

MA/MFA Creative Writing Feedback Form

1. Assessment Details

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2. Student Declaration

The work I have submitted is exclusively my own except where explicitly indicated (for example, with quotations and references). I have read and understood the statement on plagiarism contained in the School Handbook and understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offence and could result in my exclusion from the University.

3. Title and context

Title	From the Zenana, With Love
Form	<i>These are three stories from a proposed collection titled From the Zenana, with Love.</i> <i>Each story follows the tale of a woman in either Indian mythology or history. The stories of these women have generally been told my men, and the collection (and each individual story) aims at giving the women the autonomy to tell their own stories. They are all tied together through the themes of female self.</i> <i>There are three stories in this submission: Kodom Gache, Vardaan and Chandni.</i>

From the Zenana, With Love

Kodom Gache

Context

This piece is about Hindu Mythology's symbols of love's pure and sacrificial nature. Radha and Krishna are eternally bound to one another, intrinsic to the existence of the other. They are almost always revered together. The narrative deals with a part of their story that is not usually discussed and from a point of view that is not usually observed.

Lord Krishna, the cowherd, Vishnu's eighth avatar and the Leader of the Yadavas, is the only male character in the story. He has various other names; Kanha is one of them. He is a god known for his miracles, his mischief, and for being a rule breaker. He is playful, charming, and the eternal lover – be it filial or romantic, fraternal or philautia, or agape, Krishna advocates for it all. According to the epics, Krishna devotes his time to the service of love.

Radha (or Radhe) is his childhood companion and best friend. She is his chief consort and, in some traditions, an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, Vishnu's wife. She and Krishna have spent lots of time together, dancing and playing by the banks of the Yamuna. However, it is essential to note that she is not one of his eight principal wives. There is a lot of debate about whether the two got married. Still, it is popularly believed that the two married different people.

This piece based on an old Bengali song from the Baul tradition of mystic minstrels titled Kolonkini Radha. The song depicts what could have happened in the aftermath of Radha's marriage with Ayan Yadav. Not much is known about her life after marriage, for Krishna also left Vrindavan soon after. It is a song cautioning Radha against being swayed by Krishna's charm. It tells her to not go to the Yamuna to fetch water, for he will be there too. While nothing untoward will happen, merely being in his presence has vastly different connotations after marriage.

The song tells the tale of these two beloveds who find themselves a fix. It uses the example of Radha and Krishna as a mirror to the reaction that society would have had towards anyone else

in a similar condition. Romantic love, the second it does not culminate into a marriage, is seen as impure. Although their love is older, their new circumstances mean that even an innocent interaction can have ruinous consequences for their reputations.

Glossary for foreign words in the piece:

Kodom Gach(e) – Kadam Vriksh – [Burflower Tree](#)

[Gilli Danda](#) – an Indian game, similar to Cricket

Mausi – Maternal Aunt – but is used as a respectful term for any older ladies

Bitiya – Affectionate term for daughter

[Dhoti](#) – is a men's garment that is wrapped around the leg.

Jamuna Maiyya – means Mother Yamuna, name of the goddess who dwells in the river and an affectionate name for it.

If you want to know more about the Baul Tradition, you can watch [Who is Baul](#) on Mubi.

You can listen to Karthik Das Baul's version of the song [here](#).

Kodom Gache

Radha is done with her share of the morning housework. Her husband is away in the city, accompanying his father for some business. She is alone at home, only her mother-in-law, Amma, to keep her company. She walks into the house, after she has swept the veranda once more, and up to the earthen pot of water that sits outside the kitchen. Picks up the long ladle to dip into the pot only to have it ring hollow. Empty.

Sighing deeply, she stares at it for a long while. She will have to make a trip to the Yamuna. The sun is high in the sky. She can't ask one of the herdsmen outside to fill the water for the family, Amma will get mad.

Oh, it's so hot outside!

Perhaps, the pot in Amma's room will have water – Empty. Kutila was supposed to fill them today, but she left to see the village fair early in the morning. Radha will have to go fill the pots – if Amma realizes what has transpired, neither Radha nor Kutila will hear the end of it for eternity.

She picks up the pots – one balanced on her head, the other held flush against her body. Walks out of the house, her anklets tingling, calling out to Birju – she is going to get water, tell Amma she will be by the Yamuna!

She begins her journey down to the river. Placing one foot after the other, slowly, trying to walk only in the shade. This is a new blouse. She doesn't want it to get drenched in the Vrindavan summer – she has only worn it twice now. Her feet carry her slowly, her thoughts wandering. The Yamuna has been a safe haven – she played with her friends and lazed among the herd and the trees for hours on end.

The gilli danda, the tag, the seven stones, she's played everything. Even the *Raas* with her friends as she enjoyed dancing on moonlit nights took place by the river. It was so constant

in her life, everything happened by its banks – Jamuna Maiyya, as they liked to call the river, was the life and soul of Vrindavan. It was like the sound of the flute, known to everyone, even beyond their village. Its owner was always sat in the same spot, occupying the cool shade under the Kadam tree, his hands playing his flute, eyes shut and face smiling as he waited for his cattle to graze. She can hear the melody now too, lighting up the entire area. Her feet begin to pick up pace, running when she finally registers who she is hearing.

Kanha!

She hasn't seen him since calloused hands held hers so delicately, and red-rimmed eyes bade her farewell, that she felt her soul leave with him, her body still standing in the wedding podium. For a long time after that, she came to visit Jamuna Maiyaa every day, hoping that the Kadam tree would be occupied. But besides water and the village folk going about their day, she didn't find what she was looking for. She didn't know why it had unsettled her so when her visits only ever ended with her filling water.

Afterall, that was her purpose to go to the river – as the daughter-in-law of the family, it was her duty too. The Kadam tree was always there when she went, and but the spot underneath it remained unoccupied. After a while, she stopped visiting altogether.

To hear the flute again today, her feet can't seem to carry her fast enough, new blouse be damned.

The grove surrounding the river bank becomes clearer as she hurries past the fields, feet nearly tripping over the narrow paths. Her anklets jingle along, almost as if complementing the flute melody. She waves hello to Leela Mausī when she calls out from the paddy field, telling Radha to slow down, the Yamuna won't change its direction if Radha goes a little later. Rama emerges from the sugarcane field, looking like she wishes to chat, but Radha just speeds past

her. Amma is going to be very upset if she wakes up before she reaches home, she says when Rama asks her to just listen for a second.

By the time the river comes into view, Radha's blouse is soaked. So much for wanting to keep it looking new. She stops right behind a tree in its shade, putting her pots down and waiting to catch her breath. The scene is just as she remembers – the women are washing their laundry by the river, the cattle are grazing, and the kids are causing as much of a ruckus as possible.

But her mind is on the melody wafting through the air.

The sound is louder here, palpable. It has been so long since she has heard anything musical, let alone something so sweet. Vrindavan is a lot of things and musical is certainly one of them. But the music seems lost and lacking without this flute. Squinting, her eyes follow the sound, hoping that she is mistaken. The melody leads her eyes right to its source situated beneath the Kadam tree.

She knew of his presence; the faint flute melody was enough. In fact, Kanha was the reason she nearly ran all the way to the river bank. Still, she finds herself hiding behind her tree, gasping for breath, her heart racing. Radha knows he can't see her, besides his eyes are closed. The effect he has on her still is surreal. She wants to run up to him, wants to speak to him, and wants to listen to his music for longer. She wants to leave him right here, wants to scream at him, and never wishes to listen to another note ever again. And yet she stands, sweat trickling down her back, reveling in the melody and the sounds of children playing, her eyes closed.

‘Arre Radha bitiya, why are you standing here? Panting so hard, too!’

Radha opens her eyes to see Leela Mausi looking at her, concerned. Rama is with Mausi, holding onto pots of her own, giving Radha a knowing look. She looks behind Radha to the source of the music. Then Rama looks back at her, looking like she wants to say something.

‘Mausi! Namaste! It’s nothing, I just, I ran all the way here so I was just catching my breath.’

‘That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier!’ Mausi says just as Radha bends down to pick up her pots. ‘Why run bitiya? In such heat too! The river isn’t going to go anywhere!’

