

**To Bare a Heart**  
**Jade C. Lee**

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## The Lotus Princess

Sita clung to the wrought iron bars encasing her. In the roaring calls of war, a conch horn bellowed. An arrow shot overhead, splitting into sparks as it plunged into the gloaming sky. With each twirl it grew, transforming into a golden spear. Then, a great cry trembled through the earth.

A pillar of light poured onto the battle scene where Ram stood, red pooling at his feet. Beneath him laid Ravana, staked into the ground by his heart. Silence fell as the light enveloped him in flames. Thousands of soldiers erupted in cheer. Murasu drums pounded as they reveled.

The cell crumbled like dried mud at Sita's fingertips, her nails bloodied and black. She gasped. Heat surged from her stomach, traveling to her cheeks. Tears rolled past her brown eyes as she broke into a run, leaping over each corpse. "Ram!" she howled, arms reaching out for him.

Ram's lips quivered into a smile, before thinning. "My love," he replied, embracing her.

"You defeated him—the demon lord!" Sita's chest swelled as she cupped his dirtied face. "Is it really you? My husband, come with an army to rescue me?" she asked, searching his eyes.

"Oh, how I have missed you all these long months," he whispered.

"As have I," Sita murmured, her gaze tender. "I knew you would not fail, so I waited."

Ram parted his lips to speak but stopped. The warmth in his eyes cooled. The hands that weaved around Sita then dropped to his sides, clasping onto the smooth plating of his armor.

“Ram?” she asked, her fingers extending to touch his wrists. “What is wrong?”

“Sita, you must listen to me...” He took a step back, slipping away from her grasp. “Though it breaks my heart... I cannot be your husband any longer.”

Sita froze. Her heart turned to ice. As the clamor surrounding them died down, she stared at Ram, her honey complexion paling. *No*, she told herself. *This cannot be. It is impossible.*

“You were with Ravana longer than you’ve ever been with me,” Ram went on, his voice hitching in a sob. “You know the ways of this land, my love. You know what will happen.”

“The people of Ayodhya will not accept you as their ruler,” Sita answered with a croak. “Because of me.”

“I have done my duty as your husband,” Ram said, kneeling. As he bore into her, he offered one last smile. Streaming tears mixed into the blood and grime on his face like watercolor. “I saved you from your captor... Now, I set you free.”

“No.”

The crowds of soldiers whispered at Sita’s response. The whites of their prying eyes multiplied in her teary vision. Her hands covered her from view. Daylight fell past the horizon. “If I had known this is what you would decide...” she began, looking up to the heavens. “Then I would’ve killed myself when Ravana took me.”

“Do not speak of such things,” said Ram. As he rose to his feet, his hand gestured in the air and the army scattered. All left with groans and muttering disapproval, except for two. Both monkeys approached, one wearing a large crown, the other flying in the cold breeze of night.

“You sent Hanuman so that I might wait in hope,” said Sita, her tone laced with venom. “He may vouch for me! Was he not the one who brought me your signet ring?”

Hanuman hovered beside Sita, the wind carrying him. “Sire, she is your wife,” he urged.

"I cannot ignore the customs of the kingdom I will rule," Ram replied, ruffling his hair.

"And I am innocent!" Sita announced, staring daggers straight through him.

The chirps of crickets filled the space between them. A gale blew past, prickling bumps on their bare skin. Silver braziers lit one by one, circling around the battlefield. The dead laid still. Each of Ravana's ten severed heads watched them with black, lifeless eyes.

"Build a pyre." Sita spun around, plucking a bundle of flowers from an oleander bush. "Build me a funeral pyre, and I shall kill myself now," she repeated, facing Ram's sorrow.

"Sita, I love only you," he cried, dropping to his knees yet again. "Forever, only you."

"As have I," Sita murmured, her smile not meeting her reddened eyes. "My prince..."

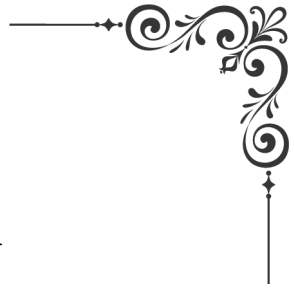
With each branch collected and set at her bare feet, a hollowness settled in Sita's chest. The few words of noncompliance said amongst the monkeys and her husband fell on deaf ears. As the white moon ascended in the darkness, the warriors returned to gawk at her. Rather than jumping from the platform, Sita held her stance firm, her toes curling onto the sharp twigs. *His honor must not be tarnished*, she thought. *This is my fate. Ram is to become king.*

"Begin." Her voice rang clear, echoing in waves across the grassy plains. The scent of early rotting wafted in her nostrils, then the faint puffs of smoke. A small fire radiated from beneath her like a soft candlelight. Yet, it continued to grow, her lungs filling with the fumes.

