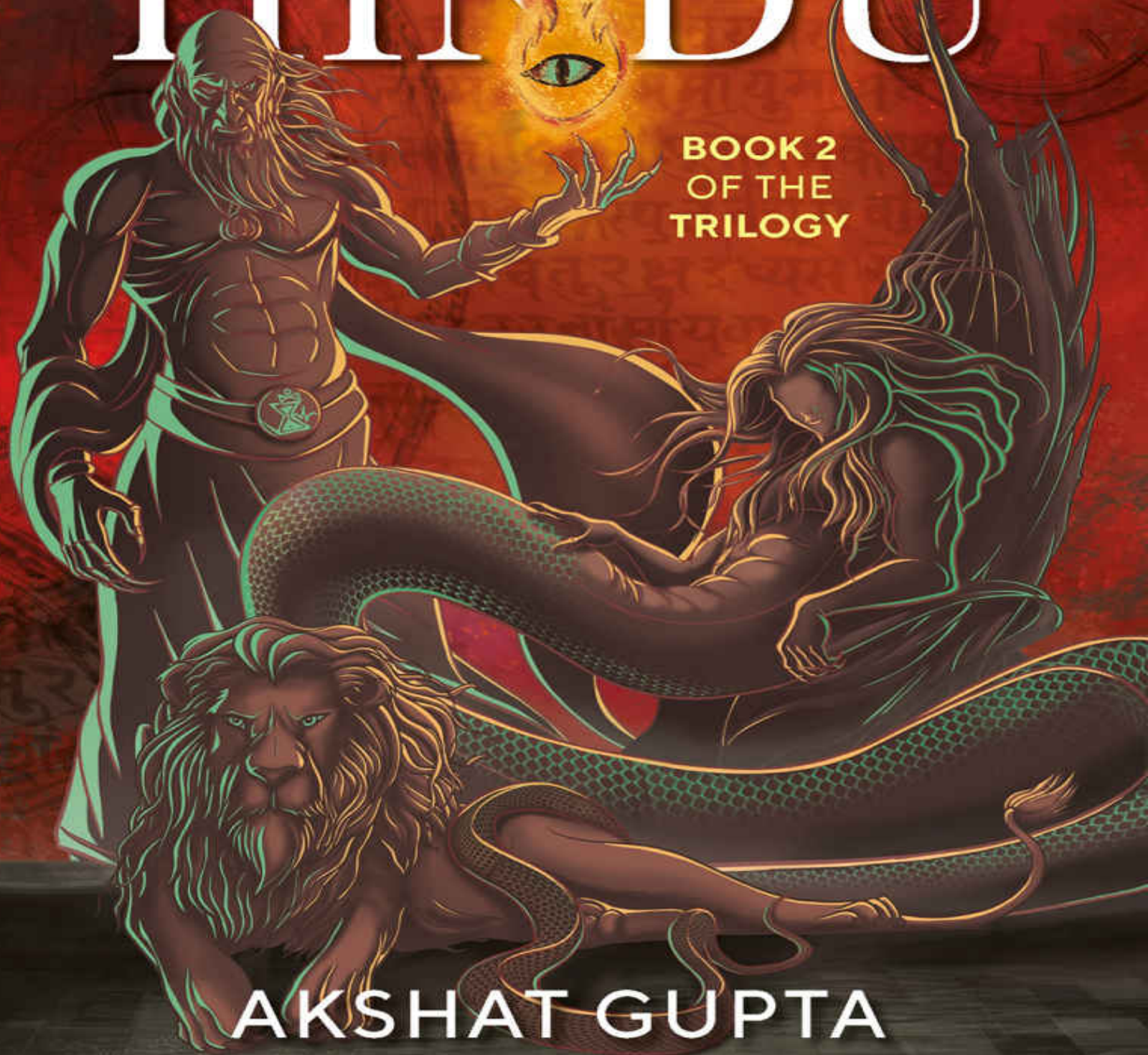




THE HIDDEN HINDU

BOOK 2
OF THE
TRILOGY



AKSHAT GUPTA



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AKSHAT GUPTA

THE HIDDEN HINDU 2

Book 2 of the Trilogy



PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE HIDDEN HINDU 2

Akshat Gupta belongs to a family of hoteliers and is now an established Bollywood screenwriter, poet and lyricist. He is a bilingual author and has been working on The Hidden Hindu trilogy for years. He was born in Chhattisgarh, grew up in Madhya Pradesh and now lives in Mumbai. You can connect with him on Instagram at **authorakshatgupta** or send him an email on akshat.gupta0204@gmail.com.

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Chapter 1

Land of the Extinct

Prithvi had been narrating the chronicles of Ross Island for quite some time. The kidnapping of Om for interrogation about the books of Mrit Sanjeevani, the uncovering of Om's past, the resurfacing of Ashwatthama and Parashurama, their rivalry with Nagendra, and the reality of Parimal and LSD, Nagendra's lieutenants, who had been hiding in the guises of an Indian history professor and a hacker, were already swarming Mrs Batra's head. While she struggled to absorb it all, Prithvi's new revelation raised more questions than it answered. Startled by Prithvi's claim that he was Om's son, Mrs Batra sat up in alarm and said, 'Om Shastri is *your father*?'

'Okay, I need a break,' she added distractedly. 'Do you want anything? You know what, I'll just heat up some soup quickly.'

'That would be great, thank you,' Prithvi smiled.

While Mrs Batra went about her tasks in the kitchen, Prithvi absorbed the surroundings. Her house was noticeably compact. The living room contained simple furniture, with the glass windows overlooking a small garden and veranda. There were two bedroom doors and another door leading to a descending staircase. Behind him was a wall exhibiting Mr Batra's achievements in the field of medicine. The framed photographs hinted that the couple had no children, that it was just the two of them. Prithvi's observations came to a halt when Mrs Batra entered with two bowls of steaming soup in her hands and a question on her mind.

'So, where were you after all of this unravelled at Ross Island?'

Prithvi thought for a moment as he blew on the steam and took a sip. 'It's a little complicated. I was 21,780 feet above and 25,938 feet below sea level, both at the same time. Where would you like to go first—above the mountains or beneath the ocean?'

Grimacing at the riddle, Mrs Batra said, 'Let's just start from the top.'

At 21,780 feet above sea level, Om was lying unconscious at an unfamiliar location. His senses were still tuning in when he heard a distant yell.

‘Hurry up! Ask him to come immediately.’

As if waking from a dream of the past, Om opened his eyes slowly. Encircling him were a few old men who were smiling down at him blissfully, none of whom he recognized, yet he felt oddly safe under their gaze. He got up gingerly and sat up straight on the thin jute mat under him. The mud-walled hut was freezing cold. The men around him were covered in brown woollen robes. Everyone was wearing the same clothes, and Om realized so was he. This must be a monastery, he assessed.

When he looked around, he was confronted with his own reflection in a mirror propped up in the corner. He did not see the usual matted dreadlocks on his head or the uneven, ruffled moustache and beard on his face. Instead, he saw trimmed hair and a shaved face that drew more attention to his features: the bare cheeks and lipline, the forehead, the eyes—he had been given a complete makeover.

Om peeked outside the small window with wooden grills and saw tiny snowflakes falling softly and mingling with the bright white blanket that covered the land as far as he could see. Suddenly, a wave of *déjà vu* washed over him. Waking up in a hut, being greeted by unknown faces, the snowfall outside—everything added up to remind him of the time he had first met Dhanvantari and Sushruta . . . Om’s first memory. Although that was aeons ago, one thing still remained unchanged—he still had no idea about his identity before he became Mrityunjay.

He stood up, removing the blanket, and questioned the old men around him while walking towards the door. ‘Where am I? Who is it that has been called for me?’ While questioning the strangers, he wondered who they were, but before he could speculate in his head, his thoughts were interrupted by a strong, booming voice, a voice that had become familiar to Om only recently.

‘They called me,’ the voice, belonging to one of the mightiest combatants of all eras, answered. Ashwatthama, the cursed immortal, followed. Om had met him before losing consciousness on Ross Island, where Ashwatthama had been in advanced battle gear. Here, he was dressed simply in the same robes as Om and everyone else. Here, there were no differences; every soul

was equal, and an unspoken sense of peace and mutual respect prevailed. All the old men bowed their heads in respect as Ashwatthama walked past them. He reciprocated in the same manner. He gradually closed in to see Om's bullet wound, but it was not to be found. The injury had miraculously healed without leaving any discernible scar. Ashwatthama seemed to have been expecting it and looked back up at Om's face, but Om already had other questions.

‘This place seems familiar ... Where am I?’

Ashwatthama smiled. ‘Yes, you have been here before. As the guardian of Mrit Sanjeevani, you had wandered in the Himalayas for nearly nine years after your reawakening. This is very close to your first home, the residence of Dhanvantari and Sushruta, the place you were resurrected.’

Om was shaken to his core when he heard Ashwatthama utter those words. Deep down, he had yearned for this answer, but he still had not braced himself for it. At last, the place that always evaded him had been found, putting his search over all those centuries to rest. His mind raced with a thousand questions, and he did not know how to react. Om gathered himself and finally spoke up.

‘So, we are in the Himalayan range! I could never find this place. Which mountain is this?’

Ashwatthama answered with a recitation of reverence.

Om grasped that the Awadhi verse was hinting towards the pious mountain he was standing on. He joined his hands, looked up in awe and said, ‘Mount Kailash! The abode of Lord Shiva, the centre of the universe, the navel of the realm, the pillar of the world, the Swastika Mountain, the “Precious Jewel of Snow” in Tibetan; all these names belong to one of the most enigmatic and holy mountains in the world—Kailash Parbat.’

‘Yes, Kailash Parbat,’ nodded Ashwatthama.

Hoping to gain more clarity, Om continued. ‘I have come to Kailash before but have never found my home.’

‘I know,’ Ashwatthama said confidently, which brought Om to his next question, ‘Why couldn’t I?’

‘So far, no one has been successful in climbing the revered Mount Kailash and neither will they ever. Numerous expeditions have failed to

reach its summit; the mountain mysteriously changes the direction of its tracks for those who want to climb it. It is believed to be the axis mundi, literally, the “axis” of the world, which provides a connection between earth, heaven and hell, between the physical and the spiritual worlds—’

Om chimed in, ‘Yes, I know that the abode of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati in the majestic Mount Kailash has been a point of fascination for pilgrims for millennia. This is the celestial centre of the world, where heaven intersects the earth, and is considered holy by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. These fascinating ranges are also home to 500 souls, as some saints believe, and only when a resident soul wishes for moksha (salvation), can another soul dwell here.’

‘Yes, and some of those sacred souls are standing with you right now,’ replied Ashwatthama, affirming what Om thought was just a myth.

Om took another long look at the cluster of ascetics and noticed the calm smiles adorning their faces.

‘These widely believed fables are all actually true. This place is Gyanganj, the city of the extinct,’ Ashwatthama confirmed.

Om’s thoughts were flying a mile a minute. It was impossible for him to stay composed, and he interrupted Ashwatthama yet again.

‘Gyanganj is often revered as a legendary prehistoric Indian and Tibetan city, a kingdom of enigmatic eternal beings, well-concealed from the world. Despite existing in the deeper crevices of the Himalayas, it has an influence over mankind in several stealthy ways. This is the place where sages formulate the evolution of not only the human race but of all conscious beings.’

‘It is often addressed with various names like Shangri-La and Siddhashram. This is the holy realm that drafts the destiny of all. No one can access Gyanganj unless they have a karmic connection with it,’ Ashwatthama added.

Om was not done yet; he was bursting with unanswered queries. ‘Is it true that there is no death here and the consciousness always remains alive?’

Ashwatthama uttered the exact words Om had been waiting to hear his entire life. ‘As I said, all myths that you have ever heard about this place are true. Om, you are finally amid the clan you were searching for.’

‘But why couldn’t I find it all these years?’

Ashwatthama guided Om out of the cottage as he began explaining the elusive nature of Gyanganj.

‘Our city is embedded with a spiritual camouflage and exists in a completely different plane of reality, a dimension of manifestation, which is why it has managed to stay hidden from modern mapping techniques, various technologies and satellites.’

Catching up with Ashwatthama, Om let the mystical place engulf him as he experienced a divine and powerful silence. Passing the southern edge of the mountain, he happened to look down from the cliff and couldn’t help but stop at the mesmerizing sight before him. Ashwatthama glanced back to find Om standing transfixed and followed his gaze.

‘That’s Lake Mansarovar. It was first conceived in the mind of Brahma, after which it manifested here on earth,’ Ashwatthama explained as Om’s eyes took in the ethereal beauty; his face lit up with awe as sunlight bounced off the surface of the water, giving the lake a holy glow. The water was mostly tranquil, but still held a hint of chaos with tiny ripples embellishing its serenity. The deep blue sitting in the middle of those snow-capped peaks was one of the best scenes Brahma had painted for earth.

‘It’s . . . beautiful,’ Om managed to muster something despite the indescribable scene overwhelming his senses.

‘Come, we have another place to be,’ Ashwatthama pulled Om out of his reverie.

After a short walk, they came upon the entrance of a cave. The opening led them into a tunnel which they could easily navigate because of the presence of a bright natural glow. Om was a little baffled to see this light because the top of the tunnel was sealed, and the source was untraceable. The tunnel continued to expand as they walked further. On the other side, there was a grand opening. When they stepped out, it was dusk. Om turned around to see that the tunnel’s interior was still brightly lit. Maybe these are two different time zones, he speculated.

Om turned again towards Ashwatthama and found him on his knees, praying, his head bowed and hands joined in front of a flat rock platform. The platform was covered entirely with tiger skin that still had a ferocious feline head attached to it. Beside it hovered a transcendental, brilliantly carved, enormous trident, defying the laws of gravity. A 40-feet-long snake guarded the majestic trident. The whole set-up was no different from the

depictions of Lord Shiva meditating in popular portraits. Om always supposed that these ideas must have been fragments of the imagination of Lord Shiva's devotees, but he was wrong. They were all authentic. Now that he stood there, he could observe that the illustrations he had admired throughout the yugas were actually exact depictions of Shiva's home; the only difference between those portraits and reality now was the absence of Lord Shiva himself.

Om waited for Ashwatthama to finish his obeisance before he could confirm if this place was truly the one he was compelled to believe it was. It seemed so surreal to find himself in the lap of forces mightier than him—the forces of creation, destruction and transformation, which jointly sustained the universe. He could feel the sublime beauty pass through him in waves, charging the very fabric of his being, and subsequently the whole of Gyanganj.

Om was snapped out of this trance by a peculiar sound. He turned around to find that it came from a flightless bird that fluttered its brownish-grey plumage, tapped its yellow feet, and had a tuft of tail feathers, a grey, naked head, and a black beak. The bird was about one metre tall, and judging from its gait, Om could deduce that it weighed approximately 15 kg. It seemed to be the bird whose last confirmed sighting on earth was in the year 1662.

'Dodo!' he let out a loud whisper.

The bird immediately noticed the unfamiliar man staring at it and waddled further into the shrubs. Om found Ashwatthama still on his knees with his eyes closed, so he decided to take a closer look at the bird, which had disappeared centuries ago and was declared extinct.

Having encountered numerous beasts and birds during his prolonged lifetime, Om had become adept at identifying and responding to other creatures around him. He tiptoed in the direction of the bird and stood near the bushes it had disappeared into. There, he discovered another large and flightless bird about two and a half feet tall. It trotted about with its black back and a white belly, looking almost weighed down by a heavy black beak with grooves on its surface. A white band stretching between the eyes almost made the avian appear blind, but a keener look showed the glimmering beads of tiny black eyes. The wings appeared only around 15 cm long, rendering the bird flightless. It was another extinct species of bird, sighted last in 1852, called the great auk. Great auks were gifted swimmers,

which made them impeccable hunters underwater. Like the dodo, it, too, sensed Om's scrutinizing gaze and sauntered away.

Spotting two extinct species in a matter of minutes added to Om's increasing astonishment and so he let his curiosity drive him to tail the bird. When the great auk dove down a cliff, Om came to an abrupt halt at the unexpected land's end. At the edge, a lake appeared out of nowhere. He took cautious steps towards it. The lake looked like a perfectly flat disc of metal. It was exceptionally serene due to the shimmering vacant space around it. The placid spectacle took Om's breath away. The heaven-leaking light added a golden tint to the face of the lake. Om felt heaven on earth, though he was not sure if he was still on earth or not. Maybe it was true. *Maybe Kailash Parbat was indeed the only connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.* Om was startled at his own epiphany. He had never experienced such potent tranquillity and beauty before. He closed his eyes to let the stillness of the surroundings settle on him, but at that exact second, something disrupted the restful water, making him snap his eyes open. The movement was relatively close to him. The metal disc appeared to be melting when a gigantic creature, more than 40 feet long, that seemed to weigh tons, surfaced from the water. It was Steller's sea cow, another extinct herbivorous mammal. The last recorded Steller's sea cow had been sighted at the end of the seventeenth century!

Before Om could register the odd sightings of fauna that had disappeared from the rest of the world, he noticed that the sea cow was casually accompanied by a group of 20-feet-long baiji white dolphins, also known as the Chinese river dolphins, lapping towards the shore. As per Om's knowledge, these creatures had been officially declared extinct in 2002. As his eyes followed the dolphins near the shore, he spotted a towering Cry violet plant, with thick, light green leaves and light violet flowers. This beautiful species had last been sighted in the fifties. Om was again engrossed in the scene, but the silence didn't last long.

Suddenly, dry leaves crunched behind him, and Om turned towards the sound, which was coming from some distant shrubs. The shrubs were *Coffea lemlinii*, tall with white blossoms and a peeling, papery bark. They were last seen in 1907. He walked a few steps towards the bushes, expecting the dodo or the great auk to be behind them, but he held his steps in a heartbeat once he realized that what he beheld was no flightless bird,

but a carnivorous creature which was almost twice the size of a lion and lived 11,700 years ago. It was the splendid savage, the sabre-toothed tiger. Om realized he had become a prey to the beast that could easily tear apart, and there was little distance between them. The predator could already smell his fear and hear his heart pounding due to the adrenaline coursing through him; all that was left for the beast to do was to pounce and devour. It was now time for the anticipated attack. Om knew this was an inescapable ground he was standing on; how could he possibly outrun this naturally skilled beast in this vast terrain? He was stumped. His legs felt glued to the earth. That's when the beast did what it knew best—attack. The distance between them diminished in no time as it rushed towards Om with its heavy and bulky paws, releasing sharp nails and an open maw. The roar that rumbled from the beast, the loudest Om had heard in ages, travelled down Om's spine, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. It was now a matter of seconds before Om would experience excruciating pain that would be enough to kill a mortal. The beast took its final step before leaping on its prey. Om's survival instincts loosened the grip of his feet on the earth and he knew he had to defend himself no matter what.

The two collided in wild fury; the sabretooth dominating Om with swipes and lashes and Om using all the combat skills learnt over the ages to get out of the fight alive. He knew that he wouldn't last long but just then, an apish entity, taller than an average human, came like thunder from the skies between the predator and the prey. The sabretooth collided with the new entrant, and the impact threw both the beast and the apish man a little distance from each other on the ground. The new fighter was apparently guarding Om, the way he bounced back on his feet before the sabretooth did. What Om witnessed next was a little hard to believe even for a man like him. The beast started falling back as the apish man advanced towards it. He walked very much like a human and despite his ape-like features, he held himself admirably, without any awkward movements. Because of him, the beast went back into the bushes and Om was safe. The saviour turned towards Om, who could now take a better look at his features. He was a monkey-headed human being with a monkey fur tail. He closely resembled Lord Hanuman, but it wasn't him. Om could tell the difference because he had met Lord Hanuman in the Ramayana era as Sushen, who had suggested Sanjeevani *buti* to save Laxman's life.

‘Here you are!’ exclaimed the heavy voice of the cursed immortal, bringing Om out of the bizarre experience of the hidden city inside the world-famous Mount Kailash. Om turned around and found Ashwatthama smiling, looking at the monkey man. The monkey man approached Ashwatthama and greeted him by bowing low with his hands joined in respect.

‘These are all officially declared extinct!’ Om blurted out in wonder.

‘Yes! That is why they are preserved here, every last one of them.’ Ashwatthama picked up a stray twig from the ground. ‘Our timeline starts from Satya yuga, here,’ he explained as he made a small inscription on a muddy patch. ‘Then comes Treta yuga,’ he drew a diagonal line from left to right, ‘which is followed by Dwapara yuga.’ He dragged the end of that diagonal upwards, drawing a straight line without lifting the twig. ‘And then Kali yuga.’ From there, he drew another diagonal from right to left. ‘Once this Kali yuga ends, all this flora and fauna will restart the next Satya yuga.’ He drew a final straight line, connecting it to the starting point. ‘And so the cycle continues repeating itself.’ As he said this, he ran the stick through the diagram repeatedly, making the strokes deeper. It was an infinity symbol.

Om looked all around him and found more such wiped-out species—a small bush of *Acalypha wilderi*, declared extinct in 2014, beside a *Sigillaria* tree growing tall, which had existed 383 million years ago. A West African black rhinoceros, weighing 1.5–2 tons and bearing two horns, last seen in Cameroon in 2006 and declared officially extinct in 2011. The Pyrenean ibex, that fed mainly on grasses and herbs, the last of its kind killed in 2000. Om found himself standing amid the most flourishing natural habitat, surrounded by every extinct animal and bird that had once inhabited this earth.

Ashwatthama started heading back to where Om had entered the habitation. While Om and the ape man followed him, Ashwatthama spoke to Om.

‘Om, this is Vrishkapi. He is the last of his clan, called Kimpurusha or Kapi.’

‘Kapi!’ repeated Om.

As if on cue, the huge monkey man roared,

‘

’

The ape man spoke in a voice heavier than a man’s bass. He continued, ‘I am the last of the Kapi species mentioned in the first lines of the Hanuman Chalisa and—’

‘And also the guardian of this territory of our city,’ completed Ashwatthama, with a smile reciprocated by the Kapi.

‘Thank you for protecting me, Vrishkapi. I wasn’t sure if I would make it,’ Om said humbly.

‘That was just my Cutie. He likes hunting. I just conveyed to him that you’re off limits,’ said Vrishkapi with an innocent smile.

‘You call that giant Cutie?’ Om raised his brows, tickled by the nickname.

‘Vrishkapi is very creative with names,’ explained Ashwatthama with a chuckle.

‘And who are you? What are you doing here?’ Kapi turned to Om.

‘I ... I am ... trying to figure that out,’ stuttered a confused Om.

When Ashwatthama stepped into the tunnel, he walked out of the dusky sky into ample sunshine in a mere step. For a moment, it seemed there really were different time zones—hardly a few metres of distance had managed to create a stark difference in time perception. It appeared as if there was a transparent wall between Om and Ashwatthama, which was demarcating the territories of sun and moon, day and night, reality and dream. Vrishkapi stood at the invisible boundary and waved goodbye to both of them. He noticed a movement on his right side and shouted at the dodo, ‘Tara! I have told you several times not to walk on this side.’

In no time, Ashwatthama and Om were back at the vacant stone platform. Om took this opportunity to ask another question.

‘You mentioned my first home, the abode of Dhanvantari. How did you know that I lived here in the Himalayas?’

‘We didn’t know about your existence till we met him who knew everything about you.’

Om stood clueless as he did not know whom Ashwatthama was referring to. Noticing the anxiety on his face, Ashwatthama asked, ‘Would you like to meet him?’

At 21,780 feet above sea level, Om was not the only curious man in search of answers. There were questions being raised at a distance of approximately 2772 km from Kailash Parbat, 25,938 feet below sea level too. Nagendra glared at both the books of Mrit Sanjeevani open on his lap. He had achieved what he wanted, the secret to immortality, but he still lacked one crucial element—a sample of Om's blood. Without that, his plans were in vain. He slapped the books shut in a loud thud. Behind him, Parimal and LSD flinched as they watched the enraged Nagendra scowl, and wondered what he had in mind next.

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Chapter 2

Legends of the Past

At 10°N 90°E, around 560 km from Indira Point (the southernmost part of India's territory), a humongous submarine manoeuvred its way through the depths of the ocean. The submarine was almost two football fields long and as wide as a three-lane highway. Two steam turbines producing 50,000 horsepower and four 3200 kW turbo generators provided a sailing speed of 41.1144 kmph on the surface and 53.708 kmph underwater. This intimidating vessel was maintained and run by a crew of about 100, who worked in shifts.

In the common lobby of the submarine, Nagendra was busy plotting a new plan with Parimal and LSD.

‘Set course for the shore closest to Kailash Parbat,’ Nagendra ordered composedly. He stood up and briskly started walking towards his chamber, indicating that their short meeting was over. Parimal and LSD followed and made their way to the command centre. They would have to determine the shortest route to Digha beach from their present location while evading the Indian Navy.

The spontaneous change of route caused a stir of anxiousness within Parimal, which became evident as he spoke. ‘Climbing Mount Kailash is forbidden. According to legends and writings, no mortal can summit Mount Kailash, where, among the clouds, is the abode of the gods. He who dares to start the journey towards the top of the mountain and see the faces of the gods will plummet to death! It is said that the only person to have ever been atop the sacred mountain was Milarepa, and—’

‘Do not speak of that scoundrel in front of me ever again!’ Nagendra's thundering objection to the mention of Milarepa interrupted the rant. Parimal shivered in fear and so did LSD.

Nagendra halted abruptly in the lobby before a watertight door made of heavy metal and secured with a sturdy lock. A white signboard spelling

‘Restricted’ in bold red made it clear that no other person on the ship was allowed to access the door. The upper part of the door had some mystical symbols and letters engraved on it, as if derived from an ancient language. As Nagendra’s arm moved closer to open it, LSD and Parimal shared a look before taking a deep breath, bracing themselves for what was coming. An extraordinary and dominant force field radiated from the restricted chamber and the space around them warped as the door was unbolted. An invisible energy entwined them like the roots of an old tree. Their shoulders felt the weight of the entire ocean on them and a waterfall of tears rolled down their cheeks. The network of blood vessels became etched on the interiors of their skin, appearing thick and webby on the exterior, as if they could burst at any moment, while blood poured out of their nostrils and ears. They stood stunned, with their eyes wide open, like souls trapped in statues, and could feel their hearts hammering against their ribcages. The blood flow in their veins outran the speed of the submarine.

Right before closing the door, Nagendra’s brows furrowed as he raised his voice, ‘I said take me to the closest shore to Kailash Parbat, not to Kailash Parbat.’

The door was finally shut, and the spell was broken. Parimal and LSD stood there disoriented while the door was bolted from the inside. LSD was sweating profusely. She wiped her face with her shaking palm and turned towards Parimal, who had trails of blood going down from his nose and ears, and drops falling on his shirt. LSD frantically took a big tuft of cotton and helped him wipe the blood off. Parimal held another piece of cloth to his nose to stop the bleeding.

After making sure that Parimal was stable, LSD broke the silence. ‘So, tell me more about Mount Kailash.’

Parimal still held the cloth, which was now partially soaked in crimson, to his nose and continued to narrate in a hushed voice, ‘Mount Kailash is known as axis mundi, or the axis of the earth suspended between the celestial poles. The ecosystem naturally regulates itself to create a habitable environment for all living beings. Pilgrims and others who visit the area around the mountain have reported a rapid growth of hair and nails within a span of twelve hours, growth which would usually take two weeks under normal conditions. Even while in the mountain’s vicinity, time travels

faster; something which is not witnessed anywhere else in the world. The mountain has air that causes accelerated ageing.'

The nosebleed subsided and Parimal discarded the cloth carelessly before opening his laptop. He continued to speak, 'Another profound mystery of Mount Kailash is its geographical position with respect to the earth's poles and other ancient monuments. It cannot be a coincidence that the distance from Mount Kailash to the North Pole is 6666 km, and 13,332 km to the South Pole, which is exactly twice the distance to the North Pole, for some inexplicable reason. Mysteriously, the distance between the Egyptian pyramids and the North Pole is also 6666 km.'

Parimal flipped his laptop towards LSD. 'Look at this.'

LSD was astounded to read what was on the screen.

Kailash Parbat to North Pole: 6666 km

Kailash Parbat to Stonehenge: 6666 km

Stonehenge to Devils Tower: 6666 km

Stonehenge to Bermuda Triangle: 6666 km

Bermuda Triangle to Easter Island: 6666 km

Easter Island to Tazumal: 6666 km

As LSD stared at the numbers in disbelief, Parimal continued to chant everything he knew about the cryptic mountain, 'The highest peak of the world, Mount Everest, is 29,029 feet high and yet its summit has been scaled by more than 4000 people. Mount Kailash is almost 21,780 feet high, which is 7251 feet less than Mount Everest, yet numerous expeditions have failed at climbing the mountain. Even with several extensive studies and theories, it is believed that no one could comprehend the true reason why Mount Kailash cannot be ascended, why many attempted and failed despite it being a fairly scalable height for proficient mountaineers. I guess some mysteries are better left unsolved, no matter how intimidating they seem or how elaborate their history has been. There are legends about a Tibetan named Milarepa being the only human being who scaled the peak of Mount Kailash over 900 years ago.'

The submarine progressed towards 21.42°N 87.30°E, coordinates for Digha beach in West Bengal, the coast closest to Kailash Parbat. Parimal,

being a historian by nature, also set sail to a narrative dating back almost a millennium in time.

‘The life of Milarepa is one of Tibet’s most treasured legends. Preserved orally for centuries, we cannot know how much of the story is factually true. Even so, through the ages, Milarepa’s life instances have continued to teach and inspire incalculable numbers of Buddhists. This chronicle of Tibet’s greatest mystic is a saga of greed, vengeance, demons, magic, murder and restoration.

‘Milarepa was born in 1052 AD in the village of Kya Ngatsa, a province of western Tibet. He was named Mila Thopaga, which means “a joy to hear”. His family was a prosperous one and his family name, Josay, indicated noble descent from the Eagle clan. Thopaga and his little sister were cherished by the villagers. Eventually, his father grew very ill and realized he was dying. Calling his extended family to his deathbed, Thopaga’s father directed that his estate be cared for by his brother and sister until Milarepa came of age and got married. But as soon as he died, Milarepa’s aunt and uncle betrayed their brother’s trust without a second thought. They divided the property between themselves and disowned Thopaga along with his mother and sister.

‘Now outcasts, the little family lived in servant quarters. They were given meagre food and clothing and were made to labour in the fields. The children were malnourished, ragged and covered with lice. Those who once showered them with affection were now demeaning them with pleasure.

‘When Thopaga turned fifteen, his mother tried to reclaim his inheritance. With great effort, she scraped together every last bit of her paltry resources to prepare a feast for her extended family and former friends. When the guests had eaten, she stood up to speak. Holding her head high, she recalled exactly what her husband had said on his deathbed, and she demanded that Thopaga be given the inheritance his father had intended for him. But the covetous aunt and uncle blatantly lied that the estate actually never belonged to them, and so Thopaga had nothing to claim. They forced the mother and children out of the servant quarters and into the streets. The family resorted to begging and odd jobs to stay alive.

‘The mother had shot for the stars for her Thopaga and lost even the broken roof protecting them. Now she seethed with hatred for her husband’s

family and urged her son to study sorcery. “I will kill myself before your eyes,” she told him, “if you do not attain vengeance.”

‘Compelled by his mother’s vengeful entreaty, Thopaga found a sorcerer, a just man who had mastered the black arts, and became his apprentice. Initially, the sorcerer taught him only ineffectual charms, but once he learnt about and verified the injustice done to Thopaga, he diligently passed over to him all his knowledge of secret powerful spells and rituals.

‘Thopaga spent a fortnight in an underground cell, practising his lessons in dark magic. When his brief hibernation ended, he learnt that a house had collapsed on his extended family while they were gathered at a wedding. The rubble crushed everyone to death except the greedy pair. Thopaga deemed it fair that they survived the disaster, as it now gave him a chance to make them confront the ultimate consequence written by their own avarice.

‘His mother gave him the perfect plan. She wrote to her son and demanded that he destroy their crops as well. Thopaga hid in the mountains overlooking his hometown and summoned monstrous hailstorms to demolish the barley crops.

‘The villagers suspected black magic and angrily stormed into the mountains to find the perpetrator. Still in hiding, Thopaga overheard them talking about the ruined crops. He realized then that he had harmed innocent people in the heat of revenge. Burning with guilt, he repented his actions, travelled in search of another teacher and eventually, his intuition led him to India.

‘No one knows what he did in India and whom he exactly met during those years. It is said that his skin had turned green from consuming only nettle soup. His austerity—dressing in a white cotton robe, irrespective of how harsh or gentle the weather would be—earned him the name Milarepa, which means “Mila the cotton-clad”.’

LSD couldn’t wait to tie the story together. ‘If the summit of Kailash Parbat is unattainable, how did he achieve the impossible?’

‘I don’t know, but it is believed that no one can access Kailash Parbat unless they have a karmic connection with it. Milarepa lamented his wicked past later in life.

‘According to the legend, this is what he had said, “In my youth, I committed black deeds. In maturity, I practised innocence. Now, released from both good and evil, I have destroyed the root of karmic action and

shall have no reason for action in the future. To say more than this would only cause weeping and laughter. What good would it do to tell? I am an old man. I want to be in peace.”

‘Maybe the secret behind sumitting Mount Kailash has something to do with these words,’ suggested LSD.

‘Yes, maybe . . . but what does Nagendra have to do with Milarepa?’ mumbled Parimal.

‘What? Did you say something?’ LSD asked, looking confused.

‘No! I wasn’t asking you. Anyway, as the tale goes, he died in 1135,’ Parimal sighed.

Confined inside a submarine, Parimal’s question about the relationship between Milarepa and Nagendra was unanswered, but back in Gyanganj, Om was about to decipher how Ashwatthama and Parashurama learnt of his existence. Ashwatthama took Om back to the hut he had woken up in. There stood a saint who had green skin and was clad in a white cotton robe.

‘Meet Milarepa,’ Ashwatthama gestured towards the man, introducing him to Om.

Milarepa, the man who had died in 1135, according to historians, was actually hale and hearty in the land of the extinct!

At this point, Om was ready to hear all about his forgotten identity before he had met Nagendra in the hut of the great Dhanvantari. Under water, Nagendra sat in his restricted chamber, anticipating the submarine’s arrival on Digha beach.

As Prithvi paused and took his last sip from the bowl, Mrs Batra noticed the cold bowl of soup sitting full in her hands. Placing it aside, she asserted, ‘There was a third place between the mountain peaks and the ocean bed where crucial discoveries were being made. Dr Tej Batra, my husband, had noticed something extremely unusual while examining Om’s blood sample, which he managed to sneak out when the facility on Ross Island was destroyed. Unlike ordinary blood, which has red and white blood cells, Om’s sample contained unique black blood cells speckled throughout his blood. Tej decided to put them through various tests in order to explore the strange discovery. According to his hypothesis on Ross Island, just like the doubling of lifespan in yeast and mice, Om’s genes might be altering themselves to counter ageing. As predicted, the black blood cells in the sample mutated and cleared the test of longevity.

‘To take it a step further, he mixed it with several infected blood samples. He tested it against *Salmonella typhi* (bacteria causing typhoid), *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Vibrio cholerae*, Ebola, influenza and so on. Tej was absolutely stupefied to see that Om’s blood cells were perfectly immune to all the pathogens, resulting in a blood rich with all sorts of antibodies.

‘The absurdity of the situation made it seem as though the black blood cells were mocking Tej and his competence. Instead of considering this revelation a boon disguised as an opportunity, he mistook it for a challenge. Before he knew it, Dr Tej was at an unsolicited war with the black blood cells and refused to give up. He subjected the blood to 2500°C, a temperature hot enough to melt iron, and recorded the effect on the sample. Strikingly, the black blood cells fused together to prepare a kind of insulation around the other blood cells and froze themselves to the exact opposite temperature at -2500°C, protecting them from the heat. Tej then subjected the sample to an extremely low temperature, only to find that the black blood cells banded again and worked the opposite way by heating themselves up, this time to neutralize the external conditions, hence keeping the red and white blood cells safe, just the way Parashurama and Ashwatthama were protecting Om. But what were Parashurama and Ashwatthama preparing Om for?’ an agitated Mrs Batra thought out loud.

‘For his own death,’ Prithvi shrugged.

Mrs Batra’s jaw dropped slightly at his nonchalance. But she knew that there were no simple answers. She would have to just sit back and wait for Prithvi to complete recollecting what he had seen, no matter how obscure it was to listen to a man speak of parallel events which he wasn’t even born to witness.

‘It was 3 a.m. when the submarine arrived at its destination,’ Prithvi resumed the narrative.

Digha beach was nearby, and so Parimal knocked on the watertight door of the restricted chamber. Nagendra was already prepared with a packed bag and a round metal bottle hanging from his neck when he opened the door before the third knock. The same wrath followed him outside, bringing merciless pain to LSD and Parimal again. The pain was so excruciating that a crew member crossing the lobby at that unfortunate moment turned to pulp and died immediately.

An unfazed Nagendra shoved the pile of death inside the chamber with a swift foot and shut the door, relieving the other two survivors from their terrorized form.

The submarine tore through the surface of the waters. Parimal's boat, which he had used at Ross Island, was employed again to drop the team off. Nagendra was the first one to set foot on the shore and started to march away like a horse with blinders, which had nothing but victory in its line of vision.

LSD looked back to check on Parimal, who was still unloading their bags from the boat. Looking at their tardiness, Nagendra yelled at them in his thundering yet ominous voice, 'It is a race against time. Time will not stop for me and I will not stop for anyone. I have only nine days to reach.'

'Where do we have to be in nine days?' LSD asked with a shaky voice as she jogged towards Nagendra to keep up.

Nagendra handed her a folded piece of an old, embossed paper.

By the time Parimal joined them, Nagendra had started walking again. LSD crouched and opened the paper to see it better. The piece of paper was ripped out of the books of Mrit Sanjeevani, depicting a sea at its right end, mountains on its top and a red line drawn between them. It was hard to tell which part of the world it was. Parimal read the confusion on LSD's face, picked up the glass shard of a broken liquor bottle near him and started to outline what could be around the torn part of this map. LSD decoded his strokes with a mystified look before Parimal stopped drawing altogether.

It couldn't be, Parimal thought. It was the map of India that the stray piece belonged to. That little piece was a depiction of the eastern coast of India at one end and the Himalayan range on the other. The red line, which ran from Digha beach to the foothills of the mysterious Mount Kailash, was the route they were to trek in the next nine days. Still concerned by the incomplete knowledge of where they were headed to, Parimal and LSD spotted Nagendra, who had already covered a lot of distance. LSD tucked the map safely in her bag and they scurried to catch up with Nagendra.



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Chapter 3

Nanshaad

Meanwhile, up on Kailash Parbat, Om was eager to know more about the legendary Milarepa, and so he asked, ‘I have heard and read so much about you. Some stories say that you eventually retreated to dwelling in caves, but that’s speculation and not the whole truth, isn’t it? But firstly, how do you know about me?’

Milarepa looked at Ashwatthama as if seeking his approval and Ashwatthama nodded reassuringly.

‘Let me take you back to the beginning. In my younger days, fuelled by pure vengeance, I destroyed many lives. I left home on my mother’s request and studied sorcery to channel my hatred. My mother passed away, but I continued with my revenge, assuming that’s what dutiful sons do—they avenge their mother’s suffering. Numerous innocent souls had to bear the brunt of my violence.

