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Reflection

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Reflection

Aditya Patel was a strong prince of good reputation. He was handsome, intelligent, and rich. A rich prince who would soon receive his father's inheritance.

Abdul, Aditya's father, had been at a point between life and death for months. When the old man lay on his deathbed, the young prince had one thing in mind: gold. His father had a vault, rumored to be piled high with treasures. With his last breath, the king gave his son simple instructions.

"In the gazebo, there is a loose floorboard beside our seat."

Aditya knew that gazebo. Abdul and his mother would spend every Sunday evening in there, sitting in the seat that was made in honor of the couple.

"Underneath it you shall dig in the ground." He took a deep breath, making a great effort to speak. "Under the dirt is the key to the vaults."

Aditya nodded and stood to leave, knowing his mother would want a moment with him, but Abdul's weak hand reached out to grab his. The old man did not speak but stared into his son's eyes, his own wide like the full moon.

Their relationship had always been distant and sad. Aditya's father was wealthy and authoritative. With the entire state under his thumb, he felt he did not have much use for a son. Only when he realized that the kingdom would fall without a strong king did he decide it was time to pass the key.

So it was with a hard heart that Aditya watched his father die in that dark, depressing room. The broken king held his son's hand, and much was shown with this simple, silent gesture. What could be said after twenty years with barely an ounce of fatherly affection? They simply stared at one another, the wonder of regret hanging in the air. It whispered, as though it wanted to be heard but couldn't get its words out.

In that moment, the atmosphere seemed to change. Abdul's grip on his son's hand tightened, and a single, wandering tear made its way down his cheek. Regret. Regret that Aditya couldn't understand, even if he tried. His father told him one last thing before the soon to be king left, but he was so near death that his words were difficult to comprehend. "Take... good care of her."

Aditya nodded, knowing this would make the old man happy. As the sun went down and the light left his eyes, the prince left his father's side and brought news to his mother. She poured her tears onto him, and Aditya felt in her the grief he had difficulty procuring himself.

But after the funeral, any sadness he felt turned to hostility. His father had done

nothing for him. They never spoke one on one, and there was never once a moment when the king had told Aditya the simple three words that he always told his wife. And now, the only thing left between them was Aditya's inheritance. He pondered the gold and, when the time was right, went to the legendary gazebo. There was the loose floorboard, and deep in the ground he found the key. Aditya smiled as he saw it. His father had, at least, trusted his son with one thing.

He hurried to the vaults, excitement surging through him at the thought of the stacks of gold coins.

So it was with disappointment that he opened it to see one thing; a simple full length mirror, leaning against the opposite side of the closet sized vault. Aditya looked behind it, hoping for at least a small bag of coins, but nothing. He fumed with anger, staring at the one simple item his father had left him with. He examined the mirror, hoping for more, and saw the frame was made of pure gold. That would sell for at most 30,000 rupee. One more examination of the room told him there was nothing more. It was while this contemplation took place that he heard it—a whisper—beautiful, soft, feminine. “Can you see me?”

Aditya jumped back. The sound had come from the mirror. “Hello?” he said, and his voice shook with sudden excitement.

“Are you so modest, you will not look at your own reflection?”

He hesitated, terrified to look, but the pull of that glowing voice was too much. It was clearly coming from the mirror. Then, Aditya stepped forward to look at his reflection.

However his reflection, with those handsome features, was not what stared back at him. Instead, he saw a woman. He could never have explained the physics of it, nor the beauty of the woman inside. It seemed that her skin glowed and her face shimmered with kindness. The prince lunged forward without hesitation, standing inches from her. “Who are you?” he whispered.

She smiled. “The love of your life.”

He nearly cried out and immediately knelt to the ground. “Has my father truly blessed me with such an astounding gift?”

She smiled. “Stand up, Aditya. We are equals. Your humility is much too great.”

He looked her up and down, feasting his eyes upon what he had not known he would ever be permitted to possess.

The prince then leaned forward and brushed his lips against the glass. “No,” he muttered, and then kissed the mirror once more. “You—are you real?”

She seemed so alive, there in the mirror, as if she was standing on the opposite side of

a thin layer of glass.

Her soft, beautiful smile faltered. “Of course I’m real. I am as real as you want me to be.”

“But—” He could not find any more words. He wanted to touch her. If she was the love of his life, he should be able to do more than stare at her from the other side of a glass.

“Aditya?”

The voice of his mother rang through the vaults, and he jumped. He had forgotten where he was, staring at the woman so blindly.

“Aditya, are you down there?”

“Yes, mother, I am coming.”

Aditya turned to the mirror, looked at her beautiful eyes. “I will be back.”

He did come back, but not for another week. There were many things to sort out, such as the contents of his father’s will and Aditya’s coronation. He longed to leave, to go back down to see his lover.

“Son, come here.”

His mother, Karishma, held out her arms. Her hands were delicate, worn down with stress. They shook slightly. Abdul had been dead for eleven days.

