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Chapter 1

The Prophecy

When Narad teleported into Brahmaloaka, Brahma's outer realm, he saw she was already waiting for him at the gateway. As soon as he appeared, the great swan sauntered majestically to his side. Narad stroked her head, and she pecked his hands gently in return.

"How have you been, son?" Saraswati said with a welcoming smile as she approached him with outstretched arms.

"Mother! I am always better off away from him," Narad smiled as he embraced Saraswati.

"He gave his favorite son to Vishnu for a reason. You are the smartest. You can teleport to all realms. But you never seem to like paying a visit to your parents. You come only when you are called for!" Saraswati did not attempt to hide discontent in her voice.

"That's because everything here is so heavy! I feel the weight of a thousand elephants with every step I take. A day spent here is like years in other realms. And then there is his overbearing aura. I feel like a fool in front of him." Narad frowned.

"Knowledge is heavy, my boy." She laughed as she led him through Brahmapura, the maze of space and time where everything, everywhere were happening parallely, to where his father was waiting for them. The great swan strolled away into the Lake of Giant Lotus, carefully examining the plants and fishes.

Narad never liked the walk through the corridors of Brahmapura. The maze is like none other in the universe. Yet, it encompasses the entirety

of the universe. At one moment, he would be in one realm, and the next moment, he would be in a different world. Sometimes, he would be in the same world he was a few seconds before, but everything would have changed by countless years.

His father would say that the abode is like a cloth that weaves the entire universe with all the realms and worlds woven parallelly like single threads. Every step would be on a different thread. They were moving over the cloth but weren't a part of it. So, they could glimpse what was happening, but no one in the places they walked could see them. Narad never understood the explanation fully. But it gave him an eerie feeling like he was a ghost, though he knew otherwise.

After a few restless heartbeats that seemed like an eternity, they saw Brahma sitting on his Lotus Throne. They were on Kailash Parvat at that instant. When Narad gently bowed and touched his head to the Lotus Throne, Brahma raised one hand to bless him, without opening his eyes. Narad knew that the next few heartbeats would be intense.

"You might have already guessed why I summoned you, son," Brahma said coldly.

"Not entirely, father. I see we are on Prithvi. But it can't be good! Usually, you open your eyes and greet me with a smile when I come. But not this time!" Narad replied with a trembling voice.

"You are becoming more intelligent and empathetic with time. Vishnu is a good master! I called you to say that the time has come for a change of Yuga on Prithvi. And I see trouble ahead." Brahma said while opening his eyes slowly.

"A change always comes with resistance. You had never worried before. Why now, father?"

"I'm worried because the time has come for the last Yuga in the cycle. Kali Yuga will be the age of Dark and Chaos. It will rely primarily on survival instincts. It's the beginning of the end until Vishnu selects a perfect Manu accompanied by few to migrate to another realm." Brahma replied.

"All these souls of Dharma or Adharma, have originated by the division of the Council of Nine plus the three Trinity. They are all part of you twelve, and purging them in such large numbers won't be a popular solution. The

Council wouldn't welcome the process. Lords Indra, Agni and Brahmanaspati would resist strongly. Others will follow them to protect this establishment. Only Lord Mahadev and Lord Skanda might actually welcome it. Most would cast their strongest vote to resist." Narad argued.

"Council would have to do their best, because the Trinity already supports the great purge. Even then, it would be difficult for the mankind. All our knowledge imparted so far will have to dissipate. People will gradually forget how to interpret or propagate our signs. Our laws and rules will mean nothing to them. This will ensure that Vishnu get as much time as required before the end." Brahma replied with sorrow.

Tears trickled down Narad's beautiful eyes as he listened like a child whose sand castle was being trampled. "Why does it have to be like this every time, father?"

"Lord Dharma's influence is losing to Lord Adharma in the realm of Earth. Adharma's sons, Lords of Fear, Torture, and Death, have spawned throughout the realm beyond Prithvi's control. Order and calculated response failed to maintain balance, falling prey to inheritance through lineage. There is limitless power in the hands of a few unworthy persons, and their greed leads to the destruction of the limited resources changing the structure and geography of the realm. The realm has become a breeding ground of Asuras." Brahma took a pause to look at Saraswati. She nodded, giving him the required strength to continue.

"Lady Prithvi has asked for my help, and I have already promised to help. Now, I have to give everyone a fair chance. It would spill a lot of innocent blood. If Lord Dharma wins, Kali Yuga will have a little longer. Otherwise, Lord Varun may have to clear the soils with a Parasmani in another suitable realm to commence the Satya Yuga there. And Lord Vishnu will have to salvage a Manu along with chosen specimens to relocate there."

Narad could see that his father was in pain. Everyone had a special place for Lady Prithvi in their hearts. Lords Surya, Brahmanaspati, Varun, and Skanda were loved and respected by everyone there. Migrating humans away from Prithvi would mean less interaction with them and their offspring. Preparing a new realm with a Parasmani and leaving the current realm with a new Manu and a select few is hectic and painful. The previously inhabited

realm in Meena Nakshatra had witnessed a violent and tragic end. This migration meant leaving almost everyone to die in the old realm and killing everyone in the new realm before migration for no fault of their own. Narad tried to say something, hoping he could change his father's mind. But before he could utter a sound, Lord Brahma raised his hand again and disappeared into the fabric of Brahmapura.

Narad turned towards Saraswati. She, too, had a grim face. "You know what to do, Narad. Come, I will lead you to the gateway." She held out her hand and beckoned. Narad nodded and took her hand, trying to remain as close to her as possible. If someone could see them, they could easily mistake him for a toddler being taken to the first day of gurukul. Saraswati saw her son in great anxiety. She smiled and sang in her ethereal voice to ease him. *If the sky grows dark now*

Welcome the night somehow

The night is unknown

But afterwards, it's a beautiful dawn

The night calls for poisonous insects

The birds retreat to their nests

The wolves howl, and snakes prey

The hyenas laugh, but listen to them say

For fear not, this night will pass

The sun will shine, and dew will fall on grass

Dharma and Adharma are two sides of Brahma's coin

He welcomes everyone to heartily join

Ashes scattered on barren lands

Give rise to beautiful plants

Old men die, and young men inspire

Nature is a cycle not an insatiable fire

When she finished, Narad had tears in his eyes. He said with emotions welling up, "Mother, everyone thinks I am a great musician. Lord Vishnu loves to hear me sing. And all I say to him is that if you listen to my mother, you won't want to listen to my songs again."

Saraswati patted him and said lovingly, "You are a great musician, Narad. You can sing whenever people ask you for a song. I only sing when my mood

is right. I am not a musician on purpose. But you are, and you do a great job."

Narad thanked her and wiped his eyes. They left Brahmapura and Saraswati blessed him. They bid goodbye.

Narad went straight from Brahmaloaka to Vaikuntha, the realm of Vishnu, and informed his master of the forthcoming crisis. Narad had always thought that the seventh Manavantar was the best so far and he had seen his master's efforts to restore balance in the current Manavantar through various avatars. He asked Vishnu the reason why the seventh Manavantar was also failing. Vishnu had his usual affectionate smile as he explained,

"You want to understand why the current Manavantar is failing. Let's recall the previous Manavantar in the Dravida realm of Meena Nakshatra. In the sixth Manavantar, humans were given full control over their mind whose complexity was a fractal of the Brahmmand itself. Utilizing its total potential, they controlled their Mandala fully, exploiting all its planets and the sun for their comfort. They grew so advanced that they reduced every other thing, living or nonliving, to the status of a tool. All plants, animals, natural objects and even the sun were their resource, used for some purpose. If anything couldn't be used for their benefit, they simply annihilated it. The weaker people who couldn't work were also eliminated for the fear of using resources without positive output. There was no compassion and the Faculty of Zoetic Synergy suffered the most in their race for technological supremacy."

"That's when I had to select a Manu which I found in Satyabrata. A compassionate garbage collector whose job was to dispose off the unwanted industrial water, Satyabrata took my fish form into his home and secretly provided for me by smuggling in some of the waste water. My matsya avatar kept growing and he kept building bigger water bodies for it, from bowl to pond, to lake to river. On several occasions I gave him a choice between compassion and laws of the realm. Every time he chose compassion and that's when I took my Vishwarupa before him and told him that Dravida was coming to an end and that he being the garbage collector had the most important duty. To drown the realm and escape into a new realm. Satyabrata turned out to be the perfect guardian of Zoetic Synergy and readily agreed

to the plan, even if he didn't know if he'd survive the process. He prepared for the great migration and when the realm was drowned, he migrated with the Zoetic samples and few chosen people.

Meanwhile, the Vasus had already prepared the realm of Prithvi with Parasmani and necessary evolution, making it habitable. Satyabrata, who was now Vaivashvat Manu, travelled in the ship guided by my matsya form, into Prithvi, surviving the journey of Yugas by cryosleep, waking up only seven times to interact with the matsya, who taught him the new laws that would govern the realm. This time, I made sure that the Manavantar would have more self regulation and lesser autonomy to put a check on the rampant exploitation as that had happened in the sixth Manavantar. Sixth Manavantar failed because humans were all powerful and chose their own material gain over ecological harmony.

I had carefully planned and administered the seventh Manavantar whose codes of conduct were delivered to Satyabrata by me during his ethereal journey. The rules were designed in such a way that humans couldn't possibly destabilize Zoetic and Terrestrial Synergy. People were assigned specialized roles including those who would check the unrestrained expansion, with a little help of Lord Adharma. I had thought that this Maya would prevent the current Manavantar from blowing out of proportion like the sixth.

However, this Maya under the influence of Lord Adharma has led into societal degradation, turning people into factions that are constantly clashing with each other. Rivalries lead to atrocities, which lead to moral degradation and unwarranted bloodshed. The disparity of power and wealth, which were my tools for control has become the reason for destruction. Renunciation turned to beggary, hierarchy turned to slavery, freedom turned to exploitation, wealth disparity turned to rivalry, jealousy and murders, societal order turned to anarchy. My principle of duality is leading this Manavantar towards annihilation faster than anyone had expected. There is only one way to slow this down, and that is Brahma's way."

Still Narad looked unconvinced. Vishnu told him to consult the Lord of Temporal Synergy. So Narad went straight to Shmashan, much to his discomfort.

Chapter 2

The Council of Nine

Shmashan was the most terrifying realm that Narad ever visited, and being the divine wanderer, he had visited every realm in the Brahmand. There were active volcanoes in the shape of Mount Kailash everywhere, spewing ash and poisonous gases. The lakes and rivers carried molten rock that would melt anyone's body and spirit. The atmosphere was just as hostile as the mountains and the lakes. The place would purge the most diabolical of the souls that existed in the Brahmand. Even though Narad had the boon to travel anywhere, a visit to Shmashan would shake his soul to the core. In the center of the realm was the largest and only snow-covered mountain of the realm, a freezing place where Mahadev would practice Yoga all the time. It was no secret that Mahadev would actually enjoy the hostile place, saying he felt intoxicated from everything around him. Narad went to Mahadev's throne, certainly a throne that nobody in the entire Brahmand dared to sit on or even desire. He greeted Mahadev who looked back at him with half-closed eyes, seemingly intoxicated as usual. Narad quickly explained to him the developments that had happened so far.

"Dear Narad! When you talk about destruction, nothing is more pleasant to my ears. I was rather looking forward to this news of yours, waiting for years, anticipating when Lord Brahma would make the decision."

"Being the keeper of Temporal Synergy, did you always know it was coming, Lord?"

"Of course, I did, Devarshi Narad. I hoped and waited for it. I prepared for it in so many ways. I have been transferring my knowledge of warfare,

weaponry and weapons of mass destruction, even training some of these mortals into mastering Temporal Synergy. This particular world of Lord Vishnu is far from perfection. His web of Maya failed to create a sustainable world for humans. He gave their soul so many facets that they are under the influence of a constant struggle within. That makes them clash with each other. The current order needs to be destroyed, Devarshi. It is destined to be."

"But why do you take so much pleasure in destruction, my Lord? While the other Lords try so hard to create and sustain, you are always keen on destruction."

"It is creative destruction, Narad. Destruction is the greatest illusion, the grandest of all Maya, Devarshi. Two things clash and destroy and, in the process, they lift themselves to a new form over a higher dimension. They become pure and exponentially more powerful from the experience. Destruction is the true beginning of a better form than the existing ones. The new form holds the universe together. That is why I am so keen on your 'destruction'. To you, it may look like a sacrifice, but to me, it's just a cement to bind the universe together. This transformation is the key to the great cycle. I wanted a mass destruction for so long. And it seems, Lord Brahma sensed my desire finally."

"So, you will participate in the change of Yuga wholeheartedly?"

"Of course, I will participate in every possible way. I am going to assist the process through my avatar who will ensure that the realm of Prithvi is cleansed of anyone remaining even if he is hated forever for that act. You can count on me."

"Thank you for relieving me of my ignorance, my Lord. I feel more enlightened and less worried after your darshan."

"Why don't you stay for a while, Devarshi. Have dinner with us and then you could leave. Your news calls for a celebration."

"Thank you for the invitation, Lord. I am honored as always. But today I must hurry. There is so much planning to do. I must visit the Lord of Perceptual Dominion. He should be able strategize everything."

"Some other time then. This work is of utmost priority. But the celebration is due on me."

"Absolutely, my Lord," Narad left Shmashan as fast as he could, feeling light already.

Narad always felt refreshed and youthful in Swarg, Indra's realm, the moment he teleported into it, although, a word with Mahadev had already enlightened him. This day was no different, either, even if he had a sorrowful message to convey. The realm was the creation of Lord Vishwakarma himself, bright as the sun, clear as rainwater, and refreshingly fragrant as the *Parijat*. Since Indra ruled the senses, he ensured that there was no place for fear, sorrow, or fatigue in his realm. No one was senile or ugly there.

The realm was embellished with divine trees, beautiful beyond imagination. Each had unique properties and provided divine fruits. They never died or withered. They all ensured Swarg's cheerful, youthful, and peaceful atmosphere.

He walked towards Indra's throne, the brightest and grandest of all seats in the realm. Behind the throne was Indra's palace, so tall that one could not see its tip from the ground. There were other palaces for the realm's citizens, none as tall or grand as Indra's palace. After a few steps, he could see Indra on his throne, beautiful beyond words, wearing a crown that dazzled the eyes and vibrant scarlet bracelets on either hand that marked his victories over the demons Baal and Vritta. He wore unblemished white garments that emitted a bluish radiance like a flash of powerful lightning on a night.

Indra was accompanied by his consort, Indrani Shachi, who was just as beautiful and graceful as Goddess Lakshmi. Nearest to them were the three devis - Lajja, Kirti, and Kanti, radiating elegance that could melt anyone's heart, be it a man, asura, naga, or deva. The court was adorned by Parashar, Parvat, Savarni, and several other rishis and maharishis, Sahadev, Shamik, Marut, Gautam, Megha, and other accomplished virtuous men and women, Urvashi, Menaka, and other Apsaras and Gandharvas were engaged in their hypnotizing music and dance. Several other Lords, like Varun, Brahmanaspati, and Skanda, were also present in the court.

Upon seeing Narad coming towards him, Indra smiled with joy and came forward, leaving his throne. They embraced each other as Indra beckoned him toward a throne beside him. Indra continued.

"After so long, you graced Swarga with your presence, Devarshi. How is

everything going in Vaikuntha? How is my friend, Lord Vishnu?"

"They were very well when I saw them last. But it's been a while since I left Vaikuntha."

"Devarshi, I make sure that no negative emotion can touch Swarga. But I know that Swarga's charms are powerless against you. Such is your will and brilliance. No wonder you are the greatest of all rishis. Today, I sense that something makes you uncomfortable and unhappy. Please tell me what I can offer to help you."

Narad said with a smile,

"A word in solitary would be fine for now."

