



# Lost Gem of the Nagas

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## 1. A Strange Experience

Addy walked slowly forward, right up to the edge of the cliff. He gazed down at the valley below, unable to believe his eyes. The hillside gently sloped down, a verdant green, undulating with exotic-looking plants and a few trees further down. He could see the sparkle of a stream winding its way down here and there between the foliage. Although this was all very beautiful in a surreal way, Addy had eyes only for what lay beyond, at the bottom of the hill. He took off his glasses, polished them on the end of his shirt, and rubbed his eyes to ensure he was really seeing what he was seeing. He put his glasses back on and looked again. The scene before him was unchanged – a beautiful shimmering city lay snuggled in the valley between two hills. It was neatly laid out in a grid with beautiful mansions, gardens, what looked to be a bathing tank, neat tree-lined roads, and a market. What really caught Addy's attention was the beautiful palace in the center. It had to be the size of at least four football fields put together. It was breathtakingly beautiful, not like any building he had ever seen before, gleaming golden in the sunlight. There seemed to be colored glass or gems all over it, in myriad colors. The other lesser mansions spread out over the city seemed topped by golden domes and turrets too. "A city made of gold? How impossible is that?" he asked himself.

He could see the inhabitants of the city going about their business. But this was another thing that made him uneasy. They did not look like typical human beings. Sure, they moved like humans and wore clothes and had torsos and arms like humans. But the similarity came to an abrupt end there. There seemed to be something wrong with their heads and/or legs. He could not make out what, from this distance, and it gave him the shivers. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a rustle in some trees nearby and something took flight, soaring into the air. Addy whipped around to look at it, nearly getting a crick in his neck, and his jaw dropped. It was an elephant, gliding up majestically high into the air and flying towards the city center. Addy felt dizzy and faint at the unexpected sight.

"Enjoying the view?" asked a husky drawling voice behind him. Addy whipped around for the second time, pivoting on the spot to look at whoever had spoken to him. A part of him was relieved to hear a human voice but another part apprehensive about what unanticipated surprise could



*be in store for him. It seemed to be a day of surprises. He could not imagine how he had gotten here and where 'this' even was. What he saw was beyond his wildest apprehensions. There, behind him on the forest track, a scant meter away from him, stood the weirdest creature he had ever set eyes on. He gazed dumbstruck at the fierce proud face with a golden crown, a strong warrior torso, and arms rippling with muscles. Both the torso and arms were covered with vibrant jewels. What shocked him, however, was the lower half of the man...er whatever it was. It had no legs. Instead, the lower half was a snake-like appendage on which the creature was gliding slowly forward toward him. It was too much to take in. Addy felt himself falling forward in a dead faint.*

“Aditya, are you done yet?.....Aditya? Where has the boy gotten to?” A podgy man in his 60s with an unsympathetic face stood in the doorway to the dingy filing room, peering around through his thick glasses. The room was full of filing cabinets in a maze-like pattern. He stepped in towards the desk at the corner behind the cabinet nearest the door and stopped in anger. “Just as I thought” he barked. “Shirking work and wasting taxpayers’ money. I knew he’d be no good as soon as I saw his degrees or rather lack of them, his casual clothes, and his inexperience,” he growled to himself. “ADITYA!!” By now the man was almost shouting, and the young man who was flopped forward on the desk finally seemed to stir. He sat up with a bewildered look in his eyes, glasses askew and hair rumpled, comprehension dawning slowly as he looked at the man he reported to at the government archeology office. “Ss...sorry Sir...must have fallen asleep,” he mumbled sheepishly.

He quickly righted his glasses on his nose and stood up respectfully. “Humph. Have you finished re-filing the contents of Alphabet N?” asked the irate man. “The...the re-filing?” Addy shook his head to clear it of sleep and what he felt was a scary dream and luckily found himself getting more lucid at last. “Er...no Sir. But I’ll get on with it right away. It’ll be ready in another hour, Mr. Kher,” he promised. That would be almost closing time. The superior looked Addy up and down contemptuously before saying, “It better be. There is an inspection tomorrow as you know, and you cannot afford to slip up at this stage of your career.” He trundled out of the room, leaving a relieved Addy alone.

The young man sank back down slowly into his chair, looking

unseeingly down at his desk, leaning his head thoughtfully on his hands. What had he been dreaming of? And how had he fallen asleep? Last he remembered he was at the farthest wall, near the cabinet containing files starting with N. Then he remembered something about a snake man. “Must’ve taken in too much of that drivel Mom keeps watching on TV,” he muttered to himself. “That serial on shape-shifting snakes. She does insist on watching it at dinner time, and I am forced to watch along too,” he grumbled to himself. He suddenly remembered the dream vividly. It was so bizarre, the golden city in the valley, the flying elephant, and the talking snake man. How on earth had he had such a strange dream in the middle of the office day? He had never fallen asleep at his desk before, boring as his job was. Addy tried to shrug it off, pulling at his sweat soaked polo shirt to get it unstuck from his back. Must have been quite a nightmare, to get him so agitated and sweaty, he thought.

He got up and went out of the filing room into the corridor outside and down it until he reached the staff restroom, or comfort station as one of his colleagues called it. He couldn’t imagine anything being less of a comfort in this place, however. It was dingier than even the filing room, paint peeling off the walls which showed water seepage, dirty looking toilet booths, and floor tiles that needed a good scrubbing. He avoided this place as much as possible. He kept his gaze carefully averted from the filth and concentrated on getting to the basins. He took off his glasses and splashed water onto his face and looked at himself in the mirror. Dark brown eyes still a little bemused gazed back at him from a pale long face that nonetheless had character in the lines of the nose and a stubborn chin. His hair, cut short, stuck up straight at the top as if he had received an electric shock. He vaguely mused to himself how it was lucky he had hair that naturally looked as if it had been gelled and styled in the latest style.

A rueful smile twisted his lips as he remembered the nickname his little cousin sometimes called him by – Porcupine. He tried to flatten his hair automatically and as usual unsuccessfully, then wiped his face on his handkerchief and replaced his spectacles on the bridge of his nose again. The nightmare had shaken him more than he wanted to admit to himself. He generally was careless about his appearance but wanted reassurance now that he didn’t look as if he were going crazy. He looked at the man reflected in the dirty full-length mirror next to the door – he was tall by Indian standards,

nearly six feet, sturdily built without being overly muscular or fat, wearing a collared tee-shirt and jeans, with hiking boots (his only claim to vanity) on his feet. Whatever he saw in the reflection reassured him, and he nodded once to himself before going back out into the corridor.

He hesitated at the door of the filing room and turned to the right instead, into the little pantry where there was a little water cooler and a table and chairs for the staff to eat their lunch. He drank some water and was about to head back when two of his favorite colleagues (in fact, the only ones he spoke to apart from his boss) came in just then and he paused. “Hey Addy, goofing off as usual eh?” asked the male of the two, a dark and somewhat chubby fellow who went by the name of Shaheer and who was always pulling his (and everyone else’s leg). Addy rolled his eyes in response “Can anyone ‘goof off’ with a tyrant like Kher forever on their case?” he asked. “Hey there Kay, how’re you doing?” he asked the other colleague, a beautiful girl with sleek white-blonde hair and blue eyes. Kayla Anderson was Australian (probably with Swedish ancestry) and had recently joined their office as a Research Associate. He remembered how, in the beginning, he had hardly understood what she was saying because her accent was totally different from Indian, American, or British (the latter two he was familiar with having watched innumerable English movies). The first day when they had met, she had said something that sounded like ‘go die.’ He had gulped and stared blankly at her. He had been reassured she didn’t mean it as her demeanor and smiling face had belied the words. Now, after a few months, he was finally beginning to understand everything she spoke and replied “Good Day to you too.” Now they had fallen into a kind of mixed English with Indianisms, Americanisms, and Australianisms all stirred together into a language which they could understand.

“Not bad, all considered,” said Kay, smiling. “Actually I’m pretty excited. Mr. Kher gave me a new scroll to decipher, and although I haven’t yet finished even half of it, it seems to be a really ancient one,” she gushed enthusiastically. Kayla was a Sanskrit expert, having taken that as her major subject during post graduation with a view to working in India. This, ironically, was her idea of a dream job. Addy wondered for the hundredth time how she liked the position when he was just waiting to get out and go abroad, probably to the United States or maybe even Australia (or some other developed country), after completing the three years of experience required to

apply successfully to a job overseas. The only reason he was putting up with the old slave driver Kher, was because he needed a letter of recommendation from him at the end of next year, his third here in this dull place. This job had been a huge disappointment to Addy, who had done post graduation in Archeology with visions of being the next big adventurer who found a never-before-discovered civilization or at the very least, a job as a trainee curator in a grand museum such as the Louvre or the Smithsonian Institution. Instead here he was, stuck for the past two years as nothing more than a glorified secretary in a government-run archeological department in India, re-filing decades old discoveries in a musty room. It was the lowest of the low and made him feel glum all over again.

*“It’s all very well for you,”* he thought. *“At least you get to see the light of day out in your cabin.”* He wondered if she was getting preferential treatment because of her higher degree and expertise, or because she was blond, pretty, and female. He then mentally chided himself for being so nasty. Shaheer had meanwhile launched into a lengthy diatribe about their much-loved topic, their boss. “Isn’t it?” he asked now, butting into Addy’s morose thoughts. “Er..yes, yes,” said Addy automatically, having no idea what Shaheer was saying, but concluding rightly the correct response would be to agree.

Kay, during this time, had been busy brewing three cups of tea at the tiny stove in the corner and handed him a cup, saying “Oh, belt up, Shaheer. The old coot isn’t as bad as all that.” They sat down at the table to drink tea and after a few more minutes of general gossip, Addy stood up, saying he had to get on with his work or face another tirade from the boss, as he *had* promised to get the ‘N’ files done by today. He went back reluctantly to the filing room and approached the far wall where the cabinet for ‘N’ stood. As he drew closer, he had a strange foreboding and a feeling of déjà vu. He stopped short of the innocent-looking cabinet but seeing nothing out of the ordinary, took a deep breath, went forward and opened it. He checked how far he had gotten with re-filing and pulled out the file he had started on before mysteriously falling asleep.

He went back to his desk and opened the twenty-five year old file. It was about a discovery a little-known archeologist had made in the Himalayas. There was an ancient palm leaf with Sanskrit letters on it, along

with the notes. Generally, files contained only the notes the archeologists had made over the years, and the actual artifacts were stored in a museum somewhere in the country. But here, in this file, there seemed to be an artifact, the old palm leaf, which somehow seemed to have been included in the file by an error. He looked at the leaf and suddenly remembered what had happened before his so-called ‘dream.’ He had read the inscription out loud. And shortly after that, had had his dream experience. Although he wasn’t a Sanskrit expert, the alphabets were the same as Hindi, his second language at school and college, and so he had been able to read it, even though he did not understand the meaning. He had idly read it out loud and...he wasn’t sure what to think. Did the dream have anything to do with this leaf? Or had he really fallen asleep and had a nightmare? Although he had a very scientific mind and scoffed at what he called silly superstitions and premonitions, he felt a sudden thrill of presentiment as he held the palm leaf in his hands. He put it down carefully and started reading the notes left by the archeologist.

*“This is the mantra to propitiate Vasuki, written approximately 4500 BC. It has to be chanted 108 times to be effective. Once propitiated, Vasuki will appear, and grant a boon with the help of his Nagamani. However, it is a very dangerous and risky proposition as the mantra has to be pronounced exactly right each of those 108 times with the correct intonation. If the mantra is mispronounced or the wrong cadence used even once, it will backfire, and the one who chants it will be beholden to the Nagas until he has completed a task of their choice for them to obtain his freedom.”*

There was also, incongruously, an old faded newspaper clipping in the file. It related the strange disappearance of Mr. Harish Bhattacharya, the archeologist in question, from his house a few days after the discovery of this artifact. The file on which he had been working was in his study, but there was no trace of him and the police had not been able to find him, dead or alive, even after two months of searching.

Addy looked up, his eyes blank, brows drawn in as he thought hard, his thoughts chasing themselves furiously in his head. The one word that struck him was – nagas – he knew that meant the snake people. He knew the word Vasuki was familiar but could not remember at the moment what or rather who it was. He felt chilled to the bone and gave a start when his phone rang.

It was his mother, and when he automatically answered, he winced and moved the phone a little away from his ear to keep the shrill voice from deafening him. “Why are you late? Where are you? And why didn’t you call me if you were going to be late? Are you still at office? Or with your friends?” (This last suspiciously) asked his mother in a continuous flow. “Er...mom. I’m still at the office,” he answered, quickly looking at his watch, surprised to note it was more than an hour past his usual go-home time. “Well you better come home right now. I’m not reheating your dinner if you’re late. I can’t miss my serial, it’s the showdown day between the shape shifter and the heroine vying for the hero’s attention today,” his mother said excitedly. Addy rolled his eyes and sighed in exasperation. “Ok, ok mom. I’m just leaving. I’ll be there in 10 minutes, ok?” he said. He got up and started packing up his things. At the last minute, on an impulse, he decided to take the file with him and stuffed it into his backpack and rushed out.



## 2. Vasuki – The serpent king

Back at home, Addy changed and freshened up before sitting down to a delicious dinner of parathas, his favorite curry, curd, and pickles. His Mom was already absorbed in her serial. Addy took out the file from his bag and started reading up on the palm leaf artifact while eating his dinner. There was not a lot there, to his disappointment. He got the feeling that the name Vasuki was really important and wondered how to find out about who this deity was. For it was obvious that in order to be propitiated, Vasuki had to be a deity. And one who could grant boons with the use of...what was it again? Yes, the Nagamani. Maybe it was some kind of boon or another deity, he thought. He pondered over the problem and suddenly it struck him that his mother might be a good point to start from. He looked at her. She was still watching TV but it was the ad break now, and he thought he would try his luck. After all, she was as crazy about mythology as serials, or probably more so. If this was a deity mentioned in Indian mythology, she would be sure to know.

“Mom,” he said “Do you know any divinity called Vasuki?” His mother, who had been sitting with a glazed expression (probably gloating over the cat fight between the shape shifter and heroine), suddenly brought her eyes back in sharp focus and said “Vasuki? Why do you ask? It’s not like you to be interested in mythical beings,” she replied, curious as ever. “Er... it’s something to do with my work. Do you know who or what it is?” asked Addy a trifle impatiently. His mom’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Work? I thought you dealt with fossils and pottery and stuff like that. What has mythology got to do with archeology? To answer your question, of course I do know who Vasuki is. And if you had ever paid attention to the bedtime stories I wasted so much time and energy telling you when you were a kid, you would too,” she said huffily.

“I’m sorry mum. But please can you tell me again?” asked Addy pleadingly. “Vasuki is the king of serpents. He is the snake you see coiled around the neck of Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the world. He also was the snake which was used as a rope to churn the Ocean of Milk,” she said, her eyes sparkling with her usual zeal when talking about mythology. “He is half man and half snake and is the owner of the wish-fulfilling gem, the Nagamani,” she concluded. Addy absorbed this in silence. He was thrilled at getting so much

information at once. It was great, the way his Mom was like an encyclopedia on the subject.

“Do you know any incantation specific to him? To ask for boons?” he asked hopefully. His mother’s brows furrowed in thought and she said – “No...no, I can’t say I do. I am not well versed in the mantras for various deities. I just like to keep up with the colorful stories behind them, you know.” She looked at him curiously. “Why do you need it anyway? What boon do you want to ask Vasuki?” she asked. Addy didn’t bother to answer her, asking instead, “Do you know anything more about the Nagamani, mom? Why is it a wish-fulfilling gem?” “Umm...I don’t know much about the Nagamani, only that it is a wonderful precious stone that can heal wounds immediately and bring back people to life. As far as I know, in the Mahabharata, a snake woman called Uloopi used it to bring Arjuna back to life after his son had killed him in a war,” she replied.

“It’s quite an obscure gem and not much is written about it. But why do you want to know all about this gem and Vasuki?” she asked with avid curiosity. “Uh..nothing mom, I was just curious,” Addy said, reluctant to voice his misgivings about what he had experienced earlier in the evening. He was usually the one to ridicule his mom’s belief in such things, and he did not want to scare her or get her agitated about it. At least not until he found out if it was anything to worry about. He looked up to see his Mom looking at him speculatively and groaned inwardly. It was very difficult to deflect her when she wanted to know something. She was so inquisitive. Luckily, the ad break had gotten over, so he quickly pointed out that fact to his mom, and she immediately turned back towards the television to continue watching her serial. He heaved a sigh of relief and got up to go to his room.

He wished he knew what to do about it. He didn’t really believe there was anything in it; that it had just been a dream, but he felt a little uneasy all the same. Fortunately, it was Sunday the next day, and he thought he would distract himself by going over to Shaheer’s place for a badminton match before lunch. They met up regularly for these matches and usually Shaheer had other friends join in as well, so he wouldn’t be left alone with his thoughts. And he felt he deserved some good physical exercise after a week in a dungeon-like room. However, his plan fell through almost immediately as his Mom called from the living room, “Addy dear, remember tomorrow

you have to help me shop for the groceries and in making lunch. You do remember tomorrow we have invited Khushi, Samrat, Pracheta, and Kay to lunch.” He had forgotten. He resigned himself to spending the day shopping, helping his Mom cook, and then entertaining his aunt, cousins, and Kay. Oh well, it would be distracting at the least. Especially the fights between his cousins. Maybe he could go over to Shaheer’s house in the evening and persuade him to a match.

The next day was a busy one for Addy. His Mom had woken him up early, nearly shouting in his ear, “Aditya Kamat, will you get up already?!! Am I supposed to do everything around here? How many times do I have to wake you only to find you’ve fallen asleep again?” He’d got up reluctantly and started on his chores. He actually looked forward to the day; he loved cooking (although his Mom didn’t let him do the actual cooking, she only needed help washing and cutting veggies and soaking the rice (little things like that) and his hated job of buying groceries was done and over with. He now looked forward to the get-together. He thought about the people who were coming. He especially looked forward to his little cousin, Pracheta, who had just entered her teens at 13, but was actually 5 going on 90. She was a complete entertainment unit, talking nonstop, doing goofy things, and flaring up at the drop of a hat. She had such refreshing ideas about everything under the sun. And boy, was she inquisitive. He sometimes thought if they had been the same age, he’d have suspected their mothers of having switched them at birth. She was like his mom, while he was more like hers. The fact that she was the only girl on both sides of her parent’s families just meant she was pampered silly. Samrat, her elder brother, who was 19, was nearer his own age of 25, but although they got along fairly well, he felt a little more affectionate towards Pracheta.

His aunt, Khushi, was the quietest of the group, although always happy and smiling. She and his uncle ran a bookstore and were deeply spiritual people. Khushi only got really voluble whenever she was lamenting Pracheta’s latest escapade. Then there was Kay. He wasn’t sure how he felt about her yet. At first, when she’d arrived at their office, he’d been a little intimidated by her higher qualification, different accent, confidence, and striking good looks, although he had done his best not to show this. After they got over the initial language barrier, he found her stimulating company because she was an intellectual (as he liked to think he was) and also friendly.

“Should I mention the palm leaf to her?” mused Addy as he cut up some salad and made a dressing to go over it. He usually kept his cards close to his chest, preferring to work things out by himself. However, this time he had to admit he was stumped. He did not know much about primeval manuscripts, especially as old as those written on palm leaves. He had always been more interested in field work, excavating a site and gathering artifacts and data. He had a hunch Kay would be able to help him on this, as it was her subject, and she was intelligent to boot. He decided he would play it by the ear and would show her the leaf if he were able to talk to her privately. He had to be careful not to pique his mom’s or Pracheta’s interests, for both were impossible to put off when they wanted to know something. He heard a car draw up and saw his cousins and aunt getting out. His mother was already out, welcoming them, and he went out to greet them too.

“Hey bro,” said Samrat who had arrived in first, grinning. A small tornado tore past him and bumped hard into Addy, winding him, and then throwing her arms around him in a tight bear hug. “Hey, hey, I’d like to have a few unbroken ribs,” grinned Addy hugging Pracheta back lightly. She was thin and scrawny with thick black hair combed into two plaits and wearing jeans and a top. She reminded him of a pocket dynamo. Small, but lethal. Her eyes were sparkling, and she started babbling excitedly immediately. “Is your foreigner girlfriend Kay really coming today?” she asked eagerly. Addy groaned. “She is my colleague, and yes, she is coming to lunch,” he said, trying to get his breath back after the bone-crushing hug. “How does she speak, does she have an accent like Steve Irwin the crocodile hunter? Does she have golden hair?” she asked dreamily. “I wonder if she will like me?” she said with sudden anxiety. “Of course she will. I’m sure you’ll get along very nicely with her,” reassured Addy, smiling at the girl. “Well I don’t like Shaheer much. He is always teasing me.” She said with a scowl. Addy threw back his head and laughed. “She isn’t anything like him, don’t worry,” he said.

Khushi and Soma (Addy’s mom) had retired to the kitchen to add the finishing touches to the lunch. Samrat was hanging around the living room, looking a little bored. Addy slapped him on the back and asked him how he was. His cousin replied in a monosyllable, typical for him. “Must come with having to live with a nonstop speaker like Pracheta,” thought Addy. He was

being dragged along by the girl who was chattering away. "Come on, let us go to your room and watch our favorite movie again," she was saying. "Shawn of the Dead. You promised we would today," she said determinedly. Addy, dismayed, said "Oh no, not again! We must have watched that at least six times already. And you know how scared you get by the end of it." "I do not," retorted the teen indignantly. "You get scared. I saw you last time, hiding your face in your hands!" Addy grinned. He had been so bored but did not want to let his cousin know. He shook his head. Little cousins were supposed to hero-worship their elder cousins, not order them about imperiously and wind them about their little fingers. He should be more older-brotherly, like Samrat, he supposed. But the fact was, he loved her to bits and agreed to her demands as much as possible. Samrat was following them a little listlessly, and Addy said "Hey Sam, how would you like to play my latest video game?" at which Samrat perked up at once. His favorite pastime was playing video games. He settled down on the bed facing the TV and started playing the game.

"Either show me Shawn of the Dead, or a video of a sea serpent on Youtube," commanded Pracheta. "Or one of the mummy Juanita being discovered, or any other new mummy they've found," she continued. "After all, I must get ready to become an archeologist as well, and there is no time to waste," she said pompously. The last bit about time sounded like something her mother would say, grinned Addy. "Prachi, I've told you, archeology is not only about mummies and sea serpents," he said. "It's not as exciting as they make it seem on videos. Sometimes you go years without even seeing a new artifact!" Pracheta was not ready to listen to this, however. "But I like to watch them," she said. "Show me a burial site being discovered then, or about the ghost ship that was discovered in the arctic seas. Mom never lets me use the internet," she pouted. "That's because you'd go on and on watching video after video and never do a bit of studying or homework," answered Addy severely. He did, however, get out his laptop, and they began watching a video about the ice mummy that had been found in the Alps. They were interrupted by Khushi coming in to call them, saying that Kay had arrived and lunch was ready.

Pracheta rushed out at once and Addy quickly shut down his laptop before following her into the living room. Kay was talking to his mother, looking very pretty as usual. "Hello Kay, thanks for coming," said Addy, a



little formally. “How ya goin?” she said with a smile and then noticed the little girl gazing round-eyed at her. “And who is this little missy?” she asked, holding out her hand to Pracheta. After a moment’s pause, Pracheta extended her hand shyly (Addy was highly amused to see her speechless for a change) and said “I’m Addy’s cousin, Pracheta.” She smiled coyly with a dimple in her cheek and sat down next to Kay, still gazing wide-eyed at her. After a little small talk, they moved on to the dining room and ate the scrumptious lunch Soma had prepared. Pracheta sat by Kay and kept looking at her devotedly, observing every movement keenly. “I hope the food is not too spicy for you, dear,” said Soma to Kay. “Oh no, Mrs. Kamat, it’s absolutely supah. I love spicy food. I used to frequent the Asian restaurants in Sydney more than the Western ones. I love it here. Everything is so yummy here in India. So many different flavors,” she gushed. “Oh, I didn’t know you were familiar with Indian food,” said Soma excitedly. “I should have asked what your favorite was and made it today!”

After lunch, Samrat went back to playing video games in the bedroom and the mothers sat down to a quiet chat, mostly about their kids, the rising cost of everything, and their recalcitrant maids. Addy thought this might be a good idea to get Kay aside to show her the palm leaf. But with Pracheta hovering nearby, he didn’t know whether to risk it. He was surprised that her quiet spell was lasting. She had been uncharacteristically mum throughout the meal and spoke only when spoken to. However, he did not want to show Kay the leaf with her looking on. He wondered what to do. An idea struck him. “Er...Prachu, would you like to watch Shawn of the Dead by yourself? I need to discuss some work with Kay,” he said, hoping she would not disagree immediately which was her usual habit. She agreed meekly and sat down to watch the movie in the bedroom along with Samrat. Although she always fought with Samrat, she felt safer now, watching the horror movie with him sitting stolidly by her. She wished Addy would spend more time with her though. And she wanted to watch Kay a little more. She frowned a little but shrugged her shoulders and started watching the movie.

Addy took Kay to the little courtyard behind the house and they sat down. “What’s all the mystery about?” asked Kay. “Has anything happened?” Addy showed her the file and related to her the events of the previous day, down to the last detail. He handed over the palm leaf and watched anxiously as Kay looked it over carefully. She had taken the story

remarkably well, not laughing it off as he had been a little apprehensive she would. “It does seem a strange coincidence doesn’t it? You looking at this manuscript on which there is mention of snake people and then dreaming about a snake man. And you say you did not know the meaning of the words written, so you could not have psyched yourself into dreaming it?” she said at last. “Is there anything written about Vasuki or Nagamani anywhere?” she asked. Addy remembered he had jotted down whatever his mother had told him, on a piece of paper. “Yes, wait a minute, I’ll bring down some notes I made from my mom’s encyclopedic memory,” he said, going back inside to the study to take up the loose sheet he had written on. It took him a couple of minutes to locate it.

As he was going back, he saw Pracheta was sitting next to Kay, looking at the palm leaf. They were both holding one end of it, and it looked like Pracheta was pulling at it. He had a sudden gut-wrenching foreboding and ran the last few steps. He grabbed the edge of the leaf too, and noticed she had started to read it aloud. “What...Prachi give me that back *at once*....don’t read it....NOOOOOO” he shouted. But it was too late. Pracheta had read out the incantation just as he had the previous day. There was a sudden whoosh and he felt the world tilt on its axis. Everything around them spun rapidly out of balance. Addy, feeling dizzy and nauseous, fell to the ground, hearing Kay and Pracheta screaming next to him and falling with soft thuds too. He had closed his eyes before he landed and now opened them gingerly, having a very bad feeling he knew where he’d find himself. It was as he suspected. He was back in the forest on the mountain slope. The same place he had met the snake man. Kay and Pracheta were trying to get up beside him. Pracheta’s face was screwed up in terror and she was trembling and crying. Kay looked shaken and pale but composed. She quickly hugged Pracheta and turned to look at him. “Is this the place?” she whispered. He nodded dumbly, unsure what to do now. Then he blanched, for up on the slope above them, gliding toward him again, was the snake man from yesterday.

### 3. Nagamani – The wish fulfilling gem

“Well, well, well,” hissed the serpent man. Addy wondered how he could have not noticed the slight hissing sound accompanying his words yesterday. He supposed he had other things on his mind at that time. “So you are back again! And with company too this time,” he went on, turning his gaze onto the two girls who were still clutching each other, Pracheta looking like she would scream any minute. The snake man came closer and slithered around them in a wide lazy circle, looking them over from top to bottom. “Humanssss...your fashions get more and more peculiar each time I see one of you,” he commented, looking slightly contemptuous. “Who...who are you and...and wha..what do you want?” bit out Addy in a strangled voice. “K...keep away from us.”

“You don’t know who I am?” asked the creature, seeming affronted at this display of ignorance. “Huh...don’t you humans have education? You are supposedly an ‘intelligent’ race,” he said even more contemptuously. He drew himself up. “I’m Vasuki,” he said. “The king of serpents. You must have heard my name at least?” he asked hopefully. “No...I mean yes, I have, just yesterday,” said Addy, looking around desperately, trying to think how to get back home and away from this strange creature. The snake man did not seem like he was going to harm them, but it was distinctly weird holding a conversation with him in this bizarre place. He wondered how he had been able to get back yesterday without doing anything.

He turned to look at Vasuki, who was still slowly circling them, his face as fierce as he remembered from yesterday, his lower half (which was a snake, broad at the hips and tapering to a long tail), a shimmering iridescent dark green-blue in the afternoon sunlight. He wore a golden crown with precious stones embedded in them. Addy was relieved to note he carried no weapon. His torso was bare except for rich golden chains and necklaces covering his chest almost like an armor, gold arm bands on his upper arms and wrists, and a silk sash at his waist. He seemed to tire of intimidating them and stopped his circling, coming to a rest in front of Addy. He coiled his tail neatly around itself on the ground so that it supported his upper (human) half like a pedestal.

“Since you are so conveniently here, let me tell you the task you have

to do for my people,” he said. “Task? What...what task? And why should we do a task?” asked Addy, although he already knew the answer to the latter question. “Don’t tell me you don’t know even that?” asked the snake man, seemingly taken aback. “Why did you attempt to invoke me, when you hardly know my name and do not seem to know what will happen if you do not succeed?... Answer me, boy!” he said in a ferocious tone, his eyes flashing. “I did not know we weren’t to read the palm leaf aloud. I read it inadvertently and...and that’s how we got here,” said Addy, alarmed at the change in tone. “By the way, where is here?” he asked, curiosity finally winning over his fear.

“All in good time, all in good time, boy,” replied Vasuki. He had his arms folded across his chest and looked at Addy speculatively. “I can’t believe my good luck, humans can be so foolish,” he muttered to himself in a soft hiss. “The law of invocation states that if the incantation is not rendered clearly and accurately, the chanter comes under the power of the invoked deity and has to provide anything the deity demands. That is the ‘task,’ which I am about to ask you to do,” he said smugly. His hand went to his waist and Addy tensed up, thinking he was going to threaten them with a weapon. But he needn’t have worried, Vasuki pulled out something from the silk sash at his waist and held it out to Addy.

There were two awed gasps from behind him, at the sight of the beautiful blue-green translucent stone in the snake-man’s palm. It looked like it was afire from inside, sending out rays of light. “The Nagamani,” whispered Kay. Addy had almost forgotten that she and Pracheta were still there behind them. He turned back to Vasuki. “Look, he said, I was the one who tried to summon you. These two are innocent, please let them go. I’ll... I’ll do any task you give me,” he said bravely although his extremities felt like ice and heart thudded painfully. “Aha, gallant to your womenfolk, I see. I like that,” Vasuki said, and Addy felt a sudden hope that he could at least get the girls out of this mess.

However, the next moment his hopes were dashed to the ground when Vasuki went on, “It was the young one who invoked me. And all three of you were holding the palm leaf when she chanted the incantation, wrongly, I might add,” he said, seeming to relish saying the word *wrongly*. “You can do the task for the little girl, but no one moves until I have explained the

mission, do you understand?” he asked. “It’s okay, Addy,” said Kay softly. “Whatever this experience is, we are in it as much as you are and although you are sweet to try to get us out of it, we wouldn’t be here if not for Pracheta reading out the incantation and me not being smart enough to prevent her in time,” she said.

“We’ll try to do whatever he wants us to do and go home together.” She turned to Vasuki. “Is that the famous Nagamani?” she asked him fearlessly, looking again at the lovely gem in Vasuki’s open palm. Vasuki looked at her in appreciation. “You seem slightly better endowed in the brains department,” he told her, while Pracheta let out something suspiciously like a half sob and half snigger and Addy felt a twinge of indignation. “However, you are wrong. Why would I need a puny human to do a task, if I had the Nagamani, the great wish-fulfilling gem?” he said.

“This is a poor replica of the real gem of my people, the Nagamani,” he replied. “The real one is hidden away there,” he continued, pointing down the mountain toward the golden city spread out in the valley below them. “And the charge I give you, boy, is to get it back for me.” The three of them turned to look at the city, Addy too, although he had seen it before. The city looked idyllic and surreal just like last time. “But...isn’t that where you live? Isn’t it your city?” he asked in confusion. Vasuki snorted in disgust. “The snake people do not resort to blatant show like that,” he said proudly. “We have an underground city much more beautiful than this. This is the city of Vaisravana, the king of the yakshas,” he spat, his face twisting in hatred.

“But why is the Nagamani, your gem, in the city of the yakshas?” asked Addy, bewildered. He felt someone tug at his sleeve and found Pracheta pulling at it. He raised his eyebrows at her and she asked timidly, “What is yaksha?” He almost smiled to see she was getting over her fear and starting to ask questions again. “Umm.. some kind of mythical being I think,” he replied. “They are benevolent nature spirits, caretakers of natural treasures,” stated Kay, remembering the definition from one of her textbooks on Indian mythology. “But sometimes they can be wicked too, living on trees and devouring people who pass underneath,” she said. Pracheta shivered and moved closer between the two adults, holding their hands tightly.

“Why is the Nagamani in the city of yakshas?” repeated Addy. “Because they have stolen it from us,” snarled Vasuki, his face a mask of



fury. In the last war between the nagas and yakshas, Vaisravana seized our priceless gem and kept it for himself.” He seemed beside himself with fury, his hands clenched into fists and eyes flashing dangerously. Addy noted distantly that he had very dark eyes with longitudinal pupils like snakes do, especially when he was angry, like now. “Calls himself the Lord of Wealth and takes our jewel like a common thief,” he went on, baring his teeth in rage. “Oh...” said Addy, his heart dropping like a stone at the realization of what the snake man wanted him to do. “You want me to steal it back for you?” he asked. Vasuki turned furious eyes back at him. “It is ours,” he roared. “It will not be stealing to get back what is ours.”

Addy was sure that wouldn’t be the opinion of the yakshas if they knew what he was up to. “Why can’t you do it yourself? After all, you must be more powerful than a ‘puny’ man like myself,” he said, hoping Vasuki would not turn him to ash with a glare of his eyes or something equally impossible like that. “Because there is another law about it,” sighed Vasuki regretfully. “I would have liked nothing better than to hoodwink that old imposter of a yaksha and get back our Nagamani. Unfortunately, dharma (the natural law) states only men can take or receive wealth, including gems, from the city that Vaisravana built. Usually that is in the form of boons, but men have also been known to take away wealth from the city by force.”

Vasuki carefully failed to mention that none of those men had reached home with their loot. They had been found out before even reaching the gates of the city and devoured by the rakshasa guards. “How is it possible to do this?” asked Addy in despair. “We know nothing about the city or inhabitants, nothing about where the gem might be kept and how it is guarded. Besides they are all divine beings, how can we pit our might against theirs?” he asked. “I will give you all the help you need. I will inform you about where to go, and how to conceal yourself from the yakshas. You just have to go and get it. It will be a piece of cake, believe me,” Vasuki said smoothly.

Too smoothly, thought Addy. There was bound to be a lot of danger and he honestly did not see himself or the two girls getting out of this place alive. He thought hard and a plan formed vaguely in his mind. “Er... can’t you ask some other humans to do this? Please?” he asked in a last ditch effort to escape. Vasuki looked at him pityingly. “The humans of another

era would not have trembled in the face of a challenge the way you are doing, boy. Everything seems to be declining on the human plane,” he said with a sneer. The human plane? Did that mean this was a different one? Not a part of the planet which was still undiscovered?

“Is this a different plane then? How is it possible to travel here and back?” Addy asked, cleverly inserting the thing he actually wanted to ask. “There are several planes in creation. This one is just above the human plane. The place you see is in what humans now call the Himalayan range. It is colder on the human plane and less fresh. The place you live in, Delhi, is to the south,” he said. He looked broodingly at Addy. “Travel between planes is possible only with the use of highly potent mantras, chanted, as I told you before, exactly right, with the right intonation, number of times, and pronunciation. “So is there a mantra to go back to the human plane too?” asked Addy, trying to sound as casual as he could. “Trying to run away, boy?” asked Vasuki, apparently amused. Addy flushed. He’d been found out. “You will have to go back anyway,” said the serpent king. “Go back and prepare a strategy. Then come back and get the gem for me,” he hissed imperiously.

“We can go?” asked Kay incredulously. “How do you know we will come back?” she said. “Oh, you will,” said Vasuki complacently. “I have been around eons longer than you have, impudent girl. Besides, we have our ways,” he said, almost laughing at the mixture of emotions running across the faces of the three humans before him. I will tell you the mantra for getting back as soon as I’m done giving you some points to remember before formulating your plan,” he said. Kay interrupted him, saying, “I have a question,” and when he glared at her, she gulped and said, “Sir.” Addy was beside himself with anxiety at whatever she was going to say. Didn’t she understand they were in mortal danger here? Despite her superior knowledge of Indian scriptures and mythology, he felt she was not conversant with the nature of these divine beings. If she had listened to half the stories his Mom had related as bedtime stories, her hair would have curled.

“Humph, what is it, girl?” asked Vasuki. “How is it possible that we are speaking English but you understand and reply?” she asked. Addy stared at her, dumbfounded. That was a pertinent question, and one he had not thought of until now. Vasuki chuckled. “I suppose it seems strange to you,

human. However, we of this higher plane, do not really have to learn languages. Just as you do not consciously have to learn how to digest your food, or learn to see, or learn to hear, because these are performed for you by your mind on a subconscious level, we do not need to learn languages. It comes automatically; our subconscious takes care of it.” He still looked at her, as if expecting her to ask more questions.

“I’m sorry to ask, but what happens if we just refuse to do the task... Sir?” Now she had torn it, thought Addy, his palms sweating. Why did she have to go and ask a stupid question like that when they were trying to go away quietly here? Just like a typical woman, he groaned inwardly. He supposed he should be happy that she at least seemed to have cottoned on to the fact that deities need to be addressed with respect. “There is no question of refusing,” said Vasuki, smirking. “You are bound by the natural law that operates between this plane and yours, not by your word. You will find things...happening to you if you do not intend to go through with your charge.” “Is there a time limit for this then? Do we get any time to make a plan?” she asked further.

“There is no fixed time limit, you can take your time. However, the natural law will come into play automatically when you decide not to go ahead with the job.” Pracheta was again trying to get Addy’s attention by jerking his hand this time. He looked at her and she whispered, “Do you think he has little baby snake children like him at home? I wonder what they do, how they play? I’m sure they don’t have anything like computers or TV here.” This was typical for Prachi, thought Addy. She always had had a strange fascination for reptiles, albeit crocodiles were her favorite with sea serpents and snakes a close second. Addy shushed her and was greeted by a chortle from the snake man. “The little one is very curious, isn’t she? I must say I’m thankful she is, as she landed you here in the first place. If you get the Nagamani for me, I might let her play with the children of my city,” he added as if it were a favor. Addy shuddered at the thought of Pracheta among snake children, probably in an underground snake pit like the ones he had seen at zoos. He quickly put the mental image out of his mind and asked a question himself. “Er...can you read minds too?”

He was mentally crossing his fingers, hoping his thoughts could not be heard, especially the ones that were screaming at him to try to escape as soon

as possible. Vasuki looked at him with a strange look. “No, we cannot read thoughts. Only beings higher than us, who live on a plane above us, can do that. We can however read thoughts if given permission by the owner of the thoughts to enter his or her mind. Anymore questions?” he asked briskly as if he were a lecturer and they his students, or if he were their troop commander explaining a mission.

When all three shook their heads, he said, “There are a few points you need to know about the difference between our and your plane and travel between the two. One you already know, which is that you can see this plane when you chant that mantra you already have and go back with another mantra that I will give you shortly. The second thing you need to know, is that time on our plane is not the same as on yours. An hour here is two hours on your plane. So when you plan on coming here, make sure you know that you will be losing double the time spent here. Another is that you need to take into account Vaisravana will not be pleased (to say the least) if he comes to know his coveted jewel is missing. He may attack or chase you along with his minions. So you need to know the kinds of creatures living in his city, what they do, and how you could possibly escape them.” He held up a hand when Addy opened his mouth. “Let me complete. The third and most important thing you need to know is that he has a very powerful missile in his possession, the Agneyastra. It is a fire missile and is armed to unleash the moment a thief leaves the city with any treasure. Nobody can stop it, and it razes everything to the ground, even a cave, in a wide arc around the city, in a matter of minutes.” He paused while Addy and the others gasped. “There are generally counter measures to powerful missiles and you could find out about these.”

“Any questions?” he asked now looking at Addy. “Er...can’t think of any,” he choked out, past the lump that had formed in his throat. He looked at the girls, and they looked as terrified as he felt at that moment. “This is all new to us. We might fumble the attempt and lose you the gem forever. Please, please can’t you just let us go, I’m sure a powerful king like you can pardon us and get some other human to do this?” he asked in a last ditch attempt to wriggle out of the situation they were in. Vasuki seemed a little discomfited at this, and spoke a little more gently than he normally did, “I’m afraid not. The possibility of another human chanting the incantation

wrongly to land here anytime in the near future is very slim. And unless that happens, I cannot get the mani (gem) back. The wellbeing of my people is at stake here, and I, as their king, cannot let them down. The Nagamani is not only a wish-fulfilling stone but one that has tremendous healing powers. It is on account of the Nagamani that we are virtually immortal. My people are now suffering due to its loss, and their numbers have already decreased to half from the time it was snatched away from us, as they are now vulnerable to disease and death like lower beings.”

He stood up straight again and said, “I will now give you the mantra to re-enter your plane.” He held up his hand at chest level, with the palm facing Addy. Addy saw a faint light pulse from his hand toward his own chest and he flinched, thinking it was an assault. However, he didn’t feel any pain. “It’s in the pocket of your shirt now,” said Vasuki. Addy looked down at the pocket on his tee-shirt and was amazed to see he was right. There was a palm leaf just like the one they had brought from the archeological department. He took it out carefully and looked at Vasuki. “Any instructions about reading it out?” he asked cautiously, not wanting to make yet another mistake and get into even more trouble, if that was even possible. “No, this one is uncomplicated,” said the serpent king, “Just read it out loud, and you will find yourself back where you came from.

“Can we at least come back here to ask you any questions before we actually have to go get the gem?” Addy asked tentatively. “Yes, you can. Just read the other leaf as you did before, and you will find yourself here again. I will come as soon as I sense you here,” replied Vasuki. Something was niggling Addy at the back of his mind. He remembered suddenly and said, “I have one last question. How come I was able to return to my plane yesterday automatically? I did not read out any reverse mantra...” Vasuki smiled. “You had been here only for a minute or two the first time and blacked out on seeing me. Hence you were able to return automatically. But now it is the second time and you have been here for a much longer time without losing consciousness. You cannot return except with the help of a mantra now,” he said. “Go on, read it out and go home,” he urged. “Come back after you have devised a plan of action.”



Addy looked at Kay and Pracheta. The three of them were still holding hands. Kay gave a little nod, and he read out the incantation clearly. At once, they felt the now familiar whoosh followed by a sensation of the world tilting on its axis, and everything spinning dizzily around them until they fell over.

#### 4. Back home

Addy paced up and down his bedroom. His brain was running in overdrive, going over all the things that had happened that afternoon, again and again, like a broken record. He could not think of anything else. Kay and Pracheta, who were sitting on the bed, did not help matters at all by continuously and volubly discussing every second they had spent in their shared ‘experience,’ for want of a better word. “Didn’t he look like a Roo, sitting there on his tail as pretty as you please?” a grinning Kay was saying. Addy frowned. Her Australiaisms had suddenly increased, he noted. The little adventure seemed to have made her excited instead of terrorized which would have been more natural. Pracheta, who had been terrified, now under Kay’s influence (and also the fact that they were safely home) seemed to also have bounced back with a bang. She was literally bouncing on the bed discussing the sights they had seen and the snake man and his words.

“Oh, will you stop wearing down the floor and sit down for a bit?” said Kay to Addy. His frown became a scowl and he stopped his pacing and sat down on the only chair in the room. “What are you both gushing about?” he demanded. “Any one would think we just had a good time at a theme park, not had a harrowing experience, the way you both are going on about it,” he said. “You don’t seem to realize we are on the razor’s edge here. What are we going to do? How do we get out of doing the task?” Kay looked at him teasingly and said, “You were moaning yesterday about how bored you were with your job. Now is your chance, Addy. Nothing can get more exciting than this, don’t you think?” Addy gritted his teeth. He had changed his mind. Boring was good. Boring meant he still had years to live. He even wouldn’t mind going on a field trip like they had sent him on last year, where he was out in the hot sun at an excavation site which was suspected to be a 12<sup>th</sup> century town. However, after a couple of months of sifting painstakingly through the dirt all day, everyday, they had to admit there wasn’t anything there. The only finds were a few very broken pieces of pottery that did not give a clue to the people who might have lived there.

“Mummy and Auntie were so angry weren’t they?” giggled Pracheta. Addy thought back to how they had arrived back, in a heap in the courtyard. They had got up and dusted themselves off, feeling a little disoriented, to find Khushi and Soma rushing out of the house towards them. Addy was afraid

they had been caught appearing out of thin air but was relieved when the two mothers only started asking where they had been. “We’ve been looking all over the place for you Addy,” his Mom complained. “Why didn’t you tell me if you were going out? You didn’t pick up your mobile phone either. I tried calling so many times,” she continued accusingly. Of course it didn’t ring, there wasn’t any cell tower where they had been at that time! “Er mom....we were...we were...” before he could think up a plausible story, Kay pitched in, “Mrs. Kamat, please don’t be upset with Addy. It was all *my* fault. I wanted to walk around the park nearby, and Addy and Pracheta kindly volunteered to take me there.”

“But we sent Samrat there to call you, and you weren’t in the park,” said Khushi, looking perplexed. “After some time at the park, we took Kay to the mall on the main street mom,” said Pracheta, who could be counted on for quick white lies. Addy pulled himself together, knowing he had to say something or his very suspicious Mom would know something was amiss. “My phone battery was on its last legs, mom, so I switched it off,” he said. “And I’m sorry we forgot to inform you we were going out, we lost track of the time (he meant this literally although thankfully the two mothers did not realize that) and didn’t realize it was quite so late.” All three of them had been astonished to note it had been past five o’clock in the evening when they got back, although they must have been on the other plane only little more than an hour, having probably left at near about 3 o’clock. He realized the truth of Vasuki’s words that time moved differently on the different planes.

They’d gone inside and although Khushi wanted to go home, Pracheta threw a tantrum about staying back and finally Addy said he’d drop her home later. Samrat had already left to go meet his friends, feeling bored of playing the video game all by himself. Addy was so busy thinking about what had happened to them, he even forgot to feel guilty for not entertaining Samrat. Khushi had left and the trio had retreated to Addy’s room to talk about the event. Addy didn’t want his Mom to know anything about the afternoon’s events and was relieved when she sat down to watch one of her Sunday evening serials. He had been very stern with Pracheta (at least, he hoped so). He had scolded her for pulling the palm leaf out from Kay’s hand and reading it out when she had no business to even be there. Pracheta had pouted and sulked a little, unused to even a word of censure from Addy. But only for a

minute, since Kay hugged her and made her cheer up by saying it was equally her fault for not telling her immediately she should not read it, much less aloud. “So what do we do?” Addy asked Kay. “Do you think it is feasible or even possible for us to do what Vasuki asked?”

“I do think we cannot ignore it,” said Kay slowly. “He was very certain, after all, that we would be...punished if we knocked back. And all that I have read in the Sanskrit scriptures about mantras, leads me to believe that we cannot trifle with the ‘divine law,’ although that sounds a bit clichéd,” she finished. Even though Addy still felt shaken from the encounter, he still wasn’t ready to believe in something as preposterous as ‘divine law.’ He’d never been very religious and didn’t want to think of Vasuki as a demi-god. He’d rather think of him as an...as an alien. It made things more believable to himself. Maybe the creature was just having them on about those planes of existence. Probably he was an alien and was transporting them to and from his planet wherever it was by some advanced scientific means.

There was a niggling doubt in his mind about the costume the snake man was wearing though, which looked like the drawings of mythological deities he had seen in Indian temples and literature. He explained it away to himself as a disguise worn by the clever alien. However, he felt if he put forth any of these theories to anyone outside this room, he’d be sent to a shrink immediately. He suddenly felt an irrational anger surge through him at the futility of even trying to decipher the events. He raked a hand through his hair, making it stand up even more wildly. With an abrupt movement, he stood up suddenly. “Chuck it” he said angrily. “I don’t believe anything will happen. That old snake was just trying to scare us. What can he do? He cannot summon us there himself. And I’m pretty sure he cannot come here either, otherwise he would have come after me yesterday when I lost consciousness and woke up in the office,” he said with mounting conviction. “And I really don’t believe in this bullshit about different planes of existence, divine law, blah, blah....” he said stubbornly.

Kay looked a little upset and put out at this. “Fine, have it your way,” she said. Addy didn’t know her well enough yet to observe that she had a very determined look on her face when she said this. He was just surprised and a little deflated because he had been expecting a long argument on the

subject. He was relieved however, that she had agreed so easily. He did think she was different from other girls he knew, and much easier to get along with. “Ok then, now that that is settled, I gotta go home,” said Kay. “I’ll drop Pracheta at her home on the way,” she added. “Thank you,” mumbled Addy, feeling a little ashamed of his outburst now. They went into the living room. “Thanks for a lovely lunch, Mrs. Kamat,” Kay said to Addy’s mom. “It was my pleasure dear. Please do come again some time,” beamed his mom. They moved to the door and Pracheta piped up suddenly. “Kay, you are very nice, I like you very much,” she said. She turned to Addy. “You can marry her if you want,” she added generously.

