

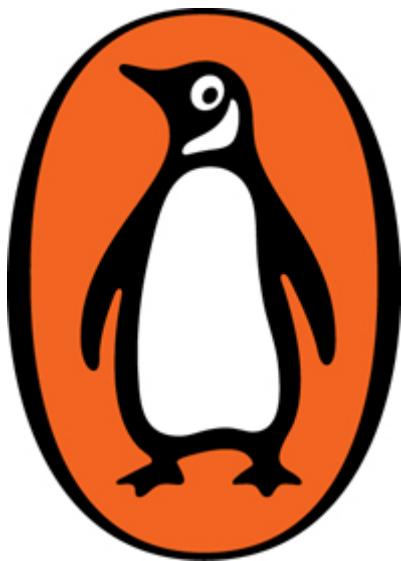


THE HIDDEN HINDU

BOOK 1 OF THE TRILOGY

‘An unputdownable work where timeless Hindu mythology meets science fiction’ **ANAND NEELAKANTAN**

AKSHAT GUPTA



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THE HIDDEN HINDU

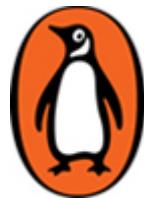
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Memory of the Unborn

Year 2041

There was an eerie silence in the room. It seemed like everything had come to a halt. The space between the empty walls of the room was filled with the sound of their breath. Before Mrs Batra could ask Prithvi what was bothering him, he turned around and, in a strong voice, said, 'I have seen it all myself in 2020 and so I know that there has not been anyone like him before, nor will there ever be. He is the divine truth, an undefeated challenge to the gods of death and destruction.'

'How can that be? You are saying that you have seen things from before you were even born? That's impossible!' said the agitated seventy-four-year-old Mrs Batra. She was bewildered as to how a boy who was around twenty years old in 2041 could have seen things from 2020.

'You are right. I wasn't born then, yet I was present in that facility on Ross Island in more than one way. I remember everything as clearly as if I am still there, witnessing it all happening right in front of my eyes,' replied Prithvi.

Looking at Prithvi, Mrs Batra spoke again, 'I have witnessed many incredible events and mysterious things in the last few years, things that science does not have an answer to. So I am compelled to believe that there are truths and mysteries that an average human mind like mine cannot process.' With tears rolling down her cheeks, she continued, 'I wanted to live a normal life and die silently,

like every average person. I almost got a satisfactory death in 2020. Things were good then. I wish I had died peacefully then, but everything changed.' Mrs Batra took a deep breath and tried to contain herself. Prithvi silently stood there, giving her time. After a long pause, she said 'Neither did I want to be part of any of that then, nor do I want to be a part of any of this now. Why are you here?'

'Because I am still searching for him and you are the last person to have seen him,' responded Prithvi with hopeful eyes. Mrs Batra looked into Prithvi's eyes and said, 'I lost everything in that fateful mission and yet, I don't know how or why. Yes, I have seen him. But I still don't know who he was. You were there on the island, you said. Tell me what happened on that island in 2020. You said you are searching for him. He was also there on the island back then. You must know who he was. What do you know about him? Tell me everything,' insisted Mrs Batra.

Prithvi stared at Mrs Batra for a while, and then eventually asked, 'Will you tell me everything that you know if I answer your questions?'

'I promise, I'll not hide anything . . . just tell me what happened in 2020. It changed my death. I don't want to die not knowing why all this happened to me and why I was chosen.'

Now Prithvi was looking into the old, hopeful eyes of Mrs Batra looking back at him. He took a deep breath and started to narrate . . .



Chapter 1

Unidentified Journey

It was one of those rare days during summer when the sun didn't shine at its brightest. The blue sky and the early morning breeze were refreshing. The sound of a chopper was enough to break the silence of the surroundings. In this picture-perfect scenario lay a man in the helicopter, unconscious and oblivious. Four well-built gunmen had set their eyes on him, as if they had been waiting since eternity for the man to open his eyes. The man's face was painted white and he had an unevenly grown beard and moustache. His long, black, dishevelled hair added to his mysterious look. For a forty-year-old, he appeared quite young. His face was ethereally carved, his skin so clear and luminous that it formed an aura of beauty around him. His body showed signs of motion to the sound of the helicopter's thrust. And at times, when he moved, his body shed ashes into the air. His unconsciousness didn't stop people around him from wondering who he was. This man aroused curiosity and awe in everyone who saw him.

The pilot announced, '11.6755 degree North, 92.7626 degree East; Landing at Ross Island in three minutes.' Ross Island happened to be the most aesthetic piece of land in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, about 2 km east of Port

Blair. It beckoned one to take in the serenity of nature's finest gifts with the inheritance of rare yet significant species. Adorning the island was a dome-shaped high-tech facility.

Built purely for the purpose of research on the isolated land, the magnificent structure could leave even the greatest sceptics awestruck. Equipped with the latest technology, the facility boasted state-of-the-art coastal and marine monitoring systems. Constructed using only glass, the facility exploited surface technology to its best. Each screen one touched started talking to them as if it were part of an advanced species, altering the temperature and atmospheric pressure around them, thus making life easier in ways unimagined.

As brilliant as it was in these aspects, it was even more so when it came to security. Motion sensor cameras were installed in each corner of the arched roof. No one was ever alone inside the dome. A digital eye accompanied people wherever they went.

Veerbhadra, a voluntarily retired former Indian army brigadier, left his station and walked straight towards the dome's lobby. As soon as he entered, he spotted the captive surrounded by four armed guards. They were dragging his handcuffed and blindfolded insentient body through the corridor. His bare feet continued to leave traces of ashes on the floor. He is 'The Man', thought Veerbhadra. The detainee was wearing minimal clothes; only a short and narrow loincloth covered his lower abdomen. His body was smeared with ashes. A rosary made of *rudraksha* seeds hung around his neck. Half of his matted hair was rolled up into a topknot and adorned with a rusted iron trident.

Veerbhadra had come to this place as the security chief with a team of twenty-one, including gunmen and guards.

He was there on a mission. Being the finest of the men that his cult possessed, he was summoned for various missions, confidential or public, by various organizations throughout the world. But this one was different from the others.

Veerbhadrā was 6 feet tall. He had lived well past the common life expectancy of forty years, a substantial part of it devoted to the army. His face was that of an average man, not particularly well-featured. His dusky skin, with his salt-and-pepper military haircut, added to his rough look. Some bruises and scars on both his hands, not very old, pointed to the battles he fought and their intensities. His hard muscular body was evident under his black jeans, white T-shirt and brown leather jacket. His eyes were masked by black aviator glares. He was always aware of his pistol, concealed at his waist inside the jacket, no matter what the situation at hand.

He ordered one of the guards to unmask the man and free his hands. He took off his glares. A scar parallel to his right eye was now in view and his jet-black eyes were set upon the man before him. Veerbhadrā stood amazed for a moment.

Veerbhadrā and his boss had been waiting for this man, though he didn't know precisely why. All he knew was that the man they were searching for had been found and was to be interrogated. Interrogated about what, he didn't know, but was sure that it was something serious. His impatience was at its peak; he wanted to know the whole story. He deserved to stand in the innermost circle. If not, why had he been summoned at all?

He had worked with the most powerful of men and knew their ways well. However, his new high command was strange. He had been anxious about everything, but still managed to keep it a big secret.

'VeerbhadrA!' He nearly jumped when his name echoed in a familiar voice in the lobby. It was Dr Srinivasan, his boss. 'Yes sir,' he replied.

The man VeerbhadrA answered to was 4 feet and 8 inches tall, about sixty-five years old. His lips were dark brownish, which revealed that he was a chronic smoker. His white hair covered only part of his scalp. Another aspect that revealed his age was his dowdy appearance. Dr Srinivasan had donned a brown matte suit with a white shirt beneath it. A broad red tie hung loose from his collar. He also wore obsolete black square-framed glasses over his eyes, with a string that hung low from the two edges and went around his neck.

Dr Srinivasan's appearance was comical, but his eyes brimmed with discipline. His conduct could command the attention of even the topmost officials. He was a boss by default. He could give everyone a sense of being a subordinate in his presence. He was funny only as long as he was quiet. It could be easily concluded that he was a no-nonsense man and highly dedicated to his work.

Dr Srinivasan was followed by another man, Dr Batra. He introduced Dr Batra to VeerbhadrA and vice versa. They shook hands. Dr Batra was Dr Srinivasan's colleague, or so it seemed to VeerbhadrA.

VeerbhadrA took him to be a not-so-jovial kind of man. He wore a grumpy look and seemed infuriated. He looked even more educated than Dr Srinivasan. His eyes were those of an intellectual.

Dr Batra was a tall, fair man of around fifty years of age and belonged to the Sikh community. He had brown eyes and a chubby face. He wore a formal maroon shirt and black trousers that went well with his black leather shoes. Most of the fat in his body was accumulated around his abdomen.

His beard and moustache were trimmed stylishly. He wore a metallic *kada* (bangle) on his right wrist and a classic watch with Roman numerals on the left.

'Is he the one?' asked Dr Srinivasan in his heavy voice and south Indian accent.

'Aaunu, sir,' replied Veerbhadrā in Telegu and rectified it immediately. 'I mean, yes, sir.'

'So who are we waiting for? Take him to the interrogation room.'

The guards followed Veerbhadrā, dragging the captive and holding their positions around him. They entered an L-shaped corridor. Dr Srinivasan walked straight ahead and Veerbhadrā followed him. The passage was sandwiched between a plain wall on the left and a few doors on the right with a dead end ahead, preceded by a sharp left. They reached the dead end of the wall, guarded by two men.

Veerbhadrā was still unaware what this man was being interrogated about.

The room that they entered was about 12 feet high and done up in the same posh and ritzy decor as the rest of the dome. A chair crafted out of stainless steel, with a footrest affixed to it, iron rods serving as its backrest, a black leather seat and handcuffs integrated into the armrests, happened to be the only furniture in the room. It was a laboratory, or so it seemed. Surrounding the chair were a number of polished wooden tables. Each table had a computer screen on it.

The facility also had a projector hanging from the ceiling and a white screen was nailed to the wall opposite the projector. The captive would sit in the centre and the interrogator would debrief him, digging out answers by hook or by crook.

The man was dragged, pushed into the central seat and tied to it by the guards using the available provisions. His waist, head and legs were fastened to the chair using leather belts. His fingers were now the only movable parts of his body.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadrā was sitting silently observing the cameras. He could sense that not only the captive, but everyone else present in the room was also being watched.

It was around 11 a.m. when the man slowly started regaining consciousness. His eyes were still closed but he could feel that someone was cleaning the white paint on his face using wet tissues. He overheard someone talking about him. The conversation was about his identity as an Aghori. 'He looks so weird. What kind of an unpleasing look is this?' exclaimed a girl. 'I know who he is,' replied a confident male voice. 'Before introducing this weirdo . . . first things first . . . who are you?' asked the girl.

'Abhilash,' the man replied instantly.

'And how do you know him?' the girl asked.

'I don't know him or who he is. I know what he is. He is an Aghori.'

'Aghori?' asked the girl in surprise, as if she had heard the word for the first time.

'Aghori. The word in itself is enough to send shivers down the spine. There are stories about Aghoris in each and every hamlet of India and Nepal. It is said that they possess unlimited powers over nature, can conquer death, materialize objects, eat human flesh and faeces and live in extreme impurity, sometimes totally naked.'

'Aghoris even indulge in macabre practices like mating with corpses in their urge to obliterate any duality even between pure and impure and to achieve the non-dual state of mind. They obsessively indulge in the ugly, the impure,

and in social taboos in the process of their self-discovery. They drink alcohol, take drugs and eat meat. Nothing is considered taboo. But the thing that makes their ancient traditions bizarre is that their temples are cremation grounds. Their clothing comes from the dead, firewood from the funeral pyres and food from the river. When a person is cremated, they coat themselves in the ashes of the dead and meditate on the dead. Aghoris survive by begging with bowls made from human skulls. Still, the most shocking aspect of the Aghori life remains their cannibalism. The corpses, which may either be pulled from a river (like the Ganga) or obtained from cremation grounds, are consumed both raw and cooked on an open flame, as the Aghoris believe that what others consider a “dead man” is, in fact, nothing but natural matter devoid of the life force it once contained. Therefore, while for ordinary folks cannibalism may be seen as primitive, barbaric and unclean, for Aghoris, it's being both resourceful and subverting the common stereotypes placed on such taboos into a spiritual ascertainment that indeed, nothing is profane or separate from God, who is hailed to be all and in all. In fact, the Aghoris see it as a scientific approach towards trying to discover how matter converts from one form to another.

‘One may find many Aghoris walking the streets of northern India with their skull cups. They let their hair grow to great lengths without ever bothering about the need to cut it. They follow the pure, non-discriminatory path of using the body to conquer fear and prejudices, and to achieve the ultimate state of non-duality. Now, for centuries, they have been mesmerizing people around the globe with their eerie and mysterious lifestyle.

‘While tracing the history of Aghoris, one may find that the very first Aghori, who laid down the foundation of the

lives of future Aghoris, was Kina Ram. According to urban legend, he lived up to 150 years and died during the second half of the eighteenth century.

'Aghoris believe that Shiva is absolute and omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. According to them, whatever happens in this universe happens because of Shiva. Among the female deities, Kali is the most sacred form for them.'

Another voice intervened in the conversation. This time, the voice was too close to the man. It was Dr Batra joining the conversation, saying, 'Aghoris claim that they have the cure for the deadliest of diseases that we have today, even AIDS and cancer. These medicines, which they refer to as "Human oils", are collected from the burning pyre after a dead body is cremated. Although they have not been tested scientifically, according to Aghoris, they are highly effective.' The captive could feel that Dr Batra, while shedding the light of his knowledge on Aghoris, was injecting a syringe into his hand.

'From snow-clad mountains and hot deserts to tiger-infested jungles, Aghoris are known to live in places where no other human beings are known to survive.'

Abhilash took it further, 'For Aghoris, nothing is impure or nasty or filthy. According to them, if you are able to concentrate on God even while doing the most perverted acts, then you reach unison with God. That would take the guts out of the majority of the population: to meditate sitting on a corpse in a cemetery.'

'Aghoris believe that everyone is born an Aghori. A newborn child doesn't distinguish between his faeces, dirt and toys and plays with everything. It starts distinguishing among them only after its parents and society tell it to do so. As the child grows up and makes choices on a

materialistic basis, only then does she or he lose the traits of an Aghori.

'They believe having sex in the midst of dead bodies gives rise to supernatural powers. The women partners are also smeared in the ashes of the dead and the sexual act takes place while drums are beaten and mantras chanted. They make sure that no women are forced to have sex with them and also that the women are menstruating while the act goes on. Now, when you practise cannibalism in a city like Varanasi, where even eating non-vegetarian food is still frowned upon, you know you bring trouble upon yourself. But surprisingly, even after consuming human meat in public, no particular action is taken against them. This might be because they eat dead human flesh and do not kill anyone to eat them. Pure Aghoris are innocent, lovely, ever-kind, merciful and bless you whenever you seek them out. They spend most of their time in meditation, chanting "Om Namah Sivaya".'

The word 'Om' echoed in the man's ears and he slowly opened his eyes.



Chapter 2

Inconclusive Inception

The door slid open and a lady walked in. She introduced herself to the team as Dr Shahista. She was a prominent psychiatrist who had been awarded and applauded for her significant work in the field of hypnotism and had received funding for her research. She was appointed by and for the government as and when needed.

She had been called from Pune, Maharashtra, her home town. She was in her mid-forties. Five-and-a-half feet tall, Dr Shahista was beautiful, fair-complexioned and elegant. She bore honour and pride in her personality and an aura of optimism surrounded her. Copper-brown hair hung freely past her waist. She never forgot to wear an amiable smile. Apart from that, she wore a black embroidered kurti, a cream Patiala salwar, a black printed dupatta across her shoulders (a traditional Indian ensemble) and a pair of traditional *jootiyaan* (handcrafted leather shoes).

God has not seen it fit to distribute evenly the gifts of beauty and brains. However, Dr Shahista possessed both. *Cap-a-pie*, she was adorned with varying jewel stones worn for all sorts of peace and fulfilment. She had a *tabeez* (an amulet or locket containing holy verses) fastened on her left bicep, two golden bangles on the other hand, a thin golden

chain around her neck and a few rings with embedded stones affixed on her fingers.

The man was still tied to the same chair, but the faces around him were none he had seen before. The dull silhouette of each person seated behind the encircling tables was all that he could make out, apart from an intense fog farther away, starting from the tip of his nose. He was subconsciously awake.

He was not mentally present because of a concentrated narcotic drug that he had been compelled to take down his nostrils. His vision blurred as he tried to regain his senses.

After meeting her colleagues, Dr Shahista took over and sat right in front of the captive. From the way he flinched before his eyes got fully accustomed to the light, it was evident that the man had stayed in the dark for quite a long time. He saw her and suddenly found that she was staring him in the eyes. Her eyes were intense and deep, a hue of sea blue. They seemed to possess the power of hypnotism. Something about this man told her that he also held a secret of his own. At the same time, she realized that even when the man had been given the highest degree of drugs, no wave of fear or worry once crossed his face. He seemed like a man of courage and confidence.

All said and done, the interrogation was now to commence.

Before she could say anything, in an unperturbed tone and gesture, the man intervened and said, 'Om Shastri', introducing himself. Dr Shahista wouldn't have been dismayed had this man tried to free himself and scream, which was quite routine for Shahista. However, his calmness left her confused and she looked at Dr Srinivasan. The man also turned his head in the direction where Shahista's eyes were stuck. The Aghori had to peep a little farther to catch a

clearer glimpse of Dr Srinivasan. As soon as he did that, his eyes widened and he almost screamed, 'Chinna?' All the heads turned towards the sound, astonished. 'What?' asked Dr Batra in his throaty voice, confused.

The man continued looking at Dr Srinivasan as if he was seeing him after a very long time.

Dr Srinivasan was offended; he felt he was being mocked.

Veerbhadrappa too was astonished by the incident. He had never met a man like this.

All of a sudden, a palm with a piece of cotton covered Om Shastri's nose from behind. The smell from the cotton was nauseating.

He was falling into a well of silence. No thoughts, no feelings, all voices muted . . . The man did not realize that he was being hypnotized.

'Who are you?' Dr Shahista asked the captive.

'Om Shastri,' he replied in a state of trance. 'We know that, Mr Shastri,' Dr Shahista affirmed. 'Tell us what we don't know,' she continued. 'You don't know anything,' murmured Om Shastri.

'Yes, Mr Shastri. We don't know things, which is why you are here, but the one thing that we know for sure is that this isn't your real name.'

'What is your real name?' repeated Dr Shahista. 'I don't remember,' said Om Shastri in a feeble voice.

An unusual answer from a hypnotized person, thought Dr Shahista.

Sitting on one of the chairs, with a mythological book in his hands, Abhilash said, 'Liar.'

'He cannot lie,' Dr Batra countered. 'He has been injected with the narco analysis drugs.' Dr Batra was clearly frustrated.

'Narco!' said Abhilash like it was French to a Greek and continued looking at Dr Batra for a reply.

'It's a truth serum. One cannot lie after taking it,' said Dr Batra curtly, showing no interest in the explanation.

Dr Tej Batra was a sincere and mature person. He was driven only by logic and intelligence. A bit quick-tempered, Dr Batra was at times a little unpredictable. Rarely did situations lift his mood and make him happy.

'And above that, he is hypnotized,' intruded Dr Shahista, in firm agreement with Dr Batra.

Both of them looked at Abhilash, expecting surrender. Abhilash shrugged and whispered, 'There are things beyond medical science,' and continued reading his book.

Abhilash had spent the thirty years of his life with his head in Hindu mythology books, so his knowledge on the subject was boundless. Being a descendant of a Brahmin family of Raj Purohits (administrative priests) in a small town called Ambikapur, his family was treated like gods, driven by people's superstitious beliefs. Honoured with the highest forms of respect and prestige, he had a massive ego that reflected in his attitude. Criticizing others for their mistakes was in his blood.

He was 5 feet and 8 inches tall, dark-complexioned with a plump physique. He was wearing an ill-fitting white kurta paired with blue jeans, unaware of his belly showing.

Abhilash was a staunch believer in myths and superstitions and his appearance proved it. He had put on various rings with various stones for various purposes. He never failed to give his advice on which stone to trust in a particular problem, even if he hadn't been asked for it. A *raksha sootra* (protective strand of cotton) was tied to his left wrist, his neck carried a rudraksha (the seed of a plant believed to be a shield against bad luck and ill health)

string. His forehead had a U-shaped sandalwood tilak traced on it and he wore Kolhapuri chappals (slippers) on his feet. He carried an old-fashioned jute bag on one of his shoulders and it contained a few books on Hindu mantras (verses).

'Tell us whatever you remember, Mr Shastri,' said Shahista, coming back to the point.

Om Shastri's face reflected a myriad of expressions—smiling, calm, tense and afraid—rapidly changing as he spoke.

'I remember Banda Bahadur,' Om Shastri uttered with his eyes closed.

Dr Batra looked surprised by that name, as if he too knew Banda Bahadur.

'Who is he?' Abhilash demanded. 'My general,' said Shastri. 'Is he also a part of your team?'

'Yes.'

'Where is he now?'

'He is dead.'

'How did he die?'

'He was killed.'

'Who killed him?'

'Farukh Siyar did.'

'Who else can you recall?'

'Sanjay !'

'Who Sanjay? Sanjay Dutt? Sanjay Suri? Or Sanjay Leela Bhansali?' retorted Abhilash in a sarcastic tone.

The girl who had questioned Abhilash about the Aghori guffawed. LSD: Lisa Samuel D'Costa. A professional hacker, LSD was involved in frequent online forgery and bank account seizures. At the young age of 25 she had caught the attention of the Indian Cyber Cell, but she wasn't in the least bothered about that. She had all the expertise without a degree. LSD was a beautiful girl, raw and unpolished in

her mannerisms, smart and intelligent in her work. She had an offhanded outlook towards everything but her job.

'Could be Sanjay Manjrekar,' LSD chuckled.

LSD played it fast and loose. Her tongue was seldom in her power. She had a face anyone could read instantly and know her random thoughts. LSD had come to this place from a small town, which had a significant impact on her language being accented but unimpressive.

She had black, wavy hair. Her eyes were almond brown. She wore a floral white dress with lots of accessories and a bold black frame, with her bright, high heels showing off her toned legs. She'd put on a couple of contrast bands and bracelets around her wrists and an axe pendant hung around her neck. 'Sanjay! The son of Gavalgan,' said Om Shastri.

'And how do you know him?' Shahista asked.

'Sanjay was the one who guided Dhritarashtra, king of Hastinapur, during the war,' Om replied.

'I met him at that time as I was the prime minister of Hastinapur and my name was Vidur,' he continued.

Abhilash at once started pondering over the names and spoke slowly as he did so.

'I've heard this name before.'

'Anyway,' Shahista wanted to proceed.

'You don't get it. He is claiming to be alive during the time of the Mahabharata,' Abhilash retorted.

'Do you want me to believe in all his mythological nonsense?'

'This isn't nonsense . . . you-'

Before Abhilash could complete his statement, Shahista threw another question on Om.

'What other names do you have, Mr Shastri?'

'Sushen,' Om Shastri replied as a smile crossed his face.

'What did you do as him?' Shahista emphasized.

'I worked as a vaidya (a person who makes herbal medicines and cures the diseases of common people).'

'Is that it or did you use any other names?' Shahista probed. 'I was also Vishnu Gupt once,' he replied.

Shahista rolled her eyes at yet another name and threw her arms in the air.

'And what did you do as this Vishnu Gupt?' she asked with a bewildered expression.

Om Shastri started mumbling something that everyone found hard to comprehend.

व्याघ्रीव तष्ठतजिरा परतिर्जयनृती
रोगाश्च शत्रव इव प्रहरनृत देहम्।
आयुः परस्विवतभिन्नघटादविमृभः
लोकसूतथाप्यहतिमाचरतीतचित्तिरम्॥



Chapter 3

Disconnected Disclosure

'I don't understand what this man is saying!' shouted Shahista, clearly frustrated.

Om Shastri was silent for a moment and then, without warning, woke up from his narcotic stupor. His sudden return to consciousness shocked the team members, who thought they had ample time to deal with him. Shahista, who was sitting closest to Om Shastri, got alarmed and, while trying to distance herself from him, fell off the chair in surprise. All the others in the room stiffened. Shahista's rational mind argued that this was impossible: *It's not been even an hour. How did he get conscious?* Never in her experience of over three hundred patients had a man woken up from his hypnotism so abruptly, without any sign of physical disturbance.

Dr Batra was equally stunned and disoriented. His knowledge of medicines told him that the patient could not regain consciousness in less than eight hours of the injection, given the dose. It had not even been an hour since Om was injected. This defied all the norms ever studied and practised by Dr Batra. LSD was horrified too and was bad at hiding it. None of them had any clue what was going on.

Om Shastri was looking at them without trying to get free of the shackles that constrained him.

When he spoke, his tone was calm and peaceful. ‘Why have I been brought here? What do you people want?’ He seemed disappointed.

Dr Shahista didn’t respond to Om Shastri’s inquiry. She looked over to Dr Srinivasan across the room. Om also turned towards him.

