

MAYA

SEED TAKES ROOT

ANAND GANDHI + ZAIN MEMON

Copyright © 2024 Department of Lore Inc.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, mail at contact@departmentoflore.com.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

ISBN 000-1-1010-1010-1 (print)

ISBN 000-0-1110-0011-0 (ebook)

1st edition 2024

Weary travelers, each choice in your life has led you to this moment. You stand before two ponds. One reflects the person you aspire to be, but can never be. The other shows your unvarnished self, every flaw laid bare. One quenches your thirst; the other erases the thirst from your mind. Step closer, weary travelers, for your choice has already been made, even if you don't yet know it.

The peoples of Samsaar converse in a variety of tongues-Kosh, Elu, Purvam, Seni among them. What you read has been translated into your Earthly English, a choice that's been already made for you.

Moreover, some names and pronouns have been rendered in Sanskrit. This is to preserve the nuanced flavors that might otherwise vanish in the blunt vessel of English.

So remember, weary travelers, every word you read captures an approximation, though not the exact shape and essence, of the original utterance.

CHAPTERS

BARBAROUS ELSEWHERE
SAME MARKET TWICE
ALL THINGS CONSIDERED
A SEED OUT OF PLACE
NETI NETI
A MILLION HEARTBEATS
A PRAYER AND AN OATH
WE ARE FOOD
GNOSIS
WHEEL OF OFFERING
THE MEMORY OF WATER
THOSE WITH WINGS
THREE DEATHS
THOSE WITHOUT A NAME
FULCRUM
THREE BREATHS
VIDHI VIDHAATA
SEVERE PUNISHMENT
ONE-EYED TURLOTH
ONE BARD, ONE LULLABY



BARBAROUS ELSEWHERE

“Our peace rests on a barbarous elsewhere.”

– Kuber, the palms of the great body

KARKOTAK FLICKED his forked tongue, searching for the little girl. *There she was, again.*

Though “again” wasn’t quite right, he thought. “Again” implied something happening once, and then happening once more. This was the same place, the same moment, just a different could-be. And it wasn’t really happening.

Surely, the great Divya had a word for it.

The first few times Karkotak died, the implosion had caught him mid-slither. Now he kept his distance from where the scooter would crash, far down the market’s cliffside terraces.

You never get used to dying, no matter how many times you wake up from it.

He slipped through a narrow gap between two shops with living, breathing walls. His powerful, serpentine tail pressed against the ground, steadyng him as he rose upright.

Years of vertical posture had settled a dull ache into his spine where his torso became tail. It was a price all urban naags paid to fit in. His body was built for sliding along the ground, not this strained mimicry of bipeds.

He tightened the tension-weave vest strapped around his middle. The responsive fabric's hair-thin tension bands flexed like tiny muscles, bracing his spine. His long, scaled fingers worked the fastenings. The contraption eased the pain—but never enough.

His great-grandmother would have hissed at such compromises—more so for the reason he made them. When Darib was born, Karkotak had watched his muscles spasm, noticed how the tail already showed signs of failing. There was an established path for such things.

The naag clans had always sent their runts on risky errands, letting prison or worse filter out weakness from the bloodline. But when Darib's pearl-soft scales first brushed his chest, Karkotak had made an unthinkable choice: his son would live. Even if it meant taking on a hundred missions like this one.

Karkotak slipped into the market crowd. His heat pits flickered with a warm signature they'd picked up before. He didn't look up. He knew. There were eyes upon him.

Above, cable-carts with wind sails glided along elevated tracks. In their shifting shadows, a vaanar enforcer crouched on a patrol beam, watching. His nimble tail and strong arms gripped an overhead support, while muscular legs folded beneath him, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

His tail-tip shifted nervously. The diamond-studded mace strapped to it, shimmered in the light. Karkotak had seen what one swing could do. The vaanar dropped to a lower beam, tracking

Karkotak's movement keenly.

Karkotak knew what made this burly enforcer so uneasy. Something about the way a naag glided, triggered ancient suspicions in vaanar minds. Today, those fears fell short of his true purpose.

Karkotak's lips curled faintly. He knew: later, when asked how the riot began, the vaanar would recount every stone hurled, every scream—but he would never think to say: when the naag gave the girl a fruit.

Karkotak had spotted him before. His pink fur marked him as a low-rank patroller. Karkotak moved on, keeping his cobrahood flat against his back—another relic that city life had tamed. These days, flaring it meant fear, not threat.

A network of poles and ropes turned the market's airspace into a vaanar's path. The enforcer could swing across the entire market without ever touching the ground, fast and lethal.

But he wouldn't dare. Even without official robes, Karkotak carried himself with unmistakable authority. The patroller knew better than to underestimate a confident-looking naag—not these days, when naags were running for office.

The vaanar turned away with a sneer, directing his scorn toward the refugees from Udayan who were flooding the city in search of work and food.

Karkotak couldn't deny the plan's brutal elegance, though it defied every instinct he'd honed in the field. "Weeding out the scion of a great Divya in Dhaara's busiest market?" he'd confronted Adharvan with a soldier's caution. "I might as well announce it to the vaanar police."

Adharvan's reply had illuminated the way. "A spark ignites

a flame,” he had said. “A flame starts a fire, a fire becomes an inferno. A chain reaction is beautiful, but even more so is the spark’s innocence.”

A procession of a dozen ornate carriages wound its way through the market’s distant quarter. At their center, a palanquin draped in rare thraak silk shifted colors with each sway. Riders flanked it on their blind colhaans, leading the two-legged beasts with sonar rattlers.

Elite vaanar militia with crimson dyed fur formed a protective ring around the elegant palanquin like a living wall. The scion’s caravan had arrived, right on schedule.

But the target was a distraction. First, Karkotak needed his spark.

Near the procession, Karkotak spotted her — the manushya girl, barely six years old. *There she was. Again.* She threaded her way between the colhaans, darting to the next lane.

She wore a loose hand-me-down dress that seemed to have once belonged to a child who had never known her kind of hunger. The fabric was faded but clean, a quiet proof of a mother’s struggle to maintain some semblance of dignity amid scarcity. Her eyes, older than her years, were locked onto a heap of gleaming sunpears, guarded by a fruitseller across the street.

The girl had almost reached the fruit stall when screams erupted overhead, drawing all eyes skyward. A young naag tore through the market’s airspace on a stolen rikta skyscooter, its volatile core sputtering with warning. Vaanar police swung in pursuit through the aerial infrastructure. The thief’s forked tongue sampled the air, tasting freedom and capture in equal measure.

Stupid kid, Karkotak thought, watching the fleeing naag. *What did he think he was going to do with a rikta skyscooter?* Only gandharvas were permitted to own them.

A portly vaanar enforcer, deceptively agile despite his paunch, hurled a bola. It struck the scooter's tank, exposing the light-sensitive rikta fuel. The thief leapt clear as the rikta core imploded mid-air, creating a violent vacuum. It sucked in nearby matter—bola, scooter, even the corner of a treetop—into a dense, hurtling orb.

The crowd watched in horror, as the compacted sphere slashed through the air, splintering terrace edges before it vanished into the gorge below.

The thief hit the pavement and slithered low, belly scraping stone as he wove through legs and carriages. Vaanars descended behind him, swift, relentless.

This was Karkotak's cue.

He had tried mastering this timing—counting breaths, keeping beats—but the moment always defied precision. There was no rhythm to memorize, only shifting markers to watch for: the thief's pungent fear, the pressing heat of the crowd's panic, a seller distracted by fleeting drama.

Karkotak slid through the frenzy with reptilian calm. He slipped behind the housing of a large, unwinding spring—one of many that lifted passengers to the aqueduct channels above. Its position offered perfect access to the fruit stall while keeping him hidden from view.

Soon, the market returned to its baseline hum, a restless organism used to shrugging off brief disruptions. The fruitseller's attention settled back on his wares. The girl stood at the stall now,

still transfixed by the sunpears.

Though slim chance of commerce, a salesman's hope died hard. "Got coin, girl?" the fruitseller asked, ignoring the stark evidence to the contrary.

She just stared at him, amused by the odd sounds he made.

"Handouts are that way," he said, dismissively flicking his wrist toward a group of Udayan refugees, huddled around a food distribution booth. Their gentle civility betrayed the proximity of their tragedy. Vaanar officials shouted orders at a sufficiently orderly crowd that just spoke a language of lesser familiarity.

In response, the girl bumped her tiny fists together. It was a silent, defiant gesture she did not fully understand, yet its impropriety sparked a primal thrill within her.

The fruitseller chose to ignore the indecent retort, turning instead to someone who did have coin.

Adharvan's voice echoed in Karkotak's memory. "Do you share this merchant's fascination with these mundane discs of metal?" he'd asked, casually weighing the bag of vajra coins, as though he might fling them into the gorge below if Karkotak showed insufficient interest.

"It has its uses," Karkotak had replied, drawing a single coin from the bag. "A compact ledger of the world's distributed sacrifice, holding essence of time and toil through common agreement." He'd flicked the coin back. "But I seek something more... fundamental."

It was a price only a certain kind of employer could comprehend, let alone pay. Karkotak had named it only once he was certain that Adharvan was precisely the kind who could. The flitt-locust pendant around Adharvan's neck had confirmed it. No

artificer, however skilled, could ever forge such a thing.

Concealed behind the wind-up spring's bulk, Karkotak's tail slid forward like smoke, well out of the fruitseller's view. In a whisper, it swept two sunpears from the stall, the act so smooth the fruits seemed to vanish on their own.

His tail curled back, depositing one sunpear into the girl's small palms. She turned to his hiding spot with a gap-toothed grin.

Before she could form a thought, Karkotak nudged her, pivoting her to face the fruitseller—no words, just a subtle rearrangement in the world's geometry.

The girl locked eyes with the fruitseller. Fear flooded her small frame. She bolted.

A guttural yelp escaped the fruitseller's mouth, two impulses collapsed into a single utterance.

"Fru—ief!"

The fruitseller shoved through the crowd behind the girl, his pursuit fueled by the conviction that humiliating one thief deterred the next.

Karkotak remained as inconspicuous as the half-light of dusk. With a flick of his tail, he tossed the second sunpear into the dry gutter that sloped along the road.

The fruit rolled, guided by the channel's funnel, spurred on by gravity. It threaded beneath tails and wheels until it bumped to a stop a few steps away from a gruff.

The creature's ribs showed beneath matted fur. Its nose lifted, nostrils testing the air.

The gruff lunged for the fruit, only to be yanked back by its

leash. The prize sat just beyond reach, taunting it. Karkotak watched with satisfaction as the beast strained against the leash, unable to stretch it any further.

Down the road, circumstances snowballed.

The girl ran as the hunted run—without thought, without plan. The fruitseller's strides ate up the distance between them, each step promising retribution.

From the opposite direction came the naag thief at breakneck pace, scales burning stone, vaanar police in hot pursuit. The gruff's taut leash, stretched across the thief's path, became an instant tripwire. His momentum folded him over the cable and sent him crashing down on top of the fleeing girl.

The first vaanar, eyes locked on the thief, hit the same leash at full speed. He slammed into the fallen naag. A chorus of grunts and curses erupted as more vaanars piled on in a tangle of fur and limbs, oblivious to the small life trapped beneath them. Their weight was crushing the air from her lungs.

The vaanars dragged their prize away, the bound naag cursing and thrashing. The fruitseller had vanished at the first sight of red-furs, his inventory a little lighter, but his sense of justice temporarily restored.

Two vaanar constables lingered behind. Their captain noticed, and sent the younger one back with official regrets. What happened here, he reminded his junior, was most definitely an accident.

The sunpear slipped from the girl's limp hand, rolling until it met its twin—two points in a constellation of cause and effect, now united, their purpose served.

As the child lay still, a contagious silence emanated outward in

waves from the epicenter, bracing for the coming anguish.

A manushya refugee pushed through the crowd and crumpled beside his daughter. He cradled her head gently — as if to hold each vertebra in place, an unconscious hope that she might still wake.

A rakshasi healer emerged from the circle of onlookers, her pouches of curatives now futile. She knelt beside them, her hand on the father's arm carrying the finality of condolence.

The vaanar constable approached with measured steps, his tail lowered. He spoke of the state's remorse, of compensation—words that even he knew were inadequate for their task.

The father's scream tore through the city's skandha foundations, a plea to undo this nightmare. Karkotak strained to hear, but couldn't catch the girl's name that the frail manushya was trying to etch into the city's memory. The market swallowed the father's rage into its underbelly where it kindled and erupted.

The first stone flew from the crowd—a mother's grief-made weapon. It struck the vaanar captain's brow, drawing blood. He shoved the naag thief aside, more to shield than restrain. "Hold!" he ordered, to de-escalate. But his youngest officer's bola was already in flight, spinning towards its mark. The mother collapsed beside her daughter's still form.

The crowd surged forward with raised fists. The vaanars locked formations, armored tails lifted high—legislating anguish, insisting sorrow be swallowed. Their vajra discipline held the tide back until an urn came flying into a vaanar's face. A decade of brittle peace shattered with clay and skull.

The volley of stones followed. A pointed rock punctured through a vaanar's chest plate. Another caved a helmet in. Blood

turned red fur rust-black. Stones whistled through market air, finding flesh with an accuracy bred by years of bowing.

For three heartbeats, the vaanar line held, as if contemplating the weight of what would follow. Then they answered with brutal efficiency.

Lassos, meant for naags, wrapped around manushya necks instead. Bodies jerked, feet leaving ground. Combat nets fell from above—iron mesh on flesh. Protesters thrashed in their folds.

Vaanar enforcers swung on ropes, their feet and tails striking with precision - a kick landing on a rioter's head, a tail-mace striking a shoulder. Beautiful and efficient. Protestors fell. One, then another.

Each vaanar strike bred deeper anger. Protesters smashed the skandha-stone pillars, and the splintered shards became weapons as if that's what they were always meant to be.

Their fury sought everything that had towered over them—the shops that loomed, the wares that gleamed, the high perches of the elite garudas that mocked them. The ancient marketplace foundations, laid long before uniform or uprising, trembled.

Karkotak recalled his guru's words: "Our peace rests on a barbarous elsewhere." Once puzzling, now clear as he watched his design unravel. *Today that elsewhere is here.* Rage was incomprehensible, but useful.

The scion's caravan sat trapped in the riot's heart, cut off front and back by the surging mob. Frenzied bodies closed in, drawn by the gleam of wealth.

Karkotak needed better vantage; from street level, it was all just a blur of limbs and flying debris.

His tongue sampled the air—first the immediate scents of spilled food from toppled urns and the sterile smell of collagen bandages, then the earthy musk of mud clinging to stones as they arced toward an immense garuda statue that dominated the marketplace.

He tilted back to take in the full height of the sculpture—fifteen stories of skandha-stone, a monument to a long-dead garuda politician that dwarfed the surrounding buildings.

Even from this distance, Karkotak could see how the garuda's infamous sneer had been preserved in stone. The statue's massive hooked beak—large enough to swallow a real garuda whole—gazed down at the city. Her keeled breastbone thrust forward still domineering over the streets she had once governed.

Enormous wings with metal feathers spread out from its sides, flapping back and forth in slow, mechanical sweeps. Each pass cast moving shadows over the market below, bright day and sudden dusk chasing each other.

The statue's head served as an observation chamber. Its eyes were vast windows, made from polished chitin of giant insects. A dual-headed gandharva was stationed within: one head watching the riot, the other tethered to a Maya tree growing within the statue's hollow core.

Stones pelted the chitin windows, fracturing them. Karkotak almost pitied the mob's futile attempt to blind the city's memory. They never understood that true surveillance lived in the eyes of their own loved ones.

He considered seizing the chamber—perfect view for now, yet worthless on the day that truly mattered. He wouldn't want his face to be the gandharva's final memory preserved in the tree. Instead,

he set his sights on the statue's mechanical heart.

A gap in the mayhem revealed his path. His tail dipped into spilled jona-oil as he wound toward the statue's base. The sticky substance invaded his vajra plating's grooves, making his scales crawl. He left a slick trail behind.

The garuda's stone robes fell in deep folds, offering hidden routes upward. Finally prone, Karkotak scaled these shadows until he reached the chamber housing the wing mechanisms. Inside, a network of service platforms surrounded the central gear works.

From a ledge above the western wing's axle, he surveyed the scene below. Each mechanical sweep cast a broad eclipse over the street, then slid away, revealing a crowd that moved like pieces in a game of Yuyutsu. Through this strobing gloom, he saw his target: a lavish palanquin right at the riot's core.

Elite vaanar guards formed a ring around it. Their colhaans snapped at anyone who ventured close, but still the stones rained—as if opulence was gravity.

The palanquin's open sky-door offered Karkotak a clear view. Inside, the divya's scion Tarkash perched on a carved beam, his keeled chest leaning against the ornate frontrest. Though his wings twitched at each scream from outside, his tilted head indicated assessment, not fear.

Tarkash reached for the sky-door. A volley of stones pummeled the palanquin. "Stay inside, shreeman!" a guard shouted, but Tarkash was already rising, his upper half emerging as if to address the crowd. A stone shard found the gap through shields, striking his wing-claw talons. He lurched from his perch, wings spreading wide, but another stone cut his flight short before it could begin. His pinions flared for balance, but too late—he crashed back into

the gilded interior. Satisfaction welled in Karkotak as he watched the scion fall.

But something was changing. Young voices emerged from the other carriages, reasoning with the mob. The word “Divyasantaan”—the scion of Divya—carried on the wind. Fingers pointed at the hue shifting thraak silk on the palanquin as if its rarity were proof enough. Even the most enraged rioters hesitated, their hatred of wealth warring with reverence toward divya blood.

Karkotak watched his careful plan dissolving. He had to act fast.

Below his ledge, the statue’s heart lay exposed—a massive coiled spring powering the metal wings through gears and counterweights. If he jammed the axle, all that pent up tension would tear the wing free.

He searched frantically for something sturdy—a loose tool, a metal bar, anything. His eyes caught on a chunk of skandha-stone, broken loose from the statue’s core, bigger than his head.

He lunged for it, both hands closing around its jagged edges, scales scraping stone. At the ledge, he studied the churning gears below, their curved teeth pulling everything inward. The distance made precision impossible, but he had to try. He heaved the rock up and over. It tumbled—and glanced harmlessly off a support beam, vanishing into the depths. The machinery ground on, indifferent.

He needed something longer and stronger. Something he could guide. The mob’s conviction was cooling into doubt. There was only one way.

Karkotak uncoiled his large tail, lowering it into the churning gears. He watched the wing’s sweep intently. Timing was

everything. Then, bracing himself, he twisted sharply, and wedged the thickest, most heavily plated section of his tail between two massive, interlocking gears.

Metal shrieked in protest as gears bit hard into his tail's vajra armor, making him wince. The wing juddered to a stop, its shadow frozen directly above Tarkash's palanquin.

The spring's trapped force pulled relentlessly against the jammed wing. Pain shot up Karkotak's spine as gears ground deeper into his plating with crushing pressure.

Counterweights swung wild, yanking at locked levers, as the system began tearing itself apart. Housing bolts popped free, shooting off like shrapnel. One ricocheted off the wall with a sharp clang, missing him by a scale's breadth.

The wing's central joint gave way with a deafening crack. Below, the guards still wrestled back the crowd. They were now shouting demands to see the scion. The chaos drowned out the groaning metal above.

Karkotak bared his fangs against the excruciating pain. The wing tore loose, its immense weight looming over the palanquin. Nearly there—

The vajra armor shattered.

Gears ripped through his tail. Scales sliced, flesh shredded, bone snapped. The world shrunk to a single point of agony, all-consuming, his scream lost in the screech of tearing metal.

The spring burst through the platform beneath him, blasting the skandha ledge into fragments. Karkotak plummeted with the debris, the ground rushing up to meet him.

“Stha!”

The command tore from his throat as he hit the ground. And the universe obeyed.

The massive axle froze mid-air above him. Debris hung in arrested time, like studs embedded in solid space.

Only he stirred in the stillness. He could taste static air, see through motionless light—Maya’s selective mercy. The agony still insisted on being true.

“End it.” Adharvan’s voice possessed the space around him. Not from anywhere. From everywhere.

“Wait.” The word burned through what remained of Karkotak’s body.

“Why prolong pain?” Adharvan’s question held no mockery, only curiosity.

“Pain is noise. Only time is true.” Another day lost if he died now. He dragged himself forward on raw bone. He had to see how close he’d come.

Rolling onto his side, he surveyed the frozen chaos. All around figures stood motionless — vaanars mid-swing, faces locked in grim oaths, water suspended like crystal archways from broken aqueducts.

And there, in the palanquin’s sky-door, Tarkash. The young garuda’s eyes blazed with confidence, his beak open as if to address the mob. Scattered feathers hung in the air around him.

The massive wing dangled by its last hinge above. In this frozen moment, Karkotak could see every detail—the fractures spreading through metal, the perfect angle of its impending fall.

“It could work.” The words escaped him like a prayer.

“It won’t,” Adharvan said.

Karkotak’s forked tongue tasted the impossible stillness one last time. “Asthu.”

Reality lurched back into motion with violent force. Before he could see the wing fall, the platform collapsed, killing him instantly.

SAME MARKET TWICE

“You never cross the same market twice.”

– Niririn, the eyes of the great body

SEARING LIGHT enveloped Karkotak, pulling him through tunnels of vein and root. His senses thawed, like night receding at dawnbreak. Through the haze, he felt the Maya tree releasing its chemical grip on his mind — unbinding from dreaming pathways, like an anesthetic reversing its course.

He woke with a sharp gasp in Adharvan’s chamber. Signals from the bonsai Maya tree ceased flowing as it gradually withdrew its tendrils from his open mouth.

You never get used to dying, no matter how many times you wake up from it.

The phantom pain in his tail suddenly stopped. He surveyed the chamber, seeking familiar anchors amid disorientation’s fog. The space glowed with a loamy scent of biosynthetic light.

Adharvan sat cross-legged on the far side. His frame, too young for such stillness, spoke of deliberate chiseling — as if he had identified and excised every gesture, every element of himself that

didn't serve a purpose. What remained was something that even Karkotak's predator instincts recognized as dangerous: absolute conviction.

Like most personal spaces, this one mirrored its occupant — a presence defined by absence. Sparse furnishings broadcast focus. A mattress, a mat, a writing table, nothing more. Precision tools need no ornament, Karkotak had thought when he first arrived here.

Now he understood: the emptiness itself was another tool — one that left visitors exposed to the young manushya's piercing gaze.

"The wing could have broken off and fallen earlier," Karkotak began the familiar post-run analysis. "I just need to reach the mechanism sooner."

"You are still too visible," Adharvan noted.

"I stayed well hidden," Karkotak said, unwilling to give up on his strategy yet, even as doubt crept in.

"Physically, yes," Adharvan said. "Causally, no."

Karkotak's hood flared reflexively. Embarrassed, he forced the ancient defense to flatten.

Another day burning away — he could see it in the window set in the chamber floor. Through a tunnel of angled reflectors, it brought a view of the sky into Adharvan's hidden chamber, even though the space was buried deep within Avval's maze of offices.

Dawn's violet light had barely touched the mirror when Karkotak entered Maya. Now afternoon burned through it, harsh and bright. His glimpse of next month's market had devoured most of today.

This was nothing like the Maya that Karkotak knew. Maya

trees stood in every corner of Samsaar, their tendrils connecting minds to shared visions. From diplomatic chambers to teaching halls, billions dipped in and out of Maya daily, seeking whatever flavors of impossible their hearts desired.

In its endless dreamscapes, they raced biomechanical marvels through phantom skies, fought drawn out mythic battles, mastered forgotten arts from great masters, built and lost fortunes between breaths. Karkotak had himself completed adventures spanning generations over a single evening's tethering.

For him, just as for every last person in the world, Maya was as natural as gravity, as necessary as bloodstream. But this was no ordinary Maya.

Adharvan's clandestine Maya told no tales. Each tethering revealed the same market morning, exactly a month ahead. The tree used his mind to calculate every detail till tomorrow became as vivid as now.

His first attempts had cost him whole days. He was beginning to doubt if he could master this future before it arrived.

A gentle voice answered Karkotak's unspoken worry. "At least the time cost of each run has gone down." Adharvan's gandharva assistant Tiresia-Sanjay had noticed his preoccupation with the window in the floor.

The gandharva's younger head spoke while pruning the branches. The older head stayed lost in pure calculation, ignoring both physical work and social niceties — until something made it stir.

The younger face froze in what gandharvas considered a polite smile — measured and memorized. Karkotak recognized this pause.

It always came before their shared consciousness turned inward to debate over some conflict. He had worked with many gandharvas in the service, watching their divided attention solve puzzles that baffled single minds.

“A clarification,” the younger head resumed. “Your mind learns the patterns with each attempt. It needs to process only the variations. You move more swiftly through unchanged moments, like walking a familiar path, .”

“But not fast enough,” Karkotak said, watching the sun set in the window, while elsewhere his son’s scales grew duller by the day.

He watched Tiresia-Sanjay graft a root onto the bonsai tree he had recently tethered with. The potted grove itself defied everything Karkotak had learned about Maya.

Unlike the vast tree network that bound Samsaar together, these were clandestine specimens: hidden from the divya’s watchful gaze. Each grafted marvel was invaluable for its isolation. Submerged in nutrient baths, their roots whispered secrets unknown to any but Adharvan and his gandharva aide.

In the service, Karkotak had confiscated many standalone trees. But those were crude things grown in basement vats, producing uncontrolled hallucinations for thrill-seekers. Sheshan Maya, they called them at the branch — named after the dark ages it was invented in — Sheshan Yug. The bonsai here were different - they simply shouldn’t have been possible.

Everything about this place existed in gaps—a chamber between thirteenth and fourteenth where blueprints showed only beams. Even Karkotak’s own superior had forgotten sending him here.

When his gandharva contacts found no trace of Adharvan in the public registry, Karkotak wasn't surprised. More telling was Tiresia-Sanjay's presence. Gandharvas served only the divya, yet here was one bound to a young manushya's will.

The one fixed point was the pendant at Adharvan's throat—a flitt-locust that was chemically invisible. Where every biomechanical construct released chemical signals to function, Karkotak's tongue detected nothing, even when it fluttered. Yet his heat pits sensed a thermal signature far hotter than any living organism, somehow perfectly contained within the same object. It was a perfect miniature of the great Divyendra's legendary mount. Not proof enough for the investigator in him, but sufficient for the father.

If this impossible chamber could exist, if Maya could dream up futures, if a gandharva could break protocol—then perhaps a cure for Darib could exist too. But his failures could stop him from ever finding out.

He moved closer to Adharvan, his scales finding purchase in the floor's coarser channels.

"If someone else jammed the axle," Karkotak said, masking his restlessness. "Not me. I could arrange for—."

"You could," Adharvan said, not looking up from his scrolls.

"Well?" Karkotak's coils tightened. "Would it work?"

"Unlikely."

"But then, how does one reliably catalyze an outcome?" He heard the desperation in his voice, and knew Adharvan heard it too. Twenty years in field-craft, and this manushya half his age made him feel like a new recruit seeking his handler's wisdom.

Adharvan's eyes lifted, held his. "Did you imagine a fruit could

ignite a city?"

"The fulcrums were there, in Dhaara's bones. I only found them."

"And you'll find another," Adharvan said. "We have time. Not much, but enough. Tarkash enters Dhaara in a month."

Karkotak stared into the abyss of untested permutation. Each market day a perfect forgery of the last, yet treacherously different. Like dust motes in sunlight. Some variations whispered, others screamed, but all conspired to waste precious time.

An ally critical in one attempt would vanish in the next, only to resurface cycles later, mockingly out of reach. A pendulum that crashed into Tarkash's palanquin in one run, swung uselessly through empty air in the next, its perfect timing too rigid to adapt to shifting possibilities.

Like a garuda bard, Maya recounted a familiar tale but never quite the same way twice. Yet certain players stayed constant, like career bureaucrats surviving every regime change.

The waif-girl was the first constant he discovered. Despite his mission's urgency, he spent weeks searching for alternatives, unable to accept that her death might be necessary. His scales shuddered at the thought.

He tried steering other odds — diverting Tarkash's palanquin into the rikta orb's path, turning the hungry gruff against the scion. But his schemes reliably backfired or simply faded to nothing.

When the last alternative crumbled, he finally accepted what he'd known since the beginning. The girl would have to be his lever.

The whole process reminded him of a popular game manushya youth played in Maya — fitting gears and levers to create elaborate

war automata. But his components were living beings, each with their own will and weight.

Through death after death, he'd mapped out the essential sequence: the stolen fruit, the fleeing girl, the hungry gruff, the thief's crash, the riots that followed. Yet the desired outcome remained maddeningly out of reach.

One vital fulcrum still escaped him. Which meant more days lost hunting that drop in an ocean of what-ifs, with no end in sight.

"I was hoping to conclude affairs here a day early, to attend my son's ceremony," Karkotak heard himself say, as if from a vessel now detached.

He instantly regretted such vulnerable openness, unsuited to present company. Something flashed in Adharvan. There and gone in less than a microspan. The faintest grin?

"The de-venomization?" Adharvan inquired. "Would he be strong enough to attend?"

"That depends." *On you*, Karkotak left unsaid.

"A fascinating custom." Adharvan's voice held no sarcasm. "Social integration through surgery. How many young naags will surrender their venom glands this Pancham?"

"The city halls are expecting a full house."

Adharvan's quill paused. "I'm told the fangroot oil makes it painless."

"So I've heard."

"But you wouldn't know firsthand?" Adharvan looked up then. His smile was a careful thing. "Your venom glands remain intact."

Karkotak's fingers found the swollen nodes beneath his scales.

“Some of us are more useful unchanged.”

Adharvan’s fingers touched the pendant around his neck. Karkotak felt its heat signature go from white-hot to cold emptiness.

Adharvan’s eyes held Karkotak’s for a long moment, weighing. Then, his furrowed forehead relaxed into decision. His words came precisely chosen.

“There might be a way,” he offered. “What you’ve experienced of Maya so far — these are mere fragments of Divya Maya.”

Karkotak looked into Adharvan’s eyes. Eyes that seemed to have seen too many possible futures, and chosen among them.

Tiresia-Sanjay set down his pruning tools with a click that felt like a seal breaking.

“No mortal has attempted full immersion in Divya Maya.” Adharvan’s voice dropped lower. “The risks are unknown.”

Karkotak waited. Risk was an old acquaintance, neither feared nor welcomed, but merely acknowledged.

Without command, Tiresia-Sanjay began rolling the bonsai trees. Each pot scraped stone in precise arcs, too measured to be unrehearsed. The screeching sound made Karkotak’s scales itch.

A copper basin appeared. Sand poured in soft hisses, each grain catching light like shattered glass. Karkotak noticed how both of Tiresia-Sanjay’s heads focused on the same task now.

The room grew still. Even the biosynthetic light dimmed, as if drawing back. Through the floor-window, Karkotak saw clouds gathering in the evening sky.

This whole bargain was an act of faith. One more risk wouldn’t matter.

The sand was cool when he settled his coils. Fresh. Like a newly dug grave.

Tiresia-Sanjay wove tendrils into knots. No word spoken. The silence pressed against Karkotak's scales like water-pressure at ocean's floor.

The first tendril touched his jaw, circumspect. Then another. And another.

Maya reached for him. But not like before. Vaster.

An old mantra surfaced as useful anchor as he drowned in a bottomless ocean. *You never cross the same market twice.*

The ever-familiar Dhaara market bled into Karkotak's perception, but something was fundamentally wrong. Around him, the market strobed and glitched. People stuttered between states of being — present then absent, here then there, as if time itself had developed a stammer.

The assistant he'd recruited once stood at a stall nearby. As Karkotak watched, he blinked out, then snapped into existence three shops away wearing different clothes. A couple haggling over baskets appeared instantly across the market buying furniture, then separated in the next heartbeat.

An astatar's melody splintered into rapidly switching song shards. Cooking smoke fractured with each pulse — gray streams became red clouds became yellow rings. Spice root aromas swapped identity. The sharp bite of jona morphed into sweet herbs, then suddenly decayed into something rancid.

Vendor calls warped through octaves, their stalls pulsing between abundance and emptiness. A single transaction before him spawned a dozen fates between blinks. Ruin crept in, wealth

bloomed, disease claimed then unclaimed its toll. The crowd breathed like a living thing, expanding, contracting, dispersing.

Above, vaanars and garudas phased in and out of the aerial paths, staccatoing back and forth. And hands... *What's with everyone's fingers?* Fingers multiplied like echoes, each appendage desperate to perform every gesture it had ever known, would know, could know, all at once.

No discrete detail held firm. Each glance revealed a different version of now, entities jumping between blinks. A flood of competing truths taunted his mind. He wondered if this was how his targets felt when his venom rewrote their perceptions, except now all of existence seemed to be wearing false faces.

He shut his eyes. The scent of fangroot oil touched his tongue. Like a Zylith bloom opening to its eternal pollinator, his mind unfurled to reveal the dream nectar within — Darib's ceremony, his skandha pillar amid shifting sands. He held on to it till it sparked a thought. *Skandha pillars.*

His eyes opened to find them unwavering. The great architectural columns, oddly impervious to surrounding turbulence, stood steadfast. While canals shimmered, their fluid histories compressed into rapid seconds, nearby stone stepwells remained immutably fixed. Amid the blurry ghosting of wheels, tails, and wings, the factory machines and elevators jerked and halted unpredictably, yet their buildings, too unlikely to change in mere weeks, held their solid form.

Overhead, rakshasi biodomes grown from symbiotic tissues thrummed without rhythm. Their living walls, cultivated as the city's lungs, trembled where they should have heaved gently. People flickered behind translucent walls, yet the overall forms of the

dwellings persisted, rooted in place.

Above, cable-carts snapped between wind currents, though their elevated tracks held true. Higher still, the metal lotuses of garuda landing pads shone as steady beacons. Below them loomed the vast garuda statue, its metal wings fluttering like membrane.

Karkotak broke it down. Each breath showed him one way that moment might unfold. Then came a glimpse of the next — not following from what he had seen, but sprouting from any of the countless other ways the previous moment could have unfolded.

This Maya was a composite, a moment from one likelihood beaded with the next moment from another, creating a chain of all likely futures for this destined market hour. As if a chronicler had plucked fragments of subtly different fortune-tellings from a thousand seers and stitched them — each line spoken in a distinct voice, yet the story whole.

In that way, it resembled his own mental map, charted by cycling through months of market-runs. Much as length and breadth summon height when bound in sheaf, here too, by stacking thousands of divinations, each laminated slice made of time, place and happening, a fifth dimension had spawned — of probability.

As he slid forward, it occurred to him that he was moving not only through space and time but through an axis of probability. Not just when and where, but how likely. While unlikely events rippled like fleeting wisps, likelier ones, frequent across moments, overlapped into becoming more visible.

A cacophony of time-scattered shouts drew his gaze upward. The chase he knew was coming flashed in fragments above him. His slit eyes narrowed, trying to follow.

The thief's ride and pursuing vaanars blink-jumped through multiple likelihoods, over the catapult monument... gone... through hanging counterweights... gone... past registration platforms... gone. Yet through these broken glimpses, a clear path emerged.

Each individual's choices split into endless potentials and yet merged at the same end — the bola striking, the tank imploding. Only the timing wavered: one moment the bola curved through air, the next the chase still raced on.

Karkotak found himself transfixed as the orb plunged. A scattered constellation of fractal chances filled the sky. Suddenly it crystallized — real, immediate, coming straight at him. *Move!* His tail snapped aside but — the orb vanished mid-air, reappeared distant, and sliced through terrace edges into the gorge below.

The near-miss focused his mind. He could navigate this shifting space now. Slithering forward, he wove between probable bodies that blipped around him.

And there she was again.

Each quiver of her dress whispered of winds in alternate probabilities. But her form stood solid amid streaking bands of color, as though she were the axis upon which worlds turned. For whichever way the odds might slide, they pivoted around this solitary constant in the maze of likelihoods — the waif-girl transfixed by sunpears beyond her reach.

What causal currents, Karkotak wondered, would funnel her presence here in the weeks ahead, with such unyielding certainty in the weeks ahead?

His questioning coiled into purpose. Karkotak hissed, fangs bared, and got to unpleasant work.

He acted with speed, his movements sure. The sunpear morphed forms in his clutch — now a zoran, then an orba — his tail shifting subtly to keep pace with its transformations.

The girl received the mutating fruit with multiplying fingers. The fruitseller's turban swirled like colorful wind as he stared at the girl. She bolted in echoes.

The fruitseller's face oscillated between anger and confusion as he pursued the girl with the constancy of his worldview.

For his second fulcrum, Karkotak lobbed another fruit towards the hungry gruff. It passed through phasing obstacles. A cart appeared and crushed it, then vanished, leaving the fruit to continue unharmed. But it wasn't good enough. He had to get the throw right across all probabilities.

As he swiped another fruit, the fruitseller's son appeared, spotted him, then faded before he could raise the alarm. A maybe he'd deal with if needed.

Karkotak's next throw landed flawlessly. The fruit rolled to a stop by the dry drain, right before the drooling gruff.

The rest unspooled with mechanical precision.

The thief collided with the girl. Stampede ensued. Vaanars caught the naag. The child fell. Her father's anguish etched her name into the market's alloy memory.

“Moha!”

Karkotak heard it echo.

Turmoil followed, reliably — stones were hurled, vaanar guards leapt into action, the pent up anger erupted into cries, cracks and sling-cannons.

Karkotak watched the riot surge toward Tarkash's procession. But stones against trained militia, bare hands against armor — it would end the same way it always did. The guards would cut through the crowd like wind through smoke. He slithered closer, his mind racing for an answer he'd somehow missed all this time, some way to give the crowd's resentment teeth.

His tail brushed through something slick. Jona-oil. It clung to his vajra plating, trailing behind him. Karkotak stopped, looking at the glistening patch. And there it was — the third lever, hiding in plain sight.

One flick of his tail released a knot. A hanging fabric dropped, toppling a crate. The massive urn of jona-oil crashed into the cobbles, its contents spreading beneath the crowd's feet like rumour.

In Samsaar's long annals, Karkotak had observed a recurring alchemy — hunger, when morphed into anger, transmuted its tools as well: pestle, plough, knife, axe, rikta, skandha, vajra, wakati and the two most blunt of all — oil and know-how.

Within moments, the spilled oil caught angry eyes. Flasks met scraps of cloth, birthing bright improvisation from the mob. The first burning pot arced high, its flaming tail marking the way. Vaanar enforcers stumbled back as makeshift firebombs bloomed in their ranks.

Karkotak watched his work unfold. In every version of this moment, the oil-fueled momentum bound stranger to stranger in fleeting fellowships born from fatigue and famine.

Karkotak watched the high likelihood of the firebombs' path — a steady stream arcing toward the scion's gilded carriage. Through fractured time, the barrage burned consistent as sunrise, finding its target. The popinjay's wealth drew hunger's heat like a

magnet.

Tarkash's carriage flickered between possibilities, solid one moment, ghostlike the next. Though rioters and details phased randomly, the outcome held sure.

In the riot's fiery wake, many deaths bloomed at once. There, behind the fog Tarkash stood amidst flames, his magnificent plumage fueling the blaze; blistering showers fell upon preened feathers; steeds bolted, sending gilded carriages plunging into the gorge; oil pooled below the silk carriage's smouldering cocoon; wings caught in a snapped spring's steel teeth, turning the gilded palanquin into an inescapable crematorium.

Infinite likelihoods converged toward inevitability. Karkotak stood in the middle of Tarkash's death blinking and phasing and blipping all around him.

Providence pivoted upon humble hinges — a child, a gruff, some oil — three hungers tilting history's pendulum profound with want, flame, and blood.

“Avati gaman,” Karkotak hissed at last, exhausted.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

“All things considered, the flutter of a leaf can never sway the direction of the wind.”

— Vishwakarma, the spine of the great body

MAYA TENDRILS withdrew from Karkotak's mouth, leaving their cloying sap behind. He stirred in the copper basin. Sand shifted beneath his coils as his core struggled to reassert control.

Through vision still adjusting, he found the window set in the floor — the slice of sky should show day by now. Instead, stars glinted back at him.

“Still only night?” His voice emerged raspy, hoarse.

Adharvan and Tiresia-Sanjay watched him with the careful attention of biomech-crafters observing a new fusion take hold. Fascination in their faces, but also something else. *Relief?*

“Twenty days,” Tiresia-Sanjay’s younger head said. “You have been navigating Divya Maya for a while.”

His throat seized between its hinges, all passages closing at once. The more he tried to grasp what was happening, the harder

it became to breathe.

The implications waded through his sluggish mind. Twenty days of induced metabolic depression. Which meant—

“Darib’s day... did I miss it?” The words tore past his fangs, his hood trembling raw. “It was...” His mind stumbled over the calculation.

“It is two days from now,” Tiresia-Sanjay supplied. “He is well.”

A blade-thin margin, but enough. Karkotak tried to rise, but his spine protested, stiff from disuse. Every nerve felt raw, flayed. His tail remained unresponsive while he tested each muscle group. Temperature signals flickered as his body sought its natural balance of warm and cold blood. He had survived, but barely, pushed to his biological limits.

“And Tarkash enters the market in six days,” Adharvan added, placing a small vial on the nearest tree branch. A single drop of silver fluid hung suspended in clear gelatin, catching light like a tiny star. “The first dose, as promised. I will administer the second myself when you return.”

Karkotak inclined his head, the gesture neither too deep nor too shallow — gratitude tempered by an undercurrent of pride. Triumph surged through his half-numb form, sharp enough to hurt. The “when” in Adharvan’s words, not “if,” reminded him of the invisible threads that bound him.

“Once you depart, avoid any connection with Maya trees outside,” Adharvan warned, as he always did. “You won’t need to. Your official obligations remain sufficiently undefined.”

Karkotak no longer questioned the restriction. Three months

since his last tethering to the great Maya network—longer than anyone he knew had ever gone untethered. “When you gaze into Maya, it gazes back into you,” Tiresia-Sanjay had told him.

