

War

Mudra Rakshasa

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Her husband stepped back from the window and said impatiently, “They haven’t come yet!”

His wife did not respond. She was arranging her hair, as if for a guest. Finished with her hair, she carefully applied lipstick. Then she put a little color from the stick on the ring finger of her right hand, applied a dot of lipstick on each cheek and rubbed it in and around. Fretting, her husband went and stood by the window again. He put his head out in an effort to see farther, but a huge explosion in the distance made him pull his head in immediately. His wife broke into a laugh. He heard her laughter but did not turn around to look at her.

As if trying to comfort him she said, “They’ll be coming, for sure!” Her husband did not respond.

People all over town had said they were definitely coming, so it had to be true. The town was practically empty. Those unable to leave were trying to hide, but he knew that hiding now was useless and running away was even more so.

Suddenly, a number of blasts happened all at once, and the window’s glass broke and fell to the floor. He sat in a chair away from the window and rested his

head against its back cushion.

Why are they advancing so slowly! Another blast occurred, and this time the entire building shook. Dust came pouring into the room so much that for a while they couldn't see anything. Her husband fell down off his chair. Getting up slowly, he brushed off the dust and looked around the room. His wife had remained just as she was, mirror in hand, tending to her makeup. Her husband looked away from her. Then, as if he had suddenly remembered something, he rushed outside. In no time he returned.

“I don't understand why they are doing all that shelling when they're getting no resistance at all.”

It was as if he had spoken to himself.

Carefree his wife said, “It's their call! It's also possible that they're shooting simply to announce they're coming. After all it's not as if they can march in playing musical instruments!”

“But then why don't they come?” said her fretting husband.

“Maybe this is indeed as fast as they can come, or perhaps they're advancing afraid of what they'll find.”

After waiting a number of hours, some footsteps were heard outside.

“They've come!” said her husband.

This time he noticed that his wife's body underwent a strange shake as if someone had struck her in the back. Under her makeup her face went ashen. She wanted to say something but was unable to do so. She looked weak, and then she slowly sat on the floor right where she was.

“Are you afraid?” asked her husband.

“No,” she replied. But right then her face, now yellow, pulled tight over her skull. With one hand she rubbed her stomach and then threw up on the floor’s dust. Afterward, she became calm. The yellowish tint of her face also diminished.

Her husband gathered up some of the dust by the doorway and used it to cover the vomit. He had just straightened up and turned around when he could see shadows at the door. Each carried a Sten gun. For a moment he was rooted to his spot, but then he slowly slunk back away from the door.

Their eyes having adjusted to the room’s lack of light, they could see his wife now, too. From the back of that group of uniformed men someone shouted in sheer delight. The man in front looked back at him harshly. He fell silent.

The one in front stepped forward a little and said to her husband, “There’s no need to be afraid or to run away. In fact we want to assure you that if you do a good job helping us, we’ll even reward you for it.”

Meanwhile, among the soldiers in the back was some pushing and shoving. Perhaps even more had arrived.

“A woman, my God! A woman!” they screamed.

His wife was a little shaken but regained her poise. In a calm voice she said to the man in front, who seemed to be the officer, “Are these your soldiers?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Can’t you keep them under control?” she said.

The soldiers pressed forward, excited. Two or three in the front even filled the air with obscene curses. The officer suddenly turned toward them and with a

booming voice ordered them to back off. The soldiers' frustration festered.

“This is our war booty! We're taking it!” they screamed.

The officer roared, “Go back outside!”

Slowly, the soldiers backed up and went outside. Then one of them shouted out an obscene curse having to do with their officer and that woman. Furious, the officer bolted outside, but by then all his soldiers had already disappeared. He went back inside and returned to the woman. And it suddenly struck him that there in that room was he, a victorious army officer, and this woman. He looked at her attentively. Her face showed no change at all, no fear, no disgust, no allure. It was totally without emotion. Her eyes did not even blink. A layer of dust covered her hair and clothes. Nevertheless, she was no less beautiful.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had stepped up to her and started to brush the dust gently off her clothes. In response she remained stone still. The officer stopped. Then he started blowing the dust off her hair. A cloud of dust filled his eyes. Rubbing them, he stepped back a bit. Then his gaze fell on the woman's husband.

He roared at him, “Jackass! What are you looking at? Whatever you've got to eat in this house, bring it here!” Her husband swiftly dashed inside. Then the officer continued, “And look here, don't try to run away. My men are all over this town; you'll be shot. And don't try to be clever with the food you've got.”

