

Sometimes a Raincloud

a faerytale

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Long ago, before the land known as India split into three, its people lived in languages with geometric words. The languages bled from deep sapphire to sharp green and hardened like sun-struck pearls. Ghazals romanced the moon. In a tribe far into the east, hidden outside a village in Chittagong, a girl named Masna ran her comb through locks of stormy hair. In the morning as the sun pierced the crimson horizon, Masna combed by the river for fish. She ran her fingers through the movement of the cold twisting water as she separated the knots, and the fish sprung, sleepily, into the net of her hair, where they rested, gasping for air, struck by the star-like gleam of the soft tangles. Masna walked barefoot through the villages, the thickness of her hair branching behind her, the rising and falling of her voice luring clawed ants out of seashells on the beach. Children who waited to collect the shells once the creatures abandoned them ran after her with anticipation, whistling cheerfully into flutes that beguiled poisonous snakes from the nearby jungles, and leaving no footprints in the sand.

Monsoons showered the generative land, which had emerged from the sea and was due to sink into the ocean once more. At midnight, Masna danced with tigers, who called to her as she slept. Sometimes, the tigers killed wild birds, and sometimes they killed children. Masna's dark eyes leaked as she wove the tigers and the children into her sari. She favored rich, powdery scarlet, but

the sari was nearly always a lush green, darkened with welled leaves. When the British came, first with gifts, and soon after with weapons, Masna stopped singing. She retreated, quietly, into the shadowy corners, into the roses and trees of her stitching, and into the night that slanted over her. The conquerors spoke a language that tasted like water against spoiled metal. Their words cut her melodious tongue.

The strangers were armed with the ferocity of dragons. They came from the South, but they believed it to be the North and drew it so on their maps. The world titled for the Empire. They subjugated countries that were, from them, far away, mysterious, and, to their calculative gazes, untouched by the refined hand of civilization. Everywhere they attacked in the villages of Chittagong, there was violent resistance, immense sorrow, and the transpiration of the most depraved of crimes. Girls disappeared in the night. The bellies of starved children were pumped with air until they burst. Arms and legs, dismembered, and strands of hair collected on the banks, and both the young and elderly thinned to skeletal remains. The youth carved tunnels deep beneath the earth to escape executions. But with dragons, laced in white scales, weaponry as fierce as the monstrous embodiment of fire, victory for the conquerors was frequent and inevitable.

When a girl named Aadila returned from Lahore to the village near Chittagong, she arrived armed as well, with propositions. Her sari was a shade of sky blue that broke Masna's heart; trimmed with silver, the sari and the heart fluttered upward toward new constellations as though greeting an old friend. Aadila was clear-eyed and restless; she had travelled far to study philosophy and law, and her hair was arranged with jasmine and kept away from her eyes.

"The dragons are not theirs," Aadila related to Masna. "They have been stolen from Nanjing and painted white."

Masna said nothing. With the new violent seasons, waters had warmed and the tigers retreated into the forests. Masna's feet wandered in the night, but despite the longing in her own heart Masna had not travelled like Aadila, nor like Aadila's friend, Zerina, from Kāñci-pura. Aadila had met Zerina in Nanjing. Masna did not know the girl well.

"I have never seen a dragon before, but Zerina has seen them," Aadila added. "Zerina is well-experienced in trade, but the dragons she has seen were very far from the Silk Route. They live in the mountains."

"They will fall," insisted Zerina, who had studied in Persia and brought, with her trades, the knowledge of new religions that spoke of jinn made of fire, with a single diety and a new Prophet. "It is Foreseen. They believe that we are less human, that we are Other, but there is no Other; without comparison, there cannot be *one*, which can exist only with *two* or *three*."

"Only All," Aadila agreed. "In Love, there is no Other."

Masna said nothing, but listened to this philosophy, her cheeks sunken into her dark eyes. She heard, in the distance, a tiger growl, but it might have been the teeth in her stomach. She felt the teeth growing slowly as she slept.

Soon, when the most restless among the conquered people made way for an uprising as Zerina had prophesized, and as was inevitable and could have been Foreseen, the equipped conquerors arranged for a cruel agreement: liberation would be granted to the conquered peoples if, in three trials, a dragon were convinced to allow the competitor to live.

Unwilling to lose to what they viewed as the simplest of wit—"They want us to know we are monsters, not human," repeated Aadila in tears the night of the proposition—the conquerors captured three among those whom they believed to be the weakest: three girls, who could not stand in strength against a dragon, three children who had barely reached womanhood and could access neither the wisdom nor experience of the grown. From a village near Chittagong, the imperialists took the girls from their sleep.

The girls had been resting together after speaking to Masna. Only Masna had been awake. She had faced Zerina and Aadila as the three of them were smuggled. The caravan drove into the jeweled capital, and although the girls were well, the fright and sorrow made the shadows on their faces appear skeletal. At their seizure, Zerina and Aadila had screamed, but Masna, her eyes dark and voice low, had sounded low, the base strings of a sitar, a tiger's growl. *A monster against a monster,* laughed the conquerors, their tongues still foreign, about the dragon against the girls. *Isn't it then a fair fight?*

On a day when the sky had been compassionate with rain and the earth sparkled in new mourning, Aadila stood before a terrible dragon and a crowd of intrusive spectators. The family of the girl was permitted to watch from the humid ditches below with other onlookers, while the conquerors, claiming the splendor of the view for themselves on the steps of luxury, swarmed the great monuments. Aadila gazed at the towers. Her own grandparents had erected them. A rich green forest surrounded them. Aadila had believed she would inherit the monuments in her name for the people of her village, but the imperialists, their faces pale as they watched from the balconies, had taken them for a different queen. She shuddered at the sight, for among the faces of the conquerors, she saw a few of her own.

