

# The Oath of the Vayuputras

**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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‘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.’

– **Gautam Chikermane**

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‘Amish is a literary phenomenon.’

– **Anil Dharker**

*(Senior Journalist & Author)*

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

– **BBC**

# The Oath of the Vayuputras

Book 3  
of the  
Shiva Trilogy

Amish



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

To the late Dr Manoj Vyas, my father-in-law

*Great men never die*

*They live on in the hearts of their followers*





Har Har Mahadev

*All of us are Mahadevs, All of us are Gods  
For His most magnificent temple, finest mosque and  
greatest church exist within our souls*





# Contents

	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xv</i>
	<i>The Shiva Trilogy</i>	<i>xix</i>
	<i>List of Characters</i>	<i>xxi</i>
Chapter	1: The Return of a Friend	1
Chapter	2: What is Evil?	11
Chapter	3: The Kings Have Chosen	32
Chapter	4: A Frog Homily	50
Chapter	5: The Shorter Route	66
Chapter	6: The City that Conquers Pride	80
Chapter	7: An Eternal Partnership	90
Chapter	8: Who is Shiva?	103
Chapter	9: The Love-struck Barbarian	115
Chapter	10: His Name Alone Strikes Fear	128
Chapter	11: The Branga Alliance	137
Chapter	12: Troubled Waters	147
Chapter	13: Escape of the Gunas	156
Chapter	14: The Reader of Minds	166
Chapter	15: The Magadhan Issue	176
Chapter	16: Secrets Revealed	187

Chapter 17:	Honour Imprisoned	195
Chapter 18:	Honour or Victory?	204
Chapter 19:	Proclamation of the Blue Lord	214
Chapter 20:	The Fire Song	222
Chapter 21:	Siege of Ayodhya	230
Chapter 22:	Magadh Mobilises	241
Chapter 23:	Battle of Bal-Atibal Kund	250
Chapter 24:	The Age of Violence	261
Chapter 25:	God or Country?	270
Chapter 26:	Battle of Mrittikavati	279
Chapter 27:	The Neelkanth Speaks	289
Chapter 28:	Meluha Stunned	301
Chapter 29:	Every Army Has a Traitor	311
Chapter 30:	Battle of Devagiri	321
Chapter 31:	Stalemate	332
Chapter 32:	The Last Resort	342
Chapter 33:	The Conspiracy Deepens	351
Chapter 34:	With the Help of Umbergaon	357
Chapter 35:	Journey to Pariha	367
Chapter 36:	The Land of Fairies	373
Chapter 37:	Unexpected Help	382
Chapter 38:	The Friend of God	394
Chapter 39:	He is One of Us	404
Chapter 40:	Ambush on the Narmada	415
Chapter 41:	An Invitation for Peace	422

Chapter 42:	Kanakhala's Choice	432
Chapter 43:	A Civil Revolt	441
Chapter 44:	A Princess Returns	450
Chapter 45:	The Final Kill	463
Chapter 46:	Lament of the Blue Lord	481
Chapter 47:	A Mother's Message	488
Chapter 48:	The Great Debate	494
Chapter 49:	Debt to the Neelkanth	506
Chapter 50:	Saving a Legacy	516
Chapter 51:	Live On, Do Your Karma	523
Chapter 52:	The Banyan Tree	531
Chapter 53:	The Destroyer of Evil	540
Chapter 54:	By the Holy Lake	551
	<i>Glossary</i>	566





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\*\*\*

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## The Shiva Trilogy

Shiva! The Mahadev. The God of Gods. Destroyer of Evil. Passionate lover. Fierce warrior. Consummate dancer. Charismatic leader. All-powerful, yet incorruptible. Quick of wit – and of temper.

No foreigner who came to India – be he conqueror, merchant, scholar, ruler, traveller – believed that such a great man could ever have existed in reality. They assumed he must have been a mythical God, a fantasy conjured within the realms of human imagination. And over time, sadly, this belief became our received wisdom.

But what if we are wrong? What if Lord Shiva was not simply a figment of a rich imagination but a person of flesh-and-blood like you and me? A man who rose to become God-like as a result of his karma. That is the premise of the Shiva Trilogy, which attempts to interpret the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact.

*The Immortals of Meluha* was the first book in a trilogy that chronicles the journey of this extraordinary hero. The story was continued in the second book, *The Secret of the Nagas*. And it will all end in the book that you are holding: *The Oath of the Vayuputras*.

This is a fictional series that is a tribute to my God; I found Him after spending many years in the wilderness of atheism.

I hope you find your God as well. It doesn't matter in what form we find Him, so long as we do find Him eventually. Whether He comes to us as Shiva or Vishnu or Shakti Maa or Allah or Jesus Christ or Buddha or any other of His myriad forms, He wants to help us. Let us allow Him to do so.

*Yadyatkarma karomi tattadakhilam shambho tavaaraadbanam*  
My Lord Shambo, My Lord Shiva, every act of mine is a  
prayer in your honour



## List of Characters

**Anandamayi:** Ayodhyan princess, daughter of Emperor Dilipa, married to General Parvateshwar.

**Athithigva:** King of Kashi.

**Ayurvati:** The chief of medicine at Meluha.

**Bappiraj:** Prime minister of Branga.

**Bhadra a.k.a. Veerbhadra:** A childhood friend and a confidant of Shiva, married to Krittika.

**Bhagirath:** Prince of Ayodhya, son of Emperor Dilipa.

**Bharat:** An ancient emperor of the Chandravanshi dynasty married to a Suryavanshi princess.

**Bhoomidevi:** A revered non-Naga lady who established the present way of life of the Nagas a long time ago.

**Bhrigu:** A Saptrishi Uttradhikari (successor of the Saptarshis), rajguru of Meluha.

**Brahaspati:** Chief Meluhan scientist; belonged to the swantribe of Brahmins.

**Brahmanayak:** Father of Daksha, previous emperor of Meluha.

**Chandraketu:** King of Branga.

**Chenardhwaj:** Governor of Maika and Lothal; earlier the governor of Kashmir.

**Daksha:** Emperor of the Suryavanshi Empire of Meluha, married to Veerini and father of Sati and Kali.

**Dilipa:** Emperor of Swadweep, king of Ayodhya and chief of the Chandravanshis; father of Bhagirath and Anandamayi.

**Divodas:** The leader of the Brangas who live in Kashi.

**Ganesh:** Sati's first child, one of the Naga leaders.

**Gopal:** Chief of the Vasudevs.

**Kali:** Sati's twin sister and queen of the Nagas.

**Kanakhala:** The prime minister of Meluha, she is in charge of administrative, revenue and protocol matters.

**Karkotak:** Prime minister of the Nagas.

**Kartik:** Son of Shiva and Sati, named after Krittika, Sati's best friend and attendant.

**Krittika:** A close friend and attendant to Sati; wife of Veerbhadra.

**Manobhu:** Shiva's maternal uncle and teacher.

**Manu:** Founder of the Vedic way of life; he lived many millennia ago.

**Mitra:** Chief of the Vayuputras.

**Mohini:** An associate of Lord Rudra; respected by some as a Vishnu.

**Nandi:** A captain in the Meluhan army.

**Parshuram:** A dacoit in Branga; he was named after the sixth Vishnu.

**Parvateshwar:** Head of Meluhan armed forces, he was in charge of army, navy, special forces and police; married to Princess Anandamayi.

**Ram:** The seventh Vishnu, who lived centuries ago. He established the empire of Meluha.

**Rudra:** The earlier Mahadev, the Destroyer of Evil, who lived some millennia ago.

**Sati:** The royal princess of Meluha, daughter of King Daksha and Queen Veerini, married to Shiva, mother of Kartik and Ganesh.

**Satyadhvaj:** Grandfather of Parvateshwar.

**Shiva:** The chief of the Guna tribe; Neelkanth, the saviour of the land. Married to Sati, father of Kartik and Ganesh.

**Siamantak:** Prime minister of Swadweep.

**Surapadman:** Prince of Magadh.

**Swuth:** Chief of a tribe of Egyptian assassins.

**Tara:** A pupil of Bhrigu.

**Vasudev pandits:** Advisers to Shiva, tribe left behind by the previous Vishnu, Lord Ram.

**Veerini:** Queen of Meluha, wife of Emperor Daksha and mother of Sati and Kali.

**Vidyunmali:** Brigadier in the Meluhan army.

**Vishwadyumna:** A close associate of Ganesh.







## Chapter 1

# The Return of a Friend

Before the Beginning.

*Blood dribbled into the water, creating unburied ripples which expanded slowly to the edges of the cistern. Shiva bent over the container as he watched the rippling water distort his reflection. He dipped his hands in the water and splashed some on his face, washing off the blood and gore. Recently appointed Chief of the Gunas, he was in a mountain village far from the comforts of the Mansarovar Lake. It had taken his tribe three weeks to get there despite the punishing pace he had set. The cold was bone-chilling, but Shiva didn't even notice. Not because of the heat that emanated from the Pakrati huts that were being gutted by gigantic flames, but because of the fire that burnt within.*

*Shiva wiped his eyes and stared at his reflection in the water. Raw fury gripped him. Yakhya, the Pakrati chieftain, had escaped. Shiva controlled his breathing, still recovering from the exhaustion of combat.*

*He thought he saw his uncle, Manobhu's bloodied body in the water. Shiva reached out below the surface of the water with his hand. 'Uncle!'*

*The mirage vanished. Shiva squeezed his eyes shut.*

*The macabre moment when he had found his uncle's body replayed in his mind. Manobhu had gone to discuss a peace treaty with Yakhya, hoping the Pakratis and Gunas would end their incessant warmongering. When he hadn't returned at the appointed time,*

## 2 The Oath of the Vayuputras

*Shiva had sent out a search party. Manobhu's mutilated body, along with those of his bodyguards, had been found next to a goat trail on the way to the Pakrati village.*

*A message had been written in blood; on a rock next to where Manobhu had breathed his last.*

