



Twisted

FLAMES

(The Sands of Singoor Series)

MV KASI

TWISTED FLAMES

by

MV Kasi

Twisted Flames

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2023 by M.V. Kasi

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>PROLOGUE</u>
<u>CHAPTER 1</u>
<u>CHAPTER 2</u>
<u>CHAPTER 3</u>
<u>CHAPTER 4</u>
<u>CHAPTER 5</u>
<u>CHAPTER 6</u>
<u>CHAPTER 7</u>
<u>CHAPTER 8</u>
<u>CHAPTER 9</u>
<u>CHAPTER 10</u>
<u>CHAPTER 11</u>
<u>CHAPTER 12</u>
<u>CHAPTER 13</u>
<u>CHAPTER 14</u>
<u>CHAPTER 15</u>
<u>CHAPTER 16</u>
<u>CHAPTER 17</u>
<u>CHAPTER 18</u>
<u>CHAPTER 19</u>
<u>CHAPTER 20</u>
<u>CHAPTER 21</u>
<u>CHAPTER 22</u>
<u>CHAPTER 23</u>
<u>CHAPTER 24</u>
<u>CHAPTER 25</u>
<u>CHAPTER 26</u>
<u>CHAPTER 27</u>
<u>CHAPTER 28</u>
<u>CHAPTER 29</u>
<u>CHAPTER 30</u>
<u>CHAPTER 31</u>
<u>CHAPTER 32</u>
<u>CHAPTER 33</u>
<u>CHAPTER 34</u>
<u>CHAPTER 35</u>
<u>CHAPTER 36</u>
<u>CHAPTER 37</u>
<u>CHAPTER 38</u>
<u>CHAPTER 39</u>
<u>CHAPTER 40</u>
<u>CHAPTER 41</u>
<u>CHAPTER 42</u>
<u>CHAPTER 43</u>
<u>CHAPTER 44</u>
<u>CHAPTER 45</u>
<u>CHAPTER 46</u>
<u>CHAPTER 47</u>

CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50

She stood still as his eyes fell on her. He saw the knife she held but didn't stop. He came closer until he was barely any distance from her.

Silence prevailed, along with heavy, tensed awareness.

She tightened the fingers around the knife while she looked up at him. "We may be married. But if you touch me, I will slit your throat."

His eyes flashed darkly. "Don't threaten me," he said softly.

"There isn't a mere threat. I will kill you if you touch me."

He watched her with a cold smile on his handsome face. "My dear wife, then you shouldn't have tricked me and become my bride."

She tensed at his words and gripped the knife tightly in her hand before raising it.

PROLOGUE

**Singoor desert,
India**

“There’s a storm coming!”

Men in different colored turbans and women with colorful veils that covered hair and a part of their faces scrambled around to seek shelter in the nearby building of a small local market.

Rishab Thakvar looked up at the sky that was a clear blue. But at a distance, he could see the sky turning brown, which was the swirling sand from the desert.

“It’s a sandstorm, sir,” said a nearby vendor whom Rishab had spoken to earlier. “Please go inside the building until it passes.”

Rishab knew the desert was prone to sandstorms. There was a huge sandstorm two days ago that lasted for nearly a day. He had been in the city at that time, but he had heard of it.

He hoped it wasn’t going to be that long.

Just when he wondered if he should take a chance and get into his SUV and try to head back home, his eyes fell on an old woman who was struggling to pack her goods on a small cart. He went to her.

“Let me help you,” he said before holding the ends of the large bright-colored cloth on top of which were handmade bangles and other accessories. He tied the ends of the cloth into a knot.

Holding the large bag, he led the old woman towards the old building

where the rest of the people from the market were taking shelter. There were camels outside, and people covered the faces of the animals.

Finding a spot in the middle of the shelter, which was an old building, he placed the bag on the floor.

“God bless you, my son,” the old woman said gratefully.

He nodded with a small smile.

“Let me gift you some bangles that you can give your wife, sir,” she said, opening the knot on the cloth bag.

“Thank you, but it’s not required. I’m not married.”

The old woman looked at him for a long moment.

“A handsome man like you would surely have a special woman.”

Rishab had no special woman. He only dated casually, and he ensured right at the beginning that the women knew of that fact. At twenty-seven, he had no intention of getting married or being in a relationship.

“Take these gifts, sir, and you will surely get married within no time.” The old woman pulled out a few bangles and accessories from the cloth bag.

Rishab was amused. “I don’t want a wife, but I’ll take these.”

He planned to give them as gifts to his mother and sister, who preferred handmade trinkets to expensive jewelry.

The old woman nodded and took out more bangles and accessories.

“These are from different clans in Singoor, sir,” she explained while packing the bangles and other accessories carefully in a small, colorful cloth bag.

“Do you go to these clans to purchase the goods?” he asked.

She shook her head. “My husband and I used to go until thirty years ago, but now, since there is unrest, the clans ship the goods to the nearby markets. My grandson helps me, but he’s now at the school. His school is far away. It’s in the Thakvar province.”

“I see.”

Rishab knew the old woman was talking about the unrest that began in the region when a statue of a goddess was stolen from the Singoor temple. Since then, a lot of people have left the region or stayed in confined regions within the desert without regular communication with other clans.

“Here are your things, sir.” The woman closed the small bag securely.

“Thank you.”

He took out his wallet and gave her cash.

The old woman shook her head. “But these are gifts to you, sir. There’s no need to pay.”

“This is for your grandson.”

The woman hesitated a moment before taking the money. “Thank you, sir.”

Rishab nodded.

The place began to get crowded as people took shelter from the sandstorm. Holding the small colorful bag in his hand, he maneuvered out of the crowd and went to the back of the building. He stood under the shade, but fine sand blew around him. The sky had completely turned brown with no visible blue.

Reaching for his pocket, he took out his satellite phone.

“Sam, I’m sending my location. Can you check how long the sandstorm will last here?”

There was a pause. “Sure, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab knew his security head wasn’t too happy about his boss getting stuck in a sandstorm. Along with that, the Singoor desert was considered to be dangerous to outsiders.

Many outsiders, who were mostly businessmen and a few tourists, were often found with their throats slit and their bodies decomposing in abandoned vehicles.

Rishab wasn’t too concerned about his safety. He was used to venturing

on his own in many dangerous places across the world. He often chose to be hands-on and learn as much as he could about a place to determine the viability of doing business. That's how he and his brothers were able to set up a successful mining and manufacturing corporation spread across many parts of the world.

But he wasn't at the Singoor desert for business. He was there on a personal mission, and it was important for him to learn as much as he could about the history of the place and the locals.

Although it was his first visit to Singoor, he wasn't entirely an outsider. His father and several generations of his father's family belonged to a prominent clan from the Singoor desert. But until recently, his father had kept the existence of his children a secret. Rishab was yet to be known by the people of Singoor as one of the heirs of the Thakvar clan.

"Sir, the storm is intense but will last only for another thirty minutes. I'll be sending a helicopter to the location behind the market building to pick you up in a while."

"No, that's not needed. I'll head back to the Thakvar mansion in the SUV. Just ensure the team is continuing with the search in other markets."

"Sure, sir."

Rishab was at the market for an important purpose. He was searching for clues of a particular businessman. A man known as Tantra. Although that man operated from outside Singoor, there were definitely minions within the Singoor desert who were doing Tantra's dirty job for him.

There had been multiple attacks on Rishab's older brother in the last three months. The attacks happened in a manner that implicated a particular Singoor desert clan named Kabali.

However, the Kabalis were known to be savages and barely had the resources to plan an assassination in Africa, where the first attack had

happened. The second attack was made in Singoor, but it was proven that the attackers were not from the Kabali clan and had deliberately dressed as them.

“I’ll check with you later when the sandstorm passes,” he said before ending the call.

He continued to wait outside.

While he looked at the sandstorm, he saw a small group of riders coming through the swirling sand. They were on horses, which was the mode of travel for the Kabali clan.

He turned alert. He was about to reach for his concealed gun when he noticed that the riders were not wearing black-colored clothes, which were the color of the Kabali clan. Instead, the riders were wearing sapphire blue-colored riding robes.

They were from some other clan and most likely seeking shelter from the sandstorm.

The people of Singoor were dressed similarly but with subtle differences that indicated their clan. Men wore turbans in different colors, and most women covered their hair and a part of their faces using different colored veils. And women whose faces weren’t covered had distinct patterned dots.

He had yet to familiarize himself with the clan colors and distinct markings.

The small group got down from their horses. But they didn’t run to the shelter right away. They covered the horses’ heads with blankets before coming towards the shelter.

Although they were definitely from Singoor, they looked different from the rest of the people in the market. The riding robes were of a more expensive material.

There were four men, three of them were tall, and the one standing behind in the middle was of shorter height. They didn’t go inside the building and

stood opposite him under the shelter.

The four tall men assessed him while the shorter one in the middle looked towards the storm. It was only when he took a closer look he realized that the shorter one was actually a woman.

He couldn't see her entire face as the top of her head and lower half of her face were covered by a shiny blue cloth matching the robe. But he could see neatly shaped eyebrows and the black dots at the center of the forehead and around the corners of the eyes, similar to most Singoor women.

The woman must have sensed his gaze because she turned her head and looked right at him.

Her kohl-rimmed eyes were dark and intent during the brief gaze. But a moment later, she looked away to give out a soft order to the man next to her.

The man bowed his head deferentially in response.

The men weren't the woman's brothers or related to her. Their body language indicated they were her bodyguards or people who worked for her. She was definitely someone who held an authoritative position in a clan from the Singoor desert.

A strange curiosity grew inside him to know how she looked and find out what clan she belonged to.

While he watched, the storm intensified, and the wind picked up even more in speed. The riding robe covering the woman's head and lower face blew aside, revealing her entire face.

She had skin in the color of wild honey, high cheekbones, a small nose with a diamond stud and lush lips. The patterned dots on her face enhanced her features.

Fuck.

She was gorgeous.

Sand blew on his face, but he didn't care. He stared at the exotically

beautiful woman who was utterly captivating.

With a small frown, the woman pulled the cloth and covered her hair and lower face once again. But even though her face was covered, her exotic beauty was branded into his memory.

Sensing his gaze, she looked towards him again.

She caught him watching her. But this time, she didn't dismiss his presence. Instead, her eyes slowly swept over him.

He saw her pause for a long moment on the brightly colored bag he held. When her eyes met with his again, there was a flash of something. She looked at his face closely then.

Was she trying to guess if the bag holding bangles and accessories indicated he had a wife?

His mouth twisted into a smile at her blatant staring, but she didn't return the smile or even look embarrassed. She continued to watch him.

A thrill passed through him, which was shocking and a bit embarrassing. It took a lot more effort from many beautiful women to catch his attention. A mere glance from a woman had never thrilled him.

He didn't know how long they held eyes, but soon, people from inside the building began to come out as the sandstorm had passed.

The beautiful woman looked away and said something to the men next to her, and they all nodded before following her outside. She went towards her horse and pulled away the blanket covered with sand before climbing on top with a smooth move. Then, throwing him one last sweeping look, she turned her white horse and rode away along with her men.

A strange disappointment pierced him as he watched his desert rose leave.
Fuck.

He let out a soft laugh at his fanciful thinking and shook his head at the absurd, smitten feeling he felt towards a woman who probably had absolutely

nothing in common with him.

His preference for women ran towards modern jet-setting socialites, not a horse-riding woman from a desert clan.

Shaking his head again, he headed towards his SUV.

“We have covered three markets successfully today, Mr. Thakvar. Eight people seem viable as our contacts. They will pass on information about any suspicious activity.”

Rishab was heading back to the Thakvar mansion. He had lost time due to the sandstorm, but he hoped to catch up the lost time using an alternate route. Most of the narrow roads were covered by the sand, but the four-wheel drive made it easier to wade through the sand.

“Good,” he replied. “I will be leaving tomorrow, but the pace should remain the same. Gather as much information as possible about the clans.”

Rishab was flying out of Singoor the next day as he was taking his father to San Francisco.

“Yes, sir.”

“The focus should be on the West and South side clans—” Rishab broke off when he saw something in the sideview mirror.

Rishab frowned, trying to figure out if it was a vehicle at a distance behind him. The alternate route he was taking would not be accessed by regular vehicles unless they were four-wheel drives.

A moment later, he saw a flash of blue. He realized they were horse riders wearing blue robes, and they were catching up quickly as the animals could navigate the sand quicker than a vehicle.

His mouth twisted when he recognized the rider in the front. It was his desert rose. The beautiful woman he had seen earlier in the market during the sandstorm. Although her hair and lower face were covered, he knew it was her.

“Sir? Is everything okay?” the security head asked at the long pause.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll call you later tonight.”

With that, he ended the call.

Barely a few moments later, the woman caught up with the SUV and rode alongside him.

Their eyes met, and once again, he felt a jolt of thrill and excitement racing through him. The kohl-rimmed eyes on the exotically beautiful face utterly captivated him again.

While she rode, he could see the jewelry on her upper arm. It was an armband shaped like a coiled snake about to strike. He guessed it to be the insignia of her clan. Going by the gold jewelry and clothes, her clan must be one of the prominent ones in Singoor.

He was leaving the next day, but he badly wanted to pursue the woman. He wanted to speak to her and know more about her. Just when he wondered if he should signal her to stop because he wanted to talk to her, she rode past him.

He shook his head.

Stop getting distracted.

She may be beautiful and rides a horse like a boss, but there were a shit ton of important things he needed to do before obsessing about a woman who was a stranger to him.

The rest of the riders remained behind the SUV while the beautiful woman rode way ahead. He kept his eyes in the front and saw that she had stopped at a far distance and was facing him. She was right on his path as though waiting for him.

She is bold.

It made her all the more captivating because he preferred boldness in a woman rather than meekness. He always went for women who knew what they wanted.

He continued to drive, keeping his eyes on her. He decided to talk to her.

As he neared, he watched as she pushed back the hood of her riding robe, revealing her hair and face. Just when he thought she was doing it to entice him, she reached for something from her back.

He couldn't figure out what she held until she pulled out something else and then aimed it towards him.

Fuck.

It was a bow and arrow.

His heart raced at the realization of the sudden threat. His reflexes made him reach for his gun to remove the threat, but his hand paused on the holster. The small pause cost him as she released the arrow. And in rapid movements, she released more arrows.

The first arrow cracked the windshield right in front of him at his eye level. As more arrows flew towards him, he swerved the SUV sharply to avoid them.

The vehicle went over a sand dune and lost control before overturning and crashing with a heavy impact.

There was blinding pain followed by darkness.

CHAPTER 1

He heard voices through the darkness.

“He is still alive, madam,” said a man. “Should we kill him?”

“No,” a woman’s voice replied calmly. “Let this be a warning to the Thakvars.”

Even as his head throbbed in pain, he fought the darkness and opened his eyes. He was inside an upturned SUV in the middle of a desert.

Blood poured down from his cut forehead to his eyes, but he raised his head slightly until his eyes fell on the woman responsible.

Her exotic beauty, which had utterly captivated him a while ago, now made him burn with rage.

Even as darkness began to fill his vision again, he vowed to make her pay. Whoever you are, I will find you soon.

Rishab opened his eyes to the low hum of the private jet’s engines. Outside the large window of the jet, the sky was brightly lit in shades of orange and red, reminding him of a certain desert sky.

“We’ll be landing in San Francisco in two hours, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab nodded at the air hostess who had approached him with a tray with a warm towel and a steaming cup of coffee and breakfast. He made use of the towel and picked up the cup of coffee, waving away the breakfast. He preferred to wait until he got home and had homemade breakfast.

Over the past seventy-two hours, he had been flying in four different time zones across four different continents and with barely four hours of sleep each day to catch up on.

The team currently accompanying him, consisting of personal assistants and executives, were still asleep. He knew they were exhausted by the previous week's hectic schedule. Although they were used to such a pace, the last forty-eight hours were more strenuous than usual.

He had to ensure that all major business deals at Thakvar Enterprises across the globe were transitioned well so that the operations would run smoothly over the coming months when he and his brothers would be away for an indeterminate time.

Sipping his coffee, he checked his messages. The first message was from a high-profile socialite he had dated a few months ago. She had been sending messages and her pictures, wanting to know when he would return to San Francisco.

Deleting the message, he scrolled through the rest. Most of them were business-related, but there was one that wasn't. He read the message and sent back a reply.

A couple of minutes later, he received a call on his satellite phone.

"Good morning, Mr. Thakvar." It was the head of the private investigation team he had hired.

"What's the update?" Rishab asked.

"Bank accounts information is being compiled. We are also scanning to check if any transactions have used the word 'Tantra'."

"Good."

"And on the other trail... we are still working on getting more images. Since there is no social media or online presence for the Bhil clan, it is taking slightly longer. Our team has infiltrated the clan and is expected to send more images shortly."

"I want the images in twenty-four hours."

There was a small pause. "Sure, sir."

Rishab ended the call.

He knew it wasn't an easy task to infiltrate a region known for its violence and capture the images of people. But he was hiring the services of the topmost investigation company for the very reason that they were experienced in handling such tasks.

Although the violence wasn't as known or prevalent as the wars in the Middle East, the Singoor region had three decades of bloodshed, making it a dangerous place to infiltrate.

A place he will have to return to soon. The very thought made him burn with anticipation.

"The flight will be landing shortly, Mr. Thakvar," the air hostess announced. "Would you like me to get anything else, sir?"

"No."

He pressed a button to straighten the reclining seat and continued to watch out of the window as the private jet began to land. The sight of the rising sun and clouds began to blur, and an image of an exotically beautiful woman with kohl-rimmed eyes took over his mind.

My dear desert rose, I'm going to find you soon.

Rishab's car stopped in front of a sprawling house built on the top of a cliff overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and the San Francisco skyline.

Even though he traveled extensively, the feeling he got whenever he returned home was unmatched.

"I'll be heading to the office in an hour," he said.

"Sure, sir," the driver replied.

The door to the car was held open by a uniformed security guard. There were at least another dozen guards patrolling the compound in shifts.

"Good morning, sir."

Rishab stepped out of the car and greeted the man.

"Are my parents at home?" he asked, as he hadn't spoken to his parents in two days.

"Yes, sir. Mr. and Mrs. Thakvar are at home."

Thanking the man, Rishab went into the house. Even though he was tired and had to freshen up, he went towards the outdoor dining area.

His parents were seated at the table and did not notice his presence right away. They were absorbed by one another.

There was a tug inside his heart as he watched them exchange soft smiles and deep, longing stares while they held hands. It was the longing between two loved ones who had united after being apart for nearly twenty years.

Each time Rishab saw his parents, his determination to set things right grew even stronger. He and his brothers would move the world if needed to ensure his parents were safe and could be together for the rest of their lives.

"Good morning," he greeted.

His mother saw him first. Her face lit up, and she got up to come running

towards him. “Rishab!”

He laughed and hugged his mother, sweeping her petite body off her feet.

“Put me down, you devil!” she scolded with a laugh.

Smiling, he put her down gently.

“Come on,” she said, tugging his hand. “Let’s eat. You must be hungry. I made your favorite *jungle maas* with parathas.”

His mother knew he preferred her homemade food and wouldn’t have eaten during his flight. The meat dish his mother had made was his favorite. It was also his father’s favorite dish.

Rishab had memories from his childhood of his father cooking the meat dishes because Rishab’s mother was a vegetarian. But later, with his father gone, Rishab’s mother started cooking meat dishes for her children.

The sacrifice that his parents made to keep their children safe and happy was immense.

“Welcome back home, son,” his father greeted with a smile.

“Thanks, Dad.” He hugged his father before joining at the breakfast table.

The table was nearly thirty years old and looked out of place in the sprawling designer home. But his mother had kept it because it held many memories. He and his brothers would laugh and talk while their mother fed them and their younger sister homemade food.

For the longest time, the corner seat had remained empty because Mihir Thakvar was presumed dead. It was only recently that he and his brothers were told the truth about their father being alive, a secret that their mother had held for twenty years.

“I hope you are going to stay home for at least a week,” his mother said while serving him breakfast. “You boys are always gallivanting around the world!”

Rishab smiled. “Yes, Ma. I’ll be home.”

However, he would spend most of the time in the office headquarters as he had to meet with the board of directors and start delegating critical tasks to his executives.

Chithra Thakvar shook her head. “Now that Shivay got married, I should find someone for you and Nakul too. At least you’ll stay in one place like Shivay.”

Rishab’s eyes met with his father’s eyes, and he saw a flash of worry in them. Mihir Thakvar knew that Rishab might also choose an alliance bride from the Singoor region like Shivay had done.

“I’m too young to get married, Ma,” Rishab teased like he always did.

“Not that young!” his mother as usual replied. “At your age, your father and I had three children already. But you boys...”

Rishab smiled, listening to the same speech his mother had often repeated to him and his brothers over the last few years.

“But Ma, Dad was very lucky,” he said. “I’m yet to find a woman who can match your beauty and wit.”

His mother laughed and whacked him playfully. “Flattering devil!”

The rest of the breakfast continued in the same vein. His mother spoke about her children’s childhood antics. Rishab’s father smiled, and there was deep longing and joy listening to his children’s stories that he had missed.

“We get naughty nature from you, Ma. Remember you told us Dad was the serious type, and you were the one always pranking him.”

His mother laughed.

“That’s true. When Mihir first met me, he was entirely too serious.”

Rishab’s father smiled softly at his wife. “You were the only one who could make me laugh, especially with your naughty pranks.”

Rishab watched as his parents exchanged a soft look while they recalled their old memories.

The determination inside him grew even stronger.

Whether or not his parents or others agreed, he would begin initiating the alliance talks. He would get married to an heiress from Singoor. It was the only and fastest way to ensure his parents led a peaceful life together.

It was close to midnight, but Rishab was working out in his home gym. He had spent all day in meetings with the Board of Directors at the Thakvar Enterprises headquarters. He had more coming up the next day, along with critical transition meetings with his executives, but far from feeling tired, his body was restless and revved up. Even his mind was far from peaceful despite things going as planned for trapping Tantra.

He knew why his body and mind couldn't rest, but he continued to push himself.

Sweat dripped off his forehead as he grunted and lifted weights in the gym. His left hand had healed from the accident, but some of the stiffness still remained.

Ignoring the pain from the stiffness, he finished the powerlifting routine and dropped the weights. He hoped his body would begin to tire and relax so he could finally catch some uninterrupted sleep.

Straightening from the weights, he wiped the sweat off his forehead. But as soon as his finger brushed against the small ridges on his forehead left by the stitches after the accident, an exotically beautiful face with kohl-rimmed eyes flashed in his mind, making his heart rate shoot up even more.

Fuck.

All tiredness from his workout disappeared, and he began to get agitated.

The woman responsible for the scar and his lack of sleep stole his peace of mind again.

Who the hell is she?

Like a madman, he was desperate to know.

He only knew she held some kind of authoritative position in the Bhil clan

based on the way men followed her orders. But apart from that, he knew nothing else. He couldn't return to Singoor and search for her yet because his parents needed him more, and he had to take care of many things that needed attention while his brothers were away.

In the big scheme of things, she shouldn't matter. Tantra and everything else going on should be the only things that should matter.

And yet, he was obsessed with the woman who had attacked him and threatened his family.

She slipped into his dreams, rousing him and taunting him, making him burn with anger and dark desire. The hold she had on his body and mind was immense.

He let out a deep exhale, trying to control his anger and frustration.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he should call one of the women who had been messaging him for a date. A hot, passionate night with a beautiful woman would relieve his body of stress and might even get rid of the unwanted obsession he had with a particular woman.

But he chose not to. The women he normally hooked up with expected a dinner date with wining and dining at an expensive restaurant that was followed by a passionate night. But in his current state of mind, he only wanted aggressive fucking and release with no conversation whatsoever.

Because of that reason, ever since his return from Singoor, he had been choosing to take out his aggression in the damn gym.

Fuck.

Sucking in an angry breath, he was about to head to the boxing area when his phone began to ring.

He went towards it right away, knowing it could only be his brothers or the investigating team calling him at midnight.

It was the investigation head.

“We got the pictures, Mr. Thakvar. They contain images of the Bhil family members as well as other members of positions in the clan, as you had requested. We’ll get hold of more images over the next few days along with the information that you need.”

“Good.”

Ending the call, Rishab opened the link that the investigation lead had sent. The first image was of the Bhil clan heiress in the garden. He had seen her pictures before as part of the information on heiresses of the prominent clans of Singoor.

The woman was pretty. The previous pictures he had seen of hers were outside of the Singoor region, where she was studying medicine at a university. He was surprised that some of the heiresses were allowed to go outside of Singoor to study.

Komal Bhil was only twenty years old. He felt she was too young for him because she was the same age as his sister Nandini. But he wasn’t looking for a wife as a life partner. All he needed was to ensure that a marriage took place to form an alliance needed for a larger purpose. And once that purpose was achieved, the woman he married could lead a comfortable life wherever she wanted.

He went through the rest of the pictures, which were taken mostly around the Bhil mansion. The pictures were of the staff who were companions and security to the young heiress. The security and administrative staff consisted of some women as well, but none of them were the person he was looking for.

Frustrated, he wanted to fling his phone away, but he continued to search through the dozens of pictures. The woman he was looking for was from the Bhil clan, no doubt about it. The snake-shaped jewelry, the bright blue dressing, and the uniquely designed dots were all specific to the Bhil clan.

There were also pictures of the heiress's uncle, who was the proxy clan head for the Bhil clan. The man took charge when the previous heiress of the Bhil clan became a widow. Since the widow was considered to be infertile for not conceiving during the length of her marriage, her younger sister was declared as the heiress.

The laws of the Singoor land were outdated and brutal at times.

He quickly scrolled through the pictures of the uncle, who was mostly surrounded by men. The uncle also had a son who was strangely missing from the pictures taken in the Bhil mansion.

Making a mental note to check on the son, he was just about to close the folder and open the one on the son when a sudden jolt hit him.

He stared at the last picture of the uncle.

With his heart thudding, he called the investigating lead.

The call was answered right away.

"I just sent you an image. Find out who that girl is in the painting."

"Sure, Mr. Thakvar."

Rishab ended the call and continued to stare at the photo, which was taken inside the Bhil mansion. The photo was of the heiress's uncle, but what caught Rishab's attention was the large painting of a girl in the background. Although the girl in the picture was too young, most likely a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old, Rishab recognized her. It was his desert rose. The woman he was hunting for.

The phone rang exactly ten minutes later.

"The painting is of Gauri Meena, Mr. Thakvar."

Rishab frowned at the last name. "Meena? Not Bhil?"

"Meena is her late husband's clan name. Gauri Bhil became Gauri Meena after her marriage. She is Komal Bhil's older sister."

Another jolt hit him at the information. She was the widowed older sister

who was the original heiress before she was made to give it up after the death of her husband since she was childless.

“I need more information on her. Everything that you can get.”

“Yes, sir.”

He ended the call and continued to stare at the picture.

He hadn't expected her to be related directly to his soon-to-be bride. When he read information on the Bhil heiress' widowed sister, he assumed she would be someone restricted to the Bhil mansion with her face covered in a heavy veil. Not someone riding horses and attacking using bow and arrows.

Rishab's heart burned and raced in anticipation. His days of anger and frustration of not being able to find the woman who had attacked him were coming to an end.

His mouth twisted into a dark smile.

Gauri Meena Bhil. We are going to meet soon.

CHAPTER 2

One month later...

Singoor desert, India

No music played inside the large room where a sole dancer danced fluidly in front of the god statue that was surrounded by a vertical circle of flames. The sound of anklets and the rousing music playing within the conscious mind drove the movements of the dancer.

The world spun around with a burst of magic and beauty as the dancer gave in body, heart and mind to the supreme being. The mind stayed in the realms where there were no worries, sadness, or grief, and the sole purpose was to celebrate life as it was and remain one with the supreme lord.

The movements turned even faster before coming to a conclusion with the left leg and hand suspended across in the air, depicting the pose of the ultimate creator, preserver, and destroyer.

Slowly, Gauri Bhil's mind returned from inner consciousness to reality. Lowering her left leg and hands to the floor, she bowed deeply with joined hands in front of the magnificent form of the dancing God statue.

She straightened and went to the corner of the room, where she removed the heavy dancing anklets and placed them on the shelf before wearing her usual lighter anklets. Taking another bow before the god statue, she stepped out of the prayer room, which was in the garden of the Bhil mansion.

She went to the earthen pot kept outside and poured water into a copper tumbler.

She was sipping the cool water when she heard hesitant voices calling her.
“Madam...”

She turned to see a couple of maids standing at a distance. The household staff knew Gauri was not to be disturbed while she was inside the garden prayer room.

“Yes?” Gauri asked.

“Madam... your uncle wanted to let you know that an important guest is arriving shortly.”

“Who?”

“Your uncle didn’t convey the details.”

Normally, her uncle informed her well in advance of an important guest arriving. Whoever was visiting must have decided to come at the last moment.

“I’ll instruct the staff for preparations.”

“Your uncle has asked Komal madam to help with the preparations, madam.”

A flash of annoyance passed through Gauri. Her younger sister was back home for the holidays before the university exams. Gauri did not want her uncle to burden her sister with household duties.

“Tell my uncle I’ll be joining him shortly.”

“Okay, madam.”

Gauri stepped into the mansion. She could see the household staff scrambling around to prepare for the guest.

“Where’s my sister?”

“In the kitchen, madam.”

Gauri nodded and headed to the kitchen area that was to the side of the mansion. The place was as usual hot and smoky from the burning wood under the stoves.

Gauri saw her sister inside the kitchen. Komal stood hesitantly, trying to speak with the head cook. As soon as Komal's eyes spotted her, there was visible relief.

“Thank God! I didn't know what to instruct. Apparently, the guest is a foreigner.”

Gauri's mouth twisted into a smile. “I'll take over. Get back to your studies.”

Komal bit her lip. “But my uncle asked me to get ready to receive the guest.”

“There's no need,” Gauri replied. “I'll receive the guest with our uncle. You can join us during lunch.”

Komal let out another sigh of relief. “Thank God! I still have a lot to study for my exams!”

“Go. I'll instruct the staff not to disturb you.”

Komal let out another relieved sigh and hugged her before scrambling out of the hot, smoky kitchen.

Gauri spent the next few minutes giving instructions to the staff. Since the guest arriving was a foreigner, she asked the food that would be served on the main dining table to be mild rather than their usual spicy food. She added a few additional sweets that the Bhil clan was known for.

“I'll check back later, before lunchtime,” Gauri told the head chef.

She then stepped out of the kitchen and headed back to her room to shower and get ready.

“Which room has been prepared for the guest?” she asked the housekeeper.

“Your uncle didn't ask for a room to be prepared for the guest, madam.”

Gauri frowned. Most foreign guests that her uncle entertained stayed at least for one night. It was odd that the person wouldn't be staying, which

would mean he would have to travel in the desert after sunset, which was quite dangerous in the Singoor region.

“My uncle might have forgotten to instruct. Have the guest suite on the Eastern wing prepared.”

“Yes, madam.”

Gauri was about to take the stairs to go up to her room when the security head approached her.

He bowed his head in greeting. “Madam.”

“Kedar, ensure that security is provided to the guests from the Meena province. I don’t want a dead guest arriving or leaving from here. Also, find out who else is accompanying the guest.”

The security head looked surprised. “Your uncle mentioned that the guest didn’t need security, madam. The guest is arriving by helicopter.”

Gauri frowned. Although she had never done any air travel, she knew about it. She wasn’t sure she would like someone arriving in the Bhil province by air as it might cause disruption. The people in her clan, including her, traveled by horses. The loud sound of a helicopter might scare the animals.

“Make sure the horses are tied securely.”

“Yes, madam.”

Giving the security head a few more instructions, she continued on her way. She made a mental note to tell her men to go to the local market as planned to purchase necessities. She had been looking forward to a brisk ride that afternoon, but she would have to postpone it to another day.

Annoyed by the inconvenience caused by the unexpected guest, she stepped into her room to get ready.

The Bhil province needed money from large investments, which is why she tolerated outsiders coming into her province. Having more money would

mean being able to modernize. Instead of a smoky kitchen due to wood and other traditional sources of fuel, they would be able to afford to get gas cylinders. Her people would have better homes and quality of life as well.

Her uncle had invited a few international businessmen before. He would woo them for days, trying to convince them to invest in Bhil province, but only to see them fleeing after discovering the dangers of doing business in Singoor.

The current businessman was most likely destined to meet the same fate.

By the time Gauri finished taking a bath and got ready, she could hear the sounds of the drums and trumpets. She preferred to get ready on her own and didn't enjoy being fussed over. But she knew it would have been faster if she had asked a couple of maids to help her that morning.

Adjusting her arm bracelet and tucking in her small knife at the side of her waist, she drew the sapphire-colored cloth around her shoulders and on the top of her head.

She stepped out of her room and went down the stairs.

The inside of the mansion was nearly empty as most of the household staff had gone outside to receive the guest.

A large crowd had assembled, and she could see her people playing the drums and trumpets. Even snake charmers played their signature instrument behind the swaying snakes. According to her uncle, such pomp and show were necessary to draw the attention of international businessmen.

Since it didn't cause any harm and her people enjoyed it, she didn't oppose it.

She stood in the side, next to her people, and waited for the receiving party and the guest to pass. She couldn't see much as security covered the guest from the front. She could only see the top of the man's head as he was quite tall.

When the receiving party came closer, the security staff moved to the sides, and she got a clear view of the guest.

She expected a middle-aged businessman like before, but her heart jerked in shock when she saw the guest clearly. Just when she thought she might be mistaken, the man's eyes collided with hers.

She saw the dark flash in his eyes as he maintained eye contact.

He recognized her as well. They had never spoken to each other before, but the brief meeting between them in the desert wasn't something either of them would forget.

Their eyes remained locked until he walked past her, followed by her gushing uncle and the welcome celebrations.

It was him. One of the alleged secret heirs to the powerful Thakvar clan.

The man she had attacked as a warning to the Thakvars. And now, his presence in her province indicated that he didn't heed her warning.

CHAPTER 3

The guest was taken inside the Bhil mansion with equal pomp and show.

Gauri watched as he was received by a group of waiting women who put vermilion powder on his forehead and a garland around his neck before welcoming him inside. She wasn't included in that group because she was a widow, and according to tradition, it was considered inauspicious for her to be in that group.

She normally didn't care. But right then, she felt impatient while waiting for those traditions to be completed. Her heart began to thud as soon as the initial shock of seeing the alleged Thakvar heir began to wear off. She knew his presence could only mean terrible things.

He had come to either retaliate for the attack, or he was there for an alliance as the rumors had indicated many weeks ago. She didn't care about retaliation as she could easily handle him. It was the alliance that put her on the edge.

Unable to wait any further, she approached the guest and the receiving group.

"Uncle, I would like to talk to you in private."

Her uncle didn't look happy that she had approached before the customary welcome was completed.

"Let's first welcome Mr. Rishab Thakvar properly, Gauri," her uncle said in a slightly admonishing tone.

Her uncle put on a smile and looked at the guest. "Mr. Thakvar. This is Gauri, my older niece."

Gauri looked at the guest who was watching her. A slow smile formed on his handsome face, but his eyes flashed darkly.

“We’ve met before, Mr. Saini,” he said in a deep voice.

She thought he would tell her uncle about the circumstances under which they met.

“Oh, when?” Gauri’s uncle asked in surprise.

“A while ago,” the man replied. “But I didn’t get a chance to talk to your niece. She left before I could introduce myself to her.”

A bolt of anger shot through her at his words. The man was playing some kind of mind games with her. Although she wanted to respond, she had more important things to discuss.

“Excuse us... Mr. Thakvar,” she said. “I need to speak to my uncle urgently.” She looked at the receiving group. “Have Mr. Thakvar seated in the main hall. We will join him shortly.”

With that order, she stepped away and went to a room that was at the far end of the main hall. It was a weapons room where bows, arrows and knives were kept along with other weapons that the Bhil clan used. She didn’t turn to see whether her uncle followed behind her or not. She knew he would.

Her uncle looked tense as he stepped into the weapons room.

“That was quite rude, Gauri. Rishab Thakvar is a very important guest.”

She turned to look at her uncle. “Why is he here?”

A look of discomfort passed on her uncle’s face before he straightened.

“He and his brothers are international businessmen worth billions—”

Gauri cut him off. “Is he here as a businessman or for an alliance?”

Her uncle once again looked uncomfortable. “He’s here for... an alliance... with Komal,” he replied hesitantly.

Her heart jerked as her doubts became real. “I won’t agree to this. Ask him to leave or...”

“You can’t threaten the heir of the Thakvar clan, Gauri!” her uncle pleaded. “That’s why I didn’t want to discuss this with you before. I knew you would react badly.”

“Of course, I will react badly. Komal is my sister, and she is only twenty years old. She wants to become a doctor.”

Her uncle looked at her. “You were fifteen years old when you got married. And your husband was much older than what Rishab Thakvar’s age is right now.”

Gauri sucked in a breath at the reminder. “That was different,” she replied. “The circumstances were different at that time.”

“The circumstances are different even now! There has been unrest in the region for decades. But now that the Thakvar clan has heirs, there are expectations from all the clans that alliances could be formed to commission the Goddess Shakti statue and restore peace in Singoor.”

Gauri knew those facts already.

Her uncle took advantage of her momentary silence.

“If you oppose this alliance, not just the Thakvars, all the clans of Singoor will blame the Bhil clan for continuing the decades-long misery. They have already made an alliance with the Gujjar clan. They have extended the alliance offers to the Kanwar clan and to us. You know very well it is considered a privilege to be a Thakvar bride. If we reject the alliance, no one else in Singoor will dare to marry Komal.”

Gauri didn’t think it was a privilege, but the rest of the people from all the clans in Singoor did. And she didn’t necessarily want Komal to marry someone from Singoor. Gauri wanted her sister to choose her husband based on love and mutual respect.

She didn’t tell her uncle that.

“That man is most likely not even the real heir,” she said. “There is

information that three men came out of nowhere claiming to be Mihir Thakvar's sons. They are frauds who are after the oil wells in Singoor."

Her uncle frowned at her statements. "Those are just rumors. And even if they are true, Mihir Thakvar has already declared them as his heirs, and people have accepted it."

Gauri knew that as well. But it wouldn't change the truth.

"Please get Komal ready," her uncle pleaded. "I know she will be scared. But if you talk to her, she will agree to this alliance and marriage. We have no choice right now."

With those statements, her uncle left to return to the guest.

Gauri stood in the weapons room, feeling helpless. She hated feeling that way. But whatever her uncle said was true. The alliance with the Thakvar clan could not be rejected as it was tied to restoring peace in the region.

But she also knew that the price of peace would come at the cost of sacrificing her sister's happiness and aspirations.

She sucked in a deep breath.

I won't let that happen.

She would have to get rid of the Thakvar heir.

Gauri combed her sister's beautiful, thick hair to fall in waves at the back. She had sent away the maids who helped Komal get ready because she wanted to tell her sister about the alliance in private.

But unlike all the times when her sister enjoyed her hair being combed by Gauri, there was terror in her sister's beautiful eyes.

"M-marriage alliance?" Komal stammered.

Gauri looked at her sister in the mirror. "It's just the initial talks. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"B-but it's with the Thakvars. Aren't they supposed to be the most powerful clan in Singoor? What if they get offended if I say no? What if they take their anger on—"

"You don't have to say no," Gauri told her sister.

Her sister blinked, looking confused.

Gauri let out a small smile. "You don't have to say no because... Rishab Thakvar will reject this alliance."

Komal looked shocked and still confused. But the terror had left Komal's eyes because she trusted her older sister to take care of any problem that came her way.

Gauri held her sister's slightly trembling hand. "Come, they are waiting for us."

Komal nodded and stood up.

Gauri and her sister were both wearing sapphire and gold-colored dresses. The sisters were of the same height and build, but both of them looked very different since Komal resembled their beautiful late mother, and Gauri had her father's regal features. Komal was also delicately beautiful, with petal

soft and radiant skin, while Gauri's skin was tanned from spending significant time outdoors riding horses. Komal's eyes shone with innocence and wide-eyed curiosity, while Gauri's eyes carried the burden of responsibility from a young age. Komal was the epitome of sweet innocence, while Gauri represented a woman hardened by life.

Rishab Thakvar would definitely be captivated by her sister's sweet and innocent youthful radiance. No man could resist that pull. But Gauri would ensure that he was driven away.

They went down the stairs and went to the dining area, where a lavish meal was prepared for the guest. Her uncle and the guest were already seated at the table with the rest of the important Bhil clan members.

Silence fell as Gauri and her sister approached the table. Everyone got up from their chairs out of respect. Gauri watched as Rishab Thakvar's dark gaze fell on her.

"Mr. Thakvar," Gauri's uncle said. "This beautiful young woman is my niece Komal."

Rishab Thakvar's gaze continued to collide with Gauri's before he looked at her sister. Gauri couldn't read anything on his handsome face as he acknowledged her sister.

"Miss Bhil. I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

"I... uh... thank you."

Komal sounded nervous.

Gauri led her sister to the empty chair opposite to Rishab Thakvar and took the one next to it. While the meal was served, Gauri's uncle led the conversation.

"Komal is well-versed in running a household. She is the one who gave instructions to the kitchen staff to prepare today's special meal. She is a very bright young woman as well. She is studying medicine at a university in the

city. I know your father will be very happy since he encourages girls' education in your province.”

“Not just our province, Mr. Saini,” Rishab Thakvar replied. “My father has encouraged all the clans to avail educational facilities in the Thakvar region.”

“Oh yes! I've heard of that as well.”

The conversation was mostly led by Gauri's uncle with Rishab Thakvar's deep voice responding to her uncle's questions. Gauri cut into the conversation.

“Why did you not come to Singoor before, Mr. Thakvar?” she asked. “Why did you and your brothers suddenly appear just a few months ago to claim your alleged birthrights?”

There were gasps across the table.

“Gauri!” her uncle's voice admonished. “I told you Mihir Thakvar has already declared them as his heirs. You can't just—”

“It's okay, Mr. Saini,” Rishab Thakvar replied. And then, his dark gaze fell on her. “My father chose to keep us as a secret for our protection, Miss Bhil.”

“Mrs. Meena,” she corrected.

Even though she wasn't usually referred to by her married name, something made her want to assert her position.

His eyes held hers. “My apologies... Mrs. Meena.” Although the words were of apology, there was a dark undertone to them.

Gauri could sense the people at the table shifting in discomfort. But she didn't let the matter go.

“If your father chose to hide his sons away, what has changed for him to reveal his heirs now? It's still dangerous here in Singoor.” Her eyes held his. “You can be easily attacked... and left for the dead in the middle of a desert.”

Rishab Thakvar's eyes flashed dangerously at her words that more or less called his father a coward and also at the reminder of what she had done to him during their encounter in the desert.

"Gauri!" her uncle broke in again. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Thakvar. Gauri didn't mean—"

Rishab Thakvar didn't acknowledge her uncle's apology. His dark eyes remained locked on hers.

"My father knows that we are more than capable of protecting ourselves now, Mrs. Meena," he stated. "And as far as the attacks are concerned... let's just say I now know not to let down my guard with anyone, especially the ones who seem deceptively harmless."

Gauri knew he was talking about her. He had thought her to be harmless, which proved to be wrong.

She held his gaze. "I don't think you seem all that cautious, Mr. Thakvar. You are here alone at the Bhil mansion with no security of your own."

A pin-drop silence prevailed as her words were taken as a direct threat to the Thakvar heir.

Gauri's uncle interjected hurriedly. "I apologize again, Mr. Thakvar. Gauri is just being protective of her sister. Please don't take her words otherwise. The Bhil clan is not issuing a threat to you. The Bhil clan will always be an ally to the Thakvars."

Rishab Thakvar didn't say anything. His gaze was directed towards her while her uncle hurriedly directed the conversation to what the Thakvars, especially Mihir Thakvar, had accomplished over the past twenty years.

The rest of the meal continued without Gauri participating in the conversation. She hoped Rishab Thakvar got the message that it wasn't going to be a smooth alliance. He also said that he would be better off making a similar alliance with some other clan, even if it wasn't as prominent as the

Bhil clan.

Komal remained silent throughout. It was only at the end of the meal that Gauri's uncle made reference to her sister.

“Would you like to ask Komal anything, Mr. Thakvar?”

Rishab Thakvar's eyes fell briefly on Komal before returning to Gauri.

“No.”

Anger shot through Gauri that the man didn't show interest in her sister but wanted to make her his wife.

“But Komal would like to speak with you in private, Mr. Thakvar, before deciding to agree to the alliance.”

There were shocked murmurs across the table.

“Gauri, we can't have unmarried couples speaking in private!” her uncle said. “It's unheard of in Singoor.”

Gauri looked at her uncle. “Komal won't be alone, Uncle. I will be with her.”

There was panic on her uncle's face because he knew Gauri would use the opportunity to offend Rishab Thakvar further. But before he could say anything, Rishab Thakvar spoke.

“I'm not conservative, Mr. Saini. I don't mind clearing any doubts that my future bride has towards the marriage.”

Satisfaction filled Gauri.

A man such as Rishab Thakvar, who had an alternate agenda of wanting control of the Singoor oil wells, would not want to take the unnecessary trouble of forming an alliance with the Bhil clan if he thought it would come with unnecessary complications and trouble. He would immediately seek an alliance with another clan.

Gauri was determined to ensure that he would remove the thought of an alliance with the Bhil clan by the end of the visit.

Gauri ensured that the meeting took place away from the main hall, where there was enough privacy. So, she chose the weapons room. It was small and had limited seating since it was only used to discuss the strategy of attacks and defensive measures.

