

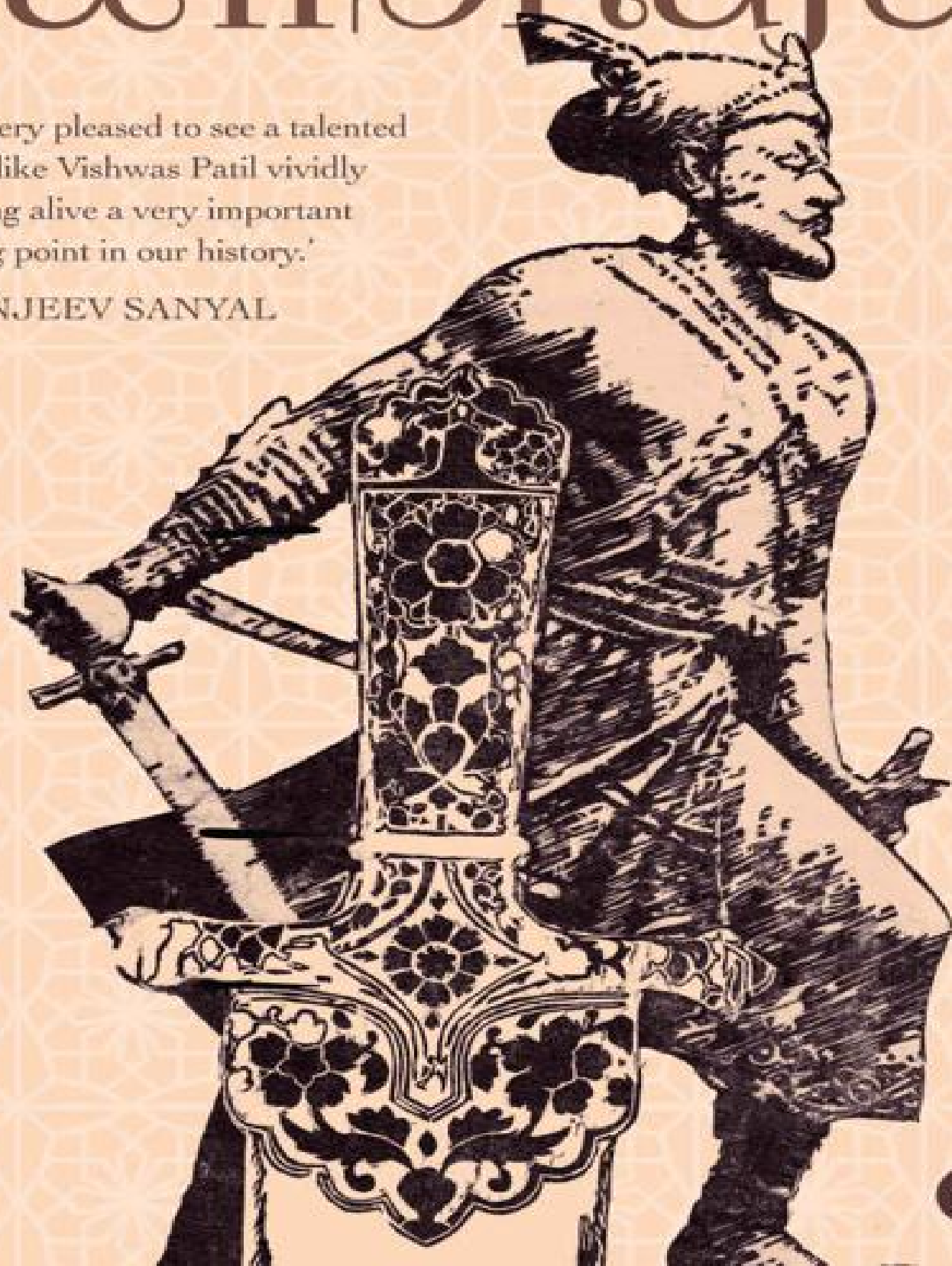
*Translated from the Marathi by* VIKRANT PANDE

VISHWAS PATIL

# Sambhaji

'I am very pleased to see a talented writer like Vishwas Patil vividly bringing alive a very important turning point in our history.'

—SANJEEV SANYAL



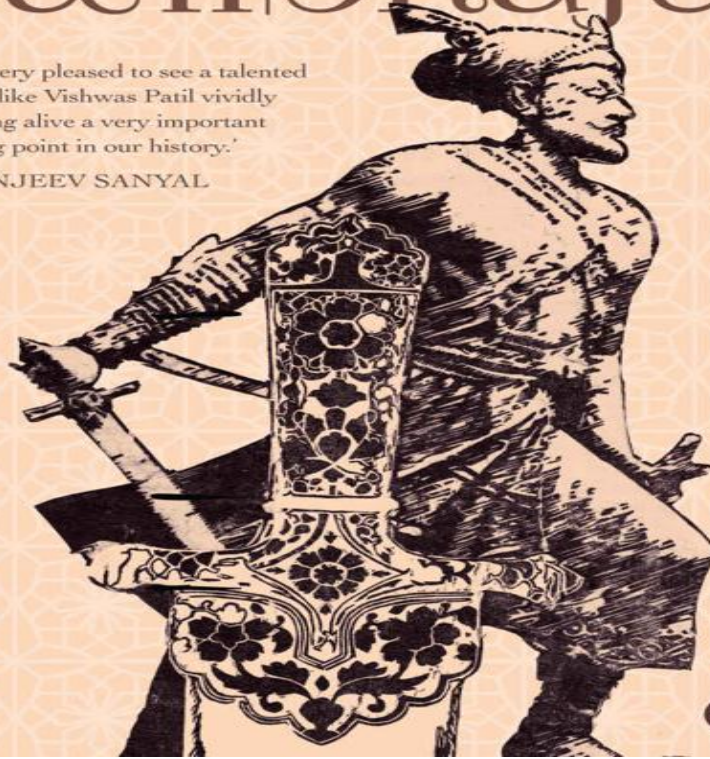
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**Vishwas Patil** is one of the most acclaimed Marathi writers today. He has written iconic novels like *Mahanayak*, *Chandramukhi*, *Pangira*, *Zadazadati*, *Panipat*, *Sambhaji*, *Nagkeshar* and *Lust for Lalbaug*. He has received the Priyadarshini National Award, the Vikhe Patil Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Zadazadati* and the Gadkari Award for *Mahanayak*. In 2020, he was awarded the prestigious Dr Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) National Literature Award. *Panipat* has received thirty-eight awards since its publication in 1988 and was recently released as an English translation by Westland. *Nagkeshar* is being made into a television serial.

**Vikrant Pande** has published ten translations from Marathi into English, namely Ranjit Desai's *Raja Ravi Varma*, *Shivaji: The Great Maratha (Shriman Yogi)* and *Karna: The Great Warrior (Radheya)*, N.S. Inamdar's *Rau: The Love Story of Bajirao-Mastani* and *Shahenshah: The Story of Aurangzeb*, Milind Bokil's *Shala*, V.P. Kale's *Karmachari* and Ratnakar Matkari's collection of horror short stories titled *Darkness*. His translation of Girish Kuber's *Tatayan* as *The Tatas: How a Family Built a Business and a Nation* bagged the Gaja Capital Best Business Book Award 2019. His most recent translation is Kaka Vidhate's *Duryodhan* which was released by Eka. Vikrant's forthcoming translations include Anita Padhye's biography of Goldie Anand (Manjul Prakashan). He is also working on a book capturing 200 years of the State Bank of India, being published by Westland.

Vikrant is a graduate of IIM Bangalore and after spending nearly twenty-five years in corporate sector is now a full-time writer and translator. He resides in Vadodara.



# Sambhaji

VISHWAS  
PATIL

*Translated from the Marathi by*  
VIKRANT PANDE

eka





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ONE

The  
Unknown  
Danger





# 1

It was past midnight but Godavari was wide awake. She could hear the cool wind as it ruffled the leaves of the trees in the nearby wood, and the constant drumming of the peepal seeds falling on the roof of the house. Even the cows seemed unable to sleep tonight; she could hear them move about restlessly in the cowshed.

Godu tossed and turned in her bed. She wore the green bangles of a new bride. It had only been a month since she was married. The house was silent except for the rhythmic snoring of her mother-in-law who slept in the next room. Godu's husband had not come in yet.

After a while, Godu got up and stepped outside her room to peep into the garden. A mashaal, stuck on a pillar, burnt brightly as Trayamabakrao, Godu's father-in-law, and her husband Niwasrao, sat engrossed in a serious discussion. There were three other strangers; men Godu had not seen before. Trayambakrao, after all, was a Deshpande who managed the affairs of twelve villages.

'Looks like my father-in-law is trying to sort out some petty misunderstanding,' Godu concluded, trying to convince herself that the nocturnal assembly in the garden was of no importance.

Yet she could not dismiss the feeling of unease that came over her tonight. What kind of politics people indulge in, she wondered. Her village was near Mahad and her uncle, Annaji Datto Prabhunikar, was one of the Ashta Pradhan, the prestigious council of ministers in Chhatrapati Shivaji's court. Godu had visited her uncle many times as a child and had been to Pachad and Raigad often. She had grown up listening to military campaigns being planned and to tales of victorious battles. The sun, the moon and Shivaji—Godu believed they would live forever!

She remembered an event from her childhood. She was visiting some relatives with her family when they heard the tragic news of Tanaji Malsure's death. He had fallen in battle while trying to save the Kondana fort. The fort had been recaptured but the lion was dead! Shivaji had named the fortress Sinhagad in memory of Tanaji.

'Tanaji is dead! The palanquin carrying his body is coming this way. Shivaji Maharaj himself is one of the palanquin bearers!' One of her cousins, a boy, came rushing in excitedly. All the boys wanted to pay their last respects to Tanaji. In a moment, they started running across the woods to see the procession. Soon, they heard someone following them. Turning around, they saw it was eight-year-old Godu!

Godu recalled that evening with vivid clarity. She could barely look at the crestfallen face of Shivaji Maharaj, the way he walked beside the palanquin with drooping shoulders. He had lost his most precious lieutenant. Men from villages on the route were joining the procession in droves. Soon, it was a caravan of more than two thousand people. It was a sight Godu would never forget. Nor could she ever forget the way her heart ached seeing the Chattrapati's face. He was devastated!

It was very late but Godu was still restless, her nerves on edge. She got up once more to look at the assembly in the garden. They were huddled together around a fire—their voices softer now, taking on a tone of conspiracy. Godu was suddenly alert. She listened intently.

Trayambakrao said, suddenly laughing out aloud, 'That's it! Just another day to go! Tomorrow is Holi ... the festival will provide the spark we need to end the Bhosale might. Forty of our daredevils are out there, spread all over. As soon as Shivaji reaches the square to celebrate Holi, our men will fire the cannons at the Tiger gate. In the garb of playing with colours, we would have finished Shivaji off!'

'Are you sure everything is going according to plan?' Niwasrao asked nervously.

'I have had discussions with Khan sahab at Bahadurgad. Twelve of his men in disguise are already at the fort. The moment the cannons are fired, signalling the end of Shivaji, the Mughal troops hiding in the woods will stream in. The capture of Raigad will be a fitting snub to the so-called Maratha Empire!'

In the light of the fire, Godu could see the flame of vengeance burning in Tryambakrao's eyes. The men around him were mesmerised as they



listened to his fiery words outline his confident plan.

Trayambakrao flung his shawl around his shoulders in a single movement and tied his hair with a flourish. He was already celebrating a victory which was yet to be his.

Godu's mouth went dry. She had heard every word her father-in-law had spoken and the message was loud and clear. Worried that her nervous breathing may be heard in the silence of the night, she pushed the edge of her pallu into her mouth and rushed towards the back door.

Soon, she was out in the open. A cool breeze blew, almost as if it was pushing her to run faster. Entering the stable, she was able to spot Pakhru in an instant, even among the seventy or eighty horses there. She was astride her favourite horse in a single smooth move. Spurring the beast, she raced across the woods towards Raigad.

Nothing was going to stop Godu tonight. The thorny bushes which brushed her limbs, the low branches which she ducked as she galloped through the woods—nothing!

‘Come on, dear!’ She spurred Pakhru, eager not to lose time.

She reached Pachad just before dawn. Now the silhouette of the Konkan Diva mountain was clearly outlined against the paling sky. The peaks were slowly becoming visible. Sunrise was still sometime away. Pachad was soon left behind as Godu continued her ride. Soon, in the faint pre-dawn light, she could see the main entrance of the Raigad fort.

‘Did you hear the neighing of the horses?’ Niwasrao asked, frowning, not long after Godu had left. He had heard some noise from the direction of the stables.

Suddenly everyone was alert. Yes, they too had heard. Trayambakrao's men rushed to the stable and found the door open. Pakhru was missing. It was obvious! Godu had bolted with Pakhru.

‘I know that bitch is Shivaji's devotee. I am sure she has overheard our plans and rushed to Raigad!’ Trayambakrao screamed.

There was no time to lose. Soon, the men were astride their horses and galloping towards Raigad. The only way to prevent disaster was to find a way to overtake Godu.

The horses were soon foaming at their mouths as their riders spurred them relentlessly.

## 2

Now that the fort's entrance was in sight, Godu breathed a little easy. Riding up to the great doors, she stopped the horse. Both she and Pakhru were sweating, exhausted from the long and frantic ride. Jumping down, Godu rushed towards the gate, shouting.

‘Open the door! Open the door, please! There is a conspiracy!’

Her shrill voice cut through the cold morning air. Two guards peered over the ramparts above and saw a young girl running towards the gate. Her face was scratched and bleeding, and her crumpled saree told of a long journey on horseback. She screamed once more, at the top of her voice, ‘Dada, please open the door. I have to meet Maharaj right away! It's urgent. Please!’

‘Who are you? Don't you know the rules?’

‘But, dada ...’

‘The fortkeeper will come at seven. Only then can the doors be opened. Not before, do you get it?’

The guard's voice carried a steely edge. Who the hell was this wisp of a girl demanding that the doors of Raigad fort be opened? And that too to meet Maharaj!

‘It would be too late by then! Maharaj's life is in danger! Please, I beg of you. Let me in!’

The guards laughed. All her screams and supplications fell on deaf ears. After a while they started mocking her. They were used to such raving madwomen, wandering about like ghosts in the early hours of the day, they said jokingly.

Godu really was raving mad by now. There was no way she was going to let the guards decide! She had to find a way to get the news to Maharaj. Realising that she was wasting her time there, she moved away quietly from the gate. A plan had formed in her mind.

In her childhood she had heard of a daring woman who had once climbed down the walls of the fort. It so happened that the fort had closed its doors for the evening. The woman, a milk-seller, was trapped inside as she was not allowed to leave the fort once the doors were closed. That was the rule. But she had to find a way out to breastfeed her hungry child, who

she knew would be crying in her hut in the village below. She managed to climb down the steep walls, reaching the base of the fort, and had become a legend thereafter.

Godu was now desperately searching for a way to climb up. There had to be one! Soon she noticed holes made at regular intervals in the rock to allow the rainwater to flow out. It was enough for her! Soon, she was climbing up the steep rock face. Her face, arms, and legs were bruised. Her saree was half-torn. But she did not care. All she wanted was to meet Maharaj!

The sky was brightening now, the darkness slowly receding. Preparations for the festival were to begin at dawn. The trumpets and horns were ready. The elephants had been decked for the occasion, and people had begun to gather on the ramparts clad in their finest clothes. A few guards, with swords at their waists and spears in their hands, stood outside Maharaj's room.

Suddenly they saw a dishevelled young woman rushing towards them. She fell at their feet and pleaded,

‘I need to meet Maharaj! Please, take me to Maharaj!’

She was insistent. The guards were at their wits' end. Where had she come from? Who was she?

‘Why do you want to meet Maharaj?’

At that moment, they heard the sound of hooves behind them. A handsome man astride a horse looked at Godu curiously. She stared at the finely sculpted face, framed by long hair that flowed down to his shoulders. His nose was aquiline, the eyes dark and deeply penetrating. A faint beard and a thick moustache enhanced his manly persona. Was he the Yuvraj? She was mesmerised.

The guards ran up to him, saluting,

‘Shambhu Raje! Sambhaji Raje!’

Sambhaji was followed by Jotyaji Kesarkar, Kavi Kalash and Jagderao. Along with them rode a man of the Mahar caste, called Rayappa. He did not wear the kind of turban which Sambhaji and the others sported, but had tied a cloth around his head. Although he was dressed like an ordinary farmer, his thick whiskers and his tall, dark and solidly built body added a distinct personality to his looks. His horse drew up beside Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash's.

Yuvraj would normally be in a jovial mood on the day of Holi but he seemed jaded today. It was apparent that he had not slept the previous night. The truth of the matter was that he had had a premonition of sorts and now his alert eyes looked around, trying to find the source of his restlessness.

Sambhaji pulled the reins of his horse when he heard Godu shouting at the guards, ‘Mahraj’s life is in danger; why don’t you listen to me? I want to meet him.’

The moment Godu recognised Yuvraj, she turned to him and cried, ‘Yuvraj ... Yuvraj ... our Maharaj is in trouble. His life is in danger ...’

Sambhaji exchanged glances with Jotyaji and Rayappa. Then he said in a low voice,

‘Let us not make a fuss here. Get the woman to come with us. We will talk to her in private.’

Sambhaji turned his horse in the direction of his quarters. His men followed, escorting Godu.

Once he was seated in his chamber, Sambhaji allowed Godu to narrate what she had heard the previous night—the details of the plot her father-in-law and his men had hatched. He believed that she was telling the truth. Sambhaji said, turning to Kavi,

‘Now do you believe me, Kaviraj, when I say I had a strong premonition that something untoward was to happen?’

‘I believe you. But we have checked all the main points on the fort. There is nothing to worry about.’

‘You cannot be sure of that, Kaviraj. Abasaheb believes in being safe and alert all the times. Ensure that the father-son duo are apprehended. Send your men to their village. I want them arrested today.’

‘As you command, Rajan,’ the men said and walked backwards a few steps before exiting the room. At that moment Yesubai walked in.

Godu had been standing at the edge of the room, just inside the door. She was shivering with excitement and fear. Sambhaji looked at her and said to Yesubai, ‘Give her some nice clothes to wear. I feel she has averted a disaster today. But her life could be in danger. I put her in your care.’

It was a bright and sunny morning. There was festivity in the air of Raigad. The crowds were already flocking to Shivaji Maharaj's palace. Amidst the celebrations, Trayambakrao and Niwasrao entered the fort, looking rather terrified. They knew that were Godu to reach before them and talk to Maharaj, they would not escape the death penalty. And that meant being thrown over the cliff. The very thought shook them to the core.

Trayambakrao asked a guard standing near the entrance, 'Did you see a young woman, newly married, wearing a saffron-coloured saree with a yellow blouse?' He spoke in whispers lest someone else hear them.

'Yes, I did see a woman of that description. Shambhu Raje took her to his quarters.'

That meant Godu had probably spoken to Yuvraj! Trayambakrao smiled. It was a golden opportunity to cast aspersions on the character of the young bride. And it would be easy to smear Yuvraj's name by alleging that it was he who had mesmerised and lured her to the fort. He was a known womaniser. Or so people believed.

All Trayambakrao wanted now was to escape death. He was willing to go any lengths to avoid that.

They rushed towards Sambhaji's quarters. But by the time they reached his door, their confidence had vanished. It was akin to entering a lion's den. Would they be able to stand before him and accuse him of making off with their new bride? No! It was better to speak to Maharaj. He was likelier to fall for such rumours.

They headed to Maharaj's palace instead. The crowds outside were swelling by the minute. Maharaj was expected to emerge and visit the Jagdeeshwar temple for a darshan any moment now. Trayambakrao set his plan in motion.

He started shouting, 'My daughter-in-law! She has been kidnapped by Yuvraj!'

'My wife! Where shall I go now?' Niwasrao followed suit.

Both father and son were shouting at the top of their voices. Niwasrao wailed loudly for added effect.

The people around them could not believe what they were hearing. Here were two men alleging that Yuvraj Sambhaji, the heir to Shivaji's throne, had actually kidnapped someone's wife! And these men had the guts to shout these accusations in front of Maharaj's palace? It was unbelievable!

Seeing the crowd's reaction, the father-son duo increased their pitch. 'Do you realise,' they said to no one in particular, 'that this is happening in the very court of justice? Where should poor people like us go then? What faith would we have in those who rule? Do the men in power have the right to do anything with us mere mortals?'

'Hey you!' A guard shouted. 'Be warned, you are inviting death. Don't you think twice before making such allegations?'

'And what proof do you have?' Someone else butted in.

'You want proof? Go to Yuvraj's quarters and see for yourself. You will find my wife has been caged there!'

'What exactly happened?' Another man asked, curious.

'Let me tell you,' Niwasrao said, stepping forward. 'A few days back Yuvraj had gone for shikaar near our village when he spotted my wife at the edge of the lake. He coveted her as soon as he set eyes on her. And as we feared, he sent his men to our house the next day and they literally dragged her to Raigad.'

'What are we poor souls supposed to do?' Trayambakrao wailed.

Suddenly the crowds parted. A palanquin had arrived. As they waited to see who it was, the palanquin was lowered to the ground and Prahlad Niraji, one of the Ashta Pradhan, stepped out. It did not take more than a few seconds for his keen ears to ascertain the situation. Niraji wondered why Yuvraj had chosen the pious day of Holi to carry out such a vile act. How would Maharaj react?

Niraji hurriedly entered the palace and stepped into Maharaj's private quarters. For once he even forgot to salute his Maharaj, so eager was he to tell what he had heard. By then Kazi Mullah, one of the judges in Shivaji's court, had arrived too. The Wadkar father and son were called in. Trayambakrao was not one to waste such an opportunity. He fell forward, and banging his head on Shivaji's feet, started sobbing.

'Maharaj, we are doomed! How do we live if the Yuvraj himself behaves in such a manner? How is this different from the Mughals who forcefully take any young and good-looking woman who catches their eye into their harems?'

'Khamosh!' Shivaji's voice rang across the room. 'Trayambakrao, please reign in your tongue. Be careful of what you are alleging.'

Shivaji's face was stern. He was dressed for the occasion, and ready to celebrate Holi with his men. Little had he imagined that the stain of such an

allegation would soil his festive attire even before the celebrations began.

Shambhu Raje's stepmothers, Soyrabai and Putalabai, had arrived from Pachad especially to celebrate the festival. Putalabai loved Sambhaji dearly. Soyrabai was about to leave for the pooja with Shivaji Maharaj when Trayambakrao and Niwasrao entered the private chamber. She was dressed in an exquisitely embroidered saree. A beautiful necklace of pearls, a gold cummerbund, and a lovely shawl draped around her shoulders completed her attire. Shivaji had plans to present her with a special diamond which he had got from a jeweller at Poladpur.

As Yuvraj's character was being assassinated, she smiled contemptuously. But Trayambakrao's words had left Shivaji and Putalabai downcast.

A few months back, Raigad was rife with rumours linking Yuvraj with Annaji Datto's daughter Hansa. It had troubled Shivaji no end. Why did Shambhu behave so? Shivaji, who had the courage to face enemies as formidable as Aurangzeb, was forced to bend his head in shame today. He was desperately trying to rein in his emotions. Was Shambhu at fault? Or was he being accused falsely?

However he had no choice but to take action as would be deemed fit. He could not afford to be seen as being biased towards anyone. He said, turning towards Trayambakrao,

'Listen! Let the celebrations get over. We will then go over the matter. Rest assured that the guilty, whosoever they may be, will be punished.'

Shivaji hesitated before leaving the room. After a thought, he conferred with Kazi Mullahsahab for a while. He was a trusted aide, someone Shivaji had absolute faith in. Kazi Mullah was reputed to be a fair and incorruptible judge amongst the Marathas. Shivaji, having shared his thoughts, walked out of his quarters to join the crowds who had been waiting for him so eagerly.

Putalabai, glancing in the direction of Sambhaji's quarters, could barely hold back her tears. She was clearly worried.

Never before on the day of Holi in Raigad had one felt stained even before the colours were thrown. People everywhere gossiped. ‘How did Yuvraj dare to do such a thing? In broad daylight, he had the temerity to pick up a married woman, throw her on his horse and bring her here!’

‘Well, nothing surprising about it. It is an age-old tradition for Maharajas, isn’t it? To pick up whomsoever they fancy and despoil her.’

The celebrations subsided as the day drew to a close. As the sun was setting in the western sky, Shivaji sat in his chamber, his face faintly creased with anxiety. Despite his agitation, he maintained a calm demeanour. After deliberating for a while, Maharaj said to one of the guards in attendance, ‘Ask Shambhu Raje to present himself immediately.’

Trayambakrao and Niwasrao sat in a corner of the room. Their drama continued. The way they wept and made themselves look like meek victims was truly worthy of applause. Anyone would have believed them! Now they turned to see Sambhaji entering.

He walked in with firm but slow steps, touching the emerald necklace he wore. How handsome he looked, with his fair complexion, broad forehead, arched eyebrows, and lively, shining eyes! Anyone present would have been impressed seeing the two most powerful men in the Maratha Empire in that room. Shivaji and his son Sambhaji clearly stood apart from the rest in their attire, bearing and personality. It was the meeting of the moon and the sun, a poet would have surmised.

But the air was fraught with tension. Yuvraj, looking at his father, was taken aback seeing the mixture of agony and anger in his eyes. Sambhaji’s close confidantes, Rayappa and Jotyaji Kesarkar were no less distraught. They had never expected Sambhaji to be charged with such an allegation. In a few moments Yesubai entered, followed by a young woman clad in a simple yet elegant saree. The father-son duo was now clearly nervous. They had not anticipated that Godu would be there. Shivaji himself was surprised. He had not expected Yesubai to accompany Sambhaji. As for her companion, Shivaji surmised that she was the lady in question, the one the Wadkars claimed his son had abducted.

Shivaji asked, ‘Yesubai, what brings you here?’

Yesubai hesitated for a moment, taking some time to frame an answer. Mistaking her silence for guilt, Shivaji thundered,



‘Are you unaware that Yuvraj has managed to keep you in the dark about his doings? Please bear in mind—Shambhu’s crime cannot go unpunished. A father may turn a blind eye but a king cannot allow his affection to come in the way.’

The room reverberated with the sound of Shivaji’s deep and firm voice.

Yesubai was tongue-tied. Sambhaji looked at the carpet, insulted by the way his father had spoken. Their reactions encouraged Trayambakrao. He stood up and said,

‘Maharaj, I want my daughter-in-law back.’

‘Maharaj, my wife! Please give her back to me!’ Niwasrao pitched in for added effect.

Shivaji threw an angry glance at Sambhaji and erupted,

‘What a pity! What a tragedy! If a common man feels that his wife or daughter or daughter-in-law is not safe, then we need to question the very purpose of our existence. What are we here for?’

Sambhaji and Yesubai were speechless, unable to summon the words to counter Maharaj. Shivaji’s words echoed in the silence of the chamber. Godu could not bear it anymore. She felt suffocated by the truth that remained unspoken. Rushing towards Shivaji, she fell at his feet and cried,

‘Maharaj! Let me speak! This is all a conspiracy.’

Before Trayambakrao and Niwasrao could react, she continued,

‘Maharaj, my father-in-law and my husband—they are not as innocent as they pretend to be. I swear on the name of Bhawani Mata, Maharaj. These two had planned to kill you today. The plot was to assassinate you while you were on your way to the temple!’

‘You mean they planned to attack me? That too, here at Raigad?’

Shivaji smiled incredulously at the thought. Even the guards standing next to Maharaj smiled. No one could bring themselves to believe what Godu had just said. Trayambakrao, encouraged by Shivaji’s response, said,

‘Maharaj, do you see the influence Yuvraj has had on her? For the rich and the powerful, all this is play, but poor people like us have to bear the consequences of their games, Maharaj.’

Shivaji did not doubt Sambhaji’s courage or his capabilities but certain snippets of gossip and rumour had found their way to his ears, indicating a blot on his son’s character. Several of his ministers and confidantes had

hinted at Sambhaji's penchant for good-looking women. They had, in direct or indirect ways, suggested that Yuvraj was something of a philanderer.

Just then, a little commotion outside the door attracted the attention of the guards. Before they could bar his way, Annaji Datto entered. He was about sixty-five years of age and there was a solemn weight to his personality, despite his simple attire and the way he had casually thrown his shawl around his shoulders.

He said, bending low in *mujra*, 'I beg your pardon, Maharaj, for coming in unannounced and without permission.'

He hesitated for a moment as he looked at Sambhaji. The fact that they did not like each other was evident. Wiping his forehead he said, 'Raje, Trayambakrao is a close relative of mine. And Godavari is my niece.'

Looking at Godu, Annaji could barely restrain his tears. The memory of his only daughter Hansa was too painful to bear. She had been the darling of his household and the apple of his eye. Annaji could not have imagined life without his daughter. Hansa had been married for barely a month or so when, on her way home for a brief stay, she had visited the royal household. What happened there was unknown but she had returned hurt and unhappy. After a day or so, Hansa's body was found in a well outside Pachad. It was a tragedy which Annaji had not been able to reconcile with.

Her death spawned a myriad of rumours. Some said she had been raped while a few believed she had suffered some form of mental torture which had led to her suicide. Most were pointing fingers at Shambhu Raje. Annaji firmly believed that Yuvraj was responsible for Hansa's death. It had been two years since Hansa's death but seeing Godu had reawakened the memory, bringing tears in its wake.

With Annaji's entry, the tense atmosphere in Shivaji's chamber tautened almost to breaking point. Even the judge Prahlad Niraji, a man of equanimity, was taken aback at his sudden arrival. As for Trayambakrao, he continued his drama. Removing his turban, he placed it at Shivaji's feet. 'Maharaj, please allow this poor man to take his daughter-in-law back.'

Annaji, encouraged by Trayambakrao's words, said, 'Maharaj, it was you who had ordered that the daughter-in-law of the Subedar of Kalyan was to be treated with grace and dignity after the Mughal Subedar and the caravan with his treasure had been captured. I have seen such great days. Anyway, what's the point in speaking of the past now ...'

He deliberately left his sentence hanging.

Shivaji looked at Yesubai. He was surprised to see that she was unaffected by Annaji's words. On the contrary, she seemed ready to counter them.

Yesubai said, 'Annaji, it is not right to accuse someone without an iota of proof. And speaking of dignity—Yuvraj cares as much for a woman's dignity as anyone else.'

It was apparent that Annaji was chastised by her words, but Shivaji interrupted. 'Yesubai, you might be blind to your husband's flaws, but as a father I know my son well.'

Surprisingly, despite being the topic of discussion, Sambhaji had remained silent until then. He did not want to argue with his father in public, and he was aware of the political intrigue and gossip-mongering which was aimed at creating a gap between him and Maharaj. But now he could not stay quiet anymore and erupted,

'Abasaheb, I feel sad that I am being labelled a criminal when I have done nothing wrong. I urge you to look into the matter first. If you find me guilty, I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit. You will be surprised to learn that there was indeed a plan to fire the cannons while others were bursting crackers. Your life was in danger, Abasaheb. That is why Godu, without caring for her own safety, rushed all the way to Raigad to inform you. But now she is being made to look like a fool and I am being accused of having kidnapped her.'

Annaji was not one to keep quiet. He said, 'Shambhu Raje, one cannot go by hearsay or assumptions. We need proof.'

At that moment Mullah Haider, a close confidante of Maharaj, entered. He said, saluting quickly,

'Maharaj, as you had instructed, I have carried out an inspection of the ammunition and gunpowder at the Lion Gate. It was certainly not meant for the fireworks. It was for firing the cannons.'

All present in the room, with the exception of Trayambakrao, Niwasrao and Godu, were stunned. The fact that such a thing had happened in Raigad, the very heart of the kingdom, the capital of Hindavi Swaraj that was Shivaji's dream of a land ruled by its own, was disturbing at the very least. Mullah Haider further described how the guards had accosted five or six suspicious-looking men who were seen loitering around the gate. When the guards gave a chase, the miscreants had managed to run towards

Bhawani Point and jump over the wall into the bushes below. The search for them was still on, Mullah Haider said.

Within a few minutes, Kanhojirao entered and said, 'Maharaj, the bodies of four of the men who had jumped have been found. From the way they were dressed, they look like Pathans. No one has seen them before.'

Shivaji's face relaxed now. He looked at Godu, his expression clearly showing gratitude. He was now convinced that there had indeed been a conspiracy to kill him.

He turned to Sambhaji and said, 'If this was so important, I wonder why you did not inform me before rushing towards the Lion Gate.'

'It was my duty to first ensure that the cannons were safe, Maharaj. It was a question of your life,' Sambhaji said.

Shivaji now turned his gaze on the Wadkars. They were clearly rattled, and knew their game was up. But they waited with bated breath to hear what Maharaj would say. Annaji too realised that Godu had spoken the truth. All eyes were now on Shivaji.

He said, 'Annaji, this is a serious matter. It needs to be investigated thoroughly. Meanwhile, arrest these two and throw them into the temporary prison.'

Before the father and son could react, the guards had already pointed their spears at them. There was no escape for them now.

Annaji turned to Godu and said, putting his hand on her shoulder, 'Dear, you have been through a terrible ordeal. Come, let us go to your aunt's place.'

Godu brushed his hand aside, saying, 'I don't want to go anywhere. I am tired of all my relatives. Enough of it!'

Shivaji was disturbed by Godu's response. He was indebted to her; she had risked her life to save his. He would, on any other day, have taken his necklace off his breast and gifted it to her. But today was different. Although the Wadkars were clearly at fault, he did not want to offend Annaji. He was one of the Ashta Pradhan, his key council of ministers, and it would not do to insult him publicly.

But what should he do with Godu? Shivaji was confused. She had clearly refused Annaji's invitation. Finally, he said,

'Godu is not a child. Let her decide for herself.'

Godu too was confused. Where would she go? She stood rooted to her spot, not knowing what she should say. She looked at Sambhaji once and

then turned towards Yesubai, who stood with a grace, poise and dignity that reminded Godu of the butter lamp burning steadily in the temple. Rushing towards her, she hugged her affectionately and said, ‘Ranisaheb, take me into your fold! I am willing to work as your slave, do whatever task you wish. Only, please give me shelter!’

For a moment, Yesubai did not know how to react. A little while ago, everyone had labelled her husband as the one who had kidnapped her. And now the same woman was embracing her, pleading with her. Yesubai gently caressed Godu’s face, saying, ‘As you say, Godu. Till we find a place for you, you can stay at my servants’ quarters.’

Yesubai gestured to one of the guards to take Godu to the queen’s quarters. Annaji was expecting Maharaj to react, but to his surprise, Shivaji did not say anything. He was already deep in conversation with Mullah Haider, instructing him to get to the heart of the conspiracy and uncover the truth. Realising that Shivaji was not in a mood to discuss the matter with him, Annaji walked away in a huff.

## 5

Only Sambhaji, Yesubai and Maharaj himself now remained in Shivaji’s private chambers. Shivaji looked at Sambhaji who could sense the hurt in his father’s eyes. He said, ‘Please pardon me, Abasaheb. I have given you a lot of trouble. But I wish you would believe that I was in no way connected with this incident.’

‘Shambhu, you are the Yuvraj of the Hindavi Swaraj. And you are now nineteen years of age. I wish you to behave responsibly, as befits the position you hold.’

‘Abasaheb, how is it fair to treat someone as a criminal when he has not committed any crime? But leave all that aside for the moment! I am more worried that the security at Raigad is so lax.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘How come the main door of the fort can be opened at any time of the night, especially when Maharaj is at Raigad?’

Shivaji was amused at his allegation. 'What are you saying, son? Once the doors closed, they are not opened till the next morning. Not even a worm can enter.'

'If that be the case, how are Annaji and his kin accusing my men of having left the fort and kidnapped the girl in the night? How could they have come in once the doors had been closed?'

Shivaji threw a surprised glance at Sambhaji. He realised something was amiss. Then Sambhaji said, 'Maharaj, it is my fate, unfortunately, that you barely hear me. And on the other hand, the doors of Raigad are opened for people to come in and go at their will.'

Shivaji's heart, pierced by these words, grew fonder towards his son. He knew Sambhaji was hurt.

He said, putting a loving hand on his shoulder, 'Don't take it to heart, my son. I will investigate the matter.'

'Maharaj, I wish you understood that everyone is conspiring to ensure you hate me ... that you don't trust me and my words.'

Shivaji asked Sambhaji to sit next to him while he continued to caress his shoulder. 'I will look into the matter, Shambhu. But I want you to understand that my ministers have worked with me for the last forty years, toiling day and night. They have sacrificed themselves to the cause of the Swaraj, and I urge you to show them some respect. You are the Yuvraj and it is not becoming of you to throw these allegations at them. You need to change your attitude, else ...'

'Else, what?' Sambhaji did not utter the words but his raised eyebrows conveyed the question.

'I will have to find a way to live without you, Yuvraj.'

Sambhaji had not expected such a response from his father. He felt literally uprooted, as a small tree would be swept away by a great flood. Tears gathered in his eyes. He said, 'Abasaheb, the very thought of being sent away is intolerable. I can bear the pain of being trampled by an elephant, but I cannot even imagine being separated from you.'

Sambhaji remembered his grandmother's words. Jijabai used to say, 'Shambhu bal, please stay in Shivba's shadows.' It was like a mantra that he had taken to heart. But things had changed now. Shivaji Raje, whom the world loved, and who cared for his Swaraj, had no time for his own son. Sambhaji's voice quivered with emotion as he said, 'Abasaheb, I have one fault for sure.'

‘And what is that?’ Shivaji asked, unable to read his son’s heart.

‘You may be able to survive without me, but it would be impossible for Sambhaji to live without the loving protection of Shivaji Raje. I suppose that is my only fault.’

In his heart, Shivaji knew that he was being unnecessarily harsh. Sambhaji had never seen his mother. Jijabai, who had raised him, too had died a few years ago. As for Shivaji himself, Sambhaji had been the apple of his eye till his coronation.

As a young prince he had shown his administrative skills while managing the Jagir of Kolar in Karnatak. It was a testament to his diplomatic abilities that the emissaries of the French, the Portuguese and the English would first meet Sambhaji before presenting themselves in Shivaji’s court. Seeing his intelligence and charm, these envoys had often commented that he was already a step ahead of his father and that he would be the next Shivaji.

That very son was today, somehow, estranged from him. Shivaji knew that something needed to be done to bridge the gap. Lost in thought, he did not realise that Sambhaji and Yesubai had quietly left the room and were walking away. When he got up to hug his son affectionately, all he could hear were their receding footsteps.

Shivaji sat down with a deep sigh.

## 6

Rayappa was at his post, guarding the main entrance of the fort, when sometime in the late afternoon, a heavily decorated palanquin stopped at the doors. It was accompanied by Bhaskar Thakur and two firangi soldiers. The Subedar waved his hand, asking Rayappa to allow them to proceed. But Rayappa stood in the way and asked, ‘Who are you? Who do you want to meet?’

‘Let them go, Rayappa! They are Ramji Thakur’s men, here to meet Annaji Pant.’ It was evident that the Subedar had been expecting the party.

Rayappa was a little confused as he had not been given any notice of their arrival. 'Guests of Ramji Thakur, the emissary from Goa? Should they not meet Raje first?'

'So what if they want to meet Annaji?'

'But there are no orders to let them pass, Subedar.'

'Rayappa, why are you being so adamant? In any case, Maharaj is not in Raigad!'

'In that case, should they not meet Yuvraj?'

Rayappa was a seasoned guard and a man who had grown up in the wild. He could sense danger intuitively. He wondered why the Portuguese emissary's guests would want to meet Annaji Datto, the treasurer and chief revenue officer, instead of Raje; and that too without prior intimation to anyone. He directed the guests to meet Yuvraj.

Sambhaji greeted the guests and asked in a harsh tone,

'Tell me the truth. What are you carrying in this box?'

The clerk accompanying the palanquin blurted out, 'There are two pearl necklaces. They have been sent by Ramji Thakur from Goa.'

'Who are they for?'

'For Annaji Pant.'

'A gift?'

'Not exactly ... it is ...' The clerk was stammering. 'It so happened that when our emissary had met Shivaji on behalf of the Portuguese Viceroy, he had presented Raje with lavish gifts. Annaji Pant and Moropant Peshwa later wrote to our emissary and threatened him with dire consequences if he did not give anything to them. That is why we were carrying this for him.'

Sambhaji said grimly, 'I will accept this on their behalf.' He turned to Kavi Kalash, the poet, who stood next to him. Kavi Kalash was a Brahmin from Kannauj, a friend and an advisor to Yuvraj. He was a tall, well-built man in his thirties with shoulder-length hair, an impeccably groomed moustache and fair complexion. Sambhaji said to him, 'Please give them a receipt and ask them to return to Goa immediately.'

'Rajan, what do you plan to do now?'

'Well, let the person who commissioned the gift ask for it and I will give the pearls to him,' Sambhaji said, laughing loudly.

That evening Annaji's younger brother, Somaji Datto, came to meet Sambhaji.



‘Yuvraj, a couple of months ago, my brother had sent a messenger to Goa with some money to get a few pearl necklaces made. I believe the same have been delivered to you.’

‘Oh, is that so? A man had indeed come from Goa, but he said he was the emissary’s clerk and not the jeweller. Since when have jewellers started using the emissary’s office to deliver goods, I wonder?’

Somaji wiped his forehead with his angavastram nervously. He knew his bluff had been called.

Sambhaji thundered, ‘Let Annaji Kaka know that I am aware of the whole affair! Shivaji Raje never takes a single gift for himself, as you well know, but deposits them in the royal treasury. While your brother complained to the Goan ambassador, demanding a personal favour. What a disgrace! Everything here belongs to the Hindavi Swaraj. It is no one’s personal property, not even the king’s! I would like to know where Annaji planned to deposit this gift? Not in the royal treasury, for sure!’

Somaji Datto had no answer. He took his leave with a hasty salute without daring to look at Sambhaji. After that, no one from Annaji’s household came asking for the jewels.

A few days later, Shivaji Raje invited his ministers to the palace for a meal. Those in attendance were Annaji, Moropant, Rahuji Somnath, Balaji Avaji and Shambhu Raje.

Balaji Avaji was a close confidante, almost a friend, of Shivaji. Moropant was an old man now, bent a little at the waist. But his energy and enthusiasm were the same as before. Shivaji had often depended on Moropant and Annaji for the success of some of his most ambitious and dangerous missions. But they had their own misgivings about each other.

Annaji was generally a man of few words, but on this occasion he was unable to hold himself back.

‘Maharaj, the firangi jewellers are experts in their trade. That is why I had sent some money in advance to get a few pearl necklaces made.’

‘I heard about it,’ Shivaji Raje said, nodding his head.

‘But Shambhu Raje was so enamoured of the necklaces that he decided to keep them for himself,’ Annaji said.

Sambhaji, undeterred by the taunt, said, ‘Well, you have got the receipt. The necklaces have been deposited in the royal treasury. You may verify this for yourself.’

That shut Annaji up. But Sambhaji's blood boiled. Unwilling to tolerate the insults anymore, he said, looking at his father, 'Abasaheb, it is my firm belief that our ministers should not deal directly with the emissaries and other agents of the firangis or any other kingdom. It has certain repercussions.'

The council of ministers was taken aback. They had not expected Sambhaji to accuse them in such a direct manner. Shivaji's lack of comment made them even more restless.

The next day Annaji invited the other ministers to his quarters, ostensibly for a game of chess. Naturally, the topic of discussion was the fearless way in which Sambhaji had spoken against the ministers. The Ashta Pradhan were not a little offended by his audacious criticism of their methods of working. What upset them even more was the fact that their freedom would now be curtailed. Sambhaji had shown himself to be unusually alert in matters of administration which till date had been left entirely to the jurisdiction of the ministers concerned.

## 7

It was a pleasant evening, and Sambhaji and Yesubai sat on a swing in the pretty garden adjoining the small wooded area behind their haveli. It had been many days since they had enjoyed such solitude together.

Yesubai said softly, 'May I say something?'

She continued, without waiting for his reply, 'A king's word is final. He has the ultimate power of decision when it comes to matters of state. But does that mean a king can take every beautiful girl he fancies and put her in his zenankhana? Would that be right?'

'What are you blabbering? We are not Mughals! This happens in the realm of the Sultans. not in Shivaji's kingdom.'

'Are you sure?' Yesubai asked smiling. Her eyes conveyed different emotions though, those of anger and hurt.

'Yesubai, what do you want to say? Don't speak in riddles,' Sambhaji frowned.

‘Annaji Datto Prabhunikar is a pillar of Abasaheb’s kingdom. What did you achieve by torturing his beautiful and innocent daughter Hansa?’

‘Yesu, do you realise what you are alleging?’

‘I am only repeating what people are saying in the streets.’

Sambhaji was stunned by Yesubai’s words. She had the same power in her voice as Jijabai. Despite his impulsive, short-tempered nature, he decided not to react, and remained silent.

Yesubai was a year or so younger than Sambhaji but she had already earned a place in the royal household through her genuine affection and dedication to the people around her. While Soyrabai and the other queens kept to their quarters in the palace, Yesu had managed to carve a niche for herself.

Sambhaji thought of the events that had brought Yesubai to Raigad, many years ago. Shringarpur was a small kingdom, nestled in the Konkan mountains near Sangameshwar. Suryarao Surve, the local ruler, considered himself the sovereign lord of the territory and ruled in a manner befitting an emperor. He had under his control the ports of Dabhol and Sangameshwar, and had managed to capture and loot more than a hundred ships, intercepting the vessels en route to Mecca, Madina and other distant destinations. Suryarao Surve was Yesubai’s maternal grandfather. Her father, Pilajirao Shirke, was an important sardar in Suryarao’s court.

When Shivaji announced his desire to form a Hindavi Swaraj, many like Suryarao openly opposed it. They believed they were superior to the Marathas and yet they did not hesitate to stoop low and kowtow to the Mughals. Suryarao hated Shivaji and, forming an alliance with the Mores who controlled the Jawli area, he had often fought against Shivaji’s forces. When Siddi Johar had surrounded Panhala, it was Suryarao who came forward to provide local support to the Mughal sardar.

Shivaji had confronted Suryarao during his campaign in Talkonkan, and announced his willingness to pardon his mistakes. He wanted to give the ruler of Shringarpur one last chance to join the Swaraj. But Suryarao had responded with a snub that was beyond endurance. Shivaji consequently marched on Shringarpur himself.

Suryarao had no option but to flee in order to save his skin. Even as she witnessed her grandfather run for his life, seven-year-old Yesu had stared in awe at Shivaji’s magnificent personality. Her father Pilajirao,

however, did not run away. He had long been a silent admirer of Shivaji and received the Maratha leader as befit his stature.

While the loot captured from the fort was being counted, Shivaji remarked, 'I have seen many a treasury, but the way the silver and gold vessels have been kept, especially those used for worship, shows the hand of a very diligent lady.'

'Maharaj, you are right! It is my daughter Yesu who is responsible for the upkeep.'

Maharaj turned to see the young girl looking at him. She had been peeping from behind a door all the while, watching the proceedings.

Shivaji had put a loving hand on her head and blessed her. Then he said, looking at Pilajirao, 'I am so incensed at your father-in-law that I feel like burning down half of Shringarpur but your daughter has mesmerised me. Please keep all the wealth for yourself. All I ask in return is the most precious thing from your palace—your daughter as my daughter-in-law!'

Overwhelmed, Pilajirao fell at Shivaji's feet and wept in gratitude. 'Maharaj, I am a traitor. We don't deserve to be treated with such affection. You will find many girls who are far more capable and beautiful than my Yesu.'

'You are mistaken, Pilajirao. I can recognise the value of a jewel when I see one.'

Many events unfolded in a few days. Sambhaji and Yesu were engaged to be married, and Raje's daughter Nanibai, also known as Rajkunwar, was married to Pilaji's son Ganoji.

Yesu soon moved to Raigad. The two young newly-weds would sit with the pandits and learn their lessons together. They were more like friends than husband and wife. Their relationship was thus cemented long before they realised that they had a conjugal relationship as well.

Ever since she had come to Raigad, Yesubai had struggled to manage the two strong and often opposing personalities in her life. On one hand was her father-in-law, who was loved and respected everywhere as a wise and cautious people's king. On the other hand her husband, despite his capabilities, was more famous for his blunt and often politically incorrect way of confronting the most influential and esteemed ministers at Raje's durbar.

Yesubai's direct accusation regarding Hansa had stunned Sambhaji. He said, recovering after a while, 'Yesu, if I was enamoured of a girl, I

would have married her. There is no dearth of space here to build another mahal.'

'But Yuvraj, she is Annaji Pant's daughter. She was, I mean ...'

'People enjoy gossiping and I cannot stop them.'

'Well, I have been told by Rayappa and Jotyaji that you are even careful not to bathe in the open while on a campaign. I believe women have only to see your handsome face and manly figure once to fall hopelessly in love with you. The girls who come to the rivers to fill their pots swoon and fall down ... I believe it has happened a few times.'

'It seems you are quite aware of many things. Where is the need for me to clarify?'

Yesu smiled. Sambhaji continued, 'If I wanted to take pleasure in amorous activities, I would find a place far away from Raigad. What can I do if some Hansa fell in love with me? How am I responsible for it? You know only too well that she literally chased me. I had known her since she was a child. But she was a grown-up girl when she came here, on the way to Pachad for a visit, the first after her marriage. She was exceptionally attractive, no doubt. But from the moment I realised that she had grown into a young woman, I stayed away from her. I avoided meeting her. Annaji Pant was after all like my father's elder brother.'

'So you were aware of what was likely to happen?'

'Annaji Pant himself was aware that Hansa was enamoured of me. It was the reason he had got her married in the first place.'

Sambhaji paused before he continued, 'I was in my private chamber, engrossed in writing a letter, when Hansa entered. The guards had been given strict instructions not to allow anyone in but she fooled them by saying I had invited her. She came in and embraced me. Then she started showering kisses on my face. I pushed her away and slapped her hard, shouting, "Have you gone mad? What is wrong with you? You are Pant's daughter and a married woman at that." She laughed hysterically and said, trying to hold my hand, "I am here to dedicate myself to you. Me, my soul, my body ... they are all yours." I pulled my hand back and said, "You idiot! You are not in your senses."

'She refused to go away; I slapped her hard once but her madness had reached its peak. Laughing, she said, "Raje, love makes a person go blind. I am like the moth attracted to a lamp, one that does not care if it gets burnt."

‘I asked her what she wanted and she said, “My husband is no one compared to you. Raje, I am longing for you. I need you. Just once, please take me in your arms.”

‘I realised she was not going to give up without a fight. I tried putting some sense in her head but she was beyond reason. Then she put her arms around my waist. I pushed her away again, with such force that she hit her head and began bleeding. She was hurt, but the most terrible wound was in her eyes. As she stepped out of my quarters, I could see that she was sobbing. She said, turning towards me at the door, “Raje, I will wait for you for three days. If you don’t come to me, I swear, you will see my dead body.”

‘Hansa rushed out. At that moment, her mother happened to see her leave my quarters. Naturally, her hair, her saree, her entire appearance was dishevelled. After that, even if I had tried to tell my side of the story, no one would have believed it. They all assumed that I had tried to force myself on her. Yet even I had never imagined that she would kill herself. After four days, her corpse was found in a well in Pachad. Everyone believed that I had committed the unpardonable crime of violating a married woman, that I was responsible for her death. I am innocent, but I have had to suffer taunts and accusations in silence ever since. That’s the truth, Yesu!’

The same night, after dinner, Sambhaji asked Yesu, ‘So what have you decided to do about Godu?’

‘Where can the poor girl go?’ Yesu said, ‘She cannot go back to her father’s place or to her in-laws’. Let her stay at the servants’ quarters here.’

## 8

Godavari had never seen such a magnificent palace. Her husband’s house, where she had stayed after her marriage, was large but only modest in comparison to the palace here in Raigad with its great chandeliers, the waist-high lamps and vast chambers. It was almost heaven, she thought.

They had found room for her at the servants’ quarters behind Yesubai’s palace but she had become Yesu’s shadow, never leaving her side,

whether in the kitchen, the pooja room, or the garden. Godu had become indispensable to Yesubai too. She was a bundle of energy, always ready for any chore with her radiant smile. Soon, she was the talk of the servants' quarters, for most of them felt jealous of the way she had become the Yuvrani's confidante.

Shivaji had fortified the wall which Godu had climbed to get into the fort. Raigad was now completely secure, invulnerable to enemy incursions. This meant that Godu had become the talk of the town too. And not all of it was in her praise.

'That Godu seems to be a daredevil! Look at the way her poor husband and father-in-law, who came to lodge a complaint, have been thrown into the jail, while she enjoys the luxuries of Yuvraj's palace. First, she mesmerised Yuvraj, and now she has managed to become Yesubai's confidante. Wonder how she manages all this!' Such were the comments heard on the streets.

Rayappa, overhearing the gossip, found it hard to tolerate. Everywhere in Raigad, people were openly talking of Yuvraj and his household. He made his way to Sambhaji's quarters, determined to do something about it, but knew that he could not bluntly state what he had heard on the streets. Yuvraj approached most matters in a direct and no-nonsense manner but he had a quick temper, sensitive to such aspersions cast on his conduct.

Stepping into Sambhaji's chamber, Rayappa said, finally finding his voice, 'Yuvraj, people out there are gossiping unnecessarily, and I don't like it!'

'What about?'

'About Godu, and the way she has mesmerised you and Yesubai Ranisarkar.'

Sambhaji did not react immediately. But while having his meal that afternoon, he asked his wife again, 'What do you think we should do about Godu?'

'Let her stay here,' Yesubai said, smiling. 'Such a sweet girl, and she has really become my right hand ...'

'Yesu, you are large-hearted and innocent. But what about all the talk on the streets? They don't care whether they are talking about a poor man or a prince. When it comes to gossip, they don't discriminate ...'

Yesubai looked into Sambhaji's eyes and said, 'But you know the truth, don't you? She risked her life and her family ties to come here and

save Maharaj's life. We cannot punish her for that.' She continued in a low voice, 'Only the other day, Maharaj saheb was enquiring about her and whether she was being taken good care of.'

A few days later, a secret message sent by the Wadkar duo in prison to Aurangzeb's 'milk brother', Bahadur Khan Kolkatash was intercepted. Aurangzeb and Kolkatash had been fed by the same wet nurse. It said: '*As discussed before please see that we are released quickly. We need your help.*' It had finally come to light that the Wadkar father and son were, in fact, traitors. They were speedily despatched to the ill-famed dungeons in the Lingana fort. Godu's innocence, and the fact that she had risked everything to save Maharaj's life, was now proven beyond a doubt.

Yesubai said, 'Godu, we owe a lot to your selfless courage. You did not care for your life or your reputation when you acted as you did, only for the future of our Swaraj. You are truly a hero.'

Godu was overwhelmed. 'Vahinisaheb, Shivaji Raje is our God! We would do anything for him.'

Yesubai looked at Sambhaji and said, 'Yuvraj, had her in-laws not accused you of having kidnapped her, Shivaji Maharaj would have taken out a procession in her honour today.'

The days passed rapidly.

Ananji Datto was rattled by the fact that his close relatives had turned out to be traitors. To save face, he once again requested Godu to stay with his family but she refused.

Sambhaji's sister Ranubai, who came visiting from Wai, was impressed with the way Godu managed her chores. But before she left, she said to her sister-in-law in a confidential tone,

'Yesu, no doubt this Godu is really efficient in her work. But she is so young and good-looking! Whatever you say, she is a married woman, and the fact that she stays with you has already got tongues wagging. You need to do something about it.'

Gradually, Yesubai began to realise that she needed to make plans for Godu's future. She asked her one day, 'Godu, have you thought about your future life?'

'What can I say, Vahinisaheb? My husband turned out to be a traitor. What future can I possibly think of?'

'Why not get married again?'

'Married? Well, I can think of only one person ...'



‘And who is that?’

Godu glanced at Sambhaji Raje before staring into the deep blue sky. She let out a heavy sigh.

Sambhaji asked gently, ‘Godu, are you in love with someone?’

Godu nodded her head absently but refused to answer the question.

A few days later, she came to Yesubai and said, ‘Ranisaheb, can I take some time to visit my aunt who lives in the valley beyond the fort? She is old and all alone. I thought I could spend a few days with her.’

‘Why not? It’s a good idea!’

Sambhaji instructed the headman of Sarvat, the village Godu was to visit, ‘She is to be provided with everything she requires. Your expenses will be reimbursed from the state treasury.’

The next day, Godu was packed and ready to leave. Only before stepping out of the palace did she look at Sambhaji once, a brief glance, and then, nodding her head absently, she set out on her journey.

## 9

Balaji Avaji, one of Shivaji’s secretaries, was waiting for Maharaj to arrive when Sambhaji walked in. He said, looking at Yuvraj, ‘I am told that you are making really life difficult for the Ashta Pradhan these days. Is that so?’

‘Why do you ask, Balaji Kaka? Have I erred in any way? Whatever I do or object to, is for the benefit of Swaraj,’ Sambhaji said, his tone a little defensive.

‘No, I didn’t mean that ... but ...’ Balaji hesitated. ‘Yuvraj, sometimes your matter-of-fact tone is taken as accusatory. It does not suit a young man of your age. Rulers must learn not to confront their ministers unnecessarily. One should tread carefully, that is all.’

Balaji was a man of ripe years and a seasoned minister of Shivaji’s court. Sambhaji, careful not to offend him, merely nodded. Balaji said, holding the young man’s hand affectionately in his, ‘Yuvraj, I didn’t mean to hurt you. The blood spilt on mother earth in a battle is washed away by

the rains but the repercussions of what the clerks write on paper in ink can be felt for generations. I just want you to be careful.'

TWO

# —Emotional Discorel





# 1

For the first time since his coronation, Shivaji was planning a military campaign in Karnatak. Maharaj and Sambhaji were set to leave with an army of nearly forty thousand foot-soldiers and twenty thousand cavalry.

A campaign of this size required preparations on a massive scale. Eighteen factories at the base of the fort were producing weapons and other equipment. Shivaji was overseeing the war effort himself and would often ask Sambhaji to update him on various matters.

Shivaji's questions were relentless. To keep up with them, Sambhaji would get up at the crack of dawn and hurry to the base. Rayappa, the loyal soldier, would be there even before Sambhaji arrived. The evenings would turn into nights as Sambhaji pored over letters carrying military intelligence from strategic Maratha posts across Shivaji's kingdom. Yesubai would often wait until the small hours for her husband to return.

Much to his satisfaction, Shivaji could finally see in Sambhaji a diligent and responsible Yuvraj who was equal to the challenges heaped on his shoulders every day. Balaji Pant helped Sambhaji at each step, ensuring that he did not slip up or fall behind in his duties. Sambhaji's friends too were excited about the upcoming campaign and gratified by the way Maharaj had entrusted various important tasks to their beloved Yuvraj.

It had been out of sheer curiosity that Jotyaji Kesarkar had first come to meet Sambhaji. A single meeting had been enough to convert his curiosity to loyalty. In no time, he had become one of Sambhaji's closest and most cherished friends. Once, on a hunt, Sambhaji had shot at a wild boar but the arrow missed its target. Rayappa, a very young man then, had charged at the boar, putting himself between the Yuvraj and mortal danger. Despite being grievously wounded, he held on to the beast and killed it with his bare hands. Since then, he too had been more a friend than a servitor to

the Yuvraj, following him like a shadow and guarding him with his life. Among all his companions and advisors, only Kavi Kalash was older than Sambhaji by about ten years.

Outside his inner circle, Sambhaji already had a large and devoted following among the youth of the kingdom. His mere presence next to Shivaji Maharaj during the coronation had trebled his popularity, and the young men around Raigad flocked to him afterwards. Impressed by Sambhaji's brave and affable nature, many had volunteered to join the Maratha army, increasing its strength.

From this enthusiastic crowd of new recruits, Sambhaji had gradually carved an elite force of his own. They followed the Yuvraj on his inspection tours and he supervised their training himself. Sambhaji would often challenge his men to run up to the top of Konkan Diva fort from the base. It was a sheer climb of nearly four thousand feet that tested the endurance as well as the courage of the youth who attempted it.

Sambhaji would spend his leisure hours with his men too, sometimes fishing in the clear waters of Kalganga or enjoying a lazy swim in Banganga. On these occasions, Yuvraj was often seen showing his skills with the gauntlet sword or dancing with the lezim cymbals, much to the entertainment of the poor folk of these parts who gathered to watch. For them, it was a matter of pride and delight to have the crown prince of the Swaraj visit their villages and attend their humble ceremonies.

Some of Shivaji's senior courtiers and ministers were critical of Sambhaji's friendly nature. They had complained to the Maharaj that it was not becoming of Yuvraj to roam around so freely and meet people from all castes, especially the lower ones.

Shivaji, for his part, was happy that his son was mixing with the ryots and not behaving like a typical Yuvraj. It was evidence that he had the ability to gather men around him. He said, when he met Sambhaji at his chambers one day, 'Yuvraj, I am happy to know that you are roaming the kingdom in search of gems. The Swaraj has need of such loyal and dedicated men. Carry on with your good work.' Sambhaji was thrilled to receive his father's endorsement. So, despite their best efforts, his father's advisors had not managed to corrupt his mind against him yet!

## 2

Annaji Datto was one of the high-ranking sardars of Shivaji's court who resented Sambhaji's popularity and his proximity to the common people. As head of the royal treasury, he disapproved of the way men from all backgrounds were able to approach the Yuvraj with their troubles and get away with a waiver on their taxes.

'If the people start meeting the Yuvraj in person to get respite from paying their dues, how are we to run the Empire?' He complained to Moropant Peshwa. 'Why is the Yuvraj interfering in the matters of finance?'

Moropant laughed, much to the chagrin of Annaji. He clarified, seeing Annaji raise a questioning eyebrow, 'Annaji, Yuvraj is responsible for the ryots. It is quite right on his part to listen to the people, his subjects, isn't it? After all, he is the crown prince of the Swaraj.'

'I knew you would say so. You are always justifying his actions.'

'I do not support Yuvraj blindly. Just take the case of the men who had come from Vishalgad the other day, asking for permission to dam a stream nearby so that their fields could be watered properly. You might object to the expense but it was a reasonable request. Look Annaji, this is bound to happen when new blood takes over. You must learn to accept such changes and move on.'

Annaji was not convinced. He said in a taunting manner, 'Today he has diverted a stream. Tomorrow he may talk of building dams on the rivers. What then?'

'Well, I am told Shambhu Raje is planning to discuss quite a few matters of importance while on campaign in the Karnatak.'

'I am not surprised,' Annaji scoffed. 'He is influenced in all this new thinking by the poet Kalash. I don't see much difference between a poet and a buffalo, frankly speaking.'

Annaji recalled Moropant asking Shivaji Raje only a few days ago, 'Raje, is Yuvraj coming with you on the campaign?'

Shivaji had answered, smiling, 'Of course! He is a young man now and there is no point in making him sit here in Raigad when he can learn so much on the battlefield.'

Balaji Avaji had added, 'After all, Yuvraj is of age. It is the right time for him to learn the art of warfare, not to mention what goes into the planning of such a large campaign.'

Annaji did not like Balaji trying to score a point, but he had held his tongue. It seemed inevitable now that Raje would take Sambhaji with him. It was something Annaji had wanted to prevent at all cost. That Sambhaji would outshine all others on the field of battle and impress Maharaj with his bravery and skill was a foregone conclusion. Annaji was disturbed by these thoughts. He stepped out of his office, and almost of their own accord, his feet turned towards Soyrabai's palace.

Annaji had shifted his residence to Raigad a few months earlier. He was ageing and it was difficult for him to ride up to the fort everyday. The death of Hansa, his daughter, was the final straw. Pachad did not feel like home anymore.

Annaji's formidable personality was enhanced by his tall, heavy build and dusky complexion. His smart turban and dangling earrings made heads turn as he strode confidently into the administrative office at Raigad each day. As a young man, he had impressed Maharaj with his bravery, acumen and dedication to the Swaraj, and he had risen quickly to become one of the Ashta Pradhan. He was the principal correspondent for the Maratha Empire as well as the minister in charge of the treasury. He ran his office like a tight ship. The clerks, fearing his temper, worked hard to meet his meticulous standards.

Annaji had rendered many years of faithful service to the Swaraj. At Pratapgad, when Shivaji had gone to meet Afzal Khan, he had left Jijabai and the young Sambhaji in Annaji's care. While Maharaj was away in Agra for negotiations with Aurangzeb, a large part of the administrative responsibilities of the kingdom were managed by Annaji. He was at the forefront of the battles which captured the Panhala and Rangana forts. It was no wonder that he occupied pride of place amongst Shivaji's sardars.

However, Sambhaji was a young, dynamic and blunt man, unschooled as yet in the art of diplomacy, particularly when it came to dealing with the senior ministers of the Swaraj. And when he started looking into matters of revenue collection, raising questions about the management of the treasury in his straightforward manner, Annaji began to sit up and take notice, not a little alarmed.



For instance, it was customary for the emissaries of the English, Dutch and Portuguese companies, when they came to pay their respects to Shivaji, to bring expensive gifts for Annaji, Moropant and Rahuji Somnath. In fact, at times, Annaji even sent his men to collect his 'dues'. On several occasions, Sambhaji had pointed out discrepancies between the revenue collected in the Konkan region and the amount deposited in the treasury, much to the embarrassment of Annaji.

Evidently, as the kingdom grew, so did the expectations and aspirations of the men running it. It was not that Shivaji was unaware of the fact that some of his courtiers enriched themselves at the expense of the Swaraj. However he would ignore minor transgressions, keeping in mind the dedication and loyalty of the men concerned, and the role they had played in building the Maratha Empire over the years.

For Sambhaji, on the other hand, it was a question of ethics and integrity, and his blood would boil when he came across such deliberate lapses. Consequently, he had accused Annaji of stealing from the royal treasury—publicly, and in no uncertain terms.

Unfortunately, these events had led to Annaji distancing himself from Yuvraj. Moreover, the tragic death of Hansa had added fuel to fire. Annaji squarely blamed Shambhu Raje for his daughter's suicide, and it was apparent that his dislike had grown to implacable hatred.

### 3

Soyrabai welcomed Annaji into her private chambers. Each recognised the other as an ally; their objective was the same although their paths were rather different. Soyrabai had often said, while talking to Annaji, 'I wish Rajaram was the eldest son, not Sambhaji. It would have been perfect, don't you think?'

'Maharani saheb, age is not the only factor to be considered while choosing a successor to the throne. There are instances where even a pregnant queen has been made to sit on the throne and rule in the name of

the would-be prince. Rajaram saheb is no longer a child; he is nearly seven now.'

Annaji's fertile mind imagined the coronation of Rajaram and a smile appeared on his face.

Soyrabai said, 'Well, it is good that both father and son are going on a long campaign. We can at least breathe easy in Raigad for a few months.'

'Not at all, Maharani saheb. You are totally mistaken!' Annaji's bitterness was evident in his tone. 'Pardon my saying so, Maharani saheb, but you live in a dreamworld. This campaign would be the perfect opportunity for Sambhaji to show his valour and add more feathers to his cap. He will showcase his capabilities as the rightful successor to Maharaj!'

Soyrabai, disturbed by Annaji's assessment of the situation, fanned herself with her pallu and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead. 'This does not portend well, Annaji.'

'But tell me, Maharani saheb,' Annaji challenged her, 'Am I responsible for this? My hands are tied. But maybe *you* could have done something about it ...' He deliberately left the statement hanging for effect.

Soyrabai instantly remembered the day Maharaj had asked her to look into the circumstances that had led to Hansa's death. Yuvaraj was openly accused of having molested Hansa, triggering her suicide. It was no easy task, this investigation. On one hand was Annaji, Hansa's father, third in the hierarchy of the Ashta Pradhan, close confidante of Shivaji, and a loyal sardar of the Swaraj. On the other was Shivaji's eldest son, Yuvraj himself.

Annaji said, reminding Soyrabai of the task she had been entrusted with, 'You were given a God-sent opportunity. Had you concluded that Yuvraj was responsible for Hansa's death, the matter would have been settled once and for all.'

But Soyrabai had been loyal to the task assigned to her by Maharaj. She had taken great care to speak to all the witnesses, even inspecting the well where Hansa had ended her life. All the evidence she had gathered suggested that Hansa had gone to meet Sambhaji of her own volition.

Soyrabai recalled vividly what Sambhaji said when she had questioned him about Hansa's death, 'Maasaheb, my palace is surrounded by temples on all sides. There is a tulsi plant right in the courtyard. There is an image of Ganesh on every door. Can you imagine me engaging in such a vile act—molesting a young woman, at my private quarters? Would I commit such a heinous crime in the presence of divinity?'

‘Shambhu Raje, tell me whether you are guilty or not,’ she had said to him.

‘Not to mention the fact that the guards and servants, and several of my men, are always around! Maasaheb, I would be a fool if I were to force myself on a woman in my palace. And lest you forget: I am a lion’s cub!’

Soyrabai had presented her findings to Maharaj. He had let out a deep sigh of relief when they confirmed Sambhaji’s innocence. However, he had asked Soyrabai, ‘Ranisaheb, had he been found guilty, how would you have reacted?’

Soyrabai had said, without a moment’s hesitation, ‘I would have been saddened by the fact that a father so revered by the masses has such a lecherous son. But I would have asked Maharaj to give him the death penalty and set a new standard for justice and good governance in the Swaraj.’

Raje smiled. Soyrabai asked, ‘Why did you assign this task to me when you have esteemed judges like Kazi Haidar in your court, a man known for his judicial acumen?’

Raje answered with a smile, ‘It was a very delicate matter, Ranisaheb. And I was sure you would not allow your emotions to influence your judgement. I was confident that you would conduct an impartial investigation.’

Recalling Shivaji’s words, Soyrabai now said, looking at Annaji, ‘I am convinced that Hansa was in love with Yuvraj, and when he did not entertain her overtures, she decided to end her life. That is the truth, Annaji.’

‘Whatever you may say, Maharani saheb, I cannot forget the fact that I lost my only daughter because of Sambhaji, that he and only he is responsible for her death. He is a curse on our family. I can never forgive him.’

‘What do you think I could have done, Pant?’

‘Ranisaheb, had you thought of the coronation of Rajaram, I am sure the scales of justice could have been induced to tilt the other way.’

‘Why did you not advise me to do so then?’

‘Knowing your ambitious nature, I was sure that you would not waste such a golden chance to remove the thorn from your path. I never imagined you would do otherwise.’

‘In any case, this is a rather fruitless discussion,’ Annaji said, coming back to the issue at hand, ‘Maharani saheb, it would be best if Yuvraj does not accompany Maharaj on the Karnatak campaign. You must find a way to prevent him from going.’

‘But it is decided, Pant. Maharaj has made that clear to me,’ Soyrabai said, with a sigh. ‘Like day follows night, the Yuvraj too has to follow in the footsteps of his father: those were Raje’s words.’

But Annaji was not one to give up so easily. He lowered his voice, his tone becoming conspiratorial, ‘There is a way out!’

Soyrabai threw a surprised glance at him as he continued, ‘You remember Maharaj had once spoken of breaking the empire up into two regions—Karnatak and Raigad? What you must do, Ranisaheb, is sow the seeds of partition in Raje’s mind. Then, let Maharaj decide whether he wants to divide the Swaraj, or take Yuvraj with him. If we still don’t manage to stop Yuvraj from going, be assured that he will return with the confidence to take over the entire Swaraj. And there will be no place left, not even a small hut, for you and Rajaram saheb to take shelter in.’

## 4

Soyrabai walked towards Shivaji Maharaj’s chambers. There had been a time when Shambhu Raje was Soyrabai’s favourite. After the death of Jijabai, it was she who had taken Shambhu under her care and given him all the tenderness and affection of a mother. But now with her own son growing up, and Shambhu Raje proving himself to be a capable young man eligible to succeed Shivaji on the throne, the threat her stepson posed to Rajaram’s chances of ruling the Swaraj was becoming more and more evident to Soyrabai. Rajaram, on the other hand, was an innocent child who worshipped his elder brother and spent every minute he could in the company of Yuvraj.

Soyrabai watched worried as Sambhaji’s prowess and popularity grew by the day. The very sight of him perturbed her these days, and her forehead would crease anxiously at the mere mention of him.

Shivaji was relaxing in his private chambers when Soyrabai entered and sat on the edge of his bed. After some small talk, she ventured, 'Swami, it is difficult to control a firebrand like Shambhu Raje when you are not around.'

Shivaji smiled and said, 'Oh, are you suggesting I take him with me on the campaign?'

Soyrabai was taken aback. She wondered if she had misspoken. 'Not at all! I didn't mean that. What I am trying to say is that he tends to rub people the wrong way. If misunderstandings were to erupt in your absence, it will be difficult to resolve them.'

Shivaji was silent for a while. Then he said, 'Tell me Ranisaheb, do you want me to take him with me or are you suggesting that he stay back?'

'Swami, the fact of the matter is that he does create a lot of headaches for all of us.'

Shivaji said, sighing sadly, 'I know. Even Annaji and Rahuji are not happy with him and they too have pleaded that he not be left behind at Raigad. They don't seem to see eye to eye with Shambhu.'

'The last thing I want is for Shambhu Raje and the ministers to start fighting amongst themselves. I have a suggestion ...'

Seeing her hesitate, Shivaji said, 'Please speak freely.'

'You once spoke of dividing the kingdom in two halves?'

'Don't mention that, Ranisaheb,' Shivaji interrupted her, raising a hand. There was an edge to his voice as he continued, 'The very thought of breaking up the Hindavi Swaraj is not only painful but also ludicrous. It is not just an empire. It stands for the sacrifices of thousands of Maratha men, and the blessings of our elders, our gods and goddesses. How can I even think of splitting it into two parts?'

Soyrabai blurted out, 'Maharaj, lest you forget, you have two sons.'

'I am aware, Ranisaheb! Whosoever shows his mettle and his calibre would be chosen as the successor. It is as simple as that!'

'Maharaj, isn't that unfair? Is Shambhu Raje entitled to all the opportunities? Why don't you take Rajaram on your campaign instead? Let him also learn.'

'Do you realise how young he is?'

Soyrabai burst into tears. Shivaji did not know how to react.

She said, sobbing, 'Maharaj, either you divide the kingdom and hand over a part to Rajaram or don't take Shambhu Raje to Karnatak. If you

cannot make a choice, then the only option for me is to forsake water and food and fast unto death.'

Shivaji Raje managed to convince Soyrabai not to take such extreme steps. She left for her quarters after a while. A worried Shivaji sat alone in his chamber. The emotional drama which Soyrabai had just staged had left him feeling drained and slightly feverish. He summoned Balaji Chitnis to share his thoughts.

Chitnis heard him out and said, 'Maharaj, I would advise you not to give much credence to her threats. If you wish to take Shambhu Raje with you, don't think twice. Please go ahead as planned.'

Shivaji had a despondent look as he replied, 'One may spend an entire lifetime with a woman and yet not be able to read her mind. I am surprised and worried at the way Maharani saheb has put forth her demands today.'

'Maharaj!'

'Look at the timing, Chitnis. I am to leave for the campaign in a few days. I cannot delay my departure because of this domestic discord. This is a terrible dilemma. God knows what other difficult choices are in store for me!'

## 5

Yesubai hurried to her quarters when she was told that Shambhu Raje had returned earlier than expected. A weary Sambhaji was resting in his bed when Yesubai entered. He seemed dejected.

Yesu said softly, 'You know, Jijabai used to say, "The relationship between Shivba and Shambhu is a unique one. They do not need to talk to each other to communicate!"'

Sambhaji responded with a deep sigh but did not say anything. Yesubai put her hand on his shoulder and said, 'You must be tired. After all, the preparation for the Karnatak campaign involves a lot of work, and you leave in a few days, is that right?'

'You believe I should go?'

‘Of course! After all, it’s the first big campaign after the coronation, and a chance for you showcase your skills. Even as a young lad, you were with him in Agra when he planned the escape from Aurangzeb’s prison. Now you are the successor to the throne of Hindavi Swaraj! Should you not work shoulder to shoulder with Maharaj ...?’

Shambhu stood up suddenly and said, stopping Yesubai mid-sentence, ‘Enough! Don’t build castles in the air, Yesu. I am told that Abasaheb has decided not to take me along with him.’

‘I cannot believe it!’ exclaimed Yesubai, dejected at Sambhaji’s words.

Sambhaji did not elaborate. He paced the room like a wounded lion, hands knotted behind his back and lost in his thoughts. Knowing her husband was deeply hurt, Yesu did not pursue the matter. Sambhaji continued to pace up and down for two hours, until his legs began to hurt. The lamps had nearly burnt themselves out but sleep still eluded him.

Yesubai said, when Sambhaji finally sat down on the edge of the bed, ‘I feel Maharaj saheb has taken the right decision.’

‘How can you say that?’

‘After all, someone responsible needs to stay behind and look after Raigad. Just think, the treasury has crores of hons in it. Does Maharaj’s decision not make sense?’

‘Well ... I don’t think it is as simple as you make it out to be. But I don’t want to discuss it right now. I have a splitting headache.’

Yesubai knew Sambhaji’s dismissive manner concealed a distraught mind. As for Sambhaji, he was quite unable to control his emotions. Thoughts raced through his mind. He racked his brains, wondered why his father had decided not to take him. It was not that Sambhaji was unfamiliar with the territory. In fact, as a young boy, he had been given charge of Kolar and Chikkabelapur as a Jagirdar.

He remembered a conversation with his father about the southern provinces. Shivaji Maharaj had said, ‘My father, Shahaji Maharaj, governed the Bengaluru province and he had played an important role in earning the city its pride of place. Later, my stepbrother Ekoji Raje made the mistake of shifting his headquarters to Tanjavur.’

‘I am told the provinces of Tanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Jinji are very fertile. Aren’t they?’

‘That is true, but the fact that he shifted his base to Tanjavur allowed the king of Mysore, Chikkadevaraja, to run riot. We have lost a lot of revenue from the provinces of Karnatak and other southern territories. We need to find a way to retrieve and secure them.’

Recalling these talks with Shivaji, Shambhu had been tremendously excited about the campaign in Karnatak until the new orders came. He was deeply hurt and disappointed to learn that he would not be a part of it.

Finally, Shambhu’s tired body could no longer stay awake and he fell into a deep sleep. But Yesubai, still sitting on the edge of the cot, had a worried look on her face. Her forehead was creased with anxiety as she wondered what had made Maharaj change his mind.

## 6

Annaji Datto and Soyrabai, with their jealous intrigues, had managed to stab Sambhaji in the back. Petty politics had played a winning hand, and all Sambhaji could do was pace his room like a lion wounded in battle. Sambhaji’s close confidantes, Kavi Kalash, Jotyaji Kesarkar, Krishnaji Kank and others, stayed close to Yuvraj, worried that Shivaji’s decision not to take him on the campaign had affected him tremendously. As for Yesubai, she was trying her best to ensure Sambhaji did not develop any ill feeling for his father.

She said, trying to pacify him, ‘What’s so sacrosanct about this campaign? There will be many more. And it is not that he has ordered you to be imprisoned here in Raigad.’

‘Yesu, the very air in Raigad has become poisonous with the kind of politics and backstabbing which is going on. I feel suffocated here.’

Sambhaji waited eagerly to hear from Balaji Avaji who was at that very moment conferring with Maharaj about the latest plans for the campaign. He was hoping that Balaji would be able to convince Maharaj to reverse his decision. It was late in the night when Balaji stepped into Sambhaji’s quarters.



He said, without further ado, ‘Maharaj has advised that till he returns from his campaign, Yuvraj should stay put at Shringarpur.’

Sambhaji turned sharply towards Balaji, tears gathering in his eyes. ‘That means he does not even want me to stay at Raigad!’

Balaji and Yesubai hardly knew how to react. Sambhaji said, ‘Balaji Kaka, it is an age-old tradition for the Yuvraj to manage the throne in the absence of the king, isn’t it? I was hoping, when Maharaj spoke of my accompanying him on the campaign, to get a chance to spend some time with him and learn a few things. That is not to be. But now, I am being asked to leave Raigad! And the reins of the capital will be entrusted to the hands of a mere sardar like Rahuji Somnath who hates me. I wonder what kind of politics is going on and why Maharaj has fallen prey to it.’

He paused as if to collect himself and continued, ‘I feel orphaned and impoverished, despite having a father like Maharaj saheb and a treasury worth crores of hons. I am being exiled to Shringarpur as if I were some kind of criminal!’

‘Yuvraj, hasn’t the Maharaj given you the sole responsibility of managing the South Konkan region?’

‘And the Prabhavali province,’ Yesubai added.

‘Enough! All this is to save face, to make the world think that he has not treated me badly. Such small mercies do not change the reality, Yesu. Nor does it soothe my wounded feelings in the least.’

Sambhaji remembered the night he and his father had planned their escape from captivity in Agra. Shivaji Maharaj, worried about Sambhaji’s safety, had said, to Hiroji. ‘I may be able to ride all the way to the Deccan, but I am worried about my son. How do I leave Shambhu, the apple of my eye, my dearest, to fate?’

His father had sobbed at the very thought of leaving him behind. However Maharaj had no choice but to make the hard decision to leave for the Deccan on his own while his son took a different route. That had been the only way to secure the future of the Hindavi Swaraj.

Recalling those events brought fresh tears to Sambhaji’s eyes. He said, ‘I get goosebumps each time I think of that night. His warm hug, the tears in his eyes, his angst—I will never forget, for as long as I live.’

Yesubai said, smiling, ‘When you have such a father, why would you ever feel dejected and lonely?’

‘Yesu, I don’t care if I am captured and killed by enemies. But it hurts when people you consider your own stab you in the back. Faced with a difficult choice, Maharaj left a seven-year-old son to fend for himself, back in Agra. Today, when I am eighteen and capable of assisting him in an important campaign, I am being asked to stay behind. And packed off to Shringarpur, because Soyrabai Matushree is worried that I will be a nuisance if I stay at Raigad. Their entire effort is to ensure I don’t have a chair to sit on—forget the throne!’

He said, almost choking with emotion, ‘What hurts me most is that Abasaheb, who trusts the lowly soldier guarding the gates of Raigad, is not willing to trust his own son. The very thought is killing me.’

## Z

Sambhaji entered Shivaji’s chamber and said, bending low in *mujra*, ‘Abasaheb, please bless me. As you have commanded, I am leaving for Shringarpur.’

For a moment, Shivaji Raje was taken aback. Then he said, placing his hands on his son’s shoulders, ‘What’s the hurry, Shambhu? Wait for a day. I have to leave for Karnatak and we can travel upto Sangameshwar together.’

The next day, the departure of Shivaji Raje and Sambhaji was announced by the horns and trumpets. Once they reached Pachad at the base of Raigad, they turned to look up at the fort. A huge army of nearly twenty thousand cavalry and forty thousand foot-soldiers awaited the command from Shivaji Raje to move forward. It had been a long time since the Marathas had waged a campaign of this magnitude, and the men seemed restless, eager to march forward.

On such occasions, Jijabai would have accompanied them till Pachad to bless Raje before he set out on a new campaign. Her death, soon after the coronation, had deeply affected Raje. He directed his men towards her mausoleum to pay his respects. At a respectful distance stood Suryaji Malsure, Baji Sarjerao, Yesaji Kank, Sarfoji Gaekwad, Anandrao and many others sardars. They waited patiently as Shivaji spent a long time at the

grave. He could feel his mother's presence there and he sorely missed her blessings.

Shivaji recalled the day they had left for Agra. The treaty of Purandar, signed with Mirza Jai Singh and Diler Khan, had forced them to make the trip to pay their respects to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Before their departure, Shivaji had spent time training Sambhaji in the art of using the sword and the spear. He had also coached him on how to behave in the Mughal court and other matters of etiquette.

When they were about to leave, Jijabai had asked, her voice choking with emotion, 'Shivba, is it necessary to take this young lad with you? Are you not being cruel?'

Shivaji had replied, 'Maasaheb, the treaty forces me to. I have no choice.'

He had stood watching Jijabai hug Sambhaji who refused to leave his grandmother's embrace. It was a poignant moment, but Shivaji had grown restless and said, 'Maasaheb, I have a duty to fulfil. Please let Sambhaji go now. Do you remember how you had blessed me when I set out to meet Afzal Khan? You knew the dangers that awaited me; yet you had given me your good wishes smilingly, urging me to kill that demon.'

Jijabai said, 'Raje, you will understand my emotions when you become a grandfather.'

'Maasaheb, I can understand your emotions. But an eaglet, if it has to soar high in the air, must learn to live with the dangers of flying. How else will it develop strong wings?'

Shivaji could hear Jijabai's voice ask him, as he sat near the grave, 'What happened to your eaglet, Shivba? Why are you leaving your brave and valorous son in Shringarpur instead of taking him with you?'

Shivaji's angst was palpable. He knew he was making a mistake, yet he felt helpless. He asked Sambhaji to ride with him for a while. At Sangameshwar, they parted ways after crossing the river Shastri. Yuvraj took the route for Shringarpur while Shivaji turned towards Karnatak.

Before departing, Sambhaji said, 'Abasaheb, you have just recovered from a long illness. I feel I should be by your side on this campaign. But you are not asking me to join you. I could have been of great service to you, yet you choose not to take my help.'

'Shambhu, please be patient. Things will turn out fine.'

‘Abasaheb, it is difficult for me to accept the fact that you are going to war in the southern provinces, at your age, while I—capable in every way of leading our troops—must stay put in Shringarpur. But it seems I have no choice but to obey your command.’

Raje was acutely aware that Sambhaji’s pride had been deeply hurt by his decision. He said, ‘The Yuvraj has recourse if he feels some injustice has been done to him. But what if the King himself feels that he is being tried? Who does he reach out to?’

‘Abasaheb, maybe the fault lies in my stars. But it appears that the pens of the clerks and the whispers of others are more capable of taking revenge than the swords of bravehearts which are left to rust.’

‘Shambhu, you are still young. Let the matter rest!’

‘Abasaheb, I was only eight years of age when I attended Aurangzeb’s court with you. I was made a Mughal mansabdar before I turned ten. And now, when I am nearly twenty, I am labelled as an ignoramus and somebody who can easily be abandoned! How is that fair, Abasaheb?’

Shivaji could sense the helplessness Sambhaji was experiencing. Desperate to make amends before parting, he said, ‘Shambhu, it was a deliberate decision not to take you along on this campaign. Please try to understand. If something were to happen to me, I need you to take charge. Don’t you realise that?’

Sambhaji’s laughter surprised Shivaji. He replied, before his father could react, ‘The rest of the army and the treasury is at Raigad while I am being banished to Shringarpur. I wonder how I am to protect the kingdom.’

Shivaji held Sambhaji’s hand in his and squeezed it gently, saying, ‘Remember this, Shambhu; Raigad is not safe for you at present. For many reasons, I cannot allow you to remain there right now. I want to protect my son from danger. Please bear that in mind. You are dear to me.’

Sambhaji suddenly realised his father was suffering from the strain of being unable to speak his mind, and undergoing the same kind of torment as him.

Shivaji said, ‘Shambhu, at Shringarpur you will have a lot of time to be with yourself. Use that time to make friends with the sons of the soil, the ryots, and others around you. Learn to understand people better. And remember—there are many amongst us, men with no ethics whatsoever, who, for the smallest of selfish gains, will not hesitate to destroy their king or endanger their kingdom.’

THREE

# Shringarpur





# 1

Shringarpur was a bustling town nestled at the base of the great Sahyadri mountains. Once the capital of Suryarao Surve, it had since Shivaji's conquest been entrusted to the stewardship of Pilajirao Shirke, Sambhaji's father-in-law. Nearly twenty thousand people lived there. There were around sixty havelis in the town, big and small, belonging to the sardars who worked under Shirke.

Shivaji had built a spacious palace next to the residence of the Shirkes, where Sambhaji, Yesubai and Durgadevi, another of Sambhaji's wives, stayed. In front of the palace was a garden, and next to it was another haveli, occupied by Kavi Kalash, Yuvraj's friend and mentor.

Shringarpur had become famous as a Hindu shrine and many pandits, sadhus and others interested in the art of tantra had made it their home. In a cave high up in the mountains, en route to the Prachitgad fort, lived a tantric guru known as Shivayogi. Kavi Kalash and Sambhaji were frequent visitors, and they consulted him on various matters. Prachitgad was a new fort built by Shivaji which overlooked the territory of Shringarpur. Many tantriks and Brahmins had taken up residence at the fort and in the caves nearby.

Finding Sambhaji in low spirits one day, Yesubai said, 'I am quite confident that everything would be fine once my father-in-law returns from Karnatak.

'And till then?'

'Till then? Well, why not enjoy the beauty of Shringarpur? We have Kavi Kalash with us. You can spend time working on your poetry.'

Sambhaji was too despondent even to respond. Yesubai was trying her best to humour Sambhaji while somehow managing to keep her own emotions at bay. She had not forgotten the victorious glance which Soyraibai

had thrown at her in Raigad just as she was about to get into the palanquin that would carry her to Shringarpur. But Yesubai had deliberately erased these insults from her memory, and devoted all her energy to lifting her husband's spirits. She was aware of his direct and simple nature—compassionate at heart yet capable of taking tough decisions, wise but with a short temper that bristled at any kind of injustice.

Yesubai had learnt to deal with uncertainties and troubles since her childhood. She was barely six when she was married to Sambhaji. Sambhaji was a young lad of eight or nine then.

Having signed the treaty of Purandar, Shivaji had been forced to travel with Sambhaji to Agra and present himself in Aurangzeb's durbar. It had been months since their departure for the Mughal capital, much to the anxiety and consternation of Jijabai. She would spend all her time in prayer, and performed various abhisheks and poojas at the temple. Yesubai was a mute participant in all these activities. Sometimes, she would pray quietly at the grave of Saibai, Sambhaji's mother.

The air was heavy with gossip and rumours. It was becoming increasingly clear that Aurangzeb had played a dirty trick, and that the lives of Shivaji and Sambhaji were now in his hands. Would Shivaji be sent on a campaign to Kandahar, where death was inevitable? Had he been put under house arrest? There were no clear answers. The rumours continued to multiply, making Jijabai more and more anxious.

After many months had passed, one day, a group of mendicants called Gosavis arrived at the palace door, demanding to meet the queen mother. A guard came to Jijabai's chambers, saluted and said, 'Aajisaheb, one of the Gosavis is insisting on meeting you and says he will not leave till he has received your blessings.'

Jijabai nodded in acquiescence. Soon, a curly-haired, fair and handsome Gosavi entered and approached Jijabai to put his head reverently on her feet. He said, tears falling down his cheeks, 'Aausaheb!' It was Shivaji! Jijabai's joy knew no bounds and she embraced him, saying, 'Shivba!'

Shivaji had finally managed to find a way to escape from Agra. But where was Sambhaji? Jijabai looked behind her son but all she could see were the smiling mendicants that formed the rest of the party. The young lad was missing!



While all the trumpets, horns, drums and cannons of Raigad announced the return of Shivaji, the question on everyone's mind was about Sambhaji. Where was Yuvraj? What had happened to him? Yesubai looked at Shivaji, wild with anticipation, but kept quiet, waiting for Jijabai to ask the question.

‘Shivba, why are you alone? Where is Shambhu Raje?’

Shivaji turned to face his mother and said hesitatingly, ‘Maasaheb, let us talk of it in the evening. I will speak to you in private.’

Shivaji's hesitant and vague reply tortured Yesu. All kinds of thoughts and fears flashed through her mind in quick succession. Where was her husband? Was he safe?

On the third day after his arrival, Shivaji sat in his private quarters with Jijabai and his queens. He stretched his hands towards Yesu. ‘Come, dear. Come and sit with me,’ Raje lovingly asked her to sit on his lap. The little seven-year-old, wearing a traditional nine-yard saree, looked like a doll dressed up for a play. Raje caressed her forehead and then, in a sudden movement, wiped the sindoor off her forehead.

Everyone present gasped in surprise! No one spoke but the message was clear: Sambhaji would never come back. Jijabai burst out sobbing, ‘Bal Raje!’ In an instant, the palace was cloaked in sadness. Shivaji said, ‘Yesu, it was an unfortunate accident. While we were running away from Agra, he fell from his horse in a jungle and succumbed to his injuries.’

Pilajirao and his family reached Raigad the next day. It was a tragedy which broke their heart—their young daughter, widowed, at the tender age of seven. Shivaji tried consoling them as best he could. The ryots came in droves to meet their beloved Shivaji but they would burst into tears the moment they heard of Sambhaji's fate. Soyraibai, not yet a mother, was heartbroken too. She had looked after Sambhaji since Saibai's death, and loved him dearly.

Shivaji prepared for Sambhaji's last rites. Messages of condolence reached Raigad from all over— from Jaipur in the north to Jinji in the south. Shivaji performed the rites, feeding hundreds of Brahmins and mendicants. As for Yesu, she had literally collapsed under the weight of her sorrow. She said to her mother, once the ceremonies were over, ‘Maasaheb, I would like to commit sati. I want to join my husband. He was my friend, my playmate and my soulmate. What will I do without him?’

Yesu had no idea what sati meant. Surprisingly, her parents seemed to accept the decision—even to encourage it. Shivaji, on the other hand, was greatly disturbed.

He said, ‘My dear, don’t worry. Things will be fine.’

‘How will things be fine when he is gone?’ asked Yesu.

Shivaji struggled to find an answer. He simply folded his hands as he would when praying to Bhawani. The sight was heart-rending. Here was Shivaji pleading with Yesu! How was he to console the poor child? Yet somehow, he managed to convince her not to take the extreme step of committing sati.

The days passed by rapidly. Yesu would be overcome with grief at the mere sight of the clouds in the sky that matched the white saree which she now wore as a widow. She spent most of her time in the temple, praying.

One day, the cannons of Raigad roared, shattering the peace of the morning. It had been two months and eight days since Shivaji’s return. Yesubai ran out of her quarters, fearing the worst. Was there an attack on Raigad? But the trumpets, horns and drums followed. It was a celebration!

A confused Yesubai stepped out on the street. Then she saw Soyrabai rushing towards her quarters, with a bowl of sugar in her hand. Beaming with joy, she hugged Yesubai and said, ‘Our Shambhu Bal has returned. Our Bal Raje is safe!’ The news was too much for Yesu to bear, and she collapsed on the floor.

Visaji Pant, Kashi Pant and Krishnaji Pant, the Trimal brothers, had risked their lives to get Sambhaji to Raigad all the way from Mathura. They had faced terrible dangers at each step. With them was Kavi Kalash, then a twenty-year-old youth.

Raje called for a special durbar in honour of the Trimal brothers, and bestowed upon them the title of Vishwasrao. They were given expensive gifts, including an elephant, a royal palanquin, and clothes befitting men of royal stature.

Visaji Pant said, accepting the gifts with humility, ‘Raje, I am Moropant Peshwa’s brother-in-law. It is our honour to serve under you for the cause of Swaraj.’

The Trimal brothers were then invited to partake of a special meal in Raje’s company. They were overjoyed by the respect being accorded to them.

As the meal progressed, Raje asked Visaji, ‘Pant, you must have faced a lot of problems en route. How did you manage to keep your disguise?’

‘Raje, it was difficult. We had put a sacred thread on Yuvraj to make him look like a young Brahmin. With his long hair and his lovely eyes, childlike and innocent, he looked just like our nephew,’ Visaji Pant smiled at the memory. ‘But Maharaj, your escape from the clutches of the Badshah had created quite a furore. We were being questioned at all the check points and had to bribe several officials. Besides, Yuvraj, with his beautiful face, was attracting a lot of attention and curiosity. That was when we decided to dress him up like a girl. We put some jewellery on him and decorated his eyes with kohl. Travelling as our ‘maid’, he was much safer!’

Yesu, imagining her husband in the guise of a girl, could not contain her laughter, much to the amusement of the grown-ups present. Soon afterwards, the Trimal brothers took their leave. Kavi Kalash, who had become a close friend and confidante of Yuvraj, decided to stay back.

As soon as the brothers left, Raje’s queens erupted. They had believed that Yuvraj was dead and participated in his last rites, grieving terribly. It had been revealed to them that Raje was aware of the truth all along. Yet he had chosen to go along with the charade. Soyrabai was so upset that she refused to speak. As for Jijabai, she turned her penetrating stare on Shivaji, which Raje did not dare to meet.

He said, finally finding his voice, ‘I had no other choice, Aausaheb! I knew Aurangzeb was furious and would leave no stone unturned to find us. The news of Yuvraj’s death was the only piece of misinformation likely to slacken the Mughals in their hunt.

‘But you went ahead and performed his last rites!’

‘Maasaheb, I am acutely aware that it was a cruel and heartless act, as far as you were concerned. But believe me ... that was the only way to ensure Yuvraj’s safe return. Had I not made that decision, we may have had to, God forbid, perform the ceremony in reality.’

The very thought made Jijabai shudder. She said, hugging Shambhu Raje, ‘Shivba, don’t make me go through such an ordeal ever again. When you indulge in such politics, it is I who must suffer the consequences!’

## 2

Shringarpur transformed itself in the rains. A dense fog would envelop the valley after a heavy downpour, covering everything in its wake. The river Shastri, emerging out of the mountains near the Prachitgad fort, tumbled down the steep slopes, dancing merrily to the tunes of the numerous waterfalls on its way. Never had the Sahyadris been more beautiful! Yuvraj was often mesmerised as he stood by the windows of his palace which faced the imposing fortress, watching the showers.

The monsoon months were indeed an ideal time for Kavi Kalash and Yuvraj to compose poems, but the soldier in Sambhaji was not going to be satisfied simply by penning verses on the beauty of the rains. He decided to set up five akharas where the youth of the region would be trained in the art of wrestling and body building. Soon, the akharas became a popular gathering place for young boys and girls.

Sambhaji learnt from one of the firangi sailors who had come from the port of Rajapur that the English troops were quite unlike the Maratha army. While the Marathas would spend entire months during the monsoon tending to their crops, and fight for the army during the months that remained, the English troops had full-time soldiers, ready for a campaign any time of the year. Sambhaji decided to set up a standing cavalry of two thousand mounted men and purchased the finest horses from Dabhol and Rajapur. His plan was to create a 'Shringarpuri cavalry' which would be known across the Maratha Empire.

Sambhaji deliberately chose men from the lower castes. The young recruits were proud to be a part of Yuvraj's cavalry and committed wholeheartedly to their rigorous training, which commenced soon enough in right earnest. The men would vie with each other, riding their mounts up the steep slopes of Prachitgad. It was a daunting task which challenged the toughest of them. But they were a determined lot and would race to reach the top, crossing deep ravines, muddy fields and dense woods. Curious villagers would gather in crowds to watch the training.

As expected, it was not long before Sambhaji received a note from Rahuji Somnath. It questioned Yuvraj's act of creating a new army in the

absence of Shivaji Maharaj and without taking the permission from those in charge at Raigad.

Kavi Kalash replied, saying, ‘Please be informed that Yuvraj deserves the title he was given when he sat with Maharaj at the coronation. He has powers equivalent to those of the Ashta Pradhan. The army he is setting up is for the benefit of the Swaraj. His actions and decisions are hardly out of place.’

Sambhaji, however, was hurt by the fact that even this well-meaning endeavour, to recruit the people of Shringarpur to the Maratha army and make them feel they were a part of the Swaraj, was being seen with a jaundiced eye. He said, feeling dejected, ‘I am training cavalymen and setting up akharas to teach people the art of wrestling. I am not opening zenankhanas. I wonder why they fail to understand such simple acts. In what way am I working against the Swaraj?’

During those days at Shringarpur, Sambhaji would often stand at the highest point of Prachitgad and look at the river Warna in the distance. Beyond it was Panhalgad, and in the same line of vision although far beyond his ken, were Bijapur and the southern province of Karnatak. He would gaze wistfully at the horizon, sighing deeply and wondering where his father was at that moment, while he stood alone on the ramparts of the fort.

Like a calf waiting for its mother to return in the evening, like the lover waiting for her companion to arrive, or the devotee who climbs the steps to a temple to worship his God—a range of emotions would rush through Sambhaji’s heart. He was desperate to meet his father. But he knew the wait would be long. He would go only when he was called for.

Yesubai was pregnant and the child was growing rapidly in her womb. Sambhaji had made up his mind to return to Raigad only after the child was born. He would pray at the Jagdeeshwar temple and then meet Maharaj.

The monsoon progressed steadily, changing the topography of Shringarpur. More than half the territory was covered with dense jungles while numerous waterfalls cascaded down the steep slopes of Prachitgad. The rice fields shone in the mild sunlight and wild flowers lit up the shades of the rainforest.

Kavi Kalash was the son of Muralidhar Shastri of Prayag. His real name was Umaji Pandit but by the time he was a youth of twenty, he had participated in various literary competitions and made a name for himself as a poet as well as a scholar of Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha. It was because he had reached the zenith, the ‘kalash’, of his poetic abilities at an early age that he was given the title of Kavi Kalash.

Muralidhar Shastri had attracted the wrath of the Mughal throne for having composed and sung paeans in praise of Shivaji. One day, when Kalash returned from his morning prayers, his father said, ‘You need to leave immediately for Agra. I have received news that Shivaji Maharaj and his son Sambhaji have been summoned to Agra, and I fear that Aurangzeb may have some tricks up his sleeve. We cannot trust the Mughal Emperor to play straight ... he might try to arrest Maharaj. I am too old to make the journey. But you need to leave right away.’

As Kalash took his leave, Shastri said, ‘Remember, we owe a lot to the Bhosale family. Do whatever it takes to help them. The Hindus of this land look to Shivaji Maharaj as their saviour, and we cannot let him down in his hour of need.’

Kalash reached Agra and presented himself to Shivaji. Impressed with his mastery over Sanskrit, Maharaj asked him to tutor Sambhaji. Kalash and Shambhu were ten years apart in age but became instant friends. Sambhaji’s love for poetry and languages made Kalash’s job easy. Soon, the pair were inseparable.

On the eve of his escape from Agra, a tearful Shivaji had told Kalash, ‘I am going away but I leave a part of myself behind. Take care of him!’ He took off a diamond ring he was wearing and gave it to Kalash.

Kalash stayed on in Agra for a few days with Saxena, a friend of his. Soon after Shivaji’s departure, they were arrested on suspicion of involvement in his escape and asked to leave town. Kalash then made his way to Mathura, where his grandfather lived. Sambhaji was already there, dressed as a Brahmin boy, under the care of the Trimal brothers. Kalash

went with Sambhaji to their house and, when the Trimal brothers decided to leave for the Deccan, Kalash joined them on their journey.

Travelling with Kalash gave Sambhaji the opportunity to understand and develop his passion for literature, Sanskrit classics and poetry. He decided that he would write verses under the pen-name of Nrupashambhu. Kavi Kalash became his best friend, critic and guru.

In the daytime, at Shringarpur, Kalash would help Sambhaji in his official duties, including correspondence on various matters of state. The evenings were devoted to poetry and discussing the classics. The two got along as well as they had when they met almost a decade earlier, mixing work and pleasure with ease.

The serene beauty of Shringarpur helped Sambhaji to refine his poetic skills, and it was during his sojourn there that he started writing Budhabhushanam in Sanskrit. Gradually, in the stimulating company of Kavi Kalash and Keshav Pandit, Sambhaji began to get over the fact that his father had not taken him along on the Karnatak campaign.

## 4

Yesubai sat at the window of her bedchamber, enjoying the beauty of Prachitgad bathed in the light of the morning sun. She was taken by surprise when she felt Yuvraj's hand on her shoulder. He said, 'You seem to be lost in your thoughts. What happened?'

'Whenever I see the huge tree guarding the gorge, I am reminded of Maharaj. Whether in Raigad or Shringarpur, his presence is felt everywhere.'

'Well, it was his keen eye that spotted a gem here in Shringarpur,' Sambhaji said, much to the embarrassment of Yesubai who blushed pink. Sambhaji was referring to the proposal of marriage that Shivaji had made to Yesu's father.

Late that night, Sambhaji lay on his bed. But sleep eluded him as his eyes strayed towards the open windows. In the distance, he could see the dark silhouette of the mighty Prachitgad fort. In the dense jungles below,

torches glowed intermittently. Sambhaji knew his men were patrolling the forest and guarding the road to the fort. Then he heard horses. The sound of their hooves stopped at the gates of the palace.

Before the messenger reached the palace, Sambhaji came out. The tall lamps that were lit at dusk continued to burn, albeit weakly, on the verandah. Kavi Kalash, ever alert, already stood quietly in a corner. The messenger approached, escorted by the guards. Sambhaji looked closely at the man; he appeared to be a Mughal soldier in his fifties. The guards saluted smartly, seeing Yuvraj arrive.

Sambhaji looked at Kalash, who addressed the messenger, ‘What is this about?’

‘It is a message from Diler Khan, Raje saheb,’ the old man said.

Sambhaji was careful not to show his reaction although he was not particularly surprised to hear that a mighty Mughal sardar like Diler Khan had reached out to him. Khan, in his sixties, was a tall, well-built Rohilla Pathan and a seasoned soldier who had fought many a battle from the Ganga in the north to the Bhima and the Kaveri in the south. His bravery and devotion to the Mughal cause matched his religious zeal and his belief in cruelty as a means of gaining his ends. It was he who had brought Muazzam, the Shahzada who had tried to usurp his father Aurangzeb’s throne, to his knees. He was no less skilful in the diplomatic negotiations of the durbar. Diler Khan had been given the Subedari of the Deccan a couple of years ago and had since been making frantic efforts to win Sambhaji over.

Sambhaji muttered a silent prayer before asking Kalash to read the message aloud. Kalash nodded and read:

*‘Rajadhiraj Sher Shamsher Sambhaji Raje Bhosale,*

*I don’t need to tell the poet in you that when a man extends his hand of friendship he has already burnt away the cobwebs of enmity from his heart. I am sure you are aware that a lotus blooms in a lake and nowhere else. A lion cub too shows its beauty in the dense jungles and not in a zoo. I am thus tempted to ask you—why has a Maratha Shahzada like you decided to confine himself in the dark caves of Shringarpur? I believe that you have been kept away from Raigad. Despite being the son of*



*Shivaji Bhosale himself, you are neglected and deprived of his love and affection.*

*You are familiar with enmity of the Mughals but you have not experienced their friendship. Had we not been true to our vows of friendship, we would not have been able to maintain relations with the Rajputs for three generations. I request you therefore to consider my proposal without any doubt or suspicion. Don't reject my offer of friendship. If you accept, please be assured that if you ever need my assistance of any kind, all you need to do is send word. Don't hesitate whether it is day or night. This old man will not spare any effort to give you all the help we can provide.'*

Kavi Kalash paused, wondering if Diler Khan was being earnest in his offer. Amused by Diler Khan's desperate attempt to take advantage of the situation, Sambhaji burst out laughing. The very fact that the Mughal Subedar of the Deccan was now speaking of pure and disinterested friendship with the Yuvraj of the Maratha Empire was ironic, if not utterly ridiculous.

Nevertheless, an uneasy silence reigned in Sambhaji's quarters for the remainder of the night. The messenger waited patiently outside to take his message back to Diler Khan. Sambhaji decided that it was best not to answer in a hurry and resolved to confront the issue the next morning.

The next day, wearied by his long wait in the humid Shringarpur weather, the messenger sent several reminders to Sambhaji, asking humbly for his reply. That afternoon, Sambhaji finally said, summoning the messenger, 'Please convey my answer to Diler Khan—like the river which cannot flow back to its origin, the very thought of a friendship between a Mughal Subedar and Shivaji's son is impossible. It not merely foolish to wish for it—it is sheer madness.'

It was well past noon when the palanquins carrying Sambhaji and Yesubai reached the coast near Sangameshwar. The bright sun reflected on the waters, the fishing boats gently bobbing in the sea, the swaying palm trees—all added to the charm of the afternoon. Sambhaji loved the ancient town which was situated at the confluence of the rivers Varuna and Alaknanda. It was said that the Lord Parshuram had built numerous temples here. So had the Chalukya king, Karna, who made it the capital of his kingdom. The Adilshahi sultan of Bijapur once had a subedar stationed here who later moved to the Deccan when the Hindavi Swaraj expanded and threatened his existence.

Enamoured with the beauty of the place, Sambhaji decided to construct a palace at Sangameshwar and gave orders for the work to commence immediately. ‘It will help me to keep an eye on the movement from Goa and Kolhapur, he said, ‘while I enjoy the natural beauty of this coast.’

Sambhaji, aiming to reach Shringarpur before nightfall, decided to ride back. But it was already growing dark as he and Kavi Kalash sped through the woods close behind a few men who rode with lighted torches. As they passed a small village, a group of nearly two hundred men and women came forward. They all clamoured to meet Yuvraj. Sensing the urgency of the matter, Sambhaji pulled the reins of his horse.

‘Yuvraj,’ one of the men began, ‘please help us. Save us!’

‘What happened?’

‘Sarkar, how are we to survive if you take away our fields?’

‘Whose orders are those?’ Sambhaji asked, signalling to Kavi to read the papers which the old man held out in his hands. The province of Prabhavali was under Sambhaji’s direct supervision and he wondered how such a directive had come from Raigad without his permission.

‘We have not been able to pay our dues for a few years due to poor harvests. Now they have issued orders, attaching our land to the treasury,’ the old man said.

‘The orders have come from Rahuji Somnath. Based on specific instructions given by Annaji Datto, it says,’ Kavi Kalash said, his eyes moving swiftly over the documents.

The old man stepped forward to touch Sambhaji’s feet, ‘Sarkar, our crops have failed for the past seven years. Many of our men have

committed suicide out of sheer frustration. Please have pity on us, Sarkar!’

Sambhaji looked at the weak, shrivelled men and women; it was clear to him that the villagers were desperate and that they were not lying. Without a moment’s hesitation, he summoned the thanedar of Sangameshwar. When the man arrived, he said, ‘I am exempting these people from paying any taxes or dues, past and present. Please issue the orders immediately.’

The villagers were astounded at the instant decision taken by the Yuvraj. They nearly danced in joy as they blessed his kind heart.

That evening, as Sambhaji sat relaxing in his room, Kavi Kalash came in and suggested, ‘Yuvraj, don’t you think we should inform Raigad of your orders, for their records?’

‘Why? Do you think I made the wrong decision?’

‘We should not give the head of the royal treasury a reason to object to your decision. Is it not wise to explain why we have issued such orders?’

Sambhaji erupted, ‘I am the Subedar of Prabhavali and I have the authority to waive the taxes. And, in case you forget, I am the Yuvraj! It is my duty and privilege to give instant relief and justice to the ryots, especially those who are suffering. Don’t you think so?’

Kavi Kalash smiled, unperturbed, and said, ‘Yuvraj, I know I don’t have a right to lecture you on these matters but I am advising you as a friend, based on my experience. The walls of the durbar are porous; the winds of rumours and gossip blow through them incessantly. In the current situation, when those in charge at Raigad are waiting to find fault with you, is it not prudent to send a note to the treasury, explaining the rationale behind our decision?’

## 6

Days turned into months, but the routines of Yuvraj and his household at Shringarpur hardly changed. One morning, Balaji Avaji arrived from Raigad. He was the official responsible for all of Shivaji’s correspondence. His slim, tall figure, not to mention the energetic pace at which he climbed

the twenty-odd steps to the palace in one go, belied his sixty years. While Yesubai welcomed him with a respectful namaskar, Sambhaji hugged him affectionately and asked, a little surprised, 'Balaji Kaka, what brings you here?'

'Shambhu Raje, it has been months since Shivaji Raje left for Karnatak. There is no fun at Raigad without him; hence I thought I might spend a few days here with you.'

Balaji Avaji was one of the few handpicked men like Hambirrao, Yesaji Kank, Hiroji Farzand, Annaji Datto and Moropant Pingle, who had been with Shivaji since the beginning. Daredevils like Tanaji and Bajiprabhu Deshpande, beloved of Maharaj, had died martyrs in the service of the Hindavi Swaraj.

Balaji's association with Shivaji had begun with a tragedy spawned by an unfortunate coincidence. His father, Avaji Hari Chitre, was a prominent official at the court of Siddi Babshikhan in Janjira, infamous for his cruelty and the way he treated the common man. Meanwhile, Avaji rapidly rose to the position of Diwan due to his dedication and hard work, arousing the jealousy of the Muslim sardars of the Janjira court.

The Siddi was ailing when Avaji had taken leave to visit his family deity in Jejuri. On his return he found that the Siddi's health had deteriorated further. This gave the Muslim sardars a chance to spread the rumour that Avaji had gone to Jejuri to pray for the Siddi's death. As luck would have it, Siddi Babshikhan died, and his young successor was led to believe that the tragedy was caused by Avaji's black magic. Despite Avaji's ardent pleas of innocence, he was forced to drink poison along with his brother Khandoji. Then their bodies were tied together and thrown into the ocean.

The cruel young Sultan did not stop at that, and decreed that Avaji's three sons Balaji, Chimnaji and Shyamji, as well as his wife Rakhmabai, be sent to Persia as slaves. They were rounded up and put on a ship. Luckily, near Rajapur, the winds changed their direction and the ship was forced to dock. It was Rakhmabai's good fortune that her brother Visaji Shankar was a trader stationed at Rajapur, and he managed to cajole, bribe and finally convince the sailors to release his sister and her sons.

Balaji was only eleven years old. But he had already heard stories of Shivaji's efforts to create a Hindavi Swaraj and was impressed by his valour and determination. One day, he composed and sent a letter to Shivaji in his

neat cursive handwriting, 'It would be my honour, Raje, to serve under you as a soldier for the cause of the Swaraj.'

Luckily, Raje was visiting Rajapur then and wanted to meet the brave young boy who had written the letter. Soon afterwards he inducted Balaji into his army. Rakhmabai was worried about her son's safety, as she was yet to recover from the terrible and torturous death of her husband. However Raje gave his word to Rakhmabai, saying, 'Mother, you have three sons. Please consider me as your fourth one. For as long as your son takes care of the Swaraj, I promise to take care of your son.'

Balaji rose swiftly in the ranks owing to his dedication and integrity. Despite opposition from the Brahmins in Shivaji's court, he was given the title of Chitnis, personal secretary to Shivaji, responsible for all the correspondence and paper work of the Empire. Eventually he came to be known as Balaji Avaji Chitnis. All the important forts of the Hindavi Swaraj were entrusted to Balaji's supervision. He appointed capable men from his community, the Prabhus—also known as Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu—to manage the forts. This was widely resented by the Brahmins who felt that the Prabhus were growing arrogant and misusing their powers.

Amongst the Ashta Pradhan, Moropant Pingle and Annaji Datto were on least friendly terms with Balaji Avaji. But neither of them had the temerity to openly state their differences in the presence of Shivaji Raje. The reality behind their pretence of cordiality was very different, of course.

Balaji Avaji had always felt a deep affection for Sambhaji. He could empathise with the fact that Sambhaji had grown up without the loving presence of a mother while his father had constantly been away on one campaign or another. He was one of the few men in Shivaji's council of ministers who invariably acted in the Yuvraj's best interests.

His support was based on genuine respect: he was impressed by the way Sambhaji had run offices of the empire in Raigad under Shivaji's direction. Even earlier, Sambhaji had earned his spurs by proving himself an able administrator by the way he had governed the provinces of Kolar and Chikkabelapur, not to mention the success of the daredevil military campaigns he had conducted at Raibagh, Golconda and Akola, going right up to the borders of Goa. The Yuvraj had even managed to get a large booty for the Swaraj after extending a hand of friendship to Diwan Madanna of the Qutbshahi regime.

Yuvraj and Yesubai were overjoyed to receive Balaji Avaji at Shringarpur after a gap of many months. That evening, at dinner, Balaji asked, 'Where is that kapalik, the practitioner of black magic?'

'To whom are you referring?' Sambhaji asked, puzzled.

'The one who has mesmerised you. The one whose scheming mind is poisoning your thoughts. The one who sits on a wet buffalo skin and meditates.'

Sambhaji realised that Balaji was speaking of Kavi Kalash. He smiled, looking at Yesubai, before he replied, 'It seems that you too have been influenced by others in your opinions, Balaji.'

'He is manipulating people with his tantric practices. He kills animals for his sacrifices and eats all kinds of meat. He is a bad influence, Yuvraj.'

'Balaji Kaka, you are being misled. There are different ways of practising your faith. The tantric practices by themselves are not bad. It is a way of praying to Shakti. After all, our family deity, Tulja Bhawani Mata, is depicted holding a sword in her hand to kill her enemies and wipe out all evil. She requires blood as an offering from her devotees, doesn't she?' Sambhaji smiled and continued, 'In this vitiated atmosphere, when everyone is against me, don't I need someone who can protect me from the evil eye?'

'Shambhu Raje, the elder Maharaj never went looking for such support.'

'I am surprised you say that, Balaji Kaka. When Maharaj was not satisfied with the coronation ceremony supervised by Gaga Bhatt, he had invited the Gosavi Nischalgiri to perform various tantric rites. Don't forget that Nischalgiri was later given a place to stay at Sangameshwar, on Raje's orders.'

Balaji suddenly said, 'I did not know you were so eager to take your place on the throne.'

'What are you saying, Kaka? Why would I even imagine myself on the throne when Abasaheb is alive? Am I a Mughal or a Sultan's son to dream of overthrowing his father?'

'I am told you had a kalashabhishek performed.'

'Kakasaheb, you are not aware of the events that drove me to perform this ceremony to ward off the evil eye. I have seen a horse die suddenly for no reason. Lemons pierced with needles and dolls have been found in the palace grounds. Allegations against me multiply; all kinds of malicious

gossip is being peddled about me and my behaviour—it was all becoming too much. If I am to serve the Swaraj as my father might wish, I need peace.’

Balaji Avaji was not impressed by Sambhaji’s explanation. He persisted, ‘Peace! What kind of peace are you looking for, Yuvraj? When do you expect to find it—when Shivaji Raje is no more?’

Unable to tolerate such accusations, Sambhaji shouted, rising from his seat, ‘What kind of nonsense is this, Kaka?’

‘Yuvraj, you don’t realise the enormity of your act. The kalabhishek ceremony is performed only by someone who wishes the death of the one who sits on the throne. News of your ceremony has spread far and wide, and people have sent messages to Shivaji Raje. Annaji Datto, Rahuji Somnath, Soryabai Maharani, and many others are very upset..’ Balaji Avaji wiped his face with his angavastram and continued, ‘When I heard all this, it pierced my heart and I could not stay put at Raigad. I had to see you!’

Sambhaji said, with a lump in his throat, ‘What a pity! I wonder why these vile people are out to spread such malicious rumours about me. What do they have against me? Now I realise it is a good thing that I am so far away from Raigad. What an irony that in the land of greats like Tukaram and Samarth Ramdas, we still entertain such petty and selfish thoughts!’ Overcome with emotion, Sambhaji nearly collapsed on the floor. Balaji Avaji rushed to help him up and made him sit on a chair.

Sambhaji was deeply hurt. He had never imagined that the conspiracy against him would reach such proportions. He said as Balaji brought him a tumbler of water, ‘Balaji Kaka, isn’t it a pity that the men holding high posts in the Swaraj indulge in dirty politics of the basest level?’

Balaji had known Sambhaji since childhood. Yuvraj had always spoken his mind. He had a strong sense of justice, and treated everyone around him as they deserved to be treated. He was blunt and rude with those who behaved in a similar manner, and could be most compassionate and soft-spoken with those who merited such kindness. Balaji knew his clear and transparent mind inside out.

He said, trying to soothe Sambhaji, ‘Yuvraj, people are not blaming you. They feel that you have been influenced by Kalash who is playing with your emotions and manipulating you.’

‘I don’t think so. It may look like they are criticising Kalash but their taunts are most certainly directed at me.’

‘Shambhu Raje, just ignore them. Even today, many of the so-called high-caste Brahmins and Marathas are not willing even to recognise Shivaji Raje as a Kshatriya. In fact, they had openly protested before Raje was coronated. They claimed that ever since Lord Parshuram decimated all the Kshatriyas, there were none left and hence Shivaji Raje could not claim to be one! To prove the naysayers wrong, it was I who had gone all the way to the north to prove that Raje’s ancestors belonged to the Sisodiya family of Rajputana.’

‘Why don’t people like Annaji Datto understand this?’

‘Yuvraj, you must recognise the fact that Annaji Datto has been an efficient Pradhan. He has fought many battles with Raje and served the Swaraj well. It is he who oversees the collection of the revenue that maintains the empire. Of course, it is a different story that he was tempted to keep a part of the revenue for himself. Despite his capabilities, it is evident that he is not an entirely honest man. But above all, remember this: Annaji believes that there are no real Kshatriyas in the kingdom, whether among the Marathas or the Prabhus.’ Balaji paused before he said, ‘I myself have had to suffer many insults silently, Shambhu Raje. When I needed to perform my son’s thread ceremony, it was Annaji who raised objections. I appealed to Moropant Pingle for justice, only to find that he had already been biased by Annaji’s opinion. Finally, I managed somehow to convince Gaga Bhatt to perform the ceremony, against the wishes of these so-called Brahmins.’

Balaji stayed at Shringarpur for two days, conversing at length with Yuvraj and Yesubai. It was clear to Sambhaji that the people acting against him and Kavi Kalash were trying their best to poison Shivaji Raje’s mind. The ministers were also blaming him for having waived the taxes of the Prabhavali peasants.

Regarding his decision, Sambhaji said, ‘Kaka, these people have been plagued by torrential rains and floods for the past eight years. For the same reason, they are also in debt to local moneylenders. They are in no position to pay taxes. Isn’t it fair that in such a situation we waive their dues and reduce their burden?’

‘Yuvraj, your heart and its motives are as pure and transparent as the flowing stream. But your enemies are spreading the rumour that you are out to undo whatever Raje has done. They have already sent several messages



to Maharaj, complaining about your actions, twisting the truth to serve their purposes.’

‘I am not bothered about their plots and plans,’ Sambhaji said confidently. ‘Let Abasaheb return. I will tell him the truth and I am sure he will only pat me on the back for the way I have conducted myself and the affairs of the kingdom during these past months.’

However, when Balaji Avaji took his leave, the Yuvraj was despondent again. ‘I did not bother when these people found a way to stop me from joining Abasaheb in the Karnatak campaign. I did not complain when I was asked to leave Raigad and stay at Shringarpur. I was even accused of molesting a girl and driving her to suicide. I took all that in my stride, but now they accuse me of performing some tantric acts against my own father! I cannot take it any more ... I feel ...’

Sambhaji could not continue. He was overwhelmed with emotion. He said, after taking a deep breath, ‘Kaka, let them say what they have to. But I tell you—to fulfil Abasaheb’s dream, for the Swaraj—I am willing to sacrifice myself anytime, anywhere. That is my promise!’

## 7

Memories of the elder Maharaj flooded Sambhaji’s mind. Images of Raigad troubled him. He said to his wife, sighing deeply,

‘How things change with time. There were times when Soyraibai, playing with me in my childhood, would turn into a small child herself. She would often fight with Jijabai on my behalf. Later ...’

‘What happened later?’

‘Well, it seems the very walls of the palace changed their colour ever since the first cries of baby Rajaram reverberated there.’