*'Shiva. Forgive them. Forget them. Your only true enemy is Evil.'*

*All that his uncle wanted was peace and this is how they had repaid him.*

*'Where's Yakhya?' Bhadra's scream broke Shiva's chain of thoughts.*

*Shiva turned. The entire Pakrati village was up in flames. Some thirty dead bodies lay strewn across the clearing; brutally hacked by the enraged Gunas seeking vengeance for their former chief's death. Five Pakrati men knelt on the ground, tied together, a continuous rope binding their wrists and feet. Both ends of the rope had been hammered into the ground. The fierce Bhadra, bloodied sword in hand, led the twenty Guna guards. It was impossible for the Pakratris to escape.*

*At a distance, another contingent of Guna warriors guarded the shackled Pakrati women and children; unharmed thus far. The Gunas never killed or even hurt women and children. Never.*

*'Where is Yakhya?' repeated Bhadra, pointing his sword menacingly at a Pakrati.*

*'We don't know,' the Pakrati answered. 'I swear we don't know.'*

*Bhadra dug his sword point into the man's chest, drawing blood. 'Answer and you shall have mercy. All we want is Yakhya. He will pay for killing Manobhu.'*

*'We didn't kill Manobhu. I swear on all the mountain Gods, we didn't kill him.'*

*Bhadra kicked the Pakrati hard. 'Don't lie to me, you stinking arsehole of a yak!'*

*Shiva turned away as his eyes scanned the forests beyond the clearing. He closed his eyes. He could still hear his uncle Manobhu's words echo in his ears. 'Anger is your enemy. Control it! Control it!'*

*Shiva took deep breaths as he tried to slow down his furiously pounding heart.*

*'If you kill us, Yakhya will come back and kill all of you,' screamed a Pakrati at the end of the rope line. 'You will never know peace! We shall have the final vengeance!'*

*'Shut up, Kayna,' shouted another Pakrati, before turning to Bhadra. 'Release us. We had nothing to do with it.'*

*But the Pakrati seemed to have come unbinged. 'Shiva!' shouted Kayna. Shiva turned.*

*'You should be ashamed to call Manobhu your uncle,' roared Kayna. 'Shut up, Kayna!' screamed all the other Pakratists.*

*But Kayna was beyond caring. His intense loathing for the Gunas had made him abandon his instinct for self-preservation. 'That coward!' he spat. 'Manobhu bleated like a goat as we shoved his intestines and his peace treaty down his throat!'*

*Shiva's eyes widened, as the rage bubbling under the surface broke through. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he drew his sword and charged. Without breaking a step, he swung viciously as he neared the Pakratists, beheading Kayna in one mighty blow. The severed head smashed into the Pakrati beside him, before ricocheting off to the distance.*

*'Shiva!' screamed Bhadra.*

*They needed the Pakratists alive if they were to find Yakhya. But Bhadra was too disciplined a tribesman to state the obvious. Besides, at that moment, Shiva didn't care. He swirled smoothly, swinging his sword again and again, decapitating the next Pakrati and the next. It was only a matter of moments before five beheaded Pakrati bodies lay in the mud, their hearts still pumping blood out of their gaping necks, making it pool around the bodies, almost as though they lay in a lake of blood.*

*Shiva breathed heavily, as he stared at the dead, his uncle's voice ringing loudly in his head.*

*'Anger is your enemy. Control it! Control it!'*



‘I have been waiting for you, my friend,’ said the teacher. He was smiling, his eyes moist. ‘I’d told you, I would go anywhere for you. Even to *Patalloke* if it would help you.’

How often had Shiva replayed these words uttered by the man who stood before him. But he had never fully understood the reference to *the land of the demons*. Now it all fell into place.

The beard had been shaved, replaced by a pencil-thin moustache. The broad shoulders and barrel chest were much better defined. The man must be getting regular exercise. The *janau*, *the holy thread of Brahmin identity*, was loosely slung over newly developed muscles. The head remained shaven, but the tuft of hair at the back appeared longer and neater. The deep-set eyes had the same serenity that had drawn Shiva to him earlier. It was his long-lost friend. His comrade in arms. His brother.

‘Brahaspati!’

‘It took you a very long time to find me.’ Brahhaspati stepped close and embraced Shiva. ‘I have been waiting for you.’

Shiva hesitated for a moment before joyously embracing Brahhaspati, allowing his emotions to take over. But no sooner had he regained his composure, than doubts started creeping into his mind.

*Brahhaspati created the illusion of his death. He allied with the Nagas. He destroyed his life’s purpose, the great Mount Mandar. He was the Suryavanshi mole!*

*My brother lied to me!*

Shiva stepped back silently. He felt Sati’s hand on his shoulder, in silent commiseration.

Brahhaspati turned to his students. ‘Children, could you please excuse us?’

The students immediately rose and left. The only people left in the room were Shiva, Brahhaspati, Sati, Ganesh and Kali.

Brahaspati stared at his friend, waiting for the questions. He could sense the hurt and anger in Shiva's eyes.

'Why?' he asked.

'I thought I would spare you the dreadful personal fate that is the inheritance of the Mahadevs. I tried to do your task. One cannot fight Evil and not have its claws leave terrible scars upon one's soul. I wanted to protect you.'

Shiva's eyes narrowed. 'Were you fighting Evil all by yourself? For more than five years?'

'Evil is never in a rush,' reasoned Brahaspati. 'It creeps up slowly. It doesn't hide, but confronts you in broad daylight. It gives decades of warnings, even centuries at times. Time is never the problem when you battle Evil. The problem is the will to fight it.'

'You say that you have been waiting for me. And yet you hid all traces of yourself. Why?'

'I always trusted you, Shiva,' said Brahaspati, 'but I could not trust all those who were around you. They would have prevented me from accomplishing my mission. I might even have been assassinated had they learnt about my plans. My mission, I admit, prevailed over my love for you. It was only when you parted ways with them, that I could meet you safely.'

'That's a lie. You wanted to meet me because you needed me for the success of your mission. Because you now know you cannot accomplish it by yourself.'

Brahaspati smiled wanly. 'It was never meant to be my mission, great Neelkanth. It was always yours.'

Shiva looked at Brahaspati, expressionless.

'You are partially right,' said Brahaspati. 'I wanted to meet you... No, I *needed* to meet you because I have failed. The coin of Good and Evil is flipping over and India needs the Neelkanth. It needs you, Shiva. Otherwise, Evil will destroy this beautiful land of ours.'

Shiva, while continuing to stare noncommittally at Brahaspati, asked, ‘The coin is flipping over, you say?’

Brahaspati nodded.

Shiva remembered Lord Manu’s words. *Good and Evil are two sides of the same coin.*

The Neelkanth’s eyes widened. *The key question isn’t ‘What is Evil?’ The key question is: ‘When does Good become Evil? When does the coin flip?’*

Brahaspati continued to watch Shiva keenly. Lord Manu’s rules were explicit; he could not suggest anything. The Mahadev had to discover and decide for himself.

Shiva took a deep breath and ran his hand over his blue throat. It still felt intolerably cold. It seemed as if the journey would have to end where it had begun.

*What is the greatest Good; the Good that created this age? The answer was obvious. And therefore, the greatest Evil was exactly the same thing, once it began to disturb the balance.*

Shiva looked at Brahaspati. ‘Tell me why..?’

Brahaspati remained silent, waiting.. The question had to be more specific.

‘Tell me why you think the Somras has tipped over from the greatest Good to the greatest Evil.’



Bits and pieces of the wreckage had been dutifully brought by the soldiers for examination by Parvateshwar and Bhagirath, who squatted at a distance.

Shiva had asked the Meluhan general and the Ayodhyan prince to investigate the wreckage. They had been tasked with determining the antecedents of the men who had attacked their convoy on the way to Panchavati. Parvateshwar and Bhagirath had stayed behind with a

hundred soldiers while the rest of Shiva's convoy had carried on to Panchavati.

Parvateshwar glanced at Bhagirath and then turned back to the wooden planks. Slowly but surely, his worst fears were coming true.

He turned to look at the hundred Suryavanshi soldiers who stood at a respectable distance, as they had been instructed. He was relieved. It was best if they did not see what had been revealed. The rivets on the planks were clearly Meluhan.

'I hope Lord Ram has mercy on your soul, Emperor Daksha,' he shook his head and sighed.

Bhagirath turned towards Parvateshwar, frowning. 'What happened?'

Parvateshwar looked at Bhagirath, anger writ large on his face. 'Meluha has been let down. Its fair name has been tarnished forever; tarnished by the one sworn to protect it.'

Bhagirath kept quiet.

'These ships were sent by Emperor Daksha,' Parvateshwar said softly.

Bhagirath moved closer, his eyes showing disbelief. 'What? Why do you say that?'

'These rivets are clearly Meluhan. These ships were built in my land.'

Bhagirath narrowed his eyes. He had noticed something completely different and was stunned by the general's statement. 'Parvateshwar, look at the wood. Look at the casing around the edges.'

Parvateshwar frowned. He did not recognise the casing.

'It improves water-proofing in the joints,' said Bhagirath.

Parvateshwar looked at his brother-in-law, curious.

'This technology is from Ayodhya.'

'Lord Ram, be merciful!'

‘Yes! It looks like Emperor Daksha and my weakling father have formed an alliance against the Neelkanth.’



Bhrigu, Daksha and Dilipa were in the Meluhan emperor’s private chambers in Devagiri. Dilipa and Bhrigu had arrived the previous day.

‘Do you think they have succeeded in their mission, My Lord?’ asked Dilipa.

Daksha seemed remote and disinterested. He felt the intense pain of separation from his beloved daughter Sati. The terrible event at Kashi, more than a year ago, still haunted him. He’d lost his child and with it, all the love he ever felt in his heart.

A few months ago Bhrigu had hatched a plan to assassinate the Neelkanth, along with his entire convoy, en route to Panchavati. They had sent five ships up the Godavari River to first attack Shiva’s convoy, and then move on to destroy Panchavati as well. There were to be no survivors who would bear witness to what actually took place. Attacking an unprepared enemy was not unethical. In one fell swoop, all those inimical to them would be destroyed. But it was possible only if Daksha and Dilipa joined hands, as they together had the means as well as the technology.

The people of India would be told that the ghastly Nagas had lured the simple and trusting Neelkanth to their city and assassinated him. Knowing the significance of simplicity in propaganda, Bhrigu had come up with a new title for Shiva: *Bholenath*, the *simple one*, the one who is easily misled. Laying the blame on the treachery of the Nagas and the simplicity of the Neelkanth would mean that Daksha and Dilipa would be spared the backlash. And the hatred for the Nagas would be strengthened manifold.