"Let's walk into my private chamber, shall we?" Indra said, leading the way. Indra's chamber was one of the most comfortable of all places in the universe. The fragrance of the room would soak away all the fatigue if one had some left after entering the realm. The six walls were adorned with living images of all realms under Indra's rule, which showed beautiful landscapes with playful animals and lush green trees with birds chirping. The sound of flowing rivers, waterfalls, streams, and oceans in the landscapes soothed the ears. Some walls showed realms with multiple suns, and some showed the night sky with bioluminescent plants, birds, and insects. There were exotic fruits and water from the fountains that restored one's youthfulness. Narad took one glance around the room and all the unhappiness in him disappeared. There were so many beautiful realms apart from the Earth that he suddenly seemed to care less about its upcoming crisis. But he had to convey father's message anyway. So he began,

"There is an upcoming crisis in the realm of Lady Prithvi. The present Yuga on the realm has to change."

"So what? There were changes before. It never brought much trouble. And the people on it have more in common with the devas and rishis than before."

"Out there, it is Dwapar now. And it is the last cycle."

"Oh, Lord Mahadev! It had completely gone out of my senses. So, the last Kali Yuga is imminent, is it Devarshi?"

Narad nodded. Indra recalled his encounter with Uparichar, son of Pourav when he had gifted him Chedidesh, now in Bharat, in order to distract him

from conquering his Realm of Perceptual Dominion, which he secretly thought was Uparichar's motivation for penance.

"Oh Uparichar! Future Lord of Bharat! You will be revered as a Messiah when you rule Bharat. But you will have to be careful about your actions. You will establish the laws of our realms on this green field, Chedidesh. I have ensured that you start with the place that bears the most resemblance with my realm."

"This place has an abundance of nature's most precious gifts. This place is full of mineral wealth, flora, and fauna. The Indigenous people of Chedidesh are naive, respectful, and truthful. They treat their elders with utmost devotion and care and are also careful not to do anything that may cause sibling rivalry or hostility among each other. People have adopted the division of labor, and everyone is content with their Varna."

"I present you with two things that will seal your supremacy over the land of Bharat. The first is this Crystal Vimana, which has capabilities beyond anyone's imagination in Prithvi. You will be in touch with all the realms and can telecommute anywhere you want with this Crystal Vimana. The second one is this Necklace of Senses called Indramala. As long as you wear it, you will be aware of everything around you. It also enhances your fame, strength, and vitality. Wear it all the time and you will remain invincible."

"You will carry our staff into Chedidesh. When you have conquered it, put the staff on the ground. It will mark the beginning of our rule over Bharat." Uparichar did as he was told, and within a year, Indra's staff was put in the ground.

Indra sighed and tried to bring his senses back to the present issue. The days of past were so full of bliss, much in contrast with the present situation, where the world was divided into two factions of people, one being full of the vices, the other consisting of those who had conquered them to follow the path of Dharma. He looked at Narad with pensive eyes.

"You should discuss it with the Council of Nine in Lord Dharma's courtroom. Some may not like it, I fear."

Narad nodded again.

"Is it absolutely necessary?" Indra asked.

"Lady Prithvi feels so. And the feeling is deep-rooted, according to my father." Narad grimaced as he replied.

"What are the consequences of the status quo?" Indra persisted.

"Lady Prithvi will react with an uncontrolled outburst of homeostasis, and Lord Vishnu will have to find another realm where a new commission of Manu with samples will have to relocate. The Vasus are busy identifying suitable territories in the Ashwini Nakshatra as seen from Prithvi. It's a long and devastating journey in which most might perish in mid-journey, and Lady Prithvi will be a mess beyond resuscitation, much like the last one in Meena Nakshatra from where Swayambhu Manu had emigrated" Narad replied. Both of them agreed that it was a painful process.

"But if we could change the Yuga, we would at least have more time to evolve the humans," Indra said.

"Yes! And the Vasus would get more time to prepare the new location in the meantime," Narad said firmly.

"And the evolved humans would be closer to us in nature and intellect over the next Yuga. If we had more time, it would be the finest lot ever." Indra said hopefully. Narad nodded.

"So be it. We will bring about Kali Yuga. Give them some more time," Indra said.

"You will have to get involved, Oh Lord." Narad said.

"Do you want me to go there and raise an army?" Indra asked with chagrin.

"Not at all. You will have to send your Avatar," Narad reassured. "Others fighting for the cause will join you. Human beings need to relate to whatever is happening. They should be under the impression that their actions are accountable."

"As you wish, Devarshi. So be it." Indra replied with a bow and some relief.

Narad bowed in return and spoke,

"Thank you for your help and assurance. I know that what I ask for is a difficult task. But such are my father's wills, which can't be avoided. Your agreement to the great cause is a testament to your being the rightful ruler of Swarg. It's an honor to meet you, Devraj Indra, the Lord of Perceptual Dominion!"

Indra bowed in return and smiled.

"Oh, Devarshi, please. The honor is entirely mine. I am happy that I could be of any service in this great task."

Narad mounted the gateway and raised his hands. With a smile and a feeling of assurance, he vanished into the portal that opened behind him. With him gone, Indra explained the situation to Indrani. Indrani agreed with him. Moreover, she requested that he allow her to send an Avatar herself. Indra smiled. He knew how possessive she was. He agreed without hesitation. At least his Avatar would have a good time while executing his duties. Little did he know how rough it would be for her during the times ahead.

When Narad apparated into Dharma's realm, its hue changed into that of the setting sun, but a thousand times brighter. Dharma's realm changed its appearance with any new visitor, and the fact that it took the aspect of twilight could only mean that Dharma had a premonition of the forthcoming change. Dharma welcomed Narad with a warm smile and open arms. He said,

"You must be hungry and thirsty from your journey, Devarshi. Can I get you something?"

Narad smiled with twinkling eyes. "You love your tricks, Oh Lord of Justice, don't you?"

Dharma looked surprised. Evidently, he couldn't understand what Narad implied, "Excuse me, Devarshi. Did I say anything wrong or offensive?"

Narad's smile remained unchanged, "I wonder if you can ever say anything wrong. There is no hunger or thirst, pain or fatigue, regret or misery in your realm. Yet, you have arranged all kinds of alluring food and drinks."

Narad looked around himself to take in the beauty of Dharma's realm. The exotic trees and beautiful animals seemed to smile back at him in the twilight hue. From the splendor all around, it looked like there was hope after all. Narad continued, "This place is devoid of lust, greed, or any other sinful thoughts. Yet, you have the most beautiful Apsaras and Gandharva playing their charming music, chanting divine songs, and performing hypnotizing dances. The intoxicating smell, dazzling beauty, and calming serenity of this realm are a testament to Lord Vishwakarma's engineering finesse. But I know very well that all of these are Maya."

Dharma replied, "Devarshi! Nothing is hidden from you! Yes, these are all illusions. But these are necessary to mete out judgment, which is my job! You know I have to weigh every soul."

Narad smiled even more, "And you put them to good use here. Everyone's true nature is revealed like an open book. I have no hunger or thirst, and I have not come here to eat or drink anything. Certainly, I don't want to be tried for gluttony!"

Dharma looked flustered.

"Oh, Devarshi! I am too insignificant and ignorant in front of you. I have no desire or competence to judge you for anything. Please forgive me if I made you think like that!"

Narad laughed and said,

"Aha! caught you! Did you think that you were the only one who could pull off a good joke? I am perfectly okay eating and drinking whatever you offer, Dharmaraj. But first, I need to do what I came here for."

Both laughed and embraced each other warmly. Dharma led Narad towards his private chamber, past the courtroom of justice. Dharma's chamber was one of the weirdest and was a masterpiece by Vishwakarma. It had eleven walls, one for each jury members along with Dharma and the seeker which was Narad on this occasion. Every wall would become the floor if someone stepped on it. From their position, every person could see all the other ten walls and whatever was happening in them. Dharma sat on a chair on one of the walls and pointed Narad to another chair on the wall opposite to him. In front of each chair was an eleven-sided crystal sphere that displayed the chamber itself. With that sphere, everyone could see what everyone else was seeing and each other at the same time.

"I see that my realm took the appearance of setting sun with your arrival. Is there a change coming, Devarshi?" Dharma asked apprehensively.

"I am afraid, yes, Lord Dharma! And it is going to be rough. I bring you my father's prophecy. And this time, you will not be the passive judge you were before. You will be a key participant in the process." Narad replied, watching Dharma's expressions keenly. Dharma looked concerned and pensively instructed his servants to arrange for food and somaras in his chamber.

"A change of Yuga is coming up in the realm of Lady Prithvi. This is what Lord Brahma foretold me." Narad began as he settled in the chamber. He noticed the empty chairs in the chamber for the Council of Nine. Dharma sat on the throne in the center.

"Does Lady Prithvi know about it?" Dharma asked.

"Yes. Rather, she initiated the change during her visit to my father's realm." Narad replied.

"Oh, I see. What about the rest of the Council of Nine?" asked Dharma. "I have informed Lord Mahadev and Lord Indra. Others have not been informed yet, but I will if you summon them," Narad replied.

"So, what seems to be the problem here?" Dharma asked with a furrowed countenance.

"This will be the last one in this realm. It's already Dwapar there. Last will be the Kali yuga, the age of darkness after which the only possible turn of events is the complete abandonment and the commissioning of Manu." Narad replied slowly.

Dharma leaned back on his chair and looked at his crystal in deep thought. Then he became straight again and asked Narad with a frown appearing on his forehead, "Hmm. So, the Lords and Ladies of the mandala would not welcome it, I guess."

"Yes. And if they succeed in their resistance, that is, if the Yuga cannot be changed, Lord Vishnu would relocate at the end of the resistance." Narad replied with a nod.

"Yes, your master would always find a way out in the end if everything is a mess. But it is a lot of trouble for us all especially my sons, the Vasus who are charged with identifying new realms. They will have much less time to prepare the potential new realm. So what do you expect me to do, Devarshi?" Dharma asked with his heart in full support of Brahma's plan. He wanted to let everything continue as it is for some more time. A rehabilitation would mean a lot of orientation and active participation from everyone and he wouldn't get so much of a free time as he enjoyed now. Moreover, his sons would be away from home, busy with setting up the new realm.

"Send your avatar to the realm of Lady Prithvi and execute the crisis." Narad replied.

"But I never take active participation in the matters of the universe, Devarshi. My purpose is to execute trials and give out judgments. For execution, there are better Lords than me," Dharma replied humbly.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Dharma. But this time, you have to participate in the process. This time, there will be a war between the forces of Dharma and Adharma. And the force of light is with Adharma. Without you, the force of darkness cannot match them. Unless there is a contest, the cleansing of the realm wouldn't be possible and the cycle of Yugas cannot continue," Narad gave his best to convince Dharma. He took a few moments to calm down and continued, "Kali yuga is the forthcoming age of darkness. It will democratize the administration of the realm, which would mean more unlawful actions and more freedom of thought, speech, and actions. It will be a gradual and progression towards the end, which is necessary to prevent the sudden destruction, and it would lead to a gradual abandonment of the realm giving us more time." Narad said.

"I understand that part. But why do you need me exactly?"

"Your avatar can only deliver correct and unbiased decisions against the forces of Adharma. The force of light is strong and has commanded absolute faith for thousands of years. The army fighting for the cause needs your judgment and guidance relentlessly in order to stay on course. That is why you need to be active there." Narad pleaded with as much humility as he could muster. Dharma thought deeply for a while and then replied,

"What you ask of me is not in my job description or nature. I will pass this decision on to the Council of Nine if you don't mind, Devarshi." Dharma said while shaking his head slightly. He was always against executing anything as he loved to be neutral and judgmental only.

Dharma signaled at Chitrugupta, who seemed eager to start the trial. He quickly prepared the room. In a few moments, Brahmanaspati, Varun, Agni, Indra, Surya, Vayu, Mahadev, Ashwin, and Skanda appeared on the remaining sides of the room, while Prithvi took the centerstage. Chitrugupta placed a crystal sphere in front of each of them. The sphere would display the current context and also anything else the Council of Nine wanted others to know. They would have to touch the sphere to draw the attention of others to them or whatever they wanted to show. Everything was smoothly

managed by Chitragupta, who was sitting behind Dharma. As Chitragupta got ready to take down notes in his journal, Dharma began,

"Esteemed Council of Nine, I thank you for your presence in today's trial. I assure you that your Vahanas will be taken care of to the best of my abilities in my personal garden. We have gathered today for a trial that is a difficult one for all of us. It involves a matter that is of concern for all of us here. Therefore, even if it will be difficult for us to pass an unbiased judgment, I would request each and every one of you to be in your best self and deal with this matter with as much impartiality as possible. I want all of you to arrive at the same conclusion and pass a judgment unanimously. We will continue the trial until a unanimous decision is reached."

Dharma paused to wave his hand, and the crystal sphere in front of all the members changed the display from Dharma's chamber to the realm of Prithvi. Dharma said to everyone,

"Before we begin our procedure today, let us try to understand what has caused this crisis. I think we should have a look at the troubles Lady Prithvi is having in her realm. From that, we can gauge the magnitude of seriousness this issue possesses. We may begin with Lady Prithvi showing us glimpses of human activities on her realm, especially, those being carried out under the influence of Lord Adharma. Lady Prithvi, are you ready?"

Lady Prithvi nodded and placed her hand on her crystal and several scenes flashed past the crystals in front of everyone in the room. Everyone looked with horror as in the first scene, men were killing wild animals. One such scene showed an elephant being killed with agneyastra by some men to protect crops, and Brahmanaspati could be seen wiping tears. Another set of scenes showed armed men killing and looting other innocent people in streets. Some scenes showed people burning forests or cutting trees, killing or dispersing hundreds of animals, to make space for agricultural land or settlements. Yet some other scenes showed humans polluting land, water and air with waste products. There were brothers killing each other, women whose modesty was destroyed and later traded as things of enjoyments. But the most brutal of the scenes showed men attacking, raping and killing women and children, which left everyone numb in sorrow. When Prithvi finally stopped the images on the crystals, everyone was somewhat relieved that the horrors had ended.

Agni placed her hand on her crystal sphere and said,

"The realm of Lady Prithvi is teeming with evil spirits from the realm of Adharma. There are thousands of cases of atrocities against innocent lives in the realm. The women are treated as objects of pleasure. They are kidnapped and dominated in the name of manhood. In fact, some call it Kshatriya marriage. Only the affluent people get to do Swayamvar for their wards, where the girl has the chance to execute her free will. In most cases, it's just a male chauvinist system where the girls might not be able to express themselves at all. This is a total violation of Lord Vishnu's order. The societies in Lady Prithvi's realm are beyond salvation. It must be abandoned as soon as possible. Otherwise, Lord Brahma's creation will be beyond any hope of continuing in any other realm. I'll vote for the complete abandonment of Lady Prithvi's realm by appointing a new Manu to emigrate from the realm."

Skanda touched the sphere in front of him and spoke to the Council of Nine in a calm and composed manner,

"Lord Agni, it is the job of a man to take care of his wife and wards. They sacrifice so much to earn better life for themselves. So, they have the right to choose the woman they love. And if a man is more deserving and capable than the person the woman is currently with, he should get her. He can give her a much better life. Women are confused most of the time and cannot choose properly. I have been the closest to this realm compared to other honorable members of the Council of Nine. I don't see anything wrong with the current order. These people should be given more time to sort out the best system for them. I think there is no need for any intervention in this matter from our side at this moment."

Mahadev began when Skanda had finished,

"What you suggest, Skanda, leads to the destruction of social order. You advocate adultery and indiscipline. Your idea of human society only brings disorder and chaos into society, apart from the points that Lord Agni put forward, which in my opinion are very valid."

Skanda tried to defend himself.

"But many animals follow the traits that I mentioned. Male tigers and lions fight and kill other males of their species to mate with their females. It

is natural."

"There should be a difference between animals and humans. They have been given the responsibility of carrying forward the Nine Faculties of the Council." Mahadev retorted.

"Fine! Let there be a decisive war that cleans the realm once and for all. We can start afresh after that if that's what you want," Ashwin gave in. There was no way he could counter Varun. He looked at Indra who silently nodded and bowed her head.

"Absolutely! And I will ensure that Varun's heir trains the important characters of this war so that the war can be the most destructive so far. My only concern is that Lord Ashwin will shower his blessings and people will recover from this as well." Varun said with a glint of victory.

"Varun's heir? You mean, Parashuram, the one Lord Vishnu had sent before Ram? Is he still walking the realm?" Skanda asked with amazement.

Mahadev replied to his question, "Parashuram has mastered all eight of the Nine Faculties, breaking free from Temporal Fabric. He has been emancipated."

