

# Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku

**Amish** is a 1974-born, IIM (Kolkata)-educated banker-turned-author. The success of his debut book, *The Immortals of Meluha* (Book 1 of the *Shiva Trilogy*), encouraged him to give up his career in financial services to focus on writing. Besides being an author, he is also an Indian-government diplomat, a host for a TV documentary series, and a film producer.

Amish is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy, finding beauty and meaning in all world religions. His books have sold more than 6 million copies and have been translated into over 20 languages. His *Shiva Trilogy* is the fastest selling and his *Ram Chandra Series* the second fastest selling book series in Indian publishing history. You can connect with Amish here:

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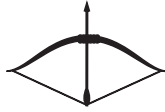
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‘{Amish has} a deeply thoughtful mind with an unusual, original, and fascinating view of the past.’

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‘Amish’s influence goes beyond his books, his books go beyond literature, his literature is steeped in philosophy, which is anchored in bhakti, which powers his love for India.’

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‘Amish is a literary phenomenon.’

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‘{Amish’s writing is} a fine blend of history and myth... gripping and unputdownable.’

– **BBC**

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Book 1  
of the  
Ram Chandra Series

Amish



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This book is produced from independently certified FSC® paper to ensure responsible forest management.

To my father, Vinay Kumar Tripathi,  
and my mother, Usha Tripathi

*Khalil Gibran said that parents are like a bow,  
And children like arrows.*

*The more the bow bends and stretches, the farther the arrow flies.  
I fly, not because I am special, but because they stretched for me.*





Om Namah Shivāya  
*The universe bows to Lord Shiva.*  
*I bow to Lord Shiva.*

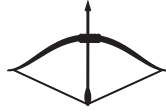


Rāmarājyavāsī tvam, procchrayasva te śīram  
Nyāyārthaṃ yudhyasva, sarveṣu samaṃ cara  
Paripālaya durbalam, viddhi dharmam varam

Procchrayasva te śīram,  
Rāmarājyavāsī tvam.

*You live in Ram's kingdom, hold your head high.  
Fight for justice. Treat all as equal.  
Protect the weak. Know that dharma is above all.  
Hold your head high,  
You live in the kingdom of Ram.*





## List of Characters and Important Tribes (In Alphabetical Order)

**Arishtanemi:** Military chief of the Malayaputras; right-hand man of Vishwamitra

**Ashwapati:** King of the north-western kingdom of Kekaya; a loyal ally of Dashrath; father of Kaikeyi

**Bharat:** Ram's half-brother; son of Dashrath and Kaikeyi

**Dashrath:** The Chakravarti king of Kosala and emperor of Sapt Sindhu; husband of Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra; father of Ram, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughan

**Janak:** King of Mithila; father of Sita and Urmila

**Jatayu:** A captain of the Malayaputra tribe; a Naga friend of Sita and Ram

**Kaikeyi:** Daughter of King Ashwapati of Kekaya; second and the favourite wife of Dashrath; mother of Bharat

**Kaushalya:** Daughter of King Bhanuman of South Kosala and his wife Maheshwari; the eldest queen of Dashrath; mother of Ram

**Kubaer:** Trader and ruler of Lanka before Raavan

**Kumbhakarna:** Raavan's brother; he is also a Naga (a human being born with deformities)

**Kushadhvaj:** King of Sankashya; younger brother of Janak

**Lakshman:** One of the twin sons of Dashrath; born to Sumitra; faithful to Ram; later married to Urmila

**Malayaputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu

**Manthara:** The richest merchant of Sapt Sindhu; an ally of Kaikeyi

**Mrigasya:** General of Dashrath's army; one of the nobles of Ayodhya

**Nagas:** A feared race of human beings born with deformities

**Nilanjana:** Lady doctor attending to members of the royal family of Ayodhya, she hails from South Kosala

**Raavan:** King of Lanka; brother of Vibhishan, Shurpanakha and Kumbhakarna

**Ram:** Eldest of four brothers, son of Emperor Dashrath of Ayodhya (the capital city of Kosala kingdom) and his eldest wife Kaushalya; later married to Sita

**Roshni:** Daughter of Manthara; a committed doctor and *rakhi*-sister to the four sons of Dashrath

**Samichi:** Police and protocol chief of Mithila

**Shatrughan:** Twin brother of Lakshman; son of Dashrath and Sumitra

**Shurpanakha:** Half-sister of Raavan

**Sita:** Adopted daughter of King Janak of Mithila; also the prime minister of Mithila; later married to Ram

**Sumitra:** Daughter of the king of Kashi; the third wife of Dashrath; mother of the twins Lakshman and Shatrughan

**Vashishtha:** Raj guru, the royal priest of Ayodhya; teacher of the four princes

**Vayuputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev

**Vibhishan:** Half-brother of Raavan

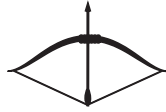
**Vishwamitra:** Chief of the Malayaputras, the tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu; also temporary guru of Ram and Lakshman