Bhrigu glanced at Daksha briefly and then turned his attention back to Dilipa. The *Saptrishi Uttradbhikari* seemed to place his trust on Dilipa more than the Meluhan now. ‘They should have succeeded. We’ll soon receive reports from the commander.’

Dilipa’s face twitched. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. ‘I hope it is never revealed that we did this. The wrath of my people would be terrible. Killing the Neelkanth with this subterfuge...’

Bhrigu interrupted Dilipa, his voice calm. ‘He was not the Neelkanth. He was an imposter. The Vayuputra council did not create him. It did not even recognise him.’

Dilipa frowned. He had always heard rumours but had never really been sure as to whether the Vayuputras, the legendary tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, actually existed.

‘Then how did his throat turn blue?’ asked Dilipa.

Bhrigu looked at Daksha and shook his head in exasperation. ‘I don’t know. It is a mystery. I knew the Vayuputra council had obviously not created a Neelkanth, for they are still debating whether Evil has risen. Therefore, I did not object to the Emperor of Meluha persisting with his search for the Neelkanth. I knew there was no possibility of a Neelkanth actually being discovered.’

Dilipa looked stunned.

‘Imagine my surprise,’ continued Bhrigu, ‘when this endeavour actually led them to an apparent Neelkanth. But a blue throat did not mean that he was capable of being the saviour. He had not been trained. He had not been educated for his task. He had not been appointed for it by the Vayuputra council. But Emperor Daksha felt he could control this simple tribal from Tibet and achieve his ambitions for Meluha. I made a mistake in trusting His Highness.’

Dilipa looked at Daksha, who did not respond to the barb. The Swadweepan emperor turned back towards the great sage. 'In any case, Evil will be destroyed when the Nagas are destroyed.'

Bhrigu frowned. 'Who said the Nagas are evil?'

Dilipa looked at Bhrigu, nonplussed. 'Then, what are you saying, My Lord? That the Nagas can be our allies?'

Bhrigu smiled. 'The distance between Evil and Good is a vast expanse in which many can exist without being either, Your Highness.'

Dilipa nodded politely, not quite understanding Bhrigu's intellectual abstractions. Wisely though, he kept his counsel.

'But the Nagas are on the wrong side,' continued Bhrigu. 'Do you know why?'

Dilipa shook his head, thoroughly confused.

'Because they are against the great Good. They are against the finest invention of Lord Brahma; the one that is the source of our country's greatness. This invention must be protected at all costs.'

Dilipa nodded in affirmation. Once again, he didn't understand Bhrigu's words. But he knew better than to argue with the formidable maharishi. He needed the medicines that Bhrigu provided. They kept him healthy and alive.

'We will continue to fight for India,' said Bhrigu. 'I will not let anyone destroy the Good that is at the heart of our land's greatness.'



## Chapter 2

# What is Evil?

‘That the Somras has been the greatest Good of our age is pretty obvious,’ said Brahaspati. ‘It has shaped our age. Hence, it is equally obvious that someday, it will become the greatest Evil. The key question is when would the transformation occur.’

Shiva, Sati, Kali and Ganesh were still in Brahaspati’s classroom in Panchavati. Brahaspati had declared a holiday for the rest of the day so that their conversation could continue uninterrupted. The legendary ‘five banyan trees’, after which Panchavati had been named, were clearly visible from the classroom window.

‘As far as I am concerned, the Somras was evil the moment it was invented!’ spat out Kali.

Shiva frowned at Kali and turned to Brahaspati. ‘Go on...’

‘Any great invention has both positive and negative effects. As long as the positive outweighs the negative, one can safely continue to use it. The Somras created our way of life and has allowed us to live longer in healthy bodies. It has enabled great men to keep contributing towards the welfare of society, longer than was ever possible in the past. At first, the Somras was restricted to the Brahmins, who were expected to use the

longer, healthier life – almost a second life – for the benefit of society at large.’

Shiva nodded. He had heard this story from Daksha many years ago.

‘Later Lord Ram decreed that the benefits of the Somras should be available to all. Why should Brahmins have special privileges? Thereafter, the Somras was administered to the entire populace, resulting in huge progress in society as a whole.’

‘I know all about this,’ said Shiva. ‘But when did the negative effects start becoming obvious?’

‘The first sign was the Nagas,’ said Brahaspati. ‘There have always been Nagas in India. But they were usually Brahmins. For example, Ravan, Lord Ram’s greatest foe, was a Naga and a Brahmin.’

‘Ravan was a Brahmin?!’ asked a shocked Sati.

‘Yes, he was,’ answered Kali, for every Naga knew his story. ‘The son of the great sage Vishrava, he was a benevolent ruler, a brilliant scholar, a fierce warrior and a staunch devotee of Lord Rudra. He had some faults no doubt, but he wasn’t Evil personified, as the people of the Sapt Sindhu would have us believe.’

‘In that case, do you people think less of Lord Ram?’ asked Sati.

‘Of course not. Lord Ram was one of the greatest emperors ever. We worship him as the seventh Vishnu. His ideas, philosophies and laws are the foundation of the Naga way of life. His reign, *Ram Rajya*, will always be celebrated across India as the perfect way to run an empire. But you should know that it is believed by some that even Lord Ram did not see Ravan as pure evil. He respected his enemy. Sometimes there can be good people on both sides of a war.’

Shiva raised his hand to silence them, and turned

his attention back towards the Meluhan chief scientist. 'Brahaspati...'

'So the Nagas, though small in number initially, were usually Brahmins,' Brahaspati continued. 'But then, the Somras was used only by the Brahmins until then. Today, the connection seems obvious, but it didn't seem so at the time.'

'The Somras created the Nagas?' asked Shiva.

'Yes. This was discovered only a few centuries ago by the Nagas. I learnt it from them.'

'We didn't discover it,' said Kali. 'The Vayuputra council told us.'

'The Vayuputra council?' asked Shiva.

'Yes,' continued Kali. 'The previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, left behind a tribe called the Vayuputras. They live beyond the western borders, in a land called *Pariha*, the *land of fairies*.'

'I know that,' said Shiva, recalling one of his conversations with a Vasudev Pandit. 'But I hadn't heard of the council.'

'Well, somebody needs to administer the tribe. And the Vayuputras are ruled by their council, which is headed by their chief, who is respected as a God. He is called Mithra. He is advised by the council of six wise people collectively called the Amartya Shpand. The council controls the twin mission of the Vayuputras. Firstly, to help the next Vishnu, whenever he appears. And secondly, have one of the Vayuputras trained and ready to become the next Mahadev, when the time comes.'

Shiva raised his eyebrows.

'You obviously broke that rule, Shiva,' said Kali. 'I'm sure the Vayuputra council must have been quite shocked when you appeared out of the blue. Because, quite clearly, they did not create you.'

'You mean this is a controlled process?'

'I don't know,' said Kali. 'But your friends will know a lot more.'

‘The Vasudevs?’

‘Yes.’

Shiva frowned, reached for Sati’s hand, and then asked Kali, ‘So how did you find out about the Somras creating the Nagas? Did the Vayuputras approach you or did you find them?’

‘I did not find them. The Naga King Vasuki was approached by them a few centuries ago. They suddenly appeared out of nowhere, lugging huge hordes of gold, and offered to pay us an annual compensation. King Vasuki, very rightly, refused to accept the compensation without an explanation.’

‘And?’

‘And he was told that the Nagas were born with deformities as a result of the Somras. The Somras randomly has this impact on a few babies when in the womb, if the parents have been consuming it for a long period.’

‘Not all babies?’

‘No. A vast majority of babies are born without deformities. But a few unfortunate ones, like me, are born Naga.’

‘Why?’

‘I call it dumb luck,’ said Kali. ‘But King Vasuki believed that the deformities caused by the Somras were the Almighty’s way of punishing those souls who had committed sins in their previous births. Therefore, he accepted the pathetic explanation of the Vayuputra council along with their compensation.’

‘*Mausi* rejected the terms of the agreement with the Vayuputras the moment she ascended the throne,’ said Ganesh, referring to his *aunt*, Kali.

‘Why? I’m sure the gold could have been put to good use by your people,’ exclaimed Shiva.

Kali laughed coldly. ‘That gold was a mere palliative. Not for us, but for the Vayuputras. Its only purpose was to make

them feel less guilty for the carnage being wrought upon us by the “great invention” that they protected.’

Shiva nodded, understanding her anger. He turned to Brahaspati. ‘But how exactly is the Somras responsible for this?’

Brahaspati explained, ‘We used to believe the Somras blessed one with a long life by removing poisonous oxidants from one’s body. But that is not the only way it works.’

Shiva and Sati leaned closer.

‘It also operates at a more fundamental level. Our body is made up of millions of tiny living units called cells. These are the building blocks of life.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard of this from one of your scientists in Meluha,’ said Shiva.

‘Then you’d know that these cells are the tiniest living beings. They combine to form organs, limbs, and in fact, the entire body.’

‘Right.’

‘These cells have the ability to divide and grow. And each division is like a fresh birth; one old unhealthy cell magically transforms into two new healthy cells. As long as they keep dividing, they remain healthy. So your journey begins in your mother’s womb as a single cell. That cell keeps dividing and growing till it eventually forms your entire body.’

‘Yes,’ said Sati, who had learnt all of this in the Meluha *gurukul*.

‘Obviously,’ said Brahaspati, ‘this division and growth has to end sometime. Otherwise one’s body would keep growing continuously with pretty disastrous consequences. So the Almighty put a limit on the number of times a cell can divide. After that, the cell simply stops dividing further and thus, in effect, becomes old and unhealthy.’

‘And do these old cells make one’s body age and thus eventually die?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes, every cell reaches its limit on the number of divisions at some point or the other. As more and more cells in the body hit that limit, one grows old, and finally dies.’

‘Does the Somras remove this limit on division?’

‘Yes. Therefore, your cells keep dividing while remaining healthy. In most people, this continued division is regulated. But in a few, some cells lose control over their division process and keep growing at an exponential pace.’

‘This is cancer, isn’t it?’ asked Sati.

‘Yes,’ said Brahaspati. ‘This cancer can sometimes lead to a painful death. But there are times when these cells continue to grow and appear as deformities – like extra arms or a very long nose.’