“Yes, mother.”

She hugged him, kissed him on each cheek. “You have seemed very down.” She looked him in the eye, holding his shoulders tight. Karishma knew that he and his father were never close. “Your father was a brilliant man. He was stern and always tried to get his way, but he had a heart. I know he loved you. You are precious.”

Karishma had always known the right thing to say. She would always comfort Aditya when he was sad, and knew if he wanted to talk or if he just wanted a hug. But this time, Aditya did not want to hear it. He never understood the relationship between Abdul and his wife, for the man had loved her so much. If that was so, why could he not show the same love for his son? Aditya couldn't see what made his parents so close. Karishma did not understand. Yes, his father had a heart for her; but no one else. Not even for his own son. Aditya simply nodded, but his mother did not let him go.

She was staring at him, and her expression was different. It was sad, and had a sort of wonder to it. Aditya felt that she knew what was down there, in the deep secrets of his father’s vault.

“It is time to find you a wife.”

Aditya did not say anything. He stood and stared at her, his expression unchanged.

“Do you not agree?”

He said nothing.

“I have invited many women to your coronation. Perhaps you will find someone there.”

He stayed silent. Karishma let him go.

“What is your name?”

He sat on the cement floor of the vault, looking up at her face, marveling at the mystery of it. The woman in the mirror smiled that radiant smile that made his world melt. “That is a good question.”

He squinted at her. “Do you have a name?”

She did not answer but watched him, staring as if he were mildly interesting, but her eyes showed her love. She stared, and her expression said something even more. Perhaps sadness, or even disappointment.

Aditya took it for a no. “Then I shall name you.” It was a long five minutes of consideration. He contemplated her like a cat does its prey, making decisions, finding the most effective answer. “Pratima,” he whispered finally.

She smiled.

Aditya stood and kissed the mirror. “Pratima,” he repeated, soaking himself in the sound of the name. She stepped forward, put her hand on the glass. He looked at it. “If I broke the glass—would you are able to come out?”

“Don’t break the glass,” she said.

“If you stood back—”

“Don’t break the glass,” she whispered.

Aditya looked into her eyes. He trusted her. “I am at your command, dear lady. What you desire is my wish.”

And he left.

A year passed in which Aditya was crowned king and later met his wife, Rajni. They found each other at the coronation, and since the moment their eyes had met they were in love. Their wedding took place only three months later, and together they became king and queen of the state. As their wedding present, he gave her a gold necklace with a diamond pendant. Aditya fell in love with her quiet nature, the way she was confident but humble, and perfectionistic but patient. Slowly he allowed himself to stay away from Pratima in order to be fair to his wife.

And yet, it did not seem right. For there Pratima was, beauty he had never seen which made Rajni almost mediocre. He continued to visit Pratima out of guilt for leaving a gift from his father alone. But when he saw Pratima, Aditya was unsure if he was cheating on his wife or the woman in the mirror.

How could it be cheating if all he did was wish for something he could never have? And why should Aditya leave Pratima? She needed him. So Aditya decided that in order to fulfill his father's last wish, he would go down as often as possible—nearly every day—as years began to pass. He would stare at her, willing her to melt through the glass. But he could only wish more and more.

Aditya pleaded with Pratima, begging to know if there was some way they could be together. He told her to step out, to at least try. He looked around the mirror, trying to find a way in. Any way to be with her.

But he tried in vain. Aditya would settle on staring greedily at her beauty.

“I love you,” he whispered, leaning on the mirror, as close as he could be. He watched her and knew that it was wrong, that Rajni should be the one to hear those words. But this was a gift from his father; the father who had never said those three words to him. Perhaps the mirror was here to make up for something Abdul had forgotten to teach him. “I love you.”

Pratima spoke very little, but when she did, her voice was like a dream, soft and calming. It drowned his confusion, and hid his worry.

“I love you too.”

Slowly a distance grew between him and his wife. It was not a lack of love, for Aditya never saw her without feeling a fire in his chest. But something had broken between them, and Aditya could not pinpoint what it was. He would watch as she fingered the necklace that he had gifted to her, as though she wanted to yank it off. Perhaps she was angry with him for something Aditya could not understand. He tried to find out subtly.

“Are you angry, Rajni?” he asked once, holding her hand tightly and pressing his lips against it. She looked away, and once again tapped the pendant.

“Are you hiding anything?” she asked.

Aditya paused. Of course she had noticed his frequent visits to the vault. He tried to ignore the guilt that made its way to his throat. But his father never said to tell anyone the secret of the vault. It was none of her business; a simple secret he should protect.

“No,” he replied. “I would never hide anything from you, my love.”

Pratima, too, became sad. This Aditya understood, for she was trapped behind the glass, and could not be reached. When he fought with Rajni, Aditya would go to Pratima,

who would watch him with sadness in her eyes. They had little conversation; their eyes would lock and those simple moments would be enough. Aditya would sometimes stare in his own mirror, watching himself and wondering what he had done differently from his father; what had prevented the love that existed between his parents from being passed to their child.

