



A woman
wronged
will shake
an empire

SAVAGE BEASTS

RANI SELVARAJAH



PRAISE FOR SAVAGE BEASTS

* * *

‘A **beautiful and unique** retelling of Medea. I loved it!’

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For Mum, Dad and Chitran.

And for Jerell, my love.

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*‘Zeus, do you hear how I am mocked, rejected, by this savage beast,
polluted with her children’s blood?’*

Euripides, *Medea*

PART I



‘Imperialism’s image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind.’

Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

CHAPTER 1



Calcutta, May 1757

She should head back. Meena knew she would pay for being outside the palace one way or another; certainly if Abhishek had anything to do with it. Even the sun seemed to glare at her as she watched it glint off the giant white sails bobbing up the Hooghly River. But she also knew that she was staying put. As she had done the day before, and the day before that.

She stood on the bridge in the middle of Calcutta, watching, only taking her eyes off the British's ships to briefly observe how her hands were darkening in the midday sun. She pictured her father's curled lip, disgusted at the sight of her walnut hue.

But this image did not last long; barely a thought tripped across Meena's mind at all as she watched the sails go by. All she could think about was where the ships had come from, where they might be going next, and what those who travelled on them had seen. When she was younger, Meena's aunt Kiran used to take her for trips to the shore. These excursions were few and far between; the journey to the coast from their home in Murshidabad was long and her father did not like her leaving the palace with anyone, let alone with Kiran. But she treasured those visits. She loved the delicate dance of the waves building, lulling you in closer, concealing

the mighty force that lay beneath its foamy surface. And the smell. She wished she could bottle that heady saline scent, and the way its decadence overwhelmed her senses. Kiran had often told her of the beach back at her home, down south in Madras where the sea gleamed turquoise and the scrawny fishermen were loaded down with their catches by sunset. Meena could have sworn she could smell that scent again when she saw the ships.

Meena had missed the luxuries of home, since leaving Murshidabad for Calcutta. One benefit, however, was that the usual detail of guards were busy now that war with the British was on the horizon. There were apparently some slight benefits to be gained from the city shifting between the British and her father's hands, like some shiny bauble. A land to be conquered, though she had thought conquest was only for kings, not traders. And yet, the commercial heart of her father's kingdom, its trade hub, had for several decades been in the hands of foreigners. That was the case until her father was sufficiently slighted by their arrogance. It was one thing to act like you ran a city, it was quite another to build forts to defend it from its rightful owners. Whether such arrogance was sufficiently a reason for war was another question – though she had heard plenty about the damage the British East India Company had wrought down south.

She made the most of the reduced supervision and would often steal away and linger on the bridge overlooking the dock, watching the ships go by, clad in her plainest clothes and the sludge-brown cloak that Meena had lifted a while back from her handmaid Binita when she wasn't looking. She would scuttle through the palace, having feigned melancholy or headache that would naturally leave her bedbound, and then out the kitchen back door she would sneak. She hoped that she looked insignificant enough to those that cared to look – perhaps a servant girl dawdling on her way back from the market.

Meena drew her veil closer as it flickered in the breeze, briefly exposing her as she watched the rush of men piling in and out of their boats. The

docks were always chaotic. She grabbed absentmindedly at the tiny shoots of grass growing in between the cracks of the bridge's stone slabs as she stood transfixed, watching the ships glide through the waves. The thin, straggly weeds bent under the force of her grasp. Men from all corners of the world disembarked the ships with a similar ebb and flow. Some were truly just boys – even younger than Meena – walking with false swagger, a rehearsed ease in the swing of their limbs. The older ones looked around, trying to spot the nearest tavern or brothel from the dock itself. The officious ones were the worst. Looking for their welcome party while covering their faces with their jackets, for fear of polluting their pale bodies with the exotic, offensive smells and sights around them. The British ones in their red coats were scarce since her father took the city back but Calcutta was full of others. Those who made the long, uncertain journey from France and the Dutch Republic and Portugal to make their fortune. War might rage on, but in the midst of death and destruction there was still money to be made. Perhaps even more so.

Not that she had ever been in their shoes. She couldn't imagine what travelling across the world to new lands would be like. Aside from those trips to the coast with her aunt, she had barely left their palace in Murshidabad before they came to Calcutta. There were apparently some upsides to her father going to war with one of Bengal's biggest trading partners. Meena was relieved when she was informed that her father would be leaving Murshidabad to keep a closer eye on the East India Company after he took back Calcutta from them – that is, of course, until she realised that the family was expected to follow. War was no place for women, but as the daughter of his first wife there was no way Meena's father would risk leaving her or her older brother behind in Bengal's seat of power with the rest of the household. Generations of palace machinations and suspicious deaths in their family had put paid to such ideas. And so here they were, stationed in their rather humble home in Calcutta, away from her childhood

home with nothing to do but while away her afternoons watching the feverish activity of her fellow new arrivals. The French, the Portuguese, the Dutch would all emerge from their ships overwhelmed by the new surroundings, looking for any small, familiar comfort to soften the shock. Meena peered closer, as among the usual crowd of Europeans, she thought she saw a British insignia on one of the ships, next to the word *Argo* emblazoned on its side.

The Englishman that first disembarked lacked both the others' restlessness and the pressed and proper attire of the officious. He was free from the stiffness of their collars, his rolled-up shirt sleeves worn and previously patched. His jodhpurs were oil-stained from ship work. He seemed light – carefree, certainly, but also as if he were lit from within. Glowing. Meena watched intently as a tanned, hairy arm was slung across his shoulders, belonging to one of his squat friends. The crew he was with certainly shared his more casual demeanour, if not the elegance to carry it off as anything other than uncouth. The taller man leaned towards the hairy man and whispered into his ear, some joke of sorts apparently, because the both of them proceeded to laugh so loud she could hear them clean across the river. She squinted and saw the shorter man's head jerk back as he laughed, exposing his blackened teeth.

Meena considered how convivial this gaggle of men of varied appearance were with one another. The striking one was one of them despite clearly not being one of *them*. His pale skin was an obvious sign. His body may have toiled recently, but he was not born to a life of hard labour. No, this was a choice, one in a long line of choices in a life full of them. High-born definitely, possibly even noble. She had seen enough of them at the palace, back when relations were cordial: an endless parade of white men in red coats and impossibly shiny buttons and decorations all lined up with their grasping hands out, ready to trade and take what they could from the city. However, force was now the order of the day for the

British East India Company. They had been in India long enough to no longer feel obliged to take orders anymore, they wanted to make their own rules. And Meena's father had taken serious exception to this.

But she didn't care about her father's ego or any personal objection to the Company's rule. Governing. War. These were not areas that Meena was educated in, but she knew the greatest impact was felt by those who had the least say in the matter. Three wars in ten years had been waged in the south of the country. The French and the British fighting proxy battles for supremacy in a land neither had any claim to, far from their own European shores. Sending brown bodies to fight their wars. Young men sent to their deaths, bloodshed spilling out till it reached the women and children in Madras and Pondicherry. It was in neither side's interest to care until one was victorious. But not here, Meena decided. Not in Bengal.

While the other men were still preoccupied with their own hilarity, she could see, despite the Englishman's mouth being open with laughter, his head turned back and forth with barely disguised frenzy. Keenly aware apparently that something was wrong, even if the others were not. He clapped one of his friends – a broad, stocky man – and proceeded to extricate himself from them, quite deftly she thought. He straightened his once stiff collar and made his way to the port authorities. Meena leaned in and placed her head in her hand. She was curious how this was going to go. Arjun was in charge of the port, and she had heard much from the servants about how he ruled it like his own fiefdom. She had been watching him whenever she snuck off, cutting others bigger and stronger down to size for daring to cross him. Abhishek said it was because he was the son of a fisherman, though Meena silently observed that Abhishek was the son of a Nawab and that didn't stop him from being pathetic and cruel. Not that she would risk telling her brother that. In both her brother and Arjun, all she saw was weak men desperate for the flimsiest scrap of power over others.

But this Englishman didn't know that. So, when he went up to Arjun with a beaming grin and casual swagger, pointing to his crew and their large weather-beaten ship, Meena got down from the bridge and walked across to the other side so she could get a closer look. Her elbows on the hot stone bridge, face cupped in her clammy palms. How she wished she could hear what he was saying. The expression on Arjun's face, however, told her that this situation was not going to work out in the stranger's favour. As the man continued – at, from what she could tell, breathless pace – it was clear that Arjun was not listening to a word but instead was scanning him from head to toe. Trying to place this stranger in the pecking order: no entourage, no military brass, no powder that some of them absurdly chose to wear. She could practically hear his brain whirring. No, here appeared to be a white man that Arjun could harass with impunity. Meena saw a wide grin spread across Arjun's face as he apparently finished making this calculation. He looked at the stranger, ready to devour him like a ripe mango. The Englishman, clearly taking Arjun's smile as a good sign, put his hand on Arjun's shoulder, as if he was about to enter into some conspiracy, rather than signing his own death warrant.

‘That Englishman is brave,’ Meena overheard a sailor, just back from a voyage by the way he dressed, say to his friend as they walked past her on the bridge.

‘Brave or a lunatic,’ replied his friend, laughing. ‘Arjun looks like he wants to eat him alive. Imagine arriving here and demanding to see the Nawab.’

Meena snapped her head round upon hearing this. The English stranger was getting more and more peculiar. He wanted to meet her father? With the East India Company currently at Calcutta's door on the verge of war? She could not possibly think that was true. No one sane would dare suggest such a thing, let alone someone sailing under British insignia. Not unless there was a specific reason that he needed to speak to her father. A message,

perhaps? It must be important if he thought it was worth the risk. Meena could also see from the swarm of guards now surrounding him that whatever his reason was, it was likely to die with the Englishman if Arjun had his way. She could not let that happen.

‘Gora,’ Meena muttered under her breath. She let out one final exasperated sigh before raising her head from her hands. She straightened up, re-adjusted her veil and cloak then made her way down to the port.

By the time she made it to the Englishman, he had already managed to get himself into a fine mess. Meena found him apprehended by Arjun’s men, his hands tied behind his back, his hairy friends shouting at Arjun, brandishing their swords. Meena pieced this picture together from the glimpses she caught while weaving through the bustle of the port. The crowd barely registered the slight, veiled figure slip between the gaps.

‘What on earth is going on here? You think you can create a riot in my father’s port? Explain yourself.’

She scowled at Arjun, secretly enjoying how quickly his glee turned to recognition, then panic and finally horror-tinged fury at being humiliated in public by a woman, even royalty. Arjun worked his way through the full spectrum of human emotion while Meena watched his mouth flap open and close for a couple of seconds before he managed to form words. The fear she could cast over him was *just* worth the potential danger that came with exposing herself so publicly. Just.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, trying to hide his surprise, while bowing just a little too deeply. ‘I am honoured by your... *unexpected* visit. Please forgive me. I would never dream of dishonouring you or your father.’

‘And yet, you do.’ She folded her arms to stress her displeasure. She hoped that an imperious display would eliminate further implied questions about what she was doing there without a chaperone. She cast her eyes over the white foreigners, who were utterly confused by what was unfolding. She

then caught the eye of the Englishman, who smirked back at her. She stared warily at him in response.

‘Please Your Highness, that was not my intention. It was these Englishmen that started the trouble.’ Arjun pointed his finger at the bemused stranger. ‘This one said he wanted to meet your father. My men were just taking him for questioning but then this rabble of hooligans tried to obstruct justice.’

Meena frowned and paused, considering Arjun’s words. She looked at the man again. He certainly did not look like an envoy to Meena’s mind – not with that eclectic crew. And even if he were, to try and meet her father during such a time of heightened tensions would be a death wish. And if he didn’t think so, then who was he, and what could he do to them?

She was in the middle of pondering what he could possibly want when an amused voice broke through her meditations.

‘Excuse me?’

The blond Englishman, his arms still pinned behind his back. He had a lopsided, self-deprecating smile as he spoke. Sheepish at the awkward position he found himself in yet amused by the absurdity of it.

‘Yes?’ Meena asked. She was surprised to discover he knew Bengali, the common tongue of Calcutta. Most of the Englishmen who came to their shores never bothered, relying instead on local agents.

‘Excuse me, I am—’

‘Let me be clear, sir, since you are new here,’ Meena said, deepening her voice and standing a little straighter. ‘I am the daughter of the Nawab of Bengal, so you will address me accordingly. Is that clear?’

His face wrinkled with surprise and wry bemusement before he rearranged it into a picture of placid innocence.

‘Of course. Please accept my sincerest apologies, Your Highness.’ He bowed his head lower to the ground, so much so that Arjun’s men were

struggling to keep hold of him. ‘I would show my respect properly and bow, were it not for my... circumstances.’

He paused and bashfully grinned on that final word. Meena fixed her stare upon him. His playful tone was teasing, tempting, yet ultimately incapable of distracting her from the seriousness of her supposed enemy standing in front of her.

‘So? Who on earth are you?’

‘Your Highness, I am James Chilcott. You asked about my business here, well here it is: I have arrived to speak with your father.’

Meena looked at the man, desperate to keep her face expressionless so as to give nothing away. *Chilcott*. It could not be possible. A Chilcott, here in Calcutta – could he *not* be related to the most feared and most fearsome man of the East India Company? She strove to not show any emotion but in truth she could not move a muscle even if she tried. Fear had taken hold of her body.

She felt his gaze upon her, searching for any sign of a positive response. A polite cough from Arjun was enough to shake her out of her trance. Even if the fear had not subsided, she knew her appearance could not betray such terror. Especially to Arjun. She had learned from her brother that it was a mistake to show any weakness in front of such contemptible men. She knew it was expected of her and she refused to give them such satisfaction. She folded her arms.

‘And this – so you think you will be granted an audience?’ Meena said, fumbling over her words. ‘That any Englishman can just sail over here, and we will simply dance to your tune?’

James laughed, clearly emboldened by her disorientation. ‘As delightful as I’m sure that would be...’

Meena frowned. Though he might have thought his behaviour charming, she could not allow such impertinence. She nodded at the men

apprehending James and they twisted his arms further back, eliciting a short, sharp yelp.

‘Forgive me, forgive me! Your Highness, I’m here on business. It is about my *uncle*. Please.’

His voice grew more desperate with the pain as Meena considered his words. His *uncle*. She clenched her fists momentarily, attempting to quell the slight tremble in her fingers. She knew his name could not be just a coincidence. She approached him slowly, until his head was not far from her navel. The proximity, his mouth mere moments away from her body, was at the forefront of her mind, but she chose not to step back or make any attempt at distancing herself. In truth, that was the last thing she wanted to do. Meena was suspicious of him, she had to be, but she was also intrigued. No one operating on behalf of Sir Peter Chilcott would dare meet her father without good reason. Meena cupped his face in her hand, so she felt the stubble on his chin, rougher to touch than it first appeared. She liked it. He turned his head up towards her eyes, wide and questioning. He might be related to that vicious vulture, but he did not seem like it. His eyes were kind, and his manner gentle, if a little overly confident. Surely he could not be the same creature. Surely there must be more to his story.

She straightened up before rounding on Arjun. ‘Enough of this foolishness. My father does not pay you to spend your day harassing merchants. Let this madman be on his way and get back to your job, Arjun.’

‘But Your Highness, he wants to see your father...’

‘As touched as my father will be by your interest in his wellbeing,’ Meena sneered, ‘his affairs are none of your concern. Now get back to work.’

Arjun pouted but, after muttering a few curses under his breath, clicked his fingers at his men. James dropped to the ground where he stared at Meena and rubbed his wrists from where Arjun’s men had been holding

him. James's puzzled gaze and Arjun's intense glare suddenly made Meena all too aware of the fact that she needed to leave lest anyone else saw her.

'Now, I will be on my way,' Meena said. 'My chaperone is grabbing some dates from the market for me, but she will be back very shortly. And Arjun, might I suggest you keep this little exchange to yourself. My father would not be best pleased hearing how you while away your days with such nonsense.'

Arjun's eyes narrowed. 'No, Your Highness. I am sure he would not.'

CHAPTER 2



*M*eena scuttled off and crossed the bridge. She made her way through the winding narrow streets through to the heady fog of spices in what the English called the Black Town. To them, the Bengalis, Persians, Hindus and Armenians that populated Calcutta, long before they ever set foot in the city, all blurred into one for the sake of their convenience. In this part of the city, away from the port and the bridge and the English, the buildings gleamed less bright, and the roads had fallen a little further into disrepair. This was a consequence of years of British dominance before her father took back Calcutta and drove the Company back. How long that would last was the question on everyone's mind, even if it dared not reach their lips.

Here, away from the port and its European traders she stood out less, but Meena was still aware of how conspicuous she was unaccompanied. She wondered whether she would go less noticed if she stuck to the quieter cypress-lined side streets or immersed herself in the crowds bustling in the market. Meena opted for the deserted narrow roads lined with whitewashed houses currently empty of their usual occupants. At this time of day, the men would be working and most of the women would be taking their children to the market or down to the river for laundry. She liked how quiet it was, only the rustling of the leaves in the breeze to accompany her

footsteps. She began to hear a little rhythm to her quick footsteps, a drumbeat against the melody of the trees in the wind. So when she noticed a new instrument added to this song, Meena knew she was being followed. The shadow to her right, truncated by the high afternoon sun, was her second clue.

Her heart was racing. Was it Arjun? Or one of the palace guards, having discovered her disappearance? And those would be one of the good options, Meena thought. It could also be a stranger. Such dangers had been pressed upon her with great severity ever since she'd first bled. Abhishek received no such lectures; these dangers were the concern of women alone. Their dangers to avoid, and their shame if they were found negligent in preventing such dishonour. In the years following, or indeed any of her seventeen years, she had become no wiser as to what exactly this danger constituted but she knew it when she felt it. Different strategies ran through her head as she balled up her fists. She briefly considered whether she could outrun whoever was following her. Or whether her nails were long enough to draw blood. Her thoughts were interrupted, however, by the heavy hand suddenly placed on her shoulder.

‘Your Highness.’

Meena turned around and screamed before covering her mouth and trying to breathe when she realised it was the Englishman from the port. He took a step back, clearly alarmed by her shrieks and wary of scaring her any further. He held up his hands to signal he was not a threat.

‘Sorry! I am truly sorry, Your Highness. I did not mean to startle you.’

‘What are you doing?’ she hissed. ‘Are you trying to get killed? Do you know what my father’s guards would do to an Englishman that decided to follow his daughter?’

‘No, no I’m not. I just... You ran away so quickly, and I wanted the chance to thank you. For your help earlier.’

‘So you decided to follow a young unescorted lady through the city?’ she asked, unimpressed and trying to not let him see she was still panting.

James scratched the back of his head. ‘Admittedly, I didn’t think about that. That was my error. I apologise. But I am grateful. For your help.’

‘Be that as it may, that does not justify you stalking me like prey.’

James dipped his head slightly. ‘I am sorry, Your Highness, that sincerely was not my intention.’

Meena folded her arms. ‘Fine. You are forgiven. And you’re welcome. For saving you from Arjun earlier. Now if you don’t mind...’

‘Actually, Your Highness, I wondered if we might speak further. I really *do* need to see your father on business.’

Meena hesitated. She was not sure why, having barely escaped punishment, he would insist on pursuing such an absurd notion. Though she also could not help feeling rather unimpressed. ‘I just spared your life and now you are asking for another favour?’ James shrugged, the corners of his mouth upturned, his confidence undented. Meena hated that she found herself smiling back; she hoped he couldn’t see it beneath her thin veil. But the way he looked at her when he smiled, she found it hard to not follow suit.

‘Well, Your Highness, you did save me. Surely you must have had a reason?’

Meena frowned at him. His gall was unimaginable, but she had to admit she was intrigued. She scarcely knew the reason herself. Oh yes, if interrogated – though she prayed that time would never come – she would insist that she helped him because any Englishman so brazenly keen to face her father could not be your average soldier or assassin looking for his mark. No, few men these days actively sought out to be in her father’s presence, let alone Englishmen, during this time on the precipice of battle. That required a level of confidence and conviction she was not familiar

with. She was almost impressed, if a little fearful. That was enough to go on. For now.

‘Keep a couple of paces behind and don’t say anything until I say so.’

She led him to an iron-wrought gate with a heavy black lock speckled with rust. She looked around and quickly cast her eyes over James – hastily, in case her examination was misconstrued as interest – before finally settling on his hobnailed boots.

‘Kick it. The lock is old, it should give way easily.’

James looked amused by this order. Meena was still unsure of what she was doing but she would be lying to herself if his attention and great efforts to follow her had not flattered her in some way. Though she would go to her death denying it, if ever pressed on the matter.

‘There’s a meadow on the other side,’ she explained. ‘It’s secluded and should be empty around this time of day.’

James regarded her and stepped closer until they were barely a breath apart. She felt heat rise and prick her skin, and her breath caught in her throat. He placed his hand on her waist. Her protests melted on her tongue, as he gently moved her out of the way of the gate. Leaning on the wall adjoining the gate, he drew back his leg and kicked the padlock so that it gave way and broke. James dramatically bowed and gestured for her to follow.

For possibly the first time in her life, Meena was grateful for her mahogany complexion. Normally her dark skin earned her scorn, from Abhishek, her father, even from servants whenever she overheard their whispered words. But now she appreciated the cover it offered to her cheeks, currently set ablaze by this strange man.

She straightened up and tried to compose herself. ‘I could have you killed for that,’ she said while attempting to casually saunter through the gate. ‘Daring to touch the daughter of the Nawab of Bengal? You’re as brave as you are foolish.’

‘Well, it’s a good thing I am not a subject of the Nawab, the Emperor or any Mughal, in fact.’

He came up from behind her and stood in front so she could not take another step forward. She looked up to meet his gaze.

‘And it’s a good thing my father is still the ruler of this land. Regardless of what the East India Company might think.’

James smiled. ‘That’s very true.’

She shot James a sharp look. ‘We have just met, you need a favour, and you insult me?’

‘I mean you no insult, princess. That is the last thing I would want to do.’

She stared at him, desperate to not let him know how much his words perplexed her.

‘So, Your Highness, are you going to tell me why you decided to save me?’

She shrugged, looking away, assembling a nonchalant expression on her face.

‘I told Arjun to get back to work, I didn’t save you. This had nothing to do with you.’ James looked incredulous which made Meena blush at how bad a liar she was. ‘I don’t know whether girls back in England are more inclined to pay you mind, but rest assured Mr Chilcott, that is not what is happening here. I just did not like an official of my father abusing his power like that.’

James playfully held his hands up to show he was not going to question her blatant lie. ‘Of course, Your Highness, of course.’

Meena narrowed her eyes. ‘Now you tell me this, what exactly did you think you were playing at back at the docks?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you were nearly thrown in jail, if not worse. All within five minutes of stepping foot on dry land. Is that a common occurrence for

you?’

‘No,’ he said, a shade of embarrassment across his face. ‘I dare say because I don’t normally run into such troublesome little men.’

‘So, you normally arrive, looking like a deckhand, demand an audience with the local ruler and they bend over backwards to accommodate you?’ Meena said, barely able to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

James’s mouth flapped open and closed before he half-chuckled and sighed. ‘Not quite. I’ve never had to deal with a man like that before, but I am normally operating under the banner of the East India Company.’

Meena frowned. ‘And you’re not now?’

James paused before smiling sphinx-like at her. ‘In a matter of speaking.’

Now was her turn for incredulity. She sighed, exasperated. ‘Okay, now we can finally get to the crux of the matter. What are you doing here and what do you want with my father?’

‘I can’t tell you that.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘You can and you will.’

‘Are Indian women always this pushy?’

‘No, powerful women are.’

James laughed. Meena found herself smiling back, almost taken aback by her own brazenness. She knew she ought to be more circumspect with how she presented herself to this English stranger. She knew if anyone were watching she would be in trouble. But she also knew that she enjoyed how he looked at her – like he was intrigued, captivated even, by her spikiness. Her ‘pushiness’. And she did not want to do anything that would stop him looking at her the way he was.

‘So, are you going to speak? Or do you want to just sit here and stare at one another?’

James smiled, watching her intently. ‘What do you want to do?’

Meena pursed her lips. ‘You can’t imagine the things I could have my father’s guards do to you. So speak.’

James paused for a moment. His eyes combed over Meena more carefully, this time seemingly evaluating her, before he let out a great sigh.

‘Okay, fine,’ James said heavily as he sat down on the grass. It looked inviting were it not for the grass stains that she knew would cover her clothes. ‘I am here because of my uncle.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You said that earlier. I was unsure whether you were telling the truth. You are here to do something for your uncle?’

‘Yes. Well, not exactly. He sent me here to get something. From your father.’

‘It isn’t Calcutta by any chance, is it?’ she asked drily. ‘I know the English are planning on attacking any day now. I did however think they would send more than one man.’

James laughed for a moment, before recognising the bleakness of Meena’s words. ‘Yes, it is likely that they would. *Will*. My uncle is Sir Peter Chilcott. He will march thousands of East India soldiers towards Calcutta. I, however, am not here to fight.’

Meena pursed her lips. He was related to Sir Peter Chilcott. His nephew, in fact. The kin of the man who had caused more havoc in her kingdom and India’s shores than anyone else. The only man whose name her father could not hide his fear of when mentioned, not that many dared to mention him in his presence unless it was strictly necessary. Sir Peter Chilcott’s reputation was built on rapacity and devastation. None of the East India Company were well regarded in India these days; what had begun as mutually beneficial trade had turned menacing a long time ago. So many competitors – the French, Dutch, Portuguese – of course they had to protect their interests. It was only logical that they needed a small armed force to protect their investments from other European companies – so they said. This was of course exploited to its inevitable end, with armies and conquest, not in

the name of any king but of petty shareholders. Yet Sir Peter's name rose above all as ruthlessness personified, if the whispers were to be believed. A creature totally without mercy or any measure of temperance. A man who would break every loom and impoverish every woman in the city if it meant he could control the cotton supply, let every child starve if it meant greater tax revenue as a result. Greed, violence, obliteration. Those were the words most associated with him. And now she was standing in front of his nephew. She could not imagine that such words could fall from a Chilcott's mouth, yet she would surely be a fool if she took him at his word so easily.

Meena frowned as she weighed up the likelihood of his honesty. She remembered back at the port. 'You mentioned business. Earlier, back at the docks.'

'Yes. I came here to make a trade. For information that I have. About what my uncle is planning. And I am here to trade it.'

Meena frowned. 'You want to sell information about your uncle's plans to take back Calcutta?'

'Yes,' said James, his face betraying no emotion or scheme.

'But you were also sent here by your uncle to take something from my father?'

'Yes.'

'So, which is it? Are you here for your uncle or not?'

James shrugged.

Puzzled, Meena sighed and sat down next to James, relegating earlier concerns about grass stains to the back of her mind. She hoped she would be able to slip into her room later without anyone seeing her. James laughed at her apparent exasperation which earned him a scowl from her.

'Okay,' she said, 'enough of this. What do you mean?'

'It means that my uncle has sent me here on business. But my conscience will not allow for it, so I have my own plans.'

Meena watched him intently. ‘Very well. Now explain what information you have and what are you hoping we will give in return?’

James smiled patronisingly at her. ‘Princess, with all due respect, if I thought you were capable of delivering what I needed then I would tell you all I know. But I need to speak with your father.’

He rose to his knees; the seriousness of this request apparently could not be appropriately conveyed while seated. Meena, though confused, mirrored him and shifted until she met his eyeline.

‘I can’t,’ she said softly, looking down at the grass. What this handsome stranger was asking was utterly ridiculous. She had heard enough whispered conversations between the servants and thunderous roars from her father; they might have the advantage in terms of sheer bodies, but the English had significant resources and Sir Peter Chilcott was an unpredictable threat. She had heard some question his sanity, not that she would mention that to James.

But if he was truly here not for his uncle, if he were in fact not her enemy, what could that mean for the city, for Bengal? He was mad, there was no doubt about that – only a madman could suggest she risk so much – and yet, Meena reasoned, what would she be risking if she chose not to take him at his word? Would she be any better than her father, bloated with rage and paranoia? She looked into his eyes, soft, trustworthy but most of all trusting. He was the foreigner here, the unwelcome presence in a strange land. If he was willing to risk coming unprotected to where so many of his countrymen had been imprisoned and died at her father’s and grandfather’s hands then surely his motives, if not his heart, must be pure. Surely no one so trusting could be untrustworthy.

And after all, Meena considered, any genuine information about their plans could tip the balance – but Meena doubted any of that would matter once her father knew she had snuck out of the palace. And she knew what sort of punishment that would earn her.

‘I know what I am asking is enormous. I know it makes no sense for you to trust me, to help me. But all the same, I need you.’ He took her hands in his and turned them upwards so that her dirt-streaked palms faced the sun. His hand felt soft, clearly not rough from life at sea, but she liked that. They felt refined. No, they felt gentle. He might have not lived a life of work, but he knew what it was to be kind, to show care. The sensation was utterly alien, but delicious and heady. She remembered his hand on the crook of her waist. She buried her head down lower so he could not see her expression.

‘Do you really think it would be a good idea to bring you for an audience with my father?’ she said, still looking down at his hands. ‘An audience where you will presumably tell him that he will lose Bengal if he does not give you whatever you want. How do you think that would end for you?’

She looked up and saw that confident smirk on James’s face once more.

‘Not well, I imagine. But perhaps he might appreciate the risk in mistreating the nephew of his greatest threat right now.’

Meena looked at his face, and wanted to believe in the easy self-assuredness of his manner, that whatever scheme he was threatening to concoct would work out fine for everyone involved and that he wasn’t going to lead her off a cliff. But she knew better. After all, his confidence in his abilities had seen him barely escaping death (thanks to her). And she had no intention of letting him wreck her life. Precautions would need to be taken.

‘Mr Chilcott, if you think I am going to help you when you do not even consider me worthy enough to know what you’re after, then you’re even madder than your earlier behaviour suggests.’

He paused, watching her, apparently assessing whether she could be trusted. ‘I need gold.’

Meena could have laughed for how utterly banal this was. How predictable.

‘Your uncle is one of the most powerful men in the East India Company and you’re selling his secrets for gold? I’m disappointed, Mr Chilcott. I had presumed you were after something relatively interesting. But you’re just a turncoat.’

‘I’m no turncoat, Your Highness,’ he said, barely masking the irritation in his voice.

‘You’re willing to betray your family.’

‘So perhaps the better question is what would make me do such a thing? And why would I be willing to help your father against my uncle?’

Meena frowned. ‘So then. Why are you doing this?’

‘I need to start over, and I need money to do that.’

‘But your uncle is a powerful man. Why do you need to make a new life for yourself?’

James half-smiled and shrugged, pulling at the grass by his feet and twirling a dandelion around his finger. ‘Because I don’t agree with what my uncle is doing. What the Company is doing. I can’t spend my life making shareholders on Leadenhall Street fatter on the exploitation of others. I have no intention of joining my uncle in this venture of his.’ James shot Meena a serious look. ‘You and I both know that this will not be the last move my uncle makes. That Bengal is just the first step. And I believe a man has to make his own way in the world, not wait for his destiny to be handed to him.’

This left Meena speechless. Her heart beat faster when he spoke of his dissatisfaction with the Company. She had never imagined such words in the mouth of an Englishman, let alone the nephew of Sir Peter Chilcott whose savagery in Madras years earlier ensured his reputation preceded him before he made a beeline for Calcutta. The area used to be known as Puliur, because of its abundance of leopards and tigers, yet within a few

short years every single animal had been hunted, the jungle stripped, indigenous people turfed out, all so the Company could grow more profitable crops. Whether or not the land had been home to people for centuries, home to beautiful animals, did not matter when there was profit to be made. It was one of many stories Meena had heard about Peter Chilcott and now his nephew was before her, espousing such contrary ideas. It unnerved her. *James* unnerved her.

She folded her arms. ‘Do not think you can charm me with what you think I want to hear. Please be advised that I might be young, but I am not that foolish, Mr Chilcott.’

‘I never thought that you were, Your Highness. My only intention was to speak my heart’s truth, not charm you. Though I suppose if it has the same outcome, it doesn’t really matter. And you can call me James, please.’

‘Very well. It is still Your Highness,’ she said drily.

James laughed. ‘Very well. I will earn your name. But even if you do not trust me with your name, please do trust my words. You may have heard of my uncle, but I dare say you do not know the extent of his ruthlessness, his brutality. One must have regard for one’s enemy in order to meet fairly in battle. My uncle has none for your countrymen. He sees ants scurrying, and he believes it to be his duty to set the colony on fire.’

Meena swallowed hard. His words were not a surprise, yet they chilled her bones despite the humidity brought on by the rapidly setting sun. ‘But your perspective is different?’

James gazed into her eyes, full of irrepressible earnestness. ‘Quite different, Your Highness. And I will endeavour to prove this to you. Even if I have to face a dragon to do so.’

‘So you have heard about my father, then,’ Meena said drily. The two of them looked at each other and James let slip a small, rueful laugh. Meena felt her lips twitch and form a shadow of a smile before contemplating how

her father could in fact react when he heard about this. And yet she knew what she would do, despite her better judgement.

CHAPTER 3



*B*y the time Meena made it back to the walls of her temporary home, the earlier blistering heat had given way to the cool night air whistling through the trees and the sky's streaks of soft pinks had transformed into a star-mottled inky blue. Since her father had taken the Company's headquarters from them and driven them out of Calcutta, he was reluctant to leave the city, suspicious of when they might strike back. This meant Meena and her brother and father all had to stay at their much older, much neglected summer palace in the city. Built by the previous line of Nawabs, it was a lot simpler than their grand home in Murshidabad but tonight Meena found herself succumbing to its charms. It overlooked a great, reflective pool that shimmered with a distortion of the night's sky. A soft amber glow illuminated the palace from within. The white marble walls gleamed bright during the day, but at night their shadows loomed. Normally, this might feel threatening, but this night Meena was oblivious. This time she felt enveloped by the darkness, drawn in closer by the sinuous Arabic calligraphy creeping up the tall white walls to those that got close.

Their creeping darkness offered the necessary cover for Meena to consider the sheer foolishness of her actions, her decisions. The time spent with James, and his words, felt like a dream, utterly surreal, yet the weight

of his request was real enough. She felt it in her arms as they swayed, and in her feet as she crept up to the palace, daring not to make a sound.

Meena went round to the back entrance, slipping past the armed guards in the shadows of the tamarind trees, and tiptoed through the kitchen door left slightly ajar by the new maid. She rushed through a network of doors leading to an atrium at the centre of the building. She knew she ought to head straight up the staircase to her room before anyone saw, and indeed had a foot on the first stair, but instead found herself staring at the lotus-filled pond in the middle of the room. The flowers danced on the surface of the dark waters. In one of them, she noticed a little bright green frog nestled in among its velvety-soft petals. She wondered how on earth it had managed to get inside and crouched down for a closer look. She got up and walked over then found herself reaching out, stroking the tiny creature with her forefinger. It was drier than she had expected. She became hypnotised by the slow, rhythmic movements as it breathed in and out. She continued to stroke its back until, perhaps because her touch was too strong, the frog violently lurched forward and stole away, jumping to the safety of another lotus flower on the far side of the pond, beyond Meena's reach. She tutted, annoyed that her newfound pet had left, before raising her gaze above the frog where her eyes fell upon familiar bronze and crimson shoes. Her stomach leapt as violently as the frog as she scrambled to her feet.

‘Abhishek,’ she gasped, patting down her clothes in a vain attempt at making the grass stains and dirt from the day's adventures disappear.

‘Meena.’ Not the beginning of a phrase or a question. Just a statement designed to make Meena anxious with its brevity. He'd hope that she would babble her unspooled thoughts to fill the silence. But she knew better. Even if she did want to say something just to avoid focusing on his slow-unfolding, wolfish grin, his eyes trained on his prey.

‘Cavorting with pondlife? I suppose you do have much in common,’ he sneered.

She considered turning on her heels and heading straight to her room, but she knew that such a provocation would not be smart. Running away would give him an opportunity to chase her. He would like that. She rooted herself to the floor and tilted her head, jutting out her chin.

‘What do you want, Abhishek?’

‘I just wanted to check on my behn, of course.’ He began to slowly walk around the pond. ‘It is my duty, after all, to protect you.’ He had made his way to her, filling her whole field of vision.

An array of options filled her mind. Run upstairs: escaping further threat or risking physical reprimand once he caught her. Stand her ground and cut him down with a sharp retort: earning his grudging respect perhaps? Or, more realistically, just his wrath. Her eyes drifted to the brilliant bronze vase just behind him, shimmering in the torchlight as she considered bashing his skull with it, red droplets swirling in the water. Or she could try non-aggression. Yes, she thought, playing the suppliant would be best for now. He was much too unpredictable for anything else.

‘Yes, bhai.’

She held his gaze without blinking, hoping he would notice how meek her response was and grow bored of antagonising her. He stared at her, before letting out a sigh. She dared wonder whether he was done before he answered that for her. Abhishek folded his arms, ensured no one was watching, and then, in one fluid motion, grabbed a fistful of her hair, eliciting a doglike yelp from Meena.

‘Do you think I don’t know about your little adventure today? Look at yourself, dressed like a beggar woman,’ he seethed, twisting her head back, contorting Meena’s body till it was spider-like in its grotesqueness.

‘Let me go!’ Meena screamed, flailing her limbs as forcefully as she could despite the sharp pains shooting through her body. At the back of her mind, amidst the pain, was a thought even more hideous: if Abhishek

already knows that she left the palace, did her father? Did he know that she had snuck out before? And did he know about James?

‘Oh no, Behn,’ he said, ‘you like playing with pond scum, so why don’t you play with some more.’

Meena felt a rush of water bubbles up her nose as Abhishek threw her to the ground and shoved her head until she was submerged beneath the water. She remained there among the dancing underwater weeds for longer than she was able to comprehend. She could feel her chest grow tight as the air in her lungs began to run out. She thrashed her limbs about in a whirlpool of her own making. She realised that the urgency of her movements made her chest feel even tighter and so gave in to stillness, a gross echo of death as she attempted to stave off the real thing. She held her breath and tried to stomach the swallows of slimy pond water she had accidentally ingested when first submerged. Her limbs fell heavily by her sides, even as she launched her right hand above her head in submission.

Meena was wrenched out, her tailbone colliding with the hard marble floor as she landed in a heap. Sharp, searing pain shot up her spine. But she hardly noticed the pain over her hideous gasps for air and spluttering coughs. Her heart drummed in her ears, rattling through her bones.

‘What is going on here?’ A familiar voice pierced through the drums. ‘This hardly seems to be behaviour suited to such high-born children.’ Amir, her father’s advisor, looked alarmed by the two royal members currently soaked and scrabbling on the floor.

‘What the hell do you want, Amir?’ Abhishek barked. ‘Do you really dare interrupt and address us in this way?’

‘I meant no disrespect, Your Highness,’ Amir said smoothly. ‘Nor did I mean to interrupt your... fun. Unfortunately, the sound does carry quite well and your father... He requests your presence. At once. The both of you.’

The siblings glanced at each other, briefly, bearing a twinned expression of fear, before jumping to their feet. Neither wanted to be caught dawdling.

* * *

THE NAWAB SPARKLED as the diamonds and silver thread of his clothes caught the lamplight while he thundered across the room. This was the room where his throne sat, where he received Amir and his other advisors to discuss how to defeat Sir Peter Chilcott and his army. Meena's great-grandfather had been a great military leader, but it was evident to all that her father had no mind for strategy. Just a temper and short-sighted greed which saw him make enemies wherever he went. His throne room was of course decked out in the finest embroidered silks and intricately woven carpets but after several months staying in Calcutta away from home comforts in Murshidabad, his displeasure could be roused with the smallest infraction. Meena had tried to avoid him as much as possible since arriving in the city.

He sat silent on his golden throne, carried by at least fifteen men the whole long and tiring distance to Calcutta. During war, even in times of defeat – *especially* in times of defeat – her father would never let anyone forget who he was. His jewel-encrusted throne was only inferior to the Emperor's, throughout all of India. Abhishek would dare Meena to sit in it when they were children. She would be careful, certain not to leave behind any impression of her presence while he kept watch. It was only later when her handmaid would apply salve to her bruised back that she would realise that her brother might not have kept her confidence.

Meena looked nervously between her father's implacable countenance and her brother's anxious face as she recalled this memory, breathing in the heady incense wafting through the room. They stood before their father in

silence for a couple of minutes, gently swaying under the weight of their anxiety. The Nawab finally cleared his throat.

‘You think you can act like a pair of mongrels, huh? Fooling around loud enough to be heard all the way back in Murshidabad? You mean to shame me?’ he boomed. Meena and Abhishek, though unsurprised, were both nonetheless caught off guard by the sheer intensity of his rage. Silence fell once more. Perhaps his latest generals’ conference had not gone well. Meena’s gaze was pinned to the rug. During the various beatings she had endured over the years, she was accustomed to focusing on the sensuous swirl of colours on the floor. It had a numbing, almost anaesthetic effect.

‘Do neither of you have anything to say? And you girl, you don’t even look me in the eye?’

Meena’s head snapped back. ‘Of course. I am sorry, Baba.’ She dipped her head in an act of contrition. She needed him to listen to her, so she didn’t want to do anything to antagonise him further.

‘And what about your sorry appearance, huh? Come here girl!’ She stepped forward until she could see that his beard was growing more silver than sable. This stand-off with the British had taken its toll on him. She rarely came this close to him which meant these little signs of his mortality seemed to announce themselves dramatically rather than sneak up on her over time. He grimaced in disgust at the dishevelled sight of her.

‘Not only do you behave like a filthy animal, you look like one too?’

‘And she’s been outside,’ Abhishek added gleefully. ‘Half the city would have seen her!’

‘Of course she’s been outside, you idiot boy, her dhilja is heavy with mud and her feet are sandy. Don’t bother me with such asinine observations,’ the Nawab retorted without so much as a glance in Abhishek’s direction. Even though she kept her face immobile, Meena did enjoy that despite the public adulation that propriety demanded, it was clear to everyone that her father could not stand her brother either. However,

Meena's enjoyment was greatly tempered by the fear that came with the realisation that her father knew that she had left the palace.

'And what were you doing?' He returned his attention to Meena. 'Outside, unchaperoned?'

The question hung heavy in the air, filling the small space between them. Meena considered her words carefully.

'I—'

Meena was cut off short by a hard slap across the face that knocked her off her feet.

'You dare to try to explain your shameful behaviour to me.' He spat venomously at the crumpled heap of his daughter at his feet. 'You think I am interested in your lies about cavorting about the city while you dishonour me. I am in the middle of war! And what will people think, a ruler who cannot even control his own daughter.'

'I didn't do anything!' Meena pleaded as she struggled to her feet.

'Who were you with?' Her father stood up, towering over her while she lay still on the floor unable to right herself. He screamed a torrent of questions, all of which went unanswered. Her cheek felt hot while her loosened teeth clicked. She willed herself not to cry. Eventually the Nawab resumed his position on his throne.

'Go. And do not let us meet like this again. I will not be so tolerant of such blatant disobedience in the future. Your guard detail will be doubled. And you will be confined to your quarters. Even the rest of the zenana will be off limits unless I permit it. Do you understand?' he asked with an icy demeanour where his ire had just been.

Meena gingerly got to her feet and nodded. Her hand brushed the side of her face to check the damage. She turned around and began to walk back. In the corner of her eye she could see Abhishek's smug face, and beyond it, she caught sight of the map of Bengal on the wall behind him. She could also see various rolled-up maps and letters, presumably from the day's

strategic discussions. It would be so much better if she could just leave and not worry about what would happen, what the English would do to Bengal if she didn't try and do something. But she couldn't.

Meena sighed and slowly turned around. 'The East India Company.'

Her father, having already disregarded his daughter, jerked his head up.

'What?'

'You asked who I met with. The truth is that I met the nephew of Sir Peter Chilcott of the British East India Company.'

'She was meeting with the enemy,' Abhishek said, frantically pointing at her. 'She's not only dishonoured you but she's a traitor as well!'

His protestations were ignored by their father whose eyes were firmly trained on Meena. She was being given some rope. Now all she had to do was not hang herself with it.

'I found him, at the docks. I left the palace, briefly, for a short stroll and found him. He was getting into trouble with the port authorities. I had no idea who he was or why he was here. But he has information on his uncle's plans and he wants to meet with you. He says he'll only tell you what he knows.' Her father narrowed his eyes but said nothing. 'He says he has promising information about our biggest threat. He wants something, of course – and I know whatever he has to say won't come cheap. But, Baba, what if it's worth it?'

Her father stood up, staring at her. 'You fool. And what if he's lying? Why do you trust him? Why should any of us?'

Meena exhaled a long-held breath, her cheek searing with pain.

'Because they've taken every other kingdom, stealing everything in their sight. His uncle is a powerful man and if they win, he could have whatever he wanted. There would be no reason to put himself in danger, entering this house to speak to you.' She looked at her father, seeing the scepticism start to ebb away, if only slightly. 'Ultimately, I trust him because we have no choice.'

This statement was met with silence. Meena wondered what punishment would await her, how many lashes she would have to endure. She even considered whether she had just got James killed by revealing who he was.

‘I will receive him.’ He mumbled his words so Meena did not at first hear him.

‘Excuse me?’

‘I will grant this Englishman an audience. He will have five minutes. If he has something to say, good. If not, I will have him tied to our guns and blown apart till nothing remains.’

Meena nodded slowly. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest.

‘Of course.’

CHAPTER 4



This was a terrible idea. Meena was sure of it. She was now wondering what sort of spell he must have put on her to make her lose her wits. Her aunt always told her that while men had their swords, a woman's weapon was her words. A woman needed to know how to speak and put her point across, even when they refused to listen. But she had never met anyone as convincing as James.

He must have had some magic or enchantment that would explain why she was meeting with the relative of a mercenary like Chilcott, she thought. A relative who was disarmingly relaxed, sat astride a marble bench in the palace gardens, especially for someone about to meet her father. Binita protested, of course, but Meena begged and begged and finally Binita relented and agreed to help. Her brother had a friend, whose cousin could get a message to James. It was dangerous but Meena chose to ignore the risk. She needed to urgently speak with him and when weighed against the risk of war, her concerns about being caught sending him a note seemed trivial.

She reasoned that she had to meet him before his audience – if only to make sure he did not intend to say anything foolish – and that the best way to avoid a lashing would be to meet in the most secluded part of the gardens: where the mango trees grew thickest, providing shade and

seclusion to those who needed it. Here she could hear what he had to say and warn him of any answers that might risk provoking her father. The idiot man, however, proved stubbornly mute as a mule on the business of the day, instead preferring to pepper their conversation with inconsequential questions about the trees and the grounds and whether the gardens of the Murshidabad palace were similar.

‘It was designed by my mother,’ Meena said. ‘It’s much more beautiful than this. Now, about today...’

‘Your mother designed the palace garden? What is it like?’ James leaned forward, his eyes bright with interest and his chin perched on his hand.

Meena narrowed her eyes and shrugged. She had no idea what had piqued his interest but the way he looked at her made her feel warm, so she kept going. ‘Well, it’s extraordinary. My favourite part is the fountains. The garden is full of cypress trees, orchards. It’s my favourite place.’

‘What is she like?’

‘Who?’

‘Your mother. What is she like?’

Meena narrowed her eyes. ‘Do you always ask such mindless questions?’

James raised his eyebrows. ‘Are you always so *prickly* when someone asks you a question?’

She was totally stumped as to why on earth this man wanted to talk about her mother, especially right now. But he did have a point. She was unused to being asked anything about herself, and even less used to talking about her mother. ‘She was the one who named us,’ she said, her expression softening. ‘Abhishek and I have our formal Mughal names, the one he will take when he takes the throne. But she wanted to give us names of her culture. After she died, my aunt used the names my mother intended so that even after she left, everyone – even Baba – was so used to her calling us by

those names that they stuck. Anyway, that is not important. The garden is beautiful, and so was she. Now can we focus on the matter ahead?’

His eyes widened. ‘Was? She’s dead? I’m sorry, I didn’t know that. Do you visit her garden often? Does your father?’

Meena laughed. ‘Not since she died. I visit often. I’m the only one. My aunt Kiran used to go with me – she helped my mum with the design – but she’s gone now, left in the night for Ceylon. So now it’s just me.’

James nodded sympathetically. ‘My father died when I was young.’ He reached out to pat her hand but then, thinking wiser of it, snatched his hand back. A pregnant pause lay between them as Meena stared at where his arm had been. She bit her lip and looked up at James’s sheepish smile. ‘It’s nice you have somewhere you can go and feel connected to her.’

Meena didn’t know what to make of this statement. ‘Yes. Yes, it is.’ She looked around the garden, at the juicy mangos dangling above, while she enjoyed the gentle hum of buzzing insects visiting each magnolia flower in turn. The pleasure of the garden’s hidden treasures was enhanced by having someone to enjoy them with. ‘How old were you when your father died?’

‘Six. What about you?’ he asked.

‘My mother died in childbirth.’

‘You never knew her?’

She shook her head and sighed, leaning against the bough of one of the trees. She ran her hand over her cheek which had taken on a slight red flush since her run-in with her father.

‘Your Highness?’ James asked, frowning, nodding his head at her hand. ‘Are you alright?’

She snatched her hand away. ‘Yes, of course.’ She stopped leaning against the tree and stood up straight, narrowing her eyes and glaring at him. ‘I am perfectly fine, or at least I would be if it were not for the fact that you have so far refused all attempts at preparation. Would you approach addressing the King of England with such a cavalier attitude?’

That smug smirk made another appearance. ‘I mean no disrespect, Your Highness, but your father is not the King of England. He’s not even the Emperor.’

Her scowl intensified. ‘For someone who does not mean disrespect you are in serious danger of being misunderstood.’

James’s expression had now given way to something altogether more sincere. He reached out and touched her hand. She frantically scanned the garden to make sure no one was watching. However, she chose not to move her hand away from his. It felt soft and warm. ‘Meena, don’t think I haven’t noticed you keep trying to soothe your cheek. I don’t know what you said or did to convince him to hear what I have to say... but I am very grateful. And I do, of course, respect your father’s throne and his kingdom, despite the actions of my uncle. And I promise to address your father with the utmost respect.’

He stood up and looked straight into her eyes. ‘I know what I want to tell the Nawab, what I need to tell him. And knowing I have you on my side, that gives me all the confidence I need.’ He flashed her a smile, not the smirk but a wide-open, carefree smile. It made her nervous, how confident he was. Even if his dazzling smile had melted her own anxious frown. But at this stage, with her father expecting the both of them, there was nothing further she could do but as he said. Trust him.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘It’s time.’

* * *

THE COURTYARD WAS PACKED with armed guards, as well as Abhishek lurking in the far corner, to gleefully watch when it all went wrong no doubt, as well as Amir. Though ostensibly the Nawab did not take James seriously enough to give him more than five minutes, Amir’s presence, with his extensive knowledge of the British, suggested otherwise. Letting

Calcutta slip out of his grip and back into the Company's control could not be allowed to happen, and the Nawab was clearly even willing to listen to this English stranger if it meant there was a chance he could defeat them for good.

James drew his head back to take a long look at Amir, before turning his attention to the screen of the zenana, behind which Meena watched, up in the balcony. He raised his eyebrows playfully even though she was hidden behind the intricate lattice screen necessary for female members of the household when male visitors had an audience with Nawab. Meena's eyes widened, furious at his casual recklessness, fearful for what could happen as a result. For a fleeting moment, she even saw a flicker of fear in his eyes. Just for a moment. She was certain he didn't realise that she had seen.

James stood before the Nawab, a couple of feet away from him. The Nawab sat on his throne, the intensity of the green and gold of his jama overwhelming any beholder. Though not a tall man, he seemed to tower over them in his plumed silk turban, even when seated. His shadow, cast by large lamps in the corners seemed to stretch out over them to the far end of the room, looming. Meena looked back and forth between her father and James, comparing the anxiety and inscrutability of both men. James looked up at the balcony again and raised his eyebrows once more in a quizzical fashion: an attempt at defusing the tension. Or perhaps an attempt at pretending there was none. But his fists, balled-up with anxiety, were not as convincing as the rest of him. Despite her better judgement, she found herself peering through the screen to try and give him a wry smile as some small piece of comfort.

'Your Majesty,' Amir began, 'this is Mr James Chilcott. Mr Chilcott is the nephew of Sir Peter Chilcott, of the East India Company. He apparently wishes to—'

'If I may,' James interjected, 'I would like to speak to the Nawab directly.' James stepped forward and bowed deeply. 'Your Majesty, I wish

to speak with you as I have information about my uncle and the Company's plans. He sent me to Calcutta to take something, to weaken you, destabilise you and your throne, but I would rather come to an arrangement. I love my uncle, but I disagree with many of his methods. And his plans. I do not support the plundering of a great nation, nor the bloodshed that accompanies it. I would therefore be willing to trade the information I have about him and his plans for taking Calcutta. Because that is what he will do, if you do not stop him first.'

Meena felt flushed hearing this speech. James's words made her heart beat faster and unravelled her resolve to maintain a healthy level of suspicion of him. He was a stranger – worse, the kin of a known enemy. Even the Europeans in Calcutta who were not related to Sir Peter Chilcott could only see a city ripe for exploitation and greed and vice. And yet... here was another prospect entirely. A man quite different.

The Nawab stared at James without blinking. This went on for a full minute. It was now James's turn to alternate looking between the Nawab and glancing nervously up towards the screen. Meena avoided catching his gaze despite sharing his anxiety. Eventually Amir coughed politely.

'Your Highness, do you have a response for Mr Chilcott? Anything regarding what he has just said?'

Abhishek scoffed. 'Do you seriously expect our father, the Nawab of Bengal, to dignify this ridiculous gora's stories and demands with a response?'

While he was saying this, Meena noticed her father's eyes never once left James. He leaned back in his throne, having apparently finished his examination.

'What are you doing with my daughter?'

Meena's breath caught in her throat. Silence passed as James just stood in shock. Only a barely concealed snigger from Abhishek pierced through the quiet. Meena eventually called out below, deciding if she had to be the

topic of conversation, she should at least be part of it. ‘Baba, please. There is noth—’

The Nawab swivelled his head towards her, silencing her in an instant. ‘Not you. Him.’ He extended a bejewelled digit in James’s direction. ‘I want him to speak since he’s so keen on talking. On providing “information”. Perhaps you can shed a light on my daughter’s sudden interest in trade and yellow-haired, blue-eyed Englishmen, and in exchange I won’t get one of the guards to open your throat where you stand.’

James gulped. She could see him trying to consider his words carefully. Meena hoped very dearly that he would choose wisely.

‘Your Majesty, I have treated Her Highness with honour, and I would never dream of doing anything to the contrary. I cannot speak as to why she is willing to vouch for me. I can only imagine she wants the best for you and your kingdom. And I believe she can see that I am telling the truth in what I have told you today. And I am truly grateful.’

Meena looked down, grateful no one could see her brief smile and the heat begin to creep up her neck and cheeks.

The Nawab nodded slowly. ‘So, it is my daughter’s generous heart and open mind that have brought you here today? You are indeed fortunate, Chilcott. Now tell me this.’ Meena’s father leaned forward, his right hand clutching the arm of the throne. ‘What were you sent here to steal, what information do you have and what are you asking for in return? Because as far as I can see, you have spent an awfully long time speaking and have yet to say anything of any importance. All we have established is that you are not fond of your uncle and that my foolish daughter trusts you. That does not earn anyone an audience with me, young man. Tell me something interesting or there will be grave consequences.’

James was taken aback, unable to pretend that he was unafraid. He chewed his lip and braced himself for what would come next. ‘Your Majesty, they sent me to take your allies. To enter the city without

Company insignia, and pay off your friends in the city for information and resources to help the Company. I was then to feed information back to them in their camp. I have information about my uncle's army. The size of their ranks, when they plan to strike, their allies in the city – at last count there were over fifty men in the city ready and willing to help the Company for a price. And then there is the support from London. Half of Parliament are shareholders and the dip in share price following your victory taking back Calcutta was a source of great concern. They will want to ensure that does not happen again. And they did not appreciate the jewel of England's enterprise being humiliated.'

James paused, waiting for a response. Instead, he was met by the dark pits of the Nawab's blank stare and a stern expression that seemed carved in granite. That is, before he suddenly barked, behind James, towards the end of the courtyard.

'Amir! What do you say to this?'

All eyes flocked to the inconspicuous adviser who stood silently observing. He considered the Nawab's question for a couple of moments, chewing paan as he did. It was a filthy habit that few men of Amir's rank practised, and even fewer would dare to do so in front of the Nawab. It was a sign of the unrivalled level of trust and respect between the two men that Amir was permitted to do so. His family rose to prominence in Bengal as bankers under the last Nawab as trade began to boom. The influence his father's fortune and connections afforded him in the region, as well as his own shrewd intellect, ensured he was soon established at court as the Nawab's most indispensable advisor. And at this febrile time, his counsel was depended on even more so than usual.

Amir swallowed his paan and cleared his throat. He stared at James for the longest time before speaking. 'I think it's not beyond the deviousness of those Britishers to try to pay off weak men. Or for them to secure more

troops with their ministers' help. So he might have some worthwhile information. It would however depend on his price.'

'Ah, yes,' said the Nawab, 'you haven't told us what you want for such *valuable* information.'

James smiled, seemingly relieved by what he understood to be Amir's support. 'Well, Your Majesty, as for what I want, I have no desire to take what is rightly yours. But I am putting myself at great danger and I would like gold. Your throne's weight in gold. If I am to risk my life to help you keep it, then it is only right that I receive appropriate compensation.'

The Nawab let out a deep, rambunctious belly-filling roar of laughter once James had finished. It caught Meena off guard as she was still reeling from James's brazen demands. She had already surmised that he was overly confident but even so, she had not expected him to be so foolhardy as to dare make such demands of her father. He could be bluffing but the risk involved was unimaginable.

'I see,' said her father, finally calming down. 'And here I was, thinking you would be some dolt asking for my daughter's hand.'

Meena burned with embarrassment and turned away from James for fear he was looking at her at that moment.