Ashwin placed a hand on his crystal sphere and said,

"Lord Agni has put forward a critical point. Atrocities against women are a rising concern in the realm. Evidently, only the noble and pious care to follow the last Manu's guidelines. I received a lot of cases of female deaths due to atrocities done by men, even their family members and close friends. They are often due to jealousy, anger, superiority complex, a vindictive nature, or just plain evil of the culprit's soul under the influence of Adharma. Apart from death or physical and sexual violence, there are cases where girls are involved in trading as a commodity. This violates our order of equality for both genders. Does anyone else have to say anything about this?"

Agni looked at everyone sheepishly before placing his hand on the sphere and said,

"There are places where men provide wealth and gifts to spend time with the women. The women enjoy their time and get paid to do so. They are physically weak to do warfare and heavy work, so this is how they earn. They don't have to worry about finding one man to take care of them. They have many and they raise children just fine. Wealth flows in those places.

They can also deny any man if they want to, either directly or indirectly. I don't see anything wrong with treating sexual intercourse as a service. Both parties are happy. If they are happy to make it work that way, what bothers you Agni? I don't see any reason for a change right now."

Surya was visibly agitated. He slapped the sphere and said,

"Lord Agni, can you show one woman who got into such a life willingly? All those women living and working in such places are forced to do so. They have none but themselves to call as their kin. And too much jealousy, competition, and backstabbing prevail there. They smile not because they are happy, but to entice customers. They weep within forever."

Varun wanted to steer the discussion to the problem at hand and also reduce the heat in the court. He stepped in,

"Lord Agni is correct. The human beings have turned into a menace, a disease in the Mandala. They have no regard for law and order, no regard for nature, no regard for morality, and not an ounce of the qualities Lord Brahma envisioned among his elites. They kill animals for fun or torture them. They destroy trees and plants, demolish mountains, and fill up lakes and rivers; they spread pollution into everything they come across. In fact, the human beings themselves are the pollution. This realm was balanced before the start of the Manavantar here. The animals and plants lived in harmony. There was balance. Human beings have desecrated the ecosystem and destroyed the natural balance. This Manavantar is fast becoming like the previous which had to be abandoned for destruction of Zoetic Synergy!"

Ashwin touched his sphere, drawing everyone's attention,

"But humans also tame dogs, cats, horses, cattle, and many other animals. They love their pets, often like family members. They raise plants through agriculture. Yes it's true that they change the ecology. But they also develop the realm. They use knowledge to understand the realm and make it a better place for themselves, through civilizational progress. I think their fate should be decided with a war. The war would also ease the burden on Zoetic Synergy and give more time to prepare the plants and animals for emmigration. Let the best system win and the wheel of time should keep rolling. I'll personally ensure the success of the process with my Avatar. It took me a long time to establish Zoetic Synergy on this realm with the help

of Lord Vishnu on several occasions. I sincerely don't want our efforts to go waste so soon. Emmigration would happen at the end of this Manavantar, like the previous ones. But let's give these evolved humans some opportunity to redeem themselves."

Surya closed his burning yellow eyes and took a deep breath as he finished. He rose from his seat, walked around the room for a while, releasing gusts of fire from his mouth and nose. Then he came back to his seat again. The entire chamber could feel the heat of his anger. Narad observed him silently and waited for him to finish releasing his anger. As he calmed down a little, Narad touched his sphere and said,

"You may be right about the activities of human beings, Lady Prithvi. But their destiny is for the entire Council of Nine to decide. Let me remind you of the consequences of a sudden and complete abandonment of Lady Prithvi's realm. Only a handful will be chosen to leave the realm, which will be decided by my master and enforced by a Manu. After that, a Parasmani will be sent to wipe out the life in the realm. No human will be left in the realm, and most plants and animals will be extinct. Nobody can determine what might survive the collision. You and your circle would become a forgotten speck in the chronicles of Lord Brahma. You will stop getting the privilege of hosting humans from any of the Lords and Ladies of the Brahmand. Are you ready for oblivion while some other circle gets all the attention?"

Prithvi shuddered from the thoughts of a cataclysmic Parasmani. She had experienced it during preparation. The thought of experiencing it again made her relive the pain and distress again. She touched her sphere in visible pain, saying,

"I don't want humans to be totally evicted from my realm. And certainly I can't bear the pain of another Parasmani clearing out most creatures. It took me ages to build what I have accomplished today. I made a complaint to Lord Brahma so that he intervenes to restore the balance in my realm. There is too much evil in the humans of today. I have a problem with their activities, not their existence. A great war changing the yuga is the best option for now. Even Lord Brahma approved this."

Brahmanaspati touched his sphere pensively, saying almost to himself, "If humans had gained wisdom from the Nine Faculties passed on by us

to their true potential, they would have received unlimited enjoyments from the bright expanses of infinite knowledge. They could leave the shackles of Adharma easily without fear, skepticism and distrust to walk the path created by Lord Brahma. Yet they are entangled in ordinary reasoning, trying to justify their wayward actions with every might they have. And in their pursuit of mirage, they are ruining the sequences designed by Lord Mahadev, only to bring chaos and despair."

Everyone listened to him intently, trying to understand which way he was leading to. As always, it took time for the rest of the Council of Nine to decipher his thoughts. After some moments in silence, he said,

"Why can't we eliminate all the minions of Lord Adharma selectively? Lord Vishnu's avatars had done it previously. Why can't he do it again?"

Finally, everyone figured out where the Lord of Transcendental Synergy was leading to. Skanda touched his crystal sphere and said,

"Lord Adharma has played a tough game this time, Lord Surya. He slow-poisoned the society with his ideologies in small amounts over time. Human beings can no longer be separated into exclusive groups of good and evil now. It's not plain black and white anymore. Darkness overlaps light everywhere. There are mixed emotions, mixed ideas, and mixed actions in the entire humanity. Every human being is fighting a constant battle of good and evil inside their mind. Any attempt to eliminate Adharma selectively would mean only one thing. Complete annihilation. The best solution is what Lady Prithvi has proposed."

Indra said, "Lady Prithvi. Didn't you try your homeostatic techniques to restore balance to your realm? You have experienced similar situations in the past, and you were always able to restore balance."

Prithvi said, "Trust me, Lord Indra, when I say I have tried every possible way I knew of. I have used the primal energies enforced by Lord Surya, geological calamities issued by Lord Varun, diseases and epidemics inflicted by Lord Ashwin, silent cleansing orchestrated by Lord Agni, political turmoil influenced by, Lord Indra and even open warfare initiated with the help of Lord Skanda. Everything seems to be ineffective on this species. They survive, and they come back stronger unlike any other organism. And they destroy the balance of life that I had so far maintained so meticulously. I am

out of techniques now. I don't know what to do. That's why I sought Lord Brahma's help. He agrees with me and he gave me this solution. But I need all of your help. I can't do it alone."

Brahmanaspati said, "Complete annihilation can't be the solution. But we can surely reduce the load on Lady Prithvi's realm. To do that, there needs to be a massive war. It doesn't matter who dies. The followers of Lord Dharma and those of Lord Adharma are similar in their contribution towards choking up the realm of Lady Prithvi. The only thing that matters is that their number must be significantly reduced."

Skanda said, "I see your point, brother. A complete annihilation would require a Manu beforehand and Lord Dharma's sons are not ready with another realm yet. I think, the most probable solution is a war. Haven't I always said that war is always the right solution. And humans have an affinity towards blood and gore. It will be easier to make them fight each other in a big war and change the Yuga after that."

Indra said, "I think I will go with Lady Prithvi's decision. After all it's her realm and she has the right to choose what is best for her. A war leading to Yuga change is the most well-suited option now."

Lord Dharma announced that there will be a vote. Ashwin, Indra, Mahadev, Skanda, Prithvi, Brahmanaspatia, Dharma and Narad agreed to the war. Agni, Varun and Surya voted for complete annihilation.

"We have three people disagreeing to a decisive war. Until we have a unanimous decision, we cannot proceed. Lord Surya, why do you want to evict humans from your circle?"

Lord Surya said, "I don't like humans at all. My circle was a lot better than when the previous Manu arrived. I have so much to do now and it keeps me busy all the time. I just want it like before."

"So, you want another Parasmani on me, Lord Surya. Why can't you be a little more sympathetic towards me," Lady Prithvi said painfully.

Varun touched his sphere. "I think Lord Surya has a point here, Lady Prithvi. Our circle was better before people arrived. And as time flows it will grow worse."

Prithvi snapped at him, "Oh! You are just jealous, Lord Varun. You can't bear life. So, you don't want it one me either!"

Varun slapped his sphere with exasperation. "Fine! Do whatever you want. I won't object. Your realm, your decision. Why was I even called in this court!"

Dharma said, "Let's not get too personal in this trial, honorable jury. It isn't about us or our affinities. Human beings are on trial today. Let's conduct another round of vote. Members who support a war please touch their spheres."

All except Agni and Surya immediately touched the sphere. Surya shook his burning head, "Fine! Let there be a war. I'll fight in support of Adharma. I'll ensure that Adharma's forces give their best fight and humans are eliminated once and for all. My avatar will lead them to a fight that no one has witnessed before." He touched his sphere.

Everyone looked at Agni. Agni felt uncomfortable from their gazes. Reluctantly he said while touching his sphere,

"Okay, Okay! I'll go with the flow then."

"We have to decide a time when this war should happen. Without a proper plan, our efforts would not be coordinated. Lord Varun, would you like to help us through."

Varun was contemplating with closed eyes, busy in his own calculations. When Mahadev called out his name, he came back to the situation with a start. He touched his sphere which turned into the view of the sky from Prithvi's realm. He said,

"In a few years on Lady Prithvi's realm, there will be two back-to-back eclipses within a fortnight. In that year, the Shani will be near Rohini, Brihaspati and Chandra will be closest to each other and Mangal will be retrograde. That is the year that I choose for this inauspicious event. The ideal place for this event is the stretch of land between Kailash Mountain and Ratnakara ocean."

"Inauspicious but essential, Lord Varun. Thank you for your input. But how do does the Council plan to initiate this war?"

"This war should remain a stark reminder of the consequences of following Lord Adharma's principles. More importantly, it should be initiated due to the atrocities against the women being the primary reason. My avatar will

initiate and coordinate the war and my consort's avatar will be the primary cause."

"And my avatar will ensure a befitting opposition, crucial for getting the most out of it."

"We have a consensus, finally. There will be a change of Yuga starting on the year that Lord Varun identified. This will be initiated through a great war which would be monitored by us closely and aided as needed. The Dwapar Yuga will end in order to pave the way for the fourth and final Yuga on Lady Prithvi. My sons will get more time to prepare a place for relocation after Kali Yuga. As the trial ends, I thank all the Council of Nine members for their active contribution in this fair trial. You may resume your usual activities now." **

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On most occasions, Narad loved coming back to Vaikuntha, his home. Vaikuntha is the most amazing of the worlds that Narad had ever been to, and that is a lot to say because of his ability to travel effortlessly across the universe. Vaikuntha is by far the largest of the worlds. All types of living things could be found here. Different living beings have different food habits. But none of them ate each other. All of their food is arranged by his Lord. So, there was no need for any of them to kill or eat each other. In fact, they lived like one giant family. Narad had been training on the characteristics of each of these organisms since he was assigned to Vishnu. Yet he didn't even know how to communicate with or take care of even half of them. He didn't even have much idea about how his Lord created for food of all varieties for each of them whenever they felt hungry. He even created all of Narad's favorites whenever he felt hungry.

However, on this occasion, Narad wasn't so peaceful or happy to visit his Lord. He had bad tidings to give. Vishnu wasn't waiting for him at his usual seat. He must be in his inner abode. Vishnu's inner place was the only place in the entire universe that Narad couldn't go to. Although he had a lot of curiosity about the place, he was scared to ask about it to his Lord. Narad waited for him in the throne room in his usual seat beside Vishnu's throne. As he sat, a plateful of sweetmeats appeared on a table in front of him. A few moments later, Vishnu came in and on seeing him, embraced him happily.

Narad returned the smile half-heartedly and they sat down in their places.

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Narad took a sweetmeat from the plate before him and put it blissfully into his mouth. His master always had the best treats for him. After savoring the divine sweet taste, he began, already feeling relaxed,

"But, have you identified the holy medium, My Lord?"

"Yes, I have!" Vishnu said with gleaming eyes. He looked keenly into Narad's eyes, like he was challenging Narad to see what he could see. Narad had no clue, as evident from his bewildered stare. After a while, Vishnu said, shedding the air of mystery,

"She will be born in the house of Yaduvamsa king Shurasena. But she will not live like a princess. She will be raised by her uncle Kuntibhoj, who will train her to be a priestess."

Narad seemed confused. He looked at Vishnu and said,

"Why such an arrangement, My Lord? If you want her to be a priestess, why not choose a Brahmin family?"

Vishnu took a sweetmeat for himself and savored it, taking all the time needed to build up Narad's curiosity even more. He took a gulp of the Somaras after the sweetmeat was finished and clearing his mouth, he said,

"Her royalty will ensure the genetic traits of warrior princes in her children. And her priestly training will prepare her for bearing the Avatars. When her body, mind, and soul are ready, Sage Durvasa will visit Kuntibhoj. His notoriety will ensure that Pritha is appointed as his hostess."

"Oh Lord! Now, your plan is beginning to make sense. You have chosen Durvasa to ensure she is the perfect, holy medium for the avatars. Satisfying Durvasa is as difficult as pacifying Lord Mahadev himself. After all, Durvasa was the result of Mahadev's anger!"

"Exactly! If she passes his tests, it means that the Avatars are in safe hands. We have to ensure that they develop the right personalities, which only a perfect mother can do."

"Once Durvasa is satisfied, he will give her the summoning mantra. She will use that to summon the lords who will impregnate the medium with their seed for bringing their avatars to the realm."

"Is that the reason for her name, Pritha, after Lady Prithvi?"

"Absolutely!"

"But who will agree to live a life of such hardships, my Lord?"

"Who else but Lady Prithvi herself! She wants to hold on to human civilization for a bit longer, doesn't she? She will have to fight for it through her avatar!"

"Very well, My Lord. But where do you fit into the picture, Lord?"

"My avatar will be there at that time, too. But I will not be born of Pritha. If I do so, all the avatars will be nothing more than my shadow, which I don't want. I will remain close to the family. I will appear at the house of Pritha's brother, Basudev. But I will grow up separately and be fully capable of harnessing my skills from early on. That way, I will be able to steer the events of the crisis in the right direction whenever my intervention is necessary."

"Will you engage yourself totally in eliminating the evil spirits from the realm like your previous avatars?"

"You mean Parashuram and Ram? No, this time, it will be different. Lord Adharma is more powerful than ever. His influence now is very strong. His ideologies are spreading like a pandemic. If I try to identify and eliminate his followers and their influences, most humans would be dead. I will have to play along with Lord Adharma's game. So, I will have to take a different approach. I will have to think and act like him, only in my own way, instead of using his evil methods. A total cataclysm isn't a choice, as we have to give Anala some time to prepare another realm. A Manu won't be ready until the end of the Kali Yuga. I will only play the role of a wheel-turner, facilitating the change. Nothing more or less."

"That's very wise of you, My Lord. I am proud that my father handed me to you. There is so much to learn from you that my father or mother couldn't have taught me."

"Lord Brahma and Lady Saraswati see the entire truth and only the truth. But to run the world, sometimes truth is not enough. It would be best if you had more than that. People cannot live like animals. They need food for their minds, too. Only Maya can provide that. That's where my forte lies, Narad."

Chapter 3

The Sunrise

The Kunti palace was abuzz from the first light of the day in preparation for the sixty-six hundredth Ram Navami, which was still a month ahead. This year's preparation was even more pompous than the year before because the number sixty-six was considered auspicious by many scholars. The maids had cleaned the floors and the priests could be heard reciting the verses from Valmiki's Ramayana in the temple. Every day, the palace would be decorated with fresh flowers delivered by the peasants in the early morning. Diyas were lit in almost every nook and corner throughout the palace. The servants and anyone who visited the palace would get new dresses from the kiosks set up in the fort free of cost and free prasad near the temple. Often to get the gifts, people of all ages would simply visit the palace without any work.