Adharvan descended through the hatch in the floor, his wrap jacket billowing as he disappeared. He always retreated to the lower chamber when Karkotak occupied the sanctum.

A soft flutter drew Karkotak’s attention upward, where root-veined walls curved inward like a bell. A chaatak bird perched upon the tendrils, its gas-filled body almost weightless. Thread-like appendages rippled with faint charge around it, dancing like living silk. Its eyes fixed on patterns within a frame.

“The chaatak,” Karkotak said, watching its strange movements. “I’ve never seen one remain without a cage.”

“Cages belong to cruder times.” Tiresia-Sanjay’s grafting head glanced up. “Those emberglow stripes behind the chitin glass? The chaatak sees perfect plumage, the promise of a most beautiful, impossibly healthy mate. Those dots overhead? They pulse like mineral salts it spends years seeking. Always approaching, never arriving. What prison could be more exquisite than desire?”

“Twenty days without a meal, and you feed me allegory.”

A laugh alternated between Tiresia-Sanjay’s heads like spore-pods popping in perfect counter-rhythm. Karkotak allowed himself to enjoy it.

His feast arrived: dense protein blocks, rolled sheets of cultured fungi, and a thick broth. *Good home food.* Though this chamber lay as far from Vishar as one could journey.

“What I witnessed in Divya Maya...” he began, then paused, careful of crossing boundaries. “Would it truly happen?”

"If it won't," Tiresia-Sanjay answered, "then we are all mad here, tending gardens that bear no fruit."

Months of risk and mind-breaking work had earned Karkotak silence. But twenty days under the gandharva's care had shifted something between them. Not trust yet, but perhaps the right to test its edges.

"Do you really believe the future can be known?" The question had gnawed at him since his first day here. "Not guessed at, but known?"

The gandharva's pruning head continued its endless work. "Belief is for those who can't measure."

"But how?" Karkotak swallowed the last roll, his voice pressing. "How can anybody pierce the veil of the next moment?"

Tiresia-Sanjay's younger head considered him for a moment. "Each time you begin the market sequence... what's the first thing you see?"

"A winged fruit of the veta tree," Karkotak replied, the memory etched over countless rehearsals. "It bursts, scattering its seeds." He could almost taste the sweet-spicy fragments on his tongue.

"And how long has it been waiting there?"

"Five days."

"You seem quite certain."

"That's how long ripening takes after a veta fruit falls. Its wings start sunset-red, turn golden before it splits open."

"How did such a fruit reach Dhaara's market?"

"It would have ridden the wind. Those four translucent wings, each longer than my palm, they catch the easterlies like the great

Mihi's wings. The seasonal winds can bear it across three states."

"And its origin?"

"It's got to be the Khaasiya cliffs," Karkotak said, following the chain of evidence.

"How would you know that?"

"Veta trees grow across these regions, but this one's from rocky Khaasiya. You can tell by the size and color. The Dhaara trees produce smaller fruit that the winds carry to Seema." He saw them in his mind, clinging to wind-carved terraces. "At dawn the easterlies blow strongest. The tree releases its fruit then, hoping its children might find kinder soil."

"You see? You traced its path backward," Tiresia-Sanjay said. "From the market to the wind to the tree in Khaasiya. Using only what must be true. The future is no different; it's simply the other direction. Now consider: If that fruit will burst in the market six days from now..."

A cold pulse shot through Karkotak's spine. "It's still on its tree right now. It will fall tomorrow at dawn, catch those winds, land in that exact spot. If all unfolds as seen."

"Now, does that sound like measurement or belief?" The gandharva's heads smiled, pleased at their elucidation.

"But the flight itself..." Karkotak's coils shifted restlessly. "So much sky between tree and market..."

"Ah," said the younger head. "Wings may catch the wind, but cannot alter its course. Our actions are stones in time's river, splitting the current into a tangle of minor streams. Yet even as the flow divides, it seeks reunion, compelled by laws that were old when time was young."

Karkotak's crest scales shivered. For a moment, he couldn't even taste the air.

"Then the divya..." Karkotak felt the words catch in his throat.
"They truly steer the world thus?"

"Why do you think we call them vidhi-vidhaata? Makers of laws and destinies?"

Karkotak had always dismissed the title as poetic flourish, an epithet conferred by eager bards.

"I assumed it meant - makers of laws and by that extension, destinies."

"From high enough, past and future flow as one. Law and consequence appear together."

Did this absolve him of the tragedies about to come, if they unfolded exactly as rehearsed? For a brief breath, the chamber forgot its shape and gravity leached from the floor.

"Is it true then?" he asked. "Adharvan said that no mortal has experienced Divya Maya before me?"

"It is so."

"So either Adharvan hasn't experienced it," Karkotak tested.
"Or he expects to ascend someday soon."

"This sudden curiosity," Tiresia-Sanjay cautioned, "What drives it?"

Karkotak coaxed his stiff muscles and uncoiled from the basin. He slid over floor vents releasing water-chilled air. The draft brushed his tail as he faced the gandharva.

"Everything I thought I understood has shifted completely." He held firm against the flood within. "And I'm about to orchestrate

the death of a divya's scion. I am indebted to a young manushya for life. It would be... illuminating to know why."

"I thought you already knew your reason."

Karkotak looked at the vial on the branch, time distilled to tincture. "I do."

"Is it not sufficient then?"

"It is sufficient," Karkotak ventured carefully, "if you insist it must be."

Tiresia-Sanjay set their shears down, both heads regarding Karkotak with unsettling focus. "I will lend you some light for this maze."

Karkotak studied the gandharva. His tongue flicked out, tasting the air for unspoken things.

"The Trials approach," he said.

"Indeed." The gandharva waited.

"And Adharvan... he would have been too young for the last Trials." Each word measured. "One chance is all anyone gets, so I assume he hasn't—"

"He hasn't participated," Tiresia-Sanjay confirmed.

The answer's simplicity gave Karkotak the thread he needed. "Divya Maya could have shown Tarkash emerging victorious from a billion contestants. His death would clear the path for another to ascend."

"You believe Adharvan would use foresight—the most powerful weapon of all—for mere ascension?"

"Mere ascension!" Karkotak was shocked. "What ambition

could possibly be greater than becoming divya? What goal could be loftier than joining the ranks of those omnipotent immortals?"

"Have you ever seen a divya?"

"Of course I—" Karkotak stopped. He thought of the great ceremonies, those distant figures on their vaahanas, wreathed in light above Mithra's highest spires. "Not up close. I once met the great naag Shweseri, before she won the Trials and ascended."

"Do you believe she is indeed the most powerful of all beings alive?"

The question caught him off guard, but he had other certainties. Divya edicts governed every aspect of life in Samsaar, enforced through an unbroken chain of authority from the highest garuda to the last functionary.

"Why believe when measurement exists." Karkotak quoted the gandharva back. "Independent accounts from all races who have served in their presence stand scrutiny. No contradictions. You yourself confirmed they are vidhi vidhata—wielders of maya, makers of fate."

"And who guides their design?"

"Divyendra, the benevolent preserver of all."

"Then perhaps," Tiresia-Sanjay said with quiet certainty, "Adharvan seeks not to join the ranks of the guided, but to serve directly at the source of all power."

Karkotak's coils found the nearest pillar, instinct seeking anchor. Comprehension seared through him, blinding and absolute. His heat pits flared uselessly, his tongue forgot to taste the air. The flitt-locust pendant, the impossible Maya, the gandharva's presence — suddenly every piece blazed with new meaning. For the first time

in his life, he felt no need to be in control.

Karkotak had missed his chance at the Divya Trials during the lost years in detention. By the time of his release, cynicism had cooled any hunger for glory. But this... this was beyond ascension. By one degree of separation, he served the will that shaped Samsaar itself. The thought steadied him, gave weight to every choice and chance that had led him here.

When he found his voice again, it emerged light, unburdened.
“What do I do now?”

“Go to your son,” Tiresia-Sanjay said. “Prepare for the days to come. Your aerik has been fed and waits below.”

Karkotak began to move.

“Wait. Given how little time remains, I will take you home on my vaahana.”

They ascended through narrow passages, climbing higher and higher until they reached a small circular chamber. Moonlight poured through its open window, gleaming off a familiar shape.

The rikta skyscooter stood exactly as Karkotak had seen it countless times in his visions—its broad frame, the distinctive core housing, the shadows playing across its hull. The same machine that would tear through market air in six days’ time.

Tiresia-Sanjay’s gaze lingered on the vehicle. “One final ride.”

Karkotak smiled. Only gandharvas were permitted to own skyscooters.

—

Dawn broke over rocky Khaasiya. At the cliff’s edge, a lone veta tree clung to stone, its fruit sunset-red and ready. As the first

SEED TAKES ROOT

rays touched its stem, it broke free.

Four translucent wings spread wide, catching the easterlies.
The fruit sailed over wind-carved terraces, down ravines, riding
currents that had carried its ancestors for generations to Dhaara.

Until it hit a surprise obstruction, its breezy passage abruptly
broken: Without warning, a playful grin emerged where no face
should have been.



A SEED OUT OF PLACE

“A wild seed doesn’t exist. I suspect it never did.”

— Hidamma, the shoulders of the great body

MOMENTARILY DISTRACTED by the winged fruit’s slap, Yachay bumped into a vaanar guard at Khaasiya’s toll gates.

“Watch it!” The pink-furred guard shoved him back.

“Apologies, shreeman!” Yachay savored the formal address he’d recently picked up from other travelers. A staff stretched across his shoulders, heavy baskets swaying at each end. His muscles flexed as he steadied the load.

Fruit wings fluttered against his cheek, still trying to catch wind.

The young manushya angled his face toward the guard. “Care to lend a hand?”

The guard reached out. Yachay blew first, sending the fruit spinning away. Its sunset red wings marked it as a highland variety he’d only read about.

“There! Freed it myself.” He tried a wink. The vaanar’s stony

expression cracked into a half-smile.

Beyond the weathered gates, sheer ravines gave way to sun-baked passes. A carved arch “Khaasiya Begins” read more warning than welcome. The Kosh script looked different from the books Yachay knew — newer, more angular.

He approached a senior vaanar at the toll booth, keeping the baskets steady by pacing his steps. He imagined he looked like one of those weighing scales at home, if it had legs. The thought made him grin.

“Purpose?” the toll officer asked, his bored tone honed to prod travelers along.

Yachay turned sideways to swing one basket forward. “Visiting the Kathari monastery,” announced a muffled voice from within.

The officer leaned closer, peering into the mesh. An elderly face burst out.

“Hidamma, preserve me!” The vaanar recoiled, pressing a fist to his shoulder in swift benediction.

“Let me know if she does!” Daddu’s eyes sparkled. “I’ll pop out of my basket more often, then.”

The officer chuckled, flicking his tufted ears. “No plans for Dhaara?” He pointed east, where morning winds carried down from Khaasiya’s cliffs.

Yachay watched travelers his age picking their way down the pass, warning each other about loose stones. One gestured wildly and the others laughed. He smiled though he couldn’t hear their jokes.

“What’s there?” Daddu asked.

“The closest registration centre.” The officer gestured at Yachay. “He seems about the right age for the Trials. Won’t he participate?”

“Oh, he is going to win them!” Daddu declared.

The vaanars erupted in laughter. “Looks like he can outgrin and outdance anyone!”

Daddu’s laughter echoed from his basket. Yachay joined in, half lost in light patterns in the guard’s tail-mace.

The officer bent in mock solemnity before Yachay. “I better seek your blessings now before you ascend!”

“I apologise on my grandpa’s behalf for his unrealistic claims,” he said, matching his smile.

“Nothing to apologize for, son. If not for my own grandsire’s far-fetched notions, I’d lack even this guard’s modest perch,” the toll officer said with a thoughtful nod. “Now, that’ll be two shulikas for safe passage.”

“But it’s just me heading through, sir!”

The officer tapped his tail-mace on Daddu’s swaying container. “And him then?”

“Why, he’s luggage, of course!” Yachay grinned.

Their laughter redoubled. Yachay pivoted his cargo pole, revealing a second basket overflowing with clothes and fruit.

“Help yourself to anything you like,” he offered.

The officer grabbed a cluster of palamp fruits and studied Yachay’s face. Yachay held steady, waiting. The officer smiled and dropped them back. “All right, on your way.”

As Yachay bowed thanks, the officer quietly dropped two coins

into the toll tray. Their clear ring settled into Yachay's memory.

The weight of pole-hung baskets steadied Yachay as he walked. Their heft grounded the spring in his step, which sometimes became too much even for him.

Jagged ravines stretched into the distance, their edges sharp against the sky. Green was a whisper here. Impact craters of varying sizes pockmarked the distant valleys. Heat and dust formed floating lenses in the air, stretching his shadow into a molten rainbow across wind-sculpted black rocks.

Yachay studied the paths cut through stone, wondering about their first makers. What fates had they fled that made these hostile peaks feel welcoming? What audacity had driven them to take chisel to mountain? How had they thought, in such heat, to ease the way for those who would follow?

"Seven sightless seekers touched the same thing," Yachay said, his voice lifting with the rhythm he'd practiced. "The first cried, 'It's a grove of trees!' The second said, 'No, it's a pair of very large shovels.' The third insisted, 'You're both wrong. It's a garuda matriarch's flapping wing.'"

"Throwing me an old one?" Daddu interrupted from his basket. "It's a bhooyan. Its ear-fin would seem like a wing, its forelimb claspers like shovels..."

"Please hear the rest," Yachay insisted. "The fourth claimed, 'Shaking tiles in floor, but nothing above.' 'It's just a chair,' said the fifth. 'A massive plough,' insisted the sixth. 'Nothing but distant war,' declared the last."

"Tiles in the ground," Daddu repeated slowly. "A plough,

war..." He paused. "A chair?"

"Yes," Yachay beamed.

"They all touched your bhooyan, but in a pen and at different times. The fourth found it burrowing underground, just its back plates trembling on the surface. The fifth found it in hibernation, shrunk small as a chair. The sixth found it restored, its segmented tail ploughing earth. The last found an empty pen and heard only its calls echoing from distant peaks, making the ground shake like war drums." Daddu hummed thoughtfully. "A clever twist to the classic, but needs work."

"What should I change?"

"Start with the chair... the hibernating bhooyan. Replace those old images of shovels and trees with more dynamic ones, like your last four seekers. That's where the riddle comes alive."

"The chair first..." Yachay nodded, already seeing how it would work better. "I've never understood something. Why do the seekers cling to their fragments so fiercely when they could simply stitch them together and see the whole bhooyan?"

The ground trembled beneath his feet.

Daddu chuckled. "Now there's a question."

"Did you feel that?" Yachay froze, watching the pebbles dance.

Another tremor. Stronger. Daddu's hands tightened on his basket. A rancid stench flushed out clean air.

A vast shadow moved across the ravine wall. Yachay traced its shifting outlines. A walking hill of shovels and plough-tail on tree-trunk legs. Had the heat-bent light somehow cast his thoughts onto cliff rock?

Sweat stung his eyes. The darkness spread ridge to ridge, blotting out the pass.

Daddu whispered. “Bhooyan.”

Then came a roar, deafening and terrifyingly close, dispelling any confusion. The bhooyan’s massive feet thundered against the ground, sending tremors through ancient fault lines.

Twin shovel-claspers scythed down. Yachay dove aside, but a massive leg crushed where he’d stood. A second foot crashed down, the impact throwing him against rough stone. He tried to dart past its rear legs, but the beast’s segmented tail whipped across the entire path, forcing them forward.

A foot the size of a small hut swung toward Daddu’s basket. Yachay pivoted, the staff rattling his shoulders. Pebbles spat past his face in dusty plumes, the ground hurling ochre obscenities.

He hurtled between the bhooyan’s diamond formation of legs, matching its thundering pace. Darkness swallowed him, heat rolling off the beast’s hide like forge-breath.

Daddu clung to his lurching basket, scanning through cascading stone. “Wait...” The tail lifted briefly. “Drop!”

Yachay dropped instantly. The tail scythed overhead, then its plough-edge crashed down before them as the bhooyan moved on.

Its shadow lifted, and light scalded Yachay’s eyes. He staggered, lungs burning. Relief collided with the hammering of his pulse, leaving his hands shaking as he fumbled the pole loose.

“Did I have too much wakati?” Daddu’s voice was unsteady as he braced against stone.

“No Daddu,” Yachay chuckled between breaths. “That was

real.” Their laughter tangled together, shaky and relieved.

They felt the next one before they heard it — a quake in the rock that spoke of massive things approaching. Steps cut into the cliff face ahead led to a small shrine.

“There,” Daddu said. “Let’s wait.”

The rock they settled against held yesterday’s coolness. Daddu slipped off the harness with a wince. He reached into his side pouch and handed Yachay a pot of jona pudding, still warm from morning. “Eat,” he said.

Yachay tasted sweetness, salted faintly by his own sweat. Daddu’s thumbs found the knots beneath his shoulder blade, then another, easing the muscles that had coiled during their flight.

“I’m fine,” Yachay mumbled, but leaned into the familiar pressure. His grandfather’s hands moved from his scruffy head to his arms. The tremor in those fingers was new. Yachay swallowed his pudding past the sudden tightness in his throat. He offered the pot to Daddu.

Daddu took one small taste. Pushed it back. “You finish it.” His eyes scanned the lengthening shadows. Another distant rumble made him shift uneasily.

“What?” Yachay asked.

“Nothing.”

As Yachay ate, Daddu peeled palamp fruits, laying their crescents around the pudding’s edge, careful not to let them touch — the way Yachay needed things to be.

The bhooyan they’d felt coming finally reached them, its shadow sweeping over their ledge. From safety, Yachay watched

its living plates flex with each step. Cargo holds drifted past at eye level. High above in the howdah, a red-furred vaanar mahout sat alert while others dozed.

"Thank you for your service, sir!" Yachay called up. The mahout's solemn nod made his heart swell.

"Now, where did you learn these ritual courtesies?" Daddu asked, voice sharp with concern.

Yachay turned, the question breaking his focus on the howdah's lattice. "From the village kids we passed yesterday. You should have seen them... so proper with their decorum and Maya games."

"Lost in their Maya runs," Daddu muttered. "Most can't even read."

"They don't need to!" Yachay's hands cut through air. "Do you know how much they know? And they share it all with each other."

"Can they prepare a feast like you?" Daddu's chuckle held a brittle edge. "Build a shelter? Craft a riddle?"

"Ancient skills! Is there anybody else my age who doesn't know what Maya is like?"

"Oh thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions possibly." Alarm threaded through Daddu's voice. "Did you say something to those youths?"

"Just that I couldn't join their game in Maya. The usual lie: temporary illness."

"What's untrue about that, son?" Daddu's voice gentled.

"Temporary?" He touched the band covering his navel through his shirt, the barrier between him and Maya.

"One day," Daddu said, but Yachay heard the old fear in his

voice.

"Sure." His fingers picked at the edge where the band fused with his skin.

Daddu noticed. He turned toward the shrine behind them, his gaze guiding like a parent's finger. Yachay's attention followed. His restless fingers stilled as movement caught his eye.

A living idol of Hidamma swirled, its form less a shape than a suggestion. A swarm cloud of quivering tej spores created the divya's likeness as if held in a glass sculpture.

Dense murmurations flowed within, like thoughts taking shape: a face, Hidamma's face, watching him with half-formed eyes.

Beneath the spore population, Yachay could see a skeleton of protein threads. Its chemical whispers herded the spores into harmony: countless individual decisions creating a beautiful whole that no single spore could comprehend.

Daddu smiled seeing his grandson's shoulders relax. The familiar remedy never failed: patterns.

Yachay placed his last slice of palamp at the idol's feet, watching the scaffold draw it in through countless capillaries.

Daddu discouraged divya rituals. But then, Daddu encouraged feeding gruffs and colhaans. This wasn't so different, Yachay thought. It was just sustenance for the idol's delicate ecology in these scorching heights, not worship. Still, as the spores formed Hidamma's smile, he wondered: would making a wish turn nurture into trade?

The swarm shifted. A hand formed above Yachay's head, fingers flowing like liquid light. It hovered in blessing.

Yachay stared up, transfixed. Daddu made a soft sound. “Cheeky design. Feed a divya some pudding, and beget as many blessings.”

The hand held its shape a moment longer before dispersing back into the greater swarm, each spore finding its place in Hidamma’s form.

Another distant rumble. Daddu’s hands moved quickly as he gathered their things. “We will stay ready to leave.” As Yachay secured the baskets on the pole, the stone shivered beneath their feet.

“That’s the third one today.” Daddu watched the sun sink lower.

Yachay leaned past the shrine’s corner, craning his neck. The bhooyan emerged around the ravine’s curve. High on its haunches, a cargo hold swayed in rhythm. “What’s going on?”

“Demolition work,” Daddu said, adjusting his harness. “The only other use is war, and there’s no war in Khaasiya.” He paused. “We’ll let this one pass too.” Another distant rumble made him sigh. “Could be a whole convoy today. We need to get to Noh Lake before dark.”

The cargo hold rose and fell with each six-legged stride, appearing and vanishing behind massive haunches. Yachay traced its path. “Where are they going?”

“Same direction as us. Deep into—” Daddu caught Yachay’s spreading smile and his voice tightened. “No, no. Whatever you’re thinking, no.”

But Yachay turned right and climbed one shrine step, his head tilting as he tracked the cargo hold’s motion. From here he could

see inside—bales of wool rising from floor to beam.

“Step back!” Daddu yanked at his harness straps.

“Trust me.” Another step up. The ledge jutted toward the road, one jump’s width. The cargo hold swept into view, then swept back. Yachay clicked teeth, marking time.

Thunder swallowed Daddu’s shouts as the bhooyan arrived. Living plates rippled past, close enough to touch. *Now or never.* Yachay swung their provision basket out. It landed with a muffled thump.

“Don’t you dare—” But Yachay already had Daddu’s basket in both hands. He waited for the cargo hold to align perfectly, then let go. Daddu’s protests vanished into wool.

The cargo hold was moving away. Yachay tensed. One perfect leap. He pushed off into empty air.

His jaw cracked against wood, but he was in, they’d made it.

His laughter split his lip, tang of iron on his tongue. He probed the inside of his mouth, found a loose tooth, and laughed harder.

Daddu’s hand shot out, gripping his arm. His old fingers trembled, betraying a fear that ran deeper than anger. “Do you have any idea...” Daddu began, his voice strained.

The bhooyan lurched, cutting off Daddu’s words. Yachay instantly pressed Daddu against the cargo wall to keep him from falling forward. Simultaneously, Daddu’s hand grabbed Yachay’s collar, yanking him away from the hold’s edge.

As the bhooyan steadied, their grip on each other eased. Daddu’s face burned with an intensity Yachay had never seen before.

“I just thought—” he started, weakly.

“No, you didn’t.” Daddu sighed, a sound heavy with more than just exasperation.

Yachay swallowed hard. The wind caressed his face like a stray gruff, but offered no solace.

NETI NETI

“Saying “neither this, nor that” over and over, the sculptor removes all that is not, revealing what simply is.”

— Mahagaruda Vyasa in ‘Whispers of the Wind’

THE BHOOYAN’S steps punctuated the silence between them.

The dissonance in Daddu’s teachings nagged at Yachay like his loose tooth. Seeking refuge in reflection, he reached for his *tadpatra* journal.

The journal’s translucent pages, bound at the top, were made from thin peels of aquatic leaf-pods. Each bore a faint grid of hexagonal cells — nature’s perfect canvas for *Tridha*, the *language of thought*. Yachay stared at the hexagonal grid for a long moment. It always steadied his thoughts.

Yachay retrieved the skandha-etcher from his pocket. Its tapering end gleamed with a soft, toxic sheen.

He etched the symbol for “animal” in the central hexagon of the page. Around this nucleus, he linked first order concepts: “body,”

“mouth,” and “feet”. He connected each of these to the second order descriptors of “size” and “shape”. This web of symbols conveyed a clear meaning: not just any bhooyan, but *their* bhooyan—its towering enormity, its scarred hide, its metronome-like gait....

From this hub, Yachay drew lines outward, populating the surrounding hexagons with related concepts. In Tridha, colours and intensity conveyed additional context. By varying the etcher’s angle and pressure, Yachay could write each symbol in a different colour. This allowed him to effectively compress multiple ideas within a symbol: its shape conveyed information, its position generated meaning, while its colour expressed emotion.

He etched “dust cloud” in light red, reflecting the mild fear he had felt. He added “rancid” in green below “breath”, and “proximity” in deep red, echoing his shock at the beast’s sudden appearance.

Connecting higher order actions like “balance”, “dodge” and “sync” with modifiers in shades of blue and yellow, he captured their narrow escape and his resulting thrill.

Yachay studied his journal entry. The entire encounter lay before him: objective event and subjective experience overlaid in Tridha glyphs. The compact script communicated what would require pages in modern Kosh.

His etcher hovered over a blank cell as he contemplated his action. *Reckless, yes, stupid even*, he admitted. But Daddu’s disappointment... *it stung deeper than his anger. It was disproportionate*, he decided just as soon. The symbols flowed onto the page in a stifled dull grey.

“Writing another riddle?” Daddu’s voice, a gentle intrusion into his thoughts, made Yachay start.

Daddu averted his gaze, as if to assure him that he hadn't seen the inscription. A glimpse of a page written in Tridha was enough to glean its overall meaning.

"Just something I've been keeping," Yachay replied, relieved at Daddu's softer tone but unsure whether to offer peace so readily. "A collection of sorts."

"Collection of what?"

"Contradictions," Yachay answered, the etcher adding a symbol in a brighter hue. "From the great bards you've had me study. I don't mind you seeing."

Daddu leaned closer, peering at the shimmering pages. Neat clusters of symbols summarised each bard's teachings, but as the translucent leaves overlapped, a new insight emerged.

Colours blended, revealing Yachay's emotional journey through the lessons: anxiety's crimson met excitement's blue in a deep purple doubt; scepticism's light red merged with confident yellow into cautious orange.

Yachay flipped through the pages, searching for an older entry.

"In '*Ascension*', the garuda Timiru insists," he read aloud, translating the script back to spoken Kosh, "'Ambition is the fire that forges greatness. Let it consume you...'"

He paused, turning a delicate page.

"Whereas, in '*Whispers of the Wind*', garuda Vyasa suggests," Yachay continued, a hint of amusement in his voice, "'True peace comes from surrendering ambition. Be content in the now.'"

Yachay's eyes sought Daddu's, searching for a reaction, an explanation, or even validation. Daddu's face remained impassive,

his silence an invitation for Yachay to continue.

He continued. “The great bard Kaavya glorifies her protagonist who believes that ‘Vulnerability is strength. Baring yourself for all to see is the only way to be.’ Let’s see what Nira has to say about it. ‘Never show weakness,’ she recommends through the voice of her hero. ‘In love and in war, work from the shadows.’”

“Here’s from naag Chandi’s *Fruits of Fortitude*.” Yachay pointed at an idea web in his diary. “Your voice is a weapon. Use it against every injustice, even if it costs you everything.” Whereas the celebrated mentor in *My Flesh, Your Talons* says to his protege, ‘Pick your battles wisely. Live to fight another day. Often, silence is the bravest choice.’”

Yachay looked at Daddu, who was now smiling. “You see? It goes on and on,” he said, gesturing to the pages. “Live for yourself, ‘Live for others’... ‘Only hope can instil change’, ‘Only fear can instil change’, ‘Nothing ever changes’... ‘Manushyas and vaanars sprouted from the same branch of life’, ‘Manushyas and vaanars have nothing in common’... Every truth seems to have a counter-truth.”

“And these pages?” Daddu pointed, his curiosity piqued.

“Those are all your contradictions, Daddu.” Yachay said with a chuckle. “This one is the most recent. On one hand, ‘Think for yourself, question everything, follow your inner voice.’ On the other, the swift reprimand — ‘Not like that.’”

Daddu pulled out his wakati container, and started polishing it. “Quite a pickle, isn’t it?”

It was Yachay’s turn to roleplay exasperation. “It’s as if the seven blind seekers were touching seven wholly different creatures.”

“Would you rather all of Samsaar had only one truth? A single

set of rules?”

Yachay thought about it for a moment. He wondered if that wasn’t the case. “But how is one supposed to learn anything like this?”

“Reminds you of something?”

“Fine-tuning an instrument?” Yachay ventured. Then, with excitement, “Or a riddle with a shifting cipher?”

Daddu tapped his shoulder playfully. “Giving up? Do you just want the answers already?”

A smile tugged at Yachay’s lips as he shook his head. “I just wanted to know if there are any.”

Daddu’s smile mirrored his. “And until you solve them?”

“I suppose I should simply trust you?” Yachay’s tone was playfully knowing.

“You trust me, alright... but you seldom listen to me.” Daddu paused the polishing and looked up. “Tread on gentle feet. Keep your nose out of trouble.”

Yachay cocked his head. “You want me to follow my mind or just listen to you?”

“Both,” Daddu said, wobbling his head sideways in a nod that was both yes and no.

Yachay theatrically opened his journal, pretending to jot down a note. Daddu laughed.

“We could take turns.” Yachay pinched his throat with his thumb and forefinger, their old sign for promises.

“Following?”

“And leading.”

Daddu gestured at their precarious berth in the cargo hold. “I followed you here.”

“Not exactly, but fine. So next time, you lead.” Yachay pinched his throat gently. Daddu pinched his in reply, sealing their pact.

The bhooyan lurched, sending Daddu tumbling onto Yachay.

“Well,” Daddu said, steadyng himself, “this is certainly one way to travel.”

A deep voice echoed from above. “Oi! What’s this then?”

Yachay’s heart skipped a beat. He craned his neck upwards, catching a glimpse of a vaanar mahout peering down from the howdah atop the bhooyan.

“Hitching a ride, shreeman,” Daddu replied, his tone so casual it was almost bored. “We’re headed to the Noh lake.” He smiled up at the mahout.

The young vaanar blinked. Daddu’s utter nonchalance made him second-guess himself. *Was this... normal?* Had he missed some unspoken rule about civilian use of state bhooyans?

“I... well, this isn’t exactly...” the mahout stammered. “A coach.”

Daddu nodded sagely, as if the mahout had made a profound point. “That’s very well put. We’ll hop off at the winding. That work for you?”

The vaanar, now thoroughly wrong-footed, could only nod. “Right. Yes. The winding... Did you hear? There’s a rakshasi at large. Seems to have... you know... eaten an old woman.”

Daddu crossed his shoulder — a vaanar sign for gratitude.

“Very kind of you to warn us. Thank you for your service.”

Yachay’s head whipped toward Daddu. *Cheeky old manushya.*

The vaanar regained some confidence. “We are on state duty, you know.”

“Wouldn’t dream of keeping you then,” Daddu said, as if granting him permission to go back to his seat.

The mahout retreated, visibly relieved to end the encounter. Yachay marvelled at his grandfather’s handling of the situation.

“Which lesson did I just trample on, then?” Daddu asked.

Yachay’s hand was halfway to his *tadpatra* before he caught Daddu’s wink.

“I’ll let that one simmer a while longer,” Yachay said, a conspiratorial grin spreading across his face.

And suddenly they were two kids on an adventure in the bowels of a living mountain, trying not to giggle and alert the serious grown-up above.

“What is this place?” Yachay’s voice sounded hollow, caught in the silence.

Noh Lake stretched out before him, vast and white. The semi-opaque expanse reflected nothing, as though refusing to acknowledge the world above it.

“This is Noh Lake, but as you can see, it’s no lake at all,” Daddu said. “It was made to catch a meteor.”

The ‘lake’ filled a crater, its edges forming five distinct lobes like the petals of a massive, lifeless flower.

Yachay glanced at the surrounding cliffs. They cast long shadows that stopped abruptly where the lake began, as if reluctant to touch it.

He tapped his foot. No echo. No familiar scents of earth or water filled the air—only a faint metallic tang that clung to the back of his throat, like the taste of iron in blood.

He looked up at the sky, half expecting to see a meteor hanging there, suspended in time.

Daddu hummed softly, gesturing toward the odd-looking raft by the shore. “Lay me down on that raft, and hop aboard.”

Yachay settled Daddu onto the craft. It was wide and flat with twin hand cranks. Beneath, he glimpsed textured tracks connected to gears. The raft bobbed under their weight, but the lake’s surface remained unnaturally still.

“What are we doing here?” Yachay asked, gripping the cranks.

“A sale,” Daddu replied simply.

“But the Kasumbi emberglow we have is for the Kathari monks,” Yachay pointed out. “We just have the tree vials that they ordered.”

Daddu nodded, pretending that Yachay had made an observation and not implied a question.

Yachay began to turn the cranks. Gears whirred, tracks moved. To his amazement, the lake’s surface solidified beneath them, allowing the raft to glide forward. Behind them, the surface liquefied, erasing any trace of their passage.

Fascinated, Yachay knelt and reached toward the lake’s surface. He glanced at Daddu, who lay comfortably with his eyes closed.

"It's safe," Daddu murmured without opening his eyes.

Yachay tapped the fluid. It hardened instantly under his fingertips, firm as clay. Pressing gently, his fingers sank in, the substance yielding like thick oil. When he withdrew, the liquid slid off cleanly, leaving no residue.

Wonder momentarily eclipsed his unease.

Through the crank's rhythm, Yachay saw Daddu turn away and draw a small tin from his satchel. He watched his fingers scoop out wakati, the chalk-like substance he'd seen prepared countless times.

Daddu measured pinches into his flask, rubbed the grooved base. The paste liquefied, cloudy reactions stirred, steam rose to fill a balloon waiting at the flask's mouth.

Daddu lifted the balloon to his lips with ritual care, eyes closing in quiet ceremony. Yachay watched his grandfather's face soften. What jagged edges did the ancient remedy smoothen? Distance and memory, Daddu would say when asked.

But Yachay had witnessed something else on those rare days when supply shortages interrupted the ritual. Then, Daddu's hands would work at his inflamed joints for hours. First massaging, then digging fingers deep into the tissue around his ankle and knee, eventually striking them as if to knock the pain away. Whatever 'distance and memory' meant, Yachay understood that some of it had seeped into his grandfather's very bones.

"Where's the market?" Yachay asked, scanning the horizon.

"Just ahead," Daddu replied, gesturing vaguely.

Shapes materialised in the distance — bare rafts scattered across the white expanse. Each held only a solitary naag, lounging like statues in the middle of nowhere. As Yachay and Daddu

approached, the serpentine figures turned in unison, eyes fixed intently on the newcomers.

“That one,” Daddu murmured, indicating a particular raft.

As they drew near, the naag aboard straightened. Yachay suppressed a shiver.

“Peaceful waters,” Daddu called out casually.

The naag flared his hood slightly but remained silent.

“We seek Waahi,” Daddu pressed, undeterred.

The naag’s tongue flicked. “How many spots on my mother’s eggs?” he asked in a low voice.

Daddu looked up at the clear sky. “On a day like this, none.”

The naag nodded and tapped his tail thrice. The raft shuddered, then slowly capsized. As the naag slid underwater, the raft’s underside turned over, revealing a domed canopy of translucent resin.

Fluid cascaded off the dome, unveiling shelves lined with vials, scrolls, and devices — artefacts of desire and fear. At the heart of this contraband emporium stood Waahi.

The young naag, barely as old as Yachay, held herself upright. Her tail coiled behind her like a spring wound too tight.

“Waahi...?” Daddu squinted his eyes as if trying to see someone in the dark.

“Yes?” Waahi’s voice was as flat as a dead man’s tongue. “A problem?”

Daddu studied her for a moment. “It’s just that the last time I saw you, you looked just as young.”

Yachay's head whipped toward his grandfather. Daddu never commented on appearances, let alone age.

"And...?" Waahi's eyes flashed a warning: '*tread carefully, now.*'

"That was thirty years ago," Daddu said, his accusation now unambiguous.

Waahi's lips curled into what Yachay might have taken for a smile, had he never seen one before. "Oh, yes," she said. "There has been a... handover."

A chill slithered down Yachay's spine. He'd heard stories. In naag-speak, a "handover" was as pleasant as a colhaan's kick to the jaw. He wondered what kind of storm this hatchling-faced naag had weathered — or brewed — to end up in this place.

Daddu nodded, accepting the universal constant. "Indeed. Let the most worthy run the streams."

Waahi's gaze softened. "You've hoofed a long way. You must want something badly."

"You could say that," Daddu replied. "We are makers of the rare *Kasumbi emberglow* dye," Daddu continued, gesturing to Yachay. Taking the familiar cue of their sales routine, Yachay hiked his foot up like he was trying to kick his own ear. He held it there, showcasing a long glowing lace wound around his ankle.

Waahi considered the display. "Very well. I'll take ten *shirs*. Payment upon sale, naturally."

"We don't have the dye right now," Yachay started. "But we are grateful for your advance order—"

"I am afraid I have been unclear," Daddu said. His fingers worked at knots in his basket. He emptied a large compartment

onto a tall stand — devices, tools, scrolls. “I am offering everything. Our equipment, our permits, our methods recorded over a lifetime of distilling the dye.”

The words hit Yachay like a physical blow. “Daddu! No!” he cried out, disbelief in his voice.

Waahi examined the equipment and the scrolls. “These permits cannot be transferred.”

“Hence good business, no?” Daddu offered.

“But...” Yachay’s mind reeled, trying to make sense of this sudden upheaval. “Why are you doing this?”

“We will talk later, son.”

“No! Why are you doing this?”

Daddu turned to Waahi. “How much can you offer?”

“I have ten vajra coins for it.” Her voice was firm. She glanced between Yachay and Daddu. “Unless, you want to return later?”

“We need twelve.” Daddu countered.

“We need nothing...” Yachay’s hands found the raft’s cranks, gripping them like a lifeline, and began to turn them.

“We do... for our way to Dhaara.” Daddu pinched his throat, invoking their earlier pact. “This one, you follow.”

Yachay froze. He trembled with betrayal, but pursed his lips tight.

Daddu turned to Waahi. “Now will be nice.”

Waahi tossed a pouch onto their raft, the coins within clinking softly.

Daddu, with a grunt of effort, held the bag out. Old bones creaked a lament as he handed over everything he owned to the naag. “It’s yours.”

Waahi’s tail snapped and claimed the purchase. Yachay lunged for the bag, his fingers grasping at empty air.

“See you at the Trials,” Waahi’s voice was suddenly friendly. Her tail cracked like a whip and the raft capsized, taking their former life with it.

The enormity of what just happened crashed over Yachay in waves. He turned to Daddu, his voice crackling with anger, his eyes moist. “What’s wrong with you? That’s all we had. What will we do after I return from the Trials?”

“You don’t come back from the Trials, son. You win, and you don’t come back at all.” Daddu said.

The journey to the Kathari monastery passed in taut silence.

A MILLION HEARTBEATS

*“A million heartbeats after birth,
A million in bereavement,
Half a million on common days,
Three million in sickness.”*

— Samsaar Edict on Maximum Duration Without Tethering

“WHERE IS everyone?” Daddu’s voice drifted on the wind in the fading light.

The monastery stood atop the hill, a hulking structure that seemed more like a puzzle than a building. Its layered terraces jutted out in sharp angles, twisting back into themselves.

Yachay mused about the monastery’s inhabitants, wondering if they dreamed in right angles. Did they grow rigid and unyielding like their dwelling? But then he thought of his own home. Had its gentle bends moulded him?

Smaller box-like cells clustered around the main building, connected by translucent blue corridors. Large coiled springs lined the flanks, hinting at mechanisms beyond his grasp.

A soft glow caught his eye. He walked to the hill's edge, passing under *induri* fabrics that had trapped the day's light in their threads.

In the valley below, figures gathered around a Maya tree. Yachay had seen Maya trees before, and always at such distances. Its fractal branches reached upward, splitting and rebraiding. Aerial roots cascaded down like a waterfall frozen in time.

Between the larger boughs, translucent membranes stretched like sails catching unseen winds. The tree's saffron hue stood out even in the dimming light — an unmissable yet familiar sight across Samsaar.

Yachay could easily recall more striking trees from their travels — the *Phoogga* trees of Udayan, their buoyant, gas-filled trunks straining skyward against restraining root-ropes, or the *Chumbak* trees, their magnetised cores slowly accumulating an armour of lost tools and trinkets. He had always found the Maya tree striking, not for its beauty, but for the throngs of people always gathered beneath it, like *flitts* swarming over *zylith* nectar.

This tree was no different. Kathari monks in flowing robes stood around it, along with some eager-faced young people. At this distance, Yachay couldn't see clearly. He squinted, trying to make sense of what seemed to be a strange ritual.

An old monk cradled an infant, while another monk pressed an aerial root to the child's belly. Nearby, a gandharva hung suspended in the tree's aerial roots, one head speaking while the other remained still. Yachay felt a shiver run down his spine.

"A naming ceremony," Daddu murmured from the basket, sensing Yachay's disquiet.

Yachay's chest tightened. The betrayal at Noh Lake still stung.

How could Daddu act so casually, as if nothing had happened?

Voices from the valley below pierced Yachay's thoughts. A group of young people, no older than himself, huddled around an elderly monk, nodding as he spoke.

"Vidha," the monk could be heard as he addressed one of them, "search every corner of the monastery. See if even the smallest speck remains."

The young woman stepped onto a wooden platform built into the hillside and released a lever. With a soft whirr, the platform began to rise, powered by the unwinding of a massive spring alongside it.

The monk's gaze followed her ascent, then moved past, settling on Yachay. His weathered face creased in a smile as he waved.

Yachay turned to see Daddu waving back, the familiarity hinting at a history between them that he knew nothing about.

The monk's voice carried up the slope. "An orphan was left in our care, yesterday."

"Fortunate child," Daddu remarked, his tone unreadable.

The monk smiled and tilted his head back. "We do what we can."

"We were hoping to stay the night. Leave in the morning. Could we?"

"We always have space for you, my friend." The monk turned around for a quick look and then up to Daddu again. "Listen, the ceremony is stalling. You wouldn't happen to have any wakati?"

"I'm afraid not," Daddu replied quickly.

"Daddu!" Yachay hissed, the address laden with accusation

and reprimand.

