



THE WHISPERING KOTHI

They entered the house, but only fear came out...

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THEY ENTERED THE HOUSE, BUT ONLY FEAR CAME OUT...

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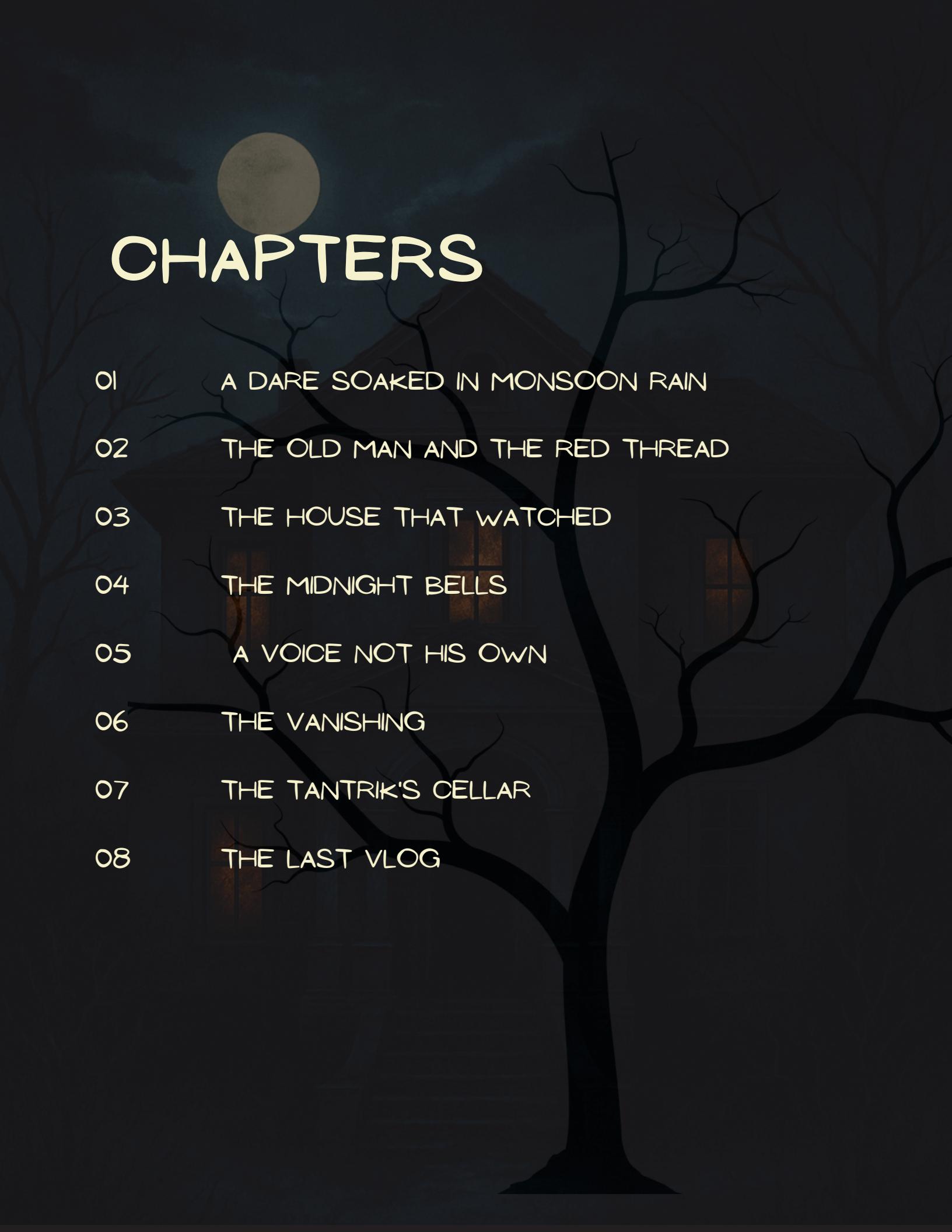
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CHAPTERS

- 
- 01 A DARE SOAKED IN MONSOON RAIN
 - 02 THE OLD MAN AND THE RED THREAD
 - 03 THE HOUSE THAT WATCHED
 - 04 THE MIDNIGHT BELLS
 - 05 A VOICE NOT HIS OWN
 - 06 THE VANISHING
 - 07 THE TANTRIK'S CELLAR
 - 08 THE LAST VLOG

A DARE SOAKED IN MONSOON RAIN

The rain was lashing against the windows of the small café near KIIT Square in Bhubaneswar, turning the world outside into a watercolour blur of headlights and drenched trees. Inside, the air was thick with the smell of coffee and fried pakodas. For Aakash, Priya, Sameer, and Diya, it was a perfect evening to do what they did best: plan their next adventure.