‘Yes Mausi, but the flute might. Lord knows, it has been a while since we heard the flute in Vrindavan, wouldn’t you say, Radha?’ Rama pipes in.

Radha freezes, bent at the waist, one pot flush against her body, hand reaching out for the other. She feels her face heat up a little at the comment. The heat really isn’t doing her any favors today. Apparently, Rama isn’t either. She slowly stands straight, adjusting the pot against her body and putting the other one on her head. Radha won’t let herself be pulled into this once again. She won’t. The Yadavas are all one big family, kind and gentle, warm to everyone and keeping to their cattle. But the family rears its ugly head when they don’t agree with something.

‘How would I know Rama?’ She bites back, annoyed. ‘You know I haven’t come here since Kutila came to visit us. Shall we go then, Mausi?’

Radha walks out from behind the tree, and into the sunlight. The river water shimmers. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. The sand shifts under her feet. Her anklets jingle. She keeps her eyes straight ahead, squinting at the river in front of her. She can’t even hear the flute anymore. The sweat trickle down her back. She doesn’t even turn around to see if Mausi and Rama are following her. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of

the left. If she can make it to the water without looking at him, she can make it back home without an interaction. That'll be best. It'll show them how little she cares of Kanha. After all, she is a married woman now.

‘Radha!’

She won't turn around. Her feet keep moving. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. She will not.

‘Radhika!’

Left foot in front for the right. Right foot in front of the left. The river is not too far now. She will not. The sand is wetter, the grass sparser.

‘Radhe!’

Just a little bit further. She would not dare to look at him. Or back at Mausi and Rama, behind her. The river was her only focus.

‘Radhe! Arre, Radha Rani, suno toh!’

The river is close, she can feel the cool wind from near the water on her face. She continues to walk, the sun beating down on her head, refusing to turn and look in his direction. If anything, her feet move faster. She mustn't acknowledge him. It will only make it worse; she can already feel Rama's eyes on her. Even the children have stopped their game to watch what is happening. Suno toh? He wants her to listen to him now?

She startles when he comes to stand right in front of her, blocking her way. Lean, and tan, his skin almost blue like the nighttime darkness. His stomach glistens in the daylight, his flute tucked into his yellow dhoti. The jewels he wears reflect the sunlight and the peacock feather on his head slowly sways in the breeze. Radha has to remind herself to look away, before she completely loses herself in the moment.

Radha knows what happens when a stoic bride, bursts into tears the moment her *friend* leaves the wedding podium.

She knows what happens when no matter how hard she tries the tears won't stop and the entire wedding party is silent. She knows what it feels like to not know whether her husband will stay after everything is settled. Radha knows what it feels like for people to look at her and just know, to look at her silently and then whisper the moment she has passed. They don't leave her, the whispers, they cling to her like dry sand on feet after a dip in the river.

At first, her grief and fear didn't let her recognise the whispers. Her mother says she is lucky Ayan didn't choose to leave that day at the wedding podium. She is lucky his family were gracious and that they love her as if she were their daughter. If she were the same Radha from the wedding podium, she would have turned around the moment he called out for her. In fact, she would have run up to him the moment she saw him. But all those months hoping for a glimpse but getting nothing, have given her some clarity.

‘Please move aside sir, I have chores to do.’

She steps to the side and resumes her walk. They are almost at the river. She knows her Kanha, he won't come up in front of her like that again. He stands there for a second, before he moves to catch up to her.

‘Radhe, please!’

She adjusts the pot on her head as she bends down, placing one near the river bank. He comes to stand next to her. She can feel his stare as she takes one pot, dipping it into the river. If she can avoid looking at his eyes, she can make it back home, she knows. If she can ignore his voice, then she can make it back home. She watches as it fills, feeling it get heavier in her hands.

‘Radha rani! Arre, suno toh!’

That voice is impossible to ignore when it is so close by. She pulls her pot out of the river, uncaring of the water that sloshes onto her skirts. Then she turns to face him. He smiles a little, happy she has finally caved.

‘What shall I listen to Krishna? What do you have left to say?’

‘But if you just let me explain-’

‘Explain what? I asked you to marry me, and you said no! You even bid me farewell! What else is there to say?’

‘Ah, but Radhe, at least let me tell you why I did that-’

‘I don’t care why, Kanha! I don’t want to hear it!’

Out of the corner of her eye, in the distance, Radha can see that the women have stopped beating their clothes on the river rocks to watch the two of them. Rama and Leela Mausi are filling their pots near her. She shoves her pot into the river again. Shifts to turn her body towards the river, feeling the wet sand mould to her feet. Her eyes linger on Kanha, even as her hands keep the pot steady under the river. If this continues for any longer, Radha is sure that it will reach Amma. Empty pots will be the least of her worries then. So, when Kanha opens his mouth to say something, she beats him to it.

‘Please let me just fill my water and leave. Don’t you know it is improper for an outsider to speak to a married woman, especially in the absence of her husband, sir?’

The moment the words leave her mouth, Radha wants to shove them right back in. His mouth settles into a hard line and he takes a step back to put some more distance between them. Then, he bows a little, gesturing with his hands towards her pots.

‘Apologies my lady,’ he says, ‘perhaps I overstepped my bounds. I shall bother you no more.’

Radha watches him make his way back. Watches as he walks to the Kadam tree, his steps heavy and shoulders hunched. Watches as he approaches his spot and pulls his flute free from his dhoti. Watches as he sits down in the shade, before looking at her for a second. Then he closes his eyes. Slowly he brings the flute up to his lips and begins to play. This time when the melody reaches her, Radha’s eyes burn. She too, faces the river again. She fills her other pot with water. Kanha continues to play the flute, his tune melancholy. Then, she pulls it out, placing it next to the other. The melody is one she has heard him play only once before. She stands and then bends down to pick up a pot before placing it on her head. Then, she picks up the other, pressing it flush against her waist.

It is a soft tune, lower notes making up most of the melody. She can feel the pots cool the hot skin of her stomach. She turns around, mindful of her burden. It makes her want to apologise, the tune, makes her want to tell him that everything will be alright. Radha watches Kanha from a distance, before she begins to walk back towards the grove.

Her feet move slowly, her anklets jingling. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. She can feel his eyes on her. She can feel them follow her as she adjusts her pot, being sure not to splash it on herself. Her skirts stick to her calves as she walks, the sand clinging to her feet, all the way up to her ankles. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. Amma will probably be awake by now, Radha has to make her tea, and then she has to start preparing for lunch. She must move faster. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left.

The eyes follow her all the way until she has left Jamuna Maiyya far behind.

Vardaan

Context

This is a piece for storge, the instinctual kind of love. A mother's love is unconditional they say, but what happens when she is forced to give up her child? What happens when a woman must make the call to disclose a secret that has the potential to ruin her? Perhaps the most well documented answers to these questions are in the tale of Kunti.

Vardaan, meaning boon, is a piece based on the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. The war is fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas – cousins, divided over the desire for the throne of Hastinapur. It is an extremely long story spanning four generations of one family – this story focuses on one of the sub-plots that has extensive repercussions during the climax of the Mahabharata. Here are the main characters essential to understand this story:

- Krishna – Kunti's nephew, advisor of the Pandavas, called Madhav by the Pandavas.
- Kunti – Mother of the Pandavas, Krishna's paternal aunt (Bua)
- The five Pandavas in order of age:
 - o Yudhishtir
 - o Bheem
 - o Arjun – an archer, Karn's archenemy, and Abhimanyu's father
 - o Nakul and Sahdev (twins)
- Draupadi – wife of all five Pandavas
- Karn – an archer and Kunti's eldest son, born out of wedlock with the Sun God (Surya). Constantly humiliated for being a charioteer's (his adoptive father's profession) son, he was befriended by the eldest Kaurav, for his vengefulness against Arjun, and made King of Anga (Angraaj, meaning ruler of Anga).

You can find more context for this story and a summary of the entire Mahabharata, [here](#).

You can find an essay about the moral vision and connotations of the epic, [here](#).

