

# **The Blood Witch**

**By**

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## Chapter 1

The moon was a scarlet globe nestled in a cave of warm velvet. Like fog rolling off the ocean, the spirits of the drowned roamed the river bank, wailing their misfortune. Starlight illuminated their pearl-like pallor as they felt the familiar tickle of magic around them. They watched the river churn and froth, exposing a crown made of seashells and light and the ghosts decided that their lamenting could wait a night. They floated back into the enraged waters, only then noticing the heavily pregnant woman straddling on their river bank. Her breathing came in ragged gasps like fish scales against coral and the shadows averted their eyes.

As the last of them disappeared under a swamp of rotting leaves, Wanwisa, the Goddess of the Sea, bloomed out of the waters. Her crab-clawed hand patted her seaweed green hair, crowned with coral, as she stood in the shallows of the Lopburi River, gazing down at the sorceress that had summoned her. “Isra, is it time?”

The witch nodded, cradling her belly as if it were a ripe watermelon. “King Niran’s child is almost here.”

The goddess Wanwisa cringed as a new wave of pain engulfed the witch, sending her screams echoing into the night.

When the spasms subsided, the witch leaned on the last of her strength. “Please, favour my baby with your protection.” She paused as another contraction rocked her womb. Sweat trickled down her temples as she murmured. “If it’s a girl, I shall name her after you and raise her in your ways.”

Smiling, the Sea Goddess nodded and glided on her powerful tentacles toward Isra. She placed her other hand, the human one, on the witch’s stomach. “I bless you, little one. Come now and the four Winds will welcome your arrival.”

Isra slumped back into the rich soil and let out one final scream.

Shortly before midnight, on the thirteenth day of the seventh moon in the year 1670AD, Princess Wanwisa—soon to be the most powerful sorceress to ever walk the Earth—was born on the banks of the Lopburi.

## Chapter 2

Isra wrapped her baby girl in a *sarong* that she had brought with her and buried the afterbirth deep in the black soil of the river. Wanwisa the Goddess blew over the upturned soil and seared it to a black crust, imprisoning the evidence of Isra's labour under layers of alluvium. The Kra-Sue, a bodiless ghost whose entrails shadowed her approach like backwash, would have smelt the blood and would soon come hunting for a meal. Thanking the goddess, Isra chanted with the quiet force of a cascading waterfall and the malignant spirits that roamed the area, wishing to harm the living, dispersed into their holes, stunned into submission.

Waving farewell to her goddess, the sorceress set off. She was weak, but managed to return to the Great City and slip through the palace gates with the help of her eunuch, Ethina, who was waiting for her return. When they were safely inside, Isra sighed and leaned against an intricately tiled wall. Before she could open her mouth to thank Ethina, the look on her eunuch's pudgy face sent everything that she had been about to say out of her mind. Ethina did not want to be known as a eunuch but to be recognised as a woman—and she had that searing glare only a woman could conjure.

“What the hell, Isra?! Really, what the hell—”, the eunuch hissed, while taking the baby from her mother's arms and nuzzling her still damp neck. The years of living at the Tai king's palace had not managed to erode Ethina's thick, Indian accent.

Isra winced; she had been hoping that her doting eunuch would have pity on her and not berate her for running out in the middle of labour, but she should have known better. Ethina's love for her would surely throw the moon off its axis one day

The sorceress rearranged her features into something that she hoped resembled contrition. “Sorry, Ethina. I'm fine, but a bit sore. You know Phra Pai and Wanwisa would never let anything happen to me.”

The eunuch huffed, rolling her heavily kajaed eyes. “Ya, ya, I know you lay all your trust in the Wind God and the Sea Goddess, but running to the river in the middle of labour is cause enough to put you in the crazy house.”

“I said sorry. And you left India for an explorer, so don't lecture me on sanity.”

Ethina narrowed her eyes at Isra. “Love is not insanity, Isra, even if you don't believe. I almost died worrying about you. You're set on killing

me. You could simply ask for a new maid, you know. There's no need get rid of the old ones."

Sniggering at her eunuch's warped tirade, Isra doubled over as her womb cramped. Ethina's frown softened and she led the sorceress through a darkened hallway toward her chambers. Isra watched her eunuch assiduously scan the sapphire tiles at their feet, ascribing her watchfulness to baleful goblins who would try to trip them up and steal the baby. Once placated, Ethina pushed open the heavy teak doors to Isra's room. The sorceress groaned as she realised that her only sanctuary suddenly looked like the jetty after the fishing boats had come in. It seemed that all the servants of the palace had come to see the new addition to the king's long list of heirs.

