

## CHAPTER 01

# THE SOUND OF DRIPPING BLOOD

Shloka's mind wrenched itself awake, her consciousness clawing its way out of a suffocating abyss. The air was thick, stale, cloaked in a silence so unnatural it made her ears ring. Then, the chanting began. Whispered prayers, low and rhythmic, encircled her like unseen hands, caressing her skin with an icy touch.

Her parents, their voices. Murmuring ancient verses, too close, yet nowhere in sight.

She tried to move. Nothing. Tried to speak. No sound. Her body—paralyzed, trapped inside itself. A scream swelled in her throat, but only silence came forth.

A breath of laughter slithered through the void.

*“Don't bother. I've tried everything. There's no way out, until AzaGka finds us”,* a voice, Arit's voice, chuckled somewhere in the darkness. *“Maybe we're hiding in someone's brain.”*

A cold shiver raced down Shloka's spine. Arit? Here? But he wasn't, *“Hold on... who just spoke?”* Abhaya's voice sliced through the blackness, sharp with panic. *“Arit isn't even with us.”*

A suffocating stillness followed.

*“Arit... can you hear us?”* Abhaya whispered, the words barely leaving her lips, as though afraid of being heard by something else. *“Maybe... maybe he’s trying to communicate from another world.”*

A wet sound. A drip. Another.

Then, a thick, warm drop splattered against Shloka’s cheek. Another against her forehead.

Asmi, still sobbing uncontrollably, let out a strangled whimper.

A sickly metallic scent coiled through the air.

Abhaya swallowed hard. Her voice, now a whisper of dread. *“Is that... blood?”*

## CHAPTER 02

### FADING FOOTSTEPS

*“I am sleeping*

*I am eating*

*I am hunting*

*I am crying*

*eating again*

*I have started*

*crying again*

*Everyone is talking*

*but I am not listening...”*

The first time I transformed, I hated it. The sensation of my body shifting, the weight of something unnatural settling into my bones. It felt like losing myself, piece by piece. But then, I saw something change. I wasn't afraid anymore. I was becoming fearless. Strong. Or maybe, just... Numb.

At first, I tried to keep this darkness hidden, fearing what it meant. But then, I realized darkness isn't something you escape from. It finds you, whether you want it to or not.

And now, here I am, swallowed by it.

“Eyes can’t rest,

closing shut at best,

seems like a test,

were even insects

are winning...

From sunrise to sunset,

crawling out of the nest,

in an aimless pursuit,

what needs to be around,

isn’t around.”

The curse had been on for two weeks now. But I had been too distracted, too caught up helping Ekaksh unravel the mystery of a headless man possessing the elders of Shikaar Nagar, forcing them to hunt mothers of newborns.

Meanwhile, Ram and Daksh had grown restless. Their visions kept pulling them back to the realm they swore to leave behind. And the reason? Their daughter had strayed too far from the path she was supposed to walk.

I had...

Because the curse had already taken Abhaya, Asmi, and Shloka, they had turned into three crows in our backyard, their human

lives stolen away. And yet, amidst all this horror, something else happened, something I never imagined was possible.

I got my father back.

For the first time ever, I was with him. Ashvath. The man whose love I had spent my whole life craving, whose absence had left a wound inside me that never truly healed. Now, he was here, in my world, and it felt like childhood again.

We spent hours in the in-house library, sipping tea, lost in conversations that I had always wished we could have had. I waited for him to return from his college, just like I used to. We went on long evening walks, stopped at the ice cream stall like we had done when I was little.

It was everything I had ever wanted. But it wasn't real.

Deep down, I knew.

Ram's voice shattered the illusion like a blade tearing through flesh, *"Are you not going to break the curse, AzaGka?"* His voice was sharp, cutting through the air as he barged into my room.

I barely acknowledged him, lost in the song playing on my gramophone, Mukesh's haunting voice echoing through the dimly lit space – *"Yeh Mera Deewanapan Hai..."*

*"Of course, I'm looking out for them"*, I said, my voice lighter than I felt. *"What makes you think I'm not?"*

*"What you're seeing is a distraction"*, Ram warned. *"It's meant to keep you trapped."*

His words hit like a fist to the gut, but I refused to let them settle.

*“He’s never going to come back”*, he added, softer this time, but with more weight than before.

I stood up abruptly, the warmth in my chest turning to ice.

*“Enough”*, I muttered, brushing past him, my footsteps echoing in the corridor.

I couldn’t listen anymore. I didn’t want to.

Instead, I went looking for Ekaksh, Viansh, and Arit. It was time to start dinner. Time to focus on anything but the truth clawing in my mind.

That if I chose to break the curse... I would lose my father all over again.

## CHAPTER 03

### THE SOUND OF ECHOES

#### *Present Day – Shikaar Nagar*

AzaGka stood by the broken railway tracks, the wind whispering something only she could hear. The cold metal beneath her fingertips sent a shiver down her spine. It had been two weeks since the curse took Abhaya, Asmi, and Shloka, turning them into crows - watching her from the old peepal tree in their backyard.

Two weeks since she had got back something she had longed for her entire life, her father, Ashvath.

But Ram was right. This wasn't real. It was the curse's way of making her forget what she needed to do. And yet, how could she willingly destroy the only time she'd ever get with her father?

The fog thickened around her. The tracks stretched into the void like an open mouth waiting to swallow her whole.