**Urmila:** Younger sister of Sita; the blood-daughter of Janak; she is later married to Lakshman

*\*Refer to inside back cover for map of India in 3400 BCE*





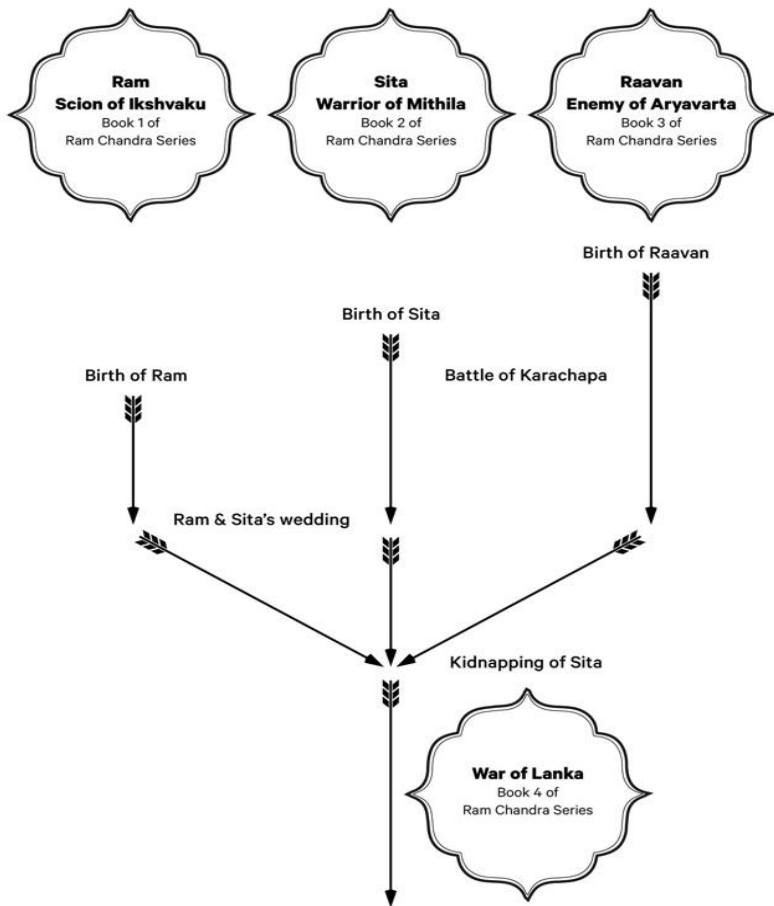


## Note on the Narrative Structure

Thank you for picking up this book and giving me the most important thing you can share: your time. The Ram Chandra Series, of which *Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku* is the first book, has an intricate narrative structure. This note is my attempt to explain it.

I have been inspired by a storytelling technique called hyperlink, which some call the multilinear narrative. In such a narrative, there are many characters; and a connection brings them all together. The three main characters in the Ram Chandra Series are Ram, Sita, and Raavan. Each character has life experiences which mould who they are and their stories converge with the kidnapping of Sita. And each has their own adventure and riveting back-story.

So, while the first book explores the tale of Ram, the second and third will offer a glimpse into the adventures of Sita and then Raavan respectively, before all three stories merge from the fourth book onwards into a single story.



I knew it would be a complicated and time consuming affair, but I must confess, it was thoroughly exciting. I hope this will be as rewarding and thrilling an experience for you as it was for me. Understanding Ram, Sita and Raavan as characters helped me inhabit their worlds and explore the maze of plots and stories that make this epic come alive. I feel truly blessed for this.

There are clues in this book (*Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku*) which will tie up with the stories in the second and third books. Needless to say, there are surprises and twists in store for you in all the books of the series!

I hope you like reading *Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku*. Do tell me what you think of it, by sending me messages on my Facebook or Twitter accounts listed below.

Love,  
Amish

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\*\*\*

I don't agree with everything that John Donne wrote, but he was right on one count: 'No man is an island'. I am lucky to be connected to many others who keep me from being 'rifted'. For creativity has no greater sustenance than the love and support of others. I'd like to acknowledge some of them. Lord Shiva, my God, for blessing me with this life and all there is in it. Also, for bringing Lord Ram (who my grandfather, Pandit Babulal Tripathi, was a great devotee of) back into my life.