Ethina winked at her. "Ay, darling, they've come to take the baby to Satrina and then to the temple. You need to be washed and put to bed, anyway."

"She's already been blessed by Wanwisa, the goddess. And that cow of a first concubine doesn't need to see my baby," Isra hissed, wondering how much longer Satrina was going to be a pebble in her sandal. For reasons Isra could empathise with but do nothing about, Satrina had hated Isra since her first day at the palace, wary of her youth and beauty as a feasting lion watches a hyena circling the feeding grounds.

Ethina ground her teeth. "How often have I told you that your tongue will lead you to the executioner? They'll have my wobbly bottom also for training you so badly. Satrina will bless the child and make sure she's healthy and then the Buddha will be asked to protect her until she belongs wholly to us after the first month. As long as you haven't become first concubine, you'll just have to tighten your underskirts and bite your tongue."

Manouevring through the over-crowded chamber, the sorceress cleaned her hands in a shell-shaped basin and shrugged. She was far too tired to argue with her eunuch. Knowing that she had her gods on her side was enough for her. The palace could go through whatever rituals they wanted with her daughter now that she was already dedicated to the Sea Goddess. Nothing and no one could break that bond, except the little princess herself. Knowing that she had no choice in the matter, Isra conceded. "Alright, let the old hag scrutinise my baby like a smelly fish at the market. I'm sure she'll have a lot to say about her."

The Indian eunuch swaddled the baby in her colourful sari paloo: the part of the long fabric that hung over her shoulder. Trying to comfort her charge, Ethina sighed. "Isra, even Satrina won't find anything wrong with

this bubu. She's lovelier than the rarest blossom. Just look at these locks as thick as my finger."

"Enjoy it until they shave it off at the Kwan Duan ceremony in a month." The sorceress did not like being ungracious but she despised the way the palace came running to her for solutions but refused to acknowledge that her gods were just as good as theirs.

"You're as cranky as a castrated bull at mating season!" Ethina bawled, twitching her lips from side to side.

Isra glared at her eunuch. "Ethina, I've seen the goddess and the Wind God and all the demons and angels that have our fates in their hands. With my own eyes. Have you seen your gods?"

"Oh, you heathen, you've even less control over your mouth than I do! Only God knows how you've managed to stay alive for so long. I'll make sure to stand far away from you when that bolt of lightning comes your way," the eunuch cursed, bobbing her head furiously.

Isra blew her hair out of her eyes and sank into her bed as though it had been made in Nirvana, indicating that their chat was over. "Call me what you want," she said, "but I've suffered worse than celestial revenge and still survived to tell of it."

### Chapter 3

The servants washed the princess and took her to Satrina's parlour. They dreaded visiting her chamber even more than having the palace physician pull out their rotten teeth. Satrina was bestial at the best of times, saving her meagre amount of goodwill for the king alone. However, her normal acidity would be nothing compared to her foul mood today: Isra's joy would be like poisoned darts to her heart. The servants placed the baby in her arms as though they were feeding the little princess to a dragon and backed away.

Water stones trickled loudly in the quiet room as the first concubine took her time checking the princess's toes and fingers; slipping her little finger into the infant's ears and nostrils while blowing on her pink lips. "If only I'd find some deformity that could crumble this acerbic perfection," she spat, loudly enough to be heard, but quietly enough to be misunderstood. Grudgingly nodding her approval, she handed the baby over to the servants who accepted her as if they were handling glass. Satrina snorted, "I'm certain that she's inherited her mother's thick hide, so don't worry about dropping her." She could not have abased herself further had she declared that she was sleeping with the God of the Underworld himself.

The servants hurried out of the room, warding off Satrina's evil stares by spitting on the floor outside her chamber. They fervently hoped that the concubine and her asperity would slip on their collected saliva the next time she walked out her door.

Moving swiftly through the many corridors, the servants bounced holy water off the peacock-plume walls. Finally, they arrived at the bejeweled temple situated in the north eastern wing of the palace grounds. They set the baby before the emerald statue of Buddha while a wrinkled monk encircled her with incense smoke. Reverently bowing their heads in unison before the statue adorned with golden garments, the servants listened as the high pitched voice of the monk filled the room. His chanting interlaced itself with the incense, making everyone drowsy. The servants' heads suddenly shot up as they heard his ancestral cane clatter to the floor. He was pointing a trembling finger at the statue. They strained their necks to see what could cause a holy man to look like a carp out of its pond. Silver streams were rolling down the statue's face like tree sap, the Buddha's usually dormant eyes suddenly alive.

