

# The Queen's Last Salute



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 juggernaut

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*For my mentor Dr Daisaku Ikeda*

*For my parents, who instilled in me the love for stories; and  
my husband Rajib and son Pronoy, who always patiently  
listened to all the stories I told them*

*For Nandini Sengupta, who believed that this story was  
good enough to be told to the world*



## Prologue

*The year is 1842. In a small principality somewhere in central India, politically christened the Bundelkhand Agency by the British East India Company, an event is unfolding at this very moment that has its entire population in the grip of frenzied excitement. Nothing like this has ever been seen before, nor heard. Tucked away in the deepest recesses of Britain's much prized jewel in the crown that is Hindustan, lies this expanse of barren and stony plain, punctuated by patches of forests which are mostly dry given the long spells of the blistering heat that scorches the ground, and leaves the rocky outcrops that arise every now and then, sizzling. Amidst this igneous sandstone landscape springs up the principality of Jhansee, flanked by the Indo-Gangetic plain to its north and the Vindhyachal mountain range to its south.*

Not too many people live here. Their livelihood depends on trade, mostly weapons and warfare implements. Under the patronage of a rather hedonistic and self-indulgent ruler, the inhabitants of this sluggish kingdom are in a perpetual

state of torpor. Blame it on the weather that renders even the sprightliest of beings lethargic and inactive. Or the fact that this sleepy province, eclipsed by its more glorious and mightier neighbours, Awadh and Gwalior, is yet to be nudged by any event of purport, political or otherwise. Rarely does the state warrant a visit even from the officials of the East India Company, who are already troubled by the several warring principalities of the northern and central provinces of India. These kingdoms are often engaged in ascension disputes or with each other. To resolve such conflicts, the East India Company, commonly addressed as the Company Sarkar or Company Bahadur, has to often intervene by placing its own candidates on the thrones. Caught in such a conflict, and not meriting any entitlement to a dynastic lineage, Jhansee has suddenly moved into the ecliptic orbit of the Company Sarkar who is observing it keenly. Why? This particular event is by no means insignificant and has raised the hackles of the East India Company.

‘So, what’s brewing here in Jhansee, Colonel Sleeman?’ Lord Auckland asked. The Governor General of India drew on his pipe as he scanned through the reams of paper that lay strewn on the desk before him. The faint swish of the punkahs above was the only sound that filled the sahib’s ears, and the occasional call of the cuckoo pierced the still, hot afternoon air.

‘I hear it was a close shave for you right after you arrived here. That Afghan sepoy nearly killed you,’ frowned the Governor General. ‘What a war it has been! I’m told the Duke of Wellington is none too happy with our invasion



of Afghanistan. Were you injured in that attack, Sleeman?’

‘Oh no, sir! I’ve seen much worse when I was in charge of the suppression of thuggee and dacoity,’ said Sleeman.

‘You did some remarkable work there. You caught their chief, didn’t you? What was his name . . .?’ Auckland snapped his fingers.

‘Ferringheea,’ Sleeman replied.

‘Ah yes!’ Auckland nodded. He turned over a page of the record book kept on the table. ‘So, this contains all details of the entire thuggee operations?’ he asked, looking up at Sleeman.

‘Sir!’

Auckland went back to the register. ‘It’s a pity you let go of the Residency of Lucknow offered to you last year in acknowledgement of your having squashed the thuggee menace! Thuggee Sleeman, indeed!’ Auckland laughed loudly. ‘Although I’m mighty glad to have you in charge of matters here in Bundelkhand. This place needs a lot of organizing!’

Sleeman nodded. He was feeling quite despondent of late. Lord Auckland was on his way out. It had been a productive association and the Governor General’s support had been crucial in crushing the ruthless thugs who had rampaged through territories of central India for several decades.

‘I would have liked to have met all the kings in this region, especially the Raja of Jhansee, Gangadhar Rao,’ continued the Governor General, ‘but Lord Ellenborough takes over next month and I have to get back to Fort William. Moreover, this place is bloody hot, I say!’

Sleeman smiled at Lord Auckland's obvious discomfort. It was the month of March and the soil of Bundelkhand was already simmering. He sighed thinking of his current appointment. He had been called back to Bundelkhand to sort out a few administrative issues. It was an arduous task that lay ahead of him. He had a fairly large territory under his supervision and, given the endless royal intrigues that crackled in almost every court of Bundelkhand, he was sure this would not be a particularly pleasant task. Shrugging off such unsavoury thoughts, he turned his attention back to his superior who had taken out a rather large and soiled handkerchief and was wiping the sweat off his brow.