Somewhere behind her, the sound of a train whistle echoed - long, haunting, even though no train was scheduled to pass.

That's when the memories started pulling her under.

### *Flashback – The Vanishing Man*

Ashvath's father had always said that the railway tracks held secrets. They carried echoes of the dead, stories that were never spoken aloud.

That night in December, the fog was thicker than usual. The train had come to a sudden halt at the wrong station. It wasn't supposed to stop there. But power failures were frequent, and his duty as an electrical engineer for the Indian Railways meant working odd hours, fixing unexpected breakdowns.

As he walked with his two assistants toward the central control system, the flickering oil lamp barely cut through the mist. And then, he saw him.

A lone figure, walking away.

Ashvath's father called out, warning him that the train was standing on the opposite track. But the man didn't turn back. Didn't even hesitate.

A train came roaring through the station. The impact should have been immediate flesh against steel, the undeniable finality of life meeting death. But when he and his staff rushed to the spot, expecting a mangled body...

There was nothing.

No blood. No remains. Just an eerie silence that stretched beyond the tracks.

It wasn't the first time he had seen someone disappear into thin air. It wouldn't be the last.



### ***Present Day – AzaGka's Dilemma***

AzaGka felt her pulse quicken. The stories were merging, past and present twisting together like two hands gripping her throat.

She thought of Ashvath's childhood, how he grew up watching his father chase ghosts on railway lines. How his mother lost her mind when Avannya was taken by the thing in the forest. How she abandoned him to live in isolation, trying to find something that could never be brought back.

And now, here she was, on the same path—chasing ghosts, clinging to something already gone.

Behind her, a voice whispered., *“AzaGka, come inside. You shouldn't be here.”*

She turned. Ashvath stood in the mist, just as she remembered him - tall, handsome, the kind of father she always wished she had more time with.

But she could feel it now. The weight of unreality in his presence. The cold truth pressing down on her chest.

Ram's voice from earlier echoed in her mind: *“He's never coming back.”*

A sharp pain surged through her skull. The curse was feeding on her weakness. The longer she stayed here, the harder it would be to let go.

Somewhere in the distance, three crows screeched. Her sisters. Still waiting.

Ashvath smiled. *“Let’s go home, beta.”*

AzaGka’s hands trembled. If she chose to stay, she would lose them forever. If she broke the curse, she would have to lose her father again.

The sound of an approaching train filled the air, drowning out her thoughts. She had to decide. Before the past swallowed her whole.

## CHAPTER 04

### THE HEADLESS MAN

#### *Present Day – Shikaar Nagar*

The trees whispered warnings. Blood dripped from the leaves. A foul stench lingered in the air, rotting flesh mixed with wet earth.

AzaGka and Ekaksh crouched behind an overgrown banyan tree, their breaths slow, measured.

*“They’re close”, Ekaksh muttered. “I can feel it.”*

AzaGka’s golden eyes gleamed in the dim moonlight, her muscles tense. She could sense the darkness slithering through the air, something old, something rotten.

Ahead, three elder men knelt before an altar, their blank, soulless eyes reflecting the flickering flames. The newborn was still alive. The witch stood in front of them, her robes drenched in blood.

*“Do you recognize her?”* Ekaksh whispered.

AzaGka’s heart pounded. The figure was hooded, face obscured. Something about her felt familiar, yet completely foreign.

Then, from behind them, a woman's voice trembled in the night.

*"You won't see her face", she whispered. "No one does. But I know what she does. I've seen what she leaves behind."*

AzaGka turned sharply.

The woman was thin, gaunt, her saree torn at the edges. Dark circles carved into her face, and her hands trembled as she clutched her shawl.

*"Who are you?"* Ekaksh asked, stepping closer.

She swallowed hard. *"My name is Leela. And my husband... my husband is one of them."*

### ***Flashback – Leela's Nightmare***

Two weeks ago, Leela had been just another housewife in Shikaar-Nagar.

Her husband, Sadhan, was a quiet man. He had been sick for months, barely able to leave his bed. His body was weak. His voice was weak.

Until the night she saw the shadow.

It started by the window. At first, it was just a shape, tall and featureless, watching her through the glass. She thought it was a thief, but thieves don't hover.

She rushed outside, calling for the servants. But when she reached the backyard, she saw something worse - A man with no head.

His shadow stretched across the dirt, reaching her trembling feet.

She choked on a scream as it climbed the wall and vanished.

Heart pounding, she ran inside, only to find her husband sitting up.

He was never awake at that hour.

“*Sadhan?*” she whispered.

He turned his head, his voice low, guttural. “*I’m hungry.*”

The way he spoke, it wasn’t him. His tongue curled unnaturally, the words rolling in a language she didn’t understand.

Something was inside him. She sent for a “Faqr” (*a religious man who can spiritually detect and cure evil possession*).

When the old man arrived, he took one look at Sadhan and murmured a single word: “*Possessed.*”

### ***Present Day – The Ritual in the Woods***

AzaGka’s jaw tightened as she listened to Leela’s story.

“*So, you’re saying your husband, he’s one of them now,*” Leela whispered. “*He left the house three days ago. I saw him... following the headless man into the woods. I know he’s here.*”

Ekaksh’s eyes darkened. “*If he’s with the others, we can still save him.*”

AzaGka exhaled. “*But we need him alive. We need to know how this started.*”