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THE VISHNU CHRONICLES

Adventure One



THE HUNT FOR RAMA'S BOW

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This is his second book.

The Vishnu Chronicles (Adventure One)

THE HUNT FOR RAMA'S BOW

SUHAIL MATHUR

To
My late grandfather, Ranjit Bahadur Mathur.
Thank you for narrating the wonderful tales
from Hindu mythology and making my
childhood memorable. You will
always stay in my heart.
Every devotee of Lord Vishnu and
each of his avatars.
Every single reader of this book.

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The Beginning

Prior to any creation, when the universe was in a nascent and an embryonic stage, Lord Brahma emerged from the essence of Shri Hari Vishnu, who rested in the calm and quiet waters of the ‘ocean of milk’, also known as the Milky Way.

Lord Brahma came to life from the navel of Shri Hari Vishnu, also known as ‘Padmanabha’ or the one from whose navel a lotus emanates. Seated comfortably on this very lotus, Lord Brahma folded his hands in reverence to the great Lord and expressed his intrinsic desire to create the three worlds and its indwellers.

The four-handed Shri Hari Vishnu, who sat in a reclining posture on his mighty, several-headed serpent, Sheshanag, smiled charmingly and permitted Lord Brahma to fulfil his wish. Lord Brahma then sat in meditation and after persistent penance, created four divine entities known as the ‘Manasputras’ or sons born from the mind of Lord Brahma.

As Lord Brahma successfully accomplished his task, his four Manasputras—Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana, and Sanata stood before him and respectfully paid obeisance to their creator. Delighted with the majestic view that stared him in the face, Lord Brahma ordained his sons to bring forth progeny. However, he was discomfited when the Manasputras revealed that liberation and the attainment of true knowledge, and not generating progeny, was their paramount aim in life.

Though slightly downcast by the revelation, Lord Brahma, nevertheless, blessed his sons, who then departed in pursuit of true knowledge and everlasting wisdom. As time elapsed, the Manasputras attained miraculous powers which were a consequence of the severe penances undertaken by them as well as their unflinching devotion to Shri Hari Vishnu.

Such was the effect of their penance that the Manasputras were blessed with eternal youth and appeared as mere boys despite being extremely old in reality. Now equipped with sapience and endowed with the vast sea of knowledge, the Manasputras decided to visit the heavenly abode of Shri Hari Vishnu—the glorious and bedazzling, Vaikuntha!

Surging ahead with great impunity, the Manasputras traversed half a dozen gates and finally arrived at the seventh and terminal gate of Vaikuntha, which was dutifully guarded by Jaya and Vijaya, the dwarf-pals or gatekeepers of Shri Hari Vishnu’s abode.

Abruptly stopped in their tracks by the two gatekeepers, the four expressed their desire to have an audience with the almighty himself. Unaware of their true identities and considering them as mere boys, Jaya and Vijaya refused to entertain their request. Surprised by the blunt refusal, the Manasputras once again put forth their request which met a similar fate since Lord Vishnu was in a state of deep slumber and had strictly instructed his gatekeepers not to awaken him.

Both, Jaya and Vijaya apprised the Manasputras of the situation at hand. However, the four refused to relent. Holding their ground stoically, they put forth their demand one final time, categorically warning the dwarf-pals of dire consequences if they weren't permitted to enter the premises.

Jaya and Vijaya were now in a fix. Restraining the Manasputras from ingress would mean being anathematised, while permitting them entry would show a clear and reckless disregard for their Lord's orders. Entrapped in such a precarious situation, Jaya and Vijaya deemed it fit to invoke the wrath of the Manasputras rather than disregard Narayan's orders.

Infuriated and enraged to the hilt, the usually calm Manasputras doomed the two gatekeepers.

"You ignorant and discourteous fools! You have committed a grave blunder by depriving us the opportunity of seeking the blessings of the almighty and for this wretched impunity of yours, you shall face our ire. It emerges to us that the two of you have become conceited by virtue of this position bestowed upon you. Hence we, the sons of Lord Brahma, in the presence of the heaven and Earth, curse the two of you, divest you of your position as the palace guards of Vaikuntha and banish you to live in the mortal world of the Earth for eternity!" the Manasputras thundered in unison.

No sooner had the four, who were also known as the Kumars, uttered the curse on the hapless guards than lightning flashed and thunder struck throughout heaven. Alarmed by the dissonance, Shri Hari Vishnu awakened from his sleep and at once realised the horrific sequence of events that had transpired between the Manasputras and Jaya and Vijaya.

Teleporting himself to the scene, Lord Vishnu tried to intervene and bring about peace. Alas, it was too late and the damage had already been done since the Manasputras could not revoke their curse even at Shri Hari's behest. Evincing his disappointment, Shri Hari Vishnu, mindful and appreciative of Jaya and Vijaya's dedication, decided to come to their rescue.

"Jaya and Vijaya, I am delighted with your devotion and dedication. It is unfortunate that the curse uttered by the angered Manasputras cannot be revoked. However, I shall place two options before you and you may choose any

one,” revealed the merciful Lord.

The look on the faces of Jaya and Vijaya underwent a hopeful transformation as they prostrated in front of the Lord with folded hands and requested him to relieve them from their misery. Blessing his dwarf pals, Shri Hari Vishnu finally spoke and revealed his two options.

“The first option is that the two of you shall take birth on Earth as the greatest devotees of mine the world has ever witnessed. However, you shall have to take seven such births on Earth. The second option is that you take only three births on Earth but, you shall be born as my sworn enemies and will live your life desecrating and damaging my idols as well as the ideals I stand for.

With these options placed before you...I put the choice entirely in your hands!”

As soon as Mohan finished reading the sentence, a gush of wind blew hard and shut the window in his room with a bang. Surprised by the sudden commotion, Mohan got up from his bed and setting aside the thick and comforting duvet under which he had snuggled up all this while, kept the book he was reading on the table.

Standing near the first-floor window of his residence, Mohan couldn't understand the cause of the sudden disruption in the weather. However, a strange stillness had engulfed the atmosphere on this otherwise chilly October night.

Finding it rather odd but not dwelling much into it, Mohan latched the window. He was about to retire for the night when something made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. As he stood transfixed, he could feel someone watching him, closely following his each and every movement. Despite being scared, Mohan decided to open the window and investigate.

On opening the window, he was again taken aback to find nothing unusual on the broad road which was chock-a-block with parked cars. Mohan heaved a sigh of relief and dismissed his fears to be a figment of his imagination. Suddenly, something strange and scary caught him unawares.

As the young history student tried to get a closer look, a figure dressed in a silky black robe emerged from darkness. While Mohan stared at this mysterious entity, the figure ambled across the street with the help of a huge wooden staff in hand, its limp unmistakable. As it reached the intersection of the lane, the figure came to an abrupt halt and, like a harbinger of evil, slowly turned its face towards Mohan.

It slowly lifted the veil but before Mohan could catch a glimpse of the shadowy face; the window slammed shut across his face, as if some unseen force was trying to shield him from the maleficent entity.

Mohan was visibly shaken. His throat felt parched. He reached for a bottle and gulped down glasses of water. In the stillness of the night, he could only hear his own breathlessness, the tick-tock of the old wooden clock hanging on the wall and the barking of dogs across the street.

It was well past one on a chilly October night of 2020 and Mohan remembered that he had a presentation to make in his college the next morning. Sleepy but deeply troubled, he got into his bed to catch a few winks. After tossing and turning in bed for almost an hour, sleep embraced him.



The following morning, everyone in the classroom sat in anticipation. The wooden chairs in the huge classroom—adorned with posters of famous historical figures—glistened. Mohan stood confidently behind the desk and, using the microphone, commenced addressing the class on the revolutionary: Madan Lal Dhingra.

“Dear friends, it is quite appalling to learn that our history has committed the gravest injustice to one of our most courageous patriots, Madan Lal Dhingra. Dhingra belonged to the affluent household of Rai Ditta Mal, who owned more than 21 houses and six bungalows; also, his car was the first—by an Indian—to have run on Amritsar’s roads.

Despite this opulence, Dhingra, smitten by the patriotic zeal and influenced by the Pagdi Sambhal Jatta movement, initiated by freedom fighters such as Lala Lajpat Rai and Bhagat Singh’s uncle, Ajit Singh, joined the Independence movement himself and as an inevitable outcome invited the wrath of his British loyalist family. While his family hosted and attended lavish dinners in honour of the British and their government, Dhingra toiled and strived to make ends meet by working, sometimes, as a clerk, a labourer, and even a horse cart driver,” revealed Mohan with much anguish.

The initial chatter among the students had now subsided and everyone in the classroom listened to Mohan with rapt attention.

“Somehow, his family convinced him to abandon the freedom struggle and pursue higher studies in England. Dhingra obliged without any protest. But, once he reached England, he gradually associated himself with Shyamji Krishna Verma and Vinayak Savarkar and together they planned to assassinate Curzon Wylie, the political aide-de-camp to the Secretary of State for India. It took five bullets right in his face to put an end to Wylie’s tyranny, in a manner that legends are made of.”

As Mohan continued with his analysis of a forgotten revolutionary’s life,

Professor G.S. Suryamurthy—wheatish in complexion, pot-bellied, wearing his usual check shirt that hung out from his black trousers—marvelled at his protégée as he sat in one corner of the class—his pair of thick black spectacles resting on his nose—admiring his favourite student.

“Dhingra was arrested for his criminal act and produced in court. His trial, which I would term a *mockery*, because no Indian was allowed to enter the court premises nor was Dhingra given the opportunity to defend himself by using the services of a lawyer, began and ended with the court passing a death sentence. As he kissed the gallows, the patriot’s last words were: *My only prayer to God is that I may be re-born of the same mother and I may re-die for the same sacred cause. Vande Mataram!*”

A visibly disturbed Mohan sighed and continued with his narration.

“The abrasive truth remains that even in death, Dhingra was denied the recognition he deserved. It is rather strange that while Dhingra’s nemesis like Winston Churchill grudgingly admired the man’s patriotism, our very own Gandhiji severely criticised Dhingra’s actions by launching a scathing verbal attack on the wisdom of his actions. In fact, his own family severed all ties with him and even refused to claim his corpse.

Dhingra was martyred on 17th August, 1909 at the young age of 26, but his lifeless body continued to languish in England and it was only in 1976, 67 years after his death, when his remains were accidentally discovered. His body was exhumed in the presence of India’s then High Commissioner, Shri Natwar Singh, and his ashes were sent, along with the Late Udham Singh’s ashes, to India for the last rites.”

Every individual in the classroom was moved by Dhingra’s tragic tale and the touching sentiment with which Mohan had narrated the same. While some eyes turned moist, others had a lump in their throats. Professor Suryamurthy stood up and applauded his student’s efforts in the retelling of Dhingra’s life story. The class congratulated Mohan on his wonderful presentation.

After the lecture, Professor Suryamurthy summoned Mohan to his cabin. Once the two men were seated, the former enquired about the latest development on the ambitious and controversial Sethusamudram project, undertaken by eminent archaeologist and also Mohan’s local guardian, Dr. Sujit Chandra, and his team of archaeologists and historians.

“Ah, the Ram Setu Bridge project!” exclaimed the handsome Mohan.

“Uncle has recently left for Tamil Nadu, where he and his group of archaeologists and historians shall determine the veracity of all the claims made in our ancient scriptures and mythological tales pertaining to the construction of the bridge. According to mythology, the Ram Setu was constructed by the

Vaanar Sena or the monkey army of Lord Rama when he was in pursuit of his wife, Sita, who had been abducted by the demon king of Lanka—the ten-headed Ravan. I am sure you know all about it, Sir!”

Suryamurthy gave an acknowledging smile and asked his favourite student to share his personal thoughts on the matter.

“Sir, it is obvious to each one of us that the shipping canal project at Sethusamudram shall be of immense advantage to India. Not only will it help India have a navigable sea route in close proximity to the coast, it will also reduce the travelling distance by around 650 kilometres and that, by any yardstick, is massive, but...” Mohan stopped short.

“But what, young man?” the professor questioned.

“India, as we all understand, is a country deeply rooted in religion and that it is a nation where religion is a way of life! In such a scenario, it would be nothing short of imbecility to turn a blind eye to a tale from one of India’s foremost mythological narratives—The Ramayana.

I, therefore, feel that the government has shown great tact by constituting a committee comprising established names in the field of archaeology to safely conclude, one way or the other, the deliberations on the authenticity of these rocks found in the vicinity.”

“Hmm,” mulled Suryamurthy and posed another question to Mohan after much contemplation.

“But you still haven’t responded to my question. I intend to seek your opinion on the final outcome of this mission,” stated the professor.

Slightly befuddled, Mohan took some time before discussing his personal prophecy on the matter.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure than the certification by the team of archaeologists dating the rocks back to the golden age of Lord Rama, but in this age of science, I know that will never happen,” replied Mohan with a sense of disappointment.

“You know what, Son, I think this time the result shall be different,” said the professor, his eyes gleaming with hope.

“Oh come on, Sir! You are prognosticating an extremely optimistic outcome,” said Mohan looking at his cell phone, which had started ringing loudly.

Professor Suryamurthy noticed the caller’s name flashing on the screen and playfully said,

“Oh, it is Samaira! Guess, I better let you go then!”

Embarrassed, Mohan bid adieu and went to meet his girlfriend, Samaira Tandon.

Samaira Tandon, ‘the woman of every man’s dreams’ was the daughter of an

eminent and powerful cabinet minister and her mother was a famous socialite. Blessed with an enviable height, luscious locks and a beautiful face, Samaira was the hottest girl in DU. An absolute head-turner, men would go weak in the knees each time she threw a glance at them. Stepping out of her red swanky Mercedes, the leggy lass looked divine, as always, in a figure-hugging Versace outfit that she had accessorised well with her colour-coordinated clutch and Jimmy Choo high heels.

The entire college knew of Mohan and Samaira's romance. The two had been dating each other since the time they began pursuing their Bachelor's in History. They were now in the final year of their post-graduation.

Samaira's parents had approved of their daughter's partner; not only were they extremely grounded, they also had a high regard for bright individuals like Mohan, who had charmed them with his personality, knowledge and a great sense of humour in their first few meetings.

The romantic moment of the much-in-love couple had to pause as their friend, Devraj Kohli, came up to them and handed a letter to Mohan.

"Here! This one's for you," panted Raj, as he was fondly called.

With a surprised expression on his face, Mohan opened the sealed envelope and started reading the letter.

Not amused after reading, Mohan rushed to the exit gate with Raj, who informed him that a middle-aged man, attired in a white safari suit, had requested him to deliver the letter. But, by the time they could catch hold of the messenger, the man in the safari suit had vanished into the crowd of college students.

Mohan looked perturbed. Samaira arrived shortly after and began to read the letter.

Dear Mohan,

I am utterly distressed to inform you of your grandfather, Ekashringaji's ill health. As he lies on his deathbed in the village of Sahastapur, it is his final desire that he be united with you before departing from this world. A matter of utmost importance needs to be disclosed and you, being the sole surviving member of his lineage, are at once required to arrive here before tragedy strikes.

"What does all this mean, Mohan?" questioned a confused Samaira.

"I have no idea whatsoever. This seems to be the work of a person with a very poor sense of humour. It's nothing but a dirty prank. The person who has penned the letter hasn't even bothered to identify him/herself. I don't think there is a need to dwell much into the childish antics of some crank," advised Mohan and he tore the letter along with its white envelope.

"So, where are the two of us heading for dinner tonight?" Samaira asked in

her alluring voice, trying to draw Mohan's attention away from the letter.

"Well, you are cordially invited to my humble abode for dinner, if that is okay with you," smiled Mohan.

"At home?"

"Yes. And let me once again inform you that in the absence of Sujit uncle...you shall find me all alone in the house," winked Mohan.

As the glamorous Samaira blushed, he embraced her and told her that he would be going to the gym in the evening and shall expect her at his residence by nine.

Mohan was one of the few students who were never seen sporting an unshaven look; he always remained clean shaven, kept his hair neatly cropped and short, and wore rimless glasses that complemented his overall persona. However, at the gymnasium, his boy-next-door image would undergo a drastic transformation. After intense workouts, every inch of his body would radiate an aura of machismo. His physique was truly a sight to behold.

As Mohan took a break from his rigorous exercise routine, he noticed an envelope under his bottle of water; it read *Just For You*. In a flash, Mohan opened the letter and was aghast on realising that it was like the one he had torn earlier that afternoon.

Baffled, Mohan cautiously looked around at the gymnasium in order to ascertain who the culprit could be but was unable to suspect anyone. Mohan, once again, tore the letter into shreds and threw it in the bin before driving back to his residence in Defence Colony. As he entered the gate, he opened the letterbox to check if he had received any mail. A white-coloured envelope, with *Really For You* written in green, was lying inside.

Already aware of what to expect, Mohan opened the letter only to find the same cryptic note inside. This time, however, the letter brought a wry smile to Mohan's lips. He was sure the prankster wanted to see him flummoxed on receiving these letters, but, he wasn't going to give in.

It was still evening and the setting sun looked beautiful. Mohan entered his house and threw the letter into the dustbin after shredding it to pieces. The 23-year-old cleaned up the house, took a quick shower, changed into fresh clothes and ordered some Chinese food from one of the best restaurants in town.

Later that night, Samaira landed up at the decided time. She looked glamorous in a white cotton shirt and a pair of fitted jeans. Once the two had finished dinner, they retired to Mohan's room and gave in to their amorous desires.

In the darkness of the room, partially illuminated by the distant rays of the street light permeating through the window, Mohan unbuttoned Samaira's shirt, revealing her buxom figure. Holding an ice cube, he stroked her back

seductively while Samaira moaned softly. Not to be outdone, Samaira turned and took off Mohan's T-shirt, caressing his bare and muscular chest while passionately biting on his nipples. Mohan stuck his hand in between her back and bra and slowly started moving his lips on Samaira's, kissing her. The couple was turning up the heat as Mohan raised his hands up to touch Samaira's hair and tangled his fingers in them. He quickly unhooked her bra, and cupped her heavy breasts. The stunning female then threw herself on top of her lover.

The two of them intimately played with each other's tongues. It was when Samaira unbuttoned Mohan's jeans and started pulling them off that she saw his face go off colour. Mohan stood, frozen. Trying to gauge what had suddenly come over him, she turned around and saw a piece of paper sticking on the window.

Anticipating what it could be, Mohan got up from the bed and, to his horror, found the same white-coloured envelope with the words—*For You: Final Reminder*—written on it.

Samaira and Mohan stood still and exchanged worried glances. Mohan had been disturbed at finding these letters at odd places, but now he was getting angry, irritated and concerned, all at the same time. The thought of someone entering his room made him furious and it also sent a shiver down his spine.

What unsettled him the most was the fact that he had never heard or known of his grandfather's existence till that day! Was Mohan's past threatening to ruin his present?

Journey to Sahastapur

Perplexed and mulling a plan of action, the only viable option available to Mohan was to call up Dr. Chandra and solicit his advice. Without any delay, Mohan grabbed his phone and dialled his godfather's number.

"Hi beta, how are you? I hope you aren't facing any difficulties managing everything all by yourself?" enquired Dr. Chandra.

Mohan revealed all about the paranormal activities which were carking him. Dr. Chandra heard Mohan out attentively and after excogitating for a few minutes, imparted his advice to him.

"The situation does seem precarious. However, being a man who has revelled in exploring the realms of the unknown, I propose that you undertake this journey in order to discover what fate holds in store for you. But, before you commence, request Professor Suryamurthy to come over and stay with you till such time that you set out for Sahastapur," Dr. Chandra said.

Mohan did as advised and Professor Suryamurthy agreed to stay at Mohan's residence out of his own volition, since not only was Mohan his favourite student, but his association with Dr. Chandra went back a long way. The following night, at dinner; Suryamurthy expressed his curiosity to know more about the cabalistic letter.

The question had been lurking in the professor's mind and Mohan, without fretting over the issue, disclosed a closely-guarded chapter of his life.

"Sir, my parents and well-known archaeologists, Hemang and Vibha Sharma, were Dr. Chandra's close friends and colleagues. It was on one inauspicious night in July, days after my birth in 1998, when the cataclysm struck.

As they were returning home that night, there was an unexpected downpour. Unable to see clearly in the torrential rain, a truck on the opposite end lost control and the inevitable happened: a head-on collision with our car. My parents, severely injured in the accident, were rushed to a nearby hospital where they succumbed to their injuries. Call it a miracle or a vicious quirk of fate; I emerged completely unscathed from the collision.

Since then, Dr. Chandra, or Chachu as I fondly call him, has brought me up with the same affection, care, and devotion as my parents would have raised me. He even sacrificed a wedded life for my sake, fearing a situation where his wife would have objections accepting me as part of their family. He was also wary of my being ousted not only from their house but also from his life, and this thought was too much for him to bear. Hence, in the absence of any other close relative, Dr. Sujit Chandra looked after me like his own son and I have nothing but immense respect and regard for him.

Thus, I find it slightly bedevilling to receive a letter from my supposed *grandfather* after all these years. My instinct tells me something isn't right," replied a slightly emotional Mohan.

Later that night, when the professor was surfing channels on the television, something caught his attention and he immediately called out to Mohan, who was busy packing for his journey to Sahastapur.

"Look at this," said the professor.

As Mohan stood next to his professor, both men gaped in horror at the news being broadcast on television.

In a shocking development, it is believed that the highly cherished and sacred sword of the mighty Maratha ruler, Shivaji—Bhawani, has been stolen from the National History Museum in Mumbai. The police officials have declined to comment on the theft but are relentlessly pursuing the case. Recent reports have affirmed that the daring heist took place a few hours ago; but, the number of people involved in this crime remains unknown.

This disturbing piece of news caused Professor Suryamurthy great anguish; he twitched his face and sighed in dismay.

“It is nothing but an abject pity that our own countrymen have lost pride and veneration for our national treasures, that are integral to our glorious history,” ranted an outraged Suryamurthy.

Mohan, on the contrary, seemed uncertain about the authenticity of the information. Cerebrating on the revelation, he spoke,

“Sir, this news is nothing but a big hoax. If my memory doesn’t elude me, the Bhawani has been treasured at the Royal Collection Trust in London and that belongs to the royal family.”

Professor Suryamurthy, however, put forth a contrary view that astounded Mohan.

“That news was a mere hogwash. It was indeed presented to the Prince of Wales way back in 1875, but recently, the authorities regained the possession of the historical sword and they were to unveil it on the 10th of November to commemorate 361 years of the duel between Shivaji and the Mughal General, Afzal Khan. Alas, it seems this time around, the ill-fated sword may have been lost forever!”

Their conversation was interrupted when the doorbell rang and Samaira and Devraj walked in. As the four of them sat together and discussed the letter and Mohan’s journey to an alien land, Samaira seemed apprehensive of Mohan’s decision to go alone and irrespective of his best efforts to alleviate her anxiety, Samaira refused to budge.

Seeing the discussion leading nowhere, Raj volunteered to accompany his best friend to Sahastapur.

“Bravo! That is a superlative suggestion,” the professor remarked.

“Well, now that one hurdle is out of our way, I suggest you drive down to Sahastapur,” advised Samaira.

Mohan quashed the suggestion on two grounds.

“Firstly, I am not familiar with the complex routes and secondly, driving a car through a remote village makes little sense to me. I think travelling by bus is the most convenient method and there is, in fact, a bus service that passes through Sahastapur.”

With another issue resolved, Mohan and Raj bid farewell to the professor, who blessed them a safe journey. Samaira gave Mohan a warm hug and reminded him to be in constant touch with her.

“Don’t worry, Samaira. Will do as you say,” smiled Mohan and reassured his girlfriend.

As the two friends set out on their journey to the unknown land of Sahastapur,

that chilly October morning, they couldn't help but admire the breathtaking hues of nature's bounty around them. The swift flowing rivers, lush green fields, and the canals along the road were a painter's delight. Raj opened one of his bags and took out a travel guide that had all the details about Sahastapur—the humble village situated in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

“Hey, Mohan, listen to this interesting piece of information. The guide states that eons ago, the village of Sahastapur was believed to be part of the legendary city of Ayodhya, Lord Rama's birthplace. It was severed from the holy city when the vast and swift flowing river, Sarayu, changed its course after the village was cursed by a sage,” Raj narrated.

“Hmm... now, that is some revelation. Does it happen to reveal anything more on the curse, by any chance?” probed Mohan.

Shaking his head dejectedly, Raj replied in the negative.

“Well, another mystery seems to be on our hands that we must unlock. Surely...there is more to the village of Sahastapur than what meets the eye,” remarked Mohan, cautioning his friend.

It was 10 in the night when the bus halted at a roadside dhaba. After having finished his dinner, Mohan was seated on a charpoy when, suddenly, he began to feel a bit uneasy. He shivered as the temperature dipped and he sensed an uncanny presence of an unwanted entity lurking somewhere in the dark, keeping a close watch on him. Mohan was pondering over this strange feeling when Raj got up to relieve himself.

Suddenly, Mohan observed some surreptitious movements behind the trees across the highway. What had initially seemed to be the gentle swaying of trees turned out to be someone desperately trying to camouflage itself in the thick forestation. Mohan felt it was someone whom he had encountered previously too.

Realising it had been spotted, the entity decided to reveal itself. Fear gripped Mohan as he saw the same mysterious entity—attired in a silken black robe with a staff in hand—he had seen outside his residence across the road. The other passengers, surprisingly, remained blissfully unaware of the fast-approaching sinister presence.

Before Mohan could think of anything, the bus came to a screeching halt between him and the entity like a shield. The bus driver called out to all the passengers and as everyone began boarding the bus one after the other, Mohan used this opportunity to mingle with them, cleverly escaping another encounter with the entity. Raj, oblivious to his friend's unnerving experience, found his seat and the bus started moving again.

It took them a couple of hours more to reach their destination. As the two men

stepped out of the bus, they found themselves standing in the middle of a deserted road. It seemed like either a road less travelled or one that had been shunned by weary travellers. Overgrown vegetation covered this lesser-traversed path and an uneasy silence engulfed the vicinity. The two souls were clearly a little tense as neither of them had any idea of where they were or how to find the route to Ekashringaji's house.

As they stood together, doubtful about their next move, both of them heard a sound in the distance...a sound that grew louder with each passing second. They soon realised the sound was that of a horse's hooves. Within moments, they could see a horse cart approaching them, on which sat a middle-aged man with white headgear and a stick in hand.

"Where do you want to go?" asked the man in a heavy voice.

"To Ekashringaji's house," replied Raj.

On hearing the name, the man threw a dirty stare at them as if they had committed a crime. Then, without uttering a single word, he gestured the two of them to hop on.

As they seated themselves, Raj wondered why the man had raised his eyebrows at the mention of Ekashringa. To add to his bewilderment, Mohan informed him about his uncanny encounter with the man in the black robe.

"It's entirely my fault. I shouldn't have left you alone in the first place. But, why didn't you tell me this earlier?" asked a visibly surprised Raj.

"I am sorry, Raj, but I was just waiting for an opportune time to tell you about this. I am confused myself. After analysing these abrupt happenings, I have come to this conclusion that there is some supernatural force that shields me each time the strange entity tries to cause me any harm," replied Mohan as the horse cart came to a stop.

"You have reached your destination," spoke the middle-aged man.

Both, Mohan and Raj got out of the carriage and took a look at the astounding view in front of them. In the middle of all the ramshackle and diminutive huts stood one huge and sprawling haveli; the sharp contrast with the rest of the humble houses was unmistakable. The low-hanging clouds, the thick fog and the chilly winds created a magical ambience that made the massive three-floored haveli more striking and magnificent.

"Dude, this place's eeriness is giving me goosebumps. This reminds me of a scene straight out of a Ramsay Brothers' horror flick," commented Raj.

"I couldn't agree more. I loved those films but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would land up in a place that seemed stranger than fiction. But, I wonder if this is the haveli we have been looking for?" asked Mohan.

"Good question. Let's ask the dri..." was all that an aghast Raj could mouth as

the cart driver, who had dropped them off just moments ago...had now vanished into thin air.

“Where did he disappear? Where is his cart? And where are the horses? How could all of them disappear in a matter of seconds without making the slightest noise?” Raj bombarded his friend with a barrage of questions.

Standing on a narrow, long, and deserted stretch of land—well past midnight—Mohan thought it best to remain silent and urged his friend to save all his queries for a later hour.

As the two of them proceeded to ascertain if they were at the right address, they saw a huge wooden nameplate adorning the haveli gate.

“It says Ekashringa...Sharma! How’s that for luck and coincidence?”

“So what? There are several Sharmas in this world. It doesn’t mean they are all related to me,” Mohan gave a terse reply, trying his best to play down the coincidence.

Amidst the moonless night, the two of them looked for the doorbell. Unable to find it, they threw open the large iron gates which moved tardily and made a creaking noise, giving Mohan and Raj the heebie-jeebies.

Trying to put on a brave face, Mohan and Raj arrived at the main door. They knocked on the door and it was immediately opened by a gawky-looking tall man with a pockmarked face, and a lantern in hand. He stood still and stared at them without blinking his eyes.

“Who are you?” he asked after a long pause.

Intimidated by the look of the man, the two of them had to muster courage before Mohan could introduce themselves.

“This is my friend, Devraj. And I am Mohan Sharma.”

The man’s expressions underwent a paradigm shift on hearing the latter’s name. His protruding eyes had a look of disbelief. He immediately toned down his voice and warmly welcomed the two boys inside the haveli.

“I am sorry for any inconvenience that may have been caused to you on your journey to the Sharma residence,” the man apologised and promptly took them to the chambers of the senior-most member of the Sharma household—Ekashringa Sharma.

As the two friends moseyed through the haveli, they were awestruck by its grandeur. The white marble flooring, the tall and handsome equidistant pillars; the sprawling terrace; the shimmering chandelier atop a long dining table that could seat, perhaps, 30 people at the same time—everything about the haveli was larger than life. The spacious rooms on three different floors were quite tastefully done up. A fine blend of opulence and sophistication, thought Mohan.

However, there was an overwhelming sense of grief and despair that seemed

to have engulfed the haveli, plunging it into the depths of darkness and gloom. Mohan and Raj were going to unravel all the hidden secrets about this haveli and its owner.

As the servant knocked on the gigantic wooden door, a voice from inside the room asked him to enter. The man entered the room along with the two young boys.

An extremely old and frail man—with wrinkled skin that had survived many seasons and storms, a receding hairline but thick white flowing beard—lay on his deathbed.

“What is the matter, Maan Singh?” asked the old man in his shaky voice.

“Master, we have two visitors who seek an audience with you,” replied the servant.

“Wasn’t it he who wanted to seek an audience with us, rather?” mocked Raj in a whisper.

The old man slowly focussed his eyes on the visitors and asked them the purpose of their visit.

“Umm... My name is Mohan Sharma and this is my friend, Devraj Kohli. I received a letter...” was all that Mohan could manage to say before the old man suddenly held Mohan’s hand firmly, despite his ill health, and gazing with moist eyes at the young man, spoke in a manner of disbelief.

“Mohan...Mohan, my child! My grandson, you have finally arrived...arrived where you truly belong,” he said and kissed Mohan’s hand with affection.

Mohan, however, remained unmoved. His insensitivity was noticed by the old man, who tried once again to convince his grandson.

“Ah! Don’t you just resemble your father! I can see his reflection in you...Please son, I beg of you...please wipe off this look of incertitude from your handsome face,” appealed Ekashringa.

Aware of the fact that Ekashringa was on his deathbed, Mohan decided to play along as he didn’t want to be the cause of the old man’s death.

Touching his grandfather’s feet out of respect, Mohan commenced enacting the part of the long lost grandson with aplomb. There was a hint of veneration in his eyes as Mohan comforted the tormented soul.

“Grandpa, it is nothing less than a cruel joke that fate has played with us by keeping us apart and away from each other’s company for 22 long years,” bemoaned Mohan. He played the part of a loving grandson so well that even Raj was fooled.

A smile appeared on the tired and old face of Ekashringa at this show of emotion by Mohan. Wiping his tears, he disclosed the real reason for summoning his grandson.

“How I came to know of your existence is a matter we shall deal with later, in detail, but for now, as your grandfather and the oldest surviving member of the Sharma family, it is not only my utmost wish and desire but also my responsibility to see you married before I breathe my last. This is to ensure the continuity of the Sharma lineage,” revealed Ekashringa.

Exasperated, to say the least, with the derisory and preposterous proposal put forth by Ekashringa, Mohan, nevertheless, continued with his act and wilfully acquiesced to the request.

Delighted at the immediate acceptance of his request, Ekashringa ordered Maan Singh to summon Jayadev, the faithful man Friday of the patriarch.

After an agonising wait, a clean-shaven man of medium-built and twinkling eyes walked in. He was fair-skinned and was wearing a sweater over his kurta-pyjama. He also wore a monkey cap. Mohan guessed that he must be Jayadev, the man Ekashringa had summoned.

Being the courteous young man, Jayadev first offered his salutations to the visitors and then went and stood next to his master, awaiting his orders.

Ekashringa gestured Jayadev to bend a little and as the latter obliged, the former whispered in his ear.

“Take Mohan to the secret chamber and let him make his decision. Make sure no one else influences him,” spoke Ekashringa in a deliberate whisper. Raj knew that the old man was indirectly warning him to stay away from Mohan.

As Jayadev nodded his head, Ekashringa smiled and turning towards his grandson, informed him of a secret chamber where he and his friend would be escorted by Jayadev. After instructing Jayadev, Ekashringa took out a key from the drawer placed next to his bed and handed it over to his servant.

As the three of them turned to exit the room after paying their due respects, he stopped them and said,

“Mohan, I shall eagerly await your decision. Jayadev, do not under any circumstance forget to warn Mohan about the impending danger.”

Though the secret chamber was located well within the palatial haveli, the entrance to the chamber, however, was from the outside. As the three of them walked towards the secret chamber, a restless Raj asked his friend about his sudden change of heart.

“What do you think you are doing? Selecting a bride for yourself! What happens when Samaira gets a whiff of all this?”

Mohan gestured Raj to relax and not sweat over the matter.

“It’s all acting on my part. I don’t wish to break the old man’s heart, irrespective of his ludicrous demands,” Mohan whispered and cheered his friend. He then asked Jaydev a pertinent question.

“Jayadev, isn’t it rather odd that in the entire village of Sahastapur, there is only one haveli that stands tall while the rest of the houses, if I may term them that, are in a sorry state? Is it only because my grandfather seems to be the sole wealthy person in an otherwise humble village or is there a different explanation to this disparity?”

With a forced smile on his face, a dispirited Jayadev replied.

“You are indeed correct in your assessment, Mohan. There is much more to all this than what the naked eye can fathom. Once upon a time, when Sahastapur was part of the glorious city of Ayodhya and the Sarayu flowed, each and every house was as huge and shone as brightly as the Sharma haveli. Prosperity spread in all directions and everyone was wealthy. Then, one day, a sage traversed this path and requested a few residents for some water to soothe his parched throat, but blinded by their affluence, the village folk recklessly disregarded the revered sage’s request. They arrogantly commanded him to walk till River Sarayu in order to quench his thirst. This rude behaviour infuriated the sage, and in a fit of rage, he cursed the entire village.”

Oh, despicable souls, in your conceitedness, you have dishonoured a sage who requested you for water. Hence, I curse this entire village that the very waters of the Sarayu that you are so arrogant about, shall abandon you forever and change its course. This shall always serve as a grim reminder of the treatment all of you meted out to me, hollered the enraged sage.

“When your ancestors came to know of the incident, they rushed forward to offer water to the sage. The Sharmas, had, on several previous occasions honoured the sage and the sage too, mindful of this fact, blessed the Sharmas that their household would continue to flourish while others’ businesses would suffer huge losses and sooner than later, their houses would turn into ruins!”

A pensive Mohan enquired if there was a way for the villagers to redeem themselves from the curse that had been handed down through generations.

“The answer to this question lies only with a sorceress, of whose existence and location I have little knowledge. It is said that when the task is accomplished, a great bird of epic proportions shall swoon over the village area and fly across the Sarayu, ordaining the mighty river to return to its original course, thereby redeeming Sahastapur of its age-old curse,” revealed Jayadev, sighing in dismay as he unlocked the secret chamber.

As he threw open the door to the secret chamber, cobwebs, dust, and an omnipresent darkness greeted them. This room hadn’t welcomed a visitor for quite a few years. It looked like a room that harboured a powerful secret...a secret that had been intentionally kept hidden. But at the same time, it also appeared as if the room was expecting someone’s arrival, desperately awaiting

its secrets to be unlocked.

Inside the room, Mohan came across seven canvases covered with white sheets that concealed paintings beneath. Jayadev pointed the torch at them and Mohan withdrew the cloth to unveil the paintings. As he did so, he realised these weren't ordinary paintings depicting mythological tales, historical battles, or nature's beauty, but were, in fact, portraits of seven stunningly gorgeous maidens who were to be his potential brides and that he would have to choose one in order to fulfil the old man's dying wish.

Mesmerised by what he saw, Mohan couldn't take his eyes off the portraits that had a lifelike quality to them. Portrait after portrait, he found himself completely enchanted by the beauty of the princesses. Just as Mohan was about to uncover the last and final portrait, Jayadev tried to stop him and persuaded him to desist from unravelling the seventh portrait. So bewitched was Mohan by the portraits of the princesses that Jayadev's words of caution fell on deaf ears.

The instant Mohan unveiled the final painting, he stood transfixed, hypnotised by the mesmerising beauty of the princess. Never before had he come across such a divine face. Suddenly, lightning struck and the windows were thrown open by a gush of wind. As Mohan looked to see how the weather had suddenly turned turbulent, he was disturbed to find a crestfallen Jayadev sitting on his knees with a morose expression on his face.

"Why did you uncover the last portrait?" questioned Jayadev in a dead voice.

"Why? What happened?" asked Mohan, unable to fathom Jayadev's anguish.

"Mohan, you have little idea about the gravity of your actions. You have opened a Pandora's Box. The portrait you see is of Princess Alankrita, the most entrancing yet tragic beauty of our time. She resides at the other end of the ocean, at the palace of the most malefic, vicious, tyrannical, and evil king Dasavanakoka. This king is the most ruthless of all the rulers the world has ever known or witnessed in this yuga."

"So? That doesn't explain anything, does it? And you forget, I still haven't chosen my bride, so merely unveiling the princess' portrait is not going to have any ramifications for us," countered Mohan.

"Mohan, you speak thus since you are blissfully ignorant of the dreadful conditions. It is not by choice that the Princess resides in the palace of Dasavanakoka. Her tragic destiny has thrown her into a pit of ignominious existence. Several years ago, King Dasavanakoka, also known as Dasavana or Trivarmrut, attacked the territories of King Virajaditya and brutally massacred every person in his kingdom before finally slaying the king and his wife. He, then, forcibly abducted the young princess.

Now that the princess has grown up into a spellbinding beauty, the malevolent

king is desirous of marrying the princess, much against her wishes. Unmatched in zeal, vigour, and strength, Dasavana has been granted the boon of immortality by none other than Lord Shiva himself. He is sure to be annihilated if three conditions are simultaneously fulfilled, but that too, is an inconceivable thought since no one is aware what these three conditions are. Nor can anyone reach him because he resides at the top of his 500 feet tall palace!” revealed Jayadev.

Nonplussed by the story, Mohan tried to put up a brave front and replied with conviction.

“This is truly a tragic situation for the princess and if it were in our capabilities, we would have definitely rescued the princess, but...”

“The question of ‘but’ doesn’t even arise. You are still unaware of the entire sequence of events. I, thereby, inform you that it has been foreordained that whoever unveils the portrait of Princess Alankrita shall have to, without exception, undertake a journey to King Dasavana’s kingdom and wage a war against him and his armies to liberate the princess from the shackles of misery and torture.”

Jayadev’s words shocked Mohan and he became quite concerned at the precarious situation that he had landed himself in.

“Is this some sort of a joke? Because if it is, then I have had enough,” thundered Mohan and stormed towards the door.

Barely had he pulled the door open when he saw another door, identical in structure and colour, in front of it. Slightly perturbed by the sudden appearance of another door, Mohan, nevertheless, pulled that one open too, but there was another door ahead. Convinced that sorcery was at play, Mohan relentlessly opened one door after another in quick succession in his pursuit to exit the strange room.

With sweat dripping from his hair and face, his body feeling the fatigue of his actions and the end nowhere in sight, an exhausted Mohan finally turned towards Jayadev and asked him the purpose behind indulging in such juvenile pranks. Unscathed by Mohan’s caustic remarks, and as if in an answer to his bafflement, Jayadev calmly advanced towards the door and opened it in one go.

“There you are,” he replied politely, as Mohan stood dumbstruck with terror in his eyes.

Even as Mohan was trying to come to terms with what had transpired, an unnerving sight met his eyes that forced him to retrace his steps in fear, making him fall on Jayadev, who stood behind him.

As fear gripped Mohan, his friend Raj, rushed to his aid.

“What happened, Mohan?” he asked, concernedly.

“The...the ground! There is no ground in front of the door!” mumbled a panic-

stricken Mohan.

“What’s the matter? Everything is normal out here,” Jayadev said, standing adjacent to the door.

“Don’t try and mock me!” replied Mohan as he gathered courage to advance towards the door and take a look outside.

“Can’t you see where we are currently standing?” Mohan asked, for there was no path, no road, and no ground beneath where they stood. Surrounded by stars and constellations, planets that could be seen in the distant background, it didn’t take much time for Mohan to realise that the haveli and all of them were suspended in the solar system.

“We are standing exactly at the same spot where we were when we entered this room,” responded a surprised Jayadev, unable to understand what was troubling Mohan so much.

Mohan had scant trust in Jayadev and the only person he could wholeheartedly rely on was his trusted friend, Raj. Mohan requested Raj to peep outside and tell him what he saw.

Not one to disappoint his friend, Raj dutifully obliged and stood at the edge of the door even as Mohan advised his friend to exercise caution, much to the former’s surprise.

“Why Mohan, is there something to worry about?”

A visibly agitated Mohan, unsure of Raj’s response, questioned him.

“Can’t you see the stars and the planets around us?”

With a bewildered expression on his face, Raj replied, “No. All I can see is the road we took to arrive at this room and the trees and the huts surrounding this place,” he responded.

“What?” said Mohan and rushed to the spot, even as he continued seeing all the celestial bodies.

“You mean, you cannot see the Earth over there?” he asked his friend while pointing down south.

“No!”

The reply stupefied Mohan, who couldn’t believe it was he alone who was witnessing this strange phenomenon while the others remained oblivious.

Jayadev put a comforting hand around him and spoke.

“Mohan, do not be shocked. This is your fate and you must accept it. You are destined to perform acts of bravery which no ordinary human can even think about attempting. You are blessed and can see things otherwise invisible to ordinary mortals. Accept your fate willingly rather than running away from it; this is your true destiny!”

Meanwhile, as Jayadev revealed Mohan’s destiny, his visions of the planets,

the space, and the solar system started fading away only to be replaced with familiar sights of the road, the huts, and the haveli.

As thunder struck and the winds howled, a sceptical Mohan somehow knew that he would have no alternative but to conquer his fears and rise like a true warrior if, as Jayadev predicted, he were destined to embark on a perilous journey.

The Forest of Taraka

As advised by the astute Jayadev, Mohan and Raj agreed to spend the night in the haveli. The senior Sharma slept comfortably in his room, unaware of the strange developments.

At around 10 in the morning, there was a knock on the door. Groggily, Mohan got up from his bed and opened the door. He saw a slightly perturbed Jayadev standing in front of him.

“Why haven’t the two of you got ready till now? We need to leave the haveli, immediately. Ekashringaji shall wake up soon and under no circumstance can we tell him about last night’s happenings; that would only agonise him further. There is a cartographer by the name Rannvijaya, who resides in a nearby village and it is believed he is well-versed with most of the routes and passages. If we can reach his village and convince him to chart a map for us, our arduous journey could be a little less difficult,” Jayadev suggested.

The idea appealed to both Mohan and Raj, and despite being tired from their long journey to the village the previous day, they did not waste much time and left with Jayadev, carrying only the essentials with them.

On the way to the cartographer’s village, Mohan noticed a tiny white-coloured potli dangling from Jayadev’s hand but when asked about it, Jayadev silenced him and said.

“Shhh...Not so loudly! I must forewarn you, the village that we are going to is known to be full of cheats and thugs. We need to be careful and watchful of our surroundings. As for this bag, it contains gold coins that shall help us combat critical conditions in our quest.”

“But, what was the need to carry gold coins when Mohan and I already have our wallets?” queried a puzzled Raj.

Jayadev smiled at him and whispered.

“My dear friend, your rupee shall have no value when we reach the village. Only gold is considered a valid currency here.”

“But Jayadev, if you are already sure of thugs and cheats in that village, what

makes you trust an individual from the same place?” questioned Mohan.

“You are right. To be honest, I too had my reservations about his work but after my thorough research on him I have come to the conclusion that he is perhaps an exception and we can rely on him without any doubt,” explained Jayadev.

Suddenly, Jayadev stumbled over a stone and fell, causing the bag of gold coins to fall out of his hand. The contents lay scattered on the dusty street of the village, inviting everyone’s dreaded and unwarranted attention to the coins. Mohan helped the slightly bruised Jayadev get up and Raj hurriedly began putting the coins back into the potli when someone stepped on a few gold coins. As he glanced at the miscreant, he saw a burly man with a smug expression, who seemed to be in no mood to relinquish his hold on the gold coins.

Raj got up, angrily, to deal with the burly thug but stopped himself in time as he noticed that other villagers had encircled them, menacingly. All of them wanted a share of the booty.

The three men were clearly outnumbered. They braced themselves for a violent attack when a voice boomed.

“Return the gold coins to these men. They are the rightful owners.”

As everyone turned to see who had spoken, they saw a tall, clean-shaven and a bare-chested man with long, silky hair. His well-developed muscular physique could even give Mohan stiff competition.

While the three companions stood fixed to the ground, all the other villagers began retracing their steps in fear. Some of them, however, did not want to let go of the gold coins.

The man repeated his warning, this time balefully and his booming voice echoed. For a few moments, all was quiet. Then, one villager charged at the undaunted young man and attempted to biff him on the nose, but the assailant was no match for the brawny man, who moved away with an amazing speed and seizing the attacker’s wrists, broke them effortlessly. The attacker lay on the ground screaming in pain. Mohan, impressed with what he saw, went up to their saviour and asked him his name.

“I am Rannvijaya,” replied the man while unflinchingly staring at all the other men in possession of the gold coins as if trying to virtually intimidate them into submission.

Mohan was overjoyed to hear the name because he was the one they were seeking.

“Rannvijaya! We came to this village searching for you, and it is indeed our good fortune to have met you here!” remarked Mohan.

Surprised, Rannvijaya questioned them on the purpose of their visit.

“It would be better if we discuss the issue at someplace private. It’s confidential,” suggested Jayadev.

“Do not worry. You may reveal your purpose without hesitation. I give you my word that no harm shall befall you till such time you remain in this village,” declared Rannvijaya in an authoritative tone.

On Rannvijaya’s assurance, Mohan disclosed the purpose of their arrival in the village.

“We came here to seek your help. We require a map that only you can chart out for us...A map to reach the forbidden Kingdom of Dasavanakoka!”

But even before Rannvijaya could reply, clunking sounds of gold coins being dropped on the ground were heard. As Mohan and Rannvijaya turned, they saw all the villagers voluntarily dropping the gold coins to the ground and fleeing, panic-stricken, upon hearing Dasavanakoka’s name.

Clearly taken aback, Rannvijaya requested the three men to continue this discussion at his residence. Once the trio reached Rannvijaya’s house, they narrated the entire sequence of events leading up to the unveiling of Princess Alankrita’s portrait and the unleashing of the curse.