‘In my years of retreat, I repented my actions and became a student of Marpa, the translator. Before Marpa accepted me, I had to endure a great deal of arduous labour performing tasks he had devised. On his orders, I would start building a tower but halfway through, he would ask me to tear it down and start from scratch. This happened again and again. I would erect the column, only to raze it to the ground. After the third round of building and demolition, I was asked to construct a final multistorey tower at Se village in Lhodrag, Tibet, which still stands.

‘Eventually, Marpa accepted me as his disciple. He explained that the construction and destruction was a way for me to atone for my negative karma. Even though I understood that, I always wondered why it was always towers that he had me build. It was only when I came to India that I got my answer. Back then, though, the territory that constituted India was very different from what it is now . . .

‘Marpa taught me everything he knew and when his lessons ended, he took me to his teacher, Naropa, who was born in an upper-class Brahmin household in Bengal. This brought me to India for the first time. Many scholars of various ages were practising Sutra^{*} and Tantra,[†] like me. Upon the completion of Naropa’s teachings, it was time to leave. I was uncertain about how to proceed further so I posed my dilemma to him.

“I am grateful for your guidance, but I still don’t see my true purpose,” I said to Naropa.

“I have taught you everything I could. Now it is time you set out to find your own path again. You must journey through India to find a man named Nanshaad () and seek his counsel,” he said.

‘I bade him farewell and embarked on my odyssey through India. After wandering for a few years in the quest for Nanshaad, I arrived at a city named Saket, which means heaven in Sanskrit. It was known as the land of Lord Ram and is presently called Ayodhya. There, I finally learnt the whereabouts of Nanshaad. I was directed to a village he resided in, approximately 640 km from Ayodhya, which is modern-day Bisrakh. After an exhausting journey over several days, I finally reached Bisrakh, brimming with hope.

‘At the village’s entrance, the first person I came across was an old man who was working on the construction of an unfinished building. I went ahead and asked him, “Do you know who Nanshaad is around here?”

‘He eyed me strangely before picking up a dry leaf off the ground and talking to it. I repeated my question, in case he hadn’t heard me properly the first time, but he dismissed me rudely and then continued talking to the dry leaf in his hand! I looked around to see if there was anyone else who could help me out, but it was just him with his half-built structure, and so I walked on to continue my search.

‘For the next three days, I asked the natives about the man who had me tracing the country for him. It was a small hamlet, so I made sure I tried my luck everywhere. But to my grave disappointment, not a single soul knew anything about Nanshaad. With no other option left, I decided to return to Tibet with a heavy heart.

‘On my way back, I passed the same old man who was still busy working on the incomplete structure. The villagers informed me that he was the sole

labourer of whatever was standing of the structure. Given his shrivelled state, it was clear that death could come knocking at his doorstep any moment. I pitied him. I had become fairly adept at building towers for Marpa, and I was also at the dead end of my quest for Nanshaad. Considering the building's completion to be the old man's last wish, I decided to help him finish the construction.

'I offered him my help, but he refused bluntly. I assured him that I didn't want anything in return. His age and fragility made me wonder how he had the kind of grit and motivation to build anything at that point in his life. To take the conversation forward, I asked him casually whom he was building it for.

'He suddenly turned towards me and asked, "Whom do you plan to do it for? For yourself or for me?"

'I wasn't prepared for that question at all. I stood there speechless, trying to find the answer for my own sake rather than for the satisfaction of a response. Before offering him my service, I really hadn't thought about my motivation for it. The old man stared at my brooding face for some time and then set a condition—as if I needed his help more than he needed mine! He said that I would not question him about anything until I finished. I agreed.

'*Whom was I doing it for?* This question became the reason for me to finish the structure without any questioning. I accepted his condition, and he accepted my offer.

'As I stepped inside, the old man called out for someone named Malti. In there was a large door made out of stone. It was shut, so I assumed that Malti would walk out from there, but then I heard him say, "There you are. Come here."

'I followed his gaze to see where Malti was. All I could see was a dead leaf on the ground. He was smiling down at it . . . and the dead leaf fluttered up to sit on his palm! That's when I realized it was actually a butterfly that looked like a dry leaf when its wings were at rest.

"Meet Malti," he said.

"How did you manage to tame a wild butterfly?" I asked, intrigued by what had just happened.

'The grave stare from his hollow eyes was enough to remind me of the condition we had just agreed upon; there was no scope for any questions.

He then pointed towards the huge stone door and said, “You are not allowed to walk inside that room. Don’t even try it. Malti, keep an eye on him.”

‘All set for work, I started the construction the next morning.

‘The next few months, we worked in silence. His bitterness remained a constant until the last day. He never talked to me. Every day, he would open the door just enough to get in and stay locked away for six hours after sunset. Meanwhile, I would cook for both of us and carry on with my meditation and regular practices. Malti would always sit on a specific damp spot on the wall, facing me. I tried to befriend her, but she never budged. It sometimes felt as if she was genuinely following orders and keeping an eye on me when the old man was not around.

‘Malti would be on the lookout diligently every day until one unpleasant morning when I woke up to see that she was dying. It was evident that those were her last few hours. I was feeling the loss already, but the old man remained inexpressive and unbothered. He was occupied trying to capture a lizard on the wall and needed an insect to lure it. The next thing I knew, he picked up the dying Malti and used her as bait. That heartless bastard! Pardon my language, but it was just infuriating. As the lizard inched closer to Malti, she turned towards me, and I imagined her vulnerability. In the blink of an eye, the lizard gulped Malti alive. Her dead-leaf wings fell on the ground and the lizard chewed up her remnants while the old man watched the gruesome scene with much excitement. He carefully took the lizard off the wall and began walking towards his room. When he looked back at me, his eyes were twinkling as he cupped the reptile in his palms. “She is pregnant. Her offspring will be my next pet,” he said, walking like a mischievous child back to the forbidden room, and locking himself in again.

‘Malti’s isolated wings blew with the wind as dry leaves usually do. I was dejected. But more than that, I was curious to know what exactly he did behind that door. But questioning him was forbidden. I had sweated with him for several months, yet he had not even bothered to ask me my name. Regardless, I continued my work as promised. A few days later, he came up to me with a tiny lizard on his palm. It was a male lizard this time, which had never seen its mother because he had killed her along with the rest of her litter and eaten them. He named his new pet Kark. A couple of weeks passed by and Kark became the new resident of Malti’s damp spot, keeping an eye on me in the old man’s absence.

‘In the following six months, I built the pillars of the veranda, the central structure over the roof, and the passages on the sides. At some point during the construction I began to apprehend that this was no ordinary building; it had a special purpose. Given the old man’s frail physique, I suspected that I would never learn his true intentions—his cremation might just predate the construction’s completion! During those months, I also witnessed many other sorcerers and yogis come to Bistrakh in search of Nanshaad. The old man ignored all their enquiries as he had ignored mine and I gave the same answer to all of them, that there was no such man in the village. Days turned into nights and after a whole year, the construction was finally complete. That day, I finally realized that the structure was actually a shrine for some deity. The external architecture suggested that the forbidden room was actually the sanctum, and its design was unlike that of any other Hindu temple I had seen or heard of before. That night, I stayed up late to clean the place while the old man remained locked in as usual.

‘It had been only a few years since I had moved to India from Tibet, and I was still in the process of learning about its colossal culture and religions. I learnt that in Hindu rituals, the ceremony of establishing the deity’s idol in the temple is called *sthaapana*, which was going to take place the next day.

‘It was dawn. The old man woke me up and asked me to leave instantly as my work was finished. I realized that I was no longer bound by his condition of not asking any questions. Recalling the question he had asked me in the beginning, I finally answered him. “You asked me who I was doing it for, remember? I did not know which god this shrine was being erected for, so I didn’t do it for divinity. After leaving this place, I will be moving on with my life, so I certainly did not do it for myself. That leaves you, so I built this for you.”

‘Eyeing the heavy stone door, I asked, “Who did *you* build this for?”

“I ask you a single question but you seek two answers. I shall answer only one, after which you must leave. Decide for yourself which question is more significant to you,” replied the rude and stubborn old man.

‘But I had asked him just one question, so I was confused. I wanted to ask him what the other one was, but given his curt demeanour, I knew that I would be left with both my queries and zero answers.

“Hurry up! I have to initiate the proceedings of *sthaapana*. I don’t have all day for you to respond,” the old man was losing patience.

‘Before I could respond, a wandering scholar stopped by and asked him, “Do you know who Nanshaad is here?”

‘I looked at the old man with startling realization—that was what he meant by *two* questions! The scholar waited for a few moments but when he got no response, he walked to the other side to ask someone else. I decided to take my chance.

“Answer my first question,” I said with wide, hopeful eyes.

‘Kark climbed on him and sat on his shoulder. He looked at Kark, caressed him under his chin and sighed, “I am the name which brought you all the way to Bisrakh. I am Nanshaad!”

‘And then he retreated to the forbidden room, leaving me baffled, with my eyes fixed on him. I had been working the entire year for the man I came in search of, without knowing that he was indeed the one.

‘Dawn changed to dusk and soon, the stars came out. I simply sat there, waiting for him to come out. Never before that day had Nanshaad stayed indoors for that long. Long past midnight, he finally emerged and found me standing right where he had left me, with no trace of surprise in his expression. He went back inside, leaving the door open. For the first time in a year, I took a glimpse inside. An incredible force of energy radiating from the sanctum engulfed me. After several years, I felt the same level of malice and hatred coursing through me, but this time the fury was accompanied by immense strength. I was absorbing so much power that I started bleeding from my nostrils. Within a few moments, my consciousness left my body and I dropped down on the ground. The last thing I saw before my eyes shut completely was a hazy figure, and it was certainly not Nanshaad.

‘When I regained consciousness, half my clothes were soaked in blood. Kark was sitting on my chest, looking into my eyes, and the *sthaapana* was already done. I got up to face a huge statue, standing almost 20 feet tall, with ten heads and numerous hands wielding weapons. Covered in ornaments of gold, it was placed on the platform that I had constructed for the deity. The sculpture emanated great intensity in its expression and posture.

“Whose idol is this?” I asked as I breathed in awe.’

Before Milarepa could quote Nanshaad, Ashwatthama chimed in, ‘Ravana, the demon king of Lanka.’ Meeting Om’s eyes, he continued, ‘Bisrakh is situated in what is now Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh and is

believed to be the birthplace of King Ravana. The land has ancient temples in abundance. The Swayambhu* Shiva linga, which was worshiped by Ravana and his father Vishravas, was unearthed there over a century ago. It is octagonal in shape. The linga protrudes 2.5 feet above the ground and allegedly extends 8 feet underneath. It is deified in a temple built near a large banyan tree and has a courtyard laid with marble where devotees worship daily.'

Milarepa nodded in agreement and added, 'I constructed this unearthed sanctum before 1135. Now, a new shrine dedicated to the demon king is under construction, comprising a 42-foot Shiva linga and a 5.5-foot sculpture of Ravana. I was never aware that I was labouring over the development of Ravana's temple.'

'But I asked you how you knew about me. What does all of this have to do with me and my question?' Om's impatience was obvious.

'It is essential for you to know why and how I met Nanshaad and who he was, because that has everything to do with you and your question. So listen carefully. Ravana went by numerous names like Dasis Ravana, Dasis Sakvithi, Maha Ravana, Dashaanan, Lankeshwar, Lankeshwaran, Ravanasura, Ravanaeshwaran, Eela Vendhar and Ravula.'

'Yes, I know that. So?'

'So, write down "Nanshaad" and read it backwards.' Om complied. Once written and read in reverse, became (Dashaanan), which was one of Ravana's popular names.

Milarepa continued, 'Like Ravana, Nanshaad also had many titles. One of them is Nagendra—the name that you once knew him as.'

Om was staggered to hear Nagendra's name fall out of Milarepa's mouth. 'What happened then?'

'Then? Then I left empty-handed from Bistrakh after the sthaapana of Dashaanan,' replied Milarepa. With that, Om's curiosity rose to a higher pitch than ever before. But he was not alone in that—the same curiosity was agitating Parimal and LSD, who were on their way to Kailash at that moment.

The journey from Digba beach had started nine days prior to the perfect crescent moon. They had travelled for twenty-two hours to reach the Nathu La Pass for their first halt.

At night, they checked into a secluded motel. After a quick dinner, they decided to meet in Nagendra's room. Parimal stood beside LSD, waiting for further instructions from Nagendra, who was focused on the torn piece of map spread out on an old wooden table.

Nagendra began. 'There are two ways to reach Kailash from India. One is through the Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand and the other is through the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. The Lipulekh Pass used to be a popular option earlier, but it is now damaged due to the floods in Uttarakhand. The route via Sikkim crosses the India-China border at the Nathu La Pass.' Pointing to the dots marked on the route, Nagendra started explaining the roadmap. 'From Nathu La, tomorrow, we will travel to Kangma, which is 185 km away. Then we will cover 295 km to Lazi, and then another 477 km to Zhongba. An additional 477 km from Zhongba will lead us to Darchen and later to Qugu.

'This route from Nathu La Pass takes around five days and also offers a shorter transit to Kailash. We have spent one day out of nine already to reach Nathu La, which leaves us with eight days to reach Kailash on the perfect crescent moon night. This means we have three days to spare,' Parimal reasoned.

'No. We are already running two days late and we will have to compensate for them,' Nagendra corrected him.

'But you said five days,' LSD interjected.

'Five days on wheels. We are going on foot. The trek to Kailash is ideally undertaken between the months of (April–May) and (October–November). Trekkers are advised against carrying out an expedition in the five months from (November–December) to (March–April) as it becomes tough to breathe and survive there. We have chosen to travel in (January–February), which is the coldest and most difficult time of the year in that range. The roads are blocked and there is no commutation to our destination. This is why we require ten days or even more. Anyway, the night is growing darker. Go get some rest, because you won't be able to get any for a long time after tonight. We leave tomorrow before sunrise.'

Nagendra closed his eyes and sat down to meditate, indicating that he had answered the last question for the day. At four in the morning, the team left for Kangma and then on to Lazi, the next two junctions en route to Kailash. Parimal, walking with LSD almost 100 metres behind Nagendra, looked at

the sky and found the waning gibbous moon, signifying that barely eight days were left for the crescent moon to be seen.

‘What is it with the night of the crescent moon?’ Parimal asked LSD.

‘You will get the answer when the time is right,’ LSD responded curtly as they walked.

‘And who are you? When is the right time to get an answer for that?’ he frowned.

LSD thrust her chin out towards Nagendra, who was walking ahead of them. ‘Why don’t you just ask *him* all these questions?’ she challenged, assuming that this would shut him up.

As was his nature, Parimal had been wondering what the link between Nagendra and Milarepa could be. There was no historical account of it. He was well aware that he couldn’t ask him about Milarepa directly. So he decided to disguise this query as a question about the crescent moon. Therefore, he began drafting the query in his head. The crescent moon night was coming closer, hence the time was indeed right to ask *that* question at least; maybe that could give him a way to pry out some answers about Milarepa too.

A confused LSD watched Parimal walking more briskly towards Nagendra.

‘What are you doing?’ she hissed.

‘You will get the answer when the time is right,’ Parimal glanced back triumphantly as he closed the distance between Nagendra and himself. He reached right behind Nagendra and said, ‘You don’t trust us, right?’

Nagendra continued to walk while he replied, ‘That’s not true.’

Parimal was positive he had sparked a conversation that might get him some answers, and so he continued, ‘LSD says that you don’t tell us anything because you don’t trust us.’

Nagendra’s face betrayed no emotion as he replied, ‘And what is it that you want to know?’ Parimal looked around at LSD, who was still following the protocol of keeping a distance and not questioning anything.

‘I want to know what Kailash Parbat has to do with the crescent moon night. She is afraid to ask you about the connection between you and the man who climbed Mount Kailash.’

Nagendra halted abruptly and said, ‘You have two questions; I will answer only one of them. Decide for yourself which question is more

significant to you, and I shall answer it.'

Mirroring Nagendra's pause, Parimal also stopped in his tracks, maintaining the distance. He thought for a moment and decided that the mystery of the crescent moon could be solved when they reached their destination, but there might not be another window to ask about the man who climbed the enigmatic Kailash Parbat. So he declared, 'I want the answer to her question.'

'Very well.' Nagendra gestured for Parimal to come closer and scowled at the recollection of his nemesis. 'I met Milarepa in Bisrakh, while building one of the oldest Dashaanan shrines. He won my heart by selflessly helping me with the construction of the temple and left empty-handed after the sthaapana. But I . . . we couldn't let him leave. He didn't realize that not only his, but our work in Bisrakh was also completed. He did not realize that while he was searching for a guide and a guru, we were also waiting there for the right prodigy and accomplice. Milarepa did not realize that he was not the one to find us; we found him. So, the guide followed the wanderer. Yes, we tailed Milarepa for months from Bisrakh to the northern boundaries of this country until we were confident that he could be reliable. Finally, just when he had fully given up and was about to go beyond the border, we crossed his path again and took him under our wing. He was a good student at first. Later, he became one of our two best prodigies and then the second most trusted confidant, till he gave us the deepest gash of betrayal.'

'Us? We? One of the two best prodigies? Second most trusted confidant? What are you talking about? Who was the first one? Did I miss something?' Parimal was puzzled.

Nagendra heard all his fresh doubts calmly and said, 'I told you that I will answer only one question.' Parimal had no choice but to suppress his queries and let Nagendra finish.

'He had a great quality of never doubting our decisions and so he never questioned or reasoned with anything that we were doing. He gained our faith and we taught him everything we knew until he became as zealous as me. Together, we tracked Om, meticulously tracing the places where we got hints about him or suspected his presence. However, he kept changing his name, identity and location, so I did too, but Milarepa couldn't do it because lying was a sin according to his principles of morality and ethics,

so he chose to remain mum. He was so silent and submissive to our mission that he never even asked the name of the man we were chasing, or why. Milarepa, the perfect accomplice,’ Nagendra trailed off, reminiscing about those times.

‘His silence was so constant that people presumed he was mute. But his quietness was what we mistook as his sincere compliance to our objective. After failing uncountable times at nabbing Om, one day, Milarepa spoke after several years. “Maybe I could serve you better if I knew who the man is and what he possesses that we want so direly.” *Maybe he could indeed serve us better if he knew*, we thought, thus revealing our biggest secret to Milarepa. We took him to Dharagiri.’

While Nagendra talked about Milarepa to Parimal, heading towards Mount Kailash, up on the mountain was Milarepa, talking about Nagendra to Om.

‘What is Dharagiri?’ Milarepa looked at Om before answering. He gathered the courage to speak about this part and looked at Ashwatthama, who also glanced at Om. He then signalled that Milarepa should resume his story.

‘Dharagiri is a waterfall in the Ghatshila district of Jharkhand. The whole area was flourishing with forests and hills, and I had no idea that a place so splendid could also be the site of such barbarism! Hidden behind the waterfall was a cave where, for the first time, I witnessed a man in the most dreadful physical condition a human being could ever be imagined in. I looked at him through a crack between the rocks, where he couldn’t see me. He was breathing but was neither alive nor dead. He was so skinny and disfigured that it pained me to even keep looking at him. I asked Nanshaad, “Who is he?”

““He is the one who let Om escape. He is Dhanvantari,” explained Nanshaad.

Om could not believe the preposterous words he was hearing. Someone was telling him that Dhanvantari had been alive for that long!

‘At that time, I had no clue about you and your endless existence. Nanshaad narrated everything beginning from your creation till your escape when he had attacked Dhanvantari and—’

‘Sushruta . . .’ Om added, his emotions weighing down his voice.

‘He had kept Dhanvantari alive since then, torturing and compelling him to write the book of Mrit Sanjeevani for him all over again as these were the only two options he had in order to avoid death.’ Learning about Dhanvantari’s state was not only harrowing but also bewildering to Om.

On their way to Kailash, Nagendra recounted as they trudged on, ‘I was alive but my body was decaying from within because, unlike Om, I cannot prevent ageing. Although I managed to slow the process to the extent that I was ageing as much as a single day over the span of multiple years, I was falling short of time in my physical form. I shared everything with Milarepa so that he could understand the urgency of both, searching for Om and getting the information out of Dhanvantari. Milarepa promised that he would do everything to get the books for me. Together, we hatched a plan to send Milarepa undercover into Dhanvantari’s chamber as another prisoner.

‘Inside the chamber, Milarepa pretended that he couldn’t speak. To win Dhanvantari’s heart, he looked after him, cleaned and fed him, but Dhanvantari did not utter a word. It was a subtle war of silence between the two while Kark was my eyes and ears on their prison walls. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and soon, Kark died a natural death in that dungeon, but nothing decayed between the two prisoners: neither Milarepa’s dedication nor Dhanvantari’s silence. I eventually replaced Kark with Kuroop.’

‘Kuroop? Who was it this time?’ asked Parimal.

‘My new pet, a hyena!’

‘There was one thing they had in common—stubbornness.’ Nagendra’s rage was boiling as he continued to envision Milarepa but he composed himself, curbing his frustration.

‘Dhanvantari wouldn’t utter a single word and Milarepa wouldn’t budge without hearing him talk. Neither of them was giving up. Ultimately, after eighteen months of silence, Dhanvantari spoke to Milarepa. We could not hear them talk, but at least the first barrier of communication was broken. Right then, based on the pattern of Om’s travel history decoded by Milarepa, we learnt that Om was last spotted in Avanti, which is now known as Ujjain and is in central India.

‘Thus, we left Kuroop to guard Dhanvantari and Milarepa for a few days and headed to Avanti to check the information.’

‘So that’s how Nagendra located me in Avanti?’ Om realized.

Milarepa replied, ‘Yes! When Nanshaad told me about the cities you were visiting back then, I figured that your migration wasn’t arbitrary and observed the pattern you were travelling in. You were returning to each location you had left after a certain number of years with a new name, meeting all the old people of the locality, posing as your own son, and if I was right, the next place you were journeying towards was Avanti again.’

‘I escaped that raid by a hair out of sheer luck. What happened when he came back?’ Om asked Milarepa. At the same time, Nagendra was answering that question for Parimal.

‘When we came back, Milarepa was gone. He had fled after receiving all the information from Dhanvantari. I found Kuroop’s dead body at the entrance. Kuroop was murdered. He cheated us; we had misunderstood him all along. He was a traitor masquerading as an ally. He was gone and with him, one out of the two opportunities to get to Mrit Sanjeevani *was also gone*.’ Nagendra’s words came to a halt but his feet still moved towards their destination.

‘So, did he kill Kuroop to rescue Dhanvantari?’ Parimal enquired, eager to gain clarity. Nagendra turned to look at Parimal, who was approaching him to get the answer. Remembering that Milarepa’s betrayal led to his defeat, Nagendra suddenly grabbed Parimal by his throat. Parimal was caught off guard and struggled to breathe. Nagendra pulled him closer to his face with a jerk and sneered, ‘You know, hyenas are capable of eating all sorts of animals, whether it’s their own prey or a rotting corpse—from wild beasts and birds to lizards and snakes, everything! Their jaws are strong enough to crush bones. But Kuroop didn’t eat Kark, I did.’

Parimal began to choke. He struggled to speak despite Nagendra’s death grip. ‘I . . . ca—can’t breathe!’ LSD was a mere spectator and stood there quietly.

Nagendra used his other hand to pinch Parimal’s tongue tightly between his thumb and index finger and said, ‘You could be a better servant if you couldn’t speak. Like Kuroop. But the absence of voice wouldn’t allow you to tell me that you can’t breathe. You wouldn’t defend yourself. So, you see, everything is double-edged, with a good and a bad side, even your tongue. It saves you today, but it can push you to your death tomorrow.’ Nagendra released Parimal’s neck and tongue and he immediately fell to his knees, violently gasping for air. Nagendra crouched beside him before saying,

‘LSD didn’t ask any of those questions—you did! Next time you lie, you die.’ Leaving him there, he carried on.

Parimal took a minute to collect his wits. LSD came up and offered her hand. He held her blurry palm to pull himself up and saw Nagendra striding ahead. Nagendra’s fingers had left prominent marks on his throat. Now he knew his place as he walked with LSD again, with the last question about what happened to Dhanvantari suspended in his head.

‘So, what did Dhanvantari tell you?’ asked Om.

‘Dhanvantari cried and told me that you were alone in this world and it was imperative that Parashurama knew about you as well as what you possessed. It was then that I realized the purpose of my life, which I had set out to find in the first place. It was not Nanshaad where my destiny lay; he was only a part of the journey. Everything that happened in my life led me to Dhanvantari so that I could learn the ultimate reason for my birth. Dhanvantari was the one who told me about the city of Gyanganj and how to reach Parashurama, which led me to summit the great Kailash and attain salvation. Therefore, these books of history recognize Milarepa as the only man who ever climbed Kailash Parbat. Om, you must now know that I did it for you. I reached Parashurama for you.’

‘What about Dhanvantari? Did you set him free?’ asked Om.

‘How could I have left Dhanvantari in that hell on earth? Of course I set him free. I killed him,’ replied Milarepa with a hint of remorse.

Om felt like someone had lit a fire in the pit of his stomach. Before he could process the information rationally, he came charging at Milarepa with burning rage. Ashwatthama was quick to hold Om back, but the force was enough to knock Milarepa to the ground. Understanding that Om’s anger was justified, he got up calmly. Ashwatthama kept an arm around Om’s shoulders to console him as he tried to compose himself. Om turned around with teary eyes and said, ‘The books are gone. Dhanvantari died in vain. We have lost the war already, before even fighting it. Now we have nothing to fight for.’

Ashwatthama spoke softly, ‘We have you. Everything that has happened so far is just the tip of the iceberg. You must know what Parashurama told me when you were lying unconscious on the rocks near the seashore on Ross Island. You will be the one who will defend us the next time we face Nagendra. Only you have the ability to remember who you were before

becoming an immortal. What if there is something still worth fighting for? The war doesn't end till the world exists. Can you fight if there is still something worth fighting for?'

'And what could that be?' Om scoffed hopelessly.

'The question is not *what's worth it*; the question is, can you fight?'

Om stood answerless. Ashwatthama continued, 'War has only one purpose and that's victory. The responsibility for your triumph lies in my hands. You need to be trained for battle and I will ensure that you are ready. Your training starts tomorrow.'

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Chapter 4

One Word and Two Lakes

‘After thoroughly examining the nature of Om’s blood sample and obtaining full proof of its indestructible nature, Tej wanted to analyse its resistance against pathogens. He took Pooh, a healthy guinea pig he had in his lab for conducting experiments on, and injected it with the Marburg virus. Leaving it in the room, Tej closed the door behind him so the guinea pig wouldn’t get out,’ Mrs Batra recounted. The room upstairs was chock-full of a plethora of high-end medical equipment and discrete medicines, but somehow still seemed empty. The light hum of beeping monitors filled the air.

‘This was taken during those days,’ added Mrs Batra as she handed a picture to Prithvi. Prithvi saw the limp, tiny Mrs Batra on the bed surrounded by medicines and monitors. Her body looked like it had been reduced to nothingness. ‘I saw Tej enter the room with a comforting smile, and just for a moment I felt peaceful. I loved him. But the very next moment, the agonizing throb was back. My head swirled as a fresh wave of pain blurred my vision while my back muscles spasmed wildly. Any outsider could’ve easily mistaken it for a seizure, but this was different. Despite the extensive research about multiple sclerosis, I was beyond the scope of being saved.

‘Tej rushed to the big compartment of medicines lined up in almost an army formation and took out an injection. He held my hand down firmly and as the fluid flooded my veins, I was stable again. I mustered up a smile to make him feel better, but my eyes couldn’t lie. Tej could see in them that he was losing me, my memory was fading away. He climbed into bed with me and held me like a baby. I lay there, numb, clueless about the treatment he was putting me through, even though he knew that no medicine could save me.

‘For a few hours, Tej stayed beside me. His heart broke at the sight of my misery, but it shattered further at the thought of it all ending along with me. He clasped my hands tightly whenever the pain grew unbearable. I kept breathing and fighting just to live one more day of life with him. When he recounted the incident later, he shared what it felt like for him to be losing me. Pooh and I were at the same stages of our lives. We both barely breathed, we hardly moved, our vitals were deteriorating rapidly. Tej returned to his basement lab. He placed Pooh on his worktable. It was time to test the miracle!

‘Tej took a drop of Om’s blood sample in a syringe and injected the dying guinea pig with it. The previously undefeated black blood cells were Tej’s last hope, they had to come through!

‘When Tej checked on the guinea pig again, it had stopped struggling and its symptoms seemed to be reducing in severity. Happy with the progress, he breathed a sigh of relief. He could, after all, save the love of his life.’ Mrs Batra took a break with a sigh and said to Prithvi, ‘Anyway, what happened next with Om and Nagendra?’

Prithvi could gauge that she was hesitant to say anything further and needed more time to trust him fully, so Prithvi continued narrating his story.

Hiking uninterrupted for days on end, Nagendra and his team crossed Kangma and Lazi at dawn. The next stops were Zhongba and Darchen, which brought them closer to Kailash Parbat.

Meanwhile, on Kailash, the morning breeze was as chilly as ever and the open field was all set for Om’s first day of training. The sun’s emerging red blended with the night’s fading black seamlessly. Ashwatthama brought Om to a makeshift rocky platform where an assortment of ancient metallic weapons had been placed upright. Om stood amazed and watched as they glinted in the dark. This set-up was the complete opposite of his expectations. He had expected such weapons to have vanished forever along with the warriors who wielded them, or to at least be entirely rusted by now, if they had been preserved at all. But there they were, right in front of his eyes, along with one of the vanished warriors who had used these weapons once.

Om carefully moved closer, his eyes scanning each one of those weapons minutely. Eventually, his gaze came to rest on a quiver full of arrows.

He wondered out loud, ‘What about those modern weapons that you had brought along to rescue me at the island? Those pistols and rifles were way more advanced and sophisticated than these simple arrows. Aren’t you going to train me with those? Why have you brought—’ Suddenly, the tip of the arrow he had just touched sent him flying off 40 feet into the air. In a millisecond, more than 7,00,000 volts, the kind found in a high-tension transmission wire, travelled through his whole body and tossed him back to the ground like burnt toast. The shock was more than sufficient to kill an ordinary man, and Om, despite being Om, also barely survived. The right side of his body was completely charred, exposing the bones that his skin was sticking to, and his nerves were as black as ink. He was so gravely wrecked that he could not get back to his feet. He lay on the ground grunting, trying to understand what had just happened.

As Om’s wounds healed slowly on their own, Ashwatthama clasped the same arrow in his hand, walked towards Om and explained, ‘Because today can never win over yesterday, and neither can tomorrow. The foundation of all science is ancient science, which is now mostly trapped in books scattered around the world—many have even been destroyed. More than half of ancient science is yet to be discovered and deciphered. What is proclaimed to have been invented is actually just a discovery of principles and inventions that the ancient scientists, mathematicians, physicians and engineers had already experimented with and written about millennia ago. Sushruta wrote the *Sushruta Samhita*, uniquely describing surgical training, instruments and procedures, which is still followed by the contemporary science of surgery. Modern inventions are nothing but discoveries of science during the prehistoric ages, which the world calls mythology now. Planes in this part of the planet have flown way before the invention of so-called airplanes claimed by the Wright brothers in 1903. The distance between the earth and the sun, that is 149,597,870 km, had already been calculated and written in the Hanuman Chalisa aeons ago, even before my birth, not after 1653. We have been praying to the nine planets since before the Ramayana, not after the invention of the telescope in 1608. Do you really think that people who wrote and implemented intricate books like the *Vimana Purana*, which today’s scientists have now started finding relevance in, had never contemplated the presence of *gurutvakarshan*, which was later called gravitational force? Do you think that writing a comprehensive

purana on flying would have been possible without a precise understanding of gravitational force? A Sanskrit verse from Brahmagupta's book *Brahmasphutasiddhanta* says, "A body falls towards the earth as it is the nature of the earth to attract bodies, just as it is the nature of water to flow." This statement indicates Brahmagupta's grasp of the concept of gravity, which was later elaborated by another Indian astronomer, Bhaskara II, in his book *Surya Siddhanta* in 1150. All of this occurred way before Isaac Newton. Brahmagupta died in 668 CE and Bhaskara II wrote his book in 1150. Newton's *Principia*, which describes gravity, was published in 1687, which was more than 500 years later.

'Contemporary science and modern artillery are no match for the knowledge of ancient science and the power and destruction that these ancient weapons possess. I used modern weaponry on Ross Island because those were the weakest among all the weapons I have mastered. They were enough to rescue you from humans, but what lies ahead cannot be fought with those toys.'

By this time, much of Om's tissues had been restored, but he still struggled to stand up on his feet. Ashwatthama bent and tied a *rudraksha* on his unharmed left arm. 'With this, we start the guru-shishya tradition. I will teach you about all the *astras* I possess,' Ashwatthama said as he initiated his teachings.

'Rule number one: never touch a weapon that you have not possessed. You cannot hold it unless it allows you to. Imagine a furious sabretooth on a leash with its master, Vrishkapi. What will happen if you try to hold the tiger's leash? The sabretooth will tear you apart. He will never allow anyone but his master to come close to him. You can only interact with him after you befriend him. You can only order him once you have mastered him. These weapons, they submit to you. But before that, you need to know them, learn them and win them over. These weapons are divine weapons called *astras* and the bearer of these weapons is called *astradhari*, which you are clearly not so far.' By this time, the sun had risen higher in the sky, causing the shining metallic arrow to lose its radiance and turn into an ordinary, corroded one, just the way Om had imagined earlier.

'I was aware of what you just told me about the *astras*, but I didn't know they could still be in existence,' Om replied, amazed. His remaining burns

and abrasions continued to heal and Ashwatthama gave him a hand to help him get back up on his feet.

‘Summoning an astra requires the use of a specific chant. Every astra has a chant that commands and controls it. Once the chant is recited, the concerned god endows the weapon with divine power, making it impossible to counter by regular means. There are specific conditions for the use of astras, the violation of which can be fatal. Because of the great power involved, the knowledge of an astra is passed on in the guru-shishya tradition from a guru (master) to a shishya (follower) by oral instruction only, and only after judging the capabilities of the student. Certain astras were so mighty that the mere knowledge of the chant was insufficient, so they had to be handed down directly by the deity involved.

‘The extensive use of astras began during the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Yet, not every warrior had astras. You’ve met some of those who did.’

Ashwatthama was right. Om had indeed met some of them, including Lord Ram and Lord Laxman; Bhishma, the son of River Ganga; Dronacharya, Ashwatthama’s father; Karna, the spiritual son of the sun; and Arjun, the spiritual son of Indra.

‘The three who still have astras are Parashurama, Kripacharya and I.’ Om’s eyes twinkled as the name of the third immortal of Hindu mythology fell on his ears. ‘Kripacharya? Where is he?’

‘That is not known. He comes only when needed and only I can summon him,’ Ashwatthama replied with a hint of pride.

‘The celestial astras are usually evoked using arrows, although they can potentially be evoked by any weapon or anything else. I invoked the Brahmashirsha astra using a blade of grass as my weapon. Indra’s son, Arjuna, was capable of shooting all his celestial weapons with the power of his mind alone. He didn’t need any physical vessel for the astra to manifest in.’

Ashwatthama then brought Om back to the weapons that looked like innocuous antique armaments in the sunlight. They were only empty vessels; their power was channelled through the celestial astras.

‘These are some of the astras that I possess,’ Ashwatthama said, picking up one in his hand. ‘This is Vayuastra. It brings about a hurricane capable of lifting entire armies off the ground. On the fourteenth day of the war in

Kurukshetra, when the battle continued past sunset, I used this weapon to breach the illusions that Anjanaparvan, the grandson of Bhima and the son of Ghatotkacha, had created. Arjuna also used the Vayuastra against Karna in the final battle.’ So saying, Ashwatthama put the arrow back in the quiver.

‘Now, sit down and meditate to invoke Vayu, the God of Wind. This will take five whole days, so prepare yourself. Repeat the chant after me.’ Ashwatthama sat down and started chanting, with Om repeating his words. The entire open field reverberated with their vibrations. The ground, the grass, the wind, the sky—everything seemed like one being.

Days passed and the chant echoed constantly on Kailash. Meanwhile, Nagendra and his team, with their heavily packed bags, passed Zhongba and Darchen, inching closer to their final destination.

A freezing temperature of -14°C had LSD shivering relentlessly and walking with Parimal behind Nagendra through the final highs and lows of the terrain.

Parimal noticed that Nagendra had come to a halt and was looking at the view in front of them. Parimal and LSD joined him. A reflection of Mount Kailash was visible on the surface of the majestic lake. They stood there for a while, admiring and soaking in the serenity. The setting sun merging with the horizon added a striking, shimmery hue to the lake’s surface, and it seemed that the whole cosmos had simply melted into it. The freshness of the atmosphere around them washed away their struggles and exhaustion. At an altitude of 22,028 feet above sea level, the sight of that abode of purity, nestled in the lap of nature, left both LSD and Parimal awestruck. The mystical lake, round, with clear blue water around the shores and emerald-green in the centre, gave them a moment of bliss.

Emerging from her reverie, LSD said breathlessly, ‘So, we were not headed for Mount Kailash? Where are we?’

Parimal, still mesmerized, started explaining.

‘This is Lake Mansarovar. *Manas* means “mind” and *sarovar* means “lake” in Sanskrit, which, compounded, form, “lake of the mind”. Hindu scriptures say that Brahma had conceived this lake in his mind and it received visible manifestation later, thus the name. Lake Mansarovar is a personification of purity, and one who drinks its water supposedly goes straight to the abode of Shiva after death. They are believed to be cleansed

of all sins committed over even a hundred lifetimes. The existence of such a magnificent freshwater lake at such a height above sea level is indeed remarkable.'

Both LSD and Parimal now turned towards Nagendra, but neither dared to ask him any questions regarding the current standstill they had come to. Nagendra looked at them and read their curiosity.

He said, 'We are here to search for a word . . . the first word of the mystic enchantment that will liberate them all. Look for a hideout between the rocks that could conceal our lights at night, set up two tents and wait for the right time.' LSD and Parimal silently got to work without asking, 'The first word of which mystic enchantment and liberate who all?'

On the eve of the crescent moon, right before sunset, Om opened his eyes after five days and looked at Ashwatthama, who instructed him to stand and pick up the Vayuastra. Om seemed a bit hesitant. Ashwatthama smiled and assured him that he would not be hurt again. Om lifted the Vayuastra and felt its power coursing through his blood. He had done it! Ashwatthama beamed at his disciple proudly and gave him a warm hug.

'Well done, Om. Go to sleep now. You have not slept a wink in five nights. You need to rest. I shall see you tomorrow at dawn,' said Ashwatthama, relieving Om from their long meditation. Om obeyed the order just the way LSD and Parimal obeyed their superior.

The sun withdrew and darkness replaced twilight. The temperature at Mansarovar dropped even lower. LSD and Parimal were done setting up the tents in an appropriate hideout between the rocks. As they finished, wondering why they were supposed to put up two tents instead of three, Nagendra came and ordered them both to walk with him to the west of Mansarovar. They shared a look and joined Nagendra in the darkening night. The sky was starry, but the moon was still not visible. They tramped through the pitch black alongside Nagendra. LSD took out a torch, but before she could switch it on, Nagendra stopped her. 'Light is celebrated only due to the fear of the dark. Without evil, goodness has no value.'

As Mansarovar was the calmest of all lakes, even in the worst climatic conditions, serenity draped the air around them till the sound of the waves rippled through the quietness. They advanced a few more steps. 'We have not come here for Mansarovar or for Kailash Parbat,' said Nagendra, moving closer to the sound of the waves.