‘Yuvraj, don’t you remember the grand celebration when Maharaj was coronated? The way he introduced you as Yuvraj of the Swaraj and the heir apparent! On that occasion, even Soyraibai, Shivaji Raje’s chief consort, had not objected to it!’

‘Well, that may be true ... but I distinctly remember her growing cold towards me since that day.’

Yesubai said, rubbing Sambhaji’s palm affectionately, ‘What’s the point in getting upset like this? Maharaj saheb, who considers me his daughter, will surely never forget you—his own flesh and blood.’

‘Yesu, understand this—Shambhu is not going to get justice in his father’s palace. Many are waiting to put a black mark on my character whenever possible. There is literally a contest amongst them to label me as cruel, drunkard, wayward, arrogant, vagabond, womaniser—in short, as one who is not fit to be Yuvraj.’

‘Yuvraj, have faith in the Lord.’

‘I pray to several gods and goddesses each day but, in truth, there is no God higher than Shivaji. I shelter in his shade, like that of a massive banyan tree. However there are evil souls who would not only deny me refuge under the tree but uproot my very identity!’

Yesubai could sense the growing restlessness in Sambhaji. He could barely sleep. The deep sighs he let out at intervals spoke of the inner turmoil he was experiencing. The baseless allegations churned out by the Raigad faction were beginning to test his self-esteem and hurt his ego; his usually poetic and peaceful mind seethed with violent rage nowadays. Yesubai, in her maturity and wisdom, tried her best to curb these destructive passions.

‘Yuvraj, the elder Maharaj has spent all his life trying to build the Swaraj that you are destined to rule. Why don’t you go to him, tell your side of the story? Or, at the very least, meet Annaji and speak to him.’

‘What’s the point? Is he going to listen? Ever since Hansa took her life, he blames me for it. And to top it all, Godu turned out to be his brother-in-law’s daughter. Things have taken such a turn that wisdom seems to be hiding its face in darkness.’

These anxious thoughts refused to leave Sambhaji’s mind. He was awake till the wee hours of the morning.

The next morning, as Yuvraj rose a little late, he found Kavi Kalash waiting for him with the thanedar of Sangameshwar. After a long journey on horseback, the man was sweating and out of breath. He said, before Sambhaji could speak,

‘Yuvraj, everything is topsy-turvy. Yesterday, riders came from Raigad and confiscated the poor farmers’ milk yielding cows; even their utensils!’

‘What for?’ Sambhaji exclaimed, unable to believe his ears. Kalash was quiet, looking down at the floor.

‘Oh, I see!’ Sambhaji said suddenly, nodding his head. ‘It is because I had issued orders to waive their dues.’

‘Yes, Sarkar,’ the thanedar said hesitatingly. ‘I tried explaining to them that those were your direct orders and that the farmers were really distressed but they said ...’

‘Please go on. Don’t hesitate.’

‘They said ... Shambhu Raje is not the one on the throne. When he is, we will salute him.’

‘I see!’ Sambhaji said, at a loss for words. Then he said, reining in his emotions, ‘Tell the emissaries from Raigad not to trouble the poor farmers, and that I will take responsibility for the loans they have forfeited.’

‘They don’t seem to be in a mood to listen, Raje. I tried, but ...’

‘Go on!’

‘They said that if Raje had intended Yuvraj’s orders to be followed, he would have handed over the charge of Raigad to him before leaving for Karnatak. He would not have been banished to the jungles of Shringarpur, the way we throw small pebbles out while cleaning rice.’

The thanedar seemed relieved that he had spelt out every word he had heard. Sambhaji’s face, however, was creased with pain, and Yesubai and Kalash were clearly dejected. They could not believe that Yuvraj was being openly insulted in this manner.

Sambhaji finally said to Kalash, in a cold and dry voice, ‘Kaviraj, take a platoon of a thousand soldiers and leave for Sangameshwar right away. Capture Rahuji Somnath’s official and his other men, and throw them in the prison here at Shringarpur.’

That day, before the sun set in the western sky, Kavi Kalash had carried out Yuvraj’s orders. Sambhaji said, when Kalash reported to him after completing the task,

‘Let those fellows suffer from hunger and thirst. Don’t show any pity on them.’

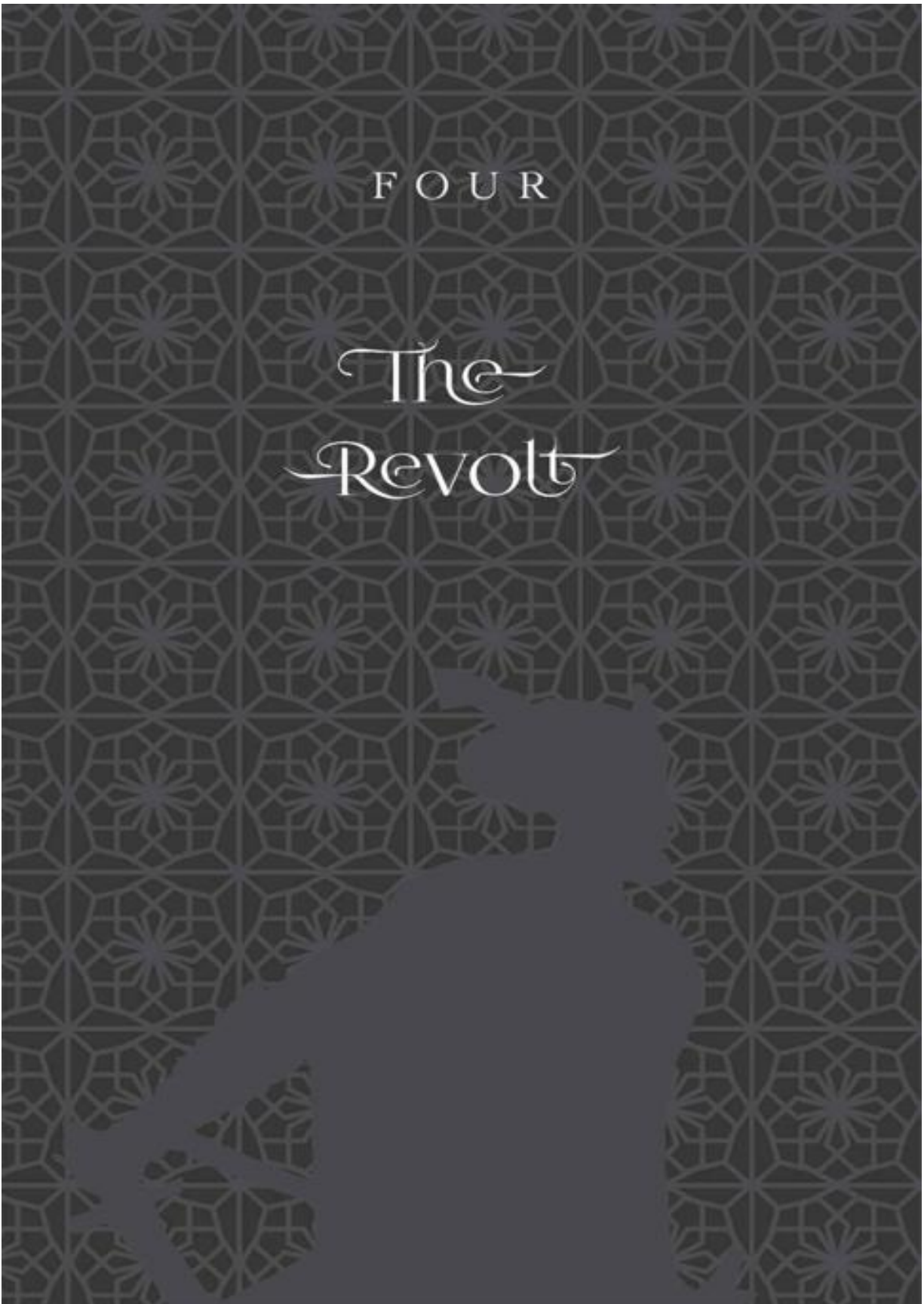
Annaji Datto was the Subedar of Prabhawali earlier and had ruled with an iron hand, caring a damn about the troubles faced by the ryots. The fact that someone like Yuvraj had arrived and shown the revenue officials their true place was a matter of celebration for the ryots and residents of Shringarpur.

Sambhaji said to Yesubai that night, ‘At last, things are changing!

Yesubai took his hand gently and put it on her belly, saying, ‘Well, I am worried about the changes happening here too. Please be careful. Act with restraint till the elder Maharaj returns.’

FOUR

# The Revolt





# 1

Not long after Balaji Avaji's visit, Ranubai Akkasaheb and her entourage reached Shringapur. Ranubai Jadhav was excited by the news that her younger brother was going to be a father soon. Sambhaji had lost his mother when he was only two years old but he had been showered with love by three sisters. The eldest, Sakwarbai alias Sakhubai, was married to Mahadji Nimbalkar of Phaltan, the middle sister Ranubai married into the Jadhav family of Wai, and the youngest, Ambikabai, was married to Harji Mahadik of Tarale near Satara. All three were older than Shambhu. While Sambhaji had mostly lavished his love on Ambikabai, it was Ranubai who had really cared for Sambhaji.

It happened when Sambhaji was nearly one and a half years of age. Running on the ramparts of Raigad, he had stumbled and would have fallen into the deep ravine overlooked by the fort, had it not been for Ranubai who rushed to the spot and held him by his legs, hurting her own knees badly in the process. Saibai had said that day, as she hugged Shambhu tightly, 'Ranu, our Bal Raje is brave, but aggressive and a little rash in nature. He tends to act without thinking sometimes. I may not be there to look after him always, but I wish you would take care of him, my dear!'

It was dark when Sambhaji reached his quarters the day Ranubai arrived. Yesubai welcomed him with a smile and said, pointing to the inner room,

'Guess, who has come to visit us today?'

A lady sat near the shrine inside. When she heard Sambhaji's footsteps, she turned. It was Godu! She blushed seeing Yuvraj. How much she had changed, Sambhaji thought! The slim, petite figure was the same but the face, framed by long tresses, had lost all its charm. Faint dark circles below the eyes suggested anxiety and lack of sleep. Before Sambhaji could

speak, she said, 'Raje, ever since you stopped the revenue officials from collecting their dues, your name is being besmirched at Raigad. The senior officials are spreading all kinds of gossip.'

'Let it be, Godu! These pen soldiers can only do so much damage.'

'Yuvraj, a soldier like you might not be able to estimate the kind of damage these paper-pushers are capable of causing.' Godu stopped for a moment, realising that she may have spoken more than what she should have. She said, 'Rahuji Pant, under guidance of Annaji Kaka, has sent a note to the elder Maharaj, blaming you for creating obstacles in their work. They have recommended that you be arrested for this crime!'

'Godu, are you sure of what you just said?' Yesubai asked.

'Baisaheb, they have gone further and suggested that if Yuvraj cannot be arrested, the title of 'Yuvraj' and all associated benefits may be removed till such time as the elder Maharaj returns. They have sent three reminders to Shivaji Raje since then.'

Sambhaji closed his eyes, muttering Bhawani's name. He said, after a pause, 'Godu, you have our thanks for bringing us the news. But I wonder why my spies have not been able to give me this information.'

Yesubai said later, while discussing the matter with Sambhaji, 'Yuvraj, I am confident of your father's intelligence and his large-hearted nature. Knowing his keen sense of justice, I would not be worried. He is not going to punish his son without a thorough investigation.'

The next day, Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash visited a few villages where they had planted mango saplings some weeks earlier. After enjoying a homemade meal with the villagers, they were returning to Shringarpur when they spotted a royal palanquin crossing the dry bed of a river. As per Yesubai's orders, the palanquin was carrying Godu to the village of Sarwat. Sambhaji stopped the palanquin to speak to Godu while the men stood at a respectful distance.

Sambhaji asked, 'Godu, what has become of your husband and father-in-law?'

'They are dead as far as I am concerned. The day they planned a revolt against the Swaraj, they were dead to me. I pray you don't raise this topic again; it troubles me to speak of it.'

Sambhaji said, a little hesitantly, 'Godu, why don't you think of getting married again?'



‘There is only one person in the world that I can marry!’ Her eyes shone as she spoke.

‘Well, why don’t you then? I am sure that person knows how much you love him.’

‘God only knows!’ Godu said, in a soft voice. ‘But I know that his wife is Lakshmi in human form. I cannot afford to hurt her.’

Raigad’s constant interference and the deliberate attempts to besmirch his name were disconcerting for Sambhaji. But now he was increasingly preoccupied with the news from Karnatak. He frequently received messages describing the success of the campaign. The entire city of Hyderabad had poured itself on the streets to welcome Shivaji Maharaj. Qutb Shah of Golconda had welcomed him with open arms. Men like Dhanaji Jadhav, Nagoji Jedhe and Hambirrao Mohite had shown unparalleled valour on the field of battle. The footsteps of the Maratha soldiers echoed even on Jinji fort, signalling the extent of the spread of Maratha might. Naturally, Yuvraj was ecstatic upon hearing such success stories.

Yesubai remarked, referring to the officials captured by Sambhaji for trying to extort revenue from the farmers of Prabhavali, ‘Raje, it seems you cannot remain angry for long! I am told you released the men within two days and that you ensured they had adequate food and money for their travel back to Raigad!’

Sambhaji merely smiled in response.

Two days after Godu’s departure, Diler Khan’s emissary arrived at Shringarpur again. The moment Sambhaji read Mughal Subedar’s message, he said, his anger evident,

‘Has the old Khan gone senile?’

The message read:

*‘Rustam-e-Dakhan-Sambhajiraje!*

*I request you to meet me in my camp. Badshah Aurangzeb is keen to capture the whole country including the Deccan. Please pardon me as I don’t intend to poke my nose into your family matters. Yet, I can understand your pain. Your father’s affection seems to be veering towards Soyrabai and Rajaram. The officials at Raigad look at you with suspicion. Instead of putting up with*

*these insults and managing the tiny territory you have been given charge of, I wish you would accept the hand of friendship I extend to you. One day, Alamgir will march on the Deccan and our fortunes will shine.'*

Sambhaji said, 'We must reply. I don't want my silence to be taken as a mute acceptance of his offer.'

'What shall we say, Raje?' Kavi Kalash inquired.

Sambhaji dictated the reply,

*'Khansaheb, I must thank Allah for your kind wishes and your concern for my welfare. You are right about the situation at Raigad which has created a rift in the family. But that need not give you any reason to feel elated. When he departed for Karnatak, my father left the kingdom in the hands of his most trusted officials and his Yuvraj. And you are now suggesting I betray his trust! Khansaheb, I am lucky to have the blessings of a father like Shivaji. How can I think of leaving the shade of a mighty tree to take shelter in your tent?'*

Sambhaji was in tears as he dictated the message. Kalash could feel the intense love Sambhaji had for his father and the Swaraj. As Kalash was about to tie the messenger bag, Sambhaji suddenly said, 'Wait! I want to add a few more lines.'

Sambhaji dictated, *'Dilerji, if you and your Badshah are truly impressed with my valour, I would like to join forces with you and present a new territory to the Badshah.'*

'My intention is not to break ties with Diler Khan but to keep the conversation going,' Sambhaji explained to Kalash.

'Raje, why engage in a discussion with someone like him?'

Sambhaji's face darkened for a moment. Then he said, trying to smile while he let out a deep sigh, 'We never know what destiny has in store for us.'

## 2

Yesubai stood on the terrace, looking in the direction of Sangameshwar. She was observing a group of cavalrymen who were approaching the haveli. Squinting her eyes, she was able to see the saffron flag held aloft by the man leading the group. She smiled. A few days back, they had received information that Shivaji Raje had returned to Panhalgad after nearly two years. They were waiting desperately for an invitation from the elder Maharaj.

Kavi Kalash and his men rushed to receive the mounted soldiers. The entire party at Shringarpur— Sardar Vishwanath, Ranubai and Yuvraj—were eager to meet Shivaji Raje. Even Pilaji Shirke, despite his failing health, was waiting for the invitation. The excitement and expectation in the air was palpable. Sambhaji came into the hall, acknowledging the mujras of the messengers, and said to Kalash,

‘Please read the message.’

He began, *‘My dear Shambhu, I rushed to Panhalgad after completing the campaign at Karnatak. The very thought of meeting you and embracing you with affection spurred my horse. But ...’*

Kavi Kalash stopped for a moment. A strange fear gripped him. He was worried that the next line might not be to Yuvraj’s liking. Sambhaji said, his voice ringing loud and clear, ‘Please continue; whatever it may be.’

*‘But ... I heard of your daredevil acts. Yuvraj, you are a man of twenty-two years and not a young boy anymore. I am surprised at your lack of wisdom. You have pardoned people who have not paid their dues for eight years. Moreover you have arrested and threatened officials who were doing their duty. You have insulted my Ashta Pradhan. These are men who have fought shoulder to shoulder with me for the past twenty or thirty years. You have, without considering their age, their contributions to the Swaraj and their place in the hierarchy of my court, insulted them. I know you are eager to meet me but let it be clear—don’t bother to show your face to me!’*

As he read, Kalash's face was pale from surprise, fear and sadness. His hand, holding the letter, trembled. The others present did not know how to react. Sambhaji himself felt as he was drowning in an ocean of sadness. His discomfiture was unnerving to watch. He signalled to Kalash to continue, but Yesubai screamed, 'Stop!' she said in a tear-filled voice, 'Enough! Enough, Kaviraj! I don't want to listen to a single word more.'

'Why should he stop?' Sambhaji's voice had steadied itself. 'The words are those of Shivaprabhu. Don't stop, Kaviraj. Those present should hear everything lest this too gives rise to unnecessary and vicious gossip. Let us all hear what is written.'

Kalash continued, *'I suggest you don't go about destroying the Swaraj and insulting my men. Please don't interfere in the work the officials are doing. I hope you will heed my advice if there is an iota of wisdom left in you. Instead of meeting me at Panhalgad, please go to Sajjangad and spend some time in the company of Ramdas Swami. I hope his presence would drive some sense into you, teaching you a few things about good manners and the conduct that becomes a prince of your standing. Take Swami's blessings, and change your ways before it is too late.'*

No one dared to speak. After a while, each of them left without saying a word. Only Sambhaji remained, seated in his chair like a rock, unable to move, while Kalash stood silently next to him. After a long silence, Yuvraj said with a sigh, 'Look at the way Diler Khan praises my wisdom. Sometimes it seems to me that my own blood relations are blind! And many a time the enemy speaks the truth.'

'Raje, don't give up your hopes so easily,' Kalash tried to console him.

'Have I done anything wrong? After being separated from him for nearly twenty months, I was desperate to meet Abasaheb. He had promised me to meet me after returning from Karnatak, to discuss the allegations against me with an open and patient mind. But now ...'

'Yuvraj?'

'But now there is no invitation, no discussion! Not a single word of love! And I have been declared a criminal without being given a chance to prove my innocence.'

Sambhaji was in deep agony. He retired to his bedchamber, refusing to have his lunch. Soon, it was evening. Shadows lengthened in the garden outside. Yesubai came in with a tray of food, hoping to persuade him to eat, but to her surprise and dismay, Sambhaji waved it away. He lay on the bed

with his face buried in the pillow. But rest offered no solace. He felt that he was burning all over.

Looking up at the chandelier suspended from the ceiling, he felt that his life too was hanging by a thread. He said, banging his fist on the bedpost, ‘Yesu, I was sure that the cunning officials and clerks of Raigad would carry their accusations to Maharaj. They have the support of Annaji Datto. That man has spent half his life spreading malice against me. After all, his complaints serve to deflect Maharaj’s attention from his own deficiencies.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Maharaj would have, on his return from Karnatak, asked why the campaign at Janjira did not succeed. So he must have started a litany of allegations against me, diverting the topic of discussion elsewhere. That way he kills two birds with one stone!’

Yesubai stepped forward to touch Sambhaji’s forehead which seemed to be burning with fever. She said, ‘This too will pass. Have some patience.’

‘How much patience can I show? While the officials are pouring in with their complaints, Soyrabai Ranisaheb does not miss a chance to increase the rancour against me. I have no one left and no place to go. My father has abandoned me and Raigad has closed its doors on my face!’

Sambhaji’s opponents were working overtime, as his spies informed him with their regular updates. The Ashta Pradhan were suggesting that the Hindavi Swaraj be divided into two parts—that Raigad and twelve other provinces be given to Rajaram while the difficult terrain of Jinji was to be relegated to Sambhaji. There were rumours that Shivaji Raje too was thinking along similar lines.

Sambhaji’s exile at Shringarpur seemed endless, with no solution in sight. To make matters worse, he received another message from Diler Khan, rubbing salt into his exposed wounds. It said:

*‘My dear unfortunate Shahzada! The officials at Raigad have succeeded in their task. I wonder what you are waiting for! Isn’t the Badshah’s camp closer and more convenient than going all the way to the far-flung Jinji? You may come to me without any*

*doubt or fear in your heart. My shamiana is itching to offer you our famed hospitality.'*

Despite the annoyance Sambhaji felt on reading these words, Diler Khan's latest missive set him thinking. The moon and star symbols on the distant mosque seemed to be inviting him. After all, his own gods were silent these days.

Diler Khan, the man who was extending his hand in friendship, was no ordinary sardar after all. He had earned his spurs in Aurangzeb's durbar. And he was courting Sambhaji as if his life depended on it.

In reality, Diler Khan dreamt day and night of the moment Alamgir would put an aigrette of honour in his turban. There was no one who could challenge Aurangzeb's supremacy from Kabul and Kandahar in the north-west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. But there was a formidable foe in the South. Aurangzeb had often said in private that the only enemy worth his steel was Shivaji. A single vision—the Emperor's reaction when he, Diler Khan, presented Sambhaji, his sworn enemy's son, in the Mughal durbar—had consumed the old Pathan for the past two years. His spies had been feeding him with accurate and timely information on the developments in Raigad, and he knew that Sambhaji was troubled of late by his father's attitude.

For his own reasons, Sambhaji too made diplomatic overtures to the Mughal sardar. He began by sending Jotyaji Kesarkar into Diler Khan's territory to get a first-hand report of the situation. Yesubai, when she came to know of it, was deeply worried that Jotyaji had been sent on such a dangerous mission. She entered Sambhaji's quarters as he was about to start his daily pooja.

Yesu said, her voice full of entreaty, 'Yuvraj, it is not wise to be so reckless. You must exhibit some restraint.'

Sambhaji said, ignoring Yesubai's request, 'You may say or believe whatever you want but the Swaraj does not need Sambhaji anymore.'

'Does that mean you must go and put your head in Diler Khan's lap?' Yesubai fumed. 'I am sure you have not forgotten that it was the same demon Diler Khan who did not hesitate to behead Murarbaji when he seized Purandar. Yuvraj, please show some restraint. Think!'

'What am I supposed to do sitting here? I may be the Yuvraj but I am barred from the campaigns. I am not allowed to stay in my own palace. I

cannot raise my own cavalry nor even solve the simplest of problems which the ryots face. Am I to spend the rest of my life discussing philosophy at Sajjangad?’

‘Yuvraj, I beg of you, listen to what I am saying. Consider Ramdas Swami as your saviour. The pious and serene atmosphere of Sajjangad would cleanse your mind of toxins. You will find a way out of this darkness,’ Yesubai said, her voice quivering.

For a moment Sambhaji was lost in his thoughts. Soon a pall of sadness spread over his face and he said, his voice trembling, ‘Yesu, I don’t know why I am in the clutches of a strange fear all the time. We were to visit Abasaheb this coming month, with our little one. I would have put the heir to the Swaraj at his feet! Now, I am worried Abasaheb may give the order for me to be chained and thrown into a dungeon before that.’

‘How dark your thoughts are! I am surprised you don’t have an iota of affection or respect for your great father. It is not right, Yuvraj,’ Yesubai reprimanded her husband.

Sambhaji said, gulping down his doubts and distress, ‘I wonder why Abasaheb had to send that letter through the royal messengers. I would not have felt so bad if he had summoned me in person and skinned me!’

Yesubai was only a month away from delivering the child. But the pain of watching her husband suffer was far greater than the troubles of her pregnancy. She requested Ranubai akkasaheb to ask Sambhaji’s other wife to come down to Shringarpur.

When Durgabai arrived at Shringarpur, Yesubai received her warmly, saying, ‘Durgavati, Yuvraj is in a delicate state of mind. The next few weeks are critical. I cannot run behind Yuvraj with a pregnancy entering the ninth month. Please see that you take good care of him.’

Durgabai nodded, holding Yesubai’s hand in hers, ‘Your word is my command, Akkasaheb.’

Once the Jadhavs of Supe had invited Sambhaji to their home. When he sat down to the dinner prepared in his honour, his eyes fell on their pretty daughter Durga. Sambhaji was enamoured of her in no time. She was not as tall, slim and beautiful as Yesubai but her short and slightly plump stature was endearing. She did not have the doe eyes of Yesubai but her narrow slanted eyes had the power to enchant a man in their very first glance. Unlike Yesubai, who was talkative, Durga was quiet and reserved by nature.

Sambhaji's visits to Supe and Baramati had increased after he saw Durga a couple of times. He would often, on the pretext of a hunting expedition, reach the Jadav haveli at lunchtime. Seeing through her husband's antics, it was Yesubai herself who proposed idea of the marriage to Sambhaji. She said to her husband, 'Keep in mind that this proposal is in my own best interest. It is not possible for me alone to manage a burning ember like you. I need someone to assist me!'

One night Sambhaji sat writing for a long time. He did not seem to want to his clerk or Kavi Kalash around. Yesubai, sleeping fitfully, noticed that Yuvraj had been at his writing table for many hours. It was nearly dawn when he stood up, stretched and lay on the bed with a sigh.

Yesubai rose and went over to the table. Several crumpled pieces of paper lay on it. Then she noticed a royal messenger bag beside them. Yesu instantly recognised the Mughal seal of Aurangzeb. Unable to contain her curiosity, she read the contents. It was a message from Diler Khan on behalf of Shah Alam, Aurangzeb's son, who had taken charge as the Subedar of the Deccan. The message urged Sambhaji to join hands with them without any apprehension. Yesubai realised Sambhaji was contemplating the next steps. That morning, Sambhaji woke up to find a tearful Yesubai at his feet. She said, as soon as he opened his eyes, 'Yuvraj, I beg of you. Don't take such hasty decisions. Don't strangle Shivaji Raje's dream of Swaraj just because you are upset with a few officials at Raigad. It would be disaster!'

'You are blind to the fact that I am being made to look like a fool. The decision had already been made at Raigad: Rajaram will get twelve provinces and Raigad while I will be banished to Jinji.'

Yesubai wiped her tears and said, looking into Sambhaji's eyes, 'Let the kingdom go, if it has to! Since when did a brave soldier, a poet and a scholar like you start coveting power? Yuvraj, tell me; what will you choose if you have to—between fourteen provinces on the one hand and a father like Shivaji Raje on the other?'

'You know the answer. Why do you keep repeating the question? You know very well that without Shivaji Raje and his dreams for the Swaraj, Sambhaji cannot live for even a moment. But what about the fact that the king who has such love and affection for his ryots has none left today for his own son?'

Yesubai was silent. Her tears had dried on her cheeks. As for Sambhaji's grief, it was beyond mere tears. Yesu said in a soft voice,



‘Yuvraj, I am deeply worried by the way you are being treated. But try to imagine the elder Maharaj’s state of mind if he were to learn that you have joined hands with the enemy. He would be shattered!’

That night a fever raged in Yesubai’s body. The physician prepared a strong medicine which Sambhaji made Yesu drink. Sambhaji knew the reason for her illness. He said, gently touching Yesubai’s cheeks with his fingers, ‘Don’t worry so much. Your excessive anxiety is causing all this. It’s not that the world is going to come to an end if I go over to the enemy camp. Have I not been to the Mughal court as a young boy, holding Abasaheb’s hand? I have been appointed a Mughal mansabdar twice.’

Yesubai tried to smile, saying, ‘Your visit to Agra was part of Maharaj’s political game plan.’

‘How long will I remain quiet? What will the officials think of me? They will say that I have no spine, that I am scared! Yesu, there is only way for me to remove this stain from my reputation. I need to show them that I can make my moves intelligently and once again gain my father’s trust and confidence.’

Yesubai was not convinced. Sambhaji revealed his plan, ‘The idea is to enter into the enemy camp with a gesture of friendship and then defeat them at the appropriate time.’

‘Yuvraj, Diler Khan is no ordinary fish. He is a crocodile.’

‘And you think I am an infant suckling his mother’s milk? I am the son of Shivaji, the one who will become the scourge of the Mughals!’

Both were awake the whole night. Yesubai continued to insist that Sambhaji should not join the Mughal camp. Her fever, her weak voice and her pale face indicated an agitated state of mind, putting brakes on Sambhaji’s determination to act immediately. Finally, using her womanhood and her deep bond with Sambhaji, she appealed to him, placing his hand on her heart, ‘Yuvraj, make a promise to me—the one who has walked all the way with you.’

‘Ask.’

‘First honour Maharaj’s wish and visit Sajjangad. Decide on the next steps after you take the blessings of Swami Samarth.’

‘I promise.’

### 3

Sambhaji was all set to journey on a bold new path. The lovely Mahadev temple at Shringarpur was overflowing with his friends. The sky was overcast with dark clouds. They began the prayers, led by priests who sat bare-bodied chanting the mantras. The pooja lasted more than an hour. As the men streamed out, Kavi Kalash and Sambhaji remained in the sanctum sanctorum.

Kalash said, 'Maharaj, I have been with you like a shadow ever since Agra. You are everything to me—my home, my kingdom.'

Sambhaji smiled and said, 'You are the soothing shadow of the tree of knowledge. You are more than a friend—rather, my most trusted advisor.'

'Shall I come along with you then?'

'No. Not this time,' Sambhaji said. 'I don't want you to be blamed for my departure. They will say you performed some tantric ritual to influence my mind and persuade me to join the Mughals.'

Kalash smiled dejectedly. His sadness at Sambhaji's impending departure was evident. Yuvraj said, trying to console him, 'In fact, if you stay back it would be a great help for me to keep an eye on the people here. And I promise to ask you to come to me when I need help.'

'As you command,' Kalash said. 'But Yuvraj, I won't be surprised if some people instigate the elder Maharaj to throw me out of the kingdom.'

'Don't be worried about that. Shivaji Raje is aware of who you are. Remember that it was he who chose you as my advisor in Agra. If he had believed some of the rumours people are trying to spread about you, he would have ordered your execution long back.'

Kalash, overcome by emotion, could barely speak. He said finally, holding Sambhaji's hand, 'Take care, Maharaj.'

The clouds were threatening to pour when Sambhaji set out from Shringarpur, accompanied by nearly two thousand five hundred horsemen. Yesubai, Ranubai akkabsaheb and Durgabai, in their respective palanquins, went till the borders of Shringarpur to see him off. Kalash was in tears as Sambhaji bid him farewell. Yesubai's palanquin had been set down below a large jamun tree. That she was at an advanced stage of her pregnancy was evident from her bloated face and sunken eyes. Tears streamed down her

cheeks, the collyrium leaving black lines on her fair face. Sambhaji tried wiping it off with the edge of his shawl.

Ranubai took leave of Durgabai, instructing her to look after Yesu's health. Sambhaji tried to persuade his sister to stay on but she said, 'Shambhu Raje, I will accompany you till the gates of Sajjangad, whence I will leave for Wai.'

Yesubai said, seeing Sambhaji's worried face, 'Don't worry about me. What matters is that Swami will help clear your mind at Sajjangad. These days shall pass.'

'Don't stay at Shringarpur for long. Leave for Panhalgad when you can.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Haven't you heard? Abasaheb is exhausted from the long campaign in Karnatak. Shouldn't someone from the family be there to look after his health?'

Yesubai's tears vanished, replaced by a smile that spoke volumes of her pride in her husband.

## 4

Only a person with self-respect and dignity can understand how difficult it is to suffer indignity and slander. The humiliations of the past months caught up with Sambhaji on his long ride. When he reached the gates of Sajjangad, his head was aching so badly that he felt the only way to reduce the pain was either to bang his head against a stone or surrender it at the feet of someone like Samarth Ramdas.

Krishnaji Bhaskar and Vasudev Balkrishna, the officials at the gate, received Sambhaji warmly. Yuvraj asked if he might pay his respects to the Swami at his ashram before retiring to the palace in Sajjangad. But misfortune seemed to be following Sambhaji everywhere. He was informed that Swamiji had left for Kolhapur the previous day and was not expected to return for a fortnight.

During the weeks that followed, Sambhaji tried his best to keep his mind occupied. Accompanied by his guards, he walked to the temple of Hanuman situated in a corner of the fort every day and offered his prayers. Like a kite whose string had been cut off, he roamed the ramparts without any purpose. At times he would sit near the ashram and meditate for hours.

One day a Gosavi named Sadanand came from a nearby village to meet Sambhaji with a request to resume the annual donation which used to be given to the ashram there. Sambhaji, gladdened by an opportunity to look into administrative matters, asked him to come back the next day. That night at dinner, Ranubai, who was staying in Sajjangad for a few weeks, asked her brother, 'You still harbour feelings of anger against Abasaheb, don't you?'

'Have you realised how long it has been since Abasaheb returned from Karnatak? Six months now! A father does not bother for six months to meet his twenty-year-old son. Isn't that strange? And when I request a meeting, there is no response. What crime have I committed to deserve such treatment? Why is Shivaji Raje, famed for his affection and compassion for the world at large, so stingy when it comes to his own son? I am not a mute unfeeling stone, am I?'

The next day he met Sadanand Gosavi and said, 'I understand that you deserve the donation you were getting earlier. But my hands are tied. However I shall write to Annaji Datto today, conveying your request.'

Sadanand Gosavi's face fell. He said, hastily saluting, 'I did not come here expecting this. Yuvraj, it would be done if you put merely your seal on the paper ...'

'Listen! I cannot interfere in matters of administration. I am sending my recommendation today. You will meet Annaji after a few days.'

'As you command,' he said, and left.

More than a month had passed since Sambhaji arrived in Sajjangad, but Swami Samarth Ramdas had not returned to the fort. Tired of wandering around Sajjangad and neighbouring Parli, Yuvraj was growing restless. He had enquired many times with the Swami's disciples and the officials of the fort but he did not get a satisfactory answer.

After a few weeks, Sadanand Gosavi returned to Sajjangad. Meeting Sambhaji, he said, 'I spent three weeks at the base of Raigad, waiting for permission to meet Annaji Datto. But all I got were vague excuses. Finally,

when I confronted Annaji, he said, “Our king is in Panhalgad and not Sajjangad.” That is when I came to know the truth.’

‘What truth?’

‘That the elder Maharaj does not trust you. The clerks these days not only ignore your orders but don’t even read them.’

Sadanand did not realise but he had just dropped a burning coal on a haystack. Sambhaji’s face was red with anger. He asked all the lower officials to leave and ordered Vasudev Balkrishna to present himself. Upon being questioned by Sambhaji, Balkrishna said, his voice quivering with fear, ‘Yuvraj, Sadanand is not entirely wrong. We have been instructed to ignore, as far as possible, any orders given by you.’

‘Are these instructions in writing?’

‘No. Just oral.’

‘Are they from Panhalgad? From Abasaheb?’

‘No ... but they are from Raigad ... from Rahuji Somnath and other officials.’

‘So what have you decided?’

‘Sarkar, we are mere servants. When we received oral instructions from Raigad, we sent a messenger to Maharaj in Panhalgad for clarifications. Despite waiting for four days, our messenger did not receive any clarity from Maharaj. What are we to assume?’

Sambhaji responded with a dejected smile and retired to his quarters. He said, looking at Ranubai, ‘I have been in Sajjangad for nearly two months now. There is no sign of Samarth. What crime have I committed for Maharaj to ignore me in this manner? Even Samarth seems to be ignoring me! Despite being Yuvraj, I do not have the power even to resolve a simple administrative matter. If neither my people nor my king need me, I will be better off in a foreign land.’

‘Shambhu, please restrain yourself. This calamity will soon pass.’

That afternoon Subedar Kheloji Naik Bhange from Mahuli came to meet Sambhaji. Kheloji was in his seventies but had the energy and enthusiasm of a teenager. His loyalty to the elder Maharaj and affection for Sambhaji knew no bounds.

Sambhaji said to him, ‘Tomorrow is an auspicious day and I would like to come to Mahuli for a holy dip. But let that be a secret.’

It was 3 December 1678.

The next morning, Sambhaji and three hundred of his cavalymen left for Mahuli. By the time the sun rose, they had reached the banks of the Krishna. The rivers Krishna and Venna meet at Mahuli. They also marked the boundary of the Hindavi Swaraj. The far bank was under the control of Adilshah of Bijapur. The Rahimatpur post in his kingdom was close to Mahuli.

A large crowd of worshippers had gathered at the banks of the sangam for the auspicious bath, including many sanyasis. Kheloji Naik was more than happy to receive Yuvraj. He bowed low in mujra, welcoming Sambhaji.

As the religious rites were being performed, Sambhaji's mind was preoccupied. He constantly glanced at the eastern boundary of the rivers. Soon, it was bright and sunny. As the rivers did not run deep at this time of year, many worshippers crossed to the other side, wading in waist-deep water. Sambhaji took his holy dip in one of the many pools created by the dry weather in the river bed.

All of a sudden, there was a movement in the grass on the other bank. A green flag appeared for a brief moment, as if signalling something, and vanished. Kheloji had noticed the flag but considering it part of a routine patrol in the enemy territory, he chose to ignore it. However, Sambhaji quickly climbed out of the pool and put on his clothes. The moment he put on his headgear, Kheloji, seeing his aquiline nose, fair complexion and shining eyes, was reminded of the elder Maharaj. Lost in trance, he continued to stare at Yuvraj.

At that moment, Sambhaji mounted his horse and spurred it. It shot forward like an arrow. Kheloji stared at the galloping horse, unable to believe his eyes. Instead of turning towards Parli, Sambhaji was crossing the river into enemy territory.

Sambhaji's men spurred their horses too, following him. In the distance, Kheloji could see a line of Mughal soldiers on the other bank. Seeing Sambhaji enter the river they shouted, raising their spears and flags in the air, 'Jay Shambhuraja! Allah-o-Akbar!'

The shouts of the Mughals hurt Kheloji's ears; his heart refused to believe what he was hearing. He jumped into the water and, with his naked sword glinting in the sun, shouted, 'Shambhu Raje! Where are you going?'

Sambhaji turned to look at Kheloji. He said, in a tortured voice, 'Khelojibaba, everything is over. Our paths must separate henceforth!'

'What are you blabbering, Yuvraj? These are the words of an enemy! Can the son of Shivaji be under the care of Diler Khan? Enough of this, Yuvraj! Don't take another step. Just turn back.'

Sambhaji turned his horse and was surprised to see nearly thirty or forty Maratha soldiers in the water, hard on his heels. Worried that they would surround him and stop him from going over to the other side, he unsheathed his sword and prepared to fight. But Kheloji, without thinking of his own safety, stepped forward. Folding his hands in supplication, he pleaded, 'Dear Yuvraj, don't do that! Shambhuraja, this act of yours would break Shivba's heart into pieces!'

Sambhaji, taking water from the Krishna in his palms, thundered, 'I take an oath with Krishna as my witness. I shall let you know, at the appropriate time, who Sambhaji really is! I shall conquer the world and return to accept your salutes.'

The Maratha warriors scrambled to obstruct Sambhaji and his men with shouts of 'Stop, stop!' Soon, a hand-to-hand combat ensued.

Kheloji was standing near Sambhaji's horse, and before Sambhaji could react, the old man lunged at him. Had the old man managed to hug him at that moment, saying 'Shambhubal!', Sambhaji would have been forced to let his sword fall in the river. But he succeeded in avoiding Kheloji's embrace, and rushed towards the other bank. The bank was steep and the horse, unable to jump over, came to a halt, raising its forelegs in vain. Sambhaji spurred him and pulled the reins tight, to no avail. The poor animal bled from its nose as it tried desperately to climb. In a few minutes, Sambhaji's horse collapsed and fell with a thud. Sambhaji managed to save himself from being crushed as he jumped off the horse's back in the nick of time and rolled out of the way.

The Mughals on the bank welcomed Sambhaji with 'Aaiye, Yuvraj, jaldi aaiye!' Sambhaji turned to see Kheloji being surrounded and restrained by a few Mughal soldiers.

As for Sambhaji's horse, its chest had been split open by its broken ribs. It lay on the bank, bleeding and drawing its final breaths. Sambhaji

could not bear to see his favourite horse in such agony. Ignoring the helping hand of a Mughal soldier, he ran back to his horse and took out a water bag tied to the saddle. He poured a little water in the horse's mouth. Soon, the horse stretched its legs and, in a few moments, was still.

Sambhaji climbed the steep bank and walked into enemy territory. But he was troubled by a sudden fear as he took his first few steps. He wondered if these were inauspicious signs of things to come. Was he going in the right direction? Was his decision wise? But he had nowhere else to go. The territory he had left behind—its forests, fields, men, palaces—they were no longer his!

He did not know what awaited him but, after all, a man was known by his bold deeds and daredevil attitude. His father had had the courage to revolt against Adilshah when he was still a vassal in the Shah's service. Sambhaji believed that he could create a name for himself and then return victorious to his father to take his blessings. He had no other option at this moment but to jump into the mouth of the golden fish called Diler Khan.

## 6

It was an extraordinary day for the Mughal soldiers. The Yuvraj of the Maratha Empire was riding with them. The news that Sambhaji had joined them was cause for elation throughout the Mughal dominion from the Delhi Durbar to the Deccan.

As for Sambhaji, the farther they journeyed into Adilshahi territory, the more nervous he felt. It was beginning to dawn on him that there was a thin line between daredevilry and a risk which could turn out fatal. At the village of Vathar, Diler Khan's Subedar Ikhlas Khan waited for Sambhaji with a cavalry, nearly two thousand strong. They greeted Sambhaji warmly.

They crossed the river Neera, while Diler Khan paced in eager anticipation in his tent at the Kurkumbh, the Mughal outpost. Things were moving the way he had planned, but he did not trust the Marathas and had therefore sent Ikhlas Khan to meet and greet Sambhaji first. He recalled how Shivaji had entered the Lal Mahal in Pune and maimed his friend



Shaista Khan, cutting off his fingers. Shaista Khan had often wept, showing his disfigured hand, whenever he recalled that unfortunate incident. The story of how Shivaji had killed Afzal Khan, tearing his chest open and then beheading him, had been told many times over. It was no wonder, then, that Diler Khan was circumspect, despite the friendly tones of Sambhaji's recent letters. He still suspected that this was a ploy by the father-son duo to deceive and overthrow him.

Yet, he was happy when a messenger brought news that Shivaji's son had joined the Mughals a couple of hours ago and was already on his way. The joy exceeded even the sadistic pleasure he felt when he had beheaded Murarbaji at Purandhar and wiped his bloodstained hands on his embroidered coat.

Diler Khan turned to look outside his tent where an approaching cloud of dust announced Sambhaji's arrival. In a few moments they entered his range of vision. The sight brought tears of joy to Diler Khan's eyes. Sitting atop a richly decorated elephant in a howdah were Ikhlas Khan and Sambhaji. As he stared at the rapidly approaching elephant, Diler Khan noticed that Sambhaji resembled Shivaji very closely.

The servants following the elephant rushed to set up a ladder and were about to climb up when Diler Khan, with a wave of his hand, dismissed them. He climbed up the ladder himself to welcome Sambhaji. 'Aayiye ... the pride of the Deccan, Sher Sambhaji! Welcome!' Diler Khan, beside himself at the way things had turned out, felt the kind of joy he would have experienced upon meeting a long-lost brother.

There was a feast that afternoon with a spread of delicacies which included kebabs specially made for the occasion. Diler Khan was nearly forty years older than Sambhaji but the two spoke to each other as if they were childhood friends. Despite the show of friendship and happiness by Sambhaji, Diler Khan's keen eye did not miss the tinge of melancholy on young prince's face. He said, encouragingly, 'Yuvraj, the all-powerful Alamgir is really pleased with you. What is there to fear when you have his blessings?'

The two conferred that afternoon. Diler Khan was careful in word and deed to ensure that the proud son of Shivaji, quick to take offence, did not find him wanting in hospitality or tact. He did not want to mar what promised to be the beginning of a great alliance. He said, pacifying Sambhaji, 'Shahzade, don't worry even one bit! A bright future awaits you.'

Your brother Diler Khan is fully aware of the way you have been insulted at Raigad.'

Sambhaji fell silent. Diler Khan said, taking Sambhaji's hand, 'Don't make the mistake of taking decisions prompted by the heart. A king must ensure that his parents, friends and close confidantes are all in his control before taking any step. It is quite natural that your stepmother Soyrabai would demand the throne for her son. And after all, even Dashrath could not refuse his favourite queen!'

Sambhaji said, taken by surprise, 'It seems you have studied the Ramayana ...'

'If you want to rule a place, it is important to understand the weather there, isn't it? One should be aware of the gods and goddesses there. But let me assure you—the Badshah of Hindustan, Aurangzeb, is deeply concerned about your welfare.'

'Thank you, Khan saheb.'

'I tell you, Shahzade: do not feel guilty for having left your family. In your puranas, you have examples of Ravan fighting with his brother, Yudhishtir with his uncle Shakuni. Why, our own Alamgir Aurangzeb had to revolt against his father. There is no victory without war and no glory without victory.'

## Z

Diler Khan knew he had a long way to travel. He was worried that Shivaji Raje might, in order to save his son, come marching against him. Taking necessary precautions, he ordered the camp to pack up and move. Sambhaji's throat went dry when he heard they were approaching Bahadurgad. Diler Khan sensed the change on Sambhaji's face and wondered why the Yuvraj had suddenly become tense. The troops crossed the Sahyadris and soon the flat plains on the banks of the river Bhima were visible from a distance.

Aurangzeb had earlier appointed his 'milk brother' Bahadur Khan Kolkatash Jafarjung the Subedar of the Deccan. He had built a strong fort

on the banks of the Bhima at Pedgaon and christened it Bahadurgad. Sambhaji had heard of the fort, namesake of the Sultan's brother, for the first time during the coronation of Shivaji Raje. Maharaj had also received information that a huge treasure worth at least a crore hons as well as two hundred of the choicest Arabian horses were being held at the fort. It was a mouth-watering prospect for the Marathas.

One day, Bahadur Khan received news of a Maratha force, nearly two thousand strong, approaching the fort from the western side. He smiled. He had deliberately kept vigil at the western gates quite lax to fool the Marathas. Consequently, the Maratha soldiers were able to enter the fort quite easily, only to find thousands of well-armed Mughal soldiers waiting for them within the walls. The Marathas ran for their lives, much to the amusement of Bahadur Khan, whose men chased them as they crossed the narrow Saraswati river and entered the territories of Jalalpur and Shedgaon. The Mughals continued their chase.

The fort, meanwhile, was left almost unguarded, and only women, children and servants remained inside. There were not enough soldiers left even to shut the twelve heavy doors. Just when the people of Bahadurgad had relaxed their guard, out of nowhere, seven thousand Maratha soldiers, who had been hiding in the woods nearby, attacked the fort. The Marathas faced no resistance whatsoever, and soon, they were marching away with two hundred horses and the contents of the fort's treasury. The wily Shivaji had once again scored over the mighty Mughals. Bahadur Khan had been made to look like a fool.

As he neared the fort, Sambhaji was under tremendous pressure. He wondered whether his plans would make the Maratha Empire stronger or destroy it. With the river Bhima on his right, he could see the distant ramparts of Bahadurgad clearly. Trumpets, horns and drums welcomed him with great gusto. Diler Khan sat proudly with Sambhaji in the howdah. A large bustling town was visible within the strong, heavily guarded walls of the fort. Sambhaji could see the moon and stars, symbol of Aurangzeb, fluttering on the battlements and on the rooftops of havelis.

The fort was a symbol of the arrogance of the Mughals. From these strong walls and ramparts, they believed they could look down with contempt at the Deccan kings. The residents of Bahadurgad had often seen sardars from the Deccan arriving with their necks bowed, carrying trays of gems and jewellery as a token of their acceptance of Mughal suzerainty.

Many of these sardars were welcomed with a whiplash and treated like slaves. But the scene today was very different. Men, women and children assembled on the terraces and rooftops to see who was being felicitated with such fanfare and who was arriving on a howdah with all the pomp meant for a Mughal Badshah.

Sambhaji, despite the grandeur of his reception at Bahadurgad, was not comfortable. An inkling of something being amiss constantly irked him. He wondered whether it was his victory or defeat to arrive here amidst such pageantry, saluting and receiving salutes while entering an enemy camp. To moisten his dry throat, he gulped down water from a camelskin pouch. Yet, his nervousness did not abate.

The fort, built on flat land, was spread over nearly six hundred acres, a section of its walls looking out over the confluence of the rivers Saraswati and Bhima. Sambhaji, who was used to the Maratha hill forts, was reminded by Bahadurgad of his childhood stay in Agra and its tall havelis, mosques and temple spires. The town had a population of nearly seventy thousand which included ryots, soldiers, Arabs, Persians, Muslims from the Deccan, and Maratha soldiers, not to mention the Mughals, who were at the top of the social hierarchy.

At the centre of the town was a square palace built by Bahadur Khan. The palace was made of teak and decorated with flying banners, buntings and flags which fluttered in the wind. There were no drapes covering the windows though and people sitting in the Diwan-e-Aam could see the silvery Bhima flowing in the distance. Sambhaji was to be a guest at the palace today.

## 8

The celebrations, with firecrackers bursting all around him as he climbed the steps to the palace with Bahadur Khan, reminded Sambhaji of Diwali. He felt as if even the huge oil lamps, lit in his honour, were shouting with joy, ‘Look! Shivaji’s son has joined hands with the Mughals!’

The palace singers sang paeans in praise of Sambhaji as he was presented with fine clothes and jewellery. Sambhaji glanced at the sardars in attendance. An old sardar with his white flowing beard attracted his attention. His attire was that of the Mughals, but he was a Maratha! As Sambhaji's eyes met him, he turned his face away with a look of hatred. Sambhaji recognised Bajaji Naik's son Mahadji who was married to his elder sister Sakhubai.

Shivaji's son was being felicitated in Bahadurgad but the town had not forgotten the way Shivaji had fooled Bahadur Khan and looted the fort. Moreover, he had yet another humiliation in store for the Subedar of the Deccan. When Shivaji had left for the extended campaign in Karnatak, he sent a message to Bahadur Khan, with a plea to hand over all his forts in the region to Aurangzeb. It was Shivaji's ploy to ensure that Bahadur Khan would not attack Raigad in his absence. He had pleaded, 'I want peace in my old age. I am happy to surrender all my forts unconditionally.' Aurangzeb, already troubled with the unrest in Kabul and Kandahar, had been delighted when he heard Shivaji's message.

Shivaji's sole condition for his surrender was that he wanted an impression of Aurangzeb's palm as a token of his acceptance. Bahadur Khan had smilingly accepted the condition and sent a note to Delhi. The treaty was to be executed the moment he received the token from Delhi. In the meantime, Khan decided to give some exquisite gifts to Shivaji. He made arrangements for an elephant and a sandalwood palanquin to be delivered to Raigad. While Bahadur Khan was still waiting for the message from Delhi with the Emperor's palmprint, Shivaji returned from his Karnatak campaign and promptly cancelled the treaty to surrender. Once again, Bahadur Khan had been made to look like a fool. Aurangzeb, incensed at Khan's inability to read the Maratha rat's mind, had removed him from the post of Subedar of the Deccan.

While celebrations were in progress, Diler Khan pointed to the richly decorated elephant which had brought them to Bahadurgad and said, 'Shahzade, this is the same elephant which Bahadur Khan had selected as a present for Shivaji. I am going to present it to you today.'

He continued, 'The elephant is lucky to meet the son, if not the father!'

Sambhaji was reminded of his father's bravery and cunning. Diler Khan then stood up, holding a silver tray in his hand. He said, waving a

hand towards the sardars in attendance, 'I request Sambhaji's brother-in-law, Mahadji Nimbalkar, to present this token of our appreciation to Shahzada.'

Diler Khan's suggestion was greeted with loud applause from the crowd, forcing Mahadji to get up, albeit with a long face. However, he had a sudden cramp in his back while rising from his seat and was forced to sit down again. Hence Diler Khan had to present the gift of royal clothes himself. He said, addressing the assembly, 'On behalf of Shahenshah Aurangzeb, I declare Sambhaji as a Watandar with seven thousand troops. He is also honoured with the title of Raja. He will be treated henceforth as a king.'

After the ceremony, many including Diler Khan insisted that Sambhaji should sit atop the elephant again. They wanted him to ride to his haveli sitting in the howdah. But Sambhaji declined and walked down to the haveli. His quarters were in the inner wing of the haveli. Soon he realised that Mahadji's rooms were adjacent to his own. Wishing to enquire about his brother-in-law's health before retiring for the night, he entered Mahadji's bedchamber. Despite sensing Sambhaji's presence in his room, Mahadji did not move, nor even bother to get out of bed.

Sambhaji asked, 'How is your health, Daaji?'

'Fine,' Mahadji growled.

'Well, it is natural that you would feel the spasms of a fake sprain.'

Mahadji glared at Sambhaji. He said, spitting into a spittoon, 'Sambha, why did you leave Shivaji and come here? What was your compulsion?'

'I thought it would be nice to follow your footsteps and become a slave.'

'Don't rub salt into my wounds. Sardars like me have been working under others all our lives. But you and your father have a duty towards fulfilling the dream of Swaraj which you have been talking of for so long, for all our sakes.'

Mahadji's words pierced Sambhaji's heart. The brittle smile, which he had carried since the durbar began, vanished. In this beautifully decorated town, resplendent with Mughal wealth, Sambhaji suddenly felt lonely.

After a couple of days, two royal palanquins arrived at Bahadurgad. Anticipating the possibility of a chase and some skirmishes during his escape into Mughal territory, Sambhaji had asked Durgabai to go to the Mughal post of Rahimatpur and stay put there, along with a few loyal

servants. Hence he was shocked to see both Durgabai and Ranuakka at Bahadurgad.

He asked, 'What is Akkasaheb doing here? Why is she here, leaving her family and children back at Wai?'

'Shambhu, don't worry about me. In fact, I insisted that I would come along to take care of you.'

'But Akka ...'

'Shambhu, you never got your mother's love. Nor is your grandmother, Jijabai, alive now. Your father has turned his back on you. Shouldn't someone from the family be by your side?'

Overcome by emotion on hearing his sister's words, Sambhaji did not say a word.

Sambhaji's quarters were in a new and beautiful haveli. Behind the haveli was a small house. It was a small but strongly built house where a mysterious prisoner was being kept. It was evident from the fact he was incarcerated alone in an independent house rather than thrown in the Bahadurgad jail with other prisoners, that he was a man of high standing. Inexplicably, Sambhaji was attracted towards the house and would often look at it from the haveli's terrace or his window. But he had never seen or heard the doors being opened. The prisoner inside was being treated like a caged animal, with irons chains around his ankles. Food and water was dropped through the windows.

Sambhaji had seen the prisoner at the windows a few times in daylight or by the light of candles at night. He appeared to be an old Muslim man, probably in his sixties, a little bent, and with beautiful sparkling eyes. Sambhaji soon learnt that his name was Miyan Khan and that he was the former Subedar of Athani. Judging from his demeanour, Sambhaji presumed that he must have been a good man who had fallen on bad times and gotten arrested.

It had been two months since Sambhaji's arrival in Bahadurgad. He was not able to make out what Diler Khan had in mind and began to feel suffocated in the luxuriously furnished haveli. He would toss and turn in his bed at night, fiddling with his necklace which had an image of Bhawani. Memories of his homeland, and especially his father, would often overwhelm him. He recalled the loving eyes of Yesubai with an aching heart. Durgabai and Ranubai watched Sambhaji helplessly, not knowing

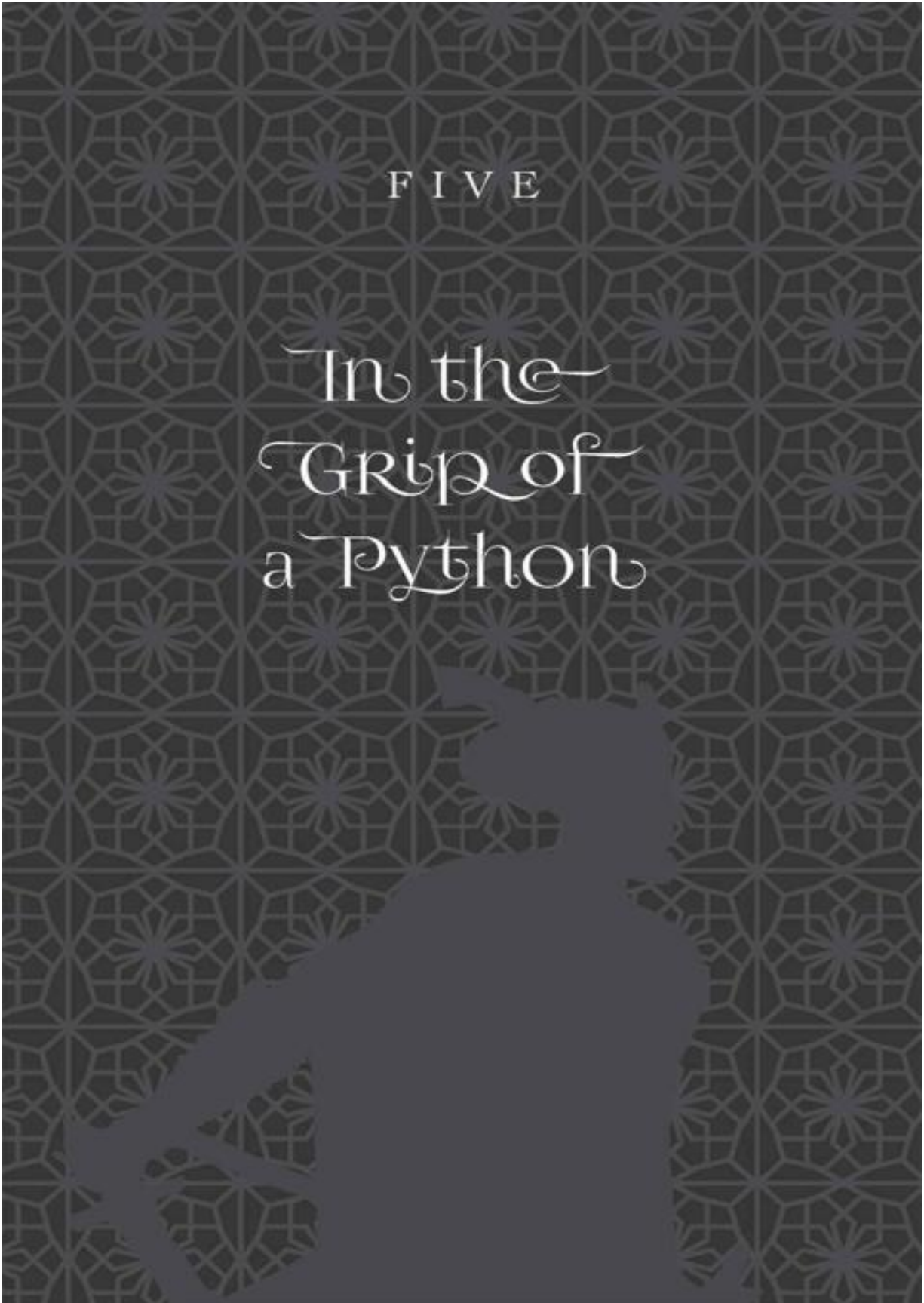
how to console him. Durgabai could barely sleep at night wondering how she could make her husband more comfortable.

One night, Sambhaji woke up from a terrible dream. It was windy outside and the neem trees swayed in the night breeze. Sambhaji, despite being awake, was still under the influence of the nightmare he had just seen. In the dream, the elephant gifted by Diler Khan was crushing Sambhaji beneath his heavy feet. Sambhaji could clearly see his own bloodstained body as it was ground into the earth.



FIVE

In the  
Grip of  
a Python





# 1

A man from Mahad, under the pretext of selling Maratha-made jewellery, had entered the strongly guarded fortress of Bahadurgad. He possessed the art of glib talk, persuading Durgabai to buy a whole bunch of trinkets. The moment he saw Sambhaji, the jeweller revealed the primary purpose of his visit: he had come as a bearer of glad tidings.

‘Yuvraj, you have been blessed by Bhawani. A Lakshmi has been born in your house, and both daughter and mother are fine.’

Sambhaji was overwhelmed hearing the news. He took off his pearl necklace and presented it to the messenger. He also instructed the man to inform his wife that he had gifted two diamond rings from his treasury to his newborn. While he rued the fact that he was not there when Bhawani, his first child, was born, he could barely contain his joy. He wanted to distribute sweets to the villagers sitting on an elephant.

Days passed without much incident at Bahadurgad. Sambhaji often saw Miyan Khan, the Adilshahi nobleman and erstwhile Subedar of Athani, at the window of his prison. He had gathered a great deal of information about the man in the last few months. Miyan Khan had served as a Subedar under Adil Shah of Bijapur but was loyal to the Mughal ruler in Delhi. He would send vital and timely information to Aurangzeb about the affairs of the Deccan but his enemies conspired against him and managed to convince the Emperor that he was a double agent. Aurangzeb, suspicious by nature, sent his troops to Athani and captured Miyan Khan. Khan was then placed under arrest at Bahadurgad.

Sambhaji soon realised that while he was free to move around Bahadurgad as the Yuvraj of the Marathas, there were men who silently stood guard outside his haveli at night. They were keeping an eye, no doubt, on him. Many a time, when Sambhaji had stepped outside the boundaries of

the fort to take a dip in the Saraswati, a few soldiers would surround him, albeit under the pretext of protecting him. The same was the case when he would go for long walks along the Bhima.

He bluntly asked Diler Khan once, ‘Khan saheb, am I a guest here, or a royal prisoner?’

The old man laughed and said, ‘You’re not an ordinary man, Sambhaji. You are the Shahzada of the Marathas and we need to protect a gem like you!’

Sambhaji was unable to gauge Diler Khan’s plans for him. This made him restless. Meanwhile, Khan had sent the good news of Sambhaji’s defection to Delhi but Aurangzeb was not willing to believe it just yet. He wanted to make sure that the man proclaiming himself to be Sambhaji was really so and not someone masquerading as the Yuvraj. He decided to send a few handpicked men to the Deccan for the sole purpose of ascertaining the truth. Both Diler Khan and Sambhaji were playing a guessing game: Khan trying to find out what the Badshah had in mind while Sambhaji tried to read Khan’s mind. The days crawled and nights were torturous. Sambhaji’s restlessness increased.

One night, Sambhaji observed that Miyan Khan was sitting at the window of his house, his face creased with extreme sorrow. Tears were flowing down his cheeks and he banged his head a few times on the window in distress. The scene was repeated next afternoon and also the next night. Sambhaji suggested to Durgabai, ‘When you go for your morning darshan to the temple, why don’t you leave a little early when it is still dark and speak to the old man? Take a couple of your loyal maids with you.’

Sambhaji eagerly waited the next morning for Durgabai to return. She said, as soon as she entered the haveli, ‘He seems like a gentleman. Aurangzeb has made his life hell, and now he is troubled by a personal tragedy.’

‘Why, what happened?’

‘His begum died at childbirth, leaving behind two daughters. Miyan Khan brought them up on his own. Six months ago, they were betrothed to the sons of a zamindar of Bijapur. The wedding is to be held a few days from now, but under these circumstances the large dowry he had promised for his daughters would be impossible to pay. He is stuck here in prison and feels it is unlikely that the marriage would take place at all.’

Sambhaji was upset on hearing this but soon a daring plan took shape in his mind. He waited restlessly for nightfall before summoning his cook, Zainuddin and instructing him and two other servants to perform a task.

Sambhaji then went out of the haveli and started bursting crackers, pretending to celebrate the joyous occasion of his daughter's birth. All the guards in the vicinity, attracted to the display of firecrackers, assembled to watch the show. While this was going on, his men were working on opening the door of the house behind the haveli. Soon, Miyan Khan was released and in his place, putting on the chains, sat Zainuddin!

At around midnight, Miyan Khan, who had been hiding at the basement of the haveli, came out and fell at Sambhaji's feet in gratitude. He was in tears.

Sambhaji said, 'I can understand your sorrow. I too am a father of a daughter now. And I haven't even seen her face yet.'

Miyan Khan's happiness knew no bounds. He said, 'I will be back in five days. Don't worry, Shahzade!'

Sambhaji said, 'I have taken this bold step as a father who understands your pain. If I am accused of having released a prisoner of the Mughals without permission, it will be an excuse for Aurangzeb to hang me. Please don't betray my trust.'

'Shambhu Raje, rest assured that I will never do anything to betray the trust you have reposed in me. I pray to Allah that I get a chance to serve you. If that day ever comes, I will make shoes out of my skin and put them on your feet.'

The guards posted outside the prisoner's house soon remarked to each other that the old man was not keeping well. For a few days, he rarely sat at the window and his constant coughing could be heard from outside. After about a week, Zainuddin was back in the kitchen and Miyan Khan was at his window again! Even from a distance, Sambhaji could see the look of contentment on his face. He would bow elaborately every time Sambhaji looked at him.

Nearly three months had elapsed since Sambhaji had arrived at Bahadurgad. He felt stifled by the constant surveillance of the guards posted outside his house, and the fact that he was not allowed to mix and meet the other Amirs and Umraos in town. It soon became evident to him that while there were no locks on his door or chains on his feet, he was practically under house arrest! Thankfully, he had Ranubai, Durgabai and loyal servants to keep him company.

As for Diler Khan, he kept up his sweet talk and gave Sambhaji honeyed assurances of all kinds. Sambhaji began to realise that the plan he had devised earlier might not work. On the flat terrain of Bahadurgad, the disciplined Mughal soldiers would clearly have an upper hand, and his initial gamble may not pay off. Each passing day made him more nervous and restless.

Sambhaji was 'free' to move around, but the soldiers who accompanied him everywhere never relaxed their vigil for a moment. Despite his mounting frustration, Sambhaji often took long walks along the banks of the Bhima. He visited the palace built by Chand Bibi and enjoyed the beauty of the ancient temples on the other side of the river.

The river Bhima took a semicircular turn near Bahadurgad fort. Here, the river was quite deep, an abundant source of water for the residents as well as the troops garrisoned there. Elephants were used to draw water from the river in massive leather bags which would then be poured into a channel that supplied water to the fort.

One day, Sambhaji was riding alongside the river. In the distance, he could see the Saraswasti as it merged with the Bhima. Suddenly, he felt a little giddy and decided to rest for a while. He spotted a pleasant green patch on the river bank where he dismounted. Lying down on a carpet of grass, he was soon lost in a trance which brought some strange visions, as if his mind was playing tricks with him. He woke up sweating profusely and realised that he had been having a nightmare. Unable to understand its meaning, he mounted his horse to return to his haveli.

Diler Khan knew that being Subedar of the Deccan was like living on a knife's edge. As a seat of power, it was next only to the Delhi throne. Aurangzeb himself had been Subedar twice, as a prince. He thus had a thorough knowledge of the territory—its terrain, its geopolitics and its challenges. Diler Khan had expected the Badshah to reward him for having wooed Sambhaji, Yuvraj of the Marathas, into house arrest at the Bahadurgad fort. Instead, Aurangzeb had sent his own Shahzada, Muazzam, to the Deccan with instructions to look into the matter and report back to him.

Before long, a messenger arrived at Bahadurgad. As Diler Khan read the Emperor's message, his eyes popped out, as if instead of being invited to a feast, he had been slapped.

'Diler, I am told that you are felicitating Sambhaji every day for some reason or the other. The enemy's son is in our camp. You need to take full advantage of this situation. Use him as a shield and attack the Maratha territories. Create havoc. I want maximum damage inflicted on the enemy.'

Diler Khan was disappointed. He had expected a pat on the back but he had received a rap on his knuckles. He asked his Diwan, Ziya Khan, for his opinion. The latter said, 'Huzoor, the Badshah is very cunning. He wants to kill a few birds with a single stone. Hence, Alampanah feels you should take Sambhaji along in your campaigns against Shivaji, as well as the attacks on Bijapur and Golconda.'

Diler Khan began to realise that it was a golden opportunity to exploit Sambhaji's presence. What the Yuvraj himself felt about it was irrelevant as no one involved, least of all Sambhaji, had the authority to oppose the Badshah's plans. Diler Khan asked his Diwan, 'What, according to you, would make the Badshah happiest? Where should we attack first?'

'Bhupalgad.'

'Why so?'

'It is en route to Bijapur and managed by a powerful fortkeeper. If we take the fort, it would open doors to Bijapur.'

Diler Khan's mind began to work overtime. In the days that followed, he gathered as much information about the fort as possible. Built on flat land, it had once brought the ferocious Shaista Khan to his knees when the daredevil Firangoji Narsala held it for fifty-five days during a Mughal siege. Firangoji was the fortkeeper at Bhupalgad. His administrator was

Vithal Bhalerao. Situated at the border of several warring states, the fort had witnessed many conflicts between the Adilshahi troops and the Mughals, as well as between the Marathas and the forces of Bijapur. Bhupalgad had stood like a rock amidst all this. The residents put their faith in the Shiva temple inside the fort, in their ample stock of water and foodgrains, and above all in Firangoji, their fortkeeper.

Plans for the campaign were put in motion and one day, soldiers streamed out of Bahadurgad. The carriages carrying the cannons creaked as they moved slowly through the gates of the fort. The accompanying men, including servants, smiths and traders from the bazaar, followed in a caravan.

A distraught Sambhaji sat in his haveli, unable to control the events that were unfolding around him. Diler Khan had not shared his plans with him. Meanwhile, he had received secret letters from Kalash at Shringarpur and Yesubai at Raigad. The messages were almost identical: 'Yuvraj, don't sit idle. You need to do something. All kinds of rumours are circulating. Many have already declared that you are going to convert and adopt the Muslim religion the way Netaji Palkar did. If you feel you are not getting a chance to show your valour, and unable to find a way out, now is the time to act. The very least you can do is to protect what you have. Don't let that go!'

While Sambhaji sat wondering what he should do, Ziya Khan came into his quarters and said, 'Shahzade, Diler Khan is waiting for you to join him.'

'Ask him to meet me here,' growled Sambhaji.

'How's that possible?' Ziya Khan said. 'He is the Subedar of the Deccan.'

Sambhaji's angry glance silenced Ziya, and the Diwan left. Horns and trumpets were announcing that the troops were already on the move. Soon Diler Khan, already in his armour, came to Sambhaji's haveli. He said, saluting him once, 'Shahzade, we must leave now if we want to reach Bhupalgad in two days.'

'I am not in a mood to visit Bhupalgad,' Sambhaji said.

'But the orders from Badshah Alamgir are clear.'

'Is that so? So Delhi decides which forts we should capture?'

Diler Khan was gentle but adamant. After all, the message from Alamgir was clear: use Sambhaji to inflict maximum damage in enemy



territory.

Thus, Sambhaji was compelled to accompany Diler Khan on his campaign. Travelling through Baramati, Phaltan and Mandesh, they reached the outskirts of Bhupalgad. Diler Khan had planned his moves very carefully. He was aware of the courage and determination of Firangoji Narsala, who had fought at Chakan with a handful of soldiers, not to mention his valiant defence of Bhupalgad against Alamgir's uncle Shaista Khan.

Diler Khan camped a few miles from the fort. Sambhaji's tent was nearby. Khan called for the Yuvraj that night and said, 'Speak to your compatriot. Ask him to vacate the fort before it turns ugly.'

Sambhaji was aware of Diler Khan's ploy but he was trapped and had no option but to comply. He sent a message through one of his trusted servants, 'The fort is weak and Diler Khan's army is strong. Why put your men at risk, and invite destruction of Abasaheb's fort? Hand it over peacefully and go your way unharmed.'

The next morning a messenger arrived from the fort. Sambhaji read Firangoji's message and then handed it over to Diler Khan without a comment. It said: *'It is not Shivaji's habit to run away without putting up a fight. Why don't you tell your friend that it might be a Mughal tradition to do so?'*

Diler Khan's face turned red with anger. He screamed, 'Is that the way someone replies to a message that seeks peace?'

'Khan saheb, a proud Maratha would behave like one, wouldn't he? Not everyone is a traitor like Sambhaji,' Sambhaji said, his face full of sorrow as he uttered the words.

Diler Khan looked at Sambhaji through his kohl-lined eyes, 'Shahzade, how long will you remain blind to the way you were insulted in Raigad? Despite being the rightful heir to the throne, you are being treated like a criminal. Your father does not take you on campaigns, your stepmother tries her best to prevent you from visiting Raigad, while petty officials and senior administrators find fault in your behaviour and try to shred your reputation to pieces. Even a maid's son is treated better!'

'Does that mean I should die an ignoble death?' Sambhaji growled.

Diler Khan held Sambhaji's hand and said, in a pained voice, 'Shahzade, I am offering you a hand of friendship in your time of trouble yet you still look at me as if I am the enemy.'

Sambhaji did not respond. Within moments, the cannons started firing. Now there was no turning back; the attack on Bhupalgad had begun. Meanwhile, a message from Firangoji meant for Sambhaji was intercepted by Khan's men. It read:

*'Yuvraj, please go away as soon as possible. If you are in trouble, let us know. We shall fight to death to release you. Please inform immediately.'*

Needless to say, it never reached Sambhaji. Diler Khan muttered, as he watched the message burn in the fire in his tent, 'Allah, you have been merciful.'

The Mughal cannons tried their best to destroy the walls of the fort. The Marathas put up an equally strong resistance. They had launched a counter-attack with stones flung from catapults while showering the enemy troops with arrows. Diler Khan was growing impatient. He said to his chief of artillery, 'Do anything; but give me a breach in the walls. Else, this old man Firangoji will not surrender.'

The cannons slowly advanced amidst the shower of stones and arrows. The artillery troops struggled to protect their heads using metal shields while trying to work the cannons at the same time.

Soon, the Mughal soldiers managed to dig a trench to lay the mines. After lighting the mines, they withdrew in haste. As the blasts shook the fort, the mighty walls of Bhupalgad rattled. A few large boulders came rolling down but the fort stood intact.

Sambhaji was in charge of the attack from the other side of the fort. He instructed his men to attach tall ladders along the walls. But the constant artillery fire, as the men climbed up the ladders, proved fatal. Many fell, and others were singed by fire or succumbed to the rain of arrows unleashed by the Maratha soldiers.

Finally, one of the ramparts crumbled, opening a path for the Mughals to enter the fort. Firangoji had put up a spirited defence but could not hold out against the combined attack of Diler Khan and Sambhaji. Realising that the fort had been taken, many Maratha soldiers ran away. Most of the soldiers were captured and brought back as prisoners.

The sun had set. A cool breeze blew. A shattered Bhupalgad was trying to hide its wounds in the darkness of the night. At the Mughal camp outside the fort, Sambhaji and Diler Khan sat in their lamp-lit tents. They watched as nearly seven hundred Maratha warriors were marched down from the fort, hands tied behind their backs. Sambhaji stood up to look at the soldiers. Many of the faces were familiar. Some of them looked at the Yuvraj with suspicion while many openly glared at him. Their contemptuous looks, sharply turned moustaches, and the fire in their eyes—all pierced Sambhaji's heart.

Yet, many of them bowed in *mujra*. Sambhaji, seeing the jewels of the Swaraj thus humiliated, felt miserable. He said, turning to Diler Khan, 'Where are you taking them, Khan saheb?'

'To the dungeon at Bahadurgad.'

'Please keep in mind, Khan saheb ... they deserve no greater punishment than being jailed.'

The next morning, Sambhaji woke up to the loud sounds of hammers crashing against stone. To his utter surprise, Diler Khan had given orders to break down the walls of Bhupalgad. Aghast at the foolishness of the act, he rushed into the Subedar's tent, saying, 'Khan saheb, what madness is this? Why destroy a strong and beautiful fort which we have captured?'

Diler Khan said, smiling contemptuously, 'What is the point in Mughals guarding a fort which is on the borders of Maratha and Bijapur territories?'

Already dismayed, Sambhaji was further incensed when Diler Khan extended his taunt, 'No point in keeping such spoils. The moment cattle-herding children see these forts, they start dreaming of becoming a king one day!'

A few hours later, Sambhaji went for a *darshan* at the Shiva temple with Ranubai and Durgabai. As he carelessly kicked a few stones lying around, he could hear the work of the hammers and other tools being used to break down the walls of Bhupalgad. Filled with the agonising guilt of being

responsible for destroying what Shivaji had built with the blessings of many generations, Sambhaji's mind reeled and he walked with faltering steps. A chain of unfortunate events had begun, he realised, since the day he had entered the Mughal territory after crossing the Krishna at Mahuli.

On the way, he met a Kazi. The man said, 'Alamgir has committed a crime which will bring shame upon all the people here, irrespective of their caste or creed.'

'Why, what has happened, Kazi miyan?'

'The Badshah is imposing Jizya, a tax on all people who are not Muslims. Such blasphemy would never have been condoned by his father or his grandfather!'

Sambhaji muttered to himself, 'Maybe it's Lord Shiva's way of giving me a hint. What kind of justice can I expect from Aurangzeb if he is willing to penalise thousands of innocent Hindus?'

These were indeed challenging times for Sambhaji. In the cool and dark sanctum sanctorum of the temple, Sambhaji sat silently for a long time, his head resting at the feet of the idol.

Ranubai offered twenty-one coconuts and a gold necklace, requesting the priest, 'This time, please bless my brother with a boy child.' Durgabai blushed while Sambhaji looked at her in surprise. He wondered how he was going to carry this sweet burden amidst all the chaos.

Sambhaji's moment of peace did not last long. Four of his servants came running and said, literally screaming in their excitement, 'Yuvraj! Yuvraj!' Sambhaji sensed urgency in their cries. Surely, there had been some calamity! He asked, picking up his sword, 'What has happened? Tell me!'

One of them blurted out, 'Treachery, Raje! We have been fooled.'

Another began, 'The seven hundred Maratha prisoners of war! They were taken away to Bahadurgad and ...'

'Don't stop! Tell me what happened to them,' Sambhaji cried.

'How do I tell you, Yuvraj,' one of the servants said, tears running down his cheeks. In between sobs, he revealed, 'These devils cut off one hand each of half the soldiers and one foot of the rest. Even animals are not so cruel!'

Sambhaji's rage knew no bounds. He clenched his fists and ground his teeth in anger. He rushed out of the temple and jumped onto his horse in one smooth movement. Spurring his mount, he raced through the jungle,

leaping over rocks and steering through the dense undergrowth. His men, following close behind, shouted, 'Yuvraj! Be careful!' But Sambhaji was in no mood to listen. Somehow he managed to reach the Mughal camp without any mishap, halting the horse only when he reached his tent.

The Mughal soldiers who stood guard outside Diler Khan's tent stared at Sambhaji's dishevelled hair and the bloodied hooves of his horse. Sambhaji's eyes were flaming red with anger. He jumped off his horse and screamed, 'Where is that treacherous old man? Where is Diler Khan?'

Diler Khan, who had seen Sambhaji racing down from Bhupalgad, sensed danger. He was hiding like a mouse in a field nearby, with nearly two thousand men around him. He did not have the courage to face the enraged Sambhaji.

'You old coward! Come out!' Sambhaji shouted a few times.

The boiling ocean in Sambhaji's mind took a long time to simmer down. Finally he said to a soldier standing near him, 'Give my message to the old Khan. Just because Sambhaji has joined the Mughals, Shivaji is not finished. Not yet.'

That night Sambhaji was in turmoil. Images of the men in the dungeons of Bahadurgad, their hands and feet broken and severed, their faces full of pain and reproach, appeared in vivid waking dreams. His head literally exploded with these visions, denying him even a single moment's respite. Durgabai and Ranubai sat by his bed, their faces creased with worry. As the night wore on, Sambhaji's restlessness increased. Getting up, he went and picked up a sharp stone lying at a corner of the tent. His wife and sister ran after him in a panic and held onto his arms. He said, trying to get out of their embrace, as the servants rushed in, 'Leave me! Leave me, Akkasaheb.'

'Raje, what are you trying to do?'

Sambhaji slapped his forehead with his palm, saying, 'Ranu Akka, despite the presence of Shivaji's son, seven hundred Marathas lose their limbs to the cruelty of the Mughals. What is the point in me being here if I am not able to stop such heinous acts? Let me cut off these vile and useless hands of mine.'

Durgabai pleaded, 'Raje, please restrain yourself. If you give in to despair, what future remains for the Maratha Swaraj?'

Sambhaji pushed the servants away. But Ranubai held his hands, pleading, 'Please listen to me, my dear! If you decide to cut off your hands,

have you thought of what would happen to us? If tomorrow Aurangzeb decides to march on Abasaheb, it is only you, Shambhu Raje, who is capable of cutting off his horse's legs.'

Sambhaji could not take it anymore. He dropped the stone on the floor and walked towards a huge metal pole that stood in the middle of the tent. Hugging the pole, he started banging his head on it. Almost delirious, he screamed, tears streaming down his cheeks, 'Abasaheb, please pardon me! I made a terrible mistake. I have erred!'

## 5

Even a small scratch inflicted by a mouse on a lion's nose is enough to enrage the noble beast. Sambhaji was not only proud of his land and its people but felt responsible for them. Besides, he was young, barely twenty, and blood boiled in his veins at the thought of the seven hundred Marathas who had been maimed by the Mughals while he had stood by doing nothing.

As for Diler Khan, he was an anxious man these days. It had taken the tireless effort of nearly three years to win Sambhaji over to his side. Now, with a single act, he had irked the lion's cub he had tamed by the sweat of his brow. If Sambhaji was to leave suddenly, Diler Khan would lose the gem which had earned him some respect at the Mughal court in Delhi.

The Mughal troops were still camped outside the walls of Bhupalgad. Sambhaji refused to come out of his quarters and had not touched food or water for three days. He would sit in a trance, barely consenting to drink half a glass of milk. Ranubai and Durgabai were growing more anxious by the day. Meanwhile Diler Khan was trying to devise a way to gauge Sambhaji's state of mind. When Durgabai contracted a fever, Khan used the opportunity to send his hakeem to their tent with instructions to ascertain the situation. He also sent baskets of sweets and fruits, and a honeyed message to the effect that the orders to cut off the hands and legs of the Maratha soldiers had not been issued by him. He conveniently put the blame on his nephew Gairat Khan.

Four days went by. Taking stock of the situation, Diler Khan realised that the lion cub's initial anger may have subsided. Entering Sambhaji's chambers like a thief, he sat at his bedside with the meek air of a penitent sinner. Then he said, with a show of sympathy, 'Raje, it has been a real tragedy. Gairat Khan has disappeared. I have petitioned Alamgir to hang him to death.'

'How does that help anyone? Tomorrow, when these disabled, half-legged and one-armed men return home, people would ask how Shivaji's son, who was standing nearby, could allow this kind of cruelty. What am I supposed to say?'

Diler Khan knew Sambhaji had a sharp mind. He had to think of a convincing answer. Calling Ziya Khan to his tent, he dictated a message to Aurangzeb:

*'Alampanah, please declare all over Hindustan that Sambhaji is the true ruler of the Marathas. A large number of people who are loyal to Sambhaji are in Shivaji's forces. If the enmity between the father and son increases, we will surely benefit. There would be a split amongst the Marathas. Once that is done, it will only be a matter of time before we seize and ravage their territory.'*

Diler Khan instructed Ziya Khan, 'Tell Sambhaji that I have recommended to Alamgir that he be declared as the Shahenshah of the Marathas.'

Ziya Khan conveyed the message to Sambhaji with all the drama he could muster, and he was disappointed by the Yuvraj's indifferent reaction. Sambhaji knew these were childish attempts to incite him to revolt against Shivaji. Besides, the cruelty of the Mughals towards the Maratha prisoners after the siege of Bhupalgadh was not something he could easily forget. And now they were now trying to take advantage of the rift with his father! He desperately wanted to wring the neck of that wily old Diler Khan. He told Durgabai and Ranubai, 'I can finish that old fox any day but the Mughal soldiers guarding him will hunt me down afterwards.'

One day Diler Khan stomped into Sambhaji's quarters, waving a piece of paper. It was apparently a message from Shivaji which his spies had intercepted. He growled, 'Is this the way a lion like Shivaji deals with his cub? Read this!'

Sambhaji retorted, 'What do you mean? What does Abasaheb say?'

'Listen to the message and judge for yourself. It says, *'Don't be hesitant if Sambhaji attacks. Ensure that each and every fort is protected and fight till the end. Don't be merciful to Sambhaji just because he is my son.'* What kind of language is this for a father to use against his own son?'

Sambhaji laughed sarcastically. 'What else do you expect my father to do? Garland his son who has defected to the enemy camp?'

That shut Diler Khan up. The wily Subedar realised that Sambhaji was growing restless and did not wish to remain in the Mughal camp. That night he stayed awake and composed another urgent message to Aurangzeb. It read:

*'Jahanpanah, I beg your pardon but I reiterate that the need to declare Sambhaji the Shahenshah of the Marathas. I urgently request you to send out a public notice across the Empire. One such proclamation from you will separate the father and son. The Maratha Empire will be split wide open.'*

Diler Khan waited with bated breath for Aurangzeb's reply but he received no response. He was no longer sure of the course of action he should take with regard to Sambhaji. His Diwan, Ziya Khan, perceived his confusion and suggested at an opportune moment, 'Khansaheb, it is my view that we shouldn't waste any more time. Let us arrest Sambhaji like an ordinary criminal and send him to prison at Agra.'

'How does that help me?'

Ziya Khan said, 'Khansaheb, you will get all the credit. If the Emperor is happy, Diler Khan would be appointed Diwan of the Delhi Durbar, no less!'

Diler Khan laughed at Ziya Khan's suggestion. 'You idiot! This means you have not understood our Alamgir yet. He has no enemies left in the North. If Shivaji and his son, his enemies in the South, are finished off, he will have no need of people like us. And he would treat us with the contempt reserved for dogs and cats.'

'What do we do then?'

'Ziya, we have to ensure we don't break the stick and allow the snake to die. Only then can ordinary servants like us survive. Else, we are finished!'



One evening, just as it was getting dark, Diler Khan went out for a ride with his guards. As he crossed a small hill, he saw a tall figure in the distance standing with a few other men. In the enveloping darkness he was not able to see who it was. Ziya Khan said, 'It is Sambhaji with his men.'

'What is he doing there?'

'Khansaheb, have you forgotten? It has only been fifteen days or so. It is the spot where you ordered the limbs of hundreds of Marathas to be cut off. Sambhaji spends a lot of time in this place ... sometimes in the morning, at times in the evening. Often, he spends the whole day here. I am told he takes the soil in his hands and cries like a child.'

'Sentimental fool!' Diler Khan muttered to himself. 'But what frightens me is that this fool is a tiger too!'

Returning to his camp, Diler Khan said, 'We must move away from this place. It has occupied Sambhaji's mind. He will soon go mad. Let us find a way to keep him engaged elsewhere.'

By now, in order to gain Aurangzeb's favour, Diler Khan had begun taking an interest in the affairs of Bijapur. The Sultanate was weak and vulnerable, basking blindly in its lost glory. Adil Shah had been promised support by Shivaji in the event of a Mughal attack. Meanwhile Diler Khan tried to woo the sardars of the Adilshahi durbar by sending letters of assurance that promised them riches in exchange for shifting their loyalty to the Mughals. Everyone was surprised when he finally managed to catch a big fish like Sarja Khan.

Diler Khan also received a letter from his well-wishers at the Delhi durbar. It warned: *'Diler, don't send recommendations to the Alampanah asking for Sambhaji to be declared as Shahenshah of the Marathas. The Badshah views your excessive praise of Sambhaji with suspicion. He suspects that you have struck an friendship with Sambhaji and that the two of you are planning something together. He worries that you may join forces with the Marathas and revolt. The Badshah is growing old and your letters are making him anxious.'*

Two days later, Diler Khan entered Sambhaji's tent with a broad smile and an outstretched hand of friendship. 'Shambhu Shahzade, you might be thinking that we are against the Marathas and no one else. Well, that is not true. Get ready! We are marching on to Bijapur. I will show you how Diler Khan ravages an Islamic kingdom.'

## 6

One night, furtive footsteps were heard outside Sambhaji's quarters. It was a spy from Raigad who had managed to find his way through enemy territory and reach Sambhaji without any mishap, bearing a message from Maharaj himself. After holding the message to his forehead reverently for a few moments, Sambhaji started reading it:

*'Blessings to you, my son. Ever since you have left, my mind has been reeling with all kinds of thoughts and making me restless.*

*'What did you learn when you were being taught the Ramayan by the pandits? Ram left his kingdom and chose to live in the forests to fulfil the promise he had made to his father. But you have gone away, abandoning our precious Swaraj. You chose to join the enemy, considering me an outsider. Without thinking twice, and allowing anger to rule your decisions, you entered the camp of the Mughals. I am tortured by these thoughts.*

*'Recently, I heard of the cruel act of the Mughals wherein our men's limbs were brutally severed. My eyes have been shedding tears of blood since that day. Back in the days when Maratha sardars considered it their religious duty to serve under foreign overlords, I managed to gather ordinary but brave souls like Tanaji, Murarbaji and many others in order to build our Hindavi Swaraj. What a misfortune that the very hands which continue to build the temple of Swaraj are brutally cut off by our enemy!*

*I can understand that you are going through the same pain that I am suffering. Shambhu, there are many people here who hate you and are jealous of you. But If you believe that I am biased and listen to their views alone, you are wrong. Please keep in mind that there are as many who love you dearly and would not think twice to sacrifice their lives for you. How can I, as a king and a father, be blind to them?*

*'Let bygones be bygones. Bury your ill-feeling and come out of that hell. Half of Maharashtra is waiting for your return, from*

*the ryots and the sadhus to Shivaji Maharaj. Please return, Yuvraj! Come back immediately. You have a lot of responsibilities to shoulder.*

*P.S: I am aware that it is not easy to come out of the jaws of a crocodile. But I can help you with that. We are now on friendly terms with the Bijapurkars and they will rush to your aid, should you ask for it. Shambhu bal, leave all your worries behind. Don't let the distance between us remain.'*

His father's message, written from the heart, touched Sambhaji deeply. His own heart, troubled by the torture of the Marathas at Bhupalgad, was now consoled in some measure. Like a child overcome by unexpected joy, he excitedly showed the message to Durgabai and Ranubai. But now there was a single thought in his mind: how was he to escape Diler Khan's clutches?

Sambhaji was now receiving messages regularly from the Swaraj. He heard that Adil Shah of Bijapur, discovering the Mughal plan to attack, had sent an urgent request to Shivaji asking for help. Shivaji looked at this as an opportunity to build a strong defence against the Mughals in the Deccan. Besides the impending Mughal attack, Bijapur was reeling under a severe drought in which thousands of men and animals had perished. Shivaji had sent a caravan of two thousand bullocks loaded with grain. Yuvraj sorely missed all the action and rued the fact that he was not there to help.

One day, an incensed Diler Khan stormed into Sambhaji's room and said, 'Shambhu Shahzade, it looks like your father is not in the least bothered about your safety. He has attacked our post at Jalnapur near Aurangabad.'

'What about it?'

'Had the attack been of the kind he launched on Surat with the primary intention of looting, it would not have mattered much. But this has been done deliberately to distract us and reduce our pressure on Bijapur.'

Sambhaji did not bother to reply. His mind was preoccupied with wondering how he and his family could escape the old man's clutches. But to all appearances, he was stuck with Diler Khan for the foreseeable future. Sambhaji did not want to attack Bijapur with Khan. He knew that all efforts made by his father to build an alliance with Adil Shah would go to waste if he was seen there with the Mughal army.

Meanwhile Diler Khan's senior sardars were advising him to 'arrest Sambhaji, tie him up and get him to Aurangabad.' But the old man felt he could not afford to give up the last card he held. He was confused and did not know what to do.

A few days later, a spy came with a message from the Maratha commander Hambirrao Mohite. It said, '*Yuvraj, I have sent a few troops to the jungles near Athani. They are waiting for you. Take their help to escape and return home soon.*'

The message gave Sambhaji some solace. Another night, he received a message from his dear friends Kalash and Jotyaji. It said, 'Shambhu Raje, please be alert! We have intercepted some instructions from Aurangzeb and we fear that your life is in danger. You may be taken prisoner soon. We urge you to act at once. Break the cage and fly!'

Sambhaji was looking for an opportune moment to escape but Diler Khan hovered around him all the time with his eagle eye, hatching his own plans. One afternoon he said, 'Shambhu Shahzade, I want to seize Panhalgad under your command.'

Sambhaji knew exactly what Khan had in mind. 'So you want to repeat what you did in Bhupalgad and use me as a shield to take another Maratha fort, don't you? You wish to defame me once and for all in front of my people.'

'Why bother about your good name any more? You are going to become a Mughal sardar soon. I will take you to Delhi. I will ask the Badshah to gift you a royal armour.'

'Royal armour or a ton of fetters?'

Sambhaji's sharp retort put Diler Khan in a spot. He managed to conceal his surprise but was alert thenceforth, knowing Sambhaji could call his bluff anytime.

## Z

Keeping Sambhaji by his side, Diler Khan proceeded towards Panhalgad. Sambhaji fumed silently. He had recently learned that it was Diler Khan

who had recruited the Wadkar duo to attack Shivaji on the day of Holi while celebrations were on in Raigad. Khan still tried to wear a cloak of courtesy but the devil in him was itching to get out. He looted the villages of Athani and Tikota en route to Bijapur, despite the fact that the villages were populated largely by Muslims. The fact that they were under Adilshahi rule was enough for Diler Khan to wreak havoc on them.

Diler Khan's lawlessness and cruelty reached its peak during the march to Panhalgad as he looted bazaars and killed merchants, burnt standing crops and destroyed forests. Soon, he began to round up men and women from the villages, giving orders for them to be stripped and subjected to whiplashes. The desperate cries and pleas of women rent the air. Diler Khan's men raped women and young girls, both Hindus and Muslims. Many were murdered after being tortured and molested. Dead bodies were hung on branches of trees for others to see. Many women, fearing rape, jumped in wells and killed themselves.

Several of the Muslim sardars in Diler Khan's troops were shaken by the way he was conducting himself. But not having the courage to confront Khan, they complained to Sambhaji. An already incensed Sambhaji stormed inside Diler Khan's tent and yelled, 'Are you devil or human? How dare you torture the common man?'

'Shambhu Raje, I hope you are now convinced that I do not differentiate between the Hindus and the Muslims.'

'Are you a Mughal sardar or an ordinary thug? You need to stop this right away, or else ...'

'Or else? What will you do?' Diler Khan laughed mockingly.

Sambhaji's body burned with the thought of revenge. He lay on his bed staring into nothingness. Durgabai and Ranubai were at their wits' end, watching helplessly as Sambhaji moaned, 'Durga, what have I done to myself? Diler Khan will drag me to Panhala, shedding blood every inch of the way. There he will repeat the gory deeds of Bhupalgad and I will be branded as traitor for life.'

A couple of days later, Sambhaji received a secret message from Bahadurgad. Sambhaji was happy to see that it was from Miyan Khan. He had written:

*'My dear friend Sambhaji,*

*I was fortunate to witness the marriage of my daughters, thanks to you. I have two reasons to send you this message. One, I have received the royal orders from Delhi declaring me as innocent. I am going to be released soon. But the other news from Delhi is disturbing. I am informed that you will be arrested in the next few days. The Badshah has ordered five thousand men to march from Aurangabad especially for this purpose. It is Aurangzeb's devilish plan to capture, imprison and torture you. By doing so, he wants to frighten your father, his arch enemy, into submission. Please remember, Diler Khan is Aurangzeb's slave and can never be a true friend to the Marathas. Don't delay even a minute! Shambhu, go! Run away!'*

The hair on the back of Sambhaji's neck stood as he read Miyan Khan's epistle. That night, his sleep was troubled by recurring nightmares of the men at Bhupalgad losing their limbs and of his father's grief-stricken face. No! He could not go on with this humiliating existence anymore! To live the life of a slave with the enemy while his illustrious father suffered on his account was unthinkable!

Sambhaji spent the rest of the night sitting in front of the idol of Lord Shiva in his room. Durgabai entered his room and, pressing her tear-laden face to Sambhaji's, wailed,

'Yuvraj, I know you are unable to take bold steps because you are thinking of us. Don't bother about us. We don't care if we die here. It would not make a difference to anyone. But if you survive, Shivaji Raje's Swaraj will flourish.'

Sambhaji wiped his tears and got up with a new sense of determination. Durgabai was in the seventh month of her pregnancy. Sambhaji was overwhelmed with emotion by the spirit of sacrifice she displayed even in this condition without a thought for her own safety. All she cared about was to get Sambhaji back to his father! Sambhaji raised Durgabai to her feet by her shoulders and embraced her passionately.

She said, 'Raje, don't get entangled in my love.'

'Durga, look at my fate! When I left Shringarpur, Yesu was pregnant. And now, you want me to run away from here, when you are carrying a child! How can I even think of leaving you here in this state? It seems I do not have the good fortune to see my children playing on my lap.'

Ranubai stepped closer to Sambhaji and said, putting his hand on her forehead, 'Shambhu, don't think about us. While trying to plan an escape that includes us, you may land up being a prisoner of the Mughals for life. The Jadhavs of Wai will find another daughter-in-law like me, but Shivaji Raje's Swaraj will not get another Sambhaji. Don't waste any more time. You need to leave right away!'

Sambhaji sat on his bed for a long time, brooding and silent. He was uncertain of the next steps. Ranubai gently caressed his back and said, 'Shambhu Raje, you are probably not aware of how much Abasaheb misses you. He often used to tell me: "I would not be worried if Sambhaji was a warrior through and through. But I know he is a poet too! Such people are sensitive! When provoked, they can be as dangerous as a raging bull. But when overcome by emotion, they can get carried away like a waterfall. A king cannot afford to be so. He must hold onto anger and revenge, to be used at the appropriate time. But Shambhu cannot hold anything in his heart. I worry about him!'

'Ranu Akka, Abasaheb is a keen observer of character. And he cares for me so deeply!'

'One day he said, with tears in his eyes, "There is only one person who truly understands his valour, his boyishness as well as his maturity; it is Jijau saheb!" Then Abasaheb said, his voice choking, "I wonder who will be able to understand this mad fellow when I am no longer around!"'

Sambhaji continued to sit on his bed, lost in thought. Ranubai pulled him up, holding his hands, and said,

'Get up, Shambhu Raje! Fate seems to be playing a game with us. Can you imagine Abasaheb's state of mind ever since we crossed the Krishna and came to Mughal territory? I am sure he has not been able to sleep even one night!'

'Why did you come with me, Akkasaheb, against the wishes of everyone?'

'I don't know. I was worried about you, Shambhu. Well, there is no time to waste now! You know what the kings used to do earlier to strengthen their forts? They used to perform human sacrifices! The blood of the sacrificed was mixed with mortar and lime to provide protection. So, I want you to stop caring about your sister and your pregnant wife. If destiny smiles on us, we will meet again. But if we die, the fortress of the Hindavi Swaraj, built by Shivaji and Sambhaji, must stand strong.'

Diler Khan had lost his ability to sleep at night. The daredevilry with which Sambhaji had attacked him, the sardar of thousands of Mughal soldiers, had left him nervous. He now realised why Aurangzeb had been warning him to ‘arrest the dangerous son of Shiva, bind him in irons and get him to Delhi at the earliest.’

That morning, Munsib Khan had visited the camp to report to Diler Khan along with his nephew Bale Khan. Munsib and his nephew had recently switched loyalties from the Bijapurkars to the Mughals. He commanded a troop of five thousand men. Diler Khan asked, with barely concealed anxiety, ‘What news, Munsib?’

‘Khansahab, we have followed your instructions and captured the two hundred men who had come from Maratha territory.’

‘Very good!’

‘We have confiscated their horses and put the men to work at a labour camp.’

Diler Khan was pleased with Munsib Khan’s report. He said, caressing his white beard, ‘Sambha is hot-blooded. I was really taken aback at the way he reacted the other day ...’

‘Khan saheb, how long do you intend to keep this firebrand with you?’

‘Munsib chacha, tomorrow I am expecting five thousand men from Aurangabad. I will send this ball of fire to Aurangzeb in their company. The world knows that Alamgir is capable of turning a raging fire into water.’

The next day, as they marched ahead, Diler Khan had requested Sambhaji to travel in a howdah next to his own elephant. Diler Khan wanted to buy time, to appease and humour Sambhaji, at least until Aurangzeb’s troops reached them.

The huge army lumbered along, crossing a small mountain to the valley beyond. Sambhaji saw a small lake with a stream flowing into it. An old Shiva temple stood nearby. Asking the mahout to stop the elephant, he said to Diler Khan, ‘Khan saheb, I have not had a darshan for several days. I suggest we stop here, pray to the Lord, and then move ahead.’

Diler Khan smiled, ‘Why do you even ask, Yuvraj? Do finish your prayers while I get some rest.’



While the troops halted in the shade of the trees, Sambhaji moved towards the lake with a few of his trusted men. After praying at the temple, he took a dip in the lake. Watching him, Diler Khan was contented. He wondered if this would be Sambhaji's last bath as a free man.

Sambhaji seemed to be in good spirits. He encouraged his men to take a dip. He appeared to be enjoying himself as he splashed around, swimming with joyous abandon. Munsib Khan's men, seeing that Sambhaji and his men were cavorting around in the water, sat down for lunch. Only a few soldiers stood guard at the edge of the lake.

Soon, Sambhaji noticed that five sanyasis were also taking a bath in the lake. Initially he ignored their chants of 'Jay Shambho', but when they started saying, albeit in a low voice, 'Shambho! Shiva's Shambho!', he looked at them carefully. A shiver went down his spine. One of the sanyasis was Jotyaji and another was Rayappa!

Sambhaji glanced around. Without making it obvious to the guards standing at the edge of the lake, he casually swam towards the sanyasis. Jotyaji said, as he came within earshot, while the others continued to recite mantras, 'There are five horses behind the temple, and fifty of our best men in the woods behind. Raje, we need to make a dash for it!'

Sambhaji now began taking dips in the water, pretending to pray to the sun. The soldiers on guard duty watched him curiously. Finally he took a deep breath and plunged into the water. The soldiers waited for a while, but Sambhaji did not surface. They started shouting, 'Sambhaji has escaped. Sambha bhaag gaya!'

There was a clamour all around. Diler Khan was wild with rage, and Bale Khan, without even waiting for further orders, rushed into the woods with five thousand of his men. Munsib Khan stood next to Diler Khan, smiling. Irritated, Diler Khan asked, 'What is so amusing, Munsib Khan?'

Munsib Khan gave no reply as he mounted and spurred his horse. Diler Khan shouted, 'Wait! Don't bring me his dead body. I want him alive! Else, Shahenshah would never forgive me.'

Munsib Khan and his men gave a chase but Sambhaji had left them far behind. Seeing that Bale Khan and his men were far behind, he spurred his own horse violently and repeatedly.

It was evening; the shadows lengthened in the woods. The sun was about to set behind the mountains, cutting off the last rays of light. Munsib Khan could see a valley below him. Then, in the distance, he saw Sambhaji.

He was tied to a tree, next to a fast-flowing stream. More than half of the fifty men who had accompanied Sambhaji were lying dead around him. It was evident that they had had a clash with the men chasing them.

Sambhaji himself showed signs of having fought many men. There were wounds all over his body and his clothes were stained with blood. Bale Khan, sword in hand, was screaming at Sambhaji.

Rushing down the slope, Munsib Khan shouted, 'Beta Bale Khan! Stop! For Allah's sake, stop!'

Sambhaji and Bale Khan continued their angry exchange of words while Munsib Khan ran towards them. Bale Khan was punching Sambhaji in his stomach now and, in his rage, pulled his beard violently. Incensed, Sambhaji spat on Bale Khan's face. Bale Khan, throwing restraint to the wind, raised his sword to split Sambhaji's head in half, when Munsib Khan ran up behind him with a cry, 'Bale Khan, beta!' A spear pierced Bale Khan's back and he crashed to the ground.

Sambhaji and the thousand Mughal soldiers surrounding him were stunned into silence. Munsib Khan sat down on the ground, taking his nephew's head into his lap. He tried to give him a sip of water, but he was dead. Munsib Khan, shattered, started wailing like a child.

A few Mughal sardars came forward and one of them said, incensed at Munsib Khan's cruel act, 'Chacha, in order to save the devil, you killed your own nephew?'

'Yes, he was my nephew, my true friend and only heir. But I ask you: why are you so outraged by sight of a dead body on the ground today?'

'What do you mean?' The sardar asked.

Munsib Khan said, throwing an angry glance at the men around him, 'Have you forgotten how Diler Khan and his men looted Athani and Tikota? Do you not remember how they raped hundreds of women, hanging their bodies on trees for others to see? Many of those helpless women were Muslims! But none of you unsheathed your swords in disgust at sight of Diler Khan's cruel acts!'

The men fell silent while Munsib Khan continued, 'The only man who was truly upset, who literally attacked Diler Khan on behalf of those murdered innocents, was Sambhaji, the lion cub. Not one of you! Why were you silent then? What happened to your manly pride?'

'What is it that you want to say, Chacha?' One of the men asked.

‘We made a terrible mistake in betraying Bijapur to join Diler Khan. If one of Aurangzeb’s sardars has the temerity to carry out such violent acts against us Muslims, imagine our state when the Badshah himself arrives here!’

The truth of Munsib Khan’s words began to dawn on the men and they nodded their heads. Munsib continued, ‘I tell you, the greatest enemy of the Shias of the Deccan is the kafir Badshah Aurangzeb. If this devil from Delhi destroys the Maratha Empire, it will only be a matter of time before Golconda and the Bijapur Sultanate are razed to the ground. We forget that it was Shivaji who sent a thousand bullock-cartloads of grain to our land when our land was ravaged by drought last year. We must help to protect Shivaji’s Swaraj if we are to protect ourselves from Aurangzeb’s cruelty.’

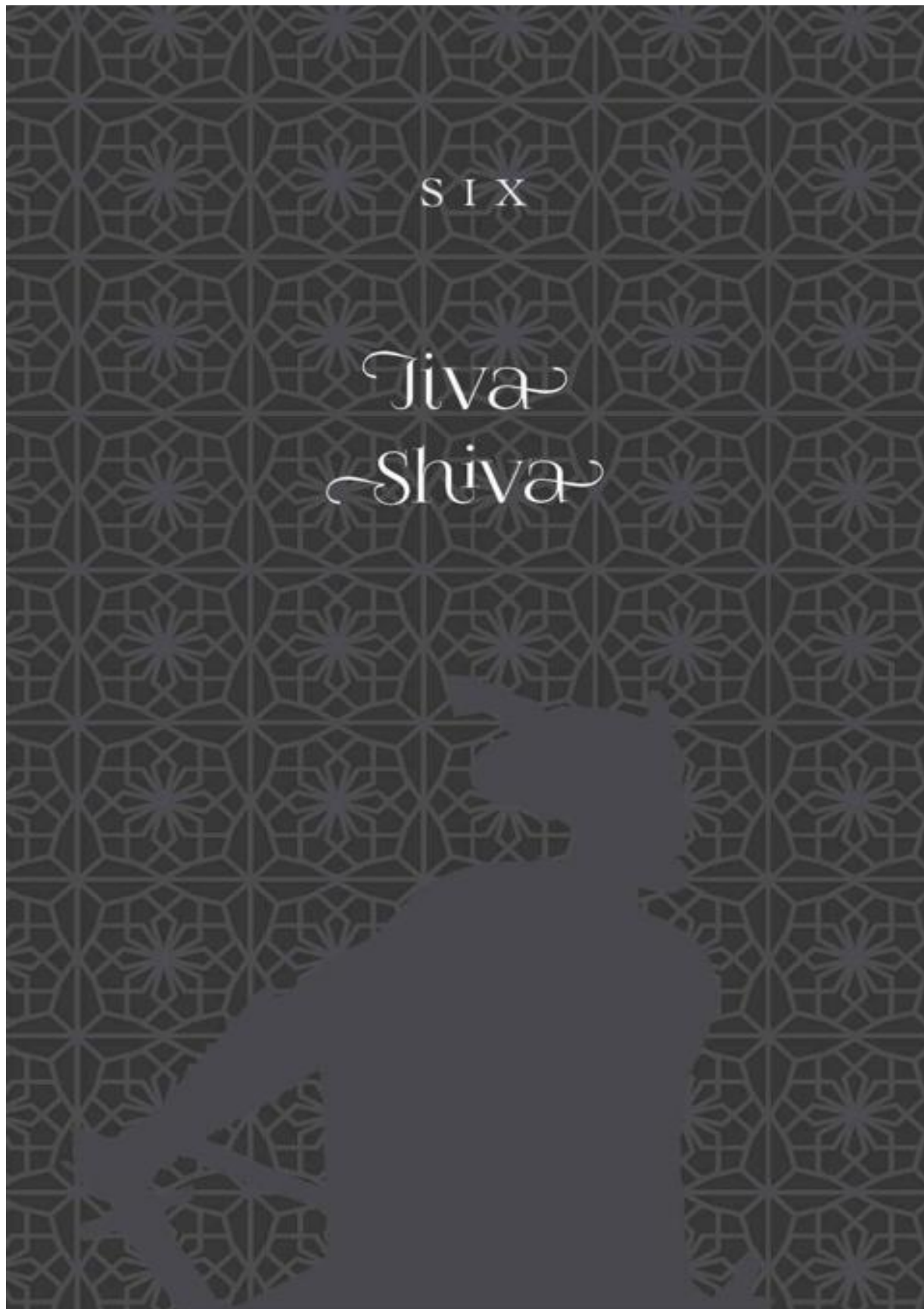
Munsib Khan took a dagger out of his cummerbund and cut the cords which bound Sambhaji to the tree. He instructed his men to offer fresh horses to Sambhaji’s surviving men. Patting Sambhaji’s back affectionately, he addressed the soldiers, ‘We need to ensure that Shivaji’s son is safe. If not for anything else, to ensure that we in the Deccan are protected!’ Turning to Sambhaji, he said, ‘Go, beta! Run away!’

Sambhaji, his robes drenched with blood, hugged Munsib Khan affectionately and took his leave.

Munsib Khan returned to the Mughal camp with his men, wondering what excuse he would give Diler Khan for Sambhaji’s escape. A few soldiers carried Bale Khan’s corpse. Munsib Khan, looking at his dead nephew, could not stop the tears flowing down his cheeks.

SIX

Tiva  
Shiva





# 1

Shivaji's palanquin reached Panhalgad late in the night to the sound of cannons booming at the main gate. Sambhaji was there to welcome him. Father and son hugged each other. Shivaji caressed Sambhaji's face affectionately, his hands trembling. There was so much to say. So much had transpired since they last saw each other. All the bittersweet memories were waiting to be relived. But the long journey had tired the elder Maharaj. Besides, it was not possible for him to bare his heart in the presence of all. It was decided that they would meet the next morning in private.

It had been a month since Sambhaji's arrival at Panhala. But he didn't travel around much. The people were hurt by the knowledge that their valorous and capable Yuvraj had chosen to join the Mughals. The ryots would give him strange looks whenever he went out for a ride. Hence Sambhaji chose to stay indoors as much as possible.

Waiting for the elder Maharaj's arrival was torture for Sambhaji. He had committed the heinous crime of defecting. How was he to face his father now? However the affectionate embrace with which Shivaji Maharaj had greeted him put his mind at rest and gave him a new lease of life.

At dawn the next day, Sambhaji put aside his blanket. The cool breeze of the morning filled the room as soon as he opened the windows. He could hear the tinkling of bells at the distant temple. Sambhaji's mind was transported to Agra, some thirteen years back. He was merely nine years old when he had stood next to his father with pride, a small sword hanging by his waist, at Aurangzeb's durbar.

The invitation to Agra had turned out to be a snub and an insult. Shivaji Raje was given the title of a 'panch hazari', a minor sardar in charge of five thousand troops, which naturally enraged him. Despite Shivaji's obvious displeasure, Badshah Aurangzeb continued to sit on his throne and

fiddle with his rosary, his face impassive, as if nothing untoward had happened.

Shivaji had said, as they returned to their haveli that evening, ruffling Sambhaji's hair affectionately, 'Dear, I am worried about you. I wonder how we will escape this place and return home!' Sambhaji recalled how he had promised his father the next morning, as they were about to leave for the durbar, 'Abasaheb, please don't get upset. I promise you ... wherever you cannot be present or attend to matters, Shambhu will try his best to fill in for you.'

Sambhaji's recollections were interrupted by a message from Shivaji, instructing him to meet Maharaj at the Mahalakshmi temple. However, an elaborate pooja had been organised to welcome Shivaji, and it was not before afternoon that father and son could be alone together. There was no one else at Maharaj's private chambers now.

Shivaji said, smiling, 'Shambhu, even after you left the Mughals, the thought that you may not return to the Swaraj made me lose my sleep. I was worried that you may hesitate or fear to return here and choose to go elsewhere.'

Sambhaji gulped nervously. His eyelids fluttered for a moment. 'Abasaheb, for a long time I roamed and stumbled through darkness. Then I consoled myself, saying: I am returning to the light; why should I be scared?'

Shivaji Raje sighed, 'I know, Shambhu, that you are a poet first and then our Yuvraj.'

Tears escaped Shivaji's eyes and flowed down his cheeks. He said, in a voice full of pain, 'Shambhu Raje, why have you returned alone?'

'Please pardon me, Abasaheb. I pleaded with Durga and Ranu Akka to leave with me but they refused.'

'I understand why they said so, Shambhu. In the process of trying to save them, you could have got caught. I am sure Bhawani will bless you with the strength and resourcefulness to find a way and release them from captivity.' Shivaji paused before he continued, 'Shambhu, you believe that I made a terrible mistake not taking you along for the campaign in Karnatak, don't you?'

Sambhaji hesitated for a moment and said, 'Yes, Abasaheb, I do! I was a mere lad when you put me in custody with Mirza Raje Jaisingh till the treaty of Purandhar was executed. I was just a child when I attended the

Agra durbar as a representative of the Hindavi Swaraj. And I was no more than twelve years of age when you sent me to Shahzada Muazzam as a Mughal mansabdar.'

'You remember everything, don't you?' Shivaji said.

'Let me remind you of a few more instances, Abasaheb. Do you recall the responsibility that was thrust upon me while I was serving under Muazzam?' Shivaji threw a questioning glance at Sambhaji, who continued, 'That of finding a way to convince Muazzam to join us; to make him revolt against his father.'

Shivaji smiled at the memory of the event.

Sambhaji continued, 'Abasaheb, you gave me an enormous responsibility at such a tender age. Yet, you found me unfit to join hands with on the campaign in Karnatak?'

Shivaji's face was pained as he replied, 'Shambhu, the Karnatak campaign was a painful chapter in my life. You will understand this when you are a Chattrapati yourself. Sometimes, in the larger interests of the state and your subjects, you are forced to be unfair to your dear ones. Don't I have that right, Shambhu?'

'I could at least have continued to stay in Raigad.'

Shivaji was silent for a few moments at the mention of Raigad. Then he said, with a heavy sigh, 'Shambhu, Raigad is not the same anymore. Ordinary folks have simple aspirations but those in power want the world in their palm. There is nothing as dangerous as the lust for power! Sons have killed their fathers for it. Mothers have turned against their own sons. I could see such lust sprouting in Raigad! Keeping that in mind, I decided it was best not to allow you to stay there. But I am blessed that you were able to escape the clutches of Diler Khan. And you are lucky to have managed it before Aurangzeb found a way to trap you. I heard of your escape when I was in Jalna. We gathered so much loot on the campaign that the elephants and camels were literally bent with the weight. But thanks to the Lord, I am here and we are together ...'

Shivaji stopped for a moment and Sambhaji asked, 'Why, was there any trouble on the way back here? Did you fall ill?'

'Shambhu, while we were returning, we were attacked at Sangamner by Ranmast Khan, the Mughal sardar who had come from Aurangabad with nearly twenty thousand troops. We were trapped in a gorge. But we were saved by the dense jungle and our valorous Bahirji Naik. The canopy was



so thick that it blocked all sunlight. Led by Bahirji, we negotiated our way through the forest for nearly three days and then, bypassing the Mughals stationed at Junnar, we reached the Malshej ghat and journeyed onwards to Raigad.'

Sambhaji listened intently as Shivaji continued, 'Strength alone is not enough. Imagine what would have happened if I had been captured by the Mughals. Shambhu, a man may try as hard as he wants to succeed in his ventures, but without the support of the gods, he is nobody. We are meeting here today by the grace of Jagadamba. But remember! A king has to make harsh decisions for the benefit of his kingdom. If you believe that today I am embracing you affectionately as a father, you are under the wrong impression!'

Sambhaji looked at his father, surprised. Shivaji said, smiling, 'I enquired into the matter of your waiving the dues of the poor farmers. This old man has decided to felicitate the true heir to the kingdom, the one who cares for his people!'

Shivaji said, placing his hands affectionately on Sambhaji's shoulders, 'Aurangzeb has been busy with his campaigns in Kabul and Kandahar ... but our spies tell us now that he will surely descend on the Deccan within a year or so with a huge army. We must be prepared and will need to assemble an army of more than a hundred and fifty thousand men to raid territories in Gujarat, Burhanpur and other areas.'

Sambhaji let out a hearty laugh. He said, eyes brimming with pride at his father's foresight, 'Now I know, Abasaheb, why you have been so busy buying ammunition from the firangis for the past few years!'

'Son, the most deadly weapon in my arsenal is you! We were forced to sign the ignominious treaty of Purandar because of sardars like Diler Khan and Mirza Raja Jaisingh. We were humiliated at the Agra durbar, and now, we hear that Aurangzeb himself may march upon the Deccan. We must not forget the fact that he is one of the most powerful emperors in the world today. I don't need an astrologer to tell me that the only man capable of confronting his might is the lion's cub! You, my dear, must fight! Fight with all your strength! And save the jungles, the animals and the common man of the Swaraj from the tyranny of the Mughals!'

Sambhaji instantly fell at his father's feet and said, embracing them, 'Abasaheb, your blessings are enough for me to move mountains.'

Shivaji said, ‘Dear Shambhu, all we can do is try our best. We cannot tell where the crooked paths of destiny will take us. Tomorrow, when you confront Aurangzeb, I may or may not be alive, but I am sure my blessings and the fruits of my good deeds will be with you.’

## 2

Shivaji Raje was meeting his eldest son after nearly three years. Just as a stick cannot break the surface of water, jealous intrigues cannot damage strong bonds of heartfelt affection. Both Shivaji and Sambhaji knew they were a rare combination: a father whose valour was known all over the land and a son who had true potential.

After the reunion at Panhalgad, they wanted to spend as much time as possible talking to each other. Father and son were together nearly every moment of the day—offering prayers at the temple of Bhawani in the morning or overseeing administrative affairs of the Swaraj later in the day. Sometimes they would stand on the fort’s ramparts, looking northwards at the distant river Warna or the river Panchaganga and its surrounding territory in the south. As the sun set, Sambhaji and Shivaji often sat gazing at the distant hills of Gajapur and the forests below Vishalgad.

Sambhaji was now literally a devotee of Shivaji. The barriers between the two had melted away like wax. Shivaji had found a dedicated follower, a son who hung on to every word he uttered.

Shivaji said one day, ‘Shambhu, Rajaram is your younger brother. You must forget your differences. I pray that Bhawani shows you the way.’

‘Abasaheb, if I have your blessings, I am happy to survive on a little rice and milk while serving the Hindavi Swaraj.’

A sudden thought changed Shivaji’s mood. He said, ‘Shambhu, it is easy to confront an enemy who challenges you with a naked sword. But the foe who claims outwardly to be your friend is more dangerous. I have faced many since childhood. There are Maratha families who have served Adil Shah of Bijapur or the Nizam of Ahmednagar for generations. Look at your own brother-in-law, Mahadji Nimbalkar of Phaltan, who takes pride in

being a lackey of the Mughals. The Mores of Jawli are traitors. The Surves of Shringarpur and Ganoji Shirke pretend to be loyal to the Swaraj but their true allegiance is to the Mughals! When Afzal Khan destroyed the idol of Tulja Bhawani with his sword, there were several Maratha sardars who praised him. Not one had the temerity to confront him and avenge the desecration. Forget stopping him; they did not even dare to look him in the eye!’

Sambhaji said, his voice full of admiration, ‘You have created a Swaraj despite being surrounded by such people!’

‘Son, I am proud when my sword rises to cut off the head of an enemy, but when our own people, our kin turn traitors, my head hangs in shame. In future, Shambhu, you must be wary of selfish Marathas and the Brahmin watandars.’

Shivaji continued, ‘Keep in mind that when you rule the country, you must be concerned above all with the poorest of the poor. When I started building the Swaraj, I deliberately distanced myself from power-seekers like the watandars and the jagirdars. Instead I looked after the simple folk, cattle herders and humble farmers, who were willing to give their lives for the cause. I made them shiledars and taught them to fight. That is where a Tanaji and a Murarbaji were born! It is the common man who will remain loyal to us till death!’

‘But Abasaheb, not all the landlords holding a watan or a jagir are our arch enemies, are they?’

‘But neither are they friends of the ryots. Their first loyalty is to their revenues, their profits, their titles, and the positions they hold.’

Shivaji Raje paused for a few moments and said, holding Sambhaji’s hand, ‘There were times when the green flag of the Muslims fluttering on the walls of Raigad would pierce Maasaheb’s heart. Siddi Johar’s flag on the Janjira fort still breaks my heart. I have tried to put the saffron flag on the ramparts there but failed, despite making eight attempts.’

‘Is Janjira so crucial?’

‘Crucial?’ The very thought of capturing Janjira bought a smile to Shivaji’s face. He said, clenching his fists, ‘Janjira, the fort which controls all the trade by sea! When we capture it, just see how the borders of the Swaraj touch the Ganga and Yamuna!’

The question of dividing the Swaraj arose once more. Maharaj had been falling ill often in the last four years and the senior sardars were a

worried lot. Shivaji had, in fact, clarified the issue of succession during his coronation by declaring Sambhaji as the Yuvraj. Sambhaji had governed Raigad for four years before the coronation and had a thorough understanding of its administration, its flaws and challenges, the strengths and weaknesses of its forts as well as their escape routes.

But Soyrabai's ambition with regard to Rajaram had not died down. If Rajaram were to ascend the throne, the sardars supporting Soyrabai, already licking their lips at the thought of this golden opportunity to grab power, would fill their coffers under the guise of teaching the younger Yuvraj the art of administration. No wonder men like Annaji Datto were throwing their weight behind Rajaram and Soyrabai! Sambhaji was a thorn in the flesh for the corrupt sardars backing Soyrabai. On the other hand, the ryots and troops saw Sambhaji as Shivaji's true successor.

Annaji and others were trying to convert Maharaj to the view that Sambhaji should be given charge of the Karnatak region while Raigad should be handed over to Rajaram. Shivaji would smile awkwardly whenever the topic of partition came up. 'Our Swaraj is not a watan, a piece of private property, like those managed by the saranjamdars,' he would say, 'It is a temple built by the blood and toil of thousands. An edifice which stands for the unity, strength and the culture of the Deccan. How does one divide such an entity?'