Vardaan

Kunti has spent a large part of her life walking; walking through palaces, through cities, through forests, and now through a battlefield. Never has a walk felt so endless and yet so short. The ground she walks on now is wet. Her saree is soaked from the bottom, its edge dyed a muddy red. It has been ages since she donned anything red. Widowhood had left her with its pristine white when she was far younger. Now, when something red has finally touched her, Kunti hates it more than anything else. Still, she must move ahead. She steps over a chariot wheel as her daughter-in-law, Draupadi, gently manoeuvres her towards their destination. She must reach him. She has to. She was present for his birth; she must be present-

‘Mother!’ Draupadi chides her, pulling her away before she takes her next step.

Kunti looks down towards her feet, only to be met with glassy eyes staring back at her. The body lies in a pool of red, arrows sticking out of its chest, and a broken shield held in its hands. Kunti stares into the dead eyes, mesmerized. She stares at the face, her breath coming in puffs. She tries to steady her breathing. The stench of blood assaults her nose as she watches its face morph, twisting and turning into something strange. Its lips move, features twisted into something painful. She recoils into Draupadi’s arms, gagging as the stench begins to overpower her, feeling lightheaded.

‘Please, Mother, you must hold yourself together. Please! We have to reach Angraaj.’
Draupadi says, her voice strained.

Kunti turns into her embrace, screwing her eyes shut. She takes in her smell, breathing in and then breathing out. She focuses on the smell of Draupadi’s perfume mixed with sweat. Slowly, she steadies herself, allowing Draupadi to turn her away from the body. Then she opens her eyes, focuses on the horizon and lets herself be led by her daughter-in-law. They are not

too far away from her five sons now. She can see the Pandavas, standing around Arjun who is kneeling by a fallen chariot. Krishna stands close by too, looking pensive. She wills herself to walk faster, uncaring of what or who she steps on to get to her sons.

With each step she takes towards them, her feet feel heavier. Like they have stones around them and keep sinking further into the ground.

Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. The ground is wetter beneath her feet and her saree sticks to her calves. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left. The bodies seem sparser here than when she entered the field, or maybe the scene in front of her has her so focused that she no longer notices anything else. Left foot in front of the right. Right foot in front of the left.

It is Krishna who spots them first.

Krishna who has always looked at her with love and respect. Krishna, whose eyes are always filled with mirth and mischief. Krishna, who always has something witty to say, his words cryptic yet comforting. Now, he looks at her with so much sorrow in his eyes that she feels her feet stagger.

‘Mother?’ Arjun calls out, when he finally notices the two women approach. He moves to help Kunti as the rest of the Pandavas take note of their presence as well.

Krishna stands, watching tearfully as Kunti finally breaks out of Draupadi’s hold to approach Angraaj lying near the chariot wheel, not a word on his lips. She can feel his eyes on her as she falls to her knees. As Arjun falls with her. As he takes Draupadi’s spot, crawling forward as Kunti moves forward. As Kunti begins to weep in earnest when she reaches Angraaj, loud sobs escaping her mouth. She can feel his eyes on her when she finally cradles Angraaj’s face in her lap, her hands shaking and tears falling faster when she sees his pained smile. She

knows Krishna only closes his eyes, letting his own tears escape when she finally speaks to Angraaj.

‘Karn! My son! Please you mustn’t do this to your mother!’

Kunti feels Arjun stiffen beside her at the statement. As she strokes her shaking hand over his forehead, Karna closes his eyes at the sensation. Her tears drip onto his face, mixing with his own, as she watches him slowly blink up at her, trying to put on a brave face. Kunti has wanted to do this for a long time. She cries her heart out, murmuring apologies to Karn over and over again, letting Arjun’s hands on her shoulders steady her. It is only when she has calmed down a little, her sobs having subsided into hiccups that Arjun finally speaks.

‘What do you mean by your son, Mother?’

~*~

The young girl clutched her basket closer to her body. Quickening her pace, she made her way through the forest. It wasn’t too far away now she could feel the ground getting wetter beneath her feet. Sand clung to them, grating on her soles. The basket felt heavier with each step. The walk to the Ganga seemed to go on forever, and yet, she could see it get larger and larger in the distance. The sun’s rays became harsher the higher it climbed up in the sky. The heat rose steadily, even though she made sure to walk under the shade. She could feel the sweat trickle down her back, soaking through her blouse.

A day ago, Kunti had simply been the princess of this land, one blessed enough to be granted a boon by the great Sage Durvasa. Today, she was on the verge of bringing shame upon the entire kingdom. She hadn’t known that things would turn out this way.

If anyone were to find out what had happened-

Oh lord, this basket had the potential to destroy any future prospects for her family and her people.

She willed her feet to move faster, clutching the basket tighter when a little cry emerged from within it. The trees were sparser here near the river, and the sun was right overhead. She needed to hurry back if she didn't want to get caught. Kunti was sure she looked in a right state – her saree was filthy and torn, her blouse soaked with sweat and her face streaked with dried tears. Not to mention the basket. She glanced over the basket once, pointedly not looking at it for longer than a second. She could see the little hand flailing inside, the breastplate gleaming when it caught the sunlight.

The sight was enough to trigger her tears again. As she approached the river water, she set the basket down slowly on a rock under the shade of the tree, before sitting down next to it. She kept her eyes on the basket, afraid that it would disappear if she let it out of her sight. Kunti wasn't sure if she would prefer that-

No, she knew she didn't want to do this. Surya's blessings were in this basket. Alas, she had no other choice. For the sake of her family, for the sake of her honour, there was no other choice.

'My dear child, you have been the most gracious hostess. You have doted on me day and night, cared for me come hell or high water. I am very pleased.' Sage Durvasa had said when he was leaving after his extended stay. She had impressed him and he wanted to grant her a boon that would be of great service to her husband. Kunti had closed her eyes, quickly folding her hands in the Namaskar and bending her head. The sage had recited some incantations. A strange warmth had slowly begun to dissipate through her head, all the way to the tips of her toes. Then he had spoken.

‘Kunti, daughter of Kunti-bhoj and princess of this great Kunti Kingdom, I, Sage Durvasa, grant you this mantra that will help you invoke any God you wish to provide you with a son as glorious as his heavenly father.’

Her family had rejoiced upon hearing the boon. Kunti had just felt greatly honoured, but confused.

What was she to do with such a mantra?

How did it work?

How would it even be beneficial to her?

The more time she had spent thinking about her boon, the more plagued she had been with these questions. Her mother had told her not to dwell on it too much, its time would come. Time always revealed everything. But no matter how hard she had tried, one question kept coming back to her.

Did the mantra even work?

That one question had led her here today, weeping by the Ganga, Surya’s blessing in a basket next to her. The torn edge of her muslin saree that was covering the basket had shifted and curious eyes looked up at the sky. Slowly, she picked up the basket and brought it to her lap. Inside was an infant, not more than a few hours old, a golden breastplate covering his upper body and gold earrings piercing his ears. Even from under the muslin, they glinted in the sunlight, making it hard to look at the basket. Kunti took the cover off and took a good look at the baby. She knew what she had to do.

Karn, Surya had called the baby when he had given him to her.

She picked the baby up from the basket now, cradling him in her arms, and letting the basket fall to the ground.

‘Karn,’ she said, ‘I am so sorry that I have to do this to you, my love. But there is no other choice.’

She held him to her chest for a long time, kissing his head and murmuring apologies as her tears dripped onto his face.

‘What else am I to do? I only ever wanted to test the mantra! But then, Surya actually appeared in front of me, and told me that he would grant me the boon. I said to him that it was a mistake, that I only wished to test the mantra, but he would not be swayed. I told him I was not yet married! Oh Karn, I begged and I begged, and yet here you are, with your golden breastplate and gold earrings just as he had said. I’m so sorry to do this to you, my child, but what else am I to do?’

Kunti rocked Karn in her arms. To the left and to the right. She began to hum a lullaby. To the left and to the right. She shifted him in her arms shielding his face from the sunlight. To the left and to the right. She stroked his forehead with her thumb gently. To the left and to the right. She watched as his eyes drooped slowly. To the left and to the right. She looked at him for a long time, even after he was soundly asleep in his mother’s arms, holding one of his tiny hands in her own.