As they walked on the west bank of Mansarovar, Parimal and LSD wondered where the sound could possibly be coming from. The crashing of the waves grew louder with every step. After a few minutes, they felt as if they had reached some vast shore. Nagendra stopped and looked up into the sky. LSD and Parimal wondered what Nagendra was searching for. They had been waiting patiently for almost an hour when the sky began to brighten slowly with moonlight, and then emerged the moon in its perfect crescent, illuminating the land around them in a silver mist.

LSD and Parimal's eyes fell upon the source of the sound of crashing waves as Nagendra addressed them, 'We have come here for the first word.' It was another lake they were now standing close to, its shore covered with beautiful but poisonous Euphorbia flowers that grew amid the sand and gravel.

Nagendra explained further, 'This is Rakshastal, also called the Ravana Lake or the lake of demons. Rakshastal was created by Ravana for the express purpose of garnering superpowers through acts of devotion and meditation towards Lord Shiva, who resided on Mount Kailash. He would make a daily offering with one of his ten heads as a sacrifice to please Shiva. Finally, on the tenth night, when Ravana intended to offer his last head, Shiva was moved enough to grant Ravana his wish to harness superpowers. It was on a crescent moon night that his wish was fulfilled and so the lake acquired the shape of the crescent moon. Tonight, all the planets and the moon are aligned in their exact same positions as that night. Thousands of years ago, it was the same night, the same month with the same moon in the crescent shape when Ravana met Shiva here. Rakshastal is said to have a close resemblance to the moon. The desolation of the lake is often compared to the emptiness of the moon. Mansarovar remains tranquil and undisturbed forever, whereas the much smaller, crescent-shaped Rakshastal is always turbulent, irrespective of the weather. While Mansarovar exudes an inviting aura and bounteously gives away its water for bathing and drinking, no one even dares to come near the adjoining Rakshastal. They are scared by its tempestuous appearance. Even touching the water of the Rakshastal is strictly prohibited.'

Nagendra took off all his clothes and started walking naked into the freezing water alone. With half his body submerged in Rakshastal, he turned and ordered Parimal to get ready. Parimal opened the bag he had

with him and took out a diver's suit. Nagendra started praying as Parimal wore the suit. LSD opened her bag and gave him two underwater bombs before he entered the forbidden water. Nagendra instructed him further.

'Mansarovar and Rakshastal are divided by the thin neck of mountains here. This neck has been distinguishing the names and natures of these waters for centuries, but not any more. Go and search for the weakest link underwater and break it. You have three hours at most. The search of the first word can start only after your work is over. We have to get the word tonight before the moon sets. There is no second chance and so there is absolutely no margin for error. Three hours it is! See you on the other side.'

Parimal followed the order and strapped on his oxygen mask. Before he plunged in, he turned to look at LSD and then dived in expressionlessly. Nagendra stepped out of the water and walked to LSD holding his clothes. He got dressed and walked back with LSD behind him. She was keeping track of Parimal on a monitor that she held in her hand. A glowing dot denoted Parimal's movements and exact location.

Deep in the dark waters, Parimal found the weakest spot and started digging the tunnel with an advanced and powerful earth auger. He dug nearly 20 feet in approximately two hours and found a natural cavity in the waterbed where he could plant one of the bombs, whose blast would create a massive impact. He fixed the bomb and swam back with the detonator in his hand, maintaining a safe distance.

While Nagendra meditated on the placid shore of Mansarovar, waiting for Parimal, LSD's heart was racing with every passing moment, her eyes fixed on the monitor. It indicated the giant wall between Mansarovar and Rakshastal and Parimal's position in the water near it. Nagendra continued to meditate with closed eyes. Suddenly, they felt the earth under them tremble. LSD grew tense but Nagendra opened his eyes and stood up, beaming at Mansarovar, expecting to see Parimal any moment. But LSD's monitor displayed something else.

Parimal dove back into the water and swam to the location of the blast to check if the work was done. It was not. The wall between the lakes had sustained the blast. He checked his watch and knew that time was running out. He touched the wall and with his wave scale, measured the thickness which was yet to be penetrated. The remaining thickness was greater than that of the recently destroyed wall! He immediately pulled out the second

bomb, planted it at the deepest point of the newly formed hole and detonated it.

LSD and Nagendra felt another quake. This tremor was just a little stronger than the last one. The tension plastered on LSD's face was now visible on Nagendra's forehead too.

Three hours were almost up. Nagendra's eyes went to and fro between the moon and Mansarovar, which was still unruffled, and there was no sign of Parimal resurfacing. He was still in Rakshastal because even the second bomb had failed to destroy the wall entirely. Now it was just Parimal and his tools under water. Without wasting any time, Parimal started digging further to break the final layer, which seemed like a never-ending task. His oxygen supply was getting exhausted rapidly and so was he.

Nagendra signalled to LSD. She took out another detonator and her diving suit but realized that Parimal was running out of time. She simply ran into Mansarovar and dove in without the suit, clasping the bomb and the detonator. Following the monitor's signal, which indicated Parimal's exact location and depth, LSD was right in line with Parimal, who was on the opposite side of the wall. She was out of breath and started choking, but continued fixing the bomb and finally pressed the detonator. But in her haste, she could not distance herself from the explosive. It exploded; the impact hurled LSD into the depths of the lake. Being right at the mouth of it, Parimal came flowing in with the first vicious wave of Rakshastal into Mansarovar and saw LSD unconscious and drowning. He desperately treaded the water, inched closer to her and caught her sinking figure. The wall had finally collapsed and the waves of the fierce Rakshastal started destroying the silence of the serene Mansarovar forever. The lake that was once as calm as the gliding moon had now transformed into an intense lake filled with lashing cacophony. Nagendra became the first man to witness Mansarovar losing its revered existence and dissolving completely into the high waves of Rakshastal for the rest of earth's life. If it is to be believed that Mansarovar and Rakshastal were the symbols of good and evil respectively, then that night, the evil had indisputably defeated the good mercilessly.

In a few minutes, Parimal emerged from the water, dragging LSD by her left hand to the shore, her body as limp as a corpse. He laid her down and immediately gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Nagendra rushed to

find Parimal performing CPR on LSD. LSD gasped loudly as she came back to life. Nagendra pulled Parimal away from her, handed him another set of oxygen cylinders and showed him the crescent moon that was rapidly descending, ordering him to quickly get back in the water with him. Parimal saw the sinking moon and knew that he had to follow Nagendra's command, so he left LSD on the rocks of the shore.

When LSD opened her eyes, she saw Parimal and Nagendra entering and then disappearing into the giant waves of Mansarovar. To her, it felt as if Mansarovar were fighting its lost battle of existence with its last breaths of peace.

The luminous crescent moon was directly above them, shining at its brightest, as if conveying the occurrence of something extraordinary. They swam into the depths of the water, where Nagendra gestured to Parimal to turn his palm towards the moonlight, and warned him that his hand should remain absolutely steady.

As Parimal followed the instructions, he felt an unbearable pain as soon as the rays touched his palm, turning it red like an almost molten iron rod. He writhed in agony and could barely control his scream, but managed to keep his hand still until a part of his palm actually melted. The light penetrated and bore a hole through his hand. The scattered moonlight above his palm changed into a concentrated beam of light. The light refracted and fell at a distant spot to their right.

Nagendra followed the beam to the base of the lake and there, he finally found what had brought him there. Bright blue flames were dancing slightly above the seabed. He swam closer to the flame and spotted the glowing letters of the word that he had been searching for all this while. The word read 'Avinasi' (Avinasi). As Nagendra touched the glowing word, the letters disintegrated and turned into fireflies. They resembled the bursting sparks of fireworks against a dark sky. Nagendra gazed at this astonishing phenomenon underwater. The sparkling fireflies then entered Nagendra's body and he fainted. Parimal picked him up and returned to the shore, where LSD stood waiting. They each thanked the other for saving their life. As LSD discovered the wound in Parimal's palm, Parimal also noticed that the hand with which Nagendra had touched the word was shining like frost in the moonlight, as if all the fireflies he had seen in the deep, silent water

had been trapped inside his hand. It was an implication that Nagendra had consumed the word 'Avinasi', which meant 'indestructible'.

Nagendra opened his eyes and saw that the moon had set. The sky was now speckled by the stars alone. He had succeeded in his very first hunt. LSD and Parimal stood right by his side while Rakshastal roared with the sound of waves crashing on the shore of the dead Mansarovar, as if applauding for Nagendra. He stood up slowly and saw Parimal's ferociously burnt palm.

'Butterflies can see a range of ultraviolet colours invisible to the human eye,' said Nagendra as he placed his glowing hand on Parimal's palm. As he did that, the hole started filling up and was partially healed. 'LSD! Clean and cover the recovering wound, it will be fine in a few days,' Nagendra instructed.

He then went towards one of the two tents put up for the night. LSD and Parimal stood there, awaiting their next set of orders.

Right before entering his tent, Nagendra said, 'LSD, as you're ovulating tonight, it is the perfect time to fertilize your egg. I want Parimal's child from you in the month of (Kartik); you have nine months. Tomorrow, we leave before sunrise. We have more words to hunt for before LSD's child is born.' Nagendra took a swig of water from his round metal bottle as he went in, leaving LSD and Parimal standing there stupefied. Now they knew why Nagendra had ordered them to set up only two tents.

LSD broke the silence and said, 'Hi! We have not been introduced properly. Though I cannot tell you my name yet, you deserve to know that LSD is not the real one. So, what's your story?'

Parimal shrugged, 'I don't feel that way about you.'

'Neither do I,' LSD smiled amicably before continuing, 'He has asked us to produce a child, and thankfully, falling in love is not a part of the natural procedure of getting pregnant.'

The thundering wind and screaming waves continued tormenting the hushed silence of the night as they entered the tent.



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Chapter 5

The Scion of Serpents

At around five in the morning, Om heard a ruckus outside his hut and woke up with a jolt. He saw all the sages rushing towards something and spotted Vrishkapi and Milarepa in the crowd. He put on his robe hastily and caught up with them.

‘Where is everyone running to?’ he asked Milarepa.

‘I’m not sure, but something terrible has happened.’ Om saw Milarepa sweating despite the nip in the wind.

He soon realized that they were headed to the southern edge of the mountain, where he could vaguely spot the backs of Ashwatthama and Parashurama. The distant sound of waves grew louder with each step Om took.

‘What has happened? Where is this noise coming from?’ Om asked as soon as he reached.

Parashurama stood silent. It was evident in his eyes that even though he stood still, his thoughts were as turbulent as the harsh waves in front of them. Ashwatthama spoke in his stead. ‘Someone has destroyed Mansarovar.’

Milarepa was perplexed. ‘Destroyed? What do you mean? Mansarovar is not a . . . pot of water! It is a water body! With a surface area of, like, 400 square km!’ No one responded. A crowd had gathered at the cliff by then, all the sages looking solemn and distressed. Everyone stood motionless, as if observing silence for the death of a loved one.

With sunrise drawing closer and the sky glowing brighter with each passing moment, everyone finally saw the catastrophe from the top of Kailash. An even bigger lake was now visible where Mansarovar had once been. The lake that had originated from Brahma’s conception was now consumed by the Ravana lake.

‘It is not about the size of the pot, but what is preserved within,’ Parashurama spoke. ‘The soul of the lake has been abducted. What is a body without a soul? It is no more a water body; it is a dead body,’ he declared grimly and suddenly walked away.

Om watched as Parashurama stumbled away on an unknown path. ‘Who did this? What is happening? And where is Parashurama going at such a time?’ He was completely staggered by this disastrous development.

Ashwatthama’s eyes were also fixed on the departing Parashurama. ‘He is going to bring the man who might have the answers to our questions. There is only one man, after Dhanvantari, who has all the answers. He has been in deep penance in a hidden cave in Amarnath for the past 5400 years, and Parashurama is now going to wake him up.’

‘Who?’ asked Om, wondering.

‘What matters right now is your training. We will be speeding that up,’ replied Ashwatthama.

Om had several questions looming in his consciousness, but before he could get entangled in that mesh, Vrishkapi attacked him. Taken aback, Om tried to defend himself, but he was way off guard to counter his attacks; the impact shoved Om to the ground. Wondering why Ashwatthama was not helping him, he got back on his feet and saw that Ashwatthama stood silently, waiting for his next move as Vrishkapi charged at Om again. The sun was up and Om realized that his training for the day had already begun, without warning, and he was in the middle of a combat with the last of the surviving beings from Hanuman’s clan who was much stronger than a sabretooth.

Parashurama stood on the shore of Mansarovar. He found the empty oxygen cylinders, food packets, tent anchors and other stuff like matchboxes, but no man in sight to claim them. While Parashurama stood there, wondering who it could have been, Parimal was leading the way to the west of Mansarovar holding another piece of the same torn map which Nagendra had given him, and which highlighted their next destination. Nagendra followed closely behind him while LSD trailed behind both.

While these two sides were playing their own roles, no one knew what Dr Batra was busy with. This was less a statement and more an indication from Prithvi to Mrs Batra to narrate Dr Batra’s tale of progress and failure.

After two more days, Dr Batra went to check on the guinea pig again. ‘It had been a week and he was expecting to see Pooh completely recovered. But upon entering the lab, he found that it was lying unconscious under the table. He held it up to examine it, and it was clear that these weren’t signs of recovery but of death. And then, right there in Tej’s hand, Pooh passed away,’ Mrs Batra recounted.

‘*This can’t be*, Tej thought as his mind started racing. It was getting better; the symptoms had reduced; it had not been struggling in pain. His experiment had come so close to finding a cure to save his wife, but was it all in vain? It couldn’t be!

‘He held Pooh’s corpse in his hands. He was so devastated, he broke down completely. Tej was a scientific man who had dedicated his whole life to the field of medicine, and who had initially refused to believe Om’s “stories” but had put his faith in them nonetheless; he believed it all, only to lose at the end. He was angry with himself, angry at the circumstances, angry that he wouldn’t be able to save me. Heavy sobs of fury and frustration ripped through him. He had truly hit rock bottom.

‘He returned upstairs to see me squirming in pain. The pain was impossible to bear despite all the injections and painkillers. But the magnitude of Tej’s pain was much greater than mine because he was experiencing the pain of helplessness. I could see it on his face.

“‘Tej, I can’t take this any more. You must let me go!’” I muttered as he clutched my hand firmly. Tej couldn’t contain his sorrow. Tears flooded from his eyes as he turned and left the room.

‘He sat silently in the basement for a few minutes, composed himself and rose resolutely. He opened the freezer where Om’s blood sample had been stored. He took all of the remaining blood in a syringe, came to the bedroom and pampered me as his lips curved into a wistful smile.

“‘Please Tej, relieve me of this pain. Let me die, please.’”

‘He took out two sleeping pills and brought a glass of water. He propped me up on the pillow carefully and handed them to me. As I gulped them down, Tej smiled through his tears and squeezed my hand. I lay down again and saw his figure fading. The last thing I remember is smiling feebly at him. I knew that Tej also couldn’t bear to see me suffer any longer and that he was really releasing me. After I fell asleep, he injected me with Om’s blood. The quantity was enough to at least give me a painless death as

observed in the guinea pig, if nothing else. He sat by my side as I transcended into another world. The beeping of the machines halted as the heart monitor flatlined. Tej, having stayed awake by my side for days, fell asleep out of exhaustion right beside me.'

Back in Prithvi's narrative, Parashurama was en route to the town of Pahalgam to visit the Hindu shrine of Amarnath, which was 683 km to the north-west of Mansarovar. Meanwhile, Nagendra went into hiding in the south-west, with his next destination 173 km away.

'Now that we have acquired the first word successfully and Mansarovar is destroyed forever, the journey to the extraction of the next word from here will be riskier as they will be on the alert now. We must be more cautious from now on as they will already be on the prowl for us; if not, they will begin soon. Our next destination is close,' said Nagendra, and passed a slip to LSD. 'Shhh!' The gesture Nagendra made was enough for Parimal and LSD to understand that nothing should be enunciated aloud. The slip showed the attributes of a mysterious lake. 'The time isn't right yet. We have to reach this place on the night of the next crescent moon. We must remain out of sight till then,' concluded Nagendra.

In the north, Parashurama had reached Amarnath. The Amarnath pilgrimage was open to devotees only between the months of May and August, because only during that period did the Shiva linga made of ice appear in the cave. It was mid-February, so there was no one around and the place was absolutely quiet. He entered and continued to tread past the main area till he reached the last accessible corner inside the cave. The walls there were bumpy, with asymmetrical crevices. In that corner was an inconspicuous bulge in the rocks. Parashurama felt the rough surface with his palms until he found a particular spot. He summoned his *parashu* and the axe appeared and hammered the rock lightly with its butt. A few chunks fell out and revealed a closed eye. He started digging around it with his hand, clearing the rocks until a meditating figure was revealed.

It was the man he had come in search of, sitting in silence with his eyes closed. Over all the centuries that he'd sat there, he had become a part of the cave, completely unified with nature. His body was mostly skeletal, his thin skin speckled with tiny insects and worms that lived there. His hair was caked with mud and dirt along with the rest of his face.

Parashurama awoke him from his deep *samadhi* (trance) and the man opened his eyes. He looked at Parashurama and realized that it must be something urgent because Parashurama himself was standing in front of him. He silently waited for his visitor to speak.

‘Mansarovar has been defeated by Rakshastal. The soul of Mansarovar is missing. We have also lost the books of Mrit Sanjeevani,’ said Parashurama.

While Parashurama continued to brief the old man about the situation in Kailash, Nagendra and his team arrived at a remote hotel, where they checked into a small room to get some rest. While the others settled in, LSD researched the mystery lake. She learnt that Roopkund was a high-altitude glacial lake, surrounded by rock-strewn glaciers and snow-clad mountains and was widely known for the hundreds of ancient human skeletons found at its edge, contributing to the lake being called Skeleton Lake in recent times. These carcasses are still visible in the clear water of the shallow lake but for only a month, when the ice melts. Along with the discovery of skeletons, wooden artifacts, iron spearheads, leather slippers and rings were also unearthed. Radiocarbon dating had determined that the remains were from a distant point down south. All relics of South Asian ancestry were dated back to the Satya yuga. The studies of the skeletons revealed a common cause of death: blunt force trauma to the back of the head. In a study published in August 2019, the examination of DNA extracted from thirty-eight skeletons deduced that populations experienced mortal incidents at the lake aeons back.

Just then, Nagendra took out his worn-out metal bottle and drank from it. The faded colour made it appear old, but the light dancing around its curved edges made it shine as good as new. *He had been carrying that around in Mansarovar with the other camping equipment*, recalled LSD.

‘I have to go back to my chamber in the submarine and deposit our extraction from Mansarovar. I will be back in a few days. Meanwhile, you both stay here and be vigilant,’ he stuffed his bottle back into his bag and left for the submarine.

Vrishkapi continued striking Om while Ashwatthama dispensed a series of instructions from afar on how to defend himself, but Om couldn’t keep up and continued absorbing the brutal blows. A frustrated Ashwatthama stopped Vrishkapi and marched towards Om.

‘Why are you not following my instructions? Where is your concentration? We don’t have time, Om.’

‘And I thought that we were the only handful of men who had time,’ Om groaned, panting for air.

Om’s smug response annoyed Ashwatthama. ‘You do not understand. I have to—’

‘You are right! So help me understand. Give me the answers. Tell me clearly what is going on. There are a hundred questions hampering my attention, questions more pressing than this illogical training Parashurama has asked you to put me through.’

Ashwatthama signalled that Vrishkapi leave. Vrishkapi bowed his head to Ashwatthama, gave a friendly smile to Om and left.

Considering what Om was going through, Ashwatthama calmed himself down and spoke politely. ‘All right. Come, sit. Tell me, what’s bothering you?’

Om took a deep breath, apologized to Ashwatthama for his behaviour and sat beside him.

Om opened with, ‘What is going on here?’ Ashwatthama gathered himself before answering and said, ‘I don’t know as much as Parashurama, but I do know that Mrit Sanjeevani was stolen from you and it wasn’t done for the process of immortality.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The man who has the answers to many of your questions, if not all, must be on his way here with Parashurama. I promise that I will make sure you get all the answers that he has, but until then, my friend, please cooperate with me and please focus on your training. We are already running short of time and every minute wasted can amount to the loss of uncountable lives as well as our defeat. Can we please start again?’

Om nodded quietly.

‘Come with me.’ Ashwatthama stood up and began to walk.

Time crawled as LSD and Parimal stayed cooped up in their small hotel room at a location midway between the two lakes of Mansarovar and Roopkund. One morning, Parimal clenched his fist and felt no pain, so he decided to uncover the bandage wrapped around his palm. LSD came close and noticed the scar left behind by the healed wound. The mark resembled an unusual iris with a vertically elongated pupil inside.

She grasped his hand to take a better look and peering at it from different angles, she remarked, 'You know, this mark on your hand looks like a kind of eye deformity called coloboma. It's derived from a Greek word meaning 'defect'. Medical literature typically describes it as a keyhole-shaped defect. It's rare and occurs in less than one in 10,000 births. Apart from humans, this abnormality is also found in cats but for some snakes, it is a normal phenomenon. There is a specific breed called vine snakes. Vine snakes have this keyhole-shaped pupil that helps them focus and provides better binocular vision as compared to other snake species. They have enlarged, grooved teeth at the back of their mouths but they are not as poisonous as cobras, yet poisonous enough to subdue their prey.'

'How do you know all of this?' Parimal was amazed listening to her talk about it in such detail.

LSD was thrown off by his question. She fidgeted with her hands and looked away as she replied, 'Uh . . . I was once supposed to prepare a . . . a project report on snakes, in my childhood, although I personally don't like snakes. Coincidentally, this scar resembles the eyes of vine snakes . . . so I remembered.'

Parimal could sense that she was hiding something. 'You know you can tell me why you are here. Why are you working for Nagendra?'

'And why should I tell *you* that?'

'Look, we are working towards Nagendra's goal together. We have slept with each other . . . no matter how awkward it was in the beginning. There's a good chance you may have conceived my child, which will belong to us equally. This association seems to have transformed into a lifelong relationship already. We have time to strengthen it. We have to learn to trust each other and for that, we must know each other better,' Parimal reasoned.

LSD remained mum. Parimal sighed. *The only way to get her to open up would be to share my own story*, Parimal thought and so, he continued. He looked at LSD and admitted, 'You are right about the scar, it is not a coincidence. Vine snakes, found in the Indian subcontinent, do have keyhole-shaped pupils. This mark does have a reason, though. I had an eyeball with a keyhole-shaped pupil grouted on my palm when I was born.'

'That is . . . weird. You came out of the womb with closed fists and when you uncurled your hand, people found you holding an eyeball?' LSD grimaced in surprise and confusion.

‘Firstly, I wasn’t born surrounded by doctors and nurses the way you’re assuming. I was born with open fists, only in front of my father, while Nagendra waited outside the room to confirm that I indeed had the same eyeball on my palm. Every child born in our family is born with open fists and an iris with the keyhole-shaped pupil embedded within the palm, exactly the way eyes exist inside the eye socket. However, these eyeballs are connected to our veins and draw our blood to grow rapidly till they pop out of our hand. But these are not made up of tissues and cells, so don’t imagine them moving inside the palm and seeing things around. Within days, the eyeball matures and falls out, leaving behind a scar that heals over time and finally vanishes as the dead skin sheds over the years,’ Parimal explained.

‘So you shed skin too! And what happens to that eyeball?’ asked LSD suspiciously.

With a smile, Parimal replied, ‘Yes, I shed skin too, but not like snakes, as you are probably imagining. And also, the eyeball naturally disintegrates into sand particles after exactly nine days of popping out of the palm.’

‘Then why is it there? What purpose does it serve?’ was the next question from LSD.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Parimal, as if trying to close the topic.

‘What? So this has been happening for generations and no one has figured it out?’ LSD frowned in disappointment while Parimal smirked at her. She saw Parimal’s expression and thought that he was bluffing.

‘You’re just making this up, right? This is simply a story that you cooked up right now when I said that the scar in your palm looked like an eye,’ she glared at him.

‘No, I am not cooking up anything.’ Parimal’s words were genuine, but LSD had made up her mind already on her belief that Parimal was lying.

‘It’s pretty incredible; I do not believe you.’

Parimal stood there, wondering where to begin, while LSD narrowed her eyes at his face.

‘Maybe this will help. You see, you haven’t noticed one thing yet, LSD . . . I have no palm lines.’

Stunned, LSD scrutinized both his palms and realized that he really did not have any lines, not even on the hand without the scar.

‘I don’t have any palm lines because I don’t have a destiny. I was not making it up. I really don’t know what purpose the eyeball serves and why it destroys itself after nine days. But I want you to know that I’m telling the truth and that you can trust me.’

LSD still looked unconvinced and couldn’t meet his eyes.

‘So ... why are you here?’ asked LSD.

‘Because I have been ordered to,’ replied Parimal with a vague understanding of what she meant to learn about him. She reframed her question. ‘What has he promised you for all of this?’

‘Nothing!’ He averted his gaze.

LSD did not believe him and dug deeper with a gentler tone. ‘Then why are you serving him, Parimal?’

‘I am the outcome of the amalgamation of a boon and a curse. What I mean will require some explanation. Have you ever heard of Kadru?’

LSD wore a blank expression.

‘Seer Kashyap? Aghasur? Ashtavakra?’ Parimal listed a few other names from the tale to see if any of those rang a bell. ‘Well, if I’m reading your face right, that’s definitely a *no*.’ He understood that to explain his connection with Nagendra, he would have to take her to the very beginning.

‘My full name is Parimal Nair and I am a Nagavanshi. Like Chandravanshis^{*} are descendants of the moon, Suryavanshis^{*} of the sun and Agnivanshis of Agni[†], Nagavanshis belong to one of the many principal houses of the warrior–ruling class who descend from snakes. I am sorry that you don’t like snakes, but I am originally a snake inside this human body, LSD. Nagavanshis are known to be a snake-worshipping tribe of ancient India. The primary deity of the Nairs is Goddess Bhagavati, who is the patron goddess of war and fertility. The serpent is worshipped by Nair families as a guardian of the clan because we are believed to be a part of Kadru’s family tree and all snakes in the world are considered to be her children.

‘All of this started back in Satya yuga, when a seer named Kashyap married one of the granddaughters of Lord Brahma, named Kadru. For years, Kadru lived as the seer’s wife and tended to all his comforts. Happy with her devotion towards her duties, one day, Kashyap blessed her with a boon of her choice. Kadru asked for a thousand serpent children who would

be courageous. Kashyap granted the wish and Kadru became pregnant. After a long time, Kadru gave birth to one thousand eggs. The eggs were carefully incubated in jars with hot water, which kept them warm. After five hundred years, Kadru's eggs hatched and her sons came to life. The descendants of these sons are called Nagavanshis. Now you must be wondering how Nagendra fits into this picture.' Parimal waited for LSD's reaction. She just gave a slight nod.

'Nagendra owns my family's ancestry. My entire lineage owes its loyalty to Nagendra. Our loyalty towards him is the price we pay for our vision and our service to him is in exchange for a complete human body, to be able to live on land as humans do.' Parimal looked at LSD, who still seemed confused, so he went into the details.

'I am the proof of an old and famous tale of Dwapara yuga, from Lord Krishna's childhood. I come from the lineage of Aghasur. In Satya yuga, Aghasur, a demon, came across a seer named Ashtavakra, whose body was malformed in eight places, because of which he appeared extremely ugly and walked in a zigzag pattern. Aghasur made the mistake of laughing at the handicapped seer and ridiculed him for his looks and gait. Insulted, Ashtavakra cursed Aghasur to turn into one of the ugliest serpents, as they can only crawl in a zigzag pattern. Frightened by the curse, Aghasur fell at the seer's feet and begged for forgiveness. Ashtavakra's wrath subsided but he couldn't revoke his curse, so he told Aghasur that at the end of Dwapara yuga, Lord Vishnu's incarnation would liberate him of this bane by killing his serpent body and ridding him of all his sins.

'Aghasur waited for thousands of years as a serpent for the reincarnation of Vishnu and in the meantime, became one of King Kansa's trusted generals. Kansa, who wanted to kill Krishna, was the brother of Krishna's mother, Devki. He made many attempts on Krishna's life, beginning at Krishna's birth, but failed. In those attempts, two of Aghasur's siblings, Putana and Bakasur, lost their lives at the hands of the child. Kansa then ordered Aghasur to kill his nephew, who was also the reason for Putana and Bakasur's deaths. Unaware of the fact that the boy he was sent to kill was the very incarnation of Vishnu, he took the form of an 8 mile-long serpent, camouflaging his open mouth with a mountain to swallow Krishna when he would step in. Instead of Krishna, all his cowherd friends entered Aghasur's mouth, mistaking it for a cavern. To save them, Krishna entered the

serpent's mouth too and then enlarged the size of his own body. As a counterattack, the demon too extended his size until he couldn't breathe any more. Suppressed by Krishna's strength, the demon's life force could not pass through any outlet, and therefore, it finally burst out through Aghasur's eye sockets. His keyhole-shaped eyes rolled about frantically and then popped out. Thus, the demon-serpent met his end through Krishna, and Ashtavakra's curse was lifted.

'But when he had set out to kill Krishna, he had left his pregnant serpentine wife, Sarputi, in Paatal city. After Aghasur's death, his wife gave birth to a son named Lopaksh, who was half serpent-half human. Because Aghasur's eyes had popped out before his son's birth, Lopaksh was born blind, with plain skin in place of the eye sockets. Lopaksh, the child who was neither a snake nor a human, was cast out by the city of Paatal. Sarputi left Paatal with her infant in search of someone who had the ability to cure her blind child. Years passed as Lopaksh grew old and Sarputi grew older, hiding and wandering on land with her sightless half man-half snake son, looking for a remedy, till she finally met a man with immense supernatural powers who could grant any boon and treat any illness by mere chanting. The man was sitting near a lake beside a black lion flaunting a shiny and rich black mane. The lion sat up majestically, enough to scare away the best of beasts. But when the man caressed the back of the lion, it purred softly like a cat being stroked by its master. The man called it Kaalo banthan, as it was really his pet!'

LSD interrupted in realization, 'You are the successor of Lopaksh. I know about him. The man Sarputi met was Nagendra himself, who was seeking the stolen Mrit Sanjeevani created by the demi-god Dhanvantari. By the time Sarputi met him, her desperation was so intense that she was ready to pay any price. Nagendra said that he could give the boy both, the vision and the complete body of a human, after which he would never have to return to his serpent form and could live on land, but in return, Sarputi would give him an oath which would have to be honoured by all her successors. If anyone ever tried to break this oath, then the complete lineage would be doomed.

'For the well-being of her son, the desperate serpentine mother gave consent without even asking what the oath was. Nagendra used his powers and the blind Lopaksh saw his mother for the first time at the ripe age of

thirty-two. Indebted to Nagendra, Lopaksh touched his feet and thanked him for the favour.' Suddenly, LSD became conscious of her rambling and stopped.

'How did you know all of this?' Parimal was amused.

'Well, actually, Nagendra used to tell me this as a bedtime story,' LSD replied and then fell silent again.

'It was not a favour but a barter,' Parimal continued. 'Nagendra reminded Sarputi of her promise and told Lopaksh that now, his mother would take the oath and all her successors, including him, would keep it.'

'What was the oath?' asked LSD curiously, and Parimal disappointedly replied, 'The oath is what connects me to Nagendra till date. Sarputi came forward and said, "O seer! I am ready to take the oath and abide by it, so will my son Lopaksh and his successors after that. Tell me what we must do to return the favour." Lopaksh stood by his mother and watched silently.

'Nagendra said, "First of all, Sarputi, you will never be able to return this favour because I will never let you. You worship the patron goddess of war and fertility, Goddess Bhagavati. From now onwards, you will worship her only for war, as Lopaksh and every adult after him will have only one child, after which they will lose their fertility forever. Every child will serve me selflessly, without any choice, till death, and only I shall hold the authority to free them from this oath. If any one of your successors even thinks of breaching this vow, they shall see in their dreams that their predecessors have been cast out from heaven and the living have returned to their original form of half-serpents with no vision. As a warning, in their dreams, they will be forced to go back to the pits of the earth or die without an heir, thus destroying the lineage and making all their past sacrifices futile. All of this shall become their reality if the one warned by their dreams still chooses to betray me. Your vision and your human body are the rewards you get for serving me, which may be retracted whenever you cease to serve." Thus, every time a successor takes over the oath, it relieves the ancestors forever, transforming them into a blind old snake for the remainder of their lives.'

'How can you be certain that the oath is binding and that it's not just an anecdote passed down through the generations?'

'Because I have seen a man losing his eyesight and turning into a snake before I cremated him. It was my father,' Parimal retorted. 'We are

transformed into snakes when he relieves us, passing the same oath to the next in our clan. I have seen my father turning into a blind snake when I undertook the oath. That was the fate of all my ancestors and it will be mine as well as of our child. We come with open fists, no palm lines, no destiny, and leave the world without hands, in the very form that we evade all our lives. Now you know why we don't have lines on our palms—because we have not been created by gods and we never deserved hands.'

'And the dream? What about the dream? Did you see it too?' LSD's curiosity was piqued.

'No! I have seen enough to not think about betraying my lord in my wildest dreams.' Parimal shook his head angrily. 'Now, what's your story?' he finally asked LSD.

Before he could question her further, LSD raised a finger, signalling him to be quiet as she heard footsteps approaching their hotel room.

They straightened in alarm and retrieved their 92 FS Beretta handguns. Nagendra was back. He entered to find them on guard and ordered them, 'Pack your bags. We are leaving now.'

He had returned sooner than they had estimated and Parimal's question to LSD remained unanswered. They also wondered why they were leaving so early, because the next crescent moon was still days away, but neither had the audacity to raise the query. They knew that they would get their answers when the time was right. Soon, their bags were packed and LSD was about to swing hers on her back when Nagendra approached her, handing her a pregnancy test kit in front of Parimal. It was obvious what Nagendra wanted to know, so she took it and went to the washroom. Parimal silently observed the orders being followed. Nagendra gestured to Parimal to carry LSD's bag too and walk out with him. In a few minutes, LSD joined them and took her bag back from Parimal, looked at Nagendra and nonchalantly uttered, 'I am pregnant.'

In no time, they were marching towards their next destination in search of the second word.



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Chapter 6

Nine

Upon a rock were placed multiple arrows with varied heads. The leftmost was zigzag in shape, the one beside it looked like molten metal, the third in line had a droplet-shaped transparent head while the fourth head looked like a beak. Another beautiful metal arrow had numerous weapons intricately carved all over it.

Om stood in front of the assortment as Ashwatthama explained the powers of the divine arrows. Lifting the arrow with the molten metal head, he said, ‘The other day you learnt about Vayuastra, which had the potential to create hurricanes vicious enough to blow away an army. Now, the one I’m holding is called Agneyastra. When shot at the target, it emits flames which are inextinguishable by normal means. The Agneyastra is the divine weapon of Agni. It can melt anything. It is so formidable that it can wipe out every trace of the enemy from the face of the earth. It can not only burn an entire army but can also melt guns, tanks, missiles and flying jets if aimed and chanted upon rightly. The volume of fire, the intensity of heat and the potency of the flames depends on the powers yielded by the person, their concentration and chanting prowess.’

Ashwatthama then picked up another arrow that was zigzag in shape with a snake head at its tip. ‘This is Naagpasha. As its appearance and name suggest, this weapon grants you the power to invoke snakes to attack your enemies. Upon impact, this weapon binds the target in coils of venomous snakes which tighten their grip till the foe’s bones are crushed and there remains no breath of life left in them. In the age of the Ramayana, it was used against Ram and Lakshman by Indrajit, the son of the demon king Ravana.’

Next was the one that had several other weapons carved on its body. ‘This is Narayanastra. On the sixteenth day of the war of Kurukshetra, I was the one to propel it with the intent to kill the Pandavas, but Lord Krishna’s

advice saved them from a definite death. This weapon belongs to Narayana (Vishnu). It is an inimitable celestial weapon because when fired, it simultaneously launches a thunderous outburst of millions of deadly weapons like *chakra*, mace and ultra-sharp arrows that wreak absolute destruction and overpower the target. Whoever tries to resist it is inevitably destroyed as the intensity of the showering armaments increases with resistance. It is destructive enough to slay anyone or anything. No obstruction is capable of hindering its strike and that's why it can't be countered by another weapon. When I shot this at the Pandavas, they didn't know that the only way to stop it is through total surrender, but it was Lord Krishna who advised them to lay down their weapons and submit completely to the Narayanastra.'

Then Ashwatthama gripped the arrow with a transparent water droplet on its tip. 'This is Varunastra. This one is commonly used to counter the Agneyastra. Launching this arrow would release torrential volumes of water.' Moving on to the arrow with a beak shape at its tip, Ashwatthama added, 'And this one is Garudastra, a weapon that can defend against Naagpasha and Nagastra. Garuda is a bird-like creature that is the serpent's predator. Ever vigilant and agile, Garuda is the steed of Lord Vishnu. When the Garudastra is released from the bow, it unleashes a hefty flock of these creatures to attack the venomous snakes of Naagpasha and Nagastra.'

Before Ashwatthama could pick up another weapon, Om saw Parashurama approaching them. Walking beside him was the sage that he had gone to Amarnath to awaken. Ashwatthama turned to see what had grabbed Om's attention. Seeing Parashurama and the sage, Ashwatthama bowed.

'Blessing you with *ayushmaan bhavah* (a long life), Ashwatthama, would be no better than shining a torch at the sun,' said the sage and instead, blessed him with, '*Vijayi bhavah* (May you be victorious)!'.

Following Ashwatthama, Om also bowed to the sage, who didn't need to be introduced, for the two had a connection from aeons ago. The man standing in front of Om was none other than Ved Vyasa. During the age of the Mahabharata, upon his request, Om had acted as a stand-in for his son Vidur. Ved Vyasa had wanted to keep at least one of his sons safe and away from the war and thus had replaced him with Om on the frontline. No one knew what the real Vidur looked like as he was not raised in the kingdom

with the rest of his brothers and hence, it was easy to make the switch. As sage Vyasa locked eyes with Om, an unspoken understanding passed between them. Vyasa gave him a slight nod, as if thanking him for his role in the past, as Om vanished after the war and Ved Vyasa never wrote the end of Vidur that made his end questionable.

‘It is great to have you here, Om.’ Om had no idea how to reciprocate or behave while meeting the third of the seven immortals after ages. Before he could say anything, Parashurama spoke. ‘Sage Vyasa! As you wanted, here stand all three of us together. Please explain—why has Mansarovar been destroyed?’

Sage Vyasa shared a sombre look with the three men in front of him. ‘The destruction of Mansarovar is not a complete event, dear Parashurama. It is merely the beginning of a convoluted plan that is almost impossible to carry out.’

‘Plan! What plan? Whose plan?’ Ashwatthama spoke in agitation.

‘I can answer the *what* but I don’t know *whose*,’ replied Vyasa.

‘Maybe the answer to the *what* can lead us to the *who*,’ Om chimed in, unsure if he could even share his inputs.

‘Maybe,’ Vyasa reflected.

‘So, what is the impossible plan?’ asked Parashurama.

