

# KALİ

DEMİR BARLAS



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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	9
1. An American Factory.....	10
2. Uncaringly On.....	26
3. Some Psychic Gas.....	42
4. Fortunately, Tess and Wilkie.....	57
5. The Same Sad and Broken Boy.....	72
6. The Abyssal Stars.....	88
7. Charity and Magic and Wonder.....	103
8. Almost the Whole.....	118
9. A Human Border.....	133
10. The Blue Colossus.....	149
11. We'll Make Him a God.....	165
12. Sleep Forever.....	181
13. Luke-Asura.....	196
14. Little Fleeing Humans.....	212
15. The Goddess and the Demons.....	230

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The seed of Tess grew from my loneliness, without whose ideas, humanity, and inspiration this novel and its underlying life would be impossible.

## 1. AN AMERICAN FACTORY

The village of Kalipur had been devastated by only some forms of modernity. The young men had only just discovered colleges and migration to megacities in which they could make an agriculturalist's annual pay in four weeks. The young women had only just discovered, and fought for, access to the same channels of opportunity into which the boys (to be honest, pushed mightily by their mothers) had already gone. The older people, as addicted to their land as the younger people were to their imagined futures, still had no greater amusement than sitting cross-legged on their daybeds—now five thousand years old in their design—and staring at the fields. Kalipur had long been electrified and married to the current India, but the fields and the sunsets were immemorably and unalterably old. Perhaps gods and demons had fought here, in this very dusk. Perhaps queens and kings and their retainers had passed through this very forest in unjust exile.

Perhaps, perhaps, but long ago; the question of the moment was the new factory being erected on the single hill that overlooked Kalipur. This was to be an American factory. The factory was to produce chemicals, and there would be many jobs for the sons and (in a more progressive, inevitable time) daughters of Kalipur. The man in charge of the place was called Hadfield, a name lovingly pronounced by many in the village before they had seen him or his factory, for his rumor had come long in advance of his reality. Finally, they broke ground. A politician from a much larger and more important place than Kalipur showed up to deliver an ambitious speech of welcome at which Jonah Hadfield himself, present in a pavilion with his wife and young son, had to smile. The politician said that India, already urban, would become more so, that her many remaining villages and hamlets, tributaries of the great metropolitan flow, would themselves grow large th-

rough economic opportunity. The politician said that Hadfield had chosen this site for natural bounties that he would now convert, or help the state convert, into prosperity for Kalipur.

Although white people had long been demystified for Kalipur by television, there was still an unspoken and general fear that exposure to the sun was bad for them, and, consequently, no little effort had gone into the erection of the pavilion. A large canvas had been tightly extended and bound to each of the four supporting pillars, and the speech had been scheduled for noon, when no angle of the sun could pierce the canvas. Hadfield himself was indifferent to these preparatory details. He had not wanted to build his factory here, but the province and its politicians enticed him with an absence of regulation and a promise of cheap and endless labor sourced from villages such as Kalipur. Vivian, his wife, had turned subtly away from both him and their son, Luke, as he played on the floor with his toys. No eye of Kalipur could detect this state of alienated motherhood. Motherhood here was rough and normal and unshakeable in both love and responsibility.

It was a strange American family, or maybe circumstances made it so. Jonah, not yet forty, had the kind of look that men three generations before him had—a lean and capable look set off with a properly fitting suit, the kind that even Presidents had ceased to wear. Vivian was a throwback to an even earlier time: An atavism of the nineteenth century, the essential resilience and optimism of the frontier having just been worn down into some sad sequel of motherhood. Luke was the sole contemporary specimen of this family. He had the universal pudginess of the contemporary American child. He was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt that advertised nothing, and he was playing a remarkably intricate game with three trucks vying with each other to bring concrete blocks to some place of construction.

You wouldn't have placed them together if they weren't physically grouped and additionally distinctive in this village. They were like sadder, stranger versions of the people one encounters in mass-produced frames—a Chinese manufacturer's idea of an Indian's impression of an American's idea of an American, filtered through some unknown country's conventions. But they were very remarkable all the same. They had flown here in a private jet that was visible to Jonah from

where he sat, and which was capable of flying them almost anywhere in the world without refueling.