'Sir, thank you for your visit to Jhansee. It has boosted the morale of our men, especially the English troops. As for Raja Gangadhar Rao, he is now firmly ensconced on his throne!'

'But I hear he rules neither wisely nor well and spends most of his time in the pursuit of dance and drama. Fraser told me that the man even dresses up as a woman to perform in these plays he puts up.' Lord Auckland snorted. 'Does a ruler of a kingdom ever warrant such behaviour? What do you think, Sleeman?'

'He's quite a patron of art and music. But he has brought about a fair amount of law and order in the state. His people are happy.'

'I would keep a strict watch over Jhansee,' Auckland cautioned his junior. He paused to drink water and drained the glass of its contents entirely. 'I can't hold him to his trespasses, though. The man is widowed, I believe, and has no children?'

‘That’s right, sir! But there’s been a development. The Raja is getting married again. In fact, the wedding takes place this week. He hopes his new bride will give him an heir. She’s still very young, you see.’

Lord Auckland looked up sharply. ‘Eh? Gangadhar Rao is remarrying?’ A crease appeared on his forehead. ‘Who is he marrying?’

‘A fourteen-year-old girl from Benares. She grew up in the court of the exiled peshwa, Baji Rao.’

The crease on Auckland’s forehead deepened. ‘A Maratha again?’ He didn’t like the Marathas. Three wars had already been fought with them. They were a source of incessant trouble.

‘I don’t like this development. Not one bit. Another heir means more trouble,’ Auckland said, his lips set into a thin line. But after a brief pause, he smiled. ‘She’s only fourteen, you say? Then that’s not much cause to worry about.’

‘But sir, she will grow up, won’t she?’ Sleeman pointed out.

Auckland frowned briefly. Then he smiled. ‘But the king is old!’ he said smugly. Then the frown reappeared. ‘Though you never know with these kings. I admire the vitality of the Easterners!’

Sleeman was trying hard to maintain his composure. The Governor General’s mood was rapidly changing. He must step out to tell the punkah-wallahs to move the punkah faster. He clicked his heels and saluted. ‘I’ll take your leave, sir!’ As he turned to go, Auckland interjected.

‘Sleeman, when is this wedding?’

‘Sir, the day after tomorrow.’



Book I

# Jhansee

(1842–1855)



# 1

‘Where are we going?’ Meera asked her mother who was trying hard to wrap the slippery chanderi sari around her daughter’s nimble waist. It was proving to be a herculean task as her slight frame and undeveloped body were unable to hold the six yards of clothing in place.

‘Stand still, Meera,’ Saanvali said sternly as she slid the shorter edge of the sari from between her legs and brought it up from behind to tuck into the satin leggings that the little girl wore underneath. Saanvali then folded the longer edge neatly into pleats, gathered them at Meera’s waist and stuffed them into her leggings, yet again.

‘Bau, I can’t breathe,’ said Meera angrily as she tugged at one of the pleats. The sari came off and lay in a heap around her ankles. Meera looked up at her mother guiltily.

‘Do I really have to wear this? Can’t I go in my angarkha?’

‘No, you can’t,’ Saanvali replied humourlessly.

‘Why not? I’m neither the bride nor the queen. Who’s going to look at me?’

‘Today is a special day. The new queen will be introduced to the ladies of the harem. Do you want to meet her in your usual rags, looking like a boy?’ Saanvali asked through gritted teeth as she attempted to wrap the sari around her ten-year-old daughter in vain. The heavy silver embroidery on the sari made it quite difficult to negotiate the folds of the cloth. But it was Saanvali’s treasured sari that she had carefully kept away all these years. She had no use for it any more. Her beauty had faded with the passing of years, and over time, summons for her to appear before the king were becoming increasingly rare. She would be called to sing in front of the king once in a while as there was still no one in the whole of Jhansee with a voice as melodious as hers. But she was unable to do any riyaz lately due to her failing health. As a result, her voice would often crack. The last time she sang before the Maharaja was almost a year ago. But she never wore her blue chanderi sari.

‘Why don’t you ever wear it?’ Meera asked her mother.

Saanvali was silent, intent on the task at hand, her mouth stuffed with betel leaves, eyebrows knitted into a frown.