As for Sambhaji, whenever the topic came up, he would say, 'Abasaheb, I am not power hungry. I am happy with whatever you give me, even if it is just a coconut from the temple. I am content to live my life at your feet.'

The western horizon towards Gajapur and Vishalgad was illumined by the rays of the setting sun. It caught the emerald stone adorning Sambhaji's headgear, which was slightly askew. Shivaji Raje, adjusting his son's turban, said, 'Shambhu, have you ever looked at our throne carefully?'

'Yes, many times; why?'

'I want to talk about it. Elsewhere, the right to the throne is hereditary. But you must know that it is different in the Swaraj.'

'I don't understand you, Abasaheb!'

'Let me explain! Don't be in a hurry to ascend the throne. The next time you go near it, inspect it carefully. Look at the pure seat of power and the five steps leading to it.'

He continued, ‘The first step, when you look closely, has hundreds of eyes—like the ones you see in a peacock’s tail. They represent the eyes of our people; the common folk. And you would, if you listen carefully, be able to hear the waters of our sacred rivers—the Krishna, the Bhima and the Godavari.’

‘When you put your feet on the second step, you would be able to see the three hundred and fifty forts in the Sahyadris. When you look at the ramparts of the forts carefully, you would see stains of the blood our valiant soldiers have shed to capture them.

‘On the third step you will get a darshan of Jijausaheb. You will see Aausaheb, and thousands of mothers as well as wives who have gracefully accepted their loss for the cause of Swaraj. You can hear the sound of the bangles breaking from the threshold of every widow’s house.

‘Be careful when you step on the fourth one! You would be able to hear the devout abhangs of Tukoba and the teachings of Gyaneshwar. You will meet the great saints, Ramdas and many others.

‘And when you are on the fifth step, you would feel the tall peaks of the Sahyadris speaking to you, looking at you with great hope and unshakeable devotion. Our past, troubled with unfulfilled dreams, would be looking at you with high expectations. Wounds, still raw, would implore you to heal them. Rays of the rising sun would bless you with the ability to accomplish great deeds which can benefit the Swaraj at large. Shambhu, my dear daredevil, the past, the present and the future would be at your feet, imploring you to reach new heights.

‘Once you see the five steps the way I have described them, then and only then, my dear son, should you ask yourself a simple question: are you ready? Do you have the capacity to hold high the unfulfilled dreams and aspirations of the ryots? Can you can handle the enormous responsibilities that will be thrust upon you? If you believe you can, you are most welcome to sit on the throne. But if there is even an iota of doubt in your mind, don’t go anywhere near it! You may as well become a sanyasi, renouncing this world!’

The festivities of Dusshera and Diwali were in full spate in Raigad. Shivaji was at his capital after a gap of a few years. Adding to the charm of the celebrations was the occasion of Rajaram's marriage. He was nearly ten now.

Moropant Peshwa said to his colleagues as they sat in the office of the administrative council, 'We had all been curious and excited to know which lucky girl would be chosen by the elder Maharaj as his daughter-in-law. We were all happy to hear that it is Prataprao Gujar's daughter.'

'Prataprao is a valiant sardar but he committed a serious offence when he pardoned Bahlol Khan of Bijapur. I recall how angry Shivaji Raje was. Shamed by the elder Maharaj's fury, he had marched on the enemy with only six men in tow and sacrificed his life for the cause of the Swaraj. He is immortal now!' Balaji added.

'No wonder Ramdas Swami calls Raje a "jaanata raja", the one who understands. Shivaji Raje has never forgotten Prataprao's sacrifice and has now shown his gratitude by choosing his daughter to be Rajaram Raje's bride.'

'Well friends, we never have had any doubts about the character, vision, or the ability to dispense justice as far as the elder Maharaj is concerned,' Annaji Datto said, leaving a part of his sentence deliberately unsaid. It was clear to the others present what he wanted to convey.

Shivaji Maharaj was busy at the queens' quarters, supervising arrangements for the wedding. Balaji Avaji asked Moropant Peshwa in a low voice, 'Pant, is it true, what I am hearing?'

'What did you hear?'

'That Sambhaji Raje and Yesubai have not been invited for the wedding.'

'Well, unfortunately, it is true,' Moropant said dejectedly.

Balaji Avaji was saddened by the news. He said, 'Doesn't custom say that one must not forget one's kin during marriage and death ceremonies? Shambhu Raje is Rajaram's elder brother, after all!'

They spoke in whispers but Annaji Datto, sitting nearby, heard all of it. He said, smiling and caressing his grey whiskers, 'You seem to forget that each man is destined to get what he deserves on the basis of his abilities and merit.'

Moropant said, shaking his head, 'I think it is unjust to deny Shambhu Raje an invitation to his own brother's wedding.'

Annaji was expecting the Peshwa to disagree. He said, 'No one appreciates salt in milk or an unwelcome guest during marriage festivities.'

'Annaji, this is too much! Your hatred for Shambhu Raje has spread through your veins,' Balaji commented.

'Well, only some of us who have lost their beloved daughters to his cruel lust can understand the pain and sorrow. How will you ever know?' Annaji said, his voice turning hoarse.

Annaji's bitter words silenced others. No one said another word.

Fearing Shivaji Maharaj's anger, ministers of the Ashta Pradhan conducted themselves with apparent bonhomie but the undercurrents of animosity were strong. Moropant and Annaji were unable to see eye to eye on many issues. Shivaji Raje would often avoid sending the two men on the same campaign, knowing they did not get along.

It was afternoon. The office had taken a break for lunch. Prahlad Niraji was about to leave when Annaji held his hand, indicating that he was to stay back. Then Annaji addressed Shivaji, literally stopping Raje in his steps, 'Maharaj, may I ask you to spare a few moments? We have a request to make.'

'Certainly,' Shivaji said.

'No one doubts your keen sense of justice. Even an enlightened soul like Ramdas Swami praises you. Would it be unusual if we ask for a little fair dealing from you?'

'Pant, why are you speaking in riddles? Come to the point.'

'Maharaj has never allowed relationships or emotions to come in the way of deciding what is good for the Hindavi Swaraj. You killed Afzal Khan at the base of Pratapgad, but Khandoji saved Afzal Khan's son, hiding him in the jungles. Khandoji's son-in-law had taken the help of Kanhoji Jedhe to plead on his behalf. But you did not allow your relationship with Kanhoji, someone who was a father figure to you, to come in the way of your decision. Your emotional restraint, firm convictions and purity of heart are praiseworthy. You punished Khandoji, ordering his hand and leg to be cut off.'

Balaji Avaji interrupted, 'Maharaj is in a hurry. Cut the preamble short.'

Annaji threw an angry glance at Balaji and said, raising his hand as a judge would do, 'This is what I wanted to say: I believe Shivaji Raje would not allow an iota of leeway when it comes to a crime like treason.'

Shivaji's expression was a mixture of pain and surprise. All those present, except Balaji, shivered. Annaji had boldly voiced that which no one else would have dared to murmur. They all knew that Shivaji Raje had undoubtedly realised what it was that Annaji was alluding to.

Maharaj said, 'There is no need for this drama of allusions. If you have a complaint against Shambhu Raje, please say so explicitly.'

This blunt remark silenced Annaji for a few moments. He said, recovering quickly, 'I beg your pardon, Maharaj, but according to the law of the Swaraj, the scales of justice do not differentiate between an ordinary cowherd and a Yuvraj. Well, what I want to say is that the elder Yuvraj is not exactly under house arrest at Panhala. So I mean ...'

'I have not put him under any kind of arrest,' Shivaji Raje said bluntly. 'I have asked him to look after the provinces of Panhala, Prabhawali and Dabhol.'

Annaji wiped the sweat off his face, but persisted, 'That's exactly what I want to say, Maharaj! Those who have committed treason are roaming around freely, being rewarded instead of receiving just punishment. I wonder what the common man is making of it!'

Shivaji, about to leave for his quarters, stopped in his tracks. He turned around and sat on his chair determinedly. He said, forcing a smile to his face, 'True, Shambhu Raje joined the Mughals. I was sure that the request for punishing him would be put forth by you, if no one else.'

'Maharaj, he waives the taxes of farmers and the weavers.'

'Annaji, I have looked into the matter. I had set up an independent enquiry, examined every detail of the case, and found that the plight of the farmers whose taxes were waived by the Yuvraj was terrible. He would have committed a crime, in fact, had he allowed them to be taxed.'

'But Maharaj, his behaviour since then has hardly been exemplary.'

Shivaji glanced at Annaji with surprise. He had not expected him to discuss Sambhaji's behaviour so openly. Others were in a state of dilemma, not knowing whether to run away or stay. But the curiosity to know how Raje would deal with the issue compelled them to stay.

Shivaji said, taking the bull by its horns, 'Annaji Pant, I am acutely aware of the pain caused by the death of your dear daughter. I had asked



Soyrabai to enquire whether Shambhu Raje was responsible for the tragedy. I have not yet heard of any crime committed by Shambhu in that regard.'

'Raje, you were the one who treated even the daughter-in-law of the Muslim Subedar of Kalyan with such respect ...'

'I am asking you, Annaji, to give me proof that Shambhu has misbehaved. If found guilty, I will see that he is punished appropriately; arrest him, if needed.'

But Annaji was not one to abandon the issue halfway. He said, 'What about Godu?'

'I did look into the events which took place on the day of Holi. Godu's accusations were corroborated by my findings. Trayambakrao and Niwasrao were caught red-handed. They tried to escape from jail and both men died while fleeing down the steep slope, falling into the deep ravine below. You are aware of the facts, aren't you?'

The tension in the air was palpable. Annaji had touched a raw chord, challenging Raje's pride. The old man was desperate to ensure Sambhaji would not return to Raigad as a result of being invited for Rajaram's marriage. Risking Raje's wrath, he continued to make accusations. Raje heard footsteps behind the curtain of the doorway that led to his private quarters. He smiled and said, a tad loudly, 'Ranisaheb, you may not be able to hear everything I say. You might as well step into the office.'

Soyrabai came in, her eyes fixed on the floor while taking a seat in a corner. Well, here is one more person who loves Shambhu, thought Raje wryly. Annaji, somewhat chastised by Raje's remarks, was now emboldened once again by the presence of his ally Soyrabai. Tension in the atmosphere was greater than before as the others shuffled their feet nervously, waiting for Raje to speak.

Shivaji, forcing his anger to subside, said in a friendly voice, 'Gentlemen, Shambhu is my son. However, I have known many of you since childhood and I can never forget sacrifices you have made for the Swaraj.'

Annaji glanced at Soyrabai. It was evident from her expression that she was on his side. He said, his voice taking on a confident tone, 'Maharaj, are we to conveniently assume that no crime was committed? That Shambhu Raje never met the Mughals? Maybe he never even left Shringarpur!'

‘Annaji, bear in mind that Shambhu met the Mughals in broad daylight. It begs the question: Did his act cause any actual harm to the Swaraj?’ Shivaji paused and looked around. ‘Where is Moropant? Call him.’

Balaji Chitnis said, ignoring the glares of Soyrabai and Annaji, ‘Raje, Shambhu is adamant by nature. Many think he is arrogant. But I can swear on Bhawani’s name that he is pure at heart.’

‘Why not look at evidence? That, at least, is undisputable,’ Shivaji suggested.

On cue, Moropant entered the room with a bag meant for carrying secret messages. Shivaji said, opening its silken knots, ‘While leaving for Karnatak, I had planted my spies all around Shambhu Raje, specifically with the intention of intercepting messages between Diler Khan and my son. My spies sent me copies of Yuvraj’s letters to Khan. Later, when I returned to Panhala after concluding the campaign, Sambhaji had shifted to Sajjangad. By that time the threads of my spy network had snapped, leading to a tragedy later. But listen! This is a letter written by Shambhu Raje to Diler Khan from Shringarpur: *“It would not become me if I were to defect when my father is away, having handed over to me the responsibility of protecting my people.”* Do you see? While the Mughal sardars would not hesitate to behead their own fathers, brothers and sons to grab power, our Yuvraj, in the absence of his father, is unwilling to do anything which might harm the Swaraj! This is the difference between a Mughal Shahzada and the Yuvraj of the Marathas!’

Shivaji seemed tired. He said, looking at the men assembled in the room, ‘Joining Diler was no doubt an imprudent act, a misdemeanour committed in the arrogance of youth, prompted by misplaced overconfidence in his abilities. But imagine what would have happened if he had really intended to damage the Maratha Empire, betraying it and despoiling Bhawani Mata! Can you picture him coming to Raigad in my absence and trumpeting his act of treason? Can you even think of that! If that had come to pass, I would have jumped on my horse at once to ride back to Raigad. Yet, it would have taken me four days to reach here. Can you imagine the havoc that would have been unleashed in those intervening days?’

The men in the room were rendered speechless by Shivaji’s emotional speech. He asked Moropant, focusing his gaze on Annaji, ‘Tell me, Pant,

what would you have done if such a thing had actually happened?’

‘I beg your pardon, Maharaj. Such a situation would never have occurred! Yet, if it had happened, we would have fought the enemy tooth and nail.’

Shivaji laughed, saying, ‘Suppose such a thing had happened when none of you were present in Raigad! All of you are often away on some work or other. Well, we may not have lost the empire, perhaps, but such an act would surely have endangered it, am I right?’

No one dared to speak. There was sorrow in Shivaji’s voice when he spoke next, ‘I had been thinking of dividing the kingdom between Rajaram and Sambhaji. But I see that the kingdom is already divided by the differences amongst the people in it. Instead of working to unite and strengthen the Swaraj, many are trying to secure their own personal gains first. There is much enmity and jealousy between the Maratha sardars. Look at the infighting amongst the Ashta Pradhan here. Balaji Avaji and Annaji Datto cannot see eye to eye. Meanwhile the Brahmins are forming their own groups. Not to mention the clamour of demands by the Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhus. The Maratha people are being divided into warring factions based on their castes. If I were to divide the Empire in the midst of all this mistrust and rivalry, it would mean sinking deeper into the quicksands of disunity and corruption that threatens to swallow us all. In any case, future events will decide my course of action.’

Shivaji stood up. Those present were about to leave when he said, ‘I was in the thick of battle at Pratapgad. We had just taken over the fort of Purandhar when he was born. His mother died soon after, leaving him in my care. I remember the way he had clutched my thumb when I hugged him close to my chest. Soyrabai, Annaji ... many of you may find Shambhu short-tempered or blunt in his manners. But remember what Jijausaheb had said, “Shivba, don’t be fooled by his irreverent attitude. He is a gem, a real diamond in the rough. If the need were to arise, this mad son of yours would willingly sacrifice his life for the truth and for his father’s Swaraj.”’

Sambhaji loved to roam the mountains and valleys around Panhala. He knew the ravines and routes like the back of his hand. There were spots where a thousand-strong army could watch the enemy from afar, undetected. Sambhaji would say proudly, 'There are many such places in the Sahyadris, inaccessible and impossible for the enemy to conquer. Where even sunlight fails to enter, how can that sinner Aurangzeb dream of conquest?'

Shivaji came to Panhalgad a day before Sankranti. Father and son continued their talks for three or four days, after which Shivaji left for Raigad. Sambhaji was struck once again by the large-hearted and tender nature of the elder Maharaj. Yet, despite being given the Subedari of Panhala, he felt like an outsider. He had experienced men like Hiroji Farzand and Janardan Pant working for him, along with new recruits like Bahirji Naik. Farzand was related to Sambhaji and had always been affectionate towards the Yuvraj. But Sambhaji now sensed a coldness in his demeanour. The other officials of the fort answered to the Ashta Pradhan. All in all, Sambhaji felt he was a stranger in his own home.

Sambhaji had asked his father, when he was leaving, 'Abasaheb, when shall I come to Raigad?'

Shivaji Raje had hesitated for a brief moment before replying, 'Listen, Shambhu! Stay put until I ask you to come.'

'Shall I consider it my misfortune that you have not gotten over your mistrust?' Sambhaji asked, unable to hold his tongue.

His words pierced Shivaji's heart. Maharaj said, 'Shambhu, I don't need any proof of the purity of your heart. Believe me when I say the poisonous winds blowing in Raigad are not good for your health. Pray to the Lord and let time heal all misunderstandings. I am confident that one day we will all assemble in Raigad as one family. We have much to do in the meantime.'

The days spent in conversation with his father at Panhalgad left a deep impression on Sambhaji's mind. But his nights were sleepless once again. Anxious thoughts crowded his mind. He would complain to Yesubai, 'I wonder why Hiroji Farzand Kaka has changed. When Abasaheb escaped from Agra, he was the one who stayed behind in his place, masquerading as Shivaji. I always believed he would be there for me when I needed him. But I find him avoiding me these days.'

Yesubai said, 'Yuvraj, perhaps they disapprove of your behaviour.'

'I know. They love to call me a womaniser and a drunkard, a smoker of cannabis.'

'Ignore all that, Yuvraj. You have made peace with Maharaj saheb, haven't you? He does not get influenced by these rumours. Why then should you bother about others?'

'Yesu, a king needs the trust and support of his ministers and administrators. Without them he cannot function. But often, the fence erected to protect the farm manages to destroy it!'

Meanwhile, he received news that Rajaram's thread ceremony had been performed, soon to be followed by his marriage. Yuvraj was happy to hear of it. Hoping against hope, he waited for a formal invitation, but soon realised that it would never come.

Yesubai asked, sensing Sambhaji's disappointment, 'Can't we go even if we don't get an invitation?'

'Who is going to stop me? If not me, who will attend Rajaram's wedding, the Mughal Shahzada?'

Sambhaji and Yesubai resolved to attend the wedding and made preparations for the journey. Meanwhile Hiroji Farzand, Janardan Pant, and even the clerks at Panhalgad had received their invitations. Little Bhawani, who was now two and a half years old, ran excitedly into her mother's arms and asked, 'Everyone is ready to leave for Raigad. When are we going?'

Sambhaji hugged his daughter and said, trying to restrain his sobs, 'Dear, the younger Balraje's mother does not like our presence.' Sambhaji then said to Yesubai, 'When Abasaheb was here, we were able to speak so freely! I wonder whether he is so busy that he has forgotten to invite me for my younger brother's marriage.'

'I am sure he has his reasons. Even the saints have had to suffer when it came to the troubles caused by their family members.'

That day, many palanquins and horses left for Raigad. Sambhaji and Yesubai had decided not to go, for the deliberate snub implied by the omission of a formal invitation was difficult to swallow. While young Bhawani, enjoying her new clothes, pranced about, Sambhaji was quiet, recalling how he used to play with his young brother, carrying him around the fort on his shoulders.

He said to Yesubai, 'You know Rajaram used to say, "Dadasaheb, you must come to my marriage dressed as a Mawal playing the drums." Yesu, I

am eager to fulfil the promise I made to him.’ He continued after a pause, ‘No one would believe me today, but after Jijabai, if there was someone who loved me dearly, it was Soyrabai saheb.’

Yesubai mumbled, ‘How things change!’ Then she said, ‘Ever since Hambirrao, younger brother of Soyrabai Ranisaheb, has been made the commander-in-chief of the Maratha forces, she is in seventh heaven. I am told that she boasts, “Since my brother is now the Senapati, who can stop Rajaram from ascending the throne?”’

Seeing Sambhaji silent, Yesu asked, ‘Do you believe Hambirrao would support Soyrabai Ranisaheb in the matter of succession?’

‘Why not, Yesu? Which uncle can resist the temptation to ensure that his nephew takes charge of a kingdom that boasts a treasury brimming with crores of hons? It is obviously a foregone conclusion that Hambirrao would support Ranisaheb when the need arises.’

When those who had attended Rajaram’s marriage returned to Panhala, Sambhaji, out of sheer affection and curiosity, could not stop himself from enquiring about his younger brother. One of them said, ‘Rajaram Raje was upset just before the ceremony. He made a fuss about your absence, Yuvraj! Finally, Hambirrao made him go through the rituals with a promise that you were expected to arrive by evening. It was then that the younger Yuvraj finally agreed.’

Sambhaji’s heart was wrenched listening to how his brother had missed him.

The next morning, while Sambhaji and others sat for lunch, a servant arrived with a decorated basket. Yesubai immediately realised that the basket was a gift from Raigad. She admonished the servant silently with her eyes but the poor fellow was confused. Finally, Yesubai managed to pick up the basket and was about to take it to another room, when Sambhaji said, ‘Why are you trying to hide that, Yesu? It is a gift from the wedding. Serve it here!’ His tone betrayed a mixture of anger and frustration. Sambhaji took a laddoo from the basket and put half of it in Yesubai’s mouth. ‘Eat! Eat, I say! After all, it is from Rajaram’s marriage.’ He put the other half in his mouth while tears streamed down his cheeks. ‘Jotyaji, Yesubai; all of you! Eat! And don’t bother whether they are sweet or bitter. We have no choice but to eat them, henceforth!’

It was Falguni Amavasya, new moon day, and a solar eclipse was under way. Many at Panhalgad watched curiously as the sun disappeared slowly behind the moon's shadow. Sambhaji too stood gazing at the sight until Yesubai came out and held his hand. 'Come inside now! It is not considered auspicious to watch the solar eclipse.'

'Yesu, does all that mean anything now? I committed the grave sin of going over to the enemy camp. My father, the lion-hearted one, pardoned me. Pleading with me not to make such a mistake again, he hugged me. That one embrace was enough to dissolve all woes, jealousies, suspicions—everything!'

Four days had passed since the eclipse when Sambhaji returned to his quarters one evening, his face downcast and forehead creased with anxiety. Yesubai saw him standing in his room, looking out of the window, lost in thought. 'What happened?'

'Abasaheb is unwell.' Sambhaji's voice trembled as he spoke. 'Soyrabai Matoshree is taking advantage of Abasaheb's illness. She has ordered strict vigilance all around Raigad, restricting movement of people in and out of the fort.' He continued, 'The atmosphere is rife with suspicion and fear. No one can enter or leave without explicit orders. Sardar Malsavant stands guard with ten thousand men at the base of the fort. Yesu, I am worried. Trouble is brewing in Raigad.'

'Should you not rush to Raigad?'

'Yesu, I am confused. Abasaheb's failing health worries me to no end, but I don't want to precipitate a clash. You know that if I go, I won't put up with anyone trying to bar my way. But that would be interpreted as revolt, or an opportunistic attack. My defection to the Mughals did not dent the Swaraj in any manner, but I have a black spot on my forehead for life!'

'Perhaps it's better for you to stay here. I am sure we will get regular updates from Raigad. Let's wait it out then, and not take any steps in a hurry.'

Sambhaji sent an urgent message to Kavi Kalash at Sangameshwar. He also alerted his father-in-law Pilajirao Shirke at Shringarpur.

A fortnight passed. It was Hanuman Jayanti, a full moon day. Sambhaji woke at dawn and prayed to the tall idol of Hanuman.

Yesubai was anxious that morning. 'I am very worried about elder Maharaj's health! I am feeling uneasy today.'

Sambhaji's state of mind was no different. Yet he said, wanting to put Yesubai at ease, 'Don't worry about Abasaheb! He is going to live a long life. After all, he will be fifty a month from now. The Marathi soil needs him more than it needs you or me!'

That evening, Kavi Kalash came to see Sambhaji. He was accompanied by two of Sambhaji's spies who had been sent to Mahad and Raigad. The moment Sambhaji saw their faces, he knew the news was not good.

'No one is allowed to enter the fort,' one of the men said, 'But we hear that the elder Maharaj is seriously ill and bedridden. The ryots too are clamouring to see him but not even an ant can get into Raigad these days.'

The other man added, 'We heard that he is suffering from a deadly disease. Other sources, who do not wish to be quoted, whisper that the Maharaj has been poisoned by Soyrabai Ranisaheb.'

Sambhaji sighed heavily as he listened to these grim reports. He said to Kalash, 'Kaviji, things are not going well at Raigad. We need to be alert. Please send some spies who can find out exactly how Abasaheb is faring.'

On the day of Chaitra Poornima, after suffering from high fever for eight days, Shivaji Maharaj died!

## 6

Raigad was cloaked in grief by the sudden and unexpected death of Shivaji. It seemed that the very pillars of the fort were bent in sorrow and even the water in the tanks tasted bitter.

The spine of the Maratha Empire was broken. There were worries that enemies of the Swaraj, waiting for an opportune moment to strike, would descend on them at any moment. None of the senior members of the Astha Pradhan had been present in Raigad when Maharaj drew his last breath.



Rahuji Somnath and Soyrabai ensured that news of his death was contained. They did not want the tidings to spread far. Somehow they managed to get Rajaram to perform the last rites.

Annaji Datto, who was on a campaign in Karwar, returned hastily. Moropant Peshwa too returned from Trayambakeshwar. It was important for the Ashta Pradhan to ensure that the rules of command were being followed in this time of crisis and that power remained with the throne. Annaji Pant, especially, was an anxious man. Some of his followers were asking, 'Annaji, now that Shivaji Maharaj is dead and Shambhu Raje is likely to take over, how are you going to fare?'

'Well, whatever may happen, we cannot allow Sambha to take the throne. We are all finished if that happens.'

Sambhaji had never minced words telling others how corrupt Annaji was. He was aware of the way Annaji had misused his power, issuing orders to suit his interests and filling his coffers by diverting revenue for his personal gain. He was often heard saying in public when Annaji approached, 'Here comes our minister, the one who has looted us in broad daylight!'

Sambhaji knew that while his father had worked for the welfare of all, there were many senior ministers whose primary aim was to fatten their own purses. There was no question that the revenue collected from the ryots and provinces was being pilfered for this purpose. When the representatives of the French, English and the Portuguese came to pay their respects to Shivaji, these ministers would brazenly demand gifts for themselves. Yuvraj, young and hot-blooded, could not tolerate such shameful behaviour. He would fret and fume, attracting the wrath of the senior ministers who had earned Shivaji's gratitude for their years of loyal service to the Swaraj.

Prospects for corrupt ministers like Annaji were dim. Although he was sure that Soyrabai would try her best to put Rajaram on the throne, Annaji was well aware that intrigues and conspiracies were not enough to manage a kingdom. He knew that good governance must rely on resources, both monetary and military. Annaji sent an urgent message to Hambirrao, the commander of the Maratha army, who was camped at Karad, *'I am determined to coronate your nephew Rajaramsaheb. And he would see to it that seven generations of your descendants are taken care of. But I need your explicit support to make this happen.'*

Annaji was elated by Hambirrao's quick response. *'You are the chief of the treasury and know the kingdom better than anyone else. What greater pleasure can I expect than seeing my nephew ascend the throne? An ordinary soldier like me would be elated.'*

Support in writing from Hambirrao made Annaji's resolve stronger. He had conferred with Soyrabai a couple of times but now, with the letter from Hambirrao, he was emboldened to move fast. No one knew better than Annaji the greedy eagerness Soyrabai had shown to put her son on the throne. All Soyrabai's selfish ambition needed was a little nudge, which Annaji was more than willing to provide. Rajaram's accession to the throne would ensure Annaji's position and security in the days to come.

## 7

Shivaji's palace seemed desolate. Yet, Annaji was not kept waiting when he called upon Soyrabai. She was shattered by Maharaj's death and her mind was racked with anxiety about her future and that of her son. However, not allowing the situation to bog her down, she had ordered a strict vigil around and inside the fort. Annaji was well aware of Soyrabai's desires, intentions and capabilities, making him confident that his plans would see the light of day.

As soon as Soyrabai stepped out of her quarters, Annaji saluted her and said, 'Maharanisaheb, it does not make sense to delay any further. The ryots are confused and the army is rudderless, sans direction and command.'

'You are suggesting that we expedite our plans?'

'Expedite? Ranisaheb, the more we try to suppress the news of Raje's death, the faster it will spread. Keeping the throne vacant is inviting trouble.'

Soyrabai's angst was clearly visible on her face. She let out a deep sigh. 'Who do you propose to ascend the throne?'

'Well! When the opportunity has walked into your arms, you ask such rhetorical questions?'

Soyrabai felt encouraged by Annaji's confidence. Yet, she could not brush off the nameless fear which enveloped her.

'Would the ryots accept Rajaram in place of Shambhu Raje as their king? Would the elders give their consent?'

'Why are you hesitating at the last moment? You have been at the elder Maharaj's side all these years. Has he ever explicitly said that Sambhaji should be made the king?'

'Well, neither did he deny it!'

Annaji wiped the sweat from his face nervously. He warned Soyrabai, 'Ranisaheb, try to recall the last days of Maharaj. What was he saying?'

Soyrabai was confused.

'Well, he was delirious most of the time. He would shout, "Call my Shambhu; call Shambhu Raje."'

'It does not that mean he was calling for him to take the throne. At death's door, one remembers and wants to be with loved ones, that's all!'

Even as he spoke these words, Annaji Datto felt suffocated. He waved his angavastram to fan himself and continued, 'Even if Maharaj had left explicit instructions for Shambhu Raje to succeed to the throne, we are not naïve to follow his wishes!'

Annaji's words were music to Soyrabai's ears. He was saying what she wanted to express.

'Maharani, you need to act fast. The delay in announcing Raje's death and declaring Rajaram as king is causing a lot of confusion and fear in the minds of people.'

'Fear? What fear?'

Annaji looked around to ensure that there was no one within earshot. 'Tongues are wagging, Ranisaheb. There are rumours that you poisoned Maharaj to fulfil your ambition!'

Soyrabai was shaken. Her mind was in turmoil now. She realised that it was crucial for her to take a firm decision without further delay.

The same afternoon, Ramchandra Nilkanth, Prahlad Niraji and Rahuji Somnath assembled at the office. Soyrabai was present as well. But the Peshwa Moropant Pingle had not arrived yet, although they heard that he had set out from Nashik five days earlier. Annaji was not sure of Moropant, and was rather relieved that he had reached Raigad before the Peshwa. It was easier to drum up support against Sambhaji in Moropant's absence.

After waiting for a long time, and having sent three messengers to Moropant's haveli, an impatient Annaji stood up and said, 'Let us send a battalion to his house to find out why he has not bothered to come here. That arrogant man is not going to make an appearance otherwise.'

At that moment, Moropant Peshwa's tall and slender figure appeared at the door. He had heard what Annaji said. Glancing at the men assembled in the room, he quickly surmised that they were all opposed to Sambhaji.

'Well, gentlemen! I want you to speak up. These are tough times and the enemy is at the gate. We need to take a wise but swift decision,' Annaji began. 'Can we trust a man who, only last year, defected to the Mughals and helped them to destroy a strong Maratha fort like Bhupalgad? How can we hand the reigns of the kingdom to someone who was a traitor to his own father and his kingdom?'

No one argued. Annaji's reasoning was strong. Moropant was his usual calm and reserved self. 'I say we need to proceed with caution. What is the great hurry?'

'Hurry?' Annaji stood up. 'Are we waiting for Shambhu Raje's arrival? Are you hoping that he arrives and orders that many of us be crushed under an elephant's feet? Are you not worried for your own life? Is your future so secure?'

Annaji made a huge fuss, but none of the others openly supported him. In fact, many of them were tickled by the fact that Annaji's worry stemmed from the fact that Sambhaji, who knew all of Annaji's corrupt practises, would not hesitate to put him in his place. They shrugged their shoulders and remained mute.

The lack of response to his tantrum was too much for Annaji to bear. He grit his teeth and, caressing his whiskers with a show of bravado, said, 'Well, you may all feel blessed to wipe Shambhu Raje's sandals. Do as you wish! I will not stay here a moment longer. I would prefer to spend the rest of my days in Kashi!'

A dejected Annaji glanced at the assembly, hoping against hope, but no one said a word. Soyrabai realised that none of the ministers had declared support for Annaji, and that it was unlikely her hopes would be fulfilled. All her dreams of strutting around as a Rajmata evaporated, and the thought of walking towards Kashi in the garb of an ordinary pilgrim sent a shudder down her spine. She said, speaking to no one in particular, ‘Annaji is not saying this for his own benefit. Maharaj’s death has brought the kingdom to the brink of disaster. Have you considered the threat to the future of the empire if someone like Shambhu, who does not have the wisdom to differentiate good from evil, ascends the throne? I urge you to make a decision now! Not because of what Annaji said, but based on your love for the Swaraj.’

Soyrabai’s words managed to turn the tide in her favour. Most of the men assembled in the room had been hurt or insulted by Sambhaji, and nursed a grudge against him.

Justice Prahlad Niraji said, ‘It was out of sheer affection for his son that the elder Maharaj never spoke against Sambhaji openly. But I am willing to wager that a person with his choleric temperament will fail if he is given the charge of a kingdom.’

Ramchandra Nilkanth nodded in agreement. ‘You are absolutely right. He will destroy himself and everyone around him.’

Annaji Pant realised that he was back in the game. ‘That is why I urge you to hurry. Rajaram Raje is calm and composed. We need to place him on the throne before Aurangzeb knocks on our doors. This is the best course of action for all of us.’

Soyrabai got an opportunity to voice her thoughts now. ‘One should not share in public what is said in private. However under these circumstances I have no option but to do so. The elder Maharaj had confided in me many times that Shambhu is a hot-headed young man with many harmful habits. His behaviour has always been reckless and irresponsible. His stay at Aurangabad has only increased his debauchery in all forms, whether it be food, drink or women. If such a careless and self-indulgent person were to ascend the throne, the kingdom would be destroyed in no time.’

The atmosphere in the room had changed now. Soon they began to discuss the modalities of running the kingdom while Rajaram was

coronated. Many views were aired on how to manage the threat posed by Sambhaji. Moropant Peshwa was silent.

Annaji asked, 'Peshwa, why are you not speaking?'

Moropant said, his voice calm and composed, 'I am loyal to my king and his kingdom. I am unable to understand why the elder son, who is still alive, was not called to perform the final rites of his father, and how we can think of putting the younger son on the throne, ignoring all the rules of hierarchy and ascension.'

Annaji Datto fumed, 'It is the view of most of the ministers that Rajaram should succeed Shivaji to the throne.'

'Gentlemen, you are free to decide whatever suits you but I am not going to be party to this crime.'

Moropant Peshwa's words were a powerful reprimand to all present. Soyrabai was confused and did not know how to react. Annaji Datto on the other hand was incensed, realising that Moropant might turn the tables on him.

'Peshwa, are you in your senses? Do you know what you are saying?'

'Annaji, I wish you would not get agitated,' Moropant said, without raising his voice. 'I have nothing against Rajaram but you must concede that the situation is delicate. I wonder who would lead the charge if Badshah Aurangzeb decides to descend upon the Deccan.'

'Wah! You mean to say that we are all impotent fools? Is Shambhu Raje the only valorous man amongst us?'

'That is true! It is Shambhu Raje who has the courage to lead an attack against the Delhi Badshah. No one else can compete with Yuvraj in this regard. Have you taken a look outside the fort? Thousands have gathered, shouting slogans in Shambhu Raje's support. The army is behind Shambhu. You need to recognise that times are changing and act wisely. Annaji, if you wish, I will go and convince Sambhaji to give away the throne. He will do so happily if you all demand it. But I warn you: this is not the time to act in haste and make childish decisions prompted by personal grudges.'

Moropant's blunt remarks shut everyone up. Balaji Chitnis began, 'Well, to tell the truth ...'

'I suggest you don't say a word, Balaji Pant,' Annaji interrupted him. Turning to Moropant he said, 'What's your fear regarding the army? Have you forgotten that Hambirrao, Soyrabai's younger brother, is the commander-in-chief? The army answers to him.'

Soyrabai added, 'He has already sent his written consent in support of Rajaram.'

'Peshwa, you must have noticed a strong force of fifteen thousand men standing outside the fort's main entrance. The treasury and the administration of the fort is under our control as well. The commander is on our side. The queen too is with us. Where do you stand, Moropant? Which side are you going to support? That of Kavi Kalash?' Annaji challenged Moropant.

Annaji was in his element now, at his dramatic best. As he spoke, he raised his eyebrows and stroked his moustache, removed his turban and put it back several times while tying and untying his hair. Once again, he reiterated the benefits of putting Rajaram on the throne and the dangers of coronating Sambhaji, exaggerating the latter's vices and flaws. Then he turned his vitriolic flow of words towards Kavi Kalash.

'Let him come here once. You will see his true nature when he sits on a buffalo skin, sticking needles into small dolls and performing his tantric rituals. Only then will you realise what kind of a shaman he is!'

Those assembled in the room shuddered, imagining the scenario. Finally, even Moropant seemed to relent. But Annaji was not going to leave it at that.

'Moropant, I prefer that you give your consent in writing. Not that I doubt your words, but they have a tendency to fly away in the wind. It is always best to have things on paper.'

Soyrabai and Annaji let out secret sighs of relief. Things were moving the way they wanted. Even the date of Rajaram's coronation was agreed on. But the question still remained: what to do with Sambhaji? Would it be possible to run the kingdom even for a day if he was still at large?

Annaji thundered, 'Moropant, send orders to arrest Shambhu Raje. As long as he is free, no one would be able to live without fear.'

'Yes, issue the orders right now,' Soyrabai demanded. 'Send word to Janardan Pant to arrest Yuvraj and imprison him in the dungeon at Panhalgad. No point in dragging him to Raigad.'

Moropant smiled sweetly. 'You seem to be forgetting something, Annaji. Such orders are not issued by me or by you.'

'Oh, really?'

'No fortkeeper or subedar would take any action unless the seal of Balaji Avaji is on the paper.'

Annaji was clearly rattled. Sweat trickled down his neck. He turned to look at Balaji Avaji but he was not there. No one had realised that Chitnis, the chief secretary of the king, had long since left the room.

## 9

It was a dark and windy night. The lamps in Soyrabai's quarters burnt brightly. Outside the window, the loud chirping of the crickets could be heard. Annaji Datto and Soyrabai sat silently, their faces strained with anxiety.

'Ranisaheb, I wonder who could make this Chitnis understand the situation. He has always been inclined to favour Shambhu Raje.'

Soyrabai seemed fidgety. 'He has been sent the message, hasn't he? I am sure he will come. He must obey your orders.'

Within a few minutes, the tall, hefty Balaji Avaji entered the room and bowed in *mujra* to Soyrabai. She put on a sweet smile and said, almost pleading, 'Chitnis, the letters with your seal need to be despatched at once.'

'Only over my dead body, Maharani saheb.'

'No fortkeeper will take action unless the letters carry your seal. You know that!'

Neither Soyrabai's repeated requests nor Annaji's veiled threats had any effect on Balaji. He bowed respectfully and said, 'How can I be disloyal to Maharaj? I cannot issue such orders. Sambhaji Raje is my king now.'

Soyrabai and Annaji persisted, 'But you have to write what we order you to.'

'Don't force me to. I cannot commit such a crime.' Balaji Avaji could not have put it more bluntly. 'Maharani saheb, these orders are clearly not in line with the law, or with our tradition and customs.'

Annaji tried to change his tactics, switching from threats to a tone of reconciliation.

'Chitnis, do you think we will harm Shambhu Raje? After all, the elder Maharaj treated us like his children. His son is our son too. Rajaram is



not going to rule forever. Shambhu Raje is a little immature now. When he is older and wiser, we will ask him to manage the kingdom. It is up to him to then take charge or refuse.'

Soyrabai and Annaji were trying their best to conceal the anger and annoyance they felt towards Balaji Pant. It was getting late but Balaji would not change his stance.

'Balaji Pant, you are getting old. Your two sons, Khandoba and Niloba, are not going to find jobs at Janjira. Their future is in serving Soyrabai Ranisaheb. Your stubbornness will ruin their prospects. Why do you want to be responsible for that?'

Annaji had found Balaji's weak spot. The emotional pressure of this final threat was not easy to withstand. Balaji realised that Soyrabai and Annaji were not going to rest until the orders to arrest Sambhaji were stamped with his seal. He folded his hands in supplication and said, 'I beg of you, do not compel me to commit such a crime. Please pardon me!'

Balaji remembered how, years ago, when he was a fatherless boy with no prospects, his elegant handwriting had impressed Shivaji Raje. He said, wiping his tears, 'It is my handwriting which raised an orphan like me to the position of the Chief Secretary of the Hindavi Swaraj. I am not going to use the same hand to commit treason. Tchah! Annaji Pant, if you wish, you may cut my fingers off, but I will not be forced to write that letter.'

It was past midnight. Annaji threatened Balaji with arrest and the confiscation of his property but the latter did not move an inch. Finally, Balaji said,

'If you insist, I will ask my son Abaji to write. But I am unable to come to terms with my part in this backstabbing. Shambhu Raje reposes unconditional trust in me. I wonder what he will think!'

## 10

Every time Sambhaji glanced at the Sajja Kothi in Panhalgad, where he had been under house arrest for a while, he would remember his father and tears would come to his eyes.

Feeling suffocated, Sambhaji decided to go for a ride. Kavi Kalash and Jotyaji Kesarkar accompanied him. They stopped on the edge of a deep ravine, observing the winding path below. Sambhaji spotted two travellers on foot, holding the reins of their horses as they guided them slowly up the steep path.

After a while, they were clearly visible. Sambhaji instantly recognised them. They were Khandoji Naik and Ganoji Kavle—spies whose job was to keep an eagle eye on the area around Panhalgad and Vishalgad up to the borders of Raigad. Yuvraj surmised that they were returning with some urgent news from Raigad.

The pair finally reached the spot where Sambhaji and his companions stood. Seeing Yuvraj, Khandoji bent low in *mujra* as he tried to recover his breath. Then, avoiding Sambhaji's eyes, he took a letter from his cummerbund and handed it over. The note was from Balaji but Sambhaji could see that the handwriting was not his. The letter did not contain any important news. After a hurried *mujra*, the two men began to walk away when Sambhaji thundered, sensing that something was amiss, 'Why are you in a hurry? And where are you off to?'

'We have to meet the fortkeeper before it gets dark,' Khandoji faltered.

Sambhaji's glare bored into them. They were unable to meet his eye. With a wave of his fingers, Sambhaji gestured them to come closer. They were shivering, and sweat trickled down their foreheads.

'Kavle, what are those papers in your cummerbund?'

'Nothing, Yuvraj! Just some regular letters. They are addressed to the fortkeeper,' Ganoji answered hurriedly, trying to put on a casual air. But his trembling legs gave him away.

Sambhaji signalled to Kavi Kalash who rushed forward and snatched the letters from Ganoji. One of them was addressed to the fortkeeper, Vithal Trayambak, and the other to Havaladar Bahirji Naik. Sambhaji read the contents:

*'The situation here is a matter of great concern. We shall update you whenever we can but, for the time being, don't allow Shambhu Raje to step out of the fort under any circumstances. Arrest him. Don't let him know about Maharaj. We shall send you further orders as and when necessary.'*

Sambhaji anger knew no bounds. The two spies did not dare to raise their eyes and started trembling more violently.

‘Tell me the truth! What is going on in Raigad? Who is behind the orders to arrest me? Is it Matoshree, or is it that loyal servant of the Swaraj, Annaji Datto?’

Then, recalling the reference to Maharaj, he asked, ‘And what about Abasaheb? How is his health?’

The fierce barrage of questions overwhelmed the two spies; they collapsed to the ground, quaking in fear. Tortured by the fact that they were carrying a terrible secret that they had been ordered to conceal from Yuvraj, the heir to the throne, they started crying like children. Clutching at Sambhaji’s feet, they sobbed, ‘Sarkar, please pardon us. We poor folks are caught in the crossfire of this fight amongst the royals.’

At a gesture from Yuvraj, the soldiers standing not far away rushed forward and arrested the two spies. Sambhaji called for an urgent meeting with Vithal Trayambak, Bahirji Naik and others. It was clear that a political conspiracy was being hatched.

Sambhaji glared at Khandoji. ‘Out with the truth, Khandoba! How is Abasaheb’s health?’

The spy, shivering to the core, did not know how to break the terrible news. Somehow he blurted, crying hoarsely as he spoke, ‘Yuvraj, destiny has played a cruel hand. The elder Maharaj has left all of us orphaned!’

It was as if the heavens had collapsed. There was not a single soul who could hold back their tears. Even Vithal Trayambakrao, who was part of the conspiracy in a way, couldn’t restrain his grief. The palace was drowned in sorrow.

Surprisingly, Sambhaji’s reaction was very different. He neither shed tears nor spoke a single word. Like a huge boulder falling down a steep slope, he simply collapsed to the floor. He was not unconscious; his eyes were wide open. Yet, there was no movement whatsoever!

There was chaos all around. They tried to revive him with smelling salts. After a while, like a wounded lion who roars with pain, Sambhaji screamed ‘Abasaheb!’ Kavi Kalash and others rushed to hold him but Sambhaji pushed everyone aside. Clutching a pillar, he started banging his head on it while he continued to mumble, ‘Abasaheb, Abasaheb!’ It was as if the Lord had appeared in form of an iron pillar and Sambhaji was resting

his head on his shoulders. The poignant sight left everyone transfixed. They did not know how to console Yuvraj.

After a long time, Sambhaji was quiet. He managed to sip a little water from a tumbler. But his grief was palpable as the rumbling of the earth long after an earthquake. He shouted at the spies, 'If you are trying to make fun of me, please tell me so! How can Abasaheb leave this world so easily?'

'Yuvraj, unfortunately, it is true. He had a fever for merely a week but it turned out to be the cause. Shivaji Raje is no more!'

The shock had subsided now. Sambhaji listened carefully to the spies as they explained how the fort had been sealed during the week leading up to Maharaj's death. On the day of Hanuman Jayanti, Shivaji Raje had bid farewell to the world. As the two men spoke, none present could suppress their sobs.

'Who performed the last rites?' Kavi Kalash's voice boomed in the uncomfortable silence of the room. The spy tried to evade the question by describing how the funeral pyre was laden with sandalwood.

'Who performed the last rites?' Sambhaji repeated the question.

'It was Rajaram saheb.'

Sambhaji said, to no one in particular, 'Did the pandits forget that it is the duty—nay, the right—of the eldest son to perform the last rites?'

Tears continued to flow down his cheeks. Those present were reminded of pearls flowing down a necklace when the delicate silk thread holding them snaps. Yet, he was angry too, seething with rage at the gross injustice of it all.

'What right did Matoshree and her self-serving sycophants have to perform the last rites in my absence? Is Shivaji's Shambhubal dead? Or do they feel that my hands are soiled, unworthy of offering the rites? Did they not know that I would have regarded it a blessing merely to have prayed at his deathbed? But no, I was not considered worthy even of being informed of my father's death, depriving me of the chance to offer a few flowers to the memory of his valiant soul.'

SEVEN

At  
Raigach





# 1

‘It has been quite a while since we went to war. The body feels dull and stiff,’ Hambirrao thought, filling his mouth with water and spitting it out. He had just completed his morning exercise routine and sat watching the sun rise. The Koyna flowed serenely by. The Maratha garrison he commanded, which had been inactive for a while, was camped nearby. Even the horses, mules and elephants were getting restless.

It was only the previous day that Hambirrao had returned to his camp at Karad from his haveli at Talbid near Satara. It was his habit to do more than a thousand push-ups every morning. He would feel relaxed only after his whole body and the floor below was drenched with his sweat.

Hambirrao was a tall, muscular man with a bull neck and thick, curled whiskers. He had earned his reputation with the prowess of his sword. There was an aura of strength around him, a commanding persona which radiated the ability to lead men in battle. In the battle against Bahlol Khan at Nesari, when Prataprao Gujar had jumped into the fray with just six men and sacrificed his life, it was Hambirrao who had galvanised the rest of the troops, ensuring that they did not retreat in fear. He had, on the other hand, managed to turn the tide, chasing Bahlol Khan and his men towards Bijapur like wild boars being hounded by hunting dogs. When Shivaji’s step-brother Vyankoji Raje had raised his voice and challenged Shivaji Raje’s supremacy, it was Hambirrao’s daredevil attack on Tanjavur that made Vyankoji run for his life.

The elder Maharaj had been heard to say, ‘You may offer me fifty firangi cannons which can destroy walls of a fort but I am not willing to exchange Hambirrao for them! He is more precious than any artillery the Europeans can devise!’

Everyone at Raigad was now waiting for word from Hambirrao. It was crucial to know which side the commander-in-chief of the Maratha forces was leaning towards. His support would be crucial to win the war of succession. As expected, Hambirrao had received requests from both sides.

As he was leaving his haveli, his wife Rakhmabai bid him goodbye, saying, 'I am sure you have received the message from Soyrabai Ranisaheb. All said and done, it is the kinship of blood which matters in the end. Rajaram Balraje is our nephew. I hope he ascends the throne and that you will support his claim.' Hambirrao's only response to his wife's words was an indulgent smile.

When Hambirrao reached his camp at dusk, a clerk was waiting for him with a message from Panhala. He read the letter by the light of the burning torch.

*'Warm regards from Shri Raja Shambhu Chhatrapati, to the commander in chief, Hambirrao Mohite.*

*Mamasaheb, I am your nephew by blood. The Bhosale and Mohite families have been associated for three generations now. Why did Abasaheb appoint you as the commander? Not because you were Soyrabai Ranisaheb's brother, but because there was a need to fill the vacuum left by that gem of a soldier, Prataprao Gujar. Since the elder Maharaj's death, I feel orphaned. Mamasaheb, what else can I write. I pray that there are no differences amongst us, and I am sure you will take a wise decision.'*

Hambirrao was approaching his mid-fifties, but his energy and enthusiasm would have shamed a young soldier. After his exercise, he ran towards the river and dived into the water that was twenty feet deep. Swimming for a while, he reached the bank where his servants stood waiting with his clothes. After changing into them, he rode to the camp, accepting mujras and salutes from his troops on the way.

Rupaji Bhosale and Anandrao Makaji were waiting at his tent. Their weary faces showed that they had been waiting for a long time.

Rupaji conveyed the message, 'I am informed that the team from Raigad has reached Umbraj.'

'The team from Raigad?'



‘Annaji Datto and Moropant Pingle.’

‘What for?’

Hambirrao knew why they had come but he had posed the question deliberately.

‘Well, they want to convince you to join them. I am told they want to take your help to march on to Panhala and arrest Shambhu Raje.’

Hambirrao was silent. He knew that, as commander-in-chief, he was not answerable to anyone there. At that moment, he recalled another letter which he had received from Sambhaji. He took the letter out and read it again.

*‘Warm regards from Shri Raja Shambhu Chhatrapati, to the commander-in-chief, Hambirrao Mohite.*

*I felt as if the heavens had collapsed when I heard of Abasaheb’s demise. The only silver lining is the fact that three months ago, I had the privilege of spending five days with him at Panhalgad. We were able to sort out all our differences. He pardoned my misdemeanours, including my defection to the Mughals. He not only forgave me but also entrusted me with the task of vanquishing the Mughals. His sudden departure from this world has shattered me. But I am determined to fulfil his wishes.*

*But there are a few men who insist on putting a spoke in my wheel. Their intentions are suspect. They are corrupting Soyra Bai Matoshree’s mind with idea of putting Rajaram on the throne. For their personal gain, they are willing to split the kingdom. Mamasahab, I may not be related to you the way Rajaram is, but I am the son of Shivaji, the founder of the Hindavi Swaraj. Once my path is cleared of these obstacles, I vow to finish off Aurangzeb the sinner. I have high ambitions and I am sure I can cross any sea of troubles if you are with me. You have every right to pull my ears, if ever I make a mistake or act wrongly.*

*Badshah Aurangzeb is growing arrogant by the day and wants to crush us by levying the Jizya tax on Hindus. My sole purpose is to ensure that we fulfil Abasaheb’s vision. I look forward to your blessings.’*

Shambhu Raje's heartfelt letter touched Hambirrao and he mulled over it the whole afternoon. As he sat in his tent, he was informed that two senior administrators from Raigad had reached his camp. Hambirrao peeped out of the canvas window. He could see a tired Moropant Pingle astride a horse, his face aflame from exposure to the raging sun. It was clear that he had not enjoyed the ride. Close behind him, sitting in a palanquin carried by six men, was the corpulent Annaji Datto. He too seemed tired and irritated by the long journey.

Finally the two men, huffing and puffing, entered the cool environs of the tent. Despite their exhaustion, they seemed eager to perform the task for which they had journeyed so far.

Hambirrao ordered his soldiers to leave the tent. Now he sat alone with the two sardars from Raigad. He said, smiling at Annaji,

‘Annaji, looks like you left your horse behind at Umbraj.’

‘No! Can you imagine him riding a horse at his age? He has been in a palanquin since Raigad. The poor bearers are dog-tired, despite the fact that we have two teams,’ Moropant responded, laughing heartily.

Annaji was not pleased with the turn the conversation was taking and shifted nervously in his seat. Hambirrao quickly realised that both men were hesitating to bring up the topic they wanted to discuss.

‘Pant, you have come all this way with high hopes for a favourable outcome from an important discussion. But I am sorry to have to tell you that I don't think your wishes will be fulfilled here.’

The pair had not certainly not expected an opening remark which rejected their proposal outright. In their arrogance, they had assumed that the commander, a pea-brained soldier, would naively follow the dictates of power and be more than willing to march with his forces to Panhala. But his words put them in a quandary and their faces fell.

Annaji was furious. ‘What are you blabbering? Have you not promised me already that you will take your troops wherever we ask you to? And now, when we demand action, you seem to be backing out!’

Moropant looked at Annaji, indicating that a more conciliatory approach might be wiser. Annaji's tone changed.

‘What we mean, Senapati, is that ... after all, it is your nephew who is going to be coronated, isn't it?’

Hambirrao smiled. ‘I would like to know what makes Rajaram the right choice for the throne.’

‘Well, Hambirrao, it is Shivaji Maharaj’s own dying wish.’ Their subdued tone suggested that they did not even expect Hambirrao to swallow this.

‘Don’t lie so brazenly, Pant. Had Maharaj been so sure, he would have left instructions in writing.’

‘Well, neither has he said explicitly that Shambhu Raje should be made the king. Listen, Hambirrao, if your nephew ascends the throne, it benefits you and us too.’

‘No! I do not think so.’

Annaji was losing his temper now. ‘No? What do you mean? Are you Rajaram’s Mama or Kansa to his Krishna?’

Hambirrao was as cool as a cucumber despite such a direct confrontation.

‘No, you listen to me! I know I would benefit more than anyone else, but that’s not the point. You are all learned men while I am an ordinary soldier. I only know that when one walks with the Lord’s palanquin, one gets showered with the petals meant for the Lord and feels blessed. Walking with a great man like Shivaji all my life, I have learned to follow what is right. Let me explain! When someone like Shivaji leaves the world suddenly, I look towards his Bhawani sword for directions. It is my responsibility to ensure that it is handed over to the right person. Don’t try to corrupt my mind by reminding me of my nephew and my sister. I appeal to your conscience. Think for a moment! If we want to further the cause of Swaraj, there is no choice but to put Shambhu Raje on the throne.’

Hambirrao’s words were like those of a judge delivering his final verdict, leaving the accused in turmoil. Annaji removed his turban and placed it on his lap. Moropant looked confused and did not what to say.

Hambirrao continued, ‘You have seen Shambhu Raje as a meek son in the presence of Shivaji Maharaj. I have been witness to his avatar on the battlefield when, naked sword in hand, he cuts his way through the enemy ranks. It is a sight to behold! You are unfortunate never to have seen it. Whenever Shivaji Raje was on a campaign, he would entrust Shambhu Raje with thousands of troops. And the valiant son never let his father down. He could inspire an ordinary man, a ryot, to fight for his kingdom by the mere spurring of his horse. Tomorrow, God forbid, if we are to face Aurangzeb, we need a soldier-king like Shambhubal at Raigad.’

‘What are you blabbering, Hambirrao?’ Annaji Datto stood up, prepared to continue his tirade.

‘Annaji Pant, I am going to act according to the principles taught by Shivaji Maharaj and Prataprao.’

‘But your nephew ...’

‘Will you stop saying that? This is not about my nephew. Had it been my own son, I would have pushed him aside to make way for the lion’s cub. Shambhu Raje is the man who deserves my salute.’

Annaji and Moropant were speechless. Evidently, they had not expected Hambirrao to sing paeans in praise of Sambhaji. Annaji gulped water from a tumbler and said, ‘Please call your Diwan.’

The Diwan, Raibhan Sabnis, presented himself. Annaji’s fury had returned, and he thundered, ‘Diwan, Rajaramsaheb is the king of the Marathas. By his orders, I, Annajipant Prabhunikar, and the Peshwa Moropant, order you to arrest Hambirrao for committing treason. Bind him in fetters and drag him to Raigad immediately.’

Annaji thought he had fired a cannon but it turned out to be a damp squib. The Diwan barely moved a muscle. After a moment, Annaji stood up and stormed out of Hambirrao’s tent. They had come from Raigad with a troop of five thousand men but they did not stand a chance against the twenty thousand loyal soldiers who stood with Hambirrao. Yet, Annaji was not one to give up. He screamed at his men, ‘Come on! Attack! Enter the tent and arrest Hambirrao!’

Hambirrao stood at the door of his tent. Not a single soldier from Annaji’s troops dared to step forward. Annaji, waving his hands, looked like a raving madman. Hambirrao said to his second-in-command, ‘Rupaji, arrest these two and leave for Panhala immediately. Present these ‘jewels’ to Shambhu Raje and inform him that I shall be there by dawn tomorrow.’

## 2

A mountain of work was piling up. It was time to set the kingdom right. There had been too many disturbances and distractions thanks to politics

and intrigue. Sambhaji's eyes were red; he had been working day and night.

A servant announced the arrival of Rupaji Bhosale. Sambhaji stepped out of his quarters. Rupaji saluted him and said, almost shouting with joy, 'Raje, we have won! The ones who were trying to arrest you are in chains now!'

'What do you mean?'

'Hambirrao arrested Annaji Pant and Moropant Pingle this afternoon at Karad. I have brought them here, tied in chains. Hambirrao will present himself tomorrow morning.'

'Fantastic! Put them in the dungeon and keep a strict eye on them. We will discuss the rest tomorrow,' a relieved and happy Sambhaji said.

It had been a lively few days at Panhala. Despite Rajaram being declared the king, the ryots considered Sambhaji as the real heir to the throne. They had flocked to Panhalgad in thousands, clamouring to meet him.

Sambhaji went back into his quarters to find Yesubai sleeping. She was tired too, from helping her husband with his work day and night. Sambhaji did not feel like waking her up but he simply could not keep the latest news to himself! The arrest of Annaji and Moropant, and the fact that the Senapati of the Maratha forces would stand by him, was indeed a turning point in their fortunes. Sambhaji's detractors and enemies, both within and outside the kingdom, would be stumped by the news. He wanted to share it with Yesu at once.

Sambhaji shook her out of her sleep and told her about the latest developments.

'Where is Hambir Mama meeting you?'

'At my private quarters, why?'

'I suggest you welcome him formally, in a durbar.'

'That is a good idea, Yesu. But we don't have a throne here.'

'Why worry about that? A throne is wherever the king stands!'

According to Yesubai's suggestion, a small durbar was set up in Panhalgad. Everyone waited eagerly for Hambirrao's arrival.

The Senapati made a grand entry. His tall, strapping figure and the string of pearls dangling from his turban made quite the impression on those assembled to greet him. He saluted Yuvraj in an elaborate fashion. Sambhaji was in tears. Yesubai wiped her tears gently. Hambirrao held Yuvraj's hands and hugged him affectionately.

They were genuinely happy to be meeting each other after a long time. Sambhaji could scarcely believe that Hambirrao had not allowed his relationship with Soyrabai Ranisaheb and Rajaram to come in the way of extending his support to him. Visibly relieved, he said, 'Mamasaheb, your presence here is truly reassuring. Going forward, you will continue to be the commander-in-chief, the Senapati of the Maratha forces.'

'Shambhu Raje, don't look at me as your Mama. Shivaji Raje used to say: let the boundaries of your relationships end at the rangoli laid around your dining plate.'

'Whatever you say, Mamasaheb, but the service you have rendered to the Swaraj has been exemplary.'

Hambirrao's affection and loyalty overwhelmed Yesubai and Sambhaji. Shambhu Raje took off his jewelled necklace and gifted it to Hambirrao, along with fine clothes.

'Mamasaheb, I want to honour another giant here today. He will be here any moment.'

'Who is it?'

'Our Hiroji Farzand Kaka. You are aware of the heights to which Abasaheb has taken Hindavi Swaraj. It is not possible for someone like me to steer the chariot alone. I have made mistakes, drunk on the arrogance of my youth. I want to ensure that I have experienced people like you to guide me. Hiroji Kaka is another.'

While the durbar was in progress, a servant announced the arrival of Ramji Naik, the emissary from Goa. He presented a message from the Viceroy Paes de Sande, expressing his grief at the untimely death of Shivaji Raje. He also conveyed the Viceroy's wish to maintain cordial relations between the Marathas and the Portuguese. Sambhaji could picture the sea on one side and the green Konkan coast on the other. Above all he was thinking of Janjira near Murud, a fortress which curled like a poisonous snake, threatening anyone who dared to attack.

Hambirrao interrupted his reverie, saying, 'Raje, it is not advisable to stay at Panhala any longer. The earlier we reach Raigad and take charge, the better.'

'There is no need to hurry, Hambir Mama. See how the Portuguese, the French and the English are making a beeline to Panhalgad, to present themselves as our allies!'

That afternoon, Moropant and Annaji were dragged into Sambhaji's presence. Moropant's hands were tied with ropes while Annaji was bound in iron chains. Guilt was written all over the old Peshwa's face and he did not dare to meet Sambhaji's gaze.

Sambhaji rose from the throne and said, walking towards Moropant, 'Kaka, I wonder what made you join these devils. Why did you choose to toe their line?'

Moropant was devastated. He said, in a piteous voice, 'What has happened is not right. I know I made a mistake.'

Shambhu Raje gestured to a guard to free the old man from his bonds. 'Moropant is in his seventies now. Don't tie him in ropes.'

He turned his attention to Annaji Datto. Annaji had not allowed guilt or shame to show on his face. However, he fidgeted like a wild animal caught in a hunter's trap.

'As for you, Annaji Pant, you take the cake, leading the revolt against me! I am unable to understand your motives. But it would be suicidal to pardon you and let you go scot-free.'

Despite being in fetters, Annaji growled, 'Sambhaji Raje, what good can any sensible person anticipate from your ascension to the throne? The elder Maharaj is no more. And with him has gone all justice and logic. What can the Maratha Empire expect from you, with your rowdy behaviour?'

'Pant, do not pretend to be so concerned about the kingdom. Speak for yourself; what made you take such desperate measures?'

'I will tell you; provided you assure me that you have forsaken your unruly behaviour and show that there is a semblance of politeness in you.'

'Politeness is not called for when dealing with a traitor. Say what you must!'

'First release me from these iron fetters.'

'This is a small punishment for a grave crime like treason!'

'You are the one committing treason, Sambhaji Raje. I am here under the authority of the seal and signature of the king who has been appointed at Raigad. You must release me immediately!'

'Clearly, you are not willing to change!'

'Shambhu Raje, you are a sinner, with many vices and a terrible reputation,' Annaji shouted, waving his hands in the air. Yesubai rose from her seat, unable to listen to his rant. Sambhaji glanced at Hambirrao, and

the Senapati shouted orders to his men, 'Take this ungrateful rascal away and throw him into the dungeons.' Moropant was put in a prison cell while Annaji was thrown into a dark dungeon.

The durbar continued and matters of administration were discussed in detail. Hiroji had not yet arrived. Suddenly, a few ryots rushed in and, after a quick salute, said, 'Raje, we have been fooled. Farzand has escaped!'

'Escaped? But we had never put him under arrest! What exactly are you trying to say?'

'He has taken two large boxes full of jewels from the treasury and is on his way to the Konkan coast with fifteen of his men.'

Hambirrao was shocked that someone like Hiroji Farzand had taken such a step. He ordered a few men to follow them and report their whereabouts. Sambhaji was unfazed. He said, 'Hambir Mama, where can he hide? Let's not worry. Anyway, there are more important matters to discuss. We will have to sit here well into the night.'

Malhoji Ghorpade, Krishnaji Kank, Hambirrao, and Prahlad Niraji, who had arrived earlier to meet Sambhaji, were present for the discussion. Yesubai joined them. Sambhaji began, 'Our hopes were dented by Hiroji's act but this does not surprise me. A mansion will always attract a few mice. We must find them and squash them. I am not very worried about revolts or infighting. But we must start preparing for the eventuality of a Mughal invasion. Abasaheb had warned me of such a possibility when we met three months ago. Aurangzeb is one of the world's most powerful emperors. A single Subah of the Mughal Empire is a few times the size of our entire Swaraj.'

'Is that so?' Niraji exclaimed.

'I am not exaggerating. We have to begin reinforcing each and every Maratha fort with food supplies, ammunition and troops.'

'Once we reach Raigad, we will start the process formally.'

'We cannot wait for that. We have to start this very moment. Troubles don't arrive with a forewarning. Pant, I will need a detailed inventory of all the forts in the Swaraj within the next four days. We have to ensure that the ammunition is dry, that the wells are full of water, and that the forts are sufficiently stocked with food. I will also require a list of all the key personnel at every fort. Send your men to Rajapur tomorrow and get the inventory of the stock of foodgrains there. I want to ensure that each and every fort is ready to withstand a siege before I leave for Raigad.'



Sambhaji was aware that many sardars were sitting on the fence. He despatched personal messages to them, reminding them of his love and appealing to their loyalty. Sambhaji's unbounded enthusiasm and the promptness with which he had set about the task of defending the kingdom immediately inspired those around him.

He said, as he finally stepped out of the room, 'Let Aurangzeb know: the plateau of the Deccan was formed by mighty volcanoes. You are most welcome to arrive in a golden howdah but the men of the Sahyadris would destroy you. Your body would be mixed with the dust here and you will never see Agra or Delhi ever again. You will be finished once you step into the Deccan.'

### 3

Hiroji had created history in Agra, taking the place of Shivaji while Maharaj had escaped. He resembled Shivaji closely in physical appearance and had successfully fooled the guards at Agra. The fact that he might be beheaded by Aurangzeb did not stop him from saving his king's life. The same Hiroji had today decamped with contents of the treasury from Panhala.

Sambhaji was disturbed. He said, looking at Yesubai,

'I wonder what makes people like Hiroji do such things. Why do men change colour like a chameleon? Farzand Kaka's behaviour is surprising. And so is Balaji Avaji's.'

Yesubai looked askance. 'Balaji Avaji?'

'Yes! You might not be able to realise that. He lovingly calls you "daughter-in-law." But I am surprised to learn that he sent a secret message to the fortkeeper at Panhala, asking him to take immediate action and arrest me!'

Yesubai realised that Sambhaji's anger was rising.

'Yuvraj, but the letter was probably not written by Balaji. The handwriting was not his, surely? It was probably written by his son.'

That further enraged Sambhaji.

‘Do you think I am naïve? All of us are aware that in Balaji’s absence, his son’s seal and signature is perfectly valid.’

‘I still cannot believe that the orders had Balaji Kaka’s consent.’

Sambhaji’s was an affectionate, trusting nature. He had always reciprocated the trust and affection of those who had showered the same on him. Balaji Chitnis was one such person. During Shivaji’s reign, he had been a close confidante of the family. Sambhaji was hurt by the fact that many of the administrators in Raigad had taken sides against him but he was working to ensure that the vitiated atmosphere changed slowly in his favour. To help matters, he had the staunch support of the ryots and the troops.

There were murmurs all over the kingdom, urging those in power to declare him king. The commoners were increasingly agitated by the fact that administrators were trying to oppose Sambhaji’s ascension. Eventually, Raigad’s troops and ryots revolted openly. They arrested those in favour of Soyrabai and, marching on the havelis of Annaji and Moropant on 16 May 1680, looted them. Taking charge of Raigad, they sent an urgent message to Panhala, ‘Raje, come immediately!’

Seeing the tide turning, Sambhaji worked with renewed vigour. He immediately despatched a message to Shringarpur, asking his father-in-law, Pilajirao Shirke, to march on Raigad with ten thousand troops. Hambirrao was also on the move with five thousand men. Sambhaji had ensured that the soldiers were paid two months’ salary in advance. Soon, thousands of troops on horseback, brandishing their swords and spears, were seen approaching Panhala to join Sambhaji. At the same time, hundreds of bullock carts from Rajapur were moving towards forts all over the kingdom, carrying grains and other food supplies. Everything was working in Sambhaji’s favour and according to plan.

One morning Yesubai, who was performing pooja at her quarters, heard footsteps behind her. Realising that they were not Sambhaji’s, and wondering who had dared to enter her quarters unannounced, she turned to see a tall, thick-moustached man smiling at her. Yesu smiled back at Ganoji Shirke, her brother.

Yesubai gestured towards the swing in her garden, asking him to wait while she finished pooja. Sitting there, Ganoji looked with admiration at his younger sister, who would now be the Queen of the Hindavi Swaraj in Raigad. He remembered their carefree childhood days, and how he used to

roam the woods near Shringarpur, collecting wild flowers to make garlands for his sister. Now she was to be the Maharani of a kingdom which had crores of hons in its treasury.

‘Dadasaheb, would it not have been better for you to go directly to Raigad? There are so many things to do there ...’

‘Yesu, don’t worry about all that. Destiny is in your favour now!’

‘It has nothing to do with destiny. It was my father-in-law who chose me and changed my life. Remember, how he was impressed by the shining utensils in the kitchen and surmised that I must be very meticulous in my work?’

A flicker of anxiety appeared on Ganoji’s face. ‘Yesu, I hope you won’t forget us, once you don the Maharani’s clothes.’

‘Don’t pull my leg!’

‘Well, you know that the Shirkes of Shringarpur are not Maharajas. I just hope we too can benefit from the good fortune which shines on you now.’

‘Why are you speaking in riddles, Dada?’

‘Then let me put it plainly. I have heard that power corrupts the mind and tends to make you forget your loved ones.’

Yesu watched her brother closely as he continued, ‘The day you are anointed Maharani, I hope we too can be awarded a small watan.’

‘Watan? What are you talking of?’

‘I am asking that the territory of Dabhol, which belonged to our family, be returned to us in the form of a watan.’

Yesubai was taken aback. She had not expected her brother to come asking her for special favours when Sambhaji had scarcely occupied the throne. She said, ‘Things are hectic here, Dada. Give me a couple of days. Let me put in a word with Yuvraj, and we will see.’

Ganoji was back in her quarters after two days. He had stayed on at Panhala.

‘So what did Yuvraj say, Yesu?’

‘About what?’

‘Oh, it appears that you have picked up the Bhosale style of cunningness pretty quickly,’ Ganoji said, in a bitter tone. ‘I am speaking of Dabhol, your hometown. We talked about it, remember?’

‘I did speak to Yuvraj. He asked me to tell you to wait for a while.’

‘Yesu, it looks like you have forgotten the pride of the Shirkes now that you are Bhosale’s daughter-in-law!’

‘Dadasaheb, why are you so adamant?’

‘The fault is not ours. We were forced to give up our hereditary watandari under pressure from the great Shivaji Maharaj!’ Ganoji spat out.

‘Why are you blaming Maharaj?’

‘He was a cunning man, your father-in-law! He promised that we would get our watandari back when I have a son. What if I don’t get it even after having a son?’

‘Dada, Maharaj was against the whole notion of watandari. He believed that it was the root cause of the kingdom’s troubles, being a system that impoverished the ryots. He was opposed to the estate holders exploiting the poor farmer.’

‘You must understand that we are not begging. Our watan was granted to us by Adil Shah of Bijapur. We are only demanding what is ours by right.’

Ganoji’s angry tone spoiled the festive mood of the palace. Yesu said, trying to pacify her brother, ‘I ask you to have some patience, Dada. I will speak to Yuvraj. He is busy with preparations for the coronation. Please bear with him.’

‘Well, that is why I thought I should remind you. Your father-in-law died without fulfilling his promise. I hope you will help fulfil it now. Though, of course, I cannot expect people like your husband’s family, descended from ryots themselves, to understand the pains of a respectable and landed Maratha family like ours.’

Yesubai lost her patience. ‘Well, if you are in such a hurry, I suggest you meet Yuvraj yourself and put forth your demand.’

However, she touched his feet when he was leaving and said, ‘Dadasaheb, don’t hold these things against him. I hope you will be there in Raigad when he is coronated.’

Ganoji threw an unpleasant glance at her. ‘Huh! You mean we should be there to see prestige and honour being showered on you while we silently suffer and bear our insults?’

It had been two months since the demise of Shivaji Maharaj. Kavi Kalash's advice to Sambhaji was clear: A king should not stay away from his capital for long. Hence, after ensuring that all the forts had been adequately provisioned, Sambhaji moved with his troops towards Raigad.

En route, he prayed at the Bhawani temple in Pratapgad. Sambhaji was accompanied by Hambirrao, Kavi Kalash, and the senior commander Malhoji Ghorpade. While Hiroji Farzand may have been a deserter, Kondaji Farzand, a warrior well into his sixties, had pledged his loyalty to the Yuvraj. Kondaji and Rayappa were constantly at Sambhaji's side.

Sambhaji stood on the ramparts of Pratapgad, gazing at the undulating outlines of the Sahyadris merging into each other as if they stood with their arms around each other. In the clear light of the day, he could see the peaks of distant Raigad, nearly thirty kos away. To his right were the green mountains of Mahabaleshwar.

Luckily, the wave of revolt had subsided before it turned into a hurricane. Hambirrao's strict instructions had ensured that all the commanders and provincial sardars had fallen in line and joined Sambhaji. Slowly but surely, Sambhaji was gaining control of all aspects of the kingdom's administration. Heavy responsibility often makes a man turn towards religion. Knowing that Aurangzeb was occupied with his military campaign in Rajputana, Sambhaji breathed easy and took the time to meet various Brahmins and sanyasis en route to Raigad.

Sambhaji was resting in the village of Par at the base of Pratapgad fort when a few riders arrived, announcing, 'We have found Hiroji. He has been arrested!' Hiroji had been intercepted at Chiplun and the treasure he had stolen was recovered. As Hiroji had been a veteran commander in Shivaji's day, Sambhaji decided to confront him in private rather than humiliate him in public.

Hiroji was presented at the haveli of the local Patil at Par. Sambhaji looked at Hiroji—a tall, well-built man with a pointed chin, hawk-like nose, beard tapered to a point, and bright eyes—how he reminded him of Abasaheb! Sambhaji smiled at the thought but Hiroji's face remained grim.

He was clearly overwhelmed with guilt. Tears trickling down his cheeks, he said, 'Shambhubal, don't kill someone who is already dead!'

'Hiroji Farzand Bahadur! Kaka, look at the way I address you! Instead of taking care of me, you run away like an ordinary thief with jewels from the treasury? You stabbed me in my back, Kaka!'

Hiroji stood with his hands folded in supplication. 'I made a mistake, Shambhubal.'

'Farzand Kaka, all you had to was ask and I would have put the entire treasury at your feet. Why did you choose to run away like a burglar?'

After conferring with his men, Sambhaji Raje decided to pardon Hiroji's mistake.

'Let bygones be bygones. I will pardon him.'

Hambirrao interrupted. 'Raje, I understand your large-heartedness but I must remind you that you are not a Yuvraj anymore. People should not misinterpret your good nature. A king needs to ensure that people fear punishment for their misdeeds.'

Sambhaji thought for a moment. 'Let us take him to Raigad and put him under house arrest then. But don't bind him in fetters; see that he is treated with due respect.'

Noticing Sambhaji's crestfallen face, Kavi Kalash asked, 'What is the matter, Raje?'

'The mind goes numb when someone so dear is tempted to stab you in the back and run away! Farzand Kaka, or for that matter Soyrabai Matoshree, who considered me dearer than her own son at one time! I was not even allowed to attend my father's funeral!'

'Forget the past, Raje!'

'Kaviraj, it seems that I have been the target of their ill-feeling and curses for too long.'

They were crossing small ravines and rivulets. The massive fort of Raigad was visible from time to time. It reminded Sambhaji of a proud eagle's nest. When Shivaji had decided on the spot for building Raigad, he had thought of the eagle's penchant for building its nest in inaccessible places. Sambhaji's mind was filled with myriad emotions. He had spent the happiest years of his childhood there. But he was returning after three long years.

The town of Pachad was decked up to receive the new king. Horns, trumpets, drums and garlands of flowers created a festive atmosphere. As

soon as the trumpets began playing at Pachad, cannons boomed from the great fort to welcome the new Raje. Raigad, drenched in sorrow ever since the death of Shivaji Raje, was now awakening to a new dawn. Men like Rahuji Somnath, Kanhoji and Malsawant had been arrested a while ago, removing the thorns in the path of Sambhaji Raje's ascension.

Pilajirao Shirke was at Pachad to welcome his son-in-law. He had ensured that the town was well protected and that his guards stood at attention to receive Sambhaji. His face reflected the pride in the fact that his daughter's husband was to become the second king of the Hindavi Swaraj.

Sambhaji was taken aback by the reception party. The winds were surely blowing in his favour these days. He was pleasantly surprised to find all his brothers-in-law in attendance to receive him, without having been formally invited. His cousin Arjunji Bhosale, Harjiraje Mahadik and Tukoji Palkar were eagerly awaiting his arrival.

Yesubai was surprised to see her elder brother there, smiling and welcoming Sambhaji. She recalled how he had threatened not to show his face till he was promised his watandari. Sambhaji spotted Mahadji Nimbalkar, smiling and bowing in mujra. Jotyaji Kesarkar whispered to him, 'You know, Mahadji has left the Mughals once and for all!'

'Is that so?'

'Yes! He says, "When my brother-in-law is the Chhatrapati, why should I work for someone else?"'

While the trumpets, drums and horns, the fireworks and chanting of mantras by the Brahmins created a welcoming din, Sambhaji's mind turned to the haveli at Pachad where Jijabai had spent her last days. Overwhelmed by memories of his grandmother, tears of joy and sadness streamed down his cheeks. Those watching him could not restrain their tears either.

That evening, palanquin bearers dressed to their nines presented themselves. Sambhaji sat in the palanquin and moved its curtain away as the bearers lifted it and started up the path leading to the fort.

Yesubai, Hambirrao, Kavi Kalash and others followed. As soon as the palanquin reached the main entrance, Sambhaji indicated to the bearers to stop. He stepped out. There was an air of nervousness about him. He looked at the great doors leading into the fort and then, surprising everyone around him and ignoring protocol, sat down on the steps. His fair face was flushed with emotion when he looked at Pilajirao and said, 'Mamasaheb, what's the

point in going to a deserted place? A temple without the Lord and Raigad without Shivaji Maharaj—they are both the same!’

The poet in him had come to life again. ‘What’s the point in visiting Kashi, Mathura, Vrindavan and Rameshwar? You are the unfortunate one if you have not visited Raigad!’

Finally, after a lot of cajoling, Sambhaji consented to entering the fort. At the Mahadwar, he met with a rousing welcome. Stepping out of the palanquin for a darshan at the Jagadeeshwar temple, he met many of the officials who had come to receive him.

The officials brought Malsawant before Sambhaji. He had had the temerity to tell Yuvraj, when the latter had reached out to him for support, that he was loyal to Soyrabai. He had also tried to punish those who had raided Annaji’s haveli. Raje ordered the two men who had aided him in this treachery, Kanhoji and Hiroji Indulkar, to be sent to prison. Surprisingly Malsawant, despite being under arrest, was as arrogant as before. He looked at Sambhaji with contempt when Raje said, ‘Good words are all very well for gentlemen but crooks only understand the language of weapons, unfortunately.’ He immediately gave orders for Malsawant to be thrown off the cliff—a death sentence!

That night, Takmak Tok, a point which overlooked the sheer vertical drop of one of the highest cliffs of Raigad, was crowded with traitors, their faces covered with blindfolds as they were thrown off. They met a painful death. Vultures gathered for their feast, swooping down as soon as corpses tumbled down the rocky cliff.

Next morning, the doors of the prison at Pachad creaked open. Annaji Datto and Moropant were to be presented to Raje. They were asked to walk all the way up to the fort. Guilt was written all over Moropant’s face but Annaji continued to maintain his contempt for Sambhaji. He looked at the guarded ramparts as they walked up to Raigad.

Annaji was sure of meeting the same fate as the other traitors. Both men knew their crime was even worse than theirs. They wondered if there would be any reprieve from the painful death which loomed large over them.

‘We have committed crimes far worse than others,’ Moropant said, ‘I doubt that we can hope for a pardon.’

They were detained in the palace itself with guards posted at the door. Meanwhile, Hiroji Indulkar was presented to Sambhaji. Hiroji Indulkar was



a well-loved and familiar face in Raigad. Shivaji Raje, seeing his unwavering attention to the repair and maintenance of the fort, and his tireless labour—day and night, come rain or shine, even in the biting cold of winter—used to lovingly call him a ‘roaming ghost.’ Those present could only rue the fact that he had fallen in wrong company and joined the revolt against Yuvraj.

Taking Indulkar’s wrinkled hands in his, Sambhaji Raje said, ‘These hands are worth revering. But you soiled them by joining hands with traitors.’ Those in the assembly shuddered, remembering the the traitors who had been thrown off Takmak point the previous night. Sambhaji said, continuing to hold Indulkar’s hands, ‘You know how Shah Jahan had treated the men who built Taj Mahal? He ordered their thumbs to be cut off.’

Indulkar shivered involuntarily. Was Sambhaji suggesting that he would meet with the same punishment? But Raje smiled.

‘I admire Abasaheb’s foresight. If I am unable to save these beautiful hands, people would doubt my interest in poetry and music and wonder whether I value artistic abilities at all. Go! Ensure the magic of your hands remains untainted in future!’

Sambhaji’s decision took everyone by surprise. Indulkar pressed Raje’s hands to his chest and said, tears in his eyes, ‘Who says the elder Maharaj is no more? He lives in Shambhubal now!’

## 5

That afternoon, Sambhaji and Yesubai prayed at the temple of Jagadeeshwar. Yesubai had asked Sambhaji not to meet Soyraibai yet, but he had visited Putalabai the previous evening. Putalabai Matoshree was devastated by Shivaji Raje’s death. She looked frail and Sambhaji was concerned about her health. After hearing that she had made up her mind to jump into Shivaji’s pyre and commit sati, Sambhaji was shaken to the core. He remembered how Abasaheb had managed to convince Jijausaheb not to take the extreme step when Shahaji Raje had died.

Raigad was brimming with activity. Yesaji Kank and Malhoji Ghorpade were taking stock of the foodgrain stocks and ammunition reserves while Kavi Kalash was busy setting up a library. Suddenly, Raje remembered Pandit Gaga Bhatt. He had formed a friendship with him during Shivaji Raje's coronation. Young Sambhaji had impressed the pandit with his incisive questions. 'He is a precocious child,' Gaga Bhatt had remarked. Sambhaji instructed Kavi Kalash, 'Send for Gaga Bhatt; ask him to come to Raigad. And send the gift of a thousand hons with the message.'

Kavi Kalash looked askance. Sambhaji clarified, 'Kaviraj, I want to commission a new treatise on how a king should follow religion and ethics. What better person than an authority on the subject like Bhatt to write it?'

It was evening and golden rays of the setting sun bathed the fort in a beautiful hue. The lamps had been lit when Sambhaji walked towards Putalabai's palace. Yesubai followed. Putalabai, wearing a white saree, sat next to Shivaji Maharaj's bed which was adorned with Raje's personal items. Sambhaji stepped into the quarters and hugged Putalabai affectionately. She said, in between her sobs, 'Shambhubal, he went away too early!'

Sambhaji did not have the words to console her. She regained her composure after a while.

'Shambhu Raje, it is good that you are here. I have been waiting for you. I was planning to go away with him but I was waiting for two reasons.'

'Aaisaheb, I beg you, get over your pain before you speak of such matters,' Sambhaji interrupted.

Putalabai seemed determined to speak. 'Maharaj died suddenly. The possibility of an enemy attack was very strong at the time, and in such a situation, I did not want to send my men to Mahad or elsewhere to get the clothes for sati. Had they been intercepted by the enemy, they would have known of Maharaj's death.'

'Aaisaheb, it is more than two months now ... please ...'

She continued, ignoring his pleas, 'There is one more reason; the tragedy occurred just a fortnight or so after Rajaram's marriage. Maharaj was in a delirious state in the last ten days. I spent day and night at his bedside. One night, he was wide awake. He asked me to come near him. What he told me is of utmost importance to you.'

A shiver went down Sambhaji's spine. Putalabai continued, her voice barely audible, 'Raje took my hand and said, "Putala, I am not likely to

meet Shambhubal. But pass my message on to him. Tell him: Shambhu, I am leaving for the other world. I am sure that the Swaraj built on the sweat and toil of the ryots is safe in your hands. If only I could have hugged you tightly before leaving, my tears would have washed off all the misunderstandings between us. I would have been blessed. It is only you, Shambhu, who has the courage to challenge and defeat Aurangzeb, if he ever has the temerity to attack us. I have not lived long but destiny and blessings of the Lord have crowned me with many victories. I pray to Jagadeeshwar that you are blessed with such fortune and more.”

It was impossible to stop Sambhaji's tears now. Raje's last words had rendered him inconsolable. He said, hugging Raje's turban and sword, 'Aaisaheb, if only you had sent me a message when his health deteriorated ...'

'How was I to do that, Shambhu Raje? I was helpless. What shall I say to you about the way things were being handled here during Raje's illness?'

Sambhaji had issued orders for the house arrest of Rajaram. The very thought of Soyrabai enraged him and he avoided meeting her. After seeing the dedication with which Putalabai had served the elder Maharaj, he was further incensed at Soyrabai's ambitious and scheming nature. One evening he decided to confront her on a whim and stomped his way to her quarters.

On the doorstep was young, innocent Rajaram who affectionately called out 'Dadasaheb!' The brothers rushed towards each other and hugged. Sambhaji kissed him on his cheeks affectionately. Rajaram said in a gruff voice, 'Dadasaheb, I am offended.'

'What happened?'

'You never came for my wedding.'

'I was not invited, my dear.'

'Why does a family member need an invitation?'

Sambhaji's face fell. 'Matoshree invited even the servants at Panhala. There is a limit to putting up with insults. You will understand that when you grow up.'

Sambhaji left his brother in Prahlad Niraji's care and entered the palace. The maids, seeing Raje's stern face, ran away scared. Soyrabai, shocked for a moment, recovered quickly and stood up.

'Matoshree, do you realise the extent to which you can go for the love of your son? You allowed yourself to be a mere toy in the hands of those selfish rascals.'

Soyrabai was aware of her crime. She had, under the influence of the council of ministers, played a treacherous game but it had not worked in her favour. All she had managed to achieve was to provoke Sambhaji's anger. Self-serving men like Annaji had manipulated her. But they all had played with fire and got burnt in the process. In the end, Soyrabai had incensed a lion's cub, challenging his self-esteem, inviting ignominy and defeat upon herself.

Waving a casual hand to indicate that she may sit, Sambhaji growled, 'Matoshree, whether you like it or not, whether you approve or not, I have been crowned now. At least for courtesy's sake, you can invite me or welcome me into your home!'

'Why do you expect me to welcome you? The moment you arrived, you ordered seven or eight poor souls to be thrown off the cliff. Their anguished voices still hang in the air.' Soyrabai retorted angrily.

'Are you a mother or a witch? How can a mother's heart speak so?'

'Shambhu Raje, do you have an arsenal in the place of a brain? Look at the way you explode! It extinguishes all wisdom, if there was any in the first place.'

'Why should you sympathise with those who were thrown off the cliff? What did you expect? That I would felicitate them for having committed a grave offence like treason?'

'You throw an old and loyal soldier like Hiroji Farzand into prison! Did you not think once about his age and experience?'

'He deserves to be imprisoned in the dark dungeon at Lingana for the rest of his life. And people like Moropant and Annaji deserve to be blasted off a cannon! All I have done is put them under house arrest. I have not insulted them in any way. I may not have learnt much from Abasaheb, but I have certainly understood how to behave when it comes to such matters.'

Seeing that Sambhaji's anger had subsided, Soyrabai said, 'Shambhu Raje, you and your immature friends are finding reasons to blame me. I am told rumours mills are abuzz with the allegation that I was the one who poisoned Maharaj and caused his death!'

Sambhaji did not respond immediately. He looked at the floor.

'Matoshree, I would not give any credence to such rumours. I know that your heart is pure like quartz. I know how affable and loving you have been towards my father. Nevertheless, you are blinded by love for your son. The crimes you committed against me are unpardonable.'

Soyrabai was alert. She could see a glint of fury in his eyes. He had curled his fists in anger. At that moment, Sambhaji turned to see Rajaram standing at the door, trembling with fear. Like a crystal of salt dissolving in water, Sambhaji's anger melted away. The storm had subsided.

He hugged Rajaram saying, 'Dear, who but me would take care of you, now that Abasaheb is no more?'

'Dadasaheb, I hope you will not put Matoshree in prison.'

'No. She is my mother too. I will see to it that she is not touched. But you both would be placed under house arrest.'

'What does that mean, Dada?'

'I have to ensure that no one corrupts your mind and that you are not influenced by selfish and scheming men. As a king I have to ensure this.'

'As you command, Dadasaheb.'

Sambhaji turned to leave.

'Matoshree, I promise you that I will behave in a manner befitting Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's son. What has happened in the past cannot be changed, but I do pray that in future you do not behave in a manner which tarnishes the image of that great Yugapurush!'

## 6

Three weeks after Shivaji Maharaj's death, on the eve of Ekadashi, Putalabai committed sati. Sambhaji had tried his best to change her mind but she was determined. Finally, he relented, much against his own wishes. After her death, Sambhaji occupied himself with acts of charity for a few days.

The date for his formal coronation was fixed for 20 July 1680. Raigad was overflowing with visitors and friends. His elder sister Sakhubai and her husband Mahadji Nimbalkar had come to stay. So did Ambikabai and Harjiraje Mahadik. Ganojiraje Shirke was everywhere. He was married to Sambhaji's sister Rajkunwar, in addition to being Yesubai's elder brother. Ganoji thus commanded a great deal of respect in Raigad.

One morning, Sambhaji had a bath and sat down for pooja. Yesubai noticed that he seemed somewhat crestfallen despite the festive atmosphere in the palace.

‘Yesu, I wonder how Ranubai Akkasaheb and Durgabai are faring. They are still at the enemy camp.’

‘Raje, I cannot stop thinking about them. My eyes are always watching the Mahadwar desperately, waiting for their arrival. But I am sure this Bhawani sword of yours will find its strength and you will, seizing the right moment, attack and release them from captivity.’

Sambhaji was about to begin his pooja when he heard someone say, ‘Shambhubal, wait a moment!’ It was Ambikabai. She was older than him but the youngest of his sisters. Sambhaji was surprised to see his favourite sibling up so early.

‘Shambhu Raje, you are aware that the region around Karnatak and Jinji is one of our richest territories. Yet, the question is whether we receive the revenue that is due to us in proportion to the taxes being collected.’

Sambhaji was surprised at the directness of her allegation. ‘Why? Is there any reason to doubt that we do? After all, we have an experienced and loyal administrator like Raghunath Pant Hanmante managing the province. Do you know who appointed him? It was our grandfather, Shahaji Bhosale. He has been managing the southern province for us for the past thirty years.’

Ambikabai was silent but the large vermilion dot on her forehead could not conceal its creases. Sambhaji expressed his surprise. ‘Akkasaheb, why this sudden doubt early in the morning?’

‘To tell you the truth, Shambhu Raje, you may be king now but to me you are first my younger brother. And it is the job of elder sisters to look after their younger brother. Despite your position and hereditary right, the officials and ministers here did not hesitate to stage a revolt, did they?’

‘Akkasaheb, are you saying that the embers of the revolt are still burning? And that Raghunath Pant is one of them?’

‘You guessed right! You are not aware of this fact but he has been in secret correspondence with Soyrabai Matoshree. You may investigate the matter if you want to ascertain the truth. But Raje, it is dangerous to leave such a rich province to the governance of a traitor. I have told you what I know. I leave the rest to you!’

Akkasaheb turned abruptly and left the room without waiting for Sambhaji to respond.

After finishing his pooja, Sambhaji stepped out of his quarters. There were men all around waiting to felicitate him, throwing garlands around his neck or bowing in mujra. Sambhaji's mind was not at ease. He asked, as he walked with Akkasaheb, 'Assuming that Raghunath Pant is not reliable, I wonder who I can trust to govern the southern province instead.'

Akkasaheb said, looking into Sambhaji's eyes, 'My husband Harjiraje Mahadik is a capable man. You may confer with Kavi Kalash if you have any doubt.'

Akkasaheb walked on but Sambhaji stopped. He remembered his father's words, 'Amongst my four sons-in-law, Harjiraje is a real daredevil. He has the courage, just like you Shambhu, to put his hand in a lion's mouth.'

There were many things to look into and the discussion ended there. The coronation was only two days away. Sambhaji walked hurriedly towards the office of the council. Kavi Kalash, Prahlad Niraji and others were already there. A group of farmers from the Konkan were waiting for him with a plea. The coast was ravaged with famine and they were expecting rice crops to fail that year. Sambhaji issued orders to waive their taxes. He also instructed the treasury to give them support for buying seeds and manure. The farmers, happy with the quick and just decision, bowed before leaving.

Kalash said, 'Raje, the Portuguese emissary has been waiting to meet you for the past four days.'

'Is that so, Kaviraj? It is not advisable to meet so many enemies at the same time, be they from the family or outside. My so-called family members, the Portuguese boats sailing around the Konkan coast, a deadly snake called Siddi at Janjira, and the poisonous cobra called Aurangzeb who is itching to descend on the Deccan any moment, not to mention the English ... we have to save the Swaraj from all of them, Kaviraj.'

'I agree, Raje.'

'The Habshis at Janjira are happy to concede their rights to Aurangzeb. We need to put the Goans in their place before the Portuguese and Aurangzeb shake hands and become friends. We cannot ignore the artillery strength of the firangis.'

The Portuguese emissaries were presented before Sambhaji in his office. Wearing long, tubular Portuguese hat, heavy, colourful coats and trousers, the two of them bowed in *mujra*. Their translator, Ramchandra Shenavi, stood by their side. Sambhaji's emissaries, Ramji Thakur and Yesaji Gambhirrao, were present too. Ramchandra read the message aloud: *'Shambhu Raje, please accept salutes from the new Viceroy Conde de Alvor. We are more than eager to extend our hand in friendship.'*

Sambhaji smiled ironically. 'Well, we too are pleased to know that the Viceroy is keen to make friends with us.'

The translator continued, *'The main reason for this, Raje, is that we have common boundaries in the Sawantwadi and Kudal provinces. We have a suggestion: you need not send any soldiers to guard those borders. We, the Portuguese, will ensure that your borders are safe!'*

'Wah!' Sambhaji exclaimed but refused to comment further.

The firangis presented rich gifts to Raje before departing.

The atmosphere in Raigad was charged, with trumpets and horns playing while the Brahmins chanted mantras continuously. Many religious ceremonies were being conducted as precursors to the coronation.

Sambhaji's close friends were in conference. Yesubai was present too. He could detect from their excited and eager faces that they were discussing something important.

Mahadji Nimbalkar said, 'Shambhu Raje, it is a great honour to be here to witness your coronation. But ...'

'Speak, Mahadji. Don't hesitate!'

'Raje, have you noticed the havelis on the right? The ones where the Ashta Pradhan are housed?'

'I don't understand you!'

'For the past three months, Balajipant Chitnis, Annaji Datto, Hiroji Farzand and others have been under house arrest. There are guards standing outside their gates.'

'We all feel that they cannot be in such sorrow, living in darkness, while we celebrate,' Harjiraje Mahadik said.

Sambhaji was silent for a long time. It was evident from his face that his mind was in turmoil. He said with a heavy sigh, 'I am pained too when I see the state they are in. They were all close confidantes of Abasaheb. I grew up in their arms. Hiroji Kaka is a relative. I have often toyed with the



idea of pardoning them. But I also wonder whether, going forward, their loyalty can be relied on.'

No one could answer that question with confidence, and they all avoided his gaze. Yesubai said, 'Raje, you are thinking too much. Everyone makes mistakes.'

Yesubai's words pierced Sambhaji's heart like an arrow but he did not allow his emotions show.

That night Ambikabai came to his quarters to meet him. She did not say anything but her questioning eyes impelled Sambhaji to say, 'Akkasaheb, don't rush me. I have no doubts about Harjiraje's valour. But I have more than one brother-in-law. Even Ganojiraje has been demanding the same.'

'Shambhu, Ganoji has his own watan. That makes him nearly as independent as a king. All we are asking for is a subedari, under your rule, that's all!'

Sambhaji was silent. Ambikabai continued, 'Raje, don't compare Harjiraje with your other brothers-in-law. I can promise you that he will be willing to sacrifice his life, if the need arises, for the cause of the Swaraj. And he will never be a traitor.'

'I will decide at an appropriate time,' Sambhaji said, and he left the room. He saw Yesubai smiling as he entered his bedroom. 'Look at how rattled you are by Ambikabai's proposal! Raje, it is not a crime to be Chhatrapati.'

'These people are willing to dance to any tune for power and money. But it is more than likely that none of them will stand with us when we are in trouble. Abasaheb had deliberately kept relatives away from power. Instead, he found his gems in the soil. That is why the crown of our Swaraj, decked with these jewels, shines with such brilliance.'

He snapped his fingers, remembering something. 'Do you know why Abasaheb chose Raigad as the capital of his kingdom, so far away from Pune? When Mirza Raja Jaisingh and Diler Khan attacked Purandhar, Absaheb was not willing to concede defeat. The Mughals went on to ravage over seventy villages around Rajgad. It was then that Abasaheb decided he needed to move the capital away from the plains to a place like Raigad. The fort is in a sparsely populated area and is difficult to access, with its cliffs and ravines providing natural protection from enemies. There is only single route, a narrow path, that one can take to reach the top. Only the wind and

the rain can reach the summit of Raigad with ease. There was one more reason: the ryots here are as dependable and as protective of us as nature herself. Raigad allows us the luxury of distancing ourselves from selfish and arrogant folks.'

Yesubai smiled. 'Raje, it is good to hear that you have been large-hearted and decided to pardon Balajipant Chitnis, Annaji Datto and Hiroji Farzand. But please bear in mind, Harjiraje has a clean chit. He has not committed any crime.'

'Do you trust him?'

'Why not? He is an intelligent man. And he is keen to do something for the Swaraj.'

'Well, it appears that luck is in his favour.'

He explained, seeing Yesubai's surprised look, 'I just received some messages from our spies. The Bengaluru province was consolidated by my grandfather Shahaji Raje. A huge city was founded there. My father and Ekoji Raje established the Maratha presence in the south. But the rich and fertile province is under threat from Chikkadevaraja of Mysore. Our jagirs are spread over Karnatak, Tanjavur, Madurai, Mysore, and Bengaluru but we face threats from the local rulers all the time. And to add to our troubles, Chikkadevaraja has now entered Trichanapalli. We must nip his ambitions in the bud. In such times, we need a daredevil, someone who can use his brains and brawn with equal ease.'

'You mean our brother-in-law?'

'Not merely our brother-in-law, but a capable, efficient and valorous Maratha subedar like Harjiraje. I have decided to send him to Karnatak.'

Later, Sambhaji was resting on his bed, lost in thought, when he suddenly recalled Yesubai's words, 'Raje, who does not make mistakes?' He said, looking at Yesubai, 'Your words pierced my heart like an arrow. I wish you had not uttered them.'

'I am sorry, Raje, I did not mean to hurt you. But wasn't it a crime to abandon a great father like Shivaji Raje and join Diler Khan, albeit for a few days?'

'No, Yesu. It was not a crime. It was the arrogance of youth. It was my foolishness. I thought I could fool Diler Khan, making him believe that I had defected, and thus, entering the enemy camp, defeat them on their own ground. I wanted to set a new standard and example of valour. It was my dream to show my father what I was capable of; to do something which no

one had ever dared to do before. But as fate would have it, everything collapsed and I could achieve nothing!’

‘Yuvraj, even on a full moon night, one cannot ignore the blemishes on the moon’s face. This act of yours will remain a black spot on your character forever,’ Yesubai bluntly said.

‘What if the moon itself were to burn to ashes?’

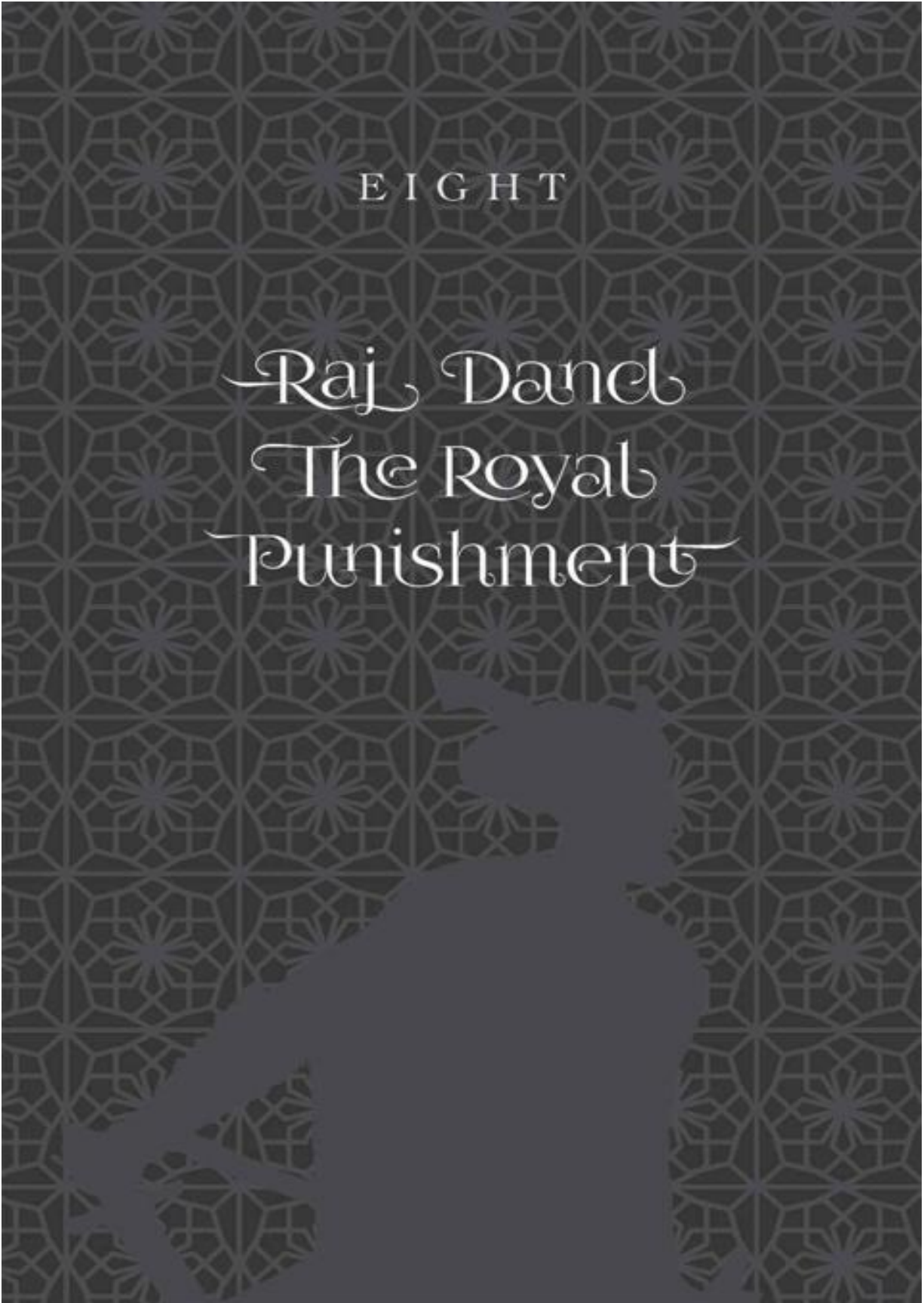
‘Don’t say such terrible things, Raje!’

Sambhaji got up. A strong wind blew outside. Holding Yesubai’s wrist, he literally dragged her onto the terrace. The sky was cloudy and one could barely see the crescent of the moon, partially hidden behind the mountains.

Holding Yesubai’s hand near his heart, Sambhaji said, ‘If my motherland demands, this moon is willing to burn itself away for Abasaheb’s Swaraj. Ask the moon in the sky whether it has the courage to do the same.’

EIGHT

Raj Danel  
The Royal  
Punishment





# 1

‘Raje, I wonder how our guests have survived these torrential rains and the misty clouds throughout the day?’ Kavi Kalash said, smiling.

‘Guests?’

‘Well, we have two English emissaries in Raigad: Gary and Robert! They are housed right at the edge of the fort, very close to the huge waterfalls. They have been there for the past three months. Their butler said they often get up at night, scared of the din the rain makes. Apparently, they were complaining that if they stay any longer, their bodies would sprout mould!’

‘Kaviraj, come to the point!’

‘Why don’t you meet the poor souls?’

Sambhaji did not respond. That night, Kavi Kalash and Jotyaji Kesarkar discussed the matter for a long time. The port of Mumbai was now under control of the English, having changed hands from the Portuguese. Along with the port, the English had gained in arrogance as well. The main cause of worry for the Marathas was the English port at Surat. The English stationed at Surat were supporting the Siddi at Janjira, supplying him with ammunition and encouraging him to act as if he were invincible. He was ravaging the Konkan coast. Sambhaji had sent Kavi Kalash to tour the southern Konkan region. Kalash, braving the torrential rains, had just returned to Raigad after inspecting the area. Sambhaji had plans to set up ammunition factories at Dicholi and Kudal. This would reduce their dependence on the Dutch and the English.

The next morning, Sambhaji woke early and looked out of his window to see the valley and the ramparts of the fort covered in a thick fog. It was still dark outside and a cold wind blew. With all the administrative work that had piled up, he could barely manage the time these days to go on a

tour of the fort. This morning, with a dozen guards in tow, he stepped out of his quarters. New grass grew along the paths with jasmine flowers blooming everywhere, giving out a pleasant fragrance. On the other side of the valley, the Konkan Diva fort too was waking up to a new day.

Sambhaji stopped at the Gangasagar tank to look at the blue waters reflecting the skies. Lotuses bloomed in the ponds. The sun was now peeking from behind the clouds. Despite the beautiful surroundings, Sambhaji felt miserable. The memory of Durgabai and Ranuakka languishing in the enemy camp troubled him. He turned to look westwards. Beyond the hills was the blue ocean. And somewhere on the vast Konkan shore, kissing the waves was Janjira—the fort that had captured Sambhaji's imagination for a long time now.

Sambhaji was restless. It had been three months since he took over the reins of the kingdom. Yet he had not been able to plan a campaign against the Siddi. The Abyssinian Siddis ruled over the territory from Murud to Shrivardhan along the Konkan coast. The region was also referred to as Habsan, after the 'Habshis,' as the Abyssinian race was called in local parlance. The fort stood on a huge outcrop of rock that spread over forty acres. A fisherman by the name of Rama Patil had built a wooden structure on the rocks, gaining access to the ships plying in the coastal waters and, eventually, control of the maritime trade in the area. Later, Patil became a rebel and refused to take orders from the Nizam Shah.

One of the Nizam's commanders captured the fort by entering with three ships full of soldiers who pretended to be sailors of a merchant fleet. Piram Khan, the leader, offered Rama Patil and his men some fine wine from their cargo. Once they were intoxicated, Nizam's soldiers captured the fort. Piram Khan's son Burhan Khan later built the impregnable fort of Janjira on Rama Patil's rock. But the Siddis, known to be selfish, rebellious and cruel, were nobody's friends. They managed to break away from the Nizam, keep the Portuguese, the English and the Mughals at bay, while extending a hand of friendship whenever it served their interests.

That afternoon, when Sambhaji was at work in his office, he heard a clamour outside. Stepping out, he saw a group of nearly three hundred men, drenched to their skin, screaming for justice. They were fishermen from Nagothane, Apta and Nagaon. The moment they saw Sambhaji, they fell at his feet and pleaded, 'Raje, please save us! The Habshis looted our villages

two days ago. They ravaged our homes and took away our young daughters.'

'Our women are going to be ruined, Raje. The Siddi will force them to embrace his religion and sell them in the bazaars of Mumbai ...' An old man wailed, as he lay at Sambhaji's feet.

Sambhaji was stunned to hear their account of the Habshi attack. Such complaints had reached him earlier too. He shouted at Kaviraj, 'Kalash, do you hear their wails? Do you recall that you were praising the English emissaries? Tell me, whose support has made the Siddi so arrogant?'

'But Raje ...'

'Abasaheb used to say: just as a mouse nibbles everything once it enters the house, these Siddis are nibbling at our Konkan coast. The scheming Habshis keep the Mughal Badshah happy on one hand while befriending the English at Mumbai on the other. We need to kill this snake before it spreads poison everywhere.'

Sambhaji promised the fishermen to put the Habshis in their place. After the men had left, Sambhaji asked Kavi Kalash to present the English emissaries in his durbar.

That evening, Gary and Robert entered the durbar and saluted smartly. Gary placed a bag full of jewels, diamonds among them, at Sambhaji's feet. Hoping to attract Sambhaji's attention, he stood fiddling with his uniform. Finally Sambhaji said, in a dry voice, 'Perhaps you expected me to be wide-eyed, seeing your "priceless" gift? Please keep in mind that you can scarcely win my respect with such a lowly offering.'

The English emissary realised that Sambhaji was furious. Wiping the sweat off their foreheads nervously, they stood waiting for Raje to continue. Sambhaji turned to their interpreter, who asked,

'Raje, if I may; I wonder why you are so annoyed at us.'

'That is because you Englishmen don't have a habit of keeping your word. Did you not make a treaty with Shivaji Maharaj whereby you promised to stop supplies to Janjira? But here you are, happily ignoring the treaty by docking their ships in your port at Mumbai, supplying them with ammunition, and what not! Stop this immediately or you will see what my wrath looks like!'

Sambhaji did not stop with a mere warning. He said threateningly, to the translator, 'There is a steep ravine next to the rooms in which you are staying. There are dungeons nearby. I wonder if you have seen them.'



‘No, not really, Sarkar!’

‘Well, the dungeons are quite notorious. When the English stationed at Rajapur tried to help Siddi Johar during the siege of Panhala, Abasaheb had them arrested and thrown into those dark cells for nearly two years. Let your masters know: if they persist in fooling us and maintaining a friendship with the Siddi, we would be happy to host them in those dungeons!’

The English and their translator left with hasty salutes. Krishnaji Kank, impressed by the way Sambhaji had reprimanded them, said, ‘You really ticked those monkeys off, Raje! I am sure they won’t be able to sleep for a week.’

Sambhaji waved the compliment off casually, saying, ‘Well that’s just letting off steam. But kingdoms don’t run on that. Kavi Kalash, Daulat Khan at Rajapur has five thousand Maratha soldiers and fifty ships. He has been itching for action ever since I took charge. Ask him to be on the alert. Tell him that if the Siddis at Janjira try anything funny, we will descend upon them. We will destroy their jetties at Mumbai too, if we are provoked.’

## 2

‘Do whatever it takes, but you need it to rein Kavi Kalash in,’ Somaji Datto pleaded.

The revenue officials had been pardoned after Sambhaji’s coronation. While Balaji Avaji had taken charge of the department, the division of work amongst the officials was yet to be done. Balaji was happy to be back in his job and had plunged himself into work with dedication. They had assembled in Moropant’s haveli for a discussion.

Moropant was not happy that the meeting included Annaji and Somaji Datto. Annaji had spent three months under house arrest, thanks to his ambitions! He was lucky that Sambhaji had not tortured or punished him physically. But the emotional trauma he had suffered was considerable.

‘I will drop by in the evening,’ That was the message the Chief Justice Prahlad Niraji had left for them. They were all waiting for him. Annaji was

getting impatient. He asked a guard to find out what was delaying Prahlad Niraji.

Moropant's haveli was close to the main office and the guard returned soon. A restless Annaji was sitting on the swing outside. The guard announced, 'He is busy. The court is still in session.'

'Raje is here? I was told he left this afternoon.'

'Yes, that is right. He left this afternoon. The court is discussing the matter of Mahadji Patil of Masoor.'

'You idiot! You say Raje is not in court. Who is presiding then?'

'Kavi Kalash saheb.'

'Sitting on the throne?'

'No! He is sitting on the steps below the throne. How can he sit on the throne? He salutes it even when Raje is not present.'

Annaji smiled sarcastically. He said, looking at those present, 'How does it matter where he sits? What matters is that he is presiding over the court in Raje's absence.'

At that moment Prahlad Niraji entered the room. Annaji said, with an edge to his voice,

'Prahlad Pant, it looks like you have retired from your job. And has that Qazi Haidar, the elder Maharaj's favourite, left for his Haj pilgrimage?'

'What are you saying, Annaji?'

'Well, I wonder what Kaviraj is doing in the durbar.'

'Well, Raje has gone for an inspection of the weapons and asked Kaviraj to look into the matters of the court in his absence.' He looked at Annaji and continued, 'Raje has a thousand things to do at the same time. He has a right to allow someone else to act on his behalf. The elder Maharaj too used to do that too. However, I have every authority to oversee the judgments made by Kavi on behalf of Raje; they are subject to my approval. Only then can the decisions be implemented. Annaji Pant, that is what Sambhaji has commanded.'

'Well, you showed you true colours! Remember, we had all led the revolt together and you were sent to arrest Shambhu Raje. But you turned the tables on us and joined him. Your sweet talk and fickle loyalties ensured that you kept your post. We were the fools who suffered the consequences,' Annaji muttered.

'Let bygones be bygones, Annaji Pant,' said Prahlad Niraji. I am pitching for you, to ensure that you get the prestige your position deserves.

So are Maharanisaheb and several others.'

'What prestige are you talking of? As long as we are ruled by this notorious king and his scheming friend, what justice can we expect? Misrule and injustice will reign at Raigad!'

Moropant could not remain quiet any longer. He said, looking around nervously lest someone outside overheard them, 'Enough, Annaji! I beg of you! We don't want to get burnt by your hatred for those two. We have suffered a great deal in our old age. Now let us live the rest of our lives in peace!' Moropant glanced at his son Nilopant as he spoke.

### 3

The date of Sambhaji's formal coronation was approaching fast. Preparations were on in full swing at Raigad. Sambhaji was naturally inclined towards religion and made several decisions with regard to the administration of the temples in the kingdom after he ascended the throne. He also ensured that Tukaram Maharaj's son Mahadoba, received his annual pension.

One day a group of men came from Karad with requests, 'Maharaj, Ramdas Swami has built a huge temple at Chapal and is planning a great festival on the day of Ramnavami. We are short of funds ...'

'What's the hesitation?' Sambhaji interrupted. 'The elder Maharaj has already sanctioned an annual expense fund for Sajjangad and Chapal. I have continued the tradition. Take money from the treasury for the festival. You need not ask me. I have already instructed the treasury to ensure that your expenses are met.'

'Raje, we have had trouble with some of the rogue Muslims there.'

Sambhaji's forehead creased with irritation. He ordered Kavi Kalash, 'Please instruct Vasudev Balkrishna to ensure that he provides security to Ramdas Swami and other Brahmins who assemble there for the ceremonies. Ask him to send us a detailed report once the festival is over.'

Raje had heard that Moreshwar Gosavi, who managed the temple at Chinchwad, was facing similar problems. Sambhaji issued instructions to

arrange for the protection of the temple. As the day of the coronation neared, Sambhaji descended from the fort one day and went to Kelshi to pray at the tomb of Yakub Awaliya Fakirbaba. He had visited the tomb many times with his father. Instead of staying at the fort of Mandangad, which was nearby, he spent a whole week camped close to the tomb. Memories of childhood flooded his mind and praying at the tomb daily brought him a measure of peace.

The office was busy with preparations for the coronation. Yesubai received news that Khando Ballal had returned to Raigad after visiting Kashi. He had been sent to invite Gaga Bhatt to supervise the coronation.

When Sambhaji stepped out of his office, Yesubai noticed that while he was trying to put on a cheerful face, he was in fact anxious and disturbed. After dinner, she asked, 'I hope Khandoba could meet Gaga Bhatt.'

'Huh ...? Yes, he did meet him. Upon my request, Gaga Bhatt has written 'Samanvay', a treatise on how to run a kingdom in accordance with moral ethics and principles. He has sent the manuscript with Khando Ballal.'

'Is he attending the coronation ceremony? Raje, you seem to be avoiding this question,' Yesubai asked, a little hesitantly.

'He is not well, it seems.'

Yesubai was silent. Sambhaji let out a deep sigh and said, 'Ranisaheb, our unseen opponents have a far greater reach than ours. Their messages reached Gaga Bhatt even before Khandoba presented himself in Kashi.'

'Apparently, they complained that my conduct has been unbecoming of Shivaji's Yuvraj, of how my behaviour flouts the laws of religion, and how the kingdom is being run without any regard for morality ...'

Sambhaji was getting used to such aspersions. Yet, it hurt him that his detractors had managed to poison Gaga Bhatt's mind against. His friends—Jotyaji Kesarkar, Dadaji Raghunath Deshpande, and Krishnaji Kank, along with trusted aides like Yesaji Kank, Kondaji Farzand and Hambirrao Mohite—gathered at Raigad for a discussion. The first item on the agenda of the conference was the recent death of Moropant Peshwa. Moropant, ripe in age, had died of a minor ailment. Sambhaji said,

'He was a good man at heart. He did confess that he made a mistake in letting the others influence him to join the revolt.'

'Raje, we must commemorate him,' Hambirrao suggested.

‘I believe his son, Nilopant, is the most capable candidate to take up the post of Peshwa,’ Sambhaji said, his eyes on the future.

Everyone was delighted at Sambhaji’s decision. Raje said, ‘Yesaji Kaka, Kondaji Kaka, I want to share something with you. My enemies have been quite successful in spreading the rumour that I don’t respect the old administrators and others who were loyal to Abasaheb all their lives, and that I treat the revenue officials with contempt. Their poisonous tongues have even reached Kashi.’

‘Ignorant fools will rant but there are many veterans, like Yesaji Baba, Hambirrao and others, who don’t get swayed by such rumours. Raje, why are you worried when you have men who have served the Swaraj since Shivaji Raje’s times standing firm behind you?’ Kondaji Farzand said.

‘I am more worried about the noise from such wagging tongues than the booming of enemy cannons, Kaka.’

‘You have spared the lives of those who revolted against you. You have reinstated them with honour. I can tell you this: Shivaji Raje would not have been so merciful,’ Hambirrao reminded him.

Dadaji Deshpande and Kondaji said, almost at the same time, ‘Raje, we must warn you: whatever you do, don’t spare Annaji Datto.’

Sambhaji was not one to be influenced by such pleas. ‘Kondaji Kaka, we must keep in mind that Annaji Datto’s contribution in building the Swaraj was substantial.’

Balaji Chitnis joined the discussion after a while. Sambhaji said, ‘Balaji Avaji, please send a messenger to Samarth Ramdas, requesting his presence at the coronation.’

The conference continued well into the night but Sambhaji, lying on his bed hours later, was wide awake. He asked Yesubai, ‘What do you think? Should we pardon Annaji Pant?’

‘The most important thing is to be decisive, whether your decision is harsh or otherwise.’

Sambhaji sighed heavily. ‘Annaji has always been a slippery character by nature. Never easy to catch, like a slimy fish. He is good at creating the impression that he and some of his men are indispensable. I feel like a man with a twisted ankle. I cannot run fast, but if I sit, it hurts like hell.’

16 January 1681

Nearly a hundred thousand men from all over the Swaraj and representatives from other kingdoms had assembled in Raigad. It was after a gap of six years that a ceremony of this scale was taking place in the Maratha capital. Except for Ranubai, Sambhaji's sisters were present as well with their families. Like the tens of thousands of Varkaris who gathered on the banks of the Chandrabhaga on the day of Kartik Ekadashi, huge crowds had flocked to Raigad to witness the important event.

Sambhaji hurried towards the Sabha Mandap when he spotted a group of around fifteen Muslims waiting for him. Curious to find out who they were, Sambhaji moved towards them but Somaji Datto and Jotyaji reminded him that he was already late.

It was then he heard the shani mantra being recited by one of the Muslims:

*'Nilanjana samabhasam raviputram yamagrajam chaya  
martanda sambhutam tam namami shaishcharam.'*

'You are resplendent like a blue hill; you are the son of Lord Surya and the brother of Lord Yama. You are the son of Chaya and Martanda (another name for the Sun God); Oh, the slow moving one, I pay my respects to you.'

Sambhaji stopped in his tracks. Who were these people, and why were they reciting the powerful shanti mantra meant for times of trouble? He asked them, 'Who are you?'

'Raje, we were once Brahmins. Kolhatkars from Shreebag. This man here is Gangadhar Pant from Rasool. We were all forced to become Muslims by the Habshis at Janjira.'

'Raje, please take us back into the Hindu fold. There are many like us who have suffered.'

Sambhaji glanced around for Balaji Chitnis to look into the matter immediately. Somaji Datto volunteered, 'Pant is busy with the ceremonies. I will do the needful.'

People in the durbar hall were getting restless as Sambhaji had not yet arrived. The hall was resplendent with beautiful Venetian glass chandeliers. The walls were painted with scenes from epics. It was the second coronation ceremony to be conducted there.

The throne awaited Sambhaji's arrival. Finally, the trumpets and horns blew to announce his entrance. The mace bearers announced in chorus:

*Beware all ... Maharaj! The learned, the compassionate, the  
Kshatriya ... Shambhu Raje!*

Sambhaji entered the hall, walking with slow and purposeful steps. The onlookers cheered loudly. He was barely twenty-two! They stared in admiration at his tall and powerful physique, his dreamy eyes and the aquiline nose which reminded them of the elder Maharaj. The large jarring gems around his neck shone in the light of the lamps but the glow on his face bespoke an indescribable confidence.

Tall, graceful and smiling, Yesubai followed a few steps behind Raje. She wore a beautifully embroidered silk saree and matching jewellery. The vermillion on her forehead enhanced her radiant beauty, while the golden cummerbund accentuated her slim figure. She reminded many of the statue of Meenakshi at the temple in Madurai. Rajaram's wife Jankibai and Shambhu Raje's step-mother Soyarabai walked behind her.

Accompanying Sambhaji was an eleven-year-old boy. The dignified walk, royal garb and fine jewels were sufficient to indicate to those assembled in the durbar that he was none other than Yuvraj Rajaram, Sambhaji's younger brother.

Sambhaji walked up to the golden throne. He glanced at the crowd and then turned towards the throne again. His mind was in turmoil. Should he ascend the throne or walk away? He stood very still, unable to make up his mind. He recalled his father's words, 'Dear son, when you look at the throne, ask yourself whether you have the strength to fulfil the mountain-high dreams of the people here. You will ascend the throne not because you are entitled to it by birth but because you have the confidence to fulfil the dreams of the people you represent. But, if even for a moment you doubt your capabilities or your loyalty, don't even think of sitting on the throne. You may as well put on a hermit's clothes and walk away into the forest.'