Daddu shifted in his basket. “It’s ritualistic theatre. They just need to persuade the dual-head to proceed without wakati.”

“They are being so nice to us. Don’t be—”

“Very well,” Daddu sighed, avoiding Yachay’s gaze. He reached into his satchel and drew out the small tin. “Vidha!” he called to the rising platform. “I have some left.”

The platform shuddered to a halt. Vidha disembarked, her eyes meeting Yachay’s with a curious intensity. She hurried towards them, words tumbling out as if continuing a conversation.

“Can you believe it? The child’s already a week old,” she said, eyes bright with excitement. “The gandharva wanted to impose a fine for late tethering. Maana managed to talk them down.”

Yachay nodded, absorbing the unfamiliar names and customs.

“No swaying them on the ritual, though,” Vidha continued, fingers tracing patterns in the air. “They demanded all four offerings.”

Daddu held out the tin. Vidha took it and measured a careful pinch into her thimble. She handed the tin to Yachay and ran back to the platform, pausing as if expecting them to join her.

Yachay found himself taking a step forward, drawn by curiosity and the promise of company his own age.

“Son,” Daddu called out, his voice suddenly fatigued. “Could you help me to the pod? I need to rest before I collapse.”

Yachay’s shoulders slumped. He offered Vidha an apologetic smile, then turned sharp toward the monastery. Daddu’s basket swung wide at the pole’s end.

“Do you want to join us for the auditions later?” Vidha asked Yachay. Her hand hovered over the elevator lever.

“Auditions?” Yachay echoed.

“The scion of a great divya has camped in the next town,” Vidha’s voice rose an octave. To her, the arrival of a divya’s descendent felt as momentous as Hidamma herself descending upon their village. “They say he’s Varuna’s only son. He’s assembling a team for the Trials. Can you imagine? To be able to train alongside a divya-scion!”

Yachay couldn’t imagine why that would be any more thrilling to her than training with her own friends. But Vidha’s excitement infected him like the Giggling Pox. He offered a wide smile and nodded vigorously, hoping it conveyed the appropriate level of enthusiasm.

“If selected, he’ll cover all expenses, offer a salary, and double it if you clear the pre-Trials,” she said as if sweetening an already irresistible deal, then offered her conclusion to leave no room for ambiguity: “It’s the chance of a lifetime!”

Yachay saw himself as she must see him — an ordinary young man, eager for adventure or opportunity, just like her other mates. Not some peculiarity raised with the words of long-dead bards where maps run out.

For a breath, he inhabited this other life. But Daddu’s voice cut through the fantasy. “A fine prospect. If only we weren’t in mourning... someone dear to us just died.”

Yachay shot him a look.

“One hopes their debts were paid and chhavi granted” Vidha offered, customarily.

What a strange expression, Yachay thought. He'd ask Daddu its meaning, once he was ready to forgive the old man.

Vidha's eyes met Yachay's, voice lowering conspiratorially, yet loud enough for Daddu to hear. "The mourning period isn't mandatory, you know. Just an old custom. If you change your mind, we'll be at the orba field."

With a final glance, she pulled the lever and descended.

From above, Yachay could see Vidha moving deliberately at the tree's base. The details were lost to distance, but he assumed she was making the offerings she'd mentioned.

The valley hushed. A soft light rippled through the resin canvases held between the Maya tree branches.

The gandharva's voice rang out. "This manushya accepts the three debts of his life. With precious offerings to the mother tree, he begins the repayment of his debts. We hope that—" The gandharva paused, as if listening to an inner voice. Then, with a flourish, proclaimed, "Soraken may someday ascend!"

"Soraken!" The crowd echoed in unison.

As they headed towards their sanctum cell, Yachay glanced back. The valley pulsed with celebration—monks embracing, young faces beaming, the newly named Soraken passed from arm to arm.

"Why did you lie about the death?" Yachay confronted Daddu, as soon as they got to the resting sanctum.

Daddu, sprawled on a padded plank, sighed. The cell's stark geometry and lack of windows made it quieter than the quietest nights back home. The only light came from the soft, Kasumbi emberglow emanating from Yachay's ankle lace. A reminder of what they had given away.

“I thought it would be easier,” Daddu replied, his voice weary.
“Than explaining your... temporary illness.”

“I don’t mind explaining,” Yachay countered. “I’d rather you didn’t lie about me...”

“Understood,” Daddu murmured, his eyes closed.

“...or to me,” Yachay pressed.

“When have I ever lied to you?”

“Isn’t withholding information the same as lying?”

“No,” Daddu finally said. “That’s prioritising, son.”

“How was selling our livelihood for a wakati-induced daydream a priority?” Yachay’s voice cracked in the dark.

Daddu didn’t respond. The moment stretched between them.

“Daddu?” Yachay asked softly.

The silence in the cell pressed in, heavy with worry. Yachay leaned closer, his eyes straining in the dim emberglow, searching for the slightest flicker of movement in Daddu’s chest. A cold dread coiled in his stomach, squeezing out his anger.

Then, a shallow rise. A soft fall. Daddu’s chest moved with the gentle rhythm of sleep. Relief flooded through Yachay, and he sagged against the wall. In that moment, he understood that his home wasn’t the place with gentle bends, but a gentle manushya with jagged edges.

Yachay counted the beats between Daddu’s breaths until they became a lullaby of permission. Then he rose silently. He pinched his throat, claiming his turn in their pact, and slipped out.

He navigated the monastery’s sharp, twisting corridors of blue

translucent stone. Pausing where the wall thinned, he pressed his face close. It was cool to the touch, like frozen mist.

Through the crystalline wall, the world outside wavered like a submerged dream. The orba field stretched before him, moonlit and alive with moving figures.

He found a door—heavy, reluctant—and pushed it open. The scent of zylith blooms and damp earth filled his lungs as he stepped into the cool night. Laughter bubbled up from the field, effervescent and irresistible.

Vidha called out, “You made it!”

Yachay offered a shy smile, for a moment feeling he had indeed made it. Though he wasn’t entirely sure what “it” entailed.

As he approached the group, a boy built like a young colhaan turned to Vidha. Muscles rippled beneath his skin like creatures trying to escape. “Why invite more competition?”

Vidha rolled her eyes. “Calm your muscles, Mikash. You only know about the auditions because of me. Besides,” she added with a glance towards Yachay, “he’s in mourning. He can’t tether tonight.”

Mikash studied Yachay for a long moment. “I’ve seen people ditch their dead grand-aunts for less.”

“I won’t be auditioning,” Yachay assured him, lifting his hands as if to fend off the accusation.

Mikash’s eyes narrowed. “Then why come?”

“I just...” Yachay faltered. *Why had he come?*

“He wants to see the son of a divya,” Vidha jumped in. Yachay nodded, grateful for the excuse.

Mikash's stance relaxed slightly. "Charming! Care to share some load?"

He gestured toward a pile of bags—trip essentials. Yachay stepped forward, hoisting one onto his shoulder, its comforting heft anchoring him.

As he adjusted the strap, Mikash's eyes fixed on a bluish mark on his neck. "What is that?" Mikash asked, pointing at the inverted triangle that looked like a small leaf beneath Yachay's skin.

Yachay touched the mark absently. "It's a birthmark, I think," he said, as if implying that his thinking had little to do with knowing.

A girl with intricate braids stepped forward, her smile suggesting she knew several excellent secrets. "Don't mind Mikash, he's more generous than he lets on."

Mikash snorted but didn't argue.

"I'm Lani," the girl added, then pointed around the circle. "Aadrishi, Sumegh, Lukago, and Jiara.

"Not that you'll remember our names," Aadrishi said. "Just think: blue hair, pink hair, braids, ancient robes, impractical climbing boots, muscles."

"Let's go," Vidha said, giving Yachay a nudge. "And try not to trip over your tongue."

"How does one...?" Yachay wrestled with her metaphor.

Vidha grinned. "Oh, you know," she said. "Drooling over the divya-santaan, begging for a spot on his team..."

Yachay nodded, confused. *Did she really think that's why he was here?* He considered correcting her but didn't. The misunderstanding

felt like a borrowed cloak of normalcy — ill fitting, yet comforting.

As they descended the monastery hill, their path wound through shadows and clearings in silver light. Vidha pointed toward a dark smudge on the horizon. “We’ll be crossing that hill,” she said. “But we’ll be back before the monks have their morning *kaadha*.”

Yachay squinted, trying to make out any landmarks, but everything blurred together—just like his reason for being here.

“The path splits into two valleys on the other side,” Vidha said. “We’ll take the route along the rock-spine. If the wind permits, we might be able to take the cable-palanquins from there.”

“That’s twice as long.” Aadrishi groaned. “Let’s just cut through Raza valley.”

“They start clearing Raza in a few hours,” Lukago said. “For the new skandha mines.”

“Better to avoid it anyway,” Mikash said, his voice hardening. “Place is full of troublemakers.”

“Troublemakers?” Yachay asked.

“Enemies of the soil,” Mikash said, as if citing well established knowledge. “They keep fighting the new mines, just don’t want any progress in Khaasiya.”

Lukago’s voice brightened. “Once they set the work camps up, they’ll need hundreds. The mines, the skandha-pullers....”

“Who told you all this?” Vidha asked.

“Everyone knows. We’ve been training in the games. Fruits of Fortitude, especially...”

“All these boys with their windup spring games,” Jiara laughed. “Already planning for when they fail the pre-Trials.”

“For all of us,” Vidha said. “Unless someone here makes it through the auditions tonight. Then whatever comes, we share it.”

They skirted the edge of an impact crater. Yachay studied the hill rising dark against stars, wondering what else these games showed.

“I still don’t get it,” Aadrishi’s whisper carried in the night air. “Why Khaasiya? Of all places?” She stumbled slightly. “We haven’t sent anyone to finals in... ever. So why would a Divya’s scion even look at us?”

“And why a team?” Jiara added, adjusting her bag with a grunt. “No one’s ever heard of teams in the Trials.”

“Maybe there are,” Lani countered. “Who knows anything about the Trials!”

“We know one thing,” Jiara said. “Only one ascends. So a team makes no sense.”

“If a Divya-scion is building a team, there must be a reason,” Lani persisted.

Jiara tilted her head. “You think the children of the Divya know something about the Trials that we don’t?”

Lani shrugged. “Could be.”

Mikash stopped so abruptly that Yachay nearly collided with him. “Can’t be! The Trials are sacred,” he declared, and Yachay heard in Mikash’s voice how much he needed this to be true. “When was the last time a Divya-santaan actually ascended?”

“I agree.” Vidha weighed in. “All who lose forget everything. Even the scions. No one knows more than anyone else.”

Aadrishi glanced at her twin brother Sumegh, grinning. His

eyes widened. “Don’t—”

“Tell them about your naag!” Aadrishi dared on, laughter bubbling in her throat.

“Aadrishi, don’t!” Sumegh’s face flushed. He lunged at his sister, trying to clamp his hand over her mouth.

But Aadrishi twisted away, her grin widening. “There’s this naag who claims he made it to the Trials and remembers everything. He offers a ‘secret workshop’ for the pre-Trials. The secrets, yours for just a small fortune!”

Sumegh finally caught her. “Stop it!”

She mumbled against his hand, laughing. “Sumegh’s been saving every Maya coin for it!”

“Why would you do that?” Sumegh’s voice cracked with hurt. “You just ruined our only chance.”

“Yes, cruel sister,” Jiara mocked lightly. “Robbing your twin of his one shot at being scammed by a naag.”

Their laughter rose into the night air. Yachay hung back, watching them, feeling the warmth of almost belonging.

He drifted closer to Vidha, voice pitched low. “Why?”

Vidha’s raised eyebrow invited elaboration.

“You said,” Yachay fumbled, piecing his question together. “Why doesn’t anyone remember what happens at the Trials?”

Vidha studied him for a moment. “Maya takes away all memory of the Trials.”

“But what if someone doesn’t tether after the Trials? Maya wouldn’t be able to wipe their memories then, right?”

Vidha looked at him quizzically. “And what about during the Trials?”

“Well,” Yachay wondered aloud, feeling his way through the dark of his own ignorance. “That too, perhaps?”

Vidha stopped walking, turning to face him fully. The others moved ahead, their voices fading. “Yachay,” she said slowly, as if explaining to a child that water is wet, “the Divya Trials happen in Maya. Everyone tethers for the pre-Trials as well as the final Trials.”

“The Trials are in Maya?” Yachay repeated, blinking.

Vidha stared back with probing disbelief. “How could you not know that?”

A moment passed and he laughed at the depth of his grandfather’s delusion, harboring dreams of Yachay participating in something he had never accessed, and never could.

“What?” Vidha looked at him, puzzled.

“There’s just so much I don’t know...” Yachay said, smiling.

Where there should have been disappointment, he found instead a curious lightness. Unable to tether and thus unable to participate, he was absolved of choice—of having to deny Daddu’s dreams.

He could journey with these almost-friends, carry their bags, assist them, belong; be part of something without being at the centre of it. There was peace in being peripheral.

“It’s even brighter than induri,” Vidha’s voice pulled him back to the present.

“What is?” he asked, before following her gaze to the luminous band around his ankle.

“Your lace... it’s like a beacon. What’s it made of?”

“Oh, we make this pigment called kasumbi—” The words died in his throat as realization struck. His lace must be visible from paces away. He yanked his pant leg down urgently. But even as the fabric swallowed the light, he suspected it to have done its damage.

A siren pierced the night, its wail echoing off the hillside. The monastery erupted in torchlight behind them, sudden as dawn.

“Why in Sheshan’s tail!” Lani gasped. The others stopped, their excitement deflated.

“What’s happening?” Yachay asked as the group turned back toward the monastery.

“Curfew,” Vidha explained, her shoulders slumping. “We’re being summoned back.”

The group trudged up the gentle slope toward the orba field. Maana stood waiting, shadows pooling in the creases of his brow.

“I understand you had great hopes tonight,” Maana said, his voice carrying the regret of an unwelcome task. “I wouldn’t have called you back if it wasn’t necessary.”

“What’s going on, Maana?” Vidha asked.

Maana took a deep breath. “A rakshasi has been spotted nearby. A dangerous one—took the life of an elderly manushya. It’s not safe to be out tonight.”

A hush fell over the group.

“I don’t see a messenger,” Jiara whispered, her lips barely moving near Vidha’s ear.

Vidha nodded subtly, her eyes narrowing. “Maana,” she said sweetly, “who told you this? Did someone bring the news?”

Maana's gaze darted briefly toward the monastery before settling back on them. "Prepare the offerings, my dear," he replied.

His evasion made Yachay glance over his shoulder. Through the torch-lit haze, he caught a glimpse of Daddu. His unhurried pace suggested neither surprise nor concern about any lurking rakshasi.

Back in their cell, Yachay's anger finally found its voice. "We're going back to Noh Lake," he declared, yanking their bags open. "We're buying our equipment back."

Daddu sat up, eyes widening. "That's not—"

"You lied," Yachay cut in. "Or were you simply prioritising again?" The borrowed word turned bitter in his mouth. "The Trials happen in Maya. How can I participate if I can't even tether?"

Daddu's shoulders slumped. "That's why we need the money," he admitted. "That's why we're going to Dhaara. I know someone who will help you."

"But you always said my condition wasn't curable," Yachay's voice cracked.

"Now it is."

"Why the secrecy then, Daddu?"

"You saw how the gandharvas react. Heavy fines for tethering delays—"

"But," Yachay's voice strained in an exasperated plea. "You could trust me to understand. Like you should have tonight... I wasn't going to tether. You didn't need to raise an alarm. You crushed their dreams too."

"They could go in the morning," Daddu waved his hand.

"Daddu! You cannot decide for other people."

“And who can?”

“Nobody,” Yachay said, breathlessly. “People decide for themselves.”

“You seem pretty certain of that.”

Yachay looked away, then back at Daddu. “This cure... how can you be so certain that this person has it? Is it a naag?” He hesitated, tasting the ugliness of the words forming, but they slipped out anyway. “Because I heard that their kind are never to be—”

“Yachay!” Daddu interrupted, his voice edged with disbelief. It struck Yachay as oddly unfair—to disappoint someone while being disappointed in them. *Perhaps there should be a rule about taking turns with this too.*

“No, son,” Daddu said quietly. “Never say such things. That’s not you speaking. These are someone else’s misguided words.”

“Daddu!” Yachay’s frustration boiled over, even as a part of him felt guilty. “Can you just answer me without trying to make me better than I am?”

“Yes!” Daddu said. “I trust this person with my life. She will cure you.”

Yachay shook his head and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To help my new friends,” Yachay said, drawing a calming breath. “With whatever task has now fallen upon them because of me.”

Daddu watched in silence as Yachay walked out.

"Eight points, eight buckets," Mikash instructed, pressing a weathered pail into Yachay's hands. "Only collect what's rotten. Just-dead won't do for rakshasi offerings."

Yachay felt knowledge rise like a sour bubble in his throat. "I thought that they eat only—"

"Decay," Mikash finished, wrongly. Yachay wanted to say "fallen".

Yachay's tongue caught between correction and connection. The scrolls in his head said one thing, but friendship — that new, fragile possibility — whispered another.

"They love the taste of rot," Mikash said, depositing something small, furry and dead into his bucket with surprising tenderness.

"I think fresh death works too," Yachay ventured and immediately regretted.

"Oh?" Mikash's voice acquired the sort of edge usually found on well-maintained vintars. "How'd you know that?"

"I read about it."

Mikash blinked. "How do you *red* about something?"

'Lech', the word for 'read' in Kosh sounded like 'yellow' — 'lechh'. Suddenly Yachay was laughing at language's little jokes. But laughter can sound like mockery when trust hasn't set its roots.

"Lech, not lechh." Yachay clarified hastily, trying to mend the sudden tear in the seams of their conversation. "I was just wondering... if you think that the rakshasi eat only decay, then there is nothing to fear, right?"

"Did you stumble out of Sheshan Yug or something?" Mikash's face scrunched. He turned away, his bucket swinging like a

pendulum. It marked the exact moment Yachay wished he had left some things unread.

They worked their way around the monastery's perimeter, placing buckets where stone met wilderness.

Vidha sidled up to Yachay. She had a way of moving that made everything look intentional. "So," she whispered. "Was it your grandfather who told Maana?"

Heat rose to Yachay's cheeks.

"Probably saved us from becoming rakshasi snack. We'll leave again at daybreak." She looked at him and added quickly. "I will come fetch you when we are ready to leave."

Relieved, Yachay returned to scanning the forest floor. "What's this?" he asked, picking up a wrinkled, brown sphere.

"A rotten orba—exactly what we need," she said, with a joy usually saved for things that still have cellular integrity.

He brought it to his nose and recoiled.

"Don't try that one." Vidha chuckled, plucking it from his hand and dropping it in the offerings. "I'll get you fresh orbas in the morning. For the journey to the auditions."

A warmth spread through Yachay's chest.

The rakshasi's shriek tore through the night. Vidha's body knew to jump before her thoughts could catch up. Then came relief, quickly souring at Mikash's smug grin. He'd thrown a shrieking-nut just past her ear—close enough to scare, but not to harm. The nut sounded like the rakshasi shrieks they knew from Maya.

Mikash hurled another shrieking nut. Lukago yelped and fled inside, even after realising it was just a prank. Mikash ran after him

and Vidha ran after Mikash, laughing.

Why did fear bring such joy when made safe? Yachay wondered. Perhaps this was how nature taught all young things? Hide, seek, catch, flee, grapple—the alphabet of survival, learned in play before life demanded fluency. Daddu's words echoed in his mind: practise your fears before they practise you.

Yachay crossed the tree line, bending for another fallen orba. As he straightened, something deeper in the woods caught his eye.

Moonlight carved silver gashes in the ground, and in them lay things that might have once been fruit. His feet moved toward them, even as his throat tightened.

The darkness moved fast, arranging itself into something with teeth, with appetite. The rakshasi emerged partially, suddenly. Yachay could barely make her out. Something dark glistened on her chin like slick tar. But somehow he could still tell it was blood.

An ancient memory surfaced in him — the part that knew what it meant to be food. It split him — one half remembering how to run, the other half forgetting how to look away.

He just stood there, trapped in the gravity of her presence. He watched as his hand rose, offering up the rotten, stinking orba.

A scream caught in his throat at what he saw next—she smiled. Lifted the fruit like a mother showing a treasure. Something stirred from behind her—quick eyes, small hands, a flash of movement—and vanished with the orba into a slit in her flesh that closed like a pouch.

Branches rustled. Yachay snapped his head around to look. When he turned back, she was gone.

Vaanars crashed through the underbrush and found him. They

carried weapons — grudges made iron.

“You! Did you see her?”

“Which way?”

Yachay hesitated. Then he raised a trembling hand and pointed in the direction the rakshasi had disappeared.

They bolted past him without another word.

Yachay fell to his knees, breathing heavily. He worked his loose tooth with his tongue until it yielded. He held it in his palm: this small thing that had occupied so much of his attention till now.

All his anxieties, the lost equipment, Daddu’s tiny deceptions, his inability to tether, his need to fit in, suddenly felt distant. They belonged to another Yachay, one who hadn’t yet stared at the maw of loss and returned with his gifts intact.

There was, he recalled, garuda lore about two stillnesses: one before the first plucking of an astatar’s strings, another after the final note faded. He swelled in the latter.

In their dim chamber, he watched Daddu sleeping like a child. Daddu’s peculiarities suddenly seemed endearing, making him smile. In the morning, he would tell his grandfather how grateful he was for everything.

He tried to imagine Vidha’s face when he would tell her about the encounter tomorrow, when she would bring him his first fresh orba. Mikash might doubt him, but the others would believe. For once he’d have something real to share — not from scrolls and riddles, but an adventure of his own.

But what had he done? The rakshasi hadn’t harmed him. She had been gentle, had even smiled.

He pressed the guilt down with facts: the vaanars' authority came from the Divya themselves. So he'd done right by assisting them. But as sleep came, all he could see was that tiny creature vanishing into the flesh-pouch.

"Stay." Maana's voice pulled Yachay from sleep. Through heavy lids, he made out two shadows in the doorway - Daddu's curved spine, Maana's straight back against the morning light.

Daddu's shoulders tightened — that familiar signal that meant no. "We have some business before the Trials."

"The journey to Ranga is long," Maana said carefully. "Let him face the pre-trials here, with friends. Facing failure together might ease the sting of disappointment."

"He'll see the great cities," Daddu said, his voice brightening with convincing hope. "Millions gathering for the trials. Think of the kasumbi we could sell."

Heat rose in Yachay's throat. More stories spun from empty air — they had nothing left to sell.

"Where are the others?" Yachay asked, though his chest already knew.

"The auditions," Maana said. "They left at dawn." He paused. "I can arrange a cart to the aqueduct station, if you'd like."

Yachay nodded and began gathering his things, struggling to keep his face blank. Then he saw them: fresh orbas by his bed. His pulse quickened.

"Daddu. Had Vidha come?" he asked, hiding the orbas from view, so as to not have him know that he knew.

Daddu shook his head. "Nobody came, son."

Yachay nodded again, slower this time. Then, deliberately, he placed the orba bunch on the plank between them. Watched Daddu's eyes fix on the fruit. Watched his face change.

"Oh yes, of course, Vidha did come." Daddu stumbled over the words, forcing a chuckle. "I was in sleep, thought it must have been a dream. She just left them there and said—"

Yachay kept nodding as he walked out of the sanctum.

"Yachay, son... listen..." Daddu's voice trailed behind.

But Yachay was already running, his feet carrying him anywhere but here, the monastery's sharp angles blurring through his tears.



A PRAYER AND AN OATH

“When all land is lost, will we eat skandha?”

— Overheard in Khaasiya

YACHAY RAN. The monastery path fell away behind him. ‘He better rest this one out,’ he imagined Daddu saying to Vidha while he slept. But Vidha’s message needed no words. The orbas were placed exactly where they would speak their quiet accusation.

His feet traced last night’s journey. Past the orba field. Down the sloping hill. He could reach the Divya-scion’s auditions and join his friends if he ran fast enough.

Along the crater’s edge. His lungs burned, but slowing meant thinking. When had his grandfather started to change? *It was recent.* He tried to pinpoint its beginning, like tracking the spread of rust—gradual, invisible, until something breaks. Since... *but that made no sense.* Since the Trials were announced. Since good humor became delusion became a thing with claws.

Something jabbed his thigh with each stride. He ignored it until the pricking forced his hand to his pocket. Daddu’s wakati tin. *Daddu would need this.* He must turn.

He halted and looked back at the monastery's sharp angles in the distance. Daddu would be digging his fingers hard into his ankles and knees by now, waiting for mercy measured in wakati pinches. *Was this the root of everything?* This daily bargain with fog? Or had something deeper driven him to trade their livelihood for shadows, to plant falsehoods where trust once grew?

Yachay's fingers tightened around the tin as he turned away from the monastery and ran on, faster now. The hill's shoulder rose before him. They had reached this far the previous night before being summoned back.

The climb left him gasping. At the summit, he doubled over, hands on knees, drawing ragged breaths.

In the distance to his left stretched the rock-spine ridge that Vidha had mentioned. Farther still, the sails of the cable palanquins caught wind. He imagined Vidha's face lighting up. 'You made it!' she'd say. But doubt crept in. What if he couldn't? Or maybe they'd meet him halfway, returning from the auditions with new tales. At least this time he knew what "it" meant.

His pulse thundered in his ears. But it wasn't just his heartbeat. The ground trembled beneath his feet. The tremors grew stronger. He counted. They were rhythmic, like war drums, but closer. More familiar.

Screams cut through his thoughts, tearing in from the right. He found himself moving toward them. Beyond the hill's curve, Raza valley opened like a wound in the earth.

Heat shimmered over the valley as Yachay strained to see through the dust-choked air. A pair of bhooyans stampeded across the valley floor. Their tusks crushed fences meant for smaller troubles. Plow-tails carved through fields of jona. Seasons of tending

dispersed back to dirt.

Villagers lay prone before their homes, forming futile flesh shields. Their pleas were drowned out by thundering steps. Others stumbled through broken walls clutching what they could save—children, elders, whole lives compressed into whatever could be carried. History, suddenly portable.

Yachay turned left. Whatever was happening was guided by wise people, he thought. The bhooyans served some greater purpose, clearing land for the skandha mines his friends had spoken of. The future they awaited with such hope. The thought felt hollow even as it formed.

He shook his head and turned right again, all the way to the hill's bend. He leaned over. Below, one bhooyan drove through the heart of the village while its partner swept wide, as if clearing way for more to follow.

A couple at the village edge stood frozen, eyes searching with growing panic. Yachay saw what they sought: their baby lost behind a tilted wall. Just paces from them, directly in the lead bhooyan's path. A hundred heartbeats at most before impact.

The wakati tin felt cool in his palm. His thumb found the glyphs on its surface — the first cipher he had ever solved, back when Daddu's every word had been truth. He turned left to look at the rock-spine ridge, the path that led to his friends, then at the tin in his palm.

He could almost hear Daddu's refrain: "Tread on gentle feet. Keep your nose out of trouble." His body chose while his mind still debated, hurling down the bush-littered slope.

He tumbled faster than his breath could follow. Pebbles tore

his hands, his knees. Each impact felt like shedding another of Daddu's lessons. Farmland slammed up to meet him. He staggered up, finding his balance, measuring angles.

The bhooyan filled his vision. Forty paces and closing. Numbers usually calmed him; now they stacked against him. Thirty paces. Too far to reach the baby, too close to find another way. His shouts to the mahout vanished under thundering steps. Twenty-five. His mind raced through scrolls of knowledge, seeking solutions, finding none.

His fingers remembered the wakati tin. They fumbled at its clasp. Twenty paces. Yachay steadied his nerves and pried it open. He rolled a generous pinch of wakati paste between his palms into a ball. One chance.

The bhooyan charged on, tusks lowering to tear the earth. Yachay sprinted toward it, matching its thundering stride. One planted foot, a twist, a leap—and he let fly.

The wakati ball struck the bhooyan's forehead, rebounded at a perfect angle, and dropped straight into its sucking trunk. Yachay rolled clear of the beast's path.

Leathery lids drooped over massive eyes. Muscles went slack. Vaanar mahouts leapt from the swaying bhooyan's back.

Its six legs buckled mid-stride. The stumbling giant crashed belly-first, but momentum carried it toward the child.

With a final lurch, the bhooyan skidded to a stop. Clods of earth rained down around the baby. It stopped crying.

A tiny hand extended upward, patting the beast's trunk in reprimand. The bhooyan toppled sideways with a playful rumble. The child giggled, rolling against its warm hide.

Yachay rushed the infant through the ruin. The young mother broke from the crowd, trembling as she clutched her child. She met Yachay's eyes. "The only thing worse than being born in Khaasiya is when a garuda finds skandha beneath your home."

An elderly woman limped toward them, laying a frail hand on the mother's shoulder. Her face twisted as she looked past Yachay. Another bhooyan pounded toward them. She tugged at Yachay's sleeve. "Come with us."

Yachay felt each footfall in his gut, his chest, his jaw.

"Take faith in the Divya," the old woman intoned, her cataract-clouded eyes carrying a calm Yachay couldn't fathom. "Those Vidhi Vidhaata watch over all, seeing what we cannot. Their justice comes slow, yet certain."

"Till then, we shall keep our wrists busy," Yachay echoed, completing the common prayer. He turned and broke into a sprint, fingers fumbling urgently at his wakati tin.

His first throw glanced off the bhooyan's forehead. Another missed entirely as the beast shifted. Surprising agility for something that large. Yachay grimaced. His wakati stash dwindled.

He curved around the charging beast. When its breath became hot on his skin, he hurled a precise shot directly into its flaring nostrils. The effect was immediate again. The bhooyan staggered, tusks lowering, knees buckling.

The vaanar riders shouted and struck with their tail-maces, but their mount only swayed. One by one, they dismounted, scratching their heads. The massive body blocked their view while dust clouded the air. Yachay slipped away.

The third bhooyan was already charging straight at him.

Yachay recognized the scarring on its left tusk. This was the same beast he and Daddu had evaded earlier. He knew its gait, its rhythm. Recognition sparked confidence.

That confidence died as he scraped the nearly empty tin. He gathered the remaining wakati grit into a final ball. One shot remained.

A chorus of trumpeting shattered the air. The drugged bhooyans had found their voices, sounding as if they were inciting the charging bhooyan's vengeance. Their calls carried strange harmonics, almost like words. Their companion responded immediately. Its charge intensified to a raw, primal frenzy.

The dust cloud thickened around Yachay. Light splintered, landscape dissolved. Nothing remained but the knowledge of an immense presence hurtling toward him. He raised his arm, wakati ball held in futile defense. There was no way to land the shot.

His eyes stung from dust. He shut them tight as regrets flooded his mind. He should never have fought with Daddu. Never left without talking it out. Maybe he could dodge. But where? How? He braced for impact.

Then, impossibly, the bhooyan halted. Its massive bulk skidded to a stop mere handspans from crushing him. Hot, musty breath washed over him, carrying unfamiliar scents that made his eyes water more.

The bhooyan's vast head lowered before him, eyes bearing a playful expectancy. Its trunk unfurled gently, hovering beneath his outstretched hand.

Yachay understood. The trumpeting hadn't been a call for revenge but an endorsement. The first two bhooyans were urging

their companion to also sample the wakati treat. Yachay chuckled with relief and fed the final wad into the eager snout. The bhooyan rejoined its swaying friends with a satisfied rumble, trumpeting its approval.

Just then, the mahout spotted Yachay. “Oi! You!” the vaanar yelled, the leather straps of a bola already spinning in his hand.

Yachay locked eyes with the furious mahout, pivoted, and bolted. Three strides into his escape, a wall of muscle materialized before him. The collision knocked his breath away, sending him crashing into the dirt.

He twisted as he fell, using the momentum to roll clear of grasping hands. He scrambled up and darted left, directly into another soldier. Strong fingers clamped his shoulders, pinning him in place.

The vaanar Chief towered over him, flanked by his lieutenants. One nod from their leader would unleash their fury.

Yachay went limp, dropping his full weight. His tunic ripped free, leaving the Chief clutching nothing but fabric. Yachay hit the ground in a crouch, slid between the Chief’s legs, and ran.

He dodged pursuers left and right. Behind him, the Chief’s bola whirred in tight circles, the spiked orb gathering deadly momentum. Ahead, a sentry waited, arms splayed wide. There was no way out.

A blink before the throw, something pulpy exploded against the Chief’s face. The bola jerked off-course. It swooshed past Yachay and cracked into the sentry’s chest with a bone-crunching thud.

The Chief wiped the pulp from his face, tasting what was unmistakably a ripe orba. He scowled and glanced upward,

searching.

The sky was clear, yet waiting. Splat, splat!

Orbas pelted the vaanars from all sides. Sour juices burned eyes. Enforcers staggered from pulpy blows, slipping on crushed fruit.

Yachay should have seized this chance to escape. Instead, he stood transfixed by the impossible sight. For there, amid the confusion, moved a figure he knew but didn't recognize.

Daddu.

His grandfather somersaulted into the fray, vaulting over a startled vaanar. He struck the enforcer at a spot just below the ear. The vaanar dropped instantly.

Yachay's mind refused to process it. His lungs forgot how to work. He barely noticed the vaanar guard charging toward him. Didn't matter.

Daddu twisted, faster than sight. His foot struck Yachay's solar plexus hard enough to fling him clear but controlled enough to spare him real harm. Yachay sailed beyond the vaanar's grasp and tumbled downhill.

Gravel tore at his skin. He scrambled to a halt, coughing out dust. He spat blood and squinted upward toward the crest of the slope.

There, sharply silhouetted against the sun's glare, Daddu stood lightly on the balls of his feet. Around him loomed the massive, shadowed shapes of the vaanars.

The largest vaanar swung his mace-tipped tail at Daddu's ribs. Daddu pivoted inward past the weapon, then tugged the tail

sharply. The vaanar lurched forward, his momentum amplified. Daddu's kick found the nerve junction where spine met tail. The vaanar crumpled face-first into the dirt.

Fists converged on Daddu from opposite sides. He tilted subtly, letting knuckles whistle past his temples. His palms brushed the attackers' forearms, redirecting their trajectories just enough. Their knuckles collided with each other's temples. The vaanars reeled backward, eyes unfocused.

Three vaanars attacked as one. The first somersaulted forward, tail-mace arcing toward Daddu's skull. The second lunged with a heavy fist aimed at his spine. The third dove low, sweeping for his legs.

Yachay's breath caught. Daddu moved within it. His palm deflected the tail-mace outward while his foot scattered gravel into the spine-striker's eyes. The blinded vaanar raised his other arm defensively, directly into the diverted mace's path. Bone cracked.

As the somersaulter descended, Daddu's knuckles found his exposed ankle. In the same motion, Daddu seized the blinded attacker's wrist, twisted, and thrust upward at the elbow. The vaanar's momentum carried him in an arc, colliding into his somersaulting comrade.

The leg-sweeper twisted to avoid his falling companions, momentarily exposing his hip. Daddu's heel found the vulnerable spot. All three vaanars crumpled, spasming, writhing. Yachay released his breath.

More vaanars charged. More fell. Brutal strength meant nothing against Daddu's dance of knowledge.

Forms overlapped too swiftly to follow, becoming a blur of

motion. Only Daddu remained clear. His grandfather was solving riddles of momentum, pressure, and anatomy between heartbeats.

Yuyutsu. The name of the art surfaced in Yachay's mind from half-remembered scrolls, tales of legendary masters who could dismantle armies without bearing a scratch.

The Daddu he knew, weak-jointed, wakati-dependent, was a facade. This Daddu was something else entirely. Something sculpted by purpose too profound to imagine.

"Stay back!" Daddu shouted from above, snapping Yachay from his trance. He froze mid-step, suddenly aware he'd been climbing the slope.

A sentry barreled toward him, tail-mace rising. Yachay flinched, but the vaanar toppled mid-stride, crashing past him down the slope. Above, Daddu flickered into view, already retreating to intercept another threat.

His voice cut sharply across the distance: "I told you to stay away!"

Refusal roared within Yachay. He charged upward, Daddu's warnings dissolving into the rush of blood in his ears.

Ahead, the vaanar Chief's bola spun. The rope whipped out, coiling around Daddu's forearm. Daddu stepped through, aligning wrist and elbow precisely. The bola loosened, its momentum drawing the Chief forward, exactly where Daddu wanted him.

But the Chief turned stumble to lunge, massive arms clamping around Daddu's torso. He lifted Daddu off the ground, crushing the air from his lungs.

Yachay's eyes dropped to a large stone at his feet. His fingertips brushed its sharp edge, a boundary he'd never imagined crossing.

His fist closed around it. It felt heavier than a stone should, as if wielding it might crush something fragile within.

Daddu's grip closed around his wrist, sudden and firm. "Not that way," he said. Behind him, the Chief lay sprawled in the dust with his bola.

"Let's go!" Daddu yanked Yachay forward.

They broke into a sprint down the slope. Yachay stole a glance at his grandfather running alongside, feeling a strange exhilaration.

"Do you know what's the final step of all great Yuyutsu kata?" Daddu asked as they ran faster, as if it were a playful race.

Yachay smiled through tears. "No." He had a thousand other questions.

"It is to r—"

A lasso whirred from behind, entangling Daddu's legs. He crashed forward, tumbling through the dust.

Guards converged from all sides in standard containment formation. Before Daddu could recover, they struck as one, driving him into the earth. Held face-down, he twisted toward Yachay, eyes finding his.

"Run!" His voice was cut off by the Chief's fist.

Rage flooded Yachay's veins, drowning all reason. He hurtled into the thrashing scrum, driven by a single, searing instinct: shield Daddu at any cost.

Vaanars closed ranks. Massive hands seized his arms. Pinned beneath the Chief, Daddu watched helplessly as a club struck Yachay's back. He crumpled with a whimper.

Iron chains locked around grandfather and grandson.

Daddu's face contorted. Not just anguish, but the recognition of consequences long evaded. As darkness claimed him, one thought crystallized with perfect clarity. *Failure.*

Yachay's metal cage trundled forward. Iron bars sliced his view into narrow segments. Behind him, yakshis hauled another cage. Their lanky forms folded at sharp angles. Legs compressed into tight, zigzagging folds. Torsos bent forward under strain. Through the shifting limbs, Yachay glimpsed Daddu in his cage.

"Daddu," Yachay called hoarsely, gripping the bars. Questions flooded his mind, but he settled on the most urgent. "Are you badly hurt?"

Daddu remained slumped, swaying with the rattling cage. His chest rose in shallow, uneven breaths.

Beyond, the ruined village receded steadily. In the flattened jona fields, vaanar guards jabbed vajra prods into bhooyans. The beasts lay sedated, mouths agape in oblivious delight.

Battered villagers sifted through the wreckage, salvaging dented pots and scattered seeds. They picked anything worth carrying to the next patch of soil that could be coaxed fertile again.

One woman strained to lift a fallen rafter. She wedged it to prop two collapsed walls. A youth tugged at her arm, gesturing toward the departing families. She shook her head and turned back, already searching the debris for another fragment to mend the ruin.

Her stubborn mending drew hesitant eyes, then hands. Yachay watched them pass her rocks and planks. *Don't they know it's futile?* he wondered. Then he saw their shoulders press closer as they worked beneath the fading light.

The cage lurched. Yachay gripped the bars as his view swung left.

Nearby, a young vaanar soldier sat slumped on a rock. Blood and dirt caked his face. His dusty hands flexed and shivered uncontrollably. Crimson eyes stared vacantly into the distance. He flinched, belatedly noticing the Chief approach.

The Chief's armor was battered, the helm missing, yet his movements remained assured. He placed a firm hand on the shaken soldier's shoulder.

"First month's always the hardest, son," the Chief said, voice low. "But few days see this much action."

"I won't look so fine for my sister's wedding next moon," the private trembled.

The Chief smiled faintly. "You'll wear those new scars like medals." He nodded encouragingly. "Now, speak your vows. Remind yourself why we serve."

The young vaanar straightened, steadied his breath, and recited:

*"For justice we strive, for law we unite,
With courage we guard, with valor we fight,
To fatherland's call and motherland's embrace,
We stand for the people, in vigil and grace."*

The Chief listened, approving, then clapped the soldier firmly on the back.

Yachay watched the Chief stride away. Just then the private glanced his way. Their eyes met for a moment.

Yachay turned away to study Daddu's unconscious face. Once

familiar features now appeared strangely foreign. Not from the fresh wounds, but from revelations that only bred more questions. His hidden prowess, their shifting homes, years avoiding Maya. Yachay's fingers traced the band sealed to his navel. No answer would ever be enough.

Regret flooded Yachay for the first time in his nineteen years. Not for his impulse to intervene, nor even for the chains it brought. Rather, for rushing off before revelations could pass from Daddu's lips to his waiting ears.

As the cage rattled into the red dusk, Yachay ached to fit the scattered clues into something whole, something certain.

He closed his eyes and once again, tried to remember his mother's face.

WE ARE FOOD

“It’s all been about food, all along.”

— Annapurna, the stomach of the great body

THE NAAG bailiff’s tongue flicked as she counted lanterns gathering at the base of the hill. Her coils settled on black rock, skandha flecks glittering beneath white scales.

“Nothing draws a crowd like a rakshasi trial,” she said, glancing sideways at the judge.

“So many eyes,” the garuda judge murmured, talons gripping his rocky perch atop the hill. Forty years adjudicating petty disputes had dulled both plumage and purpose. “Swift judgments will be difficult tonight.”

“They’re here to spectate, not to witness,” the bailiff remarked.

“You are right. We might manage an offering or two by dawn.”

“We need twelve.” The naag said quietly. “Chandru sent word. Four times the payment if we deliver twelve laalmanis by tomorrow night.”

“Impossible,” the judge said, barely moving his beak.

"A single night's work. A large slice of our debts cleared."

The garuda judge straightened, smoothing his feathers.

"Then perhaps we shouldn't keep this lively lot waiting."