‘You are here because there are some answers we need. What do we want? Nothing but the information you possess,’ said Dr Srinivasan in his bossy tone.

‘How much do you know about me?’ Om continued.

‘Well, Mr Shastri, not much for now. Just that Om Shastri’s not the real you, that you know someone called Banda Bahadur and Sanjay, and that you were Vidur and Vishnu Gupt: other fake names you used.’

Om Shastri shut his eyes tightly and a wave of pain and sorrow crossed his face. At this point, Dr Srinivasan, losing his cool, said in an authoritative tone, ‘I am Dr Srinivasan Rao, a retired scientist from the National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources. I am now leading this group.’

‘I know who you are,’ responded Om.

Dr Batra moved close to Om to inject him again.

Om tried resisting initially and let out a scream. ‘I am immune to midazolam, flunitrazepam, barbiturates and amobarbital. This won’t help you.’ These were Om’s last words before losing consciousness again. Om’s scream brought two guards running to hold him in place.

Dr Batra concealed his astonishment on hearing the names of the drugs that constituted the narcotic mixture and injected him once more. Om started feeling sleepy. Dr Shahista started in the direction of Om Shastri to get on

with hypnotizing him. She sat comfortably in front of him and stared him in the eye. Shahista's beautiful eyes had the magic and the power to hypnotize any person. She didn't blink at all and spoke in a soothing voice. When she touched Om Shastri on the shoulder, he felt limp and heavy. Dr Srinivasan registered these odd words in his mind, 'I know who you are'. *How*, Dr Srinivasan wondered. 'Tej, is he ready to be questioned again?' Dr Srinivasan inquired.

Dr Batra checked some readings in a device and said, 'Not yet, sir.'

Meanwhile, LSD approached other teammates, asking, 'What was he babbling?'

'Sa . . . nskrit,' said Parimal.

Parimal, aged 35, hailed from a village called Wardha in Maharashtra, where his father worked as a farmer. He was an introvert. He did his PhD in Indian history. His knowledge in his subject was immeasurable but he lacked the guts to put it forth confidently. The reason for his lack of confidence was his stammering, which had been his biggest hurdle in keeping up with others and so, he was often ignored. As a consequence of his silence, his presence and his absence were indistinguishable.

Parimal was two inches short of six feet, creamy-skinned, and handsome. He wore a checked brown shirt with a pair of black jeans and white sport shoes. He had coal-black eyes and hair in the same hue with some oil applied to it.

Parimal was denied the importance he desired in the team, owing to the fact that his questions and suggestions were considered naïve. 'Sanskrit! Who speaks Sanskrit in this century?' LSD remarked in frustration.

'He!' said Parimal, pointing towards Om Shastri.

'Yeah, but who in today's world has the time to understand his language?' wondered LSD.

'Me!' came the answer from Parimal again.

'Sushen!' said Abhilash to himself slowly.

'What?' asked LSD after overhearing Abhilash.

'Nothing,' said Abhilash, bringing himself back.

LSD insisted. 'No. I heard you repeat the name this guy said minutes ago.'

Abhilash replied, 'Sushen.'

'Yeah, that name. What is it? Tell me,' LSD insisted. Parimal too joined the conversation.

'Sushen is a very rarely used name. As per my knowledge, Sushen was the name of a medic in the Ramayana who saved Lakshman, the younger brother of Lord Ram, in the battle with Ravana, the king of Lanka, by suggesting a herb called *sanjeevani* which was found only in the Himalayas. Lord Hanuman was ordered by Lord Ram to bring *sanjeevani*, as advised by Sushen. Lord Hanuman, after reaching the Himalayas, could not make out the difference between *sanjeevani* and other herbs, and so he lifted the entire mountain and flew back to Kanyakumari with it to let Sushen himself make the choice.'

'Yes! I have seen the Hindu mythological picture of Hanuman flying with the mountain. Is that what you are referring to?'

'Yes! But I don't remember the mention of Sushen's end in the Ramayana,' said Abhilash.

'Everything is unusual about him. Not even close to anything I have witnessed before,' Dr Shahista said, still lost in thought.

She then turned to Dr Srinivasan and asked politely, 'Sir, we should at least clearly know what we are dealing with.'

Everyone looked at Srinivasan, expecting a fair answer.

'This is what you are here for,' retaliated their boss. 'So concentrate on your work and get more out of him to help

us understand what we are dealing with.' Dr Srinivasan glared at Shahista.

That was rude and Shahista didn't like it, as was evident from her expression. Everyone went back to the task at hand.

Parimal walked to Dr Batra and asked frantically, 'Dr Batra! A . . . a . . . are you a . . . a . . . alright?'

Dr Batra was clearly disturbed. He gathered himself and came up with, 'Huh? Yes? Yes.'

'We a . . . a . . . are not very well a . . . a . . . cquainted. But we a . . . are to work a . . . as a team here. You seem a bit disoriented. Is everything a . . . all right?' Parimal repeated in an anxious tone.

Dr Batra felt comforted by this kind gesture and whispered into Parimal's ears, 'This man woke up within an hour!'

'So?' Parimal was confused.

'How could he? That's not possible!' Dr Batra exclaimed with his eyes wide.

'Not possible? What do you mean? We a . . . all saw him wake up!' Parimal went on with his innocent queries.

'Exactly! That is what's bothering me, Parimal. A single dose of that drug takes a man down for four to five hours at the least. You know what? He didn't lose his consciousness after one dose! Then I increased it to twice the normal measure. He went dizzy for a while but was still awake. I gave him one more round. A dose of that kind is more than enough to kill a man. And he managed to regain his wits within an hour!' Dr Batra went on explaining.

'This is a question mark on my knowledge and calibre. I need to find out how he did that,' said the determined Dr Batra.

Whatever Dr Batra said didn't register on the radar of Parimal's brain and so he got out of it with, 'Did you tell this to Dr Sriniv . . . asan?'

'Yes, I did. Perhaps Dr Srinivasan knows things we aren't aware of. When Om Shastri saw Dr Srinivasan, he called by his nickname, Chinna!'

'How did he k . . . know it?' Parimal was shocked.

'That's the point. How on earth could he know it?'

'A man who knows Dr S . . . rinivasan's nick . . . name and claims he doesn't remember his own n . . . ame?'

'Are you on a mission?' Shahista was all ears again.

'Yes,' Om Shastri nodded.

Everyone's face went pale.

The deep lines on Dr Srinivasan's forehead revealed the nature of his thoughts.

LSD grew a bit tense thinking about interrogating a terrorist who was being given such importance that people who were the best in different walks of life had been brought together here, in this isolated facility. Dr Shahista was equally frightened for once.

'I knew it! He is a Muslim. He looks like one!' snapped the proud Abhilash. He had the habit of discriminating against people on the basis of caste and religion. Shahista chose to ignore him and went on.

'What is your mission?'

'Hide and be hidden.'

'Hide what?'

'My belongings.'

'Where do you secure it?'

'In my memories . . . and in a locker.'

'Who do you protect it for?'

'For this mankind,' Om said with a heavenly smile on his lips.

Without being questioned further, Om breathed, ‘No, I am not a terrorist.’

Shahista had lost her patience. She turned towards everyone else and discovered they were in the same boat, equally jolted. Dr Srinivasan was on the phone talking to someone. He saw Shahista’s face and hung up before snapping, ‘What happened?’

‘I didn’t put up a question and still he spoke! Who on earth asked him about being a terrorist?’ cried Shahista, clearly taken aback.

‘Lisa Samuel D’Costa,’ Om replied.

‘I was talking to Parimal about the possibility of him being a terrorist. But I wasn’t loud,’ admitted LSD.

Parimal nodded in agreement.

‘How come he heard you and not me?’ Shahista’s face grew serious with contemplation.

LSD didn’t know what to say, so she kept quiet for once.

It was already past noon when Om Shastri broke the spell yet again. Veerbhadrā looked at his watch and noted it was 1.45 p.m. He went outside the room to inspect the guards. Meanwhile, in the room, Om locked his eyes with the fear-stricken Dr Shahista and spoke to her like a father to his daughter: ‘You don’t have to do this to get your answers. I am in your custody. You may tackle me as you wish. Go ahead without terror on your face. I will not harm anyone. And I never did. Trust me, I’ll cooperate.’

Shahista was at a loss for words.

Dr Batra crossed the room towards Dr Srinivasan and said, ‘I need your permission to diagnose him, sir.’ He was more than agitated.

Dr Srinivasan didn’t take any initiative to help Dr Batra. He was preoccupied with his own work.

Shahista left Om and walked towards the group.

'Yes, Shahista?' inquired Dr Srinivasan on seeing her approach.

'Sir, I suggest we try interrogating him without the drugs and hypnotism for once,' Shahista pleaded.

Dr Batra seemed ridiculed by Shahista's request but chose to remain silent.

'We may do that. Are you to take the responsibility of authenticating his words? Is it ensured that only the truth is spoken?' the adamant Dr Srinivasan concluded.

'But this is not helping either,' Dr Shahista reasoned.

'Please let me diagnose him once, sir. I want a sample of his blood,' Dr Batra appealed.

'He is not a lab rat that you can research on, Tej. I cannot allow you that privilege,' was all Dr Batra got from his high command.

Dr Batra and Shahista looked at each other with an expression that said, 'We are in the same boat.'

With a deep sigh, Shahista said, 'Okay, sir. Then what do we have to do now?'

Dr Srinivasan's phone rang. He took it out from his pocket, saw the caller's identity, and grew a bit nervous.

'All of you take a short break and thereafter prepare for the next session,' said Dr Srinivasan in haste, before attending the call. He strode past them out of the room.

With Dr Srinivasan's departure came some relaxation in the atmosphere. A smile swept across LSD's face instantly.

Parimal looked in Abhilash's direction and then towards LSD. Dr Batra was still having a hard time without his answers and that was troubling him. Likewise, Dr Shahista had her gaze on Om Shastri, who was keenly observing the room around him and the people inside it. When he looked at Shahista, she turned away. That instant, the security chief, Veerbhadra, entered the room with two other guards.

He echoed in a heavy voice, 'Everyone! This way please,' and showed them the door with a wave of his hand. All of them took a couple of minutes to leave the room. Veerbhadra and Om Shastri were to be alone in the room for an hour.

The next room was occupied by the investigators. Dr Batra was speaking to his family in his native tongue. Parimal, LSD and Abhilash were sitting comfortably around a wooden table. Dr Shahista chose to be alone for the time being. She sat at another table, scribbling something in a diary.

Parimal was struggling with his words, LSD with her wires and Abhilash with his pride. They were engaged in a conversation, talking about their careers and themselves.

'Why don't you join us, Dr Shahista? Let's get to know each other a bit,' LSD invited.

'Sure! I'll be there in five minutes,' replied the congenial woman.

Since Shahista was senior to them, she knew all about them through their files. She had joined the crew knowing whom she would be working with, but not for how long. She came and sat on the empty seat beside Abhilash. As Dr Shahista got seated, Abhilash stood up and went to the other side, changing his seat with Parimal. Everyone noticed the discrimination and felt its sting, but no one said anything.

Dr Shahista was embarrassed.

Dr Batra was still on his phone.

'What's that diary all about?' asked LSD bluntly, pointing towards the diary in Shahista's hands.

'I am just keeping track of all the usual and unusual happenings of the interrogation. Proves to be beneficial for the case study later,' replied Shahista with her calm smile.

'Wh . . . at unusual ha . . . appenings?' Parimal inquired in his typical manner.

'You see, he doesn't ask the usual questions. When he wakes up, he asks worriedly about what and who we are and so on as if he already knew in his heart that he is going to be caught someday.'

'M . . . aybe he had experienced this before. M . . . aybe he knows wh . . . at we are looking for,' Parimal proposed.

'Even we aren't fortunate enough to know what we are looking for from him,' Shahista said in a disgusted tone.

'Wha . . . t other unusual tra . . . aits does he s . . . s . . . show?' Parimal stammered.

'He breaks the spell I cast upon him without any prior sign of breaking it. It's a swift process. As if he was normally sleeping. Snap! And he wakes up,' Shahista explained with a click of her fingers.

'Dr Ba . . . atra is also more than concerned a . . . about his a-a . . . bility to overcome the effect of his drugs, which usua . . . ally lasts several hours,' Parimal remarked.

'I personally dread Dr Batra's presence. Wonder why he is always infuriated and worked up!' admitted LSD.

'Dr Batra is a nice man. He is crawling alone through the shadows. That's all,' Shahista explained.

'Oh! Do you know him personally?' LSD kept on.

'Yes. We have worked together earlier.'

'So? What's troubling him?'

'He is not his usual self. Actually, he is a bit down in the dumps because his wife is on her deathbed. Though he is a renowned doctor, there is not much he can do about it. That's the reason for his disappointment,' said Shahista in an empathetic voice.

LSD criticized herself for not trying to understand a situation before forming an opinion about it. And at the

same time, she envied Shahista for being able to do the same thing so easily.

There was silence for a while as Shahista pondered over the mental agony which Dr Batra might be suffering.

A wise man comes out of a difficult time wiser than before. Dr Batra is a wise man indeed, thought Shahista.

'Parimal, what did Om Shastri say in Sanskrit?' asked Shahista, changing the subject.

Parimal replied, 'It was a sloka (verse). I didn't fully understand it, but I think he was talking about man's life shrinking with the smooth and speedy passage of time, and he wondered something. I couldn't take it in as he spoke it in a voice too weak to reach me. But if I could hear it once more, I could tell you the exact translation.'

'I can do that easily. I can make him repeat it,' informed Shahista confidently.

'We must record it all for the future. Shouldn't we?' suggested LSD.

'What! A . . . a aren't we recording it a . . . already?' Parimal's surprise was evident in his eyes.

At that moment, Dr Batra joined in and sat with his head in his palms.

'No,' replied Shahista.

'Why not?' Parimal was shocked beyond explanation.

'Because Dr Srinivasan does not want anything to be recorded,' Dr Batra interjected.

'And we a . . . are fol . . . lowing that?' Parimal ceased being respectful.

'Yes. Because he is the boss,' LSD said, rolling her eyes.

'I don't think he is,' Abhilash contemplated.

'What do you mean?' LSD asked.

Dr Batra and Shahista exchanged glances and before anyone could pay heed to Abhilash's intuition, Dr Batra

interrupted with, ‘LSD, could you get me some information about someone?’

‘Sir, with the equipment and devices I am provided with in here, I can give you practically any information about anyone: their account numbers, passwords, emails, places visited, current location, phone numbers, personal details . . . every piece of data since they were born,’ replied LSD confidently as her eyes shone.

‘Okay, then. Dig up everything you can about this man, Om Shastri,’ said Dr Batra with a hint of satisfaction.

Om and VeerbhadrA had been together in the room for quite some time. Om was tied up as earlier, with no change in his position, and VeerbhadrA was sitting idle at one of the tables. Om Shastri finally broke the silence, saying, ‘Can I get a glass of water, Mr VeerbhadrA?’ His voice was husky, VeerbhadrA noticed. Maybe because of his dry throat, he thought.

‘Get him a glass of water,’ he ordered one of the guards without moving at all.

‘So, for how long have you been working here?’ Om tried to start up a conversation.

‘It’s been a while,’ came the flat and rude reply from VeerbhadrA. Om inhaled deeply and started smiling. ‘What do you smile at?’ VeerbhadrA asked, irritated.

‘It’s going to rain soon. And I love the smell and the sound of it,’ replied Om Shastri, his gaze set upon the minimal sky visible through the ventilator.

He then gulped down the water he got from the guard.

‘Rain? Now? It’s summer! Have you lost it?’ VeerbhadrA responded.

VeerbhadrA heard many footsteps in the corridor. He left the room again when everyone else entered. And within a few seconds, everyone was back at their original positions in

the room. LSD was chirping with enthusiasm as she finally had something to work on. Abhilash continuously stared at Om Shastri, his expression unreadable. Om Shastri stared back. Dr Batra was prepared for another session. Suddenly, he remembered having missed something.

He went over to LSD and said in a hushed voice, ‘Om had also mentioned a locker where he keeps his information safe. Do check about that too.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said LSD.

Dr Srinivasan was back in the lab. He began by scrutinizing it for the presence of all the team members. Dr Shahista was absent.

‘Abhilash!’ called out Dr Srinivasan. ‘Look for Dr Shahista and ask her to get here.’

Abhilash nodded and went straight towards the door with a disgusted feeling, thinking, ‘Why me?’ He knew where he would find the lady. As expected, Dr Shahista was in the next room, keenly studying her notes.

‘You still here?’ Abhilash asked bluntly and reluctantly.

‘I was just going through the notes I had prepared. This might help in the next—’

‘Dr Srinivasan is expecting you,’ said Abhilash, cutting her off.

Shahista nodded.

Dr Shahista and Abhilash started walking together. Just before entering the lab, Shahista said in a strict yet gentle tone, ‘Abhilash, you know so much about Aghoris. Let me fill your knowledge gap with one more thing about them. Aghoris have a policy of no hatred towards any creature or thing. They believe that one who hates cannot meditate or reach moksha. We, who always look for reasons to hate others, whether based on religious views, skin colour, linguistic choices, political approaches, sexual orientation,

gender, race and whatnot, must learn from them. The bottom line of the story is that I treat people like people, and not on the basis of their religion, and I prefer to be treated in the same way. Am I clear?' Shahista's eyes had a penetrating gaze.

Abhilash understood her message and gave his assent in a nod.

As they entered the lab, they saw, halfway inside, Dr Batra talking to Dr Srinivasan.

'Sir, what will we do if he defies the medicines again?' Dr Batra was anxious. 'We'll see,' replied Dr Srinivasan. Dr Batra's words fell on deaf ears.

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Chapter 4

Names from History

Dr Srinivasan took the seat facing Om's back.

'Chinna, please don't do this. I am willing to cooperate in whatever you ask me.' Om Shastri was almost pleading, his gaze set towards the ceiling, signalling towards Dr Srinivasan, who in turn glanced in the direction of Dr Shahista and Dr Batra. Their faces conveyed the same wish.

'Please start,' ordered Dr Srinivasan, with antagonism and annoyance on his face as his ears were poked with the word 'Chinna'.

Om was sedated again and the interrogation was set in motion.

The first question was to be for Abhilash to pay attention to and translate the answer for the others.

'So, what did you advise as Vishnu Gupt?' began Shahista with the unconscious Om. Om repeated the same verse in Sanskrit.

व्याघ्रीव तष्ठितजिरा परतिर्जयन्ती
रोगाश्च शत्रव इव प्रहरन्त देहम्।
आयुः परस्वतभिन्नघटादविम्भः
लोकस्तथाप्यहतिमाचरतीतचित्रम्॥

Dr Shahista was looking at Abhilash, who gave her a thumbs up.

‘Who did you advise as Vishnu Gupt?’

‘Chandra Gupt Maurya.’

‘Why did you become Om Shastri?’

‘To hide my real identity.’

‘From?’

‘This world.’

‘What is your true identity?’ Shahista was more than capable of finding out hidden answers.

‘All my identities are true.’

She made a mental note of the line.

‘What were you doing as Om Shastri in Varanasi?’

‘Searching.’

‘Searching? For?’

‘Subhash Chandra Bose.’

All the colleagues looked at each other in surprise. Shahista didn’t know what to ask or say further. *This was getting even weirder*, she pondered. Finally, she took a deep breath and continued.

‘Subhash Chandra Bose is dead.’

‘No. He is not. He is just living under another name,’ said Om with a firm gesture.

‘Why do you think that Subhash Chandra Bose is not dead and is living under some other name?’ Shahista pressed on.

'I don't think so. I know so.'

'What makes you believe that?' she inquired.

'Because I met him when I was Vidur,' said Om.

Shahista rolled her eyes. *This was not a point to be argued*, she thought.

'Why are you searching for him?'

The answer to this shook Abhilash. 'Because he is Ashwatthama.'

'Ashwa . . . What?' Shahista didn't get it.

Abhilash had started listening intently at the pronunciation of 'Ashwatthama' and thereafter, started walking towards Shahista. 'Ashwatthama,' Om restated.

'Ask him which Ashwatthama he is talking about,' Abhilash whispered in Shahista's ear.

'Ashwatthama, the son of Dronacharya, the immortal cursed by Krishna,' Om replied without Shahista's intervention. 'Krishna' was all that Shahista could grasp.

Abhilash turned to Dr Batra, 'He is not making any sense.' Shahista asked, 'Who else are you looking for?' In a broken voice, he said 'Parashuram.' Considering it all nonsense, they continued.

'This name, Vishnu Gupt, seems to be a code name,' countered Dr Batra, deep in thought.

'Or he might be mentally disturbed, a patient of split personality, or a little demented,' he added.

'This could even be a case of reincarnation,' Abhilash came back with his mythological point of view.

Dr Batra paid no heed.

'What other names have you been using lately?' Shahista continued.

'Govindlal Yadav, Bhairav Singh, Suvarna Pratap Reddy, Bankim Chandra Chakraborty, Gursheel Singh Khullar, Vidur, Om Shastri, Hatim Ali Maulvi, Protim Das, Vishnu

Gupt, Kabir, Sushen, Jai Shankar Prasad, Madhukar Rao, Adhiraiyan,' Om began as if reciting a mugged up poem. His accent, tone, pitch, pronunciation and facial expressions changed with every name he mouthed. 'Bhairav Singh', 'Hatim Ali Maulvi', 'Gursheel Singh Khullar' and 'Suvarna Pratap Reddy' were uttered in a tone that spoke of strength and bravery. 'Bankim Chandra Chakraborty' was spoken in the typical Bengali accent. 'Kabir' and 'Sushen' came with a wave of calmness and serenity. The names seemed unending and continued, with his pitch and tone changing with every uttered name.

Everyone in the room was awestruck at his flawless and natural response. Even the best of actors couldn't have pulled this off so brilliantly.

Shahista held her head in her hands, signifying strain. Dr Srinivasan was taken aback for the first time. LSD had jotted down all the names Om mentioned. Parimal was going through Shahista's notes. Something struck the PhD-in-history guy and he at once went to Dr Batra while Om continued reciting names in a semi-conscious state.

'S . . . S . . . Sir, when Om used the names Vish . . . nu Gupt, I believe he was talking about some time in 300 bce b . . . b . . . because Vishnu Gupt was the real name of Chanakya! A . . . and he was the chief a . . . adviser to Chandra Gupt Maurya. You a . . . are welcome to perceive me as a ma . . . dma . . . n but . . .' Parimal said in his usual unsure tone when he was interrupted midway.

'No, Parimal. I wouldn't consider you a madman. In fact, if he was actually talking about Chanakya, then he was talking about the same Banda Bahadur that I thought, but did not believe he was. I need to confirm something about Banda Bahadur as well. Give me a moment,' said Dr Batra and excused himself to make a call.

LSD came over to Parimal, excited.

'I overheard your conversation. 300 bc! That is 2,317 years back, right?' LSD said, calculating in the air. 'Could he possibly be a time traveller?' LSD's eyes were almost popping out of their sockets in her enthusiastic anticipation.

This insane idea left Parimal irritated and compelled him to reply coldly, 'He is nothing but a fra . . . ud. That's what he is.'

'Biji, Sat Shri Akaal (regards, mother)'

Dr Batra was talking on the phone in a louder volume than his usual as his mother, at the age of eighty, had trouble hearing.

Dr Batra's voice was loud enough to be heard by all. And since the lab had grown quieter, everyone was easily and intently listening to the conversation. Even LSD stopped her work, which put an end to the sound of typing. '*Jinda reh puttar* (Long live my son),' came an old voice from the other end. '*Ik gal dasso mainu . . . Banda Bahadur kaun si* (Tell me something . . . who was Banda Bahadur)?' asked Dr Batra in his regional Punjabi accent.

'O puttar, Banda Singh Bahadur Shri Guru Gobind Singh ji da jarnel si (Son, Banda Singh Bahadur was the name of a general of our Guru Gobind Singh)', replied the feminine voice with a lot of respect and veneration, along with a not-so-juvenile voice that was in sync.

Dr Batra heard the other voice; he turned around to see the source, and instantly knew who had said that. He was shocked to see Om replying to all the questions that he was asking his mother in Punjabi, and Om was considering them as if they were being raised to him, even in a highly drugged and unconscious state, which was abnormal.

Dr Batra tottered as he struggled to interpret what was happening. He was feeling sick. He had been going through

a lot already and needed to resolve this mystery soon.

'*Onna da intekaal kis tarah hoya si?* (How did he die)?' Dr Batra asked slowly, asking his mother on the phone but observing Om instead, in surprise.

'*Onna nu Mughal badshah Farukh Siyar ne marwaya si* (He was assassinated on the orders of Mughal emperor Farukh Siyar),' came the voice on the phone and from Om.

This left Dr Batra perplexed and he decided to continue his conversation from a distance where he couldn't be heard. He departed the room, leaving everyone shocked.

They could see Om Shastri was talking of ancient times and was answering the questions in the language they were asked in: Punjabi. But no one knew why.

Breaking the silence, Veerbhadrā entered the laboratory. He was short of breath, which conveyed that he had been running.

He eyed Om Shastri once and then kept walking inside, taking long strides.

'*Aimi aindi* (What happened)?' asked Dr Srinivasan in his native tongue. He did not feel right involving everyone, seeing Veerbhadrā's body language.