"Okay, guys, listen up," Aakash said, leaning forward with a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. He pushed his phone across the table. "I've found it. The ultimate location for our next vlog."

Aakash was the self-appointed leader of their group and the creator of their moderately successful YouTube channel, 'Bhubaneswar Bhoot Busters'. His enthusiasm was infectious, often overriding the common sense of the others.

On the phone screen was a grainy picture of a dilapidated mansion, half-swallowed by a dense, menacing jungle. It looked like something out of a colonial nightmare, with dark, gaping windows that looked like eye sockets in a skull.

"Where is this, yaar?" Sameer asked, munching on a paneer pakoda. He was the group's jester, always ready with a joke to diffuse tension. "Looks like my uncle's house in the village after he forgot to pay the painter."

"Not funny, Sameer," Aakash said, though he was smiling. "This, my friends, is the infamous 'Rakta Mukhi Kothi'-the Blood-Faced Mansion. Deep in the jungles of Dhenkanal, somewhere near the Saptasajya hills."

Priya, who had been scrolling through her own phone, looked up, her brow furrowed. She was the pragmatist, the one who packed first-aid kits and extra power banks. "Rakta Mukhi Kothi? Seriously? Who comes up with these names? Sounds like a C-grade Odia movie."

"That's the beauty of it!" Aakash exclaimed. "The locals are terrified of this place. They say no one has set foot inside for over fifty years. Legend has it that a powerful Tantrik lived there. He was performing some dark ritual, a Maran Mantra, and it went horribly wrong. They say his spirit, and whatever he summoned, is still trapped inside."

Diya, who had been quietly sipping her tea, shivered. She was the most sensitive of the four, a believer in energies and auras, and her grandmother's ghost stories had left a permanent mark on her. "Aakash, are you sure about this? A Tantrik's curse is not something to play with. These things are real."

"Oh, come on, Diya!" Sameer chuckled. "It's 2024. The only spirits in that house are the ones in dusty old bottles of McDowell's. Think of the views! The subscribers! We'll hit 50k for sure. 'Bhoot Busters Bust a Real Bhoot'!"

Priya wasn't convinced. "What do the stories say, exactly? Just 'a ritual gone wrong' is very vague."

"They say," Aakash lowered his voice dramatically, "that on moonless nights, you can hear his screams. And sometimes... sometimes, the bells of a non-existent temple ring out from the jungle at exactly midnight."

The café suddenly felt a little colder.

"Okay, that's just classic folklore," Priya countered, trying to sound dismissive. "Every haunted place has a midnight bell story."

"Exactly! It's the perfect blend of spooky and cliché. Our audience will love it," Aakash said, his eyes gleaming with ambition. "We go this weekend. Three days, two nights. We'll film everything. We'll be legends."

"And what if something happens?" Diya asked softly, her voice barely a whisper.

Sameer put an arm around her. "Don't worry, Diya. If a ghost shows up, I'll challenge it to a dance-off. My moves are so bad, it'll die of laughter. Again."

Priya sighed, seeing she was outnumbered. Aakash's ambition and Sameer's recklessness were a potent combination. "Fine," she conceded. "But we take my car. And we pack for every emergency, understood? Snakes, insects, ghosts, the works." Aakash punched the air. "Yes! The Dhenkanal expedition is on! Get ready to be famous, guys."

As they left the café, the rain had subsided, leaving behind a cool, clean scent. But as they said their goodbyes, Diya couldn't shake the image of the house from Aakash's phone. The dark windows seemed to be watching her, and in the distant rumble of thunder, she thought she heard the faint, chilling chime of a single, solitary bell. She dismissed it as her imagination, but a seed of pure, cold dread had been planted in her heart.

THE OLD MAN AND THE RED THREAD

The drive to Dhenkanal was filled with the usual chaos. Sameer's playlist of 90s Bollywood hits blared from the speakers, Aakash was already vlogging from the passenger seat, and Priya navigated the winding, pot-holed roads with grim determination. Diya sat in the back, staring out at the changing landscape as the urban sprawl of Bhubaneswar gave way to lush green paddy fields and the distant, hazy blue of the Eastern Ghats.

