



Atishay Ritul Patwa

The Dance
of
QUEEN
AND
PAWNS

A Chronicle of Empire, Love, and Betrayal.

Prologue

Princess Sanjana leaned in as her grandma fed her curry. Tonight the dining room was unusually quiet for a Friday, save for the low clatter of cutlery and the soft rustle of the chiffon.

“Your father is coming home,” Her Grandmother, Dowager Queen Catherine said, almost offhandedly.

Sanjana stopped chewing. The world contracted into a moment of stillness, as if the chandeliers above had forgotten to sparkle.

“Finally!” she burst out, nearly toppling her glass as she scrambled upright. “It’s been almost a year since Papa has been gone!”

The table shivered from her sudden movement, but she barely noticed. Her heart brimmed with equal parts joy and relief.

Across the table, her mother’s fork paused just before the plate. She didn’t speak, but her eyes narrowed, just slightly, and she cast a glance toward grandma. Her expression was... guarded.

Grandma's voice remained gentle. "Well, when he comes home, he'll be getting married. To someone new."

Sanjana blinked for a moment longer.

Then her brain reached instinctively for the parts she liked: marriages meant parties, dresses, fireworks, games, cousins, and, best of all, no limits on sweets. She grinned. "Will there be sweets?"

Her cousin, Mona snorted into her goblet. "Of course that's your first question."

Catherine chuckled. "Yes, there will be sweets. And chocolates."

But Sanjana wasn't listening anymore. She was already picturing fairy lights across the garden and fountains that were brown from the chocolate like the ones that Dad had brought for her birthday after last year.

Her daydream was broken by a tap on her shoulder. Sanjana turned to see her older brother grinning.

"Sis," Vijay said, mischief glinting in his eyes, "you'd better be careful. Or you'll end up like Mona, dramatic and hollow."

That was a war horn.

A second later, A piece of malai broccoli flew through the air. Mona's aim was ruthless. Vijay ducked but a fraction too late. It struck him right in the hair.

Sanjana tried not to laugh. If Bhaiya's comment was an invitation to war, then smashing broccoli into Bhaiya's precious hairs was Mona's declaration of the Great War of Broccoli, cause nobody touches Bhaiya's hairs. She remembered that last time she had done it, her brother burned all the sweets and chocolates in the palace; she couldn't get one for weeks.

Before things could spiral, Grandma Catherine's voice cracked through the room like lightning.

"Everybody. Quiet."

Instant silence.

Nobody dared defy grandma.

Catherine changed the topic as if the broccoli war had never happened. “Vijay, I hear you’ve found yourself a new friend.”

Sanjana wasn’t old enough to know what the kind of friend it meant, but she knew anyway. Her brother had one of those ‘good’ friends. The kind of friend adults never explained to kids, but all the kids understood anyway.

Vijay shrugged casually, “Yeah, her name is Sofia. She’s very nice. I think you’ll like her.”

Catherine raised an eyebrow, wiping her fingers with a napkin. “Bring her to your father’s Gala,” she said, her voice smooth but firm. “And I’ll be the judge myself.”

The Index

Ch-1	The capital	5
Ch-2	Palace intrigue	15
Ch-3	Gala	21
Ch-4	A Game of chess	29
Ch-5	An old friend	43
Ch-6	Advice	48
Ch-7	The royal dinner	57
Ch-8	BirthRight	67
Ch-9	The Family Dinner	77
Ch-10	Threesome	90
Ch-11	Bureaucrat	104
Ch-12	Cleric	113
Ch-13	The briefing	125
Ch-14	Wedding	145

Ch-15	Berlin	155
	Epilogue	167

The Capital (1941)

The railway station roared with the noise of an empire in motion. Steam hissed from the mouth of the imperial locomotive like a mythic beast. Its black hull etched with a lotus crest that shimmered gold in the morning haze. The air pulsed with heat and coal dust, a symphony of hawkers shouting, porters swearing, and steam engines thundering like distant artillery.

The scent of roasted peanuts mingled with wet stone, cardamom, saffron, sweat and something harder to name. The anxiety of transition, the hush before ceremony.

King Ashok emerged from the train in silence. Soldiers saluted with precision, and murmurs rippled through the station like the passing of a ghost.

Beside him, his wife to be Hau descended more slowly. Her jade sari clung to her trembling form, and the embroidery along the pallu mirrored the mountains of her lost homeland. She had once been a warlord's daughter. Now she was a queen-in-waiting, gift, trophy, symbol.

No one greeted her.

Ashok didn't offer his arm. She didn't expect it.

Behind them, Prince Shiva, who was the King's uncle, the general who had never lost a battle, stepped onto the platform like a relic carved from wars past. His grizzled beard matched his aura unyielding and unquestioned, and his sharp eyes swept the station as if it were a battlefield still warm with danger. A wiry driver and two rifle-bearing guards fell into step.

The royal car, black and burnished like onyx, idled at the curb. Ashok entered first, the scent of teakwood and cardamom embracing him. Hau followed, her gaze low. Her hands twisted the edge of her sari. Not for the first time, she felt like a pawn surrounded by queens.

Two more guards settled into a second car. The convoy moved through highway, slipping past markets where the empire's pulse beat, traders in Arab robes, clerks with Slavic accents, and Indian soldiers in khaki and furs. Their voices, their fashion, their hybrid tongues were the legacy of the Great Migration of 1831, the kind that she could barely understand. It wasn't really hindi which she had learned in china nor was it english.

Ashok spoke, his voice smooth with restrained pride. "Jaipur is divided into three parts. The Walled City – the old city, a maze of history and incense. Then the Core, built by my father after the great revolt of 1890. Opulent, modern, and secure. And beyond that lies the outer

metropolis, where soldiers are born, where farmers rise, where ambition climbs.”

Hau glanced at him, curiosity flickering beneath fear. “The Core... what is it like?” Her Mandarin accent softened the syllables.

Ashok’s face, so often unreadable, broke into something warmer. “Streets smooth as still water. Homes with carved balconies and electric lighting. No dust. No noise. It’s the only place my children can walk without guards.”

Hau’s brow furrowed. “In my father’s lands... I never stepped outside without armed men.”

Ashok chuckled softly. “Then in Jaipur, you will feel both freer and more dangerous.”

But his voice turned hard as he looked out the window. “If you can’t trust your own people, who do you trust?”

Hau missed the edge in his words, she missed what he didn’t say, the Core was heavily surveilled. Entry required clearance. Workers were vetted twice, and visitors thrice.

Hau hesitated, then asked the question already pressing against her ribs. “They’ll hate me in Jaipur, won’t they?”

The words were barely above a whisper.

Ashok looked at her deep in the eye as he war judging her too. “They’ll judge you. Not for your father’s surrender, but for the softness in your eyes. The court is a palace of silk and knives. You were not raised for this. But now you will be a queen.”

“Will they let me be?” she asked.

“No. But you’ll stand anyway.”

Then Ashok glanced at her but said nothing. The silence between them was heavier than words, the kind that filled old battlefields and courtrooms alike.

The car slowed as it approached the first checkpoint. Guards in camo raised their rifles in salute. A captain approached. His eyes skimmed over Hau with disapproval he didn’t bother to mask.

“Your Highness,” he said, bowing stiffly. “The road is clear. Some Naxal rebels linger in the Aravali hills. Nothing we can’t handle.”

Ashok's voice was flat. "Handle it."

The captain stepped back. The convoy rolled forward. Hau exhaled, the air catching in her throat. The glance the captain had given her felt like a branding that disobedient laves would be forced to endure.

And then, finally, they reached the capital of all the world: Jaipur.

The Walled City rose like a painted myth, its pink sandstone walls etched with centuries of soot and silk. Within them, narrow alleys coiled like snakes.

The car reached the outskirts of the core, the fences rising tall and gleaming in the fading light. They were a stark reminder of the divisions that still existed within the empire, a stark contrast to the unity that the king spoke of. The fences were adorned with intricate patterns of gold and silver, a testament to the wealth that lay beyond them. Guards in gleaming uniforms that designated them as special force their faces as stoic as the stone they protected, saluted as the royal convoy approached. The gates swung open with a thunderous boom, revealing a world of opulence that Hau had only dreamed of.

The houses were indeed smaller than she had imagined, but they were constructed with a beauty that spoke of a

culture that revered space and efficiency. Each building was a masterpiece of modern architecture, blending seamlessly into the landscape while maintaining the grandeur of the ancient world. The roads were as smooth as the surface of a still lake, unmarred by the ravages of time. The absence of horses and carriages was a stark reminder that this was a place of innovation, where the past and the future met in a dance of progress.

“It’s so different,” Hau murmured, eyes wide with wonder. Ashok nodded, his gaze softening. “It’s our empire’s evolution. These streets are as much mine as the palace walls.” His pride was palpable, yet Hau felt a pang for the lives lost to this monument of ambition.

They arrived at the central market, a sprawling bazaar that seemed to stretch on forever. The air was thick with the scent of exotic spices and the aroma of sizzling meals, a symphony of sights and smells that reward seemed to exist solely to overwhelm the senses.

The stalls erupted in a riot of color, their wares spilling across the walkways like offerings to the gods. Silk and gold shimmered in the soft light, while the sound of merchants haggling and children laughing created a cacophony that was at once overwhelming and utterly alive.

The crowd parted before them, allowing the vehicle to pass, whispering as they did. Hau felt a bolt of excitement mingled with a hint of fear.

These were to be her people, and yet she was such a stranger in their midst. Would they accept her as their queen?

Would she be more than a token of her father's surrender, her brothers' subservience? Her hands trembled, but she sat tall, chin high, determined not to cower.

They reached the palace, an edifice of yellow sandstone that blazed gold in the sun. Its towers pierced the sky like sharpened quills.

A girl burst from the palace doors, her braid flying, dupatta fluttering like a comet's tail. Her small arms outstretched, she barrelled across the courtyard on bare feet.

"Papa!"

Ashok turned just in time to catch her. It was Sanjana, his youngest. The force of her leap staggered him a step back. Her laughter rang like temple bells, arms wrapping tight around his neck, claws of joy digging into his embroidered collar.

He stumbled, then steadied, and laughed. Not the practiced laugh of a ruler, but something deeper, the laugh of a father remembered.

He held her close, burying his face in her jasmine-scented hair. The burden of empire lifted, just for that heartbeat. Here, in this golden courtyard beneath the eyes of a watching court, Ashok was not king, not conqueror.

He was only Sanjana's father.

"Look what I brought you," he whispered, reaching inside the folds of his cloak.

A trembling creature peeked out, a white-furred cat, with eyes like sapphires. The kitten blinked, mewed once.

Sanjana gasped. "A kitten! A big ones! Yay!!!!"

"To remind you that amidst the chaos, there is always beauty and warmth to be found."

Sanjana's eyes lit up as she cradled the tiny creature to her chest, her heart swelling with love. It was the first time in a long while that she had seen such genuine joy in ashok's

eyes, and it brought a smile to her own face. The kitten, sensing the moment, began to purr, its tiny body vibrating against sanjana.

The sound of footsteps grew louder as Roshani approached with her graceful form. She entered the hallway, her eyes meeting his for a breath before shifting to the woman beside him, the foreign bride Jaipur had not chosen. Hau looked at her, her gaze unreadable, a mask of calmness that did not quite reach her eyes.

Roshani offered a courteous nod, her eyes lingering on Hau for a fraction of a second longer than necessary. "Welcome," she said, her voice a soft melody. "Your beauty does your father's lands great justice."

She had been taught to be gracious, to be a reflection of the grace and poise that her father had hoped to instil in her. "Thank you," she said, her voice a whisper that seemed to carry the weight of the world.

Sanjana, her eyes still shimmering with excitement, looked up at her mother, the kitten peeking out from her embrace. "Look what father brought me!" she exclaimed, her voice carrying the innocent joy that only a child could possess. Roshani's gaze softened as she took in the sight of her daughter's happiness.

Hau, feeling the tension in the air thicken, stepped forward, her eyes meeting Ashok's. "Your Highness," she began, her voice a gentle whisper, "why is she here?"

Ashok's eyes searched hers, the green depths holding an emotion that she could not name. "She is the mother of my children," he said simply, his jaw clenched tightly.

The words hit Hau like a blow to the chest, a stark reminder of the reality of her situation. A wife, but not the mother of his kids.

And Hau, felt like shivering beneath her façade, for she scarcely knew she had stepped into a war not of armies, but of lineage, legacy, and names spoken too softly to leave a trace.

Palace Intrigue

The palace corridors glowed with the amber flicker of brass lamps. Their light weaving shadows across sandstone walls carved with lotus vines with each curve whispering secrets of empires forged in conquest's fire. Roshani stood in the courtyard drawing noble eyes that lingered despite whispers of her low birth, a waitress's daughter who'd captivated a king's heart.

She knelt to her daughter's level, she brushed Sanjana's braid, her smile warm, their obsidian depths reflecting the lamps' glow. "Sanjana, you can play with the cat until six. Then you should be back for lessons."

Sanjana's eyes sparkled, her small hands clutching the purring creature Ashok had gifted, its fur soft as the silk cushions on marble benches, its claws snagging her dupatta's lace. "I will make it jump." She squealed, her hairs bouncing, the kitten's mews bright against the courtyard's stillness. She darted down the corridor, her laughter echoing off the arches, the scent of her jasmine hair oil trailing like a comet's tail. The silence was heavy, gilded with unspoken roles, the lamps' glow casting shadows that danced like courtiers' secrets.

Uncle Shiva's laugh rumbled and asked. "I heard my granddaughter Mona had been quite the handful while I was away. What trouble has she stirred?"

Roshani's eyes twinkled with amusement as she recounted tales of Mona's escapades. "Ohh, mona," she said, her voice filled with fondness. "She has a spirit that seem defy the very fabric of the universe."

"While you were on campaign," she began, "she decided to climb the oldest tree in the courtyard. The guards were in a panic, but she just giggled and called down to them, daring them to catch her."

The room erupted in laughter, the tension dissipating like a morning fog. The sound of their mirth was a balm to the weary travellers. Hau felt the first stirrings of a smile tug at her lips, a tentative response to the warmth she saw in their eyes.

"Mona is quite the adventurer," Ashok said. "Now, Where is my mother?"

Roshani's smile was a delicate blade, her obsidian eyes glinting, her lotus pendant swaying. "She is planning a gala to unveil your eastern bride," she said, her tone smooth.

A servant bowed, his turban casting shadows, the clink of his silver tray punctuating the silence, saffron scent sharp from his robes. "Your Highness, Dowager Queen Catherine awaits in the dining hall."

Ashok nodded, his gaze sweeping the group, the weight of his crown etched in his eyes, his maroon kurta's gold thread catching the lamplight. "Join us, Roshani," he said, his voice formal but warm.

Roshani's smile grew a touch wider, but she declined gracefully. "Thank you, Your Highness," she said, her eyes never leaving Hau's. "But I think it's best if Hau gets accustomed to her new surroundings without the added... distraction." The words hung in the air, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken tension between them.

In the dining hall, the rosewood table gleamed under a chandelier of a thousand crystals, its carvings tracing the empire's triumphs from the overthrow of the tyrannical Miraz Mughal to Ashok's European campaigns, the wood's polish reflecting candlelight. Catherine sat at its head, Her green eyes, sharp as her son's, assessed the room, her chignon seemed like a golden crown, rose perfume sharp.

"Sit," she said, her voice cool as a winter stream, gesturing across the table, where silver platters held spiced lamb and almond-studded naan, steam curling like incense. Ashok took his place with regal ease, his eyes meeting his mother's with respect. Her hands trembled as she sat opposite Catherine, Shiva claimed the table's end, his grin wry.

“Welcome,” Catherine said, her gaze grazing Hau, lingering on Vijay, fingers tracing a crystal goblet’s rim, its facets catching the chandelier’s glow. “Your journey was smooth?” Her voice cut through the air, silver bangles clinking.

Vijay took his seat beside Hau, his eyes briefly meeting hers before focusing on his mother. His face was a mask of calm, but she could feel the tension coiled within him.

Hau swallowed, throat dry, accent thick but steady, clutching her sari’s hem, gold thread glinting. “Yes, Your Highness,” she said, eyes on the table’s carvings. “The lands are a marvel.”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed, shifting to Hau, “The empire is vast,” she said, glancing at a map behind her, borders stretching from the straits of Hercules to the coast of Korea, inked in black blood. “It demands loyalty, wisdom, forged in our forebears’ fires.”

"Ah, the future of our empire," Uncle Shiva said, raising a glass of amber liquid in a toast. "May you both bring us peace and prosperity."

The glasses clinked together, the sound resonating through the hall like the peal of a distant bell. Hau took a sip, the

taste of the wine rich and unfamiliar on her tongue. She felt the weight of their expectations upon her, the unspoken demands of a union that was as much about alliances as it was scarcely about love.

Catherine's nod was curt, fingers tightening on her goblet, crystal catching light like a blade.

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The palace hummed with gala preparations, servants gliding through corridors, arms laden with peacock-hued silk banners, footsteps muffled by Persian carpets, spoils of the Persian conquests of 1905. Ashok watched Jaipur's lights twinkle, pride swelling for an empire he ruled.

Roshani's entry was as quiet as the whisper of a secret, her footsteps muffled by the plush carpet that adorned the floor. She approached him, her eyes lingering on the reflection in the mirror. He knew she was there, but he did not turn to face her.

"Your Highness," she began, her voice a seductive purr that seemed to wrap around him like a warm embrace. "You look...distracted."

Ashok's gaze snapped back to hers, his eyes darkening with desire. He knew the game she played, the dance they had danced for years. Roshani, the woman who had borne him

his heirs, the woman who had shared his bed but not his throne. He felt the familiar pull of passion, the heat that had burned between them. But now, it was tinged with something else, something that made his chest tighten.

"Roshani," he said, his voice a low rumble, "this is not the time."

Her hand remained on his shoulder, her eyes burning with a passion that had never dimmed. "But when is it ever the right time?" she asked, her voice a soft caress. "When will we have this moment again?"

Ashok's gaze fell to her chest, the tight fabric of her dress revealing the curves that had haunted his dreams for so long. He felt a stirring within him, a hunger that threatened to consume him. He knew he should push her away, knew that this was wrong, but her touch was like a siren's call, too sweet to resist.

Her breath was warm against his ear as she whispered, "You don't have to," and pressed a kiss to his neck, her teeth grazing his skin lightly. The scent of her perfume, a blend of exotic spices and sweet flowers, filled his nostrils, making him dizzy with need. He knew he was playing with fire, but the flames flickered at him, beckoning him closer.

Roshani stepped back, her hand sliding from his shoulder to trace the line of his jaw, her thumb brushing against his bottom lip. Her lips took a small dip into his, he said in a weaker voice, "What if she comes?"

The words hung in the air, thick with the weight of their history, their desires, and the impending future that neither of them could control. Roshani's eyes searched his, her gaze unyielding. "Then she can watch us," she murmured, her voice a sultry whisper that seemed to echo through the chamber.

Ashok felt a tremor of something akin to anger, but it was quickly doused by the flames of passion that had been kindled within him. He knew the risks, knew the consequences, but he was king, and in that moment, he was also just a man, weak to the allure of the woman who had shared his bed and borne his children. He pulled her closer, his hand tangling in her hair as he claimed her mouth in a kiss that was as fiery as it was forbidden.

Roshani's body melted into his, her hands slipping beneath his shirt to trace the contours of his back. The room around them faded away, replaced by the heat of their desire. The fabric of her dress whispered against his skin as he pulled her closer, the sound of their breathing the only thing that broke the silence of the chamber.

Their kiss grew deeper, more urgent, as if they were trying to devour each other whole. Ashok's hands moved to her back, pulling her against him, feeling the curves of her body pressing into his.

The sound of the door opening made them both freeze, their hearts pounding in their chests. Sanjana's voice, filled with excitement, called out, "Papa, I found the kitten!" The spell was broken, the reality of their situation crashing down upon them like a tidal wave.

They sprang apart, their breathing ragged, their eyes wide with fear and guilt.