'*Varsam padtondi* (It's raining)!' replied the fretful Veerbhadrā.

'*Aayite* (So what)?'

Dr Srinivasan was already troubled enough handling Om Shastri. He didn't want a new drama altogether. '*Ataniki gantala kritam yela telusindi* (How come he knew it hours before)?' asked Veerbhadrā, pointing at Om.

Om started to say something in the same dialect.

'*Mellaga ushnograta mundu two degrees taggindi, tarvata inka five degreel varuku taggumukham pattindi. Gaali lo tema anapinchindi Tadi matti suvasana, vacchindi gaali 40 km vegam tho veestondi varsham vastundi ani*

anukunnanu (The temperature dropped by two degrees, then another five degrees later. The winds started blowing at about 40 km/h. I could feel moisture in the breeze and could smell the wet soil. So I presumed that rains would follow),’ replied Om Shastri with certainty.

‘What are you guys talking about?’ Dr Batra intervened as he entered the room.

Everyone else was impatiently waiting for the answer.

Veerbhadrā started to explain to Dr Batra and the team but Dr Srinivasan interrupted and said, ‘Nothing.’

No one reacted or countered. Shahista was confused again as to what to ask Om Shastri. And so she was looking in the direction of her boss for the next command. The hour was on the verge of completion and as Dr Batra had anticipated, Om showed signs of waking up again. The session was done. It was late afternoon.

Nothing went as planned and their old questions subsisted as new ones surfaced. Most of the answers to these questions were in the grip of people who were deliberately hiding them.

‘We need to talk,’ Dr Batra approached Shahista.

‘All of us need to talk,’ said an exhausted Shahista.

Om Shastri stirred and awoke. A crestfallen expression came over his face as it dawned upon him that he had let out some more of his ‘secrets’.

Dr Srinivasan left the interrogation room and announced a short recess while leaving.

Dr Batra ushered Shahista to the door and mouthed, ‘Meet me at the end of the lobby.’

‘I suggest we all meet together,’ Shahista responded with the same apprehension.

LSD joined them instantly. ‘Sir, I have found something.’ ‘Not here. Come with us,’ Dr Batra escorted her. ‘I’ll bring

the rest,' Shahista called out.

Everyone left the room and Veerbhadra came in to take care of Om Shastri along with his guards.

At the end of the lobby, Parimal was the first to initiate the conversation. 'He i . . . s not referring to divergent centuries. He is ta . . . lking of different millennia. How is that pos . . . sible?' he wondered.

Shahista intervened, 'I don't understand this man. He says his name is Om Shastri. At the same time, he claims to be the Sushen of Ramayana and the Vidur of Mahabharata, which means he wants us to believe that he has stopped ageing. And on top of that, he's also searching for Subhash Chandra Bose, believing him to be Ashwatthama. Who the hell is he exactly?'

'The question is, *what* the hell is he?' Dr Batra was irked. 'LSD, what did you get?' he demanded.

'Sir, many startling facts. To start with, I have found some bank accounts of Om Shastri. They all have a decent balance and are all in different states.'

Abhilash was curious to know why, if he had so much money, would he be teaching in a school, living a mediocre life. 'Hmm . . . and?' Dr Batra listened raptly.

'All his accounts have his photograph on them as proof of identity. I then used his photograph as a key to dig out other information under the various names he pronounced. I discovered that Protim Das has a valid all-India driving licence. Govindlal Yadav has a voter identity card to his name. Bankim Chandra Chakraborty possesses a passport; Madhukar Rao owns many bonds and shares of DSP dated about seventy years ago. This is the same day when DSP was incorporated and its initial public offering was issued. These shares were purchased by Madhukar Rao's father, Mr Venkata Ramanna Rao. The accounts of Mr Venkata

Ramanna Rao have the same face as Om Shastri's. Om Shastri is forty years old and Madhukar Rao's father also died at the age of forty, as per the records. I went through the data of the fathers of all the mentioned names. Different names, same face. Which means he has been the father and the son both for a period of forty to fifty years each time.

'Now, coming to the lockers. Gursheel Singh Khullar has a locker in Punjab National Bank in Punjab; S.P. Reddy owns a locker in Andhra Bank in Hyderabad. All police records are clean except for Gursheel Singh's father. He has the same face as Gursheel. He was caught at the Indo-Pak border. He is one of the people who were imprisoned in Pakistan. All of these people have graduated from prestigious institutes and universities. Adhiraiyan is a doctor. B.C. Chakraborty has travelled to Paris. I didn't come across anything about Vishnu Gupt, though. Neither is Chandra Gupt associated with any of the names he mentioned. The same is the case with Vidur and Sanjay,' LSD was proud of her skills in her field.

Before LSD could continue, Dr Batra speculated. 'What about his mother?'

'Their mothers all died when they were very young. No photographs could be found. All of these people have been raised by single fathers,' LSD informed.

'Which can't be a coincidence,' said Dr Shahista, 'He had said that all his identities were real.'

'Did you possibly spot any connection between all these people and Subhash Chandra Bose?' asked Dr Batra, facing LSD.

'Sort of . . . as I found some astonishing facts claimed by people who allege to possess information regarding Subhash Chandra Bose,' LSD revealed.

'That he didn't die in a plane crash? Everyone kn . . . ows that,' Parimal stammered as his eyes filled with anxiety.

'Yes. But apart from that, I unearthed something very weird. Subhash Chandra Bose died five times, under five different names, in five different cities in India.' LSD spoke as if revealing a skeleton in the cupboard. 'What?' everyone screamed all together.

'Huh, that was imminent. This man inside attracts everything unworldly to himself,' Dr Batra criticized.

LSD smiled at the joke, then continued.

'Subhash Chandra Bose, born on 23 January 1897, was an Indian nationalist whose disobedient patriotism made him a hero in India, but whose attempt during World War II to liberate India of British rule with the help of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan left a troubled inheritance. Known by the honorific 'Netaji' (Hindustani: "respected leader"), he was earlier a leader of the younger, fundamentalist wing of the Indian National Congress in the late 1920s and 1930s, rising to become Congress president in 1938 and 1939. However, he was expelled from Congress leadership positions in 1939 following differences with Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress high command. He was subsequently placed under house arrest by the British before escaping from India in 1940.

'Subhash Chandra Bose was believed to have died in August 1945 at Taihoku, Formosa (now Taipei, Taiwan), in a plane crash. In the unanimity of intellectual opinion, Subhash Chandra Bose's death occurred from third-degree burns. However, many among his supporters, especially in Bengal, refused at the time, and have refused since, to believe either the fact or the circumstances of his death. Conspiracy theories appeared within hours of his death and have thereafter had a long shelf life, keeping alive various

fierce myths about Bose. These myths of Bose being yet alive gained strength soon after, when, in 1945, he was seen in Delhi and was believed to have been murdered at Red Fort. But, fifteen years later, in 1960, he was sighted in a photograph that was captured in Paris.

‘Bankim Chandra Chakraborty happened to be in Paris in 1964 in search of Subhash Chandra Bose. On 27 May 1964, Subhash Chandra Bose was seen at the funeral of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. He was a saint when he was claimed dead again in 1977. After all this humbug and mystification surfaced a theory about Gumnami Baba (a saint who is anonymous). He addressed his people from behind the curtains. In Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, Gumnami Baba’s confidants somehow revealed his having travelled to Germany in 1944: the same time Subhash Chandra Bose is said to have met Adolf Hitler in Germany.

‘His confidants let out that he praised the beauty of Paris every now and then. There is record of Gumnami Baba’s visit to Paris, but Subhash Chandra Bose had definitely put his foot there. Gumnami Baba’s close friends say that whenever there were local rumours of him being Subhash Chandra Bose, he would change his residence.

‘He is believed to have left his body on 16 September 1985. Another point of interest lies not in this date but in his date of birth, which happens to be 23 January 1897, the same day that Subhash Chandra Bose was born. Needless to say, our subject is of the opinion that Subhash Chandra Bose is still alive and furthermore, that he is searching for him,’ LSD laid out all the facts and information she had laid her hands on.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, comprehending, putting together all the pieces, decoding again. But nothing

made sense. After a while, Dr Batra spoke up, 'Parimal, what did that sloka mean?'

Parimal answered humbly but stammeringly.

'Old age frightens man like a tiger. Diseases strike the body like enemies. Life drips down as water from a broken pot. Yet people think of harming others. They do not realize that they are transitory. This is indeed a matter of wonder. That is the exact meaning of the verse,' Parimal said.

'None of us is aware of the direction we are heading in through this interrogation, but there is one person who has all the answers and it's about time we knew the purpose we all are serving here. I am going to Dr Srinivasan. I'll come back with the answers, or I'll leave right now. Is anyone joining me?' asked Dr Batra.



Chapter 5 Open Ends

Back in the lab, Veerbhadra and Om Shastri were forced into each other's company yet again. Veerbhadra had questions that bothered him, but he couldn't talk to Om. A tiny mistake could put him on the verge of dismissal, he thought. So he deliberately controlled himself despite his curiosity.

Om had been observing Veerbhadra since he had entered. 'You alright?' Om asked, concerned. 'Yes! Why?' Veerbhadra replied, controlling his curiosity. 'You look stressed,' Om said.

Veerbhadra was in a dilemma about whether or not to reveal the thing that was bothering him. He remained silent for a few seconds, contemplating, but the urge to know was far more intense than everything else.

And so he asked, 'You are seated in a chamber. How could you possibly have known that it would rain, and that too, hours before the weather built up? Moreover, you calculated the wind speed, smelt the wet soil, felt the altering temperature. There was no wind in the room. How can your senses be that strong? How did you do that?' Veerbhadra looked around in disbelief.

Om Shastri smiled a bit.

'As a matter of fact, I am also aware that I am sitting in an island off the southern coast of India. And I just make all this out with the help of my senses,' Om said as if skills like these were an insignificant part of him.

VeerbhadrA was shocked.

'You can't know that! You were unconscious and blindfolded in the chopper when you were brought here!'

'Well, but I do know all of it. It just needs experience and practice. Even you can do that. Anyone can,' Om shrugged in a matter-of-fact way.

'How?' VeerbhadrA was unable to take in any of this.

'As you can easily differentiate between numerous colours with your eyes, just focus and smell the air in layers. Likewise, you can see an aeroplane vanishing in the sky after it takes off and an eagle transforms into a dot as it moves higher. The same way, you can smell things coming close, and going farther away,' Om explained, betraying all the logic and the reasoning VeerbhadrA had ever learnt.

VeerbhadrA had much to resolve, and so, not waiting for his brain to comprehend what he had just been told, he put forth another question. 'You are not south Indian. How do you speak such fluent and flawless Telugu?'

'When did I speak in Telugu?' Om was mystified.

Both of them now stared at each other, perplexed. And before anyone could reply, Dr Srinivasan entered the room. Coincidentally, Dr Batra also followed. VeerbhadrA looked first at Dr Srinivasan and then towards Dr Batra.

Dr Batra arrogantly stared in the direction of Om Shastri, and then murmured to Dr Srinivasan, 'Sir, we want to talk to you.'

'We?' asked Dr Srinivasan.

'All of us, sir.'

'Not now. We'll talk after this session, at the lunch break.'

'We will not begin another session before talking to you, sir,' Dr Batra emphasized.

'Where is the rest of the team?' Dr Srinivasan snapped hysterically. 'In your office, waiting for both of us,' said Dr Batra.

Om and VeerbhadrA were looking at both of them and listening to their conversation. Dr Srinivasan banged a file on the table, exasperated, and proceeded towards Dr Batra. Dr Batra turned the other way and left the room. Dr Srinivasan turned around on his way out and signalled to VeerbhadrA to follow him. VeerbhadrA followed unwillingly. The guards were left behind to keep an eye on Om Shastri.

'The temperature of the oil is rising! The chopped onions will burn if there is even a slight delay,' Om called out from behind VeerbhadrA, a smile stretched across his face.

VeerbhadrA left the room behind Dr Srinivasan. On his way, just before entering Dr Srinivasan's cabin, he reached out to peep inside the kitchen, just to make sure. He was astonished to see the flame with a bulk fryer over it and the chef out of sight. Chopped onions were kept beside the stove for frying in the bulk fry. The oil had reached the appropriate temperature. VeerbhadrA reached out and overturned the vessel of onion in the pan. The chef suddenly appeared and was stunned to see VeerbhadrA there.

VeerbhadrA left the kitchen hastily to catch up with Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Srinivasan entered his office and found everyone standing there. He crossed everyone, reached his chair behind the table and sat down in his habitual fashion, with an attitude of superiority. He kept his gaze on Dr Batra. The tension in the room was tangible, which further heated the environment.

'Who is he?' Dr Batra began with the obvious question.

'Tej, you are here to do what you have been called for. You haven't been called to question me.'

'I have the right to know. Who is the man we are dealing with?' Dr Batra pushed his limits further as he was being backed by the team.

Dr Srinivasan was offended and stood up immediately, saying, 'No! You do not have any rights here. All your rights are reserved with me.'

'Please calm down, sir,' Shahista interjected at Dr Srinivasan's outburst, and continued. 'There are some strange conclusions we are being compelled to draw on the basis of our incomplete knowledge of him. And we all are alarmed and confused.'

Shahista's words calmed Dr Srinivasan to an extent, and he replied, 'None of you need to be afraid. You are all safe here.'

Veerbhadra, who was standing right behind Dr Srinivasan, nodded in agreement.

'We may be safe here. But our families might not be, if he is a terrorist.' Dr Batra showed his concern.

'He is not a terrorist, damn it!' Dr Srinivasan got worked up again and thundered in his throaty voice. His verdict seemed to be echoing in the distance.

'How can you be so sure?' Dr Batra wasn't giving in to someone's whims and tantrums. Not this time.

'Because I know,' Dr Srinivasan was clearly controlling himself, folding his arms over his chest.

'What more do you know?' Dr Batra demanded, doing the same thing in return.

Dr Srinivasan remained tight-lipped. Shahista came close to Dr Srinivasan, soothed him by patting his shoulder, and made him sit down. She offered him a glass of water that was kept on the table. He took it.

Shahista allowed the man to relax before saying very calmly, 'Sir, we have come across some facts which are bothering us and leading to such open-ended conclusions. LSD, please brief sir.'

LSD repeated the gist of her knowledge about Om Shastri by saying, 'Sir, this man we recognize as Om Shastri has many identities in various parts of the country. In some places he is mentioned as his own father and in others as his own son, carrying the same face but different names. I came across two active lockers in the names of his other identities and numerous bank accounts with huge sums in them. Legally, he came out clean. He seems a highly organized person and might be working for some underground terrorist organization. He may be on a confidential mission which we have not discovered yet. The other fact we turned up is that he is searching for Subhash Chandra Bose, which may be of utmost concern to the government authorities and to the nation in general.'

Dr Srinivasan listened intently as LSD presented the facts.

Dr Shahista, taking it from there, said, 'While in a state of hypnotism, he talked of people who had walked the earth in past millennia. Some of us suppose that he remembers all his reincarnations. Some think he might be a patient of split personality disorder. He could even be a member of some ancient, secret group working generation after generation on some hidden purpose. But none of his identities stands in coherence with any of these possibilities.'

As Dr Shahista finished, a silence swept the workplace. Shahista went on.

'Sir, please help us with what you know if you want us to help you.'

'What is the reality of this facility? Why did we get this man? What are we struggling to get out of him? Tell us all you know, please, sir.' Dr Batra sounded more helpless than enraged this time.

Dr Srinivasan didn't let any expression crowd his face, as usual. He took in a deep breath and stared at his feet, as if calculating something in his head.

After a while, he spoke.

'Okay. I'll tell you all whatever I know. But before I do that, I want you to fetch me the details of the lockers Om mentioned.'

LSD said, 'Already done, sir, here they are.'

She promptly handed over the page to Dr Srinivasan, who passed it on to VeerbhadrA.

VeerbhadrA left the room with the paper instantly. He knew what to do with it.

Dr Srinivasan carefully unlocked a vault in his desk and took out a few photographs and some documents. He handed all of this to Dr Shahista, who in turn circulated them among the others, after having a look at them one by one. All the photographs captured Om Shastri in different appearances and outfits. Each snapshot contained the year and the place where it was taken. Shahista read them one by one: 1874 in Banaras, 1882 in Haryana, 1888 in Madras, 1895 in Maharashtra, 1902 in Kerala, 1916 in Lucknow, 1930 at the Salt Satyagraha (a request for truth, the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi for complete independence), 1944 in the Forward Bloc of Subhash Chandra Bose's army, 1947 in Delhi in the crowd at the flag hoisting, 1964 at Jawaharlal Nehru's funeral, 1984 at Indira Gandhi's funeral, 1991 at Rajiv Gandhi's funeral, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 . . .

Dr Srinivasan carefully studied their faces and said, 'These are the death certificates and other government records proving the deaths of all those names carried by Om, but once he is dead somewhere, he appears alive somewhere else. Remarkably, he has the same age in each photograph, neither younger nor older. Approximately forty years.' Dr Srinivasan paused so they could all grasp the information and when he spoke again, his voice was intense.

'That is why all of you are here. You aren't here to question me as to who the man is. Instead, I am here to get answers from you about this man. You all are a part of this secret mission to get answers and relevant information from this mysterious man. Remember, *secret mission!*'

Dr Batra's mind was flooded with doubts and he didn't hesitate to put them forward.

'Who owns this organization?' he asked bluntly.

'Enough questions, Tej! This is all you needed to know. Now you are left with only two choices. Get back to work or pack your belongings, and I shall make arrangements for your return,' Dr Srinivasan warned, unable to hide the scorn in his voice.

Dr Batra went very still. He was about to turn on his heel to get back to the laboratory when Shahista spoke up.

'Sir, it will take weeks to gather all the information from Om Shastri, as he regains his wits every other hour of hypnotizing.'

'Can you suggest some other way, doctor?' Dr Srinivasan asked as if he knew the answer.

'Yes, sir. I suggest we try talking to him directly, without any use of sedatives or hypnotism,' Shahista proposed.

'I'm afraid he won't say anything that way,' Dr Srinivasan showed some concern.

'He will, sir. He has no idea how much he has already disclosed. We can make him believe that we know everything and then he will tell us everything.'

'This could prove to be a risky procedure for all of you,' Dr Srinivasan warned.

Dr Shahista had begun to learn how to convince and handle Dr Srinivasan. Her understanding approach had the strength to win over his dominant personality.

So she said, 'Sir, I have interrogated numerous criminals and with my experience, I can confidently assure you that he is not to be feared.'

'I don't think we should trust him without the drugs and hypnotism. There will always be the possibility of the truth being doctored while it travels through his nerves to his mouth.' Dr Srinivasan maintained his stand on the issue.

'We could make use of a lie detector and LSD here could help us in visualizing everything that he thinks while he speaks,' Dr Batra spoke as if suggesting some million-dollar plan.

'Sir, a few devices will be connected to his body through cables. They'll register his pulse rate and the wavelength of his thoughts, and convert them to visuals on the screen. If he responds well, we can see the exact replica of what he remembers, along with the minutest details, like the era and the time. Am I right, LSD?' Shahista said.

'That will be great fun!' LSD chimed in excitement. Her words came out a bit fumbled as she had her mouth occupied with a chewing gum, which she wasn't embarrassed about. But right after she said that, everyone else threw a glance at her that said 'What's wrong with you?' In response to this gesture, she stopped chewing her gum and started working silently.

'Sir, words may lie, but thoughts can't be voluntarily controlled. If we see the visuals of his thoughts, there's no way he can fool us,' Shahista said.

Dr Srinivasan went back and forth in his mind, weighing everything against the possible consequences, while everyone else waited for an indication.

Shahista pleaded, 'Sir, it's your turn to believe in us and in your own selection of the best experts.'

Dr Srinivasan was forced to agree. But before he did that, he asked, 'What if this doesn't work?'

'Then we will carry on the same way we have been doing until now,' Dr Batra assured him.

'Sir, it has been very difficult so far. Every sentence he spoke stimulated numerous questions. I am now clueless about what to ask him,' Shahista said.

'Okay, go ahead with whatever you feel like. But be cautious, Shahista. You must maintain the necessary distance. No recordings. We'll start after lunch.' Dr Srinivasan was concerned.

Everyone proceeded towards the dining room for lunch but Dr Shahista headed towards the laboratory.

She walked towards Om and stood in front of him. She brought back the jovial smile on her lips and said, 'Hello. I am Shahista. I didn't get a chance to introduce myself properly before. Om, please have your lunch while I join the others. If you need anything, do let me know.' Shahista tried to befriend Om, as her job after lunch was to talk to him in his conscious state. Psychology says that once you gain the trust of a person, you get his secrets too.

'I requested them to untie me, I wanted to use the restroom,' said Om humbly. 'Oh! Sure, Om. Actually, they aren't authorized to talk to you or make any decision on

their own. Please pardon the inconvenience,' Shahista said with amiability on her face.

She then ordered one of the guards to escort Om Shastri to the restroom.

Shahista was now confident about the next session as Om wasn't defensive or rude to her.

As the guard did the needful, Om turned and said, 'One more thing. I'm a vegetarian. I don't like cabbage. Potatoes and pulses will work. Green chilli and salt separately, please,' Om laid out his eating style.

Shahista didn't understand him, but nodded nevertheless. She then left the laboratory and as she reached the dining room and saw the menu, she freaked out. She saw non-vegetarian food being served along with two vegetables: potato and cabbage. She got a hold of herself and said, 'Do not send non-vegetarian for Om, nor cabbage. He doesn't eat that.'

'How do you know?' LSD was baffled.

'He told me himself,' Shahista replied.

'What?' LSD inquired.

'That he is a vegetarian and he dislikes cabbage. And that he wants green chillies and salt separately.'

Everyone looked at each other in shock while Shahista started having her food.

LSD racked her brains and spoke slowly, 'How could he make out that potatoes and cabbage were on the menu for lunch? Moreover, if he stated that he was a vegetarian, how did he even know that non-vegetarian food has been cooked?'

Shahista stopped midway at that and began to ponder.



Chapter 6

Divine Yugas

There was a momentary silence after which Parimal spoke, 'Looking at all the photographs, the theories of his split persona . . . lity and of reincarna . . . tion are out. What's the new explanation?'

Another few moments passed in silence, which were shattered by LSD, saying, 'Time travel!'

She was looking at her laptop when she said that, concentrating on her gadgets.

'Bah! Humbug! Time travel is a myth. Time is not stagnant; you can't travel back and forth over it. The past is the past and the future hasn't materialized yet,' Abhilash criticized LSD's theory.

LSD chose to ignore his words. Dr Batra then said to everyone, 'Parimal says that Vishnu Gupt, which Om claims he himself is, was the other name of Chanakya. Also that Chandra Gupt is probably Chandra Gupt Maurya of the Maurya Dynasty.'

'I am compelled to trust him because the Banda Singh Bahadur and Farukh Siyar he mentioned are names from Sikh mythology. You all might have overheard my conversation on the phone a few minutes ago. Now I want to know your views about all this.'

'Dr Batra, you are a doctor. How could you believe all this? This is downright illogical,' Shahista was furious.

'Okay, Dr Shahista. Then please proceed and logically explain all these people and their fathers carrying the same face in the documents LSD discovered,' Dr Batra retorted.

Dr Shahista was speechless and remained so.

'Sir, Om Shastri's recitation is an original by Chanakya,' LSD was still on her mission.

'Who is Banda Bahadur? And what's the past of Chanakya?' Abhilash questioned. Before Dr Batra could say anything about Banda Bahadur, Parimal responded in his stammering voice, but this time, he was a little more confident while speaking.

'Cha . . . nakya's birth is believed to have happened in 350 bce but it . . . is a matter of controversy a . . . nd there are multiple the . . . ories about his origin. According to the Buddhist tex . . . t, his birthplace was Takshashila. The Jain scri . . . ptures mention him as a "Dramila", implying that he was a native of south India. According to another Jain belief, Cha . . . nakya was born in the Cha . . . naka village of the Golla region, to a Brahmin named Cha . . . nin and his wife Chaneshvari. Other sources mention his father's name as Cha . . . nak and state that Cha . . . nakya's name is derived from his father's name. According to some sources, Cha . . . nakya was a Brahmin from north India, a scholar of the Vedas and a devotee of Vishnu. According to Jain accounts, he became a Jain in his old age like Cha . . . ndra Gupt Maurya,' recited Parimal.

'Cha . . . nakya was an Indian teacher, philosopher, economist, jurist and royal advisor. He is traditionally identified as Kautilya or Vishnu Gupt, who authored the ancient Indian political treatise, the Art . . . hashastra. As such, he is considered a pioneer in the field of political

science and economics in India and his work is thought of as an important precursor to classical economics. His works were lost near the end of the Gupta empire and not rediscovered till 1915.' Everyone listened to Parimal's narration about Chanakya attentively.

LSD took over from there with her laptop, reading aloud more information on him.

'Originally a teacher at the ancient university of Takshashila, Chanakya assisted the first Mauryan emperor Chandra Gupt in his rise to power. He is widely credited with having played an important role in the establishment of the Maurya empire. Chanakya served as the chief advisor to both emperors, Chandra Gupt and his son Bindusara.

