

ROAD TO SHAMBAYLA

“How did you get that scar?” The man leans in a little too close to study the thin, winding welt of skin on Kali’s jawbone. She looks away and slides over in the seat, hugging the window. When she looks out, she can see the man’s reflection in the glass. He is still looking intently at the side of her face. Kali turns her shoulders away from him, pushes her long, red hair over her cheek. She wants the man to get the message.

“Were you in an accident?” he asks. He has an accent Kali can not quite place. His breath smells of cinnamon. Not the heavy cinnamon smell of gum or candy- it is as if he’s just eaten a sweet roll. It’s a soft smell. She turns toward him. There are flecks of gray in his black, wavy hair. His dark face is clean-shaven and smooth, his eyes brown with crinkly laugh lines at the corners. It is a nice face, so Kali says, “Please, I don’t mean to be rude, but excuse me.” She turns back to the window.

“I am sorry, miss,” he says, tipping his head slightly. “It is an unhappy memory, of course.” The man faces forward, leans his head back on the seat. They ride in silence for a while. Kali chews her bottom lip. Her neck pinches from turning toward the window and the long, hot bus ride. She looks back at the man, still careful that her hair obscures the welt of flesh on her jaw.

“That was a strange way to start a conversation, is all,” she says. Part of her is hungry for more of his halting English, in this place that is so full of unfamiliar syllables and guttural sounds she does not understand.

“Yes, of course.” He nods at her again, his eyes searching beyond the curtain of fiery hair. “It was the way the sun was falling on your face,” he says. “The sun accentuated it.”

Kali blushes and puts her hand up to cover the scar.

“No, please,” he says. He reaches up and puts his hand on hers, pulling it away from her face. He tucks her hair gently behind her ear. Kali draws in a breath, taken aback at his familiarity. “Please,” he says then. “It is very beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” Kali’s eyes go wide, her cheeks coloring as she feels the familiar sting of ridicule. She brushes his hand away. “You’re cruel,” she says angrily. “Now, please, stop talking to me. In fact, can you please change seats with someone?” She says this a little loudly, making eye contact with a round, brown woman across the aisle. The woman looks at Kali over her newspaper and shakes her head. She pulls a large, cloth bag off the floor from between her feet, sets it on the vacant seat next to her, makes a point of looking away.

“No, miss, please,” the man says. “You misunderstand. I do not mean a cruel intention.”

“What *do* you mean then?”

He relaxes a bit in his seat and turns his left hand over, palm up. “You see,” he says. He pulls up the sleeve of his loose shirt to reveal an angry mass of scar tissue covering his forearm. Kali sucks in her breath.

“A fire,” he says, running his hand over the angry flesh. After a moment he sighs. “This is not beautiful.” He shakes his head, then reaches up and traces the scar on her face. “But this- it is like a little silvery river.” The scar snakes down her neck and chest, hidden by her modest clothing, but his finger stops just below her chin.

He puts his hands in his lap and smiles at her. His teeth are dazzling against his dark skin. “Okay, then,” he says. He holds out a hand to her. “I have been rude. I am David.” He pronounces it *daa-VEED*.

“I’m Kali.” She shakes the offered hand.

“The dark goddess,” David says, smiling, nodding, showing his white teeth.

“Excuse me?”

“Your name,” he says. “It is Sanskrit, meaning *dark goddess*.”

“Oh-” Kali blushes. “I guess I didn’t know that.”

“And are you?” he asks.

“Am I- ?”

“A dark goddess.”

“Oh,” she says, trying not to smile. “I don’t think so. Probably not.” But she is pleased at the thought. At the possibility.

“Kali is a fire goddess. She would like your red hair,” says David.

“Well,” says Kali, looking down into her lap. “I would be a disappointment to her, I think.”

“Not at all,” he says. “We are all- necessary.”

“I suppose.” Kali looks away. Outside, foliage slides by. She thinks of Robert and the church and the knife. Not everything, she thinks, not everyone, is necessary and even though the heat on the bus is stifling, she trembles.

“What is it?” David asks.

“It’s - nothing.” Kali’s throat feels tight.