"We're getting close to the Saptasajya range," Aakash announced, pointing his camera at the hills. "The locals say the Kothi is hidden deep in the forest off the main road to Kapilash Temple. We'll have to trek the last few kilometres."

They stopped at a small, sleepy village market to buy water and some last-minute supplies. It was a typical rural Odia hamlet, with mud-walled houses adorned with jhoti chita art and a massive banyan tree at its center. As Aakash and Sameer haggled for packets of biscuits, Priya and Diya sought shade under the banyan tree.

An old man, his skin as wrinkled as a dried leaf and his eyes a startling, cloudy blue, sat on a stone platform, watching them. He beckoned to them with a gnarled finger.

"You are not from here," he said, his voice a raspy whisper. His Odia was thick with a rural accent.

"No, Aja (Grandfather)," Diya replied politely. "We are from Bhubaneswar. We are just visiting."

The old man's gaze sharpened. "The jungle has many paths. Which one do you walk today?"

Priya felt a prickle of unease. "We're just exploring. Looking for an old building."

"The Red-Faced House," the old man stated, not a question. A hush seemed to fall over the immediate area. A woman buying vegetables nearby paused, shot them a fearful look, and hurried away. "You should not go there. It is a place of sorrow. A place where the living are not welcome."

"We've heard the stories," Priya said, trying to sound casual. "About a Tantrik."

The old man spat on the ground. "He was no Tantrik. He was a fool who called upon something he could not control. He wanted to achieve immortality, to bind a Dakini-a fierce she-demon-to his will. He offered it blood, but it wanted souls. The ritual was broken on the final night. Now, the house and the demon are one. It waits. It is always hungry."

Diya's hand flew to her mouth. This was far more specific and terrifying than Aakash's vague version.

"He said the house itself is the demon?" she whispered to Priya in English.

The old man seemed to understand. He reached into a small cloth bag and pulled out four lengths of red thread. "Take these. Tie them on your right wrists. It is a mantra-suta. It may not save you, but it will give you a warning. It will burn your skin if the evil comes too close."

Before they could refuse, he pressed the threads into Diya's hand. His own hand was cold, unnaturally so.

Aakash and Sameer returned, laden with snacks. "What's going on here?" Aakash asked, seeing their serious faces.

"This gentleman was just telling us to be careful," Priya said, pocketing the threads.

The old man looked at Aakash and his camera, then at Sameer's flippant smile. His cloudy eyes filled with something that looked like pity. "Fools rush to their own graves," he muttered, before turning away and refusing to speak another word.

"Creepy old dude," Sameer said as they walked back to the car. "Probably just trying to scare us city folk."

"Maybe we should listen to him," Diya said, holding out the red threads. "He seemed to know things."

"And miss out on this adventure? No way!" Aakash said, starting the car's engine. "We'll be fine. Come on, Priya, you're the rational one. You don't believe this stuff, do you?"

Priya hesitated. "No," she said, but her voice lacked conviction. "But I think we should all wear these threads. Just in case."

Reluctantly, even Sameer agreed. They tied the simple red threads around their wrists. It felt silly, a childish superstition. But as they drove away from the village and into the deep, encroaching shadows of the jungle, the thin red line on Priya's wrist felt less like a charm and more like a final, fragile barrier against a darkness they were willingly driving towards. The real world felt like it was receding behind them, replaced by the ancient, waiting silence of the forest.

THE HOUSE THAT WATCHED

The final stretch of the journey was on foot. They left the car parked by a forest department checkpoint, shouldering their backpacks and trekking gear. Aakash led the way, machete in hand to clear the overgrown trail, his camera constantly rolling. The air grew thick and humid, buzzing with the sound of unseen insects. The sunlight struggled to pierce the dense canopy above, dappling the forest floor in an eerie, shifting twilight.

After nearly an hour of strenuous hiking, they saw it.
The Rakta Mukhi Kothi.

It wasn't just a house; it was a carcass. A two-story colonial-era mansion, its white plaster now stained a sickly, peeling red and black by decades of moss and decay, giving it the gruesome appearance of flayed skin. Enormous banyan roots snaked up its walls like arthritic fingers, cracking the foundation. The wrought-iron gate, decorated with faded floral patterns, hung from a single, rusted hinge, groaning with every gust of wind.

But what struck them all was the silence. The incessant buzzing of the jungle seemed to stop at the edge of the property line. Here, an unnatural quiet reigned, heavy and oppressive.

"Whoa," Sameer breathed, his usual humour gone. "This is... something else, man."

"This is gold," Aakash whispered, his camera panning slowly across the facade. "Absolute gold."