Jonah Hadfield was maybe young enough to have inherited the factory, but he was also old enough to have worked for it. Neither possibility told conclusively in his features. There was patience, though, and mechanical empathy—smiles when the politician told a joke, as far as he could understand it; unconscious frowns when the politician described a period, not long ago, of famine or drought (Jonah had not, however, noted which); and nods to strengthen the politician's claim that this area would lead an industrial resurgence of the kind that, regrettably, had skipped over some patches of rural India (though not because of any deficiency of the provincial or federal governments).

Vivian, when she looked up, looked briefly but appealingly into some native faces. She had wanted, if not demanded, some kind of spiritual renewal from India, but she had not found it during these past three weeks. There had been the unexpected acidity of the bottled water, the unreasonable incongruity of monkeys actually in trees, and the sense that her medicinally untreated depression would find no relief here. Maybe the entire country had had a Parisian magic for white people as late as, she reckoned, the era of the Beatles, but that spell had dissipated into the fragment of modernity she saw now: A young farmer, turban-bound, clearly checking a phone and smiling at the same instant connectivity that amused other portions of the globe. There was nothing here, as there was nothing there, and the heat and the canvas only made it worse, and she soon returned her glance to the dirt of the makeshift pavilion.

Luke was absorbed in his game. Whatever shadows his parents were casting, as individuals and a unit, had not yet subsumed him. He was pure. His game was pure. He did whatever his soul counseled.

There were a few other white faces in the crowd—fortuitously, not because the profession of journalist was as mono-racial as it had been. The white faces were important conduits to the global marketplace, which watched Hadfield continuously—but all the more intently now that he was making a foray into chemicals. There were brown faces as well, but these



belonged to the Indian media and were focused, to the extent that they were present at all, on the rural development policies of the current Prime Minister.

The speech came to an end. They, the villagers of Kalipur, served lemonade and cucumber sandwiches, with the cucumbers hand-cubed by the slightly dull knives that predominate in any vegetarian environment. Jonah shook hands with the politician. Vivian offered a sandwich to Luke, who refused it good-naturedly; he had yet to finish his game. The politician was saying something to Jonah, but the American industrialist had no ear for it. The talk was of the order of mall music or makeup in the morgue, a soothing sound that politicians made to cover the corpses of corruption. Jonah took a sandwich, and, biting it reluctantly, he found it good. He could taste the cucumber—which, in America, had the shared plastic anonymity of any other mechanical item; he could taste the cheese and even the fibers in the bread. He reflected that his factory was enlisted on the side of removing such flavor from the world, because local and genuine flavors were globally inefficient.

Jonah had contracted Indian managers for the factory, and he had moved over one of two vice presidents of his own concern from Long Island or wherever they were billeted. But these first six months were crucial, and they required his presence on the site (because nature, too, was a site). He had suggested to Vivian that she remain behind with Luke, but she had vetoed him. She had wanted to replace, or at least augment, her medications with India—just a little change of scene—and why? Why had the chemistry of childbirth and motherhood affected her so adversely? Several experts had given several answers. Each round of medication was effective for six weeks, after which it had to be replaced by some other kind of medication, and the rotation was thinning. Family and friends had not known what to say—well, they had known—they had made a very American maneuver of reminding Vivian that, should she want for something, they were available. The burden was on her to go and ask. More fundamentally, the burden was on her to know what was wrong. One needed, in this moment, the honesty and stern humanity of a prairie grandmother. She wouldn't have told you to come and ask her for something; she would have merely given it to you; but that America and that world were somewhere behind and before

the factory.