“You are thinking about things not so pleasant?”

Kali’s smile is wan. “It was- a long time ago.”

“I understand.” David’s eyes seem to glaze over. Kali looks down. Her hands are clenched so tightly that her nails have made pink, moon-shaped crescents on her palms. She tries to relax.

The bus leaves the dusty tarmac, turning onto a narrow dirt road that leads into a low area of jungle. Fragrant tree branches brush the sides of the vehicle, and Kali begins to hear the cries of birds and see bright flashes of their feathers through the thick foliage. The other passengers talk softly to each other, and near the front of the bus a woman sings softly to her child. When Kali turns away from the window, she finds herself looking directly into David's eyes.

"You were looking at it again," she admonishes, but this time she smiles gently.

"Yes," David says. "If I may ask- are you also going to Ztumbe for the doctor?"

"Yes," she says. "I am." She searches his face. *Also*, David has said. Kali's mind goes back to the angry, ribbon-y flesh of his arm. "They say he can work miracles." She says it as much for him as for herself. "You have the same first name."

He eyes her quizzically.

"As the doctor," Kali says.

David smiles softly. "You are right," he says. "I had not thought about it. Maybe it is good luck." He shows his white teeth again. "But surely your silver river does not require a miracle? There must be many wonderful doctors in the United States. Doctors who could repair something so- please pardon the word - insignificant."

"I – I suppose," Kali say noncommittally. She slides her hand protectively over her abdomen and can feel the ragged flesh beneath her fingers through the soft, worn cotton of her shift.

"Are you - familiar with his methods?" David asks.

"No, I-." She swallows visibly. "I understand that his methods are- controversial."

"You are afraid," David says after a moment.

"Yes," she whispers. "Aren't you?"

David moves in close. Kali can smell the sweetness of his cinnamon-y breath once again. “Yes, I am scared too, little goddess.” He smiles gently. “But still, we step off the cliff, do we not?” David takes her hand between his own brown ones, and Kali lets him. The bus rocks gently. “This is the longest stretch,” he says. “You should rest.” Kali looks into David’s brown eyes. She sees only kindness there, understanding. She leans back in the seat. Kali sleeps.

All she’d done was change her mind. Her sister, her mother, Jeannie, they said it was wedding jitters, everyone got those, but it was something else, something not right. There was a stone in her stomach, a heavy stone that wouldn’t go away. And the dreams. They were bad. She woke up wet with sweat, out of breath, as if she’d run for miles.

Robert smiled woodenly when she told him, and said the same thing everyone else said, it was jitters, nothing more, but his eyes were cold. Looking into them, Kali felt an odd chill. She sat back in her chair. Between them, their dinner cooled. Robert reached across the table, held her hand a little too hard. How long he wanted to know. When Kali couldn’t answer, he’d stood up fast, his chair scraping the floor, and walked out of the restaurant. Some of the other diners looked surreptitiously her way, whispered a little behind their hands. She’d had to pay for the uneaten dinner with a credit card already bulging with wedding expenses.

Later he called her, much later, it was after three a.m., in fact. Kali came out of a muzzy sleep, groping for the phone on the bedside table. Robert’s voice was raspy, and at first she’d thought he’d been crying. Then she realized he was drunk, angry. “Is there someone else?” he’d wanted to know, and she’d said “No, Robert, of course no-“

“There’d better not be!” he’d said then. “We are getting married! As planned!” At first, Robert’s somewhat dominating ways were sweet and made Kali feel cherished, taken care of, but as they’d gotten more overt, made her slightly uncomfortable. Now his he-man routine was pissing her off. Kali hung up and lay down, knowing she’d made the right decision. She loved Robert, but she had to be sure. And she would take as much time as she needed to do so.

She wakes as they are coming to a stop. Her head has drifted to rest on David’s shoulder. She looks up into his face. “I’m sorry,” she says, sitting up quickly. “I’m afraid I’ve wrinkled your shirt.”

“It is fine,” David replies. “What are a few wrinkles?” He smiles and pats her hand. “This is the last stop before the city.”