Then, she adjusted the basket with her feet. Slowly, she laid Karn into the basket. She retrieved the torn muslin of her saree. She covered the baby with the muslin, tucking him in snugly. So as to not wake the baby, she picked the basket up gently. Then, she stood up slowly, walking the short distance to the Ganga. Crouched down near the water and whispered an incantation, a desperate plea to any God who was willing to listen.

Then, Kunti set the basket afloat in the river.

~*~

The silence of the field is only punctuated by Karn's ragged breathing. Not a single creature stirs, not even a bird. His head is still in her lap, and she continues to stroke his hair. Arjun is frozen beside her. He hasn't moved since when she began her story, his hand still resting on her shoulder. She can feel Arjun's grip on her shoulder tightening slowly. Kunti doesn't dare to look up. Looking up means baring herself to the scrutiny of her grown children, the upholders of Dharma, as it were. She doesn't want to see the look in the Pandavas eyes, to witness the change in their gaze. So, she doesn't look up, not even when Arjun's grip becomes painful. Not even when she knows Krishna has come closer, standing next to Arjun. Not even when Karn looks her in the eye, silently urging her to say something.

'Mother,' Yudhishtir, the eldest among the Pandavas, says finally. 'Does this mean that the Angraaj is our older brother?'

Arjun digs his nails into her shoulder at the question. Kunti closes her eyes, nodding.

But Mother, how can that be true? He has tried to kill us throughout the war! He is the commander of the Kaurava army!

If he were our brother, would he have chosen their side?

Would he have murdered a child so callously? Which uncle would kill their own nephew?

One by one, her children begin to ask her questions, different versions of the same thing. Krishna stands quietly near Arjun. She closes her eyes, focusing on Karn's breathing, simply nodding her head at each question. What can she say? What is left to say? Answering their

questions isn't going to bring her son back to health. Answering their questions isn't going to erase her confession. So, she simply nods at each question, continuing to look down. And then, Arjun speaks.

‘Mother, you say that you gave up Angraaj as an infant. Does this mean I have just fatally maimed one of my own?’

Kunti whips her head up at that. Her eyes meet Arjun's: his face is full of an emotion she cannot place. She tries to take a deep breath in. Then opens her mouth to say something, but the words won't come out.

‘Tell me, Mother! Have I just-’ he stops, taking in a shuddering breath. ‘Have I just killed my brother?’

Kunti tries to take another breath, but the air keeps getting stuck in her throat. She wants to tell him that- She wants to say- It's all a misunderstanding! That is not what happened! Arjun couldn't have possibly known- The air seems to be getting thinner. No matter how hard she tries, she can't breathe. She flits her eyes, looking away from Arjun, but every face she looks at seems to be asking the same question. Has he killed his own brother?

‘Madhav!’ Arjun speaks again, his voice agitated. ‘You're God himself, are you not? Why are you being so quiet? Always have something to say, don't you? Tell me then that I am I wrong. That I haven't killed my own brother! Tell me what our mother won't Madhav!’

It is Bheem who finally speaks up. Arjun is still looking at Krishna, silently urging for an answer. Still, he says nothing.

‘It doesn't matter Arjun. The Angraaj's actions were not righteous throughout this war. He has been trying to kill us throughout this war. Just remember our Abhimanyu. When he

killed his own nephew, did he feel remorse? Did he even know the truth? So, how does it matter? You only accomplished what he has been trying to do!’

‘Bheem!’ She chides. Even Krishna’s eyes widen at the comment. He looks grieved, pained. She knows why Bheem is saying all this. Knows it’s easier to speak ill of Karn than to accept that they have been disrespectful to their older brother their entire lives. Knows it’s easier to accept that they have warred against him. Knows it’s easier to accept that Arjun has fatally wounded an enemy. ‘Whatever may be the circumstances of right now, Karn is still your eldest brother. You must show him respect.’

‘Then tell us Mother, has he not tried to kill us several times? Madhav, Am I not right in asking this question?’

‘He has never tried to kill any of you, Bheem.’ Kunti hopes Krishna will forgive her this lie. ‘In fact, he hasn’t fought against any of you in this battlefield.’

‘But does that mean that the Angraaj has known that he is our brother?’ Nakul asks.

‘Yes,’ comes a ragged reply before she can even open her mouth to speak. ‘Yes. I have known that the mighty Pandavas are my brothers for a while now.’

Her eyes find the only other pair not full of questions – Krishna. He holds her gaze, silently asking her to do something. Kunti squeezes Karn’s hand softly, breaking eye contact to look at him again. He looks paler than he was minutes ago, and Kunti feels her heart clench.

There is no going back now. Everything is out in the open. She will have to tell them everything – what their brother has done to protect them. She will have to tell them what she has done. She will have to tell Arjun the truth, and not just the one he is asking for. She closes her eyes, but even that gives her no relief. An array of lights dances behind her eyelids, like that time when Surya came to visit her before Karn was born. The thought of having to say

everything out loud makes her feel dizzy. She opens her mouth to take a deep breath but instead she tastes metal, the stench of the battlefield suddenly pushed to the forefront of her mind. Kunti feels fingertips slowly pull her face in a different direction.

When she opens her eyes again, Arjun is staring at her.

~*~

‘Greetings, Queen Mother. What brings the mother of the mighty Pandavas to me this morning?’

Kunti startled a bit upon hearing his voice. She took a deep breath, swallowing against the lump in her throat.

Karn had been standing at the shore of the Jahnvi River, offering water to Surya with his daily prayers when she had approached him. The sun had just ascended into the sky, perching on his throne. She had crept into the camp before its ascent, silently as she could. Being here was dangerous and it was pertinent she left before anyone else awoke. She had waited for him to finish his prayers. Kunti’s heart had been beating faster with each incantation he made to the sun. Her eyes flitted around, looking for any signs of movement. When he had been done, he had stood watching the river flow for a bit.

‘This mother comes to the glorious Angraaj with a humble plea.’ She replied. ‘She wonders if you might be able to fulfil it.’

‘If it is something within my capacity to grant, the mother can rest assured that it will be fulfilled.’

‘I wish to hold my son to my chest, and ask him to accompany his mother to see his brothers. Will you grant me this wish, Angraaj?’ She asked, stretching her arm out towards the King.

‘How can I, a commander of the enemy’s army, grant that wish? How could I be of help?’

‘For the mighty Angraaj-’

‘For the mighty Angraaj is your son? The son you wish to hold to your chest and ask to accompany you to see his brothers?’

Kunti had to take a step back at the question. The motive, he guessed correctly. But, how could he have known? How was he aware of this truth? How did he know of this truth that she had held to her bosom, safe within the warmth of her chest, never to be revealed? How could he have-

‘Your nephew Krishna, came to see me last night. Told me of how I could ascend to the throne if I sided with the Pandavas. I could even wed their wife, Draupadi. When I asked him why I would side with the Pandavas, he told me the story of their birth. How their mother had begotten them from the gods, using an old boon since their father was incapacitated. But, that’s not all. He said that their mother had once used the mantra before her marriage. She had obtained a son too, but she gave him up. He told me to side with them, for they were my brothers.’

Kunti felt all the air leave her lungs. He knew. He knew what she had done, before she could tell him. She looked around, eyes looking for anything moving, ears tuned to the slightest rustle. Kunti pulled the loose end of her saree closer to her face, opening her mouth to speak again.

‘Tell me, o Queen Mother, are you here to ask me to spare the lives of your sons?’

The question seemed to ring louder in the quiet of the morning. Kunti stood rooted to her spot, one hand stretched out towards her son. Her ears were ringing. His voice was so full of scorn when he spoke to her. And yet, his eyes were filled with sorrow, remnants of tears clinging to his eyelashes. She wanted to say something. Anything. She wanted to deny the accusation, to tell him that he was wrong. That he had misunderstood her intentions. Somehow, her mouth would not form those words.

‘Please you misunderstand me!’ she tried, her voice not above a whisper. ‘I am only here to reveal the complete truth so you may be united with your family. So that I might correct my mistake!’

‘My family are the parents who adopted me, the wife who has loved me dearly, and the son who reveres me. How could those who have disrespected me for so long be my family?’