She and Komal were seated on a raised platform daybed with several decorative pillows to relax and sit back while Rishab Thakvar was offered the leather chair in the front. It was a setup that would make the person sitting on the chair uncomfortable as they would feel interrogated.

But Rishab Thakvar didn't seem uncomfortable.

His tall, broad and muscular body was relaxed on the chair as he sat forward with his fingers intertwined in a casual gesture.

And unlike the previous times when only their eyes collided, this time his eyes swept over her lazily, taking in her attire. His eyes lingered on the jeweled knife that was tucked into the corner of her exposed waist, which could be seen through the sheer cloth covering her hair, shoulders, and waist. His mouth twisted, looking at the knife before his dark eyes returned to her face.

Anger filled the pit of her stomach.

She began the conversation. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Thakvar?" she asked.

"I'm a businessman," he replied. "My brothers and I own manufacturing and mining industries across the world."

The fact that he confirmed owning mining industries proved that he was most possibly an imposter out to steal the valuable oil wells in Singoor.

"I see. So, you must be traveling a lot for your work."

“Yes.”

“Then you must realize that forming an alliance with the Bhil clan would mean taking responsibility as the Bhil clan head. And there are a lot of responsibilities, which a man who grew up outside of Singoor, especially in a pampered city life cannot handle.”

She watched as his eyes flashed darkly.

“I can handle the responsibilities just the way my brother is able to handle leading the Thakvar as well as the Gujjar clans. And based on what your uncle said, your sister is also well-versed in handling the responsibilities of the Bhil clan.”

Gauri had heard about Rishab Thakvar’s older brother taking over the Gujjar and Thakvar clan responsibilities. It only further confirmed that the men alleged to be the Thakvar clan heirs were furthering their agenda of gaining complete control over the Singoor region.

The man seated in front of her looked confident and quite capable of such a ruthless agenda.

“There are other responsibilities that come with being married to the clan’s heir,” she said.

He didn’t say anything.

Satisfaction filled her because she knew her next challenge would be the last straw to drive him away.

“Take off your clothes, Mr. Thakvar,” she ordered softly.

There was a shocked gasp from her sister.

“Gauri! What are you saying!” her sister whispered in horrified panic.

But Gauri kept her eyes on the tall, arrogant man seated in front. “My sister wants to ensure she isn’t tied to a man unfit to beget an heir.” She swept her eyes over him. “Undress, Mr. Thakvar.”

She expected Rishab Thakvar to erupt with anger and storm out of the

Bhil mansion before canceling the alliance.

Dark eyes flashed dangerously on his handsome face, but slowly, his mouth twisted.

He stood up, and then, keeping his intense gaze on her and not on the bride-to-be, he began unbuttoning his shirt.

There was another shocked gasp from Komal. Gauri was caught off guard as well, but she kept her face even and watched as the man in front of her undressed.

He didn't wear anything under his shirt. She could see a tanned, masculine chest rippling with muscles on the narrow abdomen under a smattering of masculine hair. He shed his shirt completely, exposing his broad shoulders and biceps.

Continuing to lock his gaze with her, he reached for his belt. There was no hesitation or discomfort in his movements. The sound of a zipper filled the room before he stepped out of his trousers and stood with his powerful thighs apart in just his underwear. The small piece of cloth left nothing to the imagination. The outline of his rigid manhood could be seen clearly.

The heat in her stomach intensified and radiated all over with the display of the overtly masculine body.

Komal's head and gaze were lowered, but Gauri refused to look away and held his gaze. Her cheeks heated as their gazes continued to collide.

"As you can see, Mrs. Meena," he drawled. "I won't have a problem consummating my marriage or producing heirs. Unless you need further demonstration and a medical certificate."

The heat in her cheeks intensified at his challenge. The visuals in her mind of what would be further demonstration were too torrid.

"There's no need," she gritted.

Angry that he could embarrass her, she stood up abruptly. She then held

her sister's hand and walked out of the room, feeling angry and embarrassed even though the purpose had been to humiliate him.

Her uncle was waiting anxiously in the main hall. He looked at Komal's flushed face and Gauri's angry expression.

"What happened?" he asked.

Gauri sucked in an angry breath. "Rishab Thakvar is a pervert. He removed his clothes in front of me and Komal. I pulled Komal out of that room to protect her modesty."

Her uncle was shocked.

"Is that true?" he asked Komal.

Komal's face remained flushed, and she didn't say anything.

"We cannot form this alliance," Gauri stated firmly. "The man is not fit to lead our clan with such perversities."

Her uncle sucked in a breath. "I already told you that we have no choice, Gauri. The alliance has to happen."

"You are right, Mr. Saini," a deep voice drawled.

Gauri turned to see Rishab Thakvar as he joined them. He was fully dressed right then but was buttoning the cuff on one of his shirt sleeves. When he finished, he looked up, and his dark eyes met with hers. The expression made her cheeks heat up with anger.

"The alliance will go through," he said in a commanding tone. "And the marriage will take place in... two weeks."

Listening to that declaration, there were loud, excited murmurs across the hall.

Gauri then knew that it was going to take more than just humiliation to get Rishab Thakvar to back away from the alliance.

CHAPTER 4

It was late evening, and Rishab was at the Thakvar mansion talking to his brothers on the phone.

“You should have taken additional security, Rishab.”

Rishab knew his older brother Shivay wasn't happy about going to the Bhil province with minimal security.

“The Bhil clan has attacked you before,” Shivay stated. “Not all clans in Singoor abide by the rules, especially when it comes to outsiders. They attack first and enquire later.”

Rishab knew that as well.

“I don't think the Bhils would dare to attack him again,” his younger brother Nakul said. “By now, most of the clans know the importance and purpose of the alliances.”

Nearly all the clans had heard that the alliances formed with the Thakvar heirs would lead to the commissioning of the goddess statue. The commissioned statue would then be placed inside the Singoor temple, where the original goddess statue had been stolen nearly twenty years ago, causing major unrest and bloodshed in the Singoor region.

“Most of the clan do know the importance, but not all trust us,” Shivay said. “We still have a long way to go.”

So far, only the Eastern clans in Singoor have signed the peace treaty to not attack each other. The other clans were yet to be contacted to sign a similar treaty. Since the Bhil clan was on the West side of Singoor, they hadn't signed anything yet.

“How did the Bhil heiress take the news?” Shivay asked.

“She didn’t have anything to say.” It was the heiress’s older sister who had a lot to say.

“She might not have said anything, but be prepared for surprises,” Shivay warned.

Rishab knew there would be strong objections and quite a lot of trouble caused by his soon-to-be bride’s sister. He was prepared for it.

“The wedding will take place in two weeks.”

“Whoa!” said Nakul. “Are you sure?”

Rishab was beyond sure. He was determined there wouldn’t be any obstacles. “Yes. The faster the weddings take place, and the alliances are formed, the faster we can commission the goddess statue.”

He and his brothers were on the same track when it came to their mission.

“I’ll be flying to the Caribbean tomorrow. I’ll get back in time for the wedding.”

Rishab was going on a mission to shut down the shell accounts that were linked to the man named Tantra. Once the accounts were shut, Tantra would no longer be able to use people from Singoor to cause chaos and unrest in the Singoor region.

“I’ll speak to Mom and Dad about the wedding,” said Shivay. “I know mom would not want to miss another son’s wedding.”

Their mother couldn’t attend Shivay’s wedding because the people in Singoor weren’t told about her, and her location had to be kept hidden for safety reasons.

“It’s still not safe,” Rishab reminded.

“I know. But mom will insist on being there. We’ll take the necessary precautions.”

Rishab knew that their gentle but determined mother would insist on

attending the wedding. Although he and his brothers dealt and negotiated with the toughest of people in business over the years, one thing they couldn't do was stop their mother when she was keen on something. They loved their mother too much to disappoint her in any way.

"Then I'll coordinate to have my wedding around the same time," said Nakul. "Dad and mom wouldn't have to wait too long to begin the pilgrimage to fifty-one temples of goddess Shakti."

"But will the Kanwar clan be prepared for a wedding in such a short duration?" Shivay asked.

"Yes, they will," Nakul replied. "The Kanwar heiress will ask them to prepare."

Rishab knew his brother Nakul was approaching the alliance in a different way. Although the three brothers dealt with forming alliances differently, their goal was the same.

"We'll inform Nandini that Mom and Dad will be going on a pilgrimage for the next few months."

Nandini was their younger sister who was studying at a university in the United States. Rishab and his brothers agreed to keep her away from Singoor for safety reasons.

"All right," he said. "I'll call with updates."

"Take care, Rishab," Shivay said. "I know I've said this many times in the past few months, but don't push if things escalate and get too dangerous. Finding Tantra and his spies is important, but our safety and forming these alliances takes precedence over anything. Tell us if things get too dangerous."

Rishab and his two brothers had always taken several risks in business. All of those risks paid off, and they came in with certain dangers that they were aware of right from the beginning. But the risks they were taking when it came to forming alliances, finding the missing goddess statue, or hunting a

man named Tantra all came with several risks and unknown dangers.

“I’ll take care.”

Ending the call, he looked outside the mansion window at the darkening sky.

He had always shared everything with his two brothers. But there was one thing he kept from them.

He hadn’t told his brothers the identity of the person who had attacked him in the Singoor desert. They knew it was someone from the Bhil clan, but they didn’t know it was the older sister of his soon-to-be bride. They thought it was a random attack by someone in the clan who hadn’t known the consequences of attacking the Thakvar heir. If his brothers discovered the truth, the alliance would not only stop, but they would also ensure the Bhil clan paid a hundredfold for daring to attack him.

But Rishab didn’t want anything to stop the alliance. The alliance had to go on with the Bhil clan in particular.

And there was another major reason why he kept the secret. It was because his vicious desert rose was his personal war. He would be the one to make her pay for attacking him and threatening his family.

And she had threatened his family.

Gauri Bhil had known who he was right from the beginning.

Initially, he had thought she made a guess seeing the SUV in the small market. The Thakvar clan was the only clan in Singoor that had vehicles and proper roads. Other vehicles belonged to outsiders, mostly businessmen or tourists.

But it wasn’t the SUV. It was something else. Something she had seen much before she had seen him in the SUV.

His eyes fell on the heavy ring on his left hand.

It was a heavy gold ring with the insignia of an attacking tiger, which was

worn only by the Thakvar clan heirs. His father had given it to him in Singoor even though a public announcement hadn't been made at that time.

During the sandstorm, when her eyes had lowered and paused for a long moment, he thought she was looking at the small, colorful cloth bag that held bangles and accessories he had purchased from the old woman in the market. But she wasn't looking at the cloth bag. She was looking at his left hand. More particularly, his Thakvar insignia ring.

She had known right then that he was a Thakvar heir. And despite knowing, she had chosen to attack him as a warning to his family to stay away.

A dark smile of satisfaction twisted on his face.

He recalled the look on her face when she saw him at her home that morning.

She was stunned and furious when she realized what his presence in the Bhil mansion meant.

Her exotically beautiful face had burned with rage and determination.

It had taken quite an amount of self-control on his side not to do anything to the woman who had been haunting him day and night for weeks, especially when she taunted him throughout the visit and tried to humiliate him by ordering him to take off his clothes.

Dark satisfaction filled him again as he recalled the look on her face when he met her challenge and stood before her in just his boxer briefs. She was shocked and outraged. He had seen her fingers flexing on the handle of the jeweled knife she had worn near her exposed waist. He expected her to attack him with the knife, and he waited for her to do it. But she held back, knowing the consequences.

A dark smile continued to twist his mouth as he looked forward to the next confrontation.

CHAPTER 5

The wind blew into Gauri's hair as she rode her horse through the desert.

She knew it was dangerous to travel alone outside of her clan. Brutal clans like Kabali traveled in the dark and often attacked lone travelers. But she was willing to take any risk.

She had been riding for several hours before dawn. And now, the sun was beginning to rise.

But the beauty of the rising sun over the desert sand escaped her as her mind continued to be filled with thoughts and conversations from the previous day.

"I will not agree to this alliance."

"Stop being stubborn, Gauri," her uncle pleaded. "You know we can't reject this alliance without facing the consequences. Not only you but even Komal will be ostracized by our own people. This alliance and marriage will have to take place, no matter how you feel."

Gauri knew her uncle was right. As soon as the news of the Thakvar heir arriving at the Bhil province for an alliance had spread, there was celebration among her people. Everyone was overjoyed that the decades-long curse would be broken when the goddess Shakti's statue could be finally commissioned. And that the Bhils were given the opportunity to partake in such a divine cause.

While Gauri understood her people's sentiments and respected the centuries-old legacy, she also recalled how her sister reacted to the impending marriage.

Komal had a look of defeated acceptance.

“It’s okay, Gauri. I-I will get married. Maybe Rishab Thakvar will allow me to continue my studies.”

Gauri didn’t want her sister to sacrifice her dreams.

The very thought of Rishab Thakvar holding so much power over the future of the Bhil clan and her sister’s life enraged Gauri. The man knew the alliance wasn’t wanted by the woman he thought of making his bride, and yet he exerted his power and dominance to get what he wanted.

I can’t let that happen.

She continued riding the horse with renewed purpose. The sun had just finished rising when she saw the outline of vehicles at a distance coming her way. She also saw the helicopter from the day before waiting at a distance. Knowing the vehicles were heading towards it, she rode past the helicopter and pulled her horse to a stop. She waited with her face remaining covered.

She was going to the Thakvar mansion to meet with the man responsible for the chaos. But looking at the two vehicles that were heading out of the town that was in the Thakvar province, she knew she didn’t have to go all the way.

The vehicles came closer and slowed to a stop because she was blocking the path to the helicopter.

The doors opened and shut before several men in security uniforms got down and communicated via radio. They surrounded her, but none of them approached her.

A moment later, she saw the tall form of Rishab Thakvar walking towards her. He was dressed very differently from the previous day. Instead of traditional clothes, he was wearing a blue-colored business suit, and his eyes were covered with sunglasses.

He stopped in front of her. Although she was seated on top of her horse

and he was on the ground looking up at her, power and confidence radiated from him. She couldn't see his eyes but could feel the heavy intensity of his gaze sweeping over her. She knew he recognized her even though her lower face was covered.

“You are on the Thakvar land, Mrs. Meena,” he said.

“I want to talk to you.”

He didn't say anything.

She got down from her horse and stood in front of him. Then, pushing away the cloth covering her lower face, she looked at him.

“Withdraw the alliance with the Bhil clan,” she ordered. “There are other clans with heiresses that you can choose from. As I had mentioned already, the one who marries into the Bhil clan will have to lead. You don't have to take such trouble. My clan doesn't have the riches or resources that would benefit you in any way. There are heiresses in Reevar and Rathod clans who are of eligible age and would be happy to form alliances with the Thakvar clan.”

He listened silently without interrupting.

Just when she thought he was contemplating her proposal and would agree, he removed his sunglasses. His dark eyes clashed with hers before he replied.

“No.”

Anger erupted inside her at his refusal. By reflex, she reached for her bow and placed an arrow before pointing it at his throat.

His eyes flashed darkly, but he stood calmly while his men surrounding her pointed their guns at her.

Her heart thudded, knowing she would get shot and killed if she released the arrow.

Lack of sleep made her want to take the risk, but better sense prevailed,

knowing her sister and her clan would have to pay for her actions.

Slowly, she lowered the bow.

Rishab Thakvar's mouth twisted into a dark smile. "The marriage will take place in two weeks. The alliance will happen between the Thakvar and Bhil clans. Yes, I know I can make an alliance elsewhere. But I won't. You know exactly why, and there is nothing you can do, *Mrs. Meena.*"

The last part was said in a soft taunt.

He put on his sunglasses before walking back towards the SUVs. Her hands trembled, wanting to release all the arrows she had into his broad back. But she remained standing, with her bow lowered to the ground.

The men surrounding her also returned to the SUVs.

Soon, the vehicles drove past her while she stood alone in helpless fury.

According to the legacy, the alliance should be made between the Thakvars and the Bhils, but there was a workaround if circumstances weren't ideal. If the Bhil clan didn't have any female heirs, the Thakvars would have chosen some other clan to form an alliance.

It's because of me. Because of what I had done to him.

She knew Rishab Thakvar was going to seek revenge for the attack. The previous day's insults and humiliation seemed to have added to his fury instead of putting him off the alliance as she had hoped.

Her sister was going to become the innocent victim of his vengeance.

Gauri sucked in a breath.

I can't let that happen.

She might not be able to stop the alliance or wedding from happening, but she would do everything to stop Rishab Thakvar from harming her sister.

CHAPTER 6

The helicopter took off from the desert.

“The jet has obtained clearance, Mr. Thakvar. We should be at the airport in thirty minutes.”

Rishab nodded and looked down from the helicopter window.

His eyes were focused on the lone rider at a distance on top of a white horse riding across the desert in the opposite direction. The sapphire blue robes looked bright against the pale sand of the desert.

His vicious desert rose was foolishly bold to have come alone. She could have been attacked or killed by a rogue clan in the desert. That fact angered him more than the threat she issued to him.

It wasn't because he felt any softness towards her or cared for her wellbeing. He just didn't want her snatched away before he could make her pay. She owed it to him and his damn peace of mind to pay.

He was not surprised by the sheer gall she had to order him to break the alliance. And when he refused, she dared to aim an arrow at his throat.

If he didn't have a jet waiting at the airport or a packed schedule with various delegates and heads of the banks starting in a few hours, he would have prolonged their confrontation to show her who held power between them.

He knew she would try her damn best to stop the marriage between him and her sister. But unfortunately for her, there was nothing she could do to stop the marriage or the alliance from happening.

His mouth twisted darkly with satisfaction as he watched the spec of

sapphire blue fading at a distance.

Two more weeks, and then you will begin to pay, my dear vicious desert rose.

CHAPTER 7

It was the day of the wedding.

The sounds of drums, trumpets and conch shells filled the air at the Thakvar mansion.

“I can’t believe you just flew in this morning!” Rishab’s mother scolded while she adjusted the pendant on his wedding dress.

A team of men was sent to work on his wedding attire, but he had sent them away, which prompted his mother to take over.

Rishab’s mouth twisted in amusement. “I didn’t think there would be so much to the wedding attire, Ma. I think I’m wearing more accessories than you.”

His wedding attire consisted of a long, heavy ethnic tunic in Thakvar clan colors. It was accessorized with layers of pearls arranged over a clan insignia pendant that was surrounded by gold-rimmed tiger nails. A long ceremonial sword with a jeweled handle and ornately decorated gold case was strapped to his side. There was also a heavy red and gold turban with the clan insignia to be worn.

He would have preferred it if it were just the wedding tunic and the ring with the clan insignia that his father had given after publicly declaring him as a Thakvar heir.

His mother laughed. “You look like a prince. A devilishly handsome and charming prince.”

Rishab smiled. “Thanks, Ma. And you look elegant and beautiful as always.”

His mother was beaming with joy and happiness as two of her sons were getting married. His brother Nakul was getting married the next day. With two weddings, the celebrations were twofold.

Suddenly, there was a small flicker in his mother's eyes.

Rishab frowned. "What is it, Ma?"

She looked uncertain. "I know I asked you this before. But are you happy with this alliance, son?"

Rishab cleared his frown. "I'm the one who proposed this alliance, Ma."

His mother nodded. "Yes, I know that. But I also know you are getting married so your father and I can stay together in Singoor without any threat. I'm not sure if this is what I wanted for you. I wish you loved the woman you chose to be your wife."

Rishab smiled. "Then I wouldn't have decided to marry even if I were fifty, Ma."

His mother let out a laugh at his words. "I can believe that as well. But I'm feeling quite positive. I've seen how Shivay loves Ishani even though it was an arranged marriage. Ishani is like a daughter to me now. I'm praying the same happens with my other two daughters-in-law."

Rishab smiled but didn't say anything. He knew his marriage would be different from his brother's and he would never fall in love with his wife. The marriage would be purely for the sake of forming alliances. Once the purpose was solved, he would ensure his wife could leave to lead a comfortable life.

But he didn't tell his mother that.

Rishab's mother sighed. "I miss Chitti here, though. I wish she could attend her brothers' weddings."

Rishab's younger sister Nandini wasn't told about the weddings. She would immediately want to fly down to Singoor with her boyfriend, which was not safe.

“She can fly here once the goddess statue is commissioned, Ma.”

“Yes, she can then meet her new sisters-in-law.” His mother smiled. “I can’t wait to see and meet with my future daughters-in-law. I know I won’t be able to spend much time with them until a few months, but I hope they feel welcomed into our family.”

Rishab’s parents were leaving Singoor to go on the planned pilgrimage, where they would be taking the precious stones and gold that were required to commission the goddess statue. They would be visiting fifty-one temples across seven countries as per the legacy.

“Don’t worry, Ma. You can get to know them better when you return.”

His soon-to-be bride would most likely feel comfortable and adjusted to him since he would allow her to live a life independent of him. He planned in such a way that she would continue to stay in the city pursuing medical college. He just needed to make arrangements to have her security increased and move her to a safer apartment close to the university.

Meanwhile, he would fly in and out of Bhil mansion when required to take charge of things.

That is if my bride’s sister allows it.

A dark thrill of anticipation ran through him at the thought of the next confrontation with his soon-to-be bride’s sister.

He knew Gauri Meena Bhil would cause quite a lot of trouble and make his life as difficult as possible. Unfortunately for her, she wouldn’t succeed as he was more than prepared for her.

“Are you ready, son?” a voice asked.

Rishab turned to see his father approaching. “Yes, Dad.”

His father stopped in front and placed the turban on Rishab’s head. “The last time I placed a turban on your head was when you were six years old and in a school play.”

Rishab smiled. "I remember that, Dad."

Rishab recalled that as well, and there were pictures of that school play in their family album. He also recalled that barely a few weeks later, he and his brothers were told by their mother that their father had died in an accident. What followed was nearly two decades of living with a lie until his mother had to reveal the truth.

Rishab's father hugged him. "I want you to be happy, son. I hope you find the same happiness I did when I married your mother."

"Thanks, Dad."

Rishab saw his parents exchange a sweet, poignant look as they recalled their old memories.

Rishab's father smiled. "Let's go. They are waiting for us downstairs."

Rishab nodded and went with his parents to the entrance of the mansion. His parents were called to perform the rituals ahead of the journey through the desert to the temple.

Rishab was joined by his brothers and sister-in-law Ishani. His brothers hugged him. Nakul and Shivay were dressed as the Thakvar clan heirs. Shivay's wife Ishani looked radiant in regal attire and heavy jewelry that represented both Thakvar as well as her Gujjar clan.

"You look beautiful, sis," Rishab told his sister-in-law.

"Thank you," she said with a blush.

Ishani was not only sweet and beautiful. She was a powerhouse of history and information about the Singoor land. Rishab enjoyed her company.

"Anything I should know ahead of the wedding ceremony?" Rishab asked.

Shivay's mouth twisted. "Always expect the unexpected from a Singoor bride," he said, exchanging a look with his wife.

Ishani blushed.

Rishab knew that although his brother had intended the marriage to be

purely for an alliance, he fell in love with his wife.

“I can predict that my Singoor bride is going to be too shocked tomorrow,” Nakul said drily.

Nakul’s soon-to-bride didn’t know his true identity.

Before Rishab could say that his Singoor bride was going to be predictably scared and anxious until he could reassure her, the sound of the conch shells increased in volume along with the drums and trumpets.

Rishab’s parents joined them. “It’s time to go,” his father said.

Soon, the entire Thakvar family stepped out and stood at the top of the mansion steps. Hundreds of men and women stood in rows playing the drums, trumpets and conch shells. Every Thakvar clan member, including the children, assembled to participate in the celebration.

Rishab and his brothers bowed before the crowd before straightening and raising their ceremonial swords, leading to deafening cheers. Mihir Thakvar beamed with pride.

Soon, the family sat in one of the SUVs to head to the Singoor temple, which was located in the middle of the desert. Half a dozen SUVs flanked them in the front and at the back as security.

The rest of the clan people followed either on foot or on camels to the temple, where all the Singoor clans’ heirs got married. Three helicopters hovered in the sky to scan the desert and report to the security team.

Although the law of the Singoor land dictated that blood could not be spilled around the temple, necessary precautions were taken to keep the clan people safe from rogue clans who would want to stop the weddings from taking place.

Rishab’s thoughts once again fell on a particular woman. Gauri Meena Bhil.

He wondered if she conspired with brutal and rogue clans such as the

Kabalis to stop the wedding. If she did, there would be hell to pay, not only for her but also for her people.

The crowd that assembled outside the Singoor temple was massive. Apart from the Thakvar and Bhil clans, there were several other clans who had come to witness and partake in the wedding festivities. There was also a small group who didn't belong to any clan.

They were called the Aghoris, the half-naked holy men who covered their bodies with ash. They wandered the Singoor desert and several holy places across the country and were known to be the caretakers of the Singoor desert.

Rishab bowed before them, allowing them to apply ash on the foreheads in the form of three horizontal lines. Although Rishab wasn't religious by nature, he had a deep respect for the culture and traditions that his mother had instilled in him and his siblings.

"You will now be a caretaker of Sands of Singoor," the holy men declared.

The small group did not enter the temple and disappeared into the desert.

Rishab and his family entered the temple. His eyes automatically searched to see if his bride's family was already present inside, but they hadn't arrived yet.

He was led inside to be seated in front of the large form of a deity made of natural black stone.

Water from a natural source gushed around the deity, which made the temple significantly cooler in temperature. A goddess form made of flowers was placed near the ceremony.

The original goddess Shakti statue had been stolen thirty years ago, leading to violence and unrest in the region. The people in Singoor were of the opinion that unless the goddess returned in the statue form, the Singoor

region would continue to be cursed.

The original statue had been commissioned hundreds of years ago when prominent Singoor clans made alliances through marriages. But recently, based on an old Singoor priest's memory, a hand drawing of the original statue was made.

Rishab had seen the hand drawing. It showed the golden form of the goddess covered with black diamonds on her body, a white diamond and rubies necklace, and a platform made of white diamonds and emeralds on which the goddess sat. Each of the three components of Goddess Shakti was commissioned by the three alliances.

A new goddess statue would soon be commissioned with the same likeness after three alliances were formed. Rishab's parents were going to take the gold, diamonds, and precious stones contributed by the prominent clans in alliances to fifty-one temples of the goddess Shakti to seek blessings before returning to Singoor and having the new statue commissioned.

The time taken for his parents to finish the pilgrimage to fifty-one temples and return to begin commissioning the statue would be around six months. And during those six months, Rishab would have to ensure there was no hindrance to the alliance.

A flicker of doubt ran through him. What if the alliance didn't go through if his bride didn't show up for the wedding?

He knew there were chances of that happening even though his bride's uncle sent a message when the Bhil bridal party began heading to the Singoor temple. But a lot of things could happen in the meantime. Gauri Bhil could have convinced her sister midway not to get married.

Before he could think of asking his brothers to check with security, the sounds of the trumpets and drums increased in tempo, indicating the arrival of the bridal party.

He looked at the temple entrance to see a palanquin with the Bhil colors decorated in ornate snake patterns.

When the palanquin was lowered, and the bride stepped out, his eyes searched for the people surrounding the bride, especially the women. Except for the bride, none of the women's faces were covered. And he didn't find the one he was seeking.

He then realized that the bride's sister wouldn't be attending the ceremony as she was a widow, and outdated traditions didn't consider her presence auspicious. A bolt of anger ran through him.

The priests continued to chant while the bride sat next to him and joined the ceremony.

While he focused on the rituals, he wondered about how he would spend the next three nights with his bride in the Singoor desert tent. It wasn't something they could avoid.

Komal Bhil was too young and innocent. He felt responsible for her well-being and considered it his duty to protect her and keep her comfortable. But he didn't know how much he could reveal to her about their marriage being purely a business transaction.

He needed to gain her confidence first so she wouldn't reveal the truth to her sister.

If Gauri Bhil came to know that the marriage was not consummated or was going to remain platonic, she would do everything possible to break the alliance.

Anger shot through him at the thought.

Sucking in a deep breath, he pushed away those thoughts and focused on the wedding rituals. He would plan everything in a way that would not threaten the alliance.

The three Thakvar weddings would finally ensure alliances could form,

and the goddess statue could be commissioned to bring peace to the Singoor region.

He would deal with his personal vendetta in a way that would not risk the main purpose in any way.

“Please place your right hand on the bridegroom’s hand.”

At the priest’s instruction, Rishab extended his hand with the palm facing up.

There was a significant pause. He wondered if his terrified bride would start crying or get up from the ceremony and run away from the temple.

As he waited, slowly a small, delicate hand with heavy bangles and decorated with dark red henna patterns hovered on top of his. The hand didn’t tremble like he expected, but he could sense the heavy reluctance.

There were murmurs while everyone waited for the Bhil bride to follow the instructions.

Another long moment later, the bride’s hand joined his. As Rishab stared at the joined hands, his heart began racing.

CHAPTER 8

“Please apply sindoor on the bride’s forehead.”

It was the final part of the wedding ceremony. A small group of women lifted the bridal veil so that a pinch of vermilion powder could be applied by the bridegroom on the spot right above the bride’s forehead.

As soon as the customs were completed, Gauri raised her head.

“My God, it’s the wrong bride!” an elderly woman from the Bhil clan exclaimed.

There were shocked murmurs until a man burst out.

“How could you do this, Gauri!” Jaswant Saini’s shocked voice asked. “Where is Komal? Bring her here for the ceremony. She is the one who has to be a Thakvar bride!”

Gauri remained calm while chaos ensued around her.

“We’ll bring the real bride!” her uncle announced, making the shocked murmurs increase in intensity. “Just give us a few hours.”

“The ceremony took place before our supreme lord,” the head priest replied. “It is considered binding in every way. Gauri is the bride now.”

“But Gauri is a widow!” her uncle continued.

“That doesn’t matter,” the head priest replied. “Once the wedding rituals are completed in front of god, the sanctity of a marriage is binding.”

Amidst the chaos, Gauri realized that the man who got tricked into marrying the wrong bride hadn’t spoken or reacted. She turned to look at him, only to find that he was watching her.

Rishab Thakvar’s handsome face was unreadable, but his dark, intense

eyes glinted with something. She knew he must be beyond angry at the deception.

“Please seek blessings from the almighty,” the priests instructed.

Gauri got up and stood next to her new husband. Closing her eyes, she sought blessings from the god and goddess.

The bridegroom had to seek blessings and also perform a ritual that was specific to the male heirs who weren't the firstborn. Those heirs, when married to heiresses from another clan, would automatically become the head of the wife's clan.

Rishab Thakvar drew out the heavy ceremonial sword and held it up before speaking in a commanding voice.

“I promise to lay down my life to protect my wife and her people, who are now my people as well.”

Gauri's eyes met with his. She knew Rishab Thakvar would rather kill her using the sword than lay his life to protect her.

The priests gave their blessings before concluding the wedding ceremony. The newlywed couple was then led outside the temple to partake in the wedding festivities.

Gauri's uncle approached her.

“How could you do this, Gauri,” her uncle whispered in fear. “The Bhil clan will face the wrath of the Thakvars.”

Gauri remained calm. “The Thakvars wanted an alliance with the Bhil clan. This marriage, regardless of who the bride is, will ensure there is an alliance formed. I wanted to be the Thakvar bride, and my sister did not.”

There were murmurs among the people, and the elders of the Bhil clan looked tense, but there was no aggression or threats of violence from the Thakvars.

Her uncle didn't seem too convinced, but he didn't express more fears out

loud. She knew she would have to speak with him later to allay the rest of his fears.

She walked towards the dais, where the newlywed couple would be seated to join the wedding feast and enjoy the festivities. Although she didn't turn to look, she was very aware of Rishab Thakvar's presence next to her and could sense his simmering hostility towards her.

She knew the clans would adjust to the change in brides, but Rishab Thakvar wouldn't.

Her new husband would most likely hurt her and might even end up killing her.

And right then, she didn't even have her knife as protection as she had left it behind to keep her identity a secret.

The sun began to set when the newlywed couple was taken to the Singoor desert tents, where they would be spending the next three nights.

Gauri's heart thudded as a group of old women accompanied her and Rishab Thakvar to a large tent on the West side of the Singoor temple.

“This is where you will spend the next three nights as husband and wife. It is considered auspicious to conceive a child in the sands of Singoor. The child born will be as strong and brave as our Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti.”

Gauri didn't say anything. She nodded and entered the tent. There were several tents in the holy lands that were around the temple. Based on the clan, a tent was allocated.

During her first wedding, since her husband was from a relatively smaller clan, the tent allocated was simple. But the one she was in right then was large, spacious and very luxurious. It was meant for a Thakvar heir.

Her heart began to thud. She still didn't have a weapon to protect herself for the next three days. Immediately, she began searching. Lanterns hanging from various nooks offered the necessary lighting.

The tent was divided into various sections. The first section was the sitting area with a couch and two heavy chairs. There wasn't anything she could use as a weapon. She stepped inside to see two more sections. Her heart raced when she saw a large bed with white sheets on which red flower petals were sprinkled on top.

Sucking in a deep breath, she continued searching. There was only one more section, which was the dining section, where fruits and delicacies were laid out on a table. She was about to ignore it and go into the bathroom to

check when she paused, seeing a shiny object lying next to the fruits.

With hurried steps, she went closer and saw that it was a small knife to cut the fruits. She picked it up immediately.

Barely a moment later, she heard the sound of the wind blowing outside as someone entered the tent. The door shut once again, muffling the sound.

Her heart raced as she waited. A few moments later, she saw the tall form of Rishab Thakvar appearing near the entrance of the dining nook.

She stood still as his eyes fell on her. He saw the knife she held but didn't stop. He came closer until he was barely any distance from her.

Silence prevailed, along with heavy, tensed awareness.

She tightened the fingers around the knife while she looked up at him.

“We may be married. But if you touch me, I will slit your throat.”

His eyes flashed darkly. “Don't threaten me,” he said softly.

“There isn't a mere threat. I will kill you if you touch me.”

He watched her with a cold smile on his handsome face. “My dear wife, then you shouldn't have tricked me and become my bride.”

She tensed at his words and gripped the knife tightly in her hand before raising it.

His cold smile turned darker. “Do you really think you can harm me with that knife when I'm carrying a sword at my side?”

Her eyes fell on the long, bejeweled sword at his side. Although it was ceremonial, it was a real sword made by skilled craftsmen.

“You don't have the necessary skill to use a sword,” she said, calling his bluff.

“One doesn't need a skill to wield a sharp weapon with intent.”

Her heart thudded, and she tensed as his tanned fingers wrapped around the jeweled handle of the sword. Even as she prepared to tackle him and grab the sword, she quickly assessed the situation.

He was tall and broad, and based on the muscles she could see outlined under his wedding tunic, he was strong as well. If it came to a confrontation between equals, a small fruit knife wouldn't do much damage compared to a long, sharp sword.

She didn't know whether or not he had the skill, but the confrontation would definitely end with one of them getting seriously hurt and possibly killed.

If he died, the Thakvars were too powerful, and the support they had from other clans made them invincible. Her clan would be attacked and left with nothing.

And if, by chance, he ended up killing her, Komal and her people would be left defenseless and at the mercy of the Thakvars. After her murder, the man in front of her was ruthless enough to force her sister to marry him for alliance.

The current situation warranted diplomacy.

"You can't spill blood on holy land," she said, lowering her knife.

A masculine eyebrow rose. "Didn't you just threaten to slit my throat?"

"Only if you touch me."

His eyes swept over her bridal attire. "We are married. As per the law of this land, you are obligated to allow me to touch you and do a lot more until you conceive my heir."

She sucked in an angry breath at his words. Even though she knew she had to diffuse the situation with diplomacy, she couldn't stop from tightening her fingers on the knife.

"This marriage is purely for an alliance," she stated. "I will not allow you to touch me, and neither will I give you any heirs."

His eyes darkened dangerously at her words, but he didn't say anything.

Before she was tempted to jam the knife into his throat, she turned away

from him and went to the sitting area. Clearing away the excess pillows from the couch, she lay on top of it.

She sensed the dark, heavy gaze falling on her. But despite the threat, she closed her eyes.

If he touches me, I will surely kill him.

CHAPTER 9

Anger simmered through Rishab as he stood inside the tent in his wedding attire. The woman who had tricked him into marriage threatened him, and attacked him was asleep at a distance on a couch. Her fingers were still curled around the small knife.

“When it comes to Singoor brides, expect the unexpected.”

His brother’s words from that morning rang true.

Rishab was expecting to comfort a frightened and innocent bride that night. But he ended up having a bride who was bloodthirsty enough to attempt to attack him. Again.

Gauri Meena Bhil.

That very name was enough to shoot up his blood pressure. And now that she became his wife through trickery, the effect remained the same.

His eyes swept over her, taking in the heavy wedding attire that exposed more than it covered. He could see the plump curves of the top of her breasts and the long, smooth slope of her exposed waist covered only by a sheer cloth.

He felt a strong urge to run his mouth over every inch of the exposed honey-colored skin.

Fuck!

He reached for the drink placed on the small dining table. Pouring the dark red liquid into the copper tumbler, he swallowed the slightly bitter drink in one shot. A split moment later, he wondered if the drink had been poisoned by his wife.

He wouldn't put it past her even though killing him would mean certain death not only to her but her entire damn clan. The woman was a dangerous menace. A menace he was foolishly attracted to beyond reason.

He waited a few minutes, and when nothing happened, and he didn't feel any effects of a poisoned or a drugged drink, he took another shot. It was a fermented local alcoholic drink that was similar to the ones he had at Thakvar mansion. It wasn't potent and simply relaxed. But the effect of it on him was only a slight burn in his throat and heat radiating in his stomach. It barely relaxed him.

Moving away from the dining nook, his eyes once again fell on the woman who became his wife.

Gauri Thakvar.

That would be her new name. A flicker of satisfaction ran through him, knowing she would most likely be angrier about that fact than he was. Although she had tricked him into marrying her, she was hardly a blushing bride who aspired to be his wife.

With his mouth twisting in dark amusement, he stepped away and went to the bed. Shedding his wedding attire and placing the wedding accessories on the table next to the bed, he pushed away the white bedsheet with flower petals and lay down.

He had a long day. In fact, his entire two weeks had been hectic with meeting the heads of the States, the chairmen of the banks, and several bureaucrats. He had gotten at least a dozen shell accounts shut down and acquired the details of the people who operated those shell accounts.

Tantra was going to be toothless for a while since his minions would not receive money from him.

But despite that, on Shivay's insistence, a special security team was tasked to patrol discreetly around the holy land tents for the next three days. He

didn't see the need, but Shivay was very particular.

If only he could tell his brother that the threat would not come from outside but from within the tent from his damn bride.

Letting out a sigh, he closed his eyes and willed his body to relax and fall asleep. But despite the physical exhaustion, his mind remained active, thanks to the thoughts about the woman lying in the same tent as him. Even though he was beyond pissed, her exotically beautiful face continued to captivate him just like the first time he had seen her in the desert.

He had let down his defenses then, and it had nearly cost his life.

I have to spend the next six months with her as my wife.

The thought strangely made him burn with anticipation.

CHAPTER 10

Gauri opened her eyes. The lamps from the tent had dimmed considerably, and everything seemed quiet. She couldn't see the large bed from the couch as the tent was divided into multiple sections with thick, multi-colored woven carpets as walls.

She had been waiting for Rishab Thakvar to fall asleep. Several hours had passed since he had finally stopped pacing across the dining nook and gone to bed. Carefully, without making any sound, she untied both her anklets and got up from the couch.

“We are married. As per the law of this land, you are obligated to allow me to touch you and do a lot more until you conceive my heir.”

He hated her as much as she hated him. But there were high chances that he would exert his husbandly rights just to hurt and punish her.

She had to get the sword away from him to protect herself. He would use it as a weapon to threaten and injure her in the coming three days when they would be alone in the desert tent.

Slowly, she walked towards the large four-poster bed. In the dim lighting, she could see the stark white sheets on top of which the tall, muscular form of Rishab Thakvar was sprawled across. His gold-colored watch and the Thakvar insignia ring glinted in the semi-dark. He had shed his wedding tunic and wore only the thin bottom trousers. The entire tanned, broad back was bare while he slept on his stomach with his arms wide. The muscles on his arms and on the back were well-defined. For a man who grew up in a city, he had the body of a warrior.

Her cheeks heated when she recalled how he had removed his clothes and stood just in a scrap of cloth that barely covered his modesty. The man was shameless and recklessly dangerous.

Unfortunately, due to circumstances, he was now her husband.

Sucking in a deep breath, she walked across the bed and went to the small carved wooden table on the top of which the turban was placed. The pearl necklace with the Thakvar insignia pendant was next to it. Her eyes searched the shadows and found the long ceremonial sword that was placed against the wall in the corner.

Her fingers wrapped around the jeweled handle, and she picked it up. It was surprisingly quite heavy. For a split moment, she wondered what would happen if she unsheathed the sword and used it on the man who was her husband. It would free her of him, and he wouldn't be able to come after her sister either. She could even come up with a perfect story that they were attacked by some rogue clan in the desert.

No, I can't.

Unfortunately, her morals didn't allow her to do so. She didn't attack defenseless people or someone from behind, no matter how strong a reason she had.

With a small sigh, she was about to leave with the sword when long fingers wrapped across her wrist and dragged her to the bed. It happened so fast that she was stunned when she crashed against a hard body before being rolled and pinned on the bed with her hands caught at her wrists and placed next to her head on both sides.

The hard, muscular body now lay on top of her with dark eyes blazing down on her.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted," he growled. "And that you would attempt to kill me."

Her heart thudded seeing the dark fury on his face. She tried to push him away, but he was too strong and heavy.

“Get off me,” she ordered.

His expression changed, and he became more furious. “You tried to kill me just now and expect me to follow your damn orders?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill you.”

There was disbelief in his eyes. “You crept up on me while I was asleep, and I caught you with the damn sword in your hands.”

She knew the circumstances made her appear guilty. “There’s no reason for me to kill you.” *Yet.*

The expression on his face remained angry. “You threatened to slit my throat. You attacked me in the desert and left me to die. I would say there is every damn reason for me to believe you wanted to kill me tonight.”

She knew he wouldn’t believe her, and she wasn’t used to explaining herself to anyone. People followed her orders and listened to her without questions.

“If I intended to kill you, you’d be dead by now.”

At her words, his expression changed. The dark fury remained in his eyes, but his mouth slowly twisted.

“Is that so?” he drawled lazily, his eyes glinting. “How... generous of you for not wanting to kill me. I misunderstood your intentions. I didn’t know you came to my bed... to fulfill your wifely duties.”

Her heart continued to race, and she didn’t know how to deal with him right then. He was furious, but she felt the heat radiating from his heavy muscular body with a throbbing hardness against her stomach that was unmistakable.

Her cheeks heated in anger and awareness. “I told you already that this marriage is purely for alliance,” she said. “And that if you touch me, I’ll kill

you.”

But he was touching her. His body pressed against hers. She could feel his chest hair brushing against the top of her breasts, and the skin exposed at her waist clung to his bare muscular torso due to the slight dampness caused by the heat inside the tent.

She sucked in a breath as a strange trickle of heat ran inside her, along with anger. Even though she didn't explain herself to people, she knew she had to right then.

“I came for the sword because I didn't want you to threaten and attack me in the coming three days.”

He let out a soft scoff. “I don't believe you. Everything that comes out of your pretty mouth is either a lie or a threat.”

Anger shot through her. “I don't care if you believe me. Now, get off me!”

Tensed awareness thrummed between them as their eyes held. She could sense dark anger and something else. She braced herself for an attack, and before she could say anything in warning, a loud sound filled the air.

Rishab Thakvar's body tensed even more. But the next moment, his heavyweight disappeared when he rolled away from her.

Sucking in a deep breath, she sat up to see him getting out of the bed and reaching for something in his wedding tunic.

It was a mobile phone.

“Yes?” he answered.

There was dark rage on his face as he listened to the person on the other side of the call.

“Send a helicopter right away to the location I'm sharing.”

He ended the call and pressed a button on the watch he was wearing before he returned his focus to her. She was still seated on the bed.

“I'm leaving,” he said, shrugging on the wedding tunic.

Her body tensed at his words. “You are breaking the alliance?”

She didn’t know how that would impact their clans. But before she could think of the consequences, he replied.

“Don’t celebrate yet,” he said. “The marriage and the alliance stand.”

She didn’t know how to process his words.

He finished buttoning his tunic while watching her. “Go to the Thakvar mansion as my bride,” he ordered. “I’ll return in a few days after my work is done.”

She didn’t say anything even though his arrogant order angered her.

His mouth twisted into a dark smile. “Until the next time... wife.”

With those words, he walked away and disappeared from her sight. She could hear the sounds of the desert wind. A few minutes later, there was a loud, familiar sound of a helicopter.

She remained on the bed until quietness prevailed after the helicopter took off.

Rishab Thakvar was arrogant, reckless and ruthless. But he was now her husband and the head of her clan.

All she had to do was ensure he didn’t claim any of those rights.

CHAPTER 11

Rishab continued to give instructions while getting on the private jet.

“I want everyone evacuated at all locations regardless of whether the explosives have been diffused. Unless there is a proper clearance, I don’t want any of the operations to begin.”

“Yes, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab ended the call. He immediately received another one. It was from his older brother.

“What’s the situation in South America?” Shivay asked.

“They found and diffused the explosives around the mine. But I asked them not to begin the operations until clearance. I’m heading to Chile first, and then I’ll fly to Zambia and other locations.”

“Tantra is warning us,” said Shivay.

“Yes, I know. I’m glad the bastard is shaken.”

Tantra was retaliating for closing the shell accounts. The man had planned on destroying the mines owned by Thakvar Enterprises, but before anything could happen, the explosives were detected.

