

She was a not prisoner at his house. He had taken all efforts to ensure that she would live like a queen, the queen that he imagined her to be. However, for the world outside, he had brought her here without her permission and was now keeping her a prisoner. However, he did not want to spoil her name, and more importantly, he would not allow anything to spoil her husband's name. It did not matter that when this was over and done with, the dust had finally settled, and everything had been dusted, his name would roll in grime and he would have maligned himself forever. For him it was worth it; for her, every stone, every shoe, and every word that would be thrown at him, was worth it.

It was more a month since he had brought her here. He remembered the day five months ago when he had first set eyes on her. Since that day, a passion that he did not know had entered his system and had taken over every waking hour. It had taken over every sleeping hour and even in his dreams, he dreamt of her, he dreamt for her. It was then he decided that he would have her, no matter what the cost.

It was not very hard to kidnap her; after all, given his status as the preeminent person in the district, there were scores of people who would readily do his bidding. Add to this that he was rich and he could purchase those who refused to do his wishes, it was more or less his reign on the district. He had the husband called out of the house on some pretext or the other and when the husband was away, led a small band of men to her house, and got her here.

Here was a holiday house that he maintained in the outskirts of the district. It was something that not many people knew. When his life became too stressful, he would pull a few days out of his life and head here, peaceful and quite, surrounded by Ashoka trees, separated from the outside world by an electrified fence, guarded twenty-four hours by a band of well-built, well-armed men extremely loyal to him. It was to this house that he brought her.

The house itself had all the conveniences that a person could desire. Despite the fact that an electrified fence surrounded the house, there were acres of well-maintained land to walk around in, the garden was exquisite and well maintained, and there was a fountain in the middle of the garden, imported of course.

The house itself was cozy with well-ventilated rooms. Each of the rooms had a view of the outside world and he had ensured that he had filled the library with books. There were books on every possible topic from almost every author that he had heard of. Books lined two walls of the room and the other two walls were lined with pictures, reproductions of the great works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Picasso. He was a connoisseur of the truest sense.

It was to this trophy house that he had brought her; another one beauty that he admired and another beauty that he needed to possess.

That was a month ago.

During the month, she had made herself at home; she had even developed a daily ritual and used to follow it strictly, without missing even a single aspect of it.

She awoke daily at five sharp. There was no alarm in the house; he had wanted the house to be more of a holiday home, without the need for clocks and watches. However, during the few days he spent in the house, he noticed that she was up at five sharp, no matter what. Even though she was not required to do any household chores, there was an army of servants around to serve to her every need; she was up at five sharp.

She would then proceed to sit in the garden until the sun came up, did not speak a word to the guard who made it a point to wish her good morning every morning as she came out into the garden.

Once the sun was up, she would then retire to the library after her bath with her cup of coffee and a book. She would sit around reading and thinking for the better part of the morning. She ate little if at all anything and generally restricted herself to a single meal and two cups of coffee, one as mentioned in the morning and another in the evening. She did make it a point to go and sit in the garden to watch the sun set between the Ashoka trees.

Just as she had a routine, he had made it a point to visit her daily. It was not possible for him to live in the same house. He had to take care of his business in the district headquarters. However, he did come every day, sharp at four, and usually he found her at the library. He had read most of the books in the library over the years and would engage her in a conversation about what it was that she was reading. He questioned her about the book, she answered, he questioned her about the author's thought process, and she answered giving him her perspective. However, when he moved on to other topics, about her life, her husband, she was silent. She did smile when he asked her those questions, but she did not answer.

As the evening came, and the sun began his descent into the night, she would get up from the chair, making sure that she moved the bookmark to the page she was reading and would walk out into the garden. Not a word was said; the first time he had not a clue what to do so he just followed her.

