

The Protectors

By

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There is a valley of forests that nestles like a sweat drop between the brow of the Himalayas. Shiva sleeps quietly deep within the snowy peaks, the water running off his long matted hair in crystal clear rivulets into the forests and lakes below. He will sleep now. Because now is the time for sleeping. But soon, as the cycles of Birth and Death, Disease, Suffering and War begin to turn around, like the wagon wheel of the Karmas, He will awaken, and the world will be healed. But today, he will only sleep.

His eyes seem closed to the plight of the people down below in the valley of a place called Kashmir, with its resplendent carpet of flowers and its trees that Shiva's hand planted. But his third eye is open, and he looks deep into the forest below, knowing all and seeing all. He smiles a benign smile of a God that knows that everything comes full circle. There is starvation and suffering today in this place people call "The Jannat-e-Jahaan" or "Paradise on Earth. This earthly paradise stores jewels that are not forged mined and sold at auctions. The jewels are the Forests, the Lakes and the Waterfalls. And once there had been a time when the people guarded these jewels like kingly treasures, and protected them for they were the only riches they cared for. The sentinels of the beauty and bounty of the forests were the Trees.

Trees, perhaps because of their great size and longevity vividly affected the people of the valley. The trees were alive, like human beings and animals, but did not move away from their place and stayed their ground with solid roots to add fortification and protection to the people. Like the Himalaya Mountains, they seemed immobile, always the same but never the same. Dense forests held many mysteries, for they were miraculous. They appeared in lush Earthy landscapes, soaring high amongst mosses and ferns, holding and carrying secrets.

But now they yearned to tell their secrets. They wanted to tell the great Lord Shiva of the men that had come to the valley, with important-looking paper, with strange instruments and large frightening machines. They whispered to each other at night that they had heard and witnessed the intentions of the men.

They wanted to say to the Lord Shiva, that a group of men had sat under the shade of a Tree and called the Headman of the village to speak dark words.

The valley was suffering. No one came to look at the beautiful Dal Lake any longer, no one came to see the carpets of a myriad of flowers, no one came to gaze at the dense groves of trees any longer. War had come to Kashmir. People, who prayed in different ways to perhaps a God who was One, had begun to fight with bombs and guns over who owned the Valley and the Forests. The poor people of the village began to starve, because they made their living out of the world of people who would come from every corner of this strange Earth to spend time in this Paradise, and buy the soft shawls and pretty trinkets. But now, no one came to Jannat any longer. People were too afraid of bombs. As Shiva slept, the important men convinced the village Headman to do what no person had ever dreamed. Take our forests, the Headman said with deep reluctance. We need your paper to feed our children.

There came a time when the important men from the west decided it was time. They went with bags of paper to the Headman, and the Headman summoned his sentry. The men of Jannat first prayed to the great God of Lightning and Wind, Indra, beseeching him with their supplications and their offerings of food to strike large bolts of lightning down onto the trees, ripping their trunks into two, reaching into the ground that they were rooted to, and felling them for eternity. They prayed this prayer because they felt in their hearts that it should be the Gods that take the lives of the Great Trees first, and not the men of the West. But on a moonlit night, as the men prayed to Indra, the God of Storms and Varuna, the God of The Night Sky, a long snaky line of women came, crying songs of mourning, keening with bowed heads, carrying brass pots of crystal clear water, and lit lamps fuelled by palm oil in their lovely woman hands.

The women stood around the trees, and with their eyes they beseeched the men to stop.

“ Do not pray for the death of these Trees” they cried, “for here inside the very heart, covered by layers and layers of tough woody bark; lay the souls of Mothers long departed.”

“How will we communicate with our mothers, the ones whose souls have become the Southern Cross and the Little Bear?”

“These trees that you are trying to destroy contain the wisdom of our Priestesses and our Old Ones. We come to this forest with its fecund, dark smells, its ripe pregnancy, filled with creatures and Earth to commune and to receive blessings and answers to our prayers. The trees and the flowers are the conduit towards reaching God’s sky. No riches in paper are worth the blessings.”

The men grew angry. They were already imagining all the weapons they could buy with the paper the important men had promised them.

“What are these strange, ugly amulets you women hang on the branches of these Old Trees. They sway too loudly in the breeze, clanging against each other, falling into little litter heaps onto the ground. We are men, and we must show our Prowess, our Superiority over this forest. This forest must submit to men’s will, because strange amulets and totems, and moonlit vigils, dancing around trees by firelight are not the way of a Man. A man must forge forward. A man must conquer and build and reach the modern world with bounty.” The Headman boomed in anger.