Neel, my son, my blessing, my pride, my joy. He gives me happiness by simply being who he is.

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My family: Usha, Vinay, Meeta, Donetta, Shernaz, Smita, Anuj, Ruta. For their consistent faith and love.

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Nitin, Vishal, Avani and Mayuri for their hospitality in Nashik where I wrote parts of this book.

And last, but certainly not the least, you, the reader. Thank you from the depths of my being for the support you've given to the Shiva Trilogy. I hope I don't disappoint you with this book, the first in a new series. Har Har Mahadev!





## Chapter 1

*3400 BCE, somewhere near the Godavari River, India*

Ram crouched low as he bent his tall, lean and muscular frame. He rested his weight on his right knee as he held the bow steady. The arrow was fixed in place, but he knew that the bowstring should not be pulled too early. He didn't want his muscles to tire out. He had to wait for the perfect moment. *It must be a clean strike.*

'It's moving, *Dada*,' whispered Lakshman to his *elder brother*.

Ram didn't reply. His eyes were fixed on the target. A light breeze played with the few strands of hair that had escaped the practical bun atop his head. His shaggy, unkempt beard and his white *dboti* gently fluttered in the breeze. Ram corrected his angle as he factored in the strength and direction of the wind. He quietly cast his white *angvastram* aside to reveal a battle-scarred, dark-skinned torso. *The cloth should not interfere with the release of the arrow.*

The deer suddenly came to a standstill as it looked up; perhaps instinct had kicked in with some warning signals. Ram could hear its low snort as it stomped its feet uneasily. Within a few seconds it went back to chewing leaves as silence prevailed. The rest of the herd was a short distance away, hidden from view by the dense foliage of the forest.

‘By the great Lord Parshu Ram, it ignored its instincts,’ said Lakshman softly. ‘Thank the Lord. We need some real food.’  
 ‘Quiet...’

Lakshman fell silent. Ram knew they needed this kill. Lakshman and he, accompanied by his wife Sita, had been on the run for the last thirty days. A few members of the *Malayaputra* tribe, the *sons of Malaya*, led by their captain, Jatayu, were also with them.

Jatayu had urged flight well before the inevitable retaliation came. The botched meeting with Shurpanakha and Vibhishan would certainly have consequences. They were, after all, the siblings of Raavan, the wrathful demon-king of Lanka. Raavan was sure to seek vengeance. Lankan royal blood had been shed.

Racing east through the *Dandakaranya*, the dense *forest of Dandak*, they had travelled a reasonable distance parallel to the Godavari. They were fairly reassured now that they wouldn’t be easily spotted or tracked. Straying too far from the tributary rivers or other water bodies would mean losing out on the best chance of hunting animals. Ram and Lakshman were princes of Ayodhya, inheritors of the proud Kshatriya tradition of the *Raghukul*, the *descendants of Raghu*. They would not survive on a diet of herbs, fruit and leaves alone.

The deer remained stationary, lost in the pleasure of grazing on tender shoots. Ram knew this was the moment. He held the composite bow steady in his left hand as he pulled the string back with his right, till it almost touched his lips. His elbow was held high, almost perfectly parallel to the ground, exactly the way his guru, Maharishi Vashishtha, had taught him.

*The elbow is weak. Hold it high. Let the effort come from the back muscles. The back is strong.*



Ram pulled the string a notch further and then released the arrow. The missile whizzed past the trees and slammed into the deer's neck. It collapsed immediately, unable to even utter a bleat as blood flooded its lungs. Despite his muscular bulk, Lakshman rushed forward stealthily. Even as he moved, he pulled out a knife from the horizontal scabbard tied to the small of his back. Within moments he reached the deer and quickly plunged the blade deep in between the animal's ribs, right through to its heart.

'Forgive me for killing you, O noble beast,' he whispered the ancient apology that all hunters offered, as he gently touched the deer's head. 'May your soul find purpose again, while your body sustains my soul.'

Ram caught up with Lakshman as his brother pulled the arrow out, wiped it clean and returned it to its rightful owner. 'Still usable,' he murmured.

Ram slipped the arrow back into his quiver as he looked up at the sky. Birds chirped playfully and the deer's own herd displayed no alarm. They had not sensed the killing of one of their own. Ram whispered a short prayer to Lord Rudra, thanking him for what had been a perfect hunt. The last thing they needed was for their position to be given away.



Ram and Lakshman made their way through the dense jungle. Ram walked in front, carrying one end of a long staff on his shoulder, while Lakshman walked behind, holding up the other end. The deer's carcass dangled in the middle, its feet having been secured to the staff with a sturdy rope.

