

In the corner of the village stood a shack, with cracks in its wooden walls and holes in its straw roof. Nobody remembered it being built, but the villagers all agreed that it had been such a fine dwelling once, and its disrepair was truly a shame. They would shake their head at the nearest bystander upon passing: *miteni demko*, they would say, *so tragic*.

In the centre of the shack stood a man hunched over a barrel of wine, stirring unceasingly. His clothes were clean, his skin callous free; his hair fell delicately over his face, feather soft, pumice light, though not one of the villagers had ever seen him relinquish his barrel.

Sometimes children would sneak up and peep in, curious of the estranged man. They were hurriedly shooed away by their elders however, chastised *non mirine, do not bother him*.

Occasionally, someone would gingerly approach the man, and beseech *Haneri siko... min?, Can you help me?*

The man would listen carefully, pausing his stirring. Licking his lips and he would pronounce quietly, *Mo haneri, I cannot help you*.

*Sha, iip'kola*, he would continue, offering a cup of golden liquid.

Hesitantly, the villager would take a sip. If the villager glanced up, they might catch a glimpse of the man's bright grinning eyes beneath his locks. Later, the villager would proffer the story to their neighbours, saying he had eyes like honey, or stars, and for this the man earned his name *Soma*, meaning the most luscious of golds.

Slowly, the villagers' afflictions would alleviate, though the methods by which this occurred could be quite... unusual.

One such unfortunate tale, since we have the time, is when a young man begged Soma to help his sister. A horrible rash had spread across her skin. *Tem iip'kosemate...* He breathed, *He hated to see her like this*.

Soma exhaled: *mo haneri, sha iip'kola*.

Like the others, he drank the wine.

A month later, disagreements between neighbouring colonies bubbled into war, and the young man became a soldier, but lost his eyes in the battle.

When he returned, after the war diminished, his sister hugged him until he couldn't breathe. He smiled, enjoying the sound of her giggle, inhaling her scent, stroking her soft hair, elated at hearing her so full of life. He stroked his empty eyes and silently thanked the man- if his blindness was the price for her recovery, then so it be.

Alas, he was deceived; the illness remained. But without his eyes, he could not see the lesions snaking around her neck, and a year later all laughing ceased as the illness stole her breath away. The man wept for days, and upon confronting Soma, he only received *marthi tuo, you got your wish*. In his heart, the man knew Soma was correct: he did indeed no longer see her suffer.

Many more stories spun into similar endings, but I'm afraid I could not bear recounting any more. This continued for many years, perhaps decades, as Soma's youth was seemingly eternal, until finally the villagers' anger blistered and they pointed their weapons towards the shack. Inside, Soma tutted at his barrel. Finally, it was empty. Sighing wearily, he rested his stirring stick on his shoulder, glanced one last time at his dwelling, and vacated. He walked barefoot but left barely a smudge, let alone a footprint in the icterine sand.

The villagers converged on the shack, cries of *osa nala!*, *Burn him!* Surging through the crowds. They struck the shack alight, too blind in their rage to realise it was empty. They cheered, staying until the last flame glittered out deep in the night. They slept soundlessly every night after.

Meanwhile, Soma teetered along, supporting himself with his stirring stick. In the next town, people bustled about under the shrimp pink sky, and for the first time in a while, the man sat. A boy joined him, lonely as his parents went to work, and rested his head in his palm, muttering about his unrequited love. Soma smiled gently, *mo haneri...* He revealed a canteen and offered it to him, who marvelled at the way its contents shone and moved as if alive.

*Sha, iip'kola.*

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