For a few seconds, Rannvijaya appeared dazed. He did not know how to respond but finally spoke.

“I shall not give you false hopes by declaring to be an expert on the route leading to Dasavanakoka’s kingdom. To be honest, neither did I conceive a precarious situation like yours to confront me nor do I possess the requisite courage to even remotely associate myself with anything colligated to the fiendish king,” he replied with dismay.

With their hopes dashed, the three men appeared extremely dejected before Rannvijaya broke the awkward silence with a revelation.

“Do not despair, friends, for all is not lost. The uncanny truth is that the map of Dasavanakoka’s kingdom does not exist as no one knows the exact route. However, I am well versed with the path from where we must commence our journey!”

“By saying ‘we’, are you trying to tell us that you too wish to accompany us?” asked Jayadev, hoping that Rannvijaya would reply in the affirmative.

“For all these years, if there was one path I desired to tread...it was the path to the Kingdom of Dasavanakoka. Term it prudence or fear, I was unable to muster up the courage to proceed in this direction. But now, with all of you undertaking this parlous journey, I think God has provided me with a golden opportunity to quell my inner apprehensions. I shall certainly not let this opportunity pass because neither do I intend to disappoint you nor do I wish to let myself down,” asserted Rannvijaya, bringing a smile on the faces of his new friends.

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by a vigorous knocking on the door. As Rannvijaya opened the door, a medium-built man scampered in. He was clean-shaven, had mischievous eyes and he held on to a bag. He rushed inside and stopped at one corner of the room, gasping for breath.

“Who are you and what brings you here?” asked Rannvijaya in a brusque manner.

The intruder replied after catching a few deep breaths. “I sincerely apologise for barging in like this. My name is Pawan and I come from the city of Ayodhya. I was on the run since I belong to a lower-caste family and dared to study the sacred scriptures from Indian mythology, which are forbidden to us, and hence I was ostracised. However, a section of the privileged class wants to make an example out of my so-called impudence and they are after my blood. As I ventured into this village, I was informed that a few men were setting off for Dasavana’s kingdom and as soon as I heard the news, I rushed to your doorstep to accompany you before it was too late,” he replied while recounting his tale.

“But, if you are so petrified by death, why do you want to accompany us? Aren’t you aware of the fact that each one of us shall be putting our lives in jeopardy the instant we set out on our journey into the unknown?” questioned a sceptical Jayadev, uncertain of Pawan’s motives.

“If I am destined to die before my time, I would much rather perish whilst being part of a historic journey into the terra incognita rather than accept death at the hands of men who subjugate others in the name of caste and race in this age of equality,” replied a sure-footed Pawan.

Hearing this, Mohan hugged Pawan and welcomed him to the team.

“Friends, I now introduce our new companion, Pawan, to all of you. His knowledge of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and other sacred texts shall prove beneficial to us during our journey,” declared Mohan and all the others agreed in unison.

After a hearty meal, each one of them sat around a wooden table under a dimly-lit lamp and Rannvijaya unfurled a huge map to an audience of ambitious men. He pointed his finger to the direction from where they were supposed to begin.

“Tomorrow, at the break of dawn, we shall set out in this direction on horseback. There are five of us and as luck would have it, I have five horses of the finest quality. These horses are fit to lead us to our desired destination at a brisk pace. The only difficulty is that our destination’s terminal point is Zahoba—the modern-day name for the forest where Taraka, the demoness, had once lived before being slain by Lord Rama,” explained Rannvijaya.

On hearing the name of the demoness, a chill ran down the spines of all the

men.

“Taraka? Wasn’t she the dreadful demoness who had wrecked havoc by biting off mountaintops and spitting them at innocent people? Isn’t she the one who had also sabotaged the prayers and rituals of revered sages?” prodded Raj.

“You are quite correct, Raj. However, from whatever I have understood, it is believed that the forest has not been traversed by mankind for ages, as an unspeakable horror continues to lurk in the dense forest of Zahoba. But none have been successful in determining who or what the entity is and those who had tried to do so by venturing into the forest...never returned,” explained Rannvijaya.

“Well, in that case, there remains only one alternative to ascertain the truth. And that is by...venturing into the forest ourselves,” Mohan declared.

Early next morning, amid the omnipresent chill and heavy fog, the five men set out to the forest of Zahoba on their horses. As the men were stacking up their baggage onto the backs of the horses, Mohan noticed something peculiar. He observed that despite the chill in the air and the near freezing temperature outside, none of his accomplices, besides Raj, were wearing any warm clothing. In fact, Rannvijaya roamed bare chested.

Puzzled at this, Mohan went up to Raj to discuss this, when Jayadev interrupted their conversation and brought a pair of clothes for them.

“Here! Take off your clothes and change,” stated Jayadev.

“What? Do you intend to kill us? We shall freeze to death in these clothes!” Mohan protested.

When Jayadev purposely turned a deaf ear to Mohan’s outburst, the latter was left with little choice but to oblige. Putting on a fawn-coloured sleeveless koti—that highlighted his muscular physique—and a pair of black pyjamas, Mohan emerged out of the house looking like a mythical hero. And to his bewilderment, the moment he adorned the apparel supplied to him and his friend, Raj, by Jayadev, the chill ceased to have any effect on him.

With the necessary items including food, water, and a few weapons safely packed, the five men embarked on their journey into the unknown. Pawan clung on to his bag all through.

“What precious items are you concealing from us?” asked Raj, wary of Pawan’s surreptitious movements.

“Oh, it’s nothing really! There are a few eatables I am carrying along for our journey ahead,” Pawan replied, hesitatingly.

As the men galloped ahead, Mohan asked a question that had been bothering him for the past couple of days.

“If Dasavanakoka is as mighty and powerful as each one of you is projecting

him to be, then, how is it that neither Raj nor I have ever heard of his tyrannical regime despite us being students of history and world affairs?”

Mohan's confusion brought a gentle smile on Jayadev's lips and he decided to quell his friend's misgivings.

“Mohan, as we commence our journey into the realm of the unknown, it is my duty to apprise you of some ground realities. From this day on, whatever you have ever known shall become non-existent and the unimaginable shall stare you in the eye. In this journey, the lines between fact and fantasy shall blur and give rise to a never-before-experienced exhilarating adventure!”

Stupefied at Jayadev's prophecy and lurid revelation, Mohan was trying to come to terms with this new reality when someone called out.

As they turned to see who it was, they noticed a young man seated comfortably on a large rock under the shade of a tree, blithely munching an apple.

“I caution you to bring your journey to a temporary halt, for a King Cobra shall cross your path if you were to venture any further,” forewarned the man, without even glancing at them.

Dismissing it as ramblings of a mentally unstable man, the group carried on. But, hardly had they crossed a few metres that they saw a huge King Cobra emerge from the dense foliage, coiling up right in their path, hissing at them with its forked tongue.

The horses neighed in fear and almost got out of control at the sight of the snake. Every rider had to quickly reign in the horse to prevent an accident. Meanwhile, the snake slithered away the moment the man sitting under the tree let out a strange sound. The surprised men stared at the man in amazement and questioned him.

“How did you know the King Cobra was going to cross our path?”

“God has blessed me with the gift of foresight. I have the power to see the future. I knew you would come by this road in your pursuit of Dasavanakoka and I patiently waited here to warn the five of you,” responded the man. The others looked at the man in complete bafflement.

“How do you know about our journey? Surely, you could be no ordinary man! O, great friend, kindly reveal your identity to us,” requested Mohan.

“I am who I am and wish to conceal nothing from you. My name is Nagarjuna and I appeal to you all to not treat me with scorn and contempt. I am a sorcerer, albeit an honourable one, as should be evident by my actions,” spoke the man.

“I seek to join all of you in your perilous journey, as I feel my powers could be of advantage to you, especially since you are still unsure of where fate is leading you and what the future holds in store.”

Mohan, who had already developed an admiration for the young man, readily welcomed him to his group and requested him to sit behind Pawan, on his horse, as they all resumed their journey.

Six hours had passed since the men had embarked on their journey along with Nagarjuna. The sun's rays that had so far illuminated the land were slowly giving way to the darkness of the night. It was while they were passing through a hamlet that they came across an elderly man, smoking a hukkah, and enquired about the path leading to the forest of Zahoba. They also shared their curiosity about the manslayer of the forest.

With great despair, the old man, whose name was Vasant Bhan, revealed, in a shaky voice, whatever he knew but not before drawing their attention to a couple of tall pillars carved out of stone, with flattened circular tops, that were positioned adjacently to each other.

"Our humble village has been damned by an unimaginable horror. It is a horror that lurks in the deep, dark, and dense forest of Zahoba and waits patiently for its next hapless victim it seeks to devour in the swarthy nights. Our brave sons have, time and again, assayed to wipe out the fiendish beast but, unfortunately, they have failed miserably. The pillars you see over there bear testimony to this dreadful fact—each time a son of this village has gone to vanquish the beast, his blood-soaked and mauled body has been found atop these circular pillars.

"After examining the bodies, we villagers concluded that this was the work of a ferocious carnivore that remained conspicuous by its absence, during the day. Do not be hasty in your decision, please abstain from entering the jungle at this hour. I would be happy to invite you to spend the night at my humble abode if you were to consider it suitable," spoke the man, teary-eyed.

"I promise to put an end to all your worries. We shall slay this beast that has been the cause of the villagers' vexation. As a mark of my assurance, I am going to place my bag atop one of these pillars and swear replacing it with the lifeless body of the beast that has ravaged the jungle and tormented innocent people. May it be the first thing you set your eyes on when the morning sun ushers the dawn of a new era," proclaimed a confident Mohan, and after placing his bag on the pillar, he took the old man's blessings and stepped into the accursed forest with his team.

As the six men ventured into the forest, they stopped to take stock of the awe-inspiring surroundings. The jungle was dark and desolate, and the wind howled in the moonlit night. The glittering array of stars looked down on the dense trees as the men stood on the moss-covered ground.

The wild grass; the desolate, haunting lanes painted a scary picture. The forest

just stood here, waiting for its prey to pay a visit.

Moving further, the men chanced upon a pond whose waters helped refresh the weary travellers. All of them decided to camp there for the night.

“It is rather foolish of us that we have ventured into the forest of Zahoba without adequate weapons. The mace that Rannvijaya has brought along is too cumbersome to wield. We would be defenceless if the beast chooses to knock on our doors tonight!” Raj cautioned. After initial reluctance, Pawan hesitantly said.

“Forgive me friends, for not being completely truthful to you. The bag I guard so precious does not comprise eatables. It has a potent weapon dating back to the glorious chapters of Indian history...a weapon possessing the power to vanquish all evil,” announced Pawan and opened his bag to reveal a razor-sharp sword that glistened in the moonlight.

Saying this, Pawan entrusted the 3-foot-9-inch-long sword in Mohan’s capable hands. Mohan examined the sword with great admiration, but soon realised that something was peculiarly familiar about this weapon.

“My goodness...this is Shivaji’s mighty sword—the Bhawani!” he gasped in horror. Mohan was furious.

“You, scoundrel! You, thief! So, you are the one who committed the ignominious act at the National History Museum in Mumbai!” yelled Mohan. Unable to control his ire, he gave Pawan a hard push who fell on the ground with a thud.

As the others tried to pacify Mohan, an ashamed Pawan confessed his morally depraved act with remorse.

“I know I have sinned and I must repent. But believe me if you can, I had no intention of committing this despicable act but I was compelled to do so. When the upper-caste people came to know that I had read the holy scriptures— forbidden to us—they vandalised my house and I was ousted from the city. Their cruelty knew no bounds. They watched me day in and day out and made it difficult for me to settle down at one place and find a job for myself. I was devastated.

I came to know of the Bhawani while I was trying to gain a foothold in Mumbai. Suffering from extreme financial woes, stealing the Bhawani and earning some money by selling it off was the only solution that came to my mind,” lamented Pawan.

Mohan knew Pawan had been wronged but his crime couldn’t be condoned either. He refrained from consoling or admonishing him any further. The others took pity on the aggrieved soul, when Raj came up with an interesting proposition for his friends to ponder over.

“Since it is rather late and we are all famished by now, I suggest we collect

some wood to burn and cook our food. This shall not only fill our empty stomachs but also act as bait for the unknown entity, which would definitely be awakened to our presence by the sight of fire and the smell of human flesh,” he suggested.

After collecting enough wood and finishing dinner, the men fell into a deep slumber. Mohan sat awake and kept watch for any impending danger. A couple of hours passed and except for the occasional howling of wild animals in the distance, there wasn't much activity in the forest. Then, suddenly, Mohan heard someone mewling.

As he looked around for the source of the noise, he noticed a beautiful maiden with thick, long hair sitting beside the pond, whimpering in hushed tones. Mohan was, both, intrigued by the sudden appearance of this maiden as well as desirous of comforting her. He slowly walked towards the maiden without intending to startle her. Just when Mohan had reached close to the maiden, she turned but before she could raise an alarm, Mohan introduced himself to her and asked.

“Why are you sitting in the middle of a dense jungle at such a deathly hour?”

The beautiful woman wiped her tears and began recounting her tragic tale in a monotonic tone riddled with sorrow.

“The question you ask can be directed to you as well. I have spent countless nights beside this serene and soothing pond, it offers solace to my restless soul,” the maiden said.

“But why do you come here each night when you are well aware of the dangers?”

Lamenting her fate, the maiden replied.

“A couple of years ago, the beast that resides in the forest of Zahoba was at the zenith of its savagery. Its monstrosity had instilled terrible fear in every family in the village and there was hardly anybody who hadn't been a victim to the massacre of the Zahoban Tiger.”

“Zahoban Tiger?”

“Yes, the beast that roams the forest of Zahoba is an edacious tiger, referred to as the Zahoban Tiger or the Tiger of Zahoba. Few people are aware of the true identity of the predatory creature and my husband was one of those unfortunate souls who had seen the beast. Undaunted by the ferocious animal and lured by the bounty on the tiger's head, my husband had ventured into this forest two years ago... and hasn't been seen ever since.

In the last few years, the tiger has killed several other men who went in its pursuit and their bodies were recovered a few days later, placed atop the tall pillars in our village; but, there were no traces of my young husband. Hence, I

come here to seek answers to my questions, for it is believed that the Zahoban Tiger has been sighted only during darkness and appears each night to find a human to devour. But neither have I been able to find an answer to my queries, nor have I been fortunate enough to have encountered the Zahoban Tiger who would devour me and grant me salvation from this morbid life of mine,” sighed the maiden.

Mohan held her hand as a comforting gesture, when the woman broke down without a warning and hugged Mohan as if in great distress. Unable to deal with the situation, Mohan patted her back when he felt slightly odd. The woman embraced Mohan with greater intensity than before, and although he felt sorry for the unfortunate woman, he noticed something unearthly taking shape before his eyes.

The arms of the woman were suddenly turning hairy, while her weight seemed to increase exponentially. She tightened her grip on the unsuspecting Mohan.

A bewildered Mohan saw her human flesh being replaced with a furry skin. Mohan understood the woman was no hapless maiden...but the menacing Tiger of Zahoba in disguise, who had set this trap to lure him.

But before he could act, the tiger sunk its razor-sharp claws in Mohan's back and tore his skin before thrusting its teeth into his neck. As blood oozed out from his body and Mohan squalled in agony, the tiger carried on with its vicious attack. Determined to fight till his last breath, Mohan recovered and somehow managed to draw out the Bhawani.

Sensing danger, the tiger bit Mohan once again, who was unable to swing his arm and plunge the sword into the beast's body. As Mohan lay unconscious, the Zahoban Tiger charged at the five other oblivious men. The mammoth animal roared and leapt at the rest of the group that was suddenly awakened by the animal's noise.

Pawan, who was first in line thought this was his end. As he cringed with fear, he saw a blood-soaked and injured Mohan limping towards the beast and as the animal jumped in the air, Mohan slid under and plunged his sword straight into the tiger's heart. The beast fell on the ground with a loud thud and after letting out earth-shattering growls, breathed its last.

The tiger lay lifeless. Mohan had risen like a true hero and had achieved the unfathomable by slaying the dreadful creature. As his companions stared at their friend with pride and amazement, a strange sight greeted them. With every passing second, the blood oozing from Mohan's body started receding and his wounds began to heal by themselves. It was as if he were immune to injury. As the men gaped in astonishment, Mohan's body regained its original shape and

strength and the moment he had fully recovered, a dazzling flash of light illuminated the area.

From the spot at which the slain tiger's body lay, arose a spirit of a beautiful and an enchanting woman bearing a striking resemblance to that of the maiden who had interacted with Mohan, before it had turned into the tiger. The maiden folded her hands and thanked Mohan for redeeming her from the spell of a terrible curse.

"Years ago, I was an apsara, a celestial nymph, and had insulted a sage in the arrogance of my youth and beauty. Enraged at my abominable behaviour, the sage cursed me by turning me into a tiger. He had predicted the arrival of a courageous man, centuries later, who would show compassion and valour, and ultimately kill the tiger and rid me of the curse.

I am aware of your mission and where you plan to travel, and hence as a token of my gratitude I offer you some of Shabri's sacred berries," said the apsara and handed over five berries to Mohan.

"These berries are the same ones which Shabri had diligently collected as an offering for Lord Rama. But, as you know the legend, Lord Rama ate only a few berries. His hunger was satiated with Shabri's unconditional love and devotion. After this encounter with her Lord, Shabri departed from the mortal world and these berries were left uneaten. Only a few of these uneaten berries remain and are scattered at different places throughout India.

Since no one is aware of the complete route leading up to Dasavanakoka's kingdom, these berries shall help you reach your next milestone and prove to be of assistance to you in your quest to defeat the tyrannical king. But I shall warn you that much like the berries that Shabri had collected for Lord Rama—some bitter and some sweet—these berries too are of a similar nature and it would only be the sweet ones that would lead you to your destination, if fate so desires. Hit the berry with great force on the map and if God wills, you shall set forth on your next adventure!" disclosed the apsara and vanished into thin air.

As Mohan opened his fist, he noticed that the berries were glowing in the darkness of the night. Glancing at his friends for their approval, Mohan ordered Rannvijaya to unfurl the map he had brought along and once Rannvijaya had done so, Mohan threw the first berry and smashed it on the map.

"Nothing happened!" commented Raj, dejectedly.

With faith in his heart and a wondrous look in his eyes, Mohan threw the berry once again, but this time too, nothing extraordinary happened.

Not one to be cowed down by failure, Mohan hurled the berry on the map one more time and as the berry collided with the map, it produced a flash of fire. As

the group watched in awe, the stream of fire conjoined one territory to another and the berry finally halted at one destination.

“Jalahal!” exclaimed Jayadev.

“Quick! Let us make our way to the city of Jalahal,” suggested Nagarjuna.

“Of course, we will. But prior to that, I need to fulfil my promise,” smiled the charming Mohan.



The next morning as Vasant Bhan rubbed his eyes after waking up, he moved tardily towards the veranda and beheld a sight he had never dared to dream. Lying on top of the circular surface of the two adjacent pillars was the lifeless body of the beast that had deprived the villagers of their sleep and peace of mind. The Tiger of Zahoba lay motionless.

An ecstatic Bhan began to dance with joy, clapping his hands wildly and inviting his friends to join him in this celebration. The old man tried remembering the name of the brave youth who had promised to slay the beast; the wrinkled face lit up as the name came back to him.

“Mohan! Mohan!” the old man shouted out loud.

Mohan was nowhere to be seen. He had already set out with his companions, for another adventure, to the city of Jalahal!

The Legend Comes Alive

The gracious sun, in the chill of the October winter, offered much respite to the band of men as they galloped like warriors towards their next destination. After a few hours though, when signs of fatigue started showing on their faces, Raj decided to break the monotony with his not-so-palatable brand of humour.

“I wonder what the villagers would have said on seeing the Tiger of Zahoba lying like a relic on those pillars?” he asked with a mischievous grin on his face, enough for Mohan to fathom that Raj was trying to lift the spirits of the weary travellers.

“What?” asked Mohan and joined in.

“But of course, they would have remarked—*Ek Tha Tiger* !”

Mohan and Raj shared a common passion for films and the two friends could discuss movies for hours on end. While the rest of the group appeared to revel in the friendly banter, there was one person who seemed rather discomforted.

Noticing a perturbed expression on his friend’s face, Mohan asked him gently, “What happened, Nagarjuna? You look rather disturbed.”

Nagarjuna did not hesitate to express his dilemma.

“Isn’t Jalahal a rather peculiar name? I wonder what it stands for and I pray that God keeps us away from any lurking danger!”

Glances were exchanged but nobody could come up with an answer to the question.

“Well, whatever it is and whatever it means, we shall soon find out. Jalahal is another opportunity that fate has bestowed upon us to conquer our fears and reach a step closer to Dasavana,” responded Pawan.

Barely had Pawan replied, when the men realised that they had entered the territory of the Kingdom of Jalahal. A broad wide road, fringed with luscious green grass, tall coniferous trees, greeted them. The sight of the serene yet mighty river flowing alongside pleased everyone.

As the men surged ahead, Jayadev expressed his views on the city they had just entered.

“Surely, there is more to it than what meets the eye. Everything appears to be perfectly normal, but I am sure that a city which forms a linkage to the menacing Dasavanakoka can be anything but perfect, and that is what intrigues me.”

“I suggest we be on guard. We are surrounded by Dasavana’s men who are lurking around, unknown to us. I am certain they have been following each and every move of ours with a bird’s-eye view,” revealed Nagarjuna, sending a shiver down the spines of these brave men.

“But how are you so sure?” questioned Mohan.

Bringing his horse to an abrupt halt, Nagarjuna turned and addressed the group in a cautionary tone.

“I can feel it! I can sense danger waiting to strike the instant we become complacent. I must forewarn each one of you that Dasavanakoka has a well-connected network of spies planted across towns, cities, and villages all over the world; places that are beyond my knowledge and your imagination.

If I am not mistaken, Dasavana already knows about our plans and journeys. His spies; the embodiment of ruthlessness, darkness, and all things evil...have been seen only by a chosen few...and these chosen men haven’t lived long to tell their tale. Attired in raven-black silken robes and hoods concealing their faces, these spies of King Dasavanakoka or Trivarmrut, are harbingers of misery and wretchedness. If I know Dasavana’s tactics well, his men are trailing us like a shadow, awaiting an opportune moment to launch an attack!”

Mohan broke into a cold sweat and went numb with fear. He had, after all, encountered such ghastly apparitions clothed in black robes with a staff in hand.

The group’s worst fears were confirmed when Mohan recounted his dreadful encounters with Dasavana’s ‘spies’. The sun had, by now, disappeared and had

been usurped by lunar luminescence. It was while the group was recovering from the alarming news and trying to move further when, suddenly, they chanced upon the tall, magnificent, and royal palace of Jalahal. Resting on a hilltop, its secret chambers enticed the men. The horses came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the broad road, at the foothills of the palace, and the men felt a sinister force overpowering them.

“I cannot understand the reason, but I feel as if some supernatural force is drawing me towards the palace,” stated Raj, with a slight concern in his voice.

“I too feel a similar kind of force acting upon me and if each one of us is experiencing the same, I suggest we continue and proceed towards the palace. For all we know, it may be a directive for us, straight from the heavens, helping us unearth hidden facts and unlock new secrets!” asserted Mohan and led the group through the hills and the surrounding wilderness.

Diffidently, yet with great tenacity, the men arrived at the humongous palace gates that had been surprisingly left unguarded.

Befuddled at the peculiar sight, Mohan gradually realised that Nagarjuna’s prophecy was coming true and a formidable task awaited them in this paranormal town of Jalahal.

Being the strongest of the lot, Mohan and Rannvijaya pushed the gates with all their might till the gates opened with a long creaking sound.

The six men marched into the palace and were astonished to see that the doors of the palace, just like the gates, had been left unattended.

“Halt, friends! I suggest we refrain from entering this palace as I can sense despair and darkness waiting to entrap us,” warned Nagarjuna.

Mohan pacified his friend and reassured him that no harm would befall if they all stood united. Saying this, he threw open the main door of the royal palace.

Desolate, dark, and abandoned, the palace appeared to be in a state of decay, as if, it had been ravaged by the sands of time.

Within the dark confines of the palace, Rannvijaya realised the wisdom in Nagarjuna’s words.

“I feel we all should have followed Nagarjuna’s instructions. The palace, in any case, appears forsaken and there isn’t any evidence of another living entity apart from these spiders crawling in their cobwebs and rats running amuck.”

Everyone began retracing their steps. Mohan, however, for some strange reason stood firm and tried to find any clue he could lay his hands on. It was as if some distressed souls were calling out to him, yearning to meet their saviour.

Despite these strange sensations, nothing happened and the palace appeared as desolate as before. Dejected by the turn of events, Mohan proceeded to depart but hardly had he walked a few steps that he and his friends heard a faint

coughing sound, coming from one of the upper floors of the palace.

There was human presence in this palace, after all, and there was no way Mohan wasn't going to investigate the matter fully.

Within seconds, Mohan, accompanied by his friends ascended the stairs and managed to reach the room from where the muffled sounds had been heard. Upon entering the dilapidated room, their eyes met a completely demoralised and utterly depressed frail, old man who wore a long, white flowing beard and had wrinkles on his face. His hands trembled and it seemed as if he had been languishing on his chair for countless years.

The old man was dressed in a flowing blue dress with matching headgear. The sight of him, sitting there, surrounded by the gushing sound of the waterfall—easily visible in the background—lent the entire scene a supernatural air. It also provided the group with a fair idea about the lineage of the decrepit old man.

“Who are you?” questioned Mohan.

The old man, clearly taken aback by the presence of another human being, slowly turned his head to catch a glimpse of the unexpected visitor.

“Isn't that a question I should be asking you, Son?” spoke the old man with a sardonic smile on his face and anguish in his voice.

“I am Mohan and these are my friends. We have arrived here in our quest to confront King Dasavanakoka!” replied a confident Mohan.

As soon as the white-haired man heard the name of the tyrannical ruler, his facial expressions underwent change and a shudder ran down his spine.

“If you have come in his pursuit, then you are on the correct trail. I am Mukutveer, Dasavana's so-called 'friend' and the hapless King of Jalahal,” lamented the king.

Mohan and his band of men had, to some extent, guessed the identity of the King and were not surprised to have their conjecture validated by his introduction. However, what befuddled them was the king's loneliness, in a palace bereft of any luxury or comfort.

“That is because my subjects have deserted me. They have deserted me for better places as they couldn't withstand the dreadful spell Jalahal continues to reel under,” bemoaned King Mukutveer.

“Spell? What kind of spell has engulfed Jalahal?” asked Mohan.

“Call it my great misfortune, but the truth is I have been ordained not to divulge more or else an ancient curse shall be awakened and all of Jalahal will be consumed by it!” revealed the king.

As the men debated amongst themselves and tried to unravel the mystery of the curse, the bottle of water fell from Nagarjuna's bag and rolled over to the feet of the king, causing the latter to question what it was.

“Oh, just water,” responded Nagarjuna in a polite yet nonchalant tone.

But the answer seemed to have had a rather strange effect on the ageing king, who suddenly mustered strength and holding the bottle in his hands, gulped down all the water in one breath, as if he hadn’t taken a sip of water in years.

While the men were certainly surprised by the old king’s odd behaviour, they chose to concentrate on more pertinent issues.

“King Mukutveer, I humbly request you to help us in our mission and bestow on us the berries of which you are in possession.”

The king wiped off traces of water from his mouth and then addressed Mohan’s concern.

“Son, the berries you ask for and seek are extremely rare and unique. These berries can only be acquired through the completion of arduous and laborious tasks and I am afraid I shall be unable to hand over the berries to you till you and your friends relieve us from this curse.”

“But what is the curse?” questioned a slightly agitated Rannvijaya.

“I am sorry, but, I cannot reveal that to you simply because I am forbidden to do so. You all shall have to first ascertain what the ominous curse is and then rid our city of that evil, for you to rightfully own these coveted berries,” replied the king.

With no success coming their way even after cajoling, the group decided to exit the royal premises and commence their journey to determine what this curse was and how they could obliterate it.

They had barely begun descending the stairs, when Nagarjuna realised he had forgotten to collect the bottle of water and went back to the king’s chamber.

Nagarjuna returned soon and the group arrived at the same location from where they had begun their onward climb towards the palace of Jalahal. It was late in the night by the time the men came back and the city appeared to be in deep slumber. Nobody could be seen in the vicinity and the only sounds audible were the gushing waterfalls surrounding the royal palace and bats flapping their wings.

Feeling exhausted, the group decided to find a small guest house to spend the night and then resume the task assigned to them, the next day. It was while the group was still searching for a guest house in the city when Nagarjuna revealed they had run out of their supply of water since King Mukutveer had consumed whatever water was left.

With no source of shelter visible and their parched throats clearly in need of water, Nagarjuna came up with a solution.

“Why wait for someone to provide us with water when we can quench our thirst from the waters of the river nearby!”

Finding merit in their friend's suggestion, the group galloped towards the riverbank and got off to quench their thirst. While Nagarjuna went ahead with Raj and the others, Mohan decided to call up Samaira and inform her of his well-being and safety. But to his dismay, he realised that there was no network.

As Mohan kept his phone back in his pocket and looked up, he saw something move behind the grass. Unable to see who or what was secretly keeping an eye on them, Mohan took out his phone again and switched on its flashlight before quickly turning it towards the direction of the wild growth of grass at the other end of the riverbank.

So agile was Mohan that he gave the uninvited visitor no chance to escape. However, Mohan was slightly surprised to see a boy hiding behind the bush with a frightened look on his face, vigorously shaking his head, as if to warn the group of some impending danger.

Mohan sensed peril and immediately commanded his friends to stay away from the river water.

"Why, Mohan? What happened?" asked Nagarjuna.

"Yes, what's the matter? Nagarjuna and I have already drunk the water and it seemed rather soothing and refreshing to us," responded Raj, taken aback by his friend's sudden warning.

Heaving a sigh of relief that his friends were safe, Mohan felt rather stupid to have been fooled by an unknown boy but when he searched in the direction once again, he realised that the boy had vanished! Sensing something amiss, Mohan instructed his friends to wait for him and saying that, he mounted his horse and marched forward in his search of the young boy.

It was extremely dark and Mohan had to rely on his cell phone's flashlight to nab the boy, whom he could see running at lightning speed. However, the young boy failed to match pace with Mohan's horse and had to surrender soon.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Who I am doesn't matter. But...but I suggest you meet Sage Kaushik, who sits under the Peepul tree on the other side of this riverbank, on the outskirts of the forest," replied the young boy, breathing heavily out of sheer fright.

Mohan couldn't comprehend the boy's nervousness and asked him the reason.

"That is because I have seen tragedy strike in front of my eyes. I know why no one resides in our town anymore, I know why our king suffers, bereft of all power and luxury, and why the once glorious Kingdom of Jalahal has been reduced to its pale shadow. Save your friends, for they are in grave danger!"

"I still don't understand what you are trying to convey!" spoke Mohan.

"The water... the river water is poisoned and anyone who drinks it succumbs to death within minutes. Till a few months back, I too resided with my family in

this city but have now shifted since all the sources of water in our city have turned poisonous; claiming several lives, including our cattle. Our king is not destined to leave the city for he has been cursed by another king whose name we are forbidden to utter. However, since our king was once a friend of his, he has ensured that our king doesn't die but, nevertheless, suffers in agony without water.

Visit Sage Kaushik's abode without further delay, or else your friends shall be doomed. Jalahal is the city of poisonous waters; 'Jal' means water and 'Halahal' is poison!"

Mohan stood motionless and it suddenly dawned on him why King Mukutveer had quaffed the water and how correct Nagarjuna's premonition had been. Before he could ask any more questions, the boy had once again disappeared into the darkness of the forest. With no time to lose, Mohan dashed off at breakneck speed to help his friends.

Mohan's heart sank as he reached the other end of the river. The inevitable had happened. Both Nagarjuna and his best friend Raj, lay unconscious beside the riverbank while the others cried out in desperation.

Mohan instructed his friends to put the afflicted companions on horseback and without another thought, he set out in his search for Sage Kaushik with Jayadev.

Severely distressed about his friends' plight, Mohan arrived at the outskirts of the forest.

After a rigorous search for the elusive sage, Jayadev saw a ray of light bisecting the wilderness and thinking it to be the sage's dwelling, surged forward in that direction.

And he was right. Sitting below a huge Peepul tree was a sage—with matted hair, a white flowing beard and minimal saffron clothing—immersed in penance. The sage's aura of divinity, calmness and serenity pleased Mohan. Add to that, he was also surprised to see an unusually muscular sage. Given his physique, Mohan thought the sage could belong to the Kshatriya lineage.

Before Mohan could utter anything, the sage's voice boomed.

"Strangers! I sense strangers around me...strangers in great distress and in dire need of my help," spoke the sage in his frail yet commanding voice. He opened his eyes to see the men standing before him.

The sage immediately understood what had transpired in the past few minutes and commanded Mohan to bring forth the bodies of Raj and Nagarjuna.

The sage touched the bodies of the two fallen men; he chanted hymns and recited a few healing mantras. Mohan was extremely perturbed at the grave turn of events and patiently waited for the sage's verdict.

“I am sorry, my child, but your friends are...dead,” Sage Kaushik declared. Mohan’s world had turned upside down.



Samaira was pacing up and down at Professor Suryamurthy’s drawing room while praying for the safety of her lover and her friend.

“Don’t worry, Samaira. I am confident Mohan is doing fine,” the professor tried assuaging Samaira’s fears.

“If he is safe, why hasn’t either he or Raj bothered to call me as promised?” countered a clearly miffed Samaira.

“Look, Samaira, I understand you are concerned about Raj and Mohan’s safety but we must also be mindful of the fact that the two of them have ventured into a remote village called Sahastapur and it is quite possible that the network signals may not be functioning properly,” replied Suryamurthy while watching the disturbing news of a hurricane, that had devastated portions of the Caribbean Islands, Eastern Canada, USA and damaged 65.6 million US dollars worth property and resulted in severe fatalities.



Meanwhile, near the forest of Jalahal, a grief-stricken Mohan sat numb on the wet grassy ground—shattered by the horrific tragedy—unable to come to terms with the loss. Jayadev, Pawan, and Rannvijaya too were dismayed and sat in complete silence as an atmosphere of gloom loomed large in the area. It was while all the men were grieving their friends’ demise, when the sage tried to comfort Mohan and made a startling revelation.

“Do not lose hope or courage, my children...for all is not lost. Your friends can be revived, but for that you need to hear a story...a story with its origins set in mythology; a time when the gods, devas, and asuras roamed and ruled different parts of the world. Hear this tale carefully, as this story has the potential to bring your friends back to life!” spoke the learned sage.

Sage Kaushik’s words instilled renewed hope in the demoralised souls.

“Thousands of years ago, during the Satya Yuga, the great sage, Rishi Durvasa once presented a unique garland—symbolising good fortune—to the King of the devas; Indra—the God of Thunder—who placed the garland on his vahana, the magnificent elephant, Airavata. Airavata, unfortunately, got intoxicated with the garland placed on his head and flung it on the ground, and crushed it with its feet. This act of folly enraged Rishi Durvasa—known for his sudden temper—who was furious with Indra for insulting and mortifying him.

Unable to overcome his angst, he cursed the devas and proclaimed they would be devoid of all energy and deprived of good fortune, owing to the act of wretched impudence by their king.

A terrible period of darkness, misery, and gloom engulfed the devas and their heavenly abode. Sapped of all their special powers and abilities, the devas stood no match for the menacing asuras, who took advantage of the devas' defencelessness. Terrified and panic-stricken, the devas ran to their saviour, Lord Vishnu, and pleaded him to protect them.

There was only one substance that could rejuvenate the drained-out devas and restore their lost glory and pride—the sacred and elusive Amrit. But clearly, the devas were in no position to obtain the Amrit by their efforts alone. Hence, Lord Vishnu advised them to collaborate with the asuras in their quest for the sacred nectar as the latter were sure to be lured by the tempting offer of immortality.

Preparations began in full swing. While Mount Mandara was used as the churning rod, the Serpent King Vasuki also rendered his services and acted as the churning rope. Lord Vishnu took the form of Kurma, the turtle, and prevented the mountain from sinking into the ocean of milk. While the devas held the tail of the giant serpent, the asuras held its head and together they began the process of churning.

For days, the devas and asuras toiled for the completion of this arduous task and just like the two rivals, the Serpent King Vasuki, began to feel exhausted as well. Due to fatigue, Vasuki began spewing a poisonous liquid—known as Halahal—from its mouth—a poison that could have catastrophic consequences and destroy all creation.

In this hour of distress, Lord Vishnu advised the devas to pray to Lord Shiva for deliverance from the poison. The devas and asuras prayed to the almighty, Shiv Shambhu, who willingly obliged to come to their rescue and began swallowing the Halahal in a bid to save the universe.

Taking the Halahal in his bare hands, he gulped the poison down his throat as the devas and asuras watched in anticipation. Goddess Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, noticing the severe repercussions her husband's act could have on him, went and pressed his neck, thereby, preventing the poison or Halahal from spreading to different parts of his body. The poison was accumulated in Lord Shiva's throat which turned blue in colour. This is why the Lord is also known as Neelkantha: the one with the blue throat.

However, as Lord Shiva washed his hands, a drop of the Halahal, invisible to the naked eye, fell on earth into a river and turned its water or jal poisonous. This is the river from which this entire city and kingdom derives its name—Jalahal!" Sage Kaushik ended the story.

Mohan and his friends were left spellbound by this mythological tale. However, before they could ask the sage any questions, he continued.

“Wait, for the tale isn’t over yet. From this churning of the ocean appeared several priceless, unique, and unparalleled ratnas that were distributed amongst the devas and the asuras. What happened afterwards is of little consequence to you, but from these ratnas emerged Jyestha—the Goddess of Misfortune.

Believed to have taken birth from Serpent King Vasuki’s mouth while he spewed venom, she is also referred to as Alakshmi, sister of Goddess Lakshmi. Jyestha dwells in all places inauspicious; wherever there is greed, lust, power, treachery, filth, envy, and ugliness...there exists Jyestha: the harbinger of grief, sorrow and doom.

Jyestha chose Jalahal as her residing place; for she too, like the Halahal, was born out of Vasuki’s mouth. For centuries, the city of Jalahal lay abandoned and forsaken; just as you see it today. Jyestha’s wrath was challenged the day Dasavanakoka set his foot here. Blessed by Lord Shiva, he drove out the Goddess of Misfortune from the city of Jalahal and brought respite to the kings of Jalahal.

Post Jyestha’s exit, the city of Jalahal prospered for centuries. The kings ruled wisely, armies conquered territories in quick succession, the riverbank became the central trading route, and the subjects led a comfortable life until...until a year back, when Trivarmrut severed all ties with King Mukutveer and made Jalahal a living hell, for Dasavana had foreseen your arrival.”

There was a sense of disbelief amongst the men listening to this legendary tale.

“But how is that even remotely possible? King Mukutveer is on his deathbed and if Dasavana was a friend to King Mukutveer and his ancestors, he should have died and departed from this planet, eons ago!”

The sage smiled at the naiveté of the visitors and clarified their doubts.

“It is true that King Mukutveer is aged, it is correct that King Mukutveer’s forefathers were friends with Dasavana, and it is also correct to assume that Trivarmrut should have disappeared from the face of humanity centuries ago...but the unquestionable fact remains that King Dasavanakoka is still alive; omnipresent and omnipotent. And this is because he has been granted the boon of everlasting youth and immortality by none other than the benevolent, Lord Shiva.

But do not fret, as Dasavana and his army can be tackled later. For now, you need to save your friends and for that, you must let me complete the story,” reminded the knowledgeable sage.

“Ousted by Dasavana, Jyestha began dwelling at another site born out of

mythological legends. In the Ramayana, when Lord Rama wished to cross the Indian Ocean with his army to reach Lanka, where his wife, Sita, had been held captive by the terrifying, mighty and invincible demon king Ravan; he had prayed to Lord Varun—the God of Water.

Seconds turned into minutes, minutes into hours and hours into days, but Lord Varun refused to relent. Angered by this neglect, the usually calm and peaceful Lord Rama took out his bow and decided to use the fearful Brahmastra that would dry up the entire ocean.

Realising the adverse repercussions, Lord Varun, appeared before Lord Rama, apologised for his behaviour and pleaded Lord Rama to dismount the arrow. Since it was impossible to dismount, he pointed the arrow to a distant sea, in another direction, and released it. We know that place as the Great Thar Desert today. There are myths and legends, but, the most interesting part is the fossils excavated in this region indicate the existence of marine life.

It is in this desert that Jyestha now inhabits, wreaking havoc in the area. For several months now, courageous men from Jalahal have ventured out to challenge the power of the mighty Jyestha. Sadly, none have returned successful.

If you desire to revive your friends' lives, then you...you, Mohan, shall have to undertake the journey to Goddess Jyestha's abode all by yourself and acquire the magic potion—gifted to her by her brother-in-law and the preserver of our world, Lord Vishnu. This potion has the power to nullify the poisonous water of Jalahal. You have to achieve your goal before the first rays of the sun touch the territory of Jalahal!" the sage explained to Mohan.

"But, how will I complete the task before sunrise? The Thar Desert is far away from where we presently stand and it is absolutely impossible for me to reach the arid location, let alone return in good time!" spoke an aggrieved Mohan, desperately wanting to save the lives of his friends.

"Do not worry, young man, for I shall recite a mantra that shall teleport you to your desired location and once you have successfully completed the task, you ought to recite the mantra once more and you will be standing right before us," spoke Sage Kaushik.

"But, beware, she is devious in her ploys and plans; it is my duty to forewarn you, as several men have perished in their pursuit of the magical potion.

Remember the magical hymn I recite to you now, for it shall help you succeed in your journey and teleport you from the forest of Jalahal to the arid desert of Thar and back.

In the darkness of the night

Her messengers are on the prowl

Whenever she speaks

You can always see her scowl...

She asks a simple riddle

But her game plan is foul

Turning humans into crows

She appears with her sister...

Sage Kaushik chanted, what appeared to be an incomplete couplet and teleported Mohan to the barren lands of Thar Desert.

As Mohan stood unaccompanied in the expansive desert of Thar; whistling winds blew past him in the middle of the night. But even as Mohan stood there all alone; feeling overwhelmed by the sheer size of the area and the fact that not even a single human being was visible for miles ahead, humour did not seem to leave his side.

“This area sure seems deserted,” he spoke aloud, hoping for any sign or symbol that would help him come face-to-face with the dreadful Goddess. As Mohan was immersed in these thoughts and contemplated the next plan of action, a raven swooped above the area as if signalling him to follow it.

Though Mohan was initially unable to comprehend the raven’s message; he remembered how Sage Kaushik had spoken of crows while reciting the magical mantra and he decided to follow the raven.

As the raven flew high in the sky, accompanied by the solitary traveller who tried to match up to the bird’s speed, the raven abruptly halted atop a cave and just as suddenly as it had stopped, it flapped its wings and flew away as if terrorised by a tormenting presence lurking in the vicinity.

Standing right outside the eerie-looking cave—resembling the skull of a human—Mohan mustered courage and went inside. It was dark, cold, and moist inside the cave and a terrible pungent odour pervaded the area. As he took a few steps further, he saw a faint green light far away and felt as if several souls were trapped there. Mohan surged ahead. He knew that he wasn’t alone.

On reaching further, Mohan was frightened by the sight; seated in front of him in dark garments, on a lustrous golden throne was Goddess Jyestha herself! She had an extremely long nose, thick, hanging lips; braided hair wound atop her head, a pot belly and a swarthy complexion. Holding a white-coloured lotus in her right hand and a large broom in the other, she sat with great authority. The murder of crows surrounding her made loud, unpleasant, cacophonic sounds as if to forewarn him of the fate he would meet if he stayed there any longer.

But Mohan was in no mood to budge and had his thoughts focussed on the small water pot lying near her throne. Sensing an opportunity to turn another human being into a crow, the Goddess spoke in her heavy, unflattering, and menacing voice.

“A visitor...I see. Come close to me, young man; do not fear me, for I intend no harm!” spoke the Goddess in a vicious tone.

“I come here in search of a magical potion; a potion that has the power to neutralise the poisoned water of Jalahal and bring my friends back to life,” replied a resolute Mohan.

“Well...well...well! If you desperately seek the magical potion gifted to me by Lord Vishnu, then you shall have to answer the question I pose to you! You are permitted to search for clues at all places inside the cave, but you must respond quickly. And once I ask the question, you shall forfeit the right to exit this cave till such time that you have satisfied me with your answer. If you answer the question correctly, the potion shall be yours, but if...if you fail...then you too shall be turned into a crow forever!” she laughed, maniacally.

Mohan was unnerved by the Goddess’s intimidating appearance and the conditions she had laid out. However, after much thought, he calmed down and gave his assent to the Goddess; knowing well that it could be the last question in his *human* life.

The First Clue

Elsewhere, as a lifeless King Mukutveer lay on his throne yearning for water, a gust of wind howled through his room as someone stood at the entrance. Tall, broad and extremely muscular, the dark skinned-man wore armour made of steel, had a red cloak on along with a saffron-coloured dhoti, pair of golden sandals and a silver crown with heads of three snakes carved on top, in gold, symbolising terror.

As the man surged ahead, with an aura of authority, towards an unsuspecting Mukutveer, he raised his sword and the aged king could only lift his head and utter—

“Dasavana!”



Meanwhile, Goddess Jyestha thought for long and then posed a rather simple question to Mohan.

“In the guise of which bird do I visit my sister?”

‘That’s really simple.’ Mohan chuckled to himself on hearing the question, for he already knew that her sister, whose name Goddess Jyestha had deliberately withheld, was Goddess Lakshmi, and it was evident that if she had to take the form of a bird, it would obviously be none other than a crow.

Elated, Mohan was about to answer when he remembered Sage Kaushik's words—

She asks a simple riddle

But her game plan is foul.

'Surely, there is a catch. The crows are seated here to mislead me. I must rethink my answer!' Mohan told himself and thought hard.

"Goddess Lakshmi and Goddess Jyestha are sisters. Surely, the clue must lie in Goddess Lakshmi's image!"

Mohan was racing against time. He tried remembering each and every attribute of Goddess Lakshmi and then in a flash...he seemed to have worked out the answer. With a jubilant expression on his face and renewed confidence in his voice, Mohan answered by completing the last part of the unfinished couplet, recited by Sage Kaushik.

In the darkness of the night,

Her messengers are on the prowl

Whenever she speaks,

You can always see her scowl

She asks a simple riddle,

But her game plan is foul

Turning humans into crows,

She appears with her sister...

In the guise of an OWL

The moment Mohan uttered the answer, the cave began to shake vigorously and an expression of rage coloured Goddess Jyestha's face. All the crows inside the cave began to change their appearance and were brought to their original human form by virtue of Mohan's answer.

As the imprisoned men bowed their heads in respect to Jyestha, the Goddess smiled. She was pleased with Mohan's quick thinking, resolve and intelligence.

"Son, how did you arrive at your conclusion?" she asked, as the gloominess of the cave disappeared and an exquisite luminescence replaced darkness.

"Dear Goddess, you had to take the form of an owl because there has never been a more paradoxical creature than the owl. A person is 'as wise as an owl' which is why you were able to ask such an intelligent question. Mostly, it is the wise and the intelligent who are blessed with wealth and prosperity, as epitomised by your sister.

However, the owl is also considered extremely foolish and it is this foolishness that results in arrogance when a person attains wealth. The owl, therefore, represents both sides of the same coin: wealth and prosperity. It is, therefore, no surprise that your sister, Goddess Lakshmi's vahana is an owl,"

elaborated Mohan.

Impressed at Mohan's reasoning skills and logic, Goddess Jyestha not only freed the men, she also handed over the magical potion to Mohan and instructed him to empty its contents into the poisonous water of Jalahal.