Addy flushed in embarrassment. Did she have to do this 5 going on 90 thing in front of his colleagues and especially a female one like Kay? He mentally face-palmed himself and carefully avoided looking at Kay until he heard a giggle. He looked up to see Kay looking amused instead of mad. “That’s very sweet of you dear,” she said to Pracheta. “However, Addy is too young to marry yet, and I definitely do not want to marry for at least another decade!” she said, before getting into her car with Pracheta. “Sorry about that,” muttered Addy through the window before waving to them and went back in, not noticing the two eyes staring unblinkingly at him in the gathering twilight from behind the oleander bush.

Addy went to bed early that night, having been tired out by the events of the day as well as knowing he had to go early to his workplace tomorrow to finish filing the rest of the ‘N’ cabinet before the inspection started. He had no difficulty falling asleep. However, he had a very restless night with disturbing dreams and finally when it was nearly time to get up, he had a very vivid nightmare which involved a lot of snakes wriggling about everywhere and ominously appearing to chase him, his mom, Pracheta, and Kay. He looked on helplessly when a huge snake swallowed first Pracheta, then his mother, and finally Kay. He heard himself screaming as the snake came towards him, before he woke up with a jump, heart thudding fast as though he had really been running, his brow damp with sweat.

He blinked his eyes open and saw something slithering out of his window rapidly. He grabbed for his glasses which were on his bedside table, but when he wore them and turned back to the window, there was nothing to be seen. He suppressed the twinge of fear and looked at the time on his

phone. It was only 5:30 a.m. but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep again and wasn't sure he wanted to. "I might as well get an early start on the day," he thought to himself, getting out of bed.

He was at the filing room an hour earlier than usual, rapidly re-filing the cabinet so he could finish before Mr. Kher came over to hound him about it. Luckily he managed to get it done and was able to escort the inspector around without any mishaps. Mr. Kher was on his best behaviour today, to impress the inspector, who was an elderly man, a government servant. After the inspector had retired for a private meeting with Mr. Kher, Addy went around to see Kay at her cabin. He was surprised to find she had not come to the office today, and the receptionist told him she had called in sick. Addy frowned at that. She had been perfectly alright last night. Why hadn't she come in today? He tried calling her on her mobile phone, but she did not pick up after several tries so he had to give up. He decided he'd try from home in the evening.

During the course of the day, his mind kept drifting to the happenings over the weekend. In the afternoon, there was a big furor at one of the outer offices, and he went over to see what it was. There were many people gathered there (as all Indians do when there is anything out of the ordinary) and he learnt that a snake had been sighted, coiled up in the deputy manager's cabin. It had been driven out but the people were still gossiping about it. Addy shrugged his shoulders. Snakes were not so uncommon in India after all. It did seem strange that one had come into the office building, though. There wasn't much greenery around the place, and he had never heard of a snake here before.

When he got home (on time today), his mother was almost hopping to tell him the news. Khushi had called earlier in the day to relate how a cobra had been coiled up in Pracheta's room, close to her bed, but had slunk off as soon as they raised the alarm. Addy's heart skipped a beat at the news and seemed to sink down into his shoes. His palms grew clammy. He had a very bad feeling about this. He answered in noncommittal grunts to whatever his mother was saying or asking, trying to think. It could not be a coincidence. He could *not* brush it off as one, now that there was a snake sighted in Khushi Auntie's house. It was one thing for a snake to appear in a ground floor house like theirs (if the slinking movement he had caught from the corner of

his eyes in the early morning was actually a snake) or a ground floor cabin in the archeological department. It was quite another to believe it was a coincidence when Pracheta's parents had a flat on the 14th floor of a high-rise building.

He suddenly felt alarmed about Kay's absence today. He excused himself and almost ran to his room and quickly tried calling Kay again. He could not help feeling this was all his fault, for involving Kay. He felt even worse about Pracheta. His heart in his throat, he waited for the call to connect. It rang for a long time and he was almost going to give up in despair, when Kay picked up. "Kay, are you alright?" he asked immediately. "Oh, hey, Addy," said Kay. "Yes, I'm good. Why do you ask?" She seemed surprised but otherwise reassuringly normal, and Addy's panic subsided. "You did not come to the office today and I was...I was worried," he said lamely. "There was a pause at the other end. "Is there something you aren't telling me Addy?" asked Kay. "You've never called me before when I've taken the day off."

Addy decided to come clean. He related everything from the dream he had to the snakes that were slinking about in the office and Pracheta's building. "I think this is what Vasuki was hinting about," he said. "So you've come around to my way of thinking finally?" asked Kay. "To be frank, nothing untoward happened to me today. I had no dreams and definitely no snakes in my room. I took the day off because I wanted to start on the research necessary for the task," she concluded. "I didn't tell you because you were vehemently against it yesterday," she added, before he could ask why she hadn't let him know about her not coming to the office today. Addy was comforted at the thought that she had already gotten started on the research. He thought he had better get on it too, for undoubtedly two heads were better than one at making a plan and besides, he couldn't think of doing anything else while this hung over their heads.

"Where do we do the research?" he wondered aloud. "I asked my roommate to take a subscription at the Delhi Public Library since you have to be a citizen to get one," said Kay. "I think it is the best place to start, any book that we can find about Indian mythology and scriptures and anything else, we are bound to find there," she continued. "That's a brilliant idea, Kay" said Addy. "I'll come with you tomorrow, and we can continue the



search you started today. Have you found anything yet?" he asked curiously. "I'll tell you all about it when we meet tomorrow. Meet me at the café outside the library branch in Sarojini Nagar, and I'll bring you up to speed," said Kay. "See you tomorrow then," agreed Addy. "And sorry about yesterday. I should have just listened to you. You are a lifesaver."

## 5. Research

The next day, Addy woke up at 8 a.m., feeling refreshed and better than he had the past two days. He remembered he had not had any dreams or nightmares and had slept soundly. He felt a little thrill at the thought of researching the project (he preferred to call it a *project* now, it sounded professional and less fearsome) that Vasuki had given him. As an archeologist, he loved anything to do with ancient manuscripts, even if they were translations in English. He got ready quickly and left, after informing his Mom that he had taken a leave of absence to do some important studying at the library. He did not mention what it was or that he was going to do it with Kay, afraid his mom's probing nature would make him spill the beans. He paused in front of the imposing structure of the public library. He loved going there, and it had been a regular haunt of his during his college-going days. It had been a while since he had visited it though.

He checked to see if he had his library card and then sauntered into the café outside the library, looking for Kay. He saw her waving to him from a corner booth and made his way through the crowd, to sit down opposite her. She had a file open in front of her on the table, as well as a large coffee mug. "Good day, Addy," she said by way of greeting. "Would you like something to drink?" Addy grinned, remembering how startled he had been when she said good day to him when she had first joined his office. "No thanks, Mom stuffed me with such a heavy breakfast, I don't think I'll even need to eat lunch," he said. "Lucky you," said Kay smiling. Her hair was impeccably groomed and shining like a golden cap around her head. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement. "Beats having a dingo's breakfast every other day like I do. Let's get down to business then."

"I didn't get to do a lot of research yesterday," she stated. "It took me a couple of hours to decide which branch of the DPL would be most likely to be helpful. I had no idea there were so many in the city," she explained. "It was nearly the lunch hour by the time I found the best one I wanted, and explored it to find the right sections that could help us. So I decided to start after lunch. I did find out that whatever Vasuki told us about the gem, and the history regarding his people losing it in a war with Vaisravana is true. Did you know Vaisravana is also called Kubera?" she asked. "Kubera?!" said Addy, his eyebrows raised at the news. He did know who Kubera was,

and if that old snake had mentioned this name, he would have at once connected the dots, he mused to himself.

Most Indians knew about Kubera, a minor deity. He was the Lord of Wealth and was supposed to live in the northern (since for most of India, the Himalayas is north, he supposed that was accurate) direction. He was also known to be Ravana's half brother. Ravana was the rakshasa king of Lanka (now called Sri Lanka), and the antagonist in the famous epic Ramayana. "Yeah, I know Kubera. Why on earth didn't that slimy old so-and-so just say so?" he grumbled. "It clears up a lot. Ravana defeated Kubera and became the king of Lanka. Kubera was forced to flee to the Himalayas and establish another kingdom there under the protection of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity, who resides in the Himalayas too," he said, happy for once that he remembered some of the stories his mother had told him.

"Right," said Kay, nodding appreciatively at the extra information. "Apparently, Vaisravana is his real name, and Kubera is an epithet given to him over the ages. Anyway, what is important to us, is to find out as much as we can about his city, the creatures that live there, the treasury where the gem might be located, the missile Vasuki described, and any counter measure to it," she continued. "I'm also worried about the time difference. If we spend a day there, we lose two here," she said. "How do we do this without everyone panicking about us? At the very least, they will notice our long absences." Addy had carefully refrained from thinking about this so far but was obliged to now. "I think we should take some advice from Vasuki," he answered. "This is beyond our comprehension or capability. We will focus on formulating a plan and leave the time/plane travel troubles to him. I'm sure he has something up his sleeve (or rather armband) that he is not telling us," concluded Addy waspishly.

He was still sore at the coercive tactics the serpent king had used, to change his mind yesterday. Something that had struck him as odd came up again and he said, "I wonder why he didn't send any 'messengers' to you Kay? He sent a nightmare and snake to me, and a snake to Pracheta's room, but nothing to you. Is it because you are not Indian?" he wondered. "I've been thinking about that too," said Kay. "My theory is that he listened in on our conversation that evening in your house. I don't know how, maybe another snake outside the window? It's the only thing I can think of that

makes sense. I wanted to go ahead with the task, so he did not threaten me. You did not want to do it, so he threatened you with both a snake as well as a nightmare. Pracheta was neutral because she did not say anything and so he sent her only a snake,” she said.

“Do you mean to say even the nightmare was Vasuki’s work?” scowled Addy. “It could be,” replied Kay. “After Sunday, I have realized there is a lot we don’t know about the larger truths of the cosmos. Come on, lets go do some research now,” she said, standing up. They wended their way out of the café and into the huge public library. Kay had decided that they delve into books from two different sections to go about this quicker and more efficiently. She had already befriended the custodian and had used her charm and ID from the archeology department to get into the highly restricted section containing original Sanskrit inscriptions. While she went to the ancient Sanskrit scrolls section, Addy went to the section for translated literature on ancient Indian history and mythology.

They brought back several books to a table halfway between both sections and sat down to peruse them. They had divided the topics between themselves too. Addy was to find out about the creatures and the missile. Kay would try to unearth information about the city and the counter measure to the missile. They made notes as they read, and there was silence for a long time. When it was nearly 1 o’clock, Addy looked up to see Kay massaging her neck wearily. She scrawled rapidly on a notebook in front of her and there were about a hundred copies of ancient scrolls on the table that she was busy deciphering. He decided it was time for a break. “Hey, how about we go and have lunch now?” he asked. Kay smiled and agreed immediately, and they packed their notes and went to have lunch at a fast-food outlet nearby. They decided not to talk about the research they were doing while eating and instead concentrated on the delectable assortment of street food they had chosen. “I love golgappa,” enthused Kay. “There is nothing like it in the whole world! And dahi bhalla comes a close second,” she said smacking her lips. “I just need lots of water to drink and some tissues though,” she laughed, mopping up her eyes and nose that had gotten runny after eating the fiery snacks. After a fun lunch during which they spoke only about general topics, they went to a park in the vicinity, to go over their notes.

“The city is not very well described,” said Kay. “Other than references

to how prosperous it is and descriptions of the gold and semi precious stones used to emboss the buildings, there is not much,” she said, a little disappointed she had not dug up much information. “The royal gardens are said to be enchanted to remain at full bloom throughout the year. There are gandharvas, kinnaras, and rakshasas living in the city, besides the yakshas who form the main population. Their occupation seems to be the same as humans as far as I can see. Nothing is mentioned about the palace or about the treasury or specific gems. However, I think we can safely rely on Vasuki to provide us details of the palace as well as the routine there. There is mention of a highly advanced chariot though. It could potentially be of some use to us to get out of there in a hurry. It is called the Pushpak Vimana, and...” “Hey,” interrupted Addy. “I know about the Pushpak Vimana. Wasn’t it a flying chariot that belonged to Ravana, the demon king of Lanka?” he asked. “Yeah, there is mention of it in the Ramayana. On the other hand, there are various references that show it was originally Kubera’s chariot. Ravana made it his when he seized power and became king of Lanka. Later, when Rama vanquished Ravana, he used it to return to his own kingdom in it, and sent it back to its original owner, Kubera. So it should be there somewhere in the city now,” she said.

“Why is it said to be different or unusual?” asked Addy, who could not remember anything more about the chariot. “Most flying chariots in the heavenly plane have a charioteer who steers horses or other supernatural living beings that pull it,” explained Kay. “But the Pushpak Vimana has no horses or charioteer. It is said to be controlled entirely by the thoughts of the passenger. Anybody could get into the driver’s seat (or an equivalent of it) and wish for the chariot to move to the place of his or her choice, and the chariot would fly there,” she stated. Addy’s eyebrows were raised for the second time that day. He could not still believe fully in the concept of a different plane, let alone a grand flying chariot that one could manipulate with ones thoughts. It sounded like very advanced science, or science fiction. He thought of the adage, ‘truth is stranger than fiction’ and refrained from saying anything to dispute the information Kay was giving.

“I’ll try for a bit more information when we go back now. But on the whole I think I’ll start looking for information on the antimissile,” she said, “since that will be potentially of more use to us in completing the task. How did you do on your two quests?” she asked Addy. Addy took out his own

notes and referred to them. “As you mentioned, there are kinnaras, gandharvas, rakshasas, and yakshas living there. Before describing what I found about these, I want to mention something I felt was a little disconcerting. Kubera is mentioned as Nara-vahana sometimes. It means one who rides a human being. I could not find anything to suggest if this was meant literally as in using man as his vehicle, or whether it just meant he was superior to humans and that humans had to have their noses to the grindstone in order for him to part with his wealth,” said Addy, his brown eyes worried. “I don’t want to think about being made into a vehicle for Kubera if he catches us thieving,” he added.

Kay gave a snort of laughter. “I don’t think it will come to that. If we plan well, I think we can do this and get out before anyone notices anything amiss, that’s deadset. Let’s not cross our bridges before we come to them anyway,” she said, squeezing his arm reassuringly. Addy gave her the notes he had made about the various creatures inhabiting the city of wealth. She looked at it:

1. Gandharvas (their wives - Apsaras) – Male nature spirits that are part human and part animal (usually a horse) or bird. They are sometimes skilled singers or minstrels who entertain the higher deities. Sometimes gandharvas are diviners of the secrets of the heavens and divine truths. They prepare the soma juice for the gods. The gandharvas are husbands of the apsaras who are female spirits of the clouds and waters and are supposed to be divinely beautiful. The gandharvas are shape shifters and are attracted to women, can cast powerful illusions, and are skilled with horses. Important fact – they are known to combat human heroes. If the hero is victorious, the gandharva will help him in his quest, but if he loses, he will be carried away and never heard of again.
2. Kinnara (and female Kinnari) – Very similar to the gandharva, but more benevolent and harmless. They look like gandharvas but appear more delicate. They are described as paradigmatic lovers who live long lives, are monogamous, tender hearted, loyal, and are good dancers. They wear flowers, eat flowers, and use flower perfumes. Sometimes they are captured by humans and sold to kings in a cage for entertainment.

3. Yaksha (and female Yakshi or Yakshini) – nature spirits that guard the treasures. They are capricious, mischievous, and sometimes murderous. They are more powerful than the gandharvas and kinnaras and are powerful magicians and shape shifters. They have the power to grant boons if a human pleases them. They are related to the rakshasas although slightly more benevolent than them. They look more or less like humans but sometimes with ferocious features, pot bellies, and dwarflike limbs. They are known for asking riddles that end in the death of the answerer, if the answer is incorrect.
4. Rakshasa (and female Rakshasi) – half-brothers or cousins of the yakshas. They are fearsome-looking demons, eat human flesh if they can get their hands on a human, can become invisible, and can shape shift to anything they want to be. They are most powerful in the evening and during the dark period of the new moon and dispelled by the rising sun. They can animate dead bodies.

“Here is what I found out about Kubera,” Addy said, handing another sheet to Kay:

Kubera – A yaksha, son of sage Pulastya and his wife Ilavida. He is the most powerful amongst yakshas and is the king of Alkapuri, the City of Wealth. He rules over the yakshas, gandharvas, kinnaras, and rakshasas. He is the treasurer of the gods and guards the treasure under the earth and below tree roots. He carries a club and owns a golden mongoose.

When he saw Kay had finished reading it, he said, “I also researched a little about the nagas, because this all started with that snake-in-the-grass Vasuki.” Kay smiled at his tongue-in-cheek humor and waited for him to continue. “The nagas are, as we know, snake people. To be specific, they are powerful large snakes, usually cobras. They can shape shift to be full humans but usually prefer half human and half snake manifestations. They were nearly annihilated once but were saved by a human descendent, hence their ambivalence towards humans. Their greatest enemy is Garuda, the golden eagle. They are curious and are only malevolent to humans who mistreat them,” he said.

“That’s a lot of research done already!” said Kay admiringly. Addy grinned at the praise. “It’s something I enjoy doing,” he said. “So shall we go back and resume the second topic?” Kay nodded and they went back to the library.



## 6. Chennai

Back at the library, Addy and Kay got back to ‘their’ table and got down to the search for information about the second of their respective topics. Addy knew that although he had found more data, it was easier going for him because he was reading translated texts and summaries while Kay was doing the actual research, painstakingly reading up ancient Sanskrit inscriptions. It was much slower work for her but on the other hand, it would be much more accurate than reading a centuries-later translation. He began searching for books on the fire missile. He found several that included minor references to it and sat down to peruse them. Kay had gone back to studying the scrolls and parchments and was busying writing her notes.

“Ace! This is the bottler!” exclaimed Kay suddenly, looking excited. Then she frowned. Addy looked at her, not having understood her Australian colloquialism at all. He did know though, that she was thrilled about something because that is when she always slid back into phrases he couldn’t fathom. “What is it?” he asked eagerly. “There is a mention here about the Agneyastra,” she said, looking up at him. “It describes its counter measure. But the palm leaf it is written on is incomplete and the next one does not seem to be here.” She frowned in displeasure at the sudden obstacle. “It appears from this inscription that the counter measure to the Agneyastra is some sort of shield or armor, not another missile as I had assumed.”

She went in search of the custodian to ask about the incomplete text. Addy plodded on through the information about the missile including lengthy descriptions of who owned it through the ages (and realms), how it was used, and the methods of propitiating Indra, the king of the devas or demi-gods, for obtaining it. Kay came back after a long time, by which time Addy had almost gone through the whole stack of books in front of him. When Addy glanced up, she was looking into the distance, thinking hard. “What’s up?” he asked. “I asked the custodian about the rest of this inscription, and she said that they did not have the rest here. I was able to get her to look up where the rest might be, and she told me that the remainder of this particular bundle was in a small museum in Chennai. “Chennai?” said Addy. “But that’s in Tamil Nadu, all the way in the south of India...” “Yeah, I gathered that,” said Kay. “I asked how that happened, and she said there were complicated laws and treaties how these artifacts got distributed to different

museums and libraries in the country. Sometimes wealthy patrons bought them and then donated them to museums. Somehow, this particular parchment ended up here and the rest in Chennai.”

“What do we do? It’s rather important to get our hands on the information concerning the counter measure. Only if we do so, can we try to locate it, and only if we locate it, can we think about going to the realm of the demi-gods,” contemplated Addy aloud. “Yeah,” Kay said. “I was planning how to hoodwink Mr. Kher into sending me to Chennai so I could look for it,” she said. Addy’s jaw dropped. Hoodwink that old martinet? He’d have their hides *and* their jobs. “Are you serious?” he asked when he had got his voice back. “He’s never going to give us permission to go anywhere that we want to go. He decides where everyone goes and usually sends everyone to the most boring places of all,” grumbled Addy, who had seen Mr. Kher’s tactics much longer than Kay and thought she must be daft to even entertain the idea she could get him to give them permission to go to Chennai on work.

“Of course he will,” said Kay complacently. “I have a plan. We better go to the office tomorrow and do as much work as possible. Then I will sweet-talk him into it. And I will request him to send you with me as an escort as I feel it may not be safe for a poor little white girl to wander about in a big bad city like Chennai,” she concluded happily, batting her eyes at Addy. He gave a bark of laughter. “Poor,...little?” he sniggered. I’d *like* to see anyone try anything with you, and where they land, ha ha,” he said. She grinned. “Sounds like a good plan if you really can pull it off,” said Addy at last, after having thought it out. “That way, we can keep our jobs, the company will pay for the expenses we incur, and we can get our quest solved too.” “Are you done with the information about the missile?” she asked him. “Or do you need more time?” “I’m done,” said Addy. “Let me tell you whatever I have learnt about it, then we could call it a day and head back home.” “Right, go on,” said Kay, leaning forward attentively.

“The Agneyastra, or literally fire weapon, is a most powerful weapon. It was originally owned by Indra and given to his son Arjuna during the Mahabharata war. The weapon is armed as soon as the ownership changes, and discharges on incantation of a simple mantra. Once discharged, nothing can stop it from its target and nothing can extinguish the flames. The flames are 20 feet high and spread through a large swath of area, approximately 50

meters around the intended target, auto-extinguishing only when everything has been razed down to ashes. These are the extra notes I made about who has ever owned the Agneyastra and other details, although I do not think they are pertinent to us since all we need to know is how it operates and the extent to which it spreads,” he said, handing over the notes he had made. Kay read through it quickly and nodded. “However, there is one shocking piece of information that I found corroborated in three different books which changes the whole deal if it is true,” said Addy. Kay raised her eyebrows, knowing it must be something bad just by looking at him. “If the Agneyastra is used, it causes destruction in all the planes, not just the one in which it is fired. Moreover, the destruction could be more or less than the plane on which it has been fired.”

“Which essentially means, if the Agneyastra is used against us, not only are we responsible for killing ourselves, but a whole city or state in the Himayalan region?” frowned Kay. “Yes. So this means the deal is nonnegotiable now. Either we drop the whole idea of helping Vasuki and endangering only ourselves, or find the counter measure and then go on the retrieval mission. I don’t think we have much choice, we are between a rock and a hard place,” he said solemnly. “I’m glad we made the plan to pursue this to the bitter end then,” said Kay more cheerfully than she felt. Addy nodded. “We’ve really done a lot of research today. I’ve never worked so hard in one day in my entire life,” Kay said. “Let’s go home before they lock us in here for the night,” she said, trying to lighten the atmosphere although neither felt like smiling just then. They got up, put back the borrowed books, gathered their belongings and went out together, to separate at the entrance, going their different ways after agreeing to meet in the office pantry the next day at lunch.

The next day, Addy went to office on time and did whatever he was told in as short a time as possible, flummoxing Mr. Kher, who looked at him suspiciously, as if he expected him to have a nasty trick in store for him. “That’s not me, that will be Kay,” sniggered Addy to himself. At lunch time, he had met her in the pantry and waited until Shaheer and a couple of other colleagues had left after lunch, to converse about Kay’s plan. She told him she had already gotten Mr. Kher interested on the topic of a scriptural inscription she had deciphered which could reveal an important archeological discovery. “Be at your desk in the evening like a good boy, re-filing, and

wait for us to arrive with the news,” she said confidently. Addy nodded although he was still skeptical. He did not believe Mr. Kher could be taken in so easily. After all, for all his stuffy ways, he was still a very learned and experienced archeologist, which is why he was in such an important position in the government office.

However, in the evening, Kay was proven right, when he was summoned to Mr. Kher’s office. He went in after knocking, finding Mr. Kher and Kay waiting for him at his desk across from the door. Mr. Kher looked to be in a rare good mood. “Come in my boy, come in. Take a seat,” he said almost jovially. He glanced at Kay before taking the seat next to her in front of Mr. Kher. “Ms. Anderson here has deciphered a very important piece of parchment today, which could potentially lead to a new discovery for our office,” he said. “It could be the very thing we’ve been waiting for all these years and could get us a bigger grant from the government. However, she has hit a little snag because the rest of the parchment is in Chennai,” he went on. “I want her to go there and take a look at it. Since she is hesitant to go alone, and I fully agree with her...,” he gave an avuncular glance at Kay which she returned with a saccharin sweet smile that almost made Addy gag. “We thought about our options and have zeroed in on you to accompany her there. It should not take more than two days. You’ll need to accompany Kay to the Ramchandran museum in Anna Nagar, help her examine the parchment, and get back with the information,” he ended.

Addy pondered what to say. It might look suspicious if he agreed at once. He said, “Any particular reason you picked me, Sir?” “Yes. The fact that you went to college in Chennai and know to speak Tamil was a big factor,” Mr. Kher replied. “As well as the fact that the only job you are doing right now is re-filing which can wait whereas every other trainee and employee has more important work,” he said with a sneer. Addy almost flared up at that but a look from Kay stopped him. He nodded meekly and got up to go. “And hopefully the good company you will be in will improve your work ethics. Look at Ms. Anderson, she is so dedicated to her work and has been here only eight months!” said Mr. Kher. Addy did not dare look at Kay. “Please collect our tickets and hotel reservations from the front office tomorrow morning. I’ll let you know more about the project when we are traveling,” called Kay when he was nearly at the door, and he turned back to see her give him a theatrical wink. He nearly burst out laughing then but

controlled himself and went out.

How she had managed to have Mr. Kher eating out of her hands was a miracle, thought Addy. Maybe he only liked female employees he thought darkly. Anyway, their problem was solved and now they could go on the AD's time and money and later say that the promising lead fell through and there wasn't going to be any new discovery. He felt a little twinge of conscience about duping his superior like that but resolutely suppressed it. Mr. Kher certainly did not deserve his sympathy, and anyhow, it was the government that was paying, so he wasn't losing anything. He reassured himself by thinking if there had been any other way of getting out of the predicament that he, Kay, and Pracheta were in, he would have taken it. There wasn't, so this was the best they could do. He just hoped the trip was a success and they got some information about the counter measure to the Agneyastra. He went home in a happy mood and Kay called later to talk about things. It was amazing how Mr. Kher had arranged the trip so quickly, but then he was used to sending various people to various excavation sites and in search of old manuscripts so it was not to be wondered at.

The next day found the two boarding the afternoon flight to Chennai. "You never told me you knew Chennai," said Kay accusingly when they were waiting to board the flight. "Er..it never came up," defended Addy. "I did my undergraduate as well as postgraduate degree programs there since the college there is supposed to be the best in India," he said. "It's true I know Chennai quite well and know a smattering of Tamil too, enough to get by. It's a tough place to be in if you don't know the local language," he added. Kay settled down for the nearly three hour flight with a magazine and had her headphones turned on to her favorite music.

Addy looked at her for a moment and thought about what had happened the previous evening when he had gone home and told his mother that he was leaving for Chennai the next day on an office trip with Kay. He had been deluged with a barrage of questions and had answered most of them truthfully (he hated lying to his Mom but was finding it increasingly difficult to be more truthful as he didn't want her to worry). He had been going over the details of the trip in his mind, how to best get from the airport to the hotel and then the museum and was deciding to take Kay around to see the beach and other interesting parts of the city, when he realized his Mom was waiting

for his reaction to something she said.

“You weren’t even listening were you?” she asked. “You never do.” “Uh... sorry mom,” said Addy. “What were you saying?” He did not like the speculative look she had on her face. Experience told him it meant trouble. “I asked whether you like Kay?” Addy was taken aback. What did she mean did he like Kay? He hoped it wasn’t what he thought she meant. “Oh come on Addy, don’t pretend. You can tell me you know. Do you like her?” “Of course I like her, she is my colleague isn’t she?” he asked, a little irritated. He knew where this was going. If he had been more alert he could have headed her off earlier.

“I do think she would make a good daughter-in-law,” his Mom gushed. “Mommm,” Addy rolled his eyes. “Really. She is beautiful, she is highly educated, has a good job, and I found out, even her parents back home are wealthy.” “Mommm! She is just a friend,” groaned Addy, then realized this was true. He did think of Kay as a friend, not just a colleague. Being an introvert, he had very few friends. But the ones he did have were people who he could really count on. And he felt instinctively that Kay was one person he could trust, although he had known her a very short time.

“Oh, alright...you can’t stop me from hoping,” his Mom was saying, and when he glared, she said, “Ok, ok, I’ll arrange a marriage for you with a nice girl from our community if you don’t want to find a bride yourself,” she huffed. He really didn’t want to argue with his Mom again about this topic, especially not now. “I’m not interested in marriage right now mom. I’ve told you so many times. I’ll let you know when I do want to get married and you can start matchmaking then ok?” he said to take the sting out of his rebuttal. “Alright,” said his Mom sulkily. “It would be nice to have someone to watch TV with and prepare meals with,” she added wistfully. Addy had shuddered at the mental image of him coming home to two women waiting for him, fighting about the TV programs and talking non-stop. He decided he didn’t want that for a long long time yet.

“Penny for your thoughts?” asked Kay, looking up and taking off her headphones, finding him staring at her. “I was thinking about how to go about this trip. I have a plan. Shall I run it by you?” he asked. “Go ahead” she said. “Since we have the museum appointment tomorrow at noon, I thought we could go to the beach in the morning. Then I can drop you at the

museum after lunch. Since I won't be needed at the museum, I thought I could go to the other realm and meet Vasuki to ask some questions while you are there, and then come back before boarding time of our late-night flight," he said. Kay's eyes lit up. "Ace!!" she exclaimed. "I'd love to go to the beach. If there is one thing I have missed after leaving Sydney, it's the beach." "Well, there is a world load of difference between a Sydney beach and Golden Beach (which is the cleanest beach in Chennai)," said Addy. "I don't care," said Kay. I just want to look at the sea, feel the warm sand and relax for a while. The next part of your plan is good too. Let's make a list of the things you need to ask the serpent king tonight after we get checked into the hotel, and you'll be good to go tomorrow."

## **7. The second parchment – and the alternate plane**

Addy and Kay were in the dining area of the Templetree Residency where they had checked in an hour ago and come down to have dinner after unpacking and freshening up in their rooms. Addy already felt uncomfortably hot. He had forgotten how hot and muggy Chennai could get, especially after the cold Delhi winter. It was one of the things he had hated while at college. He wished he was wearing shorts and a Tee instead of a button-down shirt and jeans. Kay looked cooler than he felt, in a sleeveless top and calf-length skirt. Girls were lucky that way, he thought to himself. They could wear a variety of dresses to suit the occasion and climate. Men just had boring options. He consoled himself that he was at the least escaping the heavy smog in Delhi for a couple of days and breathing fresh air.

After dinner (they had an unspoken pact operating by now under which they did not speak shop while eating), they moved to the lounge to discuss the points Addy needed to ask Vasuki the next day. “First is the time issue,” said Addy, writing it down on a scribble pad he had brought along with him. “How to arrange it so no one knows we are missing, while we are on the higher plane.” “Ask him how he is going to help us; if there are any specific things he is going to do, like sending someone with us, weapons, etc.,” said Kay. Addy wrote that down. “I’d also like to have a map of the palace and how to get by any guards that may be there,” he said. “Right. And ask him where the Pushpak Vimana is kept,” said Kay. “It may be our best and quickest way to get out when things get hot.”

The next morning, the two went to the beach as planned, after waking up luxuriously late and having a leisurely breakfast. Kay had slathered herself with suntan lotion as she was very fair and her skin tended to burn if not well protected. She was determined to have fun since they could not work at anything while waiting for the museum appointment anyway. Addy generally preferred quiet outings and would have just liked to laze on the beach. Kay, however, had no plans of letting him do anything of the sort. She bamboozled him into getting her a beach ball from one of the little shops that dotted the beach, and they had a fun time playing with it like children. They went in for a swim and Addy felt himself relax to such an extent for probably the first time since he grew up. He loved swimming and had often come swimming here on weekends when he was a student at the Aandal



College of Archeology. However, he had rarely had time to go swimming in Delhi and did not much like swimming in the close confines of a pool as compared to the sea. After swimming, they just had time to get 15 minutes to bask on the sands before heading back to the hotel to get ready for the trip to the museum.

The Ramchandran Museum was housed in a beautiful colonial-style brick building surrounded by a well kept lawn. It came as a surprise as they had somehow imagined it to be a dilapidated seedy place like most government run museums were. But this one turned out to be a building as well as artifacts donated by a philanthropist named Ramchandran, who had been a private collector and had left the museum to the public in his will. As they went in, a little old man wearing an immaculate white bush shirt and trousers, came out to greet them. He had a thick grey mustache covering his upper lip and Addy thought he looked like he had walked straight out of an R. K. Narayan book. There seemed to be no visitors in the museum other than themselves.

The old man introduced himself as Mr. Natrajan, the curator of the museum. He was quite happy to talk about the treasures in the museum and took Kay and Addy to the Sanskrit scrolls, parchments, and palm leaves section, already talking about technical details that flew over Addy's head. He took a moment to excuse himself so Kay and the old man could get to work on the parchment they had come to find. He drove back to his hotel room in a car they had rented for the day. He looked at the list they had made the previous night, took up the palm leaf and after taking a deep breath, read out the mantra carefully. He felt the now familiar unsettling motion and dizzy spinning before landing with a thud on cool grass.

Before Addy could get his bearings, he heard a high whining sound in the air coming in his direction. *THWACKKK*.... He gazed for a moment, nonplussed, at the crazily vibrating lower half of an arrow embedded in the tree trunk behind him, just a couple of inches to the right of his face. Someone was shooting at him, he realized, stunned for a moment, staring at the arrow. The next moment, adrenalin coursing through his veins, he dived to the ground, rolling away, trying to follow the trajectory of the arrow with his eyes. He was disoriented not only because of the unexpectedness of the attack but also because where he had been expecting it to be afternoon or

early evening, it was dusk here and everything was a little hazy. He realized he was still an exposed target and quickly dove for some bushes. He calmed down enough to realize that the arrow had not been aimed at him after all. He had just been caught in cross fire.

He could hear two warriors yelling at each other not far from where he stood. He peered cautiously around the tree. There, in a little glen amongst the trees stood the biggest, ugliest creature with a vague resemblance to a human being. Addy was reminded of a grotesque statue of a minor deity he had seen at a village temple in Tamil Nadu. The creature had big bloodshot eyes, fiery red hair that glowed in the light of the setting sun, a mustache that covered most of his lower face, and teeth that were pointed. His arms were brawny with wiry hair. He wore a crown, more chunky gold jewelry than Addy had seen even in a jewelry store, and garishly colored silk dhoti and angavastram (jodhpur-like bottoms and a cloth that covers the upper half).

He was armed to the teeth with a sword, mace, and bow and arrows which were currently directed at his adversary. “Coward,” he was roaring in a deafening guttural voice. “Don’t want to fight do you? Afraid you will lose to the great Mahashan, invincible warrior, vanquisher of a hundred foes, and favorite general of the King Kuber?” he bellowed. “Or are you hoping your girlfriend will come with her army to defend you, you traitor?” Addy looked to the other side to see who what the other warrior looked like. He crept around another tree, trying to make no noise. He was feeling a little shaken and did *not* want to be seen and attacked by this fearsome creature. But his curiosity got the better of him, and he crept along very slowly.

At last he came to a spot from where he could see both the one who had called himself Mahashan and his opponent. He saw a smaller man, although not small by human standards by any means. He looked to be taller than the tallest human he had seen and had a very muscular body. Compared to Mahashan, he looked weak. He had aristocratic features, dark brown wavy hair, and was also covered with jewels, crown, and silk clothes which were, however, refined looking. Despite the formidable antagonist, he held his bow with supreme confidence and nonchalance. He even had a sneer on his face as he replied in a raised but modulated voice. “Do not bait me, Mahashan. Go back to the palace and indulge in your drunken stupors. That suits you

best, not trying to pick a fight with a real warrior,” he said contemptuously. The creature called Mahashan growled in anger “I’ve caught you red handed, Dagdharath. You cannot get out of this one! Kubera will reward me and punish you.”

The aristocratic-faced creature looked pityingly at Mahashan. “First of all, let me remind you, *I* am the favorite of Kuber. I am his right hand man now. I am the one he consults on any issue of importance. *You* are the one who is buried in a dungeon all day, babysitting the treasures. It would do you good to remember, *I* was the one who received the Agneyastra from the Pandava prince Arjuna which has made Alkapuri well nigh impenetrable.” He paused and looked around in an exaggerated manner. “And although I know you are a little wanting in the brains department, even *you* must admit, there is nothing and no one here that you have caught me red handed with.” He spat derisively on the forest floor between them. “Now get out of my sight before I show you what a warrior really does,” he said. Mahashan looked like he was having an apoplectic fit.

He threw down his bow and charged in a blind rage toward Dagdhrath. The latter stood calmly, lowering his bow and stepping suddenly to his side just as the former was about to crash into him. He moved with such speed and fluidity, Addy was stunned. He sidestepped and turned in one smooth motion as the great creature was carried past due to his momentum, and putting his foot to Mahashan’s back, gave him a violent shove that sent the already blundering Mahashan crashing into the ground with a terrific noise. The great creature groaned and was still, knocked out for the moment. Dagdhrath looked down at him. He looked like he had just removed a particularly nasty fly out of his favorite drink. He turned and walked away unhurriedly. As he took a few steps, he transformed into another form. While his upper half remained more or less the same, only a little less muscular, his lower half changed into a horse.

“Ssssst....are you okayyy?” hissed someone close by and Addy nearly dropped dead from shock. He whirled around and found three snake men standing in a semi circle around him. Shit. They had slunk up on him when he was busy watching the fight. He wondered what to do if they attacked him. Then he realized they were smiling. At least if the grimace on their faces could be called that. “Vasuki sent us to escort you to his palace,” said

the one in the middle. He was an older man....er snake, judging by his grey hair and weather-beaten face. The other two flanking him looked young. They all had different colored clothes and tails, Addy noted. And the jewelry was kept to a minimum, which was just as well, grumbled Addy to himself. He was getting a headache looking at all that shiny gold.

He nodded mutely and followed them through the forest, observing how silently they glided over the forest floor. The snake men took him in the opposite direction of the city, up the slope to the cliff where he had landed the first time he ever read out the incantation. He turned to look back over his shoulder, and there it was, the city of wealth, lying nestled in the valley below him. Even in the deepening twilight, he could see it shimmering and glowing in an enchanting manner.

The snake people took him down the other side quite a bit, until they came to a vast cavern, guarded by more snake men. They passed in and went down, a long long way down into the bowels of the earth. Halfway there, the cold stone walls began to take on a more decorated look, with paintings and hangings and dim lights gracing the walls. They finally came to a junction of two tunnels. The elderly snake informed Addy that the smaller tunnel lead to the dwelling place of the snake population while the right, which they were taking, lead to the palace of Vasuki. The right tunnel, Addy noted, was sumptuously decorated in fine silk hangings, a soft material which he could not recognize below him on the floor like a carpet, bigger and fancier lights along the walls, and numerous wall decorations. The entrance to the palace was even grander with carvings and gold covered surfaces. The three snakes took Addy up to the throne room, where Vasuki sat on a throne made entirely of gold, embedded with jewels and covered with intricate patterns.

“Welcome, welcome my boy,” said Vasuki cordially, smiling at Addy. Addy felt a little overawed after seeing how powerful and wealthy he appeared to be. Until now, they had always seen him alone and in a neutral setting. He did not feel fear particularly, but a little unease to be so far below ground in the midst of a whole lot of snake people. “So, tell me, do you like my little city?” he asked and waved him over to take a seat in the court close to the throne. The other seats were only filled by a handful of snake people, Addy observed at a glance. His gaze was riveted on the most breathtakingly beautiful woman he had ever seen, who was sitting next to Vasuki on a

smaller throne similar to his. She was the only female in the room, all the others being males and all of whom were sitting a little lower down and farther away. "It's...it's beautiful, Sir," stumbled Addy a little, looking away from the mesmerizing eyes of the girl snake. He shook himself mentally. After having watched (under duress) innumerable serials on snakes on TV thanks to his mom, he was understandably a little wary of girl snakes. They were supposed to be beguiling and then would sink their fangs into the hero. He knew real life was not so melodramatic, but he made a mental note to himself that he'd try not to get distracted by this intriguing snake damsel.

"Glad you like it," said Vasuki, looking a little amused at Addy's discomfiture. "Let us move to the dining room, and we can have a little chat over refreshments. I take it the reason you have come is that you have queries for me?" he questioned. "Or have you already made a plan and are ready to start on the mission I set you?" "No, I'm not ready for that yet," replied Addy. "But yes, I do have many questions," he agreed. He was guided to another large room down from the throne room and given a low stool with a silk cushion to sit on. A splendid feast was laid in front of him and as they all began to eat, Vasuki looked inquiringly at him. "Before I ask my questions, I want to know something about what happened when I landed on the forest floor," he said. "There were two men.... umm.. creatures fighting each other. Who were they?" Vasuki looked at the three snake people who had escorted him, and they spoke to each other in a sibilant language he could not understand. Vasuki was frowning and looking at the girl snake who was again sitting next to him. She just shrugged her elegant shoulders imperturbably and kept eating. He turned to Addy. "Those two are inhabitants of Alkapuri, Kubera's city. The large coarse fellow is Mahashan, a rakshasa. He guards the treasures in the vaults and is a very powerful and vicious rakshasa," he said. "The other one, Dagdhrath, is a gandharva prince. He is the heir to the throne of the gandharva kingdom. He is a highly accomplished warrior and a favorite courtier of Kubera."

"What were they fighting about? Shouldn't they be on the same side?" wondered Addy, feeling confused at this news. Vasuki seemed a little uncomfortable at first, then seemed to come to a decision. "Dagdhrath likes my daughter Kudala," he said, indicating the beauty beside him. She goes to meet him in the forest which is kind of a no-man's land between our two kingdoms. The girl smiled, making her almost heart-stoppingly beautiful.

He drew in a deep breath and pulled away from her hypnotic gaze again as Vasuki went on. "After the war between the two kingdoms, we have avoided establishing any kind of relationship with citizens of the other kingdom. Mahashan suspects Dagdhrath of conspiring with the enemy and is also out to undermine his credibility since he is jealous of Dagdhrath's superior position at court despite being much younger and a gandharva to boot." "Oh I see," said Addy, sighing at the way politics and love seemed to work the same way even on other planes.

They had finished dinner and were now seated on plush couches covered with large silk cushions. "The first question I have for you is about time. How do we manage the time difference between our plane and yours? Do you know of a way to manipulate it such that no one realizes I am spending most of my time away from there?" he asked. "I'm afraid I cannot help you there," said Vasuki. "It is beyond my capacity to play with time. Only Lord Shiva can break the space-time continuum. No one else has the capability to do it. You will have to find another way to explain your absences," he said. Addy was dismayed. This had been, according to him, his biggest difficulty on the human plane. He had been quite confident Vasuki would be able to help him with this. He felt his faith in Vasuki's prowess waver a little. He just hoped he'd have the answers to all the other questions.

"I have a tentative plan in place, but I'd like to know how you are going to help me. Will you send someone with me into the city? And I need a plan or map of the city to understand the layout, as well as a floor plan of the palace and adjacent buildings," he said. "That can easily be done, the next time you come here to put the plan into effect. My spies will also give you all the information you require to locate the Nagamani, including the number of guards and their routine," Vasuki said, answering the latter question. "As for sending my people, I can send only one with you to guide you because as I told you before, my people are not welcome in Alkapuri. However, this one person is all you will need. Kudala is proficient in all types of warfare and can handle all kinds of situations. You can ask her guidance on anything that is an obstacle to your plan," he said. Addy's heart almost stopped beating. Kudala was going to accompany him?! He suddenly looked forward to the task a little more enthusiastically.

“My last query is about the vehicle of Kubera, the Pushpak Vimana. Do you know where it is parked? We were thinking of capturing it for our escape. Does it really work just by holding a thought?” asked Addy. Vasuki looked at him admiringly with raised eyebrows. “You know, I do believe that’s a very bold plan, which might just work,” he said. “It is kept in the royal stables next to the flying horses and elephants. The map of the palace will have its whereabouts on it. It is true that whoever sits in the charioteer’s seat and thinks of a place to go to will be obeyed by the vehicle. It will move at the speed of light and no horse or elephant can keep up with it. You do surprise me boy. And this is your first battle, you say?” he said. Addy was glad Kay had thought of that one. He looked at his watch which was still running on human time. “I need to go back now,” he said. “Hopefully, I’ll have a concrete plan within a short time and come back.”

Vasuki looked at him kindly. “Do not think you are getting a raw deal young man,” he said. “After the Nagamani is in my hands, I will reward you richly for your efforts. You can have a pick of my choicest treasures. It will be like nothing mankind has ever owned,” he added. Addy couldn’t help feeling pleased at this. He had been ready to do the task just to protect Pracheta and Kay, but getting something out of it sounded good. He had a brainwave. “Could you give me something that is not valuable to you but will be very valuable historically to me? It would help me in my job,” he said. Vasuki seemed a little put out at the thought that the reward would not be valuable. “Anything you like,” he said. “What is the nature of this thing?” “I’d like to know the location of an ancient site on the human plane and a few objects that are associated with it,” he replied.

“That is a very small reward you are asking the great serpent king,” said Vasuki. “Are you sure you do not want riches?” “Dead sure,” confirmed Addy. “Hmm, I can point out to you a lot of ancient sites. There may be minor treasures in those sites too. And I can fish out some corresponding items from my vast treasury,” agreed Vasuki. “Before you leave, there is one thing I need to tell you,” said the serpent king. “It is not safe for you to appear at the forest on the mountain. The next time, before you chant the mantra, meditate on me for a few moments and then chant it. This will ensure you appear directly outside my city gates, which will be safe for you.” Addy thanked him and left with one of the snake people guiding him to get out of the city. When he was outside the city gates, he chanted the

mantra again, landing back in his room in the hotel.



## 8. Pooling information

Addy looked at the time on his watch. It was nearly five o'clock. He had got back early enough to pick Kay up at the museum if she wasn't back already. He gave her a ring on her phone, and she confirmed she was still at the museum but ready to come back. He drove down and met her at the gate of the museum. She seemed to be in good spirits so he assumed things had gone well and they had found the parchment she was searching for. "Addy!" she said excitedly as soon as she got into the car. "You won't believe what I found. It's certainly going to make Mr. Kher sit up, and I can justify his confidence in me," she said. Addy glanced sideways at her while driving through the dense Chennai traffic.

"I take it you found the parchment?" he asked. "Yeah, sweet as! We took a long time to find it as they have quite a surprisingly large collection of old material in there. I must remember to come back here someday in the future after our task is over," she said enthusiastically. Addy smiled at her fervor. She really did love her job. "Did you have tea yet?" he asked interrupting. "Uh..no. Let's have some now, and I'll tell you all I found over it," she said. "Sometimes I just get so carried away I forget to eat! I'm starving, I forgot lunch too," she said with a sheepish grin. They had reached the Templetree Residency and went straight to the dining area. While Kay was ordering a large tea, Addy called up the rent-a-car people to return their car. They wouldn't need it anymore as they could hire a cab to go to the airport in about three hours' time.

Addy let Kay eat her fill of the South Indian snacks she had ordered before broaching the topic again. She seemed so wrapped up in her own discovery, she had yet not asked about what his experience was. As she reached the end of her meal, she seemed to realize it, and said, "Hey, how rude of me, I didn't even ask you what happened in the other realm. Did you meet Vasuki? What did he say? Did you ask everything we had talked about yesterday?" "Whoa, slow down already," said Addy, throwing up his hands at the barrage of questions. "Let me hear your news first. You might bust something trying to keep it in," he added and laughed. She frowned mock angrily and said, "Alright, here goes. As I said, we finally found the parchment and Mr. Natrajan very kindly allowed me to sit in his office and decipher it. He is quite knowledgeable about old Sanskrit and was quite a

help, which is why I could decipher it in so short a time. It was an amazing experience working with him. The parchment clearly describes a shield or armor that protects the wearer against the Agneyastra. What is more, it says that the power of the missile is sucked into the armor, making it more powerful and preventing any kind of destruction even around the person wearing it.”

Addy waited for her to go on. “That is not the best part though. There is a very clear location mentioned on the parchment along with a bit of history about how it ended up in that place. You’re just going to love this,” she smirked. “What is the name of the armor?” interjected Addy. “It is called Karna’s kavacha,” said Kay, looking expectantly at him. Addy was stunned. He of course knew about Karna, the sixth son of Kunti, or rather the first son who had to be cast away since he was born out of wedlock, who unknowingly became the foe of his half-brothers the Pandavas, in the great Indian epic, the Mahabharatha. According to mythology, he was born wearing a golden kavacha (armor) and kundala (earrings) as a blessing from his father Surya or the sun god, whom the young unmarried Kunti had propitiated with a newly acquired mantra. The armor was attached to his body like a second skin. It was the one thing that could have turned a battle with his most hated brother, Arjuna, in his favor, as they were otherwise equally matched in their fighting skills. However, Arjuna’s father Indra, the king of gods, had intervened to protect his son before the great war; he had tricked Karna into cutting it off his body and giving it to him in charity, and hence, Arjuna had been able to kill him. “Do you know about it?” asked Kay impatiently.