Ashok took the creature, hands trembling, forcing a smile, Roshani's jasmine clinging to his clothes. "Wonderful, my heart," he said, voice strained, candlelight flickering in her eyes. "Show Granny, she'll love its mischief, and tell her cat's tales."

Sanjana scampered off, laughter echoing, kitten's mews fading, jasmine hair oil lingering.

The door clicked, and Ashok's gaze locked on Roshani, desire warring with dread, walls pulsing with their secret.

Roshani stepped back, her eyes never leaving his. "Ashok," she whispered, her voice a warning and a plea all at once.

But he was beyond the point of reason, driven by the primal need that surged through him like a river in flood.

He closed the distance between them, his hands cupping her face as his lips found hers once more. The kiss was desperate, a silent declaration of desire and a promise of more to come. The guilt was there, a dull throb in the back of his mind, but the fire of his desire washed it away, leaving only the heat of the moment.

Her eyes searched his, a question in their depths that he could not answer. But her body responded, her arms slipping around his waist as she melted into his embrace. He knew it was dangerous, knew that their actions could set off a chain reaction that would shake the very foundations of his empire, but in that moment, he did not care.

Their kiss deepened, their tongues dancing together in a rhythm as old as time. The fabric of their clothes whispered secrets as they moved against each other, a silent language of need and want. The room spun around them, the walls closing in as the rest of the world fell away.

But the sound of distant footsteps grew louder, a harsh reminder of the reality they could not escape. Ashok pulled back, his breathing ragged, his eyes searching hers. Roshani's chest rose and fell with each breath, her eyes a

swirl of passion and fear. They knew the danger of their actions, the price she could pay if caught.

He took her hand, leading her to the bed, their eyes locked in silent understanding. With trembling fingers, he unbuttoned her dress, the fabric sliding off her body like water, revealing the soft curves that had haunted his dreams for so long. Her skin was warm, her eyes never leaving his as he kissed her neck, her collarbone, her breasts.

It was a wildfire, burning away the months of distance and duty that had kept them apart. His hands roamed her body, relearning the landscape of her curves, the valleys and peaks that had once been his to conquer. Her breathing grew shallow as his mouth found hers again, their kisses deep and all-consuming.

Their bodies intertwined on the grand bed, the silk sheets a soft cocoon that muffled their gasps and sighs. Their passion was a symphony, a crescendo of touches and caresses that resonated through the chamber. Every stroke, every whispered word was a declaration of war against the fate that had torn them apart.

Their movements grew more urgent, their hearts beating in unison like the drums of an ancient battlefield. Ashok's hands explored every inch of Roshani's skin, his lips tracing a fiery path from her neck to her waist, leaving a

trail of goosebumps in their wake. Her nails dug into his back, a silent plea for more, for him to never stop.

Their bodies moved together like two dancers in a passionate tango, their rhythm perfectly in sync, their limbs entwined in a dance of desire that had been denied for far too long.

With each thrust, Ashok felt only the raw, unbridled passion that Roshani had always been able to ignite within him. She was the storm to his calm, the chaos to his order, and in this tumultuous reunion, he found a peace that had eluded him since the day she had been cast aside.

Roshani's eyes searched his, the desire and pain in them a mirror of his own tumultuous emotions. Her breath hitched in her throat as their bodies reached for the pinnacle of pleasure, their movements a symphony of passion that had been silent for too long. In this stolen moment, she was not the mistress, but the queen of his heart, the only one who truly knew the man behind the throne.

Their bodies moved as one, each touch and caress a silent promise that transcended the walls that had been built around them. The room was filled with the sound of their action, a crescendo that shook the very foundation of the bed. It was as though they were trying to outrun the

ticking clock, to hold onto this fleeting moment for just a little longer.

Few moments later, their passion reached its peak, and they lay entangled in a heap of silk and sweat. The grand bed, a symbol of power and duty, had been transformed into a sanctuary of longing. The candles flickered, casting a warm glow across their flushed faces, the only light in the shadowy chamber.

With trembling hands, Roshani began to button up Ashok's shirt, her eyes never leaving his. Each button was a silent promise, a secret shared only between them. His chest heaved with the aftermath of their union, the thundering of his heart matching the rhythm of her own. He watched her, his eyes filled with a mix of desire and regret.

As the fabric of his shirt closed over his chest, the room grew colder, the reality of their situation seeping back in like an unwelcome chill. Roshani's hands stilled for a moment, her eyes flicking to the door, as if expecting it to burst open and reveal their secret. But the hallway remained quiet, the palace's secrets held within its ancient walls.

"Roshani," Ashok began, his voice thick with emotion.
"What we've done..."

Her fingers paused, the last button still unbuttoned. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with a determination that seemed to cut through the very air. "This changes nothing," she said firmly. "You are still their father, and I am still their mother. Our love for them will never waver, regardless of who you marry."

Ashok nodded, his gaze softening as he took her hand. "You're right," he murmured. "But I can't help but feel that this...that we..."

Roshani's grip tightened, cutting off his words. "We have always danced to the tune of fate," she said, her voice steady despite the quaver in her heart. "But tonight, we danced to our own music."

Her eyes searched his, looking for a spark of hope, a hint of understanding. Ashok took a deep breath, nodding slowly. "Yes," he murmured, his hand coming up to cup her cheek. "Tonight, we danced for ourselves."

"This is just the first of many," she repeated, her voice a soft echo of the tumultuous emotions that swirled within her. "We will find moments like these, stolen from the jaws of duty and expectation."

Ashok sighed, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. "We will be caught one day," he whispered, his eyes filled with the weight of their secret. "And when that happens, I hope...."

Roshani's smile was sad, but her eyes gleamed with the steel of determination. "And you are the king," she murmured, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

Gala

The Great Hall blazed with a thousand oil lamps, their golden glow dancing across sandstone arches carved with peacocks and lotus blooms, weaving shadows that flickered like courtiers' secrets on crimson and sapphire silk tapestries.

Tonight's gala was like a chess board, with Ashok's eastern bride, Hau, as its reluctant pawn.

Ashok stepped forward, his voice, steady force of nature that silenced murmurs like tornado that wipes out everything in its path. "Tonight, we honour our empire's strength, forged in the fire of the courage and fortitude of the not just the leaders of the empire but the people who built it brick by brick, blood by blood." he said, gesturing toward Hau at the hall's threshold, her emerald sari heavy with gold thread tracing her lost court's mountains, its weight bowing her slender frame, rosewater scent faint. "And I present to you Hau, the future queen of the Empire, the one who will bind china to the empire for all of entirety. A toast to Unity."

A chorus of sycophant and vassals repeated his word, "To Unity." Goblets clinking, spiced wine scent curling, but whispers hissed, Hau was foreign and weak and court would never let her forget it.

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At the cocktail table at the far end of the great hall, "Pal," Mona said to Vijay, her grin so wide it looked like it could crack her face in two. "You look boring, it's like your gal cheated on you."

Vijay rolled his eyes. "Cousin, Your jests are as subtle as a bull in the china shop."

Mona's laughter was like the tinkle of fine crystal, a sound that had gotten her out of trouble more times than he could count. "You little bunny is here, by the way. Looking like she's about to be devoured."

Sofia, a vision of loveliness, stepped into the opulent space, her clothes a little too simple for such a gala, but her beauty so radiant that it didn't matter. Her crimson hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders and across her chest, each strand gleaming like a thread of fire in the candlelight. Her eyes, a deep and vibrant almond, shimmered with excitement and a hint of nerves as they scanned the room, looking for the one face she knew she would recognise.



"Sofia," he called out. The music seemed to fade into the background as he beckoned her over, his hand

outstretched in a gesture of welcome. She looked up, her eyes locking onto his, and a warm smile spread across her face. She glided through the crowd, her simple dress whispering against the marble floor, her grace undiminished by the grandeur that surrounded her.

"Vijay," she said as she reached him, her voice a soft melody that seemed to resonate in his very soul. "You are looking so warm today."

His hand cupped hers and said, "You are a sight for sore eyes."

The door of the grand hall swung open, and a flurry of motion filled the space, the buzz of conversation rising like a swarm of bees. Vijay thought, "His father and that eastern doll were already in the room, of course they were. Who else could cause such a disturbance in this carefully choreographed court?"

The commotion grew louder, and then she appeared, like a vision from the past that he had almost forgotten: Zamia, his childhood friend. Her dark hair cascaded down her back like a waterfall of night, Her eyes were a deep shade of grey that looked almost black in the shadows.

The first thought in Vijay's mind was her delicious Dal Bukhara, a dish she had prepared once when they were

young. His mouth watered at the mere thought of the tender lentils simmered in a rich, creamy sauce, fragrant with spices that sang of comfort and home. He had not tasted it since she had left the city so long ago.

"Zai!" he called out, his voice a beacon in the cacophony of the market. The crowd parted like a sea before Moses, revealing the slender figure. She looked up, her eyes widening in surprise and then lighting up with a smile.

Her beauty was veiled in elegance, so carefully wrapped in layers of dark fur and silk that elegantly tightened to show the barest hints of her plentiful curve. She walked towards him with grace, and formality that he scarcely expected from an old friend.

"Can we please find a place to sit, the dress is killing me," Zamia said, her voice a mix of playfulness and pain.

"The burdens of beauty," Vijay quipped, his eyes sweeping over her attire with an appreciative gaze. He offered her his arm, and she took it, the fabric of his sleeve brushing against the softness of her skin.

The custom dictated that none but royalty should sit before the meal began. But for a prince, customs are little more than guideline to be ignored or as one distinguished writer once said, Guidelines are rules which are meant to be broken.

Sofia watched as Vijay's eyes lit up at the sight of his childhood friend, feeling a peculiar tightening in her chest. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something about the way he looked at Zamia made her feel like an outsider in a place she had never been before. She tried to shake off the feeling, telling herself that it was just the unfamiliarity of the situation, the jealousy of a new love feeling the sting of the old.

As they all sat around the dinner table, the air was thick with tension and anticipation. The table was empty as was expected the dinner was not supposed to start until half an hour later. as he introduced Sofia to Zamia, "Zamia, this is Sofia, she is my ladylove. And Sofia, this is Zamia, a very dear old friend of mine."

Sofia offered a gracious smile, her eyes meeting Zamia's with a cool curiosity. "Vijay has indeed spoken quite fondly of you," she said, her voice like a silk ribbon unfurling in the air.

"Ah, but I know nothing of you," Zamia replied, her tone playful in the words and almost in a manner they she didn't even consider that Sofia was a person. Zamia continued, "You must tell me how the two of met?"

While the girls were chit chatting, Vijay ordered one of the waiters, "Bring the starters."

The waiter hovered at the edge of the table, the silver tray with the royal seal trembling slightly in his hands. "Your grace, the starters are not yet ready," he murmured, his eyes darting nervously between the prince and his guests.

Vijay raised an eyebrow. "Get the starters, and make it happen quick." The waiter hurried off with a face that showed nothing but fear, disappearing into the kitchens like a mouse into its hole.

Turning back to the ladies, he said, "As I was saying, it was a delightful day. I was hurrying off to St. Stephen's library, you know how much I love history books. And there she was, we stumbled on each other." His eyes searched for a spark of recognition in Zamia's gaze, a hint that she knew the depth of his affection for this girl.

Sofia completed his words, "Next thing, we were bunking class to catch small moments with each other."

Vijay picked up where she had left, "She nearly wept over the lost lectures and she was so convinced the entire scholarship committee would expel her for skipping class with the prince."

Zamia's smile grew knowing, her eyes flicking briefly to Hau. "Ah, a scholarship student," she murmured, the words

carrying a weight that only those in the know could understand. "That must have been quite the adventure for her, bunking classes.."

Just as the conversation was about to deepen, a messenger rushed into the chamber, his breath coming in gasps as if he had sprinted from the ends of the earth to deliver his message. He bent at the waist, his forehead nearly touching the floor, and whispered something into Vijay's ear.

Vijay's eyes narrowed, his handsome features darkened. He turned to the ladies, his voice as calm as the eye of a hurricane. "It seems that something important has come, so Ladies, I will leave you to it." He stood, his movements fluid and filled with the authority of his birthright, and strode from the room without a backward glance.

The silence that followed was thick with unspoken tension. It coated the air like a sticky syrup, clinging to every surface and making it difficult to breathe. The candles on the table flickered as if they too felt the sudden chill that had descended upon the chamber.

Sofia's eyes darted to Zamia, then back to the now-empty chair beside her. The awkwardness was palpable, like a living creature that sat heavily on her shoulders, whispering in her ear that she was an imposter in this

grand hall filled with marble, silk and gold with her dress of cotton.

"Well, what has the Darling of Persia been doing?" Mona asked with a grin on her face, clearly enjoying the discomfort that seemed to create for Zamia..

Zamia replied with a chuckle that deflected the comment with ease, "That name is just a bad joke by a bad newspaper." Her laughter was like the sound of chimes in a gentle breeze, a stark contrast to the tension in the room. She leaned back in her chair, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "You know the usual, school, embroidery, tea party and public events. Tehran is quite dull if you ask me."

Roshani jumped in the conversation from afar and asked, "Would any of you young ladies happen to know the whereabouts of my son?"

Zamia replied, "Aunty, He just left a moment ago, the king called him up for something important."

Mona giggled, "He's probably just avoiding the boring old speeches, like me. I swear if I have to sit through one more lecture on the importance of trade agreements, I'll scream." Her eyes flicked toward Zamia, a smirk playing on her lips. "Though I'd wager Ashok's new bride would rather hear those than face the nobles' whispers.'But

Roshani's words cut through the tension like a knife, her voice dripping with the sweetness of honey,. "Ohh, is that so? Then Sofia, I must borrow you for a moment."

Sofia's heart skipped a beat. What could the Vijay's mother want from her? The woman's gaze was piercing, yet there was something almost predatory about the way she looked at her. And she had no choice but to comply.

"Of course," she said with a courteous smile, standing up from her chair with a grace that belied her nerves. She followed Roshani through the grand halls of the palace, the sound of their footsteps echoing through the emptiness. The walls were adorned with tapestries depicting battles and triumphs of the empire, a stark reminder of the power plays and politics that governed their lives.

Roshani led her to a balcony, the night air cool against their flushed faces. Roshani asked with a sly smile, "Dear, do you know who Zamia is?"

Sofia nodded and replied, "She is an old friend of Vijay," unsure of where this line of questioning was heading.

Roshani chuckled, the sound like a warning bell in the quiet night. "Is that what you truly believe?" she asked, her

voice a seductive purr. Her eyes held a knowing glint that sent a shiver down Sofia's spine.

Sofia's nod was hesitant. "That is what I know," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Roshani leaned in closer, her eyes gleaming with an unspoken challenge. "Zamia is not just a friend," she murmured, her words wrapping around the truth like a python around its prey. "Her lineage is as noble as it gets without being from the royalty. Her great-grandfather was none other than Bahadur Shah Zafar, the second-to-last Mughal emperor."

A Game of Chess

The following morning, as the sun cast its early rays over the sprawling city, the air was still heavy with the residue of the previous night's festivities. The grandeur of the palace felt oppressive, a stark reminder of the weighty decisions and alliances that had been made in the gleaming halls.

Sofia, feeling the pressure of her new role as the Girlfriend of Prince Vijay, made her way to the invitation-only Chess Club, her heart racing with both excitement and apprehension. The club was known to be a sanctuary for the elite Ladies. She had received the invitation from none other than Roshani herself, a gesture that seemed to be both welcoming and intimidating.

The cobblestone streets of Jaipur were quiet at this early hour, the air still cool despite the promise of the scorching day ahead. The grandeur of the city, with its blend of ancient and modern, felt almost surreal in the soft morning light. The air was filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread and spices, a stark contrast to the stifling perfume of the gala the night before.

Sofia stepped into the waiting car, her heart fluttering in her chest. She had chosen her attire with care, a relatively inexpensive cotton sari in shades of emerald and gold that

she knew would complement her almond eyes, crimson hair and ivory complexion. It was a deliberate choice, a silent message to Roshani that she knew her place but would not be intimidated by her.

The ride to the Chess Club was a blur of early morning activity as the city began to stir. The car's engine roared against the cobblestone streets echoing through the quiet, a rhythmic reminder of the gravity of the meeting to come. She smoothed her sari, taking deep breaths to calm her nerves. In the mirror, her reflection revealed a determined young woman, ready to navigate the complex web of courtly intrigue.

Upon her arrival, she was greeted by a stern-faced doorman who nodded in recognition before opening the heavy, carved wooden door. The club's interior was bathed in a soft light that danced through stained glass windows, casting an ethereal glow upon the polished wooden chess boards and plush velvet chairs arranged in intimate circles. The silence was absolute, a stark contrast to the cacophony of the city outside. It was as if the very air held its breath, waiting for the delicate dance of strategy to begin.

Nearly the entire club was empty, all but one place, where Roshani sat with a queenly poise. She was dressed in a sari of midnight blue, adorned with silver



embroidery that shimmered in the muted light. Her jet-black hair was piled high atop her head, a single crimson teardrop resting on her forehead, drawing the eye to her sharp, calculating gaze. The room was suffused with an aura of power and poise that seemed to emanate from her very being.

As Sofia approached, Roshani's gaze flicked up from her own chessboard, her eyes lingering on the girl's attire for a fraction of a second. "You have learnt a lesson from last night, what is it?" she asked, her voice as smooth as the chess pieces she moved with a grace that belied their weight.

Sofia took a deep breath, her heart pounding in her chest. She had guessed that this invitation was not merely a social call but a subtle test of her mettle. "That appearances can be deceiving," she replied, her voice steady. "And that one must always be prepared for the unexpected."

Roshani's face showed hints of disapproval, "You guessed it wrong." She continued, "The lesson you learnt is that every place, every event has its outfit. sometimes like a little girl, sometimes you have to dress like a whore, and other times like a princess."

Sofia felt a sting at the last word. It was clear Roshani knew about her past, the whispers of her being a street girl before being swept into the prince's arms. But she held her

ground, refusing to let the other woman see her discomfort. "I see," she replied evenly. "And what lesson would you like to teach me today?"

With a flick of her wrist, Roshani gestured to the chair opposite her. "Sit," she ordered, her voice as sharp as the pieces on the chessboard.

Sofia lowered herself gracefully into the seat, her eyes never leaving Roshani's. "Do you play chess?" Roshani inquired, her eyes glinting with an unspoken challenge.

Sofia replied, "A little, though in front of you that might flatter."

Roshani's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Is that so?" she said, her voice a cocktail of amusement and skepticism. She slid a pawn forward with a grace that belied the aggression of the move. "Perhaps we shall see just how much."

Sofia took a deep breath, placing her hand on the knight. The weight of the piece was surprising, a stark reminder of the gravity of the game before her. She knew that this was not merely a game of chess, but a battle of wits and a declaration of intentions. Her hand hovered over the board, contemplating her response to Roshani's opening gambit.

The rook was an intricate carving of ivory and gold. It was a symbol of strength and wisdom in the ancient game, a piece that could leap over others with ease, forging a path where none seemed to exist. She slid it forward, placing it in front of her pawn. It was a bold move, a declaration that she would not be underestimated.

Roshani watched with a smirk playing on her lips, her brown eyes gleaming as she studied the board. The clack of the knight settling into place echoed through the hushed room, a sound that seemed to resonate with the tension between them.

Sofia felt the sting of the loss, her heart racing as she realised the symbolism of the move. The knight, a piece that could leap over others to strike at the heart of the enemy, had just toppled her own rook, the symbol of strength and wisdom she had hoped to project. It was a clear message: Roshani was not a woman to be trifled with.

Roshani said, "I thought you said you know something about chess."

Sofia said nothing. Quietly, she moved her pawn with a firm but gentle touch, her eyes never leaving Roshani's. The pawn glided over the polished wooden board, a silent assertion of her place in the unfolding drama. It was a simple move, almost innocuous in its simplicity, but it was

loaded with meaning. It was a declaration of her intention to defend her position, to stand her ground in the shadow of the empire's power.