'But no, I can see you're no dolt, or cad,' her father continued, his voice rising as he sat up, spittle spraying from his mouth. 'You're some English bastard who thinks I'm a moron. Some commoner that washed up on my shore and now thinks he can threaten and extort me.'

Meena tracked a thin line of sweat running down James's face as she felt her own palms grow clammy.

'Your Majesty,' he said, 'I do not mean to threaten you...'

'No, you just want to helpfully inform me of your uncle's military plans while demanding treasure beyond your wildest imaginations. Do you take me for a fool? For a man who claims to hate how your uncle does business, I find a striking family resemblance. And you expect me to believe you are

so intimately acquainted with their plans despite not being an ally of your uncle's? But, yes, I am sure you meant no threat.' Menace dripped from the Nawab's words as he stared unblinking at the Englishman.

'I am privy to my uncle's plans, Your Majesty, because he trusts me. Were circumstances different, he would be right to.'

'So you're here, abusing your uncle's trust so you can loot us instead of him? I see. You're not just a commoner, you're a pirate,' Meena's father sneered. 'And you dare stand in front of me and make demands?'

'With all due respect, Your Majesty, I am not making demands, threats or anything else you have accused me of.' James's voice rose just a little in volume, though it was evident that he was at pains to stay deferential. 'I have information that you would find valuable, and I would like to sell it. If you do not find my terms agreeable, then I will be on my way.'

The Nawab pursed his lips. 'You will be on your way, Mr Chilcott, when I say you will be on your way. Otherwise, you will be making your way to the executioner. Have I made myself clear?'

James stared at him for a moment. Meena could see his throat bulge as he silently swallowed down his fear. 'If that is the case, Your Majesty, my uncle would most likely take exception to that. And it might be a reason for him to take action even earlier as redress. Even if you do not believe anything else I have said, my uncle is amassing a great force and this should be cause for concern. For you and all your subjects.'

The Nawab folded his arms and smiled. 'Well, it's a good thing you're not threatening me. I'll tell you what, young man. Since you've travelled so far to seek your fortune, and...' He paused, catching Meena's eye. 'Have been so... *industrious* in your efforts to arrange this meeting, I will make you a deal. In addition to this gravely important, valuable information you have promised, I would like something else in return for such a high price. I need you to earn your prize.' A slow, unnerving grin spread across her father's face. Meena had learned to fear that grin.

James frowned, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. ‘And how exactly do you imagine I would do that?’

The Nawab kept smiling as he stood up and walked slowly towards James. ‘Maybe you should spend a while in the cells. Or you can scrub those docks you’re so fond of.’ His eyes lit up. ‘Or maybe you could look after the elephants; they do need a boy to clean up their muck, actually. The last one died recently, they rarely seem to last long.’

Meena’s eyes were wide, confounded by what was unfolding before her. She glanced over at James. Another trail of sweat ran down his cheek. Her father snapped his fingers.

‘I know. Instead of the war elephants, you can help with my army. My personal guard. If we need to prepare for a British attack any day now, they will need to practise. They will need *target* practice. And what would make better practice for us than the enemy himself.’

James gulped. Meena saw a red flush grow around his clavicle where his shirt was loosened. His eyes had not left her father but simply grew wider and wider. The deep blue sparkled in the candlelight, illuminating the fear they contained. After a long period of heavy silence, James cleared his throat.

‘Target practice? For your armed guards?’ James spoke cautiously, his words deliberate, even if his questions were redundant.

‘Yes. You claim to know a lot about the East India Company – their tactics, their methods and this information you say you possess would be useful. But it has been a couple of months since my men have been tested and I don’t want them to get soft. And if we had an Englishman they could practise with... well, that would keep them sharp.’

‘Baba!’ The word slipped out of Meena’s mouth before she could think.

‘Be quiet, girl!’ he bellowed. ‘I am tired of you talking back to me, trying to interfere in how I rule. Is this not still my kingdom? Or am I to be dictated to by Englishmen and my own daughter? You will be silent, or you

will be sorry.’ His voice fell low and quiet, ending in a menacing seethe. It was more alarming than his roar.

Meena froze in fear. She could feel James’s eyes burning into her behind the screen but she dared not look.

‘Fine.’

Meena flicked her eyes over to James, confused, convinced she misheard.

‘Excuse me, boy?’

‘I said fine. I agree to your terms. I’ll do it.’ James’s voice sounded flat and defeated. Meena looked over to him and found him staring at her, even when he was speaking to her father. Her eyes flicked up towards her father who’d noticed too.

‘Then, my friend, I believe we have a deal.’ The Nawab extended his hand, which James cautiously accepted, before laughing and clapping James on the back. He then leaned into James’s ear. Whatever was whispered made him grow pale.

The Nawab turned his head in Meena’s direction and nodded at the guards behind. ‘Her.’

A pair of them rushed forward, taking each of Meena’s arms. She felt their pincer-like grip into her flesh long before she realised what was happening or could have had any hope of doing anything about it. She heard her animalistic cry before she felt it leave her lips. Soon the force of their combined weight against her own miniature frame made her give way as her knees buckled. Pain shot up Meena’s body as her knees collided with the marble floor.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ shouted James.

‘What are you playing at with my daughter, huh?’

Her thumping chest and the pain mostly distracted Meena from what they were saying but she was struck by her father’s cool tone, and James’s distress.

‘Nothing, you madman. Let her go!’

‘Are you trying to dictate to me in my own kingdom again, Chilcott? About my daughter? Only I decide what happens to her and she needs to be punished for her insolence. However I see fit.’

Meena felt a sudden punch to her gut, the many layers of her outfit affording little protection as the guard’s knuckles dug into her side. Pain radiated out to the tips of her fingernails. She thought she may have heard her father’s voice but the rush of blood to her ears, her heart pounding, drowned out anything decipherable. She lay on her side, cradling her body before being turned flat on her belly. Fear rose as she felt the back of her peshwaz rip from the lash, exposing her to even further torment.

Silver mesh tails sliced her skin open as he went for a second strike of the lash. Each strike left Meena writhing, desperate to escape despite knowing that moving made it much worse. Her screams turned into choked sobs, punctuated by the crack of the whip. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks; she hoped James could not see her. Not like this.

Her body moved unnaturally, contorting in ways a human should not be able to move. She could feel the rug beneath her growing wet. She opened an eye and could see a bright red patch bloom under her. It was hot and sticky. Her breath grew even quicker at the sight of this and the room began to tilt.

Suddenly the wet, slapping sound stopped.

‘Now, see Mr Chilcott out. He will be back soon enough.’

She heard a scuffle, swearing and heavy footsteps, but otherwise no further violence. She could not yet raise her head to see. Fat, heavy teardrops splashed onto the rug, diluting the intensity of the red while helping it spread. The cool air stung her back.

‘Bring her down.’

She felt her joints twist again as she was raised up and carried downstairs. With her head still lowered she could only see her father’s

emerald shoes as they approached. She suddenly felt a tugging at the crown of her head as he pulled her up to meet his gaze. He took her chin in his hand and leaned in.

‘Have I made myself clear?’ His breath was hot on her sodden face. She nodded which provoked a sharp downwards tug of her chin, opening the wounds on her back even further. He glared at her.

‘Yes,’ she gasped.

CHAPTER 5



Meena waited in her bedroom until she was sure everyone had left, until she could no longer hear footsteps on the other side of the wall. She had finally relented and, after several failed attempts herself, let Binita dress her. Meena chose an outfit of the lightest muslin she could find, the finest from Dhaka's looms, to avoid irritating her back, but that proved impossible. Meena had caught sight of her ragged body in the mirror that morning and the thought of threads catching set her teeth on edge.

They had travelled to Calcutta with a diminished household, so Binita was the only one of Meena's maids that had come with her. Binita had looked after her since she was born, was there when Meena's aunt left, and had witnessed Abhishek's behaviour throughout their childhood. Their father never let a moment go without letting Abhishek know what he thought of his dull-witted son and heir; in response to such cruelty, her brother sought to assert his dominance over anyone weaker and Meena was often caught in the crosshairs. When tormented with such cruelty he chose to be crueller to those who could not or would not fight back. This was not the first time Binita had had to care for Meena after being seriously beaten by her father's guards. Meena knew this so she didn't know why her maid was acting so strangely.

‘What is it, Binita?’ Meena asked. There was only so much of the woman’s anxious pity she could take, especially with whoever was lurking outside. ‘I am a little tired from yesterday so...’

‘Of course, Your Highness. It’s just...’

‘Yes?’

Binita’s eyes shifted from Meena to the floor as she fiddled with her waistband. ‘I have it, madam. Your balm.’ Binita pulled out a small brown bottle from the waistband of her churidar and set it down on the mahogany chest next to the bed. ‘There isn’t much left. I know sometimes ghee and honey is enough to treat you but this time... I thought maybe this would help.’

Meena stared at the bottle. She thought it had been lost in the rush when they had had to leave Murshidabad so quickly. Like everything to do with her aunt Kiran, the bottle provoked a million questions in her mind, and a tightness in her chest. Before she had to leave, Meena’s aunt left her what she had apparently felt was an adequate replacement for family: a jar of ointment to help after her father beat her. Kiran was skilled in the art of healing and other more obscure practices. She had even started to teach Meena before she left. And yet she did not require any sorcery or arts of divination to predict that Meena would need something to recover from her father’s abuse in the future. As far as parting gifts went, it was small in size and not precious, though its properties were significantly more marvellous than any physician’s concoction. She rubbed her thumb over the cork stopper, held it up to the light and saw the viscous liquid slowly slosh inside.

‘Thank you, Binita,’ she said, turning to the older woman. ‘I think this would be of great help.’

Meena lay on her front on the bed as Binita walked over. She heard herself gasp and immediately regretted agreeing to this. Leaving her back untreated for a few hours meant that her wounds were still fresh with a

sticky sheen. Her back was more cuts than skin by this point. She tried to get up and change her mind but Binita, gently and firmly, guided her head back down. She could hear her uncork the bottle and give its contents a furtive sniff before tapping the liquid out into her palm. Though her head was buried in the bed, she could still smell the cardamom and sandalwood and the scent of something unknown but undeniably botanical. Meena instantly thought of her aunt. She smiled and hugged her arms folded underneath her head. Suddenly she felt something cold and wet on her back and she flinched. She thought she could hear a smothered laugh from Binita and struggled not to flinch again. Binita had been tending to her wounds and cuts since she was little and Meena hated how small and helpless she must seem even at the age of seventeen.

The balm seeped into her skin and soothed the once searing pain, binding her previously torn skin. The effect never ceased to amaze both women.

‘Yes,’ said Meena, still mesmerised and holding onto the bottle. She stared at her back in the mirror, half-expecting blood to seep through the fine fabric. ‘Thank you, Binita. You may go now.’

Meena sat on the edge of her bed, tracing the lines of the glass bottle, tapping on the stopper, feeling the cork spring back in response. She slipped it into her pocket. It had been so long since she had held something of her aunt’s and she wanted to keep it close.

She twisted the doorknob, pressing her other palm against the inside of the lock to dull its metallic squeak. Furtive glances up and down the hallway confirmed no one was around. Meena crept towards the servants’ stairs, carefully going on her tiptoes to avoid the tell-tale ‘slap’ of her slippers’ wagging tongues on the marble floor and slipping them off before she scuttled down the stairs.

Once downstairs, Meena crouched down, checking the guards were distracted in conversation, before inching towards the kitchen. Back in

Murshidabad, Meena had learned how to slip out undetected and even which guards would turn a blind eye. Here, in this unfamiliar home, she had to learn again, quickly. Even with the tightened security, she knew that she had to wait until the eunuch guards took their lunch break – those on duty rarely stayed for long even outside her door if it was their shift – and how she would have to go through the kitchens to make it outside.

She made her way to the main house and clung to the wall beside the closed kitchen door. Through the heavy engraved oak door, she could hear the clatter of knives, orders barked back and forth, and felt a whirlpool of smells flood her nostrils.

Kitchens and their chaos held a special place in Meena's heart, not least for the escape to the outside world that they offered. Dhruv, the palace chef who had travelled with them to Calcutta, would variously scold or spoil her depending on his mood. He did not care one jot whose daughter she was and would not fawn or grovel, or even act polite most of the time. But his own daughter had died a couple years back of fever with his wife passing not soon after, and Meena knew, however unpleasant it was, his tragedy benefitted her when it came to him tolerating her in his kitchen. The rising level of clattering and inharmonious blend of smells emanating from the kitchen however suggested that his mood would be foul. Too sugary a demeanour would only irritate him when in such a state. Taking an interest in his craft would be a better approach, allow him to play mentor. She needed to get this right if she were to make it out the back door to the port. Dhruv treated any kitchen he was in as his own personal fiefdom and his surly demeanour meant that no one questioned this.

Meena waited until the din died down. She thought she could hear him order the porter to fetch more saffron and haldi from the market. She caught a squeal on the tip of her tongue as Janaki, the new kitchen girl, rushed out with a silver tray of chai and samosas.

‘You blundering girl. Do you think it’s okay to stomp around with the Nawab’s tea, huh? Think you’re an elephant?’

Janaki squeaked out a high-pitched apology. ‘Sorry, sahib, I’ll be more careful.’

‘Well, go then! Do you think the Nawab or his guards are interested in waiting on some village girl? Go!’

Meena waited until Janaki bumbled apologetically round the corner and she could no longer hear the jangle of silverware. She guessed there would just be a few others, maybe three in the kitchen, all now well versed in knowing when to avert their eyes. So long as it wasn’t too hectic it should be fine. Should be.

Meena exhaled and drew her dupatta across her face tighter. She put her shoes on once more, hooked her fingers round the edge of the open door and walked in. She attempted to saunter in until an overly buoyant step saw her jut out her hip too far and hit the countertop. The spoons and knives on the table rattled in response as Meena bit down to avoid crying out. All eyes in the kitchen turned towards her but quickly pivoted away once they saw who was responsible for the commotion. She saw a plate of cut papaya and helped herself to a piece, trying to not draw attention to her other hand furiously rubbing her hip, trying to soothe the blazing pain.

‘Your Highness, what is this honour you have graced us with?’ Dhruv’s gruff sarcasm was tempered by his concentration in jointing the massive lamb before him. On the fire was a pot full of potent, acrid odours that, in a few short hours, would sing once they’d had the chance to mellow from the unmistakable metallic smell of an animal being butchered. It was so strong Meena felt the impulse to swirl her tongue round her mouth, just to make sure she could not actually taste it.

‘I was feeling a little hungry and looking for something to fill my belly.’

‘If that was the case, Binita would be here.’

‘I didn’t want to trouble her.’

He sniffed dismissively and did not look up from the carcass but instead continued to separate the lamb's leg from its hip.

'And I knew,' she continued, 'that if I came here myself, I could have my pick.' She walked her hand over to the pile of freshly fried samosas but she found it promptly slapped away.

'Hey,' she said playfully as Dhruv flipped the beast on the counter and started work on its front. Meena walked over to behind him.

'What's that?'

'The shoulder.'

'It looks fatty. I hate that white, flabby fat. Can you cut it off?'

'First of all, I know you have never eaten such flabby fat because I have never served anything like that. Secondly, I absolutely will not cut it off. That's where the flavour is.'

'I've never found it to have flavour. It just makes me want to spit it out.'

Dhruv flicked his eyes up. 'You spit out my food?'

Meena's eyes widened. 'No! I just mean... It's an expression...'

'It flavours the meat but by the time you eat it the fat won't be there.'

'How?' Meena cocked her head, puzzled.

Dhruv sighed and slammed down his cleaver. 'This meat,' he said, picking up the whole shoulder, 'if you tried to cook it quickly, on a high heat, it would go stringy, tough. And yes, its fat would be flabby. Like Nikesh when he's had too much of the aloo gobi,' Dhruv said, raising his voice a little so the aforementioned junior chef could hear him. Nikesh didn't look up but swore with his back still turned.

'Mind your language, fool! Acting like a ruffian in front of madam,' Dhruv said as he shook his head. 'She'll be thinking I can't run a kitchen properly.'

'Never,' Meena said, laughing. She knew if he was joking then his mood must be brightening, and that she was on the right track. 'Go on, about the lamb.'

‘It’s tough so you need to take your time over it. Cook it slowly. Gently. Then the meat will yield. The flesh will have grown tender as the fat melts into it. Some cuts need the harsh fire and others require a gentler approach.’

‘But is it any gentler for the lamb if you’re going to eat it anyway?’

Dhruv snorted. ‘I don’t get to eat this lamb, princess, I just cook it.’

Meena, enjoying how far she could press him, nudged the surly old man. ‘Can I try taking off the other shoulder?’

‘No, you may not, unless you want to lose an arm. Alisha!’ Dhruv’s attention was now focused on a young girl chopping onions across the kitchen. ‘Put another pan on the fire. We need more samosas.’

The timid girl looked as if she was about to question his order but apparently thought better of it. Soon the kitchen resounded with the explosion of noise from the hot pan of oil once uncooked samosas were added. The kitchen sounded like they were trapped in the middle of a monsoon.

Dhruv drew almost imperceptibly closer to Meena as the crack and fizzle of the oil drowned out his voice. ‘Are you going to get me in trouble, Your Highness?’

Meena kept her eyes downcast, staring at his butcher’s table. ‘Of course not.’

‘So you are not going out somewhere unchaperoned? Somewhere you shouldn’t be going?’

‘I’m not doing anything that would get you in trouble.’

‘It’s my kitchen you’re in.’

‘Actually, it’s my father’s.’

‘Either way, it’s not yours to come and go as you please. And you know that.’

Meena paused, calibrating her voice to sound higher, younger. Sweeter perhaps. ‘I will be back before sundown. I told Binita I needed to rest and that I was not to be disturbed today. And if anyone finds out I was here, you

can say I snuck extra food, being greedy as usual, and you saw me head back to my chambers.'

Dhruv looked her square in the eye. 'Are you doing anything that will get you punished?'

She took a deep breath. 'Yes. But I'm still going anyway.'

The chef shook his head distractedly and grabbed a relatively clean cloth from his waist. He grabbed fistfuls of the earlier plated samosas, placed them in the centre of the cloth and drew the corners up together in a knot. He handed it to her.

'In case you don't get any dinner. You'll probably get caught so you don't want to go too long without food. Especially while you're still healing. That oaf of a porter will be back soon, so avoid the market.'

* * *

MEENA'S FEET started to hurt from the sea of jagged pebbles leading to the port, squeezing themselves into her shoes and between her toes. Avoiding the market meant that she had to stay closer to the river and its long stony pathway. Here, only the fishermen across the river could see her heading towards the port, and they were much too concerned with their catches piling up on the shady, tree-lined bank to take any notice. She wasn't exactly sure how she would find James again but thought heading towards the port would be a good start. Meena stopped for a moment to take off the now dusty shoes one by one till she rid herself of the tiny irritants. When she looked up, she saw a large, white man staring at her and she quickly put her shoes back on. She recognised him from the day she'd met James. The hairy, loutish one, that had his arm around him. Behind him, she recognised the same ship James had disembarked from. It was grand, its tall masts and white sails looming over her, but had clearly already seen its best days, the

wave-lashed paint chipping away from the bare oak. She straightened up and approached the man, now with his arms crossed and a curious smirk.

‘Where is James?’

‘Come again, sweetheart?’

‘James Chilcott. You are part of his crew, yes? I recognise you from when you docked. I wish to speak with him. Is he here?’

A surprised and sly grin spread across his face. ‘Is that right?’

Meena did not like how his eyes combed over her from top to tail. ‘Yes, it is. Can you please fetch him. Now.’

He looked at her for a moment and then suddenly, deliberately, spat on the ground.

‘Listen sweetheart, I’m not that lad’s fetch and carry boy, nor am I minded to take orders from his bit of fun. But I’m a reasonable man, and who am I to stand in the way of my boy getting a piece, so I’ll tell you what: I’ll take you to him.’

‘Pardon?’ she said, utterly baffled by his words, though she had the sneaking suspicion she knew his meaning.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, love.’ His expression turned oddly apologetic. ‘Thought you spoke English.’ James’s companion took a deep breath. ‘You me go to James – oh-kay?’

Meena stared at him and at his wild gestures that accompanied his words. Her aunt had taught her English, one of the many arts she had equipped her with. She thought that it would help Meena in the future, clearly aware of the East India Company’s growing strength. She, however, probably did not anticipate Meena needing her skills to converse with foolish sailors.

‘I understand perfectly, sir. If what you’re saying is right then please, do lead the way to James.’

He led her along the riverbank and towards the heart of where the Englishmen stayed in Calcutta. This part of town was awash with tall grand

buildings, columns and porticoes abounded, lest anyone doubt their importance. There were quite a few wealthy Bengalis that had moved into this town, either on their own, having made their fortune, or having married their way in, but Meena did not want anyone to think that she was with her current companion. She drew her dupatta closer till it covered most of her face to avoid being recognised. She had made pains to dress plainly, leaving her royal jewellery at home lest anyone might catch a glint of gold.

She noticed he would turn around every now and again, seemingly to check that she was still there, though she could not help but detect a certain curiosity that sat ill within her. She stared back defiantly, in an attempt to hide how uncomfortable his stares made her feel. She wondered if James had told him about her, and if so, what he had told him. She did not need word to get out that the Nawab's daughter was secretly meeting Sir Peter Chilcott's nephew. He turned around again to scrutinise her.

'You alright, love?'

Meena looked at him blankly. 'Yes, thank you.'

'Don't suppose you're used to this part of town? Doesn't seem like many of your lot come this way.'

'I'm not originally from Calcutta so I am not very familiar with any of it.'

'Where were you before?'

'Elsewhere. But "my lot" used to live in this part of it long before yours did.'

The man looked uneasy. 'Right. Of course.'

They walked for a while in silence once more.

'Harry, by the way. And you are...'

'A friend of James.'

Harry chuckled. 'Okay, love. Have it your way then. I can take a hint.'

Eventually she realised they were approaching a narrow, whitewashed stone building with a young Indian man in British military garb standing

guard outside. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed familiar faces of guards scattered leaning against trees and hidden in shadows on street corners. James had been free to go after his audience with her father but there was no way he would be leaving the palace with free rein of the city. Meena knew the Nawab had had Amir assign men to watch James, report on who was visiting him. However, a lifetime of restrictions and rules had made Meena an expert in finding ways round them.

‘Is there a back entrance?’

Harry looked bemused. ‘Trying to go unnoticed? Who are you trying to avoid, then?’

‘Where do the maids enter? Take me there,’ Meena said in gritted, hushed tones.

Harry snorted. ‘If I were bringing a girl round the back, they wouldn’t think you were a maid, darling. But I think we can sort something out.’

Meena was led around the side of the building, where stagnant pools of rainwater collected and mosquitos formed a frenzied swarm. A knocked door and a whispered word from Harry, and soon Meena was ushered in. She stood in the hallway, waiting until one of the attending young men went inside for a moment, returning after a few minutes with a shocked James.

‘James, got a present all gift-wrapped for you.’

James scrunched up his face and tilted his head to the side. ‘Oh?’

His friend punched him in the arm. ‘She was hanging about the *Argo*, all lovesick. You do like sampling the local flavour, don’t you, man?’

‘Harry, that is enough.’ James, irritated with his friend, turned his attention to Meena, squirming with embarrassment at such bravado at her expense. ‘Hello?’

‘Hi,’ she said shyly, immediately cursing herself for sounding so timid. ‘Is there somewhere we can go to speak... privately?’

‘Yes, of course.’ James nodded. ‘We can go to my quarters.’

‘Excuse me?’ Meena exclaimed before glaring at Harry who bellowed with laughter.

‘It’s private. That’s all I meant.’ Now it was James’s turn to stutter and act awkward. *‘So we can talk in private.’*

Meena looked at him and thought of all the reasons to not follow him. And then she felt an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion. *‘Fine.’*

He held out his hand and led her in. He laced his fingers between hers and led her through a narrow, bright passageway, punctuated by imposing portraits of grand Englishmen in white wigs, till they reached a heavy wooden door. He looked back, almost waiting for her permission which she gave with a small nod. The wooden door gave way to a cavernous white room, sparsely decorated with old furniture and a thin rug in the centre. The only item of note was the wooden bed pushed up against the far wall. She kept her eyes studiously off it.

James closed the door and settled himself into one of the wicker chairs, gesturing for her to join him. She walked over but hesitantly hovered by the proffered chair. He noted her reluctance but said nothing.

‘How on earth are you?’ James exclaimed. *‘I didn’t think you’d be standing after what those animals did to you. How did you even get here?’*

Meena tried to organise her thoughts but they refused to coalesce into anything coherent. Instead, she felt her heart beat so fast her chest hurt.

‘Well?’

Meena, overwhelmed by the enormity of shame at meeting the man who had last seen her stripped and beaten, lunged at him and slapped him.

James recoiled before any further attack could be launched, rubbing his cheek. *‘What the hell is wrong with you? You came all the way here to attack me?’*

‘No...’ Meena said, embarrassed. She was unsure how to explain her actions. She felt so ashamed from the last time they met. She wished she could rip the memory out of his skull. Of her, screaming, helpless,

tormented at her father's request. She wanted to destroy every trace of it ever happening.

'Then what was that?' James rubbed his face, glancing at the mirror in the corner. 'You must have an explanation, or are *you* trying to kill me as well as your father?'

Meena looked down, confused by how he made her feel. She hated that he'd seen her like that, how exposed she felt by him. And she hated that he tried to come to her rescue.

'And could you remove that scarf please? There's no one else here and I – I would like to see your face.' He smiled nervously. 'I would like to see the face of the woman who has been trying to help me so much.'

Meena frowned. 'No.'

James looked earnestly at her. 'Please. I know it isn't sanctioned, though neither is you coming here. I need to know you are well. That you're not in pain. Because of me. Please.'

She was not meant to unveil herself in front of a stranger, the idea made her uncomfortable. But she feared that his interest would quickly fade if she did not do as he requested.

'Come on,' he pleaded.

Meena paused before awkwardly pulling down her dupatta from her face. She watched his eyes travel over the lower half of her face as they discovered her lips and her loose hair.

'You are so beautiful,' he said, awestruck.

Meena smiled shyly before looking down at her lap. She pushed her hair back behind her ears and sighed. 'Why did you agree to it?' she said quietly.

'To what?'

'To my father's terms.'

'Because those were the terms he gave me. Even if your father is insane...' James trailed off, shaking his head. 'I had no idea what you had

to live with. What barbarity.'

Meena scowled. She did not appreciate the tone or choice of words, but she could not mistake the tenderness in his eyes. 'I was not talking about that. You know what I meant.'

James's eyes took on such a soft, quizzical look that, along with the pain, it was enough to make Meena bite down on her tongue to stop herself from crying.

He sighed and shook his head. 'Because I thought it would keep you safe. That it would keep all of you safe.'

Meena slowly nodded, holding back her tears. 'Yes, well. It didn't work.'

James shook his head. 'No, it did not. Why did he do that?'

'Because he was unhappy with my behaviour,' said Meena, lingering over each syllable.

James paused before leaning forward. 'He had you beaten, princess.'

Meena scoffed. 'Your father never beat you?'

'He died before he could get a chance, I suppose.'

Meena cursed herself for her thoughtless comment. She had forgotten about his father. 'How did he die?'

James wandered over to the bed and sat down heavily. 'Gin. An abundance of it. I was then sent to live with my uncle. My mother thought it would be best for me to stay with him. Be educated. Join the Company.'

'But now you want to leave the East India Company?' James nodded and then looked down. Meena paused before getting up and walking over to him. 'He intends to kill you, James. But you already knew that.'

James looked up, grinning, batting the idea away with his hand. 'I'll be fine.'

'No,' said Meena firmly, 'you will be dead. He'll make certain of it.'

James's mouth flopped open and closed like a goldfish before eventually speaking. 'And why do you care?'

‘I care about why you chose to march willingly towards your death.’

‘That’s not important.’

Meena lifted his chin so he was looking her right in her furious eyes. ‘My father had a man slice my back to ribbons because of what you decided. Clearly he thought your decision was important.’

James’s eyes widened. ‘I didn’t know that would happen. I wanted to help, I thought sharing the information I have would keep you and your people safe.’

‘What a successful mission,’ Meena said drily.

James ripped her hand from his face before standing and pacing in exasperation. ‘Are you always this difficult? And if it was so obvious what would happen, why did you speak up when he proposed this death march? You could have kept quiet.’

Meena placed her hands on her hips. ‘I don’t need a reason to not want you to die. Anyone with a heart would have done the same.’

James laughed hollowly. ‘Yes, you clearly have a very tender heart, princess.’

She glared. ‘Do not mock me. I will not have some common Englishman make fun of me.’

James stood up so he towered over her. She could not help but notice how close their bodies were. ‘And do you think I will tolerate being slapped by some woman?’

‘Not some woman. The daughter of the—’

‘Nawab of Bengal,’ James chorused with her. ‘Yes, Your Highness, I am aware. *Meena.*’

She leaned forward to strike him again, but he caught her arm this time. Her breath hitched as she looked at his fingers laced around her forearm, his index finger drawn across exposed skin. She glanced at James as she felt her pulse quicken beneath his touch. He dropped her arm like a stone as she attempted to cough away the awkwardness.

‘How are you such a virago today, anyway? I would have thought you would still be recovering from your injuries.’

Meena reached into her pocket. ‘I would be normally, were it not for this.’ She pulled out her aunt’s balm.

James took it from her fingers, their hands touching briefly. She detected a slight yet unmistakable tremble from him. A contrast with his cavalier demeanour. Meena bit her lip as he held the bottle up to the light.

‘What is it?’ he asked, examining the bottle.

‘An ointment. My aunt... She left it for me.’

James raised an eyebrow at her. ‘Clearly your aunt was well acquainted with your father.’

She smirked bleakly. ‘Yes. Yes, she was.’

James continued to examine the bottle, his eyes narrowing and his mouth set in a frown. ‘So it’s a home remedy? Not from a physician?’

‘My aunt is better than a thousand physicians.’

‘I see. Do you need someone to put it on you? I can.’ James paused. ‘If you wish.’

Meena stared at him and shook her head furiously, trying to ignore the scorching heat emanating from her cheeks. She attempted to casually press her hands against them, without arousing suspicion.

‘No. My maid applied it this morning and I feel much better already.’

James exhaled, looking away. Meena was certain that two bright spots of pink appeared on his face. ‘Right, that’s good. But this morning? How can you be healed after a couple of hours?’

Meena smiled. ‘My aunt was a very wise woman.’

‘It sounds like it. Is she still alive?’ he asked softly.

Meena paused. ‘Yes, she was exiled. My father never liked her and when he took power and my mother died, he did not want such a clever woman near him or his throne. He never trusted her.’

James raised his eyebrows. 'You said she left for Ceylon. Is she still there?'

'Yes. She couldn't go back down South. That had been taken by your men,' Meena said pointedly. She could not help that she enjoyed James's company. But she could make it clear that this did not extend to the rest of his countrymen.

James nodded. 'Yes, I can imagine she wouldn't want to go back. My uncle made his reputation down South.'

'Exactly. So she decided there was nothing left for her in India and sailed to Ceylon.'

'Don't the Dutch bother her? They're making headway on that island, aren't they? I know they dominate the cinnamon trade.' Meena could hear the disappointment in his voice.

Meena laughed. 'That might be the case, but if my aunt was bothered by them, they would not last long. She's quite a formidable woman.'

'And she has quite a formidable niece,' James said.

'Ha! I'm nothing compared to her.' She continued, desperate to distract herself from the warmth of his voice, 'She taught me some of what she knew but I think I was not always a good pupil.' Meena felt a twinge in her chest. It had been so long since she'd allowed herself to talk about her aunt, about the good in her. Her father would often just curse her, call her a witch, if not worse.

'Well, I do not know how good a teacher she was, but this balm of hers seems to have done the trick so she clearly was highly skilled.' James handed her back the bottle, which she received with a grateful half-smile.

'Thank you.'

He smiled, tucking a stray black curl behind her ear. 'You are most welcome, Meena.'

She wanted to stay in this moment, in the ease of his smile, but something scratched at the back of her mind.

‘James?’

‘Yes?’

‘Why are you so against your uncle that you’re willing to betray him?’

James froze, locking eyes on her warily like a cornered animal. Eventually he cleared his throat. ‘I love my uncle. He raised me. When my father died I...’ Meena observed his expression growing much softer. ‘I know what it means to lose a parent as a child. How rudderless you feel.’ She reached out and touched his hand. He smiled at this small gesture of sympathy. ‘I know how you cling to whatever you have of them. For you, it is your mother’s garden. For me, it was my uncle and the East India Company that he and my father worked for. My uncle raised me when my mother couldn’t cope. Not quite as his own perhaps – the son of his penniless, dead brother made for a burden round his neck, rather than a beloved son – but he took me in all the same. She wanted me to have a decent life, an education, a good home. All my father left her was a long list of debts and I...’ James sighed and chuckled to himself. ‘She did the right thing. I’m glad she did it.’

‘Did you ever see her again?’ Meena asked.

James pushed his hair back. ‘No. She sent word that she had remarried and that they were bound for America.’ His voice was strangely even and emotionless in tone. He then shrugged. ‘I haven’t heard from her since.’

Meena nodded, not knowing what to say in response to this. ‘So you lived with your uncle?’

‘Yes, not that he was an easy man to live with. His wife died not long after he took me in – cholera, possibly brought back from his first tour of India – and after that he decided to throw himself into Company matters. His way can be harsh. I have a great deal of respect for my uncle. But I don’t want to be just his ward anymore. I need to be my own man. A man can’t have a master any more than a kingdom can. Clearly there is much to

be admired in your country.’ He looked directly in her eyes. ‘It would be heinous to crush such a beautiful land just in the name of profit.’

Meena smiled. His words made her feel lightheaded as she was struck by his earnestness, the honesty of his face. She tucked her leg under her and leaned forward.

‘Do you live in London?’

James looked bemused at this sudden question but smiled. ‘Yes. You would like it. There are many people. Fine ladies in their silks and velvets, tall grand houses that stretch high into the sky... good food as well. I miss the food a lot.’

‘Oh, that reminds me,’ Meena ran over to the table by the couch where she left her wrapped-up package. She retrieved the cloth bundle and proceeded to undo the knot. ‘I managed to get these. Take one. They’re good.’ James chuckled before taking a samosa and biting into the still crisp layers and spicy lamb mixture. She helped herself and quickly wolfed one down before taking another. She felt James look at her as she chewed. He cocked his head and shook it, laughing at her gleeful gluttony.

‘You are not like other noblewomen I’ve met.’

Meena finished her second samosa. ‘That is not the first time I have heard that. I apparently lack the positive female influences to be a proper lady.’ Meena said this sarcastically, the exasperated voice of her Kathak teacher echoing in her ear as she repeated her words.

James put his hand on hers. She looked up and he lifted his hand to gently brush her face. She closed her eyes for fear of being overwhelmed. She had never been looked at like that before.

‘Do you know anything about my father’s personal guards? Do you know what you’re going to do?’

James looked down and laughed ruefully. ‘No, no, I do not. I don’t suppose they could be persuaded not to tear me apart?’

Meena shook her head. ‘No.’

He ran his hand through his hair and sighed. 'Well then.'

The image of what would happen once James was before the guards filled her mind. The silence in the room told her that the thought hung heavy in his head too. 'They have been reduced in recent months, thanks to the fighting,' Meena said hesitantly before pausing.

James looked at her. 'And yet, I imagine that does not particularly help.'

Meena looked at him wordlessly, her eyes wide and forlorn that everything she had just been through might be all for nothing. James stroked her cheek. His eyes took on a certain intensity that made Meena's mouth dry. She swallowed in anticipation of what he might do next.

'I am very fond of you, Meena. I know how foolish that sounds and I know we have only known each other for a short while, and yet I cannot avoid the fact that I care about you very deeply.' She took a deep breath and tried to interrupt before James hushed her. 'You are beautiful, intelligent, and brave and I—'

'And you like to talk too much, Mr Chilcott,' Meena said finally, interjecting before he said too much. She could not allow herself to be swept away so carelessly, even if he could be. The stakes were much more serious for her, and she knew it. The attention of men was not unknown to her but never had it been given with such affection. Nor had she ever had a man touch her so gently, and only after seeking permission. She knew what it meant that James sent a shiver down her spine and made her make poor decisions. And she knew that his words and the look on James's face meant the same thing. 'No more, it wouldn't be right.' Meena looked at him. 'You know this.' James nodded, if regretfully. 'But, as for the real matter at hand, my father's guards, I will help you.'

'You can?' he said, amazed.

'I can try.'

CHAPTER 6



Meena loved her mother's garden. She had always known it as *her* garden though she had never actually seen her in it. Meena knew of her beauty from the paintings that hung in the palace and from her aunt's stories. It was odd, as if she were a character of folklore rather than a woman of blood and bone who birthed her and died as a result. And yet her garden in Murshidabad was full of abundance and fertility. The garden in Calcutta was not half as beautiful but it would do. Meena knew that a garden was much more than its aesthetics. Her aunt had taught her that, like a woman, plants had more to offer than their beauty. Kiran had spent many an hour with Meena in the palace garden, pointing out each plant, its name, its uses. She told her how she and her mother had planned the whole garden, choosing each and every plant. Kiran was apparently an unexpected wedding present for Meena's father; her mother refused to leave Madras without her, so the two sisters were sent to Bengal together. Though Kiran was the eldest she did not begrudge her sister's royal match, but instead busied herself with the garden, and then doting on her sister's daughter when she died. Until, that is, Kiran's swift departure.

Meena recalled sitting cross-legged on the grass with her aunt behind her. Kiran's hands over Meena's as they ground leaves in a little wooden pestle and mortar, the older woman steadying Meena's clumsy, stubby grip

on the heavy little club. The aroma rising to kiss her on the nose, the rhythm of adding ingredients at the right time.

Meena thought about this as she walked round the grounds. Though not as splendid, it had what she needed. She made her way past the heady frangipani and walked up to a tree with dainty pink flowers, with dark buds giving way to pale blossoms. Meena traced her finger round the soft petals and leaned in to take in its sweet scent. Yes, this was what she needed. What James needed. Meena breathed in its perfume once more and began to pluck the oleander.

* * *

THE GUARDS ANNOUNCED THEMSELVES NOISILY. Despite none being in the flush of youth anymore, this did not stop them from behaving like young recruits on their first campaign: full of the vigour of violence and lust for anything that drew breath and could be taken by force. Meena suspected this was a consequence of being part of her father's personal detail. Though her great-grandfather had been a great military leader, Meena's father had grown fat and lazy off his abundant wealth and his guards followed suit. They also shared her father's tendency for rage at a moment's notice.

Meena stood at the window, watching them file into the courtyard after lunch. She hated being around the guards at the best of times – she did not like how they stared – let alone when she had just had a pair of them hold her down and tear the flesh off her back.

‘Looking forward to today's little show?’ Abhishek asked, walking up to her slowly.

Meena stared at him warily. ‘Leave me alone, Abhishek.’

He smiled and held his hands up in submission. ‘Okay, okay. I just wanted to make sure you were alright after your... confusion, a couple of

days ago. Luckily, Baba was able to clarify matters for you.’ He grinned, his teeth bare and sharp.

‘Well,’ she said, steely-eyed with studied breeziness in her voice, ‘I felt no more confused than when he “clarified” the situation for you after you kept wetting the bed when you were still—’

Meena barely took her next breath before she felt her head slam against the wall. She saw the unadulterated rage in Abhishek’s eyes, but it was only when she tried to scream and instead gasped for air that she realised his strong bony fingers were roped around her throat.

‘You filthy bitch,’ he spat out. ‘You’re nothing. That gora just thinks you’re enough of a whore to get between your legs. And even he won’t be around after today.’

‘Bastard,’ she spluttered back, her voice thin but full of bile. Her hand flailed by her side, hoping and failing to find her pocket so she could check its contents had not fallen out.

Abhishek eventually let go, leaving Meena doubled over and gasping for breath. She looked up and saw him smiling.

‘Come now, Behn. We can’t keep them waiting, can we?’

James’s armour was rusty and ill-fitting. Supposedly, the Company didn’t have heavy armour with them, so James had to barter for some protection down at the docks with a group of Dutchmen. The breastplate was too broad for him, hanging like an iron barrel over his narrow shoulders and hips. At least he had a short musket in his hand, turning up at the gates like a sheepish overgrown schoolboy for his first day. Once, she’d seen all the little English boys marching to their school for English officers’ sons in their smart uniforms: officers in training. James looked like them, little boys waiting to be caned.

The soldiers had belched and guzzled their way through lunch, consuming everything in sight. But now, all fifteen stood lined up in a row, with a studied formality only present after copious amounts of arrack had

been consumed. This formality was intensified by her father's presence. They were sat in a balcony overlooking the courtyard which offered some shelter from the punishing heat. Meena did not want to attend – she had hoped to watch from her window instead, or possibly not at all depending on her nerves – but her father had sent word for her and Abhishek to attend. Though behind the screen, she arranged her face in a picture of placidity when she saw James. She tried not to look, keeping her gaze steady in the middle distance and her mind as light as a cloud.

‘Getting ready for your widow’s lament?’ Abhishek hissed through the marble lattice. Leaning up against the zenana, no one could hear his cruel jibes.

‘Leave me alone,’ Meena whispered back through the screen, swallowing down her rage.

‘Silence!’ the Nawab shouted. ‘Now for today, we are honoured to have a special guest. Mr Chilcott has graciously volunteered his services for the benefit for our kingdom. Apparently, he has little loyalty or love for his own home nation, or family even. Instead, he will help us prepare for the might of the British. Thank you, Mr Chilcott, for your gallantry.’

Meena heard the disdain drip from her father’s lips like sap from a palm tree. James gave a curt if uneasy nod while Meena stole a glance at the guards. She noted that although still in a regimented and stoic stance, many had a glassy look, and beads of sweat dripping down their faces that could not be merely explained by the day’s heat. She tried to work out how long it had been since lunch.

‘But Mr Chilcott,’ her father continued, distracting Meena from her calculations. ‘I think gallantry does not require such elaborate protections. I have heard so much about the English, their military prowess. Come now, take off the armour and drop your weapon. You know that was never part of our agreement. You gave me your word. After all, an Englishman is nothing without his word.’

James stared at the Nawab. Meena thought her heart stopped for a second. She couldn't look at James, not at that moment. She just looked at her father, disquieted by his preternatural calm.

'Take off your armour and drop your weapon.' Meena's father repeated his demand quietly. It marked an unnerving change from his usual rage. James continued to lock eyes with the Nawab before throwing his gun to the ground. He unbuckled his armour and let his breastplate fall to the ground too with a heavy thud, all the while refusing to break eye contact with the man who had his fate in his hands.

James dipped his head. 'As you wish, Your Highness.'

The Nawab nodded and clapped his hands. 'Now. Let us begin.'

The guards took this signal and unsheathed their swords. Meena tried to watch for signs of the oleander taking hold, and whether it would be soon enough. His weapon and armour were just insurance but James's lack of defences made Meena nervous, even with their plan in motion. The guards walked a couple of steps forward. She thought she could see some of the men stumble ever so slightly. Siraj, their general and the worst of them, looked particularly unsteady as he stepped forward and held his sword aloft, taking a moment to stop swaying. Meena thought she could see her father's eyes crease in confusion out of the corner of her eye, but she dared not tear her gaze away from the guards.

Siraj took a couple of deep breaths. 'Men, on my word.'

He took a few more deep breaths, placing his hands on his knees and doubling over momentarily, before seemingly remembering where he was and straightening up again. His breathing was now clearly laboured and sweat poured off him as he appeared to liquefy. Meena held her breath.

'Atta—'

Before he could finish the second syllable, Siraj doubled over again, and a stream of bright yellow vomit emanated from his body and spilled out onto the ground. The sight appeared to tip some of the other men over the

line as they gave way to their growing nausea, leading them to follow their commander's lead. Others, overwhelmed by dizziness and shortness of breath, or possibly the pungent odour of bile and half-digested lunch, leaned against the columns behind them, the stone the only thing holding them up. Before long, all fifteen were on the ground curled up like infants crying for their mother. Meena watched this display impassively, her eyes flicking between each guard in turn. James's disgust was writ large, as was her father's open-mouthed horror as his personal guard were reduced so humiliatingly. He turned to James whose display of shock did nothing to stop the Nawab's frenzied pointing of his finger at him.

'You did this! You will be kept in the palace, locked up, lest you run. I'm aware of your family's cowardice and underhand tricks. You will not leave till I am satisfied you have had no hand in this,' he shouted. 'I will decide what is to be done with you tomorrow.'

James froze, waiting to be taken away until it became clear that everyone capable of imprisoning him were emptying their stomachs. Eventually someone clicked at a couple of servant boys who awkwardly led James away, carefully side-stepping the men and their sick. Meena finally found her breath once he was outside the walls and harm's way. Now came the hard part.

* * *

'THE EMERALDS WILL GO NICELY with your outfit, princess.' Meena shook her head.

'No, Binita. I think I will go with the rubies tonight.' Defeated, Binita tutted, set aside the emerald choker and picked up the long ruby necklace, tying it round Meena's neck so the large crimson jewel sat snug over her heart. Meena knew that Binita would be wondering why tonight of all nights she was so concerned about her appearance when she never mustered

up any enthusiasm for what she wore to banquets. Men might be on their knees and an underhanded scheme might be afoot, but the great Nawab of Bengal would never let that get in the way of his pageantry. The symbols of power were even more important when that power was threatened. The soldiers expected to be fed when they came to the palace and Meena and Abhishek were expected to be there too. So despite the pall that hung over the day, there would be feasting and drinking. But she needed to be noticed tonight. Meena scrutinised how she looked in the mirror: she was bejewelled and decked out in fine gold and green silks, wrapped in ropes of rubies and pearls and her lips were reddened with betel leaf. She was ready.

Having spent most of the afternoon recovering, the guards were in a surlier mood than usual ahead of the feast. After the horrors of the day's fun and games they'd retired to soothe their stomachs and egos with arrack and rum. Meena remembered her aunt's warnings about oleander and its potency; she had made sure to only use a pinch. The guards were in a room near the kitchen, easy for them to bark orders so their cups never ran empty. Her father was still napping so they entertained themselves in the meantime before dinner. Janaki was just returning with an empty tray, rubbing her backside where she had inevitably been pinched. She was about to close the door to their room when Meena called out to the girl in her most haughty voice.

'Janaki! Stop messing around with that door and help me.' She called out loudly, 'My necklace needs fastening, Binita did a terrible job. Fix it.'

Janaki, terrified, set down the tray and scuttled over to Meena. Meena noticed some of the guards turning around to peer through the door. She gestured to the girl to get behind her. 'Yes, Your Highness, of course.'

Meena held the pendant low down her chest so that the poor girl, as much as she tried, could not make the clasps meet. Janaki struggled awkwardly until Meena was sure the men were still watching them.

‘Forget it!’ she shouted. ‘You clumsy girl. Begone! I can’t stand your kerosene hands on me any longer.’ The girl, startled by the harshness of Meena’s tone, picked up the tray and left for the sanctuary of the kitchen, mumbling apologies as she went. Meena huffed noisily and turned around to fiddle with the necklace, until she heard unsteady footsteps behind her.

‘Perhaps I could be of some assistance, princess?’ Siraj slurred, his tongue slackened with liquor. A slow, sleazy grin slid over his face. His eyes, though starting off meeting hers, continued to travel south over the course of his words. Meena shifted uncomfortably. She tried to focus on the image of him curled up in the foetal position just hours before. It settled her.

‘That would be wonderful, Siraj, thank you so much for your kindness. I simply cannot figure out this contraption,’ Meena simpered.

He spun her around rather forcefully and took the necklace out of her hands. He fastened the clasp and then quickly spun her back, laughing as she took a moment to steady herself.

‘There you are. Don’t worry, Your Highness, I am completely at your service,’ he said, rubbing her lower back as he pulled her in slowly. Meena’s stomach flipped as the memory of her being held down and beaten by the guards, *his* men, flashed through her mind. The thought of what she had to do next sickened her; she hoped that it was not clear from her eyes – or that Siraj would be too drunk to notice. Thinking about when the lash of the whip ripped apart her skin, the latest of many beatings at their hands, was a small source of comfort but she could not avoid the sense of dread creeping up her body. She forced herself to swallow it down and continue with her plan.

‘Thank you, General,’ Meena replied demurely.

‘You know, princess, you have grown a lot since the last time I saw you,’ he said, drinking her in. ‘Not a child anymore.’

‘No,’ she said, looking down, attempting to strike the perfect balance between bashful and coquettish. ‘I’ve just had my seventeenth birthday, not

a child anymore...' She let slip a giggle. 'Back then I was such a greedy little girl, always sneaking into the kitchen for extra food.'

Siraj let loose a throaty chuckle. 'You naughty girl!'

Meena flicked her eyes down and then up again to meet his, almost provocatively. It was a move she had seen the dancing girls use when performing. She hoped it conveyed the playful modesty she was reaching for.

'Yes, I know. It's so embarrassing. Though today, it's Jahan sneaking extra portions.'

Siraj cocked his head. 'What?'

Meena giggled again. She needed to ensure he believed her pose as the naive coquette – especially for this part. She leaned forward conspiratorially.

'I saw him, earlier,' she whispered, 'sneaking into the kitchen. Hovering by the food, the bitter gourd, I think. That's one of your favourites, isn't it? I hadn't realised he liked it so much, but I suppose he must have wanted to make sure he had his helping before everyone else.'

'Yes,' Siraj said as Meena could feel his mind fogging up, thoughts beginning to coalesce but just out of reach.

'He probably thought you would polish off the whole dish yourself and so wanted to get a taste first. Though, of course, all of you would have had some, I'm sure.'

'Yes... When was this?'

'Earlier today, just before the meal. I know because I saw him with that gora at the gate first. The prisoner.'

Siraj's eyes, bleary and struggling to focus, bulged out. 'What did you say?'

Meena shrugged innocently. 'I think it was by the gate. The gora arrived and Jahan was guarding him, I suppose. I don't know why. I wouldn't have thought he would be assigned such a junior role.'

‘No,’ said Siraj. ‘No, he was not.’

Meena hoped the slow-witted soldier would get there before the feast. She began to fear that the alcohol had taken hold too strongly. But she had to trust that the embers of old enmity would light the way. Siraj and Jahan were well known to loathe each other. Jahan was the younger, slimmer, swifter man. Siraj did not like that, and Jahan resented taking orders from a bloated, aged drunk. Meena had overheard from the servants that even her father was considering retiring Siraj and promoting Jahan before trouble with the Company broke out. Siraj’s temperament, coupled with this information about Jahan’s whereabouts before Siraj’s great humiliation, should be enough to set her plan in motion, Meena thought. That is, if he could piece it all together.

‘I do hope you are feeling... better, Siraj. And I hope you have put it out of your mind. Sometimes food doesn’t agree. Especially for men of your age – I mean, men of such experience and wisdom. I have heard that men of advanced years must watch what they eat. We are all getting older. And you are not a young man anymore,’ Meena said with the most pitying look she could muster. Siraj smothered down a scowl, knowing better than to lose his temper with nobility, and garbled a ‘thank you’ before returning to the gathering. But as he opened the door, he stopped and stared at the kitchen door, and then at his men. Jahan sat, squeezed in the middle of them, laughing. Siraj frowned and closed the door behind him.

Bad-tempered, middle-aged men drinking on empty stomachs, still sore with shame, were always dangerous. But, even with Meena lighting the fuse with Siraj, she knew they would need to be helped along. Which was why she had switched out the tobacco in the hookah in their room while they were still recovering in the afternoon. Its sensuous wisps of smoke whirling around the room, filling their lungs and spilling out their mouths as if they were dragons. There were certain arts Meena’s aunt had trusted her with. How to make others joyful. Lachrymose. Paranoid. Full of rage. Kiran

trusted her to only use these skills in case of an emergency. With James's life and the lives of her people in the balance, Meena could think of no other way to describe her current predicament than an emergency.

And so, with all these elements combined, Meena knew it would not be long before they exploded. She lingered by the door, hoping that if any of the kitchen servants passed by they would just think she was a silly girl sweet on one of the men. She listened out for changes in the murmuring, as subtle as the sun's slow movements in the sky before nightfall. Though behind the door, Meena could hear the laughter die down and fevered side conversations, conspiracies and outrage begin to build. Jugs of arrack were ordered at greater pace, and then, not at all. Meena could feel the mood curdle from fraternal pretence to open hostility. The only thing left was to ensure that dinner wasn't called now, lest it defuse the tension. She needed a delay.

She walked into the kitchen and marched directly to Dhruv as he was putting the finishing touches to tonight's spectacular meal. She did not have time for subterfuge.

'Dhruv.' No response. 'Dhruv.'

'Princess, I am busy. Take your food and go.'

She leaned forward and whispered, 'Delay the banquet.'

He set down his ladle. 'What?'

'I need you to delay the banquet.'

He leaned towards her. 'Are you mad, child? Your father would have my balls. I'm not doing that.'

'Trust me. It'll be fine. No one will worry about the food.'

Dhruv's eyes narrowed. 'Why?'

'Because today's events will be at the top of people's minds, not their dinner.'

'We have fifteen men who spilled their bellies in front of the Nawab of Bengal. They need something else for people to think about.'

Meena looked into his eyes. 'Dhruv, it will be fine. I promise. I need you to delay the meal.'

Dhruv was momentarily silenced. 'What have you done, princess?'

She swallowed. 'Nothing.' She considered her best course of action. 'I have done nothing. But I need you to delay the feast, otherwise I will tell my father that I saw you poison the soldiers' food.'

Dhruv pulled away, shaken. He looked around to make sure no one was watching. 'I thought it was that English boy.'

'Maybe it was. Or maybe they did not have a witness who knew the actual truth. It would, after all, be easy for you to have done. Easier than that Englishman breaking in. You and I both know my father will not listen to reason once swayed to anger. So please. Delay the food.' Eventually the old man's shock gave way to a resigned nod. 'Thank you.'

'How long?' he asked, gruff and weary.

'You will know.' As Meena turned, she felt his hand on her forearm. She looked up at him.

'Please. Princess. Don't come back. I do not want any trouble in my kitchen.' His eyes looked sad, and uncharacteristically scared. Meena wished she could give him what he wanted. She gently lifted his hand off her arm.

'I'm sorry.'

As she left the kitchen, she could hear the fuse burning down to its explosive end. Conspiratorial murmurs had given way to drunken rages, shouted accusations and threats so loud that none of them heard Meena lock the door. Siraj had a temper, so it was expected that with fifty or so hot-headed drunks, the first blow was to follow soon after. Meena lingered outside the door for a while, the sitar and tablas drummers for the banquet drowning out the commotion for the ears of others. But she knew when it happened from the sudden hushed disbelief. And then, retribution followed and followed again. She heard screams that she had only heard when

passing the butchers' lane of the market. The cloying scent of blood overpowered the fragrant food simmering in the kitchen. Occasionally the door handle rattled frantically. The first time made Meena jump. But it was not long before the rattle was replaced by a heavy thump as an unknown poor soul's lifeless body slumped to the floor.

This was the plan. This was *her* plan. Hers and James's plan. This was not the time for reservations. She couldn't let James die. The stakes were bigger than both of them. His information might be the only chance Calcutta had and she couldn't let it die with him. A band of men, brutes, who'd spent years abusing and leering at her – how could they be more worth saving? She forced her shallow breaths to deepen, filling her lungs as if diving underwater.

And then there was silence. The servants hadn't come, just as Meena had hoped. The reputations of her father and Abhishek had preceded their journey to Calcutta; even if they didn't know what was happening, the servants knew better than to come running if they heard screams. And Dhruv would have made sure no one left the kitchen for as long as he could.

Meena took the key out of her pocket and unlocked the door. She smoothed down her hair and tried to push the screams to the back of her mind. Then she made her way to the banquet hall.

CHAPTER 7



*T*hough hushed whispers and furtive looks around corners filled the palace over the next couple of weeks, no further action was taken. With James locked up the chaos that night clearly could not have been caused by him in any way, which added to the fear and paranoia. Meena's father wanted to avoid any word of the whole bloody affair from getting out beyond the gates. As ruler, his claim to the city hung in the balance, as a stronger foreign power stood threatening at his door. What would people say if he could not even guarantee the safety of his own home? Not to mention the fact that he was personally more vulnerable, having lost his armed guards. No, there was no profit to be made from such information getting out. So, secrecy swathed the palace, covering them all in suspicion and intrigue.

By the time Meena scuttled back to the hall she had managed to compose an expression of calm that belied her recent whereabouts. She suppressed her desire to run back to her quarters and scream into her pillow but thankfully her father was sulking in his quarters after being denied James's head earlier, and her brother – the preening fool – was still busy getting ready so she didn't have to pretend. Courtiers gathered by the bronze elephants flanking the entrance of the vast hall, but their hollow bellies led to a growing impatience at the tardiness of the guests of honour.

The Nawab and his heir could be late, but it was the height of disrespect for the soldiers to not arrive on time. Chatter began to sour as finally Amir, his hunger rumbling for all to hear, called for one of the servant girls to fetch them. By the time Abhishek and the Nawab had graced the guests with their presence, it was apparent something was wrong. Once the guards opened the doors, the full extent of the horror that had unfolded was clear.

The terror was writ on the contorted, lifeless faces, some barely still attached to their wretched bodies. Others were not so lucky. Meena had learned from Binita and the servants' whispers that a delicate little trail of red ants marched through the blood to get their fill of the spilled arrack which had fallen amidst the fighting. The sofas in the centre of the room had been painted red with slit throats. Every man was frozen in fury or shock. A smeared trail of handprints suggested a couple had dragged themselves to the door to try and get help; no one knew what to make of the fact that they hadn't succeeded. There was no alarm sounded, however. The whole bloody affair instead seemed to seep through the palace, in hushed tones and shared, haunted looks. Like a festering wound, the cursed sight spread from the initial site of infection and flowed through the palace until everyone was tainted with knowledge of the unnatural violence that had befallen the men.