She would go and sit in the garden and he would go and sit not alongside, but a few feet away. They exchanged no words, she would be gazing upon the setting sun as if it were some long lost lover, one that she had no means of reaching, one that came to her in the mornings and was deserting her in the evening. He almost felt that she

was having a conversation with the sun, saying things that he wanted to listen to, saying them not to him, but to the sun.

He would gaze at her, not saying a word, for he was not sure what it was that he could say. He had tried talking to her about what was going on in the outside world given that she was isolated from everything around; neither was there a television nor was there a radio in the house. It was isolated in all senses of the word. However, she would not respond. He did not know if she chose not to listen or she chose not to reply.

Over the past month he got used to the routine and stopped talking to her about anything but the books she read. It was more than what he expected; although it was lesser than what he wanted, he was willing to settle for what he got from her, he was willing to settle for whatever he got from her.

It had been three days since his last visit. However, when he came to the house, her actions signified that she had hardly noticed his absence. Nothing in her eyes or in her demeanor seemed to question him over his absence over the last few days. Even though it was something he was used to, it did hurt him that she chose to ignore and what hurt even more was the fact that she was so successful in ignoring him

He walked to the empty chair near her and sat himself down.

"What have you been reading?" he asked her after what to him seemed an eternity of silence.

"Ramayan".

"I have not read that book for so long. The story remains ingrained in my head, the righteous Ram, the evil Ravan, the godly Sita, the devout Hanuman; the story is amazing."

"So, if you were given a chance to go back in time and influence Valmiki, what is the one thing that you would have him change in the story?"

For a moment, he was baffled. Was he hearing right? Did she actually ask him a question; did she start a conversation; did she utter something that was more than just a reply?

"Umm, the relationship, or lack of it between Ravan and Sita, I would have to say," he replied slowly.

She smiled and nodded.

Unsure if she wanted to know more, he went on, "It is plainly obvious to the reader the difference between Ram and Ravan and the extent to which they love Sita. Ram's love for her is more of a duty, he wed her for he was told to do so by his guru, and he was ready to leave her behind in Ayodhya as he left for exile. I have come to believe that his rushing to search for Sita was done more as a result of the fact that she was his wife and it was his duty to protect her rather than the fact that he loved her. For if you love someone, there cannot be any doubt and the very fact that he tested her fidelity not once, but twice shows the fickleness of the man. Ravan on the other hand was willing to destroy everything in his path; he even ended up destroying his own dynasty, and his clan for the love he had for that woman. Now you tell me which man loved her more."

She smiled.

She did not reply; instead, after a moment of thought, she asked him another question, "Do you think that Ravan would have killed Ram if he had the opportunity?"

After a brief thoughtful pause he replied, "I do not think that Ravan would have killed Ram. Although every word that Ravan utters seems to have the same motive that he was going to kill Ram, when the moment came, if Ravan had the opportunity, he would not have killed Ram."

"Why is that?"

"I think that Ravan knew that when Sita did not come to him when Ram was alive and well, there is no way that she would come to him once Ram is dead. It is easier to love a dead person than it is to love a live one. The faults vanish and you are reminded of only their good qualities. If Ram had died, especially at the hands of Ravan, then Ram would have become a martyr, who lost his life for the sake of his lovely wife. Ravan knew that if Ram were to die, then there would be no way that Sita would belittle the memory of the man by giving herself to Ravan. No, I strongly believe that Ravan would have killed all the monkeys, even the kings of monkey, and he probably would have even killed Ram's brother Lakshman; however, I do not think that if the cut came to the chase, Ravan would have killed Ram. I think that Ravan entered the war with Ram and his monkeys with the knowledge that he would meet his end with Ram and not the other way around."

After another bout of silence, she asked, "So why did you not come for the last three days?"

He was further taken back. He realized that she noticed his visits. In fact, he was more than struck by the fact that she noticed not only his presence, but also his absence.

"I was caught up with some panchayat issues. Those monkeys take extra pleasure in issues that deal with me. They seem to carry a particular interest in my affairs. If they could, they would lay my affairs bare and laugh it all over town."

