

HANDPRINTS

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Outside Bina's bedchamber they're whispering, the other wives.

Bina covers her ears. 'Why won't they stop?'

'They're frightened, Mistress,' Gita says.

There was truth in Gita's words. Bina saw the wives walking by the lake at first light. She'd followed them as far as the fort's outer wall. At first it puzzled her as everyone knew vipers and cobras lurked under the rocks by the water at daybreak, until she realised a snake bite was what they were hoping for. She pitied them for their lack of devotion.

Gita shakes out Bina's sari and lays it out on her bed. It's a wedding sari, new and untouched. The jade silk shimmers like sunlight on a pond as she smooths out the creases.

'I have something for you, Mistress,' Gita says.

She hurries from the room to return seconds later. Slowly she unfolds her right hand to reveal a lump of yellow resin.

Bina frowns. 'Opium?'

Gita nods. 'To make it bearable.'

Bina knocks it out of her hand. 'How dare you.' Gita scrabbles on the floor to retrieve the drug. 'I don't want to make it bearable. This is an honour,' she says. Gita straightens and Bina sees surprise in her servant's eyes. 'Take it to the others. Perhaps Saanvi's need is greater?'

Gita nods and hurries from the room.

Saanvi is only sixteen. Perhaps Bina should go to her and offer words of comfort? But then she remembers the day everything changed.

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The day almost a year ago when Maharaja Jai Singh brought Saanvi to the palace.

On the day of Saanvi's arrival Bina was waiting with the other women. The men had the best view as the Hall of Public Audience was opposite the huge gateway and the women had to make do. Bina made sure she was at the front and the other wives knew better than to deny her this right. She'd sent Gita out earlier for sightings of Jai and his new bride. And now Gita was back, brimming over with stories of Saanvi's renowned beauty. Bina didn't want to give the impression she was interested in what a servant girl had to say, but she listened as Gita passed around goblets of butter milk.

Jai always said Bina was his special one. His first. Bina had been the same age as Saanvi when she arrived at the fort twenty years before. And, despite the others that followed, she was the only wife to have her own private bedchamber. This gave her a hold over the others.

'Here they come.'

There was a collective intake of breath as the first elephant came swaying through the gate. Jai looked like one of the palace peacocks in his Maharaja finery.

Jai didn't even glance at Bina as he strode up the main staircase, but he didn't wait for his new bride either and Bina comforted herself with this. The curtains of the howdah perched on top of the second, smaller elephant, parted. And there was Saanvi, dressed in blood-red. Gita rushed down the steps to help. As Saanvi alighted, the sun glinted on her wedding jewels and the blinding light made Bina look away.

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Saanvi and Gita talked in excited voices as they climbed the stairs. In the shadows Bina waited. So it was true then, the rumour Bina had heard about Gita being Saanvi's ayah when she was a baby. As the women approached, Bina stepped forward. She lifted Saanvi's veil and, as the girl smiled, Bina saw the truth in Gita's words.

It wasn't long before Jai built Saanvi her own bedchamber. And the other wives looked at Bina with a mixture of pity and triumph. And as for Gita, she practically gloated.

As the months passed Jai stopped coming to Bina and she convinced herself that the groans of pleasure from Saanvi's bedchamber would abate with the summer heat. Bina's heart grew as heavy as the oppressive humidity.

There's a knock and Gita enters. She places a tray on the low table. The smell of cumin and egg plant makes Bina's mouth water and she closes her eyes against the temptation.

'Take it away, girl. You know I can't eat on today of all days.' She shoos Gita out of the room.

She had hoped her son would come, but knows it would be a violation. She has to face this alone. She rubs almond oil into her arms and face. It no longer keeps her skin supple and she suspects Gita of watering it down. As she pulls her hair over her shoulder the light catches the silver threads. Jai adored her thick ebony hair, but that was a long time ago. The wedding bangles on her arm jingle as her hands move, but her fingers are clumsy as she plaits the strands. She should

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have let Gita stay. It must almost be time. She can't be late. But she wants to stay a moment with her memories. After all, the past is all she has.

Yesterday, was it only yesterday, had started like any other ordinary day. The Maharaja and his men were on a tiger hunt. In the courtyard the youngest children, frustrated at being left behind were tormenting a baby elephant with a stick. Despite the shade from the mango tree the sun was warm on Bina's bare face. She closed her eyes listening to the trickle of water from the fountain. A shout woke her. Running through the gate came one of the Maharaja's men. The women barely had time to cover their faces. He carried what looked like a bundle of rags. As the sun glinted on a jewel within its folds she knew what it was. As the first wife her duty was to relieve the man of this burden. She took a step forward, but Saanvi caught her arm, her fingers biting into Bina's flesh.

'Don't,' she whispered.

'Get off me,' Bina hissed, shaking herself free.

The man came forwards and handed Bina the bejewelled scarlet turban. She lifted the coils to her face. It was surprisingly heavy. She breathed in the earthy twang of soap berries and Jai's sweat. Around her the women started wailing, but Saanvi remained quiet. Through her veil Bina could see the whites of Saanvi's eyes.

Footsteps draw nearer. It's Gita. 'It's almost time. Here let me help you with your sari.'

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‘Is that music?’ Bina says, as Gita drapes the fabric around her body.

