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The man who opens the chipped blue door is a contradiction. Beneath the worn white t-shirt and faded green apron, his slightly hunchbacked figure, the deep, folded lines of his face, the liver-spotted skin and greying black hair all whisper of weakness. At the same time, the sure footing, the clear sharpness in his green eyes, and the flex of well-defined arm muscles say strength.

The door clicks closed and the man breathes in the air of the studio, tasting the dry atmosphere of the rectangular room and the particles of dust illuminated by morning light. In one corner lies a rumbling vent hood and a kiln, its cylindrical belly red hot with molten earth and glass. In the other corner, a rectangular metal sink sits on four pipe-thin legs, its faucet leaking with periodic drops of water into a navy blue bucket. A variety of sponges and rags are haphazardly tucked beneath it. Pale, birchwood shelves line the walls, laden with finished pieces and dried by sunlight filtering through high-set windows under an angled roof. Next to the door, rows of clay are stacked in a mosaic of square reds, whites, and greys against the straw-brown wall.

The potter approaches a bag of terracotta, black boots clicking across the tile floor. He drops it with a heavy thunk on the sturdy table next to the sink, catching a whiff of dewy mold and wet earth over the small cloud of agitated dust. Calloused hands roll down the thick plastic bag and places the clay on the plaster-topped surface. In a familiar, rhythmic motion, the man drives out bubbles of air in spiral wedges, letting his body follow the rocking-turning push of his arms and shoulders. He repeats the movement ten, twenty, thirty times, softening the clay with heat from his hands and feeling the particles of earth realign into one malleable unit. The veins on his arms bulge, sweat collects in the deep grooves of his face, and a ball of clay ready to shape.

The low metal stool creaks as the man sits in front of the potter’s wheel, his back warmed by heat radiating from the kiln. A small plastic bucket of water and a sponge lie within reach as he fixes a worn wooden disk on the wheel’s short pegs. He slaps the ball of clay in the center. The electric machine hums eagerly at a nudge from the clay-encrusted pedal, the disk spins, and the man braces himself. The lump of red earth pushes and shakes and grabs at his hands, but must submit to the steady pressure of locked arms, leaving a still, furiously spinning form on the wheel. With one aged hand on the form, the man adds water with a sponge and feels the cold liquid smooth out the burning friction of dry clay against his palm. Deep, russet streaks of watery terracotta stream towards the edge of the wooden bat and splatters onto the floor. He swipes a sheen of perspiration off his forehead, leaving a faint, wound-like streak marked across his face.

The application of water mollifies the clay, the shape softens. The man leans into the hypnotic movement of the wheel the bone-deep rumble of the vent hood behind him. His stance loosens even as steady hands coax the clay higher and higher and higher. Bright orange flecks decorate liver-spotted arms and splatter across the green apron as the walls grow taller and thinner with each pull.

The wheel slows in increments, then stays at a crawl with a low whine. A round wooden clock on the wall marks the slow climb of the sun as the potter refines the shape of the clay with wooden tools and small, careful movements. With a metal rib, he smooths out the spiral markings on the vessel and scrapes away slippery red trails of clay. The thin piece of aluminum reflects the growing anticipation on his face as the final form--a reddish-brown vessel that swallows his arm in its height, bigger than anything else in the room--emerges.

Then.

A moment of distraction, a misapplication of pressure, and the carefully crafted wall folds in on itself, leaving a floppy, nest-like structure behind. The pedal clacks and the wheel screeches to a stop.

The man stares.

In the rectangular room illuminated by morning light, with water that runs crimson brown and hands stained bright orange and a greying hair marked with rust, the man breathes out a rueful sigh, removes the dead shape from the wheel, and leans back.

He stretches and feels the pop of joints along the swollen knobs of his knuckles and the crooked length of his spine. His gaze scans the room: the clay-stained floor, the dripping faucet, the birchwood straining with dried pieces. He tastes the dry dust in the air, feels the burning warmth of the kiln at his back, listens to the low rumble of the vent hood, the drips of water from a leaky faucet and the ticking of a wooden clock.

His eyes rest on a small, dusty form displayed prominently on the wall, its misshapen walls and unsteady tilt a stark contrast to the professional pieces on the shelves. On it, there is a fading date marked in a childish scrawl and a signature that reads “the Shaypur.”

The man quirks a smile and reaches for another bag.