—

Yachay couldn't hear their exchange from the holding pit beneath the hill. Voices from above dissolved into scraping metal and prisoner screams. He pressed his face against his cage bars, craning his neck. Through ventilation grates overhead, he glimpsed the judge and bailiff silhouetted against the darkening sky.

He shifted, searching past them for any sign of Daddu.

Behind the officials rose a slender pyramid of polished skandha supporting an inverted pyramid of chitin at its point. The upper structure rotated with each breeze, perpetually threatening to topple yet never falling.

Lantern-light filtered through the ventilation grates. Shadows shifted across Yachay's cage as sandaled feet shuffled restlessly above the pit's edge.

Metal scraped stone. Another cage emerged from darkness, yakshis pulling its wheels. Yachay's fingers tightened on his bars. *Daddu?* The cage rolled closer. Lantern-light caught its occupant, and he stopped breathing.

The rakhasi from the forest stood inside. The one whose capture he might have caused.

She wore nothing but what her body had grown. Translucent membranes overlapped across her pelvis and thighs like pleated glass. A symbiont wrapped around her hips, curving with her waist. Lantern-light played across her dark skin.

Frills around her neck stirred, then settled. Cheekbones curved outward, gleaming softly. Her lips glistened, parting slightly as she breathed. She stood at exactly his height, balancing still on digitigrade legs despite the cage's sway.

She slipped something through the bars. *A bone?* Her cage lurched sharply as a wheel caught, stopping across from his.

The rakshasi pressed against the bars. Luminous, tilted pupils held Yachay's gaze.

"We met in the forest," she whispered.

Yachay stared back, frozen.

"You remember?" Her voice was urgent, yet held no accusation.

Yachay nodded.

"My name is Ayn."

"Oh," Yachay mumbled. He hadn't expected her to look like this. To have this voice. To speak Kosh without an accent. To speak at all.

"Did you kill anyone?" Ayn asked.

"K-kill?" His tongue caught. He shook his head.

Ayn studied him, then nodded. "You'll be fine then."

A small creature stirred within the translucent bio-sac on her back. Ayn reached in and withdrew it, cradling it briefly before extending her hands through the bars. Yachay drew back.

"Keep Johnji safe," she whispered. "They'll harm him if they find him."

Yachay hesitated, then accepted the creature. It stretched just longer than his forearm.

“Clear,” a yakshi announced, dislodging the obstruction. Ayn’s cage jerked away toward the mouth of the pit.

The creature squirmed in his arms. Its oversized head swivelled fully on a thick neck. Yachay recoiled. Its skin stretched taut over sharp bones, wrinkled and bunched in odd places. Dark red veins pulsed beneath thin flesh, fluttering with each rapid heartbeat. Thick membranes sagged between elongated joints. Patches of coarse fur grew unevenly, as though nature had abandoned its task halfway.

It blinked up at him, one eye milky and wide, the other smaller and yellow, set so far apart they seemed to belong to separate faces. When it grimaced, needle-teeth jutted in different directions. Yachay’s gut twisted. People sought predictability, the equilibrium of the average. This creature’s very existence was a provocation. Its asymmetry would mark it as something to be corrected, or destroyed.

A spindly limb reached out. Six uneven fingers unfolded like a flower, grasping his index finger. Those strange eyes blinking at him held an awareness that bridged the gap between their species. Yachay glanced toward the guards at the pit entrance, then covered it with his arms.

Then Johnji settled with what felt like a sigh against Yachay’s chest.

Winches creaked as yakshis cranked gears. Ayn’s cage rose into the air. Yachay watched her suspended against the night sky. Galaxies collided in the distance, vivid drama unfolding across eons. Nebulae stretched like spilled paint across darkness, seeming close enough to touch.

The garuda judge straightened, peering at Ayn, now level with

his high perch. The crowd fell silent.

“You stand accused of murdering and consuming an elder who lived alone at the village outskirts,” he announced, voice carrying clearly over the pit. “How do you plead?”

From the hill’s shoulder, the manushya prosecutor stalked close to her cage. “Blood still stained her face when we found her, not far from the victim’s home.”

The crowd’s whispers grew teeth. The accusation alone was enough. Guilt or innocence mattered little.

Yachay studied Ayn. *Was she the monster they claimed?*

“We do not kill for food,” Ayn said firmly. “For centuries we’ve told your kind. We feed only on decay—”

“Answer plainly,” the prosecutor interrupted sharply. “Don’t rakshasi eat manushya flesh as if it were a delicacy?”

Ayn held his gaze without blinking.

“Our citizens are unfamiliar with your customs,” the prosecutor continued, his tone performative. “Please enlighten us. Have you, for instance, ever eaten a manushya?”

Yachay found the question absurd. Then Ayn’s reply shocked him.

“Yes,” she said simply. “But that’s not—”

“We could tether you and have a gandharva discover the truth,” the judge said impatiently. “But let’s save time. Do you deny consuming the elderly woman you’re charged with killing?”

“No.”

“A confession!” The prosecutor spread his hands dramatically.

“She ate my grandmother!” A woman’s anguished cry ignited demands of swift punishment. “Burn her!”

Yachay’s stomach tightened. He’d read accounts of rakshasi habits but never quite believed them. He glanced at the creature in his arms.

“Fallen decay alone feeds our need,” Ayn raised her voice over the cries to address the judge. “We do not prey on the living. By the Dhaara-Vyati Accord, rakshasi may consume deceased creatures even on manushya land. Consumption isn’t punishable—”

“She might have been alive. She could have been saved.”

“She was most certainly dead when I found her. Her elements had already begun to disperse,” Ayn countered. “I only took what faded life had already released. Scavengers, worms, and I played an equal part in consuming death to make new life.”

“No better than a worm by her own admission!” the prosecutor shouted, feeding the crowd’s frenzy.

“What is more repulsive?” Ayn asked, voice straining against hostility. “To uproot a plant for its flesh, or recycle tissue that’s already come loose?”

“I see no remorse for your bloodthirst.” Conviction built up in the judge’s voice as he spoke. “This court finds you guilty of murder! Rakshasi Aynethema, gender pragya, you are sentenced to the—”

“I demand my right for rakshasi co-jury,” Ayn interrupted.

“Khaasiya law doesn’t guarantee such a right,” the judge declared. “Rakshasi Aynethema, gender pragya, you are sentenced to the Wheel—”

“I demand my right to a final tethering,” Ayn shouted.

The judge paused, irritated. “Do you claim your debts are settled, and you’ll earn your chhavi upon death?”

Ayn nodded.

From his cage, Yachay saw the judge’s posture shift. The garuda and the bailiff measured Ayn up and down, shaking their heads in disbelief.

“Denied,” the judge declared. “You are sentenced to the Wheel of Offering.”

Spectators roared approval. The judge pressed a talon into a clay tablet, chipping his nail to seal the verdict.

Ayn crumpled in her cage. Pity stirred in Yachay for the rakshasi cornered deep in manushya heartland. But she had admitted to eating someone. Could there truly be merit in her argument? Yet a plant wasn’t a person. Who decided the hierarchy by which matter and life exchanged hands?

The bailiff nudged the judge to hasten. “More cases await your astute judgement, shreeman.”

At her cue, Yachay’s cage rolled forward sharply. He stumbled against the bars. Johnji squeaked as he tucked the creature into his tunic. Pulleys jerked his cage upward, and his stomach dropped with the sudden ascent. Cool night air filled his lungs. Across from him, another cage rose through the shadows.

Daddu sat inside, knees drawn to chest. Yachay sighed. *Daddu would know what to do.*

Then their eyes met, and hope crumbled. Deep lines creased Daddu’s face, shoulders hunched as if bracing against an unseen weight.

The naag read their crimes aloud. “Assaulting officers of law and state-owned bhooyan. Unauthorized possession of controlled substances. Destruction of property. Critically injuring a dutiful sentry, breaking his ribs, rendering him paralyzed.”

She leaned forward. “And most gravely, disrupting the extraction of minerals intended for life-saving medicines. The suffering caused by this delay—.”

Yachay’s head sank. The force of truth hit him more than the half-lies. The vaanar sentry, robbed of his future. Medicines delayed, lives put at risk.

“My grandson had nothing to do with it,” Daddu called out. “Consider his young age. Release him.”

The bailiff turned toward the judge, who tilted his head as though burdened by reluctant duty. “These terrorists,” he declared solemnly, “are sentenced to the Wheel of Offering.”

The garuda judge extended a talon over the clay tablet held out by the naag bailiff. He pressed down, breaking off a fragment of nail that embedded in the clay as biometric proof of the sentence.

Once, judges performed this ritual to acknowledge justice’s price. Each shard of nail was a token of shared loss with the condemned. It was a quiet prayer that the cycles of crime and punishment would someday break too.

“There are two of them,” the bailiff said, holding the tablet steady.

He grunted, pressing again. The second fragment stuck beside the first, leaving the verdict doubly scarred.

Below, gears groaned. Yachay and Daddu’s cages lowered onto a waiting cart. Johnji stirred in Yachay’s lap as enslaved yakshis pulled

SEED TAKES ROOT

them away from the tribunal, into a night stripped of certainty.

GNOSIS

*“The light of simplicity pierces the horizon’s fog.
Cunning can’t look past its own shadow.”*

— Waaz-nayak, the opposable thumbs of the great body

TIRESIA-SANJAY SETTLED onto the reed mat, assuming lotus position. He pressed thick tendrils from both his heads to interlace with the potted Maya bonsai. Though no stranger to this neural tether, excitement quivered his legs today.

Bolit walls held their breath in perfect silence, but for the creaking of Adharvan’s steps. He paced, absently stroking the locust crest that hung from his neck — Divyendra’s sigil.

He wondered what revelations or commands the supreme Divyendra might bestow upon him this day. He worried if he had overreached, overread, overdone. His pulse quickened with pregnant possibilities.

The potted bonsai began swaying as though in a private breeze. Tiresia-Sanjay’s four pupils flashed azure. Adharvan, halting his restless movement, watched intently as Tiresia-Sanjay became a conduit for something far greater.

Sap screens stretched between the bonsai's branches came to life with a gentle glow. Whispy Hands appeared on one resin screen — less form than impression, more light than substance. Adharvan approached the screen with reverence, kneeling in front.

On the screen, the Hands moved with care over an unseen object, a childlike wonder driving immortal digits. One hand cradled a palm sized stone with tender care. The other poured a shimmering liquid from a vial onto the stone's dull surface.

Then, breaking the chamber's stillness, Tiresia-Sanjay's lips parted. His mouth moved, but the resonant Voice spilling forth belonged wholly to another. Gandharvas had a vast vocal range, enabling them to channel diverse voices. The unmistakable kind timbre of Divyendra himself now came through the mortal vessel of Tiresia-Sanjay.

"I was trying to wake the rocks up," he announced, playful disappointment shading his tone as his experiment yielded no result. The stone remained inert.

Adharvan's lips curled affectionately, humouring the boundless curiosity of his great guru-father.

The sap membranes morphed seamlessly from the experiment to a vivid scene — the garuda champion Tarkash, triumphant in the Divya Trials resolutely ascending to Divyalok. All the screens stretched between boughs, displayed the same outcome with minor variations, as if no alternatives could be imagined. As if each rendered realm replaying in the roots' reflections was screaming, "If not Tarkash, then who?"

A small disappointed click of the tongue escaped Divyendra's borrowed mouth. "A wave of undesired certainty," he declared, his disapproval unambiguous.

Adharvan swelled, his suspicions fully affirmed. For moons, he had built his mission upon a lone utterance glimpsed in their previous communion:

“Gilded glory might soon ascend to blind my sight with outstretched wings,” Divyendra had shrugged off his trepidation, in passing.

Adharvan had interpreted, he had acted, and now validation shone clear. Tarkash’s looming victory threatened to inconvenience the ancient one’s plan for all.

Karkotak’s execution of the mission, honed in Maya, was set for two days hence. Adharvan, ready to halt if advised, now saw no need; the plan would unfold as rehearsed.

Adharvan beamed, “*Ajoba*, the work is already underway!”

Adharvan sensed his master’s smile in the gentle breath leaving the gandharva vessel’s motionless face.

“You’ve surprised me again, my son.” Divyendra rewarded his affection, tempered with caution. “Careful though — walk the path of least interference.”

“Yes, *ajoba!*” Adharvan soared in devotion. “You know I won’t fail you.”

Then hesitating, he continued thickly, “I wanted to say... I long for the day I can finally see you. It has been too many years alone.”

Stifling silence swelled around his plea.

“In time, when the way is prepared.” The elusive promise finally echoed through Tiresia-Sanjay. “For now...”

As the image of Tarkash’s proudly outstretched wings began to fade, a new champion emerged from the shifting lipids of the

sap-screen.

Faint wisps animated a small figure. Barely visible, the figure could be seen ascending to Divyalok.

"I couldn't tell if that was a manushya boy or a small vaanar. Who is this most fortunate being who has received your blessings, ajoba?"

"He is called Baluta. When the way is cleared, this ripple would become a wave," Divyendra mused, implying a potential Directive.

Adharvan smiled and silently nodded once like a dutiful soldier.

The sap-screen lipids dispersed to their quieter state of translucent potential. As Adharvan touched the dim screen, tears surfaced like private prayers.

As Divyendra's presence receded, Tiresia-Sanjay shuddered back to awareness. Adharvan held his trembling hands, gazing with patient affection.

"Lord spoke..." Tiresia-Sanjay's first head managed. "...through me?" ventured the other.

Adharvan nodded, honouring the moment's sanctity with silence.

Recollection eluded Tiresia-Sanjay's grasp, like a serene dream fading swiftly, slipping through fingers like sand. Still dazed, he confessed recalling nothing.

"When infinity whispers, its memories are felt, not held." Adharvan replied as he pressed Tiresia-Sanjay's shoulders gently. "Now rest."

Adharvan nestled Tiresia-Sanjay gently into his bed of aerial

roots.

Alone again, Adharvan gazed through the chamber's floor window. In the far distance below, waves rose high enough to engulf hills.

In mere two days, the Plan would unfold. The waif-girl would die. Her name he somehow still recalled, surprising himself — Moha. Alongside, more faceless lives would fade as collateral, as they unavoidably do at altars of the greater good.

Order would need firm restoration once the mission came to fruition. Rules imposed would prevent contagious anger from spreading. Compensation and consolation must flow swiftly to quell unrest. Pain would soon be forgotten. The Plan would be nurtured.
Precise chaos needs careful engineering.

WHEEL OF OFFERING

“All struggle is against impermanence.”

— Varuna, the blood of the great body

PREDAWN LIGHT seeped into the spherical cage, bleeding the cramped space in hues of bruise-purple. The cage dangled from a spoke at the rim of a giant waterwheel.

Inside, Yachay crouched over Daddu’s crumpled body, feeling his laboured breathing. Johnji, the flying gruff, reached with his paw and touched Daddu’s face gently.

Occasional creaks echoed up from the waterwheel fitted into the canyon cliffs. The giant wheel could dwarf ten bhooyans stacked vertically. Below, the gorge churned with rapids, waters crashing against sheer walls funnelled into torrent.

Yachay recalled the judge calling this the Wheel of Offering. Its gaping cages screamed rumours of its purpose. Its deceptive stillness held against the currents of water that its bottom-most arc was immersed in. Yachay desperately prodded at Daddu, trying to wake him up.

Their cage faced a loading platform used to bolt cages upon

spokes and pack prisoners within. Vaanar guards held their cage steady against winds and flung two more convicts within, alongside a pallid Ayn.

Johnji leapt from Yachay's shoulders into Ayn's grateful embrace before she could find her feet. The flying gruff nuzzled her soft neck frills opening up to the light of dawn as she caressed his matted fur.

"Thank you for saving him," Ayn whispered, shivering from Maya withdrawal symptoms. Just as Yachay nodded, yakshi slaves released the brake. The water current began turning the enormous wheel eastward, with a terrifying rusty groan.

The platform fell from view as their cage swung skyward. Vertigo seized Yachay as he dropped to the cage floor with the other inmates grasping at bars and limbs. But Ayn hooked her feet atop their enclosure and hung upside down.

She kissed Johnji before swinging him out past the bars. The creature spread the furry membrane of skin between his limbs, gliding the wind. His tail arched, steering him onto the sheer rock face now passing before Ayn's view.

Ayn watched him scramble surefooted toward strange clusters of jutting crustacean moults. Chiselling free several moults in tiny claws, Johnji leapt back toward her outstretched hands.

He presented each moulted casing, which Ayn pried open, urgently sucking at glittering red mineral deposits collected within. She chewed up the chitin rinds as well. Her guardian companion sailed back toward more, cradling crystal nourishment in a frantic race against their cell's orbit, now taking pace.

Their cage was one of twenty pods, all identical and bolted

evenly around the huge wheel. As their cage arced upward, it presented a bird's view of the opposite arc below.

There, within a descending cage, Yachay glimpsed a lone naag. Even at this distance, Yachay could sense her horror as she squeezed her serpentine lower half through the bars, desperately trying to delay the plunge. Never before had Yachay seen such terror of water in a naag. Her distant, wordless cries rose, then dissolved into the current's froth.

All around the colossal rim, more prisoners bore witness - screaming, crying, praying to the taciturn divya. All aware that their upcurved view was a fleeting grace. The wheel would soon turn their own cage toward the lower side fate.

Teams of emaciated yakshi slaves strained past exhaustion against the brake levers, heaving to gradually halt the vicious momentum they had earlier unleashed.

With a violent screech, the metal wheel lurched, sending the cages swinging wildly. Yachay slid helplessly across the cage floor, as the other inmates were knocked off their feet. Daddu slammed against the bars that jolted him awake.

Yachay scrambled over tangled limbs to reach Daddu's reviving frame. Careful not to put his full weight on Daddu's frail body, Yachay still held him tightly as if grasping reality again. Daddu's eyes refocused behind blood-caked lashes to meet Yachay's frightened gaze. He gently returned the relieved embrace.

Sudden hope swelled in Yachay. If they survived the evening before, perhaps this bhooyan-scale death machine could be similarly outwitted. Yachay helped Daddu to his feet, his resolve rising against gravity's indifference.

Daddu's clearing eyes met Yachay's spilling questions. "What were you going to tell me yesterday? Who are you truly?" Yachay pleaded urgently.

"I am your guardian," Daddu said clearly. As faculties returned, he quickly grasped the dire circumstances from their elevated vantage point.

"Of course you are. You are my grandfather," Yachay said impatiently.

Daddu glanced at their fellow prisoners - two shivering manushyas and the rakshasi, Ayn. She was still hanging upside down against the cage ceiling, hungrily consuming crimson minerals, her own eyes now turning red.

Gripping Yachay's shoulders, Daddu met his confusion with steady calm. "What matters most now is who you are, son. You are a *nirmaya* — a potential."

The yakshis released the brakes. With another jolt, the wheel jerked into motion again. Their capsule now arced downwards. Daddu grasped that sparse moments remained to gather all the necessary information for them to survive.

"A what-maya?" Yachay yelled against the groaning axle and cries echoing through iron gaps.

Rolling over to peer past their toes, Daddu witnessed a cage plunging into the river froth, below. The agonised faces of a manushya youth no older than Yachay mirrored the naag woman's haunting fate from moments earlier. He thrashed at the capsule ceiling with torn fists and swollen feet until flesh showed through ruined skin.

His screams stretched soundless against churning currents

gushing faster through their cage's drowning iron. The arcing descent of the wheel's spoke impaled his cage deep into the river's swallowing grip, claiming his cries as it submerged. Fleeting air bubbles rose, then vanished.

Simultaneously, the naag's cage resurfaced empty, facing the loading platform.

As the wheel halted with a familiar jolt, Daddu saw the platform across the axle below. Vaanars secured the empty cage, while yakshis began their grim task, meticulously removing the naag's skeletal remains.

Yachay recoiled, bile stinging his throat. Cages thrashed across the wheel, shrieks laced with frantic sobs.

A vaanar unfastened a tethered satchel from the cage bars. An emaciated yakshi, half the vaanar's size, dutifully waited, her bent posture betraying generations of oppressive conditioning. From the satchel, the vaanar retrieved a polished red marble, two finger-widths large, and handed it to her. The yakshi knew this gem as a laalmani, but lacked a name for herself.

She skittered up rusty platforms toward an elevated scaffolding. Atop it stood a yakshi everyone called the White Yakshi. His short silhouette loomed over the hulking vaanar soldiers on the lower deck.

The White Yakshi examined the freshly harvested laalmani against the light until satisfied with its optical properties. He nestled it among similar previous acquisitions in his waist pouch - another oddity for bonded yakshis who are not allowed to have belongings. He signalled the vaanars to resume with dismissing fingers.

The vaanars snickered, an attempt to mask their discomfort at

being commanded by a yakshi. Even Daddu, from his cage above, eyed the White Yakshi with curiosity. “Never seen one like him before.” Daddu reached for his wakati balloon. He drew a wisp of the remaining vapour and then flicked the valve open, rinsing the bag with fresh air.

Yachay peered over Daddu’s shoulder to look at the overseer of this macabre enterprise. The White Yakshi’s piercing gaze snapped upward, as if he sensed Yachay’s scrutiny upon him. Just as their eyes met through iron bars, the wheel lurched into motion, shattering the chilling contact.

Daddu had seen all he needed to. He pulled Yachay closer so his strained whisper met eager ears alone. “You must travel to Dhaara. Enlist yourself for the Divya Trials...Then wait through whatever trials may come find you before...”

“Daddu, no!” Yachay pulled back, shaking at the implication. “We’ll find a way out of here...”

Daddu gripped Yachay’s shoulders, his eyes fierce. “Yes, yes, but still listen! Whatever happens, rush to Dhaara. Enlist with your name. Your name could open doors.”

As their cage plummeted, another surfaced across the arc. Workers toiled, harvesting one more laalmani from the satchel.

Yachay wondered if this arc was but a shorthand for the sentence shared by most across samsaar: naive hope, brief impotent struggle, then the void prewritten into the wheel’s blind turn.

“Do not tether to Maya till you reach the Divya Trials,” Daddu insisted, his voice urgent. “Have faith in Hidamma.”

The prisoner beside them spat, his face twisted in resentment. “The divya have forsaken us, old fool!”

“That’s true, my fellow. They have.” Daddu nodded solemnly. Then he grasped Yachay’s hand. “If you find yourself all alone, seek the blue lotus. Tread carefully, don’t draw attention...”

Yachay clutched Daddu’s fingers tighter, shaking his head. “Don’t speak like that. You’re staying with me.”

Daddu smiled, his eyes glistening. “I’d like that too, son.”

The wheel turned, grinding lives to memories, memories to statistics, drowning one capsule while hoisting up the next vacant.

The frothing river had suddenly approached, lapping hungrily at their feet as the wheel stayed temporarily arrested.

“This wasn’t how we thought it would go, but that’s the whole point of you, I suppose,” Daddu said, gazing at Yachay lovingly.

“All my fault!” Yachay choked, “If only I hadn’t...”

“Never think that.” Daddu cupped his face, fingers trembling. “I’m grateful for you. For this life.” He drew a shaky breath.

A tremor ran through the wheel as it resumed. Bolts creaked. Water exploded through their cage floor, up past ankles, rising fast.

Daddu held Yachay’s gaze, as their prison sank deeper. “Repeat my instructions so I know you heard them!” he implored over the mounting roar.

Lungs burned, drowning out thought, as their spherical tomb tipped vertical. Furious water enveloped their waists, their chests.

“Enlist for Trials. Find blue lotus.” Yachay gasped, the words barely audible. “None of it makes sense!”

Daddu shouted a desperate warning to Ayn and the other two clinging above. “The jalpari see by fear. Don’t show it.”

Submerged to the shoulders, Daddu gripped Yachay tighter. “No matter what, stay calm. Stay close. Take a deep breath with me...”

Yachay nodded, clasping his guardian, gazing into his smiling eyes. He sucked in a lungful of air just before the churning abyss engulfed them entirely.

THE MEMORY OF WATER

“We are woven from the strands of others. There’s a word for stealing the biomaterial of another living being, erasing the memories stored in it, and repurposing it to store your own genetic code. It’s called ‘eating’.”

— Annapurna, the stomach of the great body

THE WHEEL rattled above, sending violent lurches through the water.

Each push set the scout unit spinning. Some molecules of cortisol brushed its tentacles. *Food!* But as it pulsed weakly, holding against the torrent...*Seek!* Nothing. Gone.

Then more traces. Remnants of peptides lingered in the currents, the echoes of a meal finished moments ago. *No good.*

Wait. Membranes relaxed, surrendering to the current. The scout unit tumbled idly.

A sudden jolt tore through the water as the cage smashed in from above. Pressure waves pulsed. The scout convulsed, shocked. *Very bad.* But then it tasted rust particles. Rust was *good.* It preceded

food.

The scout followed the trail, swift and sure, searching for the source. Just then, a burst of fragrance enveloped it. *Exciting!*

It sent an electric whisper out. *Anyone?* A moment later, a gentle response brushed its tentacles. *Connect.* Then another came, faint but growing. Each confirming the smell. Norepinephrine. Cortisol. *The sweet, sweet taste of fear.*

A delighted murmur spread from one to another as more scouts joined the cohort. *The food box is here!*

As the cohort darted upwards, more electric static danced ahead - others drawn by the same provocation. Chemical messages ricocheted around. *Merge.*

With individuals and cohorts dissolving into whole, something stirred within — a sense of being. Together they became more than many.

A tactile command grew louder as it passed through half a million tentacles now connected. *It is time.* Its many thousand small bulbous bodies lit up.

And thus, the Jalpari had awokened.

Just as they became visible to their prey, the prey started pulsing brightly with panicked hearts and hormones, becoming more visible to them. The Jalpari spotted two inside the metal enclosure. Both were of the flavour they liked most.

They remembered the last time they had this kind. After feasting, they had suddenly known what to do with a debris pile blocking home. They had formed again and laboured to drill a tunnel through the pile.

Food was necessary, surely, but this jalpari loved to learn. And to that effect, they loved to play. *Let's see what happens if—*

Cascading instructions rippled through the swarm. Orders flowed from body to body. *Match your neighbour's turn. Rise if they fall. Cohere in pairs.* Soon all moved together, shifting forms seamlessly.

They watched the prey as the fear ebbed. This form, the Jalpari noted, made their prey disappear. The swarm reconfigured to a previously memorised form. The prey reappeared.

The swarm kept transforming until prey panic spiked bright as a beacon. Their flesh stark against the cage bars, blazed with hormones that lit up the water. *Thrilling!*

Remember configuration. They imprinted the pattern within each body. Countless echoes of that knowledge now lived within them, ready to reemerge when needed again.

The prey's scent was irresistible now, synapses firing ripe beneath tender flesh. Thousands of tiny mouths quivered hungrily, a writhing mass of teeth and tentacles.

The swarm engulfed the man-morsel, so lush with secrets to be urgently devoured. Chunks of him vanished in mere moments, swallowed whole... and then, he was gone.

The jalpari extended a limb made of hundreds of tiny bodies and deposited *the thing* into the satchel nested on the cage. Someday *the thing* will return to them. Until then, they wished *the thing* the best out there. The red marble-like body nestled into the satchel.

Then they turned to the second course.

Daddu gripped Yachay firm, breaths held as the swarm approached.

The jalpari darted past them toward their cagemate, who thrashed and choked as water invaded his lungs. He had just watched his partner gruesomely torn apart. Now the shape-shifting terror came for him.

Rows of thousands of bodies had formed enormous teeth. The pseudo-mouth was stretching open as if to swallow the cage whole.

Massive hollows gaped where eyes should be. It was as though the absence of eyes performed the function of eyes even better. The uncanny eye-holes triggered an intense chemical phobia in him — making him glow like a neon buffet to the jalpari.

While the manushya's eyes saw only monster, not formation, even as they poured through gaps between the bars, engulfing him.

He braced for stingers to pierce and shred his flesh. Instead, a sudden sweetness spread through his veins. He saw sky rivers of twinkling starlight. He remembered mother's smile. He felt enveloped by a warm light of unconditional love. And then nothing.

As the jalpari dispersed, wordless ideas found new flesh: sky, sweat, mother.

Daddu seized the lull to retrieve his wakati balloon. He pressed it urgently to Yachay's lips, whose lungs burned for air. Yachay desperately sucked in the precious stored breath before Daddu took his turn. A detaching calm seeped into Yachay. The last remnants of wakati vapour slowed his thoughts.

But the respite was fleeting. The dispersed scouts halted abruptly, as if responding to an unseen command. In a frenzied surge they turned, slicing through water with renewed purpose. A silent coordinated consensus aligned their bodies like iron filings converging.

They cocooned Ayn within their writhing mass. Like a living battering ram they propelled themselves against the cage ceiling. Many jalpari units faced brave deaths, squishing between collective assault and screeching metal. With a few more strikes the cage broke free from its moorings, the door flinging open.

The jalpari slithered through the open cage, carrying Ayn away into the murky depths. The cage tumbled wildly, tossing Daddu and Yachay inside, sinking to the riverbed.

Daddu's eyes fluttered. Desperation clawed at Yachay as he fumbled for the balloon, pressing it frantically to Daddu's lips. But only a wisp of stale air remained.

Horror sank into Yachay's bones. Latching onto Daddu with one arm, he kicked furiously upwards, darting out of the cage. His one free hand flailed against the disorienting pressure, lungs screaming for air.

Daddu opened his eyes and glimpsed the movement below. Another jalpari hive was freshly gathering, an army of liquid shadows stirring in the depths. Revulsion coursed through Yachay. He pumped his legs harder, dragging Daddu's weight and their odds. The water throbbed in his ears, blurring his vision.

Daddu's hand closed on his wrist, an urgent message passing in that intentful grasp. The implication shattered Yachay. "No!" he cried soundlessly, swimming faster, protesting. They could outpace that lumbering jalpari if he just kept kicking. But the swarm was closing in, a man's height below his thrashing feet.

With a calm twist, Daddu wrenched Yachay's grip free, leaving him alone in the rushing water.

Daddu plunged toward the swarm's parted jaw. He let his calm

crumble into open terror, a calculated performance making himself visible to the jalpari. They engulfed him in a swirling mass that immediately sank, compelled to follow his forceful dive.

Yachay's scream was a bubble bursting beneath the rising darkness. He tumbled wildly, propelling himself downward. His heart stopped as he could not see Daddu — only a rapidly flitting swarm. He thrust his way in their midst — just then they dispersed like scattered ashes.

A howl tore from him, dissolving into wrenching sobs. He clawed futilely where Daddu had been. In his clenched fist, all that remained of Daddu was a single laalmani, its scarlet surface stained black by the void.

Agony imploded within Yachay. A cold bile drowned his very being far greater than the flood invading his lungs. As the jalpari pulsed beneath him reforming, he thrashed violently, not caring if he lived or died now.

Then, a blinding flash — a behemoth jalpari, serpentine and enormous, barreled toward him from above. Astride it was Ayn, her scarlet eyes fixed on him. She breathed through a sea creature masking her nose and mouth. She snatched Yachay from the maw of the other swarm with a powerful thrust of her arm.

As Ayn steered her serpentine swarm upward, grief ripped Yachay apart. Through tears washing away in water he caught a blurry glimpse of the swarm below, chasing theirs menacingly.

The pursuing jalpari unleashed their fastest individuals to form long tentacles. They shot forward to reclaim their hive-kin that were mind-hacked into doing Ayn's bidding.

As they made contact, Ayn sensed rebellion stirring within her

hijacked swarm. Above her, sunlight pierced the surface, shining bright promise. She grabbed Yachay and released her mental grip on her mount with one forceful command.

The two swarms collided in a frenzy of tumbling bodies and confused tangles. Seizing the opportunity, Ayn kicked off a submerged rock, rocketing upwards fierce through rushing waters. Yachay, fading fast, felt Ayn's grip tighten.

As hive directives stabilised, the swarms merged into a single monstrous formation, vast as the riverbed. The fused jalpari surged upwards with blistering speed, unfurling a razor whip made of thousands of linked units — aimed to harpoon the fleeing mammal morsels above.

The glistening jalpari chain sliced past Yachay's ankle by a finger's breadth. Before Ayn could break the surface, another whip slashed toward them.

With a guttural cry, she threw herself and Yachay forward, crashing onto the bank.

The venomous whip cracked out of water, tearing through air, seeking them. Ayn dragged Yachay away with her last shred of strength.

The whip slammed into the rocks a breath away from his skull. Now disconnected from the hive, the slick units convulsed and flopped violently in the glaring sunlight — suddenly nothing more than fish out of water.

Ayn detached the creature that had served as her breathing mask, allowing it to loosen its hold of her mouth, before releasing it back into the water.

Chest heaving, she gazed across the river. The wheel creaked,

now bereft of the cage that had plunged them underwater.

The White Yakshi vaulted from the platform, as he glimpsed Ayn and Yachay through the haze. “Westward!” he shouted, directing the vaanars toward a downstream bridge - the only nearby crossing.

Ayn pumped Yachay’s chest — ribs barely rising under her urgent blows. He coughed and sputtered rivulets down his chin. His eyes snapped open, wide with disorientation. As he drew in a ragged breath, an agonised sob tore from his throat.

With a sudden burst of strength, he stumbled back towards the river, thrashing and wailing against Ayn’s firm hold. Then he collapsed, limbs splayed, face pressed hard against the rock. His eyes stared, vacant and wide.

Johnji scampered over the rocks, and reached Ayn’s side. She scooped him up and settled him into the sac on her back, his weight a reassuring presence against her spine.

With the vaanars heading for the bridge, Ayn jolted Yachay. “We must move!”

Yet he remained unresponsive, the crimson laalmani clutched tight in fist, gaze fixed on the lifeless jalpari.

Ayn sprinted for the bridge, her semi-digitigrade feet padding on stone. Razor cartilages emerged out of her ankles and knuckles.

She reached the bridge just as the White Yakshi landed spear-first on slick planks. Behind him the muscled vaanars, almost twice his size, thudded onto the bridge.

Ayn saw the bridge was designed to split down the middle, to allow boats through. A chain-and-pulley kept the two halves balanced.

With frantic kicks of her ankle blades, she severed the chain links. Counterweights smashed down with violent clangs. Gears screamed as bridge sections turned skyward.

The vaanars roared as the tilting bridge slid them backwards onto the bank. The White Yakshi clung to the railing, dagger glinting between clenched teeth, spear lodged into the planks. Scrabbling over wet planks, he hauled himself up the steepening slope.

From his precarious perch, he peered down at Ayn, muscles rippling through his diminutive frame. She snapped her knuckle cartilages, stabbing them into the broken gears.

Ayn's three hearts hammered as she whirled and raced back to Yachay. The vaanars cranked their side down, but Ayn's side remained diagonally stuck. She turned to see them gather around the White Yakshi as he gestured fresh orders.

Ayn yanked Yachay up. His knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground again. "I will have to leave you if you don't get up," she warned.

Ayn shook him, then sighed and turned away. She stumbled toward the tree cover only to find Johnji had stayed behind. Her flying gruff companion tugged fiercely at Yachay's sleeve, whimpering.

Cursing, Ayn returned and dragged Yachay to his feet. Draping his limp arm over her shoulder, she half-dragged him toward the cover of the jungle canopy.

Yachay's body trembled as they staggered into the thick foliage that swallowed them in its shadow. His feet began to involuntarily move in tandem with Ayn's, allowing them to quicken their pace.

Behind them, a heavy splash echoed as a massive weight hit the water. The wet slosh of a floating log, nudged along by paddling limbs, was followed by more violent scraping and splashing, as if additional crude rafts were entering the churning river.

Ayn's shoulders burned under Yachay's weight, who suddenly resumed sobbing. He went limp, nearly pulling her down. "Daddu. Let's stay..." he mumbled, eyes glazed.

She propped him against a tree, slapping his face. "Bloom!" she growled, urging him to wake up in her native *Elu*. His head lolled forward.

The distressed honks of domesticated *colhaans* announced the pursuers had landed. Footsteps crunched on the riverbank's stony ground, distant and muffled. The crunch of feet fell silent for a moment.

Ayn tensed at a nearby snapping twig. Johnji whimpered, peering between the moonflower vines, and jumping back into Ayn's dorsal sac.

Obscured by the relentless buzzing of the jungle, low, guttural voices murmured in argument. Ayn could place them — still not too far, at a sprint's distance to the river.

Two vaanars wrestled with the harnesses of their *colhaans*, trying to pull them from crude log rafts.

"Impossible to catch a rakshasi in a forest..." one vaanar hissed to the White Yakshi.

"...then get manushya," the White Yakshi snarled, his voice rising sharply. "If rakshasi stupid, she come too. Two laalmani. No small. Go!"

Vaanar troops regrouped cursing the yakshi slave who somehow

had the authority to drive them beyond exhaustion. They fanned out through the undergrowth, their colhaans nosing through the thick foliage.

Ayn strained to control her breaths, hearing feet and hooves on dry leaves. Nearby, a cluster of carnivorous blossoms caught her eye — each flower large enough to conceal a crouching person.

She seized a length of capillary vine, prized back home for making irrigation tubes. Jamming one end into the meat eating flower's pool of digestive acid, she sucked hard on the other end. The burning fluid scalded her tongue. She dropped the vine that now began flushing out the reservoir of digestive acid. Her body responded to the caustic burn by secreting an oil that spread all over. She similarly drained a second blossom.

The sounds of the hunting party got closer, punctuated by the grunts of the colhaans. Her muscles screamed with exhaustion. But she had to buy more time. She wrapped Yachay up in broad, waxy leaves. He stirred slightly, his eyes fluttering open for a moment before slipping back into grieving numbness.

She caressed the pale yellow bark of a tall tree, marked with soft bulbous growths on the trunk. Then, with a sudden violence, she began to hammer her sharp, clipped cartilages against the bark.

Chips of wood flew as Ayn struck the tree repeatedly. The bulbous lumps on the trunk swelled in defence, stretching the bark to its limits. They ruptured with a series of wet pops, unleashing clouds of stinging microneedle spores.

The razor-sharp spores glittered in the dappled sunlight, refracting light with their microscopic prism structures. The microneedles perforated similar sacs on neighbouring trees. More spore bombs detonated, spreading a defence contagion from tree to

tree like a pain radiating outward from a wound.

The sound of bursting lumps alarmed through the forest network like muffled explosions.

A vaanar guard yelped as a couple of microneedles sliced his eyes. He howled in agony, clawing at his face as he tumbled from the branch he'd been swinging from.

His cries were echoed by the hunting party surrounding the perimeter. The microneedles found gaps in their fur, burrowing into sensitive skin, injecting toxic cocktails into nerve endings.

Colhaans crashed through the undergrowth, throwing riders as they fled the invisible agony. Birds burst from the canopy in screeching flocks, while smaller creatures scurried for cover.

Amidst the onslaught, the White Yakshi remained focused. He noticed animals fleeing away from the epicentre of the forest's fury. He gritted his teeth and pushed forward, realising his prisoners had revealed their location by triggering the forest's defences.

He just had to now move in the direction of increasing spore density. With each step, the glittering storm became more unavoidable, engulfing him. He used his own escalating pain as a compass to guide him to the source of the forest's wound.

For a fleeting moment, he considered turning back to allow the venom coursing through his veins to subside. But the laalmani exchanges were close. He wouldn't let them slip away, not for mere pain. He had worked too hard to let anyone think that he was just another yakshi.

Despite his resolve, the White Yakshi crashed to his knees. The agony tore at him, his vision blurring, blinding, as he collapsed to the ground.

Ayn stopped scaring the tree and prepared to hide Yachay and herself inside the drained carnivorous flowers. Their once-deadly cavities now offered a petal-doored sanctuary.

Just as she lifted Yachay toward the blossom's cavity, a movement caught her eye. Through the lifting haze of spores, the yakshi's figure emerged, striding forward with grim determination.

Panic ignited a fierce clarity in her, the hormonal gift of her pranya gender. Move, it commanded, and move now. She ripped away the leathery leaves cocooning Yachay. He winced as the microneedles stung his flesh, a mere whisper against his roaring grief.

Ayn risked a glance over her shoulder. The White Yakshi was closing in, his form growing clearer. She turned to Yachay. "If you don't move right now, Johnji will stay with you. He will die with you. *Vaazhiku? Understand?*"

Yachay's eyes widened, a flicker of comprehension breaking through the haze of pain and sorrow. Ayn helped him to his feet, supporting his weight as they stumbled forward — a four legged beast of survival.

Behind them, the White Yakshi reached the wounded tree that had begun to calm down, as if it had yelled itself out. Drained carnivore pods lay splayed open, vine-tubes sticking out of their maws.

The White Yakshi's eyes darted around... then, through the thinning spores, he saw them. Two figures vanishing into the distance.

He lunged into the pursuit, his bare feet devouring the ground. The residual pain evaporated in the heat of his single-minded focus.

Ayn and Yachay ran, ragged gasps tearing from their throats. Johnji held tight inside Ayn's dorsal pouch. The jungle closed in — a maze of vines, fallen logs. Ayn searched for a path, a hiding spot... anything.

The White Yakshi's footsteps grew louder, closer. With a final burst of strength, he sprang forward, hand outstretched, fingers grasping... and then in a blink, he retreated as if he had seen a horror. He disappeared into the green.

An ornate palanquin blocked Ayn and Yachay's path. They were surrounded by vaanars. But these were different from the ragtag ones at the wheel. Their fur was dyed in the rich hue of old bloodstains, the livery of professionals.

The gilded door swung open, an invitation wrapped in a command. They clambered aboard, a pair of desperate stowaways. The embellished colhaans raced away, hooves churning earth to dust. The palanquin jolted forward.

Inside, a garuda, elite and inscrutable, smiled. "You're safe now. I am Tarkash."

Yachay curled into a ball, seeking the saving grace of convulsive tears. He painted the floor with his grief. Ayn's eyes locked on Tarkash, perched upon his scented wooden staff. His smile flashed at the corners of his beak — charismatic, yet not very comforting.

Ayn understood something about the garudas that no other rakshasi ever could: in their world, there was no such thing as a free ride. And this, she appreciated.