The gates were locked and the guests were questioned in turn as to whether they had seen anything. Everyone except for the women who were sent to the zenana at once, lest their sensitive temperaments become overwhelmed or corrupted by such darkness. Meena spent the night worrying about Dhruv but when daylight broke it was clear that he had kept her confidence, however reluctantly. Once interrogation had turned up no information, the consensus was that the hot-headed men just killed each other after too much booze and resentment. How no one heard, or why none of the guards had managed to escape or get help remained unanswered questions, but the day was shrouded in enough horror that no one wanted to

dwelling. The smell, lingering and penetrating every inch of the palace, no matter how hard the servant girls scrubbed, became the only unspoken reminder.

Her father, though deeply suspicious of how he lost his whole personal guard in one day, was even more paranoid about word getting out. A Nawab with the East India Company battering down his door was one thing; but one that lost his personal bodyguards was an altogether weaker, more vulnerable prospect for the British to finish off. There was no way Meena's father wanted to draw any attention to what had happened, so new recruits were swiftly and quietly brought into the palace. However, having to draft in young and inexperienced men as temporary guards had left him with an even greater temper and more suspicious of everyone around him than ever before. He was declining more audiences and staying away from the rest of the household in his quarters. Meena was relieved as sleep had continued to evade her since then and she likewise sought solace away from everyone. She threw up that night but luckily Binita took it for her delicate, if unladylike, reaction to such violence. This meant Meena was able to stay in her room without any questions. But still, she could not sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the blood seeping through the door. And the strained screams. They gnawed at her, hunted any scrap of peace she allowed herself. Whenever she began to drift off it was always the screams that jolted her right up. This time, however, it was the rocks at her window that stirred her. She opened her eyes and sighed, wishing she didn't have to get up because she knew exactly who was at the window.

She dragged herself up and put on a robe thrown on the back of a chair. It had been days since she had drawn herself up from her bed. She walked over and peered through the curtains of the window where she spotted him. She sighed. Meena had barely said a word to anyone since that night and was sure she did not want to speak to him of all people. She wanted to put all thoughts of that day, and her part in it, out of her head. But that wasn't

all that was running through her mind, and she loathed it. Seeing him, being around him, would put everything she tried to keep hazy suddenly into sharp focus. Meena nodded and made her way downstairs to meet James.

She crept through the mango grove where she found him waiting. He looked rumpled: his shirt half-tucked, his hair stuck up from his hands running through it too many times. His brow was deeply furrowed as he turned around when he heard her footsteps.

‘What happened to you?’

‘What do you mean?’ Meena said, hunched with her arms folded. ‘I’m fine.’

He gestured in her direction. ‘Your eyes are bloodshot, your hair is a mess—’

‘I could say the same about you,’ she said drily. ‘And it is not polite to comment on a lady’s appearance if she is not... up to her best. It has been quite an ordeal, you know.’

James took a step forward towards her, his eyes poring over her searchingly, trying to understand her new, aloof tone. ‘Yes, I know,’ he said. ‘You were meant to come and see me after. Your deranged father still has me under watch; I have only just now been able to slip out of the Company’s house.’

Meena shrugged, trying to avoid his keen gaze. She was very aware of how close he was to her, how the gentle breeze of his breath felt on her skin. ‘I lost track of time. I forgot.’

James frowned. ‘Did you lose track of time, or did you forget?’

Meena did not like his incessant questions and was already craving the cocooned comfort of her bed. She could not bear to continue this conversation. ‘I think you should leave.’

‘Wait a second.’ James grabbed her by her wrist.

‘Let me go,’ said Meena.

‘I need answers.’

‘I said, unhand me.’ Meena stared at him as she spoke, her voice firm and determined.

James let go of her and looked around. He held his hands up in surrender. ‘Fine. Just, please. Speak to me.’

‘What does it matter?’

He stared at her incredulously. ‘Of course it matters. I want to know what’s wrong.’ His voice grew soft as he pleaded with his eyes. ‘Please, Meena.’ He let a small, bashful grin spread across his face. ‘You must be aware that I care for you now. You’re not like any other woman I have ever met. I can’t stop thinking about you. If you don’t want to see me again, if my feelings are not reciprocated, then I will leave you be. Even if it does pain me to leave you in such a state. And if my feelings are...’ James hesitated. Meena could see him turning words over in his mind, trying them all for size until he found those that fitted. ‘If there is any chance that you feel just the merest affection for me, then I need to know.’

Meena did not know how to respond. She had steadfastly chosen not to examine her feelings about James, though they lay there in the background, ever present in their every interaction.

Meena sighed and sat down, letting the full weight of her flop heavily on the ground.

‘I do. Have feelings for you. But it would be unthinkable. The consequences would be too great.’

James sat down beside her. He held her face and slowly tilted it up to his, which was lit up by a small but hopeful smile. He moved the hair out of her face; Meena thought she almost caught a slight tremble of his fingers. ‘I understand. Thank you for telling me. I would never put you in danger or ask you to do anything that would put you in harm’s way.’

Meena smiled briefly at him. ‘Thank you.’

They sat in silence under the forgiving shade of the mango trees for a while, the bright green canopy offering much needed shelter and seclusion

from the midday sun – as well as from any prying eyes.

James coughed lightly. ‘And I wanted to thank you for what you did. For doing that for me. I cannot imagine how awful it was.’ Meena looked down once more. She had hoped they had moved the conversation on. Though merely days, it felt like so long since she had left her room. She needed to use her surroundings to take her mind off that night. Off what she had done. The whistle of the breeze through the trees, the sway of the grass, they all offered something else to focus on. Something other than the blood and desperate banging on the door.

She could feel James pausing, waiting for her to say more, which she had no intention of doing. He finally broke their silence. ‘Does anyone suspect us?’

Meena shook her head. ‘No. Baba doesn’t want anyone to find out about it – he’s worried it would make him seem weak – so he hasn’t called for a proper investigation. We’re safe.’

James exhaled a huge sigh of relief. He smiled and, after a moment deep in thought, nodded and took her hand. ‘Come with me.’

Meena snatched her hand back in shock. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Come with me. Leave this land. What is there here for you anyway? Let me save you from your father and brother. You deserve so much more than this life of cruelty. Don’t you want a life of freedom? Of adventure?’ James caught his breath, seemingly surprised by the palpable exhilaration. He reached for her hand more firmly this time. ‘Please say yes. We can build a new life, not one of war and greed. Together.’

Meena tried to compose herself. She was tempted by his charms, that at least she was sure of; even if she could not bring herself to admit it to James. But his ideas, his beliefs, his dream of what their life could be. It was far too intoxicating to ignore.

‘I would like that,’ Meena said breathlessly. ‘Theoretically,’ she followed up firmly, trying to regain some composure but this cracked under

her excitement. She let slip a small laugh.

James's grin spread wide. 'Really?'

Meena smirked. 'Yes. But how would we?'

'Well, has your father mentioned the gold?'

Meena stared at him blankly. 'His entire company of personal bodyguards murdered each other in a bloody, drunken brawl. No, he has not.'

'But I survived them, so it's mine.'

Meena glowered, drawing back her hands. She was utterly perplexed as to how his mind could have turned to something so inconsequential when blood had been spilt. Because of their actions. *Hers*. She felt frustration and anger rise within her, engulfing the warm feelings that were there just moments ago. The pain she felt regarding the guards was sharp, close to the surface. And James's lack of interest or concern drove the knife that much further in. She folded her arms. 'So ask for it.'

'Excuse me?'

'You want to claim your prize. It's what you came for. So ask for it.'

James, evidently not expecting such a hostile reaction, physically leaned back, away from the force of Meena's blunt words. 'Hang on now—'

'But before you do,' Meena said, cutting him off, 'I recall you promising something to my father first. Information that was supposedly going to help us against the Company.'

'Your father will kill me on sight after the other day.'

Meena stood up. 'Well, that would be a risk you have to take.'

James looked hurt by this. 'I thought you cared for me.'

'And you said you wouldn't put me in danger,' Meena retorted. 'My father is even more erratic and paranoid. He had me whipped last time I tried to help you; what do you think he would do now?'

'What do you think he'll do to me?' he asked.

Meena got up from the ground, brusquely brushing off errant blades of grass from her trousers. ‘I don’t know. You say you care for me, deeply, but all you have concern for is your precious gold. I don’t know how you might be able to claim it, but I know that I cannot do your dirty work for you this time. You have to do this yourself.’

* * *

MEENA BURIED herself in the bedcovers, trying to block out thoughts of him. But all she could think about instead was the ache of her guilt and the blood trickling out from under the door. What made it worse was the creeping heat, the tingle in her belly that he gave her. They were all dead. All by her hand. Because of him. Meena cursed such feelings after what she had done. But lying in her bed, cold and alone, she found herself longing for that fire that lit her from within. She felt it, when he touched her face, caressed her hair. But now her skin felt cold and the tingle had turned into knots. Occasionally, Meena would find her hand drifting to the hollow of her stomach, or brushing over her arm, just to feel that creeping heat once more. When she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine James was there with her.

Meena lay like this for the next couple of hours, until she heard a knock at the door. One of the servant girls.

‘Um, Your Highness?’ the frightened girl squeaked. ‘The Nawab has sent me to, um...’

‘My baba has sent you to what? Summon me?’

She nodded.

‘Well, tell him I am unwell.’

‘I – I am sorry, Your Highness but, um, he insists... He insists you come at once.’

Meena folded her arms and bowed her head to avoid the girl seeing her expression as she sighed, her loose curls falling like a curtain over her head. 'I will be there shortly.'

Meena didn't know what she'd expected when she walked into her father's throne room – her mind was still foggy from sleep deprivation – but seeing James again was not it. Her heart was heavy and her mind exhausted. She turned to her father, confused.

'I thought the usual formalities could be dispensed with, given the apparent circumstances,' her father snarled. Meena looked down in embarrassment. She did not know what her father knew but she suspected it was more than she hoped.

'Meena, this young man has returned. To claim his reward.'

Meena raged on the inside but attempted to maintain an appearance of placidity. 'I see.'

'Do you know anything about this?'

James interjected before she could speak. 'No, Your Highness. The princess knew nothing of this. I have come here alone. You have my word.'

Meena focused her eyes on the rug, if only to stop herself from rolling her eyes at this excessive response. She soon picked her head up, however, when she heard the click of her father's fingers.

'Meena,' he said sharply, 'is this true?'

She shrugged. 'Yes.'

Her father frowned at this curt response. 'So? What do you think? You were such a keen advocate for him before.'

'I defer to your judgement, Baba.' Meena did not want to be drawn further into whatever James was playing at.

The Nawab's eyes widened. 'Oh? You were so eager to put your view forward before and now you have none?'

Meena was certainly of the view that she did not want another whipping. 'Forgive me, Your Highness, I am not well,' she said,

swallowing half her words, 'but my opinion has not changed.' She paused to glance briefly at James. It was just a moment, but their eyes locked, and she saw the wariness in his eyes. She recognised it well. The feeling of having your life in someone else's hands and not knowing what they would do next. 'I believed he had information that could prove useful to us. If that is so, then anything that was agreed ought to be owed. If not, then he should leave. Immediately.' She could feel her father observe her carefully, intently. Silently.

'If I may, Your Highness,' James said to her. Their eyes met, again only briefly, but Meena felt lightning course through her bloodstream. 'I have explained to your father, His Royal Highness, that I do have information that I believe is of great importance to your father's kingdom.'

Meena looked in turn at her father and James. 'And what information would that be?'

'Thirty thousand men. Thirty thousand men march in three days. Not on Calcutta, but Plassey, one hundred miles north of here. You will know it is near Murshidabad. My uncle is riding tomorrow, and he intends to meet you in battle at Plassey and then the rest of Bengal.'

Meena's breath caught in her throat. She may have not been fully alert when James began to speak but she was awake now.

'Thirty thousand soldiers. In three days?'

James held Meena's gaze with solemn intent. It was the first time, since she entered, that he'd looked at her without any sense of fear or apology or shame. 'Yes, that is correct. And what's more, they have been advised on weaknesses in your defences by an ally of yours they were able to bribe.' James looked at the door to make sure no one could listen in. The guards were already dismissed. James took a deep breath. 'Amir, Your Highness. He has been taking money from my uncle's men to provide information about your plans, where you will be and how they can get the better of you. I am sorry, Your Highness, to be the bearer of such news.'

A long pause followed James's speech which filled Meena with fear. Eventually the silence was broken by the Nawab snorting in derision. 'What are you sorry for? I've never heard such nonsense in my life.'

'I assure you, Your Highness, this is no lie. I was given Amir's name before I arrived in Calcutta. I was told he was a man within the Nawab's circle that I could trust. He has been in my uncle's employ for the past six months, passing on intelligence to the English and sabotaging your military plans. I have personally seen letters from him, letters filled with sensitive information about your armies, provisions, positions. My uncle has been able to prepare for battle all the while knowing what you will do and how to defeat you. He knows there would be little point in meeting you in open battle with your numbers. So he drew you down here to Calcutta, leaving the north open for him to take.'

Meena's mouth fell open. 'What?'

Meena's father scowled at her. 'Foolish child. You cannot possibly believe him. You think some company is going to Plassey, at least a two week-march, with that kind of army? Or that I've been betrayed by Amir, of all people.'

James stepped forward, his brow slightly furrowed. 'Your Highness, you know my uncle has been amassing an army for a while, made up of anyone willing to fight for pay.'

'And you think any self-respecting India-born man would fight against the Nawab of Bengal? That my own advisor would turn against me? You must be a madman. My men are loyal.'

'My uncle pays handsomely, you must know that. Enough to turn even Amir's head. Powerful men are just as greedy as any other man,' James said.

Despite his protestations of his men's loyalty, a week hadn't gone by since they came to Calcutta that her father hadn't raged against some advisor, some general, even some poor servant, alleging treachery. The idea

that someone betrayed him to the English would not have shocked him. No, what would have burrowed under his skin was the idea that someone he never suspected was taking him for a fool. Amir had been part of his court for as long as Meena could remember. And her father's own slow wits depended on Amir's skill for machinations. This was Meena's father's worst nightmare.

The Nawab slumped in his throne, arms folded in front of him. 'If you think I'm going to take your word for this... That I would risk my men. I know what you're doing, Chilcott. You're trying to get me to leave the city again so your uncle can take it while I'm up in Plassey. Well, forget it and forget your gold. Your uncle is not getting anywhere near my throne.' Meena's father leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he almost hung off the edge of his throne. 'I don't know how, but I know you were involved in what happened. It is only because of who you are, Mr Chilcott, and the potential repercussions that you still stand where you are. Anyone else and I would have had the skin stripped from your bones. You are to leave Calcutta and never return. Do you understand? Speak!'

James swallowed and glared at the Nawab. 'You're making a mistake,' he said quietly between gritted teeth.

'*What* did you say? Or do you need a reminder of what comes from crossing me?'

Frustration was burned onto James's face as he shook his head. Meena could see him struggling to swallow the futility of the situation. 'I understand, Your Highness. I understand.' He bowed and left the room, staring straight ahead without so much as a glance at Meena. She felt a ball of dread growing in the pit of her stomach. Dread about the East India Company. About Amir. About James. Yet what really left her feeling ravaged was the thought of not seeing him again.

'I don't know what has happened,' her father said, snapping Meena out of her gloomy reverie, 'but I am pleased you have found some sense.'

He got up and walked towards her, placing his hand on Meena's shoulder. She could not remember the last time her father had expressed an approving word to her. It made the ball in her stomach throb even more.

'Yes, Baba.' She bowed and headed towards the door. She paused and spun on her heels.

'Baba?'

Meena saw the approval fade from her father's eyes, the dying embers of candlelight, leaving only cold darkness in its wake.

'What?' he asked gruffly.

'What if he's telling the truth?'

Meena's father walked up to her and looked straight into her eyes. 'That man is a charlatan. You may not be able to see it, but he is. All of them are. They come here, treating us like fools, taking what they can at the point of a gun. Traders, merchants. They like to call themselves businessmen when they're just pirates who think they can make demands of kings. They all come here taking what they want, till they have little use or value for it anymore. A man like that will say anything he must to get what he wants and will not give it a second thought. Whatever the cost.'

'I understand that, Baba.' Meena guessed this familial appeal may grant her just a bit more licence to probe further. 'But still, what if he's telling the truth?'

'Then we will defeat them. Bengal will never fall into the hands of a foreign power.'

Meena frowned. She considered pointing out that once her family had been the foreign invaders but thought better of it. Centuries ago, arriving on their elephants, defeating their enemies with technological advances, bringing with them arts and innovations to their new kingdom, as she was often told. Meena occasionally wondered whether there was a corner of the world untouched by invasion, and what it might be like to live there. 'I believe James is telling the truth and we need to prepare,' she said.

‘Otherwise, every man, woman and child in this city will be under British rule, or worse. How can you sit around when they are coming for your kingdom?’

His eyes blazed with fiery resolve. ‘No one is taking my kingdom from me.’

‘But how can you be so sure? We know they have been growing their army. We know they’re devious enough to turn your most trusted allies,’ Meena’s voice had turned to a whisper for fear that Amir was still lingering close by, ‘and that they’ve taken most of the south. Why do you think this would be so different?’

‘Because I am not going to be bullied by some jumped-up pirates.’

‘Then do something!’ Meena pleaded. ‘We need to fight back.’

‘I will not discuss matters of war with a little girl anymore. We will be fine, that is all you need to know.’

‘Baba, you have an inexperienced personal armed guard and exhausted troops. We will be captured by sunset if they try to take Bengal.’

She noted something flicker across her father’s face – fear, perhaps? Something had certainly caused his face to turn solemn. ‘That will not happen. I will not let it happen.’ He held his head in his hands and sighed. ‘You have no idea, girl. Can’t you see how precarious this all is? I have enemies on all fronts, and you want me to trust the worst of them?’

‘Baba, James is not the enemy.’

‘They all are!’ he roared, his voice almost breaking with desperation. It was a sound she had never heard come out of his mouth. ‘He might cloud your judgement with fine words, but he is of their stock. They totally overran the south, your mother’s lands. This isn’t about trade or control – this is about domination. Over our people, our kingdom. Over us. I will not allow myself to be taken in by one of them, no matter how good a liar he is. I can’t.’ The fear in his voice lent a certain resonance to his words, the

shame reverberating, striking Meena to her core. She wished she could say something, as much as she wished he would admit the terror in his heart.

Meena paused and frowned, unsure of what to make of this change from his prior belligerence. 'What will you do?'

'We will leave tomorrow.'

'For Murshidabad?'

'Yes, to gather the rest of our belongings, before heading to Patna.'

'Patna?'

'We still have allies there. My men will meet this supposed army in battle at Plassey, but I won't let myself be taken by the British.'

Meena didn't know what she had expected her father to say but she knew it wasn't that. Moving away again. Away from home. Away from James. She found herself staring at him for a whole minute before she could find the words.

'You want to run away? From battle?'

'I am not running away, girl,' her father snapped. 'I do not run away. I am preparing for a strategic retreat.'

Meena scoffed. 'From battle. You're not even going to face them yourself.' He struck her. Her cheek was on fire but she couldn't stop.

'What about the people? Are you just leaving them to the mercy of the British? What do you think will happen to them?'

'I am the Nawab, and this kingdom belongs to me. Not them.'

'What about everyone here, in the palace?'

'We will take a small detail of guards for protection, whatever good that will do us, but otherwise we will travel light. Don't look so upset, foolish child. There are more handmaids in Patna.'

'So they will be left here. For the British to do what they want?' Meena was now yelling despite her better judgement.

'Enough! I have had enough of your insolence and arrogance,' the Nawab shouted. 'I always knew you would take after your witch of an aunt.'

She was sullen and insolent like you, always thinking she knew better than me, about your mother, about my kingdom. I am your father and your ruler, and you will do what I say. And I have too much to do to waste my time arguing matters of state with a child. The sooner I take you away from this wretched city and those white men and their disgusting influences, the better.'

He flicked his wrist and Meena duly left in silence. She could not believe her father, descendant of great warriors, was intending to run away. But time was slipping away and, if her father would not listen, she would have to act.

CHAPTER 8



Meena arrived at James's lodgings and knocked impatiently. She stood waiting by the white building's imperious columns until a servant finally appeared. He looked around her, astonished to see that she was indeed by herself.

'I would like to see Mr Chilcott. James Chilcott. It's urgent.'

'Yes, madam.' He bowed and gestured for her to come in, his stiff English costume soaked with sweat and clinging to his skinny arm.

James entered the drawing room. His shirt was loosened enough to reveal a small tuft of hair on his chest. He stood uneasy, his hands fidgeting like a child's.

'Meena, I did not expect to see you here.'

She stared at him and bit her lip. 'I did not expect to come.'

His face softened. 'Why did you? Come, I mean?' Meena glanced at the servant standing nearby, and then back at James. He nodded. 'Sanjay, we're fine here. You may leave.'

The boy bowed to James and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

James settled down into the chintz sofa, waving Meena over. 'Are you going to sit?'

Meena paused.

‘Princess? Are you going to claw at me again?’

She gave him a look and sat down beside him. ‘You are spared today.’

James mock bowed to her. ‘You are most benevolent.’

They exchanged a brief smile before sitting in silence, their legs barely apart from each other as they sat side by side. Meena, despite everything, enjoyed sitting there with James but knew that time was limited and there was too much to discuss. ‘I didn’t think you were going to ask him *today*.’

James smirked. ‘I thought it doesn’t suit a man to linger where he is not wanted. And besides, you were right. I needed to go and tell him what I knew, even if I knew it would not be well received.’

‘Is it true? Are they marching on Plassey?’ Meena had turned his words over in her head on the way over and still could not bring herself to believe it.

‘Yes.’

‘And Amir?’

‘Yes.’

‘But how do you know?’

James sighed. ‘This is my uncle’s plan, Meena. He sent for me to help him take Bengal, to take your father’s throne. He expects me to be here waiting when he arrives in Calcutta a conquering hero.’

‘But he wanted my father to listen to you?’

‘He thinks I intend to feed your father false information. That’s why he supported me. Though once I leave all will become clear.’

‘Why are you leaving?’

He shrugged. ‘Your father has made it very clear that I am to leave Calcutta as soon as possible. Staying would be a death wish.’

‘But according to you he will not be Nawab for long. So why go?’

‘I have told you how I feel about what my uncle is planning. I don’t wish to be a part of that.’

Meena looked at him. She didn't know what to think but she knew how she felt.

‘Where will you go?’

‘I have some friends in the southern tip of Africa. A colony called the Cape of Good Hope.’ James flashed her his carefree grin. ‘A place can't be that bad with a name like that?’

The Cape of Good Hope. Meena had heard its name spoken around the port.

‘What is your father doing about the attack?’

Meena sighed. ‘He plans to leave Bengal. They'll meet the British in Plassey, but Baba says we have allies in Patna, so he'll first leave for Murshidabad to gather our belongings and then travel there. He claims that he will be able to regroup there but he's just being a coward,’ she said softly, and with a great sadness even she did not know she was carrying. ‘He still says you're a liar and a charlatan. But he is now planning to leave Bengal and all its people to the mercy of your uncle, while he seeks refuge in a foreign land.’

James took her hand. She wished she didn't find the weight of his hand on hers so comforting. She turned her hand over and laced her fingers through his.

‘So, what are you going to do?’ he asked.

‘I don't know.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘I don't know that either.’

‘I think you do.’ He took her hand in his other hand and stroked it. ‘I think you know exactly what you want to do.’

Meena's heart quickened. ‘And what is that?’

Before she knew it, James leaned forward and kissed her. His lips were soft and warm. He wrapped his arms round her waist, tightly pulling her in closer. He tasted sweet and salty and delicious. As her mouth parted, she

found herself wrapping her arms around his back. His arms were strong and lean, carved like fine oak. She would have forgotten how to breathe were it not for James's hand travelling south which elicited a gasp. She felt him playing with the hem of her kameez which caused her to pull away. She felt like she could devour him, like she was starving and tearing herself away from a feast. She had never felt so hungry.

Once recovered, they both stared at one another. James smoothed the back of his hair, looking at her with a fire in his eyes. Meena looked away, afraid of such intensity, her own as well as his. Her eyes crept back to him, and they stared at each other in silence.

'I can't,' Meena said, shaking her head. 'I just can't.'

'There is nothing for you here. Your insane father, your sadistic brother? I want to be with you, and I know you want to be with me too. Sail with me. Leave this place forever and we can start anew. Together.'

'But Bengal is my home.'

James took her hands in his to underline the intensity of his words and his gaze, which was refusing to leave her. 'Build a new home with me. You don't have to be afraid anymore. Not of your father or your brother or anyone. We can be together.'

Meena considered his honeyed words and his offer. His sweet mouth made it sound so simple, but she dared not believe it could be true.

'What about your uncle? Once he knows you've betrayed him then surely he will come looking for you. And me.'

James rubbed her hands. 'I'll protect you. I swear. You won't have to worry about a thing.'

Meena felt flushed. Such a promise made her hands feel clammy and her head feel light. Her heart throbbed yet she still dared not be drawn into his fantasy. No matter how beautiful the fantasy was.

'James. You know that I – I am very fond of you—'

‘Damn “fond of you”!’ James shouted. ‘Meena, I love you. I know I am not a prince, and I don’t have gold or jewels to offer you. But I do not want to leave tomorrow and never see you again. I could not bear it. I *need* you. So if you don’t feel the same way then please, let me know and I will not continue to hope. Let me know if I’m just being a fool.’

Meena’s breathing grew shallow. She drank in this grand declaration, along with his bright blue eyes and his hopeful, nervous smile. She shook her head ruefully.

‘You are not a fool. I feel the same way. I love you. And I don’t want you to leave here tomorrow without me.’

James’s eyes lit up and he kissed her again, this time more firmly, his fingers tangled in her curls. Meena felt her centre of gravity shift, her head felt lighter. She let her body fall gently on his shoulder. James put his arm around her and pulled her in closer. He smelled of the sea.

‘What do we do now?’ she asked, murmuring into his neck.

‘Prepare to leave. You will need to pack lightly to avoid suspicion. There isn’t much space on the ship anyway.’

Meena smiled warmly. ‘I will. What is the Cape of Good Hope like?’

‘Its waters are the colour of sapphires and that they glitter like diamonds. The people are from all corners of the earth. There are Africans, of course, but also Englishmen, Dutchmen, naturally, and some Malays and even people from India too.’ He grinned at her. ‘We will fit right in.’

Meena laughed at his excitement. ‘But what will we do there?’

‘Whatever we want. That’s the beauty of it.’

‘No, I mean. What will we do for money? Do you have an income?’

James laughed ruefully. ‘I’m the son of a man who died penniless, and the former ward of an uncle that I am betraying.’

Meena frowned. ‘So, what will we...’

‘I’m working on it,’ James said with haste. ‘But I will find a solution. In the meantime, I can help the sailors around the port, maybe join short

voyage crews.'

Meena sat up straight. She did not like the sound of being left in a foreign land while James went sailing around the world. 'Are you mad?'

James laughed. 'Princess, most of us do not live within palace walls. This is what the rest of us have to contend with.'

'But I don't want you to be away all the time.'

James shook his head. 'I am sorry, princess, but that is all I can offer you. I had hoped to leave India with enough gold to be set for life. But that has not worked out.'

'The gold my father owes you,' Meena said quietly. James nodded. She had never contemplated leaving Bengal, let alone sailing to a new land. Could she steal from her kingdom for an Englishman? A man to whom she was not even betrothed. Meena coughed.

'Would we be sharing a cabin on the ship?'

James stared at her blankly. 'Excuse me?'

'And when we get there? Will we share a home, a bed? What will we tell people?'

James looked puzzled. 'Yes, I supposed we would. Why, would you not like that?'

'No,' said Meena, now averting her gaze. 'I did not say that. But if I were thinking of leaving with you, then I need to know what I would be to you.'

James smiled. 'What if you were my wife?'

Meena bit her lip. 'Is that what you want?'

James took her hand once more. 'I do not want to be with any other. I want you to be my wife.'

'But how would we marry? And so quickly?'

'Well, I think a vicar might look askance at this,' James smirked. 'But what does it matter if some man of the cloth does not give us his

permission? I pledge my undying love. As far as I am concerned that makes you my wife. Mind, body and soul. That is all that matters.'

Meena looked in James's eyes, searching for answers to her unasked questions. She had become fast accustomed to James's pretty words but what he was proposing was more than unusual, it was totally contrary to everything she had been taught. A woman, certainly a woman of her noble birth, could not allow herself to be desecrated in this way. That is what everyone had ever told her. Or she could put her trust in him. In what she knew to be the right path for her. Meena tried to rationalise the question, numerate all the concerns she should have. And yet, they all melted away the moment she looked into his eyes. She could not lie to herself and pretend that she would ever let him leave without her. Even if it meant sacrificing everything.

'And I promise you my undying love. To you, my husband, in mind, body and soul.' She smiled. 'You're right, that is all that matters.'

CHAPTER 9



*R*unning and leaving everything she knew behind was not something Meena had ever considered before, and she found it rather challenging to do within a short space of time. Deciding what would be needed for a sea voyage and to start a new life was not easy, especially doing so without arousing Binita's suspicion.

She packed an assortment of yaleks, lunghis and anything else that would fit into a soft canvas bag. She was unsure of when she would need fine silks, but she could not bring herself to leave behind her finery, in particular her mother's sari. The gold one, blinding as the sun and heavy with pearls and gold and silver thread. Similarly, she could not leave behind her jewellery. Assuming their plan would work there would be no need to sell it, and, from what James had told her, there would be even less reason for her to wear any of it, but nonetheless she felt it was too beautiful to leave behind. She found a velvet pouch embroidered with jasmine flowers and filled it with bangles, rings, necklaces and earrings. She ran her hand over her mother's coronation gold diadem with pearls and rubies hanging down. She put it on and looked at herself in the mirror. She liked how it framed her face, how the light bounced off the wrought gold and onto her cheekbones. It had been worn by her mother and, before her, Meena's great-

grandmother wore it when her great-grandfather took the throne and the title Nawab. It was part of her family, her history.

Meena took off the diadem and placed it in the overstuffed pouch. She might be leaving Bengal behind and would have no need for royal jewels as the fugitive wife of James Chilcott, but she was still of noble and honoured lineage. Whether people knew it or not.

She put the pouch in her bag and carefully pushed it under the bed when she heard Binita's footsteps and a knock at the door.

'Begum, you wanted to see me? Is there anything I can get for you?'

Meena had wanted to see Binita but now she was here, she didn't know what to say. Knowing that they would never see each other again, but that she could not say goodbye. She had tried arguing that Binita could come with them, but she was swiftly informed by James that that would not be possible. Meena didn't want to be responsible for Binita on a ship with a few dozen sailors. Not that she didn't consider what would happen to Binita when they discovered her disappearance. What torture or punishment they would inflict. But then Meena came to the realisation that it didn't matter. In a couple of days everyone in the household would all be dead anyway.

'Yes, come here, Binita,' Meena waved her over. 'I know I have not been feeling well recently but I wanted to let you know that I am better.' Meena paused to take a deep breath. 'And I wanted to thank you so much for that. And for all that you have done.' Her voice was cracking despite her best efforts. She looked down in a weak attempt to compose herself, but that seemed to let the tears pool in her eyes faster. She tried to discreetly wipe them away.

'Begum, what's wrong?' Binita brought her hand up to help brush away Meena's tears.

'Nothing, nothing. I am just very grateful to you. That's all.' Meena thought about what would happen to Binita and everyone here after she left, and the guilt gnawed at her.

‘You know my jewellery box? The silver with rubies and emerald inlaid?’

‘Of course, Your Highness.’

‘I want you to have it.’

Binita frowned. ‘Excuse me, Begum?’

‘I want you to have the box. It’s worth a lot and well... it might be useful. Why, don’t you like it?’

‘Of course, Your Highness. That is very kind of you. And I am happy you are feeling better.’ Binita paused, watching Meena for a moment. Binita twitched as she appeared to consider whether to say anything. ‘Begum, you would tell me if anything was wrong... yes? I know that... I know that there have been a lot of misunderstandings between the Nawab and you. And your... that Englishman. But you can trust me. I promise.’

Meena wiped away another tear and pulled Binita in for a hug, clinging fiercely, to Binita’s surprise.

‘I know, Binita, I know,’ she said, still hugging the handmaid tightly. ‘I... it’s just... I don’t want you to get hurt. You know we are leaving the city,’ Meena leaned in, whispering into the woman’s ear. ‘I know you’ve been ordered to stay, but *perhaps you should leave too.*’ Binita pulled away, unsettled and confused. Meena took her hand whilst shaking her head, as if to dismiss any potential questions. ‘It will all be okay. I promise.’ Meena looked at the only woman who had cared for her after her aunt left. A woman who, unless she ran, would be dead or defiled in a few days. Meena felt paralysed by the guilt and heartache.

‘Thank you, Binita. That will be all.’

* * *

MEENA WENT DOWNSTAIRS to the foyer. There, she looked around to check no one was around to see. The new guards were still getting to grips

with their duties and were so far proving helpfully slack in executing them.

‘Your Highness, can I help you?’

Meena turned and found Amir walking towards her.

‘Amir.’

Knowing he was helping the British take Bengal set Meena’s blood ablaze when she saw him. He seemed to be coming from seeing her father, undoubtedly advising him towards disaster. She thought she could see a smugness in his smile – his smirk. Did he know that she knew? Or had he looked like that all this time, puffed up by the knowledge that he was secretly stabbing them in the back while lining his pockets, and she had just never noticed.

‘Are you okay, Your Highness? I am surprised to see you down here away from your quarters.’ His words dripped out, slow like honey. Every syllable seemed to take on a significance that Meena was not sure she would have otherwise noticed, were it not for James’s revelations.

‘Yes, thank you, Amir. I am well. I was just in fact on my way to the garden to get some fresh air,’ Meena said.

‘Ah, very good. It is good to take in the palace grounds one last time. I gather the Nawab informed you of his plans to travel today and I agree. It is the best course of action.’ *One last time*, thought Meena. Not exactly the words of someone who expected they would be back to reclaim the city.

‘I am so glad to hear you agree,’ Meena said coolly. ‘Your counsel has always been of great importance to my father. It has never steered us wrong, and I am sure will not do so now.’

Amir looked puzzled at this sudden praise from the typically awkward young royal. ‘Thank you, Your Highness, that is most generous. Your father wishes to leave before it gets dark so I would advise not lingering too long in the gardens.’

‘Thank you, Amir,’ said Meena. ‘I understand.’

‘Excellent. Now, if you’ll excuse me Your Highness, I need to inform the guards of the change of plans today.’ With that, Amir walked off through the front gate. Meena watched every footstep he took until the door shut behind him. She could not take any chances.

Having checked no one else was around, Meena tiptoed down the corridor. She peered inside the rooms, leaning forward just enough to catch a glimpse before snapping back, for fear of being seen. Eventually she found Amir’s study. In Bengal, his influence was unrivalled but apparently that was not enough, Meena thought as she shut the door behind her. Presumably they had promised him even greater wealth. No one desires gold more than a wealthy man.

As James had pointed out, though he might be able to get by on scraps and his wits, he could not condemn his wife to such uncertainty. They were to start a life together and that would need resources. They would need gold. And only Meena was in a position to get it. James might not be able to reap his reward for surviving her father’s trials, but Meena knew someone who had plenty of gold – and who it could be stolen from. She began to rifle through the draws of his desk, trying to carefully replace the ledgers and paperwork after looking, to avoid leaving behind any sign that anyone had been in the room. The bottom drawer was locked – the only one – which piqued Meena’s interest. She looked around the desk for a key and when that proved unfruitful, dispensed with subtlety. She picked up the heavy oak chair behind the desk by its arms and, with one determined shot, broke the lock with the chair’s leg. She prayed it was there so she could leave quickly in case anyone had heard. She knelt down to search and eventually, her fingers found the familiar cold, hard touch of money. She had brought small bags, small enough to fit into a pocket, and quickly set about emptying out the gold.

* * *

JAMES PACED while hidden in the mango grove, waiting for Meena. His eyes darted around and tapped his foot anxiously.

‘Did you get it?’ he asked as he took her bag from her.

‘Yes.’ She took out one of the bags from her pocket and gave it to James. He began to open it.

‘We don’t have time.’

‘Fine. But is that it?’ James looked nervous as he handled the small bag.

Meena pulled a look. ‘Of course not. I’ve many more in there.’

James’s eyes lit up and he kissed her hard on the mouth. ‘I love you.’

Meena’s displeasure at James’s odd behaviour faded fast. ‘I love you too. They will be leaving in an hour so we need to leave now.’ She grabbed his hand and hurried him through the back of the garden. They hid behind a jasmine tree to watch the back gate. Normally there would be only two guards at the gate whom they might have been able to overpower. But her father’s plan meant that the gate was currently overrun with guards and palanquins, coaches and drivers.

‘We’ll have to go through the kitchen,’ she whispered.

‘How can we do that?’

‘I don’t know yet, but we have to.’

She led him to the entrance. The house’s security was busy upstairs, having been alerted to a burglary. Meena went ahead and beckoned James to follow. They got to the kitchen where Meena stopped and pressed her ear to the door. Unusually for this time of day, she could not hear anything. Silently signalling to James, Meena turned the doorknob and shoved the heavy wooden door open. Inside sat Dhruv by the back door, feet on the table, dozing in the late afternoon sun. He awoke suddenly and stared at them, one eye still squinting.

‘I didn’t realise anyone was here,’ Meena said.

Dhruv snorted. ‘Where else would I be?’

‘Well, where is everyone else?’ she said, looking around the empty kitchen. ‘Where did they go?’

Dhruv took his feet off the table and sat up. ‘I sent them home. There’s no point in any of them waiting here to die. Better they get to spend these moments with their families.’

Meena stared at him in confusion.

Dhruv pulled his feet off the table. ‘I heard your family was making its way to Murshidabad. Though it seems like you have your own plan.’ Dhruv glanced at James. ‘This is the Englishman who has caused all this havoc?’

‘Well,’ said James, ‘I don’t know if that is entirely accurate...’

‘I wasn’t starting a conversation with you, boy,’ Dhruv replied curtly. James was duly silenced.

‘Why are you still here, Dhruv?’ Meena asked.

Dhruv shrugged. ‘Where else would I go? The better question is, where are you going?’

‘I was wondering the same thing.’

Meena turned around and saw Abhishek by the kitchen door, grinning his piranha-toothed smile. He walked slowly towards Meena and James.

Meena froze with fear. James took her hand and stood in front of her.

‘We are leaving, Your Highness,’ he said, puffing out his chest. ‘I am sorry if you do not like that, but that is what is happening.’

Abhishek laughed. ‘Oh, is that right? We’ll have to see about that. I am sure my whore of a sister has led you to believe otherwise, but she is not running off with some foreigner. She is coming with us, and you are mostly likely ending up in the bottom of the ocean.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you,’ Meena said quietly, still half hidden by James.

Abhishek grinned. ‘Sorry Behn. That is just not up to you.’

CHAPTER 10



Meena was suddenly acutely aware of the vast array of kitchen knives just out of reach. Her eyes shifted to them as she tried to gauge how she could grab one.

‘No, no, none of that, Meena,’ Abhishek said, shuffling over to the countertop, blocking her view of the sharp blades. ‘Now, enough of this foolishness, you’re coming with me.’

‘No, she’s not,’ said James, ‘we’re leaving together and that is that. And no tyrant or his insane son is going to stop us. Meena, let’s go.’

‘Dhruv, stop them,’ Abhishek commanded. Meena and James stood still, waiting to see what the older man would do. Dhruv himself seemed to be waiting to see what would happen.

‘Go on!’ Abhishek’s voice grew thin and reedy with impatience.

Dhruv shrugged. ‘I do not wish to be dragged into this mess.’ He stood up from his chair and walked over to the counter away from the back door. He proceeded to take an onion and started chopping. The three of them stood staring in disbelief.

‘Excuse me, you old fool! You’re defying my orders? *I* am the Crown Prince of Bengal,’ Abhishek shrieked.

‘In a couple of hours, you won’t be my master anymore. And from what I’ve heard, you might not be a prince anymore either.’

‘How dare you, you dog.’ Abhishek marched up to the chef, who was still chopping onions. ‘I should have you flogged for that.’

‘And you should have had a lot worse a long time ago, but here we are.’

‘What did you say?’ Abhishek was seething now.

‘I said my piece.’

Abhishek sniffed disdainfully and turned on his heels. Meena and James watched Abhishek make a beeline for them, having apparently finished with Dhruv. Her eyes were so keenly trained on Abhishek that she barely noticed Dhruv plunging the knife, previously slicing alliums, into the back of her brother.

Abhishek staggered and fell to the floor, his eyes glassy and his mouth wide and flapping like a fish. Meena cried out and her hand flew to her mouth. She looked at James who was similarly stunned. He put his hand on her shoulder and rubbed soothingly. She leaned gently into his arms so that he could wrap them around her.

‘What the hell are you two playing at? Leave!’ Dhruv shouted. At that moment they stood dumbstruck in horror as Abhishek, inexplicably, managed to hook his hand on the side of the counter and pull himself up. He wrenched the knife out of his back, turning around to drive it into Dhruv’s chest. Meena screamed as James tugged at her arm. They ran out the door.

Meena’s chappals slapped noisily against the stone slabs on the ground as they ran towards the port. Her arm started to cramp at her shoulder from James’s tugging. James carried her bag as it bounced between their legs as they ran. Her chest tightened as her lungs couldn’t take in air fast enough.

‘James,’ she gasped as they ran down the path to the port. ‘I can’t.’ She could feel her heart in her head, could hear the blood rushing in her ears. She doubled over as she tried to get her breath back. Her mind turned to the kitchen knife. Plunged into Dhruv’s heart, his face twisted in pain. She shook the images out of her head. The sound of heavy footsteps and

breathing filled the air. Meena turned around and saw Abhishek shambling down the road. She straightened up and ran.

‘We’re nearly there,’ James said, pulling her along. Meena looked up at the port on the horizon. She tried to focus on that rather than her breathing, or Abhishek’s footsteps which sounded like they were just behind her.

When they finally made it to the port, James and Meena weaved through the sea-lashed sailors and crates of cargo spilling out onto the docks. Despite the buzz of the crowds Meena swore she could still hear the laboured footsteps of her brother. She dared not look back and check.

Eventually they reached James’s ship. They had been told that they were leaving today and would have an extra passenger onboard but most of the crew seemed to be lazing around in the humid heat despite the sails being already hoisted. Harry – the vulgar one, as Meena remembered him – laughed when he saw them running.

‘Look, it’s James and his royal lover. Hello, lovebirds. In a hurry to get to that cabin, huh?’

‘We need to leave now Harry,’ James shouted, throwing his bag at Harry to catch. ‘Hurry!’

Meena finally looked back and saw her brother shuffling through the crowds. Her breathing became shallow again.

‘Now!’ she screamed.

Puzzled but equally alarmed, Harry and the rest of the crew set to work. James walked across the gangway, turning around halfway to hold out his hand to help Meena. She stepped onto the ship with a heavy *thud*. Her left shoe caught on the wooden plank, and she fell onto the deck, landing in a crumpled heap. Her knee blazed with pain. James came over to check she was alright. And that was when they heard the second *thud*.

Abhishek’s hair was slicked against his forehead with sweat, loose strands sticking up at odd angles at the back. His breath was jagged, and he stood uncomfortably, seemingly to avoid aggravating his stab wound. James

got up and charged but Abhishek side-stepped him and kicked James's legs out from under him. He proceeded to repeatedly strike him. A crew member ran over to Abhishek and punched him, grabbing him roughly in a headlock.

Meena scrambled over to James who was spluttering, his face contorted in pain. Meena felt the ship sway beneath her, adding to her confusion amidst the chaos.

'We need to sail before any more mad bastards come aboard!' yelled Harry from the main deck.

Meena nodded. 'We can drop Abhishek overboard. He won't get back to the dock in time for anyone to catch us.'

'The rope, the rope needs to be untied,' James gasped. Meena looked around and saw the ship was still moored with a thick greying rope tying them to the dock. She ran over to it but couldn't figure out how to undo the knot.

'The axe!' she heard Harry call behind her. Frantically, she looked around and saw the light glint off the sharp edge of the heavy blade to the side of the ship. She cradled it with both hands and brought it back carefully to the rope. She took a deep breath and swung the axe with all her might over her head. She hit the edge of the ship, a couple of inches from the rope. She swore and tried again. On the third swing she hit the braided rope and separated the strands, freeing the ship from its mooring. The vessel creaked and swayed as it began to drift away from the port. Meena dropped the axe and looked around. Abhishek and the crew member were grappling on the ground, both sets of limbs flinging in opposite directions as they rolled around on the deck. She saw one of them reach into their waistband and then she was blinded as the object reflected the sun into her eyes. She held her hand over her eyes just as she saw her brother repeatedly stomp on the man's head. The man dropped the gun he had been holding in his other hand and Abhishek snatched it up. The ship lurched one way then the other

as it picked up speed. Abhishek pointed the gun at the handful of crew on deck in turn as they all watched him warily. Then he slowly walked towards James. Meena felt her heart stop. She ran over but Abhishek smashed her face with the side of the gun. She heard the heavy thud of metal and crunch of her bones as her vision distorted and she fell down.

‘You bitch,’ he spat as he crouched over her. ‘I’ve had enough of you.’ The gun dropped as Meena then felt his hands wrap around her throat and squeeze. She watched his eyes take on a razor-sharp focus. Fear overwhelmed her senses as she felt her windpipe constrict. She tried to rip his hands off her, kicking and flailing her legs as breathing turned to empty gasps. Her vision grew blurry and full of white spots. Then there was a gunshot, and a gust of wind filled her lungs as his hands fell from her throat. She looked up and saw James punching Abhishek who now lay on the ground. His side was bloody from where the bullet had grazed him, but Abhishek showed no sign of defeat. He refused to. He blocked one of James’s punches and, having pulled a knife from his waistband, proceeded to stab at him repeatedly. And then another and another until James was laid low, flat and bloody. Meena, slumped on the floor, felt something dig into her back. She reached behind her and felt the smooth wooden handle of the axe.

Meena picked it up and felt its lethal weight in her hands. She could hear Abhishek’s blade repeatedly swoop and try to connect with James and crawled to her feet. She coughed, still clearing her airways. The coughing caused Abhishek to turn around. Meena swung.

Blood spurted forth and sprayed Meena in a downpour. She pulled the axe back which brought back with it a bright red stream from the deep gash in his forehead. Meena breathed faster when she saw Abhishek’s eyes bulge in shock and she swung the axe again, this time hitting his chest. Some of the gore splashed onto James who staggered back in horror. Abhishek crumpled before her. Meena saw her brother’s stiff, blood-soaked body. The

brother who had killed Dhruv, tried to kill her, tried to kill James. Who had tortured her for years, made her spend every moment of her life in his presence on edge, terrified of what might happen. She thought about this as her grip on the axe tightened. She swung the axe and brought it down heavily on his broken body. And she swung again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again.

CHAPTER 11



When the axe met the wooden deck Meena finally stopped striking her brother. The sound of the wood splitting woke Meena from her blood-soaked trance. She dropped the axe, astonished by how badly her hands hurt. She turned to James who was as white as the fluttering sails, mouth agape and eyes darting between her and where the wooden deck had split. She began to turn her head down towards the deck but hesitated. She took a deep breath. And looked.

Where Abhishek had lain was now a bloody puddle. Jagged parts of limbs and unidentified ephemera were strewn around her. Her heart beat quicker when she saw his severed neck. Beads of sweat fell where his torso once was. She looked down at her shalwar kameez and stared at the red patina creeping up her sea-green trousers and tunic. She clenched her fists and tried to rub the sticky, bright-red gore off her fingers. She rubbed her hands on her trousers but then stopped once she saw the blurry, bloody handprints. Meena slammed her hands on the deck as the horizon swayed sideways, shifting the boat on its axis.

‘Oh God,’ she said, as her head fell low to the deck and she squeezed her eyes shut. After a few quick breaths she opened them and ran to the side of the ship, emptying the contents of her stomach over the railings.

Meena spat the bitter taste out of her mouth, using the back of her hand to wipe away the residual bile from around her lips. She closed her eyes again, and saw the axe drop, severing his head from his neck, dousing her in blood. She sprang her eyes open, shaking the image out of her head.

Meena turned around. Her eyes met James's watchful gaze.

'What happened?' she whispered, before she crumpled to the ground. James staggered over, clutching his side, and crouched down in front of her to whisper soothing reassurances that everything was okay. Meena, in response, was incomprehensible, unable to speak for the ferocity of her tears. Eventually the torrent subsided enough for her to form words.

'I didn't mean to... He was trying to kill you.'

'I know, I know.' James rubbed her back and held her. He gently lifted her face so that her eyes met his. 'It's okay. I know you didn't mean to. It wasn't your fault.' James half-hugged Meena. She could hear his heart pound as he tried to soothe her. Felt the bulge in his throat as he gulped.

'Some rum! Can someone get her something to drink?' he shouted, his voice cracking.

One of the crew ran over to Meena and James with a dusty corked bottle. James thanked him and took the bottle. He uncorked it with his teeth and handed it to her. Meena looked up, eyes wide with confusion.

'Here, drink this. It'll help calm your nerves.'

She gingerly took the proffered bottle and let the brown liquid enter her slightly parted lips. She coughed as the harsh burn of alcohol hit the back of her throat, the rum's molasses sweetness offering no succour.

James smiled encouragingly. 'It's okay, I imagine you wouldn't have taken drink before. It'll help after a few sips.'

She took another swig. This time it burned a little less, or at least hurt less because she knew it was coming. She tried to focus on its sweet jaggery-like smell; she tried to let it overwhelm her senses and supplant the

metallic scent around her. She paused before raising her head to meet James's gaze.

‘What are you thinking?’ she asked.

James frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you think I’m a monster?’

James seemed taken aback, pausing briefly before pressing a forceful, “No, of course not” upon her.

‘I don’t know what happened,’ Meena whispered. ‘I saw him hurting you, and he had just tried to... tried to kill me. I saw the axe and... and I... and I swung.’

James nodded, his stare fixed on her. ‘I know. It’s not your fault. You were defending me. Defending *us*. I shot at him too. We both did this.’

‘You didn’t... keep going,’ she said quietly, her eyes downcast. She dared not look at James. She didn’t want to see him remembering how she looked.

She suddenly felt him take her face in his hands. ‘You saved me. No one has ever done anything like that for me. I promise it will all be okay. We’ll deal with this, move forward, I promise.’ James’s hand crept up towards her thick, dark hair and pulled her in as he kissed her forehead. Meena leaned forward and squeezed her eyes before raising her head to meet his gaze again. She reached out to squeeze his fingers and then recoiled when she saw her bloody hand.

‘What do we do with the, the...’ Meena gestured behind James towards the remnants. James followed the invisible trail of her hand to the gruesome scene. He turned back and tried to settle his alarmed face, until it looked determined and solemn.

‘We have to throw it, *him*, overboard.’

‘What?’ Meena said, alarmed as she stole a glance at the bloody mess.

‘We need to throw him overboard, Meena.’ She heard him clearly that time and shook her head with increasing frenzy. ‘No, no, no, we can’t do

that. We need to bury him. We need to have prayers said over his body. We need to—’

‘Okay, okay,’ James soothed. ‘Harry! Tom!’

The two men reluctantly walked over from their vantage position on the upper deck, careful to avoid the whole gory scene. They had been grimly watching the horror unfurl, wary of getting closer lest they become somehow polluted by proximity. James nodded at them before they groaned and gingerly began to pick up pieces of her brother. Meena felt Harry’s eyes bore holes into her as he grabbed fistfuls of her brother. She let loose a whimper.

Meena looked on, horrified, suppressing her instinct to throw up again. Her eyes, sore and blurry from where Abhishek hit her, flicked towards the rest of the silent crew, frozen in horror. She looked at the bloody pile before her. She thought about the look on her deceased brother’s face and blinked it out of existence. She watched them touch the wet, red mound. It squelched in a way that reverberated through her. She leaned against the rigging for support and swallowed down the rising bile. She thought about the beatings, the drownings, the chokings. She thought about the fear and the torment and the hands around her throat just minutes before. She walked over to the side of the ship and watched the top of his forearm drop into the ocean. She watched as the bloodied limb foamed in the water, bobbed up and down, then sank deep beneath the waves.

* * *

‘WHERE CAN I WASH MY HANDS?’

‘About fifteen miles that way,’ said Harry, gesturing towards the rapidly fading shoreline, as he watched her intently.

Meena paused, waiting for more information before realising that was all Harry had to say. ‘Is there anything closer?’ She looked down at her

hands; the sticky red film covering them was growing stiff.

Harry stared at her in disdain. 'No, *Your Highness*. I'm afraid not.'

Meena frowned. She looked again at her mottled hands and her blood-encrusted clothes and walked over to James.

'Is he joking?' she said quietly. James was leaning heavily against the prow, catching his breath while batting away the concerned ship's surgeon.

'No, he's not.'

'I need to bathe, I need to get this off me!' she hissed.

James looked up, mildly distracted. 'Where do you think you can bathe here? We have a limited supply of fresh water and a long journey ahead of us. The sea is too rough and the Cape is a few weeks away at least.' James looked at her and, out of pity, grabbed the bottle of rum from the surgeon. He poured it over her hands and then his. 'Here, this will have to do for now.'

Meena stared at him and rubbed her hands together. She winced as the alcohol seeped into grazes she hadn't realised she'd had. The dried blood re-hydrated and started to slide off. But the acrid metallic smell remained, if now a little tempered by the sharp scent of alcohol. He untucked his shirt and gently rubbed her hands with it, until they resembled clean.

'Listen,' James said, leading her away from the rest of the men with his hand in the small of her back, 'it will be different here, compared to palace life, and I know our voyage hasn't got off to the... best start...'

'Best start,' Harry mumbled, 'that's one fucking phrase for it.'

'Harry!' barked an irritated James.

'I'm sorry boss. Forgive me, *my lady*,' Harry said, with an almost imperceptible note of sarcasm.

'Actually Harry, I think you will find it's *Your Highness* to you. And you are *fucking* welcome,' Meena said, raising an eyebrow at him.

The crew fell about laughing, cutting through the tension. Meena hated the ugliness of the word and how it sounded in her mouth, but she wanted

to shut him up. Anyway, she knew James was right; she was going to have to adapt and quickly. James put his arm around her approvingly and squeezed her shoulders. He leaned in to push a strand of hair past her ear, but his balance gave way and he stumbled momentarily.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, steadying himself. ‘I think today’s excitement has got the better of me. Come, let us rest. You still haven’t seen the rest of the ship. Let me show you to our cabin.’ Meena nodded slowly, her eyebrows furrowed at the sight of his slightly laboured footsteps. She wished she could insist on James seeing the ship’s surgeon first, but she did not want to argue. And anyway, she needed to get away from the deck, the crew. Abhishek. Get away from the horror and shame of what she had done.

Meena had thought about how big James’s cabin would be, but she had not anticipated how dark living below deck was. Its saving grace was a chink of light that made its way through the porthole. James struck a match and lit a small lamp by the bed, illuminating the crumpled sheets on the bed. It was at most a quarter of the size of her bedroom at the palace. The chipped wooden chair held a single threadbare embroidered cushion. She silently appraised her surroundings as James stood, waiting with his hands behind his back.

‘It’s the biggest cabin on the ship, of course,’ he said. ‘Though when we get to the Cape we’ll have a large house, with a grand drawing room and a legion of servants and everything else you’re used to.’ He turned to Meena and took her hands in his and looked deep into her eyes. ‘This is just temporary.’

Meena smiled. The force with which he pressed his words upon her struck Meena uneasily, but she wanted to believe him. James pulled Meena into a deep, passionate kiss. His lips were slightly wet with saliva and his face was hot. Her mind was once again filled with the wet, slapping sound of the axe breaking Abhishek’s face, forcing her eyes to spring open.

‘I need to change,’ she said, pulling away. She placed her bag on the rickety table and dug through until she found fresh clothes.

‘Good idea.’ James pulled the bloody shirt over his head. His torso was lean and dusted in a fine coating of blond hair leading down to his britches; however, spreading across his left side was a matted burgundy. Meena gasped at his wounds. Deep and black and shiny.

James flashed her a strained grin. ‘I’ll be fine,’ he said, ‘come here.’

‘No, you’re not. Look. You need to wash the wound.’

He chuckled as he wiped beads of sweat from his brow. ‘Don’t overreact. It’s just, it’s just...’

Before Meena could try and persuade him, his knees buckled and he grabbed onto her shoulder to steady himself. She screamed for help.

James’s face soon grew even paler, and his eyes rolled back. Suddenly various members of the crew filled their tiny cabin amidst a flurry of raised voices in panicked tones, with the surgeon, a broad, bespectacled man, pushing his way forward with his kit.

Meena stood anxiously by the door where she had been edged out by the men as they all waited for the surgeon’s appraisal of the situation.

‘The wound is deep and he has a fever,’ he said. ‘I’ve cleaned it as best I can with the supplies I was able to get in Calcutta before we left in such a hurry, but it’s no good. There’s nothing more to be done but to wait to see if the infection takes hold.’

‘For God’s sake McGregor, what’s the point of you then?’ yelled Harry. ‘You must be able to do something.’ Meena was frozen in the corner of the room, her eyes fixed on James and the abscess on his chest. They had only just left Bengal. First Abhishek, now this. This was meant to be their beginning. She couldn’t let him leave her like this. She dared not even think what would happen to her, alone on this ship, if this was it. She refused to let that happen.

‘Not on this ship. Maybe if we were on land, or if I had some leeches perhaps ...’

‘What?’ she said sharply. Everyone turned around to look at Meena whom they seemed to have forgotten about. ‘He doesn’t need leeches, he needs medicine,’ exclaimed Meena.

‘Look, you’re not helping,’ said Harry before turning to Tom, who Meena had learned was the navigator. ‘How far out are we from the Cape?’

‘Four weeks, and that’s if the wind is good to us, which it isn’t at the moment,’ Tom said, glancing at his ailing captain. ‘I don’t think he’s going to last the journey.’

Meena felt a blade of ice strike her heart. She could not let James die. Not now, not ever. Not after all they had already been through. Not after all that *she* had already done.