‘For you are my first born, Karn! You are my son too, eldest of them all. Greater than even Arjun or Bheem in skill. I love you just as much, my son! Yudhishtir will grant you every right should you come with me. I will make sure of it!’

‘Do my brothers even know the complete truth Queen Mother? Do they know that the man they have scorned, humiliated and sworn to kill, is their eldest brother?’

Kunti remained silent at the question. He kept looking at her, expecting her to answer. She didn’t know if her answer would make the situation better. But she had promised to be truthful. She could see the outline of the enemy camps in the distance beginning to show signs of life. She had promised Krishna that she would reveal the full truth to her son, no matter the consequences. So, she simply shook her head in reply.

‘Then how do you promise that they will give me these rights? When they have failed to even show me any basic respect? You have yet to tell them that I am their brother, but I don’t want them to know. I don’t think of them as my brothers. I want no part in their kingdom, or their family.’

‘Please, you mustn’t say that, my son-’

‘My mother is the one who loved me throughout my childhood. Who cared for me and was there for me when I needed a mother. So, what if I was not born of her body? She didn’t set me afloat as a new born, leaving me to fend for myself. She didn’t choose the most opportune moment to tell me the truth. Pray tell me, o Queen Mother, how long have you known?’

The tears that had been slowly accumulating in her eyes, finally spilled over her cheeks. She pulled her saree closer, covering her mouth, hoping he would not hear her answer.

‘The day you came to the presentation of the Pandavas and Kauravas for their final public test. I had an inkling when you challenged the entire stadium to a duel. But I knew for sure when I saw your breastplate and your earrings.’

‘And yet you chose to wait for years and years to tell me the truth! You are not here for me. You are here for your sons! You know that Bheeshma, their grandfather, and Drona, their teacher will never kill them. That leaves me. If I leave the Kaurava army, they won’t be successful against your sons.’

He turned away from her at that statement, refusing to look at her any longer. When she tried to place her hand on his shoulder, he shrugged it off.

‘Tell me, how can I abandon my friend in favour of those who have only ever disrespected me? Would it not be a sin to abandon the friend who gave me everything – a

kingdom, respect, kindness and love, for a family who doesn't even know who I am? How can I do that? Why should I, Queen Mother?'

Kunti felt her knees shake at the question. She slowly dropped down to the ground, kneeling on the river sand. She could feel her saree slip from her head as the cool morning air nipped at her cheeks, drying the tear tracks on her face. More tears fell as she tried to conjure a response.

'I cannot do what you ask of me. I refuse. However, since you came here with a plea to be granted, I shall not turn you away empty handed.'

Karn finally turned around, kneeling down when he saw that she was no longer standing. She looked up to see that even his face is rife with agony, his cheeks too, wet with tears. She could feel her heart swell at his words, even though he had refused her initial request.

'I shall grant you a wish, only because you are the woman who gave birth to me. But in return, you must promise me something too.'

'Anything, my child! Anything, ask for what your heart desires!'

'Let the war happen, Queen Mother. Keep your other children in the dark about my identity. I promise that no harm will come to four of your sons. I will not kill Yudhishtir, Bheem, Nakul or Sehdev. But at the end of this war, you will have five living sons. I will not spare Arjun – you shall either have Arjun or you shall have me.'

The joy she had felt began to sour at his words – she would have to part with Arjun? But she wanted all six of her children to be with her. Even the thought of losing Karn made her heart rife with grief. Nonetheless, a promise had been made. If not all six, at least four of her sons would remain safe. Kunti had to make her peace with that, she could only pray for the

safety of the other two. She brought her arms up to her son's shoulders, gently pulling him closer to her, uncaring of anyone who saw them.

‘Thank you for this kindness you have shown your mother, Karn. Grant me this last wish, before we part too.’ She said, as she held him to her chest, gently kissing his brow.

~*~

Krishna's hand is on Arjun's head by the time Kunti has finished talking, much to Karn's displeasure.

She knows he wished for the entire ordeal to remain under wraps. But if Kunti doesn't tell her sons, especially Arjun, the full truth now, she stands the chance of losing something far greater. She stands the chance of losing those very five whom she had sought to protect. She is willing to answer all the questions now, however painful, however damaging, they may be.

She has nothing to lose, after all.

All five of her Pandavas know her deepest secret. They know that they have disrespected their eldest brother numerous times. They know that they have been extremely caustic to the man they ought to have given the same respect as their father.

Arjun knows that of all the Pandavas, he has held the most animosity for his brother. He knows that he has competed with and defeated his own brother. She watches as he slowly moves to touch Karn's face, his lashes wet with unshed tears. Karn smiles through his pain, hand coming up to hold Arjun's at his cheek. Arjun whispers something, before taking in a deep breath. He closes his eyes, finally letting his tears wet his cheeks. A sob breaks free from his mouth, as he bends forward a little, touching his head to Karn's chest. Then, he straightens himself up, looks at Kunti and speaks.

‘Why did you not tell me that the man whose blood I had been lusting for was my own flesh and blood, Mother?’

She has decided to answer all his questions, and yet, Kunti has no answer for this one. Why had she not told her five sons the same information she had afforded Karn? Why did she leave them in the dark, letting them foster the animosity, the anger? She looks at Krishna, hoping to find a way to answer this question. He too, had known the truth - he knew everything. Why then did he not reveal to Arjun the truth about Karn’s heritage? Why had he not made the choice that she could not?

Krishna simply keeps stroking Arjun’s head, his gaze unflinching. She is grateful for the comfort he gives her son.

In his eyes, she sees the answer, she can almost hear his voice in her head – Bua, it was your choice to use the mantra. Yours to abandon Karn. It was your choice to not reveal the truth early enough. Yours to reveal the truth to only one party. I cannot help the choices you have made, and I cannot help the consequences of those choices either. You must make the choice once more, whatever it may be. I am but a bystander in your life, aware of your choices, but unable to intervene.

‘Arjun,’ Karn addresses his brother haltingly, ‘would you have done otherwise, were you in our mother’s situation? Revealing such a truth would put the honour of her father’s family and her husband’s too at stake-’

‘Perhaps it would have then, but what of when she told you?’ Yudhishtir interjects. ‘Mother! Why did you not tell us when you chose to tell him?’

Kunti keeps her eyes on Krishna. She knows she has to speak. She has to answer. But her lips just won’t form the words. Arjun turns her head once again, forcing her to face him.

‘Mother!’ He says, ‘How could you let me do this?!’

Kunti can feel the tears well up in her eyes once again.

‘How could you have let me commit this grave sin Mother? We fought this war for Dharma-’

‘Arjun,’ Karn speaks to his brother once more. Kunti can hear how hard it for him to draw each breath. She continues to stroke his head gently. ‘Don’t blame Mother. She only did what she deemed was right!’

‘How can I not do that?’ Arjun replies, his voice heavy. ‘I have always disrespected you, humiliated you, fought against you! It isn’t just fratricide! Had we known- had I known- I would never have, never have done something so wicked!’

Arjun holds Karn’s hand, looking at him, his face aghast and eyes watering. Kunti wishes she could take everything back. She wishes she could take back this interaction, take back not telling her sons at the same time as Karn, take back not revealing sooner that he was her son. She wishes she could reach Karn before Krishna and tell him the complete truth herself. There was so much she wanted to say. So much more she wanted to do.

‘But I didn’t know either, Arjun.’ Karn says after a while, his voice ragged, barely above a whisper. ‘Not until much later. And I have done the same to you as you have to me – forever have I instigated fights, and fought with the intention to prove myself the superior! I have always supported the side that wronged you. You only did what you thought was right too.’

Kunti lowers her head. She lets her tears drip down onto Karn’s face once again, watching her son speak. She hasn’t seen him this close since he was but a little baby, barely a few hours old. She hasn’t held him since then either. Perhaps, she should have chosen to not

rid herself of the baby. But she made that choice, and her children are here today, facing the consequences. Her eldest son is dying a slow death, bleeding out of his numerous wounds. Her Arjun is weeping beside her, his head laid on her Karn's chest, the brother he has slain. Her other Pandavas are crying too, at the thought of never having the chance to truly know their brother outside of their animosity.