Sambhaji glanced at the people gathered in the durbar. Energy surged through his body as he saw thousands of eyes looking at him, especially those of the ryots full of expectation. Puffing his chest out with confidence, he moved towards the throne. The very thought that it was the same throne on which Abasaheb sat brought tears to his eyes. He mumbled to himself, ‘Yes, Abasaheb! I shall endeavour to keep the reputation of your honoured seal and your tradition intact, following your footsteps to the best of my ability.’

‘Wah, Raje!’ Kavi Kalash, Jotyaji and Prahlad Niraji, who were standing close by and had heard him, cheered loudly.

Sambhaji Raje said, his voice taking on the tone of an oath, ‘I will see that the Swaraj, and its priceless forts adorning the Sayhadris like shining jewels, are never despoiled by anyone. If, while protecting it, I have to sacrifice my head, I am willing!’

With confident steps, Raje ascended the throne. At that moment, the cannons boomed, announcing the arrival of a new king. Yesubai was in tears while Rajaram, Jankibai and others were simply overwhelmed by the rousing reception.

The religious ceremonies began but cheering did not subside. There was a general clamour as celebrations and rituals continued together.

The Brahmins were being felicitated and those representing Ramdas Swami were given alms. Sambhaji took their blessings and gave them gifts of jewellery and expensive clothes. Sant Tukaram’s son Mahadoba and Narayan Maharaj were present. They too were felicitated. Emissaries from other states presented themselves before the new king.

Sambhaji announced, as the celebrations were being concluded, ‘I have decided to remove the restrictions placed by house arrest on Balaji Pant, Annaji and Hiroji. I intend to take the Swaraj forward using the advice, experience and dedication with which they have served the elder Maharaj.’

The elders were happy that the senior officials had been accorded due respect by Sambhaji. Soon, Annaji Datto, Hiroji Farzand, and Balaji Avaji Chitnis came out of their havelis. They wore turbans, jewellery and clothes befitting the occasion. They bowed gracefully—first to Sambhaji and then to the entire assembly. The durbar welcomed them with a loud cheer.

Sambhaji said, ‘Gentlemen, the waters are no longer murky. My mind and heart are clear now. So I ask you: who shall we appoint to the post



of Chitnis?’

The durbar was silent. Sambhaji laughed loudly and said, ‘There is no one better qualified than Balaji Avaji, our Chitnis, whose dedication and diligence in service of the Swaraj are unmatched.’

The senior administrators were impressed by Sambhaji’s straightforward humility and capacity for forgiveness. Raje requested Chitnis to step forward and accept a gift of fine robes as a token of appreciation. An overwhelmed Balaji Avaji wanted to fall at Sambhaji’s feet but instead Raje held him by the shoulders and hugged him affectionately. Sambhaji had already decided to appoint Moropant’s son, Nilopant, as the next Peshwa. He also proposed to entrust him with the additional responsibility of governing the Subahs of Kalyan and Bhiwandi. Sambhaji then looked at Hambirrao Mohite proudly and said, ‘It takes a real man to lead an army. After the untimely death of Prataprao Gujar, you have handled the responsibility remarkably well and I wish that you would continue to hold the post of the commander-in-chief of the Maratha forces under my rule.’

Soon after, Sambhaji felicitated Prahlad Niraji and asked him to continue as the chief justice. Janardan Pant would continue to serve as Dabir or the minister responsible for external relations. Abaji Sondev was made Surnavis, the chief secretary, while Dattaji Pant was appointed the minister for internal affairs.

Annaji Datto, standing in a corner, was now an anxious man. His whole body shivered with beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. He feared for his fate as his earlier position of Surnavis had been taken away. The Surnavis was responsible for all royal edicts and commanded a great deal of prestige in the administrative council.

After staring at him for a moment, Sambhaji said, ‘Pant, there is a lot of pressure on me to not unshackle you. But I believe you deserve a position in the new administration and I am happy to inform you that you have been appointed as the treasurer.’

Annaji tried to force a smile but he could not hide the resentment at having lost the important post of Surnavis.

Sambhaji did not forget to honour Rayappa, the man who had served him loyally all these years. Raje then spotted Daryasarang and Daulat Khan, standing at the rear of the durbar. They looked striking in their tall, pointed Turkish turbans, flowing green robes and short henna-stained beards.

‘My Abasaheb used to say that one must learn to control the seas if one wishes to protect the forts and keep the Swaraj’s flag fluttering on their ramparts. I want to honour you who protect the seas.’

He said, ‘Jijausaheb showed us how a woman could manage a kingdom and a household with equal ease. She made Shivaji Raje what he was and Shivaji created the Hindavi Swaraj. The jewel in his crown was his mother.’ Sambhaji turned to look at Yesubai, creating a flutter of excitement in the durbar. ‘I will often be away on campaigns with my ministers to confront the enemy. I would like to hand over the reins of administration to Maharani Yesubai. This newly minted gold coin and seal is being released in her honour.’

‘Abasaheb created heroes like Tanaji, Yesaji, Murarbaji, Daulat Khan, and Daryasarang out of ordinary men. Today, I am happy to honour a man who has never asked me for anything—Kavi Kalash. I am bestowing on him the title of ‘Chandogamatya,’ expounder of the Vedas, and I include him in my council of ministers with this special post.’

A grateful Kavi Kalash bowed, while his wife Tejasbai could not hold back her tears. The coronation of the second Chhatrapati of the Maratha Empire thus came to an end. More than a hundred thousand people had assembled in Raigad, and it was now time for them to disperse. Thousands of brahmins and sanyasis who had come to collect alms were caught in a stampede while rushing out through the fort’s narrow gates. A few hundred lost their lives.

Many who were not content with the alms they had received, quickly blamed Kavi Kalash for the calamity. ‘You know, Kavi Kalash, the chandal, beheaded nearly fourteen hundred men and four thousand sheep for the coronation!’

‘You don’t say! I have heard that he is neck-deep in occult practices!’

## 5

A few select men were assembled at Sambhaji’s quarters. Having finished dinner, they were relaxing on the terrace at midnight. Sambhaji said,

looking at Hambirrao, 'Hambir Mama, during Abasaheb's time, the territory of Sinhagad, Rajgad and Pratapgad earned a lot of fame. We must create a name in the region of Nashik, Ramshej and Trayambakeshwar.'

He stopped for a moment as he clenched his fists. 'I am told there is a likelihood of Aurangzeb marching on the Deccan. Let him! We are ready.'

Hambirrao suggested, 'In Marwari weddings, it is customary for the Mama to present a unique gift to his nephew. I too want to give you something.'

'What are you hinting at, Mamasahab?'

'Surat!' Hambirrao almost whispered, taking everyone by surprise, and they exclaimed, 'The third time?'

'Yes! And why not? There is much to loot in the city.'

There was a general consensus on avoiding the discussion of this plan at length in public, as they wanted to keep it to themselves for the time being. But such exciting news did reach a few more ears nevertheless.

Annaji Datto and Hiroji Farzand presented a silver crown to the deity at the Jagadeeshwar temple. They had taken a vow to present a crown to the Lord if they were released from captivity. Only a few months earlier, they were royal prisoners under house arrest. They wondered at their good fortune: Sambhaji had not only released them but pardoned all their crimes. To top it all, they were inducted back into the council of ministers.

The same day, after their midday meal, senior ministers sat on the terrace of Annaji's haveli discussing various matters. Coronation was over but the palaces and havelis of Raigad still wore a festive air. Rahuji Somnath said to Farzand, pointing at a haveli next to the Peshwa's residence, 'Hiroji, do you notice the richly decorated haveli over there? Whose is it?'

'It has been built on orders from Sambhaji and is for Kavi Kalash,' Rahuji continued before Hiroji could respond.

'Well, let it be,' Hiroji said. 'It is for Raje's friend.'

'Hiroji, I am surprised at the lack of reaction from you. Are you made of stone?'

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Well, a friend is taken care of by a friend. That is all very well. But should a nephew not take care of his uncle? You may be the son of Shahaji

by one of his mistresses, but you are Shivaji Raje's brother and an uncle to Sambhaji, aren't you?

'Let it be ... Rahuji.'

'Why should I? He felicitates that fellow he picked up from the banks of the Ganga and builds a haveli for him. But you, Hiroji Pant, are given an ordinary two-storeyed house to stay in! Is that just?'

Annaji, who had remained silent till now, smiled ironically. 'Hiroji, you stayed back in place of the elder Maharaj while he escaped from Agra. What a risk you took! You could have lost your life. But this is what you get for your loyalty and daring!'

Hiroji downed another tumbler of wine and said,

'Well, I did commit the crime of running away with jewels from the treasury. Shambhubal is kind; he pardoned me.'

'That may be true. But have you asked yourself whose treasure it is? After all, you too are part of the family and may claim some of it.'

It did not take much to influence the simple mind of a soldier like Hiroji. Others joined the discussion. The clerks from Ratnagiri and Devgad complained,

'Annaji, isn't Shambhu Raje insulting you by taking away your post as the Surnavis? We have nowhere to go now. If there is an accounting error of a few hundred hons, we won't have someone like you to pardon us!'

'Do whatever it takes, Pant! But we cannot allow this to continue.'

Annaji's disciples were deliberately raking up the issue. The old wounds opened up easily, and Annaji winced at the memory of the day he had learned that Sambhaji had not re-appointed him as the Surnavis. He said in a bitter voice, 'Can you guess where our second Chhatrapati was after the coronation? Paying his respects to Yakub Fakir Baba at Kelshi!'

'Well, even Shivaji Maharaj used to consider him his guru. Maharaj used to visit him often ...'

'Hiroji, you old fool! How can you compare Shivaji Maharaj with Shambhu? Mark my words, as long as the two of them, Shambhu and Kavi Kalash, are thick as thieves, old loyals like us have no place in the administration of this kingdom. That arrogant, reckless Raja and his vile advisor need to be shown their place.'

N I N E

# Miscemeanour





# 1

After Agra and Delhi, Burhanpur, on the banks of the river Tapti, was the most important city of the Mughals. Not only was it a strategic post for the army, being the gateway to the Deccan, but it had also grown into a vital trading centre. The Subedar of Burhanpur was invariably a close relative of the Badshah. Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan Kolkatash, Aurangzeb's 'milk brother', had been appointed the Subedar, and he kept a close eye on the region.

On 30 January 1681, the beautiful palaces and havelis along Burhanpur's riverfront glowed in the golden hues of the evening sun. The tall, majestic minarets of the Jama Masjid rose from the heart of the city.

Bahadur Khan Kolkatash had left for Aurangabad four days earlier to attend the marriage of his nephew. The bride was from Golconda and the marriage party had left Hyderabad with a lot of fanfare. Not wanting to fall short in the reciprocal arrangements, Bahadur Khan had taken with him an army of three thousand men out of the eight thousand troops stationed at Burhanpur. It would not do for the groom's party to pass up an opportunity for a show of strength.

The Naik Subedar, Kakar Khan, was in charge of the city in Bahadur Khan's absence. As evening fell, lamps were lit across the city. The reflections of the illuminated facades dissolved in the small waves on the Tapti's surface.

The old city had fortified mud walls, but Burhanpur had expanded in the last few years, and new localities like Nawabpura, Karanpura, Shahjahanpura, Khurrampura and others had sprung up. Bahadurpura was one such neighbourhood where a large number of rich merchants as wealthy as their counterparts in Surat and Hyderabad lived. Transactions worth

crores of hons took place there in silk, gold, silver and other precious commodities.

To all appearances, the evening of 30 January was no different from other evenings. Kakar Khan had just finished his evening prayers. Two hundred armed soldiers guarded his haveli day and night as a precautionary measure. Of late, he had managed to antagonise the Hindu ryots, thanks to his harsh and discriminatory policies.

The afternoon had been quite eventful. He had received news from spies in the vicinity of Surat. They had spotted a large number of Maratha horsemen in the jungles around the city. The citizens, especially the foreign merchants based in the port, were dreading another Maratha attack. They had not forgotten the two raids on Surat by Shivaji, twelve and twenty years back. The very thought that his son Sambhaji was planning the next foray made them shiver with fear.

The Thanedar at Surat had requested for urgent reinforcement, asking Kakar Khan 'to send as many troops as possible from Burhanpur.' After the last loot of Surat, the Mughals had built a fifteen-foot-high wall around the city and increased the number of troops permanently stationed there. But the thought of a Maratha raid still made them nervous. The moment Kakar Khan received the message, he angrily thumped his fist on a table, saying, 'It is a tragedy that Bahadur Khansaheb is busy with wedding celebrations during such testing times.'

After a brief discussion with his sardars, Kakar Khan decided that afternoon to retain a thousand men in Burhanpur and send the rest with adequate ammunition towards Surat. By evening, when Khan had finished his namaaz, the troops were far away. As he was folding his prayer mat, a few soldiers rode up rapidly, tied their horses at the gates, and rushed in. 'Huzoor! The Marathas are marching on Burhanpur. We are being attacked, Huzoor!'

'What are you raving about? Marathas at Burhanpur? You idiots, their target was Surat ...' Kakar Khan stopped mid-sentence. He gulped water from a tumbler, and closed his eyes for a moment as he regained his composure. Then he asked, 'Who is their leader? It cannot be Sambhaji! He was in Raigad a fortnight back, enjoying the coronation ceremonies. Even if he rode day and night, it would take him at least six days to get here.'

Kakar Khan and his sardars could hardly believe what the soldiers were saying. But their frightened faces testified to the truth of their report.



Khan despatched a messenger to summon the wealthy traders of the city. By then, news of an imminent Maratha attack had spread like wildfire across Burhanpur creating panic. One of the spies reported, 'The Marathas are only a few kos away, hiding in the jungles. It is a large force, led by a commander called Hambirrao.'

'How many?'

'Nearly fifteen or seventeen thousand men, Huzoor.'

'Ya Allah!' Kakar Khan exclaimed.

He wondered what he could do. Half the force was with Bahadur Khan while he had despatched the remaining troops to Surat. He cursed himself for doing that. He yelled in desperation, 'These Marathas are despicable fellows and our spies are idiots! They fooled us by acting as if they were going to attack Surat while their real target was Burhanpur all along. Looks like Sambhaji is an even more cunning fox than his rascal father Shivaji!'

'What can I say, Huzoor! Those Marathas have been camped in the jungle on the outskirts of the city since last night. They must have prepared their meals but we could not even see the smoke from their kitchen fires. We learned that their commander Hambirrao ordered the troops to leave pieces of meat outside the villages in the vicinity, attracting the dogs there. While the dogs were feeding, they killed them with arrows. That way they have ensured that the dogs would not bark and wake the villagers.'

One of the merchants asked, 'What exactly is their intention?'

'What else?' Kakar Khan said, curling his fists in anger. 'They want to attack Burhanpur and loot the city.'

Soon, an urgent meeting was underway at Kakar Khan's quarters. The prominent merchants and mullahs of the city were present, as well as the sardars who worked under Khan. They all were scared, anticipating the worst. Many of the traders were on the verge of tears.

They pleaded, 'We know how Shivaji had looted Surat. Please help us! Do whatever it takes!'

Saying so, a few of them placed bags of silver and gold coins at Kakar Khan's feet. Khan was a seasoned soldier and a stern administrator whom Aurangzeb had trusted to implement the Jizya tax. He conferred with his fouzdar and assessed the situation. It was a tricky one: they had only a thousand men to defend Burhanpur.

Finally Kakar Khan announced confidently, 'I have a thousand soldiers with me. Send your private guards to join them. Let me make this clear: I may die, but I will save Burhanpur!'

That gave a lot of courage to those present at the meeting. Nearly fifteen hundred guards who were in the employ of various merchant families joined Kakar Khan's forces that night. He shouted, galvanising the men, 'Let us go! Why should we waste our time waiting for the Marathas to come here?'

'What is your plan, Sardar?'

'The Marathas must be fast asleep right now. If we show some daring and manage to enter their camp, we can take them by surprise. We will burn their tents and roast the devils alive!'

'Wah!' The idea was met with cheers and applause.

At midnight, the main door of the fortified city creaked open. A thousand-strong cavalry, followed by fifteen hundred foot soldiers, exited the gate. The contingent was led by Kakar Khan who was astride a horse. Accompanied by five hundred soldiers, he rode ahead and reached a moat which had often been filled with burning logs to keep the enemy at bay.

Something stirred in the darkness of the moat and suddenly, as if it had sprung to life, out came thousands of Maratha soldiers with cries of 'Har Har Mahadev!', 'Shivaji Maharaj ki jay!', and 'Sambhaji Maharaj ki jay!' Nearly four thousand Maratha soldiers rushed forward to attack, with shouts of 'Kill!' and 'Attack!' Leading the men was Sambhaji, wearing an armoured vest and metal headgear for protection. His Bhawani sword swung in the air as he urged his men on. Like the stalks of jowar cut down by farmers in the fields, the Mughals were beheaded and struck down as the Marathas advanced.

For the Maratha troops, it was the first opportunity to fight alongside their newly coronated Chhatrapati, and their enthusiasm knew no bounds. They chased the Burhanpuris and crushed them. Kakar Khan somehow managed to save his life by retreating behind the city's fortified walls. By then, nearly four hundred of his men had been massacred while hundreds lay wounded on the ground.

Khan had closed behind him the huge doors leading into the city. However Sambhaji was aware that the loot was not inside the mud walls but on the outer periphery of the city where the rich merchants resided. He said to Kavi Kalash, 'Keep a few men here with instructions to bang on the

doors. Maintain the facade of trying to break them open to enter the inner city while the rest of the troops make their way to Bahadurpura. We need to start looting the shops right away.'

'As you command, Raje.'

'And make sure that no women or children are touched. Avoid killing even a single man if you can. But spare no one if he attacks you!'

## 2

A good commander has to be ware even while he is asleep. Hambirrao Mohite and his men were resting in the jungles outside the city when they heard the shouts of 'Har Har Mahadev', 'Shivaji Maharaj ki jay', and 'Sambhaji Maharaj ki jay!' Hambirrao woke up and rushed out of his tent. His men too, having heard the commotion, came out to see.

Sensing that his men were excited, he said, 'Don't do anything silly. These are traps set by our enemy to fool us into thinking that Sambhaji Maharaj is here and has attacked them.' At that very moment, hearing the sound of approaching horses, the men unsheathed their swords. Soon, a pair of Hambirrao's scouts rode up, shouting, 'Mamasaheb! Shambhu Raje!'

'Shambhu Raje? Where? How is he here?'

'I saw him. He has attacked Burhanpur!'

The other man added, 'Shambhu Raje rode without stopping for five days and nights from Raigad with five thousand men.'

That was enough for Hambirrao to spring into action. Twirling his whiskers, he mounted his horse and shouted 'Har Har Mahadev!' His troops poured out of the jungles and charged towards Burhanpur, soon converging with Sambhaji's forces. The loot of Bahadurpura began. They broke down the doors of shops and pried open safes full of jewels, coins and other riches. They found passages leading to basements where most of the traders stocked their wares.

Sambhaji and Hambirrao took stock of the situation. Many soldiers were still at the doors leading into the old city, creating the impression that the Marathas wanted to enter and sack Burhanpur. Meanwhile, Sambhaji

was informed that the Sikhs who resided in Karanpura could join Kakar Khan's forces. He directed his troops to that locality and soon managed to get the Sikhs to surrender. At the same time, he ensured that news of their attacks on the outskirts did not reach the old town.

Many men who took part in the raid on Burhanpur led by Sambhaji were experienced looters who had attacked Surat along with Shivaji Maharaj. They plundered the localities of Nawabpura, Shahjung, Shahjahanpura and Khurrampura. They also dug through basements and recovered hoards of wealth stored underground.

The raid was nearly over before the night ended. Sambhaji and Hambirrao sat on a boulder near the Maratha camp. Rayappa, realising that Raje would be hungry, had roasted a few corn cobs which Sambhaji and Hambirrao nibbled on.

Hambirrao looked at Sambhaji with pride. 'My nephew, you seemed quite eager to follow us!'

'A nephew should never be far behind his uncle, Mamasahab. And don't forget! This nephew of yours has his father's blood in him. A Raja is not one who wears jewels looted by his troops but one who fights hand in hand with his men to acquire them! And secondly, I am told a coronation is akin to a king marrying his land. According to tradition the husband, after marriage, is supposed to go out and hunt to bring something home for his wife. I thought, what better way to show my gratitude than by looting Burhanpur?'

Both Hambirrao and Sambhaji laughed.

Hambirrao was on a constant vigil to ensure that news of the loot never reached the main city. The plunder continued for two days while some soldiers gathered extra horses and mules to carry the loot back into Maratha territory. On the third day, Rayappa brought news that a horse trader with two thousand Arabian steeds in his possession was willing to negotiate a deal with the Marathas.

'He had come hoping to strike a deal with Bahadur Khan but the Subedar is in Aurangabad and the trader is growing impatient.'

Sambhaji immediately left to meet the trader. He was impressed at the sight of the tall and sturdy horses. He had not seen such magnificent beasts in recent years. The trader stood with his hands folded, a little scared.

'Where did you get such lovely animals from? I am sure there are none like these in Hindustan.'

‘From Arabestan, Huzoor.’

Sambhaji suddenly leaped onto a barebacked horse and pulled its reins. It neighed and lifted the hooves of its forelegs in the air.

‘Raja saheb, stop! You will fall! Don’t try to ride that horse!’ But Sambhaji and the horse shot forth like an arrow, with Rayappa and a few other soldiers in hot pursuit. The trader sat down on the ground, slapping his forehead with his palm. Hambirrao, looking at the man, merely smiled. After a few hours, Sambhaji returned. As for the horse, it behaved as if Sambhaji had been its rider for years!

When asked what his price was, the trader fell at Sambhaji’s feet and wailed, ‘Huzoor, take them free of cost but spare our lives! We want to return home safely with my family and my men.’

‘I don’t intend to accept that offer. State your price! You have reared these animals with care and we will not use our strength to steal them from you.’

After closing the deal, Raje instructed Khando Ballal, ‘Please ensure that the money is paid from our treasury and not from the loot here at Burhanpur.’

Later that day, a few spies came rushing from Aurangabad. ‘Bahadur Khan Kolkatash has received news of the raid and has left the wedding celebrations to return as soon as possible. They are on their way; the horses and the men have not even stopped for water.’

Immediate instructions were issued to wind up the operation in Burhanpur. The loot in any case was over. There were no more mules or carriages available to transport it. By afternoon, the carts left Burhanpur. The total value of the loot exceeded a crore hons.

Meanwhile, Sambhaji had received several complaints from the Hindus around Burhanpur who were troubled by imposition of the Jizya tax. Kakar Khan was arrested and presented before Sambhaji. Sambhaji ordered his men to remove Khan’s robe and tie him to a tree. Then he said to him, ‘I warn you ... don’t harass the people around here with the Jizya tax.’ Kakar Khan nodded meekly in reply. As soon as Sambhaji turned his back, Rayappa rushed towards Kakar Khan and tried to remove his dhoti. Sambhaji shouted, ‘Rayappa, stop that! He may be a rascal but that does not mean we abandon all decency!’

Hambirrao and Sambhaji were worried that they might have to encounter Bahadur Khan on their way back. They knew the Mughals were

aware of the routes Marathas had taken while returning with loot from the raids on Surat. In order to reduce the risk, they divided the Maratha force of twenty thousand men into five parts.

Hambirrao suggested, 'Shambhu Raje, I propose to return after taking Aurangabad. A troop strength of ten or twelve thousand would suffice.'

'I have five thousand men with me; that will be sufficient,' Sambhaji said.

'Be careful, Shambhubal. It might be safer to take along a larger force,' Hambirrao suggested.

Most of the loot was to be deposited at the Salher fort. They were planning to return via Dharangaon and Chopda, and the possibility of being confronted by Bahadur Khan en route was strong.

### 3

Bahadur Khan waited patiently a few miles from Chopda. He planned to massacre the Marathas as soon as they reached there. After a long wait, he was finally able to hear the sound of hooves in the jungle nearby. He was surprised to see that it was a small force consisting of only about five hundred men. As soon as the Mughals attacked, the Marathas shouted,

'We are only emissaries! Please don't attack.'

Bahadur Khan and his men confronted them, blocking their path. Two men, sitting atop a camel, addressed him, 'Huzoor, we are Mullah Kazi Haider and Jotyaji Kesarkar. We are emissaries on our way to Bhaganar to deliver a message to Qutb Shah from Shambhu Raje.'

Bahadur Khan took the letter and asked his spies whether the signature was that of Sambhaji. The spies confirmed that. Bahadur Khan then questioned the emissaries about Sambhaji's whereabouts.

'He would not dare to come this way, Huzoor! He knows that he is likely to meet you here.'

'Where is he then? Where is the Maratha army?'

'Well, we believe he must be well on his way towards Jalgaon or Aurangabad. We are not sure though. However we are certain that they have

not taken this route.'

The two emissaries soon started pleading with Bahadur Khan to take them into his service. First, Mullah Haider requested, 'Sarkar, I am a man of your faith. Please take me into your fold and make me a sardar.' Then Jotyaji said, 'Khansaheb, even Netaji Palkar embraced Islam. If you have need of a tough commander like me, I too am willing to change my religion.'

Suddenly Bahadur Khan noticed it was getting dark and he heard horses in the valley. He indicated to his men not to move or attack until he gave the signal. Khan and his men waited, hidden by the dense undergrowth, as the Marathas came climbing up the slope. There were nearly three thousand men—mere soldiers—and they carried no loot. Bahadur Khan signalled to his men not to attack and let them go.

Jotyaji said, 'What did I tell you, Khansaheb? Shambhu Raje is not coming this way. They must have taken the route via Edlabad.'

Bahadur Khan was obsessed with the thought of confronting Sambhaji and Hambirrao, and recovering the loot. That was the only way he could protect himself from Aurangzeb's wrath. Possessed with the idea, he rushed towards Edlabad. He never even noticed when Mullah Haider, Jotyaji and their men turned in another direction and vanished.

As soon as Bahadur Khan left for Edlabad, a chain of spies sent the information to the Marathas waiting to move on with the loot. Barely three hours after Khan's departure, Sambhaji and Hambirrao crossed Chopda and moved rapidly towards Salher.

It was past midnight. The troops had been riding without a break. Despite the cold, both the men and the horses were sweating from exhaustion. Nearly five thousand riders crossed a narrow gorge. They wanted to reach their destination by dawn.

Manaji pointed towards a hill, saying, 'Raje, the hill ahead is the abode of Saptashrungi Mata.'

Sambhaji halted his horse. 'Let the others go ahead. Fifteen hundred men are enough for me.'

'Where are you planning to go? For the darshan at Saptashrungi?'

'Yes! I had made a promise to pay my respects at the temple before leaving for Burhanpur. I cannot proceed without taking Mata's blessings.'

'Raje, we are already delayed, and not yet out of danger. We can always return for the darshan on another day,' Rupaji tried to convince

Sambhaji.

‘It will take the whole night just to scale the steep mountain,’ Manaji said.

‘Well, one does not achieve success or receive blessings without making an effort, does one?’

Kavi Kalash was asked to lead the troops with the loot while Sambhaji, along with fifteen hundred men, began the trek up the mountain. It was getting bright as they reached the summit. The local thanedar was ready to receive him. The small temple of Saptashrungi was perched on the edge of a cliff. They had to dismount near the temple and walk up the steep slope by the light of torches.

The news of Raje coming to the temple had already reached the beggars, sadhus and fakirs in the area. They crowded the temple in a frenzy of anticipation. Khando Ballal carried the bag of coins which Raje used for giving alms. Crying out ‘Jay Mate Saptashrungi’ and ‘Allah!’, they blessed Raje. Suddenly, cries of ‘Deen, Deen!’ were heard. Pathans, disguised as fakirs, took out swords hidden beneath their shawls and attacked Sambhaji. Raje unsheathed his sword while five fakirs lunged at him. A sword struck his shoulder, but all it could do was hit the armour. Sambhaji had not neglected to wear his armour and metal headgear. They finally came to his rescue now!

Sambhaji then pounced on the Pathans the way a lion would attack its prey. Soon, three of his assailants were on the ground. Sambhaji struck the fourth man on his shoulder with such force that his arm was severed. He fell off the cliff, unable to keep his balance. Suddenly, the fifth Pathan, hiding behind a tree nearby, jumped onto Sambhaji’s back. He gripped Raje’s neck with his thighs and both men fell to the ground, rolling in the dust. The Pathan was a strong man and did not allow his grip to loosen. Somehow Sambhaji managed to extricate his right hand and took a dagger out of his cummerbund. The next moment the dagger had entered the Pathan’s stomach and emerged, ripping his body open near his neck. Sambhaji stood up and brushed the dust off his robes. His men rushed over to see if he was hurt. Sambhaji was unscathed.

‘Well, it is all due to the blessings of Saptashrungi Mata,’ he said, laughing.

Dawn broke as they continued their trek to the temple.



## 4

Sambhaji Raje, Hambirrao Mohite, Manaji, Rupaji, and the twenty-five thousand Maratha troops accompanying them, had performed feats of valour across Maharashtra. They had devastated favourite cities of the Badshah—Burhanpur and Aurangabad. All along the route to Raigad, at Apta, Pen, Mahad and various other places, the soldiers were felicitated by the local womenfolk. Shouts of ‘Shivaji Maharaj ki jay!’ and ‘Sambhaji Maharaj ki jay!’ were heard wherever they went.

A durbar was held in Raigad. Sambhaji wanted to felicitate the brave soldiers. Stepping forward and walking ten steps, he presented fine robes to Hambir Mama and showered diamonds on his turban. Sambhaji wanted Soyrabai to felicitate her brother but she had excused herself, stating ill-health as a reason for not attending the durbar.

As the celebrations were drawing to a close, Sambhaji said to Prahlad Niraji, ‘I hope you have taken stock of the loot.’

‘It is going on, Raje! The clerks are exhausted, their eyes strained by making an inventory of this mountain of wealth. I am told a similar quantity is stocked in Salher?’

Sambhaji nodded. ‘Yes, that’s right.’

Suryaji said in a disappointed tone, ‘It was our bad luck! We had almost captured Aurangabad. When we entered the town with seven thousand men, the place was deserted and ripe for plunder. The townsfolk were hiding in their homes. Then we heard that Bahadur Khan was marching on us. We were forced to leave!’

‘Nothing is lost, Suryaji. There will be enough and more opportunities in the future.’

Sambhaji had sent his forces across the region to every corner of the Deccan. The Maratha troops, despatched towards Nagar and Nashik right up to Warhad, and some towards the borders of Bhaganar and Hyderabad in the south, were wreaking havoc in the Mughal territories. Their mandate was to create as much trouble as possible and ravage these areas. The men were encouraged by the fact their Raja was willing to fight with them, come rain or shine.

The victory at Burhanpur had been achieved a mere fortnight after the coronation. While most of Sambhaji's courtiers were appreciative of this, there were voices of dissent in the durbar. A few of the elders expressed their opinion, 'Raje, you have managed to create quite a spark but we are sure Aurangzeb is not going to watch this silently.'

'That's right!' Mullah Haider added, 'The Badshah has dismissed Bahadur Khan and appointed a new subedar at Burhanpur. And the Muslim ryots are up in arms.'

'Why so?'

'They have threatened that they will stop the Friday prayers if the Badshah is not able to find ways to protect them.'

Sambhaji said, 'Well, I agree with you. But let us keep in mind that I cannot hold back the ambitions and aspirations of young daredevils like Rupaji Bhosale, Dhanaji Jadhav, Santaji Ghorpade, Nilopant Peshwa and Krishnaji Kank. They dream of building a strong Swaraj.'

'Raje, Aurangzeb is building an army numbering hundreds of thousands of men. He is not going to take this lying down.'

Hiroji Farzand said, pride in his voice, 'The lion cub shall prove to be mightier than the lion Shivaji!'

Sambhaji smiled. 'Farzand Kaka, let me make it clear: I am not a patch on Abasaheb! Such men are born only once in a few generations. Don't even try to compare me with him. At the same time, I wish no one forgets that it is his blood which flows through my veins!' He continued, 'Know this: I will not allow a single fort—nay, a single stone from any of the forts—to be taken by Aurangzeb!'

The durbar was over but Sambhaji stayed back to talk to the ryots who had come seeking an audience. As Balaji Chitnis walked with Yesubai towards her quarters, he said, 'Shambhu Raje seemed very emotional today.'

'That is to be expected, isn't it? He is a poet in a soldier's uniform! A soldier's heart can be like a stone but a poet's heart melts at the slightest thought of seeing his men in pain.'

Sambhaji was resting in his quarters one afternoon when Kavi Kalash stormed in, waving his hands. He was clearly upset. ‘Raje, it’s a calamity! A pillar, on whom the Swaraj rested, has crumbled.’

‘Don’t speak in riddles! What happened?’

‘Farzand has joined the Siddis at Janjira.’

‘What are you saying? Hiroji or Kondaji?’

‘Kondaji!’

Yesubai’s face fell. She had heard Shivaji Raje sing the praises of Kondaji—the way he had climbed the walls of Panhalgad with only sixty-four Mavals and captured the near-impregnable fort. Shivaji Maharaj had called him a magician!’

Sambhaji said, trying to rein in his anger, ‘We cannot believe all rumours, Kaviraj!’

‘Here! You may read the letter from Dandarajpuri’s subedar.’

Sambhaji read the letter and said, biting his lips to keep his voice low, ‘Did he take his men too?’

‘Well, eleven of them followed him. To add insult to injury, he has complained about the lack of justice here and how the administrators are creating havoc in the kingdom.’

‘I wonder what makes people do this!’ Yesubai asked, thinking aloud.

‘Well, it is all because of the watandari system!’ Sambhaji said, letting out a deep sigh. ‘It is the greed for one’s own watan that has been the bane of the Marathas.’

The news of Kondaji’s defection spread like wildfire across Raigad. Sambhaji was deeply disturbed when Kavi Kalash said, ‘Raje, you need to make a decision. All of them, be it the Brahmins or the Maratha sardars, are clamouring for their own watan—the right to hold lands where they can collect revenues. They were unable to raise their voices on this matter in front of Shivaji Maharaj, out of sheer respect and fear of his displeasure. But now you need to confront this issue once and for all.’

Sambhaji said, ‘Abasaheb always said that the watandari system was the bane of the Marathas and believed that the entire kingdom would be broken into pieces if we continue the age-old practice. Let them clamour for their so-called rights. I am not going to budge an inch, as long as I am alive!’

Kondaji's betrayal had been a great shock for Sambhaji but it also made him more vigilant. He instructed Nilopant, 'Be prepared for a war on the seas. Ensure that the fort at Kulaba is adequately stocked with foodgrains and ammunition. If need be, send them more.'

Nilopant said, 'The elder Maharaj's foresight is praiseworthy. He started building the fort two years before his death.'

'But the fort is not yet complete. I must ensure that the ramparts are strong and well-protected within the next four months.'

That night Sambhaji lay awake for a long time. Seeing him smile, Yesubai asked, 'What is it, Raje?'

'Yesu, I was recalling an incident from my childhood. During the negotiations leading up to the treaty of Purandar, having lost all his forts to the Mughals, except Raigad, Abasaheb had made a request for the fort of Janjira to be handed over to us as a compensation. Mirza Raje Jaisingh had made the petition to Aurangzeb on behalf of Abasaheb. But you know what Aurangzeb said?'

Yesubai continued listening.

'Well, Aurangzeb wrote back saying Jaisingh was a fool to suggest it. He said, "Janjira is dear to us. If we make the mistake of handing the fort over to him, that mountain rat would turn into a dangerous alligator and the swish of his tail would shake the Mughal throne."'

'Raje, is Janjira such a strategic fort?'

'Yesu, I am not disappointed that we have not been able to take Janjira so far. But Kondaji's defection is a hard blow. He has doubled the Siddi's strength by his mere presence.'

## 6

*'If by Allah's grace, I am able to ascend the throne at Delhi, I will be the Emperor but you would be in command, Sambhaji Raje! Alamgir Badshah may be my father but, keep in mind, he is your enemy and mine! It is imperative that we come together to finish off this enemy of ours.'*

Kaviraj paused while reading the letter.

‘Who is the author of this letter, Kaviraj?’

‘Shahzada Akbar.’

‘Is he Badshah’s real son or a fake?’

‘I have conducted my enquires, and he is indeed Aurangzeb’s son, born to Dilras Banu Begum. In fact, he was considered the Badshah’s favourite amongst all his sons!’

‘Isn’t he the one who revolted against Aurangzeb in Rajputana and joined the Rajput forces, declaring himself the Emperor of Hindustan?’

‘That’s right! He is the one.’

‘Why does he want to meet me in the Deccan?’

‘Where else can he hide from Aurangzeb’s wrath?’

‘Find out why he wants to come here. What are his real intentions? Who are his supporters? I need all the details.’

Sambhaji had been playing safe, but he heard that Shahzada Akbar, not waiting for a formal invitation from the Marathas, had already begun his journey to the Deccan.

Within a fortnight, another message arrived from Shahzada Akbar. He seemed to be eager for Sambhaji’s help and was keen to meet him at the earliest opportunity. But his urgent pleas did not appear to move Sambhaji. Kaviraj was surprised at Raje’s cool demeanour. ‘Raje, you have not replied to his earlier letter either. Is it wise, not to take any action?’

‘Kaviraj, I am keen to know more about him. What have you heard?’

The question took Kavi Kalash by surprise. He said, recovering quickly, ‘Aurangzeb is deeply hurt by his dearest son’s rebellious attitude. And he was taken aback when he heard that his son is joining the enemy camp of the Marathas. He is worried that others who are against him may also join forces with the Shahzada and will somehow find a way to stop his march into the Deccan. Aurangzeb has asked his men to stop the prince, wherever they can find him, whether in the mountains, ravines or serais. Poor Akbar is dodging all this as he moves southwards.’

Sambhaji listened quietly. Kavi said, unable to contain his excitement, ‘Raje, the very fact that the dearest son of the Badshah wishes to join forces with us has made our sardars jump with joy.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Hiroji Farzand and others believe you will form an alliance with Akbar and attack Delhi.’

Sambhaji merely smiled. Seeing his cold reaction, Kavi said, a little agitated, ‘I beg of you, Raje! We cannot sit idle. He is, after all, the Badshah’s son. And he is on the run, lest he get burnt in the fire of his father’s wrath. We must make the most of this opportunity.’

‘Is it not important to find out whether he is running with the fire or away from it? Let us not act in haste.’

Meanwhile, Annaji Datto was fuming. Sambhaji had received several complaints about revenues that were not reaching the treasury. He has increased the audits and introduced checks and balances to ensure that there were no leakages. Moreover, Annaji could not tolerate the fact that the abhorrent Kavi Kalash was Raje’s closest confidante, almost as powerful as Sambhaji himself.

Annaji’s brother Somaji said in a peevish tone, ‘I don’t understand why Raje bothers about all these details. The elder Maharaj too ran a tight ship and there was discipline all around but he would overlook small mistakes.’

‘Well, he was truly an Emperor! He had the wisdom to understand that while carrying a potful of water, a little of it will invariably spill over. Likewise, minor errors in accounting are normal. He ignored such slips.’

‘Dada, things have changed here. Yesubai Ranisaheb, instead of spending time in her mahal, is always in the office. She even handles the paperwork, amongst other things!’

Annaji sighed heavily. ‘What a pity! Raje, Maharani, and that Kavi! When three devils are at work, I wonder how ordinary folks like us can survive?’

## 7

It was late evening and the shadows lengthened at Raigad. Sambhaji was about to wrap up the day’s work and leave for his quarters when Prahlad Niraji came in.

‘Raje, the Portuguese emissaries have been waiting to meet you for the past two days. The humid weather here does not suit them and they are getting quite restless.’

‘Are our emissaries with them?’

Yes, Ramji Thakur and Yesaji Gambhirrao are with them.’

‘Send them in,’ Raje said.

The Portuguese emissaries were soon ushered in, accompanied by their translator Ramchandra Shenavi. They saluted Sambhaji. After the initial introductions, the Portuguese emissaries glanced at Kavi Kalash before saying, ‘Raje, we have a message from our Viceroy which we have been instructed to deliver to you in private.’

‘You may speak without fear. Kavi Kalash is my confidante. There is nothing he does not know.’

Ramchandra Shenavi read out the letter:

*‘Dear Chhatrapati Sambhajiraje,*

*As you are aware, we have complained on earlier occasions of the uncultured and rough behaviour of your Subedar Moro Dadaji of Dicholi. He is both a corrupt man and a cruel administrator. I am writing to inform you that he is trying to create a rift between us, with intention of sabotaging our relations. We are told that the reason for his temerity is the fact that he is close to a senior administrative official in your court. He seems to have no fear of the consequences of his actions.’*

Sambhaji did not react immediately. When the Portuguese emissaries were about to leave, he asked, ‘Who is the senior official your Viceroy was referring to?’

‘We don’t know,’ the men said.

Sambhaji glared at his own emissaries. ‘Don’t you know?’

Seeing their tense faces, Raje said, ‘Your reaction tells me that the person concerned is a powerful man indeed!’

Sambhaji left for his quarters. Many complaints had reached Raigad regarding the malpractices of the Subedar of Dicholi. But it was the question of the identity of the senior court official whose support had emboldened Moro Dadaji which troubled him. That evening, he sent his guards to the emissaries’ haveli to summon Ramchandra Shenavi. Meeting the translator alone in the office, Raje came straight to the point. ‘You refused to reply when I asked you. Tell me, who is the official supporting Moro Dadaji?’

Ramchandra Shenavi looked at the floor as he spoke, ‘The person who has been visiting Dicholi regularly in connection with the ammunition factory and to collect revenues.’

‘You mean Annaji ...?’

‘Yes! He is very close to Moro Dadaji. Annaji has lent his black money to the traders at Sawantwadi and Ponda at high rates of interest, and given Moro Dadaji the task of managing it.’

Sambhaji’s guess was right. He mumbled, when Shenavi had left, ‘Who else but the shameless Annaji Datto would have the gall to carry on in this manner!’

He said to Kavi Kalash, who had joined him in the office, ‘I was not delirious when I took over the throne. I knew what such men are capable of. Moro Dadaji is just one of the men Annaji is using to serve his own interests. I had discovered the leaks in the treasury back when I was put in charge of it during Abasaheb’s coronation. I was merely sixteen then, young and bold, and I spoke my mind! It was then that these administrators turned against me!’

He continued, ‘We need to take action against the Subedar of Dicholi. Not that I trust the Portuguese completely. Their loyalties will be tested when the Mughals march on us. In any case, send out an immediate royal decree removing Moro Dadaji from the post.’

‘Raje, doesn’t it require the seals of the Peshwa and the Surnavis?’

‘Why have I given you the title of Chandogamatya? If there is a need to send an urgent firmaan and none of the Ashta Pradhan are around, you are automatically entitled to all the powers which are bestowed on the council of ministers.’

‘Raje, I am grateful for the trust you repose in me but please understand that these are matters of administration. It is better to involve your ministers in this.’

‘I don’t believe in protocol just for the sake of it. When I know what I am doing is for the good of the Swaraj, I don’t care what others say. I am responsible for this kingdom. Whenever there is turmoil, when the throne is threatened, it is the one sitting on the throne who has to worry about his neck—not the clerks!’



Moro Dadaji was asked to resign and his haveli was taken over. Under the supervision of Ramaji Thakur, his seal, official papers and the keys to the local treasury were confiscated. Within an hour, he was a nobody.

The news of his dismissal reached Raigad four days later. The council of ministers were taken aback by the fact that Raje had issued direct orders of which they had no inkling. Many in the Ashta Pradhan felt insulted that their position had been challenged, and almost made redundant by such an act.

Ananji Datto was the one most severely affected. He lost his sleep and appetite, and refused to touch food for a few days. He complained to Balaji Chitnis, 'These are signs of things to come. Action will be taken without an enquiry of any sort. Anyone who is not in Raje's good books will suffer!'

Chitnis said, trying to pacify Annaji, 'Let it be, Annaji! Why make an issue of the termination of an ordinary Subedar? Raje, after all, has the right to take action without conferring with his ministers, doesn't he?'

'Balaji, don't underestimate the significance of the act. There is a deep-rooted conspiracy behind this. Certain people are being targeted. It is a ploy to prove that all the revenue officials appointed during Shivaji Maharaj's reign are useless and corrupt.'

'Who is responsible for this conspiracy?'

'Why look far for someone to blame? That rogue Kavi has put our entire administration, not to mention our religion and society, at risk!'

Hiroji Farzand had of late been assigned a number of important tasks and spent a great deal of time with the revenue officials. However, he seemed disturbed. Raje had received complaints about his lack of involvement in the task at hand.

One afternoon, he presented himself before Raje. Although well into his sixties, he was still a tall, sturdy man. He said, as he saluted sambhaji, 'Raje, if I may give you some advice ...'

'Please speak your mind freely, Farzand Kaka.'

'Shambhubal, that son of Aurangzeb's has been sending you messages but you don't seem to be responding at all!'

'That is true.'

Hiroji was annoyed at Sambhaji's lukewarm response. 'Shambhu Raje, I can tell you one thing with certainty. Had this opportunity presented itself to Shivaji Raje, he would have lost no time in seizing it. It is the whole of Hindustan, on a platter! I suggest you hold that rascal Akbar's hand, and together, attack Delhi.'

Sambhaji smiled. 'Your imagination does run wild, Hiroji Kaka. The less said about your ambitions, the better!'

'Shambhubal, I wonder why the lion's cub is so timid today?'

'Kakasaheb, you have far more experience in these matters than I so. Surely, you understand that we need to ensure that these messages are coming from Akbar and not from someone posing as the Shahzada?'

'Shambhu Raje, we have made enquiries. It is indeed the Shahzada who is reaching out for help.'

'Then we need to be sure why he wants our help. Is it for a full-fledged revolt or will it turn out to be a damp squib?'

Hiroji was quiet for a few moments. Then he left without attempting further discussion of the matter. The next morning, Prahlad Niraji taunted him. 'Hiroji, I am told you met Raje. Have you planned a royal welcome for the Shahzada?'

'What to say, Prahlad Pant! I can imagine Kavi Kalash decamping with the entire treasury of Raigad but Raje trusts him blindly. His constant presence and devious mind has made Shambhubal a dull-witted person. That really frightens me!

In fact, Sambhaji was keeping a close eye on Shahzada Akbar's progress. He sent Farzand towards Trayambakeshwar for a lookout and instructed the Subedar at Nashik, on the northern border of the Maratha Empire, to welcome both Akbar and Durgadas Rathore (the Rajput from Marwar who was helping Akbar to defy Aurangzeb) with expensive gifts of jewels and finery. A troop of Raje's soldiers had been speedily despatched to accompany the Shahzada while his spies, moving equally fast in the opposite direction, carried news back to Raigad.

Kavi Kalash said, 'Raje, you and Akbar have much in common. Both of you are twenty-four years of age and the fourth child of your fathers. The Shahzada lost his mother when he was barely two months of age while you

lost your mother at the age of two. And, if you will pardon me for my insouciance, both of you revolted against your fathers.'

Sambhaji was amused at the similarities listed by Kalash. Kavi continued, 'Raje, politics is much like a game of chess. As a rule, one must not ignore a jewel when it literally walks onto your chessboard. Such a pawn can be used very effectively in the game.'

'Kaviraj, by the same analogy, it is not wise to hurry your moves. However, keeping in mind that Durgadas Rathore is accompanying the Shahzada, I ensured that we gave him an honourable reception at the borders. We must not forget that Aurangzeb, while he keeps his other sons at bay, genuinely loves Shahzada Akbar. His mother, Dilras Banu, was his true love. Aurangzeb, who ruthlessly destroyed the temples in Mathura, Somnath and Kashi, has a soft heart when it comes to some people. Shahzada Akbar may have revolted against his father but we cannot be sure how things will pan out in future. In such cases, it is better to bide our time and rely on wisdom rather than force.'

Sambhaji received news that Shahzada Akbar had reached Bhiwandi and Kalyan. He immediately sent a message asking them to halt at Sudhagad. He instructed Hiroji Farzand, 'Leave at once for Sudhagad and meet the Shahzada as an emissary of the Hindavi Swaraj. Take as many jewels from the treasury as you deem fit for an emissary of the Swaraj to honour the Shahzada.'

## 9

No one can predict the twists and turns of destiny. Some are born with a golden spoon in their mouth while others become Shahenshah by dint of sheer accident or true merit. However, it is always a tragedy when a man who is born to riches turns pauper owing to the vagaries of fate.

He too was a Shahzada. The Shahzada of Delhi's Badshah! He merely had to lift a finger to get a host of servants dance to his tunes. But now the time of luxury and ease had ended. He was forced to ride through valleys and ravines spending his nights in herdsmen's cottages.

He was a young man, barely twenty-four years of age. Slim, of medium height and a glowing complexion, he carried the sapphire necklace which shone brilliantly around his neck with grace. His clothes, stitched by the royal tailors of Delhi's Meena bazaar, had not yet lost their sheen. However, his mind was in turmoil.

Ironically, while the treasury in Delhi overflowed, Shahzada Akbar was roaming the wilds of the Deccan like a beggar! Gone were the days when lissome, blue-eyed maids were at his command and all kinds of entertainment were devised for him from the moment he opened his eyes each morning. The Shahenshah had long since banned music and dance but his concubines and maids knew how to take care of the Shahzada. He was, after all, preferred by Badshah Aurangzeb to the Shahzadas Azam, Muazzam and Kam Baksh. He was considered by most as the likeliest successor to the Mughal throne. Dilras Banu had died when he was barely two months old and since then Aurangzeb had taken a personal interest in his upbringing, ensuring he received the best of care and affection.

Shahzada Akbar woke up to the bleating of goats in a dense forest somewhere near Sudhagad. He could still see in his mind the tall minarets and palatial columns gleaming through his ivory-framed windows in Delhi each morning. He always felt suffocated in the open wilderness. On campaigns with his father, Shahzada's caravan alone would spread across three miles. But now he was sleeping on a bed made of grass, with calico curtains hung over the windows of his tent. Only four hundred horsemen, a few foot-soldiers and two hundred and fifty camel riders accompanied him. It was a tiny battalion, more suited to a Mughal platoon commander than a Shahzada of his stature.

Dark clouds, a constant drizzle and humid weather had welcomed him in Pali. He had not seen the sun for weeks together. The biting cold, and his fear of snakes and scorpions in jungles made his life miserable. It had been months since he reached the Deccan but Sambhaji had not yet formally invited him to Raigad. In fact, despite his repeated entreaties, there was no word from Sambhaji.

Losing his patience, he screamed at Durgadas one day, 'Don't forget that I am the future Shahenshah of Hindustan. I am surprised that an ordinary Maratha zamindar called Sambhaji dares to act so impertinently.'

'Shahzade, please be a little more patient. I am sure he will present himself soon.'

‘Tchah! I am fed up. I had expected him to rush here to honour me. I had even planned to make him the Subedar of the Deccan when I ascend the throne. But now I am not interested. Even if you were to make a personal request!’

Durgadas could not hide his smile. Shahzada Akbar shouted, ‘Don’t be so shameless, Durgadas!’

‘It is true that you were born a Shahzada. But see where you are now and in what condition!’ Durgadas said. ‘Without land, crown or subjects, a king is reduced to a mere caricature. What matters is the present, Shahzade.’

‘I wonder why that cruel Sambhaji is not concerned about my suffering.’

‘Well, he has sent a senior official of the Maratha court, Hiroji Farzand, as his emissary. He has also sent gifts of precious jewels. Not to mention five hundred cavalry for your protection! He has treated you the way one king should treat another. What more do you expect, Shahzade?’

Akbar continued his rant, ‘How cruel destiny is! The long journey from the North, the endless stay in these jungles ... I am tired of this torture. I am going mad!’

‘Don’t blame others for your plight. The fault lies in your own idle life, filled with pleasures. The Rajputs waited for nearly ten days near Ajmer, literally poised to garland you, but you were busy sleeping. Of course your father took advantage of the situation and stumped you! Who else but you were to blame in that situation?’

Akbar was silent. Durgadas continued, ‘The only man in Hindustan who is capable of challenging a mighty emperor like Aurangzeb is Sambhaji. Don’t be so impatient. Watch where the wind blows and go with the flow.’

Shahzada Akbar could not argue with Durgadas’s prudent advice. He was aware that Sambhaji was young and dynamic, and that he had a devoted army. Yet, a plot was taking shape in his crafty mind which he could not resist putting before Durgadas, ‘What if we were to get Hiroji Farzand on our side and raise our own army?’

Durgadas was incensed by Akbar’s childish plots. ‘Shahzade, don’t get carried away by such ludicrous plans. Keep in mind that Sambhaji’s strong forts and faithful sardars will not change sides. Their loyalties are well nigh unbreakable.’

Akbar laughed out loudly. ‘I can understand that it may not be possible for us to capture the forts. But as far as the loyalty of the sardars you speak of is concerned ... well, time will tell!’

## 10

In the dim light of the lamp, Annaji Datto’s swarthy faced looked even more menacing. His sharp eyes had a new twinkle in them. He had just returned to Raigad after a long visit to the Karwar and Kudal provinces. Sambhaji had been at Panhalgad for the past two months.

Annaji Datto said, looking at Hiroji, ‘Whatever you may say my dear Farzand, the council of ministers had a certain prestige during Shivba’s time. They had respect. Now I neither have the post of Surnavis nor do I command any respect.’

Somaji Datto added, ‘Now Yesubai and Sambhaji manage everything. No one else is allowed to take any decisions.’

‘Let me correct you, Somaji. The third character in this play is the vilest one. The tantric ghost ... how can you forget Kaviraj?’

Annaji Datto was an anxious man these days. The termination of Moro Dadaji’s job meant that Annaji’s illegal activities were in danger of being exposed again. He was worried that the ill-gotten money he had lent to several people at Sawantwadi and Panaji was unlikely to be returned in the absence of Dadaji. Earlier, Rahuji Somnath had held the keys to the treasury vault but now it was under the direct and strict supervision of Yesubai. Times were tough indeed.

Rahuji Somnath said, ‘Annaji, Shambhu Raje has not been in Raigad for the past two months. It is an opportune moment. Let us go for the kill!’

Hiroji Farzand lamented, ‘He lacks vision. For the past three months, Aurangzeb’s Shahzada has been sitting idle, getting drenched in the monsoons. It was such a golden opportunity to destabilise the Mughal Empire. Had it been Shivba on the throne, he would have seized the moment and converted our small Swaraj into a huge empire!’

‘Let it be! We cannot expect anything else from the whimsical Sambhaji.’

‘Shivaji, the protector of cows and Brahmins, has a son who revels in sin. He has a dirty habit of mingling with the lower castes. Look at the way he treats Mullah Haider with honour and considers the Muslim fakir, Yakub Baba of Kelshi, as his guru!’

Nilopant Peshwa could not remain quiet any longer. He stood up, red-faced with anger, and said to Annaji, ‘Pant, we seem to be going too far! Mullah Haider was given the same importance by Shivaji Raje himself. Didn’t the elder Maharaj consider Yakub Baba to be in the same league as his other gurus, Tukaram and Ramdas? I wonder why veteran administrators like you are unnecessarily castigating Sambhaji Raje.’

Somaji was not going to take this reprimand lying down. He taunted Nilopant, ‘Well, we all know you got the post of Peshwa thanks to your hereditary status! Please sit!’

Annaji said, ‘Gentlemen, my daughter lost her life because of Sambhaji Raje. However I am not saying this because of my personal tragedy ... I am sure that the Hindu religion is in great danger of corruption by tantric miscreants and we need to stop it from getting further degraded.’

He continued, ‘Shivaji Raje’s coronation was carried out under the expert guidance of Gaga Bhatt but, for some reason, Raje invited this tantric Kavi Kalash to crown him. I am sorry to speak against the one that feeds this mouth ... but this is a question of the survival of our religion! The elder Maharaj may have erred once or twice but his son has pampered this so-called Shiva worshipper beyond the limits of our endurance. Given the kind of powers granted to him, soon the real Brahmins and scholars would have to leave this kingdom!’

Nilopant Peshwa was clearly rattled by the allegations Annaji was levelling but the old man was in no mood to stop.

‘Nilopant, I am willing to say it in writing: our religion and our gods are in danger as long as Shambhu Raje is on the throne. And don’t stare at me as if I am ranting like a lunatic. Do you think your father Moropant would have tolerated this? Would he have allowed that scheming fraudster Kavi Kalash to take Muslim converts back into Hindu faith?’

Nilopant was evidently incensed by the barrage of questions. He said, getting up angrily, ‘Do you know why those poor souls forced to adopt

Islam, go to Kavi Kalash for redemption? It is because you Brahmins charge exorbitant rates, literally killing them with debt.'

As Annaji glared at him, he continued, 'Well, I am not lying, am I? Let me ask you: has Shambhu Raje made any significant changes in Shivaji's administration? There are hardly any new appointments among nearly three hundred and fifty officials, be they Brahmins, Marathas or anyone else. Even in Shivaji Maharaj's time, there were Muslims in high positions like Brahmins. Above all, Shambhu Raje has not revived the watandari system despite tremendous pressure from family members. However, in my opinion, he committed one grave error.' He continued, scanning the faces of his colleagues, 'Despite your act of treason he made the mistake of pardoning you all. You were given back your posts and treated with honour. That was his mistake!'

Without waiting for others to react, Nilopant stormed out of the room. A visibly relieved Annaji wiped beads of sweat off his brow. He also knew that Nilopant's rant had only a superficial effect on those present. Annaji was confident that he had the support of his fellow ministers. Surprisingly, even Hiroji was in favour of Annaji now.

The very fact that Sambhaji had ascended the throne rankled Hiroji. Poisonous comments like 'Hiroji, you may be an illegitimate child, but you have the Bhosale blood in you', and 'You are being treated unfairly, just the way Vidur was treated in the Mahabharata', had brought about a change of heart, slowly but surely. Reconciling himself, albeit grudgingly, to the fact that he would never be considered as a potential successor to Raje, he had developed a sort of contempt for Sambhaji. Annaji could read his mind like a book.

Hiroji mumbled, 'Let us decide once and for all. What can we expect from a son who wishes his father to die so that he may ascend the throne? From the man who allows that fraud pandit from Kashi to carry out his tantric activities? We cannot expect any justice from Shambhu Raje, Annaji! Don't worry, I am with you.'

'Wah, Hiroji!' Annaji shouted, as he looked at the others triumphantly. Then he said to Hiroji, remembering something, 'Farzand, you were sent to receive the Shahzada, weren't you? I am sure you must have struck a chord of friendship with him, having stayed with him for so long?'

'But of course! All I have to do is snap my fingers and he will come running from Pali to Raigad.'



Hiroji's comment strengthened Annaji's resolve. The thought of revenge, which had been simmering in his mind for a long time, was now boiling over, mixed with ideas for a devious conspiracy.

He asked, 'Hiroji, will the Shahzada listen to you? I want your word on it.'

'Be assured. You must take a bold decision, swiftly!'

Annaji was encouraged by Hiroji's confidence. 'You are right, Hiroji. Why wait if we have the Shahzada's support? What has Shambhu Raje ever done for me? All he did was force my daughter to commit suicide, put a stop on my earnings, remove me unceremoniously from my post, find fault with my revenue collection, and parade us all the way from Panhala to Raigad as if we were common criminals! If there is a golden opportunity to drive away such an arrogant, insensitive, injudicious and debauched Yuvraj with Shahzada Akbar's help, we must seize it!'

The very thought filled Annaji with joy.

'Annaji, how we do we make it happen?'

Annaji smiled. 'The same old game: throw Sambhaji behind bars and put Rajaram on the throne.'

The discussion continued. Shahzada Akbar would in all likelihood succeed Aurangzeb to the Mughal throne, and the idea of taking his help to remove Sambhaji seemed plausible. Annaji was now in his elements. He gave vent to his rage against Kavi Kalash, 'I say the elder Maharaj made a terrible mistake, inviting that devil for his coronation. And Sambhaji is spoiling him rotten, building a new haveli for him here as well as in Malkapur. Who the hell is he anyway? He drinks wine and eats meat! Tchah! Farzand, in the name of Lord Shiva, I take an oath to end this. It is impossible to stay any longer in such a suffocating atmosphere.'

Hiroji warned, 'Let us be careful lest we fail and are accused of treason again.'

Annaji was furious. 'Don't teach me what treason is! Sambhaji Raje joined Diler Khan. He was the one who made his father weep. He was the one who tarnished the family's name.'

Rahuji Somnath could not resist, adding, 'Raje has gone mad, believing whatever that fraudster says. We need to get out of his clutches, sooner than later.' It was late in the night but the conspirators continued to plot and plan. The lamps were refilled with oil. Someone enquired whether there was concurrence from Soyraibai's side.

Annaji said, ‘Why would she refuse to support us if, when our plans succeed, she is going to be the Rajmata without so much as moving her finger?’

‘But what about Balaji Chitnis?’ Rahuji Somnath asked.

Annaji’s enthusiasm was slightly dampened by Rahuji’s question. Hiroji Farzand said, ‘We presumed that Hambirrao would join us, remember? Let us not make the same mistake with Balaji now.’

Somaji Datto let out a deep sigh. ‘Balaji is a devotee of Sambhaji. But we have to find a way to get him on our side if we want to succeed this time.’

‘Why not finish him off?’ Annaji suggested.

‘Annaji, what kind of suggestion is that? Have you considered his caste?’

‘What has his caste got to do with it?’

‘Don’t forget that, ever since Shivaji Maharaj’s time, the fortkeepers have been from the Prabhu caste. If we harm Balaji, all the fortkeepers would be baying for our blood. We need to find way to convince him—with love, with wit, with affection!’

Annaji smiled. ‘Farzand, your suggestion is apt. We need to win him over to our side. We will ask him to write a letter to Shahzada Akbar. I don’t mind rubbing my nose on the ground in front of that Shahzada. If he helps us, we will all live happily. Forever!’

The thought of it brought tears of happiness to Annaji’s eyes.

## 11

Evil thoughts have the power to deprive a man of peaceful rest. At an hour past midnight, sleep was far from the minds of those plotting against Sambhaji. They all got up and walked towards the residence of Balaji Chitnis. It was a dark, humid night. A dog barked somewhere in the distance. The stars were hardly visible as clouds covered the sky. Balaji came out of his room, rubbing his eyes, when the servants called out for him.

He stared at the ministers assembled in front of his haveli. Why were they here in the dead of the night?

Annaji said, 'Chitnis, we need to go immediately.'

'Where to?

'To meet Soyrabai Ranisaheb. She has called for an urgent meeting.'

Chitnis put on his sandals hurriedly. He presumed there was an urgent message from Raje at Panhala. Or else the ministers would not meet at such an odd hour. The guards outside Soyrabai's palace were surprised to see the Ashta Pradhan in the dead of the night but Annaji barked before they could react, 'What are you staring at us for? Go and wake Ranisaheb. Tell her we are here at her command.'

A little while later, Soyrabai came out. She glanced at all the men, especially Balaji. Was it the moment she had been waiting for? It was difficult for her to believe but the triumphant smile on Annaji's face gave her hope. She asked the men to step in and bolted the door behind them.

'Pant, I hope this time everyone has made up their mind.' There was doubt in Soyrabai's voice.

'Matoshree, you are going to be the Queen Mother. You cannot show fear!'

Soyrabai was clearly nervous as she fanned herself with the edge of her saree. 'Sambhaji has eyes and ears everywhere. Even if a leaf moves, he will find out.'

Annaji cleared his throat and said, 'What can I say, Ranisaheb? We had the privilege of serving Shivaji Maharaj but now everything has changed. We cannot work like this anymore. That is why we are here. Only you can save the kingdom. You must put Rajaram on the throne!'

'Careful!'

'Oh, I don't care now. Let whatever has to happen, happen now.'

Balaji Chitnis and his son Avaji looked at each other, unable to believe their ears. They felt like animals trapped in a cage. The others seemed quite unperturbed.

Annaji's directness seemed to put Soyrabai at her ease. 'I must say I was feeling suffocated here. To lead a life of an ordinary woman after being the favourite queen! There were seven other queens but Maharaj always treated me differently and with honour.'

Hiroji added, 'Ranisaheb, your days of glory can return if you wish.'

Soyrabai let out a deep sigh. ‘After all, I had a queen like Jijau to guide me, as my mentor and mother-in-law. And now look at Yesu, the girl who was born yesterday! I believe she even has a seal in her name now. She orders everyone around, young and old alike. And Shambhu Raje trots around calling himself a lion cub! It is better to die than to live here anymore. My own brother Hambirrao is supporting the enemy, unfortunately. He did not welcome the possibility that his own nephew could have been crowned. What a pity!’

Annaji was moved by Soyrabai’s agony. He said, folding his hands in supplication, ‘We cannot tolerate this injustice anymore, Ranisaheb! Shambhu Raje and his crony Kavi Kalash have wreaked havoc on this kingdom. We cannot allow this to continue.’

‘What do you suggest, Pant?’

‘We still have time. We can win back what we have lost.’

‘You mean, revolt against Shambhu Raje?’

‘Yes.’

‘But who is going to support us?’

‘A magician called Shahzada Akbar. He is Aurangzeb’s favourite son. It is an opportune moment. Shambhu Raje is away in Panhala.’

Hiroji added excitedly, ‘Shahzada will agree to whatever I propose. Even if we promise him half the kingdom, it will be worth it—we will get what we want.’

Soyrabai felt confidence seep into her as she heard the way the men spoke. She said, ‘It does seem as if the gods are favouring us. But we must be careful and move slowly. We have to ensure that this does not leak out.’

Annaji said, ‘Well, we have Balaji Pant and his son too here with us.’

Soyrabai looked at Balaji Chitnis. She could not believe that she had his support. She said, ‘Chitnis, you have not spoken a word since you came in.’

Both father and son felt like rabbits caught in a hunter’s net. They knew all eyes were on them. Balaji’s throat was so dry that he could barely speak. He finally said, finding his voice, ‘As you command, Maharanisahab!’

‘Chitnis, you and Shambhu Raje are close friends. Your children spend time at his palace. Yesubai considers your Khando and Nilo as her children.’

Rahuji Somnath spoke on his behalf, ‘Maharanisaheb, Chitnis has his grouses. He does not get the respect he used to be given earlier.’

‘How is that?’

‘Well, Dadaji Raghunath Deshpande of Mahad is at Panhala, trying to convince Shambhu Raje to give him the post of Chitnis.’

‘Is that so? And remove Balaji?’ Soyrabai said, pretending to be shocked.

Rahuji added before Chitnis could speak, ‘Dadaji is Kavi Kalash’s friend.’

Balaji and his son, already pressured by the others planning the coup against Sambhaji, were further silenced by this new information. They promised support to Soyrabai although she did not believe them fully.

Balaji said, trying to buy time, ‘Avaji had issued orders on my behalf to arrest Raje at Panhala. Since then, he has been upset with me. I am not sure how long my position will last.’

‘So, what do you plan to do?’

Balaji said, ‘My family ties with Shambhu Raje are a thing of the past. I cannot trust Raje anymore. I would rather lend my support to Rajaram Saheb.’

Soyrabai, Annaji Datto and the others looked at Balaji Chitnis and smiled.

## 12

The morning breeze at Panhala was biting cold. Kavi Kalash greeted Raje but was surprised to find him red with anger. Surely, something had happened to upset him. Sambhaji asked, ‘Kaviraj, what according to you is fit punishment for an ordinary soldier or an official who commits treason?’

‘The only just punishment for such a crime is death penalty, Raje!’

‘What if such a criminal is a minister?’

The second question took Kavi Kalash by surprise. ‘Raje, it is possible that an ordinary man could, under the influence of some personal need or greed, commit the crime. One may look at such a case with compassion, but

when a minister or a senior official decides to go against the king, it is surely a dereliction of duty. The king has no choice but to make efforts to transform such a person.'

'But what if the king ignores such a crime committed by a senior minister?'

'Then the king is as ineffective as a scarecrow in the field.'

'Kaviraj, what if the senior minister, who has been pardoned once, decides to commit the crime once again?'

'If the king decides to pardon such people every now and then, he may as well abandon his throne and herd cattle.'

Sambhaji sat down with a heavy heart, repenting his earlier actions or the lack of them.

Kavi Kalash suddenly noticed a tall Rajput standing nearby. He had a striking personality, enhanced by the shapely beard. Shambhu Raje said, introducing him, 'Oh, this is Gaurav Singh. He is an emissary of Shahzada Akbar.'

Sambhaji said, 'Kaviraj, remember the day I almost died?'

'Are you talking of the poisoned fish you were about to eat?'

'Yes! I survived, thanks to the innocent kitchen workers who warned when I was about to eat the piece of fish. I threw it away, and the moment the dog ate it, he died. I realised that such an act could not be carried out by cooks. It was the work of someone in a far superior position.'

'Anyway, Gaurav Singh bears a gift, along with a message from Shahzada Akbar. It is a letter from Matoshree Soyabai, Hiroji Farzand, Balaji Avaji Chitnis, and Annaji Datto. Read it out.'

Kavi Kalash read the letter aloud:

*'Badshah-e-Hindustan Akbarsaheb,*

*We are honoured to know a man of your valour. You have already met Hiroji Farzand. We were once fortunate to work under Shivaji Maharaj but now we are leading a life worse than those of insects. Sambhaji is a short-tempered, vengeful and debauched man. Loyal ministers like us feel suffocated serving under him. To add insult to injury, he is being advised by the ill-mannered tantric from Kanauj, Kavi Kalash. He is bent on sending us all to hell. If your honour so decides, we can easily eliminate these two devils.*

*We request you to free us from them. It is up to you whether you kill them or arrest them. In exchange, we are willing to give you half our kingdom, and we ask you to allow Rajaram to ascend the Maratha throne. As for us, we loyal sardars would be content to manage a small territory with our old watans restored to us. Please release us from the clutches of Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash. We can discuss the rest of the terms when we meet in person.'*

Raje said, 'It is our good fortune that Shahzada has sent this letter to us.'

'Where are these treacherous people? Have they run away?' Kavi Kalash asked, sounding a little worried.

'No! The Shahzada has kept them guessing and tricked them into accepting an invitation to Sudhagad.'

'What about Soyrabai Matoshree?'

'She was clever enough to remain in Raigad. In case the traitors were caught red-handed, she could always deny her involvement.'

Sambhaji trembled. He wondered how the Ashta Pradhan could dream of such a treacherous act. He had, over the past year, not only run the kingdom smoothly but also forgiven their earlier crimes and reinstated them in their posts. What had made them do this, he wondered, as he banged his fists on a wooden pillar.

'Kaviraj, look at this and tell me who has written this letter.'

'It looks like Chitnis's handwriting.'

'Do you realise the depth to which this treason has percolated? This time Balaji Chitnis wrote the letter himself! What do you make of the fact that a man of such intelligence and so close to our family should participate in treason? This is no ordinary storm; a hurricane is brewing! If we don't find a way to stop it, we will get blown away like dry leaves.'

There was no point in staying at Panhalgad anymore. Kavi Kalash and Sambhaji left for Sudhagad immediately. After riding for nearly two days, they reached the base of the Sudhagad fort. Sambhaji looked up at the towering fortress, bathed in the full moon light. The traitors were holed up there!

Sambhaji reached the haveli where Shahzada Akbar and Durgadas Rathore had been put up. They embraced Sambhaji as soon as he

dismounted.

‘Shahzade, I am grateful for your help,’ Sambhaji said, holding Shahzada Akbar’s hands.

‘Sambhaji Raje, your father’s kingdom is one that accepts all religions without discrimination. This is why a Mughal Shahzada has come here with a Rajput and is asking for shelter,’ Durgadas Rathore said.

‘What an inopportune moment you have chosen! You come all the way from Delhi to seek shelter, and here we are, our ministers begging you to usurp the very throne they serve. What a shame!’

They spent the night sitting on makeshift cots outside the small haveli. Sambhaji was exhausted after a two-day ride. Seeing Raje look up at Sudhagad darkly from time to time, Akbar said, ‘Don’t worry, Raje! I have kept your ministers in good humour. They do not suspect anything.’

But Sambhaji was restless. He whispered to the Shahzada and Durgadas, ‘Let us not wait for the morning. Send your men up there and bring those traitors here.’

‘As you wish,’ Akbar replied.

Sambhaji passed a restless night, lying on the cot under the night sky. Every now and then, he would wake from a fitful sleep and look towards Sudhagad. Finally he spotted a group of soldiers climbing down the fort, torches in hand. He had sent fifty of his own foot-soldiers as a precautionary measure. Soon, the men reached the base of the fort and ran towards him, shouting, ‘Raje, Raje! They have escaped!’ Sambhaji stood up startled. Akbar and Durgadas Rathore look bewildered too. One of the soldiers panted, ‘There is a narrow path through the forest on the other side. They ran away before we could reach the fort.’

‘But how did they know you were approaching? You walked through forests under the cover of night!’

‘We had to cross a barren piece of land at one point. In the moonlight, it is not difficult to make out a cavalry of a thousand odd men marching through, Raje!’

‘You are right!’ Sambhaji said, sighing heavily. ‘Annaji has an eagle eye. That old fox must have spotted you!’

A dejected Sambhaji sat down on his cot. Shahzada Akbar and Durgadas Rathore looked confused and worried. After a while, Raje said, ‘Well, whatever had to happen has happened. But where will those traitors go? Annaji cannot move without a palanquin. Balaji’s age does not allow



him to ride a horse. The only one capable of running is Farzand Kaka. But no one will allow anyone to go ahead, so the traitors will slow each other down!’

Sambhaji called out to his men, ‘Jotyaji, Rupaji! Let us move! Those traitors will still be in the ravines on the other side of the fort. Search the forests before dawn, and once you find them, tie them to a tree and inform me.’

It was a sad day for any king who had pardoned his treacherous ministers and reinstated them with full honours. The very same men had decided to stab him in the back. It was a terrible shock for Sambhaji and he was in no mood to engage in discussions of any kind with Shahzada Akbar and Durgadas. He said, ‘Let us meet in another fortnight or so.’

## 13

The next morning Sambhaji had a quick bath before performing his morning prayers. Soon, Jotyaji and Rupaji returned. Their beaming faces told Sambhaji that the mission had been successful.

‘We caught them and tied them up in a cowherd’s shed. Some of our troops are posted nearby and we have asked them to guard the prisoners.’

Sambhaji asked his men to assemble below a tree. He folded his hands to salute some of the older soldiers who were too embarrassed to look into his eyes. Then he said, in a voice choking with pain, ‘You are aware that the senior ministers of the Swaraj wanted me to be arrested rather than exercise my hereditary right to ascend the throne. Instead of me, they wanted a ten-year-old boy to be coronated. Not stopping at that, they sent an army to capture me at Panhala. Despite their treasonous acts, I pardoned them and treated them with honour. In the past year, what crime have I committed for them to repeat their treachery? While putting up a show of loyalty each day, they now try to get the Shahzada on their side to conspire against me! I want the ryots to decide how these traitors should be treated.’

An old man with bushy whiskers, strong despite his age, said, ‘Raje, you cannot tolerate this any more! You must make a decision like a real

king—harsh yet just.’

‘Hang those traitors!’ A few of them shouted.

Another man added, ‘Have you forgotten how the elder Maharaj punished those who revolted against him? Remember how he had dealt with Chandrarao More of Jawli. He dragged his two sons to Pune and had them beheaded in a crowded bazaar!’

‘I had not expected Annaji Datto to change his treacherous ways. But I am shattered by the way Hiroji Farzand Kaka has behaved. Somehow, I am not willing to believe that Balaji Chitnis could have participated in this act willingly. I don’t doubt his loyalty.’

‘He wrote the letter himself. He is here with the other traitors. What more proof do you want, Raje?’

Sambhaji knew he had to make a decision now. He said, turning to Kavi Kalash, ‘I sentence Hiroji Farzand, Annaji Datto, Somaji, and Avaji Chitnis to death, to be trampled beneath the feet of an elephant. But I want Balaji Chitnis to be chained and brought to Raigad. Put him in prison there.’

The men were unable to understand why Raje would be so sympathetic towards Balaji. They looked at him suspiciously. Kavi Kalash kept looking at Sambhaji but did not move an inch. He said, ‘Raje, I feel you must be present when the orders are executed.’

Sambhaji smiled wryly. He said, ‘It seems you still don’t know me, Kaviraj. I have seen these men, the ones who are traitors now, with my father for more than twenty years. What if I am tempted to change my decision when I see their faces? No, Kaviraj! I cannot relent this time. In order to stop such revolts, it is imperative that we execute the punishment meted out to them.’

‘Raje, why don’t you send some Maratha or a Brahmin to carry out the sentence? I am just an outsider ...’ Kavi Kalash pleaded with folded hands.

‘We don’t have time to lose, Kaviraj. You must execute my orders at once. I am content to be labelled as a murderer as long as I preserve from harm the Swaraj so lovingly created by Abasaheb’s hard work.’

Kavi Kalash pleaded with Sambhaji to be excused from the task. ‘I am already labelled as a tantric, as one who practises black magic. I will be considered responsible for these deaths. Please do not send me, Raje!’

‘Whom else can I send? Hambir Mama is not here. Kaviraj, this time it is the king’s dearest friend who has to bear the brunt!’

Kavi Kalash had no option but to go. Sambhaji asked him to take Dadaji Raghunath Desphande along with him as a witness. Kavi Kalash pleaded once more before leaving, 'Raje, think twice! No doubt treason is a grave crime, but I wonder if you would be labelled as someone who is responsible for the killing of Brahmins.'

'I don't care! I know the scales of justice do not differentiate on the basis of caste. It is the crime which needs to be punished.'

## 14

Sambhaji halted his horse at the base of Raigad. He looked at the Takmak Tok, the steep point from which criminals were flung to their death. The dark ragged cliff looked menacing. Sambhaji patted the his horse affectionately and dismounted.

'I will not be proceeding to the capital for another four days. I will be here at Pachad, in Jijausaheb's palace. I want to spend a few days here.'

Kavi Kalash, Rupaji, Dadaji and Jotyaji started their ascent to Raigad. Shambhu Raje turned his horse towards Pachad. The news of his arrival had reached the people even before he reached the town. The ryots were celebrating the execution of the traitors. Balaji Chitnis too had met the same punishment, and was trampled by an elephant.

Sambhaji was in deep distress. While he had ordered the punishment deep inside he felt something was amiss. Four elephants now stood at the entrance of Jijabai's palace. They were decked up to welcome Sambhaji and looked resplendent in their caparisons of fine embroidered cloth. But a glance at their bloodstained feet sent a shiver down Sambhaji's spine.

Trumpets announced the arrival of Raje at Pachad, and within a few hours, Yesubai had descended from the fort to receive him. Kaviraj's wife Tejasbai accompanied her. Kavi Kalash, who had met them halfway up the path, joined them.

Yesubai said, seeing Sambhaji's surprise, 'It was I who suggested that Kaviraj should come here. People at the fort are up in arms against him. They are blaming him for the way the traitors were put to death.'

‘But the orders were issued by me. He only executed them!’

‘That may be true, Raje, but a few angry men tried to burn down his haveli. I thought it was safer for Kaviraj and Tejasbai to spend some time here.’

There was a desolate air about the palace at Pachad that night. Yesubai was relieved that the traitors had been eliminated, but was distressed by Balaji Chitnis’s death. Balaji’s haveli was not far from Yesubai’s palace and she had heard the heart-rending cries of Lakshmibai, Balajipant’s old widow. Unable to bear the torture anymore, she had decided to come down to Pachad and meet Raje there.

Yesubai remembered her last interaction with Balaji. Somaji Datto and Hiroji Farzand were with him. As they saluted, Yesubai had asked whey they were on the way to Pali when Raje was at Panhala.

‘Some work given by Raje, Ranisaheb,’ Balaji had replied, a little hesitantly.

‘What work?’

It was Hiroji who answered, ‘Raje has instructed Chitnis to meet Shahzada Akbar.’

Balaji Chitnis had walked a few steps when he stopped and turned, removing his turban and placing it on his chest. ‘Maharanisaheb, I am tired now ... I feel like I must retire. Whatever happens, I wish you would take care of Khandoba and Niloba.’

‘And where is Avaji these days?’ Yesubai had asked.

‘He too is coming with us,’ Hiroji replied.

‘Chitnis, why are you speaking in such morose tones? You are going to meet the Shahzada for a discussion, not to wage war.’

‘What for we need war? I may die just mounting or dismounting a horse. You will care for my children, I hope.’

Before Yesubai could respond, Somaji Datto had interrupted, ‘We must leave; shall we?’

It was the last time Yesubai had seen Balaji. He was wiping his tears as he walked away behind Hiroji and Somaji.

Both Yesubai and Sambhaji were restless that night. The silence of Jijabai’s palace weighed on them. Balaji Chitnis was no ordinary man. Shivaji Maharaj had looked upon him as a brother and never questioned his loyalty to the Swaraj. It was Balaji whom the elder Maharaj had sent as his envoy to Rajputana, to retrieve papers attesting to Shivaji’s connection with

the Sisodiya family. A man with a sharp intellect, he had a remarkable memory and the ability to ingest long paragraphs from treaties and reproduce them verbatim in his neat, cursive handwriting.

Sleep eluded Sambhaji as he tossed and turned in his bed. Yesubai said, 'Raje, they were not ordinary men. Whenever people recall Maharaj's visit to Agra, they will talk of Hiroji Farzand.'

Yesubai's words pierced Sambhaji's heart. He rose from his bed.

'Yesu, it was painful for me to take their lives. You cannot believe the turmoil I went through when I issued the orders. But when senior ministers in the durbar start plotting against their king, must the king write a letter of pardon and touch their feet? I arrived at the decision after much deliberation. Yesu, all these men were veterans who have served on the administrative council since Abasaheb's reign, but they committed the worst crime of all—treason. And as a king, it was my duty to see that they were punished. But I am saddened by the fact that people are blaming Kavi Kalash. He, in fact, was very reluctant to carry out the order.'

'Should you not have been a little lax when it came to Chitnis?'

'In fact, I had only instructed Kavi Kalash to arrest him. But when the guards were about to execute Avaji, Balaji Pant jumped in between and started shouting that he would allow them to touch Avaji only if he were first trampled under the elephant's feet. Kaviraj immediately sent a messenger to me, asking for my opinion. I was in a dilemma. If I let both father and son live, I realised, I must let everyone go scot-free. I had no choice but to decide to punish all those who had been part of the plot ...'

Sambhaji and Yesubai slept fitfully. At dawn, a message was delivered by a soldier who seemed to have travelled a great distance and was visibly exhausted. Sambhaji was shocked the moment he saw the beautiful cursive writing. His mind reeled with the emotions of repentance, anger and fear. He rushed into the room, shouting. 'Yesu, Yesu ...!'

'Yesu,' Sambhaji stuttered, not able to find words. 'This was sent to me but I had already left to confront the traitors at Sudhagad. This letter written by Chitnis was never seen by me, Yesu. He had tried to warn me about the plot. Oh, look at my cursed fate, Yesu! I was never to receive this in time!'

Yesubai stared at Sambhaji, wide-eyed, before reading the message.

*'Salute to Shriraja Shambhu Chhatrapati from Balaji Avaji Chitnis.*

*The moment you left for Panhala, a plot to overthrow you has started rearing its head. Your senior ministers are once again planning to stage a coup and put Chiranjeev Rajaram on the throne. Unfortunately, the same officials whom you pardoned are once again joining hands. The plan is to meet Shahzada Akbar at Pali and take his help to throw you out, Swami.*

*In your absence, I have been forced to participate in this dangerous and vile plot. My son Avaji and I are being forcibly taken to meet Shahzada Akbar. They compelled me to write letters detailing our plot to the Shahzada. I have somehow managed to find time to write this and I hope it will reach you, with the blessings of the Lord, in time. My son and I feel that we are trapped in the coils of a python and are praying that you come and release us. The rest I leave to my destiny!*

*When the elder Maharaj died, they had forced Avaji to write a letter on my behalf. Now I too have been forced to write with a sword at my neck.*

*I cannot explain how I felt while writing that letter, against my wishes. But Swami, you are Saraswati's son, a man of knowledge! You may throw your tantrums but you are large-hearted. I bless you, Shambhubal and Yesurani: may you have a long and blessed life.*

*If I survive, thanks to the Lord's blessings, I will be at your service for as long as I live. If I don't, I will meet my Lord. I wish you good health!'*

Somehow, leaning on a wooden pillar, Sambhaji sat down. He was sweating profusely. Gulping water from a silver vessel, he said, 'Yesu, what a misfortune! Now I understand why Balaji was repeatedly asking Kavi whether I had received any letters!'

Sambhaji's grief was beyond consolation. For the first time after his father's death, he once again sobbed like a child. Yesubai put a hand on his shoulder, trying to pacify.

'Swami, take charge of yourself. We will treat their sons, Khando Ballal and Nilo Ballal, as our own. We will give them a chance to serve us.

We will nurture them as one cares for a tender sapling.’

T E N

# The Invasion







# 1

In Raigad, Sambhaji had immersed himself in work in order to forget the nightmares which tormented him. He often rode alone to the temple of Jagadeeshwar, seeking solace in the cool silence, but it eluded him. The threat of Aurangzeb's descent on the Deccan was very real and Sambhaji spent some time inspecting the ammunition stores. However, all his efforts to bury himself in work had not helped.

The image of Balaji Chitnis, with his grey eyes and loving face, would not leave his mind. Kalash had narrated in detail how the executions had been carried out. Annaji Datto had faced death without batting an eyelid. Perhaps he had known for a long time that someday he would be punished with death for treason. Balaji Chitnis, on the other hand, had met his tragic end with great agony. He had explained everything in his last letter to Sambhaji but it was never to reach Raje in time. Sambhaji felt no guilt for having put the traitors to death, but owing to their intrigues and treachery, he had been responsible for the death of a man whose loyalty and affection to the throne were undoubted. This grieved him deeply.

As he was climbing up the palace steps one day, he suddenly stopped. He realised that he had punished all but one of the traitors who had plotted against him. She was still alive and living in the royal quarters! There was a clamour among the guards, servants and other attendants when they saw a grim-faced Sambhaji enter the main hall. Terrified, they rushed to inform Soyraibai of his arrival, quickly closing the door leading to her private chambers behind them.

Reaching the door, Sambhaji growled, 'Matoshree, closing the doors and windows is not going to hide your sins. The first time I had you placed under house arrest, I had warned you to behave as a real mother would! Unfortunately, you have crossed the very limits of treachery. Instead of a

Rajmata, all I see is a woman who is selfish, cunning and conniving. Why are you hiding now? Open the door!’

Sambhaji’s heart burned with anger. He shouted, ‘Matoshree, your deed is worse than that of Queen Kaikeyi in the Ramayana. Despite my being the true heir to the throne, you plotted with your men to arrest me! Not once, but twice, you tried to kill me! For mere selfish gain, you are willing to give away half the kingdom to Aurangzeb’s son? What kind of a Matoshree are you? You don’t deserve to be called one!’

The servants and guards on the other side of the door were a worried lot. At that moment, Yesubai came marching in with firm footsteps and said, holding Sambhaji’s raised hand, ‘Dear! You are a Raje! And you must behave like one.’

Sambhaji brushed Yesubai’s hand off, saying, ‘Shouldn’t the Rajamata behave like one? Should our Ashta Pradhan kowtow to a Mughal emperor? Should they plot to kill me?’

‘Raje, restrain yourself ...’

‘Let me go, Yesubai! Had she not been Rajaram’s mother, I would have punished her by burying her alive!’

Yesubai shivered at the sight of Sambhaji’s fury. Then she caught sight of ten-year-old Rajaram, holding onto a pillar as he stared at his elder brother, eyes wide with fear. With tears in her eyes, Yesubai held Sambhaji’s hand and turned him towards Rajaram. Sambhaji, coming to his senses, rushed to him and hugged him. He said, as he wiped Rajaram’s tears, ‘You know dear, your tears have such strength! Just two drops and they deluge me!’

Picking him up affectionately, Sambhaji put Rajaram on his horse and rode towards the temple. Yesubai and Raigad heaved a sigh of relief.

## 2

Yesubai was surprised to see Kavi Kalash so early in the morning. However, it was evident he was suffering from tremendous anxiety. Yesubai could understand the reason for his distress. Ever since he had carried out

executions of the traitors, Kavi Kalash had held himself responsible for the untimely and unfortunate killing of Balaji Chitnis.

‘Please relieve me of my duties,’ he said, prostrating before Yesubai. ‘I want to go back to Kanauj.’

‘Why, is anything the matter there?’

‘No, Maharansaheb. I want to retire permanently.’

Yesubai said sympathetically, ‘I understand, Kaviraj. Often, when the wood burns, a few leaves get singed. Balaji Chitnis’ death was the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding ... because of his letter not reaching Raje in time. You don’t know how troubled he is! He mumbles and shouts in his sleep every night.’

‘Ransaheb, I tried to dissuade Raje but unfortunately he was unaware of the letter then. However, now my enemies have one more reason to hate me,’ Kavi Kalash said, clutching Yesubai’s feet. ‘Let me go; I cannot stay here anymore!’

‘Kaviraj, if you leave in this manner, your enemies would celebrate while Raje will be the loser. To be frank, I need you here. You know how difficult it is to manage the tornado called Shambhu!’

She continued, ‘Whether it is a play from Kalidas, a poem from the Gita Govinda, or a Sufi song, it is you he wishes to discuss it with. It is due to your influence that he has composed the Budhabhushanam in Sanskrit, and the Nakhashikha, Satasataka and Nayikabheda in the Brij dialect. He has people like Hambir Mama, Mhaloji Ghorpade, Rupaji Bhosale and others by his side on the battlefield, but only you who can accompany him when he wants to be in the garden of Saraswati.’

Kavi Kalash was silent, not knowing how to react.

‘There are many opportunists who have joined Raje. They have their selfish reasons. But Raje is struggling to hold onto the old loyalists while priming the new generation to take over. At such a time, if dear friends like you go away, who will he look up to?’

‘Ransaheb, I am accused of black magic while I find dolls and lemons with pins stuck in them outside my door each day. I am really worried!’ Kavi Kalash folded his hands in supplication.

‘Do you think Raje gives credence to such accusations? I myself would have smashed the head of such a fraudster!’

Kavi Kalash let out a sigh of relief.

Yesubai continued, ‘Shivaji Maharaj has seen you for more than twelve years. If he had believed that his Yuvraj was being influenced by someone who practises black magic, would he not have ordered his execution? Listen to me now! Forget your plans to leave for Kanauj. Raje is burdened by many battles. The Siddis at Janjira have been emboldened by the patronage of the Mughals. We have the Portuguese, Dutch and the English to worry about. There are dark clouds on the horizon. Aurangzeb can arrive here at any moment. Our administration is yet to be streamlined. Not to mention the traitors, waiting to revolt! In such times, Kaviraj, Raje needs a matured, experienced mentor and father-figure like you.’

### 3

Alamgir Aurangzeb departed from Ajmer in September 1681 with a huge army of nearly five lakh men, and another hundred thousand men comprising servants, cooks, water-bearers and palanquin-bearers. It was not an army. It was a city on the move.

Aurangzeb sat at a makeshift tent set up near a stream for a brief rest. He had been on the throne for more than three decades. His robust health belied his sixty-three years. Very few could withstand his penetrating gaze.

A select group of men including Kazi Abdul Wahab and Wazir Asad Khan sat with Aurangzeb.

‘Jahanpanah,’ Asad Khan began, ‘your rule extends from Kabul in the west to Bengal and Assam in the east, and upto Burhanpur and Khandesh in the south. No one today dares to look into your eyes. You are amongst the most powerful emperors on this earth.’

Kazi asked, ‘Jahanpanah, how long would we be in the South?’

Aurangzeb replied in a serious tone, ‘You are not aware of the difficulty the Deccan poses. Even Emperor Akbar did not succeed in capturing it. My Abbajaan, Shah Jahan, managed to defeat the Nizam at Ahmadnagar. Golconda and Bijapur are under the control of Shia Muslims while the whole of Maharashtra is ruled by the Marathas. The terrain, while it looks deceptively simple, is not easy to capture.’

No other Mughal emperor had marched with an army of such gigantic proportions. Sitting in his howdah, Aurangzeb could see the three lakh cavalymen, two lakh foot-soldiers, and an ocean of men, animals and carts stretching as far as the eye could see. Such an army would be a matter of pride for any emperor and certain to scare the living daylights out of any opponent. Aurangzeb believed the Shahs of Golconda and Bijapur would soon be running for cover. He imagined the 'kafir' Sambhaji would behave like a frightened mouse upon hearing of his massive onslaught. Yet, somehow, the Shahenshah felt he was not yet able to put a finger on the pulse of the Deccan.

Aurangzeb was restless. The way his favourite Shahzada, Akbar, had treated him still rankled.

The Mughals had always managed to keep hundreds of Rajput rajas and sardars under their heels. After Raja Jaswant Singh's death, Aurangzeb had refused to acknowledge his son as his heir, provoking the ire of the Rajputs who joined forces against Aurangzeb. But the wily emperor, using political and other stratagems, was able to avoid a direct confrontation. At that crucial moment, Shahzada Akbar had chosen to revolt against his father and managed to garner support in Rajputana. But once again, Aurangzeb's wiles won the day and Akbar had to run away to the Deccan to save himself. Akbar had taken the help of Durgadas Rathore, son of one of Raja Jaswant's ministers.

Aurangzeb said, when Asad Khan congratulated him on his victory in Rajputana, 'I may have won the war but a Badshah has lost his Shahzada and a father his son!'

It was not an easy task to be the Emperor's confidante. His four begums had found it impossible but Wazir Asad Khan, a cousin of Aurangzeb's, had managed to fill the post for many years. Asad Khan was not able to understand why the Emperor had taken Akbar's revolt so much to heart.

Meanwhile, Aurangzeb recalled the days of his youth. As an eighteen-year-old, he had been given the onerous responsibility of the Subedari of the Deccan by Shah Jahan. But the young Shahzada had realised that his father's true motive was to send him away. No Shahzada would wish to be far away from the throne and the riches. But Shah Jahan had rightly understood the over-ambitious nature of his young son. He had sensed that Aurangzeb—reticent, secretive and serious by nature—would likely

become a threat to his throne. Shah Jahan also wanted to protect his favourite son, Dara Shikoh. He knew that if the tree called Aurangzeb developed its roots in the capital, it would one day spread deep and wide enough to destroy the walls of the palace.

But a strong tree will grow roots even in dirt. As the Deccan Subedar, Aurangzeb showed his mettle, expanding the boundaries of the Mughal province rapidly. He defeated Malik Ambar and razed the city of Khadki, renaming it Aurangabad. Aurangzeb was also confident of defeating the Shia rulers in Bijapur, hoping to earn his father's praise, but intervention by Dara Shikoh at the last moment spoilt his chances.

When Shah Jahan died, Aurangzeb had to rush to Delhi. He had always dismissed Shivaji as no more than an arrogant landlord. But he warned his thanedar before leaving for the capital, 'Be careful of that rebel! He is getting too big for his boots.'

Aurangzeb was stuck in the north for nearly twenty-five years after ascending the throne, occupied with administrative tasks and military campaigns in Kabul-Kandahar, as well as in Bihar and Bengal.

Now, sitting in his tent, Aurangzeb recalled how he had erred in not sending Shivaji and Sambhaji on the campaign in Kabul. 'I had plans to finish them off in the ravines there. What a terrible mistake I made!' Aurangzeb confessed to Asad Khan. 'The day Shivaji called the Brahmins from Kashi and coronated himself was one of the most disappointing days in my life. I rubbed my nose on the floor when I heard the news and begged Allah for forgiveness.'

'Why should an ordinary zamindar's so-called coronation upset you so much, Jahanpanah?' Asad Khan asked.

'Wazir-e-Azam, a ryot decides to ascend the throne and calls himself a Maharaja! The very thought is disturbing!'

'I am told Sambha calls himself a lion's cub!'

'Huh! He is just a mosquito.'

'How long will it take to rout him?'

Aurangzeb caressed his long white beard and raised a finger in the air.

'Just a year?' Kazi was surprised.

The Badshah merely nodded.

Apart from the enormous cavalry and the giant infantry, Aurangzeb's army boasted nearly three thousand five hundred elephants which carried the Mughal sardars. Behind them were the seventy-odd elephants of the

royal zenana. It included the begums, the princesses, the Badshah's daughters-in-law and the families of the the senior mansabdars. Udepuri Begum sat in an exquisite sandalwood howdah. The Badshah's favourite daughter, Zeenat-un-Nissa, sat beside her. Hundreds of Khojas, the royal eunuch guards, and Kashmiri and Afghan women guards walked alongside. The zenana was a sight to behold with its silver- and gold-plated howdahs, not to mention the accompanying fanfare. Behind the elephants, with their swaying gait and wide eyes, walked nearly fifty thousand camels with their mounted troops. Aurangzeb's personal effects and other paraphernalia alone required fourteen hundred camels, four hundred carts and a hundred and fifty elephants. Around two hundred and fifty bazaars from Delhi followed the massive caravan.

Wherever the caravan city camped, it spread across more than twenty miles. The men accompanying the Badshah were an excited lot. 'The moment the Marathas see our vast army, they will run for cover! The mountain rats, those kafirs ... they would bury themselves in the ground in fear!'

Thousands of men went ahead of the caravan, clearing the path for the huge carriages to roll by, especially the ones carrying cannons. Aurangzeb had seventy cannons, some so large that they required twenty pairs of bulls to pull them. Elephants were put to work when they had to be transported over hills or across rivers. Apart from the huge old-fashioned cannons, the artillery was equipped with three hundred new brass cannons manned by artillery experts who were mostly of English, French, Dutch, German and Portuguese origin.

Aurangzeb was the richest of the Mughal emperors, thanks to the wealth hoarded by generations of Mughals. It had been looted from every corner of Hindustan—be it Kabul, Kandahar, Agra, Mathura, Kashi, Bengal, Orissa, Malwa or Gujarat. Confronting such wealth, and an ocean-like army with hundreds of thousands of soldiers, the Marathas looked like a small rabbit facing an elephant. In terms of their geographical extent and the size of their treasury, the Maratha kingdom was smaller than a single Subah of the Mughal Empire. There were twenty-two such provinces under Mughal rule!

Aurangzeb marched with the confidence of a conqueror certain of his victory. To add to his assurance, his arch enemy Shivaji was no more. Sambhaji had taken over a year and a half ago. Many of Shivaji's old



sardars had already sworn allegiance to the Badshah. Their letters read, ‘Alampanah, you rule the entire world. Please come to the Deccan at the earliest and redeem us from the cruel Sambhaji!’ Aurangzeb was sure that he could simply crush Sambhaji like an insect.

One evening, the advance party had cleared a hilltop for the royal tents. Nearby Aurangzeb’s tent were the royal hammams and the sentinel posts guarding his family. Aurangzeb’s elephant sat down near the Badshah’s tent. The khidmatgars brought a silver ladder for the Emperor to dismount. Aurangzeb stepped down slowly as he surveyed the landscape surrounding the camp. In the distance, just beyond the hills, the sun was setting. Aurangzeb looked at the massive caravan of his army, spread across dozens of miles.

While the cantonment busied itself with various tasks, Aurangzeb, along with his select sardars, performed the evening namaaz. After some discussion with the sardars, he returned to the Gulalbar—the area reserved for the royals.

It was an important evening. The Badshah had invited the royals, all his senior sardars, and a few other guests for a ‘bada khana,’ a feast. The guests had already arrived in the Gulalbar. The begum entered, led by Udepuri Begum. They were followed by the shahzadas, Muazzam, Kam Baksh and Azam Shah, and all his grandsons. Those in the durbar stood up on seeing the royals enter. Asad Khan stood behind Aurangzeb. To his right stood Aurangzeb’s cousin, Zulfikar Khan. Aurangzeb had appointed his close relatives to key posts in the army and the administration.

The banquet was quite an event, as the Emperor rarely indulged in any form of extravagance. His interests lay in politics and prayers. He abhorred music and dance. He was rarely, if ever, known to smile. Muazzam and Azam were terrified on receiving any message from their father. Such was the fear Aurangzeb inspired that despite having been invited to a grand feast, the men in the durbar were on tenterhooks, praying to Allah lest they do something to attract the Emperor’s ire.

Aurangzeb entered the durbar, acknowledging the salutes of his guests. His slim figure exuded the energy of a much younger man. His favourite daughter, Zeenat-un-Nissa, followed. Earlier, his elder daughter Zebunissa had occupied that coveted place in his affections, but the moment it became clear that she had played a role in Akbar’s revolt, Aurangzeb had her imprisoned for the rest of her life in a dungeon in Salimgad fort.

After a relatively quiet dinner, Aurangzeb said, his voice tinged with pride, 'I use only two weapons in the battlefield—my sword and my intelligence. And I find the latter more effective!'

Asad Khan, encouraged by the Badshah's words, ventured, 'You remember the way Alamgir was able to make that Rajput dog Durgadas Rathore and the unfortunate Shahzada Akbar run for their lives. That battle was won without shedding a drop of blood!'

Aurangzeb said, his voice solemn, as he looked at his guests with piercing eyes, 'I have one more weapon—sharper and more dangerous than the other two.' He took a small dagger from the girdle at his waist and raised it, as he spoke. 'If someone tries to commit treachery, this dagger goes into his stomach to come out only after breaking a few ribs!'

He continued to scan the faces of those present. 'Many brave Emperors have sat on the throne at Delhi. Many of them were connoisseurs of art. Jahangir sahab spent half his life painting. But I am made of a different clay. My hands itch to hold a sword. I am hungry for the blood of enemies which flows on the battlefield. My Abbajaan, Shah Jahan sahab, wasted his entire life building beautiful tombs and palaces. Emperor Akbar used to love embracing the Rajputs. I am not in favour of fondling snakes! I am not enamoured by displays of affection from the enemy. On the other hand, I have great regard for Allauddin Khilji sahab. He knew how to treat his subjects, be they ordinary folk, dogs or horses. He treated all animals with the same contempt. I, too, rule with my sword on the common man's neck.'

Shahzada Azam was not present in the durbar. He had been sent ahead to investigate the whereabouts of Sambhaji. However, it was his eldest son Muazzam whom Aurangzeb considered the one most capable and trustworthy when it came to carrying out a dangerous mission.

'I have undertaken this campaign in the Deccan despite my age. However, it is also a test for my two capable shahzadas. It is time to decide who will ascend the throne once I step down.'

Muazzam looked at his father, surprised. Azam's wife looked around, unable to believe what she had just heard. Aurangzeb's face darkened, as he remembered something. He said, after a pause, 'In fact, neither Azam nor Muazzam have the credentials to ascend the throne. It is my misfortune that the one who really was capable turned out to be a fool. I pity him. Allah

gave him all he wanted but, thanks to his stupidity, he has lost everything now.'

Aurangzeb's heart bled. The very thought of Shahzada Akbar and his treachery was difficult for him to bear. The durbar was stunned. Very rarely did they see the Badshah express his feelings so openly. Stung by the memory of Akbar's rebellion, Aurangzeb thundered, 'Anyone who tries to revolt against me will be reduced to ashes. It is only I who know the true art of treachery. When my own father turned senile, I did not hesitate to teach him a lesson. I assassinated my brothers while my sister, who took their side, was thrown into a dark dungeon. I did not allow my father to decide who the next Badshah would be. But let me make this clear: I alone am going to decide who my successor will be! The shahzada who wins this campaign, the one who crushes that ignorant Sambhaji—he is the one whom I will crown as the Emperor with my own hands.'

## 4

Hambirrao was in Raigad to requisition some ammunition and a pay rise for his soldiers. After a meeting with Yesubai, he was surprised to receive a message from Soyrabai requesting his audience. In the year and a half since Sambhaji's ascension, he had not met his sister even once. In fact, Hambirrao had made a few attempts to meet Soyrabai but she had refused to see him.

Hambirrao knew the reason behind his Akkasaheb's anger and refusal to meet him. He remembered the bitter words which Soyrabai had spoken: 'Why blame anyone else when he himself did not wish his own nephew to ascend the throne?'

It had been two months since Sambhaji had almost knocked down the door leading to her inner quarters. After that, the residents of Raigad had seen Soyrabai only once, when she had visited the temple. She had confined herself to her palace. Rumours of her failing health were doing the rounds. Yesubai had visited to enquire about her health and ensured that the royal physician and hakeem were looking after her.

Hambirrao was shocked when he saw his sister. Soyrabai was a pale shadow of her former self. With her white saree, creased forehead, dark circles around her eyes and an emaciated body, she resembled a nun living the life of an ascetic for years. Her voice too had lost its charm and sounded faint. She asked her brother to pull up a chair.

Hambirrao said, 'You seem so tired, Akkasaheb!'

'Let it be, Hambir! Raje is no more and I have committed a sin I shouldn't have. Why aspire to live any longer?'

'I am sorry, Akkasaheb. But I was not able to support you in any manner.'

'Oh, forget that, Hambir! I was angry at you initially, but when I look at the events dispassionately, I do realise that you did what was right. I must congratulate you!'

'I remember the day of my appointment as commander-in-chief, not long before Rajaram's marriage,' Hambirrao said. 'The elder Maharaj had said, 'I am giving you this post not because you are my brother-in-law but because of your capabilities.'"

'He had the knack of spotting talent.'

They were meeting after a long time and Hambirrao felt relieved to be able to speak freely. 'The elder Maharaj had told me after meeting Shambhu Raje at Panhala, "Hambirrao, I am now confident that the kingdom is safe in Shambhu's hands. Rajaram is still a child.'"

'I see!' Soyrabai said.

'Akkasaheb, let me say this: I may have not have taken my sister's side but I did what a loyal servant of the Hindavi Swaraj should do.'

Soyrabai said, gazing into the distance, 'You know Sambhaji was very dear to me when I came to Raigad. But when Rajaram was born, I inadvertently started thinking of his future. I was influenced by others who accused Shambhu Raje of being cruel, addicted to wine and women. I started believing in those lies. Now I know it was my greed which made me act as I did!'

Hambirrao looked around the room. 'Where is Rajaram saheb these days?'

'Whenever Shambhu Raje is at the fort, he forgets everything and everyone else. Shambhu Raje, despite the differences he has had with me, loves Rajaram the same way he did earlier. For Rajaram, he has taken the

place of the elder Maharaj. Yesu too treats him like a son. He does not need me now!’

‘Akkasaheb, please don’t be so morose!’

‘Hambirrao, I can confide in you as my younger brother. I committed terrible crimes with my eyes wide open. I don’t feel like living anymore. I feel ashamed even when I go to the temple. People see me as a sly, selfish and dangerous woman, don’t they?’

‘Akkasaheb, you must take care of your health. You must rest ...’

‘Hambirrao, guilt and regret torment me all the time. Aurangzeb, who has been our enemy for three generations, is finally marching on us. It is my duty to be by Shambhubal’s side, offering him solace and counsel. But I got caught in my own selfish politics and sided with the traitors! I nurtured devious thoughts of eliminating him. I feel ashamed of myself ...’

Soyrabai had tears in her eyes. She had a coughing fit and a maid rushed in with a tumbler of water.

‘Akkasaheb, you must pay attention to your health. Don’t worry about anything else now.’

Hambirrao was about to leave when Soyrabai said to him. ‘Give Yesubai my message. Tell her that I am not worried anymore, now that Rajaram is under her care.’

On 27 October 1681, the palace was rent by cries. Soyrabai’s frail body lay on her bed. She had breathed her last. By the time Rajaram and Sambhaji rushed into her room, the royal physician diagnosed that she had committed suicide by swallowing a diamond the previous night.

Sambhaji performed Soyrabai’s last rites at a spot not far away from where the elder Maharaj had been consigned to flames. By evening, the ceremonies were over. The palace was full of people who had come to pay their respects.

Sambhaji said, ‘She may have been wrong to think only of her son’s advancement and conspire with those who wanted to finish me off. But I cannot forget the way she took care of Abasaheb in his youth and looked after me when I was a child. It would be unfair to cast aspersions that she tried to poison the elder Maharaj, whom she loved so much!’

## 5

‘Sambhaji Raje, Aurangzeb is spreading terror across Hindustan. He has imposed the unfair Jizya tax on the Hindus. Only someone like you has the intelligence and strength to defeat a sinful bigot like my father,’ Akbar said.

‘The Shahzada’s right, Raje. We left Delhi and Rajputana, Shahzada and I, to confer with you at Raigad and lend our support for that purpose.’ Durgadas Rathore added.

Sambhaji had reached Sudhagad the previous evening and stayed the night at a haveli in the fort. He was now meeting Akbar and Durgadas at the base of the fort in the village of Dhondse. After the formalities where they had exchanged expensive clothes, Arabian steeds and precious gems, they got down to discussing business. Sambhaji looked at Shahzada Akbar. Although slightly rotund, and of medium height, he was still a rather attractive-looking prince.

‘Let us meet at the fort tomorrow and discuss the details.’

‘Raje, you may take Durgadas with you right now. I will come over tomorrow,’ Akbar said.

‘Why not today?’

‘Raje, I somehow manage to survive the rains here. I am not particularly fond of the cold weather up there.’

The next morning, Sambhaji and Durgadas, after finishing their prayers, took a round of the fort. Durgadas had a pleasing personality and appearance. He was a tall man with a typical Rajputana beard. His angst was visible. Durgadas’s dream was to unite all the Ranas in Rajputana under a single banner, finish Aurangzeb off and install Shahzada Akbar as the Mughal emperor. His love for Rajputana, loyalty to the Shahzada, and respect for Sambhaji was evident from his behaviour.

Raja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur had been loyal to the Mughals and had participated in the Kabul-Kandahar campaigns. He died fighting at Khyber Pass. Instead of mourning the death of a loyal ally, the Badshah was delighted at the prospect of annexing his kingdom to the Mughal Empire. The Raja’s wife was pregnant when he died. The Rajputs demanded that his newborn son Ajit Singh be declared the king of Jodhpur.

Aurangzeb laughed at the suggestion, saying, 'Why not? But on one condition. Ajit Singh and his mother should adopt the Muslim religion.'

The loyal Durgadas could not tolerate the arrogant and hurtful suggestion made by Aurangzeb. 'I will see that he is dead before I do any such thing!' Durgadas made a promise to himself as he walked away from the Mughal durbar.

The very memory of the incident made Durgadas turn red with anger. 'Our people have sacrificed their lives for the Mughals since the time of Akbar and Raja Mansingh. Three generations have passed. But Aurangzeb cannot think beyond religion. Look at the imposition of Jizya tax!'

'Why haven't the Hindus in the empire revolted?'

'Well, one day, he was on his way to the Masjid on his elephant when a few Hindus tried to appeal to him to lift the tax. Instead of hearing them out, he ordered the elephant to crush them. It was then that Rajputana erupted.'

Aurangzeb had rushed to Rajputana to crush the rebellions. He summoned Muazzam from the South and Azam from Bengal to join him. However, Durgadas found an opportunity to get Shahzada Akbar on his side. Akbar not only revolted against his father but declared himself the Emperor. He had confronted the Badshah on battlefield. Aurangzeb was not one to forgive and forget. Hence both Durgadas and Akbar had sought refuge in the Deccan. More specifically, they were looking up to Sambhaji for protection.

Sambhaji said, recalling how Shivaji had reacted to the Jizya tax, 'Abasaheb had written to Aurangzeb, asking him to repeal the tax. He said an emperor cannot discriminate among his subjects on the basis of religion. The Hindavi Swaraj had five thousand Pathans from Bijapur in its army. We have sardars like Daulat Khan and Daryasarang.'

'Don't compare Shivaji Maharaj with Aurangzeb,' Durgadas said gloomily. 'Expanding the boundaries of one's kingdom does not necessarily make one large-hearted.'

Shahzada Akbar had informed them that he would be at the fort by dawn but there was no sign of his till late afternoon. Sambhaji and Durgadas were disappointed at his lack of punctuality. Finally, in the evening, he arrived.

Hiding his irritation, Sambhaji said, 'Shahzade, if it takes so much time for you to reach here from the base of the fort, I wonder how you

aspire to capture Delhi!’

Durgadas smiled. ‘Shambhu Raje, if only our Shahzada could shake off the habits of his pampered life, we would have defeated Aurangzeb ten months ago.’

He continued, ‘We had such a golden opportunity then! Aurangzeb’s army numbered no more than ten or twelve thousand, facing more than a million Rajputs. But our dear Shahzada took fifteen days to travel twenty-one miles. He was so engrossed in dreaming of the day he would become an emperor that he forgot he needed to defeat the Badshah first. He wasted time discussing the design of the new throne with the carpenters and jewellers, and the measurements of his royal robes with the tailors. It was a golden chance but we threw it away. As for the cunning old Badshah, he was not going to sit idle. He had his way. We had no option but to run and save our lives!’

Akbar said, ‘I agree that I had acted foolishly. In fact, I was fooled by my superstitious nature. An astrologer advised me that I should not travel more than a few miles each day. I later came to know that my father had bribed the astrologer and delayed my arrival in Rajputana. Well, my father is not a Badshah for nothing.’

Durgadas added, ‘Raje, you would have seen all kinds of people in your life but I will wager that you have not met a man more cunning, deceitful and sly than Aurangzeb. Despite the Shahzada’s delayed arrival, we were on the brink of victory. We were sure we would defeat Aurangzeb’s army. One of Aurangzeb’s senior sardars, Tahavvur Khan, was on our side. Aurangzeb arrested Khan’s wife, children and his father-in-law Inayat Khan. He sent a secret message to Tahavvur that night, “You are free not to join us but if you don’t meet me I will ensure that your children are sold as slaves. Your wife will be thrown to my guards who will enjoy dishonouring her.” Tahavvur Khan rushed to Aurangzeb’s camp and, as expected, he was murdered there. Aurangzeb did not stop at that. He sent another “secret” letter to Akbar and ensured that it fell into the hands of the Rajputs. The letter said, “Dear Akbar, you have done wonders, making the Rajputs believe that you are on their side. Tomorrow my forces from one side and your army from the other will crush them.’ When I read the letter, I rushed to the Shahzada’s tent but he refused a meeting with me.’

‘Why?’ Sambhaji asked, a little surprised.



‘Well, he had issued strict instructions to his guards that his sleep should not be disturbed. I shouted and screamed but to no avail. Then I rushed to Tahavvur Khan’s tent but was told that he had left to meet the Badshah. After that, I had to bear the brunt of the Rajput ire. They accused me of having fallen for the trap. So we decided that it was best to run away and save our own lives. Well, the duplicity of Aurangzeb had made Akbar the victim. Aurangzeb had managed to defeat us without even unsheathing his sword. More than a million of us abandoned the battlefield. We could have easily defeated him ...’

Sambhaji said, ‘I am told you are the Badshah’s favourite son. I believe he has been sending message after message, asking you to return. Is that true?’

‘True enough. His letters are full of loving and affectionate words. But I can detect the hand of a cunning old fox by now. I am not going to fall for it.’ Akbar was overcome by emotion as he continued, ‘My uncle Dara was a scholar of Sanskrit, loved by both Hindus and Muslims. He was Shah Jahan sahab’s favourite son too. But my father had his way in the end. I cannot forget one day when I was a child, my father had asked all of us to assemble on the balcony and watch the street below. A procession with trumpets and horns passed by. In its midst, sitting on an elephant, was a young man, bedraggled, wearing torn clothes and with dried blood on his face and limbs. He must have been a fair-skinned man once but his face was now tanned. He seemed to have been brutally beaten. He sat there with his head bowed. Behind him stood a young fourteen-year-old boy, whose eyes were filled with terror as he looked around. The moment he saw me, he tried to look away.

‘I said, shouting at my father, “Abbajan, do you see him? He is Sifir!” My father replied, “Yes, I know, dear! That unfortunate man is your foolish uncle Dara and the boy is his son Sifir Shikoh.” I shouted, “Who has done this to my uncle and my cousin? Who is that cruel man?” In response, my father punched me in my face and I fell down with a thud. After a couple of days, I saw my uncle’s beheaded corpse on the same elephant. I heard from some friends later that my father had thrown Sifir and my uncle in a dark dungeon. One night, a few men entered the dungeon. Seeing their bloodthirsty faces, Sifir hugged his father and said, “I don’t want the throne. I don’t want anything. My father and I will go far away and live our lives begging for food. Don’t kill my father.” But they grabbed my cousin and

threw him in an adjacent cell. My uncle too begged for mercy. Even a butcher kills a goat before skinning it but those devils cut off my uncle's limbs, torturing him cruelly before beheading him. Sifir could hear the screams of his father from the other cell.

'Sifir was then brought to Abbajaan's palace. After the trauma he had undergone, he was like the living dead. I saw him later, sometimes in the bazaars, or on the steps of the Jama Masjid, walking in a trance. I can never forget his face. The shahzada who had once lived a life of luxury was now roaming around like a beggar. I realised then how cruel my father could be.'

Akbar was deeply disturbed. He was silent for a long time. Sambhaji said, trying to lighten the situation, 'But I must admit your father is deeply religious, and a man who respects women.'

Shahzada laughed. 'Well, he may not have been as libidinous as my grandfather but he had his own ways.'

'Don't tell me! Your grandfather built the Taj Mahal in memory of his love. It is not a symbol of lust!'

'Don't forget he lived for another twenty-six years after building the Taj Mahal! His eyes were always preying on the sardars' wives and other women. He even tried forcing Mumtaz Mahal Begum's sister, Farzana Begum, to his bed. Naturally, my father was incensed.'

'But your father has never behaved in that manner!' Kavi Kalash said.

'You don't know, Kaviraj! My father's favourite begum is Udepuri. She used to be at my uncle's harem. Just a month after my uncle's brutal assassination, my father married Udepuri. There was another favourite of his at my uncle's harem—Ranadil. But she somehow managed not to allow Alamgir to touch her.'

Akbar was lost in memories. He said, 'One day some people from Central Asia had come to meet my father. They had a Turkish maid called Jakshi. Abbajaan fell for her and managed to get her into his harem. The son born to her, Yalangtosh Khan, is one of Alamgir's sardars.'

Akbar's face now turned grim. 'My father has many faces and only Allah knows what they all are! He does portray himself as a pious servant of Islam. He reads the namaaz, hobnobs with the mullahs and maulvis, makes copies of the Quran by hand, and stitches caps to pay for the building of mosques. That is what people see and believe. But the crimes he has committed—killing his own brothers, imprisoning his father, torturing them to no end—I am sure they have destroyed his peace of mind! He possibly

tries to wash away his sins by stitching caps, visiting mosques and reading namaaz. Well, it is a mystery—what we see and what he really is!’

ELEVEN

Tanjira!  
Tanjira!





# 1

‘It is our good fortune that your father was not born a sailor. Else, he would have been the master of the seas as well!’ The English emissary Henry Oxenden had once told Sambhaji while visiting Raigad.

Sambhaji had not forgotten Oxenden’s words. In fact, the very sight of the blue seas made him increasingly restless these days. He would often ride his horse to the shore and stand there, watching the waves crash. It had been his father’s dream to capture the coast from Surat till Karwar. Sambhaji wanted to fulfil that dream now.

Shivaji had explained it all in simple words. ‘The Portuguese, the English and the Siddis are like the wild boar of the seas. They will chase you with the singular intention of goring you with their tusks in order to kill you. We need to be wary of them.’

Sambhaji was in conference with his sardars when a guard informed that a few ryots from Roha and Nagothane were keen to meet him. He asked for them to be sent in. The men came in and fell at Sambhaji’s feet, crying, ‘Raje, that cruel Siddi has kidnapped twenty-five boys from our villages!’

‘What does he do with these boys, Raje? Why does he need them?’ One of them wailed.

‘He sells them to the English at Mumbai. Their slave trade thrives on the young boys who are easily captured in our country,’ Kavi Kalash explained.

Sambhaji was lost in his thoughts. He ensured that the ryots received adequate compensation and said, trying to assuage their pain, ‘I am going to put the Siddi in his place. Be assured.’ The men left, nodding absent-mindedly.

Sambhaji turned to Kavi Kalash. 'Kaviraj, send a note to Mumbai's English saheb. Warn him that there will be serious consequences if he continues his slave trade. Let him decide how he wants to answer us. Tell him that we will be forced to throw him out of the port if he continues his dealings with the Siddi.'

He sent another note to the Subedar of the port at Chaul, near Raigad. 'Keep a vigil on the seas. Stop and loot the ships carrying grain to the English at Mumbai. Not one grain of rice or wheat should reach them!'

Sambhaji was now growing impatient. Like a log stuck in a whirlpool, his mind was spinning. 'Like the tall cliffs challenge the soldier in me, the huge sea, its vastness and its thundering waves challenge me too.'

Sambhaji could never forget that night in 1671. The festival of Holi had just been concluded. The fort of Raigad was awakened by loud booming noises. There was clamour and chaos all over, with men running for safety. The noise was ear-shattering. Jijabai had rushed into Sambhaji's room, followed by Shivaji. Maharaj said, 'Something is brewing at Janjira.'

Janjira was nearly sixty miles away from Raigad. It was remarkable that the noise had covered such long distances. 'We will wait for a message from Janjira,' Shivaji said, and he had stayed awake that night.

He said to Jijabai, 'Maasaheb, it is imperative to take control of the seas in future. Things are changing fast and we have no option but to put that the saffron flag on the ramparts of Janjira soon.'

Jijausaheb asked, 'Shivba, how many times are you going to attempt to capture Janjira? How much more wealth will you lose? How many men will you sacrifice at the altar of the sea?'

Shivaji answered, 'I undertand, Maasaheb! Ten years back we had captured Danda and Rajpuri. We could not take Janjira but we managed to build Padmadurg close to it. We controlled the seas from there. Despite our best efforts, Fateh Khan, the fortkeeper, did not yield Janjira.'

Sambhaji, listening to the conversation, said, 'Abasaheb, if we find that we are not able to penetrate the fort from outside, why not destroy it from the inside?'

Raje and Jijabai smiled at the words of the fourteen-year-old Shambhu Raje. Maharaj patted his back. 'Shambhubal, I have tried methods that your imagination cannot even visualise. After many attempts, I managed to win Fateh Khan over to our side. But some of his colleagues at the fort stayed loyal to their master, the Siddi. They captured Fateh Khan who had tried to

escape using a sea route in order to join us and threw him into a dark dungeon for the rest of his life.'

Sambhaji listened as his father continued the conversation with Maasaheb. 'The Hindu religion forbids travel across the seven seas but if we have captured the world, we must control the oceans. We need to build a strong navy. Our men, the daredevil Mawals who can climb any fort, will take to water like fish, I am sure!'

The day after Holi was one of the most tragic in Shivaji Raje's life. He received news of how Siddi Kasim and his brother Khairyat had divided their men into two groups—one of them attacking the Maratha fort from the seas while the other attacked from the land. They had targeted Shivaji's ammunition dump. It was that explosion which they had heard the previous night. Many men had lost their hearing due to the ear-splitting noise. Shivaji was shattered. 'I have lost everything I had gained over the past eight years.'

Sambhaji recounted his memories. Kavi Kalash asked, 'When was the first time Shivaji Raje had set his eyes on Janjira?'

'Since the beginning! It was even before Afzal Khan's death. The first time Vyankoji Pant and Moropant attacked, Siddi Khairyat was literally begging for a treaty. He agreed to hand over the stations at Rajpuri and other places. The only thing he had not given up was Janjira. Abasaheb was determined to take the fort but Afzal Khan was nibbling at the borders on the other side and Abasaheb had to cut his short campaign mid-way.'