‘One of the oldest prophecies was declared in a verse that was intentionally hidden and over time, grew so old that we thought it was already lost forever from all Hindu scriptures, but Dhanvantari saved it. A verse that spelled, “In nine consecutive old moons, starting from the month of Magh, one shall succeed in extracting nine hidden words from nine mysterious locations, which would function as the key to a mysterious door.”’

‘O seer! Kindly enlighten us with the complete knowledge of what this means,’ said Ashwatthama with joined hands.

‘We will be weak in comparison to him because together, we are not nine in number, but eight. The number nine holds great significance in our world. Starting from the life of a foetus in the mother’s womb before birth, to the death of the human being, after which the family must calm and pacify the Navagraha (nine planets), everything revolves around the number nine.’

‘The sum of the digits of every yuga, for some obscure reason, is nine. When calculated in human years, Satya yuga lasts for 14,40,000 years. Treta yuga is 10,80,000 years, Dwapara yuga is 7,20,000 years and Kali yuga is 3,60,000 human years. The individual sum of all the digits in each year is nine.

‘Hindus have eighteen Puranas, 108 Mahapuranas (Upanishads), the Mahabharat has eighteen chapters, the battle lasted eighteen days, the Gita has eighteen chapters and the Bhagavata Purana, 18,000 verses. The sum of all these digits again equals nine.

‘In the Vaisheshika branch of Hindu philosophy, there are nine universal substances or elements: earth, water, air, fire, sky, time, space, soul and mind.

‘We worship the Navagraha, the nine planets. We celebrate Navaratri, which is a nine-day festival dedicated to the nine forms of Durga—the Navadurga; each day is associated with the celebration of one of these incarnations.

‘Hindu astrology recognizes nine gems, called the Navaratna, meaning nine jewels, one to influence every planet: ruby for the sun, pearl for the moon, red coral for Mars, emerald for Mercury, yellow sapphire for Jupiter, diamond for Venus, blue sapphire for Saturn, hessonite for the ascending lunar node and cat’s eye for the descending lunar node.

‘In Hindu aesthetics, there are nine kinds of rasa. Rasa, meaning juice or essence, is a concept that offers nine different expressions to help describe the intangibility of emotions that can be evoked within the reader or audience through any visual, literary or musical work.

‘The fight between gods and demons for earth is as old as the earth itself and to deny the demons victory, Lord Vishnu has taken nine incarnations till date.

‘The Bhagavata Purana describes an infinite cycle of four great ages, from Satya yuga to Kali yuga, during which the principles of religion, dharma and virtue gradually deteriorate.

‘In the Satya yuga, dharma and virtue are innate. In Treta, they are sought and attained. In Dwapara, they are intensely provoked and agitated, and in Kali yuga, they perish. At the end of Kali yuga, the principles of religion, or the occupational duties of humanity, will dissipate entirely. Kali yuga began 5121 years ago, the sum of which again amounts to nine. It is meant to end

in the year 4,28,899 CE, which means, as of 2020, it has 4,26,879 years remaining, the sum of which is also nine. But what makes the year 2020 particularly perilous in the fourth yuga is not the number nine but four, which is the sum of the digits of the year 2020 and also of the year 4,28,899 CE, the purported end of the last yuga. Someone is trying to advance this anticipated conclusion to 2020 to terminate the fourth yuga 4,26,879 years early. Everything will end in this year if in nine old moons, starting from the month of (January–February), one succeeds in extracting nine souls hidden in nine mysterious locations, which, once freed, would follow the ninth immortal against the remaining eight of us. I believe that “the lost text” was the hidden books of Mrit Sanjeevani and someone has figured out that every ninth page of the book has the route and the procedure to reach and extract the souls that are camouflaged as words. The compilation of all the words will form a verse. I believe that someone is trying to make this prophecy come true and liberate the demons through the integration of the words that are scattered and protected in mysterious places all over India.’

‘So, where exactly is that door?’ enquired Parashurama.

‘No one knows that. But Parashurama, I can say with utmost certainty that the upcoming eight months are extremely crucial.

‘There are twelve months in the Hindu lunar calendar. The nine old moons span nine months, with one old moon occurring every month. Calculating from Magh onwards, which begins in the second half of January, according to the Gregorian calendar, we have already lost one. The destruction of the pious lake of Mansarovar is a sign. We are now left with barely twelve days before the crescent moon of the next month, (February–March), which begins in the second half of February. This will be followed by 252 days divided into eight more months of (March–April), (April–May), (May–June), (June–July), (July–August), (August–September), (September–October) and (October–November).’

‘Ashwatthama! Call Vrishkapi and Milarepa,’ ordered Parashurama. Obeying the command, Ashwatthama left with Om immediately.

As they departed, Parashurama turned towards Vyasa. ‘Where are these mysterious places protecting the words of the verse?’

‘Right now, I can tell you about only three places,’ replied Ved Vyasa. He also revealed that while Dhanvantari was dictating the books of Mrit

Sanjeevani to Sushruta, he, Ved Vyasa, had heard them. ‘The rest will have to be decoded further from the book. Moreover, the sequence written in the book is unknown to me,’ the sage added.

‘We will work something out for that too. First, we need to know the locations,’ Parashurama mused.

On the other side, Ashwatthama and Om were headed back to the abode of Vrishkapi. While crossing the cave of light, Ashwatthama voiced his thoughts. ‘Nine! Never thought about nine the way Ved Vyasa explained it.’

Since Om was mulling over the same information, he added, ‘Yes! Perhaps the number nine is a mysterious number for mathematicians too. They are obsessed with nine because of its tricky, almost magical qualities. I wonder if all of this is connected.’

‘Mathematicians! How?’ Ashwatthama mused.

‘There are several reasons. To begin with, nine is the first composite lucky number, the first composite odd number and the only single-digit composite odd number. It is the only positive perfect power that is one more than another positive perfect power, according to Mihăilescu’s theorem.

‘Moreover, if you multiply nine by any whole number except zero, and repeatedly add the digits of the answer until it’s just one digit, you will end up with nine. For example, 2 multiplied by 9 is 18. 1 when added to 8 is 9. Take a bigger number, say, 5,78,329. When multiplied by nine, the answer is 52,04,961. And $5 + 2 + 0 + 4 + 9 + 6 + 1$ is 27, and $2 + 7$ is 9. Conversely, if the digits of a number add up to nine or a multiple of nine, then the number itself must be a multiple of nine.

‘If a number is divided by the amount of nines corresponding to its number of digits, the number turns into a repeating decimal. For example, 274 divided by 999 is equal to 0.274274274274.

‘Furthermore, the formula for determining the sum of the interior angles of a polygon is $n-2(180)$, where n is the number of sides. The sum of all angles of any polygon will always equal 9. A nine-sided polygon is $9-2(180)$ or $7(180)$ or 1260. $1+2+6+0 = 9$. This is true for a polygon with any number of sides.

‘The same applies to circles, triangles, rectangles, pentagons, hexagons and heptagons.

‘A full circle is 360 degrees— $3+6+0 = 9$.

‘A semicircle is 180 degrees— $1+8+0 = 9$.

‘A 90-degree circle— $9+0 = 9$.

‘A 45-degree circle— $4+5 = 9$.

‘A 22.5-degree circle— $2+2+5 = 9$.

‘For any angle in a circle, the resulting angle always reduces to 9.

‘For a 180-degree triangle, $1+8+0 = 9$.

‘For a 360-degree rectangle, $3+6+0 = 9$.

‘For a pentagon, $5+4+0 = 9$.

‘For a hexagon, $7+2+0 = 9$.

‘For a heptagon, $9+0+0 = 9$.

‘Similarly, the diameter of the moon is 2160 miles, which again adds up to 9.

‘The diameter of the earth is 7920 miles, that adds up to 9: $7+9+2+0 = 18$, $1+8 = 9$.

‘The diameter of the sun is 8,64,000 miles, $8+6+4 = 18$, $1+8 = 9$.

‘Not only that, the speed of light is 1,86,282 mps, which means $1+8+6+2+8+2 = 27$, $2+7 = 9$.

‘It is believed that the number nine governs space and time too. It plays an important role in earth’s axis. For example, if minutes are calculated at different levels, the end is always nine.

‘5,25,600 minutes in a year: $5+2+5+6+0 = 18$, $1+8 = 9$.

‘4,32,000 minutes in a month: $4+3+2+0+0+0 = 9$.

‘1,00,800 minutes in a week: $1+0+0+8+0+0 = 9$.

‘1440 minutes in a day: $1+4+4+0 = 9$.

‘There are other interesting patterns involving multiples of nine. For instance,

$$12345679 \times 9 = 111111111$$

$$12345679 \times 18 = 222222222$$

$$12345679 \times 81 = 999999999$$

‘This works for all the multiples of nine. $N = 3$ is the only other $n > 1$ such that a number is divisible by n if and only if its digital root (sum of digits) is divisible by n . In base- N , the divisors of $N - 1$ have this property. Another consequence of 9 being $10 - 1$ is that it is also a Kaprekar number.’

As Om finished explaining, Ashwatthama chuckled, ‘Some of it bounced right off my head, but it is interesting to know that the number nine holds

such significance in mathematics too.'

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Chapter 7

The Curse and the Cure

As Prithvi took a break, Mrs Batra intervened, saying, ‘I heard the news on television on my deathbed and it was the same month, the month of February. I remember when, after a deep slumber of six hours, Tej suddenly jolted awake, feeling utterly dazed. Out of exhaustion, he had fallen asleep right beside my bed in his chair. The sound of the monitor flatlining woke him. He sat up straight to check on me, and in a flash, everything hit him like a relentless tsunami. I was dead. The experiment had failed. Despite being an expert, he was unable to save the one thing that mattered most in his life. His head twinged with the slightest movement. He gripped his chair for support and arose with a wince. He tugged the sheet up and covered my face, his eyes glistening with mournful tears.

‘He was lost; he didn’t know how to go ahead from that point. Should he start making arrangements for my cremation and last rites? Should he call his family members? But first, he needed an Ibuprofen for his pounding headache. He went downstairs to the lab and found a strip kept in one of the cabinets. As he turned to go back upstairs, he heard some scuttling and a thud. Tej was not expecting it and almost jumped up in shock.

‘The source of the sound seemed to be behind the refrigerator. He gingerly stepped towards it and when he bent to peek underneath, Tej’s eyes widened in disbelief. It was Pooh! He was nibbling on something. The guinea pig saw him and tried to scurry away, but Tej grabbed hold of him and pulled him out. He peered at him in amusement and then looked up at the roof above, where my body lay. The lost hope was rekindled. Tej rushed back to check on me, holding Pooh in his hands. While ascending the stairs, he began to hear the distant beeps of the heart monitor. His own heart pulsated harder with every step he took. He entered the room. The monitors were displaying my vitals; the lines were no longer flat. I was breathing. His heart was thumping so loudly against his chest it could be heard across

the room. It was happening! I was recovering! Tej came closer and sat beside me. As I opened my eyes, he clasped my hand between both of his and placed his quivering lips on my knuckles. I was not aware then that I had come back from the dead. The drowsiness of the sleeping pills was still too strong for me to fully grasp what was happening.'

'The locations are scattered all over the country. Mansarovar is already compromised, which leaves us with eight cryptic destinations. The ones I've deciphered so far are Tejo Mahalaya of the Agravana, the Skeleton Lake and the crater in Bheemkund,' Ved Vyasa said to Ashwatthama and Om, who were back with Vrishkapi.

'What are these places? Where are they situated?' Vrishkapi's eyes widened as he had never stepped out of Mount Kailash.

Om answered this question on behalf of everyone present there. 'Agravana is an old name of Agra in Uttar Pradesh, Tejo Mahalaya is what we know today as the Taj Mahal. The Skeleton Lake is a peculiar lake in Roopkund, Uttarakhand. Bheemkund is a mysterious water reservoir situated in Madhya Pradesh. A natural water tank that is sure to satiate the ones who have a strong penchant to dig deep about mysterious places.'

'How do you know that?' Milarepa abruptly asked Ved Vyasa.

'Sound is energy that continues floating in the universe. I can hear every sound ever made and every word ever spoken and these three places are what I have managed to identify in relation to what we are trying to find,' the sage answered calmly.

'The duration between one crescent moon and the next gives them ample time to reach any of these destinations. How can we know where his next raid is going to be?' Milarepa thought aloud.

Ved Vyasa looked equally pensive about the challenge confronting them. 'I am not aware of a travel sequence to be followed, yet there might be one.'

'If you, wise sage, do not know of a travel sequence, then the possibility of there being one is highly unlikely,' Parashurama remarked.

'Vrishkapi, I want you to keep a check on Roopkund. Out of all the probable places, it is the only one devoid of humans. However, you must be immensely wary of being spotted as your burly physique is hard to miss. And the rest of us have to remain as covert as possible.' Vrishkapi was delighted to take up this responsibility as he would get to step out of

Gyanganj and see novel landscapes. ‘Milarepa, you go to the Taj Mahal. Make sure to wear clothes that cover you and use your powers to make your green skin inconspicuous. It is a populous area. You should be able to blend in with the crowd conveniently. And I shall go to Bheemkund. It’s in central India; they won’t be able to cross that frontier from there.’

Parashurama’s voice deepened as he spoke, ‘The next crescent moon is three nights away. We need to be in our respective assigned locations on or before that night. Vrishkapi and Milarepa! Remember, once we are out of Kailash, amid humans, we shall refrain from using any powers unless it is the last resort. This means, Vrishkapi, do not fly or roar. Milarepa, do not use any magical powers and I shall avoid using any ancient weapons. Ved Vyasa, I request you to gather as much information as you can about Nagendra’s mission through your meditation.’

Everyone got to work promptly. Om followed Parashurama and asked, ‘What are your orders for me?’

Parashurama’s gaze shifted from Om to Ashwatthama and back. ‘Why do you think Ashwatthama has not been assigned to protect any location? Because you need to be protected as well. The only wall between Nagendra and his immortality is your blood and you are not equipped to save it for yourself right now. Try finishing your training soon.’ Ashwatthama and Om shared a glance as Parashurama left.

Meanwhile, Nagendra and his team crossed the deep virgin forests, gurgling brooks, beckoning meadows and witnessed the stunning, mighty white peaks of the Himalayan ranges again on their way. They faced the challenges of zigzag trails and the biting cold winds under the billions of stars sprinkled in the majestic night sky, discovering the most primeval of the Himalayan oak and rhododendron forests, with the latter in bloom. They trekked towards the water body perched in the lap of the snow-clad Mount Trishul, situated at an altitude of 16,499 feet. The Roopkund glacial lake was close—he could see it now from a distance. They were almost at their destination, three days before the crescent moon.

Nagendra turned towards LSD and Parimal, who were right behind him, and pointed towards the frozen lake of Roopkund. ‘What you see is called the Mystery Lake, known for the human skeletons lying at the bottom of the lake, which are distinctly visible when the snow melts.’

Nagendra retrieved the same ancient round metal bottle from his bag. Staring at the mystery lake of Roopkund, he held the bottle in one hand and said, caressing LSD's stomach with a wide grin on his face, 'The thought of a new life at the very place where I had killed a few so-called good men is strangely pleasant.'

LSD could see the scattered bones from where they stood and could not stop herself asking, 'So you know the real story of this massacre!'

Nagendra closed his eyes and smiled cynically, basking in the memory of his wickedness. 'Now that you have what I need inside you, you deserve to be answered. Among all the theories regarding these skeletons, the one that is true is that I slaughtered all these people. The finest memory of this place etched in my mind is of dragging the corpse of the man I loathed the most after killing him with this bottle.'

'Who was he?'

'LSD, you will need a few more lifetimes to know me completely. Wait for them,' Nagendra smirked.

'A few lifetimes! As if she would remember all of this in her next life and he will answer it then,' thought Parimal, who simply stood there. Parimal looked silently at them. With a failed attempt at concealing her displeasure beneath a half-hearted smile, LSD asked another question to change the topic, 'What are our orders?' Parimal also had questions, but this time they were not for Nagendra and LSD could sense it.

'These skeletons are not lying here without a reason. These men were under an oath that I was unaware of when I murdered them. Their remnants scattered here are still bound to that oath and hence they continue to fulfil it. They vowed to protect the very word we have come here to steal. From the month of (September-end) to (February-end), the lake is frozen, making it impossible to dive in and search for the word. This is when the skeletons sleep beneath the frozen lake as the word is secured by the ice. In the remaining months, when it thaws, the skeletons awaken to guard the word. We are in the month of , so the layers of ice are brittle and melting. The skeletons, therefore, are semiconscious and unprepared for any raids. That gives us a slight advantage over them for the time being.

'I don't know where the word is. I don't know how they will attack us to defend the word, but the pages of the book have taught me how to find it.

When the snow melts, the skeletons wake up and come out, guarding the word. This word was travelling to Dhanvantari through someone but thanks to me, he never reached his destination. The word remains in his head till date. Though I know this word, according to the process, I have to drink it to activate it. Submerged at the deepest point in the lake is his skull, shielded by ice for six months and by the remaining skeletons for the remainder of the year. We are in that transitional period when both, the ice and the skeletons, are vulnerable. One is losing its strength by thawing and another has not completely amassed the vigour to fight. We have seventy-two hours to find that skull and extract the next word before the frozen ice gradually melts to water and the skeletons rise to their full power.'

LSD and Parimal started taking out all the gadgets to do the needful, which included a GPR (ground penetrating radar), a CO2 laser and their weapons. LSD wore a Bluetooth headset and handed two others to Parimal and Nagendra to aid instant communication.

While they were establishing their communication links in Roopkund, Om, having lost all contact and communication with the outside world, stood solitary at the edge of Mount Kailash. Staring blankly at the destroyed Mansarovar, he mourned the horrendous death of Dhanvantari and resented himself for losing Mrit Sanjeevani to Nagendra. The sound of approaching footsteps drew him out of his bitter reverie. He turned to see Milarepa walking up to him. Om's sombre expression changed to one of distress upon seeing Dhanvantari's killer.

'You didn't leave for the Taj Mahal?'

'Yes, I am just about to, and meeting you is the last thing I have to do before leaving.'

Om chose to stay silent, his eyes unwilling to meet Milarepa's. He was devastated and furious, and he wanted Milarepa to know that.

'Om, I know how you feel about Dhanvantari's loss. I know that you blame me and hate me for his death and that's natural, but you need to know that what I did to Dhanvantari was my faithful obedience to his command. He was suffering in captivity. He was much older than the last time you had seen him, and was constantly inflicted with torment. I am sure you know what happens to a body starved of sunlight. He was confined in the dark, where not even a flimsy ray of sunlight had entered for years. He had lost track of time completely. He wasn't alive; he was barely surviving.

I didn't kill him, Om. I liberated him of his woes because he urged me to. He told me to first release him and then reach Kailash, seek Parashurama and tell him about you.'

Om's face remained passive, unmoved by everything he was hearing, and Milarepa let out a helpless sigh. 'I am sorry; that was the best I could have done for him and for you.'

Milarepa then trudged towards the steep fall to join Parashurama and Vrishkapi, who were already on their way to their respective destinations.

Om was disappointed at Parashurama's decision. He was supposed to stay here and do nothing. This state was nearly universal, though, as nearly the whole world was locked down at the time because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was March 2020. The best thing one could have done to save the world at the time was simply remain indoors. Ashwatthama could see Om's frustration and tried to divert his attention. 'I know how you feel right now. I have endured this feeling of helplessness for centuries, hopelessly wandering in the jungles with pus oozing from my forehead and a never-healing leprosy consuming my body due to Lord Krishna's curse.' Om, too, wished to divert his attention from the thoughts that were consuming him and so he participated, questioning Ashwatthama.

'There have been reports of people claiming they have spotted you around the River Narmada with wounds all over your body. It is said that you will receive salvation at the hands of Kalki, Vishnu's tenth incarnation. How much of it is the truth? Another question I often mulled over was how you broke the curse.'

'I didn't. Parashurama got me out of it. That is why I suggest you have faith, obey and follow Parashurama and yes, it is true that Kalki will be the one to grant me moksha,' replied Ashwatthama. That answer led to another question from Om.

'Parashurama broke the curse of Lord Krishna! What happened afterwards?' Another question led to another answer and thus Ashwatthama took Om through his past.

'Years passed. Krishna and his brother, Balrama, left the mortal realm. All the Kauravas and the remaining warriors from the Mahabharata era passed away. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti retired to the forest and perished in a forest fire. You, as Vidur, vanished. The Pandavas experienced a deep sense of emptiness after Krishna's departure, and so they handed

over the kingdom to Arjuna's grandson Parikshit. With Draupadi, the Pandavas left for the forest, never to return.

‘All this while, I continued to wander till I was told about the ashram of Parashurama in Prag tirtha, now renamed Prayagraj. Parashurama has been the guru of three of the mightiest warriors of the Mahabharata—Bhishma Pitamah, Surya Putra Karna and my father, Guru Dronacharya. It was suggested to me that Guru Parashurama might sympathize with me and guide me on the path of salvation as I was the son of one of his most famous prodigies. With the hope of getting rid of my cursed body, I crawled along, searching for Parashurama's ashram for months.

‘After arriving at his ashram somehow and waiting for a few more months, I finally met Parashurama. By then, he had already learnt about me and my deeds and bluntly refused to help, ordering me to leave immediately. He had passed his verdict, but I implored him to save me for the sake of Dronacharya, who had worshipped him until his last breath. I told him that the wrath that had blinded me into the arms of revenge was a consequence of the unethical murder of his disciple and my father, Dronacharya, by the Pandavas. I urged him to believe that my love for his prodigy was similar to his love for my father; that Parashurama was like a father to him. Eventually, Parashurama realized my love and devotion towards my father and understood the reason for my revenge. He promised to help me.’

‘But you were cursed by Lord Krishna himself. How can anybody lift such a curse?’

Ashwatthama closed his eyes and recited with great praise and reverence.

Continuing to explain the meaning of the Sanskrit verse, Ashwatthama said, ‘This is a verse from *Guru Gita* written by Ved Vyasa. *Guru Gita* describes a conversation between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, when Parvati asks Shiva to enlighten her about the guru and liberation. As an answer to Parvati's question, Shiva recites this verse, which means that if the disciple

is cursed by the gods, the guru can protect and liberate the disciple. A guru can protect the disciple from even *kaal* (death) and from the fear of death. But if the guru himself curses the disciple, then the disciple gradually becomes feeble, eventually attains destruction, and even the gods cannot save such a disciple from such a curse.

‘Dronacharya was not only my father but my guru as well and Parashurama is the guru of my guru. Everything that I learnt from my father was bestowed upon him by Parashurama, and was ultimately passed on to me. Thus, Parashurama was my guru as well.

‘Parashurama then told me that he could not grant me salvation and release me from Lord Krishna’s curse completely, but he could relieve me of my wounds, aches and leprosy till Kalki arrives to grant me salvation. In the following years, Parashurama gradually cured me of leprosy and all other illnesses. The day finally dawned in Parashurama’s hut when I was half-rid of the bane and all the accompanying misery. That was the day I witnessed something so incredible that I would never want to face it again in my life.’ As Ashwatthama fell silent, his eyes flashed with absolute terror and he was so lost in horror that Om had to bring him back by asking him what he saw. An immortal warrior as valiant as Ashwatthama seemed petrified by a mere reminiscence. Om noticed Ashwatthama gulp the lump in his throat before continuing, ‘I saw Ashwatthama standing right in front of me.’

‘What do you mean?’ Om furrowed his brows.

‘I saw a man who looked exactly like me, with the pus and the leprosy, the pain and the hatred, the strength and the purpose, the power and the revenge. He was a devil who held all the antagonism prevalent in my body, heart and soul. He was standing right in front of my eyes, trying to get back inside me. I felt vulnerable and frightened, as if I were a child thrown in front of a famished crocodile. Never in my life had I experienced such terror. He was striving to grasp and overpower me with his rage and dominance, but Parashurama did not let that happen. He asked me to leave the hut.’

‘Who was he?’ Om’s mouth was agape in absolute confusion.

‘Parashurama had split me into two selves, which created a lookalike. The good in me had the upper hand until my father was killed and the evil of anger and revenge overruled that part of me after his death. When I was

separated from my negative alter ego, I felt weak and the lookalike who stood opposite me was twice as powerful. I was a mere body recovering from illness and was simply no match for him. Every person has both good and evil dwelling in them as we are in between the first yuga, which was the most pious phase of Satya yuga, and the worst phase of the end of Kali yuga with no trace of optimism. That is why some are directed by good and others by evil. The dominant part within a person dictates their character. But it's been millennia now and I have regained that strength in all these years by being with Parashurama ever since as his disciple.' Ashwatthama smiled softly.

'And what happened to your negative self? Where is he?'

'I don't know. I tried to ask about him indirectly at times but one day, Parashurama told me sternly that I don't need to know about him. I never tried to enquire about him ever again,' Ashwatthama concluded.

'Today, for the first time, I have seen fear in your eyes, Ashwatthama,' Om looked away as he confessed.

'Yes! Because he still haunts me. He walked and talked just like me and he possessed all the knowledge and power I had back then. The only difference between us was that he had bloodshot eyes filled with malevolence and vengeance.'

While Ashwatthama and Om were knitting a bond between themselves, Parimal was preoccupied with breaking the ice to reach as deep as he could. LSD continued to examine everything beneath the water through the GPR that was scanning the mystery lake inch by inch, unaware that Vrishkapi was closing in on the spot with each step. He walked alongside Milarepa and Parashurama.

'Can I ask you for a favour, Milarepa?' Vrishkapi said.

'Yes?' responded Milarepa humbly.

'I am a little confused here. Will you please correct me if I have misunderstood anything?' said Vrishkapi.

'About?' asked a muddled Milarepa.

'Dhanvantari wrote a book named Mrit Sanjeevani, which was kept safe with Om, but has now been stolen from him by some old man named Nagendra. Nagendra is the same man whom you once worked for and then betrayed by killing Dhanvantari to reach Parshuram. And you did this to

save the protector of Dhanvantari's book from the one who once thought his secret was safe with you. I am not sure what I said, but did I say it right?'

'Yes! You did,' replied an embarrassed Milarepa.

'But whose side are you on? I am confused,' the naive Vrishkapi asked again.

'I am on your side,' replied Milarepa, putting a friendly hand on Vrishkapi's shoulder.

'You worked for the old thief. So, who is he? Vrishkapi sounded curious.

'I don't know.' Lost in the oblivion of his past, Milarepa withdrew his hand, but the trail of questions was not over.

'Okay! But you risked your life to reach Parashurama, for Om. Who is Om?' Vrishkapi persisted.

'I don't know,' said Milarepa, still looking into oblivion, which irritated Vrishkapi, who only wanted straight and simple answers.

'You don't know the one you worked for and you don't know the one you saved. Who knows it then?'

'The one I worked for and the one I saved—Nagendra and Om,' replied Milarepa, humbly sensing and calming Vrishkapi's childish anger, before both of them were called by Parashurama.

'Here, this will stay on you at all times,' Parashurama announced as he stuck microchips to the backs of their necks. 'It's a tracker. This will help me trace both your locations on my device.' He then handed them a set of clothes with their respective maps to follow and turned to Milarepa with some money in his hands.

'This is the currency accepted in India now. It will help. You have a long journey through many cities ahead,' Parashurama said, handing over a bundle of Indian currency.

Milarepa took a glimpse and smiled meekly, 'Thank you, sir, but I won't need it for anything.'

Parashurama informed him that the world as he knew it had changed drastically, and so he might just require it. Keeping it and not using it was better than needing it and not having it. Milarepa took the money from Parashurama only to honour his words as he was still sure that it wasn't a necessity.

Looking at the money, Vrishkapi asked innocently, 'What's that? Can I also have some?'

‘It’s not a good thing and you won’t need it because you are not meeting any men.’ Parashurama shook his head gently as if persuading a child.

Vrishkapi frowned with a little pout, and so Parashurama smiled lightly and handed him a single note. ‘Here, you can keep it.’

Vrishkapi’s face lit up instantly. ‘Thank you!’

‘Now wear the clothes I have given you,’ Parashurama said as Vrishkapi’s contagious smile was passed on to him.

Vrishkapi obeyed and started to struggle with the clothes while trying to put them on.

‘Has he travelled out of Gyanganj for the first time?’ Milarepa asked.

‘Yes, he has. He does not want money; he just wants to have it because you have it and is simply curious to know how the coloured piece of paper works.’

‘But isn’t it risky to send him out alone?’ said a concerned Milarepa. In Parshuram’s eyes, Milarepa was right and so he justified his decision.

‘Sending anyone to counter Nagendra is risky. In fact, sending him anywhere away from Gyanganj is risky, as he has never been out before. That is why I am sending him to a desolate area like Roopkund, which is relatively close to Kailash and closed to humans in this season. He is obedient. He may be too innocent to confront the world but he is powerful enough to tackle Nagendra. Now wear this and get going. May the gods be with you.’

By then, Vrishkapi had managed to wear the shirt, pants and the monkey cap, but his discomfort was obvious as he struggled to adjust his tail, which was inside one of the trouser legs. Parashurama looked at him and spoke solemnly, ‘Whatever happens, do not take these clothes off, Vrishkapi. Remember your way from Kailash to Roopkund and follow the same route to return to Kailash.’ Nodding his head and adjusting his pants, Vrishkapi acknowledged both instructions.

While Vrishkapi was all set for Roopkund, at the mystery lake there, everything LSD could see on the screen was completely frigid, with no hint of life. The first day passed and one-sixth of the lake was scanned, but nothing significant turned up, so they decided to continue at night. The clear, starry sky loomed over them as they continued to destroy the serenity of the surroundings, ignorant of the screams of nature echoing through the mountain valleys, while Vrishkapi was still two days away from saving it.

They worked all night long, yet the monitor displayed nothing but the carcasses. It was twilight when Parashurama, Milarepa and Vrishkapi departed for their separate locations from the Uttarakhand–Nepal border. The closest from that point was Roopkund for Vrishkapi and the farthest was Bheemkund for Parashurama. Somewhere between the destinations of Vrishkapi and Parashurama stood, in all its glory, the Taj Mahal of Agra in Uttar Pradesh, Milarepa's destination.

The day passed and the sun began to sink in the west, but nothing changed on either side as Nagendra and his team continued their search and Parashurama and his team continued their hike.

At the end of the second night, hardly half of the lake was scanned, which frustrated the three. Nagendra's patience was wearing thin, so he ordered them to accelerate the search; the crescent moon was just one night away. Hiding in the woods and dodging human settlements, Vrishkapi continued his journey towards Roopkund. It was dusk when LSD detected some heat signals beneath the ground in one spot and Parimal rushed to see what it was while Nagendra kept an eye on the surroundings, anticipating danger in some form or the other.

Parimal followed the scanner's reading and dunked his hand underwater. LSD could see the heat of Parimal's hand overlapping the previous heat trace, but Parimal couldn't touch anything solid or sense anything alive. LSD told him to dig a little deeper, suspecting that he might have been tapping the surface right above the thing. As he plunged his arm deeper in, his fingers grazed against something solid beneath the layer of ice. The surface felt ragged to the touch. Trying to estimate its size, he gripped it firmly to extract it. He tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. As Parimal clutched it securely underwater, LSD peeled her eyes away from the scanning monitor when she sensed something shuffle on her right. She saw a human bone moving itself. Her eyes wandered and examined the premises, only to realize that almost all the bestrewn bones were shaking. She looked at Parimal, who was still struggling.

She shouted for Nagendra to bring his attention to what she was witnessing. 'The bones are moving. What are your orders?'

Nagendra, who was still preoccupied raking the periphery far and wide for potential threats, snapped his head up to see that the crescent moon was emerging out of the diminishing sunlight.

He yelled, 'It's time! It's time! The moon is out. The bone guards are waking up. We only have a few hours left to find it. Ask Parimal to—' Nagendra swallowed the rest of his sentence when he spotted a giant approaching the lake.

'Shh!' Nagendra whispered. 'Someone is coming; save Parimal and hide.' Instead of daring to tackle the upcoming danger, Nagendra hid himself, quietly lying straight on the ground. Near the shore of the lake, LSD did the same while keeping an eye on Parimal, who continued to pour all his strength into uprooting what he held.

Vrishkapi reached one of the mountain tops near Roopkund. Oblivious of a stretched out Nagendra on the ground right beside his feet, he looked around, sweeping the perimeter with his eyes. Tents, torches, monitors, ropes and other suspicious material scattered around the lake made the presence of humans evident for him. It was then that he saw a man perched in the middle of the freezing water, trying to fish something out. Parimal spotted Vrishkapi too. Both of them knew what to do, and so did LSD. Still unaware of Nagendra lying so close to his foot, he sprinted down the slope to grab Parimal. By then, Parimal had managed to pry the object a little loose from whatever it was cemented in, but he knew that if he left it then, he would lose it. On the other hand, the speed and size of Vrishkapi could have sent chills down anyone's spine and Parimal could see him advancing with all his might. Parimal's wide, frightened eyes switched to LSD, who was hastily loading her Origin-12 shotgun as she recovered from the sight of the humongous Vrishkapi. At this point, the crescent moon was fully visible.

The ground trembled with Vrishkapi's mighty footsteps, awakening the army of skeletons. They started to close in on him from all sides. Looking at the alert bone guards, Parimal ceased all his activity so that the skeletons would only attack Vrishkapi. It was up to LSD to aim correctly and stop the enormous ape before he could nab Parimal. Vrishkapi charged towards Parimal as the bone guards darted towards him. LSD took her shot. She fired thirty rounds in less than eight seconds, hitting all of Vrishkapi's left side. But the bullets barely injured him. However, due to his momentum, his body was thrown off balance and hit the ground. The firing had caught Vrishkapi completely off-guard. The bone guards immediately pounced on him and assaulted him with their bones and the rocks that they held as

weapons. With a swift swoop of his arm, he effortlessly brushed away the clutter of carcasses. LSD realized that he couldn't be taken down by guns, he had to be captured. She took out a net gun from her kit and aimed before shooting. The net entangled its target by tightly wrapping itself around Vrishkapi's body, electrocuting him and making him immobile.

Vrishkapi's struggle had given Parimal some time, but he still grappled with the skull as it was firmly lodged in the lake. He hooked his fingers in the skull's hollow eye sockets and tried to rip it out with all his strength, but it still didn't budge. Through his clenched jaw and squinted eyes, Parimal could sense Vrishkapi freeing himself from the net and advancing towards him again. He did not have much time. LSD fired more rounds with her shotgun but that didn't seem to affect Vrishkapi's galloping frame.

Before they could do anything else, Vrishkapi grabbed him and with one shove of his hand, hurled Parimal with great force. This assault worked in Parimal's favour as his hand, which was stuck underground, whipped out the skull with the backbone dangling from it. Nagendra saw it all and knew that this was it. As soon as Parimal crashed on the ice, Vrishkapi charged at him rapidly. The skull in Parimal's hand had also drawn the attention of the bone guards to him. In no time, a cluster of bone guards started emerging from every rock around Roopkund. Before anything could be done, Vrishkapi snatched the skull from Parimal's hand. In the process, the skull cracked open and the moonlight fell on the interiors of the upper skull; it shone silver as the moonlight touched it and there emerged the two words engraved in it ' (Anadi Ananta)', which meant 'eternal.' LSD continued shooting both the bone guards and Vrishkapi. The bone guards would shatter on the ground, only to regroup to form a whole skeleton again and continue to attack. And as for Vrishkapi, the bullets from LSD's gun failed to disturb him.

Nagendra had been lying low so far to hide from Vrishkapi, but now it was time to finally intervene, as the skull that he needed was in Vrishkapi's possession. With the skull in one hand, Vrishkapi picked up Parimal with his other and threw him away. Ignorant of other potential assaults, Vrishkapi kept warding off the bone guards around him. Nagendra commanded LSD through the earpiece to stop firing at Vrishkapi as he had the skull in his hand and they couldn't risk anything happening to it. LSD stepped back, looking at Vrishkapi's eyes, which belonged to a furious

animal. Just then, Nagendra darted towards him, lunged at him the way a predator does to hunt their prey, and landed on Vrishkapi's back. Nagendra's speed and tactics astounded LSD and Parimal. Before he could react, Nagendra sunk his teeth deep into Vrishkapi's neck. Of all the attacks on Vrishkapi in Roopkund, this was the most lethal. He tore off a big chunk of Vrishkapi's flesh. Vrishkapi bled heavily as a major artery supplying blood to the rest of the body from the heart was ruptured.

Within seconds, Nagendra was off Vrishkapi's back and on his feet again. Without wasting any time, he snatched the skull from his hand, opened his ancient metal bottle and poured some water into the skull, using the broken piece of the upper skull as a goblet. Some bone guards continued attacking and mounting the fainting Vrishkapi. Parimal and LSD kept all the bone guards at bay so they couldn't interrupt Nagendra. They could sense an increasing multitude of the skeletons waking up. They were soon going to be overpowered. Parimal knew that he would have to use his hand grenade to escape as there was no way that they could fight such a colossal horde of skeletons. He waited for Nagendra to finish the process as that would be their cue to flee.

As soon as the water touched the inner surface of the silver shining skull, the inscription dissolved into the water, turning it into a sublime turquoise. Vrishkapi, overpowered by the fleet of skeletons, helplessly watched his mission fail in front of him. Nagendra was savagely chewing on the piece of Vrishkapi's fresh flesh, and sipping the celestial water from the skull to wash the piece down. When he gulped his turquoise drink, it was visible to LSD and Parimal as it travelled down his throat. Vrishkapi knew he had to escape or else he would be killed either by the brainless skeletons, or by the debased Nagendra and his team. The only way to evade all of it at once was to resort to the last tactic that Parashurama had prohibited him from exhibiting. Vrishkapi closed his eyes and took a moment to decide while the bone guards continued to assault him. Right then, Parimal got his cue from Nagendra: the word had been acquired. He pulled the pin of the hand grenade and threw it on the icy lake.

Vrishkapi gathered all his strength one last time and flew high up, away from the ground, with a clump of skeletons still clawing him, just seconds before the grenade fell. The guards dangling from him fell one by one, leaving many bleeding wounds on his body. Nagendra watched him escape,

still chewing on the last bits of his flesh. The blast resonated violently throughout the silence and created an avalanche in the snow-clad mountains surrounding the lake, leaving very little time for LSD, Parimal and Nagendra to save themselves. Parimal saw the skeletons dragging LSD by her legs into a rocky cluster. Seconds later, huge boulders and tons of ice that rolled down from all sides of the lake engulfed the area. By the time the landslide ceased, everything was covered by the thick layers of snow. There was no sign of Nagendra and his team and the mysterious lake with all its skeletons lost its existence forever that night.

Brutally injured and barbarously bitten on his neck, Vrishkapi continued flying without realizing that he was attracting the attention of many ordinary human eyes on his route back to Mount Kailash, giving them opportunities to capture him on their mobile phones as images and videos. Vrishkapi's sight was slowly dimming due to the heavy loss of blood and exhaustion. Unable to see much farther ahead and unaware that humans had now learnt the secret of Vimana Purana and they could fly now, he collided into a small, low-flying aircraft above the Himalayan range, plummeting to one of the mountains and disappearing into the dense layers of snow due to the impact of his fall and body weight. Unconscious and helpless, Vrishkapi was impossible to be seen or found in the vast, majestic Himalayas.



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Chapter 8

Lost and Found

On the night of the crescent moon, Milarepa and Parashurama reached their respective destinations of Agra and Bheemkund, prepared for an attack, unaware of the annihilation of Roopkund.