Addy related whatever he knew about it and Kay nodded. “The parchment says that after Indra received the armor, he was stricken with remorse for the nasty trick he had played on Karna by coming to him begging for alms, disguised as a poor brahmin and asking for the kavacha, when he knew Karna never turned back a petitioner after his morning prayers, and would grant anything asked of him that was within his capacity. So although he took the kavacha, he threw it out of his chariot when he was going back to his own kingdom on one of the higher planes. The kavacha fell to the ground near what is now Jamnagar in Gujarat,” she said pausing to see if he was following her.

He nodded and gestured to ask her to go on with the details. “The parchment says that a contingent of Yavanas was camped nearby. They were the remaining warriors from a group that had come with Kalayavana, their ferocious leader, to try to capture Dwaraka, Lord Krishna’s wealthy fortress city. After being defeated and almost annihilated, these few survivors were retreating when they found the kavacha. They took it along with whatever other loot they had managed to save, back to their own kingdom.” She looked expectantly at Addy but he was just listening passively, so she went on, “They went back to their stronghold in a mountainous area of their kingdom. This stronghold has never been found by modern-day archeologists. It is possible the kavacha along with other artifacts is still there,” she said elatedly.

“Err...one little question. Where on earth could this kingdom be? We can’t go searching all over the globe or even all over India for it....,” said a confused Addy. Kay made an exasperated noise. “Sometimes I wonder how you could be Indian and know less than me about your own culture and heritage,” she sighed. “I said the *Yavana* race took the armor. Don’t you know who are referred to as Yavana in Sanskrit?” “No...no I can’t say I know. I’ve always been focused on either Indian or international archeological sites and artifacts. I really don’t know much about Sanskrit. And although my Mom does try hard to din a little mythology into me, I don’t seem to have absorbed as much as I could have,” said Addy shamefacedly. “Yavana is Sanskrit for Greek people,” relented Kay. “Do you know what this means? The armor is in Greece, as well as a potential excavation site just waiting to be found. By *us*! Isn’t that a bottler?” she continued triumphantly.

Addy’s jaw fell open. Greece? He’d not known that there were Greeks in India during the legendary period of the Mahabharata war. “Are you sure about the validity of these facts?” he asked tentatively. “Of course I am,” exclaimed Kay. “The palm leaf is certainly authentic, because Mr. Natarajan said all the artifacts in the museum had been carbon dated and inventoried. The parchment is four centuries old. And it describes the events that happened probably another century before that, right about the time that the Mahabharata war is supposed to have taken place, the same time that the Greeks, Sumerians, and Egyptians were trading with India. So I see no reason to doubt the veracity of this information,” said Kay insistently.

Addy could guess what the ambitious young lady was thinking next. “Do you think Mr. Kher would sanction an expedition to Greece? It would cost a lot...,” he said pensively. “We certainly can’t afford to pay our way and cannot take those many days off either.” Kay nodded, but he could see a faraway look in her eyes, she was busy thinking. “It wouldn’t really be an expedition, more like a recon trip before the expedition, but I agree, we need to think about this some more,” she answered finally. He looked at his watch and realized they would have to have dinner and pack soon if they were to board their flight. At least they were still in the dining area. “Let’s have dinner now and think some more about it while packing. We can talk on the plane,” he said. Kay agreed, and they had a delicious South Indian thali as quickly as possible, before going up to pack. They did not talk much as both were thinking about all that had happened, and it was rather later than they had planned on leaving to the airport. They had to really rush to catch the plane. However, once aboard and settled in their seats, Addy realized he had not yet told Kay about all that he learnt from the other realm.

“Don’t you want to hear what happened to me in the higher plane?” he asked, turning to Kay. She was gazing out of the plane at the aerodrome, still thinking with a heavy frown. “Oh, yeah, I completely forgot. What did happen?” she asked eagerly, turning towards him. Addy narrated all his experiences as well as Vasuki’s instructions. Kay’s eyes grew round at his description of the altercation between the gandharva and rakshasa. “I wish I could have seen the underground city where the snakes live. It sounds like they don’t do too badly for themselves,” she said. “I wonder how long they will take to make a map of the city as well as the palace building? And this is another worrisome hurdle, the fact we cannot do anything to hide that we are missing. Any plan we make has to take into account a lot of variables,” she said, looking worried. “If we are somehow able to convince Mr. Kher into letting us go to Greece, I think it would be easy to go missing for a couple of days or weeks, hopefully as long as it takes to complete the task. Since it does not matter where on the earth we are, to reach the other place, we could do it from there and go back there when we have completed the charge,” said Addy hesitantly as his main concern was that they wouldn’t be able to convince their superior to send them to Greece on a recon trip. “We could say we will be going into remote places where the cell phones may not work and so no one in India will expect a call from us. And since no one knows us

in Greece, no one will miss us.”

“That is a good idea,” said Kay. “It would undoubtedly leave us free to go to the other realm, get our bearings and reconnoiter before we go through with a plan, and get back without anyone being the wiser,” she said.

“However, there are some snags that I can see right away. The first being, will Mr. Kher be ready to send us? Even if he does, will he send us at short notice? And even if he does send us as soon as possible, what if he sends a senior archeologist along with us? We are neither of us experienced enough to be entrusted with a big initial visit like this. What if he takes the information and sends another archeologist altogether. Then we would really be in a fix,” she said, trying to be sensible, although she wanted to go as much as Addy did. “It would be awful to be saddled with one of the oldies. We won’t be able to go missing as we planned and even if we found the kavacha, will neither be able to hide it from him, nor take it with us to the divine plane. Worst would be not making the trip at all,” she said morosely. Addy patted her hand kindly. “Let’s not cross our bridges etc., as you say,” he said cheerfully. “I think we should take this one step at a time. Let us go back and formulate a pitch that Mr. Kher cannot refuse. After this first step, we will get to the others.” Kay smiled and nodded in agreement.

The rest of the flight went in quiet companionship as the two thought about everything again. Just before landing time, Addy thought of something. “Is it mentioned where this place is in Greece?” asked Addy suddenly. “What? I didn’t get you,” said Kay looking confused. “In your parchment, is it mentioned where the Yavana’s stronghold is? Because I don’t think Greece is a small country, and we could spend years looking for the armor unless we know where to look,” he said. “It is mentioned as a mountain fortress in the spine of Greece,” she said. “But a specific location is not mentioned.” They sank into silence again, digesting this new bit of information. They both thought it was going to be really difficult to find the site at short notice even if they did get permission to go. The problems seemed almost insurmountable. They had to finally stop thinking as the plane landed and they got busy collecting their overnight bags and deplaning.

They agreed to meet in the lobby of the archeological office the next day and finalize their pitch before going together to Mr. Kher’s office. Addy

was glad to get back home to his own bedroom. It had been a fun and exciting journey, but he was tired now and glad to be back in the familiar and comfortable surroundings of his home, with his mother fussing about as usual.

Next morning saw him up early with no real plans about how to tackle Mr. Kher. He hoped Kay was having better luck than him in coming up with something. He went early to the office and waited in the lobby as she had instructed him to. When Kay came in, he observed that she had taken special effort to look smartly professional. She always did look good, but as she nodded at him and sat down, tucking a lock of golden hair behind her ear, he had to admit that today she had outdone herself. She wore a tailored cornflower blue shirt that matched her blue eyes exactly, paired with a crisp white skirt that reached her knees in a slim fit. She looked cool and competent, and if he had been in the position of deciding the outcome of whatever proposal she was going to make, he admitted he would have been at the least inclined to hear her out.

“So here we are,” she said. “I’ve brought the digital images of the parchment I deciphered, to show Mr. Kher. After a good night’s sleep, the solution came to me. It’s really quite simple. I’ll just point out how lucky we are to have found this clue to a potential excavation site. It will not only give us the government grants that Mr. Kher wants, but put the Indian Archeological Department on the international map, so to speak. I will speak as convincingly as possible, hoping that Vasuki will come through on his part of the deal when this is all over, and get us to a real site in Greece as well as a few artifacts,” she said.

“We may be able to find it ourselves, but that is beside the point. My trump card for going on the exploration mission myself is that I did a brief course of the Greek language as part of my undergraduate course. This included both the Greek alphabet which is used currently, as well as the Linear B script which was used in Mycenaean times. I also know very basic Egyptian hieroglyphics from which the Greek language originated several millennia ago,” she said. “Language is going to be a very important factor while investigating this clue, to decide where to start searching. Although I am not as much of an expert at Greek as I am at Sanskrit, I don’t think there is anyone else here in the department who is an expert at Greek either. So I

am fairly confident I can ensure a seat for myself on the recon mission. Once I'm in, I'll try to get you in too," she concluded. "We don't really require a senior member to join us because we will most probably be accompanied by someone from the Greek Archeological Survey anyway, since that is part of the treaty with Greece regarding international exploration of archeological sites."

Addy nodded, hoping she would succeed in not just getting herself but himself too into the survey trip. He couldn't imagine not going with her. He'd crawl up the walls until she came back with the armor, if he had to stay back in India. Moreover, not going meant the time issue was back to square one, since he'd have to wait until she returned and then go to the heavenly plane, which meant their plan for hiding their whereabouts would fall flat. He crossed his fingers and wished her luck. She had decided it would be best if she went in alone to meet Mr. Kher, and he agreed with relief. He did not want a run-in with Mr. Kher with so much hanging in the balance. He went to the filing room, deciding to get some work done to keep himself busy. He met Shaheer on the way, who ribbed him about his trip to Chennai with Kay in his usual manner. He wished he could confide in Shaheer about the palm leaf and the resultant quest. He missed talking things over with a guy. But he knew it wasn't the best idea. He already regretted speaking about it to Kay and landing her in this spot, although he knew she loved every minute of it and took it as a challenge. It was still dangerous, and he did not want to endanger any more people by sharing his strange predicament.

## 9. In search of the armor

It was the lunch hour when Kay finally came in search of Addy. He was sitting morosely in the pantry cum dining area alone, after Shaheer and the others left after lunch. One look at Kay's grinning face had the young man feeling better. He jumped up and asked eagerly, "How did it go?" "Bonzer!!" she exclaimed. "We are in. I had to really work hard to convince him though. Although he agreed, we still have to await confirmation from the Chairman. Mr. Kher promised to talk to him today and let me know tomorrow. If all goes well, we'll be able to go by the end of the month. Mr. Kher still has some reservations about sending just two junior archeologists, but luckily for us, all the senior people are tied up with big projects already and would not be able to spare the time for at least another six months."

She giggled happily. "You know, I nearly passed out when he said he'd like to come with me too." Addy looked at her in shock. "What? Do you mean to say he is coming with us? How on earth are we to search for the kavacha and disappear with it without losing our jobs and probably being put in jail?" he almost shouted. "Calm down," laughed Kay. "Of course he is not coming. He hasn't even gone on a national field visit in years, and this is an international one. He was just trying to be kindly and protective. I assured him that after this Chennai trip, I felt I could rely on you, and it would be much easier to send you since you have less responsibilities here. He did see reason, though he was grumbling a little about sending you on an international trip when you were still new and inexperienced and did not deserve it," she said. "New? Huh...I've been working my butt off for the past two years for that old tyrant. And how does he think I'm going to get experience when I'm shut up in a filing room all day?" he asked indignantly.

"Yeah well, I can't imagine why he is hard on you. But he did ultimately agree to my plan. I have to prepare a formal report about it, and how we are going to go about the investigation. I better get on with my sanger," she said, hastily getting out her sandwiches and bottle of fruit juice. She sat down and started munching quickly. "When do you have to give him this report?" asked Addy. "By three o'clock, so that he can talk to the Chairman later with the report ready at hand. He said he might even go to meet the Chairman at his house since they are old college mates, and show him the report," replied Kay. "I'll help you prepare the report if you like,"



said Addy. “I’m done in the filing room for the day. I was so apprehensive about whether he would or not agree to the journey, I worked very quickly and am now a day ahead of my work,” grinned Addy. “Spiffy, come to my cabin with me, and we will discuss what to put in the report. And maybe even plan about where to go to in Greece first, although we have a lot of time for that yet,” said Kay.

Kay’s cabin was actually a large cubicle in one of the bigger office rooms. She had tried to make it look cosier by adding a bright rug on the floor, photographs of her parents and a smiling couple with a baby on the desk, as well as a few knick-knacks on the shelf behind her. It was still a bleak-looking government office room. Addy sat down on the single guest swivel chair and waited for Kay to get a pen and paper ready. “It’s funny how they still prefer a physical report than a digital one,” said Kay. “I could have done this on my lappie so much more easily and quickly,” she sighed. “Ok, so I’ll first put in what I found at Chennai. That reminds me, I need to make a formal report about my discovery of the first parchment at the library and why we went to Chennai. I’ll do it later since it is not urgently required now. So....here goes,” she said writing rapidly on the sheet of paper. Addy waited until she paused and asked, “What is our real plan once we get there?”

“We’ll go to Crete. It is the eastern-most part of Greece that is also historically well known. Travelers from the east must have stopped there before they went on to the mainland. I want to go to their museum there and see what we find. If we do not find anything, we’ll have to visit any island that has a museum. After that, we could go to Athens and look into the many museums there. First and most important will be the National Archeological Museum with the Acropolis museum a close second. Hopefully, we will find some clue in one of these museums. If we don’t, we go to the Pindus range,” she said. “Why the Pindus range?” asked Addy. “I did a little research and found out the ‘spine of Greece’ mentioned in the Sanskrit inscription is the Pindus range,” replied Kay. “I don’t know how much to put on this report however. Do you think we should mention everything?” she asked. “No, definitely not. It would be very suspicious,” said Addy at once. “Put in the bit about the museums. But leave out where specifically we might go, such as about the Pindus range,” he advised. “Okay,” said Kay, writing again.

“There, how does it look?” she asked, pushing the paper across to Addy. He read it through and marveled at how she had concisely put in everything so swiftly. He knew he’d have taken an hour to write a similar report, at the very least. “Brilliant,” he said handing it back. He stood up. “I’ll get back to the filing room,” he said. “I want to finish all the cabinets before we go to Greece, and there are multiple S and T cabinets.” It would also help to keep out of trouble so Mr. Kher was more inclined to be kindly to him, he thought. He didn’t want to antagonize the old geezer and find himself pulled out of the trip at the last moment.

The following day, Mr. Kher called them both to the office. He had been pleased with Kay’s report and gone to meet the Chairman as promised. Since they were close friends, it had been easy for him to get the Chairman to sanction the trip, although he had laid down some conditions about the duration of the trip, hotel accommodation, and reporting regularly. The duration was two months, which was more than Addy was hoping for. He had thought it would be more like two weeks. It did not matter actually, because he knew a tourist visa would last for three months, and he definitely hoped to get back, having accomplished the task by then. But he preferred not getting in trouble with his employers and so two months would do very nicely.

The next few weeks were busy ones for Addy and Kay. They had to complete all their pending assignments at the office as well as get things underway for their international trip. They filled forms and submitted documents to the Greek Consulate to apply for a visa. In Sydney, this would have been taken care of by the employers, but here the system was different, more so because it was a government department, and so they had to be more involved in the nitty gritty of putting together the trip. They booked the flight tickets and got hotel reservations at Crete and Athens. They had to play it by the ear because they knew they could not stay at one place for so many weeks since they would be investigating, but the visa process demanded they show the reservations so they booked with the intention of shortening the reservation when they got to Greece, while checking into the hotels. Finally, they went to the Greek Consulate to have their identities checked and for an interview, before the visa was dispatched to them.

On the domestic front, they were busy preparing for the trip by buying

winter wear as it was winter and although it was cold in Delhi, it would be much colder in Greece. On Kay's advice, Addy also bought some hiking gear and another pair of hiking boots as they would most likely be going mountain climbing in the Pindus range, which they had read, was a very rugged one. They debated whether to buy a tent but decided not to, hoping to rely on inns and B&Bs on the road. Kay had an old tent which she had brought over from Australia, and she said she would pack that, just in case.

Addy's mother had been thrilled at the idea of her son going abroad, albeit for a short stay, and went around announcing it to anyone who would listen to her. He had visited with Pracheta twice in the meantime, and she kept being alternately jealous that they were going on a trip to Greece, and happy that she could demand some Greek souvenirs, chocolates, and anything else he felt like buying for her. She had wormed out of him the fact that this trip had something to do with the Nagamani and threw a tantrum that she wanted to come with them, it wasn't fair that they kept her out of it, when it was *she* who had landed them on the other plane by reading the mantra. Somehow, with Kay's help, he had been able to convince her that the only reason they weren't taking her was because it was an office trip and they would surely take her along on the task of retrieving the gem.

Pracheta was mollified at this and again her warm self. Luckily for them, she did not yet know their plan of visiting the higher realm from Greece and getting back there with the reverse mantra, which meant she would not actually be included in any of the retrieval plans. Addy definitely did not want to put his little cousin at risk and Kay was even more vehement about it. They showered her with a lot more attention and little presents to keep her happy so she would forget about trying to prise out any other secret from them. Addy was relieved she did not make any more references to marrying Kay, and his mother was not behaving in an embarrassing manner either. Addy looked forward to this trip immensely. He had never been abroad; this was his very first trip outside India, and he was absolutely delighted about it.

They had started corresponding with a Greek archeologist, Reinhart Drakos, who was to be their liaison on their travels. He seemed a nice enough person, but their problem was they did not want anyone to dog their steps and realize what they were doing. They spoke about this but were

nowhere near deciding what to do. Addy was all for ditching the guy when they were in the mountain region. Kay was more cautious. “We might need him more in the mountains than at Athens or the islands,” she said. “Neither of us is a professional hiker. We do not know the lay of the land or where we might need to go. If we ditch him too early, we might regret it.” Addy had to agree but did not see how they could evade him when they found the kavacha. There was no doubt in his mind they would find it. If they didn’t, he’d just go back to Vasuki and tell him to find it by divine means and guide him to it.

“We’ll deal with it as the situation plays out,” said Kay firmly. “We have plenty of time to decide what kind of person he is, and whether we might need him or not. If it turns out we can do better without him, it would be easy enough to disappear. But if we need him, it’d be better to delay getting rid of his company until we are fairly sure where the kavacha is, after which we can vanish with the help of the mantra.” Addy agreed reluctantly. They also made a note to pack a change of clothes in their hiking gear so they had some alternates to wear in the higher realm. By now all their preparations were done and the visas had arrived. Addy looked forward to the trip with a mixture of exultation and trepidation. Exultation because he was going on his first real survey mission, that too an international one, and he looked forward enormously to the search for the kavacha. Trepidation, because he knew that whether they found it or not, he would have to go to the divine plane and complete his charge of salvaging the Nagamani.

Finally the day arrived when they found themselves aboard the flight that would take them to Doha, Qatar, where they would board a connecting flight to Athens. It was a night flight and they spent most of it sleeping, although it was a very disturbed sleep despite the aircraft being very comfortable. Every time he nodded off, it seemed the staff turned up with something to eat, or there were kids crying, or someone jolted him while they were going to the restroom, or his arm fell asleep because Kay was leaning against him fast asleep. He was disgruntled she was able to sleep so soundly. He decided he hated all night flights. They arrived at Doha in the wee hours of the morning and disembarked to go through customs to the waiting area, where they would have to wait nearly half a day for the connecting flight.

The Doha airport was a large one, and they went to get breakfast before freshening themselves at the restrooms. The breakfast dishes were much too oily for his taste and the quantities too huge, but there being no choice, he ate what looked like the least greasy amongst them. He was pleasantly surprised on the plane as well as Doha that the food wasn't that much different from Indian food, with a lot of spices. He had been a little apprehensive about that because he had heard too many stories from friends and relatives who bemoaned that food available outside India's shores was bland to the point of being totally unappetizing. After breakfast, they went window shopping around the numerous shops in the airport, finally going back to the waiting area to curl up with a book for the rest of their wait.

The flight to Athens took less time, and Addy knew he would never forget his first glimpse of Greece from the air. It looked absolutely picturesque, golden and emerald green surrounded by the turquoise blue of the sea. The sky was blue, too, impossibly blue. The toy-sized buildings were multicolored, and he could see tiny ships anchored at the port. Kay went into raptures over the sight. She said she had always debated whether to work in Greece or India, which is why she had taken both Greek and Sanskrit, but decided on India because it had the oldest civilization that was still living. They disembarked and made their way through customs and immigration and took a bus to the hotel they would be staying for the night. As it was late evening, it had been decided they would spend the night at Athens and take a ferry to Crete the next morning. They were also scheduled to meet Reinhart Drakos at the hotel for dinner. He would be accompanying them the next day as well as through the entire survey period.

The bus ride was an eye opener for Addy, who had been told Greece was a poor country and would be most likely dirty unlike the more affluent European countries. However, he found that wherever he looked, everything was just perfect. The streets, the buildings, the trees, the gently undulating hillocks, the impression of space, he loved all of it. The late evening sunlight seemed to make everything looked soaked entrancingly in gold. They checked into the hotel and went to their rooms to unpack and relax until dinner time. They went down to the dining area together at 8 o'clock and found their liaison waiting for them at a table. He waved them over and they went to sit at the table he was at.

Reinhart Drakos was a tall and handsome Greek. His features looked like they were copied from the marble statue of a Greek god. He had dark blonde curly hair, striking green eyes, tanned skin, and a dazzling smile. Addy chuckled to himself imagining how Pracheta's jaw would have dropped if she had seen him. He looked like he was probably in his early thirties. He met them cordially and held out Kay's chair politely for her. "Hope your flight was good?" he asked smiling at them both after introducing himself. "This is not one of our better hotels," he said deprecatingly, "but I know we archeologists have to slum it more often than not. I hope your stay in Greece will be a good one," he said. They ordered dinner and again Addy found he liked Greek food. Reinhart had been kind enough to suggest what they order and everything had turned out to be sinfully tasty. Addy thought he was going to love the food here; it was exotic, lightly spiced, very flavorful, and delicious. They spoke a little about themselves, and then got around to discussing their survey assignment. Reinhart seemed interested and knowledgeable and agreed that Crete would be a good place to start the investigation. He had already booked their passage for the next day, and after reminding them to be checked out and ready in the morning, he took his leave.

## 10. Crete

Kay and Addy met up early for breakfast the next day having already packed and gotten ready for the day. They checked out and went in for breakfast. Addy took one look at the buffet spread and knew he just had to taste everything. He heaped his plate with sausages, toast with tahini, stuffed omelet, eggs with staka, bacon, stewed peaches and cream, a spinach pie, coffee, and orange juice. Kay looked at him a little oddly, but he just grinned at her boyishly and dug in. “Now I know how I must appear to an Indian when I load my plate with the unlikeliest of choices back in Delhi,” she said, smiling back. Reinhart came in when they were more than halfway through breakfast and ate a much smaller breakfast of juice, stuffed omelet, toast, and coffee. After they were done, they went down to the port, Piraeus, in a hired car and got into the ferry that was to take them to Crete.

The sea looked absolutely breathtakingly beautiful. As the ferry moved away from shore, the islands looked as if they were painted into the horizon far way in a haze of mist. Addy realized that the way the sunlight shone down here was different from India. While it was hotter in India, the light was a different color. Here, in Greece, it was cold but the light was almost blindingly bright, a light bright yellow. It made everything look absolutely heavenly. He was reminded vividly of a movie he had seen long ago, *Mamma Mia*. It had not been his kind of movie but he had brought the video for his Mom and been spellbound enough by the scenery to watch it. It had been shot in Greece, and he had thought at that time it was impossible for it to be so beautiful and likely a trick of the cinematographer’s. However, now he found that it was exactly the same, Greece really was that appealing. There were rugged mountains, wide expanses of land with no buildings on them, the blue-green sea and everything drenched in that unbelievably bright sunlight.

The ferry ride was more than seven hours long, but Addy did not stop feeling the wonder even when they disembarked at Heraklion. There had been a two-hour entertainment on board, with traditional Greek dances, folk songs, and a short skit. There had been lunch shortly afterwards, and it was an even more sumptuous spread than breakfast had been. However, Addy regretted eating so much, because soon the movement of the ferry began to make him feel nauseous, and he knew for the first time what seasickness

meant. Luckily, he was able to hold down whatever he ate, although Kay was not so fortunate. Reinhart was extremely sympathetic and tried to make things easier for them. There was a stop at one of the smaller islands, and he urged them both to get down and walk around on solid land so they wouldn't feel so sick anymore. Although Addy hadn't wanted to get up from where he was half reclining against a table (and by the glares Kay was shooting at Reinhart, he guessed she did not want to either), he was thankful Reinhart had practically forced them out. Both of them felt much better after walking around and found the feeling had disappeared when they got back on board. However, they were wary about eating anything at tea time and resolutely kept away from the mouth-watering array of snacks laid out in the dining area. They only had a cup of tea each with biscuits so they wouldn't spoil the rest of the ride.

As they got down at Heraklion and checked into a hotel, Addy marveled anew at Kay's resourcefulness and intelligence. It was obvious that the ancient Greeks had not only used this as the frontier to the east, but also that it was at the cross-roads of the Mediterranean sea-routes. It was absolutely strategically placed for international trade and travel. Although the Archeological Museum had closed at 3 p.m., they went for a stroll to look at it from outside before dinner. It was a glass and brick building which surprised Addy, as he had been expecting an ancient structure. The hotel they had stayed at in Athens had been close to the Acropolis, and they could see some of the ruins in the distance. Somehow, because of that, he had imagined that the museum here would be housed in an ancient renovated building. After dinner, during which Reinhart regaled them with amusing stories about his experience as an archeologist, they decided to call it an early night as both he and Kay were a little tired after the long ferry ride. Kay reminded him to be up early so they could get to the museum as soon as it opened at 8 a.m.

Kay had already ascertained that there were no known records of the particular group of Greek warriors who had tried to attack Dwaraka under Kalayavana's leadership. Since the name 'Kalayavana' meant black or dark-skinned Greek in Sanskrit (and modern-day Hindi), it was safe to assume that was not his original name. It was hence difficult to find out about this contingent directly. They had to go over every archeological find pertaining to warriors of near about the third century B.C. This was a daunting task but



one that both Addy and Kay loved.

Being in a historically rich museum such as the Archeological Museum of Heraklion, Addy mused, was something like what he would expect paradise to be like. They first went on a quick tour of the entire premises to get an idea of which room housed what period artifacts. This took them the larger part of two hours since they couldn't resist stopping every now and then to read something. Reinhart accompanied them, explaining anything they did not understand, although everything was labeled in English as well as Greek.

Most of the exhibits were from the Minoan era, but there were many that were unknown and were probably even older. They knew they could not ignore the Minoan era exhibits, inscriptions, and artifacts because the Minoan era had flourished a mere three hundred years after the Yavanas had left India with Karna's kavacha. It was possible that they had left the armor here on their way to their stronghold, although this did not seem probable. If they had left it in Crete, the Minoans would have inherited it, and so it might be mentioned in the finds from the Minoan era, although the armor itself had never been found, as they had learnt.

They took their time the rest of the day looking at each and every item displayed and making notes about whatever they thought may be useful. Reinhart excused himself after a couple of hours since he was not needed at this stage. He would travel with them after they knew where to go, so that if they did find a new archeological site, both Greece and India would have a stake on the site archeologically. He told them he would meet them everyday at breakfast and take them to whichever museum they wanted to go, and then get on with his daily assignments. When they had an idea about the likely place to look for the missing stronghold of the India-returned Greeks, he would be entirely at their disposal.

That first day set a comfortable routine they fell into for a few days. They would meet Reinhart at breakfast, discuss which section of the current museum they were going to concentrate on, and go to it. After Reinhart left, Addy and Kay would divide the section they had chosen and examine everything thoroughly. They would then exchange their notes and go over the section the other had done. They had covered most of the Archeological Museum in this way. It was their fourth day at the museum, when Addy

noticed that Kay had probably found something. She was staring off into space in the midst of writing on her notepad. He went to where she was sitting on one of the museum seats, and asked “Found anything interesting? I mean anything relevant?” he amended, since everything here was definitely interesting.

He had gotten a little distracted from their goal himself, as he found a fascinating exhibit of a burial mound. There was a little girl (a skeleton now of course) buried with all her crude wooden toys, a couple of broken bead necklaces, a pot, and sundry other items. What was strange though was the stakes driven through her limbs, spaced about half a foot apart. Although this was not going to be useful for their quest, he could not help reading up about it, thinking how excited Pracheta would have been if she had been here. She was as interested in burial rituals and sarcophagi as she was in mummies. He finally shook his head and reminded himself they were here on a job, not to sight see. That was when he looked at Kay and found she was thinking something instead of studiously looking at the exhibits and writing notes.

“I don’t know if it means anything,” said Kay. She motioned him over to a bowl she was looking at. It had patterns all around it as well as inside it. It was a large shallow ceramic bowl. It was evidently from the early Minoan period judging by the pattern of spirals, triangles, and circular lines painted on the inner and outer surfaces. It had a star pattern in the center on the inside. “Have you seen this before?” she asked him, pointing to the star. Addy looked at it. It was actually two equilateral triangles transposed one over another, one pointed upwards and the other downwards. “It’s a six-pointed star,” he said, wondering what was so unique about that. “Exactly,” said Kay. “It is six pointed and there is a hexagon formed by its sides in the middle. Although it is mentioned here that it is the precursor of the Star of David, I have seen something like this in old Indian symbols. It is called a Shatkona, or six-pointed figure,” she said.

Addy thought about this. He was sure he had seen it too; it was a recurring symbol in Hindu religion, and he vaguely recalled seeing it on some text or the other when he was learning ancient Indian symbols. He nodded. “I’ve seen it before,” he answered. “It cannot be a coincidence. There does not seem to be any origin for it in Greece, and I think there must be some Indian influence here,” Kay said. “It might be a symbol brought back by the

Greeks who came back from India. It's worth investigating, anyway," she said. "Yes," agreed Addy. "It's the best clue we have found so far."

They spoke to the curator and asked him if there were any more bowls or artifacts with this particular pattern on them. The curator told them that this was the only one in the Archeological Museum but that he knew of at least one more, on a painting this time, at the Historical Museum on the other end of the island. They thanked him and decided to cover the rest of the museum in as short a time as possible, so they could go to the Historical Museum the next day.

Reinhart accompanied them to the Historical Museum the next day and spoke with the custodian there about the Star of David. There appeared to be three different exhibits that could possibly have this symbol and so the three of them went to see these. The first two turned out to be normal five pointed stars, to their disappointment. The third, however, was definitely a six-pointed one. There was very little written in the label below the painting so they approached the custodian again. The custodian said that the full notes by the archeologist who found it must be stored in one of their lockers in the back room. He went to find it and came back in a half hour, with some yellowed files.

They sat down in the custodian's office to read the notes. The notes implied that the painting, although not of the Minoan era, was based on art by the Minoans, which in turn was probably based on art found at a historical archeological site in Chania, another city in Crete. The excavation of this site had occurred just a year before the archeologist wrote about the Star of David painting. Addy had a strong hunch that they should go to Chania to follow this lead. Kay looked a little doubtful as they still had to cover three more museums in Heraklion. However, she admitted that it did seem a good lead and if it did not turn out to be the right one, they could always come back to Heraklion and go over the remaining three museums.

Therefore, the next day saw them driving towards Chania. Reinhart told them that he had visited this excavation site many times in the past and was familiar with it. They wanted to have a look at the site although of course there wouldn't be anything much to see except ruins. After that, he was to take them to the Archeological Museum of Chania, where they hoped to find more evidence regarding the Shatkona and hopefully some clues as to

the Greek warriors who brought the golden armor back to Greece. The site, as they expected, was fully excavated and did not yield any leads despite going over it carefully. They moved on to the museum. This one, to Addy's satisfaction, was housed in an ancient building that was reputed to be older than 600 years. It was absolutely majestic and contained a wide range of exhibits including clay tablets with inscriptions, coins, mosaics, and pottery. It was vast and as tempting as it was to go over it in a leisurely manner, Kay and Addy contented themselves with going to meet the curator with Reinhart and asking about finds from the newly excavated site.

"Look what I found!" exclaimed Addy. The three of them were poring over exhibits, mostly inscriptions and artifacts, from the site. They had roughly divided it between themselves to save time. Reinhart, sensing they may be close to finding the clue, had not left today and was helping them search. "What?" asked Kay and Reinhart in a chorus. They went over to look at the section Addy was working on. There was an inscription in Greek with an accompanying pattern of geometrical figures surrounding it. The one at the top in the center was the Shatkona. Although Addy could not read the inscription, the label below said it was an inscription that was older than the Minoan era, but that it was unknown what its true origins were. It was found along with Minoan artifacts at the site. Kay and Reinhart quickly put aside their work and sat down at the table with Addy. Both Kay and Reinhart could read ancient Greek, so Addy sat by impatiently while the other two worked at deciphering the script to read what was written on it.

"This is incredible," enthused Kay, her eyes sparkling like sapphires. "This is the best find you have ever made, Addy," she said. "If I read right, it says here that the five pointed star stands for Galenos, Alkaaios, Praxiteles, Kleisthenes, Erastos, and Pelagios, the brave explorers of the Agrafa who traveled far to the east to the land of the peacocks and snakes, braved dangers, and brought unimaginable treasures home," she looked at Reinhart for confirmation. He nodded admiringly. "You are very good at ancient Greek," he complimented. Kay blushed. "Oh, I just get by," she said. "I find it really difficult because I'm not an expert at it." "So what does this mean?" asked Addy impatiently. "Are these six explorers the surviving warriors who came back with the...er came back from India?" he asked, remembering at the last moment not to mention the kavacha in front of Reinhart. "I do think so, yes," said Kay. "The symbol is unmistakably the

Shatkona which is an Indian symbol, and they say they have been far to the east, and they mention peacocks which are found in plenty in India,” she concluded. “Where is this place ‘Agrafa’ that is mentioned though?” she frowned, looking at Reinhart questioningly. “Do you know?” He smiled. “Yes,” he said. “It is a part of the Pindus range, a very harsh part of the mountains. Much of it is still unexplored.”

## 11. Off to the Spine of Greece

They looked at each other in excitement. Finally they had a location. Now all they needed to do was get there and find the stronghold of the Greek warriors and uncover the armor. “How can we get there?” asked Kay, getting straight to the point as usual. “We’ll need to get back to Athens first,” said Reinhart. “Then hire a car to take us to the village of Agrafa, which is the south-western most tip of the Agrafa mountains in Central Greece. It is only a few villages and hamlets scattered over the easiest part of the outer mountain slope. Beyond that are the almost impassable slopes of the actual Agrafa mountainous region. The reason it is uninhabited and unexplored is that the slopes are very steep and sometimes dangerous to climb. There is also not much sustenance other than wild growing fruit and nut trees. With modernization, it has been mapped from the air, and there is a steep drop to a little valley at the bottom of three mountain peaks beyond the village of Agrafa. But no one has ever been there. There are no passes in except for the one with the Agrafiotis river and that is impossible to traverse,” he concluded.

Kay looked at Addy, and he knew what she was thinking. It seemed almost sure the “stronghold” spoken about must be in that valley. It sounded quite an impenetrable place, and if they were right, the site must be intact. Anticipation thrummed through Addy’s veins. “Are we ready to go hiking then?” he asked. Kay and Reinhart looked as excited as he did when they replied in the affirmative. They had to however, go back to Heraklion to collect their luggage and check out of their hotels. The ferry to Athens would not leave until the next day as it was already late afternoon, and so they decided to stay put for the night in Heraklion and leave the next day. They went through all the exhibits carefully to see if there were any other clues or anything that could help them on the journey. There wasn’t anything else, so finally, after an hour more of thorough checking, they drove back to Heraklion.

Early the next day, the trio checked out of their rooms and left to take the ferry back to Athens. Reinhart was apologetic that he didn’t have the authority to get them there by a flight which would have saved them an entire day. However, Addy and Kay were happy they were going by ferry as they had finally found their sea legs and were thankful for the opportunity to really

enjoy the beautiful ride that had been partly spoilt by their feeling sick on the way in. They were all in high spirits and even took part in some impromptu dancing during the entertainment, when the Greek dancers pulled them on to the low stage. Addy decided he had to come back to Greece again, when he had more time (and money). He added it to his bucket list of places to go to. There were so many other islands that they had not explored yet. And even on the mainland, there were ancient monument sites that he wished they could visit but there really wasn't time. As it was, they had used up nearly a week of their three months before they had to return to India. They still had to get the armor on this realm and the Nagamani on the other realm. He wondered if even three months were enough time to get all this done.

They reached Athens at 3 p.m. Reinhart suggested they visit the Acropolis and the New Acropolis Museum adjacent to it since they would be leaving for Agra the next morning and didn't know when they would get back to Athens. If the site was undiscovered by them at the end of three months, they would just have to go back to India. So he suggested making the most of their time in Athens and visiting at least the most famous site there, the Acropolis. Although it was a cold late October by Indian standards, it was still considered summer in Greece and hence the Acropolis as well as the museum would be open until late in the evening. Kay and Addy were agreeable to the sight seeing tour with Reinhart as a guide and after checking into the same hotel they had used earlier, they got walked toward the Acropolis. The best part of choosing this particular hotel, Addy decided, was the proximity to the Acropolis. They walked through colorful lanes crammed with tiny shops that sold all kinds, shapes, and sizes of souvenirs. Addy and Kay bought a few souvenirs to take back with them, although keeping them small so they would not add to the bulk and weight of their backpacks which they would later have to lug up steep mountain slopes.

There were plenty of outdoor cafes as well as indoor ones with the owners trying to wave them in for a cup of tea. They finally succumbed and sat down at one, but indoors, as it was a little too windy to be outdoors. Kay and Addy were still not quite used to the cold climate. Addy ordered Greek coffee which looked good on the menu as well as a small Tiropita to go with it. Kay ordered regular coffee and almond tea cakes which were S-shaped cookies. Reinhart ordered tea with Samali, a cake made with semolina. Addy couldn't get how Europeans (and Australians) could eat something

sweet with their beverages. He could only have something salty or savory right before his tea or coffee, otherwise it spoiled the taste, making the beverage seem bitter. He loved the cheese-filled snack he had ordered. The Greek coffee, however, he decided he did not like at all. It was the first time he did not like an eatable (or beverage in this case) in Greece. He kept in mind never to order the Greek tea if he ever came back to Greece. It wasn't even Greek tea, it turned out; Reinhart said it was actually Turkish tea but they called it Greek tea in Greece. He had a taste of both Kay's and Reinhart's choices after he had finished drinking his tea, and loved both the deserts.

They reached the Acropolis a nearly five o'clock and again Addy and Kay thanked Reinhart for his thoughtfulness. The Acropolis was something unlike they had ever seen in all their lives. It was on a little hillock, and the size of the majestic white columns, albeit in ruins, was awe inspiring. They roamed through it in a leisurely manner until Reinhart shepherded them off to the museum as it was almost 7 p.m. and close to their closing time. The museum was a very small one and a little disappointing after the magnificence of the two museums they had gone to at Crete. However, the finds were entirely those that had been dug up from the Acropolis, so they looked at all the exhibits diligently. It was educational to listen to the running commentary Reinhart had kept up all through the tour, and Kay teased him saying he had missed his calling as a guide. She seemed to have fallen into an easy camaraderie with Reinhart, observed Addy in a detached manner. After the museum curator kicked them out, they went back to the hotel, and Reinhart promised to call early the next day with a hired cab so they could start off to Agrafa.

Morning saw Addy and Kay ready and rearing to go get really started on their mission. They had packed and were having breakfast before checking out. Reinhart joined them just as they finished breakfast, and they set off in the hired car. Reinhart told them he had taken the liberty of changing their plans slightly. Addy looked at him questioningly and Kay expectantly, and he smiled before saying they would be taking a detour from the usual route, to go to the ruins at Delphi. It would take them several hours more than the five and a half that should have gotten them to Agrafa village. "I just cannot let you two go back to India without visiting Delphi," said Reinhart. "It is probably *the* most important archeological site in the whole



of Greece which is really saying something since Greece has such a long and varied ancient history. As an archeologist, I cannot permit two international colleagues of mine to miss this golden opportunity,” he concluded, flashing his dazzling smile.

Addy found he was getting a little sick of that smile. However, he had to agree the idea was a good one. It would without doubt take five and half hours for them to reach Agrafa and then they would be too tired to start their hike in the late evening, besides which they would need to get their bearings, decide which way to go and get supplies to last them for a while in the wilderness. Going to Delphi would only delay their journey by a few hours which meant they would reach Agrafa at night instead of late afternoon, and they could just start on their arduous trek the next day. He and Kay had spoken before about Delphi (when they were in India) and how it would probably not be possible for them to visit there as they did not anticipate their search would take them anywhere near it.

Kay was thrilled that they were going to Delphi and immediately asked Reinhart to describe everything he knew about the history of Delphi. They both knew it was the place that was world famous as the seat of the Oracle in the ancient world, according to Greek mythology. Kay’s request started Reinhart off on an almost never-ending saga of the mythology related to Delphi, it’s founding, and how the temple to Apollo (the Greek equivalent of the sun god Surya) came to be built. At any other time, Addy would have found all the tales fascinating, but he was feeling a little irritable by this time because the addition of Reinhart to their company had meant less time for Kay and him to discuss their mission privately. The past several days he had hardly got her alone to talk about it. They needed to have a specific plan in place, without Reinhart overhearing it, about how to find the site and more importantly how to find the armor, and, if they did, how to give him the slip to enter the higher plane. He did not want to call her aside with Reinhart looking on; it would look too suspicious (besides being rude), as if they had secrets or were planning something against him. He guessed he would just have to be more alert, and get her alone when Reinhart was busy with something else. Perhaps when they got to the village and Reinhart went to talk to the villagers about the supplies or something like that.

Delphi turned out to be as good as they anticipated and Reinhart

promised. It was a vast site with ruins of temples, stoa, theatre, and gymnasium spread over a rugged slope with a view of the bluest mountains Addy had ever seen, the Mount Parnassus. At the base of the mountain was the Delphi Archeological Museum. It housed an immense collection of exhibits, including some of the most precious ones that Addy had seen. After a couple of hours at the museum and the ruins, the trio went back to their car. It was past lunchtime, and so they had a quick lunch at one of the kiosks next to the museum, after which they got back in for the rest of the journey to Agrafa.

The view was scenic all the way to Agrafa, and the time passed quickly. It was half past four when they reached their destination, at the south-western tip of the mountainous region of Agrafa, as high as they could go up the slope in a vehicle. The first impression Addy got of the mountains was of ruggedness. It was high, rocky, steep, and although covered with greenery, making it possible to climb, it would take all their amateur skill as hikers to get to their ultimate destination, which was on the other side of this slope, which, according to Reinhart, did not have any way of passage. If they could not find it...he couldn't bear to think about it. They *had* to be positive and so told himself that they would find a way to get to the other side. They had come to a small scattering of cottages looking very pictersque, dotted over the slopes, which constituted a hamlet. Reinhart had earlier spoken and arranged with a villager he knew there, and they went to his humble cottage for the night and to gather supplies for the start of their trek into the mountains the next day.

The villager, Spyros, was a jovial man with a hearty manner and a tanned weather-beaten face. His wife, Arête, a rotund red-faced woman with pale hair and beaming smile was very hospitable, quickly calling them inside their humble abode and making them comfortable in the tiny living room. The house was made of stone, low roofed, and a little dark inside. Everything was a little threadbare and shabby but the warmth the couple exuded made up for everything. Arete fussed over them and made them an enormous dinner, that was wholesome and lip smacking. Addy was delighted with the barbequed cheese and veggies. The goat's cheese, feta, was remarkably like Indian cottage cheese which was his favorite at home. Reinhart was busy talking to Spyros in rapid Greek which neither Addy nor Kay could follow. Arête did not know even a little English but made up by

communicating in nods, hand gestures, and wide smiles and kept up a voluble monologue in Greek which they could not understand but smiled at her enthusiasm just the same. It was surprising to Addy, when he thought about it, how almost everyone in Greece seemed to know English. Arête was the first person who did not seem to speak it. He had met some shopkeepers in Athens on the way to the Acropolis, who could even speak Hindi! Most of his information and ideas about Greece were outdated, he realized.

After dinner, Kay and Addy waited patiently until Reinhart finished speaking to Spyros. Addy was unable to get Kay away from the small confines of the cottage to talk about their mission and so had to sit tight for the time being. Reinhart finally turned towards them. "Spyros says there is no way to the other side, and that many many people have tried before this, even professionals. He says some years ago, a rich man even thought of dropping off a team of explorers down by helicopter on the other side to find out what is there and to map it. However, they were unable to find a single landing spot and had to return. Then the rich man paid another set of people extravagantly, to be dropped off in a parachute so they could land and promised to come back to the same place they were dropped off at, in a week's time with a rope ladder, so they could climb up to the helicopter hovering above the thickly forested valley. But the horrifying part is that none of the four men dropped off were at the pickup point when the helicopter came again the next week," he said solemnly. "The helicopter hovered until they almost ran out of fuel and had to get out. They repeated the process at the same time and place for a full five consecutive days with no result, until the rich man gave up the men as dead," said Reinhart grimly.

There was silence as Addy and Kay absorbed this news. "Were the men trained hikers?" asked Kay at last. "Yes, Spyros says they were the best and boldest explorers the rich man could get his hands on, and yet they were lost in the 'dark vale' as the villagers here call the other side of the slope," replied Reinhart. Addy saw Kay give a little gulp. It did seem ominous. And disheartening. Addy had a sudden unwarranted suspicion Reinhart was making it up for his own reasons, but clamped down on that immediately. He was just being paranoid because of his slowly growing dislike of the man. The man had no motive for thwarting their mission. He had helped them greatly until now and seemed as eager as them to uncover an ancient site. It would give him as much fame as them if they found anything, as he was part

of the team of initial surveyors. "Do you still want to go through with it?" he asked looking at them in turn. Kay turned to look at Addy. She looked scared but resolute. "Yes," he answered, still looking at her. "I think we should at least try, instead of coming all the way here and turning back," he said, looking at Reinhart now. Reinhart looked at him for a minute before nodding. "I would like to try too," he said quietly. "It galls me to accept defeat without even trying. However I wasn't sure whether we can put Kay in danger," he said gallantly.

"I'm an archeologist as much as the two of you are," said Kay at once. "If there is something to be found, I'll be there to find it too. Don't tell me you are the type who thinks women are the weaker sex and need to be protected, or sidelined?" she asked a little angrily. Addy was pleased to see Reinhart looking a little discomfited at this. "No, no, of course not. I just thought...you might not want to risk life and limb on an uncertainty," he said. "Most women I know would not even want to hike into that wilderness for an unpredictable number of days, for all the gold in the world. Maybe I was associating with the wrong women," he said amiably, trying to get back into her good graces. Addy smiled sardonically. Reinhart was charming; he had to give him that. "Yes, you probably were," said Kay huffily but seemed a little mollified. "So do you have any route in mind?" Addy asked, breaking the tension in the air. "Yes, a route of sorts," Reinhart replied. "Spyros says there is a path through the thicket that leads to another cottage higher up the slope. From there we take directions from someone living there, further supplies, and onto the next cottage, taking each step of the way as it goes," he ended.

Kay and Addy felt this was as good a plan as any and decided to turn in for the night. They had been given a tiny attic room under the eaves on the first floor to sleep in. The poor villager and his wife bemoaned the fact that they had no extra bedding to give them, and Addy was glad they had prepared for the hike by buying sleeping bags. They might even need Kay's old tent before long, he suspected. They got into their sleeping bags and Addy was just falling asleep when Kay asked Reinhart, "Did you ask the old man if he knew about the local history; if he had ever heard that beyond the mountain was an ancient stronghold of the Greek warriors who went to India?" "Actually, I did," answered Reinhart. "He could not understand about India as his geography is quite poor, but he said there were legends

about a fierce warrior tribe that lived in the mountains who were powerful as the gods and had immeasurable wealth,” he replied. Addy drowsily thought this was at least some indication they were on the right path. He wanted to ask something important but couldn’t hold off sleep and soon was dead to the world.

## 12. Hiking up the slope

Next morning, the trio was woken up early by the sounds of Spyros and Arete moving about downstairs, going about their work. They got up and went down to refresh themselves in the one restroom that the cottage had got. It was a very primitive one, but at least it had lukewarm water and walls enclosing it, which was more than they would get when they started their climb up the slope. Addy shivered as he washed in the tepid water and finished his ablutions in record time. He went to see what the others were doing. They were watching the sheep-and-goat farmer go about his morning chores. Arête was already making their breakfast at the open kitchen and talking volubly as usual. This time she at least had one person to talk to who could speak Greek. By the pleased look on her face, Reinhart was giving her a lot of compliments.