'Aah, a decent meal after so many days,' said Lakshman.

Ram's face broke into a hint of a smile, but he remained silent.

'We can't cook this properly though, right *Dada*?'

'No, we can't. The continuous line of smoke will give our position away.'

'Do we really need to be so careful? There have been no attacks. Maybe they have lost track of us. We haven't encountered any assassins, have we? How would they know where we are? The forests of Dandak are impenetrable.'

'Maybe you're right, but I'm not taking any chances. I'd rather be safe.'

Lakshman held his peace even as his shoulders drooped.

'It's better than eating leaves and herbs,' said Ram, without turning to look at his brother.

'That it certainly is,' agreed Lakshman.

The brothers walked on in silence.

'There is some conspiracy afoot, *Dada*. I'm unable to pin down what it is. But there's something going on. Perhaps Bharat *Dada*...'

'Lakshman!' rebuked Ram sternly.

Bharat was the second oldest after Ram, and had been anointed crown prince of Ayodhya by their father Dashrath following Ram's banishment. The youngest, Shatrughan and Lakshman, were twins separated by differing loyalties. While Shatrughan remained in Ayodhya with Bharat, Lakshman unhesitatingly chose a life of hardship with Ram. The impulsive Lakshman was sceptical of Ram's blind trust in Bharat. He considered it his duty to warn his excessively ethical eldest brother about what appeared to him as Bharat's underhand dealings.

'I know you don't like hearing this, *Dada*,' Lakshman persisted. 'But I'm certain that he's hatched a plot against—'

‘We’ll get to the bottom of it,’ reassured Ram, interrupting Lakshman. ‘But we first need allies. Jatayu is right. We need to find the local Malayaputra camp. At least they can be trusted to help us.’

‘I don’t know whom to trust anymore, *Dada*. Maybe the vulture-man is helping our enemies.’

Jatayu was a Naga, a class of people born with deformities. Ram had come around to trusting Jatayu despite the fact that the Nagas were a hated, feared and ostracised people in the *Sapt Sindhu, the Land of the Seven Rivers*, which lay north of the Narmada River.

Jatayu, like all Nagas, had been born with inevitable deformities. He had a hard and bony mouth that extended out of his face in a beak-like protrusion. His head was bare, but his face was covered with fine, downy hair. Although he was human, his appearance was like that of a vulture.

‘Sita trusts Jatayu,’ said Ram, as though that explained it all. ‘I trust Jatayu. And so will you.’

Lakshman fell silent. And the brothers walked on.



‘But why do you think it’s irrational to think Bharat *Dada* could—’

‘Shhh,’ said Ram, holding his hand up to silence Lakshman. ‘Listen.’

Lakshman strained his ears. A chill ran down his spine. Ram turned towards Lakshman with terror writ large on his face. They had both heard it. *A forceful scream!* It was Sita. The distance made faint her frantic struggle. But it was clearly Sita. She was calling out to her husband.

Ram and Lakshman dropped the deer and dashed forward desperately. They were still some distance away from their temporary camp.

Sita's voice could be heard above the din of the disturbed birds.

'... Raaam!'

They were close enough now to hear the sounds of battle as metal clashed with metal.

Ram screamed as he ran frantically through the forest. 'Sitaaaa!'

Lakshman drew his sword, ready for battle.

'... Raaaam!'

'Leave her alone!' shouted Ram, cutting through the dense foliage, racing ahead.

'... Raaam!'

Ram gripped his bow tight. They were just a few minutes from their camp. 'Sitaaa!'

'... Raa...'

Sita's voice stopped mid-syllable. Trying not to imagine the worst, Ram kept running, his heart pounding desperately, his mind clouded with worry.

They heard the loud whump, whump of rotor blades. It was a sound he clearly remembered from an earlier occasion. This was Raavan's legendary *Pushpak Vimaan*, his flying vehicle.

'Nooo!' screamed Ram, wrenching his bow forward as he ran. Tears were streaming down his face.

The brothers broke through to the clearing that was their temporary camp. It stood completely destroyed. There was blood everywhere.

'Sitaaa!'

Ram looked up and shot an arrow at the *Pushpak Vimaan*, which was rapidly ascending into the sky. It was a shot of impotent rage, for the flying vehicle was already soaring high above.

'Sitaaa!'

Lakshman frantically searched the camp. Bodies of dead soldiers were strewn all over. But there was no Sita.

‘Pri... nce... Ram...’