The silence in the room was palpable, the only sound the ticking of an antique clock on the mantle, marking the passage of time like the beating of a metronome. Each tick was a reminder of the stakes at play, the fate of nations balanced on the head of a pin, as delicate as the dance of pawns and knights.

With a grace that belied the urgency of her move, Roshani slammed her second knight onto the board, blocking the check that had been so elegantly set by her opponent. The piece's golden mane gleamed in the light, a fierce protector shielding the king from the advancing pawns. The tension was electric, a silent battle of wills played out in the space between the two women.

Sofia felt the pressure building, the weight of her decision palpable. Her heart thudded in her chest as she pushed her bishop into the fray, capturing the pawn that had dared to stand before the queen. The piece's smooth surface was cool against her trembling fingers, a stark contrast to the heat of the moment. It was a daring move, one that left her own king exposed but offered a tantalizing glimpse of victory.

Roshani's eyes narrowed at the challenge, and she leaned back in her chair, the plush velvet groaning in protest. "Is a Queen truly worth a bishop and a rook?" she mused, her voice dripping with curiosity. She paused, the question hanging in the air like a sword of Damocles.

Sofia met her gaze without flinching. "In this game," she replied, her voice steady despite the racing of her heart, "everything is worth everything." With a swiftness that belied her nerves, she slid her pawn across the board, capturing the queen in a move that was as expected as the sun setting in the west."

Her hand hovered over the board, considering her next move. Then, with the precision of a master, she used the very knight that had taken out the rook to leapfrog over the pawns, landing threateningly close to Sofia's line of defense. It was a strategic move that spoke of both aggression and protection, a subtle message that she was not to be underestimated.

Sofia's eyes narrowed, her heart racing as she took in the new configuration of the pieces. Roshani had laid a trap, a clever snare that could lead to her downfall if she was not careful. The knight, the very symbol of the empire's might, was poised to strike at the heart of her position.

With a steady hand, she pushed a random pawn forward, breaking the tension with a move that seemed innocent

and unassuming. It was a deliberate choice, designed to test Roshani's patience and strategy. The pawn, a simple soldier in the grand scheme of the game, became a proxy for the larger battle of wills that was unfolding before them.

Roshani's smile grew a bit more predatory as she reached for her second knight, the gleaming piece reflecting the light in a way that made it seem almost alive. She moved it with the grace of a panther stalking its prey, her eyes never leaving Sofia's as the knight claimed the other pawn with an almost silent clack. The sound was like a gunshot in the quiet room, a declaration of intent that sent a shiver down the young woman's spine.

Sofia felt the loss of her pawn like a personal blow, but she schooled her features into a mask of calm. Inside, she was a whirlwind of emotion: anger, fear, and a strange thrill at the challenge before her. She had never faced an opponent like Roshani, one who could so clearly read the room and play the game of power with such ruthless efficiency.

The match stretched on, each move calculated and deliberate. The sun climbed higher in the sky, casting shifting patterns of light and shadow across the chessboard. The air grew thick with the scent of jasmine and the faint smell of sweat as the two women battled in silent, intense concentration.

Sofia's aggressive strategy had served her well in the early stages, but as the game progressed, she found herself increasingly on the defensive. Roshani's experience and patience began to show, each move a masterstroke that slowly but surely chipped away at the younger woman's position.

The tension in the air was thick enough to slice with a knife, and yet, neither player broke the silence. The only sounds were the occasional clack of a piece being moved and the rustle of their garments as they shifted in their seats. The game had become a dance of power and strategy, a silent ballet of intellect and will.

As the minutes stretched into hours, the shadows on the board grew longer, the sun casting a stark contrast of light and dark across the battlefield of their minds. The pieces grew fewer and fewer until finally, with a heavy heart, Sofia found herself with no knights, no rooks, and a queen that had been captured with a swiftness that left her breathless.

Her pawns, once hopeful soldiers marching towards a glorious promotion, had been picked off one by one, never reaching the promised land of the eighth row. The loss of each one felt like a personal failure, a chip in the armour of her ambition. Her king, once proud and untouchable, was now a hunted figure, surrounded by the relentless forces of Roshani's strategy.

Sofia's heart pounded as she surveyed the devastation before her. Her knights had fallen in valiant but futile attempts to protect her queen, and her rooks had been outmanoeuvred by Roshani's sly moves. The chessboard was a microcosm of the empire's complex alliances, and she had been outplayed in every sense.

With a heavy sigh, she reached out and tapped the king, toppling it gently. "Checkmate," she murmured, her voice carrying the weight of her defeat.

Roshani's smile grew wider, a victory that was both sweet and bitter. "Well played," she said, her voice holding a hint of admiration. "You have a natural talent for the game, my dear. With practice, you could be a force to be reckoned with."

Sofia felt the sting of defeat, but she nodded, refusing to let it show. "Thank you," she said, her voice a soft whisper. "But it seems that in this match, I have been outmanoeuvred."

Roshani's smile remained in place, but there was a hint of something softer in her eyes. "Do not be too hard on yourself," she said, her voice a gentle purr. "You have spirit, and that is a valuable asset in this game."

Sofia nodded, her eyes never leaving the toppled king. "I will take that as a compliment," she murmured. "But I fear I have much to learn."

Roshani leaned back in her chair, her gaze lingering on the chessboard as if it were a map of the empire. "Indeed, you do," she said, her voice still carrying the edge of a knife. "Every pawn remembers the day she stopped playing defence and rushed for the crown."

Sofia felt the weight of the words, the implication that she was a pawn in a much larger game. She swallowed hard, trying to push down the rising bile of anger and inadequacy. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Roshani leaned forward, her eyes boring into the younger woman's. "I mean that I see potential in you," she said, her tone measured and calm. "You have the spark of something great, but you lack the finesse, the experience. In this pit of vipers, you need more than just beauty and wit to survive."

Sofia looked up at her, the weight of the words sinking in. "What kind of help are you offering?" she asked, her voice laced with suspicion.

Roshani said with a friendly smile, "I seek to mentor you. I have been where you stand a long time ago, I seek to help you in this dance so you may come out better than me."

Sofia's eyes searched Roshani's face, looking for any hint of deceit or mockery. But she saw only honesty in the brown depths of the woman's gaze. "Why?" she asked, unable to keep the skepticism from her voice.

Roshani leaned back in her chair, her fingers drumming a silent tune on the armrest. "Because," she began, "the empire is a fickle beast, and the men who rule it are no different. They see a beautiful face and think they can use it to their advantage. But beauty fades, and what is left? Only wit and cunning can stand the test of time."

Her words hung in the air, a challenge and an offer rolled into one. The silence between them grew heavier, as if the very walls of the club were listening to their conversation. The air was thick with the scent of the chessboard's polished wood and the lingering aroma of their breakfast.

Sofia took a deep breath, considering her options. The idea of being mentored by Roshani was both alluring and terrifying. This woman, who had borne the king's children and was now his mistress, wielded power in a way that was both subtle and absolute. But could she truly be trusted?

"What do you want in return?" she asked, her voice steady despite the tumultuous thoughts in her mind.

Roshani's smile was enigmatic. "Only that you remember who taught you to play the game," she replied. "For now, let us focus on your education. There are many things a queen must know that a street girl could never learn from books or school."

Roshani's smile grew warmer, the tension in the room dissipating like mist in the sun. "Good," she said. "Now, tell me, have you done the deed with Vijay yet?"

Sofia felt the heat rise in her cheeks as she stumbled over her words, trying to maintain a dignified air. "We have not... that is to say, we are taking our time."

Roshani's eyes narrowed, the eyes swirling with a tempest of emotions. "You will," she said, her voice leaving no room for argument. "And you will do it before Zamia has a chance to sink her claws in. The throne is not won by playing nice and saving your body for wedding night that will never come."

Sofia felt a jolt of shock at the crassness of the words, but she nodded weakly. The reality of the situation was stark, and she knew that Roshani was speaking the truth. In the world of the imperial court, virtue was a commodity that could be bought and sold, and she had to be ready to play the game.

Roshani slid an envelope across the table, the sound of the paper whispering against the polished wood. "Here," she said, her voice firm but not unkind. "You must prepare for the act beforehand."

Sofia's eyes widened in shock, her hand frozen over her cross. The cost of power had never been so bluntly laid out before her. She felt the weight of Christ's cross against the skin of her chest, a silent rebellion against the words that had just been spoken. Her heart raced, her mind torn between the horror of what was being suggested and the cold reality that it might just be necessary.

With trembling fingers, she reached for the envelope, her eyes never leaving Roshani's. The leather felt cool and smooth in her hand, a stark contrast to the burning in her cheeks. This was the price she would have to pay to remain relevant in this snake pit of a court, to keep her love for Vijay from becoming a mere footnote in history.

The instructions from the woman across from her were as clear as they were disturbing. "Practice using your tongue," Roshani had said, her gaze never wavering.

"I...I understand," Sofia murmured, she could feel in her bones this was wrong. She should be studying for her UATs not preparing for this.....

"There is no shame in coming from a poor family, only remaining in it." Roshani said.

Sofia left the club, the envelope's weight a silent promise as night fell.

She hoped that the lord would forgive her for the path she was about to walk, for the woman she was about to become. Her heart was heavy with the weight of her decision, but she knew that she had to do what was necessary to survive in the treacherous waters of the Life and Love.

Sofia took a moment to compose herself, her hands clutching to the small crucifix that hung around her neck, its coldness a judge of her trembling resolve. It had been a gift from her mother, a symbol of faith and hope in a world that often offered neither. She whispered another prayer, asking for guidance and strength to navigate the treacherous path ahead.

Next day she would lost her maidenhood this would be a day that she would forever remember with shame and pleasure. The room had been candlelit, their passion a fiery dance that had transcended their social stations. She had worn the cross then too, not out of religious fervour, but as a silent declaration that she was not abandoning her

beliefs, only the rigid rules that had once governed her life.

An Old Friend

Zamia found herself in a café, surrounded by the hum of conversation and the clinking of cups and the scent of fresh coffee mingled with the faint spices of distant lands. Vijay sat across from her, with a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

"What's the secret behind that smile?" Zamia asked, her dark eyes narrowing with curiosity.

Vijay leaned back in his chair, his smile widening into a grin that could only be described as smug. "We did the deed, Sofia and I," he said, his voice low and filled with a sense of accomplishment that was impossible to miss. The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning, and Zamia felt a stab of jealousy pierce her heart.

Zamia's eyes widened in surprise, the color rising to her cheeks. "The...the deed?" she stuttered, not quite sure how to react.

Vijay nodded, his gaze unwavering. "Yes," he said, his voice filled with a confidence that made Zamia's heart ache.

"Last night, in a hotel. The things that she did, it was better than I had imagined."

Zamia felt her stomach clench, the warmth of the room suddenly suffocating. She took a sip of her tea, the minty liquid cool against her tongue, and tried to compose herself. Inside, she was a maelstrom of emotions: anger, hurt, and a burning need to claim what she felt was rightfully hers.

Mona, ever the loyal confidant, leaned in, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Bro," she whispered, her voice a conspiratorial hiss, "that's wicked. You finally ducked the bastard bloom."

Those words cut like a sword—it was supposed to have been her.

Mona leaned in closer, her eyes alight with the kind of excitement reserved for the juiciest of gossip. Her cheeks flushed as Vijay described every pause, every gasp—the mosaic of his night unfolded with shameless pride.

But as he spoke, Zamia felt as if she was being torn apart from the inside out. Each word was a hot ember landing on her skin, searing through her and leaving a trail of anger and resentment in its wake. This couldn't be

happening. He was her.... What was he to her, just a friend? No, you can't feel this anger and jealousy for just a friend.

Her eyes searched Vijay's face, looking for any sign of remorse, any hint that he knew the pain he was causing her. But all she saw was a smug satisfaction that made her want to scream. Her mind raced, trying to find a way to regain control of the situation, to somehow turn the tables.

In that moment, The thought of him with another woman, especially one so.... unworthy of him, was more than she could bear.

She cursed herself for having allowed her family to drag her away from the city, she couldn't have his first kiss, his first love, his first sex. But she would be the last to have him.

Vijay's grin grew even wider at Mona's question."It was heaven," he said, his eyes glazed over with the memory of the previous night. "Sofia is... she's something else."

Zamia's smile remained in place, a mask that felt like it was made of brittle glass. "I'm happy for you," she forced herself to say, her voice sounding hollow to her own ears. "You deserve to be happy."

She felt like a forgotten rook on the board - silent, straight, and potentially lethal. Mona tapped her fingers on the table, eyes flicking between them. “Well, Uncle’s wedding plans are still chaos, in case anyone’s forgotten.”

Vijay grunted, not taking the bait.

Hours later, as Zamia prepared for the haldi, her resolve hardened. She slipped into a tight purple dress, its bold hue a silent declaration.

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At the haldi ceremony, Vijay stood in the corner as his father and the eastern doll were painted in turmeric, a custom as old as the empire itself. Ideally, he was supposed to be applying the turmeric to his father, but conveniently for him, this was not a photographed or televised event. His father had begrudgingly allowed him to abstain, and Vijay savoured the distance, a chocolate-covered strawberry poised between his fingers.

Zamia entered like a storm disguised as silk. Her gaze found his. She looked different today, her confidence a stark contrast to the kindness she usually exuded. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of arousal at the sight of her, a feeling that was as foreign as the flavours of the treat in his mouth. Vijay felt the air shift, as if a new piece had moved into play on this intricate chessboard.

He took another bite of the chocolate-covered strawberry, the sweetness of the chocolate and the tartness of the fruit mingling on his tongue. It was a dance he knew all too well. Yet, as he watched her glide through the crowd, he couldn't shake the feeling that she was a new player in this game, one who had not yet learned the rules.

The dress she wore was like a declaration of intent, a silent shout in a room full of whispers. It clung to her body like a lover's embrace, showcasing her curves in a way that was both seductive and defiant. It was clear she had made an effort to stand out, to assert herself in a place where she felt overlooked.

Her hand moved to her hair, the dark locks cascading down her back like a waterfall of night. The gesture was innocent enough, a mere adjustment to a stray strand that had escaped.

Vijay couldn't help but watch, his eyes lingering on the curve of her neck, the pulse that fluttered like a trapped butterfly beneath her soft skin. It was a gesture that was both innocent and tantalising.



Zamia approached him, her smile as sweet as the chocolate on the strawberry he held. "Vijay," she greeted, her voice a soft caress that seemed to dance around the tension in the room. "Why is it you seem so flustered?"

He met her gaze, the heat from her body seemingly scalding him. "The heat, yes," Vijay murmured, his voice thick with a desire he hadn't allowed himself to feel in her presence before. The room had indeed grown warmer, or perhaps it was just his own body's reaction to the siren standing before him. "It's as if the sun itself has entered this chamber." He thought

Zamia's eyes searched his, the unspoken tension between them palpable as a sudden breeze from an open window ruffled the curtains. Then, as if on cue, his mother's voice rang out, cutting through the air like a sword. "Zamia, you must come for the Haldi."

Roshani, a picture of regal grace in her sapphire sari, beckoned to her with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. For a moment, Vijay felt a flicker of annoyance. He didn't want to lose this moment with his old friend. But protocol demanded it, and with a nod to his mother, he stepped aside, allowing her to lead Zamia away.

As she was drawn into the swirl of the ceremony, Zamia turned her head and whispered sweet things in his ear, her breath warm against his skin. "May we meet soon, my

dear," she murmured, her voice a melody that sent shivers down his spine. Vijay felt a pang of something akin to loss, a strange feeling in the midst of such revelry.

The Debate

Her thoughts drifted to her childhood friend from her class, Laila, a raven haired beauty with eyes that sparkled like the night sky. Laila was adventurous and had a certain allure that was undeniable. Her confidence and charm could easily capture the heart of any man, and she had always been open about her sexual experiences.

Sofia knew that convincing Laila would be no easy feat. Her fiery spirit and arrogance were legendary, but so was her sense of loyalty and her fierce protectiveness towards her friends. If she could win Laila over, she knew she had a chance at throwing back the Persian harlot in the sea.

With a racing heart, she approached her during the school break, her eyes scanning the courtyard for the familiar figure. There she was, leaning against a tree, her dark hair cascading down her back as she whispered sweet nothings into the ear of a boy who looked like he was about to faint from the sheer joy of it.

"Laila," she called out, her voice cutting through the chatter of the schoolyard like a knife. The raven-haired beauty looked up, her eyes narrowing slightly as she took in the sight of her friend. The boy's hand fell away from her waist, and she straightened up, a knowing smile playing on her lips.

"Sofia," she greeted with a smirk. "What brings you here?"

Sofia took a deep breath and approached, her heart hammering in her chest. "Laila, can we talk in peace?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the din of the schoolyard.

Laila's smirk widened, and she nodded, a glint of curiosity in her dark eyes. She led the way to a secluded bench, her hips swaying in a way that seemed to hypnotize everyone they passed. Once seated, she turned to face her friend, her expression a mix of amusement and impatience. "What's so important that you've come all the way here to bother me?" she asked, her voice a purr that could charm the stars from the sky.

Sofia took a deep breath, her cheeks flushing with a mix of excitement and nerves. "I want to make a surprise for Vijay," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Something... something that will show him how much I love him and how much I want to keep him happy."

Laila's teasing smirk grew, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "Oh, do tell," she said, leaning in closer, her voice a seductive purr. "What delicious little secret have you been cooking up for our dear prince?"

Sofia took a deep breath, her cheeks flushing an even deeper shade of red. "I wanted to invite you to come into our bed for a threesome," she blurted out, the words tumbling from her mouth in a rush. The schoolyard around them seemed to fade away, and all she could see was the look of surprise on Laila's face.

For a moment, Laila was silent, her dark eyes widening with shock. Then, she burst into laughter, the sound echoing through the courtyard like a peal of bells. "You want to what?" she exclaimed, her hand flying to her mouth to cover the grin that threatened to split her face in two.

Sofia felt her cheeks burn even hotter as she stared at her friend. "It's not funny," she said, her voice tight with tension. "It's for the good of our relationship."

Laila's laughter subsided, and she regarded Sofia with a mix of amusement and skepticism. "Alright, spill," she said, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "What's really going on here? You would never even let other girls look at him much less fuck on his cock in front of you"

Sofia took a deep breath, her eyes searching Laila's face for any sign of understanding. "It's complicated," she murmured, her voice trembling slightly.

Laila leaned back, her smile fading into a look of concern. "What do you mean, 'complicated'?" she asked, her tone gentler now. "Is Vijay not satisfied in bed?"

Sofia's gaze drifted away, her eyes focusing on a distant point in the horizon. "It's not that," she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "He is... very satisfied." She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling with the effort of containing her thoughts. "It's just..." she trailed off, biting her lower lip.

"I understand," Laila said, lifted her chin bring her head to level with hers and said, "You want to keep things spicy."

Sofia nodded, feeling a strange sense of relief that Laila had not dismissed her outright. "Yes," she murmured, her voice still trembling slightly. "And I know it's a lot to ask, but I believe you're the only one I can trust."

Laila leaned in closer, her eyes dancing with curiosity and a hint of something else, something darker. "Tell me, what does our dear prince have to offer that would make me want to share him?"

Sofia winked at her and friend, "He was too big for me at first," she confessed, her voice low and sultry, a wink in her eye that spoke of shared secrets and naughty tales. "But

he's very good with his tongue," she added, her voice dropping to a whisper, as if sharing a sacred truth.

Laila's eyes widened, her smile turning into a full-blown grin. "Oh, I've heard the rumors," she said, her voice dripping with innuendo. "But to hear it from the horse's mouth... or should I say, the horse's girlfriend," she giggled, nudging Sofia with her elbow.

Sofia's cheeks burned even more, but she couldn't help but feel a little thrill at the prospect of sharing her secret with someone as adventurous as Laila. "It's not like that," she protested weakly, but the glint in her friend's eyes told her that the protest had been in vain.

"Don't tell anybody," she whispered urgently, her eyes searching Laila's for any sign of agreement. The silence stretched between them, thick and heavy with the weight of the unspoken words.