As the stillness of the temple began cracking under the mounting whispers of the servants, the monk rubbed his glistening head and whispered, "Her fate has now been written."

## Chapter 4

Turning over in bed, Isra rubbed her hands with the leaves of the Blumea bush to ward off bloodthirsty ghosts. She cursed as her hand slipped and the silver bowl crashed to the floor, scattering her arcane herbs. Since she had given birth, depression and melancholy had set in and she despised that feeling of helplessness. Emotions that she had decided to leave buried in the past started to flow through her veins, melting the carefully sculpted ice towers that she had erected between their soft walls. Was it because of her new found love for her baby, or was it motherhood itself that was hacking away at every selfish bone in her body? She closed her eyes and finally acquiesced to the memories assailing the back of her skull.

Remembering how she had come to be in that palace full of gold leaf, priceless wood and concubines, Isra felt only loathing. She bit down hard on her lip to hold back the tears that threatened to flow forever once that dam broke. She thought about her lost love and wondered where he was at that moment. Her life had not turned out the way she had planned. Like a coconut washed into the sea of fate by monsoon storms, she bobbed helplessly along the cruel waves of life's unpredictable currents.



## Chapter 5

Isra had been born in a small shamanistic village outside the Great City. Like a rose bush growing out of elephant dung, her beauty blossomed beyond the comprehension of those around her. Her alabaster skin, large eyes and dark lashes forced men to turn their heads in awe. She could always feel their arrant adulation burn on her skin as they watched her seventeen-year-old figure. Luckily, walking closely behind—warding off the evil eye—was always her scar-faced mother, the Bone Witch. She was said to dig up graves at twilight and force the bones of the dead to do her bidding. The scratches on her face were said to have been caused by the spirits of the dead who had tried to stop her from robbing their graves. The men watching Isra surreptitiously went back to mending their huts, petrified of the old witch's curses. The witch often bawled their way, calling them obscenities that even the market harlots did not dare utter.

Learning about the art of spiritualism and ancient medicine from her shrewd yet knowledgeable mother, Isra devotedly honed her skills in magic and people from neighbouring villages started coming to her to cure their ailments. The Bone Witch, who wanted Isra to learn all the ancestral secrets by her eighteenth birthday, took her daughter along on her visits to the Maa-Yaa Gon Forest where the enchanted beings resided. The location of the woods was a secret bequeathed through generations of shaman who would rather have died than betray it. The Bone Witch had been trading with the mythical creatures for as long as Isra could remember.

There, in the depths of the forest, the Bone Witch introduced Isra to the Naang Faa, the Fairy Folk, who gave the witch their secrets in exchange for hers. Isra loved watching the beautiful creatures with almost invisible wings glide through the jungle. Their village could only be seen by the naked eye if humans consumed a small amount of their powdered coral, too much of which would cause humans to be intoxicated and forget their way, forcing them to live with the fairies forever. Isra admired the fair folk's secret ways, often simply sitting and watching them repair their huts made of crystals, leaves and honey-scented dew.

The fairies adored Isra as well and secretly invited her to their gatherings with the other forest creatures. Isra knew that her mother despised the fairy beings with their bibulous ways and moonlight dancing. They were merely a means to an end—not creatures to be socialised with. But Isra needed to escape the Bone Witch's constant attrition on her already raw nerves and so she rebelliously went along to the celebrations. Her mother

would have beaten her till her flesh curled away from her bones had she known but Isra chose to take that chance; the fairies had arrantly stolen her heart.

On her eighteenth birthday, Isra was accepted into the inner most circle of the Naang Faa where she would meet the most sacred creatures of the Maa-Yaa Gon Forest. Emerging into a clearing with the fairies leading the way, Isra came face to face with creatures that humans often talked about and even worshipped but had never laid eyes on. The gods' amorphous silhouettes hardened and took on the forms that she had heard about since childhood.