'Ten years later, when the Siddis realised that the Marathas were within grasping distance. Khairyat fell at the feet of Aurangzeb Badshah. He started getting ammunition, food supplies and other support from the Mughals.'

Sambhaji was determined to fulfil Shivaji's dreams. He held a discussion which included the experts in naval warfare like Maynak Bhandari. A map showing the route from Janjira to Mumbai was spread out.

'This is Mumbai,' Sambhaji said, indicating a spot on the map. 'The fort originally belonged to the Portuguese but was handed over to the English as dowry when their princess married King Charles. The English and the Janjira Siddis are both cunning foxes. Damage to the armpit can cause the arm to stop functioning. Mumbai's armpit is Khanderi,' Sambhaji put his finger on a point close to Mumbai. 'Abasaheb decided to build a fort there. The English were wise to the ploy, however, and involved the Siddis



who attacked us. The Siddis built a fort at Underi, just a mile away from Khanderi.’

Sambhaji recalled the events vividly. ‘Abasaheb had taken the defeat to heart. Two years before he died, he made another attempt to capture Janjira. Siddi Kasim ran to Mumbai to take shelter with the English. Abasaheb sent fifty of his best men to find the Siddi who was hiding in the Mazgaon docks but the cunning Kasim captured them and tortured them brutally. Thus Raje’s final foray failed too. In twenty-four years, he had made nearly eight attempts to take Janjira.’

Those in attendance knew that Sambhaji had planned something for Janjira. He said, as the meeting concluded, ‘The coast along Janjira is crucial for our naval warfare as well as trade. Abasaheb had said once, “Shambhu, if you manage to put your flag on the walls of Janjira, it will not be long before the boundaries of the Hindavi Swaraj extend upto the Ganga and the Yamuna.”’

## 2

Dawn broke. The outlines of the trees and the hills were getting clearer by the minute. The chirping of birds mingled with the sound of the streams gushing nearby. Sambhaji rode abreast with Kavi Kalash, followed by Rayappa. Behind them were four hundred riders. They had stayed overnight at Pachad and left before sunrise.

Soon they had reached Mahad. The mountains stood like sentinels, overlooking the small bay at Bankot which was visible in the distance. Despite the cold wind, the horses were sweating and frothing at their mouths. They had been galloping for hours on end. Reaching the bay, Sambhaji dismounted.

There was a palpable chill in the morning air. Maynak Bhandari, wrapped in a shawl, was followed by Daryasarang, Govindrao Kathe, Santhaji Pavla, and several officers of the Maratha navy. Sambhaji looked around. Several small and medium-sized boats bobbed quietly in the rippling waters of the bay. Their saffron flags fluttered in the cold breeze.

‘Kaviraj, Abasaheb loved to swim in this bay. I learnt to swim here, clinging to Abasaheb’s back. But he was clear about one thing; he would not teach me and expected me to learn on my own. I spent a lot of time in Raigad learning the art of warfare, mostly on my own.’

It was getting clearer now. At that moment Dadaji Raghunath Deshpande arrived with his me, all a tad breathless. They were all surprised to find that Sambhaji Raje had reached the spot before them.

Dadaji suggested, ‘Raje, now that you are here, will you not partake of some refreshments at my house?’

‘No, I would rather spend time here. I can always visit you later.’

Sambhaji inspected the ships that were being built near the harbour. Work was in full swing. Hundreds of carpenters were busy cutting huge logs which were being dragged to the building site by twenty bullocks at a time. Raje observed the cannons being placed on the ships that were nearly finished. Some of the vessels were huge and required around forty strong sailors to row them. Sambhaji watched the dark-skinned, well-built sailors as they went about their jobs on the boats.

Sambhaji said, shaking hands with Maynak Bhandari, ‘We need to have at least fifteen huge ships ready. Let us prove that we can build them better than the ones being built at Kalyan.’

‘Raje, rest assured. We are recruiting the best workers from Jaitpur and Rajapur.’

The men gathered around, curious to hear Raje speak. Sambhaji said, addressing the shipwrights and sailors, ‘My dear friends, you know how Abasaheb built Sindhudurg. The foundation, drilled into the rocks at the bottom of the sea, are so strong that the fort will survive any onslaught and last for centuries. Today we have an army stronger than any other kingdom in Hindustan. But the Portuguese and English guns are longer and stronger. We need to build an artillery to match theirs. We need trained men who can man those huge cannons. That is why we have set up new factories at Kudal and Dicholi. And when the cannons are fired, we need the ships to be strong enough to take the jolts.’

Sambhaji concluded, ‘The Siddis of Janjira must be crushed as one crushes a sea-snake. But we need to be careful of the Portuguese and the English.’

That afternoon they had lunch on the deck of a large ship. Raje sat down with workers, sailors and carpenters and they all enjoyed a simple

meal of brown rice and fish curry together. The men's chest swelled with pride at the fact that Sambhaji sat with them.

Soon, the evening breeze began to blow. They could see a huge ship approaching the harbour. A strange animal was depicted on its green flag. The ship anchored a little distance away as it could not venture further into the bay. Small boats were soon on their way towards the ship. Rope ladders descended from the deck. Maynak Bhandari and Daulat Khan set off in a boat to receive their guest and ferry him ashore. The guest bowed elaborately before Sambhaji. He was a tall, heavily built Arab soldier.

'Welcome, Jange Khan! We were waiting for you,' Sambhaji said, hugging him affectionately. He said, addressing the men around him, 'This is Jange Khan, the Arab commander. He is a friend of the Swaraj and we are going to benefit greatly from the knowledge and skills his men will impart to our artillery and naval units.'

Jange Khan received a warm welcome. He was one of the sailors who roamed the high seas with their powerful artillery, ensuring they reached the ports of Hindustan safely. Khan planned to stay on the Konkan coast for a few months to supervise the training his men would provide to the Maratha shipwrights and artillerymen.

That afternoon, they sat down for a conference on a specially decorated deck.

'So, how is your friend the Siddi of Janjira?' Sambhaji joked.

'Raje, we could never be friends. You know we are sworn enemies. There are a lot of differences amongst the firangis, Raje. But they are united on one issue; they don't want the Marathas gaining superiority over the seas.'

'I am aware of it,' Sambhaji nodded.

That evening, on Jange Khan's request, Sambhaji dined aboard his ship. While walking across the deck, Sambhaji saw some movement in a dark corner. In the light of his burning torch he saw a few hundred men huddled together, bare-torsoed and shivering in the evening breeze. Their bodies were covered with festering wounds. It was evident that they had not had a bath for weeks. Jange Khan said, seeing Sambhaji's questioning glance, 'Oh, they are slaves, Raje! Ignore them!'

Sambhaji asked, 'Khan sahab, why don't you employ workers? Why keep slaves?'

‘Well, there is nothing like having your own men, isn’t it? Our slaves can work nonstop!’

‘Khan sahab, isn’t there any difference between a man and a horse, or a dog for that matter?’

‘Raja sahab, why are you worried about these poor men? Oh, you are at a poet at heart. No doubt you are sentimental!’

‘It is not that, Khan sahab. These slaves are children who belonged somewhere and were caught and sold like chickens in a bazaar. The ones sold in the bazaars of Mumbai are surely the sons of our ryots. That is why my heart goes out to them.’

Sambhaji paused for a few moments. He ordered Kavi Kalash, before Jange Khan could react, ‘Pay Khan sahab whatever price he asks for but release all those men.’ He turned to Khan, ‘My Abasaheb was strictly against slave trade and would impose heavy penalties on the English who were caught plying it within the Swaraj. I too hate this age-old and barbaric practice.’

The dinner was a lavish spread, including a variety of meat and wines. Sambhaji tasted a little wine, saying, ‘I used to enjoy wine in my youth. But since the death of my father there is only thing which I am intoxicated with—the task of fulfilling my father’s dreams. To put the Siddis and the Portuguese in their place and to capture alive the terror called Aurangzeb!’

‘Wah! Bahut khub!’ exclaimed Jange Khan.

‘We need to capture the animal called Aurangzeb who has despoiled our religion and our culture. The way a juggler or a bear-handler tames the animal by putting a rope through its nose, I wish to drag Aurangzeb through the hills and valleys of the Deccan. I pray to Ma Bhawani to give me that strength!’ Sambhaji folded his hands in prayer, lost in his thoughts.

### 3

Sambhaji and Yesubai sat at the office in Raigad, discussing plans for a forthcoming campaign, when they heard a loud shout ‘Jay Jay Raghuveer

Samarth!’ Soon, Diwakar Bhat presented himself. Sambhaji was overjoyed to see one of Samarth’s favourite disciples.

‘Please come in, Shastri Bua,’ Sambhaji rose to welcome Bhat and made him sit next to him. There was a clamour amongst the servants as they rushed to get fruit and milk for him. The discussions were suspended. After all, it wasn’t everyday that Samarth’s ace disciple visited them from Sajjangad!

Sambhaji said, ‘Shastriji, I remember Abasaheb missing Ramdas Swami’s presence during the coronation. He would have been overjoyed if Swami had attended the ceremony.’

‘I can understand, Shambhu Raje. But he is not keeping well these days. That is why he has sent Diwakar Gosavi.’

‘Abasaheb had great respect for Tukaram Bua, Ramadas Swami, and the Fakir at Kelshi. He always sought their blessings.’

‘No doubt, Samarth loved the elder Maharaj. Not to mention the fact that he had disciples like Prahlad Niraji, Nilo Sondev, Ramchandra Nilkant and, especially, Balaji Avaji Chitnis.’

Diwakar Bhat had singled out the name of Balaji Chitnis. Sambhaji felt suffocated for a moment. He said after a pause, ‘I can well understand why Samarth is upset with me.’

‘Maharaj, you ordered one of your finest sardars to be crushed under an elephant’s feet while you give the respect that is due to men like him to an outsider, someone who is considered a fraudster. It does not become you, Maharaj!’

Diwakar Bhat had not minced words. Yesubai looked at Sambhaji nervously when Bhat asked, ‘Where is that Kalash? I don’t see him here. He is with you all the time, I am told.’

Sambhaji smiled. ‘He has gone to Sagargad and Kothalagad. He is taking stock of the revenue collected, the ammunition stores and other security arrangements. He is with me often, it is true, but when required, I send him into battle too. He knows how to use his sword.’

‘Don’t tell me!’ Diwakar Bhat exclaimed.

‘Shastriji, you spoke of the people who were executed. Apart from Balaji Avaji and his son, all the rest were traitors and deserved to be punished. Had I not taken action, the consequences would have been calamitous.’

That softened Diwakar Bhat a bit. He realised that the complaints reaching Sajjangad may not all be true. He said, handing over a silk bag to Sambhaji, 'It's a message from Swamiji. Read it at leisure.'

'How long are you here?'

'I was planning to leave immediately but I suppose I could stay back for a few days.'

That afternoon, Sambhaji and Yesubai remained in their quarters. They read Swami Samarth's letter many times. It was as if his message, written in a poetic form, had mesmerised them. The letter read:

*'Remember Shivaraya. A living example of righteousness.  
His deeds are known all over.  
Remember his looks. Remember his presence. His valour.  
The way he spoke, walked and advised others. Taking them  
along.  
One becomes Shiva only by forsaking pleasures. He had a single-  
minded focus on Swaraj.'*

Even after having read it ten times, Sambhaji was not tired. He said, 'Yesu, with his words, Samarth builds such a wonderful image of Abasaheb!'

'Yesu, he is the only one who can claim to be a Shreeman Yogi, a Jaanata Raja, the real king who truly understands! No one but Shivaji Maharaj can claim these titles.'

The following lines were also enlightening.

*'Beware! Don't be relaxed.  
And spend time in silent contemplation.  
Don't hold on to your temper. At times it is fine to be gentle.  
Contemplate on the inner soul.  
Pardon the deeds of the past and take your men along with  
you.  
Let them be devoted to the task at hand.'*

Sambhaji stopped for a moment. Yesubai continued reading:

*'Not all stains can be washed away by water.'*

*The minds of men too, likewise.  
If your men are happy, things are fine.  
If they are unhappy, you have not achieved your goal.  
Understand the times and act accordingly. Shed your anger.  
And never show it to others.'*

Yesubai said, 'I am sure the families of those who were executed have met Swamiji at Sajjangad.'

'I am aware of the complaints that Shivaji's son is not worthy of his throne. That he spends time in the wrong company, that he is moody and does not listen to sane advice, that the kingdom is destined to be doomed ... and what not.'

Yesubai said, 'Balaji Avaji was very close to Samarth. He was his favourite disciple. But I suspect the families of the real traitors have gone and complained to Samarth.'

For a long time Sambhaji was silent. He said, 'Whatever others may say, Swamiji has sent this message with his blessings. Listen to this!' He read out the remaining lines.

*'Get people together. Make them work for a single cause.  
And ensure that you destroy the enemy.  
Hold what you have and then reach for more.  
See that the flag flutters all over.'*

Sambhaji was overwhelmed with emotions. He said, 'Yesu, I am fighting a perpetual battle with Aurangzeb. Swamiji is immersed in the service of the Lord. How can he be aware of these harsh realities? He has been fed all kinds of lies and rumours. I think I must write to him and explain everything.'

'That's a good idea.'

Dawn was breaking outside. The distant spire of the Jagadeeshwar temple was visible. There was no point in sleeping now. Sambhaji got up, had his bath and performed his daily pooja before sitting down to write his letter. Khando Ballal had been asked to present himself at the office. Sambhaji dictated the letter:

*'Shri Raja Shambhu Chhatrapati sends his salutations to His Holiness Sant Ramdas Swami Gosavi.*

*Swami has always been a great supporter of the Hindavi Swaraj and my beloved Abasaheb. The way Swami described Abasaheb is beyond compare.*

*Your letter reached me at the right time. I have been neck-deep in planning a sea expedition. It is true that I ordered the execution of some senior sardars who have served the kingdom since Shivaji Maharaj's time. But the reason for their death was their own treacherous intrigues and the way they plotted against the Swaraj. I grew up playing in the laps of men like Annaji Datto and Hiroji Kaka. They were pillars of the Swaraj at one time. However, when Abasaheb died and there was a serious threat of an invasion by Aurangzeb, these narrow-minded men, instead of extending their support to me, conspired to overthrow me. They started a childish campaign to put ten-year-old Rajaram on the throne. Hence they were guilty of treason. According to law, they could have been thrown over the cliff to their deaths. Yet, I neither punished them nor retired them prematurely. In fact, I reinstated them in their original posts. Despite such magnanimous gestures, they continued their scheming plots. What would a king do in such a situation?*

*Swamiji, I urge you to come to Raigad and look at the papers yourself. You would be pleasantly surprised to find them in perfect order. I have learned the art of administration under the tutelage of Jijausaheb. I managed the territory of Raigad for four years when I was very young. I studied the classics, Sanskrit and the works of great poets like Kalidas.*

*Ordering the execution of Balaji Pant was a mistake and I will repent it throughout my life. I am caring for his children as I care for my own. But the story of the others, the actual traitors, is different. Like poison spreading through one's body, it needed to be stopped in time. Else, it would have been too late.*

*Swamiji, our arch enemy Aurangzeb is planning to march on us with an army of nearly five lakh men and four lakh beasts. He has the enormous wealth of the Mughal Empire to support him. But I am going to make every effort to protect our newly founded*



*Swaraj. My only aim is to see that he is defeated. If I am not able to do that, all the efforts made by Abasaheb and his dreams would be wasted.*

*I have no time to waste. Aurangzeb's son Shahzada Akbar has joined us along with Durgadas Rathore from Marwar. I am in touch with Raja Ramsingh of Ambar. I shall let you know of the developments.*

*In conclusion, Swamiji, I have been busy saving the Swaraj while you have been devoting your time and life to the service of the Lord. Who then will stop people from poisoning your ears with false complaints? I don't fear the Mughal enemy but I am worried about those who feed you with these lies.*

*I hear you speak of getting people together to ensure the spread of dharma. I need your blessings for this war against dharma. I may have ordered the killing of the traitors but I will always remember and cherish their good deeds and their contributions to the Swaraj. What is unpardonable is their treason, which they committed with open eyes.'*

## 4

Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash's tents were put up near the bay at Nagothane. It was dawn and Raje had just finished his elaborate morning prayers. Kalash too was ready. Shahzada Akbar's tent was not far away. However, he had a habit of getting up late. Durgadas Rathore had often said to him, 'Akbar, you must make it a habit to get up on time when on the battlefield. Look at the way the Marathas have their breakfast astride a horse. They are ever battle-ready!'

'Durgadas, what can I do? I have the Mughal Badshah's blood in me. The Marathas lead a nomadic life, travelling like fakirs. A Badshah, on the other hand, must behave like one!'

'Shahzada, have you seen the way Sambhaji looks after his men? There is so much to learn from him!'

Shahzada Akbar laughed in response. ‘Durgadas, you are partial to him as you too are a Hindu. I know you are in awe of that landlord’s son. In any case, tomorrow, when I am the Badshah, I don’t want to owe him any favours. I will happily grant him a Subah or two.’

All Durgadas could do was slap his forehead in disgust.

Kavi Kalash was waiting for Sambhaji to arrive. He had with him Dadaji Prabhu Deshpande of Mahad. Soon, Sambhaji, sporting a bright tilak on his forehead, arrived. The twenty-three-year-old Raje looked especially handsome this morning. Sambhaji said to Dadaji Prabhu, ‘Deshpande Kaka, how are you?’

‘I am at your service, Swami!’

‘Be prepared for a major campaign soon!’

‘As you command, Swami.’ Dadaji nodded.

It was not clear to Dadaji what Sambhaji meant when he said a ‘major campaign.’ He waited for Raje to continue.

‘Kaka, I have decided to induct you into the council of ministers.’

Deshpande responded with a bright smile. It had been his dream since a long time to be part of the council. He bowed respectfully when Sambhaji said, ‘But you need to complete a task before you are appointed. No one knows the territory of Konkan, especially the coastal region, as well as you do. I want you to attack Janjira and finish off the Siddis. You would be remembered forever for this great service to the Swaraj!’

Dadaji Deshpande was confused. He said, his voice quivering a little, ‘But Raje, you need to take one thing into account. Even Shivaji Raje could not break the walls of that fort. The Mughals stay away, too, while the Portuguese and English maintain a respectable distance. We need to be well-prepared if we are to attack the fort.’

‘I am aware!’ Sambhaji said, smiling. ‘Subedar, there are wild animals in the forest but many of them can be subjugated if you hold their tail.’

‘I don’t understand, Raje!’

‘Janjira’s tail is the port at Underi, near Colaba. Take whatever support you need, but squash Underi.’

Deshpande wiped his forehead nervously with a silk handkerchief. ‘Raje, the tail too is quite poisonous. At the village Thal, there is a fort that stores the best English ammunition. The Underi port is a mere half-mile away. The English are ever ready to support the Siddis and would not hesitate to retaliate.’

Sambhaji seemed to be lost in thought for a while. When he was about to leave, he held Deshpande's hand and said, 'Kaka, you know Baji Prabhu Deshpande's valour and the way he fought at Pavankhind. If you take Underi, you have a chance to recreate history.'

Kavi Kalash smiled. He knew Sambhaji had deliberately referred to Baji Prabhu Deshpande as a means of challenging Dadaji. Taking Underi would not be an easy task by any means. But Sambhaji did not simply hand over the task to Dadaji. He got involved in every aspect of the mission's preparation. Raje ensured that nearby Sagargad was adequately stocked with ammunition and foodgrains. Twenty-two ships were deployed in the bays of Nagothane and Rohada. Four thousand troops, commanded by Daryasarang, Daulat Khan and Maynak Bhandari, were ready to attack. The troops were paid two months' salary in advance to keep up their morale.

However, Sambhaji was worried. Aurangzeb was expected to arrive in the Deccan at any moment. It was imperative to capture Underi and then attack Janjira before the Mughals marched in.

Raje returned to Raigad. He was now busy coordinating several campaigns at the same time. His sardars were attacking Mughal posts in Mulher, Solapur, Ahmednagar and other places. Nearly twenty-five thousand Maratha soldiers had been deployed to ravage the Mughal territories. Then there was the question of logistics—managing the inventory of ammunition and foodgrains and ensuring that the troops were well taken care of. Messengers and spies visited Sambhaji regularly, took instructions and left.

Yesubai had taken over the role of managing the daily administration of the kingdom, just as Jijabai had done before her. She had the support of the council of ministers. One day an urgent message reached Raigad. Yesubai had already read the message when Sambhaji rushed into the office. It was not good news; Dadaji and his men had been routed at Underi.

Sambhaji cursed under his breath, 'I had told Dadaji to be careful!'

'It is not his fault, Sarkar,' the messenger said, 'Dadaji and his men had planned it well. But at the last moment, the English came to the rescue. Two hundred of our men had attacked the fort and eighty were caught alive. The merciless Siddi Kasam cut their heads off, the way a grasscutter cuts grass. He threw the bodies into the water and took away eighty heads, tied to a rope.'

'What about Dadaji Deshpande?'

‘He fought with valour, Maharaj! His blood-stained sword mowed the enemy down as he moved forward. But unfortunately, he got hit in his leg as ammunition from a swivel gun brushed against it and the sulphur burnt his skin. He fell down but, luckily, he was saved by his men and is recuperating now.’

A few days later another messenger arrived. Khando Ballal’s face fell as he read out the message.

‘Raje, Kasam took the heads of our soldiers to Mumbai. Hanging the heads on a pole, he mocked them by poking spears into them. The Siddi’s soldiers, drunk and shouting, took out a procession with trumpets and horns blowing all the way. Luckily, the English governor intervened and stopped the madness.’

Sambhaji’s head reeled. He stood up. In his agitation he pulled the hooks on the walls with such force that they came off. Sambhaji could not eat that night. He could not concentrate on his prayers either. His eyes burnt with rage. His body ached for revenge. ‘I am not going to stop now!’ he muttered. He went into the sanctum sanctorum and touched Shivaji’s wooden slippers reverently to his head.

He said to Yesubai, ‘Yesu, the firangis have realised that if the Marathas conquer Janjira, they would establish their superiority over the high seas. They would never want that to happen.’

Holding the slippers to his forehead he said, ‘Abasaheb, the wait is over now! I am going to lead the campaign myself. Let us see what happens!’

## 5

The Mughal Shahenshah rested at the palace in Burhanpur. The light of the lamps was reflected in the glass pillars and the elaborate chandeliers. Behind a screen sat Udepuri Begum, Shahzadi Zeenat-un-Nissa and other begums. Alamgir was busy discussing plans with his sardars.

Aurangzeb had returned to Burhanpur after a gap of twenty-three years but the memories of the old days were still strong. He was merely a

sixteen-year-old Shahzada when he had visited his aunt in Burhanpur. To this day, roaming in the gardens, with the breeze flowing through the mango trees, he was reminded of her tinkling laughter. For it was here that he had fallen in love with Zainabadi, also known as Heera. Her tall, lissome figure, almond eyes, narrow chin and the half-opened inviting lips—the very sight of her used to make him weak in the knees. It was love at first sight. She came into his life like a whirlwind and left just as soon. A mere illness was the reason for her death. Aurangzeb could never come to terms with the loss.

The Badshah took a tour of the city to see how it had been ravaged by the kafir Sambhaji. The half-burnt havelis, looted markets and the rubble strewn everywhere pierced his heart. He could not bear to see the tortured faces of the citizens and the way impoverished merchants looked at him with vacant eyes. At the city's dilapidated cemetery, he asked an old and trusted attendant to find Heera's grave.

'If you cannot protect us from our enemies, we will stop the Friday prayers,' the maulvis had threatened. The fact that his favourite queen Dilras Banu's son, Shahzada Akbar, had joined Sambhaji was a thorn in Aurangzeb's heart. Akbar had ignored the many messages of reconciliation sent by Aurangzeb. To add insult to injury, Akbar had affronted him with taunts like 'The treasury is almost empty, the mullahs and maulvis are being insulted, you are losing control over your own administration, and your officials are corrupt. What else can the citizen expect from an old Badshah?'

Aurangzeb tried to blame his son's rebelliousness on others. He said, 'That treacherous Durgadas is helping Shahzada Akbar. We must stop him. Kill him, if you find him! But it looks like the sardars in the Deccan are useless!'

'Jahanpanah, Durgadas is a cunning fox,' Asad Khan said.

'I know,' Aurangzeb sighed. 'He had met me to propose that Jaswant Singh's heir should be given the throne of Marwar. He argued with me. Jaswant Singh's queens were in captivity in Delhi then. But that wily fox managed to rescue them and escape, camouflaging them in soldier's outfits!'

'Jahanpanah, if I may ...' Asad Khan began.

'It is a dangerous situation. A wily Rajput has joined hands with the Marathas. And the Maratha leader is no less than Shiva's son—a

lion's cub.'

Zulfikar Khan added, 'Alamgir, Shahzada joining forces with the Marathas is adding fuel to fire. It will not be extinguished easily.'

Aurangzeb caressed his beard with one hand while prayer beads moved in the other. He muttered a few verses from the Quran. Everyone waited with bated breath.

'Then we must snuff out the fire before it engulfs us.' Aurangzeb's outward show of anger did not reveal the inner turmoil he was going through.

Within ten days of Aurangzeb's arrival in Burhanpur, the Marathas had attacked a station managed by Lutfullah Khan Koka and killed many Mughal soldiers. The daring Marathas had shown the temerity to attack a post that was barely ten miles from Burhanpur. On the same day there had been an explosion due to an accident at the ammunition dump near the Badshah's palace. Such inauspicious signs ever since he had arrived in the city disturbed Aurangzeb.

The sixty-three-year-old Emperor displayed the energy and enthusiasm of a twenty-five-year-old youth. His physique, his discipline and his ambition were as strong as ever. As a man who controlled a huge treasury, he was ever alert. He never went to sleep at night unless he had met his spies and taken a report from them. He had been systematically collecting information from his network of spies, including a few Maratha soldiers who had defected to the Mughals. He had created a map of sorts of the Hindavi Swaraj. The map showed the exact locations of the rivers, forts, old temples and other strategic points in the kingdom. By now, Aurangzeb could point out any Maratha fort on the map.

He said to his sardars, 'I have always had the ambition to finish Shivaji's kingdom off but somehow I have not had the time in the last twenty-five years or so. It was Shivaji's good fortune that he died before I captured him. I was sure of annexing his territories quite easily. But now, it seems, things have changed. Anyway ...'

Aurangzeb scanned the map as he spoke. He said, looking at Asad Khan, 'Wazir-e-Azam, tell our brother Siddi at Janjira to descend on the Konkan coast with all the men he has. Ask him to burn the Maratha territories in the region.'

'Ji, Hazrat.'

‘And write to the Portuguese governor. Let him know that Goa is not near Delhi where he can call on us for help at the eleventh hour. Sambhaji can overrun their territories any day. Ask him to attack the Maratha kingdom from the south Konkan side.’

‘As you command, Jahanpanah.’

Aurangzeb turned to Hasan Ali Khan. ‘Hasan, my valorous soldier, there is no one who protects Islam like you. You were the one who arrested that truant Gokul Jat when you were the faujdar at Mathura. You had torn him to pieces in the public square ...’

‘Ji, Hazrat.’

‘You were the one who razed a hundred and seventy-six temples near Udaipur to ground. You are a true follower of Islam.’

‘Just command me, Hazrat! Command me!’ Hasan Ali Khan said, banging his fist on his chest as he stood up.

‘Take twenty-five thousand troops with you and descend on the Konkan region from Nashik. After capturing the fort at Mahuli, destroy Bhiwandi and Kalyan as you move towards Raigad. The Siddis from Janjira, the Portuguese from the south and your men—you will reach Raigad after you ravage the entire Maratha territory that lies in between. I will pray at the fort once I see the green flag with the moon and stars fluttering on the ramparts of Raigad. Only then can I die peacefully. Ya Khuda! I have no other ambition other than this!’

The rousing and emotional speech stirred everyone. Aurangzeb looked at his men and said, ‘Let us see who wins! On the one hand is the old Badshah of Hindustan while on the other we have the young, immature son of a zamindar. On one hand there is an army backed by the treasury of twenty-two provinces and a legacy of two hundred years dating from Taimur while on the other is a miniscule territory of the Marathas that they call the Swaraj!’

‘We shall finish them off, Huzoor!’ Zulfikar Khan growled.

‘Shut up! Don’t throw words around casually. Despite the presence of an imperial camp manned by five lakh Mughal soldiers, Hambirrao has the audacity to attack Lutfullah Khan’s post, just a few miles from here. What does that mean?’

The sardars looked down at the carpet, not wanting to face Alamgir’s penetrating stare. Aurangzeb said, letting out a deep sigh, ‘It means only thing—we need to be alert! Our Deccan campaign may not be difficult, but

it is not easy either. A small snake can freeze a gallant soldier in his path. A mere ant, if it enters the trunk of an elephant, can make it roll on the ground in agony like a dog! Let us not delude ourselves! Be alert!’

## 6

The small town of Rajpuri, nestled at the base of a hill near the coast, was literally covered with coconut, palms and other trees. From a distance the spires of the temple and the masjid’s dome were visible.

Dark clouds covered the sky, giving the sea a muddy sheen. The fort of Janjira was eight hundred metres from the shore. The entire fort was visible from the small hill on the outskirts of Rajpuri. The massive fort had nineteen semicircular battlements where the Siddi sentinels stood guard. The afternoon gave way to evening when, suddenly, three cannons on the fort roared. The deafening noise shook the whole town. The Siddi had deliberately fired the cannons as a warning. Soon, around eighty small boats were seen approaching the shore, filled with Siddi troops shouting ‘Allah-o-Akbar’ and ‘Deen Deen!’

The few Maratha soldiers stationed at Rajpuri scrambled to their horses and fled as fast as they could. The residents of Rajpuri screamed for help, shouting, ‘They have come! The Siddis are here! Run!’ Many were climbing the hill in a desperate bid to save themselves.

By dusk, there was chaos everywhere. The Siddis had massacred the villagers in Rajpuri and in nearby Revdanda, Koliwada, Murud and Nandgaon. Women were raped and huts burnt. They looted whatever they could lay their hands on. The few villagers who survived the attack rued the fact that Shambhu Raje’s men had run away without offering any resistance.

The fort of Janjira shone in the glory of its heinous act. Torches burnt all along the walls of the fort which was a mile and a half long and nearly as wide. On one of the battlements stood Siddi Khairyat Khan and his brother Siddi Kasam Khan. They were pleased with the message they had just received.

‘Kasambhai, Alamgir’s message is like Allah himself talking to us!’



‘I agree, Bhaijaan! We shall go ashore tomorrow. By then our troops would have reached Roha.’

‘Yes, Hasan Ali Khan too would by then have taken Kalyan and Panvel, and reached there. I am confident our swords will penetrate the heart of Raigad in two days’ time.’

That night, the two brothers celebrated their triumph by sipping expensive wine.

The next morning Kasam woke up at his seven-storeyed palace. He was to leave for the mainland soon. Moving the fine chik curtains to look outside, he found it to be a misty morning. The clouds had literally descended on the sea. Glancing at the hill outside Rajpuri, he had the shock of his life. For a moment he steadied himself by sitting down on his velvet bed. The hill was aglow with saffron flags! The Marathas had captured the shore and were busy laying their cannons. The soldiers who had run away the previous evening were back in full force.

The Siddis and their soldiers were now stuck at the fort. The troops who had ravaged the villages had somehow managed to find their way back to the safety of the fort.

On a stretch of flat land near the hill stood Sambhaji, staring at the fort. Beside him stood Kavi Kalash, Jotyaji Kesarkar and the veteran commander Daryasarang. Durgadas Rathore stood next to Shahzada Akbar. Jange Khan sat on a makeshift cot nearby.

‘The Siddis are known to be ruthless. They are willing to do anything for money,’ Sambhaji said, looking at Shahzada Akbar. ‘The other day Kasam’s men kidnapped a few rich Muslim merchants from Shreebag and Pen. Despite the intervention of the English emissary, the Siddis were not willing to release them until they were paid a ransom of eighteen thousand hon.’

‘That devil beheaded eighty of our men at Underi,’ Sambhaji continued, curling his fists in frustration. ‘I am itching to take revenge.’

Not stopping at Underi, the Siddis had ravaged many small towns from Panvel to Chaul. It was then that Sambhaji had decided to go to Janjira himself. He had with him nearly twenty thousand men and three hundred boats, big and small.

The Siddi brothers had celebrated the day they had heard of Shivaji Maharaj’s death. They believed their worst enemy was dead and that they had nothing to fear now. But their misplaced confidence was soon shattered

when they saw Sambhaji's rise. The Siddis knew that they could never win against the Marathas in direct combat. The only solace they had had so far was the strong and impenetrable fort which protected them. The walls of the fort had withstood the ravages of the sea, despite being hammered by the waves and tides for decades. They had survived the forces of nature.

The Siddis were now a worried lot, however, as they knew that Sambhaji had recently managed to procure ammunition from the Arabs. From a distance, the Maratha fleet looked like small paper boats floating in the water. The Siddi brothers observed the boats using binoculars, and realised there were nearly three hundred of them, of various shapes and sizes, armed with guns, cannons, and jamburas or light guns, and manned by around five thousand Maratha troops. A large contingent was led by Daryasarang, and another by Maynak Bhandari, while the third was commanded by Sambhaji.

Sporadic cannon fire ensued. The green flag fluttered nervously on the fort. It was just a matter of time before a coordinated assault from the Marathas began.

The Marathas had also been emboldened by the defection of Siddi Sambal's son, Siddi Mistri, who had joined them with three hundred men. While Sambhaji was collecting information about Janjira from Mistri, the Siddi brothers were forming a fair estimate of the Maratha might by talking to Kondaji Farzand who had defected to the Siddis earlier.

Sambhaji said, looking at Shahzada Akbar, 'I have warned the Portuguese viceroy that if he does not send his troops from Chaul in our support, we will see to it that their fort at Chaul is razed to the ground!'

Durgadas looked at Sambhaji and asked, 'You think the Portuguese will lend their support?'

'Why not? If the Arabs can help us, why not the Portuguese? After all, they are using our ports and our coast for their trade.'

No one spoke for a while. Sambhaji said, after some time, 'Well, your doubts are valid, Durgadas. The new viceroy Conde de Alvor is a sweet-tongued charlatan. But I am not going to be fooled any longer. We need to build a strong fort very close to Goa. That would keep them in check.'

The discussion turned to Aurangzeb. Sambhaji asked, 'Durgadas, where has the Badshah reached?'

'He has been in Burhanpur for past two months.'

Kavi Kalash warned, 'He can descend on Maharashtra anytime.'

Akbar said, ‘Abbajaan is in the Deccan after more than two decades. He was once the Subedar in his youth. His empire stretches from Kabul to Bengal in the east and extends up to Baglan-Waradh in the south. His palace is brimming with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and the Mughal treasury is overflowing. Yet, the old man is restless and unhappy, and chooses to spend months in isolation here. Even the small children in the zenana are scared of his shadow!’

Durgadas looked at the Janjira fort and said, ‘I wish Shivaji Maharaj had turned his attention to this fort much earlier!’

‘You don’t know, Durgadas! He made multiple attempts to capture it. Each time, victory was snatched away at the very last minute. Let me tell you about one instance. There was a fisherman called Lai Patil. On the dark night of a new moon, he managed to reach the fort and put ladders against the walls. He was waiting for Moropant Peshwa to arrive. But unfortunately, Moropant lost his way in the forest and could not reach on time. A dejected Patil had to return. When Shivaji tried to honour him, he said, “What is the point, Maharaj, when I don’t have the fort?”’

Everyone was convinced that Janjira fort, the target which had eluded Shivaji despite innumerable attempts, was special. It was probably protected by forces beyond human understanding.

## Z

It had been two weeks since Sambhaji’s arrival at Rajpuri. The cannons were being fired intermittently from both sides but the crossfire had not yielded any results for either party. The efforts from Sambhaji’s side seemed weak and the troops wondered why he was not showing the kind of excitement they had expected him to display. They were worried by the fact that the Siddis, who traded with many countries, had managed to procure fine cannons from Istanbul and Portugal.

Shambhu Raje’s sardars had proposed a concentrated assault more than once but they had not yet received a satisfactory answer from him. One day, Sambhaji looked at Shahzada Akbar who was sitting beside him, but

Akbar seemed lost in his own thoughts. Sambhaji raised a questioning eyebrow at Durgadas who said, 'There is a concubine by the name of Roop Kanwar in the bazaars of Chaul. Shahzada was visiting her quite frequently. When he did not turn up for a few days, she came over to Murud. For the past two days Shahzada has been in her company.'

Sambhaji smiled. He said to Akbar, 'Why are you being so secretive and shy? After all, you are a Shahzada from Delhi and we understand your interests. Who is this dancer who has stolen your heart? Let's see her talent. I am curious.'

Shahzada Akbar, thrilled that Sambhaji was taking an interest in his romance, arranged for a mehfil at their camp in Rajpuri. Roop Kanwar had been born a Hindu but her mother was married to a Siddi sardar. Seeing that Sambhaji was present, she was doubly excited and performed brilliantly.

The mehfil was progressing smoothly. Sambhaji noticed that Roop Kanwar was wearing a rather splendid necklace. Curious to examine it from close quarters, he gestured to her to approach him. The moment she came near, Sambhaji pulled the necklace with a sharp tug. While the jewels were scattered all over the carpet, the other guests looked at Sambhaji in surprise. The dancing stopped.

Seeing Sambhaji's angry face, Roop Kanwar stepped back. Raje turned to Akbar and growled, 'Shahzada, you know this necklace, don't you?'

'Yes, you had presented it to me.'

'It was presented to a shahzada, not a dancer!'

For a moment, Akbar was quiet. He said, 'I am a Shahenshah in my own right. I will do what pleases me.'

Sambhaji was in a rage now. He shouted, 'If that be the case, leave now. You may go and sit anywhere you wish, and believe that you are the Badshah in Delhi.'

Durgadas, realising the gravity of the situation, quickly escorted Akbar out of the tent. Sambhaji had just stepped out with Kavi Kalash when Roop Kanwar rushed to him and fell at his feet, saying, 'Raje, don't do this!'

'I don't understand; don't do what?'

'Raje, I won't be able to face any audience after this,' she pleaded, as tears streamed down her cheeks. 'Everyone will know that Shambhu Raje walked out midway through my performance. They would presume that I am no longer beautiful or have become old, and that I don't know how to

dance anymore. I plead for justice. Please don't abandon the mehfil like this.'

Sambhaji looked at Kavi Kalash but he did not say anything. At that moment Durgadas appeared. Sambhaji took a bag of gold coins out of his cummerbund and said, handing it to Roop Kanwar, 'If someone asks, tell them that I had to leave on an urgent mission. But show them the gift I have given you. It is worth ten such performances.'

Roop Kanwar bent low in *mujra* and left.

As they walked back to their tents, Durgadas said, 'Raje, you are familiar with the Shahzada and his childish behaviour. Why make such a fuss of it?'

Sambhaji said, 'I cannot attend such concerts, Durgadas. Instead of drumbeats I hear the booming of the cannons. It is a crime to spend even a minute more at such gatherings.'

## 8

'Kaviraj, I hope you have sent the despatches to Karnatak and Golconda?'

'Yes. But Raje, you are at Janjira. Why are you thinking of Karnatak?'

'Aurangzeb is here with a massive army. Our clash, whenever it happens, would be decisive. Hence we need to ensure that we have the resources to face the Mughal army. That is where Jinji, Tanjavur, and the rest of the South would come in handy. Chikkadevaraja in Mysore is a wily fellow and we need to subdue him before he thinks of joining the Mughals. When Aurangzeb descends on the Deccan, we need to put up a united front. We must send despatches to Qutb Shah, Adil Shah and others.'

The South did pose a problem but the issue of Janjira was still at hand, and unresolved. Sambhaji was often lost in thought, staring at the fort. It had been a month since they had set up camp at Rajpuri. The fort at high tide reminded him of a huge black ship floating in the water. In the slanting golden rays of sunrise and sunset, it resembled a magical kingdom. At low

tide, when the water receded and a part of its foundation was revealed, the fort had an entirely different look.

Siddi Khairyat Khan and Siddi Kasam were restless in their palace within the fort. Never had they faced such a long siege. Even the narrow strip of bay between Rajpuri and the fort was now inaccessible.

Sambhaji had not launched a full-fledged attack yet. Siddi Mistry had created a wax model of the fort which Sambhaji would use while discussing with his men various strategies to enter it. They had spent sleepless nights at Sambhaji's tent trying to assess the best way to capture the fort. But they had not reached a conclusion yet.

One morning, Dadaji Deshpande entered Sambhaji's tent. He had a limp and was using a stick to walk. Sambhaji had been sure of Dadaji's victory at Underi but he had defeated at the last moment. Luckily, Dadaji had survived his injuries but his ankle was broken. Now, thanks to the support of his walking stick and more importantly, Sambhaji's encouragement, he was back on the battlefield.

Sambhaji was in conference with Dadaji, Durgadas, Maynak Bhandari and others. Dadaji voiced what others wanted to say but did not know how to. 'Raje, we are fed up of these small skirmishes. When are we going to launch a full-scale attack? Our troops are itching to see the lion's cub in action.'

Sambhaji said, as if startled from a reverie, 'Kaviraj, I sometimes wonder when and how this fort was built. Why don't you find out whether it was built on such an auspicious date that it has become impregnable?'

Kavi Kalash took Sambhaji's words seriously and enquired in the villages nearby. After a few day, he reported his findings, 'Raje, I did find out. There used to be a reputed priest called Ganesh Pandit. When the Siddis heard of him, they sent their men to his house. He was not present but his young daughter welcomed them into the house. On realising the purpose of their visit, she said she herself was well-versed in reading the almanac and could tell them the most auspicious date for laying the foundation. The Siddis returned, satisfied. The pandit, on realising what his daughter had done, muttered, "Daughter, you read the almanac well but your decision to inform them of the date was wrong. It is a huge mistake!" Well, the foundation was thus laid on such an auspicious date that it has since then become impregnable!'

Sambhaji looked at the fort. He wondered when he would walk the ramparts, if ever. The next morning, he announced to the troops assembled near his tent, 'My friends, once we finish this difficult campaign successfully, I will make sure that each one of you has a golden band around his wrist and a large bag of gold coins to take home!'

The men were ecstatic. The next day Durgadas informed Sambhaji that Shahzada Akbar too had returned. The troops waited patiently. They were sure an attack was imminent. Even the horses seemed to be tired of eating the same kind of fodder and were restless for lack of action.

Sambhaji was sitting at his tent the next day, looking at the wax model of Janjira, when he heard a commotion on the shore. He looked outside his tent to see eight or ten soldiers trying to restrain a man who wanted to meet Sambhaji. At a signal from Raje, the guards let go of him and the man approached Sambhaji. He was smeared with mud and seemed to be exhausted. The man saluted and put a small bag near Sambhaji's feet. Sambhaji asked him to open the bag. Everyone was shocked. It contained a half-burnt head. The man fell at Sambhaji's feet and wailed,

'Raje, this is Kondaji Baba's head!'

The Maratha soldiers standing nearby were pleased and broke into loud cheers. After all, a traitor deserved such an end! The man tried to silence them but they continued their celebration of Kondaji's killing.

Finally, Sambhaji stood up and shouted, 'Stop! Let me hear what he has to say.' Then he knelt and gently took out the head. He held it in his hand. The next moment he wailed, bringing tears to everyone's eyes, 'Kondaji Baba, what have they done to you!'

Sambhaji looked up at the mud-smeared man standing near him. He was in tears and could barely speak. He said, finally finding his voice, 'Raje, things were going fine, the way you and Kondaji Baba had planned. Accordingly twelve of us, including Kondaji Baba, joined the Siddis. Only we know how we managed to survive the past twelve months.'

'What happened then?'

'Raje, if only destiny and the gods had been with us, the ammunition store at Janjira would have been reduced to ashes last night. The flames erupting from the fort would have saluted you.'

'Arre! But Kondaji Baba was a very careful, diligent and alert sardar!'

'Raje, no one had suspected our motives for twelve months. We had ensured that the Siddi and his men never doubted us. Kondaji told everyone

of the misgivings he had about you and convinced them that he had betrayed you. Siddi Kasam had started treating him as a dear friend! He even offered Dilruba, his favourite concubine, to Kondaji Baba. That poor lady had no inkling of the purpose for which we had entered the serpent's den.'

'Continue ... don't stop!'

'Nothing went amiss till last night. We were to blow up the eight ammunition stores inside the fort. It was all planned. Babaji had bribed a few men over to our side. Even our escape boat was ready. But at the last moment, Dilruba insisted on coming with us. 'Take me with you,' she pleaded. Kondaji agreed, but a further complication was her maid Zaira, without whom Dilruba would not move an inch. An hour before the deadline, Dilruba shared the plan with Zaira. She excused herself, saying she would pack the clothes, and went straight to Siddi Khairyat Khan's palace.

'Well, it was a matter of minutes before the warning bells started ringing. Like bees swarming out of a hive, nearly two thousand soldiers streamed out and surrounded us. Three of us jumped from the ramparts; two fell on the rocks and died. Kondaji and seven others were made to stand in a line and mercilessly beheaded. Siddi Kasam himself sliced through Dilruba's neck. Kasam's men dragged the bodies and the heads, and threw them into a great bonfire they had built at the rear of the fort. Dancing and shouting to celebrate their victory, the men returned to the palace. Luckily the guards at the rear entrance were lax. I had managed to hide in a crevice in the wall. When I was sure that there was no one around, I got hold of Kondaji's half-burnt head and made for the shore. It was a huge struggle for me to get here but I knew you would be waiting to hear the outcome. Had I not survived, you would not have known of Kondaji Baba and his valour.'

No one could hide their tears. Not bothering about his mudstained dress, Sambhaji hugged the brave Maratha affectionately. The man sobbed as he said, 'Kondaji Baba used to tell us how he had captured Panhala fort with only sixty-four men and laid it at Shivaji Raje's feet. He said he wanted to capture this challenging fort and lay it at Shambhubal's feet. He said, "Let us create such an explosion that not only will it shatter the fort to pieces but fly my body high in the air to land at Shambhubal's feet. I would consider my life blessed then!"'



No one could speak a word. They were stunned into silence, hearing the soldier speak of Kondaji's last wish. Sambhaji put the half-burnt head in a palanquin. Then he placed his sapphire necklace gently around it. He ordered his men to take it with honour to Kondaji's hometown. As the palanquin and its bearers set off, Sambhaji walked up the hill and stood staring at Janjira for a long time.

Durgadas Rathore asked Kavi Kalash, 'This was planned over a year ago. Why were we not aware of the plans?'

Kavi Kalash replied, 'Even I was not aware! What you heard from the soldier just now ... I too have heard for the first time.'

## 9

The next day dawned to the sound of Maratha cannons booming across the bay. The villagers who lived nearby were frightened and many decided to leave their homes lest they were trapped in the crossfire. The Maratha boats, which had been waiting in the waters for weeks, now came to life and took part in the shelling. The walls of Janjira were being battered relentlessly. Siddi Khairyat Khan and Siddi Kasam Khan were not going to take the bombardment lying down. Soon, the Siddis were aiming at the boats. Many were drowned. Men had to jump into the water and cling to anything they could find to save their lives. Sambhaji directed his big cannons at the thick walls of the fort. Each cannonball weighed nearly three-fourths of a seer.

Soon, many large stones from the fort came crashing down into the sea. The strong walls were beginning to show some cracks. Many buildings inside the fort had caught fire and thick black smoke curled up into the sky. The women from the zenankhana rushed out of the rear gate and jumped into the boats anchored behind the fort.

Kasam Khan and Khairyat Khan were now galvanised into action. Their three main cannons started spitting fire. They targeted the large boats and burnt them but the Marathas were not in a mood to retreat. Eventually Khairyat Khan said, 'If we knew Sambha was going to harass us, we would

not have joined the Mughals. It would have been better to salute the Maratha flag and save our lives.'

The provinces surrounding the fort, particularly the towns of Murud, Tula, Mhasala, Harihareshwar and Dighi provided foodgrains and other necessities to Janjira. Sambhaji had ensured that the supplies were cut off, leaving Janjira quite destitute. The Maratha boats in the bay kept a strict vigil, preventing the supply boats from reaching the fort. It was a total siege.

The Siddis were stuck at the fort. While Janjira remained impregnable till then and offered them shelter, they knew there was no way out of this trap. They prayed desperately to Allah and Aurangzeb for intervention, divine or otherwise!

Sambhaji was frustrated that his continuous efforts had yielded almost no results. He said, 'Kaviraj, to stay here any longer could prove disastrous. Aurangzeb may enter our territory at any moment and we need to be prepared.'

'I agree, Raje. We must get results soon, or return. The Siddis are a determined lot and will not give up so easily.'

Janjira and the Siddis were considered unconquerable but seeing Sambhaji's relentless efforts, the ryots started flocking to the Maratha camp. Their plea was simple: 'save us from these marauders!' Sambhaji was disturbed. These men believed in him but he was unable to find a way forward. Suddenly an idea occurred: if Lord Ram had built a bridge over the sea, why could he not build a path to reach Janjira? Soon, huge trees were being felled. The soldiers on the battlements of Janjira looked on in awe. Was this really happening? Were the Marathas really building a bridge to reach them? Sambhaji's soldiers continued to put huge boulders and logs into the sea. They were determined to reach the fort. But the sea was merciless. Many of the logs floated away on the waves while the boulders were unwieldy and difficult to place.

However, persistent efforts began to show results. The bridge was half done. The two main cannons of Janjira boomed. Sambhaji ordered his fleet to assemble and offer a sustained counter-attack.

The Siddis were anxious now. The troops feared that they were likely to be routed within the next few days. Kasam and Khairyat ordered their retainers to pack up the treasury, brimming over with fine clothes and

jewels. The villagers had already started celebrating Sambhaji's impending victory.

Two days passed by. A few ships managed to reach the fort carrying supplies in the night. The Siddis were emboldened once again. On the other hand, a devastating piece news was about to reach Sambhaji.

That night, Sambhaji was woken up by the fortkeeper of Kothalgad. He had rushed to meet Raje along with ten riders.

'Raje, it is bad news. Aurangzeb's sardar Hasan Ali has entered Konkan from Nashik with nearly twenty thousand cavalry and fifteen thousand foot-soldiers. He ravaged the port at Kalyan and is now planning to move towards Pen and Panvel. His target is Raigad.'

'What the hell are our reconnaissance troops doing?'

'Raje,' the fortkeeper pleaded, 'what can one do while facing a tornado?'

By then, Sambhaji's sardars had gathered at Raje's tent. Sambhaji looked at Janjira in the darkness. The bridge was more than half-built. He only needed another four or five days to take over the fort. The battered walls were within grasping distance now. He could not forget Shivaji Raje's words, 'If you take Janjira, you can reach the banks of Ganga and Yamuna one day.'

Sambhaji's face was writ large with anger and frustration. He shouted, 'Kaviraj, I cannot leave till I capture the fort. I cannot retreat.'

His sardars pleaded, 'Raje, we all agree that conquest of Janjira is crucial for us. But Raigad is far more important!'

Finally, a dejected Sambhaji had no choice but to return to Raigad, leaving Raghunath Desphande to continue the siege. Before leaving, Sambhaji turned once to look at Janjira. The cool sea breeze blew. Sambhaji could see the bridge halfway across the water. The fort was so near, yet so far! He tried his best not to show his tears, lest the troops were demotivated. But his efforts were in vain. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he turned his horse.

T W E L V E

Valour





# 1

Sambhaji returned to Raigad. En route, he had stayed at Chambhargad for a night. The spies there reported, ‘Hasan Ali ravaged the areas around Bhiwandi and Kalyan and then moved towards the coast. He destroyed nearly forty villages in the Portuguese territory, presuming they were under Maratha rule.’

Kavi Kalash was despatched to supervise the ammunition factories at Kudal and Dicholi and get a sense of the Portuguese movements in Goa.

Arriving in Raigad, Sambhaji was pleasantly surprised to receive a traditional welcome from Yesubai. Wearing a yellow embroidered saree, she looked radiant. It was then that Sambhaji noticed she was nearly five months pregnant. He was overjoyed.

‘Raigad has found its successor,’ he said later, as they were resting in the royal quarters. ‘Where are you planning to go for the delivery?’

‘Why? Shringarapur, or else, to Ganojirao’s place at Dabhol. My father may not be alive but my brother would be more than happy to take care of me.’ Tired, Yesubai dozed off. Sambhaji stayed awake, thinking of Janjira and Aurangzeb’s foray into the Deccan. Suddenly, he remembered a secret message which Khandoji had handed over to him when he reached Raigad. He got up and read the message in the light of the oil lamp. It was from Miyan Khan.

*‘Shambhu Raje, it seems four of my earlier messages have not reached you. I am worried that the messengers may have been intercepted and possibly arrested by Aurangzeb’s men. I am eternally grateful to you. It is only because of you that I could get two of my daughters married.’*

Sambhaji recollected his days at Bhupalgad and the time he had spent with Miyan Khan.

*‘I am writing to you with some good news; you are the father of a lovely daughter now.’*

Sambhaji sat down on the bed reading this. He was thinking of the pregnant Durgabai ...

*‘Your daughter is now growing up at the fort of Ahmednagar as a prisoner of Aurangzeb. But you may rest assured. Your queen Durgadevi, Ranutai, and your daughter are well taken care of. But in the end a golden cage is still a cage. Your servant Miyan Khan is at your disposal. I have managed to get an ordinary job at the fort. But I am a servant of your dear daughter, not the Badshah ...’*

Sambhaji could not hold back his tears and a sob escaped his lips. Yesubai woke up to find him holding the letter in his hands and crying. Reading it, she too could not restrain her tears. Sambhaji, lying down on the bed, wondered how his daughter was faring.

The next morning, many people were surprised when Sambhaji distributed sweets. ‘The delivery is still a few months away, isn’t it?’ someone asked. Sambhaji replied, ‘Well, I can sense the child’s movements in the womb, so I thought why not distribute some sweets. We shall celebrate again when he is born,’ he said. No one knew the real reason for Sambhaji’s happiness.

## 2

It had been five days since Sambhaji’s arrival in Raigad but people had hardly seen him. He had not even gone to the temple. He was not ill but ‘war fever’ had caught hold of him and he spent day and night in

discussions with Yesaji Kank, Mhaloji Ghorpade, Nilopant Peshwa, Prahlad Niraji, Khando Ballal, Manaji More and some of the younger sardars. Durgadas Rathore and Akbar were housed in a haveli nearby and they would join the discussions once a while. As always, Durgadas showed keen interest while Shahzada Akbar was only casually involved.

The conference would begin at nine in the morning and continued almost till dawn the next day. Sambhaji would rest for a couple of hours, finish his morning chores, and start the discussions again. No one outside really knew what the meetings were about but they had seen maps and wax models of forts inside the room. Sambhaji was aware that Aurangzeb's army was as vast as the ocean, and that it was approaching the Maratha kingdom swiftly.

Hambirrao arrived in Raigad and joined the discussions midway, taking everyone by surprise. 'Mama,' Sambhaji began, 'I thought you were on a campaign ...'

'Shambhubal, I am the commander of the elder Maharaj. And his favourite brother-in-law too. I have learnt a few things from him. Someone in the camp has been assigned the task of masquerading as me, feigning illness. No one knows that I am here.'

Hambirrao's presence inspired the team. While discussions were on in the capital, ryots and other men from all over the province were being inducted into Sambhaji's troops. The eighteen factories in Raigad were busy producing weapons and ammunition.

The discussions entered a serious phase on the fifth day. Kavi Kalash had returned with reports and inventories from the ammunition factories. Sambhaji and others were in office, waiting for Yesubai to arrive. Soon, they heard the palanquin bearers outside the hall. Yesubai stepped gingerly out of the palanquin.

'I am sorry, I am a little late,' she said. 'I was looking at the list of four hundred men whom we lost at Janjira. At least thirty of the families need our support to take care of their children.'

Sambhaji explained, seeing the confused looks of the others, 'Yesubai ensures that all men whose children have been orphaned are placed under the care of the state. Once they complete their education, they are free to join the troops. The mothers and wives of the deceased soldier are also taken care of.'



‘There is an orphanage for such children near the elephants’ stables. You should make a visit to see how the orphans are being taken care of,’ Sambhaji added.

All senior sardars except Dadaji Raghunath Deshpande were present. Dadaji was busy carrying on the siege at Janjira. Sambhaji began, ‘Abasaheb knew that the Sahyadris are the true protectors of the Marathas. We can, with our guerrilla tactics, ward off any attack as long as we have the mountains backing us.’

‘But Raje, the wars that were waged back then were not of the scale we are facing now.’

‘I am confident that the armour called Sahyadri can protect us, no matter the size of the enemy.’ Raje continued, ‘We cannot face the enemy on an open battlefield. It will be disastrous. Prataprao Gujar faced Adil Shah’s troops in direct combat and sacrificed his life. There is no point in fighting like that. We cannot afford to lose a single fort of the Hindavi Swaraj. Not a single ship of ours must sink in the seas. We will dig a grave for Aurangzeb here in the Deccan! As Abasaheb used to say, it will take them five years to capture one fort of ours. Imagine the time they will need to take all three hundred and fifty forts!’

Nilopant Peshwa asked, ‘Raje, what is our plan?’

‘Wherever possible, we will attack. Where we believe we cannot, we must find a way to retreat. If the Mughals do enter the Sahyadris, we will massacre them in the valleys and gorges. But we are not going to wait for them to attack. I know we are merely seventy thousand against their five lakh, but we must continue to nibble at their numbers as well as their supplies whenever we get a chance. We will loot, burn, and ravage wherever we find them!’

Sambhaji allotted tasks to each of his sardars. Hambirrao said, ‘If we look at our history, we have five enemies: Qutb Shah of Hyderabad, Adil Shah of Bijapur, the Siddis of Janjira, the Mughals, and the Portuguese.’

‘We cannot afford to confront all of them at the same time. Luckily, Abasaheb has managed to convert Qutb Shah and Adil Shah into allies. I am sure all the powers in the South would come together to fight against Aurangzeb. I have been working day and night to ensure that.’

‘The Siddis may not have been vanquished but they have received quite a jolt. I am sure they are a worried lot now. They will think twice before joining the Mughals.’

Yesubai added, 'We need to look at salaries for our soldiers. It is a sin if a soldier dies without being paid what is due to him.'

Sambhaji looked into the matter immediately and ensured that the treasury at Raigad was catering to the needs and demands of forts and military camps all over the Swaraj. The threat of a famine loomed large too, creating further problems.

Sambhaji had summoned Daryasarang and Daulat Khan from Janjira. He said to them, 'The Portuguese have been ruling the coast for nearly a century now. It is not easy to displace them. We are busy fighting the firangis at Chaul, Thane, Vasai, Tarapur and other places. Nilopant, where are your men engaged right now?'

'Maharaj, we occupied the Portuguese territories of Mahim and Tarapur in one stroke. But the firangis managed to recover Mahim. We are now busy fighting in the Revdanda area.'

'Wah, Nilopant! I wish Moropant Peshwa was alive to see your valour!'

Sambhaji had sent some men with material to build a fort on Anjediva island off the coast of Goa. He asked Kalash, 'Kaviraj, what is the status of the fort at Anjediva?'

'The moment we began construction the Portuguese ships arrived.'

'It was a remote island! Why don't you understand that the completion of the fort is a step towards capturing Goa itself?'

'I think Conte de Alvor realised that. That is why he contrived to halt our work.'

Sambhaji let out a deep sigh. 'We need to break the legs of this firangi too, in the same way that we have managed to handicap the Siddi. Else, that wily Portuguese fox may join the Mughals at an opportune moment.'

'Let us buy as much gunpowder as we can get from the English. It will be a long battle with the Mughals and we will need it,' Khando Ballal suggested.

'Agree! I don't mind paying twice the amount but let us get a large supply,' Sambhaji concurred.

There was much discussion on how to face the final confrontation. Hambirrao and Yesaji had suggestions which Sambhaji noted down. He said, satisfied that the plans were progressing well, 'I am happy that the infighting and gossip has reduced considerably. I am sure, thanks to Bhawani's blessings and the good deeds of Abasaheb, that we will manage

to defeat the enemy. A fort does not win or lose because of the quality of its ammunition or the number of troops posted there. We can manage with damp gunpowder but if the enthusiasm of the soldiers dampens, everything is lost! We have the armour of the Sahyadri to shield us. All we need now is for the soldiers to do their job!’

Sambhaji reminisced a story Jijabai had told him of how his great-grandfather, Lakhuji Jadhav, had captured the Devagiri fort, a structure built on flat land.

‘The fort has been cleverly designed to fool any attacker,’ Jijausaheb had said. ‘If he managed to cross the first hurdle, he would face moats and trenches. Anyone not knowing the way would either be lost in dark caves or fall into deep ravines. Going further the enemy would enter a flat, dark stretch of land. It was in fact a cleverly designed iron plate, which would be heated from below. The enemy, presuming it to be black soil, would step on it and get their feet burned. Lakhoji had carried bags of water with him which he poured on the plate before crossing it. That saved him and the men. Finally, they captured the fort.’

Sambhaji continued, ‘We need to be agile and alert, and use our intelligence to defeat an enemy like Aurangzeb. Attack, retreat, and attack again! We have to try everything. But I am sure, we will win in the end. When an elephant attacks the door of a fort, it assumes that it will be able to break it open. Much later does it realise that the nails jutting out of the door are going to be its undoing. Likewise, the old elephant called Aurangzeb will meet his fate when he rams against the gates of the Maratha Empire.’

### 3

Sambhaji invited Hambirrao to his private chambers. As he relaxed on a swing, he saw that Yesubai and Sambhaji were looking crestfallen. He realised that something was amiss.

Sambhaji said, before Hambirrao could speak, ‘Mamasahab, sometimes I feel suffocated sitting here in Raigad.’

‘Shambhu Raje, I too am equally worried.’

‘But who would put balm on my battered soul? Sambhaji said, his voice full of pain. ‘Mama, three of my loved ones are prisoners of the Badshah at Ahmednagar.’

‘Ranu and Durga ... who’s the third one?’

‘Well, I have been blessed with a daughter. It has been three years. I got the news quite late,’ Sambhaji’s voice quivered.

Hambirrao was taken aback. He gauged that Raje had managed to get information from inside sources at Ahmednagar. Sambhaji said, before he could react, ‘Mamasahab, I want to attack Ahmednagar and release my dear ones. What is the point of a Raja who cannot save his own family?’

‘Shambhubal, as the commander of your army, I too am embarrassed by this fact. I have tried twice, with more than ten thousand soldiers, to take Ahmednagar. But the fort under the Nizam Shah is quite strong and unyielding. Ruhullah Khan, the fortkeeper, is a tough man. Several factors are not in our favour—the fort is under the Mughals now, the territory is far away from the Sahyadris, and the the vigil there is unabated. It is not easy.’

‘Mamasahab, we need to do something,’ Yesubai pleaded.

‘And if you cannot, I will lead the charge,’ Sambhaji warned.

‘Raje, your daredevil attitude sometimes worries me,’ Hambirrao said. ‘The elder Maharaj was born in Shivneri but the fort and the area around Junnar has remained under the Mughals. You must have heard how Shivaji Raje was held at Sangamner by Ranmast Khan. You need to be patient. You are the heart of the Hindavi Swaraj. You cannot put yourself at risk by undertaking such an enterprise.’

Hambirrao spent the next two days in Raigad discussing various issues. Sambhaji was elated when he heard news that the Maratha troops had ravaged Rahimatpur, a town in Adilshahi territory which was now under Mughal control. Several Mughal posts were being destroyed. Hambirrao could no longer afford to stay in Raigad and took Sambhaji’s leave.

That afternoon, when Hambirrao went to take Yesubai’s leave, he saw a dozen palanquins ready to leave. He noticed the palanquins were from Raigad and not Shringarpur. He remarked, ‘It will be difficult to reach Shringarpur if you start so late.’

‘I am not going to Shringarpur for the delivery. I will be in Gangoli, at the base.’ Yesubai was in tears. She touched the feet of the elders and got into the palanquin.

Ganoji Shirke had not sent a palanquin to take Yesubai to Shringarpur. Sambhaji had barely managed to read the letter. It said: *'Yesu, I am not sending my men to bring you here. The Bhosales have not done anything for us Shirkes in any case. We were made paupers. You are most welcome to come to Shringarpur, but don't forget to carry the papers for our watan as promised by your wily father-in-law.'*

Sambhaji was lost in thought. He wondered how his little daughter was living at Ahmednagar, guarded by enemy troops. He said, as Hambirrao took his leave, 'Do something, Hambir Mama. This is not an order. Consider it an appeal from a father who is desperate to see his daughter!'

## 4

'The strength of the Marathas is their forts. Capture one fort after another, each day. Within six months we will capture the Deccan.'

'As you command, Hazrat,' Shahbuddin Feroz Jung said, bending in salute. The cat-eyed sardar looked at his Badshah, who asked, 'Where do you plan to start?'

'Ramshej. It's a few miles from Nashik. I will have thirty-five thousand men with me.'

'How long will it take?'

'Well, I plan to start after the morning namaaz. And we intend to spread the carpets for the afternoon namaaz on the fort itself!'

'Wah!' Aurangzeb exclaimed. 'I need to finish Sambha off before moving on to Golconda and Bijapur. And I want to complete the task in seven or eight months so that I can be in Ajmer for Hazrat Chishti's festival in time.'

'Jahanpanah, with your vast army, we will destroy these Marathas,' Wazir Asad Khan said with confidence.

Aurangzeb was in good spirits when Feroz Jung left for Ramshejshez. He was sure that this foray marked the beginning of their victory in the Deccan, leading to the capture of more forts in the days to come.

But days turned into weeks and his frustration increased. Feroz Jung was accompanied by top sardars like Rao Dalpat Bundela and Kasim Khan. Aurangzeb heard the siege of Ramshej included huge cannons and sophisticated ammunition, but it had not yielded any results.

Asad Khan said, trying to pacify his Badshah, 'It is just a matter of time, Jahanpanah.'

'Wazir-e-Azam, I am not foolish to believe your words so easily,' Aurangzeb snapped. His angry retort made the elderly commander sweat nervously. At that moment, Alamgir's cousin Zulfikar Khan came in and saluted. 'Zulfikar, what is the news from Sarja Khan in Bijapur?'

'Nothing yet, Jahanpanah.'

Aurangzeb face turned hard. He narrowed his eyes and growled, 'Zulfikar, people can be really stupid.' Then his voice took on a tinge of sadness. 'I had told the Bijapurkars that I would happily give the Maratha territory to them provided they helped me to defeat this kafir. All I expected was his support but that arrogant fool has not bothered to listen to us.'

Zulfikar Khan was distressed. He said, 'Jahanpanah, Adilshah Sikandar is a fifteen-year-old boy. I don't expect him to understand politics, but I am disappointed that a seasoned sardar like Sarja Khan should behave so.'

'I believe he barely acknowledges our messages.'

'That is true, Hazrat.'

Caressing his beard with his left hand while his right hand continued to move the prayer beads, Aurangzeb mumbled a few lines from the Quran. He said after a while in a bitter voice, 'The Shia Muslims of Bijapur and Golconda are not going to change. Sarja Khan and the Bijapurkars are friends of Sambha while the Diwan of Golconda, Madanna, is a wily fox and a shrewd Brahmin. I have been destroying Hindu temples all the way from Somnath to Burhanpur. But do you know what is happening in Hyderabad? Qutb Shah's Diwan Madanna is building large temples there!'

'Tauba, tauba!' Zulfikar Khan said, slapping his cheeks to show his disbelief.

The Badshah looked at Zulfikar and Wazir Asad Khan, who were father and son. Squinting his eyes, as was his habit, he sighed heavily and said, 'Well, my plans, when I left the desert sands of Rajputana, were simple: to squash the mountain rat under my heel. But the Deccan seems to be a tougher place than I had anticipated. What do you say, Wazir?'

‘Jahanpanah, just be patient! I expect Ramshej to fall within two days.’

‘I am not talking of a single fort, Wazir-e-Azam! My life these days is ruled by doubt. I fear that there is some kind of a treaty between that traitor Adil Shah, that debauch Qutb Shah, and the devil Sambha.’

The father-son duo did not know how to react to the Badshah’s appraisal of the situation and decided to keep quiet. Aurangzeb changed the topic and asked, bringing up the subject which hurt him the most, ‘What is the news from my stupid Shahzada Akbar?’

‘That he and Sambha are close friends now ... nothing more, Jahanpanah.’

Shahzada Akbar was very dear to the Badshah and the very thought of him opened up old wounds. Aurangzeb’s eldest son Sultan had gone astray after joining forces with his cousins. He was now rotting in the dungeons. Muazzam, Azam and Kam Baksh found their father difficult to please. It was Akbar whom he truly loved but it was he who had joined hands with Durgadas Rathore and staged a revolt!

Aurangzeb recalled the bloody battles fought for the throne throughout Mughal history. ‘The ascension to the throne has always been bloody. Your sons are your worst enemies. What I had to do with my Abbajaan, Shah Jahan, what he did with my grandfather, Jahangir ... one has to revolt in order to take the throne!’

‘I beg your pardon, Huzoor,’ Wazir said, ‘We cannot forget that your father built the wonder that is Taj Mahal.’

‘Do you have any idea that the same hands which built the Taj Mahal were stained with the blood of Shah Jahan sahab’s brothers? He killed not only Shahryar but his young, innocent children too.’

Aurangzeb was alone with his thoughts now. Wazir Asad Khan and Zulfikar had left. Aurangzeb recalled how he had mercilessly killed his own brothers—Dara, Shuja and Murad. He was growing more anxious by the day. He knew that his sons too would fight a bloody battle to ascend the throne. He was worried that they may pounce on him at any moment. During every meal, he suspected that the food may have been poisoned.

Alamgir sighed, ‘For the Mughals, the real Taj is the throne; nothing else matters!’

The small village of Gangoli was situated in a dense jungle not far from Mangaon. Yesubai's maternal grandfather's haveli was on the outskirts of the village. The small and beautifully built wooden palace, on the banks of a little river called Vaipurna, was an idyllic sight. Shambhu Raje loved the place. After all, it was here that he had been blessed with his son Shahu. A few miles from the haveli was the magnificent Raigad fort, which was visible in the distance, reminding Sambhaji of a huge elephant which sat with its forelegs folded. Sambhaji looked at Raigad as he fondled the one-month-old Shahu in his arms.

The stay at Gangoli had been a pleasant one. Tukaram Maharaj's son Mahadev Maharaj was a frequent visitor. He and Sambhaji often spent hours chatting on footsteps of the Vajinath temple.

Sambhaji was distressed, recalling the way his men had been brutally killed in Mysore. He was waiting impatiently for the return of Krishnaji Konhere from Mysore. The image of Dadaji Kakde, Jaitaji Katkar and Tukoji Nimbalkar's heads hanging at Shrirangapattana sent a shiver down his spine. Raje was eager to attack Mysore and teach the arrogant Chikkadevaraja a lesson for life.

Monsoon was in full swing and the constant downpour, combined with the excessive humidity, made everyone uneasy. There was no respite from the rains. Brief spells of sunshine only added to the discomfort.

Sambhaji sat in conference with Yesubai, Kavi Kalash, Jotyaji Kesarkar and Rayappa. 'The year has brought mixed blessings. While we managed to scare the Siddis, stave off the Mughal attack for a while and have been blessed with Balraje, I am troubled by the way some of our men have suffered. I cannot get over the fact that three of our most valued sardars—Kakde, Katkar and Nimbalkar—were tortured to death. Even a seasoned warrior like Harji seems worried. The only way to stop this carnage is to attack! Yes!'

In the light of the oil lamps, Sambhaji's face glowed with intensity. He wanted revenge.

Yesubai suggested, 'Raje, the Mughal Badshah is literally sitting at our doorstep. In such a situation, would it not be suicidal to direct our attention



and resources to the distant Karnatak and Tamil lands?’

‘Chikkadevaraja has gotten too big for his boots. He struts around proudly proclaiming that no one can touch him. Keeping quiet would mean being disloyal to our esteemed sardars who were murdered there.’

The rains continued to batter the wooden roof. Kavi Kalash began, ‘But with the Mughal Badshah at the front door, it wise to leave through the rear door ...’

‘When we have a decisive battle with Aurangzeb, the loot we get from the South will help us to win,’ Sambhaji pointed out.

After a long discussion, it was decided that they would wait for Konhere’s return from Mysore before taking any bold steps. By the time the meeting was over, the lamps had nearly burned out. Sambhaji was about to step into his quarters when a servant came running in and announced the arrival of Krishnaji Pant Konhere. Sambhaji immediately stepped out to receive him. Everyone waited with bated breath for news from Mysore.

Krishnaji was drenched to the core when he entered. He looked weary as he had travelled continuously for nearly three days. Sambhaji offered him his own shawl. When Krishnaji had managed to dry his head, Sambhaji asked eagerly, ‘Krishnaji, what is Chikkadevaraja saying? Did he agree to a treaty?’

‘Let me show you,’ Krishnaji said, and took out a tattered angarkha. It was evident that Krishnaji had been insulted when he proposed the treaty.

Sambhaji growled, grinding his teeth in anger, ‘What did the arrogant fellow say?’

‘Raje, I don’t know how to put it ... I told him I represent Sambhaji Raje. “What Raje?” he questioned me. “I don’t know any such person,” he said arrogantly, dismissing me. “Such landlords are born and die everyday.” I was insulted in the durbar ... they tore my dress,’ Krishnaji said, as tears welled up in his eyes.

Everyone present expected Sambhaji to explode with anger. But he was calm. ‘There are no more doubts in my mind now. The decision is made! We have to teach those in the South a lesson.’

It was clear that a campaign was underway. ‘I will leave the administration and security of the kingdom under the supervision of Maharani and Hambir Mama respectively. I don’t see any option but to be in the South for three to four months.’

‘Raje, what about Aurangzeb?’

‘I have studied him well,’ Sambhaji said, as he ruffled his hands gently through Shahu’s hair. ‘The rains are heavy now. He will not dare step in the Konkan’s mud till Dusshera. In the meantime, we will accomplish what we have set out to do!’

## 6

Banawar was a little to the north of Chikkamagalur. When Sardar Lingappa’s urgent message reached Chikkadevaraja, he flew into a rage, throwing the message in the air, and shouted, ‘Since when have we become so weak and inefficient? Sambhaji, with ten thousand troops, has reached Banawar and we had no clue about it!’

‘He is a mountain rat! How did he reach there?’ One of his sardars asked.

‘Not only does he have thousands of his own men but that Basappa Naik too has joined him with another five thousand.’

Chikkadevaraja was not one to sit idle in such a situation. He gathered his troops and marched to Banawar. Unlike in the Sahyadris, there were no rains in the South this time of year and Sambhaji had made good time on his journey. The Diwan Madanna of Golconda had been true to his word and provided Sambhaji with another ten thousand soldiers. Harji Mahadik, Sambhaji’s sister’s husband, was thrilled by the fact that Sambhaji was leading the charge.

Sambhaji complimented Harji, ‘Daaji, you have been making waves in the South. It is admirable ... the way you have been carrying on Abasaheb’s work here.’

‘Yet I have not been able to stem the tide of Chikkaradevaraja’s ambitions.’

‘Which is why we are here to help, Daaji.’ Sambhaji suddenly remembered something and asked, ‘Did my step-uncle Ekoji Raje offer help?’

‘Well, did you ask him for his help?’ Harji asked.

‘Well, he is elder to me and far more experienced. And as Swami Samarth says, there is nothing wrong in asking for help for the cause of Swaraj.’

Neither Harji nor Sambhaji trusted Ekoji. He had come to meet Shivaji Maharaj during his Karnatak campaign but had suddenly decided to run away one night, crossing the river.

The troops, numbering nearly twenty-five thousand, gathered at Banawar and were being prepped by Sambhaji and his sardars. The army was a mix of Marathas, Qutbshahi and Karnatak soldiers. The plan, known to only a select few, was to move to Tiruchirappalli, loot the bounteous region of the Kaveri delta and return.

Basappa Naik said, ‘Chikkadeva’s strength has grown manifold over the last ten years. It will not be easy to attack Mysore and defeat him.’

‘I agree, Basappa. It is unfortunate that Ekoji Raje shifted to Tanjavur. We were in Bengaluru for nearly forty years. Had the Marathas continued there, we would have maintained our pressure on Mysore and not allowed them to grow so powerful.’

There was a consensus that instead of attacking Mysore, it was best to loot Tiruchirappalli. The tiger was to be lured into open ground from a dense forest! While discussions were on, a messenger rushed in. ‘Chikkadevaraja is on his way here with a fifteen-thousand-strong army! We expect them to arrive by evening.’

Sambhaji said, ‘Well, it seems Chikkadevaraja is itching for a direct confrontation. And he wants to take us by surprise.’

Instructions were issued immediately. The troops were scattered across the hills, and placed at strategic points. It was going to be a defensive battle. Sambhaji was aware that the Mysore army was strong and well organised.

By evening Chikkadevaraja had deployed his army in a wide semicircle, with the intention of surrounding the combined Maratha forces. There had been no direct confrontation yet but there were reports of small skirmishes taking place across a large area. Chikkadevaraja was a shrewd tactician and a bold commander.

It was late afternoon and suddenly the sky was overcast. When the Maratha soldiers looked up, they realised that they were being targeted by a rain of arrows. Soon, the arrows, slicing through air, started hitting the men and horses.

No one could make out where the arrows were coming from. Like bees smoked out of a hive, they seemed to pour in from all directions, piercing the soldiers in their faces, arms, eyes and thighs. Blood spilled, men died. The Marathas and the Qutbshahi soldiers ran for their lives. Raising their shields, hiding beneath their horses, running for safety—they tried everything they could to prevent themselves from getting hit. But the destruction continued.

Sambhaji Raje tried to pacify the Hyderabad troops. ‘Don’t run! Stay where you are!’ He tried to rally them but to no avail. Harji asked, ‘Shambhu Raje, what can we do? The arrows are slicing apart our men and animals.’

‘Raje, we cannot run away like this. That is not what the Marathas stand for!’

Sambhaji, Harji and Kalash were trying to infuse some confidence but it was a losing battle against the shower of arrows. Chikkadevaraja had succeeded in his mission to create turmoil amongst the Maratha forces.

That evening, Ekoji Raje and his five thousand men joined the Maratha forces. The Qutbshahi troops were the worst affected. That night, when Chikkadevaraja’s troops seemed to have taken a break for their dinner, Sambhaji was trying to console one of his soldiers who had taken an arrow to his chest. Seeing Ekoji Raje walk in, he stood up and hugged his uncle.

Sambhaji said, letting out a deep sigh, ‘Please don’t mind Kaka that I am forced to meet you in such strange lands.’

‘Well, these are testing times Shambhubal. I am sure that with Bhawani’s blessings, things shall turn out well.’

It was decided that the best course of action would be to make a quick escape. Chances of an attack in the night were fewer and they could take the cover of darkness to move as far away as possible.

Creating a diversion with mashaals to give the impression that the Marathas were busy reorganising their troops, teams led by Sambhaji, Harji, Kalash and Ekoji Raje moved their troops. It was the first instance in Sambhaji’s life where he had had to retreat.

They moved towards Tanjavur, travelling without a stop overnight. It was nearly noon the next day when they decided to halt and rest. The men and animals were so tired that they soon found spots beneath the trees or near the streams for a siesta. They had barely got time the previous night to

nurse their wounds. Sambhaji himself was tired. An arrow had pierced his right arm. It throbbed badly. Jotyaji Kesarkar, Kavi Kalash and Rayappa looked dull and crestfallen.

They had set up a makeshift tent where Sambhaji and his sardars rested. A man soon arrived from Chikkadevaraja's camp with the message:

*'Marathas, it is best that you go away into the Sahyadris. What business do you have in the South? You are lucky to be alive today. Note that the territory of Mysore begins at Banawar and you are advised not to cross it. Ever! If you dare to even glance at the direction of Mysore again, your eyes will be gouged out!'*

Harji said dejectedly, 'It would have been better if we had not gone to war, better than having to run away from the battlefield!'

'I agree! Chikkadevaraja is now emboldened while our reputation has been destroyed,' Ekoji Raje added.

Ekoji suggested, 'Shambhubal, now that you are here, why not stay in Tanjavur for a while. Enjoy our hospitality. I don't want you to be away from Raigad for long, though. At least you are well protected there.'

'That is not possible, Kaka,' Sambhaji said, sounding hurt. 'I had entered the Karnatak region hoping to motivate the troops. All we have tasted so far is defeat.'

'What do you plan to do then?'

'For an army which has tasted defeat, is there a balm more soothing than a resounding victory?' Sambhaji asked.

## 7

A slightly worried Asad Khan entered Aurangzeb's private chamber. Aurangzeb's discerning eyes sensed his anxiety. Asad Khan said, 'Hazrat, the old commander at Ramshej fort, Suryaji Jedhe, is a determined fellow.'

'I see! Tell me, how many Marathas are at the fort?'

'Not too many ... seven hundred to a thousand.'

‘And you have nearly six thousand of your troops at the base, don’t you?’

Asad Khan replied, ‘A little more than that, Huzoor. I mean, quite a bit more. Actually, around forty thousand.’

‘Such a huge army for a miniscule fort?’

‘Jahanpanah, the fort is not an ordinary one. It is old and difficult to ascend. And the Marathas under that old man Jedhe are a determined lot. They won’t give up so easily. We are trying our best with cannonfire. We even tried to scale the walls with ladders but we were bombarded with rocks from the top.’

‘Rocks?’

‘They don’t have cannons there but they are able to launch cannon balls using slings made from leather and wood. The cannon balls are quite effective, Jahanpanah.’

‘What do you mean? How many of our men did we lose?’

‘Well, around three thousand five hundred or so. But Feroz Jung claims he can capture the fort in a few days.’

The Emperor did not respond. He had been reading the messages from his spies and was beginning to worry that the friendship between Shahzada Akbar and Sambhaji had deepened. He had to find a way to break that bond and bring Akbar back to his side.

He had not expected twenty-four-year-old Sambhaji to pull this trick, that of befriending Akbar. Nor some other tricks: Sambhaji’s men had attacked Burhanpur while he himself had stayed back at Janjira. Sambhaji’s men, under Hambirrao, Rupaji Bhosale and Manaji More, had attacked various Mughal posts in the last few months. The Badshah had never imagined such a coordinated assault on all fronts.

Aurangzeb called for an urgent meeting. He said, ordering Shahzada Azam and Diler Khan to march towards Ahmednagar, ‘Ravage whatever you can in the Maratha territory—whether standing crops, or the towns. Create havoc.’

Azam and Khan nodded. Aurangzeb turned to Zulfikar Khan and asked, ‘What news from Ramshej?’

‘Jahanpanah, Shahbuddin is determined to take over the fort. He is building a huge platform on which he is mounting cannons. He is sure that ...’

Aurangzeb was happy to hear of Feroz Jung's progress. He said, interrupting Zulfikar, 'Wazir-e-Azam, I want you to give special attention to Ramshej. If need be, send more troops there. I want all the forts in Khandesh under our control.'

Asad Khan said, 'I am sorry to interrupt, your Highness, but I am not sure we should spend all our resources in Nashik and Khandesh. Instead, would it not be wiser to attack Raigad in the Sahyadris?'

Aurangzeb looked at him for a moment. 'Wazir, I appreciate your ambition but why are you so eager to push me into the pit of death? The Sahyadris are not easily overrun. Thanks to its treacherous terrain, an ordinary landlord like Shiva rose high enough to call himself a king.'

'It was in the dense jungles and gorges of the Sahyadris that Afzal Khan, a true and devout follower of Islam, was killed mercilessly by Siva. Using the Sahyadris for his protection, he dared to attack my Mamajaan, Shaista Khan, and cut his fingers off. These Marathas are known for their guerrilla warfare. An attack during monsoon would be disastrous. Small nullahs will be overflowing, turning into monsters and making it impossible for us to cross.'

'Jahanpanah, at present Sambha is busy in the Karnatak and Tamil region.'

Aware of it, Aurangzeb laughed loudly. 'Huh! Let us see if he survives the trap laid by Chikkadevaraja. We will tackle him later.'

Zulfikar said, 'Jahanpanah, I am unable to understand the reason for sending a huge army towards Nashik.'

Aurangzeb laughed again. He said, pointing at the map, 'Here! Do you see the road from Burhanpur, through Nashik and Kalyan, leading to Raigad? If tomorrow Shahzada Akbar and Sambhaji decide to join forces, and assuming Akbar gathers the courage to march on Delhi, our forces will be there to stop them! My enemies in Agra and Delhi would be happy to join hands with them. Hence we need to ensure that all stations from Nashik to Thane are under our control.'

‘Rayappa, take care of your injuries. We have a lot of ground to cover yet,’ Sambhaji said, while he nursed Rayappa’s wounds.

The Marathas were camping on the banks of Kaveri, next to a dense jungle. Sambhaji was bandaging Rayappa’s wounds. It had been ten days since he was injured. A special tent was set up for Sambhaji and his sardars. The town of Tiruchirappalli was visible in the distance, on the far bank of the river. It had witnessed glory during the reigns of the Chola and Pallava kings. At the centre of the town was a fort built nearly twenty years earlier.

From his tent, Sambhaji could see the fort. The small temples with its spires and the havelis of the town officials were also visible. Sambhaji was lost in thought when Ekoji Raje entered his tent. Slightly bent at sixty-five years of age, with his pointed beard and twirled moutache, he reminded Sambhaji of his father. Sambhaji stood up and bent in muja.

Ekoji said, his tone a little disappointed, ‘Shambhu, why are we rotting here in the jungles? We are just a day and a half’s march away from Tanjavur. How many times have I asked you to enjoy our hospitality there! Why don’t you and your troops rest for a while?’

‘Kakasaheb, I would feel guilty enjoying your hospitality when I have been defeated in a battle. The way we retreated that night still rankles.’

‘Then, come to Jinji,’ Sambhaji heard a gruff voice. It was Harji Raje Mahadik. ‘It is just two days’ march from here.’

‘No, that is impossible, Daaji! We are not mute animals, to swallow all insults and return home!’

Sambhaji was busy collecting information about Tiruchirappalli. He had found out that Chokkanath Naik from Madurai was currently housed at the fort. He was a weak and infirm king. Madurai was a prosperous town but the territory had been usurped in part by Chikkadevaraja, while other parts had been taken over by Ekoji Raje and Harji Raje. The troops guarding the fort town were paltry and hardly posed a threat. They had been stationed there for practical purposes by Chikkadevaraja. There were a few artillery men at the fort but no one was aware of their strength. Many believed they were quite powerful.

Sambhaji called for a meeting and asked Ekoji Raje and Harji Raje to arrange for extra fresh supply of ammunition. He said to Kalash, ‘Kaviraj, send a messenger to Golconda and ask them to send five thousand more men within the next ten days.’



Sambhaji said, as he concluded the meeting, ‘We need to wound the enemy before our wounds heal completely.’

## 9

Rayappa was to be on sentinel duty at Sambhaji’s tent one morning. But he was woken before dawn by some servants and he rushed to Sambhaji’s tent wondering whether everything was all right. Sambhaji looked like he had not slept at all. His eyes were bloodshot. A plan was being discussed.

‘Rayappa,’ he said, ‘Go with your men into the villages nearby and get as much cow, buffalo and elephant hide as you can.’

Kavi Kalash was confused. He had ensured that the soldiers had sufficient footwear. In fact, a factory in Raigad, under the supervision of Yesubai, was engaged exclusively in the production of footwear for the troops.

Sambhaji clarified, seeing Kalash’s surprise, ‘We need the leather to make shields.’

Jotyaji and Kavi were given the task of assembling a fleet of nearly a thousand small and large boats on the river. Monsoon would soon reach the region and a sense of urgency was evident in Sambhaji’s actions. He knew that once the river was in spate, it would be impossible to cross over. The men were busy preparing bows and arrows. Fresh troops from Tanjavur, Jinji, and Golconda boosted the morale of the Maratha soldiers, who knew that a battle was in the offing. Kavi Kalash had managed to procure five hundred elephants and the giant beasts stood all around the camp.

Finally, the night arrived.

Since morning, hundreds of boats had been lined up on the banks of the river. At midnight, the Maratha soldiers jumped into the boats, holding the reins of their horses who would be guided to swim across. After testing the waters, the mahouts too got the elephants to descend into the river. In the light of the lamps, Sambhaji’s steely face watched Tiruchirappalli, asleep in the night.

By dawn Sambhaji's army had launched its attack on the town. The guards at the fort shouted, 'Marathas! Enemy! Enemy!' The men on the ramparts launched a counter-attack with a shower of arrows. Sambhaji's troops stood in their boats, clad in thick leather jackets and hoods which protected them from the arrows! The leather armour was oiled to make the arrows slip and fall, causing no harm.

By noon, the elephants had managed to break the walls of the town and enter. There were skirmishes on the road as the troops moved ahead. By evening Tiruchirappalli had been captured by the Marathas.

Sambhaji smiled at the victory. That evening they arrived at Srirangam. Ambika Bai descended from a palanquin and looked proudly at her younger brother. They all prayed at the Vishnu temple on the banks of the Kaveri. As they exited the temple Sambhaji looked at the fort in the distance. Its ramparts were lit up and sentries were visible from where they stood.

'Shambhu Raje,' Harji Raje said, 'It may not be prudent to attack the fort right now. They have enough ammunition and supplies to inflict serious damage on us. Chokkanath and his men can hold us at bay for six months or more. Let us be patient and decide on the next steps.'

Mild skirmishes continued around the fort as both armies continued to tease and test each other. The Maratha troops enjoyed a dip in a nearby lake, in a respite from their intermittent attacks on the fort. A few days later, Sambhaji received news of Chokkanath's death.

The Diwan sought an urgent meeting with Shambhu Raje and requested them to carry Chokkanath's body to Madurai. Sambhaji immediately gave his permission. Then Basappa Naik took him aside saying, 'Shambhu Raje, this is an opportune moment. They will open the main gates to take the body out. We can storm the fort.'

Sambhaji gave Basappa an admonishing glare and said, 'Basappa, we are not ordinary dacoits!'

Sambhaji was alert. He knew that Ekoji Raje was despondent. He feared the king of Mysore. It was expected that Chikkadevaraja would attack anyday. Harji Mahadik and Kavi Kalash supervised the troops in the town, priming them for yet another battle.

A week passed. The clouds threatened to pour torrents.

One day, Sambhaji launched a direct attack on the fort with ten thousand soldiers. It was a steep climb of nearly a hundred yards. The walls

were strong and were guarded by a moat. While the Maratha troops were busy crossing the moat, the enemy soldiers started raining arrows from above. Once again, the thick leather armour ensured that the arrows merely bounced off their bodies without causing any damage.

Over the next two days, the Maratha troops tried putting up ladders to climb the walls but were repulsed. Elephants were deployed to break open the main door. There was chaos and bloodshed everywhere as horses fell prey to arrows while many elephants were mortally wounded by the cannon balls. Their agonised trumpeting was unbearable.

On the third day, Sambhaji ordered his men to launch a shower of arrows. The soldiers defending the fort chuckled privately, knowing that the puny arrows of the Marathas were of no use against their powerful weapons. But Sambhaji had other plans. The arrows tips, wrapped with cloth and dipped in oil, burst into fires as they landed in the fort. Soon, the ammunition dump caught fire and loud explosions ensued which were heard for miles around. One of the ammunition stores was close to a tower, and it exploded bringing down the tower with it. Chaos reigned inside the fort. Cries of ‘help, help!’ were heard.

Sambhaji signalled to his men to stop the arrows. The fort had succumbed to Maratha might. Finally, the saffron flag fluttered on its rampart.

Sambhaji was unstoppable now and soon he had captured twenty-two forts in the Mysore, Karnatak and Tamil regions. The Maratha cavalry unleashed havoc from Dharmapuri and Hosur in the north to Madurai in south, all the way to Jinji and Velur. Even the overflowing Kaveri had not been able to stop them. The loot captured from these forts was being transported in hundreds of carts moving towards Raigad.

Chikkadevaraja did not dare to confront Sambhaji again. Many kings, earlier affiliated to the Mysore Raja, were now allies of Sambhaji Raje. They made willing contributions to the Maratha treasury. Finally, Chikkadevaraja sent a letter of entreaty to the Mughal Badshah. It said: *‘Please stop this Sambha who is creating havoc in the South.’* But to his dismay, he did not receive any response from the Emperor.

Sambhaji celebrated Dusshera in Tiruchirappalli. He had not yet decided when to return to Maharashtra. Most of the amirs and senior officials in the South were now under Sambhaji’s control, making Chikkadevaraja nervous. Sambhaji sent a message to him: *‘It has been my*

*father's wish that I should rule over the rich and fertile lands of the Karnatak and Tamil regions. Not to mention the presence here of my step-uncle Ekoji Raje and my brother-in-law Harji Raje. I wonder why I should return to the jungles of the Sahyadri. I might as well stay here and enjoy myself!*

This put Chikkadevaraja in a quandary. He agreed to a treaty without putting forth any conditions. It was decided to hold a meeting after Diwali in the hundred-pillared hall of the fort. Chikkadevaraja was to come from Mysore with a ransom of two crore hon.

The day of the meeting arrived. Chikkadevaraja's eleven-year-old brother entered the hall with half the promised sum and a letter from his brother which vowed to pay the balance soon. Sambhaji was restless after having stayed in the South for so long and, now that the treaty had been executed smoothly, he decided it was time to return.

Before returning, Sambhaji came to know that Chikkadevaraja had deliberately chosen not to attend the meeting. He had heard of how Shivaji had killed Afzal Khan in such a meeting and was scared of countering the same fate.

As they left the borders of Tiruchirappalli, Sambhaji touched Harji Raje and Ambikabai's feet. Blessing him, Harji said, 'Shambhu Raje, may the Hindavi Swaraj stay strong under your command.'

Sambhaji was touched. Although the problems that lay ahead were uppermost in his mind. He said, 'We are facing a famine. Daaji, if I have your support from the South, who cares if one or even ten Aurangzebs attack us!'

## 10

A warm welcome awaited Sambhaji when he reached Raigad. He said, complimenting Yesubai on her foresight, 'Yesu, you were right! Harji has proved himself an able subedar in the South.' Yesubai was delighted to hear that. Sambhaji was pleased that Harji Mahadik had turned out to be loyal and dependable, unlike his other brothers-in-law Nimbalkar and Shirke. He

added, 'I hope Harji Daaji continues his support as he has promised.' Yesubai was taken aback by Sambhaji's scepticism but did not comment.

A couple of days later, Durgadas Rathore came to Raigad. He said, 'Raje, Shahzada Akbar is keen that we march on Delhi.'

'What? Leaving Raigad without any protection? We cannot think of leaving our capital when Aurangzeb is so close and waiting to pounce.'

'He wonders what made you go to Karnatak and Jinji.'

'That was different, Durgadas. I was sure that the monsoon would be a deterrent for the Mughal army and that they would not plan any major campaign. Secondly, the Siddis needed to be taught a lesson.'

'Raje, can the Shahzada be provided with adequate troops to achieve his purpose?'

'Durgadas, I am surprised that you don't understand. The Hindavi Swaraj may have created a name for itself but in reality we are just a small kingdom. We have never had an army exceeding seventy-five thousand men while the Mughal army is nearly eight times bigger. Durgadas, I suggest you spend some time trying to convince the Hindu kings in the north as well as the Muslim ryots who are tired of Aurangzeb's politics to join us.'

The meeting continued the next day. Sambhaji commented on Shahzada Akbar's absence. 'He is resting in the haveli, Raje. He says he is keener to see action than to discuss it! He is willing to march on Delhi anytime!'

Sambhaji laughed at Durgadas's comment. 'I wish Shahzada Akbar was true to his word. Well, a dead elephant too is worth quite a lot! After all, he is a shahzada. If we are able to put him on the Mughal throne, I am sure a lot of sardars would show allegiance to him—not because they love the Shahzada but because of their hatred for Aurangzeb.'

'Raje, we urge you to take action. We have received letters of protest from Rajputana and Malwa against Aurangzeb's jijya tax. They are looking for a messiah who can save them from Aurangzeb.'

'Durgadas, why doesn't someone like Ramsingh of Ambar take the lead?'

Durgadas had no answer and remained silent.

It had been nearly fourteen months since the Mughal Emperor had landed in the Deccan with his huge army. He was disappointed that he had not tasted any success yet, and disturbed by the constant attacks across the

Mughal territory by Sambhaji, Hambirrao, Manaji, Rupaji, Nilopant and other Maratha sardars.

Meanwhile, Sambhaji had decided to initiate further discussions with Ramsingh. He said to Kavi, 'He is Mirza Raje's son. Mirza Raje was treated badly in his old age by Aurangzeb. I hope he is moved by our appeal and agrees to join us.' Sambhaji asked Kalash to bring all the earlier correspondence with Ramsingh. Then he dictated a letter:

*Please accept my heartfelt greetings, Ambar Naresh Ramsingh ji!*

*I received your letter expressing your happiness in giving refuge to Shahzada Akbar. I am in agreement with your suggestion that all Hindu kings should come together for a larger cause. But I cannot agree to your request that we do not go against Aurangzeb. It is unbecoming of a Rajput like you. A proud Maratha cannot accept Aurangzeb's overlordship. There is no question of Shivaji's son even entertaining such a thought!*

*I don't need to remind you that Aurangzeb conspired to kill your son Krishna Singh. I wish a veteran ruler like you would take the initiative to unite the Hindu kings. Aurangzeb believes that we Hindus are weak and have no policies of our own. He feels that we don't have pride in our religion. But we are Kshatriyas and we will not allow anyone to treat our religion as inferior to theirs.*

*You are more experienced than me. I am far too young. I have heard many stories of your valour and pride in the Hindu religion. I appeal to you to show some courage and help me put the arrogant Mughal emperor in his place. It surprises me that a valorous and proud king like you can remain quiet in these troubled times.*

*I intend to send Shahzada Akbar and Durgadas to the North via Gujarat. I hope you will provide all the support we need to further our cause. The Emperor of Iran, Shah Abbaas, has promised Shahzada Akbar all his support. He will benefit the most if Shahzada Akbar were to ascend the throne tomorrow. My friends Kavi Kalash and Janardhan Pandit will write to you separately.'*

Sambhaji sighed as he said to Kalash, ‘What a pity that Shahzada Akbar loves to daydream, flying high over the mountains like an eagle, while in reality he cannot walk faster than an elephant! All he can do is then blame circumstances, his destiny, and the whole world around him!’

## 11

The days that followed were full of turmoil and action. The Maratha-Mughal conflict at Baglan was heating up while the Mughal troops had surrounded the fort at Salher. Ramshej refused to cave in despite persistent Mughal efforts. The proud Maratha fort stood its ground. Hambirrao and his men were creating trouble for the Mughals on the banks of river Bhima. Meanwhile, Yesubai was managing the administration of the kingdom from Raigad and Shahu Raje was growing up.

Sambhaji returned one evening after visiting a few forts in the area. That night, after dinner, he sat on the swing in the balcony, lost in thought. The previous month, Bajaji Nimbalkar of Phaltan had died. He was Raje’s Mama and he missed him sorely.

Yesubai said, sounding a little concerned, ‘Raje, are you not feeling well?’

‘Bajaji Mama was a valorous man. It is unfortunate that he spent his whole life serving under the Mughals.’

‘Let that be, Raje! What is the point in brooding over such things? His son Mahadji is on our side, isn’t he?’

‘Hmm,’ Sambhaji muttered.

‘He was walking around so proudly during your coronation. He is after all your sister’s Sakhubai’s husband. I am sure he will extend all the support if need arises.’

Sambhaji could not remain quiet any longer. He said, grinding his teeth in anger, ‘Yesu, a wolf in a lion’s clothing is a dangerous animal.’

‘What do you mean, Raje?’

‘It is not good news, Yesu! Mahadji has joined the Mughals.’ Sambhaji continued, as Yesubai sat down on the swing, stunned, ‘Mahadji

has been appointed the mansabdar in his father's place. His cousin has been given a post in Khan Jahan's troops.'

'Don't they have any shame?'

'Mahadji has instigated his other cousins to turn against us too. Apparently, he believes that Shivaji and Sambhaji's "Swaraj" is not going to last for long.'

Four days later, more bad news reached Raigad. Yesubai's cousin Kanhoji Shirke had joined Aurangzeb! It was a rude shock for Sambhaji. He asked his wife, 'Yesu, what about your brother Ganojirao?'

Yesubai looked down at the floor, unable to answer confidently. Sambhaji said disgustedly, 'Physically, Ganojirao may be in the Swaraj but his mind has accepted Mughal supremacy long back!'

Sleep eluded Sambhaji that night. He lay on his bed for a long time, staring at the chandelier. 'Yesu, I sometimes feel that this land does not belong to the great saints and intellectuals it has given birth to. Instead it is corrupted by ungrateful traitors and turncoats. While we have brave soldiers who are willing to give their lives for the cause of the Swaraj, we also have those who are willing to sell their souls for a piece of land or a mere post in the enemy camp. They don't think twice before betraying their homeland.'

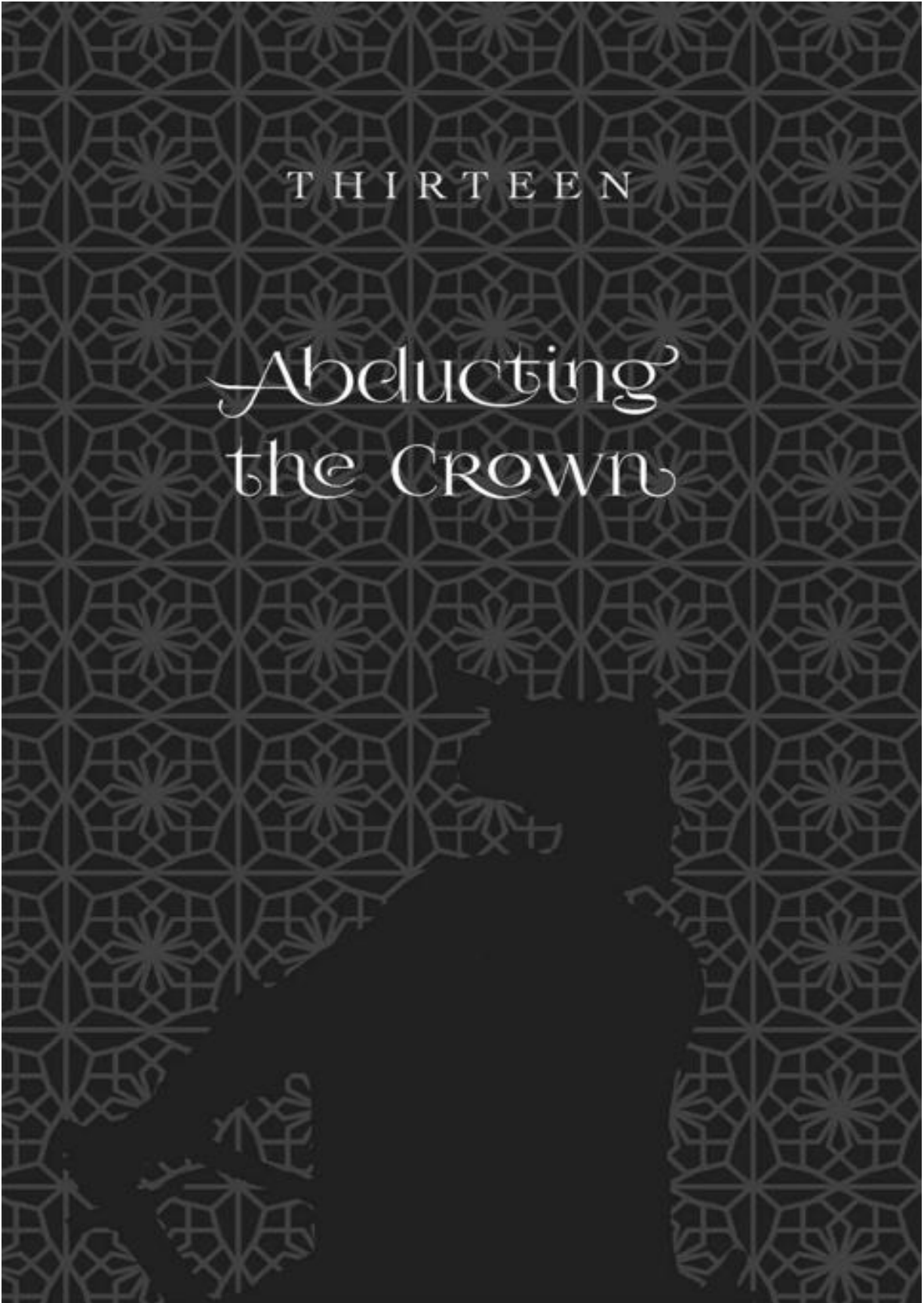
Sambhaji continued, his voice full of pain, 'What can I do, Yesu? Should I plan how to confront the mighty Mughal army or go after those who are defecting?' Yesubai could not control her sobs. She said, putting her head on Sambhaji's shoulder, 'Raje, please pardon me. My own cousins have turned traitors.'

Sambhaji hugged Yesubai, patting her head. 'Don't blame your family, Yesu. Look at my own Mama and his family at Phaltan. They preferred Aurangzeb's camp to our home!'



THIRTEEN

# Abducting the Crown





# 1

The Emperor seemed dejected. Taking liberty in his capacity as senior sardar, Asad Khan enquired, 'It seems Badshah Salamat is not keeping well?'

'Nothing good is happening, Wazir! That kafir's son Sambha is not going away anytime soon, it seems. In fact, he is growing from strength to strength. Shahzada Akbar has not come to his senses after all this time in the enemy camp. The Janjira Siddis, despite their outward bravado, are scared of Sambhaji. The idiot viceroy of Goa is not willing to confront the Marathas either and that adamant fort at Ramshej refuses to give in. There is no news to cheer me, Asad Khan!'

Alamgir continued, 'I used to believe that all my four Shahzadas are brave and loyal. Unfortunately, they have all turned out to be immature. Wazir, one life will not be enough if we try to capture one fort after another. Look at the situation: the Emperor is old, his shahzadas are useless, and the grandsons are even worse! All my sardars are fools. Whom shall I turn to for hope?'

'But Jahanpanah ...'

'Tell me, what happened to the message you had sent to Ramsingh in Jaipur?'

'He replied two months ago. He has promised that he will convince Sambha to retreat and that he is going to convince him to turn Shahzada Akbar over to us.'

'Look at the irony of the situation! We are forced to clandestinely take the help of a Hindu king to convince Sambhaji!'

That afternoon Shahzada Muazzam and Wazir Asad Khan met. Muazzam said, a little frustrated, 'Wazir sahab, it is because of my father's distrustful nature that we have landed in such a situation.'

‘I don’t understand ...’

‘Both Azam and I are in our mid forties; yet my Abbajaan feels we are immature. He does not trust any of us. Do you know why he sent Azam towards Bijapur and Kolhapur instead of Raigad? Fourteen years ago, Shivaji had sent Sambhaji to the Mughal court to be made a mansabdar. Azam and Sambhaji became friends. Abbajaan fears that if Azam is sent to Raigad, he may join hands with Sambha and stage a revolt!’

A couple of days passed. One morning a message came from Azam who had reached Panhala. The messenger read it out to Aurangzeb: *‘Hazrat, Mubarak! Azam has crushed Hambir. Many of the Marathas were killed.’*

The messenger was expecting the Badshah to remove his necklace and throw it at him as a reward. But nothing of that sort happened. The Badshah simply ignored the poor man.

Ten days later, another message from Azam arrived. The Wazir read aloud: *‘Abbajaan, we have given a fitting reply to the enemy. We managed to kill eight hundred Marathas and capture nearly seven hundred and fifty of them alive. It is a resounding victory.’*

The Badshah barely opened his eyes to acknowledge the message and sat moving his beads. The Wazir, unable to restrain himself, ventured, ‘Badshah Salamat, it does not become you to remain silent each time Azam sends new of a victory.’

‘What does he expect?’

‘A reward from you, Hazrat.’

‘Hmm,’ Aurangzeb muttered and was silent for a while. ‘Muazzam dear, can you read this?’

While a puzzled Shahzada Muazzam read the message, Aurangzeb instructed Ruhullah Khan, ‘Let me know who did what. Do a thorough investigation.’

The Wazir continued to look at the Emperor, surprised, as Aurangzeb summoned the head of the treasury and said, ‘Shaukat Miyan, take one lakh hons from the treasury. We will make a gift of it to Azam.’

Within four days the real news started pouring in from Panhala. Hambirrao had deliberately retreated during the first few clashes. Luring Shahzada Azam and his men into Maratha territory, he had launched a decisive attack on the Mughals. Azam, unable to repulse Hambir, had fled towards Satara after crossing the river Nira.

Aurangzeb said, waving the message in front of Asad Khan,

‘Wazir-e-Azam! Do you see this? I was never convinced that these two shahzadas are capable of much. I took the money out of the treasury. But it was wise of me not to have sent it to the Shahzada who does not deserve it.’

That night Muazzam and Asad Khan had a long conversation. The Wazir said, acknowledging the wily nature of the Badshah, ‘Muazzam, I consider your father as my guru. Look at the way he made you read the message, instructed Ruhullah Khan to investigate the whole episode, and while taking money out of the treasury, did not actually give it to your brother. It is difficult to win against your father in a game of wits and strategy.’

That night Aurangzeb was a little feverish. Udepuri Begum nursed him. Muazzam too spent the night at the Emperor’s bedside. The next morning, Aurangzeb looked fit and refreshed. Sensing an opportunity, Muazzam said, ‘Abbajaan, one should trust one’s children at the very least. You must not be so suspicious all the time.’

Aurangzeb smiled knowingly. Caressing his beard, he said, ‘The one who wants to rule has to learn not to trust his own shadow.’

## 2

Sambhaji climbed the hill after visiting the temple of Mumbra Devi. Gazing in the direction of the Ghodbandar fort, he could see the glimmer of Thane creek in the distance. The creek extended towards his left, touching the port of Kalyan. The town of Thane and the surrounding villages were visible through the dense coconut plantations. The Thane fort stood strong with its foundations firmly laid in the sea. It was being guarded by the firangis.

Sambhaji glanced worriedly at the port of Kalyan. It was here that Mughal sardar Ruhullah Khan had taken refuge, chased by the Marathas. A few months back, Aurangzeb’s sardar Ranmast Khan had attacked Kalyan

and ravaged the territories of Dombivli, Ambarnath and Murbad. He had managed to take charge of the port.

‘Kavi,’ Sambhaji said, ‘The port of Kalyan is strategically located and controls the trade to lands as distant as Africa, Java and Sumatra, not to mention great cities like Istanbul, Paris and London. Aurangzeb’s control over the port is akin to having a golden goose with him!’

‘I agree, Raje. It is also risky for another reason. Kalyan is on the route to twenty-five or thirty Maratha forts in Khandesh. If he cuts off access, they will suffer heavily from the lack of resources, and would become easy prey for the Mughals.’

Sambhaji nodded. As they descended the hill, Subedar Vithalrao informed them, ‘We are told that there has been some misunderstanding between the Arab Jange Khan and the English navy. Apparently, the Arab sardar attacked the English ship ‘President’ with five of his boats and tried to burn it. The ship was strong and did not drown but the incident has irked the English. They managed to drown three of Jange Khan’s boats, forcing him to retreat. Nevertheless, it has put the English on their guard. They have had quite a scare.’

Sambhaji glanced at the base of the hill. He had recently ordered the construction of a fort at the village of Parsik and work was progressing speedily. Elephants and camels were being used to ferry huge boulders. Soon, the foundation would be finished.

‘Kaviraj, we have to find a way to defeat Ranmast Khan but the Portuguese viceroy is acting strange. He is a sweet-tongued devil. Remember how he sent lavish gifts and letters of congratulation when Shahu was born!’ After a pause, Sambhaji asked, ‘Kaviraj, have our messengers reached Goa?’

‘Raje, as we speak, they must be crossing the Mandovi river and will soon reach Goa.’

‘What is our message to the viceroy?’

‘Raje, we have warned them not to poke their nose in our fight with the Mughals. They have been asked not to allow movement of Mughal ships in the waters controlled by them. We have threatened that if they don’t follow our instructions, we will attack Goa.’

Sambhaji looked at the site of the Parsik fort as he descended. The Mumbra hill was steep, making it impossible even for sheep to graze on its slopes. A wooden platform was being built near the half-laid foundations of

the fort. Sambhaji had erected cannons on it. If the Portuguese were to join the Mughals, the fort could help in sinking enemy ships as they passed through the creek. Sambhaji asked Kavi as they reached the base of the hill, 'Kaviraj, have you heard of Ranmast Khan?'

He continued before Kavi Kalash could answer, 'He was once a sardar under xAdil Shah but later joined the Mughals. When Abasaheb was returning to Panhala from Jalna, it was Ranmast Khan who had held him near Sangamner for nearly three days. Kaviraj, I am not worried about the sardars who have come from Delhi along with the Badshah but I am wary of traitors from the South who have become allies with the Mughals.'

While Sambhaji was busy supervising the construction of the Parsik fort, the bulk of his troops were engaged in multiple battles at the same time. Maratha forces were ravaging the territories around Solapur. There were skirmishes in Purandar, Shivapur and Rajgad. Sambhaji had sent his sardars, Keso Trimal, Nilo Moreshwar and Rupaji Bhosale, to attack Kalyan. While the Mughals were being attacked on several fronts, the administration of the kingdom had suffered. Hence Sambhaji decided to return to Raigad for some time.

He ordered Kavi Kalash, 'Send an urgent message to Hambir Mama at Panhala to direct his forces to Kalyan. We must defeat Ranmast Khan before monsoon begins.'

While Sambhaji was on his way to Raigad he received information that Portuguese ships were crossing Thane creek.

'What is our fortkeeper at Parsik doing?'

'They are firing the cannons. We did sink a few small vessels but the creek is wide and the bigger ships managed to escape damage.'

'Let us not lose hope. Ask them to continue their bombardment.'

Sambhaji reached Raigad. Shahu was nearly a year old and would soon start crawling.

A few days later, Hambir Mama arrived with fresh reports from the battle front. Sambhaji looked at Hambirrao whom even Aurangzeb had praised as 'the bolt of lighting.' Whether it was the three-day loot of Burhanpur, the campaign in Khandesh, the attack on Akola in the Vidharbha region, the chase of the Mughals upto Murtijapur, the siege of Ahmednagar or the recent confrontation with Shahzada Muazzam at Panhala—it was Hambir Mama who had led the men. Cries of 'Hambir has come! Run, run!' were common amongst the enemy troops.

Hambirrao was accompanied by Rajaram when he came to meet Sambhaji. Sambhaji was impressed by the way the veteran warrior had been relentlessly fighting, scarcely leaving the battlefield for the past four years. His energy was infectious.

However, news from Kalyan was not encouraging. The Portuguese had not been deterred by the bombardment from Parsik. They had continued plying their ships which carried goods and ammunition for the Mughals at Kalyan. Not only that, one night, five Portuguese ships had attacked Parsik and damaged a large portion of the fort.

Sambhaji was growing restless. ‘Hambirmama, I wonder why these firangi Portuguese are so keen to kowtow to the Mughals.’

‘Raje, you must have heard of their secret pact. The Mughals have promised to hand over to the Portuguese whatever they capture in the Konkan region, in return for the support they are receiving now.’

‘Mama, we need to break their alliance at the earliest. Leave at once and destroy the firangis.’

‘As you command, Raje.’

By the time Hambirrao had reached Kalyan, Ranmast Khan had defeated the Maratha sardar Vithoji Mane.

The battle took a turn when Hambirrao marched onto Kalyan with nearly twenty thousand cavalymen and ten thousand foot-soldiers. Aurangzeb, anticipating such an attack, had sent his cousin’s son Ruhullah Khan to Ranmast Khan’s aid.

It was an intense battle now. The Portuguese watched in awe from the Thane fort. The fort at Kalyan was deserted now as Ranmast Khan ran towards Titwala. The action now moved to the gorge near Titwala. One day, Hambirrao got news that Sambhaji had reached Dombivli. The Maratha troops were doubly inspired now. By next morning, the Portuguese and the Mughals had abandoned their posts on either side of the creek. Many drowned in the sea as they tried to escape. The attack on the creek was visible in the night even from distant Titwala. The Mughals were a worried lot now.

The next afternoon, Hambirrao attacked Ruhullah Khan and his troops. Many Mughal sardars like Akram Khan, Ibrahim Beg, Raja Durgasingh Madhoram and others were killed. Ruhullah Khan, now clearly frightened, decided to escape via Titwala. Little did he know that the route had been blocked by Sambhaji with twenty thousand men. Raje led the



attack as soon as they saw the Mughals approach. Ranmast Khan and Ruhullah Khan were stuck in the valley. With Hambirrao attacking from the rear while Sambhaji bore down on them from the other side, the Mughals were trapped like a betel nut in a nutcracker.

The Mughals ran helter-skelter, trying to find a way to escape. Shouts of ‘Har Har Mahadev’, ‘Jay Shivaji!’ and ‘Jay Sambhaji!’ were heard all over. Meanwhile, the sad news of his brother-in-law Rangoji dying in battle reached Hambirrao. By the time he returned to the camp, it was late in the night.

‘Hambirrao has been badly hurt,’ one of the messengers reported to Sambhaji.

Sambhaji rushed to his tent and was relieved to find Hambirrao awake. He had feared the worst. ‘An arrow took out a lump of flesh from my arm. That’s all!’

‘Mama, please take care,’ Sambhaji mumbled, unable to speak further.

‘Arre, my right hand is still functioning, don’t worry! Hambirmama said, laughing. Sambhaji himself dressed his wounds. Seeing his worried face, Hambirrao said, ‘Shambhubal, stop worrying! I was the one who led the elephant after Shivaji Raje’s coronation. And don’t think you ought to be worried about me because I am related to you. I never allowed my relation with Soyrabai and Rajaram to interfere with deciding whom I should support. Our relation is beyond all relations!’

Sambhaji looked questioningly at Hambirrao and he said, laughing loudly again, ‘It is a relation which binds both of us to the Marathi soil and to Shivaji!’

As they sat chatting, a message arrived. Aurangzeb had asked his troops to withdraw, keeping in mind the advancing monsoon. Sambhaji said, ‘Mamasahab, destiny took my father away too early. It is you who stand like a rock behind me. I hope you will take care of yourself. Be careful!’

‘The Delhi Badshah is strong like a rhinoceros. Compared to him the overzealous Maratha king is but a lamb. Once the rhino crushes the lamb, we will be the ones to benefit the most,’ Viceroy Conde de Alvor said.

His secretary Louis Gonsalves asked, ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Aurangzeb will retreat with the same enthusiasm that he is showing as he advances now. We will, without making much noise, get the entire Konkan strip from Malwan to Thane under our control. Goa will become an empire,’ Conde de Alvor boasted, sipping wine from a silver tumbler.

The message from Sambhaji, which the secretary had brought in, remained unopened on the table.

Conde de Alvor was a debauchee, a selfish and cunning man. All the Portuguese officials posted in Goa were corrupt. In addition to extending their country’s trade, they were making money on the side, filling their own coffers. Panaji had become an important centre of maritime trade in the region. All ships going east towards Java, Sumatra and Japan would halt at Goa. For the Portuguese, Goa was not only a rich and constant source of revenue but also one of unbridled power.

The Goan viceroy had begun to consider himself equal to the Portuguese king. Besides his own army, he had many African soldiers serving under him. The magnificent edifice of the Raj Bhawan, visible across the sandy beaches of Panaji, shone brilliantly in the moonlight. All around it, coconut trees swayed in the sea breeze. There was a lovely lake meant for the use of the viceroy’s family when they felt like swimming. The grounds were also dotted with many small guest quarters. All in all, it was no less than a palace, providing all manner of comforts and luxuries.

Conde de Alvor looked a typical Portuguese officer, wearing a stiff collar over a puffed shirt and loose trousers. He was short and stockily built. He stared at his subjects through his bluish eyes which did not reveal his emotions.

Remembering Sambhaji’s message all of a sudden, the viceroy asked his secretary to read it out. It said: *‘It has been nearly two and a half years since I took charge of the Maratha kingdom. Earlier, our emissary Ramji Thakur used to ensure correspondence between us. We have exchanged messages proclaiming our friendship. You have often reminded us that we are neighbours and have expressed the desire to maintain good relations. Yet, you act differently from what you propose in your letters. You promised*

*that you had nothing to do with the Mughal Emperor and that, if need be, you would support the Marathas in fighting them. Unfortunately, you have not bothered to honour the promises you made. You have allowed the Mughals to ferry their ships from Surat, carrying grain and ammunition. You have also betrayed our trust in the Thane region. Please keep in mind that you will have to pay a heavy price for such betrayals.'*

The viceroy sat worried for a while. On one hand there were threats from Sambhaji. On the other, he feared the Mughals. Neither of them were pleasant allies. He said, a little frustrated, 'How are we supposed to handle this?

'Sir, you must openly challenge and confront Sambhaji. That is what the Badshah wants, doesn't he?'

'That course of action is not without its pitfalls. Sambhaji is a short-tempered fellow. He has already created a lot of trouble for us in Kulaba and Thane, destroying our properties there. And he has kidnapped two of our priests at Vasai.'

Sir, we did take revenge. After all, we were able to capture Yesaji Gambhirrao who has been in our custody for the past three months.'

Yesaji Gambhirrao was brought into the Raj Bhawan. The viceroy said, 'Yesaji, I am extending a hand of friendship yet your master insists on attacking our stations. This will not help our relations to improve.'

'Sarkar, one cannot clap with one hand. Why did you allow the ships filled with ammunition for the Mughals to pass through waters controlled by you?'

Conde de Alvor was not one to keep quiet in the face of such accusations. He said in a challenging tone, 'Why does your Raja befriend the Arabs?'

'The same reason you have secret pacts with the Mughals!' Yesaji retorted.

That silenced the viceroy for a moment. Yesaji could not resist adding, 'Viceroy saheb, I don't think you ever had any plans of making friends with Sambhaji. You are waiting with bated breath for Aurangzeb's troops to defeat the Marathas!'

'Tchah! What are you blabbering? How does that help the Portuguese in any way?'

'Well, quite a bit, actually! You have been waiting to enjoy the riches that would be yours if you were to control the strip from Vengurla to

Panvel.’

Yesaji had precisely summarised the viceroy’s dream but de Alvor continued, ignoring his jibe, ‘Are you aware Sambhaji and his men have been creating havoc in Tarapur, Dahanu, Thane and elsewhere? He entered Chaul with six thousand foot-soldiers and two thousand horsemen, and looted the treasury there!’

Yesaji was delighted to hear that. Having been imprisoned for three months, he had not been able to get much information from the battle front. The viceroy sent back Yesaji to his prison cell and told his secretary, ‘We must find a way to get Aurangzeb to defeat the Marathas. But I am not willing to confront Sambhaji openly. Look at the way he has put fear in the hearts of the Siddis!’