‘How polite and scientific!’ said a livid Kali. ‘But one cannot even begin to imagine the physical pain and torture that we undergo as children when these “outgrowths” occur.’

Sati stretched out and held her sister’s hand.

‘Nagas are born with small outgrowths, which don’t seem like much initially, but are actually harbingers of years of torture,’ continued Kali. ‘It almost feels like a demon has taken over your body. And he’s bursting out from within, slowly, over many years, causing soul-crushing pain that becomes your constant companion. Our bodies get twisted beyond recognition so that by adolescence, when further growth finally stops, we are stuck with what Brahaspati politely calls “deformities”. I call it the wages of sins that we didn’t even commit. We pay for the sins others commit by consuming the Somras.’

Shiva looked at the Naga queen with a sad smile. Kali’s anger was justified.

‘And the Nagas have suffered this for centuries?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes,’ said Brahaspati. ‘As the number of people consuming the Somras grew, so did the number of Nagas. One will find



that most of the Nagas are from Meluha. For that is where the Somras is used most extensively.’

‘And what is the Vayuputra council’s view on this?’

‘I’m not sure. But from whatever little I know, the Vayuputra council apparently believes that the Somras continues to create good in most areas where it is used. The suffering of the Nagas is collateral damage and has to be tolerated for the larger good.’

‘Bullshit!’ snorted Kali.

Shiva could appreciate Kali’s rage but he was also aware of the enormous benefits of Somras over several millennia. *On balance, was it still Good?*

He turned to Brahaspati. ‘Are there any other reasons for believing that Somras is Evil?’

‘Consider this: we Meluhans choose to believe that the Saraswati is dying because of some devious Chandravanshi conspiracy. This is not true. We are actually killing our mother river all by ourselves. We use massive amounts of Saraswati waters to manufacture the Somras. It helps stabilise the mixture during processing. It is also used to churn the crushed branches of the Sanjeevani tree. I have conducted many experiments to see if water from any other source can be used. But it just doesn’t do the trick.’

‘Does it really require that much water?’

‘Yes, Shiva. When Somras was being made for just a few thousand, the amount of Saraswati water used didn’t matter. But when we started mass producing Somras for eight million people, the dynamics changed. The waters started getting depleted slowly by the giant manufacturing facility at Mount Mandar. The Saraswati has already stopped reaching the Western Sea. It now ends its journey in an inland delta, south of Rajasthan. The desertification of the land to the south of this delta is already complete. It’s a matter of time before

the entire river is completely destroyed. Can you imagine the impact on Meluha? On India?’

‘Saraswati is the mother of our entire *Sapt Sindhu* civilisation,’ said Sati, speaking of *the land of the seven rivers*.

‘Yes. Even our preeminent scripture, the Rig Veda, sings paean to the Saraswati. It is not only the cradle, but also the lifeblood of our civilisation. What will happen to our future generations without this great river? The Vedic way of life itself is at risk. What we are doing is taking away the lifeblood of our future progeny so that our present generation can revel in the luxury of living for two hundred years or more. Would it be so terrible if we lived for only a hundred years instead?’

Shiva nodded. He could see the terrible side-effects and the ecological destruction caused by the Somras. But he still couldn’t see it as Evil. An Evil which left only one option: a *Dharmayudh*, a *holy war*, to destroy it.

‘What else?’ asked Shiva.

‘The destruction of the Saraswati seems a small price to pay when compared to another, even more insidious impact of the Somras.’

‘Which is?’

‘The plague of Branga.’

‘The plague of Branga?’ asked a surprised Shiva. ‘What does that have to do with the Somras?’

Branga had been suffering continuous plagues for many years, which had killed innumerable people, especially children. The primary relief thus far had been the medicine procured from the Nagas. Or else exotic medicines extracted after killing the sacred peacock, leading to the Brangas being ostracised even in peace-loving cities like Kashi.

‘Everything!’ said Brahaspati. ‘The Somras is not only difficult to manufacture, but it also generates large amounts

of toxic waste. A problem we have never truly tackled. It cannot be disposed of on land, because it can poison entire districts through ground water contamination. It cannot be discharged into the sea. The Somras waste reacts with salt water to disintegrate in a dangerously rapid and explosive manner.'

A thought entered Shiva's mind. *Did Brahaspati accompany me to Karachapa the first time to pick up sea water? Was that used to destroy Mount Mandar?*

Brahaspati continued. 'What seemed to work was fresh river water. When used to wash the Somras waste, over a period of several years, fresh water appeared to reduce its toxic strength. This was proven with some experiments at Mount Mandar. It seemed to work especially well with cold water. Ice was even better. Obviously, we could not use the rivers of India to wash the Somras waste in large quantities. We could have ended up poisoning our own people. Therefore, many decades ago, a plan was hatched to use the high mountain rivers in Tibet. They flow through uninhabited lands and their waters are almost ice-cold. They would therefore work perfectly to clean out the Somras waste. There is a river high up in the Himalayas, called Tsangpo, where Meluha decided to set up a giant waste treatment facility.'

'Are you telling me that the Meluhans have come to my land before?'

'Yes. In secret.'

'But how can such large consignments be hidden?'

'You've seen the quantity of Somras powder required to feed an entire city for a year. Ten small pouches are all it takes. It is converted into the Somras drink at designated temples across Meluha when mixed with water and other ingredients.'

'So even the waste amount is not huge?'

'No, it isn't. It's a small quantity, making it easy to transport.'

But even that small quantity packs in a huge amount of poison.'

'Hmmm... So this waste facility was set up in Tibet?'

'Yes, it was established in a completely desolate area along the Tsangpo. The river flowed east, so it would go to relatively unpopulated lands away from India. Therefore, our land would not suffer from the harmful effects of the Somras.'

Shiva frowned. 'But what about the lands farther ahead that the Tsangpo flowed into? The eastern lands that lie beyond Swadweep? What about the Tibetan land around Tsangpo itself? Wouldn't they have suffered due to the toxic waste?'

'They may have,' said Brahaspati. 'But that was considered acceptable collateral damage. The Meluhans kept track of the people living along the Tsangpo. There were no outbreaks of disease, no sudden deformities. The icy river waters seemed to be working at keeping the toxins inactive. The Vayuputra council was given these reports. Apparently, the council also sent scientists into the sparsely populated lands of Burma, which is to the east of Swadweep. It was believed the Tsangpo flowed into those lands and became the main Burmese river, the Irrawaddy. Once again, there was no evidence of a sudden rise in diseases. Hence it was concluded that we had found a way to rid ourselves of the Somras waste without harming anyone. When it was discovered that Tsangpo means "purifier" in the local Tibetan tongue, it was considered a sign, a divine message. A solution had been found. This came down to the scientists of Mount Mandar as received wisdom as well.'

'What does this have to do with the Brangas?'

'Well, you see, the upper regions of the Brahmaputra have never been mapped properly. It was simply assumed that the river comes from the east; because it flows west into Branga. The Nagas, with the help of Parshuram, finally mapped the upper course of the Brahmaputra. It falls at almost

calamitous speeds from the giant heights of the Himalayas into the plains of Branga through gorges that are sheer walls almost two thousand metres high.'

'Two thousand metres!' gasped Shiva.

'You can well imagine that it is almost impossible to navigate a river course such as the Brahmaputra's. But Parshuram succeeded and led the Nagas along that path. Parshuram, of course, did not realise the significance of the discovery of the river's course. Queen Kali and Lord Ganesh did.'

'Did you go up the Brahmaputra as well?' asked Shiva. 'Where does the river come from? Is it connected to the Tsangpo in any way?'

Brahaspati smiled sadly. 'It *is* the Tsangpo.'

'What?'

'The Tsangpo flows east only for the duration of its course in Tibet. At the eastern extremities of the Himalayas, it takes a sharp turn, almost reversing its flow. It then starts moving south-west and crashes through massive gorges before emerging near Branga as the Brahmaputra.'

'By the Holy Lake,' said Shiva. 'The Brangas are being poisoned by the Somras waste.'

'Exactly. The cold waters of the Tsangpo dilute the poisonous impact to a degree. However, as the river enters India in the form of the Brahmaputra, the rising temperature reactivates the dormant toxin in the water. Though the Branga children also suffer from the same body-wracking pain as the Nagas, they are free from deformities. Sadly, Branga also has a high incidence of cancer. Being highly populous, the number of deaths is simply unacceptable.'

Shiva began to connect the dots. 'Divodas told me the Branga plague peaks during the summer every year. That is the time when ice melts faster in the Himalayas, making the poison flow out in larger quantities.'

‘Yes,’ said Brahaspati. ‘That is exactly what happens.’

‘Obviously, since both the Nagas and Brangas are being poisoned by the same malevolence, our medicines work on the Brangas as well,’ Kali spoke up. ‘So we send them our medicines to help ameliorate their suffering a little. Even though we told King Chandraketu how his kingdom was being poisoned, some Brangas prefer to believe that the plague strikes every year because of a curse that the Nagas have cast upon them. If only we were that powerful! But it appears that at least Chandraketu believes us. This is why he sends us men and gold regularly, to stealthily attack Somras manufacturing facilities, the root of all our problems.’

‘Evil should never be fought with subterfuge, Kali,’ said Shiva. ‘It must be attacked openly.’

Kali was about to retort but Shiva had turned back to Brahaspati.

‘Why didn’t you say something? Raise the issue in Meluha or with the Vayuputras?’

‘I did,’ said Brahaspati. ‘I took up the matter with Emperor Daksha. But he doesn’t really understand scientific things or involve himself with technical details. He turned to the one intellectual he trusts, the venerable *royal priest*, *Raj guru* Bhrigu. Lord Bhrigu seemed genuinely interested and took me to the Vayuputra council so I could present my case before them, but they were not at all supportive. This was where the issue was effectively killed. Nobody was willing to believe me about the source of the Brahmaputra. They also laughed when they heard that I was ostensibly listening to the Nagas. According to them, the Nagas were now ruled by an extremist harridan whose frustration with her own karma made everyone else the object of her ire.’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment!’ said Kali.

Shiva smiled at Kali before turning back to Brahaspati.

‘But how did the Vayuputras rationalise what’s happening in Branga?’