After staying vigilant all night around the Taj Mahal to ensure its safety and coming across no signs of Nagendra, Milarepa decided to head back. While walking down the street, he heard someone animatedly describing something seen in the sky the night before. Milarepa turned to locate the source of the voice. It was a news anchor on television, reporting that the locals on the border of Nepal and Uttarakhand had spotted a giant flying monkey, supported by a blurry phone video that captured a choppy footage of the flying Vrishkapi. Some claimed that it was Lord Hanuman; others said it was a man in trousers and a shirt. A few others opined that the flying being was an alien and some rejected the whole story on the grounds that it was a media stunt for publicity. 'It's Tuesday, the day dedicated to the worship of Hanuman. This is fake news, news channels are doing it just to garner the favour of Hanuman devotees,' Milarepa heard the person next to him speak while shaking his head. But Milarepa realized the truth. Something had gone terribly wrong at Roopkund for Vrishkapi to have used his flying abilities. He was positive that Agra was safe till the next crescent moon, so he decided to go back and check on Vrishkapi immediately.

Oblivious to the tragedies occurring in the outside world, Om sat with a vacant, stretched bow, concentrating hard. After a few minutes of powerful chanting, he was able to summon an astra.

'Well done, Om. That was quick,' Ashwatthama beamed. His student was exhibiting steady progress at possessing, commanding and controlling the astras.

Om opened his eyes. 'Whatever is happening right now has its roots in my failure in losing Mrit Sanjeevani. Ironically, I am the only one who is

unable to help. The mission has in fact been weakened by keeping you back here with me. I have to be ready as soon as possible,' said Om determinedly.

'Are you ready to learn the next one?' asked Ashwatthama.

'Yes. Please teach me everything you can and I shall do everything in my power to contribute to this mission.'

Ashwatthama closed his eyes and chanted with his palms open, as if waiting to summon something out of thin air. In a few moments, an arrow appeared in his hands that had a rudraksha at the tip. He gradually stopped chanting and raised the arrow to touch his forehead with it while Om observed quietly.

'What I hold in my hands contains the power of a Rudra. This is called Rudrastra. When it is used, it invokes the power of one of the Rudras out of the Ekadasha (eleven) Rudras and destroys thousands of enemies. I had used this during the night slaughter at the end of the Kurukshetra war.' Ashwatthama lowered his head as he recalled the incident.

The assurance that Bheemkund was safe was more disturbing than relaxing because this meant that Nagendra's absence here was due to his encounter with either Milarepa or Vrishkapi, and if not that, then some other place out of the remaining eight must have been wiped off the face of the land of gods. Parashurama retrieved his tracker and switched it on to locate Vrishkapi and Milarepa. To his surprise, he could track only one of the two. He saw a red dot in Agra moving away from the Taj Mahal, but there was no trace of Vrishkapi and the tracking history only showed him reaching Roopkund, not leaving it. He decided to head back to Kailash to check on the others.

'While Parashurama was keeping a vigil on the macro world and making decisions for its welfare, someone else in another part of the country was focused entirely on a micro world that revolved only around me. Tej loved me so much,' Mrs Batra sighed as her eyes turned moist. 'I was convalescing, so I had to rest a lot. Tej was my shadow throughout that period. He cared for me as if I was not his healing wife but his newborn baby. His once gloomy eyes now twinkled with happiness, as if he too had dodged death and come to life again.'

Prithvi nodded in understanding and continued with his story. 'While you were regaining hope to live again in that room, Vrishkapi, buried under

layers of ice below the open sky, was losing it with every passing hour. His blood was leaching into the ice around him through his fresh wounds in that deafening silence.

Meanwhile, Nagendra had woken up to realize that Parimal and LSD were buried under the thick white sheets of ice that had swallowed Roopkund forever. Nagendra had lost track of time; he had no idea how long he had lain unconscious. He got back to his feet and started searching for LSD immediately, like a mentally disturbed man, quivering and baffled, like a father in search of his missing child. After looking about frantically for a few hours without any sense of direction or method, he finally found Parimal.

He pulled him out, wrapped him with everything he managed to find from their hideout—sleeping bags, tent canvas, ropes—anything he could get his hands on to keep him warm. Parimal was shivering, his breathing was violently ragged and the insulation Nagendra provided seemed to have no effect. He could barely keep his eyes open, but just before he fainted, he pointed towards the tips of two giant black rocks and mumbled through his chattering teeth, ‘Before the avalanche, I saw LSD grabbed by her legs and dragged by the skeletons into those rocks.’ Nagendra’s mind went into a frenzy again. He saw the tip of the rocks peeking out of the ice and rushed towards them. The gap between both the rocks was sealed by ice walls created by the snowslide. Nagendra pushed it a little and the recently formed wall promptly collapsed.

He peered inside and saw LSD. She was conscious but her body language was absurd. It was as if she was possessed by some invisible power; she was taking off her clothes when Nagendra spotted her. This would lower the rate of heat generation in her body. To stop her, it was imperative to divert her attention from her actions and so Nagendra shouted her name, ‘Latika!’

LSD turned towards the voice and met Nagendra’s worried gaze. Her eyes were disoriented and she was combative. She moved her hands and growled like a zombie, as if trying to shove and hit somebody, despite there being no threat. After punching the air around her a couple of times, she stopped growling and turned towards the dead end on the other side of the rocks, undressing completely.

Nagendra started breaking the ice to make enough space to get in while the now naked LSD reached the last corner of the rock before starting to

coil into a naturally created pocket in the rock which was much smaller than her. Her mannerisms were strange enough to have terrified anyone but Nagendra. He knew that LSD was experiencing the hide-and-die syndrome that occurs in the final stages of hypothermia. This happens mostly in cases where the person's temperature drops gradually. Nagendra knew this as he had witnessed the same behaviour, at the same place, in the past.

Nagendra entered the ice cave to save LSD and bring her back to her senses. He knew that this attempt could be fatal for both of them, but he had to do everything he could. He walked towards the narrow dead end where LSD was struggling to fit. He grabbed her hand to pull her out, but LSD was hallucinating. Instead of Nagendra, she saw a skeleton tugging her wrist, so she began to attack and bite. Nagendra had no choice but to hit her hard to knock her out. He did so without any hesitation. A single blow with a small rock on the right side of her head was enough. LSD's eyes rolled back into her head and she fell limp and unconscious on the ground. Nagendra bundled her up in both their clothes and dragged her out.

Meanwhile, in Agra, Milarepa reached Tajganj Basai, which had a private chopper tour facility. Within an hour, he had the pilot completely hypnotized. This was an emergency situation; he had no option but to use his powers. The pilot started flying the chopper towards the Himalayas in search of Vrishkapi.

On Kailash, Om sat in silence, meditating and chanting the mantras Ashwatthama had given him to control and command the weapons, but something seemed to be distracting him. He kept wincing, shaking his head and restarting the process all over again. Ashwatthama noticed that Om was not calm within, so he asked him the reason. Om initially demurred but Ashwatthama insisted. With a deep sigh, Om shared what was bothering him.

‘While you explained Rudrastra to me, you felt guilty because you remembered that you had made the mistake of using it on the night after the end of the Mahabharata, on people who were not your enemies. You know who you were before and who you are now. You know that your father was Dronacharya and your mother Kripa. You know what happened to them and how they left their bodies. You know your birthplace, your existence and your end too. You know yourself. Can you imagine not knowing anything about yourself, your origin, your friends and enemies, your past and future,

your purpose of life? It's like having eyes but no vision and believe me . . . walking in eternal darkness with a quivering hope to see some light, someday, is dreadful. Who am I? Where was I born? My parents! How did they look? What happened to them? Did I ever have brothers or sisters? You cannot understand how I feel and what I experience every day when these questions cross my mind.'

Ashwatthama could really sympathize with Om's agony but was as powerless as him. 'You are right! I cannot understand it, but I believe that the answers you are searching for in the external world might just be within you, Om.'

Dismissing Ashwatthama's counsel bluntly, Om said in frustration, 'I am not in a position to endure a spirituality class right now, Ashwatthama. Let us get back to what we were doing. Parashurama will be back any day and you will be answerable to him if I fail.'

'Spirituality! No, Om. I am talking about psychology and neuroscience. Memories are usually stored in distributed brain networks, including in the cortex, and thus can be readily accessed to consciously remember an event. But in an abnormal brain state, the brain activates its subcortical memory regions. Blocked memories reroute the processing of memories within the brain circuits so that they can't be consciously accessed.

'You could be thousands of years old and everything dating back to your birth might have lost its existence in your current state of mind, but there is one dark cave where all your memories lie hidden—your brain! Just because you do not remember does not mean that it's not preserved in your brain. It just means that you have not found the right cues to recollect those memories. You have questions that no one else but you can answer. And for that, you need to let your mind and soul become utterly serene and surrender to the weapons you are trying to possess. How can you give something that you don't have? You don't have yourself completely. Achieving that needs a person to completely know themselves inside out. You need to know yourself; only then will these weapons accept you. Everything that we are trying to do here will be in vain until and unless you thoroughly learn yourself. Imagine a pot of water with a crack in it. What would happen if you tried to fill it? Consider the knowledge as the water in the pot of your brain, which needs to be leakproof. Before we jump to our next weapon, let's go and explore your inner self.'

Om was not so optimistic about the seemingly promising explanation. 'You really think I have never tried that before?'

'I am sure you have, but not with me. I cannot give up without trying. If we could only break the first barrier of your brain, then the others will be able to break the remaining walls,' said Ashwatthama

'Others?' Om didn't understand what Ashwatthama implied by that.

Ashwatthama nodded and replied, 'Now close your eyes and let me in. Attain the highest level of calmness in you and take me to your first memories.'

Far away, in an uncharted location, flying somewhere above the series of Himalayas desperately, Milarepa was keeping out a keen eye for Vrishkapi. But that was a large area to cover. It was like searching for a black cat in a coal cellar. All that was visible from where he soared was a cluster of mountains covered with snow. Even after looming over the peaks for several hours, he could not find a single string leading to Vrishkapi. The sun was about to set and Milarepa knew that either Vrishkapi was already dead or would not be able to survive one more night beneath the ice.

A clueless Milarepa's hope was exiting the horizon along with the setting sun. He remembered Vrishkapi's face from the last time he had seen him. Something struck Milarepa as he recollected his final few minutes with Parashurama and Vrishkapi before they had departed for their respective destinations. Milarepa ordered the pilot to take him above the location where all three of them had taken their separate routes. In a few minutes, with Milarepa's directions, the chopper hovered right above that place. Milarepa commanded the pilot to fly low and slow towards Mount Kailash and kept his eyes on the ground to look for anything unusual.

Meanwhile, in Roopkund, Nagendra, draped in frostbite, was now feeling the effects of the cold settle in. He realized that hypothermia had not spared him either. He knew that he didn't have much time before all three of them died. As if things couldn't get worse, everything turned invisible when the whole area was painted white by a ruthless snowstorm. He brought LSD out to where Parimal lay unconscious. Shivering in the biting cold, Nagendra tied both of them facing each other and wrapped them tightly with blankets and sleeping bags. He then tied both their legs together with one end of the rope, kept the other end on his shoulder and started lugging them through the ice as if dragging dead bodies.

As he walked, he saw another young man parallel to him, dragging a real dead body that was more than half decayed. The man had Nagendra's ancient metal bottle hung on his neck. The man looked at Nagendra and his lips curved into a cynical smile. The much older Nagendra reciprocated with the same kind of smile. The hypothermia was now causing him to hallucinate. After walking a short distance in the opposite direction, the man walking north towards Kailash Parbat vanished in the storm whereas Nagendra headed south, away from the cold.

What had struck Milarepa earlier was that Vrishkapi must have followed the same route back to Kailash on account of Parashurama's orders. Thus, tracing the same course, Milarepa saw a red spot that was distinctly visible amid the sparkling white. It was surrounded by a pack of white wolves who were trying to dig around it. By the time he could register what it was, the chopper had already crossed it. Milarepa ordered the pilot to turn the chopper and take it back to that location.

The sky would soon be awash with the darker hue of dusk. Milarepa knew that he would lose the spot once the sun set. Darkness was taking over rapidly as he found the spot again. It was surrounded by large rocks that made it impossible for the chopper to land. He ordered the pilot to land at the nearest possible location. The pilot found a plain surface nearly half a mile away. Milarepa landed and looked up to the sky for the moon, but the clouds blocked all light from the land. He had to think quickly. He pocketed a torch which was in the chopper kit. He knew the direction he had to go in but was unsure if he would be able to find the place. He started running.

After half a mile, he stopped and surveyed the area, but the spot was nowhere to be found in the dark. Milarepa continued to look for the wounded Vrishkapi, but disappointment was all he could gather. After searching for hours, Milarepa decided to return to the chopper and turned to go back the same way, following his own footsteps. The moment he pointed the torch's light downwards, he saw red footprints stained on the snow. He realized that he had been standing over the spot all this while, but due to the torch pointing forwards, the light could never tell him about it. Now he had to rely on his own footprints to lead him to the bigger red spot. Milarepa hurried back on the newfound trail of his own footsteps and soon reached it.

The ice had already been dug to some extent. This partial job seemed to have been done by the pack of scavenging white wolves he had spotted

from the chopper earlier. The next challenge was to dig the remaining ice. Milarepa desperately wanted the buried body to be of Vrishkapi as this was the last string that could lead to him. As Milarepa began grabbing the ice with his bare hands in the piercingly frigid landscape, a wave of deep growls emanated from all around him.

Milarepa picked up his torch to check the surroundings and saw a few pairs of eyes glowing in the dark. The torch light was reflecting off the wolves' eyes, which indicated that they were too close to him. Before he could think of anything else, one of the wolves lunged at him. Instantly, Milarepa's body returned to its original green colour and his black pupils switched to a bleak white. When he glared into the eyes of the very wolf that pounced at him, it turned into a heavy stone sculpture mid-attack before shattering completely. The pieces hit the ground as they fell.

Immediately, the other wolves stopped and started falling back. Milarepa took his own time to look into the eyes of every wolf that looked at him as a prey. Soon enough, the whole pack was hypnotized and sitting lined up as trained dogs, waiting for their orders. Milarepa started digging the half-dug pit further and continued to do so till he finally saw Vrishkapi's hand. He grabbed his wrist promptly to check his pulse. His pulse rate was very low due to the cold and extreme loss of blood, but he was still alive.

Milarepa tried pulling him out, but realized that he was too heavy to be lifted and taken to the chopper. Vrishkapi was critical and needed immediate medical support. Milarepa looked at his new army of wolves and they knew what to do. He gave them the command without uttering a single word and started walking towards the chopper, followed by the wolves, which had pulled Vrishkapi out with their mouths.

On the other side, in the middle of the unforgiving ice, Nagendra stopped dragging LSD and Parimal after bringing them to a large, dead tree. Nagendra could see a hazy light coming from some sort of structure, but he couldn't be sure if it was real; he was panting and hallucinating. He knew that the only thing that could save all three of them was heat. He checked LSD and Parimal's bags to find anything flammable.

The only materials he could fish out were guns and bullets. He took as many bullets as he could and started peeling them open to extract the gunpowder, behaving like a hungry animal tearing through its prey; the gunpowder was smeared all over his lips and chin. LSD and Parimal, still

unconscious, were tied and covered up the way body bags encase the dead in a war. Nagendra's numb fingers rubbed the gunpowder on the bark of the tree and filled it in the hollow crevices too. He then tugged Parimal and LSD a little further away before lighting the tree. The bark caught fire easily and soon, the whole tree was up in flames. Settling himself at a safe distance from the burning tree alongside Parimal and LSD, Nagendra fainted. They looked like three corpses near a pyre, waiting for their turn to be cremated.

At Kailash, Om was recounting his first memories. 'I opened my eyes. My vision was hazy but I could still see three figures standing at a distance. One of them beckoned to the other to call Dhanvantari as I was showing signs of movement. Dhanvantari walked in and showed me my reflection. I was devastated when I took my first look. A hollow eye socket, a missing ear and the decayed skin of my face haunts me till this day,' Om muttered with his eyes closed. 'That's my first memory.' Om opened his eyes to find Ashwatthama looking at him.

'Now, that's the thread that will take you behind the locked doors of your memory, which holds your hidden story. You were forty years old when you were revived by Dhanvantari and given a second birth. The memories of those forty years are still locked away in your consciousness. Everything that a person ever witnesses in their life is registered in the brain. All that information might not be important and the person might forget it over time but still, nothing is ever entirely wiped out. Go further back, Om. What did you see last before looking at those three vague figures? Hold that thread and keep wading through the murk of your past. Show me where this thread takes you.' Om continued to fixate his mind to find the answers in the darkness of the unknown within him for hours till the first light touched Mount Kailash.

With the sound of flowing water and chirping birds all around, Parimal opened his eyes and found himself cocooned alongside an unconscious LSD with reddened skin and frostbite. LSD was so close to him that he could feel the warmth of her breath fanning his face. Parimal caught the inner side of the zip and pulled it down to free himself. When he raised his head, he saw a full-grown tree burning till the tip of its height. He looked around and found Nagendra's bare body lying near the burning tree. Parimal noticed that LSD was clad in Nagendra's warm clothes. He recalled

his last memory of Nagendra entering the rocks to rescue LSD. Parimal tried to get up but realized that his foot was tied to LSD's, followed by a tail of rope. Parimal instantly understood the rest. He untied his legs and hastened to check on Nagendra.

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Chapter 9

The Fourth Immortal

Prithvi turned to Mrs Batra and found her lost in her own thoughts. Mrs Batra realized that Prithvi had stopped and was looking at her. Mrs Batra responded, sharing the thought she was lost in.

‘During those days, Tej conducted multiple tests to verify the validity of his experiments with Om’s blood. Once he had collected enough data and evidence to support his claim, he started making calls to the heads of the medical departments of some of India’s most renowned institutions to come and visit our home and examine my past reports and present condition. He hoped they would declare that he had made a major breakthrough in the world of medicine by bringing me back from the jaws of death,’ Mrs Batra recounted.

‘I can feel the warmth of fire on my face,’ Om muttered with his eyes closed. Ashwatthama, sitting right in front of him, could clearly see Om sweating despite the sub-zero temperature on Kailash. ‘I hear hundreds of men chanting together, I see the feet of an elephant and the hump of a bull and . . . and—’ Om’s eyes snapped open in fear and he jerked back as if trying to distance himself from something.

‘Are you okay?’ Ashwatthama offered him a piece of cloth to wipe his face. Panting heavily, Om took a moment to regain his composure.

‘Sorry! I could not concentrate further. I thought . . .’ Om gulped the rest of his statement before saying, ‘We should try again. Shall we?’

Ashwatthama put a hand on Om’s shoulder. ‘Om, I need to know what you saw in order to help you. Tell me, what scared you out of your trance?’

‘I felt like I was sitting on something—riding it—something wider than a horse that had a hump on its back, and then . . . then I turned around and there was a serpent right on my face, hissing at me. It might have just been a dream, I suppose,’ said Om, preparing to go back into a trance again.

‘It wasn’t a dream, Om. To you it must have felt like one but it was not a dream. It’s a memory; an unclear, incomplete memory. We need to decipher this. Yes! We shall go back. We shall restart,’ assured Ashwatthama.

‘If it’s a memory, why haven’t I ever seen it before? I have tried to revisit my past numerous times,’ asked Om, wondering.

Ashwatthama had a clear answer to that question. ‘What do we do if our hands are not enough to push open a door? We use more hands to push it. The memories preceding your rebirth are trapped inside your brain behind a door stronger than you can push alone. And that’s where I come in. While you meditate, and follow the thread of your memory in the dark, I support you externally by pushing the door harder.’

‘A fire pit, an elephant’s foot, an unusual chanting, a serpent—does all of this signify anything?’ wondered Om.

Ashwatthama shared his thoughts. ‘I think these might be glimpses of some major events from your life, or metaphors linking to one major event. We should soon be able to know how these visions are pertinent to you. So, are you ready to go back there?’

‘Yes!’ said Om, mentally prepared to revisit the memory.

They closed their eyes again. As they meditated to go into their astral forms, their bodies became lifeless and dropped to the ground.

Back in Roopkund, someone else was returning to consciousness under the shell of a burnt tree that still provided some heat. Nagendra faintly saw the figure of Parimal standing right in front of him as he awoke. Everything that had happened the previous night rushed back to his head and his droopy eyes widened immediately to look for LSD.

‘She is alive; frail and unconscious, but alive. I checked on her. She will be fine,’ said Parimal, comforting Nagendra.

Nagendra tried to stand up to check on LSD himself but Parimal held him by his shoulder, gently pushing him down to a seated position as he, too, needed to recover.

‘Where are we?’ After the snowslide the previous night, Nagendra just wanted to bring them some heat. He didn’t care or even notice where he had dragged Parimal and LSD to.

‘We are near the forest rest house in Wan village,’ Parimal explained their location.

‘Did the burning tree attract any attention?’ Nagendra asked.

Parimal pointed to the three dead bodies lying at a distance and said, 'The chef of the rest house and the two old security guards.'

'Are the bodies still fresh?' asked Nagendra.

Parimal nodded.

'Arrange for us to leave this place,' Nagendra ordered, his gaze still fixed on the unconscious LSD.

Parimal acknowledged his command and offered some hot water to Nagendra and along with it, a gun. Nagendra took them both and Parimal turned away to begin arrangements for a ride.

'Give me your knife,' Nagendra said.

Parimal looked at the dead bodies again. He walked back to Nagendra, handed him the knife and left for Wan village.

On his way back to Kailash, Parashurama's tracking device started beeping suddenly. He took it out and was amazed to see that both the dots denoting Vrishkapi and Milarepa were now together. Parashurama zoomed in to locate them and rushed to the marked location, which was somewhere above the mountains and moving rapidly towards Kailash.

Fighting the battle of life and death in Milarepa's lap, Vrishkapi was still out of his senses in the chopper flying towards Gyanganj. As the chopper hovered above Mount Kailash, its systems started to malfunction one by one. Milarepa knew that in order to enter the hidden city, he had to land on Kailash and walk the rest of the way hauling Vrishkapi, because there was no way that a chopper could locate or enter Gyanganj. He ordered the pilot to land. The chopper landed at a safe spot. Milarepa lugged the limp and massive Vrishkapi out of the chopper with great difficulty.

He then walked to the pilot and said, 'Thank you, my friend! Fly back to where you have come from. The moment you land back at your base, the spell shall break.' The possessed pilot nodded with a blank face and flew back. The next challenge was to take Vrishkapi to Gyanganj before his soul exited this realm. Milarepa had to cover miles with Vrishkapi's body before that and he had no idea how.

Suddenly, Milarepa heard a rustling nearby, along with the sound of heavy footsteps. It was coming from behind him, but as he turned, the shuffling shifted to his right, then to his left. The more Milarepa tried to follow it, the faster it switched. Milarepa closed his eyes and concentrated hard to locate the source of the sound. After a few minutes, he heard the

rustling finally stop. He opened his eyes to find a large ape-like creature standing a few feet away from him. It was taller than a grizzly bear and its fur was a dirty white colour. Milarepa realized that it was actually a Yeti, also known as Bigfoot. It is rarely ever spotted, but its footprints, found at various places in the Himalayas, have birthed many a rumour. However, the Yeti wasn't alone. A striking old man walked towards them and the Yeti bowed.

Elsewhere on Kailash, deep in meditation, Om and Ashwatthama stood in their astral forms at the gate that held the obstructed memories. They pushed the heavy door open with great effort and watched the bizarre visuals unfold before them again, only this time, Om was seeing a horse's hooves instead of an elephant's feet and a peacock's neck instead of the serpent. With every passing second, it was becoming harder for them to focus on the scenario. The door was too heavy for even the two of them together to keep open. Their struggle was painted all over their expressions as they were feeling fear and the heat of the fire in a havan kund.* They still managed to stand firm and watch until a young man transformed into a monster and approached to attack them. Ashwatthama opened his eyes to return to his body, leaving Om, who became too weak to keep the portal open. He was blown out of the door frame and the door closed on his face before the monster could reach Om. Om opened his eyes and sat up. He looked at Ashwatthama and they both knew that they had no explanation for what they had seen.

'I don't know who he was,' Om admitted, taken aback by the attack.

'We will find out. What's important is that we could open it. Now, we have to keep it ajar for a longer time and for that, we need more power,' said Ashwatthama, wondering who could provide more power.

'What do you mean?' enquired Om.

'We need a yogi with a meditative force much stronger than mine to go inside with you,' Ashwatthama said as a plan started taking shape in his head.

'And who would that be?' Om was curious to know.

'There are weapons that even I cannot possess. They are too mighty for me to control and command. In the same way, I can't hold this door open,

but there are some warriors more powerful than me. They can summon weapons that I can't, and they should also be able to keep the door open.'

'You mean Parashurama,' Om concluded.

'Yes, he is stronger too, but he has bigger things to look after right now than meditating with you to unfold your past life.'

'The warrior Ashwatthama was hinting at Kripacharya,' Prithvi told Mrs Batra.

'Kripacharya?' Mrs Batra was clueless.

'Hanuman, Ashwatthama and Parashurama are the more prominent immortals of the seven but that does not imply that the remaining four are weak or less powerful in any way. Ved Vyasa, King Bali, Vibhishan and Kripacharya have their own journeys, strengths and stories too.'

'Ashwatthama's mother, Kripa, had a brother named Kripa. Kripa and Kripa were not born the usual way, from a human womb, but emanated directly from the semen of their father, Shardwan, which had fallen on the ground. Kripa was later chosen as the acharya (teacher) of royal children, and that bestowed upon him the title of Kripacharya. He was the acharya of the Kauravas and the Pandavas during their youth, and later on, was also a participant in the battle of the Mahabharata from the Kauravas' side. Kripacharya was the epitome of ethics, laws and truth. He always stood by his principles, even in the face of adversity. He was the best archer that the world had ever seen before Arjuna. He eventually went on to secure a very important place in the epic of the Mahabharata by his strict adherence to values. That is what made Ashwatthama's uncle, Kripacharya, superior to Ashwatthama's father, Dronacharya, and granted him immortality. Dronacharya perished in the war but Kripacharya was one of those eighteen great warriors who remained alive afterwards. Kripacharya is considered to be the foremost among all the seers of Kali yuga.'

'The Mahabharata describes the power of Kripacharya thus:

"Kripacharya was capable of managing 60,000 warriors single-handedly in the battlefield. He ravaged the entire foe's army like a blazing fire. In fighting the battles bravely, he is comparable only to the son of Lord Shiva, Karthikeya, who vanquished the demons."

'When the war had ended, and the days of mourning had passed, Yudhishtir, the eldest of the Pandavas and the new king of Hastinapur, forgave his afflictions and dissolved all their enmity with Kripacharya, for

he knew that the Brahmin was wise and only fought on behalf of Duryodhana because of his sworn loyalty to the throne.'

Om was expecting to meet the fourth immortal and was curious about where he was. He asked Ashwatthama, 'I heard that after the war, he was appointed as a teacher to instruct King Parikshit, the son of Arjun. Then, after the collapse of the Kuru dynasty and at the beginning of Kali yuga, he just disappeared into history. There is no mention of him in any subsequent stories, nor was he seen by anyone,' Om said.

'Yes, that's right. It is because he chose to disappear. Let's say that it's his trait; that is how he has always been. But since the beginning of Kali yuga, he has been with me,' replied Ashwatthama with pride.

'Oh, right. You had mentioned earlier that he only comes when needed and only you can summon him. What does that mean?' asked Om.

As a response to that, Ashwatthama joined his hands and closed his eyes. Ashwatthama's astral form started searching for Kripacharya near perennial rivers and deep caves. His search didn't last long. It ended in Kailash itself when he saw Kripacharya along with Milarepa, followed by a Yeti who was bringing the wounded Vrishkapi into Gyanganj. Ashwatthama opened his eyes, anxious about what he had seen.

'What happened?' Om asked.

'Vrishkapi needs help!' Ashwatthama stood up and started walking away in a hurry; Om followed.

By the time Parimal returned with medicines and a vehicle, Nagendra had feasted upon half of one of the three dead men. Parimal strode towards LSD while Nagendra continued to feed on the fresh flesh. Parimal first injected LSD with a warm intravenous saline solution, after which he used humidified oxygen administered with a nasal tube to warm her airways and help raise the temperature of her body. He then put LSD in the car, turned on the heater to the highest possible degree and went back to Nagendra.

'What next?' he asked.

'Next is another off-the-radar hideout till the upcoming raid,' Nagendra said with blood smeared on his mouth and his hands, red dripping from his elbow. Parimal couldn't take his eyes off Nagendra even after he had stopped speaking. Noticing his stare, Nagendra offered him a piece of the meat he had just cut out in front of him. Parimal humbly refused.

'Wait for me in the car,' he said.

Parimal turned and went back to LSD.

Following the tracking device that showed both Milarepa and Vrishkapi together, Parashurama reached Gyanganj. Milarepa and Vrishkapi were being aided by the great Kripacharya and the Yeti. From the other side, Om and Ashwatthama were also coming for support.

‘What happened?’ Parashurama asked.

Milarepa shook his head to show he didn’t know how Vrishkapi’s condition came about.

‘Is he alive?’ he asked, this time to Kripacharya.

‘Yes! But he wouldn’t be for long, if not treated immediately,’ Kripacharya replied worriedly.

Ashwatthama and Om struggled as they took Vrishkapi from the Yeti. Kripacharya introduced everybody to the Yeti, ‘Meet Ballhaar.’ The Yeti bowed his head. Kripacharya thanked him and then he disappeared into the snow. All of them rushed to Gyanganj.

As soon as they arrived at the hut with Vrishkapi, the seers began their treatment. Parashurama and everyone else examined Vrishkapi’s wounds once he was cleaned of all the dried blood. Parashurama noticed the most lethal wound on his neck.

‘He was attacked from behind,’ Parashurama affirmed.

‘He is so mighty. How did someone reach his neck?’ Milarepa asked.

‘Because he has never been taught to cheat or bluff! A warrior’s code of honour dictates that the enemy should always be attacked from the front. Vrishkapi may be mightier than humans, but he is not cunning and surely not a coward to either attack or expect one from behind. He has not been defeated; he has been tricked,’ Parashurama said.

‘O seers, will he survive?’ Ashwatthama asked.

‘We doubt that. The wounds are fatal and the poison . . . it has spread rapidly, corroding his tissues. He has lost a lot of blood and time,’ replied one of the rishis.

‘Hmm . . . please do whatever you can.’ Parashurama folded his hands before leaving the hut and the seers reciprocated his greetings. The rest of the warriors followed Parashurama out.

‘What brings you here, Kripacharya?’ Parashurama asked.

‘I don’t know yet. Ashwatthama summoned me,’ replied Kripacharya, looking at Ashwatthama.

Parashurama looked at Ashwatthama, who assured them, 'Everything is okay on my front. We just needed a little astral guidance; everything is under control.'

'Yes! For now, it is. Kripacharya, please guide them. Milarepa, please walk with me,' Parashurama said.

'The tracking device had only indicated your location, Milarepa. I had lost all hope of seeing Vrishkapi again. How did you find him in the vast Himalayan series?'

'Because of you, dear Parashurama! While departing for our respective locations, you shared a piece of information with me: that Vrishkapi was obedient. And you ordered him to follow the same route to get back to Gyanganj from Roopkund. I simply traced the same path leading to Kailash to find him.'

'You did great work, Milarepa. But there is much more to be done.'

Milarepa knew what he meant. Time was slipping by rapidly. They needed to strategize for their next move. 'We have lost a warrior and the second place out of nine. He has advanced one more step closer to his aim,' Milarepa expressed his concern.

'Yes, this has also reduced our chances of encountering him because now we have to anticipate which one out of the seven remaining places he will choose to desecrate next.' Parashurama's gaze grew distant.

'So, what should we do now?' asked Milarepa.

'We need Ashwatthama. Let me talk to him about his progress with Om,' said Parashurama.

Meanwhile, Ashwatthama introduced Om and Kripacharya. Om folded his hands and greeted Kripacharya. Kripacharya did not pay much heed to who Om was; he had come to Gyanganj because his nephew had invoked him.

'Ashwatthama! What makes you call me?'

Ashwatthama explained everything in detail about Om, from Ross Island to Gyanganj and from Dhanvantari to Parashurama, and then requested Kripacharya for his help. He mentioned how the door inside Om's brain was too strong for him alone to keep ajar for a long time and that was where he needed help. Their strategy included Ashwatthama guarding Om inside his memory and Kripacharya keeping the door open to save them both from being trapped inside. Kripacharya agreed to help. Now it was time for all

three of them to meditate together in order to bond with Om. But right before they sat down, Parashurama called everyone to share the plan.

Parimal sat in the driver's seat of the car and closed the door, the sound of which woke LSD. Parimal turned to comfort her. 'Everything is fine.'

'Where is Nagendra?' she asked.

'He is eating outside. He asked me to stay with you. He will join us in some time,' Parimal replied.

'What happened there?' she wished to know.

'You suffered hypothermia and I fainted as well. Nagendra dragged us here. That's what happened,' he replied in limited words.

'I don't remember anything clearly,' she said, trying to remember.

'Neither do I, but I will never forget whatever I do remember,' Parimal smiled with a hint of mischief, thinking about something.

'What do you remember and why are you smiling?' she questioned.

'Last night, I saw a new Nagendra desperately searching for you in the storm, as if he had lost his own daughter. He was terrified by the thought of losing you forever. I was wrong about him. He loves you!' Parimal continued smiling while telling her that.

Right then, Nagendra came and sat in the back seat beside LSD, who was still weak but safe. Nagendra looked at LSD with the same stern gaze and ordered Parimal, 'Let's go!'

'Where to?' asked Parimal, starting the engine of the stolen car.

Nagendra gave him a piece of paper which had an address written on it. Parimal took a moment to read it and started driving.

After covering nearly 40 km from Roopkund, while crossing a bypass road on their way to the destination written on the piece of paper, Nagendra ordered Parimal to stop the car and got out of it, saying, 'See you in Bharatpur National Park after twenty-five days. Be safe.'

'I want to come with you,' LSD said.

'A female penguin can never raise its young on its own. The male is needed to protect the fragile shell of the egg. And they mate for life, because there is no other option,' Nagendra said as he turned away and started walking.

They drove away, leaving Nagendra on the road. LSD, unaware of the plan, asked Parimal, 'Where is he going?'

'I don't know. He didn't tell me,' replied Parimal, wondering.

‘And where are we going?’ LSD had her next question ready.

‘To a village called Shetpal in the state of Maharashtra,’ he replied, driving and looking outside at the road.

‘Why?’ LSD’s questions were natural and so Parimal continued answering.

‘Because I have ancestral property there.’

LSD did not know what else to ask. She looked back at Nagendra, who continued to trudge in the opposite direction.

‘Alexa, guide us to Pantnagar airport in Kathgodam.’

‘Pantnagar airport is 243 km from here. Drive straight for another 600 metres and turn right,’ the robotic voice of Alexa intoned from the car’s speakers.

‘It will take us a few hours to reach the airport. You are weak. You need to rest. I’ll wake you up when we are there.’ Parimal stretched his right hand behind him without taking his eyes off the road, offering her a packet of chips and a bottle of mineral water.

At Kailash, Parashurama briefed Kripacharya about the situation. ‘I am glad that you are here, Kripacharya. Unfortunately, Mansarovar and Roopkund have been ruined entirely. We have lost two words, which now leaves us with seven places to secure but only four men to guard them. Ashwatthama, we need you on the ground now. If Om is not ready yet, he will have to stay here. We can’t risk him till he is ready.’

‘We need more time with him,’ requested Ashwatthama.

‘You have twenty days before you leave. See what can be achieved in that duration. I have to go and consult Ved Vyasa,’ Parashurama said before walking away.

Ashwatthama’s eyes turned to Kripacharya, ‘We have to start now.’

Leaving the three warriors there, Milarepa went to check on Vrishkapi, who was still fighting a losing battle.



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Chapter 10

The Shadow Figure

‘Wake up!’ Parimal shouted to LSD, who was fast asleep in the back seat. LSD rubbed her eyes and sat up to see that the car was parked outside a hospital.

‘What are we doing outside a hospital?’ she asked.

‘We need to ensure that the baby is fine,’ replied Parimal.

LSD was not used to such emotional displays. ‘So now, will you take decisions on my behalf like a typical husband?’ she retorted with an eye roll, but definitely did not expect Parimal’s response to be so brusque.

‘I don’t give a shit about you or this child. Is that clear enough for you to get it straight once and for all? I am only following my orders. Now either you step out or I get back in the car, drive to the airport and tell him that you refused.’

LSD was shocked and hurt by his tone. She stepped out of the car and waited for Parimal to lead the way. Parimal was only doing what was asked of him. He had deliberately chosen a hospital that was not crowded in order to finish the check-up as quickly as possible. They entered the hospital, collected their token and walked directly towards the maternity ward since they were the only patients in that section.

They were greeted by a friendly lady doctor, who asked them to take a seat.

‘We need to know if the foetus is okay,’ Parimal came straight to the point.

‘Foetus? That’s strange! Usually people call it *the baby*,’ the doctor bit back a smile and continued, ‘Are you the husband?’

‘How does that matter? Is that going to decide whether the baby is okay or not?’ LSD snapped this time.

Parimal could sense her agitation, so he tried to assuage her by saying, ‘Yes, I am the father.’

This calmed LSD a little. They went through the sonogram silently and everything turned out to be normal. From there, they left for the airport.

Around the same time, Nagendra reached the submarine. As he proceeded to enter his restricted chamber, one of the crew members followed him to ask if he needed anything, without anticipating the atrocity of what he was going to be exposed to; something that he would not be able to contain. By the time Nagendra tried to close the door of his chamber, the man's remnants were splattered on the ground in a pool of blood. Nagendra saw the mess, collected the intestines of the dead body, which were still intact, took them inside and closed the door. As he walked in, a colossal shadow towered over his body, drowning almost half the room in darkness. Nagendra offered the coil of intestines to the figure in front of him casting the enormous shadow.

'We have the second word,' Nagendra said.

The shadow grew bigger, asking Nagendra to submit the word. Nagendra opened both his palms and the shadow absorbed it.

'The next words will be tougher to fetch. They will set more warriors against you. The locations will be guarded. You will be outnumbered,' the shadow's booming voice resonated throughout the room, warning Nagendra.

At Kailash, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya sat with Om to unravel his past secrets and life. They started meditating; their lifeless bodies fell to the ground as they connected to their astral forms. They were soon standing in front of the closed door of Om's memories.

'Opening it is not a challenge, keeping it open is. My powers were not enough last time,' Ashwatthama said.

Kripacharya nodded. 'Open it!'

Om and Ashwatthama pushed the door open. They walked in.

Ashwatthama gathered his strength to hold it open for a little while as Kripacharya prayed and chanted a few words. A big white sphere emerged in his hands. He stuck the sphere at the entrance; that would keep the door from shutting.

They walked into a completely black void. The path ahead and their surroundings only became visible as they walked further. Everything that they passed was too ambiguous to help derive a concrete meaning.

Kripacharya saw an infant lying alone on the ground. The baby had a black birthmark on the sole of its left foot. He cradled the child in his arms and smiled at it. He then offered the baby to Om to hold, asking him if he recognized it.

‘No, I don’t. Is that my childhood?’ Om wondered aloud.

‘Lift your left foot,’ Kripacharya said to Om as he took the child back again from his arms.

‘Why?’ Om asked, lifting his foot and showing it to Kripacharya anyway.

‘Because this child has a black birthmark on its left heel. But you don’t, so that can only mean this isn’t you,’ explained Kripacharya.