Laila leaned back, her eyes narrowing as she studied her friend. Then, with a sudden lightness, she smacked her on the ass lightly and said, "Have I ever?" Her laugh was low and knowing,

Sofia's eyes widened at the casual touch, and she couldn't help but feel a shiver of excitement run down her spine. It was true; Laila had never disappointed when it came to

keeping their secrets. "I know," she murmured, her voice barely a whisper. "But this is... different."

"How so?" Laila asked, her eyes dancing with mischief. "How experienced is the prince?"

Sofia took a moment to gather her thoughts, remembering the first time they had been together. It had been a tentative, awkward affair, full of stolen glances and trembling hands. "He was... inexperienced, but eager to learn," she said, a soft smile playing on her lips as she remembered the sweetness of those early days. "He's grown into a skilled lover, attentive and passionate. His touch is like a symphony, every move calculated to bring me to crescendo."

Laila's laughter grew bolder, and she gave a gentle elbow nudge to the side of one of the soft mounds of Sofia's breasts. "A skilled lover, you say?" she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Well, I suppose if I'm going to fuck him, he had better be worth it."

Sofia rolled her eyes, though the green of jealousy was clear as day on her face. "Trust me," she said, her voice filled with a mix of pride and challenge. "He's better than any of the losers you've been flirting with."

Laila's smile grew wicked. "Oh, I have no doubt," she purred. "But I've always had a taste for the forbidden fruit. And what could be more forbidden than the prince's cock in front of his girlfriend?"

Sofia's breath hitched, the reality of the situation sinking in. "You'll do it?" she asked, hope and trepidation mingling in her voice.

"Why not?" Laila shrugged, her eyes gleaming. "It'll be quite the adventure, won't it?" She leaned in closer, her breath warm on Sofia's ear. "But remember, if I'm going to play this game, I play by my own rules," she whispered, her voice a siren's call.

Sofia nodded, a mix of excitement and fear coursing through her. "Of course," she breathed, her heart racing with anticipation. "Whatever you want, Laila."

Laila leaned back, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. "Good," she said, her eyes gleaming. "Now, let's plan this little surprise of yours."

The Royal Dinner

Vijay took a deep breath, steeling himself for the onslaught of information that would come his way. He knew that the state expert he was to meet tonight was a seasoned player in the imperial court, a man who knew the intricacies of policy and politics like the back of his hand. He had to be on his guard, ready to listen and learn, while also being prepared to navigate the treacherous waters of the conversation without revealing too much of his own hand.

He walked into the grand dining hall, his footsteps echoing off the marble floors and high ceilings adorned with frescoes that told the story of his ancestors' reign. The table was set with the finest silver and china, the crystal glassware glinting in the flickering candlelight. It was a scene of opulence and power, a stark reminder of the weight that rested upon his shoulders.

He was a few minutes early, a trait that had been ingrained in him from a young age. Punctuality was not just a courtesy in the imperial court; it was a sign of respect and discipline. But tonight, his stomach had other plans, growling with a hunger that seemed to demand attention. With a furtive glance around, he approached the sideboard, where an array of delicacies had been laid out for the evening's meal.

Selecting a small piece of roast potato, he took a bite, the flavor exploding in his mouth. The potato melted against his tongue, and he couldn't help but close his eyes in appreciation of the chef's skill. It was a simple act, one that seemed almost rebellious in the grandiose setting of the dining hall, but he couldn't resist the urge to indulge before the evening's political games began.

As the door to the hall opened, he swallowed the last bite, turning to face Mr. Rajpurohit as he entered. The congressman was a stooped man with a sharp nose and piercing eyes, his grey and receding hair impeccably groomed and his beard trimmed to a precise point. He was known for his sharp wit and even sharper tongue, a man who could cut down an opponent with a single, well-placed remark. Vijay had heard little about his politics from the report from The Guardian, it was customary as well to read about our guest so as to not get caught off guard.

"Your Grace," Mr. Rajpurohit said, bowing low. "It is an honor to be invited to dine with you."

Vijay nodded, his smile tight. "Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing to the chair opposite him. "We await the king's arrival."

Mr. Rajpurohit took his seat, his eyes flicking around the room as if cataloging every detail. Vijay could almost see

the cogs turning in the man's mind, piecing together the political landscape of the palace from the arrangement of the furniture to the choice of cutlery. He knew the type, the kind that could read a room faster than a book.

As the minutes ticked by, Vijay felt the tension rise. The air grew thick with anticipation, and he couldn't help but feel like a pawn in a game of chess, waiting for the king to make his grand entrance. It was a show of power, a silent message to their guest that the king's time was the most valuable commodity in the empire. He knew that this happened every Friday like a clockwork.

He turned to Mr. Rajpurohit, seeking to fill the awkward silence with something, anything. "How is your daughter?" he asked, his voice carefully modulated to sound casual. "I heard her marriage is near. Exciting times for your family, I'm sure."

The congressman's eyes flicked up from the glass of wine he'd been studying, and a smile flitted across his face. "Ah, yes," he said, his tone warm but his eyes shrewd. "The wedding preparations are in full swing. She is to marry a promising young man from a good family."

But before the conversation could delve further into personal matters, Vijay steered it back to the realm of politics. "And how is the council of provinces functioning?"

he inquired, his voice smooth as silk. "Are there any new bills that I might find interesting?"

Mr. Rajpurohit's eyes lit up at the question, a clear indication of his delight in discussing his domain. "Ah, the council," he said, his tone a blend of amusement and exasperation. "They are as unruly as ever. But fear not, young prince, for amidst the squabbling and posturing, there are indeed some intriguing developments."

He took a sip of his wine, his gaze shrewd as he set the glass down with a deliberate clink against the marble table. "There is a bill currently in discussion regarding Educational reform, adding more skill based elements to current system."

Vijay's interest piqued. "Indeed? And what are the chances of it passing?"

Mr. Rajpurohit leaned back in his chair, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Going by history," he said, his voice measured and deliberate, "perhaps half a percent. But with your support, my prince, it stands a half of chance of become law."

Vijay felt the weight of the man's words, understanding the subtle push for his endorsement. He knew that the empire's bureaucracy was a labyrinth, where a bill could

be lost for years in the twisting corridors of debate and revision. To throw his influence behind a piece of legislation without clear political advantage was to risk becoming a figurehead, a prince whose opinions held no real sway in the grand scheme of things.

The doors to the grand dining hall swung open, and his father, King Ashok, strode in, his presence immediately commanding the room. His regal attire was impeccable, the heavy gold and crimson fabrics glinting in the candlelight. His crown sat upon his head with an air of authority that was as much a part of him as the air he breathed. Both Vijay and Mr. Rajpurohit leaped to their feet, the gesture of respect ingrained in them from birth.

"Vijay," the king said, his voice a warm baritone that filled the space. "I see you've started without me." He winked at his son, his gaze then turning to the congressman. "Mr. Rajpurohit, welcome to the imperial palace."

Mr. Rajpurohit bowed again, his movements slightly less formal this time. "Your Highness, the honor is mine."

King Ashok took his seat at the head of the table, his gaze sweeping over the feast before them. He picked up his wine glass and took a sip, his eyes never leaving Mr. Rajpurohit's. "So, tell me, Mr. Rajpurohit, How are things in the council?"

The congressman's expression remained unruffled. "As you well know, Your Highness, the council is quite dysfunctional these days," he said, his voice a blend of resignation and weariness. "But still, we do what we must to keep the wheels of the empire turning."

"I would like to discuss something in private," The congressman said, his voice dropping to a low murmur that carried the weight of his request. "Something of a... delicate nature."

King Ashok's eyes narrowed, the corner of his mouth lifting in a knowing smile. "Consider this private, Mr. Rajpurohit," he replied, gesturing to the secluded corner of the grand dining hall. "The prince is quite capable of holding things in his mouth."

The congressman leaned in, his voice a low, urgent whisper. "Your Grace, There is great fear in the council that the population explosion in Slavic region are threatening the stability of the empire. There is a genuine appetite in a majority of imperial provinces for a more stable and reasonable approach to population control. Even in newly adjudicated provinces of Europe and West Asia."

"The greatest threat to our empire is not famine or war. It is the seeds of secession that may be planted within our own borders." His voice grew softer, the gravity of his

words hanging in the air like a dark cloud. "Assuming current trend follow the demographic trend follow the demographic transition and adjusting for the decreasing infant mortality, we can that the population of Europe would be twice than that of India in the Year 1981. Even more than that after adjusting for the decrease in the native population in india."

The implications of Mr. Rajpurohit's words were not lost on Ashok. His jaw tightened as he considered the possibility of losing the very lands that had brought him so much power and prestige. The very thought of the empire fracturing was enough to make his stomach turn. He glanced at Vijay, whose eyes were fixed on the map with a newfound intensity.

King Ashok's gaze turned thoughtful as he said, "Is there? Could you elaborate on the level of support this has found in the council?" His question was a delicate dance, probing for information without revealing his hand.

Mr. Rajpurohit nodded gravely. "Indeed, Your Highness. Many of my fellow congressmen are quite concerned with the implications of the current growth rates. If the crown were to express, shall we say, a 'neutral' interest in the matter, the bill would likely pass in a more moderate form. One that addresses the immediate concerns without causing too much unrest."

King Ashok leaned back in his chair, his gaze distant as he considered the implications. "What would a full bill include?" he asked, his voice a thoughtful murmur that seemed to resonate with the very essence of the empire's future.

Mr. Rajpurohit cleared his throat, his eyes shrewd as he spoke. "In its current draft, the bill would introduce mandatory contraceptive education and distribution in all slavic provinces. It would extend 40% holisitic reservation to girls in most government jobs in all of West Asia as well as Europe and remove maternity leave for government employees."

He paused for a moment, taking a sip of his wine, before continuing. "However, the bill has deeper implications. The secret provisions are what truly hold the power. Firstly, an extended fertility and birth rate census in 1941 across Europe and West Asia. This would provide us with invaluable data to understand the demographic shifts occurring within our empire."

King Ashok raised an eyebrow. "And what of the religious institutions, Mr. Rajpurohit?"

"Ah, yes, Your Highness," the congressman said, his eyes gleaming. "The bill would indeed restrict the church's influence in matters of family planning. They've been quite vocal about their opposition to such measures."

The king's expression remained neutral, his gaze never leaving Mr. Rajpurohit's face. "And the other provision?" he asked, his tone even.

The congressman paused, his eyes flicking to Vijay before returning to the king. "The final provision is perhaps the most... controversial," he murmured, his words a whisper that seemed to hang in the air. "It would devolve authority to certain provinces, establishing new ones in strategic locations such as the area north of the city of Tyre, Near Tigirs River in west Asia and other place to reduce suspicion of having targeted Russian influence in Ukraine, and the Latvian and Kazakh regions," he began, his words measured and precise. "On the surface, it seems like a benevolent act to boost access to education, particularly for girls, which is something we can all support."

Vijay felt his stomach twist at the thought of such radical measures being proposed. The Slavic regions were known for their traditional values and strong religious beliefs. This could spark unrest, Dowager Queen, his own grandmother was Russian. The idea of cladding them is chain was repulsive to him.

But the king remained unfazed, his eyes locked with Mr. Rajpurohit's. "And what is the council's stance on these provisions?" he inquired, his voice calm and measured.

Mr. Rajpurohit leaned back slightly, his gaze unwavering. "The council is divided, Your Highness," he admitted. "Some fear the backlash from the religious factions and the potential for social unrest. Others see the wisdom in securing our borders and ensuring the empire's long-term prosperity. Hence some of the provision may need to be watered down in case of crown's neutrality."

The king nodded slowly, his expression inscrutable. "Mr Rajpurohit, this is indeed food for thought. Ohhh, it just came to, my mother would also want an update on the new tourism bill. Could you give her one?"

Vijay knew that was the signal for Mr. Rajpurohit to leave. The congressman took the hint, bowing gracefully. "Of course, Your Highness. I shall attend to the Dowager Queen immediately," he said, and with that, he retreated from the dining hall, his footsteps echoing down the corridor.

Once the door was firmly shut, King Ashok turned to Vijay, his expression unreadable. "Your thoughts on this, son?" he asked, his voice carrying the weight of a man who knew the gravity of his words.

King asked his son with grave seriousness on his face, "What do you think we should do?"

Vijay took a deep breath, his heart pounding in his chest. He knew that this was a moment that would define his role not just as a son but as the future emperor.

Vijay took a deep breath, his hand tightening around his wine glass. "Creating an Alwati province in West Asia would be a strategic blunder," he said, his voice firm. "It would serve only to antagonize the Arab population, and for what? To sneak in a bill about Russian population control almost 2000 kilometer away."

King Ashok's gaze didn't waver. "I am not asking your opinion about the implementation of the small fraction of the bill. I am asking you what you think of the whole bill, the good and the bad."

Vijay took a deep breath, his heart racing. He knew his father was testing him, pushing him to think beyond his initial reaction and consider the broader implications. He took another sip of wine, buying himself a moment to compose his thoughts. "The educational reforms are commendable," he began carefully. "But the contraceptive measures, particularly in the Slavic provinces, seem... extreme."

The king nodded, his eyes never leaving Vijay's, "Your objection are heard and taken into consideration. The crown will remain completely neutral, and you are

personally tasked with pushing the entire bill through the congress in it's originality,"

The king nodded, his expression grim. "If it gets to war, you will end it," he said, his eyes boring into Vijay's.

"Whether it is with guns or with words, you will not relent until the empire's interests are secured." He knew that the power of the throne was not just in military might, but in the ability to wield it wisely. He continued, "Remember that this moment will determine whether you will sit on the throne or not, and what kind of king you might be?"

The weight of the words settled heavily on Vijay's shoulders, but he stood tall, his jaw set with determination. "I understand, Father," he replied, his voice steady and firm. "The unity of our empire is paramount. If war is what it takes to secure our borders and maintain peace, then so be it."

The king called the steward and with a stoic face, he said "Get me my secretary, allot the surplus from my office from last year to Prince Vijay to help him set up his own staff for the next 6 months."

Birthright

Zamia, the young maiden whose heart had been promised to Vijay since they were children, sat in her chamber, her mother's gentle hands working the fragrant oil through her raven hair. She complained, her voice tinged with a mix of jealousy and anger. "Ama, it isn't fair. Vijay is mine. Now he's with some two-penny harlot," her voice cracked with emotion.

Her mother, Lady Mira, paused, her eyes reflecting a mix of sadness and wisdom. "Life isn't fair, my love," she said softly, her voice as cold and comforting as the moon on a winter's night. "You know this today, She'll learn it when you wear the crown."

"But she's not even one of us!" Zamia protested, her eyes flashing with anger. "How can he trust her with his heart, with our future?"

Her mother's gaze remained steady. "You must show him that you are more than just a pretty face," she said, her voice as firm as the ancient stones of the palace.

"Understanding an adversary requires you to see the world with their eyes without surrendering your vision."

Her eyes gleamed but not with hope, with calculation. The path ahead was stone and silence. She would walk it alone if she had to.

Her mother nodded, a knowing smile playing on her lips as she finished braiding Zamia's hair. "You must be patient, Zai." She said, her voice a gentle breeze that carried the scent of the jasmine outside. "But patience must be paired with action."

Lady Mira washed her hands in the ornate brass basin, the water shimmering with gold flecks. She then turned to the steaming pot of tea that had been brought by a servant. The scent of cardamom filled the room as she poured a cup for her daughter. "Here," she said, handing the delicate porcelain to Zamia. "Drink this, it will calm your nerves and remember that you must bathe in half a hour for there is somewhere we must go."

Zamia took a deep breath, letting the warmth of the tea soothe her. She knew her mother was right. Rage would not serve her now. She needed a clear head and a sharp mind. As she sipped the sweet, fragrant liquid, she felt the heat of the room dissipate, replaced by a cool resolve. She would not lose Vijay to a harlot not without a fight.

Setting the cup down with a firm click, she turned to face her mother. "I will win him back," she said

Her mother's eyes searched hers, "You are right, Zai," she said, her voice a gentle affirmation. "You will be the Queen,

you just have to keep your head straight and your legs closed."

Zamia nodded furiously like a hawk, her eyes shining with determination. She knew that the path ahead was fraught with danger and deceit, but she was ready to face it all. She had been born into this world with a crown waiting for her, and she would not let it slip away so easily.

In the opulent marble bath chamber, water gushed from an intricately carved lotus fountain, the cold liquid a stark reminder of the harsh reality she faced. She stepped into the bath, her skin goose-bumped as the icy embrace enveloped her. But as the water grew warmer with the addition of steaming buckets, she closed her eyes and let the serenity of the moment wash over her. In her mind's eye, she saw Vijay, his strong arms around her.

In that moment, it was as if she could feel his body pushing against hers. His hand on her cheeks, cupping them as he kissed. Then he would whispering sweet things in her ears, telling stories of the kids they would make. Then from a distant place she heard the voice of a servant dropping warm water into the freezing bath.

It shattered her illusion, it broke her vision of what she wanted to do. She barked at the servant, "Begone. I want no warm water." The girl hurried off to the corner like a kitchen rat which runs at the slightest of scolds.

She thought to herself, she had to be uncomfortable, she had to remember that a foreign harlot was warming the bed of the love of her life. She had remember that she was lonely. She couldn't let this petty construct of her mind distract her from what really mattered. Her love, the man she had to sweep back to her side.

She picked a Gown for the dinner. A decent regal Gold Gown that was tight in all the right places, or so she hoped. As she pulled it over her hips, she paused. Had she gained weight? There was a softness to her belly she didn't remember. Unacceptable. Not while she was trying to win Vijay back. She'd have to start running again. Or at least skip sweets.

Still, tonight, it was fine. It wasn't noticeable. Probably.

She turned to the mirror. Her dress shimmered like a promise. She looked perfect. Practically divine. How could Vijay not want to tear it off her? He was such an idiot sometimes. But he was her idiot. And she wasn't about to let some foreign harlot sink her claws into him.

Her mother's voice echoed through the chamber, "Zamia, we must leave soon."

Zamia's heart skipped a beat. She took a deep breath and replied, "Coming, Ama." The words seemed to hang in the air, a promise to return to her mother's side. She knew the weight of the evening ahead, the intricate dance of politics and power, but for now, she allowed herself to revel in the warmth of her mother's love.

The carriage ride through the moonlit streets of the capital was a whirlwind of anticipation. The cobblestones echoed the rhythm of her racing thoughts as the vehicle glided through the city, the night air carrying the scents of exotic spices and distant laughter.

Zamia looked out the window, her eyes searching the shadows for any sign of the palace or the man who held her heart. She turned to her mother, the gold gown reflecting the soft glow of the carriage's candles. "Where are we going, Mother?" she asked, her voice a mix of excitement and nerves.

"To Councillor Gupta's estate," Her mother replied, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Vijay is trying to persuade your brother to support a bill that no one cares about."

Zamia's curiosity was piqued. "Why does Vijay need to do it?" she asked, her eyes searching Her mother's for answers. "Can't he just order the voting to go the way he likes?"

Her mother had a knowing smile on her face. "Ah, my dear," she said, her voice like velvet, "being the crown prince is not just about giving orders. The King wants him to learn the art of diplomacy, to understand the intricacies of the court and the people he will one day rule. This is Vijay's chance to prove himself."

The carriage turned a corner, and the palace loomed into view, its grandeur a stark reminder of the power that awaited Vijay. But for now, he was a prince, not yet a king. The thought filled Zamia with a mix of pride and anxiety. How was Vijay dealing with his first test? Vijay was always smart, but against her brother and the 40 other councillors. His position was not enviable.

She fixed her gowns as she exited from the car, the mansion was of meddling size. A little shabby for hosting a party, if somebody asked her. But she followed her mother into the dinner area. She scanned the crowd for her brother or Vijay.

There he was, her brother. He waved at them, a smile playing on his lips, his teeth gleaming in the candlelight. He was sitting with Vijay, the two of them engaged in what seemed like a serious conversation. Sir William Jones, the councillor from Bengal, was also present.

"Come," Mother whispered, taking her by the elbow and guiding her through the throng of people. "We must join them."