In the end, it is her nephew who comes to her aid. Krishna holds her by the shoulders, letting her cry out her grief as Kunti clings to her son, lamenting what could have been.

~*~

Chandni

Context

Chandni is a story about female friendship.

The piece takes inspiration from the story of the Rajput Queen Padmavati of the Mewar kingdom in the 13th-14th century. She was a Sinhalese (present-day Sri Lanka) princess and the second wife of King Ratan Singh. She is a sensational figure in Rajput history. However, modern historians are divided over her story.

There are various versions of the legend of Queen Padmavati or Padmini (as she is also known). Some texts depict her as a Hindu Queen who committed Jauhar when her husband lost the war against Alauddin Khilji. Others, like the Khilji records of the siege of Chittorgarh, make no mention of her. Padmavat is by far the most famous account. It is a long poem composed by medieval Sufi composer Malik Mohammed Jayasi. The poem has inspired many other works from various traditions across history.

Since the historicity of Padmavat has been in question, this is a version of the story that imagines the tale of the two queens. It focuses on providing Padmavati and her counterpart with a chance to bond and find a confidant who truly understands their predicament, rather than pitting them against each other (as Padmavat is won't to do). It is a tale of *philia* and finding an unlikely ally in a lonely home.

Glossary for foreign ideas and words in the piece:

Chandni – means moonlight. Here, it is also a portmanteau of the protagonists' names:

Chandrika and *Padmini*. *Chandrika* (also) means moonlight and *Padmini* means a lotus pond.

[Jauhar](#) refers to the practice of mass self-immolation by Hindu (mostly Rajput) women in the face of a war they were losing. It was an act of honorable suicide where all the ladies related to the royalty and nobility would jump into a pyre if defeat was imminent or if the king died.

It was done to evade abuse and enslavement at the hands of the enemy, since the Rajput held honour above their lives.

[Swayamvar](#) (Swayam – Self and Var – Husband) refers to a traditional Hindu practice of the Kshatriya (Warrior) caste. The tradition allowed royal women to select their husband from a gaggle of pre-approved suitors. It finds mention in various mythological texts and in history.

[Borla](#): a traditional hair ornament worn on a middle part in the hair with chains that line the hairline.

[Geeta Govinda](#) – a 12th century poetry book written by Jayadeva. It describes the relationship between Lord Krishna, Radha and the herdswomen of Vrindavan. Each of the twelve chapters focusses on a different form of Krishna's love for Radha.

Jiji – Respectful term for Older Sister

[Lota](#) – Small metal pot used to offer water to the Gods during a religious ceremony

[Thali](#) – Big metal plates. Here the word refers to the [special plates](#) used to place all the items necessary for a ritual.

[Hawan](#) – a square or trapezoid pot (usually shaped like a step well) to contain ritualistic fire.

You can read more about the Padmavat poem [here](#).

Chandni

Streaks of orange and pink stain the sky. The desert sands look peach in the late afternoon sun. The fort stands tall atop the mountain, its colour matching the surrounding area. Its grandeur is visible from nearly a kilometer away.

What the fort has never known before is the silence that will follow the chanting that resonates within today. Not even during cold winter nights has the silence ever been so stark and piercing. Today, the fort is lit up with chants. Sanskrit mantras, that invoke the goddess for the courage to complete what is to happen, ring throughout the fort. Great mounds of planks are added to one of the three heaps of wood. Women line the perimeter of a dry stepwell, circling the area as they chant to the goddess. They are careful of the lotas and thalis placed behind them. Each is dressed in red, in her wedding trousseau, rouge on their hands and feet, and vermillion streaking the parts in their hair.

Two women stand on the bottom steps of the well. The gold adorning them glints in the late afternoon sun. One of them is taller than the other. She stands rooted to her spot with her eyes trained on the sky. Her hands are folded as she chants along with the others. The shorter oversees the proceedings as her skirt sways gently. She gestures to a heap, asking to add more to it, only this much wood won't suffice. Their composure suggests their stature, only a Maharani would not break under the present circumstances.

A bang sounds in the distance, the streak of smoke from a cannon being fired visible across the sky. The women speed up their movements, piling on more and more wood faster and faster onto each heap. Some around the area light torches, chanting louder and louder. The taller Maharani sits to complete a Hawan, the last of the offerings to the goddess. She adds ghee to the fire in the Hawan and chants a mantra, separate from the others. The spoon she

holds becomes warmer and warmer. She continues to hold on, pouring more ghee each time the chant is completed, aggravating her little fire.

A woman is heard from the top of the step well, her screams telling of what has transpired outside the fort. The sound of hooves on stones is last the thing that is heard before the torches are thrown into the heap.

~*~

From the very first strike of their swords, the princess knew that there was something very different about this man. He was ruthless in the way he fought, each blow was delivered precisely and deliberately. It left her with no option, she had to play defense. They were dueling on the stage where she had been sitting in her chair before, watching the proceedings. The clanging of their swords could be heard all throughout the arena. The princess jumped as the Maharaja swung his sword, aiming for her legs.

‘Ah, I apologise for ruining the saree, Your Highness!’ The Maharaja said, straightening up back into his defensive position. The princess could feel the saree hang a little looser around her legs. Her guess was that he had nicked a portion around her knee.

‘It’s not my only saree. Your Majesty needn’t be so concerned about it.’ She replied, swinging her sword at his shoulder. The Maharaja bent to the side, bringing his weapon against hers in defense.

‘What a pity, it is though! I must admit Your Highness looked quite a vision in it, seated at the throne. My, I felt my heart jump into my throat!’

‘Is that why Your Majesty’s answers were so oblique?’ She pushed her weapon against his, exerting all the pressure she could onto her weapon. The Maharaja stumbled a little, taking

a step back to avoid falling on his back. He brought his empty hand to push against the back edge of his weapon trying to straighten up from his awkward position.

‘Oblique? Now now, Your Highness, some would argue I was witty, piquant even!’

‘Perhaps those in your accompanying party would be inclined to agree.’ She grinned. He smiled back, before suddenly pushing her back forcefully. Sure, the princess was nearly as tall as the Maharaja, she was certainly taller than most women in her kingdom, but she was no match for a warrior’s strength. She braced herself for full impact, closing her eyes. But it never came.

‘Your Highness jests! I’m sure I saw Your Highness pass a smile or two listening to my conversation with her father.’ She opened her eyes. He was holding her non-sword arm, preventing her from falling. Suddenly the cheering in the arena seemed to have turned louder than she could remember. He helped her straighten up, smiling as she felt her face grow hotter by the second.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, his eyes twinkling ‘What can I say, it is my duty to helping a falling lady!’

‘The only person falling you should be worried about, is Your Majesty.’ She replied as she turned, aiming for his sword arm. His sword clattered to the ground, landing a little far away from them on the stage. She had locked her sword into his handle, pushing the tip of her sword into his hand, before pulling her sword back. The Maharaja stood disarmed, having lost the challenge to win her hand in marriage.

Her father was the ruler of a small kingdom in the South. Her days were filled with painting and embroidering, playing with her handmaidens and splashing about in the ocean. She loved reading too! She read so much, that her father had an especially large hall within the

fort dedicated to housing her books. When she turned 21, her father announced a Swayamvar. Suitors came from far and wide for the competition. She had sat there bidding her time, when he came in all his glory; dressed in simple travel clothing, he had stepped up to the dais.

First, the Maharaja had bowed to her and her father, before he began conversing with the latter. She sat mesmerized, as he spoke with confidence and clarity, his tone more deferential than anyone else.

Still, she refused to become hopeful.

‘My dear sir, how delightful it is to converse with you!’ She had heard her father announce finally. ‘However, to win my daughter’s hand, you must disarm her in a sword fight. If you are willing, please join my her on the stage.’

To her immense surprise, the Maharaja had nodded in agreement and made his way to where she was sat. He had climbed up the steps, walked up to her chair and introduced himself. Then, he had waited for her to get up before assuming a fighting stance. The surprised princess had mirrored his stance before they had begun to fight.