Parimal added some more information, 'According to one legend, Chanakya withdrew to the jungle and starved himself to death. According to another legend mentioned by Hemachandra, Chanakya died as a result of a conspired piracy by Subandhu, one of Bindusara's ministers. Subandhu, who did not like Chanakya, told Bindusara that Chanakya was responsible for the murder of his mother. Bindusara asked the nurses, who confirmed the story of his mother's death. Bindusara was horrified and enraged. When Chanakya learnt that the king was angry with him, he decided to end his life. In accordance with Jain tradition, he decided to starve himself to death. By this time, the king had learnt the full story, which was that Chanakya was not responsible for his mother's death, which was an accident. He asked Subandhu to convince Chanakya to give up his plan to kill himself. However, Subandhu instead conducted a ceremony for Chanakya, only to burn him alive. There are no definite mentions of Chanakya's death—'

Abhilash interrupted, ‘Which means Chanakya’s death is still unclear?’

‘Chanakya is regarded as a great scholar and a visionary in India. Many Indian nationalists regard him as one of the earliest people to imagine a united India spanning the entire subcontinent. India’s former National Security Advisor, Shiv Shankar Menon, praised Chanakya’s Arthashastra for its clear and precise rules, which apply even today,’ LSD continued again.

‘Banda Bahadur?’ asked Abhilash again.

Everyone looked to Dr Batra for some light on this Sikh name. Dr Batra stated, ‘Banda Singh Bahadur was born Lachman Dev in 1670 and later became a Sikh military commander.

‘At the age of fifteen, he left home to become an ascetic and was given the name “Madho Das”. He established a monastery at Nanded, on the banks of the river Godavari.

That was where, in 1708 he was visited by, and became a disciple of, Guru Gobind Singh, who gave him the new name of Banda Singh Bahadur. Equipped with the blessings and authority of Guru Gobind Singh, he assembled a fighting force and led the struggle against the Mughal emperor. After establishing his authority in Punjab, Banda Singh Bahadur abolished the zamindari system and granted property rights to the tillers of the land. In 1715, Banda Singh Bahadur was captured from the Gurdas Nangal fort and put in an iron cage. The remaining Sikhs from his troop were captured and chained. The Sikhs were brought to Delhi in a procession with 780 Sikh prisoners, 2,000 Sikh heads hung on spears and 700 cartloads of slaughtered Sikh heads to terrorize the population. They were put in the Delhi fort and pressurized to give up their faith and become Muslims. On their firm refusal, all of them were ordered to be executed. Every day,

100 Sikhs were brought out of the fort and murdered in public, which went on for around seven days. The Mughals could hardly contain their joy while the Sikhs showed no sign of dejection or humiliation. Instead, they sang their sacred hymns; none feared death or gave up their faith. The Sikh Sardars were subjected to tortures in front of Banda Bahadur before being executed. Their heads were then impaled on spears and arranged in a circle around Banda, who was now squatting on the ground. He was then given a short sword and ordered to kill his own son, Ajai Singh. As he sat unperturbed, the executioner moved forward and plunged his sword into the little child, cutting his body into two.

Then pieces of flesh were cut from the body and thrown at Banda's face. His liver was removed and thrust into Banda Singh's mouth. The father sat through all this without any signs of emotion. His powers of endurance were to be tested still further. The executioner then stepped forward and thrust the point of his dagger into Banda's right eye, pulling out the eyeball. He then pulled out the other eyeball. Banda sat through all this as still as a rock. His face gave no twitch of pain. The cruel devil then took his sword and slashed off Banda's left foot, then both his arms. But Banda's features were still calm as if he was at peace with his creator. Finally, they tore off his flesh with red-hot pincers, and there being nothing else left in their book of tortures, they cut his body up into a hundred pieces, and were satisfied.'

LSD was glued to her laptop again and was clicking and scrolling continuously.

'Sir, there is huge time gap between the lifetimes of Chanakya and Banda Bahadur. Chanakya belonged to the era of 350 bc, whereas Banda Singh Bahadur belonged to a

more recent period of history, 1675.' LSD spoke with her eyes fixed on her screen.

'But Om Shastri said he worked as an advisor to both. Maintained a difference of 2,000 years, almost! What rubbish!' Shahista exclaimed.

'I would say he is talking about the various yugas. He also mentioned the name Sanjay, the son of Gavalgan, and Vidur, the minister of Hastinapur,' Abhilash joined in, portraying his usual proud self.

'Yugas? Abhilash, explain,' LSD countered sarcastically.

'My dear, that is impossible for you to grasp,' Abhilash snapped back with an even more sarcastic smile.

'Still, you ought to explain to us,' Dr Shahista interjected.

Dr Shahista and LSD waited for Abhilash to begin and had their gaze on him.

'Hindu mythology bifurcates time into four yugas. These are Satya yuga, Treta yuga, Dwapara yuga, and Kali yuga.'

Shahista nodded, slowly comprehending.

'If at all there is a theory, how many years roughly does each of these yugas consist of?'

Abhilash picked up a pen and paper and started writing while answering Shahista's question.

'According to Srimad Bhagavatam, one of the earliest known texts describing the yugas, the duration of the Satya yuga equals 4,800 years of the demigods; Treta yuga equals 3,600 years, Dwapara yuga equals 2,400 years; and the Kali yuga is 1,200 years of the demigods. One year of the demigods is equal to 360 years of the human beings. These four yugas follow a timeline ratio of 4:3:2:1. The duration of the yugas is therefore:

4,000 + 400 + 400 = 4,800 divine years (= 17,28,000 human years) = 1 Satya yuga

$3,000 + 300 + 300 = 3,600$ divine years (= 12,96,000 human years) = 1 Treta yuga

$2,000 + 200 + 200 = 2,400$ divine years (= 8,64,000 human years) = 1 Dwapara yuga

$1,000 + 100 + 100 = 1,200$ divine years (= 4,32,000 human years) = 1 Kali yuga

'The end of the Kali Yuga is 4,27,000 years from now, which also means that the age of the Kali Yuga so far is only 5,000 years.

'God Vishnu incarnates on Earth from time to time to eradicate evil forces, to restore dharma and to liberate the worthy ones or devotees from the cycle of births and deaths. The above timeline ratio of 4:3:2:1 also indicates the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, also known as Dashavatara. The first four avatars of Vishnu appeared in Satya yuga, followed by three avatars in Treta, two in Dwapara and the tenth avatar will appear in the Kali yuga. The Kali yuga is described as ending with the appearance of the Kalki avatar, who will defeat the wicked, liberate the virtuous, and initiate a new Satya yuga. According to these beliefs, in the Satya yuga, the process of self-realization was meditating upon Vishnu. During this yuga, the majority of the population were epitomes of goodness. In the Treta yuga, man extended his knowledge and power over the attributes of Universal Magnetism, the source of positive, negative, and neutralizing electricity and the two poles of creative attraction and repulsion. People in this age remained righteous and adhered to moral ways of life, though godly qualities decreased by a fourth in comparison to the Satya yuga. Lord Rama lived in this age. In the

Dwapara yuga, the process of self-realization was the worship of deities in temples. Godly qualities reduced to 50 per cent by this age. We live in the Kali yuga, a world infested with impurities and vices. Virtuous people are diminishing day by day. Floods and famine, war and crime, deceit and duplicity characterize this age. But the scriptures say that final emancipation can be acquired only in this age. It is predicted that at the end of Kali yuga, Lord Shiva shall destroy the universe and all the physical bodies will undergo a great transformation. After such a dissolution, Lord Brahma will recreate the world and humans will become the “Beings of Truth” again,’ Abhilash explained.

‘How can you sum up the difference between these ages in a few words?’ Shahista asked.

‘In Satya yuga, the fight was between two worlds: Deva loka (pertaining to the world of the gods) and Asura loka (pertaining to the world of demons.) Asura loka, being evil, was a different world.

‘In Treta yuga, the fight was between Rama and Ravana. Both evil and gods ruled from two different countries, but in the same world.

‘In Dwapara yuga, the fight was between Pandavas and Kauravas. This was the yuga when both good and evil lived and fought within the same “family”. With every passing yuga, the evil continued getting closer, entering the same world, then the same country, then the same family.

‘Now, where is the evil in Kali yuga? It is inside us. Both good and evil live within us. The battle is within us. Who will emerge victorious? Who will dominate the other, our inner goodness or the evil within?’

Shahista looked at him, staggered.

‘Will somebody tell me what the hell is going on here and what exactly are we dealing with? All of you have lost your

minds. These things . . . these are impossible and mythology has no grounds in factual realities,' she thundered.

'Who says this?' asked Abhilash.

'Science! Science says this. Now can we get back to the real work here, if you guys are done with your stories?'

An eerie silence engulfed the room at Shahista's outburst and remained so until Abhilash spoke up again, contradicting Dr Shahista bluntly.

'These are not just stories, but our legacies. This is our past and fortunately or unfortunately it is true. Do you think there's nothing above science? Let me ask you one question. Tell me, when did your science discover the distance between the sun and the earth?' Shahista was dumbstruck as she didn't know the answer. LSD, on the other hand, quickly displayed her investigation skills. A few clicks on Google and she replied with pride, 'The seventeenth century! Giovanni Cassini and Jean Richer pegged the distance from the earth to the sun as 140 million kilometres, just 9 million kilometres off the now official figure.'

Abhilash said, 'In the Hanuman Chalisa, there's a line, "*Yug sahastra yojan par bhanu! Leelyo taahi madhur phal janu!*"'

He grabbed the marker and started scribbling on the white board.

'Here, one yug is equal to 12,000 years.

One sahastra = 1000 and 1 yojan = 8 miles.

Now, yug x sahastra x yojan is equal to par bhanu, which means $12,000 \times 1,000 \times 8$ miles, that is, 9,60,00,000 miles. Let me also tell you that 1 mile = 1.6 km. And 9,60,00,000 miles is equal to $9,60,00,000 \times 1.63$ km, which is 153 million kilometres to the sun, approximately.' His hands converted his words into calculations and displayed them on the board.

Everyone stood still, looking at each other's faces. Dr Batra started to walk back towards his chair while Abhilash was busy scribbling on the white board. After Dr Batra was seated, Abhilash continued, 'That's not the end. The Vedas' detailed descriptions of the universe, planets and other phenomena demonstrate the vast knowledge of the people of those times, far before modern civilization even started to exist. A Vedic scholar, Sayana, discovered the speed of light back in the fourteenth century ad. His quote translates to "With deep respect, I bow to the sun, who travels 2,202 yojans in half a *nimesha*." Now again, let me show you some calculations,' he said pointing to the white board.

'A yojan is approximately 9 miles and a nimesha is 16/75 of a second. So $2,202 \text{ yojans} \times 9 \text{ miles} \times 75/8 \text{ nimeshas}$ equals 1,85,794 miles per second, which is, remarkably, equal to the actual value of 1,86,282.397 miles per second.

'In fact, the Rig Veda 5.40.5 has a phrase which translates to "O Sun! When you are blocked by the one whom you gifted your own light (moon), then the earth will be surprised by the sudden darkness."

'This is a remarkably accurate description of a solar eclipse,' he put his marker down on the table and let out a deep sigh, as if someone had taken a weight off his shoulders.

Everyone was listening intently while Abhilash continued to exhibit his knowledge, 'You know those two brothers who invented the aeroplane?' 'Wright brothers!' LSD replied quickly. Abhilash nodded in agreement. He continued, 'The Wright Brothers invented the aeroplane in the nineteenth century. However, the description, mechanism and operation was written centuries before them in our mythology. We called it *vimanas* then, and in fact, the Pushpak Vimana is also mentioned in the Ramayana.'

According to Dronaparva, vimanas are described as shaped like spheres and as moving at a great speed on mighty winds generated by mercury. The Vaimaanika Shastra of Maharishi Bharadhwaja gives a description of aircraft that are much more advanced than our present aircraft.'

Everyone in the room was enthralled by the way Abhilash explained things. Shahista, however, was still unimpressed. She blatantly asked, 'For how long do I have to bear with your utter nonsense?' Silence engulfed the room. Parimal looked at her straight in the eye. 'Thi . . . s i . . . sn't nonsense. I don't doubt . . . science but you'll have to agree that our my . . . thology has described a lot of stuf . . . f centurie . . . s before science could . . . even think about them. You're a doctor, right? I'm sure you know about S . . . ushruta Sam . . . hita.' Shahista nodded in agreement. LSD quickly typed something and replied, 'Yes, I know about it too. It's one of the oldest, best and outstanding commentaries on the medical science of surgery. It is the earliest medical encyclopaedia known to the world, written by a man named Sushruta, an ancient Indian surgeon. Sushruta, dubbed the "founding father of surgery", was a physician originally of south India who practised in Varanasi. One of the earliest known mentions of the name is in the Bower Manuscript (fourth or fifth century), where Sushruta is listed as one of the ten sages residing in the Himalayas.

'Texts also suggest that he learned surgery in Varanasi from Dhanvantari, the god of medicine in Hindu mythology.'

Abhilash felt confident as he had a supporter now. He looked at Dr Batra, who was listening to everything attentively. While Shahista still had doubts, LSD seemed to enjoy this debate. Dr Batra got up from his chair and looked at everyone. After a couple of minutes, he said, 'Even though I don't know much about mythology, we can't ignore

the fact that medical practices had started long before modern science or modern medicine came into the picture. It was announced in a scientific journal that the oldest and the first evidence of the drilling of teeth of a living person was found in Mehrgarh. Eleven drilled molar crowns from nine adults were discovered in a graveyard in Mehrgarh that was 7,500- 9,000 years old. Some evidence of orthopaedic surgeries was also found, leading to the conclusion that ancient India had the technology to implement surgical procedures. In fact, anaesthesia was made using herbs in Ayurveda.'

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan sat in his office with his phone on. He addressed the person he was conversing with as 'sir'. It seemed as if some orders were being passed on through the phone to Dr Srinivasan. He assured 'sir' of the safety of the laboratory and all other members. He then explained why it was important to pay heed to the suggestions of the other team members.

At last, he said, 'Thank you, sir,' and hung up. The next session then began.



Chapter 7

Existence Exhibited

Everyone assembled in the same room and took their respective seats. Shahista sat on the seat next to Om. She looked around to make sure the guards were in the vicinity this time, for the sake of everyone's safety. This time, everybody could sense the sensitivity of the situation; they could feel something and were apprehensive.

Dr Srinivasan came close to Om, bent down in front of him and said, 'What should we call you? Om? Or Bankim? Madhukar maybe? Gursheel is good? Or you'd prefer Vidur? Surprised, right? You have spilled a lot of things. Now, either we get the rest of it just the same way, or you can choose to reveal it all willingly. By force or by choice: either way, we will acquire whatever we desire. What do you say?' Dr Srinivasan had a sardonic smile.

Om didn't speak and his face conveyed that he had already given in. He appeared to be very disturbed, like a thief who was just told where his million-dollar treasure could be found.

Dr Srinivasan straightened up, moved farther away and instructed Dr Shahista to explain the new process to Om.

Shahista complied.

'Om, we are going to hook you up to a lie detector and project your thoughts as visuals on the screen by matching their wavelength and converting them into images,' Shahista spoke as humbly as she could, like a mother explaining to her child, who's about to be vaccinated.

'Which means that . . .' Om said steadily and was interrupted by Dr Batra.

'Which means you can't lie, because your thoughts will be displayed as clearly as you have lived them.'

'I am sure you don't have any objection. Do you?' Dr Srinivasan spoke arrogantly.

'Do I have a choice?' Om said.

'None ! Dr Batra, set up.' Dr Srinivasan said.

'Yes, sir,' Dr Batra replied.

Om glanced towards Shahista, who was already looking at him sympathetically.

Dr Srinivasan left the laboratory for his office and dialled Veerbhadrā's number on his way.

'Veerbhadrā, report!' he commanded.

At the other end, Veerbhadrā said, 'Sir, our people have those lockers secured. They will reach in some time.'

Dr Srinivasan asked for whatever was in that locker to be brought to him as soon as they arrived.

Veerbhadrā responded, 'Consider it retained, sir,' while going through the location and address of the locker.

Dr Srinivasan asked, 'How much time you need?'

Veerbhadrā took a moment to calculate the travel time and informed Dr Srinivasan that he would have it on his desk by early morning.

Having said this, Veerbhadrā left. Srinivasan continued talking to Dr Batra and rest of the team members.

Outside Dr Srinivasan's office, Veerbhadrā made some calls and arrangements in order to complete his task in the

given time.

Veerbhadrā spoke into the phone: 'How long will it take to reach me?' After hearing the reply, Veerbhadrā said, 'Do not leave any traces behind. My men will give you a sealed envelope. After securing it, deliver it to the address on the envelope, to the person who gives you this code: 5MW580YLF, written as a serial number on a 100-rupee note.'

Veerbhadrā disconnected the call and dialled another number.

'You will get the parcel tonight at the same address. Secure it. Your code is 5MW580YLF. Get the package delivered safely to the chopper pilot at the earliest. Your payments will be transferred to your accounts and the 100-rupee note will be delivered to you before time.'

Back in the laboratory, LSD and Dr Batra carried out the placement of all the wires and kept talking to each other while doing so.

Abhilash, meanwhile, helped Shahista in preparing a list of questions to ask.

'You must start from Sushen, one of his own names as he had revealed,' Abhilash suggested.

'Why Sushen specifically? Why not any other name?' Shahista was perplexed.

'Because that is, in my view, the oldest of all and happens to be one end of this tangled thread. The other end is Om Shastri. Or you could begin by asking all he knows about the Satya yuga.'

'I am a bit confused. Who was Sushen?' Shahista said in an apologetic yet demanding tone.

'Alright! During the period of the Ramayana, which is Treta yuga, the second after Satya yuga, in the war between Lord Ram and Ravana, Lakshman (Lord Ram's younger

brother) was struck by a deadly arrow shot by Indrajeet (Ravana's son). It is said that only one herb had the ability to save Lakshman's life, the sanjeevani *buti*, at mount Dunagiri in the Himalayas. The vaidya who suggested the sanjeevani buti was Sushen. You must have seen the image of Lord Hanuman flying with a mountain in his left hand. If he is talking of Vidur, it's in the Mahabharata, that is, the Dwapara yuga. And that means, Sushen must be known as Sushen from the legendary Ramayana who, according to the stories, saved the life of Lakshman by suggesting the Sanjeevani herb, for which Lord Hanuman lifted the whole mountain,' Abhilash explained.

'So, you want to say that in order to sort out the connections between all the names, we need to begin from Sushen, that is, the Treta yuga?' Shahista cleared the clouds of doubt from her head.

'I did what you asked me to, and I've stumbled onto something,' LSD said.

'What?' Abhilash was curious.

'Vidur is said to be Dhritarashtra's brother, the most knowledgeable and wise person of his era.'

'And Sanjay?'

'Sanjay was Dhritarashtra's advisor and also worked as his eyes to the world. His father was Gavalgan.'

'So I was right!' Abhilash beamed with pride. And LSD added to his pride by confessing, 'Hmm! Looks like you were!'

'Exactly! You see, it sounds crazy, but I'm serious. There is surely some association between this man and the man from Treta yuga. And it's odd that all our answers lie with only one person, Om Shastri. So, we must start from there.'

After hooking up Om to the lie detector, Dr Batra engrossed himself on his computer. Seeing this, Dr Shahista

joined him, leaving Abhilash. As Dr Srinivasan entered the laboratory, Dr Batra called out to him, 'Sir, we are ready!'

'Proceed, then,' replied Dr Srinivasan, with a cold gaze.

Shahista requested, 'Om, please cooperate. I assure you that you won't be harmed.'

Om nodded half-heartedly. Dr Batra and LSD did the needful. They connected Om with various wires and cables.

Within a few minutes, Om found himself tied extensively. Cords ran from his head, chest, arms and feet, and diverged in two opposite directions. The ones that originated from his head were further connected to a computer and another machine, which in turn was secured to a projector screen. All others ran straight to the lie detector. Dr Batra and LSD were done with their part of the preparation.

Shahista had readied her questions with Abhilash's help. Everyone was set to start; all the lights were switched off. Darkness swept in. The only light came from the computer screens. LSD pressed some keys on her system and finally hit enter. As soon as she did that, a sheet of paper was scratched by some pins, sketching a graph. Some images appeared on the screen for a split second and went off. Om had opened his eyes.

The screen didn't show any images when Om's eyes were open. As he blinked, the brightness in the room increased. The screen projected the time of the day, the places, the attire of the people that were being projected, seasons, cultures: everything flew past all of them without making any sense.

The guards in the room were alert and loaded their guns in preparation for any unwanted activity. The faces in the room were also being displayed in a jumbled form as Om's thoughts kept on skipping rapidly. Shahista realized that

Om's thoughts needed to be controlled. For that, she had to give Om a feeling of calmness and safety.

To do that, Shahista held Om's shoulder, and said in a soothing voice, 'Om, it's okay. Calm down. You are not alone. Open your eyes and look at me. Take deep breaths, let your body go loose, relax, de-stress yourself.'

As Shahista spoke, the screen changed gradually and things became clearer. The images stood still a while before moving out of the queue.

Dr Srinivasan ordered the guards to be alert.

As his voice registered on Om's eardrums, Dr Srinivasan could see himself on the screen. Following that, the landscape of a village flowed in. There was greenery everywhere. Dr Srinivasan's gaze deepened and he grew serious. Thereafter, came the image of a government school, some children sitting on old, worn-out wooden benches and a few Englishmen in the uniform of the East India Company. The image seemed prior to India's independence. This image was a jolt to Dr Srinivasan, who was shaken to the core.

Everyone except Shahista had clearly noticed that change in expression and the uncomfortable body language.

Shahista said, 'Om, are you ready to do this?' And as she said that, the screen turned blank.

'Hmm!' came the answer from Om Shastri. The lie detector beeped, which meant Om wasn't really ready.

All the eyes turned towards the direction of the beep. Om's too. He then looked at Shahista, who had a slight trace of a smile on her face. Shahista spoke maturely, 'It's okay. I understand. But we have to start this now. Om, when you open your eyes, we lose the visuals. So, you have to keep them closed while speaking,' she explained.

Om silently closed his eyes. Shahista looked towards Dr Srinivasan first and then towards Dr Batra. Both nodded slowly. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment and started the procedure. ‘Who is Sushen?’ she asked her first question.

Om was silent for a while but he knew his memories would say it all and so he spoke.

‘It was me.’

As he said that, the picture of a village and a forest flashed on the screen. Tribal people could be seen, donned in few but clean clothes, barefoot, carrying bows and arrows. Numerous trees and flowers could be seen. It seemed to be a rich and fertile land, with mountains, amazing species of plants and flowers and dense forests with high falls.

‘What is this place?’ Shahista asked.

‘A village in southern India,’ replied Om.

‘Who were you there?’

‘I was a vaidya there. People approached me for various treatments. I knew of every root, bark, leaf and flower that ever grew on the mountains. I knew of each disease and its cure.’

‘Where exactly is this village?’ prodded Shahista.

‘The name is Suchindram. It now falls under the Kanyakumari district, in Tamil Nadu.’

‘Whose lives did you save?’

‘I saved many lives. One of them was Lakshman. I also served many people and monkeys during the war.’

‘You mean, the Lakshman from the Ramayana?’ asked Shahista to confirm.

‘Yes.’

Om started thinking and as he did that, a man materialized on the screen. Long beard, saffron clothes and

lungi (an Indian outfit that was worn by ancient men), wooden footwear and a turban on the head. His surroundings were essentially plants and herbs, with a few unusual utensils and lotions in front of him and herbs diluted in water. The man looked exactly like Om Shastri. The same face, the same man he was today. The man was sitting near an unconscious body. Beside him, there was another man holding the unconscious man's hand while tears rolled down his cheeks. There were monkey-faced humans who seemed to be concerned as well. It was evident that the characters on the screen were none other than Sushen, Lord Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman.

'How is this possible? How are you alive even today?' asked Shahista as she contained her shock in order to be more straightforward.

'I haven't aged since then. I feel tired at times but without any food or rest, I get energized automatically. I get hurt, I fall ill . . . but right before death can engulf me, I start recovering again. I don't die,' disclosed Om.

The silence in the room became uncomfortable and the atmosphere turned sombre.

Shahista could hardly believe any of it, but still went ahead and asked, 'How did you look at that time?'

All of a sudden, Dr Batra stood up from his seat and screamed, 'This is bullshit! No! This is unacceptable!'

As he thundered in rage, he started walking towards the door.

Om opened his eyes and the room went dark. One of the guards switched on the light.

Dr Srinivasan and Shahista rushed to stop Dr Batra and blocked his way.

Dr Batra echoed, 'Sir, we are dealing with a mental patient here! I can't take all this anymore. He is building up

fantasies here!'

'Why is the lie detector not beeping, then?' Dr Srinivasan debated.

'Because his pulse is normal. When someone tells a lie, their blood pressure fluctuates and their heartbeat shoots up. Our machine notices such changes and notifies us accordingly,' Dr Batra answered reasonably.

'And these images we are seeing?' challenged Dr Srinivasan.

'The images we are seeing are not his memories but those created by his imagination, which he thinks are real. He is obsessed with his stories and thoughts and this obsession has led him to believe that he was actually a part of all that he says. He reads his own fantasies like he has lived them,' Dr Batra reasoned.