The secretary said, ‘Sir, Sambhaji’s territory has borders with our province. I am told he often visits the ammunition factories at Dicholi and Kudal, and stays at the haveli at Dicholi.’

‘I know ...’

‘Often, while on shikaar, or when he visits temples, he does not have too many guards with him.’

‘Oh, I see! Tell our spies to be alert. Let them inform me as soon as they hear of Sambhaji’s presence in this area.’

It was 12 August 1683. The viceroy’s boat had reached the port of Diwadi before dawn. The Panchganga river flowed close by. It was the auspicious day of Gokulashtami. In the village of Narve, thousands had gathered for a dip in the river. People from far-off places, including Vengurla, had arrived for the occasion.

Sunrise was still an hour away. The viceroy stared at the opposite bank. As soon as it grew a little brighter, the viceroy took the brass binoculars from his faujdar and scanned the bank where the crowds were gathering. The very thought that he was peeping into Sambhaji’s territory tickled him.

The viceroy recalled the recent messages he had received from Aurangzeb: *‘Whatever territory we capture from the Marathas, we will be happy to offer it to the Portuguese. But if you manage to catch this kafir’s son, alive or dead, I will grant you the entire Konkan belt, including Goa.’* The viceroy was desperate to take hold of the entire strip of coast upto Panvel. He knew it would rake in millions for the Portuguese. He had been dreaming of this for years now.

The spies had brought him news of Sambhaji's arrival that day. The viceroy could not contain his excitement and was already revelling in his good fortune. He was sure that he would apprehend Sambhaji and fulfil his dreams.

He had placed his soldiers at strategic points all along the riverbank. They hid themselves in the bushes and waited. It was generally known that Sambhaji was accompanied by very few guards when he visited such places of pilgrimage. It was an opportunity the viceroy did not want to miss. He was willing to take a chance even if Sambhaji were to be accompanied by eight hundred soldiers! The reward would be well worth the risk.

The sun rose, brightening the whole scene. Hundreds of pilgrims were seen on the banks, taking a dip in the river. Realising that the vivid colours of his boat may be conspicuous, he ordered an ordinary fisherman who was passing by to stop. The soldiers helped the viceroy onto the boat and managed to squeeze into the space that remained. At that moment, Conde de Alvor noticed a Muslim fakir in the boat, along with four young disciples. The fakir, wearing green robes, with dark collyrium lining his eyes, patted each of the viceroy's soldiers with the peacock-feather fan he held in his hand, and muttered, 'Allah!' The Hindu soldiers were pleased to receive the fakir's blessings.

'Where are you headed to, Fakir baba?' the viceroy's faujdar asked.

'Today is the day of ashtami ...' the fakir smiled.

The viceroy was amused. He chuckled, wondering aloud why a Muslim fakir wanted to take the holy dip. The man answered, 'We are fakirs; for us Allah and Krishna are one and the same.'

The boat soon stopped at the ghats and the men started getting out. Before leaving, the fakir took the viceroy's hand lovingly and handed him his brass ring. The Viceroy felt blessed at receiving such a token from the holy man. One of the soldiers said, 'Saheb, it is a great honour to be given such a gift by a fakir!'

As the boat moved on, Conde de Alvor exclaimed, slapping his forehead with his palm, 'Oh my god! That reminds me ... inform the soldiers to frisk all the Hindu gosavis and godmen. I am told Shivaji used to roam around disguised as a godman.'

The day passed uneventfully as hundreds of men took the holy dip. The Hindu sadhus and sanyasis were frisked by the Portuguese soldiers.

Soon it was evening and the viceroy was deeply disappointed at not having accomplished his mission.

A few days later, they summoned Yesaji for a discussion. Yesaji noticed the brass ring on the Viceroy's fingers. Noticing that he was staring at it, the viceroy took the ring off and gave it to Yesaji.

Reading the characters engraved on the ring, Yesaji started laughing loudly. Snatching the ring back, the viceroy asked sharply, 'What is so funny about it?'

'I am sure your secretary can answer that.'

Loius Gonsalves read the letters on the ring—'Sambhaji'. He was stunned. Staring at the ring, he recalled the young, fair and sharp-featured fakir ... with his bright, penetrating eyes ...

## 4

'Why? Why are we not able to capture Ramshej?' The Badshah was in a foul mood. The imperial camp was now at Aurangabad, and the Emperor could barely sleep at night. Sambhaji had been making rounds all over the Sahyadris. He was also keeping a close watch on Ramshej. The fort, situated a few miles from Nashik, had been built in a place of religious importance. According to the Ramayan, Ram and Sita had stayed there. The fort was named after Lord Ram.

Ramshej had become a thorn in his side. The small yet stubborn fort had refused to yield to Mughal pressure. His father had captured Ramshej during his Deccan campaign and Aurangzeb was eager to see the green flag of the Mughals fluttering over it again. To capture Ramshej and then quickly take over the Trayambak, Ahivant, Markanda and Salher forts, to prevent Shahzada Akbar's march to Delhi, and to take over Konkan and arrest the kafir's son—it was a dream he wanted to fulfil at any cost. Yet, thousands of Mughal soldiers had died, but Ramshej refused to fall into his hands. With each passing day, the Badshah was getting more and more restless.

The fort had become a matter of prestige for both the Mughals and the Marathas. It was not as aesthetically appealing as many other forts but it was unyielding! Shahbuddin Khan was desperate to break its walls and enter. He had nearly thirty-five thousand soldiers under his command but they had not been able to make much headway. Khan could not understand it. The fort stood in isolation, unprotected by the hills around it. And to top that, it had barely nine hundred Maratha soldiers defending it.

The old fortkeeper, Suryaji Jedhe, was a seasoned and brave Maratha sardar. He had trained under Shelar Mama and had fought alongside his brother, Tanaji Malsure, when they captured Sinhagad.

Suryaji had received a letter from Sambhaji when the Mughals attacked: *'Suryaji Jedhe Mama, you are someone who has trained under Abasaheb. What advice can I give to someone as experienced as you? But I want to remind you of what Abasaheb used to say: that each of our forts can withstand Aurangzeb for five years and more! That way, with our three hundred and sixty forts, Aurangzeb will need a few lifetimes to win them! Jedhe Mama, I will say just just one thing—your fort is on the borders of Maharashtra. See that the old Badshah is held up at the border itself, and you shatter his dreams of ruining our Swarajya.'*

One such letter was enough for Suryaji! He had transformed Ramshej into an impregnable fortress. Like the black cobra who guards priceless treasures, Suryaji would roam the ramparts of the fort day and night. No one knew whether he even slept! His sheer determination had ensured that Ramshej was still beyond Mughal grasp.

Shahbuddin had come with the ambition to capture the fort in a few hours and read the evening prayers on the fort itself. But his hopes had been shattered by Jedhe and his men. The Mughals had attacked the main gate. They had managed to shake the door and were confident that they would be able to break in next day. But in the morning, to their utter surprise, they saw a newly built gate. The Marathas had magically transformed a battered gate into a strong new one, working overnight. The Mughal troops were now convinced that the Marathas were being helped by ghosts and spirits who protected the fort.

The area around the fort had witnessed some harrowing scenes due to frequent skirmishes between the two armies. Most of the villages in the area were abandoned now. Sambhaji was acutely aware that it was only Jedhe and his eight hundred men who remained. He had instructed Hambir Mama

to look into the matter. Hambirrao planned to spring a surprise attack with eight thousand men, devastating the Mughal camp which was thirty-five thousand strong. Meanwhile, Suryaji did not allow the Mughals to make progress during the day, and the night attacks by the Maratha added to their grief. They could barely sleep at night. This had been going on for months now.

Sharif Khan, another Mughal sardar, reached Ramshej in May 1682. Five hundred elephants and a thousand bullocks carted rations and ammunition. Suddenly, the forests in the vicinity resonated with whistles and signals. Nearly seven thousand Marathas, who had been hiding in the dense undergrowth, sprung a surprise attack. The battle lasted for two hours. Jahir Khan, Faizullah Khan and many other Mughal sardars were killed.

The Mughal troops at the base of the fort rushed to help their brothers. In the battle that ensued, nearly six hundred Marathas lost their lives and another two thousand men were wounded. But they had managed to destroy the bulk of the Mughal supplies. Sensing that they had suffered heavy losses, the Marathas retreated. Sharif Khan was tickled that he had managed to stave off the attack and immediately despatched a letter to Aurangabad, praising himself for the victory.

Asad Khan was aware of the fact that the Badshah was eagerly waiting to hear good news from Ramshej. He rushed to the Emperor, without having verified the facts in the message. ‘Congratulations, Hazrat! We have won!’

‘What? Have we taken the fort, or you are talking of a battle at the base?’

Asad Khan said, realising his excitement had been premature, ‘Ji, Huzoor! It was at the base.’

‘How foolish of you!’ Aurangzeb said, his eyes boring into Asad Khan, who was sweating nervously by now. ‘Why don’t our stupid sardars learn from the Marathas? Look at the way they repeatedly attack us and run away.’

Months passed by and Ramshej stood as invincible as before. Shahbuddin was frustrated and the Badshah was losing his patience. Shahbuddin had cut off all the routes which could be used to supply rations and other materials to the fort. Yet, Suryaji was as determined as before. He created cannons out of leather and wood to bombard the Mughal forces.



The newly built cannons were even more powerful than the ones he had earlier!

Shahbuddin realised that it was no use trying to attack Ramshej from the ground and issued orders for a huge wooden platform to be built. It could hold five hundred people. Then he began a fresh attack from there. The tall platform rose threateningly in front of the fort. The Mughal bombardment continued but it hardly made a dent on the little fortress.

There were messages flying daily from Aurangabad to the Mughal troops and from Raigad to the Maratha forces. An year and a half passed. Aurangzeb's spies relayed the news that Sambhaji was planning to send huge reinforcements to Ramshej. Alamgir instructed his milk-brother, Bahadur Khan Kolkatash, 'Bhaijaan, the kafirs dared to ransack Burhanpur once. Sambha managed to escape. I want you to capture Ramshej.'

He continued, 'Your casual attitude has cost us dearly. It was your lax security at Khandesh which allowed Shahzada Akbar to escape and join the Marathas.'

Bahadur Khan lowered his eyes, ashamed to meet Aurangzeb's stare. 'Hazrat, I have been promised by Shahbuddin that he will not return till he has taken Ramshej.'

'What does he lose, giving false promises? Does he realise my prestige has been shattered to pieces? I don't want the troops to lose their morale. So the two of you must try together.'

Taking only essential items with him and leaving the rest of the caravan at Bahadurgad, Bahadur Khan moved swiftly to Nashik. The information reached Sambhaji. He instructed Rupaji Bhosale and Manaji More to move immediately with eight thousand troops. Bahadur Khan had been given nearly fifteen thousand men. The two forces met and clashed at Ganesh village, not far from the base of the fort.

The Marathas suffered heavy losses, forcing Manaji and Rupaji to withdraw. Shahbuddin and Bahadur Khan were determined not to return till they had captured Ramshej.

The two Mughal sardars sat at their tents that evening. In the distance they could see the saffron flag fluttering on the ramparts of the fort. The sun slowly descended over the western horizon, just beyond the hills. Soon, there was complete darkness. Bahadur Khan instructed his men to start a relentless attack on the fort. The Mughal soldiers, with mashaals in their

hands, attacked yelling ‘Allah-o-Akbar!’ The Maratha sentries looked on, confident that nothing could touch the fort.

Unknown to the soldiers attacking the fort, Bahadur Khan and Shahbuddin had moved away and were instructing another Mughal battalion, numbering nearly fifteen hundred.

‘Now listen to me carefully,’ Shahbuddin said, as he dismounted. ‘I don’t want anyone to light a single lamp. I need men who can climb the walls of the fort.’

‘Those who are willing to die may step forward,’ Bahadur Khan challenged the men.

Nearly eight hundred men stepped forward. In the background the noise of the Mughal bombardment was audible. The Maratha sentinels on the walls were busy watching the drama unfold at the base of the fort. Suryaji Jedhe surveyed the scene for a while and said, ‘I remember Shelar Mama’s words. He had warned me that when you hear the hens making an unusual amount of noise, you can be sure there is something amiss.’ Soon, Suryaji had assembled a select group of men who disappeared into the darkness after receiving instructions from him.

At the rear of the fort the silence, compared to the commotion on the other side, was deafening. The Mughal soldiers were quietly making their way up the rock face. Using trees and thorny bushes to pull themselves up or support their weight, they progressed towards the top.

Finally, three men reached the top. To their astonishment, they were greeted by stones from slingshots which the Marathas had trained on them. With cries of ‘Allah!’ and ‘Run!’, they started climbing back down but were hit badly. As they fell, they took a few more down with them. In the meantime, the Marathas chanted ‘Har Har Mahadev!’, ‘Shivaji Maharaj ki Jay!’ and ‘Sambhaji Maharaj ki Jay!’, attacking those who were trying to climb up. Soon huge rocks and mashaals started raining down on the Mughals. Of the four hundred men who had been assigned the task, merely twenty or thirty managed to survive that dark night.

Shahbuddin was tired the next day as he had not slept the previous night. He rested the whole day but his head reeled with the defeat. He would glance angrily at the distant fort and its impregnable walls from time to time, stoking his own misery.

He realised he did not want to stay any longer in this inauspicious jungle. He planned to leave at once and stop over somewhere near Nashik

that night. He had just jumped onto his horse when he glanced at the wooden platform which the men had erected earlier. Rushing towards the platform, he instructed his men to surround it with bundles of dry grass. Soon, the bundles were lit and the platform started burning. Bahadur Khan ran to Shahbuddin saying, 'Have you gone mad? Why are you destroying it?'

'Khan sahab, I don't want anything to stand that was built by these sinners. We will start afresh.'

The platform burned through the night. Shahbuddin and his men turned towards Nashik. No one could see the tears rolling down his cheeks and disappearing into his white beard.

## 5

The skirmishes continued across Maharashtra, with both sides gaining and losing ground at various places. The sea of Mughal forces around Ramshej had not receded but the Maratha troops, like honeybees, would sting whosoever tried to scale their hive.

Bahadur Khan Kolkatash stared at the fort with disappointed eyes. One of his sardars suggested, 'Khan sahab, please don't mind my impertinence ... but why waste time? Why not take advice of an exorcist?' Bahadur Khan glared at his sardar. How dare the man suggest such a ridiculous thing? Kolkatash said, 'I can subdue not only the Marathas but their ghosts too. I am going to block all their supply routes. Let me see how long they can survive.'

Bahadur Khan instructed his men to find all the supply routes. He came to know that supplies were being sent intermittently from Trambakgad where Moropant Peshwa's brother Trimal was the fortkeeper. He kept a close watch on the route from Trambakgad.

All the routes were blocked. The soldiers at Ramshej were in trouble now. Meanwhile, Rupaji and Manaji's men were still trying to find a way to enter the fort with reinforcements but Bahadur Khan's troops were always

on guard. The men and horses were no longer able to use the underground passages leading into the fort as they too had been blocked by now.

In Raigad, Yesubai could not contain her anxiety. It would be shameful to allow the men at Ramshej to die of hunger. Bahadur Khan boasted of putting the men and animals there to a slow but sure death. Shambhu Raje, in the meantime, summoned Manaji to assist him near Kalyan. Bahadur Khan waited for a victory, which he felt was within grasp now.

After a sudden shower, Ramshej and its surroundings were covered in a thick blanket of fog. Suddenly, the Mughal troops were subjected to a horrible stink, as if animal carcasses were being burnt nearby. The hideous smell made the troops restless, and soon, they started vomiting. Bahadur Khan moved the troops away for the night, lest the soldiers started falling ill.

The very next day things had changed at Ramshej. The Maratha troops looked twice as energetic and alert as they had the night before. The existing strength of the troops seemed to have increased by a few hundred. Bahadur Khan realised that the previous night's ploy had worked in favour of the Marathas. Was it intervention by ghosts, he wondered uneasily? He was desperate for a solution now.

'Don't bother about the costs. Get me a good exorcist,' he commanded.

The same day, an exorcist arrived. The man said confidently, 'Khan sahab, all I need is a snake made of a hundred tolas of gold. Then follow me to the gates of the fort. You will be surprised at how they opens on their own!'

The jewellers at Nashik were immediately put to work and soon a huge snake was fashioned out of pure gold. Reminders from Badshah continued to arrive and Bahadur Khan replied, explaining his new strategy. He mentioned that the suggestion had been made by an exorcist.

The exorcist literally danced with joy seeing the golden snake. All the soldiers were now waiting to witness the magical opening of the gates. As the exorcist, followed by Bahadur Khan, his sardars and some soldiers, reached the gate, they were suddenly attacked by a hail of huge rocks from the ramparts. One of the stones hit a sardar on his chest and he fell on the ground with a loud thud. Another stone hit the exorcist on his forehead. The snake flew from his hand. With shouts of 'Ya Allah!', the rest of the

soldiers and Bahadur Khan ran away, much to the merriment of the Maratha troops on the walls.

A stinging note from Aurangzeb put Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan Kolkatash in his place. It said: *'One normally assumes that a man becomes wiser with age. But in your case it seems to have had a reverse effect. I am sure you remember how Shivaji, with a handful of men, had made you run away from Bahadurgad, leaving behind a treasury worth crores. Sambhaji has proved to be his father's son. He took your own dead animals and men and burnt them, making you and your men abandon your vigil. That allowed them enough time to provide additional men and supplies to the fort. Well, it is quite a tragedy that Siva's son turns out to be even shrewder than his father and continue to fool us ... it seems to be our fate!'*

## 6

For the Emperor, the palace at Aurangabad now felt worse than a jail. He was never at ease, constantly fearing an attack on the palace. What had he achieved in the last year and a half, he wondered. The miniscule fort at Ramshej had not yielded yet, while repeated excursions into the Konkan region had not been very fruitful. Shahzada Akbar was adamant as before while Sambhaji remained elusive.

Siddi Kasam and Khairyat were lucky to have survived but were mortally afraid of provoking Sambhaji now. The Badshah had sent a huge supply of grains and ammunition from Surat but they were still unwilling to take the Marathas head on.

Despite veiled threats from the Badshah, the Portuguese viceroy was not willing to take up arms against the Marthas either. The English too did not dare to step out of their territory. When Sambhaji was in Tiruchirappalli, the Mysore king Chikkadevaraja had sent urgent pleas for help but now he seemed to have gone silent.

The Badshah's younger shahzada, Azam, had returned from Panhala after tasting defeat. Hambirrao had chased him to the banks of the river Nira. Sleep eluded Aurangzeb as he recalled all the humiliating defeats the

Mughals had faced. He asked Asad Khan in a querulous tone, 'Wazir, how do we reconcile ourselves to the fact that a mere twenty-five-year-old makes us look like amateurs? What is it that we lack? Resources?'

'That we have in plenty.'

'A huge army? Daredevil soldiers?'

'We have more than we need, Hazrat. The very sight of our ocean-like army is enough to put fear in the enemies' hearts.'

'The reality is very different from what you imagine, Wazir,' Aurangzeb said, in a distressed voice. 'The very thought of entering the ravines and gorges in the mountains here makes our soldiers shiver with fear.'

He stood up for a moment and then sat down again. He said agitatedly, 'I am sixty-five while that kafir's son is in his mid-twenties. On one side we have the Badshah of Hindustan; on the other is a mere landlord's son. He cannot be compared to me by any stretch of the imagination. Yet, I am not able to subdue him. That pains me, Asad Khan ...'

He continued, after a pause, 'It seems the ghost of Dara is not willing to leave me.'

'Please forget those days, Jahanpanah. It has been more than twenty years.'

'Once upon a time Rohilla Diler Khan was in Dara's camp.'

'Please be patient, Jahanpanah. It seems you are not well. Why look at poor Diler Khan with suspicion? He had been with you ever since you attacked Delhi to capture Dara. He has been at your service all these years.'

'But how can I forget that it was Diler Khan who allowed Sambha to escape? I would not have been suffering today had he managed to hold Sambhaji captive.'

'Men do make mistakes,' the Wazir said, trying to avoid the Badshah's eyes. 'No one would ever dare to suggest Siva and Sambha were deliberately allowed to escape from Agra.'

Aurangzeb let out a deep sigh and was silent for a while. The Badshah was under great stress. He had crossed the river Tapti with a lot of hope and a gigantic army of five lakh men and four lakh animals. But the rocky and thorny province he entered had left him shaken. He had been sure not only of putting Sambha in chains but also of arresting his shahzada and then marching on the Shia-ruled Bijapur and Golconda kingdoms to subdue them.

He had nursed a dream of capturing the entire Maharashtra in a matter of six months. But now, eighteen months down the line, he had nothing to show for his troubles.

‘Sometimes I am tempted to give all this up and return to Delhi,’ he said in a frustrated tone. ‘It is clear that capturing Sambha is not as easy as we thought it would be. And destiny is not on our side.’

He continued, ‘Shahzada Akbar may be foolish but he is a good man ...’ Wazir Asad Khan raised his eyebrows questioningly and Aurangzeb said, making a face as if he had swallowed a bitter medicine, ‘Shahzada Akbar revolted openly. I am sure the other shahzadas too are silent admirers of our enemy. Tell me frankly, Wazir! Is that true? I believe Shahzada Muazzam admires Sambha. I believe he has made a secret treaty with the Marathas. What do you say?’

Wazir knew that it was better to keep quiet than reply to his rhetorical question. He was well aware of the Badshah’s suspicious nature. He had finished off all his brothers—Shuja, Murad and Dara—before ascending the throne at Delhi. He had put his eldest son Muhammad Sultan in prison for life for having supported Shuja. He had made life miserable for his father Shah Jahan. He had also sentenced his daughter Zebunissa to life imprisonment for having helped her brother Akbar. He was acutely aware that his sons would do to him what he had done to his father and brothers. This led to him keeping a strict eye on the movements of all his sons and begums. His spies had been working under them for years as washermen, cooks and other servants. The Badshah received regular updates from the palaces of his begums and his shahzadas.

But his own suspicious nature troubled him. He would at times confide to Udepuri Begum, ‘Begum sahiba, what is the use of this Sultanate, all this wealth and fame? I have vaults filled with diamonds and other precious stones but that does not help me to buy peaceful sleep. Sometimes I wonder if the half-naked fakirs and beggars sleeping on the stone steps of the masjid and the dogs dozing without a care in the world are luckier than I am!’

Coming out of his reverie, Aurangzeb instructed his Wazir, ‘Keep a strict eye on Shahzada Azam.’

When Asad Khan looked hesitatingly at Aurangzeb, he thundered, ‘Don’t argue! And call Diler Khan and Azam back from their campaigns. I want them here!’

‘As you command, Jahanpanah,’ was all Asad Khan could say.

Udepuri Begum and Shahzadi Zeenat-un-Nissa were both worried. Asad Khan said, trying to pacify them, ‘Begum sahiba, beti Zeenat, Badshah is upset that we have not had any success in the Deccan despite all our efforts. It is natural that he is becoming more and more suspicious. We need to engage him, distract him; else the ghost of suspicion will make him a lunatic. He needs to rest for a while.’

Udepuri Begum struggled to find a way to distract the Badshah from his current obsession. She finally found a solution. That evening, after the prayers, she said, ‘My dear, I have never asked you for anything. Will you fulfil my one desire?’

‘What is it?’

‘I would like you to take me to Verul.’

‘Verul? Don’t you know that it is a place of pilgrimage for the kafirs?’

‘Abbajaan,’ Zeenat said, ‘There is a unique blue bird called Nilkanth there. I wish that you see it once.’

Aurangzeb looked sharply at his daughter and his begum. Asad Khan, his son Zulfikar Khan and the Badshah’s daughter-in-law Sheherbanu Begum, were present too. They were surprised at the odd request made by Udepuri Begum.

Aurangzeb said, ‘Begum sahiba, no one dares to speak of the kafir temples in my presence. Why are you then so keen to take me to a place worse than hell? What is so special about the stone lingam in the caves there?’

‘Hazrat, if a man concentrates and stares at the lingam for a long time, he will be able to see his future.’

The Badshah was not convinced but the proposal had been made by his favourite begum and his beloved daughter after all. He could not refuse. The next day, they left for Verul. Most of the troops stayed back in Aurangabad while a small contingent of seven thousand soldiers accompanied the Emperor’s party. A few decorated elephants as well as a few thousand horses and camels completed the caravan.

The royal procession reached the caves of Verul by evening. The Badshah’s forehead creased at the sight of the Kailash temple in the distance. He said, turning to Zulfikar Khan, ‘Beta, remind me to build a masjid here in place of that temple once I destroy Sambha and the Marathas.’



They reached the caves. Aurangzeb stared at the Shiva Linga inside the cave for a long time. Suddenly, he sensed something and sweat broke out on his forehead. He turned to go, shouting, 'You idiots! Let us go. I don't want to be at the graveyard of these kafirs!'

The Badshah had ordered his tent to be pitched near one of the caves. He was angered seeing the statues of gods and goddesses, and the carvings of elephants in the Kailash temple. He gave orders to his men to destroy the sculptures. The men started breaking the idols and defacing the images on the temple walls. Soon, there was dust and broken stone everywhere. Udepuri felt disturbed. The work may have been done by Hindus but she felt that the carvings had something noble, something unique, in them.

She realised that Badshah was very upset about having come to Verul on her insistence. She wisely refrained from giving him any advice against despoiling the caves. Zeenat tried to pacify her father, 'Abbajaan, why do you want to sit here and supervise? Let Zulfikar manage that. You must take rest.'

That night they camped at the village of Verul. It had not been an easy task to destroy statues and carvings made of hard stone. They were the work of generations of stoneworkers and sculptors. The Mughal soldiers managed to break a few sculptures but they found it impossible to destroy some of the bigger ones. The arches and the larger temples stood as they were.

Zulfikar ordered his men to fill the caves with hay and dry grass and set fire to them. Soon, dense smoke spread across the night sky. Most of the idols survived the inferno but the beautiful paintings suffered damage. Seeing smoke and flames coming out of the caves soothed the Badshah's frayed nerves.

Udepuri asked a few days later, 'Hazrat, what did you see in the cave the other day that made you so miserable?'

'A pig! Do you think I am such a sinner that I will be a pig in my next life? Huh!' The Badshah dismissed the discussion with a wave of his hand. Udepuri remained silent.

There was silence in Aurangzeb's camp. He had called for a meeting of all his chief sardars—Ranmast Khan, Khan Jahan Khan, Asad Khan, Zulfikar Khan and others. Of late the Badshah had become very suspicious and cantankerous, and no one was sure how he would react to anything.

Even a lifelong servant of his like Diler Khan was restless. He had been recalled from his campaign and was being escorted to Aurangabad by five thousand of the Badshah's men. His only consolation was that he had not been put in chains but he feared that day might arrive soon. In any case it was evident that he was literally under arrest and would soon be presented in the Badshah's court. Diler Khan had seen guards posted outside his tent at night, apparently to prevent his escape. Even the begums stayed away from the Badshah these days. The men serving his meals and the khojas under his command were always on tenterhooks.

The Badshah said, 'Tell me, Asad Khan; I have been roaming around Sambha's territory for a year and a half with a huge army. I am like a nomad. But what I have achieved? I can understand the success of his tactics in the Sahyadris, but what about Ahmednagar and Warhad where Hambir is making life difficult for us? With a troop strength of merely fifteen thousand, he is destroying our camps and stations there.'

'Hazrat, Hambir seems like a man possessed. His horses move with lightning speed; that is what my soldiers tell me,' Musad Khan stood up as he spoke.

'Sit down, you idiot! Are you praising that kafir or criticising him?' Aurangzeb thundered.

Aurangzeb looked at all the sardars in attendance. No one wanted to meet his eye.

'I have not been able to make even a dent in Sambha's realm. I have decided; I am going to return!'

It was as if lightning had struck the men. They all looked nervously at each other and then at Aurangzeb. Seeing their confused looks, Aurangzeb clarified, 'I am returning to Delhi. My Shahzada Muazzam, Bahadur Khan Kolkatash, Wazir Asad Khan—we have many capable sardars here to continue fighting.'

Aurangzeb got down from his seat. His tone had not been one of reprimand. Of late he had become despondent; it was evident to everyone. His decision seemed resolute. They all looked at Asad Khan, who was the

oldest among them. Many of the sardars expressed their disappointment, exclaiming, 'Tauba, tauba, Ya Allah!' Asad Khan could not restrain himself any more and fell at Aurangzeb's feet. He wailed, 'You may be like a son to me but you are my Lord! Your strength is like that of an ocean. You cannot leave us alone, my Jahanpanah!'

'Chachajaan, don't stop me!'

'Jahanpanah, you are the protector of Islam; you are our pride. You are called a living saint—zinda peer! The moment Sambha comes to know that you have left, our troops will die a dog's death at his hands. Our dead bodies would not even reach Delhi!'

Zulfikar Khan and others followed suit; soon several sardars had fallen at the Badshah's feet. Aurangzeb realised that their pleas were heartfelt. He was quite pleased. He returned to his chair and looked at everyone present. They all sat looking devotedly at him, waiting for him to speak. They were convinced that without the Alamgir's presence and command, they were useless and in no position to fight a battle against the Marathas.

Aurangzeb said, 'You are all protectors of Islam. It is my misfortune that I am stuck here. The Shia rulers of Golconda and Bijapur are no less than the Hindu kafirs. What a pity that an ordinary landlord's son is making the Mughal Emperor dance to his tune! So tell me: will you all work wholeheartedly for the cause of saving Islam?'

'Ji Huzoor! Ji Jahanpanah!' They all shouted in unison.

'Are you ready to die for the cause of Islam, for your Emperor?'

'Ji, Hazrat! We will sacrifice ourselves!'

Aurangzeb knew he had roused the men. Yet, he was not completely satisfied. He took his crown off and held it in his hand. The Mughal crown, with its hundreds of diamonds and other gems, glittered in the light of the lamps. Holding it high over his head, he flung it with force. The crown banged against the walls and fell with a clattering noise on the floor as the jewels scattered all around.

Aurangzeb stood with his head held high. He curled his wrists and puffed his chest. The veins in his neck bulged as he thundered, 'My friends and saviours of Islam! Alamgir makes a promise today. Till I chase Sambha out of the Deccan and tear him into pieces, I shall not wear this crown on my head!'

FOURTEEN

Attack  
on Goa





# 1

Aurangzeb behaved like a man who had just recovered from a long illness and was now fully fit. He had emerged from the cave of his depression and misfortune. The sixty-five-year-old Badshah had started working on his Deccan campaign with renewed vigour. All the sardars and shahzadas were impressed at his turnaround. ‘Work, work, and work; that’s what has possessed Alamgir,’ they said.

Aurangzeb had a clear hold on the affairs of his campaign now. He knew the minutest details of every operation. Faujdar Baloch Khan and his son Abu Muhammad were frequently seen visiting the Badshah. Many were quite surprised to see the twenty-three-year-old Abu Muhammad getting the Emperor’s attention.

Aurangzeb rarely, if ever, praised anyone in public. That day, the sardars in attendance were surprised to hear the Emperor praising Abu Muhammad openly. ‘Don’t be fooled by his age. Look at what he has achieved!’ Aurangzeb said, throwing a glance at his sardars as he pointed at Abu Muhammad.

On cue, Abu Muhammad unrolled the map he was carrying. It was a detailed map of the Sahyadris.

‘Beta, tell me about the mountains.’

‘Jahanpanah, the Sahyadris are full of thorny jungles, dangerous mountains, deep valleys and gorges.’

‘How many entry routes do we have?’

There are a total of three hundred and sixty entry routes. Of which only sixty-five allow elephants, camels and other such animals to travel.’

‘What about the rest?’

‘The rest are very narrow and treacherous. Even tigers would fear to traverse such routes.’

Alamgir asked the question that was on everyone's lips, 'How did you manage to get such detailed information?'

'I have been fond of travelling in the mountains since childhood. I came here six years ago to explore the Sahyadris. With the help of many gosavis and fakirs, I traversed this difficult terrain. And in order to help travellers like me in future, I made this map.'

Aurangzeb took out his own maps. Studying them, he pointed out some of the mistakes in Abu's map, taking the young man by surprise. The Badshah then honoured Abu with gifts of fine robes and precious jewels. He said, turning to his Wazir, 'We need to progress in this direction. Find out more about these routes. Recruit men who know the routes. Pay them well.'

'Zulfikar, I am told Sambha is planning to attack the Portuguese in Goa.'

'Does he think he can survive the firangi cannons?' Asad Khan asked, laughing.

Everyone joined in his laughter except Aurangzeb. He was aware of the strength and determination of his arch enemy. He had made a plan over the past few nights. He presented the plan to his men. 'Sambha has taken a bold step, entering into the firangi territory. While he is busy there, we will enter south Konkan through Kolhapur and Belgaum, with a troop strength of fifty thousand.'

Asad Khan raised a doubt, 'Huzoor, how would we maintain such a large army on the move? We will need rations.'

'Wah! You have asked the right question! I have already instructed our Subedar in Surat to send his ships. They will cross the Arabian sea via Mumbai, Janjira and Rajapur, and move towards Panaji.'

'Jahanpanah, we must be aware of the ports and stations Sambha has created along the route. They will bombard our ships.'

'We have enough ammunition to counter them. Secondly, the Portuguese have no option but to come to our aid.'

Seeing Zulfikar shake his head and sigh heavily, Aurangzeb asked, 'What is the matter Zulfikar? You don't seem to be in agreement.'

'Hazrat, our plan is ambitious. But the moment Sambha comes to know that our troops are on the move, he would quickly withdraw and hide in Raigad.'

Aurangzeb smiled. He said, pointing to the map spread out in front of him, 'While one contingent is moving towards Goa, another would be moving rapidly towards Raigad from Panvel and Kalyan. They will meet near Mahad and then, together, they will blast the rocky capital of the Marathas to pieces.'

Seeing everyone applaud his plan, Aurangzeb warned, 'Don't be so enamoured by it. We have to ensure strict coordination if we want to achieve success. Else, nothing will happen.'

'I have one more plan,' Aurangzeb continued, as he pointed to various places on the map. 'I will descend into the Konkan with another ten thousand men. We must burn the region. But we need to be extremely alert. If we are lax, we can be sure of being attacked by the ryots. Their loyalty to the Marathas is unquestionable.'

Aurangzeb wanted to know who should lead the campaign in the south of Konkan. The unanimous candidate was Shahzada Muazzam. The tall, forty-five-year-old shahzada was well regarded for his pleasing personality and soft-spoken nature. For a brief moment, Aurangzeb's face showed surprise at the overwhelming support for Shahzada Muazzam. It was decided that he would lead the Konkan campaign.

Aurangzeb called on Dukhalas Khan, Latif Shah Dakkhani and the head of artillery, Atish Khan, who stood up. Then Alamgir said, 'The trustworthy Maratha, Nagoji Mane Mhaswadkar.' Hearing his name, Nagoji stood up, six feet tall. Aurangzeb said, looking at him with pride, 'Beta Muazzam, keep one thing in mind: there are many families in Maharashtra who have remained loyal to Adilshah, Nizamshah, and the Mughals. They have never supported upstarts like Siva and Sambha to be their king. Nagoji belongs to one such family. He will remain loyal to his master, always!'

When asked who would lead the campaign towards Kalyan-Panvel, Zulfikar Khan stood up, hoping to be given the command. Aurangzeb reined in his ambitions, saying, 'Zulfi beta, you are young. You are also my cousin and I don't want to disappoint you, but the campaign requires not only a daredevil but someone who has the nerve to behead the kafirs while razing their temples to the ground. After giving it much thought, I have decided that the person to lead this campaign will be Shahbuddin alias Gaziuddin Feroz Jung.'

Zulfikar protested, 'Jahanpanah, he has not been able to capture the tiny fort of Ramshej!'



‘Zulfikar, one cannot judge a person by one failure alone.’

Shahbuddin was sent an urgent message, instructing him to take charge of the campaign in the North. He was camping in Junnar when he received Aurangzeb’s message, ‘Descend the Naneghat into Konkan. Sambha should get trapped between your troops and Muazzam’s. And keep in mind that Sambha is like the wind—elusive and not easy to contain.’

Muazzam was getting ready to confront the Marathas at Ramdara. He received news of Sambhaji’s victory at Revdanda and Chaul near Alibag. That night Aurangzeb conferred with Muazzam. He said, ‘Sambha has moved Akbar to Banda near Goa. Once you descend into Konkan from Ramdara, you must first attack Banda and arrest that stupid shahzada.’

The next morning, Aurangzeb ordered his servants and khojas to start packing. ‘There is no point in sitting here in Aurangabad now,’ he told Asad Khan. ‘I need to be closer to the action. We will shift to Ahmadnagar.’

‘Jahanpanah ...’ Asad Khan mumbled as he bowed.

‘Well, Siva’s son has surely made me young once again!’

## 2

Strong winds blew at Rajapur, shaking Sambhaji’s tent. Khando Ballal entered. For a moment Sambhaji was reminded of his father, Balaji Chitnis. He had the same sharp nose and light, shining eyes. Sambhaji said, as he gestured to Khando to sit, ‘Khandoba, you are the Chitnis. There are battles going on at Tarapur, Thane, Chaul, Revdanda, and many other places. Should you not be holding fort in Raigad?’

‘Maharaj ...’

‘You can’t put the whole burden on Yesubai’s shoulders. Had Kaviraj been there, I would not have been worried. But given the circumstances, I suggest you return immediately to Raigad.’

Khandoba did not reply for a while. Sambhaji was concerned. Then the young Maratha said, ‘I did not come here on my own volition, Maharaj. I was sent by Maharajisaheb.’

‘What for?’

‘She was worried about you and wanted me by your side.’

Sambhaji smiled. He knew Yesubai was concerned about his health. ‘She is managing the administration of such a huge territory on her own but gets worried if she hears I am unwell!’

Seeing Sambhaji smile, Khando Ballal was a little relieved. ‘I also had a personal interest in being here.’

‘What about it?’

‘Well, I was keen to see how the Maratha Chhatrapati makes his sword speak for his valour when he attacks the Goans!’

Sambhaji looked at Khando Ballal with pride. Memories of the way Balaji Chitnis had been put to death along with the traitors, and the confusion created because of the delayed letter, flooded his mind. Sambhaji said, his voice quivering with emotion, ‘Khandoba, I remember how Balaji Kaka’s death was an unfortunate and avoidable accident. The very thought breaks my heart. The traitors had held him to ransom and I never received his letter on time. Khandoji, I am the real culprit. I am the one who committed the crime!’

‘Raje, no one is at fault. It is our misfortune. The time was not right for us, that’s all! Raje, please forget what happened. You offered me my father’s post and took care of our family. What more can we ask for?’

‘Khandoji, before I left for the campaign, I had instructed the fortkeeper in Raigad to build a temple where Balaji Kaka was killed. The constant dripping of water over the Shiva Linga at the temple would represent the tears flowing down my cheeks.’

Khando Ballal rushed to touch Sambhaji’s feet. ‘Maharaj, thousands die doing their duty every day. No one remembers them! But the way you preserve the memory of my father in your heart gives me a glimpse of your kindness and the love you have for us.’

Sambhaji let out a deep sigh. ‘The Lord’s ways are mysterious! Man can never understand Him ... or destiny.’ As Sambhaji spoke he recalled the huge fort at Ahmednagar where, for the past three years, Durgadevi and Ranuakka had been imprisoned. He remembered his young daughter who was growing up there.

The next morning, Sambhaji asked Khando Ballal, ‘So, when are you leaving for Raigad?’

Khando Ballal said, ‘Raje, my father did not have the good fortune of accompanying you when you attacked Janjira. At least let me be with you

on the Goa campaign.'

### 3

Durgadas Rathore spoke animatedly 'We should not wait any further, Raje! The Portuguese viceroy is not only cunning; we now know he is a traitor. We must attack without wasting any more time.'

Sambhaji had camped at Rajapur. Sitting in his tent were Durgadas Rathore, Shahzada Akbar, Yesaji Kank and Kavi Kalash. The sea shore was visible from the tent. Coconut trees swayed in the wind. Sambhaji looked at his seventy-year-old sardar Yesaji Kank. Sporting a stylish turban, an embroidered zari-bordered angarkha and a pure white dhoti, he had an air of confidence which came with age and experience. Sitting next to him was Krishnaji, a smart young man in his twenties. He was Yesaji's son.

'Yesaji Mama,' Sambhaji began, 'you are the commander of the foot-soldiers. I am going to ask you to undertake a dangerous campaign.'

'Raje, this old man will not think twice before jumping into a pit of fire if you command it.'

'I trust you, Mama. You were with us at Agra. And although I could not participate in the Karnatak campaign with Abasaheb, I know you played an important role.'

'Balraje, didn't Kondaji sacrifice himself for your cause? This old man too is ready, Raje, to sacrifice himself for the Swaraj.'

The discussion centred around the attack on Goa. They talked of the bays, the ports, the Portuguese palaces and churches and the firangi posts guarding them. Sambhaji was angered by the way Conde de Alvor had behaved. 'He is a selfish and a dangerous man. On one hand he sends me jewels and gifts on the occasion of Shahu's birth, while on the other, he hatched a plot to arrest me when I was visiting Narwe on an auspicious day. What should we do about him?'

'Attack Goa! Nothing else,' Yesaji Kank growled.

'Tomorrow, if Aurangzeb's forces come towards Goa, he will not hesitate to take their side. I am told he has already signed a secret treaty

with the Mughals.’

Sambhaji stretched his hand towards Kalash who took out a bunch of papers. It was a copy of the secret treaty. It clearly stated that the Badshah would give all the territory he won in Konkan to the Portuguese. In lieu of this grant, the Portuguese would allow the Mughals to establish a naval force in their coastal waters.

‘We need to hit him hard before he gets an opportunity to join the Mughals.’

Everyone was eager for action. The prospect of attacking Goa was an exciting one.

Despite the overwhelming enthusiasm all around, Sambhaji was worried. He knew that it would not be easy to tackle the Portuguese with their advanced artillery, their high-walled forts and naval prowess.

That night, Sambhaji composed an urgent message for the English. They had been requesting permission to start trading near Jinji. He ordered Kavi to send the permit to their harbour at Mazgaon. ‘It is better to have them on our side,’ Sambhaji said.

While Sambhaji and his men were walking along the beach at Rajapur late in the evening, he said, ‘Yesaji Kaka, don’t forget that the Portuguese have been in Goa for nearly a hundred years. Their cannons and ships are quite powerful. Our horses are of no use on water.’ He paused for a moment to remove the sand from his sandals and asked, ‘But what if we find a way to lure the Portuguese to the sound of our hooves?’

## 4

The tavern at Panaji harbour was crowded with sailors, traders, foreign visitors, and such. A few strangers had been seen roaming around in the vicinity over the past two days. It was difficult to assess their ethnicity: their grey eyes made them seem like Konkani, the long pointed beards suggested Afghani origins, and they were nearly as fair as firangis. They whispered to each other as they sat sipping wine, ‘Sambha has got a huge treasure worth nearly five crores at the Ponda fort. The ammunition stock is

also huge. The army is expected any day now.’ Soon the whispers reached the ears of Viceroy Conde de Alvor. He muttered, ‘Shiva’s son has always had a fascination for Goa. He has procured construction material to build a fort at Anjadiv, I am told.’

Other spies confirmed that the number of soldiers at Ponda are few in number but surely they are up to something. The viceroy was optimistic. ‘He managed to slip away two months back,’ de Alvor said, ‘We had nearly got him at Narwe. Let me see how he escapes this time.’ The Mughal army was expected soon. But the viceroy dreamt of taking over the Ponda fort and its treasury even before they arrived. If the rain gods were on his side, he hoped to march on to Konkan too. Not to mention the Mughal Badshah’s felicitation!

The viceroy raised an army of three thousand foot-soldiers, of whom nearly two thousand men were locally recruited Kannadigas. One early morning in October 1683, the army streamed out of Panaji. It was led by the viceroy himself. Three long cannons were pulled by bullocks. The soldiers marched in an orderly fashion, holding swords and rifles in their hands. They reached the banks of the river Mandovi, their feet sinking in the soft sand. It was after a long time that such an army had marched out of Goa and men from nearby villages came out in hordes to watch.

Some of his commanders advised the viceroy to avoid the port of Durbhat. ‘The Maratha subedar Dulba Naik holds fort there. It is better to avoid a confrontation.’

‘Let us see,’ the viceroy said, not wanting to give up his new-found bravado.

To everyone’s surprise, Dulba Naik came running out of the fort to meet the viceroy and hugged him affectionately. The viceroy kissed him on the cheeks. Dulba had turned traitor and joined the firangis! The viceroy was now firmly convinced that he could easily crush the Marathas and take Ponda fort.

The men marched, unsure of their final destination. They reached the base of the fort by night. Cold biting winds made the soldiers shiver. Suddenly the skies opened up and torrential rain descended on the viceroy’s army. Conde de Alvor stood in the downpour, his coat and dress completely drenched. He had brushed aside the servant trying to hold an umbrella over head. Taking advantage of the darkness, he instructed his artillerymen to place the cannons on a hillock facing the fort. The bullocks struggled to pull

the weight up the slope, some of them fracturing their limbs as they climbed slowly. Finally, they managed to reach the top. The viceroy said, 'The Marathas seem to be sleeping peacefully. Let us bury them while they do!'

The cannons began their bombardment. The walls of the Ponda fort shuddered as the firangi cannonballs found their mark. Soon, the Marathas reacted. The cannons from the fort boomed. Even in the heavy downpour, the flames of the cannons could be seen as they emitted their cannonballs. Mud flew all over as the heavy artillery continued to pound both sides.

The second night didn't favour the Marathas. The ramparts were already damaged by heavy shelling, and in the pouring rain, one of the cannons fell off the fort, taking part of the wall with it. The Portuguese camp celebrated with loud cheers. But the defiant Marathas were not willing to give up. The viceroy stood in the rains, looking rather dejected. He had stood there for two days, his drenched coat having dried on him. They had been bombarding the fort for three days but it was putting up a spirited resistance. Frustrated, he pulled Dulba Naik by his collar and demanded, 'Tell me! How many Marathas are there inside?'

'Sarkar, I was told that there were only ten or twelve. I don't know if Kavi Kalash and Sambhaji have managed to get more people in through their black magic.'

'It is not black magic, you idiot! It is Sambha's foresight and planning.'

Conde de Alvor changed his strategy, getting the cannons back on ground and targeting the fort from there. The hammering proved effective and the viceroy was convinced that at any moment the Marathas would stream out of the fort. He ordered his men to fill the moat and cross it. Soon, the moat was filled with mud and rocks. Yet, the response from the fort was an unnerving silence. As the firangis climbed up the walls using ladders, the Marathas, led by Yesaji Kank, suddenly attacked shouting 'Har Har Mahadev!' While the elderly commander led the attack, his son Krishnaji started throwing the ladders back on the ground. The firangis were falling into the moat. The six hundred Marathas inside the fort and the two hundred hiding in the bushes around it were itching for a hand-to-hand combat.

Five days passed. The fort had suffered damage but the Marathas showed no signs of yielding. The rains continued although they were not heavy enough to stop the battle. The viceroy was now losing patience.

Dulba Naik suggested that they retreat. 'I have not crossed the seven seas to be repulsed by these petty Marathas,' the viceroy thundered. One day a few firangis managed to enter the fort through a hole they had made in the wall. Krishnaji Kank, watching from the top of a wall, jumped down into their midst. In the process he sprained his ankle badly and was immediately attacked by the firangi soldiers from all sides. Despite being wounded on his chest and his back, he managed to kill nearly a dozen firangis. Enemy soldiers continued to enter through the breach.

Yesaji saw his son being attacked and rushed to save him. A hundred odd Marathas came forward to support him. Heavy fighting ensued. The firangis were now trying to flee to save their lives. Krishnaji collapsed on the ground with a hundred or more cuts on his body. The men quickly brought a palanquin and rushed the unconscious Krishnaji to the inner quarter where a physician started applying some herbs on his wounds. Yesaji tried his best to soothe his son. He himself had a deep cut on his calf which bled profusely. The men tied a bandage to stem the blood flow. Manaji More said, 'Baba, you look after your son. We will push the firangis back.'

'No, that cannot be! I have promised Shambhu that I will crush the enemy. I cannot retreat so easily.'

By dawn the next day, the Portuguese viceroy was seething with anger. He was not making any progress. The rain showed no signs of abating. The firangi soldiers stood ready with tall ladders and ropes tied around their waists. Suddenly, across the fields, they heard cries of 'Har Har Mahadev.' The Marathas from the fort were heard shouting, 'Raje has come! Sambhajiraje is here!'

Within a few minutes Sambhaji's men were near the fort. The viceroy ordered his men to attack but the firangis were literally frozen with fear. Sambhaji reached the gates of the fort on his horse, followed by Khando Ballal who rode behind him.

Sambhaji asked six hundred of his eight hundred men to surround the fort. The viceroy ordered his men to use their rifles but their gunfire seemed to make no difference to the Marathas. One of the Portuguese captains suggested that they retreat. 'If Sambhaji enters the river, our retreat will be cut off.' Against his wishes and hiding his tears, the viceroy gave the order to retreat. The firangis, wearied by the incessant Maratha attack, retreated hastily.

The battered firangi army reached the creek near Durbhat. A few Marathas hiding in the hills nearby attacked the retreating soldiers. The firangis opened fire but the Marathas, dodging bullets with their shields and horses, continued their attack. One of them, using his jamdaad—a curved snake-like sword—cut through the Viceroy’s leather armour, inflicting a wound near his ribs. The firangis jumped into the Mandovi’s waters to save their lives. Many drowned. A desperate viceroy tried spanking his soldiers with his cane but now their only concern was to save their own lives. The viceroy, smeared in mud, surveyed the damage done by the Marathas. Sambhaji and his men had managed to literally pound the three-thousand-strong firangi army to pulp. The survivors were in the river, trying to swim to safety.

## 5

It had been ten days since the attack at Ponda. Conde de Alvor’s wound was yet to heal but he resolved to put up a show of power and invincibility. He selected the date of 25 November 1863. It was on the same day, many decades ago, that the Portuguese had taken over Goa. The viceroy decided to commemorate the old victory with celebrations.

However, Conde de Alvor was an anxious man these days. He had never expected the Marathas to repulse their attack so effectively. His own emissary had assured him that Sambhaji and his men were no match for the firangis. Such false assurances had got him into trouble.

The viceroy had earned his spurs in Spain and begun his career in Goa as Governor of Angole. The city of Panaji was surrounded by a fortified stone wall with strong ramparts. A big ammunition store and many forts on the river—Aguada, Cabu Reis de Magos and others—ensured strong protection against any attack. Yet de Alvor was now apprehensive, having tasted defeat once. His anxiety increased when a spy brought information that Maratha soldiers had been spotted hiding in the woods around Panaji.

The wily viceroy put forth a proposal for his captains, involving a sum of three hundred thousand gold coins. ‘Sambhaji and his men are looting



the territories all the way from Vasai and Daman upto Goa. We don't have enough troops to defend ourselves. The Mughal Emperor has promised support but that is far away. We have not got any reinforcements from Portugal despite my reminders. We need money to be able to defend our forts!'

He passed another order. All prisoners in Panaji were to be released on the condition that they would fight in the battle. The sole objective was the repulse the Maratha attack on Goa.

Meanwhile, as the city of Panaji was celebrating the festival, just a few miles from the borders of Goa, a new development was taking place. The river Mandovi breaks into two streams, a little north of old Goa. There, the Portuguese fort of St. Estevam stood on the island of Juve. It was a strong fort with high walls. Sambhaji and his men had surrounded the fort while hiding themselves in the coconut groves around it.

Khando Ballal said, 'Maharaj, just a few days back we put the firangis in their place. I wonder why they still don't come to their senses.'

'Well, let them decide when they want to. I am told a huge ship carrying grain from Surat has reached Goa. It is clear that the Portuguese are providing financial support to the Mughals in return for handing over our territories when Aurangzeb captures them. It is only when we break their spine that these rascals will keep quiet,' Sambhaji said, banging his fist on his horse's back.

By ten o'clock that night, the river's water receded. Sambhaji was waiting for the moment and rode across the river. But he took care not to allow the water to splash while crossing. Not a single lamp was lit. Soon, Sambhaji stood on the other bank caressing his horse's mane.

On cue, forty Marathas entered the water carefully. As soon as they crossed the river, they surrounded the fort of St. Estevam. The walls were very high but ladders were quickly put up. The fort was guarded by an old fortkeeper with a few firangi soldiers. The Marathas attacked the fort with Khando Ballal leading the troops. Within half an hour they had taken the fort. Soon, Khando Ballal fired cannons announcing the takeover. The booming of the cannons was followed by the Maratha cheer of 'Har Har Mahadev!' It created a commotion in the area. There was chaos all around as people ran to seek shelter screaming 'The Marathas have come!' Goa was shaken to the core. Fearing danger, numerous churches rang their bells. Bugles announced the impending Maratha invasion.

The firangis were frightened and cowered in various churches, praying for their lives. All doors and windows in the city of Panaji were shut tight that night. Led by Conde de Alvor, a few soldiers hurried towards the borders of the city carrying weapons. Within a few days the Marathas had captured a second fort. Furious now, next morning, the viceroy attacked St. Estevam with a hundred and fifty men. The Marathas confronted them head on. The defence was fiercer than they had expected and the firangis soon turned back, jumping into the river.

Some of the Marathas attacked the viceroy at St. Estevam but he was saved at the last moment by a few of his men. The river Mandovi was now rising. The high tide had begun. Sambhaji led the attack while the viceroy and his men rushed into the water. Stuck in the mud, many were sitting ducks for the Maratha arrows and bullets. Many lives were lost.

The viceroy was lucky to find a floating raft and managed to climb onto it. He rowed to the other side but Sambhaji saw him escaping. This was the man who had promised to catch Sambhaji alive and present him to the Mughal Emperor! Sambhaji looked at the distant church spires of Goa. He knew it was the right moment to conquer this land. The firangis were terrified and their confidence was shattered. Goa held pride of place as an eminent trading post for foreigners. It had long eluded capture even by Shivaji Raje. To let go of such an opportunity would be foolish.

Sambhaji spurred his horse. The wise beast, sensing its master's command, hesitated for a moment at the edge of the river and then jumped into the current. Its hooves did not touch the riverbed. It could barely swim yet it continued to try. Soon a huge wave hit them and both were submerged. The Maratha soldiers watched as their Maharaj struggled in the rapid waters.

Sambhaji was an expert swimmer but one of his feet was stuck in the stirrups, pulling him down. Khando Ballal jumped into the river with his horse. He swam towards Sambhaji swiftly and, taking his dagger from his cummerbund, managed somehow to release Raje's foot from the stirrups. Soon, an exhausted Sambhaji and Khando Ballal reached the shore. They both sat on the ground catching their breath.

St. Estevam, now under Maratha control, was quiet. Sambhaji and his men were resting in the fort. A fire had been lit in the vast courtyard. Sambhaji sat with a warm shawl draped around his shoulders. Kavi Kalash, Jotyaji Kesarkar and others were in attendance. They had their meals sitting

around the fire. Sambhaji stood up and hugged Khando Ballal, saying, 'Khandoba, you saved my life without caring for yours. I am indebted to you. I have already given you the post of Chitnis. Tell me how I should honour you.'

Khando Ballal was overwhelmed and fell at Sambhajij's feet, saying, 'Maharaj, allow me to be at your feet always. I don't want anything else.'

Khandoba gifted his horse to Sambhaji. Raje said, 'Khandoba, don't embarrass me any further. I am already indebted to you and now you are giving me your prized horse?' He continued, 'I can now understand why my Abasaheb had such faith in the Prabhu community when it came to managing treasuries of the forts in the Hindavi Swaraj. Khandoba, the loyalty of your father, Balaji Chitnis, was unstinted. The Prabhus have lived up to their reputation of brave service in the cause of the Swaraj—be it Bajiprabhu Deshpande at the Gajapur gorge, Murar Baji at Purandar, or Khando Ballal's leap into the swirling waters of the Mandovi to save my life! You have elevated the phrase "loyalty to the state". This trait alone has earned you a thousand salutes from the "Prabhu" above in the heavens!'

## 6

The city of Panaji was quiet. A strange silence pervaded Goa and its creeks. The bulk of Sambhaji's troops were garrisoned at Dicholi. He ordered two thousand men to move to Ponda. The fortkeeper was ordered to ensure repair of the fort on an urgent basis. The Portuguese emissary Albuquerque waited patiently for a meeting with Sambhaji but Raje deliberately delayed the appointment.

Sambhaji asked Yesaji Kank, 'Kaka, how is Krishnaji's health?'

'He is not yet out of danger. The wounds are deep.'

'Why are you here then, Yesaji Kaka?' Sambhaji was concerned.

'It is not easy to leave a battle halfway, Raje. I cannot afford to be elsewhere.'

Sambhaji did not reply. At that moment they heard a commotion on the other side of the fort. Khando Ballal came and reported that the locals

were angry at the dismantling statue of the Virgin Mary. Some soldiers were also planning to burn the small church nearby.

An angry Sambhaji spurred his horse. The soldiers had just started the fire when Raje rode up and shouted, 'Stop it! Douse the fire or else I will cut off your hands.'

Soon the fire was put out. The local Hindus had incited the soldiers to destroy the church. One of them said, 'Raje, do you have any idea how we are treated here?'

'Silence! I don't want any arguments. I will not allow such deeds to be done in the name of Shivaji Maharaj.'

'But Raje, what about their ill treatment of us ...?'

'An eye for an eye is not always the solution. Marathas are known to be God-loving. We are not iconoclasts and looters!'

There were reports of riots from Bardesh and other places in Goa. The Hindu ryots, suppressed by Christian atrocities for decades, were now revolting openly. Churches were being torched. Sambhaji issued firmaans to ensure no place of worship was desecrated or destroyed. It troubled him that people were taking the law in their hands.

The viceroy assumed that Sambhaji would, after taking over Ponda, leave for Panhala. He did not know that Raje wanted to ensure a significant victory over the Portuguese before returning. Sambhaji, meanwhile, was in regular touch with spies from Raigad and sending messages to various people all over the region on a daily basis.

Reaching Dicholi, Raje composed a secret message for Shahzada Azam: *'Azam sahab, do give this a thought. Your father is old and extremely suspicious by nature. It is time to throw away the shackles. If you revolt, we will give you our complete support to take over the throne at Delhi.'*

Kavi Kalash laughed reading the message. 'Why, what is so funny Kaviraj?' Sambhaji asked.

'I was imagining the message landing in Aurangzeb's hands instead of the Shahzada's. Imagine how disturbed he would be!'

'That is precisely the intention of this "secret" message,' Sambhaji said, smiling.

He also dictated a message for Adil Shah at Bijapur: *'Don't count as blessing the fact that Aurangzeb has not yet reached the South. You may be under the false illusion that if the Marathas are defeated, the Mughals will*

*spare you. Think of your future. We must join our forces and fight the common enemy.'*

He also wrote to Diwan Madanna at Hyderabad: *'If only I had the kind of wealth you have! I would have marched on Delhi and drowned Aurangzeb in the Yamuna. Don't think you will be safe just sitting in your domain and shutting the door to reality. The storm outside is not going to subside so easily.'*

A rider brought the sad news of Krishnaji Kank's death. Yesaji almost collapsed hearing it. He burst out sobbing loudly. No one could utter a word. Sambhaji, tears running down his cheeks, hugged Yesaji. 'Yesaji mama, contain yourself!' was all he could say.

'Balraje, I am not questioning destiny, but one thing troubles me! I am an old man who is destined to die sooner rather than later. But someone like Krishnaji, who was capable of fighting by your side for many years to come, has been taken away. What a tragedy!'

That evening many soldiers came to pay their last respects. Holding Yesaji's calloused hands, Sambhaji said, 'Mama, don't mourn the loss of Krishnaji. He has reached the heavens fighting for the cause of Swaraj. He will shine forever like the pole star.' Sambhaji instructed his men to allocate a Subah, a revenue-earning province, in Krishnaji's three-year-old son's name. He also ensured that the family would continue to receive Krishnaji's pension. The soldiers were overwhelmed seeing the instant decisions taken by Sambhaji to care for Krishnaji's family.

Tears of gratitude flowed down Yesaji's cheeks. He hugged Sambhaji affectionately, saying, 'To tell you the truth, Shambhu Raje, when I am with you, I feel I am with the elder Maharaj himself!'

## 7

It had been more than a month since the Marathas had entered Goa but they had not retreated yet. Aurangzeb's ships were anchored near Vengurla but the viceroy was refusing permission to dock them in Goa. He was not

sure of the Mughals. He now feared that they may, in violation of the treaty, swallow Goa themselves!

Sambhaji roamed the banks of Mandovi restlessly. He was desperate to take Panaji. He would urge Kavi Kalash, Durgadas and Shahzada Akbar, 'Do something! We must capture Panaji. All we need is to get five or six hundred men inside. Once they infiltrate the city, we know how to attack from outside and take over.'

Shahzada Akbar started a correspondence with the viceroy, asking for permission to build a ship near Panaji. Once he had received the permit, Sambhaji started sending his carpenters, ironsmiths and a few soldiers across the river, ostensibly for the purpose of building Akbar's ship. But the viceroy smelled a rat, seeing the number of 'workers' increase, and did not allow them to stay in Panaji. Once the shahzada went to the harbour with nearly six hundred men but he was turned back. While Sambhaji was trying every trick up his sleeve, the viceroy too was vigilant.

Sambhaji was growing restless. Three thousand Maratha foot-soldiers and a thousand cavalymen had reached Madgaon. The church there was very popular. Sambhaji gave explicit instructions to loot but not harm people or damage places of worship. One day, as Raje rested at the haveli in Dicholi, Kavi Kalash asked, 'How long do we continue the siege of Panaji? Their emissary Albuquerque is desperate to meet you.'

'We cannot trust this cunning viceroy. How many times has he gone back on his word? If he is really keen to have a dialogue, let us put forth a condition that we will talk only after he has shared half of the supplies Aurangzeb has sent in his ship docked near Vengurla.'

Kavi Kalash smiled. 'Apparently the viceroy, frightened by our siege, has decided to move his capital from Panaji to Marmagoa. He has already shifted the treasury there.'

'We will not stop at that. We will take over the provinces of Salcette and Bardesh in a few days. Then we will cross Mandovi and plant our flag in the heart of Goa.'

While they sat discussing their plans, Sambhaji heard cries of 'Raje! We want justice!' and 'Please give us a hearing.' Nearly a thousand men had gathered outside the Maratha camp. Sambhaji asked Kavi to find out what the matter was. But he could not concentrate on the papers he was reading as the commotion outside was growing. The clerk explained, 'These men are from Salcette. A few of our overzealous soldiers wanted to

burn down a church there but one of our sardars, Ranoji More, stopped them. The locals are very upset.’ Sambhaji stepped out. The crowd immediately fell quiet.

One of the Hindu leaders said, ‘Raje, we are so happy that you have taught the arrogant Portuguese a lesson.’

An old man stepped forward and said, folding his hands in supplication, ‘You don’t know the situation on the ground, Raje! Do you know how we Hindus are surviving in this province dominated by the firangis? Our temples have been destroyed. They throw meat into our wells to pollute us. We are forced to convert to Chritianity. Come with us and see for yourself the pitiable state we are in!’

‘I am aware. I know how the temples of Shantadurga, Mahalakshmi and Mangeshi are struggling to protect themselves.’

‘That is what we are saying! If our gods are treated in such a manner, imagine our state. Don’t stop us. This is our opportunity to take revenge.’

The men raised their spears and sticks in unison, cheering. Sambhaji thundered, ‘Khamosh! Don’t make a scene here. Goa is being attacked by Shivaji Raje’s son, not Aurangzeb’s shahzada. Keep that in mind!’

He continued, ‘I can undertand your pain. As a Hindu raja I am willing to provide compensation for the damages you have suffered. But let me make it clear: the foundation of our temples is not built on revenge.’

Sambhaji issued orders to release some money for the reconstruction of temples destroyed by the firangis. The men left satisfied. Sambhaji was aware of the violence unleashed by the firangis in the name of Christ. But he could not allow his men to seek revenge through the same kind of violence.

## 8

The viceroy’s wound reminded him of his humiliating retreat at St. Estevam. He could still hear the cries of ‘Har Har Mahadev’ across the banks of Mandovi. At night he could see the Maratha soldiers guarding the banks with torches. He had managed to hold on to Panaji but the locals

were growing restless. They had sent letters to Portugal demanding a new viceroy and declaring the current one as a nincompoop! The viceroy felt as if a trap was closing in on him from all sides.

The Marathas had created havoc at all Portuguese stations from Thane and Tarapur upto Goa. An urgent message from the Francis de Costa, the governor at Chaul, arrived. It said: *'The English are openly supporting Sambhaji, providing him with rifles and ammunition. We have received no help from them despite our offer to give them twice the market price. If we don't get timely aid, we will lose everything!'*

The firangis had now completely lost faith in the Portuguese viceroy and their army. That night, hundreds of townspeople were seen joining a procession on the streets of Panaji. The viceroy asked, 'Where are these people headed?'

'To the Church of Bom Jesus. They believe only St. Xavier can save them now.'

Prayers were being held at the church day and night. They had received messages from Bardesh and Salcette. The fort at Shapora had fallen. News of these Maratha victories was instilling fear in the hearts of the people. One morning the viceregal coach carrying Conde de Alvor arrived at the church. He looked visibly shaken, his eyes had dark circles and his face drawn and pale. He looked less like a viceroy than a traveller who has been set upon, looted and beaten up in the course of his journey. He prayed in front the embalmed and beautifully preserved body of St. Xavier. The viceroy was in tears. He cried, 'Father Xavier, I am surrendering our lives to you. I am no longer the viceroy but an ordinary man praying to you to save us. Please save us from this destruction.'

They spent a few days in the church, eating and sleeping there. One day the viceroy instructed his men to release the Maratha emissary Yesaji Gambhir from custody. 'Tell him that we are open to Sambhaji's conditions. Let Sambhaji write the treaty. We will abide by it.' The viceroy waited with bated breath. Days went by. Sambhaji's men were creating havoc after entering Mhapse. They had taken over the forts of Aguada and Roshmagosh, as well as many small ones. A thousand Maratha soldiers were camped in Madgaon. The fort of San Miguel too had fallen.

The Portuguese emissary had repeatedly tried to make contact with Sambhaji without success. The siege had lasted twenty-two days now. The viceroy was completely fed up of sitting in the church. He wrote a desperate



letter to the king of Portugal, ‘We are in bad shape here. Our future in Goa is at stake. We don’t have trained artillerymen to manage the cannons. Our ammunition store is empty. We are like a leaking ship sinking slowly.’

Then, one day, a miracle occurred. They received news that the Marathas had abandoned their camp and departed! Everyone in the church thanked St. Xavier. An urgent conference was held by the Viceroy on 10 January 1684. Fearing an attack in the future, the Portuguese decided to shift their capital from Panaji to Marmagoa.

Nearly a hundred thousand of Shahzada Muazzam’s soldiers had been spotted by Sambhaji’s spies near Ramdara ghat. There was a danger of the Marathas getting trapped with the Mughals on one side and the Portuguese on the other. It made sense to leave immediately for Sawantwadi.

## 9

The Maratha troops reached Mahad. When they turned towards Raigad, they saw an English camp in the jungles near Nategao. A few tents were pitched there. Nearly five hundred riflemen under the command of the English emissary stood there with their horses, wearing traditional tall red hats. Seeing Sambhaji’s army, the emissary Smith sahab came out and bent low in mujra. He had been waiting patiently for Sambhaji to arrive.

On his request, Sambhaji entered his tent for a discussion. Ramchandra Shenavi acted as the interpreter. ‘Raje, you were stuck in Goa while we were forced to stay in Mumbai.’

‘How come?’

‘Well, why do you want me to spell it out? Your Daryasarang, Maynak Bhandari and Nilopant Peshwa have gathered many boats near Khanderi-Underi. We believed you were planning to attack us in Mumbai.’

‘I am not aware of this at all,’ Sambhaji said, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

‘Raje, as an emissary, I am aware that nothing moves in this region without your knowledge. Our Commissioner Mr. Child too is aware of it. We wish to make a complaint to you ...’

Sambhaji was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice had taken on an edge, 'What are you complaining about? You have a friend, the Siddi at Janjira; why don't you complain to him?'

'Siddi has nothing to offer. It is from your region that we get grain and other revenue.'

'But you have no qualms in making slaves of the children the Siddi's men kidnap from our villages, do you? And then you have the gall to come and request a treaty?'

'I request you to pardon us, Raje. I will ensure that you have no reason for any complaint henceforth. We are not going to encourage Siddi.'

'We too have no intention of attacking anyone.'

'But we see your ships in the bay at Thane. You have taken over the port at Sion. Our people are really worried. The Englishmen in Surat too are putting pressure on us to sign a treaty with you. On top of that, we are also being harassed by the Arabs,' Smith said.

'Oh, is that so? I am told they tried to sink your ship, the one called the President.'

'Sambhaji Raje, I know you were the one who had instigated Jange Khan to try and sink our ship. Raje, we request you not to test us further. We are ready to sign a treaty. We are here for trade and nothing else.'

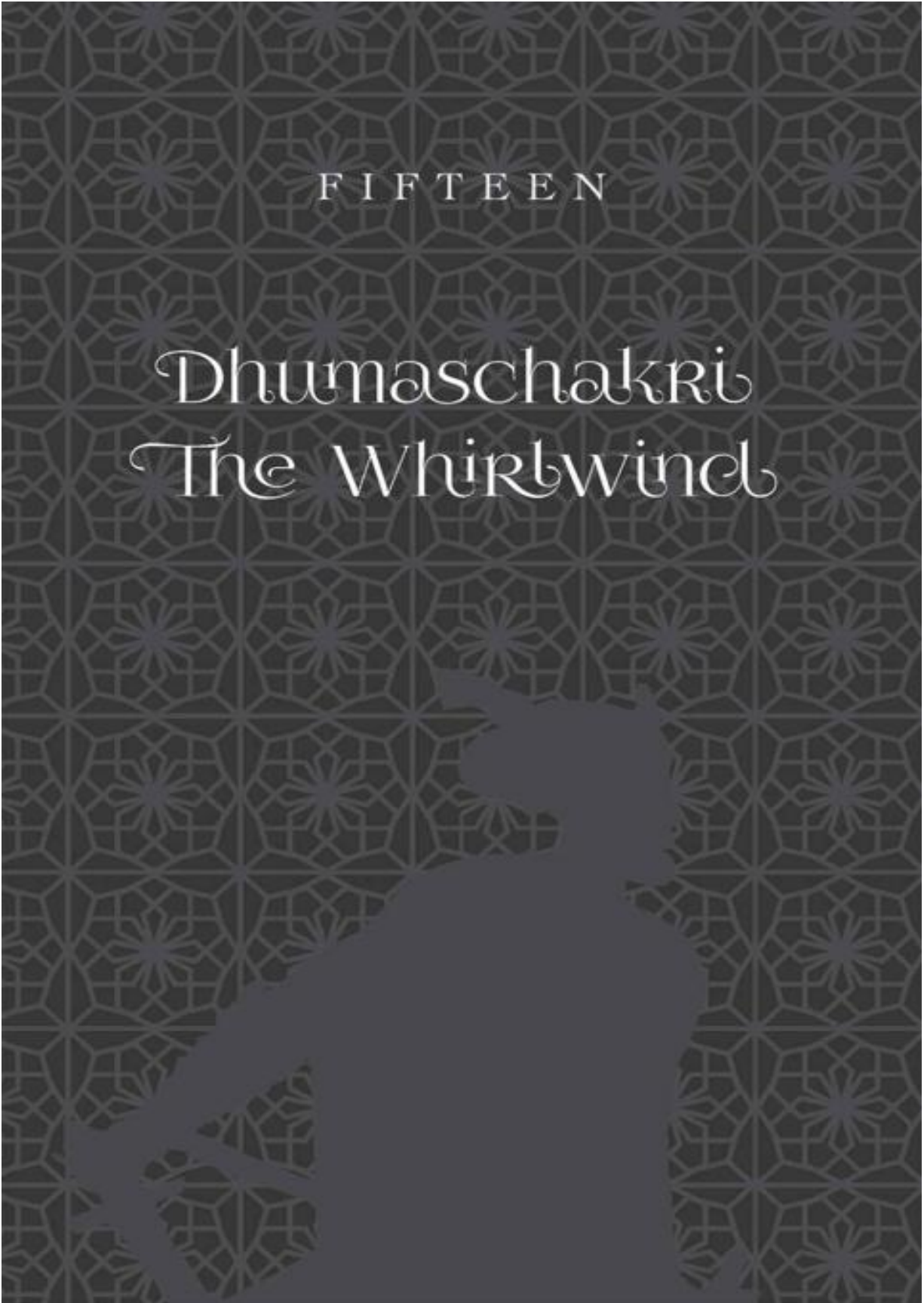
Sambhaji did not respond immediately. He said, 'Wait for my decision. Till then, ensure you don't outstep your boundaries.'

That evening, as they were climbing up to Raigad, Kavi Kalash asked, 'Raje, we are ready. Why delay our attack on Mumbai?'

'Kaviraj, I was keen to attack. But now I see the shadow of Aurangzeb falling on our territory. We also have enemies within our own kingdom. If only the ones within had kept quiet, I would have captured the English governor long ago and made him our servant.'

F I F T E E N

Dhūmaschakri  
The Whirlwind





# 1

Aurangzeb, sitting in Ahmednagar fort, was a restless man. He had been waiting for news from Shahbuddin in Konkan and from Muazzam further south towards Goa. He was receiving frequent updates from messengers who rode swiftly on horses as well as camels. Alamgir would often sit in the balcony of his room from where he could see the main door of the fort. He would rush to receive any messenger who was seen at the gates. He asked his Wazir, Asad Khan, ‘What do you think of Shahbuddin? Will he succeed?’

‘He has been camping in Pune for a few days. I am sure he will attack Sambha’s territory soon.’

‘I don’t understand what he is waiting for. I have explicitly told him to descend into the valley and ravage Sambha’s territory.’

‘Jahanpanah, it is not as easy as it seems. While studying the maps, Abu Muhammad had reminded us that the Maratha troops are guarding the entrances to every single valley. The Sahyadri is their guardian angel; it protects them. A mere platoon of five hundred men can repulse the attack of a five-thousand-strong army, provided they know the terrain.’

‘Asad Khan, have I come here to listen to the enemy being praised?’

‘Give me a little time, Jahanpanah. We are expecting news from Shahbuddin any day now. He had sent me a message expressing his gratitude to you for pardoning him despite his defeat at Ramshej. He says he will surely win Konkan and also vowed to take Raigad, the heart of the Maratha kingdom.’

The Badshah was happy to hear that. He enquired about Goa.

‘Nothing significant,’ Asad Khan said. ‘I wonder what support the cunning viceroy can provide to the shahzada.’

Sleep eluded the sixty-six-year-old Badshah. He had just dozed off when he heard a commotion downstairs. Jumping off the bed he quickly picked up the sword lying near his pillow and looked out the window. Asad Khan stood there with a message in his hand, requesting a reluctant khoja to wake the Badshah.

‘It is not possible, Wazir-e-Azam,’ the khoja was trying to explain. ‘Even when a shahzada was born, we would not dare to disturb his sleep.’

At that moment they heard the Badshah’s voice, ‘What is the matter?’

‘An urgent message from Shahbuddin.’

‘Come upstairs.’

The Wazir rushed up the steps. Aurangzeb scanned the message and smiled. He asked the Wazir to read it aloud. *‘Jahanpanah, we are blessed by Allah and you! I managed to descend into Devghat. En-route, we decimated the Marathas guarding the valley. We also managed to destroy three other stations including one at Nizampur, only a little distance from Raigad. I was informed that Sambha was inside the haveli at the base of Raigad. We managed to burn the haveli down but the wily fox Sambha escaped and reached Raigad.’*

Aurangzeb was pleased. He ordered sherbet for everyone although it was late in the night. He was now imagining Shahbuddin and his men scaling the steep slopes of Raigad. He said, as he sipped the sherbet, ‘Shahbuddin is a jewel. That is why we have given him the title of Feroz Jung.’

Another message from Shahbuddin came a few days later. *‘I was stationed at Pachad when Sambha sent troops led by his best sardars including Rupa Bhosale and Hambirrao. A battle ensued but we managed to overpower the enemy, chasing them for nearly five miles. Many were killed.’*

Aurangzeb read the message and dismissed everyone present except Asad Khan. He asked, ‘Wazir, what do you make of it?’

‘I am thrilled, Jahanpanah. I feel confident that, within a fortnight, we will take over Raigad.’

Aurangzeb’s stern face told a different tale. The Wazir was frightened. Clearly, Alamgir was not convinced. Aurangzeb said, ‘You accuse me of being suspicious. I have my doubts about what Shahbuddin is saying. He says he was in Pachad. Sometimes he says he was at Rairi. Do I expect the Marathas to sit quiet when he burns down the haveli at the base of Raigad?’

I am also told that Hambir Mohite is far away and nowhere near Pachad. I am not sure if Shahbuddin is telling the truth. Anyway, now I need to take matters into my own hands.'

Within a few days, Abu Muhammad was sent to survey the territory around Raigad. The Badshah was eagerly waiting for his return. The young man said, as soon as he arrived, 'Your guess was right, Jahanpanah. There is nothing for us to celebrate. Raigad is a massive fort and not easily breachable. The village at the base of the fort has around eighteen workshops that are constantly guarded by nearly ten to twelve thousand Marathas. All Shahbuddin managed to loot and burn were a few shepherds' villages in the jungles near Raigad. And as far as Sambhaji is concerned, he is still somewhere near Goa.'

Aurangzeb was enraged listening to the report. Abu Muhammad continued, 'Jahanpanah, it is true that Shahbuddin managed to burn some villages near Nizampur. His troops are hiding in the dense jungles near Tamhini ghat. They have managed to inflict some damage but Raigad and the Marathas remain largely untouched so far.'

'That idiot!' Aurangzeb said, irritated at the empty boasts of Shahbuddin Feroz Jung. 'I am going to transfer him immediately.'

'Jahanpanah, I would request you not to. It is true that many of the forts are unsurmountable, but all the Marathas are not as loyal as we might tend to believe. Many are willing to trade their loyalty for a little bit of money.'

'What are you hinting at?'

'Shahbuddin may not have managed to win any territory but he has been engaging constantly with several Maratha landlords, luring them with promises of money, titles and better posts. It is only a matter of time before they defect; once they do, the forts are ours!'

'Wah! I am impressed with your foresight.'

He hugged Abu Muhammad affectionately and, taking off a beautiful necklace he was wearing, put it around his neck.

Kavi Kalash and his men rode through the gorge at Wagholi. In the distance the rear walls of Raigad was visible. Having been in Goa and South Konkan for a long time, five thousand men and animals were returning to the capital. They had reduced their speed once Raigad was in sight. Sambhaji was expected to arrive in two days. Fearing a confrontation with the Mughals, Raje had decided to send Kavi and the men ahead.

Kavi Kalash spotted a cloud of dust ahead, and soon emerged a platoon of nearly three hundred Marathas led by Shiledar Murari Dange. He said, pulling in his reins, 'We need to rush, Kaviraj! The Mughals are attacking Raigad.'

Kavi Kalash tied his loose hair at the back of his head in a knot and, spurring his horse, turned to face the caravan, shouting, 'Charge! Har Har Mahadev!' Like a great wave of water gushing through mountains, the Maratha riders rushed through the gorge. As soon as Kavi emerged from the gorge, he scanned the fort and the area around it. There was no sign of any attack. His eyes then moved towards Gangoli village, visible in the distance. Black fumes could be seen coming out of the huts there. Kavi Kalash asked Murari, 'Who is that devil?'

'One of Aurangzeb's sardars, Shahbuddin. For the past five days he has been creating havoc, burning and ruining the houses and haystacks in the nearby villages.'

'How dare he come so close to Raigad! Let's push them away.'

'Har Har Mahadev!' The troops shouted in unison. 'Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj ki Jay!'

Kavi Kalash was literally flying through the air, standing on his stirrups as he led the charge. Soon, they reached the woods near Gangoli. The Mughals, not expecting such a huge army to descend on them, were terrified and started screaming, 'Sambha has come! Run!' They rushed to their horses. By then swords had been drawn and hand-to-hand combat began.

Soon, the action had spread across Gangoli, Panase, Jorgaon and Nizampur. Kavi Kalash was busy beheading as many Mughals as he could find. He knew he had to protect the capital in the absence of his Raje. The men, watching him swing his sword as if it were a gauntlet sword, were energised.

The Mughals, who had been busy looting for the past four days, had not anticipated this. By evening, when they had recovered a little, they realised that they had lost more than three thousand men while the Marathas casualties numbered two hundred or so. Shahbuddin, hiding his fear, yelled, 'We must retreat!' Seeing them flee, the Marathas were joined by villagers hiding in the jungles. The ryots came out in the fields and intercepted the Mughal troops riding on their horses. Shahbuddin's men were falling like leaves.



By evening the chase had reached Tamhini ghat. The remaining Mughals had managed to flee into the dense woods. The Marathas, tired of the pursuit, stopped for a rest. They fed their horses hay while they themselves munched on some chickpeas and jaggery saddles. They drank clear water from the streams.

Later the men, led by Kavi Kalash, entered the woods with torches in their hands. Soon, they spotted a place beside the stream where the Mughals had left their food, ammunition and other items. Kalash knew that the Mughals were hiding nearby.

The Marathas decided to call it a day. Kavi Kalash planned to enter the ghat next morning. As they were returning through the forest that night, someone shouted, 'Kaviraj, look!' Kavi Kalash followed the direction of his finger to see a row of Mughals high up in the mountains, beating a hasty retreat. Kavi Kalash laughed. He had known they would not dare to stay back and fight the next day. Kalash and his men reached Nizampur to find that one of the other platoons had caught a Mughal sardar alive. He was tied to a pole while they waited for Kaviraj to arrive.

They shouted, seeing Kavi Kalash, 'Kaviraj, behead this shaitan! Kill him!'

A Pathan in his mid-thirties, his fair face was pale with fear. Kavi asked, 'What is your name?'

'Dukhlas Khan, Huzoor!' Kalash asked his men to release him. Khan fell at his feet asking for pardon. The men around clamoured for his head, 'Kill him, Kaviraj! We want to dip our swords in his blood!'

Raising his hand, Kavi silenced them. He said, looking at Dukhlas Khan, 'Get up! And run to join your troops.'

Dukhlas Khan could not believe his ears, while the Maratha soldiers who had captured him were fuming. 'I am letting you live for one reason alone; I want you to meet your Badshah and give my message.'

'As you command, Huzoor,' the man said.

'Tell your idiotic Badshah that he need not revel in the fact that he is a direct descendant of Taimur. Ask him not to send these stupid lamb-like men to attack our capital. Let him know that if he ever dares to come to Raigad, he will not return alive. Let him come once, just once, if he dares to!'

## 2

The town of Banda near Goa was in turmoil when Shahzada Muazzam's army landed there. He had sent an order to the viceroy, asking him to present himself, but Conde de Alvor had not bothered to come. After Muazzam had waited for four days, the viceroy sent his emissary Albuquerque. Such violations of protocol were making the Mughal shahzada angry. But who was he to complain to?

Shahzada looked at the emissary and thundered, 'What does your viceroy think of himself? Doesn't he have any manners?'

'Please pardon us, Sarkar! The viceroy is not keeping well.'

'Huh! Don't lie. When Sambha was here with his twenty thousand men, your viceroy had to escape in a leaky boat. Then he took refuge in a church and prayed to the dead body of your patron saint. It seems you have forgotten those days quite quickly!'

'Huzoor, we ask for pardon ...'

'It is the Mughal forces which saved you from further humiliation. Else, Sambha would have dug your graves by now. Seeing the approach of our massive army, he ran away. But of course, the moment you got time to breathe, you went back to your old ways!'

'I request shahzada not to get upset. The friendship between the Mughals and the Portuguese is as strong as ever. Please tell us how we can serve the Mughal sultanate.'

'The ships carrying our ammunition from Surat are not docked yet. We need space to anchor them in Panaji as agreed earlier.'

'We will get that done immediately,' Albuquerque said.

'Fine then. I will give orders for the ships to dock at Mandovi.'

'Sarkar, why Mandovi? The viceroy has suggested the smaller Kaisuv.'

Shahzada erupted. 'Your viceroy is even more cunning than I had imagined. He is worried that if we dock our ships in Mandovi, your capital Panaji would be under threat, isn't it? He changes colours like a chameleon. Even my Abbajaan could learn a thing or two from your viceroy!' Well, I am not going to tolerate his crafty tactics any longer.

Shahzada had not expected this kind of reception. Especially from someone he had come to rescue! He had been hammered by the Marathas when he had descended into Sawantwadi from Ramdara ghat. In revenge, he had burnt several villages under the Swaraj in Sawantwadi as well as in Banda and Vengurla, right upto the borders of Goa.

His Diwan now advised, 'Shahzada, Sambha has left for Raigad. I suggest we use this time to catch your brother Akbar.'

'Where is he?'

'He is stationed at Dicholi.'

'Look at the way this Portuguese viceroy is treating us!'

'Far from being grateful to us, he is honouring a secret pact he has made with Sambha.'

Muazzam was shocked to hear this. However, what the Diwan had said was true. The viceroy was now keen on peace. He had been paranoid ever since Sambhaji's attack. Hence he had agreed to give a fourth of the revenue from the Vasai and Daman territories to the Marathas. He had also promised not to allow Mughal ships carrying grain and ammunition to ply in their waters. He had already given these assurances in writing.

Shahzada Muazzam was now livid and wanted to take revenge. He decided to attack Dicholi in order to arrest Akbar, but soon learnt that his brother had left the town long back. In his rage, he ordered the beautiful haveli at Dicholi to be bombarded. He used his elephants to trample its lovely rose garden. He looted the nearby villages of Narve and Bhatgram and destroyed the Ram temple at Pimpalgaon. The spire of the Saptakoteeshwar temple was broken. His troops ravaged the Maratha territory in South Konkan bordering Goa. When he came to know that Akbar was planning to flee to Iran in a ship docked at Vengurla, he burnt down the entire port, thus making it impossible for his own ships from Surat to dock there.

The cunning viceroy had signed a treaty with Sambhaji and sent the papers to his king in Portugal, ensuring the continuation of his post in India. He was not afraid of Shahzada Muazzam now. The ships from Surat had already been looted by the Marathas. The ships that had escaped Maratha plunder had been gobbled by the Portuguese. The Mughal sardars manning the ships, on realisation that they could not dock anywhere, sold their cargo to the Portuguese at a throwaway price.

Amidst all this, Muazzam had suffered the most. He had to look after nearly forty thousand cavalry, sixty thousand foot-soldiers, three thousand camels and nineteen hundred elephants. He now realised how foolish he had been to burn the villages in South Konkan. Now there were no foodgrains to be had even if he was willing to pay. As expected, the troops suffered and most of the animals were dying.

He decided to return to Ahmednagar on 15 February 1684. He had made big plans which included the creation of a naval base at Goa, the conquest of Konkan and Raigad and the capture of Sambhaji--all his ambitions had come to naught.

They marched towards Ramdara ghat. On the way, a Portuguese emissary came with a message from the viceroy: *'The Marathas damaged properties worth twenty lakh gold coins in our territories. Otherwise we would have offered you monetary help.'*

'Why are you here?' Shahzada asked dryly.

'The viceroy has requested that you should not leave this territory. Please stay back till the monsoon sets in.'

'Why? So that we may protect you in case Sambha decides to attack once again? You want us to offer you our services without any payment? What makes that rascal, your viceroy, think we would agree?'

Albuquerque was taken aback by Muazzam's anger. He ordered his men to strip the emissary leaving barely enough cloth on his body to cover his modesty. The men were then asked to cut off his earlobes and nose. 'Send him back in that state to his Lord. Let them learn a lesson.'

The emissary was tortured and sent back. But it only provided temporary solace to the enraged Muazzam. His tired and hungry elephant lumbered on. Far ahead he could see Ramdara ghat and its steep slopes. And behind him was a huge army marching on an empty stomach!

### 3

Sambhaji had returned to Raigad. At dinner, Yesubai said, 'Raje, how nice would it have been if you had captured Goa!'

‘Yesu, we were almost there! Goa was within our grasp but we heard that a hundred-thousand-strong Mughal army had descended on Ramdara ghat. The only option for us was to retreat.’

He continued, ‘But I don’t consider it a defeat. We have scared the living daylights out of the Portuguese viceroy! He signed our treaty without any objections. I am sure Aurangzeb will not be able to convince the Siddis at Janjira or the Portuguese at Goa to join him.’

‘You must have heard of how Kaviraj repulsed the attack by Shahbuddin.’

‘I do. I know you must have received the shahzada’s letter praising Kaviraj. But I don’t need anyone’s endorsement. I know how loyal he is.’

After the meal, Yesubai hesitated before saying, ‘You are aware that we had to take a tough decision in your absence.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Sambhaji said. ‘You had to order the imprisonment of Rahuji Somnath, Gangadhar Pant, Vasudev Pant and Manoji More.’

‘Yes,’ Yesubai said, a little surprised. ‘They had secretly met Shahbuddin at Mulshi. Their intention was treason.’

‘You took the right decision. Rahuji and Manaji have served the Swaraj with dedication but that does not absolve them of this.’

Sambhaji was tired of Shahbuddin’s efforts to lure men away from the Swaraj. The Mughal commander was known to ingratiate himself with men holding high positions in enemy kingdoms, bribing them with promise of riches. Kanhoji Shirke, Yeshwantrao Dalvi and Nagoji Mane were some of the men who, seduced by Shahbuddin, had defected earlier and joined the Mughals.

Yesubai knew Sambhaji was troubled. She said, ‘Raje, don’t think they are defecting against you. They are simply weak.’

‘I know. The moment they see the Mughals, the idea of defecting gains ground. The Deshpandes of Supe, the Jagdales of Mysore ... they are all the same. Yesu, the only way to avoid all this is to finish off Aurangzeb once and for all.’

He continued, ‘Yesu, all I have been planning for the past few years is a direct confrontation with Aurangzeb. He may be here with an army of five lakh men and four lakh animals. But I am twenty-six while Aurangzeb is sixty-five years old! Just wait and watch; I will tie a rope around this arrogant Mughal Badshah’s neck and make him dance to my tune at the bazaars.’

The Mughal sardars were busy plotting against the Swaraj and trying to find people who were inclined to defect. It was an arduous task for Sambhaji to ensure that his kingdom and forts were safe. He was constantly keeping an eye on those he suspected would succumb to Mughal bribe. Aurangzeb was sparing no efforts, offering expensive gifts, titles, money, and whatever else it took to lure those who were willing to go against the Swaraj.

One day Khando Ballal reported, ‘Raje, a sardar you consider pride of the Swaraj, one of our most loyal men, has left for Ahmednagar to join the Badshah. Shivaji Jedhe!’

Sambhaji could not control his fury. He shouted, ‘Let that traitor know our Ramshej fort is still being guarded zealously by the old but loyal Suryaji Jedhe.’

Shivaji Jedhe had ravaged his own territory before defecting. Sambhaji discovered that his brother Sarjerao too had plans to follow him. Sambhaji sent Santaji Nimbalkar to try and change his mind. Of late, the constant pressure of staving off such defections had made Sambhaji irritable. His voice had taken on an edge. With the help of Khando Ballal, Ramchandra Pant Amatya and Kavi Kalash, he made a list of all the sardars who were likely to defect. He met them, sent them letters of assurance and complimented them on their work. Soon, men like Shivaji Jedhe were tempted to return.

Hearing this, Sambhaji wrote a stinging letter to him, ‘You defected without any qualms. You enjoyed all the privileges of being a well-regarded Maratha sardar while you were with us but did not hesitate to join the Mughals! Now that you feel they may not treat you with respect, you want to come back. You have destroyed the meaning of loyalty. I hope you shake off this bad habit of changing sides, the way a dancer changes her looks!’

It had been four years since Aurangzeb had come to the Deccan. The skirmishes between the Mughals and the Marathas continued unabated. Sambhaji said one day, as he was resting in his room, ‘Yesu, neither is Aurangzeb winning nor are we! How long can this go on? Every time we are on the verge of victory, destiny changes its plans, leaving us empty-handed. I wonder what it has in store for us.’

## 4

Shahzada Muazzam's tired army was negotiating the difficult terrain at Ramdara. The steep, three-mile-long steep climb with narrow paths flanked by thorny bushes was gruelling for the soldiers. The dry coastal climate of South Konkan had not been kind to the Mughals. Diseases had taken a toll on men and beasts alike, forcing the shahzada to return. Many animals had died on the way. Food ration had shrunk rapidly. The men were losing morale. Although Sambhaji had returned to Raigad, he had left his troops behind at strategic points to spring surprise attacks, leaving Muazzam's army further weakened.

A messenger came and reported, 'It is not good news from Ahmednagar, Shahzada.'

He continued, 'Your enemies have been poisoning the Badshah's ears. They have accused you of fighting a very reluctant battle with the Marathas. They claim that you have actually signed a secret pact with Sambhaji, and that your lame and ineffective actions on the battlefield are evidence of the same.'

Shahzada was too weary to react. The mountainous terrain at Ramdara had drained him of both hope and energy. Elephants, horses and camels were dying by the dozens. The stench of their rotting carcasses trailed the army, tormenting living men and animals alike. Many vomited as they trekked along the steep slopes. To add to their misery, there were skirmishes en route when the Marathas, hiding in the bushes, attacked suddenly.

The Mughals took nearly eight days to cross the mountain range. The casualties were enormous; of the forty thousand who had set out on the journey, only ten thousand survived. The survivors were merely living ghosts. Those who had lost their horses had no money to buy them while those who had money could not find horses to buy! No one was willing to sell his horse. Many a sardar and mansabdar walked with empty stomachs like fakirs. They were a pathetic sight, limping and dragging their feet all the way.

Hearing of his son's state, Aurangzeb arranged for twenty thousand gold coins, five hundred camels, twenty-five mules, a hundred horses, and some clothes to be sent with all possible speed. But the fresh supplies

hardly made a difference. The shahzada was badly affected by the misery all around him.

When a weak and emaciated shahzada on an equally skeletal horse finally reached the Badshah's tent, the ladies of the zenana stared in disbelief. His miserable state brought tears of pity to their eyes.

Wazir Asad Khan stepped forward to receive him. The shahzada was like a grandson to him. He took him to his tent and offered him some fruits. But the weak shahzada found the sweetmeats and fruits unpalatable.

The Wazir then took him to Aurangzeb's tent. The Badshah merely stared at his son, fondling his beard and his rosary. Muazzam was disappointed that despite his own misery, his father did not enquire about his health. He said, letting out a sob, 'Abbajaan, we have suffered! The weather, and ...'

'Beta, wasn't it expected? If you change your route, what else did you think would happen?'

Muazzam couldn't believe his ears. 'Abbajaan, there seems to be some misunderstanding ...'

'What misunderstanding, Beta? What was our original plan? Shahbuddin was to descend into Konkan from Pune while you were to reach Mahad after taking over Kudal and Rajapur. Both of you were to meet and then attack Raigad.'

'Abbajaan, I did not have enough resources. The troops were suffering. We were tricked by the Portuguese viceroy.'

'Muazzam, don't waste my time with useless talk,' the Badshah thundered. 'Tell me, why did you move towards Ramdara instead of sticking to the original plan?'

'But ...'

'No buts! You are not blind. Who made you change your route? The one residing at Raigad? Sambha?'

This direct allegation from Aurangzeb literally broke Muazzam's back. He wanted to fall at his father's feet and cry his heart out. But he barely had the energy to do even that. He said in a quivering voice, 'Abbajaan, please pardon me! I hope you can see how I am suffering. Please don't mock me.'

'Beta, my spies can reach where even the wind cannot. I suppose a shahzada like you knows such a simple fact,' Aurangzeb said in a sardonic tone. 'I know Sambha's spies met you twice.'



‘That is true, Abbajaan. But it is part of politics to try and penetrate the enemy camp. You too do that. The question is, did your shahzada fall for any of his tricks?’

‘How do I know?’

‘Abbajaan, if you are aware of Sambha’s spies meeting me, you must be also aware of how the Maratha soldiers decimated us by attacking us in the Ramdara mountains.’

Aurangzeb growled, ‘You deliberately chose not to take your troops through Mahad and Poladpur—the territory of a friend. So, tell me, where is the bribe which Sambha gave you?’

A thoroughly dejected Muazzam did not know how to respond to his father. He stood up and stormed out of the tent. As he entered his quarters, he banged the doors and windows shut, muttering, ‘I was troubled when I left. I journeyed through hell to return and now I am being insulted. Ya Khuda! I seem to be destined to suffer!’

## 5

Sakhubai Nimbalkar was seven years older to Sambhaji. Brother and sister loved each other dearly. But Ambika Akkasaheb’s husband, Harji Mahadik, was given the Subah of Karnatak, creating a rift in the family. One day Sakhubai and her husband Mahadji Nimbalkar camped in Sambhaji’s quarters, determined to get their way. Sambhaji was often at a loss when it came to solving such domestic problems.

Sakhubai said, reiterating her demands, ‘We deserve the same honour as you have given the Mahadiks.’

‘What have I given them that is so special?’

‘You handed over the Subah of Jinji and Karnatak to Harji.’

‘There seems to be some misunderstanding, Akkasaheb. I have asked him to manage the Subah of Karnatak as a subedar. He does not own the revenue collected there.’

Mahadji Nimbalkar, silent till then, smiled. ‘Shambhu Raje, we don’t want to play with words. The Subedar is the default owner of the province,

isn't he?'

Sakhubai said in a pained voice, 'Shambhu Raje, why are you discriminating between your brothers-in-law?'

Sambhaji's face turned grave. Sakhubai continued, 'Well, maybe we are at fault. But we convinced the Nimbalkars to stop working under the Mughals. After all, my younger brother was to ascend the throne!'

'We have to suffer now, for our actions,' Mahadji muttered.

Sakhubai said, 'Shambhu Raje, we would not have said anything had you not given the Mahadiks the Subah. He managed to wring the territory out of you, using sweet words, and without having sacrificed anything. A province which is one of the richest in the Swaraj! And here we are, made to look like fools!'

'We left a high-yielding territory under the Mughals to join my brother's Swaraj. Perhaps it would have been better to serve under the Mughals than to suffer here,' Mahadji commented.

Sakhubai and Mahadji's comments were hurtful. Finally Sambhaji said, unable to stand their grumbling anymore, 'Akkasaheb, my Abasaheb used to feel that the Swaraj is a temple for the ryots. I see it the same way. However hard you may try to convince me otherwise, it is not possible for me to hand over any territory to anyone.'

'What about the Mahadiks then?'

'He is the representative of the Hindavi Swaraj and is managing the territories of Jinji and Karnatak under my command—not as a title holder with ownership of any revenue collected in the region.'

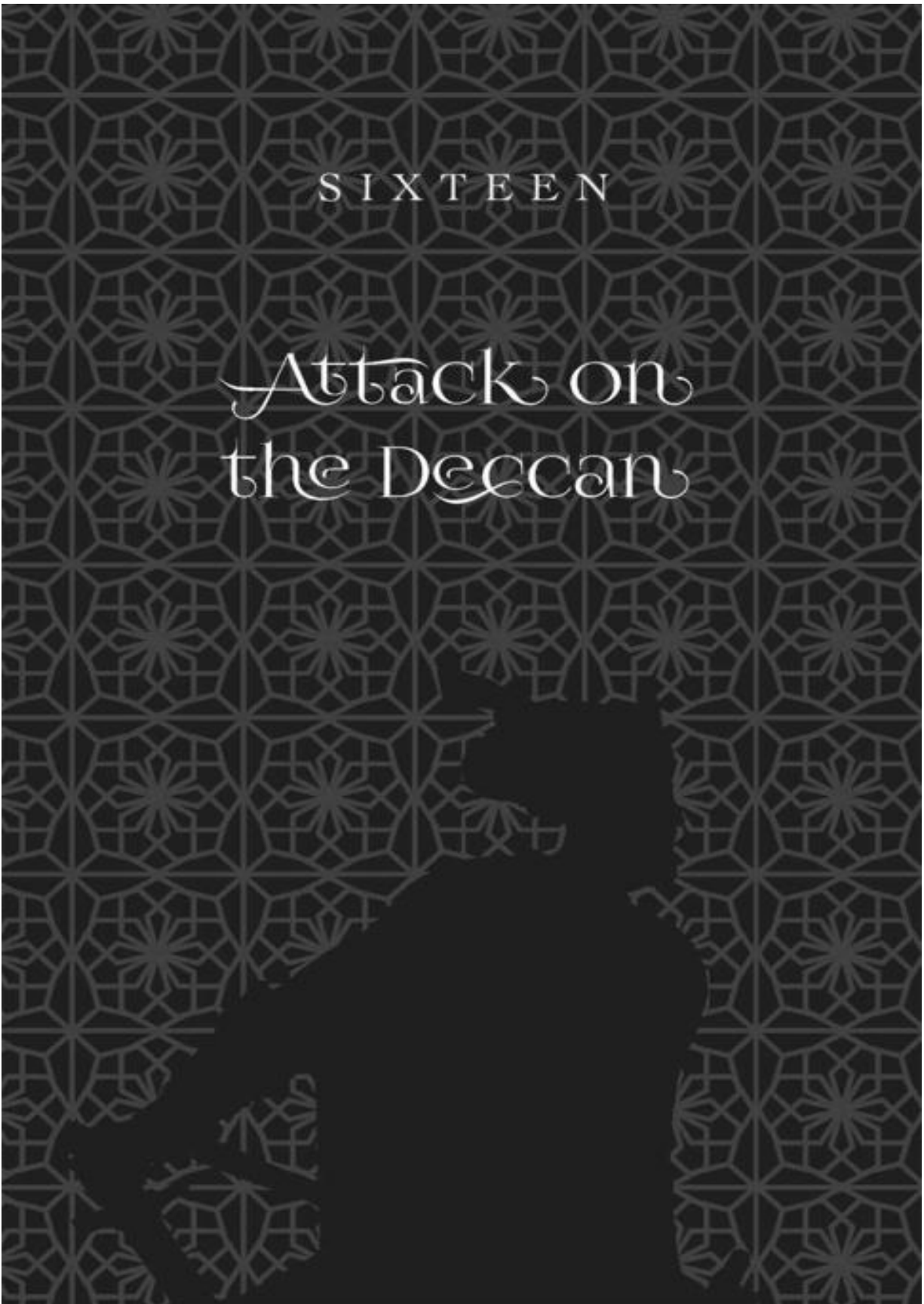
'You will know when he declares himself the owner,' Mahadji said.

'The day he tries to do that, he will be removed from the post. Let that be clear,' Sambhaji said.

Sakhubai and Mahadji did not react. They left Raigad the next day.

SIXTEEN

# Attack on the Deccan





# 1

Aurangzeb was surprised to hear that Sahar Banu, his daughter-in-law, had requested an audience. Normally the women would convey their requests through Udepuri Begum. Sahar Banu, the beautiful daughter of the Bijapur Sultan, was married to Shahzada Azam. Her sparkling eyes were visible despite the long veil which flowed down to her waist. She said, when the Badshah asked the reason for her visit, ‘Jille Subhani, your Sultanate is as pious to me as Mecca. But I do wish that there was no dispute between the Mughals and my Abbajaan’s Bijapur. I have sent a message to Sarja Khan before he crossed Burhanpur. I have requested him to support the Mughal army and defeat the kafirs.’

‘Excellent, my dear,’ the Badshah murmured. ‘You are innocent in all this but the Bijapurkars are not in their senses.’

Then Alamgir said, pointing at a messenger bag kept on a table nearby, ‘The Shia rulers are under the delusion that we are innocent children who suckle their mothers’ milk. When the kafirs had planned to destroy the fort in Tiruchirappally, it is the Shias who supported Sambha with ten thousand troops. And look at their temerity! My spies have intercepted innumerable letters of the flourishing correspondence between Qutb Shah, Adil Shah and Sambha. Their plan is to prevent the Mughals from entering the Deccan. Dear, I appreciate your concern and help. But if that childish Adil Shah, your father, does not show the basic courtesy of acknowledging my messages, I would have to burn down Bijapur one day.’

Sahar Banu bowed elaborately and retreated a few steps, taking care not to turn her back on the Badshah. Aurangzeb enquired casually, when he next met his Wazir, ‘When do we intend to march on Adil Shah?’

‘No one has dared to do so for many decades. And victory is another matter altogether.’

‘What do you mean?’ Aurangzeb asked, his forehead creased.

‘Badshah Salamat, the city is fortified with a thick wall which is nearly two miles long. It is also surrounded by a deep moat. There is an inner wall which is even stronger than the one outside. And the walls are equipped with powerful long cannons like the ‘Maalik-e-Maidan.’

The Badshah looked at the sky and did not reply. That afternoon, Zulfikar Khan came in and reported, ‘Jille Subhani, it is good news. Four of Sambha’s top sardars have defected to our camp. They are eager to present themselves to you.’

The Badshah gave his permission with a casual wave of his hand. Soon, Kanhoji Shirke, Jagdevrai, Arjoji and Achloji were ushered in. They prostrated themselves before the Badshah.

‘What do you want?’ The Badshah came straight to the point.

‘Huzoor, it is not just us; there are many sardars from good Maratha families who are fed up of Sambhaji’s rule. There is no justice,’ Kanhoji wailed.

‘What about your Hindavi Swaraj?’

‘What about it, Huzoor? It is like a bubble on the surface of water. It will burst any day! True, Shivaji Raje got Brahmins from Kashi and made a huge fuss of coronating himself. But how long can a sham last?’

‘What exactly do you want?’

‘Nothing much, Huzoor. We are landlords and want to have the right to collect revenue in our own lands, that’s all!’

‘What is the point of a mere piece of paper declaring you as the owner?’

‘Badshah Salamat, your seal will carry a lot of weight. It will be honoured for generations. Shivaji is just an accident, an exception!’

‘Shirke, you seem to be a cunning man. How is Ganoji related to you?’

‘He is my cousin, Huzoor.’

The sardars were cunning enough not to demand anything else. But the Badshah was no fool. He immediately assigned a mansab of two thousand men to each of them. The Wazir honoured them with gifts of fine clothes. The four Marathas fell at the Badshah’s feet, obligated by the honours they had received. The Badshah smiled, ‘If there are more people like you, tell them they are most welcome here.’

At that moment, Aurangzeb noticed an old man standing behind the four sardars. He was in his sixties, wore a narrow pointed cap, and sported a small beard. Zulfikar Khan replied, seeing Aurangzeb's questioning look, 'Jahanpanah, he is Kazi Haidar. He dispensed justice in Raigad during Shivaji's time.'

The sardars were ushered out. Only Kazi Haidar remained. Aurangzeb said, 'What were you doing for so many years in Raigad, working for the enemy?'

'I beg your pardon, Huzoor. I was honoured to work with someone like Shivaji. I handled all the cases, for Hindus as well as Muslims.'

'Tell me ... how many mosques have Shiva and Sambha destroyed?'

'Not one, Badshah Salamat!' the Kazi said, keeping his voice low and respectful. 'Not just that, Shivaji gave me permission to build a mosque in Raigad, using money from the treasury. The mosque was still there when I left Raigad two months back.'

Aurangzeb asked, staring into the Kazi's eyes, 'If you find Raigad to be such a heaven, why are you here?'

'I am worried about some of the clerks and other officials there. When people don't hesitate to attack their own king, what safety can I be assured of?'

Aurangzeb was silent for a while as he fiddled with the beads of his rosary. His lips muttered lines from the Quran. He said, testing the Kazi's loyalty and intelligence, 'Tell me the truth. I am here with such a huge army. Yet, I find it difficult to catch that mountain rat. What is Sambha's real strength, that which prevents his capture?'

Kazi Haidar smiled. 'The hole where the mountain rat stays is in the Sahyadris. The soil there might seem soft but below the surface the rock is stronger than iron. Besides, they may have had their differences earlier, but today Sikandar Adil Shah of Bijapur, Qutb Shah of Golconda and Sambhaji are allies. The only way to fulfil your dream is to break their alliance.'

Aurangzeb was impressed. He honoured Kazi Haidar with gifts. When the Kazi had left, Aurangzeb instructed his Wazir to ensure that the old man was treated well and taken care of during his stay. 'Make arrangements for the Kazi to stay in the Gulalbar area. Whenever I need his counsel, he should be available.'

## 2

It was 26 April 1684.

Sambhaji was at the fort of Birwadi, near Roha. After long negotiations, the English were finally willing to sign a treaty. The Maratha emissary Prahlad Niraji and the English representative Smith were busy drafting the documents.

The Marathas had put pressure on the Portuguese from Goa to Vasai-Virar, and they had recently captured Kelva, Dantora, Sargao, Mahim and Sopara. The English had been worried ever since the capture of Karanja by Sambhaji. Mumbai had become the scene of a revolt against the atrocities of English officials Child and Ward, leading to the appointment of Richard Keigwin as the governor. Sambhaji managed to keep Keigwin at bay with talks on one hand and the threat of an attack on the other. Meanwhile, the East India Company officials in Mumbai had consulted their Surat counterparts whom they trusted. Keigwin then sent Captain Gary and Thomas Wilkins to Birwadi to sign the treaty. Sambhaji hosted them at the palace in Birwadi and ensured that they were well taken care of.

Prahlad Niraji said, 'Raje, it would have been great if you were able to buy the port of Mumbai.'

'I know. We have tried our best. I was willing to offer upto eighty thousand gold coins. The Mumbai port is a gold mine. But at the last moment the Englishmen from Surat intervened. They were convinced by the Siddi that selling the port would sound his death knell.'

Captain Gary complained to Sambhaji when they met that evening, 'Raje, why do you patronise Jange Khan? It is not good to hobnob with the Arabs!'

Sambhaji smiled. 'I hope you have not put any conditions on whom we can befriend.' Gary quickly changed the topic. The English were keen on obtaining permission to open trading posts and build godowns, particularly on the stretch of coast from Jinji to Madras.

Sambhaji agreed but warned the English, 'I am more than happy to allow you to increase your trade. But I hope you will not build forts under the pretext of protecting your marketplaces and godowns there. Please see that this is explicitly mentioned in the treaty.'



Sambhaji also ensured that the treaty specifically mentioned the size of the godowns, even the length, breadth and thickness of the walls, lest they be used as fortresses later. The English were given permission to build godowns at Nagothane and Pen but it was made clear that there would be no concessions on the import and export duties. The treaty also mandated the English to inform the local Maratha subedar of the number of people working in their godowns.

Finally, Sambhaji asked a question close to his heart, 'What about the young children being used as slaves, Gary saheb?'

'Raje, is it necessary to rake up this topic? Your father would tax us four times the normal rate on such slaves. You may tax us upto six times. But we need slaves for our trade.'

'Why are you dependent on us for slaves whom you can treat like dogs? Why don't you get young boys from England instead?'

Captain Gary sensed Sambhaji's fury and chose to keep quiet. Sambhaji continued, 'You lose nothing but it harms the Swaraj. The Siddis at Jinji kidnap our young children and sell them for a high price. You work these poor souls to death, whipping them like animals. They are not even allowed a bath for months on end. I will not allow such atrocities in my kingdom. And, speaking of religion, I believe a man should have the freedom to choose the religion he wants to practise.'

'I agree with the principle, Raje,' Captain Gary said.

'But your practice is different. Your priests are forcibly converting our people to Christainity. They are propagating the slave trade in the bazaars of Mumbai and other places. This inhuman practice needs to be stopped.'

Captain Gary nodded in agreement. Accordingly, the seventh item in the treaty explicitly stated: '*The English would not be allowed to indulge in trading of humans to make them slaves or convert them to Christianity.*'

The treaty was formalised. Gifts were exchanged. As the Englishmen took Sambhaji's leave, Prahlad Niraji said, 'Raje, it would be nice if we could negotiate the purchase of the Mumbai port.'

'We will. Let me first dig a grave for Aurangzeb. We will then focus on Mumbai. It is part of our territory and, by geographical rights, we must own it. It is a key trading post and we must have control over it. I am willing to pour money into this scheme. If that doesn't work, our swords shall always come in handy!

### 3

It was a pleasant morning. Sambhaji looked proudly at Arjoji Yadav. No Maratha sardar, however valorous, had yet achieved what Arjoji had accomplished. A master of disguise, the daring Arjoji had managed to meet Durgadevi and Ranuakka.

Arjoji had contrived the meeting by posing as a cloth merchant from Kashi. He had also brought a letter from Durgabai which Sambhaji read several times. It said:

*'I think of you, day and night. The nights are especially painful. One can see one's own face in a mirror but not yours. I am lucky that I can see you in your daughter, Rajkumari Kamal. Swami, your daughter, the princess of Raigad, was born as a prisoner of the Badshah. But she is sweet, ever smiling, and as daring as her father. The Badshah's daughter Zeenat is nearly thirty-five years older but she loves her dearly.*

*I remember your love for lotus flowers. You would always get a white lotus for me from the lake at Raigad. In memory of those happy days, I have named her Kamalja. She is eager to see her father and Raigad. Swami, it has been eight years since we met. I wonder how many more years I need to wait. But Kamalja is insistent on seeing you. I tell her that a prisoner should not have such hopes but she tells me, "Maasaheb, wasn't Krishna born in a prison? I want to meet my father once, fall at his feet, and look at the tall and imposing walls of Raigad to my heart's content."*

*Ranuakkasaheb and I are taking care of her. I am sure we will come out of this darkness one day. Please take care of your health. Don't put yourself at risk for me. We are well taken care of here as royal prisoners. We may be served on silver plates but I yearn for our land! With the blessings of Tuljabhawani, I am sure we will meet sooner rather than later.'*

Sambhaji eyes were moist while Yesubai sobbed. Arjoji said, ‘Raje, they are well taken care of. I am told Aurangzeb takes personal interest in the welfare of the children of royal prisoners. He ensures their comfort and well-being.’

‘I can’t believe it! To imagine a compassionate Aurangzeb is quite difficult.’

Arjoji said, ‘Raje, I enquired into the matter. Aurangzeb’s father, Shah Jahan, had revolted against his own father. Aurangzeb and his siblings were held as royal prisoners by Jahangir at Junnar. They were treated like dogs. Aurangzeb has never forgotten those days. This is why the Badshah ensures that royal prisoners and their children are treated respectfully.’

## 4

Chaos had reigned in the cantonment for the past three days. The vast Mughal caravan was on the move again. Thousands of carriages, pulled by bullocks and camels, were already streaming out of Ahmednagar. Within two days, the imperial household would leave in the direction of Solapur. No one knew what exactly Alamgir had in mind. But it was clear that he was restless.

Sitting in his office, Aurangzeb was busy reading the messages from his spies and informers. Shahzada Azam’s troops were creating havoc in the Bijapur territory, having surrounded the Nagothane fort. Maulvi Sheikh ul-Islam was not happy with Aurangzeb’s attack on fellow Muslims. He believed that both Shias and Sunnis were Allah’s followers. He said, ‘Jahanpanah, they are only immature children after all. Why are you so upset?’

‘Who are you talking of?’

‘Jahanpanah, Qutb Shah of Hyderabad is a reckless fool while Sikandar Adil Shah of Bijapur is barely fifteen years old ...’

The Badshah was in no mood to listen. He snapped, ‘I am being reminded by Chikkadevaraja of Mysore that I must first bring these two to their knees if I am to have any chance of defeating the Marathas. Secondly,

I care nothing for their age. Even Khuda, I am sure, will not be happy with their juvenile behaviour. That Abul Hasan of Hyderabad—I am told that fool is fond of music to the extent that he plays the sarangi in court! Each Friday he gathers twenty thousand dancers and concubines in the square outside the Charminar and relishes their dance. How can we expect such persons to be of service to their subjects or to Allah?’

Remembering something, the Badshah asked Baramad Khan, ‘Can you tell me what demands we had put forth earlier to Adil Shah of Bijapur?’

Baramad Khan scanned some old papers and said, ‘We had asked them to ensure the safety and upkeep of the stations we had created within the Bijapur territory.’

‘And what was his response?’

Aurangzeb looked keenly at Sheikh ul-Islam’s face as Khan read out nervously: *‘What gives you the right to demand permission to build your stations inside our territory? In fact, you need to remove the posts you had erected without our permission. If the Shahenshah wishes to wage war against Sambha, he may do so. But we will not allow even an inch of our land to be used for that purpose. Let me remind you that the Maratha territory of Shivaji and Sambha belongs originally to Adil Shah. The Badshah should not even glance at it.’*

Those present avoided looking at the Badshah. They did not recall anyone having insulted the Badshah so blatantly. Aurangzeb asked, ‘What else did we demand? Read that.’

*‘Sarja Khan, your commander, should be removed with immediate effect and he should be asked to leave Bijapur.’*

‘And what did the silly fellow reply?’

*‘This is our private affair. And Aurangzeb should know that he is our commander-in-chief. He will remain where he is. We are, in fact, planning to increase his salary.’*

‘Enough!’ Aurangzeb said, losing his patience.

No one dared to speak. Aurangzeb could not contain his anger any longer. ‘Qutb Shah and Adil Shah—both are sly foxes. Sheikh sahab, I

wonder why you are taking the side of these devils. Qutb Shah was never loyal to Allah. He sent an army of ten thousand men to help Sambha fight against the Mysore raja. And on top of that, he has Hindu pandits and ministers like Madanna and Akanna in his court. Imagine! A Muslim kingdom with Hindu prime ministers! How silly can they get, Sheikh sahab?’

‘Tauba, tauba!’ Those in attendance murmured.

‘And that Qutb Shah is a crafty fellow! That idiot, despite his enormous wealth, behaves as if he is a minister under the Marathas. A few years back when Shiva Bhosale had gone to meet him in Hyderabad, this idiot welcomed him, putting a garland around his horse! He had also agreed to pay an annual compensation of one lakh hons to the Marathas. He has handed over all his power to the Brahmins Madanna and Akanna. He is a taint on Islam!’

Seeing Aurangzeb’s ire, Wazir Asad Khan, Baramad Khan and Kazi Sheikh ul-Islam chose to remain quiet. ‘If these two rascals have decided to protect the kafir Sambha, they will soon know the power of Alamgir’s sword!’

At that moment, the curtain moved and a sweet voice was heard, ‘Huzoor, other than the Badshah at Iran, you are the only protector of Islam in this world, isn’t that so?’

‘Who is that?’

Everyone turned to see the Badshah’s daughter, Zeenat-un-Nissa. Her fair and beautiful face was visible through the thin veil she wore.

Aurangzeb stood up. He did not like the begums and shahzadis interfering in the matters of state. He was surprised that his favourite daughter had spoken out of turn. He did not say anything but stomped out of the room and into his private quarters. His daughter left hurriedly.

All the begums including Udepuri and Aurangabadi Begum were a worried lot. The Badshah was in a foul mood. Aurangzeb summoned his shahzadi that night after dinner and asked, ‘What happened this afternoon, dear? What possessed you?’

‘Abbajaan, I was talking of Islam.’

‘Islam, or love?’

Shahzadi’s face fell. She said, her voice quivering with fear, ‘Abba, whom are you speaking of?’

‘Dear Zeenat, you know how much I loved Zebunissa. But she got influenced by Shahzada Akbar and is now rotting in the dungeon at Salimgad. I wonder why you interfere in politics despite being a shahzadi!’

Shahzadi’s face was clouded with fear. Aurangzeb continued, ‘Dear Zeenat, let me be clear: I don’t want to lose another daughter.’

‘Abba, please pardon me.’

‘I think you are in love ... with that kafir Sambha.’ Aurangzeb stared at his daughter as he spoke.

‘He is younger to me by almost twenty years. If anything, he is like a brother to me.’

Aurangzeb did not say anything. He realised that his daughter, now sobbing silently, was deeply hurt. His heart melted. He said, putting an affectionate hand on her head, ‘Dear, I know your true love is for Islam; just like me. But the two Sultanates you seem to be compassionate about are our real enemies. They are helping the kafir. Hence they are Allah’s enemies.’

Zeenat-un-Nissa looked at her father with a surprised expression. The Badshah handed her a message and said, ‘Read this. A few days back, Qutb Shah of Hyderabad wrote to Adil Shah of Bijapur. It was intercepted by our spies.’

Shahzadi’s eyes scanned the message:

*‘Bhaijaan Sikandar Adil Shah,*

*The Badshah Aurangzeb has sent his Shahzada Azam to put pressure on your territory. But you need not worry. We are sending an army of forty thousand troops for your support. Sambhaji’s Hambirmama is creating havoc in Miraj, Athani, Mahimagad and other territories. He is helping you by engaging the Mughal forces. The three powers in the Deccan have decided to create a situation so dire that the Mughals are forced to retreat towards the Yamuna. Let us see how long that old fool from Delhi can last against the might and intelligence of the Deccan. Rest assured, Shambhu Raje and I stand firmly behind you.*

*Your brother Tanashah Abul Hasan Qutb Shah’*

Shahzadi read the message, wide-eyed. She thanked her father for letting her know the truth. That night, a content Aurangzeb retired to his bed but was soon woken up by his khoja banging on the door. Aurangzeb

got up, rubbing his eyes, to find Wazir Asad Khan and Baramad Khan standing there. The Wazir began, 'Badshah Salamat, it is bad news.'

'What happened?'

'Five thousand of our troops defected this night.'

'Where? To Sambha?'

'It is not that bad, Hazrat,' Wazir said, trying to console the Badshah. 'They ran off in the direction of Delhi-Agra.'

'Why? Were they not paid their salaries?'

'It has been five years since they arrived here. They are getting their salaries and were well taken care of but they were missing their families. They have never been on such a long campaign.'

'This is not good news. Today, it is five thousand; tomorrow there may be fifteen thousand, maybe even a lakh! We cannot afford to lose them.'

'Command us, Huzoor.'

'Send as many men as you want but bring those deserters back with their hands tied. There may be a hundred pillars supporting the palace. But it would be foolish to assume that a single bent pillar would not cause any danger to the palace. We need to be alert. We cannot afford such mistakes.'

## 5

The Badshah was successful in arresting the deserters. He was in a mood to hang all of them but he realised it was not the right time to take such harsh decisions. Not wanting the rest of the army to revolt, he decided to control his anger.

A dejected Aurangzeb said, looking at his Wazir, 'One can motivate a tired army by feeding them with good food, but when they give up because they are mentally exhausted, it is a matter of concern. Tell me Wazir, what other than food, clothing and salary do these people want?'

'They want victory, Jahanpanah.'

'What?'

'Alampanah, in the last five years, they have not experienced a single victory. Even the tiny Ramshej stands invincible. And there seems to be no

indication that we will defeat Sambha. His forts seem to be made of steel.'

'Are you once again praising that kafir Sambha?' Aurangzeb glared at Asad Khan.

'It is not praise, Hazrat. We are only stating facts,' Baramad Khan interrupted. 'The Maratha army is a miracle of sorts. They never risk a direct confrontation unless they are sure of victory.'

'Then why don't you attack with a large army?'