After Arête had laid a large breakfast in front of them, she got busy packing food for their lunch and dinner, for they would not get to the cottage Spyros had mentioned, until dark that day. She was also giving instructions about how to be careful on the slopes, according to Reinhart, who interpreted everything she said for their comprehension. Addy looked around the warm, rustic kitchen with its crude dining table and chairs that looked like Spyros had hewn them himself, the open beams of the roof, the battered pots and pans hanging everywhere, as well as preserved ham and other meats either in kegs on the floor or hanging from the rafters, and the large motherly woman who was cooking so amiably for them, and thought he would definitely miss this once they were in the cold without anything other than their clothes to keep them warm. It was unfortunate they had to trek at the beginning of winter. But that's life, he thought. It does not wait for the most convenient time. Hopefully, they would be able to get to the kavacha before it started snowing.

Spyros saw them off up the narrow track he had pointed out to them. They had been presented with three sturdy sticks to help them on the climb, and they were quick to observe how impossible it would have really been for them to go on such a steep trail without a stick. The ground was uneven, with rocks and pebbles interspersing earth. There were wiry shrubs and thick oak and coniferous trees everywhere. It had been tough going right from the beginning as Spyros' house had been at the edge of the gentle slope and from

there on up, the slope was steep. Addy was glad he always wore hiking boots and had been fond of hiking even while in India, although none of the hiking trails he had gone on in the forests was anything like the one they were attempting. Kay, he noted admiringly, was holding up quite well despite being a woman. "I'm very fond of hiking," she laughed when he commented on it. "I've been on every hiking trip possible in the bush around New South Wales and even some places in Victoria and Southern Australia," she said. "Although this is a little tougher than anything I have done before," she added.

After struggling up the slope for half a day, they decided it was time for a break. They found a somewhat flat place next to the crooked trail, facing away from the mountain and sat down panting. They were quite warm from their exertion despite the chilly air, and this was their only compensation. "Bonzer!!" exclaimed Kay suddenly, looking at the scenery in front of her. Reinhart looked startled, Addy thought, until she explained, "The view, it's so out of this world!" It really was a breathtaking sight. They were quite high on the slope now, about halfway up to the top. The whole of Greece seemed to be laid in front of them, mountains, plains, and even very far away, a strip of darker blue that was the sea, blending with the sky.

They opened their lunch parcel and munched happily at the tasty treats Arete had provided, sipping on their water bottles, gazing at the landscape. Reinhart, as usual, was chatting up Kay. Addy was getting fed up about this. He tried to curb his irritation at not being able to talk to her about the mission, although there would be time enough as they still had a long way to go up the slope. He estimated it would take them at least another four or five days at their current pace, to reach the summit. However, he wanted to have things already planned before the eleventh hour. He brought himself up short at this thought. He had never been the planning kind, at least not about short-term goals. Must be getting old, he scoffed at himself.

They were hiking again now, he and Reinhart helping Kay up every now and then over particularly difficult bits. "Maybe I can get her a little farther away from Reinhart and talk to her," thought Addy. He climbed a little faster but unfortunately he had forgotten that Kay did not know he meant to talk to her. When he looked back, Reinhart and Kay were both yards below and he was helping her up a steep part. She laughed up at him

saying, "Thank you Ray, you know..." whatever else was said was not very clear. Addy scowled. Oh, it was 'Ray' now was it? He turned and started climbing again, feeling even more disgruntled than before.

It wasn't as if he were attracted to her, he thought to himself. But he had come, in the past month or so, ever since he confided in her about the other worldly mantra, to rely on her as a friend who had his back. They were a good team, he thought, in a purely platonic sense of course. But this inability to communicate with her on an important topic was really getting to him. He had been used to her full attention until the blond Adonis had joined them. He hoped she wasn't going to get closer and closer to Reinhart and make things embarrassing for him. Addy had never taken much interest in girls even while in college, although most of his friends had had girlfriends and boasted about their escapades. He had been totally focused on his ambitions and although he couldn't call himself a bookworm, he did suppose other people called him a nerd or geek behind his back. He just didn't want any distraction deflecting him from his goal. Even now, he preferred to be alone; he was a loner and loved being by himself. But having a friend like Kay, who was easy to get on with, loyal, and intelligent, off whom he could bounce his ideas, had spoiled him, and he had now come to have expectations of her.

He climbed faster now, his anger that was partly at himself, fueling him. The path was even more twisted and narrow. Addy was glad it was neither raining nor snowing as Reinhart had warned it could well be, at this time of year. He plodded on with his rustic staff, the backpack feeling heavier and heavier as the day wore on. After a time, he had cooled down and slackened his pace, and the other two caught up with him. "What's the hurry Addy?" Reinhart was saying, panting as they caught up. "You trying to get there by tea time or get a heart attack?" he asked jovially. Addy gritted his teeth. The man was absolutely obnoxious. He couldn't see what Kay saw in him. He controlled his temper again and turned around to look blandly at him. "Oh nothing..." he said. "Was I going too fast for the two of you? I'm sorry, I didn't realize." Kay was looking curiously at him, too busy trying to get her breath back to speak.

He turned and they started up the path again. By and by they sat down to take another break. It was nearly six, almost dark, and they decided they'd



have their dinner now since they did not want to have to take another break for that. Addy had his meal mostly in silence, Kay looking his way every now and then, trying to involve him in the conversation. He replied in monosyllables, still feeling moody. It was a new emotion for him, and he felt a little unsettled by it. After dinner, it was slower going. It was dark now and though they had torches, they could not see ahead more than a yard or two and had to go more cautiously. There were deep canyons and sheer cliff faces that they knew nothing about, and one misstep could mean loss of life or broken bones. "Are there any animals we need to be concerned about?" he heard Kay asking. He could not help wanting to hear the answer and looked around to Reinhart. "The wildlife here is generally scarce," said Reinhart. "Mountain goats may be the only ones we see. There are brown bears, foxes, and jackals scattered over the forests, but I doubt we will come across any on this path as they generally tend to shun human presence," he said. "However, it is wiser to keep together. There is safety in numbers, you know," he said, glancing at Addy as he said this. Addy knew it was an indirect command. Although Reinhart was not their leader, he was the one who knew best about his country. He nodded and kept close to them after that.

They finally came to the cottage Spyros had told them about. They went to it thankfully and knocked on the door. Another old shepherd couple lived here and although they were surprised at this unexpected visit, they seemed quite pleased. Living in such a lonely spot, they seemed to welcome anyone who came their way, which wasn't often, with open arms. They were treated to a slightly less abundant but nevertheless as wholesome and filling a meal as Arete had provided. This farmer had an even smaller cottage and seemed even more impoverished. Although they were paying their way, Addy couldn't help feeling guilty about using up their supplies. It must be tough to live up here in their old age, all alone. He wondered how often they went all the way down to the hamlet below to buy the things they needed. There was only room for one extra person to stay in the cottage and both Addy and Reinhart insisted Kay be the one to take it. There was a clearing next to the tiny house, and the two men set up the tent in it. They washed themselves at the tiny bathroom outside the cottage. They had to bring in the water from an infinity pool out in the clearing. It was icy cold and Addy could only manage to clean himself by dipping his handkerchief, wringing it out, and wiping himself with the damp cloth. He did feel cleaner though, and

slipped into oblivion the moment his head touched the sleeping bag's built-in pillow.

The next morning, none of the three wanted to wake up. Everything ached and they felt as if they had just gone to bed before they had to get up again. The men were especially stiff since they had slept in the tent on the bare ground with no access to a fire. Kay was slightly less stiff but being a woman, she had less musculature and so everything ached more fiercely. "I think I'm going to grow a new set of muscles everywhere, it hurts so bad," she groaned when they were all sitting down to a simple but welcome breakfast of homemade bread with fresh honey, homemade marmalade, cheese, olives, boiled eggs, and tea. It went a long way in making them feel alive again. Addy and Reinhart took down the tent and packed it back, putting the groundsheet in Addy's backpack and the tent in Reinhart's as before to distribute the weight.

"Did you get directions from the old shepherd, Ray?" asked Addy (he had given up trying to not use the nickname, as it was just easier to say than Reinhart, which was such an ostentatious name anyway he thought with a mental roll of his eyes). "Which way to hike today?" Ray nodded. "I did this morning," he said. "We have to follow the trail past this cottage and keep going until we come to a fork. The right goes to another cottage further down the slope and the left goes up the slope. So we take the left fork," he added. Kay came by then, her backpack on her back and ready to leave. She looked as haggard as Addy felt and he felt a twinge of remorse. He realized in the cold light of the day he had behaved like a jerk last evening. He tried to make it up to her by offering to transfer some of her things from her backpack to his so she would have a lighter load, but she wouldn't hear of it. "It's not heavy at all, thank you Addy," she said smiling at him. "Your pack is much heavier than mine already." They followed Ray who was leading the way, already on the trail that went past the cottage.

They came across a small brook after they had gone a little way. It was probably the one that went on down and filled the infinity pool at the cottage they had just left. They had to step over it carefully as they could see the trail continuing beyond the brook. They managed to cross it without getting anything except their hiking boots wet and those were impervious so it was okay. "Look!" said Ray suddenly, sometime in the afternoon, pointing

upwards at an outcropping of rock high above their heads a couple of yards in front of them. Kay and Addy looked up to see a mountain goat standing at the very edge of the rock. It looked like it was carved out of stone too, it was so rugged. It was absolutely still and looked majestic with curved horns. Suddenly, it gave a leap right off the rock. Kay gasped and screamed. Addy was shocked too but Ray just grinned. "Oh, did it die? Where did it fall?" squealed Kay. "There's a reason it's called a mountain goat," said Ray, still grinning. He pointed down to a tiny ledge lower than where they themselves stood. Addy and Kay leaned over to look and there stood the proud billy goat, safe and sound. "They are very nimble on their feet," he said.

They could see the outline of what looked like a cave in the distance and wondered what it was and if they could maybe camp there but dismissed that idea because it was too early in the afternoon to call it a day and strike camp. They had just had lunch a couple of hours ago and could go on for at least another three hours until it began to get dark. They had all mutually decided it would be best not to overdo things and stop trekking at 6 p.m. everyday so as to get enough rest and avoid any dangers, whether treacherous canyons or wild animals. Ray suddenly looked up at the sky. "It looks like it is going to rain," he exclaimed. We need to get under shelter soon if we don't want to get chilled to the bone.

They started walking faster up the trail. "You two go on toward that cave we saw earlier," he said. "I'll try to find us some dry twigs to make a fire. We are going to need it tonight," he added. As he made a move to go away, Kay suddenly made a move as if to follow him and caught his hand. "No, don't leave us," she begged. "You said it wasn't safe to separate, and if it rains we might not be able to find each other." Addy on the other hand, wanted to jump at this opportunity that fate had presented to him, to get her alone to talk about their secret mission. He grabbed hold of her other hand and tried to pull her away. "He's right, we must get to the cave before it starts pouring," he said as a few drops started falling.

Ray pulled away without wasting time trying to argue, and Addy succeeded in dragging Kay up the path toward the cave which was still some distance away. She was following along stumbling after Addy, when she realized he was dragging her along faster than it was necessary to go and dug in her heels abruptly. Addy stopped too, not expecting her to stop so

suddenly. She pulled him around violently so he was facing her. “What the...heck?” she looked furiously at Addy. “What are you doing?” shouted Addy as the rain started coming down in earnest, beating down on the two standing without any shelter around them. “We’ll get soaked, didn’t you hear what Ray said? We need to get to that cave as soon as possible.” “You know we can’t get *anywhere* if we get separated,” she shouted back. “In a moment we won’t be able to see the path and even if Ray disappears down a gully we won’t know,” she stormed. “Can’t you stop thinking about ‘Ray’ for a minute?” snarled Addy, emphasizing Ray in a high falsetto. Kay looked at him, stunned. “Why are you suddenly acting like a jealous lover?” she yelled finally. “You were doing it all of yesterday too.”

Addy felt like he had been slapped. He calmed down at once. “I’m sorry,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Please, come with me now, we’ll speak about it once we are out of the rain,” he said in a normal tone of voice. He slowly took her hand again, half expecting her to push him away. She kept looking at him but did not pull her hand out of his and they climbed quickly toward the cave. Their upper halves were protected by the waterproof jackets they wore over their woolens, but their jeans were soaked through and Addy could feel water squelching in his boots. In the altercation neither of them had thought of pulling up their hoods and their heads were soaked too, water running down their faces. Addy had to remove his glasses and stuff them into his jacket pocket. They stumbled along until they came to the entrance of the cave. Luckily, it was really a cave and quite a spacious one at that. The entrance was narrow but inside there was space enough to stand up and move around. It was, most importantly, dry. They were careful not to go deep into the cave as they were dripping wet and did not want to make the whole cave wet too.

After they had gotten rid of their waterproof jackets and wet boots, and wiped themselves off as best as they could, they changed into dry jeans in different corners of the cave. It was so dark by now, they could hardly see their own hands in front of their faces. “Are you decent?” asked Addy tentatively. “I’ve always been decent,” quipped Kay and Addy grinned. He turned around and Kay switched on her torch. “So, what was that all about?” she demanded. Addy sighed. He hated confrontations but this one could not be avoided. “I’ve been trying to get you aside to discuss how to get to the armor. And ditch Ray. You can’t imagine how aggravating it is to keep

quiet while the two of you are chatting nonstop about everything under the sun while lives are hanging on the balance. If we keep sticking to him, we can't get away to the other realm without him knowing about it, or worse still, risk him coming with us like Pracheta did," he said, sounding desperate. He hoped she would believe that was all it was. Her accusing him of jealousy still rankled with him. He did *not* think of her in that way. Kay was looking at him as if he were an interesting inscription she was trying to decipher. "But we need him until we find the way into the inner side of the mountain," said Kay. "How do you think we can give him the slip after that?" asked Addy, exasperated. "He will call the authorities and give our location away. It would be better we go missing now and continue the search ourselves. It's believable enough that people could go missing in these vast steep forests," he added.

"So you're not jealous of my friendship with Ray?" she asked probingly. "Are you getting romantically involved with him?" he asked back, a little incredulously. "I don't see how that is any business of yours. Answer my question please," she said curtly. "Of course I am," admitted Addy, adding quickly before she could flare up again, "but only because I've come to look upon you as my partner in this adventure. We don't have unlimited time. And we need to discuss the plan, which is impossible with a third person who does not know the secret, around. I want to complete the actual task by myself, but I need your help to find the armor," he finished, unashamed to admit it now since he had fought it out with himself the past evening. Kay softened at once at his admission. She ran forward and enveloped him in a tight hug which he returned a little awkwardly. He had never been a physically demonstrative person, at least not with anyone except his little cousin. She stepped back. "I'll stand by you, you needn't worry on that score," she said solemnly. "Not only while searching for the armor but when you go in search of the Nagamani. Don't think you can talk me out of an adventure like that, that too when it's going to be on a higher plane!" She looked away and then back. "I do like Ray....he is a good man, an interesting man. And of course he is drop-dead gorgeous," she giggled. "I'd like to keep in touch with him after we go back to India and see what develops." Addy nodded, feeling happier than he had in the past few days and feeling he could tolerate Ray much better now that things had come out into the open and their priorities had been set out clearly.

### **13. The hidden city**

They had just finished speaking and were wondering where Ray could be, whether he had really fallen down a gully like Kay feared, when Ray finally appeared. He looked as bedraggled as something the cat had dragged in. Kay went to him at once, helping him off with his backpack and waterproofs. They were pleased to see he had a stash of dry wood under his jacket. “Nearly lost my way twice on the way back,” he gasped out. Addy took the assorted pieces of wood from Ray and started a fire going while he was changing. All of them were feeling really cold and Kay, he noticed, was shivering. He helped her sit down close to the fire and wrapped her in his sleeping bag since there was nothing else to keep her warm. Ray took out some dehydrated soup mix, stirred in water from his water bottle and held it over the fire to cook. They all had a helping directly from the hot tin box as they had no bowls or other dishes. Luckily Ray did have some thick plastic spoons that Spyros had given them to eat their dessert with two days ago. Was it only two days ago, thought Addy. It seemed so long ago he was in that warm kitchen. They felt much better after their hot soup and ate a little of their dinner, not liking to eat it all in case it was still pouring in the morning and they could not get anything else to eat.

They finally spread out the ground sheet between the fire and the far wall, away from the cave entrance, and put down the sleeping bags as close as possible without being right on top of one another, for warmth. All three hoped it would have stopped raining by the next morning. They slept an exhausted dreamless sleep. The fire had gone out long before morning, making the cave more like an ice box than a cave. Morning saw the three people in the cave sleeping on, until their hunger woke them up, about 10 a.m. Kay was the one to sit up first, having been in the middle and had had a better night’s sleep than the two men who had felt much colder than her, being away from the fire and had warmth only on one side. She poked them awake and they sat up reluctantly, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Addy went over to the cave entrance to look out. It was still cloudy, but the rain had stopped. It was misty, though not enough to stop them resuming their trek.

They had the remaining food for breakfast and debated whether to go on immediately or wait until it cleared some more. “If we go on and it starts

raining again, we may not find a shelter as good as this one,” said Ray. “But if we stay, we have no food except for some dehydrated stuff and biscuits that’ll only last about a day,” said Addy. “What do we do?” he looked at Kay. “I vote we go on,” said Kay. The shepherd mentioned we would come to a fork soon and the right-hand one would lead to a cottage. We could go there and get supplies and come back to the fork and take the left one after that,” she said. Ray and Addy agreed this was the best plan. They packed up and started out, but Ray who was first, gave a shout when they turned a corner. There was a raging torrent of water across the path. They would not be able to cross it without risking being swept down the mountainside.

In silent dismay, they went back to the cave. They sat mute, thinking what to do next. Ray came up with an idea. “I’ll go back down to the shepherd’s cottage and get fresh supplies,” he said. “I’ll bring enough to last us a week and we can store some here in this cave so if we get desperate, we can come back here. The water that is cascading down the mountain across the path will thin out and stop after a few days, and then we can continue on our journey. You two stay here; there is no need for all of us to go down.” It seemed a sensible plan, so Kay and Addy sat down by the cave entrance, watching Ray recede into the distance, going faster now that it was downhill and he did not have his backpack to weigh him down.

He would still take half a day to reach the cottage and the other half to come back. They could expect him earliest in the evening, but if it got too late, he would have to stay the night and start back tomorrow. He had instructed them to cook and eat all the dry stuff by dinner time as he would anyway be replenishing their stores. “I’ll go look around for anything edible that grows here,” said Addy. Kay did not like the idea of separating yet again, but she felt she could not climb about on the slippery track in the hope of finding nuts and berries. She retired into the cave entrance to read a slim book on deciphering ancient Sanskrit writing, sitting just inside the cave, in her sleeping bag. She was still feeling chilled from the previous night’s soaking. Soon the warmth of the bag began making her drowsy and she nodded off, settling in nicely to have a nap.

It was sometime later that she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she woke with a jump, giving a squeal of fear. “Kay, it’s me,” said Addy. He had a look of repressed excitement about him. His hair stuck up in all directions as

if he had been raking his hands through his hair. He was crouching on the cave floor next to her. She sat up straighter immediately, relieved to see it was only him. “What is it? Has something happened?” she asked, looking around the dimly lit cave. “You could say that!” exclaimed Addy. “I came back a while ago and since you were sleeping, I wandered around the cave. Right at the back, there is something you need to see right now,” he said, standing up and moving toward the back of the cave. Kay blinked the sleep out of the eyes and followed him. He had his torch on and was shining it at a recessed corner at the back of the cave that had not been visible at first glance. He beckoned her closer. She went, her curiosity aroused. He pointed at the stone wall of the cave, at about his eye level. “Look at that, can you see it?” There was something on the wall; it looked like something was scratched onto the stone there. She took the torch from him and shone it directly on the surface of the stone and found she was looking at a Shatkona. She looked at Addy, her blue eyes shining in the dim light. “What could it be there for?” she asked, feeling excited too.

“It is indubitably a Shatkona, but why would anyone scratch a symbol in an alcove at the back of a cave?” she said, puzzled. “Remember, the ancient Greeks were highly skilled. They had almost god-like powers leading to mythological stories and legends being passed down to our times,” said Addy. “Today, I discovered the truth of this myself,” he went on. “Do you see the hexagon in the middle?” Kay peered at the symbol and nodded. “Look at the center of the hexagon,” he encouraged. Kay saw what looked like a circular knob in the center. It could have been a natural imperfection on the surface of the stone wall or created by human hand. She could not understand which. “There has never been a circle in the center of the hexagon in any of the previous Shatkonas we saw,” she observed slowly. “Exactly what I thought,” said Addy. “Now look what happens when I lean on it,” he said and followed words with action. The wall began sliding with a grinding sound to the side, leaving an opening behind it that stretched as far as they could see into the gloom. Kay looked up at him with wide eyes. “Strewth! Is it a passage into the stronghold, do you think?” she asked, now as thrilled as Addy was.

“It might be,” said Addy. The wall had sprung back into place and looked like it had never moved. “I want to go explore it,” he said. “Oh no, we must keep together,” said Kay decisively. “But this is a good opportunity



to find out and ditch Ray at the same time,” said Addy. “That is, if you don’t mind doing so,” he added hastily, as her face became a little sad. “You know, you don’t really need to come with me. You’ve helped me as much as you could, and now that this might be the entrance to the ancient Greek platoon’s hidey hole, you don’t need to put yourself at risk. If I find the kavacha, I can go to the other realm, finish the task, and get back. You can wait for Ray, and explain that I wandered off and got lost. Maybe after a few days, you could bring him here and tell him about the passage and...,” he began suggesting hesitantly. Kay was shaking her head before he could finish. “No, no way you are going to discover an ancient site without me,” she said stubbornly. “And get it out of your head that you can keep me from coming to the higher plane with you. I want to come there and you can’t stop me,” she said stubbornly.

“I’ll write a note to Ray that we may have found the way to the site and will be back soon to show him,” she said. “That way, he will be in on the deal and at the same time cannot interfere in our plans. I can ask him to bring some backup too, so that when we get back, we can have a proper survey going.” Addy agreed to this, and she sat down to write a note and weighed it down with a stone just inside the cave entrance, where Ray would be sure to find it when he returned in the evening. They quickly gathered up their belongings and stuffed them into their backpacks. They took the remaining dehydrated food cans from Ray’s backpack as well as all the extra batteries he had, and went toward the back of the cave. Addy took a deep breath. “Well, here goes,” he said, leaning on the knob at the center of the Shatkona. Kay was watching intently as the wall disappeared sideways into the mountain. “Amazing technology,” she murmured. “I wonder how they did it?” They walked into the passage and switched on their torches. “We never wondered about the stronghold being *in* the mountain rather than on the other side, did we?” asked Addy. He was leading the way and the passage seemed to be going steadily downward into the mountain.

“The walls of this passage are awfully smooth,” noted Kay, as the tunnel twisted and turned on it torturous way into the mountain. How do you think they smoothened it out so much? “It must be a natural formation,” said Addy, his voice sounding hollow in the dark space. “Maybe a water tunnel to drain away rainwater, that became dry and was discovered by the ancient warriors.” After about an hour of walking, they were getting quite fed up of

the monotony. “How far do you think the fortress is?” asked Kay worriedly. “I hope there aren’t any poisonous gases in the air here.” All of a sudden, the passage opened out into an underground cavern. It was vast and their footsteps echoed hollowly in it. They could see three tunnels leading off it. They looked at each other. “Which do we take?” whispered Addy. His whisper sounded hollowly across the cavern, like a lot of snakes hissing at once. Kay did not dare to speak although there probably wasn’t anyone or anything to hear them. She pointed at the first tunnel on the left. It seemed a little larger than the rest. Addy nodded and they went across the large cavern to the said tunnel.

As they kept going, Addy’s instincts started sending him alarm signals. Something didn’t feel right. The tunnel seemed brighter than before. As they went further, he realized that it was probably light of some sort that was filtering into the tunnel from up ahead. He quickly shaded his torch with his hand and motioned for Kay to do the same. As they got nearer to the light, they slowed down, not knowing what to expect. They could see it was sunlight now, filtering in through an opening in the mountain face. It was still far enough away that they could not see what else was there. They cautiously went forward, until Kay stopped. She clutched Addy’s arm suddenly, her grip so painfully tight, Addy almost cried out in pain. He looked at her. She looked terrified. He swiftly looked back up toward the tunnel and his eyes went wide. There were people ahead in the tunnel that had now opened up to form another cave. This cave, however, was different from most caves in that one side of it was totally open to the outside world. That was where the weak sunlight was coming in from. The area in front of the duo contained people lounging, walking and talking. There were about fifteen men and women.

What was shocking was their appearance. They looked absolutely wild. “Like how Neanderthals are depicted in children’s science textbooks,” thought Addy to himself. Their hair, mostly straw colored, was dirty, unkempt, and ragged. Their skin was scratched and scarred all over and covered with streaks of mud and dirt. They seemed to be wearing skins or other crude garments. They looked like feral animals. Their voices could not be heard as Addy and Kay were too far away. Despite their fear and repulsion, they were drawn nearer to see better. They seemed to be speaking in guttural sounds rather than formed speech. Most of them were having

clubs and spears in their hands or close to them. There were crudely cured skins on the floor on which some of the people were lounging. They did not wear anything on their feet which appeared calloused and claw like. Kay nudged Addy. He looked at her with raised eyebrows. She nodded frantically behind them, indicated they should go back. He nodded in agreement and they silently went back up the tunnel, right up to the cavern. They wanted to discuss what they had seen but were afraid someone might hear them. Addy wondered whether there were more of these strange people lurking in the other two tunnels.

Kay pulled him along into the middle tunnel and he went dumbly along. She stopped after they were a few yards in and whispered right into his ear, "What on earth was that?" her eyes were round. "I don't know....," whispered back Addy. "Is there another way into the valley? How did these people get in here? And why do they look so....so primitive?" he wondered aloud, still whispering. "I don't think they got in here recently....," said Kay slowly. What she said next astonished Addy but he had to concur it sounded plausible. "I think they are the descendants of the ancient Greek warriors. Maybe....maybe something happened and they forgot how to get out into the world. They were trapped here and forgot culture, language, and everything else over the millennia," said Kay softly. "They look like they are surviving on the flora and fauna of the valley, but do not know much else. They have degenerated into a kind of sub-human species!" she ended.

Addy silently nodded. It was mind blowing to think of a group of humans being trapped in an impenetrable valley, in this day and age of modern technology. The towering sheer mountains hemming in the narrow valley kept out any explorers, and kept in these people as prisoners. It was astounding that they had even survived through what must be nearly 5000 years, all alone here, cut off from civilization. By the looks of their garments and rugs, there were plenty of bears, foxes, and rabbits in the valley. "Do you think the armor might really be here?" asked Kay worriedly. "If there are these people living here, we can't be sure they would not have destroyed everything or thrown it away." Addy felt his heart sink. It was so very imperative they find the armor, and soon. It was already nearly a month they had come to Greece. He needed plenty of time on the other realm for the retrieval of the snake people's gem. He *had* to find that armor, if it was here. "It must be here," he said reassuringly, although he did not feel very

confident himself. "If they cannot go out, it stands to reason treasures will have no appeal for them. They cannot barter it for money or food."

Kay nodded in relief. "You're right," she said. "Let's continue searching for it ....and hope we don't meet any of these...creatures face to face," she said with a shudder. They went cautiously forward, deciding to try out this tunnel. The first one had not had any treasure in it, and it had opened outdoors so they thought it was safe to assume it would not lead them to the armor. This particular tunnel went downwards and went longer than the first, opening out a couple of times into midsized caves and continuing on. The caves did not appear to contain anything and were quite bare, so they followed the tunnel. They turned a corner and stood blinking stupidly for a moment in bright sunlight. This tunnel too had led out onto the inner mountain face. This time they were able to see the valley in its entirety. It was deep and narrow, with the mountain faces almost sheer to the peaks. It seemed to go further down than where they were standing, narrowing down to a gorge and they caught a sparkle of water below. They gazed around and found to the right, there were ruins of what appeared to be an ancient monument, much like the ruins at Delphi and Acropolis, only this was in much better repair despite its air of being abandoned.

They walked slowly towards it. There were enormous pillars supporting the roof and then an entrance to the interior of the large building. Despite their trepidation at finding animal-like humans earlier, both Addy and Kay found their professional selves take over, as they gazed at the great monument. It was a stupendous moment, to think that they were the first (at least the first in the modern world) people to look at this palace or whatever it was, and the first to find it for posterity. They went closer and looked at the carvings on the pillars and the rough hewn large blocks of stones that made the building. The pillars were actually carved as gods and goddesses supporting the roof on their heads. They were so engrossed in the find, they failed to note that the wide cave-like opening of the first tunnel was slightly to the left and above the one they had come in through. The people on that wide platform-like opening were gaping at the intruders.

## 14. Inside the mountain

“This is a dream come true!” Kay enthused, almost jumping in joy. “Our very own discovery where we get to examine everything firsthand before anyone else comes in!” Addy was grinning, as elated as her. The colossal building was surrounded by an open propylon on all sides, supported by the beautifully carved pillars. They walked toward the opening in the middle of the building that could be seen. “It’s weird and wonderful to see an intact roof on this monument, isn’t it?” murmured Addy, so awed he did not want to talk loudly. “There is something that strikes me as a little odd...,” said Addy. “The ancient monuments in Greece are generally built in such a way as to show their splendor ostentatiously. They are usually located on hilltops and open on all sides. I wonder why this one is built so hidden away? Although it is on a hill, it is not at the top and only anybody inside the valley can see it. And there couldn’t have been many people living here even in ancient times as it is a hidden and inaccessible valley,” he said.

“Yeah, that is something to think about,” agreed Kay with a slight frown. However, the sight of the almost intact monument pushed everything else out of their minds. They walked in like little children at a theme park through the large doorway into the first room, which appeared to be a sort of hall or court room by the dimensions of it. The roof was so high they had to crane their necks to look at it. It was simply enormous. It was built in the usual hypostyle of most Greek monuments. There was what looked like marble benches interspersed along the walls of the room and a sort of dais at the center with another large couch-like structure in the middle. Addy guessed it must have been the throne on which an ancient Greek sat, ruling over the affairs of state. The other benches must be for the courtiers. He wondered how the six explorer-warriors came into the picture.

They explored the entire room cursorily as they wanted to first look at the whole structure before lingering on in any one spot. They began their trek through the gigantic rooms to explore the whole structure. “Why did they make these buildings so large?” wondered Kay aloud. “The pillars are five feet across, the roof 20 feet high, and the rooms large enough for about 50 people...was it just for display or were they really large people?” Addy was wondering the same. Indian mythology, he knew, also claimed the people were much taller in the past, about 12 feet tall. There were several

instances in the ancient epics that described this. However those were about people who lived earlier than 7000 B.C. and the ones referring to 3000 B.C. did not mention specific heights although did declare the people were large. And he knew there was nothing discovered scientifically that proved the theory that humans were larger in the past. There was also, unfortunately, no monument discovered as yet that could corroborate this claim. “I wonder who the ruler of this place was,” he said aloud. “If we could find something about who these people were, we would be closer to finding out about their dimensions.”

“Hmmm,” said Kay, now busy looking at some intricately carved pillars. There were beautiful friezes on the lintel at the top of the pillars. The roof was constructed of heavy beams of wood and stone alternately laid cross, supported by the pillars. On the walls, they found marble moulding depicting various scenes of the Greek court life, war, and civilian life. There was even some clay moulding in one room that Addy thought looked a lot like the village deities he had seen (and which resembled the rakshasha he saw in the other realm). He wondered if that was a coincidence, or whether this was yet another connection with India that had not been known until now.

To the north side of the building, they came to a large open paved space in which there were statues interspersed. These were not in as good repair as the ones inside the building, probably as they were exposed to the elements. There were Mycenaean friezes with archaic metopes on them. “Hey, there are paintings here,” exclaimed Kay. They had gone back inside to explore the western part of the building that backed onto the mountain side. Sure enough, there were crudely painted paintings on the wall, colored with what looked like vegetable dyes. Addy clicked pictures frantically on his phone and Kay scribbled notes on hers as they went along exploring the site. The deeper they went into the building, the richer the interiors grew. “Ace!!!” said Kay breathlessly as they entered a smaller room off the painting room and saw finely crafted bronze vessels, large and small, displayed on shelves carved into the walls and on table-like marble projections all over the room. They were wary of handling anything for fear they might inadvertently damage them or compromise the thorough examination that would be done when a complete team of archeologists arrived later.

There was a passage into the last room that opened out onto the propylon at the back. Addy and Kay glanced through it, not planning to go out until they had finished checking all the rooms. However, what they saw on the propylon chilled them to the bones. There, strewn haphazardly on the marble blocks that made the floor of the porch, were four dead bodies. They were in various stages of decomposition, but the clothes they wore, were modern ones. They looked like they had met with violent death. One had the head chopped off and lying some distance away. Three had missing or nearly torn off limbs. One had his head turned right around on his neck. Kay gasped, turned around and was promptly sick. Addy was deathly pale, and he quickly grasped Kay's hand and pulled her back into the passage and took her to the next room, where he sat her down, and gave her some water to drink. She was still trembling from the shock of seeing the gruesome bodies so unexpectedly. "So now we know why they never turned up at the rendezvous with the helicopter," said Addy in a strangled voice. "I *really* hope we can get out of there in one piece," said Kay, recovering a little. She had nearly forgotten the dangerous mission they were on, and it had felt almost like she was on a tour of a museum until now. "Addy, I think we should not waste any more time....we need to find that armor and leave as quickly as we can." "You are right," agreed Addy. "Are you sure you are okay now?"

"As okay as I'm ever going to be," said Kay with a small smile. "Come on, let's go see the rest of this western side, it's the only portion we have not covered," she said. They got up and made their way back into the main part of the building, going quickly through three rooms that looked more or less empty and into a fourth one. This one had pillars next to the opening, looked grander than the others and there even seemed to have been a door there once, that had fallen apart. "This one looks promising....it could have been a treasury," said Addy. The room was stupendous. If they were awestruck before this, they were absolutely stunned by this latest discovery. It seemed to be a sepulchre that had been broken into long ago. However, nothing seemed to have been taken. There was a sarcophagus in the center of the room with carvings all across it and a statue of a sleeping man on the lid of it.

"It must have been the king or ruler of this place," said Kay in hushed tones. The statue was richly adorned in marble clothes and jewels that were embedded into it, gleaming even after millennia. There was an inscription at

the base and Kay could not resist taking the time to decipher it. "The great emperor Neleus, son of Poseidon, and conqueror of the East," she read out painstakingly. She looked at the statue again and noted that the marble of the statue was dyed and was a darker shade than all the sculptures they had seen outside. "The east? Do you think this was Kalayavana?" asked Addy in excitement. "Would they have been able to bring his body back?" asked Kay doubtfully. "But he certainly has been depicted as dark skinned," she said, moving on to another statue near the right wall that also had been dyed a dark shade. "This one is dark too," she murmured to herself. She read the dedication at the bottom and exclaimed, "This is the one, Addy! See here it says – 'Brave son of the great Neleus who lost his life trying to capture the wealthy kingdom of the East.' This must be Kalayavana," she said, her face flushed and eyes sparkling. Addy came over and looked at the imposing statue. It was at least 7 feet tall. "Was he really this tall?" He looked around and saw there were six more statues surrounding the one they guessed to be Kalayavana.

"These must be the returning warriors then," he said, quickly going over to each. He wished now he had taken a course on ancient Greek. Kay came over and read the names out slowly – Galenos, Alkaios, Praxiteles, Kleisthenes, Erastos, and Pelagios. "Yes!! We found them!" she cried. "Quick, look around at the treasures and see if you can find the kavacha." Both of them started looking through all the treasures. There were bronze swords with ivory handles inlaid in gold and precious stones. There were cups and diadems of intricate designs. There were medallions and coins. There were all kinds of jewelry including rings, girdles, colorful gemstones, beads made from what looked like amethyst and jasper, and carved ivory sculptures depicting griffons and lions. As much as the duo wanted to examine these treasures in a leisurely manner, they began searching frantically for the armor, mindful of the vicious-looking natives they had seen earlier. They found many bronze armors but those did not look like they could be the kavacha they were looking for. They were almost in despair when Kay shouted and Addy rushed to her side. "Look at this casket," she said. It was a small wooden box, flat and square. The sides had carvings, but the top was covered by line after line of inscriptions. Kay groaned. She would need ages to read so much. She had caught the words "magic shield" on it and hence shouted out to Addy.



Addy looked at it askance. How could a small casket like this contain an armor? It was only as big as a big book and an inch or two in depth. Even relatively modern armors of the medieval era were heavy and stiff ones. He tried to open the casket but found there was no indication where the seam was and no handle or clasp. He thought about how the wall at the entrance of the tunnel in the cave on the other side of the mountain had moved and on a sudden whim, examined every inch of the casket. Sure enough at the bottom of one of the sides, a Shatkona was wedged in amongst the intricate carving of animals. It was so well camouflaged that he almost missed it. There was a knob at the center of the hexagon, and he eagerly pressed on it. The box sprung open abruptly, startling both of them. Inside, there lay what appeared to be a quite an ordinary-looking piece of fine golden colored silk, folded over on itself until it fit the casket. Addy looked at Kay with puzzled eyes.

She was staring at the golden material too. She took it out gingerly. As soon as it was unfolded and held up, it felt firmer in her hands. "It's not cloth as I thought," she said. Addy touched it too, and found she was right. It was firm yet supple, somewhat like a thin rubber sheet. "How can this be a protective shield of immense properties?" wondered Addy. "Wear it and see what happens," suggested Kay. He wore it over his clothes and it felt like it tightened and molded itself to his torso. The golden material shone dully. "It has to be the one," said Kay desperately. Just then, they heard an ululating cry from outside that sent a shiver down their spines. It was followed by a chorus of such cries. "Shit. Shit. SHIT!" said Addy. "We have to get out of here NOW. They are looking for us." Kay blanched. He tore off the armor and pushed it back into the casket and slammed it shut. He snatched up his backpack from the floor where he had put it while trying on the kavacha and stuffed the casket into it and zipped it up again. Then he grabbed Kay's hand and ran out of the room, both trying to be as silent as possible despite their hammering hearts.

They ran out of the treasure room into the main part of the building. They could see figures in the distance outside, coming from the south side, the side they had come from, where the tunnel was. "We can't hope to get out before they reach the palace," panted Addy. "Let's hide somewhere. If they can't find us, they might stop searching and leave," said Kay. They thought rapidly about all the rooms they had seen. There was hardly any hiding place in any of the rooms. Everything was bare and although there

were statues in many rooms, they would be discovered at once if the natives came around the sides. "Let's hide in the garden outside where there are fountains, statues, and trees," said Kay, trying to pull Addy to the northern side of the building. Addy resisted. "No....too dangerous. They would see us when we got to the propylon and chase us. Besides we need to be as near to the tunnels as possible to escape." He pulled her along to the throne room, trying to remember all the objects in the throne room, which was larger than the other rooms and had heavy marble furniture.

"Where do we hide there? They will see us at once when they enter through the main door," ranted Kay, still being pulled along. "I remembered something from when we were there before," said Addy impatiently. They were still running, trying to run as lightly as possible to avoid making thudding sounds with their boots. They reached the throne room at the same time the natives started climbing the propylon. Another few yards and they would be in view of the huge main doorway and would be able to see them. He rushed frantically to the throne in the center of the dais at the far end. He jumped up onto the dais, not using the shallow and broad steps leading to it. Whirling back, he quickly helped Kay up and pulled her behind the throne just as the first natives rushed into sight of the arched doorway. "Oh God! We'll be sitting ducks here," whisper-moaned Kay. Addy, in the meantime, had crouched down behind the large marble throne, searching. "Come here," he said urgently in a low voice. Kay went to see and found he was crawling into a little space below the back of the throne-couch. She crawled in beside him. Addy pushed her into the farthest corner squashing himself up next to her. The opening was narrower than the couch so they were somewhat well hidden and unless someone came right up to the opening and peeked inside, they would not be seen. Luckily the couch was of massive proportions like everything else in the hall and they could lie full length on the floor or even sit up. The front lower portion of the throne had intricate lattice work, through which they could see the entire hall. They did not dare to sit up just then, afraid they might be seen through the pattern.

The natives were spreading out through the hall, a little more cautiously now, probably not knowing what to expect of these strange new people. They must not have forgotten the explorers of last year, thought Addy. Those men probably had had weapons and had tried to shoot at the natives, and gotten massacred instead. He saw them going all round the hall, looking

behind statues, benches, and pillars. They spoke to each other in the guttural language Addy had heard earlier. It was just a jumble of sounds, rather than a language. He had a bad moment when he saw a small group going around behind the dais. However, they did not climb onto the raised platform. He glanced at how Kay was doing. She was lying on her front like him, looking through the lattice. She looked petrified. He realized they were both sweating despite the cold. He looked back outside and was relieved to see the natives were going on to the next room. They sat there as silent as mice for about an hour, until the natives finally started streaming back into the hall, shouting and exclaiming before going out. Addy heaved a sigh of relief, as did Kay. It looked like they were safe for the moment.

It was growing dark, and Addy realized with a pang of hunger that they had not had lunch or anything to eat since breakfast. He had brought some fruits with him when he had gone out of the cave but since Kay was sleeping when he came back, he had stored them in his backpack. He had gotten only a few crabapples, berries that looked like the cherries back home, and something that looked like a cherry plum. He hoped all of them were edible and wouldn't poison them. He felt it was safe to speak and whispered to Kay – "Shall we crawl out now?" She shook her head. "There may be someone left behind to watch the doorway, or even the inside the hall," she whispered. "We better hide here until daylight and then we can make our way undetected to the tunnel." "Right," said Addy. "How about eating something then?" he asked. "We didn't have lunch, and it is dinner time now," he reminded her. Kay smiled. He could barely see her face in the gathering gloom. "I'd love to...but we only have biscuits and soup mix, don't we?" "We have fruit too, which I gathered while you were in the cave...although I'm not sure about the safety of eating unknown fruits," he said doubtfully.

He took out the fruits and showed them to Kay. She had to hold them close to the lattice work and peer closely at them to see what they looked like. They were wary of using their torches lest they shone through the trellis. "Crabapple, *Cornus mas*, and *Prunus spinosa*," she said as if she were a botany major instead of an archeologist. Addy gaped. She grinned. "Don't be so surprised. Ray pointed out most of the local fruit trees to me when we were climbing up the trail. When *someone* was sulking," she said teasingly.

"Oh, okay," Addy said, a little embarrassed to be reminded of his

moodiness a couple of days back. “As long as we can eat them.” They ate the fruit in silence and then ate the biscuits too. It was not a satisfactory meal, but staved their hunger for the time being. Their water bottles were nearly empty too and Addy made a mental note to look for a brook or stream the next day to fill the bottles. As there was nothing else to do, they dragged out their sleeping bags and made themselves as comfortable as possible on the floor. Addy thought this was better than sleeping out in the open in a tent; the marble though cold, kept out the chill wind.

## 15. Chased

When Addy awoke the next morning, he was stiff and could not understand where he was at first. The underside of the couch was bewilderingly near to his face like a roof come down drastically low. It took him a couple of minutes to realize where he was and why they were here. He struggled out of the sleeping bag in the cramped space, trying not to bump against Kay who was still sleeping. When he was free of the sleeping bag, he peered out of the latticework to see if there were any natives lurking in the courtroom. He could not see anyone and so decided to cautiously get out from under the couch. He crept out, making no sound, and got down from the dais. He went silently from pillar to statue until he reached the doorway. There seemed to be no one there. Maybe the natives had never stayed back after all, but gone back to their den. He went back to the couch and sat down outside it, waiting for Kay to get up. He took out the casket and looked at the golden armor again. It was a really strange material, he thought to himself. Nothing like he had seen before. It was neither fully solid nor liquid, something like a healing gel his mother had once had to use on some incisions after an operation. Unlike the gel which had been icy cold, it was warm to the touch. He tried it on again and as before, it molded itself to his torso. It still didn't feel strong or make him feel safe. He took it off and kept it back carefully in the box again. He supposed he would just have to trust that it would work against the Agneyastra.

He heard sounds of Kay waking up and peeped in through the low opening of the couch. "Good morning, Kay," he said when he saw Kay blinking up blearily at him. "Had a good night?" Kay groaned and sat up. "I'm aching everywhere. It was stuffy and cramped," she complained. "What time is it?" Addy looked at his watch. "9:15....," he said. "I checked the hall and there are no natives to be seen anywhere. "Do we try our luck to get to the tunnel now?" he asked. "Yeah, I suppose so," said Kay. "Oh, I really wish I could brush my teeth and wash my face. And there's only a mouthful of water to drink." "Hmm... the sooner we get back, the better for us then." he replied. They gathered up everything and packed up their backpacks before getting down cautiously from the dais and heading toward the doorway. They peered out around the side and finding no one lying in wait, went slowly down the propylon. They went slowly and cautiously,

creeping from tree to shrub, anything that afforded cover. When they reached the spot where they could look at the tunnel entrance, Addy, who was leading, stopped abruptly. There, at the entrance, sat a very disgruntled looking native. Kay, peering over his shoulder, saw the native too. They looked at each other and backed away. Kay suddenly squeezed his arm. Addy looked at her with raised eyebrows, and she pointed upwards silently. He looked up and saw the second tunnel, above and to the left of the one they had come through. He could just see two or three natives sitting at the edge there. Luckily for the duo, they had not been spotted this time.

They went back, still walking amongst the foliage. “So that is how they must have known about us,” said Addy when they were far enough away not to be heard. “They must have seen us either coming out of the tunnel or getting into the palace yesterday.” “What now?” asked Kay. “Can’t we just chant the invocation mantra and go into the other realm to escape these people?” “No....I don’t much fancy coming back here. Don’t you remember what Vasuki said? When we intone the reverse mantra, we will reach the same spot we were on when we invoked him. We may fall right on top of the natives if we appear here suddenly,” he said. “It’d be much better to try to get back to our cave and go from there. We can see if Ray is there and wait until he leaves the cave. If he isn’t there, we can go immediately.” Kay thought about this and nodded.

“Let’s go in the opposite direction, and see if there is anything to discover. At the very least we could get water for ourselves,” he said. “That’s a good idea. If we find water, we can clean up a little too,” said Kay cheering up. They went skirting through the greenery to the other side of the building. There were many disused fountains there but the water was not fresh, so they kept going through the trees. “I hope we don’t get lost here,” said Kay. “Let’s mark the trees so we know which way to go while coming back.” They took a penknife each and marked trees every now and then as they went. They finally heard a burbling gurgling sound and saw something sparkling through the trees. It was a narrow river that was rushing down the slope at force. They went down to its banks and Addy filled their water bottles while Kay dipped her handkerchief in the water to scrub off some of the dust and grime. They even allowed themselves the luxury of brushing their teeth as they knew they could not go near the tunnel as long as the natives were keeping a watch on it.

“How long do we wait until we attempt escape?” asked Kay. “We’ll go to the tunnel entrance in the evening and see if they are still there,” said Addy thoughtfully. “If they are, we will need to make some kind of a distraction so we can slip into the tunnel undetected.” “What kind of distraction?” asked Kay. “I don’t know yet, let’s think about it until evening,” he replied. “What do we do now?” she asked. “Let’s explore a bit. We need to find something to eat too. To last us until evening at the very least,” said Addy. Kay smirked at him. “What?” he asked a little belligerently. “Nothing...how can you even think of food when we are on the run?” she shook her head. “Well we have to keep up the energy for running, don’t we?” he asked defensively. Kay nodded absently. “Look,” she said, pointing to some trees ahead. “Crabapples!” They went on for some time, gathering whatever berries and fruit they could. Their trek through the thick forest had brought them near the palace again. From this angle, they could see there was something behind the palace in the distance. It looked like another cave. They looked at it curiously. It had not been visible from the palace as it was in the side of the mountain behind the palace and hidden by a thicket of trees.

They walked cautiously toward it, and found themselves at the entrance of a cave that seemed to go a long way in. Addy suddenly slapped his thigh. “I know what this is,” he whispered. “It’s the third tunnel that we never explored. It opens out here. Shall we go in and investigate it? We may be able to get to the large cavern where the three tunnels separate, and go back to our cave undetected,” he said. Kay had nodded in comprehension when he said it was the third tunnel and she agreed with him. “Let’s be really careful though,” she said in a whisper. “We don’t know where those natives are.” They entered the tunnel and began going inside, torches shaded with their hands as they had done the previous day. Addy wished they could have avoided torches altogether, but it was so dark in the tunnel, they could not see where they were stepping unless they switched on the torches. They soon came to a fork and took the right hand one, guessing this was the direction that would lead to the large cavern. After walking a few paces, they found themselves in a small cave that was strewn with odd objects. There were crudely made weapons, some new and some old broken ones. The spearheads and machetes seemed to be made of rock sharpened to a blade-like serration. There were old and new skins lying about the floor. But what attracted their attention were four backpacks.

