

LAST VOW

My husband was destined to die today. The stars had foretold it. It made no difference. I would fight the stars.

Van's life and mine fell into sync when we met two years ago. It was more like reconnecting with a lifelong friend rather than meeting a new love.

I expected my mother to find faults with Van. After all, he was not Indian. She surprised me.

"Savi, have you and Van talked about marriage?"

"Not specifically. But the way things are going, I think he'll eventually ask."

"Then you propose. He's perfect."

Late one evening the timing felt right. I opened my mouth, but before any words escaped my lips, Van was on his knee.

"Yes, yes, yes! A million times, yes!"

My mother had a request.

"Savi, please see an astrologer before you set the wedding date."

"Van and I have already agreed to a Hindu ceremony. Why do we need a fortune teller to tell us we're meant to be together?"

"It's a tradition in India. They help you pick a date when the stars are aligned in your favor."

“It’s a superstition.”

“Don’t you want the universe to work on your side?”

I relented. On a crisp spring morning, Mother accompanied me, carrying copies of Van’s and my birth certificates. I expected the astrologer to work in a tent with a crystal ball. He was in an office building with a large computer on his desk. For twenty minutes he typed onto a screen. He printed papers with stars and planetary patterns. His forehead furrowed.

“This is very unusual,” he said. “There are thirty-six celestial factors we try to match. Less than eighteen is a bad sign.”

“How many do Van and Savi match on?” Mother demanded.

“All thirty-six. Very rare.”

I sighed in relief.

“But there’s a problem. Your life paths align perfectly up to a point. Then only one continues,” he looked up at me, “yours.”

“What? When is this point?” I made no effort to hold back the irritation and disbelief in my voice.

“The auspicious wedding date is within the first two weeks in October. One year and two weeks later.... Van stops.”

“Stops what?” I blurted.

“Living.”

When we left the astrologer’s office, I turned angrily towards Mother.

“I don’t care what he says. I’m still...” I stopped when she placed her arms around me.

“I know, beti. The two of you are meant to be together. There are some things we can’t control. Fate.”

I was sorry for my anger.

“What should I do?” I whispered.

“Protect Van.”

Our wedding took place on October 15th. For the eight-hour-long ceremony, I chose a red sari embroidered with a 24-karat gold thread. Van wore a white silk sherwani decorated with the same gold design. For months after the wedding, our friends joked that ours was the longest they had ever attended. The Brahmin priest was pleased when we told him that we wanted every ritual and vow included in the original ceremony. No shortcuts. We needed all the luck we could get. Van and I walked seven times around the sacred fire and recited the seven vows. We pledged love, duty, and respect for each other and the universe. With the seventh vow, we swore to be by each other's side not only in this life but for eternity. A gold and red thread was wrapped around us.

“Your souls are united. Forever,” the Brahmin pronounced.

The year that followed was magical. We built homes for the homeless, gathered signatures for petitions, took cooking classes, and went on hikes. Between my teaching and our volunteer work, I felt exhausted, happy, and completely alive. I did my best to forget about the astrologer’s warning. Van saw I was bothered by something. I confessed, and he laughed.

“I’m not Indian. I don’t believe the stars control my fate. Savi, you know that, right?”

Still, he agreed to a comprehensive medical exam. He had every test and x-ray. When they returned negative, a visible calm came to my mother and me.

On our first anniversary, Van and I took the frozen slices of our wedding cake to his parents and then to my mother. She began the clinical cross-examination.

“How are you feeling, Van? Any fever? Unusual symptoms?”

He tolerated the interrogation. I had already asked the same questions many times.

I barely slept for the last two weeks. On the fourteenth day, I insisted we stay home. I never left Van’s side. At 11:59 P.M., I held my breath. At midnight, I exhaled a sigh of relief and embraced my husband. We could continue to live our lives. We went to bed, but I was not ready to sleep. I faced my slumbering husband and watched him breathe. With each movement of his chest, my own eyelids drooped.

A moan woke me. Van sat upright clutching his head.

“Van, what is it?”

He looked at me with a look of pain and sadness. Then he slumped and stopped breathing.

“Van!” I screamed, shaking his shoulders.

I clamored out of bed and reached for my phone. I kept misdialing 911. A glowing light illuminated the bedroom. I pivoted around. A spectral figure materialized next to my husband.

The figure had a human form. Its skin appeared solid black, though a white glow made it difficult to discern. The figure looked at me with large white eyes and coal-black pupils. His sympathetic gaze eased my fear.

“Hello, Savi,” said the being in a kind voice.

“Who are you?”

“The Bringer.”

“Please, don’t take Van.”

“I must. But he led a virtuous life. I am sure his destination is a good one.”

“You’re sure,” I said in surprise. “You mean you don’t know?”

