

The Problem at Despandu



The people of Despandu were known to be gentle, living happily in the foothills of the Karukala range and ruled by the wise king Marunda. When king

Marunda looked out of his palace window, he often sighed. Blue rocky peaks, warm splashing streams; cool orchard groves, rowdy children screams; busy market places, happy smiling faces.

But one season the orchard harvest failed, and the famous oranges and apples from Despandu did not ripen. Soon after, the corn harvest failed and there was much concern in Despandu. King Marunda believed this to be just bad luck and opened the store houses for his beloved people. However the next year the crops failed once more and many people had to go without food. The royal advisors tossed and turned all night. Dogs howling, babies crying dying; farmers drinking, women shouting weeping.

King Marunda, deeply troubled, called his advisors and many of his trusted farmers. Pacing up and down the room, he demanded explanations for the crop failures. "If the people worked hard then why? If the streams were flowing then why? If the bugs were few then why? If the seeds were good then why?"

A few days later, a young merchant came to the market place with two mules loaded with corn and fruit. The people swarmed him and caused a commotion. Word spread and soon

he was captured by the king's guards and brought to the palace. The king demanded where he had found so much food. The bewildered merchant spoke of Kalutta, the neighboring kingdom. "Kalutta...sire... food...wine. Green trees... corn. Orchards of apples...oranges. Fields of corn...wheat. Healthy children...beautiful people... my home."

The king shut his eyes and longed for those prosperous days again. My people, how happy they had been. He decided to make an announcement. "Royal gratitude for the one who solves the problem of Despandu. Riches for the wise that decipher the paradox of Despandu."

Now in Despandu, not far from the market place, lived three brothers. The eldest, Sumat was a carpenter and well praised for his fine woodwork. The middle, Prandi, was a clock maker who was known far and wide for his dependable clocks. The youngest and most loved was Fruntu who still had no trade but loved to travel and tell stories of far away lands.

When Sumat heard of the king's reward, he decided to try and solve the problem of Despandu. He would go to Kalutta and study their ways. Fruntu begged him to let him come along but Sumat refused.

"You wander too far and talk too much, distracting the people I will hardly learn much."

So Sumat, after consulting with the king, set off to Kalutta carrying the tools of his trade. He waited until nightfall to enter the town. Early next morning, before the farmers had risen, he hurried to the farms to study their fields. He used his precise tools to measure everything. Seeds $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, rows 22 inches, ploughs 8 inches, scythes 10 inches, bushels 40 inches, gates 90 inches, fences 120 inches.

Sumat recorded precise measurements for many months before returning to Despandu. After many calculations, he went to the king and announced the reason for Kalutta's prosperity. "Their ploughs, 2 inches longer, their rows 3 inches wider, their wells 6 feet deeper, their seeds a sixteenth bigger."

The king was overjoyed with Sumat's results. He hurriedly called the advisors and commanded them. "Make the ploughs longer, make the rows wider, make the wells deeper and pick the seeds bigger."

But the crops failed again and the people despaired. The king offered a bigger reward to anyone who could solve the problem of Despandu. Prandi heard of his brother's failure and decided to save the family name. So he set off to Kalutta to find the answer. Once again Fruntu begged him to let him come. But Prandi refused. "My tools are precise, my methods are sound, it is hard to do work with you around."

Prandi disguised himself as a merchant and slipped into the market place without being noticed. The next morning he hid in the bushes outside the fields with his best clock. He noted the precise time when the farmers worked the fields.



"Seven o'clock ploughing, nine and a quarter, watering, ten o'clock sowing, eleven o'clock fertilizing."

Prandi returned after the harvest and everyone waited for his results. Many calculations later, he described to the king all that he had learned. "The weeding, before sunrise, the harvest at full moon, the ploughing, half past one, the sowing at noon."

The king ordered the farmers to change their timings, hoping the ways of Kalutta would solve their problems. The farmers sweated, the people saved, the children helped, and the pious prayed. But way before the harvest, the people already knew. The winter would be cold and the children would go hungry. King Marunda felt old and far from wise. The people talked in whispers late into the night. "A sickness? A curse? The devil? The end?"

Late one foggy night, the people were rocked awake with the pounding of hooves on the cobble stones of the narrow streets. They rushed to their windows peering into the night. Through the market square, rushing towards the palace...an intruder! Black mane, black steed, thunder in the night; masked face, dark robe, shadow out of sight.

The intruder reached the palace and through the fog the people heard "Open up these palace doors. I'm here to save Despandu." The palace lit up, the doors flew open, and the intruder rode into the palace. All night the people heard loud words. Booming voices, angry voices, pleading voices, scared voices.

Just as the foggy night began to melt, the intruder charged out of the palace and Despandu was filled with the sound of the rearing steed. He looked up at the palace and shook his fist. "To save the people, do what I say, to claim my reward, I'll be back in May!"

All of Despandu watched and shuddered in the morning chill. The intruder galloped through the market place, heading back to the mountain. Black robe flapping in the

wind, black horse rushing through the trees, black shadow far in the mountain, black spec vanishing in fog.

That very day King Marunda called a meeting in the market square. The people huddled around to hear their future. The desperate king asked the people to decide. There was much confusion. Who was this intruder? The dark force? Should we follow his advice? Our last chance?

By twilight, most had agreed to follow the intruder's advice. Once again the people toiled to save Despandu. Long days, worrying nights. But in early spring, the fields slowly came alive and soon the birds returned and the crops rustled in the breeze. The intruder's advice had worked! The town rejoiced when the first crops came in. The children danced, the women danced, the men danced, the king sighed.

One hot summer evening, as the farmers returned from the fields, the children screamed pointing to the mountain. "He's back, he's back!" The mysterious rider had returned. The people backed away as the intruder galloped through the market square up to the palace. The king heard of his arrival and rushed to welcomed him. "My son you have saved us, I am happy to say, the reward is yours, now that its May."

The people gathered around the palace gates, cautiously greeting the masked rider. His steed snorted and stomped on the dusty hill. A woman offered him food but the rider refused and turned to leave. Then from the crowd a barefoot girl came running. "What is your name? Why don't you eat?"

The rider stopped and looked down at her. The crowd pulled back. "Come back Junli!" cried the mother. The masked rider dismounted his steed and walked up to the girl. He kneeled down, then pulled off his mask. The crowd gasped when they saw his face. "Frintu beloved Fruntu, brother of Sumat, Fruntu beloved Fruntu, brother of Prandi."

The people rushed up to Fruntu to hug and kiss him. They touched his robe and patted his horse. They lifted him up and carried him to town, singing, dancing, laughing and playing. After the feasting, an elder held up his hand and the people became silent. He leaned towards Fruntu. "How did you learn the ways of Kalutta, how did you learn to save Despandu?"

Frintu looked past the mountain and up to the stars.

I went as a student, willing to learn,
Became one of them, then again I was not,
In time their trust, I began to earn,
Realizing things, I never had thought.

I listened to stories of ancient kings,
The weddings, the gossip, the tavern brawl,
The meaning of rainbows early in Spring,
The message of locusts chirping in Fall.

I learned to hear the breathing soil,
And the need to rest in its whispered call,
Rulers and clocks can measure toil,
But the people, the people, they knew it all.

King Marunda watched from the palace and sighed. "But the people...the people... they know it all."

This story is written for Diana Forsythe, cultural anthropologist. I thank Gautam Vallabha for the long walks to Despandu.

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