Zamia allowed herself to be led, her eyes never leaving Vijay's as they approached the small group gathered around him and her brother. His eyes flickered to hers, a question in them that she was all too eager to answer. She felt a thrill of excitement run through her veins as she saw his eyes wander to her elegant and gorgeous form.

She breath a sigh of relief, at least the Foreign Harlot had not corrupted his standards.

"Vijay," she greeted him with a faint sensual smile with her voice as sweet as the sugared almonds that were passed around by the servants. He looked up from his conversation, his eyes lighting up at the sight of her.

"Ah, Zamia," he said, He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "How have you been?"

"Only too good, darling," she replied, her voice a siren's call that drew his gaze to her. She watched him closely, her eyes searching for any hint of his true feelings. His touch was gentle, almost affectionate, but she knew better than to let her guard down.

Her mother, took the opportunity to interject, her voice a melodic apology that seemed to hang in the air. "Your grace, I do apologise for my absence at the gala and the Haldi ceremony. The journey from Persia was quite taxing."

Vijay nodded politely, his eyes never leaving Zamia's. "Well I do understand.," he said, his voice a soft caress that sent shivers down her spine.

Mira leaned in, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "But my dear, I was quite delighted when Zamia told me you invited her for lunch on Sunday," she said.

Vijay's gaze shifted to her, a hint of surprise in his eyes. He had not expected this meeting to be so... abrupt "Ah, yes," he said, recovering quickly. "Our friendship is indeed a treasure."

Her mother's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. She said, "Then as it seems my husband is quite vocal that the house of Pallavi's is supportive of council's measure so as long as they protect the tradition of provinces."

Vijay nodded gravely. "The crown values the diversity and culture of each region, and the bill will not be a detriment to any of them. In fact, it seeks to strengthen the bonds within the empire through education and mutual respect.

Her brother's displeasure was palpable, his eyes flashing with annoyance as he looked from mother to Vijay. Zamia knew her brother's pride was bruised, but she couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement. Vijay was playing the political game, and he was playing it well.

"Ah, the Royal Sunday lunch," Lady Mira said, her voice as smooth as the silk that adorned her neck. "Is it still the custom that the family gathers together?" Carefully hinting that she expected Zamia to be a party to the royal lunch with entirety of the Royal family in expectation of the support of Persian councillors.

"It quite rightly is," Vijay confirmed, his voice smooth. His eyes never left Lady Mira's, a silent acknowledgment.

Her brother, noticing the tension in the air, took it as an opportunity to interject, his voice cutting through the silence like a hot knife through butter. "I just had a conversation with one of the Iraqi councillor. The clerics are making quite a circus in Baghdad regarding the overreach of the council's bill on matters of faith."

Vijay's eyes narrowed, his expression unchanged. "Is that so, i was unaware of any such overreaches." Vijay was playing it dumb, ignoring her brother's concerns. Zamia thought to herself, Vijay, you can do better than this.

Her brother took a sip of his wine, his eyes never leaving Vijay's. "Perhaps you should be," he said, his voice as sharp as the blade of a sword. "After all, the clerics have a significant following. They can make or break a man's career with a single word."

Vijay's eyes gleamed with understanding. "Indeed," he said, his voice as smooth as the velvet that lined the walls of the mansion. He leaned in closer, his breath felt warm against Zamia's cheek from afar. "A certain someone in the electoral fund of the Britannica Motor Company might be quite eager to offer their assistance. After all, they've always been quite keen on maintaining good relations with the palace." Zamia thought, this is better, sweetheart. Address his concern and offer solutions.

Her brother's eyes narrowed, his gaze sharpening as he considered the implications. He knew as well as anyone that money talked in the corridors of power, and the Britannica Motor Company had deep pockets.

"Perhaps," he said, his voice measured, "this might make the Iraqi councillor reconsider."

Councillor Gupta, a portly man with a penchant for loud laughs and even larger silk robes, waddled over to their group. His beady eyes took in the tension with a greedy glint, his mouth twitching into a knowing smile as he greeted them. "Your grace," he greeted the prince courtly and then he turned to her mother, "And Lady Mira, what a

pleasure to see you again!" He took Lady Mira's hand and kissed it with a dramatic flourish, ignoring the faint look of distaste that flickered across her features.

Zamia watched as her mother schooled her features into a courteous smile, her eyes flicking to Vijay, who had tensed at the councillor's arrival. She knew her mother was playing the game, using her charm to manipulate the councillor. She has seen the same thing a thousand times over.

Lady Mira's voice was as smooth as the silk of her sari as she spoke, "Councillor, the pleasure is indeed mine. I hope your coffee plants in Nilgiri are thriving in this monsoon season."

Councillor Gupta's face lit up with a knowing smile. "Ah, Lady Mira, it indeed is, the best deal of my life."

Zamia watched the exchange with a sly grin. Her mother had a way with words that could make a snake charmer jealous. Her maternal grandfather had been a shrewd businessman, his wealth had bought more than just jewels and silk. Her grandfather's wealth had bought more than jewels and land, it had bought pigs like Gupta, their loyalty scribbled in margins of debt and discretion.

But today, it was not her mother's charm that had captured the room, it was Vijay. He sat there, a lion among hyena, his eyes shining with the confidence of a man who knew he was born to lead. He had always been handsome, with his sharp jawline and piercing gaze, but tonight, there was

something more to him. A quiet strength that seemed to radiate from his very core, like the warmth of the sun on a cold winter's day.

Zamia studied him from across the dinner table, her heart fluttering like a trapped bird. It was as if the last week was not a week but half a decade like before. He seemed so different, he is not fluttered or eager. He is patient and present, like a man who knows he will get what he wants. He was playing the game, and playing it well.

Her sex tingled at this transformation. Oh, my lover. She thought, it is only a matter of time. She felt a warmth spread through her, a heat that had nothing to do with the spicy food or the crowded room. It was the heat of desire, of power and of her future crown.

The Family Dinner

The palace smelled like marigolds and cardamom. Sanjana wrinkled her nose as she walked beside the steward, who was talking too much about shoes and tents. Not hers, grown-up shoes. He said the Dowager Queen had commissioned another set from the Jaipur guild. Sanjana pretended to listen. She was counting the floor tiles instead.

By the time they reached the east wing, she had counted to one hundred and forty-three and lost track.

She didn't want to be here.

Sunday lunches weren't mandatory, but skipping them meant you'd be missed. And being missed meant someone would mention it, and then the Dowager would mention it again, and then your governess would raise her eyebrows for an entire week like the air headed widow she is.

The doors opened into the long banquet hall, and Sanjana's eyes adjusted to the gold. Gold walls, gold chairs, gold-edged everything. The sunlight streaming through the stained glass made puddles of blue and green on the marble, but nothing softened the shine. There is no warmth in gold, only she thought. Only glitter.

The hall wasn't full yet. The servants were still arranging cushions, and two junior stewards were arguing about the arrangement of cutlery. At the far end, the Dowager sat

like a forgotten statue, flanked by two quiet maids. Her eyes were closed. She looked asleep, or meditating, or dead. Sanjana wasn't sure which.

And then she saw her.

Her aunt Shruti stood near the corner window, a glass of something sparkling in her hand, head tilted in conversation. She was laughing with mum in that airy, unbothered way she always had, like the world was only ever half-serious and entirely hers to enjoy.

It had been months since Sanjana had seen her in the city. Maybe longer.

Aunt Shruti lived in some far-off place with more horses than people and wrote letters that always arrived smelling like dried cloves and pine. She never said why she stayed away so long. She never explained when she'd return. But now she was here, in silk the color of apricots, a hairpin like a sword tucked into her braid, and smiling like she hadn't missed a single thing.

Sanjana's stomach fluttered with something sharp and warm. She wanted to run over and hug her. She also didn't want to interrupt the conversation. She stood frozen, just watching for a moment.

Shruti glanced up as if she'd felt the gaze, and her expression shifted instantly, eyes wide, mouth breaking into a grin.

“Sanjana,” she mouthed silently, one eyebrow raised like a secret joke.

Sanjana didn't wave back. She just smiled and let it fill her whole face.

The banquet hall was filling now, but only with family.

That was the rule. Sunday lunches were for blood and marriage, not ministers or ambassadors. No guards, no councillors, no guests. Just the family and the people they had to love, whether they liked them or not.

Except this time, there was an exception.

Zamia was here.

Sanjana didn't know all the rules of court, but she knew enough to understand that Zamia wasn't supposed to be seated next to Vijay at a family table. Not unless something had changed. Or was changing.

She wore soft gold, the kind that whispered instead of shouting. Her earrings glinted with rubies, and her hair was swept up in a twist that made her look older, like she belonged in the paintings Sanjana wasn't supposed to touch. Zamia entered with a practiced ease, smiling at everyone but only speaking to Vijay, her hand briefly brushing his sleeve.

Vijay smiled at her, a real smile. Not the kind he used when diplomats bowed or courtiers flattered. It was quick, small, and real. Like the two of them had shared a joke no one else would ever understand.

They sat together.

No one said anything. No one needed to. Not when Mum kept talking to Aunt Shruti with the same calm voice, and Grammy kept flipping pages in her guest ledger, and Uncle Ashok was still droning on about epidemic to Uncle Shiva. It was as if everyone had agreed not to notice, which only made it more noticeable.

Servants began placing the first course: lentil soup in brass bowls, still steaming. Sanjana blew gently at hers, though she wasn't really hungry. The smells were all warm things, cumin, saffron, garlic but her stomach felt cold.

She glanced across the table and saw Hau, sitting in her corner, half-shadowed by the tall back of an empty chair.

She wore silver-gray and hadn't touched her spoon. She looked... wrong. Like a doll left on a shelf too long.

Grammy leaned toward the steward and murmured something about floral arrangements, pointing at her notes. Her voice was cheerful, but her fingers tapped the page with soft, nervous energy. Mum and Aunt Shruti laughed softly, something about a baron's terrible poetry. And Vijay.... Vijay didn't look away from Zamia, not once.

Sanjana watched until it bored.

Then she felt a tug at her sleeve. "You're going to miss the soup," said Edward, with a sweet voice.

She blinked. "I'm not hungry."

"Then can you give me yours."

Sanjana snorted, pushed the bowl toward him, and let the hum of voices blur in the background.

The soup smelled like comfort. But it didn't taste like it.

Sanjana leaned over and whispered, “Cousin, let’s go see the paintings.”

Edward gave her a skeptical look. “Only if you can convince Grammy and Mum to let me.”

“Convincing Grammy and Aunt Shruti is my forte,” Sanjana said with a grin. She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him across the room toward Grammy, who was still flipping through the guest register while chatting with the steward. Her face was sharp, composed like she was carved from some ancient stone

But she was not so dour as she made it seem. At least not with her, but Edward was always afraid of grammy. As both of them came in front, she made starry face that she knew grammy never said no to, “Grammy,” she said sweetly, “can we go look at the paintings?”

Grammy’s features softened and her hard veteran’s voice turned soft and friendly, “Kiddo, you are going to leave your mum’s tikkas?”

“Mum’s going to save some for us,” Sanjana promised.

“Take Bahadur with you.” Her grammy said with a smile that seemed like a silent shout in a room full of whispers

that seemed to be strangled in the throat of the most powerful woman in the world.

Sanjana beamed and flung her arms around her. “Thanks you are the best,”

Sanjana walked with purpose, Edward trailing a step behind her and Bahadur just far enough back to pretend not to overhear them. The tall corridors were quiet in this part of the palace, thick with a hush that felt heavier than silence. Every step echoed across polished marble floors, broken only by the swish of Sanjana’s skirt and the occasional clink of Bahadur’s ceremonial dagger against his belt.

“We’re not sneaking, are we?” Edward asked, his voice half-whisper, half-daring.

“We’re exploring,” Sanjana replied with mock severity. “Explorers don’t sneak. They discover.”

The hallway opened into a vaulted chamber lined with tall portraits, most somber, some grandiose, and all watching. The air smelled of old paper and jasmine polish. A shaft of sun fell across the largest painting at the far end of the room.

It showed a man and a woman seated beside one another. The man Sanjana recognised immediately, her great grandpa, King Sumudra Dev, the Philosopher King, younger than in the coins and statues, still sharp-eyed. His sherwani was a crisp white and blue, with only a thin thread of gold at the collar. His hand rested on the globe beside him, but he wasn't looking at it.



It felt like he was looking at her, staring into her soul and giving some advice that she was too young to understand.

The woman beside him sat tall in an austere gown trimmed with embroidered peacocks. Her hair was pulled back simply, her expression unreadable. Not cold but distant, like someone who'd made peace with being misunderstood. Her eyes, though, were alive. They caught the light even through layers of oil and dust.

Beneath the painting was a small brass plaque:

Her birth name was Eleanor Whitestone, daughter of a minor Anglican scholar in Kent. Her family arrived in Bombay during the early years of the Great Migration- not with soldiers, but with books. By the time she was sixteen, she was already infamous for her speeches about liberty, her pamphlets on education, and the difficult questions she asked at church, that she would soon leave like most of the migrants.

She met the man who would become the Philosopher King not at court, but at a lecture. It's said she corrected him publicly, quoting Plato back at him in flawless Sanskrit-accented Greek.

And he-who had dismissed a hundred women, asked to walk her home.

"She was not beautiful in the usual way," wrote one court chronicler, "but her eyes had the brightness of someone who had chosen her convictions over comfort, and survived the choosing."

Edward leaned in beside Sanjana, eyes squinting at the lettering.

"Odyssey?" he repeated. "Sounds made-up."

"She was real," Sanjana said softly. "Mom told me once. She was the first queen."

"She doesn't look queenly, she looks like my mum." Edward observed.

"Stupid, she is our great grandma. Of course she looks like aunt shruti," Sanjana replied with a smile.

They stood in silence a moment longer. The Philosopher King's hand hovered just barely over Eleanor's. Not touching, but close. As if history had painted hesitation into legend.

Then came the faint hum of silver platters being cleared, followed by a sound altogether different, laughter. Distant, yes, but not so far.

“Let’s go,” Sanjana said.

They turned, and Bahadur followed without a word.

The dining room was lively again, the thrum of polished conversation building like music. As they reentered, Sanjana’s eyes were immediately drawn to the far end of the table.

There, seated beside Vijay, was Zamia.

She leaned toward him, holding a small spoonful of Dal Bukhara. Her eyes were soft, her lips curved in the faintest smile, ohh not a court smile, but something warmer. Something almost private.

Vijay tilted his head slightly, accepting the bite. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t pull away either. There was a familiarity in it that made Sanjana pause.

“Sanjana!” came a voice, light but firm.

She turned. Mom, poised, regal, one hand on her thali, a gesture that brooked no delay.

“Come eat,” she said. “Before somebody eats all the Tikkas.”

Sanjana gave Edward a look that said he probably would, and hurried back to the table.

Shruti glanced casually toward the empty chair beside Sanjana and asked, “Where’s Mona? I thought she’d be glued to the pudding tray by now.”

Roshani, still carefully arranging pickles on her plate, replied without looking up, “She’s in the library.”

Sanjana gave her mother a sideways glance. “Willingly?” As aunt Shurti asked.

Roshani’s lips curled faintly. “She says she’s studying for her civil service exams.”

Shruti gave a soft snort. “And by studying, you mean she’s reading *Pride and Prejudice* and scribbling commentary about which ministers remind her of Mr. Collins.”

Sanjana giggled, nearly choking on a sip of water. “That counts as political training, doesn’t it?”

Roshani sighed. “As long as she’s quiet, I think Uncle Shiva will allow.”

Shruti raised a brow, muttering almost to herself. “That’s when she’s at her most dangerous.”

Roshani tore off a piece of paneer tikka, dipped it delicately in mint chutney, and held it out toward Sanjana with the calm efficiency.

Sanjana leaned forward and took the bite, eyes still fixed across the table.

Zamia, seated with practiced grace beside Vijay, was leaning in far too close not whispering, just... lingering. She held a spoonful of dal Bukhara to his mouth, her wrist angled just so, her smile soft as rose syrup. Vijay didn’t smile back, but he opened his mouth like it was habit.

Sanjana chewed, then muttered under her breath, “I didn’t realise spoon-feeding grown men was a royal courting strategy. Should I be taking notes?”

Roshani's eyes flicked up - not quite a glare, not quite amused. "You should be eating," she said, feeding her another bite as if to plug her mouth.

"Aren't I?" Sanjana grinned.

On the other side of the table, Shruti gave a quick cough that was really a laugh in disguise. She sipped her water to cover it, but her shoulders were shaking.

Roshani didn't turn. "Shruti, don't encourage her."

"I'm not," Shruti said innocently. "But she's not wrong."

"I can hear you both," Sanjana said, smug now, mouth full. "And I accept your apology."

Roshani rolled her eyes, but there was warmth beneath it. "Finish your tikkas, schemer."

Sanjana swallowed her bite and leaned back just slightly, eyes still tracking Zamia and Vijay.

"Mama," she said with theatrical seriousness, "you've got to teach me how to cook."

Roshani raised a brow. “Oh?”

“It seems to be quite an effective skill,” Sanjana said, voice sugary-sweet. “I mean, if she keeps spoon-feeding him, we might as well start calling her Prime Minister.”

Shruti let out a sharp laugh that turned into a cough. “That is something she really gets from you.”

Roshani pressed her lips together and gave Sanjana a look, half bemused, half exhausted. “Now, little one,” she said with exaggerated calm, “that has officially earned you a no ice cream day.”

Sanjana gasped, offended. “What! That’s not fair!”

Roshani broke into a tired but affectionate smile as she reached for the next piece of tikka. “Neither is politics, sweetheart. Get used to it.”

Sanjana made a dramatic frown, crossed her arms, and muttered just loud enough, “I was just pointing out the correlation between lentils and power.”

“Correlation isn’t causation, Little one.” Roshani said, feeding her another bite anyway.

Shruti laughed again. “Good luck by the time she’s fifteen.”

Roshani sighed. “You don’t know half of it, We’re not going to make it that far.”

Across the table, Vijay finally pulled away from Zamia's spoon. As if he had finally done enough of the love-speak just as Hau rose from her chair, leaving the dinner like the doll she had been the entire time.

“Great -grandma Eleanor was a queen, but Hau looks like she’ll never belong,” Sanjana mused to herself.

Threesome

Sofia lurched out of bed and barely made it to the basin.

Her knees hit the tile hard. The cold shock of metal on her hands. She gripped the rim as her stomach seized again, and she vomited into the bowl. Not food, there was nothing left that after last night's puke. Just bile, sour and bitter, like something from the inside.

It was the third time this week.

She coughed, spat, wiped her mouth on the sleeve of the same old cotton shirt she'd slept in. Her head throbbed. Her eyes watered. The air felt too warm.

It's just the heat.

Just nerves.

Just bad food.

She thought to herself

She leaned back against the wall, still breathing in shallow gulps. Her stomach was turning traitor on her, and her body had stopped listening. She tried to remember the last proper meal she'd eaten. Or the last time she'd woken up without nausea.

The timing didn't add up. Or maybe it did. She didn't want to think about it too hard.

She pushed herself up. Slowly. Step by step. As if standing made her guilty of something.

She hadn't seen Vijay in a week.

One call. Thirty-eight seconds. No apology. No warmth. Just a cold confirmation that he was still alive and still somewhere else.

He must be busy, she told herself.

He must be, said the voice that had stopped lying to her.

They were supposed to meet today.

She had arranged everything, even the threesome.

Not because she wanted it. Not because she desired Laila. But because she thought it might help.

She thought it might make him forget Zamia.

She thought it might make her unforgettable.

Even Laila had paused before agreeing. Not out of hesitation, but something close to pity.

Sofia reached for the drawer and pulled out the ivory silk. The lingerie Roshani had given her, folded like a secret weapon.

I wore this just before my first pregnancy, Roshani had said. Like it was a blessing. Or a curse.

It fit her perfectly.

It made her feel like glass.

She laid it on the bed. Looked at it. Tried not to think about what it meant, to put it on, to step into a room with two people, and pretend she wasn't breaking herself in half.

But she had made the plan.

She had said yes.