The dragon retracted its claws and threw back its scaly skull and fumed at the sky.

Aadila, who had not until now seen a dragon, was in awe at such a regal creature of God, Whom she praised for this invention of magnificence. Zerina's God or some of her own, it did not matter: her mind was too taken to form a distinction. What scales! What finesse like water! Aadila, though raised pristine in her conviction and sense of justice, reminded herself of kindness. At the

dragon's ferocity, she trembled, but still sounded her voice, pure, through the slow, sinking fog, to appeal to the humanity of the dragon. For surely, she reasoned, a creature sprung from the same earth that bore life, from the same God who created her, knew humanity.

"Fearsome dragon!" called Aadila, her tone lilt with reverence. "You have conquered our lands with might, but not with superior skill or virtue. You have not dealt with us justly. We were a peaceable people that did not threaten your country to adapt to our ways, and even provided your captors with our provisions. Surely you would return to us what is rightfully ours. Surely you see that you have wronged us greatly, and that this conquest is a grievous affront to virtue and integrity. Make peace with us, redeem yourself. And join us in Love!"

The dragon glinted. In a swoop and flash, his great tail swung, and his claw crashed upon the blade of her shoulder. He breathed fire on the young girl until she was burned to death.

Taken with overwhelming pleasure at the explicit satisfaction of a grotesque collective curiosity, the masses roared. Their celebration drowned a sob that rose from the ditches. Aadila's grandparents, faces crumbling like dust, sank into more bodies in misery. Those who were hopeful erected themselves from the heap, blinking away either tears or remnants of the rain, staring wide-eyed into the opening, as if attempting to pray a more forgiving future into manifestation.

The next day, when sprouts of white flowers had begun to lace the flooded kingdom before a rambunctious crowd of amused conquerors, a second girl was flung into the rink with the dragon. Her shoulder was dislocated from the sheer force of the seizure nights before when the girls had been stolen away, but Zerina, who ached already from mistreatment during the journey, had always been a quiet child, making up for words in thoughtfulness; she was diligent in the meticulous craftwork that had once been a joy to her, and had been watchful of the ways of trade as her parents, merchants, travelled through Tehran and Karbala and Nanjing.

Noting that Aadila had failed, Zerina had strategized a different approach. A natural craftswoman of the most beautiful and elegant of pieces, she sought to appeal to the dragon with apparatuses that would bestow, to the eye of the admirer, all of God's glory.

Zerina was astounded that her voice did not tremble. Her face was still wet from the thought of Aadila's death. She had not spoken since. Like Masna, Zerina's cheeks sunk into her skull, but now, she spoke. "Forceful dragon! I bear measuring instruments to map the movements of the ancient stars. These instruments will facilitate the navigation of the vast oceans for your people. If only you will leave us, these and many other inventions will be accessible to you, and together we can make great advances in knowledge. Imagine what we might create in our thrilling exchange of ideas. Is that not the most rewarding way of growth, far more appealing than violence and injustice?" At a memory of men from the caravan, her eyes darkened. "The exchange of... ideas?"

At this there was an uproar of feverish glee from the crowd, and they shouted, “Kill her, and force the equipment from her so that they will be ours for all of history! We will improve upon them! We will sail the oceans and harvest the world for our worthy country!”

And with flames and sparkling teeth, the white dragon did so. His claw pierced her, first through the womb, and Zerina was struck suddenly with a strange kind of tender happiness. She died in a victorious laughter, and the insatiable crowd jeered. The bodies in the ditches below released all pining for justice in a series of anguished sighs. Hair fell over faces like curtains. The show was over—already, two girls had lost. The conquered peoples had accepted their fate. A heavy sadness mixed with the humidity of the air.

On the third day, the telltale wind of an impending hurricane graced the meteoritic beauty of the towering stairways, ripping the new flowers from the dirt like Zerina’s veins. For a century, Masna would not speak, but she did not think of centuries. “You are painted white, but you are one of us, stolen from your home,” she would have sighed to the dragon, but she did not. Masna no longer spoke or sang to the fish. She waited by the forest, chained to the hut, and when the guards had fallen asleep, stood in silence until the tiger came. He slipped through the leaves and stared at her through fire-eyes. Masna opened her mouth. She gaped, widely, and the tiger looked on fiercely, until the tiger, with a tilt of its beastly head, unswallowed the eaten children, who bore for Masna a gift.

“We waited in the stomach of the tiger,” the children laughed. “We waited for you to sing to the fish.” They surrendered their gift to her, a glint of silver, then turned and followed the tiger back into the forest. “We must go. There will be a storm. Look! There are rainclouds. You are left. There is no other but you.”

No other but you. One isn’t one.

Delirious with the death of her countrywomen, Masna, the final contestant, prepared herself to face the dragon the next weak-sunned morning. Stormy dark hair clouded around her grim expression, and as she approached her fate, the audience of conquerors shouted in sneers and threw their fists in the air with twisted arousal.

Smoke rose from the dragon’s nostrils, and a claw curled, waiting.

There was makeshift silence. The conquerors waited eagerly to witness Masna’s brutal defeat. But to the astonishment of the crowd, the girl offered neither reason or compromise as the contestants had before her.

She raised her hand as though a signal, and in a shocking flash of silver, struck a sword at the dragon’s neck.

The creature fell.