Amongst the trees, standing proudly was Naang Ngoo, an exquisite creature with the upper body of a beautiful woman and lower body of a cobra. Beside her, awash in her own white glow, was Kinnari, the mythical half-woman half-swan. The great lion and king of the enchanted forest, Rajasi, was also there, his mane halloed by blue fire. But the creature that had caught her attention most of all was Kinnon-Nua, a stag with antlers protruding from its head-like velvet branches sprouting through black soil. Its body rippled with the muscles as it shifted its stance, turning to face her. As it did, the stag transformed into a man so beautiful he actually knocked the air out of her chest. Staring into eyes that promised only brazen behaviour, Isra shivered and knew that she was lost.

Over the next few months, the two met secretly, drowning in each other's bodies as young love assuaged the inevitable guilt. The fairies knew of the blasphemous alliance but refrained from interfering with the gods and their whims. The Bone Witch was left clueless.

As Isra was sneaking through the trees one night to see her stag, she stumbled on a whispered conversation between the head fairy and Kinnari at her moonlit pond.

The fairy, spinning phantom clouds in the water with her spidery fingers, asked, "Kinnari, will this union affect the cycle of our existence?"

The swan lowered her pan flute and watched the water ripple away from her. Sighing, she answered, "The gods have fallen in love with humans before. It's nothing new what we see here." She hesitated. "I worry about my friend; reality is but a whisper in a far off land to him now. But I know that love blinds beyond logic, although I've never had the pleasure of feeling it for myself."

Fiddling with the hem of her skirt, the fairy nodded. “Our worlds cannot join, Kinnari. He knows this and still chooses to ignore the ancient laws. A stolen night here or a secret gift there; that’s all fine and well but he seems to be truly in love with this girl. He is a god. I don’t even want to think of the repercussions if their blood mixes. There’s a reason that we don’t allow the humans into our families. We must protect the portal with our lives. The humans are good friends, but they are a young and weak race, unable to adhere to laws and definitely unable to stand strong against temptation. The valley carries much too much power for the humans to comprehend.”

Isra realised that she should not have been listening in on such a private discussion and was about to sneak away when Kinnari shook out her tail feathers, filling the still air with rainbow coloured droplets. “You’re powdering the wings of butterflies! I know all this. Look at the Bone Witch. She’s an archetype of the humans’ benightedness. They’re not ready for such power. I understand the importance of protecting that gateway, as we all do. The dragons residing in the valley alone would cause the human’s greedy hands to itch like a rampant flea infestation.”

The young sorceress frowned, wondering why she had never heard of this secret before. “But that’s beside the point,” the swan said. “I believe that this love affair will only end in heartbreak, not only because of their separate backgrounds but because Naang Ngoo is in love with the stag and will find a way to rip the lovers apart like a snail out of its shell.”

The head fairy nodded, assimilating the swan’s weighty words. “I wish the world worked differently, but I also know that wishes are senseless, disappointing things. The lovers will have to learn the harshness of the gods on their own.”

Bemused, Isra left the pond and tiptoed through the trees in search of her stag. She would have to ask him about the portal and his affiliation with the snake woman. But as soon as she glimpsed his bracing presence waiting for her at their favourite spot in the moonlight, her resolve scattered like birds from a fallen tree and she strode into his arms, engulfed by his intoxicating scent.

Kinnari’s prediction did not take long to come true. Blind in the haze of bona fide luck at having found each other, the young lovers lazed in each other’s arms, counting the fireflies that dared invade their perfect little world.

A twig snapped in the shadows.

Jumping to her feet, abashed that someone would find them there, half naked, Isra caught sight of Naang Ngoo’s powerful tail retreating into the

jungle. “Eew, your friend was watching us, Kinnon-Nua,” she hissed to her lover, who sat leaning lazily against a tree.

He smiled. “Why are you so worried about what others see or think, Isra? To me, the world only houses you and me now.”

Isra frowned, still bristling at the thought of the jealous snake watching them. She wondered if Kinnari was right—that the snake would somehow manage to tear them apart. The stag stood up and pulled her into his arms, pressing her up against a tree and kissing her as if she was the only girl in the world. Her thoughts blurred as lust claimed her mind. Their moans filled the quiet jungle, silencing even the most persistent of crickets.

Their private little universe was shattered by a shrill scream. Isra heard her mother’s voice braying through the forest.

“I’m going to kill her!” The witch’s words slashed at Isra’s spine-like cold knives.

Isra sat up, certain that her conscience was playing tricks on her. But then she smelled her mother’s protecting spirits and almost retched with fear. The stench of arid dungeons and congealed blood assaulted her nostrils like a bad dream and time stood still.