Ram recognised that feeble voice. He rushed forward to find the bloodied and mutilated body of the Naga.

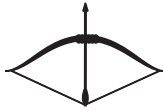
‘Jatayu!’

The badly wounded Jatayu struggled to speak. ‘He’s...’

‘What?’

‘Raavan’s... kidnapped... her.’

Ram looked up enraged at the speck moving rapidly away from them. He screamed in anger, ‘SITAAAA!’



## Chapter 2

*Thirty-three years earlier, Port of Karachapa, Western Sea, India*

‘Lord Parshu Ram, be merciful,’ whispered Dashrath, the forty-year-old king of Kosala, the overlord kingdom of the Sapt Sindhu.

The emperor of the Sapt Sindhu had marched right across his sprawling empire from Ayodhya, its capital, to finally arrive at the western coast. Some rebellious traders sorely needed a lesson in royal justice. The combative Dashrath had built on the powerful empire he had inherited from his father Aja. Rulers from various parts of India had either been deposed or made to pay tribute and accept his suzerainty, thus making Dashrath the *Chakravarti Samrat*, or the *Universal Emperor*.

‘Yes, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya, the general of Dashrath’s army. ‘This is not the only village that has been laid to waste. The enemy has destroyed all the villages in a fifty-kilometre radius from where we stand. The wells have been poisoned with the carcasses of dead animals. Crops have been burned down ruthlessly. The entire countryside has been ravaged.’

‘Scorched earth policy...’ said Ashwapati, the king of Kekaya, a loyal ally of Dashrath, and the father of the emperor’s second and favourite wife, Kaikeyi.

‘Yes,’ said another king. ‘We cannot feed our army of five hundred thousand soldiers here. Our supply lines are already stretched.’

‘How the hell did that barbarian trader Kubaer acquire the intellect for military strategy?’ asked Dashrath.

Dashrath could scarcely conceal his Kshatriyan disdain for the trading class, the Vaishyas. For the Sapt Sindhu royalty, wealth was the conqueror’s right when acquired as the spoils of war, but inappropriate when earned through mere profiteering. The Vaishyas’ ‘lack of class’ invited scorn. They were subjected to heavy regulation and a draconian system of licences and controls. The children of the Sapt Sindhu aristocracy were encouraged to become warriors or intellectuals, not traders. Resultantly, the trading class in these kingdoms was depleted over the years. With not enough money pouring in from wars, the royal coffers quickly emptied.

Ever sensing an opportunity to profit, Kubaer, the trader king of the island of Lanka, offered his services and expertise to carry out trading activities for all the Sapt Sindhu kingdoms. The then king of Ayodhya, Aja, granted the monopoly to Kubaer in return for a huge annual compensation, which was then distributed to each subordinate kingdom within the Sapt Sindhu Empire. Ayodhya’s power soared for it became the source of funds for other kingdoms within the empire. And yet, they could continue to hold on to their old contempt towards trade. Recently, however, Kubaer had unilaterally reduced the commissions that Dashrath rightfully believed were Ayodhya’s due. This impertinence of a mere trader certainly deserved punishment. Dashrath directed his vassal kings to merge their troops with his own, and led them to Karachapa to remind Kubaer of his place in the power hierarchy.

‘Apparently, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya, ‘it is not Kubaer who is calling the shots.’

‘Then who is?’ asked Dashrath.

‘We do not know much about him. I have heard that he is no more than thirty years of age. He joined Kubaer some years ago as the head of his trading security force. Over time, he recruited more people and transformed the unit into a proper army. I believe he is the one who convinced Kubaer to rebel against us.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Ashwapati. ‘I can’t imagine that obese and indolent Kubaer having the nerve to challenge the power of the Sapt Sindhu!’

‘Who is this man?’ asked Dashrath. ‘Where is he from?’

‘We really don’t know much about him, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya.

‘Do you at least know his name?’

‘Yes, we do. His name is Raavan.’



Nilanjana, the royal physician, rushed down the hallway of the palace of Ayodhya. She had received an urgent summons late in the evening from the personal staff of Queen Kaushalya, the first wife of King Dashrath.

The gentle and restrained Kaushalya, the daughter of the king of South Kosala, had been married to Dashrath for more than fifteen years now. Her inability to provide the emperor with an heir had been a source of constant dismay to her. Frustrated by the absence of a successor, Dashrath had finally married Kaikeyi, the tall, fair and statuesque princess of the powerful western Indian kingdom of Kekaya, which was ruled by his close ally Ashwapati. That too was of no avail. He



finally married Sumitra, the steely but unobtrusive princess of the holy city of Kashi, the city that housed the spirit of Lord Rudra and was famous for non-violence. Even so, the great Emperor Dashrath remained without an heir.