“These must have belonged to the men who were killed,” said Kay, still whispering. “Let’s see what is inside. Why didn’t the natives ransack them, I wonder?” murmured Addy. “Probably couldn’t make sense of whatever modern stuff is inside,” said Kay. They opened up the nearest one and it was full of climbing and camping gear. However, they were delighted to find cans of food. The food was more than a year old but expiry dates on them said they were still good to eat. “Wow! Look at all this food going waste here,” said Addy, his mouth watering immediately. They opened the other three backpacks and found more tins of meat, soup, fruit, and even preserves. They stuffed as much as they could into their backpacks and then by common consent sat down to eat some in the cave, feeling intolerably hungry after having eaten only a few skimpy meals over two days. Kay had found can openers and they put one inside Addy’s backpack and used another to open the tins for an early lunch. They had their fill, even Kay, who was actually as hungry as Addy but didn’t want to admit it. Then they decided to try to find the way out again. They had only taken a few steps in the opposite direction they had come from, southwards, when they heard a noise and froze.

They could hear someone in the passage ahead. Kay, who was behind Addy, quickly motioned to go back the way they had come and started off at a trot, trying not to make any sound with her feet. Addy followed at her heels. However, just a yard or two later, they knew they were discovered as they heard shouts and yells. Throwing caution to the winds, they began running. “Damn!” panted Addy as they ran full speed toward the outer tunnel. “Why do they always have to turn up when we are trying to get out?” They could hear many feet chasing them and yells and fierce cries. There seemed to be more than four people behind them. They reached the tunnel entrance and as they shot out, Addy raced ahead, grabbed Kay’s hand and started running into the forest. This time they did not stop to mark trees, they just wanted to escape being captured by these ferocious looking natives. Bushes and shrubs whipped against their faces and arms as they thudded through the forest as fast as they could. Kay’s side was burning and she hoped the natives would give up soon so they could stop and catch their breath. Addy was pulling her along at a furious pace.

After a long while, it seemed like they had succeeded in shaking them off their trail. They heard the voices receding and then could not hear them anymore. They slowed and stopped, Addy doubled over, trying to catch his



breath and Kay slumped down to the ground, her legs and side burning with the sudden heavy exercise. “Phew, that was a close call,” whispered Addy. “Shit....now they know for sure we are here and will be more vigilant. How will we ever get out?” “If only we could speak their language, we could have tried talking our way out of this,” panted Kay. “I think we should keep going,” said Addy. “I’ll feel safe only when we have put a lot of distance between us and them.” Kay got up and they started walking again, quickly but quietly, through the greenery. They had just started calming down after their adrenalin rush, when they heard sounds to their left in the bushes and jumped when they saw they had been found again.

They began running again, close but not holding hands this time as there was no sign of any trail and they were going full pelt through the shrubs and trees. Kay kept as close as possible behind Addy, so she did not have to struggle through the shrubbery and could follow in his wake and at the same time not get separated from him. However, both of them found they were less athletic than they had hoped and began slowing down imperceptibly, bodies screaming at the punishment. The natives seemed to be made of different material, however, and were gaining on them. Suddenly, Addy burst out into a clearing and saw they were at the river again. There was nowhere to go. He whirled around and saw the natives were now only yards away and were approaching in a semicircle to cut off any chance of escape. He pulled Kay closer. She was almost dead on her feet, they had been running continuously for more than half an hour on uneven terrain through dense shrubbery and neither of them was used to such strenuous exercise.

“Oh, what do we do now,” whimpered Kay. There were tears of exhaustion in her eyes which she swiped away angrily. The natives, men and women, looked absolutely fierce and revolting close up. They had misshapen limbs and missing teeth now that Addy got a chance to look at them from a shorter distance. He was wildly trying to think what to do to escape and in a detached manner at the back of his brain, he thought they were so gruesome looking probably because of several centuries or even millennia of inbreeding. They came menacingly closer, slowly now, spears and machetes pointed at the two new people in their midst. Addy and Kay began inching backwards towards the fiercely churning waters behind them. At last, Addy had a desperate idea. His hand tightened over Kay’s in a vice-like grip and he murmured, “There is only one thing we can do, Kay. Jump, NOW,” and

he suited action to words and almost wrenching her arm from her shoulder, jumped into the raging torrent. As the waters closed around his head, he could hear the shrill cries of the natives. He hoped they would not try swimming after them. However, the river was in such spate, there was no possibility of swimming. They were being swept along rapidly by the current. He looked to see if Kay was okay and saw she was managing to keep her head above water after the first shock of being submerged. The backpacks were heavy on their backs, but they were able to somehow keep their heads out of the water as they were carried along.

Addy strained to look back and saw the natives had given up and were not chasing them. Some of them even seemed to be laughing hilariously at them. He wondered why they were doing that. Kay suddenly cried out in alarm. "Addy...Addy...look ahead," she gasped through the icy water. "We are headed for a waterfall." Addy saw, too late, she was right. No wonder the natives were laughing. Damn. He tried desperately to steer them both closer to the shore, but they were too far in the middle of the river that was rushing furiously along, to make any headway. They could hear a thunderous sound now, the waters crashing down not far from them. They watched helpless, as they were pulled closer and closer to the edge. "Try to hold onto me when we are going over," shouted Addy to Kay. She didn't answer but her hand clenched tightly in his. The next moment, they were at the edge, suspended for a moment in the air, shot out from the water. Kay screamed. Addy screwed up his eyes, not liking the glimpse that he had got of the height of the waterfall. It seemed unbelievably high and it looked like they would be dashed to pieces at the bottom. Then they were falling, at first free of the water and then being pushed down by the force of the water. They finally struck the end of the waterfall and went under deep with the impact of their fall. As soon as their momentum let up, Addy could feel his backpack dragging him down under again, and he pushed up with all his energy.

He opened his eyes in the water, lungs burning, and saw Kay was still holding onto him, but seemed to be doing worse than he was. He shook her hand and pointed upwards with his free hand to urge her to push upwards too and she nodded dazedly. Struggling against the pull of their heavy backpacks, they swam with all their might upwards and came up to the surface, gasping and drawing deep breaths. The river was calmer here as it had grown wider. They managed to weakly pull themselves gasping onto the

shore before collapsing in fatigue. They were both shivering with the cold and shock. Several minutes later, they got back some of their breath and sat up slowly. The backpacks were dripping. They were supposed to be waterproof, but Addy didn't have much hope there wouldn't be water inside. No one had tested the packs by swirling them in swift flowing water and dunking them in a waterfall. He opened his pack and was surprised to find that though there was dampness in it, nothing seemed to be soaking wet. His phone was the only casualty. It seemed to have switched off automatically when it got damp. His clothes, the fruits, and the tins were quite alright. Most importantly, the casket with the armor seemed to be dry. It had gotten wedged in the ground sheet and been more or less protected.

He looked at Kay. She was looking like a drowned rat. She was trying clumsily to sit up. He smirked a little to think what a change this was from the usually impeccably groomed Kay. She saw him before he could wipe the smile off his face and scowled. "What's funny?" she snapped. "Nothing," he stammered quickly. "I'm just happy to be alive." He watched as Kay checked the contents of her backpack and reported that everything was fine except her mobile phone which was wrecked. "We better start walking fast again," Addy said worriedly. "The natives might come to check if we survived. Let's move away from the river so they can't find us." "Right," said Kay, heaving her backpack up again with a groan. "Which way do you think we should go?" "I wish we had swum ashore on the other side of the river," said Addy. "It would have been safer with a river between us and the natives, although we don't know if they have boats or other means of crossing the river. Let's go south east. It's the best we can do now."

## 16. Capture – or escape?

Addy felt frozen and uncomfortable in his wet clothes. Kay looked as bad and her teeth were chattering. He wished he could make a fire so they could warm up and maybe eat some soup. But it was too dangerous, it would be like inviting the natives to a feast with them as the meal. They plodded along valiantly, climbing higher and higher, going in the direction Addy had pointed. He had decided they must go higher than the vantage point of the natives so they could keep an eye on them if possible and at the least not be under their eye. The terrain seemed that much more difficult to traverse with their sodden backpacks. He helped Kay along as much as he could. They did not even have the stout sticks Spyros had given them, unfortunately. After climbing steadily for nearly an hour, they felt warmer due to the exertion. The mountainside was growing more rugged, with bare boulders and jutting out walls of sheer rock. When they came to a particularly steep bit, Kay looked quite desperate and asked, “Oh, how much higher do you want to go? I don’t think they will come up this high.”

“They’ve been living here from ever, Kay. They must be like monkeys and mountain goats. We must go as high as possible to avoid them,” said Addy firmly. They were standing next to a bit of sheer rock that was covered with creepers and bushes growing out of cracks in it. Kay began tiredly leaning against it as Addy scanned the slope below them to see if they could be seen. The mountainside was covered in thickets which were a little bare as it was autumn, and he couldn’t see anything moving. There was a sudden squeak and he turned back in fear, thinking the natives must have come up behind Kay. What he saw astonished him. There was no one beside him. Kay had vanished completely. “Kay? KAY!!” shouted Addy, unmindful of keeping silent anymore. A muffled voice came from somewhere behind him, which he thought was impossible since there was only the cliff face behind him. It was unmistakably Kay’s voice though. “Where are you, Kay?” he shouted again, frantically this time. “I’m here,” she answered slightly more clearly. There were sounds like she was moving in the rock. He stared in amazement, wondering if he had gone crazy.

Suddenly, Kay popped out next to him, looking red and excited. “You won’t believe it, Addy,” she said. “There is a bottling little hidey hole here for us.” Addy had grabbed her, relieved to find her again. “Where the...

heck? Don't ever do that again," he said, his heart still thumping although he was relieved to see her unhurt. "Calm down, Addy!" she said patting his arm. "I was leaning against what I thought was the mountainside. These fronds cover up a crack that is wide enough for us to walk through, and I fell through it. Come have a look, there is a cave here that we can use to rest in," she said. She pulled Addy toward the mountainside and sure enough, there was a narrow opening in the rock face, completely camouflaged by the creepers growing over it. Inside it was a short tunnel, opening into a small cave. "It will be warm here, and safer than any other place to hide," said Kay. Addy sneezed violently. "Bless you," said Kay. "We really need to get dry and warm again," she said already kneeling down and opening her backpack to take out their things. She took out all the clothes and spread them out on one side on the dry rocky floor so they would get a chance to lose their dampness. Addy followed her example, laying out his stuff next to hers. She had started rubbing off her head with a towel and Addy knew they should change too. "I'll be out in the passage, you change your clothes. Then I'll take my turn," he said. "Best idea," replied Kay.

After about 10 minutes, she went out and Addy took his turn, changing thankfully out of the sodden clothes, into slightly damp ones that nevertheless felt great at that point. He looked around the cave, picking up his torch since it was almost pitch dark inside. There seemed to be a little light coming from one of the sides. He went closer and found there was a gap there, going a few feet in like a half passage. On the other side, there was a wall of rock facing him, but with a gap between the entrance where Addy stood and the rock. It was like a small roofless passage that ran perpendicular to the one leading off from the cave. He went to both ends of this passage, and found a sheer drop on both sides. His eyes glinted. This would be an ideal place to make a fire. No one could see it, and even if they did, there was no way to it except the way they had come in and that was quite well hidden. The opening at the top would keep the smoke from suffocating them. They would be able to have hot soup at last. He almost ran back to call Kay in, proudly showing her his discovery. "Goody!!" smiled Kay delightedly. "I'll go get us some wood," said Addy, grinning himself. Get out the can of soup powder and water bottles."

He went out, almost skipping, although just half an hour ago he had been ready to drop dead out of tiredness. He didn't have to go far, as he had

noted a lot of twigs on the way up. He brought in a great armful, got the fire going in the little “kitchen” as Kay was calling it now, and went out again to bring in some more wood that would last them some time. Kay had the fire burning nicely by the time he came back, and the soup was simmering in its box. “I had to use the entire soup mix,” said Kay. “There is nothing to cook it in except the tin and nothing to store the powder in if we use only a little.” “Never mind,” said Addy, feeling expansive enough at the moment in the warmth of the fire and their safety, to disregard anything. “We still have the other food and tonight we really need to get something warm inside us. Some bread to go with it would have hit the spot though,” he added. Kay rolled her eyes. “We are lucky just to be alive and sitting in a warm place and soon going to be eating soup,” she said. “When you pulled me into the river, I thought it was the end, until we went down that waterfall, when I thought just being in a gushing torrent was child’s play,” she said, able to laugh at it now that they were safe and comfortable. “We don’t seem to have done so badly, have we?”

Addy smiled lazily. The warm soup was making him feel sleepy. He leaned back against the rock, not wanting to get up right now to get more food or open his sleeping bag for a nap. “I miss wearing my glasses though,” he grumbled. The only real casualty of their plunge through the waterfall had been his spectacles. He did not even realize they were gone until he reached the cave and settled down. “Everything is blurry. I can’t remember the last time I went without specs. And I can’t get any until after I’ve finished the task and gotten back to civilization as we know it.” “You’ll do fine,” said Kay reassuringly. “If you could find a way to survive and trek all the way up here without your spectacles after we got out of the river, you can do *anything* without them,” she said firmly. She took the tin box and fork out of Addy’s hand and went inside the cave. She came back out bringing both their sleeping bags. She handed Addy his and laid hers on the other side of the campfire in the passage-like place. “I’m going to take a well deserved nap,” she announced, snuggling in and dropping off to sleep in a minute. Addy wasn’t far behind. He was already half asleep on his feet anyway. He quickly spread his sleeping bag and got into it, sighing at how warm he felt now, with the fire on one side and the warm sleeping bag around him. He fell asleep even before completing the thought.

It was late evening when they awoke. The fire had gone out and there

was a smoky smell despite the open sides and top. Addy woke up feeling a little groggy and disoriented. He lay in his sleeping bag, wondering what they could do next. They could go to the other realm any moment, having got what they came here for. However, he really did not relish facing the natives and maybe being at a disadvantage the moment they appeared here on their return. He still felt they should go back to the cave on the other side of the mountain, the safe side, before they chanted the mantra which would take them to the higher plane. He got out of the sleeping bag and went to see what time it was. Luckily his watch had survived the dunking. It was almost 7 p.m. They had slept nearly two hours. He went out on the outer ledge at the entrance of the cave, to get a look outside, and to see if he could, how far away from the river and the native's cave they were.

He went to the right of the ledge, calculating that they had been going south east so the tunnels should be somewhere to the north. He couldn't see far very clearly and it was dusk, but he couldn't think of anything else to do. Fortunately for him, he found what he was looking for quite easily because the natives now had campfires burning down at their large open cave, just outside the overhang. He could just see the dark opening of the smaller tunnel where he and Kay had come out a couple of days ago. Further north, hidden amongst the forest he could just make out the roof and part of the pillars of the palace. In fact, he had a bird's eye view from up here, he realized. They were up so high that he could observe the natives without them observing him, especially if he lay flat on the ledge to peer down at them. They were quite far and little more than tiny figures, but he didn't want to underestimate them this time.

He watched for a while, the sky growing darker and darker, the fires glowing brighter now. The natives seemed busy cooking over the open fires. At least, it looked like they were roasting something, probably meat, over the fires. There were little groups, some sitting near the fires, some holding what looked like pieces of meat over the fire, some fighting and brawling on one side away from the fires, and some lying down on the rugs inside the cave. It was fascinating to watch them, Addy thought. It was like looking at a video made from archeological findings, of what the stoneage people's life must have been. Only, these people weren't actors or animations. They were real, he thought with a thrill. What an amazing discovery, if only they could get back and tell the modern world outside. Scientists and researchers would be

swarming here, wanting to observe them firsthand to get a better knowledge of the fossils that they had to normally decipher. He felt a twinge of guilt at the thought that the natives probably wouldn't like being discovered. But on the other hand, wouldn't it be better for them to join the outer world, improve their living conditions, and have a better life?

"Hey, what're you doing in the dark there, Addy?" he heard Kay call after some time. He turned back and could just see the ghostly outline of her pale face in the dark. He beckoned to her. She came closer and he said, "Sit here and have a look." She sat on the ledge between him and the mountainside and looked at where he was pointing. "Oh, the natives?" she exclaimed. "So we can see where they are after all. This cave is really the best thing we've ever found! Okay, next best to the kavacha and the palace, I suppose." She was silent for some time as she observed them like Addy had done. "They seem to have a society and even groups of men, women, and children. Wow! It's humbling to be given a chance to watch this scene," she said softly. "It's such a stupendous discovery. This could make us famous if we could only report it. I wish our phones were working, we could have at least taken pictures and tried sending them off to Ray or Mr. Kher," she said a little unhappily. "Never mind, we will get out of here and tell them ourselves," said Addy.

"So what's the plan now?" she asked after some time, getting tired of watching the natives. "How do we get out?" "Now that we have an observation point, I think it would be good to keep a watch here on their activities," began Addy. "Then we might get a good idea about when the tunnels are unguarded and try to slip into the smaller one and get back to our outside cave," he said. "Oh, Addy, isn't there any other way? I really don't want another run-in with those ferocious beings..." trailed off Kay sounding uncharacteristically timid. Addy got up to his feet, helping Kay up. He wanted to look at her expressions while talking to her, and it was so dark he could barely see his hand in front of his face. They went back inside, carefully hugging the rock face until they came to the cave entrance. Addy took some more wood and made the fire up again. They sat down next to it. He turned to her again. "I can't think of any other way. There can be no other way out because otherwise these people wouldn't be here and outside people would have come in sooner." Kay looked pensively at the fire. "It's safe in this cave. Why can't we just go to Vasuki's realm from here?" she



asked almost pleadingly.

“We’ve gone over this before,” said Addy. “We’d just have to face them when we get back. We may not have the time or energy then to try getting into the tunnels at that time. I’d prefer if this was out of the way before going to get the Nagamani. It would be one thing less on my mind. Please?” he said. Kay didn’t say anything or look at him. “What? Brave, independent archeologist is afraid of a few cavemen? What happened to the bold Kay I knew who could flatten people with her taekwondo?” he asked teasingly. He got a reaction then. Kay looked at him, her color back and eyes glittering angrily. “Of course I’m not *afraid*. But these are not ‘people’ as we know them. They are little more than wild beasts and unpredictable.” she scoffed tossing her shoulder length hair back with a flick of her head. “I’m just trying to be sensible here instead of rushing headlong into things like you do,” she said scathingly. “Look Kay, I know this is all not your choice and I’m sorry for that. We could do another thing. You stay here in this cave, while I go out and get a message through to Ray and then go to the other realm. Once the archeological and other teams arrive, you’ll be rescued. It’d probably just take a couple of days more. I could leave you as much fruit and wood as possible. You needn’t venture out and will be quite safe here.” he said.

Kay jumped up then, in a real fury, her face red. “You’re twisting around whatever I say,” she shouted. “This was my choice as much as yours. Have you forgotten I insisted on entering the tunnel with you? And what kind of a friend do you think I am, to suggest I sit all safe and sound here while you go like a macho man to fight the natives? And what if you get caught or killed? I’ll be stuck all alone here with no one knowing where I am. You really are a tosser.” She turned away angrily. Addy stood up, still reeling under the sudden onslaught of her anger. She was normally so cool, he still couldn’t get used to her being mad enough to shout at him. He took her hand and was relieved to note she didn’t pull away as he was afraid she would. “Umm, Kay, I’m sorry. You are a most loyal friend. I’ll be proud and more than a little relieved to have you come with me, I admit. To the other realm too. I really honestly cannot think of anything else we can do in this situation. Tell me what you think, if you have a better idea....” He stopped, looking expectantly at her. She was quiet for a long time. Finally her shoulders slumped, and she looked at him. “I’m sorry too. I can’t think

of any other way, to say nothing of a *better* way,” she said. “I guess I have to just prepare myself mentally to go through with it and hope the natives don’t detect us this time. We’ll watch them like you said, and hopefully learn their habits and routine and pray that’ll keep us safe.”

Addy smiled and gave her hand a little squeeze before releasing it. “Let’s have dinner then, the soup was just not enough,” he said and went into the cave to get some tins and the tin opener and plastic spoons out. He chose three cans, one of stewed peaches which he had loved eating in Athens, so long ago it seemed now, one of mixed Macedonian vegetables, and the last of sardines in tomato sauce. He opened them carefully with the tin opener. There were no plates so they just had to share everything out of the cans. They kept the cans between them as they sat cross legged on the floor facing each other and dipping into the three cans as they liked. “Tomorrow, you take first watch,” said Addy. “And I’ll go get us some fresh fruits, fill the water bottles, and get some more firewood. If we are confident enough after just a day of watching, we could try making a break for it day after tomorrow, although watching two days would be a better idea, in my opinion.” “Definitely, two days rather than just one day. We need to know it’s what they do every day, not just a one-off,” agreed Kay. “I would have said a week, but we don’t have the luxury of a week when we are eating into the time for the task,” she added.

The next day saw Addy going off in search of firewood, fruits, and water, while Kay lay down on the ledge to watch the natives camping in the caves to the north east. When Addy came back by nearly lunch time with his backpack full of the things they needed, they stored the things in the cave and then after a quick cold lunch from the cans, Addy took his turn at watching the inhabitants of the caves while Kay took a much needed walk, being careful not to stray too far and going slowly. She came back and had a nap. When it got too dark and cold to watch anymore, they went back to their campfire and had a warm dinner of heated up baked beans in tomato sauce, fresh fruits, and canned chicken breast which they poured tahini and pasta sauce over. Addy sighed. It was lovely to have at least so much. But he really missed his mom’s deliciously spicy home cooked meals. Although he loved meat and his Mom never cooked it as they belonged to the priestly cast which weren’t allowed to eat meat for religious reasons, right now he still wished he could have some of the lip-smacking vegetarian dishes she made

everyday.

They fell into the same pattern the next day, Kay watching the natives while Addy went foraging for supplies. Then lunch and it was Addy's turn at the observation point until dinner time. They pooled their information at dinner time the second day, eager to discuss how they should plan the trek to the tunnels the next day. "I counted 31 adults yesterday morning and 28 today," said Kay. "Their morning routine for both days was the same. They get up early, go out to forage for wood and fruits. They eat whatever is left over from the previous day's hunt and then go hunting. Most of the men and many of the women go in a large group that later splits up, as far as I could see through the foliage. It appears they mostly go across the river to the other side for hunting, which means there must be a lot of animals on that side, but not many here as they are afraid of the humans. Which is why we haven't seen anything except birds until now. They carry spears, machetes, and clubs, as we already have seen close up. Some women who stay back are either old or with small babies or with child. Some older men stay back too and work all day making stone weapons like spearheads. The children play and scuffle all day, but always on the open area in front of the big cave. I never saw them venture too far from the cave and never saw them enter the tunnels either," finished Kay.

Addy gave his report next. "I counted 37 adults in the evening when they were all gathered around the fires on both nights," he said. "I think it is safe to assume there are no more; they must all congregate to partake of the food at that time. The group that stays back, consisting of old men, women, and kids do all the things you mentioned and also take naps sometimes. The group that goes hunting comes back around 3-4 o'clock, with a lot of game that can be divided amongst all the clan members. It was wild boar and woodcock yesterday and rabbit, some kind of large bird that I could not identify, and fish today. They begin readying the food for roasting just by sundown and as we saw that first night, start roasting it around 6 o'clock, over the fires, using spears that have longer, skewer-like heads. By this time, everyone is gathered at the fires. Everyone eats, and I suppose, goes to bed by 8 o'clock although it's too cold and dark to watch by then. Sometimes fights break out over the division of food. They are a rough lot and seem to revel in violence at the slightest inclination," he finished.

“I think we should make the attempt at night then,” said Kay. “Daytime is too risky with groups of them wandering about everywhere. If we can get down by say 5 o’clock, after we see all the groups come back, and hide somewhere close, we can attempt entering the tunnels between 6 and 7 o’clock when they are busy eating,” she finished. “Once inside the tunnels it will be dark whether day or night so the only challenge is getting down the mountainside before dark, but not early enough that the natives are away from the caves,” she added. Addy agreed. “We can watch them tomorrow again, until it is time to go,” he said. She nodded in agreement. They turned in almost immediately, wanting to get a little extra sleep for the next day, although they would be going only in the evening.

The next morning Addy only went to get water, not bothering with fruits or wood as they wouldn’t be needing those today. He too joined her in observing the natives, to make sure they were following the same pattern as the previous two days. They had lunch quickly and decided to have a nap, not knowing whether the evening would go well and wanting to be well rested and alert for their trek down and possible confrontation with the natives. In the evening, they ate all the leftover fruits and started climbing down at precisely 5 o’clock after first observing that all the groups that had gone hunting in the morning were back. It was tough going as it was growing dimmer with each step. It was nearly winter, and it had started getting dark much earlier. They made it to the bottom of the hill without incident and started off on a course that would take them to the tunnels. They had mapped a path through the forest in their minds over the past few days of observation. However, following it in the mind and in reality were two very different things, they realized, nearly losing their way once or twice, and only keeping to the general direction because they could now see a faint glimmer of the fires through the trees every now and then.

They finally reached close enough to the tunnels to go very very cautiously. They peeped around some thick trees and could see the scene that they had watched over three nights, now happening within calling distance. They looked at the smaller tunnel entrance. There appeared to be no one there. They went around a bit to the far side, before going near the tunnel because the last few feet there was no cover and the further they were from the other entrance, lesser would be the chance of being spotted. The natives didn’t seem to be in any mood to be distracted from their usual activities.

Some had begun eating already. Addy made a signal and they made a rush for it towards the tunnel and slipped in undetected. They went blindly on for some time, bumping their heads on the walls and stubbing their toes, before they felt safe enough inside to switch on the torches and shading them with their hands as usual. They kept going until they were nearly at the large cavern from which the three tunnels separated. They had not met anyone or heard anything unusual. Therefore, they were unprepared for what they saw when they entered the cavern. There were three natives lying in wait for them there, grinning evilly, their teeth showing yellow and broken in the light from their torches. They were standing in the pitch dark, probably alerted by the faint light from the torches.

## 17. Vasuki's Palace

Addy swore viciously under his breath. Kay moaned “Oh no. No, no, NO,” then took up what he recognized as her fighting posture, a basic Taekwondo stance. He mentally shook his head. He knew they could not fight three (or maybe more, the torchlight did not reach far enough into the shadows of the large cavern to discern) feral creatures between them. Especially as he had absolutely no combat training although he was mad enough at this time to try to cause some serious damage. There was only one thing to be done. He grabbed Kay's hand and as the natives came closer, tightening the circle, he tried to concentrate on Vasuki's form and chanted out the mantra clearly and as calmly as he could. He heard the guttural shouts as the world started teetering as usual on its axis and then spun frantically before steadying again, catching them off balance.

Addy and Kay sprawled in an undignified heap onto the ground in the other realm. “Whew! About time,” said Kay. “I was wondering if you'll wait until they attacked us.” Addy lifted his head off the ground and looked around quickly to get his bearings. They were just on the border of the forest, on the right side to avoid any creatures from Alkapuri, Kubera's city. So he *had* been able to concentrate on Vasuki despite the stressful situation they were in. He gave himself a mental pat on the back and took Kay's hand to help himself up. She was already standing, brushing herself down and checking her backpack. Addy looked around for the path that would lead toward the residence of the snake people. He had been anticipating an escort such as he had gotten the last time he was here. He wasn't entirely sure he could find the way by himself. “Where is this underground palace of Vasuki's?” asked Kay looking at him expectantly. “Er...I don't think I remember the way. Maybe we should wait until someone arrives to take us there. They have some uncanny way of knowing whenever we land here, so they are sure to come,” he said a little lamely, flushing a little under her scrutiny.

“You mean you don't know the way?” Kay's eyes twinkled with laughter and her mouth twitched trying to hide a grin. “Hey, cut me some slack, I've only been here once and that was in the dark,” said Addy trying unsuccessfully to keep the whining note from his voice. She giggled outright then. “Alright, alright keep your hat on...I see one of them coming.” A

young snake man was gliding toward them sinuously. Addy thought he was one of the three that had met him the last time but couldn't be sure. The snake man greeted him with folded palms in the 'namaste' gesture that Indians followed, and he automatically greeted back. "Welcome, O friends of the illustrious King," he spoke in a husky voice. "My people have been awaiting your arrival with great eagerness. Please follow me." Addy and Kay followed the serpent man and were soon at the entrance to the kingdom of the nagas. The warriors at the gateway stood back with heads bowed respectfully as the three entered the large cavern. They walked a long way down as Addy had done in the past and came to the fork that led to the palace.

Kay was already looking at everything with wonder in her eyes. It was like an exotic dream come true. Truth be told, she had been a little disappointed at first with her first view of India. She had half imagined it (based mostly on old English movie depictions) to be full of palaces, people in luxurious embroidered silks and dusty narrow streets with naked street urchins and half-dressed women and men looking sultry and striking. Although she knew India was modern now, she had been nonplussed to see that Delhi was almost like Sydney, albeit a little dirtier and over populated and with darker skinned people. But the buildings, the clothes, were all westernized and not exotic at all. Neither were there any of the other things in the movies like wild animals, fakirs who did rope tricks, or women in glittery slinky clothes with kohl-rimmed eyes.

But here, as she progressed deeper into the larger tunnel leading to Vasuki's palace, she felt that all her previous ideas would be fulfilled. The wall décor, the velvet embroidered carpets, the snake people they passed were all much like the vintage English movies. The people were all skimpily dressed in lavish silks, with a lot of jewelry and all the women had kohl-rimmed eyes. Addy and Kay had taken off their winter clothes as soon as they recovered from their arrival. It wasn't hot exactly, but entirely too warm to be wearing more than a single layer of clothes. They were soon being ushered into a sumptuously decorated room and offered seats on silk-cushioned couches. The snake man who had accompanied them, bowed and left them.

Addy wondered why he had not been shown into the throne room

where he had met Vasuki before. They had just sat down when Kudala entered the room, looking ravishing as ever, slinking in without making any noise. She smiled and greeted them. “Welcome Aditya and Kay. Please pardon my father; he is unable to see you at this time as he is busy with an important matter concerning the kingdom and in conference with his ministers. However, he will dine with you in a couple of hours and welcome you properly then,” she said graciously, waving a maid forward. The maid, a shy-looking snake girl who had accompanied her brought forward a highly polished brass tray on which were two tall brass glasses which she offered to Addy and Kay. They took one each and sipped at the refreshing concoction. It was flavored and tempered buttermilk, cold and delicious in the heat.

Addy was smiling a little foolishly but not saying anything so Kay said, “Oh, that is alright. We know he has a kingdom to run. We can wait.” Kudala inclined her head. She said in her silky voice, “You both must be tired and in need of refreshing yourselves. I have arranged for you to be shown into your rooms. You will find everything you need there. Have a bath and take rest for a little while, then you will be summoned to the eating hall for lunch. If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask. There will be my people waiting on you and you can dismiss or call them with a clap of your hands as you wish.”

She clapped in demonstration and the same snake man who had accompanied them to the palace stepped in again. “This is Nrupad. He will be your personal attendant while you are here, Aditya,” she said. She turned to Kay. “And this is Lopakshi,” she said, gesturing to the shy girl who had served them the spiced buttermilk. “She will take care of you during your stay here, Kay. You may ask your attendants anything you like, and they will answer or get it for you, if it is in their capacity. If they are unable to fulfill your request, you can always come to me,” she smiled cordially at both of them. She made the namaste gesture and went out of the room. Addy and Kay looked at each other with raised eyebrows. When they had finished their welcome drinks, the attendants came forward to show them the way to their rooms.

They discovered that they wouldn’t be right next to each other, because in the naga palace, the men’s and women’s quarters were separate. Kay felt a little uncomfortable because she had relied on Addy so much the past few



weeks but did not voice her hesitation. After all, everyone here had been so nice to her so far. Addy went off with Nrupad while she was guided along another passage to her own room. Addy was amazed by the magnificent room he had been given. It was like a large hall, with a huge low square bed in the middle that was covered by silk and satin sheets and an abundance of plump pillows. There were numerous velvet rugs all over the floor and couch-sized cushions along the walls if he wanted to lounge. There were intricately designed vases and statues around the room, adding to the glamour. He wondered how grand the royal apartments would be, if this was a guest bedroom.

He was shown by Nrupad where to store his backpack, in a not-so-little alcove that had smooth shelves carved into the rock at one end of the room, screened by a silk curtain. He noticed there were already some neatly folded garments on the shelves. He was next taken to another screened off area next to the clothes alcove, where he found a large sunken tub-like pool that was full of water. He sighed in pleasure just at the sight of it. It had been days since he had a proper bath. The near drowning in the river a few days ago had been the closest he had come to a bath since their departure from their hotel in Athens. There were little lamps glowing all along the walls, throwing a soft glow around the bathing area. Little pots were placed along two sides. The water wasn't dark as would be expected in a deep pool in the middle of a cave. He went closer to peer in. It seemed to be lighted from inside, under the water.

He brought his attention back to the attendant who was saying something. "Please take off the garments you have on, My Lord. I will have them washed and returned to the shelves. You can use these aromatic herbal pastes for your bath. The ones on the left are for the body and the ones on the right for the hair. If you require, I will apply them on you. If not, I will be just outside the screen and you can call me when you finish, and I will come to help you dry off." Addy did not need to be told twice. He quickly took off his dirty scruffy jeans and soiled tee-shirt and stripping down to the skin, sank into the pool. It was slightly warmer than skin temperature, and absolutely delicious. He realized Nrupad was still waiting for his instructions, so he said, "I would like to experiment with these pastes myself, please. I'll call you when I've finished bathing." Nrupad picked up the clothes and went out silently.

Addy sank back in contentment. The pool was deep enough for him to immerse himself fully, keeping just his head out of the water. After a whole minute, he upended himself to go closer to the bottom of the pool to see how it was lighted up. He saw there was an almost transparent sheet of rock at the bottom beneath which there were hundreds of tiny oil lamps like the ones surrounding the bathing area. They gave out mild warmth and light. He wondered how they came to be there. He came back up and then started taking up the pastes and applying them in lieu of soap and shampoo. They smelled fresh and invigorating and made him feel really pampered as if he were in a spa. He lolled in the pool until his skin started wrinkling and then clapped his hands. Nrupad came in at once with fluffy cotton towels that looked large enough to be bed sheets. Addy felt uncomfortable at being assisted like this but knew he'd better get used to it, for on the way here, Nrupad had confided that the more he assisted Addy, the happier the king would be with him. It sounded like it would not be good for Nrupad if he was found to have not waited on Addy as much as he should. So he stood quietly while Nrupad dried him off and then presented silk garments on a large cushion. Addy looked at them in confusion. "I don't know how to wear these," he said. "Can't I wear the other set of clothes I have in my backpack?"

Nrupad shook his head. "It is the king's orders that your lordship and the lady are to wear the same garments worn by us on this plane. Your clothes are different and will be noticed by people who may not be friendly towards you. It is best you blend in with us," he said softly. "I will now help you wear these clothes." Addy stood patiently while Nrupad wound the single piece of silk that was the lower garment, a dhoti, around his hips. The smaller piece of silk was folded and laid across one shoulder and Nrupad showed him how he could wind it around his arm or knot it at the side to keep it from falling off. Next Nrupad took, what Addy was aghast to see, heavy jewelry and started putting them on to him. He tried protesting weakly but Nrupad seemed indignant that a lord would go without these adornments that even servants like him wore.

Of course, Nrupad did wear armbands, wristlets, and a neck piece but they were all made of hollow copper and crudely made like pipes, looking more masculine than the gold he was putting on Addy. Addy had to wear a long necklace with a heavy pendant, armbands that covered four inches of his

upper arms, wristlets that covered three inches of his wrists, and a wide gold belt too, to hold the dhoti in place. He was glad he did not have piercings in his ears, otherwise they would have made him wear heavy earrings like he saw all the menfolk (as well as womenfolk) wearing. He shuddered at the thought. He was also made to wear a crown, albeit a very small one that looked like a masculine version of a tiara.

He was led to a highly polished slab of black rock that leant upright on one wall in the dressing alcove. It showed his reflection almost like a mirror, and he looked at himself meditatively. He had been dreading looking at himself but found he did not look that bad. He did not really look like he was participating in a costume drama. In fact, he felt the garb actually suited him. Maybe it was because he was surrounded by people wearing the same kind of clothes, or maybe because the costume was genuine unlike the ones he had seen in TV serials or stage plays, he did not know. Whatever it was, he was glad he had gone to the gym diligently over the past few years albeit not as much as he would have liked to. He didn't look heavily muscled, but at least he didn't look skinny or flabby either, he was proud to see. His body was lightly muscled and firm like a swimmer's. Even his usually unmanageable hair looked good as it had grown out over the past month and the tiara hid most of the shorter hairs in front that usually stood up in a shock. "My Lord can take rest now, and call me when he is ready to go out. In about an hour, the king will be ready for his luncheon, and I will escort you to the dining hall," said Nrupad from behind him. "I want to go to Kay's room to have a chat with her, if she is ready," he said, not really wanting to sleep now that he was feeling revitalized after the bath.

Nrupad seemed a little uncomfortable at Addy's demand. "Our custom is that only couples that are hand clasped can meet in each other's rooms. However, I can take you to one of the small sitting rooms and send word for Lopakshi to bring her ladyship there for a private meeting," he said, looking at the ground as if he expected Addy to be angry. "Hand clasped? What does that mean?" Addy asked curiously. "We generally have elaborate marriage ceremonies, but hand clasping is considered the simplest way of getting married. When both man and woman consensually clasp their hands, it is considered marriage," he explained. Addy gulped. He made a mental note to inform Kay about this as soon as possible so they did *not* clasp hands in front of the snake people. If they knew the hundreds of times Addy and Kay had

clasped hands, they would consider them married several times over. Talk about culture shock....this was plane shock, pun intended.

Addy agreed to meet Kay in a sitting room and was led by Nrupad down another passage to a room just like the one in which Kudala had received them, only smaller. It was as opulently furnished however, and he sank into a couch, resting on silken cushions, waiting for Kay. Kay arrived about fifteen minutes later. Addy was flummoxed when he saw her. He had forgotten she would also be in naga clothes now. She was looking almost as beautiful as Kudala. She had on a dhoti similar to his, only hers was slinkier with sparkles in the material and stuck to her curves. There was only a strip of silk cloth covering her chest as was the custom here. Although it covered more than the bikini he had seen her in before at the beach, it was much more enchanting. Her hair was in a bun at the back, and he wondered how they managed that with her hair being just shoulder length. There was a long transparent veil covering the bun and falling over both her shoulders to cover her front modestly. She was wearing jewelry too, gold bangles, armbands, earrings, and a hip band that was narrower than his, as well as finger rings and anklets. She was also wearing an expression of shock at the sight he presented.

They both laughed at the expressions on each others' faces and Kay flopped down on the couch next to him in a decidedly unladylike manner. "Isn't this hilarious?" she asked, giggling. "You look such a...lair." "Er... hope that means something good," said Addy grinning. Her eyes looked different. After a moment he understood. They were kohl lined like the other females here. He couldn't decide whether it suited her or not. Kay took his hand to bring his attention back from his ruminations. "Wasn't it?" she was asking. "Wasn't what?" he asked her. "The room and the pool in my room were wonderful. Weren't yours wonderful too?" she asked patiently. Addy suddenly realized she was holding his hand and quickly snatched his hand back causing a slight perplexed frown to appear on Kay's face. He quickly told her about what Nrupad had said about hand clasping. Luckily they had been left alone to talk so no one had observed Kay holding his hand. She looked appalled, her eyes nearly popping out. "Oh my God, I'll have to keep reminding myself of this," she murmured. "Holding hands and hugging is what friends do where I come from, and it comes so automatically."

## 18. Vasuki again

They chatted on amicably for a while, discussing the marvelous things they had seen in their rooms and their experiences with their attendants. Kay had been quite accepting of the fact that she now had a “lady-in-waiting.” She had thoroughly enjoyed being pampered by having a massage before the bath and allowed Lopakshi to apply the various bath pastes and potions while she explained what each of them was made of and what it did to clean and beautify the skin and hair. She had enjoyed getting decked up in the finery and gold and having her hair and eyes done in the traditional naga way. There were even jasmine flowers in her hair, which she kept touching from time to time. Addy smiled indulgently as she chattered on about her experience. He was impatient about these things but then he was a man and considered himself above feeling giddy about the lavish treatment. He also couldn’t help the niggling feeling that they were like the proverbial lamb that was being fattened before the slaughter.

After about twenty minutes, they were escorted by their attendants to the grand feast hall where Vasuki was awaiting them for a private luncheon. Addy noticed that today there was only one other person present with him, his daughter, Kudala. “Welcome my children, welcome. Take a seat and we can begin partaking of our humble meal. I see you have worn our kind of garb as I had requested. You both look very nice now,” greeted the older snake man genially. He was resplendent as ever in the silks and gold, sitting on the low dining stool with his tail coiled tightly around the stool. Addy and Kay bowed a little and sat down. Addy noticed Kudala was looking breathtakingly beautiful as usual, her lustrous black curls hanging from the crown at the top down her back past her waist. Trying not to openly stare, Addy noticed she had the most stunning hourglass-shaped figure that was draped today in a shimmery pink veil which was a color he normally despised, but it looked absolutely lovely on her. The chest covering was a glistening gold underneath. It perfectly contrasted with her lower half which was a shimmering green blue as before. It merged into her scales at the level of her floor after which it was only scales. He wondered idly if they could change the color of their scales.

The meal was served by servants gliding around silently, and they began eating at Vasuki’s behest. “I hope you liked your rooms and

attendants?” asked Kudala politely when they had reached the main course. “Yes, absolutely!” exclaimed Kay at once. “It’s like a dream come true for me, I love everything here; everything is perfectly beautiful.” Kudala beamed at her. She turned to Addy and looked like she was waiting for his response. “Er...yeah, it’s absolutely perfect,” he stammered, hoping to see that lovely smile directed at him too. He was rewarded with a small one, before Vasuki started talking. “So how are your plans getting along? Are you ready for the task now?” Addy wrenched his eyes away from Kudala and turned his attention to the serpent king. “Yes sir. We did a lot of research and found that Karna’s kavacha is the one thing that can protect us from the Agneyastra. We found the location of this and have recovered it. Armed with this and with the Pushpak Vimana, our exit should be as safe as it can be under the circumstances. The rest of the plan will depend on the map that you promised to provide me, as well as the routine of the people in the city, the guards, and the location of the Nagamani within the palace,” he said.

“Very well done, Aditya!” exclaimed Vasuki. Kudala looked awed, much to Addy’s gratification. “And well thought out plan, although it is not yet a plan. Let us finish this last course of sweets, and then we will move to the sitting room. You can show me the kavacha, and we will discuss how my people and I will aid you,” he said. Addy thankfully concentrated on his food once more. He had been starving for some good Indian food and although the naga dishes were still a little different from his mother’s cooking, they were spicy and mouthwatering in their own way and Indian enough to feel like comfort food despite being a gourmet meal. The sweets were to die for. He wished he had left more space for the desserts. There were so many luscious looking things but he could only manage two at the most. Anyway, *we will be staying here for another few weeks*, he consoled himself. So there would be ample opportunities to sample more of this.

They moved to the luxurious royal sitting room and Addy sent Nrupad to bring the small wooden chest containing the armor. Kay and Kudala seemed to have become friends and were chatting with each other a little way away while Addy sat facing Vasuki who sat on a little low throne-like armchair made of gold. “We are also in a bit of trouble,” he said while they were waiting for the attendant to come back. Vasuki looked at him questioningly and Addy explained about how they had gotten into the cave

that led them to the old ruins of the Greek palace where they had found the kavacha and run into danger in the form of the natives living there. He explained how he had chanted the mantra just when they were about to be caught and landed here. Vasuki guffawed, his head thrown back. "Quick thinking my boy. I know what you are worried about. You fear you will land right in the same danger when you chant the reverse mantra, don't you?" he asked. Addy affirmed that this was his worry. "You will be getting a lot of training before going to attempt to fulfill your charge. One of the things taught to you will be a special type of meditation. With the help of this, you will be able to materialize at the safe outer cave instead of the inner one," he said reassuringly.

Addy was thrilled to hear this. He had been hoping Vasuki would be able to help him out with this predicament but had still been anxious because he had been unable to help with the time change. Nrupad came back and Addy handed over the chest containing the kavacha to Vasuki. The latter took the kavacha out with ease, leading Addy to think the clever way in which the box had been designed was just clever on the human plane, since they did not know its workings. It must be a standard way of locking on this plane. Vasuki admired the armor and confirmed that it was indeed Karna's kavacha, although it had been covering its original owner when he saw it last. "Once it is activated, it locks onto the wearer and glows like the sun," he said. "It makes the wearer nearly invincible against any kind of onslaught until it is taken off again. However, it has to be worn next to the skin to work, just like Karna used to wear it." "Aha. That was why it did not feel like much when I wore it previously," said Addy.

He took the casket back and told Nrupad to return it to the shelf in his room. "There are many things you need to learn, my boy," said Vasuki. "Most of it will be taught to you by others. However, first let me give you the map of the city and one of the palace and its grounds," he said. Addy was confused because he could not see any map and there wasn't any attendant holding one either. Vasuki turned to Kudala and caught her attention. "I am going to show Addy the map," he said. "You can show it to Kay." "Yes, father," said Kudala and turned to Kay again. Vasuki turned to Addy and told him, "Look into my eyes. Concentrate on only my eyes and then when I tell you, close your eyes," he instructed.

Addy felt a little weird to be staring into the snake man's jet black eyes with the vertical pupils but did as he was told. As he gazed, he felt the surroundings fade a little and become blurred and felt a sense of unreality, until he heard Vasuki telling him to close his eyes. He did so, and almost gasped. He could picture a map in his head. At first it was two dimensional, so he understood it was the map of the city. As he became familiar with looking at it in his mind's eye, it gradually changed into a three dimensional map which he could turn around and look at from all angles. But this was not the extent of the magical experience yet. When he got used to the 3-D image, it turned into a four dimensional interactive map, in which he could walk down a street, turn and look at the sides, top, bottom, and back. Before he could get immersed fully in the experience, however, Vasuki was speaking and he lost focus.

"Now for the map of the palace. Open your eyes," he was saying. Addy slowly opened his eyes. He gazed into Vasuki's opaque black eyes again for a few moments and again felt the blurring around the edges of his vision and when Vasuki told him to close his eyes, he did so, seeing the floor plan of a large building with several outbuildings and gardens. As before, it then became a 3D and then 4D interactive map. This time too, before he could start exploring the interesting phenomenon, Vasuki jerked him out of his trance by speaking. "Open your eyes." When he did so, Vasuki said, "These are the two maps you will need to navigate your way around the city as well as the palace. The city map contains the forest leading to the top of the mountain, which you will probably be flying over in the Pushpak Vimana on the way back. These maps will be in your memory whenever you want them and all you have to do is close your eyes for a moment and think about the city or the palace and you will be able to see them again like you did just now. I want you to go carefully through each map over the course of several days, while you are getting other kinds of training, so that you know the place as well as your own house by the time you need to go get the gem," Vasuki ended.

Addy looked wonderingly at Kay who was also sitting in front of Kudala with a similar enthralled expression on her face. He couldn't wait to go back to his room to be alone and explore this exciting new experience in his mind. However, Vasuki was still continuing his detailing of the training that Addy would get. "You will need to be battle ready before you go into



Alkapuri. Although what you told me about your and Kay's experiences in Greece make me sure you are both brave enough to face an enemy, you need better skills so your chances of survival are increased. Hence, your special naga war training will be started tomorrow. Another thing you need to learn is meditation with specific mantras and its uses for various roles in calming yourself, strategy, warfare, and camouflage. The third will be a short course of certain yantras and potions that you might need and which will be described to you in detail. I have allotted two weeks of rigorous training and preparation for the two of you starting tomorrow. I suggest you get a good night's sleep tonight so you will be ready for a hard day's work tomorrow."

Vasuki asked them if they had any questions but Addy and Kay were feeling overwhelmed with all the information and the maps and could not think of anything at the moment. They shook their heads in unison and Vasuki took their leave to attend to matters of state that awaited him. Kudala chatted with them for a little while more, before she too left for the inner apartments. Addy and Kay turned to each other. "Amazing, isn't it?" asked Addy. "Their mind power is what runs everything. They don't need vehicles that run on fuel or computers for storing digital information." "Yeah," agreed Kay. "What we feel are great achievements in science are but mere crutches to hide the fact we cannot use our minds with the same efficacy. Whew, this *has* been some experience. I'm looking forward to our training, aren't you?" she asked.

Addy looked at her contemplatively. "You know, we need to talk about this. I am not very comfortable putting you in danger," he began. Kay interrupted him with a roll of her eyes. "Oh, please. Don't start your whinging all over again. I'm coming and you can't stop me. Besides you will need at least two people you can trust and one of them will be me." Addy thought a bit and shrugged. "But still. I feel you should not enter the palace which will be the riskiest. We will split up outside the palace and you go find the Pushpak Vimana and wait in it, ready to leave as soon as Kudala and I get there with the gem. That way, you will be slightly safer," he said firmly, in a tone that brooked no argument.

Kay didn't look convinced but did not bicker. She nodded. "It sounds like a good plan. We'll see how it goes. This plan has to be pretty fluid because although we will be told the routine of the people, we do not know

exactly what is going to happen during the actual mission. So some things may have to be decided spontaneously,” she said easily. Addy nodded in acknowledgement of the wisdom of this. Of course they had no way of being absolutely sure of anything and would have to discard their plan and make new plans according to the situation. “I forgot to ask them where to take the flying chariot,” said Kay suddenly. “I suppose you’d better have it brought here, just outside the gates of the cavern,” said Addy. “But won’t that be dangerous for the nagas when it is traced here?” asked Kay in alarm. “According to what little I remember of the legendary spaceship from the epic Ramayana, the chariot is supposed to move by itself if given a specific place to go to. Maybe you can return it to the city after we have disembarked. Ask about this tomorrow during training,” he said encouragingly. “Right,” agreed Kay.