Now, she watched with baited breath, as the Maharaja looked at his fallen sword. He looked stunned, his face. Then, he began to snicker, his giggles turning to true laughter within seconds. She stood confused for a moment before she too began laughing. Sure, she had set the task to be completed and he had failed, and yet...

‘Do you wish to ask me anything Your Highness?’ He asked after they had calmed down a little. The princess took a moment to ponder upon the question, before replying with one of her own.

‘What must I know about you, Your Majesty?’

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘I am a married man. You will, should you choose to marry me, be my second wife. My queen and I were married when we were children, as was decided by our parents. If that is not amenable, I shall thank you for an invigorating fight.’

‘Well then, I thank you in advance for all the *invigorating fights* we are to have.’

The wedding was grand. She was renamed Padmini by her husband, in accordance with the tradition of her new house by marriage. The following days were spent by the seaside, hand in hand, walking along the water as they got to know each other. They did not depart her father’s kingdom immediately, instead enjoying what her paternal home had to offer.

‘Tell me, Your Majesty, what do you think is the one thing you shall miss the most once we go home?’ she asked one evening. They were walking along the water again, the waves crashing against their feet.

‘Hmm... Well, this sand, I think. I shall miss this sand.’

‘One would think my dear husband would have had enough of it in his life! Tell me, do you not live in a desert?’

‘This sand, it feels different. It’s soft and cool, it moulds to my feet gently. Back home, the desert gleams golden in the evening sun and shines silver under a full moon. But when it gets upset... well, you’ll see for yourself. During dust storms it rages so aggressively that not even your bedlinens will be exempt from its grains!’

‘Is your fort located so close to the ground?’ Padmini felt bewildered.

The Maharaja laughed, his eyes crinkling. It was atop a hill, but that didn’t matter. The desert sands just rise up really high during a sand storm. They continued to walk next to each other, the conversation flowing like a stream in spring. Talking had never felt so easy. The

Maharaja asked her about her life at the palace. Padmini regaled him with stories of her childhood, feeling warmer each time he delighted in something silly she and her sister had done.

‘Oh, those are some tall claims you make, dear wife!’ he exclaimed.

‘Tall claims, dear husband? All I did was tell you that I can paint.’ She looked up at him. He was already looking at her, smiling, his eyes full of mirth.

‘No! That’s not what you said at all!’ He began walking a little faster, turning to walk backwards. He was nearly running when he spoke again his tone teasing. “‘I am an excellent painter, my Lord! So skilled am I, you might be swayed to bestow me with your patronage!’”

‘Patronage?!’ She followed after him, quickening his pace. ‘What woman would want her husband to be her patron?!’

‘The same woman who would swing her sword at the throat of the man she intends to marry?’ He called back to her, laughing as she scowled, trying to catch up to him.

On their way back, he told her of his Maharani, her senior by marriage. Like Padmini, she too had been renamed, and her name was Chandrika. Padmini wanted to know more about her. What would she think of Padmini? Would she think of her as a replacement? Would they get along? Was it even possible for them to get along? She knew the king respected his wife. They had spent their childhoods in each other’s shadow. He had apologized to her in a letter sent after his marriage to Padmini.

‘Chandrika and I... we were married well before our time. Our match had been made in our infancy. When I was crowned there was so much to do and so little time, that she and I never truly got to know one another as man and wife. I suppose we would have been in love,

had our responsibilities given us the chance. We thought, perhaps a child would foster some love, but even that venture...’

‘Do you suppose Her Majesty-’

‘Yes, of course! Her reply arrived yesterday. She said she would be present for your welcome. Dear wife, you need not worry. I think, if not as a sister, she will come to cherish you as a friend.’

They set off the very next day, making their way to her new home. A letter had arrived after they had reached the palace that night – the Emperor of Delhi had sent several ordinances to the Maharaja over the past few months that he had been in the South. He wished to discuss making the Maharaja a vassal. The furious Maharaja was determined to give the Emperor his answer as soon as possible. The journey was long and arduous and with the Maharaja set on reaching his kingdom as soon as possible, they took barely any breaks during the day.

Padmini spent her time contemplating the situation. People would talk, she knew. She was the new wife, after all, an outsider. Settling into her new life was going to be hard enough. But now, with the timing of their wedding and the arrival of the ordinances, the rumor mill would waste no time spinning a web of lies. She was the reason for the ordinances, of course. Her marriage had brought bad luck to the family and the state.

In turn, her fears turned out to be true. Superstitions are hard to shake off and the timing was more than unfortunate.

The reaction to her arrival was less than glamorous. On the day of her arrival, Chandrika was waiting for them, just as their husband had told her. Padmini had exited her palanquin, bending down to touch her feet. When she stood up, Chandrika had applied vermillion to her forehead. Then she had gestured for her to slowly nudge the copper pot of

rice with her right foot. She had waited as Padmini stood in another plate full of vermillion and walked behind her as Padmini made her way into the new house for the first time, leaving a trail of red footprints on the white cloth laid as a carpet. Then, just as Padmini turned to speak to her for the first time, Chandrika had walked away, without a second look.

Whatever Padmini had wanted to say had died on her lips. She had known that the acceptance would not come so quickly, but Chandrika's message had made her hopeful of tolerance. Now, it seemed like what her husband had assured her off was a far-away fantasy. The servants took to her kindly – they were saccharine, but the whispers never died down. They held onto her like a child holds onto their mother's scarf, trailing behind her where ever she goes.

Each time she rounded a corner, and the bent necks straightened, she caught the tail end of a new rumor.

'It is good Your Majesty doesn't speak to that haughty woman! Barely steps out of her chambers that one.'

Padmini had been reading a copy of the Gita Govinda in the garden. It had been six months since she had arrived at the fort. In this time, all her hopes that the rumors would subside had been futile. At this point, it had become a game, to see how many public places she could avoid. She had taken to remaining in the Queens' Palace, within her own chambers, rarely venturing out farther than the gardens. She knew it was wrong that she kept to her palace as much as possible. But she had hoped to avoid having to listen to conversations just like this one.

'Whatever do you mean Lalita? Tell me clearly.' She had heard Chandrika's voice ask the maid who had spoken.

‘I only meant that the new bride has such a rotten attitude, Your Majesty!’

‘Does she treat you unkindly?’

‘No! I haven’t had the chance to interact with her. But, if you knew what I had heard from the other maids, you’d agree with me, Your Majesty!’

Padmini had wanted to run back to her chambers and never emerge again. They were behind the bench she had been sitting on, admiring the rose bushes that were beginning to bloom in the spring air. Padmini was hidden by those very bushes: there was no way she could have left without making her presence known. If she left then, they would have another addition for the rumor mill, who knew how Lalita would construe it?

‘But if you haven’t spoken to her, how can you know of her attitude?’ Chandrika had retaliated.

‘I heard this from one of the other maids! She said her friend who works for the new bride was severely injured! Apparently, the new bride did not like one of the new jewellery pieces from His Majesty and so she threw her perfume bottles on the floor. When the chambermaid went to clean up the mess, she cut her foot but the new bride made her clean before letting her get help. She even screamed at her for sullyng the carpet with blood. Tell me Your Majesty, what else can one expect from a lowly peasant?’

‘Lowly peasant? Whatever do you mean?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty! The new bride—’

Padmini remembered that incident. The Maharaja had sent her a lot of new gifts. She had exclaimed that her husband needed to stop his antics. Resources were tight at the moment, they needed to be careful. Her chambermaids had been flitting about the room, carrying the

articles to put aside. In their excitement, two of them had collided and a perfume bottle broke. Then one stepped on it – Padmini made sure she was tended to immediately, scolding her when she tried to clean up the mess before getting aid.

She knew of the peasant rumor too. It was their reasoning for why she never ventured out of her—

‘Will you stop referring to her as the New Bride? If you must refer to her in my presence, call her Maharani Padmini.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty. I was only relaying what I—’

‘Elsewhere too, you will refer to her by her full title. A peasant’s daughter? Lalita, if I hear another peep about this from anyone in the Queen’s palace, you will rue the day you decided to listen to this friend of yours. Have I made myself clear?’