No wonder then that when Kaushalya finally became pregnant, it was an occasion marked by both joy and trepidation. The queen was understandably desperate to ensure that the child was delivered safely. Her entire staff, most of whom were loyal retainers from her father's household, understood the political implications of the birth of an heir. Abundant caution was the norm. This was not the first time that Nilanjana had been summoned, many a times over frivolous reasons and false alarms. However, since the doctor too was from Queen Kaushalya's parental home, her loyalty forbade any overt signs of irritability.

This time, though, it appeared to be the real thing. The queen had gone into labour.

Even as she ran, Nilanjana's lips fervently appealed to Lord Parshu Ram for a smooth delivery, and yes, a male child.



'I order you to restore our commission to the very fair nine-tenths of your profits and, in return, I assure you I will let you live,' growled Dashrath.

In keeping with the rules of engagement, Dashrath had sent a messenger in advance to Kubaer for a negotiated settlement as a last resort. The adversaries had decided to meet in person on neutral ground. The chosen site was a beach midway between Dashrath's military camp and the Karachapa fort. Dashrath was accompanied by Ashwapati, Mrigasya, and a bodyguard platoon of twenty soldiers.

Kubaer had arrived along with his army's general, Raavan, and twenty bodyguards.

The Sapt Sindhu warriors could scarcely conceal their contempt as the obese Kubaer had waddled laboriously into the tent. A round, cherubic face with thinning hair was balanced on the humongous body of the seventy-year-old fabulously wealthy trader from Lanka. His smooth complexion and fair skin belied his age. He wore a bright green *dboti* and pink *angvastram* and was bedecked with extravagant jewellery. A life of excess which, when added to his girth and effeminate manner, summed up in the mind of Dashrath what Kubaer was: the classic effete Vaishya.

Dashrath restrained his thoughts as they struggled to escape through words. *Does this ridiculous peacock actually think he can take me on?!*

'Your Highness...' said Kubaer nervously, 'I think it might be a little difficult to keep the commissions fixed at that level. Our costs have gone up and the trading margins are not what they—'

'Don't try your disgusting negotiating tactics with me!' barked Dashrath as he banged his hand on the table for effect. 'I am not a trader! I am an emperor! Civilised people understand the difference.'

It had not escaped Dashrath's notice that Kubaer seemed ill at ease. Perhaps the trader had not intended for events to reach this stage. The massive troop movement to Karachapa had evidently unnerved him. Dashrath presumed that a few harsh words would effectively dissuade Kubaer from persisting with his foolhardy quest. After which, to be fair, he had decided that he would let Kubaer keep an extra two percent. Dashrath understood that, sometimes, a little magnanimity quelled discontent.

Dashrath leaned forward as he lowered his voice to a menacing whisper. ‘I can be merciful. I can forgive mistakes. But you really need to stop this nonsense and do as I say.’

With a nervous gulp, Kubaer glanced at the impassive Raavan who sat to his right. Even sitting, Raavan’s great height and rippling musculature was intimidating. His battle-worn, swarthy skin was pock-marked, probably by a childhood disease. A thick beard valiantly attempted to cover his ugly marks while a handlebar moustache set off his menacing features. His attire was unremarkable though, consisting of a white *dhobi* and a cream *angvastram*. His headgear was singular, with two threatening six-inch-long horns reaching out from the top on either side.

Kubaer helplessly turned back to Dashrath as his general remained deathly still. ‘But Your Highness, we are facing many problems and our invested capital is—’

‘You are trying my patience now, Kubaer!’ growled Dashrath as he ignored Raavan and focused his attention on the chief trader. ‘You are irritating the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu!’

‘But My Lord...’

‘Look, if you do not continue to pay our rightful commissions, believe me you will all be dead by this time tomorrow. I will first defeat your miserable army, then travel all the way to that cursed island of yours and burn your city to the ground.’

‘But there are problems with our ships and labour costs have—’

‘I don’t care about your problems!’ shouted Dashrath, his legendary temper at boiling point now.

‘You will, after tomorrow,’ said Raavan softly.

Dashrath swung sharply towards Raavan, riled that Kubaer’s deputy had had the audacity to interrupt the conversation.

‘How dare you speak out of—’

‘How dare *you*, Dashrath?’ asked Raavan, an octave higher this time.

Dashrath, Ashwapati and Mrigasya sat in stunned silence, shocked that the mere head of a protection force had had the temerity to address the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu by his name.