As they stepped through the broken gate, a strange smell hit them. It was a mix of damp soil and rotting leaves, but underneath it was a cloying, sickly-sweet scent, like forgotten funeral flowers or burnt incense.

"Smells like a badly maintained temple," Priya commented, wrinkling her nose.

Diya hugged herself, her eyes wide. "It feels like we're being watched."

They pushed open the massive, termite-eaten front door. It creaked open into a cavernous main hall. A grand, sweeping staircase, its wooden balustrade mostly rotted away, led to a dark upper floor. Cobwebs as thick as cotton candy draped over everything, and a thick layer of grey dust carpeted the floor, disturbed only by the tracks of rats and lizards. In the centre of the hall, a huge, dust-shrouded chandelier hung precariously from the high ceiling.

"Home sweet home," Sameer said, his voice echoing unnaturally in the vast space. He tried for a joke, but it fell flat.

They decided to explore the ground floor first, moving as a group. They found a large dining room with a long table still set with cracked, dusty porcelain. In the kitchen, rusted utensils lay scattered as if dropped in a hurry. Every room was a portrait of decay, a place abandoned in haste.

Aakash was in his element, providing a running commentary for his vlog. "So, guys, we're inside the Rakta Mukhi Kothi, and the vibes are seriously spooky. You can feel the history, the sadness of this place."

While he filmed, Diya wandered towards a small, closed door at the end of a corridor. She felt a strange pull towards it. "What's in here?" she asked.

Priya tried the handle. It was locked. "Probably just a storage room."

But Diya felt a distinct cold spot in front of the door, a pocket of air that was degrees colder than the rest of the humid house. "No," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "Something's not right about this room."

Suddenly, Sameer, who had been trying to peer out a grimy window, yelped. "Guys! Come here, quick!"

They rushed over to him. He was pointing at the dusty floor. "Look. Our footprints. From when we walked in."

They could clearly see their four sets of shoe prints leading from the front door into the hall.

"So?" Aakash asked, confused.

"So," Sameer said, his face pale. "Look at this one."

Next to their prints was another set. They were of bare feet. Small, almost childlike. They led from the base of the grand staircase, walked ten feet into the hall, and then simply stopped. There were no prints leading away. They just ended in the middle of the dusty floor, as if the person who made them had vanished into thin air.

A heavy silence descended upon them, broken only by the frantic beating of their own hearts. The house was no longer just an abandoned building. It was a place with secrets, a place that was not empty. And as the sun began to set outside, casting long, distorted shadows that writhed and danced on the walls, they all had the chilling realization that they had just confirmed the first rule of the Rakta Mukhi Kothi: they were not alone.

THE MIDNIGHT BELLS

Night fell upon the jungle like a black shroud. The friends set up a makeshift camp in the main hall, reasoning it was the most open and defensible space. They laid out their sleeping bags, started a couple of powerful emergency lamps that cast a stark, white glow, and tried to create a bubble of normalcy in the heart of the oppressive darkness.

Sameer, trying to reclaim his role as the joker, started telling a lame ghost story. "So, this ghost walks into a bar... and the bartender says, 'Sorry, we don't serve spirits here!'"

Nobody laughed. Priya just stared at him. "Too soon, Sameer. Way too soon."

Aakash was hunched over his laptop, reviewing the footage he'd shot so far. He was frowning, replaying a short clip over and over. "Guys, come see this. It's... weird."

They gathered around him. The clip was of him panning the camera across the grand staircase when they had first entered. "Watch the top landing," he instructed.

He played it in slow motion. For a single, fleeting frame, a dark shape was visible in the shadows at the top of the stairs—a tall, slender silhouette that was there one moment and gone the next.

"Did you see that?" Aakash whispered, his face ashen.

"It's probably just a shadow, a trick of the light," Priya said, though her voice trembled. She was clinging to rationality like a life raft.

"A trick of the light that looks exactly like a person?" Diya countered, her eyes fixed on the screen. "Aakash, rewind it again." He did. The shape was undeniably there. It hadn't been a trick of their eyes. It was on the recording. Concrete, terrifying proof.

The mood plummeted. The last vestiges of bravado evaporated, replaced by a raw, palpable fear. They ate their dinner of packaged noodles in near silence, every creak of the old house making them jump. The silence from the jungle outside was more unnerving than any noise. It was as if the entire forest was holding its breath.