She would go through with it.

Because love hadn't worked. And maybe this would.

She stared at the lingerie, then at the clock.

She remembered, even today, she had to study.

Statutes, case law, fiscal policy. She had exams coming. Exams that once felt like the ladder out of every cramped room and every rotten ceiling she'd ever lived under.

Now they felt like noise.

Palace politics had taken over. What used to be her full-time future now felt like a side job she couldn't quit like a sword that forever hanged on her neck.

She had never felt like that before.

Not once.

Not when she studied by candlelight in her aunt's hallway.

Not when she sold her textbooks to pay for meals, then borrowed them back before the finals.

Not even when she missed meals to attend prep classes she wasn't enrolled in.

She had always believed that hard work would earn her something.

Now, staring at borrowed lingerie and a planned threesome, she wasn't sure what that something was anymore.

She looked at the books piled neatly on the table. A secondhand set she'd copied by hand when she couldn't afford replacements. Margins crowded with scribbles. Pages warped by sweat.

They were the only thing that had ever truly belonged to her.

Not borrowed. Not gifted. Hers.

And she wasn't going to touch them.

Not tonight.

Tonight she would let another woman lie with the man she loved. She had invited her.

She had arranged it.

The humiliation didn't come all at once. It seeped in slowly, like cold water in old shoes. The thought that Laila, pretty, sharp, quick to smile, would be there with him, would touch him in ways Sofia had once imagined sacred.

She felt it in her throat first, a burn. Then in her chest, like something had been kicked in.

This isn't me.

But it was. She had made it happen.

She reached for the cross around her neck - the one her mother had given her before she.... The one thing she never sold. The chain dug into her skin now as she clutched it, hard.

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Forgive me."

It wasn't dramatic. There were no tears. Just a whisper in the stale air of a small room. A girl who had nothing left but a borrowed dress and a promise she didn't know how to survive.

"Forgive me, Lord. I, I didn't want this. I just wanted..."

She stopped. Because she didn't know what came next.

Sofia opened the door just enough to reach out. Her hand found the collar of Vijay's shirt and pulled. She didn't say a word. Didn't let him look around. She just brought him in, as if she still had that kind of power.

The room was exactly how she'd prepared it, dim, floral, slow with music on the borrowed player. The scent of jasmine hung in the air like a veil. In the corner, Laila's

naked body moved to the rhythm, her curves flowing in the shadows. It should have been sensual. Elegant. Seductive.

But when Sofia turned to face him, all she saw was hesitation in his eyes.

Still, she smiled. She had to.

“Surprise,” she said, her voice low and honeyed. She stepped close enough for him to smell the perfume on her neck, letting her fingers trail down the front of his shirt.

You don’t have a crown. You don’t have money.

You have this. You are this.

For a moment, she thought it was working. His hand reached her waist. Skin to skin.

Then he spoke.

“Sofia,” he murmured, voice thick with desire, but not surrender.

“I really appreciate what you’re offering, but right now, I need to eat and talk.”

Her hand froze mid-stroke.

“Talk? You’re standing between two half-naked women and want to talk?” Sofia thought to herself.

Laila’s eyes flashed with resentment, she’d hoped for a night of escape, not to be a pawn in Sofia’s game.

She tried to hide the confusion in her eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Just the usual empire-building,” he replied, with a forced smile.

She led him to the chair near the fire, every step echoing like defeat in bare feet. She had placed the sandwiches herself. Poured the whiskey. Every detail choreographed. Now it all felt like stage dressing in a play she wasn’t invited to perform in.

“Please, sit,” she said, still clinging to her voice’s warmth.
“We can talk and eat.”

Then came Laila.

“You brought me here for good sex, not bickering about his problem like a little toy,” she snapped.

Sofia’s stomach turned. She felt the heat crawl up her neck.

“Laila,” she tried, “please understand, we’re all under so much stress.”

But Laila was done. Her eyes blazed as she gathered her clothes, every movement filled with contempt. Sofia didn’t move to stop her. She couldn’t.

“You’re just an inept woman,” Laila spat, “living off the empire’s tit while the rest of us have to work for what we get.”

Sofia didn’t argue. She couldn’t. She just stood there, still dressed in the lingerie Roshani had handed her like a legacy.

The door slammed.

The jasmine air turned sharp with night wind.

Sofia looked down. Her hands were shaking. Her body was cold despite the fire.

“I’m sorry,” she said, voice small, defeated. “Laila doesn’t understand the pressures of our world.”

Vijay nodded. His voice didn’t rise. His hands didn’t reach. “It’s alright. We all have our battles to fight.”

She sat beside him, feeling more naked now than before. The velvet chilled her thighs.

She passed him a sandwich.

“You wanted to talk,” she said, trying to sound composed. “I am all ears.”

He took the food with a grateful nod. “I am sorry for ruining your plan,” he said, sincere. “I know how much you had hoped for this night to go differently.”

Sofia took a sip of whiskey, burning, grounding. “It’s not your fault. I can’t blame you for not knowing when it was secret. And there was no point in having sex when you are already tired.”

She meant to sound wise. Strategic. Not broken.

Then he kissed her. Softly. Gently. With no urgency at all.

She leaned into it, because that was all she had left.

“I like you very much,” he said.

“I really, really like you too, Vijay,” she whispered, her hand rising to his cheek like someone trying to hold onto a dream slipping away.

She pulled back and asked, “Now tell me, how have you been these past two weeks?”

“Shit,” he said honestly. “I am miserable. I have been working 10 hours a day without a break for the last 2 weeks. The people I have to work with are bickering like a pack of kids fighting over a toy.”

Sofia placed her hand on his. “What is it, my love? What’s been keeping you away from me?”

“Protection and Preservation of Minorities Bill.” He sounded bitter. Burdened. “It’s about giving language

rights to minorities in provinces and carving out new provinces if necessary. Father ordered me to get it done, by gun or by words.”

Sofia nodded slowly. “And you’re trying to stop a war from starting while getting your work done?”

He took a bite and nodded. “More like preventing a war by using the right words at the right time.” He paused, then added, “The bill is complex. It’s about balancing the scales without anyone noticing the weight shift. We want to empower the minorities but not at the cost of upsetting the majority.” He sipped whiskey. “It’s about ensuring that every child, regardless of their heritage, grows up speaking the language of the empire, while still honoring their cultural roots.”

“But why does your father think that might lead to a war?”

Vijay chuckled. “Pashtuns, Arabs and Alawites are all sons of bitches. Let’s be grateful the Russians wouldn’t make the same trouble otherwise my father would throw me under the bus.”

Sofia’s face grew quiet. She understood. But His words and eyes couldn’t be reconciled, she leaned in softly and quietly.

They were kissing.

Slowly, this time. Not like the hurried touch in the hallway two months ago. This one was careful, almost reverent, his hands on her hips, her fingers brushing the edge of his collar.

His mouth moved against hers with a kind of softness she hadn't dared imagine. She thought she felt his body finally, finally, giving in. His hands slid down her back, over her thighs, up again.

She pressed into him, heart pounding. The lace burned against her skin. She had been ready for this, more than ready. She had bought this night with blood and shame.

Let it be worth something.

Please, God, just let this matter.

Then the knock.

Three sharp raps. No hesitation. Not the kind of knock you ignore.

Vijay froze. His hands dropped.

He turned to the door, shirt still half-open, lips still damp.
"What?"

The door creaked open. One of his drivers, the quiet one, the one with ISB posture and a bureaucrat's dead eyes, stepped in, unfazed by the intimacy of the room.

"The King has summoned you," he said flatly. "Now."

A beat.

Vijay blinked. "What's happened?"

The reply came without drama:

"Abu al-Baghdadi is dead."

For a second, everything stopped.

The music. The fire. The room itself seemed to go still.

Then Vijay sprang up. "God, I must leave now."

He was already reaching for his shirt, for his coat. "I'm sorry," he said to her, breathless. "This can't wait."

Sofia sat very still. Her legs were folded beneath her, the lace pressing into her skin, the smell of jasmine suddenly too thick.

Of course it couldn't wait.

Not even for her. Especially not for her.

He didn't touch her again.

He didn't kiss her goodbye.

He just pulled on his coat, nodded once at the ISB man, and disappeared into the corridor.

The door clicked shut.

And then there was nothing.

Sofia sat in the stillness, the fire hissing like it had been mocking her all along. The cross at her neck felt heavier than before. She didn't cry. That would've been something. She just stared at the place where he had stood.

"You're part of the world now," Roshani had told her once.

But the world had no time for her.

Bureaucrat

The chess club of Jaipur gleamed with imperial indulgence, a salon of velvet and varnish built not just for the pursuit of leisure, but for the war of words among the empire's true nobility. Crystal chandeliers bloomed like captured constellations, suspended in a ceiling painted with celestial maps and crowned elephants. Below them, marble floors rippled with gold inlay, and on them moved the wives and daughters of empire, the elegant predators who married power, birthed succession, and whispered policy into pillows. The scent of jasmine hung thickly in the air, warring gently with the steam of saffron tea. Silk rustled like grass in wind as women bent over boards of ivory and ebony, pawns duelling pawns across tables carved from teak and sandalwood.

Roshani entered just before nine. She didn't walk so much as glide, her black sari a study in restraint, trimmed in silver. Her lotus pendant caught the chandelier light, its soft glint drawing more attention than any emerald tiara could have. She was not just another noble widow. She was a power, polished, alert, and unyielding. Her seat awaited, its position perfect for surveying the floor.

Lady Priya glanced up from her own board, a queen mid-move. "The prince is speaking today," she said, her bangles chiming softly. "Word is it's something decisive. West Asia again."

Roshani only nodded. She already knew. Her networks whispered louder than any minister. Still, appearances

mattered. She let her gaze drift to the steward, who stood ready with the radio.

“Miss Aaradhya Sharma,” the steward intoned a few moments later, and the salon, ever poised, paused to register the name.

She entered like a blade drawn without apology. Barely twenty, with a government-issued kurta clinging like it had been pressed ten hours ago. Dust clung to her boots, and her hairs wobbled slightly with each step. But she walked like someone who had never been asked to doubt herself.

One lady gasped lightly behind her teacup. Another leaned closer to whisper behind her fan. Roshani simply gestured to the chair opposite hers.

Aaradhya sat with a precision that belonged more to a courtroom than a club. She didn't smooth her kurta or adjust her dupatta, she simply folded her hands and looked at the board, as though Roshani were just another file she'd already skimmed.

Roshani studied her for a moment longer before sliding a pawn forward, deliberate and slow, as if drawing a first line in the sand.

Aaradhya answered with her own pawn, the motion clipped, professional. It wasn't hesitancy, it was efficiency.

She wasn't here to impress anyone. That was what made it dangerous.

"Strange," Roshani said lightly, adjusting a bishop. "To see someone so young sit across from me without even a trace of nervousness."

"I haven't yet had reason to be nervous," Aaradhya said, eyes never leaving the board.

"Ah," Roshani murmured, smiling faintly. "You'll learn."

A knight curved forward across the wood. The salon around them buzzed with soft conversation, the tinkle of tea spoons, and the rustle of silk. But the game drew subtle attention. Women watched from the corners of their eyes, wives of councillors, daughters of satraps, imperial aunts with memories of palace purges.

"How are you finding your work with Vijay?" Roshani asked, tone almost lazy.

"I find it consistent," Aaradhya said. "He doesn't waver. That makes my job easier."

“A steady man, is he?” Roshani moved a pawn to bait an exchange.

Aaradhya declined it with a sweep of her bishop. “He is as focused at midnight as he is at dawn.”

“How devoted of you to notice.”

“I have access to his schedule,” Aaradhya replied, still polite. “I follow it. That’s all.”

Roshani tilted her head. “I remember a girl who said the same thing about Ashok once. He had a schedule, too. She’s gone now. Married off. Or divorced. I don’t recall.”

Aaradhya didn’t rise to the hook. “Then perhaps history will forget her. It often does.”

“History forgets many,” Roshani said. “But not queens.”

A subtle shift. One of the older women coughed delicately behind her fan. Another smiled thinly and returned to her own board.

Aaradhya slid her rook along the edge. “Mayhap it does.”

That earned a glance from Roshani. Not surprised. Appraising.

“It seems that you believe the game to be simple.”

“Your grace, I don’t have that luxury.”

Roshani leaned back. The air around them thickened, not from scent or heat, but the tension of a challenge acknowledged and held. The salon continued its performance of normality, but the gravity had shifted.

She reached out and moved her queen not with violence, but with care, placing it in a long, quiet corridor of power.

Aaradhya stared, then smiled, very slightly. “You’ve just exposed your bishop.”

Roshani said. “Not every trap is meant to catch.”

They played in silence for a few moments, each piece punctuating a line of thought left unsaid. Aaradhya moved with mathematical certainty. Roshani with the rhythm of someone who understood consequences decades before others learned the rules.

“You must know,” Roshani said, “that rooms like this don’t forget. The wives here, the aunts, the sisters. they watch.”

“I expect them to,” Aaradhya replied. “I’m not hiding.”

“Not hiding,” Roshani echoed. “But not entirely visible either.”

Aaradhya’s gaze flicked up for the first time. Her voice was flat. “I serve his mission of the empire. That’s all.”

Roshani didn’t blink. “If that were enough, you wouldn’t feel the need to say it.”

A tense silence followed. Then: static.

The steward at the corner turned the dial with a ceremonial calm. The room froze with conditioned instinct.

From the radio: “This is All India Imperial Radio. His Grace, Crown Prince Vijay, will now address the Empire.”

A moment passed like a held breath.

Then: “Abu al-Baghdadi is dead.”

The voice was unmistakable. Controlled. Heir-apparent smooth. A little rough from late nights, just enough to sound human.

“I claim no glory for the encounter with that pig.

The Empire thanks Brigadier General Quasim Solomoni for his decisive action in eliminating the scourge of ISIL from West Asia.”

The room held stillness like a chalice.

“Long live the Empire.”

“Long live the King.”

Silence. Then, the quiet clinking of a teacup being set down. A murmur. A rustle of brocade.

“Gods, he sounds like Ashok now,” said one voice, nostalgic.

Another woman leaned toward her neighbour and whispered: "And this one" A glance at Aaradhya, "is the prince's new ant."

Roshani could feel the Aaradhya pull back slightly, a sexless industrious ant. It must not have been the first time someone had called her that.

No one laughed. The game continued.

Aaradhya's fingers returned to the board. She lifted her rook and set it with a firm click.

"Check."

Aaradhya's fingers returned to the board. She lifted her rook and set it with a firm click.

"Check." She said again with a sense of impatience.

Roshani didn't flinch. She looked at the board, then at the young woman before her, as if reassessing something she had already once decided.

Without a word, she reached for her queen and swept it across the board straight into the rook's path. A sacrifice. The room stirred faintly.

“You’re giving it up?” Aaradhya asked, the barest flicker of doubt in her voice.

“I’m not here to defend pieces,” Roshani said quietly.
“Only positions.”

Aaradhya hesitated. She captured the queen, like any sane player would. Her eyes scanned the board.

Roshani moved her bishop with surgical grace. The women nearby leaned in. A second passed. Then she slid her final knight across the flank.

“Checkmate,” she said, voice smooth as velvet.

A hush fell. Not surprise but recognition. Of hierarchy. Of experience. Of a queen who still knew how to win with blood on the marble.

Aaradhya leaned back in her chair. For the first time, her posture relaxed, almost in respect.

“You exposed your bishop deliberately,” she said.

Roshani rose slowly, smoothing her sari as she looked down at the girl.

“Game is a complicated, young one,” she said, her voice low but iron-bound. “You need to learn who are your friends.”

Aaradhya nodded again, quietly. A soldier’s gesture defeated, but not destroyed.

Roshani studied her one final time. Sharp. Cold. Promising.

“I believe you must have work to do,” she added, eyes glinting, “with my son.”

She turned toward the steward. “Escort Miss Sharma to the gate.”

Then to Lady Priya, who had been watching the entire match from behind her pawns: “Tell Lady Johanne I’ll be away in the South for a few months. She may run the club as she sees fit.”

And just like that, Roshani left not retiring, not withdrawing, but moving to a different flank of the board.

Behind her, Aaradhya sat still, the checkmate still echoing in her mind.

Not the end. But a mark. A lesson.

Cleric

The morning light in the Pallavi residence filtered softly through jali-carved windows, tracing patterns across the marble floor like fading calligraphy. The scent of sandalwood clung to the air elegant and suffocating. A servant folded Zamia's brocade gown back into its drawer, silk rustling like a curtain being drawn across a stage.

Zamia stood in her camisole, arms crossed beneath her chest, watching her mother rummage through a wardrobe she had not opened in years.

"This is absurd," she muttered. "I was going to wear the blue Vijay likes the blue."

Mira didn't look back. "You're not dressing for Vijay today."

Mira pulled out an old ivory kurta, plain, high-necked, with a dull embroidery along the cuffs. Modest. Colonial, even. She turned, holding it up with a look of quiet finality.

"It's too plain," Zamia said, her voice sharp, almost petulant. "I look like a governess."

Mira's lips curved, a smile that held no warmth. "You're not dressing for charm today, Zamia. You're dressing for

obedience.” Her tone was soft, intimate, yet it carried the weight of a command, each word a thread tightening around the younger woman’s will.

Zamia’s eyes narrowed, her reflection in the mirror a flicker of resistance. “Obedience to whom?”

Zamia’s brow furrowed. “A cleric?”

Mira laid the kurta on the bed, smoothing its sleeves. “A very respected one. From the Hejaz. Old money, older ideas. He’s passing through Jaipur before the next Council session. And I would like him to see my daughter.”

“You’re joking.”

Her mother looked up. “You think a girl who’s never stepped into a mosque before can afford to be flippant?”

Zamia froze, her breath catching. “A mosque?” Her voice wavered, disbelief threading through it. “I’ve never set foot in one.”

Mira’s hands paused, then resumed, folding the scarf’s edge to frame Zamia’s face, her touch gentle yet unyielding. “It’s not faith he wants,” she murmured, her voice a velvet blade. “It’s the sight of it.”

The room seemed to still, the jali's shadows sharpening on the floor. Zamia's reflection stared back, a stranger cloaked in modesty, her defiance muted beneath the weight of Mira's will. The older woman stepped back, appraising her work, her smile a quiet seal of dominance.

"Wear it," Mira said, turning to the door. "The car leaves in ten minutes."

With reluctant fingers, Zamia slipped on the kurta. It was looser than she expected, swallowing the curve of her hips, drowning the waist she'd learned to highlight. Her reflection in the tall mirror looked like a sepia photograph.

Mira approached and draped a thin white scarf around her head. It was linen, unadorned, the kind old widows wore in rural districts.

"You'll have to cover the hairline more," Mira murmured, adjusting it with clinical precision. "Like this."

Zamia flinched as her mother's rings scraped across her scalp. "This isn't me."

Her mother's hands didn't stop moving. "It's not meant to be. It's a message."

“What message?”

Mira met her eyes in the mirror. “That the girl they should want Vijay to marry still knows the difference between devotion and display.”

Zamia turned. “And that’s worth lying for?”

Mira smiled. “My darling, politics is only lying well enough that people start believing you were always telling the truth.”

The scarf itched. Zamia pulled at the edge. “And what does the cleric want from me?”

“Nothing,” her mother said, reaching for her handbag. “That’s why it’s important he leaves with the impression he has everything.”

— — — — —

The car glided through Jaipur’s old quarter like a foreigner through a forgotten prayer. The minarets loomed overhead, architectural ghosts from a world that no longer ruled, only remembered. The mosque they approached was small, ancient, wedged between two modern glass buildings like a relic reluctantly spared from demolition.

A pair of elderly men in skullcaps stood by the steps, murmuring to each other. One of them straightened as the car door opened.

Zamia stepped out, feeling the sun more than usual, the fabric heavier than expected. Her scarf slipped slightly as she walked; she fumbled with it, then gave up. Her boots clacked against the stone courtyard. Her modesty felt like someone else's coat.

Inside, the mosque smelled of saffron and damp stone. The interior was dim, lit only by the faint glow of brass lamps. Verses curled across the ceiling in Arabic. Zamia couldn't read them.