Brajlal had been looking closely at the Americans. These Americans reminded him of Americans from old television shows; very old; perhaps 1989. Like the other men of the village, he had reported to the factory gates with eager anticipation of a job. He had gotten one. They had been handing out jobs like sweets at the birth of a child. He had been elevated to night clerk because he had had a resume. He had been proven right in his desire to remain in the village. He had been validated in his desire to name his daughter Lakshmi, for he would now be able to pay her tuition in the private school that was opening to coincide with the factory. Lakshmi, seven, was staring at Luke now, mesmerized by his toy trucks. Even at this distance, she admired their workmanship. But she didn't look long; already, at this tender age, she realized that staring too long would cause her father distress and embarrassment, so she turned from the object of her scrutiny to a cucumber sandwich. Brajlal didn't see this act of loyalty from his daughter, although it wouldn't have surprised him. The girl had matured remarkably since her mother had died. He had worked mightily to keep his own tears from her, sneaking out into the fields when the melancholy proved too much, but he suspected she had seen and heard him. She had been confused, naturally, by the doctrine of reincarnation as he had tried to explain it to her, but then she had decided that her mother would come back to the world as a baby or a flower, and the thought finally made her smile. Brajlal had been given no model, living or dead, for the life of a single father—and, remaining in love with his departed wife, he had resisted cousinly attempts to remarry him. But his love for his daughter was strong, and they were healing together, and the opening of this factory marked the beginning of a hopeful era for both of them.

Lakshmi was wearing her best and only skirt, which her father had bought as part of a prospective school uniform. It had been a rash purchase. He had bicycled to a nearby village to have a master tailor stitch it, and the tailor's expertise had come at a premium. He had spent more than intended, but the skirt was beautiful, and Lakshmi was now taking care to make sure to hold her plate between this skirt and the sandwich. Such a punctilious, promising girl! Her braid was already thick, as thick as only Subcontinental hair could get, and her

laughter—when it came—revealed very small and even teeth.

Some of the women in Kalipur looked aspirationally at Brajlal. A father of this quality was still rare among them, and it was easy to imagine him within your own household, sensitive and hardworking. But then they would see the bond between him and Lakshmi and remember that he couldn't be plucked out of that context. He would flower only once, in the good soil of his own family.

Jonah, wondering if the lemonade (or lemon-water, as he had heard it called) had been made from genuinely imported bottled water, sensed the peripheral approach of a gesticulating man offering thanks in bad English. This gentleman was Brajlal, the new night clerk. He was not obsequious, as the beggars had been in Delhi; rather, he had the true art of graceful gratefulness, which he now endeavored to communicate to the boss, several times removed, of his boss.

"You're welcome," Jonah smiled in response, and the grateful little man, already protective of the great man's time, went away with more gesticulations.

There had been no habitation already suitable for the Hadfields, and there had been no time to build one, so the only landowner of the district, who had decamped with his family to England for the time being, had given permission for the Americans to move into his home. Mr. Wells, the President of Hadfield Industries, had taken an interest in this matter, demonstrating the orientation to detail—combined with appropriate and voluminous ass-kissing—that had endeared him to his CEO. He had developed, or had had someone develop, ideas for new furniture, appliances, and conveniences, but Jonah had told him that the house would shortly revert to its owner. All efforts were to be directed towards the successful opening of the factory, which made something both useful and modish—sealants for plastics and nuclear bombs and baby food—something ubiquitous and indispensable and unseen. These efforts were directed not so much at the integrity of this potentially terrible place, which could easily be a death factory, but at the promotion of a brand, an idea, a flower with six diversely colored petals signaling Hadfield Industries' alignment with a green and properly inclusive world.

Two hours later, alone with his chief engineer, Jonah tou-

red the chemical factory. It had been rushed into production. He could see the edges of unremoved plastic on doors, smell still-wet paint, touch construction dust on the computer desks.

"I have tried to tell you, sir," the chief engineer insisted. "I have documented the process—the processes—in my emails. We are far from operational."

"What's your name again, friend?"

"Abhayaprada, sir."

"I'm sure someone received your emails. We have to get these tanks open. Do you know how many orders we have to fulfill?"

"But, sir, I insist on your attention. You can see—you can see what the men have done—and left undone—this is not the global standard, this is not—"

"Listen, if this fails—just between us—I found a very glib or guilty German company to insure it. Just mention gas to Germans and see if they don't fall out of their chairs to make good, right?"