“He is once again framing the Kabali clan,” Shivay stated.

In one of the video footage, the security team saw a man dressed in all black with a distinct Rudraksha necklace made of stonefruit seeds.

“The team is tracking the man,” Rishab informed. All airports around the mine and border security were informed. “The man won’t be able to leave the country yet. Most likely, we should be able to nab him and get a proper trail to Tantra.”

“I’ll fly to Africa to check,” said Shivay. “Nakul will remain here for his wedding tomorrow and—”

“No, bro. The two of you have to remain in Singoor. The clans will be suspicious if you are missing at the wedding tomorrow. There’s too much at stake until the third alliance is also formed, and Mom and Dad leave for the pilgrimage without disruption. I’ll tackle the Tantra menace as planned.”

There was silence.

“You left your bride on the wedding night,” Shivay stated. “Will she create a problem tomorrow?”

Rishab knew that given a choice, Gauri Bhil would be much happier with him gone permanently.

But she was quite capable of creating a problem.

Security had informed him that she was still inside the Singoor tent. With no access to phone or transport, she would most likely remain in the tent at least until morning.

But he had added additional security in case she foolishly decided to venture out in the dark.

“She knows how important the alliance is for her clan as well,” Rishab replied. “She won’t dare risk it. But in case she does cause trouble, ensure people think I’m a disgruntled groom who went away to sulk because his bride tricked him into marrying her instead of her sister.”

It was a believable excuse.

“Be careful, Rishab,” his brother said. “Tantra is going to be out for blood. Don’t let down your guard at any time.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Ending the call, Rishab sat back in the seat and looked out of the private jet window.

Tantra was quite dangerous as the man had trained assassins everywhere.

But Rishab wasn't the kind to back down from threats.

He was, however, going to be careful because if anything happened to him, the alliance would be impacted. The people of Singoor would think his death was due to the curse on the Singoor heirs, and the goddess statue commissioning would stop.

He and his brothers were determined to succeed in putting an end to unrest and violence.

Rishab also had another big motivation to remain safe and return to Singoor. Gauri Meena Bhil. His wife.

He knew she would be quite happy if he died. But unfortunately for his wife, he would fight through hell if needed just to get back and make her pay.

CHAPTER 12

Gauri stood with her feet slightly apart and focused her eyes on the target before releasing the taut bowstring. The arrow flew and hit the target right at the center. Drawing out more arrows from the quiver, she shot them rapidly until they hit exactly at the center of the target.

Placing her bow aside, she picked up the crossbow and loaded an arrow from a different quiver. She released it until they hit the target as well. She tested a few more arrows before setting the crossbow aside. She preferred to use the traditional bow and arrow, but crossbows were also used in her clan.

“The arrows seem longer on the crossbow,” she told the head arrowsmith. “Shorten them slightly more.”

“Okay, madam.”

Gauri gave a few more instructions to the head arrowsmith to fix the newer batch of arrows. She then stepped away to walk towards the stables.

Her day had started early, but she had spent the entire morning dancing in the prayer room. By the time she stepped out, she had to attend to the arrowsmith and then the stable master. The rest of her day was equally busy as she was going to the Meena province to oversee a shipment.

She was hurrying to the stables when a maid approached her.

“Madam, your uncle wants to speak with you urgently.”

A strange feeling ran through Gauri. The last time a similar request was made, her uncle had kept the information about the Thakvar heir extending an alliance to the Bhil clan heiress.

Although it was only a month ago, a lot has happened since then. Gauri

ended up marrying the said Thakvar heir.

“Tell my uncle I’ll meet him in the office room.”

“Okay, madam.”

Gauri went to the stables and gave a few instructions to the stable master before leaving. She went into her office room to meet with her uncle.

She was mentally prepared to hear the repeat of the conversation that her uncle had over the past two weeks. Her uncle was worried because he feared that the Thakvars would react badly to the events on the wedding day.

Despite her continued assurances, her uncle remained worried.

She stepped into the office room, hoping the meeting would be brief as her day was packed. She also remembered that she had to call and check with her sister’s university regarding the pending fee payment.

“Good morning, cousin,” a man greeted.

Gauri was expecting her uncle to be alone, but his son was standing next to him.

Anger and disgust shot through Gauri. “I told you that you are no longer welcome here,” she said coldly.

Gauri’s cousin Jatin was a married man. But he had gotten a girl from her clan pregnant. The fact was revealed only when the young girl lost the baby and had nearly died. Many girls had complained about how he had made false promises of leaving his wife and marrying them, only to use and dump them later.

Her cousin looked shamefaced. “I have changed,” he said. “My wife is pregnant. Since Champa is from the Bhil clan, she wants to stay here with her parents until the baby is born. She wants me to be here with her too. Please forgive me and give me another chance. I promise not to cause any trouble.”

Gauri didn’t trust her cousin. The only reason she tolerated him was because of her uncle.

“Please forgive him, Gauri,” her uncle begged. “If he does something wrong again, I will take responsibility. Once my grandchild is born, I will ask him to leave.”

Gauri wanted to refuse, but she knew her uncle loved his son blindly. Jatin’s pregnant wife also wanted him around.

She looked at her cousin. “If I hear any complaint about you, your child will be born fatherless.”

Her cousin sucked in a breath and nodded. “I promise you won’t hear any complaints about me. I will be staying with my wife’s parents.”

Ignoring him, Gauri looked at her uncle. “You wanted to talk to me about something?”

Her uncle nodded. “Yes. It’s about your marriage.”

“We have already spoken enough times about my marriage, uncle.”

Her uncle frowned with worry. “You didn’t discuss any details, Gauri. You just said that the alliance stands.”

Gauri knew her uncle and everyone from the Bhil clan wanted to know more.

“There is nothing more to discuss, uncle,” she replied. “The Thakvar clan wanted an alliance with the Bhil clan. We agreed to it, and so I married one of the heirs for that alliance.”

“But what about Rishab Thakvar? Will he be okay if his bride continues to stay here and not at the Thakvar mansion?”

“That’s not up to him.” She looked at her uncle. “He left me on our wedding night, stating urgent work. If he doesn’t value marriage tradition, then neither do I have to. Until Goddess Shakti’s statue is commissioned, we will remain married but lead separate lives.”

Gauri’s uncle looked worried. “The Thakvars might not agree to such terms.”

“Until there is an objection, the terms will continue,” she said. Mihir and Chitra Thakvar had already left Singoor on a pilgrimage. They would be traveling for many weeks to raise any objection. Gauri didn’t think any of the Thakvar heirs would bother either, as they were married and busy with their own lives. As far as she knew, Rishab Thakvar hated her enough to want to stay away from her.

Her uncle didn’t seem too convinced.

But Gauri excused herself. “I need to oversee a shipment.”

The Bhil and Meena clans were known for handcrafted artifacts.

“I’ll come with you to help,” her cousin offered. “I was the one taking care of the shipments before... before... the unfortunate incident happened, and I was sent away.”

“No.”

Gauri didn’t elaborate any further.

She looked at her uncle. “I’ll be late. Don’t wait for me for dinner.”

Her uncle nodded.

Gauri stepped out of the office room. Giving instructions to the housekeeper, she set out for the rest of the day.

It was nearing evening by the time Gauri was done overseeing the shipments at the Meena clan. The shipments on the horses and camels would go to the main market in Singoor.

“Return home,” she instructed the men who had accompanied her.

She then took a detour and rode to an old, abandoned fort on the top of a rocky hill situated between the Meena and Bhil clan.

Getting down from her horse, she went into the fort, which was mostly ruins.

The first time she had come to the place was with Kamlesh Meena, her late husband. She had only been fifteen at the time. Her late husband, whom she had known since her childhood, had often regaled her with the tales of the rich history of the Singoor desert.

She recalled being so excited to see the Meena fort ruins that she forgot to be nervous about being married. Instead of regarding Kamlesh Meena as an authoritative figure who became her husband, she once again looked up to him as a fatherly figure who had been a close friend to her late father.

Her first marriage wasn't pushed on her. She had loved her husband deeply.

Kamlesh Meena was her mentor and the only person who understood her fears and strengths and guided her accordingly. Even though she was a female heir, he had ensured she was trained to be a good and competent leader not only to the Bhil clan but also to the Meena clan.

She missed him a lot.

After his death, she felt the acute loneliness that she had felt when her parents had died.

She had only been six when her parents died. Even though it had been nearly two decades, her heart tugged, recalling the sweet memories of them. She also recalled the time when she was told that both her parents had died in the desert quicksand.

Her mother had accidentally fallen into the quicksand. Her father tried to rescue her, but he got pulled into it as well.

At that time, Gauri hadn't known what death meant. She recalled going to the desert many times and digging to see if her parents would return from under the sand. It was only after several attempts of escaping to the desert and digging in the sand that Gauri's father's friend, Kamlesh Meena, told her gently what death meant. Gauri then realized that her parents would never return.

And years later, when Kamlesh Meena had also died, Gauri knew he wouldn't return.

She was heartbroken but didn't have the time to grieve. The responsibilities that fell on her soon after robbed her of grieving her husband properly.

She looked at the tattoo on the back of her left hand that she got as an honor to him. It was the insignia of the Meena clan. The flying pigeon tattoo was now clearly visible under the fading red henna patterns from her wedding.

She recalled that Kamlesh Meena also had a tattoo. It was on his chest as a homage to the only woman he loved. He had a small tattoo of an attacking tiger, which was the insignia of the Thakvar clan. He had loved Nandini Thakvar, a woman known in Singoor for her beauty and intelligence. Nandini Thakvar had died tragically in an accident nearly twenty years ago, but Kamlesh Meena loved her eternally.

It was ironic that Gauri was now married to Nandini Thakvar's nephew.

With a long sigh at life's oddities, she watched the sun begin to set over the desert.

Just when she was enjoying the peace and quiet, her horse alerted her of someone's presence.

Gauri tensed.

Slowly, she got up. Ensuring her anklets didn't make any noise, she moved away from the window and went towards the shadows against the walls.

Her heart thudded, hoping the intruders were either from the Meena or the Bhil clan. But she knew no one came up to the fort, especially when it would get dark soon. It was only the rogue clans who wandered the desert in the dark.

She couldn't hear the sounds of any other horses, which meant the intruders weren't from the Kabali clan. They could have come on foot.

She had left her bow and arrows on her horse. The only weapon she had right then was her knife. Hoping she could slip away without getting noticed, she pulled out her knife and walked along the broken walls in the shadows. She didn't want to claim a life, but if it came to a direct attack, she would have to use her weapons.

Her heart thudded as she heard soft footsteps approaching. The sounds of the footsteps were too soft to determine how many people were there inside the ruined fort. But whoever it was, they knew of her presence because of her horse.

A shadow loomed near the entrance of the fort. Sucking in a deep breath and knowing she had to attack first, she lunged towards the shadow, pointing the knife at the intruder.

But her hand was caught mid-air. The gold ring on the intruder's finger glinted brightly, and the next moment, her back hit a broken wall before the

hard weight of the intruder pressed against her. Orange rays of the setting sun fell on the intruder's face, revealing familiar, handsome features.

She stared, frozen in shock, as Rishab Thakvar's mouth twisted seeing her. "Hello, my dear wife," he drawled.

Gauri's heart continued to thud in shock and then in relief when she realized she wasn't being attacked by a rogue clan.

But soon, anger followed.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Rishab Thakvar's eyes flashed. "That's my sentence, dear wife. I recall ordering you to wait in the Thakvar mansion until I returned. What are you doing here?"

She knew he didn't mean in the abandoned fort but in the Bhil province. She met his eyes. "I don't follow orders, especially yours."

His eyes darkened, but his mouth twisted again. "I guess that's why I'm here."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Since you won't come to the Thakvar mansion. I have come to claim what's mine."

Her heart jerked. "I told you I won't allow you to touch me! Our marriage is only for the sake of an alliance."

"I am already touching you," he said. "But that's not what I meant about claiming. I meant claiming my place as the Bhil clan head."

Anger shot through her. "You have no right."

"I have every right."

"Then, I won't let you," she said.

"Then, prepare yourself for war... wife," he said with a dark smile on his handsome face. "I will take what's mine."

She was tempted to jam the knife into his heart. But right then, her hand was still held by his in a firm grip and placed next to her against the wall. The

heavy gold ring on his finger with the Thakvar lion insignia shone brightly even in the semi-dark.

“Let me go,” she ordered.

“I will if you promise to behave. I had a damn long journey and was looking forward to the culinary delights of Singoor rather than chasing after my bloodthirsty wife.”

His words deliberately taunted her.

But sucking in a deep breath, she replied. “Fine, I won’t kill you.” *Yet.*

His eyes flashed, reading her thoughts clearly. With another dark smile, he stepped away from her and let her hand go.

Placing the knife back into the sheath, she walked away from him and stepped out of the fort.

“It’s getting dark,” Rishab Thakvar’s voice said from behind her. “Come with me in the SUV. The security will guide your horse back to the Bhil mansion.”

Ignoring him, she got on her horse. Picking up the bow and arrows from the side, she adjusted them on her back before looking at him.

“I can find my way back home easily,” she said. “But you should be careful, watching out for stray arrows that can cause an accident to your vehicle.”

His handsome face darkened at the reminder of their first meeting when she had deliberately shot arrows at him, causing an accident.

Before he could react or reply, she pulled on the reins of her horse and rode away.

That late evening, the entire Bhil mansion bustled with excitement.

The housekeeper scolded Gauri. “How could you not tell us your husband was coming! I would have prepared a special feast!”

Gauri couldn’t tell anyone that she hadn’t known he would come either.

“There’s no need to fuss, Rumi.”

“Of course, there is a need to fuss! He’s the Thakvar heir and your husband, who is now our clan head!”

Annoyance shot through Gauri because everyone automatically accepted Rishab Thakvar to be the Bhil clan head. The man didn’t have to do anything to prove himself worthy.

“Get the East side suite ready,” Gauri instructed. It was on the opposite side of the mansion and quite far from her room.

The housekeeper looked confused. “Okay.”

Gauri was looking forward to a quiet dinner in her room. But knowing there was no escape, she joined the dining table. Rishab Thakvar was seated at the head of the table where her uncle used to sit.

Her uncle looked happy to give up the seat. “We are so glad you came to take Gauri with you, Mr. Thakvar.”

“Actually, I’m not here to take her,” Rishab Thakvar replied.

There were shocked faces around the table.

“I’ll be staying here from now on as the Bhil clan head.”

There was a long moment of silence before Gauri’s uncle spoke.

“That’s wonderful! We are so glad you decided to stay here.”

There were excited murmurs and smiles. Gauri didn’t say anything.

Soon, dinner was completed, and the guests adjourned into another room

where they would serve local fermented drinks. Rishab Thakvar was asked to try the specialty drinks.

Gauri decided not to stay.

“Gauri, join us,” her uncle requested.

“I had a long day, and I’m tired,” she said before leaving the men to go to her suite.

She did have a long day and was tired, but her mind was too agitated to rest.

Shedding her clothes, she poured rose water into her bath water. Her body was sore from riding all day, so she decided to have a hot, relaxing bath.

While the fragrance of the roses permeated the air, her mind wandered.

She didn’t know what to make of Rishab Thakvar’s presence. Did he really intend to take up duties in person as the Bhil clan head?

She knew it was only a matter of time before he got overwhelmed with the duties. He would also get bored because he was used to a faster and more luxurious lifestyle than the one in the desert. He came only as a way to exert his dominance over her to show he had the power.

He was also getting back at her for tricking him into marriage. Had Komal been his wife, he would have dumped her in Thakvar's mansion and not bothered to ever visit the Bhil clan, let alone take up responsibility as the clan head.

I won't allow him.

Breathing in the rose-scented air, she let her mind and body relax. Soon, the long day caught up with her, and she began to feel sleepy. She rinsed the soapy rose-scented water from her body before drying and wrapping a bath towel,

She stepped out of her bathroom and was about to remove the bath towel to wear clothes from her closet when she sensed something. Her heart jerked

in shock when she saw Rishab Thakvar's tall form sprawled on her bed. He was shirtless and was wearing only loose night pants. His eyes swept over her.

"Get out!" she ordered.

A masculine eyebrow rose at her order. "Why?" he asked.

"You are in my room, that's why! There's another suite ready for you."

He didn't move from her bed. "This is the master suite in the mansion. As the new master, I will be staying here. My team will be here tomorrow to set up a home office and make some changes to this suite as well."

Her hands clenched on the bath towel. "You are doing this on purpose," she gritted. "To get back at me for tricking you into marrying me."

A cold smile twisted in his mouth. "There are a lot more things you did to me, my dear wife. You might have forgotten, but I didn't."

She knew he was referring to their first meeting when she had attacked him and then insulted him when he had come to seek an alliance with her sister.

"Prepare yourself for war... wife."

He had said those words earlier, making them enemies. And now, he was already waging a war on her by intruding into her life in every way possible and threatening to grab her position and control.

I won't let him.

Sucking in a deep breath, she took her night clothes and dressed behind the changing screen. She briefly considered going and sleeping in another room, but she decided not to.

She didn't want to give her enemy the satisfaction of kicking her out of her own room. She also didn't want rumors flying that the marriage wasn't real or that the alliance might break.

Ignoring his presence and grabbing an additional pillow and bed cover,

she went to the wooden chaise and lay on it.

The chaise was too soft as it was only meant for sitting or lying down briefly. Clenching her teeth, she vowed to get rid of her enemy husband within days in a way that he would never want to step into the Bhil province again.

CHAPTER 13

The news of the Thakvar heir coming to claim his bride spread across the entire Bhil clan.

The day started with a series of rituals.

People were excited, and they came to bless the newlywed couple. After the rituals, Gauri was subjected to a lot of advice and suggestions.

“We are so glad he has come to claim you,” an elderly woman from the clan remarked. “Ensure that he stays.”

“You must seduce him,” another woman suggested. “He might still be angry that you tricked him and became his bride instead of your younger sister.”

The other women agreed.

“Yes, men forgive anything with seduction.”

A woman gave Gauri an herbal potion to increase fertility. “Make him bed you frequently until you carry his heir. Unlike your last husband, this one is young and virile. He will get you with a child soon.”

Gauri didn't allow her feelings to show. She listened quietly as the women fussed around her. She even held the herbal concoction to improve fertility even though she would never have it or allow Rishab Thakvar to touch her.

She knew her words would not prove that he wasn't a suitable leader for her clan. She would have to ensure her people came to that conclusion on their own.

Taking a deep breath with that resolve, she joined the feast prepared to welcome the bridegroom.

Rishab Thakvar was seated at the head of the table. Her uncle and cousin sat on one side, talking to him. He was listening quietly, but sensing her presence, he turned.

She saw his eyes flash as he looked at her.

They hadn't spoken to each other since the previous night. She didn't get the chance.

Even before the rituals began, he had seen her earlier that morning in the prayer room when she was dancing.

She hadn't known of his presence. But after the dance, when she opened her eyes and sought the blessings of the supreme lord and turned to leave, she saw him standing against the door of the prayer room.

She could make out that he was there for some time, watching her dance. She didn't say anything right then out of respect for God. And when she stepped out, there were several people in the garden area, and she couldn't confront him.

Later, she had to get ready and sit for the rituals that extended through the morning.

She was still furious that he had intruded into her sacred sanctuary early that morning.

Ignoring him, she took the seat next to him.

"Gauri, I've asked Jatin to stay here for a few days. He and I can appraise Mr. Thakvar of the Bhil clan responsibilities."

"There's no need," she replied.

Her uncle frowned and was about to protest when she turned to Rishab Thakvar.

"I can appraise... my husband," she said. "Although, it might take him a lot of time and effort to understand the traditions and responsibilities of the Bhil clan."

Rishab Thakvar's eyes flashed at her challenge. Slowly, his mouth twisted. "I'm looking forward to it... wife."

Gauri took him to the horse stables first.

A sense of pride filled her, looking at the vast stables of the Bhil clan. She loved riding horses and had been taught to ride her first pony by her father when she was barely three. Even though she had been only five years old when her parents died, she still had memories of her parents and her riding horses across the desert.

As she grew up, she nurtured it into a passion. Her late husband, Kamlesh Meena, wholeheartedly supported her passion.

“Horses are our primary mode of transport in the Bhil clan,” she stated. “They are also our revenue generator as we breed and trade horses with other clans. The Bhil clan horses are one of the best in Singoor.”

She looked at Rishab Thakvar. He was wearing a light blue western buttoned shirt and trousers, looking completely out of place in the stables. Except for the Thakvar insignia ring, nothing about him indicated that he belonged at Singoor.

“A leader of the Bhil clan is expected to know about horses,” she said.

He looked at her and shrugged. “I can catch up as I know a bit about horses as well.”

Anger spiked inside her seeing his handsome, arrogant face. The easy, confident way he was assessing the stables made her think of a perfect way to teach him a lesson.

“Let’s see how much you know about horses,” she said. She looked at the stable master. “Ratan, please get Manik. Mr. Thakvar and I are going to race.”

The stable master looked confused. “But... madam... Manik is not used

to”

Gauri cut him off. “Get Manik now,” she ordered.

The stable master nodded and went to the far side of the stables, where a black horse was kept separately. Manik was a new stallion that she had acquired recently. The training of the horse was not completed yet.

The stallion was restless while it was brought closer. Gauri rubbed along its nose gently. As soon as the stallion recognized her smell, it calmed down. Only Gauri could control it right then since she was the one training it.

She looked at Rishab Thakvar. “Let’s see your skills,” she said. “Manik is a purebred stallion. He is a rare find as he was acquired from the Kabali region, which is known for producing the fastest and strongest horses in Singoor. You should be able to beat me easily in a race.”

He looked at the black stallion and then at her. She thought he would refuse to race and would call her out for endangering him with an untrained horse.

But his mouth twisted. “I agree,” he said. “But on a condition. If I win the race, you will grant me a wish.”

She was almost sure he would demand an exchange of horses, but she was shocked by his words.

She knew it was impossible for him to sit on the horse for more than a minute, let alone win a race against her. “Fine, I agree.”

There was a glint in his eyes. “Don’t you want to know what my wish would be?” he asked.

She knew he would most likely ask her to declare him as the Bhil clan leader or ask her to go with him to Thakvar mansion.

“Whatever it is, I agree,” she said, knowing he wouldn’t win

He stepped closer until he was in her private space. “If I win, you will grant me a kiss,” he said softly.

Her heart jerked in shock and then anger. “No!”

His mouth twisted. “Worried you’ll lose, my dear wife?” he softly taunted.

Annoyance hit her, seeing the arrogant smirk on his handsome face. “I’m more worried about you breaking your neck on your first day here... my dear husband.”

His eyes flashed at her taunt. “That’s quite considerate of you,” he goaded. “Somehow, I thought you don’t like me.”

She hated him.

She hated his arrogance, his effortless power from being rich and entitled. His power to control her life and those of her people.

The horse race would teach him a lesson and help with her cause to show her people how incompetent he was to be a clan leader.

“Let’s race,” she challenged.

The stable master and a few others were called to witness the race. They were quite shocked that the Thakvar heir was racing a wild, untrained stallion. Gauri instructed them to get her white horse. Durga was getting older, but her mare was the most trustworthy horse.

The restless stallion was taken out of the stables to the starting point of the race. The black stallion reared on its hind legs. She knew Rishab Thakvar wouldn’t even be able to sit on it for the race to last more than a few seconds.

She sat on her horse. “I will give you an early head start,” she offered.

“How generous of you,” he said. “But that’s not needed.”

She watched as he approached the restless stallion and stood in front of it. Looking into its eyes, he patted the front of its head gently and let it sniff his palm. The horse reared and tried to move away. But he held the reins and once again patted its head and even whispered something into its ear.

Gauri frowned, seeing the restless animal calm down. Doubt crept into her mind, wondering if he did know enough about horses. But soon, she realized

he was most likely mimicking what she had done earlier to calm the horse. But Manik only recognized her smell.

With a smooth move, he sat on the stallion. “Ready?” he asked.

She saw the horse continuing to shift restlessly under him. Looking into Rishab Thakvar’s eyes, she nodded. “Ready.”

The sound of a horn signaled the start of the race. Wanting to get it over with, she started to race her horse right away. The race was to reach the other side of the mansion and return to the starting point. It would only take her five minutes to finish the race.

She turned back to see that the black stallion was rearing up and shifting restlessly. With a smile of satisfaction, she turned forward and continued the race. She didn’t unnecessarily exert her horse to run at a maximum speed. Even if Durga broke into a slow trot, she would finish the race easily.

Belatedly, she realized that she should have asked for something in return for winning the race. She could have asked him to return to the Thakvar mansion so they could lead separate lives. Hoping that the humiliation of falling off the horse at the beginning of the race would lead to that, she continued to race.

Cheers rose amidst the race. But just when she was close to the other side of the mansion, she heard the sound of strong hoofbeats. She turned, fully expecting to see the black stallion running without any rider. But she was shocked when she saw Rishab Thakvar seated on top. He was riding it with the ease of a seasoned rider.

His mouth twisted into a smile before he raced ahead. With a smooth move, he turned the horse on the other side of the mansion to return to the starting point.

With her heart thudding and in shock, she pressed her calves and heels, applying pressure and indicating to Durga to lengthen and speed its stride.

Durga ran faster, but the black stallion in the front was bred to be much stronger and faster.

There were loud cheers when Rishab Thakvar reached the finish line first and won the race.

CHAPTER 14

Rishab was greeted by cheers.

“That was wonderful, Mr. Thakvar! We are so proud of you!”

“I can’t believe he raced on Manik and won! Manik only allows Gauri madam to ride him.”

“Did you see the way he rode the stallion? It was as though he were born on a saddle.”

“He is truly worthy to be Gauri madam’s husband.”

“Yes, they are a match made in heaven.”

“Why won’t they be when their marriage is blessed by our lord Shiva and goddess Shakti in Singoor temple.”

While people continued to gush, Rishab looked at his wife. Even though she must be angry and shocked, her face remained composed as she listened to her people complimenting him.

Rishab was glad his father had insisted that his sons learn to ride horses from the age of four, along with several other skills. Rishab had continued to ride horses as a passion and had even been on his school and university polo teams. Although it had been a while since he last ridden a horse, it wasn’t a skill he would easily forget.

He also had a strong motivation to win the race. And right then, the beautiful yet dangerous motivation was walking away.

“Excuse me,” he said before going behind her.

Before she could escape somewhere, he lengthened his strides and held her arm. He then walked in the direction of the mansion.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded.

“To a place with privacy,” he said. “Unless you want us to kiss in front of everyone.”

Her cheeks reddened, and she sucked in an angry breath.

“You cheated,” she accused.

“How so?” he asked.

“You didn’t tell me you were good at riding horses. You let me think otherwise when you placed the bet.”

His mouth twisted. “You didn’t ask, my dear wife. And I did tell you that I know enough about horses.”

“That’s a lie!” she snapped. “You don’t just know enough, and you are an expert rider!”

“That sounds like a compliment,” he said.

Her cheeks reddened angrily.

They reached inside the mansion. He didn’t want to wait long. So, he dragged her into the first empty room he saw. It was the weapons room. He recalled the events that happened the last time in the room when he had come for an alliance.

She had ordered him to strip, claiming she wanted to ensure he was suitable to produce heirs.

He was tempted to do what he had wanted to do at that time. He wanted to grab her, lay her down on the flat daybed, and do things that would have her gasping in shock and begging for mercy. He wanted to do everything he had dreamt in his dark fantasies since their first meeting.

But once again, he controlled himself. Gauri Meena Bhil would surely slit his throat if she had an inkling of what his dark fantasies about her consisted of.

He was going to settle for a kiss.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

She raised her chin. “For what?”

His mouth twisted at her deliberate deflection. “I’m waiting for you to kiss me. The kiss should be on my mouth with tongues involved.”

She sucked in a breath. “Stop this silliness.”

“It’s not silliness. I won the race.”

“We can negotiate the terms to some other wish,” she offered. “Something more important than a kiss.”

“No.”

“I will let you use Manik whenever you visit Bhil mansion.”

His mouth twisted. “That’s generous of you to allow me to use my own horses. Manik, the entire stables and you now belong to me... wife.”

Her eyes flashed angrily.

“Don’t prolong this,” he said. “Keep your word.”

She looked at him for a moment, then sucking in an angry breath, she stepped closer to him.

She smelled of roses. Her scent washed over his senses, driving him crazy. He closed his palms into fists and waited.

She rose on her toes, and then, grabbing a fistful of his hair, she pulled his head lower before her lips brushed against his. It was a simple brush of lips but heated arousal hit him hard.

She was about to step away when he wrapped one arm around her waist and caught the back of her head with another before taking over the kiss. He pushed his tongue between her closed lips and entered her mouth.

She let out a gasp and tried to draw away, but he held her close to continue the kiss.

She should taste of danger and evil, but the sweet taste of her hit him like a drug. Like an addict, he tasted every part of her soft mouth. Her tongue

tried to escape, but he chased until their tongues dueled in the most erotic way. Just when he thought she was kissing him back, he felt a slice of pain on his tongue before she shoved at him hard.

He raised his head while she stumbled back.

Breathing heavily, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Then, glaring at him, she gritted her words.

“I fulfilled the terms of the kiss. Don’t touch me again.”

She pulled the door open and stormed out, leaving him alone in the weapons room with a raging hard-on just from a damn kiss.

Fuck.

He was pissed and horny at the same time. Gauri Meena Bhil always brought out that reaction in him. Sucking in several deep breaths and adjusting his trousers, he stepped out of the room.

A man waited outside. Rishab recognized him. He was Jaswant Saini’s son Jatin.

“Be careful, Mr. Thakvar,” the man said. “My cousin can be very dangerous. Her first husband died under mysterious circumstances.”

Rishab didn’t show any reaction to those words.

“Thanks for the warning,” he said before walking away.

It was obvious that there was no love lost between the cousins. But Rishab wondered how much truth was in the man’s words.

Did Gauri Meena Bhil kill her first husband?

CHAPTER 15

For the rest of the week, Gauri had to listen to the praises of Rishab Thakvar. And most of the praises were absolutely ridiculous and embarrassing.

“If the Thakvar heir can ride an untamed stallion that way, I’m sure he is a stallion himself when it comes to bedding his wife.”

“Did you see the large size of his shoes? They say it’s an indication of a man’s manhood.”

There were giggles from the women.

“I’m betting there would be a Thakvar and Bhil heir within a year.”

“Not even a year. I bet it would be within nine months.”

There were more giggles from the women.

“That’s enough,” Gauri snapped.

The women realized she had overheard their lurid comments.

“Sorry, madam,” they murmured before scrambling away to return to their work.

Gauri was angry about how her people were quickly accepting Rishab Thakvar into the Bhil clan. And the arrogant man was quick to exert his dominance.

There were dozens of workers upstairs who had come from the city the day after his arrival to set up his home office. Some of those workers had even come into the master bedroom suite to set up a proper shower. But she ordered them out. Her bathroom was quite adequate, and if her pampered city-bred husband didn’t find it satisfactory, he could leave.

She felt angry and agitated, and she knew it wasn't just because her enemy husband was taking over the Bhil clan and her personal space. It was also because of the kiss. More particularly, her reaction to them.

She hated Rishab Thakvar and wanted him gone. But her lips tingled, her stomach fluttered, and heat spread through her cheeks as her mind recalled the kiss.

She was infuriated that her enemy husband kissed her. And that kiss caused her to be aware of his presence each moment.

“Gauri?”

Sucking in a deep breath and ignoring the heat spreading through her body, she turned to look at her uncle.

“Yes, uncle?”

“Rishab and his team want to look at the last ten years' accounts. I told them we don't have the books handy. That most of them were burned in a fire a few years ago.”

“Who let them into the accounting room?” she asked.

“Rishab specifically asked me to, Gauri. We can't deny his requests. He is now the Bhil clan head.”

Anger shot through her at the reminder. “I will speak with... my husband.”

Her uncle looked worried as he nodded.

It was late at night when Rishab Thakvar entered the master bedroom suite.

Gauri thought he had chosen a different suite because a team of workers had finished making modifications to the other suite, adding modern plumbing and a shower stall to the bathroom. His hair was damp, indicating he must have used the other bathroom to shower.

But once again, he looked ready to settle in the master bedroom suite for the night. He watched her while running his fingers through his damp hair. His t-shirt clung to his slightly damp chest, displaying his broad, muscled chest.

Ignoring the awareness, she glared at him.

“Why are you not using the other suite to sleep?” she demanded.

“Because this one is the master suite,” he drawled.

Sucking in a breath, she focused on the main issue.

“I want you to stop interfering. Don’t ask for account books or speak with my people.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t belong here in my clan. You already made the alliance, so go back to where you belong.”

His mouth twisted darkly. “As I said before, everything in this clan belongs to me now and is my responsibility.” Slowly, his eyes swept over her. “That includes you as well, my dear wife. You are mine now. My property.”

Anger shot up inside her at his arrogant words. Somehow, she got the feeling he was deliberately goading her to get a reaction.

When she didn't respond, he removed his t-shirt and track pants and threw them aside carelessly on a chair before settling on the bed. He watched her with his arms folded behind his head. The muscles on his arms bulged, and she could see the well-defined abs on his chest and flat stomach. The thin shorts he wore barely covered him decently.

Sucking in a breath, she dragged her eyes away and looked at his face.

"I have a lot of important things to do tomorrow," she said. "I need a proper sleep."

"Then sleep," he replied. "No one is stopping you."

"I can't sleep next to you," she gritted.

His mouth twisted. "I don't mind, but if you do, then that's your problem."

She knew he was deliberately taunting her. She wanted to throw him out physically, but he was taller and stronger. And it would also cause a scene that would most likely have her people sympathizing with him.

Gritting her teeth, she stepped away. She went behind the screen in the closet and changed into her nightwear. She sensed his gaze on her when she stepped out. Ignoring him, she grabbed a pillow and blanket to sleep on the narrow chaise.

As she settled in for yet another uncomfortable night, she once again recalled his words.

"Prepare yourself for war... wife."

He was waging a war on her and wanted her to reach a breaking point.

But she wouldn't break. In fact, she would show him how a war could be waged both ways. Soon, she would get rid of her enemy husband from her bed and her life.

Prepare yourself for war... husband.

CHAPTER 16

Rishab was in his newly set up home office on the second floor of the Bhil mansion.

“The operations are running smoothly in all locations,” he said into the speakerphone. “The additional security will remain until the rest of the mercenaries are caught. Or rather... until their bodies are found.”

Before the investigation team could get hold of the men who had planted the explosives in the mines, Tantra had them killed brutally.

The mercenaries were found with their throats slit using a weapon with three metal prongs that were similar to the Kabali clan.

“Tantra’s minions won’t remain loyal if he is having them killed,” said Nakul.

“He’s probably being careful not to let his minions know about the killings,” said Shivay. “And now that the shell accounts have been shut down, he won’t have much of a hold to manipulate them. What about the legal accounts?”

“They are being monitored,” Rishab replied. “Even those are going to be blocked temporarily.”

One of those accounts was in the name of Gauri Meena Bhil. His wife.

Rishab didn’t get a chance to look at the account personally, but the investigating team had mentioned that the majority of the transactions were used for getting deposits from artifact wholesalers. A few transactions were used to send money to Komal Bhil for university fees and expenses.

“There will definitely be some noise,” Shivay said.

“I’m hoping there will be,” Rishab replied. “And those who make the maximum noise should be scrutinized.”

Rishab already had a list of people he suspected would make the maximum noise. His wife was also on the list despite not having any suspicious activity revealed yet.

“I have a feeling something has been going on for years in Singoor,” said Rishab.

“Such as what?” Shivay asked.

“I’m not sure yet. But I have a feeling Tantra has been operating for a much longer time in Singoor than the last few years.”

There was a pause.

“You think Tantra is from Singoor?” Nakul asked.

“He might be. For an international businessman to have the kind of knowledge and rapport with the locals is next to impossible. But as a local, he can win their trust easily.”

His brothers were silent as they processed his suspicion.

“The clans do distrust strangers,” said Shivay. “And if there is unusual activity tied to all clans, they wouldn’t know it as they stopped communicating with each other during the last two decades. But with the west and south clans’ peace treaty, we can open up the communication.”

Rishab hadn’t begun the clan talks yet. Now that he was settling in the Bhil clan and the alliance was considered to be solidified, he was going to start meeting with the clans on the West side of Singoor. His younger brother Nakul would take care of the clans in the South region.

“How is the Goddess Shakti statue hunt going on?” Shivay asked Nakul.

Nakul gave them an update. Although the statue was going to be commissioned, they were hoping the original could be found as well. And along with it, the truth of what happened thirty years ago would also be

revealed.

“I spoke to Mom and Dad yesterday,” said Shivay. “Mom is in high spirits and enjoying visiting the goddess temples.”

Rishab was glad. Phones weren't allowed into the temples, so his parents only called for a quick update. The last time he had spoken to his mother was to tell her that he was not going to abandon his bride because he was tricked during the wedding.

“Gauri Bhil is now my wife, Ma and I intend to honor all of my wedding vows.”

His mother was relieved.

“Ishani and I will be visiting Gujjar province next week,” Shivay added. “We'll be there for a few days before returning to Thakvar mansion.”

Since Shivay's wife was the heiress of the Gujjar clan, after the alliance, Shivay was considered the clan head of Gujjar. And Rishab's older brother took his responsibilities very seriously. Despite appointing several able clan leaders, Shivay and his wife ensured the clan people could speak with them directly.

“Ishani is excited about meeting your wives,” said Shivay. “I told her chances are slim, but she still wanted me to check if you both can visit with your wives before the third-month ritual.”

As per the tradition, the newlywed couples had to perform a ritual at the husband's home on the third month of marriage. Had the circumstances been ideal, and if he were married to a sweet, obedient woman who listened to his orders, he would have thought of visiting his ancestral home with his wife.

But instead, he was married to a beautiful, dangerous woman who hated him and didn't want him anywhere near her.

“We'll be there for the three-month ritual,” he said. He would drag his wife, kicking and screaming if needed, to join him for the important ritual.

“Same here, bro,” said Nakul. “My wife is not inclined to join me anywhere at this time.”

Rishab knew his brother Nakul’s wife was happy about being deceived into a marriage.

“I guess Ishani, and I’ll get to see you both with your wives only at the three-month ritual,” said Shivay.

“Yeah.”

“All right, I’ll let Ishani know. She’s going to be disappointed, but she’ll understand.”

Rishab’s mouth twisted into a smile. Less than a year ago, his older brother wouldn’t have cared or bothered about his alliance bride’s feelings. But now, Shivay did everything possible to make his wife happy.

“I’ll see you both in the office soon,” said Shivay, referring to the new Thakvar Enterprises headquarters located in the city that was only a few hours away from Singoor desert.

It was easier for Rishab and his brothers to run their business from the new office location while they were tied up with personal and more important matters in Singoor.

Ending the call with his brothers, he got on another call immediately.

It was a business call with his executives.

“The contracts are being drawn up for the latest acquisition, Mr. Thakvar. We made the changes you had proposed...”

Rishab looked into the document on the laptop screen in front of him, but it took an effort to focus. It was barely mid-morning, and he had only made a couple of calls, but he felt distracted and restless.

He attributed it to not getting good sleep at night. The bed was comfortable, and yet he couldn’t relax and sleep because he was too damn agitated to have the object of his prolonged obsession sleeping barely a few

feet away from him each night.

His logical brain knew Gauri Bhil was dangerous and possibly greedy, selfish and evil. And yet, he panted and obsessed about her like a damn lusty teenager.

He had been with dozens of beautiful women, and yet, each night when she changed into her nightwear behind a screen, he couldn't drag his eyes away. The damn screen barely hid her body, and he could see the outline of every tempting curve. And when she stepped out, she ignored him as though he didn't exist.

While she slept on the chaise that was only a few feet away from the bed, he was painfully aroused recalling the sweet taste of her mouth and memories of her lush body under his on their wedding night. He even fantasized that she would wake him up with her soft mouth wrapped around his hard arousal while begging him to forgive her.

Fuck!

His body reacted painfully to that visual. Dragging his mind away from his dangerous wife, he focused on the laptop screen and the call with his executives.

“Ensure that all parties involved agree to the terms, not just the chairman. I want the acquisition finalized within two months...”

He continued to give instructions when he felt something slithering over his leg. He frowned, wondering if he had imagined it. But when it was followed by a strange hissing sound, he looked down near his feet under the desk.

“Son of a—”

He stood up and pressed the button to open the curtains covering the windows. The sight that met with his eyes made him curse viciously. There were at least a dozen snakes slithering under his home office desk. And some

of them were even climbing the bookshelves at the back.

His wife was a dangerous menace.

CHAPTER 17

Gauri was in the accounting room looking at the ledgers with her manager when the door burst open. Rishab Thakvar's tall form strode into the room with a familiar-looking wicker basket.

His handsome face held a dark look. He stopped in front of the table and opened the basket.

There was a cobra inside. And when the snake began hissing and slithering out of the basket, the manager gasped and got up to move away. But Gauri remained seated.

"My office is filled with at least a dozen snakes," her husband said. "Any idea how they got there?"

"Snakes can climb walls," she replied.

"So, a dozen cobras decided to climb a wall to the second floor and enter only my home office?"

Gauri shrugged. "I guess so," she said. "And you should get used to such things as a Bhil clan head. Especially since we consider snakes to be messengers of God."

She picked up the snake on her desk and held it in her hands before carefully placing it back into the wicker basket and closing the lid.

She then looked at her enemy husband. "You are lucky that this one had its poison removed," she said. "Next time, there might be poisonous ones."

The snakes were put into his office upon her instructions. It was to once again remind him that he was not welcome in the Bhil mansion or as the clan head. And he was especially not welcome to sleep in her bed.

But her enemy husband didn't look intimidated.

His eyes flashed, and his mouth twisted into a dark smile. "Yes, my dear wife. I'm very lucky."

The look on his face promised consequences.

CHAPTER 18

“Prepare yourself for war... wife.”

For the next few days, Gauri remained alert.

She knew her enemy husband would retaliate, but she didn't know what he would do.

She spent more sleepless nights, expecting him to either attack her or use tricks to endanger her in some way.

Each time she stepped into the bathroom or opened her closet, she expected to see poisonous snakes. And even when she went riding, she had to check the saddle twice before sitting on her horse. It was infuriating.

She was half-tempted to snap at him and demand to know what he was planning to do as retaliation. Waiting for him to retaliate seemed a bigger torture.

But she remained outwardly composed while his handsome face held the dark, twisted smirk.

She truly hated the man.

“Madam, your tub is ready.”

Gauri nodded. “Thank you,” she said to the maids, who arranged for the bathtub to be filled with hot water.

Her day had started very early, before sunrise, as she had to oversee a big batch of shipments. Later, she went to the Meena clan to meet with the clan heads. On her way back, she didn't stop at the fort ruins and came home directly.

She felt sore and tired and wanted to relax for the rest of the evening.

Removing her jewelry and clothes, she went into the bathroom, where a movable copper bathtub was placed at the center. Tying her hair into a knot on top of her head, she stepped into the bathtub and settled in the steaming water that was infused with scented herbs.

It was a beautiful copper tub with carvings of the Bhil and Saini clan insignias, along with dancing figurines on the side handles. Gauri's father had it specially commissioned for his loving wife. Gauri had memories of her mother giving her a bath in the tub using scented herbs. Later, her mother had lovingly dried and combed Gauri's long hair before braiding it.

Gauri's mother was sweet and gentle and was known to be one of the best classical dancers in Singoor. Gauri had learned dancing from her mother and developed a similar passion.

Gauri wished Komal had some memories of their parents. Komal had barely been six months old when their parents had died. Even though Gauri had tried hard, she knew she could never take the place of her mother. The only thing Gauri could do was to protect her younger sister and do everything she could to help her sister achieve her dreams.

Gauri tried to imagine how Komal's life would have been had Rishab Thakvar succeeded in marrying his originally intended bride. The arrogant man would have bullied her innocent sister.

Although Gauri was stuck with him as her husband, she was glad her sister wasn't trapped in an unwanted marriage.

Pushing away the thoughts of the arrogant man, Gauri closed her eyes and leaned her head on the curved rim of the bathtub. Taking deep breaths of the scented herbs, she relaxed her mind.

She was almost slipping into a relaxed sleep when the bathroom door opened, and cool air fell on her exposed skin. Opening her eyes, she saw the tall form of her enemy husband entering the bathroom.

With a gasp, she sat up straight and quickly hugged her knees to her chest. He had taken a step inside and stopped when he saw her in the tub.

“Get out!” she ordered.

His dark eyes swept over her before returning to her outraged face.

“Why?” he drawled.

“Have you gone blind?” she demanded. “Can’t you see I’m having a bath?”

“Yes, I can see that *my wife* is having her bath. So?”

She gritted her teeth at his words. “I told you this marriage is only for alliance, and you are not allowed to touch me.”

His mouth twisted. “I’m not touching you,” he said. “I’m only looking. I’m allowed to look at my wife.”

She sucked in a breath, knowing he was deliberately taunting her.

“Why are you here and not in the bathroom you recently got remodeled?” she demanded.

“I’m sure you already know that my shower suddenly stopped working yesterday.”

The previous day, she had someone block the hot water supply to the bathroom he was using. She thought that would deter him from staying longer in the Bhil mansion. She didn’t think the plan would backfire on her.

“I’m glad the shower stopped working,” he drawled. “I guess I need to get used to showering in the traditional style.”

Her heart jerked in shock when he began removing his clothes.

“You are allowed to look too, my dear wife,” he said with a mocking yet challenging smile.