The cleric stood waiting beneath the central arch, flanked by two younger men in black sherwani. His beard was immaculate. His eyes were lined not with kohl, but time. He greeted Mira with a nod dipped in approval.

A cleric approached, his white beard flowing, his robe crisp despite the heat. "Lady Mira," he intoned, his voice rich with practiced reverence. "The empire's daughters guide its men back to God so they remember their place." His eyes flicked to Zamia, appraising her modesty, the scarf a shield against scrutiny.

Mira inclined her head, her voice soft, threaded with humility. “We come to seek guidance, Maulana, for the our soul.” Her words were ornate, a tapestry of respect woven for the cleric’s ears, yet they carried the faint edge of performance.

The cleric nodded, his gaze lingering on Zamia. “Purity in public image is a blessing,” he said, his tone heavy with meaning. “The soul of the your daughters strengthens its heart.”

Zamia opened her mouth, searching for words, but stumbled over a half-remembered Arabic greeting, her voice faltering. She managed a curt nod, her cheeks burning beneath the scarf. Mira filled the silence, her words flowing like water over stone. “My daughter is young, Maulana, but eager to learn the paths of virtue.”

A faint click sounded nearby, almost imperceptible. Zamia’s eyes darted to a man in plain clothes, his camera subtle but deliberate, capturing her beside the cleric. Stage-managed press, she realised, her stomach tightening. She turned to Mira, a question forming, “Why are we really here?” but Mira’s hand grazed her arm,

steering the conversation to the mosque's architecture, her voice a gentle deflection.

The cleric led them through the courtyard, his words a litany of faith and duty, but Zamia's mind churned. The stares, the incense, the camera's click they were props in a play she hadn't rehearsed, directed by Mira's unseen hand.

As Mira and the cleric conversed in thick Urdu that ebbed and flowed around phrases like "Council of Provinces," "Arab moderates," and "imperial virtue" Zamia sat, perfectly poised, perfectly irrelevant.

At one point, the cleric said: "I pray your daughter brings stability to the royal household. We need women who honour both God and husband."

Zamia offered another careful nod. "I pray so as well."

Mira's hand tightened lightly on hers. She smiled like a lioness grooming her cub.

As they stepped out of the mosque, the sun had risen higher, bleaching the sandstone walls to a blinding pale gold. The heat fell in flat sheets, and Zamia felt her kurta cling slightly to her back. Her scarf slipped again but this time, she didn't bother fixing it.

She followed her mother down the short flight of steps to the car. The street was quieter than usual, no hawkers, no chai vendors, no laughing schoolboys flicking marbles across the road. Just a few policemen posted at the corners, stiff in their khaki, rifles slung casually but not quite idly.

Zamia reached for the door handle when she heard it.

A shout. Then another.

Not close but not far, either. The kind of sound that carries when it doesn't care who hears it.

Her hand froze. Mira paused.

Down the road, maybe a hundred yards away, a crowd was forming young men, boys really, barely older than fifteen. They wore kurtas and jeans, faces covered in cheap cloth masks. One held a green flag. Another a placard with something scrawled in Arabic. One boy was dragging a garbage bin into the middle of the street.

Then the bottle flew. Not toward them towards a police van parked near the roundabout. It shattered with a crack and a hiss of smoke.

The crowd roared.

A line of policemen moved forward in formation, too calmly, too quickly, as if they'd been waiting. Batons out. Riot shields in place. One officer raised a loudspeaker.

“DISPERSE IMMEDIATELY. RETURN TO YOUR HOMES.”

Zamia stood frozen, halfway into the car, the door ajar.

“What are they doing?” she asked, voice sharp with confusion. “Why are they...”

“It doesn't matter,” Mira said, coolly, sliding into her seat. “Get in the car.”

“But they're just boys. They don't look like...”

“They look exactly like what they need to be,” her mother cut in. “Now.”

Zamia hesitated, her mother's hand grabbed her and pulled her in.

From the rear window, she saw one boy break from the crowd. Seventeen, maybe eighteen. Slender. A bruise forming over his left eye. He clutched a small book to his chest, dark green book with gold filigree. A Qur'an. He wasn't shouting. He was running. And for a split second, as the car pulled away, their eyes met. He looked like a classmate.

The air-conditioning in the car was too cold. Zamia rubbed her hands over her arms, trying to chase away the image of the boy's bleeding face, the crack of the bottle, the shouting. She turned to her mother.

"That was a riot."

Mira didn't look up from her phone. "It was noise."

"No, it was a riot. It could've been dangerous. We could've....."

Mira put the phone down.

"My dear," she said softly, as if delivering a bedtime story, "Some religions are so inherently ridiculous that they

must be instilled in children through fear and only maintained in adults by the oppression of dissenters..”

Zamia stared at her, the weight of the mosque, the cleric, the camera pressing down. The visit hadn’t been about faith. it was a stage, and she was its prop.

Mira turned the radio dial.

“This is All India Imperial Radio,” the announcer intoned. “At nine sharp, His Grace Crown Prince Vijay will address the nation.”

The car’s interior fell silent.

A short burst of static. Then:

“My friends.

My compatriots.

It is the duty of the state to protect all of its citizens. And I seek to fulfil that duty with diligence and love.”

Zamia’s fingers curled in her lap.

“But just as the state must protect its citizens, so too must citizens support the state in its fight against the terror of ISIL in our own capital.”

She gasped.

“What?” she said, turning toward her mother. “ISIL? He’s calling this calling them, ISIL? It was just teenagers. Kids with stones.”

Mira’s lips curved, a serene smile that held no warmth. “That’s what makes it useful,” she said, her tone soft, almost instructional, as if explaining a simple truth to a child.

The radio fell silent, the car’s hum filling the void. Zamia stared at the dashboard, Vijay’s words echoing terror, ISIL, loyalty, each a brick in a wall she couldn’t see beyond. The boy’s bloodied face flashed again, a counterpoint to Vijay’s doctrine, and she wondered if Aaradhya, Vijay’s chosen IAS officer, had shaped those words, or if they were his alone.

The car glided past the chaos, smoke curling over domes and minarets like a shroud. The city blurred, shattered glass, police cordons, a woman clutching her dead child on the street’s edge. Her cry shook her spine to the Core.

Zamia sat rigid, her scarf damp with sweat, its edges clinging to her throat like a noose. She said nothing, her

eyes fixed on the window, the boy's face a ghost in her mind.

Mira's pager buzzed once. She glanced at it and smiled.

Councillor Omar. Message reads: "The Sheikh is displeased. He may abstain."

She closed the phone, then opened her handbag and retrieved her lipstick. A soft maroon. She applied it with the precision of someone etching a seal on state parchment.

Zamia didn't speak. The window beside her stayed closed. The smoke remained on the outside. But it pressed against the glass all the same.

As they drove through the city's heart. past shattered storefronts, overturned bins, torn-down festival banners, Mira said nothing. She simply touched her daughter's knee once, as if to say: You did well.

Zamia didn't flinch. But she didn't look at her either.

She stared ahead, past the noise, past the politics, past the mosque and the smoke and the voice on the radio.

She thought. She wanted to be queen. She just didn't know what queens were made to walk through.

Her mother cupped her cheeks and said, "You did well." But she couldn't reply with warmth only with steel.



The Briefing

The bedroom was dim, the silk blinds drawn shut against the morning sun. The scent of rose and smoke lingered faintly in the air, carried in on Aaradhya's skin and caught in the folds of the imperial sheets. She sat on the edge of the bed, wrapping her kurta back around her frame with a quiet efficiency that mirrored the rest of her life. No words. No sighs. Her movements were neither shy nor rushed. Just... precise.

Behind her, Vijay lay back against the headboard, a file open on his chest. His bare torso gleamed with a sheen of oil and exhaustion. He was skimming intelligence reports with the same intensity he used to kiss her a few hours ago, though one now seemed more important than the other.

Aaradhya was already halfway dressed when Vijay spoke.

“You should’ve stayed.”

She paused mid-button at her collar. Her shirt was crisp again, re-ironed at the washbasin fifteen minutes ago, while he lay staring at the ceiling like there was a war being waged on it. She didn't look at him.

“You had a speech to deliver,” she said calmly. “And I had a meeting to take.”

Vijay propped himself up on one elbow, watching her cross the room like a decision already made. Her hair was still slightly mussed, and she hadn't reapplied her lip stain. But there was no afterglow in her, no softness. Just movement, efficient, fluid, final.

He reached for the folder on the bedside table. "Your edits helped. It landed better because of you."

Aaradhya nodded once. "The word compatriots was yours. The rest was calibrated to avoid alienating the Arab moderates."

"You're very good at calibration," he said, half-smiling.

She didn't answer that.

Instead, she stepped into her heels, smoothing the hem of her kurta. Then, quietly:

"Press division is going to need narrative clarity on Jaipur. The death count is unofficial, but climbing. I'd recommend issuing the ISIL afain in the press but the press thinks of humanising the victims. We have to have the opposition putting their guns on the security failure, otherwise there will be question on the nature of the event itself."

There was no accusation in her voice. Just strategy.

“And I want you there when I brief the police commissioner. You’re better at the... phrasing.”

Aaradhya gave a small nod, already lifting her tablet.

“You’re not disturbed?” Vijay asked, watching her.

“I don’t process policy through emotion,” she said.

Then, more gently: “You shouldn’t either.”

Vijay glanced up then just for a moment. “You don’t seem particularly worried.”

“I’m not.” She walked to the window and cracked the blind. Morning light spilled across the carpet like a revelation. “You have a better position. You just need a cleaner story.”

Vijay sat up, folding the file. “Is that a correction?”

“It’s a reminder,” she said, turning back, her expression unreadable. “You won the narrative yesterday. You should hold it today.”

A knock broke the stillness.

Aaradhya nodded toward the dressing screen. She was already stepping behind it when the steward opened the door.

“Your Grace. The Commissioner of Jaipur is here to speak. It concerns yesterday’s unrest.”

Vijay rose from the bed, already pulling his shirt over his shoulders. “Give him three minutes to wait.”

As the steward closed the door, Aaradhya emerged fully composed, her hairs tied, badge clipped to her waistband, posture firm. Her expression didn’t change. She moved beside Vijay, handed him his coat, and smoothed the collar without a word.

He glanced at her. “You’re staying?”

“If it pleases you.”

“It does.”

She allowed herself a half-smile, the kind no one but him ever saw.

Then the door opened, and the Commissioner entered, bringing with him the numbers.

And the dead.

The Commissioner of Jaipur was a large man, built like a battering ram in uniform. His boots echoed against the marble as he entered, his moustache stiff with tension. Behind him, two aides hovered, clutching files like shields. Aaradhya watched from a corner, tablet poised, expression unreadable.

Vijay didn't stand to greet him. He remained behind the long teak desk, sleeves rolled to the elbow, arms folded. The room was silent but for the ticking of a brass wall clock and the faint hiss of the air conditioning.

“Your Grace,” the Commissioner said, bowing stiffly.
“Thank you for seeing me on short notice.”

“I assume you’re here with numbers,” Vijay said. “Start with the dead.”

The man’s throat moved. “Unofficially? Hundred and fourteen.”

A pause.

Aaradhya didn’t look up.

“Officially?” Vijay asked.

“We’re still cross-checking, sir.”

“Give me your cleanest estimate.”

The Commissioner hesitated, then opened a folder. “We believe a majority were under twenty. Many carried no weapons. Some carried Qur’ans. Several were in school uniform.”

“Were they warned?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Standard dispersal orders. Twice.”

“Footage?”

“Drone and dash-cam. Some have already leaked to local outlets.”

Vijay reached for the file. “Let me guess. One image of a bleeding boy with soft eyes and a book in his hand?”

“Yes, sir. Jaipur Times front page already has it. They’re calling it a youth protest.”

Vijay shut the folder slowly.

“It wasn’t.”

“Sir?”

He looked up, expression flat. “It was a coordinated ISIL attack on a state vehicle outside a mosque. It escalated into street violence. The Royal Jaipur Police responded with appropriate force under active threat conditions.”

The Commissioner blinked. “With respect, that’s not what happened.”

Vijay leaned back in his chair. “It is now.”

Silence.

“I understand the need for... message management,” the Commissioner said carefully. “But this was a riot. Local kids, flash-mob style. Some of them were throwing stones, yes, but....”

“Did you see bombs?” Vijay asked.

“No.”

“Guns?”

“Only ours.”

Vijay tapped the table with two fingers. “And yet hundred and fourteen civilians are dead.”

“That’s exactly why I’m.....”

“Then the city expects an answer.” His voice dropped half a note. “Do you want that answer to be that your men fired on bunch of boys because they panicked? Or that they neutralised a terror cell acting under ISIL command?”

The Commissioner opened his mouth. Closed it.

Vijay continued. “The Empire does not panic. The Empire does not mourn mistakes.”

Across the room, Aaradhya quietly typed something.

“Sir,” the Commissioner tried again, lower this time. “There will be families. Petitions. Autopsies. We can’t fake this.”

“You don’t have to fake it,” Vijay replied. “You only need to frame it.”

He rose, crossed to the window. The blinds were half-drawn. Outside, a convoy of press vans had begun to assemble near the garden steps.

Vijay didn't turn around. "The Empire is built on perception. Those boys? They're gone. What matters now is whether their deaths fuel rage... or resolve."

The Commissioner's voice cracked slightly. "They were just students."

"And tomorrow," Vijay said, "they'll be martyrs. Or enemies. I'd rather the latter."

He turned.

"You will issue a statement by noon. I want ISIL named twice times in the first paragraph. The mosque mentioned as a cover location. Use the word 'infiltrated.' Use 'radicalised youth.' Use 'foreign influence.' Keep your men clean."

The Commissioner looked ill. "Sir... Brigadier General Solomoni, he will livid."

"Of course he will be. He just lost his promotion."

That landed like a slap.

Vijay continued, colder now. “And someone is going to lose their job. Make sure it isn’t you.”

The Commissioner looked at Aaradhya.

She said nothing. Her pen did not pause, kept taking a note of the conversation.

He swallowed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Vijay nodded once. “Good.”

“Will you be briefing the Council and the king?”

“I will,” Vijay replied. “And I will say what needs to be said.”

As the Commissioner bowed and turned to leave, Vijay added, “And remember, Commissioner, no one will ask how a hundred people died if they’re too busy asking why did the imperial board guards allowed terrorist to infiltrate the imperial capital.”

The door shut behind him.

Vijay exhaled and reached for his glass of water.

Aaradhya spoke, finally: “He’s loyal, but not steady. We will need one who is.”

Vijay raised an eyebrow. “You want to run Jaipur Police?”

“No,” she said. “I want to run your liability risk.”

He almost smiled.

The car slid to a halt beneath the palace’s north portico, its tires whispering against polished sandstone. Imperial guards in crimson and ivory stood at attention, muskets shouldered, eyes forward. The Palace of Jaipur did not shimmer it brooded. Its domes loomed heavy with history, its carved arches cast long shadows even in daylight.

Aaradhya stepped out first. She smoothed the pleats of her kurta, tablet tucked under her arm, expression composed. A stray curl of hair brushed against her cheek; she ignored it.

Behind her, Vijay emerged, his coat unbuttoned, his shirt crisp. His face was still marked by the long hours of the past few days dark circles under his eyes, tension set into

his jaw but he carried himself like someone who had not only survived the storm, but claimed it.

They climbed the steps in silence. Guards parted. The marble beneath their feet bore the sigils of old victories, etched and re polished, again and again. Above them, stained glass windows caught the morning sun and broke it into slanted crowns across the corridor floor.

A steward bowed low at the threshold of the king's chamber. "His Majesty awaits you inside, Your Grace. Alone."

Vijay didn't flinch. "Of course."

Aaradhya gave a slight, respectful nod. No protest, no flicker of offense. This was expected.

She stepped aside, positioning herself by the antechamber doors. As Vijay entered the chamber, the heavy doors closed behind him with a sound like judgment.

She didn't lean in to listen. Not yet. That wasn't her role.

Instead, she pulled out her tablet, tapped open the memo she'd drafted on the revised talking points, and waited, silent, prepared, uninvited.

She didn't need to hear everything.

Only the parts that mattered.

The doors remained shut. Their carved arches bore lotus motifs interwoven with battle standards, a design she had once studied in a footnote about the palace's post-conquest renovations. Quiet triumph disguised as elegance.

Aaradhya stood beside them, back straight, tablet idle in her hands. A stray ray of light filtered through the lattice above, tracing her face in soft gold.

From behind the doors, a voice broke through. The king's.

"How did... it is not..."

Then it stopped.

Aaradhya's brow didn't crease. Her hands didn't fidget. But in her mind, something ticked forward.

"How did..." That's the sound of a man seeing a narrative crack. Something unexpected. Something uncontrolled.

"It is not..." Not what? Not how he briefed the Council? Not what the press had been prepared for? Not what he approved for the communiqué?"

She could almost see the king's face in her mind, frowning, pacing, one hand at the back of his neck. He was not known for rage. But silence from him was worse.

Then Vijay's voice dipped lower, clipped, the edge of defensiveness masked as pragmatism.

"The general must..."

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Solomoni." That would be the name attached to it. The promotion was already fragile, dependent on the success of campaign against ISIL, "The general must..." what? Take the fall? Step aside? Resign quietly? Die???"

She shifted her weight just slightly, glancing toward the guards stationed at the hallway's curve. They hadn't moved.

No raised voices yet. That was good. That meant no orders had been given in anger. Yet.

"The king doesn't like mess." Vijay had told her in the first day of her job. And now Vijay had brought him a street soaked in blood, and a hundred mothers whose sons wouldn't come home.

And still, Aaradhya thought:

He won't be punished for it.

Not really. There are too many idiots between Vijay and the massacre, and Vijay was too important.

She could almost chart it: the statement, the foreign cleric, the abstentions from the Council, and the one loyal general who had now become... optional.

"Yes, The general must..."

Another silence.

She let the words settle into her mind like stones placed in a river.

She was not meant to hear more.

But she had already heard enough.

The future was shifting behind that door. Her job wasn't to control it.

Just to ensure it didn't collapse.

The corridor remained still, yet charged. Even the breeze from the carved jali windows seemed to hush itself. Aaradhya's gaze remained on her tablet screen, but her mind was elsewhere, measuring the tempo of the voices behind the closed door.

Another voice now Vijay's again, but quieter, harder to make out.

"I will..."

The phrase hung in the air like a blade suspended in motion.

Her eyes remained steady, but her thoughts moved swiftly.

“I will.” That’s the tone of decision. Not suggestion, not permission-seeking. Declaration.

I will... what? Apologise? Step down? Push the bill? Blame the clerics?

Vijay rarely used that tone unless the course was already set. If he was saying “I will,” it meant the discussion was over.

Then King Ashok. Not yelling, but resolute. Iron beneath silk.

“Yes, you will...”

And that confirmed it.

Ashok didn't grant permission often. He declared absolutes. If he said "Yes, you will," it meant a line had been drawn, and Vijay had just crossed into duty.

"Yes, you will..." It could only mean one of two things: either an order to salvage the Council's support, or a demand to clean up the city's bleeding wound with iron narrative and not look back.

Aaradhya stood still.

She didn't need to know what the exact instruction was.

She only needed to know it was final.

The king had spoken. And the prince had agreed.

Which meant her work began now.

She quickly scribbled a quick note.

Tighten press control. Prepare for additional abstentions. Flag the vote schedule. Solomoni file move to internal only.

The doors would open soon. And when they did, she would not ask what was said.

She would already be moving.

The double doors opened with a weighty creak, as if the wood itself bore witness to what had passed.

Vijay stepped out, his face unreadable. His jaw was tight, his eyes distant like someone carrying a sentence that hadn't yet been spoken aloud.

Aaradhya didn't look up from her tablet until he had taken three steps.

Then she moved.

Not rushed. Not hesitant.

Just enough to fall into step half a pace behind and to his left.

The steward gave a shallow bow. Neither of them acknowledged him.