Gita nods. ‘There’s quite a crowd.’

‘I must go and see.’

‘There’s barely time.’

‘You dare to question your mistress?’

In the dark passageway Gita leads the way, although Bina needs no guide. It’s a route she’s often taken. It had been Bina’s idea to have the Maharaja build a concealed room for his wives so they could observe the streets of Jodhpur without being seen. Bina likes it up here, away from the squalor.

Gita pulls the shutter aside. A pool of sunlight falls through the lattice screen marking the stone floor with criss-crosses.

‘Are you sure you want to look?’

Bina pushes Gita aside.

The last time Bina saw so many people was on her wedding day. It’s impossible to see the muddy streets through the patchwork of orange, pink, and yellow as the procession snakes its way to the palace gate. Even from this distance she can sense the celebratory atmosphere. Beyond the walls of the fort the arid sandy plains stretch out as far as the eye can see. There’s a shout and the crowds are pushed aside to let a convoy of elephants through. A frisson of excitement consumes her. The people are coming to see her. For the first and last time she will be as important as him.

‘Mistress. We have to go.’

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Back in her bedchamber Bina's hands shake as she reaches for her veil.

'Let me,' Gita says.

The bruise on Gita's face is fading. Bina has never managed to break the defiant streak in the woman. It will be one of her regrets. The silk falls like a whisper over Bina's shoulders.

Gita steps back. 'Ready?'

'Yes.'

Bina holds her head high as she leaves the room. In the inner courtyard the other wives are waiting. Their presence makes her stronger. At the first palace gate the sound of cymbals grows louder. At the second gate the priest places his blessing on them.

The Sati stone is brought forward and Bina places her right hand in the clay. There had been no such stone for her mother or her mother before her. But Bina will be remembered. The clay is soft and warm, like the touch of Jai's fingers on their wedding night. Her hand leaves behind a strong impression. She will endure.

Saanvi is hesitant. The henna pattern can't disguise the puckered skin on her right hand as she places it in the clay. The scar should have been on Saanvi's face, but Gita only managed to burn her hand. Bina should have disfigured the girl herself. Had Gita failed on purpose? Bina pushes the thought away. It doesn't matter now.

Six women repeat the same process. But it is Bina's handprint that stands out.

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The priest beckons them, but before they take a step Gita says, 'Saanvi's forgotten her wedding bangles.'

Bina's tempted to tell her to leave them, but the girl's shoulders tremble. 'I'll go with her,' Gita says.

Bina is about to say she'll accompany her, but then remembers Gita was Saanvi's ayah and, in a moment of compassion, Bina decides to let them have this time to say goodbye.

'All right, but make haste.'

Whilst Bina waits, she stands apart from the others. How could Saanvi have forgotten something so vital on today of all days? But it's obvious the young girl is anxious. When they return, both women keep their heads bowed.

Saanvi might be nervous, but Bina pushes back her shoulders and holds her head high. The past isn't the only thing that is hers. She has this moment too. At the moonlight gardens Bina touches the petals of the sweet-smelling Kamini. She inhales remembering how Jai would bring her the flowers when he visited her bed, the scent settling over them and lingering long after he'd gone. The guards shout for her to move on. She'd forgotten there would be guards. It's unnecessary. She is going to join her husband and doesn't need their escort. But maybe the other wives aren't so strong.

Ahead is the pyre and there is Maharaja Jai Singh waiting for her.

She follows the priest. The music stops as Bina faces the crowd. This is her moment. The people's respect is tangible. She takes a deep

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breath and mounts the steps. The wailing starts. It's probably Saanvi. Perhaps Gita didn't give her the opium after all.

As the first wife, Bina has the choice of where to sit and there is no doubt where she should be. She kneels before Jai and lifts his head onto her lap. His skin is unmarked from his fall. Saanvi is last and sits at his feet, keeping her head lowered. The priest holds the burning branch out to Bina.

Bina's hand is steady as she touches the flame to the wood. As the fire leaps to life the chanting starts. The women reach for each other, but Bina will endure this alone – just her and Jai. She strokes his peaceful face and remembers the first time she saw him chasing monkeys in her father's garden. She was five years old, but they had been promised to each other long before then. Now she will follow him to the afterlife. The chanting doesn't drown out the crackling of the wood as the fire takes hold. She closes her eyes and pretends it's the sound of the monsoon rains filling the stepwell and turning the desert green.

A scream forces her eyes open. For a moment she thought it had come from her, but it's the other wives. The flames are licking at the edge of their sarees and they are flapping their arms like huge birds in a futile effort to escape. She turns away from their distress and shame. Instead she looks at the crowd and in her strongest voice chants 'Ram, Ram, Sati,' *God, God I am chaste*. Let them remember Bina for the first and honourable wife.

In the mass of bodies someone looks familiar. It's probably one of her aunties here to witness Bina's ultimate sacrifice. She will rush home

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and say Bina was a good and devoted wife to the last. Briefly the smoke clears. The young woman raises her right hand, almost in farewell. There's something on her hand – a mark. Bina squints, but she's gone. Through the flames at Jai's feet Saanvi looks up. Her face is illuminated by the orange glow. Only it's not Saanvi. It's Gita and as she smiles at Bina, the heat intensifies.

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