'Imaginations are blurred, Batra. They can never be as clear as what we are witnessing right now. Only real incidents and people can be clearly traced in our thoughts,' Srinivasan replied, frustrated with Dr Batra's interruption.

'Right! And this man thinks very strongly that all this is real. So, he never perceives anything like fiction. He believes he was present then and that he lived it all.' Dr Batra grew even more adamant about his view of the situation.

'Sir, it is vividly described in all the Hindu mythological books like the Ramayana. And he has studied those books so deeply that he thinks he actually belongs in them. He never realizes that he is lying. He is diseased, sir. It's an abnormality. Cases like his are numerous across the globe,' Dr Batra asserted.

'The session needs to end here!' Dr Srinivasan said, checking his watch.

'Let us continue tomorrow. For now, assemble for dinner,' he said as he walked away.

Within no time, the interrogation room was empty. The security team took Om to a secret place. He was handcuffed and surrounded by guards.

Later, everybody started discussing the day. When they were done with dinner, Dr Batra suddenly asked, 'Abhilash and Parimal, tell us your views and thoughts about this case.'

'Has anyone here heard of Ashwatthama and Parashuram?' Abhilash was the one to reply. 'Yes,' replied the innocent Parimal. 'Only heard of them, yes,' Dr Batra informed. 'Never heard of them!' Shahista muttered. 'Googled them now. Got an idea,' the tech-savvy LSD replied.

'Okay. The word "*parashu*" in the name signifies an axe. Parashuram literally translates to Ram with an axe. He was the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu, the fifth son of Renuka and the sage Jamadagni. He is one of the seven Chiranjivis (a person who lives forever, an immortal) in Hinduism. Parashuram is mostly known for ridding the world of Kshatriyas (the clan of kings and warriors) twenty-one times, after the mighty king Kartavirya killed his father. The birthplace of Bhargav Parashuram is contested, although the history of his lineage is considered to be emerging in the Haihaya kingdom located in modern-day Maheshwar, near the city of Indore in Madhya Pradesh.

'He received an axe after undertaking terrible penance to please Lord Shiva, who in turn taught him martial arts. Pleased with his extreme devotion, intense desire and perpetual meditation, Lord Shiva rewarded Shri Bhargav Ram (his original name) with divine weapons, which included the unconquerable and indestructible axe, Parashu,

and so he was named Parashuram. Lord Shiva then ordered Parashuram to liberate the earth from felons, demons and those blind with pride. Parashuram lived long enough to see the subsequent incarnations of Vishnu as Rama and Krishna. Parashuram possessed the Vijaya Dhanush, a bow of Lord Shiva given by the king of deities, Lord Indra. In the Ramayana, Parashuram had given the bow to the father of princess Sita, King Janak, for her *swayamwar* (the process of selecting the right mate and an eligible match for a princess). As a test of strength, suitors were asked to lift and string the mystic weapon. None of them was successful, except Lord Ram. But, as Lord Ram struggled to string the bow, it broke into two halves and produced a tremendous sound that reached Parashuram's ears while he meditated atop the Mahendra mountains. Infuriated, Parashuram came to confront King Ram, who, he realized, was also an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

'Parashuram has played crucial roles in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as the mentor of Bhishma, Karna and Drona. Drona is mostly referred to as Dronacharya. "Acharya", meaning teacher: he was the mentor of the Kauravas, who were one hundred brothers, and the Pandavas, who were five.' Abhilash was adept at explaining concepts and facts pertaining to Hinduism.

'Now, why are we going astray? Abhilash, what is the point you are driving at?' Shahista was in no mood to listen to lengthy lectures on Hinduism.

'The gist of the story is that Parashuram has appeared in every yuga and is an immortal.'

'Abhilash, it's interesting to hear all these tales from you and you recite them well. They are adding to my knowledge and might help me in the interrogation too,' said Dr Batra gratefully.

'Thank you. This is what I have been called here for, I suppose,' Abhilash replied rather humbly.

'Tell me about Ashwatthama,' said Dr Batra.

Abhilash answered, 'Dronacharya was the royal preceptor to the Kauravas and Pandavas. He was a master of advanced military arts, including the divine weapons or Divya Astras. Arjuna was his favourite student.'

'Learning that Parashuram was giving away his possessions to Brahmins, Drona approached him. Unfortunately, Parashuram only had his weapons left. He offered to give Drona the weapons as well as the knowledge of how to use them. Thus, Drona obtained all of his weapons and his title of "acharya", and people called him Dronacharya.'

'Abhilash, I asked you about Ashwatthama, not some Dronacharya,' said Dr Batra, to which Abhilash replied, 'Sir, it is important to know about Dronacharya to understand who Ashwatthama is. Dronacharya did many years of severe penance to please Lord Shiva in order to obtain a son who possessed the same valiance as Lord Shiva himself and so came Drauni, also called Ashwatthama.'

'Ashwatthama possessed the same valour as Lord Shiva. He was a mighty fighter who fought against the Pandavas, on the Kauravas' side. He and his maternal uncle Kripacharya were the only two survivors of the war. Ashwatthama, an invincible warrior, is believed to be the master of the science of weapons.'

'He possessed complete mastery over sixty-four forms of art and eighteen *vidyas* or branches of knowledge. Religious texts say that he will be the next Vyasa and also that he became one of the *sapta rishis*. Ashwatthama is one of the seven immortals. He is believed to be still alive.'

'He was born with a gem on his forehead, which gave him power over all other living beings lower than the humans. In fortitude, he was equal to a mountain, in energy to fire. In gravity, he was equal to an ocean, and in wrath, to the poison of the snake.

'The gem protected him from the attacks of ghosts, demons, poisonous insects and animals. Dronacharya loved his son very much.

'Dronacharya and Ashwatthama were loyal to Hastinapur (the kingdom of Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas). Ashwatthama's father Dronacharya was the best of all warriors. Lord Krishna knew that it was not possible to defeat Dronacharya when he had a bow and arrow in his hands. Krishna also knew that Dronacharya loved his son Ashwatthama very dearly. So Krishna suggested to Yudhishtira and other Pandava brothers that, if he was convinced that his son was killed on the battlefield, then Dronacharya would be desolate and would disarm himself in grief.

'Lord Krishna suggested that Bhima (one of the Pandavas) kill an elephant by the name Ashwatthama and claim to Dronacharya that he had killed Dronacharya's son Ashwatthama. After killing the elephant as advised, Bhima loudly declared that he had killed Ashwatthama. Dronacharya, however, did not believe Bhima's words and approached Yudhishtira, the eldest among the Pandavas. Drona knew of Yudhishtira's firm devotion to the truth and that he would never utter a lie. When Dronacharya approached Yudhishtira and questioned him as to whether his son was dead, Yudhishtira responded, "Ashwatthama is dead. But it is an elephant and not your son." Krishna also knew that it was not possible for Yudhishtira to lie outright. On his instructions, the other warriors blew trumpets and

conches, raising a joyous noise in such a way that Dronacharya only heard that "Ashwatthama is dead", but could not hear the latter part of Yudhishthira's reply.

'Out of grief, and believing his son to be dead, Dronacharya descended from his chariot, laid down his arms and sat in meditation. Closing his eyes, his soul went to heaven by astral travel in search of Ashwatthama's soul.

'While he was defenceless, he was executed by the Pandavas. Thus, on the fifteenth day of the eighteen-day battle, Guru Dronacharya was killed by the unfair means used by Lord Krishna and the Pandava brothers. The incident took Ashwatthama aback, and so he decided to anyhow end the chapter of the Pandavas.

'On the last night of the war after Duryodhan's defeat (Duryodhan was the eldest of the Kauravas, the hundred brothers), the very disturbed and restless Ashwatthama was sitting sleepless under a large tree.

'An owl, attacking a group of crows, caught his attention. This gave him the idea of attacking the Pandavas' camp at night. With a few surviving warriors, he attacked the camp on the eighteenth night of the war.

'Ashwatthama burned the entire Pandava camp to ashes, leaving nothing behind. He moved on and killed many prominent warriors of their army too.

'He also killed all five of the Pandavas' sons, the Upapandavas, while they were asleep, believing them to be the five Pandava brothers. In some versions of the story, he knew that they weren't the Pandavas but killed them anyway, because he couldn't find their fathers. Ashwatthama believed that it was acceptable for him to attack the unsuspecting Pandavas due to his father's death by unjust means; although he did believe his vengeance to

be justified, he was warned by people of his own side that it was not.

'When the Pandavas returned to the camp with Lord Krishna after the night, incensed over this act , Lord Krishna cursed Ashwatthama with immortality and a diseased life till the end of Kali yuga and took the gem off Ashwatthama's forehead, saying, "This wound will never heal!" This was the story of Ashwatthama.

'The story is completely unbelievable, and yet the legend of Ashwatthama would make the people of Hindu faith believe it. Apparently, a 5,000-year-old man has been found living in some temples in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh! The team of Zee News visited shrines like the Liloti Nath temple, the Shivrajpur temple and the Khaireshwar temple in UP, and everywhere, the legend of this man existed. The news channel experts stayed the whole night outside the closed doors of the temples with their cameras on just to find out who comes in and offers water and flowers to the statues before the door opens. No one came, but in the early morning, when the doors were opened, they found that the prayers were already performed, with water and flowers scattered in the closed premises.

'Locals believe that this 5,000-year-old man is actually Ashwatthama from the epic Mahabharat. In each temple, he performs puja every morning at dawn, offering water to the idols. This happens every day without fail, even when the temple doors are locked. The reporter also spoke to some doctors, pujaris and residents to verify the story.

'There was a newspaper article more than a decade ago about a railway employee on leave. During his wanderings in the jungles of Navsari, Gujarat, he had reported a very tall man of about 12 feet with a wound on his head. He claimed to have had a conversation with him and learnt that

Bheem was much taller and stronger than him,' Abhilash concluded.

'These cannot be anything else but just stories. You mentioned Dronacharya in both the descriptions . . . Parashuram and Ashwatthama,' asked Dr Batra.

'Yes, Ashwatthama is Dronacharya's son and Parashuram is Dronacharya's mentor. Both of them are believed to be seen in different yugas, thousands of years apart. In fact, legend goes that there is an Indian village near Burhanpur where there is a fort called Asirgarh. According to the locals, Ashwatthama still comes and offers flowers to the Shiva linga in the fort every morning. Some other people have claimed to see Ashwatthama walking and living among the tribes in the Himalayan foothills,' replied Abhilash.

'Let us move towards our sleeping cabins now,' LSD proposed. She rose from her seat immediately.

All the others left their seats along with her and walked behind Abhilash, guided by the guards.



Chapter 8

Cryptic Chest

It was a windy night. In the dark lobby, the only source of light was the swinging lamp at the end of the corridor.

LSD bid Dr Shahista goodnight and went to her room, which was huge, but it had a damp smell. Though it was nicely decorated with ancient lamps and furniture, it seemed that it hadn't been used for a very long time.

In the next room, Dr Shahista was worried about her children. She sat on her chair and reclined looking at the ceiling, while others were still settling in their rooms.

With time Dr Shahista's eyes grew heavy and soon she fell asleep. Late at night, she got up with a start as she saw a shadow outside the door and felt that somebody was walking outside her room. She quickly rose from the chair and opened the door to check outside. She walked to the end of the dark corridor and realized there was nobody there. All she heard was the sound of the waves. She turned back suddenly and found LSD standing there. Dr Shahista screamed in fear. 'What are you doing here?'

LSD gasped. 'I was feeling scared alone, I want to stay with you. Can I sleep in your room, please?'

Dr Shahista nodded in acceptance, wiping the sweat off her forehead.

They both entered Dr Shahista's room. LSD threw her bag on the couch and started unpacking.

Dr Shahista asked, 'Did you hear someone walking around?'

LSD replied with fear, 'Yes, I saw somebody's shadow outside my window but it was dark and I had my headphones on, so I couldn't hear a thing. I am glad I couldn't.'

She giggled, 'I don't want to see or hear a ghost. I am not comfortable at these old places, they are always haunted.'

Dr Shahista put her glass of water back. She comforted LSD by contradicting her and said, 'There is no such thing as ghosts.'

Curious, LSD asked, 'I don't understand. What were you doing outside?'

Dr Shahista bit back her story about the haunting shadow, as LSD was already frightened, and said, 'I am worried about my family and I want to speak to them, but it's too late at night.'

LSD tried to console Dr Shahista. 'Relax. I am sure your family will be fine and we will be out of this very soon,' she said, crossing her fingers.

Dr Shahista took a deep breath and walked to her bed.

LSD put her glasses back, opened her screen and interrupted the silence of the room as she clicked her laptop keys. Dr Shahista fell asleep within no time.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadrā had travelled to Port Blair (the capital of Andaman and Nicobar) in the dark of the night with two of his men in a speedboat to receive the delivery of the chest. As he received the chest, a pair of eyes witnessed him from a distance. Veerbhadrā headed back to Ross Island, followed by the unknown spy.

The night passed.

Shahista's sleep broke with a knock at the door and she noticed an envelope in the room. She opened it and woke LSD up. The envelope had details regarding their session's timing. It was bright outside.

Post-breakfast, Dr Shahista and Dr Batra walked to Dr Srinivasan's chamber, while the others proceeded to the interrogation room.

Meanwhile, Veerbhadrā also entered Dr Srinivasan's room, and looked around for Dr Srinivasan. He walked to him with two gunmen and two boxes in his hands. These were Om's lockers.

'Open them right here!' Dr Srinivasan ordered Veerbhadrā.

Dr Shahista and Dr Batra were there for a discussion, so they also joined in.

As the boxes opened before them, they were left astonished. The boxes contained notes written even before history began shaping itself and being recorded. Kept on some faraway land, secured, the pages were scribbled mostly in Sanskrit, apart from some that were in Hindi and Prakrit (an amalgamation of Pali and Sanskrit).

They were not the pages that one saw today. They were copper sheets. Each sheet had a name engraved on it as a header. They were the names Om had claimed to be his.

An old *kharal* (ancient stone pots used to crush and mix herbs) also emerged from the box, as also a few big, heavy finger rings, not seen or used today.

Old and rare coins, used for trade by various rulers, and more scripts jotted down in the Devanagari hand and even Urdu, surfaced.

'Sir, there's a piece of information I found in the locker. I personally secured it so as to hand it over to you directly,' said Veerbhadrā.

'It's a map, sir, with some pieces of metal, a bottle of mercury and a book.'

The book was wrapped in leaves and a white cloth with blood stains on it. The book had a metal cover and something carved on it.

Dr Batra held the book in his hands and turned the pages. His eyes grew wide and his astonishment was obvious as he saw a few diagrams in the book. He kept fumbling with the pages, as if he was searching for something. He turned and looked towards Dr Srinivasan, who stretched his hands forward as a signal. Dr Batra wanted to linger over the pages a while, but he handed the book to Dr Srinivasan.

'Shall we proceed . . . if you are done?' said Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Batra looked at the metal block and the map. Dr Srinivasan said, 'Yes, it's a map. But a map of what and which kind?'

'The man with the answer is right here, sitting inside the room. Let's ask him directly,' suggested Shahista.

'No, not now. Don't let him know that we already have it in our custody. First, complete the list of questions you have prepared,' Dr Srinivasan commanded.

'Okay, sir,' Shahista replied.

'Send LSD to me. Veerbhadrā, you stay with them. Shahista, don't start until I come back,' Dr Srinivasan said.

They departed, nodding, as Dr Srinivasan waited for LSD.

Dr Batra almost ran and entered the room. He looked at Om, reflecting both anger and confusion, went back to his seat and started working on the computer. Shahista walked over to Dr Batra and found him very worked up. He was curiously searching for something on his computer.

'Tej, what are you doing?' she asked, concerned.

Dr Batra kept working and didn't even look up from his screen.

'Are you okay? See, all of us are equally shocked and surprised . . .'

'Shh . . .' Dr Batra held up a hand, signalling Shahista to stay silent, and kept doing his work.

Shahista felt offended but stood by his side for a few seconds and then turned around to leave. Dr Batra called her back. 'Shahista!' She turned back, her eyes affixed on the screen. 'Look at this.' Dr Batra shifted the monitor in her direction. 'What is this?' she asked.

Dr Batra started explaining it to her.

'Every cell in our body has tiny engines called mitochondria. They provide us with the energy we need. When these engines go down, our body starts ageing and decaying.'

'What is the point, Tej?'

'The point is, if these mitochondria start rejuvenating, the body may live longer than the average human,' Dr Batra went on.

'So, you want to say that these tiny engines never went down in Om's body?' Dr Shahista tried to clear her head.

Tej tried explaining it the other way round.

'Scientists today have formulated a way to extend the lifetime of yeast, which is normally about six days, to about ten weeks. A tenfold increase, that is.'

'And how is that related to our concern?' Shahista was perplexed.

'Shahista, those ten weeks are analogous to 800 years of a human life. When two genes, RAS2 and SCH9, were removed from its DNA, the yeast's longevity came as a consequence. The same genes when removed from a mouse doubled its life span too!' Dr Tej continued.

'So?' asked Dr Shahista.

'Sixty different genes responsible for ageing the human body have already been discovered. My concern is that science still has a long way to go before claiming that it can do the same with us humans and my concern is contradictory to Om's claim.'

'You still think of him as deceptive?' Shahista asked, and then said after a short pause, 'See, Tej, I have many reasons not to trust him, but a hell of a lot of reasons not to question his credibility, too.'

'I need a sample of his blood,' Dr Batra said with determination.

Shahista slowly nodded. 'Dr Srinivasan would never allow you to do that.'

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan was talking to LSD in his cabin.

He laid a map in front of her and asked, 'Can you prove to me that you are indeed the best? You have six hours to solve this puzzle, which is, to find the place in the map and where the spot leads us to.'

LSD loved challenges and accepted them all with open arms, as they allowed her to test her boundaries, to improve herself and to make her even more proud of herself. Her eyes beamed with excitement. She took the map from him and turned around to walk out. Dr Srinivasan said in a rather hushed voice, 'Keep this between us, LSD. Do not utter a word to anyone else. Your time starts now!'

After a while, Dr Srinivasan entered the interrogation room again.



Chapter 9 Yesteryear's Now

The next session was now to begin. As everyone settled, Shahista started the interrogation again.

'What other roles have you been playing, apart from Sushen, in all these years?'

A rapid series of places and faces depicting various events flashed on the screen.

The person on the screen wore different traditional dresses and the places portrayed different centuries and eras. But the face of the man was never-changing, not even slightly.

Om had scrunched up his eyes as he remembered all of his life and reflected expressions of fear, uncertainty, happiness, calmness, excitement, surprise and guilt.

His eyes watered then, as something unpleasant passed through his head. He opened his eyes then to reveal they had gone blood red. As he did so, the images disappeared from the screen. He seemed hurt and terrified. When he realized they were all looking at him, he controlled himself and calmed down instantly.

However, he was distressed by the fact that his life was being watched like a motion picture by strangers and the secret would soon be known to them.

Everyone in the room saw unidentifiable visuals on the screen but could easily make out three faces. The first, beautiful and elegant, which was engraved in Om's memories, clearly was that of a lady. This face was the basis of all the hassle Om underwent. She could be often seen in distinct outfits, too.

One mark of contrast between the woman and Om was that he never ever appeared to be old, whereas she was projected in every age: as a teenager, as an adolescent, as a mature lady and as an old woman. The lady's lifeless body was projected as being in three different ages, accompanied by Om in three different attires. When she was seen as being dead for the third time, Om opened his eyes.

The second face that appeared repeatedly was that of a man with a strong build, carrying a bow and numerous arrows, and an axe-like weapon called parashu, apart from some other ancient, massive weapons.

The third visage was also a strong one. His expression was full of rage and he seemed ready to combat anything with no sense of fear.

'Who are they?' asked LSD.

'Parashuram and Ashwatthama, two of the immortals of our mythology,' said Abhilash.

'Two?!" exclaimed LSD in disbelief.

'There are seven immortals in Hindu mythology. There are five others besides those two,' replied Abhilash, still looking at the screen.

'Who are they?' asked LSD again.

While a series of unrelated visuals kept changing on the screen, making no sense, Abhilash continued speaking to LSD and looking at the screen to find some relevance and connectivity to his wisdom.

'The other immortals are: King Bali. After the arrogance of Asura king Mahabali, he was crushed by the Vamana avatar of Lord Vishnu and was sent to live in Patal loka. But Bali was allowed to come to earth once a year. That day is celebrated as Onam in Kerala.

'Vibhishan, the younger brother of Ravana. Vibhishan helped Lord Ram, who blessed him with immortality. Rajasthan's town of Kota has a temple dedicated to Vibhishan. It is the only such temple in India!

'Ved Vyas, the writer of Mahabharata. Ved Vyas is also immortal.

'Kripacharya, the guru of the Kauravas and Pandavas.

'And lastly, Lord Hanuman, the immortal who protects his devotee in Kali yuga.'

All were astounded to see the events unfolding before them, except Shahista. In her experience performing hypnotism, she had seen patients in an even higher degree of distress than Om. So none of it came as a shock to her.

She kept one hand on Om's hand to soothe and calm him.

'Om, who else have you been living as all these years, other than Sushen? Answer slowly, one after another. Take your time and keep calm.'

Om looked at Shahista and then closed his eyes before he started speaking again.

In the woods away from the facility, two eyes in a face mask were fixed upon something, like those of an eagle on its prey, and were waiting for something to happen. The person was equipped with modern war weapons and hi-tech devices.

In a distant room, a pair of old eyes were staring at a white screen which showed the inside of the laboratory in the facility where the team and Om sat. The man held a

rudraksha mala (a string made of rudraksha beads) in his hands. He picked up a cellular phone and pressed the redial button, as his eyes were fixed on the screen. He waited several seconds and then saw Dr Srinivasan pick up the phone, nod his head, and calmly say, 'Yes, sir.'

Back in the interrogation room, the screen showed a man, cap-a-pie adorned in gold, surrounded by servants and maids in a palace. He had Om's face. The palace was royal and elite. Om mumbled continuously as the images flew by on the screen.

He was saying, 'I have experienced all the colours of life. I have been rich and famous, with people craving to serve me, greet me with honour. On the other hand, I have been in rags too.'

The visuals now portrayed Om as shivering in the cold, with barely any clothes on his body. The infrastructure showed without a doubt that a time gap of a century existed between the two consequent scenarios.

'I have been an emperor. I have been a slave.' The pictures showing Om in all these roles flowed on the screen.

Thereafter, Om was seen alone in some woods, clueless and petrified.

'I have been a frightened and solitary person. I have been a loved man. I have also been a brave and fierce warrior.'

Now, Om could be seen with a baby, horrified and handicapped, in his lap and the same pretty lady beside him. The image stood still for what seemed like an eternity. Then, Om opened his eyes that had gone moist. A tear rolled down his cheek, undisturbed. The first person Om saw was Dr Shahista, who was also moved but said nothing.

Om calmed down and started again, more practically and less emotionally.

'I have been Govindlal Yadav and Protim Das and B.C. Chakraborty. I have been Venkata Ramanna Rao and later, I lived as my own son with the name Madhukar Rao. I have lived as Gursheel Singh and as S.P. Reddy. Adhiraiyan is also one of my several identities.' The screen had been blank as he said this.

Abhilash leaned in towards Shahista and said, 'Ask him more about Vishnu Gupt.' Shahista looked at Dr Srinivasan and got a silent consent.

'You took many names, but we already have them. They are all over the government records. But there is one name you didn't mention: Vishnu Gupt,' Shahista questioned.

A blurred image occupied the screen that got clearer every moment.

The Om now being projected was a bald one with only the typical Brahmin lock of hair. Lord Vishnu's sign, a 'U', appeared on the man's forehead. He wore a simple white stole and a dhoti (a traditional garment worn in ancient times).

Om began, 'I was the chief advisor to Chandra Gupt Maurya. One of the most important members of his council, I was also a good friend to him. I advised him in his personal and political affairs, apart from the issues of our warfare. I was also known by the name Chanakya.'

As Om uttered this, the snapshot on the screen became clear and they realized that it was Chanakya himself without a second of doubt. Parimal was calculating something as Om spoke and as they finished, he took a piece of paper, stood up and walked across the room to Dr Batra. The heading on the page said, 'The time gap between the lives of Sushen and Chanakya and the period between Chanakya's era and the present day.'

Dr Batra, after pondering over it for a while, said, ‘That is what I am saying: impossible, unbelievable!’ Then he stood up and took the page to Dr Srinivasan.

Dr Srinivasan had a close look at the paper on which was scribbled in a nearly illegible hand:

SUSHEN AT 7292 bc, CHANAKYA AT 321 bc, A TIME LAPSE OF 6971 YEARS

CHANAKYA AT 321 bc—PRESENT DAY 2017—A TIME LAPSE OF 2338 YEARS

SUSHEN AT 7292 bc—PRESENT DAY 2017—TOTAL TIME LAPSE OF 9309 YEARS

He managed to comprehend it and stood up with a sigh. ‘Continue the interrogation. Do not wait for me,’ he said, looking in Shahista’s direction.

Meanwhile, LSD was lost in digging out meaning from the map with the help of her gadgets by locating and connecting the map and using the ancient codes, rotating it in all directions. It was evident from her curiosity and expressions that she was just a shuffle away from decoding the place the map depicted. This would be another real breakthrough for the team.