Keeping his eyes on her, he unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it, revealing his broad shoulders and muscled torso. When he reached for his trousers, she gritted her teeth and turned her head away, breaking their locked

gazes.

He was using the current situation to retaliate. And there was nothing she could do. So, she sat in the bathtub, fuming in anger.

There were sounds of water splashing while he took a bath. Despite not wanting to, her eyes were drawn towards him. She was shocked and fascinated by the sight.

He was facing his back towards her, and she could see the entire naked length of him. Every inch of his body was muscled, including his broad back, thighs and legs. Her cheeks heated, seeing that even his buttocks were muscled. Her stomach fluttered strangely, seeing his muscles ripple across his tanned shoulders and back while he poured water on himself using a copper tumbler.

She watched in fascination as water and soap slid down his body while he bathed.

His deep voice cut into her gaze after a while.

“I’m going to turn,” he said. “You are welcome to continue to look.”

Sucking in a deep breath, she once again jerked her head away.

She held her breath while waiting for him to leave.

After many tense moments, he finally stepped out of the bathroom.

Letting out her held breath and sucking in another deep one, she sat fuming, feeling angry and embarrassed that she was drawn to her enemy husband.

Rishab Thakvar was her enemy. He was the man who wanted to grab control of her clan.

She should not be drawn to him.

I hate him and want him gone.

CHAPTER 19

“All shipments are sent from this point onward, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab was at the Bhil province market, which was close to the desert. The shipments of artifacts and other goods were made using cartons placed on camels and horse carts. Transport vehicles were not allowed inside the desert. From what Rishab had heard, a few times transport vehicles entered the desert, they were brutally attacked and killed by the Kabali clan.

The men and women who led the animals were predominantly from the Bhil and Meena clans. Their loyalties would lie with their clans unless someone tempted them with money.

“Who checks the shipments?” Rishab asked.

“Gauri madam checks the shipments.”

“I see.”

It meant that if there was an anomaly in the shipments, it would be done with the knowledge of his wife.

“What containers are used?” he asked.

The man showed handmade light wooden containers of different sizes. There were also large cloth-made bags that would be hung at the sides of the camels. Rishab’s focus was more on the wooden containers. The biggest size wasn’t too big that an adult could sneak into the container. If Tantra’s assassins were to come from outside Singoor, it would be hard to sneak them into the containers.

“What routes are used?”

“We usually have a standard route, Mr. Thakvar. We rarely deviate unless

we are warned of a possible danger.”

Since the Bhil clan was on the Western side and the city was closer to the Eastern side, the route was long, and other clans could have the chance to tamper with the shipments.

“I need the map of the routes.”

“Gauri madam has the maps in her office, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab knew his wife would put up all possible obstacles for him to gain access to those maps. He wouldn't be surprised if there were more snakes in his office. This time, poisonous ones.

The woman was a dangerous menace.

A dangerous menace who is also damn tempting.

The visual of the previous night with her glaring and spitting fire while sitting naked in a bathtub flashed in his mind.

She had tried to hide her body from him, but what she hadn't realized was that hugging her knees tightly against her chest, pushed her breasts into a tempting sight. Except for her nipples, he could see the entire tempting swell of her breasts. The smooth length of her long honey-colored legs was equally tempting.

Since the bath area was on the opposite wall, she didn't witness his body's reaction while he showered. Or she would have been all the more outraged seeing the hard arousal against his stomach.

He was still pissed that he desired her obsessively.

She was a dangerous pain in the ass. But she was also the only woman he wanted above reason.

Dragging his mind away from his dangerous wife, he focused on the task at hand.

“I will speak to my wife and get the maps,” he told the manager. “But I want the list of clans and the clan heads that are on the routes. I also need a

list of the clans that we trade goods within the local market.”

“Okay, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab continued to explore the Bhil clan. Along with artifacts, other goods such as dry spices were also a primary source of income. Although a prominent clan, the Bhil province was much smaller than the Thakvar. It would be relatively easy to manage and integrate new ideas.

“Good morning, Mr. Thakvar,” a familiar voice greeted him.

Rishab turned to see Jatin Saini who was Gauri’s cousin.

“I’ve come to help,” Gauri’s cousin said. “Although I don’t belong to the Bhil clan, I know a lot since I have helped my father with the management.”

Rishab knew Jaswant Saini had begun to live permanently in the Bhil mansion when Kamlesh Meena died, leaving Gauri as a young widow. Jatin Saini joined his father, but right then, he wasn’t allowed to stay in the Bhil mansion.

“Thanks for the offer, Mr. Saini,” Rishab replied. “But I already have help.”

Jatin Saini smiled. “Please call me Jatin. After all, we are now family.”

“Sure.”

The man waited as though he expected Rishab to ask the same in return.

A moment later, he cleared his throat. “My cousin is very particular about the shipments,” he said. “She doesn’t even allow me to check on them. I don’t think she will be happy to know you are getting involved.”

Rishab didn’t say anything.

He didn’t trust the man. Something about him was slimy. Although Jatin Saini tried to hide it, Rishab could see the seething resentment the man had towards his cousin.

“Request for a sample of the wooden containers used in Thakvar region,” Rishab instructed the manager. “They are lighter and bigger.”

“Sure, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab continued to walk along the shipment area. The manager explained about the handcrafted artifacts. Most of them represented the Bhil clan insignia, which was a coiled cobra snake in a striking position.

Snakes did play a large part in the Bhil clan. Some of the snakes were caught and had the poison removed. The poison was used as an antidote for snake bites by local medical practitioners.

The population of the Bhil clan was relatively small, and like most other Singoor clans, they were a close-knit community consisting of god-fearing people.

“I want information on the school and hospital in the coming days. Make arrangements—” He broke off when something sliced into his upper arm from the back.

Pain radiated in his arm. He turned to see that there was an arrow lodged into the place between his left shoulder and arm. His white tunic shirt began to turn red as blood began seeping.

“Mr. Thakvar has been shot!”

The security team who had accompanied him came rushing towards him and surrounded him.

Rishab waved them away. “The arrow came from that direction,” he pointed at the busy market. “Go after the culprit.”

The security head nodded and directed the team to head in that direction and begin searching.

“Remove the arrow,” Rishab instructed.

Despite the security head being careful, it hurt like hell.

Fuck.

The wound began bleeding profusely. A cloth was pressed against the injury to stop the bleeding.

“Mr. Thakvar, the injury must be checked right away by a physician. The arrow could be poisoned. We have to head back to the mansion.”

Rishab nodded.

As soon as he sat in the SUV to head back to the Bhil mansion, he held the arrow in his hand.

When he saw the design, he realized who was responsible for the attack.

It was the same person who had attacked him before and had threatened him several times.

His desert rose. His damn wife.

Rishab was in the family room speaking with the security head.

The security couldn't catch the person who had shot the arrow as the direction in which it came from had a busy marketplace with a moving crowd.

A physician was summoned who had checked on the injury and determined that the arrow wasn't poisoned. Either the arrow was shot into his arm to threaten him, or it missed the mark since he had been walking at that time.

A threat or a murder attempt, both options made Rishab furious.

"Rishab, are you all right?"

Rishab looked up to see Jaswant Saini's worried face.

"I'll speak with you later, Kedar."

"Okay, Mr. Thakvar," said the security head before leaving the room.

Jaswant Saini looked at Rishab's injured shoulder.

"I heard you were struck by a stray arrow in the market," he said.

"It wasn't a stray arrow, Papa," Jatin Saini who had joined his father replied. "It was a planned murder attack."

The older man looked shocked.

"I have tried to warn you, Mr. Thakvar," said Jatin Saini. "Although Gauri is my cousin, I know what she is capable of. She will—"

"Jatin!" Jaswant Saini cut him off. "Stop uttering nonsense! And get out of the room!"

The younger man gritted his teeth and walked out of the room.

Jaswant Saini looked guilty. "I apologize for my son's careless words. He is not in his right senses."

The older man looked at Rishab imploringly.

“I know you might feel angry that Gauri tricked you into marrying her instead of her sister. But please know that Gauri cares about her people and family. She will not do anything to risk it all. Please don’t blame her or the Bhil clan for this attack.”

Rishab didn’t say anything.

The door opened again and Gauri Bhil came inside.

She was in her riding clothes with the bright blue robe covering her shoulders. He could see the outline of the bow and arrows, which she hadn’t taken off yet in the weapons room.

Her beautiful face was unreadable as she swept her eyes over his injured shoulder with visible bandages.

“Gauri, Rishab got shot by an arrow,” her uncle said

“Yes, I heard about it,” she replied.

There was a tense silence as Rishab held his wife’s eyes.

“I will talk to you both tomorrow,” the older man said. “Please call me if you need anything.”

When there was no reply, Jaswant Saini went out of the room and shut the door.

Rishab’s eyes continued to clash with his wife’s.

She broke the silence.

“You should go to Thakvar mansion,” she said. “It’s not safe for you here. Right now, it’s your shoulder. Tomorrow, the arrow might find its mark.”

Dark rage filled him with her words.

Searing pain shot through his shoulder as he got up from the couch. The physician had suggested painkillers, but Rishab had refused them.

Ignoring the pain and letting the rage take over, he walked towards her and stopped when he was barely a few inches apart from her.

“It’s not safe here for me because of whom?” he growled.

Despite the rage on his face, she stood without flinching.

“You will not succeed in driving me away,” he stated. “And if anything happens to me, not only you, your entire clan will be wiped from the face of the earth.”

Her eyes flashed angrily.

“Don’t threaten me,” she said.

“It’s not a threat,” he replied. “It’s a damn promise.”

Her jaw clenched.

“I am not responsible for the attack on you,” she said.

His mouth twisted darkly. “Maybe you forgot about the first time we met, but I haven’t. I hadn’t forgotten your sweet, loving words on our wedding night either when you wielded a knife against me and got to my sword while I was asleep. And I haven’t forgotten the rest of your sweet words and tactics ever since my arrival here. You have been nothing but a vicious, bloodthirsty little witch.”

Her eyes flashed.

“Then, why don’t you also recall what I told you on our wedding night,” she said. “That if I wanted you dead, you would be dead. I don’t miss my target on an arrow shot. Ever. And I never ever attack anyone from behind. I always attack my enemies after looking them in the eyes.”

She turned away and stormed out of the room.

He remained standing long after she left.

He didn’t want to believe her. He shouldn’t believe her. But the arrogance and anger with which she spit out the words made him believe she was speaking the truth.

Or maybe he was just being a damn fool because he was so fucking drawn to her beauty and fire that he would believe any damn thing that came out of

her pretty mouth.

Clenching his jaw, he swore viciously.

CHAPTER 20

“Madam, the fabrics vendor is here.”

Gauri was busy in the kitchen, where she was having sweets and savory snacks prepared to be sent to Komal.

“Have him seated in the main hall and set up the fabrics,” Gauri told the maid. “I’m coming in a few minutes.”

“Okay, madam.”

Gauri continued to give instructions, asking the prepared snacks to be placed into different boxes. She saw a separate container where the sweets were prepared differently.

“Why did you add sweet cream to this batch?” she asked the head cook. “Komal prefers it without the cream.”

“These are for... Rishab sir,” the cook replied hesitantly. “He enjoys them with cream.”

Gauri froze, listening to the cook’s reply. Everyone else in the kitchen also seemed to have frozen before they looked at each other uneasily.

Gauri knew people in the household sensed the hostility between her and her husband. Although she and Rishab Thakvar didn’t shout or confront each other, the tense silence between them gave it away.

It had been several days since he was shot by an arrow and they had a heated confrontation where he blamed her for the attack. She had told him that she wasn’t responsible, but it was obvious he didn’t believe her.

Since then, there has been no proper exchange of words between them. Only short and curt sentences were used when they had to communicate

because they shared the same suite.

Gauri was fine with the tense situation, but everyone in the household seemed to be worried.

“He won’t be joining us for lunch,” she said.

She recalled his curt announcement early that morning that he was going to the Garasia clan to meet with the clan heads. The Garasia clan was on the far West side of Singoor and could only be accessed on camels and horses. Her enemy husband had taken Manik, the black stallion who was now used to him.

“Keep the ghevar with cream in the cool storage,” she instructed the cook. “He’ll have it for dinner.”

“Okay, madam.”

Gauri stepped out of the kitchen and went to the hall where the fabric vendor had set up the display. He was an old man who had been selling fabrics in Singoor for decades.

“Madam, I’m so excited to show you the collection. I got such beautiful and latest ones that would put even the city boutiques to shame.”

Gauri was amused by the vendor’s exaggeration. “I’m sure you are going to charge me an amount that would put the city boutiques in shock.”

The vendor shook his head. “Oh no, madam. You are my favorite customer. You will always get the best rate!”

Gauri nearly laughed because she knew it was a lie. Gauri only purchased sparingly, and that too mostly fabrics needed for her riding attire, which she used most of the time. She used to get fabrics for getting new dresses for Komal, but now that Komal was studying at a university, her sister preferred to buy clothes in the city.

“The usual fabric, Champak,” she told the vendor, pointing at the sapphire blue cloth.

The vendor looked disappointed. “But madam, now that you are married, you will need more beautiful dresses.”

Gauri had enough dresses in her closet. Most of them were old but were in good condition. There were also dozens of dresses and extensive jewelry she had received from the Thakvars for being a Thakvar bride. She hadn’t touched any of them.

“Just the usual, Champak.”

The vendor pulled up a fabric. “You should buy at least this one, madam. It is of utmost demand among newlywed women and ones who want to entice their men.”

Gauri looked at the sheer fabric that was nearly transparent. Her cheeks heated imagining wearing a sheer dress to entice her enemy husband.

“No,” she snapped. “I don’t need anything to entice my husband.”

The old man’s face fell. “Okay, madam.”

Gauri sucked in a breath, realizing she was showing her anger and frustration at someone innocent.

“I apologize, Champak. Just give me the usual. And I’ll also buy something for... the third-month rituals at the Thakvar mansion,” she said.

The old man’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s wonderful, madam. I have the perfect fabrics for that and also the designs. Let me show you.”

For the next hour, Gauri spent time purchasing the necessary fabrics along with some expensive and unnecessary fabrics. She then gave instructions to the dressmaker to get the riding dresses ready.

“And with the other fabrics, madam?” the dressmaker asked.

“Nothing for now. Let Komal come home. She will get a dress designed the way she wants.”

The dressmaker nodded. “Okay, madam.”

Gauri turned to leave and saw the maids exchanging looks with each

other. Ignoring the possible gossip that might spread, she headed up to her room to freshen up.

She had just stepped inside and was taking out her riding clothes when there was a knock on the door.

“Yes, come in.”

The door opened and it was the housekeeper. The older woman looked visibly uncomfortable.

“Gauri, I would like to talk to you about something important,” she said.

“What is it, Rumi?” Gauri asked, hoping it wasn’t some bad news.

The housekeeper looked worried. “Gauri, there are rumors that your marriage hasn’t been consummated. That you haven’t allowed the Thakvar heir to touch you.”

Annoyance shot through Gauri. “Who is discussing such things?” she asked coldly.

“Gauri, please listen,” the older woman urged. “This is very concerning because if it’s proven that your marriage is not consummated, Rishab Thakvar has every right to break the marriage and marry Komal.”

“He can’t do that.”

“He can, Gauri. A husband can abandon a wife if a marriage is not consummated. It is the law of our land, and it has happened a few times in the past.”

Gauri was shocked and angry. “I won’t allow him to marry Komal.”

“Then he can break the alliance with the Bhil clan and form an alliance elsewhere.”

Gauri fell silent, knowing there was a possibility of that happening. But from what she had seen so far, her enemy husband didn’t seem inclined to break the alliance with the Bhil clan.

What if he changes his mind?

Gauri looked at the housekeeper. “My husband and I are having a misunderstanding, that’s all. Our marriage has already been consummated. Tell everyone not to worry.”

The housekeeper looked relieved. “Oh! That’s excellent news. Misunderstandings are common among newlyweds. Don’t worry. He will be the one to forgive first. Men can’t stay angry with their wives for long, especially newlywed men.”

With those words, the housekeeper left with a wide smile, most likely eager to tell everyone that there was no risk of the Thakvar heir breaking the alliance with the Bhil clan.

Gauri, however, was shocked and infuriated about the threat.

She began pacing inside the suite, trying to think of a way to stop Rishab Thakvar from doing something that would jeopardize her people.

She knew the threat was real.

Her enemy husband had no real practical reasons to be tied to her. He was richer and more powerful than her. Other than the purpose of the alliance to commission Goddess Shakti’s statue, there was nothing else the marriage with her would offer him. And he could get the same benefit of alliance with some other clan heiress. Before the wedding, she herself had suggested to him that idea. He might be inclined to take it up as the next wife would most likely be more pliable and give him heirs whenever he desired.

She couldn’t let that happen.

I will continue to tell my people that the marriage was consummated.

Her people would be inclined to believe her more than him. She hated lying, but circumstances were quite dire enough to make her lie. The lie would be for the greater good of her clan.

But what if he challenges the consummation and proves it as a lie?

There was a strong possibility of that happening.

Rishab Thakvar was shrewd and methodical. She had seen him deal with things over the past few weeks. He will not let her get away with the lie. He would do everything possible to prove it as a lie.

What if the marriage is consummated in reality?

Gauri's heart thudded.

Then, her enemy husband will not have an opportunity to jeopardize her clan or break the alliance. He won't be able to use any law of the land against her or threaten her with it.

Her mind and ego revolted at the idea of giving herself to the arrogant man she hated. But it seemed to be the only way she could secure the future of her clan.

She knew her enemy husband desired her. He had kissed her. She had seen and felt his heated gaze on her many times. During mornings, he lay on the bed lazily and watched her when she sat in front of the mirror and got ready, putting on jewelry and clan markings.

"Stop looking at me," she snapped at him.

But his mouth twisted mockingly. "You are my wife. I can look at you however I want."

She couldn't stop him from looking at her. And although she hated him, she was drawn to him as well. His kiss haunted her frequently, and she couldn't stop her eyes from being drawn to his tall, muscular form when he removed his shirt to step into the bathroom or when he got into bed to sleep.

Despite the hatred and enmity, the strong physical pull between them couldn't be denied.

Sucking in a deep breath, she made a decision.

I will seduce him. I will make him consummate the marriage.

CHAPTER 21

It was nearly dark outside by the time Rishab and the men who accompanied him returned from the Garasia clan.

“Thank you, Ratan.”

Handing over the black stallion to the stable master, Rishab walked into the Bhil mansion.

He had begun the talks with the West side clans. The talks with the clan were successful, but something that the Garasia clan leader said that day got stuck in Rishab’s mind.

“I wanted to join the peace treaty that your uncle Umesh Thakvar and the rest of the heirs from the prominent clans had put together. But I backed out when they all died in accidents. Around the same time, my older son went missing as well. My clan and I took it as a sign and stayed away. But now that you and your brothers are forming alliances and commissioning goddess Shakti’s statue, I want to trust you.”

Garasia clan’s heir wasn’t the only young boy who had gone missing. Based on the information Shivay and Nakul had given him about the East and South Singoor clans, there were other clans as well where young boys, mostly the heirs, had gone missing over a period.

It didn’t seem a coincidence. If it was a kidnapping done by some human trafficker for money, it would be much easier to take boys who were not the heirs of clan heads. Rishab had a gut feeling that the missing children were also linked to the prominent clan heirs who had allegedly died due to a curse.

Both missing children and death of prominent clan heirs instilled the fear

of a curse among people in Singoor. Who would benefit from such fear? And why?

He and his brothers were investigating the deaths of the heirs from the prominent clans.

Until recently, the Gujjar heir, who was Ishani's father, was thought to have died of a snakebite. But later, it was revealed that the man was killed by his own son. Nakul was investigating the deaths of the Kanwar clan heir, who had died in a fire accident along with his wife during a ritual. The initial investigative reports stated that a highly inflammable substance was deliberately used during the ritual to cause the fire.

Rishab had ordered an investigation into the deaths of the Bhil and Meena clan heirs. So far, the investigation reports had several possibilities but no definitive conclusion. He was still waiting for them to reach a conclusion.

Shivay was also investigating the deaths of their uncle and aunt in a car accident. But since all the incidents had happened almost twenty years ago, the investigation was taking time.

"Good evening, Mr. Thakvar," the housekeeper greeted cheerfully. "We have special sweets for your dinner, sir."

Rishab smiled. "Thanks, Rumi. I'll freshen up and be down shortly."

"Okay, Mr. Thakvar."

He was covered in sweat and fine sand from the desert. He needed to shower, grab dinner, and get on a couple of phone calls before preparing for the next day when he would be visiting another clan.

He went up the stairs and into the master suite before making a quick phone call.

"I want a report prepared with the timelines of the missing children and the death of the heirs," he instructed. "I'll send you the information I have later tonight."

“Sure, Mr. Thakvar,” the investigation lead replied. “We are also gathering DNA samples to run through the central system.”

“Good.”

He ended the call. He hoped that the investigation would find a link to the missing children and the death of the heirs soon.

He threw the phone aside on the bed and went towards the bathroom.

Knowing it would piss off his wife, he removed his sand and sweat-covered riding clothes and dropped them near the closet right next to the laundry basket. The woman was a clean freak and wanted everything orderly. She would most likely give him a death glare for daring to mess up her orderly room.

His mouth twisted in satisfaction as he grabbed a clean towel and stepped into the bathroom to take a quick shower. As soon as he stepped in, he was greeted by a gasp.

His wife was in the bathroom. She must have just taken a shower because her hair was wet, and there was a towel wrapped around her damp body. The air inside smelled of roses, which he had begun to associate with her.

His body began stirring rapidly.

Their eyes clashed.

He waited for her to order him to get out, but she stared at him. And then, she began walking towards him with a look he had never thought he would see in Gauri Bhil’s eyes. Desire.

CHAPTER 22

Gauri had never seduced a man before.

All day, she had been making plans to seduce her enemy husband. She finally planned to have a special feast in the master suite with his favorite food. And during that meal, she planned to wear a sheer dress that would entice him. And then, later she planned to slip into the bed with him.

The plan was supposed to be set into motion after a few days when she would make the necessary arrangements and also be mentally prepared for it.

But when her enemy husband walked into the bathroom nearly naked, she froze. Instead of ordering him to get out of the bathroom, she decided to seize the chance right then.

She decided to seduce her husband.

Before she lost her resolve, she inhaled a breath and walked towards him. She went closer and stopped right in front of him, barely a foot away. She had to raise her head to meet his eyes.

His handsome face was unreadable, but she could see the tensed stiffness of his body.

He had just returned from the desert, and smelled of masculine sweat and horses with an underlying hint of his expensive cologne. The unique combination filled her senses, making her oddly breathless. She also noticed that his face and upper body were of a deeper tan than before because of his frequent riding in the harsh desert sun. He now looked like a desert warrior rather than a city-bred businessman. Her stomach quivered hard.

She felt a sudden craving to lick the tanned skin along the wide expanse of

his muscled chest. Suppressing the urge, she focused on enticing him the way a woman would normally entice a man she desired.

Looking into his eyes, she slowly raised her hand and touched his chest.

The muscles under his chest tensed and she could feel his heart thumping faster. His eyes had darkened intensely, making her stomach quiver even harder.

She hoped he would kiss her right then and take over the seduction, just like he had done with the kiss. But he stood still.

Continuing to look into his eyes, she moved her tingling palm down over the heated, hair-roughened skin. The well-defined muscles on his abdomen tensed and contracted at her touch.

Just when she was about to lower her hand even further to touch the male hardness that showed his arousal, he gripped her wrist, stopping her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

There was dark anger in his voice.

“I’m touching you,” she replied. “I... want to touch you.”

His eyes flashed at her words. A gasp escaped her when he suddenly twisted her arm and held it to her back before dragging her close until she crashed against his hard chest.

The tips of her breasts behind the damp towel hardened against his chest, and she could feel the length of his hard arousal against her quivering belly.

She felt a strong urge to twist away from his intimate grip, but she stayed completely still.

He looked down at her. Despite his arousal, there was nothing loverlike on his handsome face.

His mouth twisted into a dark smile. “Have you suddenly forgotten that you hate me, my dear wife?” he asked. “Have you also forgotten that you threatened to slit my throat if I touched you?”

She sucked in a breath.

“I... just needed some time to get used to you,” she said, using the excuse she had thought of when she had decided to seduce him.

His handsome face remained darkly mocking. “I see. So, you are used to me now?”

“Yes.”

“How much?” he asked.

She didn't like the mocking tone he used.

“Enough to allow you to touch me and... consummate this marriage,” she replied.

His eyes darkened even more at her words.

“Consummate? You mean I am allowed to fuck you?”

Anger shot through her at his crude words. “Yes.”

“Where should we do it?” he asked. “Should I fuck you in the weapons room when you tried to humiliate me during the alliance talk? Or in the stables, next to Manik, where you tried to discredit me in front of your people? Or maybe I should fuck you bent over my office desk where you put snakes to get me to leave Bhil mansion? Or should I fuck you in your bed where you loathe my presence each night?”

She wanted to stab him right then.

“The bed,” she gritted.

His mouth twisted darkly as he looked at her face.

“My dear beautiful, vicious and scheming wife...” he said mockingly.

“Whatever game you think you are playing, you won't win against me.”

With those words, he pushed her away from him.

She stumbled back before standing against the wall while gripping the loosening knot on her towel.

With a dark twist of his mouth, he shed his underwear and walked

completely naked to the bath area and began taking a shower. Water sluiced over his broad, muscled back.

Her face flamed at his rejection.

Angry and humiliated, she sucked in a deep breath and stepped out of the bathroom.

I hate him.

Her seduction attempt had not only failed, it left her utterly humiliated.

To hell with him.

A part of her knew she couldn't afford for her pride and hatred to come in between the wellbeing of her clan. Even though she would rather stab him, she knew it was important that the marriage was consummated.

She would have to come up with another plan to secure the alliance.

CHAPTER 23

Gauri came up with a temporary plan.

“The jungle maas tastes so delicious, madam!” the head cook said with excitement. “I’m sure Rishab sir will love it!

Gauri nodded with a small smile as she finished stirring the dish that was known to be a Thakvar clan delicacy.

“We’ll be eating dinner in our suite again,” she informed the housekeeper.

Rumi looked thrilled. “Yes, I’ll have the staff set up the table on the balcony.”

Gauri nodded.

As she stepped out of the kitchen, she saw the kitchen and household staff exchanging glances and smiling.

Gauri knew she had managed to ease the worries of her clan by pretending that things were fine between her and her husband. Her people were thrilled that she made special requests to make Rishab Thakvar’s favorite sweets and had even been cooking dishes for her husband.

People were thrilled that there was no threat to the alliance between the Thakvar and Bhil clans.

It helped that her enemy husband didn’t get to witness her pretense as he was away meeting with the West clans. He only returned after the sunset. During that time, Gauri made a request to have his dinner set up in the master suite.

The household thought the newlywed couple were having intimate dinners, but it was far from the truth. While her enemy husband enjoyed his

meal, she ignored him.

And during nights, she continued to sleep on the narrow daybed.

Gauri knew it was only a temporary plan as there was still a threat to the alliance without the marriage being consummated.

She still had to think of a way to get her enemy husband to somehow consummate the marriage.

Her ego balked at the thought of another seduction attempt.

She hated him, and the last thing she wanted was to be once again humiliated and rejected by him.

She had briefly considered drugging his food and slipping naked into the bed next to him. The aphrodisiac drugs would make him take her. She would only have to tolerate his touch for one night, and the deed would be done.

But once again, her mind rejected the idea. Her morals balked at tricking a man into taking her, even if the man was her lawfully wedded husband.

She sucked in a breath in annoyance.

Either it was her ego or her morals that were risking the wellbeing of her clan.

She knew she would have to shed all three at some point to get her enemy husband to bed her.

CHAPTER 24

Rishab was at the breakfast table. After weeks of long travel in the desert to various clans, he was looking forward to having a relaxed meal.

“Please have some more sweets, Mr. Thakvar.”

“Thank you, Rumi.”

The middle-aged housekeeper smiled. “You should thank Gauri. She is the one who had asked for the special sweets to be made.”

Taking a slow bite of the creamy dessert, Rishab looked at his wife. Her beautiful face was unreadable.

“Thank you, my dear wife,” he drawled.

Her eyes flashed at his endearment.

“Try the stuffed dates as well,” she said, extending a silver platter towards him. “These are the Bhil clan’s specialties.”

For a moment, he wondered if the dates were poisoned. But seeing the challenge on his wife’s beautiful face, he picked up a date and bit into it.

“Sweet and spicy. Just like you, my dear wife,” he said.

There were giggles from the nearby staff.

His wife’s eyes flashed, but she didn’t say anything.

There was a clearing of the throat. It was Gauri’s uncle.

“Rishab, I would like to speak with you regarding your talks with the West clans.”

Rishab turned to look at the older man.

Jaswant Saini looked worried. “There are concerns that there might be an attack on you.”

“I’m taking security along with me.”

“Yes, but that’s just four people. If a clan like Kabali attacks, even a dozen people won’t be able to withstand them. They are savages.”

Rishab knew the risks involved and had taken the necessary precautions. The security team had small handguns hidden under their uniform that were to be used only if there was a real threat.

“I will be careful, Mr. Saini,” he said and turned to Gauri. “For the next clan visit, I will be taking my wife along. She will ensure my safety.”

The flashing eyes on the beautiful face indicated there were higher chances of him getting pierced in his heart by her arrow than a rogue clan’s attack.

His mouth twisted.

Finishing breakfast, he excused himself before heading to the home office.

Just as he sat on the leather chair and turned on his laptop, there was a knock on the office door.

“Come in.”

It was the housekeeper.

She came inside holding a silver platter and placed it on the office desk. “I got some sweets, sir. So, you can have them while you work.”

Rishab smiled. “Thanks, Rumi,” he said. “Although soon Manik might complain he’s not able to carry my weight in the desert.”

Rumi laughed. “That won’t happen, sir. Gauri will surely keep you on your toes.”

Rishab agreed with the old woman.

“We were really worried when some bad rumors spread about your marriage. But after seeing you both so happy and loving together, it’s obvious your marriage is strong, and the Thakvar-Bhil alliance will last forever.”

Rishab didn't say anything.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for disturbing you, sir. I know you are busy."

"It's fine," he said with a smile.

The housekeeper smiled and looked happy as she left.

Rishab opened the sweets platter and began to check on his schedule.

He had several calls lined up for the day. Apart from the business and investigation calls, he also had to speak with his younger sister. Nandini was raising hell, wanting to come to Singoor. But he and his brothers were dissuading her for safety reasons.

His mouth twisted, knowing how the call with his sister would go. Nandini would explode in anger first, and then when it didn't work, she would try to sweet talk him into letting her visit Singoor. He and his brothers were well-versed in their sister's tactics.

Shaking his head, he began to dial into a meeting with his corporate executives. But before he could join the conference call, the door burst open.

He looked up to see the beautiful face of Gauri Bhil as she stormed in.

"I want you to stop it," she said.

He sat back on his chair and picked up a sweet. "Stop what?" he asked.

She sucked in an angry breath. "Whatever it is you are doing. Don't sweet talk my people, and don't call me with endearments in public."

His mouth twisted. "So, I can call you with endearments in private?"

"No," she gritted.

"But how can I not?" he asked, wanting to ruffle her feathers even more.

"Since you took the effort to make my favorite desserts. That's quite a surprise, considering you hate me."

There was a flicker in her eyes, followed by an uncomfortable look.

He looked at her beautiful face, and slowly, the reason for her behavior at the breakfast table clicked along with what the housekeeper had said earlier.

“We were really worried when some bad rumors spread about your marriage. But after seeing you both so happy and loving together, it’s obvious your marriage is strong, and the Thakvar-Bhil alliance will last forever.”

“You are putting on a show to convince your people we are a happy, loving couple.”

Her beautiful face clammed up and became expressionless.

“Why?” he asked.

Gauri Bhil wasn’t the kind to care what others thought of her. But she was ensuring that her people thought of them as a happily married couple.

She held his eyes. “Because my people think you will break the alliance and marry another heiress... since our marriage is not yet consummated.”

She wanted her people to think that the marriage was already consummated.

Suddenly, another piece fell into place. He now knew the reason for her seduction attempt the previous week. She wanted to consummate the marriage to secure the alliance.

Gauri Bhil hated him, and she had no respect or affection towards him, and yet she was willing to let him fuck her for the sake of alliance.

The fact pissed him off.

He watched her beautiful face. Despite knowing she was calculating and devious, her beauty continued to captivate him as strongly as it did from the moment he had seen her during a sandstorm.

The fact pissed him even more.

He leaned back in his office chair and looked at her.

And then, his mouth twisted into a dark smile. “Take off your clothes,” he ordered. “I want to see what is on the offer.”

Her eyes flashed.

He deliberately used the words she had used when he had come for an alliance with her sister. She had asked him to strip, thinking it would humiliate and anger him enough to withdraw the alliance offer.

But he hadn't backed away from her challenge. Now, he waited to see whether she would meet his challenge.

He watched as various emotions ran over her beautiful face. Anger was the foremost. Her hands clenched as though controlling herself from reaching for the knife she held at her waist.

But moments later, she raised her chin and held his eyes in challenge.

And then, she began taking off her clothes.

She reached for the ties at the back of her ethnic dress and tugged until the top loosened and fell on the floor, leaving her bare from the waist up. But she adjusted her long hair until her hair fell in soft waves, covering her body partially.

Her cheeks held an angry flush while she held his eyes in challenge.

He watched her with his greedy eyes and mind, soaking up every detail.

She looked like the vision that had been haunting his darkest fantasies since the first time he had seen her. But none of the fantasies could match the reality of how Gauri Meena Bhil looked in reality.

She was stunningly, exotically and temptingly beautiful.

Her long dark hair fell to her hips, inviting his fingers to dig into the lush tresses. Even though her breasts were partially covered by her hair, he could see that they were full and perfectly rounded with hardened tips in the color of the darkest of roses. His mouth tingled with craving, wanting to taste the tempting buds. Her stomach was flat with a soft inward curve and her belly button tempted him to run his tongue around it. Every part of her made him crave her.

But the most tempting part of her was still her face. Her eyes held flames

of fire that he wanted to burn in. Her lush mouth was parted slightly while she took small, angry breaths and invited him to kiss until he was lost in the soft depths.

She exuded fire and passion. And he wanted to ignite with her. It had always taken an inhuman amount of control to stop himself from touching her.

But now the control broke, and he wanted to touch her.

He got up and went to her.

He touched her face first. Her eyes flickered when he moved the tip of his fingers over her high cheekbones and around her eyes where she put her clan markings each morning. He moved his fingers down her soft cheeks and then cupped her chin to brush his thumb against her lush bottom lip. He knew she didn't put on any lip color and that her lips were naturally a deep red and moist.

Color bloomed on her cheeks at his touch, and he felt her short, quickened breaths on his hand.

Her eyes shone with anger and passion. But he knew she wouldn't push him away. She would allow him to touch her and more.

Dark anticipation filled him at the thought.

He took a step back and swept his eyes over her.

"I told you to take off your clothes," he said. "You seem to have a problem following my orders... wife."

The color in her cheeks intensified with anger. He watched as her hand gripped the handle of the small knife she wore below her waist.

His mouth twisted, daring her to attack him.

Slowly, she loosened the tight grip on her knife and then reached for the ties of her long skirt. With a tug, the heavy skirt fell to the floor.

She held his eyes in a challenge.

She wasn't entirely naked since she was wearing panties. But apart from the small scrap of cloth, she was completely bare.

Her hips were wide in contrast to her small, narrow waist. And her legs were long and firm from riding horses. He imagined her long, smooth, honey-colored legs wrapped around his hips while he drove into her.

Fuck.

"To the office table," he growled. "Now."

Her eyes flickered at the harshness in his tone.

She looked at his face, and then her eyes lowered to see the hard arousal that his tailored pants couldn't hide. She inhaled a deep breath before going towards the office desk.

She stood with her back facing him, and slowly, she leaned over the desk.

He realized that she expected him to fuck her bent over the desk. She wouldn't have to see his face while he fucked her and consummated the marriage like she wanted.

The thought pissed him even more.

He strode angrily towards the office door and locked it. And then, he went to the office desk and stood right behind her.

He heard her inhale a deep breath when he pushed her long hair to the side. Her body jerked when he ran his palm over her smooth back. He could see her golden honey-colored skin breaking into tiny goosebumps.

When his hands lowered and encountered the tiny scrap of cloth, he tugged it down her hips, leaving her completely naked.

The sight of her smooth, rounded, bare buttocks made him want to mark her using his teeth.

But controlling himself, he stepped closer until he covered her body with his and spoke into her ear.

"Are you sure you want me to touch you?" he asked.

Her breaths turned faster, and the small knuckles gripping the edges of the office desk turned pale as though she was bracing herself for brutal and rough sex.

“Yes,” she replied.

With his body screaming at him to do exactly what she expected, he gripped her hips.

But instead of unzipping his pants and pushing into her from behind, he turned her and then pushed her on top of the polished wooden desk.

Gripping the top of her thighs, he dragged her close and held her in position. Her chest heaved as she looked at him. Her eyes lowered, expecting him to unzip his pants to take her.

But when he lifted her thighs even higher, her eyes flew up to his.

A shocked gasp escaped her when his head lowered between her legs. When his mouth touched her core, she cried out and tried to pull away, but he held her firmly.

Her body jerked, and her legs trembled with each swipe of his tongue while he tasted her.

Moisture flooded her core, and he lapped up her essence.

She wanted a rough, soulless coupling to consummate their marriage. And then, she would forget about him.

But he would ensure she remembered him. She would not be able to forget him easily.

He wanted to return the dark torment he felt from the time he had met her.

Passionate cries filled the office room. When her thighs began quivering hard, he knew she was close. He bit softly on the tiny rose-colored bud, and she came apart.

Her body shuddered hard, and her nails dug into his shoulders as hoarse feminine cries filled the room.

He straightened and lowered her thighs before bending over her.

“Taste your desire... wife,” he said darkly.

He gripped the back of her hair and kissed her. She moaned and tried to turn her head away, but he held her firmly and pushed his tongue deep inside, making her taste the desire she had for him despite her hatred.

She shuddered.

He shuddered along with her. With the taste of her inside his mouth, the feel of her plump breasts with hardened tips pushing against his chest, and her feminine core drenched with arousal, he was pushed to the brink.

But clenching his jaw, he dragged himself away from her.

He watched her as she lay on his desk like a tempting feast to a starving man.

“Leave,” he gritted.

There was shock on her beautiful face. It was then followed by anger.

She sat up and pushed her long hair to the front before crossing her arm across her breasts.

“You desire me,” she hissed out.

He didn't just desire her. He was obsessed with her. But she could only see proof of his desire that was clearly visible in front of his trousers.

His mouth twisted darkly. “It takes more than just desire for me to fuck, my dear wife. I like my women soft and willing. Not vicious and manipulative. So, get out.”

She looked like she wanted to kill him.

If she had a knife in her hands, he was sure she would stab him with it without bothering about the consequences.

But she sucked in a deep breath and got down the desk before going to her clothes. With her back facing him, she wore them back.

When she reached for her knife, she turned. Their eyes met. Hers were

stormy with rage, and his were dark with a challenge, daring her to attack him.

But she sucked in another deep breath and turned away. She went to the door and unlocked it before pulling it open and stepping out.

Even after the door shut, he remained standing.

Every damn part of his body throbbed in painful arousal and hungry desire.

Fuck.

He tried to adjust his trousers, but it didn't help. The taste of her still lingered on his lips, and the sounds of her passionate cries seemed to echo in his damn ears.

He imagined chasing after her and dragging her into the nearest room, but he controlled himself.

His phone began to ring. He knew it was one of his executives calling to check on the meeting he had scheduled earlier.

With an inhuman effort, he went and sat in his office chair and took the call.

CHAPTER 25

Gauri trembled with rage as she went down the stairs and to the weapons room.

She grabbed her weapons before going out to the stables. She had to go riding right then. It was either that or she would risk her entire clan by killing her enemy husband.

“Ratan, get Durga,” she instructed the stable master.

“Yes, madam.”

As soon as her horse was brought out, she got on it and rode towards the desert.

Wind blew into her hair and face as she didn't wear her riding robe. But she didn't care. Her mind was in a rage.

Rishab Thakvar has once again humiliated and rejected her.

Feelings of anger, embarrassment, and humiliation warred inside her, fighting for supremacy. But she focused entirely on her anger.

She was beyond angry. Her enemy husband had deliberately led her to believe that he would consummate their marriage. She had shed her clothes and did as he ordered, only to have him humiliate and reject her.

Every torrid moment in the office room continued to flash through her mind. He touched her, and he put his mouth between her legs.

Her face flamed, recalling those moments. Her stomach still trembled, and the place between her legs continued to throb. Even the touch of her enemy husband's calloused fingers over her face and on her back had made her body tingle and break into goosebumps.

The shocking pleasure she felt with his touch made her furious. She didn't want to feel anything towards him except anger and hatred. She was prepared to tolerate his touch as a sacrifice for her clan and nothing more. But he made her feel more.

I hate him.

But despite how she felt, she knew the marriage would have to be consummated. She could not give him the chance to threaten the safety of her clan or her loved ones.

She would have to find a better way that didn't end with his rejection. But until she found the way, she vowed not to humiliate herself by throwing herself at him again.

CHAPTER 26

The next morning, Gauri had just taken out her clan robe from the closet when there was a knock on the door.

“Yes, come in.”

It was a maid.

“Madam, Rishab sir is asking you to hurry,” she said. There was a hesitant look. “He also said that... uh... he doesn’t have all day.”

Anger shot through her at his arrogant words.

“Tell him I’m coming.”

The maid nodded and left. Sucking a breath to control her anger, Gauri finished getting ready. She put on her clan robe and stepped out of the room.

She had woken up late because she had hardly slept at night. She had tossed and turned restlessly with her body tingling and throbbing at unholy places. But the man responsible slept comfortably sprawled on her bed.

Cursing him, she went into the weapons room to take her bow and quiver of arrows before going out of the mansion. Several horses with her men were waiting outside. Her eyes fell on Rishab Thakvar’s tall form seated on the black horse. He was watching her with a mocking smile while his eyes swept over her slowly.

She knew he was recalling the previous day’s events on his office desk.

Her face burned with embarrassment even as her stomach began quivering. Dragging her eyes away from him angrily, she sat on her horse before adjusting her riding robe to cover her hair and lower face.

“Let’s go,” she instructed her men.

She was accompanying her enemy husband to one of the West clans.

Although he had already gone to the Meewar clan before, the clan head had resisted the initial talks. The clan head wanted assurance that the alliance between Thakvar and the Bhil clan was true.

Gauri went along to speak with the clan head. She was also curious to see what her enemy husband was doing during the clan meetings.

They rode through the desert and went to a small village that was known to be hostile to outsiders. But the Meewar clansmen recognized the Bhil clan colors and, more importantly, the Thakvar insignia, which Rishab Thakvar wore as part of his riding robe.

They were allowed to meet with the clan head. Unlike the very few prominent clans in Singoor, the rest of the clans lived in modest abodes with limited luxuries or resources. But all of them were armed with weapons to drive away unwanted visitors and to protect themselves from attacks. There were crudely made yet sharp spears and knives that were used as weapons.

Gauri's men were asked to wait outside a sprawling mud house, and only she and her enemy husband were taken to the clan head.

The Meewar clan head was an old woman dressed in bright yellow and green Meewar clan colors and wore heavy earrings that extended her earlobe by several inches. Under the heavily wrinkled skin, the old woman's eyes shone shrewdly while taking in the visitors.

“Ah, the Thakvar heir with the Bhil heiress.”

Rishab Thakvar bowed his head in a gesture of respect towards the old woman. He then straightened with a small smile. “Yes, I am back again as I promised. This time with my wife.”

Gauri was shocked to hear him speak in the local language of the West side clans.

Even the people in the Bhil clan rarely used the local language and were

used to the common language used across Singoor and in the city outside. However, the majority of the West clans still spoke the older language as they rarely interacted with the outside world.

Her enemy husband had not only learned the older local language, but he was also speaking in a perfect dialect.

The clan head looked at Gauri. “I heard you stole your sister’s intended husband and became the Bhil heiress once again,” she said.

Gauri was shocked. She didn’t think the news would spread to even a remote part of the desert. Before she could think of what to say, her enemy husband replied.

“She wanted me for herself,” he said with a small smile. “I didn’t mind having an eager bride.”

Gauri’s cheeks heated, and she wanted to deny the arrogant man’s words. But she held back, knowing it was important to show the alliance was strong.

The old woman had a gleam in her eyes. “Ah, the Thakvar heirs are known to be handsome, strong, and virile,” she said. “I can see why you wanted to steal this Thakvar heir for yourself. He will give you many strong sons and daughters. And unlike most married women, you won’t find it to be a chore to warm his bed while he begets his heirs.”

The heat in Gauri’s cheeks intensified. And she could sense the amusement in her enemy husband.

Mentally gritting her teeth, she pushed away the embarrassment and focused on the important aspects of the clan visit.

“The alliance will help our region,” she explained. “Meewar clan can join the rest of the West side clans to ship their goods to the main Singoor markets.”

The old woman nodded. “Yes, your husband discussed the advantages already. My husband and sons died when goddess Shakti left Singoor. And

my ten-year-old grandson disappeared soon after. Although I still have my fear and doubts, the only reason I am willing to join the peace treaty is because of the alliances that will bring goddess Shakti back to Singoor.”

Gauri knew that was the major reason why most of the clans across Singoor would agree to the peace treaty. They all wanted the Goddess Shakti statue commissioned.