On that day, Pritha woke up very late and without any interest in whatever was happening all around. She was mentally exhausted. To her, the previous day seemed like a dream. She couldn't believe that she had appeased Sage Durvasa, whose anguish was feared in all realms. And she was gifted by him with a set of mantras known only to her. This couldn't be real, she thought. What if she tried invoking someone now? Will it work? What if it did? What would she do if any Lord did appear? She had the hardest of the time appeasing Durvasa and he was just a sage. The Lords would be a different game altogether. She shook her head and tried to forget whatever had happened in the past few months serving the notorious Durvasa. She went on to finish her daily chores and have her breakfast.

After breakfast she sat alone in her room. It was still early morning. She

had learned to wake up with the first light of the day, finish her daily routine, make breakfast for herself and eat it, all within an hour, like a soldier. Serving Durvasa was tougher than military training it seemed. But thank God it was over now.

Pritha looked at the morning sun from the window in the east. The sun was a bright orange disk that looked like the yolk of a duck's egg. The early morning sun was such a beautiful sight that she had been missing all her life until Durvasa happened. If the sun looked so beautiful from so far, what would the Lord of sun look like? Will he glow with such brightness and fill everything around him with so much light and happiness? What would happen if she invoked Lord Surya with the set of Mantras that Sage Durvasa had given her? No, it would be dangerous. She didn't know how to appease Lord Surya. But she wouldn't know ever if she didn't invoke her. The curiosity got better of her.

She sat down on the floor facing the bright morning sun and began performing the routine that Durvasa had taught her. She kept doing it in a loop and would have continued but a voice broke her chant.

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Pritha tried to justify her stance, "My Lord, I am a priestess! My work is to serve the Gods and the sages who visit my father. I don't plan or intend to live a life of worldly pleasures. I am trained not to entertain Kamana in my mind. Then how can I even think about having intercourse or bearing children?"

Surya noticed the frown on Pritha's forehead. He took a step towards her and extended his hand to touch her arm. Pritha shied and took a step backwards. Kuntibhoj had really trained her well, Surya thought. He had to convince her. Surya said firmly, "Sage Durvasa gave you the summoning Mantra for a reason. You are no ordinary woman, Princess Kunti. You have been chosen by Lady Prithvi to bear the Avatars that want to change this Yuga. It is the reason for your upbringing as a priestess and hostess for sages, despite your royalty. This is the reason you are named Pritha. You are the holy medium of this planet."

Pritha looked with wonder at Surya as he spoke. She found it difficult to decide whether the words of Surya were true or just some wordplay to

lure her into the act of love. She had never considered herself so important, let alone as a holy medium, whatever it meant. Surya's words created more questions than answers. Although Pritha was raised like a priestess, she understood very little of the ways of the Lords. Surya continued, "For you, there is no sin in bearing a child before marriage. All your children will be born from Lords of various realms. Since you summoned me today, it is your natural action to consummate with me and bring my Avatar to this world. You may choose to raise him or dispense him. But his coming is inevitable. As I herald the day on Prithvi with my first light, my avatar will be the first among others to arrive through you. All these blessed children will be an important part of the crisis."

Pritha was slowly getting persuaded by the words of Surya. It was true that Surya was the most handsome figure she had ever seen. His deep voice and ethereal words were beginning to mould her according to his intentions. But she knew that it is a difficult choice for her. The reputation of her family was at stake. She mustered all her will and said, "Do I have a choice in this, or am I just a slave at your discretion, Lord Surya?"

Surya smiled at her. He could see that the defenses of Pritha were wearing down. But she needed some more reasoning. He admired her for her strength. Not many women had the power to resist him for so long. But she wasn't any ordinary woman either. She had strong traits of Lady Prithvi, kind and yet hard like a diamond. No wonder Lady Prithvi had stood resilient to the misdoings of mankind for so long. He said in a milder tone, "You will always have a choice. But choices are meant to be weighed in all aspects. If you choose to consummate and herald my Avatar, you will prevent the world from falling apart, and the cycle of Yugas will continue. You will also herald the Avatars who stand on the other side of the battles to come. You will have a neutral stance, and you will not be blamed for the future of Lady Prithvi."

"If you choose not to do this, you will be held responsible for all that the Avatars of Dharma's side are going to do. It may even lead to a complete annihilation of Lady Prithvi's existence, the Lady whose medium is your pure self, because if I don't balance the two sides by being on Adharma's side, the cycle stops on this world, and humans move to another realm. In that case, Lord Vishnu will choose the next Manu and another realm to migrate to,

which can begin with Satya Yuga before Kali Yuga even starts here. But you must know that your choices will only decide what is to come to the future generations and this realm, and you will be held accountable, if not by the people of this realm, then too by the Lords of all the realms, themselves."

"Oh Lord! Please forgive me for my ignorance. My head is in utter turmoil. I might collapse."

Indeed, she began to fall like a tender flower in the mighty wind. Surya caught her before she could hit the ground. Immediately, she felt the immense warmth that poured into her. She could smell him, like an incense made of a thousand flowers, burning furiously. She clutched him like a drowning person clutches a twig in turbulent waters. She knew immediately that this was the moment she had been waiting for all through her adolescent years. The last thing she remembered from the encounter was the euphoria as Surya carried her to the bed and began undressing her slowly like the sun's first rays bloom the morning glory. With the thought that the darkness of her life was being filled with divine light, she fell into a trance until she couldn't remember anymore. When she awoke, Surya had left. But there was a pouch of golden cloth and a small note. She opened the pouch and found a neckband and a pair of earrings in it, big enough to fit a small baby. They glowed like fire as soon as she touched them. She looked at them for a while with amazement as she had never seen such ornaments before putting them back in the pouch. She opened the note which had the following written in golden ink,

"Don't forget to make the baby wear these ornaments as soon as he is born. Until then, no one should see them. Take care."

She had so many emotions, most of which were unknown to her previously. One of those emotions was a sense of guilt for breaking her vow of chastity which she had taken to be a priestess. She thought that it was best that she kept the encounter secret for as long as possible.

For many days Pritha tried to forget what had happened that day. She was too afraid to let anyone about the encounter, let alone King Kuntibhoj. She felt at times that she had failed her God-parents. She found it very convenient to hide everything because no one had seen Surya arrive or leave. In the next few months, she missed her periods consecutively. She knew that a baby was inside her. She made it a point to cover herself from shoulder to

feet as her stomach began to grow. She avoided other girls of the palace and temple, even her mother. Five months had passed.

Pritha had stopped sending letters to Surasena and Marisha. Marisha was very much worried about why her daughter had stopped writing to her. In her anxiety, she decided to visit Kunti kingdom with some of her maids and lots of gifts for the king, queen and her daughter. She was very well received by Kuntibhoj and after exchange of greetings she was led to Pritha's room. Pritha didn't know yet that her mother had arrived.

She was having bath, when Marisha suddenly came to her room and after not finding her in her room, she decided to wait for Pritha on a chair near the dressing table. Pritha came back after bath and began to remove her towel to wear a clean saree and blouse. She didn't notice Marisha, who by now had noticed her pregnancy. After dressing up, Pritha turned towards the dressing table and saw Marisha. She knew that very moment that her secret was revealed.

Marisha was angry and in shock. She stood up and came to her, her hand raised to slap Pritha. But Pritha broke down and started crying furiously, repeating the words, "I am sorry, Ma." Marisha decided not to hit her and dragged her to the bed instead. As they both sat down, Marisha asked her what had happened. Pritha told her about the whole encounter with Surya. After a while, Marisha said,

"Neither of your fathers should not know about this. You will come with me to my parents' kingdom, the Nagaloka. There you will give birth to this baby and we'll see what to do about it."

Pritha found no other option but to obey her mother. Soon, Marisha arranged for their departure and after bidding adieu to Kuntibhoj and his queen, they set forth to Nagaloka. They were well received at the Nagaloka which was ruled by Marisha's father and Pritha's grandfather, King Aryaka. Marisha explained everything to him. He was happy to keep them with him until the delivery. Few months passed and by now Pritha had started hating her baby which was causing so many changes in her body and mind. The day of delivery had come and even though her mother had mentally prepared her for the labor pain, Pritha found it none like anything she had expected. A boy was born with very distinctive features. He had yellow hair and

yellow eyes. His skin was also yellowish and he was a very large and heavy baby. But the most distinctive feature in his body were a couple of outgrowths in his ears and around his neck. Pritha was so scared of the baby that he decided to do away with him as soon as possible. In the night, he found a basket, big enough to carry him, and placed some clothes and little blankets in it. Then he placed the baby which was sleeping peacefully. He covered the baby with a blanket and took the basket to the banks of Ganga. Pritha took a final look at the baby and set the basket with the baby floating on the river. She turned back to her quarters and went back to her bed. She was unable to sleep the whole night. Next day, Aryaka came to visit his granddaughter and noticed the absence of the baby. He asked her what had happened. She lied that the father of the baby had come and taken him away. After a couple of days, Pritha and Marisha went back to their homes. No one except Pritha, Marisha and the Nagas had known anything about the baby.

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Vasusena woke up with the first ray of sunlight. He was very excited because today was a big day for him. He quickly went to the washroom and freshened up, brushed his teeth with Neem stick and took a bath. When he came out Radhe was waiting for him with breakfast. Radhe had prepared a sumptuous breakfast of rice, vegetables, fruits and curd. It was the trial day for weapons training for all the kids at the Gurukool and she couldn't send him without a full stomach. Vasusena ate the breakfast hurriedly as Radhe told him to be patient and eat properly. Everything was going to be fine.

Vasusena wanted to be allotted to the archery group. Bows and arrows fascinated him since years when he had first heard stories of King Dhritarashtra's battles from his charioteer father Adhiratha. He had wanted to be a great archer from that day on, so much so that he found hardly any interest in studies. Today, he was six years of age and Kripacharya was going to allot all the kids in his batch to various weapons as per their interest and capabilities.

Vasusena finished the breakfast and rushed out of the house and towards the Gurukool. He was the first to reach there and went straight to the playground where the selection was going to happen. After a while everyone in his batch had arrived. After a few minutes, Kripacharya also came into the

ground and sat with other teachers. Kripacharya was the head teacher of the Gurukool. He was a living legend in the Gurukool. No one had any idea how old he was. Vasusena's father, grandfather and their father had also learnt from him. But he never looked that old. In fact, he looked younger than many of the kids' fathers. Kripacharya was a master of all seven categories of weapons and he could fire all types of missiles with his bow. He was the only teacher in the Gurukool who also taught at the palace. Everyone stood up with respect when he arrived. He signaled them to sit down and took his seat as well. He told the teacher to his right to begin the procedure.

One by one, the kids went to the teachers and gave their introduction. Then they were asked to pick up a weapon of choice and use it a little. The weapons were not actual weapons though and couldn't cause any damage, even accidentally. But Kripacharya noticed how they used it and allotted them to the group they best suited to. Some were allotted to spear, some to swords, some to mace, and some to bows and arrows. The kids who lived in the locality of Vasusena were all allotted to spears. When Vasusena's turn came, he quickly went to the teachers and introduced himself. Kripacharya asked him what his father did. Vasusena replied proudly that his father, Adhiratha was the royal charioteer. Kripacharya quickly decided that he be allotted to the spear group.

Vasusena said in disappointment, "But Gurudeva, I want to learn archery. Please send me to archery group."

"No, you come from the Shudra family. You will learn only the spear." The teacher to the right of Kripacharya replied.

"But Gurudeva..." Vasusena couldn't finish his sentence. Kripacharya waved his hand and called out for the next kid.

Vasusena came back to his place and hung his head. Soon the selection process was over and the kids returned to the class. Vasusena didn't speak to anyone the whole day, not even to Ravikiran, his best friend. When he returned home, his mother was waiting for him in the hall with dinner. Vasusena didn't eat anything and went straight to his bed. Radhe came to his room and asked what had happened. Vasusena told everything with teary eyes. Adhiratha was standing by the door and listening to what had happened. He came towards Vasusena and sat beside him. He gently brushed

his hand through Vasusena's yellow hairs and said,

"Son, we are Shudras. We are destined to be foot soldiers or charioteers. Our duty is to assist in the battle, not to give it a direction. Learn to fight with a spear properly and you might come out of a few battles alive."

"But father, I want to learn archery. I don't want to learn spears." Vasusena said crying heavily.

"No one can change God's will. If you were to be an archer, you would have born in a Kshatriya or Brahmin family." Adhiratha said hugging him. Radhe was about to say something, but Adhiratha sensed her thoughts and asked her to remain quiet. She went out and brought his dinner. Vasusena didn't feel hungry but ate anyway. Radhe told him a story from the fables and he went to sleep. She shut the lamp and came to her room.

"Why didn't you let me tell him about himself?" She asked Adhiratha angrily.

"It's not the right time yet." Adhiratha replied.

"But what about the note we found in the basket?" Radhe argued.

"Let him learn spears and handling horses first. When he is a little older and mature enough to handle the truth, we will tell him everything. Now bring my dinner. I am starving." Adhiratha said gently stroking his tummy. Radhe went out to kitchen grumpily.

**

The day began with a lackluster morning. Clouds, marooned from the rainfall of the previous night, obscured parts of the bright sky. Damp streets and muddy grounds of Kripacharya's gurukul witnessed an infiltration of crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, ants, worms, and many other insects, which Vasusena did not recognize, escaping their flushing abode. Most children slowed their pace to avoid mud and small pools of water. But few of them trotted chasing each other, enjoying the occasional slip. Vasusena looked at the sky. There could be another bout of rainfall, he thought. He had to find Ravikiran.

Vasusena found him at the main entrance, beckoning towards him. He hurried towards the gate, being careful not to slip and fall. Shahid was the hooligan of Kripacharya's gurukul. After the death of his parents, his kin

left him at Kripacharya's gurukul along with their belongings and the little money they had.

Their seniors despised him. The Acharyas blamed him if anyone sneezed. Juniors wanted to follow him while being scared to speak up at the same time. Vasusena was his closest pal and the natural communication channel between Ravikiran and the rest of Kripacharya's gurukul.

When Ravikiran would slip out of the gurukul, Kripacharya would catch Vasusena to know his whereabouts. Few times, he would know where Ravikiran went, and even fewer times, he would talk about it. Most of the time, he would vanish for hours, even days, only to emerge later to speak his heart out to Vasusena. They would chat about girls, alcohol, pickpocketing, gang rivalries, escaping to the far-off places forever, owning a shop, and so on.

About a month ago, Ravikiran was tied to a pillar in the gurukul and canded by Kripacharya. Everyone heard his cries and everyone except the toddlers and Vasusena felt happy. Ravikiran had broken the slates of all the boys in his hostel. While flaunting the scars later, he had told Vasusena the reason.

Carts of books, slates, and pencils are brought whenever a royal nobleman or social worker comes to the gurukul so that they can get popular in the society. But the Kripacharya sells some of them in the local market for money. The boys must carry a slate to the class and each had to be given a new one from the stocks. Both of them had cracked jokes about Kripacharya's reactions when he had to give everyone another slate in the middle of the year.

On another occasion, Ravikiran had burst firecrackers in the toilets. This time Vasusena had been his aid in setting up the crackers that Ravikiran had obtained secretly. To Vasusena he had said that the place was getting too stinky and boys needed some aromatic air. Then, the other day, Ravikiran had broken Kripacharya's chariot wheel. Though everyone understood who had done it, Ravikiran escaped punishment as nobody had spotted him doing it.

The gurukul came alive on Sundays. Students did not have to sit like stone sculptures in Kripacharya's classes. The grounds did not wait for the afternoon to echo with children's hullabaloo. Hardly any corner of it would

be left empty as hundreds of kids would run in to get their share of space to play. Some of the hostel inmates would have visitors or go visit their kin. Others would go out into the bustling city of busy roads, brawling cart pullers, screaming shopkeepers and swarming city dwellers. It was so different, so fast and happening, so colourful and so mystic to the young inmates that they would wait for this hour of free-roaming all their week.

“This is going to be the best Sunday we had in months! I have been planning for it for the last two weeks.” Ravikiran gleamed as Vasusena came near.