She had felt tears well up in her eyes. A sob had constricted her throat, making it painful to swallow. Padmini had closed her eyes, hanging her head, willing the tears away. There was no escaping it. She could tell her husband, of course she could, but that would mean nearly everyone in the Queen’s palace would lose their job. There was no way her reputation would ever emerge from a stain like that. It was okay. She needed to accept it – she was new here and a foreigner. It would take time for people—

‘If you let them speak about you in that manner, they will continue to say whatever they wish to say.’ Padmini had looked to her left to see that Chandrika was sitting next to her, her maid nowhere to be seen. She was looking down at the Gita Govinda in Padmini’s hand as she spoke.

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’ Padmini had replied.

‘You know,’ Chandrika had said, ‘The fourth chapter is my favourite of the twelve.’

Since then, Chandrika had walked with Padmini through the Queens’ Palace, keeping her silent company. Chandrika would sit with her embroidery whenever Padmini decided to spend her afternoon outside her private chambers. Padmini never knew what to say to her. She knew they shared a love for reading, but making any conversation with Chandrika proved to be a tough task.

It began with a small discussion on the Gita Govinda, three months after their conversation on the bench. Chandrika asked about her favourite chapter. Padmini said that she enjoyed the description of an apologetic Krishna in the eighth chapter more than anything else. Chandrika retaliated with her choice – the fourth chapter was the best, what could be better than a tender and loving Krishna? The discussion went on for longer, slowly bleeding into the time they were supposed to have lunch. Lalita, meekly disturbed them to ask if they should be served lunch. Yes. Then, Chandrika continued to talk about her favourite chapter. That was the first time they had ever had lunch together. Now, another four months later, Padmini knew that she was always invited to dine with Chandrika. They ate together on most days now, gossiping about the Maharaja and exclaiming about the food which got drearier each day.

Dinner included only a lentil and a potato curry, along with millet chapatis. Softer alternatives were a thing of the past. The rice pudding too, was only garnished with little dates. Food resources were reaching dangerously low levels now. For the Queens’ palace to get only two curries meant that many others in the fort were barely scraping by.

‘Ah, how I long for some Safed Maas. Slow cooked game with the cream and the nuts and the slightest hint of chillies! Now that is a dinner fit for such a lovely night.’ Chandrika exclaimed, taking a bite of her chapati dipped in the lentils.

‘I just want to eat fish curry, Jiji. With the mustard seed and yogurt marinade – truly heaven on Earth! Have you ever had fish? When our dear husband came for the Swayamvar, that’s all he ate.’

‘Well, I would have too, had our husband had taken me along. Alas! I shall remain ignorant a little longer.’

The fort had been completely surrounded for the past three months by the Emperor’s troops after the Maharaja had sent a letter refusing vassalage. Moving in or out proved to be a tough task for men. So, transporting food was out of question. Stories of villages being pillaged became commonplace. Anyone sent out to sneak some in was captured, killed and their corpse was propelled into the fort as proof. Today too, loud cannons sounds had sounded in the afternoon. Investigation revealed that there were more troops stationed outside.

Padmini felt that it was her fault – she had suggested the letter with a scathing denial for vassalage when they began seeking the next course of action. The court was against it. They argued for peace, and if that meant pledging loyalty and accepting the Emperor’s superiority above them, then so be it. Her husband on the other hand had been for it, agreeing that any inference to vassalage should be taken as an invocation of war. However, in the end, it was Chandrika, who had convinced everyone. Yes, peace was important, but to live as the Empire’s slaves? Unacceptable. The desert alliance would ostracize them for not fighting back. Padmini was right, it was a grave insult to the Maharaja and anything short of a scathing retort would be proving their cowardice.

But now, with food dwindling, Padmini was more unsure of her decision.

Several of the allying kingdoms had accepted the vassalage. Those that hadn’t, while apologizing for denying aid, said that they didn’t want to meet a similar fate. The more replies

they received, the clearer it became that the Maharaja's Southern reprieve going to be his undoing.

Padmini and Chandrika, were sitting by the lotus pond in the garden, their feet dipped in the water, waiting for more news to arrive. Conversation was non-existent today, the fort was so quiet, it seemed there was no inside. In the soft moonlight, the water droplets shone like pearls on the lotuses, the pond gleaming like silver. When the Maharaja arrived without any fanfare or the usual announcement declaring his arrival, both Queens knew the decision that had been taken. Padmini watched as he took his shoes off and joined them near the pond. He dipped his feet into the water, sitting next to them, quiet and contemplative, holding one of their hands in each of his own.

‘My dear, I’ve made a decision for the women’s palace.’ Chandrika said after a while.

‘And what might that be, my love?’

‘You know what I mean.’ Chandrika replied.

Padmini watched as her husband's face turned incredulous. She could see the gears turning in his head. It took a while before the realisation dawned on him. His face paled, eyes widening as he opened his mouth to speak.

‘No.’

‘No? Do you truly not know what I mean-’

‘No.’ The Maharaja interjected; his voice heavy. ‘You cannot mean to- No. No, that’s not it. No at all. No-’

‘Yes. We must do this. To protect our honour, our sanctity. You know we must. The Queens’ palace must prepare for every possibility!’ Chandrika replied, her eyes shining.

‘What made you come to such a decision? This is insanity! Have you truly no hope for victory? Have you so little faith in your husband? In your warriors?’ His voice was so incensed, Padmini would’ve thought Chandrika suggested he accept the vassalage.

‘Does Your Majesty pretend to be ignorant of the current situation?’

‘I do not. Neither do I pretend to not be aghast.’ He shot back, shaking his head vehemently. ‘I will not stand for this. You have no right-’

‘It has already been decided, dear husband. We are not looking for permission-’

‘Tell me, Padmini, do you agree with this? You cannot possibly think of this notion as anything but insanity.’ He looked at Padmini tearfully. ‘Tell me you disagree! Please, just say you are not for this decision. That you do not agree with Chandrika in this, this madness. Tell me, you have hope still. I beg you for this kindness my beloveds, please!’

He closed his eyes, tears spilling over his cheeks. She could feel his desperation, in his touch, in each ragged breath that left his lips, in the way his hand squeezed hers tighter.

‘I agree with Jiji.’

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The kneeling bodies are dressed in saffron, like shards of the sky scattered in the sand. The Emperor stands tall at a little distance, his eyes set on the fort. The Maharaja kneels at his feet, arm bleeding, his knees unable to move from the spot. Slowly, the Emperor bends down to hold the Maharaja by the hair on his nape, forcing him to look at his now besieged home. The

Emperor promises to pardon him and his people, should he accept to become a vassal. A small nod, and the deal is set.

A cannon is fired into the sky to declare the results of the war. Armed soldiers dressed in black make their way into the fort to hoist the Empire's flag. The sun dips a little lower in the sky, as smoke begins to rise from the fort. At first it isn't clear, but then it slowly becomes prominent. Like a painter contemplating whether to paint their canvas grey, their strokes becoming more apparent as their decision is made.

Inside the fort, the stepwell is growing warmer by the minute. Its doors are slammed shut as the sound of hooves comes closer. Chandrika urges the women to pick up their lotas and offer a little water to the goddess as she rages. They sprinkle more vermillion towards the goddess followed by rice. They rotate their thalis clockwise, the light of the diyas fading against the goddess' radiance. The chants turn to frantic singing, annotated with a sob here or there.

Padmini sits at her Hawan, offering more ghee, chanting faster as each second passes by. She needs to complete 101 chants to the goddess before the ritual will be considered complete. The vermillion rolls down her forehead from under her Borla, streaking her face red. Chandrika comes to stand beside her as she continues her chants. The women begin to climb lower into the stepwell, still chanting the *mantras*, their *thalis* abandoned.

Padmini turns to collect her *lota* from the step behind her, wincing at its heat. She offers her share of water to the Hawan and then stands to offer it to the goddess. Chandrika replaces the *lota* in her hands with a *thali* when she is done, and Padmini follows suit with the vermillion and the rice, then rotating the *thali* clockwise several times. She nudges both the Hawan and the *thali* into the stepwell. Chandrika comes to hold her hand. The women have converged at the step behind them now, waiting for them to proceed. Hand in hand, they step into the fire's sweltering embrace.

Outside, the Maharaja weeps.