

## The Palace Gate

by Ankusha Jain

‘The physician has been called,’ one of the servants announced.

The other servants prepared water, clean cloths, herbal poultices, and warmed the room. Outside, the clouds roared like a lion. The raging winds swept the curtain away. The message has been sent to the King, who was at Lucknow. Torrential rain over the grounds of Udaipur has drowned half of the city in water.

‘Ahhhh...Ahhhh... Ahhhh...’ The Queen moaned in a dreadful voice.

‘She has been in excruciating pain for the past 2 hours.’ One of the servants exclaimed to the physician while making their way from the giant palace doors to the queen’s quarters, crossing the long marble corridors, decorated with the gold-coated oil-lit chandeliers, bejewelled with artefacts from all around the world and giant ancestry portraits of the dynasty.

The physician’s hands moved swiftly. Four hours passed. The palace held its breath. The tremors started to recede slowly.

‘It’s a girl!’ he exclaimed.

Everyone giggled in joy and love. After nine months wrapped in love and darkness, the princess stretched her tiny arms and legs. The first breath in the form of a cry. Crying does not indicate that you are weak. Since birth, it has always been a sign that you are alive. The servant, Amrita, gently held the princess in her arms and wrapped her in the softest muslin fabric, making her sleep in the golden cradle.

Hand-picked fabrics and jewellery from different parts of the world came for the princess. A big feast was organised. The culinary expert was called from Italy. The dancers and musicians were from Morocco. Invitations were sent to every kingdom. The breeze was refreshing and chilling. The whole nation joined hands together in the celebration of life - the beloved princess, Anvitha. The palace echoed with laughter, yet in its shadowed corridors, unseen corners whispered secrets.

Anvitha grew up in the hands of Amrita. The King was preoccupied with moral obligations, and the Queen would seldom pay a visit. Anvitha made attempts to visit her mother, but the queen was scarcely attentive.

Often made hand gestures, indicating to take her away. Amrita didn't have a child. She enjoyed playing with her, occasionally putting white lilies in her hair, and spent hours sharing stories. The corridors echo with Anvitha's giggles. Amrita stood by her side through thick and thin. Anvitha was fluent in languages- Sanskrit, Persian, French, Urdu, had a literary knowledge, and proficiency in art, horse-riding, archery, and music. While passing through the corridors, Anvitha eavesdropped on her parents discussing political matters around the power and glory of the palace.

The king sent an invitation to other kingdoms for a feast. For a week, all servants were on their toes, including Amrita. Strict instructions were declared for the event.

Fifty different dishes were cooked. Diyas, candles and chandeliers were lit in every corner of the palace. The whole palace was adorned in the colours of red and gold, scented with the fragrance of Bulgarian rose, jasmine and sandalwood.

While draping her saree, Amrita struggled to stand upright on her feet and appeared nauseous. Concerned about Amrita's health, Anvitha suggested to go home and rest.

In the confrontation, Amrita said, 'I am with the child,' and immediately regretted it.

Jumping in happiness, Anvitha, for the first time, hugged Amrita. This was the first time Amrita shared anything about her life.

'Apologies, princess, but you should not have hugged me...' before Anvitha could interpret, Amrita continued, 'I am not in the same class as you... It would make you unholy.'

Amrita heard footsteps approaching near the chambers and hastily moved a few steps back. The clock was running. While dressing her, Amrita's eyes were glued to the floor. Anvitha's anklets sang softly with every step she took. Curating the music in her own rhythm, Anvitha crossed paths with King Daksh, the ruler of Agra.

'You move through this hall as though you belong to it... Yet your eyes wander like they are searching for something beyond it.' Daksh spoke about what's on his mind. His voice was deep and passionate.

'And what do you think I am searching for?'

'Something that cannot be found within walls built to impress, not to feel.'

'You speak as though this life is lacking.'

'I only wonder... whether it is yours.'