THOSE WITH WINGS

“If Maya indeed gave everyone wings, the garudas would have long been out of business.”

—Triveni, Opposition Leader of Mythra Senate

AYN TREMBLED. She wondered why. She couldn't be still reeling from all that transpired. She was of the pragya gender that did not experience aftershocks.

Nor could her body be trying to shake off the bitter taste of near-disintegration. Though the manushya world tried to unmake her, she had triumphed through sheer clarity of mind. To survive near-oblivion, unscathed, was net gain. Her brush with the Jalpari was not a curse, but a dark scholarship, a lexicon of survival she now carried within her. A gift of new knowledge she could share with all.

And yet she spasmed involuntarily. She looked at Yachay. Could he be the cause? She marvelled at his audacity to wail so openly, inflicting his anguish upon all within earshot. The rakshasi withheld overt displays of grief, a courtesy to spare observers from vicarious distress.

Ba had trained her to see the world through the interiority

of every species. Rakshasi education involved elaborate lessons of sensory deprivation and sensory augmentation to grasp the innermost workings of diverse beings. Yet she failed to see manushya's. She had to resist the urge to not think of them as parasitic and insensitive towards others in their environment.

Being a praya, Ayn was genetically more capable than her prerna kin to observe suffering without drowning in it. Had they been here, they would have been on the floor with Yachay, subsumed by his sorrow, incapable of separating themselves from the pain of another. But even her emotional insulation had limits, and his incessant crying was pushing at its seams.

She needed space to concentrate, to strategize, to find a way to the Divya Trials. She folded her ears shut, reducing the cries to a dull thrum. Still she convulsed. From what?

She noticed Tarkash looking at her, his golden eyes fixed on her face. His beak, slightly agape, the syrinx in his chest vibrating. *He was speaking.* She unfurled her ears.

“...days has it been?” Tarkash’s melodic, polyphonic voice held a tinge of curiosity.

Ayn blinked, grappling with the query. “To what?” Her own voice, coarse from exhaustion.

“Since you tethered to Maya.” He blinked, inner membranes swept horizontally across his eyes and then retracted swiftly.

Yes - it was the hollowness of withdrawal. She was so shaken that it took an outsider to diagnose her.

Ayn looked away, suddenly self-conscious of her tell-tale tremors. “A few,” she admitted.

Tarkash nodded. “Not too many Maya trees in Khaasiya,” he

remarked, stating the obvious.

"No, there aren't," Ayn concurred. The lack of Maya trees in the desolate manushya hinterlands of Khaasiya had been a constant reminder of how far she had wandered from the comforts of home.

Tarkash's gaze remained fixed on Ayn as her translucent red freckles faded, her eyes shifting from scarlet back to their natural deep blue. "Forgive my staring," Tarkash said, "but I've never witnessed a rakshasi's transformation this close. In games and tales, certainly, but never in the flesh. If I may ask, what did you consume?"

Tarkash well knew that he could have not asked a question like this to his own kind and expected a straight answer. Knowledge was proprietary. Knowledge was everything. But he knew that a rakshasi would readily offer up what they know when asked about it. For them, knowledge was to be shared. Knowledge was everything.

Ayn offered up with the ease of a manushya teenager talking about the stages of their favourite game in Maya. "A certain crustacean moults against the cliff rocks before migrating to the ocean as an adult. The chitin husks they leave behind accumulate mineral salts from the skandha rich rocks. The salts react with the shells in the heat. When ingested, these neuroactive metabolites amplify our ability to perceive and mimic the chemical cues of the Jalpari's communication network. And in that window of connection, our will becomes their impulse."

"Jalpari? They are lethal, no?" Tarkash said, perplexed. "Did you encounter them?"

"Not by choice," Ayn reflexively defended, a habit ingrained from youth. Her mothers always assumed all mishaps were deliberate adventures. Most were.

“He lost someone?” Tarkash tilted his head towards Yachay.

“His grandparent, I gather.” Ayn filled in the gaps in her information, a skill the rakshasi called *zhylen* - the art of extrapolating based on previously observed patterns.

“Khaasiya has its ways,” Tarkash echoed the mindless refrain. “Though, it should not,” he added, earning Ayn’s silent appreciation.

The palanquin jerked to a halt, throwing Ayn and Yachay off balance. Outside, a checkpoint manned by vaanar guards obstructed the path.

The lead vaanar turned, hand on his weapon, a silent declaration that violence was always an option in a state built on enforced order. Yachay’s muffled cries drew his attention. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. Through the gap in the curtain, he saw Ayn twitching.

The guard sauntered with the casual menace of an official who knows that his next meal is just a formality away. He stepped closer to inspect the caravan.

Ayn braced for confrontation, her mind racing through scenarios and contingencies. But before she could act, Tarkash leaned forward and parted the curtain of their confined space. His gaze fixed on the vaanar through the window.

Recognition flashed across the vaanar’s face. A spontaneous gesture followed—a hand to his head, a salute not decreed by protocol but forged in the furnace of worldly cynicism. It was a grudging respect reserved for civilians with power.

“Apologies, shreeman,” the vaanar uttered. “We did not realise this was your transport. Please, proceed.”

Tarkash acknowledged the salute with a nod. Just then,

Tarkash's private elite guards landed between them.

"We fell behind," Dangsa, the elite guard offered, her words laced with irritation directed towards the caravan's overzealous colhaan rider.

At the sight of the elite security, the officials reflexively saluted, formally. Vaanar ranks spanned public and private spheres, across the continent.

Dangsa gently rebuked, "Did the divya-santaan's insignia on the palanquin escape your notice?" She spoke in the vaanar tongue *Seni* to spare her national kin the embarrassment of a public shaving.

The checkpoint vaanar, trying to salvage his pride, countered in *Seni*. "Apologies, but insignias can be mimicked. Surely you appreciate, shreeman." The now gender neutral honorific in vaanars had male roots.

The other elite guard countered, "And what of the hue-shifting thraak silk used for the emblem's limning? Is that too easily replicated?"

The checkpoint vaanar hesitated. Further argument didn't seem prudent. Still his eyes remained fixed suspiciously at Yachay.

Tarkash intervened, speaking in flawless *Seni*, his voice changing from melodic to grunting, "Tikaros suva raktadhaval humeeka grrovika shunraa." *Your vigilance is appreciated, corporal. Thank you for your service.*

The vaanar's jaw dropped. A garuda, and a divya-santaan no less, speaking *Seni*? Recognizing his rank from his pink-dyed fur? Offering acknowledgement reserved for higher-ups?

In that single utterance, Tarkash had won him over completely.

Wheels churning again, the caravan continued on, the Khaasiya border checkpoint shrinking from view of the rear window. The wild west had gnawed them to the bone, then spat them eastward.

“A *divya-santaan?* Progeny of a divya?” Ayn asked. Her voice crackled with a tension Tarkash couldn’t quite place — ambition, or envy? Surely not insinuation.

“Not by choice.” Tarkash replied, an open-beaked smile repurposing her own words from earlier. It was a disarming trick he had honed over the years. Charm was his shield, polished until it mirrored back the world’s gaze, buying him time to assess what he was dealing with.

“Yet the hue-shifting emblem adorns your palanquin.” Ayn’s tone sharpened. “It seems... advantageous.”

There it was. A familiar rhetoric, easily classified. The disdain of the self-righteous rakshasi, who saw his birthright as an injustice upon everyone else.

“Yes, it serves its purpose, eases certain... endeavours.” Tarkash admitted, lowering his wings into ease.

“Such as clearing checkpoints?” Ayn asked, playfully, downplaying the significance of his advantages.

“Those too. But preparations for the Divya Trials, largely.” Tarkash let the words hang in the air, a dangling lure.

Ayn’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a contender, then?”

“Yes. And you?”

“I feel I have been training my entire life to participate. Yet I felt unprepared for the last Divya Trials five years ago. Fortuitous

timing when I am at my peak now.” Ayn hesitated.

“I know exactly what you mean.” Tarkash articulated each word for impact. “So now?”

Ayn thought about it. She had thought of nothing but escape the past five days.

“I hope I can still make it to Dhaara in time to register,” she said. “It’s the closest city, I reckon. I just need to find my way there. And then to Ranga, of course. You can drop me off whenever our paths diverge.”

“I am myself headed to Dhaara tomorrow,” Tarkash offered. “You are welcome to join me.”

Ayn blinked, surprised at the sudden ease with which her path had cleared. “I am grateful.” She thought for a moment before continuing, “If there’s any way I can be of assistance during our journey, please let me know. I request you to let me repay my debt before we part.”

“And him?” Tarkash’s gaze drifted to Yachay, who had fallen silent, finally exhausted. “Is he indebted to you, or you to him?”

“Neither. I simply repaid a kindness. He cared for my companion.”

Tarkash eyed Johnji, the flying gruff’s head poking out of Ayn’s dorsal pouch like a living periscope. “I thought the rakshasi believed in paying it forward.”

“Hence some never get paid.” Ayn’s retort was swift.

Did he judge her too soon? Tarkash studied her, his eyes searching for something beneath the surface. “A rebel, then?” He sensed her unease with her own kind.

Ayn didn't rise to the bait. Her dissent was a seedling, not yet ready to sprout. Instead she deflected and poked playfully, "When was the last time a divya scion won the Divya Trials?"

Tarkash smirked, a glint of confidence flashing across his features. "I have something none before me had."

"And what might that be? Will? Skill?" Ayn ventured. She couldn't resist adding, "Deception?"

Tarkash's beak curved upwards in an enigmatic smile. The palanquin juddered to a halt. He swept his wing towards the door as it swung open. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

Ayn emerged into a sprawling encampment that thrummed with life — voices raised in laughter, the scent of unfamiliar spices, the flash of scales, tails and feathers. Weary gamers lounged on scattered mattresses and perches, sharing tales and strategies.

At the heart stood a majestic Maya tree, branches sprawling out to support large, large resinous sap-screens that shimmered with the light of the games. Ayn's breath caught in her throat.

This reminded her of the rakshasi festival of Kalpa, a time of joyous gathering, knowledge exchange, and deep immersion in Maya.

"Kalpa gone wild, wouldn't you say?" Tarkash's voice rumbled at her side.

A thrill shot through Ayn. Her gaze snapped to him. "These are your... friends?"

"My team for the Trials." Tarkash flicked his wingtips, feathers ruffling along his crest.

"Team?" Ayn gaped. "I didn't know teams were allowed."

“Nobody thought of assembling one before.” He tilted his head and regarded her with one keen eye. “So it’s not disallowed either.”

“How does it work?” Ayn asked.

“We help each other past whatever challenges await us,” Tarkash said simply.

“And when it’s just some of you left?” Ayn raised her brow. “Do they cede their chances so you win?”

“From that point on, may the best prevail.” Tarkash extended a wing.

Ayn’s eyes widened. “You’re writing new rules in the blanks.”

“So now you know what those who preceded me didn’t have.” Tarkash said, his gaze sweeping over the bustling scene. “They didn’t have vision. My vision is the singular imperative to which my will, skill and resourcefulness are mere subservient tools.”

Garuda pride was evolutionary plumage — loud displays that deterred rivals and attracted mates. The rakshasi psyche recoiled from such gaudy grandiosity. They perceived in it a vulgar assault on communal harmony and the dignity of others.

Where all rakshasi would have seen hubris, Ayn saw honesty. Where they would see aggrandisement, she saw integrity: a clear articulation of one’s potential.

For Ayn, true humility did not emerge from professing inadequacy. It arose from an unflinching inventory of one’s faculties as instruments in the service of all life. Manicured modesty, she believed, evaded accountability far more than overstated self-appraisal claimed control.

A fresh wave of shivers interrupted Ayn’s thoughts. Tarkash

noted her discomfort. “You need a Maya-snaan.” He used the manushya idiom ‘a Maya-dip’ for soaking in a Maya experience, instead of the formal ‘tether’. “It should ease the tremors.”

Ayn hesitated. “I am a fugitive... tethering will give my location away.”

Tarkash assuaged her fear. “We will be out of this state by tomorrow. Till then, nobody can enter this camp without my invitation.” He turned to Chandru, his trusted manushya aide. “Guide her to the Maya tree. See that she receives precedence.”

Chandru nodded, extending his arm in a welcoming gesture toward Ayn. “This way.”

“Thank you,” Ayn replied, hastening toward the tree where many had already tethered. “But no need for precedence. I’m happy to queue up.”

She paused, glancing back at Yachay, still slumped on the palanquin floor. Tarkash met her gaze, giving a nod - a silent assurance he would attend to her friend.

Johnji burst from Ayn’s dorsal pouch, scampering ahead in a race to the tree.

Tarkash watched her go, then turned his attention to Yachay. “Word has it you faced down an entire battalion of vaanars single-handedly,” he remarked, a hint of awe in his tone.

Yachay blinked, the garuda’s words slowly registering through his fog of anguish. “With my grandfather,” he corrected, his voice a puzzled murmur.

It hit him again with sickening clarity. Daddu was gone. All of those events had indeed transpired.

Tarkash's gaze lingered on Yachay. *Was he jesting or cloaking formidable abilities behind an air of innocence? Hadn't this manushya cheated death repeatedly within a span of mere days?*

Of all his gifts, Tarkash prized most his ability to detect greatness slumbering in unsuspecting vessels.

Yachay's head dropped forward as if the mustering of speech had sapped his last reserves.

Tarkash studied him. *Those sleek muscles, surely capable of bearing the weight of two manushyas on either shoulder. And those taut leg muscles — he could easily outrace a colhaan in full gallop.* The radiant lilac ribbons tied at his ankles were unmissable. Even sprawled in apparent defeat, Yachay's posture betrayed the economy of rigorous yuyutsu training. *Was he a fool or a warrior-sage of infinite fortitude?*

“Where to from here, friend?” Tarkash asked.

Yachay looked up, face swollen, eyes bloodshot. “First Dhaara. Then Ranga.”

“Kree-ah-lu!” erupted from Tarkash’s syrinx. His wing flashed against his face in a swift, excited gesture. *I knew it.* He trilled the words in a staccato, rapid-fire upward spiralling *Purvam.*

THREE DEATHS

“We all die three deaths, but not necessarily in the same order.”

— Prabhakar, Member of the One-Eyed Turloth

AYN SHIFTED in the *Coya Cocoon*'s comforting embrace. Its thick muscular fabric contoured snugly around her, its form moulding to her curves. Its cool softness leeched the day's exhaustion from her body.

The cocoon applied a soothing pressure to her muscles, using a network of sensitive nodes to find and ease tension. Its bio-filaments pulsed gently against her neck and shoulders, stimulating tired nerves, easing the lingering soreness in her back.

Each breath brought a rush of fresh air, filtered by the cocoon to remove impurities. It bathed her in a delicate mist, infused with the essence of zylith flowers and herbs chosen from the rakshasi's treasury of medicinal sedatives.

Stretched between two sturdy branches, the ovoid micro-habitat maintained perfect temperature, humidity and firmness, adapting to her changing needs through a deep, healing sleep.

A whimper cut through the tranquillity, faint at first, then rising to a muffled cry. The Coya Cocoon in its sagacious intuition, deemed intervention necessary.

It waited until Ayn's deepest sleep cycle eased, then responded. A warmth, like sunlight, spread across her skin, and the gentle hug loosened.

Ayn stirred. Her sleep-fogged mind sensed a quiet urgency. She felt irritated as soon as she recognised the cry as Yachay's. Then annoyance made way for curiosity. *Why do manushyas grieve so much? What could be the evolutionary function?*

The weathered canvas of a solitary tent rippled in the night breeze, an impassive witness to Yachay's fitful tossing in perturbed sleep.

Emerging from the cocoon, Ayn was renewed: her skin supple and eyes reflecting nebulae hues. The coral-like ruffles of her photosynthetic collar, previously drained of vibrancy, now thrummed with renewed fluorescence, recharged by her triadic heart-pumps.

She ventured into the anguish that radiated from Yachay's mournful slumber, as he twitched and whimpered. She settled beside him in a quiet vigil.

Sensing her nearness, Yachay's eyes opened. For a moment, he seemed to struggle against waking, as if the weight of awareness was too much to bear.

With the lifting of the eyelid-floodgates, his tears burst forth anew. His gaze sought hers in the gloom.

Having spent time in Maya and in the cocooned sleep after that, Ayn looked like she had birthed anew. Her skin felt tender

and moist again, her eyes were back to reflecting the colours of the distant nebulae.

"The elder you mourn now lives within you," she whispered. It was an offering of comfort, steeped in the rakshasi way of consuming the deceased, where the flesh of the departed found new utility in the living. Hollow comfort to the manushya.

Yachay looked past her into the distance behind her. His gaze remained fixed upon the softly swaying coya cocoons.

If only he could turn back time, choose differently. Have one more day with Daddu. But the hardest material of all wasn't vajra or diamond. It was the past. So immutable, so opaque.

"He cultivated you, did he not?" Ayn's consolations hovered like bubbles over the jagged edges of Yachay's sorrow. "His memories and lessons would have taken root within you."

"I wish they did." Yachay murmured, his fingers rubbing his sternum, as if trying to physically coax the grief out from his chest.

He turned his swollen, red-rimmed eyes to Ayn. Could he confide in her? She was a rakshasi, a devourer of the dead, but she had also saved his life. He wanted to trust her.

"I thought I knew him," Yachay said, giving shape to feelings yet unplumbed. "But now...now I understand that I truly did not. He has left me with more questions than I'd ever imagined could exist."

"You can always go ask him," Ayn suggested casually with an offhand simplicity.

Yachay's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You could ask his *chhavi* in Maya, I mean." Ayn settled beside

him, the lingering scent of zylith flowers still clinging to her.

“I... don’t follow,” he managed to choke out, his voice strangled by the sudden surge of unfamiliar hope.

“What part do you not follow?” Ayn asked. She thought her statement had been clear enough, straightforward.

“Any of it,” Yachay admitted, just as simply. He wiped his face, brushing away the tears that threatened to fall, but the frown that creased his forehead only deepened.

Ayn’s eyes narrowed, her confusion mirroring his. “What’s not to follow in it?”

“I could ask Maya, you said?” Yachay asked, as if he was trying to locate her in a vast, dark cave, guided only by her faint voice.

“You could ask his *chhavi* in Maya,” Ayn clarified, her tone suggesting that this should have been self-evident. She had expected a nod of acknowledgement for her ritual condolence, not this perplexing fog of incomprehension.

This wasn’t the first time that Yachay had encountered someone his age who spoke in the cryptic code of popular Maya culture and assumed everyone understood. A chasm he was used to bridging with polite lies on the rare occasions he would meet anyone during his travels with Daddu.

He had a few readymade alibis: ‘I have never particularly liked that bard’s sagas.’ ‘Oh we call it something else in Tridha.’ ‘I was unwell when that experience was released.’ But what Ayn was offering seemed too important, too vital to hide from behind a veil of evasions.

“Who is *Chhavi*?” he asked, as a strange pulse quickened beneath his skin, echoing a beat he couldn’t name.

Ayn struggled to find a common language. “You don’t know what a chhavi is? Do you call it by another name? Avatar? Bunshin? Geist?” She threw out words – ‘Irazha? Yamaja? Tirit?’ — pronouncing terms for chhavi in Elu, Seni and Purvam with authentic accents.

Yachay shook his head. “No.” His heart gave a traitorous thud against his ribs.

Ayn blinked in disbelief. “What do you call it then? Your presence, your embodiment when you enter Maya?”

“I have not entered Maya in a while,” Yachay said. He hesitated, then spoke words he’d never uttered before to anyone. “Not since I was a child.”

Ayn had known people to abstain from Maya for days or weeks, but never for so many years. It defied comprehension. “It’s unheard of,” she said.

“Every day, I discover things that I have never heard of,” Yachay murmured, his mind reeling. *Daddu’s embodiment?* Wild hope flickered within him, battling against the cold wind of his own ignorance.

Ayn studied his face intently. “So, you don’t remember what a chhavi is?” *Was he lying?* It wouldn’t be the first time a manushya had tried to deceive her. Still, what an odd fable to make up — one so easily disproved.

Yachay met her gaze, his voice raw with honesty. “I can’t say I remember much at all. Could you explain?”

Ayn nodded slowly, deciding to take him at his word despite the seeming implausibility. “All we cherish, all we feel and do — it seeds a shadow garden of ourselves within Maya. It’s a reflection of

everything that makes you, you.”

Yachay listened intently, his brow furrowed in concentration. Ayn’s words, though meant to elucidate, sounded like one of Daddu’s riddles.

Ayn paused, observing Yachay’s reaction. In his eyes, she saw discovery, curiosity, confusion, awe — but no hint of deception. She continued, “A chhavi is how you see yourself, and how others see you inside Maya. It’s an imprint of your memories, preferences, decisions, and dreams, gathered over a lifetime. We add to and revise this chhavi each time we tether to Maya. And it persists in Maya even after we die.”

Yachay stared at her, feeling as if she had cleaved a part of him open to let light in. The idea that something could survive death—it defied everything he’d been taught.

He remembered asking Daddu, over and over, what happened to people when they died. Did they go somewhere? Did some fragments of them remain? The answer had always been the same: they disperse. Some part lives on in their children, some in their memories carried by others till they fade too, some in the tools and ways they leave behind.

“You’re telling me,” Yachay began, his voice trembling under the weight of the implications, “that I could speak to Daddu somehow?”

“In a way, yes. Not exactly him, though. Think of his chhavi as his residual echo,” Ayn clarified.

The unbearable weight of grief and regret suddenly lightened. Yachay sprang to his feet, a surge of hope coursing through him.

Tears stung his eyes, blurring his vision, but he blinked them

back, desperate for clarity. His face burned, his blood pumped, trying to grasp the enormity of Ayn's revelation. His mind spun with questions, with possibilities, with an aching need to believe that this could be real.

He pointed toward the immense, looming Maya tree at the edge of the camp. "There's a *chha...vi* of Daddu in that tree?"

Ayn studied him. There was an earnestness, a raw vulnerability about him that seemed impossible to fake.

"Not in that particular tree, but the tree can conjure it from the root network spread across Samsaar," she explained.

But how could she explain the complex web of scientific, emotional, and moral codes that all the species of Samsaar had gleaned or created around Maya? There were principles of primacy, privacy, provenance, merger and termination — the very nature of identity and its sovereignty within Maya.

The rakshasi, especially, were taught these ideas from their first tetherings, woven into the tales they experienced and the games they played.

"The *divya* have prescribed two moons before communing with the *chhavi* of the deceased," Ayn continued. "This period is crucial, to ensure that we don't lose ourselves in Maya. We have elaborate rights and rites surrounding *chhavis*, traditions that take years to fully understand and master."

It was like trying to explain the idea of the rainbow to someone who had never seen colour, or the seductive melody of *kuhibird's* song to someone who had never heard a sound.

What kind of life had Yachay lived, so cut off from the very fabric of society? Ayn tried to imagine it, a world without Maya defining

and expanding her consciousness, and found that she could not.

She sensed his urgency, and the flicker of fear beneath it — a fear she couldn't quite understand.

Yachay took a few steps toward the tree before stopping abruptly. Never had he ventured this close to a Maya tree. Daddu's warnings resonated in his skull, not words, but a visceral aversion, a recoil. *Stay away. Avoid it, always.*

For years, he had obeyed. He thought of the many times he had seen others tether, their bodies present but their minds lost to a world he could barely fathom. He had always kept his distance, as if the mere act of proximity to the trees could contaminate him in some irreversible way.

Yet now, the unthinkable possibility beckoned him — tantalising, terrifying. All he had to do was reach out and enter this realm where, perhaps, Daddu's resonance still lingered. To feel that warmth once more, to share stories and raucous laughter, to cajole Daddu's chhavi to spill his long-held secrets.

But the memory of Khaasiya was a stone lodged in his throat. Disobeying Daddu then had shattered their lives beyond repair. It had robbed Yachay of the man he loved above everything.

How could he even consider defying his dying words again, those final instructions that carried the weight of a sacred vow? "*Do not tether to Maya till you reach the Trials,*" Daddu's directive had been clear.

Had Daddu anticipated this temptation too, this agonising choice? Yachay stood frozen, torn between the promise of reclaiming what was irrevocably lost and the unknown price it might demand. The dissonance threatened to tear him apart.

"Would you help me seek him out?" Yachay finally asked Ayn.

"Chhavis are wary of strangers. Most are taciturn with people they haven't met. Some refuse to engage at all. He is unlikely to talk to me. But with you, he would..."

Yachay stared at her, his breath catching in his throat.

Ayn relented. "What was his name?"

"Daddu," Yachay said, still not able to believe this was a real choice.

"That's just 'grandpa' in Northern Aadi dialect," Ayn pointed out. "What's his true name?"

Yachay blinked, his mind racing to make sense of the question.

"That's what everyone called him," he said, his voice a mix of defensiveness and uncertainty. "Daddu."

Ayn studied him for a moment, her eyes searching his face as if she were trying to read the secrets written there. "What's your name?"

"Yachay," he replied, the absurdity of this belated introduction striking him. They'd faced death together, yet remained strangers in the most fundamental way.

Ayn nodded. "Where do you think that name came from?"

Yachay shook his head, at a loss. The question had never crossed his otherwise curious mind.

"What's your name?" he asked, his incredulity rising.

"Aynedhema," she said. "Ayn, for short."

"And you know its origin?" Yachay pressed.

“Of course,” Ayn said, her patience growing as she began to accept the improbable truth of Yachay’s claims. “Like everyone. Maya gave it to me at my first tethering, just after birth. As it must have given you yours. Each true name is unique and at least three exhalations long.”

The impossible choice vanished, as if it had never existed. In his resolute silence about his true name, Daddu had, it seemed, made the decision for Yachay long ago. Daddu’s determination to keep him from Maya reverberated beyond death.

Yachay turned away from the Maya tree. With each step back toward the tent, the pull of barricaded possibilities tugged at him, while a deeper weariness settled in.

Ayn watched him go. His pain was increasingly mysterious to her, yet she recognized the echoes of a choice not freely made.

As Yachay reached the tent, he paused, his hand resting on the cool, synthetic canvas—a static mimicry of the living coya material of the rakshasi.

“If I don’t know his Maya name,” he said, his voice resigned, “will I never see him again?”

“There might be others who knew his name. His companions, peers...”

Yachay shook his head. “We were the only people in each other’s lives.”

Ayn had ceased to be surprised by the details of Yachay’s story, accepting each revelation at face value.

Manushyas, she had heard, suffered from several afflictions of forgetfulness. Many routinely forgot major events of their own history. Some forgot past pains, others forgot their transgressions,

and some even forgot their own names.

Compared to rakshasi visceral recall, manushya remembrance seemed a perpetually leaking vessel, riddled with holes and cracks that bled out the past.

A thought struck her—perhaps Yachay and Daddu were an extreme case of *Kathari* monks, known for their months-long wanderings on the fringes of civilisation, untethered from Maya. “Are you a Kathari monk?”

“No,” Yachay replied, seeming to understand her train of thought. “But we’ve known some of them. We stayed close to them at times, our paths often crossing in our travels.”

“They might know—” Ayn began, but Yachay cut her off with another shake of his head.

“Daddu never spoke much about us to them. He always ended up deriding them, offending them, even driving them away.”

“Or people he might have met in Maya,” Ayn suggested, grasping for possibilities.

“He didn’t tether,” Yachay said, his voice flat with certainty. “At least, not to my knowledge.”

Ayn nearly blurted, “*But why?*” but bit back the question.

Curiosity had momentarily eclipsed empathy, leaving her feeling uncouth. Evolutionarily hardwired to course correct, the prgya gender felt guilt more often than any other species. Only her kind was cursed with such urgent self-correction as to induce preemptive remorse over mere unvoiced impropriety.

For Ayn’s generation, as for many before, Maya, that vast arboretum of their being, felt as fundamental as the laws that

governed night and day.

The offerings of Maya were plenty, too many to count. For most, it was a powerful opiate: an ever-available escape from misery, mundanity, and the dread of meaninglessness. At once sanctuary and temptation, nourishment and fever dream.

Amidst the thrill of urges made flesh and the gluttonous gratification of insatiable cravings, Ayn cherished one gift over all others — the chhavi, those pristine echoes of identity that Maya preserved with loving fidelity.

In the modern age, the *Manthan Yug*, death was gradual. A gentle entropy that blurred the boundaries between self and environment. People often said that there were three deaths: the demise of the body, the decay of the chhavi, and the dissolution of the name.

The first was the most immediate, the unravelling of the physical body that once housed a life— repurposed by other creatures, the tissue rinsed of all memory to store new ones.

Then came a second death, gentler, yet in Ayn's view, more profound. The chhavi, that autobiographical essence and semblance of the deceased, lingered in Maya's near-infinite root-mind.

At first, kin frequented, rousing the chhavi into momentary animation through their attention's kindling. Their motives often mirrored those visiting the living elderly: seeking love's solace, resolutions for past indiscretions, or ledgers of intergenerational debts yet to be claimed from others.

Some simply offered the balm of care and companionship out of the need to witness the well-being of loved ones. Therein lay the chhavi's bittersweetness.

For the chhavi held no inner life between those visits. It could neither yearn in the silence nor accumulate new experiences. Unstirred memories atrophied, like unused traits in the living faded.

With each summoning, it would temporarily reawaken, only to slip back into silence until the next invocation. It felt no passage of time in the interim void.

The artifice of the chhavi's mimicry would soon become apparent to its visitors. Its joys and sorrows would ring hollow. As time weathered the sharp edges of loss, the visits would grow sparse.

The chhavi would slowly be pared down, its unique quirks eroded through stochastic approximation, until it was little more than an impression. Someday, even that afterimage would quietly fade into Maya. Like a well-worn path slowly overtaken by foliage.

And then, there was the third death—the final silence. The moment when the chhavi of the last person who remembered the deceased dissolved, and even echoes no longer carried the whisper of their name.

The idea of the individual was abstracted by Maya and subsumed into the collective hindsight of the world's history.

Ayn grappled with the grim possibility. If Daddu had not tethered to Maya in years, his true name lost to time, then he was truly, irrevocably gone. Yachay would never see him again.

Desperate to comprehend Yachay's pain, Ayn conjured a terrifying image: her mother Bhadra vanishing into nothingness, leaving no trace, no chhavi.

Her mind recoiled, secreting a chemical balm from her skin's pores to soothe the visceral horror, a reflex rooted in her species' communal evolution. As if attempting to physically shed the brutal

thought, she convulsed, involuntarily.

Startled, Yachay met her gaze, his pain mirrored in her eyes. Instinctively, she pressed her pheromone damp palms against his wrists. He flinched, then relaxed, tension ebbing from his body.

She felt the change — shoulders slumping, frantic breaths slowing. She had momentarily lightened his grief, and shared it in a wordless dialogue of touch and scent.

Yachay's clenched fist finally loosened. He had kept it tightly shut all day, as if the act of opening it might release the last fleeting remnants of Daddu's presence.

From within, a glint of scarlet caught Ayn's eye — the laalmani, its surface bearing the weight of an unspeakable moment.

Without a word, she understood. This “thing”, despite its cruel origin, was Yachay's last physical connection to Daddu.

She retrieved a thread from the weathered tent and slipped it through the laalmani's natural aperture. Tenderly, she tied it around Yachay's neck, the gem resting close to his heart.

Leaning in close, Ayn caught the faint scent of Yachay's body. She noticed the bluish inverted triangle on his neck. “You smell like...home,” she murmured.

Yachay looked at her, surprise and a flicker of warmth in his eyes. He cradled the laalmani, tracing its smooth surface. It felt warm against his chest.

“I never lost anything Daddu gave me,” he murmured, sorrow's fresh sting resurfacing. “Until yesterday. When the guards arrested us, we lost all our scrolls and books.”

He met Ayn's gaze, uncertain if she knew what they were.

"Books are..." he hesitated, then offered tentatively. "They're words inscribed on sheafs and bound..."

"I'm familiar with them," Ayn interjected kindly. "I have read a few. They're like Maya experiences, but solely in words."

Yachay nodded. He had made that analogy before, only the other way round. "Then perhaps that's true for the chhavi, too. I often feel like I am talking to the bards of the Sheshan Yug when I read their books." He paused. "I may have lost all the notes I kept of Daddu's lessons. But — in the riddles that Daddu loved, the way he moved a piece across a board, there are fragments of him. I remember them all."

Ayn smiled and offered him a hand. He didn't know why, but he took it and rose.

Two thick beams lay against the tent wall, like oversized fan handles resting on a simple trestle. Ayn flipped a catch, and a spring whirred.

"My prerna mother has a saying," Ayn said. "Grief is a guest. Even unwelcome, it must be offered a place to rest. Strange that a manushya showed me what it meant."

The thick beams fanned out, thin wooden ribs unfolding between them like the slats of a fan. A thick canvas stretched taut, the large fan opening into a semi-circle. On the tent's opposite side, a clever bracing system snapped into place, locking the bed stable and upright.

Yachay sat upon it. Ayn nudged his shoulder gently. He took the cue and lay down. It was surprisingly soft. Ayn sank cross-legged onto a moss-covered stump beside him.

"The other night when I saw you in the woods..." Yachay

started. “I pointed the guards in your direction. I am sorry. I didn’t know. I have never lied...”

“You didn’t know me then. It would be sad if you were to do it now. Though I would always think you must have your reasons.”

“Unwittingly, even then, I put your life at risk. While you saved mine.”

“I was merely repaying a debt. You took care of Johnji...” Ayn began, but was interrupted by exuberant kisses as Johnji bounded into her arms, as if urgently summoned by his name.

“Yovindra noma,” she chided the flying gruff, gently rebuffing his affection. *“I see you had your rest.”*

She thought how Johnji had been showering this love on her all day. And then it occurred to her - this was the first time she was seeing him since they arrived at the camp. Throughout the evening, she had only interacted with him in her Maya adventures.

How easily she had forgotten that Maya’s gifts were mere glimmers compared to the vastness of Samsaar. The dreams and experiences offered by Maya were the result of evolutionary adaptations and centuries of cultivation by the svaanka species — the rakshasi, manushya, garuda, naag, vaanar, gandharva, and divya.

Among Samsaar’s myriad lifeforms, only the svaanka could tether to Maya. Of the four sentience classifications - self-replication, self-awareness, self-engineering, and self-transcription - the svaanka were the most unique, transcribing their essence into words, images, and biomes. The chhavi was the pinnacle of this achievement, perfected within Maya just in the previous century — a mere heartbeat ago in the cosmic scales of time.

Just as Maya could conjure a credible simulation of Johnji from her memories - the soft fur, the playful nip of his teeth - perhaps it could do the same for Yachay and his grandfather.

The chhavi that Maya might excavate from Yachay's recollections would be limited, only knowing what Yachay himself knew, but it was a chance to see Daddu again, if only in echo. Ayn stirred, excited.

"There's a way you could..." Ayn began to explain, but paused. Yachay had drifted off to sleep, exhaustion finally claiming him.

Johnji leaped onto the bed. He circled once, twice, then settled next to Yachay, his small form curling into the crook of the young man's arm.

Ayn watched them for a moment. Johnji whined softly in his sleep. Ayn reached out a hand, her fingers brushing against Yachay's.

A flicker of a smile touched her lips. Perhaps grief was the fertile soil where seeds of empathy took root. It forced one to look beyond self, towards a shared experience of breaking and becoming.

It was grief that drove the manushyas to tell stories, weave songs, and mark the passage of suns.

And in this relentless pursuit, their grief became a signal — a testament to their ability to love as fiercely as any rakshasi. To feel as deeply as the most devoted gruff. It was their way of saying, "We are more than ambition and restless enterprise. We, too, know the profound power of love and loss."

THOSE WITHOUT A NAME

“In a world of infinite paths, the bravest step is often sideways.”

— Kshapa, Member of the One-Eyed Turloth

YACHAY'S EYES snapped open. First, terror paralysed him. Then, his body reacted before his mind could fully process the sight before him. He recoiled so violently that he tumbled off the fan-bed, knocking its latch loose.

The bed folded shut with a clang that echoed the finality of a closing door. Yachay barely registered the sound, his attention focused solely on the figure standing at the entrance of his tent.

There, just a leg's height shorter than him, stood the White Yakshi. The yakshi took another slow, calculated step towards him.

Yachay scrambled backwards, desperate to put as much distance between himself and the yakshi as possible. Just then—

A flurry of iridescent feathers — Tarkash landed behind the White Yakshi, wings snapping shut with swift force. Chandru followed, barrelling in a cart filled with gleaming, elegant weapons.

Tarkash gestured towards the cart with a flourish, his eyes glinting with mischief and something inscrutable.

"A small gift from me to you," Tarkash said, his voice dripping with royal sincerity as he addressed Yachay. "Kill him. You'll feel better."

Yachay hesitated, his eyes darting frantically from the weapons to the White Yakshi and back to Tarkash — his feathered rescuer offering murder as therapy.

He looked for sanity or guidance — he looked for Ayn. She was nowhere to be seen.

The White Yakshi, meanwhile, stood motionless, neither looking for escape, nor resigned to his own demise.

Yachay's reflection warped in the weapons — a hundred possible selves, each a twisted iteration born of this single act.

He turned to the yakshi. His voice cracked as he forced the words out. "Wh-what's your name?"

The White Yakshi parted his lips to answer, but Chandru scoffed. "Yakshis don't have names. Does this latch or this seat have a name?"

Tarkash reached for a long, needle-like weapon, its hilt perfectly moulded to fit his talon. He pressed the needle against the yakshi's chest, calmly. The point dimpled his bare skin without piercing it.

The garuda extended his other wing, an invitation for Yachay to come forth and claim retribution. The outstretched wing eclipsed the tent in its shadow.

Yachay took reluctant steps towards the White Yakshi.

Tarkash's talon grasped Yachay's hand and guided it to the cool metal hilt, before stepping away.

Isn't this an orphan's duty? Yachay thought. Will it make the pain stop? His hand quivered, then steadied. He gazed into the White Yakshi's eyes, the yakshi's faintly musky scent, filling his nostrils.

Yachay flung the weapon aside, metal scraping against dust. The White Yakshi flinched, the movement almost imperceptible.

Yachay's eyes brimmed with tears as he fell to his knees, levelling his gaze with the yakshi's.

"Why?" Yachay asked the yakshi, simply.

The White Yakshi turned his head towards Tarkash as if cheekily asking, "Will I be allowed to speak or will I be interrupted?" Tarkash's beak lifted in a subtle nod, granting tacit permission.

The White Yakshi locked eyes with Yachay as he began to speak. "Yakshi have no name. You think yakshi have say? 'Why?' Why." He chuckled. "So small word to ask big-dark-nothing. Your hands shake because you smell big-dark-nothing. My hands not shake. They not my. Master say. Hands do. Me not my. Me my master's latch, seat, needle. You want pay? From who? Me, slave? Monkey who catch you? Bird-master who say kill you? The bird master's master who say what good, what bad? Who will give you good? Pretty bird-master here say he..."

"Even a yakshi understands," Tarkash interrupted, after all. "The maha-garudas — industrialists and politicians alike, are talon-in-hilt. They have abandoned us. Nobody from Khaasiya has ever won the Trials. That is why we are here. When we win the Divya Trials, we will change everything." He locked eyes with Yachay.

“Won’t we?”

Yachay blinked. A crease furrowed his brow. His gaze flickered between Tarkash and the White Yakshi, a question forming on his lips. “Did you want me to hurt him?”

Tarkash’s feathers twitched, a barely visible betrayal of surprise at Yachay’s directness. For a suspended beat, the avian lord’s piercing eyes studied Yachay’s face.

“A test,” Tarkash recovered smoothly, his voice even. “You have cleared it.”

Yachay glanced at Chandru, who gave a single, confirmatory nod, as one would expect from a dutiful underscriber.

“But what if I had killed him?” Yachay pressed.

Chandru waved his hand. “Killing a yakshi is not a crime—” he began, but Tarkash cut him off sharply.

“And yet, I would have stopped you,” Tarkash swiftly corrected. “Though I knew I wouldn’t have to.”

Chandru smiled. “He just knows these things.”

Tarkash turned the full weight of his mesmerising focus upon Yachay, his talons gripping the manushya’s shoulders as he pulled him to his feet.

“Tell me, friend,” he said, his voice low. “Do you want justice to prevail? Do you want a better world for all?”

Yachay held Tarkash’s gaze for a long moment before nodding.

“Then you are one of us,” Tarkash declared. He lifted Yachay’s hand, pressing a vajra coin into his palm. “Your efforts will not go unappreciated.”

Tarkash's talons lingered over the coin for another moment, as if confirming a wordless oath.

Yachay's gaze fell to the coin, then lifted. "And Ayn?"

"She has already pledged her allegiance. She will rejoice at this alignment," Tarkash assured. He turned to his elite security, guarding the tent. "Dangsa, please escort our champion to his friend."

Dangsa inclined her head, motioning Yachay to follow. As he fell into step behind her, Yachay turned to look at the yakshi, his culprit now left behind the tent's swaying flap.

The Maya tree dominated the camp, seeming even more immense and distant in the sun's glare. Champions swarmed its tangled roots, mere specks against its vastness. Yachay's eyes found Ayn, a flicker of colour tethered amidst the tree's thrumming communion.

The White Yakshi eyed the wheelbarrow of weapons, calculating his chances. With a ghashra and a vintar, he could easily take down the manushya, but the garuda would require swift damage to the wings.

"Shall I dispose of this creature now?" Chandru asked Tarkash, gesturing at the yakshi.

Tarkash's reply was laced with irritation. "So they sent him with just nine laalmanis, no refunds on the shortfall?"

Their voices were background noise for the White Yakshi. His eyes darted to the tent's far end, searching his memory for any elite security he might have noticed when brought in.

Chandru's chuckle held no mirth. "Just a vague apology and an offer of a credit note."

Tarkash's laughter echoed in response. "At least we have nine. We can finally leave this festering orifice of Samsaar."

The White Yakshi eyed the tent's opening. Perhaps after dismantling the present company, he should innocently wheel the weapon cart out. Who would suspect a mere yakshi slave?