‘According to them,’ said Brahaspati, ‘the Brangas were a rich but uncivilised lot, with strange eating habits and disgusting customs. So the plague could have been caused by their bad practices and karma rather than the Somras. Remember, there is little sympathy for the Brangas amongst the Vayuputras because it is well known that they drink the blood of peacocks, a bird that is held holy by any follower of Lord Rudra.’

‘And you gave up?’ retorted Shiva. ‘Shouldn’t you have pressed on? Emperor Daksha is weak and can be easily influenced. He could have brought about changes in Meluha. The Vayuputra council does not govern your country.’

‘Well, there was a good reason for me to not persist with the argument.’

‘What reason?’

‘Tara, the woman I intended to marry, suddenly went missing,’ continued Brahaspati. ‘The last time I saw her, she was in Pariha. On returning to Meluha I received a letter from her telling me that she was disappointed with my tirades against the Somras. I asked Lord Bhrigu to check with his friends in Pariha. I was told that she had just disappeared.’

Shiva frowned.

‘I know it sounds lame,’ said Brahaspati. ‘But somewhere deep within, I do believe Tara was taken hostage. It was a message for me. Keep quiet or else...’

‘And you gave up?’ Shiva repeated. ‘Why would you do that if you believed you were right?’

‘I didn’t,’ continued Brahaspati defensively. ‘But by then I was losing credibility amongst the senior scientists of other realms. Had I made the issue any bigger within Meluha, I would have lost what little standing I have amongst the Suryavanshis as well. I would have lost my ability to do

anything at all. Though I knew I had to do something, I also realised that the strategy of open lobbying and debate had become counter-productive. There were too many vested interests tied into the Somras. Only the Vayuputra council could have had the moral strength to stop it openly, through the institution of the Neelkanth. But they refused to believe that the Somras had turned evil.'

'What happened thereafter?' asked Shiva.

'I opted for silence,' said Brahaspati. 'At least on the surface. But I had to do something. Maharishi Bhrigu was convinced there was nothing to fear from the Somras waste. So the manufacturing of Somras continued at the same frantic pace. The Saraswati kept getting prodigiously consumed. Somras waste was being generated in huge quantities. Since the empire now believed that cold, fresh water had worked in disposing of the toxic waste, new plans were being drawn up to use other rivers. This time the idea was to use the upper reaches of either the Indus or the Ganga.'

'Lord Ram, be merciful,' whispered Shiva.

'Millions of lives would have been at risk. We were going to unleash toxic waste right through the heart of India. Almost as a message from the *Parmatma*, the *ultimate soul*, I was approached by Lord Ganesh around this time. He had formulated a plan, and I must admit his words made eminent sense. There could be only one possible solution. The destruction of Mount Mandar. Without Mount Mandar, there would be no Somras. And with the Somras gone, all these problems would disappear too.'

Shiva cast a quick look towards Sati.

'Whatever little doubts I may have had,' said Brahaspati, 'disappeared when I was confronted with a new scenario. When it happened, I knew in my heart that it was time for the destruction of Evil.'



‘What new scenario?’ asked Shiva.

‘You appeared on the scene,’ answered Brahaspati. ‘Even without the Vayuputra council’s permission, perhaps even without their knowledge... The Neelkanth appeared. It was the final sign for me: the time to destroy Evil was upon us.’



Vishwadyumna quickly gave hand signals to his Branga soldiers. The hunting party went down on their knees.

Kartik, who was right behind Vishwadyumna, whistled softly as his eyes lit up. ‘Magnificent!’

Vishwadyumna turned towards Kartik. While most of Shiva’s convoy was settling itself into the visitor’s camp outside Panchavati, a few hunting parties had been sent out to gather meat for the large entourage. Kartik, having proved himself as an accomplished hunter throughout the journey to Panchavati, was the natural leader of one of the groups. Vishwadyumna had accompanied the son of the Neelkanth. He intensely admired the fierce warrior skills of Kartik.

‘It’s a rhinoceros, My Lord,’ said Vishwadyumna softly.

The rhinoceros was a massive animal, nearly four metres in length. It had bumpy brownish skin that hung over its body in multiple layers, suggestive of tough armour. Its most distinctive feature was its nasal horn, which stuck out like a fearsome offensive weapon, to a height of nearly fifty centimetres.

‘I know,’ whispered Kartik. ‘They live around Kashi as well. They’re nearly as big as a small elephant. These beasts have terrible eyesight, but they have a fantastic sense of smell and hearing.’

Vishwadyumna nodded at Kartik, impressed. ‘What do you propose, My Lord?’

The rhinoceros was a tricky beast to hunt. They were quiet animals who kept to themselves, but if threatened, they could charge wildly. Few could survive a direct blow from their massive body and terrifying horn.

Kartik reached over his shoulder and drew out the two swords sheathed on his back. In his left hand was a short twin-blade, like the one his elder brother Ganesh favoured. In his right was a heavier one with a curved blade which was certainly not appropriate for thrusting. This weapon was perfect for swinging and slashing – a style of fighting Kartik excelled at.

Kartik spoke softly, ‘Fire arrows at its back. Make as much noise as you can. I want you to drive it forward.’

Vishwadyumna’s eyes filled with terror. ‘That is not wise, My Lord.’

‘This animal is huge. Too many soldiers charging in will cramp us. All it would need to do is swing its mighty horn and it would cause several casualties.’

‘But we can fire arrows to kill it from a distance.’

Kartik raised his eyebrows. ‘Vishwadyumna, you should know better. Do you really think our arrows can actually penetrate deep enough to cause serious damage? It’s not the arrows but the noise that you will create, which will make it charge.’

Vishwadyumna continued to stare, still unsure.

‘Also, it is standing upwind and your positioning behind it would be perfect. Along with the noise, the stench of your soldiers will also drive the animal forward. It’s a good thing they haven’t bathed in two days,’ said Kartik, without any hint of a smile at the joke.

Like all warriors, Vishwadyumna admired humour in the face of danger. But he checked his smile, not sure if Kartik was joking. ‘What will you do, My Lord?’

Kartik whispered, 'I'll kill the beast.'

Saying this, Kartik slowly edged forward. Right on to the path that the bull would charge on, when attacked by Vishwadyumna's soldiers. The soldiers meanwhile, moved upwind, behind the rhinoceros. Having reached his position, Kartik whistled softly.

'NOW!' shouted Vishwadyumna.

A volley of arrows attacked the animal as the soldiers began to scream loudly. The rhinoceros raised its head, ears twitching as the arrows bounced harmlessly off its skin. As the soldiers drew closer, some of the missiles managed to penetrate enough to agitate the beast. The animal snorted mightily and stomped the dirt, radiating strength and power as light gleamed off its tiny black eyes. It lowered its head and charged, its feet thundering against the ground.

Kartik was in position. The beast only had side vision and could not see straight ahead. Therefore, it was no surprise that it crashed into an overhanging branch in its path, which made it change its direction slightly. At which point, it saw Kartik standing to its right. The furious rhinoceros bellowed loudly, changed course back to the original path and charged straight towards the diminutive son of Shiva.

Kartik remained stationary and calm, with his eyes focused on the beast. His breathing was regular and deep. He knew that the rhinoceros couldn't see him since he stood straight ahead. The animal was running, guided by the memory of where it had seen Kartik last.

Vishwadyumna fired arrows into the animal rapidly, hoping to slow it down. But the thick hide of the beast ensured that the arrows did not make too much of a difference. It was running straight towards Kartik. Yet Kartik didn't move or flinch. Vishwadyumna could see the boy warrior holding his swords lightly. That was completely wrong for a stabbing

action, where the blade needs to be firmly held. The weapon would fall out of his hands the moment he'd thrust forward.

Just when it appeared that he was about to be trampled underfoot, Kartik bent low and, with lightning speed, rolled towards the left. As the rhinoceros continued running, he slashed out, his left sword first, pressing the lever on the hilt as he swung. One of the twin-blades extended out of the other, slicing through the front thigh of the beast, cutting through muscles and veins. As blood spurted rapidly, the animal's injured leg collapsed from under it and it grunted, confused, trying to put weight on the appendage, now flopping uselessly against its belly. Admirably, it still continued its charge, its three good legs heaving against its bulk as it struggled to turn and face its attacker. Kartik ran forward, following the movement of the animal, now circling in from behind the beast. He hacked brutally with his right hand, which held the killer curved sword. The blade sliced through the thigh of the hind leg, cutting down to the bone with its deep curvature and broad metal. With both its right legs incapacitated, the rhinoceros collapsed to the ground, rolling sideways as it tried to stand with only two good legs, writhing in pain. Its blood mixed with the dusty earth to make a dark red-brown mud that smeared across its body as it flailed against the ground, panting in fear.

Kartik stood quietly at a short distance, watching the animal in its final throes.

Vishwadyumna watched from behind, his mouth agape. He had never seen an animal brought down with such skill and speed.

Kartik approached the rhinoceros calmly. Even though immobilised, the beast reared its head menacingly at him, grunting and whining in a high-pitched squeal. Kartik

maintained a safe distance as the other soldiers rapidly ran up to him.

The son of the Neelkanth bowed low to the animal. ‘Forgive me, magnificent beast. I am only doing my duty. I will finish this soon.’

Suddenly, Kartik moved forward and stabbed hard, right through the folds of the rhinoceros’ skin, plunging deep into the beast’s heart, feeling the shudder go through its body, until at last it was still.



‘My Lord, a bird courier has just arrived with a message for your eyes only,’ said Kanakhala, the Meluhan prime minister. ‘That’s why I brought it personally.’

Daksha occupied his private chambers, a worried Veerini seated beside him. He took the letter from Kanakhala and dismissed her.

With a polite Namaste towards her Emperor and Empress, Kanakhala turned to leave. Glancing back, she glimpsed a rare intimate moment between them as they held each other’s hands. The last few months had inured her to the strange goings-on in Meluha. Daksha’s past betrayal of Sati during her first pregnancy had shocked her enormously. Kanakhala had lost all respect for her emperor. She continued with her job because she remained loyal to Meluha. She had even stopped questioning the strange orders from her lord; like the one he’d given the previous day about making arrangements for Bhrigu and Dilipa to travel to the ruins of Mount Mandar. She could understand Maharishi Bhrigu’s interest in going there. But what earthly reason could there be for the Swadweepan emperor to go as well? Kanakhala saw Daksha letting go

of Veerini's hand and breaking the seal of the letter as she shut the door quietly behind her.