Through the waves of shoppers, families out for a walk on the streets, couples searching for their quiet corner and happy audience coming out of the Ram Leela theatre on the other side of the street, Vasusena scanned the life-size sculpture of a female Apsara outside the theatre. It was a chubby young woman with plump milky breasts in a dance mudra. The last Sunday there were no sculptures. Looking at the latest addition to the theatre today, Vasusena asked, “Are we going there today? She seems nice.”

Ravikiran smiled at Vasusena, looking at the theatre through the corner of his eyes for a moment.

“We are going to do something better today rather than watching cheap drama actresses for two hours. Today we are going to fly!”

Vasusena involuntarily looked up above the heads of the diverse crowd and moving carts, past the banners of jewellery shops and hotels, the roofs of the buildings hosting them, past the crown of the old banyan tree with grey clouds on its backdrop. Three crows came flying to the banyan tree and perched on one of its branches that spread out of the tall trunk like the hands of the new Apsara’s sculpture. In another couple of seconds, four more crows flew towards the tree and landed on the same branch. In a few moments, the branch was lined with black spindle-shaped figures with fluttering wings and raucous cries. For a fleeting second, the sight of gurukul’s hostel, with rows of boys chatting in bunk beds lining the walls, flashed past his eyes.

"Where are we flying to? Have you found a flying chariot like the Puspak Vimana?"

“No, my boy. We will be flying on our own without wings or Vimana. Now don’t waste time on the pavement, staring at the sky. Come on. We’ve got

work to do.” Ravikiran said with a broader smile.

Ravikiran walked towards the canal bridge running over the road that connected Hastinapur to Ayodhya. They passed Makhanlal’s paan-biri shop where some elder boys were buying biris and khainis. While there were restrictions on setting up biri and mohua shops near palaces, nobody cared about such rules for local gurukuls. The boys of Kripacharya’s gurukul started smoking and drinking before growing pubic hair.

“Are we not smoking biri today?” Vasusena asked.

“We will. But that is secondary today.” Ravikiran replied without stopping.

“What is more important than biri? Are we going to drink mohua?” Vasusena asked, looking baffled.

“Don’t jump ahead of time, Vasu. You’ll know everything soon,” Ravikiran replied.

Ravikiran liked to maintain an air of mystery around him. Often other kids gossiped about what Ravikiran might be planning, from bits and pieces of information they would gather stealthily. Nobody except Vasusena would ask him directly. So, Vasusena was the source of most of the gossip back at the gurukul. Ravikiran would tell him only that which he felt was needed to be told. Right now, Vasusena knew that Ravikiran will not explain the details of today’s plan and the more he would press, the more Ravikiran would continue puzzling him. Vasusena loved and hated Ravikiran’s secretive attitude at once. It was always an adventure with him. He kept following Ravikiran like a faithful soldier.

They left behind the barber’s shop where Byomkesh would attend to customers when he wasn’t cutting hair in the gurukul hostel. They passed the liquor shop. Vasusena was hoping that Ravikiran might be buying mohua, but he didn’t. He looked at the bag hanging from Ravikiran’s shoulder. It seemed that he was already carrying whatever he needed.

They passed the jewellery shop that portrayed the road and the pavements in its numerous big mirrors. Vasusena loved watching himself in the mirrors that lined the jewellery shop counters and the display case. He would see the same boy in the orange kurta and yellow dhoti staring at him in all of them. He’d roll his eyes for a moment, searching for the mirror that showed the clearest image of himself. Nothing seemed to change in him every time

he looked except the ruffled hair which took a new form. The people in the background were never the same, though. They came in so many varieties and colours that Vasusena would wonder how he would look in a different outfit. His yellow earrings and hair completed his appearance. He would look like a small shrub set on fire.

There were no mirrors in their gurukul hostel. Elder boys would say that many years ago there used to be one in the restroom. But a fourteen-year-old boy had broken it and attacked one of the earlier Acharyas. It was rumoured that the Acharya had done things to the boy that had left him in pain and sorrow for the rest of his life. The Acharya survived the attack with a large wound on his back and another on his shoulder. The boy, fearing he would be beaten to death, ran away from the gurukul. No one ever saw him again, but the Acharya was murdered about a year later in his own house. Though no one was arrested, after that incident, all the mirrors were removed from the hostel and kids had to look into their reflection in the tubs of water, to see how they looked.

Habitually, Vasusena paused in front of the jewellery shop mirrors for a moment to stare at his own face and his hands caressed his hair. He looked at Ravikiran who had crossed the ebony statue of Lord Rama on whom many places and roads were named in Hastinapur.

“Come on. Don’t waste time.” Ravikiran told Vasusena, pulling him by the arm. As they walked towards the cremation ground, Vasusena turned back and saw Bishu, the royal palkhi carrier, approaching the man in green kurta flashing a coin, in his hand.

Vasusena followed Ravikiran to the Ganga bank adjoining the cremation ground. Some of the other kids would come to this place in tattered clothes and beg for food and donations from the kin of the deceased. Others would sell tea or ritual ingredients for the last rites, packaged by Chhotan, an old ruffian from the Kripacharya’s gurukul who had got a kiosk for the job. All these happened during the day, of course. The night time was quite different. Nobody ventured there at night, at least no one living. Ravikiran had started walking along the empty pyres with nothing but ashes, that were scattered in the ground. Vasusena followed him, stretching his arms sideways like a bird would spread its wings, whistling mostly to ward off thoughts of ghosts.

Vasusena wondered what places the deceased people came from, to be cremated here in the banks of the holy river Ganga. And where would they go from here. He would think about the mountains of snow where people threw snowballs at each other. He would think about the blue sea that looked like his sprawling bed sheet, only big enough to spread to the horizon. He wondered if some of the deceased were carried by their kin through the jungles teeming with giant snakes and roaring tigers. "Ravikiran, are we going to race to the banks and jump into the Ganga?"

"Not now," Ravikiran answered as he found a seat near a pyre. Vasusena walked around the pyre, carefully inspecting it for any leftovers from its previous occupant. Vasusena could see better than the other kids during nighttime. His earrings would glow faintly throwing enough light for him to see when others couldn't. There was nothing except ash and pices of burnt wood at their spot. "Why are we sitting in this ghostly place?" Vasusena asked.

"Are you afraid? Don't worry. Ghosts won't come near Ravikiran or his friends," Ravikiran said airily. Vasusena settled down in front of Ravikiran and watched him carefully as he took out the red colored pouch and picked up a pinch of dry leaves from it. He carefully put it on his left palm and began crushing the leaves.

"Ravikiran?"

"What's it?"

"Do you think my real parents were cremated here too?"

"How'd I know? Ask your Radhema."

Vasusena released a deep breath and looked towards the night sky adorned with the half moon and twinkling stars. He looked back at Ravikiran and shook his head, "She doesn't know either."

"Why do you think that your real parents are dead?"

"I don't know. They must have been rich though. I got these strange ornaments from them."

Vasusena touched his earrings and neckband. They were the only connections he had to his biological parents, or so he thought. He looked around himself and suddenly he thought he saw some people were nearby, watching them. He moved closer to Ravikiran and said in a low voice,

"Ravikiran?"

"Now what?"

"I think people are watching us here."

Ravikiran looked around once and said, "None living that I know of."

"What are those leaves you've got in your hand?"

"Ganja!"

"Is it some kind of tobacco?"

"It is mixed with tobacco and has to be smoked like tobacco. But it is not the same. Its comes from a different plant. It will make us fly!"

"Where did you get it?" Vasusena took a light bit of the mixture that Ravikiran had made. He sniffed it and put some in his tongue. He spat it out sideways and said,

"It smells and tastes very strange. And this place is creepy. I feel like someone is talking to me through the trees." Vasusena whispered.

"It is just the wind," Ravikiran snapped. He had drawn out a slender terracotta funnel that could fit into his palm. He placed a pebble inside it and put the crushed Ganja into it. He began stuffing the chillum tightly and bound a tiny rag to the narrow end of it. He took out a candle, some dry grass, a flint, a char cloth, and an iron dagger. He took the flint stone and strucked the dagger with it until sparks flew. He caught the sparks into the char cloth which began glowing. Then he transferred the glowing cloth to the dry grass and began blowing into it till they caught fire. He lighted the candle with the fire and picked up the chillum with his other hand. He brought the clothed between his lips and lighted the Ganja with the candle. The open end of the chillum began glowing like ember. Ravikiran drew a long puff at the chillum. He let a thick smoke out of his mouth and said,

"Don't breathe a word of it to the other kids. I know you brag about our adventures all the time. But if you let the cat out of the bag this time, I won't let you come in any adventure with me again."

"I promise that I won't go crowing about it. But why is it so secret?" Vasusena blurted as his eyebrows went up.

"You don't have to worry about that. Now take this and drag slow and easy. It is your first time." Ravikiran winked and held out the candle. The first puff left Vasusena flustered. Ravikiran told him to keep smoking. He

took another puff, this time pulling in all that his lungs could take. Vasusena started coughing vehemently. Ravikiran burst into a laughter making him feel ashamed.

“You don’t have much stamina, Vasu. Draw in slowly.”

“I am smoking such a thing for the first time. It smells and feels strange. But that doesn’t mean I am a weakling. I won’t cough this time.”

“There is no rush to grow up, Vasu. You don’t become Ravikiran in one day.” Vasusena didn’t mind Ravikiran’s egotism. He might have if it were some other boy from the gurukul. But this was Ravikiran the devil and he trusted every claim that he made. He handed back the chillum which Ravikiran poked with a twig before puffing. Then he took out a gold chain from his pouch and held it for Vasusena to see. "Do you like it, Vasu?"

"It is very beautiful. How much did you pay for it?"

"Nothing! Agnibhuja gifted it to me. Not everyone is born with ornaments."

"Hmm. My earrings and neckband irritate me most of the time. If only I could take them off, I would feel lighter. Who is Agnibhuj?"

"Your neckband is fixed tightly. What would you do when you get older and your neck enlarges?" Ravikiran couldn’t conceal his curiosity.

"Maa says she found me in a basket, wearing them. It was tightly fixed then and so it is now. They grow along with me, I guess." Vasusena replied nonchalantly.

“You are different than others. Anyway, do you really want to know where I got the money from?” Ravikiran asked with pride.

“Yes. But you don’t have to tell me if you don’t trust your dear Vasu.” Vasusena tried to conceal his curiosity. He knew that Ravikiran doesn’t like being poked. He shares his secrets with Vasusena anyway. And Ravikiran seemed in a good mood tonight.

“Who else can I trust? One-eyed Vishwa?”

Vasusena closed his right eye, mimicking one-eyed Vishwa, said in a husky voice, “Oye Shudra dogs! Do you think that I don’t see what nuisance you guys are doing? I may have only one eye, but I see and know everything about you, scoundrels!” Both of them laughed longer than usual. The Ganja

trip had begun. After they were tired of laughing, Ravikiran spoke in a low voice as if the dead people in the crematory could listen,

“Do you remember Babu?”

Vasusena frowned, trying to remember Babu. There were two students by that name in the junior classes. They were not important enough to be remembered though at that time. He asked, “Who is Babu?”

“The boy who had stabbed the prefect,” Ravikiran replied in the same low voice. Vasusena remembered now. Babu was a legend in the gurukool. But he was there a long time back and no one had heard of him for years. Vasusena said, moving his head up and down,

“Oh yes, how could I forget him? But he vanished that day, and nobody knows what happened to him. Some people say that two years later he killed that crazy bastard in his own house.”

Vasusena watched Ravikiran intently as he took a deep drag from the chillum and released slowly so that the smoke made a mist around his face. He spoke from the mist like the actors of the religious drama in the Ramleela theatre.

“Babu left gurukul knowing he couldn’t come back. Other Acharyas wouldn’t have spared him if he had. He travelled to some orphanages, but they wouldn’t keep him either. His reputation preceded him everywhere. He joined a merchant and travelled eastward with their caravan in search of trade. He stopped at Anga. He sold ganja in the daytime and worked in the mohua bars in the evenings. One day a guard, called Avinash, caught him. He heard his story and was very interested in the stabbing incident. He took him away to his village. He taught Babu how to survive in extreme situations and fight like a Yoddha. He learnt how to ride horses and chariots, fight with bows and swords.”

“Babu didn’t look like an orphan any more after two years. He became tall and quite muscular. He could get the better of six armed men with his bare hands. He learnt to fire Agneyastra that could break houses and chariots as they exploded. He could shoot down a flying bird with his bow and roast it when food was scarce in the barren lands. He learnt to catch snakes for lunch and bats for dinner. He wasn’t Babu from gurukul, any more. Everyone called him Agnibhuja, because of his mastery of Agneyastra.”

Ravikiran paused to pick up the twig and poke the glowing cinders in the chillum. Vasusena watched the grey ash disappear, his mouth gaping and eyebrows dropping. Ravikiran took another drag before passing it to Vasusena. He held the chillum, immersed in the strange story, forgetting to smoke. Ravikiran remarked curtly,

"Don't waste it. Keep smoking."

Vasusena brought the chillum to his mouth without breaking the eye contact as if he might miss a word if he broke the stare. Ravikiran continued,

"He was selling ganja and mohua in the market. He saw me pinch an apple almost unnoticed. The other sellers are old fools who don't have observations like him. He caught me by the arm and took me to his shack. At first, I thought it was about that apple. But he wanted to know my whole story. I think he saw something in me. I told him everything. He wanted to know to what extent I was ready to go in order to get even with my fucking uncle who was sitting in my father's house, leaving me to rot in the gurukul. I said that I would rip his throat apart if I had the chance."

"Some Acharyas scold you for having vengeful thoughts while others tell you to forgive your uncle. But Agnibhuja doesn't sound like a meek person who would try to calm you. He said he'd help you in your fight, right?"

"Agnibhuja he is a calm person. Signs of strong character oozes from him. He prays regularly and does Suryanamaskar."

"What is Suryanamaskar?"

"It's an exercise that strengthens body, mind and soul."

"Our Acharya didn't teach us that. He never teaches us anything useful. He doesn't even teach us archery because of our caste. Where does Agnibhuja do it?"

"I saw him do it in his shack. His shack is small but very pristine. There is a small cot and a wooden stand for the Ramayan. He visits Ramleela theatre every Sunday. He fed me duck roast, fruits and rice with lentils. They don't taste like anything that you can get back here in the gurukul."

"Did you see his weapons in the shack? Are they heavy? And the Agneyastras that explode houses?"

"No, he is not a fool. He won't litter his shack with those weapons. They are hidden where the guards and outsiders cannot know. He didn't tell me

where they are, but he told me that he would if I become his vendor here. And he gave me money to have a lot of fun. I'll sell weapons, ganja and mohua."

"Vendor! You are going to sell weapons now? Who will buy from you?" Vasusena asked in amazement.

"There are bandits and petty criminals who buy weapons for their business. But my main ambition is to learn to be a Yoddha. Kripacharya will only train us to be foot soldiers. He trains special weaponry to wards of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas only. I don't want to remain an expendable foot soldier all my life. I have bigger dreams."

"I want to learn archery. I guess Kripacharya won't teach me either. He'll probably tell me become a chariot driver like father."

"You should come with me. Your strange ornaments show that you are no ordinary Shudra. You are destined to be a bigger personality. Your present family is holding you back. You should break free."

Vasusena took a deep breath. His lungs were heavy from smoking weed. He looked around the lifeless cremation ground except for the two of them. The world without own people isn't much different from a cremation ground. Just as empty and lifeless, if not more. Strong winds blew noisily here because of the absence of obstacles and the mighty Ganga river nearby. There was so much peace and comfort here in Hastinapur. Vasusena pouted his lips and said,

"But my parents love me. They have no one else and neither do I have anyone. My real parents left for reasons unknown to me. I don't even know them. Now, I can't leave the only two people in the world who care for me. Otherwise, I will be left with no one."

"Such emotional ties aren't ... hey! who's there?"

Both of them suddenly noticed the four boys who had silently come and stood behind them.

"Look, who's decided to pay us a visit on this racy night. The Shudra devil Ravikiran and his sidekick Vasusena. Hey Golu, check out what these two ghouls are vandalizing. The cremation pyre!" One-eyed Vishwa said in a voice that was similar to Vasusena's mimicry. Another boy, slightly

younger than Vishwa, but older and taller than both of them stepped forward pointing a burning torch in their direction.