Around 11:30 PM, exhausted from the trek and the emotional strain, they tried to get some sleep. Aakash and Sameer took the first watch, sitting back-to-back with powerful flashlights. Priya and Diya lay in their sleeping bags, eyes wide open, staring into the oppressive darkness that lurked just beyond the reach of their lamps.

Time crawled by. The only sounds were their own breathing and the distant cry of a nocturnal bird. Priya was just beginning to drift into a restless sleep when she heard it.

Dong.

A single, clear, resonant chime. It was unmistakably the sound of a large temple bell. It sounded impossibly close.

She sat bolt upright. "Did you hear that?"

Aakash and Sameer were already on their feet, flashlights frantically scanning the darkness. "We heard it," Aakash said, his voice tight with fear.

Dong.

Another chime, just as clear, just as close.

Diya was crying silently, her hands covering her ears. "The old man," she whimpered. "He said this would happen. The midnight bells."

Dong. Dong. Dong.

The chimes were coming faster now, a steady, rhythmic tolling that seemed to originate from everywhere and nowhere at once. It wasn't just a sound; they could feel it, a deep vibration that resonated in their bones, in the very floorboards of the house. It was a phantom sound, impossible and yet terrifyingly real. There was no temple for miles.

Sameer, in a panic, grabbed his flashlight and shone it towards the main door. "What is that? What the hell is that sound?"

"Don't go near the door!" Priya screamed, but it was too late. The heavy front door, which they had barricaded with a piece of old furniture, slowly began to creak open, pushing the heavy table aside as if it were a child's toy. A blast of cold, cloying air, smelling of grave dirt and marigolds, swept into the hall.

The tolling reached a deafening crescendo, and then, exactly as Priya's watch beeped midnight, it stopped. The silence that rushed back in was absolute, a crushing void of sound that was a thousand times more terrifying than the noise it replaced.

The front door stood wide open, a gaping maw leading into the pitch-black jungle. For a long moment, nobody moved. Nobody breathed. They were paralyzed by a fear so profound it felt like a physical weight. The house had just rung its welcome bell for them. The warning from the old man was no longer a superstition. It was a promise. And the night had only just begun.

A VOICE NOT HIS OWN

The sun, when it finally rose, did little to dispel the gloom that had settled over the group. No one had slept. They spent the remainder of the night huddled together, flashlights trained on the open doorway, expecting something to emerge from the darkness. Nothing did. But the sense of being watched had intensified, evolving into a feeling of being studied, of being judged by an unseen intelligence.

Morning brought a fragile, temporary courage. Aakash, driven by a mixture of journalistic compulsion and sheer denial, insisted they continue exploring. "We came here for a reason," he argued, his voice hoarse. "We can't just run away because of a few strange noises."

"A few strange noises?" Priya shot back, her face pale and strained. "Aakash, a phantom bell rang and the door opened on its own! And what about those footprints? And the figure on the stairs? This is not a game!"

"Maybe there's a rational explanation," Aakash said, though he didn't sound convinced. "Wind channels, underground acoustics..."

"Don't insult my intelligence," Priya snapped.

It was Sameer who broke the argument, but not in the way anyone expected. Throughout the tense morning, he had been unusually quiet. The group's jester had vanished, replaced by a sullen, withdrawn stranger. He sat staring at a peeling fresco on the wall, his eyes unfocused.

"Sameer? You okay, man?" Aakash asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Sameer flinched, pulling away. "I'm fine," he mumbled, his voice flat. He didn't look fine. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his skin had a pasty, unhealthy pallor.

Ignoring Priya's protests, Aakash decided they would search the upstairs. "We stick together. No one goes anywhere alone."

With trepidation, they ascended the groaning, treacherous staircase. The upper floor was a maze of bedrooms, each one more decayed than the last. In one room, a four-poster bed stood with its mosquito net shredded and yellowed, looking like a giant spider's web. In another, a child's rocking horse sat in the corner, covered in a thick coat of dust. It began to rock slowly as they entered the room, as if moved by a faint breeze, though the air was perfectly still. They backed out of that room without a word. They found the master bedroom at the end of the hall. It was large and surprisingly less cluttered than the others. A massive, ornately carved wardrobe stood against one wall. Aakash, ever the vlogger, decided to open it.

As he tugged on the heavy wooden doors, Sameer, who had been lagging behind, suddenly spoke. His voice was not his own. It was a low, guttural rasp, and the words he spoke were not Hindi or English, but a dialect of Odia so old and formal that it was almost unrecognizable.

"Aeta mora jaga. Tumara ete sahasa kemiti hela ethiki asibaku?"