“Join us for the feast,” the clan head offered. “It might not be as elaborate as the Bhil or Thakvar clans, but the Meewar clan was once known for their cuisine across Singoor.”

They joined the Meewar clan head at the feast with the rest of the clan leaders.

As Gauri sat to eat, her eyes fell on her enemy husband.

Seeing him at the Meewar clan, talking in the local language and having a simple feast with his hands while seated on a wooden bench, made her think of why he was taking risks of meeting with remote, dangerous clans.

Why was a peace treaty so important for him?

She knew his two brothers were doing the same with the East and South side clans.

Were the rumors true? Were the Thakvars trying to win the trust of clans to gain control over the entire Singoor desert?

She had asked her trusted men to gather information on them, and so far, they haven't found anything incriminating. But if she ever found out that her enemy husband was betraying the sands of Singoor, she would be the one to release an arrow into his heart.

CHAPTER 27

Gauri released the arrow and it met at the center of the target.

Lowering her bow, she turned to look at the head arrowsmith. “This batch of arrows is fine.”

She was at the training area testing the new batch of arrows.

“Do you like the new design, madam?” the head arrowsmith said.

Gauri frowned. She had only focused on the practical design of the arrow and hadn’t looked at the aesthetics. She picked up an arrow from the quiver and looked at it.

Anger shot through her. “Who ordered these changes?” she asked., angry that her enemy husband was once again asserting his claim on her clan.

The Thakvar insignia with an attacking tiger was added at the tail ends along with the striking cobra snake of the Bhil clan insignia.

The head arrowsmith looked surprised. “Your uncle gave the instructions, madam. He said it was to honor the alliance.”

Gauri knew her uncle wanted to appease the Thakvars and also let other clans know that the alliance was successful.

Although it infuriated her, she knew it was necessary to show that the alliance was successful.

Just like my enemy husband.

Although she found the man infuriating, his presence was necessary.

“Mr. Thakvar hasn’t seen the new design, madam.”

“There’s no need,” she said. “He will be too busy to look at the design.”

“Oh, but he’s coming here, madam.”

She turned, and her stomach fluttered annoyingly. He was dressed in a western buttoned shirt and pants, indicating he was working in his home office. He must have stepped out to take a break.

“Good morning, my dear wife,” he greeted.

Anger flashed through her at his deliberate mockery. He knew she was still putting on an act to show her people that they were happily married with their marriage consummated and no threat to the alliance.

“Mr. Thakvar, please take a look at the new batch of arrows. They are designed to honor the alliance between the Thakvar and Bhil clans.”

Rishab Thakvar held the arrow and looked at it for a long moment. “These are quite well-designed.”

The arrowsmith beamed with pride. “Thank you, sir. We use the best of the materials.”

The older man explained in detail the materials used to make the arrows as well as the bows. Rishab Thakvar listened quietly without interrupting.

He even held the crossbow to take a closer look.

Her anger grew because of his presence in her domain. She wanted to order him out and ask him not to interfere. But she knew he would do the opposite to challenge her and assert his dominance.

Suddenly, an idea struck her.

She found a way to stop him from interfering and also to humiliate him the way he had humiliated her by rejecting her.

“You should test these arrows,” she suggested. “Not just by looking at them, but using them to see if they are efficient.”

He looked up from the crossbow and his eyes met with her challenging ones.

“Sure,” he replied.

He picked up the crossbow and looked at the arrows.

“These are for the crossbow, Mr. Thakvar,” the arrowsmith handed him a quiver with shorter arrows.

Rishab Thakvar nodded and picked up an arrow and placed it in the crossbow. And then, looking at the target, he released the arrow.

The arrow flew and met with the target.

“Bravo!” the arrowsmith cheered.

Gauri knew it was purely a fluke that the arrow met with the target. Even a beginner could aim and hit the target once.

“Give my husband another arrow,” she instructed.

She expected her enemy husband to use an excuse and decline the arrow, but his mouth twisted slowly. “How about making it interesting,” he suggested. “Let’s have a contest.”

The arrowsmith looked at him hesitantly. “Gauri madam is the best shot in the entire Bhil clan, sir. She never misses.”

“That’s good,” her enemy husband said. “I’ll get to see my wife’s skill.” He then looked at her. “This time... standing next to her,” he added, reminding her of their first meeting when he had been the target of her arrow.

The man was truly arrogant.

“Set the target closer, Chandan,” she instructed. “It’ll be easier for... my husband.”

She knew her enemy husband would miss the target even when it was placed close. It would make it all the more embarrassing for him.

The arrowsmith looked excited. “Sure, madam,” he said before going towards the target and instructing the people to set it closer.

“The bet is going to be the same as before,” her enemy husband’s deep voice said.

She turned to look at his mocking smile.

“A bet to kiss,” he reminded her.

Her face heated. He probably guessed that she was affected by his kiss.
He won't win.

He had caught her unaware the last time. She hadn't known that he knew riding. And at that time, he had a better and much faster horse. But now, he was challenging her in a skill she was more or less born with.

“And if I win, I will... ask what I want later on.”

His eyes flashed.

Her face heated because he must have guessed what she would want. She would want their marriage consummated.

“Sure,” he said, his tone once again darkly mocking.

Soon, the word spread among the household and staff about the contest.

“Another contest!” someone shouted excitedly, and people began gathering.

More arrows were placed into the quivers, and the path to the target was cleared. People stood at the back to observe the contest.

She looked at her enemy husband, who held the crossbow in his hands.

“Only three chances.”

“You go first, my dear wife,” he said with a mocking smile.

Knowing he was going to observe her closely to mimic her, she pulled out an arrow from the quiver and placed it on her bow. She looked towards the target only for a brief moment before looking at him and releasing the arrow.

The arrow met with the target in the dead center.

Cheers erupted.

“Your turn,” she said.

His eyes flashed before he picked an arrow from the other quiver. Then, placing the arrow on the crossbow, he focused on the target to aim. And then released the arrow.

The arrow not only met the target, it split her arrow into two.

There were shocked gasps followed by loud cheers.

Gauri frowned.

She knew it wasn't a coincidence or a beginner's luck. Rishab Thakvar knew archery. Once again, he hid a skill from her.

Sucking in an angry breath, she looked at the arrowsmith. "Move the target back to its original place."

"Okay, madam," the older man said cheerfully.

The target was moved back.

She shot another arrow that met the target in the center. With a mocking twist of his mouth, he aimed his crossbow and released an arrow. Once again, the arrow split hers in half.

Deafening cheers erupted.

"Move the target further back," she ordered.

The target was moved back at a distance where the red center of the target couldn't be seen clearly.

She shot an arrow, knowing it would hit its target. Her enemy husband aimed his arrow next.

Gauri's heart thudded, waiting for the target to be brought closer. There was palpable anticipation among the crowd as well.

Two men carried the target. As they approached closer, Gauri could see only one arrow at the center. Satisfaction filled her.

She looked at her enemy husband, who was watching her. Her eyes swept over his tall, broad form, knowing he would be extremely uncomfortable on the narrow chaise in her room. He would be forced to seek another bedroom suite.

She was glad.

"Mr. Thakvar won! Mr. Thakvar won!"

It was followed by deafening cheers.

Knowing there was a mistake, as she would never miss her aim, Gauri looked at the target board. Her arrow was missing, and only Rishab Thakvar's crossbow arrow was embedded at the dead center.

"Here is your arrow, madam," the arrowsmith said cheerfully, holding up two halves of a split arrow.

Shocked gasps were followed by cheers.

"He is truly the rightful clan head to us!"

"He is the perfect match for Gauri madam!"

Gauri sucked in a breath. Before she was forced to hear more statements of praise towards the man she hated, she began walking away.

Her heart thudded in anger and shock.

Rishab Thakvar grew up in a western country. And yet, he acquired skills such as horse riding and archery.

She realized she shouldn't underestimate her enemy.

She needed to get more information on him. He was definitely hiding something.

Long, masculine fingers gripped her arm.

"You seem to be in a hurry, my dear wife," a deep voice drawled. "Eager for the kiss?"

His mouth twisted mockingly, and once again, he held her arm and led her into the mansion. But this time, instead of the weapons room, he took her up to their bedroom suite.

He shut the door.

Her heart began beating faster.

She waited for him to grab the back of her neck and kiss her. She braced herself, deciding not to respond to his touch or kiss.

But even as she mentally prepared herself, he didn't touch her. He simply stood in his place and looked at her with a dark smile.

“Lie down on the bed, lift your dress and spread your legs,” he said.

Shock ripped through her.

“What.”

“I said, lie down on the bed, lift your dress and spread your legs so I can kiss you.”

Her face flamed, and she sucked in a breath and shook her head. “No. That’s not kissing. That’s—”

“It is kissing. It involves my mouth. And I get to pick wherever I want to kiss because I won the bet. And I pick the spot between your legs.”

Her face flamed even more. And shockingly, the place between her legs began throbbing.

“You can’t—”

“I can,” he said, cutting her off. “And I don’t have all day, dear wife. I have a meeting in an hour. So, get on the damn bed and spread your legs.”

She wanted to kill him.

He stared back in a dark challenge.

“I’m waiting.”

She wanted to refuse, but she knew he would question her honor about keeping her word. Sucking in a shuddering breath, she went to the bed and lay on it.

“Lift your dress and spread your legs,” he ordered.

Gritting her teeth, she slowly pulled her long skirt up and spread her legs.

Her heart thudded, and her breaths caught in her chest as she waited for him. There was a dark, twisted smile on his handsome face as he came closer and knelt in front of the bed.

She gasped when he held her knees and dragged her to the edge of the bed. She bit her lip when she felt him pushing down her underwear. Soon, cool air fell over her bare skin.

She jerked and cried out when she felt the warm lick of his tongue in the most intimate place.

Oh God.

Her body trembled.

He licked her as though he was savoring a sweet dessert that he enjoyed during his meals.

Heat bloomed over her face and spread all over her body. The trembles in the stomach increased in intensity, and her breasts tingled, and the tips hardened painfully.

She tried to shut off her mind and ignore what his touch did to her. She closed her eyes, but the sensations felt all the more magnified.

Her eyes flew open again.

His dark eyes held hers while he continued the slow licking of her intimate core.

She wanted to tell him to end it soon, but a shocked cry escaped her as his tongue flicked on the most sensitive part of her. Her legs shook and trembled, and she clutched his hair.

His mouth continued to cause havoc to her body and her senses, and she could no longer fight him or her feelings. She could only clutch his hair and ride the storm.

Her stomach quivered and chest tightened as pleasure built with each stroke of his wicked tongue. And soon, she burst apart with a cry of pleasure. Her body trembled and shook, but he held her in place while his tongue swept over her moisture.

He then bit the inside of her thigh. The slice of pain caused her to shudder even more.

By the time he lowered her legs, she felt drained with pleasure.

He straightened and watched her with a dark smile and then licked his lips.

Another shudder passed through her because she knew he was tasting her.

“You won’t be able to wipe this kiss away, my dear wife,” he said.

She wanted to kill him. But she barely had the energy to move.

His mouth twisted. “Tell Rumi I will be having a late lunch. I ate my meal just now.”

Her face burned.

She watched as he swept his fingers through his hair, straightening the mess she had made by pulling on it.

“See you later, wife.”

With another mocking smile, he left the room.

Sucking in a deep breath, she cursed him and forced herself to get out of the bed. Her legs felt too weak and they still trembled. And even as she continued to curse him, her body hummed with pleasure.

I hate him.

CHAPTER 28

“You think Tantra is linked to the missing children from Singoor?”

Rishab was in the home office at the Bhil mansion talking to his brothers.

“Yes,” he replied to Shivay’s question. “The Africa attack assassin’s DNA did indicate that he was from Singoor region. He could be one of the children who had gone missing. The investigation team is gathering samples from the clans to see who has an exact match with the dead assassin.”

There was a pause.

“You think Tantra might also be one of the missing children?” asked Shivay

Rishab had thought about the possibility, but his gut feeling was different.

“I have a feeling that he is responsible for the missing children,” he said. “He might be the one who had taken them using the help of his spies. And the children were smuggled through the shipment containers from each of the clans for the past twenty years.”

Tantra did it to create fear and cut off communication between the clans. He was most likely using some of those children as his minions.

“My gut feeling says Tantra is also responsible for the deaths of the heirs from prominent clans too,” said Nakul.

Rishab agreed with his brother. He had that feeling too because the deaths had happened within a short timeframe. And there were at least seven deaths that had happened within two years.

“Tantra wants more than just the oil wells, that’s for sure,” said Shivay. “There is a larger purpose to what that man wants.”

Rishab agreed.

“To know the answers, we have to catch Tantra or Tantra’s spies in the Singoor region.”

There was a pause.

“You have a list of suspects you are investigating from each clan,” said Shivay. “You suspected your wife to be Tantra’s spy before the wedding. Do you still feel that way?”

Rishab had added her name first on the list.

“As of now, there is nothing linking Tantra to Gauri Bhil. But the team will continue to investigate.”

His brothers sensed that what he felt towards her was beyond the need for a temporary bride in an alliance. But they didn’t question him.

“All right, I’ll see you both soon at the office next week,” said Shivay, referring to the new headquarters in the city outside Singoor.

Ending the call, Rishab looked out of the window.

He was having Gauri Bhil investigated. But even though she was vicious, manipulative and infuriating, he couldn’t sense any evil.

He knew he was too obsessed with her to think rationally. All he could think of was to have her naked under him where he could give in to his desire.

But that was exactly what his damn wife wanted too, but for the cold, calculating purpose of consummating their marriage. He didn’t want to play into her hands. So, even though his body was left in agony, he tortured her equally.

His mouth twisted, recalling the death glares he got from her all week after he had won the archery contest and claimed his prize that had her crying out in passion.

He knew she must be scheming something devious to get back at him.

Shaking his head, he pulled out a file that contained information on the Bhil province. He had to check on a few things that were needed for the preparation of the upcoming clan meeting in a few weeks' time.

He was looking into the report when he received a call. It was from his security head.

"Sir, there's a big sandstorm heading to central Singoor. You should head back soon. We won't be able to get the helicopter as the storm is heading from the East, and the visibility will remain too low."

Rishab frowned. "I'm at the Bhil mansion."

There was a pause. "Our tracker shows that your horse is near central Singoor, sir."

Someone must have taken Manik there.

"Where is my wife's horse?" Rishab asked.

"Your wife's horse is in the Bhil mansion stables, sir."

But Rishab didn't feel relieved.

"Keep tracking my horse," he instructed before ending the call.

He got up immediately and stepped out of the office room. He hoped it wasn't his damn wife who was in the middle of the desert. The damn woman had no care for her safety and often went on long rides alone in the desert.

He went down the stairs and came across the cheerful housekeeper.

"Rumi, where is my wife?" he asked.

"Gauri said she was going out for the day and won't be joining for lunch, sir."

Thanking the old woman, he hurried out of the mansion and went to the stables.

"Good morning, Mr. Thakvar," the stable master greeted.

"Where is Manik, Ratan?" he asked.

There was a surprise in the stable master's eyes.

“Gauri madam took Manik this morning. She said she had to ride far and didn’t want to tire Durga.”

Fuck.

Thanking the stable master, Rishab called the Bhil security head.

“Kedar, have an SUV ready for me.”

He was walking towards the vehicles when Jatin Saini came to him.

“I know where Gauri went,” he said. “She went to meet a man.”

Looking at Rishab’s face, Jatin Saini took a step back and spoke hurriedly.

“She is meeting Girish Dhankar,” he said. “He is the man she was considering marrying for a long time. You can verify that fact with my father. When Komal got a better alliance, Gauri decided to take Komal’s place. But Gauri and Girish are continuing to meet in secret. She is not going to return until much later today. Now that she is married to you, I thought she would stop, but she had been...”

Rishab didn’t stop to listen more. He stormed towards the vehicles.

His mind was filled with rage.

CHAPTER 29

Gauri was near the oasis close to the Singoor temple.

It was past noon, and she was packing the remnants from the ceremony performed on her late husband's death anniversary. The holy godmen had left a while ago after finishing the rituals.

She performed the ceremony as an heir rather than as a wife. Since Kamlesh Meena had no sons or heirs, Gauri had assumed the role. A lot of clan heads didn't agree with her assuming that role, but it was how her late husband had wanted.

Looking at the smiling portrait, her heart still ached with the loss of losing him.

She didn't get the chance of a proper closure. He had been visiting another clan on business and had had a massive heart attack, and he had died before he could get medical help. Just like it had been with her parents, the sudden death hadn't given her a chance to say goodbye.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and touched her forehead to the ground in front of the portrait, seeking his blessings.

She raised her head and sat up before taking the portrait and placing it carefully into the bag she carried. She gathered the rest of the items she had brought for the ritual and placed them into the bag as well.

The oasis was quiet, with a gentle breeze blowing through the palm trees. Although she should feel peaceful, her mind was still restless.

She knew it was because she was constantly battling a certain devil in the form of her enemy husband. The man barely let her be in peace. All that he

did was make her angry and embarrassed.

He also makes you feel something more.

As soon as the thought came into her mind, she pushed it aside.

She didn't want to think about how Rishab Thakvar made her feel.

Pushing away all thoughts of her enemy husband aside, she closed and secured the bag she had packed carefully. The portrait was one of the very few remembrances she had of her late husband.

Getting up from the sand, she walked towards the pond.

She was splashing her face with the cool, refreshing water when she suddenly felt a presence.

She froze momentarily. She had brought Manik that day instead of Durga because she didn't want to tire her horse. Manik was trained to alert her of intruders, but there weren't any sounds from the horse.

With her heart thudding, she remained bent and splashed water on her face using her left hand. Meanwhile, she slowly reached for her knife using her right hand. Holding the sheath, she waited for the intruder to attack.

As soon as there was a shift in the air behind her and she saw a reflection in the water, she turned with her hand, aiming for the intruder's throat.

Her hand was caught in the air, and her eyes clashed with the furious eyes of her enemy husband.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

Her heart was still thudding as she had expected an attack from an unknown intruder.

It took a moment before she sucked in a deep breath before responding.

"Where is he!" he repeated.

Angry that her enemy husband sneaked up on her without her noticing, she snapped back.

"Who?"

His eyes blazed darkly. “The man you met.”

There had been two godmen who performed the ceremony. “How did you know I was here?” she demanded.

He gritted his teeth. “That doesn’t matter. But what matters is that as long as you are married to me, you will not meet any other man.”

He tightened the grip on her wrist and dragged her close. “I will kill him or anyone who touches you,” he growled.

She was momentarily taken aback by the violence and anger in his words. She frowned, not understanding why he was angry about the godmen. “What are you talking about?”

His handsome face was twisted in fury. “I’m talking about you fucking another man. If you are horny, you will come to me. I am your damn husband. I’m the only one who is allowed to touch you. You are mine!”

She stared at him for a moment, and then, pulling her hand from his grip, she slapped him hard.

His face whipped to the side with the force of it.

When he turned to face her, his eyes blazed darkly. She thought he would slap her back, but his jaw clenched as he watched her.

Slowly, the anger on his face turned into dark satisfaction.

“You weren’t meeting a man.”

It was said as a statement rather than a question.

That didn’t reduce her anger.

He turned to look around and saw the marigold flowers and remnants of the small bonfire from the ceremony.

He turned back to her. “There was a ritual,” he said. “What was it for?”

“None of your business,” she snapped.

There was a flash of anger on his face. He was about to say something, but he suddenly looked behind her and cursed.

“Fuck.”

He held her hand and began dragging her away from the water.

“We need to leave.”

She tried to resist. “I’m not coming with you—” She broke off when she saw a large swirl of sand up in the sky at a distance.

A sandstorm.

Before she could assess properly, he began dragging her away.

“Wait,” she said, digging in her feet and going towards the bag she had packed earlier. She picked it up and held it securely against her chest.

“We need to hurry,” he shouted. “It’s a damn sandstorm.”

She wanted to snap back, saying she was aware, but the wind picked up suddenly, and the storm began to hit them.

He held her hand and dragged her up the sand dune. Manik was no longer there as her enemy husband must have sent the horse away earlier.

He pulled her to the SUV while the wind picked up even more, and the storm lashed with full force. Opening the door, he pushed her inside and shut the door. The sound of the storm was muffled from inside.

She watched as he walked around the SUV and came to the other side before getting in and shutting the door. The sand lashed on the windshield and windows, the force of the wind shaking the vehicle slightly.

He looked at her. His hair was covered with fine sand. And since she was wearing her clan robes, her hair was mostly protected.

“Why the hell did you come here alone?” he asked.

His arrogant tone angered her.

“I know how to take care of myself,” she said. “I was born and grew up in the Singoor desert.”

His jaw clenched at her reply.

“Why did you send Manik away?” she demanded.

She knew Manik would easily outrun the storm and return home safely. And even if caught in a storm, the horse knew how to remain safe until the storm passed.

“I wanted you to come with me in the SUV,” he replied.

Before she could snap back at his arrogant presumption, he turned away and pulled out something from his pocket. It was his mobile phone. He looked at it and sent a message before dialing a number and holding it to his ear.

A moment later, he spoke.

“Sam, check if the sandstorm has cleared the East.”

There was a frown on his face as he listened to the person on the phone.

“Thanks, Sam.”

He ended the call.

“What did the person say?” she asked.

“The storm is heading to the West of Singoor. There’s still a storm in the East, but the intensity is lower. We can take shelter in Gujjar province. My brother’s wife Ishani will give instructions to prepare for our arrival at the Gujjar mansion.”

She frowned. “There is no need to go that far. We can go to the Singoor tents and wait there.”

The tents were at the center of Singoor. Although the storm would continue, the tents were built to withstand the biggest of storms.

He looked at her for a moment and nodded.

He tapped the screen on his phone and looked at it before he began to drive through the heavy sandstorm.

It was nearly dark inside the tent when they arrived.

Gauri placed her bag in a corner and went towards the lamps, and lit them. Soon, there was enough light across the spacious multi-room tent. The place remained the same as she had seen before. Although there was no fresh water to drink, there were fermented beverages and dried fruits and nuts.

She turned to look at her enemy husband, who was dusting the sand out of his hair and clothes and watching her quietly. While she returned his intent gaze, she wondered if he was recalling the time during the sandstorm when they had taken shelter in an old building next to a market.

It was only months ago, but it felt like a lifetime.

She recalled seeing him and thinking he was one of the adventurous tourists who had an appetite for danger rather than common sense. It was only when she had seen the heavy gold ring on his hand with the Thakvar insignia she realized who he was and what his presence might mean to her clan.

She knew she made an enemy when she had attacked him that day.

Even though they were married now, they remained enemies.

Pulling her gaze away from his, she removed her riding robe. Apart from the fine sand on her face, her hair was protected from the sand.

Folding her robe, she placed it next to the bag. She then picked up the bag and gently dusted off the sand before placing it down carefully.

“What’s inside the bag?” he asked.

She turned towards him. “None of your business.”

His eyes flashed darkly at her answer.

Once again, there was a heavy silence.

She recalled his earlier accusation when he had suspected her of being with another man. He had been furious and even threatened to kill any man who touched her.

His possessiveness made her angry, but now a thought occurred to her.

“Why do you care who I am with?” she asked in a challenge. “You rejected me, so I can be with whoever and with how many men I want. You have no right to stop—”

Before she could finish, he strode towards her angrily and loomed over her in a threatening manner.

“I have the right. I am your damn husband.”

She held his eyes. “Not until the marriage is consummated.”

The fury on his handsome face slowly disappeared and was replaced by something darker.

His mouth slowly twisted into a dark smile.

“You are a vicious, manipulative witch... wife,” he said.

Her heart pounded at his words.

He knew she was deliberately challenging him into consummating their marriage.

She braced herself for an insult and rejection again, but her body jerked when his hand gripped the back of her neck and dragged her closer.

“But I can’t stay away from you,” he growled. “I’ve wanted you since the damn day I saw you in that sandstorm.”

His words sounded like a dark curse.

“You win,” he said. “Let’s consummate this damn marriage.”

Shock and then satisfaction ran through her. She was finally going to achieve her goal.

Their marriage would be sealed with no chance of breaking the alliance with her clan.

Before she could begin rejoicing, the grip on her neck tightened, and his head lowered.

“Wait,” she said, placing her hand on his hard chest. She recalled the resolutions she had made last time. “There’s no need for kissing. I know men don’t have to kiss to... do this.”

His kisses stole her mind. They made her feel things she did not want to feel. She wanted the act of consummation to be void of unnecessary feelings.

His eyes darkened at her words. “But I kiss and fuck, my dear wife.”

His mouth crashed on top of hers.

Her head spun, and she felt herself losing control while his tongue probed her mouth and stole her mind.

She felt as though she were being swept away. By the time his mouth parted from hers, she swayed slightly on unsteady legs. She realized he had carried her next to the bed.

Watching her, he began undressing. Even though she had seen his tall, muscular body many times before, it was always from the back. But this time, he took off his clothes until he stood completely naked in front of her.

His body looked powerfully dangerous and blatantly male with a large manhood.

Her stomach quivered seeing him.

There was nothing soft on his body or on his face. His handsome face looked harsh with anger, lust, and possessiveness.

“Undress,” he ordered.

She reached for the ties at the back of her dress, but her fingers shook, and she couldn’t loosen the knots easily. It took several tries until the knots were untied, and the top of her dress loosened and fell, baring her upper body. Pulling her gaze away from his heated one, she looked down and tugged on the ties of her skirt. When it loosened, she let it fall.

“Fuck.”

Before she could reach for her panties, he let out a curse and dragged her close. Once again, his mouth crashed on top of hers.

Her mind spun again, and she felt herself falling. By the time her senses returned, his heavy weight pressed her down on the soft bed.

Her panties were yanked hard until they ripped, and she felt his rough fingers brushing against her core. She jerked and let out a gasp when a thick finger entered her, causing a tight, burning sensation.

“Fuck, you’re not ready,” he growled.

She blinked her eyes open, and before she could say that she was ready and that he should proceed, his heavyweight disappeared. He moved lower.

His dark eyes met hers when he held her thighs apart.

She understood what he was about to do.

She bit her lip as his dark head lowered between her legs.

A moan escaped her throat, and then her body thrashed on the bed as he stole her mind with his wicked mouth. Soon, her body shuddered in release.

This time, when his finger slipped into her, there was tightness but no burning sensation.

Her body was still shuddering when he moved over her. He tugged her hair until she opened her eyes and saw his handsome features harsh with lust and passion.

While their eyes met, he began entering her.

Despite her arousal, her body struggled to accommodate him. A frown formed over his handsome face.

She knew the reason for his frown.

With her heart thudding, she held his eyes.

“Get it over with,” she ordered.

His eyes flashed darkly, and his frown disappeared. His handsome face

held lust and anger before he did as she ordered. He thrust deep into her.

A gasp escaped her throat, and her hands clenched into fists. The pain was intense as he broke through the barrier and began moving.

She turned her face away and waited for the act to be done. It would take only a few more moments before her enemy husband would find his release inside her body and roll away from her. Until then, she would have to endure the pain and his touch.

Several moments later, he still didn't seem close to being done.

He grunted harshly while his hard thrusts continued. The corded muscles of his body shifted and strained against her while he moved like the storm lashing outside. Slowly, her pain gave away to numbness, and then something shocking happened. The pleasure began once again.

Her body trembled and shook with each hard thrust, and she felt as though she were being swept away in the storm. With a trembling hand, she reached for the pillow lying next to her, wanting something to hold on to. But long, masculine fingers gripped the pillow and threw it out of the bed.

With nothing else to hold on to and unable to fight him or herself, she closed her eyes and gripped his broad shoulders, and held him with both hands.

His entire body shuddered hard at her touch. When he thrust again, he went in so deep she thought he would split her into two. She cried out and clung to him. Light burst behind her eyes, and shocking sparks of pleasure wracked her body as she found release.

She felt his body stiffen over hers, and he let out a deep groan that vibrated against her. Hot liquid pleasure poured into her from deep within, causing her to tremble even more.

She didn't know how long her body shook and trembled. But when the trembling subsided and turned into small tremors, she became aware of his

heavy, muscled body on top of hers.

Apart from the sounds of the wind blowing outside, there were only sounds of his hot and fast breaths falling against her ear.

The marriage was consummated.

Now that the required act was done, it didn't relieve her. She felt shaken.

She wanted to push him off her, free herself of his touch. But she also felt the need to once again feel his rippling muscles moving against her. This time, she wanted to touch him and explore every corded and hard muscle over his body. She also wanted to touch his manhood, to see how something could cause both intense pain and pleasure.

As though he could read her mind, his body began to stir and harden inside her. She gasped when the pressure grew to accommodate him.

He raised his head from her neck and looked at her. In the shadowy light of the lamps, she couldn't make out if his handsome features were harsh with anger or passion or both. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, his mouth captured hers in a deep kiss.

And then, he began to move again like a storm.

She didn't know if he made love or hate. But her nails dug into his shoulders, and she wrapped her legs around his hips.

All thoughts of the consummation of marriage disappeared from her mind as urgency filled her body. Only thoughts of pleasure and need remained while riding out another storm with him.

CHAPTER 30

She woke up to the sounds of splashing water.

As she opened her heavy-lidded eyes, she noticed that instead of the cramped, narrow bed, she was sprawled on her stomach on a wide, comfortable bed.

Her entire body felt sore, and there was throbbing and tingling at odd places. She tried to move her hands and encountered gritty sand next to her pillow. Some of the sand was stuck to her cheek as well.

Slowly, she rolled to the side. The throbbing soreness and stickiness in between her legs reminded her of the previous night.

She had spent the night with her enemy husband in the Singoor holy land tent. And they had consummated the marriage. Several times.

Sucking in a deep breath and ignoring the soreness, she sat up from the bed and began looking for her clothes. Just when she spotted her top and skirt near the bed, the sound of the water stopped.

She reached for her clothes quickly and held them in front when her enemy husband came out of the shower area. He was naked and visibly aroused.

Heat spread through her body. Ignoring her body's reaction, she went towards the bath area. But before she could go past him, he caught her arm and pulled her close. His fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, and his mouth covered hers in a deep kiss.

Heat erupted once again at the pit of her stomach and tingled all over her body. His large hand cupped her aching breast while his calloused thumb

rubbed against the hardened peak.

His hardness jerked against her quivering stomach. Despite the soreness, the place between her legs began to throb.

Before she gave in to her body's needs, she turned her head away and broke their kiss. And then, placing her hands on his chest, she pushed.

"People will be waiting for me," she murmured. "We must leave."

He let her go.

Holding her clothes against her, she hurried into the shower area.

She kept her mind black while she took a quick bath. The cool water numbed the aches but couldn't stop her body from tingling.

Ignoring her body's reaction, she finished her bath and dried her body with a cloth kept inside. She reached for her clothes and dusted the sand from her top and long skirt before wearing them. She thought about her missing underwear, and her cheeks heated, recalling that they were ripped and must have been thrown somewhere near the bed.

She had expected the act of consummation last night to be brutal and brief. But it wasn't.

Sucking in a breath, she pushed away her feelings and stepped out.

Her enemy husband was ready and waiting. But there was a frown on his handsome face as he looked towards the bed.

When she looked at the bed, her heart jerked.

He was looking at the small but very visible spots of blood on the white bedcover. All the bedcovers in the Singoor tents were white to indicate the purity of the bride.

But she was a bride who had been married before.

"It's my womanly time," she said as an explanation.

He turned and watched her face. "There was no blood when I put my mouth between your legs last night."

Her face flamed at the memories. “My period started this morning.”

Luckily, he didn't argue and seemed to believe her explanation. Going towards the bed, she pulled away the cover and folded it, and placed it at the foot of the bed. She knew a group of women took care of the tents in Singoor.

She went near the entrance of the tent and dusted the blue clan robe before putting it around her head and shoulders. And then, she picked up her cloth bag and looked at him.

“I'm ready to leave.”

He watched her for a long moment before joining her and stepping out of the tent.

There was a huge commotion at the Bhil mansion when they returned.

Gauri's uncle greeted them with a visibly relieved look.

"Thank God you both are safe," he said. "I was worried when I heard that the black horse came back alone, and there was a storm."

Gauri let out a prayer of thanks, hearing that Manik was safe.

"I'm fine, uncle," she said.

Her uncle glanced at the bag she held and shook his head before looking at Rishab Thakvar.

"I keep pleading with Gauri not to perform Kamlesh Meena's death anniversary ceremony. And yet, she continues to do it each year. You must ask her to be careful."

Her enemy husband didn't say anything.

Knowing her uncle would continue to complain, she excused herself and headed to her room.

She stepped in and went towards the closet to place the bag carefully inside. She was pulling out a clean dress when the bedroom door opened.

It was her enemy husband.

His face was unreadable as he approached her.

"Why didn't you tell me you were performing a death anniversary ritual at the oasis?" he asked.

He had thought she was meeting a man at the oasis.

"Because it is none of your business," she replied.

His jaw clenched.

"It is my business," he said darkly. "I am your husband now in every damn sense."

Her cheeks heated when he threw back the words she had used to goad him into consummating the marriage.

“The only reason I let you touch me last night is to make the marriage valid. Don’t touch me again.”

But he touched her. He gripped her arm and dragged her towards him.

“You are lying,” he growled, his eyes blazing into hers. “The first time might have been for that reason. But the other times I took you, you were more than willing and wanted me. You touched me as well. You clung to me and begged me.”

Her face flamed at his reminder of her weakness.

“I was only doing my duty,” she said. “Women have been doing it for ages. My goal was to consummate the marriage and ensure you couldn’t break the alliance with my clan. I achieved it last night. Nothing more.”

His eyes flashed darkly.

He pulled her even closer. “Is that how it was with your first husband? Did you let him fuck you only out of duty? He was an older man who couldn’t pleasure you well. But I can.”

Anger shot through her at his words.

She slapped him hard.

Dark violence and something else flashed in his eyes.

She looked at him coldly. “Kamlesh Meena is much more of a man than you can ever aspire to be. Don’t ever speak of him again.”

She wrenched her arm out of his grip and walked away from him.

Even though their marriage had been consummated and the alliance was secure, nothing else would change. They were going to remain enemies.

CHAPTER 31

Rishab was at a meeting in the new Thakvar Enterprise headquarters that was located in the city outside Singoor.

“We’ll have the new acquisition contracts finalized in a month, Mr. Thakvar.”

“Two weeks,” Rishab commanded. “Either they agree to the damn terms, or they’ll be a hostile acquisition. Tell them that.”

“Okay, Mr. Thakvar.”

The executives got up and left the room. The door opened once again, and Rishab’s older brother came inside.

“Everything okay?” Shivay asked.

Rishab nodded. “The Leeman acquisition is taking a while. I gave an ultimatum for two weeks.”

Shivay looked at him for a moment. “I know you’ll handle the business acquisition,” he said. “But I was asking about you. You’ve been on the edge all week. Nakul noticed it too.”

Rishab inhaled a breath. He knew that despite trying to hide it, his brothers had sensed his pissed-off mood over the past week.

“I’m fine.”

Shivay knew it wasn’t the truth but didn’t push to know the reason. Rishab knew his brother wouldn’t.

But Shivay’s mouth twisted into a small smile. “Just so you know, I went through this phase as well,” he said.

“What phase?” Rishab asked.

“The phase where I’d stay in the office brooding all day about my wife and returning home at midnight.”

Rishab wanted to deny that he was brooding about his wife. But it wouldn’t be the truth.

“Things worked out for me at the end,” Shivay said. “I hope they work out for you too.”

Rishab nodded even though he knew they wouldn’t.

“All right, I’m heading home,” said Shivay. “The helicopter is waiting.”

There was a helipad on top of the office building, and it took less than an hour to reach the Thakvar mansion. For Rishab, it took a little over an hour as the Bhil province was located on the West side of Singoor.

Rishab was mildly amused watching his brother leave. It was only five o’clock in the evening. Normally, his workaholic brother remained in the office in San Francisco well past midnight.

But things changed drastically after he and his brothers discovered the truth about their father, and Shivay came to the Singoor desert. And now, months later, Rishab knew that his brother’s priorities had changed, and Shivay went home early to spend time with his sweet wife, Ishani.

Taking a deep breath, Rishab leaned back in his office chair and looked out of the huge glass wall.

Unlike Shivay’s sweet wife, he was married to a vicious, manipulative woman who stole his peace of mind from the moment he had seen her. Had he been the superstitious kind, he would have thought she was a witch who had put a spell on him.

He should have been satisfied that he could finally have her the way he had wanted for a damn long time. He had spent a night slaking his long-held hunger and desire towards her. But it hadn’t been enough. The damn woman managed to get even deeper under his skin and piss him off.

He didn't want to acknowledge it, but he knew he was jealous of a dead man.

“Kamlesh Meena is much more of a man than you can ever aspire to be. Don't ever speak of him again.”

How could the damn woman love a man who clearly preyed on a fifteen-year-old girl?

She was only fifteen when Kamlesh Meena married her and took away her innocence. And yet, she was loyal to the man even after the man's death.

He clenched his jaw in anger, recalling her other words.

“I was only doing my duty,” she said. “Women have been doing it for ages. My goal was to consummate the marriage and ensure you couldn't break the alliance with my clan. I achieved my goal last night. Nothing more.”

He knew she was lying about not wanting him.

He had been with enough women to know when a woman desired him. And Gauri Bhil did desire him. It was there in her every moan and gasp and the way her body clung to his when he took her again and again.

But the damn stubborn woman was fighting her desire and keeping him at a distance.

I should stop obsessing about her.

He had a ton of things that needed his attention, and he was determined to only look into those and not think about his beautiful, vicious wife.

With that thought, he opened his laptop to look into some reports.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

“Yes?”

It was his assistant.

“Sir, there's a woman wanting to see you.”

Rishab frowned. “Who?”

He didn't recall having appointments with anyone, especially during the evening. And most of his executives would have left for the day.

"She isn't giving her name, sir."

Annoyance passed through him. He hoped it wasn't one of his old dates who must have heard about the new headquarters in India. The women he dated in the past were the kind who would impulsively jump on a plane and show up at one of his offices or hotel rooms.

He hadn't minded the chase in the past, and the go-getter attitude turned him on.

"Send her away."

"But sir, she is insistent and says it is important."

"Call the security and escort her out."

His assistant looked hesitant.

Rishab was more annoyed. His assistants never hesitated at his orders. Whoever the woman was must have caused quite an impression.

"I will call the security, sir."

Before his assistant could leave, the door opened, and a woman stepped inside.

Rishab was about to order her out until he saw who it was.

It was Komal Bhil. His wife's sister.

“I’m so sorry to come unannounced... Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab was momentarily silent.

“That’s fine. Please be seated.”

He turned to his assistant, who looked worried. “I’ll take it from here.”

His assistant looked relieved and stepped out of the office.

“This is quite a surprise, Miss Bhil.”

Komal Bhil smiled hesitantly. “Please call me Komal. We are family now.”

He didn’t say anything.

He was quite surprised by her visit, especially since she had seemed quite terrified of him when he had met her for an alliance. She had barely spoken to him and had remained quiet throughout.

And after she and her sister switched places for the wedding, he hadn’t seen Komal Bhil in person again. He had only received reports about her from the security team.

He noticed she looked quite different from how she dressed in Singoor. She wasn’t wearing Western wear, but her clothes weren’t entirely traditional either. She looked modern but with a touch of traditional.

Once again, Komal Bhil reminded him of his sister Nandini, who also had a similar style in clothes whenever she returned home from her university.

“I want to thank you for the additional security, Mr. Thakvar,” she said.

His mouth twisted slightly. Like his younger sister, Komal Bhil also must have noticed the security following her and had come to talk to him about it.

His sister Nandini had thrown quite the tantrum when he and his brothers put in additional security for her at the university. She didn’t want security

following her and her boyfriend. It had taken a bit of convincing for Nandini to finally agree.

Although he didn't expect Komal Bhil to throw a tantrum like his sassy sister, he knew she might not be too happy about it.

"Are you here to ask me to remove the additional security?" he asked. "Because I can't do that."

He didn't want to tell her about the threat from Tantra and scare her.

"No, the security is fine," Komal Bhil replied. "I'm used to it from time to time because my sister is quite protective of me."

He wasn't surprised. With his wife's attitude, there would be enemies to the Bhil clan.

"I... uh... came to talk to you about... my sister," she said.

He remained quiet.

She bit her lip before speaking hesitantly. "I know you might be angry with her for tricking you into marrying her. But please know that she did it to protect me."

He knew that already.

"My sister is very protective of me," she said. "I was only six months old when my parents died. Since then, my sister has always taken care of me. In fact, she is more like a mother to me than a sister."

Her eyes moistened slightly. "She sacrificed a lot for me. She even got married when she was only fifteen years old. She had to do it because we didn't have a clan leader, and some of the West clans were planning a takeover. The Dhankar clan was forcing Gauri to marry their heir, which she did not want to. Had it not been for Gauri's plan to marry Kamlesh Meena, the entire Bhil clan would have been taken over."

Rishab was surprised. He hadn't known the marriage was a political move and that Gauri Bhil had made the proposal. Until then, he thought Kamlesh

Meena had preyed on a young, defenseless girl from a prominent clan.

“Kamlesh Meena was my father’s good friend. I don’t have memories of my father, but Kamlesh Meena was a father figure to Gauri and me. He mentored Gauri in leading the Bhil and Meena clans. And he encouraged me to pursue my passion for science. When he died unexpectedly of a heart attack, I felt as though I lost my father.”

There was sadness in her eyes. “I had time to grieve Kamlesh Meena, but my sister didn’t. She bore the responsibilities of both the Bhil and Meena clans. My sister takes her responsibilities very seriously and will do anything for her loved ones.”

Rishab and his brothers were the same. It was the main reason for him and his brothers to marry and form alliances.

Komal Bhil looked at him imploringly. “Please don’t blame her or hurt her, Mr. Thakvar.”

Rishab looked at her worried face. “Your sister is not the kind to allow anyone to hurt her.”

His beautiful, vicious wife was nearly cold and untouchable. The only time she thawed and turned blazing hot was when she was in his arms.

Komal Bhil looked hopeful. “So... you don’t hate my sister?” she asked.

“Your sister is my wife. We are tied together in an alliance whether we like each other or not.”

His words didn’t sound reassuring, but Komal Bhil looked visibly relieved.

“Thank you,” she said.

She got up to leave. “Please don’t tell my sister that I came here to talk to you. She will be quite upset.”

He knew his wife would be furious if she found out. She would most likely accuse him of wanting to harm her younger sister.

The very thought pissed him off.

“I won’t tell her,” he said.

Komal Bhil looked relieved. “Thank you, Mr. Thakvar.”

“Call me Rishab. We are family.”

She smiled hesitantly. “Thank you, Rishab.”

He nodded.

As soon as Komal Bhil left, he called security and asked them to keep an eye on her until she reached her university housing safely.

Ending the call, he sat back in his office chair and, looked out of the large glass wall, and thought about what Komal Bhil had revealed to him.

He had known most of the information when he received the investigation reports.

But he didn’t know the details of the relationship between the sisters or the role Kamlesh Meena had played in protecting the Bhil clan from an attack.

He now understood the loyalty and respect Gauri had for her late husband.

And although he understood, it didn’t make him any less jealous of the dead man.

I want the damn woman to show the same loyalty towards me.

Fuck.

His head was definitely messed up when it came to her. Why else would he seek loyalty or affection from a woman who was only supposed to be a temporary alliance wife until the goddess statue was commissioned?

CHAPTER 32

Gauri returned to her room after her morning dance.

She had danced for over three hours, during which her mind felt entirely peaceful. But after she stepped out of the prayer room, she was once again dragged back into the real world.

With a sigh, she twisted her hair into a knot, preparing to take a quick shower before going and meeting with the school and hospital in charge, who had requested a meeting to express their concerns.

She had always wanted to expand the school and hospital in the Bhil province so her people didn't have to travel far to the city to get help or proper education for their children. But although there were sufficient funds, there wasn't the necessary infrastructure to achieve the dream.

She let out another sigh and reached for the ties at the back of her dress. She was about to tug when the door to the bathroom opened, and her enemy husband stepped out.

She froze.

She had expected him to leave for the city like he did each morning over the past week.

She only saw him during the early hours when she woke up to go for her dance. At that time, his tall body was sprawled on the narrow chaise, sleeping.

Each night, she went to sleep on the narrow daybed, but she woke up to find herself on the big bed. She had wanted to confront him about carrying her to the bed while she slept, but she never got the chance as he returned

home late at night when she had already slept.

This was the first time she was seeing him properly after a week.

His handsome face was unreadable as he watched her while drying his hair with an additional towel. Her eyes were automatically drawn to his broad chest and biceps, where his muscles bulged with his hand movements.

She raised her eyes and caught a flash in his eyes before he threw the towel aside and came towards her. Her heart began racing.

The clean, musky smell of his body soap tingled her nose when he stood in front of her.

Their eyes met, and her breath caught in her throat when he held her chin and brushed his thumb against her cheekbone where she put her clan markings. Her stomach quivered at the soft touch.

Sucking in a breath, she pushed his hand away from her face. "I told you not to touch me," she said, her voice oddly breathless. "And why are you carrying me to the bed each night?" she demanded.

"Isn't that what you wanted all along?" he asked. "I thought you wanted to sleep on your bed."

"I don't need your consideration, and I don't want you to touch me."

He watched her face. "Why?" he asked.

"Because I hate you, and I despise your touch," she said.

There was a flash in his eyes, and his mouth twisted into a mocking smile. "No, my dear wife. You might hate me, but you enjoy my touch. You love my mouth and my cock between your legs. You come apart when I touch you."

Her body flamed at his words. "You are disgusting," she said and walked away.

She went inside the bathroom and shut the door. She closed her eyes, willing her racing heart and throbbing body to settle down.

