

LESSONS IN SILENCE

The archives were cut like honeycombs and golden light clung to them, dousing every tome, painting, treatise and poem the soft gold of ghee freshly skimmed from boiling butter. I was only allowed to visit once a week—to meet with my weekly tutor before I inevitably scared him away. Every time I left the archival room, my arms brimmed with parchment paper. I loved the feeling of discovery, of not knowing how much I wanted something until I had discovered its absence.

The week before, I had lost myself in the folktales of Bharata. Stories of elephants who spun clouds, shaking tremors loose from ancient trunks gnarled with the rime of lost cyclones, whirlwinds and thunderstorms. Myths of frank-eyed *naga* women twisting serpentine, flashing smiles full of uncut gemstones. Legends of a world beneath, above, beside the one I knew—where trees bore

edible gems and no one would think twice about a girl with dark skin and a darker horoscope. I wanted it to be real so badly that sometimes I thought I could *see* the Otherworld. Sometimes, if I closed my eyes and pressed my toes into the ground, I could almost sense them sinking into the loam of some other land, a dream demesne where the sky cleaved in two and the earth was sutured with a magic that could heal hearts, mend bones, change lives.

It was a dream I didn't want to part with, but I had to settle for what magic I could create on my own. I could read more. Learn more. Make new dreams. But the best part wasn't hoarding those wishes to myself. It was sharing everything I learned with Gauri, my half-sister. She was the only one I couldn't scare away . . . the only one I didn't want to.

Thinking of Gauri always made me smile. But as soon as I caught sight of my tutor of the week, the smile disappeared. He stood between two pillars of the archive section marking the kingdom's history. Beyond the sheer number of things to read in the archive room, what I loved most was its ceiling. It was empty, wide enough to crawl through and conveniently linked to my father's inner sanctum.

The tutor, as luck would have it, stood directly below my hiding spot.

At least Father's announcement hadn't started. The courtiers still murmured and the footfall of tardiness fell on my ears like music. But if I was ever going to get to hear that meeting, I had to get rid of the tutor first.

"Punctuality is a prize among women," said the tutor.

I bit back a cringe. His voice was sticky. The words drawn out like they would morph into a noose and slip around you in the dark. I stepped back, only to see his eyes sharpen into a glare.

He was heavyset and tall. Soft-rounded jowls faded into a non-chin and thick neck. Greasy black eyes dragged across my body. In the past, my tutors had all been the same—a little doughy, a little nervous. Always superstitious. This new tutor held my gaze evenly. That was unexpected. None of my other tutors had ever met my eye. Sometimes the tutors sidled against the dark of the archival chambers, hands trembling as they pushed a set of notes toward me. History lessons, they said. Why did they always start with history? Show me a dream unrealized. Don't show me unchangeable paths.

The tutor cleared his throat. "I have no intention to teach you history or letters or speech. I intend to teach you silence. Stillness."

This time I didn't even try to hide my scowl. I did not like this replacement. Tutors generally left me alone. I never had to raise my voice. I never had to scowl. I didn't even need words. What scared them most was much simpler and sweeter than that—a smile. The moment I smiled—not a real one, of course, but a slow, crocodile reveal of teeth and a practiced manic gleam—the tutor would make an excuse, edge along the wall and flee out of the archive rooms.

Who wanted to be smiled at by the girl that trailed shadows like pets, conjured snakes and waited for Death, her bridegroom, to steal her from these walls? Never mind that none of it was true. Never mind that the closest I had come to real magic was making off with an entire tray of desserts without anyone noticing. The

shadow of me always loomed larger than the person who cast it. And sometimes that had its benefits.

This tutor, however, was not as easily cowed. I strained my ears, listening for the footfall of more courtiers, but it was silent. The meeting would start any minute now and here I was, stuck with some fool who wanted to teach me the virtue of silence.

I grinned at him . . .

. . . and he grinned back.

“It is unseemly to smile at strangers, Princess.”

He took a step closer to me. Shadows glommed around him, choking off the honey light of the room. He smelled *wrong*. Like he had borrowed the scent of another person. Sweat slicked his skin and when he walked closer, red shimmered in his eyes—like coal smoldering in each socket.

“Let me teach you, lovely thing,” he said, taking another step closer. “Humans always get it wrong, don’t they? They think a bowl of rice at the front door is strong enough to keep a demon away. Wrong. What you know is a false promise of strength. Let me show you weakness.”

The room had never felt this empty, like I was trapped between the space of an echo and a scream. I couldn’t hear anything. Not the parrots scuttling on their branches or the court notary droning his list of the afternoon’s agenda. Silence was a silhouette, something I could trace.

The tutor’s voice transcended sound, muddying my thoughts. “Let me teach you the ways of demons and men.”

My knees buckled. His voice echoed with all the desperation of someone who had not slaked his thirst in eons and had just

spied a goblet of water sweating beads of condensation, thick as planets. His voice lulled me, coated me. I wanted to move, but found myself rooted to the spot. I glanced up, fighting the drowsiness, and saw his shadow smeared on the wall—horned, furred belly skating over the floor, shifting into man and beast and back. Devil. *Raksha*.

Somewhere in my mind, I knew he wasn't real. He couldn't be. This was the court of Bharata, a city like a bone spur—tacked on like an afterthought. Its demons were different: harem wives with jewels in their hair and hate in their heart, courtiers with mouths full of lies, a father who knew me only as a colored stone around his neck. Those were the monsters I knew. My world didn't have room for more.

The drowsiness slipped off me. When I shook myself free of it, my smile was bitter smoke, my hackles raised until I thought my skin had given way to glass. Now, he seemed smaller. Or maybe I had grown bigger. My surroundings slid away, and all that was left was fire licking at the earth, the edge of a winter eclipse, stars whirling in a forest pool and the pulsing beat of something ancient running through my veins.

"I don't care for the ways of men and demons," I hissed. "Your lessons are lost on me."

Whatever darkness my mind had imagined melted. Parrots singing. Fountains gurgling. The distant voice of a courtier droning about wars. Sound pushed up between those lost seconds, blossoming into fierce murmurs, hushed tones. What had I imagined? I searched for the tutor's shadow splayed against the wall. I waited to see something slinking along the ground, darkness

stretched long and thin over tomes and cracked tiles, but there was nothing.

"*You,*" he hissed in an exhale that ended in a whimper. He backed into a corner. "It's you. I thought . . ." He gulped down the rest of his words. He looked lost.

I blinked at him, shaking off the final remnants of that drowsiness. I felt groggy, but not with sleep. A moment ago, I thought I had seen horns limned in shadow. I thought something had coursed through me in defense—a low note of music, the bass of a thunderclap, a pleat of light glinting through a bruised storm cloud. But that couldn't be right. The person before me was just . . . a person. And if I had heard him say something else, saw him morph into something else, it was all distant and the fingers of my memory could do nothing but rummage through images, hold them to the light and wonder if I hadn't slipped into a waking nightmare.

The tutor trembled. Gone was the blocky figure choking out the light and lecturing me on silence. Or had he said something else in those lost moments? Something about weakness and demons. I couldn't remember. I clutched a table, my knuckles white.

"I must go," he said, his face pale, like blood had drained from him. "I didn't know. Truly. I didn't. I thought you were someone else."

I stared at him. What did he mean? How could he not know who I was? Someone must have told him that I was the princess he would be tutoring this afternoon. But I was wasting time. He was just another tutor scared by a reputation pronounced by far-away lights in the sky. Curse the stars.

"Leave," I said. "Inform the court that we completed a full