Diya gasped, grabbing Priya's arm. "He said... 'This is my place. How dare you come here?'"

Aakash froze, his hand still on the wardrobe. He turned slowly to face Sameer. "What did you say, re?"

Sameer blinked, a look of confusion on his face. "What? I didn't say anything." His voice was back to normal, but the confusion in his eyes seemed genuine. He looked around at their shocked faces. "What is it? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"You... you just spoke," Priya stammered. "In a different voice."

"What are you talking about? I've been quiet this whole time. Don't joke around, yaar, I'm already freaked out," Sameer said, sounding agitated.

But they had all heard it. The voice had been deep, ancient, and filled with a chilling, possessive authority. It had come from Sameer's lips, but it hadn't been him.

Just then, Diya let out a sharp, strangled cry. She was staring at Sameer's wrist. The red thread the old man had given them, which had been tied securely, was gone. It wasn't broken or untied. It had simply vanished.

They checked their own wrists. The red threads were still there, but Priya noticed that hers felt warm against her skin, a faint, persistent heat.

The entity in the house was no longer just a shadow or a sound. It had a voice. And it had just used one of them as its mouthpiece. The horror was no longer just around them; it was now inside their group, wearing the face of their friend.

THE VANISHING

The incident with Sameer's voice shattered the group's fragile unity. An argument, fuelled by terror and paranoia, erupted on the dusty landing of the upper floor.

"We are leaving. Now," Priya declared, her voice shaking with rage and fear. "I don't care what you say, Aakash. Pack your things. We are walking out of this house right now."

"And go where?" Aakash retorted, his face a mask of conflict. "It's already afternoon. We won't make it back to the car before dark. We'll be lost in the jungle at night. Is that better?"

"Yes! Anything is better than staying in this... this place with him!" Priya gestured towards Sameer, who flinched as if struck.

"Hey! What did I do?" Sameer protested, his voice laced with hurt and confusion. "I told you, I didn't say anything. You guys are ganging up on me!"

"We all heard it, Sameer!" Diya cried, tears streaming down her face. "It wasn't you. Your thread is gone. The old man said it was a warning!"

The accusation hung in the air, thick and poisonous. Sameer looked from one terrified face to another, his own expression crumbling into fear and isolation. He was being treated like a leper, a vessel for the house's evil, and his denial only made him seem more suspect.

"I... I need some air," he stammered, his eyes darting around frantically

Before anyone could stop him, he turned and bolted, not down the stairs towards the exit, but deeper into the maze of rooms on the upper floor.

"Sameer, wait!" Aakash shouted, running after him.

"Don't leave us!" Priya yelled, grabbing Diya's hand and pulling her along.

They followed the sound of his footsteps down a dark, narrow corridor they hadn't explored yet. The corridor ended at a single, weather-beaten door. It was slightly ajar.

"Sameer?" Aakash called out, pushing the door open.

The room inside was small and bare, save for a single broken chair and a large, shattered window that looked out over the wild, overgrown backyard. There was no sign of Sameer.

"He must have jumped out the window," Priya said, rushing to look. The drop was about fifteen feet onto soft, mossy ground. It was survivable. They scanned the tangled mess of vines and bushes below. There was no movement, no sign of him.

"SAMEER!" Aakash bellowed, his voice cracking with desperation. Only the rustling of leaves answered.

Panic set in. Pure, undiluted panic. They were one person down. Their joker, their friend, had been swallowed by the house or the jungle. They searched the room frantically for any clue. Aakash looked under the chair, Priya checked behind the door, and Diya ran her hands along the damp, mildewed walls.

And then Aakash saw it. Lying in the corner, half-hidden in the shadows, was Sameer's phone. Aakash picked it up. The screen was smashed, spiderweb cracks radiating from the center. He tried to turn it on, but it was dead. It looked as if it had been thrown against the wall with incredible force.

"He wouldn't have smashed his phone," Priya whispered, her voice barely audible. "He loved that phone more than anything."

The realization hit them all at once. He didn't run away. He didn't jump. He was taken. Right here, in this room.

The house felt different now. The passive, watching presence had turned active, malevolent. It had picked one of them off. They were no longer explorers or vloggers. They were prey.

"We have to find him," Aakash said, his bravado gone, replaced by a grim, fearful resolve.

"Find him where, Aakash?" Diya sobbed. "He's gone! The house took him! The Dakini... the old man said it wanted souls."