‘Why have you kept this beautiful sari hidden from the rest of us?’ Pannabai asked. The women were gathered in Saanvali’s room for their usual afternoon session when the zenana women would drop in to talk animatedly about the latest developments in the palace. Right now, the only topic being dissected was the marriage of the ageing king to a girl young enough to be his daughter and with no pretensions to any royal bloodline.



Saanvali picked up the spittoon lying next to her and spat out some of the red juice into it. 'This sari was gifted to me by the king when he first saw me perform. I wore it a few times when I performed in a mehfil, but have now kept it away. Meera will wear it on her wedding day.'

'Do you really think there will ever be one, Saanvali?' her friend asked.

'Yes, there will be a wedding day for Meera. I will ensure it,' Saanvali instantly retorted. 'I will not let her grow up in these quarters. I will not let my daughter share the same fate as mine. She will have a husband, children and a home of her own,' Saanvali said emphatically.

Outside, the nagadas boomed and the tutari blared.

'Jhansee Naresh ki jai! Maharani Lakshmibai ki jai!' The walls of the palace reverberated with the cries of people who had thronged the fort, breaking through the palace security to catch a glimpse of the new queen. Never before had the town of Jhansee witnessed such excitement, nor had its populace been so eager to be a part of any royal event. But this was no ordinary event. The ageing king had brought home a wife, years after his first wife had died. And from the reports that were being circulated in the kingdom, the new queen was anything but what a queen was expected to be.

No one had seen or heard of a woman as strange as this new bride. But what really interested Meera was that the queen was very young, in fact, only a few years older than her.

'Has the queen arrived?' Saanvali asked nervously. They should have been present in the Diwan-e-Aam by now.

She looked at the other women. 'Aren't you all coming to meet the queen?'

Most of the women shook their heads. 'We've not been asked to be present,' Pannabai replied. She looked at Saanvali.

'We don't matter, Saanvali. But the king has not forgotten you, the koel of Jhansee,' Pannabai said, with a hint of envy in her voice.

Saanvali knew what Panna said was true. The lives of most women in the zenana were wasted. They waited, hopeful that one day the king would send for them. They dressed up, they laughed, they cried, and even fought with one another. They were secure within the confines of the zenana, involved in their petty squabbles and jealousies, sharing with each other their joy and grief. But to the world outside, they were nameless, faceless entities with their identities long wiped out of existence. They were just a part of what was simply known as the zenana. That was the only life known to them.

'Why did the Maharaja marry this girl? She's neither beautiful nor does she belong to a royal family,' one of the women asked. No one knew the answer to that. 'She is quite arrogant, I heard. During the wedding ceremony she told the priest to tie the knot tightly. Has any bride ever done that?'

Meera giggled. The woman turned to look at her, irritated by the interruption. 'What is so funny, Meera?' she asked.

'All weddings are so boring. The queen must have thought this was a good way to break the monotony.' Meera offered her two cents in defence of the queen.

'Your daughter will give you cause for trouble one day.' Panna clucked her tongue. 'You better rein her in,' she warned Saanvali.

Meera came and sat right in the centre of the group. 'Tell me more about the new queen,' she insisted.

'Why are you sitting here? Go away and mind your own business,' Saanvali reprimanded her daughter.

'I am minding my business. She is my queen too, isn't she? I want to know how our lives will change with the arrival of this queen,' Meera asked, wide-eyed.

The women laughed. 'How can a new queen change the lives and destinies of the people of this kingdom? It is the Maharaja who rules our lives. All that the queen will do is adorn herself with precious jewels and give birth to heirs of this kingdom. Like all other queens in the past have,' Kasturi said, bringing down the nutcracker hard on the betel nut, snapping it into two neat halves. She then placed the halves neatly on a betel leaf smeared with lime powder, added some zarda to it, and folded it into a triangle. 'In all my years here, I've seen so many queens come and go. What difference has it made to our cursed lives, haan?' said Kasturi stuffing her mouth with the freshly made paan.

'A new sari gets added to our wardrobe! And of course the kings let us lie in peace for some time,' Mumtaz said with a chuckle.

The women joked and passed around the paandaan. 'But I believe that this queen, or rather this girl, can ride horses and wield a sword as well! She has played only with boys throughout her childhood and thus dresses up like them,' Pannabai remarked as she dipped the cotton

bud into a bowl of alta. 'She grew up in Peshwa Baji Rao's court and has been trained in the art of swordsmanship by Tatyá Tope himself!'