Kali rolls her head and stretches her neck, rubs it with her palm. “It would feel good to get out and walk a bit,” she says.

“You know,” David tells her, “I believe there is a temple here. Shambayla it is called. I think it is mostly ruins now, but it might be interesting to look at. Would you like to walk with me?”

“I need a drink first, but yes, I think I’d like that.”

The bus driver stands up and bellows from the front of the bus, opens the door and exits. Kali looks to David. “He says one hour, do not be late,” David tells her. Stiff, sweaty passengers begin filing down the aisle and off the bus. There is a little market at the side of the road held together with pieces of corrugated tin. Kali and David follow the other passengers inside where the choices of drinks are poor, some warm soda, questionable water. Kali opts for the soda and David buys a strange-looking piece of fruit.

Outside the market, some children are playing a game in the dirt making configurations of stones of varying sizes. David walks toward them, Kali at his heels. One of the bigger boys looks up at him, a scowl on his face. “Shambayla Temple?” David says to the boy. He continues to scowl, but a smaller boy jumps up from the dirt. “Oui, monsieur,” says the small boy. His ribs stick out on his thin body. He breaks into a smile that seems almost too big for his face. He takes David’s hand. “Venez!”

The boy leads them around the rear of the bus, back along the road the way they’ve come. He stops at a little cut in the trees, barely discernible but for a stone obelisk near its mouth. It is hip high, hidden in the tall grasses, and has some worn carvings on it. The narrow path seems to be all but swallowed up by the vegetation.

“Le route,” the boy says, pointing into the jungle. “Temple de Shambayla. Ici!” He smiles broadly and holds out a dusty hand.

“Oh,” says David. “Yes.” He begins rummaging in his pockets. The boy shakes his head and reaches out, grabbing Kali by the wrist. He hooks a finger in the beaded bracelet she is wearing.

David reaches for the boy, but Kali puts up a hand. “No, David,” she says. “It’s fine.” She is already rolling the bracelet down her hand. It is strung with green and lavender glass beads. She hands it to the boy. “I made it,” she says to him, but the boy has already snatched it away without looking at her. He runs off toward the other boys, holding the bracelet aloft, jabbering at them.

“You should not have given it,” David tells her.

“Why not?”

“He would have been happy with a few coins.”

“It’s fine, really,” Kali reassures him. “Let’s walk so we’re not late coming back. That driver will leave us here in the jungle.” She smiles.

“I fear you are right.” David laughs. He’s taken out a pocket knife and begins cutting the small green fruit in half, exposing the pink and yellow center. David hands half to Kali. “Try this,” he says and Kali sinks her teeth into it. The fruit pulp makes her tongue tingle. She nods at David and they set out toward Shambayla Temple.

The path is only wide enough for one person. David leads the way, holding back fronds of fern and infant palms for her as they go along. About one quarter mile in, more of the stone obelisks line the path. Kali stops and runs her fingers over the carving on one of them. “I wonder what these symbols mean,” she says.

“They are beautiful, yes?”

Kali looks up toward him, the sun blurring her eyes for a moment, making David appear as a shadow, surrounded with a glowing light. “Yes,” she says, shading her eyes with her hand. “Beautiful and strange.” She blinks, dropping the fruit, her voice sounding suddenly hollow, echoing. She shakes her head, putting a hand to her temple, stumbling a little in the path. David reaches out and takes her hand. “I think the heat is getting to you,” he says. “Come.”

He pulls her into the shade and they walk, coming shortly to a clearing where the old temple stands. It is covered in moss and vines, and in the shade of the building it feels several degrees cooler. Kali’s light-headedness fades, and she looks up at the squat structure. The roof appears to have fallen in, for the most part, and the wooden door is slightly askew. The building is round, with carved pillars keeping sentry at the door.

“It must have been quite beautiful,” Kali says.

“Yes,” David replies. “Beautiful.”

They make their way through the vegetation and stand on the threshold of Shambayla Temple. David sighs. He reaches out and lays his palm flat on the wooden door, says something under his breath that Kali cannot not hear clearly, another language she thinks. Gooseflesh breaks out over her skin.