After receiving her blessings, Mohan recited the complete mantra once again and returned to the jungle where his friends and Sage Kaushik were awaiting his return.

"Bravo! I am extremely pleased with your success, my Son. You have not only achieved the impossible, but you have done it within the stipulated time. The sun is yet to rise. Go to the river and empty the magical potion, fill the vessel with the holy water and put this healing water to your friends' lips," commanded Sage Kaushik.

Without further ado, Mohan, accompanied by Rannvijaya, rushed towards the riverbank and turned the vessel with the magical potion upside down into the water of Jalahal. As soon as the potion mixed with the river water, the atmosphere of gloom and darkness began to fade away and the desolate palace of King Mukutveer slowly began to shine in gold and the waters shimmered more than before.

After completing the task, the two friends ran towards the jungle before the first rays of the sun appeared and put the holy water to their friends' lips. Strangely, the water did not seem to have any effect on the two lifeless men.

'What could have happened? Could the Goddess have tricked me and given me the wrong potion?' Mohan wondered.

While Mohan was still immersed in thoughts, Raj woke up with a cough and Nagarjuna rubbed his eyes as if waking up from a good night's sleep. The spell of doom had been broken and Raj and Nagarjuna's lives had been restored by the courageous Mohan. The friends cheered and celebrated Mohan's victory. Mohan hugged his friends and together they welcomed the first rays of the sun.

Interrupting the happy scene, Sage Kaushik advised Mohan to go and offer water to the person, who was in dire need of it—King Mukutveer. Mohan immediately assented to the suggestion and accompanied by Pawan and Jayadev, rode out to the King's palace.

Upon reaching, the three men found it rather puzzling that while the entire palace was restored to its original form, there was one room that still remained in abject darkness—King Mukutveer's chamber.

Perplexed at the strange occurrence, the trio advanced to meet the king, who lay slumped on his throne. The trio called out to the king a few times but he failed to respond even once. Sniffing something sinister, the three friends exchanged glances and mulled their next course of action when Mohan advised

his friends to shake the ailing ruler, gently, to somehow awaken him from his slumber.

Barely had Pawan and Jayadev started nudging the king, a horrific sight met their eyes; King Mukutveer's severed head, that had been strategically placed to fool the visitors, fell to the ground. Aghast at the brutality with which the king had been murdered, it did not take much time for the trio to realise they were standing in a puddle of the slain king's blood and that their worst fears had come true; Dasavanakoka was aware of their presence and he would annihilate anyone who tried to help them.

Even as tears welled up in Mohan's eyes, he, nevertheless, instructed his friends to look for the berries they needed to proceed in their journey. Mohan knew it was a lost cause as the berries could have been hidden anywhere within the vast expanse of the kingdom and finding them would be inconceivably difficult.

As Pawan let out an anguished sigh, Mohan knew his friends had been unable to find any trace of Shabri's berries. Nonetheless, he infused confidence in them.

"We must not let one act of depravity turn us diffident and lose heart. The slaying of King Mukutveer establishes the fact that Trivarmrut views us as a potential threat and we must not give him any opportunity to allay his fears," Mohan spoke and requested his friends to assist him in placing the king's body on the bed.

But, when have wonders ceased and when has fortune deserted the brave? As the three friends were placing King Mukutveer's exanimate body on the bed, something fell from the pocket of his robe with a plonk into the river of blood.

Surprised, the trio turned to each other as their hearts pounded faster and a glimmer of hope appeared on their faces. Without further ado, Jayadev made a dash towards the small, brown-coloured pouch and opened it in a trice. As soon as he had revealed the contents inside the pouch, the entire room radiated, prompting Pawan to exult in ecstasy.

"We have found them! The berries have been found," he reiterated joyously.

Mohan's strained nerves were palliated by the consolatory news and he urged his friends to carry the deceased king's body, along with the berries, to Sage Kaushik—who would guide them in their endeavour and shed light on other important aspects of this mystery.

Placing King Mukutveer's body on one of the horses, the three friends left the premises and rushed to the spot where Sage Kaushik was imparting words of wisdom to Rannvijaya, Raj and Nagarjuna, who were still reeling under the shock of the sudden spate of events.

"They have returned!" Rannvijaya yelled out in joy.

“What news have you brought, my child? Were you successful in procuring what you desired?” the sage probed.

Mohan, with a tinge of despair in his voice, shared the tragic news of King Mukutveer’s unfortunate demise.

“Sage Kaushik, you alone can reveal the identity of this depraved individual, who murdered an aged and benign king,” spoke Mohan, while the sage analysed the situation.

“It is rather difficult to say. The gruesome manner of execution is reminiscent of Dasavana, though, the perpetrator of this heinous act could also be Drohkaal, the malefic general of Dasavana’s army—the Kaal Sarps or the Serpents of Doom,” replied the astute sage.

“Dasavana has an army of snakes?” Raj gasped in horror.

Before Sage Kaushik could respond, Nagarjuna resolved Raj’s query.

“Centuries ago, when Lord Shiva, pleased by Dasavana’s devotion and severe penance, appeared before him, the latter asked for the possession of Lord Shiva’s snake—Vasuki—as a boon. The snake, coiled around Shiv Shambhu’s neck, represents the three time cycles—past, present, and future. It also signifies that Lord Shiva is independent of time and death and that even when a reptile as venomous as a snake seeks refuge in the Lord, it becomes worthy of worship.

Lord Shiva was in a fix, for neither could he gift his snake to the demon king nor could he deny him his boon. After much contemplation, the Lord finally blessed Dasavana with a boon of immunity from snakes and their venom, while granting him three more boons.”

“And what were these three boons that Lord Shiva bestowed on him?” Mohan asked.

“Unfortunately, I am oblivious to the three boons granted by Lord Shiva but I am certain they have a bearing on Dasavana’s immortality,” Nagarjuna replied.

“We are campaigning against an adversary, who is not only skilled in the art of warfare, but also the one who cannot be killed!” Mohan lamented, as Sage Kaushik instructed the young men to prepare King Mukutveer’s funeral pyre.

Assembling the wood, the men finally cremated the king and returned to the Peepul tree with a heavy heart. Mohan stood up and addressed his friends.

“We may have lost an able ally in the death of King Mukutveer but have, nevertheless, attained an article of immense utility,” he said and revealed the pouch containing the berries, which glistened in the dark jungle.

Enraptured by the news of the procurement of the berries, Rannvijaya unfurled the map and placed it on the ground for Mohan to throw the berries on.

After randomly picking one of the five berries, Mohan hurled it on the map and unlike the previous occasion where he had failed at the first attempt, this

time, he hit the bull's eye as the path of fire once again connected one place to another on the map and stopped at their next destination—Dandpampa!

“Dandpampa! I have never even heard of this place,” remarked Pawan, when Sage Kaushik enlightened the group.

“My children, before you commence your perilous adventure, I must concede that I have been immensely impressed by your courage, bravery, compassion, and quest for learning. Thus, I shall reveal a secret to all of you—a secret no one else in this world knows,” he said, as Mohan and his friends listened to the wise sage with rapt attention.

“It is a universal and an undeniable fact that, both, Lord Rama and Ravan were warriors of greatest repute and in the epic duel that ensued between them, it was Lord Rama who emerged victorious. Lord Rama fired an arrow at Ravan which pierced the ten-headed demon king's naval, resulting in his death.”

“Yes, I think we all know that,” spoke Raj, nodding his head vigorously.

The sage smiled sardonically at Raj's comment and posed a question to everyone.

“All right, in that case, let me ask you another question. We all know Lord Rama was an excellent archer and it was through his archery skills that he vanquished Ravan. But can anyone tell me the name of Lord Rama's bow with which he slayed the Lord of Lanka?”

There was a deafening silence. Never in their lives had the group ever considered the possibility of Lord Rama's legendary bow having a name of its own. Pleading ignorance, Mohan requested the sage to enlighten them.

Sage Kaushik smiled gently and narrated enchanting tales from India's glorious mythology.

“Lord Rama possessed a magnificent wooden bow that glistened in the dark and radiated like pure gold. It was a bow unmatched in the universe, a bow capable of destroying all adversaries. It was this wondrous bow that Lord Rama used to annihilate Ravan and ensure the victory of good over evil. This bow was called—Kodanda!

However, overcome by remorse and guilt after killing a learned sage like Ravan and aware of the destruction the weapon could cause if ever possessed by the demons, Lord Rama forsook the Kodanda and hid it between rocks, never to be seen again in the realm of mankind.

Your friend, Nagarjuna, was partially correct when he said that Lord Shiva's three boons granted to Dasavanakoka were in some way associated to his immortality. It is because of these three boons of immortality that he is also addressed as *Tri-var-mrut* —the one who can escape death with three boons.

The truth is, these three boons are the very links that can spell doom for the

savage king for these boons conceal the three secrets essential to kill Dasavana.”

Mohan’s eyes brightened, his friends were confident in defeating the most vicious king the world had ever known.

“Like the scattered berries, the knowledge of these three boons is also never in the grasp of one individual but three entities, who are aware of one boon each. Fortunately for you, I am one of the three individuals, who shall inform you about the first boon.

In heaven and earth, there is only one weapon that has the power to destroy and exterminate Dasavanakoka; the weapon which we know as Lord Rama’s legendary bow—Kodanda,” revealed the sage to the stunned group that was trying to soak in the vast expanse of knowledge the sage was apprising them with.

“But, you said that the Kodanda is lost to mankind, didn’t you?” Mohan asked.

“My Son, if it is lost, it can surely be found. No?” the sage smiled.

“But how and where?” Jayadev asked, deeply anxious.

“Patience, my Child! I shall give you all the details that will prove beneficial in your mammoth endeavour. It is true that your next destination is Dandpampa but prior to that, you must stop at Shastragram, a hamlet located at some distance from Dandpampa.

“Legend has it, all the weapons that Lord Rama’s monkey army used in the war against Ravan are hidden in a cave atop a small hill. You could find the lost bow of Lord Rama in that cave,” the sage informed.

“I hope we are able to unearth the majestic bow because only then would we be able to unlock the first link to Dasavana’s doom,” wished a hopeful Mohan.

“Yes, but exercise caution and be on guard because sinister forces will attempt to derail your mission and put your lives in jeopardy. If you are successful in procuring the mythical weapons, a ship, invisible to the naked eye, and specially designed and crafted by the celestial architect, Vishwakarma, shall await you at the riverbank adjoining the hamlet.

“Also, remember, the cave is believed to be guarded by Vayu Dev, the God of Wind, and within the interiors of the cave lies a huge golden ball, comprising the wind from all the four directions. This golden-coloured ball was gifted by Vayu Dev to his son, Lord Hanuman, after he flew towards the sun to devour it, mistaking it to be an orange.

“This golden ball shall help you set sail in Vishwakarma’s ship if, God forbid, you are unsuccessful in procuring the Kodanda. I advise you to bring this golden ball because the ship is bereft of any oars and will not be able to set sail till such time that either the ball or the Kodanda is placed inside it,” warned the sage.

“But it shall take us ages to reach Shastragram,” sighed Nagarjuna.

“Do not worry, I shall teleport you to the hamlet,” replied Sage Kaushik and allayed Nagarjuna’s doubts. Amidst all this, Mohan tried remembering where he had seen, heard or read about Sage Kaushik, but memory failed him.

As the sage prepared to teleport the men to Shastragram, he instructed them to mount their horses and he began reciting his mantras.

“Lastly, the ship shall carry you till Dandpampa, which is the point where the Dandaka Forest and the mythical river Pampa—presently known as the Tungabhadra—intersect. I wish you the best in your endeavour and I hope you emerge victorious,” the sage blessed the group of men who touched his feet and mounted their horses while the sage began chanting hymns in his baritone.

It was while the men were riding out that it suddenly struck Mohan why the sage had seemed familiar and resembled a Kshatriya. Sage Kaushik was indeed a ruler, a king, who had bequeathed his kingship and turned into one of the most revered sages in Indian mythology—Sage Vishwamitra!

As Mohan realised this, he turned to catch another glimpse of the revered sage but could only see the jungle. There was no trace of the sage, who had vanished into thin air after guiding Mohan and his friends.

A stunned Mohan informed his companions of the great sage’s true identity and closed his eyes to thank him for his help. As he opened his eyes again, he saw that he, along with his friends, had landed in Shastragram.



It was after the break of dawn when the men arrived at the humble village, abundant with thatched huts and vegetation. The barren land was surrounded by rocky hills from three sides. Famished and fatigued by their arduous journey, the men devoured a humble meal of rice and dal at a local eatery and, later, slumbered for several hours in a sarai.

Despite being winter, the village of Shastragram was rather hot. As Mohan got up from his sleep, yawning and stretching his body, he realised they had slept for almost seven hours and that it was well past midday.

Mohan awoke all his friends and ordered for some chilled lassi to beat the heat, before leaving for the riverbank to freshen up.

Mohan wanted to relax his tired body in the calm waters of the river, but, in his desire to do so, he ended up attracting unwarranted attention from the womenfolk in the village. The women were drawn towards him and seemed enticed by his bare-chested, muscular and sinewy physique while he bathed in the river.

Unaware of the female gaze, when Mohan emerged from the waters and

realised he had become the centre of attention, he could only smile sheepishly, much to the amusement of the native women.

As he returned, one of the workers at the sarai, a 10-year-old boy was collecting the emptied glasses of lassi, when Mohan nonchalantly enquired about the path leading up to the cave, believed to be guarded by the Wind God himself.

The boy looked at Mohan and his friends with surprise and bemusement.

“I was aware that you were strangers in this land of Shastragram, Sahib, but didn’t anticipate your obliviousness to the prevailing circumstances in our village,” commented the boy.

“What do you mean?” Mohan asked, slightly perturbed.

“Do you really not know?” the boy smirked.

“No, we don’t. And for the sake of your well-being, I suggest you disclose the information you have before I

wipe that smug expression off your face,” warned the burly Rannvijaya.

Put in his place, the boy finally spoke up.

“If you harbour any intention of going to the hilltop cave, I must inform you that your attempt shall be futile because no one can climb those rocks. The cave is guarded at the base of the rocks by a group of four menacing and savage ogre-like demons that stand 30 feet tall and weigh close to 500 kilograms,” revealed the boy, startling the group.

“These demons are descendants of Bhasmasura and have been strategically placed by an evil tyrant, whose name we are forbidden to utter, who resides across the ocean and has the cave guarded to prevent a terrible prophecy from coming true.”

“Bhasmasura? Who was Bhasmasura?” Raj asked.

“According to legend, Bhasmasura was a devout devotee of Lord Shiva and he undertook severe penance to please him. When the Lord finally appeared in front of him and offered to grant him a boon, the asura wished for a unique power to be bestowed on him through which any person on whose head he placed his hands would turn to ashes. This is how the asura derives his name ‘Bhasma,’ which means ‘to burn’.

“Lord Shiva, being the benevolent God that he is, granted the asura his boon. Barely had the Lord done so, the demon showed his true colours and to ascertain if the boon really worked, he decided to test it on Lord Shiva himself!

“Aghast and taken aback by Bhasmasura’s ominous intention, the Lord scampered to safety. Lord Shiva prayed to Lord Vishnu while ruing his decision and requested Lord Vishnu to help him escape the situation he had landed himself in.

“Unable to find Lord Shiva, the asura flew into a rage and frantically searched

for him, when a bewitching beauty crossed his path. With long flowing hair, dark kohled eyes, and luscious red lips, the woman was extraordinarily beautiful. Bhasmasura fell in love instantly and, surprisingly, the woman made no efforts to spurn his advances. In fact, she sat with him and asked him the cause of his immense anger.

“I cannot seem to find Lord Shiva,” spoke the annoyed asura.

“But why are you looking for him?” the woman asked, and Bhasmasura recounted his encounter with the Lord.

After listening to the asura, the woman spoke.

“It appears to me that Lord Shiva has cheated you,” she announced, much to the demon’s shock.

“But how is that possible? If that was the case, why would Lord Shiva scamper for his life?” the asura asked, confused.

“Of course, he would, for he knew that his lie would be exposed once you tried the boon on him,” she replied.

Assuaging his dilemma, the woman comforted him.

“Don’t feel disquieted. If you do not believe in what I say, I suggest you rather place your hand on your own head and confirm Lord Shiva’s betrayal to his innocent devotee,” she suggested.

The idea seemed to appeal to Bhasmasura and without giving much thought, he immediately placed his hand over his head and was instantly burnt to ashes. After Bhasmasura’s asinine act, the beautiful woman left the forest. She was none other than Lord Vishnu in disguise.

It is since then that none of Bhasmasura’s descendants have ever taken their lives, for his boon, which turned to a bane, continues to haunt them. In fact, they have pledged to not even wound themselves, even by mistake, for if that were to happen, the other members of the clan would slay the injured family member and then kill one another till none of them survived as penance for committing the murder of their kin,” the boy narrated the peculiarly absorbing tale.

Everything was quiet and there was a long pause before Pawan interrupted.

“It is rather strange that these curses find their origin in mythological tales,” commented Pawan, who was well-versed with the religious scriptures.

“What are you trying to imply, Pawan?” Jayadev asked.

“I am sure you all must be aware of Goddess Sati’s self immolation following her husband, Lord Shiva’s public humiliation at the hands of her father, Prajapati Daksha, right? So can anyone tell me, what was the most surprising incident that happened in the aftermath of Goddess Sati’s death?”

“Lord Vishnu’s defeat to Veerbhadra—an avatar of Lord Shiva?” Nagarjuna responded.

“Correct! But isn’t it rather strange that an omnipotent deity of Hindu mythology could be defeated in a combat by Lord Shiva’s avatar when Lord Shiva himself could never claim victory over Lord Vishnu or any of his avatars in the duels against each other?” Pawan asked.

“Once, two friends: a ruler named Kshuva and Dadichi, a hermit, got embroiled in a debate. While Kshuva thought himself to be the mightier one being a Kshatriya, Dadichi asserted the superiority of the brahmins because of their vast knowledge.

“Unfortunately, the situation spiralled out of control and the two friends turned arch enemies, inflicting atrocities on one another in their bid to claim a higher moral ground. Dadichi prayed to Lord Shiva, to be blessed with physical strength far greater than that of his adversary, and Lord Shiva granted him the boon. Equipped with renewed strength and vigour, Dadichi turned arrogant and thrashed Kshuva, who sought refuge in Lord Vishnu.

“As we know, Lord Vishnu never turns down the request of his devotees, and, on being apprised by Kshuva about his quest for vengeance against Dadichi, Lord Vishnu allayed his fears and promised to teach the hermit a lesson by disguising himself as Kshuva. Meanwhile, the vain Dadichi, who was boasting of his success to his father, was informed of Kshuva’s arrival.

“Furious at this news, the hermit, accompanied by his father, who eagerly wanted to see his son’s exploits, arrived at the courtyard and advanced towards Kshuva. Dadichi attempted to kick Kshuva and as he launched a fist blow with brute force at the ruler, his leg and arm froze in the air.

“Keeping his word, Lord Vishnu, in disguise, landed a forceful kick on the hermit, who immediately realised his assailant’s true identity and bowed before him. Sensing he had taught Dadichi the virtue of humility, Lord Vishnu assumed his original glorious form and blessed him.

“However, seething with rage, Dadichi didn’t even spare Narayan and pronounced two curses upon him, one of which was Lord Vishnu’s public humiliation in an open court akin to his defeat, moments earlier. Lord Vishnu gladly accepted both the curses and it was the result of the first curse that Lord Vishnu was vanquished by Veerbhadra.”

“And what about the second curse?” Rannvijaya probed.

“Mortified by his defeat in front of his father, the vengeful hermit cursed Lord Vishnu by hollering that just as his father had to suffer anguish on seeing his son in distress, Lord Vishnu too, would become responsible for his father’s agony for no apparent fault of his. And it is to keep this curse of Dadichi that Lord Vishnu took birth as Lord Rama and consented to his 14-year exile, which ultimately resulted in King Dashratha’s death,” Pawan explained.

“Fascinating!” Raj commented, as Mohan seemed to be engulfed in thoughts of his own.

“Mohan, what happened? What are you thinking?” Jayadev asked him.

Turning towards his friends, Mohan spoke.

“I strongly feel we shouldn’t delay in reaching the spot where the demons are guarding the cave and we must do so before the sun sets, so that we can have a closer look at them,” he opined and everyone nodded in acknowledgement.

As the six companions arrived at the base of the rocks and hid behind them, they saw one of the ferocious demons guarding the passage to the cave while devouring a flock of sheep. Armed with a club, the swarthy-complexioned, curly-haired and bare-chested asura matched the young boy’s description. Massive in size and shape, these rapacious demons seemed to have a ravenous appetite and while one of them kept vigilance over the cave, the other three slept blissfully.

Cast down and demoralised on seeing the size of their next adversary, the group quietly made an exit and returned to mull over strategies to defeat them.

“How is it even remotely possible to defeat such gigantic beasts?” Nagarjuna enquired.

“And even if we are able to defeat the one guarding the entrance, how can we hope to vanquish the remaining three demons?” Rannvijaya put forth his concerns.

“Don’t worry. If they cannot be defeated by brawn, they shall be conquered by brain,” replied Mohan and explained his strategy to them.



The sun had set and darkness was beginning to creep in when Mohan, accompanied by his friends, returned to the dwelling place of the demons. An atmosphere of complete silence prevailed, occasionally marred by the gruff voice of the demons, who spoke to themselves in gibberish, as the diagonally placed firelights provided a source of luminance.

Mustering up his courage, Mohan emerged from the rocks and greeted one of the demons even as the rest of his friends continued to hide behind the giant rocks.

“Salutations, O Great Asura!” Mohan announced his arrival.

The demon peered down and let out a maniacal laughter, looking at the earthling.

“Today is a blessed day indeed. A flock of sheep satiated my hunger in the morning and now you have arrived at my abode. You shall be my next meal.”

Unnerved by the vicious response, Mohan camouflaged his fears and addressed him, sure-footedly.

“By all means devour me and bestow me with the honour of having served you, O Mighty One! But, before you consume me, kindly accept the two gifts I bring to serve you better,” Mohan responded.

“Gifts!” the demon spoke with interest.

“Yes, my Lord. After having travelled the world, I have brought you two special gifts. You and your clan are truly worthy of these unique presents.”

“Is it so? Then, first reveal these gifts to me and introduce yourself,” the demon ordered.

“My Lord, the first gift is a container filled with a delicious powdered paste, a pinch of which possesses the ability to keep one’s edacious appetite satiated for several months at a stretch. The second gift is a magic pencil, using which you can defeat your adversaries and conquer territories by merely tapping the pencil on the ground,” Mohan informed the giant.

Pleased by what he heard, the demon appreciated Mohan’s gesture.

“Hmm...These gifts do seem precious. I shall certainly like to accept them and use the powdered paste to good effect. Why don’t you climb on top of me and feed me the paste while I lie down and devour you, thereafter?” the dim-witted demon suggested and Mohan willingly complied.

As the demon sat on the ground, poor Mohan had to constantly scamper from one place to another to avoid being crushed under the demon’s mammoth size. With his head resting on the rocks and his body on the ground, the demon commanded Mohan to climb on his body and feed him the powdered paste.

But barely had Mohan lifted the plastic container with a yellow lid that the demon stopped him in his tracks.

“Wait! You have not revealed your identity to me. What is your name?” he reiterated.

Feeling chagrined at being posed the question, Mohan appeared ill at ease and replied in a stuttering timid voice.

“My name...my name is...I Myself,” he replied.

“I Myself? That’s a rather odd name,” the demon commented, visibly surprised.

Lowering his head, Mohan responded.

“Yes, my Lord. It is indeed a strange name which is why I was refraining from disclosing it and saving myself from embarrassment,” Mohan lamented.

“Now, I don’t have time for your morbid tales. Bring forth the container and satiate my hunger,” instructed the nettled demon and Mohan began his ascent.

Anxious about the success of his plan, Mohan cautiously climbed till he came

very close to the demon's face.

"Come on, open the container and feed me!" the demon roared.

Mohan slowly opened the container and climbing up the demon's massive face emptied out half of the powdered paste into the demon's mouth. Unknown to the unsuspecting demon, the powdered paste was no magical dish but red chilli powder which Mohan had borrowed from the cook working in the sarai.

Mohan knew he had to be quick and agile, for it would not take the demon much time to realise what he had consumed. Surging ahead with immense zeal and vigour, Mohan drew out his pencil, which was Shivaji's sword Bhawani, and slashing the demon's nose in a single stroke, emptied out the remaining red chilli powder by throwing it into the demon's eyes.

Aware of the demon's violent reaction, Mohan continued to run and, gradually, flung himself in the air to grab a foothold on the rocks. Fortunately, for him, he managed to do so before he could be crushed by the demon, who squirmed in pain and hollered in agony while immediately laying one hand over his mouth and the other over his eyes.

But Mohan wasn't done yet. Seizing the opportunity and using the demon's condition to his advantage, Mohan grabbed one of the firelights and lit the demon's curly hair with it.

Writhing in excruciating pain, the demon violently kicked the ground and moaned so loudly that the other demons were jolted out of their slumber.

Sensing the arrival of the other demons, Mohan hid behind the rocks and saw his friends watching the highly dramatic scene unfold, from below, even as the other demons came to their brother's rescue.

Infuriated over seeing their brother's woeful condition, the enraged trio grabbed their clubs in a vice-like grip and asked their brother about the person responsible for his deplorable state.

"Who did this?" one of them growled.

Furious at the mortal's betrayal, the battered demon barely managed to reply.

"I Myself!"

For a split second, the three demons were stunned on hearing their brother's reply and they reiterated their question.

"Who is responsible for this condition of yours?"

"I Myself!" replied the demon.

"What are you saying, brother? Think before you speak. Who did this to you?" they helplessly asked another time.

"I Myself did this to me!" the unfortunate demon yelled.

Enraged at their brother's folly, unleashing centuries-old curse, the three bothers mercilessly clubbed their brother to death.

As their brother lay lifeless, the teary-eyed demons stared and without any warning, began hitting each other. Hammering each other on the head, repeatedly, with their huge and sturdy wooden clubs, the three brothers were dead in no time.

Afterwards, Mohan's five friends emerged from their hiding and made mirth by congratulating Mohan and embracing him. Once the celebration got over, the men focussed on their next task at hand.

"I think we should wait till the sunrise. The climb is steep and if any untoward incident occurs, it shall spell death for all of us," Jayadev told the group.

"Even though I agree with you, Jayadev, I shall, unfortunately, must persuade each one of you to continue with quest due to paucity of time," replied Mohan and everyone nodded in agreement.

The path leading up to the cave was a crooked one and the slightest error could throw them several feet below, to their graves. Soon, darkness descended and the air became cold. Under such strenuous circumstances, Mohan led his team, holding the firelight in his hand and cautiously advancing towards the cave.

After more than an hour's trek, the valiant group arrived at the cave's entrance. The six men ventured into the unknown territory and the gentle winds seemed to soothe their tired nerves.

There was no sign of life inside the cave. With the firelight as their only source of luminance, the men observed that the cave walls were rugged and dampness pervaded the area.

As they trudged, they noticed a sharp turn ahead and, moving forward, a spectacular sight greeted them. Suddenly, darkness was replaced by a bright light and the air felt calm and pure. Right at the centre of the cave—on top of a red velvet cloth—rested the source of illumination—the golden ball gifted by Vayu Dev to his son, Lord Hanuman.

The golden ball appeared to be composed of solid gold and was embellished with miniature carvings that gave it a regal finish. There was a lid atop the ball which made the men rather curious. Enamoured by its luminosity, the men decided to remove the lid when Pawan lunged forward and grabbed the golden ball in the nick of time.

"What do you think you are doing?" Nagarjuna, who was about to open the lid, questioned.

"What do you think you are doing?" Pawan shot back, much to the surprise of others.

"This ball was presented to Lord Hanuman by his father, Vayu Dev. The wind from all the four directions is stored inside this ball. Do you understand what

repercussions we would have had to suffer had you removed the lid? The howling winds would have swept us off our feet and thrown us miles away in any direction,” Pawan reprimanded Nagarjuna.

“Didn’t I prognosticate that Pawan’s knowledge of the religious scriptures would come to our aid?” commented Mohan.

The others apologised for their exuberance while Raj appeared extremely perturbed.

“What happened, Raj? You look rather upset!” Mohan asked his friend.

With anxiety written all over his face, a frowning Raj responded, “We have discovered the golden ball, but where are the weapons? I can’t see them.”

As Raj expressed his concern, everyone at once realised that the weapons were indeed missing. Distressed by the absence, the men frantically searched for the weapons. They looked for hours, leaving no corner untouched. Unfortunately, their exercise was a futile one.

As they assembled at the exit, the drained-out men started casting aspersions on Sage Kaushik’s prophecy.

“Sage Kaushik told us we would find the weapons here, then, why can’t we?”

“Maybe, Sage Kaushik was unaware of the exact location of the celestial weapons or maybe Dasavana stole them. It is pointless to raise questions on Sage Kaushik’s advice and prophecy, for if it were so, then we wouldn’t have found the golden ball either!” Mohan replied.

Dejected by the turn of events, the men returned with the hope of finding the ship, built by Vishwakarma, near the riverbank. Alas, all their hopes were dashed. Mohan was shattered at not finding the ship waiting for them.

“We mustn’t lose hope. I think the surrounding darkness is preventing us from finding the weapons. We should try searching once again during the day, tomorrow,” spoke Mohan with a tinge of despair in his voice before they all retreated to the sarai. As all of them lay in bed, Mohan knew that his friends would be spending a sleepless night. But, after a few hours, all of them dozed off, while a candle flickered in their room.



As the first rays of the sun entered through the window, Mohan was awakened by the cries of Rannvijaya and Jayadev.

“Get up. Get up all of you,” they spoke with excitement.

“What’s the matter?” Mohan asked, still rubbing his eyes. Jayadev grabbed his hand and took him outside towards the riverbank while Rannvijaya led the rest.

“Jayadev, what happened? What...” Mohan was unable to complete his sentence and was left open-mouthed on witnessing a surreal sight.

At the edge of the riverbank stood a huge and magnificent ship, constructed from pure gold, glistening in the sun. Its hull was watertight and the ship looked sturdy. However, its most distinguishable feature, apart from the gold, were two carvings of Lord Vishnu in a reclining position embellished on either side of the ship’s body. The ship’s vast sail, resembling a finely-pointed key, was woven from the finest silk. The only wooden part of the vessel was a carving of Vishwakarma himself, which was fitted at the prow.

Elated on seeing the ship, Mohan addressed his friends.

“Dear companions, the very fact that the ship has appeared before us proves that the celestial weapons haven’t been stolen by Dasavana, but are at a different location.

I am certain that in the course of our wanderings, we shall be able to find them,” Mohan encouraged his friends.

“But the ship wouldn’t set sail. It’s made of gold and gold, as you know, sinks in water,” Nagarjuna informed.

Mohan smiled and jumped into the vessel before replying. “And since when have ships without oars begun sailing?” he asked and Nagarjuna immediately realised the futility of his aspersions.

With a wry smile, he jumped aboard with the rest and the moment Mohan placed the golden ball inside the ship, it gradually began to move, foraying into the waters.

As the ship set sail on the bright sunny morning, Mohan wore a beaming smile on his face as he knew that the hunt for the Kodanda, the elusive bow, had truly begun.

In the Land of Bajrangbali

The sun shone radiantly as Dr. Sujit Chandra, the ace archaeologist and Mohan’s guardian, sat in his office, carefully analysing a few documents that were kept on his table when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said, and in walked Suman Agnihotri, the youngest archaeologist in the core panel of archaeologists selected by the government for ascertaining the veracity of the rocks before the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project took off.

Tall, clean-shaven, and well-built, the bespectacled Agnihotri sat opposite Dr. Chandra in the latter’s plush Rameswaram office.

“Sir, have you seen the latest piece of news doing the rounds on the channels?” Agnihotri asked.

“No, I haven’t. What are they saying?” Dr. Chandra asked while keeping his papers aside.

“Why don’t you take a look for yourself,” Agnihotri said, grabbing the remote and switching on the television.

“In what seems to be a latest development, strong winds and heavy rainfall have been reported in several parts of Tamil Nadu. The Metrological Department has informed our reporters that the situation could worsen over the next few days. Though, there has been no damage to either life or property, there is a strong possibility of a cyclone hitting the coastal areas of the state.”

“Hmm...This is disturbing news. I hope innocent people don’t have to suffer nature’s fury,” Dr. Chandra prayed while taking a sip from his cup of steaming hot coffee.

“Sir, the way natural disasters are ravaging various parts of the world, I have a strong intuition that the prophecy of the world coming to an end on 31st December may eventually come true,” replied a concerned Agnihotri.

“Don’t let such diabolic thoughts plague your mind, Suman. The almighty will save us from the prophesied deluge. Thankfully, the waters at Rameswaram and the Gulf of Mannar are still calm.”

“You are a very religious man, aren’t you, Sir?” Suman asked.

Dr. Chandra smiled wryly and remarked,

“Religious, you say? Son, I can ill afford to follow my religious beliefs when working at a conflict-ridden area like Rameswaram,” Chandra responded.

“What about you?” Dr. Chandra asked Agnihotri and turned the tables.

“It hardly matters what my personal belief on the issue is. Our job is to ascertain the truth and that is all that matters,” replied Suman.

“True. So, what have the initial reports suggested?”

“We are still working on it, Sir.”

Dr. Chandra was about to say something else but paused midway as if to contemplate, before finally continuing his discussion.

“Isn’t it rather strange that the issue of the Rama Setu Bridge has become controversial?”

“It had to. Lord Rama is the first of Lord Vishnu’s greatest avatars followed by Lord Krishna. Besides that, not only is Ramayana one of India’s greatest epics, it also prescribes the ideal way of life. If all of it was found to be untrue, it would shatter the very foundation of our religious as well as ideological beliefs,” Suman replied, making certain pertinent points.

“But Kamban’s *Ramayana* clearly states that Lord Rama destroyed the bridge

on his return to make it viable for ships to sail through; this theory was contended by Senior Advocate Fali S. Nariman while representing the government, in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court in 2008,” Dr. Chandra replied.

“Exactly, Sir. Even if we were to believe that Lord Rama did destroy the bridge; it automatically proves that Lord Rama had constructed the bridge, doesn’t it?” Agnihotri contested.

“Mr. Nariman never disputed this fact. His only contention was that the government was not cutting across the fabled bridge as Lord Rama had himself destroyed it for ships to sail in the region.”

“I have read the Ramayana as well and though there are several instances of Lord Rama travelling by boats, there isn’t any explicit mention of ships anywhere. Had it been so, wouldn’t Lord Rama have built a ship instead of praying to Lord Varuna to help him build a bridge?” Suman put forth his argument.

“Son, in an age where Ravan’s Udan Khatola, like the modern-day aeroplane, could fly in the sky, do you really doubt the existence of sailing ships?” Dr. Chandra asked.

“Whatever the case may be, it cannot be denied that the government can ill afford to vex the nation by continuing with the shipping project without considering the religious sentiments of the citizens. This is why our Prime Minister appointed a six-member committee to chart an alternate route to avoid the Rama Setu Bridge. This will also give us an opportunity to determine the archaeological relevance of the rocks,” added Agnihotri.

“Yes, you are right. I hope we can succeed in our mission,” wished Dr. Chandra.

“Sir, on closer consideration, I can safely conclude that nowhere has the existence of the bridge been disputed. This means that irrespective of whether the bridge was destroyed or not, in either scenario, we should be able to trace the history of the rocks dating back to the Treta Yuga in which Lord Rama was born!” Agnihotri concluded.

As Dr. Chandra nodded in agreement, his cell phone rang and on seeing Samaira’s name flashing on its screen, he immediately took the call.

“Haan, beta,” he said with a smile. Agnihotri requested his senior’s permission to leave and Dr. Chandra gestured him to carry on.

“Sujit uncle, I am getting paranoid about Mohan and Raj. They had left for some weird, unheard place called Sahastapur and since then, I have received no news from them,” said an extremely distressed Samaira.

“Did you try calling them up?” Dr. Chandra asked.

“Of course, I did, Uncle! Professor Suryamurthy has also been trying to desperately contact them but they are out of reach,” Samaira revealed.

“Have they tried to contact you?” Dr. Chandra questioned, even though he knew the answer.

As Samaira responded in the negative, Dr. Chandra asked her to transfer the phone to Professor Suryamurthy.

“Guru,” Dr. Chandra addressed his friend, G.S. Suryamurthy. “Try keeping Samaira away from this. Please request Samaira’s parents to look after her because Mohan’s absence is affecting her health and overall well-being.”

“Of course, I will. How are you, old buddy? I have been hearing disturbing news of an imminent cyclone in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu,” Professor Suryamurthy expressed his concern.

“Oh, I am fine. Fortunately, there has not yet been any drastic change in the atmosphere or climate,” Dr. Chandra stilled Professor Suryamurthy’s fears.

“Guru, it is unfortunate that I have been so occupied with this mission that I haven’t been able to interact with Mohan. If it’s not too much of a problem for you, could you leave for Sahastapur and give me news of the two boys?”

“Certainly, Sujit! In fact, I was mulling over this issue but with situations turning precarious, we have no other alternative,” replied Professor Suryamurthy, oblivious of Mohan and his friends’ bizarre adventures.



In another part of the world, across the Indian Ocean, the ministers of a prosperous kingdom bowed obediently as a tall, broad, moustached and extremely muscular, dark-skinned man wearing armour of steel with a red cloak, a saffron-coloured dhoti, golden sandals and a silver-coloured crown with the heads of three snakes carved on it in pure gold, walked past them with an aura of authority and dominance. He was the same man who had ruthlessly butchered King Mukutveer. He was the embodiment of evil. He was—Dasavanakoka.

With a baleful expression on his face and menacing kohled eyes, which seemed to keep vigil over every movement, Dasavana addressed his courtiers in his baritone voice while he sat on his emerald-encrusted throne, embellished with rubies and diamonds with the sculpted images of three vicious serpents forming an umbrella over the menacing ruler’s head as his courtiers raised slogans praising their King.

“Glory to the Lord of the three worlds. Glory to King Dasavana!” the court echoed with the chants as the dutiful subjects sang the king’s praises.

Gesturing them to stop, Dasavana addressed his ministers,

“Our Kingdom of Trahimam is unrivalled in superiority, splendour and might. We have conquered every territory by subjugating the natives, turning them into our slaves. There exists no one who can challenge Dasavana’s supremacy. However, our spies have sent information about a group of imbeciles that has undertaken a voyage to defeat an unvanquished and potent king like Dasavana,” he spoke in an acerbic tone before summoning Shuka and Sarana, his chief operatives, who bore the same names as Ravan’s most-trusted spies.

The menacing and muscular twins, attired in raven black outfits and wearing a silver-coloured crown with horns protruding from them, entered Dasavana’s majestic palace—Bhavan Dasavana. The Bhavan was built entirely out of silver and stood at a staggering height of 500 ft; the red flag at the tip, symbolising terror. The King addressed the brothers, “Shuka and Sarana,” he said as he welcomed the duo inside his palace.

“I have heard that some buffoons are attempting to enter our kingdom and annihilate Dasavana. Is that true?” the mighty King asked and the two men replied in the affirmative.

“Hahahahaha!” Dasavana laughed viciously, but, his eyes turned red. Suddenly, his facial expression changed and a look of disdain replaced the smile.

“I desire to see where they have reached in this doomed pursuit of theirs,” he asked Shuka and Sarana.

Without further ado, the duo, well-versed in sorcery, chanted a few spells. As they meditated, the courtroom appeared to be robbed of the sunlight that entered through the gigantic windows which overlooked the swiftly flowing River Kaalsaras, and was plunged into blinding darkness accompanied by heavy smoke.

Amidst layers of smoke, a piercing blue light illuminated the court while a giant crystal ball, floating in the air, took shape.

O Mighty Crystal Ball

The Wondrous of them All,

Locate our Adversaries

And Absolve us of All our Worries.

Within moments, the crystal ball began changing its colour and slowly, the images of Mohan, Raj, Jayadev, Nagarjuna, Rannvijaya, and Pawan, sailing in a golden ship, adjacent to a dense forest, appeared before the Trahimamis.

“Sire, these six trespassers are traversing through the forest of Dandaka in the pursuit of celestial weapons,” the duo informed their King.

Seated on his throne, Dasavana threw a piercing gaze at the brothers.

“You know what you have to do,” he smirked.



Meanwhile, Jayadev informed his mates about the region's geographical and religious history.

"The adjacent forest is Dandaka, a colonial state, which was once ruled by Ravan and administered by Ravan's demonic brother—Khar."

"Khar? But I thought Ravan had only two brothers: Kumbhakaran and Vibhishan," Mohan commented.

"Yes, but according to sources, Ravan had four more brothers: AhiRavan, MahiRavan, Khar, and Dushan," Jayadev replied.

"It is believed that it was in this Dandaka Forest that a place named Panchvati existed and it was here that Lord Rama built a hut and resided with his wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshman," he added.

"Panchvati!" Raj exclaimed excitedly, much to everyone's surprise before the ardent film buff explained his sudden excitement.

"I have a song called 'Panchvati Man Bhavan Upvan' from the 1992 animated film *Ramayana* in my cell phone," he said, and made all the men present on the ship—which was more like an elongated and wide boat—hear the soulful song composed by music director, Vanraj Bhatia.

"If this is Panchvati, it means we are close to the modern-day city of Nasik," Mohan spoke with enthusiasm.

"True. In fact, Nasik derives its name from the incident relating to the chopping off of Ravan's sister, Shrupnakha's nose, by Lakshman," Jayadev informed the group.

In a few hours, they ventured further into the stillness of the night. The cries of wild animals and insects kept the warriors company.

As their ship navigated through the forest, Rannvijaya informed his friends that they had arrived at Dandpampa—their scheduled destination. However, all of them were discommoded by the fact that nothing, besides the deep waters and the dense forest surrounded them. Even the slightest clue of the celestial weapons eluded them.

"How can this be Dandpampa? We have reached a dead end," commented Pawan.

"Going by the path charted out in our map, this has to be Dandpampa," Rannvijaya reiterated.

"So, what is the next step? Should we jump off the ship and venture into the forest?" Pawan asked his friends.

"No, that would be nothing short of suicidal, for the forest, infested with deadly creatures and wild beasts, is fraught with dangers," advised Mohan.

“I concur with Mohan’s suggestion. The territory of Dandpampa begins from this point and I am confident we shall certainly find an area from where we can continue our search,” seconded Nagarjuna as the ship sailed on its course.

Barely had the ship sailed a few miles ahead, that the men, fatigued by the journey, saw a modest stretch of deserted land separated from the forest by rocks. The group decided to camp at the spot for the night.

As they debarked, an idea flashed across Mohan’s mind.

“We may have reached a secluded spot in an otherwise perilous region of Dandpampa, but are still far away from our immediate destination. In such a scenario, there is only one man whose services can prove extremely beneficial for us—Nagarjuna’s!” Mohan announced.

“Me?” a surprised Nagarjuna asked.

“Yes, my friend, you! Remember, you had informed us of your identity as a sorcerer in our first encounter? I shall be grateful if you could apply your skills to good effect by invoking the spirit of any legendary character from our mythological tales, believed to have roamed this earth during the Treta Yuga,” Mohan beseeched his friend.

“Unfortunately, I do not possess the powers necessary for invoking the spirits of mythological characters. However, if you so desire, I can invoke the spirit of any individual from India’s equally glorious and fascinating history,” Nagarjuna replied, as the group began discussing which historical personality to summon.

After rounds of intense discussions, Mohan addressed his friends.

“While selecting a historical personality, who shall aid us in our search, we must invoke the ghost of an individual, who was proficient in the tales of the Ramayana like no one before or after him in our history.”

“Who are you referring to, Mohan?” asked Jayadev, eager to know of his friend’s choice.

“The greatest saint of our yuga, the man blessed by Lord Hanuman and Lord Rama themselves, author of the *Ramcharitmanas*, composer of the Hanuman Chalisa, and the sage credited for initiating the concept of Ramlila plays—none other than the immensely revered, Swami Tulsidas.”

Everyone’s eyes brightened at Mohan’s immaculate choice and they anxiously waited for Nagarjuna’s chants that would bring alive the sage, who was even visited by the benevolent emperor, Akbar.

As Nagarjuna, with clenched eyes, began reciting Vedic chants, winds howled, trees swayed and the leaves began to rustle. There was a sudden rise in the water levels and an enormous cloud of smoke pervaded the region.

As the five friends watched the surreal scene unfold, Nagarjuna diligently persevered with his craft while the ghost of the great sage gradually began taking

form. Once Nagarjuna had completed reciting his chants, the six men bowed in veneration.

Amidst the rising smoke, Tulsidas, whose head was the only visible part of his body, blessed the men.

“O Noble Saint, we request you to assist us in our quest to find Lord Rama’s mythical bow, the Kodanda,” Mohan beseeched with folded hands.

“Son, every path in this mission of yours is fraught with dangers. To see you conquer one obstacle after another soothes my heart. You have risked your lives and shown immense fortitude. I am pleased by your unwavering devotion and I shall most certainly disclose all that I am permitted to reveal,” the saint spoke, his calm voice echoed throughout the vicinity.

“So, are you saying there never was any clue awaiting us at Dandpampa?” Mohan probed.

Tulsidas smiled and responded to the question put forth by the youngster.

“As I said, Son, each and every stage is a test of not only your strength and bravery, but also your intellect and character. I am glad you chose wisely.”

“O revered Sage, enlighten us and lead us to the path where we may discover the celestial weapons,” Mohan appealed.

“Your destination is not far from here. As you travel further, you shall arrive close to the modern city of Hampi—once known as the mighty kingdom of the Monkey King, Sugriv—Kishkindha!”

“Hampi is where Kishkindha once existed?” Mohan asked in astonishment.

“Yes. While en route Kishkindha, you shall also come across the Anjaneyar Parvat, believed to be the birthplace of the one and only, Bajrangbali Hanuman. It is there that you will find several celestial weapons that were once used in the battle against Ravan,” revealed the learned sage. The men folded their hands in reverence and Tulsidas vanished into thin air.

Mesmerised by the divine experience and pleased on being given a direction by the revered sage, the men decided to retire for the night.

Raj stretched his body and yawned while the others prepared to lie down on the sand-laden land.

“This sleep is going to do a world of good to our tired bodies,” Raj remarked before dozing off.

“It is believed that Lakshman maintained a constant vigil to protect his brother and sister-in-law, and never slept an ounce in the entire period of Lord Rama’s 14-year exile. Lakshman has also been named Gudakesh—the one who has defeated sleep,” Pawan informed.

“Yes, my friend, but I am neither Lakshman nor Bharat or Shatrughan, believed to have been incarnations of Sheshanag, and Lord Vishnu’s conch and

disc, respectively. I am a mortal and I must have my sleep,” replied Raj while everyone smiled at the friendly banter.

A few hours into the night, a slight movement inside the water disturbed the quietness. Someone seemed to have noticed the presence of six men sleeping blissfully. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, the unknown assailant surreptitiously slithered forward, before choosing its first victim.

As the men slept, oblivious to the presence of the unknown sinister entity, all of them were abruptly awakened from their slumber on hearing the blood-curdling cries of Nagarjuna, who screamed in pain.

The men were aghast on finding Nagarjuna being brutally attacked by a huge crocodile that had grabbed one of his legs and had pierced its razor-sharp teeth into his flesh.

Cognisant that they needed to act fast, Mohan drew out the Bhawani and instructed Raj and Rannvijaya to get a grip on their injured friend and turn him upside down in a bid to upstage the crocodile.

Both the men tried to turn Nagarjuna’s body. Unfortunately, the gigantic, edacious creature thwarted their plans by biting harder and chewing off a portion of flesh from Nagarjuna’s leg. Seeing their rescue mission fail, Pawan and Jayadev leapt to help their friends.