“Those decisions are not mine to make.”

He placed his hands over Van’s body. A golden orb rose from my husband’s chest. The being placed it on a radiant black cape on his back. The cape enveloped the sides of the orb. I sprinted forward and grasped the cape, which held Van’s soul. The Bringer ascended. I levitated with him. We approached the ceiling. *I’ll crash into that and fall.* Instead, we slid through it like it was water. I floated above our apartment. A familiar anxiety awoke in the pit of my stomach.

For our six-month anniversary, Van had surprised me by booking a balloon ride for us. As our basket soared into the air, my breath caught in my chest.

“I didn’t know you were afraid of heights, Savi.”

“I didn’t want you to think I’m a coward.”

Van’s arms scooped me into a hug. The warmth of his body had melted my fear, and I had exhaled.

I looked down and saw the large oak tree outside our bedroom window. Inside that room was my husband’s body. I stared at the golden orb and held on. *Van.*

The being looked at me. Within the glow, the black skin turned translucent. Millions of stars shined through the skin. His eyes remained white and sad.

“Savi, you must go back.”

“My place is with Van.”

He reached back and clamped my hands. His touch was both hot and cold, like holding an ice cube in a shower. I felt his strength but remembered what I was holding and pressed tighter. He could not pry my hands. He looked surprised. Then the Bringer shot upward. The wind pulled the skin on my face back as though it would peel off. Our flight froze midair. The lights of the city were thousands of feet below us.

“Why did you stop?”

“Because, Savi, you belong in this realm. Let me take you back?”

“Not without my husband.”

The Bringer jolted sideways. The speed forced my eyes shut. The wind roared with such force I heard nothing. Noiseless peace. We halted, and my organs lurched forward, held back by my skin. A salty smell entered my nostrils. Endless waves hissed beneath us. An ocean. The being dove towards it. Our momentum forced the water to collide against my body. It was glass hard. My body skipped on the icy surface like a stone hurled by a child. A frozen wave struck my right hand and knocked it loose. I hung by one hand whipsawing through the air, feeling it slipping, losing my grasp on the smooth cape. My right hand hung lifelessly behind. The same hand Van had held when we circled the sacred fire and promised to protect one another. Months later, I accidentally slipped off the roof of a house we had been building. Van’s hand had instinctively shot out and grabbed my wrist. He had saved me then. I would not let him slip away now. I swung my arm and latched onto the orb. The being snapped to a standstill.

“Savi, your loyalty is admirable. But your place is with the living.”

“My place is with my husband.”

The being bolted. The air forced my eyelids shut. The next time I opened them, we floated at the base of a snow-covered mountain.

Van and I had talked about trekking the Himalayas. I wanted to share my culture with him.

“Savi, you hate the cold,” Van had warned.

“It’s time I toughen up.”

The Bringer rocketed upward. The scent of juniper disappeared in the dry air. The snow seared my skin, like metal shards battering my body. An icicle struck my right cheek. Blood coursed down my face and instantly froze.

The being took us to an infinite void. We halted. Total silence. I shuddered and stared into the blackness.

“Where are we?” No answer. I felt a terror as deep as any physical pain I had experienced that night. I was prepared for all worlds except nothingness. *Eternity could not be spent here. I am too young. It’s insane to battle fate.* Then I remembered the seven vows. I was fighting for Van. I grasped the orb tighter.

“Savi, there are few braver than you. But this must stop. You can’t go to the next realm. I’ll grant you any wish in my power, provided you do not ask for the life of your husband.”

I thought about our wedding.

“Are you always true to your word?”

“Of course,” he said.

“Then my wish is to let me always be true to mine.”

“A selfless wish. I agree, Savi. Now I’ll take you back.”

“Not without my husband.”

“I’ve told you —”

“I spoke the seven vows at my wedding.”

“So?”

“The seventh vow was ‘Attramshe sakshino vadet pade.’”

The Bringer’s eyes widened.

“I vowed to stay with Van for eternity. How can I be true to my word if you take my husband from me?”

Silence. Stillness. The being’s eyes glowed. He raised his arms. The cape covered me. All went dark.

Tap. I opened my eyes. Tap. I turned to the sound and saw an oak branch striking my bedroom window. I whipped my head. There was Van’s still body. My chest tightened. My world blurred. I failed. A sob escaped my throat, and I fell back onto a pillow.

“Savi, what’s wrong?” Van’s sleepy face smiled at me.

I sat up and hugged his neck.

“You’re alive,” I whispered.

“Of course, I am. What else would I be? Your fixation with my death should stop.” He touched my cheek. “What happened here? It’s cut.”

I felt my face. A painful scab. I jumped out of bed and ran to the mirror. The dried blood covered a gash under my eye. My gaze turned upward.

“Thank you,” I mouthed.