The women tightened their circle and the flames from their oil lamps seemed to grow large and bright orange. The Mother of the Women came forward and faced the men, her face wrinkled and lined with the years she had tirelessly smoothed the brows of boys who were now these men.

She took an ancient mirror and placed it on the ground, and began a song of secrecy beseeching each man to come and look at his reflection, and to see the regret in his eyes. In her song, she told the strong men, who’s thick limbs were braced like tree trunks into the ground, that their eyes held the secret of mercy. Her gnarled fingers pointed upwards towards a shadow that loomed over the people, unseen at night, but never denied at day.

“See, the Himalayas,” she whispered and gestured upwards. The men’s eyes followed her fingers.

“We are here in this beautiful valley of Kashmir, and our Father, the magnificent Himalayas protects us. He provides us with shade when the sun is too much to bear. He sends rivers of cool water to touch us, when our throats are parched from a day’s work. And like a father, he shows us his rumbling ire, a cascading avalanche of doom when we fall away from the Straight Path. Will you not go to our father, the mountain, and try to slay him first. Why will you want to take rough hewn axes to your Mother, who has given you the benign gift of life?”

Bowing her head into a soft shawl made of the wool of a baby lamb, the old woman retreated into her circle, and the women keened a song of gratitude for her words.

The men would not be swayed. They began roaring at the Heavens, calling for Indra to send his storm, his bolts of light that broke trees into a million shards.

“We have no need for these old things,” they said.

“We have no need for slippery mosses and curvaceous ferns with fronds that look like the hips of a child-bearing woman.”

The sky began to darken with each offering they made, pouring fresh buffalo milk onto an obelisk, begging for Shiva the destroyer to open his eyes, to point his trident at the God’s pieces of useless wood.

“Our Father, the Himalayas will provide us with all we need. We are men, and our children must learn that old things must die, that progress will set us free.

A man with a large axe showed his might, and struck a thick trunk of a Banyan with his sharpened blade. His brotherhood applauded his bravado; they celebrated the striking of the first blow.

The band of women, hiding their beautiful faces behind thick shawls sent a mournful cry into the ether. They beat their breasts. One of their own had been struck. One of their own was in pain.

Out of the wailing mob, a tiny woman came, bearing a swaddled babe in her arms. The child's tiny fists waved in the dark air. A little boy-child, lying like a bud of a forbidden flower deep inside his young mother's breast.

She began softly at first. With a prayer for the Tree that had been so cruelly injured. And when she felt the beat of the child's heart against her own, her courage swelled like the baby had once swelled in her belly.

She pointed to a string that was tied tightly around the trunk of the tree that had been hurt. The string was hanging in shreds now.

"I came to this tree, a barren woman. I came to this tree every day of my married life. The Mother told me in a dream to tie a bright red string around this tree, circumambulate it one hundred and eight times, never once letting go of this thread. And the Mother told me, I would bear a child. She held the child up to the man who had wielded the axe.

"Here, I have borne you a son. The seed planted in me, the day I supplicated this tree with a long red thread, and a hope in my heart. A hope to bring you this boy-child. And as it was told, by the Mother, this tree opened my womb for the seed to flourish. Here, will you now swing your axe at your boy-child?"

The man looked away. He slowly let his axe fall to the ground.

Another man stood tall and handsome amongst the women, and showed them his prowess by glowering at them. They cowered. All except one young woman.

"Brother," he said to the man whose axe was now fallow, "This village is dying. There is nothing here. Beauty alone does not feed hungry mouths. Beauty does not buy warm cloths when the winds from the mountains howl at our bones. There is no need for all these flowers, trees and mosses to be preserved like monuments, when they do not fortify us. What is the use of beauty, when beauty gives you no wealth?"

The young woman of such amazing beauty who had not cowered before him stepped into his gaze. She showed him her lovely face with the light of the flame.

“We lay together on these mosses” she whispered, “we loved between these ferns.”

The young man stared into the eyes of the woman that he loved and recalled their nights of dripping passion watched only by the trees and the forest animals.

First, his gaze softened into hers. And suddenly his eyes grew hard and dark.

The men became strengthened by his firm resolve. They advanced.

And as each tree fell to the ground, as each carpet of mosses and flowers were crushed, each woman lost her soul. The paper money fluttered in the wild wind and fell at each man’s feet. But their women were gone.