Acting in concert, the four of them were finally able to turn Nagarjuna’s body with much effort and flip the crocodile’s body as well. This was the opportunity Mohan had been waiting for and without wasting any time, he raised the sword in the air and in a flash, thrust it inside the vicious crocodile’s body, ripping it apart from the centre, all the way till its tail.

Mohan and his friends heaved a sigh of relief when the crocodile succumbed to its wounds. Nagarjuna was still writhing in pain as the blood oozing out from his leg turned crimson.

Seeing Nagarjuna’s condition, Jayadev, who was well-versed in the use of medicines, immediately ventured into the forest—despite the risks involved—to find the herbs to treat his ailing friend. In the meantime, Raj and Pawan went to chop some wood to carve out a staff to enable Nagarjuna to walk.

Emerging from the forest, Jayadev rushed towards his severely wounded friend. Cautiously applying the herbs, he tore a cloth and bandaged it around Nagarjuna’s leg to ease off the distress his friend was in.

While Pawan gave Nagarjuna water to quench his thirst, Mohan advised his friends to return to the ship since the river was infested with crocodiles and that it wasn’t wise to camp at the site any longer.

“I suspect a sinister conspiracy,” Rannvijaya spoke as he advanced towards Mohan.

“As had been revealed by Sage Kaushik, Dasavana is aware of every movement of ours and will leave no stone unturned to derail our plans,” he added.

“I think Rannvijaya has correctly deduced the reason behind the crocodile’s attack,” Jayadev seconded Rannvijaya’s analysis.

Mohan wasn’t completely convinced, but he couldn’t afford to ignore the incident either.

Acknowledging his friends’ concerns, Mohan instructed everyone to board the ship before a limping Nagarjuna, supported by Rannvijaya and Mohan, sat and the rest followed suit. The ship began to sail as Mohan placed the golden ball inside it and the men, who were rudely awakened from their slumber moments ago, dozed off again.

The next morning, as the men opened their eyes, they were welcomed by the scenic beauty of the fabled land of Kishkindha. Surrounded by gigantic rock formations, the men were mesmerised by the sight.

Bringing the ship to a halt, the men leapt out and commenced their search for the celestial weapons. As they reached a lush green tract of land, Pawan found it rather odd to see a barren patch of land amidst greenery.

It was while he cerebrated about the issue that an old feeble and bald pujari, attired in a white dhoti and shawl, crossed their path. Pawan asked him the reason for such an oddity.

“This is the spot where Sugriv’s elder brother, Bali breathed his last. The barren patch you enquire about is the precise point where Lord Rama fired an arrow at Bali and the latter succumbed to his fatal injury. Since Bali’s death as we locally term it, no grass has ever grown at this spot,” the pujari revealed.

“O Learned One, I would be grateful if you could inform us which of these rocks is the Anjaneyar Parvat,” Mohan asked and pointing to their right, the pujari told them the cluster of rocks situated at the top, offering an aerial view of the place, is where Lord Hanuman was born to Anjani.

“There is a cave at the extreme end of the Anjaneyar Parvat comprising multicoloured glass walls. To discover what you are looking for, you must use tact and intellect and break the wall of a specific colour chosen by you. But remember, a person is given only one chance to strike and if he fails, the opportunity is lost forever,” cautioned the pujari.

As the group of men thanked the pujari, Raj as usual, was in his blithe mood and asked his friends a riddle.

“Friends, if a serial were to be made on Bali’s death, what would it be called?”

Failing to turn up with an answer, they urged Raj to put an end to their agony.

With a triumphant smile on his face, Raj replied,

“Simple! It would be called—Bali Ka Vadh(u)!” before breaking into peals of laughter, while the others shook their heads in exasperation.

It was while they were about to begin their arduous climb to the mountaintop that Nagarjuna spoke.

“Friends, I am in extreme discomfort and shall, unfortunately, be unable to accompany you any further in this journey. I request your permission to retire to the ship and wait for your successful return,” Nagarjuna pleaded, struggling to stand straight even with his wooden staff.

Mohan and the others immediately empathised with Nagarjuna and Jayadev volunteered to attend to his injured friend.

“Who would have thought that monkeys would play such a pivotal role in rescuing Mother Sita,” Raj commented.

“Well, there is still some distance we need to cover before we arrive at the peak, so let me tell you a tale to keep you engrossed,” Pawan replied.

“It so happened that eons ago, Devarshi Narad, the jovial celestial sage, blessed with the ability to ingress any of the three worlds without prior permission, performed austere penances which rattled Lord Indra, who sent the God of Love, Kama, to distract him.”

“Oh, Kama! In fact, *Kama Sutra* is one of my favourite movies,” winked Raj with an impish grin as Mohan gestured Pawan to continue the story, while winking back at his college buddy.

“However, Kama Dev was unsuccessful in his endeavour and on being apprised with Narad’s success, Indra congratulated Narad. Elated at his achievement of conquering desire, a visibly jubilant Narad informed Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma of his victory. While both were pleased, they forbade Narad from disclosing this fact to others to avoid him being labelled ‘pompous’.

But gloating over his achievement, Narad couldn’t care less and headed straight to Vaikuntha, inhabited by his favourite deity, Lord Vishnu. Soon, Lord Vishnu heard the tale and decided to teach his most ardent devotee a lesson in humility.”

“So, what happened then?” Rannvijaya asked as the men continued their climb.

“When Narad descended on earth, he entered a kingdom ruled by King Shilanidhi, who was occupied in the preparation of his daughter Shrimati’s swayamvar. The moment Narad set his eyes on Shrimati; he was so besotted with her that he decided to participate in the swayamvar. Desirous of winning Shrimati’s hand in marriage, Narad prayed to Shri Hari Vishnu and wished for a boon that would make him look like Hari himself.

Blessed with Lord Vishnu's divine looks, an utterly pleased Narad, now confident of winning Shrimati's heart, sat alongside all the other potential grooms. As Shrimati walked past one prince after another with a garland in hand, Narad arose.

Contrary to his assumption, Shrimati began laughing at Narad and mocked him in front of everyone even as the others joined in at poking fun at his facial features."

"Facial features? Why is that? Didn't you say he had been blessed with the looks of Lord Vishnu or Hari himself?" questioned a surprised Mohan.

Pawan smiled and explained the details of what followed thereafter.

"True, Narad had indeed been blessed with the looks of Hari, which he thought was akin to that of Lord Vishnu. But unknown to him, Hari also meant a monkey and Lord Vishnu had deliberately bestowed Narad with the looks of a monkey. Besides, the swayamvara was an illusion created by Lord Vishnu to teach Narad the virtue of humility.

Chagrined and infuriated, Narad cursed Lord Vishnu by declaring that just as he had been separated from the woman he truly loved, Vishnu too, would meet the same fate and only with the assistance of monkeys shall he be able to unite with his beloved!" Pawan explained.

The steep climb had taken a toll on the four men, who had by now reached the peak of the Anjaneyar Parvat.

Quenching their thirst from the mountain stream, the men were surprised to find the pujari, whom they had met at the entrance of the cave.

"Pujariji, how did you reach before us?" Raj asked, flabbergasted.

"Son, I have been here all my life and am well-versed with every route and passage leading up till here. I took the shortcut and despite my age, arrived here before you to help you," responded the sage.

Thanking the sage for his thoughtful gesture, the men entered the cave as darkness began to engulf the area. Barely had the men taken a few steps inside, when they saw the walls concealed by glasses of different colours, exactly how the pujari had described.

"Which one should we break?" Rannvijaya asked, looking at the multitude of colours ranging from blue, green, red, yellow, grey, saffron and brown amongst a host of other shades.

"Choose blue," Pawan replied. "Narayan and Lord Rama are both represented in blue and Lord Hanuman being Shri Rama's greatest devotee, would have settled for no other colour but blue," he added, while elaborating on the reasons for arriving at his decision.

Everyone agreed with Pawan's logic and Rannvijaya was about to hurl a huge

boulder on the blue-coloured glass, when Mohan shouted at the top of his lungs and asked him to desist from hurling the boulder.

“What happened, Mohan? Why did you ask Rannvijaya to abstain from shattering the blue-coloured glass?” Pawan asked, visibly puzzled.

“The answer is not blue!” Mohan responded.

“Then, what is it?”

“Your story! Your story is the clue to our answer! Lord Vishnu is known as Hari and Hari is the term also used for a monkey and Lord Hanuman was a monkey. The common thread connecting both Narayan and Bajrangbali is the word Hari and the closest connection with the word ‘Hari’ in terms of colour is green—Hara.” Mohan argued.

Mohan’s razor-sharp thinking had once again saved the day. Patting him for his wise judgement, Rannvijaya smashed the boulder against the green-coloured glass.

The boulder came in contact with the glass but it didn’t seem to have any effect. The group fixed their gaze on the green glass, awaiting an outcome. Alas, their hopes were razed to the ground. Forbidden to try their luck a second time, a shell-shocked and deeply dejected Mohan made way to the exit with his equally disappointed friends when they heard the glass cracking.

Turning around with hopeful eyes, the men were palliated on seeing cracks appearing on the green-coloured glass. Everything was quiet before a deafening sound engulfed the men and all the coloured glasses began shattering into pieces.

Mohan and his friends bent to avoid being hurt and once the noise had subsided, they gradually opened their clenched eyes. They couldn't believe what they saw. The cave shone like a royal palace and within each of the shattered glass glistened the Divyastras— the celestial weapons—used during the legendary battle.

Tambadevi's Lair

Mythology came alive as the mesmerised men gaped at the glowing celestial weapons. The cave was full of enormous gadas, akin to a club with a heavy, round-shaped head at the opposite end of the handle, used by Lord Hanuman and the entire monkey army to bludgeon the demons of Lanka.

The men appeared spellbound, but Mohan, the first to break out of it, advised his friends to accumulate all the weapons and exit the cave. While the others were busy carrying out the task, Mohan went ahead to explore the cave. Devoid of any other human presence, Mohan bravely ventured forth towards a radiating light at the end of the cave that seemed to be beckoning him.

“Hey, where has Mohan gone?” Raj asked, concerned.

Elsewhere, Mohan stood face-to-face with the most humongous mace he had ever seen or read about in his life—a mace that glowed so radiantly, it almost blinded him. Barely able to overcome the luminescence of the gada, Mohan noticed a huge scroll of pure white paper tied with a red-coloured ribbon lying next to the mace.

Untying the ribbon, Mohan held the scroll in his hand and read the first sentence, *‘Remove your footwear, for the ground you stand on is holy.’*

As instructed, Mohan stood barefoot in front of the mace that was adorned with chunks of pointed metal, while he continued reading the message.

‘This is the place of Lord Hanuman's birth and the mace you see in front of you was the one wielded by Bajrangbali in the battle that was fought ages ago on the land of Lanka.’

Meanwhile, unable to find Mohan, the friends assumed that he had already left the cave.

“Didn't he instruct us to collect the weapons? I am sure he must be waiting for us outside,” Rannvijaya commented.

“Well, in that case, we must go and meet him soon,” Pawan responded.

Raj, in order to ensure Mohan had left the cave, called out his name aloud but could not hear anything except the echo of his own voice. Mohan had ventured so deep inside the cave that his friend's cries did not reach his ears.

Unable to hear Mohan's response, Raj decided to leave the premises.

Barely had they come out of the cave, a chill ran down their spines as the trio saw a group of eight devious entities clothed in raven black robes with hoods concealing their faces. They, at once, knew these could only be Dasavana's men as Nagarjuna had already described their sinister appearance earlier.

"Where do you think you are going?" one of the men asked with disdain, before taking off his hood.

"Your doomed journey ends here on this fateful night as our Great Lord has sent me, Shuka, and my brother, Sarana, along with the Kaal Sarps to slay you and end this chapter for once and for all." The fanged, sinewy demon with carmine-like eyes intimidated the men.

No sooner had he revealed his diabolic plan than two of his men suddenly fell several feet off the mountain peak, meeting their gory death. A gigantic mace was hurled at them, with lightning speed, from the darkness of the cave.

Aghast at the unexpected turn of events, the Kaal Sarps were instantly put on their back foot. Waiting with great anxiety to face the unknown assailant, the vicious demons were frightened on seeing Mohan emerge from the prevailing darkness with vengeance writ large on his face.

As the winds howled, Mohan rallied the courage of his friends and ordered them to repel the attack by slaying the fiends with the mystical weapons in their possession.

Infused with renewed strength, belief and confidence, the four mortals commenced their assault on Dasavana's demons.

Casting their robes aside, all the Kaal Sarps rushed at Mohan and his men with razor-sharp swords in hand. Launching a gruesome attack on the men, the Kaal Sarps wounded each of the men by jumping in the air, wielding their weapons to injure Mohan's friends.

Enraged by their assault, the burly Rannvijaya lashed at the demons, swirling his mace in the air and beating their brains to pulp. While Pawan and Raj combated two other Kaal Sarps, Mohan advanced towards the evil twins, Shuka and Sarana, and landed a forceful kick on the latter's chest causing him to fall on the ground.

"You have invited your own death by committing this defiant act," Shuka harangued as his frizzy hair began to transform into venomous snakes. As the battle raged on between the two camps, Mohan contemplated on ways to quell the attack.

While Mohan was trying to strategise, the feeble old pujari emerged from behind one of the rocks and flung a dagger in Mohan's direction.

"All his power is vested in his hair. There is only one way to defeat these evil

souls—chop off their hair!” the pujari hollered amidst the clanking of weapons.

Mohan caught hold of the dagger thrown at him and surged towards the terrified demon, who was now aware of his inevitable defeat. In a flash, Mohan jumped in the air and slashed the bodies of the snakes jutting out from Shuka’s head. With the snakes killed, the demon was divested of his powers and lay at the mercy of Mohan.

Meanwhile, in the battle that ensued, the Kaal Sarps began surrendering to the mighty weapons of the gods. Raj and Pawan overpowered the hefty Sarana and Rannvijaya was embroiled in an equally intense conflict with the Kaal Sarps.

Seizing the opportunity, Mohan agreed to help the hapless demon wriggle out of his situation on the condition that he killed his brother with the same dagger. Even though he was in a state of dilemma, Shuka took the dagger and agreed to slay his brother, Sarana.

However, contrary to the plan, he turned in a flash and attempted to slit Mohan’s throat. But the astute Mohan, aware of Shuka’s devious intentions, grabbed his hand and placing his own elbow in between the demon’s hand, he twisted it with such force that the bone snapped and Shuka’s right arm was rendered useless.

As the demon writhed in pain, Mohan apprised him of the precarious situation the demon had landed himself in.

“Shuka, your right arm shall never be of any use to you. If you want to secure your future, you must kill your brother because, remember, I am otherwise under no obligation to spare your life,” Mohan warned the demon.

With no other option, Shuka was compelled to do as told. Sarana hollered in agony when the dagger was thrust inside his neck by his treacherous brother. As a dying Sarana turned to see his assailant, a shocked expression of betrayal was visible on his face before he succumbed to his injuries.

With all but one demon slain, the four friends encircled Shuka, who begged for mercy citing the successful completion of his task while pointing at the exanimate body of his twin brother.

“Shuka, we mortals, unlike you demons, remain true to our word even when dealing with abominable creatures like you. Return to your land and inform your ruler that the countdown to his death has begun,” Mohan declared before instructing Rannvijaya to knock down the demon unconscious. The latter wilfully complied and kayoed Shuka in a single blow, breaking his fangs in the process.

With all the weapons in their possession and the assault on them thwarted, the four friends descended the mountain and arrived at the bank of River Tungabhadra where an anxious Jayadev and Nagarjuna greeted them warmly.

Fortunately for them, Jayadev was still in possession of the medicinal herbal paste that he had prepared earlier. He applied the healing paste to the minor bruises all his friends had suffered.

“We were fortunate that the old pujari’s advice came to our rescue,” commented Pawan when Mohan seemed to notice something uncanny.

“I cannot find the biggest mace that belonged to Lord Hanuman. Do you remember the pujari informed us about the multicoloured glasses and the sole chance we had to try our luck?” Mohan asked and everyone replied in the affirmative.

“But the matter to ponder upon is how did he know that we had arrived here in search of something and were not mere visitors?” Mohan asked.

“Could it be possible that the pujari was...?” Mohan was cut short by Jayadev, who placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder, gesturing him to thank the almighty and not ruminate much on the unsolved mystery. After all, some things are better left unsaid.

As the ship set sail from the banks of the Anjaneyar Parvat, the ageing pujari saw them disappear into the mist. As he retired to the cave—the gigantic mace held in a firm grip—his feeble body was replaced by a muscular physique; his bald head—now full of hair—was adorned by a gold-encrusted crown, and his human face changed to that of a monkey. He looked up, closed his eyes in reverence and uttered these golden words, “Jai Shri Rama.”



After receiving the Principal’s consent on his leave application, Professor Suryamurthy left the college premises and headed straight to Samaira’s swish residence at New Delhi’s Tughlaq Road. Guarded by several security personnel, the single-storeyed, white-coloured bungalow, with sprawling lawns and a huge swimming pool, was a sight for sore eyes.

But as Professor Suryamurthy asked for Samaira at the main gate, he was told by the guard that she was not at home. He seemed relieved at the news of Samaira’s absence, lest he faced a barrage of questions from her for not allowing her to accompany him. The professor tore a sheet of paper from one of his files and left a note and handed over the keys of Mohan’s residence to the guard on duty.

Dear Samaira,

The present sequence of events leading up to Mohan’s absence has disturbed me immensely and I have resolved to unearth the facts on my own. Your anger is warranted, but, it is in your best interests that I alone venture forth in search of

Mohan and Devraj. I have left the keys to Mohan's residence in the possession of your security guard named Veer Singh, who shall deliver them to you on your return. Due to paucity of time and the urgency of the matter, I am leaving immediately for Sahastapur by car and shall keep you updated about every single development.

God bless you,

Professor Suryamurthy



For some strange reason, the sun seemed to have betrayed Mohan and his friends.

“Why has the sun not risen?” an agitated Raj asked the others, who looked equally disturbed at the unusual phenomenon until Mohan tried to analyse the conspicuous absence of the sun vis-à-vis their next destination.

Unfurling the scroll and using his cell phone's flashlight, Mohan read out the message once again.

“A chamber of horrors awaits you at Tambadevi's lair. Complete the task successfully and the Kodandarama Temple shall be your next destination!”

“What! Do we need to encounter Tambadevi before reaching our destination?” spoke a vexed Jayadev since the Kodandarama Temple was in close proximity and visiting Tambadevi's chamber would mean going back to the location they had already crossed.

“What! We are set to enter Tambadevi's lair?” Pawan blurted in horror.

In his attempt to allay the fears of his friends, Mohan responded to their valid concerns.

“Jayadev, I am aware of the situation and I know this detour would delay our quest, but, the instructions on the scroll need to be complied with and cannot be dismissed.”

Then, turning towards Pawan, Mohan threw a question at him, “Yes, we are heading towards Tambadevi's lair. But, the way you vehemently shook your head in disbelief, it appears you are apprehensive about the possible dangers along the path. Is that true?”

“True? It's impossible! It's inconceivable!” Pawan replied with a tense expression on his face.

“Every second is precious, Pawan. Do not squander it by posing riddles,” Rannvijaya admonished his friend.

A dismayed and dejected Pawan wearily sat inside the ship and began disclosing essential facts about Tambadevi.

“Tambadevi is a terribly wicked, vicious, and a sinister Goddess of the underworld, whose most ardent devotee is none other than Dasavanakoka. In fact, it is believed that after being blessed with Lord Shiva’s boon, Tambadevi played a pivotal role in accentuating Dasavana’s powers, enabling him to commit the most heinous crimes.

“According to legend, no mortals apart from the Chiranjeevis can enter her lair and exit unscathed!”

“Who are these Chiranjeevis?” Raj asked.

“Raj, the word ‘Chiran’ means permanent while ‘Jeevi’ implies having lived. The combination refers to an immortal individual or the one who shall roam the earth till the end of time and only depart when the Great Deluge swallows all land. The first time the Deluge or the Jal Samadhi as we call it, took place was when Lord Vishnu incarnated as Matsya and rescued several living creatures on a boat, built by Manu.

There are eight such Chiranjeevis who continue to meander through the planet and have often been sighted by mankind in dense forests, mountains and caves. They are—Sage Markandeya, Kripacharya, the military guru of the Kuru princes; King Bali, who was humbled by Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Vaman; Ved Vyas, the narrator of Mahabharata; Vibhishan, Ashwathama, and Lord Hanuman,” Pawan informed, before shedding more light on Tambadevi’s monstrosity.

“The Chiranjeevis are the only mortals bestowed with this boon of entering and leaving her lair without succumbing to her wrath because Tambadevi is rendered powerless in front of them. She is said to be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged. But, her disability should not evoke any sympathy, for she is nothing less than a rapacious man-eating beast and no one who has seen her has lived to reveal her physical attributes.”

“Why is that? And if that is so, how come Dasavana has not been subjected to her wrath?” Mohan asked.

“Dasavana is also virtually a Chiranjeevi, if we take into account the many boons that have been granted to him by Lord Shiva. Dasavana epitomises evil, just as Tambadevi represents ill omen and destruction. According to rumours, Dasavana brings 200 blindfolded human captives to her lair, as an offering, on each visit.”

“But, why blindfold them?” Rannvijaya probed.

“‘Tamba’ in English means copper. Tambadevi once prayed to Shukracharya, the guru of the asuras and requested him to alter her deformed appearance. Unable to grant Tambadevi her wish, but, sympathetic at her deplorable condition, he blessed her with a boon that whoever sets their eyes upon her, shall

turn to copper or tamba. This is why Dasavana brings his captives in blindfold so that she may devour them and satiate her ravenous appetite. She shall remain hungry forever if the captives see her, for then, they would be turned to statues of copper.”

There was an ear-splitting silence. The ship sailed through and moments later, a dreadful sight greeted the men. In the swarthy night, the only source of luminance was a gigantic five-storeyed cylindrical structure, in the distance, that spouted fire from its peak. A high-pitched demonic laughter, like a hyena, could be heard from far away.

As the ship sailed closer to the sinister lair, the men prepared themselves for the grave consequences of their actions, when Mohan posed a question to Nagarjuna,

“What about you, Nagarjuna? Haven’t you heard about Tambadevi, considering she too is a sorceress?”

Dispirited, Nagarjuna replied in the negative.

“Unfortunately, no. As you know, the world is divided between the good sorcerers and the evil sorcerers and on several occasions, both coexist while being oblivious to the existence of the other,” he replied.

Frightened by the sound of her infernal laughter, none of them seemed confident about stepping into Tambadevi’s lair until Mohan marched forward. Rising to the occasion, the charismatic leader requested his friend, Raj, to accompany him while advising the others to patiently await their return. Mohan didn’t want to jeopardise his friends’ lives. He was a fearless front runner.

The friends too appealed to the duo to reconsider their decision while even offering to accompany them.

“I genuinely appreciate your selfless gesture, my friends, and I do not doubt your integrity, but, it is purely for the sake of our quest and its success that Raj and I must enter her lair. Besides, I cannot afford to put your lives at risk,” Mohan explained himself before sharing his strategy with the group.

Complimenting Mohan on his plan to outwit the sorceress, all of them embraced the duo. As Mohan and Raj jumped off the ship, Pawan cautioned them, “Remember, it is not only her eyes and savagery that you must fear, but also the trident she wields in her hand to impale human beings and roast them alive in the giant fire that rages inside her chamber.”

Mohan patted his friend and told Rannvijaya to stand guard at the entrance of the cylindrical lair, while holding onto the golden ball. With these words, the duo switched on their cell phones and entered Tambadevi’s lair, from where no man had escaped.

The ground floor of the cylindrical structure was plunged in abject darkness

and plagued with a foul smell of rotten meat. There was an open courtyard and it was while the two friends were trying to make their way to the next floor that Raj stumbled and fell. Using his phone's flashlight, Raj tried to ascertain what he had tripped on and was aghast. The ground was covered with battered bodies of human beings and their leftovers. Severed hands, gouged out intestines, scattered bones scared Raj. Mohan urged him to concentrate on the mission and not let his mind waver.

Upon reaching the second floor, they saw a macabre shadow on a higher floor peering down—a one-armed and one-legged entity descended the stairs, hissing the word “visitors” in a shudder-invoking tone.

Mohan and Raj stared at each other and tried to calm their stretched nerves.

“Look, I can see some people standing in the dark,” Raj commented.

“Be careful! Tambadevi might be hiding behind one of them to make eye contact with us and turn us to copper,” Mohan cautioned his friend.

In one far corner of the room, Mohan and Raj were appalled to see statues of various warriors—warriors, who, like them, had entered to vanquish Tambadevi, but were tricked into looking at her.

Mohan and Raj were recovering from the jolt when they heard Tambadevi's footsteps.

“It seems she is about to reach the third floor. We must get there before she does. Remember, this is the floor from where the fire starts emanating. Stand near the fire so that we are able to see her shadow on the wall and execute our plan,” Mohan advised his friend before the duo tiptoed to the third floor and stood in front of the narrow walls with only the fire separating them.

Mohan turned on his phone's camera and patiently waited for Tambadevi's arrival. A few anxious seconds later, Tambadevi reached the third floor and was delighted to find two human beings, standing with their backs facing her. Raj and Mohan, who stood adjacently, glanced at each other when they saw Tambadevi's shadow on the wall, while she raised her trident to strike them.

Her shadow gave the two friends the opportunity they'd been waiting for. Confident of where she was standing, Mohan turned with great agility and clicked Tambadevi's photo.

With bated breath, Mohan prayed for his plan to succeed. Later, a sharp, crackling sound was heard which lasted a few seconds. Eager to ascertain the result of his plan, Mohan looked at Tambadevi's feet and as he saw her, an instant smile appeared on his face that could put even the Cheshire cat to shame!

As Mohan had placed his camera right opposite Tambadevi's face and clicked her photograph, she had fallen for the bait and unwittingly gazed at her own image and was, thereby, turned into a copper statue herself!

The two friends basked in their success as they stared at the copper statue of the deformed Tambadevi.

With their task successfully executed, the duo rushed to the fourth and the fifth floors to claim the gifts awaiting them. As they reached the fourth floor, they saw two oars kept at the entrance.

“What are these for?” a bewildered Raj asked.

“These are the magic ores that will help us reach the Kodandarama Temple and our subsequent destinations at twice the speed than the golden ball. This was the gift we had to secure after vanquishing Tambadevi, as mentioned in the letter, though I deliberately refrained from revealing this, since I wasn’t confident of our victory,” replied Mohan and headed straight to the topmost floor as Raj stayed behind and carried the oars along with him.

It had been close to two hours since their departure and Mohan’s friends were getting more anxious with each passing second. Just when they were beginning to lose hope of their successful return, Raj exited the cylindrical lair with the two oars in his hand amidst loud cheering from his friends. It was while Raj was revealing the significance of the oars to his friends that Mohan emerged from the darkness, carrying the copper statue of Tambadevi in his hands.

Even in death, Tambadevi’s appearance could instil fear in the hearts of courageous men and it wasn’t before Mohan had convinced them that the lifeless statue was harmless, that his friends heaved a sigh of relief and congratulated him.

As all the men entered the ship and set sail, using the magic oars—which rowed without assistance—they saw cracks on Tambadevi’s cylindrical lair. Then, without any warning, chunks began falling into the waters in quick succession and much like Tambadevi’s fate; her lair too, was wiped out of existence.

Wonders never seemed to cease on Mohan’s mythical quest. Moments after the lair had been destroyed, the sun arose, replacing darkness with warmth and shine, signalling the dawn of a new beginning.

Bow-ing Down in Reverence

The candlelight flickered in a completely dark room. Nothing moved about in the room, there was no noise either, though the wind was howling outside. The room was desolate and seemed to be devoid of human presence. But it wasn’t. At the centre of the room, lay an entity with its head on a miniature table, as if sans life and zest for existence.

Long braided hair, serenading blue eyes, soft and glowing skin, luscious red lips, a svelte figure, and attired in an elegant red lehenga choli, the captivating beauty, who wore beautiful golden earrings, had no reason to be depressed. Yet, her facial expression was morose and bereft of emotion. As the sound of the howling winds mingled with the gushing sound of the river, the woman stared blankly at the open window and wondered what fate had in store for her. But little did she know that six courageous and dauntless men had traversed perilous paths to free her from the shackles of Dasavana's bondage. She was Princess Alankrita—the princess whose portrait Mohan had unveiled and was destined to marry.

Then, as if on cue, entered someone with reckless disregard for the word *destiny* —simply because he possessed the power to override destiny based on his strength and the authority he yielded. He was Dasavanakoka.

Towering above Alankrita's petite frame, the broad and muscular Dasavana expressed surprise over the abject darkness in the chamber.

"While our entire palace shines magnificently and prosperity surrounds our kingdom, why is it that your room is engulfed in darkness?" the King asked.

As tears welled up in her kohled eyes, she replied with a sigh of despair, "You may light up the palace and kingdom with the power of your wealth, but can never replace the darkness that is filled in our hearts for you. You say your kingdom prospers, but aren't the territories you have conquered and about which you so vainly boast, a part of your ever-expanding empire? If it is, then why is it that while the citizens of Trahimam make mirth, the kingdoms pillaged by you suffer? And if they aren't part of your empire, then you have forfeited the right to brag about your conquests!"

Dasavana merely scoffed at Alankrita's emotional outburst and spoke about the pressing matter he had come to discuss.

"So, what have you decided about your marriage with the great Dasavana?"

"My answer was and will always remain a firm no. I cannot bear to imagine the sight of the bloody hands of my parents' murderer touching me," Alankrita replied, defiantly.

"You foolish girl, there is none like the mighty, the powerful, and the immortal Dasavanakoka. It's every parent's dream to have Dasavana marry their daughter and you have the impudence to reject his proposal?" Dasavana spoke, while conferring glorious epithets upon himself.

"Parents may dream of the day when Dasavana marries their daughter but I shudder to think about it," replied Alankrita with great fortitude, much to Dasavana's ire. Grabbing the princess by her hair, Dasavana bent towards her and warned her of dire consequences.

“You insolent girl! Your body may smell of various fragrances but your demeanour reeks of impertinence. And may I remind you in no uncertain terms, Dasavana never acknowledges another person’s decision if it doesn’t benefit him. Dasavana wants to marry you, and, so it shall happen. Prepare yourself, for it is only a matter of a few days now,” he whispered in her ears as he stormed out of the room. He instructed his guards to bolt the door and seal the window lest she try and commit suicide.

However, as he walked into his court, Dasavana calmed down on seeing his trusted ally, Vinashkale and his son, Vipreet Buddhi, awaiting his return. With a huge smile, Dasavana embraced Vinashkale and warmly welcomed his son, Vipreet Buddhi. Vinashkale was an able and astute commander in Dasavana’s army and owned a palace inside a walled fortress, at some distance from the ocean and the surrounding forest.

Equally menacing, the long-haired Vinashkale had been put in charge of the walled fortress to keep an eye on intruders and extraneous attacks. The fortress was the only gateway to Bhavan Dasavana. All the Trahimamis were required to show a snake tattoo on their arms to gain legitimate access inside the impregnable fort.

While the trio was engaged in a general discussion, a bruised, battered, bald and disabled Shuka entered Dasavana’s court and broke down in front of all the courtiers. Perturbed by his deplorable condition, Dasavana asked Shuka the reason for his woeful state.

“Sire, I advise you to exercise caution, for our adversaries may be young, but they aren’t naïve and unaccomplished warriors as we mistook them to be.”

Shuka recounted the horrific encounter with Mohan and his friends and the miserable defeat of the Kaal Sarps at the hands of the young warriors. Incensed by Mohan’s blatant confrontation to Dasavana’s power and authority, an enraged Trivarmrut turned towards Vinashkale and instructed him to begin preparations for Mohan’s arrival in the land of Trahimam.



A visibly disturbed Agnihotri entered Dr. Chandra’s cabin.

“Sir, I am afraid, we will have to bring our operations to a temporary halt and flee from here,” he said, his troubled tone indicating the onset of an untoward happening.

“What is the matter, Suman? Is this related to the approaching cyclone?” Dr. Chandra asked.

Dejected, Agnihotri responded in the affirmative.

“Yes, Sir, your apprehensions are valid. The cyclone, conferred the name *Manik*, is in fact the most pernicious tropical cyclone to hit South India post cyclone *Jal* in 2010 and *Nilam* in 2012. It has originated from a low-pressure area close to the Bay of Bengal and has gradually intensified.”

“But, we cannot abort our mission midway. What about the crores of rupees the government has invested? What about the work in progress? We cannot end the operations and run away,” Dr. Chandra argued.

“Sir, unfortunate as it may be, the work in progress shall be hindered and the government’s investment will incur huge losses once the cyclone ravages this area, irrespective of whether we flee or not. Schools and colleges have already been shut in Chennai after seawater flowed inwards from the Marina Beach,” Suman informed his senior archaeologist.

“What you say makes sense to me, but, the fact remains that I shall not shirk my duties even in the wake of adversities. The cyclone has not yet reached the Rama Setu and till such time we shall continue our work,” replied Dr. Chandra.

“But, the cyclone will wreak havoc here, sooner than later,” Agnihotri cautioned.

“True. Instruct the men to not slacken their pace. I shall speak to the other archaeologists and discuss the ways and methods to safely transport the rocks and other materials we have so far discovered. We need to be on our toes. Time certainly seems to be running out for us,” Dr. Chandra said.



As the ship entered the waters adjoining the town of Hiremagalur, also known as Bhargavapuri, the men saw the Kodandarama Temple and alighted from their ship.

The beautiful temple was an amalgamation of Dravidian and Hoysala styles of architecture. As the group ventured forth, an injured Nagarjuna, walking with the support of his staff, accompanied them as well. On entering, they saw three beautifully carved out statues of Lord Rama, Lakshman, and Mother Sita, with the brothers depicted as carrying arrows in their right hand and holding their bows in the left.

“So, this must be the Kodanda!” Mohan remarked, while taking a closer look at the well-sculpted bow.

“It’s rather strange that the temple enclosure has sculptures of Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Lord Narasimha—Lord Vishnu’s half-man-half-lion incarnation—but Buddha is missing. In fact, the image of Balarama, Lord Krishna’s brother, has been engraved, instead,” Raj commented on noticing the oddity as Lord

Rama, Lord Krishna and Buddha were Lord Vishnu's seventh, eighth and ninth avatars, respectively.

Attempting to clarify Raj's doubts, Nagarjuna spoke.

"Many Vaishnavites consider Balarama as an avatar of Lord Vishnu instead of Gautama Buddha; though you and I know that Balarama, like Lakshman, was an incarnation of the mighty serpent, Sheshanag."

"As far as the incarnations of Lord Vishnu go, there is another tale associated with this place," spoke the knowledgeable Pawan.

"And what is that?" Rannvijaya asked.

"This town of Hiremagalur is known as Bhargavapuri."

"Yes, we know that!"

"And that is because, according to legend, Bhargava resided here."

"So, what's the connection, Pawan?" Rannvijaya asked.

"Bhargava is another name for Lord Parshurama, Lord Vishnu's sixth avatar," he replied.

"What a beautiful pond. Its tranquil waters are a sight for sore eyes!" Mohan commented, changing the topic, before being interrupted by Jayadev.

"Unfortunately, my friend, this is how the pond appeared centuries ago. But, when we return from this parallel time-zone to our present-day world, the pond would have dried up!"

"Mohan, what is it that we have arrived here for?" Nagarjuna asked.

"I don't know. The letter had only advised us to arrive here, after which..." Mohan was unable to complete his sentence as he was stupefied on seeing words appear automatically on the scroll he was carrying in his hand.

*Now that you have successfully arrived at the
Kodandarama Temple,*

*Unfurl your map, touch it on the holy ground of this
temple and*

You shall know where you must head next .

With a gleam in his eyes, Mohan looked at Rannvijaya and gestured him to do as described. Not one to do things tardily, Rannvijaya, without further ado, took out the map. Holding it from side to side, he placed the map on the consecrated ground, expecting another miraculous sight. But, nothing happened. Neither did the map point to their next destination nor did the ground offer any clue.

Appearing as actors participating in a failed script, the disappointed group turned towards their leader, who glanced at the scroll for further clues.

From the Midst of Darkness,

There Shall Emanate a Light.

The Weapon Symbolising the God's Might,

*Shall be Presented to You, in Order to Fight.
The Never Before Witnessed Majestic Sight,
Cannot be Seen During the Day, but Only at Night!*



It had turned dark and Professor Suryamurthy was running out of fuel. He had landed himself in a deserted land. The ill-constructed road was full of potholes. Also, Professor Suryamurthy couldn't seem to find the route to Sahastapur on his phone's GPS. Bringing his car to a halt in one desolate corner of the road, the professor unzipped his bag and took out the map of Uttar Pradesh. Focussing on regions surrounding Ayodhya, Suryamurthy was befuddled on being unable to locate Sahastapur on the map.

"Damn! It seems I have brought along one of those old, useless maps lying in my house!" mumbled an agitated Suryamurthy.

Left with no other alternative, Professor Suryamurthy exited his car and walked towards the sole source of human existence—a small house at the opposite end of the long and narrow road. There was an uneasy chill in the air and as the professor inched closer, he rued the fact that he had decided to come to Sahastapur on his own rather than boarding a bus like Mohan and Raj. Moreover, Raj had taken along the new atlas and travel guide with him, while departing for Sahastapur.

As the professor approached the house, he could hear sounds of roaring laughter and people making mirth. Curious to know what was going on, he opened the main door, small, and built entirely of wood, only to realise that the place was a local bar. Men were gulping down drink after drink and it seemed that alcohol was flowing like water. While some were being serenaded by scantily-clad women, jiving to fast music beats, others were engrossed in gambling large sums of money.

The place was dimly lit and had old wooden chairs and rickety tables. It was the kind of place Professor Suryamurthy had never envisaged in his wildest dreams. As he stood in front of the door, a gush of wind blew past him, which attracted the attention of the bearded, burly and shabbily-dressed bartender.

Immediately realising that the man standing opposite him wasn't a frequent customer, the bartender gestured his attendant to stop the blaring music as everyone dropped whatever they were doing and stared at the poor professor, who became nervous with the attention fixed on him.

Picking up a gun in his hand, the bartender questioned Professor Suryamurthy in a gruff voice, "What is it that you want old man?"

Professor Suryamurthy was expecting the humble abode to be the home of a local dweller whom he would have consulted to help him find his way back. But, to be the centre of attention in a house full of bar dancers, gamblers, alcoholics, and a gun-toting bartender was not what the respected professor had bargained for.

Finding himself in a rather awkward position, Professor Suryamurthy realised he needed to voice his concerns, quickly, before his head was blown off. Rallying courage, the elderly professor finally spoke as sweat trickled down his face.

“I...I have lost my way and wanted to know the correct route that could lead me to my destination,” spoke the apprehensive professor.

“Where do you desire to go?” the bartender asked, smirking.

“To...to a place called Sahastapur!”

For a couple of seconds, there was a deafening silence accompanied by stunned faces before everybody broke into fits of laughter. Some held their stomachs while others virtually fell off their chairs at the professor’s naiveté and his query.

Professor Suryamurthy appeared puzzled by this odd behaviour of everyone surrounding him when the burly bartender slapped his hand on the table and ordered everyone to ‘shut up’ in no uncertain terms. Then, fixing his piercing gaze at Suryamurthy, he posed a question to the professor.

“Do you know what is the date today?” he asked, calmly.

Taken aback by the question, which seemed to mock his intellect and general awareness, Professor Suryamurthy replied, “Well, of course. It is October 28, 2020.”

“Then why the hell are you asking me about Sahastapur, senile old man?” the bartender harangued.

“Don’t you know the village of Sahastapur was washed away in a flood during the reign of Lord Rama, never to resurface again?” he added.

Professor Suryamurthy felt a shudder down his spine. Aghast at what he had heard, the professor had barely recovered when he saw all the men advancing towards him, slowly, with viciousness and greed in their eyes. It didn’t take Professor Suryamurthy much time to realise that these marauders were after his valuables and would stop at nothing to claim his gold-plated watch, his cell phone, and above all, his car.

“Don’t come near me or I swear to god, you shall have to face dire consequences,” a panic-stricken Suryamurthy tried to warn them.

Realising that his weak threats weren’t making much impact on the defiant men, who surged ahead with impunity, Professor Suryamurthy turned and made

a dash for his car with the men in hot pursuit. As the professor neared his vehicle, he knew he had to escape at any cost, lest he be butchered to death. But, what terrified him more than his own fate was the fact that Mohan and Raj had ventured into a village that had been washed away more than 7,000 years ago.



Meanwhile, Jayadev had managed to find some primitive tools lying within the temple and used them to good effect.

“Wow! That looks amazing. You’ve made it for yourself?” Raj asked Jayadev, who was seated beside the temple pond.

“Thanks for appreciating my work. No, it’s not for me, but for Mohan,” Jayadev replied.

“That is such a sweet gesture on your part, Jayadev. First, a doctor and now a sculptor; you are truly a man of exceptional talents,” Raj complimented his friend.

“If that were not the case, do you think Ekashringaji would have hired me as his man Friday?” Jayadev winked and Raj nodded in agreement.

“But, where did you get such large quantities of copper?” Raj asked, seeing Jayadev work, before realisation dawned on him.

“No! I do not suppose you have...” spoke an appalled Raj when Jayadev patted him on his shoulder and replied.

“Yes, I have!”

But, before they could carry on with their discussion, Mohan asked all of them to assemble inside the temple. Each of them left whatever they were doing and rushed to the spot where Mohan stood.

The group asked Mohan if it was time to put their plan into action. Nodding in the affirmative, Mohan gestured Rannvijaya to place the map on the holy ground.

The four corners of the map were held by Raj, Pawan, Rannvijaya and Jayadev respectively, and they pinned it to the ground. Watching with bated breath, the men expected the map to once again catch fire and lead them to their next destination, but nothing happened.

Instead, the men heard a crackling sound and saw a crack develop from the point at which the map was placed. They watched the crack run along the ground till it disappeared.

“Let’s run after the line,” Pawan suggested.

“But, the scroll may provide another clue,” Rannvijaya countered.

As the discussion between them ensued, a thin line of fire engulfed the

cracked path as if to assist the men in finding their next destination. After mutually agreeing that, this, indeed was the clue they had been waiting for and the scroll had nothing more to offer, the men followed the line of fire.

For almost 10 minutes, they kept walking at a brisk pace before the line of fire abruptly ended in front of a huge rocky wall.

“What? Is that it?” Raj asked on seeing the trail leading them to nothing substantial.

“Surely, there’s got to be something more to it than what meets the eye,” Nagarjuna opined.

“Shhh...” Mohan requested them to remain quiet.

“I can hear a sound,” he whispered.

As if on cue, cracks started appearing at the centre of the largest rock in the wall. A glimmer of hope filled the men’s hearts. Then, just as suddenly the cracks had appeared, they vanished, much to their bewilderment. Still, they were hopeful for a miracle and this time around, they weren’t disappointed.

Within seconds, there was an unprecedented explosion and the gigantic rock was shattered into fragments. The men bent down and covered their heads with hands to escape any injury. Fortunately, the pieces of rock fell around them and none of them was hurt.

With the noise subsiding, the men finally raised their heads to witness a breathtaking scene unfold in front of them. The rock had given way to a path inside the wall, leading up to another wall built of huge rocks.

“Come on, let’s enter the wall and traverse this path,” Mohan told his friends and was just about to proceed when Jayadev stopped him.

“What happened, my friend? Do you sense trouble?” Mohan asked.

Jayadev smiled and responded, “Not at all, Mohan. On the contrary, I feel great glory awaits you inside this wall and you shall no longer remain the same man you are now. It is to commemorate this success of yours that I present you with a small gift of my craftsmanship,” Jayadev spoke and presented him with armour, built purely of copper, and requested him to wear it.

Touched by his friend’s gesture, Mohan embraced Jayadev and immediately removed his sleeveless koti and replaced it with the copper armour.

“Wow, this armour fits you perfectly.” Raj remarked.

Smiling, the men entered through the wall with Mohan leading the way. Soon, they arrived in front of gleaming rocks. It was while the men were contemplating their next move that Mohan observed something of significance.

“Wait! The rocks are not gleaming,” Mohan commented, much to everyone’s surprise.

“What are you implying, Mohan?” Nagarjuna asked.

“Look at these rocks closely, once again. The golden hue we felt the rocks were emanating is coming from somewhere else. I am sure these rocks are concealing something significant underneath,” Mohan revealed.

The group carefully examined the rocks and were astounded to note that Mohan’s assumption was correct.

“Yes, Mohan, you are right. There is something behind these rocks!” Raj commented.

“In which case, we must remove these rocks and see *what lies beneath* , eh Raj?” Mohan gave Raj a taste of his own medicine.

As always, it was up to the sinewy Rannvijaya and the muscular Mohan to attempt shifting the rocks. But, these were no ordinary rocks and required immense strength and force. Looking at their friends struggle, the others joined in and offered a helping hand in their task.

The men did not give up; they used every ounce of strength in their bodies and kept persevering till they tasted success. The rocks finally gave way and fell to the ground.

For the next two minutes, the men appeared hypnotised. They were seeing something so majestic and surreal that it appeared as if they were losing control of their senses. It was Raj, who finally broke the spell and jumped in ecstasy.

Lying in front of the men, safely engraved within the wall, was an object one had only heard of and never hoped to see even in their wildest dreams. It was an object that brought them face-to-face with India’s glorious mythology. It was a weapon that had been touched by the very hands of God and used to slay the mightiest asura the world had ever known.

It was Lord Rama’s mythical bow.

The Kodanda had been found.

Revelations!

The men stared at each other in amazement. Their mouths were wide open while their faces had an expression of disbelief. The Kodanda was engulfed in smoke and mist. Sturdy and crafted purely in gold with a prominent depression at the centre, the glimmering 4-feet-long bow mesmerised everyone.

“I’ll take it out,” commented an excited Nagarjuna and advanced to get hold of the bow.

But, no sooner had he touched the bow than he winced in pain.

“What happened?” Jayadev asked.

“Current flows through the bow!” Nagarjuna grimaced.

“How is that possible?” Pawan spoke before advancing and trying his luck. But he too met with the same fate.

The group was in a fix. Flummoxed by the bow’s strange behaviour on being touched, the group deliberated on a possible solution to overcome the problem.

“If the Kodanda electrocutes the person who attempts to hold it, of what use was our journey?” Rannvijaya lamented, visibly vexed.

“Maybe, the answer lies amongst us,” Raj commented as everyone turned towards him.

Elaborating on his theory, Raj continued.

“We began our quest to save Princess Alankrita, who is destined to marry Mohan. Who is the one who possesses the ability to slay Dasavanakoka? It is Mohan. With which is weapon can Dasavana can be overcome? The Kodanda! Maybe, the Kodanda, being the wondrous bow that it is, possesses the unique ability of electrocuting all those who are not destined to use it.

“So, if there was anyone truly worthy of stringing Lord Rama’s Kodanda, who would that person be?”

Realisation dawned upon the others and they rued their overzealous reaction. There was only one man who truly deserved and could rightfully use the Kodanda.

“Mohan!” the group exclaimed in unison.

Brimming with confidence, a sure-footed Mohan advanced towards the Kodanda while his friends cheerfully egged him on. Holding the Kodanda in a vice-like grip, Mohan pulled out the bow and held it in his right hand.

As expected, the current passing through the bow did not put Mohan at the slightest risk for he, truly, was the chosen one.

As Mohan held the Kodanda, which was decorated with pearls at the upper and lower ends, Nagarjuna raised a pertinent question,

“We have certainly discovered the potent weapon that would destroy Dasavana and his kingdom, but the question that arises is: where are the arrows?”