‘If it’s not Om, then why are we seeing him in his past?’ Ashwatthama voiced Om’s thoughts before he could.

‘Maybe because this boy held some significance in his past,’ Kripacharya deduced.

‘How?’ Om looked at the baby as if trying to read his eyes.

‘There’s only one way to find out. We move ahead.’

Kripacharya turned to put the baby down and walk away when a villager wearing a plain white dhoti approached them. The man introduced himself as Vishnuyasha and smiled at Kripacharya, extending his arms gently to take the infant from his hands. Kripacharya happily handed the baby over.

Meanwhile, the sphere keeping the portal from closing continued to crack under pressure. They didn’t have much time. ‘We must move ahead,’ Kripacharya said as he walked forward, followed by the two.

The trio trailed further and saw a toddler playing alone on the ground. Nearby, a woman was busy rustling up a meal with whatever was available to her. They saw the same birthmark on his left foot as he crawled.

‘Seems as though we have walked about two years into your memory,’ Ashwatthama reflected.

Ashwatthama noticed a sparrow approaching the child, who seemed curious to see what the moving toy was. The sparrow hopped closer and the woman was still busy cooking. The baby picked it up gleefully to play with it. He giggled as the sparrow fluttered around his arms and neck. After a few moments of playing around, the kid suddenly turned stiff as an unexpected fit of pure rage overtook his joyous cackles. He gripped the bird tightly by both its wings and tore them right off. The bird screeched in pain and the kid clenched its neck, twisting it to silence the screaming. Even

Kripacharya and Ashwatthama, the immortals who had been witnesses to great cruelty over the years, were stupefied by the kid's atrocious actions.

Ashwatthama tried to step in but was stopped by Kripacharya. 'These are past events and memories, Ashwatthama. Whatever happens with this kid now has already happened. Trying to change anything here might affect everything in his future. We are here only to learn, not to alter,' Kripacharya reasoned.

Ashwatthama halted at Kripacharya's orders, but couldn't take his eyes off the kid. The bird died then and there. The kid then looked Ashwatthama straight in the eye and Om said, 'Stop looking at him like that. It's making me uncomfortable.'

Kripacharya knew they had to hurry now. The sphere wouldn't be able to sustain the door's force for long and could be on the verge of breaking, in which case they wouldn't have much time to exit.

Just when they were about to head back, they noticed a baby elephant's footprints on the sand. The tracks led to the same boy, now four years old, playing with a baby elephant.

But before they could understand the scene further, the sphere had given in to the pressure and started collapsing. The door began to close and Kripacharya commanded all of them to rush back immediately.

All three of them began sprinting towards the door. They were confident about reaching it in time until they realized that everyone they had crossed on their way in was dashing towards them like an army ready to stop them. The tiger, the horse, the serpent, the elephant, the peacock, the bull—the whole herd of animals roared and charged at them. All the villagers, including Vishnuyasha, turned violent and stormed them from all sides.

The short distance of a few steps suddenly seemed like an impossible leap for Kripacharya, Om and Ashwatthama as there stood an army between them and the door. The challenge was to protect Om and themselves without harming any of them and reach the closing door before it trapped them completely. Kripacharya took on the elephant, the tiger, the bull and the snake while Ashwatthama defended Om and himself from the children, women and other men attacking them. Om noticed an old man with glowing eyes hovering above and looking at all of them, especially Om. Om tried to warn the others but they were too busy protecting him and defending themselves while trying to get out. The old man and Om met each other's

eyes before Kripacharya created a blast of light that blinded everyone attacking them. Ashwatthama and Kripacharya pulled Om and ran for the door before the sphere collapsed. Right before stepping out, Om turned back to look at the old man once again. The old man was strangely unaffected by the brightness and maintained his stare without a blink till the last moment before the door finally closed.

After finally exiting the astral realm and returning to their physical forms, they opened their eyes. Kripacharya was furious and troubled by the events he had witnessed. He jabbed a stern finger in Om's direction and said, 'I want to know everything about him. His memory before Dhanvantari is deliberately locked. I need to know the intention behind that, to identify what we are fighting against here. He is not just a random subject of Dhanvantari's trial who became a successful experiment of immortality. There is a reason why Dhanvantari sent Milarepa to you and Parashurama; the very reason we do not know now but Milarepa might. Call him too.' Ashwatthama stood up and stepped outside. Kripacharya followed him, signalling to Om to remain seated. Om sat there, pondering about the old man he had seen before the portal closed. Outside the hut, Kripacharya stopped Ashwatthama. 'Ashwatthama, this is way more complex than what all of us had imagined. You will never try to go back there without me. That's an order.' Kripacharya walked back to the room where they had left Om.

After sitting silently next to each other on a flight for two hours, Parimal and LSD landed at Pune airport, where an old driver with a vintage car was waiting to receive them for the drive to Shetpal, which was 200 km from Pune. As they began to move towards their destination, LSD opened her laptop instantly and started reading about the village they were visiting. A palpably uncomfortable silence still lingered between the two as a consequence of Parimal's behaviour with LSD outside the hospital. Parimal peeped at LSD's laptop screen and tried to break the ice by clearing his throat.

'May I ask you something?' he started rather timidly.

'What?' LSD's eyes remained glued to the laptop.

'When I told you about my ancestors, Sarputi and Lopaksh, and their karmic connection with Nagendra, you said that you knew that story. But it's a story that has never been documented or narrated outside our family. It

has always been passed down from one generation to another; then how did *you* know about it?' Parimal asked. He could sense by the to and fro of LSD's eyes that she was tensing up a little, trying to think before answering.

'I heard it from Nagendra but I always thought it was just a bedtime story for me.'

'Bedtime story by Nagendra! How long have you been with him?' LSD shifted in her seat slightly, making it obvious that this was yet another unsettling question.

'Since I can remember. He has raised me as his own . . .'

'Daughter?'

Trying to avoid any further discussion about her relationship with Nagendra, she pretended to read about Shetpal on the Internet.

'Is this true?' She changed the topic before he could pry further.

'What?' Parimal asked.

'It says that in Shetpal, snakes face no restriction in their movement and nobody in the population of more than 2600 villagers ever harms them in any way. In fact, cobras are welcomed in every house as a member of the family. Neither the cobras nor the residents feel fear in each other's presence.

'The people of Shetpal have gone a step ahead in their hospitality for their venomous co-residents by building a *devasthanam* (abode of the deity) in their homes. A special corner in the house is set aside exclusively for the cobras to come and cool off at any time they wish. If anyone in the village constructs a new house, they make sure to devote a hollow portion of the dwelling as a *devasthanam* for the snakes. Nobody knows how this culture originated in this village.'

'You can simply say that you don't want to talk about it rather than dodging my question with yours,' Parimal rolled his eyes at her lousy attempt.

LSD was a little embarrassed, and so Parimal sighed and decided to play along. 'Yes, everything you read just now is correct. This village was established by my ancestors. The entire area, housing nearly 250 families, belongs to us, like in the olden days, when landlords owned villages.'

When they arrived in Shetpal, the vintage car stopped outside a grand old mansion and the manager of the place, an amicable old man, courteously opened the door for LSD. A cluster of housekeeping staff in royal uniforms

stood at the door to greet them both with gentle smiles. Parimal introduced LSD to the old manager and said, 'Meet Shubendra! He is the oldest royal guard and caretaker of this mansion. He has been serving this family for the last three generations.'

'It feels like the start of a vacation at a resort to me,' LSD grinned, suppressing an excited squeal.

'Yes, only this is not a resort but my home,' replied Parimal proudly.

The one taking orders from Nagendra as a servant was actually no less than a king himself. Parimal saw the realization dawn upon her and smiled knowingly. Walking towards the staff members standing at the entrance to welcome them, he whispered, 'I know what you are feeling right now; yet I am no more than a servant as everything you see here is all because of him. I am the one who is burdened by the boon and freed by the curse at the same time.'

Everyone started greeting and welcoming both of them royally. The exterior of the lavish, ornate building looked like a palace. At the centre of the lush green lawn was a grand fountain with colourful flowers floating on the crystal-clear water. As she walked in through the main door, LSD felt like a princess, walking beneath the high ceilings of the mansion, the exquisite royal tapestry, the carvings on the heavy wooden furniture and the exotic silverware. Bright sunlight streamed in through large windows, leaving everything awash in a golden hue. There was a magnificent staircase leading to the upper storeys. On the ground floor were multiple long, wide and well-ventilated hallways. On their way to the dining area, they passed through one of the corridors where LSD saw many large, old handmade paintings preserved and hung in intricately carved, broad, silver frames. She stopped for a minute, seeing that the corridor was full of such similar frames, hanging at equal distances, with an unusual resemblance between all the paintings.

Comparing the two frames adjacent to each other, she kept looking at them steadily till one of the staff members spoke up to explain the exclusivity they seemed to display. It was the same old manager. 'A king, a pet and the pet's caretaker with a partially covered face; it has become a symbol of this house, madam. There have been many different pets, almost all kinds of animals, in this house. Like this one,' he said, pointing with his whole palm towards the painting of a king sitting on a regal chair with a

man standing next to him holding a chained crocodile. ‘The one you see on the chair was our King Krutvirya, in 1687. When he decided to keep a crocodile in the mansion, he got a full-fledged pond made for it that still exists behind the mansion. And this one here!’ He extended his arm with an open palm, directing her gaze to another frame that had another king and a caretaker with a half-covered face holding a pangolin, also known as a scaly anteater, as a pet. ‘Meet King Viswajit.’

LSD’s fingertips gently traced the painting where the pangolin was placed till Parimal broke her reverie by saying, ‘The food is ready. Please come.’

She gave a courteous smile to the manager and followed Parimal. They reached the dining hall where the walls exhibited more frames in the same pattern; a man sitting with one pet and a caretaker standing behind them with his face half-covered. The only difference was that these were not painted but photographed and these frames were considerably bigger than the ones she had seen in the corridor. Some of them were from the time before colour photographs were invented. LSD was seated on a chair pulled out by a housemaid as she entered. Her eyes were still on the photographs. Parimal addressed her curiosity, ‘As you have already understood, these are my predecessors. The frames you saw in the corridor were of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here are the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And that one you see behind you was my father.’

LSD realized that she had missed the wall behind her since she had entered. She turned and saw a huge frame covering most of the wall. The frame flaunted a man appearing to be in his forties, sitting on a chair with a small and gorgeous Seneca white deer crouched by the foot of the seat, and the caretaker with the partially covered face standing right behind them. Parimal watched as LSD stared at the frame with an enigmatic expression.

‘The pet you see with my dad, the deer, is not an [albino](#); it carries a set of [recessive genes](#) that produce [all-white coats](#). I learnt about this much later. In my childhood, I was simply mesmerized by its bright white colour and thus named it Baadal. He was the only friend I had as a kid. We used to play together all day until he died when I was six. My father never brought another pet home after that and the tradition of keeping a pet dissolved just like that.’

LSD was still spellbound by the photograph when she was snapped out of it by a maid seeking her permission to serve food. She looked at the smiling girl and nodded.

‘Why are we here?’ LSD asked seriously.

Parimal heard her question and looked at the manager. He knew what to do. He silently dismissed all the other staff members from the dining room. Everyone turned and went out of the door in line.

‘Do you remember the story of Sarputi and Lopaksh, the first bearers of Nagendra’s burden?’ asked Parimal, reminding her of his clan.

‘Yes!’ LSD replied.

‘All of that began here, in this village. Sarputi was a serpent whereas her son Lopaksh had a human body and they used to live together. This is how this place got its unique reputation—people live with the snakes and have a devasthanam devoted to them. Both snakes and humans, co-existing here, know that they belong together. Our ancestral, custodial deity is Goddess Bhagavati, the patron goddess of war and fertility. The serpent is worshipped by my family as a guardian of the clan because we are believed to be the children of Kadru. Three days from now is the biggest annual prayer meet for Goddess Bhagavati. We believe this day to be the most auspicious day for marriage and baby showers, during which the Goddess herself approves of the marriage and blesses the mother and her womb. This is why Nagendra has sent us here.’

‘Are you trying to say that we are getting married in three days?’ LSD seemed agitated.

‘No! I am saying that our wedding is tomorrow. It is only when a girl is married to the man who carries the lineage of this family that Goddess Bhagavati will bless her womb with a child that holds the keyhole-shaped eyeball in his palm. The girl can either be blessed for her marriage or for her child on this auspicious day of prayer, which comes only once a year. I don’t know how to explain it. This marriage is like getting permission to be a part of the family, where you have the right to know all the secrets that no one else outside the family could ever learn, and being accepted by the Goddess before she grants you the authority and power to bear the keyhole-shaped eye in the child’s palm. No ordinary female can bear that. A banyan tree can never be planted in a pot. It needs the strength of the land as a pot can never bear its roots and growth.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me all of this before?’ asked LSD furiously.

‘Because I was not allowed to!’ Parimal defended his actions against LSD’s accusations.

‘What else have I not been told yet?’ She wanted to know everything hidden from her till then.

‘I have now told you everything that I was allowed to,’ Parimal answered cryptically.

‘That means there could be more.’

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Chapter 11

Boy with the Black Birthmark

An outrageous shadow loomed large in the submarine's forbidden chamber as a grave voice reverberated through its dark corners.

'So, what have you decided?' the man's petrifying silhouette spoke as he approached Nagendra.

'I have tried capturing them before but I have always failed. They are even stronger together and with every passing day, they are conspiring to stop us from achieving our goals,' Nagendra replied.

'Yes, you are right, but there are forms other than just the physical in which they can be weakened. If you cannot defeat them all at once, you must divide them!' the voice boomed, dismissing Nagendra's perturbed stance.

'Can we do that?' Nagendra asked.

'Yes. You still have a few days before raiding Agravana. Utilize this time optimally,' the voice commanded.

'How?' asked Nagendra, seeking guidance.

'Close your eyes. Surrender yourself to me completely. It's time to meet Devdhwaja.' As the voice said 'Devdhwaja', the name furrowed Nagendra's brow.

'Only he can help you.' The shadow expanded, now drowning the entire room in its darkness. Nagendra realized that there was no option other than to visit Shambhala village.

Nagendra went outside the mystical cabin and ordered his crew members to surface the submarine. They did as ordered. Nagendra went out on deck, all alone, and shouted out loud with a smile on his face, 'Another word is hidden in Kuldhara.'

The next day, at Parimal's ancestral home, not only the mansion but the entire village of Shetpal was spectacularly adorned with flowers and lamps, representing their age-old culture. The wedding of the only royal heir was

an event of grand festivity for the villagers. LSD was dressed like a majestic Hindu princess in all her glory and was a vision of sublime beauty. She wore traditional red bridal attire woven from the finest silk, intricately embroidered with golden threads. She was covered from head to toe in the most extravagant gold jewellery, embedded with diamonds and an assortment of rare jewels.

For the first time in her life, LSD felt the burden of her duties weighing her down. Parimal, on the other hand, descending from a lineage of kings himself, definitely looked the part. He bore a striking resemblance to his ancestors in the old paintings, dressed in conventional long robes over trousers made of silk in red and gold, his head wrapped in a *saafa* and a ceremonial sword adorning his waist. LSD ambled through the corridors, looking at each frame she passed. She halted in front of one of them, her eyes lingering on it for a little longer, as if conversing with it. Then she walked on slowly, her glistening eyes taking their time to trace all of them. She was so deeply transfixed that she didn't realize Parimal was only a step away, observing her dazed self.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Nothing!’ She jumped back like a thief caught in the act.

‘Are you missing his presence at the wedding?’ Parimal guessed confidently, referring to Nagendra.

‘Not at all!’ LSD replied in a high-pitched voice and started walking towards the place where the ceremony would commence. Right before entering the hall, she turned back to see Parimal, who still stood in the corridor, wondering what had lured LSD to the frames.

Breaking Parimal's train of thought, LSD spoke nonchalantly, ‘Liza Samuel D'Costa was the girl I had killed to assume her identity before coming to Ross Island. My name is Latika. I thought you should know this before we are married, if at all it matters.’ She then walked away, leaving Parimal to absorb that new piece of information.

The venue of the marriage ceremony was one of the voluminous halls of the mansion, where a small stage had been constructed underneath an aesthetic dome. The arrangement was surrounded by Hindu priests and a handful of locals; it was obvious that these people would be the only guests and witnesses to the marriage. The rest were feasting outside on the lawn, waiting for the bride and groom to walk out to them after the wedding.

‘Which one of you is going to perform the ritual of my side?’ LSD enquired.

‘That is for you to decide,’ Parimal walked in from behind her.

She scanned all the faces present there but her gaze did not pause at any of them, as she was looking for a specific someone amid the group. Parimal thought she was still expecting Nagendra in the crowd, but what she said next proved him wrong.

‘Call Shubendra!’ she said promptly.

Shubendra was still busy ensuring that all arrangements were satisfactory when someone came running, calling out to him. Upon being told that he was needed for the ceremony, he rushed to the couple. LSD smiled, looking at him, and said, ‘Shubendra! I want you by my side during the ceremony, but only if you are willing to bless me.’

He looked at Parimal, silently seeking his permission, which was granted with a nod and a smile.

‘That would be an honour, ma’am,’ Shubendra bowed in respect.

That was the only moment filled with genuine emotion in the whole ceremony because from there on, all the rites were performed with sheer indifference by the bride and the groom. Shubendra performed the ritual of *kanyadan* for LSD, in which the father or the guardian of the bride symbolically gives away the daughter to the one marrying her. As directed by the pandit,^{*} he took LSD’s right hand and placed it in Parimal’s right hand, signifying his approval of the union and requesting him to accept her as his equal partner forever.

Next was *saptapadi*, the most important rite of a Hindu marriage ceremony. The pandit narrated the seven vows and the couple circled the sacred fire, for each vow as a gesture of agreement. The fire was the witness to them promising each other love, duty, respect, fidelity and a fruitful companionship. The pandit then blessed the holy union. The couple finished their prayers and vowed to be together forever. Everything happened without any display of sentiment. To them, the celebration was as dark as death and their emotions as cold as a corpse.

The next day was the auspicious prayer of Goddess Bhagavati.

Back on Kailash, after learning everything about Om’s history from Milarepa, Kripacharya gathered everyone together to discuss the situation

and said, 'The last time we entered Om's memory, we could hardly walk four years into his life. One thing that we have learnt is that it is not going to be easy. Covering all of his waking years is going to take us several days of traversing through his unconscious mind and nothing can hold the door open for that long.'

'Yes! But we have to come up with a plan in order to know who he actually was, how he died and why he was brought back to life. The answers lie at the end of his previous life behind the closed door,' Ashwatthama stated.

Following the same strand of thought, Kripacharya continued, 'That is why I suggest that we do not worry about the door closing once we enter. If a door could be pushed from one side, it can be pulled from the other too. We can still return by opening it again from the inside.'

Ashwatthama was not so certain about this. 'Pulling the door would need twice the strength, seer. You are well aware of what it took us to push it open from the outside, despite our powers. Assuming that we will be powerless inside and exhausted by the time we return to the door, how would we pull it open? There is a high chance we will be trapped inside it forever,' he cautioned.

Kripacharya had already crafted a plan in his head. 'We might be powerless and exhausted inside, but not Parashurama and Milarepa. We shall decide the day and time of our return to the door and inform Parashurama before entering, so that he and Milarepa can push it open for us when it's time. It's crucial that we abide by our time limit otherwise returning could be impossible due to our inability to communicate with them once we are behind the closed door.'

Milarepa looked at everyone solemnly. 'What happens if we do not return in time?'

'You would be confined in the past forever. Your identity and existence would fade into oblivion, your bodies would be as good as dead, but will still be breathing,' Parashurama explained.

'There is no other way. This is a risk we *have* to take. We enter tomorrow at the break of dawn,' Kripacharya's firm visage was resolute as he asserted his order on Ashwatthama and Om.

Thinking of the morning, Mrs Batra said with a slight smile, 'I too remember a morning with Tej after I had recovered to some extent. That

morning, when I woke up, I noticed that Tej had made the breakfast and set the table. *It's a breakfast date*, I thought, and got excited because it felt like a new morning, which might as well be marked as the first day of my new life. Tej was busy readjusting the already aptly placed silverware and coasters on the table. He saw me coming and flashed me a nervous smile; he seemed anxious. Just when I took a seat, the doorbell rang. Tej's head instantly snapped in the door's direction and he went to open it as if he was anticipating company all along. That's when I noticed that the table was set for four.

'Before I could process anything, two strangers were standing in front of me with a smile. Tej introduced all of us. They were officials from the CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) who had flown in especially to meet us. Tej had invited them to impress them on a personal level, but in reality, their prime objective was to examine me and verify if Tej's claims of curing an incurable disease had substance. In that moment, Tej seemed more like a doctor than my husband and I felt more like a subject than his wife, but these complaints were negligible in that room full of specialists. The only important fact, distinct from all these feelings, was that I was alive and healthy and it was all attributable to Tej.

'The doctors followed standard procedure and began by checking my medical history, diagnosis, stages of deterioration and convalescence period while I sat there, answering their occasional questions and looking at a nervous Tej, whose knee was constantly bouncing. That day, I questioned this miracle of life for the first time—whether my revival was really an event deserving of celebration. What could this unforeseen scientific development possibly lead to in the times to come?'

'Those days were an indelible time not only for you, but it also has great significance for many other lives in this saga,' Prithvi added, taking over again.

At the crack of dawn, Kripacharya sat down with Ashwatthama and Om to transcend into their astral forms and open the memory gate once again. Milarepa and Parashurama stood there bidding them goodbye, wishing them power and victory for the mission.

Looking at the two, Kripacharya said, 'We can only spend seven days inside as we need time to prepare for the real battle on the next crescent moon, which is on the ninth day from today. Push the gates open on the

seventh day at dusk and not a minute before. If you don't see us, do not enter to seek us out. Simply close it and open it again after one day at the same time.'

Kripacharya's gaze then settled on Om and Ashwatthama. 'These are the only two escape options we will have. Based on our first and only experience, I presume that when we start our return, the attack will be the heaviest around the door, so we know that it will be impossible for us to stay near it for very long. If we exhaust these two attempts, the odds of us reaching the door and them opening it from the other side, simultaneously, are very slim. We could be lost inside forever. Therefore, it is critical for us to make it out in time.' Kripacharya closed his eyes. Om and Ashwatthama did the same.

Soon, they glided through the astral realm, pushed the door open and entered Om's past. Milarepa and Parashurama watched as the bodies of all the three immortals dropped limp right in front of them.

Around the same time, back in the village, Parimal and LSD were ready to achieve the true purpose of their visit to Shetpal—the grand worship of Goddess Bhagavati. LSD tagged along with Parimal to the Ishaan Kon* of the mansion. They reached an elegantly carved silver door that was rather short in height for such a massive wall. It was secured with an ancient lock. Parimal retrieved its key, unlocking the door. He then bent low before stepping inside, followed by LSD. The exteriors and the small door had made her imagine it as a compact worshiping room, but to her surprise, it was actually many times bigger than the size she had pictured. The room closely resembled a huge lawn surrounded by brick walls with green grass on the floor. There was no roof; this allowed the warm sunlight to directly cascade on to them. LSD felt as though she had stepped into a holy garden. Parimal walked to a corner and LSD trailed behind, soaking in the place with much awe until she was stopped by Parimal's outstretched arm, preventing her from overstepping a line marked on the grass which she hadn't noticed.

'When will the others arrive?' LSD asked.

'Who others?' Parimal said.

'The pandit! And a few others for the prayer's preparations!' LSD spoke as if stating the obvious.

‘It will be just us. She won’t come to see you in the presence of any fourth soul in the room,’ Parimal clarified.

‘Fourth soul?’ LSD looked around, searching for any other living being except the two of them.

‘Your child!’ Parimal reminded her.

He went into one of the corners of the room and lifted a lid in the floor. It was a small snake pit, like every other snake pit in every other house of Shetpal. He then walked back to LSD and got down on his knees in prayer. Following his lead, LSD also began to kneel but Parimal stopped her. ‘No! Not you. Keep standing. You are now a mother, bestowed with the power of *srijan*, the power of creation. Your place is much higher than me now. You don’t have to bow to anyone.’

‘Okay! But who are you kneeling to?’ asked a perplexed LSD.

Parimal looked at the hole that he had uncovered and spoke in a hushed, calm voice, ‘Don’t be frightened when she emerges.’

The sinkhole-size pit started oozing emerald-green, extending in its breadth with every passing second. In less than a minute, everything until the marked line on the grass was submerged in the neon-green fluid. LSD stood still, her eyes glued to Parimal, until the water touched her feet. Suddenly the earth below her feet rumbled and she could feel something passing underground towards the opened pit. In the blink of an eye, a giant serpent tore through the collapsed ground on the very area she stood. All she could do was stare at the serpent and feel the rest of its body crawling underground, creating rumbles that reached her feet at the same time.

The serpent was nearly thrice the size of LSD, even before its whole body had surfaced. LSD’s gaze travelled up to take it all in when the snake flipped its gigantic arms, which looked like bat wings. Everything around her seemed frozen and her heart skipped a beat when the enormous serpent leaned down to her eye level, piercing through her soul. LSD was petrified but she concealed it neatly. She glanced at Parimal while the creature’s eyes remained glued to her face. Drops of sweat trickled down her forehead as she was determined to maintain a brave posture, her feet cemented to the holy ground. The serpent then turned towards Parimal and looked at his palms, which were barren of any lines, as if affirming his identity. LSD noticed the gills on the sides of the largest snake she had ever seen, another unusual part of the creature’s body. It made her wonder what it truly was,

with an amalgamation of the most unconventional characteristics—a reptile’s body to crawl, a bat’s wings to fly and also gills to breathe under water. Just then, the serpent turned towards LSD and spoke in a seraphic female voice.

‘Did you choose him willingly?’

LSD took moments to absorb the whole scene. The incredible creature questioned again, ‘Is he forced upon you in any manner?’

LSD saw Parimal, who was still on his knees with his head bowed.

‘No!’ LSD replied.

‘Do you wish to allow the child in your womb to enter this world?’

‘Yes! I do,’ LSD affirmed.

‘*Tathastu!*’* The serpent wrapped her large body around LSD completely.

LSD struggled to breathe under the serpent’s tight grasp. The gills on the serpent’s neck were filled with the same green fluid and as LSD gasped for air, the liquid got sucked in through her mouth and nostrils. With empty gills, the creature now struggled to breathe and left LSD immediately.

LSD knew that she had been granted a wish that she would have to bear and honour to her ashes. By the time she was released, LSD fainted due to lack of oxygen and Parimal immediately crouched to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to wake her up. As she gasped back to life and saw everything reversing around her in a semi-conscious state, the creature retracted into the water and the lawn dried out. Slowly, the trench shrunk back to being a small sinkhole, leaving no trace of the series of mystic events. It seemed as if nothing had happened there. Parimal closed the lid and took LSD out of the room. She felt weak and needed rest, so she was taken to bed, where she fell asleep immediately. Parimal looked at the calendar on the side table. Seven days were left for them to leave for Bharatpur National Park, where Nagendra would be waiting for them.

There was limited time for Ashwatthama and Kripacharya as well, inside Om’s memory, to figure out who Om was. As they entered the door, they were greeted by the pin-drop silence of the pitch-black void. Everything that they had experienced in their last visit and thought they knew, had vanished. It was so dark in there that Ashwatthama could hardly see Kripacharya standing right beside him.

‘Don’t worry! This seems to be a new moon night,’ Kripacharya assured.

‘What do we do then?’ Ashwatthama asked.

‘We walk forward,’ Kripacharya replied.

They saw a distant light coming from a house and decided to walk towards it. As they got closer, they could hear someone bellowing inside. To ensure their safety and to avoid alarming anybody, they peeped in and saw a pregnant woman screaming in pain as her water broke.

‘How is it possible that there is no one around her in such an emergency? This could be a trap. We should not go in to help her,’ Ashwatthama stated firmly.

‘This is all in the past already. What we see has happened thousands of years ago and we will not intervene,’ Kripacharya said.

‘I’ll go and check the way ahead to assure our safety. Please stay here till I am back,’ Ashwatthama walked ahead.

‘She needs help. There has to be a reason why we are seeing this right now. I can help her,’ Om was growing restless looking at the lone woman in excruciating labour.

Kripacharya sensed the straining in Om’s tone against his order to stand by. ‘Maybe you know why we are witnessing this. After all, it is your past that we are in,’ Kripacharya taunted.

‘Our powers are limited. Our strength is reduced to less than half when in astral form and we cannot summon the weapons we desire in here. And above all, we are not here to engage and disturb the events but to silently observe and learn who you are,’ Kripacharya reiterated.

While they talked, the lady’s contractions continued to get worse. She also started bleeding and Om could see that she was struggling to breathe and was on the brink of losing consciousness. Looking at her condition, Om felt torn between his conscience and reasoning. Should he help the bawling mother or be utterly ignorant to her dreadful misery, simply to abide by a command? Om tried to keep his feet cemented to the ground and avoid engaging but just when she had given up, which meant the death of both mother and child, Om stormed in without Kripacharya’s permission. She was fainting and Om could not bear to be a mere spectator any more.

The woman was terrified to see a stranger standing in front of her. It was impossible to know if she was now screaming due to labour or fear. Om calmed her down and explained to her that he was there to help and not harm. The lady was soon consoled by his presence but was still dying in

pain. Om immediately started preparing for a safe delivery while an irritated Kripacharya continued to ensure Om's safety by keeping an eye from outside the hut. As the child was being pushed out by the woman, half of its lower body, the legs and feet, came out at the last minute of the darkest hour of the remaining new moon night. It was a breech birth; the baby was coming out with its feet first instead of the head.

Om caught a glimpse of the infant's feet, which had the same black birthmark on his left heel. It did not take much time for Om to understand that he was witnessing the birth of the same child they had met in their previous visit. The remaining half of the child, the chest and head, came out a few minutes before the first light of dawn. By the time the baby was out and crying, the mother was exhausted by the delivery, and hence collapsed. Kripacharya glimpsed some figures marching towards them from a distance, holding fire torches in their hands, so he signalled Om to get out of the hut immediately. By then, Ashwatthama had also come back to lead them further. Om had no choice but to leave the mother and child by themselves. Om rushed outside and joined the other two. The men approaching were close enough for them to leave instantly. They ran behind Ashwatthama and entered an abandoned hut.

'We shall wait here till sunrise,' Kripacharya stated.

Later that morning, they left the hut and continued on the trail. After nearly half a mile, they found two men sitting outside a hut, one of whom seemed to be a vaidya* who was examining a boy who seemed to be about four years old. The vaidya prepared a herbal mixture and began feeding it to the boy. The kid grimaced in distaste and leaned backwards, looking at which the other man exclaimed, 'Devdhwaja! Don't disrespect vaidya ji. Sit here and have this.'

'It's all right, Vishnuyasha, this boy is too innocent to mean any disrespect. He is too young to know the ways of the world,' the vaidya smiled.

Devdhwaja was not happy with the order but he complied with a cringe anyway. After swallowing a spoonful, the boy got distracted by his pet rabbit and went about chasing and playing with it. Before the vaidya could say anything, Vishnuyasha told him to stop and let the boy be. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya monitored the little boy wherever he

sprinted. He pranced around the fields with his rabbit, greeting everyone that he passed with a playful smile.

The villagers smiled back at the innocent little boy. After frolicking about for quite some time, he flumped under a tree to catch his breath. The rabbit hopped near him to sit in his lap and Devdhwaja patted it with much adoration. All of a sudden, he grabbed the rabbit's head and snapped its neck in two. The boy found a rock and bashed the dead rabbit's body with it. The air was filled with the dreadful sound of crushing bones and the child's angry grunts as a splash of blood landed on his face. His eyes went into a frenzy and a crazed look took over his innocent expressions when his tongue accidentally caught the taste of its blood from the corner of his mouth. The three of them watched, aghast at the sight they had just witnessed. After a few moments, behaving as if someone else had murdered his pet and he had just noticed it, the boy burst into tears. He cried rivers upon rivers looking at its brutal state. A woman in a plain sari with her face covered came and picked up the crying child and walked away. It was dark already so Ashwatthama found another hideout for them to spend the night in.

When they woke up next, they couldn't tell if it was day or night; everything around them was pitch-black again. Feeling insecure about staying at one location for a long time, the trio decided to keep moving. After walking for roughly four miles, they came across a farm. As they inched closer, they realized it was a part of a long stretch of farms with each one growing a different crop. They could see the villagers labouring hard. It was harvest season and they had just begun to reap the fruit of their patient toil.

From a hut, a teenage boy came running to the farm carrying some tools. 'Be careful, Devdhwaja!' came a voice after him. Paying no heed to that and enthused to work in the field, the young boy got to work. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya continued to observe his actions from behind a tree. After working for about an hour, the boy took a break. He went inside the hut and came out with a burning wooden stick. Om was puzzled; why would he need fire in the heat of the sun? As if to answer Om's question, the boy took the burning stick and swept it through the crops. The farm was ablaze at once and the flames began spreading to the neighbouring farms. Om watched in terror as the villagers scurried to save

their crops and their own lives, but the fire, like the boy's eyes, was furious and greedy, consuming everything that came in its way. It did not take too long for the fire to engulf almost half the village's harvest. It was now spreading towards their homes and huts. A woman stood screaming at Devdhwaja to run. As if snapping back from a dream, the boy looked around at the combusting village in shock, like the catastrophe had just dawned upon him. Trembling in absolute fright, he ran away. Om, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya also sought shelter till the fire died down. When they emerged, everything had turned to ashes. They walked around for some time, but there was no one to be seen, just dead silence.

'We need to turn back from here,' Kripacharya said as he calculated in his head.

'But we are not done yet,' Ashwatthama objected.

'I know. This is like a jigsaw puzzle. We are finding incidents in random bits and pieces that need more time to place them in order to understand the complete picture and for now, we don't have it. We have walked inside for three days. I believe that returning to the door will take more time than it took to reach here. We need to walk back without wasting any time.'

Back in Shetpal, LSD had woken up after days from a deep slumber, fully recovered from everything she had undergone in the name of Goddess Bhagavati's blessings. When she opened her eyes, she found Parimal standing beside the bed with a reassuring smile. As she sat up on the bed, Parimal pointed towards a dress hanging in the corner of the room. It was a set of one of her usual clothes and not some traditional attire this time. LSD's gaze shifted from the dress to Parimal again.

'Wear this and pack your bags.' With that, Parimal left the room. LSD got up and started to gather her things.

When she was almost done, someone knocked on the door. She turned and found the old manager, Shubendra, standing at the entrance. LSD allowed him in. He came and stood near her silently.

'Yes!' LSD prompted him to speak.

'I am grateful and indebted to you for choosing me to perform the rituals that are a father's responsibility,' Shubendra said humbly as his heart swelled and throat choked.

LSD smiled and hugged him. 'There is nothing that you owe me.'

‘Why did you choose me for such a sacred deed in your wedding?’ Shubendra asked, curious.

‘Time to go!’ Parimal called out from the door before LSD could answer the question.

However, as LSD stood there, ready to step inside the car, not knowing when she would visit the mansion again, she turned to Shubendra and said softly, ‘Because you selflessly looked after Baadal; because you cried when he passed away. I am grateful and indebted to you for giving him a proper funeral.’

Another staff member overheard the conversation while placing the luggage in the trunk. LSD left while Shubendra stood there shocked and lost in thought. The luggage keeper came to Shubendra and asked, ‘Who was Baadal?’

‘The white deer and the last pet of this mansion,’ Shubendra muttered, looking at the disappearing car, still awestruck by the mystery of how LSD, who had visited the mansion for the first time, knew about Baadal’s death and cremation when even Parimal did not know that.

As they walked down the muddy path in the seemingly tranquil evening, Ashwatthama heard a light ruffle along the bushes. Although the three of them were always on guard, such an ambush was least expected. Before they could predict anything, a young, muscular man pounced on Ashwatthama out of thin air. As they dealt with this blindsided attack, another burly man jumped out of the branches of a tall tree and charged aggressively towards Om.

As the younger of the two lunged at them, Ashwatthama noticed the same black birthmark on his heel. It was Devdhwaja—the same child whom they had just visited was grown up. Distracted by this, he couldn’t guard himself against the older man’s first blow, which knocked him out. On the other hand, Kripacharya ducked away from Devdhwaja’s first attack, and then guarded an unconscious Ashwatthama from the older man’s second lethal assault, after which he fought valiantly with both the aggressors in his attempts to save Ashwatthama and Om. Kripacharya knew that if they dragged Ashwatthama back inside the catacomb of Om’s past, he would lose Ashwatthama forever.

‘Om! Drag him out of the door. Take him out. Quickly!’ Kripacharya screamed, countering the two men single-handedly. Om did as commanded

and rushed towards the door, lugging Ashwatthama along. He laid Ashwatthama on the ground and gathered all his might to pull the door open but failed to do so for he was alone and drained. He saw both the assaulters trying to surpass Kripacharya to reach Ashwatthama and him but Kripacharya was competent enough to hold off both of them; however, Om knew he won't be able to keep up with them for long. Seven whole days had passed since they had been inside Om's memory and the last rays of light seemed to be dissipating into darkness.

That's when the door opened and Milarepa stood right there on the other side, precisely as per Kripacharya's instructions. When Devdhwaja looked at Milarepa and the opening door, his eyes burned with pure wrath. He began to fight Kripacharya relentlessly and even more violently like an outright hysterical man. The frantic pair was overpowering Kripacharya, making it difficult to keep avoiding their swings at once. By the time Om dragged Ashwatthama out, one such strike had injured Kripacharya severely. Om saw this and hurried back to help him. Milarepa tried to stop Om but he was shoved away. As Om strode to enter the door again, Devdhwaja from the other side also ran to pull Om inside. At this moment, Milarepa had no other choice but to let the door close and before the two could collide in battle, the door shut tight between them.

Ashwatthama and Om woke up where they had sat for meditation a week ago, whereas Kripacharya's body remained limp. Om lashed out at Milarepa for closing the door and screamed at his face, 'Is deserting people and betraying them all you can do?'

'We couldn't lose you. What he did was on my order,' Parashurama intervened calmly.

'Kripacharya is in there! We need to open the door again and rescue him. He closed the door on one of our own!' Om's despair was inconsolable.

'Open the door? And what if those who attacked Kripacharya and Ashwatthama crossed over and came to this side, in the forbidden city of Gyanganj? Milarepa is not to be blamed for what he did. He only did what was in the best interest of everybody else. Kripacharya is in there because of your inability to have total control over your brain. If you want to hold anyone responsible, then get a hold of yourself,' Parashurama shouted at Om.

Om fell silent. Parashurama realized that he shouldn't have said that. He sighed and approached Om to console him. 'He can be held captive or tortured by hunger, thirst and wounds, but he is eventually an immortal. He cannot be killed. We will bring him back, but right now, we need to gear up for another battle in this realm. Crucial time is running out and the crescent moon is just two days away. Let's go.'

Parashurama, followed by Ashwatthama, Milarepa and Om, reached another hut that looked like a huge wardrobe filled with all kinds of clothing. Om stood and looked at the three of them packing for their next mission. While they were prepping, Ved Vyasa entered the hut.

'I have learnt about one more place. It's Kuldhara.'

The new location caused Parashurama's brow to furrow in distress.

'My plan was to send Kripacharya along with Milarepa to Tejo Mahalaya and Ashwatthama would have accompanied me to Bheemkund so we could avoid contingencies like the one Vrishkapi had to endure; but now we have three men to guard three places. I wish I could have Kripacharya here,' Parashurama said wistfully.

