

GAAN

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I have evaded wreaths of venomous, moving flowers that have invaded the dilapidated manor, writhing and sliding up and down the walls like snakes, ready to strike any moment. I had to tread carefully down the corridors, staying as far away from the walls as possible.

When I first saw the dark blue monsters, emitting the ghastly smell when the old adventurer brought me a vial of juice squeezed out of the petal, I felt like I could never make my way past them and reach the attic. But I am here at last – here next to the feathery box the adventurer described to me. It looks light and supple and so blue that it hurts my eyes. There isn't a flower in sight. Maybe they are hiding somewhere, waiting to strike the moment I ready myself to open the box.

For years after Gaan disappeared, I spent all my time trying to visualise the many texts he sent me in the last months. I played his voice clips over and over again, trying to smell the ghastly smell he talked about by some supernatural means, trying to develop a sixth sense to know how he felt. Now that I am so near him, now that I have finally managed to track him down, I know exactly how he felt when the flowers hunted him down and, after haunting him for six months, took him away.

The stench hurts my nose. A part of me wants to run far, far away from this manor. To never look back. To never think about it again. To forget the nightmares.

But how do I forget Gaan?

I make my way towards the box... the

box that might put an end to my existence in a matter of minutes.

Before I saw Gaan, I heard his voice.

It came floating from the playground, as gentle as a breeze that catches you unawares and relieves you, for just a moment, of the many worries that plague your mind. As if entranced, I walked towards the voice, finding him sitting under a tree, singing to himself.

That was his first day in school.

I stand in front of the box, holding the vial in my left hand. If the old adventurer is to be trusted, this grim adventure will end in just a few seconds, and after that... What will happen to me after that?

Somewhere, beyond the walls, over the ceilings, under the floor, the flowers are waiting to snap.

Taking a deep breath, I move my right hand over the lid. *Bad decision*, my mind says before I feel it.

I feel myself grimacing as pain spreads from my hand to my shoulder. I can feel my hand getting moist from the blueness of the lid, and the stench, moving its way up, up, up, overwhelms me.

I will probably lose my sense of smell pretty soon, I remember a voice clip from Gaan.

By the time he sent me that clip, he had forgotten how to sing.

I was the one who nicknamed him *Gaan*: Song.

Little by little, as I sat beside him for hours and hours every day, as he sang softly into my ears, competing with the songbirds that flew over us, I started feeling less like the corpse that years of being bullied had turned me into, and more like the person I

truly wanted to be: someone with dreams, with aspirations.

We all stood awestruck whenever he opened his mouth to sing, wondering how someone so young had mastered the art so beautifully. For this one skill, he was admired by everyone: by every student, every teacher.

And then the flowers came for him.

It takes only a moment for the lid to disappear when I pour the juice from the petals over it. As it turns to smoke and surrounds me from all sides, I cough and cough, engulfed by the blueness of it, blinded by the smoke, finding it impossible to breathe as the remains of the lid enter my nostrils, as they block my nose, my eyes, my ears.

Is this the end? Did it end this way for Gaan as well?

Coughing, I lean closer to the box, squinting through the blue mist, trying to get a glimpse of the one I have struggled for so many years to find.

And I see him.

It began with a single petal.

And then petals constantly kept wafting to his room, carried by the air from an unknown place, accumulating in his room. The stench was unbearable and made it impossible for him to even breathe properly. They somehow found their way into the room even through closed windows. Gaan didn't know how.

Strangely, other people could never see the petals that were making it so difficult for him to function.

Nobody believed him as he slowly lost his ability to sing. His voice, even when

he spoke, became hoarse. He was now ignored and mocked by the very people who had once feted him. He had nothing left to offer.

He begged me, again and again, to believe him. I received texts after texts from him as he described how the petals had taken the shape of flowers that took over his room, filling it with stench, the blueness making him feel like his eyes had been torn out.

Everybody laughed at him. They could not see the monsters that had overtaken his life. When he tried telling his parents what was bothering him, they scoffed at him, thinking it was just a whim of his to escape the bright career in music that awaited him. From everything that would make his – and their – name.

Stop coming up with stories!

It went on for months.

And then, one day, he disappeared. They looked for him everywhere but couldn't locate him.

His last text to me: *Blue flowers. I can't.*

Through the blue smoke, I see Gaan lying in the box, his face pale but peaceful. I want him to wake up and sing me a song that would cleanse my mind of the bitterness and tragedies that cloud it.

But I know my wish will never come true.

Struggling to breathe, barely managing to see anything, I put my arms around Gaan and as I finally give in to the blueness, I hear a creak. Squinting, I see a large blue flower crawling towards me – towards us.