Her husband took his orders and went back to the kitchen. As soon as he left, this woman, who had been standing like a statue, trembled. The officer noticed. She trembled even more and then suddenly headed outside. In the blink of an eye

he rushed toward her and grabbed her around the waist as if she were a snake. And just like a snake she twisted her body around and bit him on the wrist. His arms went limp, but he managed to punch her in the stomach. She neither screamed nor groaned; in fact with the nails of both hands she scraped his face. That was the extent of her fight. That big, tall officer quickly brought her under control. She panted and stared sharply at him. He smiled ironically. As his smile slowly faded she spat on him. Right in the face. In the middle of his nose. A lot of her spit stuck right there, and she broke into a laugh.

He let her spit remain right where it was. Her panting and her hands being held behind her made her breasts rise up toward him even more savagely. He freed one of his hands and with a sudden jerk tore off some of her clothes. Beneath her underclothes he could see her full, round, white breasts, trembling. Then one by one he ripped off more of her clothing, as if it were her skin. Each piece he pulled off from the rest and dropped to the floor. His hands trembling, he grabbed her face and kissed her hard on the lips. When he finished that abusive kiss and pulled his face away, she spat on him again. He reached an excitement beyond his control, picked her up and took her to a nearby chair.

A shadow rose up over her half-closed eyes as she lay under the chest of the officer. Her husband. She closed her eyes. A plate was in each hand. For a little while he stood there at the doorway.

A number of times the officer embraced her naked body as hard and as urgently as he could, then he suddenly separated himself from her and rolled her body down off the chair. Slowly, she raised herself up and sat on the floor, right

where she was.

Her husband then entered with the plates of food. The officer took out his Sten gun and placed it over his lap. Then, like a starving beast, he pounced on the food and started devouring it. Her husband brought in a glass of water and waited for him to finish eating. His wife remained sitting on the floor just as she was, looking at both of them but seeing neither one. The officer finished eating and was drinking the water when a commotion could be heard at the door. All those soldiers had returned.

“Go away!” shouted the officer.

“But sir!”

“Sir!”

Another soldier worked up his courage and said, “In this entire town we found only four women, and they’re so old not even a dog could eat them!”

Another one shouted out from farther back, “If you are done with her, we’d like her.”

Just as she was, without any hesitation, she stood up. The officer grabbed her by the arm, sat her down and shouted, “I’m telling you to get out of here; otherwise, I’ll shoot you!”

“But sir!”

“Sir, just give us the woman and we’ll go away.”

Irritated, the officer stood up, but he was unable to speak. As pretty as a doll, she stood up and walked over to the crowd of soldiers at the door. Once near them she stopped. Taking in her naked body with their eyes, for a few moments

they were stone speechless. Then they became agitated as if they had been caught in a typhoon, and they fell on her all at once. In the midst of those numerous arms her rose-gold body glimmered like a child's toy in a flood of filthy water, by turns drowning and rising to the surface.

For a while the officer watched the unrestrained waves of his soldiers. Then he took his Sten gun in hand and left, not interfering or even wanting to be seen. For some time none of them even knew where the woman was. Her husband was standing against a wall as quietly and as invisibly as possible, like a cockroach. Gradually, the commotion subsided, and one by one each soldier went off to the side and fixed up his pants. One of them happened to catch sight of her frightened husband. Having been seen and afraid, he quickly ran farther back in the house.

Crouched in a dark corner he kept hearing all the commotion. After a little while it subsided. It seemed as if only a handful of them was left. He could hear their obscene curses. Some time after that, silence.

With some hesitation he slowly came back out. Without making a sound. They were all gone. There was only his wife's gleaming body spread out on the floor. Perhaps unconscious. He shook her. She opened her eyes. She looked around once and then made an effort to stand up. Her husband tried to help her, but she refused him. She got up as if she were made of wood, staggered to the chair and sat down. A mannequin. Lifeless. Her husband looked at her body up close and then dashed inside. He came back out with a sheet and towel. He set both on his wife's arms and went and stood by the window.

Outside, complete desolation. Not a sound anywhere. While continuing to

look out the window he said aloud, but as if to himself, “Wouldn’t it be good if we quietly slipped outside?”

“What for?” she said.

He fell silent.

In the town there was no light, no light anywhere. His wife got dressed. He remained at his post by the window. He left it only when he heard the crush of heavy boots inside the room.

It was the officer. This time he had some men with him who went about their business without question. And behind them was a man dressed in civilian clothes. They greeted the woman very respectfully. The officer stepped forward and said with much humility, “We would like to make a small request of you, and we hope you will forgive us for doing so.”

