

The Open Window

It had all happened quickly. Hot blood was still running in rivulets down her left cheek. Pranav was lying face-first in the doorway. The masked stranger picked up the knife and examined it closely, oblivious to the uncomfortable serenity it had created. As if sensing her gaze, it raised its head. Their eyes met. Slowly, it raised a finger to its concealed lips. A bloodcurdling scream emanated from Seetha's throat as the intruder closed the door behind them.

Pranav believed that he had every right to be angry with Seetha. After providing her with the luxury of a laborer's wife for three years, only a barren womb was offered in return. His job at the railroad was on the line because of the resistance movements. Malayan fools were delusional enough to postulate independence from the Japanese garrison. Even the lesser man knew that being unemployed in 1942 spelt a death sentence. Hence, Pranav had to make his decision within two hours.

He was confident Seetha would not put up any resistance. Nevertheless, Pranav knew he had to be careful. He had escaped by the skin of his teeth after his previous handiwork with Rani. Another mistake with Seetha was too luxurious. Hence, this one was sharpened with immaculate precision for the cleanest cut.

The first strike had caught her by more surprise than pain. Her interscapular region usually bore the brunt of his rage. The alcohol may have encouraged him to aim for her temple that night. As she hit the floor, she noticed the blade in his hand. Seetha could not recall if she screamed, but she must have because his maniacal grin quickly morphed into an irritated snarl. Through ringing ears and the adrenaline in her throat, she heard faint knocking on the door.

Pranav was not expecting visitors that night and neither should Seetha. Hence, the insistent knocking on the door before the climax was a major inconvenience. He worried that the commotion had reached the neighbors. But Seetha had not screamed, nor was the impact of her body on the wooden floor loud enough to provoke any suspicion. Securing the bloodied blade in his back pocket, he reluctantly swung the door open. A greeting later, Pranav was motionless on the ground.

“Enough with that noise. He is not dead. But you need to leave immediately.”

The adrenaline permeating her very soul nauseated her. Although addressed in her mother tongue, speaking was paradoxical. Kneeling beside her, the figure removed their mask to reveal the ugliest old woman Seetha had ever seen. Most of her face was charred and one of her eyes fully white. Her wrinkled skin and teeth reminded Seetha of the rotting corpse that fueled her childhood nightmares. Seetha opened her mouth but was stopped by the blade against her trachea.

“If you scream again, you will lose your chance.” She studied the frightened woman with her good eye. “He's not good for you. Leave this place.”

“Do... do I know you?” Seetha croaked weakly.

The hag gazed at her forlornly. “You might. But even if you don't, they are on their way. Malaya is leaving this hell-hole, and it is your turn now.”

Seetha stared at the old woman in confusion.

“It’s not wrong.” The hag’s tone was sharper now. “His punches will never turn back into those caresses. Seetha, I know I frighten you. But if I don’t speak like this now...” she ran a finger over her disfigured face “... coming here is pointless for us.”

Seetha was about to question ‘us’ when the old woman turned towards the gaping front window. She had heard them too. Footsteps. Seetha’s chest tightened as a look of glee overwhelmed the hag’s scorched features. “Just in time. Now go and don’t think”. Replacing the mask on her face, she danced over Pranav’s body and hobbled away into the night. The last thing to grace Seetha’s vision was the faintest glint of the knife in the hag’s hand.

Succumbing to her emotions, Seetha cried heartily. She was almost convinced that this had been another one of her nightmares. Mustering the strength she had left, she crawled towards Pranav and attempted to revive him.

“Seetha!”

Chanvi was standing outside her window. Since Seetha had exchanged only a few words with her neighbors, she was surprised that Chanvi even knew her name. A bandage was wrapped haphazardly around Chanvi’s face, leaving only her eyes and mouth exposed. One of her eyes was eerily white. The answer to her silent question hit Seetha like a bullet. The realization was so drastic that her facial features hardened with determination. She was still dazed, but the hag was right.

Lien smiled at her with a bleeding lip. Sharma carried a sleeping boy in her bruised arms. Rosita sported a fresh burn on her leg but limped gaily alongside them. None of them had seen the hag but did report a masked female walking into their homes and attacking their husbands. Chanvi was the only one who bore full witness to their identities.

“The acid burned my eye so much that I thought I was hallucinating at first. But she walked in and started wrapping my face ... heaven knows where she got it from. She claimed she was from the future – 1985. Something about AWAS and women’s rights. I asked her why she had come, and all she said was ‘changing history’. She told us to catch the 11:20 bus. That leaves directly for Kuala Lumpur.”

”Changing history?” Rosita quipped loudly. “What does that mean? And how can she be from 1985?”

“I don’t know. But she said we cannot win by physical strength. And we cannot win alone. This is our fight against them now. We. Us.”

“How absurd!” Sharma exclaimed silently, careful not to wake her son. “If anyone caught us at this ungodly hour, we are done for.”

“Don’t worry,” said Chanvi. “It is all over.”

Silence.

“You didn’t hear? The Japanese lost the war.”