“David?” Kali leans toward him. “What did you say?” He seems not to hear her. He has laid his forehead on the temple door. “David, what is it?” She puts a hand on his arm, and he looks up at her touch. His face is moist with perspiration. For the first time since they met, he is not smiling. “It is nothing,” he says softly.

He pats the hand she’s placed on his arm, and turns and pushes on the door. It doesn’t budge. David avoids Kali’s eyes, leans his head on the door once again and says the strange words under his breath. Beneath his hand the door pops open a crack, squeaking on unseen hinges. An uncomfortable sense of *déjà vu* sweeps over Kali as she follows David stiffly through the portal.

The walls inside the temple are smooth, made of some kind of stone or clay. As Kali’s eyes adjust to the dimness, she can see figures etched on the walls, covered here and there with vegetation. There is an odd silence inside the temple, even though the ceiling of the structure has melted inward with time revealing the azure sky. The sighing sounds of the jungle, of whispering vegetation, of birds and insects are all muted once the pair have passed beyond the wooden door, which swings shut with a hollow *ka-chunk* as soon as they are inside.

At the center of the temple, the stump of an enormous tree forms a crude altar, the carvings on it echoing those of the obelisks that lined the path to the temple. David walks slowly around the perimeter of the altar, touching the carvings, his lips moving as if in silent prayer.

Kali watches him. “David?” she says quietly.

“Yes, little goddess?” He answers, not taking his eyes nor his hand from the altar.

“What is this place?” Kali’s chest feels strange and tight.

When David looks up his eyes are full of an unspeakable sorrow. Kali feels a stirring of fear low in her belly. The memory of Robert, the church, the knife- all coming back swift and relentless. Her face goes cold and clammy despite the heat of the jungle. And she is remembering.

She is naked under the dress and bleeding. The first time he tells her to say she loves him, he is hurting her, tearing at the most tender places, but she means it when she says it. She says it in a pleading way, I love you, but it sounds foreign now, amidst the violence. Now it means *please, stop hurting me*. So, yes, she means it, she does. Robert has the knife, but he has not used it yet. Shown it to her, yes, its glinty blade has elicited her silence.

The ride in the car is surreal. Robert has put the tuxedo jacket on over his bloody tee shirt, and has crushed her veil over her hair, the little combs on the inside of it digging into her scalp. As they pass other cars, people honk and wave, grinning stupidly, even though Kali’s terrified face is pressed against the passenger window. One man in an old Buick station wagon even rolls his window down and bellows “Good luck!” as he blows by them on Conger Road.

They are at the edge of town when Robert slows for a stop sign, and Kali flips the lock on the door. She pulls the latch and can see the pavement going by in a blur. Robert cranks the wheel, jerking the car toward the center lane, the momentum slamming the door shut. At the same time, there is a burning pain in her hand that shoots up her arm. She turns screaming to see her hand pinned to the seat of the car, impaled by the knife.

Inside the little church, the defunct little out-of-the-way church they'd found while searching for a picnic spot and said isn't it sweet, isn't it quaint, wouldn't it be wonderful if, there inside where they'd planned their wedding (they'd had to get permission from the county, that was who owned it now), Robert pushed her down in the aisle. Kali scooted backward on her butt as he advanced on her, grinning maniacally, humming the Wedding March under his breath.

On the altar steps he'd reached up under her dress, and the thought of what had happened in her house earlier happening again woke something in Kali. A growl began low in her throat and she lashed out, her nails tearing a gash in Robert's cheek. She began to fight. And he began to use the knife.

In the temple, Kali remembers the church and backs herself against the wooden door. Her eyes are meet David's. "Please..." she begs, her eyes filling, blurring her vision. David swims before her, poised at the altar. The dappled sunlight filters down through the hole in the roof, turning the pollen and dust they've disturbed into a swirl of golden particles dancing around him, his body in shadow. He raises his palms and a peculiar sort of mist or smoke seems to rise from them.