‘How dare you imagine that you can even come close to defeating an army that I lead?’ asked Raavan with an eerie sense of calm.

Dashrath stood up angrily and his chair went flying back with a loud clutter. He thrust his finger in Raavan’s direction. ‘I’ll be looking for you on the battlefield tomorrow, you upstart!’

Slowly and menacingly, Raavan rose from his chair, all the while his closed right fist covering a pendant that hung from a gold chain around his neck. As Raavan’s fist unclenched, Dashrath was horrified by what he saw. The pendant was actually the bones of two human fingers — the phalanges of which were carefully fastened with gold links. Clenching this macabre souvenir again, Raavan appeared to derive enormous power from it.

Dashrath stared in disbelief. He had heard of demons that drank blood and wine from the skulls of their enemies and even kept their body parts as trophies. But here was a warrior who wore the relics of his enemy! *Who is this monster?*

‘I assure you, I’ll be waiting,’ said Raavan, with a hint of wry humour lacing his voice, as he watched Dashrath gape at him with horror. ‘I look forward to drinking your blood.’

Raavan turned around and strode out of the tent. Kubaer hurriedly wobbled out behind him, followed by the Lankan bodyguards.

Dashrath’s anger bubbled over. ‘Tomorrow we annihilate these scum. But no one will touch that man,’ he growled

pointing towards the retreating figure of Raavan. ‘He will be killed by me! Only me!’



Dashrath was bristling with fury even as the day drew to a close. ‘I will personally chop up his body and throw it to the dogs!’ he shouted.

Kaikeyi sat impassively as her seething husband paced up and down the royal tent of the Ayodhya camp. She always accompanied him on his military campaigns.

‘How dare he speak to me like that?’

Kaikeyi scrutinised Dashrath languidly. He was tall, dark and handsome, the quintessential Kshatriya. A well-manicured moustache only added to his attractiveness. Though muscular and strong, age had begun to take its toll on his well-built physique. Stray streaks of white in his hair were accompanied by a faint hint of a sag in the muscles. Even the Somras, the mysterious anti-ageing drink reserved for the royals by their sages, had not been able to adequately counter a lifetime of ceaseless warring and hard drinking.

‘I am the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu!’ shouted Dashrath, striking his chest with unconcealed rage. ‘How dare he?’

Even though alone with her husband, Kaikeyi maintained the demure demeanour normally reserved for her public interactions with him. She had never seen him so angry.

‘My love,’ said Kaikeyi, ‘save the anger for tomorrow. Have your dinner. You will need your strength for the battle that lies ahead.’

‘Does that outcaste mercenary even have a clue as to who he has challenged? I have never lost a battle in my life!’ Dashrath continued as though Kaikeyi hadn’t spoken.

‘And you will win tomorrow as well.’

Dashrath turned towards Kaikeyi. ‘Yes, I will win tomorrow. Then I will cut him to pieces and feed his corpse to mongrel dogs and gutter pigs!’

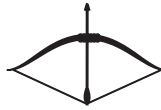
‘Of course you will, my love. You have determined that already.’

Dashrath snorted angrily and turned around, ready to storm out of the tent. But Kaikeyi could no longer contain herself.

‘Dashrath!’ she said harshly.

Dashrath stopped in his tracks. His favourite wife used that tone with him only when necessary. Kaikeyi walked up to him, held his hand and led him to the dinner table. She held his shoulders and roughly pushed him into the chair. Then she tore a piece of the *roti*, scooped up some vegetables and meat with it, and offered it to him. ‘You cannot defeat that demon tomorrow if you don’t eat and sleep tonight,’ she barely whispered.

Dashrath opened his mouth. Kaikeyi stuffed the morsel of food into it.



## Chapter 3

Lying in her bed, Queen Kaushalya of Ayodhya appeared frail and worn. All of forty, her prematurely grey hair seemed incongruous against her dark, still gleaming skin. Though short in stature, she'd once been strong. In a culture that valued women for their ability to produce heirs, being childless had broken her spirit. Despite being the senior-most wife, King Dashrath acknowledged her only on ceremonial occasions. At most other times, she was relegated to obscurity, a fact that ate away at her. All she desired was a fraction of the time and attention that Dashrath lavished on his favourite wife, Kaikeyi.

She was keenly aware that giving birth to an heir, hopefully Dashrath's first son, had the potential to dramatically alter her status. No wonder then that today her spirit was all fired up, even though her body was weak. She had been in labour for more than sixteen hours but she barely felt the pain. She soldiered on determinedly, refusing the doctor her permission to perform a surgical procedure to extract her baby from her womb.

'My son will be born naturally,' announced Kaushalya firmly.