Everyone’s face turned pale on realising that neither the quiver nor the arrows were anywhere in sight. Without the razor-sharp arrows, the Kodanda would be rendered useless. But unlike the others, the self-assured Mohan had belief in God’s powers and he was confident the almighty would never desert him after having guided him successfully from one perilous adventure to another.

Raising the bow in his right arm, Mohan strung the Kodanda with his left hand. Barely had he pulled the string, when a golden-coloured arrow, bearing a striking resemblance to the golden hue of the Kodanda, magically appeared

between the string and the prominent depression at the bow's centre.

His friends gaped in sheer amazement, first with the appearance of the arrow and then with its disappearance, when Mohan brought the string back to its original position and smiled triumphantly. Intrigued by this miracle, his friends requested him to repeat the action.

Not one to disappoint them, Mohan pulled the string another time and the arrow magically appeared once again.

"The arrow follows its master's command. The destiny of every arrow is sealed by the one who wields the Kodanda, which is why Lord Rama hid the bow and kept mankind oblivious to its existence," Mohan addressed his friends.

"But now, fate has chosen you. It has selected you to be the worthy inheritor of the Kodanda and there is no doubt you shall rise like a true hero and victory will kiss your feet," declared a supremely confident Raj, Mohan's best friend.

With the Kodanda held in a firm grip and attired in skilfully-designed copper armour that accentuated his sinewy physique and muscular arms, Mohan appeared every bit the hero he was destined to be as he emerged from the wall and stood directly under the shining moon.

Leading his men towards their next destination, Mohan suddenly stopped. Sensing danger lurking around, he drew his friends' attention to the statue of Tambadevi, which lay inside the ship. The disfigured statue of Tambadevi alarmed the men.

As Mohan was busy cautioning his friends of the impending danger, Raj, wearing a sardonic expression on his face, commented.

"And, where do you think the copper for your armour came from?"

As a shocked Mohan stared at Jayadev in surprise, the latter confessed.

"Yes, my friend. Just like the asura that Lord Kartikeya had vanquished and turned him into his vahana—a peacock—I wanted you to adorn the body of the menacing Tambadevi as your armour, for not only would it speak volumes of your courage, it would also invoke shudder in your opponents' hearts."

Mohan smiled at the thoughtful gesture behind Jayadev's magnificently-crafted armour and instructed his men to climb aboard the ship.

"But, where are we headed next?" Pawan questioned.

"Yes, besides, we are not even in the possession of Shabri's ber any longer!" exclaimed Rannvijaya.

With an impish grin on his face, Mohan addressed his friends.

"The eyes only see what they wish to. You all saw the marvellous and radiant Kodanda adorned with pearls at both ends, but forgot to notice that the last pearl at the top was not a pearl...but Shabri's ber!"

Stupefied yet elated, Mohan's friends could barely contain their excitement

and jumped with joy as Rannvijaya immediately opened his bag, pulled out the map and unfurled it on the sandy ground.

“Friends, behold and witness the power of Shabri’s last ber!” Mohan commented, hurling the berry on the map and as the berry landed on the map, a line of fire appeared and began connecting one destination to another. As the line of fire came to a halt, all the men hovered over the map to apprise themselves with their next and final destination as well as the path leading up to it.

“Get ready friends, for our destination beckons us,” Mohan galvanised his men before setting off for the terminal point of their adventurous journey.

The Kingdom of Trahimam!



The sun was conspicuous in its absence and mist engulfed the air. Professor Suryamurthy sat on a rickety wooden plank at a nearby tea stall. Dressed in his overcoat and sipping a steaming hot cup of tea, the professor casually observed the townsfolk going about their daily chores. Within a short span of time, the partially-deserted road was brimming with people—merchants, vendors and passengers.

On any other occasion, the professor, with a penchant for peace and tranquillity, would have scorned at the hustle and bustle of the locals. But today, the blaring horns of vehicles, the chatter of men and the shrill noise from the old television set fitted at one corner of the tea stall provided Professor Suryamurthy with solace and comfort.

The ghastly encounter at the bar the previous night had severely scarred him and after his narrow escape from the clutches of the marauders, Professor Suryamurthy had profusely thanked god for rescuing him. However, his car had run out of fuel and the professor had no alternative but to wait for the nearest petrol pump to open.

It was while he was enjoying his morning tea, when suddenly, several ambulances, blaring their sirens, passed through the crowded bazaar, causing great commotion. The chaos prompted Professor Suryamurthy to go and check what it was all about.

But, what he saw didn’t please him. In front of his eyes lay, inside the ambulances, scores of bodies—charred to death. Anguished by the terrible sight, he went up to one of the ambulance drivers and asked him the cause of this tragedy.

“I don’t know, Sahib. One of our hospital ambulances was passing by the area when the driver saw huge flames engulfing a plot. He immediately called us and

we, in turn, sought the help of the firefighters. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, the fire had completely ravaged the place and reduced everything to ashes. No one has survived. In fact, we were fortunate to retrieve at least a few corpses,” replied the driver.

“Do you have any idea how the place caught fire?” Professor Suryamurthy asked.

“Not really, Sahib! I overheard the police ruling out any possibility of foul play based on *prima facie* evidence. In fact, the precipitance and abruptness with which this tragedy took place has baffled each one of us.”

Professor Suryamurthy silently nodded and as he turned to move away from the scene, the driver called out to him and said, “The fire could have been set off inadvertently by a drunkard, for all you know. The razed plot was, after all, a bar!”

Professor Suryamurthy froze and at once realised that the bar was the same place where he had unwittingly walked into the previous night. This could also mean that someone or something was surreptitiously following every movement of his, and that, this ghastly act was just a precursor of what was to follow.

Unnerved by the dreadful news, Professor Suryamurthy had barely recovered from the shock when he was struck by another jolt. When he returned to the tea stall, an unpleasant piece of news flashed across the television screen that shook him to the core.

“As per latest reports, cyclone Manik has gained intensity forcing the governments of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to conduct rescue operations with immediate effect. The [Joint Typhoon Warning Centre](#), situated in Pearl Harbour, USA, has issued a [Tropical Cyclone Formation Alert](#) after noticing deep convections developing over a cloud-covered low-level circulation centre.

Schools in Chennai as well as in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam districts of Tamil Nadu have been turned into temporary relief shelters. The [India Meteorological Department](#)’s [Regional Specialised Meteorological Centre](#) in the capital has forewarned the states of large-scale destruction while adding that the damage may trickle down to certain parts of Sri Lanka.”

The steel cup almost fell from Professor Suryamurthy’s hands. Tragic events seemed to stalk him wherever he went. Not only was his phone’s network out of coverage area and his car’s petrol tank empty, the disturbing news of the recent developments along the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu, where his friend, Sujit Chandra, was stationed, in addition to Mohan’s disappearance and the horrific fire accident breaking out shortly after his exit, made him break into a cold sweat.



Vinashkale, Dasavana's trusted friend and confidant, was perturbed. The vicious attack on Shuka and the forces of the Kaal Sarps had strengthened his belief that the six men preparing to arrive in the Kingdom of Trahimam posed a genuine threat. As he vigorously paced up and down in his court, his devious mind began contemplating several malefic plans to not only prevent Mohan and his friends from setting foot in Dasavana's kingdom, but to finish them off forever.



In another corner of Vinashkale's massive fortress lay a drained out, scruffy and anguished Akhand, confined within the dungeon. For Akhand, who had once witnessed glory and success as the commander-in-chief of King Virajaditya's army, the sudden fall from grace had crushed him to the core.

Now, in solitary confinement, Akhand reminisced the day when he had left his residence to meet Princess Alankrita and expressed his love for her. The two of them were deeply in love, but, were yet to confide their feelings to each other. Akhand and his men had been engaged in war and it was only a few days earlier that he had returned to a rousing welcome after his success in his military campaign.

With all immediate threats quelled, Akhand, now at peace and cognisant of the king's support and Alankrita's affection for him, left his residence to profess his love to the bewitching princess. As Akhand walked towards the palace, he was elated at disproving the prophecy which spoke of a tall, strapping, and muscular lad armed with the weapon of the gods, destined to marry the Princess.

Barely had Akhand stopped basking in his success when tragedy struck. Without a warning, the gates of the kingdom were thrown open and the massive army of Kaal Sarps, trained by Drohkaal—Dasavana's sinister General—entered and went on a rampage. For the next three days, there was complete chaos and mayhem. The women were raped and young children were made victims of the Kaal Sarps' carnal desires. Every precious item was looted and the men were mercilessly butchered, causing a sea of bloodshed in the kingdom.

The ill-prepared forces of King Virajaditya were no match against the mighty forces of Dasavana and were routed without being able to proffer any resistance. Akhand fought bravely and tried to defend his king's honour, but after relentlessly fending off the attacks, he finally fell to an arrow, shot at his back.

King Virajaditya remained defiant and even in his last moments, refused to submit to Trivarmrut's authority. Losing out on precious time as well as patience,

Drohkaal's men swiftly carried out their king's orders by impaling the queen's belly and beheading King Virajaditya, soon after.

With only the princess and the commander-in-chief alive, Dasavana captured the duo and returned to Trahimam, but not before he had razed Virajaditya's kingdom to the ground.

The horrific sight of his kingdom being burnt to cinder mortified and tormented the courageous Akhand. It was while he was still ruminating over the matter that he heard footsteps in the vicinity. He knew what was to follow; and, he wasn't disappointed.

Flanked by his guards, who carried fire torches in their hands, the long-haired and ill-tempered Vipreet Buddhi, son of Vinashkale, stood before Akhand and reiterated his timeless question.

"Where is the secret hidden?" he asked.

But Akhand remained silent. For the past several years, this ordeal had been enacted between Vipreet Buddhi—who attempted to coerce Akhand into submission—and Akhand, who remained defiant.

Vipreet Buddhi, exhausted by his failures, warned Akhand of dire consequences if the latter did not surrender.

"Do whatever you may, but the secret is going to die with me in this dungeon of yours," replied a non-compliant Akhand.

Akhand's brazen defiance was the last straw in this acrimony between them. Seething with rage, Vipreet Buddhi ordered his guards to throw open the gates of the cell and pin Akhand to the ground.

The guards followed his instructions and held Akhand by his arms and legs as he valiantly tried to defend himself. Pinning him to the ground, the guards tied his hands and dragged him to the raised stone slab in the cell.

With a menacing smile on his face, the abhorrent asura gestured his guards to keep Akhand's right foot atop the slab. Akhand could sense something sinister and didn't want to give in easily. Violently struggling to free himself, Akhand tried to make their simple task more arduous.

However, the now feeble and weak Akhand could not resist for long and the guards were finally able to successfully put his right foot on the slab. With his plan being executed to perfection, Vipreet Buddhi wore an ominous expression on his face and drew out his razor-sharp sword from his scabbard as Akhand watched in horror.

Raising his sword high in the air, the malevolent asura deliberately turned his gaze towards Akhand so that he could gain sadistic pleasure while watching his captive's plight. With an evil grin on his face, Vipreet Buddhi brought down the sword in a flash and chopped off Akhand's big toe.

Akhand squalled in pain as blood oozed out from his foot, creating a little puddle on the ground.

“Next time, if you don’t reveal the secret, it will be your head,” warned the asura before untying Akhand’s hands and leaving in a huff with his attendants in tow.

Meanwhile, Vinashkale was busy strategising schemes to quell the threat that Mohan and his friends posed to the kingdom, when he heard the triumphant shouts of his son.

“Father,” said Vipreet Buddhi with a grin on his face, as he entered the court.

“My son, it appears you have some exciting news to share!” Vinashkale commented as he embraced his son.

“Yes, in fact, I have good news as well as a gift for you,” replied the son.

“Wonderful! You do know how much I love gifts, don’t you?” smiled the proud father.

Vipreet Buddhi clapped his hands twice in quick succession and in walked his guards carrying a steel plate, covered with a blue-velvet cloth. As Vinashkale eagerly waited to see his gift, the younger asura removed the cloth and presented his offering—Akhand’s big toe.

Surprised at this unusual gift, Vinashkale asked his son to explain his choice for the odd gift. This was precisely the moment Vipreet Buddhi had been waiting for as it gave him an opportunity to sing his own praises.

“Bravo, my son!” complimented the elated father and congratulated his son on his accomplishment before picking up the toe and savagely chewing it off.

“I must confess, Son, the toe has a savoury taste, indeed. I can’t wait for you to chop off his remaining body parts one by one so that we can feast on them. And neither can

I wait to devour the bodies of that despicable Mohan and his friends.” Vinashkale added.

“Most certainly, Father! But what is your strategy to vanquish them?”

“I have been racking my brain to find a suitable nemesis for Mohan but, unfortunately, I haven’t been able to select the one who may offer stiff resistance to the six men on the ship.”

Pondering over several options in his mind, Vipreet Buddhi finally seemed to have found a worthy adversary to overthrow Mohan.

“Father, I believe must summon Jalasura at the earliest!”

Vinashkale’s eyes suddenly brightened, as if they had witnessed a glimpse of approaching victory. Lauding his son’s choice, Vinashkale agreed to summon Jalasura to render his services and annihilate the unwelcome visitors.

Elsewhere, as Akhand nursed his foot and sobbed in agony, he knew that he

couldn't afford to reveal his secret to any of the asuras. Thanks to the secret, he had been spared alive and brought to the Kingdom of Trahimam. Akhand was aware that Dasavana and his men would continue to inflict severe torture upon him till he relented and finally revealed the secret. He knew they could not afford to kill him before finding out the secret. But what terrified Akhand most was the thought of Dasavana getting weary of repeated failures and finally deciding to slay him, thereby, sealing the secret known to Akhand, forever.

In this lamentable scenario, he sincerely prayed for the prophesied tall, strapping and muscular lad, armed with the weapon of the gods to arrive and set him and Princess Alankrita free from the shackles of Dasavana. But who and where this fabled deliverer was, Akhand had no idea.



The sun was shining bright. The waters of the ocean were tranquil. The twittering of birds could be heard in the distance. As Mohan and his friends ventured forth, it appeared as if they were the sole travellers on this vast expanse of the ocean.

A considerable distance was yet to be covered and the sunny afternoon was the perfect time to laze and rest. Each of the men were awake, but sat in utter silence, basking in the sun's warmth. While Raj lay with his arms fully stretched, Mohan admired the celestial bow, Kodanda, which radiated brilliantly under the sun.

It was at this point when Jayadev broke the prevailing silence.

"Isn't it strange and surprising that Lord Rama and Ravan belonged to the same state?" Jayadev remarked, nonchalantly.

However, this nonchalant remark was sufficient to arouse the interest of every person on the ship.

"From the same state? What do you mean, Jayadev?" Nagarjuna asked.

"Precisely, my point! Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya, while Ravan was born in Lanka. So, how could they belong to the same state?" Raj challenged Jayadev's argument.

Jayadev merely smiled at Raj's ignorance and attempted to allay his doubts.

"The belief that Ravan was born in and was a native of Lanka is a misconstrued one. The truth is Kuber, Lord of Wealth and Ravan's stepbrother, ruled over Lanka. The city was believed to be built purely out of gold. This attracted Ravan's attention towards Lanka; and envious of his stepbrother's possession, he decided to overthrow him and become the King of Lanka!"

"But, that still doesn't prove your theory of Rama and Ravan belonging to the

same state,” Mohan commented.

“To be honest, Ravan was in fact, your neighbour!” Jayadev informed an astounded Mohan.

“His neighbour? Jayadev, my friend, you are certainly sleep deprived, it seems. The two of us reside in New Delhi. What’s Ravan got to do with that?” Raj asked.

“As legend goes, Ravan’s maternal grandfather, Sumali, desired that his daughter Kaikesi be married to the most powerful mortal in this world and his search ended with Sage Vishrava. Vishrava, one of the most revered sages of his time, gave his consent to the alliance and married Kaikesi.

Ravan was born in a village called Bisrakh. This village of Bisrakh can be found today near Uttar Pradesh’s district, Gautam Buddh Nagar, also known as Greater Noida!”

Rannvijaya intervened, “And Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya, also situated in Uttar Pradesh!”

A deafening silence prevailed on the ship, as stunned faces turned towards Jayadev and the men listened to him with rapt attention. Jayadev carried on.

“In fact, Ravan was as much an Indian as any of us. At one point of time, there was a region named Mayarashtra, ruled by an asura named Maya. The daughter of the asura was a maiden named Mandodri, who later became Ravan’s wife and was mother to Indrajit.

“Mayarashtra in today’s day and age is referred to as Meerut, another town in Uttar Pradesh. In fact, if you happen to visit a place called Mandor near Jodhpur in Rajasthan, you will see an altar, which is named Ravan Ki Chanwari. This is believed to be the precise spot where Ravan married Mandodri.

“Surprised?” Jayadev smiled at his friends.

Finding it immensely difficult to digest the facts Jayadev had apprised them with, all the men bore an incredulous expression on their faces when Raj, being his jovial self, decided to lighten everyone’s mood.

Speaking in a high-pitched tone, he asked. “Why couldn’t Ravan’s family claim compensation after his death?”

“Why?” Nagarjuna asked, half-expecting a witty remark from his friend.

“Because he was killed by ‘An Act of God’!”

The entire group broke into peals of laughter at the light-hearted comment, though a few doubts still plagued Mohan’s mind.

“Many legends, tales and characters associated with the epic Ramayana have played an integral part in our journey. I, however, fail to understand the significance of this epic in our primary quest to slay Dasavana!”

“Every event in this exhilarating journey has great signifiante,” Rannvijaya

interrupted.

“Dasavana has modelled himself on Lanka’s supreme ruler, Ravan. In fact, if you analyse carefully, you will realise there exist many parallels between the two. Dasavana is as vicious, as terrible, as abhorrent, as sinister and as mighty and powerful as Ravan once was.

“In fact, it is a strange coincidence that his name itself, Dasavana, bears a striking resemblance to the epithet bestowed upon the ten-headed Ravan—Dashanana!” Rannvijaya elaborated.

“So, are you trying to imply that Dasavana is Ravan reborn?” Mohan posed the most pertinent question.

Thankfully for them, Rannvijaya replied in the negative.

“No, that is not even remotely possible!”

As Rannvijaya continued, the clouds turned dark, the sun disappeared, angry waves replaced the tranquil waters and a howling gush of wind enveloped them. Like a precursor to the arrival of an omnipotent evil, the sudden change in weather unnerved everyone. Undeterred, Rannvijaya addressed Mohan.

“Today, I shall narrate to you the legendary tale associated with Lord Vishnu’s dwarf-pals or gatekeepers—Jaya and Vijaya.”

Barely had Rannvijaya uttered the name of the two gatekeepers when Mohan’s mind suddenly flashed back to the haunting image of the mysterious hooded man, attired in a silken robe and carrying a staff in hand. Diverting his attention from the daunting imagery, Mohan, who was well-versed with the tale, cut Rannvijaya short.

“Of course, I remember this tale. The tale of Jaya and Vijaya’s unfortunate encounter with the Manasputras, who cursed the duo in a fit of rage,” replied Mohan.

“Yes, you are absolutely correct. But, do you know what the curse was?” Rannvijaya asked.

“Well, yes of course. The Manasputras banished them from the heavens and divested them from their position as gatekeepers at Vaikuntha, Lord Vishnu’s celestial abode. However, Lord Vishnu came to their rescue and offered them two alternatives. According to the first option, they would be born on earth as Lord Vishnu’s greatest devotees, but would have to take seven such births. As far as the other option goes, they would be required to take only three births each, but would be born as Lord Vishnu’s sworn enemies, as the antithesis of the ideals for which their Lord stood.”

“That is true again. So, if you know about this curse, I am certain you would also be aware of the decision Jaya and Vijaya ultimately made, isn’t it?”

The moment Rannvijaya posed this question, Mohan drew a blank. He

suddenly remembered that it was exactly at this point in the tale that Mohan's attention was diverted by the sinister presence of the hooded man lurking in the dark.

"I am sorry, but I am unaware of what transpired next," Mohan confessed.

Barely had Mohan finished his sentence, when the ocean waves hit their ship and roaring winds lashed hard against their faces. Lightning struck and the sky turned black.

It was in this prevailing darkness that the men observed gigantic bubbles forming in the water. As they kept their attention fixed, there was a sudden splash of water which completely drenched the men and filled the ship with ankle-deep water. It was from this severe upsurge in the oceanic waters that a towering, bearded, bare-chested demon arose, laughing merrily at the plight of his hapless victims.

Such was his enormous girth and height that only his upper half, which touched the sky, was visible to the men.

Aghast and appalled by this fiendish creature let loose on them, the men rallied their courage to fend off the ghastly-looking demon that had menacing eyes, long hair, and wore a crown. However, the most fazing thing about the asura was that his body was devoid of any flesh. His anatomy comprised only water.

"Good heavens! What in the name of the lord is this?" Nagarjuna muttered, intimidated by the demon's size.

"Mohan, use the Kodanda and finish off this demon, instantly," Raj suggested.

Heeding his friend's suggestion, Mohan held Lord Rama's Kodanda in his hands and aiming at the ogre-like asura, strung the bow and fired an arrow at him.

However, much to their shock and dismay, the arrow fired from the mighty Kodanda merely passed through the demon and fell into the ocean as if his body was a mere hollow.

"Firing an arrow or any weapon at this demon is futile, Mohan. He is the terrible Jalasura, the mightiest demon residing in jal. No weapon can scathe him, for the weapon shall have the same effect as it has on water," Pawan apprised the men in a high-pitched tone.

"If he is indeed Jalasura, then I am certain that he has been summoned by Dasavanakoka and his men, for it is believed that Jalasura is Dasavana's most-trusted servant," a visibly upset Nagarjuna revealed.

Even as the mortals continued their discussion, trying to figure out their course of action, Jalasura laughed and hurled one insult after another at them.

"Hahaha! You mortals have the audacity to challenge the mighty

Dasavanakoka and even think of conspiring his death! Hahahahaha! Aren't you poor souls aware of the fact that Dasavana is immortal and cannot be vanquished? Devotees of Lord Vishnu, you all will be sent right back to him—in the depths of the ocean,” the menacing Jalasura threatened them.

While the others were at a complete loss, Jayadev and Rannvijaya turned towards each other and realising that this was an opponent Mohan could not overcome easily, decided to take the matter into their own hands.

Nodding at each other, the two of them instantly jumped into the ocean, much to everyone's shock. As Mohan and the others pleaded with them to board the ship, a strange sight greeted them. Jayadev put his hand inside the ocean waters and took out a plastic container, open at both ends. Then something happened. Something that Mohan had not envisaged even in his wildest dreams.

Slowly, yet surely, Jayadev and Rannvijaya began shape-shifting. Their bodies kept expanding to an extent that the others thought it would burst, but fortunately, none of that happened. They began growing, reminding the men of Lord Vishnu's Vaman avatar and how he had humbled the Asura King, Bali, grandson of Lord Vishnu's most-celebrated devotee, Prahlad!

As the men witnessed the surreal sight, with Jayadev on one side and Rannvijaya on the other side of the ship, the duo kept enhancing their size till they had come at par with the demon, who for the first time felt threatened and challenged. What appeared more astounding was that the plastic container, much like Jayadev and Rannvijaya, had increased its size several folds.

Jalasura knew that he had met his match. But, he was also cognisant of the fact that there existed no weapon in heaven, hell or earth that could slay him. Rannvijaya, meanwhile, took a deep breath and dived into the depths of the ocean while Jayadev challenged the mighty demon for a duel.

Roaring with laughter, Jalasura suddenly opened his mouth broad and wide and unleashed his fury at Jayadev. Gallons of water that Jalasura had released from his mouth hit Jayadev at supersonic speed and he fell into the ocean, causing a sudden upsurge in the water level. The *Ship of Vishwakarma* shook violently even as the men were knocked down by the combined force of the wind and water.

As Mohan and his friends struggled to stay aboard, an undeterred Jayadev arose and attempted to knock down Jalasura unconscious. But, his antics met the same fate as Mohan's arrow and Jalasura remained unscathed. Meanwhile, Rannvijaya reached the bottom of the ocean and began searching for the spot on which Jalasura stood. However, since Jalasura's body was composed of only water, Rannvijaya's task was rather laborious.

Not giving up hope, Rannvijaya, unremittingly, continued his search before

finally spotting the silhouette of the demon's feet. Almost immediately, Rannvijaya began to dig the ocean floor with his bare hands and attempted to create a hollow around the spot where the demon stood.

Meanwhile, enraged at Jayadev's audacity to launch an attack on him, an infuriated Jalasura attempted to kayo Jayadev in a single and powerful blow. However, cognisant of what would transpire if he didn't act on his heels, Jayadev rose in the air, the lower part of his body still submerged in water, and raised the massive open-ended container before swiftly trapping the asura within it, thereby, cramping Jalasura's movements.

Underneath, after having cleared the area around Jalasura, Rannvijaya waited for the container to land on the ocean floor and as soon as Jayadev thrust the container, strangling Jalasura within its confines, Rannvijaya quickly took out the container's seal and placed it below.

Taken completely off guard by the well-hatched plan, Jalasura struggled to free himself when Rannvijaya, seizing the opportunity, put a lid on the container. With absolutely no room for Jalasura to escape, the mighty duo of Rannvijaya and Jayadev pressed the lid from both ends and commenced the process of compressing the container.

While Jayadev gradually shrunk in size and pressed the container downwards, Rannvijaya too, pressed the container upwards even as his body began returning to its usual dimensions.

The container which had assumed a massive size when the duo had enlarged their bodies, now returned to its original size. Jayadev and Rannvijaya came back to their normal selves as well. The container had only water and there was no sign of the detestable demon that had been compressed and divested of all its powers.

But, that was only till the container was not opened again. The mind achieved what any weapon was unable to. Rannvijaya and Jayadev's wily strategy had ensured a safe passage for their friends and the duo had dauntlessly snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

But before that, they had some serious explanations to provide.

As the duo, completely drenched in water, climbed aboard with the container safely held by the muscular Rannvijaya in a vice-like grip, an eerie silence prevailed even as the storm raged in all its fury.

On one side stood the dynamic duo and opposite them, were Mohan and his friends, stunned and desperately seeking answers. Anticipating the barrage of questions, Jayadev initiated the conversation.

"Lord Vishnu's dwarfals deeply contemplated the matter. To be born as Lord Vishnu's arch enemies was nothing short of ignominy, but seven births was too

long a period for Lord Vishnu's diligent gatekeepers to stay away from their beloved Lord. After due consultation, both Jaya and Vijaya, decided to take three births each, as fervent adversaries of Narayan.

In their first birth, they were born to Sage Kashyapa and his wife Diti in the Kriti Yuga, as the demonic brothers: Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyap. Hiranyaksha captured Bhoomidevi or Mother Earth and hid her in the depths of the cosmic ocean, thereby divesting mortals of sunlight, food and life. Lord Vishnu took his third avatar—that of a wild boar named Varaha—and killed the vicious demon. Using his tusks, Lord Vishnu carried Bhoomidevi to safety and restored her to her original position in the universe.

Hiranyakashyap, on the other hand, enraged by his brother's death and in his quest to become the master of the universe subjected the devotees of Vishnu to severe torture. However, he had little idea what destiny had in store for him. His son, Prahlad, turned out to be a sincere devotee of Lord Vishnu and remained unscathed even after several assassination attempts by his father. Lord Vishnu incarnated in his subsequent avatar as Narasimha—half-man, half-lion—and tore the tyrannical Hiranyakashyap's torso with his nails while placing him on his lap, at dusk," Jayadev revealed and gestured Rannvijaya to carry forward the tale.

Rannvijaya assented to his friend's suggestion and took on the narrator's role to complete the remaining portion of the intriguing tale.

"In their subsequent birth, the dwarf-pals were once again born as brothers in the Treta Yuga—this time, as Lord Rama's arch enemies—the omnipotent Ravan and the gigantic Kumbhakaran. As you are aware, both were killed by Lord Vishnu—in his seventh incarnation as Lord Rama—with the help of the Kodanda.

Finally, the duo returned to earth in the Dwapar Yuga to wreck havoc in Lord Vishnu's eighth avatar—Shri Krishna's life. While one took birth as Shishupala, Lord Krishna's nephew, who was pardoned a hundred times by Krishna for insulting him before he finally severed Shishupala's head with his Sudarshana Chakra, the other was born as the legendary evil maternal uncle of Krishna—Kansa.

While some believe, it was Dantawarka, another adversary of Krishna and not Kansa as one of the duo reborn, it is our firm belief that it was indeed Kansa," Rannvijaya concluded.

"And why should we place reliance on your theory?" Pawan asked.

"Unknown to mankind, Jaya and Vijaya were required to take one more birth when the situation demanded it, this time, as pure souls advocating worship to Lord Vishnu to atone for their past sins. And as the dire need arose, the duo

finally took birth and they presently stand before you!”

There was an ear-shattering silence that was marred by the sound of howling winds. It was then that realisation dawned upon Mohan about their true identities and how well they had camouflaged their actual names—JAYA-Dev and Rann-VIJAYA!

Folding his hands in reverence to the celestial gatekeepers, the history student couldn't help but express his disappointment with the duo for not disclosing this vital piece of information, earlier.

“And what is this dire need that has compelled you to return to earth?” Mohan questioned.

Rannvijaya merely smiled at Mohan's innocence and assuaged his doubts.

“My friend, every secret needs to be unlocked at a specific time. If disclosed either earlier or later, it can lead to catastrophic consequences.

As far as your second question is concerned, I am afraid to inform all of you that evil is rising, once again. The dark forces are aligning themselves under the guidance of Shukracharya, the guru of the asuras. As we speak, a battle is raging in the heavens. Devas are clashing with the asuras, who are now armed with renewed vigour, warfare skills and zest for victory. If the asuras emerge victorious, there will be drastic repercussions and all life will cease to exist in this universe. Every earthquake, flood, cyclone and other natural calamities taking place and causing severe casualties is a result of the asuras regaining a stronger foothold in the battle!”

Mohan, who had always believed in the good triumphing over the evil, was extremely perturbed and as appalled as the others on hearing this terrible piece of news.

“Surely, there must be some way of defeating the malevolent asuras?” Mohan asked, deeply concerned.

Nodding his head, Rannvijaya replied, “Yes, there is! There is only one weapon which can defeat the advances of the asuras for once and for all or else the gods shall perish forever. The three greatest weapons ever wielded on earth are Lord Rama's bow—The Kodanda, Lord Krishna's disc—the Sudarshana Chakra, and Lord Parshurama's battle axe—the Parshu. It is only an amalgamation of these three weapons that shall give rise to the most powerful weapon that can vanquish the sinister forces forever.

However, each of these three weapons are scattered across various locations and we must necessarily unearth these at the earliest. But remember, the members of the dark forces are spread far and wide and shall attempt to throw our mission into a quandary. Nevertheless, we must, at any cost, find these weapons in the next 60 days or else apocalypse shall be upon us and the world

will fall prey to the Great Deluge on 31st December, 2020!”

Amidst the raging storm, the perplexed men on the ship tried to de-stress and relax. Suddenly, Mohan saw a ray of light emanating from a place in the vicinity.

“Why is that place shining so radiantly and glistening in the dark?” Mohan asked.

“That is the place where we were destined to be. That is the place where our biggest nemesis eagerly awaits our arrival. That is the place for which we undertook this perilous quest!” Nagarjuna informed.

Mohan and his friends had arrived to the shores of the fabled Kingdom of Trahimam.

Secrets Unlocked

Night had fallen by the time Professor Suryamurthy returned to Delhi. He had got his phone recharged but had deliberately switched it off, lest he be bombarded with one phone call after another from an anxious Samaira. In the usual course of things, Professor Suryamurthy would have volitionally received Samaira’s call, but his futile journey in search of Sahastapur had dismayed him immensely.

As he drove his car, a million questions ran through his mind—where could Mohan have gone? Was Sujit safe? Should the news of Raj and Mohan’s disappearance be revealed at all? How would Samaira react to this unpleasant news?

Troubled and perturbed by Raj and Mohan’s disappearance, the professor headed straight to Samaira’s residence to break the news to her. Professor Suryamurthy was caught in a catch-22 situation. If he informed Samaira of Mohan’s absence, all hell would break loose. And if he didn’t—his conscience would prick him.

On being notified about the professor’s arrival, Samaira rushed to the drawing room. Gasping for breath, the first words she mouthed on seeing Professor Suryamurthy were, “Where are Mohan and Raj?”

But, one look at Professor Suryamurthy’s shuddery eyes and Samaira knew her premonition had come true.



As Mohan and the others reached the shore, they were greeted by the sight of a sprawling forest. It was behind this forest that Vinashkale’s massive fortress stood, keeping strict vigil on any impending danger. The forest was desolate and

dark. The glittering stars in the sky gazed down at the trees while the winds blew gently in the moonlit night.

It was at this point that Nagarjuna brought the men's attention to a discovery of his own.

"Look," he said, and pointed towards a dilapidated old hut.

As the men stared at the desolate hut that shone under the night sky, Pawan put forth his point of view.

"The hut seems to be in shambles. Not only does it appear to be devoid of human presence for the past several hundred years, there is an omnipotent pungent smell emanating from it, the odour of which has reached till here."

"But, the hut shall also guarantee shelter and protection from the menacing wild animals roaming free in the forests, ravenously looking for their next unfortunate victim," Nagarjuna countered.

Not wanting the argument to escalate, Mohan intervened and endorsed Nagarjuna's logic.

"I certainly do see merit in Nagarjuna's reasoning. Not only will the hut provide us with shelter, it shall also aid us in camouflaging ourselves from the watchful eyes of the Kaal Sarps lurking close by."

"As always, Mohan is absolutely correct in his assessment. But, one fundamental question remains," Jayadev interrupted.

"And what is that?" Mohan asked.

"What is to become of him?" Jayadev asked while pointing towards the plastic container that held Jalasura captive.

"I suggest the container be kept hidden from mankind," Nagarjuna said, but Jayadev wasn't completely convinced.

"It is a dangerous proposition, my friend. What if a thousand years from today, a thirsty and weary traveller chances upon this container and opens it to quench his thirst? He shall unwittingly let one of the fiercest demons loose on mankind.

"It is my duty to remind you that even if a drop of water spills out from this container, the horrid Jalasura shall once again escape and wreak havoc."

Raj turned towards the celestial gatekeepers with a glimmer of hope and asked, "Jaya and Vijaya, can't the two of you summon your magical powers and put an end to Jalasura's atrocities forever?"

"Raj, let me apprise you with the fact that in this birth of ours, we have been born purely as mortals, divested of any superpowers," Rannvijaya explained.

"But the surreal sight we witnessed, not so long ago, was indeed a result of your superhuman abilities, wasn't it?" Raj countered.

Raj's continuous pestering led the divine dwarfs to finally relent and put

their case forward.

“The truth is, Jaya and I have been blessed with five supernatural powers for the completion of each task. It is a gift we are required to use only in times of dire necessity. Besides, we have already utilised one power in our recent encounter with Jalasura and we do not wish to squander another power on him,” Rannvijaya explained.

“But, think of the repercussions the world would have to suffer if this asura wasn’t killed,” Pawan added.

“That is precisely our point, Pawan! There is no weapon, force, or energy that can kill Jalasura!” Jayadev argued.

“If he cannot be defeated by weapon, then he shall have to be defeated by tact. Remember, the one who takes birth is destined to die and cannot escape this vicious cycle. Even the mighty Ravan had desired a boon that would protect him and make him immune to all kinds of attacks from the asuras, devas and animals. However, he refrained from including mortals in his wish for he felt they posed no threat to him. The fate that Ravan finally met with is a lesson for all of us. Nothing is indestructible and can be won over with continued perseverance,” Mohan commented.

“True. I suggest we freeze the bottle to 0 degrees and let the water turn into ice. The moment we are successful in our endeavour, Jalasura will remain frozen forever,” Nagarjuna opined.

“I am afraid that wouldn’t be possible. At some point in time the ice is bound to melt and when that happens, it shall render our tedious effort completely futile, for the ice shall once again turn to water,” Rannvijaya responded.

“We cannot freeze this bottle and expect it to remain so, forever. But, we can surely boil the water at 100 degrees and allow it to evaporate. Jalasura may not be killed, but, he can certainly wither away and I think this is the perfect opportunity to vanquish our opponent,” Mohan replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Bravo! You have deciphered the correct strategy to outwit Jalasura’s boon,” a visibly excited Raj complimented his friend.

Nodding in agreement, Jayadev held the container in his hands while Rannvijaya placed his palms atop the bottle. As their hands touched each other, both Jaya and Vijaya closed their eyes and began chanting. While the group watched with rapt attention, a paranormal activity seemed underway.

As the duo continued to chant their hymns, their hands began to glow with fire. Within a few seconds, the fire had completely engulfed their palms and set the bottle ablaze. In the abject darkness of the forest, the light emanating from Jayadev and Rannvijaya’s palms appeared to be the only source of luminance.

The sound of the rising bubbles, dousing the fire, could be heard in the distance. This wondrous scene lasted for about five minutes before the fire extinguished. As the group awaited the result with bated breath, Jayadev and Rannvijaya separated their palms and, lo and behold, there was not a drop of liquid inside the bottle. Mohan's astute thinking coupled with Jayadev and Rannvijaya's heroic antics had ensured that the danger posed to the world—by the evil named Jalasura—had been averted forever.

Celebrating their success, Jayadev and Rannvijaya were embraced by the other members for their stupendous feat. However, there was little they could do about the prevailing surrounding and had no alternative but to retire for the night at the old and bedraggled hut. As they walked on the soggy ground, they knew spending the night in this hut would be no easy task.

They were right. There was no furniture and to add to their misery, an overpowering stench encompassing the area made it unbearable for the men to reside there. Moreover, the chill in the air reminded the group of the dire need to procure logs of wood to keep themselves warm.

Unable to find an axe, Mohan stepped forward and drew out the closest substitute he had in his possession—Shivaji's Bhawani!

Exiting the premises in the swarthy night, Mohan had barely walked a few steps when Jayadev stopped him short and warned, "Wait, friend! Do not take that route; it shall be a futile attempt on your part. Rather, I suggest you continue straight ahead in the direction where our hut lies, for you will find the logs of wood there."

"And how do you know that?"

Jayadev didn't respond to the question. Instead, he tardily turned and walked away.

Mohan was cognisant of the fact that Jayadev's advice had an underlying cryptic message attached to it and unheeding the same would be foolhardiness. Venturing forth in a new direction, suggested by Jayadev, Mohan was on the lookout for wood when he saw flames in the vicinity.

Surprised, curious and alarmed by the presence of an entity lurking around, Mohan drew out his sword and tiptoed through the dense forest to uncover the truth. Hiding behind the thick and tall bushes, Mohan stuck out his neck and looked furtively at the unfolding scene. And what he saw surprised him further.

Sitting alone, atop a log of wood, was an old and wizened man. Attired in a thick, brownish robe, the old man, with a white moustache and a French beard, was warming his hands by the bonfire he had lit.

Sensing no imminent threat from the poor, decrepit soul, Mohan approached the man.

“So, you have finally arrived!” The man heaved a sigh of relief without even looking at Mohan’s face.

Discommoded by this sudden welcome, a surprised Mohan rallied his courage and said, “Before I respond, you must reveal your identity. Who are you?” Mohan shot back.

The old man continued to stare blankly at the ground before nodding his head.

“Who I am does not matter. What matters is who you truly are and the incredible feats you are destined to achieve,” the old man replied.

As soon as the old man uttered those words, Mohan realised that this old man was no ordinary individual—who merely happened to squat at this spot—but a stranger armed with mystic powers and knowledge, who had been eagerly awaiting his arrival.

While Mohan’s mind was crowded with thoughts and doubts, the old man raised his hand and gestured Mohan to sit beside him. Unable to gauge the true intention of the old man, Mohan nevertheless acquiesced, to extract vital information from the stranger.

As Mohan sat next to him, the old man finally turned to face Mohan. Barely had the stranger revealed his face when Mohan realised there was indeed something mystical about this old man, whose twinkling blue eyes seemed to enclose within them a sea of knowledge.

“So, why have you come here?” he asked.

“To chop some wood to keep me and my friends warm and protected in this cold forest,” Mohan replied.

Barely had Mohan responded when the old man twitched his face in utter dissatisfaction and threw a few logs of wood, kept nearby, at Mohan.

“Here, take these and leave! Not only will these logs protect you from the freezing weather, they shall also nullify the overpowering stench that emanates from that hut,” spoke the disgruntled old man.

Unable to fathom the cause of the stranger’s rudeness, Mohan probed him further.

“When I asked you why you have come here, I meant to learn more about the purpose of your arrival to the Kingdom of Trahimam,” the wizened man spoke in his shaky, yet commanding voice.

Mohan was in a fix. He barely knew the stranger well enough to disclose the reason; neither could he conceal the truth from the old man who already seemed to have enough knowledge about their pursuit. What if the stranger was a Kaal Sarp in disguise or worse, an ally of Dasavana? It was a big risk for Mohan.

“I am sorry, but I cannot reveal the reason to you!” Mohan answered.

The old man sighed and put his hand on Mohan’s shoulder.

“Look, Son, I have patiently waited for several years for this day. Your uncooperative attitude will only create unwarranted hindrances for you. Today, it’s only me who knows you and your friends have entered the Kingdom of Trahimam with the intention to slay Dasavanakoka, but by tomorrow, the entire kingdom will be informed of your presence. The Kaal Sarps have sensed your arrival and have commenced their preparations to vanquish you and your men. Therefore, it is in your best interest that you disclose whatever you know and place your faith in me,” the old man urged Mohan.

“But, how can I? Do not try and play these mind games with me, you old man, for I am no stranger to such tactics. For all I know, you might be an ally of Dasavana, or Drohkaal, his General, or worst of all, you might be Dasavanakoka himself, in disguise!” Mohan spoke with disdain and placed his sword closer to the old man’s neck.

“Have you ever seen what Dasavanakoka or Drohkaal, his General, look like?” The old man smiled, not the least bit perturbed by Mohan’s aggression.

“Of course, I am aware of what they look like,” Mohan asserted himself, but it was futile to pretend in front of the wise old man.

Smiling derisively, the stranger mocked Mohan’s false sense of prestige and his unwillingness to confide in him.

“You too, like the gulled inhabitants of Trahimam are unaware of their facial features and what they truly look like. But, it is my duty to guide you and thus, I shall bring you one step closer to your monumental quest,” the blue-eyed stranger spoke.

Humbled by the astuteness of the old man, Mohan withdrew the sword and finally began to trust him. Sensing Mohan’s confidence, the old man proceeded.

“I think you are aware that to annihilate Dasavanakoka, three tasks need to be fulfilled. I am cognisant of the fact that you have procured the mythical Kodanda, but you are still oblivious to the remaining two tasks.”

There was a glimmer of hope in Mohan’s eyes and his heart pounded faster on the prospect of knowing the remaining conditions, necessary to vanquish Trivarmrut.



Meanwhile, in the hut, as Rannvijaya and Pawan cleaned the floor, Jayadev was sitting with a pensive expression which soon caught Raj’s attention. Walking up to his friend, Raj placed a comforting hand on Jayadev’s shoulder and asked him the reason for his discomfort.

Standing at the entrance of their humble abode that shone in the moonlight,

Jayadev expressed his concern.

“It has been over a week since I left the services of my Master, Ekashringaji. I wonder if the other servants in the house are treating him well.”

Raj listened to Jayadev with rapt attention but also realised that the latter wasn't revealing all his cards at once.

“I understand but, surely, this alone cannot make you so upset.” Raj probed further.

Jayadev nodded in agreement as he wore a fake smile.

“Raj, it is the curse that I am worried about. The curse of the enraged sage, whose request for drinking water had been blatantly disregarded by the residents of Sahastapur. According to legend, it was believed that the answer to the curse lay with a sorceress. Though, I was oblivious of her identity when we commenced our journey, I have little doubt that she was none other than Tambadevi, who was defeated at her own game by Mohan.

“But, it was also pronounced that after the completion of the task, a great bird of epic proportions would swoop over the area and fly across the Sarayu, ordaining the mighty river to return to its original course, thereby, redeeming Sahastapur of its age-old curse. I wonder what happened to the latter part of the prophecy,” Jayadev lamented.

“Don't lose courage, my friend. I am hopeful the prophecy will play out in due course and turn true,” Raj encouraged Jayadev.

It was just then that Mohan, running at incredible speed, arrived at the hut with his sword firmly held in one hand and logs of wood in another.

Gasping for breath, he immediately summoned everyone outside.

“What happened, Mohan? Is everything all right?” Nagarjuna asked, concernedly.

“Yes, my friend. I have summoned all of you since I have an important piece of information to share. I was out in the woods when I chanced upon an old, mysterious man who revealed the second boon that Dasavana had desired,” Mohan informed his friends.

“What is it? Please share the same with us.” Pawan pleaded.

“According to the prophecy, Dasavanakoka can only be slain if one uses the Kodanda while standing on a ten-wheeled chariot. The only hurdle is nobody knows the exact location of these ten wheels. However, the old man I encountered has revealed the location of the wheels that have been lost to mankind.

If we venture straight from here, we will reach a huge, rocky cave. It is there that the wheels are hidden. But, for them to be visible to us, I shall have to show the Kodanda first. The old man told me that the cave will pose a question to us

and, only, after we have given the correct answer shall we be granted possession of the wheels.” Mohan revealed.

“Fantastic! So, what are we waiting for?” Raj said, enthusiastically.

“But, wait! The moment we set foot inside the cave, we shall be devoid of our knowledge pertaining to the Ramayana and other mythological scriptures. We can only answer the question if someone reminds us of the facts,” added Mohan.

“But, who will inform us if all of us decide to go inside the cave?” Rannvijaya asked, perturbed.

Sadly, Mohan had no answer to this question. The men had no alternative but to continue in the quest for the magical wheels. Unfortunately, Pawan’s suggestion—of him staying outside while the others repeated the question from inside the cave—failed to work because voice didn’t travel beyond the cave.

Slowly, yet surely, the men made their way through the dark and dense forest and eventually arrived at the massive rocky structure with a narrow opening.

“All right, friends...this is it!” Mohan spoke and gestured his friends to follow him.

The six men marched forward as the words of caution spoken by the old man echoed in Mohan’s mind. The cave was exactly how he had described it to be—dark, desolate and devoid of any light. Mohan knew he had to make the next move. Immediately, he put forth his hand in which he held the Kodanda that gleamed in the darkness; barely had Mohan revealed the mighty weapon that a creaking sound was heard. As the men tried to fathom what the sound was all about, the darkness in the cave gave way to five humongous, golden wheels hanging from the walls at different angles while constantly rotating, resembling a clock or a futuristic machine.

It was while the men were gaping at the magical scene, a voice spoke to them.

“Welcome, the Possessor of the Great Kodanda. It is my pleasure to host you inside my humble cave. Left to my own devices, I would have straightaway handed over these five wheels to you, but I too am bound by destiny and can only present them to you once you answer my question correctly,” the voice declared.

“He reminds me of Bigg Boss!” Raj joked before Nagarjuna nudged him and requested him to stay quiet.

“Go ahead and pose the question,” Mohan said.

For a few seconds, all was quiet, as if the voice was deliberately selecting a difficult question. Then, the voice made its presence felt, once again, before finally posing the question to the group.

“Which son of Ravan did Lord Hanuman kill in a duel when the latter entered the Ashok Vatika where Mother Sita was held captive?”

Pawan's eyes suddenly brightened. He knew the answer. The prospect of attaining the wheels made him jump with joy. With a huge smile on his face, he revealed the answer.

"I know this one. It was...It was...It was," Pawan scratched his head but he couldn't seem to remember the answer.

Mohan, who was watching his friend struggle, encouraged him to concentrate harder. Pawan nodded and, once again, set his mind to it. But, it was all in vain.

"My memory...my memory has eluded me!" he informed his friends in a dejected tone.