The hallway stretched before them, flanked by marble busts of kings past, their stone gazes eternal and indifferent.

Vijay didn't speak.

Aaradhya didn't ask.

She could see it in the angle of his shoulders, the meeting had ended not with punishment, but with weight. Authority renewed, but not without price.

He carries the bill now like a blade unsheathed, she thought. No more delays. No more balancing. It's war.

They passed beneath a stained glass panel depicting the first conquest of Persia - the Philosopher King on horseback like a man in his triumph.

Vijay's steps slowed for a moment.

So did hers.

He exhaled sharply. “Press packet?”

“Waiting on your cue,” Aaradhya said, her voice low, even. “Narrative is aligned with palace briefing. We’ll suppress numbers until second wave. Cleric coverage will redirect soft resistance in the Arab bloc.”

He didn’t nod. But he moved faster.

By the time they reached the corridor’s end, the moment had passed.

She followed him.

As she always did.

Not behind him.

Beside power.

But never in it.

Royal Wedding

Roshani stood at the edge of the terrace, her gaze fixed not on the couple being wed, but on the Crown Prince across the garden court.

Vijay stood beneath the orange blossom arbor, flanked by the German councillors in fine dark suits. The second one was from Bavaria, rigid posture, ribboned insignia. And beside Vijay, almost effortlessly fluid, was Sofia.

She wore sapphire silk threaded with silver, a silent nod to Jaipur's colours but her presence was all Prussian. Her German heritage wasn't hidden tonight; it was on display. Her accent, her posture, even the sharpness of her gestures, all perfectly measured for the audience. If she was a betting woman, then she would bet that Sofia's dress had been ordered by vijay just days ago.

One councillor laughed. Another leaned in as she explained something likely a childhood story from her childhood in Germany. Vijay said little, but his smile never left her. His hand rested at her back, not possessively, not formally. Naturally.

It wasn't just politics.

Roshani's lips thinned slightly.

“The spark is back.”

She had seen it once before, at the Gala. That strange gravity between them, half unspoken intimacy, half shared ambition. It had dulled in recent weeks. But tonight, it glimmered again. Under chandeliers and jasmine, something rekindled.

And Sofia, the dirt-poor, discarded and dismissed Sofia, was making herself indispensable.

“He’ll have his bill,” Roshani thought. “By next week, if the Arabs don’t collapse. With Sofia at his side, even Germany would vote for it.”

She turned her head, gaze drifting past the soft music, past the sea of veiled nobility and brocaded ministers.

And landed on Zamia, alone for the moment, her smile polite, her stillness practiced.

Roshani set her glass down.

Time to greet the other queen-in-waiting.

Roshani moved through the crowd with the elegance of someone used to not needing introductions. Every sari dipped as she passed, every whisper softened. She approached from Zamia's left, catching her just as the girl tilted her chin toward a noblewoman she clearly didn't want to speak to.

"Zai," Roshani said, with the warmth of a garden snake. "You look quite radiant tonight. Have you met Edward, the son of Princess Shruti? He's only ten years younger than you."

Zamia stiffened. It was barely perceptible, a flicker of the eyes, a twitch at the jaw but Roshani saw it. The mask crackled. Zamia's mouth opened, and for a moment, she looked ready to say something unwise.

But before the fire could spark.

Mira appeared, her entrance as smooth as her silk dupatta.

"It is quite the event, this wedding," she said, voice velvet-wrapped steel. "The king finally marrying a noblewoman. Order restored. I heard you're leaving for the South, Roshani. Will you be taking Sanjana with you?"

There it was. A challenge, framed as conversation.

Roshani turned her head slowly, regarding Mira with the same cool respect one might show a cobra sunning on a temple step.

“No,” she said lightly. “It would be strange to snatch Sanjana from her friends. Girls need their court.”

Mira’s smile deepened, knife glinting beneath silk.

“Well, beware. Girls are quick to imitate the closest woman in their life.”

A blow. And a low one.

Roshani didn’t flinch. She simply tipped her head, her pendant catching the light.

“And that’s why I intend to stay close in her life.”

Mira didn’t respond. There was nothing left to say, not here, not in front of witnesses wrapped in gold and protocol. Roshani offered the barest tilt of her head, then turned away, letting the silk of her sari trail behind her like a curtain drawing shut.

She walked without hurry, but with intent, past clusters of ministers' wives and retired satraps. Past a noblewoman's daughter pretending not to stare. Past two old men comparing dynastic charts like battle maps. No one stopped her. They never did.

She paused beneath the carved stone archway that overlooked the central mandap. From here, the wedding looked almost theatrical, with painted gods in the backdrop, marigolds hung like blessings, the flame in its bronze basin dancing as though to its own music.

Ashok and Hau sat on the stage beside the priest, hands bound in red silk, faces solemn. The king looked tired. Or maybe just old.

But Roshani wasn't looking at Ashok.

She was watching the people gathered beneath him.

Vijay stood with the German councillors still, Sofia at his side, her head slightly tilted in attention. From afar, they looked well-matched, Sofia with her soft poise and pale confidence, him with that polished charm he had learned from Ashok but bent to his own ends.

They whispered something. It was a laugh, a quiet and genuine one. Not love. Not yet. But something. Something that would grow.

She stood apart not far, but not beside. Alone in a sea of family.

Roshani's eyes swept the room.

Shruti was speaking to the Egyptian delegation. Shiva was deep in discussion with the bishop from Goa. Catherine, or "Grammy" as Sanjana called her now, stood near the steward, nodding at a note.

They were all here.

All of them.

And Roshani was already... not.

Not unwelcome. Not disgraced.

Just no longer of it.

“This is the beginning of something,” she thought.

“And the end of me in a carter.”

The music changed flutes softening into temple bells. The priest raised his hand to signal the seventh round.

Roshani exhaled and turned, the cool stone at her back.

She didn't look again.

Roshani remained under the arch a moment longer, still and straight-backed, the only woman in the garden not moving.

She looked to the mandap again. The fire flared gold, casting shifting shadows across Ashok's face.

Her lover, he was still her lover.

Just someone else's husband now.

It wasn't heartbreak. Not quite. She had long since hardened herself against that. But there was a tightness

behind her ribs, a drop of something bitter she refused to name.

Humiliation.

Not from loss but from the demand to watch. To attend. To smile.

She had wanted to leave before the wedding, to begin her departure quietly, with grace. But Ashok had ordered her to be there.

“You must stand beside us,” he’d said.

“We must appear united.”

She had not argued.

But now, standing just far enough to be forgotten, she wondered when she had last done something for someone else’s appearance.

The scent of vetiver and old sandalwood clung to Roshani like a memory refusing to fade. She stood before the mirror, not adjusting a single fold of her sari, just staring in her eyes, at the woman who once held a kingdom’s

attention by doing nothing more than walking into a room.

Shruti entered first. She didn't announce herself. She never had to.

"You've already won," Shruti said quietly, fastening Roshani's necklace for her from behind. "Why bother watching him lose?"

Roshani's lips curved, but it wasn't a smile. "Because losing doesn't make him any less mine."

The door creaked again. Mona sauntered in, draped in marigold yellow, a smear of turmeric still drying on her wrist. She looked radiant. She looked furious.

"You're going to sit there like a statue while they hand out your throne like prasad?" Mona asked, hands on hips. "God, Mami, you're so regal I want to scream."

Roshani arched an eyebrow. "That's the first time you've called me Mami."

“Don’t get used to it,” Mona said, dropping onto the divan. “It’s only because you’re bleeding, and someone has to hand you the bandage.”

Shruti chuckled darkly. “She’s right. You should be upstairs tearing curtains. Instead you’re here sipping lemon water like it’s a political appointment.”

Roshani walked to the window, looked down at the mandap. Jasmine garlands, gilded chairs. And Hau. So slight. So breakable. So... obedient.

“He’s marrying the empire,” Roshani said. “Not her. I can survive that.”

“Sure,” Mona said. “But can you survive being invisible?”

Silence. Sharp. True.

“You don’t get to be the queen anymore,” Shruti said gently, “but you’re still the ghost they’ll whisper about.”

“And ghosts,” Mona added, “are the only women who never get dethroned.”

Roshani turned to face them. Her voice, when it came, was soft but flint-hard.

“Then let’s make sure I haunt them properly.”

The priest chanted the final mantra. Ashok reached for Hau’s hand.

Roshani turned, her sari whispering against the stone.

She didn’t look back.

“Mommy,” came a voice behind her, small and sweet.

“This chocolate shake is very yummy. You should try.”

Sanjana stood there, glass in hand, her eyes bright with the kind of joy untouched by ceremony or history. She raised the glass toward her mother with a smile so innocent, so guileless, that for a moment.

Just a moment.

She could almost forget where she was.

Berlin

The night air was velvet on her bare shoulders. The scent of roses, jasmine, and something vaguely metallic like coins soaked in perfume hung over the royal terrace. From beyond the carved railings came the fading echo of celebration: laughter, clinking glass, the gentle swell of a violin. Someone had lit the fountains. Their silver arcs caught the moonlight like blades suspended mid-fall. A steward's gaze lingered too long on them, his shadow vanishing into the night.

Sofia stood beside Vijay, his arm loosely around her waist. Her gown deep crimson, stitched with thread-of-gold still held the warmth of his hand from the last dance. He hadn't let go of her all night. Not even once.

"I think your German helped with Councillor Meinhardt," Vijay said, almost sheepishly. "He seemed to enjoy being flattered in his mother tongue."

Sofia laughed softly. "That wasn't flattery. That was coercion with better grammar."

He smiled, the old way like the boy she'd first met in a marble hallway, who asked if she like brownie and dragged her to a café.

“You did well tonight,” he said. “You looked like you belonged.”

She looked at him. “And do I?”

A flicker in his eyes, uncertainty, or perhaps calculation. But then: “Yes. You do.”

They stood in silence. The moment might’ve ended there, but she reached up and touched his collar, smoothing a loose thread near the gold emblem. “You’ve barely eaten.”

“I’ve had enough,” he murmured.

“I haven’t,” she said, teasing. “Of you.”

Vijay leaned down, pressing his forehead gently to hers. “You know,” he said, “you really do drive everyone mad. My father. The council. Zamia.”

“I only ever meant to drive you mad.”

He chuckled. Then kissed her, a light, quick, tender kiss. The kind of kiss that asked for nothing. That said nothing needed to be asked.

She thought, Maybe I'll tell him now. About the baby. About the weeks of silence, the sickness, the prayers whispered into cracked windows. She'd been waiting for the right moment but perhaps moments were made, not waited for.

"I have to go," Vijay said suddenly, stepping back. "Father's called a final council. Late-night crisis, likely nothing though."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," he said gently. "Not tonight. You've done enough."

He kissed her forehead.

Then: "Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

Sofia stood alone on the terrace for a while longer, staring at the place where he'd vanished.

She touched her stomach.

There was still time. She would tell him tomorrow. When the world wasn't watching. When he was just Vijay again, not the empire's future.

She turned, stepping inside the hallway. Somewhere a steward waited to take her home.

The torches behind her flickered. One of them went out.

— — — — —

She woke to darkness so complete, it swallowed her.

No light. No sound. No scent of incense or roses. Only the faint, sour trace of stale air and something else disinfectant? Mold? Dust? It smelled like nothing she had ever allowed in her home.

Sofia sat up too quickly and hit her head.

A gasp escaped her lips. Her palm flew up and met stone, so smooth, cold and unyielding. Ceiling. Low. She reached out in front of her. Stone. To the side. Stone. The floor was covered in a thin layer of fabric, maybe a rug, but beneath it, she could feel the chill of concrete. Or marble. Or something too indifferent to be flooring.

She pressed her hands to her temples.

Where was she?

She remembered the wedding. The music. The dance.
Vijay's hand on her waist. The terrace. The kiss.

After that nothing. No carriage ride. No bed. Just this.

She stood slowly, unsteady on her feet. Her head throbbed.
Her gown, once regal, now felt heavy and alien. Something
tugged at her hip, she reached down and found a long,
ragged tear along the seam. Her fingers froze. That hadn't
been there last night. Vijay had the gown made for her.
Personally.

Her legs shook. She leaned against the wall, breathing
shallowly.

Then, a sound that was barely audible. Metal sliding into
metal. A bolt, a latch, a key.

The door opened.

It wasn't the gilded doors of the palace. It was iron, thick,
and matte-black, as if it had been designed for forgetting.

A man entered. Not a guard in imperial livery, not a servant in white. Just a man in simple grey, civilian clothes, pressed and clean, except for the black gloves.

He did not look at her.

He said, flatly, “His Grace, King Ashok, demands your presence.”

Sofia blinked. “The King?” Her voice cracked.

The man turned. “Follow me.”

“Wait, please, where am I? What is this?”

He didn’t answer. He was already walking.

She followed. Her shoes made no sound on the stone floor. Or perhaps the floor was swallowing the sound like it swallowed everything else. There were no paintings. No carpets. No smell of jasmine. The hallway curved too often, like it had been built to confuse. It was too quiet. The silence pressed in on her ears until she could hear her own blood pounding.

“This can’t be the palace,” she whispered. “This isn’t the palace.”

Still no answer. The man didn’t turn around.

“This must be a mistake. Vijay would never.... this isn’t..... can’t be real.”

She tried to keep pace, but her gown tangled around her knees. She stumbled.

“Please slow down!”

The man finally looked back. “His Grace demanded your presence now.”

His tone was still blank. Not cruel. Not kind. Like someone reading from a script in a language he didn’t need to understand.

Sofia pressed her lips together and kept walking. Her hands clenched in fists to keep from shaking. The hallway went on. Left turn. Right turn. Another hallway. Then stairs. She had never seen this wing of the palace. She began to wonder if she was still in the palace at all.

Maybe she had been drugged. Maybe someone had taken her from her house after the wedding. But no she remembered leaving Vijay. Didn't she? Hadn't she?

Hadn't she?

There was no way to be sure anymore.

The man stopped in front of a heavy door.

It was ornate finally. Carved in rosewood, painted in lacquer, its brass handles shaped like twin lotuses. It could've belonged in the palace. But even then, something was wrong. The paint flaked. The edges chipped. The grandeur was aged, exhausted.

The man pulled the door with both hands. It creaked open, loud like a scream drawn out over wood and time.

Inside, the chamber was colder than the hallway. Not physically but spiritually. Stone walls rose around her like the inside of a tomb, bare save for a single high window that let in no sun. A table. Two chairs. One man. One woman.

King Ashok sat with his hands folded on the table. A white-gloved servant closed the door behind Sofia and disappeared without sound.

“Sit,” the King said.

Sofia sat. Her knees nearly buckled. A moment later, another man, a steward or officer, she couldn't tell appeared with a small glass of water. He placed it in front of her. She did not touch it.

Lady Mira sat beside the King. Her sari was black silk, her eyes unreadable. She looked at Sofia like a physician inspecting a dying animal: clinically, but not unkindly.

Ashok didn't look at Sofia at first. His eyes traced the rim of his glass. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet.

“You are a mistake.”

Sofia blinked.

He went on, still calmly. “Mine, perhaps. I should have brought him a slave when he was of age. A body to use, and forget. But the moralist I was, I let him chase love. I let

him sleep with pretty commoners and believe in romance.”

He looked up.

“I let him make the same mistake I did.”

Mira said, her voice smoother than silk and colder than silver, “And mistakes must be corrected.”

Ashok gave a single nod. “That they do.”

Sofia opened her mouth. Her lips felt dry. Her voice cracked: “Your Grace... I don’t understand. I.... I am a loyal citizen. I have loved Vijay,”

Ashok’s gaze sharpened. “That you have. And you are also pregnant.”

The silence that followed could have cracked marble.

Sofia gasped, recoiling as though struck. “What—no—I mean yes, but...” She clutched her stomach as if her hands could protect what her words couldn’t. “It’s true. But Your Grace, I love him. I truly do. I never wanted this position, I

never asked for power. I'd leave it all behind. But the baby...."

She fell to her knees.

"The baby is innocent."

Ashok stood. His voice carried no hatred. Only verdict.

"The physician will resolve the problem. You will not see my son again. You will return to Berlin, to your family. There will be no trace left behind."

Sofia shook her head, tears now spilling freely. "Please... don't... You can't, he's your grandson. He's yours, he's part of your blood!"

Mira's voice dropped like a blade. "You carry no heir. You carry evidence."

Sofia's hands pressed together. A plea. A prayer.

"You can punish me. You can strip me of everything. But not this. Please. Let me keep the baby."

Her voice broke.

“It’s not a threat. It’s not political. It’s just mine. Please. Don’t take that from me.”

Her eyes lifted toward him red-rimmed, unguarded. The kind of look a person gives before they’re dragged from a dream into a verdict.

Mira turned to the king. Her gaze did not touch Sofia.

Ashok exhaled. Slowly. Deliberately. Then, finally, he spoke.

“That’s precisely the problem.”

Ashok’s voice remained even. Dismissive. As if reading from a script already decided.

“The physician will deal with the problem.”

He didn’t say child. He didn’t say pregnancy.

The words were cold, bureaucratic.

Mira adjusted her shawl. Her tone was soft. Almost soothing.

“It is only the King’s mercy that saves you.”

Sofia stared at them eyes wide, uncomprehending.

Then the dam broke.

“No,” she whispered. “Please no.”

She dragged herself forward across the stone, scraping her knees. Her palms reached for Ashok’s feet, but the guards were already stepping in, moving subtly closer.

“Not the baby,” she cried. “The babe is innocent! You can hate me, you can ruin me but you cannot hurt your own grandson!”

Her voice rose now—cracked, panicked, echoing off the high walls.

“He’s your blood. Vijay’s. You can’t....”

Mira didn't flinch.

Ashok looked down at her. Not with cruelty. Not even with contempt.

Just... inevitability.

"There is no grandson."

Then he turned to the guards.

"Take her to the physician."

As the guards dragged her away, she heard the king say as if nothing had ever happened, "Mira, we haggled over dowry for far too long."

Epilogue

Date: 12 May, Imperial Year 92 and 1966 AD.

Publication: Indian Express

Q1. What advice would you offer to young aspirants preparing for the IAS?

Aaradhya Sharma:

“It is an honour to serve the Empire but just as much, it is a duty.

My advice to aspirants is simple: Master your facts. Serve the state.

This is not a position for those seeking validation or applause. It is for those who understand that loyalty is not an emotion, it is an obligation. If you are not prepared to subordinate your preferences to the needs of the Empire, you should not apply.”

Q2. If we may, your early career began during the Jaipur riots, a time many still remember as the city's darkest hour. What do you recall?

Aaradhya Sharma:

“Yes. The terrorist attack was a dark day not only for Jaipur, but for our collective sense of security.

So many young men were slaughtered by radicalised forces. It was a tragedy, and it was a crime. But what matters is how we responded.

The Empire did not retreat. Within days, His Majesty's council passed the Protection of Minorities Bill, an unprecedented piece of legislation that both protected our communities and declared to the world that terror will not dictate our policies.

That was, I believe, the final nail in the coffin of a dying ideology.”

Q3. You are widely credited with steering the adjudication of new provinces, an enormously complex, multi-year policy project. How do you reflect on it?

Aaradhya Sharma:

“Adjudicating new provinces was the signature policy achievement of my lifetime.

It was not simple. Regional histories, linguistic identities, religious boundaries, and military logistics all had to be weighed. There were competing interests, cultural, strategic, economic.

But I was fortunate to lead a remarkable team of officers. And above all, we had the guidance of His Grace, King Vijay. His clarity of vision and unshakable focus made the difference.

The bill succeeded because leadership mattered.”

Q4. There is great discussion across the Empire about the upcoming joint session of Parliament and the possibility of removing the Crown Prince’s title. What is your position?

Aaradhya Sharma:

“A joint session has been convened for the twelfth of June. It would be improper for a sitting Prime Minister to speculate on active constitutional proceedings.

However, I will say this:

The Empire’s future demands capability, not sentiment. Her Highness, Princess Eleanor, has shown clarity of mind and steadiness of hand. Should the responsibility fall to her, I have no doubt she will carry it not as entitlement, but as obligation.”