

Vibha and Baitali

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Introduction: The Weight of the Crown

The air within the royal audience chamber of Ujjayini was thick with unspoken law and heavy silk. Sunlight, filtered through panels of polished amethyst, cast the room in shades of imperial purple and dusty gold. Queen Vibha sat on the great throne, but the throne felt less like a seat of power and more like a beautifully carved cage. Her silver-armored hands, resting lightly on the lion-headed armrests, were steady, but her mind was a battlefield.

She ruled a kingdom that, by all metrics, was strong. Yet, beneath the polished marble, the foundations were rotting. The laws were rigid, built on the assumption that women were chattels, men were infallible, and tradition was more sacred than life itself. Vibha, the warrior Queen, was shackled by the very statutes she swore to uphold. Her ministers were eloquent, pious, and utterly incapable of pragmatic compassion.

The source of her immediate dilemma sat cross-legged on the polished floor before her: a gaunt, oil-slicked mendicant named Aghora. He was a master of black magic and social coercion, his request seemingly benign, but his demand absolute.

"O Queen," Aghora's voice was a low, resonant drone that seemed to vibrate the very air. "I require the spirit known as the Baitali. She hangs from the Peepal tree in the southern cremation grounds. Bring her to me on the moonless night, and I will perform the ritual that shall secure the eternal prosperity of Ujjayini."

Vibha knew the Baitali. She knew the legends of the Betaal who tested the kings. But the Baitali was different. She was said to be

the vengeful soul of the first Queen of Ujjayini, trapped by a patriarchal curse for speaking too much truth. She was the spectral repository of every broken promise and every silenced cry.

Aghora's true payment was not the ritual, but the quest itself. He needed the spirit, yes, but he needed *Vibha* to undertake the journey. He needed her to be trapped in the cycle—the carry, the riddle, the shattered head, the endless return—to prove that even her power was subservient to the dark magic of tradition. The true price was her submission to the game.

Vibha's Royal Priest whispered frantically beside her: "Refuse him, Your Majesty! This is black magic. It is beneath the dignity of the throne!"

But Vibha knew refusing Aghora would invite chaos. His power was real, and his influence over the superstitious court was vast. She was cornered. She had to enter the darkness to save the light. She had to fight the old world on its own terms, but she had to win on her own.

"I accept your quest, mendicant," Vibha decreed, her voice clear and ringing. The moment the words left her mouth, she felt a profound shift in the air, a chilling breeze that swept away the cloying scent of incense and left behind the cold, metallic tang of ozone and fate.

She would not just retrieve a corpse for a sorcerer. She would descend into the darkness to confront the ghosts of her own realm. She would carry the physical weight of the past to determine the moral architecture of the future. She would learn the rules of the game, and then, she would annihilate them.

That night, Vibha exchanged her heavy silk robes for her lighter silver armor. She would meet the Baitali in the dark.

Chapter I: The Oath in the Graveyard

The night did not fall upon Ujjayini; it rose from the earth, thick and cloying, birthed from the smoking fissures of the cremation grounds. This was not the polite darkness of the palace bedchambers, scented with rosewater and governed by the rhythm of gentle breaths. This was a feral darkness, smelling of wet ash, burning camphor, and the sickly-sweet fermentation of marigolds left to rot on the bodies of the dead.

Queen Vibha stood at the edge of the smoldering grounds. She was a figure carved from silver and resolve, her armor gleaming dully under the jagged light of a moonless sky. The silence here was not empty; it was heavy, pressing against her eardrums like water, broken only by the popping of sap in the funeral pyres and the distant, rhythmic baying of jackals.

She had come for the Baitali.

Legend spoke of the male Betaal, a mischievous spirit of riddles. But legends were written by men. The spirit that haunted this grove was older, colder, and female—a Baitali. She hung from the gnarled bough of a massive Peepal tree, indistinguishable from the twisted roots and hanging vines, save for the faint, bruising violet light that pulsed beneath her translucent skin.

Vibha tightened the straps of her gauntlets. The leather creaked, a sound that seemed deafening in the stillness. She drew her sword, not to fight, but to cut. With a breath that tasted of smoke, she began to climb the Peepal tree. The bark was rough, tearing at her hands, and the leaves whispered secrets in a language long dead.

High above, the Baitali waited. As Vibha neared the branch, the corpse opened its eyes. They were not empty sockets, but pools of swirling, milk-white nebulas.

"You have come far, Daughter of the Throne," the Baitali hissed. Her voice was the sound of silk tearing, a sibilant rasp that vibrated in Vibha's teeth. "Many Kings have climbed this tree. Most fall. Some run. None understand."

Vibha did not speak. She swung her blade. *Thwack*. The rope severed.

The Baitali fell, hitting the earth with a sound like a sack of dry leaves. She let out a shriek—not of pain, but of mocking laughter that spiraled up into the canopy, unsettling the roosting bats.

Vibha descended, her boots hitting the ash-covered ground with a heavy thud. She sheathed her sword and bent to lift the spirit.

The moment Vibha hoisted the Baitali onto her shoulder, her knees nearly buckled. The spirit was small, her body withered and desiccated, yet she weighed more than a fully armored warhorse. It was an impossible, crushing weight. It was the weight of silence. It was the physical manifestation of every swallow of pride, every unvoiced objection, and every moment of forced domestic servitude endured by the women of her line for a thousand years.