Mohan was unaware of the correct answer, but, he had not lost hope. Turning towards Jaya and Vijaya, he urged them to think.

"Rannvijaya and Jayadev, the two of you were Ravan and Kumbhakaran in your previous birth. Surely, you would be aware of the answer."

But, the celestial gatekeepers drew a blank. They remembered absolutely nothing pertaining to their previous birth as the demonic brothers.

"Lord Hanuman killed a son of Ravan? Didn't Ravan have only one son named...named..." Nagarjuna tried extremely hard but failed like the rest of the group.

Dejected and peeved at his memory eluding him at this crucial juncture, Pawan held his head in his hands.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! This cannot be!" Pawan hollered in agony.

Unaware of the answer and up to his usual pranks, Raj decided to lighten everyone's mood, once again.

"*Oh My God* ? Have you seen that film? Actors Paresh Rawal and Akshay Kumar were simply brilliant in it!" Raj smiled impishly.

Barely had he uttered the sentence when the trio of Pawan, Rannvijaya and Jayadev stared at him in amazement.

"What did you say?" Pawan asked.

Fearing the worst, a slightly apprehensive Raj replied in a hushed tone.

"Paresh Rawal and Akshay Kumar were brilliant in the film."

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" Rannvijaya asked while shaking his head in astonishment.

"W...what?" asked a petrified Raj.

"You have inadvertently stumbled upon the correct answer! The name of Ravan's son, who was slain by Lord Hanuman was...Akshay Kumar!" A joyous Jayadev revealed.

"What? Ravan's son's name was Akshay Kumar?" Raj asked, stunned.

"Yes! Yes, my dear friend! Ravan had a son named Akshay Kumar!"

Nagarjuna embraced his friend in ecstasy.

With the approval of all his friends, a confident Mohan advanced and announced the answer in a thundering voice.

“Akshay Kumar!”

Barely had he uttered the name that the cave started shaking vigorously and the rocks began to give way. Sensing danger, the men retraced their steps when suddenly, the five wheels fell on the ground with a thud. The moment the wheels fell, everything returned to normal as if nothing had happened. The cave did not shake any longer, the voice was lost and the cave was plunged into darkness, again.

Aware that they had snatched victory from the imminent jaws of defeat, each of the men held one wheel in their hand while Nagarjuna ambled along using his wooden staff. The wheels were bright and built entirely of gold. There were six spokes connecting each wheel to the image of Lord Rama drawn in the centre.

As the men returned to their hut, they were pleasantly surprised to realise that the terrible odour had been replaced by a sweet fragrance of flowers, courtesy the magical logs of wood.

“We all must profusely thank the old man for his help. If not for him, we would never have been successful in our endeavour,” Mohan spoke, as he placed the Kodanda atop the wheels which had been stacked one over the other.

“But, we have got possession of only half the number of the wheels. Where shall we find the remaining wheels?” Nagarjuna asked.

“Besides, even if we manage to discover the remaining half, from where are we going to find the chariot?” Pawan raised a pertinent question.

“Don’t worry, friends. The man I crossed paths with had informed me that he would meet me once again when I required his services. I am confident he shall guide us to victory,” Mohan allayed his friends’ fears.

“He has to. After all, if he is unable to help, no one else can!” Rannvijaya commented.

With a surprised expression on his face, Mohan questioned the celestial duo.

“You always knew I would be greeted by the old man, didn’t you? You are aware of his identity, aren’t you?”

Jayadev nodded and replied.

“Yes, we were aware of the old man’s identity and the fact that he would meet and guide you in our quest. The man had been waiting for your arrival since thousands of years and didn’t want to disclose his identity before an interaction with you.”

“Thousands of years? What are you saying, Jayadev? This doesn’t even make sense,” Mohan responded while twitching his face.

“Oh, yes it does. The man you encountered is one of the Chiranjeevis roaming the world. Brother to the two of us in our second birth, he was the successor to Ravan’s throne—Vibhishan!”

Stunned, Mohan was rendered speechless. However, his astonishment soon changed to anger and he vented it out on the celestial gatekeepers in no uncertain terms.

“How many more secrets are you going to keep from us, Jayadev and Rannvijaya? I thought each one of us had formed an unbreakable bond with the other in these past few days of trials and tribulations. Sadly, the two of you have always shattered my belief into tiny pieces,” Mohan rued.

“Is there any other secret you want to disclose?” he asked the duo, sternly.

Shaking their heads, Jayadev and Rannvijaya gestured they had nothing more to reveal. However, Mohan wasn’t done yet. Once Jayadev and Rannvijaya had responded to his query, Mohan turned to Pawan and posed the same question.

“Do you have any secret that you wish to reveal?” he asked.

“There was only one deep, dark secret that I carried with myself: my abhorrent act of stealing the Bhawani from the National Museum in Mumbai, but that too was revealed to you on the second day of my arrival,” Pawan replied.

“Nagarjuna, what about you? Do you have any secrets?”

“Mohan, I shall be lying if I said I didn’t. Since each one of us is opening about their secrets, I too shall confess and reveal mine, however immaterial it may be. The truth is *Nagarjuna* is my adoptive name. I was born Anavasad, but, I loathed my name and was finally rechristened ‘Nagarjuna’ by my Guru after I expressed my desire to apply my sorcery for the benefit of all humankind.

“Any other human being would have shunned my friendship on the very mention of the word *sorcerer*, but each one of you have willingly accepted me and made me an integral part of your journey. I shall remain eternally grateful to all of you till my last breath,” spoke a teary-eyed Nagarjuna as Mohan went and embraced him.

“Friend, your contribution to our journey has been remarkable. I am glad we were able to disprove the myth that sorcerers possess only negative virtues,” Mohan comforted his friend.

“Well, we all have our secrets, don’t we, Mohan?” Raj asked a visibly surprised Mohan.

Realising that Mohan was clueless about what Raj was referring to, the latter spilled the beans.

“Well, I was a jovial child that made my parents nickname me ‘Happy’. Since Mohan has been my best friend ever since I can remember, he is usually referred

to as 'Lakki'. And even though Mohan is not in the least amused by this nickname of his, courtesy me, we are often called the 'Happy go Lakki dudes'!"

Everyone in the room burst out laughing, much to Mohan's chagrin. With a gentle smile on his face, Mohan apologised to his friends for his sudden outburst and after embracing each one of them, the group retired for the night.



The first rays of the sun entered through the door and brought sweet warmth into the hut. As the rays fell on Mohan's face, the youngster yawned and got up, stretching his arms to a full. However, he felt something was amiss. Jayadev and Rannvijaya were still fast asleep, but there was no sign of Pawan, Nagarjuna and Raj.

Where could they have gone so early in the morning? Mohan thought to himself before assuaging his doubts by thinking that the three of them must have gone for their morning ablutions. Mohan went off to sleep again.

Fifteen minutes turned to half-an-hour. Half-an-hour became an hour, followed by a few more hours, but the trio did not return. As Mohan awoke from his slumber, he was extremely perturbed by the absence of his friends.

Shaking up Jayadev and Rannvijaya from their sleep, Mohan frantically began searching for his friends. He called out their names but there was no response. It was finally decided that Jayadev, Rannvijaya and he would go in different directions and search for half-an-hour before returning to the hut to update each other of their progress.

The three of them looked through every nook and cranny with utmost dedication and perseverance, but were unable to find even a single trace of their friends. As they returned after the scheduled half-an-hour, the three of them evinced their disappointment at being unable to find anything substantial.

Palpable tension welled up; beads of perspiration were visible on the friends' foreheads. As Mohan, Jayadev and Rannvijaya deliberated on their next course of action, Mohan made a startling discovery. He noticed a locket hanging from one of the tree branches. Praying for his friends' safety and well-being, Mohan cautiously approached the tree. The moment he pulled the locket from the branch, his worst fears turned true.

The locket was silver in colour with snakes drawn on it. Vibhishan's premonition had been accurate. Mohan's nerves froze and he broke into a cold sweat when realisation dawned upon him. Raj, Pawan and Nagarjuna had been abducted by the Kaal Sarps.

The Evil Rises

An eerie silence prevailed as the three distraught men sat inside the hut with dismayed expressions on their faces.

“Nagarjuna’s concerns had been valid ever since this expedition began. The Kaal Sarps were indeed lurking and waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike!” Mohan commented.

“And what better an opportunity to attack when all of us were unarmed, asleep and within their territory!” Rannvijaya corroborated Mohan’s statement.

However, Jayadev wasn’t convinced.

“There is something more to it than what meets the eye. If they truly wanted to apprehend each one of us, they could have easily done so. You, Rannvijaya and I were sitting ducks as well,” Jayadev raised a pertinent point.

“Precisely! This statement of yours further reinstates our belief in Nagarjuna’s advice of caution. The Kaal Sarps under Dasavana’s guidance were constantly keeping a watch on every movement of ours and were well-versed with our true identities which is why they abducted everybody else but the two of you,” Mohan explained.

“If that is the case, how come they forgot to abduct you, their most fervent adversary and potential threat?” Rannvijaya asked, aloud.

“That is because they didn’t wish to be electrocuted!” Mohan replied, much to Jayadev and Rannvijaya’s surprise.

“I deliberately chose to sleep with my one hand placed atop the Kodanda. Not only would I have been alerted had someone tried to steal it from my possession, the trespassers would have been electrocuted on touching my hand. You are aware that the Kodanda cannot be held by anyone other than me, don’t you?”

“That was smart thinking indeed, Mohan!” Rannvijaya complimented his friend.

“It was for this reason that I had deliberately placed the Kodanda atop the wheels so that Dasavana’s men find it impossible to steal them from our custody,” Mohan added.

“We may have secured the Kodanda and the wheels, but have unfortunately been unable to save our friends from being held captive,” Jayadev uttered.

“Hmm...That frightening thought is precisely what is disquieting me. We must act fast to rescue our friends from Dasavana’s clutches,” Mohan replied.

“As far as I know, the three of them would have been first taken inside the impregnable fortress held by Vinashkale and his son Vipreet Buddhi,” revealed Rannvijaya, much to Mohan’s surprise as he had little idea about their identities.

“Who are these two asuras you just mentioned?” Mohan asked.

“Vinashkale and his son, Vipreet Buddhi, are the rulers of the unassailable fortress that stands between us and Dasavana’s palace—Bhavan Dasavana. The

father-son duo is one of Dasavanakoka's most-trusted groups of generals, second only to the vicious Drohkaal," Jayadev informed.

"So, isn't there any way the fort can be breached and destroyed from within?"

"There is. But, not the way how you might envisage. Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi have been blessed—by a Goddess—that the inviolable fort shall only crumble when the severed head of either the father or the son comes in contact with each other before falling on the ground. Being proficient warriors, the duo has been relentlessly massacring Dasavana's captives with rampant disdain. However, to ensure their boon doesn't turn into a bane, Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi avoid engaging in war together."

"Hmm...Never mind! We can think of a way to outwit them when the situation demands it. What I wanted to know is whether the two of you have ever seen what Drohkaal or Dasavana looks like?" Mohan asked the dwarf-pals of Vaikuntha, who replied in the negative.

"Unfortunately, we are as oblivious to their identities as you. It is certainly worrisome that we are pitted against an enemy whom we have never seen before, but I am confident that with the blessings of Lord Vishnu, we shall overcome all obstacles," Rannvijaya assured Mohan.

Mohan gently nodded his head as his mind raced against time and contemplated a plethora of strategies to ensure the safety of his friends. Every passing second seemed like an excruciating hour to the three men, who knew that their friends would be subjected to unspeakable torture if they did not act soon. It was while the trio was deliberating on several strategies that Mohan finally had a brainwave.

"I have an idea!" he spoke with great excitement, a glimmer of hope visible on his face.

"The two of you informed us that you could summon your divine powers on five different occasions. If my memory doesn't elude me, then I think thus far, you have used your celestial powers only on two instances, isn't it?" Mohan asked his friends with an impish smile on his face.

Jayadev and Rannvijaya knew that Mohan had a plan up his sleeve and they urged him to reveal it.



In his chamber, Vipreet Buddhi stood adorning his silver-coloured armour. Flanked by a group of slaves, who helped him with his attire and presented his crown and sword, Vipreet Buddhi wore a pompous smile on his face. It was as if he had conquered destiny, won over the gods and truly claimed his position as a

mighty warrior to be forever etched in the realms of history.

Strutting around, the belligerent youth arrived at the ramparts of his fort and climbed onto his magnificent silver-coloured chariot—driven by three raven-black mares. Unable to conceal his pontifical grin, Vipreet Buddhi drew out his sword from his scabbard and raised it in the air, thereby, signalling victory to the inhabitants of Trahimam, who bowed in respect as his chariot crossed paths with them.

Vipreet Buddhi had forever lusted after adulation and he was elated on seeing the Trahimamis lavish him with praises. As he rode out of the fort with his charioteer, cries of Vipreet Buddhi's greatness echoed in the air, for the Trahimamis genuinely felt that he had landed a deft blow to the unwelcome visitors.

Soon, the gigantic silver gates of the fort opened and Vipreet Buddhi's chariot surged ahead while unsettling dust on the ground, before fading into oblivion.

Barely had the deviant asura left the fortress when three pairs of watchful eyes, hiding behind the dense growth of shrubs, leaves and trees looked at each other.

"Now is the time we must put our plan into action," whispered Mohan to his friends, Jayadev and Rannvijaya.

"Yes, but you must elaborate on your plan, Mohan," Jayadev beseeched.

"All right! By the celestial powers vested in you, I want you to change your appearance and enter Vinashkale's fort!" Mohan explained.

"But, the fort is impregnable. We cannot break into the fort even if we use all our divine powers," Rannvijaya apprised Mohan.

"But, what if the guards themselves let you in?" Mohan spoke impishly before revealing his plan.

"Vipreet Buddhi has left the fort and is not expected to return anytime soon. I suggest the two of you assume the forms of Vipreet Buddhi and his charioteer and return on the pretext of having forgotten something even though the guards are unlikely to question you. Enter the fort and search for Nagarjuna, Raj and Pawan. I shall await your return at the same spot, tomorrow morning," Mohan informed the duo.

"But, what shall you do all alone in a forest fraught with dangers? The enemy can launch a fierce attack seeing you unarmed," cautioned Jayadev.

"I am aware of the same and have, therefore, brought along Shivaji's Bhawani with me. The Kodanda and the celestial weapons however, are lying unguarded in the hut, which is why I must return to the forest to safeguard them."

Jayadev and Rannvijaya immediately understood Mohan's valid concerns and closed their eyes. Before Mohan could realise what was transpiring, the duo

began to change form. Slowly, their plain and simple attire was replaced by lustrous silver armour and headgears. As Mohan gaped at them, Rannvijaya and Jayadev transformed themselves into Vipreet Buddhi and his charioteer, respectively. Both flaunted thick, black and flowing moustaches as they marched forward to the palace.

Seeing a pleasant smile on Vipreet Buddhi's vicious face seemed phantasmagorical to Mohan, who would have never reciprocated the smile and embraced Vipreet Buddhi and his charioteer had he been unaware of their true identities. What Mohan had failed to notice was that the duo had even recreated Vipreet Buddhi's chariot along with three black horses.

"That's three powers down!" Rannvijaya, now, in the avatar of Vipreet Buddhi, sighed.

"Well, on the contrary, I would say two more to go," replied an enthusiastic Mohan before his friends departed.

Mohan patiently saw his friends surging ahead at breakneck speed and entering the fort without the slightest opposition. Confident about Jayadev and Rannvijaya's success in this endeavour, Mohan raced back to the hut.



Jayadev and Rannvijaya were surprised to find a fully-functional market inside the fort. Scores of Trahimamis flocked to the meat counters where sheep, cow, buffalo, pig and chicken were being ruthlessly butchered while the inhabitants gorged on raw flesh like rapacious beasts.

As the duo observed the frizzy-haired and dark-skinned natives with protruding teeth, merrily gulping down one glass after another of human and animal blood, Jayadev warned Rannvijaya about the presence of the palace guards advancing towards them.

"Where should we ask them to accompany us?" Rannvijaya asked.

"Under usual circumstances, the father-son duo would have thrown them in prison. But, our friends were no ordinary prisoners. Surely, they would have been imprisoned at a more secluded location. If I am not mistaken, we must head to the dungeon," advised Jayadev, barely in time, before the soldiers surrounded them and bowed in reverence before the young prince.

"Accompany me to the dungeon, O brave soldiers!"

I have some unfinished business which I seek to complete," Vipreet Buddhi spoke, putting on an ominous smile.

The baleful expression was enough to convince the soldiers of their master's identity as they led Vipreet Buddhi towards the dungeon. Within a few minutes,

the soldiers halted at a completely barren and secluded spot, miles away from any source of life. As Jayadev and Rannvijaya followed the soldiers, the latter, after walking a distance, removed traces of sand from the ground to reveal a glass ceiling.

Dutifully, the soldiers awaited Vipreet Buddhi's orders after opening the glass ceiling. With a stern expression on his face, the prince signalled the soldiers to enter the dungeon. Obeying the prince's orders, the soldiers began descending the staircase that led to the dungeon.

Vipreet Buddhi alighted from his chariot and accompanied by his charioteer, followed suit. They saw a dark, damp and dimly lit passage, reeking of an overpowering stench. The passage was narrow and could only accommodate two people walking side by side. The walls were wet and it seemed that the place hadn't been cleaned in centuries. As the soldiers walked ahead of Vipreet Buddhi while carrying fire torches in their hands, water rats and other reptiles made fleeting appearances.

After a few minutes of walking, the soldiers came to an abrupt halt and made way for Vipreet Buddhi, while gesturing him to advance further. Rannvijaya, alive to the situation, immediately walked ahead along with his charioteer, much to the surprise of the soldiers. Noticing the expressions on the soldiers' faces, Rannvijaya turned and addressed one of them while placing his hand over the soldier's shoulder.

"I want all of you to return since I have some urgent work that needs to be completed. The prisoners shall learn of Vipreet Buddhi's true powers today. Ensure that no one disturbs me in my endeavour," he instructed the soldier, who willingly complied with the orders by signalling his mates to return.

Barely had the soldiers left after handing over the fire torches to Vipreet Buddhi and his charioteer that a deafening silence pervaded the area. With no one following them, the duo desperately searched for their friends. However, they were appalled to find all the cells vacant, except for human bones which lay scattered all over.

Jayadev and Rannvijaya were yet to recover from the abhorrent sight when they heard the painful moans of a prisoner. Without further ado, the duo rushed to the spot from where the groans emanated, only to find no trace of their friends, but a man who writhed in agony—Akhand!

Meanwhile, as the soldiers began their ascent, the soldier with whom Vipreet Buddhi had interacted, complimented the young general in Dasavana's army.

"It was surprising, yet, comforting to see Vipreet Buddhi displaying warmth while addressing us," he said with a smile, before another soldier cut short his statement.

“He was behaving uncharacteristically because he wasn’t Vipreet Buddhi in the first place!”

There was a stunned silence for a moment as all the soldiers turned towards their friend who had made the startling revelation.

“On what basis are you saying so?” probed the first soldier with a frown.

“I am certain. When Vipreet Buddhi placed his hand over your shoulder, I noticed that the serpentine motif, which is engraved on every Trahimami’s right hand, was missing from his,” informed the soldier before drawing out his sword.

“Friends, prepare for combat. We have an imposter inside the dungeon!”



The palace shone radiantly. The ostentatious court was replete with many abhorrent and terror-invoking ministers, who wore menacing looks on their faces. As Vinashkale walked into the court with blatant vanity, all eyes were focussed on the three hapless victims, who had succumbed to Dasavana’s devious schemes.

Unrecognisable after being subjected to severe thrashing, the swollen faces and blackened eyes of Nagarjuna, Raj and Pawan bore testimony to the ghastly treatment they had suffered. Bare-bodied, the trio were paraded in chains and brought to the court as dogs on leashes. Blurred vision, breathlessness and aching joints had reduced the three warriors to helpless prisoners, trapped in iron shackles.

Down on their knees with their backs bent, Pawan, Raj and Nagarjuna suddenly heard the resounding laughter in the court being overtaken by the sound of footsteps in the vicinity. The injured trio soon noticed someone in a saffron-coloured dhoti, standing next to them. The new entrant in the court was keenly observing the captives.

They were aware of the entity’s identity, yet the battered souls were devoid of even an ounce of energy and were unable to raise their stooping heads to see the face of their nemesis—Dasavanakoka!

“Hahaha,” Dasavana laughed, in a shudder-invoking voice as he patted and congratulated Vinashkale on his accomplishment.

“Well done, Vinashkale. You, along with your son, Vipreet Buddhi, have truly risen to the occasion and protected the Kingdom of Trahimam by capturing these wretched souls, who harboured intentions of slaying the great Dasavana!” The King of Trahimam smirked before drawing his sword and placing it gently below the three men’s chins.

With his sword, he lifted their faces to take a look at his potential assassins.

While it gave Dasavana immense pleasure to see the three men writhe in excruciating pain and agony; it was a face Raj, Nagarjuna and Pawan could never forget. The menacing red eyes, the burly physique, the swarthy complexion and the look of utter disdain made them shudder.

Amidst this scene, the young, conceited son of Vinashkale, Vipreet Buddhi entered the court with a smug expression on his face.

“Sire, these three men are Mohan’s key aides and I am certain that his mission is in jeopardy with the capture of his friends,” Vipreet Buddhi spoke in a self-congratulatory tone.

“Hmm...However, if I am not mistaken, Mohan was accompanied by a total of five men. We have been successful in nabbing three of them; so, what happened to the remaining two?” Dasavana asked, concernedly.

Vipreet Buddhi was about to respond to the question, when his father, aware of his son’s impudence, decided to intervene and apprise the king of the prevailing situation.

“The truth is these three men were the only mortals accompanying Mohan; the two other men you probe about are the palace guards of Lord Vishnu—Jaya and Vijaya. We were unable to apprehend them due to their celestial powers and Mohan narrowly escaped our clutches, because of his firm grip on the Kodanda, which cannot be touched by anyone else but him. Had we tried to do so, we would have been electrocuted,” Vinashkale informed.

Dasavana placed his hand on his chin and twitching his face, contemplated a sinister plan to apprehend his ‘potential’ annihilator. Seeming pleased with the plan, a devious smile escaped his lips.

“Do not worry. I have found the perfect foil for Mohan. By tomorrow, he will be standing in front of our palace, begging his own death,” Dasavana spoke with great ease, confident about the success of his plan.

“Sire, it has been learnt from our credible sources, working under the guidance of Shuka, that these men had also planned to abduct Princess Alankrita from the royal palace. By apprehending the three of them, we have quelled the threat, temporarily. But, with the other three men still roaming free, their plan hasn’t been completely thwarted,” Vipreet Buddhi intimated the king.

With a wry smile on his face and a calm disposition, Dasavana addressed his men in a nonchalant manner.

“If it is so, then why waste time? Mohan and his friends must remember that we are and have always been a step ahead of them in this battle of ours. Prepare for a great feast, for tonight shall be the night when Dasavana will tie the knot with the enchanting Princess Alankrita!” the mighty king revealed, before the court resounded with his demonic laughter.

Raj, Nagarjuna and Pawan were aghast, but there was little they could do, for a fate worse than that of Princess Alankrita awaited them!



Tension pervaded, as the Kaal Sarps raised their swords and stood at the opposite end of the long and narrow pathway. Jayadev and Rannvijaya, realising that the Kaal Sarps had seen through their disguise, returned to their usual appearance and prepared for combat as an injured Akhand watched the surreal scene unfold, with great interest.

Unnerved by the mystical abilities of their adversaries, the Kaal Sarps stopped in their tracks. The duo had been waiting for this moment and using it to their advantage, caught the Kaal Sarps off guard with Rannvijaya hurling his sword at one of Dasavana's men and impaling his throat.

As the Kaal Sarps looked at their co-soldier's severed head rolling on the floor, in horror, panic reigned in their ranks. Shocked at what they saw, the Kaal Sarps had not even recovered from their initial shock when Rannvijaya surged towards the soldiers like a swooping eagle seeking to devour its prey, and in a flash, attacked the first soldier, slashing his throat with the latter's weapon.

Rannvijaya's opponents were now stricken with fear, unable to plan their next move. Daunted by Rannvijaya's sinewy frame and muscular physique, the Kaal Sarps immediately realised they were no match for their burly nemesis. They could either beat a hasty retreat or collectively fight Rannvijaya. Meanwhile, Jayadev was busy releasing Akhand.

Cognisant that turning their backs would make it easier for Rannvijaya to slaughter them, the remaining four Kaal Sarps attempted to vanquish him. Rannvijaya, however, was well-prepared for such an eventuality. Even before the four soldiers, with two standing ahead and two behind, could make their first move, the agile Rannvijaya grabbed the throats of the two soldiers in front in a vice-like grip and surged ahead, pushing the soldiers behind and smashing their heads against the wall.

Barely had the soldiers been pushed back that the swords of the two soldiers standing behind, pierced the bellies of the first two injured soldiers, rupturing their intestines. The fellow Kaal Sarps knew they were dead meat for a warrior of Rannvijaya's calibre.

Mustering courage, Rannvijaya got rid of the abhorrent asuras by throttling them to death. The danger had been averted and Jayadev too had managed to set Akhand free. As a perspiring and bare-chested Rannvijaya turned and saw that the injured prisoner had been released from jail, he stoically probed.

“Care to inform us of our friends’ whereabouts?”



Mohan, meanwhile, arrived at the hut only to find it completely desecrated. It was evident that the Kaal Sarps had been at work during Mohan’s absence. Perturbed by this sudden and grave development, an alarmed Mohan rushed inside the hut, fearing the worst.

With mounting tension, a disquieted Mohan frantically searched the place before running out of the hut towards his ship that stood on the banks of the river. With unwavering determination, Mohan ran at breakneck speed towards the ship, hoping to find something of utter consequence intact. Alas, he was too late! The beautiful and mesmerising ship—built by Vishwakarma himself—had been smashed to smithereens and had been destroyed beyond recognition or repair. With the destruction of the ship, all hopes of overpowering Dasavana had been dashed.

With anguish writ large on his face, Mohan made one final attempt to resurrect his fortune, and returned to his hut. Panic-stricken and censuring himself for his folly, Mohan fell on the ground with utter dismay, for Dasavanakoka and his men had dealt a body blow to Mohan and his mission. Not only had their ship been destroyed, but all the celestial weapons kept inside the hut and the ship had been stolen. For the first time in his journey, Mohan was crestfallen.

The Kodanda had been stolen!

Let the War Begin

Dr. Chandra’s cell phone rang. Given the aggravating circumstances he and his team were battling, the cell phone catching a signal was nothing short of a miracle. Torrential rains had lashed hard and disrupted life in Rameswaram. Trees had been uprooted, cars had been washed away and countless houses had lost their roofs and walls had caved. Such was the ravaging effect of nature’s fury that Dr. Chandra and his team, along with several other locals were forced to take shelter inside a government school.

The sturdy building was the last resort by the incumbent government to provide shelter to its people. And, though, it was an effective measure, the water nevertheless had started seeping in through the walls. As Dr. Chandra picked up his phone, he was pleased to see his friend, Professor Suryamurthy’s name flash on the screen.

“Hi, Guru! Is there any news of Mohan?” Dr. Chandra asked.

Professor Suryamurthy knew that this would be the first question Sujit would pose to him and that it was he who had to reveal the disturbing news of Mohan’s disappearance to his friend. With a sigh, he apprised Dr. Chandra of the grim situation at hand.

As if the turbulent situation at Rameswaram wasn’t enough, the news of Mohan’s disappearance gave Dr. Chandra a severe jolt. Out of desperation and dearth of ideas, he requested his friend to file a missing report at the police station without any delay.

“And you think they will believe us when we inform them that Mohan and Raj have disappeared from a place that ceased to exist more than 7,000 years ago?” Professor Suryamurthy replied and Dr. Chandra immediately understood verity in his friend’s argument.

“But, we can’t just sit and await a miracle! If there is no town by the name of Sahastapur, it is quite evident that the two of them must have been abducted en route. Try convincing the police about the same and ensure they send their search teams in Mohan and Devraj’s pursuit.”

“Yes, that is indeed the most prudent step. I have already spoken to Mr. Shashi Tandon, Samaira’s father, and informed him. Fortunately for us, despite Mr. Tandon being India’s External Affairs Minister and a man of progress, he has not only accepted our version, but, also taken out time from his hectic schedule and instructed the police to conduct search operations,” Professor Suryamurthy comforted his friend.

“That’s wonderful. But, what about Samaira? How has she taken the news?” Dr. Chandra enquired, amid sounds of thunder and lightning.

“She is depressed, obviously. But, I must say she has handled the situation with maturity,” Professor Suryamurthy praised his student before enquiring about the well-being of the team.

“Unfortunately, Guru, the weather has wreaked havoc. Even our office at Rameswaram has been damaged. However, timely intervention by the government authorities ensured there was no loss of life and we were brought to a government school in Rameswaram, which has been our temporary shelter ever since,” Dr. Chandra replied.

A concerned Suryamurthy thanked the almighty for his friend’s safety. However, he was still perturbed as the risk of Dr. Chandra and his team losing all the vital information pertaining to their mission seemed apparent due to the natural disaster, and asked him about the same.

“Thankfully, we managed to send our materials and findings for further verification to Archaeological Survey of India’s Director General, yesterday.”

“So, what did you conclude by your findings?” Professor Suryamurthy questioned out of curiosity.

“Ah well! To be honest, I am disappointed. We did manage to find a few rocks that we feel might belong to the Treta Yuga, but even if it were so, we still lack substantial and concrete evidence to assert our claims. Maybe, if the weather hadn’t caused wreckage, we could have continued our research and found an important clue to help us ascertain the available theories related to the Adam’s Bridge. But all that seems a lost cause now, my friend!” Dr. Chandra replied with a sigh of despair.

“If I am not mistaken, Sujit, aren’t the Rama Setu and Adam’s bridge one and the same? So, how come there appears to be a disparity in the names?” the professor queried.

“Well, Guru, our mythology suggests that the Setu or the bridge connecting India to Sri Lanka was built by Vishwakarma’s son, Nala, a monkey in Sugriv’s army. It was his impeccable engineering skills that had helped in the construction of the bridge. Of course, Lord Varuna, the God of the Water, supported Nala in this venture.

It was in honour of Nala’s accomplishment that Lord Rama named the 48-kilometre long bridge, Nala Setu. With time, the Muslims in Sri Lanka, (then Ceylon) rechristened the bridge to pay homage to their greatest Islamic leader Adham, who was believed to have crossed the bridge.

When the Europeans invaded the country, they found ‘Adam’ an easier-to-pronounce name than Adham and that is how the bridge got rechristened. Meanwhile, people in India renamed the bridge as Rama Setu, as a mark of reverence to the Lord. While Adam’s Bridge and Rama Setu became the popular names, the original—Nala Setu—was lost and forgotten by mankind!” Dr. Chandra explained.

“Rather interesting, I say. So, when...” Professor Suryamurthy had not even completed his question when the line got disconnected. Despite repeated efforts, Dr. Chandra couldn’t get through to his friend’s number. The professor prayed for the safe return of his friend and the accompanying team.



Raj and Pawan were being dragged through an abrasive ground that had their gentle skin cut up and ripped off, while Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi led the parade of chained victims. For some strange reason, Nagarjuna had been confined within the premises of Bhavan Dasavana while the other two captives were tied to a pole, a few metres away from the palace. In this barren land, the

only source of water in sight was—the rapidly flowing River Kaalsaras.

Even though the scorching rays of the sun hindered their vision, Raj and Pawan were still able to see Dasavana's palace, glistening in the sun. Then, suddenly, without a warning, Dasavana emerged from a mist of smoke and marched towards the altar—standing at 250 feet above the ground—and directly beneath a moat infested with esurient and rapacious crocodiles.

With every step that Dasavana took, the weather seemed to undergo a change; the radiant sun was soon eclipsed by dark grey clouds. A gentle breeze began to blow as Dasavana was still partially engulfed by the smoke. Finally, from the edge of a raised marble slab placed at the end of the altar, Dasavana spoke in his baritone that echoed in the air.

“Return to the fort and pray to Tambadevi for our success in the battlefield. With her blessings, glory shall be ours when we annihilate Mohan before tomorrow's sunset. Before that, I desire to present our adversaries with a small token of appreciation,” Dasavana addressed Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi, terror dripping from his voice.

Barely had the battered duo of Raj and Pawan understood the meaning behind Dasavana's forbidding threat, that they saw the circle of smoke receding. As the scene unfolded in front of their eyes, Raj and Pawan were aghast. Despite being in tremendous agony, the two men struggled hard to free themselves and prevent the inevitable.

Dasavana stood adjacent to the raised marble platform with a long and razor-sharp sword in one hand, and in the other hand, he held Nagarjuna by the collar. Passing an ominous smile to the terror-stricken duo, who cried in helplessness, Dasavanakoka flung Nagarjuna's slumped and energy-bereft body on the marble slab and tied him with a rope.

“Let this be a warning to Mohan. If he continues in his ill-fated quest and doesn't cease his pursuit, all his friends will meet the same fate,” he laughed, viciously.

“No! No! Don't do that!” Raj and Pawan yelled in desperation.

But, it was a lost battle. With a baleful expression on his face, Dasavana stared at the hysterical duo and derived sadistic pleasure at their woeful condition as they continued to plead for mercy. With scant regard for their supplication, Dasavana merely scoffed at them before he raised his sword high in the air, brought it down in a flash...and sealed Nagarjuna's fate forever!



Meanwhile, unaware of Dasavana's horrific act, Jayadev and Rannvijaya

interacted with Akhand, who proved to be a storehouse of information.

“Why would he worship Tambadevi now?” Jayadev asked.

“Because Tambadevi is the Goddess from whom all the asuras derive their physical strength. She is the embodiment of all things evil, vicious and malefic. She is believed to devour human flesh to satiate her ravenous appetite and anyone who looks at her, apart from the asuras, is turned into a copper statue.

“It was at the insistence of the Daitya Guru Shukracharya that Dasavana and his followers began worshipping the despicable Goddess. I would personally term her a demoness than raise her to the stature of a Goddess. But well, Dasavana was left with no option,” Akhand spoke nonchalantly, rousing Jayadev and Rannvijaya’s interest in the matter.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, drunk on power and filled with arrogance, Dasavana’s atrocities increased with each passing day. On witnessing the rampant abuse of the boons bestowed by him on Dasavana, Lord Shiva divested him of any further blessings and censured him severely. However, since he had already granted him the boon of immortality—subject to three conditions—he was unable to revoke them.

“It was during this time that Shukracharya and an unknown evil entity intervened and advised Dasavana to take refuge in Tambadevi.” Akhand continued with the story before posing a question to the celestial gatekeepers.

“But, what did you mean by ‘Why would he worship Tambadevi *now* ’? Has any significant incident occurred in the interim or has any new development taken place while I had been in the confinement of this dungeon?” Akhand asked.

Wearing a look of extreme pride, the two friends recounted Mohan’s vanquishing of Tambadevi in detail and with great joy.

Elated at this terrific news, an overjoyed Akhand momentarily forgot about his injuries and responded with a relieved smile.

“I was certain that great things were in store for us the moment your friends informed me about Mohan, the man with the magical Kodanda! In fact, it was based on this revelation that I’d shared some critical information with your friends, before they were hauled up by the Kaal Sarps and taken to Dasavana’s palace—on the banks of River Kaalsaras—Bhavan Dasavana!”

Rannvijaya and Jayadev looked at each other and wondered what information Akhand had provided them with and probed further.

Akhand, reclining against the wall for support, began narrating his story of woe about Dasavana’s conquest of his kingdom and the abduction of Princess Alankrita.

“Despite this, the Kaal Sarps have only tortured me through this time for they

cannot afford to let me die because I know a secret that Dasavana and his Kaal Sarps have been attempting to extract from me!” Akhand spoke.

Intrigued, the duo asked him to elaborate.

“King Virajaditya, Princess Alankrita’s father, was in possession of a secret which he had revealed to me and no one else. After his unfortunate death, I am the only person who is aware of the secret that could ruin Dasavanakoka—the second condition that could lead to his death. I know the location where five out of the required ten wheels are hidden,” he revealed.

Disappointed with Akhand’s revelation, after the gradual build-up of suspense, Rannvijaya informed him they were already in possession of the five wheels that he spoke of.

Vigorously shaking his head in dissent, Akhand responded.

“That is exactly what your friends said when I apprised them of this fact. The place from where you have discovered the five wheels was completely unknown to me. The five wheels that I am speaking about are hidden in a different location and this means that, you can now effectively be in possession of all the ten wheels if you somehow manage to escape from here,” said Akhand, much to the joy of Jayadev and Rannvijaya.

“So, where can we find the remaining five wheels?” the duo asked with great excitement.

“Here, within the Kingdom of Trahimam itself. The wheels have been carefully hidden atop a cave located amid the dense forest, near the ocean.”

“Wonderful. But, who was the evil entity accompanying Shukracharya you spoke of?” Jayadev questioned, but Akhand was completely unaware of the entity’s identity.

While Akhand and Jayadev were busy deliberating over the matter with each other, something seemed to discomfit Rannvijaya.

“Friends, if Pawan, Raj and Nagarjuna are aware of the location of the wheels, then Dasavana and his soldiers will try and extract the information from them at any cost. And unlike Akhand, the Kaal Sarps are bound to show them no mercy if they do not cooperate. This implies that not only are our friends in great peril, there is a dire need to unearth the wheels before the Kaal Sarps beat us to it,” Rannvijaya cautioned.

“Correct. I suggest we exit this fort immediately and begin our pursuit that would spell Trivarmrut’s doom!” Akhand advised.

However, the wily Jayadev had another plan up his sleeve.

“We don’t have much time on our hands; by the time we depart from the fort and reach the forest and inform Mohan, the Kaal Sarps would have discovered the whereabouts of the wheels. To save time, I think Rannvijaya, you should use

your fourth celestial power and change your form to that of a bird and fly to our hut before accompanying Mohan in the search of the remaining wheels!” Jayadev explained the plan to Rannvijaya.

“The idea is brilliant, but what about the chariot from where the two of you had alighted? Wouldn’t the other Kaal Sarps smell a rat the moment they notice the chariot lying vacant right next to the dungeon?” Akhand raised a pertinent question.

With a gentle smile on his face, Jayadev assuaged Akhand’s doubts.

“Don’t worry, my friend. The chariot disappeared from the scene the moment the two of us entered the dungeon. Once we are in possession of the wheels, which Rannvijaya shall intimate us about on his return, we shall hatch a plan to escape at the break of dawn.”

Rannvijaya patted his friend for his valuable suggestion and just as the trio reached the stairs, leading out of the dungeon, Rannvijaya nimbly climbed and opening the glass ceiling, assumed the form of an eagle and flew away!



In the pitch-black forest, Mohan sat under a tree. Dismayed, dejected and disappointed; a depressed Mohan, bereft of emotions, recounted the events that had transpired in the last two weeks. He had met his grandfather whom he had no recollection of, he had found amazing friends in complete strangers, who were willing to risk their lives for his sake, he had traversed through several parts of India and imbibed knowledge about the Ramayana and had successfully defended himself against ogres, wild beasts, a legendary Goddess—an abhorrent entity that turned people into copper statues.

But amidst all this action, adventure, fantasy and peril, there was one person he truly remembered and yearned to be with—Samaira! She was the true love of his life and had stood by him through thick and thin along with Dr. Chandra and Professor Suryamurthy. To abandon such a caring and loving person for a princess, whom he had never set eyes on and was only duty-bound to protect, seemed a rather absurd idea to Mohan.

While Mohan was lost in thoughts, he suddenly heard the rustling of leaves.

He may have lost the Kodanda, but had certainly not lost hope. The apprehension of danger lurking close by made Mohan stand on his feet and draw out the Bhawani. With bloodshot eyes and seething rage, Mohan was in a mood to decimate whoever crossed his path, without showing the slightest mercy.

Fortunately, the rustling sound was caused by no apparent or approaching threat, but by his friend, philosopher and guide—Vibhishan—who had arrived to

help restore Mohan's lost pride!

Dressed the same, Vibhishan made his way through the wild grass and stood beside Mohan.

"So, how are things with you, my Son?" he patted Mohan.

Vibhishan's reassurance worked like magic for Mohan, who fell at the former's feet out of sheer reverence.

"Pardon me, O Noble King, for I failed to recognise you the first time and treated your actions with suspicion!" Mohan beseeched the King.

With a benign smile on his face, Vibhishan held Mohan by his arms and embraced him.

"Don't fret over our last meeting, Son. How could you have ever recognised me? And as far as your behaviour is concerned, let me confess, I have seen many in my family behave more atrociously than you can ever imagine," he smiled.

"But, why has the smile disappeared from your face? It seems as if a great calamity has befallen you?" Vibhishan prodded and Mohan poured out his heart to him.

With a pensive expression on his face, Vibhishan, nevertheless, alleviated Mohan's distress and assured him that he would find the Kodanda again if destiny was on his side.

Dismissing Vibhishan's concern as mere lip service, Mohan decided to use this opportunity to clarify all his queries regarding the Ramayana. As the duo sat and lit a fire, Vibhishan was the one who posed the first question.

"So, who all are there in your family and what do they do?" he asked.

With a sardonic smile on his face, considering he had no recollection of his grandfather; his parents had died when he was an infant and that it had been many days since he had met Dr. Chandra, Mohan bared his soul to Vibhishan.

"Rather interesting!" Vibhishan commented as the two men smiled at each other.

"So, your uncle, Dr. Chandra, is presently engaged in a project to ascertain the veracity of the rocks that were 'supposedly' used by Lord Rama to reach Lanka?" he asked with great keenness.

"Yes, he is. But, I am not sure how successful he will be in this endeavour as earlier expeditions have failed to provide any concrete resolution."

Vibhishan took a sip from the bottle of water, he was carrying, to quench his thirst and commented, "Strange, isn't it? I am sitting here with you while your uncle has to find evidence that the legend of Lord Rama was not a myth!"

Mohan understood the underlying sarcasm in Vibhishan's words and returned a smile.

"You know, Son, when corpses are left unattended, the body begins to decay

and decompose. The body is broken down into smaller forms of matter that, sometimes, have the power to conceal the truth from us.”

Mohan couldn't decipher much of Vibhishan's vague response. Still, desirous of unravelling the myths about the Ramayana, Mohan asked Vibhishan to describe the epic showdown between Ravan and Lord Rama.

“Ah, modern day plays, serials and movies have already represented the battle scene in great detail. The present generation needs to know more about this epic battle which led to the death of my elder brother, Kumbhakaran. Sadly, that has not been discussed.

“After my brother's army suffered huge losses, he summoned Kumbhakaran from his deep slumber with the assistance of elephants, trumpets and drums. Kumbhakaran, for all his wickedness, realised it was Lord Rama who had been wronged, and our brother, Ravan, had committed a heinous crime by abducting someone else's wife.”

“I never knew this fact about your brother. It seems he inherited a few positive traits from you,” Mohan smiled and Vibhishan shared the sentiment before moving on with the tale.

“Nevertheless, he entered the battlefield and grew bigger and higher than his already mammoth size, towering into the clouds. Such was my pot-bellied brother's size that he destroyed innumerable members of Sugriv's monkey army by crushing them under his feet or chewing them alive. In fact, he alone massacred more members of the monkey army than all the other warriors in Ravan's army put together.

“Kumbhakaran's entry had unleashed gruesome repercussions and it was then that Lord Rama himself decided to take charge of the situation. In a fierce duel that followed, Lord Rama vanquished my brother by severing his arms and head. Such was the force of Lord Rama's arrow that Kumbhakaran's severed body parts were flung into the ocean. As his gigantic body fell on the ground, it was inconceivable to carry him all the way back to the palace.

“Lord Rama was in favour of cremating him with full dignity and honour, but I intervened and informed everyone that it was prudent to dispose of his exanimate body into the ocean. Lord Rama was reluctant, but on my insistence, he eventually relented since Lord Varuna had agreed to lift the weight of my brother's body, assuring us he would gently place it at the bottom of the ocean without letting the weight of the body cause a massive upsurge in the water level,” Vibhishan informed.

“That is really fascinating. I can almost visualise the scene,” Mohan commented before Vibhishan suddenly turned his attention to a graver matter.

“Mohan, I have little idea as to what the future holds for us and as my last

deed, I must disclose some vital information to you since matters are turning rather precarious,” he spoke.

“At the top of Dasavanakoka’s 500 feet tall palace—Bhavan Dasavana—sways a red-coloured flag that symbolises terror. However, unknown to many, the flag’s symbol is a heart. And not just any heart. It is a normal, fully-functional and pumping heart—it is Dasavana’s!”

Mohan’s eyes literally popped out, astounded by this revelation.

“But, how is that possible? How can a person live without a heart inside his body?” Mohan seemed puzzled.

“Well, Dasavana has certainly turned the impossible possible and hasn’t it served him well? That is precisely why he has built a staggering 500 feet tall palace and placed his heart safely inside an opening within the flag. Your arrows need to pierce his heart, for this is the third condition that needs to be fulfilled to slay Dasavana!”

But, Mohan immediately found a flaw in Vibhishan’s disclosure. Or so, he sincerely hoped.

“Wait a second. There is something that borders on the impossible in the condition you have disclosed. The first condition is his annihilator must possess the Kodanda, the second condition dictates he must be seated on the ten-wheeled chariot but, seriously, one cannot expect the arrow from the Kodanda to reach 500 feet above the ground!” Mohan reasoned.

“True. The arrow shall never reach that great a distance!” Vibhishan responded, stoically.

“Then, how in the world am I supposed to vanquish him while staying rooted on the ground? If I reach the top of his palace, I will be in possession of the Kodanda, but not seated on the ten-wheeled chariot for I can only reach the top on foot and not by any vehicle. On the contrary, if I stand on my chariot, I shall be in possession of the Kodanda, but its powers shall be rendered futile,” spoke an immensely riled Mohan.

“Strange as it may sound, this is indeed the only way Dasavana can be defeated. You certainly didn’t expect Dasavanakoka to make things easy for you, did you? Besides, the chariot shall not move an inch till such time that you can correctly ascertain its name,” informed Vibhishan.

“What! Now, the chariot has a name too? It appears we are not destined to vanquish the invincible Dasavana after all,” Mohan lamented.

“Yes, the ten-wheeled chariot does have a name. But don’t fret; the clue to the name lies within one of India’s greatest epics—The Ramayana!” Vibhishan spoke as he got up and asked Mohan to follow after him.

Walking through the dark, Mohan dutifully complied with Vibhishan’s orders

until they arrived at a completely deserted and ghostly stretch of land where they saw a magnificent green-coloured cloth hanging from the shrubs and bushes.

“Mohan, suppose you do manage to find all the ten wheels, have you ever thought from where you are going to procure the chariot?” Vibhishan raised a pertinent point.

“First, let us find the wheels. Not only am I oblivious to the existence of the remaining five wheels, I have also lost possession of the ones I had acquired,” a nettled Mohan responded.

Vibhishan twitched his face before unveiling the green-coloured cloth in a flash and presented a gift of immense value to Mohan—a golden-coloured chariot!

On seeing a chariot devoid of its wheels, concealed within the dense and wild growth, Mohan thanked Vibhishan and probed him about the same.

“Behold the wonder that you see before your eyes, for I present to you Ravan’s Pushpak Vimana!”

Mohan was astonished on seeing the magnificent and fabled flying-machine used by Ravan to abduct Mother Sita.

“Wonderful! This is the solution to all our problems. The Pushpak Vimana suffices both as a chariot as well as a flying device. Seated on this, I can bring an end to Dasavana’s tyranny,” said a jubilant Mohan when Vibhishan interrupted him.

