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*"I hear the lower castes are finding this lack of monsoons rather difficult for their crops," droned Aashka's father at their lavish supper (as usual), in the midst of her father's normal dull conversing with the other Brahmins.*

The table was long and elegant and filled every night with rich Brahmins, such as Aashka's family. Most of them were reserved old men, who hardly spoke to Aashka save for reprimanding her that if she kept up her unladylike behavior she'd surely be reincarnated as a stick bug. Some women were present of course, their faces drawn and lifeless as if no thoughts swam behind their dark eyes and extravagant cosmetics.

"I have heard this as well," said Priest Sadiva, a burly old man at the end of the table.

"It's as if they have no idea where to find the food that **does** exist, for looking at this table, it obviously is present if you know where to look." He chuckled at his own joke.

"Dalits, Shudras and Vaishyas are being buried by the cartload." said Priest Safal, a sour man who Aashka always avoided. "But they wouldn't have achieved Moksha anyhow; they led lives of great disregard for Brahman, the force that brings us all together."

Aashka felt a familiar itchy heat rising inside her, as if somewhere inside her, a caged starling was struggling to escape. *You didn't achieve Moksha in your past life either*, she thought to herself.

"That's unfair, Priest Safal, that really is!" she finally blurted. "They are not trying to starve, and they are decent people, just like any of us."

Aashka looked around the table, as everyone looked sharply up at her. The women gasped.

*If I'm referring to this lot, I'm not sure the phrase 'Decent like you' 'is very effective*, a little voice in the back of her brain piped up.

"Aashka," said her father harshly. "We have not worked hard in our past lives, studying our faith, to achieve Karma like this, to become the religious leaders to our people and compliment those who are below us."

Priest Safal's wife spoke up. "Sahistha," she said, speaking to Aashka's father. "Children should be seen and not heard. I am afraid your daughter has no hope of ever achieving Moksha, letting her soul be liberated with Brahman. She has a complete disregard for Atman."

*That's more words than she's spoken all year,* thought Aashka. Then she noticed her stepmother staring at her with a look of cold resentment and embarrassment plastered to her face. Aashka's real mother had become ill and passed away just over two years previously, the day before Aashka's eleventh birthday. Her father had married again last spring, and Aashka hated him for it. Her mother had been the nicest thing about her life.

"Servant, please escort Aashka from the table. Thank you. May Brahma bless you." said Aashka's father stiffly, with a note of restrained fury in his voice.

The following morning, Aashka woke to find all the other Brahmins gone, and her father praying. Aashka found her step-mother at the dining room table, being served breakfast by an ungainly young man who kept stumbling, apparently over his own feet. Without acknowledging the presence of Aashka, her step-mother nibbled away slowly at her meal. The young man served Aashka Aloo Paratha (flatbread stuffed with potato) and shuffled back towards the kitchen, tripping on his way out.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Aashka.

"Aashka!" scolded her step-mother, her eyes widening into her signature "you're-on-thin-ice" look.

"Sorry," said Aashka, "Only, why'd he keep falling over himself?"

Aashka's stepmother looked over her shoulder to make sure they were alone.

"The stupid boy," she drawled, "is new on the job and very nervous."

"We should give him some food."

Aashka's stepmother did a double take. "Whatever for?"

"Priest Safal said people of lower castes are being buried by the cartload. And he looks very thin. I'm worried," said Aashka.

"It's not for us to mingle with Shudras."

"I know, I know. Anyway, may I go out? I must...must pray at the temple for Brahma to forgive me for my er...rudeness last night."

"Very well." Aashka's step-mother went back to her eating with a somber face. "And you'll go again later as well. You have a lot of apologizing to do."

Aashka set out to town with half her Aloo Paratha still in her pocket. She ran briskly, but kept her face down, hoping nobody would recognize a Brahmin girl running in such a rushed and improper fashion. Aashka was not going to pray near the cattle.

The streets were more crowded than usual, as Aashka neared the poorer side of town. Shudras were holding bowls out, begging for just a bit of rice. Dalits were lurking in the

shadows, eyes full of what they knew to be unrealistic longing. Aashka put her hand over the warm flatbread in her pocket, tempted to stop right there and give it to the first person who asked.

*No, she told herself. You know someone who needs this badly.*

She was beginning to stick out like a sore thumb, and she knew it. Her clothes were too luxurious to be a member of the lower castes. People turned to stare at her, shocked that she was still healthy and well-fed-looking. For most people around here had been getting very thin lately, scarily thin. Dalit boys trudged past with their ribs sticking out like knives. Girls brushed by with legs jutting out under dresses that were so thin it almost looked like they were floating.

*You're almost there, Aashka told herself, please don't get all wish-washy.*

For Aashka was what her Mama had called a "mirror-girl." Anytime Aashka saw other people feeling sad, she would feel almost as bad as them. Right now, there were a lot of starving, disconsolate people out, and Aashka felt it was almost too much for her as she plowed on.

She finally reached her destination, a tiny hut at the end of the street, and pushed inside. A baby was crying in the corner, a woman rocked her back and forth in her thin arms. A boy stood at the door, relieved at Aashka's appearance. The boy was Agavoli.

Agavoli was Aashka's best friend. "What was your excuse, this time?" asked Agavoli, with an amused light in his eyes.

"I told my stepmother I was praying at the temple, praying to Brahma to forgive me for my *terrible* sins. She ate it up like a kitten to cream," Aashka smirked.

Again, Agavoli's eyes lit up, as if a candle burned within them. Agavoli never laughed. You had to know him well to figure out that this was his method of doing so.

"What would you do if she found out? Or your father, if he found out?"

"I don't want to think about it." said Aashka, shaking her head.