In the woods, the man took out a device from his bag and split it into four portions. The four independent devices, after being set free on the land, rolled into four different directions and placed themselves near the four corners of a nearby building. The man then pressed a button on his tablet and a 3D image of the building appeared on the tablet. The image was obstructed by red dots moving here and there, which were people. The man could now keep an eye on each person entering and leaving the establishment.

With the piece of paper stating just a part of Om's total life span, Dr Srinivasan walked the corridor, confused and disoriented. He soon stood abreast a heavy glass door and flashed his ID. The door slid open and let him in.

After a short while, he found himself in front of another door being watched over by a couple of guards. The door opened only after the retina scan of Dr Srinivasan. The doors parted and let him in.

Inside the laboratory, Shahista was saying, 'Do you even realize the meaning of what you narrated? You are trying to convince us that you were alive . . .' She was interrupted by Om.

'In Treta yuga.'

'And you were also alive in Chandra Gupt Maurya's reign?'

'In the Kali yuga . . . I am still alive, and I'm not trying to convince anyone of anything.'

Shahista took a deep breath and replied patiently, 'Om, all these periods add up to a total of thousands of years. You want us to believe that you have been alive since the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata?'

'I have been alive since the Satya yuga, through the Treta yuga and Dwapara yuga and now I'm in front of you in the Kali yuga,' Om replied with a heavenly grin.

Abhilash was keenly listening to Om. He interrupted, 'Who were you in the Dwapara yuga?'

Om looked at him and then back at Shahista before closing his eyes, and said, 'I had many names in history, but one of them that belonged to the Dwapara yuga was Vidur.'

The image on the screen provided the proof that Om's words were facts, simply stated. Om appeared in a rich outfit, embellished in golden ornaments that hung low on his chest and a golden crown to add to his majesty.

He stood beside a seemingly blind man, who appeared to be sitting on the king's seat beside a blindfolded woman, presumably the queen. The blind king and the blindfolded queen were King Dhritarashtra and his wife Queen Gandhari, the parents of the Kauravas.

'Vidur! The stepbrother of King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari!' Abhilash exclaimed. Abhilash bowed his head, joined his hands in respect and questioned humbly, 'Which means you have really met Lord Krishna? Did he actually stay at your house in Dwapara yuga?'

Shahista continued before Om could react to the remark. 'Since when have you been alive? Tell us all that you remember and have been through.'

Om took a deep breath and Shahista sensed his helplessness in it. He knew he was trapped and couldn't do much about it. So, he started.



Chapter 10

Outdated Deciphered

Meanwhile, Dr Srinivasan had entered a place that was deliberately concealed. The room, with glass walls, had been carefully disguised. He had brought with him the book that they had found in Om's locker and he handed it to the old man. The old man's eyes beamed with excitement as he took the book and started turning its pages. But soon, the happiness turned into fury. After a long silence, the man spoke in a trembling voice, 'Where is the other half of this book?'

Dr Srinivasan stood confused and scared. He had thought the book was complete, though in a language incomprehensible to any of the members in the facility and with weird diagrams, maps and plants, not easily understandable. Before he could say it all to the man, the man shouted in rage, almost screeching, 'I said, where's the second half of this book?'

Dr Srinivasan replied hurriedly, 'Sir, I don't know, sir. This is the only book we discovered from the lockers.' He was terrified.

The old man slowly twisted his fingers and gestured to Dr Srinivasan to come closer to him. Dr Srinivasan obeyed and kneeled on the floor near the man's worn-out chair.

The old man grabbed Srinivasan by his hair, looked in his eyes angrily and said, ‘Look at this. Read this, you illiterate. Every alternate page in this book is missing.’ He shoved the book in Dr Srinivasan’s face. ‘All the even numbered pages are intact here and all the odd numbered pages lie in the second book. This is a trick, so that the books are useless without each other. Where is the other book now?’

Dr Srinivasan could see no page numbers but surrendered quickly, saying, ‘This is all we could get, sir. Dr Batra understood this book as soon as he looked at it.’

The old man replied, disgusted, ‘He understood things by looking at the diagrams of DNA and the extraction of genes from it. He can comprehend things but cannot conclude anything with this damned book even if he manages to read and understand the language. No one can come to a result with this book, because it is not complete. What else did you get from the lockers?’

‘Sir, everything we found was sent to your personal laboratory, except a map which I handed over to LSD in order to decrypt,’ Dr Srinivasan said with a dry throat.

At the mere mention of a map, the old man’s eyes glittered.

‘Map? That map is the key to the other book. How long will she take to decode it?’ he asked rudely.

‘I do not know, sir.’

‘Then ask her and tell me right away.’

‘Sure sir.’

Dr Srinivasan left the room in haste, feeling insulted and terrified.

Far off, in the woods, another man, his face similarly masked, joined the first one, with an ancient key in his hand. They were about to raid the building they were keeping a close eye on. Both set their watches to the same

time and one of them showed another the internals of the building, the moving red dots, and signalled to the entrance that they had to ambush in order to break into the building. They decided on how many people each would take down before meeting at the common point, a door in the building, without speaking at all.

Back in the interrogation room, just as Om was about to answer Shahista's question, LSD shrieked, 'YES!' as she shot both her hands up in the air, as if declaring herself the winner of some unannounced marathon. The guards, out of shock, turned their guns in her direction, on alert. All the heads turned towards her and Dr Srinivasan entered the room. LSD looked around and realized what she had done. When she looked at Dr Srinivasan, her expression changed. Suddenly, she did not feel like a winner but a little girl who had broken her mother's favourite vase. She looked at Dr Srinivasan terrified and apologetic at the same time. She was so scared that tears welled up in her eyes.

Shahista stood up to console her but Dr Srinivasan stopped her from doing so.

He walked up to LSD and took her hand to take her out of the room.

When they crossed the door, he asked, 'Why did you scream?'

'Because I deciphered the map you gave me, sir.'

'Good. I was coming to you for it. Where is it?'

'Sir, actually, in the map, they deliberately exchanged the latitude and longitude values of the location. The degrees and the decimals above that were interchanged; the water bodies were converted to landscapes and vice versa, so that the location couldn't be easily determined.'

'LSD, I am not in the least interested in this. Just tell me the location,' Dr Srinivasan said rather impatiently.

LSD rushed inside the room again, jotted down something on a piece of paper from her screen, and came back within a minute.

She handed over the slip to Dr Srinivasan, and said, 'These are a series of mountains, woods and caves in Sri Lanka and this is the exact location in the map.' She pointed to a spot. 'It's an old cave-like structure.'

'Okay, go back inside,' was all Dr Srinivasan said.

LSD didn't get her part of the much deserved appreciation for the great job she had done. But she was a self-motivated girl and praise didn't matter much to her.

She nodded silently, said under her breath, 'Okay, sir,' and walked back into the room.

Dr Srinivasan took a sigh of relief with the paper in his hand and rushed to the secure vault of the old man.

Om Shastri continued with his answer in the lab.

'One day, I opened my eyes in a hut with three old rishis. The hut was big and crowded with followers from outside.

'I saw them from the holes of the mud walls. One of the rishis came to me and asked, "How are you feeling, son?"'

As Om narrated the incident, the picture started playing on the screen, wherein a fair and tall man, above fifty years of age, stood smiling. He was wearing a plain white kurta and a dhoti, with a pair of wooden slippers. Red and yellowish threads circumvented his right wrist, while a white thread ran from his left shoulder to his right waist and back again.

'I can never fail to recall them and the first flashes with them, as they are the first people I saw in my life.'

"“I am feeling hungry, sir. Where am I?”

"“Before you ask where you are, you must ask who you are,” the rishi replied with a smile.

'I wanted to tell them who I was, but I then realized that I didn't know it myself,' Om confessed.

"Who am I?" I asked them.'

'So that is why you said that you don't know your real name when we asked you about it,' Abhilash intervened and had to bear the stares of Shahista and Dr Batra for interrupting Om. Abhilash read their looks and immediately understood that he had to remain silent. Om continued and the screen too followed him.

'As the old rishi entered the room, the others touched his feet and bowed in front of him with reverence. The revered rishi sat beside me and put his hand on my head.

"Why don't I remember anything?" I asked.

"Because you don't need to; you are forty years old. Consider today as your first day in this world. You need rest now as you have many wounds in your body, some freshly stitched. So don't exert yourself," the rishi said.

I was lying on the bed and still could see scars and stitches on my hands and chest.

"I am hungry," I said.

"I know, son. But you can't be fed. You will have to stay hungry. Now, you must sleep," the rishi told me.

'One of the other rishis signalled something, and he came immediately with a liquid in an earthen flask. I gulped it down in haste as it was to quench my thirst. After a while, I fell asleep.

'When I woke up, it was dark outside. I thought I had slept for a few hours, but later, I was told that I had been in a deep slumber for 150 days, that is, nearly four months. It was raining when I had slept, which proved that they were right because when I woke up, I was chilled to the bones. I was still famished and nothing in the hut had changed. All

the three rishis still sat working by the fire, with herbs and solutions.

‘I found myself lying on a mat on the floor. My body was still covered in stitches and cuts. The senior rishi entered the hut again and everyone bowed to him.

‘He accepted their greetings and looked at me. He came to sit next to me and handed me a large vessel. Another rishi came and poured water in it till it was full. I knew nothing as to what should be done with it.

‘He guided my face above the vessel and then, for the first time ever, I saw my reflection. My face was covered with cuts and stitches. My almost bald head exhibited signs of the battle I must have been a part of. One of my eye sockets was melted and the other one was surrounded by a dark patch. I was terrified to see that my right ear was missing. I looked horrendous, similar to a demon.’

The visual of Om on screen was so disturbing that Dr Shahista and LSD had to look away. Nothing on his face looked normal, every feature was deformed.

“How do you feel, son?” the rishi asked me.

“Who are you?” I countered.

“I am Devadas, also known by the name of Dhanvantari. You can call me Kasiraja. That is what they all call me. Now, tell me, how are you feeling?” Kasiraja replied with an amiable smile.

“I am hungry,” I repeated.

“I know, but there are two more full moons to go before you can eat anything solid. Till then, you must learn to endure the hunger. You must take only the potions that the sages prepare.”

“How will I sustain myself? I will die!” I argued.

“You will get through as you have done for the past four months. As a matter of fact, if you eat something, you will

surely die. Now, you must rest," said the humble rishi.

'Kasiraja walked to the door to leave the hut, when I asked, "Tell me, who am I? What is my real name?"

'He turned back and said, "You didn't have a name in the past. At present, you will go by the name Mrityunjay and will have many names in the future."

'Kasiraja then left the hut and called out, "Sushruta!"

Everyone looked at each other's faces in surprise as they heard Sushruta's name from Om. Everything spoken about Sushruta was making sense. The ten sages, Dhanvantari, the Himalayan series, the knowledge of medicines, everything was in front of the team, on the screen.

'One of the three sages in the hut was Sushruta. He stood up and called out, "Ji Gurudev!" and left the hut too.

'After a while, Sushruta came back with a flask in his hands. He came and handed it to me. The solution smelt like mint and was green in colour. I was too ravenous to resist anything edible. So I consumed it in a single gulp. He watched me with pity in his eyes and a smile on his face. He was older than me. After a few days, he told me that he was forty-nine years old. Dhanvantari was almost seventy years old.

'After I drank whatever it was, Sushruta took it from me and said, "I am Sushruta, one of the ten sages Kasiraja has selected to impart the knowledge of Ayurveda to. We are the first three descendants of Kasiraja. Right now, we are residing in the Himalayan ranges. He is Devdrath and that is Nagendra."

As Om spoke, everything was as clear as if it was happening right in front of their eyes. Dhanvantari looked godly but aged, Sushruta had a long beard and a calm face. Nagendra and Devdrath were clean-shaven, all wearing the

same kind of old, traditional outfit with wooden footwear called *khadau*.

‘When Sushruta was talking to me, Devdrath came in carrying a bundle of banana leaves and handed them to Sushruta. I didn’t speak a word and just heard their conversation.

“Mrityunjay, I have to size all your scars on these leaves so that we can perform the surgery and remove them,” Devdrath said.

‘He took the measures and prepared some Ayurvedic medicine and herbal solutions and applied them to my wounds. With passing time, I started recovering. I got well-acquainted with them as I shared the hut with them for months.

‘As time passed, I started helping them in their daily chores and learnt from them. I knew nothing about myself and the world and so I started learning everything I could among them. While helping them, I gained knowledge of the Ayurvedic system of medicine.

‘Sushruta was the first descendant of Dhanvantari. Apart from practising medical science, he was given a crucial task. The assignment was to compile the teachings of Guru Dhanvantari, add more to it with his own experience and build a series of books, which in today’s world is known as . . .’

‘Sushruta Samhita!’ exclaimed Dr Batra from behind Om. Om paid no heed and went on.

‘Sushruta Samhita is an important classic Sanskrit text on surgeries by Sushruta, and is one of the three foundational texts of Ayurveda. It has been divided into two parts— Purva Tantra and Uttar Tantra—in 184 chapters containing the description of 1,120 ailments, sixty-four

preparations from mineral resources and fifty-seven preparations based on animal sources.'

Shahista whispered to LSD, 'Parimal mentioned this name Sushruta and you read out things about him while Abhilash was trying to prove the superiority of his mythology over science. Who is Sushruta?'

'Sushruta is said to have been a physician originally from south India active in Varanasi. He used to use the dead bodies floating on the Ganges river to perform and practise things that no one ever dared to do, like adding body parts from one dead body to another. One of the earliest known mentions of the name is from the Bower Manuscript (fourth or fifth century), where Sushruta is listed as one of the ten sages residing in the Himalayas. The Sushruta Samhita was later translated into Arabic and then to English, based on which the modern science of plastic surgery was made, written and performed. It won't be an exaggeration at all to say that Sushruta was the first plastic surgeon of the world,' Dr Batra replied in a hushed voice.

'And who is this Dhanvantari whom we saw on screen, whom Om mentioned?' asked Shahista with a lot of curiosity.

'Kasiraja, Devodas and Guru Dhanvantari are all the names of one person. Dhanvantari is believed to be the god of Ayurvedic treatments,' Abhilash elaborated.

'It is said that he reappeared as Devodas, "The Prince of Banaras", and is also known as Kasiraja,' LSD joined in the conversation.

Abhilash carried on, saying, 'Dhanvantari relieved the other gods of old age, diseases and death, too. He enlightened ten sages with the skill of surgery on his Himalayan retreat.

Sushruta was considered by Dhanvantari as his best pupil and so he also taught him other divisions of Ayurveda.

'Dhanvantari is regarded as the almighty of all the branches of medicine. There is a voluminous glossary in *Dhanvantari Nighantu*, the most ancient text available in its field.'

'We worship Dhanvantari for good health, especially on the occasion of Dhanteras (one of the days that is counted as part of the festival of Diwali in Hinduism), which is considered the birthday of Dhanvantari,' Abhilash narrated.

Back in the old man's room, Dr Srinivasan heaved a sigh of relief while handing the map and the piece of paper with the location jotted on it, to the old man, who praised Dr Srinivasan for the rapid results. Dr Srinivasan hadn't recovered from the trauma he had experienced when he last came into this room.

The old man, being thoroughly absorbed in the enthusiasm of the accomplishment, didn't notice Dr Srinivasan's gloom and ordered him the same task. The new task for Dr Srinivasan was to send Veerbhadra to the location marked on the map and bring back whatever he found straight to him. Dr Srinivasan silently collected the map from the old man and left the room.

After a while, the masked men in the woods saw Veerbhadra walking out of the facility. The three-dimensional view on their screens showed the facility where Om was being kept hostage. The location where Veerbhadra was heading to was in Sri Lanka. Ross Island, being the extreme south of India, wasn't very far from the spot. Veerbhadra ordered one of the guards to arrange a private chopper because he was given very little time to finish this job.

The men saw a map clutched in Veerbhadra's hand and guessed the development instantly. They were compelled to

alter their plans. They now decided that one of them would follow Veerbhadrā and the other would keep an eye on the happenings in the building.

One of them gave a part of his weapon to the other and left to follow Veerbhadrā. The chopper in the air was being shadowed by an advanced speedboat on the waters below.

The discussion between Parimal and Abhilash stopped midway as Dr Srinivasan returned to the interrogation room. As he entered, his image flashed on the screen, which proved that Om recognized his presence with closed eyes.

As Dr Srinivasan saw his image, he babbled with irritation, 'Why am I on the screen? What is going on here? Why don't you guys do sincerely what you have been called for and return to your respective homes?' he thundered.

His behaviour was unexpected and left everyone stunned. Dr Shahista and Dr Batra came closer to him to ensure he was alright, but Dr Srinivasan didn't entertain them and sent them back with a swift movement of his hand.

Om was staring with a wild expression at Dr Srinivasan and closed his eyes again as he saw Shahista walking back towards him. Shahista sat and signalled to Om to go on.



Chapter 11

Mrit-Sanjeevani

'It took more than a year to compile the Sushruta Samhita. Every day, without fail, Sushruta dictated and Nagendra wrote it all for hours together, starting early in the morning. Devdrath assisted them with everything they needed, along with nursing me as I had undergone a lot of surgeries all throughout my body. Those were plastic surgeries, as you all call them today, so I needed a lot of care and attention.

'After I recovered, I helped Devdrath, apart from listening to Sushruta and Nagendra. Kasiraja often visited us to make sure I was recovering and to keep track of the progress of the book.

'As time passed, I became a part of the place. I was living a peaceful life. All my scars vanished gradually. There was something that troubled me. Each night, Sushruta went to Kasiraja's hut for quite some time and no one else was allowed to enter it then.

'So one day, I asked Devdrath, "Why does Sushruta go to Guruji's hut every night?"

'Devdrath replied with equal incorruptibility, "I wonder the same. Moreover, I asked him once, but he refused to tell me."

'Nagendra was attending to us, and so he replied, "He goes to take notes for Mrit Sanjeevani."

'Both of us looked at him and then Devdrath asked him, "If this is true, how do you know about it?"

'Nagendra replied, "I followed him many times and have seen him writing the procedures of Mrit Sanjeevani."

"What is Mrit Sanjeevani?" I asked.

"Mrit Sanjeevani is a miraculous procedure of bringing the dead back to life," Devdrath said.

"But they say that no one can do that! Only the gods hold the power of giving life," I said childishly.

'Devdrath replied, "Kasiraja is a god himself and—"

"And I'll be the next," Nagendra interrupted.

"The good news is that, dreams will always be free of cost," Devdrath said.

"Has Mrit Sanjeevani been practised? Or is just theoretical so far?" I asked.

"Why do you think you are alive? We saw you dead a year ago. If Mrit Sanjeevani had been a theory, you would have been reduced to ashes long ago," Nagendra said with a harsh tone which appeared full of hatred. I had never felt comfortable around Nagendra, but this was no time to ponder petty issues. I was jolted by the news I had just received. That I was a lab rat, an experiment, and the only successful one. That moment, I stopped feeling like

a normal human being. A sense of inferiority arose in me.

"How did I die?" I asked.

I read Devdrath's face, which revealed that he was not supposed to let it slip. It also showed anger towards Nagendra for bringing this up, but being the weakest of the three sages, he didn't mouth his anger. Numerous questions had clouded my mind and my relief lay with Devdrath.

“We don’t know that. When we saw you first, you were dead,” Devdrath said, smashing my expectations.

“Where did you find me?”

“We don’t know where you died but yes, we know where you were born,” he replied sarcastically.

“Tell me! Maybe I can get some answers there,” I was hopeful.

“In Dhanvantari’s hut. There,” he pointed, “where Sushruta is writing the procedure of ‘How to make a second Mrityunjay’,” he burst out laughing.

‘For the first time, I had many feelings growing in me, the negative ones, specially.

‘Devdrath tapped my shoulder and said, “We don’t have the answers to your questions but Sushruta knows. Maybe he will tell you when the time comes.”

‘I always obeyed them. In fact, I never had an urge to disobey them until this moment.

‘After a while, Sushruta returned to find Devdrath and Nagendra fast asleep. My questions haunted me and kept me from sleeping, so I was wide awake. I wanted to know about myself, my life, my death and everything else.

‘Sushruta saw me and realized that something was not right. He came and sat beside me and stroked my hair with his fingers. “Why are you not asleep?” he asked out of concern.

“Who am I?”

‘Sushruta comprehended within a moment as to what might have happened while he was away. He handled the situation with diplomacy, saying, “You are Kasiraja’s son. He gave you your life back as a gift. You are my younger brother. That is all you must know for now. Tomorrow is a big day for all of us and you should sleep.”

“What is Mrit Sanjeevani?” I pushed.

'As the name hit his ears, he shot an angry glance in Nagendra's direction and then replied with a sigh, "That is how we saved you, Mrityunjay. You do not need nutrition or water for survival now. You may have them, but they are not a necessity for you anymore, unlike us. You will not age, now or ever, which is why you have been named 'Mrityunjay': *mrityu* (death), *vijay* (victory); the one who conquered death. You are not only a complete human being but far more advanced than normal humans, an enlightened version of this mankind."

'I was dazed by this revelation. Sushruta understood my confusion and went on, "Okay, think of it this way. We are all bound to a time circle. Time that neither reverses nor rests. It is the ship in which every being navigates. Time is the driving force of every life. Each life present on this earth has a timeline and an age. But you, my brother, have fallen out of this circle. The divinity of time can't see you. You are undetectable to its eyes. Time, in you, has been put to a halt, my friend. For this moment, time sees me, and deducts a second from my lifespan. Time passes through me constantly but is constant for you. Time sees me talking to somebody, but it wonders whom I am talking to. Therefore, I will age continuously and will die someday. But you won't. This is what Mrit Sanjeevani is. And you are blessed to be Mrityunjay.

"This book is a boon if in the right hands, for those people who are able to distinguish between who should walk upon the earth forever, serving mankind, and who should be erased. Similarly, this book is a curse when in the wrong hands; it's a treacherous weapon. That's why it is being safeguarded by Shri Kasiraja. I am revealing this to you because our reason behind this hideout is resolved. The objective, which was to complete Mrit Sanjeevani, has been

achieved. Gurudev will instruct us soon to pack our belongings, and move back to our respective capitals to serve mankind with the knowledge we have obtained from him."

"What about Mrit Sanjeevani? Where will I go now? And what will Kasiraja do next?" I flooded him with questions.

"Guruji hasn't informed me yet. He will tell me whatever we need to know at the right time, but I believe that Guruji will retain you with him as you are his creation, his son."

'I had some more doubts to be cleared, but before I could clear my head, Sushruta continued, "It's too late to talk now. We must sleep. Tomorrow is an important day. Don't worry. We will have enough time to talk tomorrow. You have waited for so many months. I'm sure you can wait for a night more. Good night, Mrityunjay.' Sushruta concluded the conversation, leaving me waiting for the morning.

'While I was asleep, I heard a disturbance in the hut. I managed to open my eyes and saw Devdrath and Nagendra leaving the hut. It was dawn. I then heard Kasiraja order them to prepare a feast for everyone. After a while, Nagendra came back, and took with him some leaves from beneath his cot. I fell asleep again.

'When I woke up, Guruji directed everyone to gather outside his hut. He came out and addressed us, "Sages, dear sons, I have bestowed upon you all the knowledge I could have. It is time for you all to go back to your cities, save and serve others of our kind. You are the few to become the first saviours and surgeons. You have been the best of apprentices and so, I have ordered a feast for all of you before you depart. I would want to see each one of you here again after a year to gather new knowledge for further research."

'Kasiraja seated the seven sages for the feast prepared by Devdrath and Nagendra, whom he now ordered to serve the food. He then gestured to Sushruta and me to follow him into his hut.

"Sushruta, you are my most obedient and favourite son. For everyone else, the job is done but for you, it has just begun," Kasiraja said.

"Guruji, my place is at your feet. It would be my honour to follow your instructions. Please go on."

"I have not trained you to stay here and serve me. Your real purpose is out there, to save and serve people. Your name will be written in golden letters in the field of medicine. Reach out to the needy and perform your duties, but I have some more responsibilities to assign to you," Gurudev replied with an amiable smile.

"Tell me, Guruji. I will do it with full faith and devotion."

"Take Mrityunjay and Mrit Sanjeevani along with you. Mrityunjay should learn the ways of the world. You are best suited to teach him that. Keep him with you for the whole year before returning here again and look after him like your own son."

Sushruta's eyes had filled with tears. Controlling his emotions, he replied, "Guruji, I wanted the same, but could not ask you. You have always understood everything without me saying it. I take full responsibility for him from this day forward."

"Also, Sushruta, Mrit Sanjeevani will not be safe here. The word will soon spread that Mrit Sanjeevani has been written and evil forces will come to get it," Kasiraja said, concerned.

"Guruji, this is a treasure to the world and is a result of your continuous research and untiring practice. How can I

carry it with me? It doesn't belong to me," Sushruta said anxiously.

'Kasiraja calmly said, "Nor does Mrityunjay, my son! But you are the keeper of both these invaluable godsends. They are safer in your hands than with any of the immortals'."

'I just stood there, listening to them.

"As you wish, Guruji. What do you want me to do with it?" Sushruta gave in.

"Take an oath to keep this book safe until you hand it over to me. Mrityunjay will help you," Kasiraja instructed.

Sushruta promised to keep the majestic book safer than his own life.

