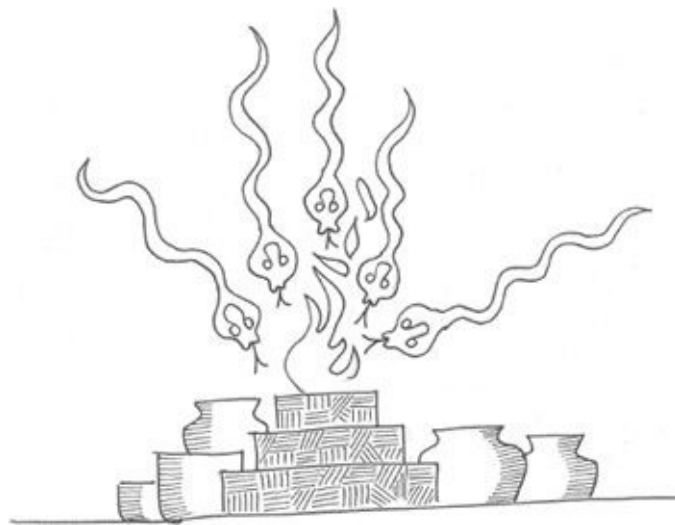


Soon a fire blazed in the centre of Hastina-puri and a plume of black smoke rose to the sky. Around the altar sat hundreds of priests pouring spoonfuls of ghee to stoke the flames. They chanted strange magical hymns and invoked invisible forces that dragged the Nagas out of their subterranean homes into the pit of fire. Hastina-puri saw swarms of wriggling serpents in the skies being drawn towards the sacrificial hall. The air was filled with the heart-wrenching cries of snakes being roasted alive. Some people were filled with pity, and cried, 'This is a mindless massacre.' Others screamed in righteous indignation, 'Serves them right for killing our king.'



Then, from the horizon a youth shouted, 'Stop, king! This is adharma.'

'How dare you accuse me of adharma,' roared Janamejaya. 'Who are you?'

'I am Astika, nephew of Vasuki, king of the Nagas.'

'No wonder you want to save the Nagas. You are one of them!' said the king, his tone accusative.

'My father was the Rishi Jaratkaru, a Manava like you. My mother was a Naga. I am you and your enemy, human and serpent. I take no sides. Listen to what I have to say, otherwise you will deny peace to all your descendants.'

'Speak,' said the king.