'I can come along,' Om offered.

Parashurama simply looked at Om with half a smile. 'I understand and appreciate that you want to help, but no, you can't. Stay here and try to keep Vrishkapi alive. Milarepa! Go back to Tejo Mahalaya. Ashwatthama! I want you to learn everything about this new place from Ved Vyasa and head for it right away. I shall go back to Bheemkund because we need more manpower. Let's hope that Nagendra does not reach one of those places that Ved Vyasa has not learnt of yet.'

Inside the submarine's forbidden chamber, Nagendra woke up, clapping his hands together in a cynical celebration. His voyage into the astral world and his meeting with Devdhwaja had been a success. They had managed to trap Kripacharya in Om's memories, who was definitely the most powerful and the biggest threat to their plans. Nagendra joined his hands together and bowed in respect to the shadow before leaving. He came back to the shore and commenced his journey to meet LSD and Parimal at Bharatpur National Park.



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Chapter 12

An Unceremonious Cremation

It had been several hours since LSD and Parimal had left Shetpal. The couple sat in total silence for a long while before LSD finally spoke, 'How dare you take me to something so dangerous? What was that creature in that room?'

'It was the representative of Goddess Bhagavati. My mother had gone through the same process when she carried me in her womb and my grandmother before that. It was to ensure that the child you are carrying is not born blind. It was unavoidable. The creature was a reptile that can crawl on the ground, climb trees and pierce into the deepest holes of the earth, with wings to cover the sky and gills to survive in water. It symbolizes Goddess Bhagavati, who is with us everywhere, as the creature can exist on the land, in the sky and in water,' Parimal replied, explaining.

'Ever since that incident, I feel like something has changed inside me,' LSD muttered, looking outside the car window.

'Yes, I know. You need not be worried about the child's health and safety any more. He is now a blessed child and Goddess Bhagavati is his protector,' Parimal explained with a smile.

'So, am I simply a carrier now?' LSD retorted in anger, which embarrassed Parimal. LSD's statement may have been harsh but it was true, and so Parimal tried to clarify.

'I didn't say that. I ...'

'Yes! But that's what you meant.' LSD was furious.

'I only meant that your child's gestation would be distinct from the rest. Considering what we have done so far and what we would have to do while serving Nagendra, you don't have to be as cautious and caring as other pregnant women because the child is guarded now. The child is yours and you are his mother. No one can change that and no one is even trying to, so calm down. We are almost there,' said Parimal, ending the discussion.

The car came to a halt. They got down and made their way into Bharatpur National Park, where Nagendra was waiting for them.

Unaware of the fact that Nagendra was just an hour and a half away from him, Milarepa awaited his uncertain arrival on the upcoming crescent moon night around the Taj Mahal, Agra. At a distance of fourteen hours from Bharatpur National Park was Ashwatthama on the other side, at Kuldhara, while Parashurama had reached the lake of Bheemkund.

Parimal and LSD walked inside the national park and spotted Nagendra standing there. They went ahead and stood by his side.

‘Sometimes, a disease can make you special.’ Nagendra’s eyes peered distantly into the dense forest. He then turned towards both of them. ‘Though peacocks are known for their striking colours, do you know there is such a kind as the white peacock? No, these birds aren’t albinos; their whiteness is a consequence of leucism, which is a mutation causing partial loss of pigmentation. It is a phenomenon that harms the peacock in no way. Then why do humans even categorize that phenomenon as a disease? Idiots! Anyway, how was your visit home, Parimal?’ asked Nagendra, after commenting on humans.

‘The work is done, sir,’ Parimal replied.

‘Good! How was your visit to Parimal’s home, LSD?’

LSD looked at Nagendra with an irritated frown tugging at her eyebrows and did not reply at first, but she knew she had to answer as she had been asked a question. She looked at Parimal before saying, ‘The work is done, sir.’ Parimal realized that her statement was a response to Nagendra but also a taunt to him.

Nagendra could sense the chemistry of expectations and disappointments, and the aggression and submission between the two. He approached LSD and knelt in front of her. He lifted her shirt and keenly looked at her tummy, which seemed shiny green in the centre.

Nagendra called both of them close and whispered, ‘Good. So now we head for the hunt of our next word. We go to 19.19°N, 73.03°E.’

LSD quickly ran a search on her tablet. ‘You mean the Taj Mahal! But why Agra?’

Responding to her query, Parimal said, ‘It is believed by many that the Taj Mahal was originally called Tejo Mahalaya. The people dominating the Agra region in the eleventh century were Jats. They addressed Shiva as

Tejaji. Jats had built many Teja mandirs, that is, Teja temples, because Teja linga is one among the several names of Shiva lingas mentioned in Hindu architectural texts. And hence, Tejo Mahalaya literally translates to the great abode of Tejaji.'

LSD typed something on her tablet again. 'It says on this site that Tejo Mahalaya was the old name of the modern-day Taj Mahal.'

'Since the creation of the world, the one who rules the land rules its religions, rewrites yesterdays, dictates todays and influences tomorrows. People believed and claimed to have evidence in the form of written texts authored by many from those eras, about how there stood a palace named Tejo Mahalaya in the city of Agravana, ruled by the Hindu kings in 1155 AD. Just like the hands of those who worked in the mausoleum were chopped off, the name of the city was also reduced to Agra from Agravana, and the monument was renamed Taj Mahal, which coincidentally stood exactly at the palace's spot,' Parimal explained.

'Which of these two totally contradicting histories, one backed by proper evidence, is actually true?' LSD asked.

'As many chronicles as there are bards! The theories have been widely discussed on Internet forums for several years and many of those arguments revolve around Oak's theory, which claims that the Taj Mahal was built by a Hindu ruler, Jai Singh, and that it was actually a Shiva temple as well as a Rajput royal palace named Tejo Mahalaya. It is believed that it was later captured by Shah Jahan, who turned it into a tomb for his wife and then renamed it the Taj Mahal,' Parimal concluded.

'I don't need to dig the corpses of the claims and kings. I don't care if it was built by a Hindu king or a Muslim invader. We need to hunt for the word, not the truth.' Nagendra dismissed their chatter, whispering, and walked away.

'Why are you whispering?' asked LSD.

'Because he is searching for me, trying to hear my plans,' replied Nagendra, whispering again.

He seemed to LSD and Parimal to have totally gone mad. Though Nagendra had dismissed the whole debate on the Taj Mahal and Tejo Mahalaya, the ever-inquisitive LSD wanted to know more about the Taj Mahal controversy. She quietly continued to google everything relevant to

Tejo Mahalaya while walking beside Parimal, who led the way out of the national park.

‘There is more information if you’re still curious,’ Parimal whispered. ‘The Tejo Mahalaya claim is supported by a Sanskrit inscription known as the Bateshwar inscription, which is currently preserved at the Lucknow Museum. It refers to the establishment of a “crystal white Shiva temple so alluring that Lord Shiva, once enshrined in it, decided never to return to Mount Kailash—his usual abode”. This inscription was found within a radius of about 36 miles from the Taj Mahal and is dated back to 1155 AD. Due to this evidence, the possibility arose that the Taj Mahal might have been built at least 500 years before Shah Jahan took credit for it. Moreover, Shah Jahan’s own court chronicle, the *Badshahnama*, admitted that a grand mansion of unique splendour, capped with a dome, was taken from the Jaipur Maharaja Jai Singh for Mumtaz’s burial.’

However, LSD was one step ahead of Parimal and read from a recent article on the Internet. ‘In a written statement filed in the Court of Civil Judge^{*} in August 2017, the ASI[†] had refused to accept the contention that the world heritage site was built on a temple dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva. They told an Agra court that the Taj Mahal is, in fact, a tomb and not a temple as claimed by a group of petitioners,’ LSD read out loud with much conviction. On their way to Agra, she spent her time reading everything she could find about Oak’s theory and by the time she was done, they were close to the Taj Mahal on the evening of the crescent moon night.

On the other hand, Milarepa was now fully equipped to confront Nagendra. From the moment he had arrived in Agra, he had traversed the city, feeding the homeless. When he handed out the food, he looked deep into their eyes and revealed his true form to them. One by one, as if in a state of divine trance, every individual was entranced by Milarepa, who needed them to act as surveillance to keep a check on every visitor at the Taj Mahal. Roaming around town, he had managed to cast a spell on various animals and birds too. Under the spell of hypnotism, Milarepa’s army of nearly 100 pairs of vigilant eyes now comprised stray dogs, wild cats, cows, rats, sparrows, eagles, vultures and peacocks, among other fauna and a few men and women, looking for anything unusual in and around the Taj Mahal.

LSD was eager to go inside and witness all that she had read regarding the controversy but to her disappointment, Nagendra did not let them out of the parked car as the plan did not involve entering the mausoleum. Just then, he noticed a pack of stray dogs simply gazing at every man and woman from top to bottom that passed them. Nagendra ordered Parimal to book the top floor of some tall hotel as close to the Taj Mahal as possible.

The sun eventually departed for the day, leaving the sky vacant for the moon, which had been a symbol of catastrophe and defeat for the past two months. While Milarepa stared at the moon and his surveillance personnel kept an eye on every human being around the Taj Mahal, Nagendra looked out for any unusual movement on the ground. As his squinted eyes peered around, he observed one of the dogs still sitting at the same spot, hours after Nagendra had noticed the pack for the first time. Like many strays on the streets, this one too seemed malnourished and weak. Chunks of hair were missing from several places on its coat, exposing the fleas latching on to its skin. Its spine and ribs were evident through the thin skin, which also had old and fresh scars, possibly from fights with other canines. While the dog sat there quietly, Nagendra saw an old man walking towards it and keeping a handful of rotis (Indian breads) in front of it. To the old man and Nagendra's astonishment, the dog didn't even move an inch. Its gaze continued to follow the old man, who crossed over to the other side of the road and tried to feed other strays along the way, but all of them stayed put. Instantly, Nagendra knew what he had to look for. He started to search for the same trait in others around the Taj Mahal. The strange immobility of other animals and birds in the area could be seen clearly as such behaviour was abnormal to their species.

'They know!' he exclaimed, calling for LSD and Parimal's attention.

'Look at these animals, and even those beggars on the roadside who are not moving. They have been sitting at the same spot like objects before sunset without moving an inch from their places.'

'They seem normal to me. What is wrong with them?' LSD asked, mentally counting the immobile people and animals.

'To the average person they are just sitting and minding their business but if you look closely, you'll realize that they are hypnotized and placed at spots covering every nook and corner to report any unusual movement,' Parimal stated his analysis of the situation.

‘So, they are acting like artificial intelligence with live cameras,’ LSD concluded.

‘We don’t know how many there are. We don’t know who is controlling them or where this person is located,’ Nagendra expressed his concern.

‘Parashurama and Ashwatthama! Who else? We are ready to take on both of them, sir. What are our orders?’ Parimal said confidently.

Still looking out from the window of the hotel room, Nagendra ordered, ‘Go to sleep!’

LSD and Parimal looked at each other in surprise after hearing the order.

‘But it’s the crescent moon night,’ said Parimal.

‘Yes, it is. But this time, what we need is not the indirect light of the sun through the moon. The spot we need would be given away by the sun itself tomorrow morning with its first ray,’ Nagendra smirked.

While Nagendra waited for the next day, Milarepa, Ashwatthama and Parashurama waited for him at their respective locations, but the night passed as smoothly as flowing water.

Om assisted the other sages in trying to save Vrishkapi. While he inspected Vrishkapi’s wounded body, he came across the vicious bite mark on his neck, which showed no signs of healing and was rapidly decaying.

One of the seers noticed Om’s keen stare scrutinizing the side of Vrishkapi’s neck and said, ‘That’s a bite mark! A deed of some carnivorous animal, it seems.’ Om glanced at the seer and asked him, ‘Will Vrishkapi survive?’ But the seer’s lack of response was answer enough to validate Om’s concerns. The night passed in uncertainty.

The next day, at the crack of dawn, Milarepa and the two immortals had to return to Mount Kailash to rescue Kripacharya and learn who Om was. Ashwatthama and Parashurama immediately started their journey back but Milarepa needed some time to set all the people and animals that he had possessed free from his spell, one by one. He started releasing people in different corners that stood at their spots. As he released the stray dog that Nagendra had his eyes on, Nagendra said, ‘Time to go.’

Nagendra had underestimated the number of eyes searching for him. They walked out of the hotel towards the Taj Mahal and crossed a beggar who was yet to be released by Milarepa. The moment the beggar saw Nagendra passing with a big bag in his hands, Milarepa saw him too, but before the beggar’s eyes could follow Nagendra, he vanished into the

crowd. Nagendra being spotted and then his disappearance were both major concerns for Milarepa, yet there were two things he had learnt by merely spotting him in Agra: one was his presence around the Taj Mahal and the other was the direction that he went in. Milarepa put all the remaining eyes under his command to work. All of them walked from different directions to where Nagendra was last seen and continued to walk to the permanently closed eastern gate of the Taj Mahal.

Nagendra halted at a point and looked at the sun.

‘LSD! Calculate and mark where the shadow of the tip of this structure would be right in the morning. Parimal! Secure the perimeter. Barricade the eastern sector.’

LSD and Parimal instantly started executing the orders without any questions, while all the possessed eyes searched for Nagendra. Milarepa also headed towards the Taj Mahal’s eastern corner.

A hypnotized cat simply walked to the extreme end of the eastern side till it encountered Parimal standing on the other side of the barricade. He tried to shoo the cat away before he saw a small army of animals slowly approaching in the same manner. Alarmed by this, Parimal was now panicking, but the bunch of strays appeared placid. He used his wireless to inform Nagendra of the peculiar situation and asked him to come and check for himself. As he was talking to Nagendra, Milarepa witnessed the scene through the animals and realized Nagendra wasn’t alone. He managed to notice LSD and Parimal in the area but still couldn’t spot Nagendra and knew that he needed to get closer. Nagendra responded on the wireless and commanded, ‘Hold them there as long as you can. Do not open fire; it would create a fuss and we don’t want a gathering against us.’

‘Sir, there are many more coming in! It doesn’t seem like good news to me.’ Parimal said, concerned by the increasing number of growling wild dogs and snarling cats who were now also accompanied by rats and snakes, slowly enclosing him.

‘Here is the point where the shadow will be at 6, sir,’ LSD informed Nagendra.

‘Parimal, they are not a threat, and killing them is not the solution. Fall back and take your position above the tree. They are all possessed. Look for the possessor and inform me when you find him,’ Nagendra ordered.

Nagendra pointed towards the big bag he had brought along. 'Open that bag and take out the ultrasonic gun,' he told LSD.

She unzipped the bag and took out a gun. It had two triggers and a scanner attached above it. LSD was still figuring out what she held when Nagendra said, 'Now shoot it on the ground with the first trigger. It will release ultrasonic rays. Keep an eye on the scanner. The area from which the rays don't reflect back is where the underground hidden passage is. That is the spot where you have to shoot again with the second trigger.'

Milarepa saw Parimal climbing up the tree and all the animals huddled around it. On his command, a swarm of crows, eagles and peacocks engulfed the tree for a better view. He now had a bird's eye view of the entire area and ordered his subjects to start attacking both Parimal and LSD to deter them as much as possible.

'Sir, the perimeter has been breached! They are everywhere. What are my orders?' Parimal asked through the wireless.

'Hold your fire. I want to reach the man controlling them,' Nagendra replied.

Badly bruised by the attacks, LSD stayed on her task despite the danger. She now had the depth and width of the structure they had to dig for. She pressed another trigger, which created a manhole in the ground wide enough for one man at a time to get inside. Right then, she was nabbed by the spellbound cluster. Parimal fell off the tree. The pair wanted to fight back, but they were supposed to stand down till their next orders and hence kept struggling to save themselves.

Nagendra, who was lurking at a distance all along, saw a group of people moving in their direction. He realized that they were the same beggars from yesterday and began sprinting towards the group before jumping in front of a woman who was rather skinny. He held her face firmly and stared straight into her eyes. Milarepa, who had almost reached him, came to an abrupt halt when he saw Nagendra, who felt just as close to his face because they were sharing the woman's vision. Milarepa immediately tried to release the woman from his grasp but Nagendra was quicker to use her eyes as a bridge to reach Milarepa and hypnotize him. In no time, the possessor had become the possessed. Milarepa was now totally under Nagendra's control. Everyone attacking Parimal and LSD suddenly ceased their movements. Nagendra knew that he had possessed the one controlling everyone but he

was still unaware of who it actually was. 'Come to me!' Nagendra ordered while looking into the woman's eyes.

LSD and Parimal got back on their feet, both with scratches on their arms and neck. They rushed to Nagendra, who was still standing in front of the woman. Nagendra ordered Parimal to drop the foldable ladder into the hole LSD had dug. Parimal hung the ladder and Nagendra went down the hole while LSD stood guard with her gun near the hypnotized woman and the rest stood still like statues under Nagendra's spell.

Nagendra descended and found a big door ahead. He uttered the two words, ' ', which he had hunted from Mansarovar and Roopkund. The door disappeared and was replaced by flames on the edges. Nagendra could see the next word on the other side of the flames. It was ' '.

By then, Milarepa had reached there and stood at LSD's gunpoint beside the hypnotized woman.

Nagendra was required to step past the flames to acquire the word. He tried to pass through the flames but just as he closed in, the fire flared up, with a clear intent to set him ablaze. Nagendra figured that the flames were securing the word and anybody who tried to obtain it would be charred by its intensity. The word needed a sacrifice of life before its surrender and Nagendra needed a living being, surrendered to sacrifice.

'Sir! A man just walked in and stood behind the woman you possessed,' LSD informed Nagendra on the wireless.

There was a moment's pause before Nagendra commanded, 'Come here!'

Milarepa started walking towards the pit Nagendra was in and plunged right in, ignoring the hanging ladder. The fall broke his right leg, but the hypnotism made him so oblivious to the pain that despite the injury, he stood up on one leg and started limping towards Nagendra.

Nagendra dispassionately observed the silhouette of the approaching figure. But as the purple hue of the blazing fire replaced the shadows on his face, Nagendra was awestruck to see the green-skinned Milarepa standing across from him. He was seeing his former ally after nearly a millennium. But as soon as Milarepa limped ahead and his face glowed brighter in the light of the fire, Nagendra's astonished expression turned into one of hatred and revenge. Milarepa now stood right in front of Nagendra and his lifeless eyes met Nagendra's furious ones. Nagendra embraced Milarepa tightly and

whispered in his ears, 'You have no idea how happy I am to see you, Milarepa. You know why you are still alive? Because I never stopped regretting not being able to kill you,' Nagendra spoke through clenched teeth. Nagendra and Milarepa had tears in their eyes. One's eyes glistened with powerlessness and defeat and the other's with a long-awaited rage of revenge and victory. Nagendra continued.

'You want to reply, but you can't. You don't want to cooperate, but you will. You want to fight, but you can't. You don't want to take that word out for me, but you will. You want to save it, but you can't. You don't want to burn in this fire as brutal as the fire of hell, but you will. Consider this as the reward for your betrayal. Now lift your hand and take that word out for me,' Nagendra's eyes lit up as he ordered Milarepa.

Milarepa turned towards the fire. A tear rolled down his cheek but evaporated immediately in the soaring temperature. He could not do anything but simply expose himself to the unbearable heat. He continued to inch closer to the fire with his eyes wide open.

'You wanted salvation, didn't you? Today is your day.' He watched as Milarepa's eyelashes burned, followed by the skin around his eyes. Milarepa stuck his hands inside and grabbed the word. The flesh of his hand melted slowly like an alloy. The licking flames caught Milarepa's clothes and his complete body was now on fire.

By the time Milarepa took out the word and handed it to Nagendra, most of his body was charred, but he was still standing. Nagendra took the word on his palm, expecting it to be hot, but it was not. As Nagendra held the word, it turned into dust particles and was absorbed through the pores of his skin.

Just as Nagendra absorbed the word, a tall and outstretched shadow engulfed the Taj Mahal and miraculously, the pristine white marble of the building became black granite. The one who had come to defend the word became the means of its delivery.

'The tunnel is too dark. Escort me out of this pit,' Nagendra ordered the burning Milarepa.

Milarepa, now reduced to a burning stump of flesh and bones, walked before Nagendra as a live torch while his burning skin dissolved and dropped along the way.

‘Ram naam satya hai! Satya bolo mukti hai! Ram naam satya hai! Ram naam satya hai!’ Nagendra started chanting the phrase uttered in Hindu funeral processions. As they reached the pit’s mouth, Nagendra took the lead and came out. He then called Parimal and LSD.

‘You wanted to know who Milarepa was, right?’

Nagendra pointed into the pit at the figure that emitted the light of the burning flames. LSD and Parimal peeked inside and saw the burning man looking up at them.

‘This is—correction—that was Milarepa!’

Milarepa was scorched to the extent that it was impossible for anyone to gauge how he must have looked before. His gaze was on Nagendra as whatever was left of him crumbled to the ground, still ablaze, as his soul exited his body.

‘Ved Vyasa! Milarepa has been burnt alive! Milarepa is dead, I cremated him without a funeral, gifting him hell for his hard-earned salvation,’ Nagendra cried in celebration, looking at the sky.

All the other men and women standing there started walking towards the pit, complying with Nagendra’s orders.

‘We are done here. Let’s go!’ Nagendra started marching away with LSD and Parimal following suit. All the hypnotized people, animals and birds went past them as the three trudged to the opposite side. Before leaving the area, LSD turned to take a look at the spellbound lot. She was devastated to see them all plummeting into the manhole and falling on the burning body one by one. The fire rose higher as all the bodies burned together. The darkness had engulfed not only this hypnotized cluster but also one of the magnificent wonders of the world as the murky smoke and the intolerable stench of burning bodies lingered in the air around the Taj Mahal.

‘Is this the beginning of the end of the world?’ spelt the captions of images displaying the now blackened Taj Mahal in prime-time news worldwide. This was enough for Parashurama and Ashwatthama to realize that they had lost yet another word. They both left their respective locations to confirm it with their own eyes and check on Milarepa.

Meanwhile, on Kailash, Ved Vyasa sat in silence with his eyes closed, trying to search for other destinations. It was then that he heard the voice that shook him to his core. ‘Ved Vyasa! Milarepa has been burnt alive!’

Milarepa is dead, I cremated him without a funeral, gifting him hell for his hard-earned salvation.'

Ved Vyasa snapped his eyes open and knew that they had lost another word. His power of hearing everything ever spoken in the universe had been used by Nagendra to mock him and convey the news of the brutal murder of one of his own.

'I remember the news of the Taj Mahal turning black being broadcast around the world,' Mrs Batra continued recounting. 'The team of doctors examined me in every way necessary to decide if Tej's name could be suggested to the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden for the Nobel Prize.

'Tej gave me an injection and started noting my temperature, blood pressure, blood sample and what not before he sat back down again, reading the Hindu Vedas. He seemed to be searching for answers. "I am the one who returned from the dead but it's you who has completely changed, Tej," I said to him.

"Maybe you have evaded death because I have changed completely, Amrita," Tej replied firmly.

"What has changed? What happened at Ross Island? What's been bothering you since you returned? Why don't you talk to me about it?" I asked him, not once but many times, but the answer was always the same. "Go back to your room. Please. I will tell you everything . . . when the time is right."

'I stood there for a while even after he immersed himself back in the pages of the ancient books. I looked at poor Pooh, who never asked for anything. I never understood what a medical science genius was searching for in the Hindu Vedas and Puranas.

'Tej was alight with anticipation, while I continued to feel lifeless despite being alive. I felt less like a life partner and more like a subject that assured Tej's success. He comforted me in every possible way but his happiness over me being alive and with him was buried deep under the aspiration of winning the Nobel Prize. I don't think he even knew how I felt. He was a good man but he just could not see the darkness in him. He was blinded by the light of life he saw in me.

'Once their subject was tested on every criterion, they left with their reports. After all that had happened at Ross Island, Tej had a fair idea of the

ripple effect this breakthrough could cause. But at that time, Tej and I were ignorant of the fact that the news of this miracle was also going out with the report. Tej was focused only on the success of his experiment.'

On the way back to the submarine at Digba beach, Parimal could not stop questioning Nagendra. 'What are you waiting for?'

'What?' Nagendra asked.

'You have the books of Mrit Sanjeevani. You can be immortal. What are you waiting for?' Parimal asked.

'Om Shastri,' Nagendra smiled.

'Om Shastri! But we already acquired Mrit Sanjeevani from him,' Parimal frowned.

Nagendra turned to look at Parimal, but instead, his gaze switched to LSD, who walked beside him. He looked down at the little bump that was visible on her lower abdomen. Nagendra clapped his hands like an ecstatic child and approached her, still looking at her baby bump. He knelt in front of her, level with her bulging belly. LSD shared a bewildered look with an equally concerned Parimal.

Nagendra carefully put both his hands on her bump and his eyes had a spark in them. 'Do you know that there is a unique species of frog called the red-eyed tree frog? They are carnivorous and have an average life of around five years. They are only around 2–2.5 inches big—just as small as a teacup! You know what's unique about them other than their expanded red eyes, webbed orange feet, bright blue-and-yellow margins and their neon-green bodies?'

Parimal and LSD stood speechless and perplexed. Nagendra stood looking at LSD's belly as if telling a story to the foetus and answered his own question, 'These red-eyed tree frog eggs can hatch early if they sense danger. But you don't have to sense any danger. I will protect you if Mumma and Papa fail to! Right, Mumma Papa?' Nagendra looked up at both of them.

Covering a distance of nearly 830 km in fifteen hours from Kuldhara and Amarkantak, Ashwatthama and Parashurama reached the city of Agra, which had been the breaking news worldwide. They learnt that the authorities had found a heap of charred bodies inside a pit at the eastern gate and every dead body had been claimed except one. They suspected it, but did not want to believe, that the unclaimed body was none other than

Milarepa's. They had no paper to prove any relation with the burnt corpse in order to claim it. They saw the unclaimed body kept in the corner and left the black building, which was neither Tejo Mahalaya nor the Taj Mahal any more.

Back on Kailash Parbat, Ved Vyasa entered the hut where Om and the other seers were trying to keep Vrishkapi alive. As Om saw Ved Vyasa enter, he stood up. Ved Vyasa approached him and asked, 'How is Vrishkapi doing?'

'He is struggling but we should be positive. We have not lost him yet,' Om reassured him.

At this point, Ved Vyasa had to be the bearer of bad news. 'Yes! But we have lost another word, Om. And along with it we have lost Milarepa in this cold battle.'

Om's expression changed from being hopeful to helpless. 'Agra!' With his head hung low in disappointment and grief, he said, 'What now?'

'I will have to divine the remaining locations faster,' Ved Vyasa let out a heavy sigh and left the hut after taking one last look at the dying Vrishkapi. Om walked out behind him and called out to him respectfully.

'All of this is happening because of me. I lost the book, because of which he got the locations. Milarepa died. Vrishkapi is dying! Kripacharya is trapped. I want to help. What must I do?'

'Know yourself,' Ved Vyasa replied calmly and walked off.

The submarine was all set to sail again. 'Where to?' Parimal asked.

Nagendra gave him a slip that read 'Mandvi beach.'

Mandvi beach in Gujarat was in the opposite corner of the country. The submarine had to first go down the south coast of India, from Digha beach of West Bengal, and take a turn near Ross Island to sail up to the Gulf of Kutch in Gujarat to reach Mandvi beach. The submarine was going to take several days to cover this distance. The voyage began. Nagendra opened Mrit Sanjeevani again and read further to learn the process of acquiring the next word.



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Chapter 13

Devdhwaja

While Om was changing Vrishkapi's dressing, he heard footsteps approaching the hut. Parashurama entered and judging by his expression, Om realized that the legendary immortal didn't walk in to check on Vrishkapi but to order him.

'Come with me!' Parashurama said.

Om handed over the gauze pieces to an old sage and followed Parashurama. They reached the spot where Kripacharya's body lay limp. Om knew why they were there, but still waited patiently to hear it from Parashurama.

'We are going to rescue Kripacharya,' he said. Ashwatthama also joined them as Parashurama continued, 'We never thought that Kripacharya could be trapped, but somehow that has happened. He is trapped in your past. It is you in the past that has him detained. A man with the strength to fight and confine Kripacharya cannot be ordinary.'

'Neither can the man who defeated Vrishkapi and killed Milarepa be ordinary. Please allow me to go out there and assist you,' Om insisted.

'I will, whenever Ashwatthama assures me that you are ready,' promised Parashurama.

Om and Ashwatthama looked at each other but Parashurama had more to say. 'Both of you, listen to me!'

Parashurama's commanding tone made them turn their heads at once.

'I don't want any discussion or debate on what I am about to say here. Consider this my order—both of you are going to follow it as one. I will go in alone to look for Kripacharya this time. Om, Kripacharya is trapped in your past in Satya yuga. This confinement of Kripacharya has taught us that you were extraordinary back then. There is no one to push the door open this time if all of us go in, which is why only one shall take the risk,' Parashurama explained.

‘If only one shall take the risk, then why not me, sir?’ Ashwatthama asked, completely willing to bear the brunt of the anticipated jeopardy.

‘Because we are fighting the battle on two fronts now! Kripacharya needs me more than you and Om needs you more than me, so no more questions about this,’ stated Parashurama, firmly putting an end to further discussion.

‘It is a span of forty years of his life inside his memory and Kripacharya could be anywhere in it. That means it could take me an immeasurable amount of time to find and rescue him. If I do succeed, we will together be able to destroy the door forever that bars Om’s memory.

‘This front of the war in this realm is solely in your hands till I return, Ashwatthama. I will do everything inside to win and you shall do everything outside to not lose. Now, push it open and let me in.’ Those were his last words before Parashurama closed his eyes. Ashwatthama and Om also followed suit. Within moments, the three of them transcended to their astral form to enter Om’s subconscious and pushed the door open for Parashurama to pass through.

Parashurama entered the door and stood there for a moment, his gaze lingering on Om and Ashwatthama on the other side as the door between them closed slowly.

Parashurama turned around and walked into the darkness in search of Kripacharya, while Ashwatthama and Om opened their eyes in the real world, next to Parashurama’s body. They lifted his body with utmost care and placed it beside Kripacharya’s.

‘What next?’ Om asked.

‘Preparation!’ Ashwatthama replied firmly.

Inside the submarine, Parimal left his chamber and went knocking on LSD’s door. The unexpected knocks startled LSD in her seat. She had been immersed in the footage from Ross Island when Parashurama had attacked them inside the interrogation room to rescue Om. She shut the laptop instantly and stood up to open the door, only to find Parimal standing there.

‘Can I come in?’ Parimal asked.

Looking back at her dishevelled room, LSD replied hesitantly, ‘It’s a mess inside.’

‘So, is this . . . between us and inside you. Let’s try and organize it a little tonight. May I?’

LSD shrugged and shifted to let Parimal into the tiny chamber. Nothing in the room was in its place. Trying to make some space to sit, Parimal picked up the bunch of maps and a laptop from the bed and put them on the little table, which was already full of clothes, chargers and other cables. Parimal took a seat while LSD remained standing near the door. There was an awkward silence between the two. Parimal tried to remove it by initiating some small talk.

‘So! How are you feeling?’

‘Why are you here?’ LSD cut straight to the chase.

‘Listen, I am sorry for what happened between us. I was simply following orders,’ Parimal justified himself hesitantly.

‘Okay! But why are you here?’ LSD repeated in the same blunt tone.

‘You have a child in you. It is mine too . . . I mean, it is our child, both yours and mine.’

Parimal looked at LSD, who was already eyeing his face to understand what he was trying to say. She waited for him to finish his statement. Parimal also realized that, so he continued, ‘I am only trying to say that you are not alone and that I am here if you need anyone.’

‘So . . . what are you trying to be, the husband or the father?’ LSD looked agitated.

‘Both! I will take care of you and the baby,’ Parimal replied firmly.

‘Why?’ LSD asked again, this time all the more bitterly, but Parimal maintained his gentle and caring tone. ‘Because that is what a man does for his wife and child.’

‘I don’t need your care, I can handle myself.’ LSD opened the door. Parimal stood up with a sigh and headed for the exit. Just before closing the door, LSD said, ‘And I understand.’

‘What?’ asked Parimal, turning around hopefully.

‘That you are sorry for what happened between us and that you were simply following orders,’ LSD stated. It was a taunt to Parimal again.

She then placed her hand on her baby bump ‘This child and I are not your problem. I am also sorry for what happened between us at Mansarovar. I, too, was simply following orders.’ Before Parimal could say anything, LSD closed the door of her chamber. Parimal walked back to his chamber but as he reached his door, he found a young crew member standing there waiting for him.

‘Yes?’ Parimal asked.

‘He wants to see you,’ the crew member replied.

Parimal knew that the crew member was referring to Nagendra. Parimal started walking towards Nagendra’s chamber but the crew member stopped him and said, ‘No! Not that side. Please come with me.’

Parimal followed him through the narrow corridors of the submarine towards a closed door. He could feel his nerves starting to creep. The young man escorted him to the door and left. It was not Nagendra’s chamber, Parimal knew. He lifted his hand to knock on the door but before he could do so, Nagendra’s muffled voice emerged from inside, ‘Come in, Parimal.’ Parimal opened the latch and entered. He saw that the chamber had numerous small screens, keeping an eye on every movement in the submarine. Nagendra spoke,

‘As a man discards his threadbare robes and puts on new ones, so the Spirit throws off its worn out bodies and takes fresh ones,’ Nagendra elucidated.

Nagendra pressed a button on a remote and a screen played footage showing Parimal entering LSD’s door. As the video stopped, Nagendra said, ‘The only emotion that would have dragged you to that door without my permission would be love. I am old. Maybe I have forgotten but I am sure you would remember. Tell me, have I ordered you to fall in love?’ Nagendra looked at him sternly and emphasized each word as he spoke, ‘She will die one day and so will you. Your births have not occurred to love each other. She knows that clearly and you must know that too.’

Parimal began to exit the chamber when Nagendra stopped him again. ‘Parimal! The next time you see her will be only when I command you to.’ Parimal halted for a moment, heard the last statement and left silently.

On Mount Kailash, Ved Vyasa was also silent. He was now going through every spoken word ever in the universe as quickly as he could to hear the next place before it was too late. He hoped that someone, somewhere, in some era, must have said something about the other places where the words were hidden.

Ved Vyasa's head continued to study the echoes of myriad words from past eras, identifying and trying to find a way to help Parashurama and the others. After several days, Ved Vyasa opened his eyes as he came across the word he was searching for.

'!' he yelled. A seer came running to Ved Vyasa upon hearing his voice. Ved Vyasa saw the seer and asked him to instantly call Ashwatthama.

Ashwatthama was summoned at once and Om followed suit. Ved Vyasa was sitting with a dead twig in his hand. On the muddy ground were written three words under each other but they were not aligned. Ashwatthama and Om saw them and looked back at Ved Vyasa for the explanation.

'He has acquired three words so far: from Mansarovar, Roopkund and Agravana, respectively. These words are flowing from north to south, like every major river in the country,' Ved Vyasa spoke while simultaneously drawing a line from Mansarovar to Roopkund to Agra. 'If I am correct, then I am certain that his next location will be the cursed ghost village in the land of deserts.' Ved Vyasa dragged the line towards the left of Agra.

'Cursed ghost village?' Mrs Batra frowned.

'Yes! The cursed ghost village!' Prithvi confirmed.

'Kuldhara, established around the thirteenth century, was once a prosperous village. Several inscriptions mention the caste of the residents as "Kuldhara" or "Kaldhar", from which the name Kuldhara appears to have been derived. Historical records suggest that the population of this village was around 1588 during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A retelling of the legend claims that in the nineteenth century, the village was abandoned overnight for unknown reasons. The local legend claims that while deserting the village, the villagers imposed a curse that no one would be able to reoccupy the village. Those who tried to repopulate the hamlet experienced paranormal activities, and therefore, the village remains uninhabited,' Prithvi explained.

'Where exactly is this place?' Mrs Batra bent forward.

'18 km south-west of Jaisalmer city, Kuldhara is in Rajasthan. The township was centred on a temple. The ruins of the village include 410 buildings and three cremation grounds, with several memorial stones. It was declared as a tourist spot by Rajasthan Tourism and till date, no one is allowed to stay in the village after sundown. People who have tried to stay

there at night have been chased away by strange paranormal phenomena,' Prithvi concluded.

Ashwatthama now knew which way to go and so did Nagendra, but Parashurama was lost as he searched for Kripacharya in Om's past. He was on the same path and came across the same events that Kripacharya had witnessed with Ashwatthama and Om, yet there were no traces of him. Parashurama diligently continued further.

Parashurama knew that he was losing time, but there was nothing he could do to accelerate the process. He tried running in the dark, using his powers, calling out to Kripacharya, but in vain. After a day of wandering, it started raining heavily. All the villagers ran for shelter and waited for the downpour to end. All the local ponds as well as the underground storage tanks and wells were brimming with fresh water, but there was no stopping the ruthless downpour. The volume of water kept increasing with each passing moment, rendering the villagers absolutely helpless.

At the entrance of the village was a dam that aided the hamlet's residents in irrigation. After a few hours of ceaseless pouring, the dam started cracking up. Parashurama could do nothing but watch as some of the villagers sobbed in fear, while some prayed. The village was already flooding, and if the dam were to collapse, their whole community could get wiped out.

Suddenly, from the other end, Parashurama saw a young man, almost twenty years old, running towards the dam. As the lad sprinted on bare feet, Parashurama spotted a black birthmark on his left heel.

'Devdhwaja! Don't go there, it's dangerous! You might drown!' A woman's voice hollered at the young man to turn back.

Devdhwaja continued to wade through the water till he finally reached the dam. The wall kept cracking due to the pressure. He tried to hold it together and stop the current, but he realized that this strategy would not work. His eyes fell on a nearby hill and he spotted a huge boulder. He immediately rushed towards it and with a loud grunt, shoved it down to let it roll towards the dam. The villagers began to anticipate another disaster at the hands of the young man.

Just as the dam broke, the boulder rolled on to fit into its centre. The water gushed at full speed but because of the rock, it split into two streams which gushed around the village premises, making its way through the

fields. The villagers watched in astonishment as the young man singlehandedly saved them all while risking his own life. Soon enough, the rain also ceased and the excess water drained away. At night, everyone repaired their houses and came out for a celebration, where they praised Devdhwaja's valour and prayed for his prosperity. Parashurama observed from a distance, his eyes still hunting for Kripacharya, who was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, Parashurama set out once again. He tramped along one of the newly formed rivers by the side of the village. After some time, he came across a gathering of villagers bowed in respect in front of a sage. From the hushed chatter of the locals crossing the area, Parashurama managed to deduce that the travelling sage had decided to halt and rest at the outskirts of Shambhala village. As the news rippled over the settlements, people came over to visit and listen to the revered sage speak.

One by one, each villager walked up to the sage to receive his blessings. Parashurama recognized Devdhwaja, a much stronger and sharper man in his late twenties, who, upon his turn, walked up to the sage and bent to touch his feet. The sage swiftly placed his right hand on the man's head and bestowed his blessings. Devdhwaja straightened up, and in one swift motion unsheathed his sword. Before Parshuram could go any closer and decipher what Devdhwaja had said to the sage, the entire surroundings turned dark, making it difficult to understand anything from a distance. Devdhwaja beheaded the sage. A collective gasp and scream of horror emerged from the crowd. The sage's headless corpse spewed blood as the head fell on the ground.