Deciding there was nothing more to discuss, they asked their assistants to take them back to their rooms until it was time for dinner. They could both utilize the intervening time familiarizing themselves with the interactive maps and learning the city and palace as much as possible. Back in his room, Addy sank back onto a plush cushion that was thrown against the wall and closed his eyes. He decided he wanted to see the palace first. He thought a moment about the palace map, and it appeared again, as clear as if he were looking at it with his open eyes. He waited until it turned 4D and then began walking down the passage that he found himself starting from. He wondered fleetingly how they had gathered the data. There must be a spy in the palace. This time around, he noticed that the palace, although in color, was not as brightly colored as it would be in real life. All the gold he could see, for example, was a pale dull yellow as if the brightness had been leached out. The beautiful hangings and carpets too were similarly a little insipid. He could guess how fine-looking they must be in reality.

He went through all the many large rooms, including the inner apartments where the king, Kubera, lived. He found that the treasury was down in the dungeons. The dungeons had been carved out of soil, shored up by great pillars and decorated as luxuriously as the rest of the palace. However, that was the extent of the map. He could not find the treasury or even the door leading to it. He guessed whoever had collected this data did not have access to the treasury. The other rooms in the dungeon were open, and he prowled around them and saw a particularly large room that seemed

important in the map as it became slightly more vivid. He wondered who it could belong to. Then he noticed there were some garments laid on the bed there and some weapons on a low table nearby. He went closer and looked curiously at them. The bright orange and yellow cloth looked familiar. So did the chunky jewelry laid out on a cushioned stool next to the bed. The weapons confirmed his suspicions. They were a mace, sword, and bow and arrows of large proportions. Without doubt, this must be the rakshasa Mahashan's bedroom. He was the guardian of the treasury and Addy remembered how Dagdhrath had taunted him about being in the dungeon all day. So, he lived here, close to the treasures that he guarded.

He went around the whole palace several times, marveling at how nice it was to be able to do so without getting his feet tired or fearing capture. He did feel a little tired mentally though, just as he would feel after working at a computer for many hours. He was brought out of his trance by Nrupad calling to him softly. He opened his eyes and blinked a little at the change of scene. He had been lost in the map so long, he felt a bit unsettled to find himself in the room he had been allotted. "It is almost time for dinner, O Lord," said Nrupad, when he saw Addy was clear-headed enough to pay attention. "Maybe you would like to freshen up a little? I have brought this warm water to wash your hands and face in," he said, waving to a large granite bowl in front of him. Addy obediently washed up, then took the towel Nrupad offered and dried himself off, before getting up and walking around his room a couple of times to get his legs working again. He felt as if he had spent most of the day sitting down. Anyhow, tomorrow promised to be an exercise-filled day.

## 19. Training

Addy was woken up early the next day, and after a quick wash up, was escorted to a meditation room where Kay was already waiting. They smiled at each other in greeting and sat down on the mats laid down on the ground for them. There were only three mats, one for each of them and one was probably for the teacher who had not arrived yet. The room was dimly lit and had a mystic air about it. There was a fragrance in the room that appeared to waft out of a small pot in one corner of the room. It was jasmine and another fragrance Addy could not pin down for the moment, mixed in. He thought it might be sandalwood. He did not like jasmine normally but this mixed perfume was very pleasant and fresh. The room was quite Spartan compared to most of the rooms he had seen so far, with no silk cushions or couches, no carpets or wall hangings. There weren't any statues or other decorations either. He could hear a faint monotonous tune reverberating in the room but could not see any source for it. He wondered who the teacher would be. He half hoped and half dreaded it might be Kudala.

The teacher came in just then. It wasn't Kudala but a snake man, the most serene looking one Addy had seen so far. He looked to be of indeterminate age, wearing white clothes and his tail was white with off-white diamond patterns, he noted. He did not wear a crown but instead had a marking of ashes on his forehead which Addy recognized as indicating he was a follower of Lord Shiva. He was carrying a bundle which he deposited on the ground before turning to greet them with a namaste. Addy and Kay had stood up as he came and returned his greeting, Addy observing that Kay had learnt it correctly as well. "Good Morning," began the guru. "Please take your seats. I am Fanishwar. I will be teaching you several meditation techniques. Each technique will be unique from the rest in that it will pertain to a specific goal. The meditation classes will be held at the same time every morning and will continue for two hours. After this you may have your breakfast and come back to this room for another hour of uninterrupted meditation, which I will supervise but not conduct."

"At the end of each technique, there will be a short practice period after which you can ask me questions or doubts regarding that technique. Then we will go to the next technique. I want to cover at least two techniques per class as the time you are allotted for training is very short. I would appreciate

it if you give me your 100% concentration,” he said, his amber eyes looking into theirs piercingly. “Since today is the first day, I will give you an overview of the various techniques we have to cover over this week, the correct posture to sit for each, and how to get prepared for meditation by blanking the mind,” he said. “Although I have been told by the king that you are both quite intelligent for your species, it might be difficult or even impossible for you to do some of these meditation methods and achieve the results necessary immediately. If you find, after trying your best that you cannot succeed at one, I will teach you the next best substitute which you might find easier.”

“There are six days allotted for meditation and so I will be teaching you 12 kinds of meditation. In no particular order, their goals are – to become invisible, to see through an illusion and cast illusions, to manifest your weapon, to make your body light, to make your body heavy, to change into another form, to leap a long distance, to focus single-mindedly on one thought or object, to see through dark, to understand the language of animals, to regain energy, and to survive without eating or drinking for a long period of time. The posture for each of these techniques is –” He changed position and showed them each posture separately while announcing which meditation it was for. He looked at each of them and after he was sure they had grasped all this, he said, “Close your eyes now and listen to the pranava, Om. Repeat it in your minds along with the tune until I tell you to stop.”

Addy realized the monotonous tune he had noticed was Om. He didn’t know it was called the pranava. He closed his eyes and sure enough, he could now hear the tune clearly in the form of Om. He repeated it in his mind as instructed until he felt a little sleepy and the guru told them to stop. “You may feel a little sleepy for the first two days. However, this has to be nipped in the bud immediately as we do not have time to get over this stage gradually. If you feel lethargy coming on, stop the meditation and do these breathing exercises until you are alert again,” he said, and demonstrated a few breathing exercises which they repeated. “Now I have time for just one technique today. Hopefully we can make up the one left out in the coming days when you pick up speed and efficiency.” He proceeded to teach them the technique for seeing through an illusion, which, he informed them, was the easiest, which was why he was starting them out with it. It proved however, very challenging for Addy and Kay, and they felt as if their brains

were wrung out by the time they were told to stop. “I will cast a simple illusion now and let us see how you do with seeing through it,” he said.

Suddenly flames appeared out of nowhere, leaping and rushing toward Addy and Kay. He heard Kay give a little squeak of shock. The flames were now licking at the mats they were sitting on. He could even feel the heat of the flames. Although he knew it was an illusion, he had to control his instinct to jump up and run out of the room. Instead, he willed himself to concentrate on the technique he had been recently taught. He saw Kay already had her eyes shut. He closed his eyes quickly and practiced the method. He felt a change in atmosphere, it was no longer getting hotter. He opened his eyes and saw the flames had disappeared. “Well done,” Fanishwar was beaming at them. “I didn’t really expect you to do it the first time. However, this was an easy illusion to see through, and you had warning that I was going to cast one. In the field, there will be no warnings. So you must practice after breakfast. There will be a set of illusions that will appear one after the other, and you must try to see through them as soon as possible, shortening the time you take to see through them, until you can see through them almost immediately. You then have to reach a point where you can do it without closing your eyes.” He stood up and Addy and Kay did the same. He bowed namaste and went out of the room.

They discussed the whole experience over breakfast. “I already knew this was going to be an experience of a lifetime,” said Kay. “But this is beyond my wildest expectations. We are going to learn so many mindblowing things which we cannot learn anywhere else besides having an exciting adventure!” Addy smiled sardonically. “Not to dampen your enthusiasm, but don’t forget, the real danger of losing our lives is always there too, to make it more exciting.” Kay grimaced. “I don’t think it will come to that. They are going to equip us so well we will not be in real mortal danger. Besides, Kudala, who is an experienced warrior, will be with us,” she said. “How do you know she is an experienced warrior?” asked Addy in amazement. He could not get his mind to wrap around the idea of the lovely maiden as a warrior. “She told me so herself. She has taken part in many wars. You know these nagas have a different time system here, don’t you? These people have been around for millennia!!” said Kay. Addy was impressed. He hoped she would be the instructress for the upcoming combat training.

After breakfast, they went back to their rooms for a quick bath and then came back to the meditation room for their practice session. The illusions waiting were progressively more challenging, and they had to use all their concentration to see through them. Kay seemed to be doing a little better than Addy, to his annoyance. He struggled to do better so he could best her. By the end of the session, both were mentally tired, although Fanishwar was quite pleased with their progress. “Well done, very well done for first-time students,” he said, smiling at both of them. “Kay you are very good but get sucked into the illusion a little easily. You must concentrate on making your mind blank and then trying to see through the illusion. Addy, you are easily distracted, I notice. When you are faced with what you suspect is an illusion, do not look around at what others are doing. Focus on the meditation and focus on how to cut through the delusion,” he advised. “Now your attendants will lead you to a room where the physicians are awaiting you for a checkup before you start your combat training,” he concluded. He bowed and left the room.

The duo followed Nrupad and Lopaskhi to another simply furnished room. There were two sections to the room, one for males and another for females, partitioned by a thick reed screen. A male physician and a female physician were waiting for them at high examination tables on either side of the room and Addy and Kay were given a thorough checkup. “Your eyes seem a little weak,” said the male physician after checking Addy’s eyes. Addy remembered he had lost his glasses in Greece. He told the physician that he was used to wearing spectacles but didn’t have them anymore. The physician tsked in disapproval. “Why can’t humans treat a problem at the root instead of finding a stopgap remedy?” he muttered, while making up a potion on an adjacent table. He made Addy lie down on the table and covered his eyes with a damp cloth on which he applied some herbal paste. Addy had to wait a few minutes for it to work. After it was removed, the physician handed him a little jar of another paste that he instructed him to take a little of every night before sleeping. “It will normalize your vision by tomorrow morning,” he said. “However, this is a temporary solution and once you go back to your plane, it will no longer work.” Addy was thrilled he even had a short-term solution to his problem of blurry vision, especially with a task in which he needed all his faculties intact, coming up.

Kay was given a clean bill of health and so was Addy after his eyes

were treated. They were then taken outside the palace and the caverns, to an open area that was the naga teaching grounds for anything related to warfare. There were two people standing there and Addy's heart leapt as he recognized one of them as Kudala. She was dressed differently now. She wore plain cotton garb instead of silk, her hair was plaited and out of the way, and the long cloth that constituted the veil was pulled across her torso and knotted firmly at one side. All the jewelry was missing too. She greeted them and called Kay over. She adjusted Kay's garments similarly to make it easier to move about, and asked her to remove all the jewelry that could get in the way during training. Addy looked at the other person and realized he recognized him. It was the grey-haired weather-beaten man who had escorted him to the palace when he came here for the first time.

The old snake introduced himself. "I am Rutajit. I am the commander of the king's army, and I will be in charge of your battle training," he said. He adjusted Addy's upper cloth by taking it off and winding it tightly around his hips, after the gold belt and other pieces of gold were laid aside. "Since there are only two weeks allotted to you for getting ready for your mission, we will have to go faster than I would have liked. You might feel exhausted or have pain by the end of the day, but I have instructed your attendant and the physician to take care such that you are fit again the next day," he informed Addy.

"The training will consist of two parts. The first part of the day, before lunch, we will do general training with warm up stretching yoga, running, climbing, leaping, and a little wrestling. The second part of the training, an hour after lunch, will include weapons training. Once we ascertain which kind of weapon chooses you, you will get more intensive training in that," he continued. "Now sit down and start repeating these yoga exercises I show you." Addy sat and started doing the stretching exercises as demonstrated by the old teacher. He could see Kay doing the same with Kudala. After about 15 minutes, he was told to take 20 laps around the big compound. He felt out of breath after just seven laps but had to keep going since he could see Kay was doing so. She seemed to be puffing and panting too, he was gratified to see.

Next they were taken to a steeply inclined part of the mountainside and shown how to climb up. Kudala and Rutajit transformed into full humans so



they could demonstrate better. Addy couldn't help staring at Kudala, she looked even more alluring as a woman, he thought. Rutajit brought his attention back with a sharp retort. "It could mean the difference between life and death if you allow your attention to wander in a real battle," he said fiercely. Addy flushed and berated himself mentally. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kay looking over with a knowing smile. Now she'd have something to tease him with. He decided he had to beat her at this climbing thing so he would have something to change the subject while talking to her. Both Kay and Addy found the first course of the mountain climb quite easy, given their recent practice on the mountains in Greece. The second course which was slightly more steep, was more difficult and Addy found he *had* to focus on the instructions Rutajit snapped out just to stop himself falling or sliding down. There were no ropes or any safety gear. He was sweaty and panting by the time he reached the tiny ledge Rutajit called a resting point, after which was the third and most difficult stage, almost sheer cliff face.

He looked at his guru. Despite his age and his disadvantage in not being in his true form of a snake man, the older guy seemed to not even be out of breath despite climbing and barking orders simultaneously. Addy wiped his forehead on his forearm, glad now of not having to wear cumbersome clothes and jewelry. He looked down and saw Kay was still struggling quite a bit over the second stage. He felt sorry for her. In Greece, either Ray or he had always helped her up the steepest parts. She was valiantly trying her best, he could see, but she wasn't used to even walking barefoot and climbing was ten times more difficult. Her feet must be bleeding. His own feet were sore and bruised but now that he had gotten to this point, he felt a new surge of energy and wanted to complete the last course.

"How do you feel?" Rutajit asked. "Do you think you can do the third course? You can decide not to since it is only the first day," he said. "I want to do it," said Addy. "Remember, after we get to the top, *if* you do get there, we still have to climb down all the way in the same manner. Will you have the stamina for that?" asked Rutajit. Addy paled a little at that. He had been so busy congratulating himself on doing well climbing up, he had not wondered how they would get down. "Hadn't thought about that, I see," smirked Rutajit. "In real life you can't climb up without climbing down and vice versa." He then thawed a little. "Don't worry, climbing down is not as

tough as you'd think. I'll guide you. You don't have to be afraid of falling; I'd catch you using my yogic powers. You can count on those as long as this training goes. However, try to learn how to do it without help over the week," he concluded.

"Ready now for course three?" Addy nodded and they resumed the climb, hugging the rock face and finding crevices in which to fit fingers and toes. "This will be much easier when you master the art of making your body lighter by meditation," said Rutajit. "Integrate all the parts of your training and you will do well, human." Sweat was rolling off Addy as if he had just had a bath and all the muscles in his body trembling from the exertion, when they at last reached the summit. He collapsed panting on the bare rock for a few moments. He sat up to see how Kay was faring. He was almost sure she couldn't have done the third course. He was right. They were already down at the first course, climbing steadily down. They had turned back after Kay reached the end of the second course.

Rutajit told him to sit in a meditation posture and when he did, Rutajit said, "Look into my eyes, I will transfer some energy into you so you are able to climb down. You must practice this meditation technique too so you can do it yourself if necessary when on the mission. Now look." Addy stared into Rutajit's eyes, feeling a strange power surging out of the old snake warrior, entering through his eyes and revitalizing his flagging body, increasing his energy and enthusiasm. He now felt he could tackle the downward climb easily. They set off down, Rutajit giving instructions again as they went. The downward climb was much easier as the veteran had foretold, and they were soon at the bottom. Kay and Kudala were sitting in the shade of a tree waiting for them. When they met, Rutajit said, "That's all for the present. From tomorrow, you have to concentrate on running faster for longer distances. The climb training will be here until you can do the entire climb and back in half the time it took you today, then we will move on to a more difficult piece of mountain."

Kudala took over, saying, "Now you may go to your rooms, have a massage and bath, and lunch. You will be served lunch in your rooms everyday for the rest of your stay as it will be much more convenient for you. You may take a nap or rest otherwise in your room for an hour or so after lunch, and then report to the weapons practice area at four o'clock in the

evening for weapons training.” The two gurus then left them and Addy and Kay were able to chat about the morning’s grueling session while they were walking (or rather limping) back down the passage behind their attendants. “I couldn’t complete even the second course,” said Kay sadly. “It was such an almost vertical incline, and there were sharp rocks biting into my feet. The thought of all that way left to go and then come back down, did me in. But you were awesome Addy. I didn’t think you had it in you to go right up to the summit!!” she said admiringly. Addy smiled happily. He went to squeeze her hand in reassurance but remembered at the last moment about the hand clasping taboo and settled for verbal back patting instead. “You were pretty good Kay. It was much more difficult than our treks in Greece, and you did very well. You won’t need to climb during the mission anyway, while I might need to. So it’s all good.”

Back in his room, Addy felt as if he had been run over by a truck. His body ached in places he hadn’t even known he owned. He accepted with alacrity the massage Nrupad offered. It was the best thing he had experienced in a long time, he decided, as he was pounded and kneaded and massaged into the firm pallet next to the bathing pool. Nrupad used several herbal oils that had muscle relaxing and antiinflammatory properties that just felt divine. After the massage, he lay in the heated pool that was glowing a warm orange-red today instead of cool green-blue. He settled back in pure bliss, until all the soreness receded. It was nearly an hour later that he had his lunch and napped for a while, sure he would need it before the weapons schooling, if the morning was any indicator of the brutal training Vasuki had planned for him, the old....snake. Despite this being his last thought as he fell asleep, Addy felt refreshed and ready to fight a dragon when he awoke. He really looked forward to the weapons. He had only ever seen these ancient weapons in movies and TV serials and knew those weren’t real anyway. He knew he was going to have fun doing this task. Or maybe he just was a glutton for punishment.

## 20. Weapons

At the dot of 4 p.m. (or whatever the actual time here was, since Addy's watch did not work on this plane and his phone was fried) Addy and Kay were waiting at the yard for their trainers. Rutajit and Kudala arrived and took them to either sides of the yard where there were weapons lined up along with a servant snake man each to serve them. "We'll begin by first trying out all the weapons one by one," said Rutajit to Addy. I'll decide which suits you the best and give you a cursory training in all with special emphasis on the one that chooses you. The last hour of training will be hand-to-hand combat without weapons." He clapped his hands, and the servant came forward with a tray on which lay swords of different sizes, shapes, and blades. He asked Addy to pick one up and showed him how to feint with it. Addy did so but very awkwardly. The sword felt heavy and unwieldy in his hands. "Put it back and pick up the next one," said Rutajit. The next one was lighter and felt better in Addy's hand but despite the instructions Rutajit gave him, the latter was able to disarm him in a few seconds. Rutajit shook his head. They went through all the swords and Rutajit did not seem satisfied although Addy thought he had done quite well the last two swords he had held. He was getting a knack of how to hold the sword and how to swing it.

"Bring the maces. Although I doubt it will be Addy's weapon," ordered Rutajit to the servant. Addy was hardly able to lift the mace, let alone swing it. It was comical to even try. Rutajit dismissed the maces at once and asked the attendant to bring bows and arrows. There were several but after a critical look at Addy, Rutajit pointed out one particular bow that was medium sized, which meant it was almost as big as himself, nearly six feet in length. It was quite heavy, but as soon as Addy picked it up, he felt a surge of power and happy excitement zinging through his veins. It was as if his body recognized the instrument although he was setting eyes on it for the first time. Rutajit showed him how to hold it upright in his left hand and Addy felt as natural doing it as if he had been holding one all his life. He even knew how to pull out an arrow from the quiver now strapped across his back with his right hand and align it with the string of the bow pulled back before Rutajit even finished describing how to do it. "An archer....I should have guessed," said Rutajit speculatively. "Come on, let's see how good a marksman you are," he said and they walked toward another part of the yard

where targets had been put up for practicing archery.

As Addy aimed and pulled the string taut with the arrow, he reveled in the strange new confidence flowing through him, despite not knowing where it came from. When the old guru gave the word, he let fly the arrow and watched in fascination as it found its mark, almost at the very center of the target. Rutajit seemed very excited. “Remarkable! To shoot right in the center at the very first try....have you done this before in your human realm?” he asked suspiciously. “No, never,” said Addy honestly. “I was never much for any kind of sports, especially not archery.” Rutajit nodded sagely. “You have a natural gift for it then. I will train you such that you can win against a seasoned warrior in this, your chosen weapon.” Addy was raring to have a go at it but Rutajit made him lay down the bow and arrow and started teaching him the rudiments of all the various weapons. When he was given a short break, he looked over to see how Kay was doing.

Kay was busy sword fighting with Kudala. Addy was amazed at the grace with which she seemed to be wielding what he felt was an unwieldy weapon. Kudala, of course, was poetry in motion. It was fascinating to watch them feinting and sweeping and twirling to the clang of the swords. Kudala kept up a constant chatter of instructions and encouragement while also being a very challenging teacher. Kay seemed to be holding her own despite it being her first day with her chosen weapon. Addy guessed it had to be her chosen weapon by the looks of it; how smoothly she was using it. He felt quite proud of his friend. At least they had saved face for the human race after the morning’s somewhat less than desired performance on the mountain slopes. He was called back to his own practice and went forward eagerly to be trained at archery. Rutajit began making it more challenging by increasing the distance, decreasing the size of the target, making it a moving target, and other variations. Addy found he was able to adapt better than he ever would have thought possible and Rutajit seemed pleased too, although he told Addy that he would need a lot of practice in the coming week if he wanted to be good enough to be able to take on a veteran in a duel and last long enough to hopefully disarm his opponent or escape with his life.

He was also taught some basic rules of warfare such as male warriors only fought with other male warriors, but female warriors were free to start a battle with male warriors, after which the male warrior could defend or even

attack the female warrior. Another was that it was hitting below the belt to attack a weaponless opponent. Attacking from behind without challenging someone to a duel was against the rules too. The most important rule however, was that if it was a choice between survival and rules, survival took precedence and all rules became null and void.

Next on the agenda was hand-to-hand combat. He saw that Kudala had already finished teaching Kay all the weapons, and they were right then involved in an unarmed skirmish, getting really dusty at the other end of the yard. Again, Kay seemed to be doing very well. But this was not surprising, because she wasn't a stranger to weaponless fighting thanks to her martial arts training. Addy himself did very poorly in the beginning. He was totally unused to a physical fight, he soon found. He hadn't had a brother growing up and hadn't been the kind to get into scuffles with other boys either at school or college. Rutajit pounded him quite unnecessarily, he felt, groaning and feeling bruised all over after round two of this part of the training. "Don't worry, you have the physique and the strength for this," said Rutajit kindly. "You just have to learn the moves. Although it looks rough and dirty, it is also an art, anticipating your opponent's moves and then countering them with a well placed skilled move of your own," he reassured him. "You'll pick it up in a couple of days. There is a whole week to practice, and actually, I am teaching you this as just a safety measure; you will hopefully not be getting close enough to the enemy to have an unarmed combat."

By the end of the day, Addy and Kay were as tired as they had been before lunch. They were too tired even to talk much other than to praise each other briefly on their individual skills, before parting and retiring to their rooms for another much needed massage, a drink of the relaxing and energy-enhancing vitamin potion they had been given by the physicians, and in Addy's case, the vision-enhancing potion. They felt almost too tired to eat but Nrupad and Lopakshi wouldn't hear of it and so to oblige them they had to eat their dinners grumbling all the while, before crashing thankfully for the night.

The next few days saw a similar pattern everyday. They were woken up early in the morning, feeling a little stiff but refreshed enough to look forward to the meditation session. They got better at the meditation rapidly

as the days passed and Fanishwar was pleased with them. He had now taught them nearly all the meditation techniques he had outlined at the beginning of the program. The ones Addy and Kay found especially exciting were the ones that made them invisible, lighter, and heavier. These had also been very difficult to achieve, taking all their mental stamina to reach even a semblance of what the teacher was trying to make them do. It was invisibility today. “Focus. Focus. Focus,” said the guru. “Look at the tip of your nose Kay....*not* at the bridge of your nose. Focus until you see everything blurring and then close your eyes and concentrate hard on feeling how liquid you are, how your essence is now airy....go on, try again, you can do it,” he encouraged when Kay stopped, looking angry with herself. She looked at Addy. He was already starting to look a little translucent, she could see. She quickly started trying again. She hated not being at the top of *any* group studying *anything*, and here too she didn’t want to be the last one to do it.

Slowly they seemed to get the hang of it. This particular meditation came with a yantra and a mantra, which meant they were given a small talisman which they had to hold and concentrate on while chanting a special mantra as well as focusing on the tip of the nose. It was quite complicated, but to Kay it felt like magic. How else could you achieve invisibility for God’s sake?! If she had been told she would be learning this in her lifetime, she would have thought the speaker to be totally off their rocker. Addy was just happy he did something before Kay did it as was usually the case. “Remember, this will only last as long as you hold the yantra in your hand. The minute you lose your hold on it, you will become visible again,” warned the immaculately dressed teacher. The talisman was in a silver pendant around their necks on a gold chain. Although they were delighted about being able to do this meditation right as well as the ones that would make their bodies lighter and heavier, the one thing they both really looked forward to, was the transformation one. They had spoken about it with enthusiasm for the last few days, wondering when the guru would instruct them on it.

“Last meditation for today, children,” said the teacher at last when there was an hour left for their morning session. “Transformation.” Addy and Kay couldn’t help giving a whoop like little children and then looked apologetically at the teacher. Fanishwar gave them a little smile. “Yes, it is an exciting one even for us when we learn it as children. Of course, it comes more easily and automatically to us snake beings than to human beings.

However, with the correct guidance and the devices to help you, you should be able to master it in a couple of days.” Addy and Kay had learnt with mixed feelings that they could not transform into anything they wished to be, but that rather, the form that they could be was already inherent in them and the meditation would just bring out this latency.

This gave them material for thought. “Oh...I wanted to turn into a snake woman,” pouted Kay. She was very impressed with Kudala and looked up to the versatile snake woman. “Hmmm,” said Addy, thinking too. He would not have liked to be a snake man but on the other hand, he too admired Kudala intensely and maybe if he became a snake man...he gave a sigh. She was already spoken for and anyway she wouldn’t notice an insignificant man like him. Besides, he couldn’t afford such thoughts when they would be leaving in another 10 days if they could achieve their goal of retrieving the gemstone. He would probably never even see Kudala again. He felt extremely sad at that thought and pushed it impatiently to the back of his mind. “Well, I don’t mind being anything as long as I don’t turn into a rakshasa like Mahashan,” he quipped in a droll manner.

They were given a vial of potion that was hung on a string around the neck. A drop of this potion sipped along with meditation on the complementary mantra would transform them into their other-worldly forms. “This potion is only to get you started off. If you are able to transform into the other form and back several times, you may be able to do it just with the nonverbal incantation of the mantra. However, this requires a high level of focus which normally humans find hard to achieve. The potion should be sufficient for the duration of your stay in this realm as only a drop is required for you to transform,” said Fanishwar.

They eagerly took the potion, got into their deep zones and said the incantation in their minds. Addy felt an excruciating pain prickling all through his body and almost cried out at the intensity of it. He heard Kay give a muffled whimper of pain. He opened his eyes eagerly when it had passed to see what he had become. He was disappointed to see he had not transformed at all. Of course, he hadn’t really expected to. Fanishwar had told them it was difficult and needed to be practiced for a long time. It was also possible they would never be able to do it. But he was really eager to transform and refused to consider that possibility. “Go on, kids....,” said the



guru patiently. “Try again. Close your eyes, focus deeply and then say the mantra in your mind. Dwell on each word as you enunciate it mentally.” After several tries, Addy and Kay were exhausted. The pain was agonizing. It would have been tolerable if they *did* transform. But it was painful and disappointing to realize it had not happened. They were given a short break in which to sip water and talk quietly together. “We must do this, we must,” said Kay giving them both a pep talk. “I really want to know how I’d look in this realm. And what powers I would have,” she said eagerly.

For, Fanishwar had told them that while snake people could transform to another form and retain all their original powers in that form, humans, who had very little power to begin with, would gain considerably from the form they took. “Yes,” agreed Addy. “I really want to do this. It may or may not help in our quest, but it would be such an achievement from a mental and scientific point of view. I cannot understand how it is possible and whether it can happen in our world, but I do want to see what I’d be over here.” The little chat calmed them both, and they went back with new determination to stand in front of the vertically placed black slabs that had been brought into the meditation room today so they could look at themselves in the polished stone mirrors after transforming.

They both took a deep breath and Addy felt it in his bones that this time he would be able to do it right. Talking with Kay always calmed and inspired him. He closed his eyes and reached deep inside himself to that quiet, calm place and then said the mantra slowly, relishing each word as it slipped into his consciousness. This time, the pain was still there but it was more like an achy pain like when he was going to the gym and his muscles were growing. He welcomed it and then he felt his body shift in an unfamiliar manner and frowned, refusing to open his eyes until his body stabilized. When it did, he slowly opened his eyes and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked... huge. That was his first impression. He was more than two feet taller, his body had widened, and he now had the lower half of a horse. He was a gandharva. He looked at his face and grinned. He didn’t usually put much store by his own looks but now he looked downright handsome. He gazed his fill before he remembered he had to see what Kay had become.

He turned to his left and gaped. Kay, who had previously been about three inches shorter than him, was now towering over him by four inches.

Where she had been slim and beautiful before, she was stunning now, her figure voluptuous and hair longer. She saw Addy looking and hid her face in her hands. Her hands had long curved nails, he noted with a gulp. She was a rakshasi. “Oh. My. God.” he said. Kay peeked through her fingers. “You are a rakshasi. No wonder you are always a step ahead when we are humans,” he grumbled. “I’m *not*,” she protested. “A step ahead, I mean. I never imagined I would be a rakshasi. Are you a gandharva? You look like the picture of one we saw while researching,” she went on, trying to shift his focus onto himself. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said, happy he was not a rakshasa. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t wanted to be a kinnara or naga either. Gandharva suited him just fine. At the back of his mind a small voice said “and *she* likes gandharvas,” which he squashed down as usual.

“You look good,” said Kay. “Spunk!” He laughed. “You know, you look absolutely beautiful for a rakshasi. I didn’t know they could be good looking.” Fanishwar who had been watching their reactions with an amused expression now spoke. “It is a common misconception of humans that rakshasas look ugly. There are beautiful and ugly and plain-looking beings in all species. Same for good and bad beings in all species. Moreover, only whatever is latent in you, gets magnified in your higher plane forms.”

“Now you will get the powers that come with your form, as long as you retain the form,” he continued. “You will find it easier to become invisible, Kay, and you Addy, will be able to cast illusions. Kay will be more powerful at night. Addy you will be able to read the stars.” He went on, “Make sure you pass on this information to your gurus so they incorporate it into your weapons and physical training. All the different things taught should be combined and come together in the end, so you are the most skilled and powerful you can be, before you go on your mission. Now you may transform back, have breakfast and then come back here to practice transformation and get familiar with your new identities.”

## 21. Chaitrath

Addy and Kay spoke nonstop that breakfast. They were both extremely thrilled with their transformations. “Is it bad to be a rakshasi?” asked Kay worriedly. “I seem to remember you telling me something about them eating human flesh and being vicious...?” she asked. Addy, who hardly knew any more than her about the other beings that inhabited this plane, said reassuringly, “Fanishwar said there are good and bad people in all beings. So you must be one of the good demons,” he finished grinning, wincing as Kay punched him in the arm for his effort. “Oww...what did you do that for? Wanna prove you are eviler than me?” he asked and she laughed.

“Yeah, might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb,” she said. “Tomorrow we will be having weapons training with each other. I’ll show you then how evil I can be and as for the contest....,” she threatened. Addy groaned. There was to be a contest of sorts at the end of two weeks between the two of them, to sort of test them against each other in all the things they had learnt so far. He had no chance against her with a sword by the looks of her first day’s performance with a veteran like Kudala. He had better practice hard before they were to duel so as not to lose too soon. He would be able to do better at archery, he knew. Although he had not seen her at the targets, he knew he was quite good for a beginner and felt confident about beating her at that. They were both about as bad as each other at the other weapons. So if he could improve his swordsmanship, he’d be able to save face.

The morning session was grueling as usual. Kay had been finally able to get to the summit of the first mountain slope while Addy had been taken to more challenging slopes and timed so that he was pushing the limits of his body everyday. He felt he had developed more muscles in a week than he had over the four-year period he had been going to the gym. Luckily, the health potions and herbal massages ensured his body remained stable throughout the punishing sessions. Kudala came up to him at the end of the morning session. “Today you must report to the cavern entrance after lunch, Aditya,” she said. It was the first time she had spoken privately to Addy and he was thrilled. He gazed into her mesmerizing eyes.

“I will be taking you into the city today, the palace garden at Alkapuri,” she said, smiling bewitchingly. “The palace garden?” Addy used the map in

his head and went through the garden quickly in his mind. It was lovely, lush, and almost like a forest but not unruly like one. “Yes, it’s called Chaitrath. It is an enchanted garden and a wonderful place. I want to familiarize you to it as it is close to the palace and we could start the mission from there. I don’t want you to be seen anywhere else in the city before the mission, but the garden is okay. You will also get a chance to see the various beings at close quarters. You and Kay may transform into your higher beings when we reach there, to avoid anyone knowing you are humans,” she concluded.

“Will Kay be coming too?” asked Addy, feeling a little disappointed. He had hoped they would be going alone. “Yes, she needs to know the garden well too. It surrounds two sides of the palace and although you have the map of it, you need to know it physically as it is enchanted to keep changing and everything does not show up on the map,” she said, before slithering away into the mountain. Addy went to his room thoughtfully. By now his body had adjusted to the daily exercises, and he did not need as much time to recuperate from the morning session. He spent some time before lunch practicing his transformation skills and looking through the interactive map. After lunch, he was escorted to the outer entrance of the cave by Nrupad and waited there until Kay and Kudala arrived. Kay was visibly excited at the thought of visiting something as pretty as a garden after having a week of her nose to the grindstone and only the caves to go into.

Kudala informed them that they wouldn’t be walking to the other side of the mountain as they had imagined. “It’s a long way and more importantly, I do not want anyone to know you humans are here. The citizens of Alkapuri are a suspicious lot. They might suspect you are here to get the Nagamani back, since there aren’t any humans living in Alkapuri in this era,” she said. “I will fly you there with my yogic powers and as soon as we land there, you must transform into your gandharva and rakshashi forms so as to be inconspicuous.” “What about you?” asked Kay. “Will you be going as yourself? I thought snake people were not welcome at Kubera’s city?”

“You are right,” said Kudala. “I will be transforming into an apsara. There are many apsaras there, the wives of the gandharvas. I can transform into many shapes, but I think today I will go as an apsara. I have a fondness

for the humanoid shape,” she confided. She asked them to sit on a small seat that was placed on the ground in front of them, and become invisible so she could fly them over the mountainside and the forest until they reached the garden. They did as they were told and then she turned invisible too and did something to turn the seat invisible. Then they felt themselves flying through the air. It was the weirdest feeling. “Oooh....it’s unbelievable,” said Kay’s disembodied voice from next to Addy. He had to agree. It was like looking out of an airplane window, except here there was no window or anything else, just space between him and the things he could see moving by below him.

“Silence,” ordered Kudala. “We do not want anyone to know we are flying here.” They flew right over the forest and a part of the glimmering city. The gold and jewel encrusted buildings were almost too bright to look at. Addy and Kay’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets at the indecent display of wealth. Everything was clean, sparkly and beautiful. Finally they were above the gardens and Kudala flew them down, landing gently at an open spot in the gardens. She spoke to them. “Now transform and become visible.” Addy carefully took the vial that he could only feel around his neck, without letting go of the amulet that kept him invisible, and took a drop of the transforming potion, before chanting the mantra in his mind and transforming into his gandharva form. “If you are both ready, you can become visible now,” he heard Kudala saying. He let the amulet go and became visible at the same time as Kay. He looked around for Kudala and saw her materializing just in front of them. He was struck dumb when he saw her. If she had been breathtakingly beautiful before, she looked irresistible now. He knew apsaras were supposed to be enchantresses, but the one he saw in front of him must be the crown jewel of the apsaras, he thought.

Kay nudged him hard, and he stopped staring. He realized Kudala was staring back at them. It was the first time she had seen them after they had transformed. “Oh...you both look so...good,” she said at last, getting her composure back. “Thank you,” said Kay, answering for both of them. “You look even more stunning than before as well!!” Kudala smiled sweetly, and Addy nearly forgot to breathe. “Come, let us wander around the garden. I will show you some of the interesting illusions here, and we might meet some city dwellers strolling here,” she said, beckoning to them. They followed her, falling into step beside her on the path. “Look at the trees,” said Kudala.

They looked and saw the trees were unlike any that were there on their plane. These trees looked too good to be true. They were large, lush, full of fruits and flowers and gave out a gentle breeze all the time. “They are always in bloom and always have fruits throughout the year,” said Kudala.

“Look at that one there on the left,” she went on. “It changes its fruits to suit the wish of the person sitting in its shade. Come, I’ll show you,” she said and told Kay to sit in the shade of the tree and wish for any fruit she wanted. Kay tried to think of the most exotic fruit she had ever seen and remembered the luscious berries they had eaten in Greece and which she was sure did not grow in India or on this plane. She wished for them and lo and behold, the branches sprouted the very same berries. “You can eat them. Go on, try them and see,” urged Kudala. Kay did so, standing up and plucking some from a low overhanging branch, and exclaimed at the sweetness. The berries from Greece had been mostly sour, but these were as sweet as if they had had sugar syrup mixed in them.

“Delish!! They are unbelievably sweet,” she exclaimed, giving some to Addy to taste. Addy was sent to sit under the shade next, and he wished for something which was not a fruit, just to see what the tree would do. He wished for one of his favorite desserts, which was Death by Chocolate. He saw dark brown fruits appear on the tree and stood up curiously to pluck one from a branch. He took a bite and closed his eyes in bliss. “Mmmm,” was all he could manage when Kay asked him what it was. He could taste warm chocolate cake, vanilla ice cream, and hot chocolate fudge with nuts sprinkled on just like the dessert he loved back in India. He gave one to Kay who looked amazed after eating it.

Kudala was laughing a lovely tinkling laugh at their astonished pleasure. “Come, there are so many more things to see,” she said, moving along the path once again. It was like walking through a theme park, but better than that, because here everything was real, tangible, and they did not have to work at suspending their disbelief. There were golden deer frolicking, sparkly fountains that changed color, gurgling brooks that seemed to sing, and myriad fragrances from exotic flowers everywhere. It was totally surreal. Above all these gentle sounds, they could hear lilting music from somewhere and asked Kudala what it was. “It is an entertainment at one of the amphitheaters. Do you want to see it?” she asked. They nodded and she

led the way down a winding path until they came in sight of a natural dip in the landscape which had been further carved into a small arena surrounded by shallow silver steps on which one could sit. There was a group at the center and the music was coming from there.

“Come sit down and we will listen to this for a while,” said Kudala. They sat down and gazed at the artistes. There were gandharvas, apsaras, and kinnaras in the troupe. The apsaras and kinnaras were dancing as well as acting and the gandharvas were playing the music and singing. It was a treat to behold, although they did not understand what exactly was being depicted in the dance drama. The music was truly otherworldly, and the apsaras and kinnaras were ethereally graceful. There was a smattering of citizens watching the performance and Addy observed them. They were mostly gandharvas, he noted, with a few rakshasas. Some of the rakshasas were looking at Kay admiringly, he noted and pointed this out to Kay, who said, “Eeewww...lets get outta here before they come to talk to me.” Kudala laughed her tinkling laugh again and agreed that they should go see a little more of the garden before they went back as it was almost time for their weapons training.

They passed a fountain that had multicolored dancing fish in it, that leaped up, turned somersaults, and dived again just as if they had been trained. A shrub that seemed entirely made of seashells caught their attention for some time. As they walked on, Addy saw a couple reclining in the shade of another enchanted tree. When they drew closer, he saw they were kinnaras. One of them had his head on the other kinnara’s chest and they seemed to be cuddling. It was such an unusual sight, he could not help staring. “What’s the matter?” asked Kudala softly. “Errr...um aren’t kinnaras male?” he asked reluctantly. “Yeah, so?” she said. “Are those two a couple? I thought only males and females were....umm...consorts?” he asked, puzzled. On his plane, especially in India, alternate sexuality was still a debatable topic and although Addy was accepting of same sex relationships, he had never known any gay people personally and did not know much about the subject. However, he had certainly never imagined that it existed in other realms too, especially this higher realm.

Kudala was looking at him pityingly. “That is typical of a human being,” she said, a little condescendingly. “Humans are so body conscious.

They can't be blamed really, I suppose, because they do not remember they are the soul encased in a body and also they do not remember the previous body (or bodies) they had. But here, we do not place much importance in the body," she said. "The soul and love are two things much higher than the outer casing which in any case we can change at will. The body changes, it dies. But the soul remains. Love remains, irrespective of the body," she explained gently. Kay nodded. It was easier for her to understand, having come from a more open community. "I understand," said Addy, a little discomfited at the thought Kudala might think him judgmental. He couldn't help feeling he had fallen in her eyes by exposing his ignorance.

"I too feel love should not have any boundaries. But I was just not expecting it here...there aren't any instances in our heritage, I guess," he said. Kudala again looked at him as if exasperated. "You, whose name is *Aditya*, don't know the instances in history? What you call mythology? Haven't you heard of the adityas – Mitra and Varuna? Or of the devas Soma and Indra? Even Shiva and Mohini?" she pointed out. "It's been there all along since time immemorial. You can go home and do some research on it," she said, a little archly, Addy thought. "In fact, usually they are revered as being above common beings as they have transcended their body consciousness," she said. They went along, Addy more thoughtful, thinking about what she had said. He guessed the LGBT groups back home probably knew about it. It was a shame the general public had so little knowledge of the concept and many still looked down on things they did not understand.

As they turned a corner around a large tree, a gandharva stepped onto the path in front of them. Kudala gave an exclamation of pleasure. "Dagdhrath!!" Addy recognized the aristocratic features at once. It was the gandharva Kudala loved. Kay asked him this in a low voice, and he answered in the affirmative. He looked again at the gandharva. Now that he was in his transformed state, he was as tall as Dagdhrath and was proud to see his physique was as good as the heir apparent's too. "What are you doing here Kudala...why didn't you say you were coming?" Dagdhrath was asking with a frown, looking curiously at Addy and Kay who were a few steps behind her. "Sorry dear....I only came to show my friends the garden," she said, beaming at her chosen man. "Who are they?" he asked, holding her hands in his. "Just some friends of mine from the kingdom lower down the mountain on our side," she said evasively. "How are you dear? I'll come



and meet you soon, okay....? I must go now,” she said. Addy and Kay moved on past them, to give them some privacy. There were some scuffling sounds behind them, and then Kudala joined them, blushing and a little out of breath. Addy gritted his teeth and frowned to himself.

They were soon at the clearing they had landed in and found the seat Kudala had left behind. She asked them to sit on it and become invisible so she could take them back. They did so and were taken back to the snake kingdom in the same manner as they had come. Kudala told them to get transformed back to their human forms and meet her at the weapons training as usual, before walking away into the palace.

## 22. Preparation

Addy watched as the beautiful snake maiden slithered away, leaving them to go get ready for the weapons training. He was quiet and did not respond much to Kay's nonstop chatter about the enchanted garden and wonderful sights they had seen. They were now in their human forms and almost at the junction in the passages where they went to their separate rooms. "See ya at the contest, Addy! Get ready for a severe beating," giggled Kay. Addy wondered morosely why she was in such high spirits. "Hah, no way. I'm gonna do the beating and you'll be soon eating humble pie," he retorted with as much confidence as he could muster. Although this was not like a school or college exam or match, he really did want to do fairly well. He did not hope to win against Kay who had an unfair advantage with her hand-to-hand skills as well as swordsmanship, but did not want to lose either. He'd really have to exert himself fully, he could see, since both of them thrived on winning, and this would be a close contest.

After getting refreshed with a wash and cold minty buttermilk in his room, he psyched himself up for the duel ahead and went to the weapons training grounds. He was surprised to see there was going to be an audience. There were several people who looked like the extended family of Vasuki, dressed opulently. There were also the common folk who lived in the part away from the palace that he had not seen up close until now. There were even little snake children that looked like tiny replicas of their adult counterparts in clothes exactly the same, talking and pointing and giggling at him as he strode forward to stand beside Rutajit in the middle of the ground. He suddenly felt horribly under prepared for this match. He supposed it was arranged so both he and Kay got a feel of a real battle, and truth be told, any warrior he faced during the task of getting the gemstone back, would be quite ruthless and fighting to kill rather than win a contest like he or Kay. So it was actually a tame rehearsal of what he might eventually experience. He looked over as Kay arrived and stood beside Kudala a few feet away.

When everyone had assembled, including Vasuki, who was sitting on a throne in a box for the royalty up in the middle of the audience, a gong was struck for silence. Rutajit began announcing the details about the contest including introducing both the humans who had come to their world and the reason they were here learning under him and Kudala. He went on to praise

how they had shown an inherent ability to learn and picked up everything taught very quickly and were good warriors despite the short training they had got. He then announced that Addy and Kay would be competing against each other, as well as trying to best their own previous timings on the non competing tests like running, climbing, and all the yogic powers they had attained at the feet of their meditation guru. Addy saw that Fanishwar was sitting up in the box along with Vasuki and smiling at him and Kay. The contest was going to begin with a prayer song to be sung by their court musicians. As soon as the music began, Rutajit turned to Addy and began advising him about the contest.

“Aditya, my child,” he said. “Kay is a very good warrior. I almost think she is better than you, but if you follow my instructions, you can win this tournament. Her weaknesses are the noncombat events where you have to beat your previous time and skill. I know you can do those easily because you are the type of student that starts slow and progresses at a steady pace. Now coming to the dueling part, you know you are much better at your chosen weapon, the bow and arrow. You can beat her hollow there. But your swordsmanship is not very good even now although you have definitely shown improvement over the past week. Just try and get through it as best as possible, even if it means you have to play a defensive role. Be sure not to lose your sword at any cost. Try to tire her out by retreating every now and again and not giving her an opening to get into a full sword fight. You know your stamina is better than hers so that is the only way to ensure you don’t lose heavily in the sword fight. The final event will be hand-to-hand combat. Here too, she is an expert whereas you are still learning the ropes. Try to avoid being pinned down or thrown so you can stretch the duel until it is time up,” he instructed.

Addy asked something that had been intriguing him for some time now, “How is it that male and female warriors are allowed hand-to-hand combat? I thought even touching a person that is not your spouse was not allowed over here? How can I fight Kay in such a physical setting when I’m not even allowed to hold hands with her? Also, what if she gets hurt?” Rutajit was taken aback for a second, then he smiled and replied, “I can understand your dilemma since you are new to our ways. I see now that we should have had an orientation course for the two of you, explaining the social norms in our world. In civil society, we do not permit an unmarried couple to be

physically close. However, while fighting, every other rule is discarded and only the rules of battle apply. And the rules of battle state that every warrior is equal. The aim is to survive and defeat the other person, male or female. So, just think of Kay as your opponent, an adversary that you have to defeat to maintain your dignity as the best warrior. You can apologize to her later if you feel you have hurt her. In my opinion, it is far more likely that she will hurt you,” he chuckled. Addy scowled. Great. Even his guru had more faith in his adversary. “I know Kudala’s method of teaching. She will do everything in her power to influence Kay to go all out and make you bite the dust in the worst way possible. Best thing to do is avoid getting trapped and keeping the wrestling to a minimum,” he advised. Addy nodded.

The music was tapering off by this time and an announcer was announcing the beginning of the contest with great fanfare. Addy and Kay took up their places for the noncombat contests and took off as soon as the gong was struck. As Addy had hoped, his longer legs and the fact he was in slightly better shape, ensured he outdid his previous time and left Kay far behind. He did splendidly in the climbing too as he knew he would since he had been better than Kay from day one and had been steadily growing better all through the past week. When they were tested for the yogic powers, it was a tie since both of them were good at things the other could not do as well. Kay was particularly good at illusions but Addy was good at dispelling them. They could both become invisible to the same extent and Addy found it easier to become heavier while Kay found it easier to become lighter. Both were found to be equal in calming down and rejuvenating their bodies which was now a sore necessity as only half the contest was over and they had used up a lot of their energies.