I watched as Kasiraja handed over the Mrit Sanjeevani to Sushruta, and heard him say, "Now, you may leave, and enjoy the feast with the rest of your brothers."

"Guruji, there is a request I want to make before taking your leave," Sushruta politely said.

"Yes?"

"Guruji, Mrityunjay is very anxious. He wants to know about his past. This is the one thing I can't help him with. Please help him get over it or he won't become the person you want me to make of him."

Kasiraja smiled and glanced towards me. He directed me to sit close to him. I acted in accordance.

"What do you want to know?" he asked humbly.

"Who am I? Where am I from? How did I die? And how did you find me?"

I was interrupted by Nagendra, who entered the hut with three bowls of kheer arranged in a tray.

He said, "Sorry, Guruji. This is my last day here and I committed the mistake of entering without consent. I waited outside but it was taking too long. Everyone, including

Devdrath, had already feasted. So I considered bringing it here for all of you, else it might have lost its fresh taste."

'He handed a bowl to each of us. I wished he would leave soon, so I took my bowl readily, as my answers awaited me. Just as I was about to have my first sip, Kasiraja interjected.

"No! Mrityunjay, don't! You have not eaten anything for a long time. Three hundred seventeen days, to be precise, dear. Nine more days are to pass before you can have food."

I kept the bowl back on the tray, feeling a bit awkward. Kasiraja supped from his bowl. After taking in the first taste, he made a face and warned Sushruta not to have it. The kheer contained a poisonous herb, but before they could react, Nagendra launched an attack on Sushruta. Sushruta was the only threat who could have retaliated. Dhanvantari was too old to fight, and I was witnessing such an act for the first time in my life.

A minute later, I saw Sushruta bleeding. He was being attacked with a knife and defending himself with his arms. Dhanvantari tried helping Sushruta and struggled to stop Nagendra, but it was in vain. Leaving Sushruta helpless and exhausted, Nagendra set upon Dhanvantari. Sushruta, without wasting a moment, ran up to the Mrit Sanjeevani books, wrapped them in a white piece of cloth, and handed them over to me. The white cloth was stained with Sushruta's blood. I was already jolted by everything happening then and this gesture added to it. Sushruta shook me hard to bring me back to reality, held my terror-stricken face in his hands and whispered,

"Mrityunjay! Run! Run as fast as you can and as far as you can get towards the south. Wait for me down the hill for a day. If I don't turn up, proceed onwards. Protect this book with your life. Don't let anyone know that you have it. Now go, my brother. Go!"

'He turned on his heels then and plunged over Nagendra to set Dhanvantari free. This was the last thing I saw. Then I ran like a child, scared and lonely. I paused on my way and it took me about twenty-four hours to reach my destination. I then waited for him a whole day, as Sushruta said. However, he didn't arrive. Instead of losing hope, I began imagining that Kasiraja and Sushruta were walking down the terrain and they were taking time to reach me.

'In this fantasy, I waited another day, and one more, and some more days. But they never appeared. When I had left Kasiraja's hut, I had seen all the other sages sleeping under the open sky. I wandered in the Himalaya mountains for about a year. My state worsened with every passing day, without anyone to care for me. I learn to drink water and eat leaves like the animals in the rivers and forests. I got sick and starved to death and had many diseases. I even ate poisonous herbs by mistake and was attacked by wild creatures that consumed me to death, but I never died.

'I learned the cycle of life from seeing the births and deaths of beasts. I continued wandering and one day, saw a village down a hill. I was frightened of mankind after seeing Nagendra's act of violence for the book and did not want to go any closer. I returned to the woods and mountains and traced my way back to where I started from.

'A year had passed. As I reached the hilltop again, I saw skeletons scattered all over the place. I then realized that the sages had not been sleeping the day I ran, but were dead. I cried like never before or ever after. I sobbed for people I knew, who were my friends, my family and my entire world. I felt like an orphan and ran from one set of remains to another, but I could not make out who was Devdrath, who Dhanvantari and who Sushruta. I thought

they might have escaped alive somehow; my heart consoled my brain.

‘I sat on my knees, face towards the sky, wondered where my creators were and prayed for their well-being . . .’

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Chapter 12

The First Outbreak

Veerbhadra had reached Sri Lanka as ordered and directed. His movements were being keenly followed by a man in disguise. A Sri Lankan guide was paid highly to escort Veerbhadra to the desired location. The guide also agreed to arrange for some ammunition for him if need be. The voyage began with twelve men in total, and one following all of them. This man called up his partner, who stayed in the woods, waiting for the right time to complete the task.

In the woods, the partner was fully prepared to launch the strike. He attended the phone, nodded a few times and said yes. Then, he disconnected. He looked up towards the sun and then at his watch, waiting for the right time.

As Om spoke in the interrogation room, Dr Srinivasan's phone rang. Everyone was disturbed by the volume of the ring. The caller ID displayed a name that couldn't have been ignored. So he indicated that they continue, and left the room, picking it up.

'Yes, Veerbhadra!'

'Sir, we are a mile away from the location and the wheels can't go any further. We are on foot now. Expect my call as I reach there,' Veerbhadra's voice echoed through the phone.

'Veerbhadrā, you are the bravest and the best fighter I've ever known. Get me everything you find there, undamaged. It is a matter of life and death. Please, don't let me down.'

'I will do my best, sir, but it would be convenient if I could know what we are looking for.'

After a short pause, Dr Srinivasan replied, 'We don't know that. All the best,' and hung up.

He then went towards the chamber the old man resided in.

The old man was his usual self, angry and sick. He sat facing the screen, watching Om and the team. Dr Srinivasan told him about the call he had just attended. The old man was least interested in Veerbhadrā's progress; he just wanted to hear the result. The result for him was the second book. So he directly jumped to the right question. 'Did he find the book?'

'No, sir,' said Dr Srinivasan.

'So what are you here for?' asked the old man.

That was discourteous, but Dr Srinivasan had no answer, so he stood silent.

Back in the interrogation room, Om continued, 'I was lost in my thoughts and mourning for the loss of my people, when I found myself fenced by some shadows.'

I brought myself up on my legs and realized that some men were hiding when I had arrived there. And now, they were approaching me. I knew that the shadows were not waiting for me.'

Shahista, for once, interrupted him and said, 'In the mountains, if not for you, what were they looking for?'

In the woods at Ross, the man received another call from his partner informing him about the movement in Sri Lanka's caves.

Veerbhadrā had come out of the cave with a metallic chest. He called Dr Srinivasan and informed him about the chest. Dr Srinivasan ordered him to open it. Veerbhadrā was now striving to open it. Both the sides went silent in anticipation of what lay inside it.

'What is it in the box?' the man from the woods whispered, waiting, like Dr Srinivasan. His partner replied with the same thing that Om Shastri revealed to Shahista and Veerbhadrā reported to Dr Srinivasan.

'The book.'

Veerbhadrā held in his hands the other half of Mrit Sanjeevani.

Dr Srinivasan shot a glance at the old man on hearing about a book. He had already known about the book when he had seen the map. The old man was busy cutting banana leaves the size of his scars when Dr Srinivasan reiterated Veerbhadrā's findings to him.

'The Book,' Dr Srinivasan mouthed. The old man got distracted and looked towards him with insane excitement in his smile.

He showed signs of mental imbalance as he yelled, 'Bring me the book! Now! Hurry! How long will he take? Tell him not to stop for anything. Just bring me the book, right away!'

The old man repeated the same statements over and over again.

Dr Srinivasan was terrified and astounded at his unusual conduct. But he complied and ordered Veerbhadrā to do what the old man had demanded of him. The old man had started murmuring to himself like someone who was mad. The phone got disconnected.

As soon as the man in the woods heard about the book, he got tense and his voice became heavy. The lines on his forehead deepened. He closed his hand in a tight fist, took a

deep breath, as if preparing himself for something, and said in a throaty voice over the phone,

‘Do whatever it takes to take the book in your possession. Don’t hesitate to kill anyone if need be. Come back soon. We are running out of time.’

Dr Srinivasan’s phone rang again. It was Veerbhadrā, the caller ID revealed.

‘Yes, Veer?’ Dr Srinivasan answered it.

‘Sir, we have also found some equipment and apparatus out here. We have a big bow, a few arrows and their carrier, apart from a crown, a golden *kamardhani* (an ornament to be tied around the waist), some carved metallic weapons, a box full of ornaments and some gold coins. Also, we have found some equipment and apparatus, like that used in a laboratory.’

Dr Srinivasan said, ‘Bring as much you can, but Veer, the book in your hands is the priority.’ In the interrogation room, Shahista kept on going with her duty.

‘What happened next?’ she asked.

‘It had been a year. I had been alone, stranded. I had no idea what food was. I wandered in the mountains and they became my home. After a year, I was back at the place where I was born. I was among my family, the sages. Only they didn’t talk to me now. Dead people, they don’t talk.’

As he went on, the bits and pieces of his memory flashed on the screen, evidently showing the remains of people as Om remembered them and Om’s condition by then.

‘The shadows around me were close to me now and the faces more clearly visible. I was left with no will to live any longer. The men were armed and I was ready to taste what death had to offer me. So I paid no heed to them and did what I wanted to. I cried my heart out, like an orphan does for his lost parents. I knew that my days were numbered

and those people would take me far away and kill me. All through the year, I had been alone. I hadn't changed my clothes. I had no idea how the beard had to be cleaned.

'My feet were cracked. My hair had grown long enough to hide my face. In this attire, I could have been mistaken for a madman in the mountains. I was ready to die, but they weren't ready to kill me. They hit me hard on my head, the world spun around me and I fainted. A few hours later, when I regained consciousness, I realized I was being held captive, tied with chains to a chair, soldiers all around me equipped with bows and arrows aimed at me.'

'The man I faced appeared to be the one on whose command the arrows would rip through me. He had been waiting for me to wake up.'

"You will not be given a second chance. Tell me what I ask, do you understand?" The chief spoke in his hushed voice. I nodded.

"Who are you? Whom did the skeletons belong to? What were you doing there?"

'I told him my name, that was all. I did not know how much should be revealed and how much should be held back. So I chose to hold back everything and said, "I don't know how I reached there or who those people were."

'I came across as a madman because of the lack of manners and basic conduct. They couldn't suspect me of anything as I carried no luggage. Within a few days, they were convinced that I was no more than a burden upon them, who had to be fed twice a day only for being useless. So they now knew that it was in their best interests to either kill me or to set me free.'

The whole team in the interrogation room was watching it all on the screen like a movie and was convinced that every word from Om's mouth was as true as their lives.

'One day, hence, the commander ordered one of his men to make me presentable as I was to be taken to their king. My beard was shaved and I was bathed properly, after which I was given a new pair of clothes to put on my new body. The king had decreed that I be set free, sensing no threat in my survival. As I dressed up and looked in a mirror, I recognized Mrityunjay for the first time in my life. However, my happiness faded as it dawned upon me that I was a full-grown man and was good for nothing. I was hollow inside, with no love, no hatred, no peace, no commotion, no noise, only silence. My existence or absence would not affect anyone here. Surrounding me were merry faces, both young and old, tied together by the Almighty. What could be worse than dwelling alone in this world full of people, good or bad? Tears rolled down my eyes. I couldn't end my life because I was bound to a promise, which Sushruta had taken from me, that I would protect the book with my life. Otherwise, I had no reason to live. That one promise and those books drove life in and out of my body. I kept learning the ways of the world slowly and stealthily. I fell ill a few times, of diseases that had no cure, but I didn't die.'

As Om revealed the fact, the images on the screen showed Om, fragile and dying, but the breaths he took were strong and healthy.

'There was a time when I was living with a nobleman, working as his servant in exchange for food and shelter. He also used to give me some of his old clothes occasionally. My job was to take care of his children, play with them and do whatever they demanded of me. In addition, I also performed other household tasks like laundering the clothes, running the errands etc. While I played with the children, I too learnt a lot of things that they did, apart from elementary reading and writing.

'As time passed, I became family to them. I was treated like the best of all the workers, but this didn't last long.'

Om took a short pause. All looked at him with the same question in their eyes: why?

'What went wrong?' Shahista pressed.

'I wasn't ageing at all. It started bothering me, as everyone else was growing old with time.'

The people in the room saw it all as clearly as it was in Om's mind. The kids could be seen growing up. The head of the family had grown feeble too, but Om never showed the slightest sign of any change.

Veerbhadrā was looking at the book in his hands. It was extremely worn out. Veerbhadrā had no idea how it could be so important to anyone. Just as he was pondering over the thought, he was alerted by the sound of a bullet leaving a gun. Other gunshots followed. He turned back, only to see five of his men lying dead. They had lost their lives before anyone could identify the source of the bullets. Veerbhadrā ordered four of his men to run in the direction from where the bullets seemed to have originated, and catch the shooter alive. The rest, along with Veerbhadrā, ran in the opposite direction towards their vehicles, with the book. This book is crucial as hell, thought Veerbhadrā.

The men who ran in the direction of the shooter knew not who they were about to encounter. They only woke up to the truth seconds before their deaths. One moment they realized that they stood no chance of beating their target, and the next moment, life ran out of their bodies. The fighting skills their opponent possessed were unbeatable. He exploited the oldest of the skills of combat, and the now extinct art of fighting a war. Perhaps the death of the four men had not proved to be completely useless. It had bought time for Veerbhadrā to escape with the book.

The mission of the man had failed, but it wasn't over. As he killed those men, he knew exactly what would rectify it.

The man in the woods received a call from his partner in Sri Lanka. He answered it immediately.

'Is it done?'

'Negative. He got away with the book. Be prepared.'

'How long will you take?'

'Half an hour, less, maybe. I'm close behind them.'

'Okay. I'm ready to engage. How many?'

'There are three heading towards the facility. Nine are dead.'

Dr Srinivasan was halfway to the interrogation room when his phone rang. It was VeerbhadrA. He answered it while turning back to reach the chamber in a hurry.

'Yes, Veer!' He was out of breath.

VeerbhadrA was panting on the other side, terrified at how events had unfolded. He was smeared in blood. He managed to reply in a choked voice, 'Sir, someone attacked us. Many of our men have been shot dead. Sir, something worse than we know is going on here.'

Dr Srinivasan, too, was horrified at this revelation. He had never witnessed a murder and had no idea how the situation must be handled. He doubled his strides towards the old man. He put VeerbhadrA on hold. As he reached the old man, he noticed that he had been sweating profusely.

He babbled, 'Our men have been murdered there in Sri Lanka. VeerbhadrA is on the call. What is going on here? What is the worth of that book that people are dying for it? And who could possibly be an enemy to us? What are you making us do? Answer me!' Dr Srinivasan thundered.

The old man stood up, walked up to Dr Srinivasan, and snatched the phone from him.

'Where is the book?' he asked.

'The book is with me.'

'How long will you need to reach here?'

'Thirty minutes or so. Who are you? Where is Dr Srinivasan?'

The old man disconnected the phone without any further questions or concerns. He didn't bother about the loss of life that had taken place.

Dr Srinivasan stood there looking at the old man's wobbly legs. He looked from head to toe at the merciless creature that stood there, behaving insanely. Then only did he realize for whom he had been doing this through thick and thin.

The old man was now seated on his chair, collecting a few things.

Dr Srinivasan pulled himself together and approached the man, taking small steps. He grabbed the hand rest of his chair and spun him around suddenly to make the old fellow face him.

He then demanded in a beastly voice, 'What have you put us up to? If men have been murdered there, it can happen here too. I am freezing the interrogation and other work until I get the answers I need.'

Dr Srinivasan's eyes had gone red with fury. The old man suddenly stood up and grabbed Dr Srinivasan by his biceps, only to push him eight feet back with one swift movement of his hand. Dr Srinivasan hit the wall hard and winced in pain. The old man was far too strong and speedy for his age. Dr Srinivasan had never imagined a physical assault like this from this fragile-looking creature. The old man, for the first time, straightened his back and stood abreast of Dr Srinivasan, staring him straight in the eye. His eyes were terribly big and he didn't blink even once. His pupils contracted and expanded remarkably as their gazes locked.

Dr Srinivasan stared in terror, and the old man in rage. Then the old man spoke calmly and politely.

'It is not your team. It's mine. I have paid each one of them and you too. I have had numerous servants in my life. Out of them, only those who never asked "what" and "why" have died natural deaths. You understand?' he warned.

Without waiting for an answer, he pointed towards the screen showing the interrogation room and the people in it.

'Look at them. See the calm on their faces. The reason behind this serenity is that they don't know what they should not. So they are just doing what they have been told to. They hope to go back to their homes to see their families because they trust you. Now you have two choices. Either all these people go back home with their unanswered questions, or you take the answers from me in exchange for their lives.'

Dr Srinivasan ran his eyes over all their faces. He realized that some of them were younger than his own children.

Tears welled up in his eyes and the old man got his answer. He started back towards his seat, stopped at a distance, half turned and said, 'No more questions, huh?'

Dr Srinivasan stood speechless. He left the chamber at once, turned the corner in the hallway, wiped his tears and took deep breaths. He stood there for some time to calm down. Suddenly, something struck him and he rushed to the interrogation room.

Back there, Om was speaking.

'The word about me had spread in all directions, which soon made me the talk of the town. People looked at me like I was an extraterrestrial. I was the topic of discussion in the evening tea meetings. Then, one day, soldiers came to my master's house and ordered him to present me before the court the next morning. I was afraid at the mention of a

court, and anyway, I knew the questions that would be put to me. As I didn't want to answer any of them, I ran from the house at night. Without bidding goodbye or exchanging words of care and affection, I simply left them. I walked out of the kingdom.'

'Where did you go then?' Shahista asked.

'I began walking south. I walked for months together, until I was accepted by wanderers. In my solitary journey, I starved for days and became frail. I had to bear many injuries, but they healed before long. I faced chronic diseases, natural disasters and extreme climatic conditions, but I didn't die. I survived all of it.'



Chapter 13

Classified Transformation

Back in the woods, the man impatiently checked his digital watch and knew he had no more time to waste. The plan had to be executed soon. *I ought to call him for the last time*, he thought, taking his cell phone out of his pocket. He had to confirm the whereabouts of his partner before he decided to storm the facility alone. His partner rejected the call. *He must be close to the target*, the man mused. He then decided to send a voice note that said,

‘I am entering the facility as per our plan. You too stick to it.’

He then readied himself with heavy arms and ammunition, his face still hidden behind a black façade, and strode over to the entrance of the facility. Looking around, scanning for cameras, he found one at the entrance and, after checking that all was clear, shot an arrow in its direction. It hit the camera’s eye and ruptured it. He then sneaked into the building with his automated arrow shooter, a glass covering one of his eyes attached to his forehead by a ring that circumvented his head. The glass showed images of men present inside, along with a three-dimensional view of the building with all its corridors and rooms, directing him towards the cell where Om had been held captive. He could

fix his target with this glass and then shoot him with his arrows, leaving no room for mistake. He also had a belt bag tied around his waist with similar-sized pockets in the front, the sides and the rear. There was a metallic piece attached to his right hand from wrist to elbow, with a small arrow placed on its muzzle.

He carried another bag on his back with a PDW 19 assault rifle with a range of 250 feet, 40 per cent stability in its grip, a maximum zoom of twenty times, a clip size of twenty-five bullets, which took 4.50 seconds to be reloaded automatically, and two P622 pistols with a range of 150 feet, clip size of eight bullets that took three seconds to reload.

After taking a few cautious steps, he saw a guard with a gun in the other corner of the corridor. He slowly moved towards the guard. The glass displayed how far he was from the guard. He then came to a halt and stood still. The glass displayed, 'Target reachable!' in a bright green colour. It helped to set the hand and eye coordination between the arrow and the target. Then he shot the first arrow, which hit the target on his head. The guard fell dead instantly. He ran towards the guard, making sure not to make any noise. He checked one of the pockets of his belt bag, took out a fibre plate, set up the time on it and fixed it on the wall of a hidden corner.

He then moved forward, ready to take the next man down.

On the shores of Ross Island, a chopper landed, followed by a speedboat tearing through the sea and reaching the same spot. The man could see the chopper landing slowly. He grabbed his bag and rushed towards it. While sprinting, he loaded his weapons. As men descended from the chopper, they were welcomed with a shower of bullets.

Some recoiled and shot in the man's direction. Veerbhadra got off the chopper and knew that the book he held was the treasure. So, without wasting any time, he looked around for his jeep, found it and rushed towards it. The man smelled Veerbhadra's intentions and to foil them altogether, shot the wheels of the jeep and then the driver. Veerbhadra threw himself in the driver's seat as the driver fell dead and started the engine to drive the punctured jeep to the facility. The other men engaged the shooter, not allowing him to stop Veerbhadra, even at the cost of their own lives.

Back in the interrogation room, on the screen, Om had a beard, golden earrings and a tribal crown on his head and was being venerated like a god. Om said, 'I didn't know how to cheat, lie or deceive people. I did not take advantage of anybody. A few old men said I was an avatar God had sent for them. They believed serving me was like serving God himself. These people had seen me recover from deadly diseases, walk out of a natural disaster unharmed. This belief continued and my life passed uneventfully for some time, but then a few young men died of some unknown disease.'

People started noticing that I had not aged a day since I joined their clan. All the old men leading the tribe, who believed and worshipped me, died their natural deaths and with them died their belief. Time changed, their leaders changed too. I was now considered a curse. A curse that sucked the life out of young people to remain young. They believed I was the reason for the deaths of the young men. A few of them still had faith in me and fought for me, but the fear of darkness was dominating the light of faith. I was expelled from the tribe. They did not kill me because of the fear of a bigger curse.

'I was alone again. Now I knew that I had to keep changing my identities and locations, as no one was mentally prepared to accept the truth.

'Since then, I have been hiding myself, but . . .'

The door of the interrogation room opened with a bang and Dr Srinivasan entered. Om got alarmed. The sudden noise of the door drew everyone's attention towards Dr Srinivasan. Furious, Dr Srinivasan saw Om and started walking towards him.

'Sir, are you . . .' Dr Batra said, and was interrupted by Dr Srinivasan, who showed him a palm, a signal to remain quiet.

Dr Srinivasan grabbed Om's shirt with both his hands and stared at him with eyes red with anger.

'Sir! What is wrong with you? What are you . . .' Shahista stood up. Dr Srinivasan looked into Shahista's eyes and she instantly knew that not saying anything was the only choice she had right now. Dr Srinivasan brought his gaze back to Om, only to find him calm and composed as usual, waiting for a question. The old man in the chamber saw all of it and pressed a panic button.

'*Emi ayindi, Chinna?*' Om said.

Dr Srinivasan calmed down at once upon hearing, 'What happened, Chhotu?' in Om's tone and language, but the next moment, his fury returned and he replied in Telugu, '*Nenu Chinna kaadu! Naa manasu lo prashanalu unnai, naaku samadhanan kavali* (I am not Chhotu! I have questions and I want straight answers).'

'*Sare, Chinna kaakpote, em ani pilvali? Kunju* (Okay. If not Chhotu, then what shall I call you? Kunju)?' Om said.

'*Naaku ala yavaru pilavaru, neeku ela telsindi? Nuvuu yavaru* (No one calls me by that name anymore. How can

you possibly know that? Who are you)?' Dr Srinivasan replied.

Om closed his eyes and the screen came back to life. The image it projected showed a few students in a classroom, seated on the wooden benches of an old, decrepit government school wearing half-pants, white half-shirts and slippers. Some of them were barefoot. They were all bullying their classmate, who was sobbing. Then Om, the teacher, entered the classroom and scolded them all for bullying the kid. He shooed all of them out of the class and sat with the innocent student, talking to him, and calmed him down.

'*Neeku adi gurtunda* (Do you remember that)?' Om said calmly.

Dr Srinivasan's eyes welled up with tears and he cried like a kid again. He was compelled to believe in the impossible after seeing his own childhood with Om. He now believed everything Om had said and saw him with compassion and respect.

The others in the room were clueless as to what was happening due to their lack of knowledge of Telegu.

Dr Shahista came near both of them, just as LSD's computer beeped.

She looked at the screen, which went blank for a second, before the old man's face appeared on it. LSD got alert and pressed enter on the keyboard once. Her screen now displayed a digital watch. 8:43, it read, and the countdown started with each passing second. Her eyes went wide and she saw Parimal.

He was already looking at her. He had received the same beep and the same face with the same timer. Parimal moved a few steps towards Abhilash's bench and put a hand on his shoulder. Suddenly, the jolly and careless hacker changed into a mature and sincere adult. That childish face

vanished in the dark. The introverted, silent and scared Parimal suddenly became hyperactive.

As the distance between the jeep and the facility reduced to less than 2 kilometres, the man decided to start running to follow Veerbhadrā after he had killed all his men. He now chased him. Veerbhadrā, on the other end, reached with the punctured jeep and entered the building. His body was full of injuries and his face was red, with blood smeared over it. He panted heavily as he entered the facility and called Dr Srinivasan. The armed security guards surrounded him to guard him and were on high alert.

In the interrogation room, Dr Srinivasan asked, ‘What’s in the book?’

Om smiled with the faith that the books were safe at the place where he had hidden them himself. He was unaware of the fact that the books were at Ross Island, like him.

‘Those books are the answers to the biggest secret in the world, death. They hold what men have not yet discovered. They contain the key to immortality. They describe the process of making a man similar to me. Time keeps an account of every second in everyone’s life. So you age every day. The books have the ability to make you fall off the vision of the almighty time. Imagine you don’t exist for time. For you, death is an illusion. For the one who passes through the book, life will be forever.’