The joke didn't land with Abhayaprada. He was, Jonah thought, remarkably young, or maybe that was the effect of his slender physique and glasses and earnestness.

"Abha—Abhaya—is that a Hindu name?"

"Yes, sir," the chief engineer responded, instinctively surprised that the big man could want to pronounce his name. "We are all Hindus here. The Muslims are in the next village."

"I'm sure we'll be fine once production starts. We have fail-safes, don't we?"

"We do, sir, but the quality standards—"

"Are you married, Ab?"

"I am not so honored, sir. Not currently."

"Do you want to be?"

"Very much."

"Well, in a couple of months, you'll be all set. I imagine the local girls will want a big house and a nice car. They're transactional, aren't they, your marriages? You'll have a lot to offer. And I have my orders to fulfill."

"Sir, sometimes—when I have turned on the smallest of

the tanks, in testing—I have heard a terrible rhythmic sound. I don't like it. I invited the working group to listen to it. I told them such a sound shouldn't be coming from a new machine. You don't have to be an engineer to hear the mischief."

"Boy, you have an admirable commitment to covering your ass."

"This is not a question of my ass, sir," returned Abhayaprada, hotly. "Nor yours. It is a question of safety for the entire village. I am very sorry that so many of my countrymen are lazy and corrupt. I am sorry that you, with your orders to fulfill, are not listening. Any breakdown in the tanks, given our position—"

"Look, nothing will happen. No, of course that's wrong. Something will happen—the same thing that's happening now. The order of the world will perpetuate itself. This factory will run because I want it to. Because, unfortunately, there's a fundamental difference between four- and five-hundred-foot yachts. That's why I'm here—not because of the factory or you or the village; because I need the press to see and acknowledge and transmit my commitment back to the market, which will revalue my shares accordingly. I hope you don't mind this honesty. I'm sure it's what you associated with my people."

Somehow, despite the diabolicism of this monologue, Jonah's eyes twinkled and voice coruscated in a manner that didn't allow any of it to be taken seriously. Americans make bad devils. They lack the old-world weight of evil, even when they are evil. Anyway, he nodded at Abhayaprada as if to demand that the chief engineer continue on the remainder of the inspection in a more pro forma manner.

Night. Brajlal was checking the fit of his suit in the cracked mirror that stood in the kitchen. The suit had short sleeves and a tropical look. It was a little too large for his frame—anything would have been—but he still managed to look graceful in it. Lakshmi, playing with dolls on the kitchen floor, saw her father smile for the first time in months. The smile was neither self-satisfied nor mindless. Brajlal had caught a glimpse of Kavitā in the mirror. He had always taken great (and, the village would say, unmanly) pleasure in his wife's approval, and she continued to give it from beyond the grave, apparently. For everything Brajlal had told his daughter about reincarnation,

he suspected, albeit sadly, that it was nonsense. He would rather believe in ghosts, whose helpful incorporeality was something that the wind in the trees and the color of the moon could confirm.

“There,” he said. “Ready.”

He had left roti and onions for Lakshmi, who assured him that she would eat as soon as he went to the office (the word, in her mouth, coming out with intense and loveable stress on the second syllable). He kissed her goodbye and made the slight transition into night, which was separated from them only by a curtain. From there, the transition to the factory was to have been attained by a bus that the boss-wallah was supposed to have gotten up but had not. Brajlal had never counted on this chimeric bus in the first place; he was comfortable relegating it to the realm of phantoms (Internet, paved roads, an uncorrupt establishment) that made their way from federal to local unreality. He was prepared with a bicycle. He had been riding the bicycle everywhere and so assiduously that the hill to the factory was no real challenge for him. He was, as if by instinct, slightly miffed to note how many of the young men making this journey alongside him had mopeds (and even, in a few cases, scooters and motorcycles), but he consoled himself with thoughts of his salary and what it would do for Lakshmi and himself. Although a motorcycle would be nice, he thought more frequently and passionately about Lakshmi’s school and what she would make herself there. He had a vision of her as the Prime Minister. He gave full credence to this fantasy during the final third of the ascent, which was the steepest, and his excitement lent vigor to his flagging legs.