Isra could only stand there helplessly as her mother emerged through the trees like a lava flood. Isra looked at Kinnon-Nua, fear robbing her fair skin of colour. “But how?”

The stag shook his head, as clueless as she was.

The furious witch let out an ear-splitting howl as she glimpsed her only daughter with the stag. He flitted between forms, as though wondering which one could protect them best. The fairies warily stumbled from their trees, realising that Isra had been found out. Trying to calm the witch, one fairy elder urgently begged Kinnon-Nua to leave. The stag threw Isra’s dress over her nakedness, but refused to let Isra face her mother’s fury alone.

The Bone Witch strode up to them and pulled Isra by her silky hair, screaming. “How dare you disobey me? You’ve smeared your ancestral blood with stag shit. You’ll never see that animal again. Do you hear me?”

The witch obviously did not believe in his godly status.

Isra tried to explain through the pain searing her scalp. “We’re in love, Mama. He wants to marry me. Please stop and let’s talk about this rationally.”

The witch laughed. “Oh my god, you’re serious. Do you think I would blithely sit and watch as my shaman blood is passed on to a bunch of deer babies? Has he knocked your head against that tree too often? This isn’t how I raised you, running around the jungle playing house with animals.”

“He’s not an animal. He’s a god.”

“What makes you think that this ‘god’ of yours will forsake his powers for you? They aren’t allowed to marry humans, stupid girl. He’s just been planting lies in your gullible little head.”

Kinnon-Nua pushed past the fairies holding him back. “Madam, you must believe her. We really are in love. Stop hurting her and let her go.”

Isra winced at his tone. The Blood Witch was unaccustomed to being ordered around. Isra wished that he would just leave, worrying about his safety, but she could only watch as her boorish mother turned and pulled a pouch out of her dress pocket. Without warning, she blew a gust of purple powder in his face and Kinnon-Nua staggered back, blinded.

“You keep your dirty hooves to yourself,” she screamed. “Go and find your own kind to mate with. I don’t care if people worship you; you’re nothing but an abomination in my book. Unless you want to end up as fish food at the bottom of the sea, this will be the last time you ever see her.”

The stag reached for Isra but her mother’s protecting spirits swirled around him, attacking him from all sides.

“Hmph,” the witch snorted. “A god, my wart covered bum!”

Isra begged her mother to stop hurting him, but the witch ignored her. When she was satisfied, she called out and the *hantu raya* halted its malicious venture, trailing behind the witch like a loyal lap dog.

The last thing that Isra saw as her mother dragged her through the trees toward their village was Kinnon-Nua falling to his knees, a hand raised to her, tears spilling down his cheeks. She watched benumbed as the snake woman, whose presence Isra had not noticed before, slithered toward his shaking form and wrapped him in her scale covered arms. The snake aimed her slanting eyes directly at her, turning Isra’s stomach into a mass of knots. The triumphant glint in those reptilian eyes was unmistakable.

## Chapter 6

As the sun came up the next day, Isra surfaced from dreams of her lover and her mother's animal-like screams. She recognised the tell-tale sign of her mother's sleeping potions in her defiant limbs and heavy lids. Squinting around at her surroundings, Isra was almost blinded by the opulence surrounding her.

Mother actually killed me and I'm in heaven, she thought. But the shock at being murdered only lasted for a fragment of a second as a young girl approached her bed with a buxom lady by her side.

"Good morning, young one. I'm Haniya and this is Ethina. How are you feeling?"

Isra sat up unsteadily. "Where's my mother?"

Haniya smiled kindly. "This is the palace. Your mother brought you here and sold you to the king."

Isra fell back on her plush bed in disbelief, too appalled to cry. Her mother had betrayed her. Murder would probably have been better. Barefaced bigotry was one thing but bartering her only daughter to the king was beyond palatable. "Oh holy mother of the seas, she'd often threatened me about this when I was wayward, but this is—," she howled, unable to find the words to finish.

Biting down on her full lower lip, Haniya smoothed down Isra's hair. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel. My parents were killed in Burma and I was sent here too, many years ago by a greedy cousin. It'll be alright. The king is kind and we really live like princesses."

Isra arched her eyebrow in scorn.