'Have you ever heard of a *Brahmin's* daughter doing such things?' Kasturi asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

Meera's ears pricked up. A woman, and a queen at that, who rode horses and flourished swords? She had never seen any woman sit on a horse, leave alone ride one. She was intrigued. She had seen only men tend to horses and brandish their swords. She had stroked the muzzles of horses a few times when no was looking and had run her hand down their manes. She liked being around them, but she knew she could never ride. Girls were not allowed to indulge in such activities. She would often loiter in the stables, and if ever found in one, she would be chased away by the courtiers and ushered back into the zenana where she would resume her dance lessons.

'There, it's done!' Saanvali gave a final tug to the pleats and stepped back to look at the young girl who stood before her, transformed. 'You look beautiful, Meera! Now let's go and meet the new queen!'

As though in agreement, the cannons boomed and a glittering spray of fireworks lit up the evening sky.

Saanvali walked out of the zenana with Meera in tow, who much to her discomfiture, was greatly hindered by the yards of silk wrapped around her. Negotiating the innumerable layers and putting on a scowl on her pretty face, Meera took each step cautiously, certain that she would step on one of the pleats of the sari, and it would come undone, much to the horror of all present. And

indeed, it was quite a crowd that thronged not only the royal premises, but the streets of Jhansee, too, which were lined with hordes of people eager to catch a glimpse of their Maharani.

Meera stood squashed between her mother and another woman. 'Bau, I can't see anything,' she moaned, craning her neck. Her mother held her arm in a tight grip.

The new queen arrived astride an elephant, amidst a shower of coins, roses and lilies, glittering in gold and diamonds. She was seated in a bejewelled howdah atop the elephant, gently swaying to its motion. She looked like a jewel, radiant and dazzling. And before Meera could see her face properly, the Maharani had passed by and was headed towards the durbar hall. The crowd went berserk and broke through the security trying to gain access into the palace but was deterred by the guards with great difficulty.

Saanvali pulled Meera towards the durbar hall. The Maharani had got off the elephant and was now, flanked on both sides by courtiers, entering the hall. She walked up the few steps to the throne and took her seat beside the already seated king.

'Let the ceremonies begin!' the king exclaimed with a flourish of his hands. The new queen smiled and straightened up. A flicker of impatience flitted across her face, but she was quick to cover it up with a smile. It was going to be a long evening.

All the important women of the palace – relatives, wives of noblemen – came up to the queen, one by one, to bless her and offer her their gifts, who in turn, touched

each platter and sent it away. She had a smile on her lips, but her eyes flickered nervously every now and then. She heaved a sigh of relief when the last person finally left, and the durbar hall suddenly reverberated with the beats of the dholaks. Within minutes, a troupe of Gari dancers swept in, their colourful ghagras swirling, and their ornaments jingling. The queen sat back and relaxed.

The evening sky had given way to a starry night. Strains of music and the rhythmic beats of dhols filled the air. The crowds slowly thinned out, and the last of the remaining citizens returned home after a day of uncontained excitement. The lamps had been lit and the illuminated palace atop the Bangra Hill cast a luminous glow for miles around.

After the dancers left, Saanvali walked up to the dais, bowed her head and folded her hands. The Maharaja turned to his new bride. 'This is Saanvali, the best singer in Jhansee. No one can sing the Miyan ki Malhar like her,' he said. 'So, Saanvali, what will you sing for us today?'

Saanvali kept her head bowed. 'It is my daughter who will dance for the new Maharani today,' she said. Then turning to Meera who was standing behind her, she signalled for her to come forward. Meera walked up to the dais and instead of bowing her head, looked straight into the eyes of the queen.

'Is it true that you ride horses?' she asked curiously.

The courtroom lapsed into silence. People looked at this impudent girl, aghast. Saanvali almost fainted. There was no knowing what the punishment would be for such impudence. Never before had anyone had the cheek to look

straight into the queen's eyes and demand an answer. And that too, a courtesan's daughter!

'Hush, hush, you wretched girl, what have you done?' Saanvali spat through clenched teeth. Surprised, Meera looked at her mother and then turned back to the queen, waiting for an answer.

'What is your name?' the queen asked. Saanvali knew what that meant. Meera was now a marked girl, an offender who would be remembered for years. Saanvali fell down on her knees.

'Please forgive her, she's a mere girl. She is foolish and knows not what to say. Pardon her, Maharani! She will be your slave for years.'

'Why would she be my slave? I just asked her name,' the queen replied, puzzled at the woman's behaviour.