The factory, which had slept in darkness these nine months, was now lit up like a festival. It had a large and unruly mouth by which to swallow the men who had come to run it on this, the day of its birth. The guards, newly officious in stiff khakis, were delighted to look at the badges and credentials the workers presented—although their attention and inclination were insufficient to the task of truly checking the names against the faces. Brajlal, caught in the crush, waved his own badge around until he found himself spilling through the gate. From there, he walked briskly up the stairs, joining the smartly marching stream of employees. Abhayaprada and some of the other top-tier employees stood at the top of the stairs. Before

long, Brajlal found himself directed to his own station, which was a desk just inside the foyer of the factory. No one could tell him what exactly to do, so, on his own initiative, he dug around until he found cleaning supplies with which to clean the desk. Finally, when things had calmed down, Abhayaprada wandered over to the desk and told Brajlal that his duties would become clearer as things went on.

There are truths the body tells. At three o'clock, fighting sleep, Brajlal's eyes opened wide and heart pumped more decisive blood. Only seconds later, the echoes of shouting men reached him, but these were rapidly overtaken by a siren.

Jonah, who had been sleeping, was reached on the phone and apprised of the situation at the factory. Abhayaprada was speaking to him through gasps and tears, conveying the central and horrendous fact that the main tank had ruptured. To this was added the subsidiary fact that the containment fields had all failed, and that poisonous gas was consequently free.

Abhayaprada had left it to Mr. Hadfield to alert the authorities, then issue orders to him personally, but, even before he had come to the end of his few tortured sentences, Abhayaprada sensed that the titan would take other steps. Indeed, Jonah realized that the milk was spilled. His presence at the factory could neither be of material assistance nor assist the narrative that would form—which, as he already envisioned it, would center on the regrettable laxity in local regulations and policy that allowed him, despite his unquestionable commitment to safety, to be misled by certain pivotal actors. Coeval with this intuition was the thought that he, Jonah—and, secondarily, his wife and son—had to escape this place as they had come into it, in the plane that he himself had piloted.

On the hill, a factory; in the factory, chemicals, from the chemicals, gas; and, from the gas, death. Hadfield, said the side of the factory in large green letters.

The gas killed like demons kill, unfairly and in the night. Death came not after the valiance of struggle but in the temporary cowardice of sleep. The mothers died first, their babies surviving—on average—another eleven minutes because of the superior resiliency of their lungs. The babies, mercifully untouched by knowledge, gurgled those eleven minutes away as the final residents of a village in Uttarakhand that was to be

no more.

The gas was odorless, tasteless, colorless, insubstantial. It was chromed and charmed modernity and the fall of Rome, the permanent cowardice of betrayal, the disloyalty of parents, the hideousness of humanity in full decline.

The gas had circulated through the factory too, and most of the men there had died. Brajlal had not. He was bicycling back to the village. By this time, dawn, the gas had dissipated.

Before he reached his home, Brajlal encountered the dissolved dead in gullies and on porches. Bursting through his own door, gasping in the extremity of his fear and exhaustion, he saw Lakshmi. She had been crawling to the door. She had died there, an outstretched and emaciated arm reaching for help that would never come. Brajlal kneeled down next to her, cradled her, and sobbed.

And he asked for vengeance. He asked for Kali to emerge from her slumber. He looked into Lakshmi's unseeing eyes to make this wish, as if Kali were somewhere inside her instead of in the margins of the universe. He refused to wonder why Kali had slumbered through the long decline of her people and the rapine of the world. This one unjust death was enough. It encapsulated all the misery and anger that had ever been. He promised Kali another death, his own, should she awaken.

The men in hazmat suits didn't find Brajlal twenty-four hours later, not that they were looking for him. There were enough of the dead to attend to (and there would be more, for the men thought spared at the factory would each die over the next week of residual poisoning).