His crudely uttered words were right. Her mind hated him, but her body craved his touch.

Each night, when she slept, she dreamed of his kisses and his touch and the feel of his powerful body moving inside her.

She woke up in the mornings with her body throbbing with need.

She let out a shuddering breath, angry with herself. She had to remind herself that she hated him. And that she didn't trust him. Their marriage was consummated, and the alliance was secure.

She didn't want anything else from him.

She didn't want her enemy husband, whom she didn't trust, to disturb her mind or her orderly life. She knew that if she ever displayed any weakness, he would take everything from her. He would take her power, position, and even her soul if he could and then leave her with nothing before going back to wherever he was from.

He had been staying out of her way all week. She hoped he would continue it that way.

CHAPTER 33

Her enemy husband didn't fly to the city and remained in Singoor.

It was late afternoon, and Gauri had just finished dropping supplies to the Meena clan.

"Go home," he told her and the men who accompanied her. "I'll check on a few things and join later."

Gauri was angry at his order and also that he was meddling in something again, but she didn't say anything.

Clenching her jaw, she sat on her horse and began to ride back.

But soon, she slowed down to take a detour.

"I'll be back later in the evening," she told her security head.

Kedar looked hesitant to leave, but he nodded. "Okay, madam."

Gauri didn't like the brief pause. Her men had always followed her instructions right away. But now, she knew the pause was because her security head must have got instructions from her enemy husband to stay by her side until they reached home. Kedar and all her people considered Rishab Thakvar to be the clan head.

Clenching her teeth, she rode towards the Meena province.

She went to the Meena fort.

Tying Durga to a large rock, she went inside, looking forward to having some peace of mind.

Even as she sat on the stone window and looked towards the vast desert, peace escaped her.

Her mind continued to remain in turmoil with thoughts.

And all those thoughts circled around just one person. Her enemy husband.

She was infuriated by him.

He had not left Singoor like she wanted and began meddling in the clan activities again.

He had even come to the meetings when she spoke with the school and hospital heads. He joined her everywhere when she oversaw the shipments in the Bhil and Meena clans.

She was annoyed seeing him talking to her trusted people, gathering information, and giving them specific instructions.

She wanted to order her people not to listen, but she knew everyone considered him to be the new clan head. She didn't want to put her people in the middle of the tussle between her and her husband.

She had snapped at him a few days ago in the privacy of their room.

“Stop meddling with things that don't concern you,” she said. “Why don't you fly to the city and take care of your business or whatever it is that you do.”

He looked at her with a mocking smile.

“Deal with it, wife,” he drawled. “You won't get rid of me any time soon.”

Much to the delight of Rumi and the entire household, he didn't go to the city anymore. He remained home, joining for most meals and indulging in the culinary delights that the cook and Rumi pampered him with.

He worked from the home office at night and came down to sleep late at night.

She knew that because she woke up when he came. She had stopped sleeping on the narrow daybed because she didn't want him carrying her to the bed, which he did until she began sleeping on the bed.

But even though he didn't touch her anymore, she was still disturbed by him and his presence.

Her stomach quivered each time his gaze fell on her during mornings when she got ready. And she couldn't stop her gaze from falling on him, looking at his tanned, muscular body and his hands, recalling his touch and the feel of him.

He caught her watching him, and there was a mocking smile on his handsome face, which made her angry and embarrassed.

“You might hate me, but you enjoy my touch. You love my mouth and my cock between your legs. You come apart when I touch you.”

She was infuriated that his words were right and that she was strongly drawn to him.

She couldn't get rid of her enemy husband, but she vowed to ignore him.

Just as she thought that the sound of her horse alerted her of someone's presence.

She let out an angry breath.

The arrogant man had followed her once again to the fort.

Getting up, she dusted her hands to confront him.

She saw his shadow approaching.

“I don't like to be disturbed here—”

She broke off when the shadow came nearer, and the person appeared. It wasn't her enemy husband.

And it wasn't just one person. There were two men, and they were wearing jet black clothes, and their faces were covered with ash, and the three horizontal lines with red dots. They held a distinctive three-pronged sharp weapon in their hands.

A chill passed through her.

It was the Kabalis. And they never left anyone alive.

She slowly reached for her knife and waited.

The two men began to approach her. As soon as they came close enough, she lunged at the man on the left with her knife. He cried out in pain and jumped back when she sliced his arm. She took the opportunity to slip past the men and ran towards the entrance of the fort.

Before she could reach it, she saw another man waiting near the entrance. Her heart thudded as he came closer. There were footsteps behind her of the other two men.

She raised her knife and lunged at the man near the entrance. But the man blocked her blow with his weapon and shoved her back.

She stumbled, but she quickly stood on her feet and raised her knife in an attack position. She knew they were going to surround her. The other two men came into view. The one she had stabbed looked furious. His eyes blazed.

Her heart thudded. The weapons in their hand glinted even in the semi-darkness. She knew her knife wouldn't be a match.

Just as they began to close in on her, there was a loud sound of footsteps. The Kabalis froze. They turned to look back, and she was shocked to see her enemy husband.

Before she could open her mouth to warn him and ask him to run out, the Kabalis attacked him. Two men went behind him while one lunged at his throat with the weapon. He blocked the front attack by holding the Kabali man's wrist. There was a harsh cry of pain when he yanked the weapon out of the Kabali's hand and held it.

Using the three-pronged weapon, he slashed through the Kabali man's face and chest. The look on Rishab Thakvar's face was calm. He turned, and there was a sound of scraping metal as the weapons clashed. The fight was violent but brief. Shockingly, the three Kabalis backed away and ran towards

the entrance to escape.

But he didn't chase after them. Instead, he came to her and ran his fingers over her throat under the riding veil.

"They didn't hurt me," she said, pushing his hand away, knowing he was checking to see if the Kabalis' weapons got to her.

There was a flash of relief in his eyes before he looked furious.

"Why the hell did you come here," he growled. "I gave you instructions to go home."

She was still holding her knife. She lowered it as anger trembled in her stomach.

"I'm not your lackey to listen to your orders. I can go where I please."

He grabbed her arm. "You were attacked by three fucking men just now. They were going to slit your damn throat!"

She shoved at him. "I can take care of myself. I don't need you or anyone to protect me."

"Like hell, you don't," he growled, dragging her even closer. "You are my damn wife. If you don't fucking do as I say, I'll keep you locked in our bedroom."

She slapped him.

A part of her knew she was too shaken to behave rationally. But shock, anger, and the adrenaline of nearly getting killed made her erupt. He was equally volatile.

His eyes burned with rage, and he held the back of her neck before crashing his mouth against her. His kiss was brutal and possessive.

Shock and desire trembled through her. And she kissed him back.

He growled when her hands gripped his shirt to pull him closer, wanting to feel the heat of his body. Anger and desire warred and became one. A primal instinct took over.

She found herself on the stone floor of the fort, and her enemy husband's hard body covered hers.

Their eyes collided, his dark eyes reflecting fury and lust that made her womb clench.

Even as she ripped at his shirt to feel his heated skin, he shoved her long skirt up. She spread her legs as her heart beat like a drum inside her head. His fingers held her underwear and yanked before he gripped her hips. Barely a moment later, he pushed inside her.

She cried out. Like his kiss, it was a brutal and savage joining. She responded equally savagely, biting into his shoulder as her body rose to meet his.

She closed her eyes as raw and urgent desire swirled with each thrust.

He moved into her like a wild storm until her world caught fire and exploded. As her body trembled, he threw back his head and let out a roar, finding his release deep inside her. Liquid heat washed inside her, making her cry out and tremble.

Her heart thudded, and her body throbbed with pleasure long after.

Heavy breaths fell against her neck, and she felt his nose nuzzling against her jawline.

Her stomach trembled at his soft gesture after their savage joining.

She opened her eyes and saw the shadows of the setting sun against the fort walls.

Sucking in a breath, she pushed on his shoulders.

He lifted his head to look at her.

"Don't touch me," she said.

His handsome face darkened. "I'm still inside you," he bit out. "Let me at least catch my damn breath first."

Her face heated.

A long moment later, he withdrew and rolled away from her and got up. She immediately missed the heat and hard weight of his body on top of hers.

Sucking in a deep breath, she got up as well. Her legs felt weak and trembled slightly while her body hummed and throbbed.

She dusted the dirt off her body while he adjusted his pants and buttoned his ripped shirt.

Her cheeks heated, recalling she had torn it, wanting to touch him.

He was watching her while adjusting his clothes.

“This was a mistake,” she said. “It won’t happen again.”

His eyes flashed darkly before his mouth twisted into a mocking smile.

“Sure.”

CHAPTER 34

By late evening, news spread about the attack by the Kabalis

At first, Gauri thought her enemy husband had told her people. But it wasn't until much later when her uncle told her that a doctor was called to tend to Rishab Thakvar's wounds on his back, that they recognized the injuries caused by the three-pronged weapon that was specific to the Kabali clan.

“My God, Gauri. Are you all right?”

Her uncle looked shocked and worried when he came to see her.

“I'm fine, uncle,” she said.

“You could have been killed, Gauri! You should be careful, not just for yourself but also for your clan.”

She nodded, knowing there was truth to what he said.

It wasn't the first time she had been attacked by other clans. But it was the first time being attacked by the Kabalis. She had nearly been killed, and had it not been for Rishab Thakvar, her throat would have been slit.

Instead of thanking him, she reacted badly to him.

Her face burned, recalling how they had both blown up on each other and what had followed.

She had avoided seeing him after returning home, but she knew she had to speak with him. Despite her embarrassment, she had to thank him for saving her life.

Taking a deep breath, she went towards the kitchen and met with the housekeeper.

“Rumi, did... my husband have his dinner?” she asked.

The housekeeper looked surprised.

“Yes, Mr. Thakvar requested his dinner in the suite. I thought you were with him.”

“No, I was... busy.” The older woman looked disappointed that Gauri was not with her injured husband.

“Can you bring me a platter of sweets,” Gauri requested. “I’ll take it up to my room.”

The housekeeper’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, sure. Mr. Thakvar had already eaten dessert. But he won’t mind a second helping.”

Gauri nodded, knowing it was true. Her enemy husband had a sweet tooth.

She waited until Rumi put together a spread of sweets on a platter and handed it to her.

“Here. All of them are his favorites.”

Thanking the older woman, Gauri went up to the master suite.

She opened the door and saw him seated in a chair next to the small round table where his dinner must have been served. He was shirtless, and she could see the white bandages on his back. Her face heated because she could also see a dark bruise, which was her bite mark on his shoulder during passion.

He was distracted and didn’t hear her come.

There was a small frown on his handsome face as he looked at something in his hand. As she went closer, she saw that he was looking at the three-pronged weapon that he had snatched from one of the Kabalis. Sensing her presence, he looked up.

He saw her and then saw the plate she was holding.

“This is for you,” she said, placing the platter on the small table. “Rumi wanted me to give these to you.”

His eyes flashed. "I see. Thanks for bringing them."

He helped himself to a sweet while watching her. She noticed that despite eating a lot of sweets, there wasn't any fat on his hard-muscled body. He had the body of a warrior, even though she had never seen him exercise. He had even fought like a warrior with the Kabalis. And though it was several hours ago, she still felt the imprint of his hard warrior body moving over her, along with the slight burn inside from the hardness and girth of his manhood.

"Unless you want a repeat of this evening, I suggest you stop looking at me that way."

Her eyes flew up and caught his heated gaze while he bit into a sweet.

Her cheeks heated. "I was looking at your wounds," she said.

His eyebrow lifted. "My injury is on my back, not where you were looking."

Angry embarrassment filled her.

She wanted to get away from his mocking presence, but she stayed. She reminded herself that she had come to thank him. He had saved her life.

Sucking in a breath, she pushed away her embarrassment and looked at him.

"I didn't expect the Kabalis to attack," she said. "They usually only attack during the night. And in the many years I've been visiting the Meena fort, I've never seen the presence of Kabalis. I did come across a few drifters from other clans who attacked, not knowing who I was, but—"

His eyes flashed. "Don't go there again," he ordered.

Anger shot through her at his arrogant order.

"I will if I want to," she snapped. "I'm used to the place."

His eyes flashed darkly. "Then take the security with you."

"I don't need security. Today was an exception that the Kabalis—"

"What will you do if there is another day of exception.?" he demanded. "If

you want to go again, I'll accompany you."

"I go there to be alone," she snapped.

The last two times she had gone was to get away from him.

Angry silence filled the room.

She walked away before he said anything to make her angry again.

She went to the changing area to put on her nightwear. She had taken a hot bath earlier, but her body still ached. The stone floor of the fort left bruises on her back, and there were also bruises on her hips, where her enemy husband had gripped her before thrusting into her.

Her cheeks heated. Hoping to catch a good rest, she stepped out.

She saw him getting ready to lie down on the small bed.

She knew that with his injury, it would be hard to get comfortable on the narrow chaise.

"You can sleep on the bed," she said.

Which meant she would have to sleep on the narrow bed again. The very thought of spending the night in the cramped space made her body ache.

"I... will sleep on the big bed too," she added.

His eyes flashed.

"Don't touch me," she quickly said.

His mouth twisted.

Wondering if she should just sleep in another suite, but knowing it would cause a commotion, she joined him.

The bed was big, and there was enough room for the two of them to sleep comfortably. But she didn't trust him. She picked up pillows from the smaller bed and placed them in the middle.

Ignoring the mocking smile, she turned down the lights and lay on her side of the bed.

Her body was comfortable, but her mind remained too aware of his

presence next to her.

Even through the pillows, she imagined feeling the heat of his body against her. Sucking in her breath, she shifted a little further away and tried to ignore his presence.

After several moments of thick silence and awareness, she realized she hadn't thanked him properly or at all.

"Thank you for saving my life from the Kabalis," she said.

There was no response. When she heard his deep breaths, she realized he had fallen asleep.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to her side and closed her eyes.

The events of the long day caught up with her, and her eyes began drooping, and she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 35

“They were hired goons who pretended to be the Kabalis.”

Rishab was on a call with his brothers.

“That’s how an attack was staged on me near the oasis,” Shivay reminded.

“And the weapons they used are not from Singoor. I’ve asked the team to check if it matches the one the assassin had in Africa.”

Rishab had a strong feeling the weapons would match.

“The Kabalis have a very distinctive weapon,” Nakul said. “Someone would have to manufacture them in a customized way.”

“It’s Tantra,” said Rishab.

Rishab knew Tantra must have had those weapons manufactured along with the clothes the goons were wearing.

“Did the investigating team get back about how Tantra’s men knew your wife was at the Meena fort?” Shivay asked.

“The tracking chip wasn’t hacked. Someone had given information about her going to Meena province that morning.”

The very thought made him furious. That person knew Gauri would most likely stop at the Meena fort like she usually does.

“Her cousin?” Nakul asked.

“The team is verifying it,” Rishab replied.

Jatin Saini wasn’t in the Bhil province during that time. But the weasel probably did it to remove suspicion. Rishab was having the man investigated and followed closely.

“There are going to be more attacks in the coming months,” Shivay

warned. “Tantra will not want the goddess statue commissioning ceremony to commence. He’s going to try to break the alliances either through death or in other ways. He’ll want people to think that the death of the heirs is due to a curse.”

Rishab had sensed that right from the beginning, which was why he had asked the Bhil security to be with his wife all the time. But the damn woman had ordered them to leave.

He was pissed that she still didn't care about her safety and continued to defy him.

“Tantra has no means to pay his spies in Singoor,” Rishab said. “The spies are going to get restless. Tantra will have to come to Singoor soon.”

“We are prepared for him,” said Shivay.

Rishab knew that Tantra would use his persuasion skills to convince his spies to do his dirty work without payment. But soon, he would exhaust it and be forced to come to Singoor.

Rishab was waiting for that to happen soon.

Tatra would have answers to a lot of unanswered questions.

“All right,” said Shivay. “I’ll talk to you both later. I have to... help Ishani with a few things around the mansion. She’s way too nervous and excited about your visit this coming week.”

Rishab’s mouth twisted in amusement as he witnessed his reserved older brother as a doting husband.

Ending the call, Rishab looked out of the home office window. The injury on his back burned. But he ignored it. His mind was however restless.

It was because of his beautiful, vicious wife. The woman was a menace with no thoughts of her safety.

Rage still filled him as he recalled the attack in the Meena fort a few days ago.

He had already been angry when the security head had informed him that his wife had taken a detour from the Meena province. He had gone to drag her home and warn her not to go anywhere without security.

But when he saw three unknown horses outside the fort along with his wife's, his heart nearly stopped. He thought he was too late. He ran inside and saw three assassins with weapons surrounding his wife.

She had a knife in her hand and would have most likely used it on the attackers, but the knife was no match against the three-pronged weapon that the assassins held.

He had disarmed one of them and used the weapon to attack them. But he wanted to tear those assassins apart and torture them to reveal the name and whereabouts of the person who asked to target his wife. But the men managed to escape. He didn't chase after them because he wanted to ensure his wife's throat wasn't slit and check to see if she sustained injuries during the attack.

But the damn woman blew up on him, and he reacted in fury. The anger had led to their mutual desire. He knew he was brutally rough when he took her on the stone floor of the fort.

He had wanted to show her gentleness soon after, but the woman was prickly like a damn thorn.

She had asked him not to touch her again.

But on the same night, she asked him to sleep next to her on the bed with a mound of pillows in between.

Lying next to his wife on the same damn bed and not touching her was the worst kind of torture. He wouldn't be surprised if his beautiful, vicious wife planned it that way with the intention of torturing him.

He shook his head, knowing he shouldn't get agitated or obsessed by his wife, but it was an ongoing uphill battle. He wanted her beyond reason. And

the woman continued to torture him in ways that only she could from the moment he had laid his eyes on her.

CHAPTER 36

Several bags and baskets full of gifts and food items filled the entrance of the Bhil mansion. Half of them were already loaded and sent through horses and camels early that morning, and the rest were being loaded into several vehicles outside.

“We are so excited that you will be going to the Thakvar mansion, madam!”

“We heard it’s four times as big as the Bhil mansion with beautiful gardens and fountains!”

“Rishab sir will be happy to see his family!”

Three months had passed since the wedding, and according to the tradition, Gauri was supposed to accompany her enemy husband to his ancestral home for a ritual, after which they were to spend a night there.

She knew Mihir Thakvar and his wife wouldn’t be at the Thakvar mansion as they were traveling to the fifty-one goddess Shakti temples with the jewels that would be used to commission the statue. Rishab Thakvar’s two brothers and their wives would be there.

“I’ll be back by tomorrow evening,” she said.

Bidding goodbye to her uncle and the excited faces of her household, she stepped out of the mansion and went to the waiting SUV in front of the steps. The rest of the vehicles had security staff and gifts being loaded into them.

Her enemy husband was in the driver’s seat of the SUV.

She opened the passenger door and sat in.

“Are you excited, my dear wife?” he asked.

She couldn't see his eyes as they were covered by sunglasses. Ignoring his mocking smile and presence, she looked in the front while the vehicles began to move.

She didn't want to admit it out loud, but she was curious and was looking forward to the visit.

The SUV drove through the tall gates bearing the insignia of an attacking tiger.

A massive red-colored four-story structure with several high marble columns came into view. The vehicle stopped in front of the wide marble steps that led up to the mansion.

Sounds of conch shells and drums filled the air in a grand welcome.

A group of people wearing the Thakvar clan colors waited at the foot of the marble steps to receive the Thakvar heir and his bride.

Before she could get down, her enemy husband came around the vehicle and opened the door. When she stepped out, the heavy weight of his muscular arm wrapped around her waist and led her towards the waiting group. Her stomach fluttered, but she couldn't brush away his hand and touch as there were dozens of eyes watching them.

Gauri noticed that most of the faces looked tense and somber.

She knew it was because of what had happened at the wedding. She had tricked Rishab Thakvar by switching places with her sister. Many people of the Thakvar clan still believed that her sister was the rightful Thakvar bride.

Some of the tensed faces slowly began to relax and looked curious at her.

Gauri realized that by putting his arm around her, her enemy husband was claiming her as his bride in front of his people.

“Welcome, Rishab and Gauri,” a familiar woman greeted with a wide smile.

Gauri recognized Shivay Thakvar, who was the oldest Thakvar heir, and his wife Ishani, who was the Gujjar clan heiress. It was the first of the alliance marriages that the Thakvars had formed.

From what Gauri had heard about the Gujjar heiress and the first alliance, she expected Ishani Gujjar to be a terrified and nervous woman. Gauri was surprised to see a happy smile on the other woman's face.

Gauri returned the smile with a polite one while her enemy husband hugged his brother and smiled widely at his sister-in-law. He greeted a middle-aged couple affectionately and introduced them to her as his father's trusted man and woman.

The heat of his muscular arm circled her waist again as they were led up the wide, marble steps.

There was a ritual at the massive doorway, after which they went inside. It was then followed by traditional dances and folk songs from the Thakvar region.

Despite the tense atmosphere, Gauri enjoyed them, especially the dances. She didn't know her feet were tapping until a middle-aged woman, who was introduced as Malini, came to her. "I've heard that the older Bhil heiress is a good dancer like her late mother. Come and join us!"

Before Gauri could say anything, the woman pulled her to the large courtyard where the dances were ongoing. Gauri often joined her clan dances during festivities. She joined the women, matching their lively steps. Ishani Gujjar was also pulled into the circle, and soon, they began to dance to the traditional songs of Singoor.

After a few dances, she stepped away, her heart feeling lighter like she usually did after dancing.

"That was so wonderful!" said Ishani, joining her with a laugh. "I didn't know you could dance so well! Next time, I will have you join early on."

Gauri smiled. As she returned, she caught the gaze of her enemy husband, who was watching her. She expected him to have a mocking smile, but his eyes held the same heated look that she often caught him gazing at her in the

privacy of their room.

Ignoring the fluttering in her stomach, she sat next to him for the rest of the performances.

Soon, they were directed to a feast that was spread on a massive table.

“These are the Thakvar clan specialties,” Ishani Gujjar said with a smile. “Junglee maas is Rishab’s favorite dish.”

“My wife already knows that,” Rishab Thakvar’s deep voice replied. “In fact, she has lovingly prepared the dish several times along with many of my favorite sweets.”

“That’s wonderful!”

Gauri’s cheeks heated when he reminded her of the time when she had pretended to be a considerate wife in front of her household.

She wanted to glare at him, but there were dozens of eyes watching them.

“Rishab, you must feed your bride!” the woman named Malini said. “It’s tradition!”

“Sure,” her enemy husband’s deep voice drawled. He broke a piece of bread and dipped it in a rich, creamy curry, and extended it towards her mouth.

Their eyes met. She opened her mouth and let him feed her, but instead of drawing his hand away, his thumb brushed against the corner of her lips.

Her cheeks heated at his brazen touch in full view of everyone.

Stop it! She wanted to snap at him.

There was a mocking challenge in his eyes as he fed her a few more bites, each time brushing his calloused thumb against the corner of her lips, causing her stomach to quiver and heat.

Unable to take it. “I’ll eat on my own,” she said.

There was laughter. “Your bride is shy, Rishab. Even Ishani was quite shy when Shivay fed her during her first meal at the Thakvar mansion.”

Ishani blushed and exchanged a quick look with her husband, who looked amused.

There was more laughter.

Soon, the feast came to an end. Most of the household dispersed to receive the gifts and goods that had arrived from the Bhil province. They would also be preparing to ready the gifts they would be sending to the Bhil clan in return. It was a long-held tradition in Singoor.

“Do you and Rishab want to relax in your room for a while?” Ishani asked. “You must be tired after the journey.”

There was a heated, mocking smile on her enemy husband’s face as he watched her.

Gauri looked away from him and shook her head. “I’m not tired.”

Ishani Gujjar’s eyes lit up. “Oh, then let me show you Thakvar mansion!”

Gauri nodded, wanting to see the place as well.

Thankfully, the Thakvar brothers didn’t join the tour and went to speak with the clansmen.

After a couple of hours, Gauri realized that the tales she had heard were right. With vast, well-kept gardens, water fountains, and endless rooms, the Thakvar mansion was like a palace.

“This is my favorite room,” said Ishani.

It was a library. Gauri could see that the vast library was divided into sections. One part had old volumes of books, and the other held shelves where the books looked relatively new.

Gauri’s eyes were drawn to a large portrait of a beautiful woman at the center of the library. Gauri recognized her right away as she had seen the likeness image many times in Kamlesh Meena’s private collection of books and portraits.

Gauri had known about Nandini Thakvar when Kamlesh Meena spoke about a woman who he loved and lost. He had told her that his love had been one-sided since Nandini Thakvar considered him to be a friend, and she had vowed that until peace was restored in the Singoor region, she wouldn’t give her heart to anyone or marry. Peace wasn’t restored in Singoor, and Nandini Thakvar had died tragically in a car accident with her older brother. But Kamlesh Meena vowed to love Nandini Thakvar eternally.

“That is Nandini Thakvar, Rishab’s aunt,” said Ishani. “She was known for her beauty and also her vast knowledge of history and politics.”

“Yes, I know. My late husband was a good friend of hers as they both had an interest in history.” Gauri didn’t want to mention Kamlesh Meena had loved Nandini Thakvar.

There was a flash of surprise in Ishani’s eyes, followed by excitement. “Oh, yes. I have read of Kamlesh Meena’s contributions in compiling

Singoor history along with Nandini Thakvar. Have you read all the books written by him?”

“Yes,” Gauri replied. “He used to teach me in person about the history of Singoor.” Gauri had loved listening to the tales during her childhood whenever Kamlesh Meena visited Bhil mansion to check on her and her sister.

“You were so lucky,” said Ishani softly.

“Yes, I was.”

There was a short silence followed by a soft smile from Ishani.

“Had things been different, the two of us would have met each other during our childhood and become friends,” she said. “As the Singoor heirs, our parents had met each other. But their untimely demise changed everything.”

Gauri nodded, knowing it was the truth.

Ishani Gujjar’s father had died of a snakebite, and Gauri’s parents died in quicksand. Nearly all the heirs from prominent clans had died tragically.

Ishani smiled. “Let’s hope our children and the rest of the generations in Singoor clans can grow up being close as peace would be restored soon.”

Gauri’s heart jerked at the mention of children. Although she hoped peace would be restored in Singoor, she knew her marriage would not end in children.

Because once the goddess Shakti statue was commissioned, she and her enemy husband would go their separate ways.

It was late at night by the time the evening festivities and another lavish feast concluded.

Gauri was finally led to a guest suite upstairs.

“This is Rishab’s room,” said Ishani with a smile. “I hope you find it comfortable. Your clothes are arranged in the closet. If you need any help for tonight, please let us know. Malini will send help in the morning for you to get ready.”

Gauri nodded. “Thank you.”

The clothes and jewelry she had brought along were gifted by the Thakvars. She would need help to wear them in the morning.

“Have a good night,” said Ishani with a smile before stepping out of the room.

Gauri went inside the room, which was a large two-room suite that was nearly twice as big as the master bedroom in the Bhil mansion.

She went past the sitting area to the bedroom inside. There was a massive four-poster bed with carved wood and marble nightstands to the sides. There was a balcony from which a gentle breeze blew in.

She went towards the closet and pulled out the nightwear and kept it ready near the dressing area before going into the bathroom. The bathroom was quite huge. The bathroom was tastefully updated with modern fittings amidst the traditional Singoor red stone and polished marble.

She removed her clothes and paused when she saw a marble bathtub that could easily fit three or four people. Although she was tempted to use it, she chose to take a quick shower.

She couldn’t see any water container or tap that she was used to taking a

shower with. So, she opened the glass door and stepped into the colorful tile area, and turned on the knobs until water fell on her from the top.

The hot water spray felt soothing on her skin. She let out a long sigh as the shower area began filling up with steam.

She understood why her enemy husband had wanted to upgrade the bathrooms in the Bhil mansion. The luxury of water falling from the top like rainfall while steam seeping into the skin was unparalleled. She washed her hair and body but stood under the hot spray of water for a long time.

Just when her skin began to crinkle, she turned off the knobs.

She opened the glass door and stepped out. Using a thick, fluffy towel, she dried the excess moisture from her hair before wrapping it around her head. She was reaching for the additional towels kept on the polished marble wall when the bathroom door opened. Her enemy husband walked in, and he was naked.

With a gasp, she dragged a towel from the top and wrapped it hurriedly around herself.

“You should have knocked on the door!” she snapped. “You are doing this deliberately.”

There was a mocking smile on his face as he watched her clutching the towel tightly.

Her face heated.

He had seen and touched her everywhere, and yet she was determined to hide her body as though he were a stranger.

“The Thakvar mansion bathrooms have locks, my dear wife,” he said. “If you wanted me out, you should have locked the door. Not that I’m complaining.”

Her face heated even more because she didn’t know about the locks.

Sucking in a breath and not wanting to argue while he was naked, she

hurried out.

She dressed quickly. Then, going towards the large bed, she placed the additional pillows in the middle and lay on it on her side.

After a while, she heard the bathroom door opening, and then her enemy husband joined her next to her. The lights dimmed to a soft orange glow.

“What did you and Ishani speak about?” he asked.

She wanted to pretend she was asleep, but she answered.

“About our families and Nandini Thakvar,” she said.

There was silence.

“What did Ishani say about Nandini?” There was a dark edge to his voice.

Gauri frowned, not understanding. “Yes, we spoke about your aunt’s collection of books. Some of Nandini Thakvar’s handwritten notes are in the Meena province. I told Ishani she could borrow them.”

There was a pause. “I see.”

There was silence once again.

“Did Kamlesh Meena speak to you about my aunt?” he asked.

Her heart raced at his question.

“None of your business,” she replied.

She could sense his anger.

“You are hiding a lot of secrets, my dear wife,” he said.

“So are you,” she replied.

“Do you want to know my secrets?” he asked.

Although his tone was mocking, there was an edge to his question.

“No,” she replied. “Because to me, you are the man I married for the sake of an alliance and to get my sister out of an unwanted wedding. As long as you don’t harm my people, what you do and why you do certain things don’t matter to me.”

He didn’t say anything.

Silence filled the room once again.

She closed her eyes. She thought she'd be awake for a long since it was a new place, but the luxurious bed slowly put her to sleep.

The conversations about the history of Singoor and the heirs dying due to curses led to disturbed dreams.

Gauri dreamt of her parents disappearing into the sand during a storm. She tried to save them, but they slipped away from her hands and into the sand. She then dreamt of Kamlesh Meena, who had a heart attack. She tried to revive him by pressing on his chest and giving him water, and calling for a doctor. But he also died in her arms.

She felt helpless for being unable to save them.

Just when she thought she was losing people she loved, she saw Rishab Thakvar. He looked tall, handsome, and vitally alive. He was watching her with a mocking smile, but his eyes held a heated desire.

She didn't love him, and he declared war on her and became her enemy, but she didn't want him to die from a curse.

She went closer and touched him. His shirt disappeared at her touch, and she felt the warmth of his tanned skin. Desire filled her.

She put her lips against the smooth yet hair-roughened skin and moved her lips. Curious to know how he tasted, she put her tongue out and licked him.

The slight salty taste tingled her tongue and caused her stomach to quiver.

There was a deep masculine groan. "Gauri," he groaned.

He never called her by her name before. He always had a mocking smile and called her wife. But in the dream, he called her by her name.

She tasted his skin again before lowering her hand and brushing against the hardness.

His arousal was hot and it pulsed and throbbed against her palm. The thin cloth of his underwear was in between, and she wanted to take it off to touch

properly.

He emitted another deep groan, and his hand gripped hers.

“I won’t last if you touch me,” he said and pushed her hand aside.

Before she could protest, she found herself on her back with him on top of her. His mouth met hers in a deep kiss, making her heart race.

She ran her hands over the broad length of his muscled back while he kissed her. But the kiss didn’t last long. The heat of his mouth disappeared. Before she could protest, she felt his lips on her throat, making her pulse race.

His touch was magical and exciting. The heat of his mouth moved lower, leaving a trail of fire. She felt small tugs on her clothes before his mouth covered her breast. She cried out when he sucked, and a bolt of pleasure hit deep inside her womb. With every deep suck, her womb quivered, and the place between her legs throbbed.

She wanted him to take away the throbbing need that he caused within her.

As though he could read her mind, his hand went under her long skirt and then brushed against her core before a thick, calloused finger swept in.

She cried out at the sensation.

She raised her hips against his finger, urging him to fill the need that only he could.

“Fuck,” he cursed with a groan against her breast. “I promised myself I’d go slow the next time.”

She didn’t want him to go slow. She wanted him to take her with the urgency she felt towards him.

“But you are a witch, making it so damn hard for me each time.” He bit the underside of her breast.

The slice of pain caused a bolt of pleasure and made her jerk her eyes open.

The sight of the elaborately carved ceiling and soft yellow lighting

confused her. Her body jolted with shock when she realized she was at the Thakvar mansion. And that she wasn't dreaming.

Her eyes lowered, and she saw her enemy husband's dark head on top of her breast. Her hands were gripping his wide shoulders while his thick finger moved inside her.

This isn't a dream.

Her body trembled with pleasure, and she sensed the onset of a climax. But she pushed at his shoulders.

"Stop," she said.

His mouth left her breast, and his eyes met hers. There was a frown on his handsome face. His finger slid out of her.

"What happened?" he asked, moving over to her.

"I don't want you to touch me."

His expression slowly changed, and there was anger on his face.

"You are a bloody cocktease," he growled.

Her face flamed at his words.

He fell to her side with a dark groan. She pulled the ends of her top close together. Her body was on fire and throbbed in need.

"I was dreaming, and I... didn't think it was you," she said. She added the last part, knowing it would anger him further.

She sensed his dark anger.

Turning away from him, she faced the other side once again.

Even as her body continued to throb with need, she closed her eyes. For the rest of the night, she remained awake and ensured she didn't turn or touch him accidentally.

CHAPTER 37

“It was so nice to meet you,” Ishani Gujjar said with a smile. “I wish you could stay for at least one more day.”

Gauri knew the words were genuine. Ishani Gujjar was sweet, friendly and affectionate.

They were standing outside on top of the Thakvar mansion steps and were ready to leave. Several baskets of gifts were being loaded into vehicles and on the camels and horses. They were gifts from the Thakvar clan.

“They’ll visit us again in three months, Ishani,” Shivay Thakvar said, wrapping his arm around his wife’s waist.

The causal gesture of affection surprised her.

She had expected Shivay Thakvar and Ishani Gujjar’s marriage to be devoid of any affection since it was also made to form an alliance between the clans.

But the love and protectiveness Shivay Thakvar had towards his wife was evident. And Ishani Gujjar seemed equally besotted and in love with her husband. She positively glowed radiantly each time Shivay Thakvar touched her or looked at her. Ishani had also spoken glowingly about her husband.

“Three months is too long,” Ishani said with a shake of her head. “And we’ll all be busy with the Goddess Shakti statue ceremony at that time. Nakul and Adhya will be here soon and stay until tomorrow. You both should stay as well.”

Before Gauri could reply, her enemy husband did.

“We can’t,” he said. “I have a few important things to finish.”

Gauri knew he was going to meet with a few more clans before the main clan meeting. She would be joining him for the main clan meeting as well. It was a meeting where all the western clans in Singoor would come to an agreement for peace and development in the region.

Ishani Gujjar sighed with a smile. “Okay, fine. But we’ll meet again soon.”

Gauri nodded. “You are welcome to visit the Bhil province anytime.”

Although the Bhil province wasn’t as developed or prosperous as the Thakvar province, Gauri was proud of the rich, varied traditions that her clan offered and contributed to Singoor.

“Shivay and I will definitely come! I have always wanted to visit the Bhil clan for so long.”

Gauri smiled, seeing the excitement on Ishani’s face.

They bid final goodbyes. Gauri also thanked Malini, the older woman who along with Ishani had made the stay pleasant.

Gauri sat inside the SUV. While the vehicles drove out of the mansion, she nodded and acknowledged the Thakvar clan people who had come to bid them goodbye. This time, their faces weren’t tense or grim. They waved happily.

As they headed out of the Thakvar province, Gauri could not help but compare Ishani’s marriage with hers. Ishani’s marriage held love, trust and loyalty. In comparison, Gauri’s marriage began with trickery, hate and distrust.

She threw a glance to the side and looked at Rishab Thakvar. She knew her enemy husband hated her and would never trust her, and she had given him several reasons not to. She might not hate him anymore, but she didn’t trust him either.

Apart from the burning attraction that constantly flared between them,

they would never have anything else. It was a marriage that began with her tricking him into it and continued purely for an alliance. It would remain that way until it ended when the Goddess Shakti statue was commissioned.

They were in the desert, and Gauri's eyes were drooping slightly due to lack of sleep. But her sleep vanished when she felt her enemy husband tensing next to her.

She blinked her eyes to focus and saw something at a distance down a sand dune. A group of horsemen were heading their way.

They weren't the Kabalis, as they weren't in black clothing. But there were many other clans who were also dangerous.

"Hold your weapons," Rishab Thakvar instructed.

She realized he was speaking with the security who were right behind them in another vehicle.

"Okay, Mr. Thakvar," Kedar's voice said through a speaker.

They were passing the holy land and couldn't take a life. But the clan attacking might not respect the law. To them, people traveling in vehicles were foreigners who had come to steal something from them again. They would only, if at all, spare the people belonging to Singoor.

The SUV didn't stop and continued to go ahead until the group came closer.

Gauri recognized the clan and the leader of the group. They were the Dhankar clan.

Soon, the horsemen stopped in front of the SUV, blocking the way. They were holding spears.

She turned to her enemy husband. "They are from the—"

"Dhankar clan," he said. "I know. I recognize their clan colors and spears."

"I know Girish Dhankar," she said, referring to the man leading the group.

“I’ll talk to him. Don’t come out.”

She got out of the SUV and went towards the group.

“Gauri Meena...” the leader of the group remarked. “What a surprise to see you in a vehicle and not on your horse.”

“I’m returning home with my husband. Ask your men to clear our way, Girish.”

The man didn’t move or instruct his men.

“Your husband?” he asked as though he was surprised. “Ah, yes. I heard you married the Thakvar heir.”

Girish Dhankar and most of the clans in the Singoor desert must have heard of her marriage. But Girish was known to be a troublemaker.

“You know what else I heard,” he said with a deliberate, thoughtful look. “That three men from a foreign land are fooling Mihir Thakvar into thinking they are his sons. But they are actually businessmen who want to steal the oil wells.”

“Mihir Thakvar has accepted them as his sons,” Gauri replied. “And so have most of the Singoor clans.”

“Most... but not all,” Girish Dhankar said.

She looked at him levelly. “Regardless of whether or not people have accepted, the Thakvar heirs are now the protectors of Singoor.”

Girish Dhankar stared for a moment and began to laugh loudly.

“You think those city men can protect Singoor?” he asked. “I doubt if they can protect themselves without their armed security.” He looked behind her. “Let’s ask your husband.”

Gauri turned, and her heart jerked seeing Rishab walking towards her.

She was angry that he didn’t listen and stayed back in the vehicle like she had asked him to.

But she held back her anger and waited. With casual traditional wear and

sunglasses, he looked far removed from the local clansmen of Singoor. Apart from the heavy ring on his hand with the Thakvar insignia, there was nothing else that indicated he belonged to Singoor.

He stood next to her and removed his sunglasses before looking at Girish Dhankar.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

Girish Dhankar swept his gaze over him. The look on Girish Dhankar’s face indicated he was going to cause trouble.

“Your wife said you are the protector of Singoor,” he said sneeringly. “Why don’t you prove it to her and us by challenging me in a fight.”

“There is no need to prove anything,” Gauri said sternly. “Before I consider your actions to be a challenge to not only the Thakvar clan but also to the Bhil and Meena clans, leave with your men right now.”

Girish Dhankar’s eyes wavered. The man knew that the Bhil and Meena clans held more power than the Dhankar clan in the west Singoor region.

Her enemy husband’s deep voice cut in. “I accept the challenge,” he said. Gauri sucked in a breath.

“See,” Girish Dhankar said with a satisfied smile. “Your husband accepts the challenge.”

He immediately stepped back and began to instruct his men for a fight.

Gauri turned to look at Rishab Thakvar angrily.

“This is not like a horse race or an archery contest. Girish Dhankar will fight to injure or kill.”

There was no concern on the handsome face.

His mouth twisted. “Are you worried about me, wife?” he asked.

She sucked in a breath at his words. “I’m worried about the alliance!” she snapped. “And that I would be blamed for your death or you turning into a cripple!”

“Don’t worry,” he said with a mocking smile. “I’ll try not to kill or cripple myself.”

Gauri wasn’t too sure. Before she could intervene, Girish Dhankar returned.

“Choose your weapon to fight, Thakvar,” he said, showing the spears.

“I’ll choose a sword,” Rishab replied and then spoke softly. “Bring my sword.”

Gauri saw Kedar getting down from the vehicle at the back and going to the SUV in the front. He drew out a sword from the backseat and approached. Kedar looked tense.

Gauri knew the security team was alert. Although they had weapons, they were instructed by Rishab not to draw them out. They stood at a distance, watching the events unfold.

Thanking Kedar, Rishab Thakvar held the sword.

Gauri recognized it. It was the ceremonial sword from the wedding.

“Let’s begin,” Girish Dhankar announced. “I will be fighting the Thakvar heir.”

Gauri’s heart raced.

Although she knew her enemy husband was strong and could combat the Kabalis when they attacked her, he wasn’t used to fighting with spears or swords. Like her, Girish Dhankar was trained in weaponry from childhood.

Rishab Thakvar was taller, but Girish Dhankar had bulky muscles from wrestling and training in spear fighting.

Gauri’s breath caught in her throat when Girish Dhankar raised the spear and plunged it at his opponent.

Rishab blocked it and then shoved the spear back using the sword.

Gauri was shocked.

She noticed how effortlessly Rishab held the sword. Although she had

never used a sword, she could see that her enemy husband knew how to use it.

The fight continued. Girish Dhankar attacked, and Rishab blocked the blows and shoved the other man back. The intensity of the attacks increased, but Rishab continued to block them as well. In the next blow, Rishab sliced the end of the sword through the Dhankar clan robe, nicking the skin and drawing out blood.

Girish Dhankar's face reddened with anger and humiliation, and he gestured to his men with his hands.

Gauri's heart raced when two Dhankar clansmen attacked Rishab from behind.

She stepped towards the fight to intervene, but Rishab turned and blocked the blows from behind as well.

As the sounds of metal clanging filled the air, she turned to Girish Dhankar. "The fight is supposed to be with only you. My husband already drew your blood."

Girish Dhankar's face darkened. "The protector of Singoor should know how to fight with multiple people during any surprise attacks," he said.

The fight turned intense, but Rishab blocked the blows and sliced through the clan robes, nicking the clansmen, bloodying each of them, and ending the fight.

There were cheers from the security men.

Rishab looked at Girish. "Give your father my regards," he said. "And tell him I will see him at the West clans meeting in two weeks."

Girish Dhankar's face darkened with fury and humiliation. Without replying, he turned away and got on his horse. Soon, the group rode away.

The security returned to the vehicles, and so did Gauri.

But as soon as the doors to the SUV shut and the vehicle started to move,

she burst out. Her stomach was shaking at what had nearly happened.

“That was the most irresponsible thing to do!” she shouted angrily. “You could have been killed! As a clan head, you are expected to follow restraint in such situations. You cannot take unnecessary risks!”

Her enemy husband turned to look at her.

“You can go to the Meena fort and other places alone despite being attacked, but I need to show restraint and not take unnecessary risks?” he demanded.

Her face heated at his words.

“Follow my damn instructions first,” he ordered. “Then you can tell me what to do.”

Angry silence followed.

The rest of the ride remained silent.

The news of Rishab Thakvar winning a fight with the Dhankar clan spread quickly. Her people were overjoyed.

There was a hero's welcome followed by a feast.

"We knew he would win over anyone!"

"His very name, Rishab, is named after our Lord Shiva's strength and valor!"

While the household continued to gush about their new clan head's bravery and strength, Gauri remained silent. She checked on a few things and returned to her suite. Her enemy husband wasn't there. He must have gone to the home office to make phone calls.

It was only after she had showered and wrapped a bath towel, and stepped out that she saw him. He had shed his traditional tunic and was facing the other way. He was getting ready to shower as well. Her eyes fell on his back. One of the stitches from the injury caused by the Kabalis had come open and was bleeding. And there was a long scratch right under it that must have been caused by a spear from the Dhankar clan's attack. Although it wasn't as deep as the injury from the Kabali attack, it had visibly reddened.

Once again, her stomach clenched, recalling the events.

Sensing her presence, he turned. Long silence continued while thick tension filled the air.

"Fine," she said. "Until Goddess Shakti statue is commissioned, I won't go to the Meena fort or anywhere else without taking security."

His eyes flashed, but she didn't see satisfaction in them.

There was a dark frown on his face.

"What happens after the goddess statue is commissioned?" he asked.

She didn't want to say that they would go their separate ways. It was a given, considering how different their lives were before they had to marry for the sake of an alliance.

Her stomach clenched and felt hollow at the thought of him leaving the Bhil province and returning to where he was from. But she quickly pushed away the feeling.

She was merely used to him and the strong desire that always flared between them.

"You are bleeding," she said. "Your injuries need to be tended."

His mouth twisted. "Have you stopped hating me, wife?" he asked.

Her cheeks heated in embarrassment. "I... just don't want you to get blood on my handwoven sheets."

His eyes flashed. Whether it was in amusement or in anger, she wasn't sure.

Pulling her gaze away from his, she went to the cabinet and took out a medical kit box that had cotton pads and antiseptic liquid.