The man with the sword suddenly snapped back. The villagers wailed in fear as he disappeared into the woods. Parashurama tried to follow him but soon, everything turned pitch-black again.

Mrs Batra added, 'The path of my future, too, looked pitch-black. Medical teams kept coming to our doorstep every now and then. The home felt like a museum, sometimes a laboratory, and I felt like a relic, sometimes a subject. We were both in that house but never felt each other's presence. We were not equals any more. I felt like a mere subject, who must be perpetually indebted to her husband for her new-found life.

'This went on for months. Tej was no more a doctor but a businessman who had elaborate plans of minting money through his discovery, as he

termed it in front of everyone who came for the demo of my life. All that he was waiting for were approvals and IP rights to be registered. What started as the agenda of saving me had become a means to fame and wealth. To catalyse the realization of his aspirations, the pandemic of Covid-19 hit India in March 2020. This was the same period when the Taj Mahal had turned black,' Mrs Batra recollected.

'Yes! The month of _____,' Prithvi added.

'The world was toiling to devise the vaccine and a cure for the novel virus and Tej was leading the race as he joined hands with some honchos in the pharmaceutical industry. That was another bad decision he made,' Mrs Batra seemed disappointed.

'Bad decision? How?' Prithvi enquired.

'These men often came to our house to examine me, but that day they had arrived with different plans. I was in the other room when I heard Tej's voice rising in disagreement. I went and stood by his side. The men wanted to take me or at least my blood sample for further tests, which, according to them, were not possible in our house. Tej was not ready to share my blood sample. They offered him a huge sum in exchange for him letting them take me along. Tej lost his temper. In that very moment, I knew we had created enemies, enemies way more powerful than us, who might do more than just threaten us. They left empty-handed that day, but we knew they would return soon.

'Tej decided to approach the government for help with his discovery, which he called the invention of a new blood type, confided to them that his life was in danger, and asked for Z-plus security. I requested him to let this obsession go. I wanted to simply go off the radar and bury that miracle of life with Tej and me. I begged and insisted, but Tej refused and rejected. After a tough negotiation from both sides, we finally arrived at a decision.

'He gave me an address with some cash and all his chequebooks and credit cards, and said, "Take this! Pack your bags and leave. I will join you in two months. What I have discovered is a boon to humankind and I cannot betray my own race. Look around you. People are dying all over the world due to Covid-19. This blood can save millions of lives."

"This blood can take millions of lives too, Tej," I argued, unaware of Nagendra or Om's existence back then.

‘Tej held my arms tenderly and said, “That is for humankind to decide, not us—whether they use it to save millions of lives or to take millions of lives. I have to take it to the right authority. I owe that to my nation before I vanish with you. Please, just trust me and leave,” he begged.

““But how will you prove it without me if I am gone? They will need a subject to experiment on and authenticate your claims,” I reasoned.

‘Tej went to his basement lab and brought out the encaged Pooh, his first subject of the experiment. He showed the guinea pig to me, smiled lovingly and said, “You are not a subject, Amrita. You are my wife. This is a subject and its name is Pooh. I love you and that has made me do everything I have done so far. I am well aware that I’ve found it and it is not an invention but a discovery, and also that this is not my best discovery. My best discovery is you and I will do everything to save you. Now go. Let me deliver this to the right place and I shall come back to you, forever.”

‘Tej and I were married for twenty-seven years and he never broke a single promise he had ever made in that period. He said he would come back to me, forever. That was the first time he broke a promise. And along with it he broke everything, forever. He never returned. He betrayed me,’ Mrs Batra burst into tears.

‘No! He did not betray you. Yes, he did break the promise and didn’t return, but he did not betray you,’ Prithvi assured her.

Mrs Batra looked at Prithvi with wide, watery eyes and a trembling chin as she realized that he knew something about her husband.

‘Where is he?’ she asked, hoping to see Dr Batra again.



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Chapter 14

The Old Man's Pet

Om saw Ashwatthama packing his things hastily. He knew that he was heading for Kuldhara.

‘Take me with you. I can help,’ Om said despite knowing the answer.

‘You know Parashurama’s orders for you, I can’t overrule him.’

‘Parashurama said that I can help only when you confirm that I am ready,’ Om disputed.

‘You are not ready, Om. And you won’t be until you learn to control your mind. You must stay here and practise the astras I have taught you. You are not to leave Gyanganj till Parashurama and Kripacharya come back or I return,’ Ashwatthama said sternly.

Om accepted the orders and stood silently till Ashwatthama packed his bags and left Mount Kailash. Om stood at the edge, looking at Ashwatthama disappearing into the horizon. Walking alone on the snowy paths, Ashwatthama vanished soon. With a heavy heart, Om walked back.

On his way to the hut, a seer came running towards Om and told him that Vrishkapi had opened his eyes and was mumbling Ashwatthama’s name, so he rushed to check on Vrishkapi. He reached the hut where Vrishkapi was being tended to and saw him moving his hands and raising his head. He went close to him and softly laid his hand on Vrishkapi’s shoulders. ‘You are safe and at home. Relax and do not strain yourself too much. Your body is too weak for any movement, Vrishkapi.’

Vrishkapi muttered something in response. Om bent lower and brought his ear closer to Vrishkapi’s lips to understand what he was saying.

‘Three!’ Vrishkapi groaned just above a whisper.

‘Three? What three, Vrishkapi?’

Vrishkapi tried to say something but fainted again. Om knew that he was too weak to be woken up immediately, so he decided to wait till Vrishkapi had regained consciousness.

While Om waited for Vrishkapi to wake up, behind the closed doors of his memory, Parashurama wandered everywhere to find Kripacharya. Ever since he had seen the gruesome sight of the sage being beheaded, everything had gone awfully quiet. Even if he came across any villager, they would just look at him either in rage or in grief and simply pass him by.

Parashurama noticed a crowd huddled around an old mud hut, peeking inside with curiosity. As he stepped a little closer, he realized that the reason for their inquisitiveness was a frail and exhausted Kripacharya, who was being held captive inside. His captors were nowhere to be seen. He knew he had to seize this opportunity to rescue Kripacharya. As he slunk into the hut, he prepared himself for an assault but to his surprise, no one attacked. He untied Kripacharya and helped him sneak out as the prying eyes of the crowd followed them, and eventually everyone left the scene.

Back on Kailash, days had passed by without Vrishkapi moving an inch. Om decided to stay beside him at all times. One morning, while meditating, Om heard Vrishkapi murmuring again. He rushed and sat beside him.

‘Three!’ Vrishkapi groaned in a raspy voice with his eyes still closed.

Om held Vrishkapi’s hands. Vrishkapi opened his eyes and saw Om peering down at him.

‘Ashwattha ...?’ Vrishkapi murmured.

‘He is not around right now. Tell me what you have to say,’ insisted Om.

‘He ... doesn’t fi ... ght fair ... He is ... not alone. They are three ... Tell Ashwatthama ... they are three ...’ Vrishkapi said in pain.

The distressed voices of the sages confirmed that Vrishkapi wouldn’t make it. ‘His end is very close,’ they said.

Om looked at Vrishkapi rolling his eyes all over his body and thought, ‘He is too young to go. This is not fair to him.’ Vrishkapi passed out yet again. Om realized that the information was vital and needed to be delivered to Ashwatthama before he encountered Nagendra in Kuldhara and got ambushed from all sides alone. There was no one in Gyanganj to stop Om, and so he decided to go to Kuldhara himself.

As Om geared up to leave for Kuldhara, Ved Vyasa handed him a sword and blessed him. Meanwhile, Nagendra’s submarine touched the Gulf of Kutch and Ashwatthama was almost there, too. Ashwatthama traversed a straight path through the unending desert for a few kilometres before the

lonely ruins showed up. The sun was up in the sky by the time he reached the abandoned village.

The place was a protected site and was maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. While the guards were busy collecting money in exchange for entry tickets to the village, Ashwatthama dodged them and snuck in. He walked around till he found a place to hide for the day.

At sunset, the authorities started ordering every tourist to vacate the village. Ashwatthama, hidden in a closed space inside the shell of a house, could hear the announcement. Soon, all the tourists were gone for the day; gone too were the guards, back to their posts, and Ashwatthama was the lone soul breathing in the ghost village.

Once he ensured that no one was around to spot him, he began to trudge through rows upon rows of abandoned mud houses with their roofs gone and ruined walls still erect, skeletons reminding everyone of a doomed past. The blowing winds made their presence known through their eerie whistling sounds, passing through the cracks of the ancient walls. At a distance, barn owls hooted periodically. There was only a faint light being emitted by the guard post. It was dark already.

Ashwatthama stopped at a place which seemed like the centre of the village. On his right was a house in comparatively good shape. He went inside it, scanned the rooms and went up the stairs to the roof, from where the whole village could be seen. Ashwatthama found an apt place to keep an eye on all sides as he didn't know where the word was hidden. Now all he had to do was sit back and wait for Nagendra to arrive. He looked at the moon and predicted his arrival for the next night.

The darkness of the night sky was soon taken over by the shining sun of the next day. At this point, Nagendra, along with Parimal and LSD, had entered Jaisalmer. The word concealed in Kuldhara was merely 20 km away from Nagendra's reach.

When the sun sank again and the guards were about to wrap up their work after ensuring that the place was devoid of any tourists, one of the guards noticed someone approaching them from the dark.

'Come tomorrow, sir. It's closed for the day,' the guard intoned without looking at the face, but noticed that the man kept coming closer regardless. He saw Nagendra's face, smiled and after observing his age, he spoke

sarcastically, 'All the villagers vanished 200 years ago. What are you still doing here?'

'School is over. Go back home,' the second guard taunted. They laughed out loud, looking at the metal bottle hung around the old man's neck. Nagendra also laughed along with them.

'What you laugh at now can be your future,' Nagendra retorted.

'Our future! It's at least fifty years away, old man. Now get out,' another guard sneered.

Nagendra eyes widened. 'Oh, is it? Fifty years is a long time to see. I can't even see your tomorrow, because there isn't one for you.'

'What?' said the guard, confused.

'Yes! I have just erased it. I don't like people laughing at me,' replied Nagendra in anger.

Right then, LSD and Parimal finished them with a single swift slash of their knives. The three of them then walked in from the front entrance. Parimal and LSD wore night vision goggles and walked in different directions to secure the periphery for Nagendra, guarding the village for the uninterrupted execution of their mission.

'Be alert and expect the enemy. I am sure someone is here waiting for us,' ordered Nagendra and chose to use flashlights, unaware that Ashwatthama had already set his eyes on him from the rooftop.

The howling wind was haunting. The dry, dusty and forlorn lanes felt frightening to LSD.

On the other side of the lane, Parimal could sense the presence of something metaphysical. At every step, he felt as though several eyes were stalking his every movement but to his dismay, he could not see a soul.

Nagendra chanced upon an abandoned temple. The moment he reached it, he felt a strange, prickly sensation at the nape of his neck. His eyes scanned every street along the crumbling walls that crossed the temple, but to his disbelief, there was no one around. Ashwatthama kept a silent watch on him, trying to understand his next move before attacking him. While he kept a close eye on Nagendra, LSD found Ashwatthama.

'Ashwatthama is here,' LSD informed Nagendra and Parimal in a hushed voice through the wireless.

'Knowing your enemy is a war half won. Take him down by surprise as he plans to take me. Let him make the first move,' Nagendra ordered.

‘Giving him any chance would be a fatal mistake. You are in his range. He might shoot you directly,’ LSD said with concern.

‘No, he won’t! He wants the books back. He will try to capture me alive. Take up your positions,’ Nagendra whispered on the wireless.

Nagendra was absolutely right. Ashwatthama stood up from his position and jumped off the roof right on to the sandy lane. He retrieved his weapons and walked towards Nagendra.

‘He is on your right,’ LSD informed.

Parimal slunk to Nagendra’s left and LSD was already positioned on his right, creeping behind Ashwatthama. Unaware that he was surrounded from three sides, Ashwatthama walked into the trap. He closed in on the temple where Nagendra stood and said, ‘Enough, Nagendra!’

Nagendra turned to his right to see Ashwatthama approaching him. ‘Enough? No! Not enough. There are still six words left. Today I shall possess one more. That will leave me with five more to acquire. Enough would be once I get all of them.’

‘You have caused enough destruction and created enough chaos, but this is the end of your depraved journey,’ Ashwatthama warned.

‘Kill me then! Let’s bring an end to it,’ Nagendra challenged him.

Ashwatthama took another step closer to Nagendra. Nagendra moved aside and said, ‘That was the closest you could come. Enough.’

A long, shining metal rod tethered to a steel wire pierced through Ashwatthama’s back and emerged from his stomach. Ashwatthama dropped to his knees instantly and realized that he had made a mistake. ‘You are a fool! I cannot be killed,’ Ashwatthama grunted proudly.

‘And that’s why I am not trying to kill you, you fool,’ Nagendra shook his head.

Just then, the metal rod sprang open in the form of a big grappling hook with a total of eight metal spikes. Parimal, positioned behind a wall with a peephole, was holding the gun which had fired the metal rod and was still tethered to the steel wire. He pressed another trigger that yanked the wire back to the gun at high speed. Within moments, Ashwatthama was trapped by the prongs, rendering him immobile and stuck to the wall behind which Parimal operated. He was captured ten feet above the ground, between the metal hooks in front of his body and the wall behind him. Ashwatthama

looked down at Nagendra, who was smirking at his rapidly healing wound, which only tightened the grip of the metal rod tearing through his torso.

Ashwatthama wrestled with the metal spikes but his quickly healing tissues covered the wound of his stomach, his arms were restricted by the firm grip of the hooks around him and he was unable to reach his weapons. This unexpected trap had rendered him helpless. His immortality truly seemed like a curse this time as it was getting unbearably painful and increasingly difficult to get out. The part of the metal rod and steel wire that stayed within his body was now as intact as bones covered in flesh inside him. Ashwatthama knew that he wouldn't be able to get out of this, at least not by himself. Nagendra then looked at the sky illuminated by the shining crescent moon.

'It's time!' he said triumphantly.

Leaving Parimal outside to keep an eye on Ashwatthama, Nagendra went inside the vacant temple. Walking ahead a little, he found an old havan kund at the centre of the building. He ordered LSD to stand guard outside the inner sanctum.

The crescent moon's light cascading on the havan kund showed how discoloured and faded it was from centuries of disuse. To extract the word, Nagendra would have to revive the heart of the temple. He removed the old metal bottle from around his neck and unscrewed it, pouring the blood he had been carrying with him into the kund, making an offering. The kund instantly absorbed the blood and it began to spread everywhere in the interiors and exteriors of the sanctum through visible veins, circling every pillar and creeping up every wall. Nagendra's hungry eyes followed the veins as they pumped the blood, growing like a web around him. The place seemed like it was coming back to life.

Right at that moment, Om entered the village by climbing over the main gate. He felt the tremors in the ground. As he couldn't see much because of the sandstorm that was beginning to engulf the premises, he followed the tremors and ran towards the centre.

Nagendra followed the blood coursing through the veins, which led him outside the temple again. LSD also tailed Nagendra, keeping guard. Ashwatthama watched as the dilapidated buildings rumbled as if an earthquake were passing beneath them. The veins led Nagendra to an open ground where the blood was accumulated and springing from the ground

like a small fountain. Nagendra knew that this was it; the blood had travelled and brought the word out here.

Just as Nagendra was getting ready to acquire the word, Om found them. He saw Ashwatthama trapped by the large grappling hook on the wall and then his eyes fell on Nagendra near the blood fountain. Om sprinted to stop Nagendra from absorbing the word. He jumped off the roof of the temple to behead Nagendra, but right before his sword could reach his neck, LSD's bullet hit Om's palm. The bullet only grazed Om's finger as Om was in motion. This was the second time LSD had shot Om. The first was on Ross Island. LSD missed the target but so did Om, as the abrasion made him lose his grip on the sword, bringing him to the ground with a thin line of blood visible on his palm. Om did not waste any time getting back on his feet but by then, Nagendra had already plunged his hand into the blood, which was absorbed into his skin, revealing yet another word: .

Ved Vyasa was right this time about both, the location and the word.

The now empty veins of the architecture started cracking up. The old buildings started crumbling one by one into the sand.

Nagendra saw Om and his bleeding palm and hurtled towards him like a manic, hungry beast, while Om picked up his sword again and rushed towards Ashwatthama to free him. Om could see Nagendra coming for him and so he covered his cut to ensure that Nagendra did not get even a single drop of his blood. Parimal ran towards his gun bag and asked LSD to get one of the guards' vehicles parked near the main entrance of the village. LSD complied and went for the gate. Parimal's priority was not to attack Om but to defend Nagendra, so he too ran after him.

Om had the lead and reached the wall to which Ashwatthama was impaled. He climbed up the uneven bricks and cut the steel wire with a single swing of his sword in order to release him. Nagendra grabbed Om with tremendous force, which brought him down to the ground and his sword fell away from his arm's reach. Om was struggling to defend himself from Nagendra, who was behaving no better than a savage, but Om seemed to have dominance in this barehanded combat. By the time Parimal arrived, he saw Ashwatthama on his knees, gripping the steel rod inside him and trying to pull it out. Parimal knew that they'd have no chance of defeating them once Ashwatthama was back on his feet. He moved to Ashwatthama and shot multiple rounds on his face and head till the magazine of his gun

ran out of cartridges, buying them some more time. Ashwatthama collapsed on the ground like a corpse and Parimal turned to rescue Nagendra, who was now completely overpowered by Om and had no strength left to defend himself. Om continued smashing Nagendra, whose face was now drenched in his own blood. By the time Parimal dragged Om away from him, Nagendra lay limp like a dead body.

LSD reached the dead guards and started patting their corpses for the key. She found a key with a remote lock and pressed the unlock button to identify the car. Once the lights of the car blinked with a beep, she pressed the button, got in and started to drive heedlessly on the dusty village road to rescue Nagendra and Parimal. She kept honking to send the signal that help was on the way.

Om was now fighting Parimal, who had better combat tactics, but Parimal also knew that he had time only till Ashwatthama healed and stood up again. He started thumping Om with all the strength he had to bring him down. After a few lethal blows to his face, Om hit the ground. On the other hand, Nagendra managed to gain some strength. He woke up and sat a few feet away from where Om had fallen.

Parimal picked up Om's sword and turned around to see Ashwatthama, who had almost recovered again. He had very little time to fell Ashwatthama again and was on the verge of giving up himself as the immortality of his opponents gradually eclipsed his will. His shoulders drooped in exhaustion and he panted rapidly. He didn't know how long he would be able to keep up with this inhuman struggle. Just then, Parimal's strength spiked when he heard the blaring horn of a car. He knew it was none other than LSD coming to their rescue. This meant that Parimal would just have to protect Nagendra till LSD reached them. By the sound of the horn, he estimated the distance to be not too much. A considerably injured Parimal left Om bleeding on the ground and staggered towards Ashwatthama.

Weak and fatigued himself, Nagendra saw Om defenceless and moved towards him again. He bled from every injury on his face while clumps of dust covered his features, soaking up the blood as he swiftly crawled towards Om on all fours, like a chameleon ambushing his prey. Om could not see Nagendra behind him when he got back on his feet, but Ashwatthama was able to see both, Nagendra closing in on Om and Parimal

rushing towards him. Ashwatthama took out his gun as Nagendra lunged on Om's neck for his blood like a vampire and Parimal charged at Ashwatthama with the sword to slit his throat. He had only two choices; either to shoot Nagendra and help Om or defend himself and let Nagendra get Om's blood. He knew he had two targets but not enough time to take down both, so he could take only one shot before Parimal's sword met his throat. Nagendra attacked Om and Parimal attacked Ashwatthama, simultaneously. Nagendra climbed on Om's back and then used his arms to crane his neck to one side. Nagendra sunk his teeth into Om's exposed neck and Om howled in pain, but right before his blood could touch Nagendra's tongue and he could catch a taste of Om's blood, a bullet punctured Nagendra's face, splattering his brains in all directions. Ashwatthama had managed to aim and pull the trigger just moments before falling lifeless once again with his throat slit open by Parimal. When Nagendra's face burst, a drop of his blood went past Om's lips and it knocked him out with millions of images flashing inside his head. Within seconds, Om was paralysed by the volcano of visuals erupting inside his head.

Behind the gate of Om's memory, Kripacharya and Parashurama were thrown off by a massive earthquake. Various landscapes, people and animals started popping out and disappearing in split seconds around them. Unable to comprehend what they were seeing or what was happening, they remained the passive observers they were supposed to be.

Suddenly, on their left, they spotted a cliff on which stood a man with a strong build, who bowed to someone. Parashurama and Kripacharya were confused as they could see no one around him. They tiptoed closer till they got a good view. Down in the valley stood an enormous beast, who also bowed in respect to the man. It had the head of a female dog with a sharp jawline and striking features. Its peacock neck shimmered bright blue from a distance and its back curved into a white hump of a bull as it stood on three limbs, those of an elephant, a tiger and a horse. The fourth limb was a raised human arm carrying a lotus, which the bizarre creature was presenting to the man on the cliff. From under its head emerged a tail which was actually a serpent. Parashurama and Kripacharya were terrified yet captivated by the sight of this strange, ghastly creature.

'We've seen the boy with the birthmark grow up from a child into a man. But there's no sign of Om. How can Om be missing from his own past?'

Kripacharya voiced his concern.

Before Parashurama could say anything, the scene before them disappeared and a wild gush of wind threw them outside the now open door.

In Kuldhara, everything had turned to dust. The abandoned village, which had only a few erect buildings representing its existence, was now wiped out completely, sanded down to mere dunes in a desert.

Parimal could not believe his eyes when he saw Nagendra dropping dead from Om's shoulder. LSD ran over Ashwatthama's body and stopped near Parimal, who was on his knees, burdened by his failure of being incapable of defending his master. Nagendra was dead, Parimal was shattered, Om and Ashwatthama were neither alive nor dead, but LSD still had a good grip on her emotions, strength and plan of action. She turned back to check if Ashwatthama and Om showed any movement. Om seemed like he had fallen for eternity, as if hypnotized or dreaming, and Ashwatthama was stirring a little, with broken bones and a slashed throat. The sign was enough for LSD to assess the time she had before Ashwatthama's face became the last visuals of their lives. She screamed Parimal's name to bring him out of his daze and ordered him to get in the car. Parimal rose slowly and wobbled his way to sit inside, still looking lost. LSD drove to Nagendra's faceless corpse. She stepped out, pulled up his headless body like a sack of potatoes and dumped it inside the trunk. Parimal, still aghast and unresponsive, simply sat mum and lost. LSD closed the trunk and drove out of Kuldhara, vanishing into the night.

After they were gone, Om stood up calmly and began walking straight, as if setting out on a journey. Ashwatthama, who lay on the ground like a corpse with his eyes wide open, saw Om walking away. Om trudged on and on till the darkness engulfed him.

A few moments later, Ashwatthama woke up, sucking in a deep breath. He got up in his defensive stance and realized that they were all gone. Ashwatthama knew which way Om had gone, so he walked on the same path.

Half a mile into the journey, Ashwatthama found Om standing alone, dazed, traumatized and staring into darkness. Having no idea what was wrong with him, Ashwatthama reached out to hold him by his shoulders and as if snapping out of a deep trance, Om lost consciousness and collapsed to

the ground. Ashwatthama hoisted Om on his shoulders and disappeared into the dark, leaving no trace of life behind.

LSD made a stop in Jaisalmer to stuff the trunk with large ice bricks to keep the body cold. She then continued to drive a baffled Parimal and Nagendra's corpse straight to the Gulf of Kutch and back to the submarine. As they entered the submarine, Parimal said meekly, 'Nagendra is dead and the cause is lost forever.'

LSD looked at Parimal for a second and asked him to open the forbidden chamber's door. Parimal was confused as no one else was ever allowed to enter it except Nagendra. LSD opened the bag that carried Nagendra's remains and brought it inside the chamber right next to the restricted one. The body smelled rotten as it had been more than twenty-four hours since Nagendra's death. Parimal was still so perplexed that despite knowing they would be subjected to immense pain and negativity when the door opened, he still did what was asked of him without any questions or expectations.

LSD and Parimal endured it all as tears from their eyes and blood from their nose and ears trickled down. Their depressed thoughts surrounded them, stronger than ever before. They seemed to be possessed and powerless and all they could move by their will were their eyes. They looked towards the chamber's door as a figure walked out of it. Looking at the eight feet-tall entity with cruel eyes situated between a thick white mane of hair and a lengthy beard, they were paralysed the moment they set their eyes on him. He saw the rotting flesh of Nagendra's dead body and then walked closer to Parimal, staring deep into his eyes. Parimal unwillingly showed him everything that occurred in Kuldhara leading to Nagendra's death. While the figure saw the series of events, Parimal's eyes continued shedding tears until the whites of his eyes turned bloodshot.

The figure then placed his hand on Parimal's head and that's when he was released from the spell. Parimal dropped to his knees, breathing violently from the lack of oxygen. The figure turned towards LSD and released her as well. LSD rushed to Parimal, helping him breathe and wiping his blood.

It took them a moment to regain their composure. The figure patiently stood there till both of them were back on their feet. 'Bring him in,' the figure ordered, pointing towards Nagendra's rotten corpse. LSD moved to lift Nagendra's body and Parimal followed suit. They lifted the body and walked into the chamber. The chamber was more spacious than one could

tell from the size of its door. Parimal was surprised to see that LSD knew where to put the body, as if she knew the chamber already. They placed the body on a rectangular brass surface.

When Parimal's eyes wandered around, the interiors left him shocked. The room's walls exhibited paintings and photos identical to his mansion's walls in Shetpal village. The frames displayed his ancestors with their favourite animals and the caretaker with the partially veiled face, standing behind his forefathers. All the frames were the same as Parimal's house except one. This one had the caretaker standing behind his father with his face exposed. The one who stood behind Parimal's father was Nagendra himself. Parimal was stupefied. He wanted to know who exactly the man was whose orders LSD kept obeying silently. She was calm and collected, as if this was just another ordinary occurrence. Parimal's brain flooded with questions but LSD was unruffled, as if she had all the answers already. Parimal was about to walk to LSD, asking what they were doing and who the man was, but the deep voice grabbed all his attention before he took a step. 'Latika, you know what to do now.'

LSD obeyed his orders as sincerely as she used to abide by Nagendra's. She signalled Parimal to start walking out of the chamber with her. Parimal decided to silently follow her instructions. They came out of the chamber and LSD locked it again.

Parimal bombarded her with his questions, the first of which was, 'Who was he?'

Mrs Batra had the same question to ask Prithvi after more than two decades about the real time of the incident back in 2020, 'Who was he?'

Prithvi gave the same answer which LSD had given to Parimal, 'Shri Shukracharya!'

Agitated, Mrs Batra almost screamed, 'Shukracharya! Now who is that and why are you telling me this? I asked you where Tej is. Is he alive?' Mrs Batra was on edge, losing her patience with every passing minute, waiting to know if her husband, Dr Batra, was even alive or not; but Prithvi still kept his cool and replied patiently.

'To know what happened to Dr Batra, you have to understand what led to his disappearance in 2020.'

'Shukracharya is the preceptor of the Asuras, their high priest and guru, worshipper of the Supreme Lord, but he has remained supportive of the

Asuras since Satya yuga. Nagendra was Shukracharya's best disciple. Shukracharya met Nagendra in Satya yuga for the first time before Nagendra took the corpse of the man you know as Om Shastri to Dhanvantari and Sushruta, who brought Om back to life and named him Mrityunjay. In Satya yuga, Shukracharya is known for his ability to resurrect people after acquiring the mantra that could conquer death. He acquired this rare science from Lord Shiva himself, who is known as the Conqueror of Death.'

As LSD told Parimal that the one in the forbidden chamber was Shukracharya, Parimal's mind flooded with questions and suspicion.

'How do you know this? Or should I ask, what else do I not know about you?'

'You will have enough time to know everything that you don't know, but right now, we need to get Om's blood before the new moon. Only then can Nagendra be brought back,' LSD said.

'Do you even know what you are saying? This is a suicide mission. We have faced them once on Ross Island and then in Kuldhara. Our death is certain and they are immortals. Our defeat is inevitable if we go forward with this. Besides, how would we find Om?'

LSD grabbed his palm and placed a pen drive in it. 'I never said we needed to find Om Shastri.'

Perplexed, Parimal hesitantly took the pen drive. Nagendra's death, Shukracharya's introduction, the frames of Parimal's lineage in the forbidden chamber of Shukracharya, LSD's mysteries yet to be discovered and Nagendra's possible resurrection were already too much to absorb in a day for a mortal, but there was more for Parimal in the pen drive. He plugged it into a laptop and found that it had only one file. He clicked on the file icon, which took him back to the interrogation room on Ross Island, showing him how Dr Batra collected the spilled blood from the floor and exited the facility before the blasts.

'You always questioned why we were not searching for Om to get his blood instead of hunting words. That was because I was searching for Dr Batra!' LSD threw her hands up.

'Did we find him?' Parimal asked.

'Yes! Recently found and caught,' she said proudly.

'And?' asked Parimal.

‘And we need to make him tell us his wife’s location,’ LSD answered.

‘Where is he?’ was the most obvious question Parimal could have asked and he did.

‘Right here; follow me,’ LSD replied and started walking.

Just then, their submarine surfaced. LSD led him to the open deck, where they could see a speedboat coming towards them from a distance.

Although his head swarmed with questions, Parimal was tongue-tied and his jaw was clenched in anger. LSD could sense his rage as it was written all over his face. She decided to address his demeanour. ‘What is it?’

‘Who are you?’ This time, Parimal cut straight to the chase, just as LSD did when they had met in her cabin.

LSD took a deep breath before she countered, ‘Did you notice the frames of your ancestors with their pets and the caretaker, which was Nagendra, in every frame?’

‘Yes, I did, but my question is who are you?’ Parimal was annoyed by her riddles.

‘Do you know the names of all those pets?’ LSD asked.

‘I remember a few,’ Parimal said as he tried to recall.

‘I remember them all,’ she said and continued, ‘The Steller’s sea cow your ancestors had in 1687 was named Aathavi. The bear macaque in 1557 was called Kalap. The crocodile that your family housed in 1926 was Padam. The weasel that your great-grandfather had was named Sabri and the spotted eagle his father had before that was called Darsh.’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’ Parimal shook his head in annoyance.

‘Because every pet which you and your forefathers have been seeing in all those frames has been me. The last of the pets which your father and you used to play with was Baadal. Parimal! I remember the time I spent with you as a child till my death. Your manager Shubendra, whom I requested to perform the proceedings of our marriage, was the one who gave my body of the Seneca white deer a proper funeral. He actually saved my dead body from being eaten by Nagendra. He was even beaten for doing that. I remember how you sat by my side and cried when they told you that I was about to die.’

Every word she uttered mystified Parimal even more and he heard everything in disbelief while LSD continued to talk.

‘The caretaker who stood in every frame was not the servant of your ancestors. The one who stood behind them was the real owner of two pets,’ LSD explained.

‘Two pets?’ asked Parimal, perplexed.

‘Nagendra always had two pets, Parimal! One that changed its body and another that changed its soul; you and me. You were told the story of when Lopaksh and Sarputi met Nagendra and she agreed to serve him in exchange for a vision and a human body. The black lion which sat beside Nagendra was me while that incident happened. I am that old.

‘The dead-leaf butterfly named Malti, when Milarepa met Nagendra for the first time, and the lizard named Kark and the hyena named Kuroop who guarded Dhanvantari till Milarepa killed it and ran away—they were all me.

‘It takes a thousand lives to finally be born as a human. After undergoing a thousand lives as animals, reptiles, trees, insects and birds, here I am in the form of a human being. Starting from the first child of your clan, half-man and half-snake Lopaksh, till you, I have witnessed it all with Nagendra, with the curse that I will never forget any of my past lives.’

‘Why?’ Parimal still did not have all the answers.

‘Due to the salvation that I was tricked for,’ LSD replied.

The speedboat stopped and Tej, who was held captive, was brought on board. Parimal and LSD had to stop their conversation midway to go down to another chamber, where Tej was brought in. As they entered, one of the senior men came forward to greet them.

‘What have we found so far?’ LSD asked.

‘Nothing much, just some addresses, a bunch of medical test papers, his ID cards, mobile phone, some money and a guinea pig.’

‘Take us to him,’ LSD said.

They entered and tied Dr Batra to a chair. Tej saw them and sneered, ‘Kill me if you want. I won’t tell you where my wife is.’

LSD went to him, untied his hands and said, ‘You have misunderstood us, Dr Batra. We don’t want to hurt you or your wife at all. We don’t even want your wife. We just want a few ounces of the blood that saved her. That’s it. We just want what we need and trust me, for that, we don’t want to take lives; we just want to save one. Help us to help you . . . and your wife.’

Dr Batra kept mum, weighing his options. Realizing that she would have to push him even more, LSD continued, 'We are trying to save a life that is as important to us as your wife's life is to you. Will anything be meaningful to you if she dies? Or picture this—we capture her to only torture her every day and every night for the mistake you made by not giving us the few drops of blood on time. Time is being wasted with every passing minute, Dr Batra, and if I lose the one I am trying to save, then I promise you, I will not let you die until I find your wife, bring her to you and give her the level of misery and pain that you thought only existed in stories until you yourself beg me to kill her. And only then will I kill her . . . right in front of your eyes . . . before killing you.'

'It's an easy choice for you, Dr Batra—between an award and a life most precious to you. You take a call between the two so that we can take a call about you,' LSD's sudden cynical tone left the threat lingering in the air.

'You want the blood, not my wife,' Tej said.

'Yes! But she has it in her. So we want her,' LSD asserted.

'So, you will not hunt her down or kill me if I give you the blood?' Tej sought her assurance.

'Why would we? We shared our food tables. We admired you. You are an asset for the nation and we are not against you,' LSD slowly moved closer to Dr Batra.

Knowing that it was the only way, Dr Batra told LSD that other than his wife, Pooh, the guinea pig, also had the blood.

LSD finally had what she wanted. It took them a few hours to test the guinea pig and confirm that Dr Batra wasn't lying. Once they got what they wanted, LSD came back alone to Dr Batra with the guinea pig and said, 'I told you that we are not against the nation, but that was only half the truth, Dr Batra. The thing is, we are against the entire human race, not just a nation.'

After that, LSD ordered the men to release Dr Batra. He was relieved but was soon taken to another small room. The men tied him up with ropes and gagged him. They placed him on a seat in front of a hatch. Dr Batra tried to grapple with them. His eyes widened with the horror of what they were planning to do. The men stepped out and closed the airtight door. In the room, the door by the sea opened up and the seat unlocked to release him into the water. Tied up and weighed down, Dr Batra passed through the

hollow shaft attached to the hatch door like a gunshot and sank to the bottom of the ocean in no time. After the job was done, the hatch was closed again.

Mrs Batra had tears in her eyes as her hand clamped her mouth and Prithvi stood silent, giving her time to mourn.

After acquiring the guinea pig, LSD and Parimal walked back to the corridor. LSD held the guinea pig close to her.

‘Where did Dr Batra say he wanted to go when released?’ Parimal asked.

LSD was not ready for that question and so she looked at Parimal with a blank face. Parimal reframed his question and asked, ‘I mean, where did the men drop Dr Batra?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask.’

With that said, LSD started cooing at the guinea pig, petting it with a smile and led the way again. Once again, they entered the restricted chamber where Shukracharya was just finishing the procedure prescribed in Mrit Sanjeevani. As they entered, Shukracharya took the guinea pig from LSD’s hands and held it over Nagendra’s headless body. He squeezed the squeaking little animal and the cracking of its bones resonated in the pressurized room. Drops of the guinea pig’s blood fell on Nagendra’s slit neck and were immediately absorbed. The procedure was finally complete. Shukracharya stood back as Nagendra’s head and body started reviving. LSD and Parimal stood awestruck as they saw the biggest miracle happening in front of their eyes.

On Mount Kailash, Om opened his eyes and found himself in his hut, with Ashwatthama sitting beside him. Kripacharya and Parashurama also walked in. Ashwatthama stood up to greet them and asked in a heartbeat, ‘You’re back! How did you manage to open the door?’

‘We didn’t have to; there wasn’t a door keeping us in any more,’ Parashurama explained.

‘But how could that be?’

As a response, Om sat up with a distant gaze. ‘That’s because I remember everything now. There’s no barrier between me and my hidden past any more. I remember who I am.’

‘Who are you?’ Kripacharya asked.

Om closed his eyes and took a deep breath. ‘I am Devdhwaja.’

‘But . . . that can’t be! We checked. You don’t have the birthmark!’
Ashwatthama said, trying to wrap his head around the new revelation.

In the forbidden chamber of the submarine, LSD witnessed Nagendra’s body stirring again. Now immortal, he was gradually coming back to life, his frail, creased body transforming before them. His spine straightened and the wrinkles vanished from his face. The two witnessed in awe as young Nagendra smirked with rage in his eyes.

‘Welcome back, Devdhwaja,’ Shukracharya announced with pride, as LSD and Parimal spotted the black birthmark on the heel of Nagendra’s left foot.

- * A rule or aphorism in Sanskrit literature or a set of these on grammar or Hindu law and philosophy
- † An esoteric doctrine regarding [rituals](#), [discipline](#) and [meditation](#) composed in the form of dialogues between and Shakti
- * Self-manifested

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- * Lunar dynasty
- * Solar dynasty
- ‡ The Vedic God of fire

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- * A place for making sacred oblations to a consecrated fire.

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- * Priest
- * The north-east corner, which is considered holy by Hindus.
- * Wish granted
- * Doctor

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* Senior division

† Archaeological Survey of India

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Symbols



What appears to be the tiniest can be the mightiest piece.



The unending cosmic loop of yugas starting with Satya yuga, moving through Treta and Dwapara yugas and ending with Kali yuga only to start back again from Satya yuga.



A mysterious search across Incredible India! What next!

Ashwatthama
 Parashurama
 Vrishkapi
 (The descendant
 of Hanuman's Clan)
 Ved Vyasa
 Kripacharya

Five out of the seven immortals
 found. Where are the others (King
 Mahabali and Vibhishana)?



Lost in the timeless journey
 through all yugas, who is Om?



Can time run out for the
 immortals too? Will they win the
 race against time?

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Falling apart, moving on and then reuniting with your roots, your people, your lineage and your brothers after twenty-six years. I thought that was too good to be true, like a work of fiction, far from reality. I thought it only happened in stories till it happened to me.

My dream of reuniting with all my brothers with formal smiles first, followed by drinks diluted by tears of laughter became a reality. We had a reunion after twenty-six years.

Saurabh Gupta by name, yet I choose to call him Manu Bhaiya, my (), with whom I shared my innocent childhood.

Ankit and Romi, our first siblings, our first responsibility.

Though I should mention Sankalp and Salil, Sawan and Honey sound more like family and brothers. Meethi, the only sister and the youngest among all of us.

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Russel Bhai! What can I say? Let the silence do its job with a smile. Love you, brother, for always keeping me in your heart and mind.

Some things never change is an old adage. I know someone who never changed for me. Despite being in such a seat then, you trusted me with everything and nothing has changed still. This says who you are. Harshil Shah, thank you for having my back.

I believe you have invested a piece of your heart in this cover, George and Neeraj ji. Thank you for bringing this to life, my great design geniuses.

Manisha and Saumya ... I am glad that our paths crossed. Thank you for laughing and crying with me.



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THE BEGINNING

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