The officer asked the man in civilian clothes, “Will right here work or outside? Outside at least there is some moonlight.”

“Ask her outside, please.”

Politely, the officer said, “We do not mean to trouble you, but would you mind coming outside for a short while?”

She stood up. A soldier picked up her chair and brought it outside. Two other chairs were brought out. She sat in one, and the other two were occupied by the officer and the civilian.

The officer said, “This man is one of our country’s most famous journalists. He would like to take your statement. We will have it printed in all the world’s newspapers. We will also have it broadcast over the radio. All you have to say

is how tyrannical the government was before we came and what crimes they committed against you. You could also say how the police even raped you.”

“I have no statement to make. You yourselves can print whatever you want.”

Frustrated, the civilian said, “Look, girl, I’m not here seeking your advice. This is a military matter. We don’t have to do a lot of talking. If you can think of something simple and straightforward, then fine. Otherwise, we’ll go about this another way.”

Silence reigned for a while. Then in a soft voice she asked, “Will I also be able to say what your people did to me?”

“No! Definitely not!”

The tape recorder was turned on. Staring over its slowly turning reels, the woman carefully repeated everything she had been told to say, like a parrot. Whatever was necessary. After that, on her own she expressed how grateful she was that the enemy soldiers had treated her so well.

The tape recorder was taken away. And the others left with it. Only a guard remained on duty, Sten gun in hand, standing a little distance away from them. The officer approached the woman. She stood up. Letting a smile fan out across his lips he said, “Thank you!”

She, too, smiled a little. Then she said, “You’ll be wanting to go now, or should I go?”

“I think we should both go together,” he said, and taking her arm he

respectfully led her back to the house.

QUIETLY her husband asked, “Is he sleeping?”

“No,” his wife said while putting cups on the table, “he’s already up, but he’s still shaking off his fatigue.”

“You look after the coffee; I’ll tend to the table.”

She continued what she was doing. Her husband sat down in a nearby chair. For some time neither spoke. Then he suddenly said, “I think our troops will certainly come back and liberate us.”

“Liberate us from what?”

“From this!”

“And what’s that?”

“The atrocities committed by these enemy soldiers!”

“And how is what they’ve done so different from what usually happens here? What have they done that’s such a crime?”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this! You! Whom an entire army raped!”

“Raped! But they didn’t kill us! And rape . . . you haven’t raped? Come on, I’d love to hear you say you’ve never raped anyone. In this wretched town what man isn’t a rapist?”

Avoiding eye contact he replied, “So you think what they did was all right?”

“What was wrong? What’s better?”

“Okay, okay. Look, maybe the coffee’s ready.” Then, without any expectation of a reply he said, “Today, too, he’ll probably stay here. And tonight he’ll

probably sleep here again, right?”

She did not reply but got up and went to bring the coffee.

He remained seated as he was. She returned with the coffee pot. As she entered the dining room, he smiled at her, without knowing why. She did not return his smile. He became despondent. Lowering his head he said, “I don’t see why we shouldn’t even smile.”

“No one’s forbidden it! Look, tomorrow these soldiers are going to head off for the next town. That means this officer, too, will be leaving. Then perhaps . . .”

Stretching his arms up and out, the officer just then appeared in the doorway. Husband and wife both fell silent. The officer smiled and said, “Good morning.”

She smiled, and her husband greeted him with a nod.

He came and sat at the table in the chair nearest the woman. Looking appreciatively at the coffee and the food set out for breakfast, he said, “Friend, I am deeply indebted to you. This wonderful food — wonderful — I mean — this beautiful wife of yours — yes —”

Suddenly, such a terrifying explosion occurred that the entire house shook, and the half-standing wall across the way fell into total ruin. The officer immediately grabbed her and put her under the table, protecting her. The explosions continued. One after another the shells came raining in as if the entire city were cotton being carded. The officer quickly got out and fled. Her husband was leaning into a corner like a stuffed animal, and she stayed crouched under the table. Shells did not strike their house directly, but all the lowland near it kept shaking as if from repeated earthquakes. Smoke, gunpowder, dust, and two motionless

people surrounded by walls. Neither said a word. Because of all the dust neither could see how the other was. Maybe the shelling would go on like this all day or maybe not. All the same, both of them were afraid that any moment a shell would land right on them and reduce them to scraps of bloody cloth. But that didn't happen. Yet the shelling produced an inertia and an expectation — an expectation that something would happen weighed down their eyelids and they fell asleep.