The sun was beginning its descent again, painting the sky in bloody strokes of orange and purple, visible through the shattered window. The shadows in the room deepened, seeming to coalesce and thicken. They were trapped on the upper floor of a monstrous house, with one friend missing and the darkness closing in. Priya looked at her wrist. The red thread was now burning hot, searing her skin like a hot wire. The evil wasn't just close anymore. It was all around them, and it was getting ready to play its next game.

THE TANTRIK'S CELLAR

Desperation was a powerful motivator. The thought of leaving Sameer behind was unbearable, but the idea of staying another night was a death sentence. Aakash, Priya, and Diya were caught in a trap.

"Think," Priya said, forcing her voice to be steady. "The old man said the Tantrik was a fool. That the ritual was broken. There must be a source. A center to all this."

Diya's eyes widened. She remembered the strange cold spot she'd felt on the ground floor, in front of the locked door. "The locked room," she said. "The one I felt was wrong. Maybe the answer is in there."

It was a long shot, but it was the only lead they had. Galvanized by a sliver of hope, they rushed back down the treacherous staircase, their flashlights cutting frantic beams through the gathering gloom. They reached the door at the end of the corridor. It was made of thick, dark wood, reinforced with iron straps. It looked more like the door to a vault than a storage room.

"It's locked solid," Aakash said, rattling the heavy iron handle. "We need to break it down."

He found a heavy iron poker near the dilapidated fireplace in the main hall. Together, he and Priya slammed it against the door's lock, the loud bangs echoing through the silent house like gunshots. The wood splintered. The lock groaned. Finally, with a loud crack, the door swung inward, releasing a wave of stale, musty air that smelled of dried herbs, earth, and something metallic and unpleasant

They shone their lights inside. It was not a room; it was a steep, narrow stone staircase leading down into utter blackness. A cellar. "Of course," Priya whispered. "The heart of the ritual would be hidden."

Taking a deep breath, Aakash led the way down, the beam of his flashlight bouncing off damp stone walls. The air grew colder with every step. At the bottom, they found themselves in a circular chamber.

And what they saw made their blood run cold.

The room was a Tantrik's sanctum of horror. The walls were covered in complex, terrifying diagrams drawn in what looked like charcoal and dried blood. A large, intricate mandala was painted on the floor, its geometric patterns designed to trap and bind. In the center of the mandala was a low stone altar, stained with dark, rusty patches.

Scattered around the room were the tools of a dark practitioner: human skulls, strange ritualistic daggers, and clay pots filled with ash and bone fragments. But the most chilling discovery lay on a stone shelf. There, preserved with surprising care, were several talapatra pothis-ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, their surfaces covered in dense, spidery Odia script.

Diya, whose grandmother used to read from similar-looking religious texts, felt a jolt of recognition. She carefully picked one up. Her hands trembled as she scanned the script, her lips moving silently.

"What is it, Diya? Can you read it?" Aakash urged.

"Some of it," she whispered, her face pale in the flashlight's glare. "It's a diary. The Tantrik's diary. He... he wasn't trying to summon a Dakini to serve him."

She looked up at them, her eyes filled with a new, more profound terror.

"He was trying to feed it," she said, her voice cracking. "The ritual didn't require one soul. It required four. Three to anchor the entity to the physical plane, and a fourth to become its permanent vessel, its new body. The Dakini would then be bound to the house, but the fourth person, the vessel, would gain its power and near-immortality. That's what he wanted."

The pieces of the puzzle slammed into place with sickening clarity. "The ritual was interrupted," Priya breathed. "So the entity was trapped, but the ritual was left incomplete."

"He writes here," Diya continued, pointing a trembling finger at the manuscript. "He says the entity is patient. It will wait. It will lure others. It will find its four sacrifices to complete the binding. It needs to weaken them first, fill them with fear... and then it chooses its vessel."

A cold dread washed over Aakash and Priya. Sameer. The withdrawn behaviour, the strange voice, the vanishing thread. He wasn't the first victim. He was the chosen one. The fourth soul. The vessel.

And they were the other three. The anchors. The fuel for the ritual.

The house hadn't just taken Sameer. It had been preparing him. And now, it just needed to collect the remaining ingredients for its long-overdue feast. They had walked into the middle of a cursed ceremony that had been waiting for them for over fifty years.

THE LAST VLOG

The truth in the cellar was a crushing weight. They weren't just haunted; they were sacrifices in a ritual that was already in motion. Their fear, their panic-it was all part of the process, seasoning them for the slaughter.