Daksha began to cry. Veerini immediately reached over and snatched the letter from him.

As she read through it quickly, Veerini let out a deep sigh of relief as tears escaped from her eyes. 'She's safe. They're all safe...'

On the surface, the plan to assassinate the Neelkanth worked towards the unique interests of all the three main conspirators, Maharishi Bhrigu, Emperor Daksha and Emperor Dilipa. For Bhrigu, the greatest gain would be that the Somras would not be targeted by the Neelkanth. The faith of the people in the legend of the Neelkanth was strong. If the Neelkanth declared that the Somras was evil and decided to toe the Naga line, so would his followers. For Dilipa it meant the killing of two birds with a single stone. Not only would he continue to receive the elixir from Bhrigu, but he'd also do away with Bhagirath, his heir and greatest threat. Daksha would be rid of the troublesome Neelkanth and be able to blame all ills on the Nagas once again. The plan was perfect. Except that Daksha could not countenance the killing of his daughter. He was willing to put everything on the line to ensure that Sati was left unharmed. Bhrigu and Dilipa had hoped that with the rupture in relations between Daksha and his daughter, the Meluhan emperor would support this mission wholeheartedly. They were wrong. Daksha's love for Sati was deeper than his hatred for Shiva.

Upon Veerini's advice, Daksha had sent the Arishtanemi brigadier Mayashrenik, known for his blind loyalty to Meluha and deep devotion to the Neelkanth, on a secret mission. Mayashrenik was to accompany the five ships that had been sent to attack the Neelkanth's convoy. Veerini had covertly kept in touch with her daughter Kali through all these years

of strife, and had made Daksha aware of the river warning and defence system of the Nagas. All that had to be done was to get the alarm triggered in time. Mayashrenik's mission was to ensure that the alarms went off. He was to escape and return to Meluha after that. The Arishtanemi brigadier and acting general of the Meluhan army had carried a homing pigeon with him to deliver the news of the subsequent battle to Daksha. The happy message for the Meluhan emperor was that the progeny Daksha cared for – Sati and Kartik – were alive and safe.

Veerini looked at her husband. 'If only you would listen to me a bit more.'

Daksha breathed deeply. 'If Lord Bhrgu ever finds out...'

'Would you rather your children were dead?'

Daksha sighed. He would do anything to ensure Sati's safety. He shook his head. 'No!'

'Then thank the *Parmatma* that our plan worked. And never breathe a word of this to anyone. Ever!'

Daksha nodded. He took the letter from Veerini and set it aflame, holding it by the edge for as long as possible, to ensure that every part of it had charred beyond recognition.



## Chapter 3

# The Kings Have Chosen

‘Do you believe Brahaspati?’ asked Shiva.

Night had fallen on the Panchavati guest colony just outside the main city. Injured and fatigued, Shiva’s entourage had retired to their quarters for a well-deserved rest.

Sati and Shiva were in their chambers, having just returned from the city. They had not spoken to a soul about what they’d learnt at the Panchavati school. They had not even told the Suryavanshis that Brahaspati, their beloved chief scientist, was still alive. They were to meet him again the next day.

‘Well, I don’t think Brahaspatiji is lying,’ said Sati. ‘I do remember that more than two decades ago, Lord Bhrigu had spent many months in Devagiri, which was highly unusual for the *Raj guru*. He is a rare sight in Meluha, since he usually chooses to spend his time meditating in his Himalayan cave.’

‘Aren’t *Raj gurus* supposed to stay in the royal palace and guide the king?’

‘Not someone like Lord Bhrigu. He helped my father get elected as emperor because he believed my father would be good for Meluha. Beyond that Lord Bhrigu has had no interest in the day-to-day governance of Meluha. He is a simple man, rarely seen in the so-called powerful circles.’



‘So he spent a lot of time in Devagiri. That may have been unusual, but what about the other things that Brahaspati said?’

‘Well, Lord Bhrigu, my father and Brahaspati*ji* were indeed away for many months. It had been announced as an important trade trip; but I can’t imagine Lord Bhrigu or Brahaspati*ji* being interested in trade. Perhaps they were in Pariha at the time. And yes, the talented and lovely Tara*ji*, who worked at Mount Mandar and had been sent to Pariha for a project, did disappear suddenly. It was announced that she had taken *sanyas*. Renouncing public life is very common in Meluha. But what Brahaspati*ji* revealed today was something else altogether.’

‘So you believe Brahaspati speaks the truth?’

‘All I’m saying is that Brahaspati*ji* may believe this to be the truth. But is it actually so or is he mistaken? This decision of yours can change the course of history. What you do now will have repercussions for generations to come. It is a momentous occasion, a big battle. You have to be completely sure.’

‘I must speak with the Vasudevs.’

‘Yes, you must.’

‘But that is not all you wanted to say to me, is it?’

‘I think there is another aspect to be considered. What made Brahaspati*ji* disappear for over five years? What was he doing in Panchavati all this while? I feel this is an important question; perhaps linked to the back-up manufacturing facility for the Somras that father had told me about.’

‘Yes, I didn’t give it much importance then. But if the Somras is Evil, that facility is the key.’

‘Actually, the Saraswati is the key. A manufacturing facility can always be rebuilt. But wherever it is built, it will always need the Saraswati waters. Kali told me at Ichchawar that her people attacked Meluhan temples and Brahmins only if they

were directly harming the Nagas. Maybe those temples were production centres that used the powder from Mount Mandar to manufacture the Somras drink for the locals. She also said that a final solution would emerge from the Saraswati. That the Nagas were working on it. I don't know what that cryptic statement meant. We need to find out.'

'You did not tell me about your conversation with Kali.'

'Shiva, this is the first honest conversation we are having about Kali and Ganesh since you met my son at Kashi.'

Shiva became quiet.

'I'm not blaming you,' continued Sati. 'I understood your anger. You thought that Ganesh had killed Brahaspatiĵi. Now that the truth has emerged, you are willing to listen.'

Shiva smiled and embraced Sati.



'Are you sure?' asked Shiva.

It was late the next morning, four hours into the second prahar. Shiva sat with Sati at his side in his private chambers. Parvateshwar and Bhagirath stood in front, holding a plank. The Meluhan general and the Ayodhyan prince had just returned after surveying the destroyed battleships.

'Yes, My Lord. The evidence is indisputable,' said Bhagirath. 'Show me.'

Bhagirath stepped forward. 'The rivets on these planks are clearly Meluhan. Lord Parvateshwar has identified them.'

Parvateshwar nodded in agreement.

'And the casing,' continued Bhagirath, 'that improves the water-proofing is clearly Ayodhyan.'

'Are you suggesting that Emperor Daksha and Emperor Dilipa have formed an alliance against us?' Shiva asked softly.

'They've used the best technologies available in both our

lands. These ships had navigated through a lot of sea water, judging by the molluscs on them. They needed the best to be able to make the journey quickly.'

Shiva breathed deeply, lost in thought.

'My Lord,' said Bhagirath. 'For all his faults, I cannot imagine my father would be capable of leading a conspiracy such as this. He simply does not have the capability. He is just a follower in this plot. You have to target him, of course. But don't make the mistake of thinking that he is the main conspirator. He is not.'

Sati leaned towards Shiva. 'Do you think my father can do this?'

Shiva shook his head. 'No. Emperor Daksha too is incapable of leading this conspiracy.'

Parvateshwar, still shame-faced at the dishonour brought upon his empire, said quietly, 'The Meluhan code enjoins upon us to follow the rules, My Lord. Our rules bid us to carry out our king's orders. In the hands of a lesser king, this can lead to a lot of wrong.'

'Emperor Daksha may have issued the orders, Parvateshwar,' said Shiva. 'But he didn't dream them up. There is a master who has brought the royalty of Meluha and Swadweep together. Someone who also managed to procure the feared *daini astras*. Heaven alone knows if he has any more *divine weapons*. It was a brilliant plan. By Lord Ram's grace, we were saved by the skin of our teeth. It cannot be Emperor Daksha or Emperor Dilipa. This is someone of far greater importance, intelligence and resource. And, one who is clever enough to conceal his identity.'



'Return to Meluha?!' asked Veerbhadra.

Veerbhadra and Krittika were in Shiva's private chambers. Kali and Sati were also present.

'Yes, Bhadra,' said Shiva. 'It was the Meluhans and the Ayodhyans who attacked us together.'

'Are you sure Meluha is involved?' asked Veerbhadra.

'Parvateshwar has himself confirmed it.'

'And now you are worried about our people?'

'Yes,' said Shiva. 'I'm worried the Gunas will be arrested and held hostage as leverage over us. Before they do so, I want you to slip into Meluha quietly and take our people to Kashi. I will meet you there.'

'My scouts will guide Krittika and you through a secret route,' said Kali. 'Using our fastest horses and speediest boats, my people can get you close to Maika in two weeks. After that, you are on your own.'

'Meluha is a safe country to travel in,' said Krittika. 'We can hire fast horses up to the mouth of the Saraswati. After that we can travel on boats plying on the river. It's an easy route. With luck, we will reach Devagiri in another two weeks. The Gunas are in a small village not far from there.'

'Perfect,' said Shiva. 'Time is of the essence. Go now.'

'Yes Shiva,' said Veerbhadra as he turned to leave with his wife.

'And Bhadra...' said Shiva.

Veerbhadra and Krittika turned around.

'Don't try to be brave,' said Shiva. 'If the Gunas have been arrested already, leave Meluha quickly and wait for me at Kashi.'

Veerbhadra's mother was with the Gunas. Shiva knew Veerbhadra would not abandon her to her fate so easily.

'Shiva...' whispered Veerbhadra.

Shiva got up and held Veerbhadra's shoulder. 'Bhadra, promise me.'

Veerbhadra remained quiet.

‘If you try to release them by yourself, you will be killed. You will be of no use to your mother if you are dead, Bhadra.’

Veerbhadra stayed silent.

‘I promise you, nothing will happen to the Gunas. If you cannot get them out, I will. But do not do anything rash. Promise me.’