Kali presses her body against the door and pushes backward as hard as she can, keeping her eyes on David and the swirling mist rising. The door is solid and doesn't budge. Kali begins to cry, and David takes a step toward her. She cringes back against the door and he stops, hurt in his eyes. "You misunderstand," he says, but his words are drowned out by the ones in Kali's head, Robert's voice, Robert's hand gripping the bodice of her wedding dress, gripping her

roughly to him while the knife slides silkily through the flesh of her cheek, while the blood runs warm like honey, down her neck blooming scarlet on her white, white dress.

Caught in the memory, Kali's hand flies to her cheek and cups it protectively. Her other hand is wrapped around her waist, a cry rising fearfully in her throat. Everything is bright, too bright. David inches toward her, his palms out, his voice is steady, calm, but this doesn't register. Only that he is descending on her, and she slams her back repeatedly into the door, pushing, pushing to get out.

When David puts his hand on Kali's arm, she screams, her eyes going wide in terror. She raises a hand to strike out at him, but he easily subdues her, pushing both her arms firmly against the wooden door, pinning her. She feels his breath on her skin, cinnamon and warm and moist. "Please," he says. His eyes are bright with unshed tears. "I can help you. Is not that why you have come?" But her ears have gone deaf and her eyes see only in her mind's eye, the church, the knife, and she sinks down into darkness, succumbing to it.

When David was alive, his favorite food was the aloo-baingan his mother used to make. He would wrap it in warm flat bread and cradle it in his hands, the smells of the vegetables and spices wafting up. He misses the simple happiness of enjoying his mother's cooking, of lying with his wife, smoking with his brother. And though he knows it is vain, that he will have even more penance to pay, he misses his strong, smooth body, beautiful, muscles beneath flesh that is golden, gleaming.

Vanity, vanity and greed and lust have gotten him to this plane, and still he has not learned his lessons properly. He must bow his head in shame once again, before the gods who have banished him to this place, to apologize and weep for his sins.

Kali opens her eyes. He is so close that she can see tiny golden flecks in the chocolate brown of his irises. He is lying on her, his weight less than that of a child or pile of heavy blankets. They are both naked, skin pressing together. Kali begins to tremble, to cry, understanding what has happened to her, in this far away place. This violent, common thing that happens to women everywhere, in every place, in all the world. Shame fills her being. He was a stranger, a stranger, and she went willingly.

They are staring, eye to eye, their breathing synchronic, and then David lays his head on her shoulder. He touches her it tenderly, and she shivers. He will kill her now, isn't that how this works? And she thinks again about Robert and the church and the knife, she thinks about how she came back from the dead just to be here now, in this place, about to die again, and she is tired. She is weary of surviving. So, she simply weeps quietly. And then she sees it, the scar like a silver river on his cheek, wending down his neck, onto his chest. The scar. Her scar.

He sees the scar in her eyes. He rises and Kali gasps. His body is a mass of scars, roads and rivers of flesh, red and purple and white. David nods toward her, toward her body and her hands fly to her belly, which is now a smooth, white expanse of supple skin. She slides to the edge of the altar and touches his stomach, touches her own scars, the ones she knows so well, now melded to him.

Around them, the jungle sounds are loud, the magic silence of Shambayla Temple having ceased. David turns and slides on his white shirt with difficulty. It is always painful to take these burdens away. He hands Kali her clothes and tells her to go, that the bus will take her into Tzumbe, that she should rest for a day before going home. And she leaves him lying on the altar, curled like a baby on his side.

The boy's mother has been lulled to sleep by the movement of the train. In the adjoining seat, the dark-haired man eats crackers from a tin. He is reading a newspaper. He looks at the boy and smiles, holds out the tin, offering a snack. The boy reaches out, then pulls his hand back, glancing at his mother. She has begun to snore softly, and the boy slides closer to the man and reached in the tin. He bites down on the cracker, chews slowly, even though he is very hungry. It was a choice between the train ticket or food, and his mother loves him very much. She wants him to have a good life. She tells him this every day, gently touching his ruined face.

The boy stares quizzically at the man's cheek, and because he is a child, and guileless, he reaches up and touches it. His voice is soft, almost musical. "How did you get that scar?"