He tensed, his muscles coiled, ready to spring into action. One deep breath, then—

"Yakshi!" Tarkash's voice startled him, shattering his focus. "You realise your masters have discarded you, don't you? Sending you to deliver news of their own deceit, the petty thieves?"

The White Yakshi held up his hands, splaying his twelve fingers. "Twelve laalmani."

Tarkash nodded. "Yes, twelve were paid for. We received only nine."

"Nine." The White Yakshi's fingers danced, illustrating the arithmetic. "Three with you. Tree-woman. Good sad man. His neck-rope. You want? One I get from neck-rope. Two I give tomorrow. You tell."

Tarkash folded his wings behind his back, bending down until his beak nearly grazed the White Yakshi's face. "Good sad man give me laalmani when I want. Real power — no kill. Get?"

The White Yakshi met Tarkash's gaze. "Pretty bird master have big head tool. No kill yakshi also."

Tarkash's laughter filled the tent as he turned to Chandru. "Isn't he the cleverest yakshi you've ever encountered?" His attention

returned to the White Yakshi, his eyes glinting with curiosity. “It’s a shame that a precious instrument like you is bound to such fools who would dispose of you so readily. You are clearly a dhuri yakshi, but you were born chaak yakshi, then clawed your way to the surface. Whoever started calling you the white yakshi had never seen a chaak, who are all white.”

Tarkash paused, gauging the White Yakshi’s reaction. The yakshi’s slight nod confirmed his deduction.

Tarkash pressed on, relishing the game. “You don’t have any coin embedded on your body, which means you received payment in other forms... proxy power... lessons even... got yourself gifted upwards. But you haven’t come this far to be thrown off a hill... you have some means of getting out of sticky situations like these... aside, of course, your disarming eloquence and ability to fight and plan escape...”

The yakshi’s heart leapt in his mouth — a foreign sensation.

“But you can enlighten me later, always. I accept you as recompense for my missing goods, yakshi. I will pay you in coin and lesson. Good?”

“Me want permit.”

“You ‘want’ something? And you know precisely what it is? Why am I not surprised? Please. Do tell.”

“Permit to enter Mythra.”

Chandru’s laughter rang out. “Off to the university, then?”

Tarkash, however, remained solemn. This was no mere gruff grasping for scraps, but a creature with a plan. He also knew it was too early to probe the reasons behind the request.

"I will grant you the permit." Tarkash nodded to a startled Chandru, who hastily began preparing a scroll. "It will expire in a moon's time. Don't vanish. Don't perish. Return to me."

The white yakshi nodded, surprised.

"What's your Maya sign, yakshi?"

"Bird drink pot," the yakshi replied. "But. Me also have name."

Tarkash's beak twitched with amusement. "You are full of surprises. What's your name then?"

"Baluta," said the white yakshi.

—

Enormous sheets of translucent membranes stretched between the Maya tree's branches. Upon these living resin screens, dreamlike visions materialised and faded with organic fluidity.

On one screen, Ayn's chhavi blazed through an ancient city like a ferocious comet. She was being pursued by a horde of vengeful gana-beings. Yachay's heart pounded in his chest as he watched the chase unfold on a wide resin membrane held between two branches.

Searching, Yachay found Ayn's true form silently suspended amid the tree's aerial roots. Her eyes moved rapidly beneath her eyelids, just as Yachay had seen Daddu's do in deep sleep. A thick mycorrhizal tendril had snaked into her back pouch—this, Yachay inferred, must be tethering.

He gazed up at the colossal Maya tree sprawling above him. Its vast branches stretched out like welcoming arms, embracing the assembled champions from every corner of Samsaar.

An adjacent gelatinous screen shimmered with an alternate perspective — Ayn's chhavi viewed from behind as she fled the

relentless ghoul-tide. The ganas swarmed her from all sides, fangs baring in unified malice. Where were all the players controlling them tethered?

Yachay looked around. The space hummed with festive energy. A garuda player drew plans on the ground for her teammates, while a pair of vaanars argued excitedly with each head of a gandharva. Tarkash's camp, with its fifty players and support teams, was a microcosm of Samsaar. Yet only two were presently tethered. Ayn and—

Yachay's gaze darted to a naag player entwined within the embrace of the aerial roots, some thirty steps away. Her jaw had opened to admit a tendril's bio-tether.

A gasp escaped Yachay's lips as the naag champion's tail twitched imperceptibly, perfectly synchronised with the gana army's movements in the game. He realised that the hundreds of gana-beings were all controlled by this single champion, puppeteered by her innermost thoughts.

For the first time, Yachay grasped the essence of the Maya games — a battle of minds, translated into a dazzling spectacle.

His eyes widened as Ayn's chhavi sprang into action. Luminous augmentations erupted from her chhavi, wreathed in blue fire. With blinding speed, she carved a path through the ganas, her movements rendered with breathtaking detail on the translucent screens.

Growing up in Samsaar, it was impossible not to have seen these luminous screens adorning Maya trees from far. But up close, Yachay now understood that these were living canvases.

Nearby, a short, thin rakshasi was enthusiastically explaining the biology of the screens to her vaanar friend. "Viscous sap,

dripping from the branches, is caught by other branches, forming these membranes. There, an outer protective skin develops through coagulation, akin to a scabbing wound,” she explained, her eyes sparkling with wonder that mirrored Yachay’s own growing fascination.

The vaanar nodded. “Yes, I have seen that happen. But the inner layers remain gel-like fluid, right? I have pierced the screen on an occasion or two,” he added, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. Noticing his prerna-gendered friend’s impending gasp, he quickly clarified, “Accidentally, of course! I wouldn’t dream of hurting the mother tree.”

The rakshasi, her shock subsiding, continued her explanation. “Within that biogel, there are millions of cellular sacs filled with colour pigments. As chemical signals flow through the biogel, these sacs expand or contract, creating the dazzling hues we see. Their colours and illumination are further amplified by light-refracting crystalline cellular structures.”

A hush fell over the gathering as the game neared its climax. Some champions turned their attention from the screen to some of the naags in the camp.

The naags flicked their tongues, gathering scents released by the tree that painted a picture unavailable to the others who saw only with light. A low hiss built among them, as if the outcome was already written in the air.

Yachay leaned forward, utterly transfixed by the unfolding spectacle. The naag player’s body tightened as Ayn shattered her gana hordes to shimmering dust.

The cells within the screen throbbed in response, sending vibrant colours rippling across the membrane. Blues and greens

made way for reds.

Yachay realised that each moving picture must be a unique outcome of the dreams created by the Maya tree and navigated by the players. He was glad that the game was coming to an end, so he could ask Ayn the thousand questions that had bubbled up within him.

But Ayn kept going. Her chhavi didn't fade from the screens. She seamlessly transitioned into another game, leaping from one challenge to the next without pause.

Players tethered, lost, and were replaced by eager new contenders. Ayn won game after game, each uniquely different from the last.

Yachay's head spun as landscapes shifted and morphed. Worlds birthed and extinguished before his eyes; it felt like many lifetimes packed into a single hour.

He felt nauseous with the sheer volume of sensory input, his stationery body rebelling against the rapid-fire barrage of images in motion. Yet he couldn't look away.

Instead he'd edged closer to the screens, his fingers brushing against a massive aerial root. It thrummed with a faint vibration, alive beneath his touch.

Then, a sudden sensation — smooth, unexpectedly worm-like — a tendril against his bare wrist. Startled, he jerked his hand back, stumbling away from the root. In his haste, he collided with something solid.

Yachay spun around, his heart pounding, only to find himself face to face with Tarkash.

The garuda's eyes glinted with amusement. "Quite stringent

about the mourning period, aren't you?"

Before Yachay could respond, the cheers of the crowd directed their attention to the screens.

On one screen, a spectacle unfolded that made Yachay even more dizzy. A vaanar, colossal enough to dwarf Avanti's tallest towers, lumbered through a ruined city.

This was no chhavi — it pulsed with clanking gears and hissing steam, as though a living factory had sprung into monstrous, animate form, mimicking a vaanar's likeness.

"Let's see if our friend can stand up to Virat, our best champion," Tarkash said, pointing to a vaanar hanging upside down amidst the aerial roots — close to where Ayn still lay tethered. A mycorrhizal tendril was attached to the vaanar's navel.

Yet on the screen, their chhavis were nowhere to be found. Instead, the mechanical giant vaanar moved with the clear purpose of a predator on the prowl.

A flicker of movement within the enormous mechanical head caught Yachay's eye. Nestled amidst the whirring cogs and spinning flywheels sat Viraat's chhavi, a minuscule puppeteer manipulating the monstrous construct. It was an illusion within an illusion — the champion's mind piloting a chhavi that was itself a construct within Maya.

The mechanical vaanar's steps shook the ground. Yachay frantically scanned the other screens, looking for Ayn. There she was — a mere speck against the mechanical giant.

The construct's gargantuan arm swept through the air, sending her tiny figure hurtling across the desolate landscape.

Yet, even as she was flung through the air, she wasn't helpless.

Natural appendages sprouted from her abdomen, resembling a thraak's silk-spinning organs. Instinctively, they released gossamer threads, securing her briefly between tall stone towers, and halting her uncontrolled flight.

As the stone towers began to crumble, Ayn's chhavi twisted. Her silken threads retracted, then snapped her back towards the mechanical titan with the force of a slingshot.

Viraat's factory-titan swivelled, gears grinding as it tracked her trajectory. His chhavi, nestled within, manipulated levers, preparing to attack.

As the punch connected, Ayn's form contorted. Her reflexes allowed her to slip past the giant fist. She landed on the titan's arm, silken strands lashing out to anchor her.

Viraat frantically worked the controls, but Ayn's threads held fast, their strength belying their delicate appearance.

In her nimble manoeuvring, Ayn wove a vast network of webs, intricate and confining.

Viraat, advancing in pursuit, found himself ensnared—a colossal figure caught in an equally massive web. The more he struggled, the more the silken traps bound him, rendering him immobile against the backdrop of towering edifices.

From its immobilised position, the titan opened its mouth. From inside, Viraat fired an arrow. Yachay gasped as Viraat's arrow grazed Ayn, drawing a single drop of blood.

Tarkash opened his beak in amusement. "I admire how invested you are."

Viraat swiftly swung a device, capturing Ayn's blood mid-air. Attaching this blood-capsule to another arrow, he transformed it

into a guided weapon.

The homing missile and its duplicates chased Ayn relentlessly — exploding upon contact with anything but their intended target. She darted and wove, her silken strands a blur of motion as she sought to evade the homing arrows.

Explosions rocked the ruined cityscape, sending debris flying and obscuring the screens in clouds of dust. Yachay strained to catch a glimpse of Ayn's chhavi amidst the haze.

On one screen, he saw Viraat's view from within the titan's head — a nest of gears, levers and muscular pistons giving life to the colossal metal beast.

Like the spectators, Viraat's chhavi frantically scanned the dust-choked cityscape, searching for any sign of his rakshasi opponent. Other screens echoed his frustration, revealing the behemoth stomping, arms flailing in the hope to make lucky contact.

Tarkash turned to Yachay, a smirk tugging at his beak. "There is no way she can hide from those homing arrows trained on her blood."

Yachay's brow furrowed. After a moment, his eyes widened. He murmured:

"Loyal beasts, unleashed to hunt, Noses keen, never outrun,
Where may the prey its musk leave, That hunter falls and beasts
grieve?"

Suddenly, a flicker of crimson. One of Viraat's homing missiles struck the titan square in its armoured back. The vaanar pilot stumbled within the control room. His gaze whipped around, seeking the source of this betrayal.

As realisation dawned, the crowd gasped in unison. Tarkash

tilted his head, his gaze shifting from Yachay to the screens.

Ayn was nimbly scaling the titan's back, her silken strands aiding her ascent. The titan contorted its massive frame, massive limbs scrabbling in a futile attempt to dislodge her.

The homing arrows continued their relentless pursuit. Each one narrowly missed the agile rakshasi and instead struck vital components of the titan. Cogs spun free, levers snapped. The giant stumbled, seeking the support of a stone tower.

Ayn clambered to the titan's neck. Viraat swiped, making the enormous metal fist close around Ayn. Just then, another missile collided with the fingers. An explosion. Freeing Ayn in a burst of smoke and flame.

Freefall. Ayn twisted in midair. Her abdomen pulsed as it expelled a fresh volley of silken strands. They latched onto the titan's brow, and she swung, a precise pendulum, into its gaping maw.

Inside the control room, Viraat faltered, taken aback. Ayn darted across. She carved an escape route — her blades slicing through the chamber's rear wall.

Viraat lunged at Ayn, his hands closing around her lithe form. But as he dragged her back, a stray homing arrow, still in Ayn's pursuit, rocketed towards the titan's open mouth. Ayn wrenched herself free of Viraat's grasp, leaping towards her improvised exit with desperate speed.

The rogue missile detonated inside the control room, engulfing Viraat in a maelstrom of fire and shrapnel. The titan, its internal systems catastrophically compromised, shuddered and collapsed, its once-mighty form reduced to a heap of smoking ruin.

Ayn, having narrowly escaped the explosion, arced through

the air, her figure a striking silhouette against the backdrop of destruction.

Yachay let out a breath he forgot he was holding. “By the weavers!” he whispered. The tree’s exhalation tasted of burning metal and stone, an acrid residue of the spectacle. He looked at the Maya tree. *From what crucible did such a marvel spring?*

Nagas thrashed their tails in admiration, garuda wings flared in acknowledgement. Virat, untethered, joined the other vaanars in a chest-thumping applause. Ayn, gently lowered by the roots, opened her eyes to the praise of her new companions.

Tarkash slowly murmured the answer to Yachay’s riddle, more to himself than to anyone. “On the hunter’s heart!” His voice was tinged with the realisation of his delay. He tilted his head, a rueful smile playing on his beak as he appreciated Ayn’s quick wit and Yachay’s grasp of the challenge. *Discerning investment*, he congratulated himself.

Yachay’s response was a pursed-lipped closed-eyed nod — mirroring Daddu’s signature reward for a riddle well-answered. The similarity struck him. *Ayn was right*, he thought, as he touched the smooth laalmani on his chest. For a brief moment, the grief had lifted.

Surrounded by players enthusiastically analysing her games, Ayn beamed at Yachay through the crowd. He blinked rapidly to suppress tears and offered a smile that trembled at the edges.

—

The scent of coya and trampled grass lingered as Tarkash’s crew dismantled their camp with practised efficiency.

Yachay couldn’t tear his eyes from the Maya tree, its vibrant

screens now faded to a soft amber. He wondered: were the memories inside his head, too, stored on such transient material?

He turned to Ayn, his eyes still swollen, yet shining with a faint glimmer of wonder. “Your adventures in a mere day... They outshone the dreams that dusty parchments birthed in me over years.” He looked up at her. “So, what do you think they meant?”

“Meant?” Ayn asked, puzzled.

Yachay gestured towards the tree. “Your experiences — like any great book, surely there must be... a lesson. Perhaps about the cost of misunderstanding, or the horror of conflict...”

Ayn laughed, shaking her head. “Just faces in leaves.”

Yachay looked at her, frowning. “But a tale without a... point?”

The rakshasi regarded him for a beat, cerulean eyes glittering with fond amusement. She reached out, brushing a stray curl from his forehead. “It’s a diversion, not a parable.”

Yachay opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. Perhaps Ayn was right. Perhaps he had been too eager to seek a recognisable shape — as he did often in fleeting clouds.

“Like the white yaskshi said — asking questions of the big-dark-nothing,” Yachay mused.

Ayn’s head snapped up, her eyes widening and her nostrils flaring. “*The White Yakshi?* When...?”

Yachay’s stomach dropped as he realised his mistake. He’d been so caught up in the wonder of watching Ayn in Maya, he had forgotten the most urgent matter at hand — his unsettling encounter with Baluta.

He recounted the event in detail — Tarkash’s disturbing

proposition, the yakshi's cryptic words, his recruitment in the team. As he spoke, he watched Ayn's face harden, like it had only a day before when they were chased by the yakshi.

"A test?" Ayn's nostrils flared, her voice dropping in register. "No, it sounds wrong. Let's watch them for another day. If we feel something amiss, we're out of here."

Yachay's gaze softened, turning inward. He savoured Ayn's use of "we". The simple word whispered promises of belonging in a world increasingly unfamiliar. As he lifted his eyes to meet hers, a gentle flutter, sweet and unforeseen, stirred in his veins.

"Yachay!" a familiar voice called, startling them both.

He turned to see Vidha approaching. Ayn's warmth had eased the ache within him, just enough for him to muster a smile, shaky but true.

"Vidha! How did you—" Yachay's words hung unfinished. His gaze drifted to the camp, his hand rising to his mouth. He turned to Vidha again, realisation dawning. "The divyasantaan's auditions..."

Vidha parted her lips, but saw Ayn and stopped.

Yachay gestured towards Ayn. "Vidha, this is Ayn, the rakshasi whose mere rumour had cast upon us all a sleepless night. Can you believe it?" He summoned some amusement.

Vidha's gaze darted towards Ayn, her greeting stiff. "We are one seed."

Ayn completed the ritual phrase, her tone polite. "And one root."

An awkward silence fell. Ayn broke it. "I'll see to Johnji," she said to Yachay and walked away.

Yachay studied Vidha's hesitant smile. "I'm happy you made it. This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

Vidha shook her head. "I might have been the best among the orphans, but here, I'm nobody. They gave me multiple chances, but I failed each one. I'm only here because I begged to stay as the provision keeper's apprentice."

Yachay's brows knit together. "There's still time. You'll learn from them."

"I'm not participating," Vidha said flatly. "Seeing their skill... it shattered something in me. Maybe the next time the trials come around."

"But didn't you say that could be a decade away, or more?"

Vidha sighed. "Yes, and maybe even then, I cannot hope to match this kind's least adept. Time to make peace with who I am."

She paused, then added, "I wanted to apologise to you."

Yachay brow creased gently. "For what?"

"It wasn't up to me," she continued. "The others didn't want to. They thought you'd embarrass us."

"Didn't wha—"

"I didn't come to get you the other morning, but I did leave you some palamp..."

Yachay staggered, his hand groping blindly for support. His knees went soft and boneless, depositing him with difficult grace onto a nearby mossy rock.

"They... Yes, they were right. I might well have embarrass—" he heard himself say through the roaring vortex, his lips twisting in a broken smile.

"No, we embarrassed ourselves plenty," came Vidha's voice, still external to the storm encasing him. "But I feel our deceipts... they cancel out."

"Our deceipts?" He asked, staring at the ground through the glassy sheen that had returned to his eyes.

"You acted like you knew nothing about Maya." Vidha's gaze drifted to the side, her voice tight. "But here you are, selected as a champion, invited into the divyasantaan Tarkash's palanquin. That's a great honour." Her lips pressed into a thin line as she nodded. "And I have been tasked with the errand of escorting you to it..."

Vidha took a step towards him. "Now, would you prefer..." Her voice caught as she noticed the glistening streaks tracing his cheeks.

She sank to her knees before him. Her hand hovered in the space between them, then retreated, unsure.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to... I didn't even ask." She swallowed hard, her eyes searching his face. "I heard about Daddu. May his chhavi linger forever. What happened?"

Yachay could only shake his head.

—

Yachay settled into the palanquin, sinking into the plush cushions embroidered with hue-shifting thraak silk.

Ayn, seated across from him, regarded him with a playful curiosity. "She seemed to quite like you," she remarked, her tone laboriously nonchalant.

"Vidha? She is a nice person, yes." Yachay said, his attention drawn to the art adorning the palanquin's walls. It depicted a herd

of small, pretty animals. As he leaned closer, however, the image morphed, the animals dissolving into the petals of a massive flower.

He moved closer, his nose nearly touching the wall. The painted and embroidered forms were layered with tiny chitinous prisms.

He was oblivious to Ayn shaking her head, as if dismissing all import from her own remark.

Yachay crossed the palanquin, his eyes fixed on the wall. As he moved back, the flower dissolved back into the animals and the herd morphed into a sweeping landscape of rolling hills and distant mountains.

Without taking his eyes off the mural, he said to Ayn. “There’s so much that confuses me.”

Ayn released a breath she hadn’t realised she was holding. “Yeah, the chitin prisms refract light...” Her voice was hurried, the words a distraction.

“Oh no. Not this,” Yachay clarified. “Yesterday, you mentioned that Maya gives everyone their names. Does... does Maya ever give the same name to more than one person?”

Ayn’s posture straightened, her earlier unease forgotten. “Never,” she replied. “No two people will be given the same name by Maya.”

“That’s strange,” Yachay murmured.

“Why?”

“Because when I was small, I had six friends, and they were all called... Yachay.”

Ayn stared at him. What about this manushya wasn’t strange? Each revelation about his past only served to multiply the questions

she wanted to ask of him.

The palanquin's ceiling, a large aperture of translucent insect wings, opened with a soft whir. Dawn's first light flooded the interior, making it glitter.

Ayn leaned close to Yachay, her voice urgent. "Later. Best not to mention your lack of tethering experience in his presence."

Yachay blinked. A shadow fell across the opening as Tarkash descended, his wings folding neatly against his back as he landed on his perch.

"Welcome aboard, champions!" he exclaimed, his beak curving into a warm smile.

Ayn smiled back, heartily. "Where are we headed?"

Tarkash beamed at her. "The Dhaara market... to register for the trials."

FULCRUM

“A fissure in the wall beckons the vine.”

— Aplakist Proverb from Swapna Yug

THE GRID-LIKE interior of the residence was built for swinging vaanars, not slithering naags. Floor-to-ceiling vertical bars intersected with horizontal beams, creating a network of handholds and perches.

Karkotak’s scales rasped against the cold bars as he ducked and wove, a choreography of avoidance honed by necessity. The residence’s layout was optimised for vertical movement. The meagre floor surface denied him even the simplicity of going prone.

A closet lay atop an intersection. Its doors faced the ceiling — a reminder of its intended user etched in the very scent of its polished *thal*-wood. A vaanar could have dangled from a foot-grasp above, reaching down towards the doors. Their prehensile tail could be coiled around a nearby beam for stability.

Karkotak had never used it in the past two years. Instead, he had repurposed a lower intersection into a hanger. Dust on his robes was his subtle counterattack, a rejection of design that rejected him.

He reached for his robe, the fabric brushing against his scales. The sharp, sterile tang of skandha alloy clung to its fibres. He moved to a forked platform jutting out from the grid with the garment in his hands.

The split platform, meant for vaanars to recline with their limbs splayed, offered little stability for his sinuous form. He draped his robe around his shoulders and pinned the pleats.

Ducking around a low-hanging bar cluster, he recalled the young vaanar recruit whose misguided prank had been to grease this section days before his arrival. The lapse in discipline was soon rectified, but the subtle humiliation persisted, itching beneath his scales.

The temporary state-issued quarters would have been a privilege for any ranking member of the species they were designed for. For him, they were a veiled barb at his status as an outsider - no matter his standing.

He approached a trapdoor on the floor of his chamber. After tapping a polite announcement with his tail, he opened the door to the room below. The passage was meant to be jumped through, lacking any surface for his scales to hold onto.

Karkotak coiled his tail around a pole, hands gripping tight as he lowered himself. The ungainly descent was a daily ritual, an unwelcome necessity.

Yet today, he resolved not to let the structural taunt burrow beneath his skin. It was time to shed it. He had never thought of it as home, and after today's mission it won't be his dwelling either.

"*Qaasa*," Darib's voice was as sweet as his scent. Karkotak had pined for both during the boy's prolonged illness.

“Where does the *hukefe* go?” Darib asked, holding up the spice-scented teahouse miniature. His fingertip traced a path across his sprawling town of wooden blocks and moulded clay.

His amputated tail-stump twitched, a phantom echo seeking its vanished limb.

Darib’s chamber was a small oasis of softness amidst the apartment’s harsh angles. Disregarding protocol, Karkotak had set up soil-textured planks, allowing the boy to coil in ease. Vertical poles, cut out, furniture, moved aside, no permission sought in matters of his son’s comfort.

Karkotak stretched out beside him on a low, woven mat. “It’s right next to the centre of the canal. Here,” he said, pointing at a spot on his naaglet’s cartographic masterpiece.

He tapped a section of the floor beside the mat. A hatch clicked open, revealing a prosthetic tail stored within.

The expensive prosthetic was made of a series of wooden vertebrae discs linked by a supple resin spine, all encased in a layer of *lochak*, the carefully preserved moulted skin of Darib’s own scales.

He held out the base of the faux tail, where a metallic mechanism awaited attachment to the stump. With practised care, Karkotak fastened it on, watching it come to life.

Darib gazed at it as it twitched and swayed, responding to the subtle muscular impulses from his stump, amplifying them into flowing movements that mimicked the dexterity of a natural tail. Then a stillness fell over him.

“What happened?” Karkotak asked.

Darib’s body slumped as he laid down.

“When we visited *nigaasa*, he said...” he trailed off, and he fidgeted with a wooden block from his miniature map.

Karkotak leaned closer, his voice gentle. “You can tell me.”

“He said that you were lying about it. Tails don’t regrow.”

Karkotak caressed the boy’s twitching hood. It calmed down. “If your grandpa stopped scamming children, they’d perhaps let him out sooner.”

Darib’s cheeks bunched up in a smile, revealing a hint of dimple-slits. Karkotak reached out, his fingers hovering near the boy’s jawline, where his venom sacs should have been. Darib tilted his head, leaning into his father’s touch.

“Does it hurt?” Karkotak asked, his brow ridge dipping downward.

Darib’s chin lifted a fraction, his eyes meeting Karkotak’s. “Nothing hurts anymore, *qaasa*.”

The boy’s scales, once dulled and ravaged, now shimmered with a healthy sheen. The tincture was working, magnifying his resilience.

He’d staked his entire bargain with Adharvan on a cure he was sure couldn’t exist—yet Adharvan had delivered.

As proof, Adharvan recounted the tale of a naag who, despite a similar affliction, won the Divya Trials decades ago. After ascending, she concocted a cure for herself and became the ninth Kadru—Divya of cloud seeding.

Still skeptical, Karkotak sought confirmation from the most respected healers. They agreed it was theoretically possible: a powerful tincture, perhaps three doses, to mend what nature had

broken.

Karkotak coiled his tail around Darib, giving him a playful squeeze that elicited a smile.

He then slithered to the raised door, grasping the frame with both hands to haul himself up and through the opening.

“Your big day, father,” Darib said, his voice thrumming like the city outside. “I wish you all the success.”

Karkotak’s brow furrowed. *How did he know?* He had been so careful. Maybe — just small slips, hints dropped in the haze of preparation. A mention of moving homes, the final day at work, anticipation of a task... fragments for a clever boy to piece together.

He almost regretted the boy’s innocent blessing. Karkotak sought to keep Darib insulated from the day’s impending events. If his hatchling was meant for greatness, if he too would one day face the Divya Trials, let him do so unburdened by his father’s choices.

Forgiveness, if it were ever needed, would be a bridge they’d cross when the time came, when the echoes of this day faded from memory.

—

Karkotak emerged into the sprawling expanse of the *Baaradwar*, the twelve-gated police compound built atop a bridge shaped like two intersecting *gada* maces.

The morning air, sharp with the scent of river mist and oil-slicked chains, filled his lungs. His eyes caught a flicker of movement in the courtyard below: a squad of vaanar recruits, their light pink fur gleaming in the sun-dappled dawn, locked in a training exercise against a row of straw-stuffed naag dummies.

Lassos snaked through the air, wooden sticks thudded against unyielding forms. The rhythmic beat of practised aggression echoed against the bridge walls. The recruits abruptly froze as Karkotak's shadow fell across the courtyard.

Young faces turned upwards, eyes darting in confusion between their training dummies and the imposing figure before them: a naag in plain robes, lacking insignia, yet radiating authority.

A grizzled *subhedar* caught mid-shout, squinted for recognition before snapping into a belated salute. "Shreeman!"

"*Subhedar*," Karkotak acknowledged with a curt nod, his hood swaying gently. "At ease."

The recruits echoed the salute with a nervous stiffness. Karkotak offered no further words, his attention drawn to the edge of the bridge.

Below, the Dhaara river churned, its waters forking and rebraiding around large boulders. Across, Karkotak could see the entire Dhaara cityscape laid out like one of Darib's miniature maps.

Spires, factories, and breathing pharmacies stood like game pieces on a vast board — strangely less real at this distance than in his countless Divya Maya dreams.

His gaze drifted towards the distant market square, where the colossal garuda statue with gleaming metal wings pierced the horizon.

When it came down to it, his task was so simple, its innocuous beats etched into his mind with the clarity of a child's rhyme: girl, gruff, oil.

Yachay's eyes opened slowly, squinting against the blinding light. For a moment, the plush interior of the palanquin felt alien in the haze of his half-awake state.

As his vision adjusted, he saw Tarkash standing tall on his perch, head poking through the open sunroof.

Yachay blinked, disoriented, convinced he was seeing double. A colossal, ghostly echo of Tarkash's form loomed in the distance behind him.

Yachay rubbed his eyes. With wakefulness, understanding dawned. It wasn't a trick of heat and dehydration on his sleep-addled mind. A few streets behind, a monumental statue of a garuda stood, its metal wings spread wide, as if poised for flight.

Yachay noticed movement behind its large eyes that seemed to gaze out over the busy market. The details of its feathers and talons were visible even from this distance.

Tarkash's excited trill cut through Yachay's bewilderment. "That's my great-great-grand-aunt," he declared to Ayn.

Ayn leaned sideways, craning her neck to take in the colossal statue looming behind Tarkash. A playful smile spread across her face. "Why am I not surprised?" she murmured as Tarkash settled back onto his perch.

"You garudas hold such privilege," Ayn began, a hint of challenge in her voice, "yet you rarely win the Trials. Why is that?"

Tarkash chuckled and rolled up the mat curtains.

Yachay took in the vibrant sights of Dhara's bustling marketplace. A naag merchant arranged shimmering trinkets on a tattered cloth. Beside him, a rakshasi tended to a pulsating building. Its fleshy walls absorbed smoke billowing from nearby manushya

factories.

Their palanquin trudged through the traffic, the colhaans' hooves clattering against the cobblestones.

Yachay looked up as a garuda leaped from a balcony. Outstretched wings caught an updraft, carrying the garuda past the intersecting ring network of sky tracks overhead. Cable-palanquins glided along the rails, just above the tallest trees, their sails billowing against the wind.

Above towered the city's tallest spires, each crowned with a garuda perch dwarfing the palanquin stations. Nimble vaanars swung from knotted ropes connecting the lofty structures, blurring forms navigating dizzying heights with tails providing balance.

Tarkash's eyes glinted with a knowing light as he responded to Ayn. "The farther one sees in space, the less they see in time," he mused. "Justice and equality are invented to safeguard all from apex predators — us. Why would we want to build civilisations? Once someone does, we just have to retain our top perch, not play their games."

He gestured at a bank outside — a towering institution of black tourmaline rock, six sides with tall pillars, garuda sculptures perched atop, facing out in each direction.

"Unless you didn't start there," Ayn remarked, more a question.

"Well observed," Tarkash confirmed, but didn't linger on it. "We are somewhat similar — garudas and rakshasis."

Ayn bristled. "We are scavengers, not predators."

"Be as it may. But you don't see anything wrong with nature. Nor do you see any need to rectify natural laws. What is "right" if not a rectification of what is "true"?"

A hooded naag slithered past their cart, carefully avoiding the vaanar guards. Tarkash continued, “The naags, with their cynicism, lack the faith in civilisation’s promise.”

“I would argue that the garudas are to blame for that,” Ayn countered.

“Yes? Then what did you rakshasis do about it? Exactly my point, see. You tread slowly, cautiously, so as to not trample over anything. Get ten rakshasis to agree on anything.”

Ayn smirked. “I’d start with three: my mothers.”

Tarkash opened his beak and chuckled, then gestured ahead to Dangsa riding a colhaan. “The vaanars, on the other hand, agree too readily. They are bound to duty, to codes, to hierarchy. The outliers, the ones who try to think for themselves, are often beaten into conformity.”

Tarkash sighed. “The gandharvas, already so close to the Divya, are content with their role as keepers of knowledge. They observe, they collect, but rarely do they correct.”

He turned back to Ayn, his eyes blazing with a newfound intensity. “It’s the manushya, gifted with both necessity and invention, who win the trials so often. They have that one thing that all others lack.”

Ayn’s lips curved slightly. “And what is that?” she asked, indulging his thesis.

Tarkash pointed outside at the four block-long queue of Udayan refugees. “Hunger.”

Tarkash’s gaze lingered on Ayn, amused. “I see your skepticism,” he murmured. Then turned his attention to the crowded street across. A young girl, weary and dishevelled, broke

from a seemingly endless queue, her eyes scanning the bustling market for a solution.

“Child!” Tarkash called out, his voice cutting through the market’s clamour.

The girl approached the palanquin, trusting.

Tarkash leaned forward. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

The girl reached out a hand and caressed the garuda’s smooth beak. “Better,” she said in a small voice.

A smile crinkled the corners of Tarkash’s beak as he glanced at Ayn.

Turning back to the girl, he offered an affirming nod. “May your dreams take flight, little one.”

The girl pivoted and began retreating. Yachay called out, “Wait.”

She turned, curiosity flickering across her face. Yachay reached into his pocket. He leaned forward, gently placing something into her palm.

The girl’s fingers closed around the cool, solid weight. As she looked down, the glint of a vajra coin caught her eye.

Then, Moha turned and disappeared into the throng of the market. The palanquin lurched forward.

“Did you just give her your vajra coin?” Tarkash leapt off his perch, wings flaring. “A vajra is worth a hundred and eight shulikas! That coin was meant to fund your essential supplies for Ranga. Are you utterly da—?”

He cut himself off, realising he had lost composure. Ayn and

Yachay stared at him, stunned.

Tarkash opened his beak, then closed it again. He studied Yachay for a long moment. Ayn rose and crossed the palanquin, settling next to Yachay. Her eyes never left Tarkash.

Tarkash smoothed his ruffled plumage, settling back onto his perch. When he spoke again, his tone was clipped but restrained.

“Charity only weakens will. If you truly wish to help that child and those like her, then we must win the Trials. Once we reshape Samsaar, only then can we save lives.”

“I reckon we just did,” said Yachay. He looked out. A few streets away, the girl was making her way to a fruit stand.

—

Karkotak slithered forward, his large tail wafting smoothly across the pavement. His cobrahood lay folded discreetly behind, camouflaged against his dappled scales.

Across the road, a vaanar guard eyed Karkotak with suspicion. Karkotak stopped at a pharmacy run by a rakshasi. He came into his first position.

Everything was just as predicted, except — her.

The fruit seller stood idly by, but she was nowhere to be seen — the one constant, more dependable than the rock-cut buildings and the skandha monuments. His eyes scanned for her, jaw fully open, tongue flicking repeatedly to catch her scent.

Did she even exist? Or was she a figment of Divya Maya’s imagination?

So consumed by his panicked thoughts, he failed to notice the rikta scooter that had imploded into a dense orb, now hurtling

directly towards him.

At the last instant, his instincts kicked in, and he recoiled just as the metal sphere scraped his tail with a shrill screech before plunging into the nearby manhole.

Then he saw her.

Across the street, amidst the Udayan refugees, the girl moved with purposeful determination, distributing sunpears, palamps, and orbas from an overflowing sack. Her father beamed with pride. The gruff feasted on an orba by her side.

Karkotak slithered down the street, passing familiar landmarks that held the echoes of countless simulations. He moved past Moha, now giving away fruit at the very spot where she had died in every training scenario.

Behind him, vaanar police apprehended the naag thief.

Karkotak's tail twitched, avoiding the jona-oil puddle that had plagued him in training. Eyes locked forward, he flowed like liquid shadow to the garuda statue and rapidly ascended its spiral stairs.

At the top, Karkotak paused to survey the bustling market below. His eyes narrowed, spotting Tarkash's caravan.

Flicking his tongue, he focused on the palanquin with the thraak-silk emblem. A young manusya leaned out of the window, curiosity etched on his face.

Who was this manusya? How had he been absent in all the could-bes over months? Questions stormed in Karkotak's head. Everything familiar felt slightly off-kilter. Suddenly, nothing seemed measurable.

Yachay's eyes flicked to Karkotak before settling on the

towering garuda statue. He considered those immortalised in stone — what did the child, Tarkash, and Ayn understand that he did not? For, he felt no insatiable hunger driving him. He felt no urge to alter the course of the world.

THREE BREATHS

“The past doesn’t exist anymore, the future hasn’t happened yet, the sliver of the present is thinner than a single breath.”

— Kumarizha, the heart of the great body

YACHAY FELT the press of bodies around him, like a vast living organism pulsing with anticipation. They’d left their palanquins behind in the crowded lots, taking a path on foot toward the registration site.

Looming ahead, a repurposed catapult carrier pierced the sky. “Centuries ago, this was a devastating weapon of the war,” Ayn’s voice rumbled near Yachay’s ear.

“You mean the *Kalpa* war?” Yachay asked as his gaze spiralled upwards to the ruined watchtower atop the structure.

“Which other could it be?” Ayn rebuked him like an affectionate *guru*.

The back of the structure sloped downwards, nearly as wide as it was tall.

"It could launch a hundred catapults at once," Ayn continued. "Enough to decimate an entire forest."

The weapon dwarfed most of Dhaara's buildings, which were already taller than anything Yachay had ever seen before.

"After the war ended," Ayn gave Yachay context to the tree high above them, "a single Maya seed was planted on top of this death machine."

What once embodied the primal hunger to destroy now stood reclaimed by the tree — the very subject of the war. The tree had now grown massive. Its aerial roots streamed downward, like ropes, enveloping the structure.

A large aerial tendril had dropped to the ground and taken root, giving birth to a clone tree, even larger than its elder twin. The two trees seemed stacked atop each other.

Ayn leaned closer to Yachay. "See, the gandharva?" She nodded toward the dual-headed official tethered to the giant Maya tree in front of them. "One head scans the participant, the other pulls up your chhavi from Maya to speed up verification. Otherwise, tethering everyone in would take an eternity."

Yachay's eyes widened as he took in the gandharva's unique form, so strange yet familiar from the scrolls he had read. The two heads laboured in perfect synchronicity, bridging the physical and Maya realms.

Cantilevered platforms jutted out from the weapon, each hosting two to three gandharvas tethered to the Maya tree. Participants found their way to these stages from every corner of the city.

Commuters crossed swaying rope bridges that connected

the air palanquin stations to the platforms. Nearby, the aqueduct system snaked through the city, stone channels bound by metal, carrying a constant flow from the city's upper waterfalls. Cylindrical containers, filled with passengers, floated along this watery highway.

Yachay watched as one such vessel arrived at a designated stop created by an upward slope in the channel's trajectory. A weight system anchored it at the loading dock with a gentle bump. A team of manushyas helped travellers disembark.

Laughter echoed as children slid down chutes branching from the aqueduct, while others loaded packages onto the swiftly flowing water.

Spring-powered elevators jerked and hummed, carrying participants to the cantilevered platforms. Yachay marvelled at the massive springs, storing potential energy converted from the labour of countless yakshis.

Winding staircases carved into the very stone of the structure offered a more traditional route. Worn handrails, guided climbers toward the registration platforms above. Vendors on intermittent landings offered respite with a variety of refreshments for all *svaanka* species.

Yachay noticed the crowd's attention turning towards him. People were pointing and calling out excitedly, waving in his direction. He felt a moment of confusion, wondering why.

Then he caught their words—“*Divyasantaan!*” Realisation dawned as he followed their gazes to see Tarkash right beside him. The crowd parted before Tarkash, a mix of awe on their faces.

Tarkash took flight, landing on a raised platform just a few paces ahead. He stood before a gandharva registrar. “Tarkashetar,”

the garuda announced his Maya name.

The gandharva's unblinking eyes locked onto his form. On a large Maya screen, Tarkash's chhavi materialised—a shimmering mirror image moving just moments ahead of the real Tarkash.

"The chhavi leads by three breaths," Ayn explained the temporal offset to Yachay.

Tarkash's chhavi extended sharp talons, snatching a small clay pot from the ethereal stone table before it.

Yachay counted three steady breaths—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale—before Tarkash mirrored the action, his physical talons lifting an identical pot.

The garuda and his chhavi shook the pots. The chhavi then rolled six long, bone dice onto its table. Yachay watched the dice tumble, each marked with a unique arrangement of dots or glyphs, forming a unique equation.

Three breaths later, Tarkash rolled his own set of dice. Though each individual die differed from its counterpart on the screen, the resulting equations on both tables matched — tallying to the same sum.

"That's Maya's way of ensuring his chhavi is current," Ayn explained, looking at Yachay, whose jaw had dropped open. "It means the chhavi shares his memories, impulse and fate."

A ceremonial vaanar guard approached Tarkash, fastening a bracelet with a seed around the garuda's talon. Once tied, the seed sprouted delicate roots that burrowed painlessly into Tarkash's skin.

Tarkash raised his talon, feathers ruffling in jubilant celebration. A roar of approval erupted from the champions and other onlookers, washing over Yachay.

“That seed is required to enter Ranga for the Trials,” Ayn explained, her words nearly drowned out by the cheers.

One by one, Tarkash’s teammates stepped forward, their *chhavis* materialising on the screen, followed by the dice roll and seed implantation. The rhythm of verification was smooth, until Viraat, the vaanar champion, took his turn.

Instead of his current self, a gangly teenager appeared on the screen, staring at a set of dice already rolled and settled. A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd.

“Oh! He’s participated before,” Ayn whispered urgently, her grip tightening on Yachay’s arm. “That’s forbidden.”

Before Viraat could offer an explanation, a phalanx of guards descended upon him, their movements swift and decisive. He protested, his voice rising in indignation, but they dragged him away. Tarkash and his team looked on, in shock and confusion.

As Viraat stepped off the platform on the other side, Chandru intercepted him, whisking him away from the crowd. His voice, though hushed, dripped with barely concealed anger.

“How dare you lie to us?” Chandru snarled.

“I didn’t lie,” Viraat stammered. “I... I didn’t remember.”

