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chapter-1

At the far southern end of the extended corridor of Manteswar Sagarbala High School, inside the classroom of Class Ten, Section A, the suffocating, muggy heat of the month of Bhadra had taken on a terrifying form. Under the scorching midday glare, the parched soil of Rarh Bengal seemed dry and sizzling like an overheated iron skillet. The air was utterly still, without the faintest breath of wind stirring anywhere. Out in the school courtyard, not a single leaf moved on the century-old, colossal blackberry tree; only perched upon a dried-up upper bough, a lone raven croaked incessantly in a harsh, grating voice. That monotonous caw made the suffocating silence inside the classroom feel even heavier and more unbearable. The atmosphere of the room was a bizarre and uncomfortable mixture of fine white chalk dust, the musty odor of worn wooden benches, the sour , damp scent of teenage boys' sweat, and the sharp, pungent sting of formalin wafting across from the biology laboratory. Decades of dust and mud stains had dried hard over the red cement floor . Peeling patches of whitewash on the walls exposed the ancient red brickwork beneath, resembling the protruding ribs of a skeleton. Subrata Sir was nearing fifty-five. The furrows across his forehead bore the distinct marks of age and long teaching experience. Peering over the worn tortoiseshell rims of his thick bifocals perched on the tip of his nose, he stared toward the rear right-hand corner desk with profound irritation. His white khadi kurta was soaked dark with sweat across his back. In his hand, a flat, hard wooden ruler tapped idly against the table in a gentle, rhythmic strike. All forty-five boys and girls of the class sat with lowered heads, either driving their pens across their notebook pages or gazing with fearful eyes at the master's face. All except one. He was Debatanu Chowdhury. He was the only child of Sarajan Chowdhury—the revered scholar of Sanskrit grammar , master of Manteswar's ancient traditional toll academy, and an immensely respected figure throughout the entire district. Debatanu had only just crossed sixteen, but his physical build was already tall, erect, and robust, like that of a fully developed young man. Beneath his broad forehead, chiseled jawline, and thick, dark eyebrows, burned two piercing hazel eyes. Looking into those eyes for the first time, one could immediately perceive that there lay no serene grace of scholarship, but rather an unrestrained arrogance, patrician haughtiness, and a perilous defiance of society. His intellect was razor-sharp and monstrous. He could crack the most convoluted mathematical problems or the most abstract physics formulas in the blink of an eye without touching pen to paper . Yet that unique genius had never become a pure blessing; to the townspeople of Manteswar , it was a name of dread. Bolstered by the vast wealth of the Chowdhury estate, unbridled influence in high society, and the egotism of his monstrous intellect, Debatanu had grown into an arbitrary, destructive

adolescent. From the schoolmasters to the marketplace grocers, everyone knew it was far wiser to step aside from this unruly youth's path.

"Debatanu," Subrata Sir's calm yet resonant voice cracked through the silence of the classroom like a whip. "Come to the front. Stand beside the colored chart of the human circulatory system hanging next to the blackboard, and clearly trace the pathway of oxygenated blood through the left atrium and left ventricle of the heart." The entire class fell dead silent in an instant. Classmates cast furtive sideways glances toward the back bench. A bizarre, venomous, and crooked smirk of contempt played upon Debatanu's lips. He showed not the slightest haste. With excruciating slowness—as though he were an emperor in a grand palace and everyone else merely his slaves—with that very body language, he rose from the wooden bench. The friction of his worn yet expensive leather sandals stirred the dust on the floor . Hands shoved into his pockets, slouching his body slightly, he ambled toward the blackboard with lazy strides under the collective, terrified gaze of the entire class. Debatanu picked up a broken piece of chalk from the table. But there was not the slightest sign in him of drawing the blood pathway as instructed by Subrata Sir . The moment the chalk touched his hand, his muscular arm darted with unbelievable swiftness. Right into the center of the human heart illustrated on the hanging chart, he slashed with a sudden jerk a bloody, venomous arrow— piercing clean through the heart from side to side. The entire class held their breath in sheer horror . But Debatanu did not stop there. Chalk in hand, he turned around with deliberate slowness. His arrogant, cruel gaze locked straight onto the girl seated at the far right end of the front bench. Debjani Mukhopadhyay. She was the eldest daughter of Prasanna Mukhopadhyay, a humble copyist clerk at the Manteswar subdivisional court. She was the school's most gifted, quiet, yet grave student. She had always kept herself leagues away from classroom chaos, idle chatter , and childish antics. She wore a simple, spotless white cotton frock. Two thick black braids tied with neat red ribbons hung down her back. Tiny droplets of sweat glistened like dew on the bridge of her nose and upper lip, shimmering like glass in the slanting afternoon sun from the window. An open notebook lay before her , in which she had been diligently recording the master's lecture in pearl-like handwriting. Debatanu did not look at anyone else in the room. Keeping his hazel eyes fixed directly on Debjani's eyes, he used the chalk tip to scrawl two large, distinct English letters beneath the pierced heart: 'D' and 'D'—Debatanu and Debjani. The entire room froze in an instant, as if turned to solid ice. Even the sound of breathing could no longer be heard. This was no innocent adolescent love confession; this was an atrocious display of Debatanu's pedigree, physical power , and intellectual conceit deployed to publicly humiliate and trample a quiet, self-respecting girl from a modest household. The other boys cast their eyes downward in dread.