The crowds were cheering madly and even the nobility was clapping, enjoying the show, Addy noted, as he rested during a brief break. He was beginning to enjoy himself now and felt he might even win this contest. Finally, it was time for the weapons contest. Addy and Kay stood facing each other in the middle of the grounds. This was the first time they were actually competing against each other. Addy noted Kay looked as nervous as he felt but she gave him a smile and he grinned back. “May the best man...or woman win,” he called out, and she stopped looking nervous and laughed, nodding happily. They were given the first weapon, which was a mace. As expected, both weren’t too good at it and the battle ended in a draw. A series

of weapons after that all ended in a draw because both of them were well matched and neither was particularly good at any of the weapons, the chakra or disc, the mushala or cylindrical rod, the parashu or battle axe, and most of all the naga pasha or the weapon of the nagas that threw out coils of snakes which would bind an opponent. The latter ended the contest in a hilarious (for the audience) manner as both Addy and Kay ended up flat on their faces, bound tightly by snakes thrown by the other. Both had managed to throw their weapons at the exact same time and ended up writhing on the ground much to the amusement of the king and the crowds that were shouting and jeering at the tops of their voices.

All too soon, it was time for the bow and arrow and sword fight. “Show no mercy,” whispered Rutajit in Addy’s ear. “She will show you no mercy when it is her turn with the swords and with the hand-to-hand combat,” he said. “This is your last chance to come out on top,” he warned. Addy nodded in a determined way, taking his bow and allowing the attendant to fix the quiver around his torso so it rested against his back to the right side. At the strike of the gong, they began their duel. Addy was surprised to see Kay had improved tremendously since the first day, after which he had been too busy with his own training to observe what she was doing across at the other end of the grounds. If there had been any residual hesitation remaining, it evaporated on seeing how confident she was with the weapon that she did not really excel in. His competitive spirit kicked in at full force, and he let fly arrows in quick succession. So quick was he that his hands and the arrows were almost a blur. In no time at all, despite being quite good herself, Kay was defeated, standing with a broken bow, half empty quiver and plenty of arrows around Addy that had not met their target. Addy had used only four arrows from his quiver. One had cut the string of Kay’s bow, another had cut the bow in half, and two others had deflected Kay’s two arrows that had gotten too close for comfort.

There was loud clapping and cheering. Kay looked stunned as the bows and arrows were taken away from them. She shook her head and put her game face back on, eyes blazing, as they were handed their swords for the next contest. Uh oh...thought Addy. Not good. Not good at all. She was going to kill him now, he knew it. He just hoped she remembered in time that he was her friend. “Remember what I said about retreating. Use your shield to the maximum,” whispered Rutajit in Addy’s ear as he handed over

the sword and shield. Addy hardly heard a word. His eyes were riveted on Kudala who was whispering in Kay's ear. Her eyes were turned to Addy though and whatever she was saying, it was making Kay look more and more lethal. It was beyond scary.

The gong struck and the contest began. Addy and Kay closed in, Addy circling warily. Kay swooped in and Addy quickly used his shield. He kept moving back as Kay went on the attack, swinging her sword menacingly. Her eyes were glittering, Addy thought, insanely. He sidled around when he reached the end of the grounds and again began backing as she advanced. "Stop dancing around ya mug!" Kay spat, angry that she wasn't getting in a single blow. "Stand and fight you deadhead." Addy didn't listen and instead again brought his shield in for deflecting the cutting motion. He was fast with the shield so that was a good thing, he thought to himself, trying to predict how Kay was going to move next. He could see she was getting frustrated and angrier by the minute. He hoped she would get angry enough to make a mistake and let him get a blow in or something like that, before his shield hand dropped from sheer exhaustion, leaving him open to her attack. Suddenly she caught him off guard and he stumbled, falling backward. He heard her whoop and rolled quickly to the side. *Thunk*....he stared disbelievingly at the spot where her sword was buried in the earth, right where his neck had been moments ago. He scrambled up faster than he could breathe, holding up the shield again. Shit...she did mean business, didn't she?

"Man up Addy," snarled Kay. "Are you *afraid* to fight?" she asked cunningly, knowing that would goad him into raising his sword hand. Addy clenched his jaw and tried to clamp down on the temper boiling just under the surface. "Never knew you were such a sissy," she went on. Addy lost his cool. He entered into the fight, clanging his sword against hers, meeting thrust for thrust. The crowds were cheering deafeningly again, and it was getting difficult for him to concentrate. Sweat was trickling down his brow while Kay appeared as cool as ever. She kept up an intermittent soliloquy of invectives designed to get under his skin. "'avago, you twit," she said as she clashed her sword with force against his. It nearly took the sword off of his hand, but he managed to hold on somehow. He began thinking he was going to lose, it was inevitable. Was it allowed to lay down the weapon and accept defeat, he thought wildly, before he got massacred? He tried getting back to

his original tactic of using the shield but Kay was having none of that. She swung her sword rapidly so he had to deflect it with his. Another two particularly vicious slashes and Addy stood defeated, his sword flying from his hand to land far away. The crowds and even the nobility were standing and cheering now. Kay smiled complacently. “Touché,” Addy said.

Rutajit came to take away the sword and shield and Addy looked at him a little shamefacedly. “Never mind,” he said gently. “You put up a good fight. I didn’t expect you to last so long anyway.” Next was the hand-to-hand combat that Addy was dreading the most. He hadn’t wanted to fight Kay with a sword. This was ten times worse. He did not think he had it in him to be physically ruthless with a friend, much less one who was female. Besides which, her prowess was greater and his humiliation would be complete when (not if) she won. Rutajit put his hands on Addy’s shoulders. “Now remember. Try not to get close enough for Kay to pin you down or throw you. Keep deflecting blows and try to get some blows in like you were taught,” he advised.

Addy took a deep breath, shrugged his shoulders and got ready. This was his last chance of winning the tournament. He wasn’t sure if he had done well enough in the non-combat exercises to be able to still win if he lost miserably in this last contest. He had to try his best anyway because Kay was on a winning mode. Although he knew she had this side to her, it was still disconcerting to come up against it when she was usually so amiable and accommodating. He watched Kudala give her usual instructions in Kay’s ears while glaring at him across the grounds. Her hypnotic eyes almost seemed to make him believe he was going to lose. He quickly turned his eyes away. Maybe she really was doing that. He better not look into those mesmerizing eyes, not now when he wanted to win. The gong went and Addy and Kay circled around each other again. Kay went almost immediately on the attack and Addy was forced into defensive tactics to counter her moves. He kept at an arm’s distance as Rutajit had advised.

Soon Kay was getting more and more aggressive, and it was becoming successively difficult for Addy to remain at an arm’s distance from her. She was using her hands as well as her legs. It was clear she was all out to win now. He deflected the blows as well as he could and tried to get in a few of his own. He winced when one of his blows connected sharply with her

shoulder, making her stagger. He hated this. However, it only seemed to make Kay want to win all the more, and she redoubled her efforts to bring him down. Her movements were getting so quick, it was difficult to gauge what she was trying to do and defend accordingly. Finally, it was no longer possible for him to keep away, and he had to get closer to wrestle. At first, it seemed he had a slight advantage due to his being taller and more muscular than Kay.

He hoped he would be able to pin her down for the shortest time possible for the contest to be declared completed. But Kay was not going to allow this. She moved suddenly, kicking his leg out from under him so that they both fell to the ground, still in a mad struggle for supremacy. The next moment was a decisive one where Addy could have crushed her down under him and ended the duel but hesitated to do so for the fraction of a second. This was enough for Kay. She mercilessly punched him, knocking his head back and pushed him down under her so that he was lying with his face in the earth, her body keeping him immobile, his arms behind him, held in a vice-like grip by both of hers. It was the end. She stayed like that until they heard the gong indicating the contest was done.

Bruised and bloody, Addy stood up with a groan and saw Kay bowing to the crowd who seemed to have become her fans and were jumping and cheering. They bowed to each other, making the sign of namaste with their hands put together and went to stand next to their teachers. Rutajit was announcing the end of the tournament and the scores. "It has been a close contest all along," he was saying. "Both the pupils are excellent. They are good at different things, so they complement each other perfectly which is very good for us nagas as we will be sending them as a team to recover our gem. As for the winner, Kay wins by a very narrow margin today," he said. Kudala and Kay hugged each other and shrieked in delight. Addy nodded in acknowledgement and said to Kay, "You are the better woman! Congratulations."



### 23. Celebration and Simulation I

After the tournament, the two contestants were allowed to go back to their rooms to freshen up before a grand dinner which was being held to celebrate the event. Commoners and nobility alike would be coming to the dinner, and it was being held outside the palace, next to the training grounds, in the open air. Addy was exhausted after the match and was not at all interested in going but knew he could not avoid it since it was being held in his and Kay's honor. Besides, it would look like he was sulking about his defeat at the hands of a woman. He soaked in the pool after a quick massage by his trusty attendant, Nrupad, and felt a little better. After getting ready wearily, he used the meditation technique he had learnt to rejuvenate his tired body and felt a whole lot better. He set off with Nrupad in tow for the celebratory dinner. Nrupad had insisted on him wearing his best naga clothes and jewelry, explaining that the people as well as Vasuki would be expecting nothing less.

The grounds were arranged in such a way that the nobility and special guests were seated in the middle in a large circle with people of subsequently less importance seated behind them in concentric circles. He was glad to see the most disruptive commoners and little children were right on the periphery where they wouldn't be seen or heard. He was led up to his place, which was next to Kay, with Rutajit on his other side and Kudala on her other side. Vasuki sat directly opposite them surrounded by his ministers and the rest of the extended royal family. The seats were on the floor as was the naga custom, but instead of the customary low stools, the guests sat on plush large silk cushions with bolsters at the sides and back so they could lean back and relax while eating. In the center space there was a little raised dais, on which musicians played and dancing girls (snake women) gyrated sinuously, keeping beat with the music.

Kudala looked stunning as usual, he noticed. She was wearing her royal attire and her appearance was like a picture of one of the goddesses his Mom had in their puja (prayer) room. He could hardly take her eyes off her and soon Kay was a little annoyed with him because she was speaking to him but he was responding in monosyllables, having no real idea what she was saying and staring across her at Kudala. They had been served a lavish seven-course meal which also included the naga wine, soma. It was

delicious, but before he could guzzle it, Rutajit warned him that it was highly alcoholic and could make a person fall asleep after four or five glasses. He still could not help taking sips of it between the courses, although he abhorred the idea of losing control and making a fool of himself.

After a couple of hours, Addy felt ready to burst with all the food he had eaten like a glutton. Most of the people on the periphery had left and in the innermost circle where he sat, most of them were either tipsy or fast asleep, having binged on the soma. The entertainers had left too. Rutajit had excused himself a while ago, walking off on unsteady feet. Beside him, Kay was giggling at something Kudala was saying and Addy knew she was a little tipsy herself, although he had shared Rutajit's information with her about going easy on the wine. Kudala got up and excused herself, bidding goodnight to first Kay and then him, her mesmerizing eyes lingering intimately on his before she left. Addy gaped after her, wondering if he had imagined that look or was drunk himself.

He shook his head and found Kay was speaking to him yet again, and he had no clue what she was saying. He turned to her to find she was looking at him with a strange look on her face. It almost looked like pity. He frowned. What had he missed? "What did you say? I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention," he said. Kay sighed. "That's exactly what I was saying. You seem to be in another world. Or plane to be exact," she giggled. She sobered up a little and turned on her cushion to sit facing him. "I can see how you look at her," she said. "Don't go down that road...you will be setting yourself up for pain, Addy. You are not suitable for each other," she continued. Addy, who had been feeling out of sorts all day, starting with the incident in Chaitrath and ending with his defeat, felt himself losing his temper. "When did you become my mom, Kay?" he asked irritably. "You can like someone, but I am not allowed to? And men are accused of double standards," he fumed, throwing up his hands in the air.

Kay sighed again. "You *have* to drag Ray into every argument we have, don't you? This has nothing to do with him. It's not the same at all, and you know it, Addy. Ray is a human like us living on *our* plane where we will be going after this whole getting-back-the-gem thingy. Besides, he is only a friend whom I might or might not get to know better after we go back. But in *your* case, it looks like you have feelings much deeper than friendship

for Kudala already. You forget she is *not* a human like us and you can never be on par with her on any level. The nagas live forever, unless killed, while we humans have a short lifespan. They are magical beings while we are not. They live on a different plane than us. And if all these arguments don't appeal to you, there is the little matter of her being almost engaged to a gandharva she loves very much," she said, looking at him in exasperation. "Don't you see, you are setting yourself up for a big disappointment when it is time for us to go back." Addy's shoulders slumped. Of course, he knew all that. He just did not want to face it. And he had still hoped...he didn't even know what he had hoped. He hadn't ever spoken to Kudala by himself and didn't think he ever would. Kay looked at his crestfallen face and could not help herself reaching out to him.

"Awww, come here baby," she said, holding out her arms to hug him. Addy looked shocked that she was going to hug him in plain sight when they were not even permitted to hold hands. "I don't care what they think or do," said Kay stubbornly. "I am going to give you a hug. I cannot stand by when a friend needs a hug, not even for all the snake people and gems in the world," she said and threw her arms tightly around Addy's middle, hugging him. After a moment's shocked stiffness, Addy melted into the embrace and hugged her back. It felt so good, he had to admit to himself. It was the first emotional-physical contact he had had after coming to this realm, and he hadn't realized how much he missed simple things like holding hands with a friend or a hug until now. He wasn't much of a hugger in general but being in a strange place doing strange things all day and stressing about the task had him craving a little comfort. He didn't like Kay calling him "baby," though. It made him feel she thought he was a decade younger than her or something. He decided to ignore it as a side-effect of the soma she had drunk. He pulled back at last and said, "Thanks, Kay. I really needed that. You are right as usual. I will try to focus on the task and forget about my silly feelings."

Kay smiled and patted his cheek. "Always glad to be of help," she said. "You know you can talk to me about anything that bugs you, right? Keeping quiet just makes everything more intense and complicated," she said. Addy nodded, smiling affectionately at her. "Thanks, you are the best friend a guy could ask for. Let's go get some shut eye now, I'm sure the gurus are not gonna let us relax tomorrow just because we had a tiring day

today!” Luckily for them, nobody had noticed the little interaction as most had left or were in various states of inebriation. Addy stood up and helped a slightly wobbly Kay up, and they went back to their respective rooms. He was glad she was slightly tipsy and hopefully wouldn’t remember this embarrassing conversation. He was also glad she had said the things she did because he felt much better about everything now and was determined not to make a fool of himself over the bewitching snake woman, Kudala.

The next morning, Addy sat up groaning at the stiff muscles he could feel all over. As he had predicted, no allowances were made for the amount of physical exertion they had the previous day. They were still woken early, albeit Nrupad had allowed him to sleep in an hour past his usual time. He did try to make it up to Addy by using the muscle relaxing herbal pastes and helping Addy into a hot bath in the pool. The routine today, Addy found, was different from all the previous days. He was led directly to breakfast where Kay joined him, as surprised as he was at the change in schedule. “Looks like exams are over and summer hols have started,” joked Addy. “Yeah, hols before guillotine,” remarked Kay sarcastically. “I bet they have something more backbreaking than the contest planned for us today!” They were allowed to have a leisurely breakfast, however, which they enjoyed very much, talking and joking and almost forgetting they were on this plane for a purpose.

After the meal, they were led into a large cavern that was completely covered in tapestries, carpets and other soft furnishings such that it did not appear to be a cave at all. Kudala was awaiting them at one the end of the vast space and they hastened towards her. “Namaste! Hope you had a good rest and filling breakfast,” hissed the snake woman. Even her hissing sounded melodious to Addy’s ears. Over the night and morning, he had decided that Kudala’s eyes were the things casting a spell on him and had made up his mind to avoid eye contact with her as much as possible so as to keep his vow of focusing entirely on the task at hand and getting back to the human realm with his heart in one piece. Kay nodded, smiling happily and Addy replied in the affirmative too, looking at a spot slightly above Kudala’s right shoulder. “Right! Then let’s get down to our preparations. You both now know the basics of fighting, meditation, and the various mantras that give yogic powers and how to put them to best use. This is the last day of your training, and I will be your guru for this last phase.”

Kudala paused, frowning a little because Addy seemed strangely inattentive, looking behind her instead of at her. She glanced over her shoulder. “Is anything bothering you, Aditya? Why are you staring at the wall behind me?” she asked, a little impatiently. Addy swallowed. “No..nothing,” he stammered, looking at her eyes for a fleeting second before looking at the ground in front of him. “I’m listening, please go on,” he said, flushing a little at the awkwardness. Kay jumped into the conversation, realizing suddenly what he was trying to do. “Will you be taking us to the city to practice?” she asked eagerly. Addy gave a sigh of relief when Kudala turned to her and said, “Of course not. How can we afford to advertise the fact you both are living here? It would only draw attention to you and endanger your mission. However, it is necessary for you to have a dry run so everything goes as smoothly as possible the day of the mission which could be tomorrow if you both feel confident about it. So we are here in this cavern, to do just that,” she said.

Addy and Kay glanced at each other in perplexity. How could standing in this cavern substitute a dry run in the actual city? Kay opened her mouth to ask just that but was stalled by Kudala’s next words – “I want you both to close your eyes and examine the maps in your memory thoroughly. Try to remember every detail by heart before you say you are ready. When you are ready, I will cast an illusion in this cavern that will simulate the city, palace, and palace grounds. We will move through this illusion and practice the steps we will be taking on the day of the task,” she said. “Another thing you need to know, is that after careful deliberation with the king and ministers, it has been decided we should go at night rather than daytime. It is more dangerous at nighttime since the rakshasas are stronger, but we will have to take that risk as daytime will be too complicated with a lot of people moving about and chances of being spotted will be much higher. Therefore, this illusion too will be a night one, so be mentally prepared. Now close your eyes and observe the maps thoroughly. Let me know once you are done,” said the nubile guru.

The two students obediently closed their eyes, and brought up the maps before their mind’s eyes, walking through every part of it in 4D, observing and memorizing as many details as possible. Once they were done, Kudala observed, “I hope you really did make note of everything. I am going to cast a two-layer illusion. The basic layer will be a replica of Alkapuri, and there

will be another layer with pitfalls or red herrings along the way, which you have to identify as an illusion and remove them using your meditative powers. Do you understand what I mean?" she asked. Addy was impressed by the simple ingenuity of the rehearsal plan. It would fix the route in their minds as well as the details in such a way, unless there were major complications on the day of the charge, they would find going in as easy as walking into their own houses. "The basic illusion will also include creatures which you must not dispel but fight with as you would, were they real. This is to give you practice of an actual fight. The simulation of the creatures will be as near as the real ones, based on my vast experience of them," said Kudala.

Kudala began chanting the mantras that would cause the illusion. Although she could chant them in her head, she did so verbally so the two pupils would be ready for the appearance of the illusion. Slowly, the richly decorated walls, roof, and floor became duller and fainter, and disappeared altogether. In their place, was the enchanted garden they had visited yesterday, Chaitrath. They found themselves standing in a copse of trees, dimly lit by moonlight. "This is where we will start from," Kudala instructed them. "Now follow me as I make my way toward the palace. If anything tries to stop us or comes in the way, deal with it as you feel you should. I will correct you if you are in error. You can also ask my opinion about what should be done. The aim of this rehearsal is that you clear all your doubts now, as we will not be at liberty to talk when we actually go there, unless we want to get caught."

They began following her through the garden toward where they knew was the palace grounds. They would actually avoid the city since the garden bordered on the palace grounds. They had almost reached the edge of the garden when they saw their way barred by a silent black pool. It seemed to stretch in either direction for a considerable distance. It would be impossible to go around it if they wanted to go fast and it looked ominous as it lay there silent and dark in the moonlight, not reflecting even the moon's rays. Addy frowned. He did not remember any pool like this one in the map. He closed his eyes for a second to look at the map and found he was right. He opened his eyes and knew it was an illusion. He quickly spoke the mantra for dispelling the illusion and it vanished, revealing the paving stones that made up the garden path and shrubs and trees on either side.

“Good work Aditya,” praised Kudala. “Come on, Kay, you have to be quicker than this,” she encouraged her other pupil. Addy wanted to kick himself for feeling inordinately pleased at the praise. They went further on and met a few more minor illusions that either Kay or Addy managed to see through and dispel. They reached the end of the enchanted garden which was marked by the foliage becoming sparser and landscaped gently up to the palace. There were more open spaces and no cover. “Now this is where our paths diverge,” said Kudala, turning to face them and walking backwards. “Aditya and I will continue on this path until we reach the palace and take the path around to the East gate. You, Kay, have to take this smaller path that goes southward towards the stables. During the simulation, we will explore both paths together so that both of you know what to do thoroughly,” she said, turning around and resuming gliding towards the palace. “We’ll take the palace route first, then get back to this point and take the stables route.”

The closer they got to the palace, the illusions became more frequent. Kudala was certainly a hard taskmaster, thought Addy to himself as he nearly slammed into a wall that was rendered invisible by Kudala’s illusion. He just detected it in the nick of time before breaking his nose on it. Kay gave him an appreciative grin and thumbs up. She had not seen it at all and would have walked straight into it. They went around the wall and continued on the route. Kudala said, “You may become invisible now, as this close to the palace, it is better not to be seen. Some creatures may still detect you, if they are suspicious enough to search for signs that you are there. Yakshas and rakshasas are the ones you have to look out for. Gandharvas generally do not wander about at night and even if they do, are less suspicious.”

They came to the East gate which was, they observed, guarded by a fierce-looking yaksha bearing a spear. Flanking him and slightly behind him, stood two rakshasas who looked like they were guards, barring the way with their spears crossed against each other’s. As soon as the yaksha spotted them, despite their invisibility, he shouted, “Who goes there?” Kudala paused the illusion and turned to Addy. “When he asks that, you must change into your gandharva form and become visible,” she said. “He will then ask what you want, and you must say you want entry as you are a distant cousin of the gandharva Dagdhrath and have come with a message for him. The yaksha may or may not ask you a riddle to see if you are worthy of being let into the palace. If he does ask one, wait for me to speak the correct

answer into your mind and then give him the answer.”

Addy nodded to show he understood. He changed form, let the invisibility amulet go and became visible as a gandharva. He explained he was a messenger who wanted to visit Dagdhrath. As predicted, the yaksha said pompously. “That is as may be, but since you have come at night and do not look entirely above board to me, I will ask you a riddle. If you are able to answer, I will let you in. But if you are not able to answer, I will set these rakshasas on you,” he said fiercely. Addy inclined his head in acceptance. “Tell me O gandharva, what is that, knowing which, everything becomes known? What is it by which the unheard becomes heard and the unthought becomes thought? Tell me this, O dodgy gandharva, and I will let you in.”

Addy gulped. It sounded like absolute nonsense to him. He turned to Kudala. He was astounded to see neither she nor Kay were to be seen. He guessed Kay was still invisible and now Kudala had become invisible too. Then he heard Kudala’s voice echoing in his head. “Brahman is the answer.” He turned to the yaksha and said, “Brahman is the answer to your question.” The yaksha seemed impressed. “You are intelligent, O brave gandharva! You may go in.” So saying, he moved aside and waved at the rakshasas to open the gate behind them. Suddenly the illusion melted away and the cavern came back. Addy blinked at the unexpected change. He found Kay and Kudala visible too. “Change back,” said Kudala. He obediently became human again. “You may both go and have lunch and have a little break. After that come back here, and we will continue the simulation. We must complete the entire simulation before dinner time today. That way, we can mark time and if necessary we can practice more over the next two days,” she went on, sounding almost like a drill sergeant, Addy thought. He and Kay went out toward the dining area, discussing the simulation as they went.



## 24. Simulation II

Soon they were back in the cavern, ready for the second half of the simulation. Kudala cast the illusion again, and they found themselves inside the palace now. “Shall we?” asked Kudala, waiting to see if they had any questions. Addy turned to the snake woman to ask her something that had been disturbing him all through lunch. “Er...why is it we need to go through the yaksha at the gate and his questions? Since we are invisible, wouldn't it be possible to get in anywhere without being noticed? And why were you invisible when I had to become visible and speak to the yaksha?”

Kudala smiled. “I wondered whether you would ask this. Firstly, there is no way even a fly can get through any aperture in the palace, undetected. Since all beings on this plane can shape shift, a very strong protection is cast on the palace perimeter. Anything that passes in will be seized and thrown into the dungeons before you can finish saying ‘innocent.’ The only way in are the four gates in each direction, which are guarded by powerful yakshas. As for me, I absolutely cannot risk exposure here because snake people are unofficially banned from Alkapuri since the last war. Even if I shape shifted to become an apsara, I would be running a significant risk of being detected as a snake woman due to the yakshas specifically checking everyone for this shape. They will not check for any other kind of creature, especially human, so you are safe. Once the door opens for you, I can slip in undetected close behind you.”

Since they had no more questions, the trio proceeded through the large palace. If Addy had thought the palace grand on the 4D interactive map, he knew he was mistaken; it had been a poor shadow of the real thing. The palace was huge, as if made for giants. He was reminded of the Greek palace where they had found the armor of Karna. This one was more opulent too as it wasn't in ruins and was well furnished. There were gleaming golden surfaces everywhere, lavishly embedded with precious stones. There were very few torches in the walls. The few that were there, cast so much light thanks to the the reflective surfaces of the walls, floor, and fixtures, that it was dazzlingly bright.

Although Vasuki had boasted that his palace was better, Addy felt that there was no comparison between the snake palace and this palace of the God of Wealth. Anything that could be called valuable and priceless, was to be

found here. He wondered how the treasury would be, seeing as just the ordinary everyday surfaces were so magnificently decorated. As they went deeper into the palace, Kudala told them to mark this route into their interactive maps so they would be able to find the shortest route to the treasury in case Addy had to go alone or if Kay had to accompany him instead of Kudala. “An important instruction I must give you at this point, is to avoid confrontation as much as possible. Although I know you both have been trained well and are model students, the best way to go about this task is to remain unseen and slip in and out of the city before anyone knows you are here. As soon as you lay hands on the Nagamani, you will hand it over to me so that even if you are caught, you can try to talk your way out of it.” Addy did not like the sound of this. “But what about you? Won’t that put you in grave danger?” he asked.

“Not really,” said Kudala. “As soon as the gem is in my hands, I can send it back to my father at our palace, via yogic transference. If I am caught, I will teach them a lesson or two in warfare before I fly back to the kingdom. If I am defeated, so be it. I am not afraid to die for the sake of my people who depend on my father and me for protection and sustenance,” she said proudly. “Spoken like a true princess!” said Kay admiringly. They proceeded along Kudala’s route, working their way through the large empty rooms down towards the dungeons. Some of the rooms were not entirely unoccupied, but the sleeping occupants did not pose a problem and even when one or two of the occupants appeared awake, the three who were invisible again, went undetected. Addy hoped the real mission too would go as smoothly as this.

They finally found themselves at the bottom of the steps leading into the dungeon. Kudala, whose silhouette could be seen very translucently by Addy since all of them were invisible, made a motion for them to be as quiet as possible. She then led the way into the enormous room that Addy had seen on his first journey inside the interactive map, and which belonged to Mahashan, the rakshasa treasury guard. As they tiptoed across after Kudala, they heard enormous snores from the big bed that took over a quarter of the room, and they saw Mahashan lying across the opulent silk covers and cushions, deep asleep. Addy was excited now, to see the secret way to the treasury which he had not been able to see on the map. Kudala led them across to a door which was hidden behind roof-to-floor tapestries in the

room. She silently lifted one side of the tapestry and gestured them to go in before her. The opening led to another passage, one which had guards placed along 10-yard intervals. There were three yaksha guards in all but they all appeared to be asleep.

Going past them, they reached a gigantic golden door set flush in the wall at the dead end of the passage. Addy and Kay wondered how they would be able to open the heavy door and how they could avoid being seen or heard by the three guards. Kudala pointed to four horizontal locks and one circular lock across the double door which held the doors closed securely from top to bottom. The locks were made of different materials. The topmost was made of diamond, the hardest substance here on the heavenly plane too. The second was made of stone that looked like granite. The third was made of what looked like molten lava that eerily swam in place. The fourth was some kind of metal that looked sometimes like silver and then flashed to a more golden color, almost becoming invisible in the golden door. The fifth which was in the center of the other four was made of inscriptions carved right on the door in the shape of a circle which interlaced the right and left sides of the door.

Kudala turned to them and held up her hands in front of them, palms facing Addy and Kay. She closed her eyes and Addy saw the same flash of light that he had seen when Vasuki was giving him the going-back mantra at the beginning of this whole adventure. He knew what was coming and was ready for the piece of parchment that appeared suddenly in front of him. He caught it and looked at it. He saw Kay had a similar one in her hands. He stared at the writing. It seemed to contain some mantras. There were four lines of writing. Kudala silently pointed at the first and indicated it was for the diamond lock. The second was for the stone lock, the third for the lava lock, and the fourth for the metal one. Addy nodded to show he understood. She turned back and was silent for a while. The locks began opening silently, and Addy realized that Kudala must be chanting the mantras in her mind.

Then she beckoned and made them stand one on each side of her. She put her hands on the middle lock and began turning the concentric circles. On closer inspection of the lock, Addy found that what he thought were inscriptions was actually a pattern that when correctly positioned would form a picture. Kudala rearranged all the circles to fit correctly and a picture of the

God of Wealth formed on the circular lock. As soon as the last piece was clicked into place, the lock parted in the middle and the doors began to open silently. Addy and Kay followed Kudala into the treasury. As soon as they were inside, Kudala shut the doors and turned to them. “Although I will be opening this door myself, I just thought it would be wise for you both to have the knowledge of how to open the door. You have to chant the mantras for the locks the same number of times as the number of the lock. Which means, once for the diamond one, twice for the stone one and so on. The fifth, in the middle, is a physical lock as you saw, which has to be manipulated until the picture forms correctly and opens the door.”

“Once you get inside, do not become dazzled by all the wonderful things here. This is a humungous place, and almost like a maze. If you get distracted from your goal, you can be lost here forever and never find your way out. I will show you the shortest way to the Nagamani which is in the gems section, so that you will know how to get to it quickly and back,” she said. Addy and Kay almost forgot to breathe at the spectacular treasures all around them. They were neatly laid out on shelves with the bigger ones on the floor and there seemed to be innumerable open rooms branching out from the main dungeon. Kudala led them to the left of the main door and they followed her closely, trying not to get drawn in by the splendour of various objects, most of which looked like they would have archeological value in their world.

Kudala led them to an open room that held a variety of gems. There were gems as tiny as sand particles and a lot of football-sized gems. There were all hues and brilliancy of gems. The human duo’s eyes were nearly popping out of their heads by the time Kudala took them right to the center of the gem room where there was a single pedestal on which rested the most wondrous gem they had ever seen. It was not large, small enough to fit the palm of the hand. Like the replica Vasuki had shown them, this real Nagamani too was green-blue in color with various other colors sparkling inside as if lit by an inner fire. It was absolutely breathtaking. It seemed to cast a strange feeling of exultation and warmth over Addy as he gazed at it. Kudala gestured to him to move forward to take it up in his hands.

Nervously, Addy bent over the pedestal and closed his hand on the gem, half afraid he would be triggering some kind of booby trap which would

get them all caught and thrown into the prisons. However, nothing of the sort happened, and he stood with the precious Nagamani in his hands, feeling awed and humbled by the beautiful gem. The next moment, everything vanished and the training cavern reappeared. Addy and Kay blinked at the sudden transformation. Addy found himself strangely disappointed that the gem was not still in his hands.

“So that was the route to the treasury,” said Kudala. “Keep those parchments about you carefully, in case you ever need to get into the treasury on your own. Although this was more or less what you might encounter during a real foray, remember, anything that can go wrong, *might* go wrong. So be prepared for any eventuality with a plan B. Do you have any questions?” Kay and Addy looked at each other. “Not at the moment,” said Kay. “Then shall we go back and go to the other route? The route Kay will be taking?” the snake woman asked, looking at them both. When they nodded, she closed her eyes and cast the illusion again. They found themselves back at the junction of the path which led eastwards and the narrower path that led southward.

They were instructed to become invisible again, and they clutched the talisman hanging from their necks and chanted the required mantra nonverbally, turning invisible at once. Kudala praised them for doing it so well after just a few weeks of practice. They could see her as a translucent shape going in front of them if they looked carefully and followed her down the narrow path. The path led winding among gently landscaped lawns and fountains until they came to a bare ground that was fenced around but had no gate. Kudala stopped and turned around to face them. “This is where things might get difficult for you, Kay,” she said. “This is the training grounds for the soldiers of Alkapuri. Usually they are empty during the night, but I have heard that they have random weapons and wrestling practice in the night on some nights. These nights are not planned beforehand, so we will not know if there is going to be a practice or not on the night we plan to come here. If there is anyone practicing here, Kay, be very very careful. Skirt around the perimeter as much as possible and try not to attract attention,” she said.

She pointed out a faint track through the center of the field. “This is the shortest way to the stables, right across the training grounds. If there is no one here, you can take this route.” She went down the shortcut and the

two pupils followed. When they had walked for about 10 minutes across the moonlit fields, they saw dark shapes in the distance and heard faint noises, of an occasional wicker, snorting, or low trumpeting from the animals kept in the royal stables. Kudala took them right across all the animals that were in the stalls, Addy and Kay trying to get a glimpse at the magical animals. They came to the end of the stables, where there was a high fence made of silver panels that corralled a large corner of the stables. There was a gate here, they noted as Kudala took them towards it.

“The Pushpak Vimana is kept here,” said Kudala. “The gate is usually kept locked, but it is not a physical lock. Since they might need to use it urgently, the yakshas have a verbal lock on it. It can be opened by saying – ‘King Vaisravana is the mightiest king in the realm!’ So all you have to do is say that when you are close enough to the gate, Kay,” she said. She demonstrated the truth of it by pronouncing the unlocking words and the gates swung open silently.

Addy and Kay gasped at the magnificence of the chariot they saw beyond the gates. It was no color they had ever seen, rather a mixture of different colors. It seemed to reflect the sky at times and the land around it at other times. It was shaped like a spaceship. “OMG, this is the first spaceship!” exclaimed Kay. Kudala silenced her with a frown. They had become visible again at her instructions, after entering the hangar of the Pushpak Vimana. “Normally there is no one guarding the chariot, but you must be careful at any given time, Kay. Now come, let me show you where you have to go to operate it.” She led the way to the beautiful flying chariot, and as they got close enough, a short flight of stairs appeared flowing down from the spaceship invitingly. The trio climbed these and entered the vimana.

The interior of the spaceship was stunning. It was a 12 seater. There was a seat in the center of the circular ship, which was grander than the rest. The rest of the seats were placed in a circle around the central one and these were quite opulent too. Behind the seats were couches and small dining areas with food ready on tables. Addy wondered why this was so, since the chariot was supposed to travel at the speed of light. He asked Kudala, and she said it was for passengers who came early, before the charioteer arrived, and had to wait. Kay had stepped up tentatively to the central chair that was like a

throne, gleaming copper in the dim lights that shone all over the interior of the spaceship. Addy noticed that the entire interior seemed to be made from copper covered with silk and satin furnishings. Kudala moved to stand next to Kay.

“Sit down,” she said. “Since the chariot is not real, just an illusion, it will not move. But you can sit and see how it feels. In the real chariot, it is important not to sit until it is time to go, so that you can think only one destination and hold that thought until the vehicle takes you to it.” Kay sat down on the luxurious throne and felt a little overawed. To think that she was going to have the luck of being one of the few people to have entered the legendary Pushpak Vimana, let alone be lucky enough to actually sit in the pilot’s seat! She felt a thrill even though it was not the real chariot. The circular walls and dome that had appeared opaque from outside, seemed to be made of clear glass from the inside. They must be one-way mirrors, Addy guessed, marveling at the ingenuity of the craftsmanship. They could see everything around the vehicle as if they were sitting in an open-air auditorium.

“Since you will reach much before Aditya and me, you may sit on one of the couches and relax until it is time for us to arrive. Once you see us coming in the distance, you must sit on the central seat and push away all thoughts, and when we enter and take our seats, you must meditate on the agreed upon destination which is the outer gates of the snake kingdom,” instructed Kudala. “Aditya, in the meantime, must wear the Karna kavacha and activate it so that the Agneyastra that is sent after us will be nullified.” Kudala paused. “Hopefully, everything will go just like we want it to, and we will be back in the snake kingdom before the Nagamani has been missed. Please let me know if this simulation was enough. If it isn’t, we can always go through it again over the next couple of days. You must be absolutely confident about going in,” she said after she had removed the illusion and they were back in the large cavern at the snake palace.

Addy and Kay felt like high-school students who had studied the subject one too many times. They quickly reassured the snake princess that they were satisfied with the simulation and were ready to go on the actual mission. Kudala was pleased. She dismissed them with an instruction to meet her after dinner since it was almost dinner time now, to discuss further

instructions. Kay and Addy slowly walked to the dining area, planning on waiting there until they were served, instead of going to their respective rooms, since they were not at all tired out by the day's simulation exercise. They wanted to discuss every aspect of the simulation and check every loophole and have a plan B for every eventuality.



## 25. D-Day

After dinner, Kudala briefed them about the next day. “You can eat, sleep, and relax well tomorrow until evening when you will be escorted out to the palace gates. There you will meet me, and I will take you to Chaithrath like I did last time. Then we will follow the simulation routes. Your belongings, including the Karna Kavacha, will be planted in the Pushpak Vimana by one of our people who work in the stables before we get there so that all we have to do is get in, activate the shield and fly to safety.” She paused to see if they were following. The duo nodded. “If everything goes well, we should be done in a couple of hours. Kay, you should reach the Vimana about an hour before us since you have to just navigate the grounds and get past the stables. Be ready in the chariot, Kay, and as soon as you see us coming, get into the charioteer’s seat. Start meditating, and the moment we are safely inside, think of the destination and bring us back here.”

“Aditya, Kay, both of you must carry the parchment for the treasury locks somewhere about your persons. Try to memorise the mantras and chanting times so you can manage without the parchment, if possible. You both must also be confident about taking on each other’s role if need be. If we can’t talk due to fear of discovery, you can try to link telepathically to me by concentrating your thoughts on me and repeating a specific question or statement over and over again. I will answer you.” She looked at them both. “I think that is all, I cannot think of anything else that might be useful at this time,” she said. “Please question me about any doubts that you might have.” Addy and Kay didn’t have any and so they were told to get a good night’s sleep and relax as well as eat well the next day and be prepared to go to Alkapuri in the evening.

The two humans chatted on the way back. “We must remember to meditate before attempting to chant the mantra and go back to Greece,” said Kay anxiously. “Remember, we must land outside the danger zone.” Addy nodded. “I just hope we do not run into any hurdles on our mission. I don’t know if we are really prepared for a battle with any of these beings!” Kay scoffed at that. “I’m ready,” she said confidently. “In fact, I’d welcome a challenge to test the scope of my knowledge and skill in the recently learnt stuff.” “What?” said Addy incredulously. “Didn’t you get enough of that with the contest we had? Not satisfied beating me hollow are you?” he asked

half bemused and half angry. “Well you heard Kudala, we must try *not* to attract attention. So you better curtail your bloodthirsty nature and keep out of fights and get to the flying chariot as soon as possible. And wait there *patiently* until we arrive,” he said authoritatively. Kay rolled her eyes. “Ok Dad,” she grinned.

The next day was the best Addy had had since coming to the naga kingdom. The whole day was free to do as he pleased, and he did not want to spend it cooped up in his cave-room. He had a relaxed bath and breakfast and planned with Kay to go outdoors and explore the side of the mountain belonging to the nagas. When Vasuki heard of their plans, they were given a pair of soldiers to accompany them, to protect them and keep them out of trouble. They took a sort of picnic lunch which was carried by the soldiers and set off down the mountainside, following a track that led to the next city. They had great fun, chatting about nothing serious, discussing their lives in the human realm. “This is a great way of clearing the mind and leaving it fresh for the evening,” said Kay appreciatively. “Yeah, and you’ve got me to thank for that. Great minds think great things you know,” joked Addy and received a punch from Kay. “Oww. You don’t know your own strength, girl,” he said, wincing exaggeratedly.

After they got back, they decided a relaxing nap was in order because who knew whether they would get back on time to sleep that night. They might be on the mission the whole night. So they went back to their rooms and slept away the afternoon, another luxury which Addy enjoyed rarely. When he got ready in the evening, he was feeling as refreshed and energized as he could hope to be. He went out to the gates and found he was first, so sat down on a boulder to wait. Kudala and Kay came there almost at once. Kudala gave them both armors to wear and Addy was reminded again of the contest when he had to wear an armor. She handed Addy a small pouch that he could use to keep the Nagamani in and which was to be worn around his waist on a belt.

Kudala sounded like a drill sergeant when she started giving last-minute instructions – “Remember, your chosen weapons will appear when you meditate on them just like you did yesterday. Keep the treasury door password with you at all times. Try to avoid confrontation. The aim is to get in and out as soon as possible without attracting attention. Hand me the

Nagamani as soon as possible. Reach the chariot as soon as the gem is secured and use the kavacha as soon as we are airborne,” she fired off, managing to look strikingly beautiful even in her plain warrior clothes and armor. “Any questions? Ask them now as we must be as silent as possible once we reach the City of Wealth.”

Kay had a few questions about her route and after Kudala answered them, she asked them to sit on a seat as usual and after ensuring they were all invisible, flew them over to the enchanted garden in Kubera’s city. As they began walking down the garden path towards the palace, they were startled by the sound of thunder. Kudala paused. “It sounds like it’s going to rain,” she murmured. She looked at Kay. “You will be the one outdoors. Do you think you can manage?” Kay shrugged. “How badly does it rain here?” she asked. “Will it be a thunderstorm? I think I can manage as long as I can see my way fairly well and there’s no flood,” she joked. “It does not rain in the enchanted gardens, as you know. However, it does rain in the palace grounds and rest of the city. Don’t worry, it never rains so hard as to give real trouble. After all, this is a divine city, not a human one. However, it is worrisome that it is raining since rain and sunshine are directly related to the King’s moods. So this means Kubera is already upset about something. I just hope it is something that will keep him busy and out of our way instead of being something that points to us!” said Kudala pensively.

Addy who had been quiet until now, asked – “How is the rain related to Kubera’s mood?” “The city has been constructed such that the king decides what climate or weather will be prevalent. Since Kubera is generally a peaceable yaksha, the usual climate is spring. However, sometimes he does get angry or upset and then the climate changes to the rainy season, autumn, or sometimes summer. I remember during the war between the nagas and yakshas, it was scorching summer here, reflecting Kubera’s rage at the time.”

They had reached almost to the end of the gardens and Kudala held a hand to her mouth, indicating they weren’t to talk anymore. They went down the path beyond the gardens and came to the fork where Kay had to go southwards. She waved to them silently and walked down the path. Kudala and Addy were to continue down the main path. Addy felt a little worried for Kay, who would be all alone for the first time. He knew she was capable of the task she had been allotted and of protecting herself, but he could not help

feeling a little guilty that she was here in the first place because of him. He hoped she would not have to face any dangers and would reach the chariot in record time and settle down to wait for him and Kudala in safety.

Kudala was gesturing to him impatiently to hurry up from the path ahead of him. He jogged over, and they continued on silently. They reached the palace walls and started along it toward the East gate. That was when things started happening, changing all their plans. There was a sudden booming voice quite close to them, making Addy nearly stumble. “Kudala, is that you?” Addy felt Kudala freeze for a moment in front of him. Then he felt her trying to speak to him telepathically and opened his mind as he had been taught. “It’s Dagdhrath. I must reveal myself and speak to him. Hide until I move away with him and then continue on. I will try to get to the door before you need to answer the riddle. If I don’t make it, go on as we had planned and practiced,” she said rapidly. Addy’s head spun. He remained still as she appeared visible and went round a corner where he heard her speaking with the gandharva, explaining that she had come to meet him.

Addy slunk along silently, still invisible, toward the corner and peeked around it. He saw the snake woman pulling Dagdhrath along by the arm, away from the palace, towards the enchanted garden via another path perpendicular to the one he was standing on. They were talking and laughing animatedly. He scowled after them. He walked towards the East gate slowly, wishing he wouldn’t reach it before Kudala got back. He did not fancy facing the fierce gatekeeper and trying to answer his impossibly confusing riddles by himself. He crept along but all too soon found himself near the East gate. He reluctantly went up the short flight of stairs. He could see the gatekeeper just as he had in the simulation, but standing behind him were four guards, instead of two. He wondered briefly why the security had been increased, but could not wonder long as the yaksha facing him shouted out into the night, “Who goes there? Reveal yourself! If you don’t, you will be attacked.”

Addy quickly changed into his gandharva self and released the invisibility amulet. “Greetings O gandharva! Who are you and why do you seek entry to the palace of Kubera?” asked the stern-faced yaksha. “I am a friend of the gandharva Dagdhrath. I come with a message for him from his country,” Addy said hoping the said gandharva would not suddenly turn up to

refute his claim. Where was Kudala? The longer she took, the higher the chances of their plan failing, because Addy, while fairly sure about his fighting skills by now, was not at all sure he could solve a riddle. Especially if it was anything like the one in the simulation. “If you say so,” said the yaksha, looking skeptically at him.

“I will ask you some questions. If you are able to answer me correctly, I will let you in. If you are unable to answer correctly, you will be seized and thrown down into the dungeons until either Dagdhrath vouches for you or the king gives a release order,” he said with a penetrating stare. Addy nodded. He was feeling desperate, but there was nothing to do but listen to the riddle and hope Kudala was somewhere nearby, invisible, and would tell him the answer telepathically like she had promised to. The yaksha said – “Then listen carefully:

*I never was, am always to be,  
No one ever saw me, nor ever will  
And yet I am the confidence of all  
To live and breathe on this terrestrial ball.*

Now tell me the answer O gandharva who claims to be a friend of the great Dagdhrath!”

Addy thought rapidly, whilst keeping his mind open for telepathic suggestions. He could not hear anything. Terrestrial ball must be earth. So the answer was something that gave confidence to live and breathe on earth. It was something that was in the future, not the past, given the first two lines. He racked his brains. “Well?” asked the yaksha. “What is your answer?” “Er...could you please give me a little more time to think?” pleaded Addy. The yaksha stared at him for a while before nodding. “But be quick young fellow!” Addy had a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. What could it be? Something that was in the future but which no one saw....could it be tomorrow? People were confident about seeing tomorrow and so lived, although they actually never did see it since by the time they reached it, it was the present, or today. He made up his mind and screwing up his courage, he said, “Revered Sir, is it ‘tomorrow’?”

The yaksha who had made up his mind that the young gandharva was an imposter and would not know the answer, was a little disappointed as well

as impressed. "You are right. However, you took a long time to reply. Therefore, I am going to have to ask you another question," he said smugly. Addy groaned inwardly. He had got the first one right by fluke. "Please Sir, let me in. I did answer correctly didn't I?" "My decision is final," said the gatekeeper firmly. "Here is the second riddle:

*At night they come without being fetched,  
And by day they are lost without being stolen.*

It is a simpler one this time. Be sure to answer it quickly," he said.

Addy thought furiously. He was unafraid now, because he had figured out that if he failed in answering correctly, he could become invisible and escape back to the naga kingdom instead of waiting to be captured. He could take on these guards since he had surprise on his side, if they did chase him. This confidence gave him his thinking capability back, and if Addy was good at one thing, it was thinking. Something that came out at night but was lost without being stolen? He looked up idly at the sky. The answer struck him at once. "I know the answer," he said excitedly. "The stars! The stars come out at night without being fetched because they were always there. And they are lost in the daytime due to the light of the sun, without being stolen."

The yaksha seemed delighted with his answer. "You are right O brave gandharva! I am sorry for doubting your veracity. Please enter the palace." He motioned to the four armed guards to open the gateway and allow Addy inside. Addy silently heaved a sigh of relief and wondered if Kudala was there behind him at least now. If she hadn't managed to come yet, she was not going to be able to enter the palace tonight. Which meant he, Addy, would have to continue with the mission alone. He walked slowly towards the gates, hoping she was following him. Finally he was inside, and the gate was shut again. He turned around and looked carefully to see if the translucent form of Kudala was anywhere to be seen. But there seemed to be not another soul in the large hallway except himself. He looked around at the surroundings. The hallway, with the luxurious furnishings as well as the brightly flaring sconces on the walls making the interior of the palace as bright as day, was the same as in the simulation. He decided on following the route to the treasury after checking it for a moment on the map in his mind's eye.

## 26. Inside the Palace

Addy began moving downward and southward through the palace, invisible again now and moving cautiously. He did not expect anyone to be about since it was late night but wasn't taking any chances. He could hear muted conversation from rooms along the way, but no one accosted him until he reached the stairs to the dungeons. As he was going down the stairs, to his alarm, he heard footsteps behind him. Since the dungeon staircase was a winding one, he couldn't see who it was. But it sounded like at least two people, and he did not want to be detected so close to his destination. He began descending urgently, looking wildly around the bare staircase for a hiding place. He spotted an alcove a little way down that held a statue. He went as quietly and quickly as he could to the alcove and squeezed himself beside the statue. It was not a moment too soon because he saw three people coming down the stairs. The lights on the stairs were dimmer than the main hallways of the palace, but it was still bright enough for him to have a good look at the person who came striding down.

