

Rook

by Ajay Nair

Ah, another one. All battlefields look the same to me now. Patchy, ragged and thirsty for blood. Graveyards in disguise. I can see the opposing army arrayed. Resplendent, courageous, foolish. A mirror image of my army; only their armours are a pristine white while mine is clad in a dull, faded black. The colours will only hold for a while though. We are about to begin.

I have emerged unscathed, relatively speaking, from my thirty years of fighting. From being a foot-soldier, I have gradually risen in life, losing blood many times, breaking some bones and having mine broken, winning my share of the spoils. That has earned me the privilege of leading my own unit into battle, elephants and all. I lost an ear too, and that has meant that I don't enter the battle too soon — instead, I am reserved for when it really gets interesting. I don't mind — I have learned that lesser the time I spend out there, the better my chances of getting out alive. But today — today, I have a bad feeling. It's something ominous from somewhere deep within me — and when you are as big as I am, the feeling has travelled a long way. I have a bad, bad feeling.

We wait for the first move and it's not long in coming. One of their cavalry units steps out towards the middle. I know the man who leads this unit — Shamar - he is a light-weight and I am not too worried about him. In all probability, he will just pretend to fight while protecting himself. I look at our commander — our queen, Slivinia. Now, she's no ordinary queen. The only reason our kingdom has prevailed and retained power is because of her. She is as beautiful as she is crafty. She cares not for relationships or love or honour. All she craves is power and glory. She is a sensual creature, is Slivinia — I should know; we have been sleeping together for at least a dozen years.

Silvinia doesn't return my look — instead, with an imperceptible arch of her impeccable eyebrow, she asks Vigia — one of our own cavalry commanders — to head out and stake a position with his unit. The sleek, black horses rush out with purpose. Immediately, an infantry unit of the enemy begins marching forward. I look across to see who is directing them. It can't be their king — Wirka is a pompous brat with little tactical nous. It must be his sister, Warlika — she is credited with strengthening their upstart kingdom. I can see her majestic chariot with its milky white flag fluttering seductively behind the columns of their infantry.

It's now time for both armies to quickly manoeuvre into positions that are advantageous. Their second cavalry unit and another infantry unit begin marching forward. We respond cautiously with an infantry unit of our own and roll out a set of our archers led by my good friend, Sumpuk. He is a sly bastard, is Sumpuk- openly obsequious to our old fool king, Binga. I don't expect him to stray very far from the king's side. Binga himself quickly retreats to a corner of the field, covered by my brother.

What can I say about my brother, Stroman. We are twins and we hate each other. He is an honest, brave man with scruples. He is full of bullshit. He thinks I am morally twisted. He probably has a point there, but I don't see what that has got to do with anything. He still holds a grudge against me from the time I tried to seduce his new wife. I almost succeeded too, till that damn maid came in just at the wrong time. She was delicious though, the maid.

Their archers and more of their infantry advances and then out comes that white chariot. Well, well, what do we have here? Warlika is splendid. She is young, and her eyes breathe fire. What a tight, lean body. I can imagine it to be a very interesting place to explore. I can't but help ogle, and I don't think I am the only one. I can feel Silvinia's eyes burn a hole in my head but I don't care right now.

And just like that, the battle is engaged. One of our infantry units attacks and decimates one of theirs. And before anyone can catch their breath, Warlika's troops take instant, swift revenge. It's breathtaking, the way she moves. And she is not afraid to get blood on her hands. She looks fetching in red-speckled white, does my Warlika. She is young enough to be my daughter but that has never stopped me before. I can feel Stroman seethe under his helmet as I let out a low, lewd whistle. Both armies jostle for position some more and Prag, the young, nervous commander of our second cavalry unit, who is positioned right next to me, heads out to engage Warlika. I might have goaded him a bit — I only want to see how good she is.

Our prime minister, Koppar, also heads out deep into enemy territory. Which means that I am in the line of sight of Slivinia. She shouts something out to me — I think she wants me to strike too — but I pretend not to hear. After all, my left ear's a bit suspect. Meanwhile, Prag tries to evade Warlika's ferocious assault but she chases him. She is feisty. I might be falling in love. Maybe it's the hot shame of being chased by her; maybe it's beginner's luck but all of a sudden, Prag attacks and destroys their second cavalry unit, while holding off Warlika at the same time. What he doesn't see is that he's taking on too much and it doesn't take much for one of their infantry units to drive a spear through his foolhardy heart. This is getting bloody, fast. And behind all this is Warlika and her subtle, sophisticated planning.