"And what is that you are going to do now that the issues are ones concerning my husband?"

"Yes, they do concern your husband. He has apparently heard word that you are in my custody. How do you know that it concerns your husband?"

"I did not, I guessed. My husband has always been close friends with the people whom you call monkeys. Given the state of your current affairs, I had a strong inkling that it might be concerning me or rather him."

"He has been having doubts that you are in my custody for the last month. He has tried keeping tracks of my whereabouts; however, I have always managed to give him the slip. He has raised the issue with his so-called friends and they have asked me to let them into all my houses tomorrow to check. I would rather not have you here when they come, for I cannot stand anyone finding fault with you. I would rather die than have anyone cast even a shadow of doubt on you."

She remained silent.

"I plan to take you away from here in the middle of the night and leave you in the proximity of your house. I do not know what you can say to explain your absence from your home. I hope that you can come up with something."

"Do not worry about me, what would you do if I were to accuse you once you have let me go? You seem to have been so immersed in protecting me that you seem to have forgotten to protect yourself from me."

"I do not have anything to protect myself from me. I would gladly go to the gallows, if only I knew it were from your hands."

She laughed; it was not a sarcastic laugh. It was more of a laugh out of merriment, and she laughed as if there was nothing that worried her.

Emboldened, he carried on, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure" was her spontaneous reply.

"Did you notice that you and I here seem to represent the Ramayan in many ways?"

"That thought did run through my head."

"However, there is one major difference. While Sita almost brought the entire world down when Ravan came to take her away, you barely spoke a word. I did not have to gag you in fear of your calling the neighborhood for help, I did not have to have your hands tied in fear of you trying to beat me up; in fact I did not even have to lift you over my shoulders to carry you away. All I did was land up at your house and once you saw me, all you did was walk out of the house and into the waiting car. I have never been able to reconcile that action on your part."

"I wanted to be with you. I have seen you before and the urge to be with you has been with me ever since. So, I came away when you came for me."

"If you wanted to be with me, how come you never came to me on your own?"

"I am not at liberty to come on my own. I am a woman, I have been taught to keep my urges to myself, I have been taught that I have to be a faithful wife, a loving mother, a caring daughter-in-law; I was never taught how to deal with urges of my own."

"If that is the case, how come over the last month, you did not let me touch you once? It seems to me that you are wearing a dress made of fire; every time that I even came close, it seemed to burn me."

She did not reply. She looked out the window and standing up from her chair, she left the room.

He looked out too, the sun was beginning his descent and he knew that she was going into the garden. He walked out and found her sitting near the fountain, looking at the sun through the water dropping from the fountain.

They sat like that until the top of the sun disappeared from view and it was getting dark. As was his routine, he got up to leave.

As he stood up, she spoke.

"Do you know who my favorite character in Ramayan is?"

Without waiting for his reply, she carried on, "There is no character in the entire epic that comes close to Ravan. In all aspects, he is the complete man. He is more of a saint than a man. He is devout to the lord, he is supremely confident of his own abilities; he runs his kingdom and what a kingdom it was. There were rumors, if one could call them that now, that it surpassed the splendor of even Ayodhya. His subjects loved him, loved him to the extent of even giving up their lives for him. Yes,

he was egoist, but you tell me which man is not an egoist. When you are that good, an ego is obviously a part and parcel of the property. However, what impresses me most of Ravan, it is the way that he treated Sita. For all his power, he could have had her anytime and anywhere he chose and she could have not done anything to stop him. That is where Ravan as a man makes his mark. He does not take her and is willing to even go to war, to certain death, to have the opportunity of her saying yes."

He looked at her and smiled, "It is getting late and I have to arrange transportation for your return tonight."

As he turned to leave, he felt a finger on this cheek. She was standing behind him and as she ran her finger over his cheek, she whispered into his ear, "Even if you are Ravan, I am no Sita."