"Back off. And don't you dare call me that or I'll poke your other eye too." Vasusena gnarled while standing up in his place. "Oooh! The Shudra scum has a little fight in him. I am so frightened. Will you spare me, honey, if I whip your ass, sweetie. I promise I'll be gentler than your boyfriend." Vishwa jeered while the other three burst into a laughter. Vasusena clutched a burnt piece of wood firmly, shivering with anger, getting ready to jab if needed. Ravikiran placed his hands on Vasusena's shoulder, holding him back, speaking firmly, "Go away Vishwa. Its none of your business. We don't want to start a fight now."

"Really! Then why did you come here, in my area, at this time of the night, mongrel!"

Ravikiran's lips twitched, revealing his clenched teeth, but he held back knowing very well that this was their area and they were two boys against four. Besides, there could be more of their gang nearby and they had gone there for no charitable purpose. He was about to cook up some excuse for being there, but Golu cut in.

"Look, Vishwa! These mongrels are trying to steal from the pyre!"

"Oh God! Grab them and don't let them go! These lowly scavengers are trying to agitate the spirits by stealing from their pyre. It's a criminal case and they're going to be in prison for a long time." Vishwa told his friends in excited tone, while pointing at the pyre where ash and burnt sticks lay scattered by Vasusena. Then he took something out of his shirt that Vasusena had never seen before. It was a beautiful ili, a large knife, whose curved blade shone in the moonlight like Radhema's silver necklace. In the midst of the horror, Vasusena felt Ravikiran's hand which had been resting still on his shoulder until now, had started pulling him at the sight of the blade. A muffled shout of alarm along with a gush of warm air from Ravikiran's mouth came rushing to his ears.

"Run!"

Vasusena turned towards Ravikiran who was already running a couple of steps ahead of him. He sprinted in the same direction without turning back to see if the other guys were closing in, lest it'd slow him down. Everything

around them were shifting. The silhouettes of dark cremation pyres that had stood like harmless mounds of wood seemed to come back to life. Vasusena had a strange feeling that sleepy people were coming out of them to see what they were doing, though he could not see anyone. Even the trees and the walls seemed to draw near to catch them. Only the moon and the stars were inertly smiling upon them from their positions like the king, flanked by royal attendants, watching dance shows. As the initial horror that had struck him drained away with the sweat that made his shirt stick to his body, Vasusena realized that fast movement is the most effective solution for fear and shock. He ran as fast as he could to catch up with Ravikiran, but Ravikiran was running a good number of steps ahead of him and the distance between them grew more and more.

Ravikiran was now running along the Ganga banks. They could hear the shouts of Vishwa's gang behind them. Vasusena hadn't reached the Ganga yet when he saw Ravikiran do something that he had never expected. He stopped for a moment and turned back to look at Vasusena. He shouted,

I would never yield, Vasu. Sometimes you have to do something you never want to do."

All of a sudden Ravikiran jumped over the waist high wall along the Ganga, down into the river. No boy would survive a fall into the mighty Ganga with turbulent waters. Vasusena ran up to the place from where Ravikiran had taken the leap. He looked straight underneath but there was no sign of him. Vasusena stood frozen in his place until the other boys caught him. They looked in the same way as Vasusena but nothing except the mighty Ganga was visible. Two boys held Vasusena, locking him. Vasusena tried to release himself but in vain. Vishwa thrust the ili at Vasusena but the ili seemed to bounce off from some invisible shield. Vishwa thrust the ili again, but again Vasusena remained unharmed. Vishwa said something to one of his aids and a sack came upon Vasusena's head from behind, blinding him. Vasusena struggled in vain when something hit Vasusena's head and everything went dark. He fell to the ground pressing his hands against the back of his head where Vishwa's gang had hit him. They removed the sack from his head to take a closer look at him.

A drop of icy cold rainwater that felt like cold metal, fell on his face that

was burning hot due to the blood that flushed suddenly, making its way to gush out of the crack that had developed in his head. He could hear some indiscernible voices and more raindrops falling on his body, that was lying in the fetal position with his hands still clutching his injury, before passing out into the dreamless state that, he came to know later, was called unconsciousness.

When he woke up in his bedroom later, Radhema had told him that they had to put six stitches on his head and the mark, though hidden under his hair, would remind him of this fateful night for a long time to come. She told him that the caretaker of the cremation ground had found him lying unconscious near the Ganga banks. He had also found a chillum, some Ganja, and an ili nearby. He had confiscated them and handed them over to his father.

Next morning, Radhema gently applied a herbal paste on the wound. Vasusena gave out a muffled cry of pain. Tears fell down Radhema's eyes. She wiped them and said,

"Maybe I am not raising you properly, Vasu. The fault is in my upbringing."

Vasusena felt guilty. He quickly hugged his mother and said, "Ma! Why do you say that?"

Radhe brought him in front of her and looked into his sorry yellow eyes. She said, "You do addiction, and pick up fights with bad boys. You are going astray."

Vasusena hung his head in shame, unable to bear the stern look in his mother's eyes. He said feebly, "I am sorry ma. I won't do it again. Please believe me."

Vasusena recalled the terrifying incident of last night. It was a great mistake to go on such a dangerous adventure with the most reckless boy of the town. He was defeated and perhaps lost his closest friend. If there had not been external intervention, he might not have seen the daylight today. But something puzzled him from last night and he asked Radhe, "A strange thing happened yesterday. Vishwa hit me twice on my chest. I saw him hitting really hard. But it didn't affect me at all. But when someone hit me from behind, I was hurt. Why did it happen like that, ma?"

"I don't know, Vasu. I still remember the day I found you on Ganga. You

had these strange earrings and neckband. Maybe these are responsible for what you experienced today during the fight. There was a note written in the basket I found you in. I guess it was from your birth mother. I think she can explain everything. That is if you find her someday."

"What was in the note?"

"Well! If you become a good boy, someday I will tell you. Go to sleep now."

"Ma, please. I said I'm sorry. What happened today, won't happen again."

"I promise, ma."

"Also promise me that you won't talk to Ravikiran, Vishwa or any of those bad boys. Otherwise, I will make you leave Gurukool and work with your father in the royal stable."

"I promise." Vasusena said reluctantly. He had hoped to get even with Vishwa and his gang one by one. But maybe he should keep that for later. Right now, being able to go to Gurukool was more important. He wanted to be a fearsome warrior and leaving Gurukool would ruin all his ambitions. He didn't want to be a charioteer and drive around the warriors in the battlefield. There was no dignity in that, he thought. So it was best to do as his mother said.

Some months had passed since the cremation ground incident, but Vasusena hadn't heard about Ravikiran's whereabouts. At first, he thought that Ravikiran must have hidden somewhere. Vasusena tried to search for him in all the known places. But he was afraid to ask anyone directly, lest Radhe would come to know of it. When months had passed without a trace of Ravikiran, he assumed that Ravikiran must have gone somewhere else or died in the river. Vasusena felt sorry for him and avoided other boys in the Gurukool. He remained inconspicuous and focused on spear-fighting. One morning, when he had finished his chores and breakfast and was preparing to leave for the Gurukool, he heard his father call out from the Veranda,

"Vasusena! Vasusena!" Adhiratha's voice was louder than usual and filled with happiness and enthusiasm. Typically, it happened when Adhiratha would bring something exciting but it was early morning in the middle of the month and Adhiratha would usually purchase something at the start of the month when he got his salary.

"I'm coming, father", Vasusena shouted back, while putting his books inside his leather bag. He came out on the Veranda, and saw a girl, younger than himself, standing next to his father. She looked apprehensively at Vasusena and immediately bowed her head.

"Who is she?" Vasusena asked. The girl glanced at his eyes and noticed his earrings and neckband shining. Vasusena saw her curious stare and frowned. She immediately looked down. Adhiratha smiled and signaled him to come near. Radhe was standing next to the little girl. She caressed Vrishali's hair and cheeks.

"She is Vrishali. She is my late cousin's only child. My cousin and her husband met with an accident while working near the mountain. She was sick and at the village clinic at that time. Vrishali is very intelligent and studious. She was the topper in her gurukul. You will like her." Radhe said with a kind smile.

"Is she going to stay with us?" Vasusena frowned at her.

"Yes! You can study at Kripacharya's gurukool together." Adhiratha beamed.

"What will I learn along with a girl! She won't be learning martial arts, horse-riding or charioteering. Anything else is too boring!" Vasusena grunted.

"Come on Vasu. Be polite to your new sister." Adhiratha said.

"She is not my sister!" Vasusena retorted.

"Okay! Okay! Consider her as a friend. You can do that for me, right? Now show her around the house. I have prepared your grandmother's room for her. Be a gentleman and carry her belongings into her new bedroom. She is tired from her long journey." Radhe ordered sternly.

"I can carry them. They are not heavy." Vrishali spoke for the first time in a low and sad voice. She bent to pick up her bag. Vasusena came forward and snatched it from her.

"Trying to turn my parents against me on the very first day, huh! Why couldn't you be a boy! Boys are so straight forward." Vasusena started walking with her bag in his hand. "Come on now. Don't just stand there. I am already late today." Vrishali, who was still standing close to Radhe, started following him hurriedly.

Vasusena's grandparents lived in the largest room in the house, which wasn't much. But it was nice and cozy and sunlight came in from the window in the morning. The bed was large enough for two people and there was a nice little dressing table for his grandmother. There was a small almirah which used to hold his grandparents' dresses. The furniture was all made of teakwood and very sturdy and heavy. The room was looked since grandmother had passed away few years back. Radhe had opened it and dusted everything. The almirah still stacked the old dresses of Vasusena's grandparents but had plenty of room even then. The walls were painted blue and the floor was wooden.

"Huh! You get the best room of the house on the very first day already, Shali!" Vasusena said, putting her bags on the bed.

"My name is Vrishali. And the room is very big." Vrishali said in her feeble tone.

"Vrishali is too big for a name. I'll call you Shali. And I see that you have already started complaining about the room!" Vasusena said in an irritated voice.

"I am not complaining. The room is very beautiful like your house. It's just that I have never lived in such a big place. Our house near the mountain is a small one." Vrishali said while looking around. She went near the dressing table and looked at herself in the mirror. She picked up the comb on the table and brushed her hair.

"Don't ruin my grandparents' things, Shali!" Vasusena said angrily. She quickly put the comb down and said sorry looking at her own feet. Radhe had come to the room with tea for her, unnoticed by both of them. She said,

"Don't you misbehave Vasu! Sorry Vrishali. Vasu can be irritating at times. You can use whatever you like in this room. Don't worry about him. He will like you. It is just that he was the only kid of the house for so long. Here, have this tea. It will make you energetic and cheerful."

Vrishali smiled and came forward to take the tea. Vasusena grunted and stormed out of the room.

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The storm was raging furiously and strong winds prevented Vasusena and his family from lighting the candle. Vasusena lied down on his bed and tried

to remember the actions of the boys who practiced archery in the Gurukool training ground. He would watch them from a distance and hear what the teachers instructed them. His thoughts were broken when he heard a soft voice near the door.

"Can I come in?" Vrishali said hesitantly.

"Yes," Vasusena replied and got up from his bed to help her. She came in and sat on his study chair. Vasusena sat on the bed and watched her for a while. Then he said,

"What happened, Vrishali?"

"There are no lights in my room," she said.

"Yes, it is due to the storm," Vasusena said. He watched her again as she silently. Then he asked,

"Are you afraid of the dark?" He saw her nod in the faint light of the room. He asked,

"Why are you afraid of the darkness?"

There was fear and pain in her eyes. She closed her eyes and replied, "Darkness took my Baba away from me."

Vasusena was surprised by her answer. He had never heard anything like that before. People die in battlefield or because of old age or diseases. He had heard about accidents and storms killing people too, but never anything about darkness killing people. He asked, "Darkness killed your Baba? How?"

Vrishali crouched a little and replied with a sad voice, "It was a no moon night when I saw him for the last time. I had fever and Maa and Baba needed to take me to the clinic. We never leave the house at night time. Yakshas roam near our house at night time. So, they hesitated for a while. But I became worse. So, they got a cart and we went to the clinic..."

"Wait, what is a Yaksha?" Vasusena interrupted her.

Her eyes got bigger as she explained, "They look like deformed human beings. They talk in feminine or a child's tone to lure people into their territory. But when a person goes into their territory alone, they eat the person."

"Have you seen a Yaksha yourself?" Vasusena asked, fascinated by the story.

She shook her head. "No one lives after seeing a Yaksha."

Vasusena jerked his head momentarily and dismissed it saying, "Then it is a myth."

Vrishali leaned forward and said with conviction, "It is not a myth! My father was killed and eaten by a Yaksha. All because of me. If I had not caught the fever, my parents wouldn't have to be out of the house that night. The doctor at the clinic asked more money than Baba was carrying at that time. He went out of the hospital alone in a hurry. He even forgot to take the lantern. I watched him from behind as he vanished into the darkness, never to return again. When I grow up, I will become a doctor and treat patients without any greed so that no one has to die like Baba."

Vasusena didn't want to prod the matter any further. He attempted to change the subject. "And what about your mother?"

Tears fell down Vrishali's eyes as she said slowly, "A few days later, the remains of Baba's mutilated body were found and cremated. Maa climbed onto Baba's pyre and cremated herself alive. She didn't talk to me since my Baba's body was found. Villagers said she was in shock and she thought that I was the reason for his death. During Baba's last rites, she didn't even look at me for once."

Vasusena looked at her as she cried. She looked vulnerable and lonely. Somehow, Vasusena felt a bond between them forming. He said, "Do you think that too?"

"What?"

"That you were the reason of your Baba's death?"

Vrishali hid her face in her tiny hands and said, "Not only Baba's, but Maa's as well. I am cursed. I was born on Ashtami of Phalguna month. It was the day when Lord Shiva opened his third eye. It is the most ominous day of the year."

"That is rubbish. If you think that way, the sorrow will eat you," Vasusena dismissed her again. He never believed in superstition. They remained silent for some time. Vrishali found her composure and requested him hesitantly, "Can I sleep in your room?"

Vasusena had always slept alone in his room. He found the idea of sharing the room with an outsider somewhat discomfoting. "Why? I don't light a lamp when I sleep."

Vrishali said, looking at his earrings, "But the room is never dark because of your earrings. Where did you buy them?"

Vasusena smiled, "I didn't buy them. Maa says I had it when she found me."

Vrishali was surprised by his answer. She asked with raised eyebrows, "Radhema found you?"

"Yes, in a basket, floating on Ganga," Vasusena said in a relaxed tone, happy to have changed the subject finally. Vrishali said in a low tone,

"Ohh. Then we are both orphans."

Vasusena got irritated by her choice of word. He cut her thoughts saying angrily, "Shut up! I am not orphan as long as my Baba and Maa lives. I don't care who gave birth to me. I am my Baba and Maa's son. Don't you dare insult them again!"

"I am sorry. Are you angry? Will you beat me?" Vrishali looked afraid.

Vasusena jerked his head, "Why will I beat you? I don't fight girls. They are too weak and insignificant. My Baba and Maa are your parents too. They will punish me if I hit you. You can stay in my room, but never say or think yourself or myself as orphan as you did just now. Is that clear?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Vrishali didn't reply anything. Instead, she came silently and lied down beside him on the bed. After a while, they both felt asleep.

A year had passed since Vrishali had arrived in their house. Vasusena grew fond of her over time. She had a kind heart and seemed to take care of Vasusena too. Vrishali excelled in biology and music at the Gurukool. Vasusena had become quite good at spear-fighting by now, though the thoughts of learning archery never left him. He had built himself a small bow and a couple of arrows with some help from Vrishali. Often, he would practice after Gurukool in a desolate place near the banks of Ganga. One day, Vrishali decided to accompany him to the river bank.

As Vasusena practiced with the bow, Vrishali came to his side and looked at him intently. She said after careful observation,

"You need a good professional bow if you want to be a real archer."

Vasusena lowered the bow and looked at her. "You think I am bad at archery? Why is that so?"

"Your technique keeps changing and you don't even look steady with your aim. At times, you do hit the tree you are targeting but you aren't consistent enough. May be a good bow could improve your style and technique," Vrishali said.