'Her name is Meera.'

The girl who stood before her reminded the queen of a peacock, her long sinewy neck rising above a slender body, draped in voluminous layers of turquoise silk, iridescent in the shower of light that fell upon her from the glass chandelier that hung directly over her head. Her tawny skin, like her sari, was luminous in the glow of the lamps. It lent softness to the otherwise stern face with a hooked nose, high cheekbones and a defiant chin. It was a face that defied servility and would have passed off as an arrogant one had it not been for Meera's large dark eyes that sparkled with innocence.

'She is Chandraki, my companion!' announced Queen Lakshmibai.

## 2

Chandraki, a natural dancer, was a mirror image of her mother. She was being trained in the art of music, dance and coquettishness with the sole objective to please and humour the king. But Chandraki didn't just want to be another jewel in the king's dazzling crown. She loved to dance, but only for her own pleasure and was often found missing when summons for her to entertain the king arrived. Her mother would go in search of her all over the zenana. It happened again that evening. Chandraki was supposed to accompany the lead dancer in the evening's musicale and was to play the role of Lalita, Radha's companion. But she had, as usual, gone missing.

'Chandraki!' Saanvali called. She was furious. She searched the whole room but she was nowhere to be found.

'Let me catch you, you wench, and then I'll tell you what happens when you disobey your mother,' Saanvali hissed through gritted teeth. She pulled back the curtains to see if the girl was hiding behind them. No, she wasn't. Nor was she under the bed. Huffing and puffing, Saanvali rose



from the ground. 'This wretched girl will bring ruin upon all of us in the zenana.' Saanvali sighed as she slumped on the bed, exhausted with the hunt.

Of late, she found herself panting often. She tired easily and turned down invitations for festivities and celebrations in the palace. The only summons she couldn't reject were those of the king and the queen.

Though life had not been kind or fair to Saanvali, she was not too unhappy in the royal palace, and she had, like most women, accepted her lot. The life of a courtesan had been forced upon her, though she was born a Brahmin. She had quickly learnt that caste was of no use when it came to the matter of survival. And being part of the king's harem was survival for her, nothing beyond that. The king had been kind and ensured that her daughter and she were well looked after. Yet, she winced at the indignity of her life. The silks and jewels didn't matter to her, the honour of being proclaimed as the best singer of Jhansee was a mere embellishment. Of what use were the gilded ceilings or the polished floors covered with exquisite Persian carpets when it lacked the warmth of a home, the sense of belonging to a family?

But in her heart she knew what life could have been like had she not found refuge in this palace. Saanvali had been pushed into the raging pyre that slowly licked the lifeless body of her husband of one year whilst carrying Chandraki in her womb. Her uncle had pulled her away even as the flames leapt at her. Her parents threw her out of the house since she was not a sati, and her husband's family blamed her for his death. She started living in the

village temple, but the priest, subject to immense pressure from the people of the village, asked her to leave the temple. So she took refuge in a mosque. Her uncle smuggled her out of the village and brought her to this kingdom. She thanked the lord every day for allowing her a roof over her head and meals each day. She needed all of that, not for herself, but for her daughter.

Saanvali didn't know when the tears had started trickling down. She wept for what she had lost. She wept for the defilement of her body. Wiping away the tears with the edge of her sari, she slowly rose. Her lips were set in a thin line, and her eyes glowed with a strange fire.

'I will not allow my daughter to share my misfortune. Her destiny will be different,' she said to herself defiantly.

Outside, the sun playfully smudged the sky with myriad colours as it began to set, like an artist at play with her palette.

A girl came charging into Saanvali's room.

'Kaki! Where is Chandraki?' she asked as she looked around the room.

'I can't find her,' said Saanvali, who by now at her wits' end, had finally given up her hunt.

Chandraki, who was not found till after the show had ended, had been hiding in the stables. Saanvali gave her daughter a piece of her mind that night.

'I will not dance in front of the king,' the girl offered by way of explanation. 'You know I love to dance, Bau, but only when no one is looking.'

Saanvali gave up. 'What will happen to this girl when I'm no longer alive?' she thought gloomily. And in that

instant, she made a decision. She rose from her bed and lumbered towards the small statue of Goddess Durga placed on a narrow shelf in one corner of her room. Folding her hands in front of the warrior goddess seated on a lion, Saanvali picked up the small metal box kept next to the idol and gently took out the amulet that lay in it.