Opening the kit, she dipped the cotton in the liquid and went behind him to clean the injuries on his back. He didn't flinch, even though the antiseptic would have stung and burned quite a bit.

Her stomach clenched, knowing he felt pain.

With a strong urge to relieve his pain, she ran a finger softly next to the long scratch. She watched in fascination when the muscles on his broad back jerked and shifted at her simple touch. Without giving it another thought, she placed her lips against the scratch and felt the heat of his skin.

There was a harsh inhale of breath, and then he whipped around and held her arms.

"Is this a new form to torture me?" he growled.

She recalled how she had left him aroused and in pain the previous night.

She looked at him. “No,” she said softly.

His eyes burned into hers. Whatever he saw in them made his eyes darken.

He gripped the back of her neck and crashed his mouth on top of hers in a deep kiss.

She kissed him back.

She gasped when he swept her up and began carrying her out of the bathroom into their bedroom.

“You are hurt and bleeding,” she said. “Your stitches need to be tended—”

“Fuck the stitches,” he said. “I hurt damn much more not being able to touch you and not being inside you.”

The burning desire flared and caught fire at his words.

He took her to bed and dropped her on it. Dragging the damp bath towel away from her body, he moved over her with his eyes holding hers captive.

Her hands trembled in anticipation as she placed them on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips. Keeping his eyes on hers, he held the back of her hair and thrust into her deeply, joining their bodies.

She cried out and rose to meet him.

The passion and urgency with which they came together removed all thoughts except for their desire.

The next morning, she woke up to the sight of her enemy husband.

There was a tensed, watchful look on his handsome face, even as his hand stroked her arm softly.

She knew he was expecting her to tell him not to touch her again.

Although self-preservation dictated that she should keep her distance from the man who hated her and didn't trust her because she tricked him into marriage, she felt a stronger need that craved his touch. She didn't say anything.

She couldn't read anything on his face.

The hand stroking her arm moved and covered her breast. The tip of her breast hardened, and her heart raced faster. His head began to lower, and soon, his mouth met her throat. Her pulse began racing.

When his mouth began to move lower, she gripped his shoulders and closed her eyes.

It's just desire.

She reminded herself yet again that what they had between them was just desire, nothing more.

CHAPTER 38

“Thank you, Mr. Thakvar.”

A group of executives in business suits got up to leave the boardroom.

Rishab was in the Thakvar headquarters office. He had flown to the city to check on the investigation reports and sign off on some business deals.

“Sir, your next meeting starts in ten minutes,” the executive assistant informed.

Rishab nodded.

It was only midafternoon, and his schedule was packed until late at night, but he was already feeling impatient and restless.

He knew the reason. It was because of his prickly desert rose. His beautiful, vicious wife.

The woman was once again being a menace to his peace of mind.

Although she no longer told him not to touch her and went up in flames each time he took her like a madman, and even returned his passion and touched him and drove him crazy, he still wasn't satisfied.

Something was missing. It was something he hadn't noticed or cared about before with other women.

He noticed that although he possessed his wife's beautiful body, he still wasn't allowed to touch anything else. She held back her mind and heart from him.

It shouldn't really matter to him, but it did.

He wanted to possess Gauri Bhil's body along with her mind and heart.

The woman is driving me mad.

Why else would he be seeking the heart of a woman who hated him?

A knock on the door interrupted his stormy thoughts.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and it was the investigation lead.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Thakvar,” the man greeted.

Rishab nodded.

The man sat and placed a thick file on the desk between them.

“This is the report about the Meena clan heir, Mr. Thakvar.”

CHAPTER 39

“Gauri, wait.”

It was evening, and Gauri had just returned after a long day of overseeing the shipments when she was greeted by her uncle.

Her uncle looked worried. “Gauri, there are rumors about another attack being planned on Rishab. I tried to warn him several times, but he’s not taking it seriously. You should insist that he postpone the West clans meeting until things get safer.”

Gauri knew the rumors could be true. She had gotten information from her informers as well about some rebel clans wanting to stop the peace negotiation.

“Things will never be entirely safe, uncle. Unless the clan negotiations go through and everyone agrees to a peace pact, there will always be danger in the region.”

Her uncle didn’t seem convinced. “But—”

“We will carry our weapons with us.”

Weapons were not allowed in peace negotiations. But she could place them in the vehicles in case of an attack.

Her uncle sighed. “I offered Rishab to go in his place as the Bhil clan head for this meeting, but he seems determined to go despite the threat.”

She didn’t say anything. She knew that since her husband was the one who had met with the clan heads of the western province, they would expect him to attend the meeting.

“Don’t worry,” she told her uncle. “We’ll take additional security. And...

Rishab can protect himself in case of an attack.”

After the Dhankar clan fight, word spread among the West clans that Rishab Thakvar was an able fighter.

“I know he can,” her uncle said. “But I’m worried about the Singoor curse. I’m praying the next generation heirs will escape it.”

Gauri didn’t believe in curses, but she didn’t argue with her uncle.

“We will be careful, uncle.”

Excusing herself, she went to the kitchen to ask for dinner to be sent to the master suite.

“Will Mr. Thakvar join us for dinner?” Rumi asked.

“No. He’s gone to the city and won’t be back until late.”

“Oh, then I’ll save these sweets for breakfast tomorrow,” Rumi said cheerfully.

Gauri nodded.

She went upstairs to her room.

Taking a quick shower, she came out and sat at the small table to have her meal.

It felt strangely odd to be eating alone. She realized she had gotten used to having her meals with her enemy husband, either at the dining table or in their master suite or even when they ate together while overseeing shipments and meeting other clans.

She shook her head at the irrational feeling.

She had most of her meals alone for many years, and her new husband had come into her life only for a few months.

But despite knowing she shouldn’t get used to her enemy husband and even having told him that he didn’t matter to her, her mind was always filled with thoughts of him.

She was curious as to why he was determined to meddle in the shipment

and other operations of the Bhil clan. At first, she had thought his meddling was to get back at her. To show her that he was now the Bhil clan head and everything of hers belonged to him.

But it was beyond a show of power. There was something else going on.

He also took a huge amount of risk to go and meet with remote clans and have them agree to the peace treaty. She initially thought it was a way for the Thakvars to gain control of the Singoor desert.

But to gain control, the Thakvars could rely only on commissioning the Goddess Shakti statue. All the clans of Singoor would be grateful. There was no need to take dangerous risks and go to the remote clans.

Then why? Why is he doing all of this?

She sensed it was for a very personal reason. Rishab Thakvar was driven by a strong personal reason to achieve a goal.

It shouldn't matter to me.

She was married to him for the sake of an alliance, and his personal reasons shouldn't matter. She had told him that as well.

But she continued to think about him.

It's just desire.

Her mind was muddled due to desire as she had never felt desire before, not even towards her late husband, Kamlesh Meena, whom she had loved with all of her heart.

Her first marriage was also a political alliance, but it was very different.

Kamlesh Meena became her husband because she had asked him to marry her. She had told him about the West clans conspiring to take over the Bhil province. They were pressuring her to marry Girish Dhankar, who was the heir of one of the West Singoor clans.

Kamlesh Meena married her and saved her clan. But until his death, he remained faithful to the memory of the woman he loved.

She still recalled her wedding night from nearly ten years ago.

At that time, she had been a fifteen-year-old bride who had been nervous as well as terrified. The older women of her clan had told her about what consummation of a marriage meant. They told her that she had to lie under her husband and let him do what he wanted. They had dressed her in enticing clothes, which didn't look all that enticing since her body hadn't developed fully and she was still a young girl.

Even though her legs shook and she tried not to throw up in nervousness, she had somehow gathered courage and told Kamlesh Meena that she was ready to consummate the marriage on the wedding night.

She clearly remembered the shock on his face. And then, his face had gentled.

“Gauri, you are like a daughter to me. The reason I married you is to protect you and your infant sister. I will not touch you, and my heart will always belong to a woman who is no more.”

He groomed her to become an able heir to the Bhil and Meena clan. And until his death, he remained a mentor and father figure to her.

She hadn't revealed to anyone that her first marriage wasn't consummated. If people would come to know, they would challenge the fact of her being the heir to the Meena clan, which would threaten the clan's safety.

She guarded the secret.

Rishab Thakvar almost discovered the secret in the holy land tent when he found spots of blood on the bed. They had consummated their marriage. But she had lied to him, saying she had started her period.

Luckily, he had believed her.

He didn't know that he had taken her virginity.

And until him, she had never known a man's touch or desire. She had only

known responsibilities towards her clans.

But her enemy husband made her aware of being a woman capable of feeling desire.

Her cheeks heated, and a thrill passed through her body at the thought of her enemy husband.

The man was demanding and unpredictable and angered her most of the time. But his touch always awoke her passion.

Each night, he made love to her like a possessed devil and demanded her response.

Even though a part of her rational mind insisted she deny him and push him away, she couldn't. She desired her enemy husband equally.

She touched him and kissed him and gave in to the passion

It's just desire.

Desire was a temporary thing. It was known to lessen and disappear after a while.

Taking a deep breath, she finished her meal and got up from the table, and prepared for bed. But before that, she went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet to take a pill.

She took the birth control pill with the water kept in the silver jug next to the bed. Her enemy husband had also seen her taking them but didn't question her.

A part of her wondered what would happen if she stopped taking them. Then she might fall pregnant. She had never dreamed of having a child or a family before, but lately, a strange urge filled her. And the thought of having Rishab Thakvar's baby fluttered her stomach.

But she knew that even if she did end up getting pregnant, it wouldn't change anything. He would leave once the purpose of the alliance was achieved. She would then be left alone to bring up his child. A child she

would cherish and love.

A deep craving rose inside her, which she promptly crushed.

She had already tricked him into marrying her, but she wouldn't trick him into giving her a child. It was against her morals in every sense.

Taking a deep breath, she got into the bed.

She woke up to a heated kiss.

Although the kiss was heated, she felt coolness on the muscled body. And her hands gripped thick, short hair that was dripping.

Heated mouth left hers and she met with the dark eyes of her husband.

“You are wet,” she whispered.

“I just showered,” he replied. “I didn’t dry. I was in a hurry.”

She didn’t have to ask what he was in a hurry for.

“Hold me,” he demanded.

She held him. Their mouths met with hunger. She gasped when he pushed into her and then began to move in deep, powerful strokes that stole her breath and raced her heart.

The world caught fire as she clung to him. The flames rose higher until the ecstasy peaked, and she shattered in his arms.

He didn’t stop. He demanded more and made her shatter again and again while he found his release in the depths of her body.

His heavy, muscled body rolled away from her, but a moment later, he dragged her close and held her in his arms like he did each night.

Warmth enveloped her, and this time, she felt a different kind of pleasure. Her eyes closed, and before she fell into an exhausted sleep, she once again reminded herself.

It’s just desire.

CHAPTER 40

The clan meeting was held in a large make-shift tent in the holy land.

Gauri looked around the long table where all the clan heads of western Singoor were in attendance.

All of them were keenly focused on the man who had initiated the meeting.

“I’m Rishab Thakvar, and this is my wife Gauri who is the heiress of the Bhil and Meena clans.”

He spoke in the local language of the West side clans and in a perfect dialect. Although she had seen him speak the language of the Meewar clan, it still caught her by surprise.

“I have already met each of you when I visited your clans,” he said. “But I wanted all of us to meet in the holy land and seal the peace treaty. The terms and conditions of the treaty are nearly the same as what the East side clans have signed with my brother Shivay.”

He listed the terms that would ensure the clans never attacked each other and would participate in the development of the West side of Singoor.

“Since the Bhil clan has better access and is at a central point on the west side, the current school and hospital will be extended and developed to accommodate all your clans. The West market will also be expanded, and new paths will be laid for easier shipments. My wife Gauri will work on the plans and present it to you all in the coming weeks.”

There were murmurs of agreement.

Gauri was shocked. She thought that the peace treaty would only be about

bringing the clans together and ending violence. She didn't think it would involve anything else. She had always wanted to extend the school and hospital in her clan, but she couldn't due to a lack of resources.

It was one of the reasons why she had allowed her uncle to bring in businessmen who would help achieve that dream.

“The money required for the development will come from the Thakvars,” Rishab continued. “In return, the Thakvars will not seek any control of the West clans. The sole purpose is to restore peace in the Singoor region.”

The clan heads were taken in by his words and looked quite impressed by him.

“Your wife Gauri Bhil was married before,” one of the clan heads said. “She didn't bear any children with her first husband. What if she doesn't bear you any children either? Will you take a new wife from one of our clans then?”

There were murmurs across the tent.

Gauri was surprised by the anger she felt at the question, even though she had suggested the same to Rishab Thakvar when he had come with an alliance offer to her sister.

“The alliance will hold strong whether or not an heir is produced,” he replied. “And in case I don't have heirs, there will be a Thakvar heir through my brothers who will inherit the legacy.”

“That won't happen,” a clan head replied. The old woman looked at Gauri. “The Bhil heiress will produce strong children with the Thakvar heir. The first heir will be born within a year of goddess Shakti returning to Singoor.”

Gauri's face heated at the old woman's words.

Although Gauri didn't believe in prophecies, she knew most clan people did, and a few were considered to be seers who predicted the future.

The other clan heads seemed to believe that the future heir would be from

the West clan. Gauri could see that most of them believed in her enemy husband's words. For those who couldn't understand, she told them what the words in the peace treaty meant.

"You were responsible for the death of my clansman two months ago," a clan leader said, looking at her. "His family said he killed himself because he knew you ordered your men on a hunt to find him."

Gauri knew which man the clan leader was referring to.

"That man shot an arrow into my husband's back," she replied.

Not only had that man attacked Rishab Thakvar, but he did it using an arrow that resembled hers. She had ordered her men to find the attacker and bring him back alive for investigation, but days later, they found out that the man had died of self-inflicted poisoning.

She hadn't told her enemy husband about it even though she knew he had sent his men for investigation. She sensed his heavy gaze on her.

"Kamlesh Meena groomed you well," one of the clan leaders said. "If you trust your new husband, then we will go by your word."

Gauri nodded but did not say anything to that statement. She wasn't entirely sure she trusted her enemy husband. But casting any doubts on his motive would risk and threaten the peace of the West region.

"I promise to lay down my life if needed to protect Singoor," she said, repeating the vows she had made when she was made the heiress to Bhil and Meena clans.

"As the protector of Singoor, I promise the same," Rishab Thakvar said in a deep voice from next to her. "I promise to lay down my life if needed to protect Singoor."

The clan heads repeated the same vows.

There were no other doubts or questions raised, and everyone agreed to the peace treaty to lay down the weapons and participate in the development

of the West region.

Soon, the clan meeting concluded.

“May Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti’s blessings be with you both,” the clan heads said.

Everyone dispersed.

Later, when she sat in the SUV and they began heading home, he looked at her.

“You hunted the man who attacked me,” he said. “I think you care about me a little, my dear wife.”

Her cheeks heated.

“I don’t care about you,” she said. “I did it as a duty. I would have done the same for anyone who was attacked in my clan by an outsider.”

Her enemy husband’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Are you sure?”

She sucked in a breath. “Yes!”

His mouth remained twisted, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the school and hospital expansion plan?” she demanded, changing the topic to a more important one.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Would you have believed my motives?”

No, she wouldn’t have believed him. Not at that time. But now, after seeing and hearing him at the clan meeting, she wanted to trust him.

“Why are you doing all of this?” she asked. “You are not even from here. Why is obtaining peace in Singoor important to you?”

He didn’t reply and looked at her for a moment. Something flashed through his face before it became unreadable.

“Singoor belongs to me as much as it does to you. My father and his ancestors are from here.”

His words were deliberately casual, but she knew there was something

more. Something personal. She kept quiet, not wanting to cross the boundary of their relationship. She reminded herself that they were married only for alliance. They were enemies who turned into lovers due to desire. But apart from desire, she didn't want to feel anything else towards him.

The journey was silent until he spoke on the satellite phone to the security following them.

“Return home,” he instructed them. “We’ll come later.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, knowing there wasn't anything else they had planned together that day.

“To the Meena fort,” he replied.

She frowned. “Why?”

He turned his head. The look in his eyes made her heart race in a familiar way.

“Because I want to be inside you, my dear wife. And I don't want to wait until night to get some damn privacy.”

Her face heated. She knew as soon as they stepped into the Bhil mansion, she would be pulled away to attend to things that needed her attention.

She didn't protest. Instead, her heart thudded in anticipation when he drove faster.

If her body wasn't craving his touch, she would have been worried about the speed of the vehicle.

Barely a moment after the SUV came to a screeching stop, he unbuckled his seatbelt and grabbed the back of her neck and kissed her. Heat exploded, and her hands fell on his traditional shirt.

By the time she pushed up his shirt and touched his heated skin, he moved his seat back and pulled her on top of him. His fingers tugged on the ties back of her dress, baring her on top.

His mouth enclosed over her breast and sucked. She cried out and held his

head.

Burning urgency took over, giving them no time to remove their clothes completely.

He pushed her dress up and adjusted his bottom wear. Then, drawing his head back, with his dark eyes burning into hers, he held her hips and lifted her and then thrust deeply into her. She gasped. Pain combined with pleasure and light burst behind her eyes as he moved like a storm underneath her. Once again, her world ignited and caught flames before exploding.

Much later, she was slumped against him with their foreheads touching while his hand caressed her cheek gently.

“Let’s get away for a few days,” he said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere in the world. Pick a place.”

Her heart jerked. She had never been outside of Singoor, let alone the country.

“I can’t,” she said.

“If it’s the passport, I can—”

She shook her head. “No. I can’t because I have responsibilities here.”

He was quiet.

Once again, she realized how different their lives were. While his personal circumstances brought him to Singoor, it was only a matter of time before he would go back to his original life that was outside Singoor.

A strange ache tugged at her heart. Ignoring the ache, she withdrew from him and sat back in the passenger seat.

“My uncle must be waiting for us,” she said, adjusting her clothes.

He looked at her for a while and nodded.

CHAPTER 41

Gauri was in the prayer room dancing.

The dance was gentle and graceful, with small steps of the feet, depicting the coyness of the goddess as she drew the attention of her husband, Lord Shiva.

By the time the dance ended, her heart was filled with joy, and a smile formed on her face. Joining her hands, she bowed her head deeply before the dancing statue of the lord.

With her smile lingering on her face, she straightened and went to a corner to remove her dancing anklets. Placing them in their spot, she turned to leave.

Her smile continued to linger until she looked towards the door.

Her heart jerked seeing her enemy husband standing near the doorway. He must have watched her dance.

She knew it wasn't the first time he had seen her dancing. He had seen her in the garden prayer room on the first day of his stay at the Bhil mansion. Since then, he has often seen her dance.

All those times, she had hated him and didn't want him to come anywhere near the place she considered sacred to her. But now, she didn't feel that way anymore.

She didn't speak until she stepped out of the prayer room. And then, she went towards the earthen pot to drink water.

While she sipped on the cool water, she noticed that he was dressed in Western clothes, indicating he was going out of Singoor. He was wearing a three-piece suit with a tie.

Her stomach fluttered, appreciating how well the clothes fit him, accentuating his broad shoulders and tall, muscular form. His handsome face held a stubble since he hadn't shaved the previous day.

Her cheeks heated, recalling how the roughness of his beard had felt against her skin the previous night.

His mouth twisted, watching her face.

“Get ready soon, wife,” he said. “We are going to the city.”

Her heart jerked.

“What? I can't come with you anywhere. I have to oversee—”

“You have several people in charge who can take care of things for a day,” he said. “I already spoke to them. You can meet your sister in the city. I'll be in meetings during the day, but we can spend the evening together and fly back tomorrow morning.”

She was shocked by his words.

She wanted to be angry that he gave orders to her people and was making plans on her behalf.

But she wasn't angry. She felt conflicted.

A sensible part of her wanted to refuse, but another part of her badly wanted to go with him.

She sucked in a deep breath.

“Fine,” she replied.

His mouth twisted at her tone. “Let's go.”

Komal was shocked and excited to see Gauri.

“My God! I never thought I would see you here!”

Gauri smiled as her sister hugged her tightly.

“I’m so glad Rishab Thakvar got you out of Singoor! You never came when I asked you so many times.”

Gauri’s cheeks heated. She was still in shock that her arrogant husband had ordered her people and flown her out of Singoor. After a nerve-racking yet exciting helicopter ride, he put her in an SUV with security. And then, with an arrogant, “*See you in the evening, wife,*” he brushed his lips against her cheek and ordered the SUV driver and security to take her to her sister’s university.

“I’m so excited! There are so many things I want to show you!”

Gauri smiled at her sister. “I’m only here for a day.”

Komal’s excitement didn’t dim. “Then let’s go right away!”

Gauri laughed as Komal held her hand and took her around the university campus to meet with her friends.

Komal’s friends were a group of young girls and boys who studied at the university with Komal. As soon as Komal made the introductions, they looked at Gauri in fascination and curiosity.

The group was dressed like Komal in modern clothing that people their age wore.

Their eyes fell on Gauri’s traditional dress, jewelry, and the small jeweled knife she always carried with her. They also stared at her face, where she had her clan markings.

“My sister is the best arrow shot and a fast horse rider. She also makes the

best sweets in Singoor! She can..."

Gauri smiled at her sister's gushing compliments. The group listened quietly at first, but slowly, they relaxed when Komal began speaking about Singoor delicacies that were shipped to the university campus.

"Komal often speaks of you, Mrs. Meena."

"Yes, and thank you for sending extra sweets, especially for us. We really enjoy them."

Komal looked at her friends. "My sister is Mrs. Thakvar now."

One of the boys in the group looked at her. "Is it the same as the US-based Thakvar Enterprises company that has many big buildings in the downtown area here? They even purchased a super-specialty hospital where I intern."

Komal nodded. "Yes! My sister's husband owns the company with his brothers."

Komal's friends looked all the more intrigued that the owner of an international company was married to someone from a desert clan.

"All right, I'm going to take my sister out," Komal told her friends. "I'll see you all in the evening!"

Komal led her out of the campus, and they went to the waiting SUVs with security and sat in a vehicle.

"I wish I'd known you were coming; then I would have planned the day better! But it's not too late."

Gauri let out a small laugh. "I don't need to go anywhere special. I want to spend time with you."

Komal frowned, and then her eyes lit up. "I know where we can go. Let's go to the mall! We can shop there! I can show you where my friends and I get our clothes."

Seeing the excitement on her younger sister's face, Gauri nodded.

They went to a large building with several floors that were filled with

shops and had a crowd that was several times more than the markets in Singoor.

Komal took her to a few shops, and they purchased dresses and accessories. Gauri smiled at the excitement on her sister's face. A couple of hours later, they had several bags in their hands which they handed over to the security following them.

It was late in the afternoon when they sat in a place to eat where food was being served in trays.

Komal laughed. "I think we need some of the security personnel to hold back, or we will cause a commotion in the mall with so many armed men."

Gauri saw that along with the security she had gotten from the city, there was another team of armed men wearing a similar uniform waiting at a distance. They ensured that the tables around Komal and her were not occupied by people.

"Rishab added the security team after the wedding," Komal said softly.

Gauri was surprised. She was also surprised that her sister was referring to Rishab Thakvar informally by his name.

"Promise you won't get angry if I say something," Komal said tentatively.

"I will never get angry with you," Gauri replied.

Komal looked at her. "I know you'll never be angry with me. But I'm talking about getting angry with your husband... I... met him and spoke to him a few weeks ago."

Anger shot through Gauri.

"Did he threaten you?" she asked.

Komal shook her head. "No. I went to his office to speak with him about you. To tell him not to hurt you and that it's not your fault. I told him you tricked him into marriage because you were protecting me. And I also told him not to tell you about me meeting him."

Gauri was quiet.

She should have been angry that her enemy husband hadn't told her about talking to her sister, but she was glad that he had respected her sister's wishes.

"I'm not angry," Gauri said softly.

Komal looked relieved, and then there was a smile on her face.

"All right, let's get some ice cream! And then, we can go to your hotel suite so I can help you get ready for the evening."

Gauri nodded.

“You look so beautiful! Your husband is going to be blown away!”

Gauri looked at herself in the mirror while her sister put the last of the finishing touches on the makeup. Her sister put on pale red lipstick and arranged her hair to fall in loose waves over her back. She had yet to put on the accessories that would match the dress. She was wearing a long sapphire-blue colored dress that wasn't entirely traditional or modern. It was the only purchase she had made for herself that day because her sister had insisted on it.

They had returned from shopping and were taken to the hotel suite where she and her enemy husband would be staying the night. It was a large multi-room suite on the topmost floor of the building. She could see nearly the entire city from the large windows that nearly covered the walls.

“Rishab Thakvar is going to fall in love with you even more!”

Gauri's heart jerked. “What? He doesn't love me, and neither do I. Our marriage is an alliance.”

But Komal shook her head with a smile on her face. “I don't think so. Even though I was terrified at that time, I still recall how he looked at you when he had come to talk of the alliance.”

“He came to speak about a marriage alliance with you,” Gauri reminded her sister.

“Yes, but I still remember that he couldn't take his eyes off you. He watched you during the meal and also later when you ordered him to remove his clothes.” Her sister laughed. “My god, the way you two were looking at each other, I was too shocked and scared at that time to register what those looks meant.”

Gauri's face heated.

"You are mistaken. There wasn't anything like that. If anything, he hated me then. I had... attacked him in the desert some time ago because I didn't want him to think of an alliance with our clan."

Komal shook her head again. "No, I don't think he hates you. He had the same look in his eyes when I spoke to him about you."

Gauri didn't know what look her sister was referring to. Apart from anger and hatred, Gauri had seen lust and desire in her enemy husband's eyes. It wasn't love. But she couldn't tell her innocent sister about the difference between desire and love.

"I tricked him into marriage," Gauri said. "But we are together for the alliance. Once the Goddess Shakti statue gets commissioned, he is not going to stay in Singoor. We will go our separate ways."

Komal shook her head. "He is not going to leave," she said confidently. "They have opened their office headquarters in the city. The Thakvar brothers are going to live in Singoor. And they are going to remain here for many generations."

Gauri's heart jerked at the statement.

There wouldn't be a next generation from the Bhil and Thakvar alliance. The birth control pills she was taking would ensure that.

Komal smiled. "I know you think of me as your little sister whom you have to protect, but I do know a few things when it comes to matters of heart."

"Do you love someone?" Gauri asked.

Komal laughed. "No, but I want to, eventually."

Gauri looked at her sister. "I want you to know you can choose whoever your heart desires as your husband. I will ensure no one comes in between."

Komal laughed and hugged her. "Thank you!"

Gauri smiled. It felt odd to talk about matters of the heart with her younger sister.

The sound of a soft beep interrupted the conversation.

Gauri's heart thudded. The charged air she felt around her indicated who it was. A few moments later, Rishab Thakvar appeared at the bedroom door.

"Hi Rishab," Komal greeted shyly.

He nodded at her sister's greeting.

He was wearing the same clothes as he did when he had watched her dancing that morning.

She had changed her dress twice since then. His gaze swept slowly over her, taking in her new dress and different hairstyle.

Her cheeks heated at the slow pursual.

"I... uh... need to go," Komal suddenly said, walking towards the door. "I have an assignment I need to finish by tomorrow. Uh... bye, Rishab."

Once again, he nodded.

Gauri accompanied her sister to the hotel suite door, where the armed security was waiting outside.

Komal hugged her. "I'll come home during the holidays."

Gauri kissed her sister's cheek. "Good luck with your exams."

Saying goodbye to her sister, Gauri shut the door and returned to the bedroom.

She had barely taken a step inside when she was pulled into strong arms, and her heated mouth met with hers in a deep, rough kiss.

She threw her arms around the broad shoulders and returned the kiss.

But he ended the kiss too soon.

"Fuck, if I don't stop now, I'll have you under me on that bed, and we'll never go out for dinner," he said.

She almost said she didn't mind.

He took a step away and loosened his tie. "I'll take a quick shower, and we can go for dinner soon." His mouth twisted. "I was hoping I'd be back in time for you to join me in the shower before we get ready for dinner. But it looks like I'm late."

Her face heated, recalling how uninhibited he was when it came to passion.

While he stepped into the large bathroom suite, she went to the dressing area and checked on the accessories that she could wear with her dress. She picked the multi-colored diamond bracelet that was given to her as the Thakvar bride. She left her ears and neck bare.

Just as she finished brushing her hair, which had messed up slightly due to the kiss, he stepped out of the bathroom.

Her eyes fell on him, and she admired his tall, muscular body wrapped in a white towel. He moved with the grace of a wild wolf she had seen a few times in the Singoor desert. He had the same smooth, determined stride.

"Stop looking at me like that, or we'll never leave the room until morning," a deep voice said.

Her cheeks heated once again.

It's just desire, she reminded herself.

Dinner was arranged in an intimate setting on the rooftop of the hotel.

The night view of the city lit up with lights looked beautiful. Soft instrumental music played in the background from somewhere. There were no other people around except for the uniformed staff, who only came to serve them food and drinks.

She preferred it to go somewhere crowded or noisy.

“How did your day go?” he asked, sipping wine from a crystal glass.

She had taken a sip as well. It was different and smoother than the fermented drinks prevalent in Singoor.

“My sister and I went shopping... at a mall. I bought this dress there. Komal picked the dress and helped me with the hairstyle and makeup.”

He reached across the small round dinner table and touched her face, the tip of his calloused fingers running over her cheekbones and jawline. Her stomach fluttered.

They were intimately acquainted with every part of their bodies during passion. And yet, his simple touches always fluttered her stomach.

“You look beautiful,” he said. “But you look more beautiful with your clan markings.”

She knew he meant the words since he often watched her put on the black dots each morning when she got ready.

“They don’t suit the dress,” she said.

His mouth twisted. “Does it matter to you?”

It didn’t. But her sister was excited to help her get ready for the evening.

She took a bite of the delicious food on her plate. She noticed that it wasn’t drastically different from what she was used to having. There was a

hint of familiarity. The uniformed chef who had served them called it fusion food, which he hoped she enjoyed. She liked it a lot.

“Why did you move your company headquarters to this city?” she asked.

“To be close to home.”

Her heart jerked.

“But Singoor isn’t your home.”

He watched her. “It is now.”

She sucked in a deep breath and looked away. Singoor was his temporary home until things settled down and peace was obtained. After which, he would return to his original home.

She looked at him again. “My sister mentioned that she met you at your office a few weeks ago.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I’m glad you didn’t succeed in marrying my sister,” she said. “You would have bullied her, and she wouldn’t have opposed anything. You would have done whatever you wanted without hindrance.”

She didn’t know why she was taunting him. But something made her want to put distance between them.

“My sister would have made a perfect alliance bride to you.”

He was watching her closely.

“Maybe, but I made a decision to marry you, my dear wife,” he said.

She met his eyes. “You mean you decided to *remain* married to me after I tricked you?”

She expected anger on his face. But there wasn’t.

His mouth twisted. “I knew it was you before the wedding rituals were completed,” he said.

“No, you couldn’t have guessed it was me.”

“It wasn’t a guess,” he said. He reached for her left hand and brushed his

thumb against the back of her palm. Her skin broke into goosebumps at the touch.

“I saw your tattoo,” he said.

Her heart jerked violently in shock.

“What?”

“When you placed your hand in mine at the beginning of the rituals, I saw the dove tattoo and knew it was you and not your sister who had come to the wedding as my bride.”

She was stunned.

She thought the dark red henna patterns on her left hand had covered her tattoo, which was the Meena clan insignia in honor of her late husband.

“Then why didn’t you stop the ceremony?” she asked.

He knew, yet he hadn’t stopped the wedding ceremony to demand that his original bride be brought in.

His thumb continued to brush against her skin. “Because I knew what I wanted. And I wanted you.”

She sucked in a breath. “You wanted... revenge for what I had done to you.”

His mouth twisted. “Yes, that too,” he replied. “But more than that, I wanted you as mine.”

Her heart thudded, and she didn’t know what those words meant. She didn’t want to ask him.

The rest of the meal continued in silence.

Later that night, his lovemaking was intense.

He stared at her, commanding her attention while thrusting into her deeply. The intensity of his gaze made her feel things beyond just lust or desire. Unable to meet his gaze anymore, she clutched his hair and pulled his head down. Their mouths met in a deep kiss. His tongue invaded hers as he drove into her.

He began to move faster and rougher. She gasped but urged him on by digging her nails into his back and wrapping her legs higher around his hips.

He went in even deeper, taking his fill while he pushed her towards blinding pleasure.

Even as she screamed her release, she heard his harsh groan calling out her name while he climaxed deep inside her.

Her body shook and trembled with his.

But the need inside her remained. She shoved at his shoulders. When he withdrew from her and fell to the side, she moved over him.

She kissed his jawline and stroked his hard muscles over his chest and stomach. She then moved her lips lower, swirling her tongue over the hair-roughened skin on his chest and stomach. She followed the thin trail on his hard stomach. Then, sweeping her long hair to the side, she moved even lower. She cupped his hardness and put her lips around the heated, velvety skin. His arousal jerked, and a harsh cry emitted from his throat, and he gripped her hair.

He had taught her to pleasure him, but very rarely did he allow her the chance since his needs were stronger, and he drove her crazy with pleasure.

But now, she took it from him.

She drew out his pleasure while filling the need deep inside her.

He let out hoarse groans, and the fingers gripping her hair tightened. Just when he grew impossibly big in her mouth, he held her shoulders and dragged her up. Once again, he rolled her underneath him and pushed into her.

She gave in to the blinding desire that allowed no thoughts in her mind.

It was much later in the night when their passion subsided, and he dragged her close and held her tightly in his arms while they slept.

This is just desire.

But a part of her knew what she felt was no longer just desire.

CHAPTER 42

“Mom and Dad are nearing the third part of their trip,” said Shivay. “We should begin preparations.”

Rishab was at the home office talking to his brothers.

With only some more goddess Shakti temples remaining to visit, Rishab’s parents would return from their pilgrimage in a few weeks. Soon, they would have to begin the preparations for their arrival and for the ceremony in Singoor temple required to commission the goddess statue.

“Are the clan heads informed?” Shivay asked.

“The West clan heads have been informed,” said Rishab.

All the clan heads of Singoor were invited to the goddess statue commissioning ceremony.

Rishab planned to meet the clan heads again in the coming weeks to begin executing the promises made during the meeting in the holy lands.

“I am meeting with one last clan today,” said Nakul. “In two weeks, I will have the South clans meeting and will extend the invitation to the clan heads.”

“Good,” said Shivay. “We need to ensure maximum attendance from clan heads.”

Rishab knew that the maximum attendance of the clan heads would show unity and send a strong message of peace. The prevailing distrust and lack of communication among clans would reduce, ensuring peace would continue.

“The security details should be ready by next week,” he said.

One of the most critical parts of the preparations was the security. The

security for not just the ceremony in Singoor temple but also the mines and manufacturing units.

Tantra would try to stop the ceremony at any cost. He knew the commencement of the ceremony would mean Singoor would attain peace. Tantra would most likely use another bomb threat as a warning and distraction and to get him and his brothers out of Singoor.

“Good, then let’s meet at the office next week to discuss the details,” said Shivay.

The call ended.

Rishab was about to get up when there was a knock on the office door.

“Come in.”

It was the security head.

“The vehicles and horses have been readied, Mr. Thakvar.”

“Good. We’ll be down shortly.”

Rishab knew Gauri must be back from the prayer room and would be getting ready to go to the market as planned.

He got up from the chair and stepped out of the office room. Although he was already ready, he didn’t go down for breakfast. He went to the master suite.

He shook his head at the anticipation he felt to see his wife.

The unhealthy obsession he had with her didn’t seem to lessen. If anything, it grew in intensity with each passing day.

He pushed open the bedroom door and walked in. He saw that she was seated at the dressing mirror and was getting ready.

Their eyes met in the mirror as he went closer. He was wearing a traditional dark red outfit that surprisingly matched the color of her dress.

She didn’t say anything and continued to put the clan marking dots on her face.

Her silences roused him as much as her words did.

He had taken her like a madman the previous night and the nights before that. And yet, the urge to always touch her didn't lessen.

So, he touched her.

He picked up one of the jewelry pieces she kept aside to wear. It was an anklet.

He knelt beside her and slightly raised her long skirt to fasten the delicate chain around her ankle.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He raised his eyes and met with hers.

His mouth twisted. “Helping you get ready faster, my dear wife. We are getting late.”

Her eyes flashed, but she didn't say anything.

He picked the matching chain and fastened it on her other ankle.

He then stood up and picked up the thick arm bracelet, which resembled a coiled snake representing the Bhil clan. Her skin broke into goosebumps as his fingers brushed the soft, honey-colored skin of her arm.

“You seem quite experienced putting jewelry on women,” she said.

Although her tone was casual, he sensed an underlying curiosity and jealousy.

A thrill passed through him. He didn't want Gauri Meena Bhil to feel emotionally detached from him. He wanted her to be curious and possessive about him like he was about her.

His mouth twisted. “I haven't put jewelry on any other woman, my dear wife,” he replied. “Only you.”

He had obsessively watched her many times in the morning when she got ready.

He knew how she wore her jewelry and watched as she put on the

markings of her clan. It was like watching beautiful, exotic poetry in motion.

“Whom did you purchase the bangles and accessories for when you came to Singoor the first time?”

He knew she was referring to the first time he had seen her at the market during the sandstorm. He had been carrying a colorful pouch that had bangles and accessories he had purchased from an old woman.

“My mother,” he replied.

He didn't mention his sister. It was something he and his brothers had decided when they got married. They kept Nandini a secret from the people of Singoor. Ishani only found out when she had gone to San Francisco and met his sister there.

“Did your mother like them?” she asked, looking at him in the mirror.

“Yes, she did. My father has bought her many more since then.”

He picked up a thick chain and wrapped it around her waist before fastening it. He felt her stomach quiver when he deliberately brushed the back of his fingers against her soft skin.

She sat through his ministrations, watching as he put jewelry on her.

The last piece was a necklace with the Thakvar insignia pendant. The piece of jewelry declared to the world that she belonged to him.

With his mouth twisting, he fastened it around her neck. “I like this the best,” he said. “It shows that you are mine.”

“I'm not yours,” she said with a haughty chin raise.

“But you are mine, my dear wife,” he said, lowering his head and biting the soft tip of her ear. She shivered.

“Tonight,” he said. “I'm going to make you wear just this necklace and nothing else while I make you scream my name and tell me who you belong to.”

Her cheeks flushed. “We are getting late to the market,” she snapped.

His mouth twisted. Although her voice sounded angry, it was also slightly breathless.

The market was quite crowded.

Since the small building couldn't hold the crowd, the majority of the stalls were placed outside.

“Mr. Thakvar, so far, we have eight clans in attendance. Others are on the way.”

Rishab nodded.

It was the first time in nearly two decades that the majority of the western clans were attending the market to sell and buy their goods. He could see that there was still the initial wariness among the clans since many of them hadn't communicated with each other for several years.

But the ease was settling in, and the atmosphere was turning lively at some places with music and dancing.

“Keep an eye on the clan heads and ensure there are no major clashes among the clans.”

No weapons were allowed in the market. The security ensured everyone was checked. But even though people didn't carry weapons, he anticipated some heated exchanges that could cause trouble or tensions among the clans.

“Yes, Mr. Thakvar,” the security head replied before leaving.

Rishab stayed in his spot while the bustling crowd moved around him. His eyes began to search for his wife. And he found her a short moment later at a distance, buying bangles from another clan.

There was a small smile on her face while she spoke to the old man selling the bangles.

He wanted to capture that smile and lock it away for himself.

She had never smiled at him. Their stormy marriage had never allowed her

to lower her defenses against him enough to smile. And her smile wasn't something he could demand or draw out from her like he did with passion. It was something she had to give him freely on her own.

I will make her smile at me.

He knew her feelings were changing towards him. He sensed the change after their trip to the city. She no longer hated him, and he witnessed softness in her eyes and tenderness in her touch.

But he knew she didn't love him. Not like she did with her first husband.

Although he no longer begrudged the dead man of Gauri Bhil's love, he did want her to love him with everything in her heart.

I will make her love me.

Until then, she had only experienced his anger and desire. But he intended to show her he could be gentle and romantic and whatever she wanted him to be.

He would show her the world. And he would give her everything she wished for.

He planned to woo his wife.

He began walking towards her to join her, but he stopped when he heard someone calling him.

"Are you Rishab Thakvar?" a voice asked.

He turned to look at an old woman who had approached him.

"Yes," he replied.

"May god bless you, my son," the old woman said. "Because of you, I've met my sister after so many years. Even though our clans were nearby, we weren't allowed to meet. Thanks to you and the peace treaty, many families are getting united."

Rishab smiled and nodded.

He knew the unrest in the Singoor region had distanced many families,

including his. He and his brothers hoped that peace would continue forever.

The old woman left, and he turned. His eyes once again fell on his wife, who was still talking to the vendor. He was walking towards her when something caught his eye.

There was a movement on her sapphire blue clan robe. At first, he thought it was a reflection of some shiny bangle or an accessory from the nearby carts. But his blood froze when he saw that it was a red dot hovering, and it was being focused right on Gauri's chest.

CHAPTER 43

Gauri was speaking to a bangles vendor when she heard Rishab shouting her name and saying something.

She turned and saw him rushing towards her.

The look on his face and his tone alerted her. She reached for her concealed knife and looked around him to see if there was any danger to him. She didn't see anything and knew people didn't carry weapons such as arrows or spears to the market. Before she could ask him what had happened, he pushed her to the ground, and his body covered his.

She felt his body jerking.

A moment later, he raised his head and looked at her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“What happened?” she asked.

He didn't say anything. He moved away from her and stood up. People around them gathered to see what had happened. But as soon as she got up, he held her hand and began walking away fast.

Sensing the urgency and knowing there was danger, she went along with him.

They went past the crowded market and went towards their vehicles parked outside. When they reached the SUV, instead of going to the front passenger seat, he opened the door at the back. He pushed her inside and got in next to her.

For a split moment, she thought he wanted to kiss her or get intimate like

he usually did at the back of the SUV. But she sensed something was very wrong.

“What happened—”

“There’s a sniper. Catch him alive.”

She realized he was talking to someone on the earpiece.

He was watching her. His eyes were glazed, and there was sweat gathering around his temples.

Her heart began to thud sickly.

He was too young to get a heart attack. He was also vitally strong and healthy.

“Rishab, what’s wrong,” she asked, panic gripping her.

She raised her hand and placed it on his stubbled cheek to check if his body temperature was high.

“Are you worried about me... my dear wife?” he asked.

His mouth twisted slightly in a small smile, but there was a grimace of pain on his handsome face. His breathing got heavier, and his words were slower.

“Rishab... tell me what’s wrong!” she demanded.

He continued to watch her.

“Sam... send help quickly,” his words slurred. “Gunshot wounds.”

With those words, his eyes shut before he slumped towards her. She held him in her arms. That’s when she saw that his dark red traditional shirt had turned even darker near the left shoulder and upper arm. His entire left side was nearly wet, but it wasn’t his sweat.

Her hands turned red as they were soaked with his blood.

CHAPTER 44

Gauri had never known what crippling fear meant until then.

She held Rishab's hand while he was being rushed into the hospital.

A helicopter had picked them up from the desert and landed on top of a hospital in the city. Rishab had been in and out of consciousness. The long strips of her torn clan robe that she had tied around his injuries were soaked with blood.

"Move faster!" she ordered the men pushing the stretcher on the mobile bed.

She held Rishab's hand and ran along the long hospital corridor until they reached the operating room.

"Madam, please wait outside," someone said.

"I'm his wife. I must be with him."

"But—"

She was about to reach for her knife to threaten the man not to waste time and to allow her inside when another man spoke.

"That's Mr. Rishab Thakvar's wife," the man said. "The Thakvars own the hospital. Let her in."

She was let inside the operating room.

She had to let go of Rishab's hand while they prepared him for surgery.

She wore a medical face mask and a hospital scrub and sat at a distance, watching Rishab.

Fear and agony pierced her.

Gunshot wounds.

She had never seen a gun or bullets before as they weren't used in Singoor, but she knew enough that gunshot wounds often resulted in death.

Her hands trembled as she joined her palms together and prayed while watching the surgery.

The doctors removed three bullets from Rishab's left upper arm, shoulder, and side of the lower back.

She didn't know how long she sat praying, but one of the doctors came towards her.

"We have removed the bullets successfully, Mrs. Thakvar. They didn't hit any vital organs. Mr. Thakvar is out of danger."

Intense relief passed through her.

"Thank you," she told the doctor.

"Mr. Thakvar will be put under observation for a while. He will gain consciousness in two hours."

She nodded.

As soon as the doctor left, her eyes blurred. Tears of relief stung her eyes and flowed down her cheeks.

She sucked in a shuddering breath and wiped her tears before going towards the surgery table.

Looking at her usually vitally alive and handsome husband lying unconscious broke her once again. Tears slid down her eyes, and agony and longing gripped her.

She wanted to touch him, kiss him, and feel the warmth of his skin, but she held back as her hands were still covered in his dried blood.

She felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Rishab is going to be all right, Gauri," said a soft voice.

She turned to see Ishani.

Rishab's brother Shivay was standing behind his wife with a grim look.

He didn't ask what had happened. Gauri knew Shivay Thakvar must have been informed about the circumstances of Rishab being shot.

Ishani stepped closer. She held a small golden jeweled container, which she opened. Dipping her fingers into it, she placed them on Rishab's forehead. It was the holy ash.

"I'll be here with my brother," Shivay Thakvar said. "You can freshen up and return before he gains consciousness."

Gauri wanted to refuse and stay by Rishab until he gained consciousness. But she knew she had to change from the bloodied clothes.