The nearby general who had been put in charge of the whole operation asked for Hadfield, but the American and his family were long gone. They were already in America. Before even landing, Jonah had pointed his army of public relations personnel, lawyers, and politicians to the creation of an exonerating narrative for himself and a damning narrative for India. In the months and years to come, this narrative would be successful, because too many moneyed and sophisticated interests were behind it. Wasn't India already familiar as a cradle of plagues and corruption? Hadn't Hadfield done his best for rural development? Weren't his own advertisements remorselessly and systematically engineered to position him



## KALI

on the side of right? Wasn't he in league with the brown and black and colored (for white is not a color) people of the world? And didn't the world itself need baby food more than it needed babies?

Before leaving his daughter, Brajlal had looked up at the mirror and seen a woman—not Kavita—promising him: I will come. In his anger and despair, Brajlal didn't note that the woman was in fact a woman. She had no fangs, no scarlet and protruding tongue, no necklace of devoted skulls. She was a woman—an ageless, indefinable woman whose face and form had been equally claimed by the otherwise divided Aryans and Dravidians—and she was speaking her cosmic promise to him through the mirror. Find me a form, the woman said. I need a form to dance across the starlit bridge. Then she was gone.

The men in hazmat suits, when they came twenty-eight hours later, found neither Brajlal nor Lakshmi. The father had, on indefatigable feet, carried his daughter out of the village and into the forest, where he gave her to the fire that night. The crackling reminded him of Kali's voice as it still echoed in his head. She would come. The cleansing and avenging goddess would come. She would take vengeance on the scale that Brajlal wanted it taken, on the planetary scale. She would begin to roll back the demonic age. But first, she had said, she needed a form. Where was this form? How was he to find it? Before the fire had cooled, he knew that he would have to take a mental journey towards the goddess and her lore. He would discover how to give her a form and open the starlight bridge to her. That—fatherhood and husbandry being dead—was his sole remaining task. He would accomplish it with the whole of his being.

Lakshmi being consumed, a gust of timely wind took her ashes—then stronger wind shook the skeleton of the bier that Brajlal had built for his daughter. No, Lakshmi would not return to him; there were no such cycles of renewal; there was only this endless reabsorption of the dead.

It took many years to rebuild Kalipur. Not because of any structural damage. The gas had left the makeshift houses intact, after all. The fields, too, were rich and awaited planting. But the spiritual terror of what had happened here kept newco-

mers at a distance for half a generation. And here, too, was an Indian magic too subtle to detect. Reabsorption wasn't only for the dead. It was for the living and their inexhaustible power of return. Hope returned to the village in the form of new people respectful of, but no longer daunted by, the shadow of the dead. The rebuilding of Kalipur only required a superimposition of the living on the dead—one that happens everywhere, even in America. Isn't the entirety of America precisely such a superimposition, one of Jonah's ancestors on the misnamed Indians of the New World?

But no one, save one, would ever go to the summit of the hill. The factory had long since been demolished, and the environs had been found unpoisoned, but no hope of renewal could penetrate the superstition of this peak. All the ambient fear associated with the destruction of the village had been concentrated into the active horror of this place.

Brajlal lived here. The demolition of the factory was, like many things in India, incomplete. There were ruins, and they sheltered Brajlal now. He had come here after two years in the forest, years passed almost entirely in meditation. He would have gone unrecognized even if there had been anyone to recognize him. He had grown a beard, and his hair was tangled, and there was much white in both, and the tropical suit he had so proudly worn to his first and last day at the factory had gone to unrepentant shreds. But these markers of time meant nothing to him. His internal journey had no milestones. For a time, he had lived as an animal. He had eaten roots and berries, and his already thin frame had wasted almost to death, and he had begun to find small offerings of food in the forest. The gas had had no aftereffects on him, and he had never become sick. He had cast tenacious roots of his own into the world. He would remain anchored here until he found the key to the starlight bridge. One portion of his thought was always bent on it. For a winter, he had sat thinking of Kali every day, his back to the forest's thickest tree. For a summer, he had examined the stars for any pattern, any bridge. Then, soon after taking up residence in the ruins of the factory itself, he had begun to travel, because the knowledge he needed had proven not to lie within himself.

