the churning of his stomach and the constant need for his eyes to scurry towards the door leading upstairs, he scowled. For a man who hadn't seen his mother in years, he could not let her go. Her own sons had moved on but not Rikhal Sundran.

He shoved the thought aside and turned to the stove. The pot brimmed with bubbling sweet rice; the scent of spices permeated the air. He drew in a deep breath, attempting to calm his disarrayed nerves.

He ladled a generous helping into a bowl. The rest would sit there over the flame, the magic in the pot never letting the rice burn, ready to serve the locals craving his great matama's renowned cooking. Every household had unique enchanted objects, passed down from generation to generation within a family; each heirloom left behind a legacy of the person who imbued it with their magic before passing on to the next life. At least, that's

what Chander had been taught. Such rituals were no more, not since the Great *Jala* Drought rendered many people devoid of magic and all others prohibited from using it.

He cringed as the older man made obscene sounds with his lips. With his free hand, Rikhal pulled out three small coins and pushed it across the bartop. "I would hate to have to arrest you tomorrow if you do not meet kara."

Chander clenched his jaw and his fingers twitched as he slid the coins off the table. Rikhal smirked. They both knew the three vitta was only meant to taunt him.

Still, Chander continued the dance. "Thank you, Rikhal Jie—"

Static crackled through the room, loud and jarring. Chander snapped his head to the Rajni-mandated speaker fixed in the corner of the room. The cone-shaped device vibrated as the static cleared.

"Citizens of Navapur," bellowed the voice. "Last night, Isha Javen was arrested for concealment. She has been discovered to be an *agni māyin*."

Chander's eyes flickered to Rikhal and his mouth went dry. Isha was only a year older than him. Rikhal's grin widened. "Like I said, I had a very busy night."

The voice continued. "Isha Javen will stand trial in Rajyapur. As law-assisting citizens, it is your obligation to immediately report all suspicions of concealment and other transgressions for the betterment and safety of us all. Forever live our Rajni."

"Forever live our Rajni," Chander muttered. Rikhal's voice boomed over Chander's lackluster but automatic response as he repeated the proclamation with unwavering conviction.

"That is my cue to take to the streets to assure the public." Rikhal shoved in one more mouthful of sweet rice before stepping to the sink to wash his hand.

The lightness and churn of his stomach left him dizzy. There was the hopeful anticipation that Rikhal would leave without discovering his illegal lodger and the horrifying realization that someone he knew from his school days had been hiding magic. Chander twisted his fingers together.

"You seem nervous."

Chander jerked his hands apart. Standing in front of him, Rikhal's uniform was even more imposing. Tiny blades studded into the rim of his boots. A two-bladed dagger and ornate pistol gleamed at his waist. In each village and city, only the highest ranking officer had the privilege of possessing a firearm.

"As you said, kara is tomorrow and I await my brother's return anxiously."

“Of course,” Rikhal said, although the glint in his eyes told a different tale. They both knew that an māyin exposed in their city would be disquieting for anyone. But Rikhal did not know Chander’s truths and he desperately needed him to leave before he unraveled in front of him.

Rikhal leaned over the counter and squeezed Chander’s shoulder, his fingers tracing the lines of the old burn through his flimsy shirt. “At least we know you’re not secretly an *agni māyin*.”

Chander jerked away and stumbled back, his own hand clutching the scar. A bottle of dried chillies crashed to the floor just as he heard a clatter from above. His eyes snapped towards the closed door leading upstairs. He kicked the bottle to create more noise. The older man did not seem to notice the rattle from the second floor. He just raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

“Your mother called you a skittish one. But alas, I cannot stay to reminisce. I will see you tomorrow to collect your kara and review your books.”

And with that final taunt, Chander was left alone in the room. His knees buckled and he sank to the floor. He leaned his head against a low shelf and closed his eyes.

This morning he had woken up with one pressing problem—making kara—and one forever hidden truth—the driving force behind his urge to remain firmly within the laws of the Rajni. And like the turn of the tide, he now had the vitta to make kara but only because he had broken the law. By doing so, he had made himself vulnerable to his deepest truth being exposed and like Isha, he would be dragged away from his brother to face a rigged trial.

Thank you for sharing your writing. I like the setup of Dulani's current state of life and would be interested in how that connects to the mystery and possible demons, although I think there are a few things that need to be tightened to make the chapter more compelling. I'll break it down below. But of course, these are just my opinions and I am no expert!

## **Opening/Hook**

Dulani was ten seconds away from risking a night walk to get away from another loud argument.

I would strengthen this opening line. I mentioned this on the Google Doc but this opening can be punchier (e.g. take out 'ten' and changing loud argument) and less awkward (e.g. night walk). You've also used "away" twice in the first sentence.

Additionally, the description of the town as I continued to read did not inspire danger or fear, so would there be known risk of danger by taking a walk at 11:30? It's almost described as a sleepy town.

Perhaps something along the lines of: Dulani was seconds away from taking a stroll in the middle of a night to escape another heated argument.

I would follow this with punchier dialogue between the parents to highlight the pain of having to listen to these arguments. The two lines of argument is too vague and wordy to amplify their issues and drive Dulani to want to escape.

## **Word Choice and Description**

There are times that I really enjoyed the imagery you showed in your prose and at other times, the word choice and prose felt off. I will go through a few in order that they show up. I am only talking about word choice and description here. I will come back to content after this section.

**gossamer** sheets

Awkward word choice: I will admit I had to look it up. But even with the definition, I can't tell if you mean silk sheets or threadbare sheets. I would use one of these words to create clarity in a reader's mind and avoid the need to grab the dictionary (for those of us who haven't heard of this word).