‘Perhaps if we stopped somewhere closer?’ the surgeon suggested. ‘Then I could get the supplies I need.’

‘And where do you suggest, doc?’ said Harry. ‘She’s a wanted woman in India...’

‘Excuse me,’ Meena glared at him.

Harry sighed in response. ‘It’s true. And Batavia would be too far...’

‘What about Ceylon?’ suggested Meena before she realised the words were out of her mouth. The crew looked at her.

‘Do you think we can get what we need there?’ asked McGregor.

‘Yes. My aunt lives there. She knows medicine. She can heal him.’

‘Your Highness, please. We have a surgeon here,’ Tom said as if he were speaking to a child.

Meena glowered at the young boy’s dismissive tone. ‘You have no idea what she is capable of, and, with all due respect, *sir*, it far surpasses what I have seen here. She can heal fatal wounds in minutes. I’ve seen it, I’ve felt it first-hand. She will be able to help him.’

‘Is she some kind of witch doctor?’ asked Harry.

Meena snarled. 'She is not a witch doctor. She is very knowledgeable about medicine. She taught me much of what she knows but only she will be able to heal James.'

'Ma'am, I mean no disrespect,' began the surgeon, 'but he is too ill to take a chance on some old wives' remedy.'

Meena's eyes narrowed. 'My aunt is no man's wife and we have seen the limits of your efforts already. James is my husband. I will decide on his care, not a bunch of seamen, and I have decided on Ceylon.'

Silence fell upon them all as they considered Meena's suggestion.

'It's only a couple days' sail away,' said Tom, shrugging.

Harry turned to the surgeon, currently put out, thanks to Meena. 'Do you think he will make it?'

'His condition is grave. But he should survive the journey to Ceylon.'

Harry folded his arms and turned to Meena. 'Do you really think your aunt can help him?'

Meena looked at him with fierce determination. 'I would trust her with my life.'

CHAPTER 12



CEYLON, JUNE 1757

'If History saw them as pigs, History was Circe.'

Derek Walcott, *Omeros*

Meena knew that her aunt had headed for the north-west of Ceylon, where the forest was thick, and lakes shone like crystal. She'd once overheard the servants discussing her departure and the various rumours that accompanied her. Not a year after she left Meena overheard a maid tell Binita that her cousin in Ceylon had seen her around Wilpattu. Kiran had apparently had enough of the sea, and of the sailors and traders that sailed on it. Meena insisted on travelling by herself, not knowing how her aunt would react if she turned up with the crew. To her relief, if not surprise, no one fought her.

It was agreed that she would go on ahead and send for James if she found Kiran, since he was too weak for the trek. A brief conversation with a group of fishermen on the shore told her that a dark-skinned woman lived by herself just beyond the jungle, in a clearing, a place none of the locals had dared to venture out to for as long as she had lived there. Despite being alone, she had managed just fine, only occasionally coming to the shore for

supplies. Meena probed but the fishermen were hesitant in saying anything further, perhaps regretting what they had said already, lest the old woman found out. There was no knowing that it would be her, as the crew repeatedly told Meena.

She managed to make her way through the dense, green forestry, letting the sun that broke through the canopy show her the way. She swatted away mosquitoes and a trail of red ants from her forearms. Sweat poured down her temples, rapidly browning her collar.

The heat hung heavy and thick, Meena felt like she was wading through a quagmire, but she had to keep going. Overhead, she heard wails from monkeys revelling in her confusion and discomfort. They swung from branch to branch with enviable ease and a sense of purpose that she could only dream of at that moment. She noticed that they tended to swing in a straight line, their long, hairy arms outstretched with mechanical precision, but she could see far off in the distance that they would sharply veer off leftwards. Or just climb down and travel on foot. But there was a clear point in the forest where none of them continued to swing. The clearing must be just up ahead, Meena reasoned.

She allowed herself hope for the first time in a while. She hadn't seen her aunt in so long, since she was a child. At least five years. Before she met James, before her body grew curves, before her first blood. Meena wondered whether she would look the same or whether she was an old woman now. She couldn't imagine her aunt old and infirm.

Meena marched onwards, pushing heavy branches past her, shaking off the insects while trying to avoid the scratching weeds below. She pushed back a particularly large branch which revealed great blinding shafts of light, and shielded her eyes with her hand. Once she had made it past the thick branch, she knew she must be in the clearing. She removed her hand from her eyes and looked up. Staring straight back at her was a huge tawny leopard. The jet-black whorls of its fur were striking against their golden

backdrop. Its white whiskers fanned out and its ears were small and folded over; in another situation she may have been tempted to stroke it as if it were a kitten. Meena's mind however was predominantly focused on the cat's eyes which were trained on her. Big and yellow with a startlingly black dot. Nothing else seemed to exist for this cat, no other place that the creature would rather be than right in front of Meena.

Its taut muscles flexed and undulated as it slowly approached. Meena held her breath and reached behind her before remembering that she was alone. She pulled her arm back and curled her fingers tight into her palm. As it came closer, she could hear its low growl. And see its gleaming white teeth. Like kitchen knives. Like the one stuck in Dhruv's body. Meena shook the image out of her head. She could not afford to lose focus.

'Kanne, not yet.' Meena heard a familiar voice in the distance, but she dared not take her eyes off the large predator that was now inches away from her. It had however, upon hearing its mistress's voice, stopped stalking its prey. A handclap followed and the leopard turned around and stalked off.

She hadn't aged poorly at all. Sunlight glinted off the few grey strands that framed her ebony dark face, but that was it. Her aunt was neither frail nor wizened by the passing years. Exile had agreed with her.

'Who are you? And what do you want?'

'It's me,' Meena said quietly.

'It's me *who*? What is this riddle? Give me a name.'

Meena walked towards her. 'Chithi, it's me. Meena.'

Kiran's eyes widened until they were almost the size of the leopard's. She tilted her head, scrutinising the figure before her.

'Meena?'

Meena uncovered her hair. 'Yes, Chithi. It's me.'

Kiran walked up to her niece and touched her face, her fingers tracing her nose, her brows. 'You're so big now,' Kiran whispered as she pulled Meena into a hug. Meena breathed her aunt in as tears sprang uninhibited

from her eyes. Her aunt smelled of jasmine and sandalwood and cardamom. Meena's arms were wrapped tight around her aunt's waist. It felt like an eternity before Kiran pulled away to examine her niece once more. Meena blinked away her tears. The woman who raised her, that she never thought she would see again. Having been torn apart for so long she could scarcely believe that they were both here, in this moment. Away from her father and everyone else that wrenched them apart and filled their lives with pain.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I need your help, Chithi.’ Meena noted her aunt's narrowing eyes. ‘My husband. He's hurt. Abhishek hurt him. Badly. We ran away. *I* ran away.’

Kiran scrunched her face, puzzled, and put her hand on her hip.

‘Well, that is unexpected. And, I imagine, not something your father is particularly pleased with. Where is your young man, then?’

‘He's back on the ship, the *Argo*, docked along the shore. He is with his crew. He was too weak to travel.’

‘So, they sent you, by yourself?’ Kiran snorted. ‘They do enjoy making us do their dirty work.’

‘Chithi?’

Kiran shook her head. ‘Nothing, chellam. You were right to come to me. Let us go.’

* * *

THOUGH THEY ALL agreed to the plan, it was clear from the crew's faces that they'd started having second thoughts when they saw Meena's aunt. James was slipping in and out of consciousness by the time Kiran and Meena arrived at the ship in Kiran's bullock cart, much to the apparent surprise of the crew if their expressions were anything to go by. Meena wondered what they would have done if she hadn't returned. And then

realised that perhaps they had instead not planned on what they would do if she had.

Meena was awestruck watching her aunt work. She had spent years practising what her aunt had taught her, many hours chanting the names and purposes of various plants and herbs – *cumin to ease digestion; turmeric for heart; gotu kola helps keep the mind healthy but it also reduces swellings*; Meena had learned them all. But for her aunt, decades had turned practice into instinct as a moment's look at James's wounds was enough for her to realise what she needed to do.

In elegant, fluid movements, Kiran cast her sari over her shoulder and brought out her equipment and jars full of treatments. With barely a word, she ripped open James's blood-soaked bandages to get a better look at the wound. Such a brazen lack of propriety by an old woman seemed to hush even the most bawdy of sailors as they, slack-jawed and silenced, stood by as Kiran set about mixing cardamom with honey and the bark of a local tree which she then pounded into a paste. She applied this to James's side. As she rubbed, she whispered words with a precise rhythm though Meena could not make out what she was saying. She did not know whether she would have understood if she did. Meena felt an unmistakable chill as a sudden wind swirled around them. Just moments before, the air was thick with heat and humidity, but now it seemed to fizz and crackle with a power she could almost touch with her fingertips. She looked around and the look on the men's faces told her that they felt it too. In the middle, however, Kiran appeared unfazed, her hair and clothes unmoved by the wind whistling through the palm trees. James's body began to glow as the strands of his ravaged skin appeared to lace back together on their own. The surgeon opened his mouth, but the words died on his lips, as he realised that he didn't know what exactly he would be arguing against. Meena looked pointedly at him to ensure that he did not interrupt her aunt's ministrations further.

She had to do this again when Kiran clicked at Harry and ordered him to remove his shirt with barely a glance. The strangeness of this request precluded any dissent from Harry who found himself complying, even if he didn't know why. Her aunt tore the clothing into strips and used them to bandage James up, before giving him something for the pain and heading back towards her cart with only an instruction to change the strips of fabric regularly until the wound had healed. The whole affair was over in a matter of minutes and yet for that period all onlookers were spellbound by Kiran and her skill. Meena most of all. She busied herself, helping her aunt pack away her things, so it was a while before she caught sight of Harry and several of the crew staring at her with unmistakable disquiet. Meena wondered how long they had been watching her for.

* * *

KIRAN'S HOME was vastly different from the zenana, so much so it scarcely made sense to Meena to see her in such a place. The zenana was warm with laughter and soft furnishings, but this fortress, clad with grey stone, stood imposingly tall and barren inside, but for the leopard sitting submissively at her aunt's side. Kiran insisted on feeding Meena and James, dismissing Meena's polite declines on the basis that she had to stay for a meal with her family; so, ignoring the hungry, resentful looks from the crew, they had an awkward meal of puttu and chicken kari in silence. James, awake now and unused to such food, picked at it before deciding he wasn't hungry. Meena, however, wolfed down her plate after suffering two days of what the *Argo's* crew called hard tack and salted pork, which she'd politely declined. The mellow spices warmed her body in such a joyous way that she almost forgot the oddness of her surroundings, and the darkness that brought them there. Once they were finished Kiran offered the couple a seat on a faded, hard sofa in her great hall.

‘I know, the furniture isn’t much. The last occupiers were not so concerned about making this place homely as they were focused on how to best attack our people. But it suits my purposes well enough.’

‘Who were the last occupants, Chithi?’

‘Dutch soldiers. This was their fortress for waging war against the people here.’

James’s brows furrowed, his face still wan. ‘What happened to the soldiers?’

Kiran smiled. ‘They’re still around. There are quite a few Dutchmen around this part of the island, just on the other side of the jungle. They don’t bother me anymore though.’

‘Why not? Don’t they want their fortress back?’

‘Oh, they do. But they don’t think it’s worth hassling an old woman like me.’

‘Maybe they weren’t fans of cats,’ James said weakly, gingerly touching his side. One eye trained on Kiran, the other on Kanne, who was purring contentedly at the feet of his mistress.

Kiran smiled. ‘Maybe. But Kanne is such a good boy. He only bites when provoked. Or when I am.’

‘Why do you have a leopard, Kiran?’ James asked suddenly.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, it’s not a typical house pet, certainly not for an elderly woman.’

Kiran’s eyes widened, clearly amused by James’s wary discomfort. ‘An elderly woman, eh? Is that how you speak to your new bride’s mother’s sister, eh?’

James looked nervous and Kanne stared point blank at him, uttering a low growl. Kiran threw back her head and laughed. ‘Oh, don’t worry child, I am only teasing. Kanne knows, he won’t hurt you either. He might be an unusual companion, but we have suited each other well these past few years. And when you get older, my dear, the company of men becomes less

appealing for a woman. The years pass and you want the freedom to live your life how you want.’ Kiran leaned forward. ‘And men, in my experience, don’t like that one bit. Kanne here, on the other hand, is exactly what I need. Loyal, brave, willing to fight for me, and will never leave me to the wolves. So, tell me James, are you willing to be my darling niece’s Kanne?’

James’s eyes darted back to Meena who was currently sitting next to him mirroring his own puzzled expression.

Kiran laughed again, the sound echoing in the cavernous room. Meena did not remember her aunt being so *different*.

‘Oh, you are both funny. My dear, I am only joking. Years trapped in that palace have left you so serious, no doubt a result of your father, I’m sure. I’m a bit more surprised at you though, young man. I thought sailors were a jovial sort, but maybe that’s just when they’re the ones making the jokes.’

‘Apologies, ma’am. I am still recovering.’

‘Of course. You will need some time to recuperate. And anyway,’ Kiran said as she frowned and leaned back in her chair, ‘there is more serious business to discuss. You told me Abhishek did this?’

‘He chased us as I was escaping. He climbed onto the boat and stabbed James when he tried to stop him.’

Kiran paused, taking this information in. She shook her head. ‘I always thought he had a lot of your father in him. Even as a child he had a taste for petty cruelty. Though this is extreme, even for him. Where is he now?’

Meena closed her eyes. She took a few deep breaths as James reached out and took her hand. ‘He’s dead. I killed him.’

Kiran leaned back and nodded slowly. If she was shocked – and Meena couldn’t comprehend how she would not be – then Kiran was doing a good job of concealing it. This was another lesson she had taught Meena: the world need not know your heart if it does not benefit you. And when your

feelings do not suit the moment, conceal, pretend if you need to. Whatever you need to do to survive. 'I see.'

'I had no choice. He was going to kill me. And James. I had no choice. I couldn't go back, Chithi. I wouldn't,' Meena pleaded, her voice trembling.

Kiran held up her hand to silence Meena and looked upon the now distressed young woman. Meena had to dig her nails into the sofa to stop herself from crying.

'Well. It sounds like you have been through quite the ordeal, pillai. For that I am truly sorry. We will discuss it another time.' The older woman held her palm up once more, rejecting Meena's protestations before she had a chance to make them. She turned to James. 'Now, you will need to stay here for a few weeks, months possibly. I am good but even my abilities cannot heal such wounds so quickly. You will need to rest if you are to fully recover.'

'I don't think that is necessary—'

'Luckily, *I* do. Do you really mean to be a husband to my niece in such a weakened state? You think you can protect her? I did not heal you only for you to succumb to your injuries just miles off the coast. You are staying put. That is the end of the discussion.'

James, put out by such an admonishment but too weak to fight, merely grunted his thanks. 'And my men?'

Kiran shook her head. 'I am sorry but that is not possible. I mean your crew no harm, but I will not have a horde of Englishmen under my roof. There are lodgings around the shore if your men need a bed, but they will not board here. It is only because of my love for my niece that I am allowing you to stay here. Otherwise, you would be out as well.'

Meena was surprised by this inhospitableness. 'You said it could be months. You won't offer your home at all?'

'I'm sorry, Meena, but no good comes from a band of men,' Kiran said darkly. 'I am an old woman who has learned many lessons in my years that

I hope you never will. But come, I have treated your man and I will keep you both until you are fit enough to travel.'

James coughed. 'Ma'am, that's very kind but if they are not welcome here then we should probably stay with them...'

'Nonsense, boy. I have not seen my niece in five years. I will not have her leave as soon as she has arrived. So, you will still stay here until you are fully healed.'

Meena turned to James who sat quietly, his jaw tightly clenched. He glanced at her before looking down.

'Fine. We'll stay.'

* * *

'I WONDER whether your aunt has taken leave of her senses,' James said as he tore at his shirt buttons. Meena closed the heavy door to their room. Her aunt had looked uneasy when showing them to their quarters, but Meena had pointedly reminded her that they were married. Kiran had sighed and proceeded to lead them to a cavernous stone room with the wind whistling through the window. The sheets on the bed glowed in the candlelight. The bed was far larger than Meena was used to. Big enough for two.

Meena walked over with her hands on her hips. 'Don't say that.'

James looked incredulous. 'Meena, I do not mean to speak out of turn about a relation of yours, but the woman has a pet *leopard*, for Christ's sake. She stole this fortress from Dutchmen. Clearly her sanity was in question enough for them to choose to keep away and not fight her claim to this place.'

'She also healed you. You don't realise how bad you were. And now look at you. A few hours ago, to see you walking around would have seemed miraculous. And yet here you are.'

‘Yes, she did. Though that itself is rather unnerving. I mean, what did she put on me? She’s not quite right. She’s been out here in the wilderness, by herself, for so long, it stands to reason she would take leave of her senses. But I don’t want her to infect you with her madness.’

Meena sighed. ‘You’re right. She’s been alone for so long, and I don’t want to leave her so soon. Besides, you’re making much too big a deal of this. She’s always been a bit different, but she’s not mad. And she was always... good with animals.’

James gave her a look. ‘It’s a leopard, Meena. That follows her and hangs on her word like a house cat.’

Meena shrugged. ‘And if she hadn’t trained it that leopard would have eaten us, so I am grateful. Why question it?’

‘Because I don’t trust her.’

Meena took his hands, which were balled up with anxiety, and smoothed them out, gently grazing the palm of his hand with her fingertips.

‘*I* trust her. And I love you and you love me. So you can trust my trust in her.’

She pressed her lips against his. James pulled her at her waist. His sullen disposition changed as he drew her in. Meena recognised this want and felt her heart quicken. She luxuriated in his touch, his desire, letting his hands trace the length of her back. They kissed, this time deeper, their mouths opening, their tongues meeting. Meena’s own hands found James’s back and his pronounced shoulder blades. She adored the rise and fall of his body. The odd angles and curves that made it. After a long day, she could sometimes see his shoulder blades, the taut muscles around them once his shirt was soaked with sweat. Meena was suddenly acutely aware that she was yet to see her husband without his clothes. Yet to see all of him.

‘I want you.’ Meena heard herself say the words before she even thought about it. He looked surprised but grinned, pulling her in for another kiss. She wanted to ask if he was well enough, if he had enough strength.

Even with her aunt's healing powers his injuries were serious and she did not want to hurt him further. But this question floated away upon feeling him explore her body. His hands wandered down to her bottom, cupping it briefly, before moving to the edge of her tunic. He lifted it, exposing her undergarments. She lifted her arms to help. Once her tunic was on the floor, she untucked his shirt from his waistband. After removing his shirt, James made light work of the drawstring of her churidar. It was now pooled at her feet. He took a step back and looked at her. Meena burned within. She had never been gazed upon with such unabashed wanting, let alone by one she desired so greatly. James took her hand and pulled back the covers.

CHAPTER 13



*T*he cockerel's piercing call roused Meena from her sleep. She loved waking up to the sun's warmth kissing her naked body, her limbs entwined with James's. One month into their stay and he still struggled with the humidity and Ceylon's fierce heat that refused to abate once the sun went down, yet she regularly tried to improve his mood with tender caresses at night. Though still recovering, James was gaining back his strength little by little. And each day Meena could see his bemusement with Kiran and his surroundings growing, slowly, into frustration. Strained, polite grins evolved into terse comments and surly looks scattered throughout their stay, but she was determined to defuse the tension by attending to him as well as she could.

Today, however, she had to leave her new husband alone as Kiran had asked her to help forage. James's regular draughts and mixtures applied onto his wound had depleted Kiran's considerable stores, requiring the two of them to venture off into the jungle and collect more plants for Kiran's healing arts. Meena rolled towards the edge of the bed, but both the oak frame and her husband groaned in response.

'Where do you think you're going, my beloved?' he growled affectionately while deftly scooping her back towards him with his arm. She laughed, revelling in his strength and the warmth of his breath in her ear.

She felt him gently parting her legs with his and his hand snake down from her waist.

‘Stop, I have to help Kiran today,’ she pleaded weakly.

‘And you are certain you prefer that to staying here, in bed, with me?’ He planted kisses trailing from her shoulder up to her neck.

Meena pushed his hand, gently but firmly, from between her legs, before he could change her mind. ‘I’m certain I don’t prefer it. But I promised I would help.’

James sighed, flopping on his back. ‘So, I’m to be abandoned in favour of an old woman?’

Meena squinted to see if he was serious or teasing. ‘No, I’m just joining my aunt for a few hours. And we’re going to look for herbs to help you heal, so you are welcome,’ she said cheerily, stroking the bandages that covered the partly healed wound beneath.

James raised his eyebrows sceptically. ‘More of her witchcraft, how wonderful.’

Meena frowned. ‘James, you *are* getting better. And I’m sure you won’t have to take them for much longer. Then we’ll be on our way and can start our new lives.’ This received no response, so she looked at him and, after a moment, smiled. ‘What, that doesn’t please you? What about *this*?’ She moved his hand back between her legs. ‘Does *this* please you?’

James smirked. ‘Yes. It does.’

* * *

‘WERE you waiting for it to get dark again?’ Kiran snapped when Meena finally emerged from James’s embrace, clothes hurriedly shoved on. ‘We have to get there before midday, otherwise the birds and worms will have taken all the best leaves.’

‘Sorry Chithi,’ Meena said sheepishly but she was still glowing from her morning with James. Kiran looked at her and snorted.

‘Ah, to be young. How grateful I am that that part of my life is over. Let’s go.’

Kanne led the way, his elegant, black-speckled tawny body cutting a striking path through the green overgrowth. He acted as both guide and guard against anyone who would attempt to harm Meena and Kiran, though Meena wagered that her aunt could do significant damage all by herself if the occasion required it.

‘Is this not dangerous, Chithi? Do we have to worry about thugs or soldiers out here?’ They had come to the tall saltgrass that rimmed the nearby sparkling lake. Against her aunt’s small frame, the grass reached her knees, yet she seemed to glide effortlessly through it.

‘No chellam, they know to keep away. And Kanne is so protective, even the lizards keep away. He’s a sweet thing.’ The leopard, seemingly understanding Kiran’s words, paused and turned to dip his head slightly towards Kiran so she could pet him. She acquiesced to his silent request, earning a purr in return that made her chuckle.

‘Come on, Kanne. The male need for coddling is exactly why I live alone. Let’s go this way. There’s some tumbika and satinwood just past the clearing over there.’

The sun-dappled trees that stuck out of the meadow made Meena think of the great towers in Bengal, as they called everyone to stop what they were doing and give thanks. The quiet meant that all she could hear were the cicadas and the sharp crack of branches breaking underfoot.

Meena peered up at the high treetops, their leaves swaying dreamily in the breeze. She looked back at her aunt.

‘Do you need me to climb up there?’

Kiran cackled. ‘I remember getting you to climb up and fetch me a mango.’ Meena watched her aunt smile at the memory. She wondered how

many memories she clung to, turning them around and around in her mind over the years.

‘However,’ Kiran continued, ‘we’re not doing that today. I think you’re too big for that now, don’t you think? After all, you’re a married woman.’

‘So how—’

‘I have other ways.’ Kiran turned her hands around so that her palms faced the sun. Meena watched her aunt’s fingers waggle, almost as if she was merely stretching out stiffness. Yet, not long after, the tree’s canopy seemed to bow towards her; like a besotted suitor it offered its branches tenderly.

When her aunt looked back at her and laughed Meena realised that her mouth had fallen open. She snapped it shut while still transfixed by her aunt plucking spindly branches with their bright green leaves off the tree, their verdant hue enhanced by a shimmery glow that seemed to surround them.

Once her aunt was finished, she wrapped the branches into a cloth and tucked it into the waistband of her sari. Meena stared at Kiran who raised her eyebrows and smiled in response.

‘Come, chellam, I’m thirsty. Let’s sit down.’

Kanne ripped open two ripe orange coconuts that Kiran had packed, as delicately as a leopard could. Kiran handed Meena one of the coconuts as they sat down on the soft meadow, its dew still drying in the sun, and they drank the fruit’s refreshing water.

Meena gulped down its natural sweetness, grateful for how the shell kept the drink cool. Having replenished herself, she squinted through the sunlight to see her aunt watching her. She was smiling, apparently patiently waiting for her niece’s questions.

‘How did you do that?’

The corners of her aunt’s mouth were upturned in amusement. ‘I learned.’

‘Who taught you?’

Kiran raised an eyebrow. 'Because I couldn't have learned myself? There are some things men know, some of the arts I taught you. But there are others, ones more... advanced, those I learned myself. Being here, working with the plants, the land. I learned to listen to them, and in turn, I discover how to make them listen to me, do what I ask them to do. There isn't much you can't do when you have such a connection with the earth. No one would have ever taught me how to do that, because they're scared of what we would do with such power.' Kiran looked pensively at the ground for a moment, before holding Meena's gaze once more. 'What does James think of your power?'

Meena frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, I taught you a few things before I left and, from what you've told me, I doubt you would be here, with an Englishman of all people for a husband, without using some of those gifts.'

Meena bit her lip, embarrassed at how well her aunt knew her, even after all these years.

'I may have used some of what I learned,' she admitted, her lips curling into a smile, 'though you never taught me how to control trees or *whatever* you did to James that night to bring him back from the dead.'

Kiran raised an eyebrow. 'You didn't say anything that night when I healed him. I could see you had many questions. However, I didn't bring him back from the dead, no one can do that.'

'Well, he was dying, that is for certain. And I didn't say anything because he was my concern that night.'

Kiran nodded. 'Because you love him.'

'Of course.' Meena was disquieted by the sight of her aunt, normally so carefree, clearly trying so hard to deliberate over her words.

'I hope he loves you just as much.'

Meena frowned. 'Of course he does, what do you mean?'

Her aunt sighed. 'Chellam, you were not raised to let any man—'

‘You left when I was just twelve years old so I’m not sure you raised me to do anything.’

Kiran raised an eyebrow as her expression turned to stone. ‘Were you raised to speak back to your elders?’ Meena, chastened, shook her head vigorously.

‘Nevertheless,’ Kiran continued, ‘you have done a great deal for him. Based on what I’ve seen of him I would not be surprised if you have already saved his life more than once. I wonder if that man, with his arrogant attitude, knows what he truly has.’

Meena folded her arms. ‘You just think that because he’s English. But he’s not like the others.’

‘Did he leave India a richer man than he was when he arrived? With treasure he neither earned nor deserved? Men come in many guises, pillai. Do not be mistaken by the pretty exterior or sweet words that they offer. If he does not see you as his equal, it matters not one jot. You have so much within you, so much power. Do not let yourself be used or misled by anyone.’

‘Chithi, you are mistaken.’

‘I know you are here, having done things I would have never thought my niece capable of. But there is still so much you have to learn. Don’t let him take and take, because if he ever leaves, you need to be happy with what you have left.’

Meena stood up, trying to put distance between herself and Kiran’s words. ‘You’re wrong.’

Kiran smiled kindly. ‘I hope so, chellam. I also hope you don’t end up doing anything else you may regret. For your sake and his.’

CHAPTER 14



The jungle fowl pecked at Meena's feet. Three months since they had first arrived, and the birds were no longer afraid of her. Though Meena mused that perhaps if it knew of her dark thoughts towards the culprit that had interrupted her sleep earlier that morning, it would have been more wary.

'Chithi, you asked to see me?'

Meena found her aunt in the front yard surrounded by boar. Wild boar in any other circumstances, but here was her aunt hand-feeding a dozen or so hogs a mixture of nuts and seeds as if they were lapdogs.

'Here you go, Frederick. And I have some for you too, Willem.' Finally, Kiran looked up. 'Meena, there you are. Would you like to help feed them?'

Meena did not fancy getting too close to wild animals, but she didn't know how exactly to say no to her aunt. She walked over, trying to not startle them. She had seen them around the fortress over the past few months but had always tried to keep her distance. James had told her that they could crunch human bones in seconds. They snorted at her, seemingly content with Meena keeping her bones, and grazed her fingertips with their snouts as she approached her aunt. Kiran reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of seeds and nuts which she poured into Meena's cupped hands. Meena took a pinch in one hand and held her hand out. One boar

dipped its head to meet her hand and she felt its large, prickly pink tongue flick over her palm as it ate.

‘Ah, Jans is always hungry. Not as much as Frederick here, but he is a greedy fellow.’ Kiran stroked Frederick’s wire-like, brown hair while feeding him a handful of nuts.

“‘Jans’”? Why have you given them such strange names?’ Meena asked as she stroked the beast behind its ears. He turned his head and nestled his face in her hand.

‘They’re Dutch names. They’re the names of the former occupiers of this place,’ said Kiran.

‘You named the boars after the Dutchmen that lived here?’

Kiran chuckled. ‘Something like that. The male boar is typically greedy and aggressive. They consume everything in sight.’ Kiran turned to Frederick, gently taking hold of his face in both her hands. ‘But these boys have learned that I won’t tolerate such behaviour, will I Frederick?’ The boar bowed its head and sloped off, or so it appeared to Meena.

‘Come.’ Kiran held out her hand. ‘Help me prepare dinner. I want to speak with you some more.’

* * *

IN THE KITCHEN, a pot was boiling on the fire. The room filled with sweet, herbal notes, like sunshine on grass glistening with morning dew. It was as if the walls and the ceiling did not exist; Meena felt like she was lying in a grassy meadow, her arms entangled in the bright wildflowers, as if part of the earth itself.

Meena continued to drink in the scent as her aunt moved over to the table where a boar was splayed out, raw and bloody, stripped of its fur.

‘So which one was this?’ asked Meena, peering nervously at the carcass.

‘This was Adam.’ Kiran smiled. ‘He was an arrogant one.’

Kiran took a knife and began to butcher the animal. Though Meena did not eat boar, a taste for pigs was one of the few things Kiran and James shared so she insisted on cooking it. Meena found the smell foul but she was learning to adjust.

‘How are you feeling, pillai?’ her aunt asked while slamming the knife into the bone.

The cracking brought her back to the ship. The splintering of bone under the axe blade. Meena shook the image violently out of her head. ‘Yes, fine. Why do you ask?’

‘Because you and James have now been here for three months. I want to know if you have given any thought to what happened and your actions?’

Meena clenched her jaw. ‘My thoughts haven’t changed, Chithi. I have considered my actions and it was the best possible option available. I have no regrets.’ Every syllable brought with it a twinge in her chest as Meena fought to block out the sound of the axe falling on Abhishek. The sound of his body parts plummeting to the bottom of the ocean. But she could not say that to her aunt. If she revealed that, then that would surely mean she regretted saving James. And that could not be true.

‘I see,’ Kiran said, dicing the poor boar’s leg. Her voice, light and curious, told Meena that this was not the end of the conversation. ‘Can I ask you something? Why did you come here to find me? According to James it was your idea to travel here.’

‘Yes, because James needed help and I knew you could help him.’

‘Of course. Was there not a doctor on board? Or somewhere closer – Malaya, Siam, perhaps – that you could have sailed to instead?’

Meena frowned. ‘A surgeon, not a proper physician. He was useless, and I don’t know anyone in Malacca or Siam. But I knew you could help.’

Kiran nodded slowly. ‘I see. So your desire to come here was purely pragmatic?’

‘Yes, why do you ask?’ Meena was growing more exasperated. ‘Chithi, you clearly have something you would like to say, so please. Tell all.’

‘Pillai, I think you wanted to come here because you knew you needed to see me. You needed to see me because whatever has led you down a path of such darkness... you needed to be cleansed.’

‘I had no choice.’ Meena’s throat went dry as she felt the words claw their way out of her mouth.

‘Chellam, you took your brother’s life,’ Kiran said, pleading. Meena opened her mouth to speak but Kiran held up her hand.

‘I know what he did. I am not disputing that. Your father... *Of course* that boy would grow up like that without my sister’s influence.’

‘And where were you when Baba was raising him? You left us. You didn’t take me with you.’ Meena tried to steady her voice which she felt rising in volume and growing shriller.

‘Meena.’ Kiran gently tipped her head to the side, sighing, her eyes unbearably sorrowful. ‘You are the Nawab’s daughter. Of course I wouldn’t take you.’

Meena took a moment to consider what she wanted to say. ‘But why did you have to go?’

‘I was asked to leave. Well, “asked” is a delicate term for it, I suppose.’ Kiran mused. ‘Marched out might be another. Ordered to leave in the dead of night or be dragged out and thrown on the streets in the middle of the day like a common thief, for all to see. Your father enjoyed making a show of it all. He liked that a lot.’ Meena could see a shadow pass over Kiran’s soul as she spoke. Memories of a lifetime ago before she found peace.

‘But you could have fought it.’

Kiran laughed bitterly at this suggestion. ‘I didn’t have an axe.’

‘Or you could’ve gone back to Madras?’ Meena insisted.

‘Meena, my home was gone long before, thanks to those Englishmen. There was nothing for me there or in Calcutta. So, I came here. Many of our

people are here, you know. Some by birth, others were brought here by the Europeans. I made a new home for myself.'

Meena fell quiet. She had so many thoughts but one loomed heaviest on her mind.

'You didn't say goodbye.'

Kiran stopped chopping the boar and stood in silence.

'I thought it would be for the best.'

'For whom? You thought it would be best for me if you stole away in the night, without a word?'

Kiran folded her arms, growing exasperated. 'I would have been useless to you if dead or imprisoned. And frankly, there was enough to worry about finding refuge by myself, let alone with a child in tow. I never meant to hurt you, but I've had plenty of challenges in my life and I've faced them alone. I didn't beg anyone to help me. I didn't raise you to be someone who did that either.'

Meena stared at her aunt, gobsmacked. 'So I'm at fault because you chose to run away in the middle of night? I think you felt guilty about leaving me alone with them. Alone to suffer their cruelties. Alone without a soul to confide in. Tell me, Chithi,' Meena sneered, 'do you regret your actions?'

'Meena,' Kiran said calmly, 'I don't think you understand the severity of what you've done. And I need you to.'

'Why?'

'Because you will never be free otherwise. You will never be able to move on, not if you don't acknowledge the harm you have done.' Kiran moved towards her niece and stroked her back. 'I say this because I am concerned. You killed a man. Your own blood. The girl I left was not capable of such a crime.'

'Perhaps you shouldn't have left that girl,' Meena said, forcing back the hot tears that were pricking her eyes, cursing herself for crying.

Kiran pursed her lips before sighing in resignation. ‘Maybe, but that does not mean that there is no way for you to purify yourself of the pain you have caused. Not simply for your brother, but for yourself. Otherwise, these crimes will follow you, no matter how far you travel.’

Meena glared petulantly. ‘And so, what if they do? Why would it matter?’

‘Because you are going to be a mother,’ Kiran snapped. ‘You’re going to be a mother and you don’t want to carry this darkness as your baby grows inside you. Because you don’t want it to infect you and your family, as your father’s has infected you and your brother.’

Now was Meena’s turn to look stunned. She was still light-headed from trading blows with her aunt, so it took a couple seconds for the gravity of what Kiran had said to sink in.

‘I’m going to be a mother?’

Kiran came around the table to put her arms round Meena and hugged her tight.

‘I can tell. I could tell with your mother when she had you. Your walk, your sensitive constitution – I saw you spit out your jungle fowl the other day. You’re not showing yet, but I know it well. You are with child, I am certain. When was the last time you bled?’

Meena stared off into the distance, trying to ground her thoughts by focusing on the large cauldron over the fire. The meadowy smell. Anything that would steady her in the swirling storm of her mind.

How could she be with child? Well, she knew *how*. She and James had been enjoying their newlywed life. But for something to grow inside her, a child no less. It seemed impossible that something could live within her and she didn’t know. A child. A new life for their new start. The promise was tantalising. But she could not quell the subtle shock of her disconnection from her own flesh.

‘Your husband will be pleased.’

Meena didn't like her aunt's inflection, twisting her words into a question. She didn't like Kiran's tone when she said 'husband' either.

'Of course,' Meena replied brightly. 'We will be starting a new life in the Cape of Good Hope. A fresh start for our new family.'

Kiran placed her hands on Meena's shoulders. 'Yes, I am sure. I'm sure a place with such a lovely name will bring quite the adventure.'

Meena's eyes narrowed. 'You're mocking us.'

'Not at all. I simply hope you...' Kiran paused to consider her words. 'All I have ever wanted for you, Meena, is for you to be happy. And I hope this young man, this Englishman, will make you happy.'

'He does.' Meena tried placing her hand over her belly in a protective way. Now aware of what grew within, she dared not leave it alone. It. He? She? *The baby*. That seemed sufficiently both theoretical and real. 'He'll make us *both* happy.'

Kiran smiled sadly and stroked her niece's face. 'You remind me so much of your mother.'

'What do you mean?'

Meena's aunt sighed. 'She was hopeful too. Not that she had a choice. But she hoped things would work out for her and your father.'

'James is not Baba, Chithi.'

'I know, chellam, I know. But he is a man, and a man you don't know very well. From a world you don't know very well. A little hope might be useful. Just make sure that isn't all that you're approaching this with. A woman must always keep her wits about her, especially when there are children involved. Never let emotion overwhelm good sense.'

Meena frowned. 'Yes, Chithi. I know. But after everything he's done for me, I trust James.'

Kiran laughed. 'I know you. I know that you would have done an awful lot for him too, maybe even more.'

‘Even if that is the case,’ Meena said, raising her voice in irritation, ‘I love him, and I trust him. He *is* my husband...’ Meena paused, before adding, ‘*And* the father of my child.’ The words felt new and full of all the fear and anticipation that new things bring.

‘I know, chellam. But I want you to know that my home will always be open to you. Should you need it.’

Meena frowned. ‘Why do you think I would need it?’

Kiran went quiet. ‘Because you are a very brilliant and very determined young woman. But even a rose can wilt if it is not tended to, when it has no roots. And then all that’s left are thorns.’ Kiran carefully brushed a strand of Meena’s hair behind her ear as she seemed to struggle to find the right words. ‘You will be far away from everything and everyone you know. I don’t want your life to be one of thorns,’ she said softly.

Meena snatched her hair out her aunt’s hands. ‘It won’t be. Because I will have James. And I would see the earth fall into the ocean before I let anything change that.’

Kiran stared intently at her niece. ‘I know.’

They stood in silence for a while before Kiran spoke again. ‘I will bless you, purify you so that your voyage will be safe.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because I love you and I want to see that you fare well, regardless of what has happened. I do not blame you for what you have done but it is a great wrong. And it will follow you and your loved ones if you do not take pains to cleanse yourself of this. You’re about to begin a new life with James, with your child, and you want to begin this new journey without any of what happened in Calcutta pursuing you.’

Meena was relieved that her aunt was happy to help her, but her words sat uncomfortably. The assumed apology, the sorrowfulness. She could taste the sour pity in the back of her mouth. She wanted to spit it out. But she

said nothing. She instead dutifully hugged her aunt and made her way up the stairs.

‘Hello, my darling,’ James said cheerily. He was now fully recovered so they were due to ship out the next day, for which he was delighted. Meena closed the door but stood nervously by it rather than walk over to him.

‘What’s wrong, my love?’

‘I need to speak with you. And I don’t want you to be angry.’ Meena mumbled the last part, her gaze veering away from James. He chuckled in response.

‘And why would I be angry? Because you spent our last day here with *her*? I won’t pretend to be best pleased, but I suppose you need to say your goodbyes. It may be a while till we are able to visit again.’

Meena walked over and hooked her arms around James to steady herself.

‘I am with child.’ She spoke so quickly that she wasn’t sure whether he had heard her. ‘I’m pregnant.’ James stood motionless. ‘We’re going to have a child,’ she tried once more.

Finally, James laughed. ‘Yes, I heard you. Is this true?’

Meena nodded which prompted James to sweep her off her feet and swing her round. ‘Why would you think I would be angry?’ James asked, before kissing her hard on the mouth. He beamed. ‘When did you find out?’

‘Today. Chithi told me.’ Meena noticed his smile fade just a little but chose to ignore it. ‘And she says she wants to bless us and purify us for the voyage.’

James snorted. ‘Because she fancies herself some sort of priestess?’

Meena looked at him and gave a wry smile. ‘No, she thinks she is my aunt and she wants to do everything she can to ensure our family has a safe journey.’ He raised his eyebrows at her, still unconvinced. She tried again. ‘She loves me, James.’

James pulled her in tighter. ‘Not as much as I do.’

* * *

THE LAKE by Kiran's home gleamed bright. Meena had spent many a morning while in Ceylon by the stream staring at the watery bed below, wondering whether she could just dip her toe in. James had cautioned her against the slimy algae and yet here they were, much to his chagrin, waist deep. Kiran had made her change into a sari; the peshwaz she had worn was too fine to get wet. So she wore a simple printed cotton sari that clung to her hips. The folds of her skirt billowed and seemed to multiply in the water.

Kiran entered the water alongside them. She waded over and took each of their hands.

‘Kneel.’

Meena could feel James's eyes burning into her as she knelt. He dutifully followed suit despite his barely hid sneer. A chill ran down her back. The water now rose precariously up to her collarbone. She felt tethered by neither sea nor sky. Her hands dragged carelessly through the water; she imagined her fears rippling out from her touch. Kiran cupped her right hand in the water and sprinkled Meena and James.

The ancient words Kiran spoke washed over them. Meena did not know what was being spoken but she understood and felt understood by them. The humility, the love, the hope. She knew that she would never see her aunt again; both Meena and Kiran knew. Meena's face was damp with fresh-sprung tears.

The words dried up and Kiran placed her hands on top of both of the young lovers'. Meena exhaled what she realised had been a long-held breath.

‘Thank you, Chithi.’

‘Go, chellam. And find peace.’

CHAPTER 15



TWENTY MILES OFF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, NOVEMBER
1757

Meena silently begged for a moment of peace, trying to strike some sort of bargain. Maybe if she closed her eyes and counted to ten. Or pulled her ear five times. Or promised to go one week without a cross word to James – unlikely as that might be. Meena was willing to try anything to stop throwing up. This was the sixth day in a row, and though the first week or so travelling from Ceylon was bearable, it had become increasingly clear over the long eight weeks that her baby and the rough seas approaching Africa did not make for a pleasant combination. She turned over the pillow and leaned her cheek against the cool cotton. Meena had almost managed to close her eyes when she heard the door creak open.

‘Not long now, Meena. Tom says you can see the Cape if you squint, though of course Harry just says he’s a bit soft in the head.’

Meena forced her eyes open and turned to face James. ‘So, are we close or not?’

‘We are. Should be there by midday.’

Meena nodded, already drifting off again. James came over and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Still unsettled?' Meena dipped her head slightly, suddenly overcome with anxiety about the foul stench that must be emanating from her mouth.

'Yes. Maybe I need to see the doctor? It can't be good for the baby.'

'Maybe, we'll see when we get there. Mr McGregor is a good man but he's a surgeon, unused to women. I think he would faint if asked to examine you.' James laughed. 'Anyway, I would have thought your dear aunt would have given you something to deal with these feminine matters.'

Meena hadn't had time to ask her aunt before they left, and even if she had she wasn't sure she would have known exactly what to ask. There had been no younger children in the palace, which meant Meena was unfamiliar with pregnancy and all its delights. She knew that childbirth was dangerous because of what happened to her mother, and that Kiran had given her something to drink when the time came, to ease the pain and calm her nerves, but otherwise Meena was utterly clueless as to what this new endeavour held for her.

She shook her head. 'You don't think anything is seriously wrong?'

'I don't think anything could be wrong,' James said while stroking the gentle curve of her rounded belly. Meena smirked at him and rolled away. James lay down beside her. He once more put his hand on her stomach, stretching his arm across her. Meena pressed back into him, moulding her body to his. She could feel his warm breath on the nape of her neck. The small, wispy hairs that fell about her face, dancing in time with his exhalations. James's hand moved to the bottom of her belly.

'Motherhood suits you,' he murmured in her ear. Meena smiled as she closed her eyes, lay wrapped in James's arms, soaking up the limited sunlight the porthole offered.

Their bliss was interrupted by loud shouting coming from above them. Her eyes opened and she realised that James was still beside her, similarly

awoken. He shook his head and sighed as he got up and held out his hand so they could make their way above deck.

‘You taking naps now as well, captain?’ Tom chortled when Meena and James emerged from their cabin.

‘Nah, look at the way he’s walking. There’s no way they were sleeping!’ Harry shouted. Tom winked at James before seeing Meena’s expression which turned his face ashen.

‘Are we nearly there, then?’ Meena asked, squinting at the ocean. She could still only see clouds and mist.

‘Just an hour or so to go. The winds are strong, and in our favour, so maybe less.’ Harry glanced at Meena. ‘If you can manage not to off someone in the next few minutes, we might have half a chance of docking without any hassle. Try extra hard for us, will you, sweetheart?’

James tutted but chose not to say anything, walking off to discuss navigation with Tom, while Meena scowled. She had spent two months on the boat with James and his crew and Harry had not gone a day without a snide remark. She had borne his jibes with grace, knowing that they had a long journey ahead of them and that she had better things to concern herself with. But it was high time she said something.

‘Harry...’ she began. ‘We are nearly at the end of our journey, and I have had quite enough of your tone. I hope we will not see each other in the Cape but I suppose it might be likely and I must insist that you treat me with the level of respect appropriate to a royal lady. Do I make myself understood?’

Harry stared at Meena for the longest time before clearing his throat.

‘Listen, love...’

‘And I must inform you that I am not your “love”.’

‘And I *must* inform you,’ he said, mockingly, ‘that I am not your little servant boy that you can order about. I’ve never taken orders from a woman in my life, let alone a jumped-up native, and I won’t start now. I’m a

member of this crew, same as every man on this ship, and if your husband has a problem then he's the one who can take it up with me. I used to have a steady income, whenever they needed a couple more men to join a crew, but now that's over, isn't it? How you have him fooled, I'll never know. The others will play nice, but I see you. Your two-bit title doesn't mean a damn to me. I've never seen a woman plunge an axe into a man, let alone her own brother. Where I come from, she'd have a noose around her neck if she did. So, you can recline on your fancy bed, turn your shit-brown nose up at me and call yourself a princess. But all I see is a deranged native whore up the duff with James's foreign bastard that'll never fit in anywhere it goes. You really think you, James and it are gonna play happy families? You're more deluded than I thought if you think you and your brat are going to be accepted as a part of James's life. So, I am terribly sorry, *m'lady*, if I have forgotten my manners. I will do better to show you the respect I believe you deserve.' Harry sucked in his cheeks, drew back and hurled a massive gob of spit that landed at Meena's feet.

'Cape, ahead!' James shouted. 'Get ready everyone, we're about to dock.'

Meena heard him but her gaze was firmly fixed on the foamy, clear liquid that was now spreading across the floor of the deck.

* * *

THE CRAGGY PROMONTORY jutting out contrasted sharply with the warm inviting turquoise waters. Though the sea coming in was aggressive, the gentle waves writhed around the mossy rocks in time with a gentle breeze.

Meena had expected them to disembark to a buzz, like the port in Calcutta. Instead, she counted a handful of blond scraggly-looking boys crouched on the rocks, fishing.

'Where is everyone?'

James and the crew were checking the ropes were secure. He turned around and laughed. 'In town, where do you think they are? They don't just congregate by the rocks, waiting for pregnant princesses to arrive – even the beautiful ones.' Meena tried to force her nerves down and smile.

Slowly, more and more people emerged as they made their way north by horse and cart: farms full of Africans, wiping the sweat off their brows as they toiled. And the Europeans, with their pale skin, pale hair, pale eyes. The women's dresses were voluminous but tightly cinched in on top, like a thin, tall spire atop a mahal dome. The men were almost as drawn in as the women in their stiff jackets. Meena caught snatches of conversations in an unfamiliar tongue but none of the crew were able to translate, much to her disappointment. She watched them watching her intently. Meena was over three months pregnant and, though James insisted her body remained unchanged, she was convinced she could feel the fabric of her clothes strain against her newly rounded body with every rock and pothole they rode over in the buggy. She hoped the house James had found them would have a decent bath: she desperately needed to wash off ship life and morning sickness. Meena was terrified that she could no longer accurately judge her own scent.

'Where are we headed?' she asked.

James flashed her his smile and took her hand. 'My friend Franz is around here somewhere. We will stay with him for a while until we can find a place of our own.' Meena kept her smile tight but could not help but raise her eyebrows. She was in no mood for temporary lodgings with a strange man. Especially the location they were in currently. The fine ladies and gentlemen had given way to taverns and bloated sunburned men and crudely painted women. The buildings were wide and squat, gleaming white in the bright sun. Thatched rooves and dark wooden shutters suggested much humbler dwellings than the British buildings Meena knew from Calcutta. Away from the sea the ground was dusty. Swirls of golden-

brown dirt started to dance around her as the wind picked up. She covered her mouth with her dupatta to stop herself from coughing.

They turned a dark corner and stopped in front of a seedy little tavern with peeling paint and waist-high streaks on the walls – the origin of which she dared not think about. She stared at James.

‘Here?’ she mouthed. He squeezed and rubbed her hand in response. James helped her down from the horse-drawn buggy and knocked on the side door to the tavern. They waited for a few minutes before an old, spindly man opened the door.

‘Franz!’ James said warmly.

Franz seemed puzzled by the crowd of people and bags on his doorstep, then glared at James.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing here, you little weasel?’ he spat. ‘I ought to shoot you on sight.’

James’s ashen face expressed how taken aback he was by the vehemence of Franz’s anger. So much so that he stepped back and stood on Meena’s toes. Her scream prompted Franz to swivel his attention towards her.

‘And who the hell have you brought with you, huh? More whores and drunks who can’t pay at the end of the evening?’

‘Alright, Franz, that’s enough. This is my wife, Meena. We would like to spend the night here. We all would. And don’t you worry about my crew. I’m paying for them.’

Franz folded his arms and snorted. ‘Oh yeah? And who’s paying for you then? Your wife? You’ve tried this before, James. I know you don’t have the money.’

‘Actually Franz...’ James said, pulling out a small cloth pouch from his pocket. He opened it and showered gold coins into the palm of his hand. ‘I do have the money. Now, if you don’t mind, my wife is with child and has

travelled a long way. I do not want you to bother her with concerns of money.'

Meena shot James a bemused look, intrigued at this assertion of his, given she was the one who had got the gold in the first place. But she said nothing. She was willing to play the poor, vulnerable woman if it meant they were shown to their room sooner. Franz looked sceptical but could not argue with the treasure in James's hand. He raised his eyebrows and opened the door.

* * *

THEIR ROOM WAS EVEN MORE spartan than James's rooms in Calcutta. The paint on the walls had begun to peel and the bed was hard with yellowing, threadbare sheets and a thin mattress barely providing any comfort from the hard, wooden frame. It was indeed bigger than the ship's cabin but upon inspection Meena discovered that they were sharing the room with a colony of ants, three spiders and what might have been a cockroach.

James paced up and down while Meena opened the shutters and windows in an attempt to rid the room of their insectoid guests and the disturbingly undefinable musty odour that permeated the air. Meena glanced over at James who, brow furrowed, seemed occupied deep in thought.

'Your friend didn't seem happy to see you.'

James continued to pace without breaking his stride or looking at Meena. 'That's just how he is. We had a little misunderstanding once. But I don't want you to worry about it.'

Meena walked over to the bags and began to unpack. She snuck a glance at James. 'What was the misunderstanding about?'

James walked over to her. 'Meena, my love, I told you. It isn't any of your concern.' He held her face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead.

Meena frowned.

‘But you’re my husband. And we’re having a child together.’ Meena pulled his hand down to her stomach. ‘If you have a problem then I need to know about it.’

James snatched his hand away and walked over towards the bed. He started to take off his shirt. ‘There is no problem. And that is the end of the matter.’ Meena nodded silently, trying to keep her face blank. James sighed. ‘It’s too hot.’

Meena pointed to the far corner. ‘The basin.’ James walked over, poured water from the jug next to it and splashed his face. Meena noted the basin and lack of other wash facilities and felt her fantasy of a warm bath slipping away.

Meena looked at James, stripped to the waist. She longed to be able to pull him over to the bed and let him wash away her concerns and anxieties. But she was far too tired and overwhelmed to not address what was staring her in the face.

‘I’m sorry, James, but it is not the end of the matter. I know something’s not right, and you need to tell me. Because what you do doesn’t just affect you, it affects me and our baby. So, if we are staying under this man’s roof, then you need to tell me what problem he has with you so we can fix it.’

James stared hard at her before drying his face with a calico cloth. He threw the cloth down on the table next to the basin. ‘I am dealing with it.’

Meena noted the edge in his voice. This required a delicate touch. ‘That’s *good*. I would expect nothing less. But what is it?’

‘It’s none of your concern.’

She placed her hand on her hip. ‘James, you made it my concern when you brought me here. Clearly, whatever it is was left unresolved so you must have known you would have to deal with it when we came here.’

He sighed, defeated. ‘Fine. I didn’t entirely pay my total bill when I last was in the Cape.’

She swallowed hard. This was certainly an issue James had neglected to mention in Calcutta. That in itself was not the issue – though it would be false to say that she was not at all concerned by it. No, the scab she couldn't stop scratching was the fact that he had lied to her. A lie by omission but one big enough to consume her. She knew James as a man of integrity. What did it mean if that description no longer seemed to fit? She tried shrugging it off. 'So, you have some debts?'

James rubbed the back of his neck, clearly not enjoying the conversation at hand. 'Well, not really debts, just...'

'Just some money you owe him,' Meena finished. 'Which you didn't pay because you couldn't back then...'

'Not that I couldn't pay him, it's just there was a lot on at the time, my uncle had other business he needed me to attend to...'

There was an edge of irritation to his voice that Meena didn't like, and she wasn't sure what would be more concerning: that James expected her to believe this, or if he believed it himself. But she needed to stay calm and amiable. 'That makes sense. But now we have money so you can pay Franz whatever is owed to him, and we can start our new lives without any further concern, okay?'

He walked over to her and took her hands as he looked deep in her eyes. 'Meena, that money is for us.'

Meena exhaled as she saw his expression soften. She gently leaned in and kissed him. 'And it will be. Part of that will be paying Franz what he is owed so we can be free to start our new lives. Free, without anything following us.'

* * *

FRANZ WAS DOWNSTAIRS, hunched over an account book. He sat in the corner of the dark tavern. Meena looked down and observed her silk shoes

fast becoming soiled by sawdust and spilled liquor. The place reeked of sweat and stale beer, and even though it was only dimly lit by candlelight she could see that the tavern was bustling with James's crew, many of whom were being entertained by women wearing coloured ribbons in their hair and with breasts threatening to break free of their corsets. Meena tried to avert her gaze but found herself drawn to the gruesome spectacle.

'Meena!' she heard Harry call to her right. 'Welcome to the Cape of Good Hope, love. The tavern of the sea, and this right here is the tavern of taverns.' The crew sniggered knowingly around him.

Meena self-consciously tugged up her kameez and tucked her hair behind her ears. 'How delightful. Enjoy.'

'Oh, come now, Your Royal Highness, or whatever you're calling yourself, don't be like that. Really, princess, we come here for our health, so we can nourish ourselves. And this one's been keeping me fed all day!' he cackled as he dived into the bosom of the squealing prostitute on his knee. Meena turned away in disgust. The rising foul odours, dingy surroundings and Harry's goads were exacerbating her nausea, which had fast returned. She kept walking with James as the group fell about laughing, pretending she didn't see Harry's hand creep up the woman's skirts.

Franz smelled of stale tobacco and had yellowing fingers to match.

'What is it?' Franz didn't bother to look up from his ledger.

James puffed up his chest. 'Franz, I am a man of my word. Now the last time I was here, I did incur some debts, you're right about that. But I am here now and I wish to settle them.'

Franz finally looked up. 'Is that right? Well, then. Please sit down.' He extended his arm with exaggerated courtesy. James pulled out a chair for Meena before scraping a chair across the filthy stone floor.

'So,' Franz said, smirking, 'you're finally ready to pay me? Well, what a blessed day this is, for me to have such a miracle bestowed on me.'

‘Come now, Franz, I was always going to pay up. I just needed a little time, that’s all.’

Franz nodded. ‘Uh-huh. And of course, there is the interest.’

James frowned. ‘You never said anything about interest.’

Franz raised his eyebrows at James. ‘You left too quickly for me to say anything about interest. But don’t worry, I reckon forty thousand guilders should be enough.’

Now was time for Meena’s eyebrows to shoot up. Enough Dutchmen had visited Murshidabad in the past for her to know how much that was. She’d never considered that James could have racked up such enormous debts.

James’s aghast expression seemed to suggest he could not believe it either. ‘That’s ridiculous and you know it.’

Franz shrugged. ‘Well, what I do know is that your men are loose-lipped, and if I did suspect that ill-gotten gains – be that gold or *Indian princesses* – were being harboured under my roof, it would be my responsibility to alert the authorities. Being such a stickler for upholding morality and law and order, after all.’

Meena froze. She imagined having to explain what had happened to Abhishek to a stranger in a foreign land. She didn’t know if she could be punished for murder in another country, but then she remembered Harry’s earlier remarks. She did not want to find out.

‘Okay, fine.’

James scowled at her, his eyes blazing. ‘Meena, stay out of this.’

‘No, I will not,’ she said firmly, ignoring James’s indignant expression. ‘Franz, we will pay. There’s no need to say anything to anyone.’

Franz smiled. ‘I see you’re the wise one out of the two of you. Good, good. God knows young James here needs someone with a cool head on their shoulders.’ Meena spotted a scowl flicker across James’s face. ‘I reckon we have a deal.’

‘Very funny, Franz,’ James said, holding out his hand. ‘You know you can’t close a deal with *her*. You need to agree it with her husband.’

Franz smirked and shook his hand. ‘Of course, of course. Now, if you don’t mind – the money.’

James pulled out four small sacks of gold and dropped them on the table, one by one. He rose to his feet and yanked Meena’s arm. ‘That’s enough, let’s go.’

The middle of the tavern was bustling. Meena was overwhelmed by the stench of alcohol and tobacco and sweat and sex. Their chatter, coarse and dizzying, swamped her. She thought she heard her name called followed by peals of laughter. She managed to find the stairs and clung to the banister, holding onto it with both hands, climbing higher and higher, trying to escape the hell below. Finally, Meena clutched the doorknob to their room and burst in, grateful for the fresh air blowing through the open windows. She inhaled until her chest hurt. And then ran over to the basin to throw it all up.