She nodded.

"I'll come with you," Ishani offered.

They stepped out of the surgery room, and someone was already waiting. They were led into the elevator and taken to the topmost floor of a large room.

"This is the owner's suite, Mrs. Thakvar. Mr. Rishab Thakvar will be brought in here after observation. You can freshen up here."

Gauri nodded.

The person left the suite.

"I got you a change of clothes," Ishani said.

"Thank you."

"Are you hurt as well?" Ishani asked, looking at her blood-covered hands and clothes.

"No, I'm fine."

She went inside the bathroom and took a shower. The white marble of the bathroom floor turned red as water splashed over her body.

It was Rishab's blood. Her stomach trembled in shock, and tears ran down her eyes.

She was not a stranger to the sight of blood or injuries. She had been

injured by knives and arrows and had seen people being fatally injured and killed. But the sight of Rishab's blood reminded her of how she had nearly lost him.

I love him.

There was no doubt in her mind about her feelings anymore. She couldn't deny what she had been feeling for him for a while. It wasn't just desire. Her heart belonged to Rishab Thakvar.

She couldn't imagine living in a world without him.

But she also knew love often came with sacrifices.

And she had already decided what sacrifice she would make for love.

“Nakul and Aadhya are also here,” said Ishani. “Nakul has recovered from a poison dart attack last week. The Thakvar brothers are quite strong. Even Shivay recovered from so many attacks. So, don’t worry, even Rishab will return to normal quickly.”

Gauri didn’t say anything.

They went to the surgery room. Gauri saw a man and a woman along with Shivay Thakvar. She knew they must be Rishab’s brother Nakul and his wife Aadhya, the Kanwar heiress.

She didn’t greet them.

Her eyes fell on Rishab, who still hadn’t gained consciousness. She nearly broke down once again and wanted to hold his hand and kiss him. But she controlled herself.

She took a deep breath and looked at Shivay Thakvar.

“I’m leaving,” she said. “I’m returning to the Bhil province. But I don’t want your brother to enter Singoor until the commissioning ceremony at the temple. If he does, then I will publicly denounce the alliance.”

There was a gasp.

“Gauri, what are you saying?” Ishani asked in shock.

She looked at Ishani. “If Rishab Thakvar steps into Singoor, I will renounce my marriage. The Bhil and Thakvar alliance will stand only if my conditions are met, and I will do my duty and appear at the ceremony in the Singoor temple.” She didn’t mention that after that, they would go their separate ways again.

Shivay Thakvar was silent. But there was anger on Nakul Thakvar’s face.

Ishani looked shocked and stricken, and Aadhya Kanwar looked shocked

as well.

Gauri didn't wait anymore. She walked out of the surgery room.

As soon as she reached the Bhil mansion, the household was waiting for her anxiously.

“Gauri, what happened?” her uncle asked. “Why did you and Rishab leave the market suddenly? The security isn’t saying much except that you two flew to the city.”

Gauri looked at the worried faces of her people.

“Rishab had urgent work in the city, and he had to leave. I went along with him.”

Her uncle looked slightly relieved. “Is he still in the city?” he asked.

“He had to fly out of the country for urgent work. He will be back in a few days.”

“Oh, okay.”

Excusing herself, she headed towards the master bedroom.

“Gauri, do you want to have dinner in your room?” Rumi asked.

“No, I’m not hungry.”

There was a slight frown on the housekeeper’s face.

“You don’t look well. You may be coming down with something. I’ll bring you some hot *makki raab*.”

Gauri shook her head. The way she felt right then, she knew if she ate anything, she would throw up.

“No, I just need to rest and sleep.”

Rumi didn’t say anything.

Gauri went up to the master bedroom. As soon as she stepped in, she locked the door before breaking down again.

CHAPTER 45

“Gauri, is Mr. Thakvar returning this week?”

“No, not yet. He will have to stay for a few more days.”

There was a look of disappointment on Rumi’s face.

“It’s already been two weeks. I thought he would return within a few days like he usually does.”

Gauri didn’t say anything.

“Should I send dinner to your room?” Rumi asked.

“No, I’m not hungry.”

“But you haven’t eaten anything for lunch,” Rumi said. “And you haven’t been eating well.”

“I’m fine.”

Rumi looked at her for a long moment. “Gauri... there are some speculations among the people that... you might be carrying the Bhil and Thakvar heir. That’s why you look tired and haven’t been eating well.”

Gauri’s heart jerked.

“Are you with child?” Rumi asked with a hopeful look.

Gauri wanted to say yes because it would get her people to stop worrying about her for a while. But she knew it would only be a temporary solution, and people would know within a few weeks that she was not carrying the Bhil-Thakvar heir.

“No,” she said.

Rumi’s face fell before looking hopeful once again. “We heard that the Gujjar heiress has also not conceived despite being married much before you.

There are talks that the Thakvar heirs vowed to have heirs only after they commissioned the goddess Shakti statue.”

Gauri didn't say anything.

Rumi smiled. “I have a feeling Mr. Thakvar will come home this week. I will have the cook make a batch of his favorite sweets.”

Gauri nodded, not saying anything.

She didn't have the heart to tell the cheerful old woman that Rishab Thakvar would never step into her home again.

CHAPTER 46

The world spun around her as she danced.

The current dance depicted the violent nature of the supreme god while destroying the worlds. Her mind and body were synced with the anger, rage and grief of losing a loved one.

Her chest heaved, and she spun around on her knees and feet, holding the invisible weapon destroying the worlds.

Pain sliced into her feet, which she ignored as it wasn't greater than what was in her heart, and she continued to dance.

She spun so much and for so long that her final bow was when she collapsed in front of the dancing statue of the supreme lord.

When her mind returned to reality, her chest was heaving, and there were tears running down her eyes. Something sliced into her knees, and she saw there was blood on the floor, along with the pieces of anklets that must have come loose during the dance.

The ache in her chest superseded the pain once again.

As she wiped her tears, she sensed something and turned.

Her heart jerked in shock when she saw her enemy husband leaning against the doorway of the prayer room.

She blinked, wondering if her grief was making her imagine his handsome face. She had often imagined him lying on the bed next to her, only for her fingers to touch the cold, empty pillow.

But despite the blinking, she saw him again.

Before she could say anything or get up from the floor, he stepped into the

prayer room. And then, he picked her up and carried her out.

For a long moment, she was too shocked. And then, reality hit her.

“What are you doing here!” she asked. “You are not supposed to enter Singoor until the temple ceremony!”

He didn’t respond. He continued to carry her out of the garden area and then into the mansion. The sun was already setting, which meant she must have danced for nearly twelve hours.

“Put me down, Rishab!” she said, recalling he was still recovering from an injury of bullet wounds.

He didn’t listen. He continued to carry her into the mansion.

She didn’t want to struggle because she might make the stitches of his injuries open.

“If you don’t put me down right now, I will call the security!” she threatened.

He looked at her then.

“They are busy right now. I told them to check on something.”

She sucked in an angry breath.

“Mr. Thakvar!” Rumi’s excited voice greeted. “I told Gauri you would be back soon. We even had your favorite sweets prepared yesterday.”

“Thanks, Rumi. Please send them along with an early dinner to the master suite.”

“Yes, sir!”

Gauri couldn’t believe that he just walked into her life again as if nothing had happened. She waited until he pushed open the master bedroom door and stepped in.

“I will denounce the marriage!” she declared. “You broke the conditions I put for continuing the alliance.”

He didn’t appear upset.

“How?” he asked. “How will you break the alliance?”

She sucked in a breath. “I will say that the marriage has not been consummated and that... you are incapable.”

His mouth twisted in a familiar smile.

Despite her shock and fear, her face heated, recalling the several times the uninhibited, passionate, and at times savage joining.

“Considering the lengths you went to prove our marriage was consummated, it’s going to be hard to prove otherwise,” he said.

“I will tell everyone I was lying,” she said.

He looked at her.

“There’s proof on the bed cover from the Singoor holy land tent that I took your virginity.”

Shock gripped her. “I wasn’t a virgin!” she said.

He didn’t say anything.

She began to panic. And then, she thought of something else.

“If you don’t leave Singoor, I will go to Girish Dhankar,” she said. “I will —”

“If he touches you, I will tear him apart and hack him into so many pieces there will be nothing left of him.”

She sucked in a breath.

She realized he had carried her towards the bathroom. Pushing open the bathroom door, he took her inside and placed her on the stone bench next to the bath area.

Then, turning on the tap, he began to wash her feet, which were still bleeding.

Looking at the dark head bent down while gently touching her feet, tears began to flow.

“Please, Rishab,” she begged. “Leave Singoor.”

He looked up, and there was a fierce look on his face. “Never,” he said.
“I’m not leaving Singoor or you.”

By the time Rishab carried her into the bedroom and put her in the chair, there was a hot meal waiting on the small table.

He had given her a bath and wrapped her in a towel. Her feet were washed and cleaned with antiseptic before being wrapped with bandages. Even though she was silent through his ministrations, fear continued to grip her.

She was reminded of her uncle's words.

"I'm worried about the Singoor curse. I'm praying the next generation would escape it."

Fear trembled in her stomach.

When he handed her a plate on which he had served food, she shook her head.

"You must leave Singoor, Rishab," she said. "Nearly all the Singoor heirs died while trying to bring peace to the region. It's a curse."

"I don't believe in curses. And neither do you."

She didn't believe in curses, but she did know there was an active danger to his life in Singoor.

"But there were several attacks on you and your brothers! You nearly died recently! I have already lost many of my loved ones. I can't bear to lose you too. You must leave!"

His eyes flashed, and his mouth slowly twisted. "You think of me as a loved one?"

She sucked in a breath. She loved him. More than anything. More than her happiness. Even though it felt like her heart was ripped out and the world no longer held joy, she wanted him away from her and Singoor. She wanted him safe.

“Please,” she begged again. “Leave Singoor.”

He watched her anguished face and cupped her cheek. “I can take care of myself,” he said. “And attacks can happen even outside Singoor. Shivay was attacked in Africa last year by an assassin who dressed and held a weapon similar to a Kabali. It was only then that my brothers and I discovered that our father was alive and not dead in an accident like we were made to believe for twenty years.”

She was shocked.

“Eat,” he softly ordered.

She began eating while he continued to talk.

“My mother kept the truth from us because she made a promise to my father. My father returned to Singoor to take over as the clan head after his brother and sister died. He knew it wouldn’t be safe for his family in Singoor, so even though he loved us deeply, he decided to keep us away.”

Her heart ached for his parents, who sacrificed their love to keep their children safe.

“My mother didn’t break the promise even when she found out she was pregnant two months after my father left for Singoor.”

She was shocked. “You have another brother younger than Nakul?” she asked, knowing his brother Nakul was older than twenty.

“A sister,” Rishab replied. “My sister Nandini is nearly twenty-one years old now. No one in Singoor knows about her except for my family. We kept it that way for her safety.”

She fell silent.

Their marriage began with her trickery. And she had never given him a reason to trust her. And yet, he trusted her now with a secret that could risk the safety of his loved one.

“I won’t reveal this to anyone,” she said softly.

“I know,” he said. And then, his mouth twisted. “Although... there was a time I thought you might be a spy.”

She frowned. “A spy for whom?” she asked.

“Tantra,” he said. “I don’t know whether that’s his real name, but he’s known as Tantra. He lives outside Singoor but has reached everywhere through his spies. He wants to gain control of Singoor. So, the heirs and the alliances are a threat to him. He is responsible for the attacks on Shivay, Nakul and me. And also, on you.”

There was rage on his face as he said the last part.

“He is after the oil wells?” she asked.

She knew many corporations and international businessmen had shown keen interest in gaining control of the Singoor oil wells, only to be slaughtered brutally by the Kabalis and the rest of the clans. Since then, no one has tried to enter the Singoor desert for the oil wells.

“No, he isn’t just after the oil wells. He is also searching for the stolen goddess Shakti statue. Nakul is on the trail to find the original statue, and he has come across Tantra’s men. My brothers and I feel Tantra is originally from Singoor. That’s how he knows whom to use to do his dirty jobs. There’s no concrete proof yet, but I feel Tantra is linked to the deaths of heirs from the prominent clans and more.”

She sucked in a breath.

“What do you mean?”

There was a grim look on his face.

“Ishani’s father was thought to have been killed by a snake bite. But he was actually killed by his son. Ishani’s stepbrother confessed to it, and he was the one to mention Tantra. Nakul found out that his wife’s parents were deliberately killed in a fire while performing a ritual. Ten days ago, Aadhya’s aunt was killed by men who dressed as the Kabalis. Before dying, Aadhya’s

aunt confessed to sabotaging the Kanwar ritual responsible for her brother and sister-in-law's deaths in the fire. She also said she betrayed her best friend, who was my aunt Nandini. Aadhya found her aunt's diaries that contain insights into what might have happened. We are investigating whether our uncle and aunt's death in a car accident was natural or not."

Gauri's heart began to thud sickly. "A-and my parents?" she asked.

He was quiet for a moment and then spoke softly.

"The investigators said there is no conclusive evidence that adult humans can sink under sand in a desert. It's only found in folklore. They investigated the location where the alleged quicksand had appeared, but they didn't find an indication of loose sand or hints of water underneath."

Her heart clenched in pain at the thought of someone killing her parents.

"No! Why would anyone want to kill my parents? There's no reason to!"

He held her hand in his until the warmth of his large hand seeped into hers.

"Everyone who had signed the peace treaty that my uncle led had died within two years. Someone deliberately got the Singoor heirs killed and made it appear as though the deaths were caused by a curse."

"And along with the heirs being killed, many children went missing from the clans," he continued. "Two of those children who went missing twenty years ago were used as assassins to attack Shivay in Africa and place explosives in our mining sites. The investigation team found that they were the missing children from eastern and southern clans in Singoor."

She was shocked.

A thought slipped into her mind.

No, it can't be.

"What about Kamlesh Meena's death?" she asked, even though she was terrified of the answer.

His hand tightened the grip on hers in reassurance, bracing her.

“His death was due to a heart attack,” he said. “But investigation reports state that the foxglove plants in the Bhil and Meena regions could have played a major role in causing the heart attack. One of the witnesses in the Meena clan claimed that a purple-colored herbal portion was served a few hours before the heart attack.”

Her eyes squeezed shut as shock and pain gripped her along with anger.

She didn't lose her loved ones due to natural causes or accidents. They were murdered.

“We will get him,” Rishab said grimly. “We will get that bastard Tantra.”

She drew in a breath and nodded.

Then something else struck her. “You mentioned that Ishani's brother was Tantra's spy and Aadhya Kanwar's aunt was killed by Tantra's men. Who is the spy in the Bhil and Meena clan?”

“Your cousin Jatin is being investigated as the prime suspect. He has left Singoor after the attack on you in Meena Fort.”

Gauri knew Jatin had left Singoor a few weeks ago. Rumi had told her that Jatin was scolded by her uncle regarding something, after which Jatin left the Bhil mansion angrily.

“Your cousin holds a grudge against you,” Rishab said.

She nodded. “I know. He has always felt resentful towards me.”

Rishab was silent for a moment. “There is an investigation on your uncle, too,” he said.

She was shocked. “My uncle wasn't even here in Singoor for many years. He returned to Singoor two years after my parents died.”

Rishab nodded. “I don't want to rule out the possibility. There's an investigation being done on everyone in the household.”

Gauri knew everyone would be considered a suspect until the truth came

out.

“There’s an investigation being done on me, too, as Tantra’s possible spy?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Yes.”

She wasn’t offended. She knew how important it was to find the people behind the killings and unrest in Singoor.

He got up. “Come, let’s go to bed.”

It had fallen dark outside.

Unwrapping the towel around her, she slid into the bed. He took off his clothes and joined her.

She could feel his hard arousal against her back, but he didn’t act on his desire. He simply held her.

There was comfort in his touch even while her mind continued to reel with shock and anger from discovering the events of the past.

But as she closed her eyes, something fleeting came into her mind. It was a detail she still didn’t understand.

“That day in the market, who was the... sniper’s target?” she asked. She understood that a sniper was a term used for a man with a gun.

There was silence before he answered.

“You,” he replied. “Tantra wanted you killed.”

She was shocked. She recalled Rishab had come running towards her. She thought he was already shot in the back by then. But now, she recalled how he had covered her body on the ground. The jerk she felt in his body was him taking the bullets meant for her.

Oh God.

She turned in his arms. “Why did you risk your life to protect me?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Because you are mine,” he said. “Mine to protect and

mine to love. I love you. I have loved you for a damn long time.”

Her heart jerked in shock.

He watched her face. She knew he wanted to hear those words from her mouth. But she didn't say them aloud.

She wanted to show him.

She leaned forward and kissed him softly, her mind swooning at his familiar taste and feel. She had missed him deeply. Placing her hand on the rough stubble of his cheek, she began to kiss along his jawline.

He let out a groan. “You are hurt,” he said, referring to her bandaged feet.

She continued to kiss him. “I hurt even more not being with you,” she replied softly.

She recalled him saying the same thing to her before. At that time, she had been fighting her feelings towards him.

But now, there was no doubt in her mind. She loved him with everything in her heart.

She made love to him. She touched him, kissed him, and stroked him. But the two-week separation didn't allow for a leisurely exploration. The flames of desire took over.

She cried out when he covered her body and thrust into her.

Their joining was passionate. It didn't take long for her world to explode.

I love you. The words resonated in her heart and soul.

The next morning, she woke up to the sight of the man she loved.

He was watching her.

She touched his handsome face in wonder, still unable to believe he was back.

“Did you hate me these last two weeks?” she asked.

She could only imagine how he must have gained consciousness at the hospital, and looked for her, only to learn that she had threatened to break the alliance if he didn’t stay away from Singoor.

He turned his head and kissed her palm. “No,” he replied. “I didn’t hate you.” His mouth twisted the usual way. “Although Nakul was pissed. But Shivay had seen you by my side at the hospital and knew you were worried about my safety and wanted me out of Singoor.”

She was still terrified for his safety. But after he told her about the attacks outside Singoor, she knew unless the man Tantra was caught, no one from Singoor was safe.

“The last two weeks were a hell for me,” she admitted. “I missed you so much.”

“It was the same for me,” he said. “I wanted to come here sooner and shake some sense into you. But I had to deal with some things. My parents were attacked at a temple.”

She sucked in a shocked breath. “Are they all right?”

“Yes, they are doing well. My father fought the attackers. The security isn’t allowed into most temples, so he was vigilant.”

“Your mother must be quite shaken,” she said. She knew Chithra Thakvar came from a faraway place where things such as attacks weren’t a common

occurrence.

He shook his head, letting out a laugh. “Actually, my mother was quite impressed by my father. She had never seen him fight before. She was in awe to see him that way. She was constantly singing his praises.”

Gauri was glad his parents were safe. But she knew the attacks weren't going to stop any time soon.

“I have to fly to the city to check on some leads we got on Tantra,” he said.

She nodded.

He cupped her cheek. “I don't want you to worry about me, Gauri,” he said. “I want you fearless as you always are. I want you by my side while we get that bastard Tantra.”

She took a deep breath. “I promise never to leave your side.”

He leaned forward and kissed her.

CHAPTER 47

The Bhil household bustled with excitement.

Gauri was amused by how Rumi and the rest of the staff celebrated Rishab's return with a meal fit for a wedding. After a lavish breakfast, Rishab got up from the chair.

"See you in the evening," he said, kissing her cheek.

Gauri nodded with a smile while her heart filled with warmth.

He looked stunningly handsome in a three-piece business suit. She knew he was flying to the city. Although she would miss him, she hoped the day would pass quickly as she would be busy in the office finalizing the school and hospital expansion plans.

"Rumi, I'm looking forward to jungle maas this evening for dinner," he said.

"For sure, Mr. Thakvar!" Rumi said with excitement.

Gauri smiled, watching him leave.

She was about to get up and go to the office when her uncle spoke.

"Gauri, I'll bring the files you requested to your office."

She nodded and got up.

"Rumi, I'll be in my office most of the day. I won't be having lunch. I'm too full. I'll eat later this evening with Rishab."

"Okay, Gauri."

Rumi didn't argue, but Gauri knew the old housekeeper would drop by the office during lunch with a small meal.

Gauri shook her head before going to the office.

Gauri didn't know how much time had passed since she was working on the plans when her uncle entered the office.

His face looked tense and worried.

“Gauri, please contact Rishab immediately.”

She was alerted as well. “What happened, uncle?”

Her uncle looked frightened. “It's... Jatin.”

She knew her cousin had escaped Singoor and was hunted by Rishab and his men.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“Jatin is in Singoor. But he... Please contact Rishab immediately.”

“Why?”

It was then that her uncle gave her an envelope. Gauri opened it. There was a note along with pictures. Gauri froze seeing the pictures. Her cousin Jatin was in the holy land. But along with him, looking visibly terrified, was her sister Komal.

Rishab was in the office talking with his brothers on the phone.

“Tantra is building an army,” he said. “He is using the stolen children and training them to be like Kabalis.”

There was yet another dead assassin’s DNA matching with a clan in Singoor.

“But why the Kabalis in particular?” Shivay asked.

“Maybe because the Kabalis are known to be savage,” said Nakul. “And no one would question why the Kabalis would attack people in Singoor without provocation.”

Rishab felt there was more to it. But until they get an assassin who appears to be a Kabali alive, it would be hard to know the reason or trace the location from where Tantra was operating.

The sniper who was sent to target Gauri at the local market was being interrogated. But that man was a mercenary who was paid a large amount by an anonymous person. The investigators were tracking the account.

“Once the goddess Shakti statue gets commissioned, Tantra will be like a toothless tiger,” said Nakul. “There will be peace among the clans, and it will be hard to create fear and chaos.”

“We need to remain alert,” said Shivay. “We need to ensure Tantra’s spies are caught, as they would try to instill maximum damage before the temple ceremony.”

Rishab knew Tantra would get desperate to stop the ceremony to commission the goddess statue.

The attack on his parents had proved it.

“All right, I have to go,” said Shivay. “Let’s connect tomorrow.”

Shivay and Ishani joined his parents for the rest of the pilgrimage to the goddess Shakti temples. Nakul was out of the country with his wife, Aadhya, who was battling the sadness of losing her aunt and discovering the role of her aunt in her parents' deaths.

Rishab wanted to be with Gauri in Singoor.

After two weeks of staying apart from her, the previous night's reunion was way too brief. He knew she had a lot of process regarding what he had revealed. But he couldn't stay and help her through it as he had to fly to the city to review the final security plan with Sam for the temple ceremony and check the details of the new leads received about Tantra.

A call interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes?"

It was the head of the investigation.

"Mr. Thakvar, there is a transaction of a large amount made this morning into one of the accounts we are tracking..."

Even before the investigation head could finish the sentence, Rishab knew what would be said.

"The transaction has been made into the account name of Gauri Meena Bhil, sir. And the amount has been deposited by a sender outside of India."

Rishab clenched his jaw as rage filled him.

CHAPTER 48

Gauri's heart thudded as she rode through the desert.

She knew she was being led into a trap.

“Don't go, Gauri,” her uncle begged. “Jatin will hurt you.”

Her cousin sent a note asking her to arrive near the Singoor holy land oasis on the western side. The note specified that she would have to go alone to the specified location and not bring any security. It threatened consequences resulting in Komal's death if Gauri didn't follow the instructions.

Gauri didn't know how Jatin bypassed the security that Rishab had put for Komal. Despite her doubts, she didn't want to take any chances, especially concerning Komal.

Her heart squeezed at the thought of Rishab. Just the previous night, she had promised him to stay by his side and fight together to bring peace to Singoor. But now, she didn't know if she would make it out alive.

I love you.

She should have told Rishab that she loved him. But instead, she had only chosen to show it.

Oh God, please help me. Protect my sister and keep the man I love safe.

She pulled on Manik's reins, hurrying to the oasis on the Western side.

As she neared, she saw the vehicles and horses close to the border of the holy lands. The oasis could be seen at a distance.

She slowed the horse and came to a stop near a makeshift tent. She couldn't see Komal, but she saw her cousin.

She got down from the horse and walked towards her cousin. The hired

mercenaries surrounded her as she approached the tent.

But they kept a slight distance since she carried her bow and arrows on her back. They must have also known she carried her knife.

She stopped in front of her cousin. “Where is Komal?” she demanded softly.

There was anger on Jatin’s face. “I am the boss here, not you!” he spit out. “You don’t get to make any demands here!”

She waited.

He must have sensed that she wouldn’t wait for long, so he indicated to one of his minions. Soon, Komal was brought to the entrance of the tent.

There was a cloth around Komal’s mouth, stopping her from speaking.

Before Gauri could speak with her sister, a blow landed on her face, knocking her to the side.

Gauri fell to the ground, but she slowly got up.

“Let Komal go,” she said.

“I will when you pay!” he shouted.

“Pay for what?”

“Pay for your pride and arrogance!” he said. “You have always treated me badly. You insulted and banished me from the mansion and made me a laughing stock!”

“You got a girl pregnant even though you are married,” she reminded him.

His jaw clenched. “The girl was a nobody! Yet, you supported that bitch and others who complained about me!” There was rage on his face. “I always felt like a pathetic beggar because of you. The riches that Bhil province has should belong to me! I’m the closest male heir to the Bhils! But that bastard Kamlesh Meena took over and made you capable as a man!”

Gauri’s heart thudded. “Is that why you got him killed and made it seem like a heart attack?” she asked.

There was shock on his face before it turned into a look of satisfaction. “Yes,” he said. “I was happy to give him the herbal tea which caused the heart attack.”

Her heart ached painfully at the confirmation. Kamlesh Meena was a kind-hearted, peace-loving man. He didn’t deserve to be killed due to jealousy and greed.

“I’m going to kill your second husband too!” her cousin spit out. “The bastard made me a hunted man! I had to flee out of Singoor and hide everywhere like a thief to escape his men.”

“You already tried to kill Rishab before,” she said. “You had him attacked by my arrow.”

Jatin’s eyes flared. “Yes, but the bastard escaped.”

“And so did I,” she replied. “When there was an attack on me at the Meena fort and in the market recently.”

Rage erupted on her cousin’s face. “Not for long. Mr. Tantra will ensure that you and your husband die.”

She fell quiet.

“Who is Tantra?” she asked.

“A powerful man who will take over Singoor soon. He promised to reward me for my loyalty.”

She looked at him. “You are a fool to trust a stranger you have never met.”

“I never met Tantra, but my—” He broke off suddenly, and then, drawing in a deep breath, he slapped her again.

“You are a cunning bitch!” he shouted. “You won’t make it alive to give any information to your husband. In fact, the bastard Rishab will think you are Tantra’s spy. Just this morning, an amount was put into your bank account to confirm the fact.”

Her cheek throbbed, but the pain didn’t bother her. It was what her cousin

revealed that made her heart ache in pain.

Rishab had said that he had initially thought of her as Tantra's spy. He also said there was an ongoing investigation into her and everyone in the household. However, the recent bank transaction, without her knowledge, would show her as Tantra's spy.

Rishab had trusted her and told her about his sister, whom the Thakvars kept a secret from the people of Singoor. He would now feel betrayed that he trusted her.

"Beat her!" he ordered the hired men. "I will send the video to Mr. Tantra as proof."

The men began hitting her. A blow into her stomach made her fall to her knees. While she tried to draw in a breath, another blow landed on her back, making her fall to the ground.

While she endured the pain, her eyes fell on her sister. Komal was safe and was watching her.

A thought struck her mind.

Her life was a series of unpredictable things, but one thing she was very certain of was the love of her younger sister. Komal loved her deeply. Her younger sister wouldn't remain calm watching her getting hurt. Komal would be distraught and beg Jatin to stop.

Except for the similar clothes, hairstyle, and partially covered face that resembled Komal, there wasn't anything to suggest it was her younger sister.

The woman standing near the tent was a fake. Komal was safe in the university, being guarded by the security hired by Rishab.

As soon as her mind registered that fact, she felt freed from fear.

She slowly reached for her knife and then stabbed it into the thigh of a man who was about to kick her. While there was a scream of pain, she didn't wait. She pulled the knife out and sliced it across the hand of another man

who was about to get to her.

His screams joined the other man's.

“Are you crazy!” Jatin shouted from a distance. “I will kill Komal if you attack me or my men! Put down that knife!”

She looked at him. “That is not Komal,” she said.

There was a look of fear in his eyes when he realized she knew the truth.

“Kill that bitch!” he ordered.

She continued to slice the knife through men who came closer. She even took out arrows and stabbed them into their thighs. They jumped back in screams of pain. But she knew she wouldn't be able to fight them for long while they began to surround her. There were too many of them, and she only had a knife and a few arrows left.

Just when she thought they would knock her down, the men began to scream and fall down on the ground.

Each time a man tried to get closer to her, the same thing happened.

“What the hell is happening!” Jatin shouted.

She heard strange sounds right before the men fell. The sounds were similar to what she had heard in the market when Rishab had covered her body with his. They were the sounds of bullets.

She noticed that blood began to ooze out from the men's legs.

She stood in place, instinct warning her not to move as she might get hit by a stray bullet.

While she stood waiting, she heard another familiar sound that got louder. She turned to see a helicopter flying towards the oasis.

Her heart thudded as it began landing, only a short distance away. She covered her eyes as sand blew around. But a moment later, the helicopter engine stopped. She opened her eyes and saw Rishab.

His face was grim as he came towards her.

He stopped and saw her, and there was rage on his face.

Jatin ran towards them, shouting. “Rishab, I was trying to stop Gauri! She has betrayed you—”

Before Jatin could finish, Rishab punched her cousin. While her cousin doubled over, Rishab looked at her.

“Are you bleeding or hurt?” Rishab asked her urgently.

“I’m all right,” she said.

He touched her face gently, and then he reached for an arrow behind her. He took it out and pierced it into Jatin’s thigh.

There was a scream of pain.

He pulled out the arrow and then pierced it again into another leg. He repeated in both arms. When he was about to pierce the arrow into Jatin’s neck, she called.

“Rishab, wait!” she said urgently. “We are in the holy land.”

They weren’t allowed to take a life inside the holy land. She hoped Rishab would listen to her in his rage. His hand trembled as the sharp end of the arrow stopped barely a few inches from Jatin’s throat.

He held Jatin by the neck and looked at her.

“Come with me,” he told her softly.

While he dragged the struggling man, she went along.

Rishab stopped next to Manik. Then using the rope placed next to the saddle, he tied a noose around Jatin’s neck and held the other end.

“Come,” he said softly and helped her up the horse.

There was a dull ache in her ribs, but she was in too much of a shock to register the pain. She sat while Rishab got on Manik right behind her.

Placing his arms around her, he held the reins.

Manik began to gallop while Jatin’s shouts could be heard behind them. It took only a few minutes to reach outside the holy land and near the oasis.

Rishab pulled on the reins, stopping Manik. He then got down and looked at her.

“I’m killing him,” he said. “I don’t want him alive.”

She knew that having Jatin alive would be more beneficial for tracing Tantra. But looking at the rage on Rishab’s face, she knew he wanted him dead. The burn inside her heart at the atrocities that Jatin committed also wanted him dead.

She nodded.

Rishab dragged Jatin in front of the horse so she could see the monster dead with her own eyes. Soon, Jatin’s screams were followed by a gurgling sound and then silence.

Rishab once again got on the horse. But this time, he didn’t hold the end of the rope that was tied around Jatin’s neck.

By the time they rode towards the helicopter, there were several SUVs with the security personnel.

Gauri saw her uncle in one of the SUVs.

He got down, appearing worried.

“Thank god, you are safe,” her uncle said to her. “You should have waited until Rishab arrived.”

Gauri didn’t say anything. And neither did Rishab.

“Where is Jatin?” her uncle asked. “I will speak to him and tell him what he’s done is wrong. He’s always felt jealous of you because I paid more attention to you and not him. He was resentful that I returned to Singoor only to take care of you.”

“Jatin is dead,” said Rishab. “I killed him.”

There was shock on her uncle’s face. “Y-you killed my son?”

“Yes.”

Her uncle’s face crumpled. “My grandchild will be born soon. I’ll bring up

the child to be a better person than what Jatin was. I'll return to my clan. Even though it isn't as big as the Bhil clan, I want my grandchild to feel wanted."

"I will take good care of Jatin's wife and child," Gauri said.

"You don't have to, Gauri."

"She will because you won't be in Singoor," Rishab replied. "You would be presumed dead along with your son in an unfortunate accident in a quicksand."

Gauri's heart thudded.

There was shock on her uncle's face. "What?"

"You got Gauri's parents killed. And you are Tantra's spy."

"What? Who is Tantra?"

Gauri looked at her uncle. "Jatin confessed to everything before his death. He told us you met Tantra and what Tantra made you both do."

Her uncle looked shaken, and then he broke down.

"It wasn't my fault! Tantra made me do it! I didn't mean to hurt my sister and brother-in-law!"

Gauri closed her eyes at her uncle's confession to her parents' murders.

Rishab's arm wrapped around her shoulders in comfort.

"You want him dead?" Rishab asked.

There was dark fury in his voice, indicating her single command would have him kill her uncle.

"Don't kill me!" her uncle begged.

She opened her eyes. Then looking at her uncle's face, she shook her head. "Don't kill him. He will help us find Tantra."

"No! I can't reveal anything! Tantra will kill me! He is a monster who won't spare anyone who betrays him."

A chill passed through her.

Rishab held her closer until she felt his warmth.

“Take him away,” Rishab ordered.

Her uncle was taken away by the security.

Taking in a shuddering breath, she turned to Rishab. “I love you,” she said.

They were both covered in blood and were in the middle of the desert while she was injured. But she could no longer wait until the right time to say the words. Had she been killed that day, her only regret would have been not saying those words to the man she loved.

Rishab’s eyes flashed, and then he cupped her face in his hands.

“I love you too, my dearest wife,” he said before kissing her softly. “Now, let’s go home so I can show you how much.”

Her heart filled with warmth hearing him call her home as his.

CHAPTER 49

One month later...

“Rishab!” Gauri laughed. “We are going to get late!”

It was mid-morning, and they had just returned to the stables from a brisk ride in the desert.

“I won the race,” he said. “You need to fulfill the terms of the bet.”

“You cheated,” she accused. “You didn’t tell me we were going to race. Or I would have picked Manik to race.”

He grinned. “Too bad. Maybe next time, you can. Now pay up, wife.”

She laughed as he pulled her into the empty stall next to Manik and Durga.

“We have to leave for Thakvar mansion soon,” she reminded.

“Mom and Dad are arriving later this evening. We have plenty of time.”

Before she could say anything, he dragged her into his arms, and then she found herself on a soft bale of hay with a hard, muscular body on top of her. His hands fell on her riding dress and moved quickly, tugging and pulling.

She laughed. “We can’t do this here!” she said.

“We most certainly can,” he replied with a wicked smile.

His mouth caught hers in a scorching kiss, shutting off any arguments. Before she knew it, she was half-naked on the haystack with her equally half-naked husband on top of her.

She was laughing one moment and then moaned as passion blazed and caught fire like it always did between them. Her cries of ecstasy were caught

by his mouth while he drove into her like a storm. The world exploded into flames as liquid fire coursed through her.

By the time she became aware again and could catch her breath, his nose nuzzled against her neck.

She placed a hand on the rough stubble on his cheek. Turning his head, he kissed her palm and then on her lips.

She marveled at how, despite mind-numbing passion, his sweet kisses always fluttered her stomach.

“My desert rose,” he murmured.

“Aren’t they supposed to be poisonous?” she asked.

“Yes, but I’m drawn to danger with beauty.”

She laughed.

The sounds of people from outside the stables were getting closer.

“We should go,” she said, even though she wished she could simply lay on the sweet-smelling hay with him for a longer time.

But they had responsibilities and important events coming up.

She felt his reluctance as he drew away from her and got up. He adjusted his trousers and then helped her straighten her clothes.

They stepped out of the empty stall and went out of the stables. They came across the stable master, who looked surprised to see them.

“Oh, I didn’t see you arrive, sir and madam,” said Ratan.

“We were inside... spending time with Manik and Durga,” Gauri replied, her face heating.

She sensed Rishab’s amusement.

“Excuse us,” she murmured before continuing into the Bhil mansion.

She looked at Rishab. “You are turning me shameless!” she accused when they were out of earshot.

His mouth twisted in amusement. “But you love it, my dear wife,” he

replied.

It was true. Her enemy husband made her uninhibited and shameless, and she reveled in each moment.

She shook her head with a laugh.

As soon as they stepped in, the household was bustling with activity.

Rumi came excitedly towards them.

“Gauri, the packing is nearly done. Can you check once?” The cheerful housekeeper then looked at Rishab. “Mr. Thakvar, there’s a big batch of all of your favorite sweets, sir.”

“Thanks, Rumi,” he replied with a twist of his mouth. “I’ll try to share a few with my brothers if I’m in a generous mood.”

Rumi giggled.

Gauri smiled, seeing her housekeeper giggling like a young girl. She recalled how she used to be annoyed that her enemy husband charmed and earned the respect of the entire household and clan. But now, warmth filled her heart.

“See you in a while,” he said, kissing her cheek.

She nodded with a blush heating her cheeks because she was still getting used to affectionate gestures.

She went into the kitchen and could see the flurry of activity. Unlike the hot, smoky kitchen from before, there was a well-organized, spacious traditional kitchen with modern stovetops.

The kitchen was one of the makeovers that had begun in the Bhil mansion. With the necessary infrastructure being brought in, traces of modernity were added while retaining the traditional look.

The best change that had begun was the expansion plan of the school and hospital. With set timelines and the cooperation of the other West clans, things were improving at a good pace.

The only thing that loomed as a dark cloud was Tantra.

So far, what she had heard about that man enraged and caused a chill inside her. He was an evil, obsessed man who would go to any lengths to get control of Singoor.

More information was being given by her uncle who was being interrogated at a location outside Singoor.

“I never saw Tantra. He always kept his face partially covered.”

“He collects children from the Singoor desert. He’s training them to be his foot soldiers.”

“Tantra promised me power and a better future for my son.”

“After I returned, I helped Tantra kidnap children from Singoor.”

The people in Bhil and other West clans were told that Jatin and her uncle had temporarily left Singoor for a business purpose. Once things settled down, there would be rumors of how the father-son duo had sunk in quicksand in the middle of the desert—just like how her parents were believed to have died.

“Did you put aside a batch of sweets for Komal?” Gauri asked.

“Yes,” the cook replied.

Komal would be home for the holidays soon.

Gauri checked a few more things in the kitchen before going upstairs to the master bedroom suite.

She couldn’t see Rishab in the room. With a smile, she went towards the bathroom. He was inside, standing in front of the mirror and shaving while talking on the phone.

“I have instructed Sam to begin aerial coverage from this afternoon before Mom and Dad land,” he said.

Gauri knew he was speaking to his brothers.

Shivay Thakvar and Ishani had arrived at the Thakvar mansion four days

ago to start the preparations and ensure the Eastern clan heads' presence at the temple ceremony the next day. Rishab ensured the same with the West clan heads, and his younger brother Nakul was in charge of the South clan heads' presence.

The Thakvar brothers had worked tirelessly to bring the clans of Singoor together.

And they had done it, risking their lives.

Her eyes fell on Rishab's tanned, muscled back.

His back was riddled with scars, and nearly all of them were from attacks that happened in Singoor. The first scar was from an arrow in the market, the second was from the assassins' attack in the Meena fort, the third was from the sword fight with the Dhankar clan, and the three recent scars were from the bullet wounds he had taken to protect her.

Her heart still ached that he had put his life in danger many times to save her.

She ran her fingers gently over each scar.

"Get here soon," said Shivay Thakvar. "Ishani has planned an elaborate evening."

Gauri smiled. She knew Ishani would be excited and would have arranged for music, dances, and a lavish meal. Along with the gifts from Bhil province, Gauri had packed the handwritten notes of Rishab's aunt and the books written by Kamlesh Meena that Ishani was excited to read.

"All right, I'll call when we start," Rishab said before ending the phone call.

Their eyes met in the mirror.

His mouth slowly twisted. "Clothes off, wife," he ordered. "We must hurry. I'm going to help you take a quick shower and then help you get ready."

She laughed even as her stomach fluttered and her heart raced with excitement.

“It’s never a quick shower when you help me,” she reminded.

He turned and then looked at her with a wicked grin before pulling her close. “Well, you should be used to my virility by now. Isn’t that the reason why you stole this Thakvar heir for yourself?”

She laughed as he repeated the Meewar clan head’s words, who had said Gauri stole her younger sister’s intended bridegroom as the Thakvar heirs were known to be handsome and virile.

She placed her hand on his chest, where his heart thumped, and looked at him.

“I’m very glad I stole this Thakvar heir,” she said. “I want him for myself forever.”

His eyes flashed. “This Thakvar heir will always belong to you, since you also stole his heart.”

“I love you,” she said, the words coming easily as she said them often.

“I love you too, my wife,” he said before lowering his head and sealing the words with a kiss.

CHAPTER 50

Holy land, Singoor desert

It was the day of the temple ceremony.

A small group of old men with matted long hair, dressed in loin cloths and their faces and bodies covered in ash, traversed through the sands of the Singoor, walking towards their supreme lord's temple. The rudraksh beads adorned their bodies, and they held long, vertical sticks with skull-shaped tops representing death.

They were called the Aghoris. They didn't belong to any particular clan and often wandered the Singoor desert, witnessing everything.

Over the decades, the sands of Singoor had gone through many changes, but death was a constant and more prevalent. They knew that was going to change because of the protectors of Singoor.

As they neared the glorious structure of the supreme lord's temple, they could hear the sounds of drums, trumpets, and conch shells. Hundreds of men and women from the clans of Singoor assembled to witness a ceremony that was yet to begin.

They approached the entrance of the temple, outside which the Thakvar family had assembled. Mihir Thakvar and his three sons were made the protectors of Singoor. The Thakvar heirs were accompanied by their Singoor brides. The three alliance marriages brought peace to most of Singoor.

The Aghoris knew that the Thakvars wanted to maintain peace by

replacing the Goddess Shakti statue that was stolen from the temple three decades ago. The ceremony was to seek blessings to begin the statue commissioning. Mihir Thakvar's wife held the gold and jewels required to build Goddess Shakti's statue.

"Make this ceremony into a peace ritual," one of the Aghoris stated. "It cannot be Goddess Shakti's statue commissioning. The most important piece is missing."

There was shock on Mihir Thakvar's face. "Please tell us what is missing."

Most people in Singoor hadn't seen the original Goddess Shakti statue clearly. The temple protectors and priests who had seen the original statue were killed or dead or outside of Singoor.

"The pink lotus, which is our goddess Shakti's favorite flower, is missing. She holds it in her hand. The lotus in the statue was made from pink diamonds commissioned by the alliance between the North and East clans."

There were murmurs of shock.

The North clans of Singoor were not included in the peace talks or invited to the ceremony as they were considered as brutal savages.

Just as shock and confusion spread through, shouts of a man filled the air.

"Help me!!"

A young man wearing Western clothes was brought closer by men wearing uniforms. The young man's terrified face was covered in ash, making his features unrecognizable, and there was also a distinct rudraksh beads necklace around his neck.

One of the uniformed men spoke. "Sir, we found this man tied to a black horse sent here. He claims he knows you all."

As people wondered about the identity of the young man, the man saw the Thakvars and began shouting.

“Mrs. Thakvar! Help me! Please help me!”

Mihir Thakvar’s wife stepped forward. “Rahul?” she asked in shock.

“What are you doing here?”

“They took Nandini! Oh God, they slaughtered everyone in the desert and took Nandini!” he cried.

“What? Who took Nandini? And what is Nandini doing here in Singoor! You two were supposed to be in New York!”

The man looked shocked and terrified. “Nandini said we had to attend an important ceremony in India. We flew here this morning, and a dozen men in security uniforms picked us up, and we were on our way to the temple. But we were attacked in the middle of the desert by men on black horses. They were savages! They slit throats using a three-pronged weapon and killed everyone! They spared only Nandini and me. But t-they took Nandini with them.”

Shock ripped through everyone.

“The Kabalis,” many people murmured in fear.

“Tantra,” one of the Thakvar heirs said grimly. “He must have sent his assassins dressed as the Kabalis to kidnap Nandini.”

But the Aghoris knew the truth.

One of them rubbed his fingers on the terrified young man’s face. The ash on the young man’s face had the smell of sandalwood, and the rudraksh beads around the young man’s neck were shaped into a human skull.

“Were there eagles around those men?” the Aghori asked.

“Y-yes, there were large birds flying near the men.”

“It is the Kabalis,” the Aghori declared. “And they have taken the Thakvar heiress to form the fourth alliance.”

The End.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Twisted Flames*.

Enemies-to-lovers is my favorite trope, especially when it features a strong heroine and hero like Gauri and Rishab, making the clashes, sparks and passion blaze brighter. I hope you were transported to the Singoor desert and enjoyed their fiery, passionate love story!

The *Sands of Singoor* series is not yet over. The final installment with answers to secrets, legacies and another passionate love story is coming up soon.

To get updates on upcoming releases, teasers and giveaways, follow me on Instagram: [**@mvkasi**](#)

Thank You
MV Kasi

If you haven't read it already, do check out
'The Singham Bloodlines' series.

ENTER THE DARK, FASCINATING WORLD OF
the Singhams
WHERE THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS
family honor...



BOUND BY REVENGE
THE SINGHAM BLOODLINES
PG VAN
MV KASI

BOUND BY HATRED
THE SINGHAM BLOODLINES
MV KASI

BOUND BY DUTY
THE SINGHAM BLOODLINES
RG VAN



THE SINGHAM BLOODLINES
(Standalone Enemies-to-lovers romances)