“Didn’t remember?” Chandru scoffed, keeping his voice low to avoid attracting attention. “How could you forget something as significant as participating in the Divya Trials?”

“Nobody remembers the games,” Viraat shrugged.

“But surely you’d remember entering the games in the first place,” Chandru retorted, his tone unrelenting.

“My father was posted in Avval across Ranga,” Viraat

explained, his words tumbling out in a rush. “Now I vaguely remember... my friends and I... we jumped in once, just for a few moments... It’s all a blur now.”

Chandru’s grip tightened on Viraat’s arm, his voice barely a whisper. “You owe the *divyasantaan* four vajras that he has invested in you so far.”

Viraat’s face paled, his hands shaking. “Where do I get them?”

“How much do you have?” Chandru pressed on. “I will—”

“Chandru, enough!” Tarkash’s voice cut through the tension, smooth and measured. “He is still a champion.”

Tarkash approached, his eyes scanning the surroundings for eavesdroppers before addressing Viraat directly. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to become the team’s coach. Your experience in the Trials would be invaluable.”

Viraat, overcome with relief, crossed his shoulder in the vaanar salute. “Thank you, *shreeman*. It would be an honour.”

As the commotion settled, Ayn took a deep breath, steeling herself for her turn. She stepped forward onto the platform and announced herself. “Aynedhema.”

The gandharva’s eyes locked onto her, and her chhavi materialised. The dice clattered, equations resolved, a perfect match. A guard approached, fastening the seed bracelet around her wrist. The seed’s roots burrowed into her skin.

She turned to face the crowd, her eyes seeking out Yachay. As their gazes met, her smile widened. She raised her wrist to reveal the seed, now sprouting, in an invitation of a shared adventure: Your turn.

Yachay took a deep breath and stepped forward. The platform seemed to stretch out before him, an expanse of cold stone and polished metal.

He halted before the gandharva registrar, his mouth dry, his palms slick with sweat. The gandharva regarded him with an inscrutable gaze.

Up close, Yachay could see that the gandharva's eyes were larger and more protruding than those of any other species, with countless ommatidia sparkling across their shimmering irises. Elliptical pupils constricted and expanded, adaptive lenses zooming in to scrutinise every minute aspect of Yachay's features.

"State your name." The gandharva demanded. A translucent membrane flickered across his eyes.

"Yachay," he croaked.

Yachay waited for his chhavi to materialise on the screen, for the now familiar rite of dice and equations to begin. But the screen remained stubbornly blank, its amber-hued skin barren as the primordial void.

Yachay's breath hitched in his throat.

The gandharva's other head untethered from the tree. Each head took turns to bore into Yachay with an intense scrutiny that made him want to look away.

But he held their gaze with hope, curiosity and dread.

The twin heads traded roles — the previously tethered head stared on while the twin connected to the root. Still, the screen's endless potentiality remained inert.

Confusion rippled through the crowd as another gandharva

joined them on the platform, engaging in a hushed sidebar. Yachay couldn't catch their words. They spoke over each other, in rapid staccato that sounded like equations.

A third gandharva descended from the upper platform, gesturing curtly. The vaanars flipped Yachay around, first this way, then that, allowing the gandharva to scrutinise every detail of his face and body.

All three gandharvas tethered, their respective heads bearing down on Yachay. For a lingering moment, their bodies stiffened, as if channelling a torrent of information. The crowd held its collective breath.

Yet the screen remained maddeningly vacant. A fourth gandharva arrived, instructing the vaanars, "Just tether him, perhaps his chhavi is not updated."

The vaanars led Yachay to an aerial root. Sweat beaded on his brow, remembering Daddu's warning. As the root's tendril neared his navel, the immersed heads of all three gandharvas shouted in unison — a single utterance Yachay had only heard once before.

"Nirmaya!"

A low rumble rippled through the crowd, quickly blossoming into a seismic wave of hushed asides and muttered conjectures. Confusion clouded the faces of the officials, stealing glances at each other for clues.

In that sprawling moment of disorientation, Yachay's gaze frantically sought out Ayn amidst the onlookers, but she was nowhere to be found.

Then, she was suddenly by his side, her hand finding his and gripping it firmly as she tugged him away from the dais.

Without a moment's hesitation, she guided Yachay swiftly down the steps of the raised platform, steering him past the bewildered vaanar guards.

Their hasty retreat was abruptly halted by a resonant bellow that cut through the charged atmosphere like a blade: "Hold it!"

All eyes turned toward the source of the command - a young vaanar *hawaldar* whose apprehensive stance betrayed his own uncertainty over how to proceed. The other guards reacted instantly, their grips tightening around Yachay as they pulled him back from Ayn's protective grasp.

Ceremonial vaanar guards clad in ornate robes formed a hushed semicircle around him. The *hawaldar* muttered something to his captain, who stared back at him with widened eyes before offering a terse nod.

Ayn darted toward Tarkash, pleading urgently. "Please do something."

Tarkash stepped forward, inserting himself between Ayn and the vaanar guards. "What seems to be the problem, Captain?" He inquired in fluent Seni, his tone deceptively light even as it carried an undercurrent of quiet authority.

The vaanar captain's eyes narrowed momentarily. But that briefest hesitation was all the opening Tarkash needed to seize control of the narrative.

"Clearly our compatriot is indisposed," he declared, switching back to Kosh. "A bout of heat exhaustion, no doubt - the trials and tribulations of travel taking their toll, even on the stoutest of constitutions."

Tarkash clapped a formidable wing across the vaanar's

shoulder, his talons gripping with just a subtle hint of steel beneath the veneer of camaraderie. “I’m sure you can appreciate the need for rest and respite, my friend. We shall return on the morrow, once he has recovered his strength.”

For a lingering beat, the guard’s gaze bore into Tarkash’s own, a silent clash of wills playing out between them. Finally, he ground out a terse reply through gritted teeth, his frame visibly tense. “Step back... Shreeman.”

“Watch it, bandar!” Chandru’s rebuke cracked like a whip. “You’re addressing a divyasantaan!”

The vaanar captain’s eyes flew wide, and for a moment it seemed like he might back down. But after a steady breath, he lifted his chin, holding Chandru’s gaze despite the trepidation rippling across his features. His hand lifted in a sharp, authoritative gesture towards the *hawaldar* who had first raised the alarm — “carry on.”

“With all due respect...” he began, choosing his words carefully. “It is...a ‘nirmaya’ situation.”

Tarkash’s brow furrowed. “I heard the meister,” he said, his voice hardening. “But what does it mean?”

The vaanar captain stiffened, his words laced with a restrained caution. “You must forgive me, Shreeman, but I am not at liberty to discuss that with you. Now if you allow me, I am to report it...” He trailed off, gesturing for his *hawaldars* to clear a path.

As the guards began ushering Yachay away, Ayn found her voice again. “Wait! Where are you taking him?”

The captain turned back, his face softening as he addressed Ayn. “It’s standard procedure in... these situations,” he explained,

his tone sympathetic. “Just a formality, nothing to worry about.”

The vaanars guided Yachay with a light touch on his arms, their movements measured and civil. When Yachay stumbled, one of them steadied him gently, offering a cup of water. “For your refreshment,” he murmured, his voice courteous.

Ayn’s jaw clenched. Their impeccable manners only heightened her unease. “I’m coming too,” she declared.

The captain shook his head, regretful yet inviolable. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

Ayn’s eyes darted towards Tarkash.

Tarkash stepped forward, feathers ruffling with barely suppressed irritation. “How long will this...formality take, precisely?”

The captain’s shoulders slumped. “Truthfully, Shreeman, I cannot say for certain.”

Tarkash’s eyes flicked towards Chandru, a silent command passing between them. The manushya aide approached the vaanar captain, bowing slightly with hands extended, palms facing upwards.

The captain mirrored the traditional parting gesture, pressing his palms firmly against Chandru’s in a show of mutual respect. In that fleeting moment of contact, a weighty vajra coin disappeared from Chandru’s fist into the captain’s palm.

The captain’s eyes flickered subtly in acknowledgment. A barely perceptible nod towards his *hawaldar*.

The *hawaldar* stepped forward, securing a skandha bracelet around Yachay’s wrist. Two metal tags dangled from it. He detached

one, handing it to the captain who offered it to Ayn. She studied the engraved glyph symbol.

"I will keep you apprised," the captain stated, as he held Tarkash's gaze. "Per protocols."

Yachay offered no resistance, allowing the ceremonial vaanars to guide him along through the churning crowd. Amidst the turning bodies, he caught Ayn's gaze and held it for a fleeting moment.

He offered a small, reassuring smile, a fragile attempt to convey a confidence he didn't quite feel. He wished he could share the hope that had ignited within: Daddu must have foreseen these events, else why urge him to register in the first place?

Ayn smiled back, her eyes conveying a silent promise to ensure his well-being. She followed at a discreet distance, her lithe movements deftly parting the streams of people.

Johnji leapt out of Ayn's dorsal pouch and ran behind Yachay, grabbing at his leg. Yachay tried to lay Johnji down, but the little creature stubbornly climbed up to his shoulders.

The crowd's collective attention shifted like a flock of startled birds, their focus back to the rigmarole of bureaucracy continuing its inexorable cadence.

High above, on a platform, a naag's hood slipped back. Karkotak's eyes narrowed to intense focus as his forked tongue flicked outward. His focus darted from Tarkash to Yachay, observing as the vaanars guided the manushya into an elevator.

Ayn watched as the vaanars ascended with Yachay to a loading dock and disappeared into a cabled palanquin, Johnji clinging to Yachay's shoulders.

Meanwhile, the vaanar captain, his ceremonial garb billowing

behind him, swiftly ascended a series of ramps towards Karkotak's platform. With a powerful leap, he landed beside Karkotak. After offering a swift, perfunctory salute, he rushed towards the centre of the official police terrace.

There, the captain reached for the dangling roots of the upper Maya tree. Leaping onto a heavy branch, he hung upside down, aerial roots cradling him. A mycorrhizal tendril connected to his navel, his eyes fluttering closed as he merged with the root-network.

The vaanar captain materialised in the grand halls of Baaradwaar Fort's police headquarters within Maya. The core structure maintained the emblematic vaanar grid-like interior with a network of handholds and perches.

However, these skeletal frameworks no longer adhered to rigid linear planes. Instead, they spanned endlessly in every direction without floors or ceilings. They undulated in hyperbolic arcs, twisting into geometries that shouldn't have been physically tenable.

From an arch above, a *shatrujit*, a senior officer, appeared, his presence commanding immediate attention. The captain saluted, trying not to look too much like a tourist.

“State your emergency,” the *shatrujit* demanded.

The captain met the *shatrujit*'s gaze. “It's...” He hesitated for the scantest moment as the meaningless words formed in his mouth. “It's a nirmaya... situation.”

The *shatrujit*'s brow furrowed. “What d—” A flicker of confusion passed over his features before he quickly masked it. “A grave matter, indeed. Just for the record, elaborate.”

The captain narrowed his eyes. “I must confess, *shreeman*,

I'm not entirely privy to its implications. My training emphasised immediate escalation."

"Indeed." The *shatrujit* still refused to betray any sign of ignorance. "And what did you do before reporting?"

"We detained him as per protocol." The captain responded, uncertain.

The senior's eyes widened imperceptibly - *so it was a him, not an it.* "Understood. Secure the detainee until further notice. Dismissed."

"Avati Gaman," the captain acknowledged, bowing his head. In an instant, he vanished, leaving no trace of his presence.

The moment the captain was gone, Shatrujit's confident facade crumbled. A scroll materialised before him, hovering in the air like a particularly smug piece of parchment.

He scanned through the legalese frantically for this unprecedented code. Finding the relevant passage, his brow furrowed further—it offered no answers, just protocol. Typical.

Taking a deep breath, the shatrujit steadied himself. "Avati Gaman," he muttered, and he too vanished from the grand halls.

In the physical Baaradwaar Fort of Avanti, the shatrujit untethered from the Maya tree, a grimace on his face. He swung up the gridways, bursting into his superior *subhedar*'s workspace.

The subhedar raised an eyebrow. "So, it's 'need-to-know,' and I don't need to know?" The subhedar inquired.

"Indeed, shreeman," the shatrujit replied. "Your ability to not know is a testament to your leadership."

The subhedar's eyes narrowed. "Quite so," he murmured, then

read protocol, and quickly tethered.

He stood before Veerbhanu, a higher-ranking general, his dark maroon fur a decoration of his battle-scarred past. The subhedar kept his gaze lowered, not daring to meet Veerbhanu's eyes.

"Did all the gandharvas present confirm this?" Veerbhanu demanded.

The subhedar nodded sharply, his posture rigid. "Y-yes, shreeman," he stammered as he shouted the confirmation.

When the subhedar dared to glance up, he felt his blood run cold. Veerbhanu's scarred lip twisted into a scowl that made the subhedar's heart stop. He dismissed the subordinate with a curt nod, the subhedar's pulse pounding in his ears as he hurried to escape Veerbhanu's oppressive presence.

In a blink, Veerbhanu found himself escalating the report to the head of command, the maha-garuda Makrand. The Maya space warped around Makrand's imposing presence, his perch a summit to the formidable Veerbhanu's now cowering form.

"Protocol indeed suggests that you need to escalate it further to the maha-divya. Seems like a vestige of some bygone era, shreeman," Veerbhanu offered.

Makrand dismissed him with a distracted wave of the wing. He had two emergencies too many for the day. Unlike all his subordinates, Makrand knew exactly what nirmaya meant. Only he could not imagine how a matter so trivial merit the great divya's attention.

He untethered from the Maya tree and turned to his manushya scribe. "See what illumination can be excavated on this manushya named 'Yachay'."

The scribe nodded. Makrand's gaze drifted to the window, where the sprawling expanse of Avval stretched out before him.

"And put in a prayer for an urgent audience with maha-divya Hidamma," Makrand added.

The scribe's hand stilled. An audience with Hidamma was never petitioned lightly. First, the great dean's murder and then this arcane protocol. Was there an intimation of looming war pulsing beneath these strange eddies? Or did the turbulence presage something more insidious?

The scribe found his throat constricting as endless half-formed doomsday scenarios bloomed in the peripheries of his mind's eye.

VIDHI VIDHAATA

“Life matters. Lives don’t.”

— Divyendra, the mind of the great body

HIDAMMA STOOD at the precipice, the wind whipping through her waist-length black hair interwoven with the glowing fungal crown on her head. Amber eyes, flecked with emerald, surveyed the vast expanse below.

Taller than any manushya, yet shorter than most of her formidable pratigya gender, Hidamma's broad muscular frame bore the unmistakable blend of her manushya and rakshasi heritage.

She looked scarcely older than she had when she emerged victorious from the Trials half a century ago. The panchamrit flowing through her veins, delayed cellular senescence and counteracted even the subtlest entropic effects of chronological decay.

Freckles on her dark bronze skin sparkled softly in the fading light. The photosynthetic symbiont wrapped around her solar plexus like a living scarf — absorbed sunlight to sustain her during periods of rest. Above her toned thighs, auxiliary heart-like pumps

thrummed constantly, fueling her agile mind.

The dorsal pouch on her back had hardened into a protective ossified carapace — the sacrifice made by all *pratigya*, sworn to defend.

Standing at the highest peak of the mountain ring surrounding Divyalok, the ocean glistened in the distance, visible through gaps in the clouds beneath her feet. Hidamma jumped.

Immortality eroded urgency. A freefall, Hidamma found, was its antidote — a dozen heartbeats of exhilarating surrender, a visceral reminder of fragility.

Wind roared past her. The world below transformed rapidly, a shimmering expanse collapsing into a churning vortex of whitewater.

Her mind sharpened, the imminent danger focusing her on the choices ahead. As salty spray filled her nostrils, clarity crystallised. Divyendra's tutelage resonated from memory: "Life matters. Lives don't."

A massive winged form descended from above, its shadow eclipsing Hidamma. Three pairs of legs, each with a talon as long as her forearm, grasped her shoulders, waist and legs in a firm smooth grip, arresting her plunge without jolting impact.

Whirring wings filled the air as Mihi, Hidamma's *vaahana* mount, soared upwards. Its four iridescent wings, each spanning wider than a house, beat the air with a frenzied leathery thrum.

Light gleamed off Mihi's sleek, segmented body. Its exoskeleton, a translucent armour of chitinous plates, revealed the complex movement of muscles beneath, propelling them higher into the sky.

Mihi's eyes were multifaceted clusters of shimmering orbs,

reflecting an intelligence beyond instinct. For, Mihi was an extension of Hidamma, connected by psionic impulses.

Hidamma's will alone guided Mihi's flight—wings thrumming, body tilting. Yet her subtle physical echoes involuntarily mirrored the vaahana's movements: a turn of gaze, a tilt of head, a flexed finger.

Together, they turned towards Divyalok, their island home.

The island's grey basalt cliffs appeared unassuming from afar—like a burnt hollow stump of a tree. But as Mihi crossed over the shadowed line, the stony facades transformed.

Sunlight fractured through crystalline veins of iridium and osmium, painting the concave interior in soft dusty hues of rose and seafoam. The rocky slopes shimmered like terrestrial nebulae.

Hidamma steered Mihi past the sentient Chaitanya waterfall, streaming in a ceaseless, gravity-defying loop—portions of the liquid ascending in reverse toward the torrent's crest.

They soared over Annapurna's cantilevered terraced food gardens—layered tiers of vibrant life suspended by slender cabled arches, the verdant plots appearing to float weightlessly.

These were laboratories, innovating for not only the 2674 divya residing on this vast island, but for all of Samsaar. They were the living legacy of the first Annapurnas who had transformed this once-barren island into a thriving oasis.

The kinetic, wind-driven observatory of the divya Pushan slowly reoriented its ringed aperture “petals” as Hidamma swooped past.

In alcoves ahead, Sushrut's rhomboid healing habitats connected to the Kalpa Tree's roots via osmotic channels, allowing

symbiotic exchange of fluids.

Other divya, astride their unique custom vaahanas, crossed them. Each vaahana, the only individual of its species to ever exist. A vaanar divya Kumarizha, mounted on a winged animal, acknowledged Hidamma as he joined her flight path.

Below, the colossal Kalpa Tree dominated the landscape, its apricot-hued trunk and fractal-branching ochre boughs stretching towards the sky.

Pale wisteria tendrils, extensions of the tree's root system, descended like a protective veil over a pavilion on its side. The pavilion was constructed from curved aerogel arches unfurling like inward curving blades of grass, closing and opening to the sky like a flower.

Beneath the pavilion, silken ropes hung like vines. Kumarizha, leaping from his winged reptilian mount, grabbed a rope and swung upwards, landing nimbly on the pavilion's aerogel column.

Hidamma issued a mental command, and Mihi began a controlled descent towards the pavilion's landing terrace. Mihi banked, rotating Hidamma upright as they aligned with the terrace.

Her leading foot touched down, her stride unbroken as Mihi's grip released. The pavilion's oval entrance stretched open, admitting Hidamma in. The entrance contracted shut behind her.



In the large hall, geometry and biology intertwined, converging on the living Maya tree at its heart. Gnarled aerial roots traced serpentine paths across the floor. Branches arched overhead as roots plunged underfoot, connecting this Maya tree to the vast Kalpa tree beyond the enclosure.

Around the tree's base, the twelve divya found repose attuned to their evolutionary distinctiveness — Sushruti cradled in a fungal couch, Varuna perched upon a curved branch, Kumarizha balanced on a split perch, his tail an eager pendulum.

Resin screens flickered between the Maya branches, a constellation of potential futures. One screen dominated, displaying Divyendra's gaze — a single window framing this very gathering from his nearby hermitage.

A raised channel cut through the hall, Chaitanya's luminous stream meandering through its curved path. The liquid forked, one branch arcing back to where it entered, while the other flowed directly beneath the Maya tree's flickering screens before exiting up ahead.

Annapurna, the divya of abundance, invited the council to tether.

Divyendra, the overseer of all realms, did not require a physical tether to the roots. With an inscrutable power that even the other divya did not fully comprehend, he melded his consciousness into any Maya at will.

The other twelve divya tethered into the specialised root network — the Divya Maya.

The world around them shifted, reality blurring at the edges like a painting left too long in the rain. They found themselves amidst the ruins of a city in the eastern regions of Vayu. But it was not the Vayu they knew.

Arrows whistled overhead, vanishing mid-flight. A squadron of soldiers, their faces contorted in fear and determination, charged forward, then strobed out of existence, their ranks and direction

shifting with each pulse.

Looters picked their way through the carnage, their desperate hands grasping at the meagre possessions of the fallen. As one reached for a glinting trinket, their form dissipated. The dead swapped positions flickering through endless could-bes.

From the tallest remaining tower, the divya surveyed the devastation below. A massive skandha ball thundered into a hospice across the street. Yet, in the next heartbeat, the building stood untouched, while its neighbour burst into flames.

A once-proud school reduced to rubble, a public square transformed into a makeshift graveyard, a child's toy lying in the dust.

Shimmering wisps of probability coalesced into startling certainty: the eastern provinces of Vayu lay in ruins, its people broken or dead, its streets choked with bitter smoke of burning dreams.

"I see we're in eastern Vayu," Pushan observed, gesturing towards a spiral rock-cut temple that flickered between ruin and its distinctive, recognisable splendour. "But when?"

"Two thousand four hundred and seventy eight days from today," Hidamma replied.

"Seven years to the day," Niririn's first head calculated, while his second surveyed the degree of certainty around, "As sure as the tides roll in."

"A hundred and fifty thousand dead," Hidamma asserted.

Vishwakarma, architect and crafter of Samsaar's vast infrastructure, focused his gaze upon the flickering visions. "What is going to cause this?" he asked.

“This creature,” Hidamma said, opening her palm. A thraak — a plump, mottled insectoid, scuttled across her skin. Its purple abdomen curved protectively around a cluster of spiked, bristled limbs. Its red eyes gleamed along the curved brow ridges of its head, armed with sharp pincers.”

She closed her fist around it and opened it again. The thraak had vanished.

“Let’s see how,” she said and nodded.

The visions shifted, transporting the divya to a sun-dappled forest. A river gurgled nearby. Hidamma led them to the water’s edge, where an oily sheen marred the surface.

“This is one year from today in western Vayu. Notice anything amiss?” she asked.

The divya paused, their senses straining. Birdsong filled the air, yet an unsettling silence lingered.

“The thraak,” Annapurna pointed out. “Their high-pitched chittering is gone.” The thraak’s incessant mating call was the background static to any rakshasi’s life. Its absence was far louder than its presence.

“Indeed,” Hidamma confirmed. “One year hence, the last thraak in the region will perish.”

Annapurna gestured towards the skandha factories across the river. “Their toxic waste caused it,” she observed, her tone not accusatory.

Varuna, the divya of the five minerals, still spoke with preemptive defence. “The skandha industry is Samsaar’s lifeblood.”

“Yes,” Hidamma agreed, “and its role in thraak’s extinction

is minor. Shutting them down would be futile. Other causes have been at play for decades.”

She nodded at all the divya. Hues strobbed, and they found themselves back in the pavilion chamber, untethering. On the resin screens, images shifted, showing villages and towns bustling with activity.

Yet in each scene, the same phenomenon played out. Amidst the lush foliage, between the crevices of mud roads, and even along the grouted seams of city buildings, a frenzied movement caught the eye. Thousands of small *flitt* insects appeared to be rapidly multiplying, their pale bulbous bodies proliferating at an exponential, unseemly rate.

“The thraak prey on flitt,” Hidamma explained. “With their natural predator gone, the flitt population will multiply, unchecked. All of you know what happens next. The solitary insects will transform, and become gregarious.”

She gestured toward the screens, where the multiplying flitt seemed to morph, their wings growing larger, bodies paler, mandibles more pronounced.

“Driven by their swelling numbers,” Hidamma noted, “they’ll transform into a swarming, locust phase.”

She tugged an aerial root, the tendril snaking through her carapace’s opening. The other divya followed, minds merging once more with the Divya Maya.

A deafening roar engulfed them as they materialised in the middle of a massive, swirling swarm of flitt-locusts. “At this density, they start consuming each other,” Hidamma’s voice echoed, her presence engulfed by the oppressive darkness.

Thunderous droning filled the air as dense clouds of locusts, their mandibles a blur of motion, shuttled past, devouring everything in their insatiable path. “Before long,” Hidamma continued, “they will devour it all.”

Time lurched forward. Lush fields of grain vanished in moments, leaving skeletal stalks. Once-flourishing orchards stood bare, trees ravaged.

Another leap through time. The divya stood in a village square, the air heavy with famine and the stench of decay. Granaries gaped empty, emaciated figures stumbled through the streets, and flies swarmed bloated cattle carcasses.

The divya watched as a mass exodus unfolded. Hollow-eyed families, their meagre possessions strapped to their backs, trudged along dusty roads from the western regions towards the east of Vayu.

Then, inside Vayu’s house of commons: Politicians argued, their voices shrill with polarising blame and opportunistic lies.

Job markets collapsed, the economy dwindled. Waaznayak, the divya of innovation, flicked his tongue, tasting the acrid tang of hatred in the simulated air of the city.

Small skirmishes erupted, fueled by prejudice and desperation. Buildings burned, screams pierced the night, and soon, the riots descended into a full blown civil war.

The vision blurred, plunging the divya into darkness - stale air thick with fear pressed in. Muffled sobs surrounded them as their eyes adjusted to the gloom...they were crammed beneath floorboards with terrified civilians.

Heavy boots marched overhead. Gasps caught, breaths held. The boards ripped open, hot light and armed manushyas barging in.

Annapurna's eyes darted from the militia to the ones screaming beside her. In the dim light, she could barely tell them apart. They were all manushya from Vayu, and yet one group now lived in mortal fear of the other.

A hulking figure, face twisted in a mask of hate, swung his bludgeoning mace to strike a woman.

“Stha.” Parthiv’s voice commanded.

The world froze. The bludgeon hung suspended in mid-air, the attacker’s sneer frozen in place. The woman’s terrified eyes stared into the void.

Parthiv, his face ashen, met Hidamma’s gaze. “This is sufficient,” he whispered, gathering himself. He untethered, disappearing in a shimmer of light. The others followed suit.

Back in the pavilion, the twelve figures rematerialized, their expressions grim. Hidamma, her voice bureaucratic, yet authoritative, addressed the council. “Thraak extinction, flitt-locust swarms, famine, mass migration, and societal collapse. This is the future we must prevent. With *pitamaha*’s permission, I will now present the solution.”

On the central screen, Divyendra’s hand unfurled. Hidamma nodded and proceeded.

“Thousands of manushyas are currently journeying to Ranga for the Divya Trials,” she continued. “They come from the westernmost parts of Samsaar, where the thraak still thrive.”

The screens displayed a multitude of travellers — mostly young manushyas, alone and in families — making their way eastwards.

“Unbeknownst to them,” Hidamma’s voice filled the chamber, “they carry the future of Vayu under their feet — thraak eggs and

larvae clinging to their soles. If we guide a sufficient number of them through western Vayu, the thraak will be reintroduced along their route, averting famine and war.”

“Simply closing the main route would divert all traffic to Vayu,” Vishwakarma, interjected. “But that would overwhelm the region’s infrastructure.”

“And create a cascade of unintended consequences,” Hidamma added. “A subtler nudge is required. The western travellers — the ones carrying thraak would prioritise cheaper routes. A minor toll increase of five shulikas will divert the cost conscious participants through Vayu. Those from other regions, less price-sensitive, will continue via the main route.”

“Any fallouts?” Baksha, the divya of labour, inquired.

Hidamma inclined her head curtly. “The thraak’s reintroduction in its native Vayu will enrich the soil there, a rapid anabolic boost to agriculture and silk production. However...” Her voice was as cold as chiseled stone. “Economically boosted towns will encroach south, displacing over three thousand rakshasis from Nimba and Goro forests. Four hundred to four hundred and twelve will perish - a necessary sacrifice.”

“Surely,” Parthiv ventured, “after reintroducing the thraak, we could make one additional nudge to prevent displacing the rakshasi displacement as well?”

Hidamma waved her hand once, dismissively. “This is a path of minimal intervention.” She met Parthiv’s concerned gaze. “The reintroduction of the thraak is the least disruptive path to averting Vayu’s collapse. Any further attempt to curate optimal outcomes invites unintended catastrophic consequences we cannot control.”

“But the village encroachment is years away?” Parthiv started. Hidamma’s curt blink confirmed it. “Perhaps closer to that crisis, we could—”

“No,” Hidamma said, daring him to push the matter.

Sensing Parthiv’s discomfort, Annapurna tried to explain. “Steering too many variables invites ripples we cannot predict or contain. Where do we stop nudging before we’ve essentially taken over living people’s lives for them?”

Hidamma’s gaze swept the assembled divyas. “I assume we are all in favor of proceeding?”

Nine palms turned skyward in assent. Parthiv and Varuna, the garuda divya, remained motionless.

“It is your first vote, mahadivya Parthiv.” Hidamma’s voice dripped with disdain. “Are you abstaining or protesting?”

Parthiv closed his eyes briefly before responding. “I abstain... for the reasons stated.”

“You understand abstaining has no impact on the outcome?” Baksha reminded. “It’s merely symbolic.”

“Yes and no,” Parthiv acknowledged.

Hidamma’s glare could have cut diamond. She turned her gaze towards Varuna.

“I protest this intervention, here and now.” Varuna declared, his golden eyes smouldering with conviction.

All eyes turned to the garuda divya, some in seeming expectation of his objection, others with surprised curiosity.

“In four moon’s time,” Varuna offered, “my son Tarkash is destined to triumph in the Trials at Ranga. Any nudge of this

magnitude, before he joins my side, risks altering that future.”

“It does not,” Hidamma countered. “I have analysed the probabilities, anticipating your objection. This barely perturbs the likelihood of your progeny’s ascent.”

Varuna’s feathers ruffled. “But it does, however minutely. Tarkash’s triumph is so immutably set that even Divya Maya sees no other outcome. I cannot allow anything to weaken that certainty.”

Niririn, the gandharva divya, angled his dual faces toward Varuna, one reflecting understanding while the other conveyed perplexity.

“In the absence of the council’s unanimous vote, the dissenting vote may choose the decider,” Niririn read out the rights patiently. “Who would you have cast the veto? Pitamaha Divyendra alone? The all-knowing Chaitanya? Or a full assembly of all divyas in Divyalok?”

The gandharva turned to face the council, swivelling his other head in position to focus intently on Varuna. “Excluding this council and the recently vacated seat, there are 2,660 divyas across Divyalok. To overturn our decree through protest, you must sway 1,773 of them to uphold your dissent.”

Varuna weighed his choices. Opposing Hidamma’s will was daunting, but rallying two-thirds of Divyalok’s divyas was an impossible feat in this case.

They had little incentive to risk Samsaar’s stability for one garuda’s ambition. Vayu’s economic opportunities and the toll windfalls for their acolytes only sweetened the pot. And then there was the envy — his son was on the cusp of becoming only the sixth divya progeny to ever ascend.

He glanced at the Maya screen, at the unflinching hands of Divyendra. Rarely had they disagreed, yet doubt tugged at Varuna's mind. He could not put a talon on it, but the feeling persisted that Divyendra did not share his unmitigated eagerness over Tarkash's triumph at the Trials, despite his words to the contrary.

Which left Chaitanya — the collective mind of all divyas past — had long favoured Varuna's pursuits. With the recent *samadhi* of his dear friend mere moons ago to join the flowing consciousness, Chaitanya was even more likely to flow in his direction.

"Chaitanya," Varuna declared. "I invoke the veto of the endless."

Annapurna approached the raised channel through which Chaitanya flowed. She released a plain sphere into the conscious stream that trisected the hall.

The orb traced the main channel to a diverging fork, hesitating between paths. Then, slowly it angled into the branch flowing directly beneath the Maya screens.

Varuna launched off his perch, standing tall as his feathers ruffled in agitation. Continuing upstream, the orb ascended towards the canopy, where the stream expelled it from the channel into a receiving tub.

"Chaitanya has spoken," Annapurna announced, her voice echoing through the chamber. "The thraak reintroduction will proceed."

Varuna stared angrily at the central screen. Divyendra's gaze dimmed and winked out without further comment.

In the reflective blackness of Maya, Makrand bent his body in

a deferential bow, his wings folding behind him. His form seemed to glide weightless, mirrored in the obsidian-like surface beneath him.

Hidamma, her silhouette elongated in the reflective expanse, acknowledged his presence with a subtle blink of her amber eyes. The only illumination in this void came from the faint glow emanating from Hidamma's body.

"The Shepaavan have called a truce with the Rajgeer, just as you wished," Makrand noted, as if simply reporting the weather.

Hidamma's gaze fixed on him, her patience already wearing thin.

"Guru Avakirna has been murdered in Mythra University," he continued.

"Matter exchanged hands," Hidamma intoned, her voice carrying a hint of dark amusement, as if privy to a sinister secret.

Makrand hesitated, then dared to ask, "Was this...foreseen?"

Hidamma's eyes narrowed, pinning him in place. Makrand immediately regretted his question, realising that he had overstepped. He lowered his gaze, his wings twitching in a gesture of apology.

"Preparations for the Divya Trials are on schedule," he said, recovering.

"New directive," Hidamma stated. "Get the state of Avanti to increase their highway's toll by five shulikas."

"That will reroute many through Vayu."

"Yes." Hidamma's tone brooked no further discussion.

"One final thing, great protector of all svaanka." He waited for her blink of approval before continuing. "Protocol requires I inform

you — an untethered nirmaya was discovered and detained.”

He elaborated cautiously, voice tinged with anxiety that he risked wasting the mahadivya’s time on trivialities. “A young manushya.”

Hidamma waited — a prompt for more details.

“He gave his name as...Yachay,” Makrand stated.

The name shattered the black void. Jagged shards of blue exploded as a towering obsidian peak loomed before her. At its base, a small figure burned like a torch. They raced uphill, pursued by roaring shadows. Hidamma hurtled through a raucous village celebration, but it descended into screams and chaos. A one-eyed, plump-shelled reptile screamed. Urgent whispers like scuttling insects, furtive glances, the acrid scent of scorched zylith, a crimson thread tied to her wrist, tightening.

Hidamma’s eyes snapped open, her pupils smouldering pits.

Makrand watched her closely, but her face remained an inscrutable slate. She stood motionless, auxiliary hearts pounding.

“He is dangerous,” Hidamma said. “I will deal with him.”

Makrand’s wings ruffled. Not wars, not assassinations, yet this young manushya pauper... He couldn’t fathom what danger he could pose to warrant Hidamma’s direct presence. He swallowed his confusion, clicking his beak. “As you wish, mahadivya.”

With a deep bow, he murmured “Avati gaman” and vanished.

Hidamma untethered. As the tendrils of the tree retreated, a stubborn knot came undone within her.

A sister vessel that had sailed a different route, suddenly arrived, demanding recognition. But from which self did the primal

rage flare? She couldn't tell.

SEVERE PUNISHMENT

“To outsmart the hunter, become the forest.”

— Sheshan, The First of the One-Eyed Turloth

YACHAY GASPED awake, his eyes straining against the utter darkness surrounding him. The chill of the damp stone seeped into his bones as he scrabbled against the smooth floor of the deep well.

A faint snore echoed from high above—the lone sound in the oppressive silence. Yachay peered upwards. A silhouetted form on a ledge far overhead shifted in slumber—a solitary vaanar guard, temporarily lulled by the monotonous darkness.

Yachay inhaled sharply and launched himself at the nearest wall. Fingers and toes clawed for purchase on the traitorously smooth stone. Using his momentum, he propelled himself toward the opposite wall, but the slick surface betrayed him. He slid back to the floor with a soft thud.

The vaanar lazily opened an eye and peered down, adjusting to the darkness as he spotted Yachay’s prone form. Yachay yelled, his voice echoing in the abyss, but the guard went back to sleep. It was business as usual in the bowels of the *baaradwaar*.

A loud hiss pierced the air. Yachay looked up as mists swirled above him, the acrid scent filling his nostrils and making his head swim. The mist coalesced, taking shape — a hazy, wavering face. *Daddu?*

Yachay jumped to his feet and ran to embrace his grandfather. But Daddu dodged, his movements fluid and swift.

Daddu slid down the slick stone wall. With a thud, he landed in front of Yachay. Daddu's features solidified, though still distorted, like a reflection in rippling water.

A sudden wave of drowsiness washed over Yachay. His eyelids grew heavy. He swayed, then slumped to his knees, unable to resist the irresistible pull of slumber.

When his eyes fluttered open again, Daddu's face hovered an arm's length away. Yachay tried to recoil, but his body refused to obey, held captive by a strange lethargy. A strange fragrance wafted around him, leaving his senses utterly disoriented.

“Daddu...” he murmured, his voice slurred and thick.

“My dear?” Daddu’s voice was tentative. His gaze flitted across Yachay’s face, as if struggling to piece together a fragmented memory.

A flicker of hope ignited within Yachay’s fogged mind. “Daddu?” *It can’t be. It’s me...*”

Daddu’s brow furrowed. “You...” he murmured, his voice laced with a strange, probing curiosity. “It’s good to see you... son.”

“But I saw...how did...” Yachay’s eyes went wide as he fought to hold Daddu’s mercurial gaze.

“I will get us out of here,” Daddu’s voice was now a soothing

balm.

“Yes... but wh—”

“Where would you like us to go?” Daddu’s tone was oddly detached, yet coaxing.

“Home... Let’s go home.”

“Yes, of course” Daddu blinked. “We must... I am feeling sick... can’t remember anything... where’s home...”

Utter bewilderment smudged Yachay’s features. Hot tears welled in his eyes.

“What were you doing with divyasantaan Tarkash?” Daddu delivered the abrupt question with surgical precision.

Yachay frowned, blindsided by the interrogative shift. “He... saved me. You know him?”

“Saved you, how?”

“We were being chased by...” Yachay faltered, fixing Daddu with an anguished look. “What does it matter now, Daddu? You are —”

“Answer me, boy!” Daddu’s face contorted with sudden, seething rage.

Yachay searched his grandfather’s face, as if straining to find any hint of a mask’s subtle seam.

“Daddu?” Not a question, but a summon for his real grandfather to step forth from this uncanny shell.

A pause, then a carefully measured response, “Yes... son?”

“Has it all been... a nightmare all along?”

"Yes, yes. What did you see... in this nightmare?"

"I saw you die," Yachay choked out.

"That's terrible, but I am here now. I told you something before that, right?" There was an undisguised hunger in his tone now.

"To stay calm."

"Now why would I say that?" Daddu pressed, rapidly.

"Because... the jalpari hunt by fear?" Yachay offered, his voice barely a whisper.

"Ah, yes," Daddu murmured, as if a puzzle piece had fallen into place. "And what were we feeding them?"

"Feeding who?" Yachay's confusion deepened.

"The jalpari. You said we were seeking their favour."

Yachay's mind reeled. "I didn't say—"

In one sinuous motion, Daddu reached out and snatched the stringed red laalmani from around Yachay's neck. "How did you get this then?" he demanded sternly, the laalmani clutched in his fist.

"I just told you..." Yachay swallowed hard. "I saw you die..."

"I gave you a task before that, didn't I?" Daddu's voice was now a chilling monotone.

"What task?"

Daddu regarded him with apparent pity, shaking his head in exaggerated disappointment. "Something to do with the divyasantaan, perhaps? There must have been something."

"The...blue lotus?" Yachay managed.

"Yes. Yes. What is it?"

“Daddu,” Yachay whispered, his voice trembling, “I want all of this... this nightmare... to stop.”

Before Daddu could respond, shadows fell over them. Two vaanar guards, looming large, yanked Yachay upwards by his shoulders.

“I wasn’t done!” Daddu’s mouth contorted.

“Mahadivya Hidamma herself has descended,” one of the guards noted, shivering with teary eyes. He, like his partner, wore a skandha mask that covered his mouth and nose.

Yachay thrashed and kicked out uselessly as the vaanar guards hauled him up, effortlessly ascending the two thick ropes they’d rappelled down. They moved in perfect sync, lifting Yachay between them.

“Stop!” Daddu shouted, his voice morphing into a watery, reverberating shriek.

The vaanars paused mid-ascent, confused. Yachay’s eyes widened in horror as his grandfather’s body began to elongate and stretch, his torso rising unnaturally towards him.

Daddu craned his neck up to study Yachay’s foot with an intensity that made Yachay’s skin crawl. The air grew thick with a pungent, musky odor, the stench of damp earth and decaying vegetation.

Yachay choked a scream as he glimpsed below — where Daddu’s legs should have been, a large naag tail coiled and uncoiled. Realisation struck: this was not his grandfather.

Daddu’s face, now just below Yachay’s dangling feet, morphed. His once-kind eyes were replaced by cold, reptilian slits — Karkotak’s eyes.

Karkotak focused on the sole of Yachay's foot. A cobalt green tattoo was etched on his sole. Though he had never seen the style before, he recognized the creature depicted — a *turloth*, a one-eyed reptile with a bulbous body and hardened shell, drifting on a wooden log across still waters.

After a long, tense moment, he finally spoke. "Go."

The vaanars resumed their ascent, carrying Yachay up the ropes with renewed urgency. Yachay stared down, his vision lurching as the figure below wavered and shifted.

"Naag venom," the guard said. "Makes you see things."

The guards hoisted Yachay higher, leaving Karkotak to fade back into the swirling mist of his venom.

The vaanar sentry moved with silent purpose, snuffing out each flickering lamp until her chamber dissolved into absolute blackness. She didn't pause to let her eyes adjust.

She clambered up the gridwork of beams, ascending towards the sky-window. Bracing herself, the vaanar looked up towards the towering central spire of the Baaradwaar fortress.

The immense structure loomed above like a battered fang piercing the bridge of two maces, its jagged silhouette rendered in shades of blue and silver against the star-pierced sky.

A deep, guttural chant rose from the depths, reverberating through stone and bone. Ancient syllables pulsed with primal power, drawing her into a reverent trance. She prostrated, her voice joining the rhythmic intonations.