CHAPTER 16



THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, MARCH 1758

‘The VOC [Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company] made a point of bolstering the authority of its high officials by providing them with wealth and status. They dressed and lived in a way that was intended to impress if not awe the population into accepting their superior status. The creation of social distinctions between rulers and ruled however was not enough. Where awe ceased to be effective, terror took over.’

Leonard Guelke, *The Making of Two Frontier Communities:
Cape Colony in the Eighteenth Century*

‘I’m sorry ma’am, it just won’t fit, and I can’t let it out any more.’

Meena collapsed on the bed. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eliza was tense. Meena noticed how the girl’s eyes were often assiduously averted away from her face. It had been two months since she’d taken Eliza on, and Meena still hadn’t got used to the girl’s timid demeanour. James argued that they didn’t need help, but Meena pointed out that with the baby coming soon he would be desperate to take a girl on.

James couldn't argue with that so, after he sought advice on what would be good value, they found Eliza. At fifteen she was young, but Meena thought she had intelligent eyes and remarkably already knew some English thanks to the English wife of an ex-VOC official – her former master. Her mother had been shipped from Madagascar and James was reliably informed that Malagasy slaves were the hardest working, though Meena was curious how such categorisation could be determined for a whole people. James advised against her engaging Eliza in conversation on the basis that it would only encourage laziness. Moreover, he claimed he could not understand why it would be of any interest in the first place. His tone chastened Meena against pushing the matter further.

Once they had settled James's debts, and the crew's debts, *and* bought everyone a round at the tavern, Meena had insisted they use some of their money to move. Further away from the shore, the town centre was more orderly and populated with people who did not spend their days stumbling out of taverns or down dark alleys with their skirts hitched up. Meena had imagined a large house and grounds where she could plant her own garden, just like her mother. But now she'd grown fond of their little cottage, and she was even, slowly, growing fond of Eliza.

Meena flopped back on the hard mattress and lay on her side to relieve some of the weight. It had now been three months since they had arrived at the Cape, and she was enormous. She occasionally felt her boy kick (James was sure it was a boy), he was clearly strong and determined. Like his father, James would say, as he kissed her and rubbed her belly. She liked it when he kicked. Although startling at first, this small action became her main connection to the little one growing inside her. Otherwise, she didn't feel like she knew what was going on in the swollen globe of her belly. She rubbed her stomach as she lay on the bed, hoping to coax him out to play.

'Hello, little one,' she whispered. 'It doesn't seem like we'll be going out today after all. Maybe we'll just stay in, would you like that?'

‘No, he would not,’ James called from the other side of the bedroom, putting on his shoes. ‘You have to come with me tonight. It’s important.’

‘James, nothing fits anymore. What am I supposed to wear?’

He chuckled. ‘Women’s clothes are not my domain. Perhaps you could buy a dress in town, like everyone else?’

Meena scoffed. ‘I can’t wear a dress.’

‘Why not? All the other ladies will. And besides, you’re my wife now.’ James smiled. ‘English wives wear dresses.’

She shot him a look. ‘What a shame you don’t have an English wife then.’

James smirked and sat down on the bed next to her. He stroked her cheek. ‘You would look very pretty. You could also get some material and have Eliza sew something for you.’

‘The ball is this evening,’ Meena whined. ‘There’s no time.’

He sighed in exasperation and got up. ‘Well, my love, I think I’ve exhausted the limits of my interest in ladies’ attire. All I know is that Governor Teuling himself has extended an invitation to us for tonight’s ball and that you *are* going. The particulars are for you to work out.’ Meena sulked, and sat with her arms folded, staring at him moodily as he spoke. ‘This could be a real opportunity for us, Meena. A chance to get on our feet and earn an income. To do that I need my wife by my side.’

She smiled in defeat and got up to walk over and give James a kiss. Eliza, being a quick learner, made a swift and silent exit. James moved his hand to her stomach.

‘Is he kicking today?’

She shook her head. ‘Not yet. Maybe later. Where are you off to?’

‘There’s a luncheon at the VOC club. Tom’s cousin’s friend is a member. Should be a good opportunity to meet the right people.’

Meena kept a smile pinned to her face. Every other day James seemed to be dining with employees of the Dutch East India Company – the

Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC as they called it. She was used to her father spending his days lazily indulging his vices – such was the nature of royalty – but she had not anticipated James doing the same. Nor was she sure about him doing business with the Dutch but he reassured her that they had a different way of doing things than the British. She chose to believe him.

She kissed and hugged him so that he could not see her face. ‘That’s wonderful, have a great time. I will see you later for the ball.’

* * *

AGGRESSIVE STARES LINED Meena’s journey into town. The combination of her belly, her clothes and her skin proved too much of an irresistible combination to gawk at. That was the best possible reason for the avid interest in her. But at night, when the baby would not let her sleep, Meena wondered whether it could be something else. Whether Sir Peter Chilcott could have found them. Hunting his wayward nephew and the foreign woman who had led him astray. A man like that would not hesitate to take vengeance for even the smallest slight. A betrayal this significant and this personal would surely demand satisfaction. And the fact that she did not know when the axe would swing made the thought all the more terrifying.

The bell rang as Meena entered the narrow door of the shop. In the confined space of the premises, it was impossible to avoid noticing the shop girls and patrons being fitted for their gowns looking at her. A hush fell over the store as all eyes fell on her. Meena balled up her fists by her sides, her nails scratching the palms of her hands.

‘Hello,’ she said softly. ‘I need a dress. I think.’

A middle-aged woman in a plain pale blue poplin dress came over after what felt like an eternity of endured stares.

‘For you?’

Meena paused before nodding awkwardly.

The woman broke into a smile. ‘Yes, of course, we can definitely help you with that. Why don’t you sit down here, and we can discuss what you might be looking for?’

Meena allowed herself to be led over to a sofa by a wall of different fabrics arranged to show off their brilliant hues against one another.

‘My name is Mrs Willems,’ she said in a cheerful tone.

‘Meena,’ she responded weakly, regretting ever walking in.

‘Now, that must be better for you, Meena. I found it very tiring to be on my feet for long when I had mine. How far along are you?’

Meena stared at her in confusion until the older woman leaned forward and patted her bump.

Meena was startled by this sudden intrusion but held her tongue. She still needed a dress. ‘Oh, I see. I have been with child for seven months or so, I believe.’

The woman leaned back in her chair as Meena crossed her arms over her stomach. ‘Oh, well, the next two months will go quicker than you think, and you’ll be even more uncomfortable if you can imagine it.’ Meena looked down at the bulge immediately below her. She could not imagine how she could be *this* big, let alone how big she might be after another two months.

The woman laughed. ‘Oh, don’t look so worried, dear! It won’t be great but at least you’ll be confined for the last few months, so you’ll be off your feet. Now, what can I help you with today?’

‘I need a dress for the governor’s ball, tonight. It’s formal.’

The shopkeeper raised her eyebrows, presumably in surprise that Meena would be attending. ‘Oh, my goodness! Yes, I know all about it. Half the women here are picking up their dresses for tonight. They ordered their dresses months ago.’ She smiled apologetically. ‘I am very good at my job, but I’m not a miracle worker.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Meena had never missed her wardrobe back home of silks and velvets and brocades more than this very moment. Finding something to wear for a feast had never been a problem before. ‘Well, thank you for your time, madam.’ Meena began to get up.

‘Wait.’ The woman grabbed Meena’s arm. ‘What are you going to do?’

It was a good question. ‘I have my peshwaz from back home. It might be a little tight but otherwise should be appropriate.’ Meena didn’t even want to think how tight the choli would be over her pregnancy-enlarged breasts.

The woman shook her head. ‘Oh no. I’m afraid that won’t do.’

‘Why not?’

‘The governor’s outlawed such fancy finery. No gold or silks or any such ornate clothing, not for the rest of us. Only the wives and daughters of senior members of the VOC are allowed such luxuries.’

Meena raised her eyebrows. ‘Why?’

‘Because he believes it’s not moral for the townswomen to make such a display of themselves. I know, it’s such a terrible blow to the ladies – and an even bigger blow to us.’

Meena wondered why the governor of a colony would feel the need to meddle in women’s clothing, and whether such material would be so immoral if it did not come from India and the Orient.

‘I see. Thank you for informing me.’ Meena got up. ‘I will have to see if my maid can have another go at letting out my outfit.’ As Meena turned to leave she felt a soft hand on her arm.

‘Hold on, my dear.’ The woman half-smiled, looking up at Meena with kind eyes. ‘With your bump, you’re about my size, I’d say. Why don’t you come upstairs and see if one of my dresses will fit? I might be able to take it in a little in time for tonight. Would you like that?’

Meena looked at the overly friendly woman before her and decided it would be churlish to turn down such a generous offer. Meena smiled and

nodded, trying not to worry about what sort of dress she would put her in.

‘That would be very kind.’

* * *

IN AMONG THE unfortunate pickings of Mrs Willems’ collection Meena had managed to find something suitable for the ball. Recently widowed and with grown-up daughters, Mrs Willems was happy to help Meena; she had seen her in town apparently and was pleased that Meena was doing well and with that handsome young man. She was also keen to let Meena know that it wasn’t uncommon for free Indians to marry whites here, and that she had had an Indian in her house when the girls were younger and Marin had been so clean and well-mannered. Her given name was much too complicated so they just renamed her Marin. *For the girls to be comfortable, you see.*

Meena forced a smile throughout all of this as she was being laced into Mrs Willems’ old maternity stays that she had managed to dig out from the back of her wardrobe. She couldn’t tell if she was feeling light-headed from the stays or from Mrs Willems’ monologue. They had been supposedly loosely laced, at Meena’s request, with Mrs Willems opening up the side laces as much as possible. She could however still feel her child kick against the whalebone. Mrs Willems’ feet were too big but luckily her youngest girl had pretty, dainty feet just like Meena’s apparently. She slipped ivory pumps and matching stockings onto Meena’s legs. The shoes pinched but she had to admit they went well with the light peach gown.

That evening Meena found it hard not to think about her tight pumps at the ball, even though the governor’s castle was a very fine distraction. And the mountains overlooking the five-sided castle walls were a worthy backdrop. As she and James crossed the moat through the great gates it occurred to her that it had been some time since she had seen so many people in elegant clothes. Even if they were not allowed to wear rich fabrics

or jewellery, the dresses were clearly fine and even more importantly the women matched. She would be loath to admit it, but she was pleased James had insisted she come.

Meena took a glass of champagne off a silver platter offered by a young African boy dressed in a ridiculous costume of a stiff high collar and a brocade jacket twice his size. His skin gleamed brilliantly with so many candles lit, but his eyes looked dull and yellow and heavy with weariness. Meena was troubled by how young he looked but James ushered her past before she had the chance to say anything. Meena had never tasted champagne before and at first it made her grimace, the bubbles rushing up her nose taking her by surprise, but she then felt her cheeks grow warm. Everything in the room demanded acknowledgement of the VOC's wealth. The abundance of silver and gold around the necks of the women and on the shoes of the men. The ornate furniture decorated with ivory, a result of a good trade, along with the young boys who served the champagne. There was a pianist and dancing, but both the men and women danced together, quite unlike the female dancers Meena was used to seeing at the palace.

Meena had blushed when she had showed James her outfit as she felt his gaze travel down her body and his hand explore the valley of her cinched-in waist. He was dressed smartly in his old scarlet military uniform from his Company days. Meena disliked the uniform, but she had to admit that he looked handsome in it. Even with the powdered wig he insisted on wearing.

Meena held onto James's hand, but her extraordinary skirt meant she was nearly a yard away from him. She had laughed when Mrs Willems pulled out the ridiculous frame that she was supposed to wear underneath the dress, and the padded little crescent to go round her waist. While she did appreciate the opportunity to dress up after so much travel and grime, Meena found herself craving the comfort of her churidars. But the distance

from James's side meant that she was within earshot of the hushed conversations of onlookers about her origins and pregnant appearance.

Meena was temporarily distracted from subtly eavesdropping on compliments by a tall moustachioed gentleman who came over to whisper in James's ear. After an initial shock James's face brightened. He yanked her arm and dragged her across the room in pursuit of the mysterious gentleman.

'James,' she hissed under the piano din, 'where are we going?'

'To see the governor,' he whispered back.

'What?'

'He's summoned us. I don't know why.'

Meena could not help but notice that James's voice, despite being a low whisper, had risen significantly in pitch. That and the clamminess of his hand exposed his nerves and excitement, even if he would never admit it. He had been wanting to meet the governor ever since they arrived. He wanted to be recognised as the nephew of a significant figure in the East India Company and not just a common sailor, for his – and Meena's – future.

They were led to the other end of the ballroom, where the crowds were more spread out and the laughter not so loud, before stopping in front of an elderly man with white hair and a ramrod posture.

'Governor Teuling, it is an honour, sir,' James said, inclining his head briefly.

'Yes, sir, it is.' Meena was unsure whether what she had said was right. She knew white women curtsied, looking like a cross between Bharatanatyam dancers and chickens, but she did not know what was expected for a Governor.

'Governor, this is James Chilcott, of the British East India Company and his wife.' Meena glanced at James with this introduction. He did not look back.

‘Ah, yes, Mr Chilcott. What a pleasure to meet you and... your lovely wife.’ The governor coughed politely to cover up his surprise at Meena’s complexion before sticking his hand out to shake James’s hand and pressing his cold thin lips against the back of Meena’s.

‘The pleasure is all ours, sir. Thank you so much for inviting us here,’ said James, trying to stifle his excitement. ‘This is a wonderful occasion.’

‘Well, I am glad you could attend. Now I understand you are the nephew of Sir Peter Chilcott, is that right?’

‘Yes, sir, that is correct. My father’s younger brother. I became his ward after my father died.’

‘And how is he? I heard he had a bit of luck in Calcutta.’ Meena’s ears pricked up at this.

‘Yes, well,’ James shifted his weight from one foot to the next while coughing politely. ‘I haven’t spoken to him recently. I decided to part ways with the Company and make my own journey in life. Build a new life here for me and my family.’ James nodded demonstratively at Meena who smiled, unsure of what to do when faced with being the illustration of this new life.

‘Yes, of course. And, my dear, am I right in thinking you are from India yourself?’

‘Yes sir,’ said Meena, ‘I am from Bengal.’ She noted James’s attempt to answer for her, but she managed to speak first. The governor’s eyes popped out of his head and a silence passed between the three of them for a moment.

James coughed again. ‘That’s right, Meena is a princess from Bengal. Her father is the tyrant my uncle defeated. I was able to help her escape so she could seek a better life here, with us.’

Meena kept her face still and placid in front of the governor. She knew James was spinning a tale for him but that didn’t mean she liked being the object of it.

‘Oh my goodness.’ The governor’s face was full of horror and pity, but Meena also picked up on a tone of morbid fascination. ‘I had no idea you had been through such an ordeal. And how did you manage to escape such a horrible situation? Of course, the barbarian nature of your people is well known, though I’ve always found our Indian maids to be amenable enough. More temperate than the Hottentots at least. Those dull, godless creatures gave my men a lot of trouble the other week...’

‘They are native to this land, yes?’ Meena snapped. ‘So is it not your men who are troubling them?’ Both the governor’s and James’s eyes were fixed on her in confusion, James’s gaze tinged with fury.

‘Perhaps,’ the governor said uneasily, ‘but still, they’re not in a position to be a concern any longer. Though I am sure you understand that. When I heard your father was found outside the city limits with his throat slit, I just presumed all his family had been killed. I heard the prince was missing, presumed dead, I believe...’

Meena tightened her grip on James’s arm, her borrowed shoes cutting into her feet. *Baba is dead? Murdered?* Meena’s breath grew shallow, and her mind went blank. Having eventually found air in her lungs again, she, to her surprise, found herself blinking away tears. She looked down at the floor to prevent the governor, or James, from seeing. She had no right to be upset. She had left him, abandoned him and Bengal. And she had no duty to mourn him either, not after the years of abuse and paranoid rage she had endured. And yet she could not mistake the devastation she felt at hearing of her father’s murder. Nor the guilt she felt for leaving him to such a wretched fate.

‘I am sorry, this is not appropriate conversation for a lady, let alone one in your delicate condition. My wife has long passed, but please, allow me to introduce you to my daughters. Girls!’ the governor called behind them and four fair young ladies appeared before them, breathless and giddy from dancing. ‘This is Mr James Chilcott and his wife Mrs Meena Chilcott. Mrs

Chilcott was a princess in the exotic land of India. Mrs Chilcott, this is Anneke, Lotte, Eva and Sophie. Girls, why don't you and Mrs Chilcott go and enjoy the music and gaiety while Mr Chilcott and I discuss business?'

Before she knew it, Meena found herself being whisked across the ballroom as the volume of the music seemed to rise and rise. But she could barely hear the roar of the music over the swirling vortex in her mind. Meena hadn't vomited in months, but she could feel the bile rising. Perhaps it was the baby, or the corset. Or perhaps it was the news of her father's throat being slit. She knew the city would be taken. But she could not understand how her father had been found. Murdered. Not when he had a plan. He had escaped surely, he had been planning on escaping all of it. And instead, he had been butchered and left outside the city like an old beggar. And she'd found out about it from some Dutchman at some ball while she was wearing some stranger's dress. The absurdity almost equalled the horror.

The governor's daughters stopped in front of the revellers dancing in concertinaed lines – folding and collapsing in on one another with rhythmic precision.

'Do you know how to dance?' one of the girls, possibly Lotte, asked.

'Yes, but not this kind of dancing,' Meena said distractedly. 'We dance quite differently back home.' They all nodded politely. Minutes went uninterrupted before another one of them (Anneke, maybe) ventured another question.

'How long do you plan to stay in the Cape?'

Meena stared at the girl for a few moments before answering 'We hope to make a home here, with our child.' Her mind was still in Bengal, still on her father's slit throat. Focusing on the inquisitive daughters of the governor was a challenge when her mind kept pulling her away from the girls and the dancing and candlelight and towards the image of her father's glassy-eyed shock, his mouth twisted, gasping for breath in his final moments.

‘Why here, rather than England?’ asked Anneke. ‘Isn’t that where your husband is from?’

‘He would like to build a new life outside of the Company, so it makes no sense to live there.’ Meena said this confidently but realised that the subject of them going to England had never once been raised. England was the source of such destruction for her. Yet it was also James’s home.

‘That’s so romantic, starting a new life together somewhere new,’ the smallest, blondest one piped up.

Meena smirked at this observation. How simple an event could appear from one vantage point and yet fraught from another. The idealistic nature of it shook Meena out of her head for a moment. ‘Yes, I suppose it does sound romantic.’ It felt like a lifetime ago that James had first asked Meena to come with him, even though it was only eight months or so. It was comforting to think back to that moment.

‘Your dress is very pretty,’ said the last sister, clearly not wanting to be left out of the conversation, even if she had spent most of it transfixed by the dancers.

‘It does look lovely on you. It suits your complexion,’ said Anneke.

Meena smiled. ‘Thank you.’ She paused for a moment, looking at them. She wondered whether she could use their sudden interest.

‘I’m not used to wearing such clothes. Back home we would wear silks and velvets and fine jewels to such an event. My favourite was a necklace my father gave me for my sixteenth birthday. It was so beautiful. But I had to leave it behind in Bengal.’

‘You were in Bengal? The state the British took recently?’ exclaimed Lotte. All four daughters were suddenly hanging on Meena’s words. It took all her strength not to roll her eyes.

‘Yes, that’s right. We left just before the attack. My father, he is...’ Meena swallowed, trying to choke down the pain of the recent revelation. ‘*Was* a tyrant, of course. His temper was fearsome, and once he knew that

James had asked for my hand in marriage, he was irate. We had to make our escape, so we got on a ship and sailed away, leaving it all behind.'

Lotte let an involuntary dreamy sigh slip out. Meena found her reaction somehow both humorous and nauseating.

'That's extraordinary, Meena,' exclaimed Anneke. 'So, Mr Chilcott saved you?' Meena smiled as sweetly as possible and nodded.

'And that's why he passed on information about the Nawab's whereabouts to his uncle,' said Sophie to Lotte approvingly.

Meena frowned. 'I'm sorry, what was that?' She was too shocked to play the innocent.

'Your husband. They knew about the Nawab's plan to flee Bengal because he told them,' Anneke said slowly. 'To help the British win. And to help you.'

Meena meditated on the order of these short statements. She rolled them around in her head to see which way made most sense, which was a more likely order. *To help the British win. And to help you. To help you. To help the British win.* She was not sure if she liked the answer.

'You're so lucky to have such a sweet husband,' the youngest sister cooed with her hands clasped together. Meena stared at the excitable girl in glum silence.

'If you're staying here for a while, you must call on us sometime,' said Anneke. 'We would love to see you and hear more about your life in India.'

Meena nodded, barely looking them in the eye. 'If you excuse me, I must find my husband.'

She saw James laughing and shake hands with the governor. What would it mean if he had betrayed her in that way? That he not only had her father murdered but helped his uncle take Bengal? After everything he'd said to her. He could not love her, surely that could not be true. And the baby. And, if Meena dared to imagine it, what did it mean for her? Here, alone.

But Meena knew James. She knew his heart. His antipathy towards his uncle. His vision for a world not built on domination and exploitation. Whatever Anneke's words seemed to suggest, they could not be true. Meena could not afford for them to be true. She refused to let them be true.

'We need to go,' she blurted out. 'I am so sorry, Governor. Please excuse the interruption. But I am not feeling well. I fear it might be the baby.'

James's eyes widened. 'Please do forgive us, Governor. I do hope we can continue this conversation another time.'

'Of course, my boy, of course. Good evening to you both. Perhaps, my dear, it is time for you to eschew such festivities for the foreseeable future. You have much more important matters to focus on,' the governor said as he playfully wagged his finger. Meena smiled thinly at this mild exhortation. She could not bear to be lectured about her body by ageing men. Not now.

'Are you alright?' James whispered in hushed, concerned tones on their way out.

'Yes. I'm fine. I just need to rest,' Meena said weakly.

'Yes, of course. Well, I think my meeting with the governor was quite a success. Did you have fun with the governor's daughters? They're the most noble ladies in the Cape so it's great that they've taken an interest in you.' The joviality in James's voice was almost unbearable for Meena to hear.

'Can we please just leave?' James's eyes widened at Meena's clipped tone but he said nothing.

They had made it to the door when James was accosted by a senior VOC official. Meena glared at him as he began conversing with this man. James glanced at her and clapped the old man on the back to try and hurry the conversation along. Meena felt a tap on her shoulder.

'I am sorry to bother you, dear, but I just wanted to say what a fine husband you have. How lucky you are.'

Meena gritted her teeth and forced a smile at the elderly woman. ‘Thank you and yes, I know.’

‘Shall we?’ James said, offering his arm now that he was finally free of any further impediments to their exit.

‘Yes.’ Meena pushed past him brusquely to hurry through the heavy double doors, before hearing a loud rip. She turned back and found the peach gown caught in the door, a huge gash running right down to the hem.

PART II



'I, the maiden who am now at last become a barbarian in your eyes, who now am poor, who now seem baneful – I closed the lids of the flame-like eyes in slumber wrought by my drug, and gave into your hand the fleece to steal away unharmed. I betrayed my sire, I left my throne and my native soil; the reward I get is leave to live in exile! My maidenly innocence has become the spoil of a pirate from overseas.'

Ovid, *Heroides* 12

CHAPTER 17



CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, AUGUST 1759

‘Are you sure, ma’am? I can go by myself.’

‘Please, Eliza. If I stay one more minute in this house, I’m going to throw myself out the window,’ Meena sighed, her eyes glazed over as she wrestled to put socks on Alexander. She prayed that he would wait at least until they were out the door *before* he wriggled out of them. She patted her sore nipple absentmindedly through her dress, hoping that having just breastfed him, her son would be sufficiently sated so she would not leak in public.

It had been thirteen precious and exhausting months since Alexander entered their lives and she had found the boundaries of her life closing in further and further. She had spent the last few weeks of pregnancy, when she could feel it growing within her, dreaming of when he would be out. She would feel him grow against her back till she could no longer walk – against her organs, coiled tight and testing the boundaries of her body. She could feel the child feed off her bones.

Yet, even with Eliza’s help, the past two years had broken her. Her life, her home, all had been remodelled in the image of her son. Her waking

moments ran in winding circuitous paths, feeding him; changing him; trying to get him to slumber. Having once longed for adventure and a life of voyaging, the irony that she had spent most of her time in the Cape stuck inside their modest home, with only her baby and maid for company, was not lost on her. So when Eliza mentioned that she would be going to the market after breakfast, Meena insisted on accompanying her, much to Eliza's evident displeasure.

Meena was so excited she even insisted they walk, rather than take the cart into town. She was happy enough just to be outside. The market was bustling, and Meena drank in the wonder that spread across her son's face. Alexander, having been as confined as she had been, was bewitched by the sight of so many people, different people all selling, bartering, laughing and arguing with one another. Such varied human life was a treat for the senses, along with the fragrant scent of spices and produce that transported her back home. She suddenly felt overwhelmed by the crowd; it took her back to that night at the governor's house. The night she had learned the man she loved betrayed her. The memory had dulled with the passing months, and now it was just a collection of images flickering through her mind. But the hurt, the anger, that stayed fresh as a new wound bleeding bright crimson.

Meena began to shake at the thought of what James did and how he betrayed her; however this was unceremoniously pushed to the back of her mind by Alexander's cries. His initial awe at the market's liveliness had now dissipated into anxiety.

'It's okay, chellam, it's okay,' cooed Meena, bouncing him lightly on her hip. She had found that her ability to conjure up a coherent thought had been grossly compromised by her baby. Although sometimes she wondered if Alexander was just an excuse for her to not confront the fact that her marriage was built on a lie.

With Alexander still crying, Meena looked around helplessly for Eliza, trying to avoid the stares from the curious and judgemental vendors and

patrons, but it was to no avail. Meena swore and marched around the market, peering round the tables stacked with bright, sweet-smelling, ripe fruits to soothe the empty bellies of the starving sailors that arrived at the Cape's shores. Eventually, with Alexander somewhat quietened, Meena found her maid speaking to an elegantly dressed African woman who was becoming increasingly agitated. More bizarrely, Eliza appeared to be standing her ground in whatever disagreement the two women were having.

The woman was by herself and her clothing, though nothing special, appeared to be new or at least not heavily patched. Meena suspected that she was a free black which made Eliza's apparent defiance of a woman of higher rank even more curious. She crept closer, trying to listen to what they were saying, hoping that the little Dutch she had learned would be enough, but their low and angry tones made it difficult to understand. Meena eventually gave up her attempt at subterfuge.

'What is this?'

Eliza turned round, stricken to see her mistress in front of her. Her companion likewise seemed to shrink before her gaze. She watched the woman's eyes flick from left to right, desperately looking for an escape route.

'Answer me,' Meena said sharply. 'What business do the two of you have together? Who are you?'

The woman smiled nervously. 'Ma'am, my name is Marguerite, I run a boarding house in town. I was just making my way through the market when I thought your girl pushed past me. I now see that was just an accident, so there's no need for further concern. I am satisfied.'

Meena's eyes narrowed. 'Really?' She turned to Eliza who was watching intently. 'You've never met this woman before?'

Eliza shook her head vigorously. 'No, ma'am. I was rushing around, looking for the oranges that the master likes. I must not have seen this lady, but I'm sorry for any misunderstanding.'

Meena rolled her eyes. It had been a while since Eliza had acted this meek. ‘I think the only misund—’

‘What’s going on here then?’

Meena spun around to find a man in a VOC uniform looming over her. His scowl and voice, booming with suspicion, all designed to intimidate. Meena was too tired to entertain any officious man bent on disturbing such a group of women, their dark skin undoubtedly posing a terrifying threat.

‘You need a letter from your master if you’re out unaccompanied – where is he? Unless you’re not where you’re supposed to be?’ he sneered.

‘She’s my maid,’ Meena said curtly. ‘There was some sort of brief quarrel with this woman – a *free* woman, but it’s been resolved now. You can leave us alone.’

The man crossed his arms over his broad chest. ‘Is that right?’ She watched him sneer at Alexander, curled in her arms. ‘I think I’ll decide, rather than take orders from some Indian whore with her bastard child. Who do *you* belong to, huh? Maybe I’ll take you all in to see if you’re telling the truth. You know what happens to slaves that run away? You can say goodbye to that brat you’ve got there.’

Meena’s eyes flung open, her veins coursing with fury. ‘Excuse me? I’m not a slave. My husband is an Englishman, he is an acquaintance of the governor.’

This statement provoked a scoff from the man. Meena felt a deep, all-consuming howl of rage as she heard Alexander’s gentle whimper at such open aggression. Meena gripped him tighter, kissing her son’s forehead before marching up to the officer until they were nose to nose, Meena perching on her toes, teeth bared.

‘Listen,’ she seethed. ‘My husband is James Chilcott, he is a personal acquaintance of the governor, and *I* am a friend of the governor’s daughters. I suggest you let us be on our way before I *make sure* you regret this day for

the rest of your life, however short and painful that may be. Have I made myself clear?’

Meena felt his glare burn into her. She imagined the various options for what to do with her that he was contemplating in his mind. Meena met his gaze, knowing exactly which would be his preference, what he would like to do to her for talking to him like that. She hoped he would be smart.

‘Fine,’ he spat, ‘be on your way. Haughty bitch.’ He muttered these final words under his breath as he slunk away and Meena felt a sudden wave of hot shame wash over her at being referred to in such a way in public, in front of Eliza and Alexander.

‘Come.’ She nodded at Eliza. ‘Let’s leave at once.’

* * *

THE JOURNEY BACK WAS SILENT. Even Alexander was fast asleep after the market’s excitement. It was only when they got home and Meena finished putting Alexander down that she found Eliza, hurriedly packing away their purchases in the kitchen.

‘No more lies, Eliza, I won’t take another. You will tell me exactly what that was in the market and who that Marguerite woman is.’ Eliza froze. ‘And choose your words carefully,’ Meena added, ‘you do not want to lie to me again.’

Her maid sighed. She had become much less afraid of Meena since seeing her give birth – the trauma of Meena’s blood-curdling howls of pain following the precarious delivery of Alexander overseen by a gruff midwife was enough to eliminate any shyness the girl once had. Her reservation now was therefore notable. ‘I understand that, ma’am, but I can’t tell you the truth.’

‘Try.’

Eliza walked up to her, eyes big and plaintive. ‘Ma’am, it’s not my secret to share. I don’t want to get anyone in trouble.’

‘Marguerite?’

‘Yes... but not just her. Someone who could get into even worse trouble.’

Meena searched the young girl’s eyes for a clue before losing her patience. ‘For goodness’ sake, I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong. I won’t tell anyone. You have my word.’

‘Even Mr Chilcott?’

‘I won’t tell him anything, I swear.’

Eliza sighed deeply, her shoulders physically dropping in relief. The girl was scared, but Meena had never seen her so determined.

‘Sit down,’ Meena instructed. Her tone made it clear that she would not be inviting any disagreement. ‘I’ll fetch the tea. Just be calm. All will be well.’

Once Meena had returned with the tea, she patiently watched Eliza pensively hold her china cup in hand and work up the courage to speak.

‘There was this girl,’ Eliza began, ‘at my last house. Even younger than me. Last time I went to the market I heard from one of the kitchen maids that she was in trouble. The master...’

Meena nodded, trying to keep her face expressionless and not let the horror she felt show. ‘The woman, Marguerite, she knows her?’

Eliza shook her head. ‘No, but she has friends. People who can help.’ Eliza suddenly stopped, fearing to continue. And then, at that moment, the fog in Meena’s mind cleared.

‘Help her *escape*,’ Meena said, straightening up. ‘That woman, she helps slaves escape. That’s what your friend wants to do?’

Eliza looked up and stared straight at Meena, making some invisible calculation, before giving the smallest, almost imperceptible nod.

‘Do you know that is against the law?’ Meena demanded, her voice barely daring to rise above a whisper. ‘If a master or mistress is harmed, it’s even punishable by death.’ Meena had read about a case recently: an escaped slave found a couple of days later by a shepherd. They had him tied to a rack and flogged. Others were branded. The risks were unimaginable.

‘I assure you ma’am, I am fully aware of what the law is. *We all are,*’ Eliza responded archly. Meena felt a sharp pang of shame at the sting of Eliza’s words and her unflinching gaze. A period of silence passed between them before she continued.

‘Do you have plans for something similar?’

Eliza’s eyebrows shot up. ‘No, ma’am.’

‘Why not? You clearly know how to go about it.’

Eliza paused, carefully considering her words. ‘I know the dangers.’

Meena nodded slowly. She knew the girl was too smart to tell her anything, but she hated how exposed this conversation made her feel. Guilt, however, could not distract her from the matter at hand.

‘I see. So why was Marguerite so upset?’

‘She wants more money. Apparently they’ve put additional watchmen on duty all day since my friend got pregnant in case she tries anything. It’s riskier to get her out.’

‘And that’s what she was asking you for? More money?’

Eliza nodded. Meena sat back and thought for a moment. ‘In the market, they have all kinds of produce from Africa and Asia – is that right?’

‘Yes,’ Eliza replied, confused.

‘Have you heard of valerian root? Do you know how to prepare it?’

‘I know of it, ma’am, but never prepared it. I know the mistress at my former house took a tincture for a while when she was pregnant.’

‘Good, it won’t cause suspicion if it’s found in the house. Get the kitchen girl to buy some from the market, boil it, leaves and stems, and

make sure the guards drink it. Tell her not to dilute it too much and they will be out cold.'

Eliza looked deeply puzzled but a slow, hesitant smile spread across her face. 'And Marguerite?'

Meena had been impressed by the young girl's courage. But she could not pretend their positions were the same.

'You're not going to try and flee, or give us valerian root, are you?' Meena asked coolly. 'I don't want you misreading my generosity for stupidity. You're surely not foolish enough to think that, are you?'

Eliza shook her head quickly. 'No, ma'am, I'm not a fool. I understand.'

Meena nodded. 'Good. I will give you the money for Marguerite, whatever she needs. But you must promise me this: Mr Chilcott will never know.'

* * *

MEENA WAITED for James to return home from his day in town with the officers, getting up to who knows what. As she had done the day before and the day before that. Normally she would have Alexander with her but today she was too tired to indulge his fatherhood act.

'Hello, where's Alexander?'

'Asleep,' she said, not bothering to look up at him. 'He was tired, so I had Eliza put him to bed early.'

'I see. I heard you had quite a busy day.'

Meena snapped her head up. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean someone in the tavern today said that a *Mrs James Chilcott* caused a scene in the market.'

She shot up, angry at the implied accusation. 'And who said that? A VOC officer?'

James raised his eyebrows. ‘Meena, does it matter? What the hell are you doing? And who was this woman you were apparently arguing with?’

‘She runs a boarding house, I believe.’

James scoffed. ‘An African, running her own business, I’m sure she’s *very busy*.’

Meena found his tone ugly and crass, not unlike the officer, yet she tried to laugh off his concern. ‘It doesn’t matter. It was nothing, just a misunderstanding. And then the officer was hideously rude and interrogated us as if we were criminals. He even threatened to cart us all off.’

‘Well, a group of foreign women causing a ruckus... One could understand why he was so concerned.’

Meena stared, shaken at how such a statement could come out of her husband’s mouth so casually. How he could even *think* such a thing about her, about their son. How quick he was to relegate her to the status of ‘foreign’ and thus, a person undeserving of dignity. And yet, she wondered why she should be surprised at all. She marched up to him.

‘What do you mean, it’s understandable?’ she yelled. ‘Is that how little you think of your wife and child?’

James, taken aback by this ire, stroked her arms, in a vain attempt to soothe or restrain her, Meena could not be sure.

‘What is wrong with you?’ he hissed. ‘Are you trying to wake the dead? Why are you acting so hysterically?’

Meena shrugged off his hands from her shoulders, refusing to be placated. ‘I just want to understand why you think it is acceptable for some soldier to threaten your wife and our son. Or perhaps our welfare isn’t your concern, maybe the VOC is now your main priority.’

James sighed. ‘Of course not, Meena. The man was an idiot. I am simply saying... you must be careful. When you’re out in town by yourself, with Eliza and especially any other... I just don’t want anything to happen to you.’

A chasm of silence filled the room before James finally gave in.

‘What was the misunderstanding?’

‘What?’

‘The misunderstanding with the woman? Do I need to have a word with Eliza?’

‘No, it was nothing,’ Meena said quickly. ‘The woman thought someone cheated her when she was buying her food. She was making a commotion, so I told her to calm down.’

‘Ah, that makes sense.’

Meena observed how quickly he was willing to believe a lie so long as it met his rigid view of the world and the different people within it.

‘Yes, she was quite upset. I can understand why. She must go to that market every day, must know everyone there, maybe since she was a girl. Can you imagine being cheated by someone you trust? Being lied to, betrayed?’

James shrugged, puzzled. ‘I’m sure it was not that serious. Anyway, I would have thought being cheated out of a couple of guilders would not be worth the hassle for someone in her position.’

‘What do you mean?’

James shrugged. ‘I would have thought she’d be more careful. And realise that she can’t get away with that sort of behaviour. She can’t afford to get angry.’

James’s words made her blood turn to ice, chilling her rage into fearful reflection. She thought about the officer, and how only invoking James’s and the governor’s names had saved her from jail. She was promised freedom and yet, she found that here in the Cape, her position was precariously dependent on James. The man she loved, and who had betrayed her. Despite everything, she knew which side of him she had to try and forget, for her son’s sake if not her own.

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right.’

CHAPTER 18



CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, SEPTEMBER 1762

Meena was tired. She had fed Alexander, sang to him and even put him down for a nap. Yet he still refused to give in to any attempts to soothe his tantrum. What great slight had caused these tears, she was still none the wiser.

‘Eliza, can you see if he needs to use the privy again? I gave him some haldi doodh but something is still wrong.’

‘Ma’am, I’ve taken him three times already and he hasn’t eaten anything since this morning. Whatever is bothering him is not that,’ Eliza said, folding away his clothes, but not before stopping to give Alexander a little wave.

‘Well, can you at least check, please?’ Meena said, trying and failing to keep the pleading out of her voice.

Meena handed the plump child over to Eliza, playfully stroking his golden nose. ‘That’s right, pillai, you’re going with Eliza now.’ His big watery eyes were temporarily mesmerised by her finger before remembering he was meant to be upset. He was big enough now for her not

to worry that he would crack like porcelain every time she picked him up, but still young enough to preclude Meena from a moment's rest.

Meena sat uncomfortably in her corset and dress in her wicker armchair. The chair was a relic from when she breastfed him, before his teeth came in. She let her eyelids fall heavily. His loud, persistent crying continued but she had become so accustomed to the ballad of his despair, its rises and falls, and the chorus that everyone knew by now. It was so familiar that she could just ever so slightly drift off with its melody in the background.

'Are you not ready yet?' she heard James call before entering the room. His cornflower-blue suit was well cut, if a little plain. James had done well to forge close ties with the governor, but it would still be a long time before he could dress like the rest of the Cape elite. That was the point of their ridiculous sumptuary laws; in a small colony of mostly sailors and merchants they wanted to make sure everyone knew who was in charge. And the relatively small number of women made these delineations even more pronounced for Meena. She anticipated that they would all be dressed in their silks today. The wedding of the second daughter of the governor was the biggest event of the season and everyone would be taking the opportunity to show what spoils the Dutch East India Company had brought.

'Nearly, but I think someone doesn't want us to go.'

James raised his eyebrows at Meena as he took Alexander into his arms and gently lifted him up and down. 'I see. Is that right, Alexander? Well, I'm sorry but you've had your mama all to yourself for far too long,' James paused, flashing a grin at Meena. 'I want to spend some time with her. Is that okay with you, sir?'

Both Meena and Alexander giggled at his foolishness. Meena adored the sound of Alexander's laugh. The past few years had been good to James and so had been good to them. Gone was the thick cloud of self-pity that hung over him every time he entered their home. Buried was the fury and

pain Meena felt every time she thought about home. Buried, but not forgotten. She tried to focus on her life at the Cape, her new home, her handsome family. It was the best course of action for all of them. That was what she told herself. Even as she smelled the stench of death every time she looked at the man she was supposed to love. As James had developed his relationship with the governor, Meena had become closer to the Teuling sisters. They were silly but she needed someone to speak to while James was out working and there were precious few options in the Cape. The girls had clearly decided among themselves that their exotic new friend would be their project. They ensured Meena had all the clothes she needed, knew the right people in society, and had even taught her a couple of words of Dutch. Everything she would need to be a proper lady in the Cape of Good Hope. At first Meena found their interest tiresome and patronising, however she soon discovered, much to her private embarrassment, that she was grateful. She was grateful for the safety that came with their friendship. Occasionally she even forgot about James's betrayal, Peter Chilcott and her crimes back in Calcutta. Occasionally.

* * *

CHRISTOPH DE VILLIERS was not from the Cape; no truly eligible man was. The governor had found him back in the Netherlands and entertained him when the young man travelled to the Cape on business. And although Anneke was not yet married, she was too pure-hearted to object when Christophe found Lotte the most charming. Her sisters were there in the front pew of the church, beaming and beatific as Lotte Teuling glided down the aisle with her father by her side. There was even a slight wobble in his step which Meena attributed to the emotion of the day.

She had never been inside a church, let alone for a wedding, and found the whole ritual fascinating. The mix of men and women; the organ music;

the hard and narrow wooden benches that they were crammed into. The stark white of the church walls, with a large walnut cross as its only adornment, seemed like a poor offering of praise for an almighty being. But this did not appear to bother the young couple.

The reception was to be held at the governor's mansion. The room was full of fresh gardenias and was bathed in candlelight, reflecting off gilt mirrors. Meena had learned that such occasions were always a demonstration of the spoils of their conquests before they were a celebration of anything else. She sometimes thought about the young girl that Marguerite and Eliza had helped. How she felt. Stolen, violated, bred and traded like cattle. But most of the time, she did not want to think about it at all. Just as she did not think about the abundance of Indian slaves she would see in town either. She saw no benefit in examining such horror. Not for her. She averted her gaze whenever she saw their blank faces. Looking into their eyes would force her to confront what James and the governor might do, rather than focus on the balls and her fine house and dresses. But Meena was not like those wretched people. She had her handsome English husband and fine things. These made her safe – they had to – so it was easy to look away when she needed. And she often needed to look away.

'They seem happy,' Meena said as she threaded her gloved fingers through James's.

'Her father's fortune is enough to put a smile on anyone's face,' James whispered back. She mock gasped, before playfully hitting his leg. James's earnest idealism had become tempered by a cynical sense of humour over the years which Meena did not love.

She cocked her eyebrow. 'Because that's all a single man looks for in a wife?'

'Only the smart ones,' James retorted, the corners of his lips twitching. 'The others elope and run away to start a new life.'

‘I think you’ll find that is what smart girls do.’ He rubbed her hand affectionately. It was so rare that they had these moments together, when he made her heart race. She felt a sense of relief. That those stolen moments in Bengal could still endure in another land. That despite everything they had gone through, everything she had heard, she hadn’t been wrong about him. Amidst the stares and hostility – open and oblique – Meena needed something to cling to. Alexander, her friendship with the Teulings, and James formed her life raft; she could not bring herself to loosen her grip even for a minute. If she did, she didn’t know what might happen to her.

* * *

MEENA HAD gladly accepted Anneke’s invitation to tea a couple of days after the wedding. Anneke hugged her so tight she thought she might faint. Sophie and Eva, the other two unmarried sisters following suit, hugging their friend in turn. Their eyes danced over her dress and matching shoes. She had been sure to pin her hair up and dab some rouge on her cheeks and lips like they had taught her.

‘You look wonderful,’ Anneke exclaimed. ‘I am glad you’re so well.’

‘Why didn’t you bring Alexander?’ whined Sophie. ‘I wanted to see him so badly.’

‘He’s at home with Eliza. He is rather bigger than you must remember,’ Meena said, laughing. ‘Alexander’s becoming quite the little man now. He has his father’s curls and eyes.’

‘How charming,’ cooed Anneke.

‘We should call on you sometime,’ said Sophie.

‘Or perhaps you can bring him here next time you call on us,’ Anneke added hurriedly, keen to spare Meena any embarrassment for her humble dwellings. ‘We would love to have him running around the grounds.’

‘Of course,’ said Meena, straightening up in her chair, ‘but you must call on us as well. We have moved to a charming house across town, not five minutes from here, in fact.’ These words tumbled out of her mouth before Meena could consider how ludicrous the phrase ‘charming house across town’ was for her to say. Two years of desperately trying to assimilate and being the Teulings’ pet project had apparently worked.

Anneke and Sophie exchanged a look. ‘Oh my. That is wonderful news,’ said Anneke. ‘We’re practically neighbours. I do hope you can visit more often.’

‘Have you been practising your dancing?’ Eva asked. Meena laughed and tried not to splutter while drinking her tea.

‘I wish! My little boy isn’t much of a dance partner and he hasn’t given me much of an opportunity to practise without him either.’

‘She’s not a child, Eva. She doesn’t have time to worry about such trivial matters,’ Sophie scolded.

‘Well, you’re almost nineteen and you still dance at balls,’ Eva retorted.

‘That’s because we’re not married yet,’ Anneke said with a strange look cast over her face, Meena thought.

‘If you can’t dance when you’re married then I’m in no hurry to find a husband,’ said Sophie. They all laughed while Meena sipped her tea.

‘Well, one can still have fun. Look at Meena: an excellent husband, a beautiful child. And she’s travelled around the world,’ Anneke said, lightly brushing Meena’s arm. Meena smiled, her lips pressed tightly. She could feel Anneke’s eyes burrowing into her. She turned and gave her a quizzical look. Anneke reciprocated and nodded.

Meena set her china teacup down with a delicate tinkle and stood up, smoothing her cream dress.

‘Anneke, would you care to take a turn about the room? Eva, I have been told you play the pianoforte beautifully. Would you mind delighting us all with your music?’

Eva obliged and made her way to the pianoforte as the two women began to stroll around the room.

‘So how is he these days?’ Anneke whispered as she slipped her arm through Meena’s. The eyes of several generations of Teulings past, immortalised in oils and set against the buttermilk walls, seemed to follow Meena around the room.

‘James?’

Anneke laughed. ‘No, silly, Alexander! He’s so big now.’

Meena hesitated. Anneke was staring so hopefully at her, like she could never imagine the hot, devouring flames of childbirth. Let alone what came after.

‘I’m endlessly amazed by him. But he can be a handful.’

‘That’s so wonderful. You’re so lucky. I don’t care if Sophie thinks you can’t have fun, I can’t wait till I’m married.’

Meena looked at her, amused to see two spots of red as Anneke’s cheeks became flushed.

‘And is there a suitor you have in mind?’

Anneke smiled enigmatically before rushing to answer. ‘His name is Johannes. He is a VOC officer. We met at a ball weeks ago and I am deeply in love.’

Meena looked at her companion. She was certain she had never been that young. ‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. He says he will take me sailing with him, just like you and James.’

‘Sailing is not always fun,’ Meena cautioned. She could not picture sweet Anneke in a dingy cabin on a ship full of filthy deckhands.

‘He says he will show me Batavia and China. Even *your* home country, Meena.’ Meena could only imagine the sort of dolt Anneke would fall for but nonetheless, the girl seemed happy. Meena was acutely aware that there was little more a young woman could hope for than a man that made you feel happy, no matter how fleeting that feeling might be.

‘So does he have plans to ask your father for your hand?’

Anneke leaned closer, her pale blonde brows anxiously knitted. ‘That is the problem.’

Meena shot her a look. ‘What?’

‘Papa. He’s ill. And he is worried we will leave and marry while he’s still sick. Our mother died when Eva was an infant. Lotte’s left for Batavia, and he doesn’t want the rest of us to leave. So, he has sworn to refuse any request for any of our hands until he is better.’

‘I had no idea the governor was so ill.’ Meena’s mind flicked to James and how much time he had been spending with him.

Anneke gripped her arm with her other hand. ‘You mustn’t tell James, please promise me.’

Meena nodded, keen to put Anneke at ease. ‘Of course.’

‘He takes laudanum to hide the symptoms. He shakes. He trembles with the pain. Sometimes his speech slurs when it is really bad. Then he cannot write either and I have to help with his correspondence.’ Anneke looked around at Sophie reading and Eva lost in her music. ‘I have not told my sisters yet. I don’t want to worry them.’ Her light green eyes were wide and plaintive. Meena felt the urge to hug her but did not want to arouse suspicion. They turned and kept walking the length of the vast drawing room.

‘I am so very sorry to hear that Anneke, that is truly terrible news. If there is anything I can do...’

‘Well, actually yes, there is. You are a healer, yes?’

Meena felt her heart stop. ‘Where did you hear that?’

Anneke laughed incredulously. ‘Everyone knows, Meena. Christophe’s men were beside themselves when they saw you at the wedding. You’ve created quite a legend for yourself! They’re all fascinated, as am I, to be perfectly honest. I have always wanted to ask, we all did. I’ve wanted to

since I first found out but never dared. I must say though, I still can't believe you saved James with your... arts.'

Meena was numb with shock. Was it James's men? *Harry*. Of course he would not keep his mouth shut. How many people, how many of her supposed friends, had been talking about her, behind her back, for all these years? 'No, it was the surgeon on the ship,' she said quietly.

Anneke stared at her. 'Because a *ship's surgeon* saved him after he was attacked by a madman? Don't be so ridiculous – or so modest. I've heard about your native healing practices in India and the Far East. Is it true you can save people?'

Meena observed the girl's hungry eyes, wide with hope and awe. 'Anneke. Why were you talking about me?' she asked sharply.

Anneke looked panicked. 'No! No, I wasn't talking about you, not like that. Conversation turned to the East Indies and so we said we knew a real-life Indian princess. They knew you were with James and heard that you knew how to heal wounds. Clearly, you are gaining fame for yourself.'

Meena's blood ran cold. If word had got out about this, she wondered what else Harry and the rest of the crew would say about her, and how long it would take for the Teulings to find out about what she had done to Abhishek. How many would gossip about the mad, foreign murderess? What else did they know? Would this get back to Peter Chilcott? He could surely find ways to use such information to make her life a misery. A fugitive murderer, cast out, her son ripped from her arms. Or even worse. She wondered whether her friend already knew more than she was letting on. She looked into Anneke's eyes and there appeared to be absolutely no guile behind them.

'My aunt. Sh-she is a very wise woman. She knew the healing properties of plants and she taught me a little when I was a young girl. But I am not as skilled as her, nor am I familiar with the plants that grow here.'

‘But you have healed people before, yes?’ Anneke’s eyes widened as big as saucers.

‘Is that why you are bringing this ridiculous notion up now? I’ve done nothing like this, Anneke.’ Meena did not want to be drawn further into this family’s web when people in town were already gossiping about her. ‘Your father must have access to the very best physicians. Surely one of them can help.’

‘They have all tried. But Papa refuses their advice and prescriptions without fail. They all say he needs to retire to the country. They’ve offered some mixtures to help with the shakes and his slurred words but that sends him into a deep sleep. The only medicine he takes willingly is the laudanum. And I fear he is growing much too fond of it. There are no other options left. Please Meena, you have to do something.’

Meena placed her hand gently on Anneke’s.

‘Anneke, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what I can do. I have never tried to heal anyone of an illness as serious as what your father has.’

‘But you must know something. Even just something that *might* work. I’ll try anything.’

‘I suppose...’ Meena combed through her addled, sleep-deprived mind. ‘I suppose you might need to cleanse him of the toxins that are causing his illness.’

‘Yes.’ Anneke nodded solemnly. ‘How do I do that?’

Meena thought deeply. ‘Well, he should take castor oil. A tincture of castor oil each day.’

‘Okay, I will make sure that is added when he takes his laudanum. But what about the shakes? He won’t let any of us marry until he has those under control in public.’

Meena looked away, in part to think but also to extricate herself from the intensity of Anneke’s desperate, expectant gaze.

‘Some kapikachhu powder might help. I don’t have any. But perhaps there might be some at the market. Not the powder itself, of course; you would have to buy the flowers, dry them and grind them to dust. Or maybe boil them and mix with warm milk.’

‘What flower is this?’

‘I think it might be called cowhage here. Dark and violet when in bloom, soft as velvet.’

‘Thank you, Meena.’ Anneke threw her arms around her neck. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘I cannot promise it will work. But I do sincerely hope it does.’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ Sophie called out. ‘Has she told you about her suitor?’

Eva giggled. ‘She spends most of her days staring at the door, waiting for a letter from him.’

‘That’s enough, Eva,’ Anneke said sternly before turning to Meena. ‘He reminds me a lot of James actually,’ Anneke whispered. ‘The same gallantry, heroism.’

Meena involuntarily scoffed. ‘What acts of James’s heroism were you thinking of in particular?’

‘The way he rescued you, of course, from your barbaric father and brought you here. To civilisation,’ said Anneke, bemused at Meena’s apparent lack of recollection.

Meena nodded, sucking in the sides of her cheeks until she felt her teeth bite down. She chose to forget it but despite her best efforts, Anneke’s words that night at the governor’s ball churned doubt in every dark, lonely moment. ‘Yes. Of course.’

‘It’s such a romantic story. And impressive. It’s that sort of bravery that made Papa keen to bring James into the VOC.’

Meena nodded slowly. ‘Quite.’

‘Anyway, I should watch my tongue. I am privy to all VOC matters in the East Indies. I shouldn’t share what I know. But rest assured, Papa has big plans, and James is a key part of it all.’

Meena smiled gnomically and nodded her head. She knew nothing of what her husband was doing. He refused to tell her, saying that she need not bother about such affairs. Instead, he obfuscated through displays of adoration. Pretty dresses. A new house. While she was at home nursing his heir, he was off elsewhere, conspiring.

* * *

MEENA FOUND James sat in the front room of their house with their child on his lap, both poring over a book as Alexander traced the words with his finger. Meena had wanted to give him a Mughal name to pass on some of her heritage, but James had refused. He was the son of an Englishman and so, an English name he would have. Or at least a Greek one. Meena had been reading since they moved. The old man they had rented their home from was an antiquarian with a penchant for ancient history. The house was full of books about ancient empires and the men who led them. Their son – *her* son – was named after a Greek conqueror. An emperor that marched on India. So perhaps her roots were in fact represented.

Meena stared at James, gently teaching their son in this strange house in this strange land that she had tried to call her home with her new family. She sat back and thought about how James and his uncle had destroyed her old one. How she had forced herself to choke on her self-deception for these past few years in the Cape. And then she thought about how she could not do it anymore.

Once he realised that he was being watched James looked up and smiled, his face half-illuminated by the amber glow of the hanging brass

lamp in the parlour. ‘Eliza said you were calling on the governor’s daughters. That’s good that they’re still interested in being your friend.’

‘Of course, they are still my friends,’ Meena replied coolly. ‘Why wouldn’t they be?’

‘No reason,’ James said, bouncing Alexander up and down, barely looking at Meena. ‘How are they?’

‘They are well. Anneke is worried about her father’s health.’

James looked up at Meena, surprised. ‘Oh. I am sorry to hear that.’

‘Yes, it is awful.’ Meena walked towards James and Alexander and sat down on the hard, ebony Batavian sofa opposite, her heels clacking against the diamond-patterned wooden floor, as she kept her eyes on James. ‘She even has to help with his correspondence. Did you know that?’

James shook his head, his expression stone. ‘No. No, I did not.’

‘Yes, it has been quite a burden.’ Meena held her arms out and Alexander reached out, climbing into her embrace. ‘There we are, pillai. Yes, it is a burden for her. She is privy to a great deal of plans and strategies regarding the VOC and their military. Did you know that, James?’

James’s eyes narrowed and looked at Meena as she let her boy play with her dark ringlets. ‘No I did not.’ Meena nodded silently.

‘Meena—’

‘What?’

James looked scared. ‘I think I should tell you something.’

She sighed, pulling Alexander closer to her. ‘I think you need to tell me a great deal, James. Where would you like to begin?’

He took a sharp inhale of breath. ‘Whatever you think I have done, I have only ever done for us. For *you*.’

‘For me,’ Meena repeated. Her voice was as bitter as the words tasted.

‘Yes, for you. It has all been for you.’ James reached out to take Meena’s hand but she kissed Alexander before setting him down.

‘Alexander, go find Eliza. *Now*.’

The boy, confused but silenced by his mother's firm words, wandered out of the room. Meena waited till the boy had left before turning back to face James.

'Did you have my father murdered?' She heard her voice tremble with rage.

James stared at her, speechless and terrified. He eventually straightened his back and cleared his throat.

'I can explain.'

Meena tried to keep her face still but knew from his expression that the maelstrom of disgust and fury was writ on her face. She had done everything she could over the past few years to not arrive at this moment. Yet here they were. 'Please do.'

James looked her dead in the eye and swallowed hard. 'I needed to give up your father's position.'

'Why?'

'Because my uncle would have known if I kept such information from him. He had spies everywhere, especially at the Company headquarters. They saw you, and Amir of course knew we had met. I had to give my uncle information. Once word got out that I had run away with you and that your father had escaped, then he would know that I had prior knowledge that I kept from him. He would have never forgotten. His network extends everywhere. I had already risked so much already by running away with you. I couldn't risk incurring his wrath. If he knew I betrayed him...'

'Which is why you've decided to work for their Dutch enemy?' Meena snapped. 'How do you think he will react to that?'

'I have ensured that my business with the VOC is conducted discreetly.'

'So discreetly that you spent the first few months here traipsing around every tavern in this town to try and get a job, while dining off Indian wealth. That *I* stole for you,' Meena screamed incredulously. 'Perhaps it wasn't about his wrath. I think you wanted to tell him, because no matter

what high-minded ideals you espouse, you needed to know that if it all goes wrong, he will still be your salvation, should you need it. Just like he always was.'

James's eyes narrowed. 'First of all, never presume to know my mind, especially when you spout such foolish speculation. Secondly, you are my wife. So your wealth is my wealth. Finally, I find it rather strange, Meena, for you to be so hurt about your father being killed when only *one* of us has murdered a member of your family.'