The darkness was intense, perhaps because of all the smoke and dust, perhaps because of the depth of the night itself. The shelling had completely ceased. Awake, her husband remained for a while right where he was until he believed it was indeed night. Night had in fact fallen, but what about him?

Was that officer going to come back? Or, while he himself was asleep did a bullet take his life? He slowly crawled out of his corner. He had to crawl a little farther. Then, beneath his hands he felt a warm, soft body. It was she. It was her body. But her clothes. When the shelling started that morning, she wasn't in this state. Is that officer here, too?

In the darkness he crawled on, feeling around for another body. Then he heard laughter behind him. His wife's laughter.

“Who are you looking for, that officer?”

“Hm? No, not at all.”

“No one's here. Nobody came.” Getting up in the darkness his wife said, “The thing is — the shelling frightened me, frightened me very much. But as soon as I started to take off my clothes, my fear went away. Strange, isn't it.”

Now her husband started trembling in fear. He crept up alongside her and said

in a restrained voice, “I don’t think anyone will be coming now. Today only . . .”

Suddenly they heard outside the sound of machine-gun fire, intense and from all directions. In between bursts of that they heard the fut-fut of small-arms fire.

“This is far too dangerous,” he said. “Let’s hurry down into the back cellar. Come on, let’s go.”

She laughed. “I know what’s going on. I know. You’re afraid you might not get this opportunity again. Come on, take your clothes off, too. Then you won’t be afraid, and we’ll go down into the cellar and lie there together.”

So he started taking off his clothes and a bright light filled the sky like lightning. And then he heard the sound of voices.

His hands stopped in the middle of undoing a button. Dejected, he sat down right where he was.

This time they didn’t have long to wait. Pushing the enemy back, their own troops had entered the town. As they advanced they shot out the windows and doors of each home they came to. They were flushing out enemy troops. Inside the buildings their hunger got the better of them and they took whatever came to hand. They would have to live like that for a number of days.

And then they came across these two. No officer was with them. They were a small band. And they were afraid of hidden enemies. So one of them stood by the door, Sten gun in hand, while the rest quickly jumped on this woman whom they had found suddenly and contrary to any hope they may have had. One of them shoved and pushed her husband aside. Because of all the rubble there was no place to sit or lie down. Perhaps they had no time for that either.

This hot dance continued for some time until they all became afraid and controlled themselves. One of their officers had showed up, marching in through the sharp light of a flashlight. With both elbows he shoved away the half-naked soldiers surrounding her and then stood in front of that out-of-breath, naked woman. Gradually, they all went outside.

The next morning that officer came, to that same place and in that same way, with some people not in uniform carrying cameras and tape recorders. She had still not put on her clothes. At a sign from the officer two soldiers went inside, brought out a sheet-like piece of cloth and wrapped her up in it. She lowered her head and sat down on the ground. All at once flash bulbs went off. Photographs were taken quickly, one after another. One man started his tape recorder. The officer began explaining that when he arrived here he had found this woman unconscious, lying here in the street. Enemy soldiers had looted her home and raped her. We are now going to send her to the hospital.

“Round about how many of them committed rape?” someone asked.

“That’s hard to say. I think at least — that is, it would have had to have been a large number. Hundreds wouldn’t be out of the question. Look at the condition she’s in.”

The officer then came forward and pulled the sheet back away from her thighs. With eager curiosity the crowd pressed forward, and then, as if terrified, they shrank back again. Then the sheet was placed back over her thighs.

Now it was time to record her statement. One of the journalists asked her, “Your name?”

In a soft voice she gave her name. No one was able to hear her, but she wasn't asked a second time because they all knew that whatever she said had been recorded.

Her statement was recorded, and the people took their leave. Then those two were left alone in that terrifying desolation.

Inside, her husband huddled in the corner, and after a very long silence he asked softly, "Are you in a great deal of pain? Does it hurt a lot?"

His wife smiled silently. A little later she said, "What harm did it do me to make it seem as if I had been seriously injured."

Both fell silent again. Then his wife said, "You had wanted us to go down into the cellar and lie there together. Do you still want to?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

He gave no answer. She got up and went over to him. Standing there she took off the sheet that had covered her. He looked at her and lowered his eyes.

"Come on, get up."

Hunched over, he remained sitting there, in silence. Down on her knees, she sat opposite him. Gently holding his face in her hands, she raised it up. It took some time before he raised his eyes to look at her, and just then, as forcefully as possible, she spat on him. A big wad of it stuck right on the middle of his nose.

That was all. Nothing else happened. He lowered his head down even farther. She stood up, went over to the window and looked outside as if waiting for the shelling to begin a third time.