“Err...I am sorry to disappoint you, Son, but this Pushpak Vimana no longer possesses the wings which helped it soar high in the sky. At present, it can only be used as a chariot, provided the wheels are found and you are able to ascertain the correct name for the chariot!”

In a flash, Mohan’s hopes came crashing to the ground. With the news of the chariot being divested of its flying power, he was back to square one. Still, intrigued by the mythical chariot, Mohan posed a few questions to Vibhishan.

“I wonder how this could be the Pushpak Vimana as the original Pushpak Vimana was used by Lord Rama to return to Ayodhya!”

“Who told you that my brother was in possession of only one Pushpak Vimana? If it doesn’t surprise, let me inform you that my brother had an entire airbase where these vimanas were manufactured. In fact, my brother had another aircraft known as Dandu Monara Vimana, a peacock-shaped aircraft, as the name suggests in Sinhalese.

“The Pushpak Vimana, as the name indicates was a flower-shaped aircraft. This one is one of the defective vimanas, as even though it was intended to be built as a Pushpak Vimana, neither did it possess the shape of a Pushpak nor could it fly. As you correctly mentioned, one of the vimanas was indeed used by

Lord Rama while all the other vimanas were used by the monkey army to return home.” Vibhishan told Mohan.

Mohan was engrossed, examining the chariot, when Vibhishan began walking into the woods, much to the former’s surprise.

“What happened? Why are you deserting me when I am in utmost need of your guidance and support, O Holy One?” Mohan urged the legendary King.

With his back towards Mohan, Vibhishan stopped after hearing Mohan’s question, as the sounds of wild animals filled the air.

“My Son, my work here is over. I have imparted you with all the knowledge I had. Go forth in your endeavour; glory awaits you!”

“But, does that mean we shall not meet again?” Mohan asked, saddened by the announcement.

With a sigh, Vibhishan replied, “Who knows what the future holds? If we are destined to meet again, we certainly shall, but my responsibility of imparting you with incisive knowledge in this adventure of yours has come to an end, though, I have a strong feeling we shall meet soon. I bless you, may you emerge triumphant in your cause!”

As Vibhishan continued his walk, Mohan tried to control his emotions that seemed to be getting the better of him. Disappointed, he mumbled to himself.

“Some luck I have! To kill Dasavana, I must fire an arrow from the Kodanda, which I have lost; I must be in possession of the chariot whose name I do not know nor do I have any idea where the remaining wheels are and finally, I must impale his heart, which I cannot hope to reach!”

It was just then that Vibhishan stopped in his tracks for one last time, turned around and spoke.

“The asuras are known for their vengeful behaviour, not their intellect. Wood is a bad conductor of electricity and a log could have been used to remove the Kodanda from your possession as the asuras themselves couldn’t have touched it. But then, the asuras have always resorted to deceit and have never ever used common sense, have they?” He winked before disappearing into the forest.



Severely injured and still reeling under the horrific shock of their friend Nagarjuna’s untimely and gruesome death, the two bare-bodied men, covered in blood and perspiration, lay chained in the dungeon, situated below Dasavana’s palace.

The two friends were unable to see each other in the dark, gloomy dungeon. The walls were damp and the floor was wet. Extreme heat and humidity were

taking a toll on the men, but, despite such oppressive conditions, Raj finally gathered energy and spoke.

“Today, we have lost a dear friend, someone who was of vital importance to our mission. And Dasavana had realised that, which is why he hacked him to death. God bless, Nagarjuna,” he said with a lump in his throat.

“True. It is ironical that only a few hours before our abduction, he had proclaimed he would happily give up his life for our cause; who knew, it would turn into a reality!” lamented Pawan.

“I sincerely hope Mohan can rescue us or else we shall be Dasavana’s next set of hapless victims!” Raj shuddered.

The duo could hear the thumping sounds of drums, dhol and shehnai in the distant background, aware that Princess Alankrita’s marriage was being solemnised, much against her consent, with Dasavanakoka. Both, Pawan and Raj, had managed to catch a glimpse of the princess and they were completely mesmerised by her beauty. Her enchanting, big kohled eyes; her flawless skin, her elegant posture and her soft flowing hair troubled the duo because despite her beauty, the one overpowering memory that haunted them was the depressed expression on her face.

Surprisingly, the union between Dasavana and his bride-to-be, Princess Alankrita, was a rather hushed affair with only extremely important members of Dasavana’s forces such as Shuka, Vinashkale, Vipreet Buddhi and his family in attendance. The venue was a huge and sprawling hall—made of pure-white marble—located within Bhavan Dasavana, at a staggering height of 300 feet.

Dasavana had the gates to the palace locked as he wanted no intrusion. He had been waiting for this night since ages. For several years, he, at the behest of his mysterious Lord and Master—the one who had accompanied Shukracharya and advised him to pay obeisance to Tambadevi, was in search of a ‘chaste’ female bestowed with a rich lineage and enchanting physical features, so that she may be able to bear him a successor: a successor who would ravage the world and inflict pain on those unwilling to submit to his authority, thereby, carrying his father’s legacy forward. And his search had stopped at Princess Alankrita.

“Such a pity that the gorgeous Princess Alankrita will be forcibly married off to that despicable and abhorrent Dasavana,” commented Pawan, contorting his face in utter displeasure.

“Correct. She deserved someone much more charming, much more courageous and much more respectable,” added Raj.

“Yes, someone like our very own Mohan,” Pawan quipped.

Raj remained silent on the matter because even though he was in complete agreement with his friend, he was also aware of the romance between his

friends, Mohan and Samaira, and he would do everything to protect their union.

Changing the topic, Raj focussed on a more pressing issue.

“Hey, ever since we have arrived here, we have neither seen nor heard of Dasavana’s commander-in-chief, the terror-invoking General Drohkaal.”

“Absolutely! It is rather strange that a much-feared General of a humongous army would keep himself away from the important events taking place in Dasavana’s territory. Something is definitely amiss.”

“Who knows? Anything is possible in this chamber of horrors where a pompous ruler continuously speaks about himself in the third person,” a visibly upset Raj replied.

While the two friends condemned Dasavana’s actions, Dasavanakoka—evil personified—had defied destiny and married Princess Alankrita—someone who was destined to marry Mohan. Whether Trivarmrut had been able to avert Mohan’s attack and override his destiny was a question only time could answer, but by capturing Raj and Pawan, slaying Nagarjuna and marrying Princess Alankrita all in a day’s time, Dasavanakoka was the one who looked all set for victory in this battle.



Meanwhile, as Mohan stood all alone in the middle of an eerie forest, Vibhishan’s words began making sense to him all at once. It was indeed true that the demons resorted to deception and trickery and never used their intelligence to overcome an obstacle. Could it then be that...? With positive thoughts and his body brimming with energy, Mohan took long strides and rushed towards his hut.

As Mohan reached the ransacked hut, he started removing the debris frantically. He dug out sand, and removed the broken pieces of wood. Digging through layers with bare hands, he continued to clear up the place till it was free of all ruins. Finally, when he got rid of the last of the broken pieces, he smiled, heaved a sigh of relief and standing at the centre of the hut, he shut his eyes and sent out a silent prayer.

Later, he opened his eyes again and with fierce determination, he surged ahead in the dead of night, holding the mighty Kodanada in a vice-like grip with the Bhawani placed firmly behind his shining copper armour.

The countdown to the epic showdown had begun!

All Hell Breaks Loose

Mohan walked on wet ground in the moonlit night, without stopping midway, towards the spot where he had last conversed with Vibhishan. He had to devise a plan to bring the chariot to the hut. Time was in short supply. Suddenly, he noticed an eagle swooping down from the sky, perching atop a tree branch.

Almost immediately, Mohan knew this was no ordinary eagle as it had been hovering in the sky ever since Vibhishan had begun imparting his wisdom to him. Suspecting it to be one of Dasavana's spies in disguise, Mohan cautiously moved forward. With his sword drawn out, Mohan attempted to strike down the bird, but the eagle was swifter and flew some distance before reaching the ground and assuming its original form. The eagle was none other than Rannvijaya in disguise.

Mohan heaved a sigh of relief and rushed to embrace his friend.

"Rannvijaya, my friend, how are you? I cannot begin to describe how comforting your company seems!" Mohan spoke before revealing the sequence of events that had taken place after Jayadev and Rannvijaya's entry into Vinashkale's impregnable fortress.

A horrified Rannvijaya expressed his shock and anger over the vileness displayed by the Kaal Sarps before he shared some happy news with his friend.

"Do not worry, Mohan, for we met a prisoner inside the dungeon within the fort, who provided us with critical information that could ensure our victory in our tryst with Dasavanakoka. The prisoner, whose name is Akhand, was the Commander-in-Chief in the army of Princess Alankrita's father and he has revealed to us the location of the remaining five golden wheels," Rannvijaya spoke, his eyes glimmering with excitement.

Mohan's reaction was no different. Elated on receiving the felicitous news, Mohan asked him about the location.

"It's hidden here within this forest on top of a cave," Rannvijaya replied, much to Mohan's vexation.

"Caves! Caves! Caves! I fail to understand why everything has to be inside, outside, beneath, within or atop caves?" he spoke, petulantly.

Rannvijaya bore an amused smile on seeing the characteristically calm Mohan display his irritation in no uncertain terms.

"My friend, the cave where the wheels have been concealed is known as Istripuram which means 'place of the lady'. It is the exact spot where Ravan had sent Sita after Lord Hanuman's visit to Ashok Vatika. There is a labyrinth of caves with exits to the locations identified as dairy farms and airports used by Ravan," Rannvijaya informed.

Realising the weight of Rannvijaya's words, Mohan nodded in agreement.

"Hmm...So, how far is the place from here? Mohan asked.

“More than the distance, it is the path leading up to the cave which is treacherous and cumbersome to navigate. I shall resume the form of an eagle and hover in the air to assist you in finding the concealed wheels atop the Istripuram cave,” Rannvijaya proposed and Mohan immediately assented to the former’s plan of action.



The wedding was over. The celebrations had ceased. The guests had left for their respective abodes; but for one individual, it was the beginning of a nightmare. Princess Alankrita, now officially bestowed with the title Dasavini—the better half of Dasavana—sat alone in the king’s private chamber. As tears trickled down her cheeks, she cursed her destiny while staring at River Kaalsaras, flowing rather gently today.

Dressed in elegant, intricately embroidered golden attire, with an emerald green blouse, the bewitching princess had two options with her. One was to jump into the river several hundred feet below to her watery grave and put an end to the misery that she was destined to endure; and, the other was to suffer a silent ordeal for the rest of her life and die every single day at the hands of the loathsome Dasavanakoka.

It was while she was mulling over her options that the door to the chamber was thrown open by Dasavana, who was dressed in a maroon-coloured robe accessorised with a garlanded headgear that covered his face. A chill ran down Alankrita’s spine, seeing lust on Dasavana’s face the moment he removed the headgear.

Bolting the door, Dasavana advanced in Alankrita’s direction with concupiscent eyes.

With each passing moment and Dasavana’s stride, Alankrita was completely gripped with fear before she finally realised that she needed to act promptly.

Suddenly, she began running towards the window in a desperate bid to escape from the clutches of Dasavana. She ran to end her life. But, Dasavana was no amateur and as he understood Alankrita’s intention, he made a dash at her and grabbed her by her long, silky hair in a tight grip and pulled her towards him.

Alankrita panicked and struggled to free herself, but the fiendish Dasavana would have none of it. As she tried to run, Dasavana caught hold of her blouse and ripped it apart, exposing her soft and well-rounded breasts. With tears streaming down her face and smudged kohled eyes, an appalled Alankrita shrieked in terror and attempted to cover herself with her bare hands.

Dasavana’s act of depravity overpowered Alankrita’s resistance. Seeing her

unwillingly submit to his authority gave Dasavanakoka sadistic pleasure. Using all his force, Dasavana pinned Alankrita to the bed and stripped her down to nothing. Seeing her curvaceous, naked body, Dasavana couldn't restrain his carnal desires and immediately disrobed himself till his bare, muscular body touched Alankrita's.

Uncharacteristically, Dasavana gently caressed Alankrita's body before the beast in him awakened. Hapless Alankrita's pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears as Dasavana blatantly disregarded her supplications and placed his left hand on her mouth to muffle her moans while he groped her breasts with his other hand.

But the ordeal was far from over. Dasavana, to fulfil his dream of an heir, spread Alankrita's legs apart and tied them with a rope to the corners of the bed before thrusting his manhood with bestial force. The white silk bed sheet was covered with a mixture of blood, sweat, tears and semen. Alankrita was in excruciating agony and lay lifeless on the bed, but that didn't prevent Dasavanakoka from continuing his perverse act.

Removing his hand from her face, Dasavana kissed Alankrita while tightly holding her hair in one hand and scratching her bare back with the other. Biting on her red, luscious lips, Dasavana felt elated at deflowering her. Realising his long-cherished dream of his successor, Dasavana finally came to a halt.

Cringing in pain, Alankrita heaved a sigh of relief. Little did she know that Dasavana had no plans of relenting.



Meanwhile, Mohan was not very far from his destination—the Istripuram cave, which was surrounded by tall trees and dense wild grass that almost reached his waist. It was surprisingly a silent night. Not even the buzzing sounds of insects and cries of other nocturnal creatures could be heard. The eagle was now hovering over one cave; it flapped its wings vigorously to inform Mohan of the exact location.

No sooner had Mohan taken a few strides than he felt someone lurking around. Apprehensive of the slightest activity, Mohan turned to ascertain if all was fine. However, he was aghast to see half-a-dozen Kaal Sarps—led by the handicapped Shuka—emerging from the dense foliage.

Enraged at the audacity of Dasavana's men, Mohan attempted to string his bow. But, he was a lone warrior pitted against seven demons. Mohan had been cornered from three sides and even if he could slay the ones standing in the centre, there was no way he could save himself from an attack by the remaining Kaal Sarps, strategically positioned on either side.

Rannvijaya was nowhere to be seen. He must have flown ahead to see if there was anything else that was concealed and could prove worthwhile, thought Mohan. As the Kaal Sarps took out their bows and arrows and aimed at him, Mohan felt completely disillusioned. How could he die when he possessed the Kodanda? How could he be slain by a group of abhorrent creatures, whose leader he had himself defeated? How could he, the one destined to vanquish Dasavana, meet such a tame end? As his mind was filled with a plethora of questions, Mohan felt that one could not change destiny and if destiny willed that he was to die, nothing or nobody could change it.

“Hahaha! Mohan, I have been eagerly waiting for this day—the day I would have my revenge on you! I have been smarting over the crushing defeat you handed my men that killed my brother leaving me bereft of an able hand. Today is when I will make you pay for it. Drohkaal informed me that you had gained knowledge about the path leading up to the magical wheels but as luck would have it, we beat you and brought them under our possession,” Shuka laughed maniacally while explaining his diabolic plan and revealing the five golden wheels in his custody.

He may have been unable to alter the course of destiny, but that wasn’t going to prevent Mohan from inflicting severe casualties to Dasavana’s army. With the Kodanda in his hand, Mohan strung the bow and as he did so, a magical golden arrow appeared on its own, much to the bewilderment of the Kaal Sarps.

Nimble and skilfully, Mohan shot the arrow that hit the intended victim, piercing his throat. With one of their men killed, Shuka immediately gave the call to fire the arrows and the other Kaal Sarps dutifully obeyed their leader’s command.

This was the end. There was no doubt about it. As a bevy of arrows came his way, Mohan closed his eyes and prayed to the almighty for his friends’ victory in this mission and made a plea for Dr. Chandra, Professor Suryamurthy and Samaira’s well-being. Soon, Mohan felt the arrows striking his armour, and the attack was followed by loud moans and excruciating shrieks.

But, the moans weren’t his.

Opening his eyes, Mohan was pleasantly surprised to see that his body was unscathed, and, all the Kaal Sarps were lying dead with arrows jutting out of their chests. Amazed, yet, disturbed by the strange occurrence, Mohan observed a look of dread on Shuka’s face when, suddenly, everything began to make sense.

The arrows had indeed been aimed at his chest and had struck him too, but what the Kaal Sarps were ignorant about was the fact that the armour was made from the body of Tambadevi—the evil Goddess who turned everyone to copper

statues. She had been defeated at the hands of Mohan and, thus, was incapable of inflicting further atrocities. However, the armour made from her body still possessed superpowers that helped deflecting the arrows, rendering the Kaal Sarps lifeless.

Mohan was certain that Jayadev was aware of the inherent powers even a lifeless statue of Tambadevi possessed and had skilfully crafted the armour keeping in mind such future perilous situations.

A triumphant smile appeared on Mohan's face even as he saw the eagle encircling the sky. Buoyed by the re-emergence of his friend as well as his recent spate of good luck, Mohan looked a frightened and daunted Shuka in the eye. If looks could kill, Shuka would have been a dead man.

Realising his sword was no match for the miraculous armour and the wondrous bow in Mohan's possession, the panic-stricken demon dashed off in a bid to save himself. But Mohan was not going to let this opportunity go waste.

"Shuka!" Mohan harangued at the top of his voice, causing the terrified Kaal Sarp to turn around.

"I wasn't waiting for any revenge. But today is the day you shall die!" Mohan's voice thundered. He raised the Kodanda, strung it and aimed at the hapless victim.

Shuka ran as fast as he could, but there was little he could do to outrun the arrow that surged through the air at breakneck speed and took the demon's head along with it for miles ahead.

Rannvijaya assumed his human form and heaving a sigh of relief, embraced his friend and apologised for unknowingly deserting him in the face of adversity.

Shrugging off the matter, Mohan thanked him and Jayadev for saving his life.

"You knew about the powers the armour contained, didn't you?" Mohan asked and Rannvijaya could only pass an acknowledging smile.

Then, turning his attention towards a more pressing issue, Rannvijaya advised Mohan to carry the wheels to the spot where the chariot had been hidden. While Mohan carried two of them, the burly Rannvijaya held the other three and together, they went straight to the place where Mohan had concealed the remaining wheels, next to the chariot.

As they finally arrived at the spot—safe and secure—Mohan immediately commenced preparations by fitting the wheels to the chariot.

After half-an-hour of toil and perseverance, Rannvijaya and Mohan were able to fasten the wheels to the chariot, giving it the most extraordinary appearance. With four wheels in front and four at the back, the chariot, now supported by the sturdy wheels, seemed ready for use when Mohan and Rannvijaya were gravelled by the situation they had landed themselves in.

The repair work had infused life in the chariot but something else troubled Mohan. “What was to become of the remaining two wheels?” he spoke.

“Maybe, we could use them as weapons or as a potent defence mechanism ala Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata,” Rannvijaya suggested, nonchalantly.

“I sincerely hope the dreaded situation doesn’t arise in the first place. But...” Mohan rubbed his chin while deeply contemplating the matter.

“But what?”

Mohan stared at Rannvijaya as if he had found a cure to a life-threatening ailment and went on to apprise his friend.

“Vibhishan had clearly stated that the chariot would move only when we ascribe a specific name to it, the origin of which lies in the Ramayana. The implicit meaning, therefore, is the chariot does not require horses to pull it. That leaves us with only one place where we should position the remaining wheels—right in front of the chariot, as if the wheels were the horses!” Mohan revealed.

“What an astute analysis, Mohan!” Rannvijaya commented, clearly in awe of his friend’s incisiveness.

Mohan passed a gentle smile to acknowledge his friend’s compliment before the duo completed their remaining work. With all the ten golden-coloured wheels attached to the chariot, the vehicle looked majestic, befitting a warrior of Mohan’s calibre. It was while the duo was admiring the magnificence of the chariot that Mohan intimated Rannvijaya about Shuka’s threats and how he had acted upon Drohkaal’s orders.

With a sarcastic look on his face, Rannvijaya commented, “Oh, so the elusive Drohkaal finally made an appearance!”

“Well, they are all the same for me. I am yet to encounter vicious and savage entities like Dasavana and Vinashkale; so, Drohkaal’s appearance or disappearance hardly baffles me. In fact, Shuka and Vipreet Buddhi are the only two important and power-wielding Kaal Sarps I have set my eyes on thus far,” replied Mohan.

The moment Mohan uttered the names of Vinashkale and his son, Vipreet Buddhi, Rannvijaya’s face underwent a drastic change in expression. Mohan was quick to notice this change and immediately questioned his friend.

After a brief pause, Rannvijaya responded,

“I am afraid, the news isn’t pleasant. Akhand, the captive Commander of Princess Alankrita’s kingdom, informed Jayadev and me that the destruction of the fort and the death of the devious father-son duo are interrelated.

In addition to what we had earlier communicated to you, Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi can only be slain if their heads collide with each other and fall within the confinement of the fort. This is the sole way of decimating our

enemies and demolishing the fort in a single blow.”

Before Mohan could react to the recent piece of information, an arrow whizzed past the unsuspecting duo and struck a tree with tremendous velocity. Both the men turned around to find a Kaal Sarp in the distant background scampering away to safety even as Rannvijaya gave chase.

Deeming the chase to be futile, Mohan called back Rannvijaya, who gave up his pursuit and returned. On a closer look, Mohan and Rannvijaya saw a white cloth—concealing something reasonably big—tied to the arrow.

The two men turned to each other, fearing a sinister conspiracy. Mohan asked Rannvijaya to go and check what was hidden under the white cloth. As the latter removed the cloth, both Mohan and Rannvijaya were horrified by the sight.

Stunned into silence, the two friends stood open-mouthed at the gruesome sight before tears welled up in their eyes. Concealed within the white cloth—fastened to the arrow—was their friend and confidant Nagarjuna’s severed head!

Mohan let out an anguished cry as he shook his head in dismay. He was the one who was destined to slay the malefic Dasavanakoka and his inability to do so had cost Nagarjuna’s life. Blaming himself for his friend’s death, Mohan fondly remembered Nagarjuna’s sorcery skills and knowledge that had often aided the group in overcoming tough challenges.

In fact, he was the only one who had voluntarily accompanied the men in their perilous pursuit without expecting anything in return. Despite the grievous injury caused by a fatal crocodile attack, Nagarjuna had remained resolute in his decision to accompany them and was even prepared to lay down his life for the sake of their success.

While Mohan was immersed in thoughts, an equally dispirited Rannvijaya noticed a scroll lying on the ground, adjacent to the tree. Curious to know what it contained, Rannvijaya unfurled the scroll and read it aloud.

*This is only the first casualty,
In your doomed endeavour lie more difficulties.
Arrive at Bhavan Dasavana tomorrow morning,
Before your companions go into a state of grieving and mourning.
Remember, this is only the first head,
But failure to arrive shall render all your friends dead!*

It was evident Dasavana had himself committed this abhorrent act, but what was far more perturbing was the fact that Pawan and Raj were still in his captivity. Even though he was distraught, Mohan knew he had no time to shed tears and the only tribute he could pay Nagarjuna was by avenging him.

With a silent fury visible on his face and resilience in his eyes, Mohan rallied his courage and devised a plan to trounce his adversaries.

“Rannvijaya, return to the fort and escape at any cost at the break of dawn. We have to rescue our friends before Dasavana and his Kaal Sarps inflict further torture upon them,” Mohan spoke before whispering something into his friend’s ear.

Rannvijaya nodded his head in acknowledgement, but raised a pertinent question.

“But, how are we going to decipher the chariot’s name?”

Mohan placed his hand upon his friend’s shoulder and attempted to assuage his doubt.

“We still have three hours till the break of dawn. I shall wrack my brain and reflect on the matter and god willing, we shall be able to crack the code.”

Rannvijaya smiled helplessly, uncertain of Mohan’s success at deciphering the chariot’s name as well as their victory. He was about to assume the form of an eagle when Mohan blew the bugle to announce war.

“And remember, tomorrow, we prepare for battle. Dasavanakoka should not be alive to see tomorrow’s setting sun!”



In the form of an eagle, Rannvijaya soared over the sky and hovered above the impregnable fortress when he saw Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi entering the fort.

“Today’s events shall be a severe blow to Mohan and his friends,” smirked Vipreet Buddhi, much to his equally wicked father’s delight.

“Yes. Not only did we capture three of Mohan’s friends and managed to kill one of them, Shuka informed me that he and his men had also managed to hide the Kodanda in the hut. And of course, how can we forget the solemnisation of our great king’s marriage to Princess Alankrita,” Vinashkale laughed, viciously.

“Father, now that the location of the missing wheels has also been revealed to us, what fate shall we assign to Akhand?”

“The poor soul has served his purpose. It is time to rid him of his lamentable existence. I assure that you shall be the one bestowed with the honour of terminating him. Wait for me till I return from the chamber after offering my prayers to Tambadevi,” Vinashkale revealed his diabolic plan.

As Vinashkale headed towards the temple chamber, flanked by two of his guards, completely unarmed in the swarthy night, Rannvijaya wished he could assume his human form and slay the fiendish demon. However, he had to restrain himself for the conditions relating to Vinashkale’s death and the demolition of the fort were severe impediments in this mission.

A few minutes later, Vinashkale ordered the guards to halt and entered a cave with an opening on top, which provided Rannvijaya with an aerial view of the proceedings. The temple, like Tambadevi herself, was more frightening than peaceful. The ground was barren and strewn with human skulls, animal carcasses and a trail of blood next to a monumental rock statue of Tambadevi. It was at the feet of this sculpture that Vinashkale ignited a fire and commenced his prayers by chanting out hymns in the Goddess' honour.

Seeing his enemy immersed in prayer, Rannvijaya at once realised that this was the time to reunite with his friends and apprise them of the situation at hand. Flying towards the dungeon, Rannvijaya returned to his human form on reaching the ground. Opening the glass slab, he descended the stairs and broke the dreadful news to his friends.

Cast down and demoralised, albeit for different reasons, the duo couldn't bear the outcome of the tragic events. While Jayadev mourned the death of his friend Nagarjuna, Akhand was devastated on being informed of Dasavana and Alankrita's marital union.

"Fie upon me for being unable to prevent the dastardly act," Akhand censured himself.

Rannvijaya attempted to comfort his friends when Akhand revealed another piece of information.

"It can only be termed as the cruel quirk of fate because a few months ago, Princess Alankrita had managed to win the confidence of a Kaal Sarp, who had then come to the dungeon to convey her message to me.

"'Akhand, be careful. Dasavanakoka is not...' barely had the Kaal Sarp uttered these words when he was shot down by a bevy of arrows fired at him. What Princess Alankrita was trying to convey shall forever remain a mystery to me," Akhand rued when Rannvijaya galvanised his friends into a combative mode.

"Vinashkale is seeking Tambadevi's blessings, but the moment he is done with his prayers and Tambadevi does not appear, he shall at once become aware of her fate. Vipreet Buddhi, meanwhile, awaits the opportunity to slay you, Akhand, with his bare hands once his father returns. The sun shall rise in a couple of hours from now and I want the two of you to be well prepared. Vinashkale will only return at sunrise as Tambadevi's powers are at its zenith during the night," Rannvijaya informed before divulging his plan in detail.

Once he had apprised his friends of Mohan's detailed plan, Rannvijaya began to exit the premises, causing a surprised Jayadev to question his friend.

"Where are you going?"

With an impish grin on his face, Rannvijaya responded.

"To get my mace!"



A few hours later, a distraught Vinashkale entered his chamber where he was greeted by his son, Vipreet Buddhi.

“What happened, Father? You appear extremely disturbed. What is it that has discommoded you?” Vipreet Buddhi asked his father, who sat on his bed, demoralised, holding his face in his hands.

With a sigh of despair, Vinashkale spoke in a morose tone.

“Son, the greatest source of our power, the Goddess from whom we derive all our strength—Tambadevi—has been vanquished and turned into a statue by Mohan!”

Vipreet Buddhi stood aghast. His immediate menacing plan had suffered a setback. Still, wanting to verify the truth, he requested his father to ascertain this assumption.

“I wish it was an assumption, my child. I prayed to Tambadevi for our success, but she did not appear. And it was prophesied that the only reason for her absence—after our offerings to her—would be her death!”

There was complete silence in the chamber. The darkness was gradually fading away and the first rays of the sun were now visible. It was at this point that the father-son duo was interrupted by a call to Vinashkale by someone who addressed him as father.

Surprised and alarmed by the cries, the father-son duo rushed towards their sprawling balcony that gave a magnificent view of the city outside the well-guarded fort. As they arrived at the scene, they were horrified to see a man disguised as Vipreet Buddhi, seated on a chariot driven by none other than Akhand.

The appalled expression on the faces of Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi was precisely what Jayadev—disguised as the choleric Vipreet Buddhi—had eagerly desired to see. On another occasion, he would have certainly attempted to brainwash Vinashkale into believing that the man standing next to him was an imposter. But Jayadev had a task to execute and aware of the paucity of time, he merely waved at the evil pair that stood on the balcony, terrified.

Once he had successfully accomplished his initial task, Jayadev instructed his charioteer, Akhand, to pull the reins and ride the chariot at breakneck speed. As if on cue, Akhand obliged immediately and without further ado, rushed towards the gates of the fort.

Unnerved and enervated by this grave development, Vipreet Buddhi—with fists clenched tight and anger visible on his face—rose to the challenge and hastened towards his chariot. Fortunately for him, he, unlike his father, was

attired in his armour, carrying all his weapons with him.

Seeing the enemy escape and seething with rage, Vipreet Buddhi gave chase. Jayadev and Akhand were racing against time to reach the gates. They hoped that the guards would open the gates on seeing Vipreet Buddhi and sincerely prayed that they would not see the real Vipreet Buddhi in hot pursuit. Even if they did, Jayadev was armed with a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

As luck would have it, the guards saw the masquerading Vipreet Buddhi heading for the exit and immediately opened the gates for him to pass, unaware of the fact that close on their heels was the true Vipreet Buddhi, crying himself hoarse, trying to caution the guards on duty.

Eventually, the guards realised their folly on seeing an infuriated Vipreet Buddhi charging towards the gates with his sword in hand. But, it was too late! Jayadev and Akhand had already exited the fortress and surged ahead on the barren tract of land adjacent to the forest.

However, their courage began to dwindle with Vipreet Buddhi in an unrelenting pursuit. The fact that Rannvijaya was nowhere to be seen and that they were travelling in the direction of Dasavana's palace didn't make things easier.

Meanwhile, the unfolding action was being viewed by an agitated Vinashkale from the balcony of his chamber. Unknown to him and the rest, someone else was also surreptitiously viewing the action with equal interest and awaiting an opportune moment to strike.

As Jayadev, now in his original form, and Akhand raced ahead, Vipreet Buddhi's chariot came to a screeching halt. With terror in his eyes, he saw a man emerging from the forest with a bow in hand, whose arrow was directly aimed at him. Such was the expression on the archer's face that Vipreet Buddhi momentarily became oblivious to the boon his father and he had been blessed with and began fearing for his life. The magnificent bow was the Kodanda and the ruthless archer blocking his path was none other than Mohan!

The eagle perched near an unclaimed mace. The moment the bird landed, it changed its appearance and in a matter of seconds, Rannvijaya stood at the spot with the mace in his vice-like grip, positioned directly perpendicular to Vinashkale's balcony.

Vipreet Buddhi was now completely cornered with Mohan standing a few metres ahead of him and Rannvijaya at some distance, behind. In the meantime, he had regained his composure and scoffed at Mohan's threat. However, he was in for a rude shock as Mohan mounted the arrow and fired at him.

Within a couple of seconds, the arrow severed Vipreet Buddhi's head. Such was the velocity with which the arrow had been fired that Vipreet Buddhi's head

was flung in the air, a few metres behind his chariot. This was the moment both Mohan and Rannvijaya had been eagerly waiting for.

The instant when Vipreet Buddhi's head was about to cross the spot where Rannvijaya stood, the latter hurled his mace with immense force at the severed body part and so immaculate was his aim that the mace struck its target and flung the head straight towards a distraught Vinashkale. Realising the imminent danger, Vinashkale rushed for cover, but, unfortunately for him, it wasn't to be.

Even before Vinashkale could move an inch, his son's head collided with his own and fell on the ground. For a second, all was quiet and Vinashkale heaved a sigh of relief. But his joy was short-lived because a huge fire engulfed the palace without any warning and the entire fortress was up in flames in no time. Moments later, the fortress came crashing down with a massive explosion and was reduced to rubble.

As the fire raged on, Rannvijaya rushed towards Mohan and embraced him for devising such a potent plan. As the duo celebrated, an elated Jayadev too, joined in the celebrations. Once the brief celebrations had ceased, Jayadev introduced Akhand to Mohan.

"I am extremely honoured and fortunate to have personally met our deliverer, someone who shall bring the tyrannical rule of the Kaal Sarps to an end," Akhand spoke with eyes that reflected great respect and gratitude for the destined redeemer.

But before Mohan could reply, Rannvijaya posed a pertinent question to him.

"But, how were you able to arrive at the spot at so fast?"

With a smile on his lips, Mohan asked his friends to follow him. Barely had they walked a few steps into the forest when Mohan cut a few branches with a single stroke of the Bhawani and uncovered a breathtaking view.

Concealed behind a few trees and surrounded by tall grass, stood the ten-wheeled chariot, radiating in all its magnificence. Rannvijaya almost jumped with joy on realising that Mohan had managed to decipher the name, after all.

"You did it, my friend! You were able to ascertain the chariot's correct name!" He said, beaming from ear-to-ear.

"So, what is this ten-wheeled chariot's name?" he asked.

Mohan proudly climbed atop the chariot and addressed his friends.

"For more than two hours, I kept guessing what the name could be before realisation dawned on me. Friends, what was a chariot referred to as in our epics?" Mohan asked.

"Rath! It was called a Rath!" Jayadev replied.

"Correct. This Rath or chariot is ten-wheeled. By what name is the number ten known as?"

“Dus, of course,” responded Rannvijaya.

“Absolutely right, my friends! The chariot’s name has been derived from the name of an extremely important character in the Ramayana, Lord Rama’s father—DusRath!

As all the three men marvelled at Mohan’s intelligence, the wheels of the chariot began to rotate on their own and the DusRath was automatically set in motion.

“Where do we go from here?” Jayadev asked, while mounting his chariot along with Akhand and Rannvijaya.

With an undaunted expression in his eyes and confidence in his body language, Mohan replied, “To Bhavan Dasavana! It is time to put Dasavanakoka to permanent slumber!”

Face Off!

Bhavan Dasavana had been turned into a fortress. Every Kaal Sarp in the fort was armed with the best weapons ranging from razor-sharp swords and battle axes to sturdy maces, bows and arrows.

An army of more than two-and-a-half thousand menacing Kaal Sarps stood at the palace gates to repel all attacks from Mohan and his friends. The tension was palpable. The infantry—standing at the entrance adjacent to the moat infested with crocodiles—had been given clear instructions to launch an offensive the moment Mohan and his men came in close proximity.

The Kaal Sarps’ authority had been challenged for the first time and they were only going to respond by annihilating their enemies.

Moments later, Mohan and his friends arrived on their respective chariots and—at first sight—were unnerved by the huge strength of the enemy. As Mohan stood fazed, Jayadev and Rannvijaya smiled at each other as if to acknowledge that their friend was after all a mortal and bound to think like an ordinary human being.

As Mohan brought his chariot to a halt, Jayadev called out to him. On turning, Mohan saw both, Jayadev and Rannvijaya, alighting from their chariot and walking towards him.

“Don’t be daunted by our enemy’s size. It is true they are unmatched in strength; it is true they are unequalled in size; but, it is also true that we are unrivalled in our courage, valour and perseverance. Continue waging your war against Dasavana and his army of Kaal Sarps, the gods shall be with you!” the celestial gatekeepers assuaged his worries.

Jayadev and Rannvijaya's encouragement worked like a magic potion and restored Mohan's lost confidence. Convinced of their success in this mission to vanquish the evil, a sure-footed Mohan gave out the war cry and advanced towards the enemy camp.

As Mohan surged ahead on his ten-wheeled chariot—the DusRath—he knew that force and tact would have to be combined to seal a victory in this unevenly-matched battle.

Suddenly, bringing his chariot to a halt, Mohan surprised his friends and enemies alike.

Haranguing at the top of his voice, Mohan challenged the enemy.

“During my journey, I have heard tales of your unmatched skills in warfare. But, I am yet to come across a single person who has complimented either your king or any of you on your courage and fairness.

“I know fairness isn't a term that is generally ascribed to a battle or war, but today, I present you with a unique opportunity to redeem yourselves. This is an opportunity for you to go down in history as fair, courageous and exceedingly-skilled soldiers.”

After the announcement, Mohan kept the Kodanda aside and stepped out of his chariot, much to the horror of his three companions. He took a few strides and stood right in front of the Kaal Sarps, albeit, a considerable distance away.

“You all are armed while I stand before you without a single weapon. My cause is sacred to me and I am prepared to die for it. I beseech you to call upon your best 50 archers to take aim at my chest, for only the courageous can kill by attacking from the front. I assure you I will not even contemplate an attempt to defend myself,” Mohan affirmed.

Suddenly, there was commotion within Dasavana's army as the Kaal Sarps debated the consequences of their actions as well as the legitimacy in Mohan's claims.

Mohan knew he was exposing himself to great risk. Though aware of the Kaal Sarps' impeccable aim, Mohan was confident that the unsuspecting enemy would easily fall into his trap.

Soon, a decision was made. In the absence of their king and eager to please him, the Kaal Sarps decided to take Mohan's bait and dispatched their most-skilled archers to eliminate their unarmed enemy.

Fifty Kaal Sarps formed a semi-circle and took aim. It was precisely what Mohan had hoped for but Rannvijaya and Jayadev, extremely anxious at the turn of events, witnessed the scene while mouthing a silent prayer.

The arrows were fired. For a few seconds, all seemed lost. The victory of the Kaal Sarps was inevitable, or so it seemed. But, that was only till the arrows

collided with Mohan's armour. The next moment, the Kaal Sarp army was in disarray, aghast at the sight of their co-soldiers and friends being killed by their own arrows. The barren battleground turned crimson with the blood of the fallen soldiers.

The Kaal Sarps were running helter-skelter, scampering for safety. They had to be galvanised once again. And there was only one man who could do it—Dasavana!

From a cloud of smoke, the scourge of Mohan's mission, Dasavanakoka emerged. Attired in his silver-coloured armour, Dasavana stood at the same spot where he had chopped off Nagarjuna's head the previous day.

"So, we finally meet," the king remarked, causing everyone to come to a standstill.

Mohan remained stoic. Neither was he compelled nor did he have any desire to exchange pleasantries with his fervent adversary. He had arrived at Bhavan Dasavana either to be slain or to slay; he would settle for nothing less.

Noticing Mohan's defiance, Dasavana decided to unleash his wrath on his nemesis. And the best way to do so was by slaying Mohan's friends. As the cloud of smoke rescinded, Mohan saw his friends, Raj and Pawan—who had been subjected to severe torture—bound by a rope, waiting to be struck down by Dasavana's sword.

Mohan immediately became aware of Dasavana's devious intentions and he knew he needed to act fast. He rushed towards his chariot to pick up the Kodanda to engage Dasavana in combat and save the lives of his friends even though he was aware that he had to be suspended in air or make his chariot fly to kill the evil king.

But barely had he set foot on his chariot when he heard a blood-curdling scream. As Mohan turned around to see what had transpired, he saw that his worst fears had come true.

Blood oozed from Pawan's mouth as his eyes protruded in agony. Standing next to him was Dasavana with a forbidding expression on his face that gradually turned into a sinister smile. He had thrust his razor-sharp sword deep inside Pawan's belly and was slicing him up, mercilessly. As Pawan fell on the ground, Dasavana set his bloodthirsty eyes upon his next victim—Raj!

Shocked and outraged, Mohan seized the Kodanda and took aim at the abominable king before further harm could be inflicted on his friends. Unfortunately, for Mohan, Dasavana was quick to scamper for safety in the nick of time. But, the damage was done. The arrow had struck his left arm causing the invincible king great distress. Incensed at Mohan's temerity, Dasavana held on to Raj and jumped several feet down, narrowly escaping the rapacious crocodiles

waiting to devour any piece of meat thrown at them.

“Count the last few minutes of your life. I shall kill you after I have slain this friend of yours you call the deliverer!” Dasavana threatened Raj before surging towards Mohan.

With fury in his eyes, Dasavana hurled his sword at Mohan. The sword slashed Mohan’s leg, causing it to bleed and making him lose balance. In the process, Mohan lost his grip on the Kodanda and saw the most fearsome tyrant the world had known in ages, charging towards him.

Slave to his irascible nature, Dasavana had rendered himself unarmed by hurling his sword at Mohan. Rannvijaya and Jayadev had noticed this, and though aware of the fact that Dasavana could not be killed, Rannvijaya rushed towards the DusRath to hand his friend the Bhawani in a bid to at least ward off Dasavana’s immediate scathing attack.

Dasavana grabbed Mohan, who had fallen on the ground, and flung him away. Mohan landed on his head with a thud. His ribs made a cracking sound as he fell and Mohan was certain he had broken a couple of them. The dust from the ground had entered his mouth and as he spat, he saw blood in his spit. Barely had Mohan recovered from the blow when he saw Dasavana’s shadow following him.

Turning around, Mohan landed a forceful kick on Dasavana’s chest. Stunned by the swiftness of the attack, Dasavana howled in pain. This gave Mohan some respite and he swung his fist with all his might at the ignoble soul’s jaw, causing the abhorrent king to spit out a couple of teeth in the tussle.

Dasavana was injured, but he nevertheless, relentlessly chased Mohan. This was the moment Rannvijaya had been waiting for.

“Mohan!” he hollered before flinging the Bhawani at his friend, as Dasavana closed in on him.

Cognisant that an error in judgement could cost him his life, Mohan prepared to attack Dasavana, but no sooner had he turned than the latter collided with him. As Mohan and Dasavana stood in close proximity, they could smell each other’s breaths. Dasavanakoka’s facial expression underwent a drastic change from one of disdain to that of pain and anguish.

It was while Mohan was trying to fathom the reason of his opponent’s distorted expression, he realised he had managed to inadvertently thrust the Bhawani into Dasavana’s stomach. Blood oozed from the king’s body as he fell on his knees to the ground, covered in a puddle of his own blood. Seizing the opportunity that fate had offered him, Mohan pulled out the sword from Dasavana’s belly causing the blood to flow more copiously. Then, mustering up all his strength, Mohan passed a scornful look at his wounded enemy, swung his

sword and severed Dasavana's head.

Dasavana's lifeless body fell to the ground while his head rolled in the dust. As the Kaal Sarps watched in horror, Jayadev and Akhand rushed to embrace and congratulate their friend on his success. Amidst this atmosphere of elation and confusion, Rannvijaya carried the bruised and wounded Raj to safety.

"You did it, Mohan! You fulfilled the prophecy by slaying Dasavana!" Akhand jumped in jubilation.

However, the other three men were visibly puzzled.

"Dasavana has been slain. So, was all the talk about Dasavana's three boons a mere hogwash?" Mohan asked.

"The tale about Dasavana's boon cannot be a lie, else we wouldn't have been able to find either the Kodanda or the DusRath," commented Jayadev, twitching his eyebrows.

"If the tale is true, then, how has Dasavana been killed right in front of our eyes?" Akhand questioned Jayadev.

"Dasavana cannot die so easily," spoke Rannvijaya.

"But he has been killed! He is the same asura, who had ravaged and ransacked our kingdom and abducted Princess Alankrita and me," Akhand tried to convince them.

"We are all aware of what Shuka, Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi looked like. Dasavana and Drohkaal are the only two Kaal Sarps we hadn't encountered before." Mohan told his friends.

"But I saw him with my own eyes yesterday," an exhausted Raj managed to put in a word.

With a perplexed expression on his face, Rannvijaya probed further.

"What are you trying to imply, Mohan?"

"Suppose all that was known to us was a lie. What if we were on the wrong trail since the beginning? Maybe, it was a big game and we were mere pawns being controlled by someone else."

"But, that is impossible. He is the one who mercilessly severed Nagarjuna's head and subjected Pawan and me to unspeakable torture," Raj put forth his argument, but Mohan remained unmoved.

"That is precisely my point, Raj! It was all part of a well-devised plan to fool us. If he is dead, he cannot be Dasavana!" Mohan replied in a grave tone before adding, "Friends, we have been gulled. This man is not Dasavana. He is the elusive, General Drohkaal!"

A shiver ran down everyone's spine after Mohan uttered the ominous words.

"This means my King and I merely assumed he was Dasavana since he was leading the army! It all makes sense. We could hear Drohkaal's name being

uttered at several times during the war but not once did we see him. How foolish we were to not realise that while we tried searching for him, Drohkaal, and not Dasavana, stood right in front of us. But, if he is Drohkaal, then who is Dasavanakoka?" Akhand asked with a grim expression on his face.

Suddenly, the clouds grew darker. The temperature had dipped considerably and a chill in the air announced the presence of a malefic entity. The wind lashed hard and a dust storm ensued. Jackals, hyenas and wild dogs began to howl. As the group braved against the turbulent weather, the cries of the wild animals were doused by a sinister laugh.

"Hahahahaha!"

As Mohan and others looked up to ascertain the identity of this malicious being, they could hear a maniac laugh coming from the topmost floor of Bhavan Dasavana.

"Are you searching for me?" the menacing voice roared.

Within seconds of the voice asking the question, an enormous reflection formed in the dark sky. As the reflection began to take shape, Mohan was haunted by a familiar sight—a sight he had witnessed on previous occasions and had no desire of reliving.

The entity was dressed in a silky raven black robe that covered the shadowy figure from head to toe, concealing its identity. It was the same dark force that had visited Mohan while he had been reading about Jaya and Vijaya's fate, at home.

"Who...Who are you?" Akhand asked while trying to muster up courage.

"Hahaha! I am who I am, you silly fool!" the voice boomed, before the entity finally removed the hood and revealed his face.

The entity had a swarthy complexion, menacing dark green eyes, handlebar moustache and long, flowing, curly locks that almost reached his waist. The sinister expression on his face scared the living daylights out of Mohan and his friends.

However, the face seemed somewhat familiar. As the group tried hard to recognise the man whose reflection peered at them from the sky, a chill ran down their spine when Raj uttered...

"Nagarjuna!"

"Hahaha! I truly pity you, O foolish men, for I am not Nagarjuna. There was never any Nagarjuna. It was always I who was accompanying you, the greatly revered and feared—Dasavanakoka!"

Lightning struck, the winds grew angrier and the men grappled to come to terms with the shocking betrayal. Nagarjuna and Dasavana were the same person!

“You are Dasavanakoka? If you are indeed Dasavana, why would you want to accompany us?” Raj asked.

“So that he may be aware of each and every turn we took. He was always one step ahead of us and we were always two steps behind.” Mohan sighed.

“But, then, why wait till such a long time to exterminate us when he could have easily slayed us much earlier?”

“Yes, he could have. But, the truth is he always wanted us to arrive here. He wanted us to come to his kingdom, armed with the Kodanda and DusRath, so that he could annihilate us and take away all the weapons and vehicles that posed a serious threat to his life. These were things he couldn’t have found otherwise and therefore, he let us reach the shores of his kingdom,” rued Mohan.

“But, don’t forget that though he tried his best to control his nature, it was difficult for him to abstain from harming us. How else would Shuka and the other Kaal Sarps have got to know of our hideout atop the Anjaneyar Parvat? He was the one who requested us to let him rest on the ship while all of us continued with our journey. Don’t you remember how he also withheld all information about Tambadevi?

“Furthermore, he was the only member who joined our journey without a specific motive and even saved us from, guess what, a King Cobra. Or shall I say a Kaal Sarp!” Mohan added in dismay.

“Absolutely! Which is why the Kaal Sarps could reach before us and claim the remaining five wheels since Akhand had revealed the information of its whereabouts to Pawan, Raj and him in the dungeon,” Rannvijaya added.

Everything seemed crystal clear in retrospect; the group wondered why they couldn’t spot the mole in their ranks before.

However, a few doubts remained.