Wiping away the tears pooling under Isra's eyelids, Haniya continued, "We have trusted friends, like Ethina here, who keep us company and make us laugh. By the way, Ethina is a eunuch by choice, so she prefers to be thought of as a woman. Oh, don't look so sad. You only get a whipping if you're rude or don't do as they say. You're lucky; eighteen is actually quite old for a new concubine. But our king insists that his concubines shouldn't still be children. His father was very different. In his time, the girls came here as young as twelve. Imagine, practically babies!" She patted Isra's knee. "Now wipe your face and sit up, the maids and other eunuchs will be here soon to groom you for your night with the king."

Isra jumped up, wild eyed. "No. I'm not going to be the king's plaything. I'm a witch and can curse his wrinkled manhood to flap limply

forever.” She stared around for a doorway but saw none. “Show me the way out now,” she yelled.

Haniya, appalled by her outburst, tried to cover her mouth to shut her up. “Sister, you can’t leave. The guards will kill you if you try. King Niran has summoned you tonight and you will go. There’s no running away from this life. Trust me, you’ll learn to love it.” Her smile looked fake but her caring tone sounded genuine. “We don’t have to do anything except show the king a good time and bear his children. No working and toiling in the rice fields or sweeping up fish bowels. Isn’t that what you want?”

“No. I want to go home. I’m a sorceress; bound to no man.” Isra felt like a blind man searching out the light. She could not believe that this woman expected her to accept her fate literally lying down.

With her dark eyes furtively looking around the chamber, Haniya whispered, “Just calm down, we know about your training and it’ll be wonderful to have our own sister concubine who can heal all our pains. Please, for your own sake, don’t cause trouble. Satrina doesn’t like trouble-makers.”

Isra glared at her. “And who, may I ask, is Satrina? Do I have to sleep with her, too?”

Haniya and Ethina stifled their mounting laughter. “No. Satrina is first concubine. She’s very strict and very possessive, so make sure that you stay out of her way.”

“So I bloody left one demon queen for another. Is that what you’re saying?” Isra was fed up of being biddable. Her mother had ordered her around her whole life, watching her like an eagle homing in on a field mouse and soon this Satrina would be doing the same.

Isra yearned to run away and be with her stag. She pictured him waiting for her in the enchanted forest, having absolutely no idea that she now belonged to another, and her heart shattered into a million, irretrievable pieces.

The eunuch, dressed in a bright yellow sari, had been quietly watching their exchange till then. She finally cleared her throat, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Don’t howl yourself hoarse now already! You’ll have enough screaming to do tonight with the king. He likes it when girls yowl; it makes him feel more manly.”

Ethina cheekily raised her eyebrows and then winked at the furious Isra. Lowering her ample frame onto the bed, her voice took on a more serious tone. She patted the spot beside her. “Sit.”

Glowering at the painted face of the eunuch, Isra sat, waiting.

“Darling, don’t worry about anything. I’ll take care of you. I’ve been assigned to be your eunuch and we’ll become the best of friends, okay?”

Searching between the powder-encrusted lines for any hints of further mockery, Isra frowned. “You don’t look like a eunuch.”

“Well what kind of eunuchs have you seen?”

Isra searched for the right words, unwilling to offend the woman who had spoken kindly to her. She hesitated. “My mother told me that eunuchs in palaces were cruel and whipped the concubines if they didn’t do as they’re told. You don’t look like you’d hurt a beetle. And I’ve also never heard of eunuchs wearing women’s clothes.”

Ethina laughed and further buried her buttocks into Isra’s mattress. “I don’t whip anything except the curd when my friend needs extra hands in the kitchen. The head eunuch beats the girls if they’re bad but the rest of us jump in his way when he does. Now, let me tell you a story. Let’s see if you still think that your life is rubbish after that, okay?”

Isra nodded and wiped her runny nose on the corner of her blanket, welcoming the distraction.

The eunuch sniffed and began, “I was born in India and named Ethapan by my proud parents—the birth of a son is always reason to celebrate. But as I grew, they realised that I was no ordinary boy. My father used to beat me for trying on my mother’s saris and kohl eyeliners. He made me wash off the red paste from my forehead and slapped me so hard that my fake nose rings flew off into the sand. He tried to teach me to build a cowshed but I wanted to wash clothes and gossip with the aunties by the noisy river.”