'This taweez will always protect you. It's God's word,' the imam had said while tying it on Saanvali's arm. For Saanvali, the amulet was more precious to her than all her other possessions. It represented life. She wouldn't trade it for anything nor give it to anyone for anything in the world.

'What is this for?' Chandraki asked as Saanvali tied the amulet around her arm.

'This will always protect you from harm.' Saanvali smiled. 'Remember, separating the taweez from yourself would be separating yourself from me and from God!'

The next day Motibai paid Saanvali a visit. She was the chief courtesan and was in charge of the shows to be put up for the king. 'Chandraki was missing again last evening. This is happening far too often now, Saanvali! You better clip her wings before it's too late,' she warned Saanvali sternly. 'She's now fifteen, and it's time you prepared her for the royal bed as well.'

Saanvali was quiet. Motibai looked at her hard. Then taking Saanvali's hand in hers, she said softly, 'There's no point in running away from destiny. No one knows it better than you do. Do you really think you have a choice? So, straighten out your daughter. The sooner you do it, the better!'

### 3

Lakshmibai stood before the mirror, adjusting the Chaumet Collier d'Esclavage necklace that her husband had especially ordered from London for his new bride. She had never seen anything like it before, and it pleased her to know that the necklace was the current rage among the aristocrats of England. Her husband had spent a tidy sum on it, and to have it further shipped to Bombay and then brought to Jhansee amidst heavy security had cost him half a year's revenue. She was, after all, his second bride, and although she was still a child, he earnestly hoped that she would, in time, provide him with an heir.

Two women arranged the pleats of her sari while another pinned a diamond-encrusted brooch on it. Her hair was yet to be tied and the dark tresses fell loosely around her shoulders, reaching her waist.

'Are we done?' Rani Lakshmibai asked the ladies surrounding her, rather impatiently.

'No, Your Majesty, not yet. We have to put on your jewellery!'

More jewellery! Lakshmibai grimaced. She resigned herself to being treated as some sort of a mannequin and gave herself up to the half a dozen women surrounding her. She had, of late, taken up the duties of a queen quite seriously and often sat beside her husband when he held court and even offered her suggestions during the proceedings. The king took her advice earnestly and found himself increasingly turning to her for guidance. It was now five years since she had arrived in Jhansee. She was beginning to enjoy her role as the queen of Jhansee and had an easy camaraderie with the people. The only thing she didn't like was having to dress up and being laden with heavy clothing and jewellery round the clock. Oh, what wouldn't she give to dress in her angarkha! But Maharani Lakshmibai knew that she had an image to maintain for the dignity of the throne occupied by her husband. So she allowed herself, albeit reluctantly, to be adorned the way a queen was expected to appear in court.

'Maharani ki jai!' a dasi announced. 'Saanvali seeks an audience with you, Your Majesty!'

Lakshmibai looked at her image in the mirror. How the years had flown! At nineteen, she was a woman, a far cry from the gawky teenager she had been when she married the king. She was well endowed and bestowed with a fine figure. Hers was not a pretty face, unlike most queens who were chosen for their beauty. Nor had she been raised as one since her family had no claims to any royal lineage. There had been a prophecy that she would one day become queen, but despite her father's best efforts, she was not trained in the etiquette of royalty. But even if she wasn't

endowed with the privileges of a royal birth itself, she didn't lack the required intelligence and prudence in any way. The rest she was learning quickly. And she enjoyed every moment of it.

Pleased with what she saw in the mirror, Maharani Lakshmibai smiled. The only thing she didn't like about herself was her voice. If only it could be sweeter. Oh well, that can't be helped, she thought.

'Send her in,' she told the dasi.

Saanvali walked into the queen's room, her head lowered and hands folded.

'Maharani Lakshmibai ki jai!' she saluted.

Lakshmibai liked Saanvali. But more than Saanvali, it was her daughter who had endeared herself to the young queen right from that very first day of their meeting when Chandraki had asked in all her awe and innocence if she could ride horses.

Lakshmibai now looked at Saanvali benevolently, waiting for her to speak.

'Maharani, would it be possible to speak with you in private?'

This was a rare request. Not many asked for a completely private audience with the queen. But Lakshmibai knew that Saanvali had asked this with the utmost humility. Lakshmibai sensed Saanvali's urgency, and so she dismissed the rest of the women.

'It's about Chandraki,' Saanvali said meekly. The queen raised her eyebrows. Now what had that girl done? She loved the way Chandraki would disappear every now and