“But, if he was playing a game with us all along, what was the need for him to drink the poisonous water of Jalahal and get himself attacked by a crocodile?” Jayadev questioned.

“Probably, he never drank the water from Jalahal and only feigned death. As far as the crocodile is concerned, it was all an illusion. The crocodile bit his leg which gave him an opportunity to carry a staff with him, much like the wooden staff he always carried—and still carries with himself—due to his limp,” Mohan replied.

“And what about his severed head? We both saw his severed head, didn’t we?” Rannvijaya asked.

“If you remember, he had informed us that he is a sorcerer. Surely, the severed head was nothing more than a petty act for a sorcerer of his stature,” Mohan answered while shaking his head in disbelief.

“Of course, it all makes sense now. Pawan and I were wondering why did Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi address him as ‘Sire’ instead of ‘King or Maharaj’, and why did Dasavana speak in the third person? Vinashkale and Vipreet Buddhi were in reality addressing their Commander-and-Chief Drohkaal and the person whom we thought was Dasavanakoka wasn’t Dasavana in the first place!” Raj revealed.

“And Princess Alankrita’s message also makes perfect sense now. The messenger she’d sent could only convey *Dasavana was not...* before he got killed. It is certain that he had come to reveal Dasavana’s true identity to me. This means Princess Alankrita already knew what Dasavana looked like,” Akhand said.

“Last, but not the least; on the night of your abduction, he had revealed that Nagarjuna wasn’t his real name. Do you remember what it was?” Mohan asked.

“Yes, I remember. It was Anavasad,” Jayadev responded.

A wry smile appeared on Mohan’s lips as he addressed his friends.

“At every step, he handed us clues to ascertain his identity, but we were the ones who weren’t able to smell a rat and failed miserably!”

“Why do you say that, Mohan?” Rannvijaya probed.

“Spell Anavasad backwards and you shall have your answer!”

“What would it be? Anavasad spelt backwards would be D-A-S-A-V-A-N-A!”

Raj stood horrified at his own discovery. The others too realised their fatal folly.

“Bravo! I must confess I am impressed by your detailed analysis. If you weren’t my enemies, I could have possibly offered you a position in place of Shuka and Sarana,” Dasavana mocked them.

“Enough of this nonsense now! My secret shall soon die with all of you,” he spoke virulently and galvanising his men, instructed them to massacre the paltry group.

Infused with new-found energy and confidence, the Kaal Sarps rushed towards the outnumbered visitors.

Tense and on the brink of defeat, Raj sought answers from his friends.

“What do we do now? How are we going to ward off this attack?”

“Do not fear, my friend. You shall now see the power of God,” spoke Rannvijaya and together with his companion Jayadev, summoned his celestial powers to create a safety valve around them.

The valve which looked like a gigantic bubble encased them like a force field.

As Akhand heaved a sigh of relief, Jayadev informed the men about the special attributes of the force field.

“This bubble that you see around us shall not only make us immune to any attack, but shall also let us launch an offensive against our enemies!”

Barely had Jayadev apprised his friends of the uniqueness of the valve that the Kaal Sarps began hurling their weapons at them. Long and short, sharp and blunt, weapons of all shapes and sizes were thrown at them from all directions. So vicious was the attack that the men were surrounded by complete darkness for a few minutes.

However, with Lord Vishnu’s gatekeepers accompanying the men, wonders could never cease. All the weapons hurled at the group were sucked in by the valve, leaving more than half the Kaal Sarps unarmed while Mohan and his friends remained unscathed.

Umbrageous at the outcome of his strategy, Dasavana resorted to cunning.

“Listen, my obedient Kaal Sarps,” he addressed them.

“These men have used sorcery and deceit to protect themselves. But if they wish to dabble in sorcery, they must remember we are the undisputed masters of this craft and it is time we proved it to them!

“Kaal Sarps, the time is ripe to assume your true forms. Leave your human body and transform yourselves into something you were always destined to be—The Great Snakes!”

Dasavana’s rousing speech worked like magic. As Mohan and his friends stood diametrically opposite to them, they witnessed a surreal and an unnerving sight. The Kaal Sarps were shape-shifting from their human forms to that of snakes. Cobras, pythons, boa constrictors, rattle snakes and anacondas of various shapes, sizes and colours slithered on the ground, advancing towards their enemy.

Mohan, Akhand and Raj were least perturbed by the futile tactics of the Kaal Sarps.

“When their deadly weapons turned out to be rather otiose, what success do mere snakes have breaching our safe force field,” Akhand added, sardonically.

But for some strange reason, Jayadev and Rannvijaya didn’t seem to share their thoughts. Their pale faces and sombre expressions told a completely different tale and Mohan was quick to notice the worry lines.

“What is the matter, friends? Is everything all right?” Mohan asked, concernedly.

“The wily Dasavana has launched his most potent weapon against us!” Jayadev expressed great apprehension, baffling Mohan.

“What do you mean?”

“What he means is the safety valve will be rendered useless if birds and reptiles attack us. The moment these poisonous snakes spew their venom at the

valve, it will immediately collapse and render us defenceless,” a disquieted Rannvijaya informed the group.

The snakes, meanwhile, slithered towards them with their forked tongues, hissing away, intending to unleash a brutal attack on their adversary.

Mohan drew out the Bhawani in a valiant attempt to slay as many snakes as he possibly could. The sword was the only weapon that could eliminate several snakes in one single stroke, but, unfortunately, the Bhawani was the sole sword Mohan and his friends possessed.

As the snakes approached the valve, the friends heard a shrill, hollering sound. As they looked at the sky, they saw a figure hovering over, before it took a nosedive.

“What is that?” Akhand asked in disbelief.

For the next few seconds, no one spoke. As Mohan looked at the sky, a surreal sight astounded him.

“It’s Garuda!” Mohan revealed.

Jayadev’s eyes brightened and a beaming smile appeared on his face.

“He is here. Lord Vishnu has sent his mount to save us. The prophecy has come true,” he spoke in jubilation.

“What prophecy?” Mohan asked.

“Don’t you remember? It is the prophecy I had informed you about while we were in Sahastapur. It was the one related to a gigantic bird that would swoop and fly across the Sarayu, ordaining the mighty river to return to its original course and thereby redeem Sahastapur of its age-old curse, upon the death of an unknown sorceress. Tambadevi was the sorceress and after you defeated her, this was bound to happen, Mohan.

“Look at the direction from where the Garuda flew. I am certain the great bird has already redeemed Sahastapur. Your grandfather, Ekashringaji, would be a relieved man today, all thanks to you, Mohan!” Jayadev added, elated at the turn of events.

As Jayadev embraced Mohan, the Garuda, an enormous golden-coloured eagle, almost 40 feet in height with a pointed red beak, sharp claws and big, wide eyes landed on the ground. As it did so, it grabbed more than a thousand venomous snakes in its beak and claws and flew away, leaving Dasavana astounded.

“This had to happen! Garuda is a sworn enemy of the snakes and accords them no mercy. He had even killed many of his wicked stepbrothers who were all snakes born to Kadru—Garuda’s stepmother—who constantly tormented and subjugated his own mother as a slave,” Rannvijaya announced.

But the danger had not been averted yet, for more than a thousand other

snakes were still trying to send Mohan and his friends to their doom. However, fate had other things in store. Moments later, the mighty Garuda emerged again and flew straight towards the snakes to devour them.

Outraged and incensed at the sudden turnaround, Dasavanakoka hurled his most potent weapon and pointed it at the unsuspecting bird. The weapon was known as the Tambastra, which was granted to Dasavana by Tambadevi herself. The weapon possessed the power of turning its intended victim to copper upon impact; much like what Tambadevi was herself capable of doing.

As Mohan and the rest understood Dasavana's conspiracy, Mohan called out to the great bird and pointed towards the Tambastra the treacherous king had flung at it. In a split second, Garuda turned and caught the hurled weapon in its beak. Turning its neck towards Dasavana—who stood stupefied—Garuda passed a baleful look at the king before breaking the weapon into two.

Without wasting more time, Garuda then proceeded towards the snakes with vehement impetuosity and after grabbing all the remaining snakes in its beak and claws' grip, flew away.

Dasavana was rattled, fazed and at a complete loss. Soon after Garuda had flown away, a deafening silence prevailed on the battleground that led to an impasse between the two camps. On the one hand, while Dasavana had been divested of all his forces, Mohan on the other hand, could do very little since Dasavana was out of his firing range and there was no possibility of his chariot taking wings.

What was to follow, nobody knew. As the stalemate continued, Mohan suddenly smiled with great hope and relief, much to Dasavana's bewilderment. But soon, all became crystal clear as the great king saw a shadow looming over his palace. It was none other than Garuda, who had once again made a grand entry. But this time, his target wasn't Dasavana, but Mohan himself.

As the humongous mythological bird swooped down on him, Mohan closed his eyes in fright. Everything was dark for the first few seconds till he finally opened his eyes and saw his friends—Raj, Rannvijaya, Jayadev and Akhand—but, they seemed miles away from him. Mohan realised that Garuda had not attacked him but merely lifted him—along with the DusRath—on its back, high up in the air.

This was the opportunity Mohan had been waiting for. This was the answer to the question that had plagued his mind. This was the moment for which Mohan and his friends had undertaken this perilous quest.

He held the Kodanda in his hand. He was standing on the DusRath. And he was suspended in the air with Garuda's support. What had seemed like an imminent defeat a few minutes ago had suddenly turned into a foreseeable

victory for Mohan.

Without further ado, Mohan prepared himself for the final strike. But, Dasavana wasn't going to accept defeat easily. As Garuda soared towards the flag that concealed Dasavana's throbbing heart, a queasy Dasavana aimed another Tambastra, this time at Mohan.

But Mohan was aware of the impending danger and astutely ensured that the weapon touched his armour. And as it did so, the weapon instantly returned towards Dasavana and pierced his right wrist. Obviously, Dasavana wasn't going to feel any pain or turn to copper because of the several boons he had been bestowed with, but that split second gave Mohan the time to stand diametrically opposite to the flag.

As he pulled the string of his bow, he saw panic and fear writ large on Dasavana's face as the latter gaped incredulously at his fast-approaching death.

Mohan looked at Dasavana's pounding heart atop the Bhavan Dasavana and exclaimed, "I always knew you were a heartless individual!"

Then, he pulled the string of the Kodanda and aimed the arrow straight at Dasavana's heart while a heavy downpour ensued.

The moment the arrow struck the centre of Dasavana's heart, there was lightning and thunder. Blood oozed out of his heart and the flag was drenched in red. Dasavana's eyes bulged out and his face bore the expression of a mighty ruler who couldn't come to terms with his end. As the heart stopped throbbing, Dasavana's body collapsed and fell from the balcony of his chamber.

But before his body could be devoured by the edacious crocodiles, Mohan thrust his Bhawani into the king's back and tossed his lifeless body onto his chariot.

As a victorious Mohan stood on his chariot with the bow in his hand, supported by Garuda, flowers were showered on him from the skies by the devas, whom he could not see. Humbled by the blessings, Mohan thanked them for blessing him.

As he looked down, his friends cheered him on and danced with great joy. Mohan, an ordinary college student from Delhi, had achieved the impossible. He had succeeded in this perilous adventure against all odds. His enemy had been slain and now lay at his feet, never to open his eyes again. Mohan Sharma had risen like a true hero and vanquished Dasavanakoka, the scourge of this earth, forever.

Return to Rameswaram

Mohan saw a shadowy figure move inside Dasavana's palace chamber. Almost involuntarily, Mohan raised the Kodanda and commanded the entity to show itself, threatening it with dire consequences upon failure to accede to his order.

Trembling, the shadowy figure took small steps and gradually appeared in front of Mohan. The moment Mohan saw the entity, he was mesmerised. There was something angelic about her face that enchanted Mohan. Mohan felt he had seen her somewhere before, but wasn't certain.

Without a change in his attitude, Mohan commanded the lady to reveal her identity.

"I am Princess Alankrita, the widow of Dasavanakoka," she answered.

Once the princess revealed her identity, Mohan's mind travelled back to the portrait he had unveiled at Ekashringa Sharma's residence in Sahastapur. As he stared at her, Mohan observed an inherent sadness in her eyes and felt as if his presence—the Kodanda—was intimidating her. However, experience had taught him not to have blind trust on anyone, for all he knew, this could be another scheme of Dasavana and the woman might be an imposter.

However, the way she carried herself; the anguish coupled with a sense of relief visible on her face convinced Mohan that she was indeed the princess who had been tormented by Dasavana.

Extending his hand towards her, the gallant warrior displayed chivalry and escorted her onto his chariot—the DusRath. With the princess in safe hands now, Mohan requested Garuda to proceed towards the spot where Pawan's body lay. Garuda wilfully complied with the request and landed next to where Pawan had been impaled.

Alighting from his chariot and leaping towards the ground, Mohan embraced his friend as he lay dead in a puddle of blood. Tears welled up in Mohan's eyes at the fate meted out to his knowledgeable friend, a person of a lower-caste, whose only desire was to study the holy scriptures but had been persecuted by others on his endeavour.

With a heavy heart, a dismayed Mohan placed Pawan's body on the DusRath. Garuda landed gently, the DusRath was off its back and Mohan and Princess Alankrita alighted, thereafter.

Standing on the ground, Mohan thanked the revered mythological mount of Lord Vishnu—Garuda—whose timely intervention and assistance had turned the tide in their favour. Garuda acknowledged his gesture and flew away.

It was moments after Mohan had thrown Dasavana's lifeless body on the ground, the dark clouds began receding. It had stopped raining; the winds blew gently and the rising sun marked the dawn of a new era.

As Princess Alankrita and Akhand exchanged glances, neither of them could

overcome their emotions and rushed towards each other. Tears trickled down the duo's cheeks as they embraced, happy to be reunited. For the first few seconds, none of them let go of each other till realisation dawned upon Princess Alankrita. She had been married to Dasavanakoka and he had outraged her modesty the previous night.

Distancing herself from Akhand, Alankrita stood ashamed and fearful. Akhand was quick to gauge the sudden change in Alankrita's body language and probed the reason for the same as Jayadev and Raj prepared to pay their last respects to their friend, Pawan.

"I...I..." fumbled Alankrita before recounting the events of the previous night.

The revelation extracted an adverse reaction from Akhand, who retraced his steps in utter shock.

"Never mind, Alankrita. Now that all of us are here, we must solemnise your marriage with Akhand," Mohan intervened.

"But, wasn't she supposed to marry you?" Rannvijaya asked.

With a wry smile on his face, Mohan replied, "No, she was never supposed to marry me. Destiny and fate have several things planned for us, but it doesn't mean we blatantly disregard human desire. I was never in love with the princess for there is only one woman who captivates my heart—my girlfriend, Samaira. As for Alankrita, she had never even seen what I looked like, how would she have fallen in love with a stranger? I am grateful that we met Akhand, whose heart beats for the princess and vice versa. I never undertook the journey to marry Princess Alankrita, but only to rescue her from Dasavana's captivity." Mohan replied.

"But, I cannot marry Princess Alankrita now," a distraught Akhand said in a deadpan voice.

"But why, Akhand? Isn't she the woman you love and have always yearned for? Then, what stops you now when there is no hurdle in your union?" Mohan asked.

"Because she is no longer...no longer...celibate! After her sexual intercourse with Dasavana, she is no longer chaste and I cannot marry an unchaste woman," he replied in a high-pitched tone.

"Akhand, which century are you living in?" Raj asked with an incredulous expression on his face and immediately bit his tongue, for not only were Akhand and Raj centuries apart, they were probably, several millennia apart as well.

It was at this point that Mohan walked up to Akhand and placing his hand upon the latter's shoulder, showed him reason.

"Akhand, we are all aware of Dasavana's immense power. When you, being an able warrior yourself, couldn't ward off his attack, how could the princess

have spurned his advances without facing severe consequences? Look at her face and you will realise the trauma and pain she had to suffer in this palace. Look into her eyes and you will discern the undying love she feels for you. True love happens only once in a lifetime and lucky are those who can rekindle their romance.”

“But, according to Salman Khan’s film, Lucky had *No Time For Love* !” Raj quipped in his own inimitable style bringing an instant smile to Mohan’s face even as Akhand and Alankrita wondered who Salman Khan was!

Realising the truth in Mohan’s words, Akhand walked up to Alankrita and apologised for his rude and chauvinistic behaviour. Alankrita forgave him immediately and embraced Akhand.

“He’s alive, Pawan is alive!” Jayadev exclaimed, suddenly. “Yes, he is alive. I can feel his heart throbbing,” he added with a smile. With renewed hope, his friends rushed towards their severely injured friend. Suddenly, they heard a crackling sound. On turning, each one of them witnessed a strange and surreal sight. Dasavana’s body was slowly turning into large pieces of stones. As the group watched in amazement, Dasavanakoka’s body was broken down into eight rocks of equal size.

Perplexed at this phenomenon, Mohan turned towards Rannvijaya for guidance.

“Go, claim your destiny!” Rannvijaya spoke before handing out a key to Mohan.

“This key! This is the same key that adorned our ship’s flag, isn’t it?” Mohan asked in surprise.

Smiling, Rannvijaya assuaged his friend’s query, “Yes, it is the same key. This key possesses celestial powers and shall help you claim your destiny. Rub this key against the stones, and as you do so, each stone will reveal an alphabet that shall help you arrive at what fate has planned for you. However, I am unaware of the number of stones that will reveal these alphabets to you. With every successful mission, more alphabets shall be revealed to you. But remember, you shall stop the moment a stone fails to provide you with an alphabet,” Rannvijaya cautioned.

Fascinated by the stupendous prophecy, Mohan took the key and rushed towards the rocks that lay one on top of the other. Surging ahead with giant strides, Mohan picked up the first rock and scratched it with the key handed over to him.

As soon as he did that, he saw the upper layer of the rock give way to another layer until it revealed the first alphabet.

“K!” Mohan blurted out.

“Go on, Mohan!” Rannvijaya encouraged him.

Buoyed by the encouragement, Mohan picked up another stone and rubbed the key. To his surprise, the stone once again displayed the same letter.

“It’s a K again!” he revealed to his friends.

Then picking up the next rock, Mohan began scratching it again. But this time, his efforts proved futile.

“Nothing’s happening. This stone isn’t revealing any letter,” he told Rannvijaya in frustration.

“Then proceed no further. You are not destined to know anything more. Whatever has been revealed must suffice,” Rannvijaya instructed him to stop.

“KK! What could KK possibly mean?” Mohan muttered to himself.

“Which KK are you referring to? The actor or the singer?” Raj laughed, much to Mohan’s irritation.

Rather than responding to his friend’s ludicrous remark, Mohan concentrated and pondered what ‘KK’ could possibly mean.

After cogitating on the issue for some time, Mohan’s facial expression changed and there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“I have found it! I have found it!” Mohan shouted in excitement.

Seeing his friend’s happiness, Jayadev asked Mohan what ‘KK’ meant.

“KumbhaKaran! Yes, KK refers to KumbhaKaran, indeed! I now realise each and everything that Vibhishan had conveyed to me. Everything is crystal clear!” he exclaimed in jubilation.

“What is clear?” Rannvijaya asked, confused.

“I now know why the archaeologists have been unable to unearth and find the rocks used by Lord Rama’s monkey army, thus far. They have been unsuccessful in their endeavour because they had been searching the wrong place. The rocks lie below the ocean bed which is composed of the remains of Kumbhakaran’s body—deposited into sedimentary rocks over thousands of years. His body had fallen on top of the bridge of rocks, into the ocean, carrying the rocks along, beneath him,” Mohan revealed, leaving each and everyone astounded and open-mouthed.

“Quick! We do not have much time. We must return to our own time-zone to save Pawan’s life and ensure that my uncle’s mission doesn’t end up a failure,” Mohan told his friends.

“But, didn’t you inform me our ship has been destroyed? I am afraid, I don’t have any celestial power left with me,” Rannvijaya replied, visibly perturbed.

“Never mind, friends. Thankfully, I still have one more power left and we could use this to teleport ourselves to our own time-zone,” Jayadev replied and eased everyone’s stress at this crucial juncture.

Turning towards Alankrita and Akhand, who painted a happy picture together, Mohan blessed them with his best wishes.

“With Dasavana dead, his empire needs a strong and an able ruler who shall restore peace and order throughout the kingdom. As Dasavana’s slayer, I proclaim you as the next ruler of all territories that had once been administered and ruled by Dasavanakoka. Be a just ruler and keep your subjects happy. And, yes, never forget to take care of your beautiful companion, Princess Alankrita. And in case you are ever besieged by trouble, do not fret for a friend of mine shall always be there to advice you,” Mohan smiled and hugged the couple.

“Which friend are you talking about?” Akhand asked.

Mohan smiled impishly and replied.

“You shall know in good time!”

Soon, each one of them mounted the DusRath with Pawan’s body carefully placed beside them. Closing his eyes, Jayadev commenced, chanting a few hymns and the DusRath began to rise in the air, enshrouded in layers of smoke. Akhand and Alankrita watched the fascinating sight with great admiration while bidding adieu to their friends.

As Mohan and his friends departed from the magical and dangerous land of Trahimam, Mohan saw a man standing in the forest, waving him goodbye. Even in victory, Mohan never forgot to thank the man who had made it possible by enlightening and guiding him. Bringing the attention of his friends to the man standing far away, Mohan revealed his identity to them—Vibhishan! All the friends folded their hands and bent their heads in gratitude before the smoke surrounded them and the men could only see pure white light.



The white light gradually receded and as the men opened their eyes, they saw themselves standing in New Delhi’s Safdarjung Hospital. The Kodanda had disappeared, the DusRath was nowhere in sight and their attire had changed as well. While Jayadev and Rannvijaya wore white and fawn-coloured kurta pyjamas, respectively, Raj and Mohan were dressed in jeans and polo neck sweaters.

Pawan was still battling for life and needed immediate medical attention. A doctor was summoned, and Pawan was shifted to the operation theatre.

It was while Mohan and Raj were anxiously waiting for the surgery to get over that Rannvijaya walked up to them.

“I suggest the two of you return home. Your family members will be eager to meet you,” he said.

“But how can we leave Pawan in this state?” Mohan asked.

Allaying his friend's concern, Rannvijaya assured him that Jayadev and he would take care of all the formalities and that he needn't worry.

"But, what happened to the Kodanda and the DusRath?" Raj asked.

"Don't worry about them. They have returned safely to where they belong—Lord Vishnu's abode, Vaikuntha!"

"Fascinating! We have committed such heroic deeds, I just wish we were handsomely rewarded for it," Raj said.

Rannvijaya just smiled and patted Raj on the back.

"Mohan, I shall message you the doctor's mobile number and I will keep you updated about Pawan's health," Rannvijaya added.

Mohan nodded and addressed the celestial duo before departing from the hospital premises.

"We will meet our family members and try leaving for Tamil Nadu as soon as possible, after which we shall reach Mumbai to handover the Bhawani to the National Museum authorities before finally going to Sahastapur, again, to inform my grandfather of our adventures."

"Mohan!" Jayadev called out while Raj and Mohan prepared to leave.

"We have a confession to make," he added sheepishly before continuing.

"Ekashringaji was never your grandfather. According to the Ramayana, Queen Kaushalya, married to King Dashrath—Lord Rama's father and the man after whom your chariot was named—gave birth to a girl called Shanta."

"What? King Dashrath had a daughter as well?" Mohan asked, extremely surprised as he had never heard about this before.

Jayadev smiled and continued.

"Yes, he did have a daughter called Shanta, who was later married off to a sage. Several years later, when Dashrath was desirous of having sons, he performed a yagna on Sage Vashishtha's advice. Once the yagna was over, Agni Dev, the Fire God emerged and offered kheer to Dashrath and instructed him to distribute it evenly among his wives. Kaushalya ate one portion and gave it to Sumitra, who ate a quarter and handed it to the next queen, Kaikeyi. Even after Kaikeyi had eaten her fill, there was still some kheer left which was eaten by Sumitra once again. Thus, while Kaushalya and Kaikeyi gave birth to one son each, Rama and Bharat respectively, Sumitra gave birth to two sons, Lakshman and Shatrughan. The yagna was performed under the guidance of the same sage who was Shanta's husband."

"Interesting! But how is it related to us?" Mohan probed.

"The name of the sage who married Dashratha's daughter and performed the yagna was Ekashringa. Yes, the same Ekashringa who posed as your grandfather. As legend goes, when Lord Rama was entering the waters of the Sarayu in a bid

to give up his body, many residents from Ayodhya and Sahastapur accompanied him to attain heaven.

“However, suicide is considered a sin, and because these people had sinned, but, had yet attained heaven, justice wasn’t served. Unfortunately, the village of Sahastapur was destroyed, but the spirits of the people lingered. In a bid to accord salvation to those who had entered the Sarayu and those who had died when the village was destroyed, it was necessary that a sage returned to the village and Ekashringaji volunteered. Garuda helped in completing his task after Lord Vishnu sent his mount to bless the people and offer them a place in heaven.

“The entire village of Sahastapur was an illusion. However, it was necessary for you to have visited the place at least once because only your arrival and possession of the Kodanda could have ensured the completion of salvation,” Jayadev revealed.

Both, Raj and Mohan were stunned at this revelation.

“True. Religion, hard work and good deeds are the three essential elements that bring out the true virtues in man. Lord Rama possessed these qualities and attributes, which is why the three elements still bear his name—DhaRAMA, ParishRAMA and KaRAMA!” Mohan responded.

“Bravo, Mohan! You have truly understood the language of love and tolerance that Lord Rama stood for as opposed to those who use his name to commit religious atrocities. The gods certainly made a wise decision and chose the right person to carry out their task,” Jayadev and Rannvijaya spoke in unison and patted him, before Mohan left the premises with Raj.



There was a knock on the door of the Tandon residence. An attendant opened the door and welcomed the visitors.

Professor Suryamurthy was engrossed in a lengthy conversation with Mr. Shashi Tandon about Mohan’s disappearance and the mystery surrounding it. Samaira and Mrs. Tandon were seated in their sprawling garden, soaking up the sun in the chilly month of November. All four of them were enjoying a sumptuous brunch.

Prima facie, the feast laid out would befit a celebration, but it was just the way the Tandons lived. They were used to the best in life and had impeccable tastes. Mr. Tandon was a self-confessed food connoisseur, having tasted different cuisines during his travels around the world over the years. However, despite the lavish brunch, the mood was sullen and tension was palpable.

Samaira, especially, was extremely perturbed.

“When will Mohan return? I sincerely pray for his safe return,” she muttered to herself.

As if on cue, the orderly entered the frame and spoke to the senior Tandon.

“Sir, we have a couple of visitors,” he said.

Being an influential and important man, Shashi Tandon was no stranger to visitors and even encouraged people, especially common citizens, to come to his office—situated within his residence—to apprise him of their problems. “I am, after all, a public servant!” he would always say.

“Fine. Take them to my office and I shall meet them, shortly,” the minister replied.

With great hesitation on his face, the orderly mustered up the courage to disobey his master’s orders.

“Sir, the two gentlemen say that their work is extremely urgent and cannot wait. They have requested me to inform you of their desire to meet you here itself,” the orderly replied.

Tandon grew suspicious. What was the pressing need of his visitors that they could not wait for a few minutes? Were they genuinely public citizens or men with an agenda on their mind? Attacks and assassinations were nothing new for politicians and Mr. Tandon could not afford to put his family’s safety at risk.

“Have the guards properly checked the men?” he asked, suspiciously.

“Oh yes, Sir. They are not in possession of any arms,” the orderly replied, knowing well what his master meant.

Comforted by the response, Tandon granted the men permission to enter the premises. After having received an ‘okay’, the orderly left to inform the men.

A few seconds later, the two men entered the shaded patio adjacent to the lawn where the Tandons were seated. Samaira sat with her back towards the door, but as luck would have it, she directly faced the mirror placed on the opposite end of the boundary wall. As the two visitors entered the premises, Samaira managed to catch a glimpse in the mirror and her heart skipped a beat.

Excitedly, she got up and rushed towards them.

“Mohan!” Samaira almost startled the others with her excitement.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she embraced the love of her life, despite her parent’s presence. Mohan rubbed her back to soothe her and gave her a reassuring hug. There was a visible expression of relief on Professor Suryamurthy’s face as he stood up and hugged Raj.

“Where were you? Do you have any idea how worried we were?” Samaira chided Mohan as tears trickled down her cheeks.

Addressing everyone, Mohan spoke, “I shall explain everything to you, but not right now. We need to reach Rameswaram as soon as possible before the

mission is declared a failure and the secret of the Ramayana is buried forever!”

“I do not think there are any flights after a violent cyclone hit several parts of southern India. Fortunately, it subsided yesterday and the governments of the affected states have begun the rehabilitation process, but I am not sure if this is the best time to go there,” the professor commented, sceptically.

“Believe me, Sir. Even if it is the worst possible time to reach Rameswaram, we must go there or future generations of this country will continue to remain embroiled in the debate regarding whether the Ramayana was fact or fiction,” Mohan beseeched Professor Suryamurthy.

“Unfortunately, my private jet is under repairs. But, fortune favours the brave, and you certainly are brave, Lakki. The good news is my personal helicopter is available and you could use that to reach Rameswaram,” informed the style-exuding minister, much to Mohan’s relief even though he wasn’t pleased with the name Tandon used to address him.

Within an hour’s time, the helicopter was ready to take off and accompanying Mohan on his journey were Samaira, Raj and Professor Suryamurthy.

“Sir, it shall take us a few hours to reach Rameswaram,” the pilot informed before commencing.

As the helicopter hovered, Mohan explained every detail of their perilous adventure to Samaira and Professor Suryamurthy, who heard the amazing tale with great interest.

“Unbelievable! These were certainly strange and life-threatening adventures you encountered, Mohan!” Professor Suryamurthy commented.

With a look of pride in her eyes, Samaira grabbed Mohan by the arm and staring at him, commented, “I always knew you were meant for greater things in life. The way you carried out your mission, it not only confirms your valour and courage, but, also reveals your astuteness and compassion!”

“Hey! I was there too!” Raj interrupted, feeling neglected.

“Of course, sweetheart! What would Mohan have done without you? Let us return to Delhi and I promise, I shall be on the lookout for a hot girlfriend for you,” Samaira winked.

Raj blushed while the rest cracked up on seeing him build castles in the air.

“So, where is the Bhawani?” Professor Suryamurthy asked with great interest.

Mohan showed him a black-coloured cricket kit that they had brought along and unzipped it to give his girlfriend and professor a glimpse of the historical sword wielded by Shivaji.

A few hours later, they entered the territory of Rameswaram. The intensity of destruction and wreckage was appalling. As the chopper descended, Mohan asked the professor about his uncle’s whereabouts.

After much thought, Professor Suryamurthy responded.

“He said it was the largest government school around, but I don’t think he mentioned the name.”

“Never mind! I think the information shall suffice. If I remember correctly, Chachu had informed me that his office was near the Adam’s Bridge. I think the school should be somewhere close by.”

And Mohan was right. After searching for another hour-and-a-half, the group was finally able to locate the school a few kilometres away from the Adam’s Bridge. The school was in shambles. The water had seeped through the walls and the people were stranded in knee-deep water with frogs for company.

Fortunately, the administration was doing a commendable job and evacuating people from the premises with efficiency. As Mohan and the others went from one classroom to another, they finally sighted Dr. Chandra standing in one corner of the room.

“Chachu!” Mohan shouted and waved his hand.

In his eagerness to meet his uncle, Mohan didn’t realise that the room was full of several other people, who were now staring at him.

Feeling visibly embarrassed, Mohan smiled at the other members in the room before Dr. Chandra made his way through the water and hugged the young boy, who was more than a son to him.

“Thank god you are safe, beta! How did you manage to return from an unknown territory?” he asked.

“Suryamurthy Sir will inform you about it, but first, I need to know the fate of your mission?”

With a dejected look on his face, Dr. Chandra replied with a sigh.

“We shall, unfortunately, have to call it off!”

“No, you can’t!” Mohan replied almost instantaneously, startling Dr. Chandra in the process.

By this time, Suman Agnihotri had also waded his way through water and was now standing next to his mentor.

“Here, meet Suman Agnihotri, the youngest archaeologist in our team,” Dr. Chandra introduced the young man to Mohan before coming back to Mohan’s uncharacteristic outburst.

“What happened? Why are you so adamant we continue our pursuit when we have been unable to discover anything concrete?” he asked, helplessly.

“Because you have been searching the wrong place, Chachu! Don’t you remember what Dr. S.R Rao, the former advisor at the Marine Centre in the National Institute of Oceanography in Goa, told you after returning from his successful mission to identify the submerged city of Dwarka?” Mohan argued.

“Mohan, I remember he had said that the rock formation connecting Rameswaram to Mannar would have submerged by now due to an increase in the sea level over the last 4,000 years. But the fact of the matter is we have already taken these factors into consideration.

“If we look at the statistics, experts have found that the ocean level in this region increased from 0.2 to 1.29 mm per year over the course of the past 7,000 years till date. This, effectively, means that when the bridge was built, the ocean level was approximately 3 feet below the bridge and over the years, there has been a 9-feet increase in the sea level implying that the ocean level is 6 feet above the bridge now!” Dr. Chandra responded with his analysis.

“Yes, ideally this would have been the scenario. But the truth is the ocean bed located 9 feet below is not the actual ocean bed because the real ocean bed is at least a few more feet under. When Lord Rama killed Kumbhakaran, his body fell into the ocean and the rocks were pushed below his body. The sediments you see are in fact the remains of Kumbhakaran’s body,” Mohan replied.

With an incredulous expression on his face, Dr. Chandra countered Mohan’s argument.

“Kumbhakaran’s body would have decayed by now!”

“If you are so keen on logically solving the issue, then, please explain how one man could hold a mountain on his head, another carry a mountain in his hand and a woman enter the fire and come out unscathed?” Mohan blurted out, admonishing his uncle for finding logic in a tale where people possessed supernatural powers.

For a few seconds, all was quiet before Dr. Chandra finally relented.

“All right, I shall go ahead with your plan. However, I have already conveyed my opinion on the matter to the Director General of ASI, Mr. Pravin Srivastava, and shall have to speak to him again regarding this recent development. The trouble is my phone has conked off!”

“Never mind, Sir. You can use my phone. Srivastava Sir’s number is stored in it,” Agnihotri came to the rescue.

Thanking Agnihotri, Dr. Chandra called the director general and informed him of the recent development while explaining his plan in detail. The director general, in turn, immediately called up the Prime Minister’s Office and explained the situation to them.

Despite his gruelling and hectic schedule, the Indian Prime Minister, who was himself taking keen interest in the mission, immediately called up the Sri Lankan President and explained the plan in greater detail.

The following morning, a joint mission was carried out between India and Sri Lanka and a total of 400 scuba divers, 200 each from India and Sri Lanka, were

sent to search for the elusive rocks spread over the 48-kilometre stretch.

Suddenly, there was hysteria in the country. Television channels were abuzz with the news of the Indo-Lankan expedition to unearth the rocks dating back to the Ramayana. Every house discussed this issue; while grandparents educated their grandchildren on Indian mythology, pundits and archaeologists deliberated on the subject on panel discussions in television studios.

Meanwhile, work had begun and the scuba divers had commenced the task assigned to them. Professor Suryamurthy, Mohan, Samaira and Raj anxiously awaited the results even as Dr. Chandra and Agnihotri, engrossed in their mission, refrained from giving sound bites to the hounding media.

Several hours passed and hope began to fade. The sun was going to set soon. It was while Mohan was immersed in thoughts that one of the scuba divers returned with a rock in his hand. As he approached Dr. Chandra, everyone's eyes brightened and a glimmer of hope reappeared.

Dr. Chandra took the rock and went inside a temporary shelter, along with his entire team, to examine it. Mohan had noticed something scribbled on the rock while it was being transferred from the scuba diver's hands to Dr. Chandra's; but, he couldn't see the written word clearly. Finally, after a few anxious minutes that seemed like hours, the door to Dr. Chandra's temporary office opened with a creaking sound.

One by one, all the archaeologists, led by Dr. Chandra, exited the room. There was a sullen expression on Dr. Chandra's face as he held the rock in his hand. A host of politicians, bureaucrats, media reporters, navy personnel and others stood alongside Mohan, waiting for Dr. Chandra's seal of approval.

Suddenly, Dr. Chandra lifted the rock up in the air and exclaimed cheerfully at the top of his voice, "We have found it!"

There was a resounding applause and people were overjoyed—complete strangers, embraced each other after hearing the news. After more than 7,000 years, the Ramayana had come alive, once again.

As Dr. Chandra thanked Mohan for his valuable contribution, the latter asked his uncle about the inscription on the rock.

"Under normal circumstances, it is impossible for a rock that has been immersed in water for more than 7,000 years to retain any inscriptions, but these rocks did. The inscription helped us verify the authenticity of these rocks."

"But, what is written on it?" Mohan asked.

Dr. Chandra smiled and replied, "What else, but 'Shri Rama'."

Soon, several drilling machines were brought in and a giant pole was erected on either side of the bridge. In addition, long chains were brought in. While half the rocks were transported to the Indian side, the other half was taken to the Sri

Lankan end. Then, each rock was drilled from the sides and the iron chain was connected through it. This happened on both sides of the bridge, with both countries as equal participants, till the process was complete and every rock was connected to the other along the whopping 48-kilometre stretch.

The Indian Prime Minister and the Sri Lankan President arrived a few hours later and on their signal, the chains were lifted and tied to the humongous pole that had been erected. And lo and behold, what stood in front of all of them was nothing short of surreal, magical and stupefying, for adjacent to the modern construction of the Adam's Bridge, glistened the refurbished 7,000-year-old Rama Setu.

Mohan was overcome by emotion, just like other spectators who had been marvelling at the miraculous event for the past few days. There was nationwide jubilation and the Prime Minister was hailed for his prompt action. While addressing the media, he expressed his desire to work with the Sri Lankan President and commence 'Ramayana Tours' for tourists and visitors, showcasing every place of importance connected to tale of Lord Rama.

Once the initial excitement had subsided, Raj and Mohan stood on the shore with the calm afternoon breeze gently caressing their faces.

"So, when do you plan to return the Bhawani, now that we have successfully completed our mission?" Raj asked.

"You know, Raj, I have been thinking about it. And after much deliberation, I finally realised we still have two more tasks to undertake; so, relinquishing the sword to the authorities at this point in time might not be the best idea!" Mohan smiled and Raj acknowledged his friend's decision with a thumbs-up sign.

"While exiting the hospital premises, Jayadev told me that Akhand had informed him of a sinister presence, far more vicious than Dasavana. He told me that it was this entity who had masterminded the entire show," Raj revealed.

Mohan raised his eyebrows and asked, "Now, who is this malefic presence?"

"No idea, brother. But, it is certainly someone we should be cautious of," replied Raj, as his phone rang.

"It's Chandra Uncle! I'll go to his office and return in five minutes," he said before rushing off.

As Mohan stood there, he wondered why neither Jayadev nor Rannvijaya had called him and informed him of Pawan's health. He took out his phone and called up the doctor, who had been treating Pawan.

"Doctor, I am Mohan Sharma, Pawan's friend. How is he doing now?" He asked.

"Mr. Sharma, your friend is under observation but he is in a critical condition. We are certainly trying our best, but to be honest, the chances of his survival are

rather bleak,” replied the doctor.

Mohan was dismayed on hearing this but he put up a brave front and asked the doctor about his two friends.

“Well, both the gentlemen, who had accompanied you left a day ago. It is surprising they didn’t call you up!”

Meanwhile, Dr. Chandra was in his office with two gentlemen when Raj entered.

“Raj, my boy, your prayers have been heard. Look, what the government has sent for you!” Dr. Chandra said, revealing a brown-coloured briefcase to him.

“What is it, Chachu?”

“Lauding Mohan and your effort, the government has decided to reward you by paying the both of you, Rs. 10 lakhs each!”

Raj virtually jumped in the air and immediately opened the briefcase to find ten bundles of Rs. 1 lakh each.

“And that’s not all! These two gentlemen want to interview you and Mohan as well,” Dr. Chandra added while pointing to the two men, who sat in front of him.

Raj looked at them and requested Dr. Chandra to let both the men give the briefcase to Mohan themselves. Dr. Chandra was surprised, but Raj assuaged his doubts. Reluctantly, Dr. Chandra agreed.

Soon, Mohan was joined by Samaira and the two lovers stood in front of the magnificent water-body and admired the beautiful sight. Having returned successfully from his mission, Mohan and Samaira were in each other’s arms, kissing passionately, when they heard a gentle coughing sound and withdrew immediately.

On turning, they saw two men attired in black suits, white shirts, black ties and sunglasses, standing there, holding a briefcase. Handing over the briefcase to Mohan, the men introduced themselves as reporters while the former wore an incredulous smile on his face.

“I am Jayadevan and he is my friend, Vijayaswami, and we have come to interview you, Sir.”

Mohan immediately recognised Jaya and Vijaya. With a quick nod of acknowledgement, Mohan requested them to begin the interview.

“Sir, we have only one question for you,” they said, together.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Sir, when will you be leaving in your pursuit of Lord Krishna’s Sudarshana Chakra?” they asked, in unison.

Staring at Samaira for a couple of seconds, before turning towards the two men, Mohan replied with an impish grin on his face.

“Soon...Very soon!”

Jai Shri Rama



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Acknowledgements

Writing the acknowledgments is one of the most enjoyable things an author can do. There is a feeling of satisfaction on having completed the book and yet there is palpable excitement pertaining to how it will fare in the market, commercially.

A lot has happened since the time I wrote the acknowledgements for my first book. God has been kind in showering his blessings on me, both as a writer as well as a literary agent. To be honest, one of the most important takeaways from this entire process has been— patience. I finished writing *Adventure One of The Vishnu Chronicles* around 8 months prior to the release of my first book, *The Bhairav Putras*, which released in May 2014. Why I feel my patience paid off is because my debut novel fared well, which gave me a reckoning in the literary sphere. And this reckoning, coupled with the fact that I set out and progressed steadily in my path as a literary agent with The Book Bakers, helped me sign a book deal with India's most reputed publishing house— Om Books

International.

The idea of *The Vishnu Chronicles* initially started off as a pure adventure fantasy series with no connection to mythology. But there was an inherent desire to bring to life the wonderful and mystical tales from Hindu mythology and amalgamate it with a contemporary setting in a bid to create something new and exciting that would appeal to all age groups, especially youngsters, who are desirous of knowing more about our epics. The fact that Lord Vishnu happens to be my favourite God (along with Lord Bhairav, of course!) and is someone who is yet to be explored as an individual character, separated from his avatars, helped me move in the right direction.

I can never thank my parents enough, for they are the ones who encouraged me to read and know more about our mythology. My mother, Kitty Mathur, used to narrate stories from our epics to me but now the tables have turned with me reading out the contents of my book to her. My father, Sanjeev Mathur, a well-known editor himself, helped me fine-tune my book.

As I always say, there is predominantly one person, who encourages me to write and that is my ‘wife’ (been just 10 days since I got married so, this will take some time to sink in), Sumedha Mathur. She read every chapter and shared her invaluable feedback with me.

A writer can never be a writer if there aren’t people who believe in their work. Fortunately, in my case, I had the support of two such individuals, the first being my publisher, the uber cool and extremely encouraging, Ajay Mago, with whom I have developed a wonderful relationship over the course of this book. He manages a plethora of literary activities with élan and a smile on his face; he is without doubt the coolest, sweetest and most chilled out publisher in our country.

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The list is incomplete without mentioning my editor, Ipshita Mitra. To be honest, an author is always sceptical regarding how he/she will gel with their editor but to my utter satisfaction, I must add that she takes her surname rather seriously and becomes a ‘Mitra’ or friend of the author. Extremely diligent and patient, many of her suggestions came in handy while preparing the final draft of the manuscript. Life is simple when you have an involved and understanding editor and she surely is one.

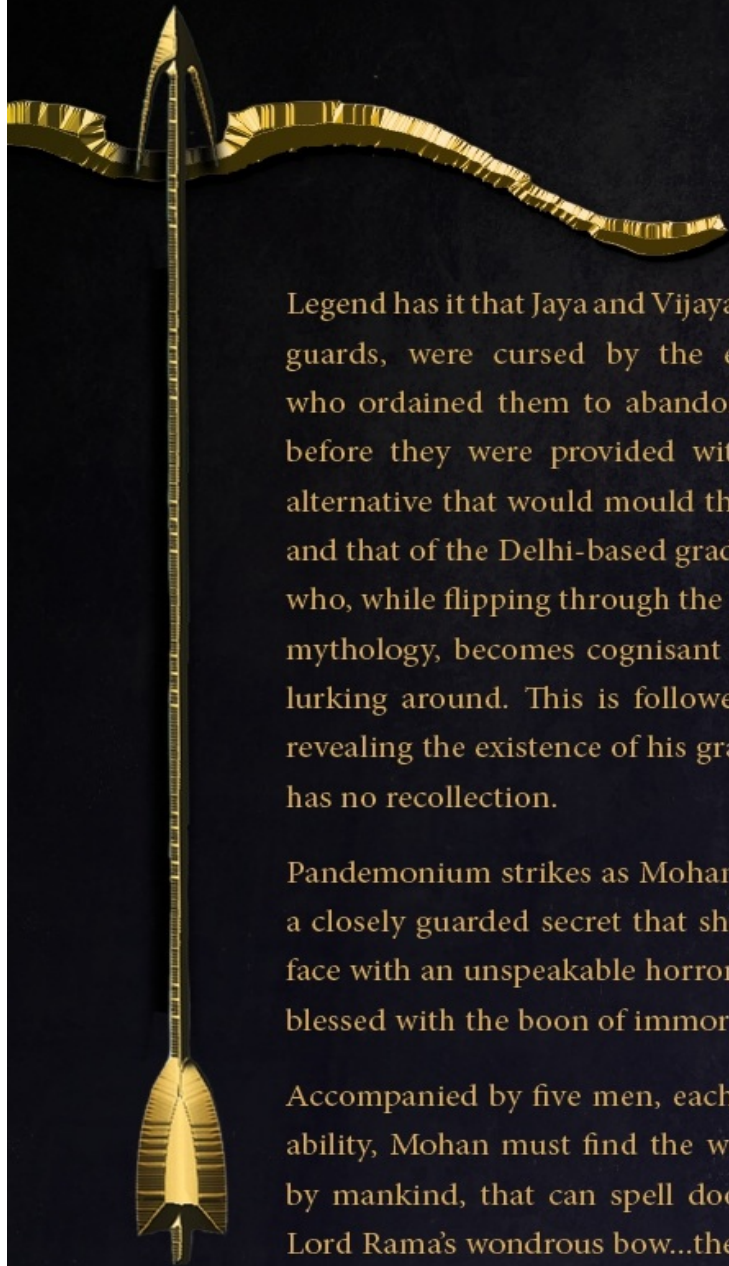
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Last but not the least, my reader, thank you for showering so much love and praise on my first book and more importantly, for purchasing this book. I hope it will be worth it.



Legend has it that Jaya and Vijaya, Lord Vishnu's palace guards, were cursed by the enraged Manasputras who ordained them to abandon Vaikuntha. But not before they were provided with an alternative—an alternative that would mould their uncertain future... and that of the Delhi-based graduate, Mohan Sharma, who, while flipping through the lesser-known pages of mythology, becomes cognisant of a sinister presence lurking around. This is followed by a cryptic letter, revealing the existence of his grandfather of whom he has no recollection.

Pandemonium strikes as Mohan unwittingly unravels a closely guarded secret that shall bring him face-to-face with an unspeakable horror, his adversary who is blessed with the boon of immortality by Lord Shiva.

Accompanied by five men, each possessing a distinct ability, Mohan must find the weapon, long forgotten by mankind, that can spell doom for his nemesis—Lord Rama's wondrous bow...the 'Kodanda'!

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