**plain-white tunnel** of a bedroom

I understand what you are trying to say here but sounds awkward. If you want to be quick, replace with **barren** or something like that. Or spend a moment to describe the room - bare walls, sparsely furnished. etc.

**flat** pillow

Using something like **deflated** is an example of replacing a plain word with a more elevated word without resorting to the most obscure word in the thesaurus.

**velvety**, umber skin

I love the attempt at positive description of darker skin. I love to see it as a darker skinned person myself. But I don't understand what velvety means. I know someone else mentioned it. Be more direct - do you mean **soft, glowing**, etc?

Dulani **girded** himself with sweatpants

Again, awkward word choice. What teenager says "girded"? Remember, with close third-person POV, you want the voice to somewhat reflect the POV character, who happens to be a teenaged boy. Unless it's a Gen Z slang I don't know about.

**naked** front yard

Describe the front yard instead of calling it naked. Dead grass or overgrown grass. Weeds or lacking trees or flowers, etc.

sunrays **glissaded** over the **bonny lowlands** or **resplendent** gardens

Again, this section takes me out of the narrative. Teenagers are not using this language, nor are most modern English speakers.

Wind crept in through the honeycombs on the walls, creaks and moans echoing to the exposed rafters that still heaved up the sagging roof.

I loved the description of "exposed rafters that still heaved up the sagging roof." But what does honeycombs on the wall mean?

lamps warmed the silent roads with a serene **gloom**

Twilight instead of gloom

**spewing silver illumination** onto the concrete

Try: light from the shop spilling onto the concrete

### **Characterization - Dulani**

I'm confused about where in life Dulani is - is a high-school aged teenager or a college-aged teenager? Given the dependency on his parents, I would opt for a high-school aged teenager. It sounds like he's no longer able to attend the elite private high school but that would mean he's been forced to go to the local public school.

I think this would also add to his characterization. It would add bitterness to his circumstances as someone who spent X number of years at one school and then forced to go somewhere else due to his parents mismanagement of money. Maybe he's coping by skipping school at times and his parents don't notice because they are so wrapped up in their own problems. It also gives weight to the dependency he has on his parents, as opposed to someone older who could make money to contribute to the household.

Also, when he sees the ruined building from the storm, this is a great opportunity to dive into some introspection or trigger a stronger emotions around his personal experience with the storm and his family's financial issues. You had one line of his closing his eyes and picturing winds and such before going into the explanation of the financial issues but I think there's an opportunity here for more emotion from Dulani about it.

He also is very fearful of being out at night. Is this a general characteristic of Dulani or his the town somewhat shady at night? Is it because of the emptiness that he has these fears?

### **Worldbuilding/Setting and Backstory**

**The Town:** Give the reader more about how Dulani feels about the town. Can you also hint more about the location and type of town? Even if it's an imaginary town, is it in America? What state? Seems to have houses and ribbons of wild land. What does that mean? Wild land through a town is odd. That gives me a rural setting vibe but then he walks a bit and is in a town, which is definitely not rural. Some clarity here would be great.

Here is a great place to add that detail:

For older folks, Litlington was a cheap, quiet paradise where they could give their children a great education.

For older folks, Litlington was an **affordable**, quiet paradise tucked way in [State] where they could give their children a great education.

--> I would avoid saying 'cheap' if most of them are paying for private school. Unless "tuition" refers to college tuition, in which case, making Dulani a college student, which does not fit your characterization. He definitely screams high-school aged teen.

**The Parents:** Be clear about the what the parents are arguing about at the beginning to set the stage for Dulani's world. Also, the way he looks at the metal-framed photo of their wedding to bring up the parents' backstory is awkward. No teenaged boy has a picture of their parents' wedding on their bedside. Maybe change it to a photo of him with his parents. And go into the backstory from there.

### **Structure/Pacing**

The pacing is all right. I like starting in Dulani's dysfunctional world and ending with the mysterious disappearance of the girl and the coin (although I have questions about the plot that

I will bring up next). You can introduce certain things before it appears on page. For example, when he thinks:

Dulani checked the clock on his cellphone, glad his parents didn't scrimp on this bill. 11:03 PM. He knew a comfy corner store that tended to stay open this late, and maybe the owner needed some help. If it was closed... well, he'd figure out a Plan B.

After reading the whole chapter, it's obvious he does this often, making this sound odd in hindsight. Instead, introduce Ruth here, for example:

Dulani checked his cellphone, glad his parents didn't scrimp on this bill. 11:03 PM. Ruth's Market might still be open. Maybe he could help him out to kill time. And if not, well, he'd figure out a plan B.

This is also an example of tightening the prose to pick up the pace.

## **Plot**

My biggest issue, plot wise, is the introduction of the missing girl and the coin. The leap Dulani makes between the missing girl and Ruth's coin is a really big one and seems weird, especially this line:

Dulani glanced at the purple and gold box clutched in Ruth's fist. "Gone without a trace like your coin..."

To compare a coin disappearing without a trace and a girl disappearing without a trace is a leap. I would focus more on the fact that the coin Ruth had and the girl had are very similar. I think you should have a stronger description of Ruth's coin and then describe the coin in the newcast to be similar to make it more clear.

Also, suddenly, Dulani is an excited amateur investigator when I don't have any reference to why this would excite him except that he's a teenager with too much time.

I think you need to create a more compelling reason for why he's interested in this mysterious disappearances. I would be more convinced if it was more about creating a distraction from the shambles of his own life than because he's a teenager with too much time. Connect the first half of the chapter (his unhappy circumstances) with the second part (the disappearances).

Think of a way to create more of a compelling reason to keep reading by connect the character motivation to the mystery.