Meena gasped and stood up. The unspoken secret between them, laid buried for so long, in the deepest, darkest part of Meena's soul. She felt her heart cleaved clean in two at the shock that he would blame her when it was all for him. 'I did that for you,' she whispered.

'And I am ensuring our future. For you and our son,' James spat out, 'so don't come accusing me of anything. Not when we both know what you've done. Your brother. Your father's guards. You have no right to question me.'

Meena's heart was pounding. 'So why didn't you tell me?' she snapped.

'Because I knew you would react this way, you would be hysterical.' James rose from his seat.

Meena's mouth was agape. 'Do you honestly believe it is unreasonable for me to be upset?'

'About a man who hit you, had you tortured, tried to have me killed? So long as he lived the English couldn't have secured Calcutta. He was a threat, he had to be removed.'

'What about me?' Meena stared James dead in the eye. 'I'm still alive, is that a problem? Am I a threat to the English?'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Why? Why is it a foolish idea?'

'Because you are a woman. You are my wife, for Christ's sake.'

'I am your wife,' Meena repeated, enunciating every word slowly, 'so why do I feel like a stranger in my own home?'

‘Probably because you have decided to act so strangely,’ shouted James. ‘I scarcely know you anymore. My actions in Calcutta secured our safety and my role with the VOC has provided for you and for our son. What would you have me do?’

‘I would have you live by the morals you spoke of when we were in Calcutta, not sentence my family to death in service of your career. I would have you not do a job that requires you to spill secrets to the highest bidder.’

James’s eyes grew cold yet blazed with a fire she had never seen before. He looked as if he wanted to crush her, pulverise her, till she was nothing. And then he struck her. Swiftly and deliberately across the face with the back of his right hand. The hand he had once held hers in as he pledged himself to her, promised to always keep her safe.

The blow was hard but not forceful enough to throw Meena off her feet. It was the shock that took her aback, stinging far more than her blazing cheek. And the shame. The shame she felt that she had believed such promises. That she was once again the focus of such abuse. The idea that she was once more the possession of a man who felt he could strike her, filled her with more fear than she would ever dare admit.

They stared at one another. Meena could feel James’s self-loathing and resentment that she could elicit such a reaction. Even when attacking her, he would find a way to deflect responsibility. Suddenly he heard Alexander’s gentle sobs. He was not with Eliza, as instructed, but half-hidden in the doorway, scared. James looked at him in repulsion before glaring at her.

‘You handle your child, and I will provide for this family. This is the last time we will ever speak of this.’

James stormed out of the room past their son as Meena crumpled to the floor, her cream dress forming a cloud of soft petticoat ruffles around her.

CHAPTER 19



Meena was in a deep sleep when Eliza knocked on her door. The night of her confrontation with James, the anxiety she felt was eventually conquered by sheer exhaustion. She had given Alexander to Eliza and told her she was not to be disturbed. James said nothing to her when he came to bed that night. The two of them lay there separately in the pitch-black silence when the light went out. This stalemate and her exhaustion continued for several days.

‘Ma’am,’ Eliza said as she entered, holding Alexander by the hand while clutching a letter, ‘would you like to take him? He slept very well last night.’

Meena smiled at her little boy’s fascination with her chintz bedsheets. ‘Come here, chellam. Do you want Amma to take you?’

‘Yes!’ he exclaimed. Meena and Eliza laughed at the child’s enthusiasm. He stretched out and found his way into her arms, overbalancing them both and causing them to collapse on the bed. Meena smiled and pressed her face against the top of his hair as she played with his chubby little arm. Her golden boy. Her only child – Meena’s regular use of ground hibiscus ensured that. She refused to put her body through such agony again for James.

Eliza walked towards the door then suddenly turned. ‘Actually, ma’am, this arrived for you.’ Eliza thrust the small, cream envelope towards her. ‘I think it might be from the governor’s house.’

Meena hesitated before taking the letter. ‘Thank you, Eliza.’ Meena’s eyes lingered on the letter. She knew it must be from Anneke. She didn’t need James, she had Anneke and the other sisters; they cared about her. She broke the seal and read the letter, which was barely a paragraph. The girl had asked Meena to call on her again, but her tone was peculiar. Too urgent, too gay, even for Anneke. Meena was intrigued.

‘Eliza, can you please dress Alexander? We are going out.’

* * *

‘MY DEAREST MEENA.’ Anneke hugged her tight. Meena felt suffocated as Anneke’s arms pressed against the whalebone of her corset. Meanwhile Alexander clung to her back, almost causing her to topple over, before Eliza stepped in. Hugs were exchanged with all the sisters who promptly took Alexander by his sticky little hand and laughed and beamed at the stories he regaled them with about his day. Meena raised her eyebrows at Anneke which made her let out a brief laugh as Meena slipped her arm through Anneke’s.

‘He will have them waiting on him hand and foot soon enough,’ said Meena. Their amusement at how he was dressed in European clothes, along with the positive observation that he was not as dark as her, did not go unnoticed by Meena. But she ignored these disquieting moments, choosing to focus instead on their affectionate displays.

‘I think they might be fine with that. My sisters seem quite besotted.’

‘They do, don’t they? I don’t suppose that was the subject you wanted to talk to me about?’ Meena prompted.

Anneke looked around. Eva was clapping and singing a nursery rhyme with Sophie puppeting him with her hands over his.

‘Shall we take the air within the grounds?’ Meena suggested, seeking to soothe Anneke’s nerves. ‘It’s such a lovely day.’

Anneke sighed. ‘That’s a wonderful idea, Meena. I just need to collect my shawl. I left it in Papa’s study.’

Meena accompanied her friend to the governor’s study, where signs of Anneke’s support were highly visible – her fan, her china teacup, the missing shawl – in the otherwise male domain, soaked in the scent of leather-bound books, ink and tobacco.

A knock at the door interrupted Meena’s examination of her surroundings. It was a maid, middle-aged and with dark brown skin, her hair thick and black with grey streaks pulled back under her cap. She was Indian or Ceylonese perhaps. Meena had never seen her before. She had seen others, in the Cape. It was full of Indian and Ceylonese who had been forced into labour, but she did not know the Teulings had one themselves. Had this been one of the many things Meena deliberately chose to look away from? But now Meena’s mind splintered into a thousand questions that had gone previously unasked. About what they thought of her. Of other women like her. She knew she was their plaything; the gift of their friendship made it a tolerable bargain. However, it was another thing to be a source of exotic novelty within the sea of faceless, nameless brown faces that otherwise populated their lives. Like teaching a dog to walk on its hind legs while the other mongrels sleep in the yard.

‘Ma’am? Miss Sophie and Miss Eva said you were in here. May I speak to you about tonight’s dinner?’

‘Of course. Will you wait here, Meena? I promise it will only take a moment.’

Anneke left with the maid. Meena, still shaken from seeing the older Indian woman, sat down in the governor’s chair. She wondered what the

maid thought of her, the pampered pet of the Teuling sisters. Did she envy or resent her? Or did Meena remind her of a daughter or niece she had perhaps lost?

The bureau-cabinet, embellished with ivory and ebony inlaid, was left open and covered in scattered letters that the governor had yet to organise. Letters in Dutch, English, written in various men's hands. Meena gave them all a cursory glance until one, sat on the edge of the desk, caught her eye. The letter was covered in jagged black letters, suggesting haste perhaps, but the words were unmistakably his: James.

Trust was the lifeblood of a marriage, she knew that. She had to trust him to do whatever was best for their family. But he had violated that trust long ago. She snatched up the letter, keeping an eye on the door in case Anneke came back, and read.

Ceylon. Fortress. Wilpattu. Unguarded. These words jumped out at Meena. She gripped the edge of the table, as reality seemed to slip through her fingers. James was working with the Dutch to take Wilpattu. They already had the south of the country and wanted the rest. Take the fortress, the letter read. It was unguarded, only occupied by an old woman, he said. Easy enough for a small force to take. These were all James's suggestions, offered freely and enthusiastically. Meena sat back and clenched her fists, fruitlessly trying to stop her fingers from trembling as she tried to gather her thoughts: her husband would gladly sacrifice her and her family once more for his standing in society. To benefit a system he had once so eloquently railed against. Because it suited him and generously rewarded him. White-hot rage coursed through her veins but she hurriedly placed the letter where it had been on the desk, smoothing down the corners where her grip had tightened. The painful words of her father, another man who'd abused her and yet also another sacrifice on the altar of James's greed, rang in her ears: *a man like that will say anything he must to get what he wants and will not give it a second thought. Whatever the cost.* Too long she had sat by in

silence while she allowed James – all of them – to profit from the destruction of her life. Allowed them to abuse her with impunity. She could not let that continue.

‘All done, sorry for that,’ Anneke called out, her voice a chirpy sing-song. ‘Are you ready?’

* * *

THOUGH THE ROADS leading up to the house were dry and dusty brown, the grounds of the governor’s house were lush and verdant, a multi-coloured mosaic of pinks and blues and purples and yellows.

‘Do you like them?’ asked Anneke. ‘I had Papa ship bulbs from Amsterdam. That was where Mama lived. She always told me about the tulips there. I wanted something that reminded us of her.’

‘Uh huh,’ Meena said, her mind still in the study, focused on the letter, on Kiran. She then looked up to see Anneke, puzzled by her friend’s disinterest. ‘I’m sorry, they really are beautiful,’ Meena said, letting her finger stroke the shape of the saffron-coloured flower. ‘My mother designed a garden back home, with my aunt. I used to enjoy spending time there. We didn’t have any tulips though.’

‘You’ve never mentioned your mother before.’

Meena paused. She was much too wary now to reveal more of herself to Anneke. She was still unsure of what she would do but she knew she had to steer the conversation delicately. She shrugged casually. ‘She died not long after I was born. My father raised me. But tell me: how is your father? Is he really fully recovered?’ James’s letter had only been written to the governor. There was a chance that Kiran could be saved if his plans went no further than the governor’s ears.

Anneke nodded, a bright smile briefly plastered on her face. ‘He really is. I got some cowhage from the market and steeped it to make a tea which

he drank, and after two days he was able to eat without dropping his fork for the first time in months. By the third day, he conducted a full day of meetings without so much as a stammer. By the fourth, he was back to his old self, it really is astonishing. I never thought such a thing would happen, not in my wildest dreams.'

'I am pleased he is back to full health. Now perhaps you can marry your suitor.' Meena noted Anneke's attempt at a smile. She was not her usual carefree self, though fashioning an adequate impersonation.

'Anneke.' Meena placed her hand on Anneke's, intent on probing further. 'Is everything alright? Is there something wrong with Johannes? Does he not intend to propose anymore?'

Anneke hung her head and took Meena's hand in hers.

'Oh Meena, I feel sick. I feel so awful.'

'Why, what's wrong? What has happened?'

'Nothing, nothing has happened. Everything is well, there is nothing to be upset about.' Anneke's voice cracked as she trailed off.

'So why are you upset?' Meena asked gently, watching Anneke very carefully. 'Are you sure everything is okay with Johannes?'

'Yes, Johannes is still wonderful. He intends to call on Papa to ask his permission for my hand.'

Meena nodded, waiting, but nothing followed. 'Well, that's *good*.'

'Yes, it is.' Anneke looked down.

'So, what is wrong?'

Anneke sighed, her slim, tall body hunched and defeated. She spoke in a low voice. 'Do you remember how I was helping Papa with his correspondence? And listening in on his meetings? Well, he no longer has any need for my help.'

'I see,' Meena said slowly. 'And you're upset about this?' Anneke looked away as Meena's eyes widened in realisation – both at Anneke's true

meaning and at the opportunity it presented her. ‘You want him to be ill, so he’ll need your help with work.’

‘I don’t wish any ill will on him,’ Anneke pleaded. ‘It was just so fascinating. I’ve never known so much about Papa’s work before. I had never had much to do at all. But now, with a stroke of a pen I can dictate the lives of hundreds, thousands even. It’s *incredible*.

It’s different for you, of course. You have Alexander. You have purpose and meaning in your life—’

‘It is not just children that give you purpose, Anneke.’ Meena found herself saying this a little too firmly, her resentment of James following the letter still fresh in her mind.

‘No, but do I have anything else? I sing, I sew, I paint. I wait to be courted. And yes, I love Johannes, but what am I to do when we are wed, when he is off sailing around Batavia? I have nothing else to fill my life. I don’t even have your skills, your medical knowledge. I need that, Meena. Power. Purpose. It has only been a few days, but I miss it so much.’

Meena stared at her companion in shock. She had not reckoned that such a delicate lamb would burn with such unladylike ambition. She was almost impressed, even if Anneke looked stricken.

‘You think I’m awful, don’t you?’

Meena shook her head. ‘No, of course not. I just... I am just a little surprised. I had no idea you felt that way. But you wanted him better so you could marry Johannes. So you could sail around the world. Do you not want to marry him anymore?’

Anneke avoided Meena’s gaze as she twirled a strand of hair around her finger with increasing agitation. ‘No, I do. I just want to wait to help Papa for a while longer, perhaps. Just a little longer.’

‘But he’s better.’

Anneke fell silent again. Meena waited for clarity as they walked through the grounds. She needed her to say it.

‘He is not ill now. But he might be again.’

Meena stood still as she waited for Anneke to elaborate. Meena knew better than to presume anything at this moment. Anneke stopped walking and turned to look at Meena face on.

‘Meena, you know how to heal people. You healed him. You must know how to... un-heal people too?’

Meena narrowed her eyes. ‘I suppose not administering the tea would... not heal him.’

Anneke sighed. ‘I told Papa about the tea once he was healed. I didn’t say where it came from, or who told me about it, of course! But now he’s made sure that it’s prepared for him every day.’

‘That is all fine, but I still don’t know what you want from me?’

Anneke studied Meena for a moment. ‘If you know so much about plants and herbs and how to heal.’ Anneke paused. ‘You must know the opposite.’

Meena fixed Anneke with a hard stare. ‘What do you want, Anneke?’ Meena asked.

‘Just a couple of weeks. He doesn’t need to be in pain. I wouldn’t want that. But I want my help to be needed.’

Meena nodded. She looked at Anneke’s open, desperate face and felt an overwhelming sense of exhaustion at being asked such a request.

‘Anneke, I don’t think I can—’

Anneke cut Meena off and took her hand. ‘Oh please, Meena, you have to help me! I will go mad if you don’t. I know you can help, please.’

Meena considered her options regarding the desperate girl before her. She cast her mind back towards the maid and whether Anneke would make such a dangerous request of her other companions. She thought about James and all she did in Calcutta to help him. How she used her talents and how wretched she felt after.

‘I could even help James if I covered Papa’s correspondence again,’ Anneke pleaded.

Meena was jolted out of her thoughts by these words. ‘What did you say?’

‘I could help James with his position in the Company. Not that he needs it, of course,’ Anneke added quickly. ‘But I could help with his plans. I am sure you know he has a big opportunity coming up. You are his wife after all.’

Meena dared not admit to herself what she was thinking. She could not wreak such devastation once more. But then, how could she stand by and let her family be murdered, again? Or worse, carted off and enslaved? She did not know of James’s betrayal last time, but she had an opportunity to put a stop to it this time. Her hands trembled at the thought of what she had to do. What she was *choosing* to do.

James would be scared of someone else with stronger connections to the men in Ceylon going ahead without him and taking the credit, Meena knew that. He was counting on this opportunity, he couldn’t risk anyone taking it from him. Without the governor, no one else in the VOC would even know about the planned attack in Ceylon.

‘Thank you, Anneke, that is good. James was in fact telling me that he was growing concerned about his plans. He thought it would be better to pursue it later, having taken the time to fully scope out any enemy forces there. But he fears the governor is set on the attack happening imminently, regardless of what James thinks.’

Anneke clasped their hands together. ‘I can make sure no word of an advancement reaches them until James wishes it so. I promise.’

Meena smiled as she resolved herself, swallowing down the bile rising in her throat. It was necessary. She would not be responsible for more of her family’s bloodshed. ‘That would be wonderful, Anneke, thank you.’ She

leaned in closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. ‘And I will help you. Or at least I will try.’

Anneke pulled her into a fierce embrace. Meena could hear her hitched breath and the poor girl’s swallowed tears. Meena inhaled her friend’s relief and breathed it out deeply, heavily.

‘Thank you,’ Anneke whispered.

‘Of course,’ Meena said, still hugging her. ‘We should get back – I need to check on Alexander. He must be driving your poor sisters mad. Now listen.’ Meena pressed her lips to Anneke’s ears. ‘Do you remember I initially suggested castor oil before we settled on the cowhage? Well, the oil would help your father but the seeds, crushed, that would counteract the cowhage. And then once you are ready, you can stop giving him the castor seeds.’

‘Okay, but how many should I give him?’

Meena paused. She knew how powerful the seeds were. Her aunt had often told her two would be enough to confine a grown man to his bed for a week, more would be dire.

‘A small handful. Eight at least, just to be sure. There might be some other effects, but that would just be from the consumption of the cowhage and seeds together. Those should settle soon enough.’

Anneke clung to her even tighter. ‘Is there nothing you can’t do? And having been brought up with such native ways as well. You are truly remarkable.’

Meena’s smile turned into a grimace as she gritted her teeth. ‘You are very welcome. I think it would be best if I stayed away for a while. This is a delicate matter and requires discretion.’

‘Yes, I think that would be wise. But what if I have any questions, or it doesn’t work?’

‘Write to me,’ Meena said. She knew that if Anneke really intended to go through with this plan, then she would never see her again.

* * *

MEENA ADDED Anneke's third and final letter to the pile. She had grown accustomed to Eliza entering every day, the searching look in her eyes growing with each time, armed with a small note sealed with wax. Each time Meena added it to the pile in her armoire, hidden from James's eyes, and hers. She knew what their contents would be but could not bring herself to face them.

Anyway, Alexander was keeping her busy. The little rascal was growing quicker by the day and was getting the better of Eliza and Meena combined. James was mostly out the past couple of days, busy with VOC business. He was still cold with Meena but managed a few cordial words over dinner.

A sharp swoosh of air rose as the front door opened and slammed shut.

'He's dead!' Eliza's head jerked up as she heard James's shouting as he entered. Meena was taken aback by the sheer anger in his voice, which served her well. She looked as shocked as she should be.

James burst through the bedroom door, face red and damp, hair darkened with sweat pressed against his forehead. 'The governor is dead.'

Eliza gasped and Meena reached for Alexander and held him tight, her eyes trained on James.

'But how can that be? What happened?' asked Eliza, in an uncharacteristic outburst. It was a testament to how alarming the news was that James did not reprimand her. Her eyes were wide with shock but not without excitement at the possibilities. The death of a powerful man like the governor would be sorely felt by the VOC. And there was no knowing what would happen next in the Cape.

'He had been ill. He had taken to bed with a fever and delirium, after suffering seizures and purging. He finally died last night.'

'Was he seen by a physician?' Meena asked.

James's glare burned a hole in her, as he looked as if he wanted to rip her apart. 'No. Anneke felt that he would recover without the aid of one.' James paused. 'Clearly, she was mistaken.'

Meena nodded sympathetically. 'Yes, poor Anneke.'

'Is that why she wrote to you?' Eliza snapped her mouth shut as soon as she spoke. Her eyes grew wide with realisation and Meena cursed the girl silently for her quick tongue.

Meena's eyes flicked between the pair. 'I haven't had the opportunity to read her latest letters. She did mention that he was ill again though. I will call on her in the morning to offer my heartfelt condolences.'

James stared at her in silence in response to this.

'Alexander, pillai, go with Eliza. Eliza, please, this isn't an appropriate conversation for him to hear.'

Eliza scuttled off with Alexander, her eyes darting between Meena and James. She firmly shut the door behind her.

'Anneke wrote to you?' James asked while crossing his arms.

'Yes, though I haven't had the chance to read them, to be honest.' Meena looked down, smoothing the sheets where Alexander had just been.

'Them? How many letters did she write?' James walked over to the edge of the bed.

Meena looked up to meet his gaze. 'Three.'

James raised his eyebrows. 'She sent you *three* letters and you chose to not even look at any of them? Because you knew what they would say?'

Meena stared at him, saying nothing, the distant laughter of their son filling the chasm of silence between them.

'He is the governor of the Cape,' James hissed, his nostrils flaring. 'What did you do?'

'What on earth are you saying, James? I haven't even *met* the governor in months.'

'No, but your best friend Anneke has.'

‘Whatever you think Anneke has done has nothing to do with me.’

‘Remember who you’re talking to.’ James lunged forward, his nose pressed up against hers. ‘I know you. He was getting better. And then apparently there were fits, purging. Such a young woman would never have been able to do something like that, let alone want to, unless influenced by someone.’

‘And so, *I* corrupted poor, innocent Anneke, is that it?’ asked Meena, her voice turning to a venomous sneer. ‘That *sweet* girl wanted to make her own beloved father sick so she could act as his secretary and pretend her existence actually mattered for once. She begged for my help. It’s not my fault if she got the dosage wrong, or maybe it didn’t react well with the old man’s laudanum habit. Either way, she killed him. That is what that sweet golden-haired angel has done.’

James looked at her. ‘I don’t know if I believe you.’

‘Because you know her so well?’

‘Because I know you. She got the dosage wrong, did she? The governor of the Cape is a bloody laudanum addict, really?’

‘You seem very shaken by this news, James. Is there any particular reason for that? Any specific plan you were working on with the governor before his untimely demise?’ Meena kept her tone pointed and her eyes open, searching for a shred of contrition from her husband.

James’s nostrils flared. ‘I have nothing to say to you.’

‘I thought as much.’

James dropped his gaze and began to pace.

‘We need to leave.’

James stopped still. ‘What?’

‘We need to leave,’ Meena repeated. The Cape was kind to its society’s elite and tolerated anyone else who toed the line. However, its punishment for those who dared to break the law was notorious; she could be branded or worse, hanged, if she was found to have anything to do with the

governor's death. And who knew what they would do to Alexander? Without James's favour with the governor, there would be no reason for them to treat Alexander any better than any other coloured child in the Cape, especially if he was the son of a murderess.

James looked broken with only empty fury left. 'And go where? I finally have a role here, Meena. That I earned. By my own efforts, damn you!'

She stared at him impassively. She lacked the energy or concern to soothe her husband's ego. 'You told tales to a dead man. You have no position here, certainly nothing formal. I'm sorry James, but there is nothing left for us here, and it's too risky for us to stay.'

'There's only risk because of you, you little witch.'

Meena glared at him. Faced the hatred radiating off him. She recognised it because she felt it too. The maelstrom of anger and hurt and pain. She knew because she had in some way or other, lived almost every day in the Cape with it. Buried deep under the weight of expectations and hopes and fears and pathetic, small-minded practicalities. Under the aggressive stares at her and her son, the patronising comments and the knowledge that she now lived in a land where her humanity was predicated on her relationship with a man she resented every day. She had felt it all, and tried so hard not to feel it, so that when she saw it in him, she did not have the energy to feel anymore. She was hollow.

'That doesn't make what I'm saying any less true.'

James grunted and buried his head in his hands. Eventually he spoke, his words muffled through his hands. 'England. We can flee to England.'

Meena's mouth went dry. 'Absolutely not,' she whispered.

James glared at her. 'Do you think we have a choice?'

'He will kill us! Kill me and Alexander at least. He won't ever accept us. Alexander is living proof of your betrayal and you're bringing him to that man's doorstep,' Meena exclaimed. Sir Peter Chilcott. His absence in

her words hung heavily in the air. She knew James would know exactly who she meant.

‘He would not kill his family, that means more to him than anything, believe me. He took me in, gave me a home when he could just as easily have left me to rot after my father died.’

Meena scoffed at this paean, so different to James’s estimation of the man back in Calcutta, and a world away from what she knew of his actions.

James slammed his palm down on the armoire in frustration. ‘And where else do you think we can go? This was our chance, our only chance and you ruined it. England is the only place left that is safe for us. Do not let your hysteria get the better of you!’

Meena glared at him before pushing past him to allow herself the space to think. She did not appreciate his words, but she could not convincingly counter the main thrust of his argument. Alexander was Chilcott’s great-nephew even if his existence might cause shame. If there was one place they would be safe from the VOC it would be the heart of the English East India Company. ‘Are you sure?’

‘No, but we have little choice.’

There was a lot she could have said but Meena chose to say nothing. She felt a deep exhaustion down to her marrow and realised she no longer cared to argue with him. She no longer cared what he thought. ‘Fine. Just until we settle upon a more permanent solution.’

James paused momentarily, his lips twitching to say more before thinking better of it. ‘Of course.’

Meena folded her arms. ‘Only so we can leave here as soon as possible. Book passage on a ship for tomorrow.’

James sighed. He buried his head in his hands, like a child playing a game. ‘With what money?’

Meena’s eyes widened. ‘What do you mean, “with what money”?’

James dragged his head up. ‘The money from India, it’s gone.’

Meena felt the floor disappear from right under her as she swayed. She reached out for the bed frame for support. A cold sweat trickled down her forehead. ‘How can it be gone? All of it?’

‘That money went on renting the house, Eliza, your dresses—’

‘Taverns? Exactly how many rounds did you buy for everyone? How many gambling debts did you settle so you could seem grand? To gain favour with strangers?’

James scowled. ‘We’ve had a lot of expenses.’

‘And your salary from the governor?’

James looked away. ‘He was going to pay me a share of the wealth once they... Once it was done.’

Meena, though still enraged at his stupidity, found her blood chilled at the knowledge that he could be so mercenary. So much so, she could not even bring herself to ask how it was possible that they had nothing. How he could have squandered so much money that wasn’t his.

‘Get us passage on a ship tomorrow morning,’ she said, reaching under the bed.

‘But how...’

Meena heaved, and having stretched to find it, clutched the heavy, embroidered purse and flung it on the bed. She untied the drawstring and pulled out a handful of gold necklaces, bracelets and bangles and let them all tumble onto the sheets. It had occurred to her that she had never mentioned her jewellery to James. Maybe she had made her mind up that very first day when he told her about his history with Franz. Maybe it was then she knew she had married a man who was lacking. Someone she could not trust. She quickly removed the bag and replaced it back under the bed. She did not want him to see it was still partially full.

‘Get us on a ship. This is all I have left so wherever we go, you need to have a plan.’

CHAPTER 20



ENGLAND, APRIL 1763

'The Company ran India, and like all companies, it had one principal concern, shared by its capitalist overlords in London: the bottom line.'

Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What Britain did to India*

The smell of horseshit was stronger in the countryside. London was filthy, Meena had decided, having glimpsed the wretches in alleys half-covered in rags and their own vomit; painted harlots selling their wares; gaunt children shivering from hunger, their little eyes bulging out of their skulls. It was not at all what James had described. But the countryside in England had a freshness to its offensive odours that bordered on obscene. It contrasted sharply with the lush rolling hills. The grey of the dismal skies seemed dull against the verdant scenery. In the city of stone and brick and sewage that was London the grey blended in; here it seemed more threatening by being out of place, Meena thought. They had docked yesterday. James promised that they would get to the house by nightfall, one of so many promises he had made her, but she no longer had any expectations of any truth behind them.

Alexander's head hung out the carriage window, his eyes transfixed on the new world that unfolded before him. Meena stroked the back of his head. His dark tangle of curls had grown long and shaggy on the ship. She knew she ought to tell him to pull his head inside but having also spent the last six months on a cramped boat with sixty strangers she could understand Alexander's need to breathe, to stretch beyond the carriage's narrows confinements. After all, she knew the real danger would more likely come from where they were headed, rather than the carriage window. Meena knew of other officers that had married women from India, though none were directors of the Company itself. How Sir Peter Chilcott would react to his latest scion being of Mughal blood had plagued her mind since they set sail for England. She had yet to settle on an answer that would satisfactorily soothe her fears.

Eliza watched Alexander's head bobbing precariously outside the window but was seemingly too tired to say anything. Meena had tried to convince Eliza that coming to England would be good for her. That this was her chance to escape the Cape, without any of the risk. James had shot down her suggestion of freeing Eliza, insisting they had barely enough money to travel to England in the first place, but Meena promised the girl that she would be taken care of. Meena also tried to tug on her emotions – her affection for Alexander and how the poor child wouldn't be able to cope if she left him. Finally, Meena admitted the truth. That she needed the girl to come with her. That she needed someone to make her feel less alone. Meena looked at the fear and unhappiness writ large on her face; she forced the guilt down along with the rest of her regrets.

James had managed to bargain his way onto a small spice merchant ship on its way to London. The boat stank of sweat and nutmeg and bile from Alexander and Eliza vomiting every day for the first month. And every day of their voyage Meena thought about what would happen when she met James's uncle. James and Meena were not speaking yet – no more than a

few words per exchange, interspersed with a blazing row. Voices would rise, someone would be slammed against a wall, Alexander would cry. It was miserable and not being able to ask James about England or his uncle was worse.

‘For God’s sake, Alexander, you’re not a mutt! Get back inside the carriage. You’re in England now, you must act like a gentleman.’ James was irritable. Not only from the long journey but Meena noted his fidgetiness – the repeated smoothing down of his shirt and endless tugging of his cuffs. He was nervous. It had been so long since James had been on these shores – Meena knew that – and even longer since he had seen his uncle. When he’d told her they would in fact be staying with Sir Peter himself, in *his home*, she’d threatened to jump off the ship and take Alexander with her. Nothing about Sir Peter Chilcott’s murder of her family and destruction of her home suggested she or Alexander would be welcome. She had seduced his nephew, caused him to leave his uncle’s side and work for one of his rivals. Had his baby. And worse still, she and Alexander were now in England. Not tucked away in a colonised land, easily abandoned and forgotten as an exotic dalliance, as was so often the case for senior officers. No gentleman would dare bring his dark-skinned wife and foreign child to England to be part of his family. This was adding insult to injury and Meena did not know what Sir Peter would do in response.

James had pointed out that they had precious few options left, and unfortunately, he was right. But still. She despised that this was her reality. And despised how concerned James now was with his appearance, with their son being the perfect English gentleman. He had attempted to get Meena to wear a dress, but she noted that she had just spent six months on a stinking ship and would spend another twenty hours travelling across England over cobbles and country lanes and if he thought she was going to wear a corset and petticoats while doing so he was losing his senses. Nor did she have any intention of making him feel better about bringing his

foreign wife to England. Sir Peter knew who she was so regardless of her fear she saw little point in hiding her identity. She opted instead for a light pink shalwar kameez with white flowers embroidered on it; it reminded her of the dresses the Teulings wore. Were it not for Alexander, she would have questioned why she was even trying at all. Meena let her head fall against the wall of the carriage with a soft thud as she sighed.

‘Amma, are you okay?’ Alexander asked, his eyes so big and bright. He had her mouth, her lips, but there was no denying that he had his father’s eyes. Meena pulled him onto her lap.

‘Yes, chellam, I’m fine.’

‘He’s too old to be coddled like that.’

Meena scowled at James. ‘He is my son, he came out of me and I will call him whatever I want and bring him into my lap anytime I want.’

James narrowed his eyes but apparently decided against further action. ‘Fine, just please refrain from calling him that in my uncle’s presence.’

‘Father, what is Uncle Peter like?’ asked Alexander. His voice had an uncertain, nervous topnote to his usual innocent curiosity. Meena kissed the top of her boy’s head and hugged him tight, disheartened that he was full of such mature and grave concern, yet undeniably grateful that he asked what she could not.

‘He is a great and powerful man. He took me in when my father died. Raised me as his own. Gave me a position in the East India Company. And then I met your mother.’ Meena felt a tiny twinge of nostalgia despite herself and despite James’s hagiography of the man who stole her kingdom and murdered her family. But she felt it nonetheless. Between her ribs where he used to make her flutter.

‘Is he excited to see me?’ Meena and James laughed and found themselves exchanging a warm smile, for the first time in a while, at their small child’s excitement.

‘I don’t know but I am sure he will be delighted to meet you when he does. He only has one daughter so until she marries, you’re technically his heir.’

Meena frowned. James had neglected to tell her that.

‘What does that mean, Papa?’

‘It means that when he dies, and I die, you will have all of his money.’

Alexander’s little plump bottom lip wobbled. ‘But I don’t want you to die.’

‘And he won’t, darling,’ soothed Meena as she glared at James. ‘These are grown-up matters, they’re not for little boys to worry about. But your Uncle Peter is your family and he will love you.’ She said this final line through a plastered smile, avoiding James’s raised eyebrows. Even if she did not believe it, she needed her son to be comforted, to not have his hopes dashed just because hers had been.

‘Yes. He said he was very happy to take us in.’

Meena raised her eyebrows. ‘He wrote to you?’

‘I wrote to him, just before we left the Cape. He sent word to London through the Company that we were to stay at his new home, Heathfield.’

Meena nodded. All this time she’d thought they were calling on him unexpectedly. There was some comfort in knowing that they would not be catching him off guard. Though the thought that he had had time to prepare was also a cause for concern.

‘And he... he knows I am with you as well?’ asked Meena.

James looked at her. ‘Of course.’

* * *

THE DAY GREW weary and the sun swapped its place with the moon. The residual light from the lazy summer evening meant that their driver could still just about make out the narrow country roads. Alexander had drifted

off in Eliza's lap, his head lying against her bosom as she snored softly next to Meena. Meena looked out at the endless fields before her, turning from bright green to inky blue as the hours dwindled.

'I think we're here,' James said in disbelief as they approached the white columns outside a vast, imposing building, lit from within by the soft, orange glow of candlelight. It was the size of a palace, Meena thought, rather than the family home of a merchant-trader. Its colonnades and turrets and the bronze winged figure atop the fountain in the meticulously landscaped gardens, lined with kuchila trees that she recognised from back home, added to its regal appearance. In front of the house a row of Grecian-style urns – Meena recognised them from the books in their Cape home – stood atop a series of short plinths with a coat of arms carved into the masonry. She let a small gasp escape her lips.

'This is where you grew up?' she whispered.

James shook his head while his eyes were transfixed on the imposing stone columns. 'No. He built this recently. We did not live anywhere this remarkable when I was young.'

They stopped in front of the house and a well-dressed older gentleman stood waiting with his hands behind his back. His clothes were well made but his officious demeanour suggested service, thought Meena.

'Mr Chilcott, sir,' he said as James was let out of the carriage. 'Welcome to Heathfield.'

'Thank you, Thompson. It is good to see a familiar face. Though I can see much has changed,' James said, looking around. Thompson nodded as he came over to the carriage to help Meena out. She shook Eliza awake first before stepping out in front of the palatial home.

'Good evening, Mrs Chilcott. And welcome to Heathfield House. I hope your journey was a pleasant one?'

'Yes. Thank you. It was fine, though I will be happy to rest.'

‘Thompson,’ called James. ‘Can you make sure our bags are taken to our room?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘And can one of the girls run a bath for Mrs Chilcott? Eliza has travelled a long way and will be too busy with our son.’

‘Of course, sir, the housekeeper will see to that. In the morning I will ask her to speak to your maid to settle her in. In the meantime, a room for her and Master Chilcott has been prepared.’ Meena noted Eliza’s eyes flitting between Thompson and Meena, nervous about where she would be taken and the housekeeper who would be settling her in.

Meena tried to give her a comforting look to calm her down. ‘That will be great, thank you. Eliza is very dear to me so I am glad she will be taken care of,’ she said, hoping that settled her worries. Truthfully, above all at that moment, she was longing for that bath.

‘And my uncle, Thompson? Where can I find him? Is he in the drawing room? Or his study perhaps?’

‘No sir, I’m afraid he is out this evening.’

‘What?’ James’s voice was raised, and his eyes widened. Meena noticed his fingers curled up, plucking his shirt cuffs again.

‘He is away on business tonight, sir. He asked me to inform you that he will see you tomorrow when he returns. The Company directors will be here for a hunt, and he intends to use the opportunity to welcome you, and Mrs Chilcott. But for tonight he entrusted me with ensuring that you are settled in and taken care of.’

‘I see,’ said Meena slowly, unsure what to make of this. James looked away. She knew that his face would be the picture of disappointment and that he would not want her to see him like that. It had been a very long time since he was anything other than cold towards her. She slipped her hand in the crook of his arm, to his surprise and hers.

‘Thank you, Thompson,’ said Meena. ‘I look forward to meeting Mr Chilcott tomorrow.’

This was enough to provoke a couple more words from James. ‘Is anyone else here tonight, Thompson? What about my cousin?’

‘Miss Katherine is home, though she has had her supper and retired for the night.’

James nodded thoughtfully. ‘Well, that sounds like an excellent idea. I think we will do the same.’ James’s flat tone underscored his palpable disappointment at the lack of fanfare at his return. His wretchedness made him seem somehow younger. He had the same pout as Alexander, and the same big eyes full of sorrow. Meena, to her utter amazement, found herself feeling sorry for him.

* * *

‘MRS CHILCOTT, YOUR BATH IS READY.’

Annie, the maid Thompson sent up, was a cheerful enough Irish girl with auburn hair. She had a different accent to James, more lyrical. It had a way of putting Meena at ease in her unusual surroundings. The vastness of the house’s atrium, with its great swooping staircase, was at odds with the overstuffed cramped luxury of the bedroom Meena and James were put in. The dizzying chintz patterned wallpaper, floral bedspread and seascape paintings, gave an already exhausted Meena a headache. She could not wait to wash away the grime and dirt.

‘Thank you, Annie.’

‘Can I get anything else for you, ma’am? The warming pan, perhaps? I suppose this must be colder than you’re used you.’

‘Thank you yes, that would be wonderful.’

‘Of course, ma’—’

‘Annie! I need a brandy. I can’t sleep.’

The voice sounded imperious yet bored. Annie shot Meena an apologetic look before slipping out of the room. Meena, confused and intrigued, followed her into the corridor where a girl with sunken blue-grey eyes and silvery blonde hair in curl papers emerged to join Meena and Annie. She was leaning against the paisley wallpaper in the hallway. She was a tall, languid figure with an amused twitch of a smile affixed to her face. Her gaze towards Meena was direct yet inviting. Meena was struck how, in this house of oppressive splendour, the girl seemed completely and utterly at ease.

‘Miss Katherine, your father would never allow it, you know that.’

‘But Father isn’t here right now.’

Annie raised her eyebrows and sighed. ‘Come now, Miss Katherine...’

Meena, amused, turned to the servant girl. ‘Actually, I would like a brandy, Annie. That shouldn’t be a problem, should it? I *am* his guest, after all.’

Annie looked between her two mistresses and departed. Meena turned to face Katherine who stood looking at her quizzically in her white muslin nightgown.

‘I don’t drink brandy,’ Meena explained, ‘so you can have mine. That way no one gets into trouble.’

‘Thank you. If my cousin wasn’t downstairs, I would have helped myself. But it’s been quite a few years since I last saw him and I probably should present myself a little better than in my nightgown, brandy glass in hand.’

Meena smirked. ‘It would be a memorable reunion, I suppose. There’s still time if you change your mind.’

Katherine grinned. ‘I’ll bear that in mind. I presume you are his wife? The one we’ve all heard about?’

Meena folded her arms. ‘And what have you heard?’

‘That my utterly absurd cousin married and spirited away an Indian princess to Africa, of all places. That he even fathered an Anglo-Indian child with her. I sneaked a peek earlier. He’s an adorable little cub of a thing, isn’t he? And *lighter* than I expected. Clearly Indian but still, it does help, I suppose. And now you’re here so my cousin can beg forgiveness or whatever my father requires of him. Does that sound like an accurate account?’

Meena laughed, despite being taken aback by such a description of her child. It was refreshing to hear her life told back to her with precious little romantic embellishment. Without the fairy-tale. ‘Fairly accurate, yes. And what about you? As you might be able to imagine, your cousin has told me precious little about his family.’

‘Seeing as we haven’t seen each other since I was a child, I’m not sure he would have had much to say. I am Katherine, James’s little cousin. Just recently out in society, sadly, so likely to be married off soon to some impoverished, noble bore who looks down on me for my mercantile father but nonetheless enjoys spending his money.’

Meena smiled. ‘You left out the penchant for brandy.’

Katherine cocked an eyebrow. ‘We don’t really need to go over old ground, do we? Please tell me you’re not going to be like one of those vapid young things that periodically come calling on me, holding me hostage in my own home. “Oh Miss Chilcott, I believe it was raining earlier, was it not?” Well, Miss Bird-brain, we both heard it rain, saw it rain, and now everything outside is wet so I suppose you might be right. But *thank you* for bringing this to my attention.’

Meena laughed at Katherine’s deadpan imitation, tilting her head in bemusement. She was not sure she had ever met someone so candid, so bold. She could scarcely believe that Katherine and James were related. Annie came back with a small tray and a crystal brandy glass. Meena carefully took it.

‘Thank you, Annie.’

‘You’re welcome, Mrs Chilcott. You should get in that bath now. The water will be going cold.’ Annie looked at the two young women standing in the corridor, neither looking like they were about to move anytime soon. Annie shrugged. ‘Well, goodnight Miss Katherine, and I’ll be with you in just a moment, Mrs Chilcott.’

‘Goodnight Annie,’ Meena and Katherine chorused, giggling once Annie left. It had been so long since Meena had laughed. She thrust the glass towards Katherine.

‘Here. Annie’s waiting for me. I should take my bath.’

Katherine placed her hand on the glass over Meena’s fingertips but gently pushed the glass back towards Meena. ‘You don’t want to try it first?’

She shrugged, smiled and brought the glass to her lips. Meena paused, watching Katherine’s eyes on her and parted her lips to take a sip. The alcohol burned as it slipped down her throat, making way for the sweetness and spice to linger on her tongue.

‘It’s nice.’ Her voice had taken on a coarseness which made Katherine’s lips twitch. Katherine nodded approvingly and grabbed the glass out of Meena’s hands.

‘Shame this one’s for me though.’

Meena laughed and turned the doorknob to the bathroom behind her. ‘I’ll remember to get my own next time.’

CHAPTER 21



James crept into the bedroom in the middle of the night. Meena was alerted to his presence as she heard him bump into the bedside table, the soft dim glow of the fireplace providing the only source of light. She could smell the whisky on him; he'd evidently drowned his disappointment at the unceremonious welcome that greeted his arrival. He slung his jacket on a nearby chair before Meena heard it slide off almost immediately.

‘James?’

‘Go back to sleep, Meena.’

She sat up and could see the faint outline of James wriggling out of his trousers. He flounced into bed, full of anxious energy that would clearly forbid any sleep. It was so palpable that Meena felt she would struggle to sleep herself.

‘James,’ she whispered, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘About what?’ James grumbled.

‘I’m sorry he’s not here.’

James laughed ruefully. ‘Is that right?’

Meena snorted. ‘Okay, I’m not sorry. But I’m sorry you’re disappointed. He is a busy man though, even I know that. He clearly just—’

‘He clearly just couldn’t be bothered to be here to greet his nephew, the closest thing he has to a son.’

‘You and I both know it’s not that simple, James.’

‘I know that I haven’t seen him in over six years but when I wrote to him, I thought... I don’t know what I thought. I know what you’re thinking Meena so the last thing I need is you spouting insincere excuses for the man.’

Meena nodded silently in the dark, despite knowing he could not see. This was the greatest number of amicable words they had exchanged for several months. The first interaction in a while that was not lacquered in a thick coat of resentment. It felt good to have an honest conversation with James. She was not sure how many of those they had ever had.

‘What do you need?’ she asked.

The question hung heavy in the air. Meena was suddenly very aware of the heat from James’s body underneath his shirt, and how her nightgown had ridden up above her knees. Though it had been a while since they last spoke, it had been even longer since they had been together as husband and wife. Their mutual anger had left her bed cold and even if either were willing to forgive the other’s sins, the cramped, crowded ship did nothing to spark desire. But in the warm, soft confines of a proper bed in a proper room, and with a forlorn, honest James replacing the brooding liar she knew, Meena felt a familiar longing once more. And she knew James felt it too.

James rolled over towards Meena before climbing on top of her. She pulled off his shirt, but before she could throw it on the floor, James grabbed her wrist, the shirt falling from her grasp. She gasped in surprise as her heart beat faster. He pinned her hand back onto the bed, while using his other hand to part her legs. Meena frowned but said nothing; his body suggested that he wasn’t in the mood to answer her questions. She was expected to be amenable, available. This wasn’t about her or their marriage. This was about him.

When he entered her Meena cried out, softly, briefly pinching her eyes together and clenching her fists in pain. Her whole body tensed up but James continued. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness Meena could see James's face, not looking back down at her, not looking at any part of her. His determined expression was stone-like, utterly invulnerable and emotionless. He pressed hard onto the top of her body as he continued to thrust, his jagged hip movements punctuated by grunting. Meena could feel his weight crushing her, feel him moving inside her. It wasn't like before, when he'd hold her close, taking care to make her heart race and body shake with pleasure. All that mattered in this moment was that she was underneath him and that he was inside her, taking pleasure in her body. And all her body was to him was a void to be filled.

The realisation of this, of James's complete and utter disinterest in her as a person, overcame Meena like a slow rising tide. She lay there, her right arm going numb from being held and bent back, as James continued to penetrate her. She wondered if this was what he was like with other women. She knew him well enough to know that there would have been other women. In Calcutta, in the Cape. Women he could spend *her* money on and pretend they were not people. She wondered if they looked like her.

Meena felt as if she could see herself and James, as if she were floating above their bodies. She could see the sweat drip from the tip of James's nose onto her face – her glazed-over eyes barely registering the droplets. She saw the corpse-like stiffness of her limbs. Her wince as James increased his pace. Meena then felt herself re-enter her body, re-connect with the hurt and repulsion she felt. It didn't matter. She knew it didn't matter what she felt or how much she wanted to cry. She would be pliable and so long as she was, she would not break. She refused to let that happen.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Meena rose late as exhaustion had overwhelmed her. The goose-feathered mattress had also aided her slumber, though she realised that it was not a hard challenge to beat the ship's cabin. Only the slightly purple mottled marks on her wrists betrayed any evidence of the night before, which Meena proceeded to hurriedly cover with her sleeves when Eliza bounded in to help her dress. James had already risen and was breakfasting downstairs. Meena selected one of her Western dresses. If she was to meet James's uncle, then it would probably be best to try not to antagonise him too much. So, she let Eliza lace her into a rose-pink dress. When she went downstairs, she was informed by Thompson that she was to meet James and his uncle in his study. No breakfast for those who slept in, apparently. When she entered the austere, dark, wood-panelled room, the two men were already deep in conversation.

Sir Peter was stood against the desk, his hands gripped onto the edge as he loomed over James. He was a portly gentleman with white thin wisps on top of his head and a receding hairline. His cheeks were ruddy and his mouth set in a permanent half-sneer. But it was his eyes that left her cold: deep blue and piercing. They were the same as James's. Putting a face to the man who had destroyed her country and hounded her happiness for so long felt surreal. The man who murdered her father. For some it might have humanised him but for Meena it had the opposite effect. The knowledge that someone so normal could be so inhumane repulsed her.

'Ah, here she is. Come in my dear, come in,' he said, beckoning her over while barely looking at her.

'Yes, Meena, come in.' James smiled thinly, clearly a little nervous, despite mirroring the older man's gestures. Meena walked over slowly, glancing between the two men.

'Uncle, allow me to present my wife, Meena, previously Princess of Bengal.' Meena kept a smile plastered on her face, even if her eyes did dart over to James upon hearing the word 'previously'.

Sir Peter reached out to grab her hand and pressed his icy lips against it. 'It is lovely to finally meet you, my dear. I do hope you have been able to settle in and slept well last night.'

'Yes, Sir Peter, very well,' she gritted out before pausing as he continued to stare at her. 'Thank you for opening up your home to us. That is most generous of you.'

'Oh, it is my pleasure, my dear. It has been so long since James was home, it's wonderful to have him back where he should be. And with his *delightful* family. It was such a surprise to hear that James had married and was now a father.'

Meena glanced at James whose Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. She cleared her own throat, almost feeling his own discomfort. 'Yes, well, I am sure both of you have much to discuss so I will—'

'No, my dear, stay. Sit down. There is much to discuss.'

Meena, wary, kept her eyes trained on him as she sat down on the quilted couch. She hated his tone. Its overt charm underscored the menace that lay beneath. She tried to signal to James to join her, but he remained standing over in the corner, hunched and eyes cast down.

'Now, tell me dear, I want to know all about you.'

Meena looked into his soulless eyes. They were cold and observant, curious as to how she would react.

She swallowed thickly, gripping the cushion of the couch. 'Well, sir, I am sure you know where I come from and who my family are.'

Sir Peter smiled and moved over to the velvet armchair by the couch. 'Oh yes, I am aware. And, by this point, I am sure you have heard about your father and brother.'

Meena clenched her fist as, upon seeing him smile through casually discussing the death of her family, she felt a surge of rage rise within her. She didn't blink. 'I know you slaughtered my father and took my home.'

‘Meena...’ James began. He was silenced by a look she threw him. Meanwhile, Sir Peter threw his head back and laughed uproariously.

‘No, no, it’s quite alright, James. Miss Meena here is right, of course. I am not one to begrudge such filial devotion. Her father is dead and dead on my orders. He was the leader of an insurgent enemy and had to be eliminated, I make no apologies for that.’ Sir Peter was staring intently at her now. ‘That’s war, my dear. Your father understood that and knew the cost of antagonising us and he paid it. And Calcutta is now mine. Ours. Well, not *technically*, of course. But as good as, with that fool Amir we put on the throne.’

The starkness of this proclamation, without hesitancy or shame, knocked the breath out of Meena. Yet Sir Peter was speaking as if he was giving an update at some dreary shareholders’ meeting. At that moment it struck her that the murder of her father might well have been discussed at such an event, along with other Company matters, written up in a tedious memorandum. Whole kingdoms ransacked, families destroyed, all to be noted down in their logs alongside quarterly profit and losses.

Meena looked around the room, observing the maps of the world, the heaving bookcases full of words written by white men who similarly felt that the world belonged to them. It was a room designed to intimidate. She swallowed the intimidation down. ‘Do you think it was yours to “take”, Sir Peter? A sovereign kingdom? Bengal is not a piece of property available to be taken.’

A slow, playful smile spread across the old man’s face. ‘My dear, that is where you and I differ; everything can be taken. I mean no malice, that is just a fact of enterprise. Sovereign kingdoms are just lines on a map, as easily rubbed out as they can be re-drawn. Money, however, *that* is real. You touch it, you trade it, you take it. You transform it into power, into influence, into whatever you want. So yes, my dear, what you have heard

about my part in your father's death is true. It is not pleasant business, but it *is* business.'

'My husband told you of my father's whereabouts so you could have him killed. That is not merely affairs of business to me.' Meena could feel James's eyes burning into her. She turned and saw his mouth hung open.

'I suppose not,' said Sir Peter, his voice still playful without a speck of remorse, 'but it has proved to be highly valuable business all the same. Once we overhaul the taxes, the agriculture, it'll be even more lucrative.'

"Overhaul", meaning take control of for your benefit?' Meena seethed.

Sir Peter laughed ruefully. 'The Company has invested a great deal in this endeavour. I intend to ensure that this acquisition pays off for our shareholders.' His eyes remained cold and fixed on her, seemingly curious as to what she would do next. She was being studied and toyed with, and she did not enjoy it. The fireplace next to the sofa made the room uncomfortably hot and beads of sweat rolled down the bridge of her nose. She loathed to think that this would be taken as a sign of weakness or fear. She could not abide that.

Meena smiled as she leaned forward and folded her arms. 'Tell me, Sir Peter, has my husband told you why we left Calcutta? Did you wonder why your nephew begged me to come with him and start a new life, rather than stay put in Calcutta as you had ordered?' Meena flicked her eyes over to James as she saw her husband's eyes fill with fear and anger.

Sir Peter's thin lips pressed tightly against one another. 'James and I have discussed his past mistakes and his desire to make amends to me. He will re-join the Company and take his rightful place alongside me.' Meena looked at her husband; cowed, cowardly and silent, he burned with a shame that rightly belonged to him. 'I am satisfied,' Sir Peter continued, 'that any youthful, foolish beliefs he once had have been well and truly banished. He is a new man and understands what is expected of him in the new world we are building. Is that not right, nephew?'

James lifted his head just enough to meet Sir Peter's eyes and avoid Meena's. 'Yes, Uncle.'

Sir Peter slapped the arm of his chair in triumph. 'Very good. I'm glad that nonsense is all over. In this world we all have our roles we have to play, our place. James now understands his – and I am sure, Meena, you will soon learn yours.'

CHAPTER 22



SURREY, APRIL 1763

‘When I think of the marvellous riches of that country, and the comparatively small part which I took away, I am astonished at my own moderation.’

Robert Clive, 1st British Governor of Bengal

The hunt had been planned for months, that was what Meena was told. A chance for all the directors of the Company to get out of town and enjoy the delights of the country. More importantly for Sir Peter, it was an opportunity to assert authority while revelling in the spoils. And he loved blood sport.

‘So, all the directors will be coming here?’ she asked as James got dressed. ‘The whole board of the Company?’ Meena tried to keep the concern out of her voice, but it reverberated with trepidation regardless.

‘Well, Sir Peter has just finished Heathfield and a weekend in the country certainly makes a nice change from a cramped boardroom in Leadenhall.’

Meena picked at the skin around her fingernails, trying to find words that did not sound weak. 'Do they know about me? That we have a son?' She made no attempt to hide her emotions this time.

'Of course they do. It will be fine. I have made peace with my uncle and will take my place back in the Company. Everything is as it was.'

Meena frowned. Nothing about how things were provided any source of comfort. 'Where does that leave me and Alexander?'

James sighed, pulled his shirt over his shoulders and continued to get dressed. 'Right next to me. Meena, I can't have this argument now. I need to go into town to get my things for the hunt. I suggest you find something to occupy yourself with. Go for a walk, take in the country air. I can't bear your morose paranoia anymore.'

James's words irritated her, but it was true that she needed to get out of the house. The estate was fifty acres, vast swathes of green stretching out to the edge of the horizon, and she had yet to explore any of it. The hills softly undulating against the grey sky. There was a restrained beauty that Meena admired. Its quiet solemnity drew a sharp contrast with Murshidabad's dusty and bustling streets. Only a lone silver birch in the near distance provided her with company. Yet, having spent the past few days cooped up in that meretricious house, she found her anxieties unspooling in the land's bucolic expansiveness. She closed her eyes and exhaled, letting a whisper of a smile spread across her face.

A quiet whinnying in the distance distracted Meena from the landscape. After a short walk around the grounds, an exploration of the back of the estate uncovered the stables.

'Who are you then?' Meena said softly to an enormous black mare. She had large, sad eyes and a white spot over her the right one. The horse whinnied in response and Meena took that as a sign that she could stroke her. She was a little alarmed when Meena raised her hand but settled into her touch. Her coat was lustrous and silk to the touch.

‘I see you’ve found Dido.’

Meena turned and found Sir Peter, standing by the entrance to the stables. She dropped her hand and took a step away from the horse. ‘How long have you been standing there for?’ Her sharp tone drew laughter from him.

‘Oh, not long. Do you know much about horses?’

‘My grandfather bred them. We had them at the palace.’

Sir Peter raised his eyebrows, amused. ‘I see. I didn’t realise you were such an expert. Pity you won’t be able to join us for the hunt.’

‘There were royal hunts back in Murshidabad, but I didn’t attend those either. Just my father and my broth—’ Meena cut off and stared at Sir Peter who was watching her intently. He broke into a warm smile.

‘Your brother? Yes, I’m afraid it’s men only here as well but perhaps we can go for a ride today instead?’

Meena studied the older man for any signs that he knew about Abhishek. Her heart had dropped to her shoes but she could not betray any fear. ‘That’s not necessary, I’m sure you must be very busy.’

‘Nonsense. It will give you a chance to see the whole estate. It would be my pleasure.’

* * *

MEENA HAD TIED her hair tight in a bun but now she wished that she had let her hair loose, flowing in the breeze. A few stray strands had slipped out which were now whipping in her face as she rode through the land. Riding was something she had only been allowed to do as a child, and she did not realise how much she missed it. Feeling the horse’s power, feeling it respond to her instruction. It gave her a sense of control that had been missing from her life recently. In fact, if it were not for the presence of a

man she despised and feared in equal measure, it would have been a perfect moment.

‘Are you alright?’ he called out, as they slowed to a trot.

‘Yes, thank you. It’s beautiful here. Very quiet as well.’

‘Well, it won’t be tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, with the men and the hounds and the horses it will be quite the frenzy. That’s even before the hunt is underway. When the hounds catch the scent, that’s when the real excitement begins.’

‘When you kill the foxes,’ Meena said archly.

Sir Peter chuckled. ‘You sound as if you don’t approve? Do you find our ways strange?’

They had now stopped at the outer edge of the estate, at the top of a hill. The sun had broken free from behind the clouds, shards of rays streaming down. The air however still had an autumn chill.

‘No. I just think the target is strange. Foxes. Such small creatures. I suppose I don’t see the thrill of chasing them across land with packs of feral dogs to rip them apart. Such sport seems little more than savagery. At least there is some skill in hunting deer or boar,’ Meena said, smiling placidly, trying to keep a biting tone out of her voice.

Sir Peter raised his eyebrows. ‘You think there is greater glory in taking down a stronger prey?’

Meena was puzzled. ‘Of course. Do you not?’

Sir Peter laughed to himself. Meena felt as if she was falling into a trap, but she could not yet see the net.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘let us head back.’

They galloped over the hills, the wind rushing past Meena’s ears, their surroundings blurring around them in their haste. As the house came back into view, she could feel Sir Peter ride closer to her, feel the strength in his stallion’s legs as they stretched out next to her.

‘The foxes are a nuisance. A pest. That’s why we hunt them.’

Meena was so caught off guard by this continuation of their earlier conversation that she nearly let her grip on the reins slip. ‘Oh, I see.’

‘That’s the reason why they need to be killed. But everything else, the ritual of it, the event, that’s different.’ Sir Peter was bellowing over the sound of the hooves kicking against the dirt.

The swell of his voice and the clattering of hooves rang out in Meena’s head. She thought she could feel it reverberate through her bones.