Subrata Sir's heavy wooden ruler slammed down onto the mahogany desk with a sharp, echoing crack. That loud 'thwack' made several students jump in their seats. The master's fair face flushed crimson with extreme humiliation, wrath, and helplessness. His hands trembled violently. "Insolent scoundrel! Savage beast!" Subrata Sir shouted, the veins along his neck bulging. "Education has failed to tame the animal within you, Debatanu! Mere intellect does not make a human being; for that, one requires ancestral culture in one's blood, and reverence for others! A disgrace like you is a blot upon this sacred temple of learning! Erase that board immediately and return to your seat! And tomorrow

morning, you shall present your revered father in the headmaster's chamber! I wish to see how Pandit Sarajan defends his beast of a son!" Debatanu did not budge an inch. Not a shadow of remorse touched his face; not a single tremor of fear was visible. He merely twisted his lips into an expression of infinite disdain. Squeezing the piece of chalk between his thumb and forefinger , he crushed it to powder in a single instant and let it scatter over the floor like dust. His eyes remained pinned to Debjani's face on the front bench. He was waiting. He wanted to see how, under the lash of this public disgrace and dishonor , the girl would break down in tears, how she would flee the classroom in shame, and how the calm dignity in her eyes would crumble into the dirt. He wanted to grind Debjani's pride beneath his arrogant boots. Yet, confounding the suffocating atmosphere of the room, the exact opposite happened. Debjani did not cry. Not a single tear gathered in the corners of her eyes. Not the slightest tremble of fear betrayed her nerves or muscles. With slow, unwavering, and poised grace, she stood up from her wooden desk. The sweltering breeze of Bhadra brushed against her face. Without any haste, she gently pushed her spectacles up her nose with one finger . Then, she looked straight into Debatanu's glaring, bloodshot eyes. But in that gaze, there was no anger , no fear , no grievance; there was only a freezing, bottomless, and mountainous disdain. It was as though she looked not upon a flesh- and-blood, powerful son of a feudal zamindar , but upon a piece of vile, trivial, and loathsome garbage discarded by the roadside. Debjani turned her face toward Subrata Sir . When her voice floated into the air , it did not sound like that of a sixteen-year-old girl; it rang like the immutable verdict of an ancient judge. "Sir ," Debjani's voice resonated clearly into every corner of the classroom, "if a vessel contains poison or wine, even holy water from the Ganges poured into it becomes impure and toxic. When God grants someone a sharp intellect, they do not automatically become human. If intellect falls into the hands of an unprincipled, uncultured, and arrogant beast, it learns only how to destroy society. And no person of conscience should ever be perturbed by the violent thrashing of a wild animal, Sir . He is unworthy of being called a human being. Please do not waste our precious class time over his foul chalk marks. Please explain the next section on blood pressure in the atrium and ventricle."

Having finished her words, Debjani did not wait a single moment for anyone's reply. She sat down composedly in her seat. Turning the page of her notebook, she resumed taking notes with a steady hand—as though no incident had occurred before or behind her , as though no entity named Debatanu Chowdhury existed in this universe. The students held their breath in terror . All the blood in Debatanu's body rushed to his head in an instant. His earlobes burned hot as fire, and his pupils began to quiver . Debatanu—whom even the school headmaster addressed with cautious deference, whose single roar made the people of Manteswar market shrink in fear—that very Debatanu had just been branded a 'wild animal' with absolute disdain before forty classmates, and hurled into the dirt by the daughter of a pauper clerk! Without shouting, without shedding a drop of tear , with nothing more than glacial indifference, she had completely obliterated his masculine pride! That scorching poison of humiliation shot down Debatanu's spine like an electric shock. His fists clenched tight, his fingernails threatening to pierce through the skin of his palms. He could speak no words. Not a single sound escaped his lips. He spun around with a violent jerk. Then, with long, heavy strides, he walked out the classroom door . His shoes made a harsh sound against the floor . Behind him remained the sweltering classroom of Bhadra, Subrata Sir's grim, stunned face, and an immovable idol writing