A natural birth was considered more auspicious. She had no intention of putting the future prospects of her child at risk.

'He will be king one day,' continued Kaushalya. 'He will be born with good fortune.'

Nilanjana sighed. She wasn't even sure if the child would be a boy. But she wouldn't risk the merest flagging of her mistress' spirits. She administered some herbal pain relievers to the queen and bided her time. Ideally, the doctor wanted the birth to take place before midday. The royal astrologer had warned her that if the child was born later, he would suffer great hardships throughout his life. On the other hand, if the child was born before the sun reached its zenith, he would be remembered as one of the greatest among men and would be celebrated for millennia.

Nilanjana cast a quick glance at the *prabar* lamp, which measured time in six-hour intervals. The sun had already risen and it was the third hour of the second *prabar*. In another three hours it would be midday. Nilanjana had decided to wait till a half hour before noon and, if the baby was still not born, she would go ahead with the surgery.

Kaushalya was stricken with another bout of dilatory pain. She pursed her lips together and began chanting in her mind the name she had chosen for her child. This gave her strength for it wasn't an ordinary name. The name she had picked was that of the sixth Vishnu.

'Vishnu' was a title given to the greatest of leaders who were remembered as the Propagators of Good. The sixth man to have achieved this title was Lord Parshu Ram. That is how he was remembered by the common folk. *Parshu* means *axe*, and the word had been added to the name of the sixth Vishnu because the mighty battle axe had been his favourite weapon. His birth name was Ram. That was the name that reverberated in Kaushalya's mind.

*Ram... Ram... Ram... Ram...*





The fourth hour of the second *prahar* saw Dashrath battle-ready. He had hardly slept the previous night, his self-righteous rage having refused to dissipate. He had never lost a battle in his life, but this time it was not mere victory that he sought. Redemption now lay in his vanquishing that mercenary trader and squeezing the life out of him.

The Ayodhyan emperor had arranged his army in a *suchi vyuha*, the *needle formation*. This was because Kubaer's hordes had planted dense thorny bushes all around the Karachapa fort. It was almost impossible to charge from the landward side of the port city. Dashrath's army could have cleared the bushes and created a path to charge the fort, but that would have taken weeks. Kubaer's army had scorched the earth around Karachapa, and the absence of local food and water ensured that Dashrath's army did not possess the luxury of time. They had to attack before they ran out of rations.

More importantly, Dashrath was too angry to be patient. Therefore he had decided to launch his attack from the only strip of open land that had access to the fort of Karachapa: its beach.

The beach was broad by usual standards, but not enough for a large army. Hence, Dashrath's tactical decision to form a *suchi vyuha*. The best troops, along with the emperor, would man the front of the formation, while the rest of the army would fall in a long column behind. They intended a rolling charge, where the first lines would strike the Lankan ranks, and after twenty minutes of battle slip back, allowing the next line of warriors to charge in. It would be an unrelenting surge of brave Sapt Sindhu soldiers aiming to scatter and decimate the enemy troops of Kubaer.

Ashwapati nudged his horse a few steps ahead and halted next to Dashrath.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, ‘are you sure about this tactic?’

‘Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts, King Ashwapati!’ remarked Dashrath, surprised by the words of caution from his normally aggressive father-in-law. He had been a worthy ally in most of Dashrath’s conquering expeditions throughout the realms of India.

‘I was just thinking we will not be using our numerical superiority in full strength. The bulk of our soldiers will be behind the ones charging upfront. They will not be fighting at the same time. Is that wise?’

‘It is the only way, believe me,’ asserted Dashrath confidently. ‘Even if our first charge is unsuccessful, the soldiers at the back will keep coming in waves. We can sustain our onslaught on Kubaer’s eunuch forces till they all die to the last man. I do not see it coming to that though. I will annihilate them with our first charge!’

Ashwapati looked to his left where Kubaer’s ships lay at anchor more than two kilometres into the sea. There was something strange about their structure. The front section, the bow, was unusually broad. ‘What role will those ships play in the battle?’

‘Nothing!’ dismissed Dashrath, smiling fondly at his father-in-law; while Dashrath had had experience of a few naval battles, Ashwapati hadn’t. ‘Those fools haven’t even lowered their row-boats from the vessels. Even if they have a reserve force on those ships, they cannot be brought into battle quickly enough. It will take them at least a few hours to lower their row-boats, load their soldiers, and then ferry them to the beach to join the battle. By then, we would’ve wiped out the soldiers who are inside the fort.’

‘Outside the fort,’ corrected Ashwapati, pointing towards Karachapa.