*Krahm nar'vok nish'ma dosh'ka vresh |
Krahm chhar'vok dresh'kel vaar'gath kresh ||*

Darkness swept over the fort, devouring the warm glow of countless lamps. Windows blinked out one by one, until the sprawling bridge of maces became a gaping void in the heart of the city it overlooked.

Inside the Baaradwaar's tallest spire, vaanar guards took their silent positions, eyes gleaming in the moonlit darkness. They moved with a synchronicity that spoke of countless hours of training.

High above, within the pinnacle cell, a luminous outline hovered, casting elongated shadows on the gridwork below.

Makrand watched from a lower perch. He had seen Hidamma's form in Maya, but never before had he beheld the Mahadivya's physical presence.

Wisps of light knitted together, coalescing into a distinct form. Makrand couldn't tear his gaze away. It was like watching the birth of a star, but in reverse.

The guards below him averted their eyes, their postures rigid. Some trembled, tears streaking their clay-hard faces.

They were overcome with gratitude to the delinquent, whose arrival had inexplicably graced them with Hidamma's resplendent presence. What incredible transgression could possibly warrant the manifested wrath of one as formidable as She? Had they unwittingly saved all Samsaar from great evil?

Four vaanars emerged from the depths of the prison, their eyes glowing with a fervent devotion. They carried Yachay between them, his struggles futile against their grasp.

They lifted him above their heads, passing him from one level

to the next like a sacred offering.

Below, in the depths of the prison, a cage rattled. Johnji's howls echoed up the spire and were swallowed by the relentless chanting.

The vaanars lifted Yachay onto a platform. With a grinding groan, a hidden spring unfurled, propelling the platform upwards towards the apex of the tower.

Yachay searched for a way out. Though the thought of escape tempted him, he knew it was futile.

The vaanar guards and Makrand watched from below, dwarfed by the ascending platform.

Yachay's ascending platform ground to a halt, mere arm's lengths from Hidamma. She hovered imposingly, her towering form backlit by the dim moonglow filtering in from above.

He involuntarily recoiled, his body instinctively seeking to put distance between himself and her. But the wind whipping in from the open windows behind him pushed him back, pinning him in place.

Yachay found himself vastly overshadowed, forced to gaze upwards at the mahadivya's overwhelming figure. Her bioluminescent freckles glowed like embers in the darkness that enveloped them.

Yachay stole a glance through the vast window behind him. The city splayed out below like a blanket of fireflies in the night. Far beneath, the glinting Dhaara was a faint mercury ribbon cutting the darkness, a dizzying drop from the towering spire.

"Who are you?" Hidamma commanded an answer.

He struggled to find his voice, to form a coherent thought.

Every fibre of his being screamed at him to prostrate before the divya he had worshipped secretly from afar.

But a flicker of defiance sparked within him. He met her gaze.

“Yachay,” he said.

“Who else is with you?”

“No one.”

Hidamma’s eyes narrowed. “Where are the others?”

“It’s just me.”

Hidamma’s hand shot out with blinding speed, her powerful fingers clamping around Yachay’s ankle. She hoisted him into the air, his body dangling helplessly in her grasp. Her stare flitted across the bottom of his foot.

Yachay’s heart hammered in his chest, his mind reeling with the sheer impossibility of his predicament. He struggled against Hidamma’s iron grip, but it was like fighting against the unyielding force of gravity itself.

From a few perches below, Karkotak emerged silently from the prison depths. He exchanged a confused look with Makrand, both transfixed by the punishment unfolding above.

Hidamma extended her arm, holding Yachay out from the spire’s towering window. His body hung suspended over a sheer drop into the abyss. An icy gust of wind howled past, whipping his clothes and stealing the breath from his lungs.

Clouds eclipsed the moon. With a swift flick of her wrist, Hidamma hurled Yachay, sending him hurtling into the air. His scream was instantly swallowed by the howling winds as he plummeted, vanishing into the unforgiving void below.

The vaanar guards rushed to various windows, eyes wide with disbelief. Karkotak slithered forward, his hood flared wide with shock, his forked tongue probing the air for Yachay's fear in his final moments.

The blackness below was total and fathomless, a hungry void that had swallowed Yachay whole. The only sound was the mournful wail of the wind.

Hidamma stood motionless, arm still outstretched, her face an inscrutable mask. "The nirmaya has been disposed of," she declared.

ONE-EYED TURLOTH

“You can get a lot done by standing still.”

— Sheshan, The First of the One-Eyed Turloth

KARKOTAK CHECKED the distance tracker lashed to his aerik’s saddle. The needle swayed, tracking the powerful fluke thrusts propelling them through the deep currents. They had just passed the midway point of their journey.

He stretched along the contoured riding platform, tail tucked into a groove, to synchronise with the aerik’s propulsive undulations, underwater.

Ever since Adharvan’s caution against Maya tethering, these long-distance aerik trips had become regular. The secrecy around Adharvan’s existence prevented using transit skiffs, so Karkotak had purchased the aerik outright.

Up ahead, the sunken sculpture’s bioluminescent marking led to the hidden tunnel. Karkotak steered around the outcrop and spotted the reinforced door along the tunnel’s length.

Tethering the aerik, he swam to the door. Fingers flowed through the familiar five-part locking sequence ingrained in muscle

memory. The heavy metal groaned open.

Karkotak fed the aerik, triggered its crest to illuminate, and spurred it into the dark tunnel. It stretched ahead endlessly.

Spotting a fissure leading to the surface, he considered briefly breaking through to refill his lungs. However, the urgency of his journey compelled him to push forward.

He knew the news would reach Adharvan long before he did. Tarkash's survival, the mahadivya's sudden manifestation, the nirmaya hurled mercilessly to his death. *Was Divya Maya a fanciful delusion... but the market appeared just as foreseen, except for the girl...*

A fleeting thought crossed his mind — should he have rushed straight home instead? Collected Darib and fled into hiding? But that would be consigning his son to a tarnished life, forever marked.

No, better to face the consequences head-on, accept whatever punishment awaited him, and negotiate leniency - a pardon for Darib, if such mercy could be brokered.

There was no time to surface for air. Karkotak willed himself into a state of metabolic suppression instead. Thoughts slowed, extremities numbed, and heartbeat plunged as non-vital processes shut down. In that suspended state, only one thought remained — he had failed his son.

The aerik's powerful twin tails propelled them through the passage at blistering speed. It would soon reach the spiralling ascent up to Adharvan's sanctuary.

Though he could never be certain, Karkotak suspected this passage culminated in a location nestled somewhere between Avval and the fabled Divyalok.

Karkotak slithered through the floor's entrance, rising upright, his scales catching the soft glow from the bonsai Maya trees.

A resin screen looped iterations of Tarkash's simulated victory in the Divya Trials. On another screen, a vaanar guard conversed with Tiresia-Sanjay. The gandharva's both heads were tethered to a potted bonsai.

Though the words were inaudible, the vaanar's animated gestures suggested a recounting of the day's strange events. Another guard soon replaced her, corroborating her account.

At the far end, Adharvan sat facing away, in vajrasana position — shoulders relaxed, spine upright, with his feet tucked beneath his thighs.

Karkotak's gaze fell upon Adharvan's upturned bare soles. His eyes lingered.

An unmistakable cobalt green drawing adorned his foot. A tattoo rendered in the same distinctive style he had witnessed only yesterday—

A one-eyed turloth encircled by three shiny stones.

Startled, Karkotak recoiled, mind racing with implications.

Adharvan rose to his feet and turned to face Karkotak, his eyes narrowing at the naag's puzzled look. He had expected abject fear; at least contrition — a grovelling plea for forgiveness in the face of failure. Not this fresh bewilderment that knitted Karkotak's scaled brow.

Karkotak lowered his head immediately. "I failed. The girl never arrived—" He choked, and his hood flared in horror at what he saw — right beside Adharvan lay a familiar prosthetic tail made of wood and lochak.

A scream left Karkotak's mouth. He prostrated and slithered forward. "Spare my son! You must not harm him. I will accept any consequences. Whatever punishment you deem..."

"It wasn't your fault," Adharvan interrupted, halting Karkotak's plea.

Karkotak looked up at him, confused. Adharvan gestured towards a cluster of small screens suspended between the Maya branches.

On one screen, Ayn gave Moha a coin. Another showed Tarkash tossing a coin to the girl. In a third, Chandru dropped a coin absentmindedly, which Moha picked up. On each one, played a variation of a must-have-been.

"The nirmaya caused it," Adharvan explained. "By definition, Maya doesn't know of his existence. Just as Maya divines the future, so too does it attempt to fill in its incomplete knowledge of the past. The failure was catastrophic, but you are not to blame for it."

Karkotak stared at Adharvan as a glimmer of relief began to take hold. That meant —

"Your son is well. I see you forgot," Adharvan said. "I had promised to give him the second dose myself."

"Indeed," Karkotak managed, recovering, yet tentative. "Is he here?"

"He requires rest."

"I could go see him then —"

"And abandon duty? Unless," Adharvan's eyes bore into him, "you are insinuating that I am holding your son against your will. If so, I can halt the procedure."

Karkotak's mind raced. Adharvan had just stated he did not fault him. He had remained true to his word all this while. He had no motive to harm the child.

So why would he hold the boy hostage? Merely a harsh precaution to ensure total compliance? To leave no possible margins for defiance or error? He knew he was slithering on a slippery surface.

Karkotak's words came out a rasped hiss. "I... saw a symbol on the nirmaya's foot."

The smallest flicker of something unreadable rippled across Adharvan's face. "A symbol?"

"I have never seen anything like it before," Karkotak spoke slowly, calculatingly. "Or after."

Adharvan realised the source of Karkotak's earlier bewilderment upon entering the chamber. The naag had seen his exposed sole.

Karkotak said, "I interrogated him...this Yachay."

The shift in the air was palpable. He had never seen Adharvan so unsettled.

Karkotak continued, "He wore a laalmani around his neck, which I retrieved. I had to surrender it at the baaradwar. He also mentioned seeking... a blue lotus... do any of these things mean anything to you?"

Adharvan held Karkotak's reptilian stare for a lingering moment. Then Tiresia-Sanjay untethered. Adharvan leaned down as Tiresia-Sanjay whispered softly into his ear.

Straightening, Adharvan turned back to Karkotak. "Did you see him fall into the Dhaara river?"

Karkotak thought for a moment. That's right. He hadn't. "I didn't," he said.

Adharvan gestured at Tiresia-Sanjay. The gandharva retrieved a small box, handing it to Karkotak. Inside gleamed a laalmani.

"Go ask the jalpari," Adharvan commanded, already turning back to his work, deliberately covering his exposed feet.

Karkotak knew there was no negotiating further — he had to bide his time, deliver on duties, or strategize another path. For now, he turned to depart.

A familiar scent arrested him. Wood blocks, moulded clay, spiced tea... and something comforting. He glanced at Adharvan, who made no move as Karkotak followed the aroma to a hatch in the floor.

Pulling it open revealed a dimly lit antechamber below. Karkotak descended.

There lay Darib, sleeping soundly beside his miniature map. From his stub, a nascent tail had begun to regrow - the transition dosage delivering miraculous regeneration.

Karkotak gently roused him onto his back. "Hold tight," he murmured.

Another heavy hatch door was set into the floor across the small room. Coiling his son securely, Karkotak slithered through it.

—

Karkotak threaded the scarlet laalmani onto a sturdy cord. His hood quaked as he tied the cord around his neck. The chill of the laalmani against his scales mirrored the ice in his veins.

His only encounter with the jalpari had been within Maya

during his training years. Decades had dulled the memory's trauma. Yet more terrifying tales echoed through the baaradwars: of an ancient, insatiable jalpari lurking in the depths of the Dhaara river.

No single jalpari unit lived more than a year — mere cells in a body. Yet this swarm had thrived across millennia. It was driven by twin hungers: one for flesh, the other for memories. Secrets passed from dying unit to newborn, an endless cycle of consumption and whispered lore.

Karkotak settled into the canoe, its open end accommodating the fin extensions attached to his tail. Each undulation propelled the vessel forward with amplified velocity.

At the river's deepest stretch, he paused, steadying himself against a primal dread. With one bracing breath, he plunged into the murky depths.

As he descended, a swirling red nebula materialised beneath him. The jalpari's bulbous forms ignited and surged towards his pulsating laalmani. Instincts screamed to flee, but he held fast.

The scarlet swarm engulfed him. A soft crack echoed through the water as the laalmani split open. From within, a single translucent jalpari unit emerged, twice the size of the others. It vanished into the swarm, now its unquestioned nucleus.

Karkotak braced as tendrils caressed his scales in tingling bites along his tongue, skull base, lips, and pits. But there was no pain. Only a warmth of synesthetic bliss flooding his senses.

Suddenly, he was young again, basking in his native Vishar's sun-drenched swamps, laughing with cousins, exploring hidden coves. It was gentle, before the critical junctures, before the irreversible decisions.

Then, an understanding emerged in his mind. Crystal clear as if a long-forgotten memory had surfaced — yet a part of him understood that this was new information:

“Three questions. Choose wisely.”

A shard of panic pierced through the euphoric haze. A chilling question took form.

“Am I dying?” he thought.

“No,” he immediately knew.

Wasted a question. Concentrate.

“Would Darib be—” *Wait.* “Where am—” *Stop.*

“Where can I find the blue lotus?”

The fog cleared. All turned white. He was swimming upstream. A peak. Some signs. Lots of birds.

Gratitude swelled within him, but he did not know whom to thank. So, he let the next question take shape in his mind. Having squandered one, he now had to squeeze two queries into his last.

“A manushya was thrown from the high spire of the Baaradwar — if he did not fall into the Dhaara, where did he go?”

Night descended abruptly, the river’s surface distorting the imposing silhouette of the Baaradwar overhead. It was cloaked in an unnatural darkness. Karkotak’s mind reeled, for Baaradwar was never without light — *save for the night before.*

High atop the spire, a figure flickered. *Hidamma.* The manushya, *Yachay*, hurtled through the air like a broken doll. But then, an aberration—a colossal bird, its silhouette grotesque and shimmering, emerged from the darkness. In a flash, it snatched Yachay in its sharp talons before vanishing into the night sky.

The vision faded. The red tide of the Jalpari dispersed, leaving Karkotak suspended in the green-tinged water, heart still pounding. He lashed out with his tail, capturing a lone unit in its coils. It writhed, its bulbous red form pulsing with a diminishing glow.

He brought it closer, studying its smooth surface, the tiny, sharp teeth, the delicate tendrils. But it had no eyes. *How had they witnessed this... or knew anything?* he wondered.

Returning to his canoe, his mind raced, replaying the vision. That bird... the creature that had snatched Yachay — with talons as long as spears — defied all known species. Was it merely a figment of the Jalpari's limited perception of the world above? *To the fish, every sky-borne shadow is a predator's plunge.*

Yet, the sheer scale of this one... it was immense, like a divya's *vaahana*.

ONE BARD, ONE LULLABY

“Find me berries, build me a house, and sweep in my wake. I shall protect you from hunger, cold and disease.”

— Naag Proverb

MIHI'S MULTIFACETED eyes glittered, mandibles parting in what seemed to be... *amusement*? Yachay didn't wait to decipher the gesture. He twisted against the healing grip of the Coya Cocoon.

Wiry tendrils stretched and snapped, spraying out the medication that they were pumping into his skin. He kicked against the stubborn sponge layers that were swaddling him in a medicinal mist.

The cocoon released him instantly, dropping him into the snow. Cold bit his skin, but a fresh vitality powered his limbs — a pain-free vigour he hadn't felt since Khaasiya.

He scrambled away from the enormous insectoid vaahana that had plucked him from the sky the previous night. He glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting Mihi to be in pursuit. But the vaahana remained stationary, its compound eyes fixed on him.

Frozen crystals lashed Yachay's face as he bolted blindly.

A sudden precipice, a chasm yawned beneath him. Teetering, he pinwheeled his arms, desperate for balance as momentum pitched him forward, over the tipping point—

A vicious force crunched between his shoulders, punching the air from his lungs. Then, weightlessness, the rush of air, the leathery thrum of immense wings, reverberating.

Mihi deposited him gently back onto a soft bed of snow. Yachay rolled onto his back, gasping, his gaze locked with the towering vaahana. Its wings stirred the air, sending swirls of snow dancing around them.

Yachay pushed himself up, words catching in his throat. "Wh-where—what—?"

Mihi lowered its head, its gaze meeting Yachay's. In those multifaceted eyes, Yachay saw a thousand fractured reflections of himself—confused, awed, terrified.

Yachay turned slowly, scanning the horizon. He squinted against the harsh glare of sun on a blinding expanse of snow, featureless save for the occasional shadow of a rock.

A shiver wracked his body. Mihi plucked a large sheet of coya from its saddle-bag and dropped it at Yachay's feet, along with several resin straps. With numb fingers, Yachay wrapped the straps around his feet and ankles, securing them with his fluorescent ankle laces. He then swaddled himself in the coya's warmth.

Yet, even cocooned, the chill seeped into his bones. Mihi extended a wing, enveloping him in a downy warmth that gradually banished his shivering.

Yachay sensed that Mihi's embracing wing offered more

than just pragmatic provision — underneath lay an unmistakable tenderness. Why was Hidamma's vaahana, legend of song and scroll, acting as both his captor and saviour?

Mihi nudged him, offering the laalmani necklace Karkotak had taken. The familiar weight against his chest was a bittersweet comfort.

Revived blood flow allowed memory's flood to rush in. The past few days had been a relentless onslaught, each terror eclipsing the last. He had yearned for stillness, yet now he desperately ached for movement — not forward, but back in time, back home.

Yachay wandered, exploring his vast icy prison.

A boulder jutted from the snow, its surface smeared by a patch of the vibrant *Kasumbi emberglow*. He raised his ankle, comparing his lace to the patch — an exact match. The sight of the familiar dye, so far from home, sent a pang through his chest.

He glanced back at Mihi, but the vaahana offered no explanation, only silent observation.

The sun kissed the horizon, casting long shadows. Hunger gnawed. "Food," Yachay rasped. Mihi flew off, quickly returning with talons gripping dozens of large, fiber-coated fruits which it dropped beside Yachay.

Yachay gathered them, shucking away the roughspun husks with deft fingers to unveil plump, juicy insides. He stacked the discarded fibres into a makeshift tinder pile, coaxing ruddy flames to flicker in the dusk.

One by one he ate the strange fruits, their juices sating his cracked lips. Replenished, he burrowed into the coya cocoon.

The following morning, Mihi was gone. Yachay ventured

further, drawn by another splash of colour on a snowy rise. He recognised them from the scrolls: a flock of *chaatak*.

Their Kasumbi emberglow bodies hovered effortlessly. Gas-swollen bladders beneath their translucent skin and numerous elongated appendages held them motionless in thin air.

Their heads were tilted skyward, gazing at an empty expanse. Their silent chorus of anticipation prickled the hair on Yachay's arms.

A rustle behind. Yachay turned. A blur of fur launched into his arms—Johnji! Down they went, into the forgiving snow, Yachay's laughter thawing like an old memory.

“How did you—?” Yachay began, but Johnji only cooed in response. Mihi was nowhere in sight.

In the vast frozen tundra, time stretched on. The gossamer hairline separating past and future had been pried apart, splaying the present into an aching endlessness.

It mimicked the quiet of home, but devoid of the promise of infinite tomorrows, Yachay thought. Daddu was forever trapped in the finality of yesterday, buried under the avalanche started by the pebble he had cast in Khaasiya. The bhooyans likely returned, making their sacrifice a bitter joke.

Samsaar should freeze in its orbit until full accounting could be made of this injustice. What delusions and lies compelled the mechanisms of society to grind stubbornly onward after such cruelty?

The question burned in Yachay's mind: *Were the divya powerless or malevolent?* Perhaps he should ask one himself. What's the worst that could happen — she'd try to kill him again?

“Find the big bug,” Yachay urged Johnji. The flying gruff

bounded away, relishing the new game.

Yachay looked around. He reached the precipice again, extending a foot over the edge, tentatively — as if pronouncing the first word of a new language.

A familiar sound answered his unspoken question — the leathery thrumming of immense wings. But Mihi remained unseen. Yachay leaned further, body angled in silent provocation.

Mihi surged from behind a rocky outcropping, sunlight glinting off its iridescent wings like a thousand shards of glass. Yachay retracted his foot, but too late — a patch of ice gave way. He slipped, plummeting.

A blink, a blur of motion, and he was cradled in Mihi's talons once more, gently deposited back onto the snow.

Johnji howled, swivelling between Mihi and Yachay. *Look, the bug is here.*

"Take me to her," Yachay demanded, meeting the vaahana's gaze. "Take me to Hidamma."

Mihi tilted its head, antennae twitching, as if saying, '*Wrong request*'.

Yachay shook his head. "Then I will find my way out of this place."

The flying gruff perched on Yachay's shoulder as he rose to leave.

As he passed the coya cocoon, Johnji suddenly jumped off, doubling back. Yachay turned to find Johnji pawing feverishly at the icy ground.

He knelt to scoop up his companion, but his eyes followed

Johnji's frantic gestures. Yachay's fingers met something smooth beneath the powdery snow. He brushed more away, revealing a glassy surface. His breath caught.

Dropping to his knees, he pressed his cheek against the cold, transparent plane, squinting into the cloudy depths below. Colours bloomed in his vision—deep blues and cerulean. As his eyes adjusted, a gasp escaped his lips.

"The blue lotus," Yachay whispered. He pressed his palms against the ground, as if reaching for the enormous flower below, suspended beneath the surface

Its massive petals, poised mid-unfurl, dwarfed Yachay entirely. Intricate veins etched each petal, preserved with perfect clarity.

After a long while, Yachay turned, meeting Mihi's compound gaze. "I need something to break through. A shovel, anything sharp..."

The vaahana stood motionless, watching. Waiting.

Yachay stomped on the surface. But his foot met not with the expected crunch, but a dull thud. This was no ice, nor was it glass. He gathered remaining husks from last night's meagre feast, coaxing a feeble flame to life.

Its flickering glow reflected across the smooth expanse, illuminating tiny specks within the lotus petals that glittered like a captive galaxy. But the heat had no effect on the surface.

Anger simmered in his gut, mirroring the dying embers. Memories of the journey with Daddu surfaced—the cryptic signs on the rocks, Daddu's sly lie when he had deciphered their meaning. So many secrets, all dispersed.

And those final maddening words from Daddu's lips: "Find

the blue lotus.” But not a whisper on how to go about plumbing it. A riddle without a question, a lock without a keyhole.

Then an idea detonated silently. He bent over the glacial barricade, cheeks flushing at the seeming foolishness...but he had to try. “Your name could open doors,” Daddu had hinted.

Yachay whispered to the glassy slab, the name that was no name.

“Yachay.”

The icy surface groaned, a ripple spreading outwards. The ground liquefied below him, solid firmness melting into a viscous, swallowing quagmire.

He sank into the flower’s maw. Fluid rushed into his nostrils and lungs. His body jolted in panic. But rather than drowning, the thick liquid allowed effortless respiration, his gasps becoming long, soothing draws.

Massive petals sealed above him. Darkness enclosed him in its womblike embrace.

Streaks of coloured light coalesced into forms. An ashen grey sky choked with billowing smoke. Shattered homes spelt out loss against the horizon. Incinerated debris smouldered while survivors keened over the dead.

Yachay grasped: this was someone’s seared memory. *But whose?*

A boy knelt amidst the devastation. Soot-streaked, hollow-eyed, dressed in archaic clothes of the previous century. With trembling hands, he etched white wax onto a flat stone, mapping the obliterated landscape, marking where homes once stood.

The boy looked up. A flicker of recognition sparked in Yachay’s

mind, but it slipped away before he could hold it. A garuda's shadow fell over the boy.

"Prabhakar," a melodious voice called. "Come with me, son."

Yachay turned to see the garuda, but reality rippled like water. Suddenly, they stood in a narrow subterranean cave. Yachay blinked, disoriented by the seamless shift in his surroundings.

The garuda, Reut, materialised before him. Yachay had forgotten how much bigger garuda females were than the males.

A young man stepped forward, his form translucent, as if woven from threads of recollection. He paused, occupying the exact spot where Yachay stood, their bodies overlapping — past and present, memory and flesh intertwined.

Then the figure tore free, solidifying like a thought taking form. Yachay's breath stuttered. His knees weakened. The boy from the ruins had transformed into a young man. Yachay knew his face better than his own.

It was Daddu.

The same gentle eyes, mischievous smile, sparkling through youth draped over him like a borrowed cloak. Yachay reached out for him instinctively, but his hand pierced through the memory's spectre.

Others gathered — three naags, two vaanars, five manushyas. Glowing softly against the wall of the cave were Maya trees shorter than any that Yachay had seen before. They were potted and barely reaching his shoulders.

Yachay drifted closer to Prabhakar, gaze locked on his grandfather's youthful incarnation.

Reut gestured towards her assembled recruits, who one by one tethered to the potted Maya trees. Daddu — Prabhakar hesitated.

“Aren’t you excited, Prabhakar?” Reut’s voice was damp.

“I have abstained for so long,” Prabhakar replied. “Isn’t it prudent now to stay off the root altogether?”

“You cannot outsmart what you do not understand,” Reut countered. “Besides, there’s something else you’ve been waiting for. Today’s the day.”

Prabhakar’s eyes widened with anticipation. “Mission assignment.” It wasn’t a question. “We will meet your teacher then?”

Reut’s silence confirmed his hunch.

“Did you speak with her?” Prabhakar leaned forward, his voice restless. “I don’t need any more training. I’m ready for my task.”

“What you’ll encounter is her *chhaya*, not her *chhavi*,” Reut said.

Yachay frowned. *Chhavi* he knew from Ayn, but *chhaya*? The word opened a new realm of questions.

Reut gently rebuked Prabhakar. “You are here to receive wisdom, not to assert your will.”

“I thought our entire struggle was for freedom,” Prabhakar challenged.

“It is,” Reut replied, her wing gesturing to the potted bonsai. “But not our own.”

Prabhakar, slumping in resignation, approached the nearest potted tree and tethered to its aerial roots.

The cave fractured around Yachay, stone walls dissolving into

a sunlit expanse. A lush garden unfurled, air thick with laughter and zylith's scent.

Children wove flower garlands and coaxed automata to life. An elderly couple swayed in slow revolutions to the gentle melody of an astatar. Families united over a feast that defied scarcity.

Prabhakar and his companions moved through the idyllic scene. Some with the tentative wonder of long-lost pilgrims, others with the practised ease of seasoned travellers between worlds.

"Quite something, isn't it?" Reut mused. "To tether after seven years of abstinence?"

Prabhakar nodded.

The realisation jolted Yachay. *This was it!* This was Daddu's memory of a Maya run, preserved and brought to life. He was finally experiencing the very thing that had been denied to him, through the eyes of the man who had kept him from it.

"What is a dream?" A plain-looking naag emerged from the festive crowd. Her whisper filled the entire space.

Yachay saw Prabhakar's eyes light up with recognition. His lips formed a name: "Sheshan." Recruits stared in disbelief, rooted to the spot. Their teacher's teacher was none other than Sheshan herself.

"Is a dream an escape?" Sheshan gestured towards the impossible feast. "Mere noise?" Her tail swept towards a puddle reflecting a different sky than the one above. "Produced by the mind while sorting through the clutter of memories?"

"Or perhaps," she looked through Yachay, as if he was invisible. "A blueprint of a future yet to be."

A flitt alighted on Prabhakar's arm. He examined it as Sheshan

continued.

“In our waking dreams, we glimpse the selves we yearn to be. They reveal our deepest desires.”

Yachay watched as the flitt twitched and morphed into a snarling locust.

“Then,” Sheshan hissed. “What is a nightmare?”

The sky ripped open like rotten fruit. A monstrous funnel cloud descended with a deafening roar. Galeforce winds tore through homes, hurling debris like missiles. People and animals vanished into the swirling vortex.

Yachay’s stomach lurched, the destruction sickeningly real. Yet he, Sheshan, and her recruits remained untouched.

“If dreams inspire hope, nightmares inform vigilance,” Sheshan said, her voice cutting through the storm’s roar. “They prepare us for the worst eventualities. In their shadows, we rehearse our responses to calamity.”

Yachay leaned forward with Prabhakar.

Sheshan continued. “Nightmares warn us, compelling us to change course before our actions lead to ruin.”

Her scales reflected the flames in the sky.

“But what if our dreams and nightmares aren’t our own?” Her words came slow and deliberate. “What if someone else whispers them into our minds, shaping our desires and fears?”

Yachay’s stomach tightened. The storm abruptly vanished, replaced by a quiet Sumeru neighbourhood.

“That craving for a sweetmeal that seems to come from nowhere?” Sheshan’s gaze swept over them. “And just as soon, a

sweet-seller shows up at your doorstep?”

The recruits exchanged glances, in quiet recognition of the hidden pattern.

Sheshan turned to face each of them in turn. “That sudden unease around a neighbour you’ve known all your life?”

An elderly woman, clutching a woven basket, hurried past, avoiding a hooded naag’s gaze.

“So one day,” Sheshan continued, “when they are whisked away in the dead of night, you don’t feel the need to ask why.”

Night fell instantly. Yachay felt Prabhakar tense beside him. In the moonlight, they saw vaanar guards dragging a hooded naag from his home.

Across the street, a spring clanged as the neighbour’s dwelling sealed. Through its aperture, Yachay glimpsed her face — guilt and fear warring in her eyes, lips moving in a silent prayer.

The Kathari monk’s words echoed in Yachay’s mind: *“They harbour enemies of the state.”* The old manushya’s eyes had burned with conviction as he had tried to dissuade Yachay from intervening in Khaasiya.

The space shifted again to a garden. They now sat in a close circle, faces illuminated by the sun-soaked *induri* fabrics overhead. Prabhakar settled beside Yachay, their eyes mirroring the same disquiet.

“How do we make dreams come true and ward off nightmares?” Sheshan paused, as if considering her own question. “We try. We err endlessly. We suffer, but we learn with each misstep. Over lifetimes, we discern poison from nourishment.

“This hard-won wisdom, we pass on as stories. That says something about us, doesn’t it? It is as if we want to spare others the agony of our costliest mistakes.”

She became excited. “These tales become our maps, our *tej*-trails, guiding us towards dreams, away from nightmares. That’s why we trust stories, no?

“We let stories refine our beliefs, repair our instincts.” She turned to look at Prabhakar. “Bit by bit, we let them rewrite us... stories become us. And therein lies their power. For whoever controls the stories, controls our dreams and nightmares, our very desires and fears. They control us all.”

Yachay’s gaze turned inward. Who was he beneath the stories that had shaped him? He imagined versions of himself raised on different tales — petty? power-hungry? — and recoiled. Was this revulsion his true core, or just another layer of story?

He found no clear boundary between self and narrative. He was a living palimpsest, each tale etched over the last. Uniquely himself, yet entirely constructed. *By whom?*

His eyes snapped to Prabhakar. Had Daddu been crafting him, story by story? Not just family, but his author? Every parable and game now seemed deliberate.

Sheshan’s voice pierced through his thoughts, pulling him back. A grand Maya tree now dominated the space between them.

“Maya promised to liberate us from life’s cruel schooling. In its boundless realm, we could fail without consequence, harvest insight without the pain of experience, accelerate progress without sacrificing generations.”

Her tail twitched, a quick, almost involuntary movement.

“But the chrysalis became a cage. For all stories now had but one bard. And those seeking control realised they only needed to master Maya.

“The divya don’t need armies,” She smiled, ruefully. “Their weapon is Maya. It is a direct conduit to your core. Every time you tether, you bare all, and open yourself to their influence.

“They create stories about wealth and power, about how wonderful it is to have those things. They make games that teach you to fear those who are different — lest garudas and naags, manushyas and rakshasis ever come together.

“They paint a world of scarcity and inevitable conflict. Then offer you exclusive hope — abundance, just for you. A secret deal like a jona oil salesman. All you have to do is stay in line. Believe, ‘*Their justice comes slow, yet certain. Till then, we shall keep our wrists busy.*’ And thus, they make you mine their treasures, silence their sceptics — all while believing it’s your own choice.”

Yachay’s world tilted. Sheshan’s words made sense—too much sense. He wondered if this clarity was a sign of truth, or merely the seductive simplicity of a lie stitched together from half truths. *A lie, then*, he thought. *Truth couldn’t be this simple.*

“The giving hand offers crumbs — its meagre charity is celebrated in song and enshrined in prayer. The grabbing hand quietly claims all, its theft hidden behind Samsaar’s labyrinthine institutions.

“Aplak and his kind were fools to rule by force. Why issue commands when you can shape desires? The divya wield power like mist — unseen, all-encompassing.”

Sheshan coiled tighter, scales whispering against each other.

“How do I know this?” she asked, as if sensing the unspoken question on everyone’s minds. “Because I was once one of them.”

Divya! Yachay’s muscles twitched to prostrate. The viscous fluid around him rippled, reminding him of his submerged state. But the reflex itself was the revelation. How had it ingrained itself in him?

Daddu’s censorship, his secluded upbringing, the mockery of the divya—all futile against the divya’s myth. It had breached Daddu’s defences, captured his imagination. Such was their reach.

Sheshan’s nictitating membrane slid across her naag eyes.

“I remember the day I joined the council of Twelve,” she continued. “We were so certain then, so full of purpose.

“We believed, with utmost sincerity, that it was our duty to guide this world towards a greater good.” Sheshan’s gaze met bewildered faces. “Surely, our wisdom, our achievements, qualified us to decide what that was for everyone.

“After all, we had charted Ketu’s moons, tamed vajra boulders shooting from skies, harnessed rikta vents. With what we call Divya Maya, we could see the future.

“Imagine seeing a thousand possible worlds, each stemming from a single choice. How could we not intervene? How could we trust anyone else with that responsibility?”

“To forge a better world,” Sheshan said. “We needed control — over soil, and over seed. It seemed logical, even imperative, to gently steer the thoughts of those less... capable. Our children all, needing our guiding hand. We never hid this. Somehow everyone believed it and yet never truly fathomed its immensity. We were the *vidhi vidhaata*, the authors of destiny.”

A chill ran through Yachay. He grasped for flaws in Sheshan’s

words, riddles even, but found none, as she continued—

“And to see our work through, we needed time. More than a single lifetime could offer. I can’t recall who first suggested it, but soon we all agreed: death was an obstacle to overcome.”

Her smile revealed a forked tongue behind sharp fangs.

“We had created a system of staggering complexity. Suffering and opulence separated by layers upon layers of abstraction. Until the causal connection became invisible — even to us.”

The fluid around Yachay seemed to thicken, as if reality itself was congealing. He struggled against a sudden, irrational urge to flee this memory, to return to the comforting ignorance of moments ago.

The divya’s grand design seemed absurd, like children building sandcastles against the tide. The tide of what-is-the-point-of-it-all, he thought.

To control Samsaar, only to live longer to control it further? The means had become the end, and the end was long forgotten.

He thought of the poets and vagabonds he’d encountered on his travels with Daddu. Their wisdom was so unambiguous, boring, simple, obvious — to not hurt. Now there were endless tools and cures, yet Samsaar still groaned in pain.

A chilling prospect occurred to Yachay: what if the divya’s actions were not a choice, but a compulsion? Prisoners of their own sand castles, unable to stop shaping a world that might be better off without their guidance.

The divya’s greatest lie, it seemed to him, wasn’t to Samsaar, but to themselves - that they were exempt from the very systems they created.

Yachay felt stifled, as if everything was wound up in knots that could never be unravelled. No measure held true anymore. He wanted to just disappear.

Sheshan's gaze softened.

"I left," she said simply. "That was an option then. I doubt if it still is. You see, I have no way of knowing how long it's been. I don't know what they will call our era in your time."

Whoever named her era might have intended a harsh jest, Yachay thought. For every child knew the name of the dark age when Sheshan existed and eventually vanished: 'Sheshan Yug.'

Reut's words resurfaced. "*This is her chhaya, not a chhavi.*" Now, Yachay grasped the difference. Unlike a chhavi, you couldn't give back to the chhaya. It was a shadow cast by the past, forever fixed.

He surveyed the young faces surrounding him. Echoes of lives long gone, their futures already played out and perhaps forgotten.

His gaze fell on Prabhakar's chhaya with newfound heaviness. So vivid, so present — like the light from an extinguished star, only now reaching his eyes.

"Unchecked power," Sheshan resumed. "Near-immortality and the ability to peer into countless futures... It was inevitable that one day, a single divya would rise above all others, their influence eclipsing the combined will of all Samsaar.

"That's why I planted this resistance. A failsafe against an oppressor yet to be. A dormant seed in the soil of time, waiting for the... signs."

She paused, her gaze sweeping over the recruits. "Your presence here signals that my fears have come to pass.

“You live under the hypnotic sway of an invisible tyrant. A divya whose unchecked power permeates every corner of Samsaar. They are likely to be bearing the position title of Divyendra - supreme among divya.”

Sheshan’s eyes flashed, her voice dropping to a hiss. “Make no mistake. The furnace that forged you, the fire in your belly? It’s their handiwork.”

The garden dissolved into a ruined bhooyan stable. Massive beasts lay fallen, skandha-harpoons jutting from their hides. A lone colhaan whimpered, nuzzling its lifeless rider amidst shattered siege platforms.

“The war that devoured your family?” Sheshan’s words cut through the distant clash of weapons. “Sanctioned by their nod.”

Yachay saw Prabhakar’s jaw tighten, a tear escaping down his cheek.

A deafening rumble. The earth buckled beneath their feet. Mountains split open, entire villages sliding into churning waters. The roar of the deluge drowned out desperate cries.

“Your homeland, swallowed by angry rivers?” Sheshan’s tail lashed out, slicing through the Maya. “Their calculated risk.”

The world snapped back to the garden. The recruits stood shivering, their eyes haunted by ghosts of futures stolen.

She leaned forward. “I understand the risk you’ve taken simply by being here. If discovered, your lives would be forfeit.

Yachay saw a flicker of fear crossing the recruits’ faces. It was quickly replaced by a steely resolve.

“Yet, you are here,” Sheshan continued, her voice rising with

a newfound hope. “In a world woven from dreams, waking up is an act of great rebellion.”

“But how do you fight an adversary who sees all, and is capable of moulding the very fabric of what is to come? They can eliminate challengers before birth — nudging conditions to prevent their very existence.

She paused, letting the question hang in the air. Then, she countered it.

“They are not infallible. Even the greatest Divyendra has blind spots.”

She angled her head in a way that made her eyes spark. “A wild seed has taken root in their blind spot. Their challenger lives. Invisible to Maya, untethered, a nirmaya.”

Yachay gasped, the lotus’s amniotic fluid flooding his mouth. *Nirmaya*. Had Sheshan’s echo somehow pierced the veil of time and spoken directly to him? But this memory was several decades old, Daddu a young man. Sheshan couldn’t possibly mean him.

The implications made his mind reel. Had there been another nirmaya before him? If there had been others, what had become of them?

Sheshan straightened. “The nirmaya is a spark — potent, yet fragile. Your mission is to shield it from the cold-wind-fingers that reach to snuff it out. Guide it to the tinderbox, and it will erupt into an all-consuming inferno.

“For that, you must find it first. You will have very little to work with. The nirmaya’s species or gender is unknown.”

Sheshan’s voice dropped to a whisper, her words carrying a weight that seemed to bend the very fabric of the memory around

them.

“You’re as adept with a brush as you are with a *vintar* blade. You’ve perfected the art of creating a single unique mark. The nirmaya will bear this very mark on their foot.”

A wave of surprise washed over the recruits, with a dawning realisation.

Yachay’s entire body convulsed, the amniotic fluid around him churning violently. *Your mother drew it*, Daddu had always said. *Why?* he would ask. *I suppose she liked the turloth*, Daddu would shrug. *Clever creature. Outsmarts the hunter by becoming the forest.*

The turloth mark on his foot was no longer a cherished memento but a brand of destiny. Yachay felt he was being claimed by grand designs of other people.

Sheshan’s voice cut through, but her words barely registered. “They will bear a name beyond Maya’s reach, yet hidden in plain sight. A shifting cipher will reveal a new name each year. The nirmaya may answer to any of the names revealed over time. You already know where to seek it.”

“The annual Vajra Congress,” a young vaanar whispered. Prabhakar nodded in confirmation. He turned to Reut and added, “That’s why we were taught the cipher.” A spark of recognition flickered all around.

Yachay was dimly aware of the determination on Prabhakar’s face, while a part of him was howling in primal rage. If what Sheshan said was true, then...

Sheshan continued. “Your seven-year training has prepared you in ways that you can’t yet understand. Each lesson will reveal itself when you most need it.

Yachay's mind was a maelstrom, he could barely hear Sheshan speak.

"Once you find the nirmaya, erase the trail that led you to them. Guard them with your lives. Most of you will never find the nirmaya, but your faith will keep the spark alive."

The world blurred, sound muffled as if he were sinking deeper into the lotus. If what Sheshan said was true...

"Now, go forth," Sheshan was saying. "You are free to change this world. And you must, precisely because you can. You..."

Sheshan's inspirational words to the recruits became a distant hum.

Yachay just couldn't focus, with all the rage exploding inside him, suddenly, unexpectedly, unlike him.

If everything she said was true, that the divya were architects of untold suffering. Khaasiya's shattered lives, the Wheel's silent screams, Daddu's fading smile, his mother's absence...

Can't be. This was too much. How could a small group of people, so great, so wise be so cruel and petty?

In the fluid of the lotus, Yachay's tears mixed with the medium of revelation, indistinguishable yet profoundly altering. He was simultaneously infinitesimal and infinite, a speck of dust and the eye of the storm, the spark and the inferno.

He wanted to tear apart the very fabric of reality, to unmake the world and rebuild it again. His body trembled with the force of his fury and erupted. His lungs burned as he let out a silent scream. He wanted to be out. To hold Daddu, to demand answers from Hidamma, to confront the Divyendra themselves.

SEED TAKES ROOT

And suddenly, he was out. The lotus ejected him back into the blinding white. Yachay threw up, purging old and possible selves onto the snow.