The conversation left Anvitha unsettled. The sudden gust of fresh wind blew on her face. Before she could say further, he made his way out of the palace gates. Her feet followed his footsteps. Dressed in the golden saree, under the luminous grey sky, she looked like a mere goddess. She could sense her heartbeat getting faster as in the chase of a man, she had left the palace far away. This was the first time she felt the place gates. She passed through the paths of fields and small huts. Heard the sound of the printing press. The breeze was humid and harsh, mixed with the smell of sweat. Every corner was telling her story, and in the chain of understanding those, she lost the shadow of the king. She gently unleashed the horse and got down to see if she could find him. While walking for the next fifty yards, she heard Amrita's cry, begging for her life. The sight was horrific. Her husband held a leather whip. Frozen, she watched the whip strike. She watched everything from the window. Amrita was immobilised. The blood was dripping from her body. He kicked her with his feet, stepping on her wounds and threw the alcohol on it.

Amrita moaned in pain. Desperate, she shook her anklets—soft jingles echoing through the night. He followed the sound, leaving her trembling, alive, and terrified.

The night was long and disturbing. Not even a single leaf moved from the tree. She couldn't do anything to protect Amrita from such a monster. She decided to speak to Amrita tomorrow.

The next day, she informed her maids to tell Amrita to meet her as soon as she arrives. She sat on the sofa, then stood and started walking. The servants entered her chambers and informed her about the news of Amrita's death, which had happened last night. Her Husband said she was suffering from cancer. Before hearing the complete news, Anvitha's knees found it hard to support her.

Her fingers traced the fragile petals of a white lily, a reminder of what she could not protect. And at the same time, servants entered her quarters with beautiful, colourful silk sarees and gemstones.

'For what reason do I have to dress like this?' Her voice rang louder than the palace walls. The servants stood in silence. 'Bring me a saree in grey, black, or white,' she added.

'Apologies, princess, but... You are a princess and such colours are not worn... by young girls,' the servant said in a trembling voice.

Anvitha flashed with anger and told the servants to send the message. She made her way to the queen's chambers. The queen presented her resentment for arriving late. She apologised. Before saying anything, she cleared her throat.

'I hope you heard about Amrita's sudden demise last night, and I was wondering...if... I... can attend her funeral?' Anvitha's voice was shaking. Her body was covered with goosebumps.

'You are the princess. You cannot attend a servant's funeral. That was her duty; stop being sentimental.' Anvitha nodded her head and left.

Anvitha looked at a dark-blue cloak, hidden in the drawers of her wooden rustic almirah. She spent most days in her chambers. The flashbacks followed her in her sleep. She would turn off the divas with her hand and spend hours sitting next to the window. Holding a white lily in her hand. Death was created to end suffering. Suffering begins with the first breath, and tears are to mourn. She distantly heard servants gossiping about the woman, who was publicly humiliated for publishing a very powerful and bold article.

'Such a woman does not deserve to live.'

'She is a shame to society.'

Anvitha stood up and followed the direction of the conversation. Looking at her shadow, the servants stopped speaking. Anvitha felt moved by her thoughts. Her ideas were original and thought-provoking, questioning the role of women in patriarchal society. She secretly started reading her work. Though her thoughts started to liberate her feelings, she felt suffocated to breathe.

To manage political affairs and bring more glory to the kingdom, Anvitha's parents declared her marriage to the king of Lucknow.

'Just to preserve the glory of the kingdom,' she said, 'you have decided to place my life on the stake?' The room was silent. The queen's eyes were wide, and her mouth was open. 'This is my life,' she continued. 'And no one thought to ask me?' The queen's face hardened.

Anvitha has never done this before.

For the first time, she publicly raised her opinions.

'The marriage will happen,' she said coldly, 'with or without your will.' She left the chamber without another word.

Anvitha stood alone. Her thoughts were more aligned with her choices in life. She knows that the life she is choosing will come with costs of loneliness, hatred and suffering, but wasn't she suffering in the beautifully decorated empty wall of her chambers, bowing to the orders of the king and queen? At that moment, she decided the kind of suffering she wanted to live with. She knew the weight of this decision, but it still felt lighter than the weight of guilt, regret and sadness. In the luminous darkness of moonlight, she stepped into the courtyard and plucked a white lily.

She packed her essentials, reminiscing about the memories of laughing and running with Amrita in the corridors, looked at the giant gates and lashed the horse. Death, she thought, was perhaps God's final kindness — the only mercy offered in a world so determined to wound the living.