Agavoli's mother, Mrs. Tanwar, bustled over, with Diya, the baby girl of the family, in her arms. "Oh hello, Aashka dear, so good to see your face during this terrible famine," she crooned.

Diya let out a gurgly laugh, sucking her thumb.

"Mama!"

"Yes, Diya, I'm Mama. Good!" said Mrs. Tanwar with a weary smile.

Aashka thought back to the day she met Agavoli's family. Her mother had died that morning, forehead blazing, whispering to Aashka, "Continue what I started, dear." Aashka had begun to weep long and hard, her body convulsing, making more noise than she ever had. Then she noticed her father, sitting stiffly, not even crying, just shaking his head back and forth, back and forth.

"You monster!" she had cried. "Don't you even feel? Well, don't you!?!?"

And she had ran out, ran, ran, ran until she stumbled into Agavoli, at the time a complete stranger, who had been running in the opposite direction, crying. Aashka could tell he was a Dalit from the way he was dressed, but against all she'd been taught, she did not back away.

"What's happened to **you**?" she asked timidly.

"What's happened to **you**?" Agavoli had countered.

Then Aashka had found out that Agavoli's father had just died, the same as her mother.

"Aashka! Aashka?"

It was Agavoli.

"Oh, yes, sorry." said Aashka, coming back to the present. "I have brought you some food."

"Ooh!" said Agavoli gleefully, "What is it?"

"Agavoli! Manners!" scolded his mother while Aashka simultaneously pulled out her offering and said, "Aloo Paratha."

"Sorry mother," said Agavoli, but in a sidetone to Aashka, "May I have it?"

Aashka handed him the flatbread, and with a look of someone who was rather tempted to disobey, handed it to his mother to be evenly divided.

"Eat up," said his mother, "I've got to go now clean the farm stalls out down the street."

An hour later found Aashka running up her mansion's steps, breathing hard but trying to look pulled together, as if she'd just come back from praying, not giving food to her Dalit friends.

But when she got in, her father and step-mother were in an uproar.

"You-you...you!" screamed her step-mother in an unbound fashion miraculously out of character. (Aashka might have even laughed at it if not for the confusion seeping through her, like a thick fog.)

"Never!" wheezed her father madly, "Never will I let you out of my sight again! Terrible...my reputation...no daughter of mine..." And with that, he collapsed into a chair.

"What's going on?!" cried Aashka, alarmed.

"Oh I think you know what's going on well enough!" shouted her step-mother hoarsely, "Priest Safal saw you conversing with a *Dalit* boy, that's what's going on!"

Oh no. They'd seen her with Agavoli. Everything was ruined. His family would starve without her help. **Oh no!**

"W-why was Priest Safal over there?"

“Priest Safal was preaching to a group of dirty Shudras, that’s why!”

Suddenly, Aashka’s father stood up, and grabbed Aashka by the scruff of her neck. Aashka saw his strong sturdy hand, flying through the air towards her face, saw her step-mother hastily disguising a look of surprise.

**SLAP. SLAP. SLAP**

### **One Week Later**

Priest Safal asked, “More deaths by starvation?”

“Oh yes, and the latest is a baby girl,” said Aashka’s father, as he rolled his eyes. Lately, he had been getting preaching jobs with the lower castes, teaching them the paths to Moksha, which he thought to be a grand waste of time with “people like them.” Aashka was always being dragged along lately, since she had lost her father’s trust.

“Knowledge – Having a true understanding of all Hindu concepts. Work – Doing things that are good for your community. Devotion – Spending your entire life loving Brahma,” she would hear her father say in his deep, leader voice again and again.

But at the mention of a dead baby girl, her ears pricked up with worry.

“What’s the baby’s name?” she piped up.

Her father looked at her warningly.

“Just some worthless Dalit girl named Diya Tanwar.”

“Diya Tanwar? DIWA TANWAR?!?” Aashka cried, filling with dread.

Aashka’s father began to turn purple. “I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse us Priest Safal.”

The man waddled away, and then Aashka’s father looked down at her, murderously.

“AND DOES SHE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU!?”

Aashka hesitated. Agavoli’s sister was dead. **Agavoli’s sister was dead.**

“Actually,” she said, as a lump rose in her throat. *Don’t cry*, she told herself. *Don’t you dare*. “Yes she does! She is-was...my best friend’s sister!”

Aashka’s father looked simply livid. Aashka’s hand flew to the bruises on her face.

“HAVE I NOT TOLD YOU NOT TO MENTION THAT BOY?!” he roared.

“I-I wish I was a Dalit too!”

Aashka’s father went silent. She was reminded strongly of a bomb about to explode.

Aashka looked timidly at her father’s big hands, scared to show her true feelings.

*Gogetoutdon’targuejustGETOUT*, she told herself.

And she turned on her heels and dashed away to Agavoli.

### ***Six months later***

Aashka walked with Agavoli to an empty field. No sign on it read “graveyard,” but the two of them knew very well that this was where all Dalits were buried.

Agavoli scattered some wildflowers over the meadow and the two of them were silent for a minute as they...remembered.

After Diya died, Aashka’s father had it. He had sent Aashka out onto the streets with a big basket of food to fend for herself and make sure to not forget ‘Atman,’ the spiritual component of the universe. Aashka had felt sad at first, which surprised her, but she had known what to do, of course. She had gone to the Tanwar’s and mourned with them; then they had gotten busy. Traded tears for dried meat to preserve on the walls. Traded sadness for rice. Traded remembrances for cheese that would keep for months. Traded emotions for potatoes.

And nobody seemed to remember Aashka the Brahmin anymore. Upper castes eyes slid from Agavoli to her, disgusted expressions never changing. Aashka was fine with that.

She prayed every day, whispering to Brahma, “Please believe that I am the good person I claim to be.”

And that was enough for her.

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