Four years after he met Pratima, Aditya's mother fell ill.

Aditya had expected it, for she was now nearing fifty three. Aditya and Rajni sat beside her bed as she began to slide into the end of her life. And while Rajni stayed every day, Aditya continuously visited Pratima. The king left her one day to check on his mother.

“She is very ill,” Rajni said. “The nurse will not allow me inside.”

He sat beside his mother, watching as lights drained from her eyes, remembering his father's death in this same bed. Its gold embroidered sheets and pillows made her look so peaceful.

“Son,” she whispered. Her voice was just audible by a hair's breadth.

“Yes mother,” he replied, remembering all the times he had said this, thinking of when he was an innocent and good child:

“Son, go outside, you have been sitting around too long.”

“Yes, mother!”

“Son, go to the well and get a pail of water.”

“Yes, mother!”

“Son, do not run, be a gentleman.”

“Yes, mother!”

As Aditya stared into her eyes, he felt himself shrink to the naive little boy he once was. A mirror did not need a woman to make it magical. Money and gold did not matter. It was solely the importance of being a free child, with smiles as bright as the sun while the adults sorted out the difficulties. He could cry about insignificant dilemmas and receive sympathy. Aditya's mess of problems would be over his head, only Greek to his tiny ears. But the death of his gentle mother could not bring him back. He tried to recall these days of simplicity, his mind racing through the memories. All he saw was his mother's face over and over, calling to him, making him listen, saying that there was no going back, that all he could change was the present.

“Son.”

“Yes, mother.” His voice quiet and broken.

“Take good care of her.”

Aditya watched to the very end of her life. He felt confused. But of course she meant his wife. There was no way that she could know about the mirror.

He left the room, feeling numb.

Rajni sat on a sofa outside, and stood when he came in. She did not need to ask. She knew by the look on his face. She always knew his thoughts, and he hated her for it. "Husband," was all she could manage.

It was this word that struck him. He knew his wife, and this was not it. His wife did not question their relationship. He could see her still fidgeting with the necklace, as if he wouldn't notice. Confusion had overcome him, and it was her fault. His mother's last words coursed through his brain. They had known; his parents had known something he could not understand, and he was determined to find answers. Ignoring Rajni, Aditya let his feet carry him down the hall, where a door led to the vaults. "Husband!" Rajni cried out, running to his side. "Where are you going?"

He ignored her and reached for the handle, but his wife blocked the way. "What is it you so desire that lies in the vaults? What causes that gleam in your eye?"

Aditya was now forced to acknowledge her. "Gleam in my eye?"

"You go there every day, and I see desire in your eyes. What is so desirable that makes today, the day that your dear mother died, no different from any other? Surely not gold?"

"It is business that does not concern you." He tried to push her, but she was stubborn and would not budge.

"I am your wife!" Tears streamed down her face. "Have I not cared for you since the day we married? My own life was devoted to keeping you happy, just because I love you. I saw something in you the day of the coronation. I did not fall for your wealth, nor your power. I fell for you because you had the passion that I thought a husband should have. Your father would have been proud. I can see that you are strong, like Abdul. Your mother and I talked and talked of your past and I know who you are. When you set your mind to a task, you will persist until you win what you deserve. If that is so, then please tell me what it is you are now persisting to see. I have made your meals and given you all the love I have, although you neglect my attempts to bestow unto you the affection you need and deserve. So can you not return the favor by voicing your secret? I promise you, your words will not hurt me, for I have been hurt to the ends of possibilities, simply by my husband's depression."

Aditya was no longer listening. Her words had become like that of a buzzing fly, and he could feel a great longing for the woman in the mirror, his true wife. The love of his life; Pratima had said it herself. This was a gift from his father. Rajni did not deserve to know. She

was not his wife.

He grabbed Rajni by the arm and threw her at the opposite wall, where a mirror hung. She screamed as her head smashed the glass. It cracked down the middle, and she fell, her face covered in blood, but Aditya did not notice or care. He had already run to the vault and was unlocking it, waiting for the relief to come, the moment when he could forget about his mother, his father, and his wife that was lying on the ground, her pulse slowing, where she lay in a pool of blood. No. She was not his wife. His conscience would not stop him when it came to the beautiful woman, his angel, his goddess, his idol.

The door swung open as he burst through and ran to the mirror, longing for comfort, greedy for those beautiful stunning eyes, for the soft smile, for the lips he could not touch.

But something was different. She was not standing inches from the glass, waiting impatiently to see his face, as was tradition. A crack ran all the way down the middle of the mirror, and there she was, lying there in a pool of blood. The necklace, its chain broken, lay beside her. A single tear mingled with the blood on her face.

For the first time, Aditya recognized her for who she truly was.

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