Veerbhadra placed his hand on Shiva’s shoulder. ‘There is something you aren’t telling me. What have you discovered here? Why are you so afraid suddenly? Is there going to be a war? Is Meluha going to become our enemy?’

‘I’m not sure, Bhadra. I haven’t made up my mind as yet.’

‘Then tell me what you do know.’

It was Shiva’s turn to remain silent now.

‘I’m going back to Meluha, Shiva. Had you asked me a month back, I would have said this would be the safest journey possible. A lot has changed since then. You have to tell me the truth. I deserve that.’

Shiva sat them down and revealed everything he had discovered during the course of the last few days.



‘And you killed the rhino all by yourself?’ asked an impressed Anandmayi, her face suffused with a broad smile.

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ said Kartik, stoic and expressionless as usual.

Anandmayi, Ayurvati and Kartik were settled comfortably on soft cushions in the dining room. Kshatriya in word and deed, Anandmayi and Kartik partook of the delicious rhinoceros meat. The Brahmin Ayurvati restricted herself to *roti*, *dal* and vegetables.

‘Have you decided to stop smiling altogether?’ asked

Anandmayi. 'Or is this just temporary?'

Kartik looked up at Anandmayi, a hint of a smile on his face. 'Smiling takes more effort than it's worth, Your Highness.'

Ayurvati shook her head. 'You are just a child, Kartik. Don't trouble yourself so much. You need to enjoy your childhood.'

Kartik turned to the Meluhan chief physician. 'My brother Ganesh is a great man, Ayurvati*ji*. He has so much to contribute to society, to the country. And yet, he was almost eaten alive by dumb beasts because he was trying to save me.'

Ayurvati reached across and patted Kartik.

'I will never be so helpless again,' swore Kartik. 'I will not be the cause of my family's misery.'

The door swung open. Parvateshwar and Bhagirath walked in.

Just by looking at them, Anandmayi could tell that they had discovered what she feared. 'Was it Meluha?'

Ayurvati winced. She could not imagine her great country's name being dragged into a vile conspiracy like the attack on the Neelkanth's convoy at the outskirts of Panchavati. And yet, after what she had discovered of Emperor Daksha's perfidy during Sati's pregnancy at Maika, she would not be surprised if Meluhan ships had carried out this dastardly act.

'It's worse,' sighed Bhagirath as he sat down.

Parvateshwar sat next to Anandmayi and held her hand. He looked at Ayurvati, his pained expression bearing witness to his stark misery. The general prized his country, his Meluha, as Lord Ram's ultimate legacy. It was the custodian of Ram Rajya. How could this great country's emperor have committed a dastardly act such as this?

'Even worse?' prompted Anandmayi.

'Yes. It seems Swadweep is in on the conspiracy as well.'

Anandmayi was stunned. 'What?!'

‘It’s either only Ayodhya or all of Swadweep. I cannot be sure if other kingdoms of Swadweep are following Ayodhya’s lead. But Ayodhya is certainly involved.’

Anandmayi looked at Parvateshwar. He nodded, confirming Bhagirath’s words.

‘Lord Rudra, be merciful,’ said Anandmayi. ‘What is wrong with father?’

‘I for one am not surprised,’ said Bhagirath, barely able to conceal his contempt. ‘He is weak and gets easily exploited. It doesn’t take much for him to succumb.’

For once Anandmayi didn’t rebuke her brother for denigrating their father. She looked at Parvateshwar. He seemed lost and unsure. Change was horrible for the Suryavanshis, for the people of the masculine, used as they were to unchanging rules and stark predictability. Anandmayi turned her husband’s face towards herself and kissed him gently, reassuringly. She smiled warmly. He half-smiled back.

Kartik quietly put his plate down, washed his hands and walked out of the room.



It was early afternoon as Kartik and Ganesh’s steps led them around the five banyan trees from whose existence Panchavati derived its name. Non-Nagas were not allowed inside the inner city. In truth, many of them, Brangas included, refused to enter due to a strong superstition about the misfortune that would befall those that did. But the Neelkanth’s family did not believe in it. And anyway, nobody wanted to enforce an entry ban on them.

‘Why have only Lord Ram’s idols been depicted on these trees, *dada*?’ Kartik asked his *elder brother*.

‘You mean why have his wife, Lady Sita, and his brother,

Lord Lakshman, not been shown?’

‘Not just them, even his great devotee, Lord Hanuman, is missing.’

Ganesh and Kartik were admiring the beautiful idols of Lord Ram sculpted into the main trunk of each of the five banyans. The five tree idols showed the ancient King, respected as the seventh Vishnu, in the five different roles of his life known to all: a son, a husband, a brother, a father and a Godly king. Each banyan trunk depicted him in a different form. In each form, in a manner that somehow appeared natural, the sculptors had made the idols look towards the temple of Lord Rudra and Lady Mohini at one corner of the square. Their idols, on the other hand, were placed in the front section of the temple as opposed to the back as in most temples, with the effect that the two deities appeared to be looking at all five tree idols as well. It seemed as if the architects intended to show the great Mahadev and the noble seventh Vishnu being respectful to each other.

‘It’s in keeping with Bhoomidevi’s instructions,’ answered Ganesh. ‘I know his traditional depiction in the Sapt Sindhu is always along with his three favourite people in the world, Lady Sita, Lord Lakshman and Lord Hanuman. But it was an order of Bhoomidevi, our founding Goddess, that Lord Ram always be shown alone in Panchavati. Especially at the five banyans.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps she wanted us to always remember that great leaders, like the Vishnus and the Mahadevs, may have millions following them. But at the end of the day, they carry the burden of their mission alone.’

‘Like *baba*?’ asked Kartik, referring to their *father*.

‘Yes, like *baba*. He is the one who stands between Evil and India. If he fails, life in the subcontinent will be destroyed



by Evil?

'Baba will not fail.'

Ganesh smiled at Kartik's response.

'Do you know why?' asked Kartik.

Ganesh shook his head. 'No. Why?'

Kartik clasped Ganesh's right hand and held it to his chest, like the brother-warriors of yore. 'Because he is not alone.'

Ganesh smiled and embraced Kartik. They walked silently around the banyan trees, doing the holy *parikrama* of Lord Ram's idols.

'What is going on, *dada*?' asked Kartik, as they continued their circumambulation.

Ganesh frowned.

'Why have both the emperors allied against *baba*?'

Ganesh breathed deeply. He never lied to Kartik. He considered his brother an adult and treated him as such. 'Because *baba* threatens them, Kartik. They are the elite. They are addicted to the benefits they derive from Evil. *Baba's* mission is to fight for the oppressed; to be the voice of the voiceless. It is obvious that the elite will want to stop him.'

'What is the Evil that *baba* is fighting? How has it entrenched its claws so deeply?'

Ganesh took Kartik by the hand and made him sit at the foot of one of the banyans. 'This is for you alone, Kartik. You are not to tell anyone else. For it is *baba's* right to decide when and how others are to be informed.'

Kartik nodded in response.

Ganesh sat next to Kartik and explained to him about what Brahaspati and Shiva had discussed the previous day.



'What have you been doing these past five years, Brahaspati?'

asked Shiva.

Sati and Shiva had joined the chief scientist in the Naga queen's chambers. Brahaspati felt like he was being interrogated. But he could understand Shiva's need to get to the bottom of the issue.

'I was trying to find a permanent solution to the Somras problem,' answered Brahaspati.

'Permanent solution?'

'Destroying Mount Mandar is a temporary solution. We know it will get rebuilt. The Nagas tell me the reconstruction has been surprisingly slow. It shouldn't have taken five years. Not with Meluhan efficiency. But it's only a matter of time before it gets rebuilt.'

Shiva looked at Sati, but she didn't say anything.

'Once Mandar is back to full manufacturing capacity, the destruction of the Saraswati and the production of the toxic waste will begin in large measure once again. So we have to find a permanent solution. The best way to do that is to examine the Somras' ingredients. If we can somehow control that, we could possibly control the poisonous impact of the Somras waste. Many ingredients can be easily replaced. But two of them cannot. The first are the bark and branches of the Sanjeevani tree, and the second is the Saraswati water. We cannot control the availability of the Sanjeevani tree. Meluha has large plantations of it across its northern reaches. How many plantations can one destroy? Besides, trees can always be replanted. That brings us to the Saraswati. Can we somehow control its waters?'

Shiva remembered parts of a conversation with Daksha when he had first arrived in Devagiri. 'I was told by Emperor Daksha that the Chandravanshis did try to destroy the Saraswati more than a hundred years ago. By taking one of

its main tributaries, the Yamuna, away from it and redirecting its flow towards the Ganga. It didn't really make much sense to me but the Meluhans seem to believe it.'

Brahaspati sniggered. 'The Chandravanshi ruling class cannot even build roads in their own empire. How can anyone think that they would have the ability to change the course of a river? What happened a hundred years ago was an earthquake that changed the course of the Yamuna. The Meluhans subsequently defeated the Chandravanshis and the resultant treaty mandated that the early course of the Yamuna would become no-man's land. And Meluhans do have the technology to change the course of rivers. They built giant embankments to block and change the course of the Yamuna to make it flow back into the Saraswati.'

'So what was your plan? Destroy the Yamuna embankments?'

'No. I had considered it, but that is impossible as well. They have many fail-safe options. It would take five brigades and months of open work to be able to destroy those embankments. We would obviously have had to work in secret with a small number of people.'

'So what was your plan?'

'An alternative. We cannot take the Saraswati away. But could we make the Saraswati much less potent in the production of the Somras? Is it possible to add something to the Yamuna waters, at its source, which would then flow into the Saraswati and control the amount of waste being produced? I thought that we had found one such ingredient.'

'What?'

'A bacterium which reacts with the Sanjeevani tree and makes it decay almost instantly.'

'I thought the Sanjeevani tree was already unstable and decayed rapidly. Ayurvati had told me the Naga medicine is created by mixing the crushed branches of another tree

with the Sanjeevani bark to stabilise it. If the Sanjeevani is already unstable, why would it need bacteria to aid the decay? Wouldn't it just decay anyway?

'The Sanjeevani bark becomes unstable once stripped off the branch. The entire branch, if used, is not. The bark is easier for small-scale manufacture, but for manufacturing the Somras in large quantities, we have to use crushed branches. This is what we did at Mount Mandar. But it is a method known only to my scientists.'