As the flames engulfed the pyre and swallowed her whole, Ram wept. In a flash, the heavens opened from the stars above, flooding the land with a beam of ivory. A hand the color of rubies grasped onto Sita's, guiding her down from the singed heap in several floating steps.

“Do not forget who you are, avatars of the gods,” roared Agni, the emblem of fire. “Ram—Vishnu the Preserver. Sita—Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu. Remain unburnt.”

A lotus tattoo welled onto the back of Sita’s pristine right hand. She grinned. “*Dharma*.”



## Glass Cannon

“Wait, we can make a deal—” Reniel sputtered as she tumbled inside the jail cell. Her palms smacked into the muck soaking the floorboards. Iron wafted in the fall. “P-Please, Veria needs me, she’s dying—”

“You both should’ve watched yer backs instead of try’na steal the Goddess’ scroll, hm?” the guard replied, locking her in. With a cackle, he sauntered to the top deck.

“When I get out of here, you’ll be sorry!” she hissed, banging the rusted bars encasing her. Heat traveled up her throat and enveloped her cheeks like wildfire. A familiar feeling.

“Gonna cry?” a voice scoffed, stepping out from the darkness.

“Cilas.” The same bitter face from her past was now possessed by a young man.

“Last I saw you... you were wearing a fancy gown. Now, you’re right where you belong.”

“So, you got caught too—”

Wind and water exploded inside, followed by the crackling of cannonballs shredding the ship. The clamor of men from above roared, but the crashing waves drowned it out. Reflected on the icy water pooling at their feet, moonlight illuminated their cells.

“Can—” Reniel coughed out a mouthful of saltwater. “Can you see who it is?”

“It doesn’t matter. Ship’s going down,” Cilas spat, slumping back in resignation.

Barrels and gadgets toppled over as the ship careened onto its starboard side. Reniel scoured the room, the rush of winter air prickling down her spine. “Come on, roll this way!”

“There’s nothing small enough to fit in that damn lock,” he muttered.

Reniel bristled. “Look, you might have a death wish, but I don’t.”

“It’s not like you can bust it open,” he said, edging closer to her. “Why don’t you accept it already? You’re just a spoiled little girl who’s got a big head.”

“And you think you’re hot shit, but you’re trapped too. Kharis captured *you*. Not just me.” Reniel held his gaze. “It doesn’t take much strength to hurt a little girl.” As she scanned him, several lashes revealed through the cuts of his sleeves. The newer wounds festered green.

Gloom swept across his face. “I survived on my own. At least I can say that much.”

“You’re nothing but skin and bones.”

“I’m still strong enough to strangle you.”

“Why didn’t you break the lock then?” she goaded.

“Can’t fit through. I cut myself earlier trying to bend the rusted part.”

“Try again.”

“*Like I said, I—*”

“Look. We need to work together, or we’ll never get out.” Reniel dropped to the water. Her hands glided along the gritty floor, debris stabbing her like needles. As she lurched forward, the tip of her fingers traced along a gelid tool, caught in a fissure.

“You found something?”

“Help me already!”

He furrowed his brows, and for a moment, a smirk ghosted his lips. Both pairs of arms then pushed to widen the gap. A distressed noise was audible as blood trickled down Cilas’ pale skin. The whites of their knuckles shone through before a slow release. “I told you...”

Wild-eyed, Reniel held out her arm. “You have to dislocate my shoulder.”



“What—”

“You had no problem with slicing me and my parents. Do it.”

As if lightning struck the ship itself, a cannonball pelted through, butchering the side of the room. The floorboards quaked. The sea pumped in and clawed at their elbows. Frenzied, Cilas gripped hold of her shoulder. One pop and an onslaught of tears fought past Reniel’s poker face. Pain seared through her right side, blazing down to the bone. With a deep breath, she sank.

Her arm ached, pulsating in pain with every touch. Surging forward, Reniel grazed her fingertips along the fissures, before reaching the tool. She pressed further past the bar, iciness biting at her shoulder, and grabbed hold. Twisting the sharpest point up the lock, she shifted her angle back and forth. As it snapped open, she propelled herself out.

“I can never forgive you,” Reniel murmured. Glancing at the thin scar across her wrist, she smiled. “But... I can’t forgive Kharis even more.” Slowly, she opened the door.

Cilas’ eyes softened as he pointed through the blasted hole, guiding her view to several discernible ships. “Our friends are here, tough guy.”



## About the Author



JADE C. LEE IS A GAME Writer specializing in fantasy, drama, action, and adventure RPGs. She is pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing from Full Sail University. She is a screenwriter for Ceragon Dubs, an online production crew amassing 1 million views on YouTube. She is also a trained vocalist and an avid fan of *The Phantom of the Opera*.