Dr Srinivasan’s phone rang just as he was trying to comprehend what Om had said. It was Veerbhadrā. He answered.

‘Sir, I have the book. I am now entering the facility. Someone followed us to the island. Where are you, sir?’ he said, almost out of breath owing to the rush.

Veerbhadrā’s voice screeched through the phone so that Om heard every word of what he had said.

Om's shock was evident on his face and for the first time so far, he felt cheated. All his kind feeling towards his old student suddenly dried up. He looked at Dr Srinivasan unemotionally just as he ordered his man to proceed towards the interrogation room and told him to wait outside until he came and collected the book himself. He hung up. His eyes were full of guilt, and his face an epitome of apology. With the same feeling, he said, 'I have committed a mistake, but I never knew I was doing so. I am going to rectify it now. Before I leave, please know that I was not leading this team, someone else was, and it wasn't before today that I knew I stood on the wrong side. All of them are innocent, these kids, they know nothing.'

Om closed his eyes, disappointed, and said, 'What have you done? Whom are you all working for?'

'I thought I was working for money, so I never tried to know the details of the work. All of them thought they were working for me and because they trusted my judgement, they asked nothing. I have to leave now, to safeguard the books from his filthy hands. I have committed an unpardonable mistake but please, try to forgive me if I fail in my quest,' said Dr Srinivasan, his head bowed out of guilt and shame. Suddenly, he turned and went to the camera installed on one of the walls for the old man to see, and hit it many times till it broke into pieces. The old man watched Dr Srinivasan hitting the camera and then the screen went blank. The old man smiled.

Dr Srinivasan held Om's hands, pressed them into his once, and turned to leave. Om asked, 'Who paid you to do this?'

'His name is Nagendra, that is all I know,' came the answer as Dr Srinivasan left the room in a rush. Om's face

turned pale upon hearing the name. He was as astounded as everyone else listening to his story of immortality.

As Dr Srinivasan left, Parimal started walking towards the exit. 'Parimal?' Dr Batra called after him.

'Going for a smoke,' said Parimal, without looking behind him.

Dr Batra and Shahista looked at each other, surprised, as this time Parimal did not stammer. While LSD kept herself engrossed in pressing the keys on her computer, she really looked as if she was in a hurry.

As Parimal got away from the sight of his teammates, he ran as fast as he could towards the kitchen, which was right behind the facility after three right turns from the door at the end of the corridors. He reached the kitchen, went to the common wall between the kitchen and the facility and stood there, waiting for something impatiently. He checked his watch every now and then. The old man still sat behind his desk, noticing every move of everyone.

Dr Batra and Dr Shahista stood in the middle of the room, stunned at the change in the atmosphere around them. They were witnessing Dr Srinivasan conversing with Om Shastri with a lot of gratitude and respect and in tears. His body language revealed that like LSD and Parimal, he too was in a hurry. Abhilash lay down in his chair, sleeping with his head on the desk.

LSD was totally engrossed in her computer and was typing a code which was tattooed on her left toe. '1 Corinthians 15:51' read the code.

It meant victory over death.

As she pressed enter on the keyboard, the wall where Parimal was waiting transformed into a door. A few bricks fell off and a small screen with a touch keypad asked for a code. He typed in the same code, '1 Corinthians 15:51'. The

door opened. It was a narrow passage between the walls, only 3 feet wide and 16 feet long. A narrow, hidden room came into view. A room full of all kinds of weapons used for assassination, bulletproof armour and suits. This passage had white light and every weapon was displayed on the walls. It had another door opposite the first one. This door opened back into the interrogation room. Parimal started picking things up without wasting any time.

LSD was continuously eyeing everyone to find a solitary moment. She now had it. She rushed towards the washrooms at the corner of the interrogation room.

The masked man had brutally killed the guards in the corridor, without making any noise whatsoever. Then his partner entered the facility and openly shot everyone he saw dressed in a uniform. The gunshots echoed in the facility and deafened everyone inside it. As all the guards rushed to the entrance, the first partner's path cleared up and saved him a lot of time in reaching the interrogation room.

Om heard the gunshots along with Shahista and Dr Batra. He was at once galvanized into action and requested them to free him, or there would be grave consequences which they would not live to see.

Abhilash didn't react and kept slumbering. Dr Batra approached him and Shahista went to Om, fighting in her head the dilemma of right and wrong. Dr Batra tried to jolt Abhilash awake but he lay there senseless.

Dr Batra checked his pulse, only to find him dead. Shahista panicked and decided to untie Om. Parimal had killed Abhilash the moment he had seen the old man's face on the computer. How and why were questions that nobody in the interrogation room had the answer to.

Dr Srinivasan reached the corridor of the chamber and told Veerbhadrā to hand him the book. Veerbhadrā, unaware of the gravity of the situation, handed the book to him. Dr Srinivasan hugged the book tight to his chest and started back towards the interrogation room. The old man saw it all. He picked up an earpiece and pressed a button.

‘Lizz . . .?’ he whispered in his throaty voice.

Inside the washroom, LSD listened intently from a similar earpiece and replied, ‘Yes, sir.’ She stood on a tap and pulled an unseen and inaccessible bag hidden in the loft of the washroom.

The Parimal who had gone inside the passage, and the one who came out of it, were two entirely different men, and yet were the same.

In the interrogation room, as Dr Batra and Shahista struggled to untie Om, LSD came out. Shahista and Dr Batra witnessed a severe transformation in her. They saw her walking towards them with a pair of automated P6 22 pistols.

The same pistols as the man who was now approaching the interrogation room had tied to his thighs.

This man’s partner, heavily loaded with ammunition, blasted the front entrance with a bazooka, with many casualties in a single shot. It was impossible for the guards to locate the man in the thick woods. The sun was going down with each passing moment.

In the facility, as Dr Srinivasan entered the interrogation room, he saw LSD and instantly knew that not all the members were as innocent as he had imagined. He was panting heavily as he stepped into the room. He tried to pretend that nothing had happened, but LSD had decided his fate. As Dr Srinivasan read LSD’s eyes, she smiled

sarcastically. All was quiet before LSD coldly shot Dr Srinivasan in the chest and snatched the book from him.

Dr Srinivasan fell on the floor and blood gushed out from his body. He died slowly, feeling all the pain he was meant to. Dr Batra and Shahista stood in utter shock, watching Dr Srinivasan breathing his last and LSD brutally watching him. Guilt was far from her. The old man back in the chamber smiled as he saw the book in LSD's hands. LSD aimed the gun at Dr Batra and Shahista together and warned, 'Don't! Or before you even realize that I have a knack of using both my hands simultaneously, your souls will have met their maker.'

Om witnessed everything in the process of being untied. 'You want to kill us? You will really shoot at us, huh?' Shahista said in a rather courageous tone. 'If need be,' came the blunt reply from LSD. 'What are you waiting for, then?' Shahista asked.

LSD smiled a shameless smile and said, 'My orders,' walking towards the only exit of the room and locking it from the inside.

After ending the lives of two more guards who stood right outside the doors of the interrogation room, in the way he liked, in peace and in quiet, the man parted with his mask and his glasses too. He had long white hair and a well-built body. He took off the armour from his chest to reveal large golden bracelets encircling both his wrists. He picked up his bow and arrow with his left hand and kicked the door of the interrogation room hard.

Parimal, loaded with ammunition, reached the old man's room and sat on the floor at his knees. The old man pampered him. While he pampered Parimal, the old man kept an eye on all the visuals on the screen. Suddenly, he saw someone killing the men at the door of the interrogation

room and trying to break it open. He pointed towards the screen in order to show it to Parimal.

At once, Parimal, who was sitting calmly, turned ferocious. He stood up in one fine movement and went for Om Shastri and LSD.

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Chapter 14

Deathless Warriors

The other partner had nearly cleared the front gate when only Veerbhadra and two of his men remained to be conquered. Dr Shahista showed some courage and started untying Om again.

Sensing that, the old man ordered LSD to kill both of them, and bring Om to him, alive.

LSD sarcastically smiled again, and then aimed at Dr Shahista and Dr Batra with both her hands, and shot simultaneously. Dr Batra could save himself because of his faster reflexes but the second bullet found its target. Only not the one for whom it was intended. Dr Shahista had her eyes on Om, Om on LSD, and LSD on Shahista. So Om had a moment to react before she shot Shahista. Om had replaced himself with Shahista unintentionally in a bid to save the selfless saviour. The bullet hit Om's back. Both Shahista and Om fell to the ground at a distance from each other. LSD realized that she had committed a huge mistake by shooting at Om. Without thinking about it, she aimed at Shahista once again. Om lay on the floor watching helplessly, wincing in pain. After a moment, Dr Shahista was shot in the chest.

Parimal entered the passage room, passing through the kitchen to reach the interrogation room through the hidden

passage. On the other side, the main door to the interrogation room was too weak to bear another kick now. LSD held Om by his collar and dragged him towards a wall, looking around for Dr Batra at the same time. Out in the corridor, Veerbhadrā fell back slowly, hitting the kitchen door as the man entered the building. Parimal entered the password to unlock the door to enter the interrogation room. A few bricks fell inside the interrogation room, where LSD waited for Parimal to arrive and Om Shastri bled heavily. The man went for the final kick just then and the door came apart. Everyone in the room stood stupefied as they comprehended the face that entered. The face was one of the images that had an imprint in Om's memory and thereby had appeared on the screen. He was the man Om had claimed to be searching for a thousand years. He was an epitome of the past standing abreast with the present, fully equipped to look time in its eyes.

He was Parashuram.

His face had on it the rage and fury of Lord Shiva. He had big eyes that hid nothing and strong hands capable of lifting a mountain.

From the other end, in walked the other partner, another person back from death: Ashwatthama, as they all knew him. Veerbhadrā saw him and immediately knew that he had seen him in Om's memories of Ashwatthama and Subhash Chandra Bose. Veerbhadrā, terrified, ran towards the chamber of the old man.

Parashuram saw Om, bleeding and a hostage in the hands of LSD, and his eyes burnt with rage. He lifted his bow to shoot at her, just when the bricks fell and the door opened. Behind LSD, Parimal walked in, ready to attack Parashuram. He rushed to get in front of LSD, took aim and shot at Parashuram before he could have shot LSD.

Parashuram missed the target as he defended himself. Meanwhile, LSD entered the passage room and dragged Om along with her. Om felt an immense pain and found it impossible to stand. Dr Batra saw it all as he hid behind a stainless steel operating table. Both Parashuram and Parimal shot at each other, but in the ambush, Parimal had managed to rescue LSD and Om. He ordered LSD to press the button that closed the door which could then not be opened from outside. LSD pushed the button and Parimal ran towards it to make it to the door. Parashuram knew that this was the last shot he could take at Parimal, so he lifted his *farsaa* (axe) and threw it at the door, screaming and wild with anger. The aim was perfect. The strength with which the weapon was thrown was enough to cut Parimal into two halves but before it could hit him, the doors slid close, catching the weapon in the slit of the opening.

Parashuram ran towards the door but knew that it was too late. Parimal crossed the hidden passage, followed by LSD, who still dragged Om. They reached the kitchen and kept walking towards the corridor to advance to the old man's chamber. They saw Veerbhadrā coming towards the kitchen's corridor, heading to the same place where they intended to reach. Veerbhadrā saw them too, rushing out of the kitchen, with all their arms and ammunition. He followed their gaze to see that Om bled and marked their trail with the blood gushing out of him. Veerbhadrā stood stupefied at the scenario. Something inside him compelled him to take aim at Parimal, a gut instinct. He had learnt from experience that gut instincts are to be followed, always! So he grabbed his gun and aimed it at Parimal.

'What are you doing? Who the hell are you?' he thundered. His voice echoed in the glass corridor for some seconds before fading away.

Parimal replied to this by aiming his weapon towards VeerbhadrA, too. LSD gestured to Parimal to put his gun down but Parimal refused. LSD then lowered his gun with her hand, slowly.

'VeerbhadrA, we are a part of your team. We are taking him to Nagendra sir. Please come along.'

'How did he get injured and who is Nagendra?' VeerbhadrA asked, raising an eyebrow.

'A man attacked us all inside the interrogation room, and tried to kill him. We somehow managed to save him. There is no time to explain the rest. We should first reach a safe spot before sorting things out between us. For now, just know that we are on the same team. Believe me,' LSD replied, concealing her expressions.

Om heard every word LSD said, but he did not counter her. He was in too much pain to talk and also, he knew that on knowing the truth, VeerbhadrA would attack them. Om also knew that VeerbhadrA stood no chance of winning against these two skilled fighters. So he decided to remain silent for the moment.

VeerbhadrA nodded at the theory served to him and accompanied them to the chamber. VeerbhadrA now held Om and assisted him in walking. The time lost in talking to VeerbhadrA had reduced the distance between them and Ashwatthama, who was now just a turn behind them. Parashuram, who had to cover the longer corridor, was on the run.

In the chamber, the old man looked at the screen for the last time to calculate how much time they would all take to bring Om there. Then he powered down the screen and decided they were three minutes down. He then moved the screen sideways to reveal a lock code pattern affixed to the

wall behind it. He pressed a few buttons on the keypad of the lock screen.

Suddenly, a few cracks surfaced on three of the walls, excluding the ones containing the entrance door and the exit door. He then pressed a few more keys and the cracks emerged as numerous doors on all sides, opening in different directions and into long dark passages. As the walls parted and the doors appeared, one of the marble tiles on the floor, 8 feet by 5 feet in size, descended below its level and moved horizontally under the adjacent tile to reveal a staircase that was hidden beneath the floor. The old man had safely wrapped the book in a blood-red cloth, which he now hid inside a bag, along with some medicines and a few other books. Now, he waited for Parimal and LSD to arrive, and hid the keypad behind the screen again.

Parimal and LSD had almost reached the door to the old man's chamber, which was being guarded by two men. Veerbhadrā was close behind as he had to carry Om's weight added to his own, which slowed him down. However, there was nothing that slowed down Ashwatthama and Parashuram. Just when Parimal entered the code to open the door, Ashwatthama took the last turn and now could see them. The opponents stood at the two corners of the long corridor, barely 20 feet apart. Closest to Ashwatthama stood Veerbhadrā.

Ashwatthama aimed at Veerbhadrā, who held Om and started walking towards Parimal and LSD, cautiously. Veerbhadrā, LSD and Parimal stood clueless, their backs towards Ashwatthama. But the security guards saw him, and began shooting ferociously at once. Veerbhadrā, LSD and Parimal were alerted and realized how close the danger had been. Ashwatthama's target had shifted to the guards now. As he shot one of them in the head, a bullet from

behind him cleared the other's chest. He turned around to find Parashuram lowering his weapon after the successful shot.

Meanwhile, Parimal and LSD entered the chamber and began a series of attacks on their foes, from the inside. Veerbhadrā, under the impression that he fought for the righteous, laid Om down against the wall and bravely fought to save Om and other team members.

Back in the interrogation room, Dr Batra stood near Abhilash, who had been deceptively killed by Parimal, and then approached Dr Shahista. He cried bitterly at the loss he was witnessing.

His grievances faded as he realized that his own life was at stake, too. He was still alive, but he knew not till when. The gunshots in the distance broke his reverie. He had to devise a plan to escape from the building. He gathered evidence and samples of Om's blood, LSD's laptop and Om's file, which contained all the pictures and names he had been using, and sneaked out of the building.

Veerbhadrā fought like a real soldier before being shot first by Parashuram in his shoulder and then by Ashwatthama in his chest and stomach. He fell into Om's lap, looked above at his face and apologized for failing to save him. Om's eyes filled with tears as Veerbhadrā breathed his last in his arms.

LSD screamed from inside the chamber and banged her fists on the door that separated her from Om and Veerbhadrā. She looked at Veerbhadrā and desired to see him for the last time, but Parimal held her back, since he knew that the enemies weren't far away. Since Om was shot, with his blurred vision, he saw Nagendra with Parimal and LSD, and could partially recognize him. Parimal closed another door with a heavy heart. Ashwatthama rushed

towards Om to ensure he was fine and Parashuram rushed towards the closing door of the chamber.

‘Guruji, he is bleeding profusely!’ Ashwatthama exclaimed.

Parashuram was busy fixing detonators on the door and replied, ‘Tear his shirt and tie it to his wounds tightly. He can’t die, but he mustn’t faint either. Take him away from this door and stay with him all the time. I am going after them.’

‘As you order, Guruji.’

Ashwatthama took Om back to the kitchen and started searching for the first-aid kit while Om was laid on one of the working tables.

Om looked at Parashuram and the door, one after another, and then found himself at a loss for words.

He had so many questions, but was slowly losing consciousness.

‘I have been searching for you for yugas. I knew you were there,’ he managed to say.

‘You were always on our radar. We never lost track of you. You never found us because we didn’t want you to,’ Ashwatthama revealed.

‘How did you find me here?’

‘We tracked down a few men from your locker in one of the banks down here to Ross Island.’

Om was taken aback on hearing this. The truth then dawned upon him that people had been to the Sri Lankan caves while he was detained at this place. Upset, he asked, ‘Where are the books?’

Ashwatthama’s face grew grim.

‘They are with them, in their possession. Guruji has gone after them,’ Ashwatthama said in a disappointed tone.

'Why have you come for me? Why are you saving me?' Om asked.

'Because . . . you hold the key to the end.'

Om, surprised, looked at him, and fought the heaviness that weighed on his mind. Gradually, he let his mind drift into the darkness and fell on the table in front of him.

Parashuram blasted the steel door and entered the old man's chamber. He saw numerous doors then and faced the dilemma of which one to choose in order to follow his enemies.

As LSD and Parimal had entered the chamber, they, along with their boss, had hidden under the tile which opened up a staircase. The tile had been shut properly again. Now, as Parashuram looked around, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He randomly chose a door and opened it. A long corridor unveiled itself. Parashuram started sprinting inside it. But to his dismay, he soon met a dead end at the other corner. He tried another one, but all in vain. Then, he gave up. The bombs he had affixed to different corners of the facility would blow any time now, of which Om and Ashwatthama were unaware. So he rushed back towards the kitchen. There, he found Ashwatthama removing the bullet from Om's body.

LSD, Parimal and the old man hadn't waited there at all. The passage was a secret one, skilfully built. It opened up to the seashore.

The three came out under the sky on to the sand. A submarine had already been waiting for them. They boarded it, and left the island with the books.

Parashuram, along with Ashwatthama, had just come out of the building when it blew. The facility, so artistically made, was reduced to nothing within a few minutes.

Their enemies too saw this phenomenon, though from a different corner of the island.

'Where are the books?' Ashwatthama asked.

'They are with them,' Parashuram replied.

'And where are they?'

'They have left the island.'

'But they have the books. What will our next move be?'

'Our next move is to protect Om. It's time for him to know about his concealed existence. Now he must know the truth about who he was before Mrityunjay as he will be the one who will defend us the next time we face them.'

'But how will we find them now? We have no clue where they might have gone!' Ashwatthama grew more and more anxious.

'They will come for us. We don't have to go searching for them.'

'Why will they come for us? They already have what they want.'

'They will soon realize that we hold the final key to the lock of immortality,' said Parashuram, looking in Om's direction.

'They will need a drip of Dhanvantari's blood flowing in Om's body to complete the procedure of immortality, for which they will have to come searching for us again.'

Hidden on another corner of the island, frightened to death, was Dr Batra, with the blood sample of Om that Parashuram thought only they had.

'Guruji, what do we do now?'

'We only wait,' assured Parashuram.

Parashuram stood firm at the edge of the rock, taking in the beauty of the sun setting in the horizon.

Ashwatthama asked Om, 'Do you have any idea who they were?'

'Nagendra,' Om replied.

'How is it possible? Nagendra is long lost!' exclaimed Ashwatthama.

Parashuram answered, standing with folded hands on the rock near the seashore, still looking at the setting sun. 'Long lost . . . not dead. Just lost.'

Nagendra impatiently started reading the book, with eyes gleaming like that of a child's at the sight of his favourite candy as Parimal drove the U-boat far from the island. LSD looked at nothing.

Far away, in the sky, the sun was setting, taking away with it the bright blue sky, leaving behind . . . darkness.

By dusk, Parshuram and Ashwatthama stood near the sea above the rocks, waiting for another wave to hit it, as the one that had just passed had failed to break it.

Year 2041

Mrs Batra spoke instantly as Prithvi stopped for a while to have a sip of water from his own water bottle, which he had in his bag.

'How do you know all of this? Who are you? Why are you searching for Om Shastri?'

Prithvi quenched his thirst while hearing the new set of questions from Mrs Batra and replied calmly, looking into her eyes after putting his bottle back in his bag, 'Because he is my father.'

TO BE CONTINUED ...

Acknowledgements

It is impossible for me to write an acknowledgment that doesn't start with you both. Dad, you were, are and will always be my best friend. Maa, the writer in me is you.

Bulbul Goyal, you are so stubborn. You never gave up on me. You are so inflexible that you did not allow me to let go of the dream I once saw. I love you for being so stubborn and inflexible when it comes to my happiness. You are each and every letter of the word 'success' in my life.

Avi, you don't usually express yourself in words, whereas I am a writer. We make a perfect balance, my little (not-so-little) brother. You flew the family out of the worst windstorm, singing us melodies as if nothing had happened.

Anu and Avi, if someone wants to learn what sacrifice for the family means, they need to know you both. I am grateful and truly blessed to have you.

Aradhya, I have been waiting for you for six years . . . and I will wait for you till eternity. I know you will come back one day . . . someday.

I still remember my first meeting with them. There were no cameras around for them to put up pretenses, or the media to judge their behaviour.

Yet, they greeted me with genial and disarming smiles, and I couldn't help but respond with one of mine, mesmerized by their charming and humble nature.

The remarkable lady appeared no different than a friendly next-door neighbour, dressed in a simple household suit. The exceptional man, cherished by millions, was in an ordinary olive green T-shirt and black track pants, with his

hands covered in grease. I would later discover that he had been busy fixing his bike.

For people like me, who are inspired by such great achievers, it may seem disappointing that at first glance these individuals seemed so unexceptional. However, reassured by the couple's unassuming and simple nature, I completely forgot the kind of company I was in within minutes. I was swept away by their magical ability to put anyone at ease. Seemingly unaffected by the attention and adoration they receive on a daily basis, the pair was as humble, modest and grounded as the people I meet in my day-to-day life.

I am talking about Padma Bhushan, Padma Shri, Honorary Lieutenant Colonel Mahendra Singh Dhoni, fondly known as Mahi. Complimenting his aura of grandeur with her cheerfulness and incorruptible innocence was Sakshi Dhoni, his better half in every sense of the term.

They were absolutely adorable together, and left me with memories I will always cherish.

Sakshi and Mahi, for your kindness, I owe you my unconditional loyalty till the end of my life.

Rishi Arora (baabaa), thank you for being the one that no one else wanted to be then. My friend, three cheers to you.

Mr Virendra Pratap Singh, I can write a book on you, but until I do, this is my tribute to you for your unsaid promise that you are always with me.

Can you imagine a lawyer not exploiting someone while pretending to help? I am blessed to have known not one but two such selfless lawyers who fought for me for four years and supported me financially instead of being paid for their services. Mrs Pooja Vijayvargiya and Mr Rahul Vijayvargiya, I'm in your debt for life for your selfless support.

True friends are families you can select. Rahul Agrawal, thank you for being just such a family, my friend.

The blessings you get fight the problems your life presents. Mrs Sapna Chitnis, I am blessed to have you as my second mom. Love you, ma'am.

Gods have their own unique ways of telling us that they exist. Mr Hatim Ali Malviya, I wonder if Allah and Ram had discussed us at a dinner table before we met.

Neli Kools and Heli Kools, thanks for the coolest support.

Sometimes, all you need to know is that there is a door you can knock on anytime, a door behind which there is someone who will take you under their wing. Mr Robin Bhatt, that's your door for me. Thank you for believing in me then.

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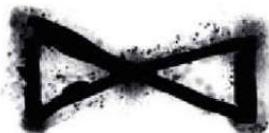


Symbols



What appears to be the tiniest can be the mightiest piece.

Satya
Yuga Dwapara
Yuga



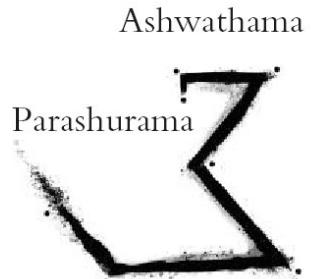
Treta
Yuga Kali
Yuga

The unending cosmic loop of yugas starting with Satya Yuga, moving through Treta and Dwapara Yuga and ending with Kali Yuga only to start back again from Satya Yuga.



A mysterious search across Incredible India!

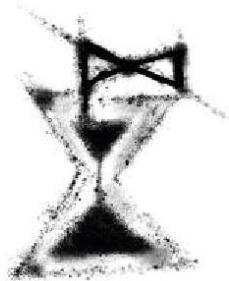
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2 out of the 7 immortals found. Where are the others (Veda Vyasa, Hanuman, King Mahabali, Kripacharya and Vibhishana)?



Om's timeless journey through all yugas continues.



Can time run out for the immortals too?



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THE BEGINNING

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