Vasusena was amazed by her insights. Frankly, he didn't expect her to be so intelligent. May be since she was from the mountains where lots of wild beasts wandered near the villages and the commoners were good hunters, she learned a thing or two about archery. He looked at his bow and replied, "Professional bows are expensive. The teachers at Gurukool won't let me learn archery. I cannot buy one and don't know how to make a good one either. Agnibhuja knows but he won't teach me. I am stuck with bows like this forever."

"Who is Agnibhuja?"

"A weapons seller and a friend of a friend."

"Oh! If he won't teach you how to make bows, why don't you join the royal princes' training classes? Your father works for the king. Can't he make some arrangements?"

"Hundreds of people work for the royal family. If everyone's children started training in the royal ground, where will the princes learn?"

If Agnibhuja is a friend, can't you ask him to gift a bow. You can buy a good bow from him if he isn't willing to gift one. At least he could give some discounts for friendship's sake."

"I need money for that. Father doesn't make that much. His salary barely provides for our livelihood. Also, our common friend has left this place."

"I have some money. You can borrow it if you want."

"Where did you get so much money that could buy a professional bow?" "My parents had been saving some money for my marriage. When they died and I left my home, I brought them in a box with me."

"Then keep it for your marriage. I don't want your money."

"You have such an ego, Vasu. Like a prince."

"Hmm."

Vasusena and Vrishali walked alongside the great canal that led the water of Ganga into the Hastinapur palace. The canal was more than 50 cubits wide and nearly a quarter of a yojana long, running from Ganga river to the great bath inside Hastinapur palace. Vasusena pointed at the grand Hastinapur palace which was dazzling in white color in the sunlight. He told Vrishali with excitement,

"That over there is the palace where king Dhritarastra and queen Gandhari resides. Guess where all this water from the Ganga goes into?"

"How will I know? I have never been to any palace." Vrishali shrugged. The city life and palaces were new and uninteresting to her. She had always been happy and comfortable in her small village near the mountains. The hotter and drier climate of Hastinapur also made her uncomfortable. She missed her home so dearly.

"Hmm. There is a great pond inside the palace. It is where the royal people take a bath. The pond is always replenished with fresh water from this canal. The king and his royal kins live in so much grandeur!" Vasusena said. Vasusena never had the chance to see it. But he had heard stories about it from his father. Royal people bathe in the pond for hours while the maids help them with shampoos and fragrant oils. Their clothes are washed in a separate place.

"If the pond is so grand and replenished regularly as you say, it wastes a lot of water!" Vrishali said. Vrishali's detachment from wealth and grandeur seemed so strange to him. He was always so much influenced by the rich and royal kids. They wore expensive jewellery and lavish clothes. He too had some ornaments but they were strange. The royal kids wore different ornaments on different occasions while his ornaments couldn't be removed. Vasusena said,

"Well, royalties can afford that. Someday, I will be a king of some Mahajanapada and live in such luxury."

"You have very high ambitions, Vasu." Vrishali looked into Vasusena's eyes and smiled.

"Ambitions are good. They drive a man forward. You'll see the day I become a king. And you'll be my queen." Vasusena had a smile now as he looked back into her eyes.

"Why do you think I want to be your queen?" Vrishali said with a blush. She tried to look annoyed. But her eyes gave away her true feelings and Vasusena was quick to catch it.

"You just gave me a nickname - Vasu. You wouldn't have done it if you didn't want to be my wife, would you? I like it though." Vasusena said with a tease. Vrishali blushed even more and shifted her gaze from Vasusena to the ground near her feet to the Hastinapur palace in the distance.

"The palace is taller in the center and spreads to its sides evenly. Any reason for that, Vasu?" she said, changing the subject desperately.

"Oh! That's because the king and his kins live in the tall and grand central portion of the fort. The left and right extensions are symmetric and house the king's subjects and some facilities like the small market, training grounds, stable, armory, etc. I will take you there someday. We won't be allowed inside the central palace, but I can show you the market and stable. Our father works in the stable." Vasusena replied, following her gaze to the palace. After a moment, he added, "If a person rides a flying chariot over Hastinapur, they would see that the palace along with this canal resembles an elephant's head from the top."

"Really? Is that why it is called Hastinapur?" Vrishali asked in amazement.

"I don't know how it got the name, Hastinapur. But it suits the place."

**

The Pandavas were in the training grounds practising with the small and light bows and arrows. Arjun kept hitting the target successfully every time, while others barely managed to fire some arrows. Bhim had already broken two practice bows because they were too light for him. The other three Pandavas went back into the palace for lunch, but Bhim Arjun stayed back. Arjun loved firing arrows while Bhim still had to find a bow good enough for himself.

Bhim found a pale brown bow made of Sal wood and it was just the right weight for him. He fired an arrow with it and it seemed to travel enough to reach the target. But it missed the target by several cubits. Meanwhile, Arjun lifted another practice arrow and placed it on the strings of the practice bow. Bhim had been watching him all along. Bhim threw the Sal bow on the ground and told Arjun, "Hey little brother! Give this one a shot. Let's

see if you can fire it."

Arjun put down the small practice bow, bent and placed his left hand on the Sal bow, trying to lift it. It nudged, but he couldn't lift it properly. Bhim gave out a laugh and said, "It's not for weaklings, brother. You should continue with the kid's bows with the kid's arrows."

Insulted, Arjun shifted the arrow to his left hand and pulled up the Sal bow with his right hand. He could make it stand upright by resting its edge on the ground. He placed the practice arrow on the string and fired it. Meanwhile, the bow had already suffered from Bhim's strong draws and tossing on the ground. When Arjun had fired a mismatched light practice arrow, bow couldn't resist further and cracked on one side.

Arjun saw the crack and became scared of how Acharya Drona would react. He placed the bow carefully on the ground and said, "Oh Lord Devraj! What would I do now? The bow is broken. Brother Bhim, please do something."

Bhim came near and picked up the bow. He saw the crack too and said, "Oh God! You broke it alright! Hmm! It isn't one of our practice bows. Maybe Dronacharyaji kept it for our tests."

Bhim noticed that the crack was on one side. He had an idea. He put it back in the armory with the cracked side facing the ground. He said to Arjun, "Shh! Brother, no one knows it's broken except the two of us. No one saw us. Whoever picks it up is to be blamed. Come, let's go back and eat something. I'm starving."

"What did you do with the broken bow?" Arjun asked skeptically. "Forget about it. You did nothing and saw nothing." Bhim said placing his arm around Arjun's shoulder and pulling him towards the palace.

"Please remove your arm big brother. You are nothing short of a little elephant. And I have too much tension already." Arjun squeaked.

Both laughed and walked towards the palace. Meanwhile Vasusena had delivered Adhirath's lunch. He watched his father eat it. His father put some of the food in Vasusena ate it gladly. He loved it when Adhiratha fed him with his own hands. After they were finished, they washed their hands and the utensils. Vasusena put the dishes into his bag and began his walk back home.

As Vasusena was passing through the training grounds on his way back, his eyes fell on the armory. He saw the bows and walked towards them. He felt hypnotised by the beauty and craftsmanship of the weapons. Arjuna saw him from a distance and came behind him. "Who is this boy? He looks older but poor." Arjuna thought as he watched Vasusena silently. Vasusena found a pale brown bow about five cubits long. It was the largest bow and looked dusty. Arjun had found his victim.

Arjun came silently up to the back and said softly, "Hey boy! Your father works in the stable right?" Vasusena turned back, startled. He saw Arjun and said, "Forgive me prince Arjun. I was just passing by and couldn't help myself from admiring the weapons."

"Don't be so formal boy. You want to learn archery, don't you! Being a stable boy you can't afford it, but I see big ambitions in your fiery eyes. Come let me teach you archery. Let it be our secret." Arjun said with a wicked smile.

Vasusena felt a little embarrassed and hung his head. "As you say, prince."

"Go on now, pick up the pale brown bow and the quiver over there. Let's go to the practice arena."

Vasusena nodded and did as told. Arjuna noticed how easily he picked it up. Unknown to Vasusena, the bow began to crack even more from the energy of Vasusena's ornaments. Vasusena carried it to the firing arena and placed the light practice arrow on the string and aimed. He fired the arrow and hit the bull's eye on the first shot itself. But by now the bow had had enough and broke from the middle. Frightened, Vasusena dropped the bow and took a couple of steps back.

Arjuna had hoped something like this would happen. The bow was a professional heavy bow while the arrows were light practice arrows. Firing such arrows from a professional bow was similar to pulling the string without an arrow. Such an act damages the bow greatly. Arjuna's plot had succeeded. Now it was time to teach this bow a real lesson that he would remember. Arjuna shouted, "Acharyaji! Acharyaji! Come here quickly, please. This boy is breaking our bows!"

Vasusena was taken aback by the sudden change in the prince's attitude. At that moment he realised what great mistake he had done by trying to fire

a royal bow meant for the princes. It was highly probable that he would be punished for touching the royal weapons. After all he was a Shudra. In worst case, his father could be terminated from his duties and his family would lose their livelihood. Vasusena pleaded Arjuna, "Please don't shout, prince. I am sorry. Please don't call Acharyaji."

But Acharya Drona and Kripa came anyway. "What is this commotion?", Drona asked.

"This boy broke the Sal bow!" Arjuna shouted immediately. Vasusena glanced fearfully from Arjuna to Drona to Kripa. Other princes had also arrived hearing the commotion. He was surrounded and felt cornered.

"I am sorry Acharyaji. I was passing by admiring the bows when prince told me to fire an arrow. It broke when I fired an arrow with it. It was an accident." Vasusena said with joined palms.

"Who are you and which arrow did you fire?" Drona asked as he looked at the broken bow on the ground. He looked back at Vasusena and noticed his yellow hairs and eyes.

"I am Vasusena. I fired that arrow." Vasusena replied, pointing towards the arrow hanging on the bull's eye. Drona saw it. Kripa remembered him from the Gurukool. He was the Shudra boy who wanted to learn archery, Kripa recalled. He whispered something into Drona's ears.

"How did you manage to come into the royal training ground and why were you firing practice arrows with a heavy professional bow?" Drona asked sternly.

"I was returning home from the stable, Acharyaji. I saw the bows. They look so grand. Prince Arjun suggested that I fire an arrow with this bow." Vasusena replied honestly.

"He's lying Acharyaji! I reached here after he broke the bow. All of us know that firing practice arrows with professional bows damages the bow." Arjun said before Vasusena could reply anything to Drona. Vasusena looked at Arjun with shock. He couldn't understand why the prince was framing him so fervently. He couldn't remember if he had done any harm to any of the princes. In fact, he couldn't remember whether he had ever confronted any of them.

"You work in the stable?" Drona asked, looking at his dress and shoes.

"My father works there. I came to deliver his lunch, which he forgot to bring in the morning," Vasusena explained.

"Who is your father?" Drona asked.

"My father, Adhiratha is the royal charioteer, Acharyaji." Vasusena replied.

Drona looked at Vasusena's eyes and earrings closely. Indeed, it was him, he thought. He had to get rid of this boy permanently! He didn't belong here. Besides, it could create problems if he stayed around during the training. He said,

"Do you know how much the royal professional bows are worth, Vasusena? Not only did you break one out of ignorance, you are accusing a prince falsely to defend yourself. If I tell this incident to the Commander, your father will lose his job and three months' income. What will you and your family do?"

On hearing this, Vasusena fell down on his knees and joined his palms together. He couldn't think what his father would do or say if Drona would do what he said. "I am sorry, Acharyaji! Please don't involve father in this. It's my fault." Vasusena spoke with a trembling voice and teary eyes.

"Stop calling me Acharya. I am not your teacher. I teach only the princes, not Shudra kids from the stables." Drona said angrily. Arjuna smiled as he looked from Drona to Vasusena. Vasusena had learnt a fitting lesson, he thought.

"Oh stop it now, Drona! Can't you see the boy repents his deed. Besides, it was just a Sal bow and it was too heavy anyway. The other kids couldn't even pick it up." Kripa spoke now.

"It's not just about the bow, brother-in-law. These Shudra kids must know their place. They have other weapons meant for them. Not everyone can learn archery." Drona said to Kripa. He turned towards Vasusena and continued,

"Look here, son of Adhiratha. This time I am sparing Adhiratha all the troubles because he is faithful towards the king. Next time, I won't be so merciful. If you try to use a bow and arrow again inside the palace grounds, I will ruin the life of you and your family. Is that understood?" Drona said as he came closer and peered down upon the trembling Vasusena. He signalled Vasuna to leave. Vasusena nodded and walked out of the palace as quickly as he could. All the princes were laughing except Suyodhan, who looked

silently at Arjun and Vasusena. Kripa came forward and took Drona away. He said in quite disbelief,

"What had happened to you, brother-in-law? I have never seen such behaviour on your part towards an innocent boy. Is it a crime to be a poor Shudra kid?"

"It's his eyes and earrings, not his status that is to be blamed, brother." Drona said in a low voice after ensuring that the other princes couldn't hear him.

"His eyes and earring! What about them?" Kripa asked and almost immediately understood Drona's point. "Oh my God! Was that him? The son of S..." Kripa couldn't finish his sentence because Drona had already silenced him.

"There is no need to let the princes know anything right now. They shouldn't hear us talk about this." Drona said with the same low voice. Kripa nodded and both started walking towards the food court. But unknown to both of them, prince Suyodhana had heard them from behind a nearby wall.

Meanwhile, Vasusena almost ran towards home with bowed head. A storm was raging inside him. He walked without looking at anybody or anything except the road under his feet. When he entered home, Radhe sensed something was wrong with him. She didn't stop him but silently followed as he went straight to his room. He took out his shoes and lied down on his bed with his face buried in the pillow. Radhe slowly came and sat beside him and gently brushed his yellow hairs. He cried into the pillow without looking back at her. "What happened?" she asked. Vasusena didn't reply. She stroked his hair a few times more then realized that Vrishali had entered the room too. Radhe beckoned at her so that she could check in on him. Then Radhe left for the kitchen to prepare lunch for them. Vrishali stood beside the bed and asked,

"What happened Vasu? Why are there tears in the eyes of the strong man?"

Vasusena got up and without saying anything, left the house quietly. He began walking aimlessly until he was out of the locality and in the fields. After walking through the fields, he found a place to sit under a large Peepal tree. The tree was home to many birds which went quiet after some chirping

upon seeing the visitor at first but later realising that he had no intention to harm them. He sat with his back rested on the tree trunk for a while and later lied down, looking at the cloud of stars which people called Akash Ganga.

The astrologers of Hastinapur believed that the stars dictate the life of every human being. He had heard stories of the predictions of the astrologers coming true for several people. He had also heard that many astrologers had failed to predict correctly in case of many people. It was a science that felt more like mysticism rather than evidence-based facts to him. As he watched the stars twinkle, he thought whether it was coded in the stars if he would survive this journey through the forest and collect Jatamansi, or he would become the dinner for some hungry animal. He closed his eyes and his thoughts strayed from the sky and the stars, to Vrishali, to his parents, to Arjun and other people in his life. After a while, Vasusena found himself walking on the sea shore. The sea was rough. Big waves burst into splash of sea water on the rocks at the shore. At first Vasusena felt himself alone. But on looking harder, he found a yellow haired person doing strange actions.

He walked slowly towards the man on the shore. The sun was rising above the horizon. The man had a physique that looked like a perfect sculpture found in the temples. He was wearing a radiant golden close-fitting tunic and equally bright yellow shoes. He had gold jewellery studded with shining yellow stones around his neck, waist, arms and wrist. He, like Vasusena, had yellow hair, yellow eyes and yellow beard with moustache. It looked like someone had cast a human figure out of gold. The man was doing a routine over and over again.

At first, he stood upright with his feet together. He brought his palms together in front of the chest and exhaled deeply. Then he inhaled and stretched his arms overhead, arching backwards. While his feet was grounded, he stretched upward. He exhaled and bent forward from the hips, bringing his hands down to touch the feet with his knees straight. He inhaled and stretched his right foot back, lowering the right knee to the ground, and the left foot between his hands. His gaze was forward and the spine straight. Then he exhaled and stepped the left foot back into a plank position. His body now formed a straight line from head to heels.