'The moment they come to know that we are marching with a large army, they disappear. They vanish into the mountains and valleys. The moment we retreat, they find ways to attack us.'

Asad Khan added, 'There is no doubt that our men are getting demoralised. We suffered badly in the mountain pass at Ramdara. The Marathas even burnt the grass there so that our horses would get no fodder. Our troops are scared of roaming the hillsides in small numbers even in daytime.'

Aurangzeb said, 'We must find a way to break the treaty between the two Sultanates and Sambha. If we cannot win the Maratha territory at present, let us divert our attacks elsewhere. But understand that we need victories—somewhere!'

'Yes, Jahanpanah.'

'We must find a way to stop the money flowing from the Islamic states to Sambha. We must first march on the two Deccan sultanates and finish them off. Then we will capture the mountain rat. There is no other alternative.'

## 6

Golconda was heaven on earth. Even the neighbouring city of Hyderabad had all the comforts a man could desire. Qutb Shah was a generous patron of the arts. He loved to play the sarangi at his durbar to the applause of connoisseurs. But he was something of a disaster when it came to matters of administration and warfare.



The territory of Bhaganagar had numerous lakes and several small dams built around them. A network of canals provided water for irrigation and the fertile land made Golconda a rich state. Hyderabad was a wealthy city with wide roads. It had been twenty-four years since Aurangzeb had ascended the throne but in all those years no one had attacked Qutb Shah. The kingdom's riches had thus grown exponentially.

Tonight's mehfil was a special one. Wearing expensive Persian robes, Qutb Shah looked resplendent as he sat relishing the evening's entertainment. The jewels in the aigrette of his turban sparkled. Beautiful maidens entertained with their dance. It was a golden age for literature, dance and music. There were more than twenty thousand concubines and dancers who were accomplished artists and entertainers in Hyderabad and Bhaganagar alone. Every Friday, a few thousand of them would present their talent while Qutb Shah, sitting at the balcony and sipping wine, enjoyed their performances.

No one had heard the sound of cannons or rifles for many years. Instead, the rhythmic sound of drums and other musical instruments filled the air each evening. While those selling ammunition had no market, business was brisk in Hyderabad for sellers of flowers and garlands!

It was an evening like any other. Madanna, with the broad tilak on his forehead, entered the Rang Mahal, the hall where the performance was taking place. The prime minister, despite being a Deccan Brahmin, worked in an Islamic kingdom. Though he was second in command in name, he used all the powers available to Qutb Shah—a fact the ordinary citizens resented. But Madanna had earned his position due to his intelligence and erudition. He was well versed in Hindi, Telugu and Persian.

He would often travel across the city in a golden palanquin. He had used his position and proximity to Qutb Shah to build many Hindu temples with funds from the royal treasury. He had entertained visitors like Shivaji Raje and numerous foreign emissaries. But his visit to the Rang Mahal tonight, the first in nearly thirteen years, made those in attendance turn their heads in surprise. The performers stopped midway.

Tanashah looked at his Diwan, a little surprised. He asked, taking the pipe of the hukkah out of his mouth, 'What is it, Madanna? Were you not made the prime minister so that we are not disturbed while music and dance are going on?'

‘Please pardon my intrusion, my Lord! But you know I would not come unless it was really important.’

‘Speak!’

‘Hazrat, there is an important message from the Mughal Badshah Aurangzeb.’

‘What is the old man saying?’ Tanashah said, sounding a little impatient. ‘These poor singers have stopped midway. The percussion and my heart—both missed a beat. Anyway, Aurangzeb would not understand the finer arts, would he?’

‘Huzoor, he warns us that if we dare to send our support to Bijapur’s Sikandar Adil Shah, he would throw our throne and our crown into a dirty nullah.’

While Madanna’s face had turned pale as he read out the message, Qutb Shah looked amused. He wanted to show that he cared little for the Badshah’s threat. At that moment a khoja offered him a betel leaf. It was from his favourite betel farm at Machilapatnam. Qutb Shah chewed the leaf for a while, spat in a spittoon nearby, and then called a sixteen-year-old dancer standing close to him. He said, putting her head on his lap and caressing her long tresses, ‘So what was Aurangzeb saying?’

Madanna repeated what he had just read out.

‘How many of our forces are stationed in the Hyderabad and Golconda forts?’

‘About a lakh, Huzoor.’

‘Oh! Send around twenty thousand cavalrymen to Bijapur. Poor Sikandar Shah is only a fifteen-year-old lad. It is our duty to support out neighbour.’

At that moment the royal consort entered the hall. The nubile dancer resting her head on his lap quickly moved away. Tanashah growled impatiently, ‘What is it, begum?’

‘I have a complaint!’ she said, speaking through her blue veil. ‘Please pardon me, Hazrat, but these are dark days. When you don’t bother to look at your kingdom or your family, your begum is forced to come to your harem and talk to you.’

‘Get to the point!’

Begum threw an angry glance at Madanna. ‘I do not mind your concubines being around you but I cannot have Madanna Pandit here.’

‘How is that possible, begum? He is my shadow, my life.’

‘And he is the one ruining my life,’ she whined. ‘You have blindly handed over the reins of power to him. His brother Akanna is the commander-in-chief. His nephew Ramdas is the chief revenue collector. All the key positions in the administration are occupied by his family. That is why the Hyderabad Muslim citizens are up in arms.’

Qutb Shah looked at Madanna. ‘Diwan, I have heard that many umraos and ulemas are making these complaints. For the last thirteen years, I have never asked a single question about how you run the affairs of the state. Tell me, which of the begum’s allegations are false?’

Madanna was dumbstruck. He sat down on his knees, shivering. He said, in a beseeching tone, ‘There is nothing false in the allegation, but Huzoor, if you had asked this question twelve or thirteen years ago, I would have changed my ways. We are poor Brahmins. And we were given a great deal of power. Naturally, the relatives took advantage of it.’

Qutb Shah’s face was stern. He took a few sips of wine and said in a disappointed tone, ‘My friend, I cannot blame you. Power corrupts everyone. But I never interefered. If only I had spared some time from this harem and sat in my durbar more often, we would not have seen these days.’

## Z

Aurangzeb’s camp was sleeping peacefully. The guards were nevertheless alert. The Badshah, in order to teach Qutb Shah and Adil Shah a lesson, had camped at Brahmapuri on the banks of Bhima near Solapur. He had entrusted the task of overthrowing Qutb Shah to Azam while Muazzam was to deal with Adil Shah. His plan was to remain close to both battles and oversee matters from the Brahmapuri camp. It had been a year since Azam had laid siege to Bijapur. But no victory was in sight, making Aurangzeb restless. Kahi-e-Jahan, one of his sardars, had managed to capture Mangalvedha and Sangola from the Adilshahi territory, putting pressure on Bijapur and Karwar. That gave some solace to Aurangzeb.

Wazir Asad Khan had his tent pitched not far away from the Gulalbar area reserved for Badshah and his family. Asad Khan travelled with his begums, a hundred and eight in all. Although the Wazir was his uncle, his casual attitude had begun to irk Aurangzeb.

Ten horsemen arrived at the Wazir's tent that night. They were delivering an urgent message. The Wazir accompanied them to Aurangzeb's tent. Seeing no activity there, Asad Khan was about to turn back when he saw the Badshah at the door. The spies were too frightened to speak but Asad Khan said, 'Jahanpanah, it is bad news. The Marathas attacked our camp at Sangola and looted the treasury. Taking advantage of the darkness of the night, they created havoc and managed to run away with five hundred horses.'

'Who led the charge?'

'It was Hambirrao Mohite.'

The Badshah looked at the sky for a moment when he heard Hambirrao's name. Then he dismissed all the men except Asad Khan who sat in a corner, waiting to be reprimanded. Aurangzeb said, 'I read the Quran every day in the hope that at least one day will pass when I would not hear the names Sambha and Hambir and I would be able to eat my meals in peace.'

He continued, 'Why can't we produce one Hambir from amongst our five lakh troops? It looks like we have an army of hijras! All useless, unfit, impotent nincompoops!'

Asad Khan felt as if his spine had been broken and he refused to raise his head. The Badshah said, 'Wazir-e-Azam, you have to do a few things. First, invite Hambir here. Pay him crores of gold coins and ask him to join us. Promise him that we will make him the king in Raigad and throw Sambha into a dungeon for the rest of his life.'

'I had never thought of that, my Lord,' Asad Khan said, standing up in surprise.

'Relax! Sit down. It is not as easy as you think. Hambir is a loyal soldier. We will greet him with flowers if he comes. Else, we will keep a dagger ready. Either way, he must be dealt with. We need to find way to eliminate Hambirrao Mohite from our path.'

They discussed the plan for a long time. The Badshah wrote a letter to Hambirrao and instructed Asad Khan, 'Meet Nagoji Mane at Varud. He is the only man from whom Hambir may entertain such a proposal. We cannot

afford to send one of our emissaries directly to him. And, Wazir, try to get Sarja Khan on our side.'

Asad Khan was surprised as the Badshah had earlier wanted Sarja Khan to be thrown out of Bijapur. Reading his mind, Aurangzeb said, 'I believe Sarja Khan is a weapon we can use well.'

## 8

The Chandni garden at Ahmednagar fort was for the use of ladies only. The begums, shahzadis and granddaughters of the Badshah enjoyed spending time at the gardens. It was Zeenat-un-Nissa's favourite place. She loved Kamalja despite the fact that she was the daughter of Aurangzeb's fierce enemy Sambhaji. Kamalja often rode her horse alongside Zeenat-un-Nissa.

One afternoon Kamalja was enjoying her horse ride. The five hundred cavalymen guarding the fort's Buland Darwaza too were relaxed. Suddenly, Kamalja's horse jumped over the fence. Shouts of 'catch them!' rang in the air as the guards scrambled to chase them. Nearly a hundred soldiers leapt onto their horses to give chase. Kamalaja and her horse were now literally flying over the hedges. All Kamalja could see was the fort in Raigad. She had spent many sleepless nights dreaming of her father and the mighty fort. Zainuddin, the leader of Kamalja's pursuers, took his sword out and swung it over his head. Flying through the air, it struck the calf of Kamalja's horse. When the horse stumbled, Kamalja went flying over its head and crashed to the ground. Her leg was sprained, and before she could move, the soldiers had surrounded her.

The ever-alert Zeenat-un-Nissa instructed Zainuddin, 'Let this remain between us. Think of it as a childish game. We don't want Abbajaan to hear of this. Else the poor girl, like Zebu didi, would never be seen outside a dark dungeon for the rest of her life.' She ensured that the khojas, guards and other servants who had witnessed the incident were either bribed or threatened to remain silent.

That night Kamalja was being treated by a hakeem for the injury she had suffered in her 'game.' Zeenat-un-Nissa, who was present, said, 'Kamalja, you and I—we both love our fathers dearly.'

'Why did you stop my horse then? An unfortunate daughter was running away to meet her father whom she has never seen. You should have been happy. I was not trying to loot your treasury.'

'Kamalja, you are not an ordinary girl. The blood of your grandfather Shivaji and your father Sambhaji runs in your veins.'

'What difference does it make to the Badshah if I run away?'

'Well, a great deal of difference! You have spent eight years of your life at the Ahmednagar and Bahadurgad forts. You know each and every corner of these fortresses. What if you were to describe the forts in detail when you meet your father? It would be a threat to my father's life! Which is why ...'

## 9

'Yesu, I don't know who has cast an evil eye on our kingdom. We had barely begun to breathe easy with Aurangzeb turning his focus to the South when famine gripped us!'

'Many old men say it is the worst they have seen so far.'

'The poor are suffering. Their cattle are dying. So are our horses. That is a matter of concern. They are the strength of our army.'

The famine, which had been ravaging the territory for a few years, was at its worst in 1686–87. It had literally brought the Maratha Empire to its knees. Sambhaji had started a special cell to take care of those who were worst hit by the calamity. Nilopant Peshwa had issued orders stating that the ryots would get support from the royal treasury for seeds and farming. Village after village was being abandoned. The prolonged war with the Mughals was depleting the treasury. But Sambhaji did not reduce his support for the ryots. He demanded grain from the Portuguese at Rajapur and Goa. Now the rivers and wells were drying up. With drinking water scarce, where would the farmer get water for his animals to drink?

Reports from various parts of the Swaraj tortured Sambhaji's soul. He had already ordered tax collection to be suspended as he knew it would be an additional burden on the ryots crushed by the famine. One day, Raje ordered an urgent meeting of his Ashta Pradhan and senior army commanders. He said, looking at Mhaloji Ghorpade, 'If we don't have any men or animals left, how are we going to rule?'

The old man looked at the skies for a moment, folding his hands in reverence. 'It may be true that the rain gods are displeased ... but even our men are not showing loyalty.'

'What do you mean?' Sambhaji asked.

'Support from Harji Raje in the South has been sporadic. Mahadik was given a specific task when he was sent to the South as a subedar. He is not fulfilling his duties. Chikkadevaraja has not met his promises either. Now the Mysore raja has joined the enemy.'

'Fifteen thousand men from his cavalry are helping Aurangzeb in his campaign against Bijapur. Read this letter from Adil Shah, Raje,' Khando Ballal said, as he handed a letter to Sambhaji.

Sambhaji did not read the letter but said, 'I wonder why he has such love for the Mughals. Should he not help his southern brethren instead? History would have taken a different course had he done that.'

Seventeen-year-old Santaji Ghorpade hesitated a little before speaking, 'If I may, Maharaj ... Harji Raje had lit up the Jinji fort for nearly a week to celebrate his having earned the title of Maharaja. He believes he is an independent king now.'

'I did hear of the celebrations. That is why I sent a strongly worded letter to Daaji. He says his enemies who are spreading such rumours. I know he is lying to me. Trouble is brewing at Jinji.'

The discussions continued for a while. Sambhaji said, 'Aurangzeb has targeted Bijapur today; he will not spare Golconda tomorrow. It won't be long before he is on us! We had taken the initiative to rally forces in the South against the Mughals. I think we must lead another campaign into the Tamil and Mysore territories.'

Mhaloji Baba asked, 'Would not that be risky at this stage, Raje?'

'Doing nothing is not the solution. In a few months, the Krishna would be in spate. The Badshah will be engaged in Bijapur till then. Let us use that time to go into the South and see that we get our dues. We can use the

opportunity to get the ryots on our side, threaten Chikkadevaraja, and conquer a few territories there.'

The following month, Sambhaji left with fourteen thousand horsemen. Mysore's Chikkadevaraja was terrified hearing the news. Most of his soldiers were in Bijapur supporting Aurangzeb. How was he to face Sambhaji? At best, he could only play a defensive game while Sambhaji managed to take back most of the Adilshahi territory in Karnatak which had been captured by Chikkadevaraja.

Sambhaji moved from Mysore and Dharmapuri to Srirangapattanam. Harji Raje was forced to come with his army from Jinji to Srirangapattanam. A fierce confrontation took place at the fort, which had a deep and wide moat protecting it. During a skirmish, Sambhaji jumped over the moat with his horse but the poor animal was dashed against the edge, dying instantly. Sambhaji's elbow was crushed, leaving him badly wounded.

A few months passed. Neither Sambhaji nor Chikkadevaraja were able to attain decisive victories. Sambhaji could not afford to move towards Golconda lest Aurangzeb enter the Sahyadris. Leaving the campaign midway, Raje was forced to return to Maharashtra. Before leaving for Raigad, Sambhaji spoke to Harji Daaji and Ambikabai Akkasaheb, emphasising the need for their loyalty to the Swaraj.

'Harji, it may be fine to complain at other times but we have Aurangzeb literally knocking at our doors. We cannot afford such tantrums from you.'

Ambikabai asked, 'Do you doubt our loyalty?'

'Let me be frank, now that you have asked a direct question. I am told that you, Harji, wish to declare yourself as an independent king.'

'What is wrong with that? It would be one more Maratha kingdom,' Harji Raje tried to justify his ambitions.

'Daaji, nothing wrong with that in principle. But a temple stands because each pillar does its job. If all aspire to be the golden dome, it will fall. We have built this Swaraj on the sacrifice of innumerable soldiers. We built our dreams on the blood shed by them, didn't we? We need to honour that, Daaji.'

Sambhaji returned with nearly ten thousand bullock carts carrying grain. But the famine was so widespread that even such a huge supply was



able to feed the starving ryots only for a few weeks. Two years had gone by now. The famine continued with unabated intensity.

Village after village was desolated. Farmers were forced to eat rats. There was misery everywhere, leaving Sambhaji in tears as he travelled from one territory to another. Even the royal granary was rapidly depleting. Sambhaji had instructed all the landlords not to hoard any grain and to distribute whatever they could. Raje prayed for the longevity of his people. He believed that if they survived, they would find ways to resurrect the Swaraj. There were granaries near Karjat, Thane, Mahuli and Rajpuri. Sambhaji issued orders to open the godowns to provide grain to the needy. He had purchased four thousand tons of rice from the English. Using his friendship with Qutb Shah, he also managed to get supplies from Naldurg near Solapur, where the Shah had a huge granary.

A territory which provided nearly half of its annual supply of foodgrains to the Swaraj was the province of Jinji. Sambhaji had sent Harji Raje to manage the key province. The key to the Swaraj's survival was in the hands of Jinji now.

While the famine had ravaged homes, emptied villages and decimated families, the traitors fared well. Aurangzeb was entertaining all the Maratha landlords and watandars who were defecting to him. Even a petty official abandoning Sambha was a reason for the Badshah to celebrate. Aurangzeb wanted to create the impression that the Swaraj was a sinking ship. He wanted to break the spirit of the Marathas. Handing over false papers promising all kinds of revenue to the defectors was a small price to pay for such a victory.

For the first time in its history, Raigad was suffering from a shortage of water. Water was now being carried up from the base of the fort. All the horses had been shifted to Pachad, Raigadwadi and other places. The nearby Kal river had almost dried up. Large holes were being dug in the riverbed and buckets were used to draw water. The water carriers were exhausted from carrying them up to the fort each day.

Only a few select soldiers remained at the fort. Most of the time, the royal family stayed at the Pachad palace. Old hands like Yesaji Kank had never seen such terrible times and wondered how they would overcome it.

Sambhaji said, his voice filled with anguish, 'Yesu, our men have fought the enemy for nearly seven years, risking their lives. What are they being punished for? Even my tears are dry now. I wonder why Maa

Bhawani is testing us. Despite repeated reminders, Harji Raje is not sending us the supplies we asked for. He could have despatched the carts long back. I wonder what is causing the delay.'

'Swami, be a little patient,' Yesubai tried to pacify him.

'Yesu, I am now worried that Harji too may turn against us.'

A few days later, Raje's spies brought news from Jinji. What Sambhaji had feared had come to pass. Harji Raje had not only decided not to send supplies, but had declared himself the king of Jinji-Karnatak. He had also stated categorically that he had nothing to do with Raigad. Yesubai said, her head lowered in shame, 'It was I who had suggested the alliance with Mahadik for Ambikabai.'

Sambhaji said dejectedly, 'What a pity that while we have Aurangzeb waiting to pounce on us and the famine literally gobbling us up, Harji Raje thinks of deserting us!' However, he was determined not to let Mahadik get away with it. 'We will see to it that we get what we need from Jinji. I am Shivaji Raje's son. I have learnt not only to praise those who do well but also to trap those who try to go against us.'

Sambhaji summoned Moropant Pingle's younger brother Keso Trimal Pingle who had just returned from Ramshej fort. Sambhaji said, 'Keso Kaka, you have managed the fort of Ramshej so bravely for the past two years. I can't praise you enough for that. But I have made a mistake. Keeping aside an old hand like Hanmante, I handed over the Subedari of Jinji to my brother-in-law Harji Raje.'

'Raje, what is your command?' Keso Trimal asked.

'I have a cavalry of eighteen thousand men ready for you. Take them and move towards Jinji. The journey will take eight days. I want you to return to Raigad with supplies from Jinji within with a fortnight!'

'What if Harji Raje resists?'

'Do I need to elaborate? You are elders who have fought shoulder to shoulder with Shivaji Raje. Do I need to say more? You have to save our people from the famine. Do what it takes to make Shivaji Raje proud.'

The nearly seventy-year-old Keso stood ramrod straight and then bent in salute. Sambhaji asked Santaji to accompany Kesopant. They left immediately.

Aurangzeb's tent was lit with torches and oil lamps. Wazir Asad Khan had spread a map of Bijapur and the neighbouring territories in front of the Badshah. It had been a year since they had surrounded Bijapur. They had spent enormous sums of money, thousands of camels and horses in the process but had tasted little success. Alamgir said, studying the map, 'Wazir, what kind of fort does Bijapur have?'

The town of Bijapur was surrounded by a square-shaped wall, nearly two and a half miles long. It was nearly seventy feet tall and thirty feet wide. There were ten huge doors and ninety-six turrets. Each turret was connected to the next by a wide road. Cannons and zamburak, a soldier on a camel with swivel mounted gun, along with long-barrelled rifles, were placed at strategic points. The famous cannon, Maalik-e-maidan, was the pride of Bijapur. A moat, nearly seventy feet wide, surrounded the wall. The enemy would have to cross the moat first to reach the wall. Shahzada Azam had spent months trying to capture the city. In the process he had not only lost many men but spent an enormous amount of money.

'I had told Azam many times not to waste his energy on trying to break down the doors. We must find a weak spot and attack,' Asad Khan said

'Why is Azam not lighting fuses near the base of the wall?' Aurangzeb asked.

'The soil is rocky and it takes days for the diggers to dig a hole even a few feet deep.'

The campaign in Bijapur had turned out to be terribly expensive for Aurangzeb. He had lost thousands of men. Qutb Shah from Golconda had sent twenty thousand cavalymen while Nilopant Peshwa had come to the rescue with ten thousand Maratha soldiers.

In the meantime, Sambhaji had stationed himself at Panhala. He was trying to provide support to Adil Shah from there. Kavi Kalash led the charge with nearly seven thousand men. Hambirrao, with fifteen thousand men, was creating havoc for the Mughals wherever possible.

Aurangzeb was keeping a close watch on Hyderabad. He had sent fifty thousand men under the command of Khan Jahan. Qutb Shah's forces had

held them at Malkhed for nearly two months now. But Aurangzeb's luck was in his favour. Two of Qutb Shah's sardars, Muhammad Ibrahim and Sheikh Minaz, had an argument. Soon afterwards, their troops ran away.

Baramad Khan reported, 'Qutb Shah has holed himself up in the Golconda fort instead of gathering his troops. His kafir minister, Pandit Madanna, had advised him to take refuge at the distant Warangal fort.'

'Baramad Khan, send a message to Qutb Shah's begum and his mother that Madanna is responsible for all their troubles and that he must be hanged to death.'

Hyderabad was now being looted freely. The Mughal troops plundered whatever they could lay their hands on. The Badshah, still suspicious of his son, had instructed his spies to find out if Muazzam was hiding the loot elsewhere.

The Badshah soon received good news. The royal ladies had sent their men to kill Madanna and Akanna. They were both hacked to death in broad daylight. In March 1686, emissaries from Hyderabad met the Mughal Badshah. They carried Madanna's head with them. Aurangzeb, moving his hand lovingly over the head, was thrilled. A treaty was signed between Qutb Shah and Aurangzeb, under which the Mughal Emperor received a sum of one crore and twenty lakh hons. He also got the rich province of Malkhed. Qutb Shah also presented a hundred elephants to Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb was pleased that he had managed to subdue one of his enemies in the Deccan. He moved decisively towards Bijapur now. He had summoned Muazzam from Hyderabad to Bijapur. It had been more than one and half years since the siege of Bijapur had begun. Aurangzeb now wanted to finish off the task.

## 11

Both the shahzadas, Muazzam and Azam, were eyeing the throne in Delhi. They were sure that the old Emperor would get tired one day and hand it over to one of them. Hence, both were over-anxious to show their valour. A few years earlier, the elder Shahzada, Muazzam, had marched to Goa to

defeat Sambhaji and returned without accomplishing anything. Azam was hoping to defeat Adil Shah and earn a name for himself.

But luck did not favour Azam either. He was ordered to retreat. Azam nearly cried himself hoarse reading the message. He was losing a golden opportunity to make a bid for the throne. He wrote to the Badshah, 'Whether the rest of the army fights or not, my begum and my children and I will stay here till death. The Shahenshah may bury our dead bodies here.'

The Badshah was overwhelmed reading Azam's message. He could not believe that his shahzada was showing such tenacity and courage. He decided to honour Azam and sent a caravan of five thousand bullock carts loaded with supplies. Azam was relieved to receive such a huge reinforcement and continued his siege with fresh energy.

The Badshah, on the other hand, was getting increasingly restless. 'Anyone else in my place would have gone crazy in these seven years,' he shouted at his Wazir. He was desperate to show that he was not yet old or tired. The Wazir remarked, 'Jahanpanah, you have asked Shahzada Muazzam to support Shahzada Azam. I am not sure if the younger shahzada would like it.'

Aurangzeb said, 'I don't care what either of them think. This is a last-ditch effort. If it fails, you may as well make my grave ready.'

SEVENTEEN

Hamburgach





# 1

It was the month of July, 1686. Aurangzeb was camped at Rasulpur, not far from Bijapur. It had been sixty days since the arrival of the Badshah but the walls of the city stood firm. The minarets of Gol Gumbaz seemed to be mocking Aurangzeb.

The wall and the moat were the two most evident protectors of Bijapur but help from Golconda and Sambhaji's Panhala were other lifelines. The Badshah had kept a vigilant eye on both. He suspected that Qutb Shah, despite the treaty, would try and extend his support. He had sent Qutb Shah a strongly worded message, 'If you want to protect your throne, don't try to poke your nose here.'

Wazir Asad Khan had been right. The younger shahzada was irked by Muazzam's arrival. The brothers had no love for each other. Muazzam knew that if Azam managed to defeat the Bijapurkars, the credit would go to him. He did not want that and tried to find a way to make a treaty with Adil Shah. He decided to send his emissaries for this purpose. Some of his advisors asked, 'Is the Badshah aware of your plans?'

'Not yet. We will tell him at an appropriate juncture.'

Muazzam started his secret manoeuvres. On the strength of his earlier correspondence with Sikandar Shah, he was able to obtain permission for his loyal servant Shah Quli to visit the Bijapur palace. The secret talks began. Shah Quli was fond of drinking wine and could not control his mouth once drunk. He said to the men manning the cannons, 'We are all friends here. Don't waste your ammunition by shelling us.' As expected, Azam's men captured Shah Quli and he was presented before the Shahenshah. After being tortured with heated rods, he blurted out the truth—that he had been sent by Muazzam.



When Muazzam was summoned to the Bahshah's tent, he feigned ignorance of the plot and said, falling at his father's feet, 'Jahanpanah, I don't know this drunkard. It is a trap to besmirch my name and destroy me.'

Aurangzeb said, not showing any emotion on his face, 'Shahzada Muazzam, you may try your best to shake off your sins but one day you will have to pay the price.'

The very next day, orders were issued to strip Muazzam of all his military responsibilities. He sat in his tent, helpless.

It had been two months since the Badshah had taken charge of the siege. Monsoon had played truant in Bijapur and the water carriers had to walk for miles to get water for the city. Aurangzeb had managed to cut off the support Bijapur was getting from the Marathas and Hyderabad. Without adequate food and water, the residents of Bijapur were suffering. The soldiers were now forced to eat horse and camel meat. The city, once verdant with flowering gardens, now lay bare.

One day, the main door creaked open and a man walked out holding a white flag. He was followed by thirty more men. They were not soldiers. They sported long white beards and wore flowing robes. They were the kazis, ulemas and fakirs of Bijapur.

Kazi Sheikh ul-Islam seemed restless. He had objected to the siege of Bijapur as an attack on Islam. He was the judicial authority of the Mughal court but the Badshah was in no mood to listen and quietly ordered him to go to his tent and rest. When he tried to argue, the soldiers grabbed his arm and took him away.

The men from Bijapur pleaded, 'Badshah Salamat, you are known as Zinda Pir. You are a true follower of Islam!'

'Come to the point!'

'Shahenshah, please pardon us for saying so but this battle is un-Islamic. You are the great Badshah of Delhi and you are torturing a small Islamic state and its citizens. We are your brothers, Hazrat.'

'Whose brother are you talking of?' Aurangzeb thundered, narrowing his eyes at the men. They all looked down at the floor immediately. 'You claim to be protectors of Islam. Then tell me, how is it that Siva's son Sambha is your friend?'

'But Jahanpanah ...' They stuttered.

'Even back in Delhi, I had been hearing complaints about him. I don't know which religion you follow, but let me tell you this: I ensure that I

destroy at least a hundred Hindu temples on any campaign I undertake. Besides, where was the Hindavi Swaraj of the Marathas earlier? Siva, and then his son Sambha managed to take a little from Adil Shah and some from Nizam Shah and created this so-called kingdom of theirs!’

The ulemas said, ‘Hazrat, we were never in favour of what he was doing.’

‘If that be the case, how is it that the Marathas are welcomed in Bijapur?’

‘Sikandar Adil Shah is ignorant, Huzoor. Please pardon him.’

‘Huh? He has the intelligence to make a secret pact with Qutb Shah and Sambha. He has the temerity to refuse support to Sarja Khan. You call this ignorance? Why are you here? Go to Panhala and take refuge under your godfather Sambha!’

‘Hazrat, you know the Quran Sharif better than any one of us. Yet, we ask you a question: does the Quran allow one Islamic king to attack another?’

‘I agree with you. I have no intention of swallowing your kingdom. Get me that kafir Sambha, and I will end my siege immediately.’

The maulvis left when Asad Khan came running, a little scared. ‘Hazrat, our chief maulvi Sheikh ul-Islam has released an order stating that our attack is illegal.’

Aurangzeb read the order with disgust and, tearing it to pieces, ordered that the Sheikh be taken to Athani and thrown into the deepest dungeon there.

Kazi Haidar of Raigad was appointed in his place. Aurangzeb asked him, ‘Kazi sahab, what is true religion?’

‘The orders of the Badshah represent the true religion. Following his dictates is the duty of all citizens.’

The Badshah was impressed with the Kazi’s answer and pleased by his ability to adapt to the changing times. That evening, at a grand ceremony, Kazi Haidar was nominated as the chief justice.

The maulvis had tried their best but the siege of Bijapur continued for another three months. The moat around the wall had been filled. The rains had added to the troubles of the town. There was a shortage of foodgrain. Earlier, horsemen from Bijapur would find ways to leave surreptitiously and get supplies but now it had become impossible. Even Hambirrao was unable to help as the river Krishna was in spate.

Sambhaji would visit Panhala often but the rains had made it difficult to provide any support to Bijapur. The Adilshahi territory was besieged by floods while the Hindavi Swaraj suffered from drought. Despite his best intentions, he was no longer able to help his friend at Bijapur.

On the other hand, Aurangzeb managed to procure supplies from the fifteen or twenty Subahs he now controlled. One day, he succeeded in getting his men into Bijapur. The city was already a graveyard. On 26 September 1686, the sixteen-year-old Sikandar surrendered. In these times of crisis, some made merry. Sarja Khan, who had conveniently jumped the sinking ship, was honoured by Aurangzeb and made a Mughal mansabdar.

Aurangzeb now trained his guns on Golconda. The forts of Qutbshahi kindom were strong and their supplies adequate. Qutb Shah was not going to surrender without a fight. But Aurangzeb was not going to give up easily. He had a throne made which his bearers would carry around. The sixty-eight-year-old Mughal Badshah would tour the environs of the fort day and night, looking for an opportunity to enter Golconda. Once, a bearer was killed by a cannon ball. The Badshah was lucky to have escaped death by a hair's breadth.

Eventually his efforts proved fruitful when Mukarrab Khan defected and another sardar called Abdullah Fanni opened the gates, allowing the Mughal army inside the fort. On 21 September 1687, Golconda was finally in Mughal hands. The Badshah now had control over a treasury worth seven crore and annual revenues worth three crore. Sikandar Adil Shah and Qutb Shah were kept in the fort of Devgiri as royal prisoners with an annual salary of fifty thousand hons.

While the Badshah was returning to Bijapur after capturing Hyderabad, he was deeply disappointed to intercept letters written by Shahzada Muazzam to Sambhaji. Muazzam had realised that he needed to take his zenankhana if he wanted to defect. Otherwise Aurangzeb would torture them. Hence he was on the move with his zenana. Unfortunately for him,

the Badshah had been informed of his defection in advance and he was caught.

Sambhaji had been elusive for seven years now. Aurangzeb gazed often at the Sahyadris and wondered when he would capture the impregnable Ramshej. Asad Khan came in one day and said, interrupting his thoughts, 'Jahanpanah, Shahzada Akbar has finally left for Iran. Thanks to Sambha, he was able to board a ship at Rajapur.'

Aurangzeb let out a deep sigh. 'Who knows where our destiny will take us? Only Allah is aware!'

### 3

One day, Hambirrao said, 'Shambhu Raje, we are losing so many men. How do we stop them from defecting? Aurangzeb is merrily handing over papers. We too can pacify our men by promising them their own 'watan.'

'How can we do that, Hambir Mama? It is against Abasaheb's principles. My father abolished the concept of large landholdings where the owner enjoyed the revenues. When did you start eyeing one, Mama?'

Sambhaji's casual remark pierced Hambirrao's heart. He said, 'Shambhu Raje, is that your assessment of me?' He continued, 'Shambhu Raje, why should Hambirrao want a watan for himself? If I was so greedy, I could have helped my own nephew to take over the throne in Raigad. You know how the other elders were in support of Rajaram.'

Realising his mistake Sambhaji said, 'Hambir Mama, please don't take my words to heart. It was spoken in jest.'

Hambirrao continued, not convinced, 'Even Aurangzeb had sent his spies to assess my loyalties. In anger, I ordered the barber to shave off their beards and sent them back. But your comments have put me in my place.' Hambirrao stood up and left the room in a huff.

Yesubai said, 'It is not good for the king and his commander-in-chief to quarrel. If Aurangzeb gets even a whiff of it, he will take full advantage to create a rift.'

Yesubai tried convincing Sambhaji to apologise but he was adamant. That night, Sambhaji was restless and could not sleep. He refused food the next day. He missed his morning prayers, and that was something which had not happened in years. Another day had passed when Yesubai came in and said, 'Are you aware that Mama too has not eaten a morsel for the past two days?'

Sambhaji stood up immediately. 'What are you saying? Why didn't you tell me earlier?' Sambhaji rushed to his Senapati's quarters. It was late in the night. Hambir Mama stood in the balcony. Before Sambhaji could speak, Hambirrao said, 'What do I hear, Shambhubal? Is it true that you have not eaten for the past two days?'

'That is true; but why are you suffering?'

'What of me? I am an old man. There is no need to worry about me. But you have to take the Hindavi Swaraj forward. I may or may not be there ...'

Sambhaji fell at his feet, 'Hambir Mama, don't say that! The very thought of your absence is akin to the world collapsing on me.'

A cool breeze blew. Uncle and nephew walked on the grass. They sat on a flat rock and enjoyed their meal there.

'Mama, I know you supported me because you believed in Shivaji Raje's dream of the Swaraj. I am sorry I hurt you. Please pardon me.'

'Don't talk of pardon, Shambhu Raje! I am what I am because of Shivaji Raje. But it was you who gave me free rein. I am the one who should be grateful to you.'

'Mamasahab, you have shown your valour in every battle fought for the past seven years. But I feel you must rest a little now; stay here and guide us.'

'What are you saying, Raje? Are you asking me not to be on the battlefield? Hambir is ready to fight till his last breath for Shivaji and Sambhaji.'

'Mamasahab, our watandars are clamouring—each for their piece of land. Shall we take the plunge and break the Swaraj into pieces to pacify them?'

'Never! Let Aurangzeb try to lure them by offering false promises. Hambirrao and Sambhaji will never allow Shivaji's dream to die.'

That night, the two of them talked till the late hours.

## 4

Durgadas was returning to Rajputana. When he came to take his leave, he said, ‘Shambhu Raje, you have done a lot for us. How do I thank you?’

‘We did our best, Durgadas, but the shahzada was only interested in the pursuit of pleasure. If only he had shown some willingness to fight, we would have ensured that he captured Delhi. Aurangzeb’s enemies were willing to fight under the shahzada’s flag but in the end he was weak. No army, however large, would have given him courage.’

‘We wasted seven years trying,’ Durgadas said.

‘Durgadas, why do you want to return to Rajputana? Stay here.’

‘I had given my word to Jaswant Singh saheb that I would take care of his son Ajit Singh. It is my duty to serve under the Jodhpur Maharaja.’ He added, ‘When you defeat Aurangzeb, I shall be there to honour you. We shall celebrate your victory all the way from the banks of the Bhima till Yamuna’s shores.’

## 5

Aurangzeb called for Sarja Khan and said in a tired voice, ‘I may have brought Bijapur and Golconda to their knees but I am still unhappy. It is Sambha I want. But neither I nor my three shahzadas, twenty-two grandsons and thirty sardars have the ability to defeat him. Only a Deccan commander like you can vanquish him.’

He continued, after a pause, ‘Take as many men as you want and all the resources you need. If you get me Sambha’s head, I shall take you to Delhi and honour you at the Red Fort. If you cannot catch Sambha, at least capture one of the big forts—be it Raigad, Rajgad, Panhala, Pratapgad or Hambirgad.’

‘Yes, Jahanpanah.’

It was midnight when Hambirrao's troops crossed the river Koyna and reached Talbid. The servants at his haveli were alert. Hambirrao would often rest there while on campaigns. Sometimes he would stop for a meal before moving on. But he stayed that night. His daughter Tarabai, who was married to Rajaram, had returned home from Raigad. Hambirrao said to her, 'Taru, see that you take care of Yesubai. She is tense these days and needs all the support she can get.'

Hambirrao and his men had barely begun their meal when he heard horses outside the haveli. He saw one of his spies at the door. The man said, after a quick salute, 'Sarkar, Aurangzeb has ordered Sarja Khan to attack our territory. We are told he is on his way.'

'What?' Hambirrao got up from his meal. He washed his hands and said, wiping them on his shawl, 'What route is he taking to get here?'

'He is expected to cross the Krishna tomorrow, heading towards Pratapgad. He has an army of twelve thousand. He has challenged his men to capture the fort in two days.'

Hambirrao and his men got ready. His wife had tears in her eyes. He had not even finished his meal. But the commander had no time for such emotions. Seeing his daughter at the gates of the haveli, he stopped. She said, 'Baba, ensure that you don't lose Pratapgad. Our Bhawani temple is there.'

The troops left crying 'Har Har Mahadev' and vanished in the darkness. They met a few spies on the way who informed that Sarja Khan had a troop strength of nearly seventeen thousand and had left Satara, making his way to Wai.

'Our main army has crossed Amba ghat into the Konkan region.'

'We cannot afford to let him swallow Pratapgad,' one of the sardars said.

'Even if we chase them, they would already have crossed Wai and will be well on their way to the gorge at Pasarni ghat. If they take the gorge, they will be in a much stronger position.'

'What do we do now?' the men asked Hambirrao.

'Let us change our route. We will go along the Koyna towards the Vasota fort. By tomorrow morning, we will be in the vicinity of Mahabaleshwar. We will then turn back and intercept the enemy.' Hambirrao knew that the route he had proposed was arduous and would

take a toll on the men and the horses but he had no choice. He spurred his horse and rode on, followed by his five thousand men.

They reached the banks of Koyana and rode through waist-high grass. Hambirrao had barely slept for several nights. Fixing his legs in the stirrups, he managed to catch a few winks while riding. As he dozed, Hambirrao dreamed of Pratapgad, and the way Shivaji Raje had walked down the fort to meet Afzal Khan. Raje had killed the treacherous Khan. Now Sarja Khan had trained his eyes on Pratapgad. Hambirrao woke up and said, 'Come, we need to hurry. We cannot allow the enemy to have an upper hand.'

They managed to cover a distance of nearly thirty kos, almost a hundred kilometres in less than twelve hours. Soon they had reached Mahabaleshwar and descended on Panchgani. They were able to rest in the afternoon before continuing their journey in the evening. Naroji Bhosale, one of Hambirrao's spies, knew the routes like the back of his hand. In the meantime, half of Sarja Khan's troops were crossing the Pasarni ghat. They stopped for the night in a narrow gorge.

Sarja Khan was resting in the cool morning of Panchgani when suddenly he heard cries of 'Har Har Mahadev!' The gorge was filled with Hambirrao's men. The massacre had already begun while Khan and his men were half-asleep. The Mughal troops did not know where to run, and soon, two thousand of them were killed. The rest ran towards Wai to save their lives.

Before sunrise, Hambirrao's men had taken charge of the gorge. Sarja Khan's dream of capturing Pratapgad was shattered. The Mughal and Bijapuri troops were now moving away towards Kenjal. They were still triple the size of Hambirrao's force but he was not in a mood to spare them. 'Let us uproot Sarja Khan and his men completely. This is our chance!'

The men, tired to the bone, asked for a little respite. Hambirrao too was exhausted. He had been fighting relentlessly for years now. They had rested for barely an hour but Hambirrao said, getting up, 'Come, dear men! Shambhu Raje is waiting for us. There are many more missions to accomplish. We cannot afford to sleep any longer ...'

The next morning, the banks of Krishna near Kenjalgad witnessed a battle between the Mughals and the Marathas. Blood flowed everywhere. The Marathas were far fewer in number. Men fell by the hundreds, their shields ruptured. In the distance, it seemed as if Goddess Kalubai watched



from the Mandhardevi temple with her huge silver eyes. In the east, the fort of Chandan Wandan overlooked the carnage.

Sarja Khan had managed to hold his position till late afternoon but by then the Marathas had massacred nearly three thousand Mughals, while Hambirrao had lost only two hundred odd men. Seeing the enemy flee for their lives, the Marathas chased them with shouts of ‘catch them!’ and ‘kill them!’ At around four in the afternoon, Sarja Khan was seen escaping. His men followed suit. The Marathas managed to capture fifteen elephants and nearly fifteen hundred horses. Khan’s men had left their rifles behind too. Hambirrao ordered the grain and other items to be loaded on to bullock carts. In the loot, they had also found diamonds and gems from Sarja Khan’s tent.

The men and women of Kenjal welcomed Hambirrao. That evening the ladies performed a traditional aarti in his honour. Hambirrao, seeing the ladies, was reminded of Yesubai Ranisaheb and his own dear daughter Tarabai.

Suddenly there was a noise from the bushes nearby. A Mughal soldier with an injured leg was lying there. Having also lost one eye, he was barely able to see. But he recognised Hambirrao, sitting astride his horse. The soldier managed to crawl forward; he had spotted a hand-held cannon lying on the ground nearby. With enormous effort, he managed to light it. Within moments, the cannon ball shot towards Hambirmama while people around shouted to warn him. The cannon had found its mark and all that remained of Hambirrao’s head was a mass of flesh as he crashed to the ground. Raigad’s foundation stone had now fallen in Kenjal. It seemed as if the Krishna had stopped flowing for a while. Tears flowed down Kalubai’s cheeks in the Mandhardevi temple. It was a tragic end for the man who never gave up.

The men managed to put Hambirrao’s mortal remains in a palanquin. His loyal horse was buried near the spot where he had died. The gems from Sarja Khan’s tent lay scattered on the ground. The drops of Hambirrao’s blood had turned the ordinary soil priceless while the diamonds lay there like mere pieces of rock.

The news of Hambirrao’s death reached Raigad. Sambhaji was at the base of the fort inspecting the factories when the messenger arrived. He sat rooted to the spot for nearly two hours, dazed and unable to move. He would normally ride his horse all the way up to Raigad, tiring his servants

and soldiers out as they struggled to keep up. But today, he walked slowly, stopping at many places. His attendants requested him to sit in the palanquin or ride his horse but he barely heard them.

He instructed Khando Ballal, 'Please ensure that his last rites are carried out as per tradition. Take whatever money you want from the treasury. Inform the Subedar at Karad accordingly.' Instead of going to his quarters, he walked to the Jagadeeshwar temple and sat outside the sanctum sanctorum. He instructed the servants, 'Tell Maharani that I need to stay here.' For two days and two nights, Sambhaji remained there.

The palace was in turmoil. Hambir Mama was Rajaram's father-in-law and Tarau's father. Yesubai tried to console Tarau as she read an urgent message which was delivered to her. Tarau said, looking at her, 'Vahinisaheb, how do you manage to keep your head above all this? What gives you the strength?'

'Tarau, we are Shivaji Raje's daughters-in-law. We have to face whatever comes our way. We are not Mughals living in the lap of luxury. Where is the time for us to sit and brood over our losses? Have you seen the daughters of the farmers? If their bullock dies, they till the soil themselves. The king too must follow the example of his ryots.'

Everyone knew the way Hambirrao's unexpected death had affected Sambhaji deeply. Steeped in sorrow, he was still unwilling to leave the temple. He had barely eaten anything in two days. All he drank was a little water.

On the third day, elders like Yesaji Kank, Mhaloji Ghorpade and Prahlad Niraji entered the temple. Yesubai accompanied them. They managed to convince Sambhaji to leave the temple. His grief was uncontrollable now, and he sobbed like a child. He said, 'I was not shattered even when my father left me. Hambir Mama did not allow me to miss my father. I had his support all this while. Now, without him, where am I supposed to go?'

'Raje, this is life! Elders have to die one day. Now we have young blood like Khando Ballal, Dhanaji, Santaji and others. We will create one more Hambirrao!' Yesaji baba tried to console him.

The mountain of work that was piling up would diminish because Hambirrao had died. Enemies like Aurangzeb were constantly trying new tricks. There was no time to mourn. Sambhaji stood up and decided to tackle things head on. He nominated Mhaloji Baba as the new commander-

in-chief. Santaji Ghorpade was thrilled to see his father being given such an important post.

E I G H T E E N

—Kavdi  
—Kabri





# 1

The office at Raigad was busy. Sambhaji was looking into both administration and military matters, from loans for farmers to providing the resources needed for various campaigns.

Ganoji Shirke came in, without waiting to be granted permission to enter. Realising that he had something important to talk about, the other staff left. Seeing Ganoji so early in the morning, both Yesubai and Sambhaji were surprised.

Ganoji said with a heavy sigh, 'My own brother-in-law is the Chhattapati of the Swaraj. He is the ruler of a treasury which holds crores of hons. My own sister is the Maharani but does little to help us. I have never been considered one amongst you, isn't that so, Yesu?'

'Why do you want to drag your sister into it, Ganojirao?' Sambhaji said, his face red with anger. 'Should I tell you the number of times you have secretly met Aurangzeb over the past months? Or do you need proof? Ranisaheb herself has seen all the letters to Badshah, signed by you!'

Ganoji was taken aback by Sambhaji's direct allegation. He said, recovering quickly and adopting a confrontational tone, 'Fine! I did meet Aurangzeb. But shouldn't the person wearing the crown try to understand why I have been forced to do this?'

'To get your watan, what else?' Sambhaji answered calmly.

'Exactly! Your father Shivaji Raje had promised us that one day we would manage our own territory. He had told us that he would hand over the jagir of Dabhol once I had a son. Now my son is eight years old. When are we going to get our watandari, Raje?' Ganoji was clearly in a mood to fight.

'Ganoji, why don't you try and understand the situation we are in? These are turbulent times. Aurangzeb is waiting for a chance to attack. If

we are to hand over watandari rights to you at this point, there are others who will demand the same. There would be anarchy. I ask you to be patient.'

'Raje, learn something from the Badshah. He hands over the promise of a watan to whosoever meets him!'

'What is the point of such deceit? How long is he going to be here? Are you going to visit Delhi and Agra to see that the promises made to you are fulfilled? I want to live truthfully and in accordance with my ideals.'

Ganoji was in an argumentative mood. Sambhaji and Yesubai were hoping to pacify him but he was not willing to give up. Suddenly he changed tactics, showing concern for Raje and the Swaraj, 'I am willing to accept whatever you give me or don't, but I wish you would ask that vile Kavi Kalash to go away. Please save the kingdom which your father has created.'

'Huh! Who is going to take his place, Ganojirao? Seeing my plight in these troubled times, my cousin Arjun Bhosale too has changed sides. My sister's husband Mahadji Nimbalkar is with the Khan now. Harji Raje is capable but selfish. You are here in Raigad but your heart is with the Badshah. While we are trying desperately to save the Swaraj, Shivaji Raje's own son-in-law goes and salutes the Mughal Emperor.'

Ganoji Shirke was rather shaken by Sambhaji's blunt assessment of the situation. He said, making a long face, 'Do you see, Yesu? That Kalash has poisoned Raje's mind so that he is unable to distinguish between family and an outsider. He cannot appreciate a valiant man like me.'

'Ganojirao Shirke, Kalash may be a Brahmin but he fought valiantly when Shahbuddin attacked Raigad. He saved us with his bravery.'

'Are you saying that I have done nothing?'

'That is a question you have to ask yourself. I fought many battles. But can you name one where you were fighting shoulder to shoulder with me? Forget leading the fight, you were not even in the rear ranks.'

'Are you comparing me with Kalash?'

'Not at all! You are not worthy of being compared with him. He would not think twice before shedding blood for the Swaraj.'

Ganoji Shirke was not willing to take any more insults. The next day he left in a huff.

On the day of his departure, Sambhaji and Yesubai had just finished their lunch when a maid came in and announced that Ganoji had returned.

Sambhaji smiled. He presumed Ganoji may have returned to talk to his sister or express regret for his actions. But to Raje's surprise, Ganoji continued to reiterate his demands. Finally, he voiced his deepest wish, 'Sambhajiraje, think carefully. Hand me my watan without any fuss, or one day, I will have to ravage Raigad.'

Sambhaji sprang to his feet. He wanted to wring Ganoji's neck but Yesubai stepped in and pleaded mercy for her brother. Seeing tears in her eyes, Sambhaji's anger dissolved.

Wishing to avert an ugly quarrel, Yesubai took her brother into the inner quarters. However Ganoji continued to press his demands and was not willing to see reason. He had come with the intention of getting his dues, come what may. Yesubai yelled at her brother asking him to rein himself in but he said, 'I had not demanded anything all this out of respect for his father. Little did the elder Maharaj know that we would be treated so shabbily! Let me tell you one more thing: that is not a king sitting on the throne in Raigad.'

'What do you mean? Who sits on the throne?'

'An inauspicious owl!'

It was more than what Yesubai could take. Her eyes were spitting fire. It was impossible for her to stand there a moment longer and listen to such insults being heaped on her husband. Before Ganoji could react, she slapped him hard. Ganoji stood up, shaken by the sudden assault. The servants could not believe what they had witnessed and stood with their mouths wide open. An incensed Ganoji glared at his younger sister. He said, looking at the sindoor on her forehead,

'Yesu, I will distribute sweets in at least fifty villages the day you are widowed! I will celebrate Diwali on that day!'

'Khamosh, Ganojiraje! Take your black face away from Raigad,' Yesubai thundered. 'I was born to great parents but unfortunately you turned out to be the black sheep—a black serpent, in fact!'

'Yesu, I shall take my revenge. It is not going to be good for you,' Ganoji hissed.

'Get out of here first. Don't spend a moment more in the pious land of my father-in-law and my husband. Huh! You talk of watan? You are but a dog at Aurangzeb's court. Go and beg to your Badshah. You won't get a morsel here in the Swaraj!'



## 2

‘Yesu, we did not entertain Ganoji. He has now joined the Mughals and promised to build their stations in the Hindavi Swaraj. He has gone there seeking revenge,’ Sambhaji said.

He continued, ‘Does he not realise the danger of opening the doors to an enemy? I have given strict instructions to Kaviraj that he should take action in the Shirke territory before Aurangzeb can begin establishing his stations in Prabhavali.’

Kavi Kalash and Sambhaji barely spent any time together these days. Kalash had been given the task of managing the Malkapur province. His mission was to keep an eye on Amba ghat and ensure that the enemy—nay even an ant—did not enter the kingdom from that side. The area extending over Panhala, Malkapur and Vishalgad up to Amba ghat was a critical region. Kavi Kalash was on constant vigil, day and night.

Since the previous month, by Raje’s orders, Kavi Kalash had been in the Shirke territory. He had made life miserable for Ganoji and his relatives. But it had been ten days since any news from Kaviraj had arrived, worrying Sambhaji.

That afternoon, Kalash’s secretary Krishnaji Konhere reached Raigad. Without waiting for lunch or taking rest, he met Raje. Sambhaji asked, seeing his worried face, ‘Krishnaji Pant, we have not received any news for ten days. How are things?’

‘Ganoji’s tongue is sharper than Kaviraj’s sword.’ Krishnaji hesitated a little. ‘Ganoji says the Raja in Raigad has gone mad. He insults Kaviraj, calling him a fraud and a practitioner of black magic. He is also spreading the word that many Marathas and Brahmins are falling for the trickster.’

Yesubai asked, ‘Why did Kaviraj go to Vishalgad, leaving the task that was assigned to him?’

‘Ganoji is creating a poisonous atmosphere with his stories, making people forget that the real fight is between Aurangzeb and Shambhu Raje. He has managed to paint Kaviraj as a demon and a villain. To avoid further tension, Kaviraj stepped back.’

Sambhaji looked at Khando Ballal and said, ‘Send a message to Kaviraj, informing him that I am coming to Prabhavali and that he must

meet me within two days at Sangameshwar.'

Sambhaji knew that he was now taking the campaign into his father-in-law's territory. Sensing his inner turmoil, she said, 'Raje, don't hold back. Do what you think is right.'

'What do you mean by that? I am going to ravage my father-in-law's home!'

'Yes, if your father-in-law's home has become a refuge for the Badshah or another enemy, then it is right to burn it down, isn't it?'

She continued before Sambhaji could react, 'Raje, you have been fighting the enemy for nearly eight years now. You stoically accepted the death of Hambir Mama. Your valour is your virtue. But some people never changed, alienating themselves from the Swaraj and their king. I have only one prayer for Tuljabhawani: let nothing reduce your determination and courage. Raje, we have lost many who were dear to us. But new heroes like Santaji, Dhanaji, Khando Ballal, Manaji and Rupaji have taken their place. The enemy is at the gates, but not one of our forts is under their command. There is no reason to fear. I am sure Shivaji Raje would be happy to know that his Hindavi Swaraj is safe in your hands.'

### 3

Shambhu Raje said to Khando Ballal, 'Khandoba, send a message to the Goan viceroy. Tell him we don't want ammunition but foodgrains and other supplies.'

Raje said to Yesubai, 'I hope we get a good harvest this year. The past eight years have been terrible. The countless battles, destruction of fields and villages, famine—we have suffered so much! We have to end this conflict soon. Once we destroy Aurangzeb, we can focus on improving the condition of the farmers.'

Sambhaji entered the fort. Ganoji had managed to paint a dark picture of Kavi Kalash in the kingdom at large. Sambhaji knew that it would be disastrous for the Swaraj if Ganoji conspired with Aurangzeb. It was crucial to stem the rot as soon as possible.

That night Sambhaji felt an urge to visit the temple of Jagadeeshwar. For the first time, he went to the temple in a palanquin. Jotyaji Kesarkar and Nilopant sat outside while Sambhaji prayed. They heard the sound of hooves and were surprised to see Godavari approach, astride a horse.

‘Godu, what you doing here?’

‘I have come from the haveli. I was told Raje is here.’

Sambhaji was in a dilemma. He was keen to leave for Sangameshwar but he could not ignore Godu. Together, they walked a little distance away from the temple. Sambhaji said, ‘Godu, you sacrificed everything for Abasaheb and his Swaraj. But what did we give you? Nothing but banishment!’

‘What else can a discarded woman hope for? Earlier, Khan’s men used to come into the villages and take away poor women as a tiger preys on lamb. Those who were later abandoned by them were treated as “despoiled.” Many ended their lives jumping off a cliff or drowning themselves. But Raje ...’

‘But you left your home for the cause of the Swaraj.’

‘I am neither married nor a widow. But I am lucky for sure. That is why I was sheltered by you and Maharanisahab.’

She continued, ‘Raje, not everyone has a selfish motive. I was attracted to you in the beginning, no doubt, but later ... while under the care of Maharani, I was able to see her as my elder sister. My attraction for you dissolved by itself. But I could not marry anyone else. No one was worth it. No one could be your equal.’

‘What do you want, Godu?’

She put her head on Sambhaji’s feet and said, ‘Raje, I have just one wish: when I die, I want you to light my pyre.’

‘But isn’t it only family members who have the right?’

‘Aren’t you one?’ She asked, and her eyes shone with tears.

Sambhaji held her hand. No words needed to be exchanged. The touch spoke volumes.

That night they received a message from Keso Trimal at Jinji: *‘Harji Raje is under control and we have managed to stem his ambitions for the time being. I will ensure that the revenues, rations and other support reach regularly and on time. Please take care of your health, Raje.’*

The next morning Raje was ready to depart for the Shirke territory but he was keen to visit the Ballaleshwar temple at Pali. Twenty-five palanquins

and five hundred horsemen moved from Raigad towards Sudhagad. Stopping at Pachad, Raje visited Jijabai's tomb. The soldiers were getting restless. But Sambhaji rested his head on the tomb, in silent conversation with his grandmother. He said, 'Aau aaji, I shall place Aurangzeb's head at your feet before I take it to Raigad.'

That evening they prayed at the Ballaleshwar temple. After an hour's rest, Sambhaji said, 'Khando, I want a darshan of the Veereshwar temple in Asregao also.' They reached the temple early next morning. Sambhaji was overwhelmed. He had never been able to get over the death of Balaji Pant. Hence he had ordered the creation of this Mahadev temple in his honour. Raje muttered, 'Balaji Kaka, the continuously flowing water from the kalash over the Shiva Linga represents the tears that flow from my eyes for you.'

Now, having completed the darshan, they marched towards Mahad. Crossing the gorge near Chambar Khind, they would soon enter Shirke territory.

## 4

Sambhaji had not seen worse times in the past eight years. Each passing day was a harbinger of bad news. Saiyyad Abdul Khan had managed to bribe the fortkeeper at Sarasgad and taken charge of the fort. Sambhaji had acted immediately, ensuring that the fort was back in Maratha hands. However, the operation had cost them nearly a hundred lives. The Mughals, using bribes and treachery, also managed to take over the port of Kalyan and the forts at Mahuli, Bhiwandi, Durgadi and Malanggad. Trayambakgad too had fallen into enemy hands. Now the Mughals advanced rapidly, swallowing the territory of Nashik and Baglan along with the forts there. The enemy was moving closer to Raigad. The treasury was facing a tremendous burden as it depleted rapidly.

Sleep eluded Sambhaji. One night, there was a knock on the door, and soon, two messengers were ushered in. They were from the Shringarpur-Prabhavali region. The news was disastrous. Ganoji and the Mughal sardar

Sheikh Mukarrab Khan had met secretly at Panhala. Sambhaji was unperturbed. He was now getting used to hearing bad news every day.

Yesubai said, 'Raje, according to their treaty, Ganoji is planning to give two villages near Sangameshwar and Shringarpur to Khan. He is also presenting him with a few stables. The cruel Mughal is going to station two battallions at Kondbhairav and Marleshwar.'

Sambhaji was now really worried. He said, 'Yesu, we have lost thousands of men and animals. We cannot allow their sacrifices to go waste. Allowing the Mughals to enter the Sahyadris is inviting death into our backyard. It is impossible! We cannot allow them to enter!'

Kavi Kalash, Sambhaji and Yesubai sat in conference. Kavi assured Raje, 'I have nearly ten thousand soldiers at Malkapur, ready to fight at any moment.'

'But we need to be alert. The Mughals can enter through other routes too.'

The situation was tense. The enemy had not only reached the door but they could literally hear them knocking at it. The Mughals were strengthening their stations at Kolhapur, Islampur, Karad, Shirval, Shivapur, Chakan and other places. Many Maratha landlords and Brahmins were joining the Mughals with the expectation of a watan. Aurangzeb now moved camp from Bijapur to Akuj.

The Mughals had managed to subdue Qutb Shah and Adil Shah. Their soldiers were in low spirits, wearied by eight years of battles and skirmishes. The only solution in sight was an open confrontation. The Mughal python, having swallowed the traitors of the Swaraj, was now itching to feast on its choicest enemy.

Sambhaji recalled an event from the annals of history. Nearly three hundred years ago, when Malik-ut-Tujjar had entered the Sahyadris, the fort of Vishalgad was under Shankarraji More. Realising that Malik was planning to attack Vishalgad, More reached out to the Shirkes at Shringapur for help. The Shirkes took a bribe from the Bahmani commander and promised to guide them to Vishalgad. Malik had no idea of the difficulty of the journey he was undertaking.

For two days, the Shirkes helped the Bahmani forces through the forest. But the trek soon turned treacherous as they encountered steep climbs and deep valleys. The Bahmani soldiers were unnerved at the sight of the high cliffs and thorny undergrowth, to say nothing of the fact that

there was not a single village or even a hamlet on the way. They could barely pitch their tents at night on the narrow paths. They hardly managed to get a little sleep. On the third day, while the tired soldiers rested, Shirke rode ahead and secretly met Shankarraai, telling him to take advantage of the the enemy's exhaustion and attack. Shankarraai and his men rushed to the spot and massacred the resting troops. The treachery of the Shirkes had cost the Bahmani commander dearly. Nearly seven thousand of his soldiers were killed.

‘Yesu, no one can trust the Shirkes.’

‘Don’t blame my father alone. What about your cousin Arjun Bhosale and your brother-in-law Mahadji? Aren’t they in Aurangzeb’s camp? I was born to a valorous father like Pilajirao, but unfortunately, I have a brother like Ganoji. Raje, give me the charge of the campaign against the Shirkes. I would like to supervise it myself.’

‘This is no job for a woman.’

‘There are many women who have sacrificed much for the Swaraj. I will sacrifice my mother’s home.’

‘Yesu, you may be confident of victory but Ganoji can stoop to any level to ensure his. Besides, if you take charge of this campaign, who will look after Raigad? You are the key administrator here. I need your presence here.’

Sambhaji said, looking at Kavi Kalash, ‘I am afraid, Kaviraj, that you must take charge of all these difficult and uncomfortable campaigns. Hambir Mama is no more. We lost Kondaji Baba at Janjira. Dhanaji, Santaji and Khando Ballal are busy elsewhere. No one else is capable of taking charge.’

Kavi Kalash said, ‘Raje, command me!’

‘Leave in the morning from Pachad. Take fifteen thousand men with you. See that you destroy the Shirke province before Aurangzeb and Ganoji come together.’

The entire Mughal camp was wasting away with a strange fever. The troops had never experienced such a malady before. Some of the firangi artillerymen called it the 'plague'. The news that the Badshah himself had contracted a mild fever was enough to send everyone into a tizzy. Nearly seventy thousand Mughal soldiers had died of the plague so far. The very air smelt foul and the pathetic cries of the afflicted made it worse. The whole camp resembled a graveyard.

The demon of plague was now dancing outside the royal camp. The Badshah had lost two of his grandsons. Wazir Asad Khan was suffering from fever. In a desperate bid to outrun the disease, Aurangzeb had shifted his camp four times in one month.

There was no cure for the dreaded disease. The hakeem provided herbs which at best offered some temporary relief but death within a few days was certain. The dead were buried in shallow graves as there were not enough men to dispose of the corpses. The grave diggers were dying of the same disease. The water carriers had perished long back.

The Badshah surveyed the camp, sitting at a window of his tent. In the distance he could see the domes of Bijapur which had been ravaged by the disease too. Aurangzeb felt lonely. His two favourite begums, Udepuri and Aurangabadi, were sitting near his bed. They were worried as the Badshah was feverish. They prayed to Allah to save him from the plague.

Aurangzeb said, thinking aloud, 'I had insulted the kazis and maulvis of Bijapur when they had paid me a visit. Maybe I am being punished for it.'

'There is no better servant of Allah than Jille Subhani,' Udepuri Begum said.

'But this dreaded disease is blind. Look at the way it has wreaked havoc in Bijapur. Each lane and every house in the city is in its clutches,' Aurangabadi Mahal added.

Aurangzeb said, looking up at the cloudy sky, 'Udepuri, I have managed to subdue the Bijapur and Hyderabad sultanates and their sultans are here as my prisoners. I don't know if I should celebrate my success or weep over the way the plague has broken our back.'

That moment, Zulfikar Khan came in and said, 'Jille Subhani, only two thousand today.'

‘There is little cause to celebrate when two thousand die in the camp and not on a battlefield. Ask your Allah why thousands are dying here each day while that shaitan Sambha is still alive!’

It was not possible to march forward with an army emaciated by illness. Those who survived were living ghosts, incapable of fighting. Thousands lay languishing. But the Badshah was confident that he would survive to defeat his biggest enemy. Asad Khan had taken ill and Zulfikar managed the affairs in his place.

Aurangzeb said to his cousin, ‘The commanders of the Mewati and Multani troops met me this morning. They complained of not having received their salary for the past two months. What is the reason for the delay?’

‘Huzoor, the treasury is half-empty and we still have ...’

‘What are you blabbering? Zulfikar, we won two large sultanates in the Deccan. We looted their treasury! How can our treasury be depleted then?’

‘Jahanpanah, we have not been receiving the monthly share of revenue from Bengal for two months. Subedar Khurshid Quli Khan is giving all kinds of excuses for the delay.’

Aurangzeb was immediately suspicious. ‘Why, is he planning a revolt?’

‘No, Huzoor. He is not so foolish as to attempt that. Most of the other Subedars in Hindustan are delaying the revenues. So he thought ...’

‘Speak freely. Don’t hesitate.’

‘He thought that while we may have won Bijapur and Golconda, the royal army is not going to find it easy to overcome Sambha and his men ...’ Zulfikar was sweating nervously as he spoke.

The Badshah swallowed his anger. Despite the famine and the plague, his mind was as sharp as ever. He had been planning a coup in Raigad with the help of Zulfikar. The plan was to win Rajaram over and declare him king of the Marathas. The prince would be abducted from Raigad and then stationed in Pune under Mughal protection. Those who opposed Sambhaji would be happy to lend their support to his younger brother. Sambhaji’s strength would be reduced considerably and the Hindavi Swaraj would gradually collapse.

It would be an almost impossible task to kidnap Rajaram from Raigad. But Zulfikar had assigned nineteen Pathan and Turkish soldiers to the task.



‘Any news on that front?’ Aurangzeb asked.

‘Jahanpanah, it is proceeding as planned. Zainuddin, posing as Khawas Khan of Golconda, has departed for Raigad. He has nineteen soldiers with him.’

‘Will Sambha suspect anything?’

‘Zainuddin will meet Rajaram in Sambha’s absence. That too, at the haveli in Pachad. It is impossible to stage a revolt in Raigad and then escape. We have got details of the Pachad haveli with the help of Mahadji Nimbalkar. There is a temple there in honour of Jijabai. The royal family often visits the place. Mahadji is Saibai’s brother and knows the area very well.’

Having heard that, Aurangzeb walked towards his office with renewed enthusiasm. Zulfikar said, showing him a letter, ‘It is from Sambhaji’s brother-in-law Ganoji Shirke.’ Aurangzeb asked, before reading the letter, ‘He was to give us two places in the Konkan region to build our stations. What has come of that?’

‘Ganoji is keen but he has been troubled by Kavi Kalash and Sambha. He writes: *“Alamgir Aurangzeb Bahadur, please accept salutes from Ganoji. Badshah Salamat, please don’t doubt Marathas like me. We need your help. I want to make it clear that Sambhaji has lost his mind and he needs to be eliminated. Sambhaji has cruelly denied us our claim on our watan. Now he and Kavi Kalash are ravaging my territory, burning and looting villages. We have managed to save our womenfolk by putting them in the fort of Jinji which is managed by the Siddis. We are in terrible shape.”*’

Aurangzeb asked, ‘How big is Ganoji’s army?’

Zulfikar said hesitatingly, ‘Maybe around a thousand strong. Well, it is not what you would call a regular army.’

‘Zulfikar, we have to march on Sambha once this plague reduces its intensity. But we will meet Mahadji Nimbalkar first. He is an insider and can help us cause serious damage in Maratha territory.’

A few khojas came running towards Aurangzeb. He surmised that either Udepuri or Aurangabadi Mahal must be the latest victim. As soon as he reached the royal quarters, he found that Aurangabadi Begum had high fever. Zulfikar sent for the chief physician but he did not arrive for a long time. A little while later, Aurangzeb received news that the physician had fallen prey to the dreaded disease and died the previous night.

‘His son too is suffering,’ the messenger added.

Finally the plague, not discriminating between caste, colour, rank or creed, had claimed seventy-five thousand lives. Aurangabadi Mahal was one of the casualties.

Aurangzeb sobbed after burying his favourite wife in a faraway land. Most people believed he was crying for the lost begum, but in reality, Aurangzeb was using her death as an excuse to let go of the emotions he had withheld for a long time—his frustration, his failures and his constant struggle over the best part of a decade.

After a fortnight, things were already looking better. Wazir Asad Khan had survived the disease but it had blinded Feroz Jung. After claiming thousands of lives and leaving hundreds blind or deaf, the plague finally disappeared.

Aurangzeb was getting regular updates on Sambhaji’s activities. The Maratha kingdom was recovering from the famine, and sardars like Khando Ballal, Nilopant Peshwa, Keso Trimal and Senapati Mhaloji Ghorpade were busy attacking the enemy wherever they could. There were clear signs that Sambhaji was planning a daring attack on the Mughals. Finally, on 14 December 1688, the Mughal army was on the move again. With renewed vigour and ambition, Aurangzeb moved towards Maratha territory.

## 6

The Mughal camp was spread over nearly twenty square miles. However, it was not the formidable sight it had been when it first pitched its tents in the Deccan. Water was scarce and the animals looked weak and scrawny. The imperial army had seen much better days.

Wazir Asad Khan, who had luckily survived the plague with his eyesight intact, stood inside the Badshah’s tent. Aurangzeb caressed his mehndi-coloured beard and said, looking at his Wazir, ‘Why don’t you tell me frankly that our troops fear Sambha?’

‘Jahanpanah, everone is afraid of the Sahyadris and of Sambha.’

‘These days, you are withholding information from me.’

‘Jahanpanah, how is that possible? There must be some misunderstanding ...’

‘Tell me then, what is kavdi and kabri?’

The Wazir was dumbstruck. He had never imagined that the Badshah would enquire into such trivial affairs. Aurangzeb repeated his question, and the Wazir said, his face turning white with fear, ‘Jahanpanah, our troops play a game in their spare time. It is played with small cowrie shells called kavdi. Each soldier throws the shells on the ground where small circles are drawn in the dust. The circles are named after different rivers. The soldier playing the game believes that if his shell falls in a particular circle, his kabar or tomb would be built there after his death. What can I say, Jahanpanah? The soldiers have lost their morale. They wonder whether they will ever see the Ganga and the Yamuna again. They fear that their dead bodies will be found lying in these unknown lands of the South one day.’

‘Wazir, I am told they also bet on where the royal tomb would be erected. Tell me frankly, isn’t it true?’ Suddenly the Badshah asked, changing the topic, ‘What is the news from Nashik and Baglan?’

‘Our loyal Mahtab Khan is doing his best. He has laid siege to the fort of Trayambak for the past six months. The Marathas are starving as he has cut off all their supplies. We expect the fort to be taken within a day or two.’

At that moment thirty-year-old Momin Khan, Aurangzeb’s grandson, came running and said, ‘We have good news!’

‘What is it? Has the kafir Sambha died? Or has he been caught?’

‘No. But Dadajaan ...’ The grandson hesitated.

‘If that is not the case, I am not interested. I am tired of hearing news of one siege after another. Nothing happens thereafter.’

Momin Khan looked at the ground, unable to face the Badshah’s wrath. Aurangzeb said, directing his anger at his Wazir, ‘An army of five lakh men and we have spent more than eight years here! My ancestors have ruled over Hindustan for more than a hundred years but none of them would have lived through such torture. Eight years. And you ask for my patience! You are aware of how the soldiers have fared for the past eight years. They are away from their families. Not to mention the famine and the disease we have suffered. They are at the edge of their patience now. I won’t be surprised if they talk of burying me alive!’

‘Alampanah, they call you a Zinda Pir!’

‘Any further delay can lead to a revolt within the camp. We need to keep that in mind.’

There was a constant murmur of dissent amongst the troops. Asad Khan too was losing patience. He said, ‘It will be impossible to hold the troops for long. All attempts to lure Sambha out of the mountains have been futile. Even that Ganoji Shirke turned out to be a coward.’

‘What a pity. We have two of Shivaji’s sons-in-law in our camp and the third one wants to join us. Many of his sardars are with us; yet, Sambha is elusive. Do what it takes! I want Sambha.’ Alamgir turned to Zulfikar, ‘What news from Khawas khan?’

‘He has reached Pachad.’

‘Take the next steps, you fool! I want Rajaram. It will teach that Sambha a lesson.’

The Badshah was waiting for Mahadji Nimbalkar and Ganoji Shirke to do the needful. Aurangzeb had learnt that while the Marathas may not give up their forts willingly, it was possible to stab them in the back using their own men. He began writing messages late into the night, luring sardars in the Maratha army with promises and urging them to join the Mughals. He dangled before them examples of Mahadji and others like Mahadik, Jedhe, Mane, and Jagdale who were now happy allies of the Mughals, and reminded them that Mahadji had been made a Mughal thanedar. He asked the sardars to either convince Sambha to yield or aid them in capturing him.

Soon Mahadji Nimbalkar came from Bahadurgad, carrying with him rich gifts for the Badshah. As Mahadji bent low in *mujra*, the Badshah caressed his beard and said, ‘Mahadji, your fortunes have changed now. Instead of remaining a mere thanedar at Bahadurgad, I feel you must take over the throne in Raigad.’

‘Jahanpanah, I am better off at your feet.’

‘Mahadji, I am giving you a large army to attack Raigad. Imagine the turmoil it would create when people hear of it!’

Mahadji fell at Aurangzeb’s feet and candidly admitted that he would not be able to carry off that difficult task. ‘But I will get the work done sitting here,’ he said. He showed Alamgir copies of letters he had written to several Maratha sardars, coaxing them to join the enemy: *‘Join the Mughals and seven generations after you will live in peace and luxury.’*

Mahadji was afraid of a direct confrontation with Sambhaji. This disappointed Aurangzeb. He asked Asad Khan that night, ‘How many

castes are there amongst the Marathas?’

‘I have heard that there are around ninety-two or ninety-six castes; I am not sure.’

‘I believe there are only two kinds of castes: one, those who enjoying the patronage of rulers like Adil Shah or Nizam Shah, or any such protector, under whom they have lived a life of luxury for generations; the second, those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their land. Siva and Sambha belong to the latter.’

‘Jahanpanah, are you criticising those who have joined us, instead of praising them?’

‘Huh! They are fair-weather friends, here only to assuage their greed for land. It remains to be seen whether they will really help us.’

‘Is Jahanpanah keen on extending a hand of friendship to Sambha?’ Asad Khan asked a pointed question.

‘Wazir, a year back, when Qutb Shah was in my clutches, I had sent an offer of friendship to Sambha through him. I knew of the secret pact he and Sambha had, of course. After all, in this age, what’s the point in spending years on end in a distant land with lakhs of troops? I had asked him to surrender all his larger forts. In lieu of that, I promised Sambha all the land he wanted in Hindustan as his jagir. But you know what he did? He spat so hard on the emissary who had carried the letter with my offer of friendship, that the fellow dared not open his eyes for a while.’

Ganoji Shirke came two days later from Panhala and fell at the Badshah’s feet. He complained bitterly, the way one would when meeting the elders at home after a long time. The Badshah cunningly extracted from an emotional Ganoji the information he was looking for—regarding Panhala, Vishalgad, Malkapur, Karad, and the ravines, gorges and jungle paths in the Sahyadris.

‘Ganoji, I know your intentions are good but you hardly have an army to speak of.’

Ganoji was taken aback by the extent of the Badshah’s knowledge. He said, recovering quickly, ‘Badshah Salamat, I agree that I may not be able to risk a direct confrontation, but the dagger in my hand can penetrate a certain someone’s back in a manner that his kingdom too will bleed.’

‘Wah, Ganoji! Now I know why Shivaji chose you as his son-in-law.’ Ganoji was honoured with finery and jewels. He spent two more days there in discussions. Before he departed, the Badshah not only promised him his

watan but said, 'You are already in touch with Shahzada Azam. Keep an eye on Panhala, and if you ever need any money, don't hesitate to ask Azam.'

'You have been most kind to me, Badshah Salamat.'

'Don't worry. I will see that my message reaches Azam before you reach Panhala.'

## 7

Kavi Kalash arrived with good news. 'We will soon receive supplies from Jinji! Harji Raje has sent three thousand bullock carts filled with grain. It will reach us within a fortnight.'

Sambhaji was thrilled. 'Harji is perceptive. He must have realised how we are suffering from famine and drought. I am happy that he has helped us.'

Two days later, Krishnaji Konhere met Sambhaji. He seemed worried. 'Raje, we have received a message from Digoji Nimbalkar at Athani. The bullock carts sent by Harji Raje lost their way and stumbled into Aurangzeb's camp by mistake.'

Sambhaji did not respond. Within a couple of days he received a message from Harji Daaji, asking whether they had received the supplies.

Kavi Kalash asked, 'Who was misguided? The men or the bullocks?'

Sambhaji smiled. 'Kaviraj, how many people do you think would be managing three thousand bullock carts?'

'At least seventy or so.'

'Can you blame the mute four-legged creatures then? These are tricks played by the men leading the carts. I know that Harji Daaji is intelligent as well as brave. This is a cunning trick he has played. He made a show of sending support to us and claimed that the carts landed there by mistake. Hence tomorrow, if the Badshah defeated us, he would be in his good books. He can claim that he was forced to show loyalty to us but he had always been the Badshah's true supporter. The "misguided" bullock carts would prove where his real loyalties lay.'

Aurangzeb was shocked to see Zulfikar when he reported to him in his tent. He could make out from the ashen face of his cousin that he was badly shaken. Furious, Aurangzeb did not even feel like asking what had happened.

Zulfikar pleaded, ‘Jahanpanah, please pardon me! I wonder how to convey the news to you. Zainuddin and his men tried their best. They invited Rajaram and his family to the temple at Pachad but unfortunately Sambhaji and Yesubai arrived that day. They recognised our men and raised an alarm. The Maratha soldiers massacred our men. The two who survived are now prisoners at the fort.’

Aurangzeb did not utter a single word. He sat at the desk in the tent that served as his office and continued doing his work.

That afternoon, Mansoor Khan reported with his men. He was immediately presented to the Badshah, along with eight captives who were disguised as gosavis or travelling mendicants. The men were tough-looking, with ghastly reddish eyes and black faces, and they glared at the Badshah.

Aurangzeb asked, ‘Mansoor Khan, who are these men?’

‘Jahanpanah, we found them at a temple in Athani. They are Sambha’s men, soldiers disguised as fakirs. There were at least a dozen of them. When my subedar attacked them, a few ran away.’

The Badshah asked, fiddling with the beads of his rosary, ‘What was their plan?’

Mansoor Khan hesitated and looked at the others in attendance. A nod from Aurangzeb, and all except Khan vacated the office. Mansoor Khan said, looking down at the floor, ‘Your death, Jahanpanah!’

The men had already been tortured; the wounds were visible on their bodies. Mansoor Khan continued, ‘They are ordinary soldiers and do not hold important positions. Their intent was clear—to locate and kill their target.’

Aurangzeb asked one of the soldiers, ‘What were the orders from Sambha?’

The young man answered without hesitation, ‘Raje told us that Aurangzeb is a threat to our country, our religion and our gods. Our orders

are to find him and kill him, wherever he is.'

Mansoor Khan said, clearing his throat, 'Jahanpanah, we are told such teams are operating in various places like Athani, Pandharpur and Mangalveda.'

It was difficult for Aurangzeb to hide his fear at this moment. He tried to conceal it with a display of anger, but deep down, he was a worried man. Nothing was working in his favour. Despite having survived the plague, his troubles were far from over. Sleep eluded the Badshah. Even the barking of a dog or the rustling of a leaf was enough to wake him. He remembered the game of kavdi-kabri. Was he destined to be buried on the banks of an unknown river? Images of the Emperor Shah Jahan, begging for water and Dara Shikoh's bloodstained head danced in his mind's eye.

The Badshah woke up next morning with a high fever. Udepuri tended to him. When the hakeem diagnosed that it was not a symptom of the plague, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. In his delirium, when he heard the words, 'Mukarrab Khan has arrived near Sangola,' Aurangzeb immediately sent for him.

The following evening, a weak Badshah lay on his bed looking at the setting sun. Sheikh Mukarrab Khan was standing at his bedside, holding a basket of fruit. He had rushed to the Emperor's camp the moment he received the message. Aurangzeb said, holding his hand, 'Mukarrab, you are my true hakeem!' A fresh surge of energy had rushed through the Badshah's body at the sight of Mukarrab.

The tall, lanky, tough-looking sardar with sharp eyes sat near Alamgir's bed. Aurangzeb said, sitting up on his bed, 'You are the ablest of my sardars, Mukarrab.'

Mukarrab was all ears for he had sensed that the Badshah had summoned him for a special purpose. 'You know that the kafir Sambha is a cunning fox. I had brought his father Siva to his knees when we signed the treaty at Purandar. But the son has made me roam the wilds of the Deccan like a fakir for the past nine years.'

Aurangzeb was overcome with emotion as he spoke. Tears gathered in his eyes. He said, 'I don't know what ill-fated moment it was in which I left for this campaign. Nothing is working in my favour.'

'Jahanpanah, you are called the Zinda Pir. You have an army of five lakh men. You are the Shahenshah of Hindustan. You cannot have tears in your eyes! What is the use of having people like me then?'



‘That is why, Mukarrab, I am nominating you to take charge of the territory of Panhala.’

‘I will challenge him to an open battle, catch that monkey, and bring him here.’

‘Don’t dream of such feats, Mukarrab. He is not one to agree to a direct confrontation. All my sardars and the three lakh soldiers who have survived are proving to be useless. That kafir dog is growing bolder by the day, sitting in the lap of the Sahyadris.’

Alamgir continued, ‘We could not even capture Ramshej near Nasik. Raigad, Rajgad and Pratapgad are deep within the Sahyadris. How do we capture them? Anyway, take an army of fifteen thousand and move towards Panhala. Even Shahzada Azam will serve under your command. I will issue the orders right away. I want your target to be one and only one man: Sambha!’

‘I am grateful that you have shown such faith in an ordinary soul like me, Jahanpanah. I am a dedicated soldier of the Deccan. I will send my spies ahead of the troops to Panhala at once. I have only one request—I need adequate funds.’

‘Granted!’

‘Let me tell you a secret, Jahanpanah. There is no race in Hindustan more greedy and selfish than the Marathas. They are willing to kill their own brothers for a little money.’

‘Wah!’ Aurangzeb exclaimed. He too had reached the conclusion that bribes were the only way to defeat the Marathas. Like a camel lost in the desert seeking an oasis, the Badshah rested his hopes on Mukarrab Khan. He said, patting his back, ‘My dear Khan, don’t bother about expenses. Take whatever wealth you need on your elephant. But come back victorious.’

Finally he warned, in a serious tone, ‘Don’t let your guard down even for a moment. Sambha is well known for his surprise guerrilla attacks. Do whatever it takes to capture him. That would be the best service you can render to Allah.’

NINETEEN

The  
Battle Cry





# 1

Light winds blew at Mukarrab Khan's camp. The horses and camels had got a few days' rest and were enjoying fresh fodder. Mukarrab's tent was at the centre of the camp. It was lit on all sides with mashaals and guards stood outside, their naked swords gleaming in the light. Mukarrab Khan was resting but his face was creased with worry. He would glance once in a while at the distant silhouette of the Panhalgad fort, visible through the window of his tent.

In the distance dogs started barking, and then a group of twenty-five riders rode into heart of the camp. They were led by Mukarrab's son Salim. Behind Salim was a Maratha sardar who was around forty-five years of age. His face was swollen and his body bore many wounds. One of his eyes was bloodshot, and seemed to have been injured. The sardar fell at Mukarrab's Khan's feet the moment he saw him. He pleaded, between sobs, 'Please save me, Khansaheb!'

Mukarrab asked his son, 'Who is this mad person?'

'Babajaan, he is Ganoji Shirke, Sambhaji's brother-in-law and Shivaji's son-in-law.'

'Get up, Ganojiraje,' Mukarrab Khan said, slapping his back. 'You are treated with respect in Badshah Salamat's camp. Why are you crying like a desperate woman today?'

'What can I do, Khansaheb? Sambha and Kavi Kalash have made us homeless. He is creating havoc in our territory, burning crops and killing those who guard the fields. He took over our haveli in the village of Kutre. A few of my cousins have been murdered. Their womenfolk are destitute; they have nowhere to go. Sambha came with only five thousand men but the way he can motivate the soldiers is fascinating! I am saying that despite

the fact that he is my enemy. I am ashamed to say it, but he routed our troops within a few hours and vanished into the jungles.'

Mukarrab Khan pacified Ganoji. He was offered a cool drink by a servant. Khan said, 'Ganoji, Sambha is a threat to the Badshah and to landlords like you.'

'Khansaheb, the sardars and Brahmins criticise him in private but run like scared monkeys the moment Sambha and his men confront them on a battlefield.'

Ganoji was desperate. All he wanted was for Sambhaji to be killed or captured somehow. Mukarrab realised that Ganoji's hatred for Sambhaji was intense. He seemed more like Aurangzeb's brother-in-law than Sambhaji's! Long hours were spent in discussion that night.

The next morning, Mukarrab Khan received urgent messages from Shahzada Azam and the Badshah. The fort of Panhalgad shone in the morning sun. Mukarrab said, 'Ganoji, perhaps we cannot capture the lion but let us at least take Panhala.'

'What?'

'We must capture Panhala. Those are the Badshah's orders. It is important to keep the morale of the troops high. Once we capture the fort, we will have control of the plateau of Masai beyond it, as well as the distant Ghodkhind pass and Vishalgad all the way up to Amba ghat.'

Ganoji gulped nervously and said, 'Khansaheb, it is a very difficult task. The fortkeepers Vithal Trayambak Mhadkar and Prahlad Pant are old hands. They cannot be tempted to change sides.'

'Huh! Many Maratha sardars are now fed up of fighting. They want peace and a territory of their own to manage. Take as many jewels as you want from us but bribe the officials at Panhala.'

'Sarkar, Prahlad Pant is not one to be tempted.'

'Don't be childish. Here, read the letter written by him to Shahzada Azam.' Ganoji read the letter:

*'Shahzada Azam,*

*Please save us from our king who is not only an ill-mannered idiot, but also losing his mind these days. A mere clerk, if found taking a small bribe, is caught and punished. He listens to Kavi*

*Kalash alone and no one else. The Shirkes have lost their homes. Many more will. All the watandars are worried.*

*We request the Badshah to save us from this devil. Save the Maratha kingdom. Put Rajaram on the throne. Old folks like us are ready to serve under you.'*

Ganoji read the letter thrice. He could not believe his eyes. Then he smiled and said, twirling his moustache, 'That's all I need! Leave the rest to me.'

Two nights passed. Ganoji and Devji Shirke visited Panhala under the cover of darkness. They returned and reported to Mukarrab Khan immediately. Ganoji said, hugging Mukarrab affectionately, 'Khansaheb, just wait for a couple of days. You won't see the saffron flag on the ramparts of Panhalgad thereafter. Prepare to take over the fort!'

## 2

The Mughal python was laying siege to the strong and strategically placed Panhala fort. The moment Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash received news that their second capital was in danger, they jumped on their horses and rode as fast as possible. En route, Kavi Kalash ordered three thousand of the ten thousand cavalymen posted at Malkapur to gallop towards Panhala.

The traitors had removed the saffron flag. The fort was already half-occupied by the Mughals. However, Sambhaji and his men entered the fort from the plateau. The Mughal troops were massacred. Sambhaji managed to retrieve the fort. That night the traitors were lined up. Prahlad Pant was captured. Yesaji and Shidoji Farzand were thrown over the precipice to their death. Sambhaji had won back a strategic fort.

Kavi Kalash said, 'Raje, we managed it in the nick of time. You rushed like an arrow without caring for food and water, all the way from Vishalgad. Mukarrab Khan would have taken Panhalgad otherwise.'

'Yes, Panhala is ours again, but it really irks me that Ganoji managed to escape. It is unfortunate, Kaviraj, that Yesurani had almost unsheathed

her sword to behead her brother when they last met in Raigad, but she allowed him to go unhurt. Else we would not have faced these problems today.'

'I agree, Raje. It was a mistake that cost us a great deal.'

'Well, Ganoji is not a person; he is a trait, a mask. Many landlords are hiding behind this persona. Many such men have approached us. These watandars were unhappy during Abasaheb's reign too but they could not open their mouths in fear. After his death, they conspired to label me an ill-mannered, dissolute, whimsical and mad person. I know these old folks. They have already attempted to kill me thrice. This is the fourth and the last time!'

One afternoon, Nagoji Mane came riding through the bazaars of Karad. He met the Yadav brothers, Girjoji and Arjoji. Nagoji said, teasing them, 'So, have you received the papers for your watan as promised by Sambhaji?'

'We put forth our demands a while ago. I am sure we will get his approval soon,' Girjoji said.

'You are being naïve. The Bhosales have never given anything to anyone. The Mughal Badshah is willing to entertain our requests but the Bhosales never will.'

Nagoji's ploy to poison the brothers' minds worked. Their faces fell. Girjoji said, 'Maybe we are not destined to have our own watan. We were about to get the papers when the elder Maharaj died.'

'So get your papers now, before the younger Maharaj dies.'

'Sarkar, don't say that!'

Nagoji realised he may inadvertently have blurted out a secret. He said, biting his tongue, 'I mean, no one knows what may happen, isn't it? Get your papers when Shambhu Raje is willing to issue them. Ganoji Shirke has been trying in vain. Find the Maharaj, plead and cajole. Get your work done!'

Ganoji was desperate now. He pleaded with Mukarrab Khan to finish Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash off at the earliest opportunity. Mukarrab Khan too was in trouble. That morning he had received a stinging message from the Badshah, 'We had high hopes in you. I am disappointed that you could not hold on to the fort. I hope I don't get the news that Sambha has captured you!'

That afternoon, Mukarrab did not have lunch. The fact that Panhalgad had slipped out of his hands was hard to digest. Each time he looked at the distant fort, the wounds would hurt.

Sheikh Mukarrab Khan had risen from a lowly foot-soldier to the rank of the commander of the Qutbshahi army. He had won laurels through hard work and tenacity. He decided now that he was not going to depend on the Maratha traitors for victory. He had managed to plant several spies who knew the territory well. He would ensure that they cross-checked the information he got from Ganoji's men.

One morning, he asked Ganoji, 'What do you say, can we manage to capture Sambhaji from the gardens at Sangameshwar? I am told that Sambha and Kalash have built beautiful havelis there.'

'How is that possible, Sarkar?'

'Did he not camp at Sangameshwar for a month last year?'

'That might not happen this year. He is a restless eagle, and one with a sharp beak, so to speak.'

Mukarrab said, ignoring Ganoji's inadvertent praise of Sambhaji, 'When he travels from Konkan to Vishalgad, which route does he take?'

'Through Sangameshwar, obviously.'

Mukarrab Khan smiled to himself. 'Ganoji, would you not expect him to halt at Sangameshwar where he has built these beautiful havelis?'

Ganoji said, without raising his voice, 'Mukarrab Miyan, don't think I am a fool. I just hope one thing does not happen.'

'What?'

'That your Badshah, disgusted with his lack of success here, decides to go back to Delhi.'

Mukarrab's face fell. But he said, patting Ganoji's back affectionately, 'I know the Badshah will place his trust in me for a few more days. After that, he may decide to go back.'



Ganoji was in tears now. He said, falling at Mukarrab Khan's feet, 'If that happens, we are doomed. Sambha will not forget how we have troubled him; we would be caught and literally burnt to death.'

'Ganoji, it all depends on what help you can provide.'

All the watandars were shaken now. The thought that the Badshah may go back to Delhi was unbearable. They knew their fate was sealed if that was to happen.

Ganoji and Nagoji were now sending secret letters to the deshmukhs and deshpandes.

*'You may call yourself Marathas or Brahmins, but we need to look after ourselves and the generations that will follow us. A watandar is his own king. For twelve generations, we lived like kings until Shivaji and Sambhaji came along and ruined our way of life. We ruled over Raigad too once upon a time. We need to support the Khan and protect our families' future now.'*

The spies were now everywhere. Nagoji seized this as an opportunity to serve under the Badshah. He was now more eager than ever to reach out to as many people as possible in the hope of turning them against Sambhaji.

## 4

'Malharrao, I need to see that rampart repaired within two days. I won't leave Vishalgad till then,' Sambhaji said.

'Sarkar, please trust us.'

'I trust you, dear. It is Aurangzeb that I don't trust. I want to ensure that our forts are so strong that he spends his entire life failing to capture them.'

Vishalgad stood next to the mighty Sahyadris the way a foal stands near a mare. It had been built during Raja Bhoj's reign in the eleventh century. It was strategically placed to facilitate as well as prevent military invasions. From Vishalgad one could enter into Konkan through narrow and

dangerous forest paths. Similarly, it was easy to control movements towards Amba ghat and Anuskura ghat using the fort as a base.

Aurangzeb's final assault was literally at the doorstep now. The kingdom trembled in anticipation of the onslaught the way windows and doors of a house shudder before a cyclone strikes it. All the Mughal stations from Chakan, Shirval and Satara to Karad, Islampur and Kolhapur were glaring at the Maratha Swaraj. The Mughal Badshah had no enemy left from Kabul-Kandahar in the north-west to Bengal in the east and upto Burhanpur in the south. Golconda and Bijapur were down on their knees. Aurangzeb had now turned his entire focus on Sambhaji and the mighty Sahyadris which protected him. It was clear that a massive battle was imminent. And the outcome was clear: either Sambhaji or Aurangzeb would die!

Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash stood on the ramparts of Vishalgad. Malhar Rangnath and Krishnaji Konda were with them. The once mighty Vishalgad had weakened a little. Just the previous month, one of the towers of the Munda Darwaza had crumbled. Sambhaji knew that the fort, with its strategic importance, should not be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy.

When Sambhaji asked the masons how long it would take to repair the tower, they said at least two to three months. Sambhaji was annoyed. He erupted, 'That will not do. I need to get the work done in two days and two nights.'

Raje ordered his soldiers to go to all the villages on the route from Sakharpa to Anuskura upto Amba ghat and collect as many men as possible. The three thousand soldiers guarding the fort kept their swords aside and lent a hand in the repair work. Bricks and stones were laid and cemented with mortar.

Sambhaji knew he had given the men an impossible deadline. He asked Kaviraj, 'Give me a realistic estimate; how long will it take?'

'I think we can manage in four days, working through the nights.'

'The enemy is at the gates. I want to give some special instructions to all my sardars, including the Senapati.'

'Don't worry about that, Raje. En route to Raigad, we will stop at Sangameshwar and hold the discussions there. We are all ready.'

'Have the messengers been sent already? Kaviraj, we must not ask all the sardars to leave their posts. We don't want to be in a situation where,

while we sit and discuss our plans, the enemy targets our undefended posts.’

‘We have only summoned a few select sardars. Senapati Mhaloji Ghorpade will come from Pachad, and as you wished, Dhanaji and Santaji will attend.’

In order to ensure Sambhaji met with success against his arch enemy, Ramdas Swami’s chief disciple Ranganath Swami was to come to Sangameshwar too. As per Sambhaji’s orders, the repair work at Vishalgad was done with utmost alacrity. Sambhaji, looking at the ramparts, felt confident that the fort could resist an enemy onslaught for at least six months. It also had adequate stores of grain and ammunition.

‘Kaviraj, once we agree on our next course of action, I am sure we will rout the enemy in no time. It is my intention to save Maharashtra from the Mughals in another month. Our ryots have suffered terribly in the past years. We need to ensure that they have funds to buy seeds, and that we dig enough wells to meet their needs. This year, the monsoon is expected to be adequate. I am sure our granaries would be overflowing by Dusshera.’

Sambhaji was sad despite his optimistic words. Kavi Kalash asked, ‘Raje, why are you so despondent?’

‘Kaviraj, I can bear many troubles and have overcome them. But sometimes I wonder why Bhawani tests me in this manner. Remember the siege at Janjira? No sardar was more valourous than Kondaji Baba. If only we had had ten more days there! Alas, the Mughal forces entered Maharashtra when we were on the verge of triumph. Why does destiny always cheat us at the last moment, snatching victory?’

Suddenly Sambhaji spotted two familiar faces in the distance. They were Arjoji and Girjoji Yadav. Skilled architects, the brothers had built the temple at Pachad among other buildings in the Swaraj. Sambhaji asked them, ‘How did you know that you are needed here?’

‘Raje, we are willing to do whatever you tell us. But there is one thing which has been pending for a long time.’

‘And that is ...?’

‘The elder Maharaj had promised to hand over the territories of Karad and Aundh as our watan. But he died suddenly and the papers were never prepared.’

‘What’s the hurry, Yadav?’ Sambhaji said, a little disappointed.

‘We are not blaming you, Sarkar. It’s just that Maharaj fell ill suddenly. But now things have changed. We hear from the Shirkes that it is

wise to get the papers in our name as soon as possible.’ Realising that he had blurted out Shirke’s name, Girjoji bit his tongue.

Sambhaji said in a dejected tone, trying to hide his disappointment, ‘Come to Sangameshwar after a few days. Khando Ballal will get your work done.’

The next afternoon, Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash reached Ghodkhind, also known as Pawankhind. The gorge was situated between Pandharpani and Gajapur. On 14 July 1660, Bajiprabhu Deshpande had stood firm with his men in the heavy rains, guarding the pass and holding the enemy at bay till Shivaji Maharaj reached the Vishalgad fort. It was only when he heard the cannons boom from the fort, signalling the safe arrival of Shivaji, that a heavily wounded Bajiprabhu had allowed himself to succumb to his injuries. At the spot where he had died, in the gorge now made sacred with the new name Pawankhind, were two tombstones in honour of Bajiprabhu and his brother Fulaji. Sambhaji was overwhelmed as he paid obeisance to these two brave warriors who had laid down their lives to protect his father and the Swaraj.

They returned to Vishalgad that evening. The deep valleys and tall peaks surrounding the fortress offered natural protection. Sambhaji stopped on his way to the fort observe the Sahyadris in the light of the setting sun. He looked up towards the Munda Darwaza where a hundred torches burnt. Then, with determined steps, he began climbing up. He was to leave for Sangameshwar the next morning. There were many decisions to take.

## 5

Mukarrab Khan’s camp was sleeping in the dead of the night. But sleep eluded him. He had been discussing their next moves with Ganoji Shirke who was confident that Sambhaji would halt at Sangameshwar before leaving for Raigad. Ganoji had also assured Mukarrab that his family would care for his troops while they were in Shirke territory. Mukarrab looked through the window of his tent at the faraway silhouette of Panhalgad. Mukarrab often shut his eyes to avoid looking at the fort but the mental

image of Sambhaji could not be dismissed so easily. Neither his mind nor his body were at rest.

Suddenly, he heard horses outside his tent. Mukarrab Khan stood up and went out of his tent. Two messengers handed over a message from Wazir Asad Khan. Mukarrab's hair stood on end as he began to read the message:

*'My dear Sheikh Mukarrab Khan,*

*This is an urgent message from Badshah Salamat. That "Jagirdar" is now in the Vishalgad territory, away from the safe confines of his Raigad. He has carelessly busied himself with the repair of the fort. He is accompanied by select soldiers. It is an opportune moment for you to capture that zamindar. Needless to remind you, Alamgir Badshah is pinning his hopes on your valour, and waits day and night for the good news.'*

The very thought of the daring campaign lit up Mukarrab Khan's face. He could barely sit still in excitement. Unable to contain his eagerness, he stepped out of his tent and started waking up his men, giving orders for them to get ready. Soon Mukarrab Khan's sons, and nearly three thousand soldiers, had assembled near his tent. Ganoji Shirke and Nagoji Mane were sent for. Mukarrab Khan hugged Ganoji, saying, 'You are like a brother to me. Your information was accurate. The message from the Badshah confirms it. Come! We need to move at once.'

Then he said, turning to Nagoji, 'I want you to move towards Karad immediately. Get the thanedar at Karad to round up at least fifteen thousand troops. We never know when we will need them.'

Mukarrab addressed his men, 'My friends, remember! We have to forget sleep, food, water and every such thing. Follow me now! The journey ahead is tough but we have to jump into the swirling waters even though we might drown.'

'Khansaheb, don't lose your wisdom in your eagerness,' someone shouted from the crowd.

'Who said that?' Mukarrab Khan screamed.

An old Bijapuri sardar stood up. He said, 'Khansaheb, no one doubts your valour or your intentions. But I have travelled through mountainous

terrain many times. I was an ordinary soldier in Siddi Johar's army when we chased Shivaji upto Vishalgad. I was barely twenty then. I have seen first-hand how dangerous the mountains are.'

'What do you wish to say?'

'That it is not just a mountain range; it is hell!' the old sardar said. 'The roads leading to the Amba ghat are so narrow and steep that a team of merely thirty or forty Maratha soldiers armed with just a catapult can send thousands of enemy soldiers to their graves.'

'Stop spreading these exaggerated lies!' Mukarrab Khan shouted.

'Let me tell you about Umberkhind, a dangerous gorge. Once Shiva ...'

'Stop! Don't utter another word!' Mukarrab Khan said, standing up. He stepped onto a slightly raised mound of earth and said, 'Friends, we have to carry out this campaign not to live but to die! Those who believe in Allah and in me may come. Those who fear for their lives may rest here.'

Mukarrab Khan walked briskly to his horse and mounted it. Ikhlas Khan and Ganoji followed suit. Then they rode away. Mukarrab Khan was in no mood to stop now. Following him were two thousand of his select riders. A thousand odd foot soldiers sprinted after them, not wanting to be left behind. Khan had always maintained strict discipline within his troops.

The very thought of Sambhaji's capture tickled Ganoji. He looked at the Jyotiba Dongar, a Shiva temple they passed en route, and prayed, 'Lord, please allow the arrest of this rascal Sambha. I shall present a gold garland weighing a hundred and fifty tolas to you.'

Mukarrab Khan's luck had favoured him. It was a starlit night. He knew there was a Maratha camp at Navli. They would have to ensure that the soldiers at Navli did not alert the troops at Panhala. A contingent of three thousand men would certainly attract their attention. Ganoji guided them through the woods around Devale village, thus avoiding any attention. Mukarrab had instructed his best archers to kill any dog which started barking lest it awaken the villagers.

Mukarrab Khan was an intelligent leader. He said to his cousin, 'Go back to my camp. Lie down on my bed and call for the hakeem and the other physicians. You must not leave the tent for four days. You need to create the impression that while the troops have left for Karad, Mukarrab is ill. No one should know my plan.'

By morning, they had reached Bahirewadi, from where distant Malkapur was visible. Ganoji informed the others that once they crossed the difficult Amba ghat, their route to Sangameshwar would be relatively free of obstacles.

‘But it is better to avoid Malkapur. Kavi Kalash has his stables there. Nearly seven thousand of his troops would be guarding the route to Amba ghat. I would suggest we go via Anuskura ghat. There too we might encounter the Marathas, but the Desais and Dalvis there are known to me. And no one would expect us to take that route as it needs an additional day. It is more treacherous than Amba ghat. I know the Marathas well. It is not possible to kill a Maratha with a sword in a fight. But it is easy to stab him in the back. Let us go via Anuskura ghat.’

Ganoji evidently knew the pros and cons of both the routes. Mukarrab Khan realised that choosing the Amba ghat route was akin to walking into the jaws of death. However, Anuskura ghat was perilous. Some men were sure to slip and die.

Mukarrab Khan hugged Ganoji again, overwhelmed with emotion. He kissed him on his cheeks and said, holding back his tears, ‘Ganoji Raje, people say you are Shivaji’s son-in-law and brother-in-law to Sambha. You might be. I don’t care! But I can tell you this in the name of Allah, Ganoji! You were surely my bhaijaan in my previous life.’

## 6

The work at Vishalgad was over long before dawn. Battlecries in praise of Bhawani, Shivaji and Sambhaji rent the morning air. Sambhaji had not slept a wink the previous night. However, there was no time to waste now. They would have to leave for Sangameshwar without further delay.

At dawn, Sambhaji went to the masjid on the fort with Malhar Rangnath and Krishnaji Konda. It was the tomb of Malik-ut-Tujjar. No one had heard the heart-rending cries of the Bahmani commander. But the locals revered the stone on which his blood had fallen. Hindus and Muslims both prayed at his tomb, worshipping him as a Peer Baba.

Soon, Sambhaji descended on Konkan with five thousand men. They moved through dense forests, at times negotiating narrow paths covered with waist-high grass. The skies were growing brighter. Kavi Kalash, riding with Sambhaji, said, 'I am told Yesu Ranisaheb too is coming to Sangameshwar.'

'Womenfolk have their own mind. She knows this will be my final confrontation with Aurangzeb and wants to pray at the Mahadev temple there. It will also be an opportunity to confer with some of the key sardars.'

He continued, 'Many sangams, the confluences of rivers, have played a crucial role in my life many times. Like the rivers themselves, my life has been changed by these confluences. You know that the rivers Krishna and Venna meet at Mahuli. We had camped with Abasaheb there. When I returned to Mahuli years later, I was itching to do something spectacular. Something which would make my father stand up and notice me! I crossed the river and joined Diler Khan's troops there. But I realised my mistake at Bahadurgad. It is another sangam, the place where the rivers Bhima and Saraswati meet. Sangameshwar is at the confluence of the rivers Alaknanda and Varuna.' Sambhaji paused before he spoke again, 'Maharani believes her prayers will help me. To tell you the truth, I don't believe in all that now. But when men start behaving like animals, and when they resort to treachery, I suppose we have no option but to turn to the Lord.'

'I agree, Raje. Your people and their treachery make even the ghosts in a graveyard look friendly.'

Sambhaji and the men dismounted and walked down the slopes. It was impossible to ride a horse on the steep inclines. Sambhaji's horse rubbed his body against his master's as he walked, almost as if he was trying to say something. Sambhaji patted his back and caressed his mane as he walked.

Kavi Kalash said, 'Raje, I wish to say something ... can I be excused from accompanying you? It is my task to protect Amba ghat. We need to be alert. Let me stay back here.'

Sambhaji was touched by his concern. 'There is no need to be so anxious. Amba ghat is well protected. Likewise, five thousand men are standing guard near Rajapur once you descend on Anuskura ghat. We have reinforced the troops in Jaydurg, Dandarajapuri, Harihareshwar and other coastal areas too. We need not worry about our forts here. Even a hawk will think twice before descending into this area, to say nothing of vultures!'



‘I understand your misgivings, Kaviraj,’ Sambhaji continued, ‘but we need your advice at Sangameshwar.’

‘As you command, Raje.’

## 7

The atmosphere at Sangameshwar was lively and pleasant. Once known as Ramkshetra, it was a charming town, surrounded by dense forests and dotted by the coconut trees lining the houses.

After a long gap, Sambhaji’s haveli was full of people. More than two thousand soldiers were on guard duty. Despite the festive atmosphere in the town at large, the mood at the haveli was sombre. Those assembled were aware of the impending clash with the Mughals and knew they were there for a serious discussion.

The rivers Varuna and Alaknanda merged at Sangameshwar. Sometimes, at high tide, the waters would flow backwards from the Arabian sea. The mingled sea and river water would wash the steps of the Mahadev temple.

The nearby port was busy with hundreds of small boats bobbing on the waves. Two large ships were anchored at the port. The fishermen had worked hard to catch the choicest fish for their beloved Raje. More than a hundred soldiers guarded the coastline.

Yesubai and Kavi Kalash’s wife Tejasbai had arrived the previous afternoon from Raigad. The priests and Ramdas Swami’s disciple Ranganath Swami had begun their preparations for the pooja. Yesubai ensured that they were able to work undisturbed.

Sambhaji had reached the previous night and was welcomed by Yesubai, Senapati Mhaloji Ghorpade, Khando Ballal, Dhanaji-Santaji-Manaji and several other sardars. They were meeting Sambhaji after nearly a month. Raje’s face looked weary. He had not slept for many nights. The tiring journey had taken its toll too. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep.

Sambhaji was keen to lie down but he knew that his men had been waiting for him. He took his seat in the office and looked at Ghorpade, his commander. He was a tough soldier who had worked with Shivaji Maharaj. Despite being in his seventies, he was a wily and strong man. Sambhaji said, 'Mhaloji Kaka, we have been fighting for eight years. it is time for one final confrontation with the Mughal Badshah.'

'Raje, it is thanks to your bravery that the Mughals do not dare step on this territory.'

Yesubai knew the discussion would be long. She interrupted, concerned for Sambhaji's health, 'Let him rest for a while. There is a lot of work to be done tomorrow.'

Sambhaji retired to his chambers. He was keen to talk to Yesubai but the moment he lay on bed, he dozed off. His tiredness had overtaken him and he was fast asleep within minutes.

Yesubai, Kavi Kalash and Senapati Ghorpade discussed various matters. Yesubai was worried that Sambhaji's health was deteriorating.

'Maharani, he has been on horseback for years now. But don't worry. Things should improve soon. During the Karnatak campaign he had once jumped over a moat. His poor horse died and Raje suffered a serious injury in his thigh. The bone still gives him trouble.'

He continued, 'The mad Badshah has only two ways forward: either he will leave for Delhi, or he will commit suicide and meet his Allah.'

'The poor boy has suffered so much,' Mhaloji Baba said, referring to Sambhaji. 'Even Shivaji Maharaj did not have to see such troubled times.'

Yesubai prayed to Bhawani, 'Aai, please relieve him of his troubles now! He was born at Purandar while it rained cats and dogs. He lost his mother before he could learn to say "Aai." He joined the Mughals, estranging himself from his father. Thanks to the Lord's blessings the elder Maharaj met him at Panhala. Luckily, that cleared all doubts and misunderstandings between them. But within four months of that meeting, Abasaheb died suddenly. And now, for the past eight years, he has been battling intrigue, family feuds, the treachery of his own sardars and relatives, and the Mughals! How long should he suffer? He has been fighting demons, both internal and external, for far too long! I wish it all ends soon.'

The next morning Sambhaji and Yesubai participated in the pooja. Under the supervision of Ranganath Swami, the religious rites were carried

out to everyone's satisfaction.

That evening, Sambhaji called for a meeting of his sardars. He said, 'The Mughal Badshah is raving mad now. We expect him to attack us very soon. With traitors at home and the famine outside, we have been ravaged on both fronts. But we have the blessings of Shivaji and Bhawani Mata, and the mighty Sahyadris which stand tall in our defence. I am deeply grateful to elders like Mhaloji and Suryaji Baba, and youngsters like Dhanaji, Santaji and Khando Ballal. I am grateful to all of you for bearing the hardships of the past eight years. It is time the Mughals learned what the Marathas are capable of. Our kingdom may be smaller than one Subah of his, and our treasury no match to their immense wealth. But we will show them what we are made of!'

'Raje, it is easy to tackle the lion at the door but it becomes very difficult to catch the mice at home. Our bodies and souls are yours,' Mhaloji said, overcome with emotion. 'Prataprao died while confronting Bahlol Khan. Hambirrao picked up the mantle and died at Wai even as he was making life hell for Sarja Khan. You have given me the task now. I am ready, Raje!'

The discussion centred around the preparedness of each fort.

'We have strong defences at Panhala, Shirval, Pune, Chakan, Panvel, Chaul, Harihareshwar and all the way from Sangameshwar to Vishalgad. We will not allow even an ant to enter.'

Everyone agreed that withdrawing the forces from Khandesh had been an error of sorts. Many watandars and sardars of the region had joined the Mughals. The Sawants from Sawantwadi too had gone over to the enemy. Prominent sardars like the Jedhes had defected. The Supe and Pune territories were under threat now.

'Our initial gameplan worked well. We have put the Portuguese and the Siddis in their place. But when the Mughals attack, they might offer Aurangzeb support. We will have to trim their aspirations before they rear their head once more.'

'Dhanaji, ensure that you maintain a strict vigil at Ratnagiri. There is a possibility of the firangis attacking us from Goa. My brother-in-law Mahadji and the Sawants are supporting Aurangzeb. We have to keep an eye on the Goan side.'

'Santaji, there is no need to remind you of that cunning rascal Siddi. He can turn against us anytime. You need to keep an eye on the coastal

stretch from Harihareshwar to Panvel.'

Santaji looked at Yesubai, his father Mhaloji, and Khando Ballal, saying, 'Raje, leave your worries to me. I am grateful that you have given me this responsibility. I remember Khandoba had jumped into the waters of the Mandovi to save your life. If I get a chance to jump into fire and help you even a little, I would consider my life blessed.'

Shahzada Azam was stationed at Chakan with an army of twenty thousand, poised to enter Konkan. Spies had brought information that Feroz Jung was waiting for an opportune moment to attack Rajgad. As Sambhaji conferred with his men on how to tackle the two, one of the spies came running and said, trying to catch his breath as he spoke, 'Raje, we cannot confirm this yet but we heard that Raje's life is in danger here. It is advised that you leave immediately.'

Sambhaji looked grave. 'I agree that I must not be here for long. After dinner, we will make our move. By the way, where is Mukarrab Khan?'

'He is in his camp. We are told he has caught the chills and has not stepped out of his tent for the past three days.'

'What about our cavalry near Malkapur?' Sambhaji asked Kavi Kalash.

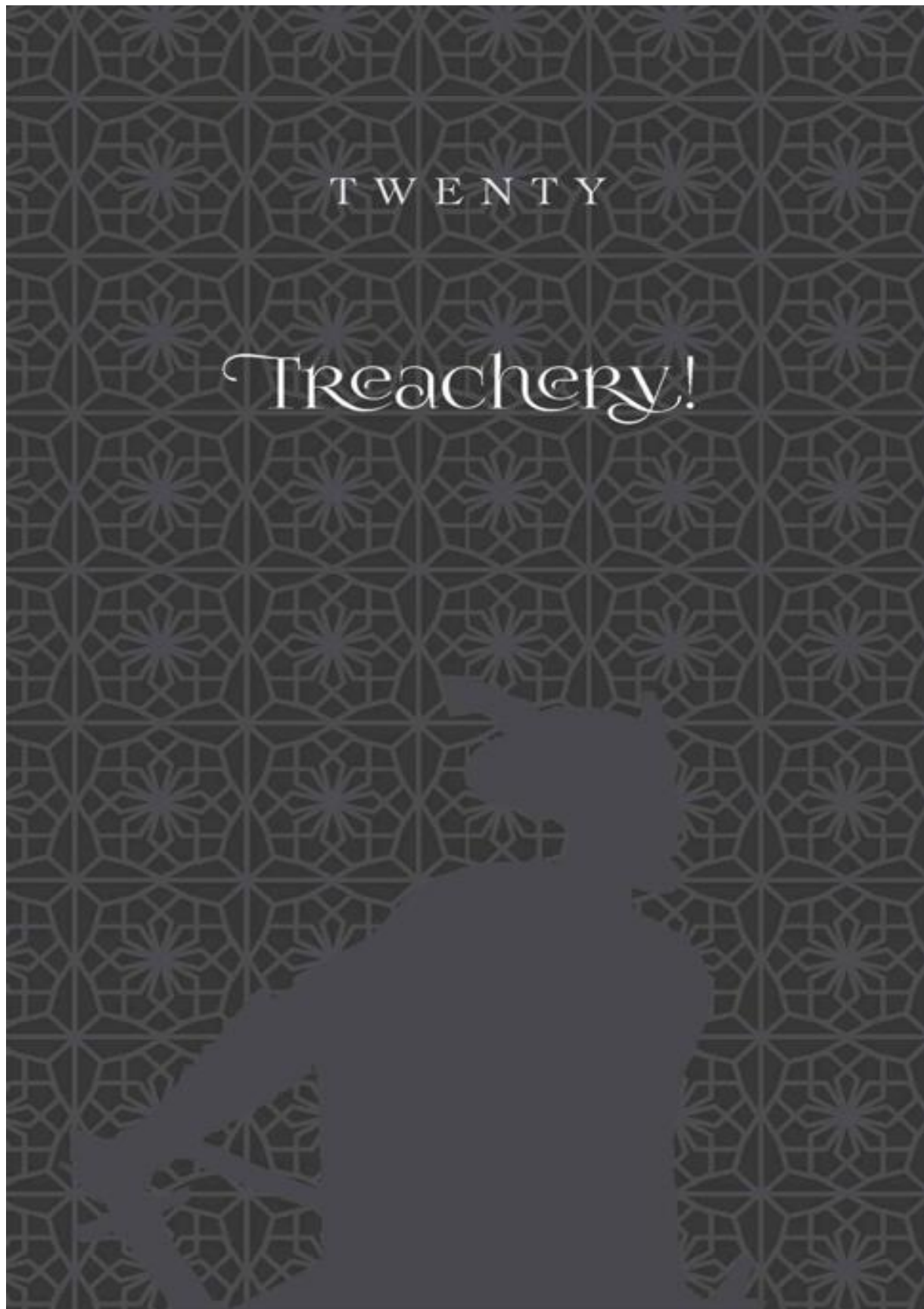
'Only four thousand cavalrymen are at Malkapur. The remaining six thousand are guarding Amba ghat and the route to Vishalgad.'

Sambhaji took stock of the situation. There were five thousand horsemen at Shringarpur nearby while five hundred soldiers were guarding Prachitgad. The route to Karad was being patrolled by a thousand horsemen. It was dangerous territory, very difficult to navigate. No enemy was likely to try that route. On the route to Goa, five thousand soldiers were on patrol. The Jaygad fort and the nearby port too were well guarded. Under the circumstances, it seemed unlikely that the enemy could reach Sangameshwar by sea or land. Yet, Sambhaji felt that it made sense to return to Raigad at the earliest.

The day ended. The woods around Sangameshwar were engulfed in darkness now. Sambhaji took leave of his sardars. Glancing at the dark forests, he said, 'If a hundred Sambhajis have to sacrifice their lives to ensure that Shivaji's flag keeps fluttering, it is worth it!'

T W E N T Y

# Treachery!





# 1

The Mughals had not encountered such a treacherous, vile and impassable jungle in their lives. They had been on the move for a day and a night. They had started descending the Anuskura ghat after nightfall. Each step was difficult to negotiate.

Mukarrab Khan, Ikhlas Khan and Ganoji dismounted their horses. It was impossible to ride a horse down the slippery slopes of the ghat. The tall trees with their dense foliage obstructed the moonlight from falling on the ground. The extremely narrow, winding path with steep valleys and ravines on one side was a nightmare. In some places, the grass reached above their heads. A few horses had lost their balance and plunged into the valley below. Their heart-wrenching cries as they fell froze the blood of Mughal soldiers.

The trek was excruciatingly slow and seemed unending. A cool breeze rose from the valley but the soldiers, tense and exerting themselves every step of the way, were sweating nervously. Soon, nearly forty horses had been claimed by the treacherous path. The men seemed to be silently cursing Mukarrab Khan and the path he had chosen. He said, reading their minds, 'I had told you; only those who are willing to die should follow me.'

Mukarrab's blunt comment made them move a little faster. No one complained about their toes and knees getting bruised. Many had twisted their ankles and were limping painfully. But no one wanted to linger and help anyone else either. Cries of 'Ya Allah!' or 'Ya Khuda!' were being ignored now. Everyone feared that the Marathas, hiding in the forests nearby, might attack at any moment.

The night was drawing to a close now. It would soon be light. The soldiers, seeing the huge cliffs towering above them, nearly swooned. They had barely covered half the distance. There were sheer cliffs on one side

and steep ravines on the other. The animals, sticking close to the side of the mountain, began climbing down slowly. Mukarrab Khan continued to exhort, 'Come on, you fools! You don't want the Marathas to catch up with you.'

In places the descent was so steep that the soldiers had to cover the eyes of the horses before they could force them to walk further. It was afternoon when the three thousand soldiers and animals inally descended the ghat onto flat land. The green grasslands were a delight to the eyes and they danced like children. The villagers looked at them curiously. The previous afternoon, Ganoji had sent his men ahead to inform the locals that a platoon of the Mughal troops had defected and was joining the Marathas. As per Ganoji's instructions, the villagers had arranged for food and water for the soldiers.

After resting a while, they resumed their journey.

While the path ahead was not as treacherous as the earlier one, it was still difficult to negotiate. They halted again that evening on another patch of grassland near a village. The local Sawants, Deshmukhs and Dalvis had gathered there to meet Ganoji. They had with them a fresh set of around four hundred horses which Mukarrab exchanged for his tired and wounded animals.

They were now only a night's walk away from Sangameshwar. The third torturous night began.

It was nearly midnight. A bright starlit sky guided the troops. Leading the convoy were Ganoji's men, followed closely by Mukarrab and his cavalry.

A few spies brought the message that Sambhaji had reached Sangameshwar. It was the news Mukarrab Khan had been waiting for. Sambhaji was literally within his grasp now. He had to hurry now, lest his prized quarry leaves Sangameshwar. It would be impossible for them to return empty-handed by the same path they had taken! Mukarrab Khan spurred his horse and galloped forward.

Mukarrab's son Ikhlas Khan called out to his father to stop. Ganoji had something to say. Mukarrab Khan waited for Ganoji to catch up. He said to Mukarrab, 'I will not be able to come any further.'

'Are you mad? What is wrong with you?'

'How do I put it, Khansaheb? The people here consider Sambhaji and Shivaji as their gods. If for some reason Sambha were to escape, he would



not leave me alive. I cannot be seen there!’

‘I will let you ride at the rear. But you have to come with us; there is no question of you not being there!’

‘Sarkar, I will provide whatever support you want. But don’t force me to come with you to Sangameshwar.’

Time was of the essence now, and it was too late to resolve such dilemmas. Mukarrab snapped impatiently at Ganoji, ‘Shirke, don’t think I am a fool. You need to be with me. Stop this childish rant!’

They rode on in the moonlight. The next morning, they received news that Sambhaji, having stayed in Sangameshwar overnight, was planning to leave for Raigad the very next day. Mukarrab Khan spurred his horse once more. There was no time to waste. His sole intention now was to force Sambhaji into a final confrontation on the banks of Sangameshwar.

## 2

Yesubai woke up. She had just heard noise of something having fallen in water. She looked out of the window. It was probably a tree branch. The curtains in the window moved with the breeze. The tiny bells attached to them let out a sweet tinkling noise. Yesubai had woken up sweating profusely. She had had a horrible nightmare. No one would ever have seen such a heinous ‘bhaidooj’ as she had dreamed—the festival where a brother meets his sister. In the dream, she had performed aarti with the traditional tray and lamp for her brother. In place of her brother, all she could see was a heap of burning coals. It was only the armlet with the snake design that she recognised as Ganoji’s. Then she saw Sambhaji’s bloodied head on the tray and swooned.

The previous evening, Sambhaji had asked his men to go back to their posts. He was keen to leave Sangameshwar at the earliest but he remembered he had given Arjoji Yadav his word regarding the papers granting the watan. Sambhaji had already asked them to meet him at Vishalgad three days later, but he wondered whether he should deal with the

matter straight away. Arjoji was otherwise a loyal man. It was he who had managed to meet Durgabai and Ranuakka at Bahadurgad.