Why are we fighting? I don't think anyone really knows or cares. It's been three years since the last big battle. Peace has started grating on our nerves, its ordinariness is stultifying. War is the distraction that we all hunger for. War can be a good thing, a fine thing — despite all the blood; it elevates our lives from its dullness. It's something to do, really, something worthwhile. I suspect most wars are fought for this reason — reasons are just excuses. So when some small border skirmish broke out, Slivinia lost no time in

declaring war and here we are. And now, poor, young Prag is dead. So it goes.

Vigia responds by taking out one of their infantry units but leaves a big hole in our formation and their arrows pour in as their archers advance. Dangerously close to Slivinia. And then, the unthinkable happens — fiery Slivinia, instead of attacking the archers runs away from them. Obviously, Warlika's performance is troubling her — she is not the running sort. Or maybe, just maybe, she has some plan? She is the conniving sort after all.

It was she who seduced me all those years back. She'd already acquired a reputation within two years of becoming queen and I was quite happy to play along. There was a meshing of styles and sensibilities and our affair endured. I wouldn't say I ever loved her — and I know she never loved me — but we had respect for each other. She once tried to seduce Stroman too — and failed miserably. That probably played its part in her sticking with me — such are the complexities of high infidelities.

Their archers, supported by another backing group begin to chase her. Vigia's horses help her hold off the onslaught. Just in the nick of time, Stroman steps up with a direct assault on the enemy king Wirka, who in the heat of battle has been exposed. Wirka retreats and this is where it gets interesting. I see Slivinia's troops taking a battering — her chariot is virtually shot to pieces — but instead of moving back, she stays put to ensure that the rest of our positions are maintained. Even as prime minister Koppar speeds back to help her, an arrow brings her down.

I wish I can say she looks back at me as she falls, with one last loving glance. I wish I can say her sudden death breaks my heart — or at least, troubles me. I wish a cloud of romantic pain has risen over the field and drenches me with its tears. Instead, I feel a lightening of heart. I look for Warlika in the field and briefly, our

eyes meet. I have the foolish urge to call out to her — though the girl has no idea what I was thinking. She is only wondering how I'd react to the death of our commander, our queen.

It is Koppar's roar that brings me back. He falls upon their dangerous archers with a cry. I can sense the mood in my hitherto uninspired army shift. They want blood — they want revenge. Even as Vigia launches an attack on their king, our infantry mercilessly lynches the archers who killed Slivinia, giving special attention to the archer who'd shot the fatal arrow. Right in front of me, they dismember him slowly — his hands first, then his legs, then spilling his guts and finally chopping his head off — and all this, while the enemy watches helplessly.

I can't pretend to not hear anymore and when Stroman commands me to move, I do. I head straight to Warlika — strictly with martial intentions. Our swords meet and though she has all the vigour of a young warrior, she is tired and I am fresh. And I have the experience of having fought and won hundreds of swordfights. She is a splendid opponent. Her jet black eyes speak of unlimited courage and her tired limbs are sculpted perfection. There is a raw energy in the trembling of her lips as she tries to breach my defences. How I wish that we had met under different circumstances. She belongs in my arms and not bearing arms against me. These are the tragedies of war — immortal loves are not allowed to be born. Even as my elephants trample her troops, I injure her and she withdraws to a corner. I could have finished her off, but I have other plans.

By now, Koppar, Vigia and I are aligned and we slowly tighten the noose around Wirkā. Even as Sumpuk protects Binga from Warlika's feeble attacks, Stroman charges into the heart of their ranks. I can immediately see what he is doing — but I can't stop him. He succeeds in killing their strongest general — the one protecting their king, but at the cost of leaving his flank exposed. The coward Shamar attacks him when he is distracted and cuts him down.

It is a noble death and no doubt Stroman is pleased with himself, the fool, the bloody bastard. He could have waited for support; all of us would have backed him up. But he has to win glory, he has to win the battle all by himself. And look at him now, his eye barely attached to his head, his body pimpled with bloodspots. Look at the smirk on his face — my face. The lousy bastard, my brother.

There's no time for sentimentality now. Koppar, Sumpuk, Vigia and I launch a final coordinated attack. We are all veterans and we know what we are doing as we trap Wirka. Our infantry units surround Shamar — I instruct them not to kill him, I want him alive. There is a planet of hurt waiting for him. Warlika is injured and helpless as she watches us draw her brother to his end. Even as she watches, I drag him down from his chariot and make him kneel in front of me. The others step back — they know I need blood now. I hold Warlika's glance as I cut her brother's head off cleanly. She slumps to the ground and violent sobs conquer her proud frame and in her vulnerability, she looks even more magnificent. A brother for a brother is a fair deal — she will learn that soon enough. I will tell her that when I take her tonight. I think she will understand — maybe not tonight, maybe not for a few years, but she will.