‘It reminds me of my time abroad sometimes,’ he said, shouting over the galloping horses. ‘In India. A lot of pests there, of all sizes. I saw no point in trying to find any honour in destroying them because that would mean I were their equal.’

Meena could see the stables now. All she wanted to do was arrive there and get off her horse and as far away from him as possible.

‘Do you know that for the grouse and pheasant shooting we cull the predator species weeks before, just to make sure there’s enough for us?’ Sir Peter continued. Meena said nothing.

‘Man is superior to beast. Part of that superiority is the ability to use everything at your disposal to succeed. And sometimes it is necessary to remind them of that.’

They finally stopped by the stables. Meena jumped off as soon as she could. His words rattled her even if she was loath for him to find out.

‘So you like to win,’ she said, staring coolly at him.

Sir Peter dismounted and stroked his horse, keeping firm hold of the reins. ‘Yes, that’s part of it. But there’s also the thrill. When the animal is caught in the hound’s teeth or felled by a shot; it takes me back to my travels. The spoils of victory over a lesser foe. There is nothing more intoxicating.’

Meena observed the glint in his eye and his wide, toothy grin as he said this. She wanted to run but forced herself to just walk away at a natural pace. Forced herself to pretend that she did not want to scream.

‘It’s a shame you can’t join us tomorrow. Or your son,’ Sir Peter called out. ‘It would have been wonderful, having you both for the hunt.’

CHAPTER 23



*Y*ou really used to wear clothes like this all the time? And now you wear dresses like the rest of us – what is wrong with you?’

Meena laughed. Katherine had asked to see Meena’s wardrobe from India when they had been discussing her life in Calcutta. She was fascinated by the clothes so Meena decided to show her. James and his uncle were busy with business and Alexander was playing with Eliza so she was bored anyway in the Chilcotts’ cavernous mansion.

‘Well, I must admit, I miss wearing some of these sometimes.’ She held up an elaborate purple outfit, smiling. ‘This one in particular.’ Katherine gasped approvingly. ‘But I’ve grown to appreciate Western styles. Most of your dresses are made with our fabric anyway.’

‘Only the most beautiful ones.’ Katherine’s eyes widened as she held up a churidar. ‘I can’t believe you used to wear britches. I wouldn’t wear anything else if I got to escape all these frills and frippery.’

‘Well, they’re not really britches, but they are more comfortable than a hoop skirt. Perhaps if you marry a Company officer stationed in India then you could wear them. We would sometimes see the officers and their wives dressing up, trying out the local customs *for a lark*.’ Meena smirked, barely able to conceal her disdain at how her home could be reduced to a costume by those intent on destroying it.

‘And I bet that was just delightful for you. Fat Englishmen playing dress-up, pretending to be emperors and nabobs.’

Meena smiled. She found that Katherine’s candour made her very easy to talk to. It had been a long time since she had had that ease with anyone.

‘So, I gather you met with my father earlier. How was that, meeting the all-powerful Sir Peter Chilcott?’

Meena hesitated. Katherine was irreverent but still James’s cousin and Sir Peter’s daughter. Katherine was also perceptive enough to pick up on Meena’s unease. ‘That good?’

Meena smiled wryly and ran her fingers through her hair. ‘I think we have different points of view. About many issues.’

Katherine snorted. ‘Yes, I imagine so. I suspect you have a somewhat different perspective on Calcutta and on his opinion that the whole world is just ripe for plucking, mining and subjugating.’

Meena’s lips twitched. ‘Just a little bit different, yes.’

‘And I have no doubt that my darling cousin has stood up for you because he is a man of principle and immense bravery in the face of my father and his obscene wealth.’ Meena gave her a look which sent the English girl into fits of giggles. Meena joined her before her whole body shook with an overwhelming sigh that she realised she had been holding in since she was in the Cape. She laughed ruefully and buried her head in her hands.

‘Oh Katherine,’ Meena said, shaking her head, pondering how to describe the mess of emotions she felt. ‘This was not what I imagined.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When James asked me to leave Calcutta with him. When he told me he loved me.’

‘So, what did you imagine?’

Meena considered the answer to this question. The truth was she barely wanted to remember how young she had been, how unworldly, when she

and James first met, how naive. But she also smiled at the memory. Liked how it remained frozen in time, while the current state of their love continued to rise and fall like the waves they sailed on to get to this point. Meanwhile that memory, a moment of idealism and love without knowledge, was captured in amber. For her to admire, to wear round her neck and close to her heart. Though formed many years ago, the memory still gleamed bright. Even in her current circumstances.

‘I did not imagine staying in the home of Sir Peter Chilcott. That is for certain.’

Katherine nodded. ‘Yes, I can imagine that was not what you had in mind. I however am very happy you’re here. You don’t know how long it’s been since I had anyone interesting to speak to.’

‘I think you just want me here so I can sneak you more brandy.’

Katherine laughed. ‘Just one of many reasons why I am happy you are here.’

Meena sighed. ‘I am sorry. Just because my marriage has been...’ Meena paused, remembering that she was speaking to James’s relative and should be more circumspect, if only to avoid another pointless argument. ‘*Challenging*, does not mean yours will be. Do you have a suitor? You mentioned you were out in society?’

Katherine snickered ruefully, her light blonde curls shaking, framing her sharp cheekbones and porcelain skin. ‘Ah, yes. I’m now officially an eligible young lady. Available for all and any bids from an equally eligible gentleman of sufficient fortune or rank.’

‘And have there been any nice young gentlemen?’

‘No, thankfully. Plenty of nice ones, but none of them wealthy or important enough, and all of them idiots. I suppose I will have to marry eventually but I would rather not bend my life to someone else’s will just yet, especially when they’re only interested in Father’s money.’

Meena gave her a playfully admonishing look. 'I am sure they are interested in you. Well, I suppose some will have their eyes on your father's fortune – I remember the offers that came in when I was young that my father turned down for being too derisory – but I am surprised you haven't had a host of suitable gentlemen lined up at your door. Especially with your father's wealth. But not only because of that.'

Katherine leaned back into the pillow behind her on the bed.

'I don't think men want a woman who thinks. A woman who challenges them. But then again, maybe I'm wrong. James married you.'

'Yes. Perhaps he wouldn't have fallen in love if he knew how challenging I would be.' Meena shrugged. 'But he did, and we decided we would be married.'

Katherine's eyes widened as she leaned in closer. 'But how did you marry when you had to leave in such a rush?'

Meena smiled wryly. 'Yes, we didn't have a lot of time to leave Calcutta, so we just decided we would just tell people we were married and that would be that.' Meena saw that Katherine was still staring at her and laughed. Katherine was rarely lost for words so it pleased Meena to have confounded her so. 'I know it sounds strange, but it never really came up when we travelled and we were able to live as man and wife in the Cape. Alexander has James's name, so it was not a problem after he was born either.'

Katherine nodded slowly. 'I hadn't realised that. That's extraordinary.'

Meena watched the young woman stare into the distance. 'Katherine? Is anything wrong?'

Katherine shook her head and smiled, seemingly tossing the thought away. 'Nothing. I just didn't realise something like that could be so easy.'

'Why? Do you plan on running away and changing your name?' Meena teased.

Katherine sniggered, her eyes fixed on Meena. ‘No, quite the opposite. I don’t plan on going anywhere.’

* * *

SIR PETER MIGHT NOT HAVE DEIGNED to welcome James upon his arrival, but James’s willingness to submit to his uncle’s will and re-join the company merited celebration apparently; and unfortunately for Meena, that meant dinner with the directors of the Company. James’s large blue eyes pleaded with Meena not to say anything when he told her, and she decided not to fight it. It was not as if her husband was in a position to say no to his uncle anyway. She had decided to finally acknowledge that despite his pretty words and promises, James’s convictions would never be as strong as his weakness and petty desires. So even if the idea of sitting and smiling through dinner with those men churned her stomach, she would do it. She would do it because she had no other choice.

Alexander begged to join them but was sent to bed by Eliza with a promise that he would get the chance to spend time with his great-uncle the following day. Even if it were appropriate for children, Meena did not want to spend the evening enduring the looks, absurd questions and remarks that her son’s presence would elicit. She had already steeled herself for such remarks about her, but ones aimed at Alexander would be too much.

Annie laced Meena into her dress – teal green with cream pearls. James had given exacting instructions – via Annie; he was assiduously avoiding further discussion of the night’s occasion with Meena – that she was to dress as an Englishwoman, lest she antagonise Sir Peter further. Annie suggested Meena did her make-up and hair in the Western style to complement the dress. Annie pinned and curled her hair high and studded it with pearls borrowed from Katherine. She slathered Meena’s face with thick, white make-up. She dotted her cheeks and lips with rouge, the sticky

redness gluing her mouth shut. Annie drew on thin eyebrows to replace where her thick, luscious brows once appeared but were now hidden by a ghostly pallor. Annie showed Meena her reflection in the looking glass. She looked unnatural. The thick make-up and heavy hair made it hard for Meena to move. She wondered whether that was the point.

James tentatively knocked and walked in, having been dressed by Sir Peter's valet. He was dressed in his britches, white bowtie and tailed jacket. He stopped in his tracks when he saw her. His eyes widened as his mouth fell open. 'My goodness. You look beautiful.'

Meena raised an eyebrow. It was the most effusive he had been since they first met. Annie left quickly and discreetly while James looked her up and down like she was still a teenager. 'I've never seen you look so lovely.'

Meena smiled. 'And I have never seen you so buttoned up.' She fingered the pearl buttons on his shirt, fastened up to his throat. 'I'm surprised you can even breathe in that thing.' He wore his new dark navy velvet jacket, courtesy of his uncle. Overall, Meena suddenly thought he had aged a decade in a moment, no longer the young rebel she had met all those years ago, nor the up-and-coming man living on his wits that he tried to be in the Cape. No, here he looked every inch the gentleman and senior Company official he now was.

James laughed. 'Well, it is certainly more difficult when you're in that dress.' His hand slid up to her waist. She paused before resting her hand on his shoulder as he pulled her in for a kiss. Not like when they first arrived. This was full of wanting. It felt like longing finally being quenched, a shipwrecked sailor getting saved. It had been several days since they saw the ocean, but she swore she could smell the salt on his skin.

'Come,' he said as they finally broke apart, stroking the small of her back.

Meena paused for a moment. 'James?'

'What's wrong?'

‘Do you really like how I look? Do you like all of this?’ She gestured vaguely around her as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror: a pale ghost of herself.

James looked deep into her eyes. ‘You have never been more beautiful.’

* * *

THE STUFFED peacocks were gathered in the drawing room when Meena and James made their entrance. Prickling heat crept up Meena’s neck – whether the elaborate dress, the lit sconces or the guests’ aggressive stares were the cause, she could not say for certain. These were men who had barely left England’s shores yet out of their pockets tumbled the gold of other lands. The directors of the East India Company were skilled in many things, most of all profiteering. Subtlety, however, appeared to be an artform that eluded them. Thompson had announced the pair of them as they entered yet all eyes were on Meena. Perhaps once upon a time she might have flattered herself that it was her appearance that drew such attention. But Meena knew that their twisted mouths – half amused, half baffled – and keen gaze were no compliment. She, in this house, in her fine English dress and her English husband, was a peculiarity, an exhibit in an exotic freak show.

Meena was walked around the room and introduced to each of them in turn. To her great surprise, the directors had all heard about Mrs James Chilcott. She had thought that Sir Peter Chilcott would not so widely announce such a connection to an Indian runaway but perhaps he considered it a hilarious boast he could make to his friends: *Come see the temptress who thought she could lure my nephew away – look at the foolish woman!*

With every taunting kiss on her hand Meena choked down her disgust. Each man was more pompous than the one before. Their ruddy faces looked

close to bursting with excitement as they questioned Meena about her 'origins'. Her answer would elicit a raise of eyebrows and look of recognition, even though she was sure they were fully aware that she was the former Nawab's daughter.

A Mr Edmund Agnew, son of an impoverished Scottish laird with beady eyes and blotchy skin, bounded over, full of enthusiasm. 'Hello, my dear! I have heard a great deal about you. How do you do?'

Meena gave a tight-lipped smile, screaming inside. 'Very well, sir.'

'And you speak English! My word, wonders will never cease.' Meena wondered whether the old goat would have a heart attack from the excitement. Agnew turned to James. 'You've done a grand job with her, James. She could almost pass for one of our own.'

Meena spun on her heels, turning to see what James would say. She smiled pointedly, enjoying his agony as he struggled against offending either party.

'Meena has always been very accomplished,' he said finally, after a few moments. 'She is well-versed in many languages and skills. She has a keen interest in horticulture, in fact.' Two bright spots of pink glowed on James's face.

Meena snorted at this assertion. She imagined 'horticulture' was an appropriate hobby of English ladies. And that the crafts her aunt taught her were rather inappropriate.

Agnew, however, was delighted with this answer. 'Fascinating. I have studied the subject for a while now and have been developing a theory that natives are more drawn to the natural world, the wilderness. I met a man at dinner the other day – Cunningham was his name, wealthy as Croesus. He has fifty strong on a plantation in Virginia apparently and he says it is astonishing how well suited they are to field work. My own grandfather said the same of his plantations in Barbados. Like ducks to water!'

‘May I ask, Mr Agnew, how extensively have you studied this topic? Perhaps you or your friend should try working on his plantation yourselves for once, to make a comparison.’ She kept her tone civil and curious, avoiding James’s furious look while Agnew just seemed puzzled.

Meena smiled innocently as she spotted a passing platter carrying glasses of sherry. She swooped down and took a glass and her leave of the conversation in one fluid motion. This proved to be a terrible mistake as she then found herself accosted by a man named Campbell whose eyes lingered upon her neckline while he enquired after her living arrangements in the zenana at the palace, taking advantage of the fact that James was still entangled discussing the finer points of Virginian plantations. Meena sipped from her glass and tried to find Katherine’s eyeline. She was on the other side of the room being paraded by her father. Katherine was on her best behaviour, trussed up in her silver silk dress that flattered her elegant frame, and so refused to provide Meena with any sarcastic eyerolls or sardonic smirks. A prim smile was all that Meena merited on this occasion, much to her disappointment. She looked forward to laughing at the pompous oafs with Katherine later, when they were behind closed doors and not under the watchful gaze of men.

* * *

VENISON WAS ON THE MENU. Red-raw and soaking in a pool of its own blood on her plate. Meena gently swirled the dish round, watching the cruor seep into her lettuce. The candelabras twinkled and silverware was plentiful, striking almost a deliberate contrast with the food. It was cooked in the French fashion supposedly, though Meena could not imagine how any country could eat like that. She chewed and chewed until she choked the metallic tasting flesh down her throat. Katherine remained on her best behaviour throughout the meal. Her face, unlike Meena’s, was sufficiently

pale on its own, so she just had a light dusting of powder and rouge to complement her natural complexion. Meena noted how James politely complimented his cousin when he saw her, remarking on what a lovely young woman she had become. As relieved as Meena was to have some company, she could not help but feel like an old matron in her thick lead make-up compared to Katherine's natural youthful beauty, despite the few years between them.

'Now, tell me dear cousin,' said Katherine as she cut into her slab of doe, her voice sugared and full of feminine naiveté, 'what is your plan now that you're in England? Will you be staying with us or posted somewhere else with the Company?'

James cleared his throat nervously. 'Here. My future is here. In England.' Meena caught James's eye across the table as she raised her wine glass to her pursed lips. Another lie, another broken promise. What did it matter if he had agreed England would only be a temporary stay? What did Meena matter to him at all, when set against his own interests?

'Finest thing for an Englishman,' Sir Peter chimed in, 'to be at the centre of the world. What more could a man need when we have everything here?'

'Here, here!' chorused the various directors as they tucked into their bloody meat.

'Or a Scotsman. Well, at least one who's temporarily made his home south of the border,' laughed Agnew. 'Though, when you have a moment, Peter,' he added, leaning towards an uninterested Sir Peter, 'I really would like to discuss plans I have for Edinburgh. I plan on turning the city into a hub of enlightenment not seen since Socrates. But until then, I couldn't wait to get back to England when I was in Delhi. Back to roast beef and no dysentery,' boomed Agnew. He turned to Meena. 'Oh, I hope you know I mean no offence, my dear.'

Before she could respond, Sir Peter interjected. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. Meena can take it all in good spirit. Anyway, she’s here now. She left India herself in search of greener pastures. Isn’t that right, Meena?’

There it was again. The knife-like, barely suppressed smirk in his voice. In the few days they had spent under the same roof, Meena had come to know this as a hallmark of their interactions. She would feel the blade rest close to her heart, press just that little bit deeper with every word.

‘Yes, I did leave India. With James.’ Meena blatantly ignored James’s glares. ‘But there are things about Calcutta that haven’t yet made it to England in East India Company ships.’ She paused as she felt the silent gaze of the room fall on her. Katherine continued to eat and look down at her plate, studiously avoiding eye contact with anyone. ‘For example, we are known for our miniatures, architecture, paintings—’

‘Well, you can find those here,’ Katherine chipped in.

Meena frowned, puzzled. ‘What?’

Katherine glanced at her father, and then at James who buried half his face in his hand. ‘Well, Father brought back some artefacts from Calcutta. When...’ Katherine faltered and trailed off when she saw Meena’s face.

Meena breathed heavily as she processed what she was hearing. She put down her cutlery with a loud clatter. ‘I would like to see this collection.’

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea...’ James began, before being cut off by the force of the rage behind Meena’s eyes.

‘I see no reason why not. After all, it has been so long since I saw such art, and you don’t mind, do you, *Uncle*?’ Meena simpered, staring Sir Peter dead in the eye.

Sir Peter’s eyes narrowed as he formed a steeple with his fingers. ‘Of course not.’

* * *

THE COLLECTION WAS UNDOUBTEDLY IMPRESSIVE. The rug leading her further and further into the magnificent room swirled beneath her feet, dark red whorls dancing with turquoise flowers. She recognised the style from the palace. It was certainly from her father's kingdom. *Former* kingdom.

'Come in, come in everyone.' Sir Peter's voice was jovial and full of false civility. 'Thompson, can you bring some chocolate for everyone? Would that be okay for you, Meena? I know your palate might be unused to such delicacies.'

'I assure you, sir, India does not lack delicacies. But I'm sure you know that.' Sir Peter Chilcott scoffed in return. Meena gritted her teeth. She spotted her grandfather's miniature masterpiece, created by his court's most eminent artist, of her grandfather at his most powerful, soon after he came from Persia and took Bengal. She saw this hanging on the wall behind James. It looked beautiful and wrong here, on some Englishman's wall. She had last seen it in the palace. She loved looking at all the artwork back home, tracing the outline of each figure. She looked at her grandfather's face; how powerful and fierce he looked. She had always imagined what it felt like to have that much power in the palm of your hand, like you could tame the sun. Meena felt a chain tighten around her lungs.

'Madam?'

Meena looked up and saw Thompson proffering a china cup of hot chocolate on a silver tray. Meena mumbled thanks and sipped the thick, creamy sweet brown liquid until she had drained her cup and replaced it on the tray. Thompson coughed and left swiftly as Sir Peter laughed.

'My goodness, how thirsty you are! That one cup costs more than one Englishman makes in a year. James, perhaps you should advise your wife to slow down.'

'My husband doesn't advise me to do anything, thank you. Where did you get that painting from?'

Sir Peter smiled. 'On my travels. India is such a beautiful place.'

‘I know,’ Meena said. ‘How did you get my grandfather’s painting?’

‘Our mutual friend, Amir, gave it to me. He’s been most helpful and obliging since he became the new Nawab. Such a good friend of the Company.’

‘Why did you steal all of this?’ Meena’s voice was rising, high-pitched and pained.

‘I told you, the new Nawab gave—’

‘Why did you steal from my home, Mr Chilcott?’

Sir Peter raised an eyebrow before smiling. ‘Oh dear, the princess is forgetting her manners! Though, I suppose you may have never been taught any over there. I hope I have not *upset* you. I know how hot-blooded your kind can be. I took it because I wanted the painting. Because I take whatever I want whenever I want to. I would never live in that godforsaken hellhole, so I wanted a little reminder that I own it. A keepsake. I’m sure my nephew understands the desire to bring back a keepsake. After all, he brought back his son.’

Meena nodded slowly, not even waiting to see whether James would stand up for Alexander. She knew all too well such a defence would never come. Somehow, hearing his uncle say it made it better. It clarified why she and Alexander were there.

She swallowed hard. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I think I will retire early for the night...’

‘Wait, Meena, there’s something special you might recognise. Have you not seen it yet?’

Meena followed his eyeline and her blood ran cold. The candlelight glinted off the gold and gave the red velvet a soft sheen. The cushions were coated in a thin layer of dust because they were not meant to be on display in an English mansion. It hadn’t been dusty the last time she had seen it. The last time she saw the palanquin her father was in it.

‘I must say my dear, though I never met your father, he did have exquisite taste.’

Meena heard Sir Peter’s words, but it was as if she was underwater. She found herself fixated on the patterned cushions. The small flecks of gold that made a small leaf motif. She stared at the little bursts of gold on the cushions and noted an irregularity. There were patches of red within the regimented pattern. Splashes of vermillion, against the burgundy velvet – no gold leaf pattern, just dried blood. Bright scarlet patches in the palanquin where her father’s throat had been slit. Meena looked up into Sir Peter’s smiling face as he took a sip of his chocolate.

‘Is that...’ Meena said, trailing off. She loathed how small her voice sounded, how futile her half-question was. She hated herself for how powerless she felt.

‘Yes, it is. Taking Bengal was my crowning achievement, you’ll have to forgive me for wanting to take a memento. And what a memento it is. Your father might have been a venal, arrogant and foolish creature, but he was a man of great taste. Not shy about his wealth or status, now *that* is a man I can respect.’

‘This is grotesque,’ Meena whispered. She said it as much to herself, still staring at the covered litter, as to Sir Peter. She heard his derisive laugh.

‘You are much too sensitive, my dear. It’s a trait I’ve commonly observed among your people. Hot-headed, emotional. Limited in rational thought. And that *grotesque* object is worth more than what fifty ships bring in. That doesn’t sound grotesque to me.’

Meena looked up from the palanquin and stared at Sir Peter, her eyes wide and accusatory. There was just one question on her lips. ‘What did you do with his body?’

Sir Peter sipped his hot chocolate slowly before replacing the cup carefully on its saucer. ‘It was paraded through the city. Parts of it at least. My men got a little... carried away.’

Meena felt bile rise in her throat.

‘The rest of that household of his, the women back in Murshidabad, well, they could not be allowed to go on either. I believe they were drowned. Or possibly poisoned, I can’t quite recall.’

The kaleidoscope of Meena’s father’s blood-soaked litter, her family’s treasures and Sir Peter’s menacing grin all swirled before her.

‘Excuse me.’

She rushed past him and found her steps quickening, racing to beat the sick feeling in her stomach, until she was running up the stairs back to her bedroom and slammed the door behind her. A vain attempt at keeping out the demons that seemed to be circling her.

It wasn’t long before James thundered through the door, slamming it so hard the pictures rattled against the walls. Meena knew that that kind of anger in him could only be provoked by shame. He was embarrassed of her, of her inability to keep her mouth shut and not take the bait. To stay pretty and silent, like an Englishwoman would.

He charged towards her and slammed her against the wall, his fingers digging into her shoulders. Her head smashed against the wall, momentarily dazing her. ‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at, Meena?’

Meena took a deep breath, trying to focus on the wall behind, not James. ‘Did you know?’ she asked quietly.

‘Did I know *what*?’

Meena roughly shook him off, her heart drumming in her chest. ‘Did you know he had all of that here? Is that why you brought me here? To see it?’

‘You’re being hysterical, Meena—’

‘Answer the question!’ she screamed at him. ‘Did you know he stole from my home? That he had my father’s palanquin, here, on display?’

‘Meena, he’s the most powerful director in the East India Company. Everything in the region belongs to him so if he wanted to take—’

‘Did you know what he did to his body?’ Meena asked, tears now tracing splotchy lines down the length of her ghostly make-up.

James shifted uncomfortably on the spot before looking up and regarding her with a cold gaze. ‘You cannot act so appalled. Not after what you did to your brother. Your father’s guards. You left your own country *and* your father defenceless. You cannot possibly pretend to be so innocent. Not after everything you have done.’

She couldn’t believe that he would twist everything she had done, everything she had sacrificed for him, so cruelly. Even when faced with the crimes of his forebears. That he could list off the worst moments of her life so casually and use them against her. Worse still, he was right. Any luminous image she may have once had of their relationship now shattered, the shards slicing her open. She had done everything that he said, because she loved him. But now, thousands of miles away from home, among his family and his people, she was alone.

‘I did that for *you*,’ she hissed.

‘Whatever the reason, you can hardly judge my uncle for winning a war, when you have blood on your hands.’

‘You shot Abhishek first! You tried to kill him.’

‘And you hacked your own brother apart. Watched him get thrown in the sea. I don’t think you can claim to be so distressed—’

‘Claim?’ Meena spluttered, wiping her tears away before placing her hands on her hips.

‘Claim to be so distressed that a member of your family was killed when it was your actions that led to their deaths. Especially your insane father.’

‘Your uncle paraded his body parts through the streets,’ Meena insisted, her voice growing weary of her pain being reduced to a logic parlour game – a schoolboy debate of no stakes. More than anything, she was tired of

having to explain this to the man she had once loved. ‘He debased not just my father but me *and* my ancestors.’

James’s eyes narrowed. ‘Your father tried to humiliate me. He just didn’t succeed.’

Meena bit her lip. ‘Because of me.’

James stared intently at her, before giving a whisper of a nod. ‘Well, none of that matters now, does it?’

CHAPTER 24



‘No, Amma! Please don’t!’ Alexander cried out as his little cherubic face erupted into a fit of giggles.

‘Too late, I’m coming for you.’ She stalked her young son around the room, slow and low to the ground like a hunter. She held her gaze fixed on the giggling boy. Meena raised her skirts up as she got closer. A couple of footsteps to the right, and Alexander shuffled to the left. A few steps to the left and he was her mirror reflection. She grinned, pausing momentarily before launching herself at him, wrapping her arms around his tiny body. He squealed in delight as she roared, pulling him down to the makeshift nursery carpet.

She proceeded to tickle him, carefully stroking his underarms, his soft belly, the underside of his unshod feet as he writhed on the floral carpet among the pink rosebuds and green thorns. She menaced over him as she delighted in his feeble screams, periodically dotting his face with kisses as his laughter filled the room. His protests persisted as Meena shot Eliza a bemused look. She felt like she needed some time with her son after the other night. She was living with a coward for a husband and on the largesse of a murderer, but she could still make sure that the most precious thing in her life was safe and well. It was not as if his father or his English relatives would care if he lived or died. James was gone by the time she had woken

and she chose not to inquire on his whereabouts after the evening's events. He had eventually turned in a couple of hours after she had left the soiree, by which time Meena pretended to be asleep. Annie later informed her that he had been holed up in Sir Peter's study for most of that evening, much to her frustration if not her surprise.

'Ma'am, I don't want to disturb your fun, but Alexander was supposed to go to bed ten minutes ago. Considering the boisterous mood he's in, it will be a miracle if he falls asleep before nine.'

'Just a few more minutes, Eliza,' Meena said as she grappled with her son who had set himself free and was now climbing over her.

'Just a few more minutes, Eliza!' echoed Alexander, having recently taken to mimicry. Meena tried to smother her laugh, tilting her head apologetically. Eliza, amused despite her best efforts, shook her head in response.

A knock at the door broke up the play fight. Annie entered, clearly not her usual self. Meena stood up. 'What is it, Annie?'

'Sorry to disturb you ma'am, but Mr Chilcott would like to see you.'

Meena frowned. 'Which one?'

Annie looked sheepish. 'Younger, ma'am. He's in the drawing room.'

Meena had no idea why James was calling her to the drawing room, as if she was to be received like a guest. It was a strange request, even by the standards of his recent behaviour. 'Let him know that I will meet him in our bedroom, and that I will be there shortly.'

Annie opened her mouth and then shut it without saying a word, before nodding. 'Of course, ma'am.'

* * *

'WHY DID you want to speak here?' James asked as soon as Meena entered. 'Why not the drawing room?'

‘Anyone could walk in on us there, at least here it is private.’ James gulped and she realised that her hunch was right: he was counting on support. Whatever was coming would be hideous. For her, at least.

‘Meena...’ he began, after much sighing and running his hands through his blond hair. ‘There is no easy way to say this – and I do hope we can deal with this matter courteously and respectfully – but I believe we can no longer continue in this way. It pains me to admit that, but sometimes the nature of life is unexpected, and we must nonetheless carry on, however hard that might be.’

Meena stared at him. She hoped her silence spoke volumes and made it clear that she did not have the faintest sense of what on earth he was prattling on about. James cleared his throat.

‘So, although it pains me, I believe we must separate.’

He mumbled the last word. Meena thought she heard but refused to believe that could be the case. She stepped forward and folded her arms, if only to stop herself from shaking. ‘We must *what?*’

James chewed his bottom lip. He seemed to be running through a pre-prepared speech in his head. ‘We must separate. I am sorry Meena, but I believe there is nothing that can be salvaged. Our relationship is over.’

Meena took a sharp intake of breath. She hadn’t thought about dissolving their marriage even if she wasn’t happy. She couldn’t. Leaving her husband, with a young son, was unthinkable. Making a life in England was as impossible as the thought of starting a new life somewhere else. The freedom to make such decisions, to disregard a marriage as simply a mistake was not one she had at her disposal. Ending their relationship would at best mean destitution and at worst leave her and her son alone in a society built on a deliberate absence of compassion for people that looked like them. They would be left vulnerable to all manner of danger, not least arising from Meena’s past deeds. That was just not an option.

‘You can’t do this. What about Alexander? We can’t get divorced.’

James sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Meena. Please. I loved you once. But my mind is made up. Also...’ James paused, choosing his words carefully. ‘We would not technically need to divorce. You and I both know we were never actually married. Not legally.’

Meena couldn’t feel the ground beneath her feet. She groped the wall to grip onto something solid as her breath quickened. She looked at James whose face was a maelstrom of contradictions: kindness, pity, fear and disgust.

Meena stared at him blankly, unable to muster the energy to express emotion. Suddenly, just breathing seemed to be almost beyond reach, let alone the anger such a situation merited.

‘You said. You said that you loved me and that was enough. I am your wife and you are my husband. You pledged your life to me. You said you would look after me, spend the rest of your life with me. And now,’ Meena narrowed her eyes, ‘now you’re leaving me.’

‘I tried. I swore to love you but that is no longer possible. We are no longer in love – that is clear to everyone. We are a long way from where we were in Calcutta. Too much has happened, you and I both know this.’ Meena thought James looked like a guilty child, caught playing when he’s meant to be in bed. She had to stop herself from focusing on how much Alexander looked like him.

‘What about Alexander?’ Meena said softly. ‘Is he to be a bastard then?’

James stepped forward and took her in his arms, daring to fashion his face into an image of kindness.

‘Alexander is my son. My heir. I would never do that to him. He will always be Alexander Chilcott. You have my word.’

Meena nodded and wiped away her tears. James’s ‘word’ offered limited relief given how little faith it merited. She meditated on this, before she stepped away and frowned. ‘You haven’t said *why* you’re doing this?’

James cocked his head, his eyes wide. ‘Yes, I have. Because we’re both miserable.’

Meena shook her head, feeling the anger rise and overtake the shock. It felt satisfying, like she was in control of her body once more. Like she felt solid once more. She wondered when she’d started to feel a disconnect from innate parts of herself. Was it when he pinned her wrists back in the dark; when he backhanded her after she discovered his betrayal; or when he had her steal from her home for him, murder for him? She wasn’t sure when it began and yet, along with the fear and anger at what might come next, there was almost a sense of relief.

‘No. An unhappy man, or one bored, takes a mistress. He doesn’t leave his wife, the dishonour is too great. I think you would only tell me this on the orders of your uncle. And he would only demand you separate from me if he had found a suitable replacement. An appropriate English rose for the nephew of the great Sir Peter Chilcott. Am I wrong?’

James’s eyebrows rose in shock and she knew that she was right. But he continued to regard her in blank, emotionless silence. ‘I don’t think it’s wise for us to continue this conversation.’ James stalked across the room to the door without looking back at his distressed wife.

Meena strode after him. ‘We are not finished, not until you have answered me.’

‘I will not speak to you when you are this hysterical.’ James pushed past her and flung the bedroom door open, letting it bang shut behind him. She shouted after him down the grand corridor, but he did not look back.

‘Meena?’

She spun around and saw Katherine standing outside her bedroom door.

‘Do you want to talk?’

Meena closed her eyes and nodded. She needed to process the surrealness of what had just happened.

Katherine nodded and called for Annie to bring some brandy to her room. There was no argument this time and the maid went to get the drinks quickly and quietly. Meena was disturbed by how much Annie had been staring at her. Clearly word had got round the household quickly. Or perhaps she was just the last to know.

She had never been in Katherine's room before. It was decorated with pinks and creams and blues, delicate florals abounding. It was pretty and sweet, like Katherine at dinner the other night. A sugared coating for her caustic wit. Katherine seemed to watch as well, as Meena settled into a quilted chintz armchair.

Meena threw her hands up, covering her face briefly before turning to face Katherine. 'I'm sorry, I can't believe this. I must seem like such a wretch,' said Meena, embarrassed at how her humiliation at the hands of James was being witnessed. 'How much did you hear?'

Katherine seemed distracted. 'A little. Shall we wait till Annie brings our drinks?'

Meena sighed. 'Fine, sure.' She barely heard Katherine above the whirlpool of shock and anxiety she found herself wading through. Almost on cue, Annie knocked and delivered the brandy. Katherine took her glass and took a large sip. She seemed unusually quiet.

'He's leaving me,' said Meena. It felt strangely comforting to actually say the words out loud, to be so blunt about the shipwreck of her life.

'I know.'

'Because apparently he's decided we were never married. All the years we spent building a life together, raising a son, mean nothing now.'

'I know.'

Meena frowned. 'You heard that part as well?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I'm pretty sure he's doing all of this now because of your father. I believe he's found him a nice English girl to marry because heaven forbid a

Chilcott could marry a Mughal.'

'Yes.'

Meena looked at her, furrowing her brow. She took another sip of her brandy. 'Did you hear that from us just now or from your father?'

Katherine gave her a wry smile and drained the contents of her glass.

'What did your father say?'

The English girl shrugged, looking at Meena hesitantly. 'He said that you and James weren't really married, and that James is to marry someone else.'

Meena looked at her. In this room, this house, Meena could see how Katherine looked as different from her as one could. She took in the flush across her pale smooth skin, a rosy glow enhanced by rouge and alcohol, that crept down to her swan-like neck. Her silvery-blond curls piled on top of her head. The deliberate steady gaze. The determined eye contact, as if she was testing herself, or perhaps testing Meena.

'And who is he going to marry?'

Katherine stared intently at Meena. 'He's going to marry me.'

And there it was. The room began to spin. Meena took another swig of brandy, letting the alcohol burn down her throat. Her heart beat faster; she could feel it thumping so hard it hurt.

'Meena? Meena, do you understand?'

Meena looked up. She looked at her friend, drinking in her innocent, doll-like appearance. Meena wondered if she had always looked so inhuman. 'Yes Katherine, I understand you. What I want to understand now is what the hell you think you're doing marrying my husband?'

Katherine sighed. 'Meena, he's not your husband. You yourself told me that. He's the father of your bastard, your *lover* perhaps'— this, coming from the girl stealing James, so incensed Meena that she felt her teeth grind in frustration — 'at one time maybe, but not your husband. He is free to marry whomever he wants, and he wants to marry me.' She explained this to

Meena as if she were a doctor treating their patient, carefully and calmly and serious as death. Meena appreciated, at this moment of complete and utter humiliation, being treated like a rational human being. What she despised, however, was the look of pity in the other girl's eyes.

‘He wants to marry you,’ Meena repeated slowly.

‘Yes, but it's not romantic, of course. It's about Father obviously. His wealth, his legacy. It's barely about James or me at all, really. This is just a consolidation of assets as far as my father is concerned.’

‘Whose assets?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Whose assets is he consolidating? Because as far as I can see, all the assets in this house are of my kingdom, my home, my money.’ The girl's demeanour, her casual dismissal of what was happening to Meena infuriated her. Almost as much as her betrayal enraged and shamed her. Meena had confided in her, yet again fooled into thinking that she could form a bond with a member of this wretched family, and Katherine had used that information against her.

Katherine raised her eyebrows. ‘Well, I don't think Father or James, or any court in the land would see it that way. You have no claim to anything here, including James.’

‘What about Alexander?’ Meena folded her arms. ‘Tell me, Katherine. How did your father find out about our marriage?’

‘I told him.’ Katherine's voice was defiant. Meena was almost impressed by the gall. It put into perspective her own staggering stupidity. How her feelings of loneliness, distance from James, how these had all blinded her. She wanted to feel rage, and she was sure that would come, but for now, all she could feel was her own putrid shame. And yet, she was still nonetheless compelled to expose her ignorance even further.

‘And why did you tell him?’

Katherine shrugged and leaned back in her chair. ‘Because I need a husband, even if the thought of one is as unappealing as it is inevitable. You know that would have meant I would become some strange man’s property. You can’t expect me to have been content with such a fate.’

‘So, I am to feel sorry for you?’ Meena exclaimed in response to this appeal for sympathy from the person who had taken everything away from her.

‘I would hope you’d be reasonable. After all, you weren’t legally married so that meant James was available. Now, my dear cousin is hardly the brightest, or wittiest – frankly, I find it extraordinary he ever managed to charm you – but he will suffice. With me being disappointingly female, James is Father’s heir and so Father needs him to marry well too. And the Lord knows you are *not* his idea of marrying well.’

Katherine regarded her. ‘I suppose if you were quieter, more pliable you might have managed to be one of Father’s baubles that he brings back from the East, but really, it was never going to work and James was just too stupid to realise.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it though. It’s just transactional. It’s a massive game to him. We’re just the pawns. At least, you and James are. And James is handsome enough, I suppose; he will stay out of my way and will be under Father’s thumb for as long as we’re married. If I have to be traded for my father’s money I might as well try and get some decent terms.’

‘And what am I to do?’

Katherine shrugged, her eyes dead and emotionless. ‘That is for you to figure out.’

CHAPTER 25



*I*t had been days since Meena rose from her bed. James had moved out of their room and the curtains had not been drawn back since. She eschewed meals, even refusing the trays that Annie brought up for her. She had not moved yet Meena felt drained. Her eyelids fastened shut, glued with dried tears that formed a white crust around her eyes. Days of non-stop crying had left her feeling dried up. A husk. That was what she was reduced to, only discussed in hushed tones. Meena had the glorious luck of being able to hear Annie and Eliza gossiping through the door. They would take turns trying to rouse her out of bed while the other hovered outside, waiting for a full report.

‘I wish we had never sailed here. I wish *he* had never sailed to Calcutta in the first place,’ Meena could hear Eliza say in her unmistakable Cape accent.

‘She wouldn’t be here in this situation now, that’s for sure,’ Annie chipped in.

‘All of it, it all began with him.’

‘Well, did it begin with him or her?’ Annie’s voice was coarser. ‘I mean, she did choose him over her father, right? I’ve heard some pretty shocking things about what happened to her brother too. I mean, you have to wonder,

why would you run away from your own home, a *palace*, if you had nothing to hide?’

Meena groaned as she overheard their conversation. Annie was right, of course. How could anyone sympathise with her plight when she’d betrayed her family? Her heart was heavy with memories of her father’s blood-stained palanquin and how pieces of her brother, thrown overboard, filled her mind. She wondered whether that’s what James thought, when he first saw her knee-deep in her brother’s blood. Perhaps they had always been doomed.

‘I certainly wouldn’t cross her, would you? Even if she isn’t at her best right now. Did you hear that crying earlier? The wailing? Sounded like there was a banshee in the house.’ Meena was pretty sure that was Annie.

‘Shush! Keep your voice down. This is exactly the time I would be most scared of her. She’s no helpless wretch. They should be afraid of what she can do.’

‘Oh, I don’t doubt that, and neither does Sir Peter apparently.’

‘What do you mean?’ Eliza’s voice was full of concern.

‘Well, I heard...’ Annie’s voice grew infuriatingly low and distant once more.

‘He can’t do that!’ Eliza’s startled voice, on the other hand, rang clear as a bell.

‘He’s richer than Midas and has half of Parliament in his pocket dancing to his tune. And as of today, the tune is “Get that woman and her half-caste boy as far away from my family as possible!”’

Meena buried her face in her pillow to muffle the scream that escaped her lips. She felt it building in the depths of her gut and it burst out of her. It had been building for years. She had been *promised*. He had given her his word about their son. He said, he *swore*, that Alexander would always be his son, that he would always be a Chilcott. That he would never make a bastard of him and now he was happy for his uncle to cast Alexander out.

Another broken promise. Another betrayal to be piled high upon the others. She sobbed as she thought of her darling boy. Where would they turn to? She had no one in this godforsaken land. Her former home was now made into a charnel house, Calcutta had been captured by her enemies and made into their very own breadbasket. She couldn't risk going back to the Cape of Good Hope, not after the governor's death. Her aunt's perhaps... but how long would it be before the Dutch or the English or someone else came and took that from them too? What she couldn't believe was that James was fine with abandoning his own son. But then, perhaps she could. He was easily seduced. He had once loved the idea of having an Indian princess in his bed. Now he had a young, pretty bride to concern himself with, too distracted by her youthful English rose looks and her father's fortune to care about his son.

'And her son,' Eliza sighed, her incredulity raising the volume of her voice louder once more. 'The poor boy hasn't seen either of them in days. She says she's too tired to see him, but I know that's not it. It's because he's the spitting image of his father. It's too painful. And if I'm honest...' Meena pulled back the covers and crept over to the door so she could listen.

'No, she would never. She's deranged, that's for sure right now, but she loves that boy more than anything.'

'She does, but she is a dangerous woman.' Meena had never heard Eliza's voice like that before. It was strangely solemn. And scared. 'I know she loves him, she can be like a lioness with her cub when she's with him, but that's the problem. I know what she can do. I just hope that poor little boy doesn't end up enmeshed in her net.'

Meena felt hot salty tears fall down her cheeks into her mouth. She was appalled. They thought her a monster capable of hurting her child. She wanted to die at the thought of it. Perhaps that would be better for everyone. Meena collapsed into a heap of tears as she continued to listen in on her maids discussing her as though she were a mad foreign witch. She'd had

enough scorn from the Chilcotts, she didn't need it from her servants as well. She needed to compose herself. She had been moping in her bedroom for too long and could not afford wasting time any longer. Meena needed a plan. And she would need Annie and Eliza onside. Women and servants operated in the shadows, ignored until they were required. They were keepers of secrets, and she would need her secrets kept if she was to go against the Chilcotts.

She crept back to her bed and perched on the edge, wiping her face and smoothing back her hair to try and tame the tangled frizz. 'Eliza! Annie! Can you come in please?'

The doorknob turned and both their faces poked round the door. Eliza's nervous brown eyes flicked downwards, too ashamed to look at her mistress. Even Annie blushed at being confronted with the object of their gossip. They entered hesitantly.

'Thank you, girls, for coming. Thank you for everything you have done for me lately. I know how awfully I have behaved, wallowing and weeping. It's not appropriate and I am sorry you had to see it. I apologise thoroughly. As you may understand, recent events have provided quite a shock.'

Eliza walked over and patted her mistress's arm awkwardly. 'It's okay, ma'am. We know you've had a tough time lately.'

'Yes, Miss Meena,' said Annie as she drew closer, 'don't worry about it. Would you like us to get you anything? Draw you a bath?'

Meena smiled blithely, choosing not to acknowledge her apparent demotion from "Mrs Chilcott". 'That would be lovely, Annie, thank you. I really appreciate how kind you have both been to me. I have spent my life loving the worst of all men, yet I have also learned that your hearts are so pure and kind. I know that I cannot rely on my husband, but I can rely on both of you. That's right, isn't it?'

'Of course, ma'am.'

'Absolutely, Miss Meena. We're here for you.'

Meena smiled and took both of their hands, squeezing them tight. 'Thank you, girls. I know that this will be hard for you. Sir Peter is your master, and James is yours, Eliza. I know that staying loyal to me under such conditions is a challenge, but I also know that you are both women of your word and that you will not betray me. That is right, isn't it, girls?' Meena squeezed their hands tight once more. She could feel the hesitation in their bodies and she wanted to strangle the life out of it. The young girls nodded silently. 'Come now. I need you to say it.'

The two servant girls exchanged a brief look before speaking, 'Yes, ma'am.'

Meena beamed. 'Thank you. I knew I could trust you both. I am truly grateful.' A knock on the door interrupted Meena's efforts. She smothered a scowl, needing to maintain her sweet, vulnerable guise. 'Can one of you see who that is? I am not ready to be seen by anyone.' Annie leapt to the door which she opened a sliver to have a brief conversation with one of the housemaids before closing it once more.

'It's Sir Peter. He wants to see you in his study.'

'We can say you're ill,' Eliza offered.

'I'm sorry but he is apparently quite insistent,' Annie said. 'He wants you there in an hour.'

Meena nodded. 'Yes, that's fine. I won't be made a liar just because of James's dishonourable behaviour, nor will I avoid his uncle. Annie, can you draw me that bath? Eliza, please can you lay out one of my outfits from India? I see no need to pretend that I am one of this household anymore so I might as well be comfortable.'

'Wait Miss Meena, there's something you should know. About Sir Peter and what he intends to do...'

'It's okay, Annie. I don't want you to feel that you need to carry tales to me about him – or that you should tell him anything about me. I wouldn't

do that to either of you. I know what that man is capable of, and I will be prepared accordingly. I promise.'

* * *

SIR PETER WAS on his feet, impatiently flipping through a book as he waited for Meena to make her entrance. He watched her carefully. She saw his lip curl as he took in her shalwar kameez. Meena stood, arms folded with her legs parted slightly and rooted to the ground. She noted a particularly disdainful glance at her trousers.

'Thank you for coming, Meena. I will be brief: I have Edmund Agnew on his way, so you'll forgive me if I am curt. I am however glad you are feeling better.' He lingered over the word "better". Evidently, reports of her suffering had been a source of great amusement to the rest of the house. He continued to watch her, trying to read her. Meena tried her best to keep her expression blank under such scrutiny.

'I see you, you know.'

Meena frowned. 'Excuse me?'

Sir Peter slammed the book shut and sat down behind his great walnut desk, his elbows planted on the blotter.

'I don't know if James has ever told you much about my family. My parents died when I was young. My uncle and his wife took me in; he was a weak-willed man but given to charity which worked in my favour. They were poor but God-fearing, the bloody fools. I decided that morality tales held little sway over the hearts of men that make something of themselves, and I was determined not to die unknown and unremarkable in a backwater in Shropshire.

'I learned that violence was a remarkably useful tool to get what you want. I used to ransom the local shopkeepers. I'd threaten to break their windows if they did not pay. I probably would have done it too. And when I

got to India, I knew that that was my great talent: I was willing to do whatever it takes. Whatever it took to win. To get what I want, because I knew it was not going to be handed to me. I did whatever it took to take Bengal and I'm doing whatever it takes now, because I can see that you would do the same.'

'You think we're alike?' Meena asked, unable to keep the edge of disgust out of her voice.

Sir Peter chuckled ruefully. 'No, no. We are nothing alike. You and your kind are as different from us as man is from beast. But I know your temperament and that, mingled with that... *disposition* your kind has... I know what you're thinking and that is why I've summoned you here.

'Now, I would rather not labour the point so I will be brief: as you know, James is to marry Katherine and so you must leave. Not just Heathfield – England. You should be mindful of the fact that I have my sources and I have done my research on you; I know you have secrets you would rather keep hidden. Secrets you would rather not reach the authorities. And I have the ear of Parliament so you and your son need to be on your way now, otherwise you will be arrested and executed for your crimes. You and I both know I am a powerful man, Meena. You would do well to heed my words, for your sake and for the sake of your child.'

Meena observed his demeanour as Sir Peter made this grand and cruel proclamation. He said it all in one breath, as if he was expecting her to argue, to be aggressive. Some feral creature he needed to guard himself against. Because of her 'disposition'. She knew instead she needed to be fragile, defenceless. Meek. A suppliant.

Meena buried her face in her hands pretending to cry. 'So I am to be banished. Me and my child cast out into the wilderness, away from his father and the only family he has ever known.' She was shaking as, to her surprise, a few real tears started to fall. She raised her head so he could see her attempt to wipe away her tears. She stole a glance at Sir Peter's ashen

face. He had not counted on this extreme display of feminine distress. ‘I understand that James is leaving us. I am distraught but I have not tried to stop him, so why must I be punished? I know I have been somewhat forthright in some of my opinions since I arrived, but I have done nothing to you or your family to deserve such treatment. How could you do this to the mother of your nephew’s child?’

‘Because I’m scared of you,’ Sir Peter said bluntly, his expression wary. ‘I know what your people are capable of. I’ve spent too much of my life fighting against wicked, cunning little savages like you. Seeing my men killed on the battlefield, imprisoned in hellish cells. You are clever, much too clever. I know that you know native witchcraft or whatever it is you call it. And I do not want to know what harm you could cause my daughter.’

‘I would never—’ Meena began before Sir Peter silenced her by raising his hand.

‘You forget with whom you speak. As I’ve said, I know all about you natives and what you’re capable of. How hot-blooded and irrational you are. Only the Lord knows what sort of jealous vengeance you would bestow on my daughter. And I would move heaven and earth to protect her from your kind’s viciousness.’

Meena seethed silently. She wanted to strike him but knew a more diplomatic approach was unfortunately required.

‘I hope you never have to experience this. Hearing your character so maligned. Being subject to such suspicion. Sir Peter, I might be “clever”, but tell me, what position am I in to do anything, even if I did harbour ill will towards your daughter? I am powerless, a stranger in a foreign land, deserted by the man that brought me here. I am only here because he was there. And now I am unable to return to my motherland. What could I do?’

The Englishman looked at her, contemplating her words, but still cautious. As if stalking an animal on a hunt, watching for any sudden movements.

‘I don’t bear any resentment towards you or your daughter. James is the one who has hurt me, but I understand why you did what you did. I am a parent myself. James is a good match for Katherine, I hope Alexander will similarly marry well one day. There is no reason to send us away. Let me and Alexander stay in England. We will be no bother to you.’

Sir Peter’s eyes narrowed. Meena turned briefly from his gaze as she realised that she might have gone too far.

‘My goodness, Meena,’ he sneered. ‘I don’t believe I have ever heard you say anything so nice to me before.’

‘Excuse me, sir?’

‘Oh, you sound harmless enough. But when you were your rude and abrasive native self, I knew where I stood with you,’ he snarled, before shaking his head at her in quiet revulsion. ‘But this? This soft and gentle rational woman before me now? She terrifies me. I have no idea what she could do. I’ve had enough of this. I have given you my orders. You and your half-breed cub are to leave immediately. None of your tricks will save you now.’

His words rang in Meena’s ears. She thought about her and Alexander on the streets. She would have nowhere to go. Destitute, homeless, her son hungry and freezing in the English countryside. Even if she were able to get back to London, she could not afford a room and board anywhere, not without begging or servicing lascars upon arrival from India. Now was the time to swallow her pride.

‘Please, Sir Peter,’ Meena fell to her knees in front of the startled gentleman, ‘I beg you. Please don’t send us away. By my own son’s life, I swear I will not do anything.’

Sir Peter paled. ‘Save your words, you wretched animal, and get the hell out of my sight. The sooner you’re out of our lives the better.’

‘Please, Sir Peter, I beg you.’ Meena grabbed his hand as Sir Peter looked on in horror. He tried to shake her off.

‘Get off me you insane creature. Leave right this minute before I have you forcibly thrown out!’

‘Please. For my son. He’s your nephew’s son!’

Sir Peter stopped and frowned, considering her words. The information, though hardly unknown, seemed to take on a new significance in his mind. ‘What did you say?’

‘Alexander. He is a Chilcott. And whatever he says now, James loves him. Knowing his son is somewhere, starving, out on the streets. He could not live with that; he wouldn’t just forget him. And what would that do to your plans? We both know that he is weak and swift to break his word when desperate. If you want this little arrangement to work out for your daughter, then you need to give me some time to get our affairs in order so that James won’t come looking for us. A father is the most important figure in a young boy’s life. Just allow me one more day to figure out a plan. Please. Just one more day.’

Sir Peter closed his eyes for a moment before swearing under his breath. She didn’t catch exactly what he said but she knew she was safe. She would have time to think, and that was all she needed for now.

‘Fine! You will have one more day but if you are not gone within twenty-four hours, I swear you will be taken and strung up by your neck. Your son can go to the workhouse for all I care, do you understand me, woman?’

Meena nodded and got up from her knees slowly. She thanked a defeated Sir Peter and left the room as he dismissed her with a flick of his wrist.

One day. One day and she would be at the mercy of the elements and anything else that would take her. And Alexander too. She couldn’t let that happen.

Meena had a thought and marched over to the foyer where she found Thompson admiring a copy of a Roman statue of Diana, gripping a deer by

its antlers as the goddess grabbed an arrow from her quiver.

‘Mrs – Miss... ma’am,’ Thompson stuttered, still getting to grips with the latest household changes. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I heard that Mr Agnew would be visiting today, is that correct?’

‘Yes, my dear, you are indeed right!’

Meena turned to the side and saw the ruddy-faced Agnew bounding up the marble steps to the foyer.

Thompson inclined his head slightly to greet him. ‘Welcome, sir. I will let Sir Peter know that you have arrived.’

‘Actually, Thompson,’ said Meena, ‘if you could give me and Mr Agnew a couple of minutes before you inform Sir Peter, I would be most grateful. I have a small matter to discuss, and your advice, Mr Agnew, would be most appreciated.’ Meena smiled sweetly at the old man who cocked his head and peered at her bemusedly through little round spectacles.

‘Of course. I am in no rush. Is Peter in his study, Thompson? I’ll go find him myself once I am finished here. Thank you.’

Thompson’s eyes shifted between Agnew and Meena but gave nothing of his thoughts away. ‘Very well, sir.’ He bowed in turn at Edmund Agnew and then Meena.

Agnew beamed. ‘So, how may I be of service to you? I trust James is in good health, as is your son?’

Meena bit her tongue. She needed to weave her tale and the first stitch was all important.

She began by sighing dramatically. ‘Oh, Mr Agnew! James is well, but I must admit, the future of myself and our son is looking dimmer by the minute.’

Agnew was caught off guard by this but his reflexive interest in Meena and her world drew him to her.

‘What on earth do you mean? What has happened?’

Meena sniffed pitifully. 'We are to leave tomorrow. Please do not bring this up with Sir Peter, I beg you. He has been generous enough. But James wishes to end our marriage and so Alexander and I are to leave Heathfield.'

Agnew's eyes widened. 'Oh, you poor dear. I am sorry to hear that. These things do happen, I suppose. But surely, James would make sure that his son is taken care of?'

Meena shrugged. 'He wishes to start a new life. And Alexander and I are to be left with nothing, ruined.'

'Oh, my poor girl. You have my sympathies,' he said warmly, if a little taken aback by such an outpouring. 'Where will you go?'

Meena took a deep breath. 'That is where I thought you might be able to help. It is my wish to sail to Ceylon – I have a beloved aunt who lives there. My son and I would be safe there. But I need passage on a ship. And to London to get to the port in the first place.'

Agnew paused, staring at Meena with his beady eyes while he took this request in. 'And you are telling me this because you wish to board one of my ships and sail to Ceylon?'

'And ride in a carriage to get to London from Heathfield.' Meena was feeling brave. Or to be more accurate, she was feeling desperate.

'And I take it Peter hasn't furnished you with these means of travel?' he asked.

'Because he cannot be seen to take against his own nephew. He has already given me another day to get my affairs in order – James would have had his wife and son thrown out on the streets like rotting fish.' Meena leaned in conspiratorially, the right level of despair in her voice. 'Sir Peter knows I have come to speak to you. He cannot advise that I ask you, but he was deliberate in informing me of when you were to arrive.'

'Ah, yes, Peter is good at that. He can be very clear about what he wants without ever moving his lips. A veritable ventriloquist,' Agnew said,

nodding his head before stroking the wisps of beard on his chin. 'I just can't believe young James could be so thoughtless. And why now?'

Meena knew any mention of Katherine would elicit far too many questions. 'I dare say his return home has dispelled him of the desire for any relic from his adventures in India – including me.' She was momentarily winded by the thought that perhaps this might in fact be true. But she also knew self-pity would not help her case. Playing the victim would only get her so far, even with a man so compelled to be a saviour like Agnew. She needed to appeal to his self-interest.

'And of course, when my aunt sees me, she would be so grateful to anyone who had helped her beloved niece to safety. She would ensure anyone who helped me would be rewarded handsomely. She is from the old Madras royal family, you know. She made sure she left with all her riches before making her way to Ceylon. I am certain she would be keen to repay your kindness tenfold. Perhaps it could help with your plans back in Scotland? To create a beacon of intellectual thought and progress. Sir Peter mentioned it and it sounds like such a marvellous idea. I would love to support it if I can.'

Agnew's eyes gleamed as visions of gold and jewels appeared in his mind. He, unlike Chilcott however, was keen not to betray any obvious sign of avarice. 'Very well. I am appalled by the situation but if Peter is happy then I will not let a poor damsel go unsaved. I will send a carriage at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. It will take you to London. The *Helios* is bound for Ceylon. Give my name to the captain and you and your son will have safe passage. You have my word.'

'Thank you, Mr Agnew! You are truly a hero among men. Again, I must ask, please do not mention our conversation to Sir Peter as I do not wish to cause him any strife between him and his nephew. But you have my eternal gratitude Mr Agnew! I am indeed saved.' She clasped his hand and

considered kissing it before deciding this would be too much. She instead beamed beatifically like a good little saved wretch.

Meena forced herself to walk up the stairs slowly. She closed the door behind her and slid down to the floor. She had got what she needed, she had more time. Now she needed to use it.

CHAPTER 26



A knock at the door and Annie and Eliza appeared. Meena stopped herself from rolling her eyes. She wondered whether the housekeeper knew how much time they were spending dawdling around her room, or perhaps they were being sent to keep her distracted in case she did anything hysterical.