He exhaled and lowered his knees, chest, and chin to the ground, keeping the hips elevated. The toes, knees, chest, hands, and chin touched the sand. Then he inhaled and slid the chest forward and upward into a snake-like pose. His elbows were close to the body and from there he lifted his chest, keeping the hips on the ground. Then he exhaled and lifted the hips up, forming an arrowhead-like shape. Keeping the hands and feet grounded, he pressed the heels toward the floor.

Then, while inhaling steadily, he stepped the right foot forward between the hands, lowering the left knee to the ground. He looked forward with a straight spine. He exhaled and brought his left foot forward to meet the right. He bent forward and touched the feet with his hands. Again he inhaled and rose slowly, stretching the arms overhead. He arched his back slightly and stretched upward. Then he exhaled and brought the hands back to the chest in a prayer position. He repeated the same sequence of postures as Vasusena watched closely.

"Is that your fitness routine or something?" Vasusena asked. The man paused for a moment to look at him. His eyes shone very brightly.

"All warriors should keep themselves in the best health so that they are ready for battle any time."

"I want to learn warfare too. But my Acharyas won't teach me."

"Wh they don't teach you?"

"Because I am a Shudra?"

"Are you really?"

He resumed his exercise without any reply.

"I have seen those eyes somewhere. I can't remember..." Vasusena thought loudly. "And those hairs. You have hair like, like..." He was interrupted by the man.

"Like you, you mean?" the man stopped and turned to face him.

"Yes! You have hair and eyes like me!" Vasusena exclaimed.

"Actually it's the other way round. You look like me somewhat, young man." the man said with a smile. His eyes twinkled as he looked piercingly into Vasusena's eyes.

"Are we... are we related?" Vasusena asked as he leaned forward to look more closely at the strangely familiar man.

"What do you feel?" the man asked with the same smile on.

"I don't know. Should I feel something? Are you who I think you are?" Vasusena asked.

"Maybe. It depends on what you think about yourself. If you think yourself as son of a Shudra charioteer, then you have already decided what you are going to be," the man said as he turned away towards the sea.

"Can I become a warrior if I want?" "What makes you think that you cannot?"

"But I don't know any Acharya who would teach me. And Dronacharya hates me."

"Why don't you find out the Acharya of Dronacharya?"

Vasusena paused for some time. This had never occurred to him before.

To learn from someone outside the Gurukool, particularly the person who taught the legendary Dronacharya himself. He turned back towards the man.

"What is this place? Where am I?" Vasusena asked him following his gaze into the calm ocean that shined with a golden hue.

"You don't know what this place is?" The man looked back at him.

"I think it is a sea shore like those in father's tales of adventure." Vasusena said. As far as he could see, there was only the sea water on one side and the golden sands on the other.

"Your father. Hmm..." the man continued his exercise again.

"Wait! Can you tell me how I came here? I think I was in a field a while back." Vasusena asked, trying to draw his attention.

"Were you? Are you sure you left the field?" the man smiled again. The sea water felt suddenly very cold on Vasusena's feet. He looked down and found the water crawling up his legs. Suddenly the scene changed and Vasusena woke up. He found himself in the place he had gone to sleep last night. A snake was crawling up his legs. The snake looked at him and alarmed by his sudden awakening tried to bite Vasusena. Immediately after the bite, the snake rebounded and disappeared into the forest. Vasusena, frightened and shocked, looked at his leg where the snake had bitten. There was some blood on his leg but Vasusena felt no pain. He swiped his hand on the blood and the blood was wiped off easily. There were no bite marks or wounds on his legs. He realized what had happened when he found two broken snake teeth

on the ground beside his leg. The snake had broken its teeth while trying to bite him. It was strange to say the least.

Then he told her what had happened at the palace grounds. Vrishali sat beside Vasusena and gently placed her hand on his. Vasusena didn't move. She held his hand to her cheeks and kissed it softly. She said slowly, "Acharya Drona isn't a simple Brahmin, Vasusena. You think that all Brahmin sages are pious. You find it hard to believe that Brahmins can be devious too. Brahmins are also humans. They have their flaws. Dronacharya didn't refute your potential. No one can. Your aura, the light in your face intimidates everyone. The royal kids don't have such aura. He refused to teach you because he knows that you are better than those spoilt royal brats."

"But what if he is right? What if I am not meant to be a master warrior? What if I am only meant to be a charioteer, like my father? After all, taking care of the royal stable has been my family's livelihood for many generations." Vasusena asked with tears rolling down his eyes.

"When you cry, your eyes look like two suns setting into the ocean. My mother used to say that the sun travels the sky in a chariot pulled by seven divine horses. There aren't many Lords who can boast of valour like him. His light follows you wherever you go, even in the night when he isn't shining in the sky. You are destined to be a great warrior. I can bet my life on life." Vrishali said while holding Vasusena's hand against her chest.

Vasusena interrupted her by placing his fingers on her lips. "Don't bet your life on losers like me. Your life is too precious for such things. Besides, how can I become a great warrior if the royal teachers won't accept me due to my caste? There are no Brahmin teachers outside the palace who know Dhanurveda except Kripacharya. And he refused to teach me archery during my orientation day."

"Hmm. Princess Sushala was telling us the other day that some of the greatest warriors in the palace were not trained by any royal teachers. Someone named Parashurama trained Acharya Drona and royal grandfather Bhisma. You can learn from this Lord."

"Why do you hang out with the Princess? We are not like them and we they will always consider us lowly."

"Sushala is not like that. She is kind and gives me gifts."

"They aren't tokens of friendship. It's just alms for poor people."

"Don't worry about it Vasu. The important part is finding Parashuram. Parashurama isn't a regular Brahmin Acharya, Vrish. He is very elusive in nature. Very few people really know where he lives. His father was a Brahmin sage who was accidentally killed by a Kshatriya king. He got rid of Kshatriyas from the entire planet in revenge. And that was in the last yuga. He has been doing penance after he killed his Kshatriya mother. In this yuga, he doesn't interact with ordinary people."

"Man from last yuga? But that ended more than six thousand five hundred years ago! How come he lives till this day and where will I find him?" Vasusena questioned.

"They say that he lives somewhere near Saptakonkana, beyond Avanti. It is about seventy to hundred yojan from here, may be a little more. He lives in a cave somewhere in the Dandaka forest. If you really aspire to be a master of Dhanurveda, you should find and convince him to teach you. Learning from him will make you equal to or even better than Acharya Drona and royal grandfather Bhisma!" Vrishali said confidently.

Vasusena was beginning to see her point. It is true that right now, Drona and Bhisma are the fiercest warriors on earth. And if he too learnt from their teacher, none of the royal princes could match him. But will his parents agree? And what would happen to Vrishali if he were gone? He leaned closer to Vrishali, held her in his hands and said,

"I want to be a Brahmin master of Dhanurveda. And when I become one, I would be the Acharya that the Shudra community is waiting for. I would teach all Shudra boys like me who want to learn Dhanurveda. Why should a Shudra boy only fight with spears if he has the talent to wield a bow? I would become the best Acharya that this land has seen in decades."

"But for that you have to find and train under Lord Parashurama. Can you leave Hastinapur and find him, to give you a better life?"

"I can do anything to be a noble, just and fair Brahmin Acharya. Not like the crooked ones of the palace. But, if I leave Hastinapur to find Lord Parashurama, what will you do? Will you still remain a friend to an escapist? Father will find a groom for you and marry you off. No, I don't want to lose you. I should start working in the stable. Maybe someday, I will become the

charioteer of one of the princes."

Vrishali twisted away from his grasp and walked a few steps away. She said angrily, "And be an obedient servant of a coward who gets to order you around just because of his royal birth? What about your valour? What about the light of your face, your earrings? Don't you know that you are special? Don't you see that you are not meant to stay here? We humans are recognized from the greatness of our work. If you promise to train for Brahmin warrior under Lord Parashurama, I will promise that I would hang myself from the Banyan tree before any man touches me. I will wait for you no matter what, even if it means a thousand life times."

Vasusena took a step forward and shook his head, saying, "I am not special. I am an ordinary boy from an ordinary Shudra family. Please do not give me such dreams, Vrishali. I can not afford such ambitions. I will tend the horses of royal stable from tomorrow. And you should learn to make good flatbreads."

Tears fell down Vrishali's eyes as she tried to counter his words, "But..."

Vasusena held her in his arms and stopped her from saying anything further. "No more buts, Vrishali. Go to your bedroom. Tomorrow you'll go to gurukul and I'll go to the royal stable."

Vasusena needed some fresh air somewhere alone. Too many conflicts were happening inside him. He left the house and started walking idly towards Ganga. As he passed the jewelry shop, he saw prince Sahadev holding up a blue stone, inspecting it for its quality. Prince Nakul, who was standing beside him, said, "What do you think about Acharya Drona, Sahadev? He is so proud for being the Rajguru, that he doesn't care about anyone, especially the poor workers."

Vasusena overheard this and quickly took cover behind a wall to listen. Sahadev was still inspecting the sapphire stone as he said, "Or maybe there was something more than that about this boy. After all, it was pretty clear that Arjun lied and Acharyaji knew everything."

"What do you mean?"

"How many boys do you see in Hastinapur with yellow eyes and hair, Nakul?" Sahadev said with a smile, while returning the stone to the owner. Pannalal, the shopkeeper asked whether Sahadev wanted to buy it. Sahadev

shook his head and started walking out. Nakul and Sahadev walked idly on the street looking at the shops' displays, while Vasusena followed them covertly, listening to their conversation.

"What about his eyes, Sahadev? Yudhisthir, Bhim, Arjun and us have all different colored eyes. So what?" Nakul questioned. To him, it didn't seem unusual as he was used to it. But Sahadev was a lot more knowledgeable than him.

"Exactly. The five of us have colorful eyes. All others in the city have black eyeballs, even our mother. All, except this strange boy. Isn't that odd enough! Acharya Drona is no proud fool. He sees and understands more than anyone else in the training grounds," Sahadev replied pensively. He knew that this boy had some connection with them. But drawing any further conclusions would hurt the royal family, their family. Nakul was beginning to understand the connection too. Vasusena was still in the dark. He closed in a few steps hoping for more elaboration. Both Nakul and Sahadev had gray colored eyes, different from any other person that he had met. But what could that mean? Nakul picked up two sweets from a roadside vendor and paid for them with a silver coin to the vendor who bowed and thanked them. He gave one to Sahadev and took a bite of the other one enjoying it slowly. Then he asked Sahadev,

"Do you mean that boy was deliberately insulted as part of some plan? But why?"

Sahadev ate his sweet, enjoying every bite slowly. The palace food was always lavish. But the street food had a charm of their own. Whenever he came out of the palace and walked the streets, he would look for the gemstones and street food. Nakul never understood his interest in gem stones. When asked, he would simply say that the gemstones are related to the stars and planets. Sahadev cleaned his palate with his tongue, savoring every last bit of the sweetmeat and said, "I don't know why. You'll have to ask the elders. Now come on. Its getting late. Mother will start worrying if we don't return soon."

Nakul nodded, "Okay. I am feeling hungry. This sweet has increased my hunger manifold. Let's return quickly." They walked towards the palace, leaving the streets and Vasusena behind.

Vasusena walked towards his house but didn't enter it. Instead he went to the temple near their house. Devotees were doing puja in the bell shaped temple of Lord Shiva. He avoided the crowd and found a quiet place under a banyan tree near the temple. There was a pond nearby which was full of rotten flowers and leaves that were used in the rituals. The dark water hardly reflected any light and Vasusena wondered what could be living in it.

As he thought about what the princes were discussing earlier that evening, he lost track of time and didn't even notice Vrishali who had sat quietly under the tree a little away from him. Vasusena wondered who he was and what significance his appearance had. It was true that he looked different from other kids. But he had thought that no one knew why it was so until he heard the princes that evening.

"Do you often come to the temple?" Vasusena's chain of thoughts were broken by Vrishali's question. He looked at her startled and asked,

"When did you come?"

"A while ago. You didn't answer my question. Do you come here often?"

Vasusena shook his head and turned his gaze from back to the pond. Vrishali looked at the leaf-tray in her hand carrying some flowers and grass for puja offering. She got up and walked to the pond. At the edge of the pond, she bent and placed the tray on the pond water. She made some waves in the water with hand that carried the leaf-tray and the flowers away from her. She touched her forehead with joined palms to pray for a few seconds and came back to her place near Vasusena.

"The temple in my village is different from other temples of the land. My village temple looks like a boat. All the temples on the way to Hastinapur, including those here have the same mountain-like shape."

Vasusena had never heard of any boat-shaped temple. He knew that this shape of temple symbolizes Mount Kailash, the heavenly abode of Lord Shiva. He asked, "What God is your village temple dedicated to?"

"It's dedicated to someone named Manu. I don't know if he is a God or not. The ancient folklore says he was the first human on this land."

"Why is the temple shaped like a boat?"

"They say he came in a boat with many animals and seeds of plants."

"Oh!" Had it been any other time, he would have been very interested about the legend of Manu. But now he was preoccupied with himself. Vrishali looked around her and after a while, prodded him.

"So, why did you come to the temple today if you don't visit often. You didn't even notice me when I came in."

"I didn't notice because I was busy thinking. And I'd like to continue thinking for a while if you don't mind keeping quiet!"

"Is everything alright? Is something bothering you?"

"Nothing that is your concern."

"My mother said that worries get reduced when shared. You can tell me if something is bothering you. I would definitely help if I can."

"The only way you can help right now is by leaving me alone. Please don't follow me," Vasusena left the place and walked towards home. He went straight to his bedroom and sat down on the floor leaning against the wall. A little while later, Vrishali too came into his room. She sat in front of him and asked with teary eyes,

"What happened Vasu? Why are you avoiding me?"

"I am not avoiding anyone." Vasusena replied without any visible emotion.

"Did something happen today?" she asked again. Vasusena remained quite and avoided her gaze. She persisted,

"Did I say something wrong?"

Vasusena swayed his head sideways, again avoiding her gaze. She asked,

"Then why are you not talking to me?"

"I have told you more than I should. It only reveals my dark and ugly self."

"Who told you that your inner self is dark or ugly. Just tell me their names."

"People will say that when you discuss with them."

"Who will I discuss with about you?"

"Your friends. People you study with, someone you will spend your life with. It's human nature to discuss others among friends. To criticise, joke or sympathize about other's weakness."

"Does that mean that you discussed about me with your friends. Joke or criticise about me and my parents. Probably you sympathize, never really considering me as your friend."

"No, I don't. You saw the darkness of life much later. Before that you were living in happiness and peace. I have seen more of life than you. I was born in oblivion, hardened by the ugly truth of life. I don't need to feed on your weakness. I know how much it hurts."

"But you think that I will feed on your weakness. How could you think that?"

"I don't have to think about it. I know. Maybe not now. But you will surely do so when I am gone."

"Where are you going?"

He remained silent.

"When will you come back?"

"Fine! Go wherever you want to. But I will wait for you, because it's my duty."

"Nobody gave you any duty towards me," he said while looking into her eyes, trying as best as he could to show indifference. She returned his gaze momentarily, then looked away, unable to stop tears from coming out of her eyes.

"You said that I'll do the things that would hurt you, right? Yes, I might! I will! That's because you don't dictate what I do. Whether I have any duty towards anyone is not your concern. Just leave!"

With that, she stormed out of his room, with tears rolling down her cheeks. That night he had his dinner without talking to anyone. Vrishali and Vasusena avoided each other's gaze, too. Vrishali had some idea where he wanted to go. It was best to let him go. It was his destiny. But she was sad because he didn't trust her because she had thought that he did. After dinner, Vasusena waited for about an hour until everyone was asleep. Then he packed his ili, some essentials for the way and left the house silently. Then he remembered something Vrishali had said.

Vasusena went to Vrishali's room. Vrishali was sleeping. He looked for it and after a while he found it in her almirah. He took the twenty four bronze coins and three silver coins from the wooden box and kept the empty box

back. Certainly, he would return the coins later, but now he needed it more than Vrishali. He looked at her again and she was still asleep. He came out, went to his room and took his baggage. He left the house as silently as he could. He thought that no one saw him, because if Radhe would see him leaving, she would stop him. Once outside, he turned back one last time to see the house and left. No one interrupted him except some street dogs that barked loudly as he passed. Unknown to him, one person watched him leave. When he was out of sight, Vrishali wiped her eyes and went back to bed.