He had walked for seventy-seven days. On the way, he subsisted on the goodwill of the countryside and a population

still judiciously respectful of ascetics. On the seventh-eighth day, he came to a bend in the Ganges unknown to him and not particularly loved by the local villagers, for not all of the Ganges is auspicious. But Brajlal felt that he had been led here. He stood looking at the greasy, slow-moving water until he heard footsteps coming out of the forest behind him. And there was a man very much like himself, a saddhu, but far older and less bitter. The men stopped to consider each other at a distance of several steps, each understanding the other's purpose.

Brajlal spoke hoarsely, because he had not had occasion to say anything for two years. He asked questions of the saddhu. He asked how Kali could be brought back into the world. The old saddhu informed Brajlal that the stars had failed. They had been out of alignment these five thousand years, and they had opened the gate to demons and degeneration, to the decline of piety and morality. The gods, themselves subject to cosmic limitations, had been barred from the Earth for a time, and it was the curse of all who lived now to be immured in this godless world. But, the old saddhu had added, there was chaos even in the cosmos, and some other—minor—alignment could still open the starlight bridge to her. And there was more. The saddhu said that he had dreamed of Kali scratching on the gates of the Kaliyuga, more eager than the passive gods to have her way on Earth, but she had found no body. The goddess could not, in this downfallen age, return to the world in the glory of her own flesh. She needed a host.

"I will teach you the words," the saddhu said. "The words of invocation. They summoned her of old, even in the Kali Yuga. They can summon her again. You will know when and where to speak these words."

The saddhu did not disclose these words to Brajlal there, at the edge of the Ganges. There are words that are better suited to darkness. The saddhu had a cave, and it was to this cave that he led Brajlal across the countryside. The cave—large, and of great antiquity—was in the side of a hill with a gentler slope than that which had held Hadfield Chemicals. The entrance was just geometric enough to have been human work, but it could also have reflected the patterns that nature generates over eons. By the time they reached the hill, it was nightfall. The moonlight felt sideways across the cave mouth, illuminating some of the walls. These, Brajlal saw, had been covered by

the handwriting of a lifetime—looping Sanskrit imprecations, benedictions, and astrological records that the younger man, illiterate in the language of his ancestors and the gods, could not read. He peered at the handwriting closely anyway, wondering if it contained the correct words, until the old saddhu turned to correct him.

“I took what I could from the scriptures,” he said. “And from the book of nature. But the book that mattered most was here, inside. You have looked for her for twenty-seven cycles of the moon. For me, it has been over five hundred. She gave me the words, but she never showed me her presence.”

“Then we were meant to meet.”

“Lie down there. Let some of the moonlight fall across you. Close your eyes. I will give you the words in your sleep.”

Brajlal’s sleep was, for the first time since the gas, deep. He knew rest again. The moonlight and the Saddhu’s words entered him through lulled ears, imprinting themselves indelibly on him.

He woke up to the sunlight. The old saddhu was gone. In the night, the walls had been scrubbed clean of wisdom and damnation. There had been calmness and systematicity in this erasure, as if it had been both planned and soothing. The white chalk had left a few streaks. Otherwise, the cave lacked any signs of habitation, as Earth itself would be rapidly liberated from tokens of human presence—when, finally, it was once more a planet of wind and water.

Brajlal did not know what the words were in any conscious way, but he knew when and where to speak them. He carried them back across seventy-seven days to the summit of the hill overlooking Kalipur. He would wait here until the moon returned to where it was when Lakshmi had been killed, and then he would speak the words of invocation. That was what the saddhu and the moonlight had told him.

The first ritual of this kind, when he performed it, was beneath a cloud. The link between Kali and himself was tenuous. During the second ritual, his third eye saw her on the starlit bridge between Earth and nullity, but she was looking away from him. In the third ritual, she was close enough to speak to him, and she told him that there was, as yet, no body strong enough to hold her. In the rituals to come—there would be

## KALI

many—she did not speak to him again, but her all-encompassing glance scoured the Earth for a body.