‘Is everything alright, ma’am?’

‘Yes, I heard that Sir Peter’s throwing you out? Is that right, Miss?’

Meena pressed her lips together tightly and smiled. ‘Do not worry, I will be fine. He tried to banish me today, but I asked for one more day to get my affairs in order. And despite what he thinks, there’s a lot I can do with one day. I *will* get something out of this ordeal.’

Meena had begun to fantasise how she might make James and his uncle pay for what they had done to her. There was little she could do to alleviate her situation, but the more she thought about it, there was no way she could let them go unpunished for their crimes against her. She liked the idea of setting the house on fire, knocking a candelabra over in front of Katherine’s door – perhaps James would be inside there too. She could spill a glass of brandy to help it along a little, before heading outside, watching saffron flames lick at the ivory-coloured masonry and turn it to ash. Though that wouldn’t let her see the look in their eyes, whereas if she drove a sword

through them... She knew that look, had allowed herself to be haunted by it, but with them she would embrace it. Embrace the sight of their life spilling out like wine on a carpet. But no, even if the victory would be sweet, she would not hack someone to pieces again. And even if she could, such a plan would be too high risk, and would most likely leave her swinging from the hangman's noose by sunrise. There was no way Meena was going to let that happen. Let herself be conquered in any way. She would not be the object of mockery. If she wanted revenge she would have to play to her strengths.

'But what is your plan after tomorrow, ma'am? Where will you and Alexander go?'

Meena sighed and flopped on the bed. 'I do not know. I need more time to consider my options.'

'Meena!' His harsh voice boomed through the door. He did not care to knock apparently. 'Open the door at once.' Meena's expression turned disdainful at his haughty tone, and she dismissed Eliza and Annie who let James in as they were on their way out.

'Can we speak?'

Meena observed that he stood taller than before, now no longer burdened by poverty, false principles or an ever-present sense of his own inadequacy.

Meena nodded. 'Go on.' She smiled and enjoyed how this seemed to irritate him.

'Somewhere else, perhaps?'

Meena raised her eyebrow at him. 'You used to sleep here. Beside me. But now the room of the mother of your child offends you?'

'Fine, fine,' James muttered darkly. 'Good God, Meena, how long am I going to have to put up with your childish behaviour?'

'*Excuse me?*'

‘You do realise that there could have been a version of events that would have worked out fine for you? That if you had accepted the situation graciously, you could have stayed here? But no, you stormed off to your bedroom and sulked like a child, ranting and raving in your nightgown, loud enough for anyone to hear your endless ballad of despair.

‘How on earth could you stay when you have spent every interaction with my uncle insulting him and being obstinate? When you dishonoured him and the Company so disgracefully the other night?’ James leaned in, for fear of someone overhearing him. ‘You knew how powerful he is, how they could make your life a misery. *You* are his guest.’

‘His guest?’ Meena scoffed. ‘Unwillingly. The only reason I am here is because of you.’

‘Spare me your recitation of my supposed past sins. You can’t abuse your betters and think it would not have any bearing on your welfare or Alexander’s.’

‘Don’t talk about *my* son.’ Meena glared at James, struggling against every instinct to claw his eyes out.

‘You’ve always been selfish and thoughtless. But despite that, I will not leave you and Alexander penniless. I know you have bargained for another day here, somehow.’ James’s eyes narrowed for a moment as he stared, desperately searching for signs of Meena’s plans. ‘I don’t know what you think you can do with another day, but nonetheless I will make sure you and Alexander are taken care of. You may want to shower me with all the horrible names you can think of, but I for one am determined to rise above this current unpleasantness and act honourably.’

Meena had never felt such intense emotion course through her veins as she did while looking upon James’s face. Perhaps when she had first seen Alexander, but she could not be certain. Never had her heart beaten so viciously, her skin trembled and hands shaken, like they did now as she looked at James with such unfiltered hatred. How she had once been

charmed by such arrogance she could not imagine. She wished she could respond to his smug magnanimity with composure and rise above it all. But she could not.

‘You bastard,’ Meena seethed. ‘How on earth did I ever love you, ever love such a monument to cowardice? You think this is honour? You want to make sure we are taken care of? You couldn’t manage that when we were married, even with the small fortune I stole for you. What makes you think I would ever take a penny from you after all of this?’ She found herself glowering at him, feeling the heat radiate off her skin.

‘I can’t believe your shamelessness. Acting generous after all the sacrifices I made for you. The guards I saved you from, that I made rip themselves apart. The money I stole for you. Abhishek. My father. My home I abandoned. Again and again, I did unspeakable things, broke myself apart, all for *you*.’ Her last word hung heavy in the air long enough for them both to feel the weight. ‘I let you drag me to that pirates’ den of a place in Africa. I tricked that fool into killing her father because of you. I bore your child, your son that you are now so willing to cast aside. All while you plotted and planned, far away from the battlefield in all your fine decorations, my brave little toy soldier. You have no idea what bloodshed is, what fear is, what staring death in its hideous face is like until you’ve seen childbirth—’

‘Meena, please.’ James’s face was scrunched up in disgust.

‘Oh, I do beg your pardon, does that offend you?’ Meena said sardonically. ‘Imagine what it is like *to go through it*. I would rather try my luck in battle three times over than risk giving birth once more. I gave birth to your son, and you decide to kick us aside like dirt.’

James’s nostrils flared which provoked a grin from Meena, baring her teeth as she did so. She enjoyed not having to tiptoe around his ego, having to coddle or soothe. Seeing his disdain writ large on his face and being

utterly unmoved, it was liberating. She was tired of tamping down her hate, she wanted it unleashed.

‘As much as I have enjoyed this reminiscence of our past,’ he spat, ‘let us at least be honest. It was not me that forced you to betray your father or steal or murder, or made you commit any of your myriad of crimes. You did that, driven by your baser instincts perhaps.’

Meena glowered at him. ‘Excuse me?’

James sighed. ‘I won’t labour the point. It’s not your fault, after all. You were raised in that culture. Full of sordid desires and corruption.’ Meena raised an eyebrow at this, her mind drifting back to James’s fine words about India when they first met, and to the British soldiers she’d sometimes see falling out of punch houses and brothels in Calcutta.

‘I had hoped you would have learned something from being in the centre of the civilised world. But even if your time here is shorter than previously planned... I hope our morals will have rubbed off on you in some way. I do, of course, accept you helped me. And I hope bringing you to England and showing you how civilised people behave can be my way of repaying you for all you have done.’

‘I am touched by your generous spirit,’ Meena gritted through her teeth. ‘And awed by such *civility*, of course.’

James smirked as he towered above where she sat on the bed. ‘There was a time I would have been irritated by your churlish tone, but my impending nuptials have been good for me. In fact, they will be good for all of us.’ Meena stared at him, curious how he would attempt to justify this self-delusional proclamation.

‘I know you think I proposed to Katherine for my own personal gain, but do you know what marrying Sir Peter Chilcott’s daughter will do for us? I was his ward, the orphaned, impoverished son of his dead drunk of a brother. This will secure my future which means I can secure Alexander’s. His brothers will inherit Sir Peter’s fortune; they will be scions of the East

India Company. And who knows, then perhaps Alexander can join us. You're too hysterical to see it now, too wrapped up in your anger, but really, this is the most sensible decision. I haven't done this because I've fallen for Katherine's appearance, or anything like that. I am doing this for us. I still have your and our son's best interests at heart.'

Meena's eyes widened as she digested his words. *Alexander can join us.* Her beloved boy, with *them*. 'That is an impressive argument, James. A brilliant way to justify lining your pockets while bedding your child bride. I wish I had such a capacity for self-deception.' Meena was astounded by his brazenness and self-delusion, wondering what endless horrors one could inflict if convinced it was altruistic. She found herself relishing her anger after years of choking down betrayal and disappointment. She folded her arms, jutting her chin forward. 'Tell me this: if this was truly all for us, why the subterfuge?'

'Because you would have willingly gone along with this?' James said dryly. 'Maybe I could have acted without such secrecy, if you weren't so full of bile and hate.'

'Or maybe having a foreigner for a wife didn't suit you once the gold ran out?'

'No Meena, you did this to yourself.'

'Did I drag you around the world, take everything you own, only to abandon you for the people who took everything else from your family?'

'Enough!' James pushed his hair back in exasperation and stormed towards the door. 'I am done with trying to reason with a fundamentally unreasonable woman. If you and Alexander need money, or friends who can help you in Europe or the East, I will happily oblige.' Meena scoffed. She wondered where this money or these generous friends had been the past few years when James had spent every penny they had. Even if he did manage to conjure up such resources, Meena would not allow James to know where

they went, able to steal her son whenever he might decide to be a father again.

‘Even though I know your stubborn pride will make you refuse,’ James said, scowling at her open mockery. ‘After that, you can burn for all I care.’

James slammed the door shut, making the paintings on the wall rattle behind him. Meena sighed and wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks. She flopped back on the bed until she heard a tentative knock at the door.

‘For God’s sake,’ Meena muttered. ‘What is it?’

‘Miss? Master Alexander is asking after you.’

Meena groaned. It had been over a week since she saw her son. She couldn’t bear to look at him or have him see her like this. She didn’t know what she would say, what reassurances or excuses she was supposed to offer on behalf of his father.

Meena opened the door and followed Annie to the nursery. Eliza was already there, playing with Alexander on the floor. They were setting up figurines on the plush carpet.

‘Amma!’ Alexander stood and jumped up and down on the spot. Meena crouched down and swallowed him up in her arms. She sniffed his hair, taking in the sweet, spiced scent. Scents from her former life – she had no idea how he smelled of that here but took it in all the same. She tried really hard not to cry.

‘Hello, darling, how are you?’

‘Amma, where did you go? Is Papa coming too?’

Meena winced. James had been absent for the birth, except for banging on the door mid-labour, yelling slurred demands to see his son. Eliza had hushed him and he’d slouched back to the nearest tavern. Her son’s devotion to his worthless father cut like betrayal. ‘He’s around, pillai, I’m sure he will be here soon. I need to talk to you first though.’ Meena started

to relax her embrace but decided that she was not ready to look him in the eye yet.

‘Papa has decided he loves your Auntie Katherine very much. So much, in fact, that he is marrying her. So you and I will be saying goodbye to Papa. Because he will have a new family and he needs to focus on them. Because he loves them more.’

Eliza raised her eyebrows at her, but Meena decided she did not care what she thought. Why should she have to protect James when he clearly could not be bothered to tell his son himself? Even if that did mean Alexander was now looking up at her with big watery eyes. ‘Is Papa mad at me?’

‘No, Alexander, of course not.’ Meena tried to hug him even tighter but Alexander pushed her away. ‘He is mad but not at you. He is mad for money and his new bride. But not at you.’

‘Is it you?’

Meena frowned. ‘What did you say, darling?’

‘Maybe he’s marrying Auntie Katherine because of you.’ Her child peeled himself away from her and stomped his little foot for emphasis. Meena stared at him in confusion. His pink rosebud of a mouth was downturned at the corners, the nostrils of his snub nose were flared. She had never noticed that he could do that before.

‘Alexander. This is not my fault. Your father is doing this to us.’

‘You were mean to Papa. You shouted at him. And you were mean to Uncle Peter.’

Meena wondered from which servant he had heard that she and Peter were on bad terms. Or maybe James had been pouring poison in his ear. She knew however that their house in the Cape had been small enough for him to hear their marriage crumbling.

Meena gripped the little boy by his shoulders. ‘Alexander, listen to me. That is not true. Your father left us for his new wife, left us to fend for

ourselves.'

Alexander had apparently decided that the conversation was over and turned his back on her to go back to his figurines. Meena wryly wondered whether he learned to act so coldly from his father. Meena slouched over and knelt beside Alexander.

'What are you doing?'

'Playing.'

Meena smothered a sigh, clamping her fingers over her mouth, trying not to be annoyed at the boy's curt response. 'And what are you playing, darling?'

'Soldiers.'

Meena frowned and peered closer at the scattering of figurines on the floor and in Alexander's chubby little fist. They were in red coats, painted crude blocks with rosy cheeks on white faces. Some of them appeared to carry bayonets, the others had swords.

'What do you mean, you're playing soldiers?' Meena jerked her head up to look at Eliza. 'I thought I said I didn't want him playing with soldiers?'

'Uncle Peter got them for me. He said it's a present from him and Auntie Katherine.'

'Did he?' Meena said, trying to keep the anger out of her voice.

'Yes. I like him.'

'Listen Alexander. I know this was a present and it is very... kind of your uncle to get this for you, but I do not want you playing soldiers, okay? It's not good.'

'No.'

'Yes, Alexander.'

'But... but I like them! See, they're about to attack the natives.'

Meena watched in horror as her son pantomimed a battle complete with sound effects. He liked to play commander, issuing orders against the

insurgent natives who, in this case, were the various animal figurines she had once carved for him in the Cape of Good Hope.

‘What are you doing Alexander? Those soldiers are attacking that poor lion. Tell them to stop, sweetheart.’

‘No, the lion is attacking them. It must be crushed,’ said Alexander, swept up in the heat of battle. ‘Onward men. Charge!’

‘Alexander, I said stop it...’

‘Get him!’

‘Alexander!’ He was getting more and more agitated and enthused, attacking the lion and then the tiger with gusto. Meena tried to wrestle the poor animals out of his hand without hurting him but this only served to throw her into harm’s way. He proceeded to poke at her with the wooden men.

‘I will only say this one more time, Alexander.’

‘Charge, men!’ he said, hitting the lion in Meena’s hand with the soldiers.

‘Enough!’ Meena snatched one of the soldiers out of Alexander’s hand and threw it against the wall. The figure split in two and was duly beheaded. Alexander burst into tears, running into Eliza’s arms, who was in the corner having just witnessed the disaster. Meena’s heart slowed down as she realised what she had done. She considered trying to make amends, but the force of his cries suggested this would not be feasible yet. Meena clenched her fist and turned her eyes up to the ceiling in a vain hope of assistance from above. She got up and left without a word. Her whole body shuddered as she exhaled a heavy sigh and shut the door behind her. She leaned against the door, her hand still resting on the doorknob, before drawing her leg forward and kicking it with all her might.

CHAPTER 27



Meena stood in front of her mirror holding the golden fabric against herself. She had forgotten quite how beautiful her mother's sari was. Her mother had worn it when Meena's father became the Nawab, looking every inch a queen. It was embellished with silver thread and little silver and gold beads. It was the most beautiful thing Meena had ever seen. Kiran had told her that her mother had always wanted to pass it down to her daughter. Meena smiled sadly at the thought and carefully picked up her mother's gold tiara as well, placing it on her head. She had never actually worn it before; she looked like the royal she no longer was. Having taken in the sight of herself, Meena sighed and began to remove her mother's heirlooms. She might not be wearing the garment, but she would be making use of it nonetheless. She hoped her mother would understand.

'Ma'am? Alexander is with me.'

'Come in, Eliza.'

Alexander was hiding behind Eliza's skirts. He had not done this since he was a toddler. But here he was, his head nervously poking out from the side of Eliza's aproned skirt, clinging to the fabric with his small, determined fist. Meena's heart ached when she saw her son so anxious to see her.

‘Hello Alexander,’ Meena said softly, crouching down to meet him at eye level. Alexander answered her by hiding completely behind Eliza.

‘Go on Alexander. Your mother is calling you,’ Eliza said while trying to extricate him from her body. Meena gave Eliza a grateful look as her boy shuffled unconvinced towards her.

‘Chellam, I’m sorry for losing my temper yesterday and breaking your toy. Amma didn’t mean to do that. I’ve just been a little anxious recently, but I never meant to take that out on you. You’re such a good boy and Amma loves you very much.’ Meena tentatively stretched out her arms and to her great relief, Alexander stepped into them and hugged her back. Tears pricked Meena’s eyes. She held him close as if she would never let him go. She never wanted to let him go.

‘Now I’ve got a favour to ask you, chellam. I need your help. Do you want to help Amma with something?’ The sweet boy nodded, his eyes wide and intrigued. ‘Well, you know how I told you that Papa is going to marry Auntie Katherine. Well, I want her to love you just as much as I do. So I thought, since she gave you those soldiers it would be wonderful if you brought her something. I bet if you gave her some lovely presents, she would absolutely fall in love with you on the spot. What do you think, do you want to bring her some gifts?’ Alexander nodded again, scratching his little forehead absentmindedly. ‘Do you want to help me get the presents I have for her?’

‘Yes, Amma.’

Meena kissed his forehead once before leaning back in to give his face a quick peppering of kisses. He hugged her again and Meena bit her lip to stop herself from crying again.

‘Now darling, can you see the gold box on the bed? I want you to undo the clasp while I unravel myself.’

Alexander giggled as he ran over to the bed. Meena busied herself with unwrapping the sari from around her body. ‘Well done, Alexander. Are you

going to help Amma fold this away?’ Mother and child carefully folded the enormous piece of golden fabric. Alexander then – carefully, in accordance with Meena’s instructions – carried the fabric to the small box. Meena took off her tiara and placed it on top of the soft bed of silk before closing the box lid.

‘Do you want to give a surprise to Papa?’

Alexander nodded enthusiastically. Meena smiled before speaking in a hushed voice. ‘Good. Your father will take you out to see the horses but when he asks if you want a morning ride, say you have a tummy ache and come back.’

‘Why?’

Meena pressed her finger gently to his mouth. ‘It’s a surprise, remember? Now, nothing to Papa, yes?’ The boy held his finger diligently to his mouth, his eyes shining.

‘Eliza, can you ask James to come here, please?’

Eliza frowned at Meena. ‘Are you sure, ma’am?’

‘It’s okay, Eliza,’ Meena said, smiling serenely. ‘I want him to see his son. In fact, darling, why don’t you go with Eliza and ask Papa to come up here so I can speak to him.’

‘Papa!’ Meena and Eliza both laughed as Alexander ran out the door with Eliza struggling to follow closely behind.

Meena glanced furtively at the closed door before opening the box lid once more. She ran over to her bedside table and grabbed a vial hidden in a small leather bag. The drawer was full of little vials and bottles rolling around, but this one, prepared only that morning before anyone else had risen, needed to be carefully secured. She could not risk anything else. Meena’s eyes darted once more to the door. She could not hear any footsteps, but they would not be far off. She rushed over to the box and, with great trepidation, uncorked the vial, pouring the white, odourless powder over the crown and sari. Its fine, almost translucent grains

disappeared as soon as they touched the silk and gold gifts. Meena snapped the box lid shut and stepped away just as she heard her former husband's heavy tread.

James burst through the door, along with a beaming Alexander swinging from his arm, with a face like a storm cloud.

‘Well, Meena, despite enduring your temper the last time we spoke, I am here. Summoned like a servant. Please do tell me how I might serve you, princess.’ His voice dripped with viciousness. Meena took a deep breath and held her hands up in surrender.

‘James, *please*. I want to ask for your forgiveness. I know I was in a foul mood yesterday and have been in such a mood for a while.’ Meena stared into his eyes, pleading. ‘We used to love each other, James. I don’t wish to part like this. Especially when I know, deep down, that you are right. You’ve always been the one to make the sensible decisions for us, for Alexander – you’re the head of our family, after all.’ Meena shook her head, looking like the picture of self-admonishment. ‘And I, in all my stubbornness, reacted with my typical hysterical aggression towards you, and Sir Peter – the man who, after everything, gave me a roof over my head when we had nowhere else to go.’

Meena looked at James and smiled sheepishly. ‘James, I’m no fool. Of course I know it’s a great opportunity for you! And such a match will obviously help Alexander. His brothers will be among the wealthiest men in England.

‘I asked myself yesterday, after we argued, why am I fighting with James, a man I love so much? Why am I pushing away my family at my most vulnerable moment? I have been so foolish. I should have supported you, you and poor Katherine, getting married without a mother. No one to help her get ready on her wedding day, advise her about her wedding night...’

Meena realised she was starting to go too far when she noticed the expression on James's face turn from relief to puzzlement – she needed to stay focused. 'Anyway, I'm going on too much. We both know I don't know when to hold my tongue. Regardless, we have a son and for his sake, in front of him, I need to say to you: I am sorry. And I wish to call a truce.'

James looked down at Alexander, smiled and then scooped him up in his arms. Even though she devised this, Meena could not help but smile back wistfully at this domestic scene.

'Well, Meena, I am very glad to hear that. And I, for my part, am not going to begrudge you your earlier behaviour. I know women get hysterical at the thought of losing their husbands, but I'm glad you've finally decided to be sensible about this.' Meena struggled to suppress the rising nausea she felt as she looked at James's smug face. 'And you, Alexander,' he said, bouncing the boy lightly up and down, 'this marriage will mean that your future will be secure. Your brothers will be in the upper echelons of the Company and of English society, and you will join them eventually. And then you'll marry well yourself...'

Meena stopped listening as her tears overwhelmed her again and she rummaged in her sleeve for a handkerchief.

James looked askance at her. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

'Amma?'

Meena smiled at Alexander. 'It's okay, pillai. I'm sorry, I'm just being foolish again. It's just... I gave birth to him.' Meena turned her back on him to hide her tears. 'And when you talk of his future...'

James placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed lightly in an awkward attempt at comfort. 'It's okay. I'm his father. I'll see to all of it.'

Meena wiped her face, turned back to him and nodded. 'I know, I just worry. Perhaps, if he was able to stay here... I know, of course, that *I* have to leave. I know it's for the best. But if Alexander could stay here with you

– even though it would break my heart – at least then I could sleep well knowing that his future would truly be secure.’

James frowned. ‘I don’t know if Sir Peter would agree to that, and I don’t think I could persuade him.’

‘No, but your bride could. Sir Peter would do anything for Katherine, we both know that. If she could be persuaded to plead Alexander’s case, then Sir Peter would have to agree to let him stay.’

Meena watched as James began to nod slowly. ‘Yes. I think that could work. But, Meena, are you sure you could leave your son?’

Meena took a deep breath and looked at her former husband dead in the eye. ‘Of course. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for my child.’ The intensity of this statement took James off guard. Meena cleared her throat and quickly continued.

‘And I was already thinking that it would be good for Alexander to take presents to Katherine for her. She will be his new mother, after all.’

James laughed contemptuously. ‘Meena, look around you. Katherine Chilcott is not lacking for expensive or fine things. Keep them, you’ll likely need them more.’

Meena scoffed. ‘And you need to understand that everyone, whether prince or pauper, loves gifts. You will need to understand that if you are to marry her, James. And I know she’ll love these in particular. My mother’s best sari, wrought of gold and silver. It’s the finest garment I own. I’ve seen her admire it before. And a circlet of gold my mother wore when my father became Nawab. I want her to see these as a gift from Alexander, and a peace offering from me. A sisterly gesture of friendship.’

Meena placed the fastened box in James’s hands. ‘Can you take this up to the door and then give it to Alexander to give to Katherine? I don’t want him to drop it or try to open it before he gives it to her.’ James smirked and nodded. Meena crouched down to kiss Alexander. ‘Now I want you to give this to your Auntie Katherine. But she’ll want to try these on so you must

leave at once so you can give her some privacy, okay? Has your father shown you the horses yet?’

‘That sounds like a great idea,’ James said. ‘Would you like that?’ Their son nodded vigorously. Meena and James laughed.

‘Excellent. Now go on, you two.’

Eliza lingered by the doorway as James and Alexander made their way to Katherine. Meena took in the look of bewilderment on the young girl’s face.

‘Eliza,’ Meena said loudly, ‘can you shut the door and help me with this?’

‘Ma’am, you’re giving her your best jewels and clothing?’

‘Have faith, Eliza. I know what I’m doing.’

She nodded. ‘Okay. I know you were angry earlier, but I am glad that you’re choosing the path of peace instead. And how wonderful it would be if Alexander could stay.’

Meena turned and played with the corner of the bedspread to avoid Eliza’s gaze. ‘Yes, that would be wonderful.’ Meena pulled out her clothes to put into her luggage. Eliza grabbed Meena’s bag and started to fold Meena’s dresses.

‘Oh, I won’t need those,’ Meena said. ‘I’ve had quite enough of stays and hoop skirts, thank you.’

Eliza laughed and shook her head. ‘I’m glad to see you in better spirits, ma’am.’

Meena, not sure how to respond to this, just shrugged.

‘And I don’t know if you’ve heard...’ Eliza began cautiously, ‘but Mr Chilcott has said I am to stay as part of his household.’

Meena stopped pulling out clothes from her wardrobe and looked at Eliza. ‘I see.’

‘I have no choice,’ Eliza said hurriedly. ‘He has my papers. Otherwise, I would obviously wish to stay with you. I’m loyal to you.’ Meena turned

back to her clothes, not wanting to look into the young girl's big earnest eyes for any longer.

‘This is very noble of you, Eliza. I’m sorry that you’ve been put in this position. That I’ve put you in this position. But you must know, in this world, it is important to ensure your best interests. And not wait for others to secure them for you.’

Eliza paused before asking, her voice shaky, ‘What do you mean?’

Meena shook her head. ‘Nothing. I am just feeling a little tired. There is a lot happening today.’

A heavy silence hung in the air. Eventually, Eliza coughed to break the quiet and walked over to the door.

‘I’ll fetch Annie. We could use her help with packing.’

Eliza opened the door, just as a piercing scream erupted from further down the corridor. The two women looked at each other, frozen in silence.

‘Close the door,’ Meena ordered sharply.

Eliza complied with her command promptly if uncertainly. ‘What was that?’

‘Eliza, listen to me. We need to pack *now*. Do you understand?’ The young girl nodded, her timid face trembling. Meena was irritated by this show of weakness. The last thing she needed was for Eliza to start crying. Meena collected her clothes and the last of her jewellery and stuffed them into a bag. Eliza brought over several pairs of shoes gathered in her arms.

Annie burst through the door, her face pale and terrified. ‘What’s going on?’ With the door now open it was impossible not to hear the commotion and panic taking place throughout the house.

‘Nothing.’ Meena continued to fold the clothes, barely looking up at the disturbed young girl. ‘Close the door.’

Annie, distracted, was peering down the corridor rather than listening to Meena’s instructions. ‘Was that Katherine?’

‘Annie, I said shut the—’

‘Sir!’ Annie shouted down the hallway. ‘Sir Peter, what on earth is going on?’

Sir Peter appeared at the doorway, wan and weary, as if his soul had left his body, never to return. He ran his hand through his thinning hair in disbelief. Sweat was trickling down his face. His eyes seemed unable to focus, darting back and forth, until they settled on Meena. Then they grew wide and fearful. And full of rage.

‘You little bitch! I am going to wring your neck!’ He lunged at her but Meena managed to successfully step back in time. Eliza stood in between them.

‘What’s happened?’ Annie asked but the futility of her question was not lost on them. The broad brushstrokes of what had happened were evident to all. And yet they all felt forced to hurtle headlong into the dark belly of the truth.

‘She killed my daughter. Katherine is dead.’

CHAPTER 28



Eliza and Annie shrieked before their hands flew to their mouths. Meena's face, however, lit up upon hearing Sir Peter's words. It was one thing to be sure that your plan would work, it was quite another to hear confirmation from someone else. She was sure there was some part of her horrified at what she did, at how she could have plotted something so vile – and perhaps there would have been a time when that part would have been screaming at the top of its lungs, demanding that she take notice – but in that moment, Meena knew all the hurt and the pain and the humiliation had buried that part deep.

'Thank you, Sir Peter,' Meena said, slightly awed that her plan had actually worked. Any fear she might have had facing him was quelled by the surge of energy coursing through her veins knowing she had destroyed him.

Sir Peter looked equal parts disgusted, devastated and terrified. 'You beast. Do you not have one ounce of regret in your damned soul? You *will* hang for this, if it is the last thing I do.'

Meena stared at the man who had caused so much suffering, on whose hands there was so much blood. She found it almost heartening to see how much he did in fact love his daughter. This was evidenced by the depth of his fury and the broken look in his eyes – his icy-blue irises now red-

rimmed and glassy. But it was his fear that told Meena how much pain he was in. She knew because it was the same fear that he had instilled in her for so many years. Now *he* was the wounded animal, cowed, yelping in pain. Meena looked at him, not entirely without pity, and shook her head slowly. 'No, I won't. Because there is nothing you can do to me. Not anymore.'

'Vile ghoul.' Sir Peter shook his head in sorrow and disgust. Gone was the viper-like menace of his earlier insults. His voice was now hollow, every syllable full of anguish and desperation.

'Sir, please. Can someone tell me what on earth has happened to Miss Katherine?' pleaded Annie.

Sir Peter leaned in the doorframe, as if to bolster himself. 'Those damned gifts. The boy brought her presents. She opened the box, saw the jewellery and clothes. She could not help herself. That was the whole hideous point, of course. She wanted to try them on there and then. She placed the golden crown on her head and wrapped the silk fabric around herself. I began to take my leave when, when...' Sir Peter's voice broke briefly. Meena could see his eyes fill with tears. Another might have felt overwhelmed with sympathy, Meena thought. Instead, she was consumed by thoughts of the countless daughters raped and murdered on Sir Peter's orders. The sight of his grief brought a smile to her face.

Meena could imagine Katherine twirling around her mother's belongings. Katherine liked to pretend that she was superior to other girls her age, much too intelligent and worldly for their nonsense, but Meena knew she had the same weakness that her father had: a deep unabashed desire for wealth and its beautiful trinkets. Meena imagined Katherine parading in front of the mirror in the drawing room – stolen from the palace, possibly. Perhaps her mother once looked at herself in the same mirror, Meena thought. The sari wouldn't be wrapped properly of course, like a child playing dress-up. Meena imagined how beautiful Katherine

would have looked and how she would have known it. How she would have loved dressing up in another woman's clothes.

‘... But as soon as I closed the door, I heard it. I heard her scream. And then I opened the door.’ Sir Peter was now mopping his brow. ‘The blood drained from her rosy cheeks. Her lifeless eyes. Her shaking limbs. And then she cried out an almighty, inhuman, bestial cry.’

Meena knew the rest. She had never used this particular poison before but Kiran had once told her what it would do, what its tree looked like and why she was never to use it. Even at night, she could not help but recognise it, its small orange fruit glowing in the house's candlelight. She'd first spotted it the night they arrived and again the following day, before the sun rose, when she plucked and ground its leaves. Another Indian treasure brought back from Sir Peter's latest excursion. Kuchila, also known as snake-wood. But Kiran had told her that Europeans knew it by another name: strychnine.

She knew that, once Katherine inhaled the finely ground seeds that laced her new sari and diadem, her face would spasm. A grotesque grin spreading from cheek to cheek, her lips thin and pale. Her head and limbs would twitch uncontrollably, like a fish hooked on a line and flopping around on the deck, until the moment when she would finally collapse. The amount Meena sprinkled on the gifts meant that it would have been no time at all till Katherine's body was practically bent in two under the strain of her convulsing muscles, contorting her body until she would hardly be at all recognisable as human.

‘She tried to shake the crown off and tear off the gold clothes, but she couldn't. She was ensnared in your hellish trap. My darling girl looked like she was on fire, burning from within.’

Sir Peter closed his eyes for a moment as he paled, reliving the torturous moments of his daughter's final breaths. Meena could not suppress her

smile as she thought about what would follow. Katherine, gasping for air as her throat closed up. Unable to do anything.

Sir Peter's grief suddenly turned to rage. 'You hateful creature! I will destroy you, and your mongrel brat. There is not a corner of the earth you can run from me. I will destroy everything you—'

'Everything I love? Everything I have?' Meena sneered. 'You and your nephew have already seen to that. You've taken my land, my family, my wealth. There is nothing more you can take from me. Tell me, how does it feel to lose something so precious? Painful? This is just a fraction of what you have taken from me over the years. I can't make you feel every life you've taken but I can make you feel this.'

'You are a despicable witch. I should have never let you into my home.'

'No, you shouldn't,' Meena said fiercely, 'but go, kiss your daughter's body goodbye. It's all you have left of her.'

Sir Peter's eyes filled with heartache as he clung to the doorframe to support himself. Pushing himself upright, he turned around and shambled down the hall, his legs collapsing under the weight of his grief. Meena was certain he would go back to Katherine and would not be able to help himself from embracing her, from kissing her. She also knew what would happen next. She wanted Peter Chilcott to feel pain, but she could not let him live. Not when he had caused so much misery. She could see it now, him dotting her contorted face with kisses. The poison would fill his lungs and his mouth long before he would realise what he had done. It would be excruciating. The thought brought a sense of peace and a rush of calm over Meena. The first part of her plan had been successful. But now would come the rest.

Eliza and Annie stared at Meena in horror, their open mouths forming little circles. But now was not the time for Meena to fret over the judgement of others. She could not let her emotions get the better of her.

‘How could you do something like that? Something so wicked?’ Eliza whispered.

‘You know what they did. Something had to be done. Or have you forgotten their crimes in your grief?’

‘Not like this.’ Annie’s red eyes were full of hurt and ire. ‘You never said anything about murder. Miss Katherine was my mistress...’ Annie sniffled.

‘And now she’s dead. She was as much a guilty party as the rest of them. You both knew I could not suffer such humiliation without acting.’

They both screamed their protests in response.

‘We didn’t know anything.’

‘Ma’am, no!’

These protests were however silenced by the appearance of Alexander wandering over to the doorway. He had evidently been able to slip away from his father without protest and was now wandering the hallways, trying to find someone who could make sense of the chaos.

‘Amma?’

The three women froze before Meena scooped up her boy in her arms. ‘It’s okay, my darling. Amma’s here.’ She gently cupped the back of his head as she did when he was a baby. She then turned back to the two young women who were watching Alexander and Meena very carefully.

‘No matter what you say, you knew something would happen and you promised you would be there for me. And I am asking you to keep your promise now. Guard the door. Make sure no one comes in.’ They looked at her in stunned silence. ‘Or risk my deeds following you to the hangman’s noose,’ Meena spat out. ‘They would never believe I could do this alone.’

Annie gave Meena a final hard stare before turning around outside the door. Eliza fixed her gaze on Alexander.

‘Eliza?’

‘Please, ma’am,’ she whispered. ‘Please don’t harm the child.’

Meena looked at her for a moment. Eliza had aged considerably since she had helped her with Alexander's birth. Her heavily lined forehead and eyelids belied her youth, Meena thought. She was barely older than Meena had been when she left Calcutta.

‘Close the door, Eliza. Make sure no one comes in.’

CHAPTER 29



*M*eena sat on the bed cradling her child in her arms. She breathed in his scent. England and its smells had begun to infiltrate but she could still smell him. He smelled of her, the jasmine oil she used for her hair, the faint hint of the oud she dabbed on her wrists. He looked so much like his father, but his scent was all her. Meena wondered whether she smelled of her mother, or Kiran, when she was young. Whether it clung to her flesh, lived darkly in her bones. It made sense, Meena thought. He grew inside her, created by her body, and would still be a part of her. They could be split apart, scattered like rose petals across the world's oceans, and Meena felt confident that she would still be able to find him, because he *was* her. *Of* her. Now and forever of her flesh.

The commotion outside grew louder. Doors slammed followed by cries for help.

'He's dead! Good God, he's dead!' She thought she heard Thompson's voice, appalled and horrified as he confirmed that Sir Peter Chilcott was in fact dead. They would search for James who would most likely throttle her when he discovered her part in the pandemonium she had caused. Meena was hurtling towards her finish and though she knew she had to hurry, every instinct in her body was telling her to stop.

'Amma, what's going on?' asked Alexander, his lips pursed in concern.

‘Nothing, chellam. Everyone is rather excited by our gifts, that’s all. Where is your father? Did he come back to the house with you?’

‘No. After we saw the horses he went for a ride but I came back like you asked.’

‘My good boy. And did you tell him what I told you to?’

‘Uh huh, that I didn’t feel too well. What surprise are we throwing for Papa?’

Meena sighed, hoping the rising tide of self-hatred would wash away if she avoided thinking about what she had to do. ‘That’s for grown-ups only, chellam.’ She leaned down to kiss his head. *But children grow up.* She thought about how they stop smelling of their mothers, and no longer seek their warm embrace. Sons scatter, they find wives and bear their own children. Pass down their father’s name, their claim to the world, to become part of his lineage, *his future.*

Meena tossed these thoughts around her head as she ran her hand through Alexander’s dark curls.

‘Amma, did I do okay? Did Auntie Katherine like her presents?’ Despite Meena’s attempts to soothe she could not block out the sound of the frantic devastation transpiring outside. Though it brought delight to Meena, her son’s distress stabbed her heart. His big bright eyes were full of concern.

Meena smiled gently. ‘You did very well, chellam.’

‘But if I stay, will you still have to go?’

Meena swallowed hard, taking a moment to find her voice. ‘Yes, darling. I have to leave. I will try and find my aunt Kiran, I think. I haven’t told you much about her but she is very important to me. My mother died when I was young, even younger than you. My aunt looked after me when I had no mother. She taught me a great deal and I am thankful for all of it...’

Eliza’s familiar voice, filled with unfamiliar terror, interrupted Meena’s memories of her aunt. ‘Please, don’t do it! I beg you, please, ma’am!’ These

pleas were punctuated by the pounding of fists.

‘Amma, why is Eliza upset?’ Alexander said as his slight neck snapped back.

Meena instinctively leaned back on the bed and pulled him away from the door, half covering his ears as if to block out Eliza. Her eyes locked onto the door as the girl continued to bang. But she soon realised that Eliza could not enter. She would not dare.

‘Eliza’s just tired. Today has been taxing for her. For all of us.’

‘But she sounds scared.’

‘Even adults get scared, chellam. But you must be tired as well. Do you want to take a nap?’

Alexander shook his little curls. ‘No, I’m not sleepy.’

‘Let me make something to help you sleep. In fact,’ Meena said, picking her son up from under his arms and placing him on the floor in front of her, ‘why don’t you help me? I told you about my aunt and that she taught me a lot. I never got the chance to teach you. Would you like that?’

His big eyes and twitching nose resembled a rabbit cornered by an intruder yet to be determined as friend or foe. His lips were pursed as if he wanted to say something, but he didn’t. The boy just nodded.

Distractions were the best thing now, Meena thought as she tugged Alexander over to the table where the discarded remnants of breakfast lay on a tray. She poured out a cup of water.

‘Can you take some of the sugar cubes, darling, and put them in the cup? No more than two, though. I’m watching you, chellam.’ Meena laughed. She hoped the levity would help. She patted his head as she crept towards her bags. After a couple of minutes of rummaging she found what she was looking for, dried poppies. She brought them over to the table and picked up the knife she had used for breakfast.

‘So you see, pillai,’ she said as she chopped finely, ‘these are poppies. They can help you get to sleep but you need to chop the flowers up finely.’

Meena glanced over and saw he was transfixed by the rat-tat-tat of the knife against the wooden table. She remembered when she first saw Kiran prepare a draught, how mesmerising it was. Her aunt had taught her so many arts, so many that she had depended on in the past... and now. Meena couldn't believe she had never thought to show Alexander what she could do before.

‘And now, you take a big pinch and you put it in the cup. Go on.’ He grabbed a fistful and tipped it into the wide porcelain teacup. Meena smiled. ‘That’s good, baby. Now take the spoon and stir it all together. Don’t stir too quickly, it has to be slow and constant. There, can you smell how sweet they are? That means you’re doing a good job, Alexander.’ Meena crouched down beside her boy and hugged his waist. ‘I used to do this with my aunt. Watch her work. Help her.’

‘She tried to warn me when I was making the wrong choice or going down the wrong path, but I never listened. Your Amma is too stubborn, has too much pride. But she loved me nonetheless. She tried to help me.’

Alexander paused from his methodical work, the teaspoon jangling against the china. He grabbed at Meena’s sleeve. ‘Amma, you said you have to leave.’

Meena took a deep breath. ‘Yes, I did, chellam.’

‘But will I see you if you leave?’

Meena let a small, high-pitched whimper escape her lips. She cursed herself for it, shaking herself out of it before fixing a smile on her face. ‘No darling. They want us to say goodbye. Now. Before I get to see you grow up. Before I’m ready to say goodbye if I’m honest, my sweet boy. Before I get to see you married, have your own children. It’s only been a few short years of joy since I gave birth to you. Such pain and now this.’ Meena’s voice broke which seemed to provoke concern from Alexander. His limitless empathy was a source of great pride to her.

‘Anyway,’ Meena said brightly, smiling just a bit too much, ‘you need to drink up. Taste it.’ She clasped Alexander’s hands and brought them over the dainty teacup, guiding their mixture to his lips. Tentative sips were followed by big gulps – Meena suspected he had snuck in more sugar when she wasn’t looking – but soon enough the cup’s contents had been drained.

‘There we are. Why don’t you lie on the bed, see if you can fall asleep?’ She enveloped him from behind and swung him onto the bed. His laughter set her heart aglow. ‘Do you know, Alexander, I always imagined you would look after me when I was old and grey? Wouldn’t that have been funny? Amma all hunched and slow and leathery like a tortoise.’ Alexander, nestled in the covers, laughed sleepily at Meena’s pantomime of her dotage as the valerian root began to take hold. He sighed and curled inwards, just as he had done when he was a baby. She sat down beside him, stroking his soft curls.

‘But still, I know you would have been dutiful,’ she said. ‘Had all the rites properly performed, when my time came. You would have been such a good boy.’ Meena choked at the sight of his face. It did her no good to think about the sweetness of his smile, his eyes – so similar to his father’s yet innocent and utterly without guile. She stroked his arm, soft as lambskin. She felt herself wavering.

She wondered what sense there was in making her own suffering immeasurable just to cause James pain. They could be happy in Ceylon. Alexander would have questions of course, but soon he would adapt. All children do.

Meena half smiled at this thought: she and Alexander setting off to a new land once more, this time without James or anyone else. He would be left behind.

But how could she let him go unpunished? Why was she not allowed pride or anger? She had spent far too long swallowing it down to bolster others’ sense of superiority, in return for a scrap of security – and where had

that left her? But this was far bigger than her. She couldn't let a vine of his poison ivy go untouched. She needed the plant to permanently wither. She needed to burn it to the ground, root and branch.

And anyway, she knew it was too late to go back. James's bride and uncle were growing cold in their shrouds. There was a fine balance to strike. She needed James destroyed, not desperate. So long as Alexander lived James could snatch him from her. He would burn Ceylon to the ground to find his son until the whole island was ash and bone. And who knows, maybe in his fury, perhaps her darling child would become part of that pile of cinders.

What was there for Meena in Ceylon anyway? Kiran had abandoned her, just like James. Could Meena really return with a child in tow, knowing how her aunt felt about James? She had hardly hidden her feelings when they stayed with her, and no doubt she would be dismayed at the idea of harbouring an infant who might disrupt her retreat from society.

No. If Meena was going to really escape, she could not go back. Not in any way. It would be a gamble, but Meena knew the trade routes well enough to know that a ship bound for Ceylon would have a couple of stops before its final destination. Or she could try and slip onto another ship. She and Alexander could begin again. A little family, just the two of them.

Or would Alexander, having grown older, have a hardened heart once he learned of what she had done? Would he leave her and seek out his father? That would be enough to make her tear her eyes out. Growing up, in England, without a mother – an object of scorn and pity to those who would happily strip the flesh off his bones to turn a profit. Or even worse, what might happen to her sweet boy if he were left to his father's corrosive influences? Would he grow up like Sir Peter and plunder the other side of the world, his homeland, for all that he could, ordering his men to burn everything to the ground for the right price? Leaving him to grow up like *him*, like *all of them*: that would be the far greater sin in Meena's mind.

She stroked his honey-coloured arm as he slept. She felt a dull ache in her chest. It had been there ever since he was born. A constant reminder that her heart was no longer her own. It had a new master. But it wasn't her heart that was driving this. If it was then Alexander would be sleeping beside her tonight. No, this wasn't born out of senseless passion. That would be so much easier.

Eliza tried again, the knocking more urgent. It was enough to briefly stir Alexander from his slumber.

‘Amma, are you still there?’ he murmured, his eyes closed.

‘Don't worry, chellam, I won't leave you.’

CHAPTER 30



Meena had to hurry. The house might have been a long way from civilisation, but she could not count on the constables being too far away. And with the sun going down, the carriage sent by Agnew to take her far away from Sir Peter and his family would be ready.

Meena smoothed down her peshwaz, trying to get her hands to stop shaking. It was orange and red, flaring out beneath her chest into an elaborate coil; it was designed to evoke dragons of legend. Umar defeating the dragon – that was his favourite. She sprinkled a little water on Alexander's forehead before kissing it and pulling up the bed sheets to swaddle him, just as she had done when he was a baby. Meena opened the door and found Annie and Eliza stood outside, a tableau of despair. Annie gasped aloud when she realised what had happened. Eliza looked weary, as if all essence of life had been drained from her. The three women's eyes darted back and forth between each other and the wrapped-up figure on the bed.

'I'm leaving,' Meena said. The words sounded faintly ridiculous coming out of her mouth but she wanted to break the silence. Eliza continued to look blankly, barely acknowledging her presence.

'And I'm taking Alexander with me.'

Annie's eyes widened. 'How? Why?'

‘Because he’s my son.’

Annie shook her head. ‘I can’t be a part of this. Not anymore.’

Meena took a deep breath and took in Annie’s round, mournful face. ‘I know. It’s okay.’ Annie wandered off while Eliza stood still. Motionless. She continued to stare at Alexander’s bloodless face poking out from the covers. ‘Eliza?’

‘He looks like he did when he was first born,’ Eliza said gently to no one in particular. ‘A little bigger. But his face is just the same.’

Meena blinked away the tears.

‘I can’t come with you.’ Eliza finally turned to Meena, ‘But I imagine you weren’t going to ask me anyway. Not this time.’

Meena nodded slowly. ‘No. I wasn’t.’

Eliza whispered bleakly, still looking at Alexander, ‘I don’t know what I’ll do. Or where I’ll go. I’ve no family. No freedom. Nothing.’ She turned sharply to look at Meena. ‘Because of *you*. *You* promised everything would be fine. I thought you might be different. That you might understand. That you wouldn’t be cruel like the others. But you brought me here. Made me a part of this horror. Forced me to sail here to this evil land with these people. Then you destroyed it all. Without giving the rest of us a second thought. For you, no one else’s suffering could be greater.’

Meena stared at her. Nothing the girl said was untrue, and she hated herself for it. Yet at that moment Alexander took up too much space in her heart. There was only so much devastation and self-hatred she could carry. ‘I know. But I also know that you’ll survive. It will feel like you won’t. You won’t believe that you will for the longest time. You won’t think it’s possible. But you will. Because you have to. And when you do, you’ll leave this all behind, until it’s hidden in the deepest, darkest parts of you. Because that’s what you’ll need to do to wake up and breathe. You’ll survive because it’s what we all do.’

Eliza bit her lip and nodded, her eyes large and watery.

‘I’m sorry.’ The words slipped out before Meena realised what she had said. ‘And thank you. Thank you for helping raise my son.’

Eliza’s tears spilled out unbidden. Meena, with no time to spare, slung her bag over her shoulder. She caressed her boy’s cheek before lifting him up and carefully balancing him as she walked past Eliza and towards the top of the staircase. She balled up the embroidered sheets in her fist as she buoyed him up so that his head lay close to her breast.

Meena gingerly made her way down the stairs before she came across a scullery maid. The girl’s eyes widened at the sight of Meena, standing above, dressed in her dragon robe, cradling a body wrapped in bedsheets. They stood and watched each other for a moment before the girl opened her mouth wide.

‘Help! She’s escaping. Help!’

Meena cursed under her breath and continued on her way to the front door. She heaved as she attempted to carry Alexander aloft with one hand while turning the heavy brass knob with her other.

‘Meena!’ James stood aloft on the staircase, having finally arrived back at the house. His clothes were drenched, his face shattered. Conspicuously absent however, Meena noted, was any blood on his shirt. Clearly, he was not so moved in his grief for his bride to make the same mistake Sir Peter did.

‘You disgusting creature. There will be no place on earth that you can go where the Company won’t find you and exact their vengeance for what you’ve done. Can’t you see the danger you’ve put Alexander in? What life he’ll live, having a mother like you?’

Meena looked at him in revulsion. ‘It’s too late.’

‘What the hell do you mean?’

‘I mean. It is too late.’

For the first time James properly looked at the bundle in Meena’s arms and his hand flew to his mouth, muffling his cries.

‘What have you done? Meena, what on earth have you done?’ He fell to his knees, despair and anguish writ across his face. Meena looked down at him, elated. The knowledge that his heart was breaking was the only thing that would make this all worth it.

‘Is he sleeping?’ James whispered. ‘Please, Meena, tell me he is sleeping.’

‘I have nothing to say to you,’ Meena replied coldly.

‘I must have been mad, bringing you here from your ghastly country,’ he seethed. ‘I should have known. Your brother, your father. What hope did our son even have, with a feral mother like you? No Englishwoman would ever act so inhumanely.’

Meena scoffed as she moved through the grand entrance, gesturing for the confused carriage driver to open the door. James pulled himself up and ran down the stairs in pursuit of Meena.

‘But no, I brought a monster into my home.’

Meena shrugged off James’s barbs and placed Alexander carefully on the carriage’s velvet seat, before turning to face James.

‘There is so much I could say,’ Meena said softly. ‘But I don’t want to waste another moment on you. I don’t have to anymore.’ Meena walked right up to James until he was barely a hair’s breadth away. ‘I am taking my son with me. Away from you, away from this godforsaken place, this island of vultures.’ Meena felt as if she was ten feet tall, with James squirming beneath her. ‘He belongs with family.’

‘I’m his father!’ James screamed, trying to grab hold of her. ‘I won’t let you take him.’

‘You exiled him so you could marry your child bride and claim her weight in gold. You belong with *them*,’ Meena roared, twisting away from his grip. ‘And all you can do now is wait and grieve until you can join them. Alone in this house of stolen treasures, with only the memories of your betrayals to keep you company.’

His eyes burned with disbelief. ‘My betrayals? What have you done to our son?’

With a final shove, Meena pushed James away from her and climbed into the carriage. Recovering his balance, James charged after her, trying to force his way into the carriage.

‘I will find you and I will make you pay. There is nowhere you can go where I will not find you.’

‘Go bury your bride,’ Meena snapped as she slammed the door shut leaving her husband broken. Resignation and defeat etched across his features.

Meena gave the signal and the horses began to trot, the carriage pulling away until Heathfield was just a dot in the far-off distance. She could no longer see James’s hunched body or hear the despair emanating from the house. It all blurred into a haze of masonry and forest, illuminated by shards of the sun breaking through.

CHAPTER 31



THE MIDDLE OF THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

*T*he cabin was cramped and dark. Meena knew they would only have a day at most before word got back to Agnew about what had transpired at Heathfield. She would not have long before having to disembark and switch ships at the next stop to evade the authorities. She could not risk leading them to Ceylon, to Kiran. The boat swung viciously on the choppy seas. Meena was sat on the floor by the bed, silent tears streaming into her mouth as she rocked her son. With only ghosts of her past to haunt her.

‘It’s fine, it’s fine, chellam,’ she cooed as she rocked him back and forth, ‘I won’t let him get you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.’

Alexander was the last part of her family, her home that the Chilcotts had not managed to plunder. She would not let him be taken too. She had to stop them at all costs.

‘I’m here, chellam. I will always be here.’ Alexander’s blanket opened slightly.

Kiran had taught Meena of her arts. Those to use on loved ones. Those for enemies. And those that were not as they seemed. Those that had the

power to deceive, to seemingly do that which is most miraculous.

Meena hugged her son tighter, rubbing his chest furiously, her bitter tears falling softly on his ice-cold skin. She whispered the words over and over, desperation rising. The air shimmered with wisdom and pain passed down across generations. Meena had been taught many things, but the rest of it, she just had to hope. Hope and pray and try until, beneath her fingertips, she almost – *maybe* – felt the tiniest flicker of warmth.

*'Zeus on Olympus,
dispenses many things.
Gods often contradict
our fondest expectations.
What we anticipate
does not come to pass.
What we don't expect
some god finds a way
to make it happen.
So with this story.'*

Euripides, *Medea*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I first studied the play *Medea* at school and was instantly mesmerised by the story of a fascinating and fearless woman who, in the face of injustice, refused to stand down no matter the personal cost. As imagined by the Ancient Greek playwright Euripides, Medea is an indelible, divisive character that has become one of the most infamous women of Greek myth for her crimes.

Twenty years before Euripides's play was first performed, the Athenian leader Pericles passed a law meaning that citizenship was restricted to those of Greek parentage on both sides. The impetus of the play - Jason's unceremonious abandonment of Medea to marry the Corinthian princess - would have therefore likely struck an uneasy chord. The unrelenting xenophobia and denigration of Medea, from Jason and others, as well as her position as an exile, underscore the precarity of her position in the play. It is this intersection of her identity as both a woman and a foreigner that I wanted to explore in this book.

Savage Beasts reimagines Medea's story in the year 1757, the year which arguably marked the beginning of Britain's colonisation of India with the Battle of Plassey. The British were led by Sir Robert Clive, once seen as a 'heaven-sent general' for his Plassey victory but later derided as 'Lord Vulture' for the greed and inhumanity of the East India Company. This

battle saw the defeat of the last independent Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daulah, and conquest of the richest kingdom in India at the hands of a rapacious and unregulated trading company headquartered in Leadenhall Street. This began the process that resulted in nearly two hundred years of British rule in India.

Estimates have placed the cost of colonialism to India at forty five *trillion*. Alongside the financial cost of what was taken, the human costs were incalculable: it is suggested that a third of the population of Bengal died during the 1770 famine, brought on by the East India Company's exorbitant taxation policies, agricultural reforms and a poor harvest, resulting in a food shortage and mass starvation. Britain, of course, was far from the only European colonial power to wreak havoc across the colonised world. The Cape of Good Hope was a Dutch-controlled area during the 1760s when *Savage Beasts* is set. By this time the Dutch East India Company had enslaved thousands across several African nations, as well as India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Hundreds of years later, the cruel system that leaves migrant women without protection or support is still very much in place today and is a testament to the enduring legacy of Britain's colonial past. Today, many migrant women risk deportation or detention if they try to report an abusive partner to the police, are not able to access mainstream refuge accommodation and are at increased risk of losing their children. These injustices are emblematic of a society that is brutal towards a foreign woman, whether in the mythic Age of Heroes, 5th century Athens, the rise of British colonialism, or today.

In *Medea*, translated through the character of Meena, I saw a young woman, in love with a man who came to her shores in search of gold. She is manipulated (by divine forces or otherwise), cannot return home and is later abandoned in a foreign land that is hostile to her once she is no longer of use to the man who once depended so much on her help. Hers is a story of

the colonised, from whom much is taken, only to be discarded and despised. As I thought about this myth I considered Jason, a young adventurer hoping to improve his status through the acquisition of foreign gold, and it was not hard to read colonial theft into the story.

I wanted to use both myth and history to explore one another through this lens of colonialism, to find the complexity and humanity of this most infamous woman, and to examine the savagery of political structures that demonise foreign women and drive them to extreme acts. The charge of savagery is regularly laid at Medea's feet in the play, yet she is victim of a cruel system and decisions that are intent on dehumanising her. I hope this book offers greater examination of this and, perhaps, some reflection on how these dehumanising structures in our modern society were formed and continue to exist.

To learn more about the period of history covered in the book, below are a few recommendations:

- Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India – Shashi Tharoor
- The Anarchy – William Dalrymple
- The Colourful World of the VOC – Leo Akveld and Els Jacob
- Plassey: The Battle that Changed the Course of Indian History – Sudeep Chakravarti
- Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire – Priya Satia
- Wine, Women and Good Hope: A History of Scandalous Behaviour in the Cape – June McKinnon

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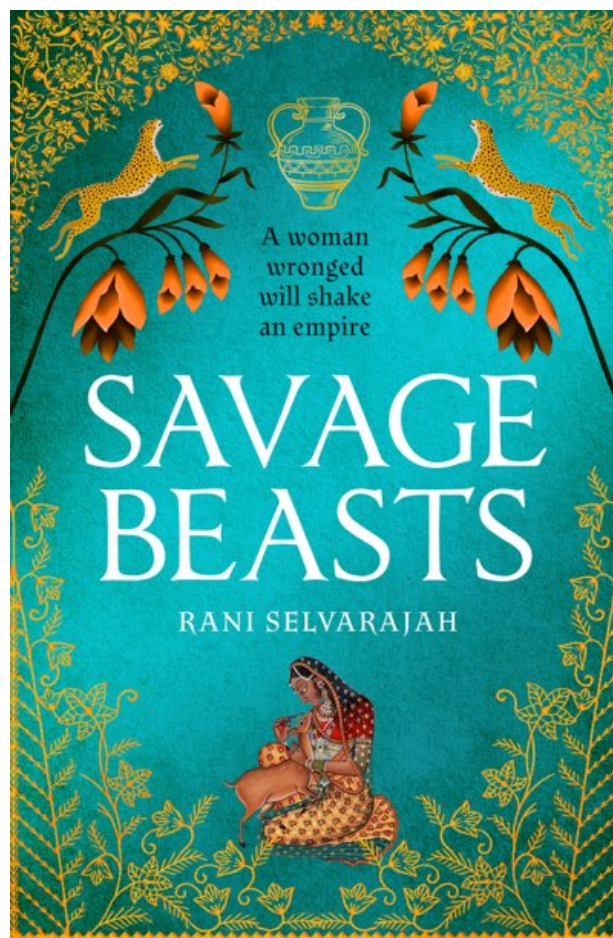
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THANK YOU FOR READING...

We hope you enjoyed *Savage Beasts!*



Do leave a review if so on all your preferred platforms to help spread the word!

* * *

Be sure to follow Rani on Twitter [@Rani_writes](#) and Instagram [@rani_selvarajah](#) for all the updates on her latest work.

Rani Selvarajah studied Classics at the University of Cambridge and has a MSc degree from SOAS University of London. She works in feminist policy and research, having worked in the non-profit sector for over a decade. Rani's debut novel, *Savage Beasts*, was longlisted for the Mo Siewcharran prize and she is from north-west London and lives with her partner in Berlin.



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