Yesubai had insisted that they should leave early in the morning. The palanquins bearers were asked to be ready. Sambhaji was in a dilemma. Should he listen to the demands of the local people including the Yadav brothers, or should he leave at once? He knew that the poor Yadavs had worked hard for the Swaraj for many years. Raje decided to take care of the matter and then leave.

Sambhaji woke up just before dawn. After finishing his morning prayers and ablutions, he said, looking at Yesubai, 'Why are you looking so pale? You seem to be worried. Start now. I shall ride behind you very soon.'

'Raje, it is an inauspicious day. I suggest you don't delay your departure.'

'Yesu, I am the Raja here. I have given my word to the Yadav brothers. I will meet them and leave.'

The guard mentioned that the brothers had been waiting for an audience with Raje since the previous night. 'There! You see!' Sambhaji said, 'They are already here. I cannot leave without listening to their demands.'

Yesubai burst into tears, taking Sambhaji by surprise. He said, hugging her affectionately and teasing her, 'Now come on! How can you, who rules Maharashtra with an iron hand, weep like an ordinary housewife? What happened?'

When Yesubai did not reply, he continued, 'Eight hundred men will accompany your palanquin.'

'Why so many?'

'I have another four hundred men with me.'

'No, your protection is more important.'

'I will soon catch up with you.'

They were alone. Yesubai put her head on Sambhaji's feet. Her tears wet his foot. Sambhaji was overwhelmed. Embracing her tightly, he said, 'Don't be so upset, Yesu! Don't you trust me? Do you think the Sahyadris would let Sambhaji down?'

It was getting late. The sun shone brightly upon Sangameshwar. Yesu stepped into her palanquin and the bearers were about to leave when Sambhaji shouted, 'Stop! I wanted to tell you that when you reach the river Vashishti near Chiplun by noon, I will join you for lunch.'

Yesubai smiled. She was reassured by Sambhaji's confidence. He said, 'We will reach Raigad the day after tomorrow. We have an important thing to do after we arrive.'

'What is it?'

'Mark a spot near the Chitta Darwaza. I am sure to find Aurangzeb soon. I want to bury his head there.'

### 3

Sambhaji had decided to spend two hours dispensing justice before leaving Sangameshwar. Santaji and a few others stayed back. They wanted to accompany when he left. It was bright outside but the February chill could still be felt inside the haveli. The meeting was being held in the garden under the warm sun. The Yadav brothers were insisting on certain demands and unwilling to make even small adjustments. Two hours passed in argument. It was nearly nine when Sambhaji heard someone shouting, 'Raje, we have been betrayed!'

A soldier came running and said, 'Raje, the enemy is entering Sangameshwar. At least seven hundred of them!'

Sambhaji shouted for his horse. His favourite steed, hearing the master's voice, came galloping. Sambhaji leaped onto him in a single movement. Kavi Kalash was ready, sword in hand, while Mhaloji Ghorpade put a pinch of tobacco in his mouth and drew his, eyes burning with rage.

While Sambhaji was planning an exit, he heard shouts of 'Allah o Akbar! And 'Deen Deen!' Soon, the Mughal troops were visible behind the trees.

Mhaloji Ghorpade shouted 'Har Har Mahadev!' while Santaji and Dhanaji followed with 'Shivaji Maharaj ki jay!' and 'Sambhaji Maharaj ki jay!' The Mughal and Maratha soldiers clashed. Swords clanged and horses neighed.

Mukarrab Khan was astride his horse when he spotted Sambhaji. His sole intention was to capture Sambhaji alive or dead. Within no time the Mughal soldiers had surrounded Sambhaji's haveli. Some of the Marathas

who ran towards the river were intercepted by the Mughals. Sambhaji, with only four hundred soldiers defending him, was surrounded by a thousand or more Mughals.

The swift and unexpected attack took the Marathas by surprise, but realising that their Raje was in trouble, they flared up. Dhanaji, Santaji and Khando Ballal were in their element. Spears, swords, and whatever weapon they could lay their hands on, were being used on the enemy with cries of 'Kill, attack!' Some of the Marathas hiding behind the trees began targeting the Mughals with their spears. Their shouts gave Mukarrab Khan the impression that a much larger force was concealed there.

Meanwhile, fifty Pathans had surrounded Sambhaji. Raje had not seen such a battle for some time and he began his attack with gusto. The jamdaad, the sharp and double-edged wavy sword, was spinning in the air around him. Sambhaji's horse danced with him.

Soon, Santaji, Dhanaji and Khando Ballal rushed to Sambhaji's rescue, cutting through the crowd of Pathans. Mukarrab Khan too galloped towards Sambhaji, raising his Hyderabad sword high. Before his sword could touch Raje, someone jumped onto his horse behind him. Khan's sword pierced his shoulders. Sambhaji's back was wet with blood. The man who had sacrificed his life for Sambhaji fell to the ground. Sambhaji turned his horse to see who the braveheart was.

It was the Senapati Mhaloji Ghorpade!

Seeing their commander dead, the Marathas were now furious. Santaji had no time even to glance at his father's dead body. Meanwhile, someone had injured Mukarrab Khan's horse. It neighed loudly and fell on its side. None of the Marathas had seen Mukarrab Khan before, but his dress and bearing suggested that he was a Mughal sardar. The Marathas rushed towards him, seeing him standing on the ground. There was hand to hand combat now. Bodies were falling on ground like dry leaves. The grass in the garden had turned red with blood.

Mukarrab felt that his horse's fall was a bad omen. His soldiers pulled him back and helped him mount another horse. By then another group of fifty Marathas had entered the garden. Mukarrab saw them and presumed that there must be at least a thousand more near the haveli. He mounted the horse and turned towards the woods to see hundreds of Mughals and Pathans lying dead on the ground. He ordered his men in a low voice, 'Run ... retreat!'

Sambhaji saw the Mughals pulling back. There were hundreds of dead and half-dead men on the ground. He could hear moans of ‘Ya Allah’ and ‘Arre Deva’. The wounded horses neighed in pain. Sambhaji had not yet recovered from the shock of the enemy entering right into his house. Despite the intense vigil on land and at sea, how had they found their way here? How had they managed to traverse the dense jungles and treacherous ravines of the ghat without guidance? There was no doubt about it: treachery was involved!

There was no time to think about it now. Nearly three hundred and fifty Marathas had died in the skirmish. Sambhaji had only a hundred odd Mawals with him. Santaji, Dhanaji, Khando Ballal and other warriors waited for further instructions. Most of the soldiers had already left the previous night to ensure a smooth passage for Sambhaji. Kavi Kalash had been pierced in his arm by an arrow. Blood oozed through the wound.

A soldier came running and shouted, ‘Raje, there is an army of fifteen hundred men coming this way.’

Dhanaji and the others shouted, ‘Maharaj, hukum!’

For a moment Sambhaji closed his eyes and prayed to Bhawani Mata. He said, ‘My friends, I understand your eagerness to fight but we must be practical. It is time to use our wits, not brute strength. We cannot linger another moment here. Go! Don’t stop till you cross the Vashishti at Chiplun. Our men are camped there.’

‘Raje, what about you?’ Santaji said, his voice hoarse.

‘Don’t get trapped in your emotions. Santaji and Khandoba, move towards Chiplun. You will meet Yesubai and the other ladies on the way. Dhanaji, take your men and go to Hatkhamba. You must hold the route towards Goa.’

‘What about you, Raje?’ Dhanaji asked.

‘I will move through the narrow paths, crossing the jungles, and reach Raigad.’

The men looked at each other. They had tears in their eyes. Sambhaji urged, ‘Come on now! Move!’

‘Raje, we cannot think of leaving you alone ...’

‘If we all try to escape together, the results would be disastrous. We may get captured. We cannot allow that. Move now! We must save the Hindavi Swaraj and dig a grave for Aurangzeb in the Deccan soil.’

Sambhaji continued, ‘Why are you so worried about me?’ His face was flushed with pride and self-confidence. ‘A child cannot be taken away from a mother who is suckling it. Likewise, it is impossible to take Shambhu from the lap of the Sahyadris. Go now! Rest assured that I will return safely to Raigad.’

## 4

Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash galloped at full speed. Kalash’s arm throbbed with intense pain. The blood continued to flow. But he could not imagine leaving his Raje alone. Sambhaji had only fifteen soldiers with him. Their sole intention now was to escape through the jungles and make their way home.

Kavi shouted, as he galloped. ‘Raje, you go ahead. Save your life. Don’t worry about me. Let me stay here.’

Sambhaji said, ‘No! It is not possible. A true friend is the one who is by your side in the royal durbar and in the graveyard. I won’t leave you.’

They galloped along the coast. Sambhaji glanced at the haveli of the Sardesais on the right. He realised that it made sense to stop here, and change their clothes as well as their direction to escape capture. There was no sense in continuing the ride in his royal clothes. Steering his horse into the woods, he removed all the decorations from his horse’s saddle and tore away his own jewellery. They reached the steps of the haveli soon.

Rangoba Sardesai was sitting in the front room. His barber was cutting his hair. Seeing a dishevelled Raje and the injured Kavi Kalash at their door, the Sardesai men rushed forward. The ladies too came out of the inner chambers.

‘Raje, what happened? What is this? What can we do, Raje?’ Rangoba asked, his voice quivering with fear.

‘Don’t worry. But we have to move quickly. Just nurse Kavi’s wound.’ Sambhaji sat in front of the barber who immediately started cutting his locks and trimming his beard. The men began dressing Kavi Kalash’s wound. Soon, a clean-shaven Sambhaji resembled a monk. At that moment,

Rangoba's old mother came rushing in. The tall, slim and fair woman in her seventies reminded Sambhaji of Jijabai. She hugged Sambhaji affectionately.

The fifteen horsemen stood outside. Sambhaji had pulled the reins of his horse so tightly that its nostrils were bleeding. The animal was thirsty and moved towards a small lake nearby to quench its thirst. While drinking water it sensed some movement in the shrubs. A small platoon of the enemy had found its way to the haveli, chasing Sambhaji and his men.

Mukarrab Khan was there, leading a party of around seventy Mughal soldiers. Amongst them stood a terrified-looking Ganoji Shirke. Ikhlas Khan and others had divided themselves into groups and were searching for Sambhaji in the surrounding woods.

Ganoji pointed at Sambhaji's horse and shouted, 'There! That is his horse.' Sambhaji's horse, sensing trouble, neighed loudly and galloped away. He wanted to warn his master.

Sambhaji was taking leave of Rangoba's mother when he heard his favourite horse neighing. He realised that the enemy had found them. He looked at Kavi Kalash. His wound had not stopped bleeding yet. Kavi said, 'Raje, don't wait for me. You may get caught. Please go!'

There was no time for tears. Rangoba handed Sambhaji's sword to him while his mother quickly cracked her knuckles to ward off evil. Sambhaji called out to his horse which stood obediently at the steps. He leaped on to his horse when ...

It was like a sudden flood. Hundreds of horses were seen galloping towards the haveli. It was surrounded. Sambhaji was incensed. Rotating his sword over his head, he spun his horse in all directions. Fifteen hundred enemy soldiers had encircled him. Not one of them dared to step forward. Mukarrab Khan tried to throw a rope over Raje's horse while Ikhlas Khan struck its back with his jamdad, injuring it badly. Blood spurted out of the poor animal's flesh. Sambhaji had just turned to look at the wound when seventy Pathans pounced on him. The long wooden handle of a spear found its mark, hitting Sambhaji on his shoulder. His sword fell down.

It was the moment the enemy had been waiting for. Sahyadri's Shambhu was captured!

Inside the haveli, Rangoba's old mother banged her head on the wall. She fell down unconscious.

Ganoji Shirke cried out. He wiped his tears, unable to believe the sight. Was it really true? He was like a madman, raving with joy. The enemy shouted 'Allah o Akbar!' They torched the haveli and the surrounding houses.

What were they to do with the captured men? For a moment, even the Mughals were confused. They had thrown blankets over Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash, and like thieves taking away their loot, they moved silently through the woods. Mukarrab Khan stopped at the banks of the river Varuna. He decided to take seven hundred soldiers with him. The rest, including Ganoji, were asked to stay back. 'Kill anyone who tries to follow us,' Mukarrab ordered.

Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash were stunned into silence. Was it really happening or was it a dream? Ikhlas Khan had bound the two with ropes. Out of sheer vindictiveness and anger, he had slapped Sambhaji. Kaviraj, seeing Ikhlas Khan touch Raje's face, spat at him in disgust. Ikhlas Khan was enraged now and removed a whip tied around his waist. He whipped Sambhaji and Kavi before tying them on a horse's back. Their clothes had already been torn off their bodies. They were forced to wear the green dress of the Mughals.

Without their pointed beards and long flowing tresses, and now with their bald pates, numerous wounds and green clothes, no one would have believed that the two were Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash.

Ganoji laughed loudly, holding his stomach, when he saw Sambhaji in his new avatar. He said, with a taunting look, 'Wah! Look at Sambhaji Maharaj of Raigad.'

Mukarrab Khan snapped, 'Ganoji, you fool! This is no time to celebrate. Guide us forward.'

Ganoji came to his senses and said, 'Khansaheb, it is better to cross the mountains in the daytime. We are in danger of being attacked by the Marathas at night.'

'Ganoji, by the grace of Allah, we have made a great catch. We need to reach out station at Karad before nightfall.'

'Don't worry, Mukarrab Miyan. The route to Karad is through Shirke territory. Please follow me.'

Without further delay, Mukarrab Khan and his seven hundred horsemen started moving through the jungles. They crossed a wooden bridge on the river Shastri. Sambhaji, tied to a horse, looked at the waters of



the river. The river flowed through his dear Yesu's Shringarpur. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

Soon, all familiar terrain was quickly left behind.

## 5

At Nivali, waiting patiently on a platform in a field, were eight youths. They had with them enough rotis for seven hundred soldiers. Two days earlier, Ganoji Shirke's assistant Govardhan Pant had reached Nivali. Pant informed the villagers that they had captured some miscreants who were trying to smuggle jewels from the Jaynagar port. They were told that the smugglers had been arrested on instructions from Sambhaji and were being taken to Satara. The locals, who believed that the dispute between the Shirkes and Sambhaji had finally ended, cheered hearing the good news. After all, they said, Ganoji was Sambhaji's brother-in-law.

Govardhan Pant, who was known to be a tough manager and a skinflint, was a changed person, the way he distributed gold coins among the villagers. The young men selected as guides for the onward journey were daredevils. Very rarely did anyone travel through the ghats where tigers roamed freely. Pant had also arranged for nearly two hundred fresh horses.

Suddenly, as they waited, they saw eight hundred men emerge from the undergrowth. The Mughals jumped down from their horses. They started eating the rotis along with hot chutney the moment they were handed the food. The long and tough journey had taken a toll and they were all tired to the bone. Govardhan Pant and his men segregated the horses which had been wounded and replaced them with fresh ones. The men who had brought the rotis looked at the two men tied on the backs of horses. Their fair faces looked dull and swollen, and their mouths were stuffed and bound with cloth.

Ganoji Shirke was impatient to resume their journey. Mukarrab Khan too was alert and rather frightened. He had never seen such dense jungles. When strong winds blew through the waist-high grass, it sounded like

elephants were walking through it. The high cliffs looked intimidating. Suddenly, they heard horses. Soon a group of fifty or sixty Marathas were seen approaching. Where had they come from? How many more were there? The Pathans were stunned and waited for the Marathas to speak. Mukarrab's face was pale with fear. Ganoji's throat turned dry. He had spotted Suryaji Bhosale at the head of the group.

Ganoji winked at the fifteen Marathas in his group who shouted, 'Shivaji Maharaj ki jay!' Suryaji rode towards them immediately. He had recognised Ganoji. He said, 'Ganoji Bhau, where are you off to?'

'We are ... we are going to ... you know, Umbraj.'

'But why are you taking this route? And who are these men? I was told you had joined the Mughals.'

Ganoji patted Suryaji on his back and said, 'Blood is thicker than water, Suryaji, after all! We do have our differences with Raje, but when my own sister is the Maharani, how can I think of joining those treacherous Mughals?'

'Who are these men you have tied on horseback?'

'Those men? Oh, they are Irani traders who were trying to smuggle jewels at the Jaynagar port. I am going to throw them at Shambhubal's feet.'

'Oh, is that so? Well, Daaji, I should not delay you. Please go as swiftly as possible and descend into the valley before nightfall. The road is tough.'

Suryaji and his men were left behind as Ganoji and Mukarrab rode on.

As they started climbing the ghat, the Mughals struggled. Except for the two horses Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash had been tied to, all the other soldiers had dismounted. It was an excruciating trek. Toes bled and ankles were twisted. The animals were frothing at their mouths.

It had been more than two hours since they had started the climb. The soldiers had not slept a for nearly four day days and were exhausted. Had the Shirkes not arranged for food at various places, they would never have been able to cross the jungle. The animals would simply have dropped dead. The Mughals would have met the same fate as that of Malik-ut-Tujjar and his seven thousand men, nearly three hundred years earlier.

Many of Mukkarab's men had crossed the Ramdara ghat with Shahzada Azam. They were frightened out of their wits. Was Ganoji planning a coup, taking them through such treacherous paths? They looked

at him suspiciously as they trudged along slowly. Mukarrab Khan, otherwise a sturdy soldier, was barely managing to walk, as he had already twisted his ankle twice. He asked, 'Ganoji, are you sure this route leads us to Karad? Or is this the path to hell?'

'Please have some patience, Khansaheb. It is through this path alone that we can reach Karad by evening. If we had taken any other route, we would surely have reached hell by now. Shiva and Sambha are the gods in this forest, Khansaheb.'

For the locals, the path was just another daily trek. They chuckled seeing the plight of the Pathans. Ganoji was tense all the way. He could not afford a single mistake. If for some reason Sambhaji was rescued, he knew he would not live long.

It was late afternoon. The trek seemed unending. Mukarrab too now started eyeing Ganoji with suspicion. Without waiting for any orders, the men simply sat down, unable to walk further. Ganoji said, taking Mukarrab to one side, 'Khansaheb, why take a risk? Why not behead these two here itself?'

'No! It is not possible. I have promised to take him to the Badshah.'

'What difference does it make whether he is alive or dead?' Ganoji asked, a little irritated.

'Ganoji, for past eight years, the five lakh strong army of the Badshah could not do what this Deccani Musalmaan has shown he can. I want to watch the Badshah going mad with joy when he sees Sambha.'

The soldiers were suffering the hardships of the trail but the state of Sambhaji and Kavi, tied to the horses, was far worse. The ropes bit into their flesh. Blood oozed from their wounds. They were literally beyond pain now.

Once the ghat road ended, it was only a two-hour journey to Karad where nearly fifteen thousand Mughal soldiers were camped. They had almost reached the end of the treacherous path. Kavi Kalash was aware that there was a Maratha station just ahead of Maleghat. His mouth was gagged but his teeth had been working like a mouse for past few hours and he had managed to nibble through the cloth. Soon, he could hear the Maratha soldiers in the distance. Mukarrab Khan looked at Ganoji Shirke. They had to find a way around them.

Kavi's ears pricked up. His world was ending but there was still a glimmer of hope. Finally, he managed to break open the rope around his

mouth and shouted, 'Help, help! Save Shambhu Raje!'

Ikhlas Khan heard Kavi's shouts. He smashed his whip so hard on Kalash's bare head that the blood which spurted from the cut splattered on his beard. The soldiers in the station were alert and shouted, 'Who is it? Who goes there?' Mukarrab froze with fear. At that moment, he heard Ganoji's voice, 'Sambhaji Maharaj ki jay!'

The thanedar looked closely at the men. But what was he to question when it was the Maharani's own brother leading them! He glanced at the two men tied to horses. Kavi Kalash was unconscious. Blood flowed from where the whiplash had left its mark on his head. Shambhu Raje, wearing green clothes, and with his beardless face, was unrecognisable. No one would have believed that the disfigured, swollen face was that of Sambhaji.

'Ganu Bhauji, are you on your way to meet Shambhu Raje?' The thanedar asked.

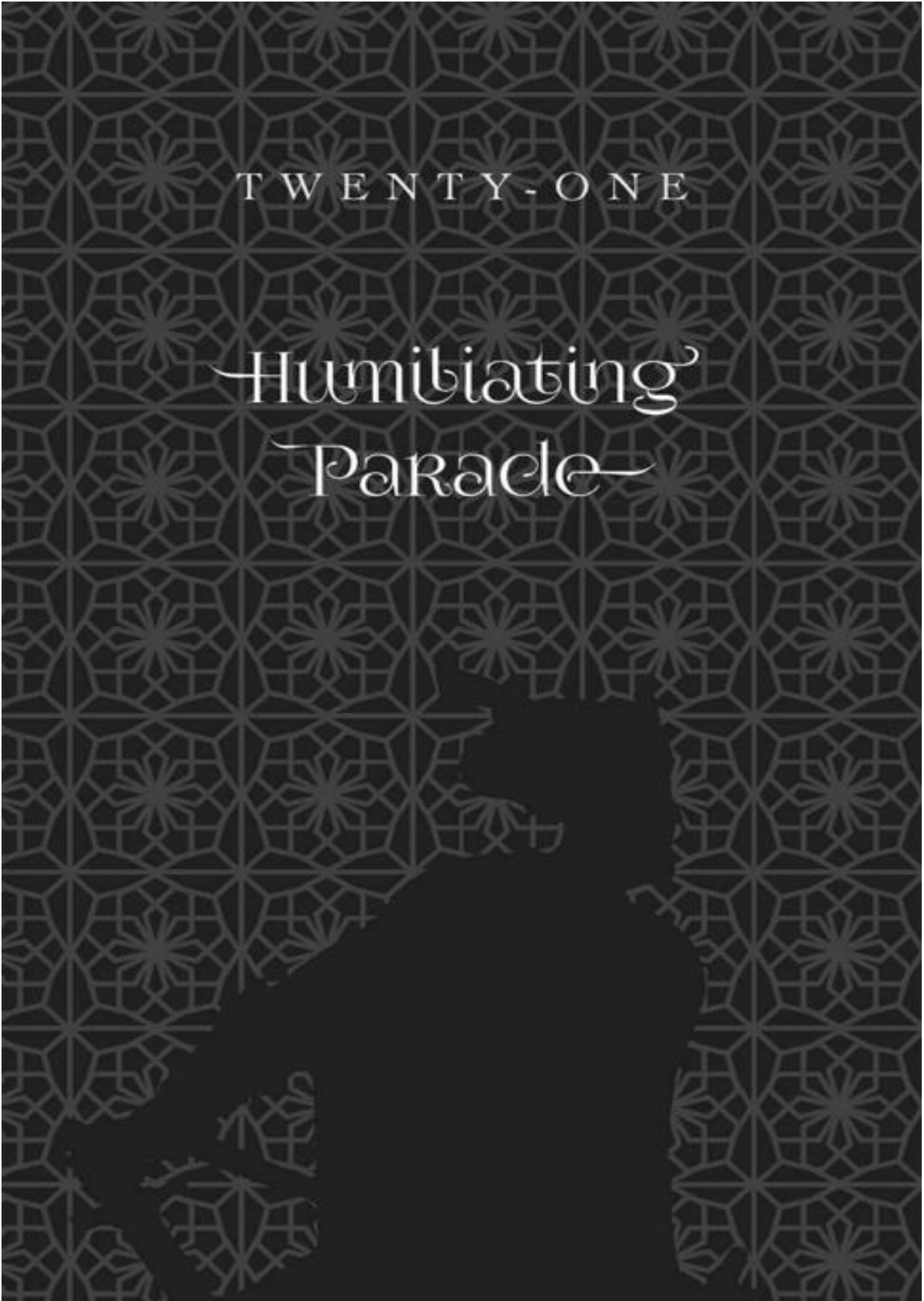
'That is right, my brother. I want to throw these two traders at Raje's feet. These Mughals too have defected and are joining our Swaraj. I am sure Raje would be happy to see them.'

'I suggest you hurry and descend the mountain before nightfall,' the thanedar advised.

They were nearing the village of Patharpunj now. The shadows were lengthening. The sun was descending rapidly into the western sky. The one who had fought to keep Shivaji's dream alive, the one who had worked for years to keep the enemy at bay, was now captured. The Sahyadris, the protector of the Marathas, were being left behind. In the distance, the burning mashaals of the Mughal camp at Karad could be seen.

TWENTY-ONE

# Humiliating Parade





# 1

The scene was at the Dhangarwada, belonging to the community of herders near Patharpunj village. The eight men of Nivali who had accompanied Ganoji Shirke and showed him the path through the ghat were thrilled. They had been given gold earrings and money in exchange for their guidance. They were enjoying a hearty meal when they heard a few farmers talking.

‘It is a terrible disaster! Shambhu Raje’s brother-in-law turned traitor. They passed this way, this very afternoon. What a pity! What a tragedy!’

The boys could not believe their ears. They confronted the farmers. ‘What are you blabbering? We guided Ganoji. Those men were traders, not Shambhu Raje!’

But the young men soon realised that they had committed a grave error. They had literally handed over their Raja to the enemy! One of them started banging his head on the wall while the others took off their earrings and threw them away in disgust. The very touch of the gifts they had received from the traitor was poison!

‘That dog Ganoji! We got trapped by his sweet tongue.’

One of them wailed, ‘I may throw my parents into a well but I can never think of harming my Shambhu Raje. How did we fall for this?’

All of them had heard stories of Shivaji’s coronation from their elders. Some had visited Raigad, sitting on their father’s shoulders. A few of them had danced and played with Shambhu when he was a young lad at Shringarpur. They all decided that there was only one thing to do. They had to find Ganoji and kill him. The eight of them set off on their mission with a single-minded fury. They set off for Karad.

These sons of soil had nothing to do with the landlords’s demands for watans. All they knew was that Shivaji and Sambhaji were their heart and

soul. They were devastated by the thought that they had played a role in the capture of Shambhu Raje.

Without stopping for food or water, they ran all the way to Karad.

The camp at Karad was quiet. The river Koyna flowed silently a little distance away. A cool breeze blew. Only the guards were awake, moving around with flaming torches. The boys walked straight up to the camp. A guard barred their way, asking, 'Who are you? Where are you going?'

'We are here to meet Ganoji Shirke, Sarkar. He has sent for us. We were the guides who led his party through the mountains.'

The guard was a little confused. Luckily, one of the soldiers recognised them and said, 'I know these boys. Take them to Ganoji's tent.'

The camp was eerily silent. Mukarrab and his eight hundred men were dead tired and fast asleep. The guards reached a tent. As soon as the boys realised that it was Ganoji's tent, they snatched the mashaals from the hands of the guards and threw them into the tent. The guards were taken aback. One of them ran off to get help, his beard singed. Soon, the entire tent was burning. Some hay kept inside for the horses had caught fire and the flames spread rapidly. There was a clamour all around as people ran helter-skelter with shouts of 'help' and 'run'.

The fire of revenge burning inside the boys was fiercer than the fire spreading through the tents. But they were inside the Mughal camp and were soon rounded up. The guards found three bodies of men who had succumbed to the fire, burnt beyond recognition. They wondered if they belonged to Ganoji and Nagoji. Who was the third, they wondered.

Mukarrab Khan had slept soundly through the chaos. The thanedar did not dare to wake him up.

The next afternoon, Mukarrab came out of his tent and stretched his sore but rested body. The eight men who had been captured the previous night were presented before him. They had been beaten up badly and their faces were swollen. Despite the beatings, their tattered clothes and whiplash marks all over their bodies, they stood with their spines straight.

Mukarrab listened to his men's narration of the events of the previous night. He was told that Ganoji and Nagoji had been burnt to death. Ignoring this piece of news, he asked, 'Where is Sambha?' He was happy to hear that Sambhaji was still in the camp and well guarded. At that moment, he saw Nagoji and Ganoji walking towards his tent. 'I thought you were burnt to death?' he asked Ganoji.



‘I was aware of the tricks Sambha’s men might get up to once they heard that he has been captured. I had an intuition and I slept in another tent.’

Mukarrab Khan smiled. ‘I am sure the Badshah will give you your jagir in addition to bags of jewels and finery. He will reward you handsomely.’

‘That is all in the future, Khansaheb. Our responsibilities are over,’ Nagoji said. ‘Please take Sambhaji away as soon as possible. Or else our lives are in danger.’

The guards asked what they should do with the captured men. Mukarrab Khan remembered that the boys had been of great help on the trek to Karad. He was in a mood to pardon them. He had, after all, got what he wanted. He said, ‘These are jungle dwellers. Leave them in the jungle.’

The boys were released. As they were walking away, they suddenly realised that their freedom had not helped Sambhaji. They turned around and rushed back to attack Mukarrab Khan and Ganoji. But Mukarrab had nearly sixty guards outside his tent.

The boys had barely reached the tent when the guards fell upon them with naked swords. Within moments, there was blood everywhere and the boys had been beheaded. Mukarrab Khan could not believe his eyes. Nagoji and Ganoji were speechless.

The eight bodies and eight heads were thrown into the Koyna.

It was evening. The sun threw golden rays on the waters of the Koyna. Like flowers removed from a garland around the Lord’s neck, eight heads floated on the golden surface of the Koyna.

## 2

The sun blazed brightly in the noon sky. Yesubai and her guards had reached the banks of the Vashishti. Her palanquin rested near the mango orchards bordering Chiplun. The soldiers had stopped for refreshment. Yesubai was about to sit down for her meal when she saw riders approaching at rapid speed. ‘There! Raje too has come,’ Khando Ballal

said. But Sambhaji was not among them. The soldiers dismounted and cried, 'Ranisaheb, there has been a tragedy. The enemy has attacked!'

Yesubai stood up. The soldiers, drenched in sweat from their breakneck ride, panted, 'It happened at Sangameshwar. Nearly a thousand Mughals were there.'

'What about Raje?'

'He was attacked near the haveli. There was a big fight. But we were only a few.'

At that moment, three hundred soldiers rode up. Santaji jumped down from his horse. He looked flustered. Yesubai rushed to him and asked, 'Santaji, what happened? Where is Raje?'

'Matoshree, try to calm yourself. There was a sudden attack in the morning. But don't worry about Raje and Kaviraj. They left through a jungle route and are on their way to Raigad.'

'How could you come here leaving him, Santaji?' Yesubai asked.

'Raje ordered me to come. He was worried about you. No one was aware that the enemy was closing in on us. It was all so sudden. I have been instructed to hold the station at Chiplun.'

'Santaji, how did this happen? In the Shirke territory, where even the wind would think twice before entering, how did the enemy come this far?'

'It has to be treachery. Someone very close to us. But there is no point in thinking about it right now. We need to hurry.'

The palanquin bearers swung into action at once and started moving rapidly. Santaji was restless. He took the help of Chiplun's thanedar to ensure that the station was secure.

That evening two riders came from Sangameshwar. Their faces, black with sweat and dust, showed they had been riding without a halt. They started sobbing, unable to say what they had come to say. Finally, they spoke, 'Sardar, we were attacked by a large force of enemy soldiers. Someone said Raje and Kaviraj escaped through a narrow path in the jungles while others are saying that they have been captured.'

'Captured? Have you lost your mind?' Santaji screamed.

There was no way to know the real situation. Santaji was sure that a dastardly plot was behind it all but he could not place his finger on it. Without further delay, he ordered five hundred of his men to mount their horses. They were to leave for Sangameshwar immediately.

By the time they reached Sangameshwar, nearly thirty miles away, it was dark. The town had been ravaged. The enemy had burnt the place down to strike fear in the hearts of the residents. A few havelis and houses were still burning. There were corpses lying scattered on the streets. Not a soul was in sight. Fearing Aurangzeb's troops may attack again, the survivors had fled to the nearby jungles and were hiding there.

Seeing Santaji and his men, a few old men came forward. 'Raje and Kaviraj were taken alive!' they wailed. Santaji could not hold back the sob escaping his lips. At that moment Dhanaji Jadhav rode up with five hundred men. He said, 'Santa, I have been searching all over but I have not been able to figure out the route they have taken after capturing Raje. People are making all kinds of speculations.'

'Dhanaji, we simply cannot stand here doing nothing.'

They discussed the next move. In all likelihood, the enemy had taken the route through Amba ghat. They must be on the way to Kolhapur, they surmised. It would take them at least five hours to reach Amba ghat. The road was perilous, with narrow paths, steep hills and impassable gorges. A thousand men were despatched towards Amba ghat.

While Santaji was giving instructions a frail old Brahmin came and stood next to him. He said, 'Come with me this moment.' Santaji followed him. The Brahmin took him to a haveli nearby which had been burnt to ashes. It was the house where Kavi Kalash resided when he was in Sangameshwar. A body lay there, covered with a shawl. At some point during that nightmarish day, while fighting, running from one place to another, and carrying our orders, Santaji had forgotten that his father, the Senapati of the Hindavi Swaraj, had fallen. He removed the shawl. Seeing the body of Mhaloji Ghorpade, Santaji stumbled back.

Sobs racked his body as he took his father's corpse into his arms. Dhanaji tried his best to comfort Santaji. When his tears had subsided, Santaji caressed his father's face affectionately. He carefully lowered his head back onto the ground and said, handing over an emerald necklace to the Brahmin, 'Shastri Bua, see to it that you carry out the last rites of my father, and those of the others who died here. I have an appointment with the enemy ...'

They had been riding towards the ghat for an hour when they stopped at a stream to refresh themselves. The journey ahead was long and tiring. They decided to halt for a couple of hours. Herder families from the nearby

villages brought some dry fodder for the horses. They had also cooked rotis with some chutney for the troops.

They were halfway through Amba ghat by afternoon. The Maratha troops at the station en route were surprised to see Dhanaji and Santaji. Santaji was equally surprised to see an army of nearly seven thousand Marathas there. When asked about enemy troops who had crossed the ghat the previous day, Krishnaji Konhere, appointed by Kavi Kalash, came forward and said, 'Sardar, we have been here for many days. I was posted here to ensure that no one crosses this ghat. There is no question of even a single enemy soldier making it through this place alive.'

Realising that Raje was in danger, Konhere shivered with fear. Everyone was confused now. Did Raje's captors travel this route at all? Krishnaji Pant said, 'Wait a moment! Just a few hours back, a jeweller named Narhar Pant from Ratnagiri arrived here via Prachitgad. His daughter-in-law is from Patan.' They immediately sent for the jeweller. When asked about any travellers he saw on the way, he said, 'Yes! We did meet Daaji near Patharpunj.'

'Daaji? Who is he referring to?'

'Our Ganoji Shirke, Shambhu Raje's brother-in-law.'

Dhanaji and Santaji drew a sharp breath. 'What was Ganoji doing there?'

'He was on his way to Karad with nearly six hundred soldiers. Daaji was leading the way. Most of the soldiers were Pathans and a few were Marathas. They had two prisoners with them, tied to horses.'

'What did they look like?'

'They were very fair and quite well-built but they had been beaten badly. Their faces were covered with blood and they were bound with ropes and chains. I was told later that Ganoji had arrested two traders at the port. He said he was on his way to Umbraj.'

It was clear from the jeweller's story that all was lost. Santaji was overwhelmed with emotion. He wailed, clutching Dhanaji, 'Dhana! We have been fooled. A black cobra called Ganya Shirka has stung our Swaraj. He has taken away our Raje ...!'

Not a single man present could hold back his tears. There was despair and confusion all around. Santaji said, unsheathing his sword as he wiped his tears, 'Dhanaji, we have six thousand men with us. We will attack Karad, and burn the Mughals and that rascal Gana alive!'

‘Santaji, listen to me without getting excited. Even if we make haste, it will take us two days to reach Karad through these winding mountain routes. Do you think the enemy will stay put there, waiting for us to arrive?’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Karad is not far from Patharpunj. They would have reached the camp by nightfall yesterday. There are many Mughal stations like Rahimatpur, Islampur and others near Karad. The enemy must have gathered a troop strength of nearly fifteen thousand before leaving Karad.’

‘Dhanaji, why are you discouraging me?’

Dhanaji hugged Santaji and said, ‘Santaji, remember what Shambhu Raje said? We need to use our wits and not our emotions. Our Senapati is dead. Our Raje has been captured. We don’t know whether Matoshree has reached Raigad safely or not. Let us leave two thousand men here at Amba ghat. We will take the rest and make haste to reach Raigad. We will consult Matoshree there. Destiny has taken Raje away from us but we need to protect our capital. Our world will collapse if Raigad falls, my dear!’

Santaji wiped his tears. He realised that Dhanaji’s words were wise. They left for Raigad immediately.

### 3

Yesubai sat near the tulsi plant, praying. Shambhu Raje had promised to reach before her. Worries creased her face.

Three horsemen reached the royal quarters. They were followed by Yesaji Kank and others. Seeing their distraught faces, Yesubai’s heart skipped a beat.

The men dismounted and wailed, clutching Yesubai’s feet, ‘Rani Sarkar, we are doomed. The enemy has taken away our Raje!’

‘What?’ Yesubai screamed, unable to believe her ears. It was as if the whole world had collapsed around her. She said, holding her maid’s shoulder for support, ‘Who was it?’

‘Mukarrab Khan.’

‘Is the Maratha Raja a cow which can be caught?’

For a moment Yesubai felt as if her spine had been crushed. She sat down on the floor where she stood. She felt suffocated and giddy, and was sweating profusely. The maids rushed to fan her but she recovered quickly. At that moment Rajaram Saheb came in. He swooned when he heard the news.

Yesubai had been a pillar of strength for the Swaraj, managing its administration from Raigad for the past nine years. But now she felt she was drained of all her blood. Soon, Khando Ballal, Jotyaji Kesarkar, Rayappa and others had arrived. Rayappa wailed, 'Why did I leave my Sarkar and come here?' He could not control his sobs.

Yesubai came to know that Raje and Kaviraj had been taken through Maleghat in the Shirke territory. 'That is impossible. That dense jungle scares even the ghosts away. How could Khan travel through it? How did he know the routes?'

'What can I tell you, Ranisaheb? It was our own Dadasaheb, Ganoji Shirke, who accompanied Mukarrab Khan.'

'Even Ganoji Dadasaheb does not know the routes!'

'He was the one who provided the route maps. He arranged for men, animals and fodder too. His officer Govardhan Pant was with him.'

Yesubai wiped her tears with the edge of her pallu. She asked, 'Where are Dhanaji and Santaji?'

'We don't know, Maharanisaheb! There is chaos all over. But we are sure Dhanaji will convince Santaji to come here. They will not take any steps without consulting you.'

The news of Raje's capture sent a shiver down everyone's spine in Raigad. A crowd of nearly three thousand people, soldiers as well as ryots, gathered outside the royal palace. They wailed for their Raje. Yesubai came out. The men demanded to know where Shambhu Raje was.

Yesubai said, 'This is not the time for such displays of emotion. We are at war with Aurangzeb. It is useless to expect that luck will always be in our favour.'

'But what about Raje? Where is he?' They clamoured.

'Don't worry. Aurangzeb has not won the battle just because he has an upper hand now. Our army will soon leave Raigad, and we will attack Aurangzeb. We will snatch Raje out of that shaitaan's grip.'

The crowd cheered. Yesubai said, 'Please go back to your respective posts and keep guarding them. There is no time to waste.'

Yesubai asked, 'Khandoba, how long will it take to raise a fifteen thousand strong army?'

'We have nearly five thousand men here. But we will need some time to gather ammunition and other supplies. The bulk of our troops are deployed in various parts of the kingdom.'

'Then send your messengers and spies to the Sudhagad, Sagargad, and Birawadi forts. They should reach their destinations before dawn tomorrow.'

'Matoshree, don't worry. We will raise the army, and be ready to move at your command. I expect Santaji and Dhanaji too will arrive by then,' Khando Ballal said.

Yesubai was awake the whole night, supervising the preparations for the war. The next day, she assigned specific tasks to various men. By evening, the palace was empty by evening.

Yesubai came into the private temple in her quarters. She could not forget Ganoji's words, 'Yesu, I will not rest until you are widowed.' The very memory of the words made her shiver with fear. She cried out, 'Dadasaheb, what a gift you have given your sister! I wonder if there is any other brother in the world who treats his sister so.'

## 4

Mukarrab Khan felt like a thief who, having picked up the Kohinoor diamond by chance, is scared to death protecting it. In order to make sure that he reached Aurangzeb as fast as possible, he gathered nearly twenty-five thousand men from the nearby Islampur, Kasegaon, Aundh, Miraj and Rahimatpur stations.

The troops moved fast. They had left the Krishna and Koyna ghats behind. Mukarrab Khan wanted to reach the gorge of Shyamgaon by afternoon and the soldiers were ordered not to stop anywhere in between.

Bound to his horse, Shambhu Raje watched the landscapes flash past as they galloped ahead. He remembered Hambir Mama when he saw distant Vasantgad and the Talbid village at the base of the fort. He mused, 'Mama,

how I wish you were alive!’ Kavi Kalash knew Sambhaji’s state of mind and was desperate yet helpless to find ways to comfort him. The troops were now moving towards the Mughal territory. His poetic mind recalled the words:

*The Koyna cries out loud  
Asking Krishna Mai  
Tell me, where is the treacherous enemy  
Taking Shivba’s child to—*

‘Come on, move fast!’ Mukarrab Khan and Ikhlal Khan shouted, urging the troops to hurry. They were terrified that any moment the Marathas would attack and take away their prized possession. Despite their army of thousands, the father and son were anxious and restless.

At Karad, Mukarrab had urged Ganoji and Nagoji to accompany him but they said, ‘We have guided you out of the difficult terrain. Please don’t ask us to follow you now. If the troops from Raigad find us, they will stone us to death.’ Then the two vanished into the night, leaving Khan uneasy and apprehensive.

As they reached the gorge near Shyamgaon, Mukarrab said to his son, looking at the distant Krishna river, ‘Beta Ikhlal, the fact that those two ran away proves that we are still not out of danger.’

Sambhaji scanned the horizon. They would soon leave the borders of the Swaraj. A host of old memories, anger, dejection and repentance racked his body and mind.

‘Our Raja has been captured and the enemy is taking him away. Shambhu Raje has been taken alive ...’ These words were being repeated in village after village. In the minds of the ryots, Shivaji and Sambhaji were akin to gods. The villagers wept, men and women alike. Many were incensed. They picked up their swords and ran towards their stables, only to remember that the famine had taken a toll on the animals. Most stables had been emptied long back; the horses that had survived were emaciated beasts.

A scorching sun bore down on the troops. Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash’s mouths were gagged. Sweat trickled down their backs. Sambhaji nearly fainted in the heat.



En route, there were many Maratha villages. The ryots had rushed to the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes with appeals for help. ‘Sarkar, do whatever it takes. Save Shambhu Raje!’ The inamdars and watandars made an outward show of grief and fear but in reality they were filled with glee on hearing the news. Had Sambhaji really been captured by the Mughals? These landlords, who believed Sambhaji had robbed them of their hereditary rights, were secretly celebrating the fact that he was now out of their way.

They tried to pacify the ryots, saying, ‘Don’t worry. Raje will be safe. We will look into the matter.’

‘Sarkar, Khan has captured Raje and he will soon pass this way with an army of twenty-five thousand.’

‘Did you hear that? Khan has tens of thousands of soldiers and we are expected to fight them with fifty men?’ They countered. Clearly they had no intentions of helping to rescue Sambhaji.

‘Sarkar, we will use guerrilla tactics. We may die, but we need to save Shambhu Raje ...’

‘You will do no such thing. Khan and his men will burn our villages if you do, and we cannot afford to be so foolish. We will look into the matter. Don’t worry, give us some time.’

## 5

Dhanaji and Santaji reached Pachad on the third day of their journey. Yesubai was already at the base of the fort with five thousand men.

Yesubai conferred with Yesaji Kank. ‘We cannot afford to round up troops from all the forts and chase Khan. It would be disastrous if the Badshah sends his army and captures our forts.’

‘I agree, Matoshree,’ Khando Ballal nodded.

They decided to set out with a troop strength of eight thousand. Yesubai mounted her horse. Rajaram had stayed behind at Raigad. With cries of ‘Har Har Mahadev,’ the men began their march. On the way, they met Haibatrao, Hambirrao’s brother. He was on his way to Raigad from

Karad. Seeing Ranisaheb, he jumped down from his horse, and touching Yesubai's feet in her stirrups, sobbed like a child. Yesubai said, 'Now wipe your tears. We will return to Raigad only when we have Shambhu Raje with us.'

'How do we do that, Ranisaheb? Yesterday, Khan crossed Shyamgaon with nearly twenty-five thousand troops.'

'Oh, oh! Raje has gone beyond the boundaries of the Swaraj,' Jyotyaji Kesarkar and Rayappa said, wailing loudly.

Yesubai had faced many difficult situations in her life. But this one shattered her. She dismounted and looked around. Seeing her, Dhanaji and Santaji too got down from their horses. They said, folding their hands in supplication, 'Ranisaheb, don't worry. We will go ahead and bring Raje back.'

Yesubai could barely speak. She finally said, finding her voice, 'I am not sure if we can do anything now ...'

'Why do you say that, Matoshree? Let us go,' the two insisted.

'The territory beyond Karad is a flat one. There are no forests, mountains or ravines. Our guerrilla tactics won't work there. It is one thing to spring a sudden attack in the Sahyadris and another to face four lakh Mughal soldiers on open ground.'

It was a clash of wise words against the spirited enthusiasm of youth. Yesubai was right; Mukarrab Khan had gone beyond the territory where guerrilla warfare would work. It would be foolhardy to attack the Mughals head on and risk losing the forts still held by the Marathas. Yesu said, 'Only Raje would be able to guide us. The question is, how do we reach him?'

Rayappa said, between his sobs, 'Ranisaheb, don't stop me now. Let me decide how I will reach Raje.'

Khando Ballal wrote a message for Raje, stamping it with Yesubai's seal. Rayappa and his brother Devappa took leave of the party. They galloped away in the direction of Karad.

The sun was setting. The western sky and the mountains were already engulfed in darkness. In the distance, even the Lingana fort seemed broken. Dhanaji and Santaji's faces were crestfallen. Yesubai's sindoor was smeared by the sweat pouring down her face. Yesubai said, looking at the two bravehearts, 'Dhanaji and Santaji, have patience. In the process of trying to save a Maharani from becoming a widow, we should not lose the entire kingdom.'

## 6

It was a hot afternoon. The Badshah's camp at Asadnagar simmered in the bright sun. Aurangzeb had renamed Akluj as Asadnagar. The territory around Akluj and Daund had been ravaged by famine, and even in the usually wintry month of February, the heat was merciless. The Badshah's desperation was growing by the day. He had spent nearly a decade in the Deccan with no success. His arch enemy, the kafir Sambha, had eluded him all these years. The single biggest campaign in his life was turning out to be a disaster, his greatest dream a mirage.

The Badshah was busy giving instructions to his clerks regarding the dispatch of various letters and documents. Any interruption of his work during these hours was considered a blasphemy. Suddenly a spy entered the tent and stood in front of the Badshah after saluting elaborately. On any other day, such audacity would have led to the death of the intruder but from the way the guards murmured and smiled, Aurangzeb realised that the message was important.

The guards outside were nearly rolling in the mud with happiness. Aurangzeb, busy dictating the letters, had alert ears and picked up the laughter outside. He asked the messenger, 'What is the news?'

'Badshah Salamat, it is great news.'

'Why, has something happened to that idiot Shahzada Akbar in Iran?'

'No, Alampanah. That devil Sambha has finally been caught. He is in our custody.'

'What?'

'Yes, Sambha! Mukarrab Khan has captured him in the Sahyadris.'

The Badshah asked the messenger to come closer. When he was within reach, he got up and slapped him hard. Aurangzeb's face was red with anger. He was further enraged when the messenger continued to smile. 'You fool. How dare you? Are you teasing the Badshah?' Aurangzeb was tempted to order his beheading that very instant for such temerity!

The Badshah glanced outside the tent. His sardars, amirs and grandchildren were all seen running towards his tent. Raising their hands in air, and with tears streaming from their eyes, they were shouting, 'Allah o

Akbar!’ The trumpets and horns were already blowing without any orders being given.

There was no longer any need to ascertain the veracity of the message. The Badshah, out of sheer happiness, put his hand on his bare head. He had not worn his crown for the past six years. Tears of joy rolled down his cheeks. He said, raising his hands in the air, ‘Ya Khuda! Ya Allah! My voice must have reached you. Oh, Badshah of this earth, a million thanks to you!’

Asad Khan stepped forward to congratulate Alamgir. Aurangzeb took his hand and said, ‘Asad Khan, even a man blind at birth, on receiving the gift of sight, would not be as mad with joy as I am today.’

## 7

The Badshah was alert. Mukarrab Khan and his troops were nearing Bahadurgad now. The years of waiting were finally over. But extreme happiness does not allow a man to sleep. The Badshah was ever watchful. His restless eyes scanned the horizon.

Along the banks of the river Bhima, there were no tall mountains. There was hardly any possibility of a surprise attack by the Marathas. But Mukarrab was vigilant. After all, he was carrying Shivaji’s son as a trophy for the Badshah.

Aurangzeb asked Asad Khan many times about the strength of the troops accompanying Mukarrab Khan. ‘Twenty-five thousand,’ he would answer, yet Aurangzeb asked many others to confirm the same. He was not sure of his own strength.

News of Sambhaji’s arrest spread cheer throughout the ranks of the Mughal army. The days of exile in the Deccan were over! They could leave for Delhi soon. Many sardars from other stations had already left for Bahadurgad to celebrate the victory.

The Badshah said to Asad Khan one morning, ‘Send orders to all our stations around Akhuj, Pandharpur and Daund that not a single horse should be seen in anyone’s stables or gardens. The residents must be asked to send

the animals away. I don't want a single Maratha soldier to have a horse handy. If a Maratha is seen on a horse, arrest him.'

Each day, instead of sitting in his office as was his daily routine, Aurangzeb would sit in the howdah of his royal elephant and scan the horizon. The only thought in his mind was, 'Let the news of Sambha's arrest not turn out to be a mirage.'

In the afternoons, Aurangzeb would go to the masjid for his prayers. A fakir who often sat there puffing on his chillum had the audacity to blow smoke while looking at the Badshah. He was not afraid of the Mughal Emperor. It was the fakir himself who had built the masjid, from coins collected over the years, one after another. Aurangzeb was often reminded of Shivaji while looking at the fakir. Shivaji too had built his army one man at a time. Now his son Sambha was ruling the Swaraj that he had created. Aurangzeb closed his eyes in prayer, 'Ya Allah, get me this devil soon.'

Sitting at his palace in Bahadurgad, Aurangzeb could see the Bhima flowing silently in the distance. There were ruins on the banks of the river which, if local legends were true, belonged to a seven-storeyed palace. People believed that there was treasure buried somewhere in the ruins of the palace but no one trying to find it had survived. Aurangzeb dismissed such stories as fanciful folklore.

Mukarrab Khan was expected in another couple of days. Aurangzeb's restlessness knew no bounds. He issued fresh orders to whip all the Marathas in the nearby villages. He had ordered nearly three hundred thousand soldiers to go into the villages and torture any Maratha who was seen walking around. The troops swarmed the villages on both sides of the Bhima. Soon, not a single soul was seen outside their homes.

## 8

The wait was almost unbearable. It had been eight long years of struggle, defeat and disappointments. The soldiers dreamt of returning to their homes, be it the deserts of Rajputana or the plains around Agra, Delhi and

Bareilli. They wondered how their families would be when they saw them after a gap of nearly a decade. The children would have grown up.

Even the torturous campaign in the snows of Kabul-Kandahar had lasted less than ten months. Many had wished that the old Badshah would die in the Deccan but no one had had the courage to revolt openly. A soldier who had dared to talk loudly of returning to Delhi had been crushed under an elephant's feet. The celebrations in the camp now reminded one of Eid. Local tailors and jewellers did brisk business. Everyone was waiting breathlessly for Mukarrab and his prized catch.

Rayappa was devastated. He had lost someone dearer than his own life. 'Whatever happens, Raymama, see that you get the message to Shambhu Raje,' Yesubai had instructed. He and his brother Devappa had travelled day and night, riding towards Bahadurgad. They were shocked to see the destruction of the villages around the Bhima. Most of the houses were empty. The villagers had vacated their houses and run away in fear of the Mughals, hiding in their fields.

On the way, Rayappa and his brother had managed to get a water-bearer's leather bag. With their overgrown stubble and dark faces, they looked like bhistis, the Deccani water-bearers, thus merging with the locals. Rayappa tried to extract information regarding Shambhu Raje but no one was willing to speak. He was desperate to meet his Raje and would often cry when alone.

One morning they heard that a royal prisoner was being taken to the fort. Rayappa managed to join the group which was to provide water inside the fort. The demand for water was high and the bhistis were busy. The camp was agog with excitement. Drums, trumpets and horns played continuously. In accordance with the Badshah's orders, everyone stood waiting to receive Mukarrab Khan.

The chains holding Sambhaji jingled as he and Kavi Kalash were led to two dirty camels which stood ready. They did not have saddles on them. A few soldiers lifted Sambhaji and put him on the camel's back. Sambhaji had not seen the sun for days on end. He looked around, dazed by the strong light, to see thousands of Mughal soldiers with naked swords in their hands. The imperial army's camp was spread across miles, with endless rows of cannons and tents.

Waves of men and animals moved forward. The procession started moving. It was being led by Mahadji Nimbalkar, the thanedar of

Bahadurgad. It was difficult to estimate whether Aurangzeb had deliberately given the responsibility to Mahadji, who was Shivaji's son-in-law and brother-in-law to Sambhaji. Mahadji was carrying out his task diligently, but did not dare to meet Sambhaji's stare.

Sambhaji was bound with ropes and chains to the camel's back. Glancing at a Rajput sardar, Amar Singh, who was supervising the tying of ropes, he said, 'You look like a Rajput. Are you from Durgadas's territory?'

'Yes,' he mumbled.

'My friend. I pray you, in the name of your Lord, enough of this torture. Spare me this humiliation and free me.'

'But, the orders are ...'

'My friend, I am appealing to you as a Hindu brother. How can a Rajput tolerate the sight of Shivaji's lion cub dying a dog's death? Please! Help me.'

'What do you want me to do, Raje?'

'Pick up your sword and cut the knots. Don't wait!'

Amar Singh was overwhelmed with emotion. He could not bear to see the tears in Sambhaji's eyes and unsheathed his sword. As he was about to lift the sword, a strong hand held his arm and Ikhlas Khan's voice growled, 'Kyun sardarji? What is your plan?' Amar Singh's bid to release the prisoner had failed. A brief moment of opportunity had passed Sambhaji by.

Sambhaji, for whom tailors had vied with each other to stitch royal clothes and jewellers competed to provide the most exquisite designs, was now forced to wear the striped clothes of a court jester. The one who had sat on a golden throne, supervising the Maratha Swaraj, was now forced to sit like an ordinary criminal on a skinny camel. His neck, which had been adorned by diamond and emerald necklaces, was encircled by rough rope which was used to tie cattle. On Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash's heads were wooden caps of the kind used by Persians for prisoners. Their hands were raised in the air and passed through holes in wooden planks. Their necks too were stuck between wooden planks, to prevent them from turning to look around.

The townspeople were enjoying the spectacle of the two being paraded as objects of ridicule and mirth. And, leading the procession with trumpets, horns and drums, was Mahadji Nimbalkar!

From time to time, the camels were deliberately made to run fast and then turn suddenly. Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash tried frantically to clutch the

camels' backs, although they were bound tightly and could not fall. Seeing their discomfort, the children and others walking alongside laughed scornfully.

Rayappa walked with the other bhistis. At one point, he had managed to get a glimpse of Shambhu Raje. The moment his eyes met his Raje's, Sambhaji smiled weakly. He had probably assumed that one of the water-bearers resembled Rayappa. Little did he know that it was Rayappa himself!

It was a pathetic sight. Within a mere nine years of Shivaji's death, the lion's cub had been caught and publicly humiliated. The men and children following the procession spat at Sambhaji, making obscene gestures. His head, showered with flowers in his durbar, was now the target of sandals and stones. Sambhaji, the shining jewel in Shivaji's crown, tied like a log to a beast of burden, felt all his senses slowly being numbed. There was no anger, nor shame, any longer.

'Abasaheb, I will be present wherever you cannot be,' Sambhaji had once assured his father. For the past nine years, he had been running from one fort to another, ensuring that Shivaji's absence was not felt by the Swaraj. He had seen to it that the enemy was not emboldened after the death of his father.

He glanced at the clouds gathering on the horizon. The dark clouds reminded him of Jijabai's eyes, as if they were waiting to overflow with tears. He recalled that it was Jijabai who had insisted, in her practical wisdom, that Shivaji marry eight times. Her intention was to ensure that the political alliances thus formed would stand in good stead when enemies attacked the Swaraj. But the greedy watandars of Maharashtra had behaved like dogs who shifted loyalties with the smallest morsel thrown at them.

The procession moved forward. Rayappa looked at the tortured face of his master as he walked alongside. Rayappa remembered how he had once attacked a tiger with his sickle and saved Sambhaji's life. Now he watched helplessly as his master's boat was being sunk in the sea of the Mughal army. He could not bear the sight of it.

The procession reached the main gate of Bahadurgad. It was Rayappa's last opportunity. His loyal blood boiled. Snatching a sword from one of the Rajputs guarding the procession, he beheaded two soldiers standing nearby and shouted, 'Shambhu Raje!' Running towards the camel,

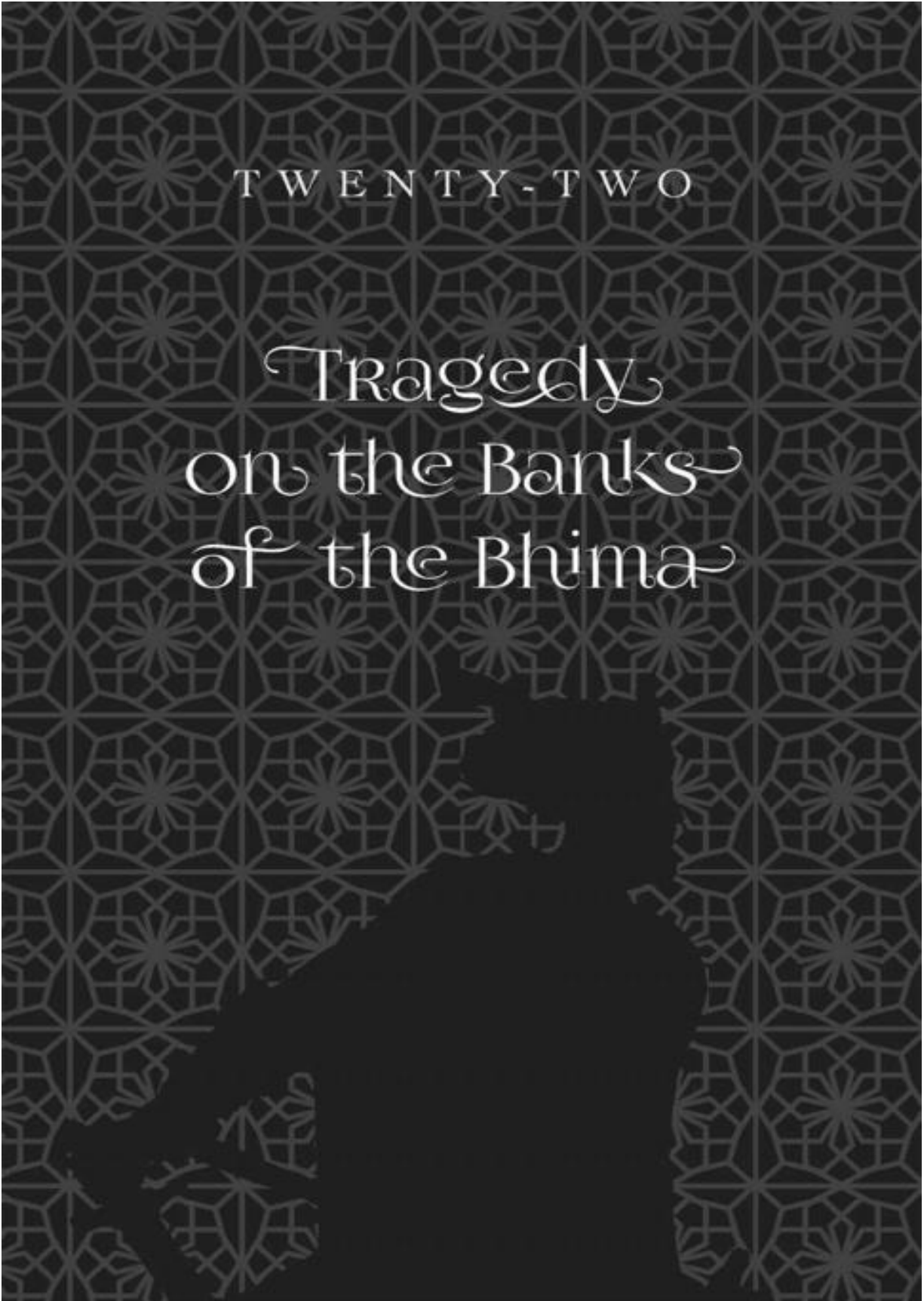


he started attacking the ropes and chains that bound his Raje. ‘Sambha’s man!’ the Mughal soldiers screamed and surrounded Rayappa.

He took blows on his neck, back and arms. Blood squirted from his body, and within moments, he was cut into nearly thirty pieces. The procession moved on. Rayappa’s body, now literally a heap, was trampled beneath the animals’ feet. It was the last blood-stained salute of a loyal soldier to Sambhaji, Shivaji and the Hindavi Swaraj. Sambhaji was stunned by the sacrifice. He bowed his head in gratitude.

T W E N T Y - T W O

Tragedy  
on the Banks  
of the Bhima





# 1

The procession passed in front of a palace with the symbol of a moon and stars. The three royal prisoners inside heard the trumpets and horns. They would, had it been possible, have pierced the walls. Ever since they had heard of the arrest of Sambhaji, they wailed silently.

The procession reached the Diwan-e-Khas now. The durbar wore a festive look with all the Mughal amirs, umraos, shahzadas, begums, grandsons and sardars in attendance.

Mukarrab Khan, Ikhlas Khan and Bahadur Khan presented themselves before the Badshah. They were honoured with precious stones and fine clothes. They bowed and stepped aside. Then the Badshah glanced at the royal prisoners. Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash, bound in chains, stood in his presence. Seeing their Alamgir smile at last, many people in the durbar had tears in their eyes.

Unable to control his joy, Aurangzeb stood up, holding his rosary close to his stomach. As the durbar watched him curiously, Aurangzeb went down on his knees and put his head on the floor, thanking his Allah. His lips quivered and he seemed a little distraught from sheer happiness.

It was the first time that those who had gathered there had seen the Emperor so overcome with emotion. Only once before had the Badshah stepped down from his throne in a full durbar. Nearly seventeen years ago, when he had heard of Shivaji's coronation, he had been overwhelmed by anger and disgust, hating himself for his inability to stop it. He got off his throne in the presence of a full durbar then, mumbling to himself, 'Ya Allah! What a tragedy that the children of mere zamindars and ryots are now sitting on a throne, coronating themselves as emperors!'

Kavi Kalash watched the Badshah thanking his Allah profusely. His chest swelled in pride as he said, in his full-throated voice,

*'Like Hanuman who stood in Ravan's court  
Stands Shambhu in the presence of Aurangzeb  
His body smeared with blood and shining  
He burns like a firefly, a sun on earth  
When even Delhi bends in salute seeing the lion's cub  
No wonder Aurangzeb steps down his throne in salutation.'*

The Badshah took a few steps forward until he was right in front of the two prisoners. They glared at him, heads held high.

Ikhlas Khan shouted, 'You fools! Don't you fear for your lives? Bow down to the Badshah.'

Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash continued to stare at the Mughal Emperor.

The Badshah had turned back towards his throne when Faulad Khan, who had been the police chief at Agra during Shivaji's time, thundered, 'You idiots, bow down. Salute the Badshah and save your life!'

But the prisoners were deaf to his suggestion. Unable to restrain himself, Faulad Khan walked up to Kavi Kalash and said, slapping his arms, 'Idiot! Salute your Emperor.'

Kalash could not take it anymore and kicked Faulad Khan in his leg. The latter fell down on the floor, taken by surprise. The Badshah turned, hearing the noise, and saw Faulad Khan struggle to his feet, gathering his dress and smiling embarrassedly.

Aurangzeb called Zulfikar who approached the throne and lowered himself to the floor, sitting on his knees. Aurangzeb whispered something in his ears. Zulfikar nodded and walked out of the durbar hurriedly. Soon afterwards, Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash were taken to the prison.

Elsewhere in Bahadurgad, sherbet was being served to all and sundry. It looked like Diwali was being celebrated in the fort. The very thought that they could return to Delhi, now that the Badshah's arch enemy had been caught, made people jump with joy.

Even amidst the joyous celebrations, there was a question in everyone's minds which made them fall silent when it arose. Would the Badshah order the execution of Sambha that very night?

'Of course!' Someone said. 'After all, he had beheaded his own brother Dara within a few days of his capture.'

'That is true. Remember how Gokula Singh, who had revolted against him in Mathura, was captured and hacked to pieces?'

‘Bhaijaan, one day Allah may pardon these kafirs for revolting against Aurangzeb, but he will never forgive Badshah himself for his brutal ways,’ someone else quipped.’

## 2

Sakhubai’s temple inside her quarters was an impressive one. Mahadji reached his haveli late at night to see his wife lying prostrate in the sanctum sanctorum. She had no jewellery on and her hair was dishevelled.

Hearing his footsteps she sprang up like a wounded tigress. Her eyes burned with anger as she thundered, ‘Oh, so you have come? What a daring task you have achieved today! Come, let me welcome you with a traditional lamp.’ The taunt was not lost on Mahadji. As he tried to pacify her, Sakhubai continued, ‘My brother Shambhu Raje was being insulted, taunted and teased by everyone in this fortress and for miles around. Did it not boil your blood?’

‘Sakhu ...’

‘He is the mighty Shivaji’s brave son, the grandson of the pious Jijau. Did you not confront the person who arrested him?’

‘Sakhu, that Badshah ... who will be able to confront him?’

Sakhubai choked while trying to speak. A sob escaped her lips.

‘You wrote letters urging all the watandars to leave Sambhaji’s sinking ship and join the Mughals. But you never bothered to consult me before taking these steps.’

Mahadji was speechless. Sakhubai continued, ‘You could have forgotten for a moment that he was Shivaji’s son but how did you forget that he was Saibai Nimbalkar’s son? He was Nimbalkar’s grandson too! How could you ignore that? Don’t you have any allegiance to the blood that flows through your veins?’

Mahadji knew he could not counter Sakhubai’s logic. A dejected and wrecked Sakhubai sat down on the floor when Mahadji said, his voice repentant, ‘Sakhu, I will answer you without hesitation. This land has created many zamindars and watandars but there is only one Shivaji and

one Sambhaji. Your father and your brother are one in a million. I must admit I am deeply ashamed of what I have done today.'

### 3

That night Zulfikar Khan presented himself to the Badshah in his battle gear. He said, 'Jahanpanah, my men have been arriving here since evening.'

'How many of them?'

'Twenty thousand soldiers. Another twenty thousand or so will come from Pune, Chakan and other areas. I will march on Raigad now.'

'Shabbash!' Aurangzeb said, anticipating a victory. 'I am sure the Marathas would be running scared since the arrest of Sambha. Don't waste a minute now.'

It was the second day after Sambhaji's procession at Bahadurgad. The sun was barely visible through the dark clouds covering the sky. Asad Khan, the Shahzadas and the sardars suspected that Sambha would be dead before nightfall. But even the Wazir was not sure of what the Badshah would do next. Asad Khan recalled how Aurangzeb had beheaded Dara and sent his head, wrapped in a box, to Shah Jahan. 'I wish I am not given the task of beheading a defenceless Sambha,' he said to his begum, wiping the sweat off his forehead nervously.

Soon it was dark. Lamps and torches burned at various places in the camp. Asad Khan heard footsteps outside his haveli. A soldier came in and announced, 'Badshah has sent Ruhullah Khan to Sambha's prison.'

Asad Khan thanked his stars that he had not been asked to carry out the task. Now everyone waited to see what Ruhullah Khan would do next.

### 4

Aurangzeb had often said that when Sambha and Kalash were captured, they would be treated not as royal prisoners but as mere looters. Hence they had not been detained in the royal prison at Bahadurgad. Instead, they were taken to new prison cells that had been built of wood on an open plot of land. Outside the prison stood nearly five thousand soldiers with naked swords. Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash had been thrown into this wooden pen as if they were wild elephants being confined in a paddock.

They were bound with metal chains and their feet were in shackles. Sitting on the barebacked camels had peeled the skin off their backs, thighs and buttocks. The wounds of the whiplashes they had been subjected to burned.

Ruhullah Khan's heart melted, seeing the piteous state of the two prisoners. He said, 'Sambha dear, look at you! Where are your million gods? Where are the Maratha daredevils willing to jump in the fire to save you?'

Shambhu Raje and Kavi Kalash were silent. Their faces were creased with pain. But they glared at Ruhullah Khan without saying a word.

Ruhullah Khan said, 'I have a message from the Badshah. He wants to know where you have hidden your treasure.'

Sambhaji's lips did not move. Both he and Kalash looked at Ruhullah Khan with contempt. Ruhullah Khan then asked, 'Tell me the names of the people who profess to be loyal to the Badshah but are in fact supporting you. I need to know who they are.'

Sambhaji did not speak. Ruhullah Khan continued, 'Think about it, Sambha. You are young. If you join the Mughals, you can still save your life.'

Sambhaji and Kalash's lips were sealed. Ruhullah Khan shouted, 'You devils! The Badshah has not shown such mercy to any of his enemies. In fact, he is even known to break his promises and show his own blood relatives the path to hell. Tell me! Where is your treasure? Give me the names of our sardars who have secretly helped you!'

'What can that Badshah do to us?' Kavi Kalash challenged.

'Don't be foolish. He will unleash hungry dogs on you. They will tear you to pieces.'

'Oh! It seems he will take the help of his brothers, after all!'

Sambhaji could not help but smile, hearing Kavi Kalash's taunt.



Ruhullah Khan, desperate to extract the information that Aurangzeb wanted, had to swallow the insults. He came closer to Kavi Kalash to whisper something in his ears. Kalash immediately spat on his face. This enraged Ruhullah Khan. He took out his dagger and lunged at Kalash but then, remembering the task given to him by Aurangzeb, checked himself. Ruhullah Khan knew he would be blamed if the prisoners were found dead. He put the dagger back in its sheath.

No amount of cajoling or threats seemed to be working on the prisoners. Khan said finally, in a sentimental tone, 'Sambha dear, I have two sons of the same age as yours. In their name, I ask you: why do you want to give up your precious life? Abandon this stubbornness.'

'Khansaheb, I pity your Badshah,' Sambhaji said, finally speaking.

'Why do you say that?'

'There is a royal way to deal with prisoners. But your Badshah does not know that. A street dog made to wear jewels and finery does not become an Emperor though he sits on the throne ...'

'Tauba, tauba! Sambha, don't talk rubbish. Are you comparing the Janahpanah with a dog?'

'No! In fact a dog is loyal, unlike your foolish Badshah.'

Ruhullah Khan was sweating nervously. He stomped out of the prison, wondering how he was to convey Sambha's message without using the words which he had just heard.

It was late in the night. The floor in the makeshift prison was mere mud and getting cold now. Outside, thousands of soldiers guarded the prisoners with torches in their hands. An old subedar entered the prison to clean it up, followed by two assistants. He carried with him some bales of straw.

The subedar spread the straw on the ground, creating a bed of sorts. He helped Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash lie down on it. In the darkness they could not see his face, but his trembling hands conveyed affection. The old man, once Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash were made as comfortable as they could be, was unable to hold back his tears. He sat on the ground, sobbing and holding Sambhaji's feet. Shambhu Raje said, recognising him, 'My friend, Miyan Khan!'

Asad Khan was in conference with Aurangzeb. ‘Jahanpanah, three hundred and fifty Maratha forts remain unconquered. Instead of trying to capture them, it would be wise to speak gently with Sambha and extract the information we need to take them over.’

Aurangzeb looked at Ruhullah Khan. The latter said, ‘Sambha and Kalash are crooks. They have no respect for the Badshah Salamat, and are cursing him with choicest words!’

Aurangzeb realised that most of his sardars were of the opinion that he should treat Sambhaji with kindness, befriend him and use him to capture the forts. None of them were in favour of escalating the conflict, having suffered in the Deccan for nine years now. They were eager to march northwards and return home.

The Badshah was in a good mood these days. Asad Khan was his uncle and he spoke freely with him. Aurangzeb told the Wazir he was sure that one day Sambha’s wife would come begging for her husband.

‘And she will not come alone. She will come with the keys to the treasury. She will beg for her husband’s release. I am sure she will come.’

As the days went by, Aurangzeb was frustrated that the two prisoners had not spoken a word despite the torture and insults they were subjected to. Meanwhile, his keen eye had noticed that Shahzadi Zeenat-un-Nissa had been restless ever since Sambha was captured. He was aware that she was close to Durgabai and Kamalja.

Zeenat-un-Nissa suggested one day, ‘Abbajaan, his wife Durga and daughter Kamala are prisoners in the fort. If Sambha meets them, I am sure he will be more open to our ways.’

Aurangzeb looked with pride at his daughter. He remembered how Sambhaji had sent an army of fifteen thousand men to release Durgadevi and Ranubai but had not succeeded. He was sure Sambha would want to see his wife and sister. How would he react when he saw them after a gap of ten years? Sambha was sure to melt, Aurangzeb concluded. He would be willing to sign any treaty!

Udepuri asked Zeenat, caressing her face affectionately, ‘What gives you the courage to speak your mind to the Badshah?’

‘It is not courage, Ammijaan. I cannot tolerate seeing others suffer.’ Zeenat had tears in her eyes, recalling her elder sister Zebunissa, daughter of Dilras Banu Begum, who had been imprisoned in the Salimgarh fort for life by Aurangzeb.

That night, sleep eluded Zeenat-un-Nissa. She recollected all the dark events of her life, when her father had mercilessly massacred or imprisoned members of the family. He may have been a very effective Emperor but she could not help shuddering at his cruel and evil ways. She recalled with horror the way the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded fifteen years back. The memory of the gruesome killings of his disciples—Bhai Matidas, Satidas and Dayaldas—troubled her.

Dayaldas was thrown into boiling oil. His screams rent the air as he died an agonising death. His disfigured body had been kept hanging at the Chandni Chowk for days. Satidas met an even more horrific death. He was tied to a pole while two men, using iron claws, had peeled off his skin. The skin and flesh fell in clumps while Satidas died screaming in pain. Two women, in the advanced months of their pregnancy, had had miscarriages hearing his tormented cries.

The Shahzadi hoped that the suggestion she had made to her father to allow Sambhaji to meet his wife, sister and daughter would be entertained.

## Z

A few years earlier, it was Miyan Khan who was being held as a prisoner in Bahadurgad. He had not forgotten how Sambhaji had helped him arrange and attend his daughters’ wedding. He would often visit Sambhaji under the pretext of looking after the arrangements in the prison cell. He felt blessed by this opportunity to serve him. These days, he was Sambhaji’s eyes and ears in Bahadurgad.

One day he whispered to Sambhaji, ‘Raje, I will do whatever it takes to release you from this hell. It is not difficult to escape from this prison, but for nearly a hundred miles around, it is Mughal territory. The Badshah has ensured that there are no Marathas managing the stables anymore.’

‘Let it be, Miyan Khan. Maybe this is what Jagadamba had destined for me.’

Rayappa had sacrificed his life at Sambhaji’s feet. Devappa, his brother, had carefully kept Maharani’s letter hidden in his dress. He managed to meet Miyan Khan, and miraculously, the letter from Yesubai reached Raje safely despite all the precautions taken by Aurangzeb to cut him off from the world outside. Sambhaji was in tears reading it. Yesu had written:

*‘Raje, don’t worry! We are raising a huge army here. We will attack Bahadurgad and release you.’*

The next line shook Raje to the core, wrenching his heart.

*‘Raje, it is my misfortune that you were taken a prisoner while in my father’s territory. What a pity it is! And my ill luck. I pray you will forgive Yesu for it.’*

Miyan Khan had managed to bring two Brahmins to the prison disguised as his assistants. Raje said to them, ‘Memorise what I am about to say. After you leave here, repeat the words to yourself and then take them carefully to Raigad. I am giving you my ring as a token of my identity.’

He said, instructing the men to listen carefully, ‘Yesurani, don’t trouble your heart unnecessarily. One has to accept destiny. But there is hope. Don’t torture yourself and feel guilty.’

The next words filled Raje’s eyes with tears as he continued, ‘Don’t blame the Shirke household for Ganoji’s cowardly act. When I went to Raigad to take charge, it was your father Pilajirao Shirke who stood like a rock behind me. After all, it was that household which gave birth to Yesubai Maharani who has ruled from Raigad for eight years with a firm hand. Yesu, families are not bad. It is our misfortune that sometimes families give birth to treacherous men. After all, even the soil has insects and there are cobwebs in palaces. Wait for my instructions. Till then, see to it that our forts remain protected as before. I know you must be worried sick thinking about me. My Abasaheb engraved the Hindavi Swaraj on the map of Maharashtra. Warriors like Tanaji, Baji, Shelar Mama and many such bravehearts have sacrificed their lives for it. Be prepared to protect the

Swaraj even if it means widowhood for you. See to it that you don't, under any circumstance, allow the forts to be taken over by the enemy.'

## 8

Durgabai, Ranubai and ten-year-old Rajkumari Kamala's eagerness knew no bounds as they left their prison to meet Raje. It had been ten long and torturous years. The previous night, when Miyan Khan told them that the Badshah had probably softened his stand, they could hardly sleep, waiting for the next morning.

They reached Raje's prison where nearly five thousand soldiers stood guard. The prison cell was dirtier than a horse stable. They saw a tattered rag spread on the floor which served as a bed. A very tired Raje and Kavi Kalash sat on the floor, their hands and legs bound in chains. Ranuakka could not hold back her tears seeing her beloved brother in such miserable state. She wailed, 'Shambhu ... Balraje ... Shambhu Raje!'

Sambhaji was hearing the sweet voice after a decade. He stood up instantly, forgetting his pain and exhaustion. He rushed forward to hug his sister. Kamala was seeing her father for the first time. She was taken aback, seeing his tattered dress, bald head, and the stubble on his face, but then she saw the glint in his eyes and she swelled with pride. She ran to embrace him. The mother and daughter hugged him, tears flowing down their cheeks as they sobbed loudly. The three wept, unable to bear the state to which Shambhu Raje had been reduced.

Shambhu Raje said, 'Ranuakka, these are tough times. It is our bad luck. I had every intention of feeding the treacherous Aurangzeb to the vultures, and ridding humanity of a cruel tyrant.'

'Raje, we spent the last ten years in the hope that one day we will go back to Raigad and see our brother on the throne.'

'Please pardon me, Akkasaheb and Durgarani! I could do nothing for you.'

'Shambhu Raje, don't say that. You fought hard and made life miserable for Aurangzeb. We may have been prisoners but we were well

aware of the things happening around us.'

Sambhaji said, 'I tried my best to release you. We had nearly fifteen thousand troops outside Ahmednagar fort, led by Hambir Mama himself. The enemy sensed our intentions and moved you to Bahadurgad.'

There was so much to say, and so little time. Sambhaji said, 'Kamala, if we had met at Raigad you would have been welcomed with the booming of cannons.'

Ranuakka ruffled Sambhaji's hair affectionately, saying, 'These days too will pass, Raje!'

'Akka, why is destiny so cruel? I had never met my daughter and now I am seeing her in these circumstances. It would be the first time in history that a Raja meets his daughter for the first time ten years after her birth, and that too, never to see her again.'

The guard, Faujdar Dular Singh, peeped in and cleared his throat dramatically, saying, 'Hurry up!'

Shambhu Raje held Durgabai's hand and said, 'Durga, I could never give you any happiness.'

'Raje, I am Shivaji Raje's daughter-in-law and Shambhu Raje's wife. What else do I need?'

'What does this cruel Badshah want?' Ranubai asked.

'Ranuakka, he has asked me several times to give away all my forts and surrender my treasury. He wants us to leave the Deccan. If we agree, he will release all of us and give us a jagir in Hindustan where we can spend the rest of our lives in luxury.'

'Don't rescind the promise you have given to your Abasaheb,' Akkasaheb said.

Shambhu Raje smiled. 'We are meeting thanks to his generosity. If the same continues, I am sure we may meet again.'

'Shambhu Raje, we don't care about our safety. Don't, under the compulsion to save our lives, agree to his vile conditons,' Akkasaheb said, determinedly.

The guard was now banging on the door, indicating that the meeting was over. Kamala hugged her father and showered kisses on his cheeks. The four of them clung to each other and cried together.

Slowly, the three women were moving away when they heard Kavi Kalash's mournful voice, 'Ranuakka!' Ranu Akkasaheb hugged him and said, 'You have been with Raje, in rain and sun, whether you were cursed or

praised. I hope you are born in your next life not as Raje's friend but as my brother.'

Kavi Kalash said, 'Ranu Akkasaheb, Durga Bhabhi, let our friends still fighting the enemy in the Sahyadris know this ...'

He recited a few lines:

*'We walk with our heads held high to the gallows  
The nails in our soles still hurting  
Friends, we never wished for long life  
But we needed some more time  
To be with you  
While we fight and defeat the enemy.'*

## 9

Aurangzeb may have caught Sambha but destiny had dealt him a cruel hand in the Deccan. He had lost Aurangabadi Mahal, his begum, to the plague. He had to throw Shahzada Muazzam into the dungeons for his revolt. Shahzada Akbar had escaped and was now trying to attack Hindustan with the help of the Shah of Iran. Zulfikar Khan and Shahzada Azam were in the Sahyadris but they had not met with much success.

The few moments of true happiness he had these days were spent in the company of Udepuri Begum and Shahzadi Zeenat-un-Nissa. He said to his daughter, 'Zeenat beta, I tried my best but Sambha is unwilling to relent. His wife and sister too are willing to go to the gallows rather than accept my conditions.'

A few khojas came in and spoke to Udepuri Begum, who was unwell and had been resting in the other room, leaving father and daughter to their chat. After the khojas left, she stormed into the Badshah's room and confronted Aurangzeb, 'Badshah Salamat, is there no limit to your cruelty? I was once married to the pious Dara. You killed him, and along with the throne, snatched me too! The throne made of wood and metal had no voice but I have been suffering all my life. Have I ever complained?'

‘Be quiet, begum! Have you lost your mind?’ Aurangzeb thundered, bristling with anger.

‘Let the shahzadi hear this. She is not an innocent young girl anymore. You cannot understand the courage one needs to live with a person who has killed her husband. Look at Shahbuddin! He has threatened Sambha that if he does not hand over his forts and his treasury, he would molest his wife and sister in the bazaar! What audacity! Does he not have any shame?’

‘Oh, is that the issue? I thought the heavens were collapsing!’ Aurangzeb said, sitting down quietly. Udepuri was still fuming with anger. Shahzadi too was angry, having heard about Shahbuddin’s threat. Aurangzeb said to his begum, ‘Why are you so worried about that dog Sambha? Why are you so argumentative?’

Udepuri was not in a mood to back down. She said, ‘Durga and Ranu are not just Sambha’s wife and sister. They are Shivaji’s family. Shivaji may have troubled you all your life but he has never allowed any of our tombs or mosques to be destroyed. You had publicly praised him after his death. Sambha too has behaved in the same way as his father.’

Aurangzeb knew he had no argument against Udepuri’s comments. He immediately sent a strongly worded note to Shahbuddin, chastising the old sardar.

The days flew by. Zulfikar sent regular updates from Mahad, describing the various territories he was traversing with his troops. This enraged Aurangzeb who took his anger out on Asad Khan, ‘What is your son trying to do? Is he teaching me the geography of the Deccan?’ The truth of the matter was that Zulfikar did not have the courage to attack Raigad.

The Badshah was increasingly troubled by the question of what to do with Sambhaji. He said one day to his daughter, ‘Zeenat, that devil Sambha has been in custody for twenty days now. I did not let even Dara live beyond a few days. The elders in the camp are laughing behind my back, calling me a coward.’

‘Abbajaan, why don’t you meet Sambha yourself? Why don’t you use your sweet tongue instead of your sharp sword? I know the power of your words from the letters you have written to Akbar Bhaiya.’

Aurangzeb frowned. The very thought of the Badshah of Hindustan cajoling a mere mountain rat was intolerable to him.



Aurangzeb was in a foul mood. He shouted at the guards, ‘What is happening in Bahadurgad? How can the enemy spies penetrate this place?’ In truth, Aurangzeb had decided to take matters into his own hands. Under the pretext of inspecting the posts in Bahadurgad, he casually arrived at the makeshift prison where Sambha and Kalash were being held. He was accompanied by Wazir Asad Khan. He entered the room. Sambha and Kalash bore the marks of torture all over their weakened bodies and wore tattered clothes. Yet, it was remarkable the way they challenged Aurangzeb with their eyes, standing straight. Aurangzeb looked at them and said, ‘Sambha, young man! It was thirty years ago that I took my brother Dara out on a procession atop an elephant, through the streets of Delhi. I had laughed at the way he was insulted by the people.’

‘Badshah, you are a fool. Dara was a pious man. He was loved by both Hindus and Muslims,’ Kavi Kalash said.

‘You foolish poet! It is better that you hold your tongue. Else, I will have to pull out that flickering, pink serpent from your mouth,’ Aurangzeb thundered.

He continued, ‘Dara knew how to fool the common man. That is why many people were wailing and beating their chests in sorrow when he died. You were paraded wearing a jester’s dress through Shiva’s own territory. Isn’t that my victory and your defeat?’

Sambhaji said quietly, ‘It is mere treachery. If you feel that this is your victory, you are living in a fool’s paradise.’

‘Such arrogance, such conceit!’

‘Why not? Release me from my chains and let me face any of your sardars. My sword will show who the winner is.’

‘Sambha, did anyone come to your rescue when you were being paraded through the streets? Save your life, you foolish fellow! Your ambitions, your prestige, your power—they are all ephemeral. Once broken, they are lost forever, like the pieces of a shattered chandelier. The world recognises a good deal. Shivaji’s son-in-law understood that well. When will you learn? You too will be treated with honour in our army. Accept me

as your Badshah. That parade was only a lesson to force you to come to your senses.'

Aurangzeb thought of all the desperate letters written by Zulfikar, lamenting that Dhanaji, Santaji and other Maratha daredevils were creating havoc in the Sahyadris, and that it was impossible to capture the forts, especially Raigad. The Badshah was therefore eager to convince Sambhaji to accede to his demands.

Changing his tone, he said, 'Sambha, I am at times jealous of your father, the kafir Siva. It must have taken great courage for an ordinary zamindar to establish a Maratha sultanate.'

'Badshah, my father's Swaraj is not the property of an arrogant sultan. The Swaraj is for the poor. The ryots own it.'

Aurangzeb continued, 'How fortunate Siva is to have a son like you. I am proud of you. A man gains wisdom from experience. You fought me and eluded me for eight years. This is not empty praise; I honestly wish at least one of my four shahzadas had shown the same tenacity you have!'

Sambhaji took a deep breath and said, returning Aurangzeb's stare, 'Instead of praising me with such words, it is better that you tell me what you want.'

'Where is your treasure hidden?'

'In my forts.'

'Which sardars from my army have joined you?'

'I don't know.'

'You arrogant fool! Come to your senses. Don't be influenced by this foolish poet. You may now know this, but Zulfikar Khan is in your territory with forty thousand horsemen. He must have laid siege to Raigad by now.'

'You foolish Badshah! Raigad is not a lump of clay which can be demolished.'

'Even if it is made of steel, I have asked Zulfikar to melt it.'

'It is made of stone and unbreakable at that.'

'You ignorant kafir! Save your life when you still can. My army is already in your territory and many of your men have joined us.'

'The men joining you are not true Marathas. You cannot destroy Maharashtra.'

'I need only two things from you: a list of the people who have joined you and the keys to your treasury.'

Even in that condition, Sambhaji could not help but smile. Kavi Kalash laughed loudly. The Badshah could not tolerate such open insults. He swallowed his anger and said, 'I am giving you one chance, and only one, Sambha. Hand over your forts and you can enjoy the rest of your life in any part of Hindustan you choose.'

'Wah, Badshah!' Kavi Kalash taunted.

'This is not a joke, you stupid poet! I give you my word, with my hands on the Quran.'

Sambhaji smiled tauntingly. 'You seem to be keen on taking over my forts. You want the forts without a fight, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Why don't you go up North then? There are many who would willingly to give you their forts, and their daughters and wives too. But we Marathas are different. We first anoint the stones of our forts with our blood and then spend our lives protecting them.'

## 11

'My Lord, I have never interfered in your campaigns for the past ten years. But we have been shifting camp too often. I am fed up now,' Udepuri complained.

'Huh! If those in the royal tents complain, what about the ordinary soldier who is out in the heat and dust?' Aurangzeb countered.

The entire camp was now frustrated. Men were looking forward to leaving for Hindustan. Sambha had been captured. What else was there to do?

'We need to capture his forts,' Aurangzeb said.

Udepuri suggested that they take Sambha to Delhi. Aurangzeb said, 'Udepuri, the destiny of Sambha is written in this soil. I am going to see to it that the end comes here.'

One night, Aurangzeb woke up with a sudden insight. Kavi Kalash was the soul of Sambha! He walked out of his palace, much to the surprise

of the soldiers who scrambled to salute him. Aurangzeb turned towards Ruhullah Khan's tent. He ordered the guard to bring Kavi Kalash there.

Kavi Kalash entered the tent. Seeing Aurangzeb sitting there, he immediately surmised the reason for being summoned alone and smiled.

Till date, Aurangzeb had tried threats of instant death, false promises, and many other tactics to make Sambhaji yield to his demands. Kavi Kalash realised that the Badshah had one more trick up his sleeve.

Aurangzeb gestured to the guard to remove Kavi Kalash's fetters. Kavi said, laughing loudly, 'Well, the foolish Badshah is now trying to negotiate with a foolish poet.'

'What do you want, Kaviraj?'

'A poet scarcely even looks at a throne; in fact, he considers it to be of no use. My state of intoxication in my happiness is my kingdom. All I need is a cloth to cover my body and a friend like Shambhu Raje.'

'I want you to send letters to all the kiledars, conveying Sambha's orders to hand over the forts.'

'You're asking me to write false letters?'

'Why not? I will make you a rich man.'

'Badshah, you are a rascal! Many people including your Shahzada Akbar told me this. But today I know that you're the most disgraceful person on this earth. You can kill your own brothers for your selfish ambitions. You are a shaitan who can play with your own brother's decapitated head on your lap. What harm can you do to me, you old fox?'

'You foolish Brahmin, I am going to hang you at the gallows.'

'Huh! I will be happy to die for my dear friend Sambhaji. It would be an honour.'

Aurangzeb fumed at Kavi Kalash's response. He ordered the khojas standing outside to get a whip and asked them to lash him. Blood poured out of Kavi's body where the lashes of the whip broke open his skin. After a while, they dragged him out of the tent and threw him in prison.

A day before their planned departure from Bahadurgad, Faulad Khan came and whispered in Aurangzeb's ears, 'Jahanpanah, Kavi Kalash is willing to negotiate.'

Aurangzeb could not believe his ears. Although Kavi Kalash had been tortured relentlessly for many days, he had not expected him to change his mind so soon.

He was brought before the Emperor. His whole body was covered with cuts and wounds which had begun to fester. The Badshah indicated to the guards to seat Kalash near him. He asked, 'Kaviraj, tell me, which jagir do you want? Agra, Bareilly, Lucknow or Sasaram? Ask, and it will be yours.'

'I have only one thing to ask. You may cut me into pieces and feed my body to the dogs but you must treat my Raje as a king.'

The Badshah was taken aback. He asked, 'Why have you come here? To save your life or Sambha's?'

'I am not begging you. I have come to remind the descendant of Taimur that there is a difference between an ordinary butcher and an Emperor.'

Aurangzeb's servants shivered with fear. Kavi Kalash continued, 'Look at the way you have insulted him, parading him in a procession. No true emperor would have displayed the animal instincts you showed in the way you celebrated his arrest.'

'This is the way we honour kafirs, you fool!'

'I wish the Badshah would learn some etiquette from his enemies.'

'What etiquette are you talking of?'

'I have a little knowledge of history, Badshah. Mirza Jai Singh fought against you when you and Shuja were warring for the Mughal throne. There came a day when you found yourself alone facing Mirza Jai Singh in a forest. Had he not shown any mercy and finished you off then, you would not have been sitting here today.'

An enraged Badshah shouted at his guards, 'What are you waiting for? Break this fellow's legs and throw him in a nullah. Let him die there!'

The guards and the khojas were already dragging Kavi Kalash away when he turned around and said to the Badshah, 'Don't make a show of being a servant of Allah by stitching his caps. You need to stitch your brain together.'

The guards pounced on him. While he was being dragged away, Kavi Kalash sang:

*'While you commit sins, your lips utter Bismillah  
You stitch caps to fool your Allah  
Your brain needs to be stitched,  
It is you who is going mad.'*

Incensed, Aurangzeb ordered his men to cut off Kavi Kalash's tongue. A huge Pathan sat on Kalash's chest. Two others held his head and one of them put his hand inside his mouth. He broke four of his teeth and then started pulling his tongue out. Kavi Kalash's eyes were white with fear. The Pathan cut off his tongue in one clean stroke. Instead of words, blood spilled out of his mouth now. He choked on his own blood while tears flowed down his cheeks. He was hardly able to breathe.

## 13

Aurangzeb gulped down water from a pitcher. He moved his hand over his bald head. He said, 'Udepuri Begum, I want to share my thoughts. I feel Shivaji is far luckier than me. He has a son like Sambha, a daredevil. Look at my four shahzadas! All donkeys. If I had a son like Sambha I would have asked Allah for just two things—a rosary and a carpet to read my namaaz. I would have left for Mecca-Madina with these two things tucked under my armpit.'

Udepuri had been by Aurangzeb's side through thick and thin. She said, 'My Lord, Allah has been with you. You defeated Bijapur and Golconda. Now you have Shiva's son. But I don't see any happiness on your face. What is wrong, my Lord?'

Aurangzeb did not say anything for a long time. He kept fiddling with the beads of his rosary while mumbling lines from the Quran. Udepuri said, 'You remember the battles of your youth? Even when the enemy

surrounded you, attacking from all sides, you would spread the mat and read your prayers. That is when you were called Zinda Pir, the living saint.'

'Abbajaan, I too have heard this from many soldiers,' Zeenat-un-Nissa said. 'I too wonder why you don't seem happy despite having captured your arch enemy.'

'Dear, I don't understand the Maratha soil or its people. Their king is with us but they are not vanquished. Zulfikar has not met with any success. It has been a month since we caught Sambha but his wife is not willing to relinquish Raigad. We have whipped Sambha and Kavi Kalash till their flesh has peeled off but they are not willing to bend.'

Aurangzeb decided to shift his camp closer to Pune. He felt that Bahadurgad was not giving him any peace. The move took place the next day and Aurangzeb decided to establish the new cantonment between Tulapur and Koregaon Bhima. His sharp mind estimated that once he was close to Pune, he would be able to control the area and also the road to Konkan. His men too were feeling refreshed by the change of air and scenery. Aurangzeb would also be better able to monitor the progress made by Zulfikar Khan from this location.

Aurangzeb hoped that the mental and physical torture of the two royal prisoners would soon compel Yesubai to come from Raigad and fall on her knees before him.

The imperial army reached Tulapur on 3 March 1689. Tulapur was on the sangam of the rivers Indrayani and Bhima. The vast cantonment held nearly three lakh soldiers, apart from servants and other officials.

One evening, Aurangzeb summoned Miyan Khan and said, 'I suspect there are still some people in my camp who are supporting Sambha and trying to help him. Find out who they are and let me know.' Miyan Khan nodded, saying, 'Ji, my Lord.'

Days went by in Tulapur. There was no news from Zulfikar. One day, a frustrated Aurangzeb ordered Ruhullah Khan, 'Gouge that rascal Kalash's eyes out with a burning rod.'

The khojas and other servants ran to carry out the order. That evening, Kavi Kalash's eyes were gouged out, leaving behind hideous hollows.

Aurangzeb would enquire about the two prisoners everyday. Anyone else in their place would have succumbed long back, but they were not ones to yield to the pressures of torture.

One morning, Aurangzeb summoned Sambhaji to his office. He said, taunting him, 'I am sure you must have grown wiser, seeing your friend's pathetic condition. I cut his tongue off long back, letting you keep yours only so that I could listen to your words of defeat. Tell me, what can you do when fate is not in your favour? What can your millions of gods and goddesses do? I think you need a new vision.'

The Badshah gave orders for two rods to be heated. Miyan Khan was standing nearby. Aurangzeb said, 'Miyan Khan, come!'

Miyan Khan stood shivering. He knew what he was going to be ordered to do. Sambhaji's hands were tied behind his back. Aurangzeb said, looking at Asad Khan, 'I was looking for someone to carry out this task. Who can be more loyal than Miyan Khan?'

Seeing Miyan Khan hesitate, he said, 'If Miyan Khan does not want to do the job, let him be the first to get the new vision!' Miyan Khan had no choice but to pick up the heated rods. When he reached Sambhaji, he suddenly pierced his own stomach with the rods. There was an uproar as the Badshah's men ran forward with swords and cut Miyan Khan to pieces. His blood fell on Sambhaji's feet. It was his last act of gratitude.

The men then carried out the task meant for Miyan Khan. With a hideous noise, the rods were inserted into Sambhaji's eyes. Smoke came out, along with the stench of burnt flesh. Sambhaji's face twisted in agony but he refused to scream. Not a word emerged from his mouth. Aurangzeb was terribly disappointed.

## 14

Kesopant Trimal was camped near the fort of Jinji. He heard the terrible news that evening.

'Sambhaji has been captured.'

Keso Trimal's heart bled hearing the tragic news. His loyal blood would not allow him to sit and do nothing while his Raje languished in a Mughal prison. He was sure Harji would summon him any moment. He



asked his troops to be ready. ‘Aurangzeb may attack any day. We must be prepared.’

Keso Trimal’s elder brother Moropant had been one of the Ashta Pradhan in Shivaji’s cabinet. Kesopant had shown his valour at Ramshej. Shambhu Raje had rewarded his loyalty with an important assignment—sending him to supervise the territory of the Karnatak and Tamil provinces. Keso received a message from Harji, instructing him to leave for Pune immediately. ‘Come to the fort for a discussion before you go,’ Harji had said. The wiry old man immediately began ascending the fort. He was drenched in sweat by the time he presented himself to Harji Mahadik.

Harji Mahadik was sitting on a swing and looked quite happy. The sound of someone weeping could be heard from an inner chamber. It was probably Ambikabai. After all, Shambhu Raje was her younger brother. Kesopant took a seat, a little confused. As soon as Harji glanced at the soldiers standing nearby, they rushed to arrest Kesopant. He was thrown into a dungeon. The old soldier fumed with anger. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined that when Maharashtra’s Raje was captured, his brother-in-law, instead of rushing to save him, would act in such a treacherous manner.

Harji Raje wrote a letter to Aurangzeb, ‘The Lord above and the Badshah on earth has blessed me. I wish you would honour me in the same manner as you have honoured Ganoji Shirke and Mahadji Nimbalkar. I may be related to Shivaji Raje but we have not lost our minds like his son. I pray that I get a chance to serve you, my Lord.’

## 15

Raigad was enveloped in grief. Ten years earlier, the capital had suffered a shock with the demise of Shivaji Raje. The second shock of Shambhu Raje’s capture was difficult to digest. The citizens were drowned in sorrow with the knowledge that Sambhaji, at merely thirty-two years of age, was a prisoner of the Mughals.

It was as if a mountain had collapsed on Yesubai. Her grief was unbearable. Memories of Sambhaji filled her mind. She knew that a cruel emperor like Aurangzeb would torture Sambhaji and that Raje would never yield or accept any conditions for his release. While on one hand Yesubai lived in mortal fear, wondering how her husband would survive, on the other, as queen of the Swaraj, she had look into administrative and military matters, ensuring the safety of Raigad above all else.

The palace at Raigad felt immensely lonely. Yesubai roamed around the fort inspecting the troops and the ramparts while looking anxiously at the valleys below. Would Raje walk through them again one day? The moon, peeping through the clouds, would remind her of his face and she would be overwhelmed with emotions. Yet, she had to carry out her duties. Yesubai's primary aim was to ensure the security of the three hundred and fifty forts in the Sahyadris.

She received news that Aurangzeb had moved his camp to Tulapur. It was clear that the Badshah was planning to attack Raigad. Each day she would hear of dozens of old sardars and watandars joining the Mughal camp with the hope of some benefit or the other, the way a hungry dog runs for a piece of stale bread.

So far Shambhu Raje had ensured that through Miyan Khan and others, messages would reach Raigad from time to time. The latest message was heart-rending. Shambhu Raje had said, 'Yesurani, as I have said earlier, be prepared to protect Abasaheb's Swaraj. At this juncture, protecting the kingdom is crucial even at the cost of not being able to protect your husband.'

These were difficult times for the Swaraj. As always, there were selfish people who found ways to get their pound of flesh. Yesubai often would pray for Sambhaji to appear in Raigad through some divine intervention. One day a few traders from Pune came to meet Yesubai. 'We are told there are a lot of corrupt officials in the Mughal camp. We can save Shambhu Raje.' Yesubai did not hesitate for a moment. 'Khandoba, give them as much money as they want.'

She got up to arrange for the payment but suddenly stopped in her tracks. Was she being fooled? It was unlikely that the money would ever reach Aurangzeb's camp, she realised. Yet, the slim hope of being able to release Raje prompted her to give it to the men after all. The thieves distributed the wealth at the banks of the river Mula and decamped.

News of the ways in which Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash were being tortured reached Raigad every now and then. The real question was how long this would continue. Prahlad Niraj, Yesaji Kank and other elders were worried sick. How long could they continue to run the kingdom in Raje's name?

'To be frank, it is not wise to leave a throne without a king,' Yesaji said.

'What is your advice?' Yesubai asked.

'Dada Maharaj is going through hell. The Swaraj owes a lot to him. Let us put his son Shahu on the throne. We are all there to support him,' Rajaram Saheb said.

Rajaram had shown his maturity and large-heartedness by proposing Shahu's name but Yesubai knew that there were many people in the administration who would object. She said, 'No! Seven-year-old Shahu is too young right now. Rajaram Saheb is mature and can take on the responsibility. He must ascend the throne.'

The same day, a small ceremony was held coronating Rajaram Saheb as the third Chhatrapati of the Hindavi Swaraj. A grateful Rajaram bowed to his Vahinisaheb and took her blessings.

The days were passing by swiftly. Zulfikar Khan finally managed to lay siege to the Maratha capital. Raigad had never seen such dark days.

The officials were worried. What if the new heir to the throne too was captured by the Mughals? The Swaraj would end! Apart from a narrow path leading from the Chittadarwaza to the main entrance, there was no other way into the fort. But Yesubai was thinking of a way out. She asked the men to create a wooden platform which could be lowered from one of the ramparts. In the distance they could see the burning torches of the Mughal camp. 'We must hurry. Lower the platform. The other forts are well protected but we must save Rajaram.'

'Vahinisaheb, what about you?' Rajaram asked.

'I have decided to give myself up. You and Tarabai should leave immediately. Else, we will all get caught. The Mughals will celebrate my arrest as I am Shambhu Raje's wife. They will be a little relaxed for a few days. You must use the time to escape.'

Rajaram could not hold back his sobs. The enemy was approaching fast. Rajaram and Tarabai began descending the fort using the wooden plank and a rope.

Yesubai closed her eyes as she prayed.

## 16

‘You fool, I am willing to accept death but not your religion. Shivaji’s son is not going to be trapped by your words,’ Sambhaji shouted at Aurangzeb.

‘Sambha, I am going to continue ruling Hindustan for many more years. I have only one question. Tell me the names of my sardars who were feeding you information. Give me the names of the traitors and save your life!’

Sambhaji’s stomach was literally touching his spine. He had not had a morsel of food for the past few days. His lips were dry. His health was extremely fragile. He said, ‘I cannot answer your question.’

‘Why?’

‘I use my sword to fight the enemy. I don’t stab my friends in the back.’

Aurangzeb was frustrated beyond words. He had not been able to extract a single morsel of information from Sambhaji. He gulped water from a jar and stormed out of the room. The Badshah was terribly confused now. Should he allow Sambha to live ... or should he honour the fatwa made by the maulvi and let him die?

## 17

It was the night before new moon. The banks of the Bhima were cold. The night was dark. In the distance a dog barked. In the hills, wolves could be heard howling. Miyan Khan’s assistants, loyal to their master, were still looking after Sambhaji and Kalash. The two suffered immensely. They were allowed a bath only once in four days. They were subjected to lashes and

beatings every now and then. The guards had literally pulled out all their hair. There was no place where their bodies did not hurt. They were now almost beyond pain!

It was past midnight. Sambhaji felt the cold breeze from the river bank in his cell. It was a gentle touch. It was his Abasaheb.

*‘Abasaheb, I could do nothing ...’*

*‘Don’t even think that, my dear. Each valley of the Sahyadris, the narrow mountain paths, the ravines, all the provinces of Maharashtra, every inch of the soil is grateful to you.’*

*‘But Abasaheb, I am blamed, maligned by many..’*

*‘My son, I have been watching you for the past nine years. Had it not been for destiny which has tied my hands, I would have come back breaking the doors of heaven to help you. You never allowed any obstacles to hinder you on your perilous path. Today or tomorrow, the world will know of your valour and bow down to honour you. You were able to hold the Mughal army at bay. They had a vast army, hundreds of thousands of men and beasts, but for eight years, they could do nothing to the Swaraj. Had Aurangzeb captured and ravaged the territory with weapons like the Jizya tax, the Maharashtra, made pious by Tukaram and Ramdas, would have wept in sorrow. But you never allowed that.’*

Sambhaji rested his head on Shivaji Raje.

*‘Shambhu, my dear valiant son! You have challenged the Mughal might. Earlier, a mere message from Delhi was enough to send shivers down the spines of the kings in the Deccan, be it the Qutbshahi or the Adilshahi dynasty. We were forced to make a trip to Agra ourselves, to meet the Emperor. I had to suffer the ignominious treaty of Purandar. But you managed to stem the tide. The brute force of the Mughals was ineffective when it clashed against you and your men. History will have to search for another example where someone has fought with such limited*

*resources while being ravaged by the forces of nature against such a mighty army. No wonder Tukaram has written in your praise:*

*“One is blessed to have a son like Sambhaji  
Who raises his flag in all the three worlds.” ’*

Sambhaji was overwhelmed hearing his father’s words. He had no eyes but he could feel his father’s presence.

*‘Shambhu, Shivaji may have taught the Marathas how to live their lives but you have taught the ryots the value of loyalty to the soil and to their religion. I will tell the ryots not to forget Sambhaji’s sacrifice while celebrating Shivaji’s valour. Long back, I had sent Balaji Chitnis to Rajasthan to trace our lineage back to the Sisodiya dynasty. But Shambhu, after you, valiant men from other parts will be clamouring and vying with each other to find a link to you!’*

Sambhaji cried, ‘Abasaheb, your words have purified me. I am eager to embrace death now! If my death can wake Maharashtra, and make the ryots pick up their spears and dig a grave for Aurangzeb here in the Deccan, I will consider such a death blessed.’

## 18

The chirping of the birds from the river bank could be heard. The cool morning breeze was strong now. Raje could see only darkness with his blinded eyes. The only way to sense day or night now was through the sounds and movements around him. Aurangzeb had still not cut off Sambhaji’s tongue in the hope that one day he would beg for his life. Sambhaji said softly, ‘Kaviraj!’

Kavi Kalash’s ears were alert although he could not speak. He had lost his eyes long back. Sambhaji recalled that Kavi Kalash could not respond to

his words. He moved slowly towards him and held his hand. He said, 'A man's life is ephemeral, like a bubble on the surface of water. Why should one feel sad? I am lucky that I met my Abasaheb last night. I feel blessed. I am ready to face Death now.'

Kaviraj moved forward and placed Raje's hand on his cheek. Sambhaji continued, 'Death is an adamant guest. He has been at our door for a long time. But I am not worried now. I am ready to welcome him anytime. I have just one wish which remains unfulfilled. If only I could have buried Aurangzeb's head at the Chittadarwaza, I would have smiled in death's embrace. The Portuguese viceroy had to run away in his boat. The Siddi at Janjira had to hide in his fort like a scared mouse. We did not allow the Mughals to touch even one of our forts. If I had embraced death on the battlefield I would have felt blessed. But I feel sad when it comes silently, like a frightened thief.'

That afternoon they heard loud footsteps. Sambhaji felt that death itself was visiting him. The footsteps stopped at the door. Then he heard Kaviraj struggling. It seemed that the messenger of death had caught Kaviraj. Sambhaji could not see but his entire body could feel the messenger's presence, and he shouted, 'Wait! Come here!'

Such was the tone of command in his voice, even death had to stop. Sambhaji moved towards Kalash and embraced him, wailing loudly, 'Kaviraj!' They hugged each other. Kavi could not speak. His body struggled to convey his emotions. It was a tragic sight. Even the dying Jataayu, with his feathers clipped, would not have suffered so much!

Shambhu Raje asked, 'Kaviraj, are you going away? And that too, before me? How lucky you are!'

Kaviraj's body was trembling. His tongue may have been cut but his whole body, even his breath, tried to speak. 'Yes, Rajan, I am indeed lucky. This is my chance to reach the doors of heaven first, to welcome you there with flowers. Your feet must be tired. The soft flowers will give them some rest.'

But even Raje's affectionate embrace was not to last for long. Death dragged him away, to the banks of the river.

That afternoon, Aurangzeb gave the order to tear Kavi Kalash's limbs apart, one by one. All the torture they practised on his body was a kind of preparation for what they would do to Sambhaji's body later. They threw the bloodied, dismembered body on the banks of the Bhima. The camp,

spread across fifteen miles, was frozen in silence. The news of the death of Kavi Kalash soon spread. The Maratha water-bearers, guards and servants sobbed quietly. Just ten years after the death of Shivaji Raje, they had witnessed another, more terrible tragedy.

The camp had a gallows to hang royal criminals but the Badshah had decided not to take Kaviraj or Shambhu Raje there. He had said many times that Sambha and Kalash were merely ordinary criminals and there was no need to hang them. As a result, Kaviraj's body lay in pieces upon the rocks on the banks of the river Bhima.

That evening news spread that the Alamgir himself wanted to witness the punishment being meted out to Sambhaji. When Asad Khan heard of it, he confronted Aurangzeb, 'Jahanpanah, you have yourself proclaimed that Sambha is but an ordinary criminal. Why should you honour him with your presence then?'

The Badshah did not react. His palanquin moved on towards the river bank.

## 19

The evening sun was about to sink behind the horizon. There was silence everywhere. A red-wattled lapwing suddenly shrieked and flew over the river. Sambhaji stood in shackles on the bank. His skin, despite a myriad of cuts, wounds and bruises, glowed in the evening sun. He could not see but he stood straight, his head held high.

It was getting dark now. Lanterns and torches lit the camp at various places. In the light of the torches, standing on the brink of death, Sambhaji's face shone with a strange radiance. Aurangzeb stepped forward slowly. Five men stood near the prisoner, each holding in their hands a small yet extremely sharp jamdaad and an axe. As soon as the Badshah glanced at them, two men stepped forward. As was customary, they began putting a hood over Sambhaji's head.

Aurangzeb shouted, 'You fools! He is blind. Where is the need for that hood?'



They threw away the hood. Aurangzeb stood near the pole to which Sambhaji was tied. He looked at his prisoner with a mixture of arrogance and glee. This was the man who had forced him to remove his crown. He had made Aurangzeb roam the Deccan like a madman, bearing insults and failures. At long last, the adamant traitor was in his clutches.

Aurangzeb said to Sambhaji, ‘Sambha, you sinner! You troubled me ten times more than your father did. You didn’t agree to a single wish of mine. I did not cut off your tongue, hoping to hear words of penitence from you. But your arrogant legs refuse to shiver with fear. Your queen continues to rule from Raigad. She does not come running here with the keys to the forts and begging for your life. Like the Sahyadris, the two of you are adamant and unyielding. Tell me, why should I keep you alive anymore?’

Sambhaji stood very still. He was beyond fear now, of death or anything else. Prison, the torture, the insults—it all seemed trivial now. At this moment, all he did was to pray to Jagadamba, Jagadeeshwar and Shivaji Raje.

The Badshah said, literally whispering into his ears, ‘Sambha, you son of a kafir! You have tormented me for eight years. So what is wrong with my wish to praise you for your valour, and keep you a prisoner for life? I am giving you one more chance. Tell me where your treasures are hidden and give me the names of the traitors!’

The Badshah’s words had no effect on Sambhaji. Aurangzeb said, ‘It was with Allah’s blessings that you were caught by one of my sardars who came from the Deccan. Otherwise, you are like a free bird of the jungle, like the wind in the forest—impossible to catch. I will not make the mistake of letting you go alive. If I do that, you will surely find a way to destroy me. That is something you know and I know too!’

Aurangzeb turned to look at the men holding the jamdaads and axes. The sharp edges of the weapons glinted in the rays of the dying sun. Raje mumbled ‘Jagadamba, Jagadamba’ in a soft voice. Memories flashed by. The sea waves ... he had learnt to swim sitting on his father’s shoulders ... the nine-year-old boy who had stood glaring at the Mughal Emperor in the Agra court ... the young Yesu at Shringarpur ... hundreds of his men who had sacrificed their lives to protect the Swaraj ... the people and animals who had died in the famine, yet struggled to live till their last breath ... the great war they had waged for eight long years ... Sambhaji recalled each and every moment of his life.

The Badshah growled once more. He dismissed the soldiers holding the weapons and gestured to a group of men who wore iron claws. At his glance, the men came forward. Two of them approached Sambhaji. One of them stood behind him, the other facing him. From the nape of his neck to the base of his spine and from his throat to his stomach, the men ripped his skin with their claws as the trumpets and horns started blowing. The men shouted ‘Deen, Deen!’ Skin peeled off Sambhaji’s back, neck, chest and stomach. His whole body was a bloodied mess.

But Sambhaji did not allow his voice to be heard by anyone present. He did not scream or shout. Clenching his teeth, he bore the intense and almost unbearable pain. His body, now red with blood, trembled from head to toe. Like the milk which pools at the base of the Shiva Linga during worship, his blood gathered at his feet. Aurangzeb laughed hysterically, seeing Sambhaji’s body now peeled the way a butcher skins a goat.

After the two men had finished their job, Aurangzeb gave the signal to the men holding the weapons. The men shivered for a moment. But they knew they had no choice but to carry out the orders of the Badshah. One of them aimed his axe at Sambhaji’s neck while the other pierced his back. Soon Sambhaji was decapitated.

The khojas presented his head to the Badshah on a tray. Lifting it with his hands, while warm blood flowed down his arms and stained his beard, Aurangzeb smiled. He recalled how he had similarly held his brother Dara’s head many years back.

Aurangzeb said, handing the head to Asad Khan, ‘Impale this head on a spear and take it around the villages of the Deccan. Let them know that as long as Aurangzeb is alive, another Sambha will not dare to be born.’

Aurangzeb glanced at the men once more. They now attacked Sambhaji’s body, cutting it into pieces. The Badshah ordered the executioners to throw the dismembered body away. Some of the pieces fell in the river, some on the rocky banks. For a moment it seemed that the Bhima shivered with grief. The distant Sahyadri seemed to be hiding its face in the all-enveloping darkness.

Aurangzeb felt that he had achieved an almost impossible task. He had finally eliminated his arch enemy—the one who had tortured him for years on end. He had made lakhs of his men suffer in the Deccan, on the battlefield and outside it, many thousands dying of plague and hunger.

A tired Aurangzeb stood at the banks of the Bhima, looking at the flowing waters. He signalled to his men to start the celebrations. A hundred horns and trumpets blew, announcing the death of Sambhaji and the victory of the Emperor. The camp danced with joy, singing, 'Sambha is dead!' It was the darkest new moon night of the year.

The Emperor looked into the waters, not sure of what he was seeing. Fear gripped him at times. He would peer into the river again and again to be sure Sambhaji was not standing there, alive and whole. But the celebrations were in full swing. There was no place for any doubt now. Sambha was finally gone. The son of the kafir was dead!

The Badshah laughed aloud. What he had achieved was almost unbelievable! But for the first time, victory frightened him. He was restless. If Sambha was really dead, who was he to fight against now?

'Badshah Salamat ... let us go!' The shouts of his men broke his reverie. Shahbuddin Khan, Ruhullah Khan, and many other sardars were rushing towards the river. They were eager to congratulate their Lord and master. 'Hazrat, the entire camp is waiting to congratulate you.'

'The Maratha zamindars and watandars are all waiting for you. Meet them,' Hasan Ali Khan requested.

'Why should I meet those Marathas? They are greedy dogs who have only come here for their share.'

'But Jahanpanah ...'

'Don't bother about those fools. Even if we chase them out today, they will come back like dogs tomorrow, licking my feet.'

'Hazrat, the soldiers have one more request. They have not seen you wearing your crown for years now. You had taken an oath that you would not wear it again till you kill Sambha. It has been five years. We have a new crown, specially made for you and studded with jewels and diamonds, which cost nearly half a crore hons.'

'What is the need for all this?' Aurangzeb asked, a little irritated.

'To celebrate your daring act. You have finished off a sinner, an enemy. It is a great achievement!'

Aurangzeb was fed up of the praise he was receiving. He was quiet for a few moments. Should he tell the truth? Then, indifferent to the presence of the others, he let the tears flow down his cheeks into his white beard. He said, his voice low and sad, 'You fools! What are you celebrating? The killer is dead and the one who died has become immortal!'

The following day, villages around the banks of the Bhima wore a sad, desolate look. A strange and fearful silence enveloped them. The Mughal camp slept through the day, dozing off after having celebrated the previous night with dance and music, which was normally not allowed by the Badshah.

In the village of Vadu, a few people had heard of Sambhaji's cruel murder. It was one of the villages which had been destroyed by the Mughal troops. They had looted the homes of the ryots and burnt their fields. A few men of Vadu had launched a daring attack on the Mughal troops, thus angering Ruhullah Khan who sent his men to the village. The soldiers dragged men and women from their homes and beat them black and blue. Many suffered grievous injuries, but they had no one to complain to. They lay in their homes, nursing their wounds.

It was afternoon. A washerman's wife, Jana, took a load of clothes from the village headman Damaji Patil's house and walked towards the river bank. Jana stood near the confluence of Indrayani and Bhima. She could see the fires of the Mughal camp on the other side. She had asked her father once to get her married to someone in Pachad. 'Why so far away?' he asked. She answered, 'Well, one day I may get a chance to wash Sambhaji and Shivaji's clothes. And I would feel blessed.'

But Jana was destined to stay in Vadu. As she washed the clothes that afternoon, one of the village goatherds was sitting near the bank. She was rinsing a dhoti when she noticed a strange rope-like thing was stuck to it. Jana said disgustedly, 'Looks like some dead animal.'

The goatherd said, 'Jana, it is not the intestine of an animal. It belongs to a human being ...'

'What?'

'Don't you know? Last night, the Badshah killed Shivaji's son Shambhu Raje on the banks of the Bhima. He butchered him like an animal. They threw the pieces in the water. Don't touch it! The orders are strict.'

Jana turned and ran back to the village, stopping only at the gates of the Patil's house. Seeing her flushed face, the Patil's wife asked, 'What happened?'

‘I am surprised how our men sitting here and twirling their moustaches do not feel ashamed that pieces of Shambhu Raje’s body are floating in the river there.’ The news spread through the village like wildfire. No one knew what to do. The villagers waited for Damaji Patil to return that evening, worried and teary-eyed.

‘Shivaji Maharaj and his son have done so much for us. We cannot allow this!’

Damaji Patil said, ‘What to do? We are surrounded by nearly three lakh Mughal soldiers. Our men and boys were beaten up badly by them. The firmaan is that no one should touch the body.’

It was decided that it was best to lie low. But Jana the washerwoman could not sleep. She broached the topic again that night while serving dinner at the Patil’s house. The Patil was scared of the Mughals and did not know what to do.

Jana went to the village square and engaged the men there.

She suggested, ‘If we gather Shambhu Raje’s body and burn it here, what is the worst that can happen? At the most they will burn our village. It is our tradition to burn a body left unattended. And this is none other than Shivaji’s son. Are our men going to sit here, wearing bangles like women and doing nothing?’

The men were roused now. They all clamoured to go to the river bank. It was pitch dark outside. Damaji Patil threatened them, ‘You will regret this when the Badshah destroys your homes.’

But even his wife took Jana’s side, saying, ‘Are we cruel and ungrateful enough to allow Sambhaji’s body to be eaten by vultures? Why were we born at all if we cannot even do this? You can sit here taking care of the village and the house. We are going!’

The women marched ahead. The men had no choice but to follow them. The Mughal camp was silent. The soldiers had celebrated till they were weary to the bone and were sleeping like the dead. The villagers picked up every piece of Sambhaji’s body that they could find.

Then they came back to the village. The boys ran to collect whatever wood they could get their hands on. The preparations for the funeral began. There was only one question yet to be resolved: where were they to light the pyre?

Damaji Patil was willing to offer a plot of land but it was a mile away. Then Govind the sweeper said, ‘Here, you can use my land. Burn

Sambhaji's body there. The rest of you till the soil. You need your land. We are sweepers, and we have no need for any land. If tomorrow the Badshah's men come after us, we can go away.'

It was important to carry out the last rites very quickly. They were afraid that they may be attacked at any moment if the Mughals came to know what they were doing. The local priest had made the necessary arrangements. Soon, the pyre was burning. The flames burned tall and the smoke reached the sky.

The villagers could not hold their tears back now. The womenfolk wailed loudly, hugging each other. By dawn the fire had burnt out. Taking Raje's warm ashes, the villagers came to the banks of Bhima. Soon, the ashes floated in the flowing waters.

The sky was growing bright now. Birds had started chirping. The men and women of Vadu looked at each other with pride. The satisfaction of having done a brave deed glowed on their faces. The village priest stood on the river bank, his hands folded in obeisance, and said,

'Villagers, it must be owing to your good deeds that you were blessed to have Sambhaji with you in his final moments. The Indrayani flows here. It was the Indrayani which resurrected Tukaram's Abhangs without any damage. Who knows, one day we may see Sambhaji resurrected here! It has to happen ... if not today, a few years or centuries later. Truth can never be buried forever. When people come to know the truth, this Vadu will be a holy place, just as Alandi or Dehu. The whole world will rush here for a glimpse of the man who sacrificed his life to protect his country, his religion and his land, the king who died a hero's death!'