She smiled as though it were a sweet memory. “He punched me so many times that I lost most of my milk teeth to his fists. But he couldn’t beat the girl out of me. I’ve always been a nice plump woman inside this body.” Ethina patted her pot belly. “As I grew older I watched the other teenage boys in my village and my heart wriggled its hips whenever a certain boy named Mohan walked by my front porch. I loved him more than the flowers love the day. He was always polite, smiling at me quickly when no one else was looking.” Her face darkened, as though a cloud were passing by the window. “But the other boys always ran away from me, scared to get my sickness. My mother cried, telling me that my father would kill me if he found out that I was a boy-loving boy. I didn’t care—I was no smelly male. I was a beautiful princess.”

Lips quivering while she patted down the folds of her cotton sari, Ethina said, “One day, I saw Mohan sleeping under a tree behind his house. It was early in the afternoon and the wide banana leaves bore the brunt of the



blazing sun. Everyone else was having a nap. I crept up to him and watched his beautiful face as his chest rose and fell like a sleeping tiger's. He was fifteen just like me, but his body was more toned and his chest hair was beginning to sprout. I swear to you now that I'll never regret what I did next, but my whole life changed after that. Trying to control myself was like swimming against the currents; I needed to feel his lips on mine." Her lips twitched, as though they remembered that day.

"As all logic left me, I lowered my face to his, feeling his steady breath on my skin. I kissed him and he woke up, startled. I was sure he was going to strike me, but he just looked down at my shorts and stared at the bulge I had there. I, too, looked down, confused at my body's reaction and I wanted to die there and then. I cursed my male thing which I didn't even want to have and started crying."

She pursed her lips, her painted eyebrows meeting briefly. "My sweet, kind Mohan wiped away my tears and told me not to worry about it and that if I'd been a girl he would have asked my father for my hand right away. I stood up to go, but saw my father watching me from under a nearby coconut tree. He was seething, every muscle in his body quivering with rage. Walking up to me, he pulled me by my hair, threw me outside on the dirt road and told me never to come back. I was too shaken to care. I hated that part of me that had betrayed me—that part that Mohan had seen. So I went to the dark alleys on the fringes of the city where I knew eunuchs lived and asked them for help."

Her eyes pleaded with Isra to see the importance of that decision—to understand.

Isra only nodded, too enthralled to interrupt.

"They knew how I felt. They knew it was inevitable. They took me to a man who did the surgery and I emerged, reborn."

"That was very brave." Isra dabbed at an errant tear.

Ethina only shrugged without a trace of pride or shame but acceptance. "Over the years, with some herbal help, too, I grew breasts to fill up my choli and lost my body hair, becoming the woman that I had always wanted to be. And all I had to do was get rid of that one dreaded thing that made me a man! I was overjoyed. The only problem was, I couldn't get any work and my singing was not as good as the others. I needed money and finally took to selling my body. It was very unpleasant and I was often beaten by drunken men, but at least I could feed myself."

The pride she eluded was somewhat tainted by the way her lips quivered—as though shamed by the things that they had been forced to do. "I

met a young Indian man who wanted to be an explorer and we fell in love. He wanted to take me over the ocean where we could find happiness. He told me of this beautiful kingdom where poverty was a myth created by travelling tradesmen and of palaces with golden chamber pots.”

She smirked, running her fingers along the hem of her sari blouse sleeve. “But he was more interested in finding some hidden gateway. They said it led to another world, one potent with magic. He heard about it on his travels and dreamed of being the first person to find it. I didn’t care where we went, as long as I could be with him. He was the sweetest of desserts, I tell you.” She bit down on her lower lip, swallowing hard. “We sailed here to this tropical land. We docked at the beautiful jetty. I went below deck to get him.” Her voice shook. “And found him dead in his bed.”

Ethina’s voice faltered but she quickly regained her previous composure. “Some other people on the boat had also been found this way, naked and covered in blisters from head to toe like a barnacled boat. They said it was the plague but I’m still not convinced. So there I was, without a man in a foreign country; as heartbroken as a white clad widow. I had to fend for myself, yet again. I tried to sell my body, but no one wanted a fat, black man-lady, preferring the skinny, fair, young men here. But King Niran’s mother saw me begging on her excursion to the city one day and asked me if I wanted to work at the palace. She was my saviour.”

Ethina finally looked up from fiddling with her pink nails. “So here I am: a eunuch for the concubines in King Niran’s palace.”

Wiping away tears that had pooled at the corners of her almond shaped eyes, Isra looked out the bay window and wondered if parents were always the reason for a ruined life.