'So what you want to do is make the Sanjeevani branch also unstable.'

'Yes. And, I discovered that it was possible to do so with this bacterium. But it is only available in Mesopotamia.'

'Is this what you picked up from Karachapa when you accompanied me on my initial travels through Meluha? You had said you were expecting a shipment from Mesopotamia.'

'Yes,' said Brahaspati. 'And it would have worked perfectly. The Somras cannot be made without both the Sanjeevani tree and the Saraswati water. The presence of bacteria in the Saraswati water would render useless the Sanjeevani tree at the beginning of the process itself. And in any case, without the Saraswati water, the Somras cannot be made. Without the power of the Sanjeevani, the Somras would not be as potent. It will not triple or quadruple one's lifespan, but only increase it by twenty or thirty years. However, it would also mean that there would be practically no production of Somras waste. By sacrificing some of the powers of the Somras, we would take away all the poison of the Somras waste. Furthermore, these bacteria also mix with water and then multiply prodigiously. All we needed to do was release it in the Yamuna and the rest would follow.'

'Sounds perfect. Why didn't you?'

'There is no free lunch,' said Brahaspati. 'The bacteria came with its own problems. It is a mild toxin in itself. If we mix

it in large quantities, as would be required in the Saraswati, we could create a new set of diseases for all living beings dependant not just on the Saraswati but also the Yamuna. We would have only replaced one problem with another.'

'So you were trying to see if the poisonous effect of the bacteria could be reduced or removed, without disturbing its ability to destroy the Sanjeevani tree?'

'Yes. Secrecy was required. If those who support the Somras knew about these bacteria, they would try to kill it at its source. Had they known I was working on an experiment such as this, they would have had me assassinated.'

'Aren't you afraid of being killed now?' asked Shiva. 'A lot of Meluhans will be angry with you when they discover you weren't the victim, but the perpetrator of the attack on Mount Mandar.'

Brahaspati breathed deeply. 'Earlier, it was important for me to remain alive since I alone could have done this research. But I have failed. And the solution to the Somras problem is not in my hands anymore. It's in your hands. It doesn't matter if I live any longer. Mount Mandar will be reconstructed. It's a matter of time. And Somras production will begin once again. You have to stop it, Shiva. For the sake of India, you have to stop the Somras.'

'The reconstruction is a charade, Brahaspatiji,' said Sati. 'It's to mislead enemies into thinking that it will take time to get Somras production back on track. To make them think that Meluha must be surviving on lower quantities of Somras.'

'What? Is there another facility?' asked Brahaspati, as he looked quickly at Kali. 'But that cannot be true.'

'It is,' answered Sati. 'I was told by father himself. Apparently, it was built years ago. As a back-up to Mount Mandar, just in case...'

'Where?' asked Kali.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Sati.

‘Damn!’ exclaimed Kali, scowling darkly as she turned to Brahaspati. ‘You had said that that was not possible. The churners needed materials from Egypt. They could not be built from Indian material. We have allies constantly watching those Egyptian mines. No material has gone to Meluha!’

Brahaspati’s face turned white as the implications dawned on him. He held his head and muttered, ‘Lord Ram, be merciful... How can they resort to this?’

‘Resort to what?’ asked Shiva.

‘There’s another way in which the Saraswati waters can be mixed with the crushed Sanjeevani branches. But it’s considered wasteful and repugnant.’

‘Why?’

‘Firstly, it uses much larger quantities of the Saraswati water. Secondly, it needs animal or human skin cells.’

‘Excuse me!’ cried Shiva and Sati.

‘It doesn’t mean that one skins a live animal or human,’ said Brahaspati, as though reassuring them. ‘What is needed is old and dead skin cells that we shed every minute that we are alive. The cells help the Saraswati waters to grate the Sanjeevani branches at molecular levels. The waters mixed with dead skin cells are simply poured over crushed branches placed in a chamber. This process does not require any churning. But as you can imagine, it wastes a lot of water. Secondly, how would one find animals and humans who would come to a faraway facility and get into a pool of water above a chamber which contains crushed Sanjeevani branches? It is risky.’

‘Why?’

‘Dead skin cells of humans or animals are best shed while bathing. A human sheds between two to three kilograms every year. Bathing hastens the process.’

‘But why is this risky?’

‘Because Somras production is inherently unstable; the skin cell route even more so. One doesn’t want large populations anywhere close to a Somras facility. If anything goes wrong, the resultant explosion can kill hundreds of thousands. Even in the usual, less risky churning process, we do not build Somras production centres close to cities. Can you imagine what would happen if the riskier skin cell process was being conducted close to a city with a large number of humans ritually bathing above a Somras production centre?’

Shiva’s face suddenly turned white. ‘Public baths in Meluhan cities...’ he whispered.

‘Exactly,’ said Brahaspati. ‘Build the facility within a city, below a public bath. One would have all the dead skin cells that one would need.’

‘And if something goes wrong.. If an explosion takes place...’

‘Blame the *daivi astras* or the Nagas. Blame the Chandravanshis if you want,’ fumed Brahaspati. ‘Having created so many evil spectres, you can take your pick!’



‘Something is wrong,’ said Bhrigu.

He was surveying the destroyed remains of Mount Mandar with Dilipa. The Somras manufacturing facility looked nowhere near completion though reconstruction was on.

Dilipa turned towards the sage. ‘I agree, Maharishiji. It has been more than five years since the Nagas destroyed Mandar. It’s ridiculous that the facility has still not been reconstructed.’

Bhrigu turned to Dilipa and waved his hand dismissively. ‘Mount Mandar is not important anymore. It’s only a symbol. I’m talking about the attack on Panchavati.’

Dilipa stared wide-eyed at the sage. *Mount Mandar is not*

*important? This means that the rumours are true. Another Somras manufacturing facility does exist.*

‘I had given a whole kit of homing pigeons to the attackers,’ continued Bhrigu, not bothering with Dilipa’s incredulous look. ‘All of them had been trained to return to this site. The last pigeon came in two weeks back.’

Dilipa frowned. ‘You can trust my man, My Lord. He will not fail.’

Bhrigu had appointed an officer from Dilipa’s army to lead the attack on Shiva’s convoy at Panchavati. He did not trust Daksha’s ability to detach himself from his love for his daughter. ‘Of that I am sure. He has proven himself trustworthy, strictly complying with my instructions to send back a message every week. The fact that the updates have suddenly stopped means that he has either been captured or killed.’

‘I’m sure a message is on its way. We needn’t worry.’

Bhrigu turned sharply towards Dilipa. ‘Is this how you govern your empire, great King? Is it any wonder that your son’s claim to the throne appears legitimate?’

Dilipa’s silence was telling.

Bhrigu sighed. ‘When you prepare for war, you should always hope for the best, but be ready for the worst. The last despatch clearly stated that they were but six days’ sail from Panchavati. Having received no word, I am compelled to assume the worst. The attack must have failed. Also, I should assume Shiva knows the identity of the attackers.’

Dilipa didn’t speak, but kept staring at Bhrigu. He thought Bhrigu was over-reacting.

‘I’m not over-reacting, Your Highness,’ said Bhrigu.

Dilipa was stunned. He hadn’t uttered a word.

‘Do not underestimate the issue,’ said Bhrigu. ‘This is not about you or me. This is about the future of India. This is



about protecting the greatest Good. We cannot afford to fail! It is our duty to Lord Brahma; our duty to this great land of ours.'

Dilipa remained silent. Though one thought kept reverberating in his mind. *I am way out of my depth here. I have entangled myself with powers that are beyond mere emperors.*



## Chapter 4

# A Frog Homily

The aroma of freshly-cooked food emerged from Shiva's chambers as his family assembled for their evening meal. Sati's culinary skill and effort were evident in the feast she had lined up for what was practically their first meal together as a family. Shiva, Ganesh and Kartik waited for her to take a seat before they began the meal.

In keeping with custom, the family of the Mahadev took some water from their glasses and sprinkled it around their plates, symbolically thanking Goddess Annapurna for her blessings in the form of food and nourishment. After this, they offered the first morsel of food to the Gods. Breaking with age-old tradition though, Shiva always offered his first morsel to his wife. For him, she was divine. Sati reciprocated by offering her first morsel to Shiva.

And thus the meal began.

'Ganesh has got some mangoes for you today,' said Sati, looking indulgently at Kartik.

Kartik grinned. 'Yummy! Thanks *dada!*'

Ganesh smiled and patted Kartik on his back.

'You should smile a little more, Kartik,' said Shiva. 'Life is not so grim.'

Kartik smiled at his father. 'I'll try, *baba.*'

Looking at his other progeny, Shiva inhaled sharply. ‘Ganesh?’  
‘Yes... *baba*,’ said Ganesh, unsure of the response to his calling Shiva *father*.

‘My son,’ whispered Shiva. ‘I misjudged you.’

Ganesh’s eyes moistened.

‘Forgive me,’ said Shiva.

‘No, *baba*,’ exclaimed Ganesh, embarrassed. ‘How can you ask me for forgiveness? You are my father.’

Brahaspati had told Shiva that he had made Ganesh take an oath of secrecy; nobody was to know that the former Meluhan chief scientist was alive. Brahaspati did not trust anyone and wanted his experiments on the Mesopotamian bacteria to remain secret. Ganesh had kept his word even at the cost of almost losing his beloved mother and of grievously damaging his relationship with Shiva.

‘You’re a man of your word,’ said Shiva. ‘You honoured your promise to Brahaspati, without sparing a thought for the price you would be paying.’

Ganesh remained quiet.

‘I’m proud of you my son,’ said Shiva.

Ganesh smiled.

Sati looked at Shiva, Kartik and then at Ganesh. Her world had come full circle. Life was as perfect as it could possibly be. She did not need anything else. She could live her life in Panchavati till the end of her days. But she knew that this was not to be. A war was coming; a battle that would require major sacrifices. She knew she had to savour these moments for as long as they lasted.

‘What now, *baba*?’ asked Kartik seriously.

‘We’re going to eat!’ laughed Shiva. ‘And then, hopefully, we will go to sleep.’

‘No, no,’ smiled Kartik. ‘You know what I mean. Are we going to proclaim the Somras as the ultimate Evil? Are we