A hideously ugly man was descending the staircase followed by what looked like two rakshasa guards who followed a step behind him. The person in front was a yaksha, resplendently clothed and glittering with gold and jewels. He was, however, short, potbellied, and had stubby limbs. His face was exceptionally ugly too, and Addy, watching, thought he could easily win a contest for ugliness against Mahashan. He waited in the alcove until he could no longer hear the footsteps. He debated what to do. Should he go on or wait until the visitor left? Since this person, whoever he was, had come down to the dungeons, he must be visiting with Mahashan which meant Addy could not risk trying to get into the treasury. After hesitating for a bit, he decided to go down and see what was happening and maybe hide somewhere near the treasurer's room to await an opportunity to slip in. It beat standing next to a statue waiting for the visitor to come back up anyway.

As he neared the room belonging to Mahashan, he saw that the two guards had been now posted outside his door, one on either side. He wondered what it was that had brought this well-dressed caller to meet Mahashan so late in the night. He felt he *must* listen to their conversation. He crept along silently until he was a yard away from the guards and wondered how he could get past them without them being aware of him. He

noticed a small statuette on a pedestal near him and was struck with an idea to distract the guards. He picked up the statuette and threw it down the corridor behind him, at the same time casting an illusion to make it seem like the statuette was thrown from the opposite direction, from farther down the corridor. It made a terrific clatter, and the guards immediately snapped to attention and ran down the corridor to see who had thrown it. Addy flattened himself against the wall when they ran past and as soon as they had gone, he rushed forward to enter the treasurer's room.

Addy paused at the doorway to check that he wasn't walking into danger. He saw no other guards in the room. Mahashan and his guest were sitting on low couches at the far end of the room, conversing and drinking wine. He walked slowly towards them, careful to keep pieces of furniture between himself and them all the time. "...knew he was giving you wrong advice," the great rakshasha was growling. "I tell you, he has some nefarious plans!" he said. "Oh...stop your tirade against Dagdhrath," the yaksha was saying. "I did not come here to argue about him. But this news about an impending attack by the rakshasha descendants of my half-brother is worrisome. No doubt they have their eye on the treasures of my kingdom. Especially those in the treasury," he said angrily.

"You better ensure stricter security measures on the treasury as soon as possible," he commanded. "As you wish, your majesty," said Mahashan quickly. "You know your slightest wish is my command. I will do it early tomorrow morning. And please do not worry about the attack. I am sure we are more than a match for those weak homeless rakshasas. Please relax now and have some more of this good wine, Sire," he said unctuously. Addy took a good look at the yaksha. So this was the great Kubera. He did not look awe inspiring at all, as he had expected the God of Wealth to look. He looked nothing like his image on the fifth lock of the treasury door! Addy stiffened the next moment when he heard Mahashan say, "I must have drunk too much. I smell human flesh! Mmmm." Kubera laughed so hard, he had tears in his eyes. "Yes, you must be more drunk than usual, Mahashan. A human? That too here in your room?! Humans have forgotten the connection between their plane and ours long long ago. There is no way one could be on our plane, let alone in our palace, and even more so, in the dungeons!" he said, still sniggering. Mahashan looked abashed.



“Anyway, you have put me in a good mood with your humor. I’ll go back to my rooms now. I had meant to take a look at the treasures in the vault but I’ve changed my mind. I will come back tomorrow after you have tightened the security on the treasury and check both those as well as the assests inside.” He got up and was escorted by Mahashan out the door. Addy crouched low behind a table containing an arrangement of fruit. Mahashan came back to the couch, murmuring to himself. He seemed to be grumbling about the king’s highhandedness and tendency to order him about. He poured himself another cup of wine and began drinking it. Addy had a very boring next half hour because he did not dare move until he was sure Mahashan was not going to be able to detect him. He waited until Mahashan drank cup after cup of wine and finally fell back on the couch cushions in an alcohol-induced stupor.

He knew he wouldn’t get another chance at the treasury. This was it. Tomorrow the locks would be changed or made stronger and who knew if the snake people would be able to learn it soon enough for him to try again. Besides, he did not fancy facing that gatekeeper with or without Kudala, yet again. He slowly got up from his hiding place and moved to the tapestry that hid the way into the treasury. He slipped inside and started making his way to the dead end where the door to the vault was. He managed to avoid attracting the attention of the guards who were looking bored and drowsy. He cast a sleeping spell on them that Kudala had taught him and soon they were snoring in their seats. He took out his parchment and looked at the door. It looked exactly the same as it had on the dry run. He repeated the mantras carefully in his mind as per the specifications on the parchment, watching as each lock dissolved into the great golden door. With the final lock opening, the door opened with a very faint click and Addy looked back to see if any of the guards had woken up.

They hadn’t moved, so he entered the treasury and closed the door quietly behind him. He made his way quickly to the open room containing the vault’s precious gems collection. With single-minded focus, he walked towards the Nagamani which was on a pedestal as it had been during the simulation. He walked forward and lifted it off the pedestal, and was just putting it into the pouch at his waist, when he heard a shrill ringing sound echoing throughout the vault. He nearly jumped out of his skin. Shit! There had been an alarm after all! And he had triggered it by taking the Nagamani.

He had wondered during the simulation about how strange it was that there was no triggering mechanism for at least the more important pieces in the treasury. But Kudala had not known about it. He was rushing to the door and slipping out as he thought all this, closing it firmly behind him. He rushed past the guards who were waking up, taking advantage of their initial confusion. They began rushing towards the golden door, while he rushed out from behind the tapestry.

He saw Mahashan struggling to stand up, his eyes bleary and unfocused. The noise of the alarm was louder here, almost deafening. Addy did not wait around to see what would happen. He ran out of the door, intent on making his escape without being caught. He took the stairs two at a time and had reached about halfway up them, close to his previous hiding place of the alcove with the statue, when he heard what sounded like a whole posse of people thundering down towards him. To avoid being caught (and trampled underfoot first), he flew into the alcove and squeezed next to the statue again. He was just in time to avoid being detected by a mix of yaksha and rakshasha soldiers in armor who rapidly ran down the stairs. Addy waited about a minute after they had gone, before resuming his ascent.

Out on the ground floor, Addy debated what to do. Would there be soldiers elsewhere around the palace now that the alarm had been given? What was the best thing to do? He decided to stick to the plan although he was skeptical about being let out by the yaksha gatekeeper at the East gate. Under normal circumstances, only people trying to gain entry were stopped. People going out were not even glanced at. However, now the news about an intruder in the treasury might have spread around the palace and the gatekeepers might have been notified not to let anyone out the gates without being searched. He went as quickly as he could but also as cautiously as possible. Before he reached the East gate, however, he knew he could not escape that way. There were guards milling about in the hallway along with a few citizens, probably palace workers, who had probably been roused by the alarm and wanted to find out what it was about.

Addy changed course and when he had put sufficient distance between himself and the hallway, he focused on the 4D map to check the other exits out of the palace. He would have to go out another way even if it meant a longer way to the stables. He wondered how Kay was doing. He hoped she

had reached the Pushpak Vimana and was waiting for him. He also wondered what had happened to Kudala. He was less worried about her, since she could return to the snake kingdom on her own. He decided not to try the North gate as that was the main gate of the palace and would definitely be a hotspot. By now Kubera himself might be up, and in the throne room which was close to the North gate. He couldn't go back southwards either unless he wanted to bump into all the people rushing about trying to find the cause of the commotion close to the treasury.

Logically, the West gate was his best bet now, and so he moved towards that as swiftly as he could. Although he was invisible, he still found himself dodging and hiding behind any available furniture or fixtures as he went along toward the West gate. He reached there without any incident but found that it was not open as he had hoped. Nor was it unguarded. His heart sinking, Addy moved closer to the gate, wondering what to do now. There had to be some way to get out. He remembered Kudala telling them to try to contact her telepathically if they needed help and could not ask in person. He closed his eyes and tried to meditate on the image of the beautiful snake woman. He found he could just about remember those mystic eyes, but not concentrate enough to know if she was tuning in to him. It was one of the things they had not practiced much of, he thought in despair. He decided to send a message, in case she was able to hear him after all. "They know there was an intruder in the treasury. I wasn't caught but now I'm at the West gate....please help me get out," he thought. He repeated the thought three times and waited for an answer but could not hear one.

He gave up and opened his eyes. He saw an old yaksha walking towards the gate, and followed him surreptitiously. The rakshasa at the gate stopped the yaksha and asked him why he wanted to go out so late at night. The yaksha explained that he had come to visit his daughter who was a maid at the palace and had gotten delayed but needed to go home to his old wife who was expecting him and would be worried if he didn't turn up. Addy waited patiently for a chance to slip out while listening idly to their conversation. "What's your name, and which village are you from?" the rakshasa asked. "My name is Haripad, and I come from the second village to the west, Manipura," said the yaksha. "Oh! Manipura? That is my wife's parents' place," said the rakshasa conversationally, while making an entry in a scroll at his side.

“Really? What is her name? Her family might be known to me. I can visit them and give a message for you if you like,” the yaksha was saying. “My name is Kalumba and my wife’s name is Damini,” said the rakshasa. “Her parents live in the little glen near the brook. If you happen to meet them, you can convey that their daughter is happy and well.” Addy perked up his ears at the mention of the guard’s name. A plan was forming itself in his mind. He waited until the two finished their little chat, and the rakshasa was opening the door for the yaksha. The moment the door was open, Addy cast an auditory illusion behind him. A voice remarkably like Mahashan’s sounded around the corner of the corridor. “Guard Kalumba! Come here at once. What is the meaning of this? Come here and explain yourself!” The voice sounded irate and the guard jumped. “Yes, Sir...coming,” he said and jogged down the corridor towards the voice.

The old yaksha shrugged his shoulders and went out the door, shadowed closely by Addy. As soon as they were clear of the threshold, Addy sprinted as fast as he could into the darkness of the palace grounds. He could hear a shout in the distance behind him, from the door. The guard had found there was no one in the corridor and was now suspicious about the old yaksha as he had not seen anyone else. Addy turned back and winced when he saw the yaksha being yanked back into the palace by the rakshasa guard, probably for questioning. He felt bad for the old fellow, but it could not be helped. At least *he* was out and he was sure the yaksha would be able to prove his innocence.

As soon as Addy was out, he realized he had forgotten completely about the rains. The whole grounds were swampy, and it was still drizzling rain. Everything was wet and Addy was soaked through in under a minute. He closed his eyes and looked into the interactive map. There was a long way to go since he had come out on the west side of the palace. The stables were on the southeast. At the south, just before the stables, he could see a yawning chasm on the map and wondered what it was. On closer observation, it looked like a deep slash in the mountainside on which the city was built. Although it was a valley, one side seemed to be open, slanting down steeply. He could go around the chasm but that would take another hour at least. As it is, he was going to be hours later than their original plan, despite his speed at running, leaping, and climbing rough terrain. He started off at a jog through the rain and wind. Soon it became too dark to see as the

lights from the palace did not reach this far into the grounds.

He had to slow down. He remembered the mantra they had been taught by Fanishwar and reinforced by the physicians at the snake kingdom, which would transform his eyes into feline-like ones. He stopped and forced himself to calm down before trying out the mantra. It was the first time he was trying it, and he hoped he would fare better at it than he had at the telepathic contact which he had not been able to achieve earlier with Kudala. He took a deep breath and chanted the mantra out loud, concentrating his mind on his eyes. He slowly opened his eyes. He was thrilled at what he saw. Whereas previously he had been able to see only about a foot in front of him, and even had been dark and hazy, now he was able to see as far as the horizon, just as he would with his human eyes at daytime on a clear day. It was black and white though, but Addy didn't care about that. It would have been too weird if he could see in color in the night! He started off again at full speed. He wondered again about Kay. Where was she? How had she fared?

## 27. Kay's Adventure

Kay had gone a little way down the southward trail when the rain had begun to fall. At first it had been a drizzle, and she felt invigorated by the cool spray. Soon, however, it had started beating down in earnest, and she debated whether to take shelter under one of the covered pergolas that were scattered around the palace gardens on either side of the path she was taking. The rain increased when she was debating this, and she could hardly see anything through it. The wind buffeted her and the rain stung as it lashed at her face and eyes. She ran to the nearest pergola and sat down to wait until the rain's fury reduced. As she waited, she thought she could see movement far off in the distance on the path. She squinted through the rain and could just make out the dim outlines of soldiers holding weapons as well as some kind of torches that were somehow impervious to the rain. She wondered what soldiers were doing down on the path going down to the stables in the middle of the night when it was pouring with rain.

Kay pondered over the strange sight. Maybe they were going to the training grounds and not the stables. Afterall, that came first on the path. And Kudala had said they sometimes train in the night. But this was a bit extreme, she thought, to be training in the middle of a rainy night when it was peace time. She thought she'd wait a while because anyhow she only had to reach the stables before Kudala and Addy did which was in another couple of hours, and she was confident about reaching the stables in under an hour even with the rain. That should give the soldiers enough time to do whatever training they were going to do and get out of her way.

After nearly an hour of waiting, feeling bored stiff, Kay decided it was time to get going on her part of the task. It was still raining, although much less wrathfully than before. She strode out into the rain, but it soon became obvious that it was going to be difficult to walk through the rain with such poor visibility. She remembered the mantra Fanishwar had taught them that would enable one to see in the dark. She went back to the pergola since that would help her focus better and sat in the meditation pose the guru had taught. She chanted the mantra out loud and opened her eyes. Like Addy was to find much later, Kay too found that her eyesight had suddenly gotten enhanced radically. She got up and strode out again, going in the direction of the training grounds.

When Kay neared the spot where she had seen the soldiers, she slowed down and went more cautiously. She was bored of this task and fumed that she had gotten the rottenest part of the deal while Addy and Kudala had the exciting part. She wished something exciting would happen. She was raring to fight and show her skills. She needed the exercise too. However, Kay was an obedient student if nothing else and remembered Kudala's warning to try and avoid confrontation as much as possible. Hence she slunk cautiously and invisibly down the path, looking out for signs of soldiers. After a few yards down the path, Kay thought they must have gone back to the palace. There was absolutely no sign or sound of them anymore.

She began going a little faster until she got to the training grounds. The stone path ended there and the ground was muddy, obliterating the trail down the center that Kudala had pointed out. There were little rivulets gushing about all over the place, and it was difficult to go quickly. She had to hop and leap across these small streams and felt lucky she could at least see clearly now through the rain. Her clothes were plastered with mud that squelched around her ankles. She wished she could have had her boots on, instead of the moccasin-like shoes they had been provided by the naga people.

Despite the churned up nature of the grounds, she could see traces of the soldiers' passage here and there where there were footprints sunk deep in the soft mud and containing rainwater. She noted they seemed to be going right across the training grounds. Why would they be going across it? Weren't they here to practice after all? What if they were in the stables right now? She would walk right into them if that were the case. She slowed down a bit again, wiping the rain out of her eyes. She tried to look as far as the stables but it was too far even for her feline eyes to fathom. She pushed on, getting closer and closer to the stables. The animals in the stables seemed to be agitated. This was to be expected when there was a thunderstorm, but she instinctively felt it was something more than just that.

As she neared the first stall, she could hear the whinnying and trumpeting of the horses and elephants. An idea struck her. She could find out what was happening by tuning into what the animals were saying to each other, with the help of the mantra she had been taught that enabled one to understand animal language. Although this had been a very brief lesson with

limited practice due to the simple fact that the naga people did not own any animals and these had had to be brought from the neighboring friendly gandharva or yaksha villages. So she and Addy had hardly been able to practice this particular mantra. She resolved to try her best and focused on the specifics of the yogic method that would facilitate her understanding of animal language.

After intoning the mantra in her mind, she went closer to the door of the first stall. “When will they go?” whinnied a foal. “Soon now, dear, very soon,” replied a mare soothingly. “I don’t like them! They smell fearsome and they make loud noises. And they have scary looking objects in their hands which can cause pain...,” continued the foal. So there was somebody in the stables or at least outside in the stableyard at the least, thought Kay. She crept closer. She saw the foal and mare in the stable move backward. Their ears twitched. They could probably hear and smell her although she was trying to be as quiet as possible. “What’s that? Another one of them?” enquired the chatty foal. “Shhhh dear. We are safe here, we are under the protection of the good king. Don’t be afraid. Try to go back to sleep,” said the mare, obviously the foal’s mother.

Kay decided to go further into the stableyard to listen to what the other occupants had to say. She neared the elephant stalls and peeped in. There were two elephants tethered in the first stall. They were murmuring quietly amongst themselves. She went closer, confident they could not see her as she was invisible. She was wrong however, as she found out immediately. The nearest animal shied away, mumbling to the other elephant, “What is this strange creature creeping in?” Kay saw the other elephant glance at her and say, “I have seen one of those! When I was in the employ of Indra, we used to frequent earth often. That is a man. I wonder what it is doing here?” Kay sighed. Her cover was blown, but she didn’t think there was any cause for fear as the elephants appeared as peaceable as the ones on earth.

She thought this was a good opportunity to ask the elephants some questions. She approached them slowly, watching as they observed her out of cautious beady eyes. “Hey there, elephants,” she began. The elephant who had shown knowledge about humans gave an angry snort. “Hey yourself! Who are you calling an elephant, puny dimwitted man? We are airavats, descendants of Erawan, the white four-tusked flying being that is



Indra's vehicle. Don't insult us by comparing us to the two-tusked weaklings on earth." Kay was taken aback. She made amends quickly. "Sorry, I didn't know, being an ignorant human. Please pardon me. Could you please help me? I am new here, and I was searching for a place to sleep when it started raining. And now there is all this commotion. Do you know why people are moving about at this time of night?" She thought she had been clever, inserting her question as innocently as possible, in the conversation.

The airavat nodded graciously at her apology. "We don't know either. We heard the commander of the army saying there was going to be an attack very soon from rakshasas. There was also some sort of disturbance at the palace some time back and teams of soldiers have been sent out to secure the palace grounds." He looked her over carefully. "You can shelter here for the night if you like. We are very hospitable creatures," he boasted with a curl of his trunk. Kay mused. A commotion at the palace sounded ominous. She hoped it wasn't Addy and Kudala who caused it and even if they did, that they had gotten out unscathed. However, that meant they would try to get to the Pushpak Vimana as soon as possible which in turn meant she had to be in it before they got there, to be ready to take off as soon as they reached. She smiled at the airavat and thanked it but politely declined the offer to stay.

Creeping out of the stalls, Kay started making her way towards the end of the stableyard so she could get to the gate separating the flying chariot from the rest of the stables. She had not gotten halfway there before she was ambushed. She stopped abruptly in her tracks when a large gandharva warrior swooped down in front of her. She quickly looked around and saw she was surrounded on all sides by four other warriors who were appearing out of the darkness from behind the stables. She noted quickly there were two rakshasas, one yaksha, and one other gandharva. She turned back to face the gandharva in front who clearly seemed the leader of this little squad. As soon as she had been ambushed, she had thought about her sword and it had appeared in her hands along with the shield. "Aha! And who may you be?" the gandharva was asking. He was a dark, muscular creature with long matted corn rows reaching down to below his massive shoulders.

Kay looked at him warily, crouching slightly, planning how best to handle this. She wasn't afraid. If anything, she was thrilled at the chance to test her battle skills in a real scenario. She fleetingly wondered if she had

always been like this or it was the rakshasi in her raring to come out and fight. The gandharva was walking in a slow semicircle in front of her. “Answer me, who are you? And what are you doing sneaking around the stables in the middle of the night?” he asked menacingly. He looked closely at her through the still falling rain and his eyebrows climbed his forehead in surprise. “You seem to be a human. A female one at that. Do you really think you can take five warriors like us on?!” he smirked, as Kay remained silent.

Kay frowned, still watching him, gauging his movements so she could attack when he least expected it. She knew the four behind would not make a move until their leader gave the orders, so for the time being she was unconcerned about them. “Have those no-good rakshasas sent you here for some reason?” he asked angrily. “Come on, answer me, woman!” Kay suddenly leapt forward, slashing at the gandharva’s flank and causing a gash. He had reacted quickly, feinting with his sword but not fast enough to avoid being slashed. Kay was now on the other side of the gandharva and whirled around to face him and the other four head on. There were gasps and angry shouts from the minions. “Let’s finish her off!” “Attack her,” “How dare she attack our leader?!” etc. The gandharva leader held up his hand to cut them off. His face was a mask of fury now.

“She is mine. Remain where you are,” he said, glaring at Kay even while talking to his troop. “That move is going to cost you your life, little woman,” he snarled. “You want a fight, do you? Come on then,” he said and raised his sword, walking slowly towards Kay. “I’ll try to be gentle,” he chortled evilly. Kay decided it was time to even the odds. She closed her eyes for a split second to focus and changed into her rakshasi form. The moment she transformed, Kay found herself bursting with a need to fight. She almost had to rein herself in. The gandharva was astounded at her change. While he had earlier been towering over her, he now found himself much smaller than this fierce creature in front of him. Using the surprise to her advantage, Kay pushed him out of the way with a forceful thrust of her shield. The gandharva fell down, stunned for a moment, which was all Kay needed to start attacking the others.

The other gandharva, two rakshasas, and yaksha started forward, shaking off their astonishment. It was a free-for-all fight now, with all of

them attacking Kay at once, defying the rules of war that Kay knew applied to them. She didn't care. The more the merrier, she thought, slashing viciously left and right, weaving her way between the four warriors. In a trice the yaksha and one gandharva were down, severely injured, and their weapons lost in the muck. It was raining so hard now that it was getting difficult to see through the water running down their faces and into their eyes.

The gandharva leader had gotten up and was mad with rage at the thought of having been thrown to the ground by a human-turned-rakshasi. Suddenly, Kay found the ground all around her sinking, leaving her stranded on a four-foot square piece of land. She was stunned. The ground all around had sunk so deep, she could hardly see the end of it. She could not step forward in any direction without falling into an abyss. Then her intelligence kicked in. It wasn't possible for the ground to sink like this. She quickly used the mantra to see through the illusion the leader had cast and found herself on normal ground again. However, one of the warriors, Kay did not notice which, got in a blow at last, which gave her a deep gash on her upper thigh. She hissed in anger and pain, and her eyes glowed red for a moment before coming back to their original color. She stopped reining herself in and let out a blood curdling cry that froze the three soldiers left standing. But only for a moment.

With answering cries of rage, the three warriors again launched themselves at Kay. Swords clanged furiously as Kay swung this way and that, protecting herself with the shield and slashing with all her skill with her sword. She was glad it was nighttime as she was at her strongest as a rakshashi at night. The two rakshasas were as tall as her and maybe stronger, but did not move as lightly as Kay and were more inclined to use might rather than cunning when wielding their swords. Kay soon incapacitated them, and they sank to the slush groaning and clutching their wounds, the pouring rain washing their blood into the slushy mud of the stableyard.

Now only the leader gandharva was left. Now that he had gotten over his shock of her being a rakshashi, he was proving why he was the leader in the first place. He knew he could not cast another illusion as she would see through it. He seemed to have decided to win at the sword fight. He was relentless in his moves, but careful at the same time. In skill, they were

almost equally matched. Kay found herself enjoying the battle fully, now that the real danger was past, and there was only one opponent. She was confident she could defeat him eventually and that increased her enjoyment of the fight. They danced around the large stableyard, fencing, sloshing through the rain puddles, trying to disarm the other.

Kay had a slight advantage because of her size and strength but the gandharva was a veteran and knew moves Kay had never seen. It was a toss up who would have won if things had remained static. However, there was a sudden bellow of rage echoing from far away to the other side of the chasm that bordered on the stableyard which caught the gandharva by surprise for a fraction of a second because it seemed like the voice of another gandharva. It was all the distraction Kay needed, and she got under his guard, thrusting her sword into his torso with all her might, ending the battle. As the gandharva fell, Kay felt a moment of disquiet. He had been a brave warrior. She wondered if he were dead, if all the other warriors she had defeated were dead. As a rakshasi she was elated. But as a human, she felt a little twinge of misgiving, knowing what she was now capable of.

Kay shook herself out of her confused musings and turned around, running again towards the end of the stables. She had no time to lose. She reached the gate demarcating the silver fenced off area that belonged to the Pushpak Vimana. She opened the gate as Kudala had demonstrated and went in, feeling the battle taking its toll on her body. By the time she had crossed the distance to the flying chariot, she was feeling exhausted both mentally and physically and the gash in her thigh was throbbing painfully with each step she took. She glanced down at it and saw it was still bleeding. She managed to drag herself up the steps and into the flying chariot. Once inside, she quickly looked around for something she could use to stem the flow and found there was an ornamental shelf that contained clothes and herbal medicines. She found that their backpacks were on the shelf too just as Kudala had promised they would be. She was in no condition to look into the packs however. She let them be for the time being and reading the Sanskrit labels on the medicines, chose one that was meant for open wounds as well as an energizing potion.

She quickly took off her sodden clothes and began dressing her wound with the herbal paste and a strip of cloth that she tore out of the dry ones she

found. Long nails kept getting in the way, until Kay realized she was still in her rakshasi form. She took a deep breath and focused on changing back to the human form. When she did, she screamed and nearly fell to the ground at the enormous amount of pain radiating from her thigh, and the almost mind-numbing weakness that was an after affect of the adrenalin rush she had had earlier, as well as the blood loss. She managed to stay conscious, however, gripping the gilded side of the chariot with white knuckles until the giddiness passed. She then completed her wound care and dressed herself in dry clothes. Limping over to the couches at the side, she drank the energizing potion and ate some of the fruits from the side table before sitting down in meditation posture to re-energise and heal before Addy and Kudala arrived.

## 28. Chased to the Flying Chariot

As Addy splashed his way through the marshy grounds leading to the western side of the stables, he suddenly heard a commotion far behind him, at the palace. He knew instinctively that the palace guards had realized he had gotten away. He increased his pace, trying to use his leaping technique which was difficult in the current slushy conditions. He could still hear voices shouting in the distance, and they seemed to be rapidly gaining on him. He risked a look back and found he was being chased by an assortment of warriors. An arrow zinged past him, narrowly missing his upper arm. Addy stopped to take stock. He knew he could not hope to outrun these creatures. He looked at the landscape and the distance he still had to go. There were boulders and shrubs scattered all over the marsh but no trees to give coverage. The chasm that divided the grounds in two was still a couple of miles away in the distance. He would have to fight his way out. Addy changed into his gandharva form. He summoned his bow and arrows and they appeared in his arms. He fastened the quiver to his back and looked up.

The hordes had gained on him while he was busy getting ready to do battle. Addy found that as a gandharva, it was not just his size that changed but that his attitude became bolder, and he felt new-found strength coursing through his veins. He felt as though he had just gotten up after a relaxed slumber instead of being up all night running and hiding for the most part of it. He took aim at the nearest yaksha, let loose an arrow that found its mark, and the yaksha went down with a cry of pain. He fired in quick succession at the front line of warriors chasing him. He saw gandharvas, yakshas, and rakshasas either scatter to avoid his deadly arrows or fall victim to them. Deciding that was enough for the time being, he took off again, finding it easier going with his lower half being a horse that could run much faster than his human legs could. He was glad Rutajit and Fanishwar had made him practice transforming and getting comfortable in his new body plenty of times.

Addy stopped every now and then to shoot arrows over his shoulder, his aim unerring despite the rain, rough terrain, and his body being in constant motion. He held to a zig-zagging path through the boulders and shrubs to provide as small a target as possible to his chasers. This, however, meant he would take longer to reach the chasm. He still had to think how to

get across the chasm once he reached it. Already he could see the sky brightening a very little on the eastern horizon. It must be four or five o'clock in the morning, Addy guessed. He turned again and shot arrows at the closest soldiers behind him before going on. After a while, there were only three warriors chasing him. They kept hanging back out of range of his arrows but did not give up chasing him.

Addy debated what to do. He had to either give them the slip or incapacitate them. He did not want to be chased right up to the Puspak Vimana or worse still have them come into the chariot before it took off. He wished again he had been able to master the telepathic powers. If he had, he could have checked with Kay and Kudala their positions. He stopped and faced the three opponents. The two yakshas and a rakshasa were battle hardened and wily. They did not come into range of his arrows but started spreading out so they could surround him.

If they succeeded in surrounding him, it would be difficult to win over this situation, knew Addy. He quickly moved to his left, toward one of the yakshas. The yaksha started back-tracking immediately but could not keep up with Addy's gandharva pace and was soon hunted down. Addy knew he should not attack a retreating soldier, but all the bets were off now. Three people attacking one was not allowed as per battle rules, and *they* had broken the rules first. So he felt vindicated in attacking the yaksha and saw him fall with a thud, Addy's arrow piercing his hip. Addy was deliberately aiming to injure rather than kill because he did not want any more deaths on his hands. He was as it is feeling guilty about the many warriors he had incapacitated earlier. He swiftly turned and started chasing the rakshasa now, taking aim as he went.

The rakshasa was less cautious and stood his ground, aiming weapons of his own. This was a fatal mistake, as he soon found out, because a moving target might have been a challenge for the expert archer. A standing one was, simply put, child's play for Addy, and he had shot two arrows in quick succession, pinning the rakshasa to the ground by each leg. The remaining yaksha was running scared and had gone quite a distance back the way they had come. Addy gave chase because he knew the moment he turned to go back toward the ravine, the yaksha would pursue him again. He aimed, although he was still out of range, and shot his arrows as he galloped toward

the yaksha. He was surprised to see the yaksha fall. He went forward cautiously to see whether the yaksha had really been hit. He found he had gotten a stray arrow through his flank and was writhing on the ground.

Without wasting anymore time, Addy turned back and galloped toward the chasm. As he went, it struck him how he could get over it. It was so simple that Addy was amazed he hadn't thought of it before this. He only had to aim a rope-throwing arrow at a sturdy tree on the other side and swing across. However, he wouldn't be able to do that in his gandharva form. He was nearly at the chasm now, so he stopped for a moment, and changed back into this human form to resume the journey on foot. When he was about to start running again, he saw movement over to his side and turned quickly to find Kudala coming over to him, slithering swiftly over the rainy muddy ground. "Aditya, did you get the gem?" she called. He smiled, relieved to see her in one piece. She seemed to be soaked through but did not look like she had taken part in any fights.

"Yes, I did," he answered proudly. "No thanks to you either. Where did you disappear to? I tried to send you a telepathic message but wasn't able to," he said. Kudala had reached him now and was beaming at him. "I had to distract Dagdhrath and by the time I arrived at the East gate, you had already gone in. After that it was impossible for me to get in. I was hanging around the gate hoping you would come out soon with the gem since there was nothing else I could do. After a while, I heard your telepathic message and answered that I was on my way, but you did not seem to receive it. I worked my way around the palace to the West gate, but you had escaped and were halfway here by then," she explained.

She held out her hand. "Give me the gem, I'll take charge of it now," she said. Addy handed over the pouch with the gem in it to Kudala. Kudala took out the gem, inexplicable delight on her face. "Do you know where Kay...?" began Addy when he was interrupted by a loud echoing bellow of rage and betrayal. He spun around to see Dagdhrath galloping toward them, his bow and arrow at the ready. He came to a stop just in front of them, his face red with anger. "How could you, Kudala?" he panted, his chest heaving with the exertion of galloping probably all the way from the palace nonstop, as well as the pain of betrayal. "I thought you loved me." His expressions changed from fury to hurt to an impassive clenched-jaw look that Addy



dreaded because it looked like the gandharva was determined not to let his emotions get the better of him and soften his stance despite his love for Kudala.

There did not seem to be anyone else with Dagdhrath. Addy began to surreptitiously bring his bow up, but was spotted immediately by Dagdhrath. He fired two quick arrows and disarmed Addy. Addy winced and clutched at his bow hand that had been grazed by an arrow and was bleeding now. “Please listen to me, Dagdhrath...I can explain everything,” Kudala was saying desperately, sounding distressed. “We did not do anything wrong. This gem belongs to the nagas, and we only took this. It is our rightful possession, and it was *your* king who had snatched it from us, as you know.” This only seemed to incense the handsome gandharva further. His lip curled in derision. “Is this why you befriended me, Kudala? So you could gain entry into the palace and steal the gem? You know as well as I that anything won in battle is rightfully the possession of the winner of the war. I cannot believe you stooped so low. If you had just told me about it, I could have tried asking Kubera to return the gem to your people,” he said.

Kudala straightened, pushing back her shoulders defiantly. “The snake people do not need the charity of your devious king, Dagdhrath. We are quite capable of taking back what is ours. And for the record, I did not befriend you with an ulterior motive. I do love you. But you are making it really hard right now for me to stay in love with you. I cannot envision life with a person who cannot see my point of view and thinks only he is right,” she said sadly. Dagdhrath looked like he might be swayed, Addy thought, suddenly hopeful. But the next moment, Dagdhrath seemed to strengthen his resolve and bit out tersely, “You knew where my loyalties lay, Kudala. I never hid that from you. If you could not accept it, you should not have continued going out with me. Now hand over that gem to me.” Kudala shook her head. “You can’t really believe I would hand over the nagamani passively, can you? It is the hope of my people. If you did not hide your loyalties, I too never hid the fact that I was the heiress to the naga throne. I will defend our property to my last breath,” she said and armed herself.

“If that is how you want it,” snarled Dagdhrath, his face twisting with bitterness. He aimed at Addy. “How about I kill this minion of yours first? After all, he is the one who actually entered the treasury. No one steals

anything from Kubera's treasury and lives to tell the tale. After he is dead, I will deal with you. You can feel free to attack me in the meantime if you like. After this betrayal by one that I had loved with all my heart, death would be preferable," he said pain flashing for a moment on his face. Addy almost felt sorry for the gandharva. If he wasn't about to lose his life any moment, he could have sympathized with Dagdhrath. He felt in his heart that this was a person he could have grown to like. He was brave and loyal despite the challenge fate had thrown at him.

However, right now that same person was aiming at Addy with intent to kill and he knew Kudala would not be able to prevent it for fear of hurting her gandharva lover. She was too far away to try to shield him either, not that he expected her to when all her focus was on Dagdhrath. He closed his eyes in resignation. He could not think of anything to do to save himself. This was how it was going to end then. He would have preferred a death during battle rather than being executed in ignominy. He opened his eyes to see Dagdhrath pulling the arrow back to let loose at him and waited for the pain. He stood stunned at what happened next. One moment he was staring into the cold unflinching eyes of the gandharva, and the next moment he saw the gandharva's head snap backwards, his eyes roll into his head, and the horse-man fell to the ground with a thud, still clutching his bow and arrow.

Kudala and Addy stared dumbfounded at the gandharva lying still on the ground. Then they looked up and noticed the petrified figure standing behind the prone figure, clutching the pole of a spear. "Pracheta!" gasped Addy, breaking into a flurry of motion. He jumped over the fallen gandharva and scooped his young cousin into his arms. "What the hell are you doing here?" Pracheta trembled as she clung to him. She was white and her lips trembled when she asked, "Did I kill him? Oh, did I kill him?" Kudala, who was already kneeling at Dagdhrath's head, answered. "No, he is not dead, thank the Lord. Just stunned." She stood up quickly and motioned to Addy. "Go quickly before he wakes up. Go to the Pushpak Vimana as planned and get to my kingdom." "What about you?" asked Addy. "I'll use the Nagamani to make sure he is out of danger, and then fly back on my own. Don't worry about me. You take your sister and go. Go, go, GO. There might be more soldiers coming now that Dagdhrath found us," she said urgently.

Addy did not wait to argue anymore. He ran with Pracheta in his arms to the edge of the chasm and set her down to summon his bow and arrows. He quickly shot an arrow with rope attached, tested if it was firm, and then picked Pracheta up again. "Hold on tightly now," he commanded. Pracheta held on so tightly, Addy thought she was going to strangle him. He swung them both out across the gorge on the rope and landed on the other side with a thud. He was up and running as soon as they landed, pulling Pracheta along by her hand. They reached the flying chariot and leapt up the steps. Kay was at the top, looking at Pracheta in astonishment. "What...?" she began but Addy yelled at her to give him the backpack so he could wear the Karna kavacha and then to seat herself at the charioteer's chair in the flying chariot. She quickly did as told and seating herself began calming and pushing out thoughts before meditating on the destination.

Addy threw off his armor and pulled on the golden kavacha, making sure it was next to the skin. It molded tighter and fitted snugly to his skin as if made of latex. However, it was still a dull color, not the sun-like brilliance described by Vasuki. Addy scowled. It also did not feel any different from the previous time he had worn the kavacha. He wondered what could be wrong. He cursed himself for having overlooked this most important aspect. Neither he nor Kay had thought it important to try out the kavacha again after they got to the heavenly realm.

He looked out the clear walls of the chariot. He could see another platoon of soldiers approaching Kudala and Dagdh Rath. She was still crouching beside him, holding the gem to his head wound. Soon she would fly away and the soldiers would turn towards the chasm and the Pushpak Vimana. "Damn!! Why doesn't it work?" he shouted in frustration. Kay looked up from her meditation. "Bring me the box. There were some things written on it. Maybe there are instructions there that we should have read earlier," she said. Addy took it over, and she began deciphering it more rapidly than she had deciphered anything in her whole life. She read a word here and there and skipped bits in between until she thought she had come to the significant part. "Look here! It says the kavacha will be activated only on the chanting of a mantra. Oh God! Why didn't we explore this crucial part of our escape while there was time! Where do we search for the mantra now?" she moaned.

“Isn’t the mantra written down there?” asked Addy, unable to keep still and rushing to the wall to see how far the soldiers had gotten. “No....the mantra isn’t given here. It is just mentioned by name as the Gay-a-tree mantra,” said Kay, biting her lip. “The Gayathri mantra?” asked Addy, standing stock still. He remembered a ceremony he had gone through when he was a young boy. It was called a thread ceremony and during the ritual, the Gayathri mantra had been taught to him. It was supposed to be a most powerful mantra that he (like other boys of his caste) was supposed to chant thrice a day. Unfortunately, Addy had never been religious and had promptly taken off the sacred thread he was given to wear lifelong, and had never chanted the mantra either. “I...I know the mantra...” said Pracheta hesitantly. “You do?” asked both the adults eagerly, turning toward the teen.

“Yes. Mom taught it to me and makes me repeat it with Samrat whenever possible. I can teach it to you,” she said eagerly. “No time for that,” Addy barked decisively. The soldiers were crossing the chasm and would be here in under a minute. “Take us up into the air Kay. Pracheta, you *have* to chant the mantra as correctly as you can. It will save our lives, okay?” Pracheta looked scared and stubborn. “I can’t. I will do something wrong, I *know* I will, just like I always do. Just like I got us all into trouble by reading that parchment in the first place and landing us here. I tell you, I will teach it to you Addy,” she said. “Then you can say it out loud correctly.” Addy took a deep breath to regain his fast disappearing patience. The soldiers were halfway to the chariot now and he could hear a portentous sound in the distance. He was sure it was the Agneyastra being armed.

He went to Pracheta and pulled her to him. He rubbed her back as he said, “Listen, Prachu....can you hear that sound in the distance? It is the arming of a missile that can destroy *everything*. Only this kavacha can save us. And only *you* can chant that mantra correctly to activate it. There is no time to teach me the mantra and for me to say it without forgetting the words or pronouncing it wrong. You know it by heart, you have been saying it almost daily, haven’t you? You *can* do it right. I will be right here, holding you, baby. Please just calm yourself, and say it out loud.”

Pracheta looked up at him solemnly. “What if I make a mistake?” she whispered. “Will we die?” “You will *not* make a mistake. We will reach the naga kingdom safe and sound and go back home, okay....now close your

eyes, pretend you are at home and chant the mantra. Nothing will happen to you, I promise,” said Addy, trying to believe himself. “Please dear, you can do it...you must do it *now*,” said Kay. She had taken them high up into the air but did not dare to take the craft to their desired destination without the kavacha’s protection. This way, the worst that could happen was the chariot along with themselves would go up in flames in the air. The destruction would be in the air which was largely uninhabited at least on this plane, and there would be very little repercussion on the ground below. Addy nodded at Pracheta again encouragingly.

Pracheta closed her eyes tightly and gave an audible gulp. Then, thankfully, she began repeating the mantra out loud. As soon as she finished, Addy felt a great energy surging through the armor. It began to glow brighter and brighter until it was almost too bright to open his eyes. “Kay, take us to the naga kingdom,” he shouted with his eyes screwed closed and still clutching Pracheta to him. He felt rather than saw, something humongous enveloping the chariot in a heat haze. But immediately he felt something pushing outwards, starting from the kavacha, and the heat reduced and disappeared with a whooshing sound. The glow began to recede, and he was able to open his eyes. He looked out and saw they were parked outside the naga kingdom, and the kavacha was dull gold again. Kay jumped up from the driver’s seat and rushed up to him and Pracheta. “We did it! We did it! We’re safe!!” she screamed, hugging them both in a group hug. They hugged her back fiercely.

## Epilogue

“Come on, buck up Kay, we are late for the conference,” called Addy through the hotel door. It opened immediately and Kay came out, looking like a fashion model in a formal dark grey suit and skirt. “You look stunningly professional,” said Addy. Kay smiled happily. “Thank you! You look rather well turned-out yourself Addy,” she said. Addy looked down at his navy blue suit and trousers. He grinned. “Let’s go nail it, shall we?” he said, holding out his arm for Kay. Kay took his arm, and they walked down the corridor and down a flight of stairs to the conference room where members of the press were awaiting their arrival. On a podium were seated an assortment of Greek and Indian archeologists, including Reinhart Drakos and Mr. Kher. They were already answering questions from the pressmen. But it was obvious the stars of the day were Addy and Kay as the press people clapped and called when they arrived.

The duo went over and took their seats and began answering the questions as discussed previously during a meeting of the Indian and Greek archeological departments. “Ms. Anderson, we heard about some people being found at the excavation site. Can you throw any light on who are? Where are they now?” a reporter asked Kay. “Yes, you are right. There were some people living in the valley. Since they had been isolated from mainstream society for many centuries, they were airlifted to a secure area where they will be able to continue their lives as they had been accustomed to in the valley. They will be under 24-hour surveillance by scientists and human rights personnel, until such time as they evince interest in modern man and his lifestyle, in which case they will be integrated into society in a controlled environment.”

“Mr. Kamat, what do you have to say about the treasures found in the palace? They must be of tremendous value?” Addy nodded. “There were ‘treasures’ as you called it, found in a room in the palace. However, they are far more valuable as historical artifacts. They are being examined by a team of dedicated experts and will be carbon dated and information about all the pieces will be released to the press in due course.” “Mr. Reinhart, as a Greek archeologist, how can you explain away the fact that there was such an important site in our country which our own archeologists knew nothing about?” Addy looked at Ray. Ray did not look flustered. They had

discussed this at length during their private meeting. “There are many sites still undiscovered all over the earth. This one was so well hidden, it was just sheer luck that we stumbled onto the secret entrance to it. If we hadn’t, it would still be unknown,” he said.

“Mr. Kher, what have you planned for the two junior members of your department who discovered this archeological site?” Mr. Kher was virtually beaming nonstop. He had been completely different to Addy, astounding the latter in a pleasant way when he had arrived a week ago. He had treated Addy with the same avuncular buoyancy that he normally reserved for Kay. “I am very proud of Mr. Kamat and Ms. Anderson,” he said. “I knew when I was sending them on this expedition that they would not return empty handed. They are both very intelligent and dedicated employees. However, they have exceeded expectations. They will, of course, stay here until the site is completely excavated and explored. When they get back to India, I will be promoting them to much higher posts!” he said garrulously.

There were a few more questions put forth to one or the other of them which they answered as planned. After about half an hour of questions and answers, one of the Greek officials announced that the press conference was now closed, and the reporters filed out. The archeologists walked into another room where there was a buffet dinner laid out for them. Addy, Kay, and Ray congregated together. Mr. Kher was busy with his Greek counterpart, discussing how the investigation would go over the next few months. Kay and Ray were deep in conversation, and Addy thought back to the events of the very busy last two weeks since their escape from Alkapuri.

After landing the Pushpak Vimana safely on the side of the mountain belonging to the nagas, the three humans had disembarked and Kay had sent the flying chariot back to the City of Wealth by a mental command. Kudala and Vasuki had rushed up to them, congratulating them on the successful completion of their mission and thanking them for the return of the Nagamani. “Aditya, my child, the naga people will be forever indebted to you for this task that you have done for us,” said the old snake king, embracing Addy in his strong arms. “Consider yourself as one of us now. Anything you want will be yours if it is in my power to give it to you. Just say the word.” Addy was overwhelmed. He and Kay had already planned what to ask for if they completed the charge and got back in one piece. “I do

not want anything material, Sir,” said Addy.

When Vasuki began to protest, Addy quickly went on to explain the work that he and Kay did on the human realm. “If it is possible, we would like a list of archeological sites that have not been discovered yet on earth. It would be really the best thing you can give us at this point,” he said. Vasuki frowned. It sounded too insignificant a reward for bringing back their precious gem and saving the future of his species. But if that was what Addy wanted, that was what he would get. After they were all back inside the underground palace, Vasuki gave him a parchment on which were written down five previous historical sites along with geographical locations and methods of unearthing them. After that there was a great celebratory dinner, their last on this realm.

Kudala, Rutajit, and Fanishwar had all come up to them and informed them that although most of the knowledge they had gained while they were being trained, would be lost to them when they went back to earth, there were some powers that would remain with them if they wished so. However, these had to be used rarely and only for a good cause, they warned as using them to harm others would result in the powers being taken away automatically. Kay immediately wanted to know what these powers were that would remain with them, but the gurus said that they could not say with any certainty and it would be up to them to test themselves when they got back. Pracheta had been speechless for a while at everything in the palace. She had hung onto Kay and chatted nonstop with her about all the wonders she saw around her. She had also enjoyed the attention she got from not only Kay and Addy but many of the royal naga children who had come to talk to her.

Addy and Kay had finally been able to get her alone to ask how she had gotten to the higher realm just in time to save Addy from sure death. “I was so bored Addy. I forced Mom to call you everyday but your phone was switched off all the time. So I suspected you must have come to this plane from Greece. To test this theory, I chanted the mantra and landed behind that big centaur-like creature. Luckily I was hidden behind a boulder and heard what he was saying without being detected. There was a pole lying beside me and when I heard he was going to kill you, I picked it up and hit him hard with it!!” she said triumphantly. “I...I did right didn’t I?” she asked, suddenly unsure, remembering how still the gandharva had fallen and how



shocked Addy and Kudala had seemed to be.

Addy and Kay had been quick to reassure her. Kay wondered, however, how Pracheta had landed exactly at the necessary spot instead of anywhere else on Alkapuri or even in the naga kingdom. Luckily for the young girl, she had been thinking so deeply about Addy and how she missed him, she had landed close to his location. If she had landed anywhere else, not only would she not have been able to save Addy, she might have gotten lost and no one would even have known she was on the higher realm. Addy shuddered to think about this and scolded her a little. “You must *never ever* chant that mantra again, Pracheta,” he said seriously to his little cousin. “This adventure is over now. We must forget all about this higher realm and never try to go back there, okay?” “Okay, Addy, I will not ever say that mantra again,” she promised. It had been decided that Pracheta had to go back first because when they chanted the reverse mantra, she would go back to India as that is where she had come from. Addy and Kay would land back in Greece, preferably the outer cave as Vasuki had assured they would, if they concentrated on it before intoning the words.

After Pracheta had disappeared, Kay and Addy had held hands and returned to the cave in Greece. They had found Ray and two other members of the Greek Archeological Department camping there. Fortunately, when they appeared in the cave, none of the three was present. They had been gone up the slope trying to find out what Kay had meant in her note about discovering the way to the valley. Ray said after he came back and read the note, he had contacted his superiors and they had sent these two archeologists to search for the valley and for Kay and Addy. They had been going up and down the mountain every day in hopes of finding the route to the other side of the mountains. After that, it had been only a matter of time for the duo to explain how they had chanced upon the entrance and explained all that happened in the valley, leaving out only the details about how they had disappeared from there using the mantra. Ray and the others thought the two of them had been in the valley for two and a half weeks instead of only half a week.

Their visas had been extended and Mr. Kher had flown over immediately. When the Greek and Indian teams were assembled, they had gone into the tunnel. A military contingent had preceded them in order to

protect them from the natives and to ensure all the natives were captured. As Kay had explained to the media, the natives had been airlifted and relocated to another valley that had a tall security fence around it and cameras everywhere that recorded their movements but which at the same time appeared to be an uninhabited pristine valley. This whole experiment was an entirely new situation for everyone including the natives, so the outcome was unpredictable. But the archeologists hoped the natives could be rehabilitated and absorbed into mainstream Greek society at least in a few years.

“Addy,” Kay was saying. Addy broke out of his trance to see Kay and Ray laughing at him. “Always dreaming about something!” teased Kay. “Did you hear what I was saying?” “Er...no...sorry,” said Addy grinning and looking unapologetic. “Next week Mr. Kher is giving us a much needed break. I am going to Crete with Ray. I want to spend some time in the museums there and even more time on the beaches, getting a tan. Would you like to come with us?” Addy narrowed his eyes and looked shrewdly at the pair in front of him.

Kay did not look as though she really wanted him to tag along and was probably just being polite. Ray looked amiable as usual. Addy shook his head. “I think I’ll take a rain check,” he said. “I’ll just take the opportunity to mess around in Delphi. My Mom and Pracheta will be arriving two days into the week for a weeklong stay, so I will need to be here to take them around site seeing after that. But thanks for asking,” he said. “And enjoy yourselves, you two,” he added with a wink, before going over to the buffet table to pile his plate with some more delicious Greek hors d’oeuvres.