"We have to get out," Aakash said, his voice a raw whisper. The vlogger, the adventurer, was gone. All that remained was a terrified young man. "Forget Sameer. He's... he's gone. We have to save ourselves."

The words were monstrous, but Priya and Diya knew he was right. Survival was the only instinct left. They scrambled up the stone steps, back into the suffocating embrace of the house, and ran for the main hall and the open front door-their only gateway to freedom.

But as they burst into the hall, a figure blocked their path. It was Sameer.

He stood in the center of the hall, bathed in the pale moonlight streaming through the doorway. He was unnervingly still. His head was tilted at an unnatural angle, and a slow, wide smile was stretched across his face. It was a smile of pure, malevolent triumph.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked. The voice was the same deep, guttural rasp they had heard upstairs. It was the voice of the house, the voice of the Dakini, speaking through their friend's mouth. "The ceremony is about to begin. You are the guests of honour."

"Sameer, fight it!" Priya pleaded, tears blurring her vision. "This isn't you!"

The thing wearing Sameer's face chuckled, a dry, rattling sound. "Oh, but it is. He was so easy. So full of jokes and laughter on the outside, but so much fear on the inside. A perfect, hollow space for me to fill."

It took a step towards them. Its movements were fluid, graceful, and utterly inhuman. "The Tantrik was a fool. He thought he could control me. But this house... this house is my body now. And soon, this boy will be, too. I just needed three more pillars of fear to complete the foundation. And you all provided it so generously." Suddenly, the front door slammed shut with a deafening boom, plunging the hall into near-total darkness, save for their flickering flashlights. The trap was sprung.

From the shadows behind Sameer, another figure emerged. It was the old man from the village. He wasn't frail or pitiful now. He stood tall, his cloudy blue eyes glowing with a faint, unholy light. In his hand, he held a ritualistic dagger, the same kind they had seen in the cellar.

"What...?" Aakash stammered.

"You didn't think the ritual was left unattended, did you?" the old man hissed, his voice no longer raspy but sharp and cruel. "My family has been the caretaker of this place for generations. Descendants of the Tantrik's only loyal servant. Our duty is to find worthy sacrifices to appease the Mistress, to keep her contained. We bring the offerings. We brought you."

The red threads he had given them weren't a protection. They were a brand, marking them as property.

The entity in Sameer lunged, its movements impossibly fast. It grabbed Diya, its fingers digging into her arms like talons. Diya screamed, a sound of pure, unadulterated terror that was abruptly cut off as a hand clamped over her mouth.

The old man advanced on Priya, the dagger held ready.

In that split second of horror, Aakash's mind broke. All thought of friendship and rescue vanished. Primal, animal survival took over. He saw a small gap between the old man and the wall. He didn't hesitate. He ran.

He shoved past the old man, who was caught off guard, and threw himself at one of the large windows in the hall. With a desperate cry, he smashed through the brittle, grimy glass, heedless of the shards that sliced into his arms and face. He landed in a heap on the damp earth outside, scrambling to his feet, adrenaline coursing through him.

He didn't look back. He couldn't.

He could hear Priya's scream from inside the house, a scream that was suddenly joined by the chilling, triumphant laughter of the Dakini.

Aakash ran. He ran blindly through the dark, menacing jungle, branches whipping at his face, thorns tearing at his clothes. He ran until his lungs burned and his legs gave out, collapsing onto the forest floor, sobbing.

He was alive. He had escaped.

But as he lay there, bleeding and broken under the cold moon, he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen was cracked, but it still worked. The camera was still recording. He had captured everything.

The last shot was a blurry, chaotic view of the forest floor. But the audio was crystal clear. Over his own ragged, desperate breaths, another sound could be heard, carried on the wind from the direction of the house. It was faint, but unmistakable.

It was the sound of a single temple bell, tolling slowly, rhythmically. Not a welcome this time. A celebration. The ritual was complete.

He had his footage. He would be famous. The last member of the Bhubaneswar Bhoot Busters had his final, ultimate vlog. But as the bell continued to toll in the darkness, Aakash knew with chilling certainty that the house was not finished with him. He had been an anchor. And an anchor, even when the rope is cut, is still tied to the abyss. He had escaped the Kothi, but the Whispering Kothi would never, ever escape him.



Thank You for Reading

So, that was The Whispering Kothi.

A haunted jungle, a forgotten mansion, and a dare that went too far.

Hope you enjoyed the story.

More such chilling tales are on the way soon.

Till then, stay safe... and if you ever hear a bell ring at midnight, don't go looking.

- Sandeep Biswal G

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